

EMISFÉRICA

Ellen Craft's Radical Techniques of Subversion

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Parts and Props

In December of 1848, William and Ellen Craft—married African-American slaves from two different plantations in rural Georgia—devised an ingenious plan for escape from chattel slavery that would make them (in)famous in America and eventually throughout the British Isles. In their escape narrative, *Running a Thousand Miles to Freedom: The Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery*, originally published in London in 1860¹, William Craft recounted the successful, albeit unusual, plan that surfaced in his mind.

We were married, and prayed and toiled on till December 1848, at which time (as I have stated) a plan suggested itself that proved quite successful, and in eight days after it was first thought of we were free from the horrible trammels of slavery [...] Knowing that slaveholders have the privilege of taking their slaves to any part of the country they think proper, it occurred to me that, as my wife was nearly white, I might get her to disguise herself as an invalid gentleman, and assume to be my master, while I could attend as his slave, and that in this manner we might effect our escape. (Crafts 1999 [1860]: 20-1)

William notes that, upon first mentioning this plan to Ellen, “she shrank from the idea” out of fear that it would be “almost impossible for her to assume that disguise, and travel a distance of 1,000 miles across the slave States” (21). Yet, the narrative suggests, after Ellen pondered her possible life under the legal system of slavery—which did not recognize Ellen as anything other than “mere chattel”—Ellen decided that such a plan, albeit dangerous, was worth an attempt (21). In her words: “Therefore, if you will purchase the disguise, I will try to carry out the plan” (21).

Subsequently, William and Ellen worked together to covertly acquire and collate the various sartorial mechanisms needed for Ellen’s disguise as an upper-class white gentleman as well as the necessary alibis required for the escape. While William, for instance, purchased multiple articles of men’s clothing “piece by piece” in “different parts of town,” including “green spectacles” to hide her eyes, Ellen made a pair of “trowsers” (21, 24). Ellen’s position as a “favourite slave in the family” and “a ladies’ maid” also proved advantageous, for she was granted “a little room to herself” where a “chest of drawers,” made previously by William, was present (21). Ellen kept the articles of clothing purchased by William, along with the pants, stored and locked inside the chest of drawers until the night before the escape. Likewise, the timing of the Craft’s escape near Christmas gave them an opportunity to obtain alibis. Specifically, the custom of some of “the best slaveholders” was to grant “their favourite slaves a few days’ holiday at

Christmas time” (22). Hence, Ellen obtained an individual pass from “her mistress,” while William obtained one from the cabinet-maker for whom he worked (22). Interestingly, neither Ellen nor William Craft was able to read what their respective passes said. Nonetheless, the passes were fundamental to the perilous four-day staging that was about to occur: without them, the Crafts left little time, if any, between their escape, their respective master’s discovery of their absence, and possible inference of their plan. Thus, with two day passes and a collection of masculine garments and accoutrements, the Crafts were steps closer to escaping their plight as chattel and embracing their dream of freedom.

Yet, the Crafts had additional practical and logistical concerns that needed to be solved by additional layers of disguise and impersonation. Specifically, two quagmires needed immediate solutions: how to hide Ellen’s feminine face, but also, more importantly, how Ellen, unable to read and write, would sign Mr. William Johnson’s, signature. This last act was important, since as William notes, “it was customary for travellers to register their names in the visitor’s book at hotels, as well as in the clearance or Custom-house book at Charleston, South Carolina” (23). In an act of imaginative agency, Ellen devised a solution: she designed a poultice to bind her right hand up in to feign injury—and hence the inability to write—so she could “with propriety ask the officers to register my name for me” (24). Ellen’s impersonation of the ability to write, or what the late critic Lindon Barrett termed Ellen’s “pantomime of literacy,” (Barrett 1997: 324) was aided by a second poultice that Ellen designed to be worn “under her chin, up the cheeks, and to tie over the head” that disguised both Ellen’s facial expressions as well as her “beardless chin” (Crafts 1999: 24). The effect of these tactics, of Ellen “being muffled in the poultices,” as William notes, in addition to Ellen later pretending on the train to be deaf, was to avoid the conversation of which “most Yankee travellers are passionately fond” (24). These props and parts, however, were also integral to Craft’s ability to surreptitiously maneuver in the esoteric world of mid-nineteenth century upper-class white slaveholders, a society where black slaves were absolutely forbidden to participate as citizens.

In what follows, I examine Ellen’s Craft’s escape through the analytical lens of performance, reinterpreting her adroit embodied portrayal of Mr. William Johnson as a series of *performances*. Put differently, when Ellen Craft says, as previously mentioned, “Therefore if you purchase the disguise, I will carry out the plan,” the verb “carry out” is an action—something is being made or done.² In my analysis, this *doing* indexes the concatenation of acts that Ellen performs to stage her temporarily infirm white male slaveholder avatar. Yet the impersonation of the fictional Mr. William Johnson was itself a performance. Ellen Craft, in other words, acted out a role encoded with behaviors and gestures; this role was a performance. This role was also a fundamentally subversive one, for in performing as Mr. Johnson, Ellen Craft and her husband William were able to evade, resist, and escape from United States-based chattel slavery, a juridical system that brutally and violently demarcated black bodies as forms of property, as consumable objects or mere things.³ Yet I also go further and examine Ellen Craft’s performance of a curtsy before an audience in the British Isles in 1851 as an appropriation of a classed *and* gendered behavior not associated with black women, particularly slaves. In doing so,

Ellen disrupts the boundaries and limits of 19th century conceptions of beauty, femininity, and blackness and the manner in which those discursive formations converge. Consequently, Ellen Craft's subversive transgression of taut 19th century racial, class, and gender categories through the mechanism of performance warrants our full attention.

Performance theory, particularly black performance studies, and historical studies of racial formation aid in orienting and grounding my arguments. I am motivated, for instance, by Paul Gilroy's argument that slaves employed dissident tactics, such as mimicking their masters, which can be conceptualized as "performance skills" (Gilroy 1995: 14). Gilroy, moreover, cites Ellen Craft's "thespian skills in crossing the line of both 'race' and gender" as emblematic of such theatrical tools (15). Likewise, E. Patrick Johnson has enumerated disobedient acts committed by black slaves—such as prevaricating to their masters, breaking tools, and skimping on chores—as what he terms "embodied performances of resistance" (Johnson 2006: 453). Meanwhile, sociologist Erving Goffman's indexing of performance as "all activity of an individual which occurs during a time marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers" is useful when applied to Ellen Craft's performances in calling attention to Craft's different enactments of behaviors before sundry audiences and, particularly for the escape, unbeknownst spectators (Goffman 2004 [1959]: 63). Yet Craft's most careful observer was perhaps her own husband who, the morning of the escape, had Ellen "dress in the disguise and stand out on the floor. I found that she made a most respectable looking gentleman" (Crafts 1999: 24). Hence, in addition to drawing upon scholarship by Saidiya Hartman and David Roediger, I consider Ellen Craft's performances through a historically inflected and performance-based conceptual framework.

Being and Realness: From Costume to Embodiment

"Mr. William Johnson" emerged as a live, flesh and blood man when Ellen Craft left her plantation in the guise of a white male slaveholder, parted ways with her husband, and proceeded to successfully purchase train tickets for *himself* and "his" slave. William describes this scene the morning of the escape in their escape narrative.

We shook hands, said farewell, and started in different directions for the railway station. I took the nearest possible way to the train, for fear I should be recognized by some one, and got into the negro car in which I knew I should have to ride; but my *master* (as I will now call my wife) took the longer way round, and only arrived there with the bulk of the passengers. He obtained a ticket for himself and one for his slave to Savannah, the first port, which was about two hundred miles off. My master then had the luggage stowed away, and stepped into one of the best carriages. (Crafts 1999 [1860]: 28)

Interestingly, in the text, William re-stages Ellen's racial-gendered shift to Mr. Johnson—and his role as Mr. Johnson's slave—by immediately ceasing to refer to Ellen as his wife. William's reference to Ellen in male pronouns, or the moniker "my master," lasts for twenty-two pages, the duration of the escape in the escape narrative. While I later probe the concomitant class dynamics in the train cars, I want to first begin thinking about the

conceptual process by which Ellen transformed a sartorial disguise into an embodied creature. How, in other words, was Ellen able to continually, over the course of four days, perilously become what she was not: an upper-class white gentleman traveling with “his” slave? Thus, I am not only interested in the action, or in performance studies parlance, the *doing* that is Ellen’s performance, but also in the *being*.

In that regard, I want to coax into conversation Ellen Craft’s 19th century embodiment and “being” of William Johnson and the contemporary category of “realness” staged by queer people of color in Jennie Livingston’s 1991 film *Paris is Burning*. Livingston’s film, shot in New York City between 1987 and 1989, is a visual documentation of the drag ball circuit created by black and Latino gay men, transvestites, and transsexuals. “Realness,” in the film, is a competitive category predicated and judged on the ability of the contestants to perform gendered, and often class, roles with accuracy and aplomb. In the words of veteran performers Dorian Corey and Pepper LaBeija, realness is defined as the following:

To be able to blend, that’s what realness is. If you can pass the untrained eye, or even the trained eye, and not give away the fact that you’re gay, that’s when its realness. The idea of realness is to look as much as possible like your straight counterpart. The realer you look means you look like a real woman or you look like a real man. A straight man. It’s not a take off or a satire. It’s being able to be this. (Livingston 2005 [1991])

Hence, realness is as much about the sanctity of the ball space as the ability to “be” in the outside world, for true realness encompasses the performative ability to evade the violence enacted on queer bodies of color. Again, in Dorian Corey’s words, “when you’re undetectable, when they can walk out of that ballroom into the sunlight and onto the subway, get home, and still have all their clothes, and no blood running out their bodies, those are the femme realness queens.” I am careful not to conflate the performative tactic of realness with Ellen’s performance of being Mr. William Johnson, for the circumstances—the spectators, everyday life, and the high-stakes of escape for Ellen and William Craft, for instance—are markedly different. There are also significant historical limits to such a comparison, most notably, that while the contestants in *Paris is Burning* inhabit socially circumscribed bodies, they at least have ownership of their bodies and free will to move in society in a way slaves could never have imagined, let alone enacted, when regarded as commodities to be purchased and sold. To be clear, then, in discussing the tactic and category of realness alongside Ellen Craft’s performances, I attempt to reveal the complex theatrics involved in the actual embodiment, the *being*, of Mr. William Johnson.

First, in becoming William Johnson, Ellen Craft had to perform and enact a white male being with a distinct upper-class sensibility. Let us recall the class hierarchies that immediately become evident in William’s description of the different train coaches where Ellen and William travel, William’s route to the “negro car” and Ellen’s “longer way round” to “one of the best carriages,” where we can infer that black slaves, like William, were unwelcome. Historian Barbara Y. Welke has noted the class, gendered, and racial

dimensions of train cars in her discussion of the court case of Mary Jane Chilton, a black woman who sued the St. Louis and Iron Mountain Railway in 1870 after she was physically removed from a ladies car in Missouri, two months earlier, after attempting to board it. She notes:

The train Mary Jane Chilton had boarded, typical of trains of the period, had two passenger cars: a ladies' car and a smoker. Only women and women accompanied by children rode in the ladies' car, while in the smoker rode all manner of men traveling alone, some of whom were smoking and drinking. (Welke 1995: 261)

Hence, the spatial logics of the train produced clearly demarcated gender cleavages—white women and children in one car, “all manner of [white] men” in another—as well as racial limits, qua “separate but equal,” since black slaves were not allowed to ride in either car, due to the fact that, as William notes, “every coloured person's complexion is *prima facie* evidence of his being a slave” (Crafts 1999: 24-5). While it is possible that Ellen could have ridden in the ladies' car by virtue of her “white” appearance, William notes that this would not have been a possibility, primarily because a white woman traveling with a black slave would have been implausible. Specifically, William notes, “we knew it was not customary in the South for ladies to travel with male servants” and despite Ellen's white skin, her “not being able to write” would have made trying to pass as white woman with a black male servant “quite impossible” (24). Hence, Ellen boarded what was probably a smoker's car and immediately segued into a virtually seamless impersonation of a moneyed white male slaveholder.

Similar to Ellen Craft's dangerous staging, the studied performative skills inherent in drag ball performances of “realness” in *Paris in Burning* had salient class aspirations as well. This class mimicry is evinced by some of the judged categories in which the performers compete, such as “Town and Country,” “Executive Realness,” “High Fashion Eveningwear,” “Schoolboy,” or as one commentator announces “High Fashion Women's Sportswear: the Poconos versus the Catskills.” Throughout, moreover, the film visually alludes to signifiers of wealth in 1980s New York, such as images of condo advertisements, the popular television show *Dynasty*, fashion spreads, Clinique counters, and displays of expensive clothes at Giorgio Armani and Chanel boutiques. Most important, however, are the bodies themselves, the bodies of unsuspecting well-dressed white denizens of the city contrasted with the minority subjects in the film who constantly refer to themselves as poor and express their desire to experience, even if temporarily, the privileges that economic elites take for granted. Performer Venus Extravaganza perhaps most explicitly expresses such a sentiment when she states, “I would like to be a spoilt, rich white girl [...] They don't really have to struggle with finances.” Thus, what appears over and over again in the film are the pleasures of white privilege, the lack of surveillance and class mobility attached to such bodies, and the competitive emulation of class identities that the ball participants perform.

The irony, of course, is that the performers' deliberate imitations expose the inherently performative nature of whiteness as a stable, coherent, literally *real* identity. Realness, as a competitive category, isolates the identity of white, upper-class heteronormativity and

de-familiarizes it by theatricalizing it. Thus, through the performances and the performers themselves, what was once a restrictive ontological category is now *itself* interpreted as a constantly staged performance. Yet, this knowledge comes from witnessing the performances themselves. Peggy Phelan's careful delineation between performance and ontology in her discussion of the film is of use here.

White women like myself have been encouraged to mistake performance for ontology—to believe that the role is real, and thus sufficient to constitute an identity, a sense of purpose, a reason for being. If performance can provide a substitute real then “identity” can truly be an invention—not something susceptible to some external facts (biological, sexual, economic) which prohibit our access to “femininity,” “beauty,” “glamour,” “power,” “wealth,” or whatever it is we desire. But the only way we can see if performance is an adequate substitute for ontology is through the staging of performances. (Phelan 1996: 105)

As Phelan asserts, the film debunks the idea that claims to upper-class lifestyles are automatic privileges of and intrinsic to stable identities, such as whiteness, because the performers vividly illustrate how easily they can copy them. Thus, the power of “realness” as a competitive category is that it reveals the inherently performative nature of the embodied practices that compose identity.

Again, despite clear divergences in historical and spatial contexts, the ability of performance in *Paris is Burning* to reveal identity itself as a series of enactments and props informs my thinking of the subversive potential of Ellen Craft's ontological rendering of Mr. William Johnson. Specifically, I am interested in how performances become regarded as stable and coherent identities. To be clear, fugitive slave Ellen Craft did not participate in a judged competition nor did she surgically alter her body, like some performers in the film. Once the four-day escape was complete, Ellen Craft only utilized her escape costume for the abolitionist lecture circuit or, later, to pose for an engraving. Yet, as we will soon see, in her ability to seamlessly mimic and embody 19th century white masculinity, even in times of distress, she demonstrated the pliability of upper-class white masculinity as a stable identity. Ellen Craft, in other words, demonstrated that the identity of a 19th century white gentleman was, in fact, an embodied role that took substance through its iteration in the social world.

A significant challenge to the Crafts' freedom occurred on 24 December 1848, as the Crafts attempted to board a train in Baltimore, Maryland en-route to the free territory of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. An officer of the train, upon seeing William, stopped him and told him he must have his master leave the train and come to an office to verify he had the right to take William along. Ellen, in the guise of William Johnson, left the carriage where she thought she was already safe and prepared to confront the officer. Here is an excerpt of their encounter:

On entering the room we found the principal man, to whom my master said, “Do you wish to see me, sir?” “Yes,” said this eagle-eyed officer; and he added, “It is against our rules, sir, to allow any person to take a slave out of Baltimore into

Philadelphia, unless he can satisfy us that he has the right to take him along.”
“Why is that?” asked my master, with more firmness than could be expected.
“Because, sir,” continued he, in a voice and manner that almost chilled our blood,
“if we should suffer any gentleman to take a slave past here into Philadelphia; and
should the gentleman with whom the slave might be travelling turn out not to be
his rightful owner; and should the proper master come and prove that his slave
escaped on our road, we shall have him to pay for; and therefore, we cannot let
any slave pass here without receiving security to show, and to satisfy us, that it is
all right.” (Crafts 1999: 45-6)

At this point, a crowd of “bustling passengers” begins to develop to witness the interaction, a few, William notes, saying “Chit, chit, chit” out of sympathy for William’s “master,” because “they thought my master was a slaveholder and invalid gentleman, and therefore it was wrong to detain him.” When asked by the officer if “some gentleman in Baltimore” could “endorse for him,” Ellen-cum-William Johnson replied, “No,” and added, “I bought tickets in Charleston to pass us through to Philadelphia, and therefore you have no right to detain us here” (46). Suddenly, just when it seemed that William and Ellen Craft would not be able to escape after all, “the bell rang for the train to leave” and the officer, in agitation, let them go and told a clerk to “run and tell the conductor to ‘let this gentleman and slave past’” (47). Ellen and William Craft were allowed back on the train, albeit in separate carriages, finally able to continue to the freedom promised in Philadelphia.

Ellen Craft’s encounter with the recalcitrant conductor illustrates that Ellen could not rely on appearances alone to become a white gentleman, but had to forcefully and repeatedly enact that identity into being. Ellen’s firm and forceful language, for example, such as her exhortation to the officer “you have no right to detain us,” projects this identity into public space. The sympathetic spectators who witnessed the interaction, moreover, actively confirmed the identity of “Mr. William Johnson.” Paul Gilroy has noted that “without their active witnessing no performance can take place,” emphasizing the importance of audiences to their efficacy (Gilroy 1995: 32). Yet, in the case of Ellen Craft, the presence of an audience confirmed the plausibility of her performance. Their presence, in other words, supports the credibility of Mr. William Johnson as a stable identity, so much so that he ultimately does not need an “endorsement” to prove who he is. After all, to pose a hypothetical question, if the spectators believe that he is a *real* white gentleman and slaveholder, then why shouldn’t the conductor? Thus, Ellen’s performance of Mr. Johnson takes on meaning, form, and substance through social interactions and performative actions.

This loops us back to *Paris is Burning* in the cogent ability of Ellen’s performance(s) to ply apart identity as a series of acts enacted and performed in the public sphere, though the stakes here are, again, very different. In *Paris is Burning*, the performance of these identities, while very much a form of “being” for participants in the film, is also a form of play staged for entertainment as well as for the spaces of everyday life. Allan Kaprow notes that “playing with everyday life is often just paying attention to what is conventionally hidden” and the performers in *Paris is Burning* accomplish exactly that,

theatricalizing identity to show the artifice behind it (Kaprow 2004 [1997]: 161). This play may also be dangerous, however, for transgendered men expose themselves to very real risk of injury, if not death. In contrast, Ellen Craft's goal was never to permanently become a white male slaveholder, nor is it a form of play, when the demonstrated goal is to escape from chattel slavery. Yet, through the conduit of performance, Ellen Craft temporarily escaped from what Saidiya Hartman terms the "discursive constitution of blackness" that was sutured to the physicality of the slave or "the inescapable prison house of the flesh" (Hartman 1997: 57). Instead, by audaciously mimicking whiteness, Ellen appropriated a tightly guarded identity imagined, in the 19th century, as an ideology and a form of property (Robertson 1996). In that regard, Ellen's seamless performance of William Johnson demonstrated a keen knowledge of both what that identity meant and the high stakes of subversively impersonating that identity and making it real.

Prosthetic Performance

Ellen's performance of disability was perhaps the least normative of all the identities she portrayed and also the most dangerous, due to the sheer spectacularity of the costume. Ellen's impersonation of infirmity, or what I am terming *prosthetic performance*, required a manipulation of a poultice around her head and under her chin and a sling for her right hand in addition to a slowed gait, feigned physical pain and deafness, and the constant attention of "his" slave. The most visible and involved of Ellen's multiple disguises, Ellen's infirmity attracted the very heightened attention the Crafts were desperate to elude. Yet despite the layered bandages, Ellen's prosthetic performance was also regarded as "real." In fact, the intricate performance only served to *increase* the sympathies of those who came into contact with Ellen's persona during the four days of her performance.

The sling, in particular, served a pivotal role in Ellen's portrayal of "realness" in allowing her to impersonate what she could not actually execute: the ability to write. I noted earlier that Ellen's performance depended on her not only resembling a real white gentleman, but also on becoming one. Historian David Roediger has illuminated how "the pleasures of whiteness," such as the ability to purchase and own a black slave, "could function as a 'wage' for white workers" that enabled them to "accept their class positions by fashioning identities as 'not slaves' and as 'not Blacks'" (Roediger 1999 [1991]: 13).⁴ If so, then, the identity of whiteness, of *being* white, hinged on demarcations between "black" and "white," such as the ability to read and write, since black slaves were forbidden by law to do either. Yet, the ontology of white masculinity necessitated not just the ability to write, but also the concomitant *performance* of that ability. In other words, as Mr. William Johnson, Ellen would need to execute a signature. Thus, despite Mr. Johnson's putative "inflammatory rheumatism," the prop of disability was not sufficient on its own to prevent "him" from being expected to sign for "himself" (Crafts, 1999: 38). In an act of substitution, Ellen's sling stood in for and represented the ability to write. Lindon Barrett has discussed the substitution of the sling as a critical rejoinder to Ellen's white skin. He writes:

Thus, the bandaging of Ellen's hand is anything but an arbitrary element of the Craft's escape. Rather, as a substitute for literacy, it is the indispensable correlate to Ellen's racially ambiguous skin. In this context it is the ultimate sign of whiteness. It articulates or supplements a literacy that is only for the moment glaringly absent (Barrett 1997: 327).

The ability to write is therefore synonymous with what it means to be white. Literacy, to put differently, was one more piece of the armature that protected whiteness as a form of property. Ellen's sling, therefore, was a technology that allowed her to assume the identity of whiteness and its privileges, such as the ability to write, without needing to perform the crucial signature.

Ellen's sling was not just a substitution, but also a performance. In his *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*, Joseph Roach has noted that culture is transmitted primarily through acts of "surrogation" (Roach 1996: 2). In this vein, performance functions through substitutions. In his words:

I believe that the process of trying out various candidates in different situations—the doomed search for originals by continuously auditioning stand-ins—is the most important of the many meanings that users intend when they say the word *performance*. [...] Performance, in other words, stands in for an elusive entity that it is not but that it must vainly aspire both to embody and to replace (3).

Thus, if writing was signified and enacted by the execution of a signature, the sling substituted, or aspired to "embody and to replace," that act. The sling was a surrogate, then, for the ability and carrying out of writing, symbolized by the "white" and "male" hand underneath the bandage that, if not for injury, could act and *perform* as expected. In other words, the sling made William Johnson's infirmity legible, replacing and representing the signature no longer required, since "real" white male masculinity was above reproach.

The irony, of course, was that the sling contained a hand that was not white, male, or injured; rather, the sling safely hid the healthy, black female hand of Ellen Craft. The sling therefore conducted a tricky maneuver of substituting for the identity and skills of a literate white male slaveholder that did not really exist. Instead, the sling was a necessary substitute for Ellen's feminine illiterate hand that, upon discovery, would have been interpreted as "black" and negated all of Ellen's performances at once. The sling was an instrument of performance that helped bring white maleness into sharper relief just as black femininity was simultaneously brought out of focus. The sling, then, legitimated and made real Ellen's prosthetic performance by allowing her own hand and "blackness" virtually to disappear.

The sling was perhaps the primary impersonation *within* the larger repertoire of prosthetic performance Ellen enacted. Analogous to a watch with a complicated structure of interlocking springs and gauges, Ellen's sling was a mechanism of subterfuge within the larger network of props and performances crucial to her escape. This performance of

disability, however, only surfaced as “real” when it worked in tandem with the other disguises and props Ellen employed as “Mr. Johnson.” The effect of all the mechanisms of escape performing together was the composition of a script that rendered “William Johnson” as a disabled, legible, and real white male slaveholder ready to interact in the antebellum American world.

The Curtsy

On a cold December night in 1850, Ellen and William Craft—already (in)famous stateside—completed a transatlantic journey from Nova Scotia and arrived in Liverpool, England via the steam-ship S.S. *Cambria* to begin new careers as fugitive slaves lecturing abroad (Sterling 1979: 37). The Crafts, indeed, were fugitives, since their journey was also an escape from the enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law—signed into law by President Millard Fillmore on 18 September 1850—which threatened that “any black—fugitive or freeborn—could be seized and taken to the South on the word of any white” (ibid. 28-9). In the Crafts’ case, Ellen’s former owner, Robert Collins, wrote a personal appeal to President Fillmore for federal aid to assist in Ellen’s capture (ibid. 36). When rumors surfaced in abolitionist newspapers in Boston that Fillmore had granted Collin’s request and was sending six hundred soldiers to Boston to aid in Ellen’s retrieval, Ellen and William’s covert escape out of Boston, and eventually the United States, became that much more urgent (Heglar 2001: 85). Though Ellen was extremely sick upon arrival in Liverpool, she quickly recovered and eventually joined William on a speaking tour of Scotland with their compatriot, and former lecture partner in America, William Wells Brown (ibid.).

Together, this trio segued back into their former lecture pattern in the United States, with William Wells Brown often delivering an opening lecture that detailed the evils of slavery and rebuked the United States for its failure to abolish the abhorrent practice, while William Craft would recount to audiences the romantic and dangerous story of his and Ellen’s escape(s). In contrast to her earlier much more active role in the escape, Ellen’s role in these lectures was as a silent exhibition piece, a form of bodily evidence that evinced—by virtue of Ellen’s “white” appearance—that the escape did in fact occur. Thus, in deference to gender norms, Ellen’s role was a passive one in contradistinction to the active roles enacted by Williams Wells Brown and William Craft. Nevertheless, Ellen was often invited on-stage at the end of William’s narrative “in a tear-jerking scene” to take advantage of public sentiment (Andrews 1986: 98). The format proved successful as the three eventually lectured to a crowd of three thousand at the Glasgow Emancipation Society (GES) and afterwards gave four lectures at the Glasgow Trades’ Hall, where William Wells Brown also displayed his panorama against slavery as another form of abolitionist propaganda.⁵

William Wells Brown and the Crafts joined a prominent, albeit small, group of trans-Atlantic activists, all former slaves from the United States, who participated in the increasingly popular forum of the lecture stage as a theatrical space for resistance to slavery. These portable theatres of dissent were venues for gathering sentiment against slavery through the display of fugitive slave bodies as well as their own lectures on

slavery's ills. In doing so, these former slaves used the podium as a mode of resistance and a powerful way to *talk back* to the country that refused to recognize them as citizens. In England, where the abolitionist movement was better funded and more prestigious, these lectures were popular demonstrations of America's inability to govern itself as a nation and the horrific lived realities of black slaves, forced to flee to England (Sterling 1979: 38). Yet, these theatrical spaces were also important laboratories for fugitive slaves in self-fashioning and shaping their narratives, lecture styles, and performance skills (Andrews 1986). The success of this form of abolitionist theatre abroad, after all, depended on not only the sheer presence of these African-American lecturers, embodiments of slavery's abuses, but also on these lecturers producing coherent, organized, and powerful performances that could speak across national, regional, economic, and of course racial boundaries.⁶

In accordance with a 19th century Victorian sensibility that discouraged women from speaking in public, Ellen typically did not speak when she was seated on stage; yet, despite her silent exhibition, Ellen found another way to speak through her body. On 7 March 1851, *The Boston Liberator* ran an article—by way of the Scottish newspaper *The Dundee and Perth Advertiser*—regarding an anti-slavery meeting held “for the purpose of denouncing the American Fugitive Slave Bill and hearing addresses on the subject of American slavery by Messrs. Wm. Brown, Wm. Craft, and others.” Of the fifteen people listed, Ellen Craft appears to have been the only woman.

Several male abolitionists—black and white—presented comments at the meeting detailing America's failures as a nation before the audience responded to Ellen's presence. William Wells Brown stated in his speech that the “name of the United States is becoming a hissing and by-word in the mouths of the inhabitants of every clime. [...] There is not a road of territory over which the ‘stars and stripes’ fly, on which William and Ellen Craft, or myself, could be protected by law.” Immediately after Brown's speech concluded, William Craft was introduced and “received with loud cheering [as] the audience listened to the narration of his escape, with his wife, with intense interest.” After the speech was done and resolutions passed supporting Brown and the Crafts, the meeting concluded, but not without the audience demanding a response from Ellen:

When the meeting was about to disperse, a general wish was expressed that Mrs. Craft, who was seated on the platform, should present herself to the audience. She seemed rather reluctant to do so, but on the persuasion of the Provost and several other gentlemen, she consented to occupy a standing position on the left side of the former. She was most enthusiastically received. At first, she seemed abashed; but the cheering having continued, she courtesied gracefully, and retired. She is an intelligent and good-looking woman. From her color and contour of feature, no one would have thought that she had any African blood in her veins.”

The reporter clearly has a vested interest in the visual paradox of Ellen's visage—specifically the inability to discern the imprimatur of Ellen's blackness on a visual register, a “blackness” that is only evident in her equally invisible “African blood.”

Ellen's performance and execution of a curtsy was class-inflected behavior. While William Craft and William Wells Brown calibrated their speeches to translate their experiences as black slaves to European abolitionist audiences, Ellen did the same but through the corporeal language of performance. A curtsy was a gesture associated with notions of gentility, refinement, and elegance, traits that were associated with the upper class. These were characteristics, moreover, that were not typically associated with black women, especially former slaves. Diana R. Paulin's discussion of the 1882 play *The White Slave* is of use here, particularly her argument that "the numerous behavioral standards established for elite white women (refinement, chastity, submission to patriarchs)" were at odds with "the roles assigned to slaves (licentious, hard laboring, primitive)" (Paulin 2001: 257). Thus, "black women, whether or not they performed gentility successfully or even looked white, were still considered part of an inferior class" (257). Thus, we should not assume that Ellen Craft's "white" appearance negated her position as a fugitive African-American slave. The execution of a curtsy by black fugitive slave Ellen Craft was the appropriation of a behavior that was raced *and* classed.

In addition, Ellen Craft's curtsy is a performance for her 19th century audience that is in dialogue with a history of forced performance, even if the *mise-en-scène* of Ellen's staging is markedly different. The colonial history of forced performance, or what performance artist Coco Fusco calls "the other history of intercultural performance," references the imperialist practice of settlers, explorers, and even artists and photographers retrieving and displaying indigenous peoples in venues as varied as taverns, museums, World Fairs, and freak shows (Fusco 1994: 143). In the United States, forced performance was most closely linked to chattel slavery and the nefarious practices of forcing slaves to sing, dance, and perform frivolity, while linked in the coffle and/or sold on the auction block.⁷ These violent theatrical spaces, which performance scholar Dwight Conquergood calls "subjugated spaces of performance," caution against facile divisions between racial terror and audience enjoyment (Conquergood 2007 [2002]: 374).

Ellen's curtsy was also instructive, for in appropriating and performing a gesture that was the ultimate sign of middle-class white femininity, Ellen performed for her audience the manner in which she wished to be interpreted: as a refined lady. The curtsy, then, was also a performance of self for Ellen. Ellen's 19th century audience seemed to oblige without contest and, in doing so, committed the radical act of interpreting a black female fugitive slave as an "intelligent," "graceful," "good looking," and ultimately feminine woman.

In the 19th century, the boundaries between "black femininity" and "white femininity" were heavily policed and demarcated and this schism was particularly apparent when it came to the notion of beauty. In her essay "Racializing Femininity," Lola Young argues that the trope of beauty was heavily defended and utilized to prop up and legitimate racial sciences of the 19th century, such as craniology or eugenics, which used "beauty" as irrefutable proof of the "fitness" of some races in comparison to others. The bodies of black women were often contrasted against those of white women to cement these notions of beauty into place and, conversely, to establish their limits. She writes:

During this same period, when white women were praised for their delicacy and modesty, black female bodies were subjected to extensive scientific examination and placed on public display in fairs and examination as curios and freaks: one of the best known subjects of such an exhibition was Sarah Baartman. Assigned what would have been perceived as the contradictory title of the “Hottentot Venus” [...] Baartman was seen as representing the absolute difference between African and European classical standards of female beauty. (Young 1999: 71)

In racial terms, “beauty” for women of African descent was positioned in sharp relief to European beauty; the clear distinction between the two standards was supposed to be made evident, as Young argues, by the irony of the sobriquet “Hottentot Venus.” The same sentiments are evident in the Scottish newspaper reporter’s description of Ellen Craft, since Ellen’s refined physiognomy—her “contour of feature” as well as her “color”—should be in direct contradistinction to the “African blood” that is surely present in Ellen’s body. Yet her curtsy temporarily unhinged the racialized moorings of beauty and employed performance to reconfigure “beauty,” “femininity,” and “blackness” as terms synonymous with, rather than in opposition to, each other. Her audience responded in kind not only by witnessing her performance—but in their cheers, applause, and support—voiced their approval of Ellen’s gesture as a “lady” and their desire and/or willingness to interpret her as such. If Ellen’s adroit impersonation of a white male slaveholder demonstrated her ability to mimic and invert white maleness, her performance of a curtsy was a deceptively simple gesture that transgressed the limits of 19th century white femininity. In essence, Ellen’s curtsy was a showcase of her fluency with a trans-racial bodily vocabulary.

Endnotes

¹ *Running a Thousand Miles to Freedom* was published by the London publishing house of British abolitionist William Tweedie, whose press also distributed the *Anti-Slavery Advocate* for the Anglo-American Anti-Slavery Association (Crafts 1999 [1860]: xv).

² I reference Richard Bauman’s definition of performance as “the actual execution of an action” (Bauman 1989: 262).

³ I am thinking here of Sara Ahmed’s argument that racism transforms black bodies into “things among things” (Ahmed 2006: 111).

⁴ Roediger attributes this argument to W.E.B. DuBois’ *Black Reconstruction* (Roediger 1999 [1991]: 11-13).

⁵ For more on the panorama as form of what she terms “black abolitionist cultural production,” see Daphne Brook’s excellent discussion of Henry Box’s Brown’s use of the panorama as what she terms “peritriphic revolution” (Brooks 2006: 77-84).

⁶ Many of the historical newspaper articles detailing lectures given by William Wells Brown and the Crafts in England also feature prominent English politicians—especially Parliament member George Thompson—who lectured on America’s inability to govern itself by indexing the practice of American slavery. See, for instance, “Celebration of West India Negro Emancipation and Welcome to George Thompson, Esq.M.P.,” *The Boston Liberator* 5 September 1851.

⁷ I am thinking here specifically of Saidiya Hartman's words on the "complicated nexus of terror and enjoyment" such spaces enabled and sanctioned (Hartman 1997: 21).

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