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One More Time with Feeling:
Repetition, Reparation, and the Sentimental
Subject in William Wells Brown's
Rewritings of *Clotel*

Abstract The publication history of *Clotel*, which was rewritten and rereleased three times in twenty-five years, puts considerable strain on conventional readings of sentimental activism's focus on the exceptional individual and private resolution. In the patterns of repetition and transformation that emerge from Brown's self-duplication, I therefore argue that *Clotel* and its successors provide a new historiography of systemic trauma that is highly relevant to current debates on redress and reparations in the United States. Read together, this interlinked series reshapes what narrative can be, producing scenes that refuse to be marshalled into the discrete chronology of simple plot and a host of characters whose lives overlap and blur in their shared circumstances and joint wounds.

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Every one then has a history in them by the repeating that comes out from them.

—Gertrude Stein, *The Making of Americans* (1925)

C*lotel* is often categorized by its singularity as the earliest known novel by an African American author, but the text is almost more remarkable for its multiplicity. After its initial publication in 1853, William Wells Brown would continue writing and rewriting his novel of slavery and escape for another fourteen years. By the end of his life, he had published four versions of it—first, as the most famous 1853 text, *Clotel; or the President's Daughter: a Narrative of Slave Life in the United States*; then, as *Miralda; or, The Beautiful Quadroon. A Romance of American Slavery, Founded on Fact*, serialized in

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1860–61 in the *Weekly Anglo-African*; and finally as the more closely related 1864 and 1867 editions, *Clotelle: A Tale of the Southern States* and *Clotelle; or, the Colored Heroine, A Tale of the Southern States*. Although each iteration was published under a slightly different guise, the different versions contain much the same plots, similar characters, and often identical prose. While some degree of recycled text is common in nineteenth-century literature, scholars of Brown have long noted his particular tendency to repurpose the words of others.¹ While his textual borrowing from journalism, law, and other authors is broadly recognized, his practice of recycling his own prior work has received little attention. I argue that studying this tendency substantially changes our understanding of Brown's relationship with sentimentalism. Read together, his interlinked series reshapes what narrative can be, producing scenes that refuse a discrete chronology and characters whose lives overlap and blur in their shared circumstances and joint wounds.²

In the patterns of repetition and transformation that emerge from Brown's self-publication, *Clotel* and its successors provide a new historiography of systemic trauma that I propose is highly relevant to current debates on redress. As conversations surrounding reparations have evolved, they have increasingly drawn energy from aesthetic experiments in the representation of nonliberal temporality and subjectivity. Breaking free from the logic of credit and debt, which had pushed proponents toward the impossible task of quantifying trauma and the terrifying presumption that money could cancel wounds, new reparations debates have turned to less limiting modes of representation. David Scott has long argued for a version of history that actively uses historical archives to provide a means of redress in the present, recovering utopian visions and strategies from older iterations of antiracist and anti-imperial movements. Literary archives contain their own utopian visions and strategies, promising alternative modes of understanding reparation beyond the language of finance. In particular, Saidiya Hartman and Stephen Best close their introduction to the *Representations* special issue on redress with the suggestion that thinking about reparations may require a rethinking of how politics should characterize enslaved peoples. Riffing from a provocation they find in Herman Bennett's contribution to the issue, they ask, "What happens . . . both to our understanding of black identity and the politics of redress when their foundational trope, the slave, is no

longer conceived of as a stable subject?" (Hartman and Best 2005, 12). Where liberal individualism encourages us to think of each life as insular and free from previous generations, the language of reparations describes the many ways in which the traumas of past lives echo and impinge on the traumas ongoing in the present. In other words, in order to fully address trauma's extension beyond the generations who immediately endured it, we first find ourselves needing fundamentally different ways of representing the category of the subject and his or her relationship to the systemic.³

Brown's narrative project offers one possible answer. I suggest that Brown's strange approach to publishing is actually a strange approach to character, an attempt to write a version of the self that would be founded on similarity and repetition, rather than on atomistic individualism. In a passage from *The Making of Americans* (1925) that I borrow as my epigraph, Gertrude Stein suggests that the link between individual stories and the full scope of history arises from moments when those stories overlap and echo one another. No single subject, she suggests, could ever be representative of the whole system of history, and yet, every subject provides a way to access it. Similarly, much as an 1853 illustration depicting Clotel's death would come to signify the deaths of other characters in later circulations, the repetition and revision of *Clotel's* multiple iterations insist on a network of injuries extending beyond the scope of any one single instance. As characters from one edition blur into those from another, exchanging names and trading fates, Brown's sequence of novels shifts from depicting private disasters of exemplary characters into a more structural history that moves between the individual figure's particular suffering and the legal and social positions into which multiple figures can be slotted.

Through this associative version of sympathy, in which the object of suffering cannot be grasped as an individual but can only ever be encountered as a node opening onto the suffering of unseen others, Brown also provides a way of imagining continuity between redress for the historical events of slavery and present harm. Much as readerly outrage migrates from the death of an established character like Clotel to the potential deaths of those like her, Brown's presentation of history allows protest to transfer across temporal divides as well. Through his pattern of serial republication, Brown suggests that the protest of slavery should continue after slavery's nominal end to provide commemoration, but also to enable the recognition and protest of

analogous oppressions. In other words, his work asserts that the year 1867 has as much need for its own edition of *Clotel* as 1864. Read as both precursor and answer to Scott's call for radical historiography, the *Clotel* sequence's reiterated histories of abuse might provide one means out of the pattern of repetitive harms that, if not allowing an escape of past wrongs, could perhaps at least make room for a shift in future repetition.⁴

Seriality and Brown's Republications

Critics in American studies have increasingly examined how the serial publication of texts reflected and shaped their readers' collective experience of time. Christopher Looby, for instance, tracks how public fervor over the cliffhangers of E. D. E. N. Southworth's 1859 novel *The Hidden Hand* in the *New York Ledger* redirected its audience's focus from unfolding national events to "depoliticized mass entertainment," enabling the *Ledger's* continued neutrality (2004, 197). Following Benedict Anderson's model of an "imagined community" formed through simultaneous reading, Patricia Okker, too, has noted the serial novel's tendency to move from the singular to the plural. As she writes, this sense of shared readership joins with the text's episodic structure to make the serial novel "an ideal form for exploring not the individual identity of an American 'self,' but rather a collective understanding of the group" (Okker 2003, 3). Given the already heterogeneous environment of the magazine, in which novels are published as fragments among a host of other articles, serial forms push us away from a model of literature as an isolated endeavor toward an emphasis on its multiplicity as a mass media form produced communally.

Recent work has also underlined the potential for more ambivalent and conflicting relationships to that collective temporality. For Melissa Gniadek (2014), seriality offers insight into the repetitive processes of settler colonialism, destabilizing narratives of progress with episodic plots and changeable vistas. Working from the simultaneous availability of Martin Delany's novel *Blake* as a serial publication and as a collected volume, Katy Chiles (2008) has questioned whether these reading publics were rigidly national. As she notes, the overlapping temporalities of these editions, one of which appears complete and the other ongoing, allows for a version of nationhood that is not

confined to any singular sense of history. By creating a work that is neither simply in nor out of step with national temporality, she argues that Delany makes space for the transnational subject who is “positioned within and without the nation, in both senses of *without*” (325). Such scholarship points to the conflicting historical trajectories that the serial can sustain as it bridges between ephemeral issues and the larger unfolding of the narrative as a whole.

The link between seriality and multiplicity that these scholars describe is certainly relevant to the *Clotel* series, especially given *Miralda*'s publication in the *Weekly Anglo-African*. However, these models fail to encompass Brown's pattern of persistent revision and republication. Unlike the discrete episodes of the periodical press, whose patterns of suspense and resolution drive readers toward the gratification of the next issue, the serial publication of the *Clotel* novels is not driven by plot or audience anticipation. Instead, their repetition and divergences produce a seriality that pushes against the limits of personhood to represent how histories can connect individuals. Brown provides a seriality centered not on plot, but on character and a history that exceeds character. Throughout the *Clotel* series' many editions, the bulk of Brown's prose remains unchanged, and in the broad strokes of action, the outline of all four books is much the same. An enslaved woman's two adolescent daughters are abruptly auctioned off, both to infatuated white men who father one or two daughters with the women before dying or growing unfaithful and returning the women and their children to the slave market. In each novel, one woman from these various generations will fall in love with a black revolutionary and eventually reunite with him in the freedom of Europe. Another will find herself trapped on a bridge by slave hunters and drown herself in the Potomac. Yet, the figure who will bear these fates is changeable, as are the details of the lives running alongside her, so that each of Brown's *Clotel* novels offers its own set of characters, but each of these sets overlaps with the others, changing and unwriting the characters that have gone before. Through this blurring of individual into sequence, Brown presents a version of how sympathy can be attached to the systemic, while also refusing to let any single figure be flattened into a spectacle of pure victimhood.

This formal approach to the writing of a reparative history proves homologous to the notoriously unruly structure of *Clotel* itself, which has never settled with total comfort into the generic category of the

novel.⁵ The long-standing critical treatment of the first iteration of *Clotel* as a clumsy overabundance of plotlines that was gradually polished in subsequent editions has come to be replaced with a more favorable appraisal of its sprawling form. M. Giulia Fabi, for instance, describes its multitudinous plotlines as “a finely tuned literary tool” that Brown designed to mimic “the overwhelming, absurd, brutal, uncertain qualities of the ‘peculiar institution,’ . . . mirror[ing] in the very structure of the novel the uncertainty and limited control that were characteristic of slave life” (2004, xvii). Ivy Wilson, too, defends Brown, suggesting that the problem rests in the misapplied expectations of readers rather than with Brown’s technical skill. He proposes that judging *Clotel* strictly as a novel misses the unique harnessing of “pastiche and, especially, bricolage” that allows Brown to ventriloquize the array of voices debating slavery and abolition (Wilson 2011, 38). Following Wilson, I suggest that the form of *Clotel*, as a single text, becomes most comprehensible when understood as homologous to the sequence of its published variants as a whole. That is, the multiplicity of *Clotel* does not drop out of later versions because Brown develops some previously lacking finesse, but because that multiplicity has been embedded elsewhere, in the very structure of its serial publication.

Despite the versions’ manifest similarity in content, contemporary references to the *Clotel* series suggest the possibility that its audience might have encountered more than just one edition. On the title page to the second edition of his 1863 work *The Black Man*, Brown heralds himself as the “author of ‘Clotelle [*sic*],’ ‘Sketches of Places and People Abroad,’ and ‘Miralda, or the Beautiful Quadroon,’ etc.,” hinting to his audience that *Clotel* and *Miralda* were equally necessary reading. Several other sources took note of this cue and credited Brown with the two works individually, including the *Liberator*, the *Douglass’ Monthly*,⁶ and Hollis Read’s *The Negro Problem Solved* (1864, 183). The *Liberator*’s audience, in particular, would have been saturated in the series. Although the journal ceased publishing before the 1867 *Clotelle* was released, the *Liberator* announced all of the other three novels in various forms, such as admiring reviews of the earliest *Clotel* in 1854, its above mention of *Miralda* alongside *Clotel* in 1862, and ads for the 1864 *Clotelle* that ran repeatedly upon the book’s publication.⁷ Brown and his publishers, at least, thus seem to have imagined the various iterations of *Clotel* as having significantly overlapping

audiences. While there is no concrete evidence that nineteenth-century readers experienced this seriality in their own time, from the vantage of the present, we can recognize that Brown's publishing practices would have made it possible.

Perhaps the most notable engagement with Brown's seriality, however, lies implicitly in another text, Katherine Davis Chapman Tillman's 1902 poem "Clotelle—A Tale of Florida." Tillman's poem promises to "tell the story as it was told to me" of "the bright-eyed slave Clotelle" (1991, 155). Tillman's retelling of "Clotelle," which literary critic Barbara McCaskill (2011, 70) describes as "reviv[ing] the tragic mulatta tale and nod[ding] to William Wells Brown's 1853 novel," recounts an enslaved woman who drowns herself after her lecherous owner publicly hangs her lover. While Tillman's depiction of a slave woman leaping in the water reenacts the most famous scene in the *Clotel* novels, her poem does more than recapitulate the past. Instead, as McCaskill notes, Tillman recirculates the figure of Clotel to address the issues of her present, using her new version of that familiar character to bring attention to the suffering of contemporary victims of lynching. Recognizing these repetitions that Brown set off can likewise provide a means for us to consider how past and present traumas might be told together.

This practice of seriality attends to the connectedness between individuals in similar positions of precarity and refuses to isolate any one subject as the exemplar of that suffering. It therefore provides the critical tools to imagine systems that exceed the span of a single life and that stretch past the bounds of any single novel. Brown's insistence on revision and republication encourages the extrapolation of readerly outrage on behalf of an exceptional object of sympathy outward to a host of unseen but contiguous subjects. As it constructs this network between the singular and the plural, it also provides a way of representing historical connection, enabling the immediacy of his characters' traumas to extend not just to the exemplary dead but also to the past experiences of surviving former slaves. In other words, this extrapolation allows reparations to have a stake in present injustices and not merely to offer belated attention to the dead. Brown's construction of history as explicitly eligible for retrospective editing thus also prevents his writing from reifying African American suffering, emphasizing the potential for change and the inability of the shared to subsume what is private.

Sentimental Association and the Work of Repair

The difficulty of representing the past's ongoing presence in the lives of current generations is closely connected to sentimentalism's long-standing trouble with transferring the sympathy for individual protagonists to a broader social scale. As Lauren Berlant (1988, 641) argues in her discussion of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, "when sentimentality meets politics, it uses personal stories to tell of structural effects, but in so doing it risks thwarting its very attempt to perform rhetorically a scene of pain that must be soothed politically." That is, because liberalism marks off feelings as the private business of each subject, the connections between reader and character made by much of abolitionist literature discourage broader collectivities. In his essay, "The Meaning of Working through the Past," Theodor Adorno ([1959] 1998, 101) provides a parallel cautionary tale about the risks of a reparative history based on the individual. Describing a woman who appears genuinely upset by a performance of *The Diary of Anne Frank*, the account lingers on the selective empathy of her cry that "that girl at least should have been allowed to live." Adorno agonizes that, much as the willingness to see the humanity of one Jewish child is a positive step for an anti-Semite, the synecdochal role intended for Anne Frank's memory had instead become a means to limit acknowledgment of Holocaust victims as a group, writing that "the individual case, which should stand for, and raise awareness about, the terrifying totality, by its very individuation became an alibi for the totality that the woman forgot" (101). Exemplarity threatens, in other words, to replace the political with a wholly singular projection of intimacy.

However, the presentation of subjects as unique and uniquely knowable also provides the genre of sentimental discourse with much of its force as a tactic for social change. The popularity of Anne Frank as synecdoche for a genocide stems in large part from her diary's ability to construct the feeling of a personal relationship and to stir up mourning. More pointedly, though, preserving a sense of the personal as politically meaningful allows for a focus on ethical appeal and a recognition of the humanity that the legacy of slavery has denied. It is important to represent a character like *Clotel* as a complete subject with her own strengths and desires that are worthy of recognition. Without this investment in her as an individual, Brown would be unable to depict the horror of her dehumanization. As a result, the

sympathy he evokes must be able to move between the specific and the general, so that it is able to recognize the private particularity of each injury, the depersonalized system that created these harms, and the extent to which repair of the systemic will not wholly repair personal loss. Readers must be able to make the shift from feeling mourning and outrage evoked by an event like Clotel's death to feeling that grief and rage toward deaths to which they have no other connection, except that they are products of the same system. Brown, in other words, must create a sympathy that operates by association, one based on position in a system of power rather than personal intimacy, able to transfer from one subject to another based on their shared harm without overwriting the differences that define their separate humanities.

This may sound like a purely literary problem, and a fairly abstract one at that, but one of the central critiques of reparations discourse has been this balance between recognizing a shared harm without overwriting individual identity. Wendy Brown, among others, has warned that if reparation claims are made into an official policy, they risk enshrining the claimants into a historical stasis, defining their future identities by a simplistic model of past harm. The appeal to state power as a source of justice, she argues, "fixes the identities of injured and injuring as social positions, and codifies as well the meanings of their actions against all possibilities of indeterminacy, ambiguity, and struggle for resignification or repositioning" (W. L. Brown 1995, 27). For Brown, reparations' assertion of two parties, those owing and those due, tends to fortify the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion that brought about the initial wrong. Still worse, as a state-centered policy, a governmental reparations program tends to reinforce the sovereign claim over all concerned (27).⁸ Claimants, she suggests, are forced to work within and, to some extent, to embrace the oppressive categories that allowed the initial injury, in order to make their claim legible. Reparation based on the preservation of traumatic history can, in this way, be a site for the conservation of these abusive hierarchies of power, installing victim and aggressor as institutionalized roles from which subsequent generations may never depart.

Although reparations have the potential to constrain African Americans as the perpetual witnesses to history, they also have the potential to elide injury in favor of a superficial progress. One of the central critiques of redress, particularly when framed as monetary debt, has

been a desire not to gloss over the irreparability of historical trauma with a redemptive story of the present. Much as they are needed, if reparations are to be made, they could also become rhetorical tools of those wanting to forget slavery by claiming that, since it had been “repaired,” we could now all stop talking about it. It is worth asking, then, whether we can speak of finding peace alongside the memory of historical atrocity without disrespect to what is unfixable from that atrocity. In the context of the Irish Famine, David Lloyd (2005, 153) emphasizes the danger of such a healing taking the form of cooption:

Can redress then take place except in disjunction from the order of the present which is no less than the future imposed on the dead by past violence? Mourning is no redress, if mourning the dead entails coming to terms with their loss, a loss not ours to justify, not ours to move on from, when our very capacity to move on is predicated on the progress that judged the dead dispensable. Commemoration too is unavailing insofar as it fixes the dead in the past where what the dead require is a place in the futures that were denied them.

The narrative of reparations, in other words, can come dangerously close to a teleology of progress, because, as Lloyd warns, the presentation of atrocity as an assimilable point in history mirrors the original hostility, casting its injury as a necessary stage in the arrival of the present. By shaping a genocide’s end into a story of overcoming, one reenacts the erasures of the original violence, encouraging a false veneer of closure over atrocities that we can never fix.

Beneath these alternating fears of a past intruding too much or too little into the present rests a common fear that the incorporation of individual trauma into a collective trauma spanning multiple generations must result in an overwriting of one or the other. Put differently, the debate around reparations makes clear how inadequate a liberal model of subjectivity is for capturing processes of racialization that span many lifetimes. The desire that history keep a respectful distance from ongoing experience and that past lives be honored as having been more than necessary steps on the way to the present are both to some extent reasonable, and I do not want to understate their value as counters to dehumanizing rhetoric. Nevertheless, by moving further from a model of isolated selfhood, the reparations debate can imagine new forms of historical connection and refuse to accept a strand of individualism that is itself inextricable from racial oppression.⁹

Brown's repetition instead constructs a more complicated network of subjects, personalized enough to attract affective attachment but always kept adjacent to others struggling under the same condition. The result shifts his presentation of both history and sympathetic connection. For instance, in tracking Brown's serial republications, one register of repetition is more obvious than the rest. With the exception of *Miralda*, which only appeared in newspaper text, a set of common images flashes between the novels in the series of engraved illustrations: a cluster of white men watching dogs pursue a black man across a lake, a black boy standing on a table as white men play cards around him, two caricatured black men wrestling as one tries to pull a tooth from the other, and, most famously, a black woman in a white gown poised midair in her leap upward off a bridge as a group of men lunge after her. Heedless of the contexts that might mark the early texts as radical activism and the later ones as memorial, the pristine repetition of these scenes refuses to be marshalled into its appropriate order in the progress of liberal history.

Such a recycling of moments represents an alternative economy of time, suturing together narratives across the space of three decades, even reappearing in Brown's final published work—*Our Southern Home* (1880). These recurrent illustrations undermine the linear positivism of history, replacing it with what Roland Barthes (1981, 93) has described in photography as an inability “to conceive *duration*, affectively or symbolically.”¹⁰ Rather than seeing steps in a historical march toward freedom, we encounter these images frozen between the antebellum and the postbellum in a state of unresolvable suspension—the swimmer will always be mid-stroke ahead of a lunging hound, the slave child will always stand waiting for the gamble that could send him away, and the fleeing woman will always hang balanced between rise and fall.

In these glimpses of a stopped time, personal identity also takes a curious turn as editions shift their characters and plots. If the conceit of the literary illustration is to give the reader a sure window into the world of the text, Brown places his readers in the position of seeing multiple characters who are given the same face. The swimming fugitive seen in *Clotel*'s illustration represents a briefly mentioned character named Harry, who was enslaved by the Pecks with a “wife . . . in town” and who survives the river only to be murdered on land (136). However, by the time of the image's 1864 publication in *Clotelle*, it is

presented as being the portrait of either the protagonist Jerome who swims to safety or, conversely, his unnamed companion who drowns in the attempt (61). Our instinct to look toward the fleeing figure and see him as a unique subject with social ties and an inner life—even if these are merely the implied backstory of a fictional character—runs up against a text that makes that identification impossible. The three characters that upturned face represents are not interchangeable. We have names and histories for two of the three, and each narrative of the slave swimming toward freedom ends differently. Nonetheless, the illustration's repetition works to make them indistinguishable. Looking at the danger of one character is the same as looking at the danger of the other. Perhaps more importantly, the image's appeal to the reader to recognize this cruelty and to condemn it functions not just in the absence of identification, but in its refusal. We cannot know who the man in the illustration is because it is his position that demands action, not his personal qualities.

In that sense, the work of Brown's illustration pushes back against the energy of his text's genre. Where the novel seeks to characterize, giving us an illusory insight into private subjectivities, the illustration is counterintuitively impersonal. The swimmer depicted is not a portrait; his image registers not as the illustration of an individual but that of a pervasive atrocity. Thus, the ethical call with which the illustration confronts its viewers does not need to explain whether its fugitive is the heroic genius Jerome, to whom readers have become attached, or the unnamed slave whose history will never be told. Its demand for a reader response operates regardless of its subject's personal identity. This iconicity verges on the spectacle, risking a reduction of the black body from person to victim, but Brown's presentation of what is effectively a single face representing three different men also provides a glimpse of the associative logics structuring his novels.

The Subjects of Repetition

The depersonalization of these images, however, represents a major formal challenge to a novelistic tradition steeped in individual subjectivity. This is even more true for reparative histories, in which some of the most pressing connections exist between the death of one character and the ongoing danger of another. There is something oddly non-narratable in this insistence that the true substance of history lies in

the denouement, in the amorphous extension of life beyond identifiable crisis, and this problem becomes all the more difficult when the history in question is of a crisis not survived.¹¹ The attempt to join one's history back to the death of another, recognizing both imbrication in the death and departure from it, requires a close managing of the matter of exemplarity. Brown's stream of multiply identified martyrs gives his narratives a means of departing from the singular catastrophe's effect on the exemplary hero, without losing the particular grief of that catastrophe in its wake. If the timeline of an exemplary death has a sharply defined moment of closure, the narrative irresolution of deaths that happens and happens again to subjects who are never entirely individuated from one another creates a history that refuses to be distanced from the present or narrowed to a uniquely sympathetic victim. Instead, repetitions of the *Clotel* series force the recognition that the immediacy of the individual, with all her loveable exceptionalities, cannot be separated from the facelessness of a structurally defined social position. Instead, they insist that the reader extend sympathy without providing the illusion of intimacy that makes suffering subject appear fully knowable.

As a lecturer on the abolitionist circuit, Brown was very aware that his white public's sympathy for the cause depended partly on his willingness to construct and present for scrutiny a persona that was simultaneously deserving and accessible. An interest in managing the limits of these celebrity-public relationships emerges accordingly in his prose. For instance, the autobiographical "Narrative of the Life and Escape of William Wells Brown," which was bundled with the first publication of *Clotel*, forms the prologue, and in some sense the necessary backstory, to the novel that follows it. Narrated in the third person, "Narrative of the Life" compels readers to recognize their encounter with the author as an encounter with a deliberately constructed character who is created little differently than the tragic *Clotel* and who will allow them to claim no greater intimacy with an extratextual Brown. Moreover, Geoffrey Sanborn (2013) has recently suggested that Brown's plagiarism, particularly in his possible coauthorship of William and Ellen Crafts' *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom* (1860), allows the author a kind of liberatory energy. Tracking the temporal suspensions and dilations of a plot punctuated by long paragraphs of expropriated text, Sanborn contends that the narrative refuses to follow the contours of its expected form and thereby

allows its authors a theatrical presence as ringmasters ushering readers through the experience. The author figure is therefore simultaneously central to the text and removed from it, as Brown reminds the reader simultaneously that the show is his but that it also remains just a show.

His shifting protagonists in the *Clotel* series unfold in a similar balance between one exceptionally sympathetic individual and an impersonal population. The *Clotel* novels open with a rather suspect logic of heroic exception by focusing on protagonists who deserve freedom not intrinsically but because they are apparently misplaced within the slave system as either too extraordinarily white or too extraordinarily brilliant to be enslaved. George, the most prominent male slave and romantic lead in *Clotel*, appears as a man “as white as most white persons [so that] no one would suppose that any African blood coursed through his veins” (222). When replaced by Jerome, who was “of pure African origin” and “perfectly black,” in subsequent editions (W. W. Brown 1860–61, 2:27; 1864, 57; 1867, 57), racial exceptionalism is replaced by exceptional merit and masculinity. In his first appearance, Jerome’s appearance is pointedly idealized. He is described as “very fine looking, tall, slim, and erect as any one could possibly be,” put forward as artistic ideal for portraitists, and likened in his affections to a parade of Western icons of devotion; as Brown writes, “Dante did not more love his Beatrice, Swift his Stella, Waller his Saccharissa, Goldsmith his Jessamy bride, or Burn’s his Mary, than did Jerome his Miralda” (1860–61, 2:27; 1864, 58; 1867, 58). Brown thus adds Jerome into the pantheon of romantic heroes, but does so at the cost of his typicality. Jerome is no average slave. Instead, he proves extraordinary among white men as well, eventually flourishing as freedman through a Benjamin Franklin–style program of self-discipline and autodidacticism (W. W. Brown 1860–61, 2:32; 1864, 89–90; 1867, 89–90).

Similarly, in each iteration, both between generations and between editions, the central female characters are jointly remarkable for having too much white-coded beauty and white ancestry of too high a social standing. Threaded through all of the versions of the scene at the auction block—the first prolonged description of this figure—is the declaration that either Clotel or Isabella, depending on the edition, stands with “her whole appearance indicating one superior to her condition,” with the heavy implication that evil of slavery lies in its clumsy selection of victims (W. W. Brown 1853, 62–63; 1864, 8; 1867, 8). While *Miralda*’s first two installments have not been recovered,

similarities in plot between its surviving twelve installments and the three other editions make the original existence of such a scene highly likely, and subsequent passages do dwell on the aestheticized whiteness of its female slaves. The exaltedness of the women's whiteness changes as the middle-generation characters shift from being the daughters of Thomas Jefferson to being the descendants of Thomas Jefferson to the slightly more dubious status of being the daughters of a slave woman who "might be heard boasting that she was the daughter of an American Senator" (1864, 5–6; 1867, 5–6). However, in all cases, the text demands a recognition of an inborn ranking in white society too distinguished to match the condition of an enslaved woman. The comment by a slaveholder that Clotelle "is far above the station of a slave" in the 1864 and 1867 editions is typical of such an attitude, which condemns slavery as no place for beautiful light-skinned women, while tacitly accepting the institution as it applies to darker-complected women lacking bourgeois tastes (1864, 76; 1867, 76).

The *Clotel* novels would each seem, then, to impose the same self-defeating borders on sentiment as the dramatization of Anne Frank that I discussed earlier. Slavery should never have happened, at least not to *those* women. However, Brown frames these exceptional individuals within the newly emerging language of demography population. The opening chapters that have survived begin the novel on the most impersonal of terms. The 1853 *Clotel* opens with the claim that "with the growing population in the Southern States, there is a fearful increase of half whites" (81), while the 1864 edition shifts this wording to suggest that "the increase of mulattoes has been very great" (5). Both continue to claim that three-quarters of slaves have at least partially white ancestry (W. W. Brown 1853, 81; 1864, 5). The 1867 edition offers a similar, but more sexualized account of the South's considerable population of "Quadroon women" as an "unlawful product of the crime of human bondage" (5). The introduction of the three women in these chapters is therefore always preceded by the knowledge that they are not unique in their particularity. If white faces are necessary to elicit sympathy from white audiences, Brown ensures that these white faces are shown as products of statistical inevitability and sexual violence, not of unusual inner worth. *Clotel* likewise subverts the novelistic tendency to "solve" a social problem through a happy private ending by moving the narrative almost immediately away from the successful marriage of novel's final central couple,

George and Mary. The conclusion is instead punctuated by the numerical accounting of many more slaves who remain captive to Christian owners, tabulating sums for each denomination (1853, 244). The novel thus begins and ends on the level of the impersonal crowd, refusing to let readers lose sight of the systemic problem however much they may feel attached to the characters in particular.

Moreover, because of their rewriting and republication, Brown's characters taken as a whole are always more fungible than they are individual; if they are marked as uniquely worthy of salvation, Brown refuses to let them be entirely unique. Rather, the most consistently variable point of the four novels is the shuffling of identities. In its central plot, each novel follows three generations of enslaved, mixed-race women: in the original publication, it is Currer, her daughters Clotel and Althesa, and Clotel's daughter, Mary; then, in *Miralda*, there is Agnes, her daughters, Isabella and Marion, and Isabella's daughter Miralda; and, finally, for 1864 and 1867, Agnes, Isabella, and Marion retain their names, but Miralda becomes Clotelle. Even the generational focus of the title shifts, moving from the second to the third generation between the first novel and the next three. With this network of matriarchs and sisters already leading to a partial overlap between characters within each novel, Brown's repetition forces us to consider his characters not as fully knowable humans but as shifting constructs for whom one may feel connection but not a stable intimacy. The woman illustrated leaping from the bridge is never simply either Clotel, granddaughter of Jefferson, or Isabella, mother of Miralda and descendent of Jefferson, or Isabella, mother of Clotelle and granddaughter of an unnamed senator. She is, rather, the intersection of all three of those figures, producing an amalgamation that is never quite a subject and leaving no singular humanity for a coercive recognition to latch onto fully.

Joining a number of critics who point to the subversive potential of Brown's use of the tragic mulatta,¹² Carla Peterson offers the compelling reading that, within the 1853 edition, the generic quality of female slaves in the novel matches a historical dehumanization. She contends that, for Brown, "the production and inflationary proliferation of a series of tragic mulattas" is an explicit presentation, and oblique critique, of the commodification of female slaves, and certainly, black or mixed-race female bodies are, under the cultural logic of the nineteenth century, more susceptible to such denials of subjectivity

(Peterson 1992, 570). However, the fungibility that Peterson notes in the characters of Curren, Clotel, and others can also accommodate the far more positive project of minimizing subjectivity not to dehumanize but to allow the novels to emphasize the structural and systemic, while also constructing a form of narrative privacy for characters often left open for readerly scrutiny and judgment. In fact, when read across editions, the fungibility that Peterson notes is by no means limited to female slaves. Affluent white men, whether slaveholding or not, prove to be an equally interchangeable category. Between editions, Henry Morton becomes Augustine Morton; John Peck becomes James Wilson; Horatio Green becomes Henry Linwood; James Crawford becomes Augustine Cardinay; and Miles Carleton becomes Mr. Carlingham, losing both his first name and his romance plot in the process. From this angle, the insistence that characters be recognizable more from their relationship to the overall schema of the novels than from the projection of some unique interiority, appears to be a general strategy of Brown's novels, and not a particularity of the commodified subject.

As a result, it is more useful to consider these superimposed networks as promoting sympathy through this association between discrete subjects. The peculiar relationship that Brown constructs not just between sisters (such as Clotel/Althesa and Isabella/Marion) but also between incarnations of the same character in different editions (such as Clotel/Isabella and Althesa/Marion) encourages the work of extrapolation necessary to move from feeling outrage or grief for a character you feel you know intimately toward extending that outrage or grief to the anonymous crowds that you will never know. In other words, the ability of character positions in Brown's narratives to accommodate the insertion of multiple characters does not undermine the individual standing of each iteration, but it does demand a recognition that these characters always exist in part beyond themselves. If the failure of sentimentalism in Adorno's story is that only "that girl" is granted a right to live, Brown's persistent reidentification of the sympathetic victim forces the reader to recognize a perpetually widening category of "girls like that." Each version of a suffering character synecdochally opens out to other victims akin to her but marked as different enough that the original figure is never entirely subsumed in her symbolic function. It thus serves as a means of performing *Clotel's* declaration that the exemplary death at the book's center

“tells not only its own story of grief, but speaks of a thousand wrongs and woes beside” because the central grief is never fully extractable from the thousand others running in parallel beside it (209).

Diegetically, too, Brown’s invocation of sympathy hinges not on a perfect knowledge of the suffering subject, but on a partial misrecognition of that person. Mary, the final female protagonist of *Clotel*, escapes slavery to live in France not because of her particular merit, but because of a chance encounter with a Frenchman, M. Devenant, who offers to purchase her freedom because of a perceived family resemblance. The connection he extends to her is far from a utopian one—Mary’s immediate response is to treat it as a pick-up line and confirmation that Devenant is a “knave” and a sexual threat (240). Moreover, in later editions, Brown adds further emphasis to the joint importance and risk of this moment of association by inserting it into a chapter in which the young slave woman arrives in the home of her new owners, only to have their neighbors gossip anxiously and accurately that she so resembles the daughter of a nearby white family that the two must somehow be related. The 1864 *Clotelle* records the shock that this likeness creates among slaveholders whose social boundaries refuse to acknowledge its origin: “I am sure I never saw two faces more alike in my life,” declares one (76). The scandal of this resemblance for the couple, who owns Clotelle while being social equals and intimates with her nearly identical cousin, is its troubling of the color line. For the readers of *Clotel*, however, this similarity between slave and owner is instead another record of the history of sexual violence that has driven much of the plot.

Despite its inherent danger, the scene of recognition between Mary and Devenant nonetheless proves to be one of the most productive of the narrative, spurring a disinterested white character to action and, in a text structured by systemic rape, allowing Mary the possibility for a relationship partially outside of sexual power.¹³ It is able to act as such because Brown carefully delimits what such a connection can and cannot do. When Devenant first speaks with Mary, she immediately turns his offer of help into a negotiation about how this sympathy would affect her autonomy:

“If you are willing I will try and buy you from your present owner, and you shall be free.” . . . “Why should you wish to set *me* free?” I asked. “I had an only sister,” he replied, “who died three years ago

in France, and you are so much like her that had I not know of her death, I would most certainly have taken you for her." "However much I may resemble your sister, you are aware that I am not her, and why take so much interest in one whom you never saw before?" "The love," said he, "which I had for my sister is transferred to you." (W. W. Brown 1853, 240)

As Brown makes clear in this dialogue, the overlap between subjects that sympathy creates does not overwrite the particularity of each person involved. Mary is deliberate in clarifying to her would-be rescuer that "however much I may resemble your sister, you are aware that I am not her." Instead, Mary retains a sense of her own self while willingly adding the role of successor to Devenant's dead sister and object of his "transferred" affection. The slippage left by this misrecognition leaves Mary the space to accept sympathy without allowing it to define her. Brown's redefinition of sympathy as association, rather than true intimacy, thus also prevents the extension of freedom from becoming an adjudication of the private character of the enslaved. Mary's liberation is presented as the product of a white abolitionist's whim, not as an exception visited on an exceptionally deserving victim; Mary's thoughts remain private from Devenant and from sympathetic readers. Close as this elision skirts toward an elision of Mary, it also allows for an abolitionism not dependent on the individual merit or especial pathos of the subject being freed. The resemblance and therefore the possibility for freedom occur arbitrarily, as the product of markedly improbable chance and the happenstance extension of feeling for a dead sister to a living stranger.

Mary's escape is thus not an inevitable outcome of her worth, a fact underlined in the three subsequent editions, in which the scenes with Devenant are interwoven with the very different results of a similar relationship between an enslaved woman and a white man, Marion and Dr. Morton. As these later texts recount, the relationship also offers a temporary safety. Dr. Morton's death, however, returns not only Marion but also their two daughters to slavery, marking suffering as an equally likely outcome of the connection between Mary and Devenant. Moreover, after Mary's successful emancipation, the narrative makes it far more difficult to dismiss Marion's hope for a simpler escape through marriage as delusion. The difference is not that Mary (or her later counterparts, Miralda and Clotelle) has chosen well and

Marion has chosen poorly, because the harm is a product of a depersonalized system. The repetition highlights how little the character of the Mary/Miralda/Clotelle figure matters in defining her vulnerability or in the reader's ability to extend sympathy when faced with need.

Like sympathy itself, this suspension of a heroic notion of agency is deeply gendered and does not extend to the male leads, George and Jerome, whose escapes are more obviously won by their own efforts. But even given this failing, Brown's presentation of this encounter between Devenant and Mary as largely arbitrary works to overturn the conventional teleologies of the novel, which would mark out the success or failure of a character as an inevitable reflection of her inner worth. The readerly tendency to audit a protagonist's choices and extend pity toward the worthy does not stand against Brown's determination to look past the individual. Mary lives and Marion dies, not because one deserved to live and the other did not, but because both are caught in a system of violence that does not care which woman of color it kills.

Closures

Brown's emphasis on side-shadowing the fate of one character with the fate of another returns us to the second and more subtle problem raised by literature's attempt to represent the need for large-scale redress: by electing a victim of singular worth to signify a mass injury, sentimental literature allows her death to serve as a source of apparent closure for that more expansive atrocity and, thereby, to become an increasingly distant pain to a reader who has finished reading. Adorno ([1959] 1998, 103) argues that for true reparations, quite the opposite is needed, as "the past will have been worked through only when the causes of what happened then have been eliminated. Only because the causes continue to exist does the captivating spell of the past remain to this day unbroken." For Adorno, history is useless and inert unless it allows the critical revelation of its persistence into the present.

In Brown's work, this possibility takes on narrative life. Because the characters of these deaths are continually eligible to be resurrected, redefined, allowed a longer life, and potentially to be accorded a new fate, the distance that might be installed between a reader,

particularly a postbellum reader, and the emplotted event is continually disturbed. Although many of the narrative deaths remain constant, there are enough exceptions that change becomes a perpetual possibility: for instance, the central slaveowner dodges a first-edition death to survive to see his daughter's death in the next three editions, while Jerome's life is extended in the 1867 edition only to have him die at a later point. The instability and substitutability allows for a layering effect that denies the closure of individual death and instead privileges the ongoing presence of the structures surrounding that death. By denying the death of the individual the power to end the narrative, Brown extends the time frame of the event beyond what the single lifespan can encompass.

None of the editions closes with a strong sense of their events truly being resolved. The 1853 and 1860–61 versions both conclude with the granddaughter and her love interest uneasily exiled in Europe before a striking shift to second person calls the readers to act themselves. Meanwhile, the 1864 edition ends with a converted slaveowner eventually returning from Europe to the United States with “the full determination” of emancipating and assisting his slaves, a resolution that Brown never actually confirms as having happened. The plotlines that are wrapped up in one edition can, in others, be reopened. Horatio Green, for instance, in *Clotel* largely exits the narrative after his slaves Mary and George escape his power. His counterpart in the later editions, Henry Linwood, on the other hand, has a nearly Gothic resurrection, returning after the reunion of Jerome and Miralda/Clo-telle as a madman raving in a storm who must be gradually converted to abolitionism by the love of his abandoned daughter. Conversely, where the slaveholding Mrs. Green of the 1853 text eventually turns “friend” to young Mary after having tormented her remorselessly (221), her subsequent counterpart, Mrs. Miller, has no such pleasant fate.¹⁴ In these versions, she dies gruesomely, an alcoholic who is burnt to death in her bed, possibly, it is implied, having been set on fire by the slaves whom she tortured (W. W. Brown, 1864, 102; 1867, 102). A contemporary reader of multiple editions could never be certain that even a minor conclusion had truly been settled; what closure one text offers for readers is made provisional by the others.

The 1867 version, however, is the most explicit in its potential for future revision. This edition is very nearly identical to the one immediately before it, except for its insertion of four final chapters that show

Clotelle and Jerome returning from Europe to support the Union in the Civil War as nurse and doomed soldier. In its repetition and continuation of the 1864 edition, the text implicitly stages the ante- and post-bellum as coexisting in a single continuous narrative, with all the attendant failure of Emancipation to stage an absolute break from the wrongs of slavery. Brown's apparent belief that the Reconstruction needed an abolitionist novel of its own is striking. However, by making his Reconstruction novel fundamentally identical to those written before Emancipation, Brown also presents the history of slavery in a past form as necessary for redressing the continuance of slavery in a new form. Publishing this account of history as an ongoing piece of literature makes clear the ways that the past is equally ongoing. In this last edition, we learn that Jerome, the novel's male lead, has survived a battle with the Confederacy only to die in its aftermath. More strikingly, though, it also leaves room in its ending for still further continuation and alteration. Brown's final lines bring Clotelle up to the moment of his writing at which point she is said to have "established a Freedmen's School, and where at *this* writing,—*now* June, 1867,—[she] resides" (114). The only closure that this novel offers is that of contemporaneity, a dating that promises, rather than forecloses, future revision. Despite the fact that, historically speaking, this future revision never actually took place, this ending is staged such that it always could. History, as Brown provides it, does not end with the present.

As this essay closes, however, I would like to pause on one moment in which the reiterative revision that I have been tracing also halts—in Brown's depiction of the Nat Turner Rebellion, a plot point that remains even after its narrative function in introducing George vanishes after the first edition. Appearing directly before *Clotel*, or in later editions, Isabella, leaps to her death, the chapter ushers a new kind of referentiality into the text. Incorporating historical figures directly into the narration, the passage offers a stable history amid the changing text and thus as a different and potentially more radical form of resistance than elsewhere in the novels. Across four editions, remarkably few changes are made to the chapter recounting this rebellion, "The Arrest." The relevant switches in character names are, of course, maintained; a passage explaining revolutionary urges as a product of white heritage drops out between 1861 and 1864; a handful of punctuation marks drift; and one or two of stylistic details shift, but

on the whole, the chapter stands unaltered from one book to the next and to the next.

To some extent, it is not surprising that an account closely following a publicly available history would have little room for revision, but something more seems to be at work in this fixed point, whose content itself ends with a melancholic reflection on historical fixity. After recounting massacres by both sides, Brown presents the fates of the unsuccessful rebels as a permanent lingering in social exile: "No graves were dug for the negroes, but their bodies became food for dogs and vultures; and their bones, partly calcined by the sun, remained scattered about, as if to mark the mournful fury of servitude and lust of power" (W. W. Brown 1853, 214; 1860–61, 2:27; 1864, 50; 1867, 50). If, as I have been arguing, part of the operation of Brown's revision is to make the past more available to the concerns of the present, such a persistence marks an excess to Brown's narrative of the fight for social inclusion. When Brown returns to Nat Turner for his semi-encyclopedic history, *The Black Man: His Antecedents, His Genius, and His Achievements*, Turner is the occasion for an extra discussion on the function of heroic history. The profile begins:

Biography is individual history, as distinguished from that of communities, of nations, and of worlds. Eulogy is that deserved applause which springs from the virtues and attaches itself to the characters of men. This is not intended either as a biography or a eulogy, but simply a sketch of one whose history has hitherto been neglected, and to the memory of whom the American people are not prepared to do justice. (W. W. Brown 1863, 59)

Brown's writing about Turner is, he claims, too brief to praise the man fully or even to describe him properly. The function of this sketch is not to inform but to mark a neglect, to provide the contour of a memory that must be prepared for before it can be received. The entry is, in effect, a promise of history still to be revealed.

The convolutions of this messianic prophesy of a future arrival of the past, the infinitely deferred time when bodies of murdered rebels might be set to rest, pushes the trauma of slavery out from something that can safely be used in the construction of a unified postwar nation. True, a major drive of the *Clotel* novels is the inclusion of blacks in the civic rights of US citizenship to which Brown implies they have long been entitled. Georgiana Peck, the white moral voice of *Clotel*,

dismisses the suggestion of Liberian colonization with an argument premised on the logic of nationalist nativism, asking, “What right have we, more than the negro, to the soil here, or to style ourselves native Americans? Indeed it is as much their homes as ours, and I have sometimes thought it was more theirs” (W. W. Brown 1853, 158). The freeing of the slaves, too, is endorsed by abolitionist character in *Clotel* as being a benefit to the nation-state, which would head off “the ruin of the Union” (178) and revive the supposedly purer liberty of American revolutionaries (225). Brown’s priorities, on balance, favor a strategic patriotism as the best argument for ending slavery.

Yet this insertion of carnage—which from the perspective of plot is almost wholly extraneous to the narratives of three of the four editions—asserts the rebels as bearers of natural rights beyond the need of state recognition. Brown, describing the Fugitive Slave Law to an English audience in 1851, declared that “instead of being law, it was a declaration of war against the colored people of America,” and continued, “There was no law in the United States, for the colored men. Then if the fugitive would be free, he must stand by his rights” (untitled article, *Plymouth and Devonport Weekly Journal*, May 1, 1851, 5). By violent resistance, however immediately useless the fight, Turner and his comrades demonstrate in Brown’s writing not only the vengeance that whites feared but the claim to ownership of the separate sovereignty which exclusion from US law had implied. This flash of extranational reform sideshadows the much more radical revision of history that Brown did not make, the one in which the rapprochement between state and slaves never occurred. The recurrent but static unclaimed bodies of the slaughtered in Turner’s Revolution, as repetition on a single note, never launch out from themselves into the collective narrative. They remain as reminders of the loose ends of reform as an excess that proves the limits of the nation-state in the repair that Brown proposes.

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Notes

- 1 For recent interpretations of this textual practice, see Geoffrey Sanborn (2013) and Ivy Wilson (2011).
- 2 The University of Virginia's excellent 2006 digital edition collating the four novels, edited by Christopher Mulvey, has made this reading infinitely more accessible.
- 3 For a contemporary example of this form of historiography, as well as an excellent analysis of reparative work, see Ta-Nehisi Coates, "The Case for Reparations," *Atlantic*, June 2014.
- 4 Although it does not receive a good deal of explicit discussion, much of the substructure of my argument is inspired by David Scott's belief in narrative form as means for political change, particularly his provocation that "the anticolonial demand for a certain kind of postcolonial future [might] oblige its histories to produce certain kinds of pasts" (2004, 7).
- 5 *Clotel*, in the singular, will henceforth refer specifically to the 1853 edition, as will any citations of the novels not otherwise labeled. Because of the similarity of titles, my parenthetical citation will include the year for citations where the edition is not clarified elsewhere, and, for citations of multiple editions, page numbers will appear chronologically.
- 6 See untitled review of *The Black Man*, *Liberator*, December 12, 1862 (issue 32, no. 50: 198); and "The Black Man, His Antecedents, His Genius, and His Achievements," *Douglass' Monthly*, January 1963, 771.
- 7 See untitled review, *Liberator*, December 12, 1862 (issue 24, no. 3: 1). For instances of these *Clotel* advertisements, see "Books for the Camp Fires," *Liberator*, March 25, 1864 (issue 34, no. 13: 51); untitled advertisement, *Liberator*, April 1, 1864 (issue 34, no. 14: 56); and untitled advertisement, April 8, 1864 (issue 34, no. 15: 59).
- 8 Wendy Brown (1995, xii) stages her argument in part as an interrogation of the hazards of heritable trauma, of how "certain wounded attachments and profound historical distortions [might] form the basis for ungrounded persistence in ontological essentialism and epistemological foundationalism, for infelicitous formulations of identity rooted in injury, for litigiousness as a way of political life, and for a resurgence of rights discourse among left academics."
- 9 On the racialization of individualism, see Sharon Holland (2008).
- 10 Saidiya Hartman (2007, 133–35) performs a similar analysis of staged "slave portraits" reenacted by contemporary schoolchildren.
- 11 For a discussion of the narrative extension beyond death in the context of trauma studies, see Cathy Caruth (1996).
- 12 See, for instance, Paul Gilmore (1997), M. Giulia Fabi (2001), or Eve Allegra Raimon (2004).
- 13 The extent to which this truly proves to be an escape from coerced sexual relations is extremely limited, as Mary and Devenant marry shortly after

her escape. Mary, however, describes the marriage in platonic terms, declaring that she had “loved him, but it was only that affection which we have for one who has done us a lasting favor.” Devenant’s death shortly after the marriage grants her a relatively sheltered status of widowed daughter-in-law (206).

- 14 After *Clotel*, the role of Mrs. Green is divided between a comparatively benign Mrs. Linwood and her mother, Mrs. Miller, who takes on the cruel nature of Mrs. Green, but to a heightened extent.

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