

Contesting the Myth of National Compassion: The Leap from the Long Bridge into Trans–Atlantic History in *Clotel or the President’s Daughter* (1853)

by

Lynn R. Johnson, PhD
Assistant Professor of Africana Studies
Dickinson College

Abstract

William Wells Brown published *Clotel; or the President’s Daughter* (1853) in order to expose the horrors of American enslavement which captive African American women endured. The publication of this novel was timely in that, during the 1850s, the United States Congress was debating whether to resume importing Africans to help sustain the Southern plantation economy (Takaki 79). With the intent to dispel any allegations of cruelty towards African people, Southerners devised, what I term, a myth of national compassion that proclaimed the American institution of enslavement a humane system. They declared that unlike Europeans involved in the Atlantic slave trade, they ensured captive Africans’ survival by treating them with great care. For, they claimed to be “slaveholders and righteous men”(Takaki 79). Brown, however, contests this myth, in the novel, by directly connecting Clotel’s suicide by self-drowning not only to the actual death of an escaped enslaved woman who secures her freedom by jumping from the “Long Bridge” in Washington, D.C. in 1842 (Gates 96), but also to the resolve of Africans who fled from their captors and jumped from ships during the Trans-Atlantic Middle Passage. Indeed, Brown merges Clotel’s identity with those of her female African forbears and, thus, refigures her as a Black revenant, an African ancestral presence. As a Black revenant, Clotel is deployed in the novel to mitigate the perennial traumas of enslavement—terror and confinement—so that she might help to “heal the community” (Christol 165) and testify to the humanity of African people. Essentially, in this paper it is argued that Clotel’s leap from the Long Bridge into the Potomac River is both a leap to freedom, and into Trans-Atlantic history.

Introduction

Throughout the nineteenth century, American abolitionists circulated harrowing accounts of the Atlantic slave trade in order to counter proslavery advocates' contention that slavery in the United States was markedly distinct from the international trade in African people.¹ This challenge to proslavery advocates' position was important especially in the 1850s, as Congress debated whether or not to resume importing enslaved Africans to maintain the Southern plantation economy.² In order to defend their arguments in favor of African importation, Southerners sought to gain the support of their fellow statesmen by assuring them that the atrocities of the Atlantic slave trade, about which they read in the national press, held no resonance with slavery in America. Indeed, they promulgated the myth of the internal slave trade³ as a humane system, and portrayed themselves as compassionate and attentive to captive Africans' basic needs for survival.⁴ Abolitionists, however, challenged this myth by revealing American enslavement's frightening similarity to Trans-Atlantic slavery. Specifically, they emphasized the unjustified confinement and exploitation of African people, the separation of Black families, the cruelty of enslavers, and the sexual abuse of Black women.⁵ By making these direct connections between the two systems of enslavement, American abolitionists stripped the United States of its guise of innocence and exposed the reality of its guilt in perpetuating African degradation.

African American author, William Wells Brown, agreed with his fellow abolitionists' conclusion that in order to establish the tyrannical nature of American enslavement, the horrifying machinations of this system of human trafficking must "be understood, explained, and made coherent through public reflection and discourse" (Eyerman 2). Therefore, in his "Speech Delivered at the Town Hall, Manchester, England, August 1, 1854," Brown explains to his audience that although conspicuous similarities exist between the internal and external trades, American slavery possesses its own discrete horrors and practices (Brown 35). For instance, he suggests that the physical enslavement of African Americans from birth until death and the enlightenment of the enslaved population account for the peculiarity of slavery in America. Brown relates:

It is true that the congress (sic) of the United States, or the constitution (sic), agreed to abolish slavery in twenty years, but the internal slave trade is still carried on, and I aver that it is even worse—setting aside the middle passage—than anything connected with the foreign trade. In the old states, the slaves are raised for market; they have their family attachments . . . and as men become more enlightened, the separation of families, and the buying and selling of them to slavery is so much the worse . . . [When] we look and see 100,000 slaves annually taken from the slave-raising states, to supply southern markets . . . we must be satisfied that the internal slave trade that is carried on by the people of the United States is as grievous in its effect as the African slave trade when carried on by the people of that country. (Brown 35)⁶

Through this speech, Brown exposes Americans' cruelty and hypocrisy in championing freedom while continuing to force thousands of African people onto the auction block to be bought and sold as eternal laborers.

A year prior to delivering this speech in Manchester, Brown published his first novel, *Clotel or the President's Daughter* (1853), with the hopes of "bringing British influence to bear upon American slavery" (Brown 47) and of advancing the abolitionist cause.⁷ Deemed a sentimental novel⁸ by literary scholars, *Clotel* illuminates the horrors of American slavery by chronicling the life and tragic fate of the titular heroine—an imagined daughter of former President Thomas Jefferson and Currer, a fictitious representation of Sally Hemings.⁹ After the death of her captor, Mr. Graves, Clotel, along with her mother and sister, is sold on the auction block as part of the Graves estate. Purchased by and "marrying" Horatio Green, her white suitor, Clotel finds solace in her new home life with her husband and soon gives birth to their daughter, Mary. However, when his political ambitions necessitate that he relinquish his ties to Clotel, Green ends the marriage and separates mother from daughter by selling Clotel back into slavery. Determined to restore her dignity and to reclaim Mary, who is in Virginia, Clotel stages an escape from the southern plantation on which she is bound. She disguises herself as a white gentleman named "Mr. Johnson" and runs away, along with a fellow enslaved man, William, who performs as her servant.¹⁰ Although successful in reaching Virginia, Clotel is captured and sent to a prison near the Capitol building in Washington, DC. Yet, a moment presents itself for her to secure freedom, and she, eluding the grasp of prison guards, flees through the streets of the nation's capital. When slavery sympathizers assist the guards in blocking her escape route, Clotel decides to end her life by jumping from a bridge and into the Potomac River.

Clotel's self-drowning evokes two significant occurrences in American and Trans-Atlantic history: an enslaved African American woman's escape from a prison and her subsequent suicide on the Long Bridge in Washington, DC in 1842, and enslaved Africans' resistance to captivity by jumping from ships during the Middle Passage. As I argue, Brown appropriates these harrowing real-life accounts in *Clotel or the President's Daughter* in order to contest American proslavery advocates' myth of national compassion. For through these deaths, the author conveys that for many enslaved people, mortality is preferable to life-long oppression under systems of human bondage. Moreover, by reading the death scene as an expression of historical memory, I further contend that Clotel emerges as a Black revenant, an African ancestral presence, who manifests in the present moment so that she "might heal the community" (Christol 165). The process of healing involves acknowledging and mitigating the psychological traumas that racial servitude engenders. Brown, thus, carefully scripts Clotel's actions so that readers will recognize that the trade in African people dehumanizes the enslaved, who traders considered chattel, as well as the enslavers, who acted as brutes in their treatment of them. Essentially, by connecting his heroine's experiences under American slavery with those endured by her African forebears in the Black Atlantic world, the author emphasizes the critical imperative to save African people's lives through abolitionism.

Historicizing Clotel's Leap to Freedom

In his introduction to William Wells Brown's *My Southern Home; or, the South and Its People*, John Ernest relates that the account of an enslaved African American woman's leap from the Long Bridge in Washington, DC is more than a "twice-told story" (199). Not only does he reveal that Frederick Douglass recounts the episode in his "Reception Speech at Finsbury Chapel, Moorsfield, England" in May 1846, but he also relates that Grace Greenwood commemorates this incident five years later in a poem entitled "The Leap from the Long Bridge: An Incident at Washington" (199). Many scholars, including John Ernest, William Farrison, and Jean Fagan Yellin, have speculated that Brown's inspiration for the death scene came from Greenwood's reference to this history in the preface to her poem (227).¹¹ Yet, as Geoffrey Sanborn reveals in "People Will Pay to Hear the Drama': Plagiarism in *Clotel*," the appearance of this event in the national press occurred before 1846, and therefore, before the 1851 publication of Greenwood's *Poems* (66). Hence, Sanborn points out that, in 1842, the *New-York Evangelist* published "Slavery in the District: The Escape," Seth M. Gates's eyewitness account of the woman's flight and deliberate choice to end her life by jumping into the Potomac (66).¹² In reading this work, one further discovers that the former Congressman's letter is the original source of William Wells Brown's chapter "Death is Freedom" (Brown 204) in *Clotel, or the President's Daughter*. For, Brown copies this item verbatim, and then he extends the scene by not allowing his heroine to "sink forever beneath the waves of the river" (Gates 1), but to be washed ashore and buried.¹³

Throughout the enslavement period, and even into the post-bellum era, the memory of the enslaved woman's death would be passed on through the reprinting of Gates's letter and through antislavery poetry, which appeared in American periodicals. For instance, the *Prisoner's Friend: A Monthly Magazine Devoted to Criminal Reform, Philosophy, Science and Literature* reissued Gates's letter on September 10, 1845 (96). On February 22, 1874, a Boston-based weekly periodical, *The Independent*, published "A Tragedy of Long Bridge," a poem by John James Piatt (3). In a footnote to the poem, Piatt writes, "Near the Virginia and of Long Bridge (sic) at Washington was once a slave pen, and many years ago, it is said, a tragedy, somewhat similar to that related here, took place upon the bridge" (3). Although he follows the basic premise of the story, he alters it by imagining the woman fleeing with her child and jumping into the Potomac with the child "close-prest (sic)" (3). The poet then suggests that the spirits of the woman and her child forever haunt the bridge. The final stanzas of the poem state:

—Yes, it was long ago; but still at night
 Across Long Bridge is seen the piteous flight.
 She sometimes—who has seen I do not know—
 Is seen the dreadful chase of long ago.
 Fierce shouts are heard: lo! shapes of shadow
 run! —
 A dusky woman's, with her babe, is one!
 Hark! One last shriek—the shrill appeal to
 Death!
 The water laps the pier with marshy breath. (3)

Here, the bridge becomes a site of memory where, “still at night” (line 32), may be “seen the dreadful chase of long ago” (line 35). It is important to note that whereas the shadows of the participants establish the presence of this traumatic event in the poem, the poem’s very existence—and other poems that imagine it—establishes the indelibility and replay of the Long Bridge incident in American consciousness. This poem, then, represents this memory as eternal.

In her novel, *Beloved*, Toni Morrison explains that a memory never dies, but continues to reside “[right] in the place where it happened” (36). People, therefore, may remember their own experiences, and they may, at any time, “bump into a rememory that belongs to someone else” (36).¹⁴ Adopting Morrison’s view of time and memory helps us to understand that memory does not haunt a space, but simply exists within a space. The same can be said of ancestral presences; they are not haunting figures, but they are coexisting spirits that “move through time” with the living, yet “in a different [metaphysical] space” (Wilks 232). Not only does Brown’s heroine “bump into [this] rememory” (Morrison 36) when she reaches the bridge, but she reenacts it. Similarly, *Clotel* does not simply encounter the ancestor there, but she becomes an ancestor. This convergence of identity is achieved by collapsing the dimensions that once separated the living from the ancestral realms.

Brown “bridges the perceived gap” (Callahan 6) between the living and ancestral worlds in order to reveal that “ultimately there is no gap” (Callahan 6) between the meanings and experiences of American and Trans-Atlantic enslavement. He does so by extending the range of the memory of the incident at the bridge to show that occurrences of suicide among captive African Americans were not idiosyncratic or unique to the American slave trade. First of all, *Clotel*’s resolve to end her life is a direct refutation of Southern slavers’ arguments that suicide, among the enslaved in America, is anomalous and more characteristic behavior of continental Africans. A case in point is South Carolina’s Governor, James Henry Hammond, who, in a letter to British abolitionist, Thomas Clarkson, in 1845, writes:

The fact is that among the slaves of the African race these things are almost wholly unknown. However frequently suicide may have been among those brought from Africa, I can say that in my time I cannot remember to have known or heard of a single instance of deliberate self-destruction, and but one of suicide at all . . . Can it be possible then, that they exist in a state of abject misery, goaded by constant injuries, outraged in their affections and worn down with hardships which the abolitionists depict, and so many ignorant and thoughtless persons religiously believe? (265)

In his memoir, *Narrative of the Life and Escape of William Wells Brown (1847)*, which he affixes to the 1853 edition of *Clotel*, Brown answers this question when he recalls witnessing a suicide on an American steamer. While serving as an under-steward aboard a slave ship headed for New Orleans, he personally observes “a woman who had been taken from her husband and children, and having no desire to live without them, in the agony of her soul jumped overboard and drowned herself. Her sorrows were greater than she could bear; slavery and its cruel afflictions had broken her heart” (51). Hammond, however, is correct to point out that Africans did resist captivity by committing suicide; therefore, Clotel’s death further signals for readers a congruity between her moment and the instant when enslaved Africans had to make an immediate decision about their fate during the Trans-Atlantic middle passage: should they submit to the oppressed life of an enslaved person or jump over the sides of the ships to claim their freedom?

In his study of Trans-Atlantic slavery, *The Slave Ship: A Human History*, Marcus Rediker relates that African women, in particular, “played a prominent role in this kind of resistance” (289), jumping overboard, especially since they had more freedom of movement on the ships. Although Clotel does not jump from a ship for the enslaved, the Long Bridge operates in a similar manner as an enslaving vessel. As represented in African mythology, “bridges and rivers establish the connections between the two worlds [of Africa and America]” just as ships for the enslaved do (Christol 169).¹⁵ In this novel, the bridge firmly connects the Black oceanic world with the world of American slavery and the Trans-Atlantic Middle Passage narratives with American Middle Passage accounts.¹⁶ Moreover, since the Potomac River served as “a major commercial artery” (Sweig 511) during African enslavement in America, it is a site of historical trauma comparable to the Atlantic Ocean.¹⁷ Indeed, the Potomac, like the Atlantic, became the watery grave for numerous African resisters.

Congruent Rituals of the Atlantic and American Slave Trades in Clotel

Throughout the novel, Brown also draws clear comparisons between the rituals of the Trans-Atlantic and the American enslavement process in order to expose Southerner enslavers' claim of holding and exhibiting compassion for African people. He first destabilizes this myth when, in chapter two of the novel entitled "Going to the South" (89), the narrator portrays the separation of families at the auction block, the eight-day march of captives from a prison to steamers coasting on the Ohio River, the steamer voyage to New Orleans, and a shipboard overseer's preparation of the enslaved for sale before landing in the South (89-95). In chapter twenty-one, the narrator recalls the history of the first ship of the enslaved that arrived in Jamestown (Brown 181). Here, Clotel's apprehension, after she escapes from one of the prisons of enslavement, provides the most distinct illustration of the transitive influence of the Atlantic enslavement on the traumatizing practices of American slavery. And just as captive Africans were stowed in barracoons while awaiting exportation to New World colonies, Clotel is consigned to a prison in the District of Columbia where she is forced to witness other enslaved people "brought in and taken out before being placed on ships and sent away to the same part of the country to which she herself would soon be compelled to go" (204). As she anticipates her Middle Passage experience, Clotel also suffers a social death. For, in the eyes of her captors, she is neither Thomas Jefferson's daughter nor is she Mary's mother, but merely chattel. Yet, this prison, which "stands midway between the capitol at Washington and the President's house" (204), is a prime location in which Clotel's redemption could be effected and her "social personhood" could be restored by influential whites who are within reach (Smallwood 60). In particular, Congress, "the assembled wisdom of the nation" (Brown "Lecture" 16) could abolish the peculiar institution through legislation and establish her freedom, and the American President, who could intercede on her behalf.¹⁸ As made evident by their collective silence, these people are indifferent to the tragic plight of enslaved African Americans. Recognizing that human compassion will never be an attendant of the slave trading business, Clotel elects to determine her own destiny by "[running] for her life" (204). In so doing, she underscores the wisdom of African people of the Black Atlantic world: escape is the only possibility out of the Atlantic market and the American slave-trade economy (Smallwood 53).

Clotel would also discover that "the most powerful force opposing [her] desperate efforts to return to a place of social belonging was not the physical constraint of prison walls . . . but rather the market itself" (Smallwood 53). The novel's narrator endorses this sentiment when he relates that there were men who "made their living by catching the runaway slave, and returning him for the reward that may be offered" (Brown 166). Since aiding in the capture of runaways was often motivated by this promise of pecuniary compensation, Clotel's exchange value registers more appreciably for the three Virginia men who help the guards in trying to capture her than the human suffering and desperation that birthed this moment.

As Clotel processes her next course of action while these pursuers close in on her, she also considers the value she places on her life. Focusing less on the commotion around her, Clotel looks to the “deep foamy waters of the Potomac” to assist her in making plain her assessment, and “with a single bound, she vaulted over the railings of the bridge and sunk forever beneath the waves of the river” (207).

Clotel as a Black Revenant

Through the death scene, Brown brings to light the “spiritual and psychological dimensions of those who endured slavery” (Spaulding 47) in order to challenge the American myth of compassion even more. Indeed, when he adapts Gates’ story of the unnamed woman’s death in *Clotel*¹⁹, he enters the ongoing debates in nineteenth-century social and literary arenas about whether or not the “Negro has a soul” (Ellis 70).²⁰ Clotel’s concern for her spiritual destiny immediately before she jumps into the Potomac responds to this concern as it positions Brown on the affirmative side of the issue. The narrator relates that “she clasped her *hands* convulsively, and raised *them*, as she at the same time raised her *eyes* towards heaven, and begged for that mercy and compassion *there*, which had been denied her on earth” (207). Since Christian theology condemns suicide as a sin that guarantees eternal damnation, Clotel makes supplications to God for compassion and forgiveness so that she will not be denied entrance into the world of eternal life. This doctrine regarding heaven and spiritual banishment steers us to an important nexus between Christian and indigenous African religious sensibilities concerning suicide and divine destiny.

Perhaps, not all Africans who endured the Trans–Atlantic crossing or American Middle Passage from Northern states to New Orleans considered suicide; but, those who did must have contemplated the spiritual consequences of this form of resistance based on their personal or communal beliefs. As numerous captains of Trans-Atlantic slavers would record in their journals, many West Africans jettisoned themselves from the ships because they believed in the transmigration of their souls back to their ancestral homeland upon death. Marcus Rediker relates that from “the beginning of the eighteenth century to the time of abolition, most captives seem to have believed that after death they returned to their native land” (301); in an “African paradise,” they could appreciate “the joys and luxuries of life with none of the fear” (301).²¹ Saidiya Hartman, however, offers a different African philosophy on suicide and spiritual destiny. In *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*, she provides an historical example of an African woman who weighs the costs of jumping into the ocean from the ship, *Recovery*. Hartman writes, “She had discovered a way off the ship. It worried her that the ancestors might shun her, or the gods might be angry and punish her . . . or she would wander the earth directionless and never find her way beyond the sea, but she risked it anyway, it was the only open path” (152). From this African perspective, both the woman and Clotel “violate prohibitions against suicide” and willingly “risk the eternal wandering of [their] souls” (Smallwood 145).

Nevertheless, Brown neither allows for Clotel's punishment nor does he force her to reside in a perpetual state of oceanic drifting. Instead, he refashions Clotel as a Black revenant when he provides a different conclusion to Gates's account by scripting for her "a way out of the water on to land" since a "fully realized death could not be accomplished alone. Nor was it something one could attain at sea" (Smallwood 140).

In "The African American Concept of the Fantastic as Middle Passage," Hélène Christol identifies the Black revenant as a personage of African cosmology.²² Using Toni Morrison's character, Beloved, as an example, she posits that the Black revenant is "a figure of negation, brought back to life" (165) and manifests in the present as "a figure of re-memory and subversion" (165). The reemergence of the revenant in literary works is directly linked to "the repetition of [a] time sequence" (166) or a contemporaneous replay of an historical event, just as we see in *Clotel*. Moreover, this ancestral presence functions as a healing agent for the community and is charged to "restore life and self to the individual" (165) after the community or individual enacts a "scandal that affects a system imprisoned in absolute rule" (166). In the novel, the "scandal" is Clotel's—and other enslaved people's—resistance to systemic slavery. The narrator relays Americans' disregard for the resistant African as a result: the body of Brown's deceased heroine was "picked up from the bank of the river where it had been washed by a strong current, a hole was dug in the sand, and there deposited, without either inquest being held over it, or religious service being performed" (Brown 207). On the one hand, this neglect to investigate Clotel's death or honor it suggests that proslavery advocates desired that Clotel would remain dead and lost to American consciousness. At this moment, she also held no value to them. Even more, this silence surrounding her death resonates with that of many ship surgeons who suppressed their knowledge of suicide during the transoceanic crossing. According to Rediker, they "had a vested interest not to report suicides in the era of charged debate about the inhumanity of slave ships" (291). In a similar way, acknowledging Clotel's death and the factors undergirding it would threaten American proslavery advocates' investment in the myth of compassion. Unlike the unburied revolutionaries of the Nat Turner rebellion who "became food for dogs and vultures (Brown 203) in the novel, Clotel must be buried in order to preserve this silence and the myth. On the other hand, the fact that she is interred at all is significant to African communities and their beliefs about becoming ancestors.

For some African ethnic groups, such as the Akan of Ghana and the Ivory Coast, and African followers of Islam, the deceased must be buried (Ephirim-Donkor 160). In *African Spirituality: On Becoming Ancestors*, Anthony Ephirim-Donkor asserts that the Akan believe that burial must occur before the dead can ascend to "the spiritual realm and abode of the ancestors" which is heaven (160).²³ In relating this belief to Brown's novel, the people who bury Clotel actually help, in part, to prevent the "traumatic consequence" of her drowning: "the unfulfilled journey to the grave and therefore also to the realm of the ancestors" (Smallwood 141). Not only must the body be interred in this tradition, but it must also be memorialized.

The Akan believed that “mourning and interment mitigated the disruptive threat that death posed by channeling the sacral power of death into a renewal of life” (Smallwood 141). Through her burial, then, Brown links Clotel with the ancestors, while also countering American slavery’s dehumanizing principles that separated her from the mainstream community. And, through her resurrection, he brings the unnamed woman who jumps from the Long Bridge back to life and social relevancy by giving her a “particular history” which Gates admits in his true account that “he [could] not give” (96). Essentially, Brown utilizes these instances of life and death, burial and resurrection, to humanize enslaved African women so that Americans can bear witness to the common humanity of and insist on freedom for all people.

Clotel’s transition from “virtual kinlessness to social belonging” (Smallwood 60) is, to some degree, apparent by two public eulogies that “a few days after [her] death . . . appeared in one of the newspapers” (Brown 208). The narrator poignantly states, “Such was the life and such was the death of a woman whose virtues and goodness of heart would have done honor to one in a higher station of life, and who if she had been born in any other land but that of slavery would have been honoured and loved” (207-208). Through this statement, the narrator reevaluates Clotel as a good and virtuous woman, whom Americans, complicit with the institution of slavery, had devalued. Also, in making evident to the skeptical reader that Clotel did value herself by “rushing to the realms of the brave” (Rediker 405), Brown follows the lead of American and British poets who “immortalized the decision of death before dishonorable slavery in poetry” (Rediker 405).²⁴ He also adapts verbatim Grace Greenwood’s 1844, poem entitled “The Escape,” which articulates a trenchant argument regarding Americans’ dishonor of the country’s historic legacies of freedom and democracy.²⁵ He writes:

That bond-woman’s corse (sic)—let Potomac’s proud wave
Go bear it along *by our Washington’s grave,*
And heave it high up on that hallowed strand,
To tell of the freedom he won for our land,
A weak woman’s corse (sic), by freeman chased down;
Hurrah for our country! hurrah!
To freedom she leaped, through drowning and death—
Hurrah for our country! hurrah! (209)

Here, Clotel most clearly functions as a Black revenant. Indeed, she is a physical and spiritual messenger whom the Potomac transports so that she may bear witness to the irony that the American people, for which George Washington won freedom from the British, is the same American nation that denies “a weak woman” the freedom from the tyrannies of domestic slavery. The repetition of the line, “Hurrah for our country! hurrah!,” accentuates the ironic meaning of the “appalling tragedy” (205) of her death and shatters the myth of compassion, the “masquerade/Which justifies [the American] slave trade” (95).

In addition, this stanza reiterates Brown's purpose for Clotel's death; it is to "serve as an evidence . . . of the unconquerable love of liberty the heart may inherit; as well as a fresh admonition to the slave dealer, of the cruelty and enormity of his crimes" (205). The first part of this statement is particularly significant given that the narrator, on the one hand, conspicuously suggests that Clotel's "unconquerable love of liberty" (205) is inherited from American revolutionaries, including her father, Thomas Jefferson. On the other hand, he tacitly communicates that this love of freedom is also the legacy of her African forbears. Ultimately, Brown uses his Black revenant to "rend dissimulation's veil" (95) that American enslavers maintained between the American and Trans-Atlantic trades.

Through *Clotel; or the President's Daughter* (1853), William Wells Brown lays "bare the institution of slavery" (Andrews 15) in order to shatter the myth of national compassion Southern enslavers devised in order to portray American enslavement as a benign system instead of as a national tragedy. In the process, Brown highlights the tragic fate of his heroine, who in resisting slavery, leaps from the Long Bridge in Washington DC and into a moment of Trans-Atlantic history. For, the scene of Clotel's death emerges as a site of memory that effectively recalls two real-life occasions: the suicide of an enslaved African American woman who leaps from the same bridge and the instances when African lives were swallowed by the sea during the transoceanic Middle Passage. Although Brown appeals to a British audience to influence the American public's opinion of the domestic trade by drawing on historical memories of the Atlantic slave trade, he appeals directly to his American readers as well. He urges them to recognize that by allowing slavery and its various Middle Passages to continue, they too will mourn losses, the losses of honor and of the true promise of the nation. In *Clotel*, Henry Morton articulates America's potential failure. He warns, "The loss of a firm national character, or the degradation of a nation's honour (sic), is the inevitable prelude to her destruction" (178).

Brown commissions his Black revenant, Clotel, to intervene in America's race towards destruction. Consequently, Clotel's story represents the traumas of terror and confinement that African women suffer under such a pernicious system in order to convey a sense of urgency in ending this victimization. The author, however, goes beyond the narrative of victimization by stressing the humanity and honor of those who challenge the system. Indeed, the unification of Africans and Europeans in the fight for abolitionism would be the best defense against the horrors of slavery imported from the Atlantic world and created in the United States.

Notes

¹ Abolitionist newspapers, such as the *African Repository and Colonial Journal*, consistently published reports about the Atlantic slave trade's similarities to the American trade, under the headline "Horrors of the Slave Trade." See "Horrors of the Slave Trade: Visit to a Dismantled Ship." *The African Repository* (1850-1892); Nov. 1858; 34, 11 APS Online: 342.

² The United States Congress prohibited the importation of Africans in 1808. In *A Pro-Slavery Crusade: The Agitation to Reopen the African Slave Trade*, Ronald Takaki states that political debates about reopening the African slave trade in the 1850s "compelled Southerners to take a definitive stance on the foreign trade and slavery in general" (79). He argues that "[Southerners] could not defend the peculiar institution as a 'positive good' and continue to describe the African slave trade as 'wretched in the extreme.' Hence, they demanded the repeal of the federal laws against the African slave trade. . . and sought to transform the African slave trade from a symbol of piracy and horror into a symbol of morality of slavery" (79).

³ Throughout this essay, I will use the terms internal and domestic trades interchangeably to refer to American enslavement. In contrast, I refer to the Atlantic slave trade as the international or external trade.

⁴ In a letter to Thomas Clarkson, South Carolina's Governor, James Henry Hammond, claims that Africans in America are well fed and clothed and that abolitionists' accounts of the separation of Black families are more exaggerated than truthful.

⁵ In 1843, the *American Anti-Slavery Reporter* published an article entitled "The Domestic Slave-Trade: Report on the Slave Trade" that drew an effective comparison between the peculiar institution and the international trade (5).

⁶ This speech was published in the *Manchester Examiner Times* four days after Brown delivered it at the Town Hall (33).

⁷ In the preface to *Clotel*, William Wells Brown states, "The fact that slavery was introduced into the American colonies, while they were under the control of the British crown, is sufficient reason why Englishmen should feel a lively interest in its abolition" (47).

⁸ Herbert Ross Brown explains that novels of sentiment represent sympathetic characters who are victimized by society or individuals. In *The Sentimental Novel in America*, he states, these "victims are jostled through one harrowing experience after the other" and "experience explosive panic and emotional crises" (171).

⁹ Ann duCille relates that long "the subject of local gossip and anti-slavery poems and ballads, Jefferson's alleged affair with one of his slaves first found the public light of day in 1802, when James Thomson Callender. . . turned his pen on the third president . . . Callender finally published his scandalous charges in the *Richmond Recorder* on 1 September 1802, about halfway through Jefferson's second year as President" (445).

¹⁰ Robert S. Levine states that *Clotel's* escape is "modeled on the 1848 escape of Ellen and William Craft. In a letter printed in *The Liberator*, Brown was the first to report on the amazing escape" (168).

¹¹ See William Farrison's *William Wells Brown*; John Ernest's "The Profession of Authorship and the Cultural Text: William Wells Brown's *Clotel*" in his book, *Resistance and Reformation in Nineteenth-Century African-American Literature*, 20–54; and Jean Fagan Yellin's chapter on William Wells Brown in *The Intricate Knot: Black Figures in American Literature, 1776–1863*.

¹² Levine states, "A New York lawyer, Seth Merrill Gates served two terms in Congress as an antislavery Whig. His house in Warsaw, New York, became an important stop on the Underground Railroad to Canada" (341).

¹³ Gates's account ends with the body of the woman never washing ashore. Interestingly, it also relates that Joshua Staples was the owner of the prison and that slave holders who suffered shameful losses through gambling would make secret deals with Staples to purchase their slaves. These enslaved people would be sent to this deplorable prison to be sold yet again (96).

¹⁴ In *Beloved*, Sethe characterizes rememory as a "thought picture" that "floats around outside [her] head" (36) and in spaces where an event that is recalled happened. In existing outside the corporeal, rememories forever remain. As Sethe states, ". . . even if I don't think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there" (36).

¹⁵ In *Enslavement, the Slave Voyage, and Astral and Aquatic Journeys in African Diaspora Discourse*, Monica Schuler identifies particular rivers as connectors between Africa and the Americas. She avers, "The water between the two worlds can be the Tano River for the Asante, the Nzadi (Congo) River or Atlantic Ocean for the Kongo, the Volta River for the eastern Ewe, the Niger and its Delta for Igbo and Kalabari, and the Jordan River or Red Sea for Afro-Christians" (194).

¹⁶ I am borrowing from Wolfgang Binder's argument in "Uses of Memory: the Middle Passage in African American Literature" that the transport of Africans from Virginia to the markets of New Orleans constitutes an American Middle Passage (558).

¹⁷ In "The Importation of African Slaves to the Potomac River, 1732–1772," Donald M. Sweig imparts that sloops carrying enslaved Africans navigated along this river and that "significant numbers of Africans were sold to Virginia planters (and presumably Maryland planters as well) on the Potomac" (511).

¹⁸ In *A Lecture Delivered before the Female Anti-Slavery Society of Salem, 1847*, Brown tells his audience that coffles are driven by the Capitol and "yet the American Legislators, the people of the North and the people of the South, the 'assembled wisdom' of the nation, look on and see such things and hold their peace; they say not a single word against such oppression, or in favor of liberty" (16).

¹⁹ Although Gates discloses that he does not know the background of the woman, he does speculate that she shares the experience of so many enslaved women. He states, "Whether it was the dread of the cruelties and starvation of a southern cotton plantation; the abuse and violence of a licentious purchaser; or the grief of suddenly and forever being separated from husband, children, and the friends of her youth, that drove the unhappy woman to adopt not only in theory but in practice, the sentiment of Patrick Henry 'Give me liberty or give me death', I know not" (96).

²⁰ In a 1766, letter to British writer, Lawrence Sterne, Ignatius Sancho, a former enslaved African and author beseeches him “to give one half hour's attention to slavery, as it is at this day practiced in our West Indies” (Ellis 70). In his novel, *Tristram Shandy*, Sterne authors “a tale of the sorrows of a friendless poor negro girl.” In contemplating this girl’s life, uncle Toby is asked whether a “negro has a soul,” to which he responds, “I am not much versed . . . in things of that kind; but I suppose God would not leave him without one, any more than thee or me” (Ellis 70).

²¹ Rediker comments that abolitionists were fully apprised of Africans’ belief in the transmigration of their souls back to Africa (301).

²² I apply the term African cosmology when speaking of the metaphysical philosophies of African people that explain their perceptions of their existence and time.

²³ Although it is not known how much knowledge Brown had of the burial practices of the Akan and followers of Islam, he does discuss African rituals of the “Jalof, Fulah, and Mandingo” as well as the funeral ceremony among the “Borers” in his work, *The Rising Son; or, The Antecedents and Advancement of the Colored Race*” (367).

²⁴ Marcus Rediker relates, “Like other forms of resistance, the action of jumping overboard circulated from the Atlantic to the metropolis, where various writers” wrote about these occurrences in poetry (405). Specifically, he references William Roscoe’s poem, *The Slave’s Complaint*, as *The Negroe’s Complaint*. Told from the perspective of Marraton, an African taken from Angola, this poem speaks of Africans’ decisions to resist their captivity by drowning. While looking down at the ocean, Marraton sees his love Addela who beckons him to jump overboard and “rush to the realms of the brave” (405). According to Rediker, this poem appeared in the *Federal Gazette* and the *Philadelphia Evening Post* in 1790.

²⁵ Geoffrey Sanborn reveals that “the poem that appears in *Clotel* is a word-for-word transcription of the original version of [Grace Greenwood’s] poem, “The Escape,” which had been published in *The Liberator* under Greenwood’s actual name, Sarah J. Clarke, in September 1844” (77). It, therefore, is not Brown’s revision of Greenwood’s 1851 poem, “The Leap from the Long Bridge: An Incident at Washington.”

Works Cited

- Andrews, William L. “Introduction.” *Three Classic African American Novels*. New York: Penguin Books, 1990. Print.
- Binder, Wolfgang. “Uses of Memory: The Middle Passage in African American Literature.” *Slavery in the Americas*. Germany: Verlag Konigshausen & Newman, 1993. 539-564. Print.
- Brown, Herbert Ross. *The Sentimental Novel in America (1789-1860)*. North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1940. Print.
- Brown, William Wells. *Clotel or the President’s Daughter*. 1853. Ed. Robert S. Levine. Boston & New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2000. 81-227. Print.

- Brown, William Wells. "A Lecture Delivered before the Female Anti-Slavery Society of Salem at Lyceum Hall, Nov. 14, 1847." *The Works of William Wells Brown*, Eds. Paula Garrett and Hollis Robbins. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006. 3-18. Print.
- Brown, William Wells. *My Southern Home or, The South and Its People*. Ed. John Ernest. North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2011. Print.
- Brown, William Wells. *Narrative of the Life and Escape of William Wells Brown*. 1853. *Three Classic African American Novels*. Ed. Robert S. Levine. Boston & New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2000. 49-80. Print.
- Brown, William Wells. *The Rising Son; or, The Antecedents and Advancement of the Colored Race* (1874). *The Works of William Wells Brown*. Ed. Paula Garrett and Hollis Robbins. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006. 353-438. Print.
- Brown, William Wells. "Speech by William Wells Brown, Delivered at the Town Hall, Manchester England" 1 August 1854. *The Works of William Wells Brown*. Ed. Paula Garrett and Hollis Robbins. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006. 33-39. Print.
- Brown, William Wells. "Speech by William Wells Brown, Delivered at the Lecture Hall, Croydon, England" 5 September 1849. *The Works of William Wells Brown*. Ed. Paula Garrett and Hollis Robbins. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006. 19-23. Print.
- Brown, William Wells. "Speech by William Wells Brown, Delivered at the Hall of Commerce, London, England," 1 August 1851. *The Works of William Wells Brown*. Ed. Paula Garrett and Hollis Robbins. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006. 29-32. Print.
- Christol, Hélène. "The African American Concept of the Fantastic as Middle Passage." *Black Imagination and the Middle Passage*. Ed. Maria Diedrich, Henry Louis Gates Jr., and Carl Pedersen. New York: Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999. Print.
- duCille, Ann. "Where in the World is William Wells Brown?: Thomas Jefferson, Sally Hemings, and the DNA of African American Literary History." *American Literary History* 12.3 (2000): 443-462. Print.
- Ephirim-Donkor, Anthony. *African Spirituality: On Becoming Ancestors*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2011. Print.
- Eyerman, Ron. *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of the African-American Identity*. New York: Univ. of Cambridge Press, 2001. Print.
- Gates, Seth M. "The Long Bridge—The Escape." *Prisoner's Friend: A Monthly Magazine Devoted to Criminal Reform, Philosophy, Science and Literature* 10 Sept. 1845: 1, 24: 96. *American Periodicals*. Web. 20 March 2012.
- Hammond, James Henry. "Governor Hammond's Letters on Southern Slavery." *Niles' National Register* (1837-1849); Jun 28, 1845; 18, 17: 265. *American Periodicals*. Web. 20 March 2012.
- Hartman, Saidiya. *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007. Print.
- Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. New York: Plume, 1987. Print.
- Piatt, John James. "A Tragedy of Long Bridge." *The Independent . . . Devoted to the Consideration of Politics, Social and Economic Tendencies*. 12 Feb. 1874; 26: 131. *American Periodicals*. Web. 20 March 2012.

- Rediker, Marcus. *The Slave Ship: A Human History*. New York: Viking, 2007. Print.
- Sanborn, Geoffrey. "People Will Pay to Hear the Drama": Plagiarism in *Clotel*." *African American Review*, Volume 45, Numbers 1-2, (Spring/Summer 2012): 65-82. Print.
- Sancho, Ignatius. *Sancho's Correspondence with Laurence Sterne, 1766*. Brycchan Carey's website, Aug. 1999. Web. 10 Nov. 2011.
- Shuler, Monica. "Enslavement, the Slave Voyage, and Astral and Aquatic Journeys in African Diaspora Discourse." *Africa and the Americas: Interconnections During The Slave Trade*. Ed. Jose C. Curto and Renee Soulodre-La France. New Jersey: Africa World Press, 2005. 185-213. Print.
- Sluiter, Engel. "New Light on the '20. and Odd Negroes' Arriving in Virginia, August 1619." *The William and Mary Quarterly* 3rd Ser., LIV. 2 (April 1997): 395-398. Print.
- Smallwood, Stephanie. *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007. Print.
- Spaulding, A. Timothy. *Re-forming the Past: History, The Fantastic, and the Postmodern Slave Narrative*. Columbus, OH: Ohio University Press, 2005. Print.
- Sweig, Donald M. "The Importation of African Slaves to the Potomac River, 1732-1772." *The William and Mary Quarterly* 3rd Ser., 42. 4 (1985): 507-524. Print.
- Takaki, Ronald. *A Pro-Slavery Crusade: The Agitation to Reopen the African Slave Trade*. New York: Free Press, 1971. Print.
- Wilks, Ivor. *Forests of Gold: Essays on the Akan and the Kingdom of Asante*. Athens, Ohio: Ohio Univeristy Press, 1993. Print.