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EN375: Captivity

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The Power of Submissiveness in *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*

In the scholarship on *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*, critics disagree as to who authored the text. On the one hand, Daneen Winthrop claims that *Running* was a collaboration between William and Ellen Craft, largely on the grounds that the inclusion of and intense focus on the case of Salomé Muller is indicative of both Ellen's and the text's "decidedly protofeminist" concerns (964). On the other hand, Geoffrey Sanborn makes a convincing case for William Wells Brown, an African-American abolitionist, novelist, and playwright, and attributes the source of the Salomé Muller material, instead, to a Brownean plagiarism of the *Boston Daily Atlas* article "The Story of Ida May." This need not invalidate Winthrop's argument for Ellen's co-authorship, of course, even if it does invalidate her reasoning. For the narrative, as a whole, is still concerned with all the qualities that convinced Winthrop of the particular relevance of Salomé Muller: that is, "a feminine epistemology..., the horror of sexual abuse, the importance of maternity, and the circumstance of marking" (968-9).

While the title page of *Running* markets the text as "the escape of William and Ellen Craft from slavery," it is, at its core, a narrative about Ellen. After the epigraph, the first words of the text are "[m]y wife and myself" (681), positioning Ellen, even at this early stage, as the focal point of the narrative. In particular, Ellen's rights to marriage and maternity emerge as the

motivators for their escape plan. “[A]bove all,” William writes, “the fact that another man had the power to tear from our cradle the newborn babe and sell it in the shambles like a brute, and then scourge us if we dared to lift a finger to save it from such a fate, haunted us for years” (681). Following this, William describes the “anomalous relation” between master, mistress, and mother (690), that is, the paradox of existing as property under both the patriarchy and the peculiar institution: “My wife’s first master was her father, and her mother his slave, and the latter is still the slave of his widow” (681). This “anomalous relation” also explains why Ellen is “almost white,” even though she is “of African extraction on her mother’s side” (681). The entirety of the text, then, foregrounds marriage and maternity.

As Claudia Tate points out, the idealization of the domestic realm is “generally absent” in “texts of black male authority” (126). This complicates claims—paradoxically, from feminist scholars Barbara McCaskill and Ellen Weinauer—that William was the sole author of the text. For it suggests, at the very least, that Ellen shaped the narrative’s focus. I suggest, then, that the centrality of marriage and maternity throughout *Running* places it firmly within the canon of black women’s nineteenth-century sentimental narratives, a canon that has suffered, in Tate’s view, from “a dearth of scholarly attention” and “a history of . . . misreadings” (101). “These texts center marriage,” she explains, “whereas the scholarship has valorized freedom,” which means that “the texts and the criticism have been mutually hostile” (100). “By historicizing this writing,” however,

the label “sentimental” becomes not merely a code word for describing domestic narratives that moralize about proper male and female spiritual, familial, and social conduct in the conventions of hyperbolic emotionality, but a term that is somewhat misleading for women’s texts because they generally appropriate the conventions of

sentimentality to mask the heroine's growing self-consciousness, rationality, and ultimately her desire to redefine feminine propriety. (103)

This twofold failure—to consider Ellen as co-author and therefore *Running* as sentimental narrative—accounts for much of the criticism of Ellen's characterization. McCaskill concludes, as an example, that William “suffocates Ellen with the problematic discourse of true womanhood,” and Weinauer takes this as evidence of “the tenacity of (white and male) legal norms in the production of subjectivity in antebellum America” (39). Ironically, these interpretations obscure the Crafts' inversions of both the generic conventions of sentimental narratives and constructions of identity that center white masculinity.

To this end, I suggest a reading of the Slaton interlude as an intact sentimental narrative. A cautionary tale against even the most benign of marriages between a slave and her master, this Brownian digression, as Sanborn describes it, is intended as a critique of feminist-abolitionist writing, thereby positioning the remainder of *Running* as a sensible and necessary revision. In this way, Brown and the Crafts accomplish the revisionary work of black female sentimental narratives in a single text, embedding the work to be revised within the proposed revisions. This will allow for more subversive interpretations of Ellen's involvement in the escape plot, both in its planning and its execution.

Finally, I contend that *Running* complicates categories of heterosexuality and, more importantly, views such complications as necessary to its revisionary work. As Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman has notably argued, the two core tenets of compulsory heterosexuality under white supremacy were anti-miscegenation and anti-sodomy laws. In her words, heteronormativity “assigned white women the responsibility of reproducing in monogamous marriages white heirs or more white masters” and outlawed non-reproductive sex for converse reasons (226). These

prohibitions, she continues, “supported the ascendancy of whiteness (and the propagation of white generations) at the precise moment of the nation’s reunification after the Civil War, westward expansion, increased immigration of non-white peoples into the US, and the enfranchisement of African-Americans.” Thus, the work of slave narratives became to invert the idea that “sexual criminality was a racial characteristic,” namely “by exposing the sexual perversity not of enslaved black people but of white slave-owners” (225). By calling into question “male sexuality as much as female sexuality,” then, as McCaskill rightfully claims, Ellen’s disguise as Mr. Johnson threatens the procreative future of white supremacy. And William’s willing submission to his cross-dressing wife completes, at last, the text’s revisions of marriage.

Before we consider *Running* as a revisionary work, we need to establish the need for revision, that is, the flaws of white women’s sentimental narratives that the text is responding to with its revisions. In her discussion of the contradictory and exploitative rhetoric of feminist-abolitionist writing, Karen Sánchez-Eppler sets out the chain of reasoning as follows. Through the equation of woman and slave, feminists recognize that “personhood can be annihilated and a person owned, absorbed, and un-named” (31); and yet, this “obliterates the particularity of black and female experience, making their distinct exploitations appear as one” (31). From there, feminist-abolitionists displace their fears and desires around sexuality onto the “sexualized body of the female slave” (33), typically through depictions of seemingly interracial marriages between white-passing and black slaves. This narrative choice allows for a transgression of the taboo against miscegenation without its legal or moral consequences, the latter of which involves an explicit recognition of the implied sexual violence that produced progressively whiter slaves. Finally, these writers encounter the problem of “trying to domesticate slavery” without

“challenging the traditions of male authority and female domesticity” (29, 34). Thus, they are confronted with the inherent paradoxes of the domestic realm:

For feminists, it constitutes not only the source of women’s power but also, antithetically, the “sphere” in which she finds herself incarcerated. For abolitionists, the domestic values that ostensibly offer a positive alternative to the mores of plantation society simultaneously serve to mask slavery’s exploitations behind domesticity’s gentle features. (Sánchez-Eppler 46)

Out of this reasoning emerge the tropes of feminist-abolitionist writing that Brown seeks to problematize in the Slator interlude: namely, depictions of interracial marriage and racially ambiguous slaves, displays of sentimentality and sexual degradation, and definitions of death as emancipation from slavery. Indeed, the conventions of the genre are subverted even as they are introduced, with the following narrative cue marking the beginning of the Slator interlude:

I am in duty bound to add, that while a great majority of such men care nothing for the happiness of the women with whom they live, nor for the children of whom they are the fathers, there are those to be found, even in that heterogeneous mass of licentious monsters, who are true to their pledges. (690, emphasis mine)

With this discursive clause, Brown makes clear that the inclusion of the Slator interlude is compelled; he even goes so far as to invoke the language of enslavement with the word “bound.” The (compelled) statement of beneficence which follows is so overwhelmed by the rhetoric of condemnation that it seems to consume its own point—a potent analogy for the internal inconsistencies of feminist-abolitionist rhetoric. To add to this, the Slator interlude is circumscribed with a second discursive act, a fact that gestures towards the inherent limitations of the genre: “After this great diversion from our narrative, which I hope, dear reader, you will

excuse, I shall return at once to it" (696). Brown subordinates "this great diversion" to the rest of "our narrative," implying both that "this narrative" is of lesser importance and that it may be read as a text within a text. In suggesting a comparison between the two, then, Brown prompts the reader to excuse "this great diversion" as a flawed attempt at sentimental narrative, one which will be revised in the narrative that follows.

However, before I show how we might reread *Running* as a revision of feminist-abolitionist sentimental narratives, I will examine in more depth the ways in which Brown problematizes the genre of sentimental fiction. After his statement of beneficence, which functions as a critique of feminist-abolitionist rhetoric, he invokes its central argument against "the interlocking structure of the patriarchy's dual systems of racial oppression and sexual exploitation," as Sánchez-Eppler puts it (41). Because "the woman and her children are legally the property of the man," the narrator writes, "who stands in the anomalous relation to them of husband and father, as well as master, they are liable to be seized and sold for his debts, should he become involved (690). This is not a criticism itself, but his progression from "several cases on record" to "I know of some myself" to "I have only space to glance at one" suggests both the feminist-abolitionist writer's limited interest in the actuality of this problem and their selection of exemplary cases which uphold the values that they seek to reform. As expected, then, the narrator introduces Mr. Slator as a "very human and wealthy gentleman" and Mrs. Slator only as his wife, an act which simultaneously conceals Mr. Slator's position as master under the veneer of the domestic and deprives Mrs. Slator of any identification outside of her marriage. Continuing in this vein, the narrator emphasizes the "three nearly white, well educated, and beautiful girls" among their "family of children," the rest of whom he deems irrelevant to the

purposes of the story. In the feminist-abolitionist mode, it seems, family is only important so long as it is white.

Throughout the Slator interlude, Brown problematizes the figuration of family as white, in particular, the “presumptions of ‘blood ties’ that permeate the traditional family ideal” and regulate “the spread of rights” (Collins 69). Even though Mr. Slator has “no surviving relatives” (690), he leaves himself vulnerable to identity theft and his family to re-enslavement because he, as both master and husband, fails to leave a will. In the absence of this legal document, a “villain residing at a distance” swears that he is a “relative of the deceased,” assuming Mr. Slator’s name and bringing his case before “one of those horrible tribunals” (690). The “verdict was given,” the narrator relates, “in favour of the plaintiff” (690), an act which, paradoxically, codifies the corruption of blood ties under slavery even as it upholds their strength. The community shares in this opinion, believing that the assumed Mr. Slator had “willfully conspired to cheat the family” (690). The second instance of this comes when “the kind lady” Mrs. Huston asks to purchase Mary from the “villain Slator” (693):

“I don’t want her for the field,” Slator replied, “but for another purpose.” Mrs. Huston understood what this meant, and instantly exclaimed, “Oh, but she is your cousin!” “The devil she is!” said Slator; and added, “Do you mean to insult me Madam, by saying that I am related to n—s?” “No,” replied Mrs. Huston, “I do not wish to offend you, Sir. But wasn’t Slator, Mary’s father, your uncle?” “Yes, I calculate he was,” said Slator; “but I want you and everybody to understand that I’m no kin to his n—s.” (693)

To make explicit what Mrs. Huston leaves implicit in desire to maintain the feminine delicacy expected of her, Mr. Slator wants Mary for his sexual gratification. And yet, as Mrs. Huston exclaims, this would constitute incest, a charge that Mr. Slator can only defuse through a

disavowal of the blood ties that undergird family. When family can be disowned, bought, and sexually exploited on the basis of their skin color, Brown suggests, then the fundamental assumptions about family in the antebellum South must be deeply flawed.

Brown also critiques the tendency for feminist-abolitionist writing to prioritize premarital virginity over moral character in assessments of female respectability. While the community values Antoinette for her “Christ-like piety, dignity of manner,” her “great talents and extreme beauty,” the narrator positions her, instead, as “the flower of the family” (691). Immediately after introducing Antoinette, the narrator places her firmly within the sentimental, using a “poetic quotation,” as Sanborn terms it, to substitute her voice and dramatize her emotion as she leaves her brother on the auction stand. Throughout the Sator interlude, Sanborn argues, “the poetic quotations come trailing clouds of artifice” (914). In relation to Antoinette’s suicide, then, these “clouds of artifice” may be interpreted as tacit criticism of the feminist-abolitionist’s artificial concern for female slaves, seeing as the two poetic quotations referring to Antoinette either silence her pain or promote her virginity above even her life. In fact, Brown may even be suggesting a causal link between feminist-abolitionist rhetoric and Antoinette’s suicide. She was “brave,” the narrator indicates, to throw herself “head foremost through the window” to the pavement below (692). And yet, this descriptor does not apply to a narrator who refuses to fully grapple with the reality of sexual exploitation under slavery and, instead, shifts the focus to her fatal escape. In an attempt to demonstrate the enduring power of her “pure and noble spirit,” which has supposedly “fled away to be at rest in those realms of endless bliss,” the narrator puts her “bruised but unpolluted body” on display. As Sánchez-Eppler writes, “[a]ntislavery writing responds to slavery’s annihilation of personhood with its own act of annihilation” (51). The inviolability of the soul may only be demonstrated through the destruction of the black body.

A deliberate act of narration even as it pretends otherwise, “this great diversion from our narrative” seems to serve two purposes (696). First, it suspends narrative progress, delaying the gratification of his audience’s desire to read about the Crafts’ escape (which is, ostensibly, the material they intended to read in the first place). Second, it diverts the reader’s attention away from Brown’s motivation to play with form in this way, even as it draws attention to the form. For it is not immediately clear that the Slator interlude is intended as critique, as I have argued, and the audience may have little reason to suspect as much. Taken together, this rhetorical strategy may make it more likely for the reader to accept revisions of generic conventions which they did not even consider in need of revision. In other words, Brown subtly shifts the reader’s understanding of the sentimental narrative without making them consciously aware of that fact. When their denied desires are gratified, at last, with the progression of the Crafts’ escape, they are in a suggestible enough mindset to accept these revisions.

In formal analyses of *Running*, Sanborn argues, criticism of Ellen’s characterization “crowds out the consideration of the relation between narrative discourse and form” (913). In the pages that follow, I will suggest that these two forms of analysis—that is, feminist analysis of Ellen’s characterization and Sanborn’s analysis of Brownean plagiarisms, digressions, and theatrical interludes—may be married to produce a promising revision of sentimental narratives, one which may be relevant, perhaps surprisingly, to conceptions of non-heteronormative family structures. As I have already discussed Brown’s role in this revision, I will turn now to Ellen’s, starting with a refiguration of the relation between female agency and emotion.

In discussing the origin of the Crafts’ escape plan, both Geoffrey Sanborn and Ellen Samuels have written about the contradictory accounts in William Wells Brown’s *Biography of An American Bondman* (1855), published under the name of his sixteen-year-old daughter,

Josephine, and the Craft's *Running* (1860). I will reproduce Brown's account at length to show more clearly the contrast between the two:

"Now, William," said the wife, "listen to me, and take my advice, and we shall be free in less than a month."

"Let me hear your plans, then," said William.

"Take part of your money and purchase me a good suit of gentleman's apparel, and when the white people give us our holiday, let us go off to the North, instead of spending our time in pleasure. I am white enough to go as the master, and you can pass as my servant."

"But you are not tall enough for a man," said the husband.

"Get me a pair of very high-heeled boots, and they will bring me up more than an inch, and get me a very high hat, then I'll do," rejoined the wife.

"But then, my dear you would make a very boyish looking man, with no whiskers or mustache," remarked William.

"I could bind up my face in a handkerchief," said Ellen, "as if I was suffering dreadfully from the toothache, and no one would discover the want of beard."

"What if you were called upon to write your name in the books at hotels, as I saw my master do when traveling, or were asked to receipt for any thing?"

"I would also bind up my right hand and put it in a sling..."

"I fear you cannot carry out the deception for so long a time, for it must be several hundred miles to the free States," said William, as he seemed to despair of escaping from slavery by following his wife's plan.

"Come, William," entreated his wife, "don't be a coward!" (76-77)

Here, Ellen seems to have come up with the plan after much careful thought, answering all of William's objections quickly and with ease. Moreover, she is eager to enact her masculine disguise, so much so that she chides William into accepting her plan with the emasculating insult "coward." In *Running*, however, the roles are almost entirely reversed. It was William who thought that, "as my wife was nearly white, I might get her to disguise herself as an invalid gentleman, and assume to be my master, while I could attend as his slave, and that in this manner we might effect our escape" (697). Ellen "shrank from the idea," believing that both the disguise and the distance of the escape made this plan "almost impossible." It is only in contemplating her "helpless condition," as both a woman and a slave, that Ellen decides to move forward with the plan, saying "I feel that God is on our side, and with his assistance, notwithstanding all the difficulties, we shall be able to succeed."

This seems to be the proof of Weinauer's claim that William exerts narrative control over Ellen to compensate for the inherent and historically significant emasculation that her disguise entails (51), or of Sanborn's claims that Ellen's agency is "squeezed nearly out of existence in William's account" and that "the plan, whose audacity had brought them international fame, is treated as a purely instrumental means to an end" (908). And yet, these interpretations can only hold so long as we ignore both the discrepancies within William's own account of the plan's origin and the moments when he does recognize, and even emphasize, Ellen's agency.

In the former case, William only states once, submerged in the middle of the text, that he came up with the plan. However, in the two other instances when he mentions the plan—both of which precede his claim as originary—he writes that "in December 1848, a plan suggested itself that proved quite successful, and in eight days after it was first thought of we were free from the horrible trammels of slavery" (681, 697). It is only the last clause which changes—and even

then, only slightly—from “rejoicing and praising God in the glorious sunshine of liberty” to “and glorifying God who had brought us safely out of bondage.” If there is a consistent story, then, it is of God’s power to secure his and his wife’s freedom from slavery.

In the latter case, William stresses how crucial Ellen is to the success of the plot, even if he does invoke the trope of the fainting woman at pivotal moments of the escape plan. (I will use his words as much as possible to make legible the extent to which he acknowledges Ellen’s agency.) It is only after “no little amount of perseverance on my wife’s part,” William writes, “that “she obtained a pass from her mistress, allowing her to be away for a few days” (698). Ellen realizes—or, as William puts it, “the thought flashed across my wife’s mind”—that “it was customary for travellers to register their names,” so she proposes to “make a poultice and bind up [her] right hand in a sling, and with propriety ask the officers to register [her] name for [her]” (700). “It occurred to her then,” William continues, “that the smoothness of her face might betray her,” prompting her to make a second poultice for her face. Finally, “knowing that she would be thrown a good deal into the company of gentleman,” Ellen “fancie[s] that she could get on better if she had something to go over the eyes.” Many elements of Brown’s account are still present, then, even if they are interspersed with Ellen’s tears and supposed reluctance to adopt this disguise.

In reading *Running* as a revision of sentimental narratives, even William’s much-maligned claim that “[m]y wife had no ambition whatever to assume this disguise, and would not have done so had it been possible to have obtained our liberty by more simple means” may be interpreted as a radical reclamation of a femininity denied by slavery and distorted by domesticity (700). Like McCaskill and Weinauer, Sanborn concedes that the narrator “fixes femininity in general and Ellen’s femininity in particular firmly in place on several occasions”

(916). And yet, he claims that a close attention to the form of *Running* “enables us to revise... the argument that William suppresses Ellen’s performative revolt.” In his estimation, “[t]he performative revolt in *Running* may be found...at the level of the narrating as well as at the level of the story; just as it may be said to decertify the apparently white, male, elite body, so may it be said to traduce the conventional means of establishing authority and naturalizing selfhood in slave narratives.” While I am largely in agreement with Sanborn’s analysis, I resist his implication, however subtle, that fixing femininity is necessarily bad. For he fails to consider the rhetoric behind that decision: namely, to reconceive femininity from within. In focusing exclusively on *Running* as a slave narrative, Sanborn misses the particular efficacy of embedding an intact sentimental narrative within its proposed revisions. And the immediate value, as I have suggested, is that my reading produces a much more satisfying revision than Sanborn’s analysis allows for.

Emotionally exhausted from the constant fear of being found out and returned to slavery, Ellen seems to be on the verge of tears throughout the Craft’s escape. While this seems a natural enough response to the circumstances, this sets up the possibility, for Weinauer, of two distinct characters in *Running*: “one is the fictitious ‘Mr. Johnson,’ a persona born of necessity, an illusion of the ‘outside,’ and the other is the ‘real’ Ellen, the ‘true’ womanly self inside the male costume” (48). “While in Mr. Johnson we get a figure of agency, independence, and courage,” she continues, “beneath the costume is the real Ellen, a delicate, faint-hearted true woman.” Although this is a reductive and flawed interpretation of these two characters, the interpretive framework proves helpful for distinguishing between the public’s perceptions of Ellen and her private conceptions of herself. Going forward, I resist the critical tendency to view “Mr. Johnson” as an empowering experience for Ellen and, in so doing, invert the presumed shift in

power differentials that accompanies Ellen's disguise as Mr. Johnson. This is to reverse the direction—but not the validity—of bell hooks' argument on cross dressing: “within white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy the experience of men dressing as women, appearing in drag, has always been regarded by the dominant heterosexist cultural gaze as a sign that one is symbolically crossing over from a realm of power into a realm of powerlessness” (146). To fully understand the revisionary work of *Running*, then, we need to follow in Ellen's footsteps and resist, as much as possible, the privileging of white masculinity in formations of subjectivity.

As McCaskill and Weinauer have mentioned, Ellen's tears emerge at crucial junctures in the Crafts' escape plan, which seems to support claims that William is diminishing her agency in an attempt to recover his own masculinity. While I wish to stress, again, that this response seems warranted given the situation, I also wish to place Ellen's emotional responses within the tropes of sentimental fiction, which Sánchez-Eppler describes as “an intensely bodily genre” designed to elicit sympathy through a shared emotion with the reader (35). “Reading sentimental fiction is thus a bodily act,” she argues, where “the success of the story is gauged, in part, by its ability to translate words into pulse beats and sobs” (36). If we are to read *Running* as inverting those generic conventions through their use, then we must view with healthy skepticism claims that these tears make Ellen delicate and faint-hearted. Indeed, as William and Ellen are about to embark on their escape, she shrinks back “in a state of trepidation,” bursting into “violent sobs” and then throwing her head “upon [William's] breast” (703). Ellen's seeming passage from self-possessed woman to “poor thing,” however, touches William's “very heart,” allowing him to “enter into her feelings more fully than ever” (703). For William and the reader alike, Ellen's tears provide access to an empathy which was believed to be impossible because of her dual position as wife and slave. Further, allowing his wife to experience her emotions is itself an act

of rebellion, given that their position as slaves without legal protections compels them “to smother [their] wounded feelings,” as William puts it (687). Rather than writing Ellen’s emotions off as feminine excess, then, William allows her freedom of emotional expression to deepen their marriage bond.

Once the Crafts complete their escape to the north, Ellen’s tears emerge again, this time in connection with marriage, liberty, and Christianity. On leaving the station in Philadelphia, Ellen bursts into tears, leans upon William for support, and then weeps “like a child” (725). “The reaction,” William tells us, “was fearful,” a word which carries implications of intensity, fear, and Biblical awe. Taken together, William’s use of fearful may be interpreted not only as an indication of his concern for Ellen’s well-being, but also as his witnessing an emotional experience so intense that it verges on religious passion. Upon reaching the house, then, Ellen is “so weak and faint” that she can “scarcely stand alone,” requiring the support not only of her husband, but also of her God. Because of this, the Crafts kneel and profess their “heartfelt gratitude to God, for his goodness in enabling [them] to overcome so many perilous difficulties, in escaping out of the jaws of the wicked” (725). This is a deeply intimate moment, one which meets at the intersection of dependency and gratitude, and it is Ellen’s tears that transform the experience of dependency from burden to pleasure.

Thus far, I have ignored the fact that William depicts himself as shrinking back in fear and Pompey, a slave on board the steamer to North Carolina, as crying unabashedly. Each of these moments weaken the claim that William is containing Ellen to the discourse of true womanhood. For, if that is the case, then he is confining himself to this discourse, too, which would imply, paradoxically, that he is compensating for the emasculation inherent to Ellen’s disguise as his master by emasculating himself. Instead, William seems to view fear and crying

as natural responses to the “iron heel of despotism” that is slavery, responses which William seeks to destigmatize—and therefore make available—to slaves who have had to “smother [their] wounded feelings” for too long (687). Hence, when William believes that the cabinet maker will recognize him on the platform before their departure from Georgia, he readily admits that he “shrank into a corner” (705), an action which mirrors, albeit imperfectly, Ellen’s shrinking into tears. Later, when the officer at Baltimore asks “Mr. Johnson” for verification that William is his slave, William slips into first-person plural to give voice to his and Ellen’s shared fear:

We felt as though we had come into deep waters and were about being overwhelmed, and that the slightest mistake would clip asunder the last brittle thread of hope by which we were suspended, and let us down for ever into the dark and horrible pit of misery and degradation from which we were straining every nerve to escape. (721)

In contrast to William’s typically measured tone, these multiple and complicated clauses are overwhelmed as much with fear as with metaphors about fear, and the barely controlled syntax mirrors the metaphorical descent into the “horrible pit of misery and degradation” described therein. From this moment of despair, however, William and Ellen emerge with their hearts “crying lustily unto Him who is ever ready and able to save,” and they are eventually allowed, “as God would have it,” to return to their carriages unharmed (721). This potential for emotion to bond slaves together is demonstrated, too, when Pompey, “[w]ith tears streaming down his cheeks,” begs William to pray for him. By way of response, William writes that he “shall never forget [Pompey’s] earnest request, nor fail to do what little [he] can to release the millions of unhappy bondsmen” (711). By experiencing and sharing these emotions, William suggests,

current and former slaves may build meaningful community, both between themselves and between husband and wife, man and God.

If we may rest assured that the “real” Ellen is not merely “a delicate, faint-hearted true woman,” as Weinauer claims (48), and that even these descriptors may be needlessly pejorative, I will turn now to the “figure of agency, independence, and courage” that Mr. Johnson supposedly embodies. While Lindon Barret devotes much of his attention to Ellen’s passage into ontological whiteness—and therefore “the license for her body to be recognized as significant in terms other than its physicality” (322)—he does not consider Ellen’s *experience* of her (disabled) white masculine persona. Thus, even though Barrett’s analysis “accounts for a radical revision of the ‘scene of writing’ so often central to slave narratives” and makes visible a white body which is often invisible and multiple, it does not quite allow for a disavowal of white masculinity as deservedly granting social power. This is not to suggest that white masculinity does not exist in a privileged position within a system of patriarchal slavery. Rather, it is to show that Ellen’s experience as Mr. Johnson was characterized as much by fear, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion as by the expected social power, which will emphasize more fully Ellen’s own belief in her black femininity as more desirable than her brief experience of white masculinity.

Throughout the Crafts’ escape, Ellen was nervous, “terror-stricken,” “anxious to avoid conversation,” afraid of “making some blunder that would tend to our detection,” all of which prove detrimental to her health (705, 714, 721). At the hotel in Charleston, she loses her appetite, unable “to make a very hearty dinner,” and throughout their journey, the Crafts have “very limited opportunities for sleeping” because of the “intense excitement, produced by the fear of being retaken on the one hand, and the bright anticipation of liberty on the other” (711, 723). It is understandable, then, that the physical and emotional exhaustion of the escape transforms Ellen

into “the very white invalid she was pretending to be: highly sentimentalized, weak, genteel, and sensitive” (Samuels 39). Samuels continues that “Ellen becomes narratively consigned to immobility and darkness, despite”—and not because of—“having just pulled off one of the lengthiest and most daring escapes in fugitive slave history” (40). Indeed, we may read this intermittent but persistent illness as the inevitable consequence of white masculinity. Even as she exclaims, “Thank God, William, we are safe!” she collapses into tears, needing William to support her (725); even as she sets sail for Liverpool, she was “so ill on the voyage that [William] did not believe she could live to see [it]” (740); even as she steps upon the shore, “free from every slavish fear,” she lies “very ill for two or three weeks.” The implication is clear: the experience of white masculinity needs to be recovered from.

As Samuels mentions, too, her particular persona as an *invalid* white gentleman would have been historically received as feminine. After all, she is dependent on a male servant, and her disability often forces her to avoid conversation and excuse herself from public spaces—all of which is more indicative of the domestic sphere which Ellen, and not Mr. Johnson, was supposedly confined to. This further complicates Weinauer’s claim for Mr. Johnson as “a figure of agency, independence, and courage,” even if her dependency on William was only made necessary by her disguise. Ironically, Samuels continues, this “performance” of William assisting her into and out of building and train carriages “reinforces her male persona; since conventionally women would be assisted in this fashion, William’s chivalry would undermine Ellen’s male disguise, were the gesture not naturalized by her adoption of the feminized invalid persona” (37-8). This is all to resist a straightforward gendering of Mr. Johnson as male and Ellen as female, which tends to obscure just how radical her disguise as an invalid white gentleman was. For her inscription from “my master” back to “my wife, as I may say now” is not

a discursive containment to femininity or a way of mitigating the true transgressions of Ellen's disguise, but rather of asserting marriage specifically and black womanhood more broadly as signifiers of freedom. The true transgression of Ellen's disguise, then, is that it is eventually and preferentially discarded.

Notably, this holds true even for the portrait of what is meant to be Ellen's disguise. "The poultice is left off in the engraving," William writes, "because the likeness could not have been taken well with it on" (700). This "artistic decision" has been met with much skepticism among feminist scholars. For "[w]hile the publicization of the engraving would seem to reflect Craft's willingness to acknowledge Ellen's unruly identities," Weinauer contends, "it in fact operates, paradoxically, to control her representation. He captures her in a visual image as well as in the verbal images of the narrative itself, rendering her a static object available for public consumption" (50). And yet, this reading fails to account for the absence of her disability markings, which were crucial to both her passing as male and her passing as white; the poultice has been removed for the engraving, and the "disability function" of the white sling, Samuels argues, has been "obscured to the point of invisibility" (20). For Samuels, then, it follows that the purpose of the portrait is to represent the "most respectable gentleman" so beloved of critics—that is, to represent the aspects of Ellen's disguise which subvert nineteenth-century assumptions regarding the immutability of race and gender, while removing those aspects which even by implication show the African American body as unhealthy, dependent, and disabled. (22)

Without the "invalid" elements of her disguise as "invalid gentleman," however, the engraving can still be said to "represent not 'Mr. Johnson' but Ellen herself," as Weinauer claims to different effect (50). For it is not "Ellen's 'true' womanly self" on display, at least not in the

pejorative sense of containment to and exploitation of her femininity that Weinauer intends.

Rather, it is Ellen when “the smoothness of her skin might betray her” (700), Ellen *before* she passed into literacy and therefore, as Barrett argues, ontological whiteness. Thus, even as the engraving portrays her in “a permanent state of racial and gender ambiguity,” as Dawn Keetley observes (14), she is depicted, ultimately, as an able-bodied black woman.

This may seem a tenuous claim, as the public would have still received her portrait as that of a white man. And yet, it is important to honor Ellen’s self-perception, to acknowledge the aspects of her portrait which do not betray, but rather *display*, her black womanhood. If it was a conscious decision to remove or obscure Ellen’s disability markers, in an effort to counter perceptions of blackness as inherently unhealthy, dependent, and disabled, then it is equally possible that the decision to remove the poultice was to make Ellen’s womanhood more visible. It may be the Crafts’ intention, then, to let her disguise “betray” her femininity, not as a way of controlling her transgressions but of empowering them.

Even if we concede that “Craft insists, finally, on the natural status of gendered categories,” as Weinauer claims, we need not view this as “writing Ellen into her *proper* place within them” (38, emphasis mine). In fact, by dressing as “a most respectable gentleman” and then fixing it in portrait form, Ellen is resisting the expected dress code of an antebellum wife and, in its place, asserting her right to non-traditional gender expressions. As “pictorial artifact,” McCaskill writes, Ellen affirms that “the true perversions of femininity, the real devils in disguise, are none other than the ‘kindly’ mistresses and gliding, giddy debutantes and belles who are supposed to be the toast of Southern chivalry.” This is a stunning inversion of the racist trope of the masculine black woman, which justified their enslavement and, paradoxically, denied them access to the very femininity that they were deemed incapable of. As Abdur-

Rahman writes, “[e]nslaved black women were masculinized by virtue of their back-breaking labor on par with black men and their being denied male protection and provision” (230). “[A]s a non-person,” she continues, “the slave did not register gender legibly, according to established paradigms of masculinity or femininity.” If this places the “androgynous” effect of Ellen’s portrait, as McCaskill describes it, within the wider history of rendering the slave body neuter, it seems to do so intentionally. For this portrait suggests that it may be more powerful not to totally disavow the (racialized) gender categories that were so fundamental to the social fabric of the time, but rather to reconceive them from within.

In that vein, we must recognize the *continued* power differential in the Crafts’ marriage even after they reach freedom, seeing as they are viewed, by the unsuspecting public, as a mistress and her slave. It is not *only* on the journey north, then, that “the marital relationship [is] materially inverted as Ellen becomes master, owner rather than owned, controlling subject rather than passive object” (Weinauer, 49). Even after Ellen drops her disguise as Mr. Johnson, the hotel staff in St. Johns and the landlady in Halifax believe her to be William’s mistress. “[U]nder the influence of the low Yankee prejudice,” as he calls it, the gendered dynamics of Ellen’s ownership change, but the racial dynamics remain the same (738). At the Halifax inn, for instance, William writes: “If I had gone in and asked for a bed they would have been quite full. But as they thought my wife was white, she had no difficulty in securing apartments” (738-9). This misperception plays out to comical effect, as the landlady asks, in her suspicions of William, if Ellen knows “the dark man downstairs” (739). Confused at Ellen’s answers to the affirmative, she modulates her phrasing to “the black man” and finally to “the *n—r*” (original emphasis); it takes three questions, then, for the landlady to dispel the notion that Ellen was William’s mistress, the moral being that racial prejudices have the power to preclude black

couples from marriage. In dramatizing William's passage from unnamed and unseen "husband" to mere slave, however, the Crafts draw attention to his exclusion, as a black man, from heterosexuality.

Paradoxically, his exclusion from heterosexuality allows William to blur its boundaries. In the hotel at St. John's, as an example, he collapses the distinction between "the real Ellen" and her persona as Mr. Johnson with his mocking repetition of "the 'lady'" (736). At first glance, this quip seems to be directed at the racist assumptions inherent to the butler's different descriptions of Ellen and himself; while Ellen is "the lady," equally as deserving of the singular as she is of accommodations, William is one of many "coloured folks," all of whom the hotel denies outright. And yet, the quotations are not placed around "the lady" as a whole but rather the "lady" specifically, suggesting that William may be mocking the very concept of Ellen as a woman. This may explain William's insistence on referring to Ellen as his master throughout *Running* when such a pretense may have been necessary for their escape but not to its narration. In other words, there may be a rhetorical motive behind Ellen's narratological passage from wife to master, one that cannot be fully explained by the impulse to realism. Thus, the revisionary work of *Running* extends not only to the sentimental and its portrayal of marriage, but also to its portrayal of marriage as strictly heterosexual.

This makes apparent the implicit homoeroticism of Ellen's portrait and several moments during their escape. As they prepare to leave, for instance, William cuts his wife's hair, watches her dress in a masculine disguise, and says, "I found that she made a most respectable looking gentleman" (700). With this comment, William blurs the boundaries between his admiration for a disguise well-conceived and his attraction to a woman dressed as a man. Later, when the principal officer of the steamer to North Carolina asks, "Boy, do you belong to that gentleman?",

William replies, “Yes, sir” before adding, in parentheses, “which was quite correct” (712). This is a pun not only on their (supposedly heterosexual) marriage, but also on his (potentially sexual) submission to his male master. In each case, then, William uses word play to acknowledge the multiple meanings of sexuality, which becomes all the more significant because compulsory heterosexuality precludes him, as a black man, from heterosexuality and, as a straight man, from non-normative sexual behaviors. While this is radical on a societal level, it also has implications for the emotional bond between the Crafts. For when William enters his master’s carriage to inform him that the officer will be verifying the status of slaves at Philadelphia, he finds his master “sitting at the farther end, quite alone. As soon as he looked up and saw me, he smiled. I also tried to wear a cheerful countenance, in order to break the shock of the sad news. I knew what made him smile” (719). This freedom of sexual expression, William suggests, allows his marriage to be more tender and reciprocal than it may have otherwise been.

It is not only William’s sexuality that Ellen’s disguise calls into question, however; rather, Ellen’s cross-dressing queers the gaze of *all* her observers. And yet, this has particular consequences for her white observers, seeing as it destabilizes “whiteness as the requisite racial category for heteronormative qualification,” in the words of Abdur-Rahman (226). Indeed, we see evidence of this in the two white women who fawn over “Mr. Johnson” on the steamer to North Carolina. Supposing him to be asleep, the narrator writes,

one of them gave a long sigh, and said, in a quiet fascinating tone, “Papa, he seems to be a very nice young gentleman.” But before papa could speak, the other lady quickly said, “Oh! dear me, I never felt so much for a gentleman in my life!” To use an American expression, “they fell in love with the wrong chap.” (714)

That this expression existed at all in the American lexicon of this time suggests both its regularity and its threat. For heterosexuality may become suspect at any moment and without any awareness after the fact that it had ever been thrown into suspicion; thus, heterosexuality requires a near-panoptic level of vigilance to maintain. The dual irony, of course, is that Ellen's portrait has much the same effect on her white audience as her disguise has on these two white women, as it makes the audience aware, if only in their own minds, that their sexuality, too, is subject to questioning.

Both in her portrait and during her escape, Ellen's cross-dressing "ridicules the respectability and reconsiders the sexuality of her former masters" (McCaskill). With her masculine attire, Ellen reverses "the widely held belief by Europeans that black sexuality in Africa was so libidinous, so unregulated, so wanton that not only did African men keep as many wives as they wanted but there existed as well 'men in women's apparel, whom they [kept] among their wives'" (Abdur-Rahman 224, original edit). To put it differently, Ellen implicates her former masters in this unrestrained sexuality, which makes visible the psychological projections inherent to justifications for slavery. While it was common for feminist-abolitionists to gesture towards the sexual degradation of female slaves as proof of the moral perversity of slavery, their focus on the victims, paradoxically, avoids acknowledging the perpetrators—that is, white masters. In simply donning her disguise, then, Ellen accomplishes what feminist-abolitionist narratives often could not. She simultaneously calls attention to the unnamed perpetrators of this sexual violence and calls into question the psychological projections—of white men and women alike, whether slave owners or abolitionists—that underwrite this convenient and all-too-common elision.

“This book is not intended as a full history of the life of my wife, nor of myself,” William writes in the preface, “but merely as an account of our escape; together with other matter which I hope may be the means of creating in some minds a deeper abhorrence of the sinful and abominable practice of enslaving and brutifying our fellow creatures” (679). With each clause, William sets up a complicated chain of subordination: his life to “the life of my wife”; “the account of our escape” to “a full history” of their lives; the “other matter” to “an account of our escape”; and, finally, the moral purpose of *Running*—that is, its abolitionist cause—to what seems to be the mere act of historical documentation. In many ways, the proliferation of subordinate clauses in the preface mirrors the pervasiveness of submission throughout *Running*, and marks it as crucial to the rhetorical aims of the text. Submission is powerful, William suggests, insofar as it confronts and complicates social mores. To be precise, submission in marriage is powerful insofar as it challenges the two foundational assumptions of marriage: a patriarchal power dynamic and a strictly heterosexual union. And yet, with Ellen’s portrait on the facing page acting as a visual preface preceding the textual one, Ellen problematizes even this notion of submissiveness. She seems almost to cast her gaze over the text, not in an attempt to control its contents but rather as a means of reaching for reciprocity. Ellen abandons the implicit subordination of chronology, of that which precedes to that which follows, and chooses, instead, to place her portrait on equal terms with William’s text.

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