

Plotting a Pragmatic National Philosophy:
William Wells Brown's *Clotel; Or the President's Daughter* (1853)

By

Lisa Marie Brimmer

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For those in this intellectual struggle

*and in acknowledgement that all
that is happening,
has been happening.*

*In honor of mentors
and too soon ancestors
Laurie Carlos and J. Otis Powell?*

ABSTRACT

In this essay I argue philosophical connections between Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1781), and William Wells Brown's premiere African American Novel, *Clotel: Or the President's Daughter*. *Clotel* was published in 1853 to a transatlantic audience with an abolitionist imperative. Previous readings of Brown's work have subdued his connections to Thomas Jefferson's settler colonialist project of western expansion in *Notes*. When we read *Clotel* as an American Pragmatic Philosophical text we unearth a discourse in the long nineteenth century. This discourse is of nationalist philosophy in which transnational discourse takes place. Brown's sentimentalist novel was written in response to the Fugitive Slave Act (1850) which inhibited the geographic flow of fugitive slaves and free African Americans across the expanding nation. Brown's fiction is one that remembers Thomas Jefferson and revises popular fugitive slave representations in order to critique the national experience of freedom and promote Brown's own philosophy.

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Peace Power Progress
Lisa Marie Brimmer

Introduction

The whisper that my master was my father, may or may not be true; and, true or false, it is of but little consequence to my purpose whilst the fact remains, in all its glaring odiousness, that slaveholders have ordained, and by law established, that the children of slave women shall in all cases follow the condition of their mothers; and this is done too obviously to administer to their own lusts, and make gratification of their wicked desires profitable as well as pleasurable, for by this conning arrangement, the slaveholder in cases not a few, sustains to his slave double relation of master and father.

The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass (2)

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

Declaration of Independence, 1776

William Wells Brown published the first African American Novel, *Clotel; or The President's Daughter, A Narrative of Slave Life in the United States*, in 1853. My goal in this article is to advance an understanding of his project in this work of sentimental fiction to be one of a national philosophy. As a fugitive slave, underground railroad conductor, physician, touring temperance and abolitionist activist, and an American playwright and author, Brown wrote *Clotel* from his fugitive position in the United Kingdom in order to perform the impacts of abhorrent racial sciences and brutal national (legislative) geographies. Through Brown's speculative style and skilled scene work he illustrates the discontinuous national philosophy of the developing nation state after the Louisiana Purchase. His fiction works to highlight the confines of a highly gender/racial/spatial-ized United States. By this I mean he uses multiple and interlocking plots in order to shine light on the underbelly of the American condition. Brown mediates these multiple and interlocking plots through a collective voice which peppers the

entertaining novel with multiple narratives, characters, and performances. Brown is battling the dominant nineteenth century narrative of a united nation state and a ceremonial ancestral presence.¹ He also utilizes a pragmatic heroine, *Clotel*, in order to subvert the sentimental conventions of feminine submission. His abolitionist intentions subvert these two conventions and foist his poetic work onto the international stage with a pragmatic, realistic, and revolutionary voice. Brown hoped to depict a divided nation in an era of the Fugitive Slave Law and deconstruct the contestable contributions of Thomas Jefferson to the United States' national philosophy. Across genres of criticism,² other readings of *Clotel* have overlooked the relationship between Brown's 1853 text and Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785). This essay understands the two texts to be linked based on substantially more than the strange and "mysterious obligation" each of the authors displayed through their re-writing of each text's multiple manuscripts.³ This essay does not position Brown's text as a mere response to Jefferson's *Notes* but acknowledges that both writings examine the presence of a national philosophy which plots geographic space.

Equality, Unalienable Rights, Liberty for All: these ideas have not been a material birthright for all those born in and of the United States. For this reason, popular literatures have attempted to produce the pragmatic social force necessary to abolish the systemically oppressive and contradictory constructs which frame the United States Constitution and expressions of government. Brown writes this type of philosophy into the geographical terrain of his premiere work of fiction. Katherine McKittrick has reduced the geography in *Clotel* to a simulative theater

¹ See Holly Jackson's *American Blood: The Ends of the Family in American Literature, 1850-1900*.

² History, Anthropology, Literary Criticism, Empiricism, Geography, Feminism, Black Feminism, Critical Race Theory, Sociology and as Brown was a practicing physician throughout his life, family studies, medicinal and healing sciences of western tradition and those practiced within African, Latin, Creole and other American Diasporas.

³ Although the palimpsest nature of these written and re-written philosophical works illuminates their geographical interventions on history and mapping, that is a discussion for another time.

of racialized and gendered performance space.⁴ This essay considers the specific situation of black femininity as representative of a generational tide and fear surrounding the national (re)birth inspired by Thomas Jefferson's sexual concubinage and western expansionist practices. This essay examines these practices of antifeminist and antiblackness found in Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* and the subsequent Louisiana Purchase (1803). Likewise, Brown disrupts the sentimental conventions framing his speculative and philosophical fiction. While other scholars have written of *Clotel* and its enslaved and fugitive female figures as part of the tragic mullatta archetype, I argue that they not to be read as a tragic mulattas but interpreted as a fugitive spirit immortalized in character: the pragmatic heroine. *Clotel*'s journey is more about Brown's performance of plot than white passing, privilege, and prestige. *Clotel* and her family, all fair skinned, subvert attitudes on racial positioning contemporary to the period. So are the levels of plot and character entwined. The racial positioning in *Clotel* is used to expand our understandings of a black-white performance space. Through plot and character Brown exposes the plurally brutal geography of the United States.

To better understand how these geographic renderings place Brown as a critical and fugitive voice, we can look to Fred Moten and Stefano Harney's contemporary discussion of the field of black study. They understand "fugitive" to have multiple meanings: both an individual escape from slavery, and an intellectual departure from the danger of singular narratives. Moten and Harney contend that black study takes place in "the undercommons of enlightenment" (26).⁵ One key area in which readers of *Clotel* witness the undercommons at work is in the anachronisms that take place throughout the text. While William Edward Farrison – who

⁴ *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and The Cartographies Of Struggle*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006.

⁵ Their book, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* stares directly at the line between pedagogy and performance theory.

resurrected Brown as both literary figure and reformer—read the anachronisms in *Clotel* as "inconsequential" and his novel as "a memorable effort of a pioneer among Negro authors" this essay regards his novel as a political critique which is endowed with national philosophy (Farrison 231). When we categorize Brown as a "critical academic" we can understand this undercommons of enlightenment to be where Brown's "memorable effort" in this first African American Novel takes place (38).⁶ A philosophical reading of *Clotel* unlocks his critical philosophy and places him in the American Pragmatic tradition. Brown's fugitive representation of nineteenth century social and historical environments describes questions of heritage and inheritance. For Brown, the struggle is depicted in Clotel's return to the dangerous south for her daughter Mary Green, in the untimely death of her mother Currer to yellow fever just before her abolitionist owners intended to free their lot of slaves, or in the loss of the well-intentioned Mr. Morton, whose death widowed Clotel's sister Althesa and sold she and her two daughters back into slavery (and delivered them to their deaths). To Brown, fugitivity is the act of getting away from or out of the gravitational pull of slavery while considering the fissures of entrapment: it demonstrates that the act of escape is never final.

Acknowledging the impact of the cotton boom on the newly and quasi-emancipated United States invites a visualization of how the United States' acquisition of the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 helped the nation-state express its economic and social philosophies. The United States sought to preserve a capitalist economic system that was driven by large scale land grabs of this kind in order to expand the dehumanizing enslavement of Africans and African-Americans in the south and west. Legislation like the Fugitive Slave Law that were active in the

⁶ Further, Harney's assumption that "[d]ebt presumes a kind of individualized relation to a naturalized economy the is predicated upon exploitation" reminds us of the ways in which McKittrick's geographic arguments to come later in the paper. Fundamentally we see the nation's racial and economic debts to slave bound roots as naturalized to the American political and geographic terrain (5).

period wrapped around the nation disturbing a simpler contemporary and historic understanding of a free north and enslaved south. By playing with such shifting and variegated borders aroused by the legislature in the United States National landscape, Brown gestures to the ways that white racial supremacy was disseminated in simultaneity with the cotton boom so that exploitative labor practices and slavery could expand west: at first with greatly devised plans, and then with more improvisation.⁷ The economic and social geographies which impacted fugitive slaves, and was being invisibilized into the fabric of the nation's philosophical center was a great danger to Brown, other enslaved and fugitive persons, and Brown was motivated to upset complacency and strive towards change. Reading *Clotel* as a philosophical text brings Thomas Jefferson's *Notes* and Brown's *Clotel* closer than even the novel's title could indicate.

But how do we understand Brown's performative fiction to be a philosophical text? And how does Brown's sentimental abolitionist project come to be in conversation with the western expansionism promoted by Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*? Cornel West, in his essay "On Prophetic Philosophy" from the longer work *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, can provide context for our understanding of the ways in which Brown and Jefferson can be thought of together. West is interested in the genealogical development of American Philosophical thought. He positions a transnational relationship between France and the United States through the figures of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Thomas Jefferson. To West, American Pragmatism is both a product of institutions, systems and legal matters, as well as a product of sociality and culture.

⁷ Shannon Lee Dawdy's anthropological history *Building the Devil's Empire: French Colonial New Orleans*, indicates a logical progression of law, order, and expansion: "If Louisiana's early experiments in agriculture and environmental engineering were characterized by blueprints and book learning later efforts were characterized by improvisation and practical knowledge, or *métis*" (84).

For our purposes American Pragmatism provides criterion under which to examine Brown as part of this philosophical tradition. West writes to the categorical problem in American Philosophy that has to do with the ways in which the “frightening wilderness of pragmatism and historicism” are typically left unexplored (West 3). West’s late 20th century work discusses the eighteenth and nineteenth century American Literatures as situated in a transnational dialogue that anticipates twenty-first Century literature. In many ways there are stark themes which bleed through the years and African American literary production.⁸ West relies on Roberto Unger’s perspective on the pragmatic being that which “consists of an emancipatory experimentalism that promotes permanent social transformation and perennial self-development for the purposes of ever increasing democracy and individual freedom” (152). We can more deeply appreciate the implications of Brown’s philosophical discourse – his experimental style, abolitionist project, and concern with freedom – in his text when we understand him as a black pragmatic philosopher. The pragmatism of Brown’s national philosophy hopes to incite social change through abolition. He also encodes his use of the feminine, the sentimental, and conventional narratives of the fugitive tradition with critical departures toward a pragmatic national philosophy.

Constructing a Nation/al Rhetoric: Thomas Jefferson

As scholar Britt Rusert writes in her book, *Fugitive Science: Empiricism and Freedom in Early African American Culture*, about the ways in which configurations of nineteenth century

⁸ I make reference this relationship through the inclusion of a header quote from Ishmael Reed’s *Flight to Canada* (1979) in a later section “Generating Abolitionist Power in *Clotel*”.

science provide adequate space for a fugitive science as something that is mutable, subversive and alternative “in the quest for and name of freedom” (4). Of Jefferson’s *Notes* Rusert writes, “In many ways [it] is the ur text against which fugitive science defined itself in the early national and antebellum periods. [It] served as a touchstone for anti-racist science” (33). To Rusert, a generation of writers took on a corrective project that was characterized by close textual analysis: “The Banneker Age is epitomized by the rhetorical rejection of Jefferson’s Anti-blackness” that took place between 1790s and the beginning of Civil War (35). This is where William Wells Brown enters – in the middle of conversation that was always already happening that was critical of a grand realm of racist industries of science and capitalism.⁹ Rusert notes that Brown’s 1863 text, *The Black Man: His Antecedents, His Genius and His Achievements*, most explicitly responds to Jefferson’s *Notes*, while *Clotel* seems to do so only indirectly. It is important we engage Brown’s *Clotel* as part of this tradition. Brown writes in the middle of the Banneker age but after many pointed and popular direct critiques of Thomas Jefferson. His popular contributions to the literary cannon go beyond a response to Thomas Jefferson’s notes and obligate a reading that entertains the pragmatic implications of its philosophical content.

Clotel: or The President’s Daughter: A Narrative of Slave Life in the United States inaugurates the use of fiction by African American authors to (re)interpret the challenges of the human, western, and curiously American condition of slavery. This title sutures together the multiple aims of the work: the fictional plot of *Clotel*, a critique of Thomas Jefferson, and a collective experience of slavery. *Clotel* specifies the position of Africans and African Americans

⁹The physiognomist whose account was published in the newspaper describing a sighting Clotel disguised as Mr. Johnson falls into this fugitive science and displays the popular buy in. This was a very typical episode of vigilantes equipped with statistics in order to produce state sanctioned arrest, containment *and even murder*. This is not much different than the state and socially sanctioned violence against Black, Indigenous and Queer communities experienced nationally in contemporary twenty first century America.

in a violent and exploitative system of slavery at the end of the eighteenth and into the nineteenth centuries. The book's title character, Clotel, is a female heroine who is depicted as beautiful, learned and brave. Clotel flits in and out of the confines of slavery. Her fair skin, gentility, and western education provide her privilege within the system of slavery yet still do not allow her a navigable escape route. Even as a mixed-race, light-skinned, and undeniably well-off enslaved person, she is not free. This complicates the popular assumption that whiteness and white privilege allowed for a socially mobile and free human experience. The title also connects us to the president as both paternal ruler through the local government body, as well as paternal figure to Clotel. Brown's Clotel is doubly rejected: as citizen and kin. But Brown's philosophical aims are not simply personal disparagement. For Brown to highlight the tension between paternal law and paternal order is a critical departure which points to his key aim: to demonstrate a national philosophy critical of that demonstrated by Thomas Jefferson in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*. The generic term, "Narrative of Slave Life in the United States," invites a connection with the slave narrative tradition. The title displays the plural ambitions of this text: in Unger's words the promotion of "ever increasing democracy and individual freedom" (252). And in many ways positions the novel as a personal, familial, and national project of abolitionist intention.

Let us first investigate Thomas Jefferson's *Notes* for an understanding of the philosophical and historical period in which Brown writes. The controversial American forefather penned *Notes* as a discrete platform for popularizing the identity of a new nation and himself as a new thought leader. His writings came as a response to a questionnaire solicited by François Barbé-Marbois, the Secretary of the French delegation in Philadelphia. Amidst rumors and conflicting accounts, Barbé-Marbois was in search of the *real* story of economic and natural

resources of the New World.¹⁰ Jefferson corrective interest sought to broker relations with French Imperialists for personal and professional gain. And so, he embarked on a thirty-year journey: a mysterious obligation to complete four manuscript revisions for various English and French audiences.¹¹ Jefferson's text wrote to the emergent transnational frontier of political and geographical yearnings in late eighteenth Century America and his writings drew particular attention to land claims to the west by extending the (metaphorical/material) power of rivers to construct the social and economic potential of the land.

Notes produced a transnational version of an American historical narrative and did much to advance the international celebrity-intellectual status of Thomas Jefferson. But his prominence has not been without broad and vast critique. Jefferson's place in history is discussed by historian Ned Sublette, who writes of "how New Orleans got to 1819" in his text *The World That Made New Orleans: From Spanish Sliver to Congo Square* (3). Sublette works to dismantle the reputation of an untainted Thomas Jefferson figure as a leading intellectual, successful capitalist and all around good guy. These attitudes are present in popular and recorded histories in a way that helps us understand the trajectory of his *Notes* and their connections to Brown's *Clotel*. Sublette introduces Jefferson as "arguably the most influential politician in American History" (209). His influence was charismatic and personal as well as affluent and political. Sublette credits Jefferson as a "key figure in American slavery's expansion on a previously undreamed-of-scale" (209). He writes: "[Jefferson] created a major industry of traffic in domestically raised humans, which was not an unintended consequence of territorial expansion but an obvious outcome, devoutly desired by Jefferson's constituents (Sublette 209-10). Sublette offers a

¹⁰ See Introduction to Jefferson's notes for Frank Shuffleton's summary ... "Jefferson's lists are methodological critique" (xxiv),

¹¹ Page in Thomas Jefferson's *Notes framing* in penguin book

concrete connection of Thomas Jefferson's part in catalyzing both westward expansionism and the expansive boom of chattel slavery. This corrective description of Jefferson helps us understand the above passage in *Notes* which depict a landscape undergoing the antifeminist, anti-black and anti-indigenous experience which denotes Jefferson's national philosophy.

Jefferson disseminates his national philosophy through speech acts in his text. The very act of world building is a speculative act that invites action and provides philosophical imperative. Sublette offers two key ways to condemn Jefferson for his incendiary to expanding capital through national expansion and sexual concubinage. To do so he corners in on Jefferson's "notorious explication of the differences between 'races'" (210).¹² Sublette compares the prose in Jefferson's *Notes* to the speech of a "latter day Ku Klux Klan member" (212). Jefferson's text is not a neutral one. From Bede in the British Isles, to Oscar Micheaux or D.W Griffith's construction of national philosophies in the United States, we can see the construction of histories, their oppositions and narratives as philosophical in their context breaking and context preserving features. This makes the construction of a nation – by means of erasure and enslavement – also an act of philosophy.

Jefferson's personal history is also implicated in our understanding of his national philosophies. Sublette traces the common story of slave concubinage and what would be later considered human trafficking through a genealogical connection to slave trader John Wayles, Jefferson's father in law.¹³ In these times you were designated to the status of slave simply by

¹² Even more notably, Sublette discusses the ways in which Jefferson anticipates French participation in the Haitian Revolution, and Napoleon's invasion. To Sublette, Jefferson "had done his part to turn his frightful vision of race war to the death into a self-fulfilling prophecy" (211).

¹³ Jefferson inherited title to 135 people upon Wayles' death. This is the way that wealth was handed down: a human dowry of interrelated half siblings. Some sold off for profit or debt collection. Sally was one of the inherited many and "a daughter of slave concubinage" (214).

being born to an enslaved woman.¹⁴ That a child was considered an *addition to capital*, or “perpetual annuity” was incredibly important to the construction of the American south in this period of western expansionism and cotton boom (219). Sublette makes clear connections between Jefferson’s personal actions and his political actions through the Louisiana Purchase. I invite a reading of Jefferson’s *Notes* based on this observation and argue that Jefferson’s influential anti-black and anti-feminist attitudes show up in the way that Jefferson describes place. Jefferson was writing to correct transnational logic about the navigability and colonial potential of the United States and French territories—the effect being pragmatic political and social change. This is why the text contains various lists of wildlife and veers toward natural history.

That this speculation is a highly visual endeavor is ostensibly captured by Jefferson’s engaging and voyeuristic language. In “Query II: A Notice of Its Rivers, Rivulets and how far they are Navigable?”, Jefferson opens with this heading: “An inspection of a map of Virginia, will give a better idea of the geography of its rivers, than any description in writing. Their navigation may be imperfectly noted” (7). This opening disclaimer provides an ambivalent truth claim that we can in no way expect an accurate depiction of the land and its topographic features; we *can* however get an avid description of this river’s navigability and capitalist potential. The United States’ expansion west took place in deep synchronicity with the boom of cotton production and was soundly coordinated with a boom in slave populations. In this context, a desire for a vulgar and exploitative expansionism can be read. A reader of *Notes* is invited to visualize the landscape by *picturing a map* and *inspecting its graphic* subjection. This heavy

¹⁴ To Sublette, the seal on Jefferson’s newly polished historical understanding is sent in a letter: “I consider a woman who brings a child every two years as more profitable than the best man of the farm. What she produces is an addition to capital, while his labors disappear in mere consumption.” (Jefferson qtd in Sublette 219)

reliance on taking a close look imitates the act of visual speculation would relay the thirst for the image. The gesture towards sexualized language continues in his prose. Jefferson remarks:

The Missisipi [sic] will be one of the principal channels of future commerce for the country westward of the Allegheny. From the mouth of this river to where it receives the Ohio, is 10000 miles by water, but only 500 by land, passing through the Chickasaw country...The Missisipi [sic], below the mouth of the Missouri, is always muddy, and abounding with sandbars, which frequently change their places. (9)

Jefferson provides a clearly anthropomorphic view of nature. What's more, Jefferson's misogynist words paint a portrait of landscape defined by reproductive, or at least sexual acts. For instance, the pornographic ways in which the mouth and the act of receiving is employed to describe the joining of mighty water forces. Even the ways in which sand bars frequently change their places. I argue that line can be read as a connection to the sexual concubinage circuit: specifically, the trade, sale and traffic in enslaved women like Clotel, her mother and sister. This circuitous text oozes with the *all too easy* anti-feminism of the times.

Generating Abolitionist Power in *Clotel*

Book titles tell the story. The original subtitle for *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was "The Man Who Was a Thing." In 1910 appeared a book by Mary White Ovington called *Half a Man*. Over one hundred years after the appearance of the Stowe book, *the Man Who Cried I Am*, by John A Williams, was published. Quickskill thought of all the changes that would happen to make a "Thing" into an "I Am." Tons of paper. An Atlantic of blood. Repressed energy of anger that would form enough sun to light a solar system. A burnt-out black hole. A cosmic slave holes.

Flight to Canada, Ishmael Reed

In *Clotel*, Brown describes the master-concubine relationship between Jefferson and Clotel's mother, Curren: "The Gentleman for whom she had kept house was Thomas Jefferson,

by whom she had two daughters. Jefferson being called to Washington to fill a government appointment, Currer was left behind and thus she took herself to the business of washing, by which means she paid her master, Mr. Graves, and supported herself and two children” (50). Rather than going after Jefferson particularly, Brown invokes Jefferson in order to discuss national political identity and disseminate his own pragmatic philosophy as demonstrated by Currer’s movements away from slavery. William Edward Farrison, the scholar behind a 1969 text resurrecting Brown as author and reformer, makes this same observation. His transatlantic was text written from exile in the UK. “Brown’s novel grew out of his desire, not to attack the character of Thomas Jefferson, per-se, but to win attention, by means of an entrancing story, to a comprehensive and persuasive argument against American slavery,” argues Farrison (218). Jefferson is invoked as a philosophical figure—or proof point—and this aspect deserves more critical attention.

In the novel, title character Clotel is discarded from master/father Thomas Jefferson’s estate—this includes the loss of any meager social and financial benefits perhaps available to enslaved persons. We witness the force of agency in her mother, Currer, who reaches beyond the traditionally understood confines of slavery to participate in the capitalist economy and support her family. Through this bind, Currer is depicted as an agent with the ability to create position and fugitive potential for she and her family through her becoming a laundress and prioritization of education for her children. While this sort of labor for hire plot is conventional in slave narratives, Brown shows himself as writing self-consciously—aware of his own experience and that of his fugitive comrades—and is interested in a pragmatic departure from convention by producing very human characters and their specific points of access to agency. This works to explore the nuance of the enslaved condition. What’s more, Brown proliferates a female heroic

figure who promotes her own agency and works against the status quo of sexual concubinage and slavery. These contestations and aberrations from the male-dominated literary environment are powerful. Sure, *Clotel*'s sale, impregnation, failed escape(s) and eventual suicide belie a reliance on tragedy. I argue that this tragedy only seeks to highlight the discrepancies between the discursive ideals and material realities rife in the social world of nineteenth century America. The tragedy is intended to sensationalize. It has the potential of pragmatic, abolitionist, social force. Coordinately, Brown's philosophy is pragmatic in its undertaking as it considers the harsh political realities of a nation invested in sexual concubinage and slave holding.¹⁵ Jefferson is employed by Brown to highlight the malformation of the nation, rather than the simple indictment of one of its leaders.

Brown chose a pragmatic and fugitive fiction in order to further his abolitionist philosophies. This fugitive flow out of slavery is discussed by Judith Madera in her book *Black Atlas, Geography and Flow in Nineteenth-Century African American Literature*. To Madera, Brown demonstrates keen interest in fugitive "movements away from slavery" (Madera 22). In the nineteenth-century the English-language novel held a strong position as a discursive tool and publishing was an effective method for the sharing of ideas internationally. As scholar Benjamin Reiss explains, "Novels were thus *not simply* a kind of cargo that circulated through the Atlantic world and penetrated American interiors, but also tools for representing *new ways of life in the spaces and places* their authors encountered (or imagined encountering)" (18, emphasis mine). Brown's publication of *Clotel* becomes not *simply* about the representation of rudimentary realities – the south, slavery, geographic and fugitive space – but about rendering legible the black perspective of these arenas for mass consumption and as part of his abolitionist project for

¹⁵ Slave holding and sexual concubinage are both holdovers from the United States' rejected colonizer; monarchical England.

social change. In Reed's quote above, his narrator ruminates on "*all the changes that would happen to make a 'Thing' into an 'I Am' Amount to 'lots of paper'*" (82). This becomes a reminder of how novels perform collective narratives that are understood as representational tools that carry a rhetorical potential to change worlds and conditions.

New Ways of Life in Space and Place: Brown's Philosophical Plots

Clotel invariably emphasizes the Mississippi River through the journey from St. Louis, the site of Clotel's sale, to New Orleans,¹⁶ just near the site of its busy delta. Interestingly, Brown uses the same rivers highlighted by Thomas Jefferson to frame and connect the novel's various scenes and in so doing forces a position within the conversation of America's national philosophy. Brown's episodic tendencies are pronounced in his circuitous fiction plots as well as the plotted points on rivers: The Mississippi, Ohio, and Potomac rivers all play significant roles in the text. Sometimes they house multiple distinct worlds and narratives. These episodes run in concurrent chapters with intertwining and sometimes unresolved plots. Additionally, there is semi-autobiographical content in the novel; as well as content from Brown's traveling exhibit "A Description of William Wells Brown's Original Panoramic Views of the Scenes in the Life of an American Slave, From His Birth in Slavery to His Death or His Escape to His First Home of Freedom on British Soil" (1850), which supported Brown's lectures; and finally, the synthesis and revision of various fugitive narratives and popular literary texts. All of these modes were being employed by Brown in the period of *Clotel* in order to counter white supremacist narratives of United States history. *Clotel* disassembles the enlightened facade of the United

¹⁶ Contextually, New Orleans was also a thriving center of the Mississippi Bubble; the cotton boom had placed mid-continent slaves at a premium for their sale south by way of the river. South of St. Louis, both Natchez and New Orleans comprised part and parcel depictions of this lucrative new chapter in US slavery.

States in a counter narrative whose construction is fueled by Jefferson's writings and politics. Brown encodes his sentimental fiction and autobiographical narrative with fugitive plots and subplots he uses to produce a semi-autobiographical and almost ethnographic piece of fiction. The novel takes its shape from the traditional mode of sentimentalist narrative and seems to speak through the multiple interwoven plots which act as a tethering thread that hold the text together.

First it uses plot to point to the generational challenge of the family structure. These many plots demonstrate the fragile ligature between parent and child. Sensibly, Brown dedicates much the opening of the first chapter, "The Negro Sale" to promoting an understanding of the practice of miscegenation demonstrated through what he calls, "the best evidence of the degraded and immoral condition of the relation of master and slave in the United States of America" (45). While anti-miscegenation laws exist, and "the marriage relation, the oldest and most sacred institution given to man by his Creator is unknown and unrecognized in the slave laws of the United States" (46), Brown points to the practical reality of trade and sale within the family structure. These fractures are demonstrated in *Clotel*, *Althesa*, and *Currer's* experience of family and marriage. *Currer*, *Althesa*, and *Clotel* are sold across the continent; *Clotel* is separated from her daughter Mary (who becomes a house servant for Horatio Green, her father, and Gertrude, Green's wife); and after Mr. Morton's death (*Althesa's* owner/husband), *Althesa* and her two daughters are not successfully manumitted and freed. All of these women, comprising three generations, are sold to various locations in the United States and experience different conditions of servitude. Slavery is a system with many forms.

Specifically, through his fiction, Brown draws a dividing line between the enslaved and free human experiences that is based on both geographic position and maternal lineage. The wildness of Brown's plot as it visits Louisiana, Ohio, Missouri, Mississippi, Virginia and

Washington, DC feels both intentional and improvisational. And if not improvisational then certainly ambitious. The United States is depicted as a nation full of knowns and unknowns, a compendium of images and experiences in space. This compendium naturalizes and critiques the national philosophy and works to undo conventional, binary, and safer understandings of the United States of America. Brown's United States contains a national philosophy that is violent, and at times incoherent. An incredibly important feature of his work is his use of the sentimental style common to the era, the episodic segmentation of its chapters, his semi-autobiographical accounts, and invocation of plural forms in order to portray a landscape that may have been wholly unfamiliar to domestic and transatlantic popular audiences alike.¹⁷

Of course, the plots of Brown's novel tell the story of how oppression can be charted or mapped as both gendered and racialized. Katie Frye's discussion in "The Case Against Whiteness in William Wells Brown's *Clotel*" provides an important deconstruction of race and its function in the novel. Most importantly, her analysis speaks to the "instability of whiteness" (535), and the ways in which white narrative structures are subverted in order to provide a counter perspective. Frye writes:

Clotel has long been the victim of canonical displacement. Most scholars cannot get past the novel's labored prose, its historical inaccuracies and perhaps most importantly, its reliance on white narrative techniques. And yet these criticisms fail to account for the many narrative elements that boldly break with convention.

This break includes the text's subversive construction of whiteness. (Frye 539)

Clotel, as a performative novel, which professes the black experience in white settler colonial territory drives a counter narrative cloaked as a traditional slave narrative. This traditional slave

¹⁷ Again, see Holly Jackson's *American Blood*.

narrative underwent four distinct drafts from 1853 to 1867. Each draft was distinct and related character, plot, and geography to current events and conditions alive in the abolitionist and reconstruction projects. The drafts turned, as Brown himself did, from an abolition to recognition of Black achievement. In each draft, Brown details three generations of lives in sentimental and sometimes humorous episodes of everyday life, adventure and escape, and romantic scenes of heartbreak and violence. All of these adventures and violence remain contingent on racial identity in a white supremacist system.

In *Clotel*, Brown works with particular attention to the situation of black women through his characters Clotel, Currer, and Althesa. This attention amounts to a proto-black feminist reading of the text. At the character level this depiction of black womanhood as agent and hero goes beyond the confines of patriarchal formations of sexual concubinage and enslavement in order to develop connections between Thomas Jefferson's expansionism and Brown's critique. Clotel relays the pragmatic problem of a nation that was founded on the premise of liberty and citizenship as an equal right, actually operates under the auspices of slave holding, the reproductive expansion of wealth and the exploitation of the land. One problem in approaching a black feminist reading of *Clotel* stems from the fact that the term feminism had not yet entered into popular or critical vernacular at the time of the writing of original *Clotel* manuscript. Yet Brown's subversive protagonist, Clotel, has a nearly constant eye toward freedom. Another subversive female character for instance is Brown's Georgiana Peck. This white, northern-educated, and abolitionist daughter of the South holds intense philosophical discourse with her husband Mr. Carlton and seeks to manumit her entire group of inherited slaves. It is important to note that Brown's work has been critiqued for having a light-skinned, mixed-race heroine. This tragic mullatta reading of the text elevates an important problem and non-progressive standpoint

of Brown's fiction. However, if we investigate the legal and economic systems interrogated in Brown's text, we must not forgive this move, but see what else is involved. Otherwise we fall into the same trap as Farrison, who doesn't see the way the anachronisms speak to a jumbled and variegated United States sociality or geography.

Scholar Katherine McKittrick reads *Clotel* through a black feminist geographical lens, promoting the idea that "The auction block [is] a site of human geography, intersections, stories, and expressions; it normalizes black pain, commodifies black working sexual bodies, and potentially motivates resistance to the naturalized place of black femininity" (68). From Brown's *Clotel* and photographs from a study of the auction blocks and geographic features of Virginia's Green Hill plantation, McKittrick writes that "racial positioning - of the auctioneer, the buyers, the onlookers, the enslaved - hold steady this domination through the gaze, the exchange of money, and bodily evaluations" (66). To McKittrick, a black female geography implies a performance: the use of space, audience, and time to communicate philosophies which antagonize the naturalized containment of and violence against black female bodies. Limiting our reading of Brown's work to a tragic mullatta reading elides the ongoing fugitive plots within the novel.

In order to acknowledge the feminist values presented in the novel we should consider a literary critic writing after feminism on plot and structure. Plot works in multiple ways in the text. In Rita Felski's *Literature After Feminism* we are reminded that: "Fiction means plot" and that "plot is an indispensable handle, a way of getting a grip on a large and nebulous mass of words...it is hard to know whether plot is a matter of form or content" (95). So it is in Brown's work. Plot is a matter of form – he plots out different geographical spaces and his content performs in these spaces the violent and dehumanizing impacts of slavery on black and brown

bodies. This quote supports our understanding that outside of feminism, plot is a tool which provides a point of access for the reader. Brown's work aimed for sensation and popularity in his abolitionist rendering of the period. The fictional plotting of content and form: these characters out of slavery, by way of Canada, the UK and simply out of the south promote a philosophical approach. Brown utilizes geography in a black feminist manner in order to territorialize the United States as geographical site of ideal and material conflict. By engaging with the tools of domination and racial positioning, Brown illuminates the ongoing quest for freedom.

By occupying and formulating the black female perspective in these novels, Brown describes the un-geographic and constructs a United States national identity that counters the expansionist position of Jefferson's *Notes*. In doing so he reckons with the relationship between the material and there metaphoric.¹⁸ Philosophy is where this gap is bridged. Brown plots the works in the tradition of pragmatic philosophy to promote a distinctly black reality of resistance, and resilience. In *Clotel*, we begin at the auction block and each of the subsequent episodes frame, complicate, and compound one another. Voices and bodies are pitted against each other through conflicting accounts, dialects, and appeals. The position of Clotel (and Curren and Althesa as mixed-race proxies) speak to the complicated generational aspects of slavery. The misclassification of these characters, and invisibilization of their plots, undermines their rhetorical value and the fugitivity of their content.

Brown's fiction in *Clotel* intends to capture the ways in which the United States had been "materially changed" by the Fugitive Slave Law (Brown 43). It illustrates the various navigable and un-navigable spaces of the United States as a discontinuous social terrain. Canada (and later

¹⁸ According to McKittrick, that "part of the work involved in thinking about black geographies is to recognize that the overlaps between materiality and language are long-standing in the diaspora, and that the legacy of racial displacement, or erasure, is in contradistinction to and therefore evidence of, an ongoing critique to both geography and the 'un geographic'" (xiii).

England) are designated as areas in which freedom and liberty are attainable objectives. By exploring the ways in which Brown's *Clotel* represents tensions between the captive, the fugitive, and the free, and understanding what he deems navigable and not, we may further understand the ways in which his work is in conversation with Thomas Jefferson's *Notes*. Brown uses *Clotel* and its characters, plot, and geographies in order to engage with the fundamental political and social binds of his time through sentimentalist fiction.

Sentimental Performance in *Clotel*

Traditional sentimentalist narratives emphasize emotional subjectivity and tend to be considered indulgent and excessive. Even the author's own experience of fugitivity is handled in a sentimental manner. As Brown considers a flight to Canada after introducing his mother's death he is able to use sentimentalism in order to territorialize freedom. He reflects on Canada through a mode of sentimental brooding saying: "When once the love of freedom is born in the slave's mind, it always increases and brightens, and William having heard so much about Canada, where a number of his acquaintances had found a refuge and a home, he heartily desired to join them" (22). This fugitive narrative which names William in third person reveals an autobiographical perspective which imagines a fugitive future outside of the constraints of slavery in the United States. The humanity inferred by the term "acquaintance" is rich with potential for a deepened relationship. This suggestion counters the definition of slave as legal property. Brown builds even more texture in his depiction of black relationships and the surrounding national geography through the progressive description of Canada by associating it with freedom. Using parallel structure, he mimics the "brightening" of freedom with the incremental transition from "refuge" to "home" (22). This expands his fugitive claim beyond the autobiographical and individual perspective and into the collective story. Through *Clotel*, Brown

makes expansive use of found, imagined, and discovered experiences in order to produce performative and speculative temporal and geographic representation of the United States after a period of western expansion.

Brown also deploys tangential episodes with text pulled from real and imagined newspapers. In chapter III, “The Negro Chase,” Natchez is the geographic site of the very public performance of a slave’s lynching. By providing a graphic account of an enslaved person’s death and of the sheer volume of forced and invited attendees, Brown pushes sentimentalist limits with grotesque content. It goes: “nearly 4,000 slaves were collected from the plantations in the neighborhood to witness this scene” (67). Here Brown emphatically points to a large scale, context-preserving violence of this activity.

Brown’s novel includes formal sentimentalism in its desire to describe domestic space and to evince Clotel as a pragmatic heroine. To do this he must use geographic spaces in order to display various configurations of fugitivity. Two good examples of this are Vicksburg (where Clotel will soon be sold) and Richmond (where Clotel resides with her master and the father of her child). Brown closes Chapter III, “The Negro Chase” by mentioning that “there are hundreds of Negroes who run away and live in the woods,” and his prose shifts to an advertisement from a Vicksburg newspaper: “A runaway’s den was discovered on Sunday, near the Washington Spring, in a little patch of woods” (67). These domestic scenes territorialize a national philosophy of fugitivity and survival. It is around this point in the novel when Clotel emerges as a pragmatic heroine in the novel of her own name. Brown depicts a classic trope of sentimentality in his domestic scene in the book’s subsequent chapter IV, “The Quadroon’s Home.” In this chapter Brown postures Clotel in hiding—cloistered, really, as mistress/slave concubine shrouded by forest—in an ornate, southern Gothic landscape, of a “beautiful cottage”

which is “almost hidden amongst the trees...piazzas...clematis...and passion flowers” (68). Here the situation of an enslaved sexual concubine is naturalized in a domestic scene. In this scene, Clotel rejects Horatio Green out of an elevated moral dignity. Brown describes Clotel’s “high poetic nature” as one that “regarded reality rather than the semblance of things” (69). This fierce commitment to reality, rather than appearance is key to understanding Brown’s pragmatic philosophy rendered by the enslaved condition. By this I mean his domestic *Clotel* proves herself to be pragmatic in her own right. Brown goes on further: “Happy as Clotel was in Horatio’s love, and surrounded by an outward environment of beauty, so well adapted to her poetic spirit, she felt these incidents with inexpressible pain” (69). The use of anachronistic content and highly stylized prose allow Brown’s plots to integrate various scenes, characters, and narratives in order to demonstrate the effects of slavery on the union. The grandiose nature of his plots and performances position Brown’s philosophy *in* his narrative storytelling. Elements are urgently and quickly juxtaposed not to describe exactly, but to assemble a sensational and performative text. Here in the span of a few pages we see what could have been a tragic mullatta figure in a heartbroken Clotel revised into a heroine with moral agency. By juxtaposing Clotel with maroon communities, we can see a pluralized narrative which describes the pragmatic reality: political, alternative, overlapping, and plotted.

Strategic Performance in Clotel

Brown performs his strategic sentimentalism, with its grandiose sensibility highlighting social and political realities, in order to sensationalize the topic of slavery for transatlantic audiences. According to scholar Jennifer Schell, the novel’s construction also reveals how “Brown manipulated his performances of the south for different audiences and social agendas” (65). Brown manipulates the use of performance and displays of performance in order to critique

conventions of economy and culture. The scenes reproduce elements of ante-bellum racial culture in order to perform or represent episodes of fugitivity and escape. Often, the escape routes don't work and the fugitivity is interrupted by death, or capture. While West considers first-wave thinkers Thomas Jefferson and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the second wave of left romanticism is represented in the works of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Karl Marx: two thinkers "obsessed with the problem of revolution" (154). Brown is similarly obsessed with the problem of abolition. Writing a little later, Brown utilizes sentimentalism as a tool in order to highlight the philosophical contradiction of slavery as moored to the nation's founding economic and social principles.

In this three-generation story of enslaved women, Brown details the regional variation of socio-legal impacts on human captivity and the fugitive's quest for freedom. Mother and two young daughters are sold in a scene at a negro ball (a formal slave auction for sexual concubines common in the promiscuous south) and the novel opens with their sale to various families. The particular project of these representations of fugitivity intend to subvert the narratives of the United States as one, unified entity. Schell elucidates this matter by commenting on how

Brown's various performances of southern life and history serve to undermine the stability of the South's regional identity; this gives Brown a place from which both he and his characters can protest against the hypocrisy of a nation that promises freedom to all men but tolerates the enslavement of African Americans.

(49)

By deconstructing the unity of regional and national experience, Brown makes a clear formal connection to Jefferson's text and the underlying anti-feminist and anti-indigenous philosophies

of western-expansionism and agrarian capitalism undergirded by the expansion of chattel slavery.

Later in the fictional portion of the text, in the chapter titled, “Escape of Clotel,” Brown engages in a particularly Black voice that plays trickster by employing multiple characters and scenes on the high road to Canada. This scene of Fugitivity is embedded with expectation that we would be looking at Clotel – however she is yet hidden behind this façade of a scene. Not so – to read this text as such would to read like Farrison. And incorrectly read the contradiction of a title chapter’s form and content as distinct and immaterial. This embedded narrative itself involves two fugitive slaves (slave-slave) masquerading as a catcher-slave duo; a trick called “ride and tie” (148). This scene relays information on geography, political structures and overlapping narratives. The dramatic irony of the ride and tie scene, renders the reader similarly bound, expecting one narrative and receiving another. This collective story—held in subsidiary characters and plot lines—is used like the maroon societies in the sentimental domestic. Here the sentimental roadside scene is used to pry open our potential understanding of Clotel’s escape experience.

Disguised as a free, male slave holder—Mr. Johnson—Clotel relates that she is to pass on to England, and that William, the generous mechanic, is to commence to Canada (150). All of these instances point to a common fugitivity which includes the transatlantic distance or escape from the United States as an entire nation, not just the region of the South. These compounding observations provide evidence of an uninhabitable and unnavigable United States. Brown highlights fugitivity both through escape episodes as well as through his bold reformulation of events which bespoke a queering of the social landscape. This queering is an abolitionist project: the culmination of the desire for revolution and freedom. Scholar Michael Berthold honors

Clotel's disguise as Mr. Johnson as a plain "renunciation of identity" in his article, "Cross-dressing and forgetfulness of self in William Wells Brown's 'Clotel'" (1993). In his reading, by renouncing her female presentation, Clotel also shirks her slave's garb. This article discusses "Brown's tempering of Clotel's cross-dressings, [and] his governance of the sexual and social possibilities of her male disguises" and is summarily more interested in borrowing from William and Ellen "Craft's script of escape" than producing an entirely new mode of fugitive thought with his fiction (20-21). Berthold argues that the ways in which Brown's reproduction of the Crafts' narrative endorses a "masquerade" which "brilliantly parodies slavery's arrangements of race, gender, and property...allowing both Ellen and Clotel an intermittent empowerment" (21). He also reads their "masculine recontextualizations of bold female stories of escape" as requiring the implied liberty of male-bodiedness. However, I argue that if we accept this reading, we may miss the underlying possibilities of queer desire alive in the work, as suggested by the correspondent's curiosity. This queer desire is less about parody and more about fugitive desire, a desire which transgresses the heteronormative social conventions in sentimentalist fictions in order to produce other ways of living and being.

Brown (re)tells scenes many times and in different voices in order to compare outcomes to select variables. For instance, the great turn in Clotel's failed escape to England is the revelation of an account by a "correspondent of one of the Southern newspapers" that was suspicious of Clotel/Mr. Johnson (153). The attribution confers power to the media as well as the individual correspondent. This correspondent is particularly and curiously interested in Mr. Johnson physical appearance and seeks to out Clotel/Mr. Johnson as a provocative figure of intrigue. He writes:

One bright starlight night, in the month of December last, I found myself in the cabin of the steamer Rodolph, then lying in the port of Vicksburg, and bound to Louisville. I had gone early on board . . . amused myself with watching the appearance of the passengers as they dropped in, one after another, and I being a believer in physiognomy, formed my own opinion of their characters. (153)

The dramatic style in which the correspondent's voice introduces his claim is meant to be persuasive. By going beyond a plain description and performing the voice of the character, Brown's pragmatic teeth show their edges, if even in a sweet sentimental style. His correspondent describes himself as a "believer in physiognomy" which tells us much about his political position as physiognomy is a particularly racist science used as a tool of oppression in this period against black and brown bodies to deem them inhuman. The correspondent also acts to rewrite the scenes as we have just "experienced" them as readers from the vantage of *Clotel*. Brown nurtures a sense of the homoerotic with the correspondent's description of *Clotel*'s fugitive companion William as a "strapping Negro" and Mr. Johnson as delicate, "mysterious and unusual" while the correspondent complains of his aroused "curiosity" (153). I do not understand this scene of homoeroticism to be about queer desire in itself, but to be a fictional performance of erotic desire that seeks to highlight the complicity and participation of everyday people in a largely economic, geographic and political situation. By profiling *Clotel* and outing her to the newspaper, the correspondent displays the power of everyday whites in this period of the Fugitive Slave Law.

Conclusion

The fact that we find texts reckoning *across disciplines* with Brown's work over time supports a philosophical reading of *Clotel*. Before Brown's birth, enslavement, and prominent writing career, the 1803 Louisiana Purchase was executed by Jefferson in an unconventional and highly contested presidential move which led to increased development of the economy of slave exploitation in the South. The philosophical discourse in Brown's text responds to the fictional development of a nation and its complications and pragmatic realities. The text is flexible and pliable in a way that opens it up to multiple readings: it is pragmatic in its understanding of social and legal formations that seek to contain binary structures of blackness and gender as well as paternal law and order by complicating structures of family/inheritance.

Simply, Brown's fiction intends to highlight a generational ambivalence that comes into direct conflict with a national philosophy of liberty and justice for all. Brown problematizes the positive geographic and economic expansionist philosophies by describing the political and personal realities of a national reliance on chattel slavery. He sees this as an urgent discursive project in the American novel and his premiere text is more than a "memorable effort," as Farrison remarks (231). *Clotel*, as the first African American novel, is a matter of pragmatic philosophy. Brown's pragmatic heroines, and undone sentimental traditions demonstrate and gesture away from the status quo national philosophy of slavery and western expansion. Overall Brown's Narrative discusses the individual and collective freedoms as he questions them and complicates the conventions of the time. His critical national philosophy has more to do with deconstructing ideas of coherency and uniformity in the United States in the fugitive slave era.

In this essay I have demonstrated Brown's *Clotel* as a sensical act of national philosophy rather than an esoteric act of sentimental fiction. Brown interprets transatlantic eighteenth and nineteenth century discourse through a corrugated narrative of constraint, romance, and freedom.

Many readings discard *Clotel* as a smothering construction overflowing with ineffective detail: a work that lacks traditional, canonical or national importance. I argue that Brown's critical study of Thomas Jefferson as a popular and political figure must be regarded as a textual act of philosophical agency. Brown invokes Jefferson in order to perform the monstrosity of a United States territory that segregates its inhabitants based on false and damaging claims of white racial supremacy and anti-feminism. In my reading of Thomas Jefferson's *Notes*, we see Jefferson as a speculative figure: his sights arraigned on western expansion and United States Imperialism. Brown's critical project evinces both the freedoms and unfreedoms rife throughout an expanding territory. He indicts a nation as a whole through his pragmatic national philosophy. By plotting his evidence throughout the United States, Brown's work makes a solid case for abolition which can be clearly seen through this twenty-first century reading. While this is a relatively brief reading of one of Brown's fictional novels, more work must be done to engage with the narrative structures that he and fellow authors use in order to bring these fundamentally true episodes to life.

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