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Hannah Crafts and The Bondwoman's Narrative: rhetoric, religion, textual influences, and contemporary literary trends and tactics

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Hannah Crafts and The Bondwoman’s Narrative: Rhetoric, religion, textual influences, and contemporary literary trends and tactics

by

Benjamin Craig Parker

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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2005

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Graduate College
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This is to certify that the master’s thesis of

Benjamin Craig Parker

has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

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Major Professor

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# Table of Contents

Preface ........................................................................................................ 1  
Introduction ................................................................................................... 4  
The Text of *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* and its Rhetorical Tactics ............... 13  
Crafts’ Preface as Authenticating Meta-Text ....................................................... 25  
The Question of Crafts’ Race .......................................................................... 37  
Issues of Religion in Crafts and Her Contemporaries .............................................. 58  
Dickensian Influence on Crafts ........................................................................ 82  
A Stolen Slave?: Plagiarism and Authorial Property ............................................... 87  
Intellectual and Authorial Property and its Relevance to Crafts .......................... 95  
Conclusion ............................................................................................. 104  
Works Cited ............................................................................................. 106  
Acknowledgements ..................................................................................... 110
Preface

Perhaps the most intriguing element of Crafts’ *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* is its ability to confound readers who insist on defining it quickly and succinctly. Hybridity is a key feature of the text that can be seen in a myriad of its facets. Perhaps the most immediately recognized of these facets is the genre of the work. Although much of *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* is widely recognized as fiction, the text claims historicity, shares many features with autobiographical slave narratives of the day, and references historical individuals both of great fame (such as John Hill Wheeler and his wife) and of abject obscurity (such as residents of the area surrounding Milton, Virginia identified only by census records). As such, our accepted notions of genre may be inadequate to classify Crafts’ text unless a hybrid category between autobiography and fiction is posited.

To date, much critical attention toward Crafts has focused on the question of her race, attempting to prove or disprove her claim to be black. Given the tendency to crave absolutely truthful historicity from autobiography and in particular from works to be classified as slave narratives (a tendency derived from abolitionist obsession with complete veracity as a rhetorical weapon against slavery), this focus is perhaps to be expected. A convincing case for Crafts’ blackness can be made that would likely satisfy most critics. However, just as the text’s heroine, Hannah, is described as “almost white” (Crafts 6) and can escape slavery by passing for white, Crafts’ racial attitudes in *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* reflect a hybridity of black perspectives and internalized white prejudices.

Also significant within *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* is the hybridity of Crafts’ attitudes on the North and on religion. Crafts’ relationship with her intended audience of
white Northern readers is somewhat complicated, as she balances her efforts to secure white abolitionist goodwill with her attempts to portray life in slavery accurately and to critique inadequate or shortsighted responses to the institution. At the same time, Crafts faces the task of reconciling her affirmation of the Christian faith with her condemnation of its misuse to support slavery and racism.

The concept of hybridity within The Bondwoman’s Narrative is also significant in the tension between Crafts’ construction of a text seemingly unlike anything else known to literary studies and her extensive borrowing (arguably constituting plagiarism) of such other literary works as Dickens’ Bleak House. In considering whether Crafts was guilty of plagiarism, it is important to consider how our modern concepts of plagiarism and intellectual property may or may not be appropriate to apply to a manuscript draft from a previous century, as well as the problematic interrelatedness of intellectual property, capitalist ideology, and the institution of slavery in the early to mid-19th century. Also significant here is current literary theory on the relationship between a text and its author, as well as the relationships between authors and protagonists in The Bondwoman’s Narrative and contemporary works by such authors as Wilson, Jacobs, and Douglass. These relationships in Crafts, according to Robbins, add a further hybridity in a narrative voice beyond that of either the protagonist or a disembodied narrator alone, creating “a hybrid or polyvocal character” and “an emergent and merging moment of consciousness” (78).

Just as Hannah eludes her pursuers as a fugitive slave toward the end of Crafts’ narrative, The Bondwoman’s Narrative itself eludes simple descriptors. In fact, hybrid
tension such as that between biography and fiction, black and white, originality and plagiarism, is perhaps the most intriguing element of the text.
Introduction

A significant recent development in the study of American literature, particularly with respect to antebellum African-American literature, has been the discovery by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., of a manuscript titled *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*, written by a woman identifying herself as Hannah Crafts, an escapee of slavery in North Carolina. As Gates explains in his introduction to *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*, the manuscript was among the items for sale at the annual auction of “Printed & Manuscript African-Americana” conducted by Swann Galleries in New York City (ix-xi). The manuscript, apparently written in the 1850s, purports to be an autobiographical account of Crafts’ experiences as a slave and her escape to the North. Such accounts are not uncommon: Gates notes that “[n]early a hundred slave narratives were published as books or pamphlets between 1760 and 1865” (“The Fugitive” 104). However, critics of *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* largely agree that major portions of the narrative are fictionalized (that is, embellished for dramatic and literary effect) if the narrative is not entirely fictitious. This includes Gates, former owners of the manuscript Emily Driscoll and Dorothy Porter (Gates, Introduction to *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* xi, xxxiv), manuscript authenticator Joe Nickell (306), and critics such as Nina Baym (322), Augusta Rohrbach (3), and Benjamin Soskis. Soskis, for instance, suggests that

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1Crafts’ name as attached to *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* may well be a pseudonym. Gates, in his introduction, reports significant difficulties in finding records of anyone by this name or a similar name who could have been the author of this text (xxxvi-lxiii). Other critics have speculated on identities for Crafts such as Hannah Vincent and Jane Johnson (identities proposed by Nina Baym and Katherine E. Flynn, respectively). Lynn A. Casmier-Paz notes “slave narratives’ tactical manipulation of the proper name” as “the site of contest, or the moment of conflict” (216-17), citing Harriet Jacobs’s “Linda Brent” pseudonym and Frederick Douglass’s adoption of his name as examples of this conflict, and concludes that “names, signatures, identities are always malleable, historical, contextual, and discursive” (221). Because the author as revealed through her work, rather than her historical identity, is my concern, I will refer to her by the *nom de plume* she has selected for herself as critics to date have done.
the text is "deliberately fictionalized" and predicts that it "will likely take up a position on the periphery of the [slave narrative] genre, where it will complicate notions of the slave narratives' duties toward verisimilitude" (36). In fact, the cover of the Warner Books publication of the manuscript titles the work *The Bondwoman's Narrative: A Novel*, implying that it has been conclusively judged to be primarily if not entirely fiction. Gates, indeed, describes *The Bondwoman's Narrative* in his introduction to it as "a fascinating novel" and "a captivating novel" (xxi).

On the other hand, such evidence as the presence in the narrative of such historical individuals as John Hill Wheeler and his wife conveys the impression that *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* is at least partially historical if not autobiographical per se. Moreover, as Gates mentioned in a radio interview with Terry Gross, the names of such characters as the Henry family, the Cosgrove family, and Frederick Hawkins are traceable in census records of the early 1800s to "within a 50-kilometer radius of Milton, Virginia," lending the impression that Crafts has written about individuals she knew personally as a slave in Virginia. Such consistency with census accounts of relatively obscure individuals would be hard to fabricate, according to Gates: "Now if this were, say, an upper-class white person writing from the North, purely fictionalizing an imaginary slave’s experience, there’s no way they would have known the identity of all these slaveholders within a 50-mile radius of Milton" (Interview with Gross). As Soskis concludes, "It remains unclear in *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* where truth ends and untruth begins … But though it may confound critics for the moment, that tension between the reported and the imagined … far from diminishing the novel’s worth, is itself perhaps the most valuable idea that this book can impart" (39). The
tension Soskis describes makes *The Bondwoman's Narrative* “both a fascinating historical document and a well-told tale” (Asim 50) whose “distinctive charms lie in its unusual combination of genres” (Bay 30). However, even if the genre question confronts the reader at his or her first glance upon the cover of the book, it is only one of a number of issues that make the study of Crafts’ work a fascinating endeavor.

Perhaps the most significant element of Gates’s discovery of *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* is the possibility that the manuscript, if the events written of within it are indeed fictional, represents the first novel ever written by an African American woman who was a former slave. That the manuscript has been preserved as an unedited draft is equally significant. While writings by African Americans were not especially uncommon before the Civil War (two such works that will figure prominently here are Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* and Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*), often these were published because of a great deal of help from white abolitionists in editing and promoting the works, as white abolitionist testimony published with the narratives of Douglass and Jacobs indicates. As Barbara Ryan notes, “virtually all 19th-century servants and ex-servants had to testify through sponsors and with permission” (144, italics Ryan’s). Those texts without such support, such as Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig*, received little notice: Gates, in researching Wilson, was unable to find any 19th century reference to Wilson’s novel (Introduction to *Our Nig* xxxi). Ryan argues that Wilson’s obscurity “recalls the importance of a sponsor” and that “Wilson’s decision to testify without editorial sanction was an arrogation dared by the favored few” (150). Alexis Brooks-De Vita theorizes that *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* went unpublished because of
“the intrinsically Africanist quality of its author’s voice” and “Crafts’ vituperative anti-white supremacy” (1). If Brooks-De Vita is correct, these qualities would be difficult to reconcile with the attitudes of subtle racism often held by abolitionists, as we will see.

Even with abolitionist help, fewer than one in five narratives were selected for publication, and those that were published “were chaperoned before the public by multiple introductory statements from prominent white anti-slavery men and women, vouching for the slave’s integrity and the narrative’s truthfulness” (Soskis 37). Hilary Mantel describes the dilemma of authenticity that surrounds works published as a result of such sponsorship:

Even where the hand that held the pen was black, a certain blurring of the boundaries of authenticity is evident in many texts. The stories of escaped slaves were intended to serve as propaganda for Abolition, and they were often edited by white supporters of emancipation. They had to sound authentic rather than be authentic, which meant that they had to conform to a white readership’s idea of how an educated black should sound. (Mantel 424, italics mine)

Accordingly, Ryan argues, such works are often “best understood as a ‘black message in a white envelope’” (144), although she adds the caveat that “the image is too static, since messages and envelopes are usually distinct” (Ryan 144). Ryan offers Lydia Maria Child’s editorial changes to Jacobs as an example:

It is fair to ask … about Child’s decision that Incidents would not include commentary on John Brown though it could find room to detail crudities that Jacobs had preferred to mention more vaguely … I do not conclude, with this comparison, that Child’s editorial emendations were innocent or even wholly respectful of Jacobs’s report … she torqued Jacobs’s testament where it was never meant to go. (150)

Crafts’ work, by contrast, never reached this editing stage and, accordingly, was not edited with these considerations in mind. It is “the only manuscript written by a slave that we can be sure was not edited by an abolitionist or an amanuensis. All the others, or most of the
others, were edited to some extent … We don’t know the extent. Here … we have the unedited consciousness of a slave for the first time” (Gates, Interview with Gross). Douglas Field agrees, noting that “it has not always been possible to gauge the extent of white editorial control over material written by blacks. If Crafts’ novel proved to be genuine, then it would offer an unadulterated insight into the thoughts of a fugitive slave” (28). To the extent that the text of *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* is what it claims to be, it “would offer unique access to a text untainted by seemingly helpful white abolitionist editors, advisers, and amanuenses who generally made extensive changes in the stories written by fugitive slaves” (Berger 147). This access, in turn, is significant to an understanding of the history of antebellum African American literature and literacy, as Adebayo Williams argues:

> The publication of *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* confirms, without any doubt, the existence of what the novelist Ralph Ellison characterized as an unsecured, ‘free-floating literacy,’ or a paraliterate culture at the very least, among black slaves in antebellum America. This inchoate and emergent culture, disarticulated from the dominant cultural matrix, was nevertheless strong enough to power a nascent literary tradition. (137)

Soskis agrees that the manuscript status of *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* makes it a significant discovery, particularly for its implications for the slave narrative genre:

> The book also helps to relieve one of the peculiar ironies of slave narratives: though the celebration of literacy and the act of writing are central tropes within them, the material evidence of their composition is practically nonexistent. But *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* is now the only surviving holograph manuscript of any work of antebellum black literature. As such, it offers a unique opportunity for those studying the period. (Soskis 38)

As one might expect, Gates’s publication of *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* has led to extensive efforts to determine the veracity of the manuscript and the narrative, to find out who Hannah Crafts really was, when the work was written, how much of its content is
autobiographical, how much is fictionalized, and how other works by published authors
influenced Crafts’ prose. Arguably, the most pressing question, judging by critical attention
so far, is whether Crafts was an escaped slave, a free black woman, or a “do-gooder white
woman pretending to be black” (John Bloom 438). Here, again, critical examination of
Crafts follows that of the slave narrative genre:

The first question usually asked about a slave narrative is not the aesthetic one but the
historical one: not whether it is good, but whether it is true … From the movement’s
earliest days, abolitionist editors and publishers were concerned about the accuracy of
slave testimony, especially since most Northerners assumed that slave life required an
expertise in prevarication…. (Soskis 36)

Many arguments on this topic have focused on proving the historical Crafts “black” or
“white” in a perhaps oversimplified binary racial dichotomy even as material within The
Bondwoman’s Narrative and elsewhere tends to indicate that the concept of race is much
more complicated than that, as can also be seen in articles on the topic by such literary critics
as Robert S. Levine. Crafts’ claim that The Bondwoman’s Narrative is autobiographical
invites such interest:

Autobiography is a literary genre, of course, but it is one from which even literature
professors are apt to crave veridicality. Though wont to remark upon
autobiography’s rhetorical aims and representational selectivity, most literature
professors still value the genre’s relation to ‘what’s really out there.’ Teachers, as
well as their students, will assume prima facie that an autobiography, however artful,
is more mirror than lamp. (Potkay 602)

However, such forensic study only touches upon a small portion of the material in Crafts that
is of current literary relevance, particularly inasmuch as Crafts fictionalized her narrative to
further her “rhetorical aims.” As other critics will readily admit, a text such as The
Bondwoman’s Narrative is of interest, as Potkay argues that Olaudah Equiano is of interest,
because of “its role in the cultural archive, its fusion at a more or less critical juncture of
several available, interrelated discourses” (603).

Although readers and critics of *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* have already made impressive discoveries leading to numerous theories on all of the above issues (and I intend here to address some of these issues and theories), it is likely that much about Crafts and her work will remain a mystery indefinitely, that the text “was in all probability written by a black woman who might not ever be found, which seemed to be the way that Hannah Crafts had wanted it” (Gates, Introduction to *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* xxxiv). If it is, in fact, the case that Crafts was a fugitive from slavery, she would obviously have made it as difficult as possible to track her from her former position in slavery, at least until the North’s victory in the Civil War was assured. The task of tracing Crafts’ identity, of course, becomes still more difficult after the proverbial trail has spent nearly a century and a half growing cold, although this does not prevent Gates and others from following any leads they can. It could even be argued that this very difficulty in tracking Crafts’ identity supports the contention that Crafts is who she claims to be, since an educated white Northern woman might not be so difficult to locate in the census records through which Gates has searched for Crafts with relatively little success. Casmier-Paz argues that authorial identifiers in slave narratives necessarily do not point toward the slave who has written: “the ‘resurrection’ of an original identity would be a fatal effect, since fugitive slave writing uses inscription to elude the laws of presence and therefore evade the location of captive identities” (Casmier-Paz 218). Jacobs, for instance, “invents ‘Linda Brent’ to mislocate [herself] further” (219), just as Brent herself writes to misrepresent her own location within *Incidents* itself. Casmier-Paz points out that this “tactical maneuver … later caused problems of authentication for
historians” (219). As Gates argues, “Crafts’ vagueness [regarding her method of escape] actually lends authenticity” in this instance (“The Fugitive” 106), as it makes all the more difficult the prospect of locating her, or preventing other fugitives from escaping as she did. This concern, of course, was quite important to African American authors of Crafts’ day, as Frederick Douglass’s criticism of Henry Box Brown for publishing details of his escape demonstrates (107). Douglass complained that publicity about slaves’ escape tactics benefited only their pursuers and tended to make the Underground Railroad instead into an “upperground railroad” (Narrative 138, italics Douglass’s). Douglass’s concerns, incidentally, are corroborated by Gates’s research on Wheeler’s private library, which contains numerous slave narratives that Gates suspects Wheeler obtained in order to “study the mind of the enemy, perhaps better to master and control his slaves, and to prevent them from escaping” (“Borrowing Privileges” 18).

Crafts’ obscurity, meanwhile, is not uncommon among African American authors of the time: when Gates attempted similarly to trace the identity of Harriet Wilson, a free black woman whose work was copyrighted and published (albeit to relatively obscure reception) as Crafts’ was not, Gates came away with the conclusion that “[while] there remains no [question] as to [Wilson’s] race or her authorship of Our Nig, we have been able to account for her existence only from 1850 to 1860. Even her birthdate and date of death are unknown” (Introduction to Our Nig xiv).

Somewhat disquietingly, deductive efforts to pin down Crafts’ identity since the publication of her manuscript can also be seen as somewhat reminiscent of the detective work of Mr. Trappe, one of Crafts’ main antagonists, within the text of The Bondwoman’s
Narrative itself. Crafts' historical identity can also be seen as somewhat beside the point if, as some modern literary theorists suggest, the author is less important than his or her text. Roland Barthes, for example, defines writing in part as “the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing” (1466). Accordingly, Barthes argues, “the modern scriptor is born simultaneously with the text, is in no way equipped with a being preceding or exceeding the writing” (1468). As we will see, though, critics such as Thomas Jeffers have relatively little patience with the theories of authorship set forth by Barthes and other modern literary theorists such as Foucault and Derrida. Meanwhile, since we know little about Crafts except as the author of the manuscript of The Bondwoman’s Narrative, a close examination of the text itself remains perhaps our best tool if we still wish to learn who Crafts really was (in the sense of her values, perspectives, literary influences, and authorial aims), what she was trying to write, and why. At the same time, we can learn more about The Bondwoman’s Narrative and the proper place it should occupy within the study of American literature through a textual comparison between the Crafts manuscript and African American autobiography (including Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs), African American fiction and poetry (such as that by Harriet Wilson), and white American literature on the subject of slavery (for example, Harriet Beecher Stowe and her seminal anti-slavery novel Uncle Tom’s Cabin).

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Wilson’s work, like Crafts’, appears to fall between the genres of novel and slave narrative. While Gates refers to Wilson’s Our Nig as a novel (Introduction to Our Nig xi), Nina Baym argues instead that the work is a “lightly fictionalized autobiography” similar to Harriet Jacobs’s Incidents (322). Baym categorizes Crafts’ The Bondwoman’s Narrative, on the other hand, as “the opposite: an apparent autobiography that is in fact a novel, the first such work that we now have by an African American woman” (322). Gates does note autobiographical tendencies within Wilson (some of which I will address later), particularly toward the end of the text, and adds that “[it] is of considerable interest to outline the manner in which one discursive field ‘collapses,’ as it were, into quite another, of a different status than the other” (xxxvi).
The Text of *The Bondwoman's Narrative* and its Rhetorical Tactics

*The Bondwoman's Narrative* relates the experiences of a young woman named Hannah as a slave in Virginia, Washington, and North Carolina, and her escape to freedom in New Jersey. Hannah is given no surname, though the name *Hannah Crafts* on the title page implies with little subtlety that Crafts wishes to be identified with the Hannah depicted in her text (though the question of whether she should be so identified is another matter entirely). Hannah is first described as a small child who has learned at a young age “what a curse was attached to my race ... that the African blood in my veins would forever exclude me from the higher walks of life. That toil unremitted unpaid toil must be my lot and portion, without even the hope or expectation of any thing [sic] better” (Crafts 5-6). Crafts’ narrator levels such invectives against the injustices of slavery at a relatively steady pace throughout *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*. Hannah, meanwhile, is described as an uneducated but curious young girl, taught surreptitiously to read and write and in the basics of religion by a kindly white woman later identified as Aunt Hetty, who for her troubles is “[made] an example of” (12-13), being imprisoned “for violation of the statute that forbade the instruction of slaves” (228).

Hannah begins the novel as a slave on a Virginia plantation known as Lindendale, owned by the descendant of a noble named Sir Clifford De Vincent (Crafts 13, 15). Early on, Crafts takes pains to set up a Gothic backdrop for her work, employing curses pronounced by Sir Clifford (15) and against him (20ff). The current master of Lindendale becomes married early in the text, to a seemingly paranoid woman haunted by a lawyer named Mr. Trappe. From Crafts’ description of the bride as a “small brown woman, with a profusion of wavy
curly hair ... [and] lips which were too large, full, and red” the reader might conjecture what Hannah learns shortly through inadvertent eavesdropping: that the mistress’s mother was a slave and that she herself had been switched at birth with the white child of the man she would come to know as her father (Crafts 44). Trappe, privy to the secret, has since used the knowledge for extortion (45ff). Threatened with exposure of the secret, Mrs. Vincent flees, taking Hannah with her (48-51). Ultimately, however, the two are captured, but Mrs. Vincent eludes Trappe through her own death, apparently due to a ruptured blood vessel brought on by her horror at the prospect of being a slave (99-100). In the interim, Hannah and Mrs. Vincent are put in jail, where they meet a Mrs. Wright and hear the story of her imprisonment for attempting to help a slave escape being sold into a life of forcible depravity in New Orleans (80-84).

The portion of The Bondwoman's Narrative involving Mrs. Vincent and Mr. Trappe anticipates the plot of Mark Twain’s 1894 novel Pudd’nhead Wilson, as Gates points out (Introduction to The Bondwoman's Narrative xxi-xxii). Both texts use a similar plot element to condemn traditional, static definitions of race involving blood quantum as absurd, while pointing out that these definitions are at the heart of a racist system that inflicts tragedy on society. In each work, a “white” and a “black” child are exchanged, though the two are in each case visually indistinguishable. Twain, in Pudd’nhead Wilson, adds for effect the datum that thirty-one in thirty-two parts of the switched boys’ ancestries come from the same “race,” yet one is “white” and the other “black”; one is an “aristocratic white youth” and a “young gentleman” (44) and the other a slave. Through this plot device, Twain delivers a reductio ad absurdum that clearly illustrates the arbitrary nature of racial divisions.
Furthermore, if the reader does not understand this illustration on its own, Twain spells out in so many words that “race” as it has traditionally been understood is nothing more than “a fiction of law and custom” (9) resulting from “the southern ‘race problem’ … [that] has always been an artificial problem created by white men who by the nineteenth century had made an obsession of these racial superficialities” (Stampp 9). Similarly, Crafts makes the argument, through Mrs. Vincent’s unwitting “passing,” that legal definitions of race are set up in a ridiculous fashion, though their consequences can be sobering. Meanwhile, Trappe can also be taken to represent a commentary on the concept of whiteness as traditionally understood by white culture. While this concept of whiteness, or rather this “cultural production of whiteness,” depends upon “the presumption that white identities are racially pure” (Mullen 72), such undiluted ancestry is frequently an illusion (Levine 279). Therefore, Trappe represents a “figure of terror” for those who identify as white, demonstrating how a racist society’s definitions of “white” and “black” can be reversed against individuals previously privileged by those definitions.

_The Bondwoman’s Narrative _also anticipates Twain’s work in its arguments about the artificiality of race and its critique of the predominant static race theories of the day. In Twain’s text, the artificiality of race as a construct is also illustrated by the fact that the racialized identity of Tom Driscoll changes so quickly. Tom is born “black,” effectively made “white” by the cradle-switching of his mother Roxy, and made “black” again when “Pudd’nhead” Wilson discovers and reveals this duplicity as a result of his work with fingerprints to solve a murder committed by Tom. Wilson, for his part, functions as something of a benevolent counterpart to Trappe, learning Tom’s secret inadvertently as he
attempts to solve the murder. This shifting of racial identity makes Tom uniquely able to see the injustice of slavery and racism, even if he does so only out of concern for himself and his own fate (Twain 44). Although Mrs. Vincent shares none of the moral failings with which Twain imbues Tom (failings which, Twain makes clear, are a product of environment rather than heredity), Trappe’s revelation forces her similarly to consider these questions as well, as neither had done beforehand: as Mullen puts it, “Being a white ... means never having to think about race” (79). Mrs. Vincent, to continue the analogy, is made “white” by the cradle-switching nurse and “black” by Trappe’s discovery of what has happened. In each case, this turn of events is a clear commentary on the inability of the dominant society to mentally carry out such an exercise. Meanwhile, Trappe’s legal maneuvering, like the perverse trial at the end of Twain (in which Tom is pardoned for the murder so he can be sold down the river to pay the debts of another man’s estate3), “rehearses the legal grotesqueries of slavery, but ... has no impact on the system itself or its requisite racial hierarchies” (Mullen 75). Like the legal absurdities regarding race and slavery that are at issue in *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, Trappe’s legal machinations in *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* depend upon an understanding of race in which “passing” for white is seen as “a kind of theft, a grand larceny” (73) against “a legal tradition ... founding and supporting a race-class-gender system that inexorably reduces individuals to their functions within an economic mode of production” (71-72). For that

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3 Southern law did provide for execution of slaves, usually with the provision that the slaveholder should receive financial compensation on the grounds that “the execution of a slave resembled the public seizure or condemnation of private property” (Stampp 199). Generally, this compensation was “something less than the full value assessed by the jury,” and some slaveholders considered inadequate or no compensation in such cases to be an “injustice” (198). Thus, Twain’s plot resolution is relatively consistent with southern legislative assent to such property concerns. Tom Driscoll could have been hanged, but it would have entailed expense to the public. As such, Twain’s perverse solution actually represents the best interests, from a purely financial standpoint, of both the state and the private citizens involved.
matter, Crafts employs Trappe’s protestations of innocence in his dealings to further condemn the system of which he is a part. Consider, for example, Trappe’s thoughts on slavery itself, much of which might seem profound on the lips of any other character:

“... Lord bless me, it is nothing so bad after all. We are all slaves to something or somebody. A man perfectly free would be an anomaly ... Freedom and slavery are only names attached surreptitiously and often improperly to certain conditions and in many cases the slave possesses more. They are mere shadows the very reverse of realities, and being so, if rightly considered, they have only a trifling effect on individual happiness.” (97)

Trappe also denies any personal responsibility for his actions, blaming instead the system from which he profits:

“You will blame me, no doubt ... yet in doing so you will be unjust. Rather blame the world that has made me what I am, like ... yourself the victim of circumstances ... The circumstances in which I find people are not of my making ... Neither are the laws that give me an advantage over them. If a beautiful women [sic] is to be sold it is rather the fault of the law that permits it than of me who profits by it ... Whatever the law permits, and public opinion encourages I do, when that says stop I go no further.” (97-98)

However, Trappe has a point. As Brooks-De Vita puts it, Trappe “baldly states that he would not destroy, pillage, and drive insane African-descent members of American society if Euro-America did not sanction his doing so” (2). Through this argument, Brooks-De Vita contends, Crafts posits an ethical stance “antithetic to the popular Northern liberal position of her time” in which those directly participating in the slavery system are reproached but the larger community that allows it to continue is not (2).

The plot involving Trappe and Mrs. Vincent can also be seen as a commentary on subversion against systematic racism. While the woman who has switched the future Mrs. Vincent with the dead “white” baby undoubtedly did so to secure a better future for her, as Roxy intends for Tom, the efforts of each ultimately fail. It can thus be argued of the baby-
switcher in Crafts, as Mullen argues of Roxy, that her “subversive potential ... is cancelled by her conditioned acceptance of a race-class-gender hierarchy she hopes to manipulate to benefit herself and her [child]. Because the economic system in which she is embedded requires both masters and slaves, the most subversive act ... for her is to swap one for the other” (75). The tragic fate of Mrs. Vincent, therefore, demonstrates that such subversion within the system is not an effective response to it.

With the plot involving Trappe and Mrs. Vincent resolved, Trappe sells Hannah away (Crafts 107), whereupon her new owner dies in an accident and Hannah finds herself the guest of a Mrs. Henry and her family (Crafts 116). While this family is extremely kind to Hannah and to the slaves they own (123), leading Hannah to beg Mrs. Henry to beg Mrs. Henry to purchase her (125), all is not well within this home, which is thought to be haunted by “an unearthly visitant” (132). Hannah, priding herself on her lack of superstition, looks for a more rational explanation and learns what she already suspected: that the “ghost” is William, the husband of Mrs. Henry’s slave Charlotte. William had recently run away from a Mr. Cropp, the Henrys’ neighbor4 (119; 134; 144). Subjected to beatings and the prospect of being sold away from Charlotte, William concocts an escape plan with her and invites Hannah along, an invitation Hannah declines (142-43).

In the chapters dealing with the Henry family, Crafts makes plain that true happiness in slavery is impossible even under the most benevolent conditions: as Hannah puts it, “those that view slavery only as it relates to physical sufferings or the wants of nature, can have no conception of its greatest evils” (130). In the passage when Hannah pleads with Mrs. Henry

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4 The motif of husband and wife as slaves on neighboring plots of land, running away at the prospect of being separated, is strikingly similar to George and Eliza’s situation early in Uncle Tom’s Cabin, as Yellin notes (107).
to purchase her, we also see another commentary on resistance to the system of slavery. Mrs. Henry refuses to so accommodate Hannah, citing “a solemn promise never on any occasion to sell or buy a servant” made at the deathbed of her father, who was involved in the slave trade but came to consider it “the greatest crime … of which a human being could be capable” (127). The ethical argument implicit in the promise exacted by Mrs. Henry’s father, that participating in the institution by buying or selling slaves corrupts one, has its merits, as Trappe’s comments on public opinion and the law demonstrate. If everyone in society adopted the perspective of Mrs. Henry’s father, Trappe would be unable to make profit by selling women whose black ancestry he has discovered. Moreover, given Hannah’s recognition that slavery even under the most ideal circumstances is problematic at best and her recognition that slave traders could not conduct their business profitably if there were no one to trade with them, her subsequent bid for a better life as Mrs. Henry’s slave appears shortsighted. As Hannah herself notes earlier, for the slave “[t]here can be no certainty, no abiding confidence in the possession of any good thing. The indulgent master may die, or fail in business. The happy home may be despoiled of its chieffest treasures, and the consciousness of this embitters all their lot” (Crafts 94). Nevertheless, Hannah finds Mrs. Henry’s subordination of personal consideration to an abstract code of ethics problematic and personally frustrating:

… my heart rose against the man, who in a slave-holding country could exact such a promise. Since in a multitude of cases the greatest favor that a mild kind-hearted man or woman can bestow on … members of the outcast servile race is to buy them. I almost felt that he had done me as a personal injury, an irreparable wrong. (Crafts 127)

Dickson D. Bruce, Jr., argues that Mrs. Henry’s vow and Trappe’s legal self-justification
represent two examples of “an opposition between … a formalistic, even legalistic approach to human affairs and an approach based on a deeper, more complex understanding of moral situations” (131). Bruce argues that the Henrys, like the Shelby family in Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, “are inescapably bound to the system of slavery in ways that force them to participate in its brutality” (130), noting that Mrs. Henry is in a sense culpable for Hannah’s sufferings at the hands of Mrs. Wheeler just as the Shelby family was responsible for what would happen to Tom. The legalism of Trappe and Mrs. Henry, Bruce continues, are in contrast with Aunt Hetty’s defiance of the law in teaching Hannah to read (131-32), leading one to the conclusion that “moral action in a slave society cannot be undertaken within the system’s constraints, legal or otherwise” (Bruce 132). Brooks-De Vita adds that the vow exacted by Mrs. Henry’s father “free[s] his daughter of the ethical obligation to protect, as well as she might, those who still suffered in the institution that had made her, her father, and her nation wealthy” (3).

In these chapters, Hannah Crafts also begins to construct her argument that slavery makes the ideal of marriage impossible to actualize. In the wake of Charlotte’s wedding to William, Hannah regards the future of the two newlywed slaves:

> Did they anticipate domestic felicity, and long years of wedded love: when their lives, their limbs, their very souls were subject to the control of another’s will; when the husband could not be at liberty to provide a home for his wife, nor the wife be permitted to attend to the wants of her husband, and when living apart in a state of separate bondage they could only meet occasionally at best, and then might be decreed without a moment’s warning to never meet again [?] (120)

Hannah expands on this opinion later, still in the context of Charlotte and William’s marriage:

> I have always thought that in a state of servitude marriage must be at best of doubtful
advantage ... The slave, if he or she desires to be content should ... always remain in celibacy ... plain, practical common sense must teach every observer of mankind that any situation involving such responsibilities as marriage can only be filled with profit, and honor, and advantage by the free. (131)

Crafts’ understanding of the conflict between marriage and slavery in the antebellum South is corroborated by Stampp:

Since slaves, as chattels, could not make contracts, marriages between them were not legally binding. “The relation between slaves is essentially different from that of man and wife joined in lawful wedlock,” ruled the North Carolina Supreme Court, for “with slaves it may be dissolved at the pleasure of either party [i.e., the slaveholder of either spouse], or by the sale of one or both, depending upon the caprice or necessity of the owners.” Their condition was compatible only with a form of concubinage, “voluntary on the part of the slaves, and permissive on that of the master.” In law there was no such thing as fornication or adultery between slaves; nor was there [illegitimacy], for, as a Kentucky judge noted, the father of a slave was “unknown” to the law. No state legislature ever seriously entertained the thought of encroaching upon the master’s rights by legalizing slave marriages. (198)

The final major portion of The Bondwoman’s Narrative recounts Hannah’s experiences as the slave of the Wheelers and her escape from them to the North. Crafts’ use of the name “Wheeler” here, along with her allusion to a runaway slave named Jane (149-52), indicate a possible connection to John Hill Wheeler and the Passmore Williamson case, as we will see. The Wheelers, particularly Mrs. Wheeler, are portrayed as social and political climbers with few redeeming qualities. Mrs. Wheeler shows contempt for Hannah’s religion and forces her to write a letter filled with self-libels impugning her own character (152-53). Mrs. Wheeler is also portrayed as being exceedingly vain, constantly in search of cosmetic products to restore her appearance. This trait becomes significant when her husband asks her to request a public office on his behalf: in preparing to do so, Mrs. Wheeler employs “beautifying powder” and a “smelling-bottle,” the combination of which blackens her skin, leading to her abject public humiliation when she requests the office (Crafts 161ff). While
Crafts’ narrator describes the turn of events as “the deserved punishment of an act of vanity” (169), the incident also demonstrates the mutability of race through Mrs. Wheeler’s temporary, unwitting assumption of a “black” identity, even as her reception by Cattell and Mrs. Piper underscores the racism present in Washington at the time (168). Meanwhile, as Williams recognizes, “the impish novelist finally turns the table on her mistress by turning her into a black wastrel shamelessly importuning for office for her husband and being resoundingly rebuffed to the bargain” (148). Mrs. Wheeler’s cosmetics incident is both entertaining and thought-provoking as perhaps the foremost of the “subversive elements to the plot” in Crafts (Soskis 39). While the incident is paralleled in Wilson when Frado fantasizes about Mary being blackened in hell, as we will see, Crafts seems to set up the ironic reversal more skillfully.

After the blackface incident, Crafts digresses briefly with an interlude in which Hannah’s friend Lizzy, formerly a fellow slave on the Lindendale plantation in Virginia where Hannah began the narrative, describes what has happened there since Hannah’s departure. Crafts uses Lizzy’s account to offer further criticism of slavery and its effects on the marriages of whites. Meanwhile, Crafts’ unfavorable depiction of Mrs. Cosgrove’s “freeing” of a slave by throwing her out altogether demonstrates another inadequate response to slavery, according to Brooks-De Vita (3). The story subsequently returns to Hannah and the Wheelers in North Carolina, where the Wheelers have moved to escape public attention (Crafts 170). Crafts’ description of the Wheeler plantation, where the slaves “all lived promiscuously anyhow and every how” among a “swarm of misery” (199) overwhelms the sensitive reader. Here, Crafts further condemns the institution of slavery as well as other
general failings of society:

This is all the result of that false system which bestows on position, wealth, or power the consideration only due to a man. And this system is not confined to any one place, or country, or condition. It extends through all grades and classes of society from the highest to the lowest. It bans poor but honest people with the contemptuous appellation of "vulgar." It subjects others under certain circumstances to a lower link in the chain of being than that occupied by a horse. (200)

Crafts’ description of the slaves and their experience is overwhelming: “It must be a strange state to feel that in the judgement of those above you you are scarcely human, and to fear that their opinion is more than half right” (201). Crafts assails any defense of slavery using both the religious and patriotic values of American Christians: “The constitution that asserts the right of freedom and equality to all mankind is a sealed book to [slaves], and so is the Bible, that tells how Christ died for all; the bond as well as the free” (Crafts 201). Crafts’ rhetorical attack on slavery, however, comes to a head when Mrs. Wheeler forces Hannah from her duties of domestic service to work in the fields and marry one of the “vile, foul, filthy inhabitants of the huts” (205). Given Hannah’s aforementioned attitude toward marriage as a slave, which she reiterates in this section of the text as “tending essentially to perpetuate that system,” this is perhaps the cruelest fate Mrs. Wheeler could impose upon her. As we will see later, this forced marriage can be considered tantamount to rape, an example of Christian sexual ethics becoming impracticable under slavery. As Michael Newbury writes regarding Jacobs and her response to a similar dilemma, “The opportunity to live with moral propriety in sexual matters is determined by economic independence, not Christian integrity” (177).

As a result, Hannah, who already has the latter, must secure the former (i.e., escape slavery) to remain true to her own ideal of chastity. She reasons, “[It] seemed that rebellion would be a virtue, that duty to myself and my God actually required it, and that whatever accidents or
misfortunes might attend my flight nothing could be worse than what threatened my stay” (206). Hannah escapes, passing for male as well as for white (210). Along the way she meets other fugitive slaves and her old friend Aunt Hetty (227), and she learns of Trappe’s gruesome demise (231ff). Ultimately, Hannah settles in New Jersey, where she marries and is reunited with her mother and with Charlotte and William (237-239).

As The Bondwoman’s Narrative chronicles the events surrounding Hannah, Crafts offers a very detailed critique of the institution of slavery, a “powerfully revealing expose of the brutalizing effects of chattel enslavement” (Brooks-De Vita 1). Crafts argues for the obvious injustice of the institution and its deleterious effects on blacks and whites alike. Meanwhile, Crafts also addresses a number of potential individual responses to the institution such as passing for white, personally eschewing the purchase or sale of slaves, benevolent care for slaves, and direct resistance to the system by breaking the law in educating slaves and abetting fugitives. While Crafts exhibits varying degrees of sympathy for these responses, in every case such responses are problematic at best (either in their ultimate effects on the slaves or in their legal repercussions), leading the reader to conclude that only by eliminating slavery altogether could American society be rid of its attendant evils.
Crafts’ Preface as Authenticating Meta-Text

While much criticism of *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* understandably focuses on the story Crafts tells within the text about Hannah and her experiences under slavery, it is also important not to overlook Crafts’ preface and what we can learn from a careful examination of it in comparison to corresponding prefaces in other works of the period, supplementing criticism of Crafts’ narrative itself with that of her prefatory comments made directly to her readers outside the context of the story she is about to tell. Crafts’ preface can teach us a great deal about the author of *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*, her aims in writing, her desired relationship with her intended audience, and the narrative itself.

At its most basic level, Crafts’ preface to *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* explains her motives in writing and apologizes for any perceived deficiencies in her authorial capacity. In her opening sentence, she puts forth the claim that the narrative is a “record of plain unvarnished facts” (3). Although she admits that the authorial exercise represents “a literary venture,” she argues that if any sentimental and didactic tendencies exist within the text, these are subordinated to an accurate portrayal of the events described within the work:

Being the truth it makes no pretensions to romance, and relating events as they occurred it has no especial reference to a moral ... while [readers] of pious and discerning minds can scarcely fail to recognise the hand of Providence in giving to the righteous the reward of their works, and to the wicked the fruit of their doings. (Crafts 3)

At its most basic level, then, Crafts’ preface represents, along with a claim of unembellished truthfulness, a statement of faith in divine justice as revealed within the avowedly historical events of the narrative. While Crafts could be taken at her word here, perhaps a more appropriate heuristic is to read this preface as an invocation of poetic license for the
fictionalized material to follow in the narrative. Here, “Hannah Crafts tips her hand to the attentive reader and admits that what will follow is as much art as chronicle” (Gates and Robbins ix). This hand, of course, is further tipped to the reader throughout *The Bondwoman's Narrative* through the sentimentalistic and often fantastic events described in the text. Williams argues that Crafts’ preface represents an “opening gambit” and that the text is nonetheless “a desperate mélange of fictionalized autobiography, the gothic, the romance, the sentimental novel, and bristling social commentary held together in a precarious synthesis by a plot relying on impossible and improbable coincidences” (138).

Early on, both within the preface and the opening pages of the first chapter, Hannah Crafts takes great pains to address the perceived issue of her authorial weaknesses. As Gates explains, this is “a signal feature” both of the slave narrative genre and of antebellum African American fiction as exemplified by Harriet Wilson (Introduction to *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* xxii), the two genres to which Crafts’ work is most comparable. Williams agrees, comparing Crafts in particular to Wilson and to Douglass (145). As Newbury points out, “It has become almost axiomatic to say that slave narratives feature the quest for freedom and literacy, apparently in the assumption that these two acquirements bear some inescapable and unambiguous relationship to each other” (176). In the preface, Crafts admits to “a certain degree of diffidence and self-distrust” in presenting a narrative “coming from a sphere so humble” and expresses uncertainty that her presentation of slavery and its ill effects on white and black alike has been successful (3). At the beginning of the initial chapter, Crafts’ self-deprecation continues:

> It may be that I assume to[o] much responsibility in attempting to write these pages. The world will probably say so, and I am aware of my deficiencies. I am neither
clever, nor learned, nor talented. When a child they used to scold and find fault with me because they said I was dull and stupid. (5)

Whether Crafts’ self-assessment of her writing ability is justified is debatable. Williams notes that the text contains a number of misquotes, “many misspellings and malapropisms,” and instances in which “authorial intrusion overrides the need for verisimilitude” (149). It has also been argued that “the nineteenth-century conventions of white popular fiction stifle the black narrator’s voice” as a result of Crafts’ fictionalization (LeClair 78). On the other hand, Crafts employs “truly prodigious” vocabulary and her quotes and allusions themselves approach the level of “verbal grandstanding” (Williams 149). Ronald Segal finds the text to have “besides a compelling narrative, skill and pace” (37). Another possibility, then, is that Crafts’ self-criticism represents an attempt to foster reader sympathy through emphasizing her humility. As Williams recognizes, “once Crafts settles into her narrative stride, the story moves quickly along with ease and facility. Could this be a tactical gambit, a disarming maneuver to infuse [The Bondwoman’s Narrative] with the status of a miracle script? Crafts could be anything but stupid, untalented, and unlearned, as her novel reveals” (145).

Furthermore, writing as a black author before the Civil War in an environment where education was atypical and frequently illegal for slaves, Crafts is aware that her own literacy itself bears explanation if she is to identify herself as “a fugitive slave recently escaped” (Crafts 1). Accordingly, Crafts provides such an explanation, giving due attention to the risks involved for both her and her educators. Crafts’ protagonist alter-ego, Hannah

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5 Following extant critical convention regarding Crafts, and working on the assumption that The Bondwoman’s Narrative is at least partially fictionalized, I use the name “Crafts” to refer to the author of the text and the name “Hannah” to refer to her protagonist. Robert S. Levine makes such a distinction in his article “Trappe(d): Race and Genealogical Haunting in The Bondwoman’s Narrative” (279), for example, noting that Hannah is not
describes herself as having "an instinctive desire for knowledge and the means of mental improvement" (6) that is stifled by her master's opposition to her education until a northern white couple teaches her to read. For their troubles, the couple is "conveyed to jail for violation of the statute that forbade the instruction of slaves" (228), as Hannah learns much later—at the time she knows only that they have disappeared.

Crafts' preface, particularly in its segments explaining her anti-slavery agenda and her dubious esteem of her own writing talents, is noticeably similar to the preface of Harriet Wilson's novel *Our Nig*, written in 1859 and rediscovered and republished by Gates in the early 1980s. Wilson, whom Gates had then identified in his introduction to *Our Nig* as "a black woman, apparently the first to publish a novel in English" and "most probably the first Afro-American to publish a novel in the United States" (xiii)⁶, opens her preface with the following apologia:

In offering to the public the following pages, the writer confesses her inability to minister to the refined and cultivated, the pleasure supplied by abler pens. It is not for such these crude narrations appear ... My humble position and frank confession of errors will, I hope, shield me from severe criticism. Indeed, defects are so apparent it requires no skilful (sic) hand to expose them. (3)

As we can see, Wilson frankly acknowledges the perceived limitations of her narrative skills, taking care to make clear that her aim is not to provide elegant literature for the entertainment of sophisticated connoisseurs of fiction, but to enlighten readers on issues pertaining to the institution of slavery in the North as well as the South: "I would not from these motives even

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⁶Gates, in his introduction to Crafts, updates this assessment with the clarification that *The Bondwoman's Narrative* is "possibly the first novel written by a black woman and definitely the first novel written by a woman who had been a slave" (xii, italics mine), noting that although Crafts' work likely predates Wilson's and Wilson was a free Northern black, Wilson remains the first black woman to *publish* a novel (xii-xiii).
palliate slavery at the South, by disclosures of its appurtenances North. My mistress was wholly imbued with *southern* principles*” (Wilson 3, emphasis Wilson’s). Wilson also appears to anticipate “severe criticism” from potentially hostile readers, as we see above. Wilson is particularly preoccupied with her reception among abolitionist readers, an uncommon worry among black authors of the period (Gates, Introduction to *Our Nig* xxxiv-xxxv), although her portrayal of abolitionists toward the end of her novel goes a long way toward explaining this anxiety, as we will see. Crafts also appears concerned about her readers’ reaction to her work, asking, “How will such a literary venture, coming from a sphere so humble be received?” (Crafts 3). Crafts is concerned exclusively with portraying slavery and its effects to her readers, making this aim the standard by which she evaluates her own work, and by which she would have her audience judge the text: “Have I succeeded in portraying any of the peculiar features of that institution whose curse rests over the fairest land the sun shines upon? Have I succeeded in showing how it blights the happiness of the white as well as the black race?” (Crafts 3).

Crafts and Wilson offer similar apologies for perceived deficiencies in writing quality even as both employ remarkably elevated language. Crafts, for example, obliquely but elegantly refers to slavery in her preface as “that institution whose curse rests over the fairest land the sun shines upon” (Crafts 3), as we have seen, including within the reference a flowery affirmation of American patriotism to appeal to her audience further. In the same way, Wilson expresses a desire not to “palliate slavery ... by disclosures of its appurtenances” (Wilson 3). Although Wilson shifts from referring to herself in the third person to the first person, she also employs vocabulary that would send many modern readers rushing to a
dictionary, vocabulary that is unquestionably on par with any of the “abler pens” to which she unfavorably compares her own work.

Crafts’ preface to *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* has much in common not only with Wilson’s preface, but also with that of Harriet Jacobs in her autobiographical *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, published in 1861. Jacobs, like Crafts and Wilson, shares openly with her audience that her aim is to relate the truth about slavery within her narrative:

I have not exaggerated the wrongs inflicted by Slavery; on the contrary, my descriptions fall short of the facts ... I do earnestly desire to arouse the women of the North to a realizing sense of the condition of two millions of women at the South, still in bondage, suffering what I suffered, and most of them far worse. I want to add my testimony to that of abler pens to convince the people of the Free States what Slavery really is. (Jacobs 2-3)

Jacobs’s admission that her work may “fall short of the facts” and her acknowledgement of “abler pens,” as seen above, also can be seen as representing an appeal for sympathy through an emphasis on humility comparable to the corresponding recognitions in Crafts and Wilson.

Much of Jacobs’s preface is devoted to this exercise, which is a good deal more detailed than its counterparts in Crafts and Wilson:

I wish I were more competent to the task I have undertaken. But I trust my readers will excuse deficiencies in consideration of circumstances. I was born and raised in Slavery; and I remained in a Slave State twenty-seven years. Since I have been at the North, it has been necessary for me to work diligently for my own support, and the education of my children. This has not left me much leisure to make up for the loss of early opportunities to improve myself; and it has compelled me to write these pages at irregular intervals, whenever I could snatch an hour from household duties ... I was altogether incompetent to such an undertaking. Though I have improved my mind somewhat since that time, I still remain of the same opinion; but I trust my

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7 Although her preface is not as detailed as Jacobs’s, Wilson faced similar financial struggles, to which she alludes briefly: “I am forced to some experiment which shall aid me in maintaining myself and child” (Wilson 3). Interestingly, Gates notes in his introduction to *Our Nig*, “the record of [Wilson’s son’s] death, alone, proved sufficient to demonstrate his mother’s racial identity and authorship of *Our Nig*” (xiii, italics Gates’s).
motives will excuse what might otherwise seem presumptuous ... May the blessing of God rest on this imperfect effort in behalf of my persecuted people! (Jacobs 2-3)

This trend of authorial modesty also has precedent in Equiano’s Interesting Narrative. In Equiano, the narrator asserts historicity while specifying his rhetorical aims with equal humility: “Permit me with the greatest deference and respect to lay at your feet the following genuine Narrative; the chief design of which is to excite in your august assemblies a sense of compassion for the miseries which the Slave Trade has entailed on my unfortunate countrymen” (qtd. in Potkay 604). Equiano, like Crafts and her contemporaries who would succeed him, makes a point of attempting to secure his readers’ approval through his “deference and respect” to them.

The prefaces of Crafts and her contemporaries subtly indicate that their tactic of gaining reader sympathy through authorial modesty is a function of their situation as black authors addressing largely white audiences. Crafts, for instance, describes her narrative as “coming from a sphere so humble” (3), apparently intending it to reach a relatively loftier readership. Crafts also appeals to white self-interest in ending the institution of slavery by announcing her intent to demonstrate how the institution “blights the happiness of the white as well as the black race” (3). Meanwhile, Jacobs makes plain that her intended readers are the women of the North and that her intent is to benefit “my persecuted people” (2-3). That she refers to southern slaves as “my people” rather than “our people,” of course, indicates that her intended readership is white.

Because Crafts, Wilson, and Jacobs each faced the rhetorical situation of addressing a white audience as a black author, and the trend of authorial modesty seen in their prefaces is a function of that rhetorical situation, their respective prefaces are noticeably different from,
for example, the preface of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, even though Stowe, like Crafts and her aforementioned contemporaries, aimed to educate her readers about the institution of slavery toward the goal of ending that institution. Stowe, as a white author addressing other whites, makes no effort at securing her readers’ goodwill by exhibiting the modesty regarding her writing abilities or temerity at addressing her subject that her black contemporaries do, referring to herself in the third person and only in relation to proclaiming her own righteous indignation at slavery and its evils:

... [T]he author can scarcely disclaim any invidious feeling toward those individuals who, often without any fault of their own, are involved in the trials and embarrassments of the legal relations of slavery.

Experience has shown her that some of the noblest of minds and hearts are often thus involved ... What personal knowledge the author has had, of the truth of incidents such as here are related, will appear in its time. (Stowe xiii-xiv)

Stowe, instead, approaches the problem of slavery from a perspective of white privilege, desiring to elicit sympathy for blacks under slavery while maintaining pride in her “Anglo-Saxon race” and its culture and civilization. This pride can occasionally be seen within Stowe’s prose, which sometimes unwittingly reflects troubling perspectives on race. Stowe and other white authors of her day are “often ... firmly in the grip of popular nineteenth-century racist views about the nature and capacities of their black characters that few black authors could possibly have shared” (Gates, Introduction to *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* xiv-xv). Gates, for example, brings up Stowe’s description of Eva and Topsy: “They stood the representatives of their races. The Saxon, born of ages of cultivation, commands, education, physical and moral eminence; the Afric, born of ages of oppression, submission, ignorance, toil, and vice” (qtd. in Gates xv). Even within initial character descriptions, Stowe and her
white contemporaries frequently follow the principle of “whiteness as the default for humanity” (Gates xix).

The “popular nineteenth-century racist views” to which Gates refers (xiv) are visible not only within Stowe’s narrative, but also in her preface. Stowe sets the stage for her novel by introducing the reader to “an exotic race, whose ancestors, born beneath a tropic sun, brought with them, and perpetuated to their descendants, a character so essentially unlike the hard and dominant Anglo-Saxon race, as for many years to have won from it only misunderstanding and contempt” (Stowe xiii). Stowe’s description of African Americans here is, of course, a far cry from anything to be found in Crafts, Wilson, or Jacobs, and is unquestionably a product of her perspective as a white author implicated in the racial attitudes of her day. On the other hand, the perspective of Crafts and her black contemporaries is that, as Dorothy Porter puts it, “other Negroes ... are people first of all. Only as the story unfolds, in most instances, does it become apparent that they are Negroes” (qtd. in Gates xix). That Crafts writes about her black characters in this way, according to Porter and Gates, is evidence that she was indeed black.

Stowe, like Crafts et al, makes no secret of her anti-slavery aims throughout her novel, and her preface is no exception:

The object of these sketches is to awaken sympathy and feeling for the African race, as they exist among us; to show their wrongs and sorrows, under a system so necessarily cruel and unjust as to defeat and do away the good effects of all that can be attempted for them, by their best friends, under it. (xiii)

However, Stowe also professes the aim, realized in the novel through the fates of George and Eliza et al, of returning former slaves to Africa, creating “an enlightened and Christianized community ... on the shores of Africa, [with] laws, language and literature drawn from
among us” (xiv), a controversial policy not embraced by Crafts, Jacobs, or Wilson. The colonization agenda was never supported by free blacks (Litwack 24-26) and fell out of favor with abolitionists in general in the 1830s (27), though it briefly regained popularity with Republican support in the 1850s (29). The policy of emigration, moreover, has disturbing elements, as it presumes that the free black individual “had to contend with an obviously ‘superior knowledge, wealth and influence … a competition to which he is unequal’” (21) and that racism against blacks is an insurmountable given (20-24). Meanwhile, the policy asks former slaves to “abandon the legacies earned by blood shed into American soil and purge their enriched homeland by emigrating to Liberia” (Brooks-De Vita 12). Remaining in America, on the other hand, offers the possibility of “eager African American inheritance of the wealth, the power, both the opportunity and the responsibility to reconstruct society that their presence in the New World has created” (12).

While awakening sympathy for slaves is at the heart of Stowe’s agenda, Crafts’ black contemporaries are more ambivalent about the prospect of personal sympathy. Wilson, for instance, includes a plea for aid within the final chapter of Our Nig as she connects Frado’s life with her own. Jacobs, on the other hand, writes of her aim in presenting her narrative that “I have not written my experiences in order to attract attention to myself … Neither do I care to excite sympathy for my own sufferings” (Jacobs 2). Instead, Jacobs’s objective, as her excerpts above demonstrate, is to enlighten her readers to the reality of slavery to move them to action, not mere feeling. Stowe’s aim to incite sympathy for slaves among whites appears at first to be a noble aim, at least in comparison to the lack of sympathy that was then common among whites of the North and the South alike. However, sympathy alone conveys
little real advantage to those with whom one sympathizes. Stowe’s suggestion of “one thing that every individual can do … see to it that they feel right” (Uncle Tom’s Cabin 385, italics Stowe’s) is effective only if feeling right is, in turn, connected to action. Otherwise, one might confront Stowe with James 2.15-16: “Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, ‘Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,’ but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?” While the slaves for whom Stowe would incite sympathy may or may not lack food and clothing, mere well-wishing on the part of her readers toward the slaves would not be a great boon to them. The use of sympathy as a rhetorical tactic also has underlying elements that can be somewhat disconcerting. Levine, discussing Crafts with respect to Hannah’s attitudes toward other slaves, notes that “the power of sympathy, even at its most benevolent, is also somewhat Trappe-like, based as it is on the sympathizer’s assumption that by virtue of a superior kind of imagination he or she can know the other” (Levine 289). Such an assumption may indeed be preferable to ignoring entirely the plight of the other while defending this decision with trite assertions that ascertaining the feelings of others based on one’s own sentiment is impossible, as the pro-slavery characters in Stowe tend to do. For example, Marie St. Clare makes such an assertion to defend her mistreatment of Mammy, a female slave who is a wife and mother just as Marie herself is:

“But as to putting them [blacks] on any sort of equality with us, you know, as if we could be compared, why, it’s impossible! Now, St. Clare really has talked to me as if keeping Mammy from her husband was like keeping me from mine. There’s no comparing in this way. Mammy couldn’t have the feelings that I should. It’s a different thing altogether … And just as if Mammy could love her little dirty babies as I love Eva!” (Uncle Tom’s Cabin 268)
Stowe clearly has a point in condemning the sort of attitude Marie displays here. However, the sympathetic assumption to which Levine refers can also be seen as condescension, as a troubling assertion of superior intellect and moral reasoning that serves as a poor substitute for a more experiential knowledge of the other or a genuine dialogue between the two.

Although Crafts’ preface to The Bondwoman’s Narrative is a relatively minor component within the narrative, its resemblance to those of Wilson and Jacobs rather than that of Stowe indicates much about Crafts’ identity as an author. Combined with the similarities between Crafts’ narrative prose and that of Wilson and Jacobs, the similarity between their respective prefaces as meta-text (i.e., describing what each author aims to do in her text) reveals striking similarities between the works. The preface alone does not conclusively prove that Crafts was a black woman or an ex-slave, as she claims in The Bondwoman’s Narrative to be, of course. However, at the least it demonstrates that Crafts’ work bears remarkable similarity to the conventions of African American writing of the day, and therefore that even if Crafts was not working from the same set of experiences as a black woman, she was at any rate familiar enough with such experiences and corollary literary conventions to replicate them convincingly in her own work.
The Question of Crafts’ Race

Hannah Crafts claims, through her Hannah persona within *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*, to be a black woman who had escaped slavery. Not all critics are convinced that Crafts was black, however. John Bloom, who writes the following excerpt in an article originally published in the *National Review*, takes Hannah’s unwavering faith, consistently positive attitude toward religion, and faultless morality as evidence that Hannah is largely fictional and that *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* may have been written by a white abolitionist woman, a “do-gooder white woman pretending to be black” (Bloom 438):

[The] most telling thing, to me, about Hannah Crafts’s story is the nature of her heroine ... What do all [Hannah’s] qualities convey? Exactly what the right-thinking white middle class of the North valued most dearly—faith, character, virtue. Everything about her is designed to be attractive to a concerned matron in Scranton or a progressive lawmaker in Boston. (Bloom 438)

Bloom’s argument that Hannah is a fictional creation on the part of Crafts may have its merits, particularly given that Hannah seems to resemble a female version of Stowe’s fictional Uncle Tom so closely with respect to her nearly unwavering adherence to Christian faith and virtue. If *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* is to be taken as Crafts’ autobiography, this similarity between characters in works of such different genres is somewhat startling. However, if the manuscript is assumed to be largely fictional, then that resemblance would be less surprising. Therefore, a comparison between Crafts and both fictional and nonfiction writing by her African American contemporaries (which I will here attempt primarily through comparisons to Wilson, Jacobs and Douglass) will be significant in determining which genre *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* most closely resembles.
Bloom may also have a point about considering the intended audience of *The Bondwoman's Narrative*: Crafts appears to take noticeable efforts to secure the goodwill of her northern readers. In some instances, these efforts are fairly subtle. For example, it can be argued that Crafts' extensive use of material borrowed from Dickens's *Bleak House*, a work that as we will see was extremely popular among abolitionists, represents an attempt to appeal to her intended abolitionist readers through the ethos of a more respected author. However, Crafts’ efforts to appeal to northern abolitionist readers are most obvious in her portrayal of the North and its inhabitants as friendly to the slave and to the cause of abolitionism. While authors such as Wilson, Jacobs, and even Stowe are more frank about the failings of the North, including racism against blacks and complicity with the South in maintaining the status quo, Crafts paints a much more positive picture of “the North where the people were all free, and where the colored race had so many and such true friends” (8). Even though Crafts briefly acknowledges that a fugitive stopping short of Canada risked recapture (183), Hannah ends her journey in New Jersey (Crafts 230) in an environment that is portrayed as extremely sympathetic to blacks—a good deal more sympathetic than the Northern states tended to be toward fugitive slaves or blacks in general, either in real life or in other works by black authors:

> Until the post-Civil War era, in fact, most northern whites would maintain a careful distinction between granting Negroes legal protection ... and political and social equality. No statute or court decision could immediately erase from the public mind, North or South, that long and firmly held conviction that the African race was inferior and therefore incapable of being assimilated politically, socially, and most certainly physically with the dominant and superior white society. (Litwack 15)

> The North was deficient not only in granting blacks completely equal social standing, but even in granting them complete and secure freedom. In 1848, well after his escape from
slavery, Douglass describes himself as “even now passing my life in a country, and among a people, whose prejudices against myself and people subjects me to a thousand poisonous stings” (“The Blood of the Slave” 945). After the establishment of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, blacks in the North were in a still more precarious position, regardless of whether they had been slaves before. Indentured blacks in the North were occasionally sold as slaves, while other blacks were sold to repay money lent to them usuriously (McManus 181). The due process involved in recovering an alleged fugitive slave was skewed against blacks, eschewing court proceedings in favor of a “special federal commissioner” who was openly paid by the government to favor the claim of the alleged slaveholder over that of the black involved (Litwack 248). As a result, whites and blacks became paid informants and often testified falsely, and few alleged fugitives could successfully refute the cases against them (249). Frequently, blacks’ only recourse against enforcers of the Act was direct violence against them (249; 251). While Stowe alludes to a number of these practices in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (for example, the legal legerdemain of Marks and Loker in their plans for Eliza, and George’s self-defense against the two), Crafts presents the North as a haven for fugitive slaves. That a community as idyllic as the one Crafts describes in her closing chapter could exist under such circumstances tends to stretch the limits of credibility.

The state of New Jersey, where Crafts ends her story, presents a particularly striking example of Northern racism. New Jersey was far less friendly to blacks in general than Crafts implies at the end of *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*, though the state was “an important terminal point on the underground railroad” and “there were six or seven all-black communities in New Jersey” (Gates, Interview with Gross). Although pressure for abolition
in New Jersey was present during the Revolutionary War on the grounds that slavery
“conflicted with the principles of Christianity” (Litwack 7), the state did not abolish slavery
until 1804, becoming one of the last Northern states to do so (3). Even then, however, New
Jersey “retained slaveholding without technically remaining a slave state by reclassifying its
slaves as apprentices for life” (McManus 181). As late as 1830, more than two-thirds of the
3,568 blacks still “in bondage” in the North were held in New Jersey (Litwack 14). Blacks
“remained in apprentice bondage there as late as 1860, and the federal census continued to
list them as slaves” (McManus 181). Meanwhile, free blacks were prohibited from settling
within the state (183) and voting rights were reserved for the “free, white, male citizen”
(184). By 1840, New Jersey’s black population as a whole was still “completely
disenfranchised” (Litwack 75), the state having gone out of its way to limit suffrage to whites
only, first through legislation and later through the state constitution (79). Such
disenfranchisement, according to one British traveler, made Northern blacks “in fact very
little better than slaves, although called free” (qtd. in Litwack 84). In churches throughout
the North, in the interest of “proper decorum” (Litwack 196), blacks were required to sit in
separate pews and to wait to partake in the Eucharist until the whites had finished receiving
the elements (97), while white and black children were similarly segregated in their Sunday
Schools (196). Meanwhile, racist violence occurred even in religious contexts, as was the
case in Newark when “the introduction of a Negro into a white Presbyterian pulpit resulted in
the virtual destruction of the church building” (198). Such segregation and violence
presumably would have horrified Crafts and her religious sensibilities.
At the same time, Crafts’ positive account of the North is also inconsistent with the accounts found in other works by black authors. Consider what Harriet Wilson, for example, writes of Frado’s life in Massachusetts in the final chapter of *Our Nig*: “Watched by kidnappers, maltreated by professed abolitionists, who did n’t [sic] want slaves at the South, nor n*****s in their own houses, North. Faugh! to lodge one; to eat with one; to admit one through the front door; to sit next one; awful!” (Wilson 129). While Crafts depicts the North as an idyllic destination for a fugitive slave, Wilson offers a much bleaker picture of a woman struggling against the specter of racist principles that dominated even the North. Jacobs similarly struggles with the specter of slavery even after escaping to the North, as Newbury points out: “Brent, however, finds that the geographical escape from the slave states cannot be equated with … corporal self-possession” (178). Historical accounts tend to corroborate the accounts of the North in Wilson and Jacobs rather than that in Crafts. For example, Frado’s aforementioned experience with abolitionists in *Our Nig* is consistent with Litwack, who explains the dilemma white abolitionists faced in their treatment of blacks:

Although they deplored racial prejudice and [endorsed] the Negro’s claim to full citizenship, white abolitionists were divided over the question of social intercourse with their Negro brethren. Since racial mixing flouted the prevailing social code and might easily precipitate mob action, antislavery advocates faced a real dilemma. If an abolitionist fought for equal rights, some argued, it did not necessarily follow that he also had to consort with Negroes socially. Indeed, such an act might endanger the effectiveness and success of the antislavery cause. (216)

While abolitionists faced a very real concern in the ultimate progress of their agenda and their desire to avoid inciting violence that could have disastrous consequences for blacks,

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8 Newbury here refers to Jacobs’s pseudonym of Linda Brent, by which she refers to herself throughout *Incidents*. Throughout his essay, Newbury uses “Brent” and “Jacobs” respectively to refer to character and author, making a distinction between the two analogous to that between Wilson and Frado in *Our Nig* and between Crafts and the Hannah persona in *The Bondwoman’s Narrative.*
Wilson demonstrates that blacks who had to interact with abolitionists were well aware of the philosophical inconsistency brought about by abolitionist concession to pragmatism regarding social equality between blacks and whites. This inconsistency was not always lost on white abolitionists themselves, either (Litwack 217). However, many abolitionists had a more intense “aversion to intimate social relations with Negroes” because they “failed to question the validity of commonly accepted stereotypes of the Negro character” (223-24).

Even the noted abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, for example, wrote in The Liberator that blacks were physically “branded by the hand of nature with a perpetual mark of disgrace” (224). Meanwhile, abolitionists responded ambivalently to African American efforts to dispel stereotypes about themselves, as evidenced by abolitionist objection to the “too learned” intellect of Douglass as potentially casting doubt on his former slavery (225).

While Crafts does not criticize or even address racism among abolitionists, her historical contemporaries often did: one black teacher compared such racism to “a dark mantle obscuring their many virtues and choking up the avenues to higher and nobler sentiments” (qtd. in Litwack 226). African Americans of the day also criticized perceived Northern indifference to racism in the North (Litwack 227).

Still, a desire on Crafts’ part for Northern sympathy does not necessarily prove that Crafts was herself a Northern white abolitionist. On the contrary, if it is true that Crafts was a black woman who had been a slave, she undoubtedly would have recognized that sympathy from Northern abolitionists would have been a great boon to her chances of publication, if this was indeed her ultimate, unrealized aim for The Bondwoman’s Narrative. This recognition is not unique to Crafts by any means. The slave narrative genre that so heavily
informs *The Bondwoman's Narrative* was “closely bound up with the abolitionist movement” (Gates, “The Fugitive” 104). The inclusion of letters and testimonies by noted abolitionists as prefaces or introductions to the publications of Douglass’s and Jacobs’s works, for instance (William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips in Douglass’s case; Lydia Maria Child in Jacobs’s), tells a great deal about the importance of the abolitionist movement to the publishing efforts of each of these authors, as we have seen. Child and her support were also responsible for the publication of Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig* in the same time period, according to Rohrbach (3). Wilson, for her part, admits frankly that her work is intended to reflect positively on the North and on the abolitionist movement, even though she concerns herself with the effects of slavery, and conditions of servitude resembling slavery, on the North (as we remember, Wilson argues for the “southern principles” of Mrs. Bellmont). In her preface she informs the reader, “I have purposely omitted what would most provoke shame in our good anti-slavery friends at home” (Wilson 3). Despite her later remarks about racism in Massachusetts, Wilson maintains that “in our part of the country there were thousands upon thousands who favored the elevation of [Frado’s] race, disapproving of oppression in all its forms; that [Frado] was not unpitied, friendless, and utterly despised” (75-76). However, contrary to what one might expect Bloom to claim, this attempt to secure Northern abolitionist sympathy does not prove Wilson to have been a white, Northern abolitionist woman.

It is also worthy of notice that Crafts, in writing *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, does not hesitate to correct perceived Northern misconceptions about slavery even when these misconceptions may have been harsher than the reality of slavery. A prime example of this
is Crafts’ description of characters such as Trappe and Saddler, two men who are involved with the slave trade and with whom Hannah interacts extensively during the middle chapters of the novel. To be sure, Crafts takes pains to set up Trappe as the most fearsome antagonist in the narrative, having him and his memory haunt Hannah even through her time in Washington and her escape to New Jersey even when he appears no longer to have any concrete power over her. However, Crafts (perhaps unwittingly) endows Trappe with positive characteristics as well. As Robbins notes, “he is not a monster to Hannah. He feeds and clothes her, he recognizes that she is ‘the best tempered in the world, kind, trusty, and religious’ [(Crafts 105)] ... and he sells her to a man [Saddler] who is rather kind to her, under the circumstances” (79). Saddler, for that matter, “does not put irons on her, speaks frankly with her, and offers her food ... Saddler’s pleasantries are surprising, under the circumstances” (Robbins 79-80). As Robbins points out in analysis of these characters’ treatment of Hannah, “there is little reason for a slave to paint a portrait of a slave trader as nicer than he is” (80), particularly if Crafts had been attempting to portray slavery as negatively as possible in order to advance the cause of abolitionism. While Robbins notes the behavior of Trappe and Saddler primarily to support her argument that Crafts’ depiction of the two men, through further Dickensian parallels, sets up a contrast between them and Mrs. Wheeler, who according to Robbins is the novel’s true antagonist, it remains the case that Crafts to some extent portrays the two men as multifaceted, giving the reader leeway to view them as having been corrupted by the system in which they participate, rather than viewing them as simply evil.
Another example of Crafts' potential unpalatability to Northern abolitionist sentiment is her reluctance to overplay the disparity between white attitudes toward blacks in the South and in the North in favor of the presumably favorable attitudes of the North. Before we examine this reluctance, it may be helpful to consider what Litwack writes of this perceived disparity and the common tendency to overemphasize it:

The Mason-Dixon Line is a convenient but an often misleading geographical division ... to dramatize essential differences in the treatment of, and attitudes toward, the Negro—to contrast southern racial inhumanity with northern benevolence and liberality. But the historian must be wary of such an oversimplified comparison, for it does not accord with the realities of either the nineteenth or the twentieth century. The inherent cruelty and violence of southern slavery requires no further demonstration, but this does not prove northern humanity ... discrimination against the Negro and a firmly held belief in the superiority of the white race were not restricted to one section but were shared by an overwhelming majority of white Americans in both the North and the South. (vii)

A key instance of Crafts' relatively favorable depiction of Southern principles in contrast to Northern principles, perhaps the more noteworthy for its subtlety, is when Crafts describes Hannah's early rapport with Mrs. Wheeler, before the cosmetics incident, Maria's intrigue, and Hannah's subsequent, cataclysmic fall from Mrs. Wheeler's good graces:

Those who suppose that southern ladies keep their attendants at a distance, scarcely speaking to them, or only to give commands have a very erroneous impression. Between the mistress and her slave a freedom exists probably not to be found elsewhere. A northern woman would have recoiled at the idea of communicating a private history to one of my race, and in my condition, whereas such a thought never occurred to Mrs. Wheeler. (Crafts 150)

Segal, as a modern reader, hails this passage as evidence that *The Bondwoman's Narrative* is "luminous in its authoritative insights" (37). For our purposes, though, the significant element here is that the last sentence of this excerpt, in particular, demonstrates that Crafts' desire to portray Northerners in a positive light has its limits. Although Crafts would
certainly have appreciated abolitionist sentiment among the women of the North, she nonetheless asserts that these same women would "recoil" at the thought of intimately interacting with a black woman themselves. This assertion is echoed and elaborated upon by Wilson as she describes Northern abolitionists' personal treatment of Frado in the closing pages of Our Nig, as we have already seen. William Andrews, in a letter to Gates, offers the following analysis of the Crafts passage above:

Of course, Mrs. Wheeler doesn’t think highly of Hannah, but ... the narrator of [The Bondwoman’s Narrative] is at pains to point out to her reader that female slaveholders treat their female slaves with a great deal more intimacy than standard abolitionist propaganda acknowledges ... a black woman is trying to get her white readers to realize that the relationship between white and black women in slavery was not one of mere dictation, white to black, or mere subjugation of the black woman by the white woman. A white woman in the North in the antebellum era who wanted to preserve her antislavery credentials would have found it hard to make such a characterization of intimacy between women slaveholders and their female slaves ... Thus only a black woman who had herself been a slave would be in a position of authority to make such a claim about this kind of intimacy between white and black women in slavery. (qtd. in Gates, Introduction to The Bondwoman’s Narrative lxxi)

Hannah’s candid depiction of her intimacy with Mrs. Wheeler and her forthright statement that it would not be matched by Northern women is a subtle but interesting example of what Brooks-De Vita describes as Crafts’ "unsparing ... condemnation of racist elitist sentiments afflicting Euro-Americans who ideologically oppose slavery" (1). Although Crafts’ correction of presumed Northern misconceptions regarding the relationship between mistress and slave is not as openly hostile as one might infer from Brooks-De Vita, it nonetheless makes Bloom’s argument less tenable. If, as Bloom suggests, Crafts was a white abolitionist woman writing for white abolitionist women, such a direct and explicit indictment of subtle racism among whites of the North would require a remarkable amount of self-awareness and
self-deprecation. For that matter, it likely would not endear Crafts to her intended audience, either.

Furthermore, it likely would not please abolitionist readers that Hannah displays a reluctance to actively seek freedom that persists until she runs from the Wheelers to preserve her virtue. When Hannah flees the Lindendale plantation with Mrs. Vincent, the decision is portrayed as a function of Hannah’s loyalty to Mrs. Vincent. In fact, Hannah rarely refers to her companion as anything but her “mistress.” Later, when the simple act of misleading Mrs. Henry about her condition would have meant Hannah’s freedom, her “better nature” leads her to tell Mrs. Henry the truth (116). Charlotte and William, Hannah’s friends from her time with Mrs. Henry, escape without Hannah, leaving her to “hug the chain” (142), while Hannah asks Mrs. Henry to purchase her and expressly denies the wish to be free (125). This seeming resignation to slavery on Hannah’s part would likewise not endear Crafts to an abolitionist audience.

Meanwhile, Hannah’s contemptuous attitudes toward a number of other slaves in the narrative (drunken Jo from the Henry home, and the field hands on the Wheeler plantation in North Carolina, for instance) might also have made The Bondwoman’s Narrative a troubling text for abolitionist readers, even though, as we will see, these attitudes were likely a product of internalization of the white racist prejudice directed against her. It is in her portrayal of the field slaves that Crafts is at her most troubling, as Williams demonstrates:

Abrasive, vitriolic, bristling, and brutally condescending, Hannah Crafts is relentless and remorseless in stripping the black slaves of the last shred of their humanity. In fact, she only stops short of calling them animals, and that categorization is already implicit in her graphic description of their fetid dwelling slums. She mimics their inelegant garblings and inarticulate stutterings with merciless and malicious
precision. To the abolitionists, this would have amounted to treachery compounded by motiveless malignity. (Williams 147)

In contrast to Wilson’s desire not to derogate the North and abolitionism, “the black community and the abolitionists would have been scandalized by the brutal and frank portrayal of slave life and the social condescensions of the author” in Crafts (Williams 140). As a result, Williams concludes, “There was no way the manuscript could have found accommodation in the literary politics of antebellum America” (140). William Andrews agrees, asserting that Crafts was likely “either … a most unusual white writer I have ever seen from the mid-19th century or a black narrator who had not yet turned her writing into something that would be sufficiently conventional to be published” (qtd. in Williams 140, italics Williams’s). While Hannah’s virtue and faith might have nonetheless had the potential to make her a popular heroine among Northern abolitionist women had Crafts’ manuscript been published and widely read by such women, this “most telling” fact alone may not be enough to substantiate Bloom’s doubt that Crafts was black.

Another, perhaps more serious potential objection to the assumption that Crafts was black concerns the racial attitudes and anxieties of Hannah, her main character and, since the text claims to be largely autobiographical, her narrative avatar. Robert S. Levine’s analysis of the role of Trappe within The Bondwoman’s Narrative complicates the issue of Crafts’ racial identity somewhat, if we combine it with an examination of Trappe’s psychological effect on Hannah within the text of Crafts’ work. Levine, in “Trappe(d): Race and Genealogical Haunting in The Bondwoman’s Narrative,” explains his critical interest in the character of Trappe:
But what I find particularly interesting about Trappe is the threat he poses to whites who don’t think of themselves as passing ... Crafts presents Trappe as a figure of terror in white supremacist culture: he points to the instability, fluidity, and uncertainty of a culture that bases itself on the racial dichotomy and binary.... (279)

Levine argues that “white racial anxiety [informs] the account of Trappe’s death near the end of the novel” (287). Hannah, of course, overhears a pair of gentlemen discussing the particulars of the lawyer’s demise during her escape from the Wheelers. Although these two demonstrate some level of personal contempt for Trappe, Levine argues that the men are “not abolitionists but rather [pro-slavery] sympathizers and slave traders” (287). Accordingly, their opinion of Trappe does not stem from his involvement in the slave trade itself. Rather, it is a product of the fact that Trappe “would not have hesitated to sell his own mother into slavery could the case have been made clear that she had African blood in her veins” (Crafts 232). Trappe himself openly acknowledges his modus operandi, for instance in his final conversation with Mrs. Vincent: “You are not the first fair dame whose descent I have traced back—far back to a sable son of Africa⁹ ... many are the family secrets that I have unraveled as women unravel a web” (Crafts 98). Trappe’s machinations, though, are ultimately a terror only to those who are identified as white, including potentially even the men discussing Trappe, as Levine notes:

Crucially, the fugitives [Trappe] pursues by uncovering their secrets are always “white” ... In the world of Trappe, no “white” is safe ... the tale-tellers and the

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⁹Crafts’ “sable son” reference here is particularly interesting given that Crafts and her contemporaries acknowledge the frequency of interracial miscegenation involving a white man and a black woman (both through Lizzy’s story and the secret of Mrs. Vincent’s lineage as exploited by Trappe in Crafts, for instance), while interracial miscegenation involving a black man and a white woman is nearly unknown in literature except in Mag’s marriage in Wilson and a parenthetical reference in Jacobs. While “sable daughter of Africa” would probably have been more literally accurate here, Crafts’ choice of “sable son” demonstrates an apt awareness of alliteration.
audience on the steamboat clearly approve [of the murder of Trappe]. No longer do they need to fear that Trappe will visit their houses! (Levine 288)

That Trappe can terrorize only whites through his legal maneuvering, though, leaves us with the potentially disturbing question of why Hannah fears Trappe as she does throughout the novel. Hannah never identifies herself as white and only relatively briefly passes for white during her escape from the Wheelers. Her scrupulous honesty about her “race” and condition preempts any possibility of Trappe using his knowledge about her against her, as he might have done had he visited the Henry family and found her passing for white while living among them. When she comes under his power as an incidental effect of his pursuit of Mrs. Vincent, he promptly sells her and can subsequently do nothing further to her. Hannah recognizes Trappe’s loss of power over her, telling herself, “I am beyond his power now” (113). Yet when she spots him in Washington, D.C., she remarks that “his presence to me seemed ominous of evil” (159), and when she hears Trappe’s name on the steamboat, she relates that it “thrilled through ever [sic] nerve of my body” (231). Admittedly, Hannah struggles with irrational fear at several points in the novel, but these tend to involve the supernatural and Gothic elements of the novel rather than Hannah’s interaction with other human beings. Hannah’s fear of Trappe, then, may represent a subconscious identification with whiteness on the part of Hannah, as character and narrator, if not necessarily on that of Crafts herself as author.

Levine also attempts to bolster his argument questioning Crafts’ blackness using Hannah’s aforementioned disparaging attitude toward the field slaves on the Wheeler plantation. Levine argues that Hannah’s lack of sympathy toward these individuals represents her “most disturbing failure of sympathy” despite her attempts to portray herself
as a generally sympathetic person throughout the text (289). Levine is not alone in recognizing this lack of sympathy: Soskis notes that in describing the field slaves, Crafts “speaks of the destitution of ‘these people,’ as if she is afraid to identify too closely with their squalor” (38). Hannah’s lack of sympathy leads Levine to question Hannah’s perhaps unconscious racial preoccupations, particularly when the issue comes to a head at her revolt against Mrs. Wheeler’s attempt to force her to work with and marry into that group:

Anxieties that one could so readily fall from white privilege to black ‘degradation’ are shared by many of the white characters of the novel, and to a certain extent by Hannah as well. The question I would pose, then, against the grain of Henry Louis Gates’s heroic research efforts to establish the former-slave status of Hannah Crafts, is why would such fears be so central to the authorial work of the ‘black’ Crafts? (Levine 289)

Levine goes on to examine in more detail Crafts’ attitudes toward house slaves and field slaves. Although Levine acknowledges that some distinction between these subclasses tends to appear in the African American literature of the period, he maintains that Crafts’ preoccupation with this issue “has no precedent that I know of in antebellum African American writing” (289). While Crafts, through her Hannah persona, pays lip service to the opinion that the condition of the field slaves is a byproduct of the effects of slavery upon them, a contention that Douglass and others address in greater detail (Levine 289-90), this contention does not mitigate her feelings toward them. Levine recognizes that gender issues as well as class issues are at play in Hannah’s dilemma, particularly the contention shared by Gates (“The Fugitive” 105) and Levine that marriage forcibly inflicted on a slave against her wishes is tantamount to rape, a position that can be easily drawn from Crafts’ own remarks within the text as well. However, Hannah’s attitude toward marrying a field slave is perhaps best compared to the remark by Mrs. Mary Howard Schoolcraft on interracial marriage that
“a refined Anglo-Saxon lady would sooner be burned at the stake, than married to one of these black descendants of Ham” (qtd. in Gates, Introduction to *Our Nig* xxviii). Levine hypothesizes that in Crafts the legitimate gender considerations about forced marriage and rape may be “put unrealistically and melodramatically to the service of Crafts’s own racial anxieties” (Levine 290). Levine supports this hypothesis by pointing to the fact that Hannah expresses no such concern over the prospect of being violated by a white man as was then a common practice\(^\text{10}\), leading one potentially to conclude that the race of the man involved is a factor, at least to Hannah. Levine, though, goes on to argue that the prospect of being so violated is a secondary concern to Hannah, less important than the prospect of becoming like the women in the field—a fear consciously exploited by Mrs. Wheeler in imposing this sentence on Hannah in the first place, as Levine points out (291). All of these indications of Hannah’s racial attitudes lead Levine to an interesting conclusion: “Crafts taps into [racial] anxieties not simply in order to undermine the ideological premises of white supremacy ... but also because these are fears that she herself seems implicated in” (291). Levine is not alone in noticing disconcerting racial attitudes on the part of Hannah; Jabari Asim also argues that Crafts “exhibits attitudes toward herself and other Blacks that reflect the influence of racial stereotyping ... Gates points out the irony of such remarks, but it is not clear that the irony is intentional on the part of the author” (51).

While Levine’s point about Hannah’s fear of Trappe is intriguing, his conclusion that Hannah’s negative attitudes toward some of the other slaves in the text reflect white racial

\(^\text{10}\)See, in particular, the “Lizzy’s Story” chapters in Crafts and the story behind Mrs. Vincent and her lineage earlier in the novel. This issue also takes center stage in portions of Douglass and Stowe and throughout Jacobs.
anxieties may be shortsighted. Instead, these attitudes may reflect white racial prejudices as forced upon Crafts and ultimately internalized by her to the extent that, as Asim indicates, they would become unconscious attitudes. Hannah herself recounts how she was assaulted by these prejudices from an early age: “When a child they used to scold and find fault with me because they said I was dull and stupid” (Crafts 5). She is told that “the African blood in my veins would forever exclude me from the higher walks of life” and that whites are “the higher and nobler race” (6). She is called an “ignorant thing” (17), denying both her intellect and her humanity. She is told that she must have “no mind, no desire, no purpose of [her] own” (108), and that “the order of nature” dictates the inferiority of blacks such as herself (161). Although Hannah resists these persistent reinforcements of prejudice, it becomes impossible for her to dismiss them:

It must be a strange state to feel that in the judgement [sic] of those above you [,] you are scarcely human, and to fear that their opinion is more than half right, that you really are assimilated to the brutes, that the horses, dogs and cattle have quite as many priveledges [sic], and are probably your equals or[,] it may be[,] your superiors in knowledge, that even your shape is questionable as belonging to that order of superior beings whose delicacy you offend. (201)

If Asim is correct that Crafts’ stereotypical racial attitudes are not intentionally ironic (51), it ultimately appears that Hannah has, perhaps unwillingly, internalized the racist prejudices with which she has been bombarded throughout the narrative, affecting her opinions both of herself and of other slaves. Therefore, it makes sense to conclude that what Levine views as racial anxieties appropriate to whites may instead be a further product of the impositions of racist attitudes on blacks themselves.

Meanwhile, the same attitudes on the part of Crafts to which Levine refers can also be taken to point to a black identity for the author. The subclass tension between house slaves
and field slaves is not unique to Crafts, nor is it a one-way affair. Frederick Douglass, for instance, “castigated house slaves as a ‘kind of black aristocracy’” (Ryan 142). Crafts’ distancing of herself from the field hands can also be seen as reflecting that she “understands the tendency of her white audience to collapse all class distinctions when dealing with blacks” (Soskis 38). Gates, following Dorothy Porter, suggests that Hannah’s attitudes toward the field slaves, along with other slaves such as María and Jo, “underscore the author’s ethnic identity as an African American” by emphasizing “the very normality and ordinariness of [Hannah’s] reactions, say, to the wretched conditions of slave life or to being betrayed by another black person” (Introduction to The Bondwoman’s Narrative xxiii).

Brooks-De Vita argues, moreover, that Hannah’s description of the field slaves and their living conditions represents further effort on the part of Crafts to condemn white America for its responsibility for these conditions, particularly the ignorance of the field hands (3), emphasizing the point by “hurting heroine, reader, and escapist racist abolitionist alike into precipitate visceral empathy with the voiceless, uneducated victim of America’s slavery debate” (4). Hannah’s revulsion at the field slaves, in other words, mirrors the revulsion Crafts’ readers should feel at the politics that made them.

As we have seen, Porter and Gates base their argument for Crafts’ blackness on her attitude, displayed through her description of her black characters, that these characters are “people first of all” and that their race is a secondary consideration (xix). Consider, for instance, Crafts’ description of those in attendance at Charlotte’s wedding: “Queer looking old men, whose black faces withered and puckered contrasted strangely with their white beards and hair; fat portly dames whose ebony complexions were set off by turbans of
flaming red” (Crafts 119, italics mine). Note that in each of these descriptions, the primary
distinction is something other than race: the men are “queer looking” and the women are “fat
[and] portly.” The “black faces” of the men and the “ebony complexions” of the women are
of secondary importance, and then only because Crafts sets up a visual contrast between their
skin tones and, respectively, their hair and clothing. By contrast, in works by white authors
such as Stowe, “all these [racial] descriptions come as soon as those characters enter the
novel” (Gates, Interview with Gross). For example, Stowe writes of Aunt Chloe’s “round,
black, shining face” and Uncle Tom’s “truly African features” (qtd. in Gates, Interview with
Gross).

Crafts’ blackness is also indicated by her “‘counterintuitive’ claim that the greatest
evils of slavery are spiritual and not physical, a standard theme in many other narratives”
(Soskis 38). Gates points out that this claim is not unique to Crafts; on the contrary, it is
found in other authors who were former slaves, extending even to particulars that at first
glance might seem frivolous:

For example, Frederick Douglass says the most important thing about being a slave
was not knowing your birth date. Now that’s counterintuitive. Who would figure
that out? You would think—I always ask my classes every year, “What’s the worst
thing about slavery?” and they say being beaten or being raped. Douglass says the
worst thing is that he never knew his birth date. So it’s surprising what was important
in the life of a slave. (Interview with Gross)

Gates contends that Crafts “has tremendous insight into the subtle effects of slavery on a
slave” (Interview with Gross). Asim agrees, noting that “[t]he heroine’s most affecting
observations seem to result from the author’s firsthand knowledge of slavery” (51).

Ultimately, “the presentation of black characters … [leaves] little doubt that a black woman
wrote [The Bondwoman’s Narrative]” (David Gates 63). Meanwhile, as we have seen,
Crafts’ knowledge of John Hill Wheeler in Washington and North Carolina and of less famous but equally historical individuals in Virginia seems to indicate that she is indeed who she claims to be.

To Levine’s argument as well as Henry Louis Gates’, the caveat should also be added that Hannah’s racial anxieties reflect those of Crafts herself only to the extent that author and heroine are mutually identifiable. To the extent that Crafts creates in Hannah a fictitious personality, she can imbue that personality (whether intentionally or not) with racial anxieties that may not be entirely reflective of her own racial anxieties or her own understanding of race. Levine ultimately admits that we can only go so far with speculation on Crafts from her text alone:

And yet because we do not know the ‘real’ Hannah Crafts, it is ultimately impossible to make categorical claims about her own racial politics, affiliations, and anxieties, and because the novel was never published, we cannot make claims about its audience, reception, and influence ... we can only note the critical tensions of an interracial novel that alternately suggests sympathetic knowledge of (and seeming identification with) black and white perspectives. (292)

Levine ends up leaning toward a black identity for Crafts, based in part upon Hannah’s involvement in the black community of the novel and its politics and stories such as the legend of the linden tree (292), but he adds that “Crafts seems to have anticipated the dilemma of racial identity politics with such prescience ... that [The Bondwoman’s Narrative] can trap its bookish Trappe-like readers who insist on working with essentialized racial categories in order to establish ‘authentic’ identities” and that Crafts’ novel “makes a

As we will see, however, not all critics are convinced that Crafts personally knew Wheeler. Some suggest that Crafts may have had other means of knowing what she did and other reasons for writing what she knew.
mockery of ‘black’ and ‘white’” (293). Levine arrives at this conclusion about Crafts and her work, supplemented with quotes from Werner Sollors:

_The Bondwoman's Narrative_ ... undermines ‘the ideology of racial dualism’ and poses a challenge to ‘the resistance to interracial life’ that remains prevalent in U.S. culture. At the same time, the novel powerfully shows that those racial categories, however fictive they might be as juridical and ‘scientific’ inventions of white supremacist culture, are socially real and affect the lives of characters and readers alike. (293)

In dealing with Crafts’ “race,” then, we must remember that race is not a delineation fixed by “the sanction of God, biology, or the natural order,” as Gates puts it (qtd. in Keating 914). Rather, Gates argues, it is “a text (an array of discursive practices), not an essence. It must be read with painstaking care and suspicion, not imbibed” (qtd. in Keating 901). If we are forced to pigeonhole Crafts within the “black/white” racial binary, then, it seems that Crafts would ultimately belong as a black author. However, a more accurate description would be that Crafts’ racial identity incorporates elements of both black and white, though rather more of the former, and incorporating whiteness primarily through internalized racial prejudices inflicted on her from outside herself. To some extent, Crafts telegraphs this tension through her heroine Hannah, who introduces herself to the reader with a visual image: “my complexion was almost white, and the obnoxious descent could not be readily traced, though it gave a rotundity to my person, a wave and curl to my hair” (Crafts 6).
Issues of Religion in Crafts and Her Contemporaries

Another issue in which it would be meaningful to compare Crafts with her contemporaries is the question of how the texts relate to issues of faith and religion. This issue is significant on a number of levels, such as the relevance of religion to the society at large of the day, its importance to the question of abolitionism, and what Crafts’ handling of it can tell us about her as an author. In *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*, Hannah’s Christian faith remains amazingly consistent throughout the text from her early meeting with a woman later identified as “Aunt Hetty” (227) whom Hannah credits with leading her to Christianity. For Hetty and her husband’s troubles, the two disappear, not to be heard from again until the closing pages of the narrative, in which Crafts writes a sentimentally idealized happy ending for Hannah. Even so, at the time Hannah concludes only that “it might be that in conformity to the inscrutable ways of Providence the faith and strength of these aged servants of the Cross were to be tried by a more severe ordeal” (Crafts 12). When Trappe reveals his machinations to Mrs. Vincent, prompting her to run from Lindendale and ask Hannah to accompany her, Hannah reassures her, “We will go and trust in heaven” (51). While the two are on the run, Hannah reads to her companion from Psalm 46, offering her “the soothing and comforting influences to be derived from reading portions of the Holy Scripture” (54). As Trappe closes in on the two, Hannah’s plea to Providence and submission to God’s will echo Christ’s words on the eve of the Crucifixion (Crafts 67; cf. Matthew 26.39, Luke 22.42). When Mrs. Vincent succumbs to the belief that “Heaven ... has turned against us” (70), Hannah continues to reassure herself with scripture (79-80). Although Hannah likewise assesses that her situation “precluded hope,” she persists in her belief that “God was with us
... we should find in Him a sure and certain refuge” (90). When Trappe taunts her as he sells her away, Hannah pities him: “I felt that my condition for eternity if not for time, was preferable to his, and that I would not even for the blessed boon of freedom change places with him; since even freedom without God and religion would be a barren possession” (109). On the other hand, Hannah’s faith also remains constant in happier times: while under Mrs. Henry’s care, she credits that “the Redeemer was leading me in spirit through the green pastures and beside the still waters of Gospel truth and peace,” rather than claiming to deserve such care: “What had I ever done to merit so much kindness? Nothing. Nothing. I could only recognise in it the hand of my Father” (118).

Hannah’s Christian faith remains amazingly consistent throughout the text, as does her positive attitude toward Christianity itself. Hannah’s faith, throughout The Bondwoman’s Narrative, appears almost larger than life, much as Tom’s faith seems superhuman throughout Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin. In fact, Hannah rarely if ever finds her faith wavering as even Tom’s does briefly due to Legree’s extreme cruelty (Stowe 338-39), though Hannah prays for death while under Trappe’s control (Crafts 102) and is “half-forgetful of my trust in the next [world]” when Mrs. Henry refuses to purchase her (128).

Hannah’s unshakeable faith and positive attitude toward Christianity may initially appear to stand in contrast to the attitudes of the protagonists of the African American autobiographies of the day toward religion in America, if we take comments by such authors as Harriet Jacobs and Frederick Douglass as an indication of these attitudes. However, the respective views of each on Christianity share a good deal of underlying common ground. While Jacobs and Douglass, for instance, confess to a dim view of Christianity as practiced
in America by slaveholders, this criticism does not extend to the faith as set forth in the Bible, which often actually informs the judicial sentiment with which they condemn the former. Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina argues that both Douglass and Jacobs “felt the need to address the difficulties of reconciling their beliefs and actions as slaves with those of Christianity as it was professed and practiced by whites” (43). By contrast, blacks’ attitudes toward true Christianity were more positive: Olaudah Equiano experiences a religious epiphany at sea, while Phillis Wheatley considers herself the beneficiary of “good fortune in being carried across the ocean from Africa to America and Christianity” (Gerzina 43). Stampp argues that most slaves “took their religion seriously ... What the slave needed [in slavery] was a spiritual life in which he could participate vigorously, which transported him from the dull routine of bondage and which promised him that a better time was within his reach. Hence, he embraced evangelical Protestantism eagerly, because it so admirably satisfied all these needs” (371). Nevertheless, slaves’ reverence for Christianity did not extend into the hypocritical perversions of the faith enacted by participants in the system of slavery. Equiano, for example, does not hesitate to point out that the slave trade reflects poorly on Christianity:

I remember in the vessel in which I was brought over, in the men’s apartment, there were several brothers who, in the sale, were sold in different lots; and it was very moving on this occasion to see and hear their cries at parting. O, ye nominal Christians! might not an African ask you, learned you this from your God? who says unto you, Do unto all men as you would men should do unto you? (qtd. in Potkay 606)

Here, it should be noted that Equiano refers to those involved with slavery as “nominal Christians,” suggesting that such involvement shows that their faith is less than genuine. Potkay notes that Equiano’s polemic “harkens back to Jesus’ denunciations of ‘scribes and
Pharisees, hypocrites!’ and to the woes Isaiah prophesied for the ‘rebellious children’ of Israel” (Potkay 606). Meanwhile, Potkay argues, “the question ‘might not an African ask you, learned you this from your God[?]’ signals not so much the perspective of a cultural outsider as a confirmation that the Christian universe knows no outside; it is all inclusive, and is itself the surety of eventual justice” (606). What is perhaps more immediately important, though, is that although Equiano’s question “signals … the perspective of a cultural outsider” and what professing Christian slave traders might inadvertently teach such outsiders about their religion, Equiano himself is unquestionably an insider.

Jacobs, for her part, avers a spiritual upbringing somewhat analogous to that of Hannah in *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*, writing that she learned early on “the precepts of God’s Word: ‘Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.’ ‘Whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, do ye even so unto them’” (Jacobs 10-11; Mark 12.31; Matthew 7.12). However, much of the religious activity taking place around her fails to reflect or abide by such precepts. Jacobs notes one preacher, for instance, who preaches to slaves nothing but guilt and exhortations to obedience, as well as another who “bought and sold slaves, who whipped his brethren and sisters of the church at the public whipping post, in jail or out of jail. He was ready to perform that Christian office any where [sic] for fifty cents” (61). Dr. Flint’s “conversion” to Christianity causes no change in his treatment of Jacobs, and he rudely answers her charges of unbiblical conduct (65). On the other hand, Jacobs also writes of a preacher who argues that God “‘judges men by their hearts, not by the color of their skins’” (63). Although this teaching prefigures the religious rhetoric Martin Luther King, Jr., would use in the following century’s Civil Rights movement, in its immediate context it is
“very offensive to slaveholders” (63). Jacobs, taking the examples of these preachers along with her own understanding of biblical morality, concludes that there exists “a great difference between Christianity and religion at the south” (64).

In the same way, Douglass distinguishes between the religion that endorses slavery and the faith that holds all people to be created equally in the image of God. Of the former he writes:

[The] religion of the south is a mere covering for the most horrid crimes,—a justifier of the most appalling barbarity,—a sanctifier of the most hateful frauds,—and a dark shelter under, which [sic] the darkest, foulest, grossest, and most infernal deeds of slaveholders find the strongest protection ... of all slaveholders with whom I have ever met, religious slaveholders are the worst ... the meanest and basest, the most cruel and cowardly. (Narrative 117)

In his Appendix, Douglass further condemns these individuals by likening them to the Pharisees whom Jesus condemned for hypocrisy and corruption (155-56; Matthew 23.4-28; Mark 12.40). To clarify that this is not an indictment of the Christian faith itself, Douglass also writes in his Appendix that “between the Christianity of this land and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference—so wide, that to receive the one as good, pure, and holy, is of necessity to reject the other as bad, corrupt, and wicked” (153). His respect for the teachings of the Bible leads him to further abhor the “women-whipping, cradle-plundering” religion then practiced in the south (153). However, Douglass also recognizes the corruption inflicted on the church by the system: “We have men sold to build churches, women sold to support the gospel, and babes sold to purchase Bibles for the poor heathen! all for the glory of God and the good of souls!” (154, italics Douglass’). That money gained through the system of slavery was spent on promoting Christianity, according
to Douglass, cheapened and degraded the religion by co-opting it to imply support for the practices that raised revenue for it.

Douglass' appeals to Christian ethics, meanwhile, can be found in his political writings as well as his *Narrative*. In an article for the *North Star* entitled “The Blood of the Slave on the Skirts of the Northern People,” for instance, Douglass accuses the North of complicity in electing Taylor to the presidency and warns of divine punishment:

Before high heaven and the world, you are responsible for the blood of the slave ... so sure as there is a God of Justice and an unerring Providence, just so sure will the blood of the bondman be required at your hands ... When Christ and Barabbas were presented, you have cried out in your madness, Give us Barabbas the robber, in preference to Christ, the innocent. The perishing slave, with uplifted hands and bleeding hearts, implored you, in the name of the God you profess to serve ... You continue to fight against God, and declare that injustice exalteth a nation, and that sin is an honor to any people.

Do you really think to circumvent God? ... Has the law of righteous retribution been repealed from the statutes of the Almighty? ... Oh, that you would consider the enormity of your conduct, and seek forgiveness at the hands of a merciful Creator. Repent of this wickedness, and bring forth fruit meet for repentance, by delivering the despoiled out of the hands of the despoiler. (947-48)

Direct condemnation of pro-slavery religion, such as that provided by Douglass here, was relatively common before the Civil War and lends support to the belief that the condemnation of pro-slavery religious hypocrisy as seen in African American autobiography of the day reflects widespread contemporary black attitudes toward pro-slavery religion.

While black authors wrote and spoke against religious hypocrisy and racism, they and other blacks also took direct action in response to such racism and hypocrisy. Litwack notes that one response by blacks to racism within Christianity was to set up “separate and

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12 cf. Matthew 27.15-22
13 cf. Proverbs 14.34
independent churches” as they “persistently assailed the proslavery and caste nature of white religious bodies” (208):

Churches which sanctioned racial distinctions, they argued, violated the true spirit of Christianity. How could such institutions propagate the teachings of Jesus Christ and ignore, or even countenance, the ruthless suppression of a human race? How could they send missionaries to convert heathens in other parts of the globe when “there are not a more wretched, ignorant, miserable, and abject set of beings in all the world, than the blacks in the Southern and Western sections of this country?” Those religious sects which tolerated such degradation ... were “nothing more than synagogues of Satan.” (Litwack 208-09)

Douglass, for instance, responded to seeing a segregated Eucharist, punctuated by the minister’s condescending and hypocritical declaration in inviting the black parishioners to commune that “[blacks], too, have an interest in the blood of Christ. God is no respecter of persons,” by leaving that church and refusing to return (Litwack 209). Meanwhile, black Christians maintained that “any ‘true Church of Christ’ opposed the sin of slavery ... and that the ministers of [proslavery] sects constituted ‘the greatest enemies to Christ and to civil and religious liberty’” (210). While some, as Litwack points out, considered all-black churches a tempting solution, others believed that these churches “helped to maintain prejudice and Christian caste and served as a constant reminder of the Negro’s inferiority” (212). Douglass was among those in opposition to such churches:

Douglass’ *North Star* castigated [all-black churches] as “negro pews, on a higher and larger scale,” differing only in location and dimension but equally obnoxious. After all, it asked, had not the Negro pew been designed on the grounds that colored people were offensive to whites and should therefore be separated from them? Did not Negro churches merely extend that separation and thus justify those grounds? Enemies of the Negro, Douglass charged, had long sought to separate the two races ... Although enormous grievances and insults had at first justified ecclesiastical independence, separate churches now served to impede the progress of the Negro people and to countenance their segregation in other fields. (Litwack 212)
The *Colored American* agreed, arguing that segregated churches “have contributed more largely to the persecution ... and neglect of our colored population, than all the politics of the land” (qtd. in Litwack 212). The Moral Reform Society, though it disagreed sharply with the *Colored American* on other issues, argued that religious segregation “fostered prejudice and insulted the true spirit of reform” and that interracial Christian fellowship was entirely appropriate given that blacks and whites acknowledged the same God and expected the same reward of heaven from Him (Litwack 212). The latter sentiment was echoed by Henry Bibb, who wrote in the *North Star* that he anticipated “no more use in having a colored church exclusively ... than having a colored heaven and a colored God” (qtd. in Litwack 213).

Meanwhile, Douglass, who also felt that church segregation “resulted in inferior religious instruction” due to the dubious qualifications and even the dubious literacy of the preachers in all-black churches (Litwack 213), advocated instead direct, nonviolent demonstration against segregation in “white” churches as had already taken place on New England railroad cars (213), anticipating the peaceful demonstrations against segregation during the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s just as the “separate and independent” segregated churches anticipated the “separate but equal” institutions of late 19th and early to mid-20th century segregation itself.

Another text to which we might compare *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* with respect to religious issues is Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig*. In particular, a comparison between Crafts’ Hannah persona and Wilson’s Frado would be appropriate. However, Frado’s attitudes toward religion seem much more ambivalent than Hannah’s. Frado accompanies Aunt Abby to evening religious meetings, which “were eagerly anticipated by [Frado]; it was such a
pleasant release from labor ... Such perfect contrast in the melody and prayers of these good people to the harsh tones which fell on her ears during the day” (Wilson 69). As a result, Frado soon “had all their sacred songs at command, and enlivened her toil by accompanying it with this melody” (69). When Mrs. Bellmont attempts to curtail her religion, Frado privately defies her in her room, where “she would listen to the pleadings of a Saviour, and try to penetrate the veil of doubt and sin which clouded her soul, and long to cast off the fetters of sin, and rise to the communion of saints” (87). However, she wonders aloud that the same God would make her black and Mrs. Bellmont white, setting the stage for the abuse she has endured, and tells James, “I don’t like [God] ... Why didn’t he make us both white?” (Wilson 51, italics Wilson’s). James, of course, is at a loss to respond to Frado’s questioning of God.

Another good example of the ambiguous opinion of religion Frado holds is her reaction toward the concept of the afterlife. Wilson notes her heroine’s doubt: “...is there a heaven for the black? She knew there was one for James, and Aunt Abby, and all good white people; but was there any for blacks? She had listened attentively to all the minister said, and all Aunt Abby had told her; but then it was all for white people” (Wilson 84, italics Wilson’s). Gates, in his introduction to Wilson’s work, describes Frado as having a “dormant passion for religion” realized primarily through her relationship with James (xlix). James, for his part, would fit in among the favorably portrayed white Christians in Crafts such as Aunty Hetty and Mrs. Henry: Wilson writes that James “had found the Saviour, he wished to have Frado’s desolate heart gladdened, quieted, sustained, by His presence” (69, italics Wilson’s). However, according to Gates, Frado’s aforementioned “dormant passion
for religion” is not actualized in a manner comparable to Hannah’s passion for her faith in

*The Bondwoman’s Narrative*:

Frado never truly undergoes a religious transformation, merely the *appearance* of one; as the text emphasizes, ‘a devout and Christian exterior invited confidence from the villagers.’ Frado’s innate innocence, outside of the respectability of the church, is one of the most subtle contrasts and social critiques of *Our Nig*” (xlii, italics Gates’s)

Much, though not all, of what Wilson writes of Frado and her religious experiences corroborates Gates’s opinion. For instance, after James’s death Frado “did not love God; she did not serve him or know how to” (99). She further writes, “*He* [James] was the attraction. Should [Frado] ‘want to go [to heaven] if she could not see him?’... [The minister] endeavored to make Christ, instead of James, the attraction of Heaven” to Frado (100, 103; italics Wilson’s). Ultimately, even the attraction of James fails as a religious motivator for Frado, outweighed by the prospect of sharing heaven with Mrs. Bellmont (104). Frado subsequently gives up “all thought of the future world” (104), though she makes a brief exception to relish the thought of Mary being ironically blackened in the hereafter: Frado “imagines the wicked Miss Mary in hell, where ‘she’ll be as black as I am,’ and then chuckles, ‘Wouldn’t mistress be mad to see her a n*****?’” (qtd. in Yellin 112). Frado also briefly attempts to assert her rights by returning to the evening meeting (Wilson 108), but references to her religion become rarer as the novel progresses from that point on. Gates surmises that “Frado has ‘resolved to give over all thought of the future world’ because she ‘did not wish to go’ to a heaven that would allow Mrs. Bellmont entrance” (xlix), Mrs. Bellmont being known as a “professor of religion” despite her mistreatment of Frado (Wilson 45, 104).
Mrs. Bellmont, notably, is analogous to the poor representations of Christianity present in other African American works of the time. Apparently concerned that religious commitments would make Frado less available for work (89), Mrs. Bellmont refuses to allow Frado to accompany her to church (though she forces her to convey her to and from church), saying that religion “was not meant for n*****s” (68), and refuses to allow her to pray on the grounds that “prayer was for whites, not for blacks” (94), initially leaving her religious instruction to Aunt Abby, who “saw [in Frado] a soul to save, an immortality of happiness to secure” (69). As the novel progresses, Mrs. Bellmont’s opposition to Frado’s religion increases, and Mrs. Bellmont threatens Frado that “if she did not stop trying to be religious, she would whip her to death” (104). Here, though, Frado’s resistance to Mrs. Bellmont is superseded by her desire not to share heaven with her, and Frado gives little thought to religion thereafter until just before Wilson’s direct appeal for support through her. If Gates is correct, then far from being in agreement with Hannah on the importance of faith, Frado and her “ironic rejection of the Christian religion” (xlix) is more comparable to the frustration with Christianity exhibited in *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* by Jacob’s sister, “the poor benighted soul to whom the sweetest influences of religion had become gall and wormwood” whom Hannah so pities for her lack of faith (Crafts 220).

Still, just as it should not be taken for granted that Crafts the author and Hannah the protagonist can be completely identified with each other, we should not be too quick to identify Wilson completely with her heroine. To be sure, Wilson offers material asserting a connection between her historical identity and the literary identity of Frado. For instance, in the final chapter Wilson makes this connection in a direct address to her audience asserting
that “an invalid, she [Frado] asks your sympathy, gentle reader ... Enough has been unrolled to demand your sympathy and aid” (Wilson 130). This seemingly startling plea might seem an abrupt development if not for the first-person chapter titles earlier on, coupled with the third-person narrative taking place in these chapters: “Mag Smith, My Mother” (Chapter 1), “My Father’s Death” (Chapter 2), “A New Home for Me” (Chapter 3). In later chapters, Wilson makes use of the third person in chapter titles such as “A Friend for Nig” (Chapter 4) and “Spiritual Condition of Nig” (Chapter 7), but by this time her proverbial hand has been tipped to her reader. Gates offers up the question of whether the first-person chapter titles “are the sign of an inexperienced author struggling with or against the received convention of her form, or the result of the imposition of a life on the desires of a text to achieve the status of fiction” and concludes that Wilson’s temporary first-person lapse demonstrates “the complexities and tensions of basing fictional events upon the lived experiences of an author” (Gates, Introduction to Our Nig xxxvii, italics Gates’s). It should also be noted that throughout her text, Wilson emphasizes the touchy nature of identity by alternately referring to her heroine by both the name of “Frado” and the derogatory title of “Nig” also referenced in some of Wilson’s chapter titles (used within the chapters mostly as Wilson writes from the perspective of members of the Bellmont family)\(^\text{14}\), and her leaving off the proper name of Frado for an indistinct “she” several pages before the final, direct address to the reader.

\(^{14}\)According to Gates, Wilson’s decision to use an infamous racial epithet as the title of her novel, and as her pen name on the title page, represents “boldness and cleverness in ... ironic use” and is “impressive, standing certainly as one of the black tradition’s earliest recorded usages” (xxvii). However, such a bold rhetorical reversal is not without its attendant risks: Gates adds, “We are free to speculate whether the oblivion into which Harriet Wilson disappeared for well over a century resulted from the boldness of her themes and from turning to that hated epithet ... both for title and authorial, if pseudonymous, identity” (xxix).
Perhaps the most significant indicator of a disparity between Wilson and her Frado persona is the discrepancy between the complex attitude of Frado toward religion, as we have examined, and the religious and moral perspectives with which Wilson imbues her narrative voice. While Frado and Hannah are worlds apart, as we have seen, the narrators in Wilson and Crafts have much more in common. This similarity begins early on when Wilson refers to the community’s treatment of Mag after her illegitimate child dies in infancy:

Alas, how fearful are we to be first in extending a helping hand to those who stagger in the mires of infamy; to speak the first words of hope and warning to those emerging into the sunlight of morality! Who can tell what numbers, advancing just far enough to hear a cold welcome and join in the reserved converse of professed reformers, disappointed, disheartened, have chosen to dwell in unclean places, rather than encounter these “holier-than-thou” of the great brotherhood of man! (Wilson 7)

Like Crafts, Wilson emphasizes care for one’s fellow human beings over moralistic pontificating, as another early address to her audience regarding Mag’s interracial marriage to Jim (of which Frado would be a product) suggests: “You can philosophize, gentle reader, upon the impropriety of [interracial] unions, and preach dozens of sermons on the evils of amalgamation”. Want is a more powerful philosopher and preacher” (9). Still, a religious view of things often informs such benevolence in Wilson: “The good man feels that he has accomplished too little for the Master, and sighs that another day must so soon close” (40-41). Even after Frado apparently abandons interest in religion, Wilson argues for God’s

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15 The term amalgamation was in Wilson’s day a standard euphemism for interracial marriage among the relatively few novels that addressed the topic. Wilson was atypical of these works in that the others “made the subject an object of bitter, racist satire” in contrast to the nonjudgmental manner in which Wilson addresses it (Gates xxviii). Gates argues that this nonjudgmental stance on the issue would not have made Our Nig popular with either Northern or Southern readers and may have contributed to its quick descent into decades of obscurity (xxix). Massachusetts legalized interracial marriage in 1843, well before the publication of Our Nig, but this decision was controversial in the North as well as the South (Litwack 105-06).
providence in Frado’s life, maintaining that “God prepares the way, when human agencies see no path” (124).

Another similarity between Crafts and Wilson is brought up during Wilson’s description of James’s death when “the Angel of Death severed the golden thread, and he was in heaven” (97). Here Wilson demonstrates that, like Crafts, she is familiar with both scriptural and classical allusions, though in this instance she does so through employing a mixed metaphor: according to classical mythology, the Three Fates, or Moirai, oversaw the thread of each person’s life, and one of these, Atropos, was responsible for cutting the thread, ending the life in question. Wilson further showcases her literary knowledge through the placement of an epigraph at the beginning of each chapter, a feature common to both Wilson and Crafts. A few of these epigraphs are by authors still familiar to modern readers, such as Byron (Chapter 4) and Solomon (Chapter 12), but others are more obscure and still others are of entirely unknown origin. Gates suggests that the epigraphs that have been identified “reflect a certain eclecticism in Mrs. Wilson’s reading habits” that may be a function of arbitrary access to literature (xxxix), while those that have not were perhaps penned by Wilson herself: “they often read like pastiches of other authors, or like lines from common Protestant hymns” (xl). A notable difference between Crafts’ and Wilson’s use of the epigraph is that the aforementioned Solomon quote (Ecclesiastes 1.9) is the only biblical epigraph employed by Wilson, while nearly every epigraph in Crafts is taken from the Bible.

Like her contemporaries, Crafts makes a sharp distinction between Christianity per se and religion as used in support of the institution of slavery, and between the participants in each. In The Bondwoman’s Narrative, Hannah first encounters Christianity when Hetty
educates her, in keeping with "our Saviour's words to Peter where he commands the latter to 'feed his lambs'" (Crafts 7). Crafts goes on to write of Hetty, who is described as white (7) and "a northern woman" (8), that she and her husband exhort Hannah to "be good and trust in God" and in themselves exhibit "the peace of God and their own consciences united to honor and intelligence" (9). As such, Hannah credits the couple with her spiritual development: "They cultivated my moral nature. They led me to the foot of the Cross" (10). We also learn somewhat later, though still before Hetty is identified, that she has given Hannah a copy of the Bible (207), thereby allowing Hannah to couple her intellectual development with her spiritual development. Meanwhile, on a meta-text level, this passage offers the reader an in-text explanation of Crafts' familiarity with scripture and the Christian worldview that permeates her narrator's commentary throughout *The Bondwoman's Narrative*.

Of course, it is somewhat easy to imagine this segment of the text being fictionalized to idealize both characters while providing an in-text explanation of Crafts' literacy. Furthermore, that Crafts writes of this woman early on, but only gives her a name toward the end of the narrative, while using that name in the intervening pages without adequately explaining who Hetty is, would seem to indicate that Hetty may be a character constructed by Crafts rather than a historical individual of Crafts' acquaintance, particularly because of Hetty's extreme importance to Hannah. While it is possible that Hetty really existed and this was merely an oversight on Crafts' part, one would expect Crafts to be more thorough in her description of a woman who had been so influential in her life, if indeed her faith and intellect are as important to her as she represents them to be. Still, as a meeting between a fictional character (Hetty) and a fictionalized character (Hannah), Hetty's treatment of
Hannah contributes to an understanding of the character Hannah’s attitude toward religion. If her first experience with Christianity had come at the hands of an individual like Mrs. Bellmont in Wilson’s *Our Nig* or one of the “Christian” characters in the narratives of Jacobs or Douglass, or ostensibly Christian characters introduced later in Crafts whose attitudes toward slavery and slaves are less than charitable (on whom more to follow), Hannah’s attitude toward that religion might have been much different.

In much the same way, Crafts paints a flattering picture of Mrs. Henry when Hannah finds herself under Mrs. Henry’s care. Mrs. Henry reminds Hannah that “a merciful Providence watches over the humblest as the greatest” and remarks, “What a blessed thing is prayer?—and [sic] the duty of thanksgiving should not be forgotten,” thus exhorting Hannah to pray further in gratitude (117). Meanwhile, Mrs. Henry has already acted out her faith through her treatment of Hannah, attending to injuries Hannah had just sustained in a wagon crash. Though Hannah recognizes that Mrs. Henry and her husband own slaves (119), this appears not to reflect negatively on her opinion of them, given Mrs. Henry’s treatment of others and devotion to religion. Though Hannah as narrator makes her opinion of slavery clear throughout *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*, she asks Mrs. Henry to purchase her rather than allow her to pass to Saddler’s next of kin, kneeling before her in a manner that resembles idolatry too closely for Mrs. Henry’s comfort (125). Noticeably, Mrs. Henry’s sense of religious duty outweighs her own self-interest as a slaveholder: when Charlotte, one of her slaves, runs away with her husband, William, after he flees a harsher owner (mirroring George and Eliza’s escape plot in Stowe), Mrs. Henry admits, “I cannot find it in my heart to blame her ... The language of Scripture is just as true to[-]day as it was six thousand years
ago. ‘Thy desire shall be thy husband.’... Heaven grant, that he prove worthy of the trust, and that they may reach in safety the land of freedom” (143-44). Mrs. Henry even goes so far as to pray for Charlotte and William as they run away from her (146).

Although she populates her text with characters such as Hetty and Mrs. Henry, Crafts also appears to recognize that the congruency of these characters’ beliefs and actions is somewhat anomalous within southern Christianity. In writing about the previous history of the Lindendale plantation and the legend of Rose’s killing and the haunted linden tree, Crafts notes of Sir Clifford that he “made it a boast that he never retracted, that his commands and decisions like the laws of the Medes and Persians were unalterable” (22), a clear reference to the ancient Persian Empire as described in the Old Testament (Esther 1.19; Daniel 6.8-15). Crafts thus endows Sir Clifford with an impressive knowledge of the Bible even as he frivolously orders Rose and an innocent dog to be torturously killed. Similarly, when Mr. Trappe, Crafts’ Gothic villain, has Hannah and Mrs. Vincent under his control, he expresses an intent to “dispose of [Mrs. Vincent] in a private manner” by selling her to a gentleman rather than putting her up for auction (99), alluding to Joseph’s initial decision to privately send away Mary before the intervention of an angel (Matthew 1.19-20). Trappe further misappropriates scripture when offering Hannah the advice that “submission and obedience must be the Alpha and Omega of all your actions” (108), imploring Hannah to afford her future owners a degree of reverence of which only Christ is truly worthy (Revelation 1.8,11; 21.6; 22.13).

Although Hannah’s faith and virtue are acknowledged by those around her, these qualities are somewhat cynically received by those who believe that profit from slavery
outweighs moral concerns. Saddler, bargaining with Trappe for Hannah, exhibits such an attitude toward Hannah’s religion, though Crafts interestingly turns Saddler’s argument into an unwitting critique of slavery:

“I hardly think that religion will do her much good, or make her more subservient to the wishes of my employers. On the whole I should prefer that she wasn’t religious, ... because religion is so apt to make people stubborn; it gives them such notions of duty, and that one thing is right and another thing wrong; it sets them up so, you’ll even hear them telling that all mankind are made of one blood, and equal in the sight of God.” (105)

Despite Saddler’s attitude toward religion among slaves, Hannah ultimately impresses Saddler with her character to the extent that he trusts her enough not to put cuffs on her, over Trappe’s objections (109-10). Likewise, Mrs. Wheeler responds indifferently even to Mrs. Henry’s reports of Hannah’s character, telling Mrs. Henry, “I never trouble myself about the principles of my girls; so they are obedient is all I require” (152) and noting to Hannah (after forcing her to write a libelous letter about herself) that “some might consider your notions of religion and truth as highly improper for one in your station” (153). Later on, in North Carolina, Mrs. Wheeler misappropriates scriptural rhetoric, telling Hannah, “Your pride shall be broke [sic], your haughty spirit brought down” (205; cf. Proverbs 16.18) even as she demotes Hannah and announces her intention to force an unwanted marriage on her.

The cynicism of Saddler and Mrs. Wheeler regarding Hannah’s faith is an interesting element in Crafts, given that in general “piety increased [slaves’] value” in real life (Stampp 162). Stampp quotes a former slave recalling an auctioneer’s opinion on the value of religion in a slave:

“[T]he religious teaching consists in teaching the slave that he must never strike a white man; that God made him for a slave; and that, when whipped, he must not find fault,—for the Bible says, ‘He that knoweth his master’s will and doeth it not, shall be
beaten with many stripes!’ And slaveholders find such religion very profitable to them.” (162)

According to Stampp, this use of religion among slaveholders was fairly common, as these slaveholders “considered Christian indoctrination an effective method of keeping slaves docile and contented” (156). Stampp goes on to describe such indoctrination in much the same way that Crafts and her contemporaries do:

Through religious instruction the bondsmen learned that slavery had divine sanction, that insolence was as much an offense against God as against the temporal master. They received the Biblical command that servants should obey their masters, and they heard of the punishments awaiting the disobedient slave in the hereafter. They heard, too, that eternal salvation would be their reward for faithful service .... (158)

Even slaveholders who had little interest in religion themselves frequently saw the benefit of instilling it in their slaves (158), though they recognized that “only a carefully censored version of Christianity could have this desired effect. Inappropriate Biblical passages had to be deleted; sermons that might be proper for freemen were not necessarily proper for slaves” (159-60). However, slaves “recognized the gross inconsistency between the allegation that this all-powerful God of the whites could care so much about their eternal salvation while remaining indifferent to the powerlessness and wretchedness of their condition” (Wilmore 32-33). This evaluation of white religious hypocrisy demonstrates “a moral integrity and spirit of resistance” (32) on the part of the slaves, who “were aware that the God who demanded their devotion ... was not the God of the slavemaster, with his whip and gun, nor the God of the plantation preacher, with his segregated services and injunctions to servility and blind obedience” (33).

Crafts’ indictment of ostensibly Christian individuals who fail to live by their avowed principles extends past those individuals with whom Hannah interacts directly in the
narrative. The primary example of Crafts’ narration other than through the persona of Hannah, of course, is the two chapters in which Lizzy updates Hannah on the happenings at Lindendale since Hannah’s departure. Accordingly, Lizzy’s description of Mrs. Cosgrove is a significant example of Crafts’ critique of avowed Christian slaveholders. Lizzy begins by relating to Hannah and to Crafts’ readers the infidelity of Mr. Cosgrove and the resulting jealousy of his wife. Upon learning of her husband’s further duplicity, Mrs. Cosgrove “more resembled a Fury of Orestes than a Christian woman” (181). Here, of course, the underlying assumption is that Mrs. Cosgrove is ostensibly a Christian, though little textual evidence offers any indication of this. In any case, Crafts’ narrator (here, through the persona of Lizzy rather than Hannah) takes a dim view of the morality practiced by Mrs. Cosgrove, who offers freedom to a “minion” of her husband and throws her out of Lindendale, instructing her not to stop until reaching Canada (advice consistent with the post-1850 dating of the manuscript of *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* suggested by Nickell). According to Crafts, this course of action on the part of Mrs. Cosgrove, compounded with her self-congratulatory attitude toward having freed a slave, demonstrates an “inconsistent ... human heart” (183) in that Mrs. Cosgrove neither knows nor cares what would happen to this woman. Brooks-De Vita argues that Crafts here intends to demonstrate that those who endorse the escape of individual slaves are still culpable as participants in the institution (3).

Crafts more explicitly condemns southern religion in a later chapter as Hannah, running from the Wheeler family, meets with two other fugitives. In this case, Crafts makes this condemnation through one of the fugitives, Jacob’s sister (another character without a name of her own). When Hannah asks her about prayer, she replies, “Ministers used to come
among us and pray, but I never minded them. They mostly prayed that we the slaves might be good and obedient, and feel grateful for all our blessings, which I know was fudge. It hardened my heart, I could not bear it.” Hannah laments this, pitying “the poor benighted soul to whom the sweetest influences of religion had become gall and wormwood” (220). However, while Crafts presents Jacob’s sister as tragically lost to saving grace, the recognition of white religious hypocrisy does not necessarily leave blacks with no recourse other than abandoning religion altogether. Instead, a different but equally viable theology was necessary (Wilmore 32-33).

Kelly Brown Douglas argues that differing conceptions of Christianity between slaves and slaveholders gave rise to the continuing theological conflict between what she describes as the Black Christ and the White Christ, as slaves attempted to reconcile Christianity with their struggle for freedom and slaveholders attempted to “participate in the business of slavery without denouncing their Christian faith” (10). The concept of the White Christ allowed its adherents to justify slavery even of fellow Christians of differing races, arguing that the conversion of African heathen and their descendants outweighed the cruelty of slavery (12). The theology of the White Christ, according to Douglas, is centered in the Incarnation: “What Jesus did on earth has little if anything to do with what it means for him to be Christ” (13). Meanwhile, the soteriology (doctrine of salvation) of the White Christ depends upon “knowledge of and belief in Jesus Christ as essential for human salvation” (16)—knowledge to which blacks gained access as a side effect of slavery, according to slaveholders. Christians are therefore “the passive recipients of God’s grace … salvation guaranteed through belief, White people could be slaveholders and Christian without guilt or
fear about the state of their soul ... Fear for their own salvation no longer regulated their behavior toward their slaves—if it did before” (13, 18-19; italics Douglas’). Slaveholding adherents to the White Christ justified the institution on the grounds that no specific biblical passage condemned slavery, while several passages operate within its contexts—despite the fact that Christ’s ministry was to “set the captives free” (15). The White Christ permitted “White enslavers to be Christians, and ... Black Christians to be slaves” (17). The Black Christ, on the other hand, “had more to do with what Jesus did in [slaves’] lives ... Jesus was a living being with whom the slaves had an intimate relationship” (21). The theology of the Black Christ emphasized “the centrality of Jesus’ ministry and relationship to the oppressed during his own time” along with the crucifixion and the solidarity between slaves’ suffering and that of Jesus on the cross (21-22). This solidarity extended to Jesus’ resurrection, which finds its analogy in freedom for the slave (24). While the White Christ was intended to placate slaves and make them more suitable for slavery, the Black Christ “radicalized them to fight for their freedom” (25). Meanwhile, the soteriology of the Black Christ challenges its adherents to “treat the oppressed the way Jesus treated them” (28). The Black Christ, therefore, resolves a crisis of faith for blacks who wish to follow Jesus:

The Black Christ who was born in slavery made it possible for Black people to be Christian without worshiping a Christ that ravaged Africa, fostered slavery, and accepted the rapes of Black women. Yet it did not address the color issue. The Blackness of the slaves’ Christ had to do with Christ’s actions, not Christ’s skin color. (30)

The criticism of Crafts and her black contemporaries and predecessors against professing Christians who participate in slavery, especially those who indulge in cruelty against slaves, is an indictment of the White Christ and the theology surrounding it. Her belief system
clearly rejects the White Christ in favor of the Black Christ, while demonstrating that the latter, to her view, represents a more biblical understanding of Christianity.

Occasionally, Crafts' narrator resorts to still more direct criticism of the White Christ and its adherents within southern religion, particularly as it is practiced by individuals with a surfeit of theological knowledge who still fail to take an ethical stand where morality is at its simplest. As Hannah arrives in North Carolina with the Wheelers, she describes the plantation huts and those living in them (before she is condemned to live with them herself) and asks rhetorically to those of her readers she imagines to be most educated in theology, “What do you think of it? Doctors of Divinity Isn’t (sic) it a strange state to be like them ... to hear such names as freedom, heaven, hope and happiness and not to have the least idea ... what the experience of these blessed names would be” (Crafts 201).

Yet another direct invective against pro-slavery religion occurs during the interlude in which Lizzy and the Cosgrove family take center stage. When Mrs. Cosgrove pushes her husband to sell away the women Crafts euphemistically describes as his “favorites” and their children (176), one of the women kills her baby, throws it at Cosgrove, and kills herself. Crafts turns the news of this woman’s death into a direct address of the political and religious leaders of the nation:

*Dead, your Excellency,* the President of this Republic. *Dead, grave senators* who grow eloquent over pensions and army wrongs. *Dead ministers of religion,* who prate because poor men without a moment’[s] leisure on other days presume to read the newspapers on Sunday, yet who wink at, or approve of laws that occasion such scenes as this. (178, italics mine)

Note here that Crafts places a comma after each “Dead” in the first two sentences, but not after the “Dead” in the third sentence. This creates an interesting double entendre (on which
more to follow shortly). Obviously, the first two sentences read as a vocative direct address on the part of Crafts toward the president and senators, respectively. Meanwhile, the third sentence can easily be read simply as a similar address toward the “ministers of religion” with a missed comma on Crafts’ part. However, it can also be read as a nominative description of the ministers to Crafts’ general readership, implying that the ministers themselves are dead, perhaps in a spiritual rather than a literal sense—or, possibly, that their religion is dead in the same sense.
Dickensian Influence on Crafts

Thanks to the largely unedited nature of the Crafts manuscript, the “Dead ministers” excerpt above provides a great deal of interesting material for study. In this instance, Gates’s decision to publish The Bondwoman’s Narrative as he initially found the unpublished holograph (Gates, Introduction to The Bondwoman’s Narrative lxxv) preserves an intriguing feature of the manuscript. Had Crafts had recourse to a copy editor while writing The Bondwoman’s Narrative, the editor would likely have noticed the flawed parallelism within this excerpt (i.e., the missing comma after “Dead” in the sentence regarding the ministers). Correcting this “error,” however, would have eliminated the double entendre, perhaps cheapening Crafts’ prose and weakening her argument here.

Admittedly, punctuation issues are not uncommon throughout The Bondwoman’s Narrative. Nickell, for example, notes that Crafts’ punctuation is “eccentric” and signals her difficulties in teaching herself to write (311). As a result, basing an interpretation of a passage on a missing comma may be a tricky proposition when examining Crafts’ work. However, the article “Blackening Bleak House” by Hollis Robbins provides critical material that can shed further light on the “Dead ministers” excerpt. In reading Crafts, Robbins and others have discovered striking literary similarities between some passages within The Bondwoman’s Narrative and passages within Charles Dickens’s Bleak House, suggesting that “[Dickens’] prose is unabashedly cribbed at several junctures” (Bay 30). Gates concludes that Crafts “closely revised—and sometimes lifted” passages from Bleak House (“Borrowing Privileges” 18). Indeed, a number of passages within Crafts resemble material from Dickens so closely that such critics as Thomas L. Jeffers (on whom more to follow) and
David Gates have accused Crafts of plagiarism in writing *The Bondwoman's Narrative*.\(^\text{16}\)

Perhaps the passage in Crafts that best displays this tendency, though it is only one of many noted by Robbins from which we could choose, is the following description of the squalor of the Wheeler plantation huts in North Carolina:

\[
\text{Is it a stretch of imagination to say that by night they contained a swarm of misery, that crowds of foul existence crawled in out of gaps in walls and boards, or coiled themselves to sleep on nauseous heaps of straw fetid with human perspiration and where the rain drips in, and the damp airs of midnight fetch [sic] and carry malignant fevers. (Crafts 199, italics mine)}
\]

Compare this passage with the following, from Chapter 16 of *Bleak House*:

\[
\text{Now, these tumbling tenements contain, by night, a swarm of misery. As, on the ruined human wretch, vermin parasites appear, so, these ruined shelters have bred a crowd of foul existence that crawls in and out of gaps in walls and boards; and coils itself to sleep, in maggot numbers, where the rain drips in; and comes and goes, fetching and carrying fever ... (qtd. in Robbins 81, italics mine)}
\]

In the two excerpts immediately above, I have italicized phrases in Crafts borrowed verbatim or nearly verbatim from Dickens (Crafts’ changes primarily involve verb tense and reflexive pronouns), along with the corresponding phrases within Dickens, to emphasize Crafts’ use of the *Bleak House* passage. Here, Crafts borrows so much and leaves her wording so nearly identical to Dickens that, when she asks, “Is it a stretch of imagination[?]” the cynical reader may be tempted to answer that, in any case, it appears not to be a great stretch of imagination on Crafts’ part in composing the text.

\(^{16}\) Robbins, however, argues that Crafts’ borrowing and reconstituting material from *Bleak House* and elsewhere does not constitute plagiarism. Instead, she counters that Crafts’ changes to this material enact what Gates calls a sort of “double-voiced discourse” involving “the Speakerly Text” (78). Central here is Gates’s idea of “a hybrid character, a character who is neither the novel’s protagonist nor the text’s disembodied narrator, but a blend of both, an emergent and merging moment of consciousness” (qtd. in Robbins 78). While the ambiguous connection between Crafts and the Hannah persona, and between Wilson and Frado, indicate that such double-voiced discourse is certainly at play in *The Bondwoman's Narrative* and *Our Nig*, it is less clear how this fact preempts the charge of plagiarism as it relates to Crafts’ borrowings as seen above.
In “Blackening Bleak House,” Robbins examines textual similarities between Crafts and Dickens and concludes that “Crafts borrows disparate elements (characters, texts, themes, tropes) from Bleak House and a variety of other widely recognized sources and combines them with her own voice such that they are irrevocably transformed” (74). In particular, Robbins notes a number of significant similarities between Hannah in The Bondwoman’s Narrative and the character of Esther Summerson in Bleak House (75). These similarities would further suggest that Crafts should not be completely identified with Hannah, a conclusion Robbins more directly endorses. Accordingly, Robbins argues, Crafts’ text presents a unique opportunity to reevaluate critical theory regarding subjectivity and the role of the author, as her narrator “complicates the idea of a speaking subject” (78). Leigh Gilmore, for example, theorizes that such inconsistency is a characteristic of “circular referentiality” in autobiography, particularly by women, and that “constitutive differences among and within a historical self, a fictional self, and the writing self in the process of constructing an autobiographical text disappear into the signature’s guarantee of anchoring textual concerns” (qtd. in Casmier-Paz 217, italics Gilmore’s).

Perhaps more to the point in examining the “Dead ministers” excerpt is Robbins’s study of the chapters of The Bondwoman’s Narrative involving Lizzy’s story and Mr. and Mrs. Cosgrove. According to Robbins, extensive material in these chapters is borrowed from Bleak House as an effort on Crafts’ part to emphasize to her readers the fictitious nature of the Cosgrove story (76). This includes an excerpt of Bleak House that, Robbins argues in an endnote, inspired the “Dead ministers” Crafts excerpt quoted above:
Dead, your Majesty. Dead, my lords and gentlemen. Dead, right reverends and wrong reverends of every order. Dead, men and women, born with heavenly compassion in your hearts. (qtd. in Robbins 84)

As we can see, Dickens in turn addresses the British monarch, the British aristocracy, the leaders of organized religion in Britain, and ordinary citizens. Crafts, presumably intending to write to an American audience, adapts the excerpt accordingly, in turn addressing the President, the members of the Senate, and ministers of organized religion in America. On the subject of Crafts' use of Dickensian material in *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, Robbins concludes, “The breadth and extent of such borrowings suggest that Crafts had the text of *Bleak House* (either in volume form or in back issues of *Frederick Douglass's [sic] Paper*) in front of her while she was writing her narrative” (77). Jeffers, as we will see, shares this assessment. Robbins notes that *Bleak House* was “extraordinarily popular in [America] after 1852 among both white and black readers” and that it was serialized in Douglass's *North Star* between April 1852 and December 1853 (73) and frequently alluded to in other abolitionist periodicals such as the *National Era* (74). Gates hypothesizes that *Bleak House* may have been in John Hill Wheeler's library after its 1853 publication (“A Note on Crafts’s Literary Influences” 331), while Parramore, refuting this possibility as potential evidence that Crafts knew Wheeler, adds that “many other libraries of the time, large and small” contain “nearly every title Hannah mentions in her account” (366). Whether or not Crafts directly copied from Dickens to her own manuscript, it would be difficult to dispute that Crafts was

17 Crafts does, in fact, occasionally spell words according to British usage, in addition to various other misspellings found in *The Bondwoman's Narrative*. However, this is perhaps to be expected if she learned to read and write at such an advanced level through studying literature, including a great deal of British fiction—including, presumably, *Bleak House*. Nickell also speculates that this may be the case, noting also the references to “English literary works” in her chapter epigraphs (304).
in any case intimately familiar with *Bleak House*. However, if (as seems likely) Robbins is correct that Crafts was reading from *Bleak House* as she wrote *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*, the missing comma in the “Dead ministers” excerpt becomes all the more noteworthy. In the Dickens passage that inspired it, each “Dead” is followed by a comma: Dickens clearly does not stray from direct address here. If Crafts’ failure to place a comma after “Dead” in her third sentence after placing one appropriately in the first two sentences is somewhat noteworthy, it seems even more remarkable that she would make such an error while virtually copying from a published author in whose work the commas were placed correctly. As a result, although it is possible that the missing comma was an oversight, and that the above interpretation of the “Dead ministers” passage thus argues more than Crafts intended, it seems more likely that this was a conscious authorial decision on Crafts’ part. Although Crafts does not adhere to the prescriptive rules of written English as uniformly as most published authors of her time, it is possible that, at least in the “Dead ministers” passage, she chose to commit a minor breach of punctuation rules to facilitate an interesting double entendre that reinforces her argument against pro-slavery organized religion.
A Stolen Slave?: Plagiarism and Authorial Property

The aforementioned issue of plagiarism, of course, is of great significance to the field of literary study. As such, crucial to the study of Crafts is the question of whether Crafts is guilty of plagiarism and, if so, what the significance of this in analyzing her work may be. An outspoken critic of Crafts on the subject of plagiarism, and of Gates in his handling of the allegations against Crafts of plagiarism, has been Thomas L. Jeffers. In “Plagiarism High and Low,” Jeffers examines Crafts alongside other notable recent instances of plagiarism such as those involving Stephen Ambrose and Doris Kearns Goodwin. Jeffers adds the understatement that Crafts’ case is in “a rather different category” than the cases of Goodwin and Ambrose, but argues that Crafts’ borrowings are still “[barely] defensible” (55). Gates’s explanation that Crafts’ literary appropriations represent a search for “a relation to a canonical tradition ... a language and rhetoric that she sometimes assimilated and sometimes simply appropriated” (qtd. in Jeffers 55) is unsatisfying to Jeffers. To some extent, this dissatisfaction is understandable. While Gates argues that Crafts has “emptied out a rhetorical template and filled it with particulars of her own” (qtd. in Jeffers 55), several of the corresponding passages in Bleak House and The Bondwoman’s Narrative as explicated in Robbins (the “swarm of misery” passages, for instance) appear to demonstrate rather that Crafts refilled the Dickensian rhetorical template mainly with Dickensian language. Jeffers’ distinction between the “accessibility of one literary tradition to another” (55) and the accessibility of one author’s words and phrasing to another is also reasonable enough: Gates’s use of W. E. B. Du Bois’s comments on the former to justify Crafts’ nearly verbatim use of Dickens’s fiction is somewhat troubling, though the Du Bois passage goes far to
explain Crafts' efforts at following the example of authors such as Dickens (as may have been Gates's intention). Jeffers, in fact, finds Gates's use of Du Bois in this manner more problematic than Crafts' alleged plagiarism itself, arguing that Gates, in writing critical material, has a responsibility to acknowledge his adaptation of another's words for his own purpose beyond that of Crafts, in writing fiction, as she similarly adapts Dickens.

Jeffers hits upon a major crux of the plagiarism issue when he invokes Dickens as a "stickler for copyright" who likely "would have looked on Crafts' transpositions as an occasion for, if not a lawsuit, then a writing lesson" (55). Working from an early 21st-century perspective on plagiarism, Jeffers makes a commonly accepted distinction between plagiarism for purposes of dishonesty and plagiarism as an issue of academic or intellectual competence. Writing about students, Nell Hertz offers this metaphor: "The student might be Alcibiades, but then again he might be Al Capone" (qtd. in Jeffers 59). Later on in his article, Jeffers further explicates this distinction, drawing on the teachings of several experts on the issue of plagiarism. Quoting R. M. Howard through Shelley Angelil-Carter, Jeffers notes that plagiarism can fall into one of three categories: "cheating (deliberate fraud), non-attribution (usually out of ignorance of the conventions for referencing), and patchwriting (the stitching-together of one's own words with a too-closely-paraphrased source, attributed or not)" (qtd. in Jeffers 58). How Crafts, as a would-be novelist of the 1850s, fits in to the concepts of plagiarism held in 21st-century academia is a more complicated issue. Robbins, as we have seen, argues that Crafts expects her readers to recognize the material taken from Dickens and interpret her borrowing of Dickensian text as a signal that fictitious material is

18 Alcibiades, as Jeffers explains, is "Socrates' frequent interlocutor in Plato's dialogues" (59).
to follow (Robbins 76). If Robbins is correct, then it follows that if Crafts has plagiarized, her plagiarism is not of the fraud variety, but instead reflects either her ignorance of how to credit Dickens properly or an assumption on her part that all who read her would recognize the Dickensian material when it appeared. Jeffers notes that Gates initially did not recognize Dickens within Crafts but that the allegedly plagiarized material was first discovered by Robbins and reported to the *New Yorker* (55; Soskis 38), but it does not necessarily follow that, had Crafts been published, her contemporary readers would have similarly failed to recognize Dickens. Gates relates that he failed to recognize Dickensian material because of his paradigm while examining *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, a paradigm Crafts' contemporary audience would not have shared: “I had been looking for echoes from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and from other slave narratives, but I wasn’t thinking about Charles Dickens … because none of the slave narratives had [ever] echoed or borrowed from Charles Dickens. Dickens just was not a source” (Interview with Gross). Given the popularity of *Bleak House* in America as noted by Robbins, particularly among abolitionists, Crafts' assumption that her readers would recognize the Dickensian material she has borrowed may be reasonable. In fact, her borrowings could even be interpreted as an appeal, flawed as Jeffers might consider it, to the ethos of Dickens, whom Douglass hailed as “the faithful friend of the poor” (qtd. in Robbins 73) and whose *Bleak House* Douglass encouraged all to read. Meanwhile, Crafts’ supposed desire for her Dickensian material to be recognized as such does not necessarily absolve her of plagiarism. Jeffers relates the theory of Thomas Mallon and the late Peter Shaw that “plagiarists are mentally disordered the way kleptomaniacs are. They steal …
because, guiltily, they at bottom wish to be found out” (58), speculating that Mallon and Shaw might not be as tolerant of Crafts’ use of Dickens as others might.

Jeffers, however, does not argue that Crafts represents an example of this disorder. Instead, he concludes that the plagiarism found in Crafts falls into the “patchwriting” category, resulting from her failed attempts to arrive at originality through imitation:

Hannah Crafts, as a nascent novelist, with Dickens, Stowe, Charlotte Brontë, and other sources open beside her, was having a problem with the patchwriting variety of plagiarism, and was clueless about how to acknowledge what she owed to those other texts ... That is where a mentor might have intervened. (58-59)

Here again, the issues of Crafts’ race and level of education (and, of course, the means by which she had been educated) become critical to the examination of Crafts and her work. If, as Bloom suggests, Crafts was a white woman who had ample opportunity for traditional academic education, one would expect that she should have been taught the concepts of intellectual property and plagiarism, and she would have to bear full culpability for plagiarizing Dickens. On the other hand, if Crafts had to teach herself, with considerable difficulty, how to write, using the examples of whatever literature she had at hand, then her presumed ignorance of the conventions of attributing quotes and respecting the originality of others may mitigate her use of Dickens and other authors. The intervention of a mentor may indeed have benefitted Crafts’ writing with respect to the plagiarism issue, as Jeffers claims—just as it may have resulted in better spelling and punctuation, more multidimensional characters, a deeper plot, and anything else with which a reader of The Bondwoman’s Narrative could potentially be dissatisfied. However, if Crafts was indeed who and what she claims in her narrative to be, she would have had little or no recourse to such a mentor before arriving at freedom: as kindly as she portrays Aunt Hetty to be, the saintly old white woman
is clearly no publisher or copy editor. If Crafts had been able to work on her literary endeavor with the aid of a more educated individual who could have helped her sort out these issues, perhaps the literary borrowings in *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* might have been handled more in keeping with traditional standards. It seems unlikely, though, that Crafts would have neglected to avail herself of such assistance had she had access to it. Accordingly, as Jeffers puts it, “what Crafts was producing was obviously a draft, and she an utter novice” (58). Therefore, her alleged plagiarism is “understandable ... [and] also, in this case, forgivable” (58).

At this point it also bears reiterating that much of the interest generated by *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* among literary scholars is due to its nature as a draft. Had Crafts had a mentor offering the assistance in composition to which Jeffers refers hypothetically, it probably would have come through the aid of abolitionists who would have wished to publish *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* as anti-slavery propaganda, editing it to make it more suitable for their own purposes. As I have indicated, a number of facets of the text might have been problematic for such Northern abolitionists had the text been made available to them. Still, for purposes of modern study, many of the most intriguing aspects of Crafts’ text are those preserved in the unedited manuscript that may well have been eliminated through the editing process had the text been cleaned for publication in its own time (as Mantel’s comments above also indicate). In introducing *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* to the community of literary criticism, Gates argues for the importance of the manuscript and other material like it: “These documents are history-in-waiting, history in suspended animation”
(ix). The Crafts manuscript, in particular, presents a fascinating opportunity for study as an unpublished draft, as Gates mentions in introducing the text:

[B]ecause most of the slave narratives and works of fiction published before the end of the Civil War were edited, published, and distributed by members of the abolitionist movement, scholars have long debated the extent of authorship and degree of originality of many of these works. To find an unedited manuscript, written in an ex-slave’s own hand, would give scholars an unprecedented opportunity to analyze the degree of literacy that at least one slave possessed before the sophisticated editorial hand of a printer or an abolitionist amanuensis performed the midwifery of copyediting. No, here we could encounter the unadulterated “voice” of the fugitive slave herself, exactly as she wrote and edited it. (Gates, Introduction to The Bondwoman’s Narrative xiii)

In reading The Bondwoman’s Narrative, therefore, it is important to remember that the text does not represent a final draft presented through publication for the author’s advancement and profit, as is the case with the other authors Jeffers mentions such as Ambrose and Goodwin (though their respective cases are beyond the scope of my concerns here).

Accordingly, the typical remedies to plagiarism discovered in modern published work that Jeffers notes and to which he would subject Crafts or Gates—“explain, apologize, withdraw current printings, provide attributions or acknowledgments in future ones, and ... perhaps pay monetarily for the stolen intellectual property” (59-60)—may not be appropriate here, though if The Bondwoman’s Narrative had been published in Crafts’ own time with plagiarized material included, such remedies may have been entirely appropriate. On the other hand, further examination and study of Crafts’ text and its literary influences, whether we categorize her borrowings as plagiarism or not, will have the added effect of ensuring that the authors Crafts borrowed from or plagiarized receive full credit for the influence of their literary work on The Bondwoman’s Narrative—and, of course, the objective of ensuring that
authors receive proper credit for their intellectual production and accomplishments is at the very heart of our conventions regarding plagiarism.

An intriguing element in "Plagiarism High and Low" is the synopsis Jeffers provides of the tradition of imitation within literature as contrasted with emergent concepts of intellectual property of recent centuries. Jeffers begins with Homer, presupposing that the Greek poet built on the intellectual work of his predecessors, and invokes the philosophy of Aristotle and the poetic theory of Horace, Dante, and Milton (55). Jeffers also recounts the autobiography of Benjamin Franklin, in which Franklin describes his study of his literary progenitors to learn the art of writing: this process included breaking apart and reconstituting paragraphs, along with using the paragraphs' structure as a template for his own writing (Jeffers 56). Of course, this exercise appears to have been a good deal more complicated than Crafts' use of Dickensian paragraphs, as can be seen in the examples above and in Robbins's work. Jeffers summarizes Crafts' intent and execution:

Wanting to tell her story in the form of a novel, Crafts not surprisingly looked to masters like Dickens to see how to do it. She started by imitating him, just as (though she almost certainly had no way of knowing this) authorities from Horace to Johnson might have urged her to do. Only, instead of pursuing a parallel path, she stepped directly into [Dickens's] footprints. Instead of strongly appropriating and transforming Dickensian elements into something palpably her own, she weakly and naively fudged. What might have been an imitation suitable for an autodidact—remember Franklin's method of learning to write—collapses, understandably at this point, into plagiarism. (Jeffers 58)

Jeffers argues that Crafts is "not even close to producing literature" through her borrowings (59). Other critics, however, offer a more positive reception to what Crafts has produced in *The Bondwoman's Narrative*. Consider, for example, the analysis Williams provides of Crafts' use of the material available to her:
Cannibalizing everything in its wake, from Dickens to Gothic writers; from romance to the sentimental novel; from the scriptural to the sepulchral; from Scientific American to bruising, Alexis de Tocqueville-like critique of American democracy and its seamy shenanigans, Hannah Crafts has produced a work of stunning originality, a generic monstrosity and literary orphan all rolled into one. Rather than being a vehicle for a monolithic consciousness, the slave narrative is itself brimful of hybridity and the intraracially conflicted, a site of intense literary miscegenation and generic disorder…. (139)

Williams concludes that “whatever tropes and linguistic resources she borrowed from Dickens, Hannah Crafts domesticates to fit the canvas of her novel” (148).
Intellectual and Authorial Property and its Relevance to Crafts

The issues of intellectual property and the relationship between author and text have dimensions relevant to Crafts beyond those Jeffers considers, such as the question of what can properly be considered individual property and the relation of an author to his or her work. In particular, the relationship between intellectual property and the notion of human property as inherent within slavery are crucial here. To be sure, the very concept of plagiarism is dependent upon the idea that an author’s words at least, if not his or her thoughts, are his or her property. Indeed, as Jeffers recognizes, the very word plagiarism is derived from the Latin term plagiarius, defined as “manstealer or kidnapper”: therefore, as Jeffers states the conventional wisdom on the topic, “To steal another’s text is analogous to stealing his slave or, more tenderly, his child” (56). Jeffers’s articulation of the concept of plagiarism here appears to represent primarily an emotional appeal on behalf of the plagiarized author—an effective one at that, if the reader feels strongly about his or her own writings and the possibility of their being plagiarized by other writers. However, it bears noticing that each of the images Jeffers calls forth—a text as a slave performing the duties its master-author requires of it, or as a child with its own identity that can often act at variance with the wishes of the parent-author who has begotten it—belies a very different conception of the text in relation to its author. Various literary theorists have constructed theories on the relationship between author and text that can be seen as agreeing with one or the other of these images of a text’s function with respect to its author.
E. D. Hirsch, Jr., for example, argues for interpretation of a text based on the meaning provided for it by its author: “But the meaning of the text (its Sinn\textsuperscript{19}) does not change ... This permanent meaning is, and can be, nothing other than the author’s meaning” (Hirsch 1689-90). Hirsch suggests various tactics for determining the author’s meaning, one of the more relevant here being genre: “By classifying the text as belonging to a particular genre, the interpreter automatically posits a general horizon for its meaning. The genre provides a sense of the whole, a notion of typical meaning components” (1694). Of course, employing this hermeneutic can be difficult when, as in Crafts’ case, it is not immediately clear to which genre a text belongs, if indeed it can be categorized within one genre without doing grave injustice to its complexity and unique nature. Hirsch also concedes that authorial incompetence can lead to a text conveying a meaning other than was the author’s intention. However, Hirsch maintains that determining the meaning of a text is exclusively the prerogative of its author, not of the speech community receiving it (1701-02). While Hirsch’s arguments regarding the place of a text within Saussure’s distinction between langue and parole\textsuperscript{20} (i.e., that a text represents an act of parole and that a parole act can be produced only by an individual speaker rather than a speech community at large) are strictly true, the fact remains that the parole must be interpreted by the speech community using langue. As Terry Eagleton puts it in his response to Hirsch, “I cannot just choose to make my words mean anything at all ... The meaning of language is a social matter: there is a real

\textsuperscript{19}Hirsch uses the German terms Sinn and Bedeutung, borrowed from Gottlob Frege, to distinguish between meaning and significance, respectively (1686). Hirsch argues that while significance can change due to factors outside the author and text, meaning is immutably fixed by the author.

\textsuperscript{20}In Saussure, langue refers to language itself, a “theoretical object abstracted from the structures of specific languages,” while parole refers to “the concrete utterances that constitute all acts of language” (Leitch 958).
sense in which language belongs to my society before it belongs to me” (61). It follows, therefore, that as formalist critics William K. Wimsatt, Jr., and Monroe C. Beardsley argue, works written in public language are similarly public:

The poem is ... not the author’s (it is detached from the author at birth and goes about the world beyond his power to intend about it or control it). The poem belongs to the public. It is embodied in language, the peculiar possession of the public, and it is about the human being, an object of public knowledge. (1376)

Wimsatt and Beardsley’s description of a text as “detached from the author at birth,” of course, lends itself to Jeffers’s description of a text as an author’s child, adding also the concept of independence Jeffers does not mention. Meanwhile, Eagleton also points out that Hirsch’s concept of meaning depends on a “pre-linguistic” conception of an author’s will, as opposed to more modern conceptions that recognize that consciousness is not independent of words and that thought itself is implicated within language (Eagleton 58-59).

Other modern critics, such as the poststructuralist critic Roland Barthes, also tend to see the text as having some measure of independence from its author, as he indicates in titling his article “The Death of the Author.” According to Barthes, “it is language which speaks, not the author; to write is, through a prerequisite impersonality ... to reach that point where only language acts, ‘performs’, and not ‘me’” (1467). Barthes also defends his position using linguistic theory: “language knows a ‘subject’, not a ‘person’, and this subject, empty outside of the very enunciation which defines it, suffices to make language ‘hold together’” (1467). In contrast to Hirsch’s theory, Barthes argues, “We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning (the ‘message’ of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash” (1468). That a text represents a combination of writings and that none of
these writings are entirely original represents a profound divergence from the assumptions underlying our notions of intellectual property, a divergence upon which Barthes goes on to elaborate:

The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture ... the writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. His only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others, in such a way as never to rest on any one of them. Did he wish to express himself, he ought at least to know that the inner ‘thing’ he thinks to ‘translate’ is itself only a ready-formed dictionary, its words only explainable through other words, and so on indefinitely.... (1468, italics Barthes’s)

While one can easily infer from Barthes that “there is no such thing as originality ... there is no such thing as an author” (Jeffers 58), we are still left with the premise that a writer should not “rest on any one” writing in constructing his or her text. This premise is one that, it can be argued, Crafts has violated in drawing so heavily from Dickens nearly verbatim.

However, given Barthes’s beliefs on originality, the premise becomes primarily an artistic rather than an ethical consideration. Jeffers is somewhat dismissive toward the theories of Barthes and other theorists such as Foucault and Derrida: “one can briefly reply: don’t go there. Authors may be nowhere without language, but language is nowhere without authors, each truly superior on endeavoring to find a voice of his [or her] own” (Jeffers 58).

A critical question here, though, is how Hirsch’s concept of authorial intent as the central concern of literary study, and the issue of intellectual property as defended by Jeffers, are dependent on the same ideal of capitalism in which the institution of slavery was entwined in Crafts’ day. As Barthes demonstrates, the concept of the author, like that of capitalism itself, is a relatively recent historical development:

...in ethnographic societies the responsibility for a narrative is never assumed by a person but by a mediator, shaman or relator whose ‘performance’—the mastery of the
narrative code—may be admired but never his 'genius.' The author is a modern figure, a product of our society ... It is thus logical that in literature it should be this positivism, the epitome and culmination of capitalist ideology, which has attached the greatest importance to the ‘person’ of the author. (1466)

Wimsatt and Beardsley agree, noting that “the intentional fallacy21 is a romantic one” (1377).

Eagleton, meanwhile, argues that the goal of Hirsch’s assertion of authorial aim over any possible significance of a text is “the protection of private property”:

For Hirsch an author’s meaning is his own, and should not be stolen or trespassed upon by the reader. The meaning of this text is not to be socialized, made the public property of its various readers; it belongs solely to the author, who should have the exclusive rights over its disposal long after he or is dead ... There is nothing in the nature of the text itself which constrains a reader to construe it in accordance with authorial meaning ... Like most authoritarian regimes, that is to say, Hirschian theory is quite unable rationally to justify its own ruling values ... Hirsch’s defence of authorial meaning resembles those defences of landed titles which begin by tracing their process of legal inheritance over the centuries, and end up by admitting that if you push the process back far enough the titles were gained by fighting someone else for them. (60)

In the context of The Bondwoman’s Narrative, a novel written to expose the injustices of slavery within a capitalist society, Eagleton’s argument takes on still more meaning. Just as the landed titles to which Eagleton refers are ultimately based on feudal battles, any concepts of slaves as human property defended by pro-slavery individuals were ultimately based on kidnappings on the coast of Africa. And, as we have seen, Eagleton, along with Wimsatt and Beardsley, notes also that language itself cannot be considered the private property of an individual writer.

The basic issue, then, is the question of what can be considered individual property: human beings, words, ideas. Robbins, for instance, argues, against charges of plagiarism

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21. The intentional fallacy, against which Wimsatt and Beardsley write in “The Intentional Fallacy,” depends upon “the design or intention of the author ... as a standard for judging” a text (1374-75).
against Crafts, that Crafts’ status as property in the eyes of antebellum American jurisprudence “complicates and perhaps mitigates her act of violating intellectual property rights” (78). Jeffers’s invocation of the etymology behind the word plagiarism brings up the same issues. As we have seen, Jeffers compares plagiarism to “stealing [a man’s] slave or, more tenderly, his child” (56), a comparison that raises intriguing questions apropos of antebellum African American literature and its critiques of slavery. The frame of reference of Jeffers’s analogy implies that stealing a slave is morally wrong, just as kidnapping a child would be wrong. Indeed, antebellum legislation penalized such theft severely, with those convicted of the crime facing anywhere from two years in prison to execution (Stampp 198). However, given the obvious injustices of the institution of slavery as depicted in Crafts, Wilson, Jacobs, Douglass, Stowe, and numerous others, the ethical issues surrounding theft of a slave are touchy at best. Douglass, indeed, describes slavery itself as the theft of a human being, arguing that those who participate in and profit from the system are “men-stealers” (Narrative 154). While Jeffers lumps slave-stealing and child kidnapping together in his analogy, slavery itself led to countless instances of such child-stealing, giving legal standing to “cradle-plunderers” (Narrative 154) who separated mother and child for financial gain, as occurs several times in Stowe, for instance.

Meanwhile, the charge of stealing slaves was often leveled against abolitionists who attempted to free slaves by those who claimed them as their property. One instance of this charge is central to Crafts. History best remembers John Hill Wheeler, the “Mr. Wheeler” of The Bondwoman’s Narrative (Gates, Introduction to The Bondwoman’s Narrative xliii), for his role in the Passmore Williamson case in 1855, involving an escaped slave of Wheeler
named Jane Johnson. Williamson helped Johnson to freedom while she was in Philadelphia with Wheeler and faced legal difficulties for his trouble, while Wheeler’s later diary entries indicate he was unable to “recover” Johnson and her sons (Gates xlix), referring to them as “my property which [Williamson] stole” (liii).

In The Bondwoman’s Narrative, Crafts writes herself into this tale, after a fashion, by alluding to an escaped slave of the Wheelers named Jane and to the circumstances of her escape as related by Mrs. Wheeler (149-152). To date, the potential connection between Crafts and Wheeler has been the subject of much of the critical effort at establishing the identity of the historical Hannah Crafts. Gates, for instance, studied Wheeler’s diary to corroborate the events of The Bondwoman’s Narrative, finding it possible but not certain that Crafts escaped the Wheelers in 1857 (iv-lvi). Gates concludes that “the portrait Crafts draws of Wheeler and the portrait that Wheeler unwittingly sketches of himself are remarkably similar ... there can be little doubt that the author of The Bondwoman’s Narrative, as Dr. Nickell argues in his authentication report, was intimately familiar with Mr. and Mrs. John Hill Wheeler” (lvi). On the other hand, this familiarity does not necessarily prove that Crafts was the Wheelers’ slave; difficulties with the timing of her supposed escape may indicate that Crafts could have been a free black woman like Wilson (Baym 320; Soskis 38) and that her familiarity with the Wheelers was a function of their fame due to the Passmore Williamson case (Baym 329; Parramore 366). That Wheeler made such a commotion over Jane Johnson’s escape but made no mention of Crafts’ is also intriguing to many critics (Baym 330; Bloom 436-37; Soskis 38). If Crafts’ version of her escape is accurate, Wheeler in this case had no fellow white against whom to take legal action as he did regarding
Johnson, but the lack even of any private diary record of Crafts’ escape would remain problematic (Field 28). Alternately, it has also been suggested that Crafts “might have been a free black woman who had examined Jane Johnson after her escape” (Soskis 38) and even that Crafts and Johnson may have actually been the same woman (Flynn 372ff). It could also be argued that Crafts included her knowledge of Wheeler, however she may have obtained it, was included as a nod to the genre of historical fiction (Baym 322, 329) and the aforementioned need for African American writing to “sound authentic” (Mantel 424). Still, the fact that the Wheelers’ name was at first written “Wh_____r” and subsequently filled in indicates that Crafts did indeed know the Wheelers, hiding their identity at first but verifying it later (Gates, Introduction to *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* xli-xlili), either to protect herself or perhaps to protect those still enslaved to the Wheelers should they have decided to “wreak vengeance for [their] loss on the innocent and helpless” (Crafts 147). The historical connection between the Wheeler family and the author of *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* is likely to remain controversial, as some critics doubt that Crafts knew Wheeler and his wife while others find it “all but certain” that she did (Segal 36).

Ultimately, though, if we follow the literary theories of Barthes, Wimsatt and Beardsley, and others, holding that authorial biography is less significant than the text itself, it may be a peripheral question whether the woman responsible for writing the manuscript that would become *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* was a historical acquaintance of Mr. and Mrs. John Hill Wheeler, or even what the race of this woman may have been, because the author is of significance only as revealed from within the text, rather than from any outside information available to us. Therefore, central to the study of *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*
would be such questions as what Crafts reveals of herself, her knowledge, her attitudes, and her aims within her text, how *The Bondwoman's Narrative* influences its readers' attitudes on slavery, and what the text indicates about its author's racial self-identification.
Conclusion

In Hannah Crafts' *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, Gates has discovered a fascinating manuscript text. While "authenticating" the text by attempting to discover the racialized identity of the woman who wrote this manuscript is significant, critics who overemphasize this endeavor risk falling into the same static perceptions of race as those exploited by one of Crafts' villains, Mr. Trappe. If, instead, we follow the literary theory of Barthes et al that the author as represented through the text is more significant than any biographical information we could find, it may be that Crafts' race is ultimately irrelevant. Meanwhile, if we follow Barthes in a different way by examining the text itself for clues as to Crafts' racialized identity rather than overemphasizing the historical author, we find a great deal to support the contention that Crafts was "black," although Crafts' portrayal of white racial anxieties raises the question of whether Crafts, through her heroine Hannah, may also identify with whiteness to some degree. However, a close examination of the text itself reveals that *The Bondwoman's Narrative* shares much common ground with other antebellum African American literature critiquing slavery such as Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig*, Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents*, and Frederick Douglass's *Narrative*. While pinning down the genre with which Crafts could be best identified is perhaps a difficult proposition (as we have seen, Wilson's genre is still disputed as well), elements of *The Bondwoman's Narrative* remain relevant for reexamining each of these works, just as they in turn provide a useful context for considering Crafts. At the same time, our access to an unedited manuscript provides intriguing insight into the thoughts, values, writing processes, and influences that shaped Crafts' writing as a previously unpublished example of the emergent African American literary tradition of her
time. Meanwhile, if critics such as Gates and Williams are correct, study of *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* may be only the beginning of examining that tradition. Gates speculates that “[d]ozens of potential Ph.D. theses in African American history are buried” in catalogues such as the one where he found Crafts’ manuscript. Williams, noting Gates’s discovery first of Wilson’s *Our Nig* and later of Crafts’ *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*, concurs that more texts within the tradition may yet exist:

> Yet there is nothing to suggest, given the logic of unfolding events, that many more ‘unpublishable’ manuscripts from black slaves and communities of former slaves are not lying out there waiting to be discovered by literary excavators of Gates’ guts and gusto. What we may be witnessing before our very eyes is the morphology of the black slave narrative and the transformation of African-American literature itself. This is why *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* is not just a literary landmark. It may well turn out a cultural monument as well. (141)

As scholars continue to search for other such manuscripts and to critically examine *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* and similar extant works further, we may learn a great deal about all of the aforementioned literary issues.
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