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Close Reading at a Distance: The African Americanization of *Bleak House*

Daniel Hack

On 1 October 1851, in Syracuse, New York, a man named Jerry was arrested by federal marshals acting under the authority of the Fugitive Slave Act. Within hours, Jerry was freed by a crowd and, several days later, surreptitiously transported to Canada and freedom. Two years after these events, the defendants in what became known as the Jerry rescue case still had not been tried. Protesting what it saw as “the indirect punishment of persons obnoxious to the Government, whom it does not hope to convict,” the abolitionist paper *The Liberator* exclaimed, “Had we an American Dickens, this might afford a text for a new *Bleak House*, quite as suggestive as the Court of Chancery itself. But, *le bon temps viendra!* Better times will come.”¹ And so better times did come, indeed had already come, if better times mean new *Bleak Houses*, Americanized and even African Americanized *Bleak Houses*. Antebellum African Americans and abolitionists seized upon *Bleak House* and put it to work in a surprising number of ways, from brief if suggestive references such as this one to reprintings of the novel in whole or in part and from the literal reenactment of one of its events to an actual rewriting of the novel in something like the way *The Liberator* envisioned.

These allusions and appropriations form part of the larger deployment of British literature in antebellum antislavery discourse and the period’s

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1. [Edmund Quincy?], “The Jerry Rescue Meeting,” *The Liberator*, 7 Oct. 1853, p. 158.

emergent African American print culture, a deployment ranging from the circulation of explicitly antislavery works by such writers as Harriet Martineau and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, to repeated invocations of Byron's lines, "Hereditary bondsmen, know ye not/ Who would be free, themselves must strike the blow?" to James McCune Smith's remarkable assertion that "The Charge of the Light Brigade" is "flat burglary" on the part of Tennyson, "a translation from the Congo, feebler than the original."² As these latter examples suggest, the British literature that interested African American readers and writers was not always literature that interested itself in African Americans. Analysis of the uses to which *Bleak House* was put by antebellum African Americans and abolitionists—as well as their opponents—helps us to map the contours of this underexplored transatlantic, interracial encounter.³

In the wake of Franco Moretti's *Graphs, Maps, Trees*, one cannot take for granted the figurative status of such a promise to map a work's afterlife.⁴ My goal, however, is not to trade textual analysis for the methods of book history and reception studies—close reading for distant reading, in Moretti's shorthand—but rather to show that each needs the other if we are to understand as fully as possible *either* a text's intrinsic features *or* its cultural impact, let alone the relationship between the two.⁵ In the present

2. Communipaw [James McCune Smith], "From Our New York Correspondent," *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, 12 Jan. 1855. I discuss this article in a companion essay to this one, "The Charge of the African Brigade" (in progress).

3. The phenomenon I am describing resembles that which Elisa Tamarkin has identified as "black Anglophilia." However, whereas Tamarkin emphasizes what she sees as the irrational aspects of "the black disposition towards Britain" (she writes of an "extravagant fixation," "a rather causeless enthusiasm, a psychological *fixe*"), I find more knowing, calculated forms of engagement at work in the cases I discuss (Elisa Tamarkin, "Black Anglophilia; or, The Sociability of Antislavery," *American Literary History* 14 [Fall 2002]: 446, 452).

4. See Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary Theory* (London, 2005).

5. For Moretti's use of the term *distant reading*, see his "Conjectures on World Literature," *New Left Review* n.s. 1 (Jan.–Feb. 2000): 54–68. For a telling example of the limitations of an approach that abandons textual interpretation even as it seeks to determine a text's cultural impact, see the chapter "Frankenstein" in William St. Clair's magisterial and, in many ways, invaluable *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge, 2004). Sophisticated and meticulous as he is in his efforts to "elucidate and model the factors which determined which constituencies of readers had access to which printed texts at which times" (pp. 8–9), St. Clair

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instance, our understanding of *Bleak House* is altered when the novel is viewed through the lens of what I am calling its African Americanization, but a proper understanding of this phenomenon itself requires close attention to the text of Dickens's novel.

In a doubly estranging movement, the African Americanization of *Bleak House* makes newly visible and meaningful certain aspects of the novel even as it calls into question the power of such features to determine the cultural work a text performs. This dynamic will be particularly clear with regard to a cultural task that has come to be seen as one of the novel form's most important: the cultivation of national identity or what Benedict Anderson famously called the "imagined community" of the nation-state.⁶ As we shall see, *Bleak House* does not merely fail to imagine a community that includes Africans, African Americans, slaves, and people of color in general but rather consolidates the national community it does imagine by means of their exclusion. Paradoxically, however, this strategy becomes most conspicuous when it is least efficacious, as members of these groups and their advocates find in *Bleak House* a material and imaginative resource for their own efforts to tell the stories they want to tell and build the communities they seek to build. Cultural mobility thus throws into relief ideological malleability, along with the aspects of a text that both invite and resist such mobility and malleability. In particular, here, the mechanics and implications of identification and appropriation across racial and national lines emerge through—and at times take the form of—a method we might call close reading at a distance.

1. Frederick Douglass's *Bleak House*

"Devoted," in the words of its editor, proprietor, and namesake, "to the freedom of the slave, . . . the moral and mental elevation of the free colored people," and "the cause of Human Rights, generally, at home and abroad,"⁷ *Frederick Douglass' Paper* began publication in 1851 as the suc-

nonetheless feels free to claim that Mary Shelley's notoriously slippery and reinterpretable text has a "plain meaning" (p. 373) and "explicit message" (p. 368), claims he supports with little more than a two-sentence summary of the plot and a statement by Percy Shelley. In relying on Percy Shelley, moreover, St. Clair takes it for granted that Mary and Percy agreed about "the meaning and message of the work" (p. 358) and, further, that the work carried the meaning and message they intended it to carry. St. Clair ignores the large body of criticism vigorously interrogating both these assumptions.

6. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 1983).

7. "Seventh Volume," *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, 16 Dec. 1853; "Prospectus of the Eighth Volume of *Frederick Douglass' Paper*," *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, 8 Dec. 1854.

cessor to Douglass's earlier *North Star* and continued through the decade. *Douglass' Paper* typically devoted the first three of its four pages to political news, with the last page given over to literary matter—poems, sketches, stories, and book reviews—along with advertisements. Many decisions concerning this literary content undoubtedly involved one of Douglass's main collaborators, Julia Griffiths, an Englishwoman who served as secretary of the Rochester Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society and bore primary responsibility for the *Paper's* "Literary Notices" column (which is often signed with her initials).⁸ Adopting an integrationist policy with obvious political significance, *Douglass' Paper* published original material by African American authors, including the poets J. C. Holly and James Whitfield, and by white Americans associated with the antislavery cause, including Stowe, Whittier, and Longfellow; in addition, it reprinted pieces by and sketches about leading British writers not closely identified with the *Paper's* political stance, such as Ruskin, Robert Browning, and Tennyson (including "The Charge of the Light Brigade"). Occasionally the *Paper* serialized fiction, such as Douglass's own "The Heroic Slave," but not often and nothing very long. Or, rather, almost nothing. From April 1852 to December 1853, *Douglass' Paper* reprinted Dickens's mammoth *Bleak House* in its entirety.⁹

The anomalous decision to publish Dickens's novel is not well documented. However, we can be sure that it was made with very limited knowledge of the novel's contents, since only the first of *Bleak House's* nineteen monthly parts had appeared in London and New York (where it was serialized in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*) when *Douglass' Paper* began running it. The *Paper's* brief notice announcing its intention to "treat our readers to this *celebrated Story*" offers little explanation, but it

8. To note Griffiths's role is not to distance Douglass from the paper's choices; he himself stresses that the *Paper*, "as its name imports, is Frederick Douglass' paper, in the fullest sense" ("Prospectus of the Eighth Volume of *Frederick Douglass' Paper*").

9. Or almost its entirety: on a couple of occasions, the *Paper* ends a weekly installment midchapter and fails to include the remainder of the chapter in the next installment, but these seem like minor oversights. For a detailed inventory of the *Paper's* literary content, see Patsy Brewington Perry, "The Literary Content of *Frederick Douglass's Paper* through 1860," *CLA Journal* 17 (Dec. 1973): 214–29. Perry emphasizes Douglass's desire to enrich his readers' lives by exposing them to "good literature," whatever its source, along with his desire to support "budding black poets who needed an appreciative audience" (pp. 214, 221). More recently, Elizabeth McHenry has emphasized the political implications of Douglass's integrationist policy, arguing that "Douglass's placement of the work of the most celebrated white European and European American writers next to that of black writers insisted on the equality of their literary, cultural, and artistic pursuits" and on the "transracial" nature of literary talent (Elizabeth McHenry, *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies* [Durham, N.C., 2002], pp. 116, 126).

does note that it is “following in the wake of the *Boston Commonwealth*.”¹⁰ As this phrase suggests, quick as it was to reprint *Bleak House*, *Douglass’ Paper* was not the first antislavery paper to do so. The free-soil *Commonwealth*, a four-page daily edited at the time by the well-known abolitionist Elizur Wright, began publication of *Bleak House* in March 1852, immediately after the first part’s initial publication (“36 hours after the appearance of the Harper edition,” according to a gloating notice).¹¹ Announcing somewhat defensively that “we think [our readers] will not only forgive us but thank us when they have read it,” the *Commonwealth* dedicated its entire first page and most of its fourth to the first installment of the novel.¹²

The *Commonwealth’s* reasons for offering *Bleak House* are suggested by a piece from the *New York Times* it had reprinted the previous day, an article that summarizes the opening of *Bleak House* and states that the novel “will seek to turn the swelling tide of public contempt, ridicule, indignation, and hatred against that great engine of oppression, made sacred by ages of abuse, and venerable in the eyes of all who live to adore the past [for example, the Court of Chancery]. It will be a most interesting and powerful book [with] a clear, practical purpose—the demolition of abuses and the reform of institutions which impede the progress and crush the energies of the race.”¹³ A biographical sketch also published in the *Commonwealth* and reprinted in *Douglass’ Paper* the day it began running the novel similarly emphasizes Dickens’s status as a reformer.¹⁴ Surprisingly, no reference is made in either of these pieces to Dickens’s criticism of slavery in his *American Notes*, published a decade earlier. Nonetheless, it is fair to assume that this notorious work contributed to the sense of ideological compatibility. Douglass himself was familiar with *American Notes*, referring to it in speeches at least as early as 1846.¹⁵

Beginning, however, with the last chapter of that first monthly number that Douglass and Griffiths may or may not have read before deciding to run *Bleak House*, there is good reason to question the fit of novel to journal.¹⁶ This chapter introduces Mrs. Jellyby, an activist working to send white settlers to “Borriboola-Gha, on the left bank of the Niger,” where

10. *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, 8 Apr. 1852.

11. “Bleak House,” *Commonwealth* (Boston), 25 Mar. 1852.

12. “The Bleak House,” *Commonwealth* (Boston), 20 Mar. 1852.

13. “The New Story by Dickens,” *Commonwealth* (Boston), 19 Mar. 1852.

14. “Dickens,” *Commonwealth* (Boston), 2 Apr. 1852.

15. See Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (New York, 2003), p. 304.

16. By contrast, the politics of *Harper’s* was much closer to that of the novel. See Thomas H. Lilly, “Contexts of Reception and Interpretation of the United States Serializations of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1851–1852) and *Bleak House* (1852–1853)” (Ph.D. diss., Emory University, 2003), pp. 75–110.

they are to cultivate the coffee and educate the “natives.”¹⁷ So consumed is Mrs. Jellyby by her efforts on behalf of “the Brotherhood of Humanity” that she scandalously neglects her duties as a wife and mother (*BH*, p. 41). This satire of what Dickens famously and damningly calls “telescopic philanthropy” (*BH*, p. 34) clashes directly with Douglass’s advocacy of transatlantic political activism and his close collaboration with British and female abolitionists such as Griffiths.¹⁸ As the novel proceeds, moreover, this initial criticism of Mrs. Jellyby and her “African project” (*BH*, p. 38) proves no isolated incident. On the contrary, such criticism recurs throughout *Bleak House* to support what emerges as the novel’s implicitly British project of promoting a localism that begins with concern for those “immediately about [one]” and extends at best to the nation’s borders; the governing image here is Esther Summerson’s “gradually and naturally” expanding “circle of duty” (*BH*, p. 96).¹⁹ This stance is directly opposed to what Douglass, in his famous speech on “The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro,” celebrates as “the obvious tendencies of the age”: “No nation can now shut itself up from the surrounding world and trot round in the same old path of its fathers without interference. . . . Oceans no longer divide, but link nations together. From Boston to London is now a holiday excursion. Space is comparatively annihilated.—Thoughts expressed on one side of the Atlantic are distinctly heard on the other.”²⁰ This speech appeared in the *Paper* only a few weeks after Esther’s anti-Jellyby credo.²¹

The presence of Dickens’s novel in *Douglass’ Paper* is all the more jarring because the novel’s treatment of place is at the same time a treatment of race; *Bleak House* consistently opposes its ethics of proximity to an interest in what we would now call people of color. Thus, the rough handling of Mrs. Jellyby is complemented by the novel’s moving depiction of the dispossessed London streetsweep Jo, whose neglect is used to indict those who concern themselves instead with “the spiritual destitution of a coral reef in the Pacific” (*BH*, p. 199). Most striking of all, in the context of

17. Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*, ed. George Ford and Sylvère Monod (New York, 1977), p. 38; hereafter abbreviated *BH*.

18. Indeed, female British abolitionists purchased Douglass’s freedom, and his paper tracks abolitionist activities in Britain and regularly thanks its “kind trans-Atlantic friends” (*Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, 3 June 1853).

19. See James Buzard’s *Disorienting Fiction* for an extended analysis of the ways *Bleak House* opposes “British consequential ground” to “place-less, unrepresentable reaches of unmeaning or unvalue” (James Buzard, *Disorienting Fiction: The Autoethnographic Work of Nineteenth-Century British Novels* [Princeton, N.J., 2005], p. 116; see pp. 105–56; hereafter abbreviated *DF*).

20. Douglass, “The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro,” *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, ed. Philip S. Foner and Yuval Taylor (1950; Chicago, 1999), p. 205.

21. Esther’s statement appeared in the 10 June 1852 issue and Douglass’s speech in the 9 July 1852 issue.

Frederick Douglass' Paper, is the novel's one direct reference to American slavery, which again contrasts attention to darker-skinned people with the fulfillment of one's domestic (in both senses) responsibilities. Describing what he calls his "cosmopolitan . . . sympathy" with "enterprise and effort," the dilettante Harold Skimpole says, "Take an extreme case. Take the case of the Slaves on American plantations. I dare say they are worked hard, I dare say they don't altogether like it, I dare say theirs is an unpleasant experience on the whole; but they people the landscape for me, they give it a poetry for me, and perhaps that is one of the pleasanter objects of their existence. I am very sensible of it, if it be, and I shouldn't wonder if it were!" (*BH*, p. 227). Skimpole is of course meant to be seen as a moral monster. However, the essence of this monstrousness is captured by Esther's response, which makes clear the racial exclusion upon which the novel's moral order rests: "I always wondered on these occasions whether he ever thought of Mrs. Skimpole and the children, and in what point of view they presented themselves to his cosmopolitan mind. So far as I could understand, they rarely presented themselves at all" (*BH*, p. 227). In other words, Skimpole's moral deficiency consists not in the point of view in which American slaves present themselves to his mind, as one might imagine, but rather in the very fact that he thinks about them. Through moments such as this, *Bleak House* emerges as a remarkably incongruous choice for the former slave Douglass to people his own landscape with and give it a poetry.²²

Additional aspects of *Bleak House* also threaten to become more salient and more troubling when framed by *Douglass' Paper*. In particular, there is John Jarndyce's ostensibly benevolent trafficking in women. When Jarndyce hires Charley Neckett to be Esther's maid, Charley announces this to Esther by saying, in what are clearly Jarndyce's words, "If you please, miss, I'm a present to you, with Mr. Jarndyce's love" (*BH*, p. 299); and, at the end of the novel, Jarndyce releases Esther from her promise to marry him and hands her over to Allan Woodcourt, saying, "take from me, a willing gift" (*BH*, p. 753). The language of gift exchange here registers, even as it seeks to prettify, profound disparities in agency and power. Present in the text but muted, this discordant note resonates more loudly

22. I will argue below that Douglass and Griffiths take various steps to downplay this incongruousness. In this particular instance, though, editorial decisions have the opposite effect; the weekly installment containing Skimpole's troubling musings and Esther's equally troubling response breaks off midchapter, with this very passage (ending with ". . . rarely presented themselves at all"), thereby heightening its prominence. Moreover, the installment is immediately—and mischievously?—followed, in the same column, by an item titled "Why Slaves Escape," *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, 24 Sept. 1852.

and to different effect when sounded in a newspaper dedicated to ending the treatment of persons as possessions.

In making these claims about the framing effect of *Douglass' Paper*, I recognize that we must take care not to assume that what seems clear now would have seemed clear in the past. Readers must be tuned to the right frequency to hear these notes. It is likely that Dickens's earlier antislavery stance and continued reputation as a reformer did prevent some anti-slavery activists from registering *Bleak House's* problematic politics; the reference in *The Liberator* article I opened with suggests as much. Similarly, after publishing the first monthly part of *Bleak House*, the *Commonwealth* went so far as to defend itself against criticism for underselling *Harper's* (which it reports as having paid two thousand dollars for advance sheets of the novel) by joking, "If we make one hundredth part as much money on it as the Harpers have made on pirated English literature, we will give a hundred dollars for the education of Mrs. Jellyby's daughter, or some other charitable object."²³ Nonetheless, we know that it does not require hindsight to see the trouble with *Bleak House*, and we know it the only way we can with any certainty: through the recorded reactions of contemporary readers. Before the novel had finished publication, even finished being written, a prominent British abolitionist publicly denounced Dickens's depiction of Mrs. Jellyby as implicitly proslavery; in a series of articles quickly reprinted as a pamphlet, Lord Denman charged Dickens with "do[ing] his best to replunge the world into the most barbarous abuse that ever afflicted it. We do not say that he actually defends slavery or the slave-trade," Denman explains, "but he takes pains to discourage, by ridicule, the effort now making to put them down." The ridicule of Mrs. Jellyby prompts him to demand, "*Who but the slave traders can gain by this course of argument?*"²⁴

In a letter to Denman's daughter responding to this attack, Dickens claimed that "no kind of reference to slavery is made or intended" in his depiction of Mrs. Jellyby.²⁵ Whether or not Lord Denman's daughter was convinced by this claim, Mrs. Jellyby's daughter clearly is not: "Talk of Africa! I couldn't be worse off if I was a what's-his-name—man and a brother!" (*BH*, p. 166), says Caddy, invoking the famous abolitionist slogan. And in fact Denman's concern over the use to which Dickens's satire could be put was well-founded; two weeks before Dickens wrote his letter,

23. "Bleak House," *Commonwealth* (Boston), 25 Mar. 1852, p. 2.

24. Lord Denman, "Uncle Tom's Cabin, *Bleak House*, Slavery, and the Slave Trade" (London, 1853), pp. 5, 7.

25. Quoted in Harry Stone, "Charles Dickens and Harriet Beecher Stowe," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 12 (Dec. 1957): 194.

a letter to the *Times* (of London) criticized an antislavery petition signed by thousands of British women by saying that efforts should not be made to “regenerate Borrioboola-Gha” when there is so much work to be done “within a stone’s throw of their own dwellings.”²⁶ Dickens may resist this application of his novel, but the novel itself does not.²⁷

I have found one contemporary reading of *Bleak House* as explicitly antislavery, but even this counterexample ends up reinforcing the sense that the novel’s treatment of place and race makes it out of place in *Douglas’ Paper*. In *The Planter: or, Thirteen Years in the South* (1853), David Brown quotes the beginning of the speech by Harold Skimpole discussed above, through “I dare say theirs is an unpleasant experience on the whole,” and takes umbrage at this unchallenged characterization of slavery as “unpleasant”: “I dare say, Mr. Skimpole Dickens, you know very little about it. I dare say, that English writers who meddle with our affairs in this way, would often appear less ridiculous and damage their own country less, if they would try honestly to know more and write less about what they are shamefully and it seems blissfully ignorant.”²⁸ Isolating one moment, Brown manages to miss the isolationism advanced by the passage as a whole. Ironically, however, Brown does capture the spirit of the novel in his criticism of Dickens’s wife, Catherine, for having signed the antislavery petition just mentioned: “I wonder if Mrs. Charles Dickens has read *Oliver Twist* and the *Bleak House*? They might point her to other work to be done, nearer home, than our Southern States; where there is no poor *Oliver ‘to want more,’* nor poor homeless Joe, who could not have had less.”²⁹ Brown’s call to tend to those “nearer home” is Dickens’s own, and the fact that Brown himself seems not quite to realize this only reminds us that such arguments against outside meddlers were already a staple of anti-antislavery discourse.

Given the obvious friction between the ideological agendas of *Bleak*

26. “Common Sense,” letter to the *Times*, 2 Dec. 1852, p. 6.

27. It is interesting to note that Dickens chose not to respond to Denman’s charge in the preface to *Bleak House* (first published with the novel’s final monthly part), even as he used this preface to defend the novel against criticism of its depictions of the Court of Chancery and of spontaneous human combustion. We might speculate that Dickens’s silence reflects his awareness of both the strength of Denman’s case, on the one hand, and the relative harmlessness of this charge, on the other; from Dickens’s perspective, in other words, even if Denman is right, this would not undermine the novel’s social criticism or Dickens’s authority to mount such criticism, as the other objections threaten to do. For more on the stakes of Dickens’s defense of his treatment of spontaneous human combustion, see Hack, *The Material Interests of the Victorian Novel* (Charlottesville, Va., 2005), pp. 37–61.

28. A Northern Man [David Brown], *The Planter: or, Thirteen Years in the South* (Philadelphia, 1853), p. 274.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

House and *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, perhaps we should conclude that the decision to reprint *Bleak House* in the antislavery paper was simply uninformed and mistaken. Someone had blundered. Yet while the initial decision to publish the novel was necessarily made with limited knowledge, we should not overlook the fact that this decision was repeatedly renewed over a period of twenty months. By contrast, the *Commonwealth* stopped publication of *Bleak House* without comment after publishing about a quarter of it.³⁰ I would argue that Douglass's persistence stems not from inertia or inattention but rather a determination to enlist "the universal favorite of the people" in the cause, if necessary despite himself.³¹ To achieve this, Douglass relied solely neither on the introductory linking of novel and author to reform nor even on the implicit argument of the novel's very presence; instead he and Julia Griffiths continued working to frame their readers' understanding of *Bleak House* and the presence of *Bleak House* in the *Paper*. The most telling of their tactics emerges in the "Literary Notices" column early in the novel's run in a statement that tacitly recognizes the need to overcome some unspecified readerly resistance: "We make no apology to our readers for devoting our fourth page to 'Bleak House.' To those among them who have read 'UNCLE TOM'S CABIN,' (and who has not read it ere this?) we commend this attractive story of the most popular of English writers."³² This notice appeared just a month after Stowe's novel appeared in book form and completed its serialized run in *The National Era*, and it establishes a pattern, as *Douglass' Paper* consistently aligns the two novels, on both aesthetic and ideological grounds.³³ To choose one

30. Despite the promise that "our readers may depend upon having the successive numbers promptly as they come to hand," the *Commonwealth* discontinued publication after running the first five monthly parts, apparently without comment. The novel may have been sacrificed to the increased coverage of the increasingly turbulent political scene leading up to the presidential election that fall. It may also be significant that Elizur Wright had been replaced as editor by this point.

31. J. G. [Julia Griffiths], "Literary Notices," *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, 22 July 1853.

32. J. G. [Julia Griffiths], "Literary Notices," *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, 29 Apr. 1852.

33. We should note a similar strategy at work in *Frederick Douglass' Paper's* embrace of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* itself; as Robert S. Levine has shown in some detail, in working to "publicize, promote, and shape the reception of Stowe's novel," Douglass acted as "a creatively appropriative reader" of a work whose politics did not entirely mesh with his own, for instance in its advocacy of Liberian colonization (Robert S. Levine, *Martin Delany, Frederick Douglass, and the Politics of Representative Identity* [Chapel Hill, N.C., 1997], pp. 72–73). In the only previous, extended analysis I know of of Douglass's reprinting of *Bleak House*, McHenry reads this notice as "highlighting [a] tension" between the two novels deriving from "the timing of [their] publication," which, she argues, "seemed to have put them in direct competition with one another." "In this implied contest," she writes, "*Uncle Tom's Cabin* was the definitive victor; while *Bleak House* inspired little critical commentary [in *Douglass' Paper*], letters to the newspaper concerning the literary and political merits of Stowe's novel abounded" (McHenry, *Forgotten Readers*, pp. 125–26). As the notice makes clear, though, the two works were not direct

typical example, an excerpt from the *London Examiner* reprinted in October 1852 states that “Mrs. Stowe[’s] . . . success in America . . . corresponds to that which Mr. Dickens, finds in England, because, like Mr. Dickens, whose influence we trace in many pages of her book, she has spent great wealth of genius in the service of humanity.”³⁴ (I should add that it may well have been the *National Era*’s success in serializing a long social protest novel that inspired Douglass to publish *Bleak House* in the first place.) *Douglass’ Paper* was hardly alone in aligning Stowe and Dickens, but it was fully committed to promoting this alignment—an alignment that did not go uncontested, most prominently by Lord Denman, who in the articles discussed above explicitly contrasts Dickens’s faults with Stowe’s virtues.³⁵ *Douglass’ Paper* noticed Denman’s articles, but did not mention their criticism of *Bleak House*.

In fact, no expressions of hostility to *Bleak House* on ideological grounds appear in *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*. Some complaints do crop up: “We prize your paper, and generally read all you publish, except advertisements and *Bleak House*,” writes one subscriber. “In renewing my subscription for your paper, excuse me if I find a little fault with it. Could not the space occupied by Dickens’ ‘*Bleak House*’ be better occupied?” asks another.³⁶ These readers’ lack of sympathy for the novel may reflect its lack of sympathy for them, its failure to include them in its imagined community. However, nothing more pointedly critical appears in the *Paper*, and the objections are outnumbered by friendly allusions as the novel becomes incorporated into the discourse of the *Paper*. Picking up on the name John Jarndyce uses for the study to which he retreats when in a bad mood, for example, one correspondent announces, “I have just dedicated a new

competitors, since *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* completed its run as *Bleak House* began its own, and book publication of Stowe’s novel preceded that of Dickens’s by a full year and a half.

34. “*Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in England,” *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, 15 Oct. 1852. The connection between Stowe and Dickens was strengthened by the fact that Stowe spent part of 1852 traveling in Britain. *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* reports frequently on this triumphant tour, informing readers, for instance, that at a dinner given by the Lord Mayor of London at which Stowe was present, “Justice Talfourd made an oration complimentary to Mrs. Stowe, to which Charles Dickens replied in the name of that lady” (*Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, 20 May 1853).

35. Dickens’s own reaction to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was mixed, whether because of or despite his recognition of a certain kinship; in one letter he writes of Stowe’s novel, “I seem to see a writer with whom I am very intimate (and whom nobody can possibly admire more than myself) peeping very often through the thinness of the paper” (Dickens, letter to Mrs. Richard Watson, 22 Nov. 1852, *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. Madeline House et al., 12 vols. [Oxford, 1965–2002], 6:808).

36. A Syracuse Friend, in “Words of Cheer from Our Subscribers,” *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, 26 May 1854, and James S. Dawes, letter to the editor, *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, 27 Aug. 1852.

'Growlery' and the enclosed, is the first issue of thoughts therefrom."³⁷ An article in *Douglass' Paper* compares a Democratic newspaper to the minor character Grandfather Smallweed—"the poor old wizzled up miser would sell his soul for money, if Dickens has done him justice—and the Oswego *Gazette* would sell body and soul and throw in character by way of making weight and measure for a petty office"—while another piece simply cites in passing Mr. Snagsby's catchphrase "not to put too fine a point on it."³⁸ Through moments such as these, *Douglass' Paper* works to create a community bound together by not only a common set of political commitments but also a common vocabulary and range of cultural references. In doing so it not only creates a community but also asserts membership in, and thus creates anew, the larger community of Dickens readers.

As part of this effort, *Frederick Douglass' Paper* even tackles one of *Bleak House's* most recalcitrantly national moments. James Buzard singles out the famous scene where the streetsweep Jo dies as the quintessential episode in which Dickens cultivates an Andersonian sense of national identity, of Britain as a "specific moral community" (*DF*, p. 123).³⁹ This scene prompts the most sustained discussion the novel was to receive in the "Literary Notices" column of *Douglass' Paper*, as Griffiths recognizes but attempts to overcome its national localism. Griffiths asserts that Dickens's "delineations are true, to the life; and his being able to give them evinces his being intimately acquainted with the dense ignorance, squalid [sic] misery, and pressing wants of 'the London poor.'"⁴⁰ For American readers, or readers in America, it seems, Jos are not "dying thus around us every day." Griffiths's point is not, however, that American readers will not or should not be moved by the scene; on the contrary, they should be doubly moved—that is, moved imaginatively to the geographical locale where they can be moved emotionally: "He who can stand by the death-bed of the poor idiot 'Jo,' without having the kindly sympathies of his nature called forth, must be callous to the wants and miseries of his kind." The appeal of

37. A Friend, letter to the editor, *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, 17 June 1852. This correspondent goes on to pepper his discussion of Liberty Party politics with references to the novel and two weeks later sends another communication from what he calls "Growlery, No. 2" (A Friend, letter to the editor, *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, 1 July 1852).

38. "Practical Abolitionism," *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, 15 June 1855, rpt. from *Syracuse Wesleyan*; and "Literary Notices," *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, 1 Sept. 1854.

39. The scene ends with the narrator intoning: "Dead, your Majesty. Dead, my lords and gentlemen. Dead, Right Reverends and Wrong Reverends of every order. Dead, men and women, born with Heavenly compassion in your hearts. And dying thus around us every day" (*BH*, p. 572).

40. The marking of the final phrase here suggests that Griffiths is alluding to, and aligning *Bleak House* with, the Victorian journalist Henry Mayhew's protosociological study *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851).

scene and novel is universal, even though their address is not. Or at least the appeal ought to be, but Griffiths finally acknowledges indirectly that she is fighting an uphill battle with a scene that, as Buzard puts it, so “effectively consolidates the national ‘us’”: “We wish we could induce every one to read ‘*Bleak House*,” she concludes. “‘Tis true that ‘the story is long;’ but time spent upon its perusal is *not ill bestowed*” (*DF*, p. 153).⁴¹

Bolder efforts to insert Douglass’s readership into the novel, or the novel into their world, occur after its serialization ended. The more elaborate of these exercises is an anonymous, eighty-line poem titled “Borroboola Gha: A Poem for the Times,” published in 1855. This poem begins by describing a preacher’s appeal for charity to minister to “some heathens,/ Thousand of miles afar,/ Who live in a land of darkness,/ ‘Borroboola Gha.’” After hearing this sermon, the speaker of the poem happens upon a starving child and its dying mother who live nearby. This encounter leads the speaker to exclaim: “Alas for the cold and hungry/ That met me every day,/ While all my tears were given/ To the suffering far away!” The poem concludes with its own appeal to the reader:

O! Christian, God has promised
 Whoe’er to thee has given
 A cup of pure cold water
 Shall find reward in Heaven.
 Would you secure the blessing
 You need not seek it far;
 Go find in yonder hovel
 A “Borroboola Gha.”⁴²

The writer here alludes to *Bleak House* and adopts the novel’s antitelescopic stance while simply ignoring its racial specificity.

An 1854 item alludes more briefly to *Bleak House* but goes even further in repurposing the novel. This article expresses outrage that the imprisonment of a Protestant missionary in Florence has prompted public indignation in the U.S., whereas the imprisonment of a woman in Virginia for teaching slaves to read “is taken quite calmly.” The writer complains, “Like ‘Jellyby,’ our sympathies run warmly for ‘Borriboola Gha’ Missions, but

41. J. G. [Julia Griffiths], “Literary Notices,” *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, 3 June 1853.

42. “Borroboola Gha: A Poem for the Times,” *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, 2 Feb. 1855. Although no source is given, *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* seems to have picked it up from the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, where it appeared on 6 January 1855; there, the poem carries the dateline “Oswego, December 5, 1854,” and is credited to the *Albany Atlas*. I have not been able to find any further information about this poem.

oppression and imprisonment nearer home are things ‘not in our line.’”⁴³ Here, then, to be like Mrs. Jellyby is to be indifferent to the plight of slaves and their supporters. The form of Dickens’s criticism is maintained, but its content virtually reversed. Today, we might be apt to argue that race serves as a Derridean supplement to place in *Bleak House*, buttressing the novel’s appeal to proximity but thereby revealing the inadequacy of proximity as a source of solidarity or even proximity’s status as an alibi for race. Opting instead for a kind of strategic antiessentialism, Douglass rejects the notion that racism is intrinsic to localism or *Bleak House*, treating that racism instead as merely a surface phenomenon, skin deep.

Ironically, this strategic antiessentialism—or, more broadly, Douglass’s strategy of transformative reproduction and creative appropriation—is itself in the spirit of *Bleak House*, which, as Buzard has shown, offers numerous examples of what he calls the “ambivalent refunctioning of the cultural past,” “keeping-but-changing or changing-but-keeping” (*DF*, p. 147). Moreover, the novel’s interest in processes of material, textual, and symbolic circulation, appropriation, and reproduction extends to its own afterlife; an early dialogue points to what we might call the novel’s refunctionability—“‘Jarndyce of Bleak House, my Lord,’ said Mr. Kenge. ‘A dreary name,’ said the Lord Chancellor. ‘But not a dreary place at present, my Lord’ said Mr. Kenge” (*BH*, p. 31)—and the novel ends with an allegory of its own dissemination, as Esther moves from Bleak House to a second Bleak House, outfitted to resemble the original.

Again, though, to enter into the logic of the novel as he does, Douglass must ignore his exclusion from it since *Bleak House* in no way envisions the active participation in these processes of reproduction and appropriation of those who have been abjected from the text. The closest Dickens comes is when he has Jo refunction “the door-step of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts” as a place to sit and eat breakfast (*BH*, p. 198). Yet the illiterate Jo is only unwittingly the agent of the irony here, and however similar his predicament may be to that of dark and distant others he cannot stand for them because he is made to stand against them and never more so than at this moment. It is tempting to say that *Bleak House* renders the notion that those dark others might grow up to participate in this process unimaginable, except that it manifestly did not. Instead, *Douglass’ Paper* so fully appropriates *Bleak House*’s logic of reproduction and appropriation that it uncannily anticipates its final expression in the novel; in the last installment of the novel, published fifteen months after one of Douglass’s correspondents “dedicated a new ‘Growlery,’” as

43. Frederick Douglass’ Paper, 17 Feb. 1854; rpt. from the *Evening Journal*.

we have seen, Esther reports that “with the first money we saved at home, we added to our pretty house by throwing out a little Growlery expressly for my guardian” (*BH*, p. 768). Twenty-five years later, in a crowning extension and disruption—that is, disruptive extension—of this pattern, Frederick Douglass himself followed suit; jumping national, racial, and even ontological divides, he erected a small one-room structure behind his home in Washington, D.C., and dubbed it “The Growlery.”⁴⁴

2. Hannah Crafts’s *Bleak House*

Without underestimating the audacity of Douglass’s sly embrace of *Bleak House*, we are compelled to acknowledge that when it comes to appropriative repetitions and reinscriptions of Dickens’s novel, there’s bold and then there’s bold:

Washington, the Federal City. Christmas holidays recently over. The implacable winter weather. The great President of the Great Republic looks perhaps from the windows of his drawing room, and wonders at the mud and slush precisely as an ordinary mortal would. . . .

Gloom everywhere. Gloom up the Potomac; where it rolls among meadows no longer green, and by splendid country seats. Gloom down the Potomac where it washes the sides of huge war-ships. Gloom on the marshes, the fields, and heights. Gloom settling steadily down over the sumptuous habitations of the rich, and creeping through the cellars of the poor. Gloom arresting the steps of chance office-seekers, and bewildering the heads of grave and reverend Senators; for with fog, and drizzle, and a sleety driving mist the night has come at least two hours before its time.⁴⁵

This pastiche of *Bleak House*’s famous opening description of the London fog was first published in Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s, 2002 *The New Yorker* article about his discovery of a previously unknown antebellum manuscript, the title page of which read “The Bondwoman’s Narrative, by Hannah Crafts, a Fugitive Slave Recently Escaped from North Carolina.”

44. See Sarah Luria, “Racial Equality Begins at Home: Frederick Douglass’s Challenge to American Domesticity,” in *The American Home: Material Culture, Domestic Space, and Family Life*, ed. Eleanor McD. Thompson (Winterthur, Del., 1998), pp. 33–34. *Bleak House* seems to have been one of the few novels Douglass owned at the time of his death in 1895; an undated edition, possibly from the early 1870s, is listed in *Bibliography of the Frederick Douglass Library at Cedar Hill*, ed. William L. Petrie (Ft. Washington, Md., 1995), p. 179.

45. Hannah Crafts, *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York, 2003), pp. 161–62; hereafter abbreviated *BN*. I cite the paperback edition because it includes more extensive documentation of the novel’s relationship to *Bleak House* than does the previous year’s cloth edition.

Although the identity of the apparently pseudonymous Hannah Crafts was and, as far as I know, remains uncertain, this seemingly autobiographical first-person narrative was widely hailed for its potential status as “the earliest known novel by a female African-American slave,” “the earliest known novel by a black woman anywhere,” and the sole “surviving handwritten manuscript of a book by an escaped slave.”⁴⁶ As is well known, however, with the publication of Gates’s article containing excerpts from the novel and even more so with the publication of the book itself later in 2002, it became clear that *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* is heavily indebted to other works, especially *Bleak House*. Early attempts to gauge the impact of this discovery on the work’s literary and historical significance were not as edifying as one might have hoped; some critics used the charge of plagiarism to belittle or dismiss the work, while others defended Crafts by downplaying the extent and significance of her debts. Partly as a result of this immediate polemicization and polarization, partly because this issue is inherently fraught due to the long history of racist skepticism concerning claims of African American authorship, and partly because of the enduring disciplinary divide between the fields of American and British literature, the relationship of *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* to *Bleak House* remains poorly understood—and so too therefore does *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* itself.⁴⁷

Crafts’s borrowing from *Bleak House* begins at the beginning. Just as Esther Summerson begins the part of *Bleak House* labeled “Esther’s Narrative” by stating, “I have a great deal of difficulty in beginning to write my portion of these pages, for I know I am not clever” (*BH*, p. 17), Crafts’s narrator, a light-skinned escaped slave named Hannah, begins the first chapter of *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* by stating, “It may be that I assume to[o] much responsibility in attempting to write these pages. . . . I am

46. David D. Kirkpatrick, “On Long-Lost Pages, a Female Slave’s Voice,” *New York Times*, 11 Nov. 2001, p. A1.

47. Most of the critical work on *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* published to date appears in *In Search of Hannah Crafts: Critical Essays on “The Bondwoman’s Narrative,”* ed. Gates and Hollis Robbins (New York, 2004). Of the volume’s twenty-seven essays and reviews, two offer extended discussions of the novel’s relationship to *Bleak House*: Hollis Robbins, “Blackening *Bleak House*: Hannah Crafts’s *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*,” pp. 71–86, and William Gleason, “‘I Dwell Now in a Neat Little Cottage’: Architecture, Race, and Desire in *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*,” pp. 145–74. Gill Ballinger, Tim Lustig, and Dale Townshend offer the most sustained and nuanced account to date of *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*’s intertextuality, in particular as it bears on this concept’s central role in African American literary criticism. Oddly, however, the authors premise their argument on Crafts’s presumed identity as an African American, which they simply take for granted, even as they criticize Henry Louis Gates, Jr., for making essentializing claims about the authenticity of Crafts’s voice. See Gill Ballinger, Tim Lustig, and Dale Townshend, “Missing Intertexts: Hannah Crafts’s *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* and African American Literary History,” *Journal of American Studies* 39, no. 2 (2005): 207–37.

neither clever, nor learned, nor talented" (*BN*, p. 5); and just as Esther promises "to be industrious, contented, and kind-hearted, and to do some good to some one, and win some love to myself if I could" (*BH*, p. 20), Hannah resolves "to be industrious, cheerful, and true-hearted, to do some good though in an humble way, and to win some love if I could" (*BN*, p. 11). *The Bondswoman's Narrative* as a whole does not track *Bleak House* with this level of precision, but throughout the novel Crafts variously reworks, adopts, and lifts verbatim plot elements, dialogue, and characters, as well as scene-setting and descriptive passages. Thus, after Hannah is injured in a carriage crash, her illness and recovery are described in language recalling Esther's epochal illness, and the mansion where she recovers closely resembles Bleak House as Esther first describes it. The novel features a blackmailer, Mr. Trappe, who is closely based on *Bleak House's* Mr. Tulkinghorn, with some of his conversations with his victim, Hannah's mistress, drawn word for word from those of Tulkinghorn and Lady Dedlock.⁴⁸ Hannah's move to Washington, D.C., produces the long pastiche of the opening paragraphs of *Bleak House* excerpted above, and when she is taken to North Carolina Dickens's description of the London slum Tom-All-Alone's is reproduced virtually verbatim as a description of the field slaves' quarters, and his evocation of the streetsweep Jo's subjectivity is adapted to represent that of the field slaves. The final chapter of *The Bondswoman's Narrative* echoes the final chapter of *Bleak House*, as Hannah brings her story up to the time of writing, when she is living as a free woman in New Jersey, happily married to a minister and running a school.

Crafts draws on other works as well—for example, a description of a

48. "Closely based" in the sense we should be used to by now, with much of the language used to describe Trappe, much of his dialogue, and many of his actions lifted directly from Dickens. For example, Tulkinghorn is "an old-fashioned old gentleman" who is "rusty to look at" (*BH*, p. 13), while Trappe is "a rusty seedy old-fashioned gentleman" (*BN*, p. 28), and just as when Tulkinghorn visits Chesney Wold he stays in "a turret chamber . . . plainly but comfortably furnished, and having an old-fashioned business air" (*BH*, p. 146), Trappe stays in "a plainly furnished chamber on the second story, old-fashioned like himself and having a quiet impassive air" (*BN*, pp. 32–33) when he is a guest at the estate where Hannah serves as waiting maid to her mistress. Much like Tulkinghorn, Trappe uses his knowledge of a secret concerning the mistress of the estate to control her actions until she flees and eventually dies—Lady Dedlock dying at the gate of the graveyard of which she has asked, "Is this place of abomination, consecrated ground?" (*BH*, p. 202), Hannah's mistress buried in a grave of which Hannah says, "I know not whether it was consecrated ground" (*BN*, p. 104). The parallels are reinforced by shared dialogue: "I am rather surprised by the course you have taken" (*BH*, p. 580) becomes "you must be aware that I could not approve of the course you have taken" (*BN*, p. 37). "It is no longer your secret. Excuse me. That is just the mistake. It is my secret, in trust for Sir Leicester and the family" (*BH*, p. 581) becomes "it is not your secret, but mine, and may be your husband's before another day" (*BN*, pp. 38–39). "I have no more to say." 'Excuse me, Lady Dedlock, if I add, a little more to hear'" (*BH*, p. 510) becomes "'I have no more to say.' 'But a little more to hear,' he replied" (*BN*, p. 41). And so on.

prison comes from Walter Scott's *Rob Roy*, and, as we shall see, the last sentence of the novel reworks that of Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*—but none nearly as extensively or centrally as *Bleak House*.⁴⁹ These debts undeniably complicate or even transform what we can learn from Crafts's work, but they hardly drain it of interest—just the opposite, and not only for Dickens scholars. Read as the lightly fictionalized autobiography of an escaped slave, as Gates first proposed reading it, *The Bondswoman's Narrative* may not tell us much we did not already know about slavery. However, once its technique is recognized, the novel emerges as a wholly unexpected and deeply enigmatic literary exercise that challenges and deepens our understanding of nineteenth-century transatlantic print culture. As I hope to show, moreover, Crafts's bricolage, in particular her reworking of *Bleak House*, does not compromise but instead generates her novel's most subtle and compelling formal effects, effects that cast *Bleak House* itself in a new light.

For reasons of space, I will leave aside the important question of where Crafts's technique stands in relation to mid-nineteenth-century norms and practices and in the African American literary tradition except to note that it bears comparison to the first two published novels by African Americans, William Wells Brown's *Clotel*, from 1853, and Frank J. Webb's *The Garies and Their Friends*, from 1857 (both first published in Britain), since the former borrows heavily from other texts and the second also references *Bleak House*.⁵⁰ Yet, despite this suggestive context, there remains a true weirdness to Crafts's use of Dickens, insofar as she neither advertises nor disguises this use. For example, just as a short temperance novel serialized in *Douglass' Paper* in 1852 calls itself *Uncle William's Pulpit, or Life among*

49. Many though not all of these debts are identified in the annotations to the 2003 paperback edition of the novel. However, these annotations are incomplete and sometimes misleading.

50. In contrast to *The Bondswoman's Narrative*, *Clotel* does not rely as heavily on any single work, borrows almost exclusively from American texts explicitly concerned with slavery and freedom, and acknowledges its indebtedness in its final chapter. The echoes of other works in *The Garies and Their Friends*, while a little unconventional, are less overt and more allusive. The novel features various Dickensian tropes, an illiterate shopkeeper clearly based on *Bleak House*'s Krook, and enough borrowed character names to induce cognitive dissonance in the reader of *Bleak House* with passages such as this:

"Oh, here he comes, and Caddy with him. They have just turned the corner—open the door and let them in."

Esther arose, and on opening the door was almost knocked down by Charlie's abrupt entrance into the apartment, he being rather forcibly shoved in by his sister Caroline, who appeared to be in a high state of indignation.

(Frank J. Webb, *The Garies and Their Friends* [Baltimore, 1997], p. 15)

I thank my student Russell Sbriglia for alerting me to Webb's use of *Bleak House*.

the Lofty,⁵¹ one might expect Crafts to broadcast her work's relationship to one of the most popular novels of the day, perhaps by calling it something like "Bleak House in America"; there was, in fact, an *Uncle Tom in England*. By the same token, it makes no sense for someone who really intends to pass off her work as fully original or as having an autobiographical basis to rely so transparently on a popular novel, including passages that were immediately famous; compare, again, *Uncle William's Pulpit*: "There [Uncle William] was in his great arm chair; he was surrounded by pyramids of books. Books, books, books, books, everywhere like the fog in Dickens' story of the Bleak House—and some of them full as foggy—as the fog, we mean."⁵² In short, Crafts seems steeped in the literature of the day and yet largely indifferent to the protocols of print culture. It is tempting to conclude that she did not publish her novel not because she was unable to but rather because she never intended to—because, in the words of another enigmatic Americanization of *Bleak House*, she preferred not to.

Whatever Crafts's intentions, a closer look at her text reveals that her response to Dickens goes much deeper than merely taking what she needs and leaving the rest. Whereas Lord Denman sought to raze *Bleak House* and Douglass to retrofit it, Crafts renovates the novel—in part, paradoxically, by deconstructing it. This transformative effect is most immediately visible with regard to the most disturbing and potentially disabling aspect of the novel from Crafts's and Douglass's perspective: its race-based localism. Through the very act of making her Esther-figure an African American slave, Crafts does not merely defy or hijack this localism but rather breaks down its defining opposition between attention to people of color and attention to family and friends. In *The Bondswoman's Narrative*, these objects of attention are no longer separable, let alone antithetical. Nor is the opposition between near and far reconstituted by the substitution of another distant other. This is not because *The Bondswoman's Narrative* is truly cosmopolitan or without its own prejudices but rather because Crafts is attacking institutions and attitudes—and institutions more than attitudes—that promote subordination and exploitation rather than disorder and neglect, as in *Bleak House*. That is, while Crafts may want to call attention to the suffering of slaves, she does not argue that this suffering is the direct result of inattention, the way it is for Dickens's lumpenproletariat. On the contrary, she makes it clear that the condition of the slaves she describes is a matter of policy on the part of their owner, who "didn't think it worth while to take much pains with such brutalised specimens of hu-

51. The subtitle of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is of course *Life among the Lowly*.

52. J. R. Johnson, "Uncle William's Pulpit," *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, 30 July 1852.

manity,” believing that “they could work just as well, and it might be even better to leave them alone in their degradation,” since “he expected nothing of them but toil. He wanted nothing else” (*BN*, p. 207). Tellingly, Crafts imagines field slaves thinking Jo’s thought that he has “no business here, there, or anywhere,” but immediately adds the phrase “except just to work—work—work” (*BN*, p. 206). Dickens’s rhetoric of misdirected attention drops away.⁵³

The preference for the proximate that we have seen on display in *Bleak House* works in tandem with its frequent retreat from institutions to individuals, the social to the domestic, and politics to ethics.⁵⁴ Crafts’s abandonment of the rhetoric of abandonment signals her refusal of this retreat and even of these dichotomies, which both structure and trouble Dickens’s novel. Despite the attention to forced labor we have just seen, the key move here is the treatment of sexual exploitation and the destruction of families as defining features of American slavery.⁵⁵ Consider, for example, Crafts’s reworking of the expression of outrage and readerly implication that concludes Jo’s last scene, discussed above. Crafts’s version of this passage comes not when she is describing the Jo-like field slaves but instead when Hannah’s fellow slave Lizzy tells the story of her master’s “haram” of slaves

53. This shift in focus creates a further, striking change in emphasis in Crafts’s recasting of Jo’s thought processes as those of the field slaves. “It must be a strange state to be like Jo!” writes Dickens, and that strangeness has two key, related components: first, Jo’s illiteracy, as he “shuffle[s] through the streets, unfamiliar with the shapes, and in utter darkness as to the meaning, of those mysterious symbols, so abundant over the shops, and at the corners of streets, and on the doors, and in the windows!” (*BH*, p. 198); and second, Jo’s sense of exclusion: “To be hustled, and jostled, and moved on; and really to feel that it would appear to be perfectly true that I have no business, here, or there, or anywhere; and yet to be perplexed by the consideration that I *am* here somehow, too, and everybody overlooked me until I became the creature that I am!” (*BH*, p. 198). Crafts’s version of this passage pays less attention to literacy, noting that the Constitution and the Bible are “sealed book[s]” to the field slaves but transforming the initial description of Jo’s illiteracy into one of the slaves’ ignorance of nature: “Isn’t it a strange state to be like them,” she writes. “To shuffle up and down the lanes unfamiliar with the flowers, and in utter darkness as to the meaning of Nature’s various hieroglyphical symbols, so abundant on the trees, the skies, in the leaves of grass, and everywhere” (*BN*, p. 206). This is a surprising revision in light of slave narratives’ typical emphasis on the importance of literacy. In part this shift results from Crafts’s relocation of the scene from an urban to a rural setting, but it also reflects the change in emphasis from the neglect that Jo’s illiteracy epitomizes to the active exploitation and brutalization to which the slaves are subjected and which are better captured in other ways; thus, Crafts also adds the sentence, “It must be a strange state to be prized just according to the firmness of your joints, the strength of your sinews, and your capabilities of endurance” (*BN*, p. 206).

54. Compare Bruce Robbins, “Telescopic Philanthropy: Professionalism and Responsibility in *Bleak House*,” in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi Bhabha (London, 1990), pp. 213–30.

55. Recall that it is the threat of a forced “marriage” that finally inspires the normally dutiful Hannah to escape to the North. The representation of slavery as a threat to the family is common in sentimental antislavery discourse.

and “their lovely children” (*BN*, pp. 177, 182); rather than allow her child to be sold, one of these women kills her infant and herself. With an improbability that only confirms the stakes here for Crafts, Lizzy concludes her story with these words: “A slight spasm, a convulsive shudder and she was dead. Dead, your Excellency, the President of this Republic. Dead, grave senators who grow eloquent over pensions and army wrongs. Dead ministers of religion, who prate because poor men without a moment[']s leisure on other days presume to read the newspapers on Sunday, yet who wink at, or approve of laws that occasion such scenes as this” (*BN*, p. 183). As in her rewriting of *Bleak House*'s opening, Crafts Americanizes a passage virtually word by word, only here she replaces Dickens's powerfully expansive yet nonetheless geographically and analytically circumscribed concluding sentence (“And dying thus around us every day”) with an emphatic reminder of institutional contexts and causes: “laws that occasion such scenes as this.”

Crafts's use of the rhetoric attending Jo's death to address the control of women's sexuality and the forced separation of mother and child is even more striking because these matters are also central to the plot of *Bleak House*, only there they are separated from the novel's main political and social agendas. Esther is removed at birth from her mother, Lady Dedlock, because she is illegitimate, and Lady Dedlock is subject to blackmail because she has borne a child out of wedlock. *Bleak House* is critical of the stigma attached to illegitimacy, but it does not defend sex outside marriage. Moreover, as important as these scenarios are to the novel, neither is directly linked to what it presents as its more public concerns, such as Chancery and poverty—or at least, as Hilary Schor has argued, the links are largely occluded, with Esther doing the occluding.⁵⁶ By contrast, Crafts broadcasts the equivalent connections in her novel, so that when she retells *Bleak House*'s stories of blackmail and mother-daughter separation she tells them as stories about slavery. Thus, whereas Lady Dedlock's secret is her scandalous liaison with Esther's father, the secret of the woman similarly blackmailed in *The Bondswoman's Narrative*, Hannah's mistress, is her race; as her blackmailer has discovered, she was removed from her slave mother as a baby to take the place of her owner's dead child. The Tulkinghornian blackmailer, Mr. Trappe, uses his knowledge to extort money from Hannah's mistress, and when she is no longer able to pay he threatens to expose her real parentage, at which point, like Lady Dedlock, she takes flight and dies.

56. See Hilary M. Schor, *Dickens and the Daughter of the House* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 101–23.

Although Hannah's mistress relives the experience of Lady Dedlock, then, she more closely resembles Esther Summerson—that is, not the unmarried mother but the illegitimate daughter separated from her mother at birth, not a sexual transgressor but instead an innocent victim of an unjust society—and Hannah's mistress, though not Esther's, is a victim of what her novel presents as her society's defining injustice.⁵⁷ Similarly, Hannah's own resemblance to Esther goes beyond the personality traits and experiences noted earlier to include early separation from her mother (of whom she has no memory and no knowledge except for the racial identity that is inferable from her own enslavement and that explains the separation itself). At the end of her narrative, however, Hannah's story breaks dramatically from Esther's when she is reunited with her mother in New Jersey. As blatant wish-fulfillment that hardly bothers to deny its status as such—Crafts writes, "We met accidentally, where or how it matters not" (*BN*, p. 245)—this ending threatens to go beyond escape to escapism. This threat seems to be confirmed by the novel's lack of a final call for political action, a typical gesture in slave narratives and abolitionist fiction. However, because Crafts has represented the separation of mothers and children as one of slavery's greatest evils, the wish being fulfilled here should be understood as political and as much a syllogism completed as a wish fulfilled: if slavery is identified with mother-child separation, then freedom must mean mother-child reunification.

Esther too meets her mother, but, whereas Hannah and her mother see their reunion and the close bond they form as "the greatest blessing of [their] lives" (*BN*, p. 245), Esther has only one meaningful encounter with Lady Dedlock, whose self-described "earthly punishment" (*BH*, p. 450) is that she cannot acknowledge her daughter publicly without disgracing her husband's family. Indeed, while Hannah finds herself "nearly crazy with delight" to be "then resting for the first time on [her] mother's bosom" (*BN*, p. 245), Esther can only thank God that the scars from her illness have left her so changed that she "could never disgrace her [mother] by any trace of likeness" (*BH*, p. 449). *Bleak House* presents this separation of mother and daughter as a personal tragedy, divorced from the social ones it describes. In terms of both the events narrated and the meaning they carry, then, the gap between the two texts is at its widest here.⁵⁸

57. Ironically, it is only because she has been separated from her mother that Hannah's mistress is able to live part of her life as free, but this is hardly an irony the novel invites us to savor, as it is careful to note that part of her tragedy (even before her flight leads to imprisonment, madness, and death) is that as a girl she was "taught . . . to consider her mother as dead," when in fact she was "a slave then toiling in the cotton fields of Georgia" (*BN*, p. 45).

58. The version of mother/daughter reunification in *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, so

Strikingly, however, even here, where Crafts departs radically from *Bleak House*, she continues to rewrite it virtually line by line. As with the relocation of Borrioboola-Gha to Europe in *Douglass' Paper*, the effect is truly startling; for example, the weeping Lady Dedlock's anguished "O my child, my child, I am your wicked and unhappy mother! O try to forgive me!" (*BH*, p. 449) becomes Hannah's mother's "child, I am your mother," words now "sobbed out in rapturous joy" (*BN*, p. 245). The very image that encapsulates the fulfillment granted to Hannah but denied to Esther and that thus epitomizes Crafts's departure from Dickens—"then resting for the first time on my mother's bosom" (*BN*, p. 245)—is itself lifted verbatim from *Bleak House* (*BH*, p. 449). With a similar violence, Crafts rewrites the opening sentence of the omniscient narrator's last chapter in *Bleak House* to form the first sentence of her own final chapter, transforming a sentence describing the sense of defeat and shame in Lady Dedlock's household after her death into a description of Hannah's enduring contentment: "There is a hush upon Chesney Wold in these altered days, as there is upon a portion of the family history" (*BH*, p. 763) morphs into "there is a hush on my spirit in these days, a deep repose a blest and holy quietude" (*BN*, p. 244). It is only in the novel's last sentence that Dickens is truly left behind; whereas *Bleak House* ends in midsentence with Esther's "they can very well do without much beauty in me—even supposing——" (*BH*, p. 770), *The Bondswoman's Narrative* ends with syntactic as well as narrative closure, as Hannah assures the reader that she cannot adequately describe her happiness and writes, "I will let the reader picture it all to his imagination and say farewell" (*BN*, p. 246). However, while this final sentence owes nothing to Dickens, it recalls—and, as with the last borrowings from *Bleak House*, not only recalls, but in its very sunniness also perverts—the famously perverse ending of Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*, where narrator Lucy Snowe "leave[s] sunny imaginations hope" that her fiancé has not died and lets them "picture union and a happy succeeding life" before ending with the same word as Hannah, "Farewell."⁵⁹ Continuing to the last to rely on British novelists, even as it makes free with their work, *The Bondswoman's Narrative* thus

different from that in *Bleak House*, recalls a similar moment in the very novel with which Douglass sought to align *Bleak House*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Cassie's reunion with Eliza). This resemblance is noted in Jean Fagan Yellin, "The Bondswoman's Narrative and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*," in *In Search of Hannah Crafts*, p. 114.

59. Charlotte Brontë, *Villette* (Harmondsworth, 1979), p. 596. The editors of *The Bondswoman's Narrative* do not note this echo.

enacts on the level of form the complex play of autonomy and dependence missing from its utopian ending.⁶⁰

Coda: Charles Dickens's *Frederick Douglass*

As I suggested at the outset, the African Americanization of *Bleak House* is part of a larger pattern of reception and appropriation, albeit a singularly elaborate and complex case. However, in focusing on the uses to which *Bleak House* was put, I do not want to create the impression that *Bleak House* itself came out of nowhere. Instead, let me conclude by affirming that *Bleak House* did not come out of nowhere and, further, that one of the places it came out of was America. It is not exactly a secret that *Bleak House* is indebted to *The House of the Seven Gables* and *The Scarlet Letter*, but this is also not something scholars have thought through in light of recent decades' work on national identity, realism and romance, the gothic, print culture, and the like. More of a secret—that is, a question that has not really been asked—is the extent to which *Bleak House* may be, if not always already African American, nonetheless indebted to and positioned in the literary field in relation to African American writings (the kind of question we saw McCune Smith already raising about “The Charge of the Light Brigade” in the 1850s). For example, we have seen how Hannah Crafts wrenches Esther's narrative out of context, but perhaps we should also view the very word *narrative* in the repeated chapter title “Esther's Narrative” in the context of the widespread circulation of slave narratives, including preeminently *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. Recall that Esther's most obvious precursor, Jane Eyre, writes an “autobiography,” not a “narrative.” Like Esther's telltale resemblance to her mother, then, the word *narrative* may suggest a kinship the novel is otherwise eager to disavow.

I would not push this argument too far; it is obviously not the case that Douglass's *Narrative* is to *Bleak House* as *Bleak House* is to *The Bondswoman's Narrative*. However, if we turn in closing to a passage in one of Dick-

60. Ballinger, Lustig, and Townshend conclude similarly that “Hannah's individual ‘becoming,’ rather than being compromised by the Dickensian example, is acted out at the level of the text.” However, the authors' conflation here of author (Crafts) and narrator (Hannah) undercuts their claims for the text's constitutive intertextuality and produces a certain incoherence in their argument. This is perhaps more easily seen in an earlier passage, when they describe “Hannah, patterning herself on Esther”—as if it were the character, rather than the author, who had read *Bleak House* (Ballinger, Lustig, and Townshend, “Missing Intertexts,” pp. 237, 227). These slips reflect the authors' lingering tendency to read the text as autobiographically referential. The novel's intertextual relationship to *Bleak House* does not rule out this possibility, but it does compromise and complicate any such referentiality in ways the authors fail to address.

ens's letters, we see that Dickens did in fact take a page from Douglass's *Narrative*. As shocking as it is enigmatic, this gesture manages to capture quite neatly what Douglass and even more so Crafts do to Dickens. "Here is Frederick Douglass," Dickens wrote to a friend in 1848, sending him a copy of the *Narrative*. "There was such a hideous and abominable portrait of him in the book, that I have torn it out, fearing it might set you, by anticipation, against the narrative."⁶¹ Just as Dickens here reframes Douglass's *Narrative*, so too does Douglass reframe Dickens's; and just as Dickens combines admiration and aggression in a violent sundering of text from author, so too does Crafts, who similarly defaces Dickens's text in the very act of transmitting it.

61. Dickens, letter to William Charles Macready, 17 Mar. 1848, *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, 5:262–63. The editors of Dickens's letters suggest that Dickens "probably had one of the American edns, containing a very grim and aggressive-looking head and shoulders portrait as frontispiece, as against the comparatively relaxed portrait in the English edns" (p. 263n). However, the portrait in the first American edition of the *Narrative*, at least, is not at all "aggressive-looking," but rather shows Douglass seated, dressed formally, arms crossed, looking very much the gentleman. It seems at least as likely that Douglass looked too civilized for Dickens's taste as too barbaric, but it is impossible to say with any confidence what inspired his reaction. I am grateful to Julia Lee for calling my attention to this letter.