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## **Embodied Social Death: Speaking and Nonspeaking Corpses in Hannah Crafts's *The Bondwoman's Narrative* and Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave***

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I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Rachel Jane Dunsmore entitled "Embodied Social Death: Speaking and Nonspeaking Corpses in Hannah Crafts's *The Bondwoman's Narrative* and Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave*." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

Katy L. Chiles, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Mary E. Papke, Bill J. Hardwig

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Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

Embodied Social Death:  
Speaking and Nonspeaking Corpses in  
Hannah Crafts's *The Bondwoman's Narrative* and  
Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave*

A Thesis Presented for the  
Master of Arts  
Degree  
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Rachel Jane Dunsmore  
May 2016

I dedicate this thesis to W.B. and Elsie Shaw

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## Abstract

Hannah Crafts and Solomon Northup share remarkable similarities in their constructions of social death portrayed through characters' bodies in images that not only represent this social death but do so in ways that illuminate the forced inbetweenness of slave life in antebellum America. This study looks at how the authors represent social death with figures that I term "speaking corpses" and "nonspeaking corpses" and portray embodiments of a unique type of social nonexistence. In Crafts's *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, the author constructs these images of speaking corpses in characters that are trapped in states of liminality and an existence that forces them into physically deteriorating figures. However, these corpse-like characters continue to vocalize their trauma even as they approach actual death. Similarly, Northup's corpse-like depictions of chattel persons in *Twelve Years a Slave* portray the same type of social death and physical deterioration. In contrast to the characters in Crafts's fictionalized autobiography, the characters in Northup's slave narrative cannot or do not vocally articulate their trauma, even while their bodies represent the trauma of social death. Of additional interest is how Crafts and Northup infuse the fictionalized autobiography and slave narrative, respectively, with these decomposing figures and thus call back to and resemble the authors' initial portrayals of these tormented characters. Moreover, Crafts's and Northup's narrator and protagonist turn away from these figures at the end of the texts as they head towards the Northern states and freedom. Thus, the authors demonstrate how their protagonists must reject embodied social death while they progress towards freedom and away from slavery and chattel status.

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## Introduction: Social Death Embodied

The study of early and antebellum African American literature has been in large part defined by the recovery and republication of previously unknown works. Hannah Crafts's *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, by Hannah Crafts, a *Fugitive Slave Recently Escaped from North Carolina* and Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave. Narrative of Solomon Northup, a Citizen of New York, Kidnapped in Washington City in 1841, and Rescued in 1853, From a Cotton Plantation Near the Red River, in Louisiana* provide opportunities in which we can analyze not only the texts themselves but also our reactions to the recovery of one recently published work and our renewed interest in the other. Historical context tells us that the time period in which the authors wrote was clearly filled with multiple tensions as proslavery and antislavery discourse permeated the national atmosphere. In the midst of these tensions, African American authors entered the white public discourse and brought their own perspectives and personal experiences to the public arena through memoirs, fictionalized autobiographies, poetry, slave narratives, novels, and autobiographies. Moreover, these authors crafted rich works that adjusted contemporary literary trends and styles to represent the experience of slavery and created their own nuanced and multilayered styles of writing. Their literature was as varied as the individual experiences of each author. However, whether the authors were free, enslaved, fugitive, man, or woman, many of these antebellum black writers sought to represent slavery's effects and use the written word to depict slavery's realities. In this thesis, I turn to two authors, Hannah Crafts and Solomon Northup, to discuss how writers represented the peculiar institution and the multiple traumas inflicted on slaves through their portrayals of social death, physical, verbal, and mental abuse.



Hannah Crafts's previously unpublished work, likely composed between 1853 and 1861, did not reach the literary marketplace until 2002, as I discuss in detail in Chapter 1. Although it was an instant bestseller after its 1853 publication, Solomon's Northup's slave narrative received little contemporary attention until the release of Steve McQueen's 2013 film adaption. Both works provide abundant opportunities to study how two very different authors not only addressed the horrors of the peculiar institution but also crafted portrayals of these horrors in their writing. There are obvious differences between the two: Crafts's demographic background has not yet been unequivocally verified and her work is very likely a fictionalized autobiography, whereas Northup's identity has been verified and his slave narrative is generally considered historically and geographically accurate. Despite these differences in author and genre, their works share remarkable similarities in their depictions of social death and socially nonexistent chattel. Furthermore, each of these works portrays the end results of social death and physical, emotional, and psychological abuses, results which I argue can be read in the authors' images of speaking corpses and nonspeaking corpses. It is through this analytical lens, which I present as a theory of speaking and nonspeaking corpses, that we can see how minor and secondary characters' physical, liminal bodies represent an embodied social death.

I argue that this analytical lens of reading the speaking and nonspeaking corpses can offer a way in which we may further understand how these authors depicted the nearly incomprehensible realities of the chattel system. Furthermore, these speaking and nonspeaking corpses offer a means for the author and narrator to describe multiple traumas, such as the trauma of social death, numerous acts of abuse and torture, and liminality. Where words fail in representing fully slavery's realities, corpse-like figures speak of the peculiar institution through the authors' words, their liminal bodies, vocalized sufferings, and even their enforced silence. I

posit that readings of these figures may show us how we can better understand, through analyses of characters that show the realities of slavery, how these authors represented the nearly unrepresentable through the presentation and portrayals of mentally and physically decaying figures. In Chapter 1, I discuss how Crafts weaves these figures' stories throughout the fictionalized autobiography. Moreover, each speaking corpse figure echoes, or calls back to, images of these other figures that appear previously in the text. This repetition peaks in chapter eighteen, during a moment in the plot when the protagonist verges dangerously close to morphing into a speaking corpse herself yet turns away from a dead slave woman's body as she continues north towards freedom. In Chapter 2, I turn my attention to Northup's nonspeaking corpses, his concern with silence, and the lengthy, relentless scenes of torture wherein we can see how the author represented the trauma of social death. I also argue that of large importance during these scenes is Northup's production of metatextual moments that resemble the nature of slavery. In these analyses, I will propose that Northup crafts these metatextual moments when he calls attention to his own authorial voice, extends the descriptions of the tortures, and disrupts the text's narrative style. Both Crafts and Northup end their works with subtle mentions of how, just like slavery haunts the corpse-like figures in their texts, slavery further haunts the society that produced it. Just as importantly, both Crafts and Northup end their fictionalized autobiography and slave narrative, respectively, with nuanced references that draw attention to their protagonists' voices and the importance of being able to use these voices.

### **Defining Speaking Corpses and Nonspeaking Corpses**

Before continuing, it is necessary to define the two terms I use to analyze the characters in my chosen texts. For my analysis of *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, I turn my attention to the

presence and repetition of speaking corpses throughout the fictionalized autobiography. In my discussion of *Twelve Years a Slave*, I focus on nonspeaking corpses and their reappearances throughout the narrative. I define a speaking corpse as a character that exists in a stage wherein the person is caught between life and death and/or mental stability and insanity. In other words, this individual exists in a liminal area comprised of a state of inbetweenness. However, despite this state of existence between life and death, or mental stability and instability, the individual continues to vocalize the suffering as long as is physically possible. In my definition of the nonspeaking corpse, a figure I use as my framework in Chapter 2, I argue that the individual also suffers from entrapment in a state of inbetweenness. Like the speaking corpse, the character suffers from mental, physical, and emotional anguish. Unlike a speaking corpse, however, this individual does not vocalize distress, primarily because he or she has learned that expressions of sorrow lead to further trauma and abuse. In some instances, the character is physically unable to speak; their existence thus revolves around the silenced voice and the trauma that results from this absence. A select few characters that suffer as nonspeaking corpses are not only physically silenced but also silenced in the narrative. More specifically, the narrator ceases to include fully their stories as the character fades into the background. As I will argue, the majority of the characters I have chosen for analysis suffer from social death. This social death, combined with liminal existences in spaces of inbetweenness, transforms the individual into a person that then makes a hideous mutation into a speaking or nonspeaking corpse.

In my definition and interpretation of these figures, I take my cue from sociologist Orlando Patterson's study of social death, anthropologist Victor Turner's theory of liminality, and critical race theorist Kimberlè Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality. Patterson argues that slavery enforced a social death on the subject, or a condition in which the individual was neither

characterized as human nor regarded as a citizen in his or her society (38). Viewed as nothing more than chattel, the person was socially nonexistent and unrecognized by mainstream society as one of its own. Victor Turner's theory of liminality centers on an anthropological study of cultural rites of passage. This rite of passage, in which the citizen transforms into an individual with a higher social status, must include a stage in the liminal period, wherein the person then exists as a nonbeing (47). While the liminal period is necessary for the transformative process, continued existence in this stage is enormously detrimental to the individual. Because of the nature of the liminal period, in which the individual's essence revolves around a state of nonbeing, the individual cannot remain – in Turner's scenario – in this state of inbetweenness (49). In a select few analyses, I focus on characters that suffer from what Crenshaw terms intersectionality, a type of oppression in which individuals endure multiple burdens such as racism and sexism (139-40). I argue that an intersectional matrix of various types of oppression contributes to the individual's social death and existence as a speaking or nonspeaking corpse.

### ***The Bondwoman's Narrative: Speaking Corpses between Life and Death***

As I previously stated, I turn to *The Bondwoman's Narrative* for my analysis of the speaking corpse as I discuss the repetitions of this figure throughout the plot, with an attention to how each liminal figure echoes but deviates from the previous corpse-like characters. For my analysis of liminality, I turn to the story's minor characters as a framework in which to understand how social death and liminality produce speaking corpses. Moreover, these speaking corpses accompany Hannah, either through recalled stories or witnessed events, throughout the plot as she makes her way to various plantations, domestic habitats, the wilderness, and, finally, her successful escape to the Northern states. I end my discussion of speaking corpses with a

close reading of Hannah's reaction to a fellow fugitive woman that is not only a *speaking* corpse but also a character whose *physical* corpse haunts Hannah to the extent that she almost transitions into her own state of irreversible mental and physical decay.

I ground my approach to analyses of these characters by looking first at Rose's story and, then, how this story and figure recurs throughout the plot as various and seemingly unrelated characters appear. Rose is an introduction to the series of events and stories that, in turn, mirror her gibbeting, echo the scene's language, and then deviate from the original scene in each story's own unique way. While many of these characters have differences in race, class, and socioeconomic status, they all suffer as individuals trapped between life and death while they suffer as physically decaying bodies. I begin my analysis of the speaking corpse figure with a close reading of Rose's tortuous gibbeting and eventual death. In my reading of this scene, I analyze the author's language in her description of Rose's body, with particular attention to imagery of decomposition. Furthermore, I discuss how Rose's gibbeting resembles the deaths of Absalom and Jesus. The tropology in this scene, as I will discuss, deviates from the crucifixion story as the author morphs Rose into a speaking corpse. In my discussion of Hannah's mistress, the ill-fated tragic mulatta figure, I analyze her transformation from a white aristocratic woman to a decaying mixed race woman who suffers from severe mental and physical deterioration. Moreover, the mistress's intersectionality, or her multiply burdened existence, plays a role in this descent into mental and physical suffering. My discussion of Mrs. Wright, who she is and what she represents, centers on a different type of speaking corpse, one that seemingly occupies a state of mental and physical decay yet exercises reason under the cover of madness. Her story is unique because she was a free white woman forced into a social death through her imprisonment and isolation because of her abolitionist beliefs. As I will argue, Mrs. Wright exists in an unusual

state of opposites; she exercises reason even as she suffers from mental instability. I then turn to a select few characters during the embedded Cosgrove sequence, an inner narrative in the plot where a minor character relates the events that occurred at Lindendale after Hannah and her mistress fled. Three characters are mentioned in this section of my analysis: Mrs. Cosgrove, an elderly beggar woman, and an unnamed slave woman. All three of these characters have glaring differences in their social status but share similarities in liminal states of speaking corpses.

My last analysis of a speaking corpse figure centers on Jacob's sister, an unnamed fugitive slave Hannah meets during her successful escape to the North. As I will argue, this woman's story, particularly the role her speaking corpse plays in this sequence, is of significant importance not only because it calls back images of Rose's death but also because it is a pivotal moment in the plot in which Hannah nearly transforms into a corpse-like figure herself. During this sequence, Hannah experiences feelings strikingly similar to those of her mistress during her mental deterioration. Furthermore, in Hannah's mind, this woman's corpse comes to life and looms over her during a terrifying dream. At this point in the story, Hannah verges on passing into the Northern states but lingers over a precipice where she almost becomes a speaking corpse herself. Her geographical location, the western area of Virginia and several days south of the Mason-Dixon Line, places her in a location where she borders on reaching the Free states but experiences an event which places her perilously close to a transformation into a speaking corpse. However, our protagonist pulls herself away from this precipice and leaves behind the barely interred corpse as she turns north. Although this very act of turning away from Jacob's sister shows how Hannah must turn away from speaking corpses to reach freedom, the shallow grave still haunts the wild landscape and thus haunts the society in which it is buried. Even though Crafts's ending is seemingly simplistic, the overly domestic and sentimental ending does

not cover or overshadow the haunted corpse that remains in the wilderness. Even though, as I will argue, the story ends with Hannah living a life opposite to those of the previous speaking corpses, slavery still remains in the background.

### ***Twelve Years a Slave: Torturous Repetitions of Nonspeaking Corpses***

For my discussion of Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave*, I turn to readings of nonspeaking corpses and the scenes in which they are produced by white brutality against the slave body. Here I draw from and hope to extend Edward Cameron and Linda Belau's discussion of trauma representation in Northup's text. As Cameron and Belau argue, the trauma survivor attempts to represent traumatic experiences through language and the symbolic field only to find that language cannot adequately represent traumatic horrors (228). Cameron and Belau posit that in the process of attempting to represent trauma through symbolic language, the survivor performs "traumatic repetition," an act that involves an attempt to represent the experience through the written account (229). As Cameron and Belau state, Northup's narrative attempts the symbolic representation of trauma but inevitably fails at fully representing the traumatic experience (229). I argue, however, that Northup does represent this trauma through repetition, narrative technique, and representation of figures that I term nonspeaking corpses. Through the figure of the nonspeaking corpse and the silence that defines this figure, Northup represents – in multiple metatextual moments – how writing and language can represent the trauma of forced silence. For my analysis of these nonspeaking corpses, I turn to three scenes of torture and one sequence of a slave woman's experience: Solomon's first whipping in William's Slave Pen, his punishment at Tibbeats's hands, Patsey's whipping, and Eliza's story. Moreover, I approach these scenes as those that call back to or echo the narrative's first whipping scene, Solomon's torture at

Burch's hands in William's Slave Pen. As I will argue, each scene and sequence not only repeats language similar to that found in the first whipping scene but also shows how, through physical abuse, the chattel system relies on mental and emotional torture for social death and results in a nonexistence that is embodied in the figure of the nonspeaking corpse.

I begin with Solomon's first whipping in William's Slave Pen for two reasons. First, the scene emphasizes the brutality inflicted on those of African descent. I argue, then, that this first scene of physical abuse combines with verbal and psychological trauma to force Solomon's name and social identity apart from his body as he is brutally introduced into the chattel system as a socially dead nonbeing. In this passage, verbal battles exist side by side with physical torture as Burch and Solomon attempt to assert their power over the other with declarations of chattel status and freedom, respectively. Because Burch succeeds as the victor, Solomon loses his name and begins a descent towards becoming a socially dead nonspeaking corpse. Second, this scene begins a series of repetitions throughout the narrative, a repetition in which Northup disrupts the narrative voice as he recalls the ongoing effects this brutality has on his present-day, writing self. In doing so, Northup disorients the readers as he reminds them that the traumatic effects are continuous. Furthermore, Northup's narrative disruptions mimic the unpredictable brutality of the slave system, a device that I argue will reappear in ensuing scenes of grotesque abuse. I then turn my focus to Eliza, the sorrowful maternal figure who mentally and physically wastes away as the narrative progresses. Because her identity is tied so strongly to her maternal status, the severing of these bonds leads to a shattered identity from which she never recovers. I will argue that Eliza is a nonspeaking corpse because slave traders often silence her words during the sale of her children and consequently construct her new chattel identity, one that is defined by silence



and vocal absences. As her story continues, her voice recedes into the background while her body decomposes into a corpse-like object.

I pay close attention to a scene in which Solomon endures an excruciating punishment at the hands of Tibeats because this account so clearly illustrates the realities of how social death is enforced through physical abuse. I also argue here that the language and the narrative techniques in this scene echo back to those found in the first whipping scene in William's *Slave Pen*. As Solomon stands next to the tree that would have been the location of his death, Northup pays enormous attention to descriptions of his blistered, tormented, swollen flesh. In the midst of these descriptions, Northup inserts a social commentary that addresses Northern misconceptions of "contented" slaves in the Southern states. The scene, with its combination of the emphasis on Solomon's suffering body and its attention to his tormented thoughts, echoes and calls back to Northup's narrative techniques seen in William's *Slave Pen* and Eliza's story.

Last, I focus on Patsey in my final close reading of a woman trapped in a liminal existence. Drawing from Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality, I argue that Patsey's multiple burdens from slavery and sexual victimization combine to enforce an extreme amount of suffering not yet seen in the narrative. Although some scholarship addresses Solomon's trauma as a willing participant in Patsey's whipping, I focus on how her voice fades into the background as the whipping climaxes into her near death. Moreover, I interpret Northup's narrative technique, in which he once again calls his readers' attention to the present-day effects this brutality has had on him, as mirroring the narrative techniques of the prior scenes of physical and emotional degradation. As I will argue, in each of these scenes we can see how physical abuse combines with verbal battles to force the individual into a nonspeaking corpse state. The oppressors transform the slaves into an embodied social death and a state in which they cannot

talk about or openly express their reactions to this social nonexistence without severe consequences. Furthermore, Northup emphasizes how their enforced silence can only be reversed on the pages of his narrative and only after he is once again a free man. For instance, Solomon's turning away from the Epps plantation as he leaves to head north towards freedom begins to reverse his social death. Moreover, this reversal of his social death and his experience as a nonspeaking corpse manifests itself in the actual writing and representation of his twelve years in slavery. Writing and representing the trauma he experienced as a nonspeaking corpse becomes the means by which Northup works to reclaim his freedom and social status as he simultaneously forces his readers to endure, as much as possible, what he endured.

### **The Authors Turn Away**

As I asserted above, these two works have much to reveal about how authors portray social death through images of slaves' bodies. Despite their differences in authorship and genre, both Crafts and Northup not only foreground chattel slavery's effects but also do so in ways that illuminate the physical and mental traumas of social death. Even in light of their differences as male and female authors, both writers provide nuanced depictions of how the peculiar institution tormented slave women throughout antebellum society. Even though Northup's account of how social death torments slave men revolves mostly around its effects against a formerly free man, his portrayal of his own trauma offers an account of how chattel slavery used various kinds of torture to force slaves, especially women, into states of social nonexistence. The continuous reappearances of these physically decaying bodies then forces the reader to witness slavery's emotionally and physically unrelenting torments.

Indeed, these scenes form a narrative of their own, wherein each scene partially repeats the text's first image of abuse, echoes those prior to it, and escalates into a climactic scene that, in turn, mimics the very climax of the first torture scenes. Rose's torture and her last moments, where she passes from life to death, pervade every scene of speaking corpses until Hannah turns away from the last corpse and continues north towards freedom. Solomon's whipping climaxes towards the moment where he ceases to assert his name and social status; nearly twenty chapters later, Patsey's whipping scene climaxes at the moment when she goes silent and her voice recedes into the background. The accumulation of these torments, portrayed in the images of speaking corpses, provides striking pictures of what slave men and women saw every day. Despite the relentless scenes of torture and degradation seen with the speaking and nonspeaking corpses, both works end with their protagonists turning away from the peculiar institution. Hannah's successful escape relies largely on her turning away from Jacob's dead sister; Northup's turning away from the Epps plantation signals the moment in the plot when he will begin to reclaim his freedom and social status. Crafts ends her story with Hannah writing in her own home and Northup's narrative ends with Solomon's return to New York, where his story would then reach thousands of readers within the next year. This is not to say that they leave slavery behind them. Indeed, slavery will haunt the texts' protagonists and the authors even as they write their stories in the Northern states. However, it is in this very turning away from the corpse-like objects that Hannah and Solomon may begin to reverse their social deaths and escape from the corpse-like existences that slavery produced.

## Chapter 1

“Suspended between Heaven and Earth”:

Speaking Corpses in Hannah Crafts’s *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*

*The Bondwoman’s Narrative*, by Hannah Crafts, a Fugitive Slave Recently Escaped from North Carolina, likely composed between 1853 and 1861, did not reach the public audience until 2002. The holograph manuscript had been in librarian Dorothy Porter Wesley’s private collection for some time before Henry Louis Gates, Jr. purchased it at an auction in 2001. The fictionalized autobiography charts the story of the mulatta slave Hannah, beginning with her girlhood in Virginia and ending with her successful escape to the North. Before the manuscript was published, Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig* (1859) was considered the first novel written and published by an African American woman. Crafts’s work, then, significantly changed the landscape in the studies of early African American women’s literature, specifically because the author is unknown, the work cannot be catalogued into any one genre, and there is no current evidence that indicates that the author intended to publish the work and enter antebellum antislavery discourse. As such, an extensive amount of research addressing these questions – as well as research conducted on the manuscript’s literary merits – has appeared in the last decade. One area of textual analysis that has drawn comparatively less attention is the exploration of social death embodied through physical liminality in the forms of minor characters throughout the plot. My discussion of *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* revolves around a study of the fictionalized autobiography’s female characters and how they exist as what I call speaking corpses. I define the speaking corpse as a character that exists between life and death and experiences a state of the “in-between” during periods of mental, emotional, and physical

anguish. Coupled with the social death of the slave, the physical state of the speaking corpse becomes a system of twofold oppression: the character is not only socially dead and unrecognized as human but also trapped in physical, grotesque states between life and death. The character, or human body, becomes a testament to the slave's continued existence between life and death, often in a grotesque manner that involves bodily harm, physical deterioration, and literal existences between life and death. Moreover, each speaking corpse echoes or parallels the text's first speaking corpse, Rose, as her story resounds throughout the plot while the author introduces various minor characters and portrays them with language strikingly similar to the language used in describing Rose and her death.

A select few scholars note the presence of liminality in the author and in her protagonist. Rebecca Soares argues that Crafts occupies a "liminal position in print culture" and that her narrative falls into the liminal space between novel and periodical (8-9). Ted Bailey argues that the protagonist's refusal to pass when offered the chance at Mrs. Henry's plantation, named Forget-me-not, "defies white readers' expectations" and "reinforces in the reader's mind the idea of Hannah as a liminal character who is simultaneously walking in two worlds" (177). In a different reading of Hannah's life at this same plantation, Bryan Sinche claims that in Hannah's revelation of the true story behind the ghost of Forget-me-not, she "occupies a liminal space between slave and master – she validates the persistent belief among slaves that a spirit is haunting the plantation while still serving her mistress's needs. This space between the two plantation communities is where Hannah persistently imagines herself" (185). Turning their attention towards the author's concern with biracial identity, Gill Ballinger, Tim Lustig, and Dale Townshend contend that Crafts works against the invisibility of biracial subjectivity by concerning herself with the "hybridity of the mulatta, the almost whiteness of its heroine and the

mixed racial past of Mrs. Vincent, the liminal products of the sexual entered into between the white slave-owner and his slave-women” (220). While I agree with the arguments that the author and her protagonist occupy liminal positions, I propose that there is room for analyses that look at the minor characters’ liminal existences. I turn my focus towards these minor characters because although their appearances in the novel are fleeting, they share similarities in that they all exist as liminal speaking corpses and portray how the peculiar institution relies on social death to force women into spaces of nonexistence.

## Current Scholarship

There is serious critical disagreement about the authorship of *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*.<sup>1</sup> To date, possible names for the author include Hannah Crafts, Hannah Vincent, and Hannah Bond. In response to this extensive search for the author, scholars questioned the

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<sup>1</sup> Nina Baym makes the case that the author was most likely not an escaped slave but, rather, a free black woman and schoolteacher named Hannah Vincent who may have written the novel for her black students. See Baym, “The Case for Hannah Vincent,” *In Search of Hannah Crafts: Critical Essays on The Bondwoman’s Narrative*, eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Hollis Robbins (New York: Civitas, 2004), 30-42. Celeste-Marie Bernier and Judie Newman argue that Crafts may have been a European immigrant or white bondwoman concerned with American class injustices. See Bernier and Newman, “‘The Bondwoman’s Narrative’: Text, Paratext, Intertext, and Hypertext,” *Journal of American Studies* 39.2 (August 2005): 147-65. Drawing from Bernier and Newman’s close readings of the author’s social commentaries on class inequalities, R.J. Ellis posits that Crafts may have been a historical novelist following in the literary footsteps of Walter Scott’s *Rob Roy* and a “well-read and educated white female ... probably fallen on much harder times than those to which she was accustomed” (158). See Ellis, “‘so amiable and good’: Hannah Crafts’s *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* and its Lineages,” *Mississippi Quarterly* 62.1-2 (December 2009): 137-62. Rudolph Byrd, in turn, argues that the narrator occupies the position of what Patricia Hill Collins termed the “outsider within” and maintains that the multiple instances of Hannah’s “outsider within” status are proof enough that the novel was written by a black female slave. See Byrd, “The Outsider Within: The Acquisition and Application of Forms of Oppositional Knowledge in Hannah Crafts’s *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*,” *Search*, 332-53. Katherine Flynn contends that “Hannah Crafts” was likely a pseudonym and that the author may have been Jane Johnson, John Hill Wheeler’s escaped slave; furthermore, Flynn maintains that genealogical and historical research supports that Hannah Crafts (the novel’s character) and Jane Johnson are the same person. See Flynn, “Jane Johnson, Found! But Is She ‘Hannah Crafts’? The Search for the Author of *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*,” *Search*, 371-405. Thomas Parramore, however, argues that the author of *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* was not one of John Hill Wheeler’s slaves because there are too many fictitious events and historical and geographical inaccuracies relating to Wheeler; the text is therefore, he claims, generally considered a novel rather than a fictionalized autobiography. See Parramore, “The Bondwoman and the Bureaucrat,” *Search*, 354-70.

philosophy and implications behind the need to know the writer's identity, noting that we should keep in mind what our preoccupations with the "Author" can tell us about our methodologies.<sup>2</sup> Augusta Rohrbach, for instance, notes that "the discovery and publication of the manuscript reinscribed publication as the *sine qua non* of writing history. Bond, her text, and its publication history also reaffirm the importance of the embodied author, revealing how ... publication still relies on identity, despite literary scholarship's disavowal thereof" (67, italics in original). Other critics note the risks black authors took when they decided to publish their work in the nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> The elements of authorship and the writer's use of literature to assert her authority have additionally drawn attention from scholars.<sup>4</sup> In a reading that combines the search for the author's name with an analysis of the writer's authorship, Laurence Buell examines the parallels between the biblical Hagar and the "Hannah" of Crafts's novel and suggests that

the writer has chosen a pseudonym in order to make author/title into a declarative sentence that will both assert her pilgrimage from bondage to free authorial agent and

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<sup>2</sup> Shirley Samuels suggests that literary critics should strongly consider reading *The Bondwoman's Narrative* through the lens of archive theory. See Samuels, *Reading the American Novel, 1780-1865* (Chichester, UK: John Wiley and Sons, Ltd., 2012), 23-44. Rebecca Soares argues that scholars would be better served by not only analyzing Crafts as a reader of serialized print publication, rather than an antebellum writer, but also by analyzing the influences that reading periodical and serialized literature had on the unidentified author (1-2). See Soares, "Literary Graftings: Hannah Crafts's *The Bondwoman's Narrative* and the Nineteenth-Century Transatlantic Reader," *Victorian Periodicals Review* 44.1 (Spring 2011): 1-23.

<sup>3</sup> Rohrbach states that "[i]f the plot of the novel turns on its narrator's quest for freedom from slavery, its publication history tells the story of freedom from the literary marketplace" (55). See Rohrbach, "'A Silent Unobtrusive Way': Hannah Crafts and the Literary Marketplace," *Search*, 3-15. Rohrbach also contends that "the author was aware of the dangers of publicity, particularly for a fugitive slave" (13). See Rohrbach, *Thinking Outside the Book* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014), 49-68. Adebayo Williams argues that because Mr. Trappe was likely a fictional character, the author chose not to publish her novel because her literary authenticity and veracity would have come under scrutiny. See Williams, "Of Human Bondage and Literary Triumphs: Hannah Crafts and the Morphology of the Slave Narrative," *Research in African Literatures* 34.1 (Spring 2003): 137-50.

<sup>4</sup> For a comparative analysis of *The Bondwoman's Narrative* and Percival Everett's *Erasure* and how the authors "pass" through authorship that defies racial boundaries, see Sinead Moynihan, "Living Parchments, Human Documents: Racial Identity and Authorship in Percival Everett's *Erasure* and Hannah Crafts's *The Bondwoman's Narrative*," *Engaging Tradition, making it new: essays on teaching recent African American literature*. Eds. Stephanie Brown and Eva Tettenborn (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), 103-22.

deepen it by aligning herself, symbolically, not only with *the* “obvious” biblical H-figure for her particular type of case but with a double-helix constellation of H’s. (16, emphasis in original)

Rohrbach argues that Crafts blurs the racial boundaries of mid-nineteenth century literature precisely because she weaves in various conventions from multiple genres; her literary knowledge “authenticates” her literacy and authorship (10). Because the text draws so heavily from Charles Dickens’s *Bleak House*, further attention has been paid to the transatlantic relationship between the writing of *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* and London’s mid-nineteenth century print culture.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, scholars generally acknowledge that the text falls into a hybrid genre that combines elements of sentimental literature, slave passing literature, and the Gothic, and the field remains open for research in regards to the author’s use of conventions prominent in Southern fiction.<sup>6</sup> In his reading of the text’s ending, William Andrews argues that if we are to take the

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<sup>5</sup> Daniel Hack argues that the text is a means by which to analyze the “African Americanization” of *Bleak House*, in that the text may be read as a method in understanding how Crafts uses the themes of class injustices in *Bleak House* to direct her readers’ attention to the injustices of the American slave system (427). See Hack, “Close Reading at a Distance: *Bleak House*,” *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 42.3 (Fall 2009): 423-30. See also Rachel Teukolsky, “Pictures in Bleak Houses: Slavery and the Aesthetics of Transatlantic Reform,” *ELH* 76.2 (Summer 2009): 491-522; Hollis Robbins, “Blackening *Bleak House*: Hannah Crafts’s *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*,” *Search*, 54-71; Gill Ballinger, Tim Lustig, and Dale Townshend, “Missing Intertexts: Hannah Crafts’s ‘The Bondwoman’s Narrative’ and African American Literary History,” *Journal of American Studies* 39.2 (August 2005): 207-37; Bernier and Newman, “Text, Paratext,” 147-65; and Soares, “Literary Graftings,” 1-23. On similarities between Charlotte Brontë and *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*, see Katherine Keyser, “Jane Eyre, Bondwoman: Hannah Crafts’s Rethinking of Charlotte Brontë,” *Search*, 72-87.

<sup>6</sup> Dale Townshend points out that Crafts uses elements of the European Gothic, specifically that of the Radcliffian Gothic and Walpolean Gothic, to reappropriate the Gothic’s exploration of darkness. See Townshend, “Speaking of Darkness: Gothic and the History of the African American Slave-Woman in Hannah Crafts’s *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* (1855-1861),” *Victorian Gothic*. Eds. Karen Sayer and Rosemary Mitchell (Leeds, UK: Leeds Centre for Victorian Studies, 2003), 141-54. Bridgett Marshall writes, “Crafts employed Gothic conventions along with the tradition of the slave narrative to achieve ends of social justice more commonly associated with realistic fiction” (124). See Marshall, *The Transatlantic Gothic Novel and the Law, 1790-1860* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011), 123-49. Noting Crafts’s role as a “comparatively passive narrator” (55), John Stauffer argues that “[t]he tension between narrator as participant and observer stems from Crafts’s success at combining different literary modes: as rebels, slave narrators are active participants in the events they narrate. But narrators of Gothic



sentimental ending at face value, the novel can be read as an autobiography; however, if we are to assume the text ends on a fictional note, it can be read as “woman’s fiction” (31). Andrews concludes that the author’s ending plays on traditional woman’s fiction in which the conventional happy ending of domestic bliss often applied only to a white heroine extends to the black heroine (40). Adding to the complexities of the research on *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*, many other literary scholars have focused on where the text belongs in the African American canon. The text may be a slave narrative, slave novel, or fictionalized autobiography. As such, several scholars have analyzed the work in relation to well-known authors in the African American canon, such as Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, and Olaudah Equiano. Karen Sanchez-Eppler notes that Crafts deviates from and possibly critiques the slave narrative genre’s emphasis on literacy as a means of liberation and seems more concerned with “the *literary* as a mode and mark of liberation” (262, emphasis in original). Cherene Sherrard-Johnson argues that in contrast to other authors, such as Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, literacy is not key to self-realization; rather, the process of observation and the narrator’s “ability to discern and anticipate the actions of others is part and parcel of her survival arsenal” (211). A small number of scholars argue that *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* shares more similarities with Equiano’s 1789 autobiography, *The Interesting Narrative*, than with nineteenth century slave narratives.<sup>7</sup>

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and sentimental fiction are more comfortable in the posture of observer” (56). See Stauffer, “The Problem of Freedom in *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*,” *Search*, 53-70. Ballinger et al argue that Crafts revises the Gothic and transforms it into a genre that addresses blackness as a racial category. See “Missing Intertexts,” 207-37. Roselyn Jua posits Crafts’s work is a prototype of literature of the black feminist movement because of its theme of the black heroine’s freedom, via the archetypal hero journey (311), and “carves out areas of black female autonomy” (312) by bringing a voice to the silenced black woman. See Jua, “Circles of Freedom and Maturation in Hannah Crafts’ ‘The Bondwoman’s Narrative,’” *Journal of Black Studies* 40.2 (November 2009): 310-26.

<sup>7</sup> Stauffer writes, “[a]t times, she resigns herself to slavery and even blurs the distinctions between freedom and slavery” (“The Problem,” 55). Stauffer continues, “[l]ike Equiano, Crafts attacks slavery when it wrongs her but does not seem to mind it when its cruelties abate” (“The Problem,” 59). Adebayo Williams contends that both authors wrote a “generic fusion of different forms” and share similarities in their tendency to “inflate their own heroic status” (“Of Human Bondage,” 144).

Additionally, others have noted the text's similarities with works in early African American women's literature, as well as the author's questioning and/or embracing of nineteenth century ideologies of marriage and domesticity.<sup>8</sup>

Many literary scholars agree that the author's identity is vital in understanding which literary tradition to which the text belongs and that the author's true identity is also vital to our research of the novel if we are to study it for its deserved (or undeserved) spot in the African American canon. Eric Gardner warns against placing *The Bondwoman's Narrative* within the African American literary canon without first knowing the identity and biography of the author:

Placing a never-published manuscript within a framework of bound books and asserting that it changes the literary landscape – before talking in great depth about a much larger number of black stories in all sorts of other *published* forms (like those in periodicals) – seems premature. (175, emphasis in original)

While I agree with Gardner in that there is a large risk in concluding that the text belongs in the canon of early African American literature, I am convinced by prior research that the text is a fictionalized autobiography written by a fugitive slave woman who successfully escaped to the North, where she composed the text between 1853 and 1861. Although recent work strongly suggests that Hannah Crafts's real name was Hannah Bond, in this chapter I refer to the author as

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<sup>8</sup> In her discussion of the economic institution of slavery and how it informed black women's antebellum writing, Joyce Warren argues that Crafts's work is saturated with the theme of economics and that "economics provides the catalyst for all major events and the basis for almost every story within a story" (174). See Warren, *Women, Money and the Law: Nineteenth-Century Fiction, Gender, and the Courts* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2005), 154-85. Stephanie Li argues that the Cult of True Womanhood heavily influenced the author and that the narrator views the world with the "perspective of a middle-class white woman" (44). See Li, *Something Akin to Freedom: The Choice of Bondage in Narratives by African American Women* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), 41-64. For a discussion of how the author questions legal marriage in antebellum society, see Tess Chakkalakal, *Novel Bondage: Slavery, Marriage, and Freedom in Nineteenth-Century America* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 107-12. For a discussion of Hannah's eschewal of marriage, see Erin Smith, "'Not Because My Heart is Hard:' *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, the Gothic, and Companionate Marriage," *MP: An Online Feminist Journal* 2.6 (February 2010): 101-15.

Crafts and the narrator as Hannah. While little is known about the identity of the author, Joe Nickell's scientific research of the holograph manuscript heavily suggests that

*The Bondwoman's Narrative* is an authentic manuscript of circa 1853 – 1861 .... It was apparently written by a relatively young, African American woman who was deeply religious and had obvious literary skills, although eccentric punctuation and occasional misspellings suggest someone who struggled to become educated. Her handwriting is a serviceable rendering of period-style script known as modified round hand (the fashion of ca. 1840 – 1865). She wrote more for legibility than speed, and was right handed.

(Nickell 13-14, qtd. in introduction to *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, xlv)

Gregg Hecimovich has uncovered new information on the author's identity and her life before and after slavery, the details of which will be revealed in a book written for the public audience – already featured in The New York Times – about the possible true writer of this fascinating text. Given Hecimovich's work on the author's identity, many of the scholars whose essays appear in *In Search of Hannah Crafts: Critical Essays on the Bondwoman's Narrative* (2004) are in the process of publishing further research that addresses this recent discovery.

### **The Speaking Corpse as Embodied Social Death**

While there is an exhaustive amount of research surrounding the genre and author, there remains room for a discussion of the liminal physical bodies, particularly those of slave women and mixed race women that are found prominently throughout this fictionalized autobiography. In addition to the multiple scholarly analyses addressing the text, I approach this book as a means in which we may study the portrayals of these liminal, physical bodies, or speaking corpses, as they appear and reappear repeatedly throughout the plot. For my discussion and

analysis of liminal beings, I draw from anthropologist Victor Turner's concept of the liminal period in *rites de passage*. According to Turner, one enters a liminal space during a rite of passage: the individual embarks on or through a passage or journey in which they move into a liminal state of nonbeing and then emerges from the process a changed individual with a different status in their community (45-46). The liminal space is necessary for this transformation but detrimental to the individual if they remain in this space of nonbeing.<sup>9</sup> As I will discuss below, I examine the liminality of women characters by approaching their stories with an analytical lens that studies how these women descend into physical and mental states of decay. Furthermore, I read these liminal characters as women trapped in this state as a direct result of their social deaths. For my analysis of these liminal beings' social deaths, I draw from Orlando Patterson's study on slavery and social nonexistence. Their existence as humans denied by society, all slaves were caught in a state of non-recognition, or what Patterson terms a "social death" (38). Patterson defines social death as a condition in which the slave is considered nonhuman and not recognized by society as a human being. As such, the degradation of being defined and relegated to the status of chattel led to a lack of identity for the slave (5). Thus, my analysis of these characters centers on how liminality and social death combine to produce the speaking corpse.

The liminal female figures I discuss below, most of which are burdened with slavery and social death, exist not only in states of entrapment but also in states of physical, mental, and emotional liminal agony and thus endure a tormented existence. Rather than analyze the novel's protagonist, I turn my attention towards one secondary character – the mistress – and five minor

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<sup>9</sup> See Turner, "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage*," *The Forest of Symbols* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1967), 46-55.

characters: Rose, Mrs. Wright, Mrs. Cosgrove, a beggar woman, and Jacob's unnamed sister. Given the systemic rape of slave women in antebellum society, it is possible that any of these seemingly white minor characters may have had African heritage. Nonetheless, the author identifies only one of these aforementioned characters as a mixed race woman. Hannah's mistress has all of the qualities of the tragic mulatta figure, which M. Giulia Fabi describes as

[t]rapped in a racial limbo because she was neither black nor white, the stereotypical tragic mulatta suffered from a supposedly inherent and fatal condition of "in-betweenness" that inexorably led to her death, a tragic ending that ultimately reinforced the viability of the separation between blacks and whites that the mulatta's existence had temporarily called into question. (M. Giulia Fabi, introduction to *Clotel*, xii)

Moreover, the white patriarchy placed a particularly high value on mulattas because they viewed these women as sexualized, exotic objects. The tragic mulatta is, then, a "multiply burdened" individual because of her status as chattel and her oppressed status as a woman. Her multiply burdened existence is a direct result of the intersection of racism and sexism in nineteenth century America, or what can also be seen as a matrix of "intersectionality" in which society's racism and sexism combine to produce multiple forms of oppression.<sup>10</sup> While many scholars have written about the tragic mulatta figure as a common trope in antebellum literature, I put this concept in conversation with liminality and social death in order to open up a broader, more theoretical way to think about the inbetweenness of this figure, as will be seen in my analysis of Hannah's mistress and her descent into a speaking corpse state. The five minor characters are of

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<sup>10</sup> American professor of law Kimberlè Crenshaw would later term these multiple forms of subjection a type of "intersectionality" in which individuals, particularly black women, suffered from more than one type of oppression. See Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum*. Special issue, *Feminism in the Law: Theory, Practice, and Criticism* (1989): 139-67.

interest because although they share few similarities, each of them inhabits this speaking corpse state and Crafts describes them with language that calls back to the image of Rose's gibbeted body. While each character's story is gruesome enough on its own, when read as a repeating theme throughout the fictionalized autobiography, these narratives of decay saturate the text with multiple instances of physical liminal beings. The repetitions and reappearances of these speaking corpses then climax in chapter eighteen when Hannah comes face to face with a speaking corpse that strongly resembles Rose. At this moment, Hannah herself verges on a precipice in which she almost morphs into a speaking corpse. However, she turns away from Jacob's dead sister and continues her escape to the North; Crafts, then, illustrates how her protagonist could reach freedom only after she turns away and leaves behind the woman's corpse. At the same time, Crafts's fictionalized autobiography also shows how slavery still haunts the landscape, even as Hannah closes her story with a final declaration of "farewell" to her readers.

### **"Suspended Between Heaven and Earth"**

As I previously stated, Rose's gibbeting from the linden tree commences this series of speaking corpse appearances. Described as a tree "manured with human blood" (23), the linden is the site of multiple occurrences of slave torture.<sup>11</sup> The mistress's favorite slave and the woman who nursed her son when he was a child, Rose's "punishment" is so extreme that those who witness it and hear about it never forget the events. The narrator begins this story by explaining that Rose's dog incurred Sir Clifford's wrath, for reasons never revealed to the readers. Sir

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<sup>11</sup> R.J. Ellis notes the similarities between this hanging scene and a scene from Letter 9 in J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer*, in which a slave dies in a cage as Crevecoeur's narrator makes a subtle remark on slave labor and arable land. See Ellis, "so amiable," 153-54.

Clifford decides not only to kill Rose's dog but also to demand that Rose commit the deed. Because the dog belonged to her daughter and is now a surrogate granddaughter of her own, Rose refuses this demand and chooses Sir Clifford's punishment:

An iron hoop being fastened around the body of Rose she was drawn to the tree, and with great labor elevated and secured to one of the largest limbs. And then with a refinement of cruelty the innocent and helpless little animal, with a broad iron belt around its delicate body was suspended within her sight, but beyond her reach. (23)

The dog's torture is all the more cruel because he is her "treasure and sole possession" (22). Rose's existence is tied to the animal, a creature the narrator describes as "the only earthly thing that regarded her with fondness, or to whose comfort her existence was essential" (22). The dog's prolonged torture, then, in which "his delicate body [is] suspended within her sight, but beyond her reach" (23), can be read as metaphorical torture of Rose's very existence. As her sufferings increase, Rose's body and existence fade away as she approaches the speaking corpse state. Suspended from the linden and watching her "treasure" and "sole possession" (22) endure this torment, Rose begins a transition in which she becomes more dead than alive:

And thus suspended between heaven and earth in a posture the most unimaginably painful both hung through the long[,] long days and the longer nights. Not a particle of food, not a drop of water was allowed to either, but the master walking each morning would fix his cold cruel eyes with appalling indifference on her agonized countenance, and calmly inquire whether or not she was ready to be the minister of his vengeance on the dog. For three consecutive days she retained strength to answer that she was not. Then her rigid features assumed a collapsed and corpse-like hue and appearance, her eyes

seemed to be starting from their sockets, and her protruding tongue refused to articulate a sound. (23)

Crafts draws attention to the body's decaying elements, the "corpse-like" eyes and tongue, as the character's frame collapses into a creature that begins to resemble more of a carcass than a human, all while the woman struggles to speak and eventually cannot articulate her sufferings with language. It is not until after a storm occurs on the fifth night that Rose's dehydrated mouth can utter words. By this time, the slave woman's frame verges on death as the narrator describes the scene in language that emphasizes physical decomposition:

After they had hung in this manner five days, and till their sinews were shrunk, their nerves paralyzed, their vital energies wasted and decayed, and their senses gone, a dreadful storm arose at night. The rain poured down in torrents, the lightning flashed and the thunder rolled. And the concussion of the elements seemed partly to revive their exhausted natures. The water that moistened their lips and cooled their fevered brains restored their voices and renewed their strength. Through the din and uproar of the tempest could be heard all night the wail of a woman [and] the howling of the dog, and the creaking of the linden branches to which the woman hung. (24)

Rose's voice now resurfaces as a wail so terrible and haunting that the narrator describes its effect as causing sleep to "flee the household" and Sir Clifford's wife to "never smile afterward" (24). Rose's voice appears one more time after the wailing, but in the form of a curse against Sir Clifford and his family, issued from a woman that is "suspended between heaven and earth" and who resembles two figures from the Bible.

Like many early African American authors, Crafts employs the literary device of Christ-like tropology and draws similarities between tortured slaves and Jesus's crucifixion. Crafts's



use of stories from Christianity, particularly that of martyrdom and Jesus's crucifixion, serves as gothic twists on biblical lessons because Rose's death resembles the crucifixion while her curse deviates greatly from Jesus's forgiveness as he hangs from the cross. Rose is a type of martyr in her refusal to beg Sir Clifford for mercy and instead curse him and his household.<sup>12</sup> However, Crafts twists the biblical story of the crucifixion into one of horror and ill omens.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, I argue, Crafts's use of the Absalom story effects a deviation in the metaphor between the hanged slave and Jesus on the cross. Rather than have Rose accept the role of *forgiving* martyr, Crafts turns Rose into Absalom, a villain and rebel of an Old Testament story.<sup>14</sup> Crafts very importantly describes Rose as "suspended between heaven and earth," a phrase that appears in the biblical lesson of Absalom:

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<sup>12</sup> Maisha Wester argues that while both Sir Clifford de Vincent and Rose issue curses upon the de Vincent family, Rose's curse is ultimately more powerful and more haunting because it relates to the social injustice of the peculiar institution. See Wester, *African American Gothic: Screams from Shadowed Places* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 35-66.

<sup>13</sup> Some critics reads Rose's death scene and curse as references to West African spirituality. Alexis Brooks-De Vita reads Rose's hanging and tree symbolism as indicative of the text's Africanist influences; Rose is a "spiritual heroine" and "spiritual ancestress" often seen in African myths (10). See Brooks-De Vita, "The Tree of Terror: *The Bondswoman's Narrative* as Witness of the Struggle," *The Griot* 22.2 (Fall 2003): 1-13. See also Elizabeth West, *African Spirituality in Black Women's Fiction: Threaded Visions of Memory, Community, Nature, and Being* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011), 67-94. Priscilla Wald, in turn, argues that Crafts does not use Rose's story to initiate a curse throughout the novel but instead works against white readers' expectations of Gothic literature. See Wald, "Hannah crafts," *Search*, 213-30. Robert Levine reads this torture scene as "suggestive talk of black blood mixing into the family tree [which] points to the sexually violative nature of the entanglement between Clifford and Rose" (169). See Levine, *Dislocating Race and Nation: Episodes in Nineteenth-Century American Literary Nationalism* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2008), 119-78.

<sup>14</sup> According to the Biblical story, Absalom (David's third born son) ordered his servants to murder Amnon (David's firstborn son) as punishment for Amnon's rape of their sister, Tamar. Absalom later led a revolt against their father; the rebellion resulted in a retreat of Absalom's army at the battle of Ephraim Wood. While retreating, Absalom was caught in the boughs of an oak tree as he rode under it on a mule, was discovered by one of David's servants, shot in the chest with three darts, and later succumbed to his injuries. Christian discourse views Absalom's story as a warning lesson against rebellion against the father and against God. Because Absalom's father, David, is such a revered figure in the Old Testament and considered a patriarchal hero and devout servant of God, Christian discourse additionally uses the story of Absalom to reiterate the necessary punishments and repercussions of rebellion.

And Absalom rode upon a mule, and the mule went under the thick boughs of a great oak, and his head caught hold of the oak, and he was suspended between heaven and earth; and the mule that was under him went away. (2 Samuel 18.9)

Both Rose and Absalom literally hang “suspended between heaven and earth,” both remain suspended between life and the possibility of death, and both remain alive after their hangings. Rose’s speaking corpse takes form in this “suspension between heaven and earth” because she is literally trapped between heaven and earth while her socially dead body moves into a state in which it has qualities characteristic of both life and death.

Although Rose’s story closely resembles the crucifixion and the story of Absalom, it is important to take into account how Crafts deviates from each of these biblical lessons. Unlike Absalom, Rose is *not* hanged due to vanity, and Crafts never describes her as a vain being. Rather, Rose is a “poor old creature” (21), a “kind old nurse” (24) to Sir Clifford’s son, and a woman with “undying affection for the [dog]” (24). However, Rose does have a “martyr spirit burning in her eye” (22) and a determination to not be the “minister of [Sir Clifford’s] vengeance on the dog” (23). Very similarly to Absalom, however, Rose practices what can be seen as a revolt against her master in her refusal to kill the dog, as well as in their verbal battle that culminates in a slave woman damning a white aristocrat’s home and name. Rose’s actions, words, and behavior in the gibbet (metaphorically on the cross) also closely resemble those of Jesus during the crucifixion. Like Jesus, Rose continues to speak to the victim hanging next to her:

Yet even in this state she would faintly wave her hand towards the dog and seemed in commiseration of his sufferings to forget her own ... [,] entreated him to be patient, and to bear with fortitude whatever the wickedness of man imposed, and strove to solace him

with the certainty that *a few more hours would finish all their woes, and safely confide them to the place where the weary rest.* (24, emphasis mine)

Also like Jesus during Pilate's interrogations, Rose passes on several chances to be relieved from her suffering. Unlike Jesus, who chooses to be silent when repeatedly mocked by the centurions, Rose responds to Sir Clifford's interrogations when asked if she is willing to kill the dog. Rose's dying words, markedly different than Jesus's, are a curse upon Lindendale and the family. Some of Jesus's last words include his plea to God to "forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23.34). In contrast, Rose's last words curse the family and the home of Lindendale:

I will hang here till I die as a curse to this house, and I will come here after I am dead to prove its bane. In sunshine and shadow, by day and by night I will brood over this tree, and weigh down its branches, and when death, or sickness, or misfortunate is to befall the family ye may listen for ye will assuredly hear the creaking of its limbs. (25)

Crafts's use of "ye" gives Rose's curse a biblical quality that echoes scriptural language as she makes a promise of her presence after death that is grotesque, gothic, and an omen of suffering. Additionally, it is through her death that Rose takes on a superhuman quality. The servants, slaves, and family believe that it is Rose's ghost that haunts Lindendale. The speaking corpse that Rose morphs into, a decaying, wasted body that continues to voice its sufferings while it exists in a state of inbetweenness brought about by social death, echoes throughout the text as more female characters – black, white, and mixed race – appear as decaying bodies trapped in states of suspension.

## The Tragic Mulatta Turned Speaking Corpse

Rose's gibbeting happens immediately before the mistress's arrival and foreshadows the speaking corpse state that the mistress will inhabit. Although she is the wife of Mr. de Vincent and her legal name would be Mrs. de Vincent, Crafts never reveals her first name or refers to her as anything other but "mistress." The child of a slave, she is placed in her white mistress's arms when the white infant dies during birth; the enslaved mother of the child who becomes the "mistress" does this so that her daughter can grow up free rather than as chattel. Too exhausted to realize what has happened, the white woman never finds out that her child died and raises the black infant – fair skinned enough to pass as white – as her own. The mistress tells Hannah that her father "*introduced her into society*" as his white daughter (45, emphasis mine). Here we see a stark contrast between the childhood the black infant would have experienced and the childhood she actually experiences. Had she not been "introduced into society" as a free white girl, she would have certainly been introduced into society as an exotic mulatta – possibly on an auction block – after she reached puberty. It is not until years later that the mistress learns from Mr. Trappe, a family lawyer who has traced her bloodline and uncovered her secret, that she is the child of a slave and may, at any moment, be sold as one and ripped out of her master class society. Although described as the infant that was swapped so that the "dead may be exchanged for the living" (46), the mistress was never "alive" in the sense of social acceptance. The first act of the mistress's life is, then, another foreshadowing of the social death and speaking corpse state she will experience as a woman. As one with "African blood," she is automatically born into a society that does not and will not recognize her as a human. As such, her fate is immediately controlled by the value of her partially African body. Because she is of mixed race and highly

valued by the white patriarchy, the monetary value of her body increases with her age and physical maturation.

Emphasis on the mistress's physical traits appears quickly in the text when the narrator "breaks down" her physical qualities in the form of the blazon. Very interestingly, the first character to describe the mistress's body is not that of Mr. Trappe, a slave-trader, or Mr. de Vincent. Rather, the novel's first blazon appears in the form of Hannah's observations:

I had full leisure to *examine and inspect her appearance* .... I was studying her, and making out a mental *inventory* of her foibles, and weaknesses, and caprices, and whether or not she was likely to prove an *indulgent mistress*. I did not see, but I felt that there was mystery, something indefinable about her. She was a small brown woman, with a profusion of wavy hair, large bright eyes, and delicate features with the exception of her lips[,] which were too large, full, and red. (27, emphasis mine)

Although Hannah explains her curiosity and interest as traits that all slaves have, it is important to note that Crafts visually dissects the mistress's body as soon as the woman appears in the plot. Crafts draws the reader's attention towards the mistress's physical appearance and thus foreshadows the moment when Mr. Trappe begins to stress the importance of her "pecuniary benefits" (40).<sup>15</sup> Moreover, the language here makes the scene sound eerily similar to a slave sale, where traders and buyers examine the slaves' behaviors, mouths, limbs, joints, and amount

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<sup>15</sup> Ann Fabian posits that "[o]bservation, curiosity, and determination likely assured the survival of many a human caught in slavery. They are also the skills Hannah will depend on as a narrator. In a sense, she translates what she learned as a slave onto the pages of her book" (49). See Fabian, "Hannah Crafts, Novelist; or, How a Silent Observer Became a 'Dabster at Invention,'" *Search*, 43-52. Sherrard-Johnson contends that in Crafts's crafting of her protagonist as an astute observer, she takes the place of "observer/spectator that is usually occupied by male narrators; she seizes the gaze, using it to both contain her narrative and critique slavery's patriarchal tendencies" (210). See Sherrard-Johnson, "Delicate Boundaries: Passing and other 'Crossings' in Fictionalized Slave Narratives," *A Companion to American Fiction, 1780-1865*. Ed. Shirley Samuels (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 204-15.

of scarring on their backs as they try to ascertain how profitable their purchases will be. Through language and observation, then, Crafts indicates that the mistress is doomed from childbirth to be used as a physical tool to bring others comfort (the childless mother), marital convenience (Mr. de Vincent), and pecuniary benefits (Mr. Trappe). Her value lies not in her mental abilities – these do not last long in the story anyway – but in the ways her body may benefit others and, by extension, American society.

From her birth, then, the mistress is destined to become not only a socially dead person but also a speaking corpse. As mentioned before, her “African blood” dooms her to becoming the property of others. Her marriage is also likely to fail, as there is always the possibility that Mr. Trappe will reveal her secret or she may give birth to a child with a dark skin color.<sup>16</sup> As the plot progresses, Hannah learns that the mistress is in danger of having her mixed race status revealed and will become subject to Mr. Trappe’s plots. The speaking corpse that the mistress descends towards begins to develop when she first learns about her heritage from a portrait Mr. Trappe shows her, a story she relates to Hannah in chapter four:

He held a paper towards me old, and torn, and yellow with age. I took it and commenced reading. At first I could make nothing of it. I could not understand the horrible truth thus presented to me. I read and re-read but by degrees the mystery unfolded. I perceived the worst and what I was, and must ever be. Then I fell to the floor without sense or motion.

(48)

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<sup>16</sup> Katherine Bassard reads the novel’s bridal plot as indicative of Crafts’s subtle use of the Book of Esther, “which features a Jewish girl’s sudden social elevation to queen, predicated on her keeping silent about her racial identity” (72). Furthermore, “the genius of Crafts’s appropriation of Esther is that she perceives the story as fundamentally a passing narrative and adds the dimension of race to this feminist hermeneutic by specifically combining the passing and marriage plots” (73). See Bassard, *Transforming Scriptures: African American Women Writers and the Bible* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010), 67-77.

The starting point of the mistress's transformation into a speaking corpse commences when the mistress sees a portrait of her real mother, a socially dead woman who was robbed of her child, portrayed on a decayed medium. The slave mother's image of her social death appears on a rotting medium that will, in turn, start to drive her daughter mad and push her towards her own state of mental decay. The mistress recalls that her thoughts after that "were in Chaos. I was half mad, half-wild" (49). The mistress also recounts how, on the day this slave woman was sold, she became so hysterical that she had to be forcefully carried away while she "shrieked and screamed in the wildest manner" (48). Thus, the "half mad, half wild" mistress repeats her mother's behavior, beginning at the moment that she views an image of her socially dead mother. Her impending social death begins to affect her precisely at this moment and will accumulate throughout her life until she makes the final transformation into a speaking corpse before her death.

The mistress decides to bribe Mr. Trappe, hoping that her money will buy his silence. The bribe works for quite some time. After the mistress's money runs out, however, Mr. Trappe decides that he will now reveal her secret. He unveils his new plan after she has married and informs her of his intentions, using the power of threats to terrify the mistress and remind her that he controls her social status and can easily reverse her father's act of introducing her into society. During the meeting in which Mr. Trappe informs her that he intends to reveal her identity, the narrator describes her as moving towards and resembling death. When she begs Mr. Trappe to take her family's honor into consideration, he responds with "[p]ecuniary interests are too valuable to be set aside because somebody's honor may be compromised" (40). The mistress "spoke not, but sighed and rather gasped *like the gasp of death*" (40, emphasis mine). Here we see another foreshadowing of the mistress's fate: now confronted with the near certainty of Mr.

Trappe's intentions and the eventual purchase of her body, she adopts the physical appearance of death itself. The mistress takes on a "deathly pallor," and Crafts describes her whole frame as "writhing as if in mortal pain" (44). The next morning, the mistress has seemingly aged, and Hannah notes that "[a] night of utter irretrievable mystery had wrought the effects of years on her frame, and in her appearance. She was bent as if with age, *her eyes were sunken and heavy* with midnight watchings, and *the pallor of her countenance was like that of death*" (37, emphasis mine). Crafts's description of a woman with African blood deteriorating and decaying into a corpse-like figure has already appeared once before in the plot. The mistress's misfortunes, while not nearly as torturous as those that Rose experienced, have the same effects on her. Note the similarities between Crafts's description of Rose and the description of the mistress. Both Rose and the mistress have a deathly pallor and sunken eyes and both women exist between life and death. Martha Cutter argues that in her passing *over* whiteness rather than *through* whiteness (to use P. Gabrielle Foreman's phrase), the mistress cannot bring herself to acknowledge her racial status – or blackness – and thus enters into a "living death" (122, emphasis in original). While I agree with Cutter's argument that the mistress enters into a "living death," I posit that this living death is more a result of the mistress's realization that her social existence is in an extreme threat of being ruined and replaced with social death. Her identity, which has always been based on white superiority and marital value, is now threatened. It is here, when the elements that comprise her existence are about to be severed, that the mistress further devolves into a liminal state, one that will mutate her body and mental capacities into the speaking corpse she was doomed to become and force her into a liminal state that involves further physical and mental ruin.



Hannah convinces her mistress that she must leave the plantation as soon as possible, and the mistress agrees, deciding that a risky flight to the North would be preferable to Mr. Trappe's revelation of her African heritage to her husband. She convinces Hannah to accompany her and tells her that she "call [her] mistress no longer. Henceforth you shall be to me as a very dear sister" (49).<sup>17</sup> During this flight, the mistress's fear of capture and of Mr. Trappe causes her mental health to further descend into a state of extreme instability as she no longer recognizes Hannah as her friend and now sees her as an enemy and a threat (37).<sup>18</sup> Her temporary mental insanity then reaches its peak in the cabin as she imagines there are numerous threats around her and descends into an incoherent, animalistic creature.<sup>19</sup> Even though the surroundings drive the mistress to madness, the two women remain in the cabin because, despite the human remains, bloody hatchet, and harsh conditions, it is the most convenient place to hide and recover from their exhaustion. Crafts describes the bloody evidence in the cabin as follows:

There was a dark deep stain on the ground that I could not divest from the idea of blood, and when we removed the straw in the corner the spears were matted and felted together as if blood had been spilt over and then dried upon them. Removing the bundle of clothes we found a hatchet, with hair yet sticking to the heft, and while searching for berries

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<sup>17</sup> Karen Sanchez-Eppler notes that Crafts and her protagonist continue to refer to Mrs. de Vincent as "the mistress" even after she has commanded Hannah not to. Thus, "while the plot consigns her [Mrs. de Vincent] to slavery, the telling of it resurrects the differences of status between these two women" (268). See Sanchez-Eppler, "Gothic Liberties and Fugitive Novels: *The Bondwoman's Narrative* and the Fiction of Race," *Search*, 254-75.

<sup>18</sup> Sanchez-Eppler argues that this madness, which occurs as the mistress nears slave status, recreates the distance between them, as in her paranoia she takes on the oppressive demeanor of the mistress, querulous and complaining" ("Gothic Liberties," 268).

<sup>19</sup> William Gleason argues that Crafts employs the trope of "cottage desire [and] suggests that a true escape from slavery requires more than freedom from incarceration; it demands a habitation, a free home, or at least a safe one" (154). See Gleason, "'I Dwell Now in a Neat Little Cottage': Architecture, Race, and Desire in *The Bondwoman's Narrative*," *Search*, 145-75.

discovered the remains of a human skeleton that the dogs and vultures had disintombed.

(68)

The mistress is now caught in a disfigured domestic space that wreaks havoc on her already tormented mind but must remain there because it is currently the safest place for the fugitives. She is trapped in a space that is decorated with human remains as her mind decays into an extreme space of instability and is ensnared between being sane and mentally incapacitated. John Stauffer reads the mistress's mental and physical decay in the cabin as Crafts "suggest[ing] that the experience of freedom weakens one's constitution during times of trial and tribulation" (60). Stauffer continues, "[a]bsolute freedom, Crafts suggests, occurs only in the next life, not on earth" (60). Her mental insanity, however, can also be read as the end result of her social death negating her previous social status as an honorable, white, aristocratic wife.

Their flight from Lindendale and Mr. Trappe, poorly planned and hindered by the burdensome mistress, inevitably results in capture and the mistress then purchased by her enemy. By the time Mr. Trappe purchases the mistress, her body is completely "othered," now set aside by society as a physical being valued for its monetary value, sexual, feminine qualities, and reproductive abilities. Mr. Trappe makes it clear that there is a profitable business in tracking down "fair dames" with African blood. Thus, the author makes apparent to the reader that the mistress's misfortunes are quite common; her story parallels multiple other women of African descent, whose bodies have been classified as "othered" and not belonging in white American society. White society's need to distance white heritage and bloodlines from those of African descent produced Mr. Trappe's "line of business."<sup>20</sup> Without this socially constructed biological

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<sup>20</sup> The author's questioning of race as a biological construct is found consistently throughout the text. In their discussion of Crafts's concern with racial indeterminacy in antebellum America, Ballinger et al argue that Crafts attempts to "articulate racial indeterminacy, to explore the positions of women who, like Mrs. Vincent and

distancing between the two races, the division between white humans and supposedly black sub-humans might break down. Despite the ubiquitous mixture of white and black blood in America (mainly due to the systemic rape of slave women), society still takes measures to separate white and black “blood.” The mistress’s formerly white body, now racialized and legally designated as black, represents the white American struggle to distinguish between the races and uphold rigid racial dichotomies.

Her eventual death after her capture and arrival at Mr. Trappe’s house, abrupt and quite unusual, is the unavoidable result of confinement in a liminal state in which she is victim to the patriarchy’s subjection of women and slaves. In her final meeting with Mr. Trappe, the mistress has a “pale countenance” and a frame “trembling with excessive agitation” (100). Upon hearing Mr. Trappe remark that her attempted escape “hurried [her husband] to the grave, [and] hurries [her] to slavery” (100), the mistress can no longer stand on her own; Hannah must assist her to a couch where she collapses with a buried face. Mr. Trappe then vocalizes the realities that have followed her from her birth: “You have long known the condition of life to which your birth subjected you, and you ought by this time to have become reconciled to it” (100-101). He informs her that he originally never intended to reveal her mixed race status to her husband, but rather hoped to use the possibility of this threat to see her “humbled at [his] feet”: “I wished you feel yourself standing on the brink of a precipice, and know that my hand could thrust you down to certain destruction, or pluck you back to safety” (102). Mr. Trappe, without fully realizing it, has already forced the mistress to this “brink of a precipice” in which she hovers between life

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Hannah herself, exist between or beyond the racial binary” (“Missing Intertexts,” 219-20). In her analysis of the novel’s preface epigraph, Bassard argues that Crafts deflects the white gaze away from her body and onto America and shows how “the myth of a ‘white’ America is the ultimate passing narrative” (*Transforming Scriptures*, 71). In his discussion of Mr. Trappe, Robert Levine argues that the character is a “figure of terror” in that he “exposes the instability, fluidity, and uncertainty of a culture that bases itself on rigid racial dichotomies and binaries; and he who threatens to reveal to white culture that which it already knows about itself and strives to suppress” (*Dislocating Race*, 166).

and death as she adopts the appearance of a corpse – for some time now – and remains suspended between mental incapacitation and sanity. Unable to voice her horror, she expresses her response to his speech through her physical reactions:

Absorbed she listened to him, and now and then her lips moved as if in replying, but they emitted no voice. It was clear that she heard what he was saying [,] that she repeated his words in her mind, and understood what they meant of themselves, but it was not so evident that she attached meaning to them in any other connection, or felt their intimate relation to herself. (102-3)

Her death then stains Mr. Trappe's furniture: "the sofa pillows were tinged with blood that bubbled from her lips .... The blood gushed afresh, staining [Hannah's] hands and clothes" (103).<sup>21</sup> Her gushing blood silences her lips *and* her voice as she attempts to recite Numbers 6:24-26:

"The Lord bless you and sustain you," she articulated whispering with the greatest difficulty.

"Don't speak dearest, it will make you worse."

A gleam of satisfaction shone over her face. There was a gasp, a struggle, a slight shiver of the limbs and she was free. (103)

The mistress's voice fades away before she can finish the last two verses: "The Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace" (Numbers 6:25-26). When read as a hermeneutic technique, the break in the biblical prayer is a reference to white society's turning away, or hiding their faces, from the torture that

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<sup>21</sup> Wester contends that the bloody description of the mistress's death "marks the linguistic construction and marking of race, not the act of passing, as destructive" ("Haunted Lands," 60).

occurs in slavery. Moreover, the absence of the Lord's face turning towards the dying woman represents how antebellum society turned their faces away and refused to acknowledge slaves as humans. As Hannah instructs her mistress to stop speaking, the author silences her words completely as her physical suffering – blood gushing from her now silenced mouth – takes over her voice.<sup>22</sup> Rose's last actions before her death reappear here: Rose's life ended with one "deep prolonged wail [as] her spirit departed" (25); the mistress's life ends with "a gasp, a struggle, [and] a slight shiver of the limbs" (103). Her voice disappears as the author finalizes the transition from a decomposing, speaking corpse to a dead woman.

### **Social Death as Punishment**

Crafts does not limit herself to detailing the effects slavery has on black and mixed race women. In a tale that fuses in to that of the mistress's descent into a speaking corpse state, Crafts intertwines the story of Mrs. Wright, a white woman imprisoned in the same jail as Hannah and her mistress. Described as "a little old woman, withered and skin-dried and having altogether the most singular appearance" (82), Mrs. Wright embodies the consequences of white resistance against the peculiar institution and is a model of the ramifications for those who have sympathy for slaves. Her confinement has "impaired her intellect [and] [s]he [is] the victim of mental hallucination" (82). Her solitary existence in the dark cell has, in fact, driven her to believe that she is a hostess in a palace; she greets Hannah and the mistress with bows and curtsies, asking

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<sup>22</sup> In a discussion of language and Signification in the novel, Zoe Trodd reads the mistress's death scene as the most obvious example of "language as a slippery signifier of reality" (295). The novel employs what Trodd calls the "Trope of the Lying Book," an African American literary device in which the text sheds light on language's inability to represent the truth about black experience with white words, white requirements for expression, [and] white limits of comprehension (305). See Trodd, "'Don't Speak dearest, it will make you worse': *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, the Afro-American Literary Tradition, and the Trope of the Lying Book," *Search*, 295-314.

them who she “has the honor of addressing” (82). Devoid of mental stimulation and human company, her mind and body have seemingly deteriorated into madness and decay.

At first glance, she is the very embodiment of a speaking corpse, physically and mentally trapped in a state of nonexistence: “she ceased to be spoken of even by those who had experienced the most of her kindness” (86). Hidden away in a cell that is in plain sight of the townspeople, Mrs. Wright no longer exists as a member of her society. She states that she “had a friend once, ... had a lover once, ... had children once, had a husband once, but I have nothing now, neither friend, nor lover, nor child, nor husband, *all deserted me when I came here*” (83, emphasis mine). Crafts’s style of listing and emphasizing “had” pulls the reader’s attention to cause and effect and the consequences one faces when they regard slaves as fellow humans. Given the prominence of Orlando Patterson’s work on social death today, scholars may read this list of cause and effect as representative of what antebellum society did to those who did not agree with slavery. Stated another way, the peculiar institution forced any who sympathized with socially dead persons into their own kind of state of social death as a form of punishment.

Her imprisonment and social death are the results of her attempts to remove a slave girl’s body from the system of sexual abuse that awaited her. Ellen, a slave girl from the neighboring plantation, visited Mrs. Wright often during her childhood. As her body matures, a nearby slave-trader notices her beauty and the potential monetary profits he may extract from her:

She had attained her fifteenth year, and was really a beautiful girl, in complexion approaching the Spanish with dark sparkling eyes, and a profusion of hair, jet black, and curling around a neck and over shoulders of exquisite grace.

A slave-trader was around. He was selecting and purchasing beautiful girls for the New Orleans market. Ellen attracted his attention, and he determined to obtain her if

possible. Readily and willingly, for the consideration of a good sum in money, her master yielded to his wishes. He felt no compunction in dooming the beautiful girl to a life of misery ten times more horrible than a death of torture. He reckon[ed] not that she was a woman of delicate sensibilities and fine perfections – she was a slave, and that was all to him. (84-85)

Horried at Ellen's fate, Mrs. Wright disguises Ellen as a boy and attempts to take her North.<sup>23</sup> Hewing off her hair and concealing her sexualized body in men's clothing, Mrs. Wright makes an effort to stop the slave-trader's addition to the sexualized spectacle of female flesh that not only profits him but also continues the cycle of *partus sequitur ventrem* – “the child shall follow the condition of the mother.” Their efforts are in vain; the pair is quickly found, with Ellen then sold into the slave-market in New Orleans and Mrs. Wright convicted for kidnapping. Crafts enumerates, in quite an orderly list, the effects this punishment has had: “Thus the matron was torn from her home, the wife from her husband, the mother from her children” (85). Being “torn” from the people that comprise her identity as wife, mother, and housekeeper, Mrs. Wright inevitably becomes a woman without a social existence. Like the mistress's social standing, once the elements of her existence are severed, Mrs. Wright can no longer be the same person and thus morphs into a speaking corpse.

There are certainly “moral lessons” inserted into this tale. Underneath these lessons, I argue, there lies a story of a woman who strangely exists as a speaking corpse but exercises rationality and reason underneath her mental decay. In an analysis of how Crafts uses Gothic conventions of horror to expose slavery's effects on white domestic bliss, Jason Haslam argues

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<sup>23</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr. notes the similarities between this plot and that found in William and Ellen Crafts' *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*. See textual annotations, 265.

that “the novel shows that the history of slavery means that Gothic horror and corruption permeate Southern society, rotting it from the core” (34). In his reading of Mrs. Wright’s insanity, Haslam further argues that there is a “representation of the domestic ideal, but here it is explicitly shown as counterfeit, as a madness based on hallucination and an improper relationship to one’s own conscience” (35). Mrs. Wright’s insanity, while it does represent how slavery “rot[s] [society] to the core” (Haslam 34), also represents a metatextual moment in which the author reveals the stakes of telling the truth. In a reading of how the novel illuminates the tension between visual speculation – “outer sign and inner truth” – Chris Castiglia contends that Mrs. Wright’s insanity provides an example of the extreme dangers of imaginative freedom: “Mrs. Wright turns speculation into the most dangerous form of accommodation, the inverse of the white masters who would make it a tool of possession and control” (251).

Mrs. Wright does indeed represent the dangers of “imaginative freedom” and embodies madness (Castiglia 251). However, I read Mrs. Wright’s story as one in which madness and reason exist next to each other: Mrs. Wright’s madness, or mental decay, covers and hides her ability to reason and use logic. The narrator includes a not so subtle hint that Mrs. Wright is still somewhat coherent in her thinking; when asked why she has been imprisoned, Mrs. Wright “answer[s] *perfectly rational*” (83, emphasis mine). When asked later if she still believes slavery is a hideous system, rather than one her society tried to convince her was “beautiful” (86), Mrs. Wright responds with a “peculiar turn of the head and twist of the eye as much to indicate that she did not tell any longer all she ... knew she said” (86). Her voiced response is as follows: “I have learned what all who live in a land of slaver[y] must learn sooner or later; that is to profess approbation where you cannot feel it; to be hard when most inclined to melt; that is to say that all is right, and good; and true when you know that nothing could be more wrong and unjust” (86-



87). I read this response as indicative of Mrs. Wright's adaptation to her forced liminal state and social death. She has descended into a partial state of the speaking corpse – inhabiting a wasting body and believing that she lives in a palace – but retains her belief that slavery is a cruel and unjust system. Moreover, she understands, in a rational manner, that she must hide her antislavery sentiments under the cover of madness. As I asserted above, Mrs. Wright's concealment of her beliefs is a metatextual moment that demonstrates the consequences of telling the truth. She understands the stakes of full disclosure; much like the slaves' one of many survival techniques – when confronted by whites, conceal the truth and lie if necessary – Mrs. Wright has learned to be quiet and hide her beliefs. Her body may be mentally decayed, but her voice and mind still hold the beliefs she had before this physical transformation began. Nonetheless, she does believe wholeheartedly that she lives in a palace. There is an eerie combination of reason and psychosis. She exists, then, in a state in which she is delusional about her surroundings but aware enough to know that if she reasserts her antislavery sentiments she may be placed in a worse area, all while her body morphs into a corpse-like state. Mrs. Wright embodies a different type of speaking corpse state, one in which she lives in a state of tension – oddly insane in her perception of her surroundings yet exercising reason in her conviction that slavery is cruel and illogical.

### **The Speaking Corpses' Wildest Despair**

While in Washington, D.C., Hannah meets Lizzy – the slave who accompanied her mistress to Lindendale – who relates the events that occurred at the plantation after Hannah and the mistress's escape. Hannah learns that Lindendale came under the ownership of Mr. Cosgrove and his aristocratic British wife. Although Mrs. Cosgrove is a minor character in the novel,

Crafts's interweaving of her story provides yet another tale of the speaking female corpse, this time in the form of an upper class white woman. Lizzy explains that Mr. Cosgrove selected favorite slave mistresses while his aristocratic wife was still in England. The sexual relationships with the slave mistresses resulted in children, all of whom Mr. Cosgrove initially treated with kindness and affection. His wife's arrival from England, however, precipitates a series of events that lead to the dismissal of these enslaved "mistresses" and their children. Shocked that her husband would unashamedly have sexual "relations" with his slaves and accept their children as his own, Mrs. Cosgrove demands that her husband sell the women and children, only to be met with his resistance. She descends into a flurry of anger, claiming that her womanly and noble honor is insulted by the presence of these slave women, and she eventually succeeds in persuading her husband to sell the women and their children. The sale leads to a notable event that, despite its brief retelling in chapter fourteen, describes an instance of a female slave's speaking corpse. During the sale, the slave woman falls into a moment of both madness and maternal protection of her children:

At length one of the youngest and most beautiful, with an infant at her breast, hastily dried her tears. Her eyes had a *wild phrenzied [sic] look* .... She snatched a sharp knife which a servant had carelessly left after cutting butcher's meat, and stabbing the infant threw it with one toss into the arms of its father. Before he had time to recover from his astonishment she had run the knife into her own body, and fell at his feet *bathing them in her blood*. She lived only long enough to say that she prayed God to forgive her for an act dictated by the *wildest despair*. (182-83, emphasis mine)

Crafts's choice of language in this passage – "wild," "phrenzied," and "wildest despair" – resembles description of animalistic traits. Initially described as one of the "youngest and most

beautiful,” the slave woman rapidly devolves into an animal-like being immediately after she discovers she will no longer be allowed to occupy a relatively elevated position in her master’s house. Note also the similarities between the bathing in blood and the “roots manured in human blood” (21) described in chapter two. Like the slave blood that manures the linden tree and stains Lindendale and its white inhabitants’ property, the young and beautiful mistress’s blood stains Mr. Cosgrove’s body – the same male body that led to this slave woman’s sufferings. Furthermore, the slave woman’s blood echoes the scene in which Hannah’s mistress gushed blood from her lips. Once again, African women’s blood – the biological trait that doomed them to social death – stains the white patriarchal system that profited from their bodies.

Despite the forgiveness the woman grants Mr. Cosgrove during her dying moments, the blood still marks the sins of the white aristocratic family. The woman, bathed in blood and marking the perpetrator of the lustful sins committed against her body, now marks the slave institution with her blood. Like Rose and Hannah’s mistress, Mr. Cosgrove’s dying slave’s last words bring to the foreground a fading voice issued from a speaking corpse. Her voice fades into the background as Crafts replaces her vocalized sorrow with description of these injustices:

A slight spasm, a convulsive shudder and she was dead. 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. (183)<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Because this passage is lifted almost verbatim from chapter 47 of *Bleak House*, a number of scholars have focused on this scene in their readings of similarities between *Bleak House* and *The Bondswoman’s Narrative*. See Ballinger et al; Bernier and Newman; Hack; Robbins; Soares; and Teukolsky.

The “slight spasm” and “convulsive shudder” at the moment of death, mentioned already in similar language during Rose and the mistress’s death scenes, calls these women’s stories back into the foreground as the narrator begins a social commentary on the slave system directed at politicians. Death and “dead” (a word mentioned four times) saturate this passage as the narrator infuses an air of finality into the description. Crafts’s narrative voice then draws the reader towards the acknowledgment that there are many more “such scenes as this” (183). Like Mr. Trappe’s statement to Hannah’s mistress that she “is not the first fair dame whose decent I have traced back .... Many and many are the family secrets that I have unraveled” (101), Crafts calls attention to the ever-present torment slave women experience. There is nothing singular about this death; it is, in fact, recurring as the readers witness the scene while senators and ministers condone, even create, a legal system that shows no sympathy for women who descend into madness and stain the land with blood.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, Crafts’s critique of the antebellum legal system calls back Mr. Trappe and his reasoning that “[i]f a beautiful woman is to be sold it is rather the fault of the law that permits it than of me who proffers by it” (102). Mr. Trappe’s assertion that the mistress’s story is shared by many and is a result of society’s laws, coupled with Crafts’s attention to ongoing and multiple death scenes of slave women who kill themselves and their children rather than be sold, point towards the author’s concern with these ubiquitous occurrences in the peculiar institution.<sup>26</sup>

The story of grotesque and hideously disfigured domesticity on the plantation does not end with the young slave woman’s suicide and infanticide. Mrs. Cosgrove, after learning that her

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<sup>25</sup> For a nuanced discussion of how Crafts places herself squarely within the contemporary proslavery and antislavery debates of legalism/formalism versus morality, see Dickson D. Bruce, Jr., “Mrs. Henry’s ‘Solemn Promise’ in Historical Perspective,” *Search*, 129-44.

<sup>26</sup> This infanticide scene has clear similarities with Margaret Garner’s infamous infanticide in 1850, which Toni Morrison then used as the basis of *Beloved*. It is quite likely that Crafts was aware of Margaret Garner’s story.

husband has kept one of his slave mistresses, Evelyn, and her children, hidden away in the plantation house, forces them out of the home and grants them manumission as she applauds herself for her noble actions. Unaware that she has actually granted the woman and her child a painful, prolonged death in the wilderness, Mrs. Cosgrove describes her actions as caring and womanly, claiming that “[n]o one can say that I have not the English spirit and blood in me” (188). Her assertion that her English blood and nobility places her in a social position superior to that of her American counterparts quite ironically mirrors the injustices inflicted on the West Africans. Mrs. Cosgrove asserts that “[s]he had not come to America to be placed quietly under any man’s feet” (185). This statement implicitly addresses the condition of the West African slaves, who were forced onto slave ships and later arrived in America only to be forced into the permanent life of slavery and social death.

After learning that his wife has dismissed Evelyn and her two children, Mr. Cosgrove immediately leaves to find the group, certain that they will soon die of exposure. Mrs. Cosgrove, correct in her suspicions that her husband has rescued them and hidden them away out of her sight, consequently descends into paranoia and mental agitation. Quickly setting into motion her plans to ascertain their whereabouts, Mrs. Cosgrove employs her young slave girl to do everything she can to find information about the slave woman and her children. This information regarding the woman’s whereabouts comes from a woman that is yet another example of a speaking corpse. An old, unnamed beggarly woman arrives at the house and unknowingly provides the whereabouts of the objects of Mrs. Cosgrove’s rage. The woman is described as “bent and decrepit [sic] with age, coarse, repulsive, clothed in rags, and hobbling along with the most awkward unseemly gait ... [and] the embodiment of squalid poverty” (194). Crafts inserts

another social commentary here as she compares the aristocratic Mrs. Cosgrove with the poor beggarly woman:

‘Twas a strange sight these two women. The one so elegantl[y] and refined, so lofty in manner and luxurious in appointment, with such magnificent eyes, such splendid hair [,] such a beautiful countenance; and the other a hedious [sic] old mummy, toothless, with bleary eyes, driveling lips. Nothing elegant or tasteful about her. (195)

There is little room for interpretation in this social commentary. The aristocratic woman, who is “so adorned [and] so accomplished, so enviable in every worldly consideration ... forgets that in exposing the honor of her husband she compromises her own” (195), has a mind controlled by vengeful rage. The beggar woman, on the other hand, who is “the embodiment of squalid poverty” (194), has a higher sense of morals than a woman far above her in socioeconomic status. Mrs. Cosgrove is morally dead whereas the “old mummy” is nearly physically dead. In this instance, the speaking corpse woman holds a higher moral position than the younger and healthier aristocratic woman.

Once Mrs. Cosgrove learns that her husband has secreted Evelyn and her children away in Rock Glen, she embarks to verify her suspicions, taking Lizzy with her. Upon her arrival, the wife discovers her husband leaving Rock Glen; an argument ensues which then leads to an accident that leaves Mrs. Cosgrove so severely injured that she is confined to her room for the rest of her life. Mrs. Cosgrove then descends into a permanent state of physical injury that Lizzy describes as a “pitiful sight to beheld [sic] that woman once so matchless and queenly in bearing, now painfully reclining day after day in the same posture .... How long a continued illness humiliates the proudest” (197). Confined to her room and suffering “nights and days of tearless mental agony” (197), Mrs. Cosgrove now embodies a speaking and nearly dead woman brought

down from her station as a “haughty self-conceited woman” (197) and who becomes a “humble-like follower of Christ” (197). Like the other speaking corpse characters mentioned, Mrs. Cosgrove’s body decays into a corpse-like state. Unlike the previous characters, however, Mrs. Cosgrove has the luxury of a restful mind, with her husband at her bedside while she dies on a day of “comparative comfort and repose” (198). Crafts contrasts the differences between subjugated women – slave women, mixed-race women, and antislavery women – with aristocratic women such as Mrs. Cosgrove. While all of these women may descend into speaking corpse states, only a select few die with a tranquil mind.

### **Hannah Meets Embodied Death**

While the linden may have been cut down after the Cosgroves’ deaths, the image of Rose’s speaking corpse reappears in its strongest form when Hannah meets the last speaking corpse in the plot – one that is nearly as gruesome and grotesque as Rose and has an enormous effect on Hannah’s mental state. Hannah meets this character during her second attempt to escape to the North, a successful escape that is significant in several ways.<sup>27</sup> Hannah’s decision to flee the Wheeler plantation is a result of Mrs. Wheeler’s decision to transfer her to field labor and doom her to live in the slaves’ huts with Joe, a fellow slave who intends to “marry” her. Revolted at the certainty of rape and forced marriage, Hannah makes the decision to leave and attempt a bid for freedom.<sup>28</sup> Unlike her first escape attempt, Hannah remains in the wilderness

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<sup>27</sup> Wald notes that during the second escape attempt Hannah “is a fugitive (neither enslaved, nor free) [and] fully inhabits a liminal position” during this sequence (“Hannah crafts,” 228).

<sup>28</sup> Levine posits the argument that Hannah’s disgust at her forced marriage *may* be revulsion at the possibility that she will become like the black women in the hut; the “possibility of white being black” extends to Hannah when she realizes that, despite her fair skin, she has been reassigned to the position of field slave (*Dislocating Race*, 175). There is a *possibility* that Hannah may share the same anxieties of whites or suffer from the haunting that “white may be black” (*Dislocating Race*, 175, emphasis in original). Li contends that although Crafts

rather than seek shelter in domestic spaces.<sup>29</sup> Of significant importance is the encounter with a fellow runaway slave, Jacob, and his dying sister. Stauffer argues that “the introduction of Jacob as biblical figure and character marks the climax of the novel. He leads Crafts out of her Canaan to the promised land of freedom and marriage and leads her narrative out of the Gothic and into the sentimental” (66). The Jacob sequence can indeed be read as the climax of the novel. However, this sequence is important because it can also be read as the climax of the novel’s series of speaking corpses, which is represented in Jacob’s dying sister. Moreover, this is the moment in the plot that the protagonist turns away from the speaking corpse as she continues her escape to the North.

Jacob’s sister has no name in the novel; her story revolves around her death and the moments leading up to her demise. Upon waking one morning during her flight, Hannah meets Jacob, who then takes her to his sister who is severely physically incapacitated and verges on passing from life into death. In her description of the dying woman Crafts pays particular attention to the body and repeats the language used to describe Rose’s physical sufferings. The descriptions of the woman’s “fevered,” “delirious,” and “wasted form” (222-23) repeat the language used to depict Rose’s fevered brain, shrunken sinews, wasted and decayed flesh, and paralyzed nerves. As Jacob and Hannah carry her to the stream to alleviate her dehydration (222), the plot echoes the description of Rose and her dog’s dehydration: “The water that

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idolizes the value of true womanhood, her decision not to submit to Mrs. Wheeler’s planned marriage with the field slave illustrates how “the passive values associated with nineteenth-century white womanhood are not adequate to confront the abuses of slavery” (*Something Akin*, 59-60).

<sup>29</sup> Bryan Sinche analyzes Hannah’s experiences in the wilderness as a technique in which the author uses the plot to assert her faith and religious convictions (176). See Sinche, “Godly Rebellion in *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*,” *Search*, 175-94. Jua posits that this second escape attempt follows a linear pattern, rather than the circular pattern of flight-and-capture that is present in the first escape attempt. Jua continues, “the story can never wholly become Hannah’s story until the demise of her mulatta mistress. Until this eventuality, the story lacks focus, because so far the foci are two mulatta women, given equal importance” (“Circles of Freedom,” 322-23).



moistened their lips and cooled their fevered brains restored their voices and renewed their strength” (24). The characters’ dialogue blends together as the death scene nears its climax and their voices are often indistinguishable:

“Presently you shall go.”

“Her mind wanders,” whispered Jacob.

I bowed.

“There are no slaves there,” she murmured.

“Neither is there sorrow or sighing there, nor parting of friends.”

“Shall I go soon?”

“I think so, yes.”

“Speak louder, I cannot hear you. It’s growing very dark, and I am cold. Oh: so cold. Is there a fire acoming?”

“There is a warmth, a rising of the sun.”

Jacob knelt impressively. I followed his example.

“My dear sister,” he said[,] bending his mouth to her ear.

“I hear you, but I can’t see you. Is the sun arisin?”

“It is, It is.”

“I see it now; it is comin, a light, a very bright light.”

The light came, the sun arose, the sun of righteousness.

Dead. (226-27)

Besides Rose, this is the only scene in the novel in which a speaking corpse character actually vocalizes her last words in the exact moment before her death. Crafts does not relate verbatim the words of forgiveness Mr. Cosgrove’s slave woman spoke before her death, she silences the

mistress before she can finish reciting the bible verses often spoken at or near moments of death, and she never has Mrs. Cosgrove vocalize her last words. Other than Rose, Jacob's sister is the only dying character whose deathbed words are presented in dialogue form. Furthermore, the dialogue captures the exact moment of death as the woman, previously described so similarly to Rose, makes the transition between her life as a speaking corpse into an actual corpse. The woman's body then becomes the cause of Hannah's mental agitation during a moment in the plot where the novel's protagonist nearly transforms into a speaking corpse herself.

Hannah's response to the corpse, which was previously a speaking one but now lies dead with "fragile limbs" and "blank, expressionless eyes" (227) – affects a severe state of mental agitation. Left with the body as Jacob leaves to forage for food, Hannah descends into a state of near madness and terror:

I retreated to my hut in which the sad wreck of mortality lay stark, stiff, immovable. Was it the presence of death, or that my nerves were weak and agitated, but a great and unaccountable terror seized me. I shuddered in every limb, great drops of sweat started to my forehead, and I cowered down in the corner like a guilty thing. My apprehensions were increased tenfold by the mysterious voices of the night. Mutterings, chatterings, and sounds of fearful import echoed through the gloom. Owls shrieked hediously [sic] to which was added the dismal howling of wolves. (228)

Hannah now shares similarities with her dead mistress's mental state when they secreted themselves in the cabin:

The scream of a night-bird, or the howl of a wolf, even the voice of the wind filled [the mistress's] mind with terror. The sounds of the night she interpreted into utterances from

the unseen world, and the shadows flitting across her path she regarded as things of eternity made visible. (68)

Like her mistress, Hannah is on a path of near madness while escaping into the wilderness. Ordinary occurrences terrify her and, like her mistress's reactions to the human remains in the first cabin, Hannah's reactions to the "presence of death" begin to overpower her sense of control. The mistress, in her mentally incapacitated state, imagined that an "invisible being" had come to "devour her flesh and crush her bones" and began to crouch into the ground and point towards the "dreadful creation of her distempered fancy" (69). Hannah now cowers in the corner in a state of extreme emotional upset as the night continues and she imagines the corpse as a being come back to life:

Then the corpse seemed to leer horribly, to gibe and beckon and point its long skinny fingers towards me. I knew that this was all fancy, though I had sense enough left to perceive even then that the absurdity of my fears I could not overcome them, I could not pray for the protection of Heaven; Heaven seemed to have turned its face against me. (228)

"Heaven seemed to have *turned its face against me*" parallels the mistress's inability to recite Numbers 6:25-26: "The Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord *turn his face toward you* and give you peace." If there were a moment in the text when Hannah makes a transition from a righteous woman to a speaking corpse, this would be the most likely place in the plot.<sup>30</sup> Hannah appears to be on the verge of breaking down in the same way as her mistress. As she falls into her "unquiet slumber" she dreams that the corpse approaches her:

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<sup>30</sup> Wald reads the dream of the corpse as a metatextual moment in which Crafts works against Gothic conventions by overcoming the Gothic terror ("Hannah crafts," 228-29).

The corpse seemed to rise and stand over me, and press with its cold leaden hand against my heart. In vain I struggled to free myself, by that perversity common to dreams I was unable to move. I could not shriek, but remained spell-bound under the hedious [sic] benumbing influence of a present embodied death.

The speaking corpse has seemingly returned to life to haunt Hannah, just like the mistress's mulatta blood haunted her to her death, Mrs. Cosgrove's vanity and pride haunted her into her deathbed, and Mrs. Wright's sense of justice haunted her into the jail cell. Rose's speaking corpse makes its final return in the fictionalized autobiography as it appears that the heroine will descend into madness and be denied her chance for freedom. Like the "slumber [that] entirely fled the household of Sir Clifford" (24) the night before Rose's death, Hannah states that her entrapment in the hut was "the longest night of my existence, and I shall never forget its horrors" (228). Hannah exists in a state in which she dreams of the "present embodied death" towering over her as she hears Jacob calling her name. Her "palsied tongue" and "immovable lips" (229) – strikingly similar to Rose's "protruding tongue" (24) that can barely utter words – cannot answer Jacob. At this moment, Hannah's inability to speak echoes Rose's parched mouth during the gibbeting, her mistress's futile attempt to finish the Bible verse, Mrs. Wright's disappearance from society, and the unnamed slave mother's spasm before her death.

In a moment which finally pulls Hannah out of the dream state and away from the perception of a corpse leering over her, she "concentrates all [her] energies in one great effort [and] suddenly awoke" (229). For the first time in the text, a woman pulls herself away from a liminal state where she is suspended in an existence controlled by inbetweenness and dominated by grotesque elements. She effectively turns away from the speaking corpse and towards a living person's voice. However, even as the plot moves Hannah towards the Mason-Dixon Line, her

last geographical barrier, the woman's corpse remains barely covered. As Hannah and Jacob continue north, they cover the hut with brush and stones to conceal the woman in a crude grave. Ironically, it is very likely that other fugitive slaves may stumble across this hut and uncover the remains exactly in the same way Hannah and her mistress uncovered a bloody hatchet and human hairs in the cabin. Thus, the cycle of madness may continue in this location as the body has the potential to haunt other fugitives and turn them into speaking corpses. Even as Hannah and Jacob turn away from the corpse and continue north, the woman's remains – and by extension slavery's remains – lay barely covered and haunt the landscape. Just as importantly, even as the author crafts this fictionalized autobiography, the woman remains barely deterred and her body is a testament to slavery's traumas and social death. The protagonist and the author leave behind a physical marker of the peculiar institution's effects in the form of a corpse that will essentially "speak" to others who stumble across it.

### **Hannah's Farewell**

Successfully escaped to the North and residing in an African American community in New Jersey, Hannah's ending appears to achieve a near-perfect sentimental conclusion. Crafts opens the last chapter with a statement that is the opposite of her "unquiet slumber" next to Jacobs's sister: "There is a hush on my spirit in these days, a deep repose[,] a blest and holy quietude" (244). Hannah's mental tranquility differs from every state of mental instability the story's speaking corpses experienced. As Hannah recalls how her mother finally revealed her identity after their unlikely reunion in New Jersey, Crafts describes the scene in language that is, once again, quite similar to prior scenes of speaking corpses. However, Crafts adjusts the language in a scene that paints a picture of women who are delirious not from exhaustion or

torture but, rather, from jubilation at their reunion. Rather than collapse in a bodily heap in a cabin corner or on a jail floor, Hannah rests “for the first time on her mother’s bosom” as the pair sobs in “rapturous joy” (245). Hannah is “nearly crazy with delight” at finding the mother for whom her “spirit had gone out in intense longing” (245). The “intense longing,” eerily similar to the sustained mental decay previous characters experienced, recedes into the background as Hannah’s story ends much differently than those of the wild, mad, and frenzied women. As Hannah and her mother fall to their knees and their tears mingle together, the tears contrast the mistress’s blood gushing onto Hannah and the Cosgrove slave woman bathing her master in blood. Note also the reversal of the social deaths of the previous speaking corpse figures: Rose was forced to watch her dog, a surrogate granddaughter, perish on the linden tree; Hannah’s mistress began to lose her mental stability when she viewed a picture of her mother; and Mr. Cosgrove’s slave stabbed the infant at her breast before throwing it into the father’s arms. Crafts essentially foregrounds the stark differences between these stories as the overjoyed, reunited mother and daughter celebrate together in a scene strikingly different than the previous ones where women’s bodies and minds disintegrated. Her mother’s statement of maternal reclamation, “[c]hild, I am your mother” (245), differs greatly from every scene in which a slave mother and child were separated. Moreover, vocalizing these words performs the act of motherly reclamation and helps to reverse slavery’s severing of familial bonds.

The last chapter does indeed paint a tranquil image of domestic bliss, with Hannah surrounded by a supportive community, now a married schoolteacher and writing in a cottage that is her own. The glaring opposites between previous scenes of unendurable torture and Hannah’s domestic bliss certainly lead us to question how realistic such an ending might be. Nonetheless, although the ending may appear to be overly saccharine and too perfect an ending

for a slave woman's story, the speaking corpse lingers in the background of the fictionalized autobiography, haunting the ending the same way that Jacob's sister still haunts the landscape where she is buried. In her preface, Crafts boldly describes slavery as having "peculiar features ... whose curse rests over the fairest land the sun shines upon" (3). She emphasizes that even now, as she writes this work, slavery's curse still *rests over* the country. Thus, this story will not attempt to cover slavery's realities but, rather, present a record of "plain, unvarnished facts" (3). While scholars may question the story's verisimilitude, the fact that slavery still haunts the country is indisputable, as shown throughout the text as multiple speaking corpses haunt the plot and reappear in various other characters. There is, however, a moment of triumph for Hannah in the last lines of the text. The author closes her fictionalized autobiography with a seemingly odd statement: "I will let the reader picture it all to his imagination and say farewell" (246). The differences in the narrator's farewell to the audience and the parting words issued by the speaking corpses are striking. This utterance comes not from a slave woman verging between life and death but an escaped slave who now resides with her family in the North. Hannah Crafts's "farewell" to the reader essentially enforces the power of the protagonist's voice. The ending of this fictionalized autobiography is thus a type of reversal, or counteraction, to each speaking corpse the author spent so much time in describing. Rather than critique the ending for its overly sentimental elements, we may instead see the story's finale as a response to these other embedded stories of physical liminality and speaking corpses. Ultimately, even as slavery haunts the landscape and the country and speaking corpses still exist, the author's voice speaks back from the work itself.

## Chapter 2

“Even now the flesh crawls upon my bones”:

Nonspeaking Corpses and Repetitions of Demoniac Exhibitions in  
Solomon Northup’s *Twelve Years a Slave*

Solomon Northup’s narrative entitled *Twelve Years a Slave. Narrative of Solomon Northup, a Citizen of New York, Kidnapped in Washington City in 1841, and Rescued in 1853, From a Cotton Plantation Near the Red River, in Louisiana* became an immediate bestseller after its 1853 release. Derby and Miller sold 8,000 copies within a month; total sales reached 30,000 copies by 1856. Despite the considerable number of copies sold, Northup’s story remained relatively obscure between the last printing in 1892 and its 1968 republication by Louisiana State University Press, with historians Sue Eakin and Joseph Logsdon as editors. Identified as an antebellum slave narrative, Northup’s text recounts his experiences as a free man from New York, kidnapped in Washington, D.C., sold into slavery, and the ensuing twelve years spent in the Red River region of Louisiana before his return to New York in 1853. After his rescue and return to New York, Northup related his story to David Wilson, who then served as the editor and amanuensis of *Twelve Years a Slave*.<sup>31</sup> While much scholarship remains on race-collaboration between David Wilson and Solomon Northup, for the purposes of my argument, I refer to the historical Solomon Northup as “Northup” and the story’s narrator as “Solomon.” Because the story belongs to a free man who experienced American citizenship before being

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<sup>31</sup> White amanuenses were commonly involved in the abolitionist movement and works published by former slaves. While the argument may be made that Wilson’s white presence discredits Northup’s narrative, Sam Worley notes that Wilson did not have an abolitionist agenda, was not a well-known writer in 1853, and very likely recorded Northup’s tale because he recognized its potential as a bestseller. See Worley, “Solomon Northup and the Sly Philosophy of the Slave Pen,” *Callaloo* (Winter 1997): 244.



thrust abruptly into a state of enforced servitude and social nonexistence, it is unique in that scholars and readers can witness how a formerly free man processed and adapted to the peculiar institution.

In my analysis of this slave narrative, I argue that of large importance is how the narrative's first scene of torture, Burch's whipping of Solomon in the slave pen, resounds throughout the text in varied forms. This first experience of physical degradation, in which a slave trader beats and whips Solomon's name from him and consequently separates his name and identity from his physical body, recurs in other characters' stories as slave traders and owners inflict physical, sexual, and psychological abuse not only on the main character but also on the other slaves in Northup's story. Like Rose's gibbeting scene in *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, Solomon's whipping scene appears again and again throughout *Twelve Years a Slave* as Northup saturates and infuses the narrative with physical torture and social death. Moreover, these traumatic events create and enforce a unique type of social death wherein the subjects become what I term a "nonspeaking corpse," which I define as an enslaved person whose voice has been silenced and who exists as a social nonbeing, prohibited from and unable to vocalize trauma and the ongoing effects these traumas have on the person's existence and identity. Although the person cannot vocalize their trauma, they still exist as a physical being trapped in a liminal state in which they experience the suffering and trauma of social death. However, Northup's very retelling of these characters' stories represents their trauma in writing and in language. Moreover, Northup's relentless portrayals of trauma and nonspeaking corpses mimic the unending torture that slaves experienced as chattel. The entire narrative, then, is a metatextual document in itself. Northup recreates the very nature of slave life through the retelling of the experiences, the disruptive narrative style, and ceaseless stories of the realities of the peculiar

institution. Thus, he (re)presents the trauma as he expresses, through language and repetition, how white society's physical, verbal, emotional, and sexual abuse symbolizes and actualizes social death.

## Current Scholarship

Much like the response to Henry Louis Gates's publication of *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, the republication of *Twelve Years a Slave* led many historians to verify and locate the geographical details and persons mentioned in the text.<sup>32</sup> To date, very little has been written on the literariness of Northup's story.<sup>33</sup> In the first in-depth close reading of *Twelve Years a Slave*, Sam Worley compares Northup's narrative and Frederick Douglass's 1845 *Narrative* and concludes that *Twelve Years a Slave* deserves as much recognition as Douglass's autobiography precisely *because* of Northup's significant deviation from literary conventions commonly seen in the slave narrative genre. More specifically, Northup's narrative differs from well-known slave narratives in that it "rejects two prevailing methods for understanding both the individual slave and the institution as a whole – the rational and the providential and their chief organizational schemes, the temporal and the spatial" (244). Northup's rejection of "inherently meaningful form" results from his "vision of the world as a place of contingency, illusion, and disorder, neither inherently rational or irrational. Douglass shows through the exercise of reason, his

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<sup>32</sup> There is very little doubt, if any, that Northup's experiences are fictionalized. For the most comprehensive biography of Solomon Northup's life before, during, and after slavery, see David Fiske, *Solomon Northup: The Complete Story of the Author of 12 Years a Slave* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2013).

<sup>33</sup> The majority of scholarly works focusing on Northup's text are found in encyclopedic entries. Marion Starling was one of the first scholars to write about *Twelve Years a Slave* and note its significance as one of the first autobiographies written by a free black man kidnapped and sold into slavery. See Marion Starling, *The Slave Narrative: Its Place in American History*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Washington, D.C.: Howard UP, 1988), 171-74. For an analysis of metonymy in Northup's rhetoric, see Stephen Hartnett, *Democratic Dissent and the Cultural Fictions of Antebellum*

unsuitability for slavery; Northup shows the irrationality of slavery when he is torn from his rational existence” (246-47).

Because the narrative chronicles the forced migration from North to South and the entire duration of Northup’s experience, a select few scholars have focused on physical movement, forced removal from freedom to slavery, and Northup’s emphasis on time.<sup>34</sup> An equally small number of scholars have turned their attention towards domesticity, heterosexual relationships, and marriage in the narrative.<sup>35</sup> In an analysis of slave masculinity and Southern white masculinity, Tara Green argues that “women’s bodies act as metaphors for the loss of black masculinity and myths associated with white masculinity” (2) and that Northup “uses the black female body, in particular, to expose the troubling aspects of masculinity within the Southern antebellum state by offering a voyeuristic gaze at the black female body, one that is not always physically scarred but is often violated, abused, beaten, and used” (2). Further scholarship that employs gender studies and studies of the patriarchal gaze – such as analytical readings which use materialist feminism, Michel Foucault’s theory of the panopticon, or Gayatri Spivak’s theory

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*America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 11-39. Further studies remain on why Wilson and Northup chose to include illustrations of the narrative’s most gruesome and emotionally unrelenting scenes.

<sup>34</sup> John Cox argues that the narrative emphasizes the relationship between the right to travel and American citizenship; by focusing on slavery’s denial of physical mobility and voluntary travel, slavery worked to deny black men and women (free and enslaved) one of the most fundamental rights of American citizens. See Cox, *Traveling South: Travel Narratives and the Construction of American Identity* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005), 63-102. For a discussion of how Northup’s narrative shows time as non-synchronic, nonlinear, and heterogeneous, see Lloyd Pratt, “Progress, Labor, Revolution: The Modern Times of Antebellum African American Life Writing,” *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 3.1 (Autumn 2000): 56-76. See also Pratt’s *Archives of American Time: Literature and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 158-186. Miriam Thaggert notes that “if a reader may be incredulous at the duration of enslavement, the lengthy title offers specific years as proof that years do, in fact, add up” (332). See Thaggert, “12 Years a Slave: Jasper’s Look,” *American Literary History* 26.2 (Summer 2014): 332-38.

<sup>35</sup> Erica Ball notes the significance of Northup’s choice to end his narrative with his own domestic scene. See Ball, *Race in the Atlantic World, 1700-1900: To Live an Antislavery Life, Personal Politics and the Antebellum Black Middle Class* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2012), 81-83. For a study of singleness in the narrative, see Andrea Williams, “Sex, Marriage, and 12 Years a (Single) Slave,” *American Literary History* 26.2 (Summer 2014): 347-53.

of the subaltern voice, to name a few – has yet to be done but can open the field for rich and nuanced analyses of Northup’s narrative.

Other scholarship surrounding *Twelve Years a Slave* notes the narrative’s publication during a significant historical moment in African American antebellum literature. William Andrews emphasizes the text’s historical importance during a period of transition in the genre, noting that *Twelve Years a Slave* was published during a pivotal time in African American antebellum literature and

anticipates a new discursive contract of the 1850s and 1860s. For decades the slave narrator had asked to be believed on the basis, at least in part, of his ability to restrain himself, to keep the proprieties of discourse that required the ugliest truths of slavery to be veiled. At mid-century, however, the black autobiographer would begin to claim credibility *because* he or she had violated those same proprieties of discourse. (181-82, emphasis in original)

John Ernest notes that Northup’s narrative tried to “effect a kind of historical eruption, an account of history (individually authenticated but shared by many) inexplicable by the usual assumptions about the social order” (368). A handful of scholars focus on what Northup’s observations and firsthand account of slavery contribute to the slave narrative genre. Andrew Urban, for instance, posits that Northup’s narrative is saturated with a “dedication to understanding slavery as a complex economic and social system” (84). Jerry Sanson contends that Northup’s perspective of slavery differs from many other slave narratives in that his experience as a free man “allowed him to observe facets of slavery that someone who grew up in slavery might not notice, but it also means that his reaction to the circumstances of slave life might not match that of other slaves .... His observations and conclusions were tempered by his

own life experiences” (9). Ira Berlin discusses Northup’s ubiquitous portrayals of slave labor and concludes that he places significant emphasis on how labor “is the terrain where the deadly struggle between slaves and their owners plays out most fully and where the slaves’ sense of self emerges” (xxix).

Because Northup dedicated his narrative to Harriet Beecher Stowe, who later referenced his work in her *Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, additional scholarship analyzes the relationship between these two texts and notes the differences between a Northern white woman’s fictional account of slavery and a former slave’s firsthand account of slavery. William Andrews notes that in its embracing the hard facts of slavery and its demand on telling slavery’s ugly truths, *Twelve Years a Slave* “would challenge Stowe’s capacity to tell the whole truth about slavery” (182) and Andrews et al argue that

in its insistence upon telling the whole ugly truth of slavery it not only departs from Stowe’s self-proclaimed rhetorical restraint but also illustrates slave narratives’ evolution during the 1850s and 1860s from earlier autobiographies whose authors had found it necessary to moderate their stories in order to win credibility from white audiences. (313)

In a brief encyclopedic entry, Dickson D. Bruce, Jr. comments on the influence of Stowe’s work on antebellum African American authors and observes the profound importance Stowe’s work had on these writers:

Perhaps nothing was a better testimony to the importance many African American writers saw in Stowe’s work than the extent to which it both inspired further work and even became a part of the common vocabulary of debate. No one acknowledged this importance more than Solomon Northup .... Dedicating his own narrative to her, Northup presented it as “another Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin,” authenticating her work and his at

the same time and placing both within the tradition of black testimony against slavery.

(286)

Northup's "historical eruption," to use Ernest's term, would repeat itself in 2013, but in the arena of cinema, in a movie that would force scholars and the public audience to question and reconsider the possibility of an American postracial society. After the release of Steve McQueen's 2013 film adaptation of *Twelve Years a Slave*, scholars began to discuss the narrative's literary merits or shortcomings by drawing comparisons between the film and the narrative. In a rather harsh review of Northup's narrative, Ernest analyzes the differences in portrayals of minor characters in Northup's text versus those same characters portrayed in McQueen's film. Ernest contends that Northup's text focuses mainly on Northup's freedom at the expense of recounting and revealing the stories of those born in slavery and who have never experienced freedom (371). Furthermore, Northup's account "is delivered so dispassionately as to make the book seem, at times, a documentary account" (Ernest 371). John Stauffer states that Solomon "clearly suffers, but the book obscures the image of his suffering" (321). Jasmine Cobb, in turn, posits that *Twelve Years a Slave* "employs words to create the contrasting images of natural beauty and the depravity of slavery" (342). To date, there is ample room for additional scholarship in multiple analytical fields, such as those that discuss cross-racial collaboration, Southern studies, regionalism and local color, to name a few. Furthermore, there is much to be gained from analyzing the narrative's representation of trauma and how these representations produce a nonspeaking corpse, an analysis that I employ to read traumatic experiences, trauma repetition, and social death in *Twelve Years a Slave*. As I asserted above, readings of nonspeaking corpses can open the field of scholarship around this now famous text as we

consider and study how one represents trauma and writes about nearly unrepresentable and incomprehensible horrors that were part and parcel of the chattel system.

### **The Language of Trauma: Speaking the Unspeakable**

In what is currently the only analysis on Northup's ability or inability to represent his traumatic experiences, Ed Cameron and Linda Belau argue that the narrative is a "written trauma memoir" in which "the survivor of a profoundly traumatic experience that essentially shattered both his identity and his subjectivity ... is unable to directly articulate the trauma of his harrowing experience in his own autobiographical writing" (228). Cameron and Belau further argue that

while most survivors feel a compelling need to communicate their experience of the event in the aftermath of trauma, the autobiographical account of catastrophe is both an exposure to and recoiling from the traumatic real, which also figures as a void in or negation of the symbolic field. The experience itself – its traumatic core – remains inaccessible in the realm of symbolic exchange, and the written word can only fail to adequately represent the full contours of the experience. (229)

In what Cameron and Belau term "traumatic repetition," survivors attempt to represent their trauma through language but then become aware that their account, or "shattering experience," cannot be represented through any written or spoken language. Cameron and Belau continue:

Thus, the exigency involved in trauma testimony bears on something much more distressing than the inability to make an accurate account: it both reflects and inaugurates the shattering of the subject. Despite the survivor's best attempts to situate the trauma through his testimonial practice, a written account of the event remains impossible. And

while this inability, more than anything else, can account for the survivor's failed narrative, it also engenders the very need to write, to make sense of the trauma that the narrative was initially intended to address. This is traumatic repetition, and it finds its most dramatic form in the testimonial account. (229)

Cameron and Belau further argue that Northup's narrative, which consists of the vocalized retelling of his trauma to David Wilson and the physical book itself, is his attempt to reinsert himself into society as a symbolic subject and respond to his nonexistence as a chattel person (229). In a comparison that analyzes the differences between Northup's narrative and slave narratives written by authors who were born as slaves, Cameron and Belau further maintain that Northup's abrupt and violent change – from free, sovereign subject to an enslaved object with no identity – was an incomprehensible reality:

Northup's entire identity was negated – shattered – in the void of this experience. It is precisely this difference that will ultimately hinder Northup's narrative as a means to symbolic reintegration .... Northup's text circles around the experience as something that is essentially unspeakable, beyond the parameters of his subjective understanding. (230)

Cameron and Belau further posit that Northup's narrative "is as much about the events recollected as it is about the events that resist recollection, the traumatic experiences that stain the symbolic landscape and render his narrative impossible" (231). In my analysis of four experiences of physical torture and degradation, I argue that Northup actually does represent this seemingly unrepresentable trauma with nonspeaking corpses. More specifically, this trauma representation occurs at moments when Northup emphasizes how physical degradation works to represent and enforce the trauma of social death. These moments of representation, then, result in portrayals of nonspeaking corpses, which are the culminations of social death and torture.



Northup thus (re)presents the nearly unrepresentable through these figures who, although they cannot or do not speak, are testaments to the effects of social death.

Moreover, while I agree with current scholarship that focuses on how Northup concerns himself with slavery's disruption of mobility and time, I offer an analysis that focuses on how scenes of physical torture disrupt the characters' lives and then, in turn, disrupt Northup's readers as he reminds them that this torture is *ongoing* and occurring *even as they read his story*. These scenes of beatings and whippings intrude throughout the narrative, much like they violently intruded on the lives of the very characters Northup describes. The torture scenes occur during times in which slave traders and owners use physical means to deny the slaves' social existence and further reassert their status as chattel. Names and identities are ripped away from the characters in moments when physical abuse works to plunge the characters into social death and an existence in which they are punished and degraded if they speak and attempt to represent the horror of their experiences. Solomon's and Eliza's stories illustrate how white society rips away a man's name and a mother's identity during degrading and humiliating scenes; Patsey's story portrays how white society reinforces a young woman's social death as a slave and sexually abused object. The results are physical social deaths, represented through the nonspeaking corpse, that hideously morph these characters into persons that exist as objects with no identities. In the midst of these scenes of physical devastation and shattered identities, Northup interjects his own disruptions in the narration as he repeats language similar to each previous scene and continuously reminds his readers that the trauma has not ended. As is the case of the speaking corpse in *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, the nonspeaking corpse reverberates throughout Northup's work as the author emphasizes the peculiar institution's enforcement of social nonexistence in the chattel system. Furthermore, Solomon's final turning away from slavery –

and a life in which he was forced into a state of a nonspeaking corpse – shares similarities with Crafts’s heroine’s turning away from the speaking corpse and slavery as she continues north towards freedom. Solomon’s turning away from the nonspeaking corpse begins his reclamation of his social identity as father, husband, and free man, a reclamation that Northup then addresses in the closing pages of his narrative through the book’s metatextual speaking about slavery.

### **A Name Stripped From the Bones**

Solomon’s descent into slavery and a state of the nonspeaking corpse begins in a cell known as William’s Slave Pen, ironically located in full view of the nation’s Capitol building. Solomon awakens in the dark, without his free papers, handcuffed and fettered to the floor and with no recollection of how he arrived in such a place. The slave trader, James Burch, has accepted money from Mr. Hamilton and Mr. Brown, the two men who befriended Solomon with the offer of work, drugged him, and then delivered him to Burch for cash. As Burch and Ebenezer Radburn, the turnkey, enter the cell, Solomon declares that he is a free man, unjustly imprisoned, and must be released at once. Burch responds with his own story, one that he has fabricated and undoubtedly told many times to other free black men imprisoned in this slave pen: Solomon is a runaway slave from Georgia who will be transported to New Orleans and sold on the slave market. Solomon vehemently rejects this lie, responding that he is a free man from Saratoga and will have justice for the wrongs committed against him. Both men know that Burch’s story is untrue, that Solomon is indeed a free man unjustly imprisoned. As it becomes apparent to both that neither man will concede their words, Burch and Solomon become locked in a verbal battle as Solomon asserts his identity as an American citizen, while Burch insists he is merely a “black liar” (22). The verbal battle over Solomon’s identity and status as free man

escalates until Burch flies into a “towering passion” and orders Radburn to bring in a paddle and whip. The ensuing scene of physical torture is as follows:

As soon as these formidable whips appeared, I was seized by both of them, and roughly divested of my clothing. My feet, as has been stated, were fastened to the floor. Drawing me over the bench, face downwards, Radburn placed his heavy foot upon the fetters, between my wrists, holding them painfully to the floor. With the paddle, Burch commenced beating me. Blow after blow was inflicted upon my naked body. When his unrelenting arm grew tired, he stopped and asked if I still insisted I was a free man. I did insist upon it, and then the blows were renewed, faster and more energetically, if possible, than before. When again tired, he would repeat the same question, and receiving the same answer, continue his cruel labor. All this time, the incarnate devil was uttering the most fiendish oaths. At length the paddle broke, leaving the useless handle in his hand. Still I would not yield. All his brutal blows could not force from my lips the foul lie that I was a slave. (23-24)

Northup’s language in describing the beating mirrors the language used immediately before when he described his assertions of freedom, as “blow after blow was inflicted upon my naked body” replaces “[a]gain and again I asserted I was no man’s slave.” Solomon’s form of resistance previously came from his vocal protests or, more accurately put, his ability to use his own voice and language to assert his freedom as a black man. Once the beating begins, Northup draws attention to his nude body; the result is a stark contrast between Solomon’s independent voice and his subjected body. Northup also describes Burch’s arm as “unrelenting” to further emphasize slavery’s constant and undeterred degradation inflicted upon black bodies.

Unrelenting descriptions mirror the scene's unrelenting physicality that, in turn, saturates the white reading experience with relentless, grotesque images.

As the scene progresses, Burch continues to ask Solomon if he is a free man; each time Solomon responds that he is indeed a free man and a citizen, the blows escalate into a fierce, uncontrolled frenzy. Despite the blows being “renewed, faster and more energetically,” this verbal battle continues as Solomon refuses to relinquish the claim of his free status. Solomon credits his own endurance by stating that admission of non-freedom and non-citizenship is a “foul lie” that he cannot possibly vocalize. His arsenal of resistance is comprised of his voice and his ability to use his own voice to assert his freedom. Solomon's strength with this weapon, however, begins to ebb when Burch replaces the paddle with the whip:

Casting madly on the floor the handle of the broken paddle, he seized the rope. This was far more painful than the other. I struggled with all my power, but it was in vain. I prayed for mercy, but my prayer was only answered with imprecations and with stripes. I thought I must die beneath the lashes of the accursed brute. Even now the flesh crawls upon my bones, as I recall the scene. I was all on fire. My sufferings I can compare to nothing else than the burning agonies of hell!

At last I became silent to his repeated questions. I would make no reply. In fact, I was becoming almost unable to speak. Still he plied the lash without stint upon my poor body, until it seemed that the lacerated flesh was stripped from my bones at every stroke. A man with a particle of mercy in his soul would not have beaten a dog so cruelly. At length Radburn said that it was useless to whip me any more – that I would be sore enough. Thereupon, Burch desisted, saying, with an admonitory shake of his fist in my face, and hiding the words through his firm-set teeth, that if ever I dared to utter again

that I was entitled to my freedom, that I had been kidnapped, or any thing whatever of the kind, the castigation I had just received was nothing in comparison with what would follow. He swore that he would either conquer or kill me. (23-24)

Northup makes it clear that this method of torture is “far more painful than the other” and drives him to pray for mercy. His statement – “*Even now* the flesh crawls upon my bones, *as I recall* the scene” – has multiple purposes. It not only recounts his experience, but also forces the readers to experience the torment with him as he recalls the scene. Furthermore, Northup calls attention to himself as a narrator when he remarks that “[*e*]ven now” this trauma affects him. Northup’s attention, not only to his present-day self but also to the effects his past life still have on his present self, forces the readers to acknowledge the lifelong effects of slavery.

Furthermore, Northup uses a description of his physical body, or his bones and “crawling flesh,” to remind his readers that even though he is a free man recounting the horrors of slavery, his mind and body still react to the peculiar institution. And, moreover, it shows the stakes of telling the truth about slavery – this scene shows at a textual level how he was treated when he tried to tell the truth in a metatextual moment that illustrates the stakes of the book itself in trying to tell the truth. Moreover, Northup brings to the forefront how physical torture and social death worked to morph individuals into non-speaking corpses – a state in which they cannot vocalize the truth without severe ramifications and punishments inflicted upon their bodies. Declaring one’s name (a name given them when they were born free) results in lacerated flesh and bleeding bodies crumpled on the floor, void of the strength it would take to assert their identities.

After Northup draws attention to the ramifications of truth telling and the ongoing effects of trauma, he delves back into the whipping scene. The narrative break here disrupts the plot and unsettles the readers even more as Northup reminds them that this is his account of trauma.

Moreover, the break is another metatextual moment that illustrates how slavery abruptly disrupted Solomon's life as a free man and then consistently disrupted all slaves' daily lives with violence. After this break, Solomon's voice literally disappears for the rest of the scene. His replies cease as he is unable to respond to Burch's questions. Despite his silence, Burch continues the whipping, which Northup now describes as "feeling as if the lacerated flesh was stripped from my bones" (23). It is only at Radburn's advice – any further whipping is useless – that Burch stops. Burch then has the last word in a statement that finalizes Solomon's new status as chattel; Solomon is no longer "entitled to freedom" and has not been kidnapped or had his freedom stolen from him (23-24). Burch thus uses physical abuse and vocal degradation to steal Solomon's name and freedom. Solomon is now socially dead and, for the time being, unnamed. His former ties to his freedom (family and vocation) have been stolen during an act of physical abuse that leaves him fastened to the floor, bloodied, and in darkness. He has become a "non-speaking corpse," a nonbeing that cannot talk and cannot voice his name without further punishment.

Solomon's wounds are, in fact, so severe that he later cannot "remain but a few minutes in any one position" (25) and must continuously roam around the cell to help alleviate his pain. When compared to his state on the morning of his meeting with Brown and Hamilton, the differences between the two conditions are striking. Before he met the two men who would set into motion his kidnapping, Solomon freely roamed the streets of Saratoga, stating that "having at that time no particular business to engage my attention, I was walking about the village of Saratoga Springs, thinking to myself where I might obtain some present employment, until the busy season should arrive" (12). Solomon's need to move around in the cell so that he may

alleviate the pain of his chattel status replaces the free and unhindered mobility he enjoyed as a citizen.

Solomon's psychological response to the whipping is also immediate. Whereas he previously "longed so ardently to see some one," he now "shudder[s] at the thought of man's approach" while faces, especially those of white people, are fearful sights and cause his heart to "leap to his throat" (25). Although Solomon later critiques those born in slavery as too untrustworthy to participate in a slave revolt, stating that "servilely they will cringe before a white man's look" (41), he has already begun to draw the connection between himself and those physically tortured and socially dead humans born into slavery. Bodily pain combines with psychological anguish as his own social death and descent into chattel status begins and then accelerates at a rapid pace. Northup's portrayals of characters he meets during this descent further emphasize how the peculiar institution relies heavily on physical and emotional torture to enact mental anguish and shattered existences. The shattered existences, which result from the physical torture, then push the characters towards a transformation from living beings into corpse-like objects that can neither speak of their trauma nor speak about the traumatic effects without severe consequences.

### **"This was the story of her life": Eliza's Silence**

When Solomon and his audience first meet Eliza, Northup describes her as a woman in silk, with rings and gold ornaments (27) and "correctness and propriety [in] her language" (27). She has the air of a woman who had "sometime *stood above* the common level of a slave" (27, emphasis mine) and is thus nearly unable to grasp her horrifically unfortunate turn of events. Rather than include the actual words Eliza would have spoken to her children, Northup chooses

to describe her grief as “filling the air” (27) and states that “[l]anguage can convey but an inadequate impression of the lamentations to which she gave incessant utterance” (27). Northup does not attempt here to catalogue any words Eliza would have spoken but chooses to fill the description with the imagery of grief. Eliza is “hustled” into the room with the other slaves before she throws her body onto the floor. Here, Northup draws the contrast between Eliza’s previous condition as a woman who “stood above” other slaves’ conditions and her current condition of a mother crumpled on a dungeon floor with her children, now sure of being sold as chattel, wrapped in her arms. The image is all the more striking because Eliza’s sorrowful words, which Northup does not attempt to represent with language, are those as only “maternal love and kindness can suggest” (28). Tara Green argues that “[a]s a narrative, [Eliza’s] body tells the story of sexual exploitation that results in unbearable grief. Northup restricts her story to that of suffering” (6). While Eliza’s story is indeed centered on her suffering, it is through her suffering that Northup repeats and echoes his first whipping scene and reiterates the brutal actions and techniques slave traders employed to enforce social death. It is also through this maternal suffering and bodily suffering that we may see how Eliza’s trauma transforms her into a nonspeaking corpse that is not permitted to vocalize and express her grief.

It is not until after Northup presents the readers with this picture of “pitiful expressions of that desolate and distracted mother” (28) that we learn her name is Eliza. A woman trapped between her owner’s lust and his wife’s and daughter’s rage, Eliza is tricked into believing she would receive free papers for her and her children upon her owner’s death. Upon entering the city, Eliza learns that Mrs. Berry’s daughter and her husband have arranged for her sale to Mr. Burch in a turn of events that Northup pays particular attention to, with a stress on the immediate change between her previous state and her current condition:



The hope of years was blasted in a moment. From the height of most exulting happiness to the utmost depths of wretchedness, she had that day descended. No wonder that she wept, and filled the pen with wailings and expressions of heart-rending woe. (29)

Northup emphasizes the abrupt, violent, and unexpected descent into the extreme form of social death. The impossibility of her emancipation, her free papers, is all the more desolate because the pen ink that would be used to write her freedom into language has been replaced by the resonant “wailings” that now fill the slave pen. As abruptly as Eliza finds herself in this slave pen, Northup just as abruptly tells the readers that “Eliza is now dead” and shocks them back to the present moment:

Eliza is now dead. Far up the Red River, where it pours its waters sluggishly through the unhealthy low lands of Louisiana, she rests in the grave at last – the only resting place of the poor slave! How all her fears were realized – how she mourned day and night, and never would be comforted – how, as she predicted, her heart did indeed break, with the burden of maternal sorrow, will be seen as the narrative proceeds. (29)

Although Northup makes the readers fully aware of Eliza’s death immediately after he introduces her, he draws her story out as painstakingly as possible. Furthermore, Northup’s change in voice – “will be seen as the narrative proceeds” – serves as another metatextual moment in which Northup directs attention towards himself before plunging his readers back into the narrative. Northup will repeatedly intersperse Eliza’s sufferings throughout the narrative and thus mimic the continuous, intrusive nature that the peculiar institution has on slave life. The previous description, in which Northup describes Eliza as finally having a “resting place” (29), is only the beginning of her story. Her story will, in fact, haunt the reader until the final scene of her death, especially the stories of her separation from her children.

On learning that her son's purchaser cannot afford both her and her two children, Eliza slips into a hysterical and uncontrollable state of grief and desperation, emotions which she expresses with hysterical wailing, sobbing, and pleading:

The man answered that he could not afford it, and then Eliza burst into a paroxysm of grief, weeping plaintively. Freeman turned round to her, savagely, with his whip in his uplifted hand, ordering her to *stop her noise*, or he would flog her. He would not have such work – such sniveling; and *unless she ceased that minute*, he would take her to the yard and give her a hundred lashes. Yes, he would take the nonsense out of her pretty quick – if he didn't, he might be d---d. Eliza shrunk before him, and tried to wipe away her tears, but it was all in vain. She wanted to be with her children, *she said*, the little time she had to live. All the frowns and threats of Freeman, *could not wholly silence* the afflicted mother. She *kept on begging and beseeching* them, most piteously, not to separate the three.

Freeman damned her, calling her a *blubbing, bawling wench*, and ordered her to go to her place, and behave herself, and be somebody. He swore he wouldn't stand such stuff but a little longer. He would soon give her something to cry about, if she was not mighty careful, and *that* she might depend upon. (49, emphasis mine)

At first glance, the actions in this scene closely resemble those during Solomon's first whipping, with one important exception: rather than incurring a slave trader's rage for asserting his name, Eliza incurs Freeman's rage by begging that, as a mother, she not be separated from her child. Even though Solomon insists that he is a free man and Eliza insists that she will be a faithful slave, the two characters cannot stop their repeated words. Solomon cannot comprehend the "foul lie" that he is a slave, and Eliza cannot fathom a life apart from her children. Despite

threats from both Burch and Freeman, the two cannot bring themselves to stop their utterances. Like Burch's whipping of Solomon, in which he beats and whips his name from him, Freeman's sale of Randall rips away part of Eliza's identity as a mother while the slave trader rips away the weapon that is her voice.

Of particular importance here is the role Eliza's voice plays in this scene, especially as this voice recedes into the background while Freeman's raging dominates the spectacle of suffering. Green notes that Northup ties Eliza's identity to her maternal identity; her "body is a narrative of long suffering and pain that is directly linked to her role as the mother of enslaved children" (8). While Eliza's identity is indeed dependent upon her maternal status, her suffering during Randall's sale shares similarities with Solomon's loss of his name in Burch's pen. Like Solomon repeatedly telling Burch he is a free man, Eliza repeatedly tells Randall's purchaser that if he purchases her, she "will be the most faithful slave that ever lived" (47). Knowing that her pleas may be her only hope in keeping her family intact, Eliza resorts to her best weapon, her voice, in a futile attempt to elicit sympathy from a white male audience that is neither concerned with her sufferings nor feels obligated to acknowledge her "paroxysm of grief."

Underneath this slave mother's pleas for mercy and the patriarchy's indifference to her suffering, there lies a story in which we may see the beginnings of Eliza's descent into a more extreme social death, one that will involve a decaying body and a withering voice. Despite Freeman's repeated threats and demands that she silence herself, Eliza continues to plead with the buyer:

*She kept on begging and beseeching them, most piteously, not to separate the three. Over and over again she told them how she loved her boy. A great many times she repeated her former promises – how very faithful and obedient she would be; how hard she would*

labor day and night, to the last moment of her life, if he would only buy them together.  
(49, emphasis mine)

Freeman also promises Eliza he will “give her something to cry about, if she was not mighty careful, and *that* she might depend upon” (47). After Solomon’s whipping, Burch warns him that his punishment will be far worse if he mentions he is a free man; Freeman makes the same type of threat to Eliza. In both threats, the slave traders make it clear that all that the slaves can “depend upon” are punishments for vocalizing their human emotions. Freeman underscores Eliza’s shattered identity when he commands her to stand up, move away from her child, and go back into the line of slaves, “to her *place*” (49, emphasis mine) and “*be somebody*” (49, emphasis mine). He has defined and constructed her new identity by deadening her voice and her protests as he forces her back into the line of chattel and demands that his human property silence her maternal sorrows. Solomon himself states that he did not dare cry during this scene (50), a stark contrast between his indignant statements and expressions of anger at being chained in Burch’s pen.

Northup’s description of Eliza’s parting from her second child is so agonizing that he states the following:

It would be a relief if I could consistently pass over in silence the scene that now ensued. It recalls memories more mournful and affecting than any language can portray. I have seen mothers kissing for the last time the faces of their dead offspring; I have seen them looking down into the grave, as the earth fell with a dull sound upon their coffins, hiding them from their eyes forever; but never have I seen such an exhibition of intense, unmeasured, and unbounded grief, as when Eliza was parted from her child. (51-52)

The “relief” of “passing over” this scene is not only improbable (he has promised his readers that he will reveal Eliza’s narrative) but also impossible. This impossibility lies in the certainty that those that have witnessed them cannot forget these scenes, or “exhibitions” of grief. Northup asserts that the very recollection of the scene “recalls memories” so unbearable that language cannot fully represent the trauma but then begins a nearly two-page description describing this trauma. A common rhetorical device in the slave narrative genre, in which the author calls attention to the traumatic event’s effects on their present self, this strategy works to assert authorial control and direct the reader’s attention towards the fact that this is a *true story* related by a *person and subject* who clearly has the ability to reason, rationalize, and experience the same reactions to trauma as their white readers. Northup then describes Eliza’s debilitating mental state that he would have witnessed only months later:

Eliza never after saw or heard of Emily or Randall. Day nor night, however, were they ever absent from her memory. In the cotton field, in the cabin, always and everywhere, she was talking of them – often *to* them, as if they were actually present. Only when absorbed in that illusion, or asleep, did she ever have a moment’s comfort afterward. (53, emphasis in original)

Northup finalizes Eliza’s transition from living to dead with his last mention of her condition. The last time the reader hears of Eliza, Northup presents her as more dead than alive: her appearance is “but a thin shadow of her former self” with a “ghastly haggard” face and a “bowed down” form (103). No longer standing upright, her silken garments have been replaced with “the coarse garments of a slave,” and she crouches and lies prone on a cabin floor (103-04). Eliza might continue to talk to her children, but is now in a state of physical and mental decay. Northup recalls that Eliza’s last owner tried to “whip back the departed vigor of her youth” and

“straighten up that bended body to its full height” to no avail. He describes her existence as “unprovided for” and “unprotected” as she “linger[s] through a life of pain and wretchedness” (104). Only death allows her to be “*free* at last” (104, emphasis in original). Northup also tells his readers that Eliza was renamed “Dradey” after being sold to Ford and that the name is “*now on record* in the recorder’s office in New Orleans” (57, emphasis mine), indicating Northup’s emphasis on her permanent physical state of nonexistence. “Dradey” replaces Eliza Berry on paper and in death, finalizing her transition from a mother assuming she is about to secure manumission papers to a corpse known only by a name forced upon her. The finality of her death and the finality of her slave name on record reiterates her social death. However, as Northup reminds his readers, this dead woman might be named “Dradey” in a Southern state but is referred to as “Eliza” in his publication. He effectively reverses her renaming in his text and for his readers as Eliza’s story replaces Dradey’s death. Her real name returns, but only on the pages of his narrative, and only after her death.

### **Entitled by Law: Tortured Flesh Continued**

While Solomon experiences multiple abuses at the hands of John Tibeats, a local working class carpenter, his near death punishment stands out in a particularly gruesome scene. Mortgaged to Tibeats to help pay for Mr. Ford’s loans, Solomon comes under the ownership of a man he describes with the utmost contempt and loathing: “He was my master, entitled by law to my flesh and blood, and to exercise over me such tyrannical control as his mean nature prompted; but there was no law that could prevent my looking upon him with intense contempt. I despised both his disposition and his intellect” (69). In this description, Solomon first expresses his disdain for Tibeats’s control over his body, “his *flesh* and *blood*.” Northup’s emphasis on

these bodily elements draws attention to the differences between his black blood and flesh, previously free in New York but now kidnapped and enslaved, and his father's status as a free man, despite his own black flesh and blood. Although his father was "born a slave" (6), he was emancipated after his owner's death. The irony is not lost here: unlike the majority of enslaved persons, Northup's father was freed from bondage and his children were born free (despite the African blood coursing through their veins). Until his kidnapping, Solomon's African heritage was never reason enough for him to be a slave. Only a corrupt and deaf judicial system allowed Burch and Freeman to sell his body into slavery and force him into a system wherein his value is now determined by how much labor his owners can extract from his flesh and blood.

Northup's remark that "no law could prevent" him from observing Tibeats with anything less than contempt attempts to subvert the white gaze. This statement of defiance, in which Solomon believes he can subvert the white gaze, is then reversed again when he remarks that he was not allowed to address his last master without downturned eyes and bowed head (119). Like Burch's rage at Solomon's insistence that he is a free citizen, Solomon despises Tibeats for his "intellect and disposition." In Williams' slave pen, Solomon's whipping resulted from his assertions that he is not only a free man but also knows there is injustice in his kidnapping. Burch despises Solomon's intellectual ability to battle back with words, rational statements, and a proud demeanor; Solomon, in turn, despises Tibeats for his steadfast belief that he is nothing more than black flesh and blood.

Undeservedly reprimanded for his labor on the weaving-house, Solomon incurs Tibeats's wrath but decides he will not be whipped for a wrong he has not committed. The physical violence that ensues echoes yet deviates from the violence witnessed and described in William's Slave Pen. Rather than Solomon's flesh feeling like it was on fire, his blood as he beats Tibeats

paces through his own veins like fire. Whereas Solomon was physically below Burch as he “struggled in all [his] power, but it was in vain” (23), he now stands above Tibeats as his victim utters “struggles and threats [which are] alike in vain” (72). “Blow after blow fell fast and heavy upon his wriggling form” (72) replaces “[b]low after blow was inflicted upon my naked body” (23). Both Solomon and Tibeats cry for mercy but do not receive it until their tormentors are satisfied. While this scene can be read as Solomon’s assertion of his masculinity and power over those who have tormented and tortured him, the scene also brings to the foreground the extreme differences between Solomon’s revenge and Burch’s whipping, as seen in the consequences that follow.

Solomon notes the injustice of his cries going unheard in the nation’s capitol and the injustice brought down on him while being confined in a cell that is “within plain sight” of the nation’s Capitol building. After Burch finally ends the whipping scene, with Solomon nearly unconscious on the floor, the cell doors slam shut and plunge Solomon back into darkness. His physical suffering is much worse than Tibeats’s suffering (lacerated and blistering flesh does not compare with the relatively minor beating he has just given Tibeats) but is unseen by anyone save Burch and Radburn. Tibeats’s whipping happens in plain sight of the overseer’s wife, Mrs. Chapin, and Rachel, her house slave, both of whom express the “utmost excitement and alarm” (72). Solomon’s screams and pleas went unheard, whereas Tibeats’s screams “had been heard in the field” (72); Solomon has been whipped so severely that he cannot move or speak whereas Tibeats stands up, brushes dirt from his hair, and looks Solomon directly in the eye: “Rising to his feet, and brushing the dirt from his hair, he stood looking at me, *pale with rage*. We gazed at each other in silence. Not a word was uttered until Chapman galloped up to us” (72, emphasis mine). Solomon was not able to rise and show Burch how enraged he was because he was still



chained by his feet and did not have the strength to stand. Gazing at or even looking at Burch would have certainly resulted in more flogging. Burch whipped Solomon's name from his flesh, but Tibeats walks away, swearing he will have satisfaction for the whipping, and converses with Mr. Chapin. Northup ends this scene with one last stab of irony. He notes that Tibeats – who shares ownership of Solomon with Mr. Ford – poor as he may be compared to the plantation owners, at least owns his own horse, “the only property he possessed besides himself” (72).

Solomon's “feelings of *unutterable* agony” (72, emphasis mine) replace any release or sense of justice he and his readers might have felt at his victory over Tibeats. “Painful sensations of regret” and the knowledge that he will soon face “unimaginable punishment” overshadow his pride at his physical victory over Tibeats (72). Northup emphasizes the physical sensations his grief has on him: “*painful sensations*” swamp his consciousness and his dread at what he has done *choke* his prayers. He underscores the futility of rationalizing his actions: “what could I *do*, what could I *say*, to justify, in the remotest manner the heinous act I had committed, of resenting a *white* man's contumely and abuse” (72, emphasis in original). He is well aware that he cannot physically or verbally do anything to explain his reactions (however justified these may be to any reader who holds antislavery views) against a white man's behavior, nor can he use logic to rationalize his actions. His voice and protestations are not only useless but also dangerous liabilities in the institution of slavery. Like Eliza in William's Slave Pen and after the sale of her children, Solomon's emotional turmoil speaks through his body rather than his voice.

While Solomon's mental anguish might be nearly unrepresentable through words, the physical damage Tibeats's punishment causes is certainly not. Tibeats returns with Mr. Cook and Mr. Ramsay, two overseers from neighboring plantations, who have joined him to assist in the attempt to hang Solomon. As the three overseers bind Solomon with ropes and lead him towards

a tree, Mr. Chapin intervenes on Solomon's behalf. Solomon's death, Mr. Chapin informs them, will result in a financial loss for Mr. Ford since he holds a mortgage on him. Mr. Chapin scares Tibeats and his friends away from the plantation, leaving Solomon to stand in the sun, still bound by ropes, for the rest of the day. Northup describes the rest of this day as an endless stretch of excruciating pain:

As the sun approached the meridian that day it became *insufferably* warm. Its hot rays scorched the ground. The earth almost *blistered the foot* that stood upon it. I was without coat or hat, standing bare-headed, *exposed* to its burning blaze. Great drops of perspiration rolled down my face, drenching the scanty apparel wherewith I was clothed. Over the fence, a very little way off, the peach trees cast their cool, delicious shadows on the grass. I would gladly have given a long year of service to have been enabled to exchange the heated oven, as it were, wherein I stood, for a seat beneath their branches. But I was yet bound, the *rope still dangling from my neck*, and standing in the same track where Tibeats and his comrades left me. I could not move an inch, so firmly had I been bound .... I wanted to lie down, but knew I could not rise again. The ground was so parched and boiling hot I was aware it would but add to the discomfort of my situation. If I could have only moved my position, however slightly, it would have been relief unspeakable. But the hot rays of a southern sun, beating all the long summer day on my bare head, produced not half the suffering I experienced from my *aching limbs*. My *wrists and ankles*, and the *cords of my legs and arms began to swell*, burying the rope that bound them into the *swollen flesh*. (76-77, emphasis mine)

Flesh, or, more precisely, descriptions of tormented, swollen, and blistered flesh, now appear to control Solomon's thoughts. These descriptions of maimed and abused flesh then pervade the

reader's mind in a metatextual moment that illustrates how physical torment is entrenched in the peculiar institution.<sup>36</sup> As the day continues, Solomon's meditations do eventually turn towards the injustice that has placed him in such a physically overwhelming condition. It is only after he has constructed the image of this torment that he begins a social commentary on white society's assumptions about Southern slaves:

Never did the sun move so slowly through the heavens – never did it shower down such fervent and fiery rays, as it did that day. At least, so it appeared to me. What my meditations were – the innumerable thoughts that thronged through my distracted brain – I will not attempt to give expression to. Suffice it to say, during the whole long day I came not to the conclusion, even once, that the southern slave, fed, clothed, whipped and protected by his master, is happier than the free colored citizen of the North. To that conclusion I have never since arrived. There are many, however, even in the Northern States, benevolent and well-disposed men, who will pronounce my opinion erroneous, and gravely proceed to substantiate the assertion with an argument. Alas! They have never drunk, as I have, from the bitter cup of slavery. (78)

Northup's reflections on these "erroneous" assumptions serve two purposes. First, Northup employs language here that contrasts his exposed body to the mistaken picture others have of the well-cared-for slave. Second, by drawing attention to these contrasts, Northup reiterates how physical abuse and mental torture work together to silence the slave. He begins to pull the reader's attention away from his swollen flesh and towards his fevered brain and thus emphasizes his ability to think, reason, and rationalize. His repetition of "never" at the beginning

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<sup>36</sup> John Cox reads this scene as indicative of Northup's emphasis on enforced physical immobility. See Cox, *Traveling South*, 91-92.

of this passage brings this scene of prolonged torture to the foreground, painting a picture of slowly moving and painstakingly sustained abuse penetrated by “fervent and fiery rays.” This first sentence serves as a metaphor for the system of slavery itself: Solomon’s chattel existence is painstakingly long, a never ending existence that pushes the limits of endurance as repetitive scenes of grotesque, blistering trauma intrude on his day to day existence. Moreover, the elaborate description of this day mimics slavery’s drawn out torture against human chattel as Northup makes the audience read this painstakingly elaborate passage as they get a glimpse of what he experienced that day.

Despite his statement that he will “not attempt to give expression to” his “innumerable thoughts,” Northup proceeds with yet another description of his thoughts about slave life. The language this time revolves around the emphasis on what slavery is *not*. The slave is not happier when “fed, clothed, whipped, and protected by his master.” Ultimately, this repetition emphasizes what the slave does not have rather than what he has. Northup repeats “I have never” throughout the passage, reiterating that the story, while taking place in the past, is being recalled in the present. The trauma is ongoing, not only for Northup, but also for the slaves who are still bound by ropes while the readers experience his retelling of the trauma. Furthermore, Northup specifically addresses those who believe that a free man in the North does not have the same happiness as that of a slave in the South. He describes these “benevolent and well-disposed men” not as people who held these beliefs in the past, while he was in slavery, but those who hold these beliefs at this present moment. He then responds to them with his language and words. In anticipation of those who will “substantiate the assertion with an argument,” Northup answers with his own assertion that he has experienced slavery firsthand, or drunk “from the bitter cup of slavery.” The battle of words, first witnessed between Burch and Solomon, repeats itself here,

but only after Solomon is a free man again and can retell his story out from under the oppressive institution.

### **A Demoniac Exhibition**

Two years after the once free Northup becomes chattel property, he is sold to Mr. Epps and remains an object of labor on his plantation for the next ten years. It is at this plantation that Solomon experiences his worst hardships and witnesses the most gruesome scenes of brutality. Epps's plantation is also where Solomon and the audience will meet Patsey and witness the narrative's most excruciating and barbaric spectacle of torture inflicted upon a slave. Much like the story Northup makes the readers experience, Patsey's life and conditions are those of unending and ceaseless sorrow. Introduced first as a laborer, the "most remarkable cotton picker on Bayou Boeuf" (109), Northup describes her as having a gift of "dexterous fingers and quick motion" (116) in cotton picking. Twenty-three years old, Patsey has lived on the Epps plantation since childhood and "glories in the fact that she is the offspring of a 'Guinea nigger'" (121). She is "genial," "faithful," and "obedient" (123), a "joyous creature, a laughing, light-hearted girl, rejoicing in the mere sense of existence" (123). Her unending grief is soon exposed as Solomon reveals why she "wept oftener, and suffered more, than any of her companions" (123):

She had been literally excoriated. Her back bore the scars of a thousand stripes; not because she was backward in her work, not because she was of an unmindful and rebellious spirit, but because it had fallen to her lot to be the slave of a licentious master and a jealous mistress. She shrank before the lustful eye of the one, and was in danger even of her life at the hands of the other, and between the two, she was indeed accursed. (123)

Solomon describes Patsey's life as one in which she must always "walk beneath a cloud" (123). The slave of a "licentious master" with a "lustful eye" (123), Patsey's body bears the scars from Epps's lash (her mistress's punishment for the rapes) while her soul bears the scars of repeated sexual abuse. At any moment she may be raped by Mr. Epps or struck with objects by Mrs. Epps. Caught between a rapist and a woman who punishes her for the rapes, Patsey is the ultimate figure of a slave trapped in an existence in which her life is valued for her labor and sexualized body while she exists in a state worse than death. Northup closes his description of Patsey with a profound statement: "The enslaved victim of lust and hate, Patsey had no comfort of her life" (124). While on the Epps plantation, Patsey's condition deteriorates into unbearable sorrow. She becomes "truly the object of pity" because Epps "punish[es] her to an extent almost beyond endurance, for an offense of which he himself was the sole and irresistible cause" (129). Northup will then push his reader's endurance when he recalls the narrative's worst scene of torture and humiliation.

Solomon describes Patsey's abuse as "the most cruel whipping that ever I was doomed to witness – *one I can never recall* with any other emotion than that of horror" (168, emphasis mine). Like the previous scenes discussed, Solomon states that the trauma – in this case the trauma he witnessed and participated in – is still with him in the present as he dictates his story, and then continues on to describe the scene in as much detail as possible.<sup>37</sup> The scene begins with Epps enraged at Patsey, believing that she has visited Mistress Shaw, a neighboring plantation owner's black wife. Because Mr. Shaw has made a "wife" of his slave, Charlotte, Mr.

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<sup>37</sup> In an analysis of how Solomon reconstructs his black masculinity, Tara Green argues that "[m]ade complicit in the public violation of Patsey, Northup transfers his own experiences of violation to the black female body" (12). See Green, "Black Masculinity and Black Women's Bodies: Representations of Black Bodies in *12 Years a Slave*," *Palimpsest: A Journal on Women, Gender, and the Black International* 4.1 (2015): 1-23.

Epps wrongfully assumes he is also involved in a sexual relationship with Patsey. As it turns out, Patsey has gone to Mistress Shaw's to get soap because Mistress Epps, in her hatred, does not provide Patsey anything to wash herself with. Mr. Epps's response on Patsey's return is arguably the most brutal scene in the narrative:

Then turning to me, he ordered four stakes to be driven into the ground, pointing with the toe of his boot to the places where he wanted them. When the stakes were driven down, he ordered her to be stripped of every article of dress. Ropes were then brought, and the naked girl was laid upon her face, her wrists and feet each tied firmly to a stake. Stepping to the piazza, he took down a heavy whip, and placing it in my hands, commanded me to lash her. Unpleasant as it was, I was compelled to obey him. Nowhere that day, on the face of the whole earth, I venture to say, was there such a demoniac exhibition witnessed as then ensued. (169-70)

There are several similarities between Patsey's whipping and Solomon's first whipping. Both are stripped and prone on the ground, while Northup makes sure the reader knows they are nude during the abuse. Northup even describes the actions taken to stake the girl to the ground when he describes Epps's method of indicating where Solomon must place the stakes. Nothing is omitted as Northup describes the preparations from start to finish and emphasizes Epps's nonchalant and unfeeling attitude as he orders the very perimeters for where the whipping will take place. The scene does not begin with the whipping but with the preparations as Northup recounts every painstaking detail.

Patsey's position on the ground, stretched from limb to limb, naked, with her sexually violated body on display for every one present, further emphasizes the degradation and humiliation that is present from the very beginning of Epps's methodical preparations. Northup's

meticulous attention in describing Epps's calculated, orderly arrangements describes how grotesquely attentive to details slave owners are when they have decided to torture a slave.

Northup then disrupts this scene with another break in the narrative voice: "Nowhere that day, on the face of the whole earth, *I venture to say*, was there such a demoniac exhibition witnessed as then ensued" (171, emphasis mine). Like Burch's whipping, Solomon's proclamation of Eliza's death, and Tibeats's punishment, Northup breaks the scene and reminds his readers that this is a retelling of trauma, a traumatic scene that he still recalls as astonishing in its brutality. "Then ensued" pulls the reader back into the story with Solomon, forcing them to become witnesses as the narrator foreshadows the brutality that is about to happen.

When Solomon refuses to whip Patsey any longer, Epps grabs the instrument of torture and continues the abuse himself:

He then seized it himself, and applied it with ten-fold greater force than I had. The painful cries and shrieks of the tortured Patsey, mingling with the loud and angry curses of Epps, loaded the air. She was terribly lacerated – I may say, without exaggeration, literally flayed. The lash was wet with blood, which flowed down her sides and dropped upon the ground. At length she ceased struggling. Her head sank listlessly on the ground. Her screams and supplications gradually decreased and died away into a low moan. She no longer writhed and shrank beneath the lash when it bit out small pieces of her flesh.

(170-71)

As Patsey's shrieks mingle with Epps's raging words, Northup adds to the scene his own language of brutalized flesh. Patsey's cries switch from loud shrieks to moans as Northup then describes her as the "panting victim" (171). The account now resembles rape and brings to the foreground a horrid realization: Patsey's sexually degraded body leaks blood into the plantation



because she attempted to procure soap to cleanse herself from Epps's filth. Her body, highly valued for the 500 pounds of cotton she picks every day and highly valued as Epps's object of rape, soaks the ground she is tied to. Solomon's earlier name for Patsey, "queen of the fields" (123), is horrifically transformed into the "tortured Patsey" as her flesh and blood sink into the land. Any verbal protests or pleas recede into the background as Mr. Epps's "loud and angry curses" and Northup's descriptions of Patsey's body dominate the scene. Like Solomon's first whipping, the scene climaxes to the point where the victim can no longer talk. Mr. Epps has indeed followed through on the promise he made at the beginning of this scene – he would "fetch [her] down" (169). Her body is the nonspeaking corpse in its most brutal depiction: a slave laying on the ground during a scene of extreme abuse and humiliation, unable to talk while the slave owner's words and screams fill the air and silence her protestations.

Her multiple burdens, or the intersectionality of which she is a victim, combine in this scene as her voice recedes into a "faint voice scarcely perceptible" (171). Lying in Solomon's arms, she refers to him again and again as "Platt" (171). This is one of the few times Solomon mentions his slave name without indignation or anger. Interestingly, the lacerated woman who cannot move and can barely speak unintentionally reinforces Solomon's (un)naming – his relabeling as the chattel person known as Platt – in a horrid image that captures the trauma of their nonspeaking corpses. Patsey, stripped of clothes and flesh, nearly dead and certainly socially dead, is carried away by a man that may easily suffer the same fate if he were to boldly announce to anyone that he is not "Platt." One nonspeaking and socially dead slave man carries a nonspeaking, corpse-like socially dead woman back across the plantation she is forever bound to. Patsey will only speak one more time in the narrative, and that is only to say goodbye to Platt and express her woes for herself (207). Salamishah Tillet notes that her vocal absence after the

whipping “reveals that her primary function was to substantiate Northup’s abolitionist agenda and appeal to the sympathy of white northerners who had yet to convert to his cause .... Northup abruptly distances Patsey to sustain his narrative authority” (356). While Patsey’s voice is indeed silenced, Northup’s descriptions of her reaction to this whipping – her silent voice – emphasizes slavery’s effects in a nuanced and detailed social commentary on how physical abuse works with psychological terror to produce a nonspeaking corpse.

Northup notes, “from that time forward [Patsey] was not what she had been. The burden of a deep melancholy weighed on her heavy spirits. She no longer moved with that buoyant and elastic step – there was not that mirthful sparkle in her eyes that formerly distinguished her” (172). Her literal voice may be silenced and her physical energy may be significantly diminished, but it is in these very silences that we can see Northup’s social commentary on a living death begin to develop further. Northup emphasizes Patsey’s deep melancholy and then turns his attention again to the living death that is her life. Patsey “does not comprehend the distinction between the corporeal and spiritual existence .... Her idea of the joy of heaven was simply *rest*” (173, emphasis in original). The state of life and death Patsey lives in revolves around her idea of life of freedom from forced labor.<sup>38</sup> Life represents the ability to work her own land; death represents forced labor on a land that she literally bleeds into. Her life becomes “one long dream of liberty” (174) for an “enchanted region, the Paradise of the earth” (174). Northup may silence her voice for the rest of the narrative, but her existence in the narrative remains as an example of a woman trapped between labor and rape, a dream of rest contrasted with the reality that this

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<sup>38</sup> Stauffer argues that after Patsey’s whipping, “[h]er dream of freedom, a form of rebellion, is also a death-wish” (320). See Stauffer, “12 Years Between Life and Death,” *American Literary History* 26.2 (Summer 2014): 317-25. Salamishah Tillet argues that Northup uses Patsey’s response to this whipping for one specific purpose: “it has ultimate significance because Northup uses it to make his biggest case against slavery: even those whose entire lives are spent under its lash still yearn for and deserve to be free” (356). See Tillet, “I Got no Comfort

dream is a “fulfillment of which she can never realize” (Northup 174). Solomon’s last sight of Patsey is one of her body with “drooping head, half reclining on the ground” (208). As Solomon leaves the plantation and the name “Platt” behind he “looks back at the last image of a doomed woman” (207). As the audience looks back with him, they witness Patsey’s form falling back into the land on which she is doomed to toil.

### **The Reversal of Social Death**

Northup’s final view of the plantation is that of Mrs. Epps, Patsey, Uncle Abram, Bob, Wiley, and Aunt Phebe. The last image from the last ten years of his life is filled with the peculiar institution nearly in its entirety: the piazza, where Mr. and Mrs. Epps verbally battled and raged over Patsey’s body, the home where Mrs. Epps joyfully watched Patsey’s whipping, Patsey sinking back into the ground, and Epps’ property witnessing his return to freedom. Solomon’s slave family disappears from sight as he makes the journey back to his biological family in the North. Even though the slaves are “hidden from [his] eyes forever,” Solomon’s narrative resurrects their stories and sustains their trauma throughout the pages. Solomon’s last account of his own family includes a recounting of his daughters’ sorrow at viewing textbook portraits of slaves in a cotton field and images in which an overseer “follow[s] them with his whip” (217). The traumatic story repeats itself yet again as the readers witness one last image of the whip as it follows the human chattel; just as the “whip” of slavery greatly affected the daughters, the “whip” of slavery and the horror at witnessing this image follows readers to the end of the narrative. Northup finalizes this domestic scene with a statement that after his kidnapping his family still “held [him] in constant remembrance” (217). Solomon then remarks

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in this Life’: The Increasing Importance of Patsey in *12 Years a Slave*,” *American Literary History* 26.2 (Summer 2014): 354-61.

that although he returned to freedom, hundreds of other formerly free citizens “are *at this moment* wearing out their lives on plantations in Texas and Louisiana” (217, emphasis mine) and reminds his readers again that the trauma has not ended for other slaves. The narrative’s plot ends with Solomon voicing his desire to later “rest at last in the churchyard where [his] father sleeps” (217). Northup reverses the social death, which began in William’s Slave Pen, as he expresses his thankfulness that he will be buried with his own name and next to the parent who gave him that name.

Although Solomon states, “[m]y narrative is at an end” (217), Northup’s slave narrative has not yet ended. Quite fittingly, Northup includes eleven appendices of various legal papers – his wife’s testimony to his real name, multiple witnesses testifying to his citizenship, and the governor of New York acknowledging that he is legally obligated to help bring Solomon out of slavery – to name a few. Only after the inclusion of these papers does Northup add in “The End.” These testaments to his real name help reverse the experience of the nonspeaking corpse known as Platt and replace the papers that he realized were stolen upon awakening in William’s Slave Pen. In one last metatextual moment, Northup includes images of papers that verify his real name and inaugurates the reversal from nonspeaking corpse to sovereign citizen.

I close with an 1853 quote about *Twelve Years a Slave* from Frederick Douglass because no other critique or analysis of *Twelve Years a Slave* more adequately sums up the slave narrative’s power:

For thirty years a man with all a man’s hopes, fears, and aspirations – with a wife and children to call him by endearing names of husband and father – with a home, humble it may be, but still a home, ... then for twelve years a thing, a chattel personal, classed with mules, and horses ... [;] it chills the blood.

It is through this very “chill of the blood,” the reaction to slavery’s traumas, that we find the narrative’s power to represent, repeat, and speak of the unspeakable, haunting effects experienced by the narrative’s nonspeaking corpses. Furthermore, Douglass’s review illustrates how this narrative inflicts on the reader a small glimpse of the trauma, even the chilling of the blood, of no longer being called husband and father but, rather, reconstructed as chattel. Much like the physical and psychological trauma experienced by the speaking corpses in *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*, the trauma of the nonspeaking corpse in *Twelve Years a Slave* finds itself embodied and represented in the nonspeaking corpses. And, much like Hannah’s turning away from the last speaking corpse during her flight to the North, Northup’s turning away from social death – followed by his liberation through the very representation of this trauma – begins to reverse his social death as he moves back towards speaking subject allowed to vocalize and represent what was nearly unrepresentable.

## **Conclusion: Bodies and Voices on the Margins**

As illustrated above, analyses of various forms of the speaking corpse can shed light on how these characters adapted to or deteriorated from their social deaths. Whether a slave woman, tragic mulatta figure, white woman with antislavery sentiments, desperate slave mother, unnamed fugitive slave, or formerly free African American man, each of these characters' stories demonstrates the realities of social death and the traumas inflicted against physical bodies. Even the story of Mrs. Cosgrove, who suffered relatively little when compared to the other women, sheds light on how antebellum society affected every aspect of women's lives. The white patriarchy's battle for power and control did not stop with slave women's bodies. Indeed, this fight for control of the entire society extended to any persons that did not agree with slavery. Thus, it is important to analyze the characters in the African American canon that appear to be on the margins of the story. Moreover, a focus on minor characters' speaking and nonspeaking corpses may contribute to further discussions of how other authors represented those who did not survive the peculiar institution. Aunt Martha's silence on the auction block in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and Rueben's whipping scene in Martin Delany's *Blake*, for instance, provide more opportunities for discussions of characters who are portrayed by silence or depicted as chattel objects that vocalize suffering while existing on the verge of death, and, moreover, are portrayed by authors with very different backgrounds and ideologies.

Of great interest in the studies of early and antebellum African American literature is the question that has occupied many readers' minds: How does one represent the trauma of chattel slavery, even when the white audience permitted these horrific representations in writing? One commonly used phrase seen throughout the genres comes to mind in which the author simply states that "they would not describe it even if they could." An analysis that looks further into this

question and asks how the authors represented trauma and social death through decomposing bodies may shed light on the problematic representability of slavery. Moreover, more can be gained by looking at how the slaves' voices, or even the absence of their voices, depict embodied forms of social death. Indeed, vocalizing the trauma, as in the case of Rose, may be seen as an act of agency or a refusal to remain silent even when the physical death of an already socially dead human is imminent. Or, in the case of Mrs. Wright and Solomon, agency may be found in the choice to remain silent even when the vocal absence reminds them of their degrading condition. Moreover, further questions remain on how these authors used speaking or silent figures to draw attention to the stakes of talking. Perhaps the narrators' turning away, or even turning towards, these decaying characters as they make their journeys towards freedom can reveal more about what could or could not be witnessed when writing about the horrors of chattel slavery.

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