

**Defying Conventions and Highlighting  
Performance Within and Beyond Slavery in  
William Wells Brown's *Clotel***

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As an introduction to his novel, *Clotel or, The President's Daughter*, William Wells Brown, an African American author and fugitive slave, includes a shortened and revised version of his autobiographical narrative titled "Narrative of the Life and Escape of William Wells Brown" (1853). African American authors in the nineteenth century often feared the skepticism they would undoubtedly receive from white readers. Therefore, in order to broaden their readership and gain a more trusting audience, African American authors routinely sought a more socially accepted and allegedly credible person, namely a white American, to authenticate their writing in the preface. Brown boldly refuses to adhere to this convention in an effort to rid his white readership of their assumptions of black inferiority. Rather, he authorizes himself. My paper illuminates Brown's defiance of authorship conventions as an act of resistance rooted in performance, one that strategically parallels other forms of resistance that take place in his literary representations of the plantation. I argue that all counts of trickery enacted by Brown can be better understood when related to the role

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of performance on the plantation.

Quite revolutionarily, William Wells Brown uses his own words in the introduction to validate his authorship rather than relying on a more ostensibly qualified figure's. As bold a move that may be, Brown does so with a layer of trickery that allows it to go potentially undetected by the reader. By utilizing the third person perspective, Brown creates the material look of a conventional, rule-abiding preface. As Dana Dudley says, "the more radical the race politics the greater the need for disguise" (10). Dudley's insight describes Brown's method well: Brown aims to deceive readers in order to make his controversial novel admissible to the general public. In the very title of the novel (*Clotel or, The President's Daughter*), Brown nods to an early-nineteenth-century rumor, declaring that one of the United States' founding fathers, Thomas Jefferson, fathered children with his black slave, Sally Hemmings.<sup>1</sup> The veracity of the rumor has been largely confirmed by historians. By connecting his commentary on slavery to a former president's personal involvement, Brown exposes slavery as a national, rather than regional, problem, a bold critique made without the assistance of an authenticating, white-authored preface.

Although Brown makes this audacious claim in the title of his novel, he employs other tactics to disguise his criticisms of American race politics. The novel undermines the very basis of racial hierarchy as well as foregrounds African American and mulatto women as protagonists. In light of Dudley's theory about race politics, readers can better understand Brown's overt yet masked judgments about American slavery and why they are rightfully disguised. Brown

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<sup>1</sup> Anne duCille calls attention to this captivating rumor and its accuracy.

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introduces a particularly long first person excerpt from his autobiography with the following: "said he in a speech at a public meeting in Exeter Hall" (21). Although the quotation is introduced as another person's voice, the nearly nine-page long quotation in the first person lends itself to misinterpretation, as Brown intended. While there are several ways in which this passage could be misread, I argue that Brown intentionally tries to fool the audience into simply trusting that the quotation marks signal an outside source, and therefore, reading his words as someone else's. Yet, if readers pay close attention, they will learn that these words, too, are Brown's. As M. Giulia Fabi says, "Brown affirms his own accomplishments as a writer with an objective tone that results from his treating himself as a secondary source" (641). Fredrick Douglass's exceptionally famous narrative, first published in 1845, is an example of an African American author upholding the conventions given him. Not only is Douglass authenticated by a white American, William Lloyd Garrison, in the preface, but he also fulfills the white audience's desire for African American autobiography. Brown's rejection of conventions of black authorship indubitably fools some readers who may be less keen on the subtle forms of resistance slavery often produces. Therefore, if Brown is able to gain readers in this illusive way, then the prevailing requirement of authorization is proven invalid. His method delegitimizes authorship conventions in an intelligent and artful way and proves his case that he can be a published African American author without the endorsement of a white American. Once again, this strategy showcases Brown's underlying goal of destabilizing the belief in "race" and its inherent qualities, which many of his contemporaries cling to.

I argue that Brown's act of defying authorship conventions is a performance and, furthermore, that one can draw meaningful

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parallels between Brown's defiance as an author and the defiance of a slave. Jennifer Schnell agrees: "Brown performs the South – its landscapes, its demography, its histories, its laws, its people – for the audience" (48). Brown nearly acts as an additional character in his novel, and scholars agree that the role of performance in *Clotel* is noteworthy; however, I insist Brown's skill and trickery goes a step farther. Not only is Brown an actor in his own novel, but also he is ever mirroring the American slave in his methods of denying white dominion. While creating the material appearance of normalcy for white readers of the nineteenth-century, Brown deliberately masks his audacious move, maintaining the cunning ability of trickery and performance learned on the plantation. Readers are left questioning why Brown would want to disguise his rejection of authorship conventions. Brown and enslaved persons alike can be seen as having two general purposes for performance--to assert power by fooling a white person and/or to preserve a beneficial position or believed attribute (like trustworthiness). Both forms of resistance involve trickery, whether its end be the establishment of authority or basic self-preservation, and they are ultimately propelled by the hope of liberation—whether from slavery or constrictive authorship conventions. Although the two forms of trickery I focus on seem disconnected and dissimilar, I insist that Brown juggles both purposes and, therefore, participates in a tremendously complex literary strategy. Brown not only maintains the level of trickery that can leave a white reader ignorant of his sly maneuver (consequently making the oblivious spectator feel intellectually inferior upon recognizing Brown's trickery) but also ensures his reputation by offering white audiences the anticipated façade of compliance (preserving his reputation as a rule-following author and compliant African American).

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Not only does Brown defy norms and surprise audiences by independently authorizing himself, but he also denies the white nineteenth-century audience's appetite for black autobiography and instead yields fiction. However, he opens his novel with excerpts from his autobiographical narrative. Brown's tactic here may have been to reel the audience in to create a more abrupt and noticeable transition into the form of a novel. The autobiographical section precedes the actual novel spatially, so Brown's trickery is double-fold. He simultaneously creates the appearance of a tradition-complying African American author's preface while fulfilling, briefly, what the audience craves: black autobiography. Both the content and the medium of *Clotel* contradict audience expectations in an overt yet coy manner. Even more, Brown illustrates for black readers how to resist white supremacy outside of bondage, offering his writing as a model of how to subvert white supremacy in a crafty and covert manner outside the institution.

Brown's presentation of performance within and beyond slavery acts somewhat like a mirror. As a former slave, Brown is well versed in the realities of plantation life. In highlighting performance on the plantation as a significant and dexterous form of resistance throughout his novel, Brown calls attention to his own technique of discrediting racialized authorship conventions in the preface as parallel to that of his previously enslaved audience's techniques. He offers himself as a model for African American readers, transferring practices from the plantation onto the page, by utilizing his writing as a tool to fight oppression. Inserting numerous examples, Brown demonstrates the knowledge and trickery of the slave as learned via white interaction. While these incidents that showcase the duplicity of the American slave appear as mistakes of ignorance or lack of intellect, Brown reveals their willful and witty undertones. Sam, one

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of the late Mr. Peck's most trusted slaves, is heard singing, overjoyed at the news of his owner's death by the slave owner's daughter, Georgiana. Understanding Georgiana's inevitable grief, Sam retires his emotions and is seen shortly after "looking as solemn and as dignified as if he had never sung a song or laughed in his life" (127). The incongruity of Sam's actions leaves the less keen observer, Carlton, believing that he and Miss Georgy had mistaken someone else for the now somber Sam. Carlton serves as a clarifying character for the readers in this scene. His disbelief at Sam's seemingly conflicting emotions and actions highlights the great believability with which slaves were able to perform various roles. Also, Carlton's naïvety elucidates for the reader the intellectual prowess of the African American slave. These small acts of resistance could go unnoticed because, as Brown shows us through Carlton, white observers were often unaware of the African American cunning at work in the various performances. Accomplished acting ability, Brown seems to suggest, is one of the few skills required of plantation life that proves beneficial beyond enslavement.

Throughout the novel, Brown inserts many comical and grand slave performances. Clotel, the protagonist, is intensely beautiful and very fair skinned, although she is considered tainted with African American blood. In an effort to escape slavery, Clotel, the feminine, attractive woman dresses as a man and plays the role of master to her fellow slave, William. Roshaunda Cade calls attention to this scene's great dramatics, for "[t]he figure of Clotel surely attracts attention rather than dispels it" (45). Fabi concurs: "Clotel passes for white and dresses like a man, a double disguise that is replete with irony" (641). As outrageous a performance as this scene involves, a young mulatto woman not only disguising herself as a white male but also a slave master, the great actress is never questioned. All

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participants receive her as she pretends to be without hesitation. She even attracts attention from some young unmarried girls on a stage coach ride: "The American ladies are rather partial to foreigners, and Clotel had the appearance of a fine Italian" (170). The father of the girls entreats Clotel to visit for a week at their family home, to which Clotel slyly refuses. The deep levels on which her disguise is successful underscore one of the novel's recurring points: that race is a performance, though whites in the novel fail (or refuse) to recognize it as such. The scene once again accentuates the extraordinary acting ability that slavery has afforded her. Although this scene of fleeing slavery is a tremendous risk and a great victory for Clotel and William, it is not representative of all the types of slave resistance.

To be sure, resistance comes in many forms, whether small or grand, covert or explicit. Brown offers a range of examples to make readers aware that seemingly innocent mistakes or slip-ups, as well as more ambitious schemes were, more likely than not, intentional and purposeful. One of the less obvious scenes of slave resistance is depicted in the midst of a sermon given to the slaves by a well-known missionary from New York, Snyder. Snyder's boisterous, passionate sermon fails to capture the slaves' attention and leads them to "leaning against trees" and "cracking and eating hazelnuts," clear indicators of an unimpressed and unresponsive audience (80). The sermon is over-flowing with passages from the bible adapted to suit a slave owner's foremost interest, that is, an obedient and submissive company of slaves. Snyder says, speaking to the slaves, "the whites fitted out ships at a great trouble and expense and brought you from that benighted land to Christian America, where you can sit under your own vine and fig tree and no one molest or make you afraid" (79). However, the preacher's dramatic sermon is

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received with great distrust and is largely ignored. The slaves converse among themselves when the sermon ends, voicing their incredulity, "I think de people dat made de Bible was great fools" (82). Notice that the more explicit critiques of the sermon are only voiced in the presence of fellow slaves and the less obvious acts of resistance, like cracking hazelnuts during the sermon, are carried out in front of whites. As Fabi underscores, these actions are "strategies of everyday resistance" (260). This statement clarifies for the audience how frequent and varying acts of resistance may be.

Yet another subtle example Brown illustrates for his audience is after a slave owner has given the field hands some liquor to show his visitors, those from the North, just how well he treats his slaves. At the request of his master, one of the inebriated slaves begins an impromptu song, but it is not quite as light as the master had in mind. The slave owner says:

Now give us a toast on cotton; come, Jack, give us  
something to laugh at. The Negro felt not a little elated  
at being made the hero of the occasion ... and said,  
The big bee flies high,  
The little bees make the honey;  
The black folks makes the cotton,  
And the white folks gets the money. (115)

This tune concludes the chapter, and Brown offers no guidelines for how to read it. Ending the chapter like this mirrors how the song would be received in real life on the plantation. Knowing that the slave owner does not think highly of his slave's intelligence, he would likely receive it as what it appears to be superficially, which is a lighthearted ditty. However, readers should catch on to something

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deeper. Although this utterance could be ignored and its meaning discredited, this seemingly careless assertion is intentional on the slave's part. Wrapped up in a cutesy song, Jack makes a powerful statement about slavery. Brown may have been trying to cultivate a parallel between this scene and blackface minstrelsy. Brown clearly calls attention to the very popular form of African American denigration, minstrelsy, which was comprised of ostensibly authentic songs and cultural practices of black plantation life. However, in this scene the slave asserts a clever argument masked with the facade of a popular entertainment form. This instance mirrors Brown's approach at trickery in the novel. The potent statements made by both the singing slave and William Wells Brown are meant to be concealed or convoluted by form. Several factors invite readers to overlook the powerful assessment Jack vocalizes. The song is formed in simple rhyme scheme and takes up only five lines. Brown refuses to offer the audience guidance in deciphering the seemingly simple ditty by closing the chapter at the end of the song without any further commentary on the moment of how it was received in actuality, or how his audience should receive it. *Clotel's* cogent message, like the slave song, can be lost in form. Brown chose to write a work of fiction, unlike most abolition-minded African American authors of the period, who wrote in the expected form of autobiography. Not only does Brown compose his novel in the unfashionable form of fiction, but also he includes a multitude of excerpts from various other print forms, including newspapers, novels, and orations. This method of incorporating fragments of other authors' work can be disorienting and require a more close reading from the audience. Therefore, in both the slave song and Brown's narrative, the striking commentary may be easily overlooked due to the unconventional structure in which they convey it.

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Brown's somewhat disorienting, unconventional methods intentionally diminish the credibility of the slave owner as well as illuminate the significance of those acts of resistance, whether small or large, that take place within the institution. While some earlier scholarship claimed that Brown's work is "crowded"<sup>2</sup> and "loosely structured,"<sup>3</sup> I argue, alongside more recent scholarship, that *Clotel* is intensely thoughtful and instructive. Foremost among those scholars who praise Brown's work as cohesive and instructional is John Ernest. Ernest eloquently describes *Clotel* as "a unified artistic achievement greater than the sum of its parts" (20). I contend that reading *Clotel* with the notion that Brown negotiates a set of conventions, although not mainstream or simple, will prove helpful in understanding Brown's literary strategy.

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<sup>2</sup> Vernon Loggins described it in this way in 1931 (qtd. in Ernest 20).

<sup>3</sup> In 1969, J. Noel Heermance described it in these terms (qtd. in Ernest 20).

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