

The Trope of the Mulatta Woman in the Cottage in Nineteenth Century African American Literature

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Introduction

In 1853, William Wells Brown publishes what is considered to be the first novel by an African American writer, *Clotel; or, the President's Daughter* where he introduces the image of the tragic mulatto—a character of mixed heritage who is consequently torn between the two races and whose life ends tragically—to African American literature.¹ Of the six mulatta characters in the novel, there is one whose life does not end tragically: the novel ends with Clotel's daughter, Mary, living in France and re-united with her former slave lover. In 1858, Brown publishes a play, *The Escape, or A Leap for Freedom*, which also features a mulatta who, like Mary, is not a tragic mulatta figure. Moreover, more contemporary interpretations of *Clotel* have rejected the protagonist's status as a tragic mulatta. Although Clotel commits suicide, her act can be read, so argues one of these critics, "less as victimization than as a powerful political statement."² What is evident from a close reading of Brown's work is that all of his mixed-race female characters are not *tragic* mulattas; however, as Barbara Christian notes, "the *mulatta* [is at] the center" of Brown's work.³ Consequently, also in Brown's work is an alternate depiction of the mulatta: a slave woman placed in a cottage in an isolated setting at the behest of a white male who is most often her owner. This pattern becomes "the trope of the mulatta in the cottage." This trope is repeated and revised, to use Henry Louis Gates' terminology, not only by Brown but also by Harriet Jacobs' in her slave narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), and by Hannah Crafts' in her fictionalized *The Bondwoman's Narrative* (c. 1853 -61), thereby firmly establishing it in the African American literary tradition.

The Mulatta in the Cottage: Clotel's Story

The image of the mulatta in the cottage is presented, and then twice revised in *Clotel*; the basic trope occurs with the quadroon protagonist, Clotel, for whom the work is named. The daughter of a miscegenational relationship between a master and his mistress, Clotel, who is being raised by her mother to become a lady, attracts the attention of the young white Horatio Green who promises to make her the "mistress of her own dwelling."⁴ When Clotel, along with her mother, Curren, and sister Althesa, is placed on the auction block at the death of their owner, she is purchased by Horatio, who keeps his promise by providing her with "a beautiful cottage," whose description and setting are essential to the trope:

About three miles from Richmond is a pleasant plain, with...a beautiful cottage surrounded by trees so as scarcely to be seen. Among them was one far retired from the public roads, and almost hidden among the trees. It was a perfect model of rural beauty. The piazzas that surrounded it were covered with clematis and passion flower. The pride of China mixed its oriental looking foliage with the

1. This definition of the tragic mulatto is derived from Sterling Brown's "Negro Character as Seen by White Authors" (Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1991), 628-30.

2. Little, "Mulatto," 513.

3. Christian, *Black Women Novelists*, 23.

4. William Wells Brown, *Clotel*, 65.

majestic magnolia, and the air was redolent with the fragrance of flowers...The tasteful hand of art had not learned to imitate the lavish beauty and harmonious disorder of nature, but they lived together in loving amity, and spoke in accordant tones. The gateway rose in a gothic arch, with graceful tracery in iron work, surmounted by a cross, round which fluttered and played the mountain fringe, that lightest and most fragile of vines.⁵

The only descriptor of the cottage dwelling is that is “beautiful”; however, the narrator is meticulous in describing its setting. Located approximately three miles from Richmond, “almost hidden” and enclosed in the iron gate, the cottage is isolated, yet set amidst trees, flowers, and lush foliage—“a perfect model of...beauty,” it evokes the Garden of Eden. As noted by Blyden Jackson, Clotel and Horatio exist in a “small, private Elysium.”⁶

The basic trope, as presented in Clotel’s story, is comprised of three elements: 1). the mulatta woman, who becomes the mistress of her own home, 2). dwells in a cottage, 3). located in an isolated, Edenic setting. The setting is an important element of the trope, for it provides protection and privacy for the mistress (and oftentimes her lover). Also it suggests an ideal relationship, one comparable to the biblical Adam’s and Eve’s prior to the intrusion of the serpent.

Yet a serpent does intrude in the Edenic setting. Although Clotel and Horatio are depicted as living happily together secluded from the world that denies not only interracial relationships but also marriage between master and slaves, the serpent appears in the form of political aspirations. Horatio’s desire to seek a political office cannot be realized until he enters into an acceptable, recognized marriage. Consequently, in order to garner political favor, Horatio marries Gertrude, the only daughter of a man of financial and popular influence. Refusing to be part of a love triangle, Clotel, who has provided Horatio with a child, bids Horatio farewell. However, she and her daughter, Mary, continue to dwell in the cottage supported financially by Horatio.

The Supplementary Plot: The White Mistress

Also introduced in Clotel’s story is a supplement to, though not part of, the trope: the wife’s response and intervention when she learns of her husband’s slave mistress. One day as they drive by Clotel’s cottage, Gertrude comments on the beauty of the young child, yet notices that Horatio offers no response. When he returns home by a different route, she becomes suspicious and, making inquiry about, learns of Mary and Clotel, whose name she recognizes having heard it often repeated by Horatio in his sleep. Gertrude intervenes; the result of her persistence is that Clotel is sold out of state and Mary is brought into the Green household as a servant. In the

5. Brown, *Clotel*, 83. It should also be noted that this passage is taken entirely from Lydia Maria Child’s short story, “The Quadroons” (1842). In fact, Brown’s storyline of the mulatta is heavily borrowed from Child; nevertheless, his is the first use of the plot in African American fiction.

6. Jackson, “First Negro Novelist,” 333.

supplementary plot in *Clotel*'s story, the wife triumphs as she eliminates the perceived competitor of her husband's affections, and the precariousness of the slave woman's position is summarized by a chapter title: [t]o-day the woman is mistress of her own cottage; to-morrow she is sold."⁷

The Mulatta Woman in the Mansion: Jane's Story

Brown repeats—and reworks—the basic trope in *Clotel* through the story of Jane, *Clotel*'s niece. One of the two daughters of Althesa and Henry Morton, the white New Orleans man who purchases and marries, but does not manumit Althesa, fifteen-year-old Jane has been raised as white. When their parents die of yellow fever, Jane and her sister Ellen learn of their mixed heritage, and like their mother and aunt years before, they are placed on the auction block. Jane is purchased “by a dashing young man,” whose dwelling is a mansion, located where the Mississippi River joins the sea; its setting is described thusly:

This was a most singular spot, remote, in a dense forest spreading over the summit of a cliff that rose abruptly to a great height above the sea; but so grand in its situation, in the desolate sublimity which reigned around, in the reverential murmur of the waves that washed its base, that, though picturesque, it was a forest prison.⁸

Jane is placed in this mansion, but she is not responsive to her master's desire to possess her. As a result, she is confined in an “upper chamber,” her *home* until she acquiesces to his wishes.⁹ Jane never acquiesces; instead, her true love, a young man who has worked with her father, finds her. With the aid of Volney, Jane attempts her escape in a Rapunzel-like fashion where she lets herself down by tied-together sheets. As they run off, Jane's master returns and kills Volney. Jane falls “senseless” next to her murdered lover; then, she descends into a melancholic state and eventually dies.¹⁰

Like *Clotel*, Jane becomes the mulatta woman in the cottage, which, in this instance, is a mansion. Situated “in a most singular spot,” its setting is remote. Described as being “grand,” sublime, “picturesque,” and accompanied by “a reverential murmur of the waves,” its depiction is Edenic.¹¹ However, significant are the differences in this variant. Unlike *Clotel*, Jane is not in love with her bachelor master; therefore, the condition under which she can become the mistress of her own home—consent to his profligate advances—is unconscionable. Because she does not consent, Jane is confined to an “upper chamber,” and the expansive mansion is reduced to a lonely tower.¹² Consequently, the idyllic setting loses its charm: the remote spot is simultaneously “desolate; the “dense forest” is also “a forest prison.”¹³

7. Brown, *Clotel*, 151.

8. *Ibid.*, 209.

9. *Ibid.*, italics added.

10. Brown, *Clotel*, 210.

11. *Ibid.*, 208.

12. *Ibid.*, 209.

13. *Ibid.*, 208.

The modifications to the basic trope are apparent. The lonely cottage is transformed into a mansion. The mulatta mistress is confined to the isolated dwelling against her will, and the consequence of such may be her death. The loving relationship between mulatta and master that shapes the basic trope is subverted; love gives way to lust, which can only be gotten by force. The reversion of the natural order of love and mutual affection is reflected in the setting which, although beautiful and luxuriant, loses its idyllic nature. In this variant of the trope, Jane dies, thereby becoming one of Brown's tragic mulattas. Yet notable, and revolutionary, in this variant is Jane's active resistance: she is the mulatta in the cottage, yet she does not become a slave mistress.

The Mulatta Mother in the Cottage: Curren

Brown further complicates the trope in *Clotel* through a third variant, which, although the least developed, is nonetheless important as it is not only the first appearance of the trope in the novel but also the catalyst for the primary plot. The mulatta woman in the cottage, in this instance, is Curren, the mother of Clotel and Althesa, and the former mistress of Thomas Jefferson. When the novel opens, Curren is residing in a cottage with her two daughters in Richmond, Virginia, and because she is raising her daughters to become ladies, Horatio, who has met Clotel at a Negro ball, becomes a frequent visitor to the cottage. It is Horatio who, while "seated in [Curren's] small garden," informs the women of their impending auction sale, and their being placed on the auction block is the event that sets the subsequent events in the novel in motion.¹⁴

Contained the narrator's brief description of Curren and her daughters are the basic elements of the trope. Curren, "a bright mulatto [...] of prepossessing appearance," is the mistress of her own dwelling.¹⁵ Of the cottage there is no description, except that it is "Curren's cottage"; likewise, there is no other description of the "small garden," except that it is the place where Horatio meets with Clotel, "the object of his affections," and promises to make her "a mistress of her own dwelling."¹⁶ As Horatio's promise takes place on "a beautiful moonlit night," the setting, although perhaps not comparable, can be likened to the Garden of Eden through the suggestive promise of idyllic love.

How Curren comes in possession of the cottage is not addressed in the novel; whether Jefferson provides a home for his paramour and offspring when he moves to Washington to further his political aspirations or whether Curren purchases the cottage in her subsequent years of earning her living as a reputable laundress is subject to conjecture. In either case, dwelling "in comparative luxury," she is the third mulatta woman in the cottage.¹⁷ In this variant, the focus is on the mulatta mother who remains in her dwelling, presumably provided for, for some years, by her lover, who is not her master. Like Clotel, Curren is abandoned when her lover pursues his political aspirations, and like Clotel, Curren is eventually expelled from her cottage, but not

14. Brown, *Clotel*, 65.

15. *Ibid.*, 63.

16. Brown, *Clotel*, 65.

17. *Ibid.*, 64.

because of the intervention of her lover or his wife.

Within the three manifestations of the trope as presented in *Clotel* are the possibilities for variation. The mulatta may be residing in the cottage by choice, force, or unexplained circumstances, and complicating her presence there is whether or not she wishes to be/come the mistress of her own dwelling. Nonetheless, implied in her presence is a relationship, however tenuous, with her white master/lover. Moreover, the master may or may not dwell with her in the isolated, possibly Edenic setting, and he may or may not be married. If he is married, his wife may learn of, and attempt to thwart, his relationship with his mulatta slave. Finally, the singular thread that runs through Brown's variants is the mulatta's eventual expulsion from the cottage, for which the possibility of the alternative likewise exists. Nonetheless, these three variants comprise the foundational trope upon which Brown himself and subsequent authors revise.

Revising the Trope: *The Escape; or, A Leap for Freedom*

After reworking the *Clotel* story in three successive novels, Brown shifts to the genre of drama to continue his address to the trope of the mulatta woman in the cottage.¹⁸ In his *The Escape; or, A Leap for Freedom*, the mulatta slave, Melinda, has not only attracted the attention of her owner, Dr. Gaines, but also his wife who, noting his designs on Melinda, insists that the slave be sold. Instead of selling Melinda as he leads his wife to believe, Dr. Gaines sequesters her in a cottage on a plantation some miles away from his primary residence. Suspicious of her husband's comings-and-goings, Mrs. Gaines follows him one evening and discovers the cottage. After he leaves, she enters and confronts Melinda accusing her of complicity in the doctor's scheme. In spite of Melinda's explanation that she is being kept against her will, Mrs. Gaines resorts to physical violence with the hope of forcing Melinda to kill herself. Melinda prevails in the confrontation and then escapes when the defeated Mrs. Gaines retreats to her home.¹⁹

The elements of the trope as outlined in *Clotel* are present in *The Escape*: the mulatta dwells in a cottage provided by her white master. Located ten miles from the Gaineses' primary residence, the cottage is isolated; its setting is not described, yet the name "Poplar Farm" conjures tranquil images of nature, particularly when contrasted with "Muddy Creek," the name of the plantation. More significant to the advancement of the trope, however, are the revisions. Like Horatio and the profligate bachelor in *Clotel*, Mr. Gaines places Melinda in the cottage where she can be her own mistress, yet he goes beyond that and offers to set her free—if she abandons the idea of having the slave, Glen, for her husband.²⁰ Like Jane, Melinda rejects her owner's offer, but she also tells him that she is married. Finally, like Jane, Melinda attempts to escape with her true love, but unlike, Jane she is successful.

The element of defiance that is introduced in *Clotel* is repeated in *The Escape*, yet Melinda's emboldened resistance is a significant revision of Jane's unsuccessful escape attempt. Melinda resists Dr. Gaines by verbally refusing his unwanted advances and by secretly marrying and running away with Glen. Her successful escape counters Dr. Gaines's having placed her in

18. These novels are *Miralda; or, The Beautiful Quadroon* (1860–1861), *Clotelle: A Tale of the Southern States* (1864), and *Clotelle; or, The Colored Heroine* (1867).

19. Brown, *The Escape*, Act 3, Sc. 5.

20. *Ibid.*, emphasis added.

the cottage against her will. Additionally, Melinda physically resists Mrs. Gaines's attempt to force her to commit suicide. Through allowing Melinda to resist, Brown gives more agency to the mulatta character in the drama than the mulatta characters in the novel. While this is a considerable difference in the trope in *The Escape*, but it is not the only one.

The Supplementary Plot: The White Mistress in *The Escape*

The second revision in *The Escape* occurs in the corollary subplot: the intervention of the wife. Refusing to be the passive, wronged wife who merely insists that her husband relinquishes his slave mistress/interest, Mrs. Gaines assumes agency by becoming an active participant in the drama. Because she suspects that her husband has not sold the mulatta slave, she follows him, riding a horse bareback for ten miles. When her suspicions are confirmed, she forcefully confronts Melinda, her perceived rival, both verbally and physically. A fight ensues, and Melinda triumphs, while Mrs. Gaines loses her cap, combs and curls. As William Edward Farrison and Peter A. Dorsey also note, the scene is farcical, an interlude that provides comic relief for the audience/ readers—at the expense of a white character.²¹ The not-so-subtle message is two-fold: the wife's anger, when vented at the slave woman, is displaced, and taking rash action on the slave woman may have physical as well as embarrassing consequences.

The final revision of the trope in *The Escape* is perhaps the most significant. After escaping Poplar Farm, Melinda finds Glen, who has also escaped Gaines's imposed bondage; they make their way north, yet are pursued and nearly captured on the American shore of the Niagara River. Amidst a skirmish between slave owners and abolitionists, Melinda and Glen leap into a boat and are successfully carried to freedom. Thus, without Dr. Gaines's granting it and despite his attempts to recapture her after she escapes, Melinda attains her freedom. Moreover, she will presumably dwell in, and be the mistress of, her own home as well as married to the man of her own choosing.

In *The Escape*, then, Brown reworks each of the variants of the mulatta woman in the cottage in *Clotel*. Through the successful escape and ultimate marriage of Melinda, who—despite being forced to dwell in an isolated cottage as well as being offered womanhood and her freedom—chooses to love a man of her own race, Brown provides an alternative to the three endings of the mulattas in *Clotel*. The story of Melinda subverts that of Curren, who remains in the cottage although abandoned by her lover; Clotel, who happily and willingly dwells—by choice—in the cottage with her white lover, yet who is eventually abandoned; and Jane, who dwells unwillingly in the cottage by force and who succumbs to death. Moreover, unlike Curren, Clotel and Jane, Melinda is alive at the end of the work; consequently, she cannot be viewed as tragic mulatta by any definition of the term. By re-tropeing his own trope, Brown introduces yet another mulatta character type in African American literature. The four variants as presented in *Clotel* and *The Escape* serve as the foundation for the trope as it appears in the nineteenth-

21. Farrison, "William Wells Brown" and Dorsey, "William Wells Brown."

century works of two African American women writers beginning with Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.

The Trope Re Worked: *Incidents in Life of a Slave Girl*

In 1861, writing under the pseudonym of Linda Brent, Harriet Jacobs publishes *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, the first extant slave narrative by an African American woman.²² As she recounts her personal experience of slavery, which includes continued seduction attempts by the slave owner in whose home she resides, Jacobs consciously imitates the trope of the mulatta in the cottage.

Central to one section of *Incidents* is a cottage. Fifteen—year-old Linda Brent captures the attention of Dr. Flint, the father of the young girl five-year-old to whom Linda is bequeathed at the death of her mistress. His efforts at seduction, however, are unsuccessful—according to Linda, because she is interested in a free man of her own race; according to Dr. Flint, because Linda fears his wife. After months of attempted seductions and “foul” whisperings, Dr. Flint revises his tactics; he tells Linda that he is preparing a cottage for her—four miles from town—where she can be a lady in her own home.²³ When Linda learns that construction has begun on the cottage, she sleeps with an unmarried white lawyer, Mr. Sands, in order to thwart Flint’s advances. Once the cottage is completed and Dr. Flint *orders* her to move there, Linda tells him of her pregnancy.²⁴ Linda’s becoming a mother appears not to abate Dr. Flint. Even after she gives birth to a second child, he tells her that he is willing to “procure a cottage, where [she] and the children can live together”—provided that she has no interaction with her children’s father. Adding a final incentive, Dr. Flint states, “[t]hink what is offered you, Linda—a home and freedom!”²⁵ Linda does not take time to consider the offer; instead, she immediately refuses. It is only when Dr. Flint threatens to send her and her children to his son’s plantation that Linda agrees to go there alone, and it is there that, she in an effort to permanently foil Dr. Flint and to save her children, stages her escape.

It is immediately apparent from the summary of this extended incident from Jacobs’s narrative that there are striking similarities as well as differences in the experiences of two of Brown’s mulattas and Linda Brent and also sufficient evidence to posit that Jacobs is consciously reworking the trope of the mulatta in the cottage from both *Clotel* and *The Escape*. *Clotel*’s story is echoed in *Incidents* with little deviation. Like *Clotel*, Linda is offered a cottage a few miles from town where she can become a lady—the mistress of her own dwelling. Moreover, Linda is also sixteen when she receives the offer of her own home. As Frances Smith Foster notes, “Dr. Flint’s offer of a cottage in the woods and an almost-marriage is comparable to what Brown’s heroine accepts,” yet in the major difference in the revision: “Linda is not in the

22. The validity of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* as truly autobiographical was not firmly established until 1981 when Jean Fagan Yellin researched and published what is now the definitive version of the narrative.

23. Jacobs, *Incidents*, 30, 59.

24. *Ibid.*, emphasis added.

25. Jacobs, *Incidents*, 93.

least tempted.”²⁶ The similarities are even more striking between *The Escape* and *Incidents*. There is the near likeness of the mulattas’ names, both women are in love with men of their own race, and their would-be suitors have the same profession.²⁷ Dr. Flint’s “intention to give [Linda] a home of [her] own, and to make a lady of [her]” as well as his final offer to give her her freedom if she ends all communication with Mr. Sands almost directly echoes Dr. Gaines’ offer to provide Melinda with a cabin, dress her like a lady, and set her free if she would abandon the idea of having Glen as her husband.²⁸ Noting other comparisons, John Ernest writes:

Dr. Gaines is a stock character, though one justified by a later nonfictional counterpart, Dr. Flint of Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Both doctors are determined to possess not only the bodies but also the wills of the enslaved women under their power—a determination that in both cases is exposed by a physical and ideological leap for freedom.”²⁹

On the other hand, Jacobs’ revisions are few: unlike Melinda’s love interest, Linda’s is free born. Also, while Linda sends her lover away for his protection, Melinda chooses to defy her master by marrying her slave lover.

The Supplementary Plot: *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

Strikingly similar in *The Escape* and *Incidents*, and the strongest evidence that Jacobs consciously reworks Brown is her development of the supplementary plot. Like Mrs. Gaines, Mrs. Flint becomes aware of her husband’s extramarital interest; consequently, she wages her own battle against the mulatta slave. When Dr. Flint moves Linda into the Flints’ home under the pretense that she is to care for their youngest daughter, Mrs. Flint impedes him by requiring Linda to sleep in a room adjacent to her own. On more than a few nights, Mrs. Flint enters Linda’s room and whispers foul things in her ear hoping to elicit a response that would confirm her suspicions about Linda and her husband. Aware that it is Mrs., not Dr., Flint who is harassing her, Linda begins to fear for her life, for as Anne B. Dalton suggests, Mrs. Flint’s whisperings in Linda’s ears are equivalent to Dr. Flint’s. Linda is subject to verbal sexual harassment from both husband and wife.³⁰ Unlike Mrs. Gaines’s, Mrs. Flint’s mistreatment does not move beyond the verbal. Yet like Mrs. Gaines’s, her tactics are unsuccessful, because her suspicions concerning the slave woman’s complicity in her husband’s machinations are unwarranted. As Jacobs’ description of Mrs. Flint serves as the title of the chapter where Linda recounts the incident, Mrs. Flint is reduced to the stereotypical figure of “the jealous mistress.”³¹

26. Foster, “Resisting *Incidents*,” 65.

27. It should be noted that Melinda in *The Escape*, is also known as Linda. That both Brown’s and Jacobs’ characters are named Linda may be coincidental; after all, as Linda’s Uncle Peter explains in *Incidents*, the name is a common one (172). However, when one takes into account the other similarities in *Incidents*, literary influence is the stronger argument.

28. Jacobs *Incidents*, 59, 93; Brown, *The Escape*, 69.

29. Ernst, “Reconstruction,” 1112-1113.

30. Dalton, “Devil,” 42, 44.

31. Jacobs, *Incidents*, 34.

Jacobs' use of the trope mulatta in the cottage is not just repetition with a difference; she revises the trope in important ways. Linda's active and continued resistance separates her from Brown's heroines. Brown introduces the notion of female slave resistance with Jane; however, once her attempted escape is thwarted, Jane's descent into melancholy and eventual death overshadows her act of defiance. It is therefore Melinda's verbal resistance that reverberates in *Incidents*. Melinda tells Dr. Gaines, "you can do with me what you please with the avail of my labor, but you shall never tempt me from the path of virtue," but when he threatens her, she pronounces "a curse that shall haunt" him both day and night; then, she reveals that she is married.³² Linda counters Dr. Flint's verbal abuse with words of her own. When he tells her that he has a right to do with her as he pleases, she responds, "you have no right to do as you like with me."³³ When he threatens that she will be carried to the cottage by force, she tells him, "I will never go there," and then reveals that she is pregnant.³⁴ Melinda and Linda both use sass as their "weapon of self-defense" against their masters and to disclose their crowning acts of rebellion—marriage and pregnancy.³⁵ However, Linda's decision—to choose a white lover—is far more defiant than Melinda's bold step to secretly marry her slave love. Linda explains it thusly: "there is something akin to freedom in having a lover who has no control over you, except that which he gains by kindness and attachment."³⁶ Like Brown's Jane and Melinda, Linda is not able to escape her master's unsolicited *offer* of the cottage, but because of her rebellious subversion, she does not *set foot* in the cottage. Yet, like Jane and Melinda, Linda eventually attempts an escape; only hers is one of subterfuge. She neither attempts to run away with her lover, nor does she head north. Instead, she remains in North Carolina as her only intent is to remove herself from Dr. Flint's verbal and physical grasp. Finally, Linda's first-person's account of her own story separates hers from that of Brown's mulattas. In these crucial ways, Jacobs not only revises the trope but also makes her own contribution to the African American literary tradition.

The Trope Solidified: *The Bondwoman's Narrative*

Jacobs' narrative is autobiographical, yet it is also, as Elizabeth Fox-Genovese argues, "a crafted representation."³⁷ Written during approximately the same time period as Jacobs' *Incidents* is a work, not discovered and published until 2002, which the author asserts is both autobiographical and fictional. That it is also "a crafted representation" is clearly implicated by its complete title: *The Bondwoman's Narrative by Hannah Crafts: A Fugitive Slave Recently Escaped from North Carolina*.³⁸ Lawrence Buell asserts that although *The Bondwoman's Narrative* is a draft, it "is

32. Brown, *The Escape*, Act 3, Sc. 5.

33. Jacobs, *Incidents*, 44.

34. *Ibid.*, 62.

35. Braxton, "Jacobs's *Incidents*," 386.

36. Jacobs, *Incidents*, 61.

37. Fox-Genovese, quoted in Braxton and Zuber, 152.

38. Crafts, Hannah. *The Bondwoman's Narrative By Hannah Crafts: A Fugitive Slave Recently Escaped from North Carolina*. New York: Warner, 2002. That the author of *The Bondwoman's Narrative* is of African descent or even

one of the most artfully structured of antebellum narratives by African Americans.³⁹ Part of its artful structure is its repetition, revision, and manipulation of the trope of the mulatta in the cottage. *The Bondwoman's Narrative* imitates and notably complicates the trope in a number of ways. As in *Clotel*, there are multiple variants of the trope in *The Bondwoman's Narrative*.

The Mulatta in the Mansion: The Mistress

The first occurrence of trope of the mulatta in the cottage is with the woman who is to become the wife of the middle-aged master of Lindendale. When the bride-to-be arrives at the mansion, she is described by the narrator, Hannah:⁴⁰

there was a mystery about her. She was a small brown woman, with a profusion of wavy curly hair, large bright eyes, and delicate features with the exception that her lips which were too large, full and red. She dressed in very good taste and her manner seemed perfect but for an uncomfortable habit she had of seeming to watch everybody as though she feared them or thought them enemies....I fancied then that she was haunted by a shadow or phantom apparently only to herself.⁴¹

The young Hannah is too ignorant to intuit what her description reveals about her mistress—that her brown complexion, curly hair, and too full lips mark her as mulatta. This fact is concealed from members of the household; Hannah learns of it when she later overhears a conversation between the mistress and Mr. Trappe, the gentleman who accompanies the mistress to Lindendale, and then through the mistress's direct admission.⁴² As the master does not know her secret, the beautiful, intelligent, accomplished mulatta “reign[s] supreme” as lady of the mansion, yet her reign is short lived.⁴³ Threatened by Trappe that he is going to reveal the circumstances of her birth to her husband, the mistress runs away from the mansion accompanied by Hannah. They wander about for a few years, hiding and also imprisoned in a number of places. Finally unable to endure the stress, the mistress becomes ill and dies.

The mistress's story expands yet departs somewhat from both *Clotel's* and *Jane's* story. Like *Jane*, the unnamed mistress is placed in a mansion where she unhappily resides, haunted by her fear that her husband will learn of her mixed ancestry. She successfully escapes, but because

an escaped fugitive slave is disputed by a number of critics; one who takes this position is Holly Jackson. Others, however, convincingly argue for the author's African ethnicity (See Andrews, Buell, Rohrbach, and Stauffer). Also in question is when the work was written. Based upon certain events in the work that occurred in the late 1850s, the work may have been written as late as 1861. For the sake of this discussion, the work will be viewed as the work of an African slave woman written after *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.

39. Buell, “Bondwoman Unbound,” 18.

40. William Andrew writes, “there is no reason to assume that the author of *The Bondwoman's Narrative* and the character who goes by the name of Hannah Crafts in the story were the same person” (“Hannah Crafts” 31). As a result, in his analysis of the work, he uses Crafts to indicate the author and Hannah to indicate the character. This same method will be used throughout this essay.

41. Crafts, *Bondwoman's Narrative*, 27.

42. A second clue is provided Hannah that the mistress has Negro blood. Lizzy, the quadroon maid, who arrives at Lindendale with the Mistress tells Hannah that it is more likely that Mr. Trappe had wished to sell—not marry—her. The implied meaning of Lizzy's statement is lost on the young Hannah.

43. Crafts, *Bondwoman's Narrative*, 33.

she is only accompanied by a young slave girl, she travels aimlessly for years over the same countryside. Eventually found by Mr. Trappe, the now physically and mentally impaired mulatta succumbs to death. Like Jane, the unnamed mistress is a tragic mulatta; however, she is not imprisoned by her master, but herself. In Hannah's description of the mistress's death is a faint echo of Clotel's: "a gleam of satisfaction shone over her face. There was a gasp, a struggle, a slight shiver of the limbs and she was free."⁴⁴ For Clotel and the mulatta mistress, "death is freedom"; like Brown, Crafts suggests in this variant of the trope that "absolute freedom. . . occurs only in the next life."⁴⁵

Both Brown and Crafts seem to suggest that the mulatta who in dwells in the mansion can only be a tragic figure. For Craft, the tragedy does not end with the mulatta mistress in the mansion; her most noted departure thus far is her contribution to the trope: an address to the white master. Returning the day after the mistress runs away with Hannah and discovering that she is gone, Mr. Trappe meets with Mr. De Vincent, the master of Lindendale. He leaves after a long time, and when the housekeeper enters the master's locked apartment some hours later, she discovers him dead; having cut his own throat, he has committed suicide. Because no one is privy to what transpires between the two men, it can only be conjectured why De Vincent kills himself; however, it can be inferred from Trappe's presence and the sparkle in the eye upon his departure that he has informed De Vincent that his wife is a mulatta, and the revelation leads to his demise. As both the mistress and master commit suicides, both are tragic figures.

Crafts also pays attention to the third element of the trope—setting—and considerably expands it in her first variant. Located within the same chapter as the bride's arrival at Lindendale, is an extended discussion of setting. More specifically, narrated over six pages is the haunting tale of the linden tree, which serves to suggest the doom placed on the inhabitants and the mansion. Consequently, despite the mansion's placement amidst elms, bowers, and lindens, the setting is far from Eden-like; instead, a Gothic gloominess prevails. When it rains, and the wind passes through the famed tree, a shrieking can be heard.⁴⁶ The mansion's interior also figures prominently. A liquid substance, thought to be water, but soon revealed to be blood, seeps from De Vincent's apartment to one of the rooms below. Doom and death permeate both without and within the mansion. Because the legend of Linden precedes the story of the mulatta mistress and her husband, it serves to foreshadow their tragic endings.

Mulatta Women in the Mansion

With its primary occupants both dead, Lindendale passes on to another master and mistress, and Crafts further develops her variant of the mulatta in the mansion through its new occupants. Hannah no longer resides at Lindendale; therefore, Crafts uses the technique of a story-within-a-story to inform Hannah, as well as her readers, of the current events on the plantation. Years after the ill-fated escapades with her mistress, Hannah is sold and re-sold eventually becoming

44. Ibid., 100.

45. Brown, *Clotel*, 216; Stauffer, "Problem of Freedom," 60.

46. Crafts, *Bondwoman's Narrative*, 20.

a slave of the Wheelers, who have residences in Washington D.C. and outside Wilmington, North Carolina. During one of their stays in Washington, Hannah is re-united with Lizzy, the quadroon slave who accompanied their mulatta first mistress to Lindendale, and Lizzy relates what has transpired on the plantation with its current residents, Mr. and Mrs. Cosgrove.

As Mr. Cosgrove keeps a number of mulatta slave women throughout various apartments for his sexual purposes, Crafts expands the trope of the mulatta in the mansion by replication. It is along with Mrs. Cosgrove that the readers learn of these mulatta women. This English-born mistress of Lindendale makes inquiry about two females with children, whom she sees in the mansion courtyard and assumes are guests. Discovering that the women are slaves, she correctly surmises that the children are her husband's. Mrs. Cosgrove confronts her husband and insists that all of the mothers and children are not only sold but also sent away. Mrs. Cosgrove witnesses their being sold to a trader, yet her suspicions have been raised, so when her husband is away, she begins exploring the many rooms and apartments throughout the mansion.⁴⁷ Discovering a locked room, Mrs. Cosgrove gains access to the second-story apartment by climbing a ladder. Looking through the window, she sees "a well-furnished apartment, with chairs, a sofa, mirror work stand, and . . . a cradle, in which from the appearance two babies had been lying, as pillow was placed at the head and another at the foot."⁴⁸ Since she does not receive an answer from the slaves as to who occupies the apartment, Mrs. Cosgrove climbs through the window and finds a young mulatta woman, Evelyn, and her infant twins, whom she immediately expels from the mansion.

Lizzy's story contains similarities and revisions of both the mulatta in the mansion and mulatta in the cottage variants of the trope. Crafts begins with the mulatta in the mansion from Jane's story in *Clotel*, yet her Cosgrove is far more profligate than Brown's young bachelor as apartments throughout the Lindendale mansion are teeming with his mulatta mistresses and children. These women, who are mistresses of their own domains although confined by force, are given access to the plantation's grounds; they have been instructed only to keep out of Mrs. Cosgrove's sight. It is the slave owner's marital status that primarily differentiates Crafts' story from Brown's; therefore, it is the wife's response, when she becomes aware of the slave women, that becomes the focus of Craft's variant. Like Gertrude Green, Mrs. Cosgrove insists that the slave woman be sold and sent away, yet remaining suspicious, she moves beyond removing the visible competitor. She actively seeks out the unknown competition. As a result, it is the wife, rather than confined mistress, who appears at the mansion's window; Mrs. Cosgrove's seeking entrance into the room is a reversal of Jane's attempted exit. Her near fall from the ladder and her disappearance through the window (which likely reveals her undergarments, although such is not mentioned in the text) elicits surprise from the slave onlookers. This incident lies within the

47. There is one exception where the slave mother and child are not sold. Lizzy relates the story of a mother who snatches a knife left outside and stabs her infant and herself, murdering them both (Crafts, *Bondwoman's Narrative*, 177-78). This incident is most likely based upon the actual incident in 1856 where the escaped slave woman, Margaret Garner, kills her child rather than allow it to be returned to slavery---also the incident upon which Toni Morrison based her 1987 novel, *Beloved*.

48. Crafts, *Bondwoman's Narrative*, 180.

realm of the comedic—especially when it is contrasted with Jane’s descent by tied-together bed sheets, witness of her lover’s murder, and tragic death. Mrs. Cosgrove’s discovery of Evelyn and her twin sons results in their being sent away and serves to introduce the strand that is supplementary to the trope—the jealous wife.

The Supplementary Plot: The White Mistress in *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*

The rest of Lizzie’s story in *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* eerily echoes Melinda’s in *The Escape*. Mrs. Cosgrove sees that mulatta woman is banished from the mansion, yet upon his return, Mr. Cosgrove goes in search of the slave woman and his sons. He returns a few days later without them, but becomes increasingly more absent from the plantation. Remaining ever suspicious, Mrs. Cosgrove overhears the overseer mention “Rock Glen” to her husband, bribes a young servant girl to find out about the place, and confirms its location. Inquiring further from an old slave woman, Mrs. Cosgrove is told that the formerly uninhabited place has a new resident who has not been seen, but has been heard—“singing a cradle song.”⁴⁹ (190). Thinking that her husband has not sold Evelyn, Mrs. Cosgrove sets out for Rock Glen and meets her husband returning from the cottage. As words pass between them, Mrs. Cosgrove is either pushed or loses her balance; the horse then runs off with her suspended from its side, her foot caught in the saddle. When she reaches Lindendale, Mrs. Cosgrove is seriously injured, confined to bed, and eventually dies.

As Shelly Fisher Fishkin so aptly notes, there are similarities between “Lizzy’s Story” and William Wells Brown’s play:

Mrs. Cosgrove...has much in common with Mrs. Gaines...Like Mrs. Gaines, Mrs. Cosgrove is outraged by the fact that her husband has slave ‘favorites.’ Like Mrs. Gaines, she demands that her husband sells these beautiful rivals, and her husband seems to oblige. However, like Mr. Gaines, Mr. Cosgrove sequesters one of his favorites in a small, isolated cottage some miles from his home instead of selling her. Mrs. Cosgrove, like Mrs. Gaines, grows suspicious and vows to ferret out the truth. Both women determine the location of the rival, and both women (accomplished horsewomen) set off on horseback to expose and punish her rival in a fit of jealous rage. Both are women are injured by the horseback ride.⁵⁰

These similarities point to Brown’s influence—or more specifically, Crafts’ imitation—in *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*. Yet as Fishkin also notes, there are differences in the two stories; consequently, she argues that Crafts shapes the borrowed elements “in new ways.”⁵¹ Among these “new ways” is Crafts’ revision of the basic trope of the mulatta woman in the cottage.

49. Crafts, *Bondwoman’s Narrative*, 180.

50. Fishkin, “Bondwoman’s Escape,” 123.

51. Fishkin, “Bondwoman’s Escape,” 123.

The Mulatta Woman in the Cottage: Evelyn

Mr. Cosgrove has made the mulatta slave the mistress of her own dwelling, Rock Glen; consequently, like *Clotel*, Evelyn becomes the mulatta woman in the cottage. Located miles from the Lindendale mansion, the cottage is isolated. The detailed description of its location—down the road, across brook, meadow, and fence, past a tavern, a store, a blacksmith shop, and the undertaker, and beneath an overhanging crag—not only emphasizes its isolation but also points, once again, to Crafts’ attention to the particulars of the setting for the trope.⁵² Rather than being “the perfect model of rural beauty” that is *Clotel*’s cottage, Rock Glen, the name used for both the overhanging crag and the cottage, is described as “pretty” and “pleasant.”⁵³ However, the physical locale—the overhanging crag—is not linked to *Clotel*’s cottage, but to Jane’s prison; the overhanging crag is the reverse of the mansion’s summit on a cliff. Thus, as in Jane’s story, there is an ambiguity concerning the nature of the Rock Glen setting. The crag, “a steep rugged mass of rock projecting upward or outward,” is more characteristic of a Gothic setting, while the brook and meadow suggest a tranquil, idyllic one.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, the Edenic setting—implied in the name of Rock Glen’s occupant, *Evelyn*—overshadows the Gothic. That she is able to reside there without interference from Mrs. Cosgrove makes it idyllic; thus, Evelyn comes closest to the ideal mulatta woman in the cottage.

Hannah Crafts imitates and refigures Brown’s trope of the mulatta in the cottage, and like Brown, she creates three variants. In the first, through the mulatta woman in the mansion trope, Crafts manipulates Jane’s and *Clotel*’s story. She repeats the image of the tragic mulatta, but expands it, for the tragedy is double-edged; the husband’s suicide leads to his also being viewed as a tragic figure. Placing these characters in a Gothic setting, embodied in the linden tree curse, Crafts links their lives, fates, and failed marriage to the long-ranging curse of slavery. In her second manipulation of the trope, Crafts revisits the mulatta in the mansion trope, choosing here to repeat the trope through the multiplicity of mulatta women. With this manipulation, Crafts segues from the mansion to the cottage by collapsing the two tropes through Evelyn, who although banished from the cursed mansion becomes mistress of her own cottage. The merger of the trope variants also allows Crafts to imitate and comment upon the supplementary plot of the white mistress; removing her from a comic representation to a tragic one, Craft permanently diminishes her power to interfere with the mulatta women, who have not willingly submitted to being mistresses in the cottage.

Before moving to her final repetition and revision of the trope, Crafts continues her contribution to the trope: the address to the slave master. Two characters are central to the mulatta in the cottage trope—the mulatta and the master/lover who places her in the cottage. When the master is married, and his wife intervenes via the supplementary plot, the master/wife/mulatta slave triad is created, the physical conflict that most often occurs is between the wives and slave mistresses. The masters, who create these entangled webs, appear immune to their

52. Crafts, *Bondwoman’s Narrative*, 188-89.

53. Brown, *Clotel*, 83; Crafts *Bondwoman’s Narrative*, 188.

54. Crag.” *The Free Dictionary*. 26 May 2010. <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/crag>.

consequences. Having addressed the tragic consequences of a slave owner marrying a mulatta without knowledge of her mixed heritage, Crafts addresses the conundrum of the slave master's invulnerability for actions. When Mr. Cosgrove meets his wife on her way to Rock Glen, a verbal altercation transpires. Because the narrator of this story (Lilly) is not paying attention to the Cosgroves, she cannot say whether a physical altercation ensues between husband and wife (although she believes that one did. What is clear is that Mrs. Cosgrove's injuries are serious; they lead not only to her confinement but also his. He does not leave her bedside, and by the time she dies, his constitution is weakened: from the time of his wife's death, he was no longer the same man. In her address to the slave master, Crafts' message remains the same: articulated by Augusta Rohrbach, it is when slavery's corruption enters the home (or marriage), the "arrangement leads to the moral downfall" of those concerned.⁵⁵

With the death of the mistress and the incapacitated state of the master in the supplementary plot, Evelyn is the lone survivor of the master/ mistress/mulatta triad in *The Bondwoman's Narrative*. Consequently, Crafts in her contribution to the trope does what Brown—and Jacobs—does not: unfettered by mistress and master, yet conceivably well provided, Crafts' mulatta in the cottage is indeed the mistress of her own home. Her central importance to Craft's manipulation of the trope is indicated in her being the only name mulatta in the mansion/cottage in *The Bondwoman's Narrative*. However, Evelyn remains a slave in a slave state. It is this dilemma that Crafts addresses in her final manipulation of the trope, a revision not only of the tropes in Brown but also in Jacobs.

"I now dwell in a neat little Cottage"

Critical attention to *The Bondwoman's Narrative* notes its author's admission that it is both a fictional and autobiographical. However, throughout most of the narrative, Hannah is a participant-observer who primarily relates the experiences of other mulattas through first- and third- person accounts. Hannah's life experiences, however, move to the foreground when she is sold to the Wheelers. Seemingly content with her elevated slave status (as she has been throughout the narrative), Hannah is moved to take action when her mistress intends to marry her to an old slave hand, thereby banishing her to dwell in a hut among the field slaves on a rural Wilmington, North Carolina plantation.⁵⁶ In language that echoes Linda Brent's explanation for choosing a lover rather than submitting to Dr. Flint, Hannah writes, "I had ever regarded marriage as a holy ordinance, and felt that its responsibilities could only be suitably discharged when voluntarily assumed."⁵⁷ Refusing to be forced to marry a slave, Hannah takes flight; traveling as a male and meeting people from her early years—both friend and foe, Hannah reaches the North. Having acquired her freedom, Hannah brings her autobiographical narrative to a close by sharing some details of her present circumstances. She tells her readers, "I dwell now

55. Rohrbach, "Silent Unobtrusive Way." 8.

56. Buell, "Bondwoman Unbound," 21.

57. Crafts, *Bondwoman's Narrative*, 205.

in a neat little Cottage” and then makes it known that she is married to a black man who has never been enslaved.⁵⁸

Hannah Crafts’ final paragraph should also be read against Jacobs’:

Reader, my story ends with freedom; not in the usual way, with marriage. I and my children are now free! We are as free from the power of slaveholders as are the white people of the north; and though that, according to my ideas, is not saying a great deal, it is a vast improvement in my condition. The dream of my life is not yet realized. I do not sit with my children in a home of my own. I still long for a hearthstone of my own, however humble.⁵⁹

Hannah has no children of her own (she does teach colored children), yet as a free woman residing in the North with the man of her own choosing, she becomes the mistress of her own home. As Williams Gleason notes, “for Harriet Jacobs the lack of [a home] casts a shadow over her very freedom...The depth of Jacobs’s lament accentuates the importance of Hannah’s success.”⁶⁰

Crafts’ attention to the cottage throughout the narrative has been intentional; the “unusual capitalization of Cottage” in the final chapter underscores its importance: she has meticulously crafted the trope of the mulatta woman in the cottage.⁶¹ Hannah, whose complexion is almost white, like a number of the slave women in the work, becomes the mulatta woman in the cottage.

Hannah reveals that she resides in a cottage, but she does not provide the details of its setting; instead, “Crafts gives Hannah’s cottage a twin in the novel’s final paragraph.”⁶² From her window, Hannah can view a “tiny, white cottage...half-shaded in summer by rose-vines; positioned between a flower garden and fruit orchard and with “honeysuckle... at the foot of a sloping green,” this cottage is the residence of the former slave William and his mulatta wife, Charlotte.⁶³ By duplicating the structure and describing its setting, Crafts presents the fully realized trope: the mulatta woman dwells in a cottage in an Edenic setting.

With the final chapter of *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*, Crafts places her the work’s primary narrator, Hannah, within the tradition of the mulatta women in the cottage from Brown’s *Currer*, *Clotel*, *Jane*, and *Melinda*, Jacobs’s *Linda Brent*, as well as her own unnamed mistresses. A free woman in her own home with the black man of her own choosing, Hannah is the successor of Brown’s escaped *Melinda*, presumably on her way to becoming the wife of a black man of her own choosing and the mistress of her own home; of Harriet Jacobs who resides in

58. *Ibid.*, 237.

59. Jacobs, *Incidents*, 224-25.

60. Gleason, “I Dwell Now,” 167.

61. *Ibid.*, 166.

62. Gleason, “I Dwell Now,” 166.

63. Crafts, *Bondwoman’s Narrative*, 239. That William and his wife’s escape may be interpreted in light of *Clotel*’s escape also with a male slave named William. In addition, just as Catherine Keyser suggests that Craft’s choice of the name Charlotte may be a nod to Charlotte Brontë, Craft’s choice of the name William may be a nod to William Wells Brown (100).

her own home with her child but without the a mate; of Evelyn who is mistress of her own home, yet who lives in slave territory and perhaps is still supported still by her white master. Also critiquing while appropriating the trope, Crafts revises it. Two of her mulattas are alive and well at the work's end; they cannot be misconstrued as tragic mulattas.

Conclusion: The Significance of the Trope

William Wells Browns is credited for introducing to African American literature the stereotype of the tragic mulatta, yet he also introduces the trope of the mulatta in the cottage, women who are placed in a dwelling as mistresses of their own home in an isolated setting by their slave masters/lovers. While some of these women become tragic mulatta figures, others do not. Because these mulattas provide an alternative to the tragic mulatta image, they are important to African American literature. The significance of the trope itself is evident in its various manifestations not only in Brown but also in Jacob's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and Crafts' *The Bondwoman's Narrative*. These nineteenth-century works of fiction and autobiography form the basis for subsequent addresses to the trope.

The trope of the mulatta woman in the cottage is repeated and revised in twentieth-century African American literature: Charles Chesnutt's *House Behind the Cedars* (1900), James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex Colored Man* (1912), Jessie Fauset's *The Chinaberry Tree* (1931), and Barbara Chase-Riboud's *Sally Hemings* (2000). In the twentieth-first century as the historical reality that underlines the trope is being told in the memoirs and autobiographies of the offspring of the mulatta women, the trope appears in works of non-fiction, such as Edward Ball's *The Sweet Hell Inside: A Family History* (2001) and Sheryll Cashin's *The Agitator's Daughter* (2008 as well as in fictionalized accounts such as Lalita Tademy's *Cane River* (2001) and Dolen Perkins-Valdez's *Wench* (2010). The trope points to the condition of many African American women, fictional and non-fictional, in the nineteenth through the twenty-first centuries, those who, by force or choice, became mistresses of their own homes, the mistresses, consorts or and wives of their slave owners/lovers, who lived lives of relative ease and/or isolation. These stories add depth and complexity to the lives of characters and women who are mulatta, yet not tragic figures.

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