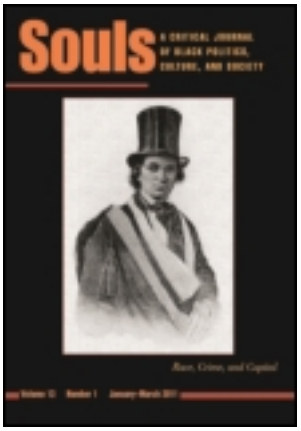

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Souls

Black Critiques of Capital: Radicalism, Resistance, and Visions of Social Justice

Crimes of Performance

Uri McMillan

In this article, I focus on the intersections between discourses of crime and illegality with modes of performance in the multiple impersonations staged by William and Ellen Craft, two married fugitive slaves who escaped from chattel slavery in the United States in 1848 through a complex set of layered performances. I begin illustrating the linkages between crime and performance by tracing the workings of a dynamic I term "fugitive transvestism" in an aesthetic representation of Ellen Craft, specifically an engraving she posed for in 1851 that was later published in The London Illustrated News. *In doing so, I not only reveal the engraving as a site where we can witness Craft's embodied performances, rather than a seemingly static document, but also focus on the crimes of "being" acted by Craft that surface in the engraving itself. In addition, I further reveal the performative and criminal acts committed by Ellen Craft, by later moving to a discussion of prosthetics, focusing attention on the mechanisms of Craft's escape costume. Prosthetic performances, as I discuss them, were dramatic and tactical strategies employed by the Crafts that continue to reveal the suturing of crime and performance in Ellen Craft's counterfeit embodiment of her alter-ego, while taking it further into yet another set of unlawful impersonations. Thus, this essay will evince how the Craft's multiple crimes of performance enabled their*

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mobility across 19th-century spatial sites and representational spheres.

Keywords: aesthetics, commodities, crime, performance, slave narratives

A strange encounter occurred "one bright starlight night, in the month of December last," according to an anonymous eyewitness account, originally published in *The Newark Advertiser* and reprinted in the abolitionist newspaper *The Liberator* on February 9, 1849. The observer, an early passenger on a steamer bound to Charleston, South Carolina, witnessed the arrival of a "young man" and his "servant, a strapping negro," the former dressed in a "capacious overcoat" with his face "bandaged by a white handkerchief." There was "something so mysterious and unusual" about this young man, who seemed "anxious to avoid all notice" and gave his name, "in a low womanly voice," simply as "Mr. Johnson." The next morning, after observing Mr. Johnson's corporeality in the daylight—remarking that he "was a slightly built apparently handsome young man, with black hair and eyes" and of a "darkness of complexion that betokened Spanish extraction"—the anonymous witness questioned Mr. Johnson's slave. While sympathetic to the male slave's claims about his invalid master's "complication of diseases," this observer was not entirely convinced of Mr. Johnson's afflictions, remarking that "he walked rather too gingerly for a person afflicted with so many ailments." The author's perceptive doubts about Mr. Johnson's appearance are seemingly corroborated by the end of the article, when he remarks that he "cut from the New York Herald the accompanying extract"—an account of William and Ellen Craft's escape—and "there is no doubt in my mind but that William and Ellen Craft are no other than my traveling companions, Mr. Johnson and servant."[1]

The eyewitness beheld a series of performances enacted by the Crafts, married African American slaves from two different plantations in rural Georgia, whose ingenious and carefully rehearsed plan of escape from chattel slavery made them famous—or infamous—in America and eventually throughout the British Isles. Ellen Craft, "nearly white" in countenance, passed as a disabled white gentleman, "Mr. William Johnson," while her husband, William, impersonated being Mr. Johnson's slave.[2] Thus, through a layered and complex set of performances—sartorial disguises, fraudulent prosthetics, a "pantomime of literacy," whiteness, and a specific gendered and classed role-playing—Ellen and William Craft subverted taut legal strictures concerning chattel slavery. The Crafts' performances became a mechanism through which to claim dissident citizenship.[3]

Furthermore, the Crafts became popular lecturers in the antislavery movement, under the tutelage of lecturer William Wells Brown, in the United States and Britain. In 1860, over a decade after their original escape, their self-written escape narrative, *Running a Thousand Miles to Freedom, or the Escape of William and Ellen Craft*, was published in London and went through two printings in two years.[4] The Crafts served, jointly and independently, as lecturers, authors, and international public figures. They were the subject of newspaper fodder, were portrayed in numerous fictionalized accounts, and were the subject of multiple engravings.[5] Most important, though, they were regarded as *subjects*. Hence, the Craft's initial techniques of subversion led to multiple dramatic roles for William and/or Ellen Craft that far exceeded their legal status in the United States as fungible commodities or as forms of property with no rights.

In this essay, I will discuss in more depth the linkages between crime and performance through what I am calling "fugitive transvestism." I utilize this particular idiom, generally, to refer to fugitive slaves' employment of performance skills to escape from slavery via transracial, transgender, and class-crossing impersonations. Abolitionist newspapers, in the 19th century, repeatedly reported instances of slaves who accomplished surreptitious escapes from slavery via forms of racial and/or gender disguises, occasionally in surprising configurations.[6] Specifically, fugitive transvestism gestures toward the myriad crimes committed by the Crafts, fugitives, in the eye of the law, not only because they were runaway slaves but also because of Ellen's fraudulent embodiment of whiteness. If whiteness, as legal scholar Cheryl Harris notes, is a form of property, what is at stake in the particular crime of chattel slaves putatively stealing the spoils of whiteness, or put differently, *property appropriating property*?[7]

Fugitive transvestism, then, yokes discourses of crime, rights, and the law to mediums of performance. William Craft repeatedly quotes the wordings of state laws and court cases in the first section of *Running a Thousand Miles to Freedom* as irrefutable proof of the "legal" and "social tyranny from which we fled."[8] Similarly, the text features a parallel line of argumentation about slavery's racial logics, that is, the faulty dependence on skin color as sufficient evidence to distinguish between a free white subject vis-à-vis an enslaved black object. The historical figures of Salomé Muller and Ellen Craft herself, as other scholars have noted, serve to destabilize these logics and evince the mutability of "whiteness" and "blackness" as racial categories.[9] Yet, I want to take this discussion farther and emphasize how Ellen Craft's performance of fugitive transvestism was implicitly tied to the discussion of crime and legality that preceded it in the text. Fugitive transvestism, rather than being an overt resistance to the

aforementioned laws of slavery, worked as an insurgent strategy by which Ellen Craft wielded performance-as-a-medium to animate and enact an imaginary object ("Mr. William Johnson") into, literally, a "being." In other words, while still legally a nonbeing, Craft used fugitive transvestism (and other performances) to will another nonbeing—a white, male, economically elite, disabled alter ego—into existence. These performances were so successful that this object was regarded as a legitimate subject and a lawful citizen. Yet, these performances also functioned as pathways for Ellen and William Craft to claim citizenship and subjectivity for themselves well ahead of the declaration of slavery's illegality in the United States.

I suggest, then, a seemingly counterintuitive focus on objecthood as a performative tactic to claim the freedom of subjectivity and self-ownership. Many literary scholars have focused on the production of literature, particularly the self-authorship of slave narratives, as the crucial marker between enslavement and freedom.[10] The slave narrative, they argue, was far from a passive object of testimonial; on the contrary, these texts were active agents intrinsic to the reformation of former slaves from enslaved objects to self-possessed subjects, or from commodities to what Henry Louis Gates calls "speaking subjects."[11] While I certainly do not discount the importance of the "strident, moral voice of the former slave recounting" that is a central feature of slave narratives, I also want to suggest, through my discussion of Ellen Craft, the critical import of dramaturgical tools as conduits to subjectivity as well.[12] Sociologist Paul Gilroy has noted, for instance, that "survival in slave regimes . . . promoted the acquisition of what we might understand now to be performance skills," acts of theatrical subterfuge that included "mimicking and in a sense, mastering, their rulers and conquerors, masters and mistresses."[13] I do not mean to suggest, however, that fugitive transvestism is simply mimesis. Rather, I utilize performance as a framework to recalibrate our analytical gazes to the ways in which Ellen Craft adroitly manipulated her physical body into a multidimensional surface that temporarily evaded and escaped its gendered and raced markings.

I begin tracing the intersections of discourses of crime and rights with those of performance by a discussion of the aesthetic sphere. Fugitive transvestism, I argue, surfaced in multiple three-dimensional and representational spaces. Thus, in what follows, I consider an engraving of Ellen Craft as a potential site to witness fugitive transvestism's workings. If aesthetics seems ancillary to this special issue's themes, I caution that aesthetics are neither unrelated to the democratic project nor to flows of capitalism, but instead are often directly implicated in both. Aesthetics "has always

been political, explicitly formulated in close relation to politics, and in some cases more a matter of politics than anything else."[14] Aesthetics, like writing or the abolitionist lecture stand or the "sorrow songs" discussed by W.E.B. Du Bois, were technologies these black cultural actors adroitly manipulated to develop, share, and often perform narratives verboten in public discourses in mid-19th-century America.[15]

Posing and Posturing

If Ellen Craft's versatile corporeal presence cleverly transgressed the borders between the theatrical lecture stage and the spaces of everyday life, she was equally adept in transforming herself into a two-dimensional image. In 1851, Ellen Craft posed for an engraving in London dressed in her escape costume, an image that later appeared in *The London Illustrated News*.[16] The engraving served multiple roles, such as becoming the frontispiece for the Crafts' escape narrative.[17] Concomitantly, in lieu of authenticating documents such as letters of support from prominent white abolitionists, the frontispiece image became a "prima facie endorsement of the narrative's truth."[18] In addition, copies of the engraving were sold at the Crafts' lectures, similar to lecturer Sojourner Truth's sale of *carte de visite* photographs of herself at her lectures, with the proceeds from the sales aiding in the purchase of William's sister out of slavery.[19] The engraving was, therefore, a medium of representation that also functioned as a marketable commodity—and like Ellen's silent body on abolitionist lecture stands in the United States and later Europe—as an indisputable marker of truth.

Immediately, I want to disturb notions of this engraving as a seemingly static and two-dimensional image and instead conceptualize of it as an embodied performance. In that sense, the careful and still pose communicated in her engraving has more in common with the original escape than use of the ostensible "master's" clothes. Craft's pose was *active*, or, in performance studies parlance, a "doing" that made use of many of the same dramaturgical techniques that she utilized in her original performance. Clothing and corporeal gestures, for instance, were important and carefully staged components integral to the success of the engraving as a plausible and successful image. Likewise, as numerous scholars have noted, the studied attention to these and other components in images of black American life, such as the photographs Du Bois commissioned for the Paris Exposition, convey the high political stakes of representation, particularly in the visual sphere.[20] Ellen Craft's engraving, then, was not a passive

object; rather, her engraving served as a performative document that revealed Ellen's embodied restaging of her avatar.

Historically, Ellen Craft's engraving is in dialogue with numerous and varied interventions made by black lecturers, artists, and activists in the aesthetic realm, particularly the smaller contributions of black American women. In 1850, Williams Wells Brown and Henry "Box" Brown exhibited their respective panoramas, Williams Brown displaying a panorama of twenty-four scenes in Newcastle-upon-Tyne and Henry Brown first displaying his *Mirror Against Slavery* in Boston's Washington Hall.[21] Meanwhile, while other male artists such as Robert S. Duncanson and James Presley Ball focused on landscape painting as well as other panoramas, black women turned to photography and sculpture as insurrectionist forms.[22] The *carte de visite* photographs taken of Sojourner Truth that I alluded to earlier reconfigured a relatively new technology initially designed for wealthy Italian elites into a uniquely abolitionist medium.[23] Concomitantly, sculptor Edmonia Lewis' *Forever Free*, made in 1867, depicted a freedman audaciously standing on the chains that formerly held him in bondage, while his companion, a former bondswoman, knelt beside him with her hands clasped in ostensible gratitude.[24] These select examples evince the presence of what cultural historian Daphne Brooks terms a "black abolitionist aesthetic network."[25] Yet, as she emphasizes, these artists were not concerned solely with making beautiful *objets de art*, but rather in utilizing the aesthetic as a potent ideological medium. Ellen Craft's engraving, then, is in alignment with these other disparate objects, because of their explicit participation in political discourses of freedom for black American slaves.

If Ellen's passive "white" physicality was on display on abolitionist lecture stands as the main, if not *the*, proof of the veracity of the escape, her engraving, in contrast, functioned as its own form of evidence. The engraving, in other words, was visual proof that Ellen Craft in disguise actually *appeared* to resemble a disabled white male slaveholder. Thus, the onus for Ellen, in posing for the engraving, was to bodily evince concatenated impersonations of a classed, raced, gendered, and handicapped subject all at once, like in her original performance, but also with the awareness that her pose would be transformed into an image, a reproducible object, and eventually an emblem of the British abolitionist movement. Ellen, I argue, calibrated her body in response to such demands, simultaneously aware of her body-in-action as well as her body becoming an object. Roland Barthes, similarly, described his awareness of this dual process when posing for a "portrait-photograph," likening it to a moment when "I am neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming an object."[26] This slippage across the subject/object dichotomy, what

Barthes calls "becoming an object" and what I call "objecthood," is a transitory stage that the mechanism of the image does not explicitly reveal, but is nonetheless there. Put another way, if visual culture is the study of *seeing* what is hitherto hidden from view or unnoticed, I conceive of this objecthood, this posing and "doing" of the body as an object, as a process contained within the engraving that is present, even if partly concealed or unseen.[27] Therefore, while the engraving of Ellen Craft acted as (and became) prima facie evidence of the escape, Ellen's embodied posing as a white male subject and an object served as the means *through which* the engraving became a form of unquestionable proof.

The engraving also *literally* illustrated how Ellen Craft utilized performance as a mode to embody and substantiate Mr. William Johnson. I am interested, therefore, in how performance functions as a mode through which the body acquires meaning. Philosopher Judith Butler's cogent arguments on how gender is constructed, performed, and enacted are of use here. Gender, for Butler, is not "natural" but produced, or in her words, is in "no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed," instead gender is an "identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*."[28] Ellen's corporeality, following Butler's logic, acquires meaning through dramatic acts, through a set of possibilities made material by her body-in-performance. Ellen Craft dressed in her escape costume, likewise, gains substance and meaning via performance. Yet, if performances are sets of "actions, interactions, and relationships," then witnesses and audiences also play key roles in how bodies bear meaning.[29] The viewers of Ellen's engraving were, therefore, crucial participants in interpreting the palimpsestic layers of the engraving and in generating the meanings of the images they saw.

Yet, if these dynamics of performance are not immediately visible, then what exactly did viewers of the engraving actually *see*, or perhaps feel, when they viewed and/our purchased the engraving? By way of detour, I briefly note some of my earlier thoughts on the engraving in order to come back to, and more fully illuminate, my current conceptualizations of its political utility. In earlier incarnations of my thinking on the subject, I have conceived of the engraving as a site where fugitive transvestism, and the performative tactics inherent to its operation, becomes visible to the naked eye. I also interpreted the engraving as, less a transparent image than essentially a trompe l'oeil, or a trick of the eye, in that what appears to be one body is actually two bodies layered over each other: Ellen Craft's and Mr. William Johnson's. Finally, as scholar Ellen Weinauer has previously discussed, I have been intrigued by the erasure of Ellen's poultice around her head in the engraving and, hence,

the incompleteness of the image as a putative "accurate" representation of the escape costume.[30] My reconsideration of Ellen Craft's engraving, in what follows, is not so much to disagree with my earlier thoughts. Rather, I hope to expand on the engraving's potentiality as an image and reproducible document and to consider questions of crime and performance when thinking about what we see—and cannot see—when viewing it.

Thus, the crime inherent in this engraving is the very process of becoming that the actual incompleteness of the document makes visible. The engraving is indeed dense, layered, and multiple. Yet, rather than imagining what we see manifested in the engraving as containing two bodies layered over one another, the point—and the crime—seems to be that Ellen Craft's *singular* body is able to become so many different personas at once. The absence of the head poultice in the engraving, therefore, is not a definitive "lack," so much as it aids in visually seeing a body in between transformations. Paradoxically, then, the incompleteness of the image aids us in a more complete view: what becomes clear is not the full escape costume, but rather the movement back and forth between multiple subjectivities. Passing as a framework, as queer theorist Judith Jack Halberstam suggests elsewhere, is incomplete when its focus is solely on one-directional modes of becoming, or in this case, the movement from blackness to whiteness.[31] Put differently, instead of horizontal traversal across sets of gender and racial binaries, or a vertical passing "up" into elite white male slaveholder status, we should consider the positions Ellen Craft inhabits more as asymmetrical or fractures. Such an interpretation would perhaps more precisely reflect the points where these performances meet, or, put differently, the occasionally frayed seams stitching these impersonations together that the ambiguity of this representation gestures toward. One of the crimes of the engraving, moreover, is not solely visually representing Craft's claims to whiteness, but rather Craft's adroit ability to perform multiple—and diverging—subjectivities simultaneously. Hence, perhaps what viewers saw was what was perhaps the most dangerous of Craft's crimes: the sheer ability for a commodity not only to claim subjectivity, but also to accurately perform *multiple* forbidden subject-positions without detection.

Ellen Craft's legal status as a commodity, and her fluid engagement with what I am calling "objecthood," complicate notions of her objectification by William in multiple spheres. Specifically, I am referencing the argument that Ellen Craft "becomes another sort of commodity when represented in the frontispiece" because William Craft sought to "control her representation" in both the visual realm and the "verbal images" of their escape narrative.[32] While I agree on

the crucial importance on paying attention to the gendered roles each of the Crafts have in their cultural production (particularly their literary narrative), such an argument relies partly on the assumption that becoming an object is always already a negative status and/or a pathway away from freedom and subjectivity. Yet, as I noted earlier, objecthood—becoming an object through performance, such as that of Ellen/William Johnson—can lead toward, rather than away from, claiming subjectivity. Hence, I suggest another way to interpret the engraving is again how it evinced Ellen Craft's ability to move between different modes of representation as well as forms of being and *nonbeing*. The verb "move" is important: a focus on actions emphasizes her physical and verbal acts and their presence, even when William Craft sought to downplay them. The engraving, by this line of inquiry, illustrates Ellen Craft's fluidity in calibrating her body into an object for the sake of political strategy and personal capital, that is, the production, sale, and dissemination of the engravings as forms of self-publicity (and personal income) as well as suggestive propaganda revealing the United States' cruel enslavement of "white" slaves. Furthermore, the fact that funds from sales of the engraving were used to purchase William's sister out of slavery does not suggest Ellen's objectification as much as it reveals the Craft's keen methods of participation in capitalism, even while fugitive slaves living abroad. Self-commodification, then, surfaces as a political strategy for the Craft's in forms as varied as material culture (the engraving), theatrical spaces of dissent (abolitionist lecture stands), and later print culture (the escape narrative).

Finally, Ellen Craft's "white" appearance in the engraving participated in 19th-century discourses of femininity, even while visually confounding them. In this sense, Craft's virtual "whiteness" operated both in the original escape and the engraving as strategies, albeit differently. In the escape, Ellen's white skin was not the only attribute allowing her to perform as her disabled male alter ego, Mr. Johnson, but it was a crucial component. Whereas in the engraving, because spectators knew they were "seeing" Ellen Craft *and* Mr. William Johnson, her "white" appearance (and the meanings behind it) was in alignment with debates over the proper character of women in the 19th century. Questions of Ellen Craft's marriage status, as well as her character and deportment, would dovetail with the "cardinal virtues"—such as purity and submission—inherent to the "cult of true womanhood" that proliferated in popular ladies magazines from the years 1820 to 1860.[33] Black women were not thought of as belonging to the cult of true womanhood; the charges of "female impropriety" against lecturer Sarah Remand or that Sojourner Truth was

a man in disguise further evinced black women's inability to claim such attributes for themselves.[34]

Ellen Craft, and her representation in the engraving, was a schism in these systems of inclusion, since she *was* positioned in these discourses. While Ellen's marriage to William and her passivity as an object of display on abolitionist lecture stands aided in her atypical regard by white audiences in the British Isles as a "lady," I would like to suggest that the engraving also played a role in this dynamic. Craft's incomplete performance of fugitive transvestism, captured in the engraving, seductively assuaged any fear by spectators that she would be unruly, dangerous, or perhaps excessively "black." Instead, the engraving presents Craft as a neutral subject: her facial expressions are mysterious but not threatening. Likewise, the danger of the escape, and its emotional toll on her, is not discernible. The engraving functions, then, as a pliable document that pivots between concealment and visibility, revealing Craft's "whiteness" and her femininity (or does it?) while, simultaneously, keeping hidden the mechanisms of performance integral to its success.

"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 attempted to successfully purchase train tickets, for *himself* and "his" slave. William described 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.[35]

Provocatively, in the text, William restaged Ellen's racial-gendered-class 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. This moment, or event, in the text is an important marker for the reader. William's narration suggests, in other words, his shift from a brief treatise on slavery's odious operations to an account of the escape. This literary event, however, is also pertinent to the themes of this essay. Specifically, the moment "Mr. William Johnson," as a performed identity, appears in the text, discourses of crime and performance become intertwined. Put differently, actions committed in

the guise of Mr. Johnson function both as criminal acts and dramaturgical deeds.

In order to further reveal the performative workings of Ellen Craft's alter ego, I shift gears, in what follows, to an analysis of prosthetics. The engraving of Ellen Craft–in-disguise is an entry point into this discussion. The engraving was a prosthetic device: it stood in for and represented the actual escape to those who purchased and/or viewed it. In that sense, the engraving's simultaneous reproduction of the narrative of the escape, and gesture toward the escape's actual disappearance echoes philosopher Fred Moten's suggestion that this very conjunction of reproduction and disappearance is perhaps "performance's condition of possibility, its ontology and its mode of production."[36] Nevertheless, I trace prosthetics in next section through a discussion of Ellen Craft's escape costume itself, specifically, the sling that held her arm and hid her hand. Prosthetics, I argue, continue to reveal the suturing of crime and performance in Ellen Craft's counterfeit embodiment of Mr. William Johnson, while taking it further into yet another set of unlawful impersonations.

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 her husband, or rather, "his" slave. The most visible and involved of Ellen's multiple disguises, Ellen's putative disability 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, if anything, 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.

In this section, I conceptualize Ellen Craft's *prosthetic performances* as a set of historically unique performative tactics. If Ellen Craft's performances of fugitive transvestism enabled her to traverse gender and racial dichotomies, her prosthetic performances had a more complex role. The slings and other ruses of subterfuge integral to her impersonation of infirmity were strategic apparatuses deployed to gain access to forbidden social–political–capitalistic spheres. Prosthetics, as I will discuss, enabled the avatar "Mr. William Johnson" to

participate in economies of writing so crucial to the plausibility of Ellen's performance of 19th-century upper-class white masculinity. Thus, I continue to suggest the multiplicity of crimes committed by the Crafts by, in this section, illustrating how performance, yet again, became a tactical mode for the Crafts—illiterate slaves—to subvert laws forbidding their literacy. Prosthetic performances, then, were potent political strategies as much as they were dramatic tools.

The sartorial markings of Ellen's masculine and "white" doppelganger, as well as the presence of William Craft as an embodied prop, emphasized that the performance of "Mr. William Johnson" was fundamentally a classed and raced impersonation. 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.'"[37] If owning a slave, then, emphasized Mr. William Johnson's "whiteness," the constant proximity of "his" slave also accentuated his class bearing as well. In the 19th century, white immigrant wage-workers began to anxiously distinguish their work from that of black slaves, ironic considering that "in labor-short seventeenth- and eighteenth-century America the work of slaves and that of white servants were virtually interchangeable in most areas."[38] Simultaneously, as the "language of labor" shifted—the Dutch-derived term *boss*, for example, replacing *master*—"white manhood suffrage became the norm" as traditional voting requirements prohibiting "*whites* who were not economically independent" were dropped.[39] While this process of universal suffrage for all "white" men was already in formation when Ellen Craft performed her impersonation, Ellen Craft's masculine persona was *still* explicitly classed as belonging to a very specific stratum of society: the white male slaveholder.[40] William Craft's politically disempowered black male body acted as an embodied prop (he, too, was performing objecthood) that aided in emphasizing, by contrast, the power inherent in Ellen's illusory "white" and "male" identity.[41] Likewise, Ellen Craft–cum–William Johnson's pieces of elegant attire—the top hat, the long overcoat, the intelligent spectacles—served to further concretize that William Johnson was not only a white male, but also specifically an economically elite white male slaveholder of the planter class. Put another way, both the physical prop of William Craft and the specific apparel of Ellen Craft's avatar functioned as performative instruments within the larger apparatus of prosthetic performance. Both devices, one embodied and the other a set of objects, acted together to transform further the transparent and fraudulent object of Mr. William Johnson

into a particular classed and raced embodiment whose citizenship was without contest.

The sling hiding Ellen's hand, in particular, served a pivotal role in her portrayal of "realness" and in allowing her to impersonate what she herself could not actually execute: the ability to write. Ellen's performance depended on her not just resembling a "real" white gentleman, but—albeit temporarily—*becoming* one. Yet, as I just argued, Ellen's performed "being" was peculiar to the particular mores of an elite white male slaveholder. Hence, if this specific classed identity included the right to own a slave, to vote, to purchase train tickets for themselves as well as their slaves, and to ride in a first-class cabin on the train, then that identity surely also included—if not necessitated—the ability to read and white. Nineteenth-century whiteness functioned in an inverse relationship to blackness; thus, the abilities to read and write gained in importance, economic privilege, and political power through the fact that they were skills absolutely forbidden by law for black slaves to learn and to practice. 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 needed to execute a signature. Thus, despite Mr. Johnson's putative "inflammatory rheumatism," the props of disability were not sufficient on their own to prevent "him" from being expected to sign for "himself."[42] Ellen's sling, in an act of substitution, stood in for and represented the ability to write. Literary scholar 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.[43]

The ability to write is therefore the quintessential symbol of white male citizenship. Literacy, to put it differently, was one more piece of the armature that protected whiteness as a form of property, pace Cheryl Harris.[44] Ellen's sling, therefore, was a fantastic technology that allowed her to temporarily assume the identity of whiteness and receive the socioeconomic privileges inherent to it, such as the ability to write, without needing to perform the crucial signature.

To take this a step further, though, Ellen's sling was not just a substitution, but also a performance. Performance historian Joseph Roach has noted that culture is transmitted primarily through acts of "surrogation."[45] In this vein, performance functions through substitutions. 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 Mr. William Johnson's infirmity *legible*. The sling replaced and represented 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," and 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 Craft's feminine illiterate hand that, upon discovery, would have been interpreted as "black" and/or "female" and negated all of her interlocking performances at once. The sling was an instrument of performance that acted like a set of lenses, bringing white maleness into shaper 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 performances 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 of the mechanisms of the 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.

If we loop back to the premises this essay first began with—the multiple strange interlocking of discourses of crime with modes of performance—we can conceptualize how Ellen Craft's clever impersonation of frustrated chirography takes the crimes committed by the Crafts even further. Ellen Craft's fraudulent inhabitation of a white male body was a crime in itself; *acting* as a white male slaveholder and *participating* as a citizen were additional acts of misconduct that went beyond the limits of legal provocation. Performances, as I have been arguing throughout this essay, were the means through which the Crafts' complex chicanery to gain freedom became tangible and, as I have shown, those means had multiple material effects. My use, then, of the verbs "acting" and "participating," are purposeful: if performances became the dramatic means

through which Mr. Johnson was willed into "being," they also became the modes through which he executed economic transactions and moved in and through physical spaces as a citizen.

In conclusion, the Craft's crimes of performance enabled their mobility across 19th-century representational sites and spatial locations. Fugitive transvestism, as a set of performances, was strategically and repeatedly employed in the actual escape from Georgia to Philadelphia and, two years later, redeployed in the engraving I discussed earlier as a representational tactic. Likewise, the Craft's prosthetic performances were utilized as subversive stratagems to enter into matrices of writing integral to the functioning of white citizenship as an ideology, even while not actually enacting the signature of that identity. Ellen (and William) Craft, as we already know, gained their freedom from these numerous impersonations, but also garnered remarkable traction from these performances long after they were said and done. Not only did the Crafts eventually publish their self-penned slave narrative in London, but they also eventually returned to the United States and opened a school in post-emancipation Georgia, again revealing their adroit manipulation of capital for their own ends. Crimes of performance, then, facilitated the multiple geographical and metaphysical movements of Ellen and William Craft, while demonstrating that, sometimes, becoming an object can be the escape hatch toward liberation.

Notes

1. Anonymous, *The Boston Liberator*, February 9, 1849.

2. William Craft and Ellen Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles to Freedom: The Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1999), 20–21.

3. Lindon Barrett, "Hand-Writing: Legibility and the White Body in Running a Thousand Miles to Freedom," *American Literature* 69, no. 2 (June, 1997): 324.

4. R. J. M. Blackett, "The Odyssey of William and Ellen Craft," in *Beating Against the Barriers: Bibliographical Essays in Nineteenth-Century Afro-American History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), 105.

5. For a fictionalized account of an escape that bears striking parallels to the Crafts's escape, see William Wells Brown, *Clotel, or, the President's Daughter: A Narrative of Slave Life in the United States* (London: Patridge and Oakey, 1853). In addition, versions of the Crafts's story, as well as their later life in the British Isles, appeared in other work by William Wells Brown as well as his daughter, Josephine Brown. See Josephine Brown, *Biography of an American Bondman, by His Daughter* (Boston: R. F. Wallcut, 1856). Engravings of Ellen and William Craft, as older adults, were published in William Still's *The Underground Rail Road: a record of facts, authentic narratives, letters, & c., narrating the hardships, hair-breadth escapes, and death struggles of the slaves in their efforts for freedom, as related by themselves and others or witnessed by the author: together with sketches of the some of the largest stockholders and most liberal aiders and advisers of the road* (Philadelphia: Porters & Coates, 1872).

6. The newspaper *The North Star*, for instance, published a "recent case which goes ahead of even the Crafts, for craftiness," in which a "mulatto man, whose complexion had been bleached by successive amalgamations, so as to approximate closely that of our own favored race," traveled from Georgia and eventually through Wilmington, Delaware using a land and nautical route similar to the Crafts. *The North Star*, March 1, 1850. Meanwhile, another newspaper article announced that an African American man from Alabama, who was "quite dark and of small stature" disguised himself "in female apparel and

passed as the servant of his wife, who is white." "Another Remarkable Escape," *Frederick Douglass Paper*, February 25, 1853.

7. See Cheryl Harris, "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (1993): 1709–1795.

8. Craft and Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles to Freedom*, 10.

9. The case of Salomé Muller, a German immigrant who successfully sued the Louisiana Supreme Court to be released out of slavery, is briefly discussed in the Crafts's escape narrative. For more on Ellen Craft and the mutability of racial categories, see Barbara McCaskill, "'Yours Very Truly': Ellen Craft—the Fugitive as Text and Artifact," *African American Review* 28, no. 4 (Winter 1994); Ellen M. Weinauer, "'A Most Respectable Looking Gentleman': Passing, Possession, and Transgression in *Running a Thousand Miles to Freedom*," in *Passing and the Fictions of Identity*, ed. Elaine K. Ginsberg (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1996).

10. See Henry Louis Gates, "The Trope of the Talking Book," in *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 127–169; Robert B. Stepto, "I Rose and Found My Voice: Narration, Authentication, and Authorial Control in Four Slave Narratives," in *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 3–31.

11. Ibid., 129.

12. Stepto, "I Rose and Found My Voice," 3.

13. Paul Gilroy, "'. . . To Be Real': The Dissident Forms of Black Expressive Culture," in *Let's Get It On: The Politics of Black Performance*, ed. Catherine Ugwu (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995), 15.

14. Susette Min, "Aesthetics," in *Social Text 100, Special Issue: Collective History: Thirty Years of Social Text*, ed. Brent Hayes Edwards and McCarthy Anna (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, Fall 2009), 27.

15. See the last chapter "The Sorrow Songs," in W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folks* (New York: Norton, 1999).

16. The engraving appeared in *The London Illustrated News* for April 19, 1851. For discussion of the image and the article that accompanied it, see Dorothy Sterling, "Ellen Craft: The Valiant Journey," in her *Black Foremothers: Three Lives* (Old Westbury, Conn.: Feminist Press, 1979), 34–35.

17. This usage of an African American woman's portrait-engraving as a frontispiece explicitly refers to poet Phillis Wheatley and the frontispiece engraving that accompanied her 1773 book *Poems on Various Subjects Religious and Moral*, the first by a colonial American woman to accompany her own writings. For more on the history and construction of this image, see Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw, "'On Deathless Glories Fix Thine Ardent View': Scipio Moorhead, Phillis Wheatley, and the Mythic Origins of Anglo-African Portraiture in New England," in *Portraits of a People: Picturing African Americans in the Nineteenth Century* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, Addison Gallery of American Art, 2006), 26–43.

18. McCaskill, "Yours Very Truly," 7.

19. For more on Sojourner Truth's photographs and the technology of the *carte de visite* photograph, see Carla Peterson, *Doers of the Word: African-American Women Speakers and Writers in the North, 1830–1880* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 40–44. For discussion of Ellen Craft's engraving and its role in raising funds for purchasing the freedom of William Craft's sister, see Craft and Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles to Freedom*, 10.

20. See, for instance, Peggy Phelan, "Developing the Negative: Mapplethorpe, Schor, and Sherman," in *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 34–70; Laura Wexler, "Black and White and Color: The Hampton Album," in *Tender Violence: Domestic Visions in the Age of U.S. Imperialism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 127–176; Deborah Willis, "The Sociologist's Eye: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Paris Exposition," in *A Small Nation of People: W. E. B. Du Bois and African-American Portraits of Progress*, eds. Deborah Willis and David Levering Lewis (New York: Amistad Press, 2003), 51–78.

21. Daphne Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850–1910* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2006), 360, 384.

22. See Judith Wilson, "Hagar's Daughters: Social History, Cultural Heritage, and Afro-U.S. Women's Art," in *Bearing Witness: Contemporary Works by African-American Women Artists*, ed. Jontyle Theresa Robinson (New York: Rizzoli, 1996), 100–101; Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent*, 362–363.

23. Peterson, *Doers of the Word*, 40.

24. Art historian Judith Wilson discusses how the pose of bondswoman in *Forever Free* references an earlier work, Patrick Wilson's *Kneeling Slave* (1835). She goes on to discuss, importantly, how the model for this profile of a slave in bondage has mistakenly been interpreted as a man and was, in fact, a black woman. See Wilson, "Hagar's Daughters."

25. Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent*, 85.

26. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1981), 13, 14.

27. See W. J. T. Mitchell, "Showing Seeing: A Critique of Visual Culture," in *The Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff (New York: Routledge, 2002), 86–101. I am thinking specifically of what Mitchell identifies as his aim of "making seeing show itself, to put it on display, and make it accessible to analysis" (86).

28. Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," in *The Performance Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Bial (New York: Routledge, 1988, 2007), 187.

29. Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 24.

30. See Weinauer, "A Most Respectable Looking Gentleman," 50.

31. See Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1998), 21.

32. Weinauer, "A Most Respectable Looking Gentleman," 50.

33. Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820–1860," *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (Summer 1966): 152.

34. Peterson, *Doers of the Word*, 138, 51. For more on Sojourner Truth's speech and the exposing of her body to her audience, see Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent*, 155–163. My thinking on black women's roles apropos the cult of true womanhood is heavily indebted to the work of Hazel Carby. I am specifically thinking of her argument that "any historical investigation of the ideological boundaries of the cult of true womanhood is a sterile field without a recognition of the dialectical relationship with the alternative sexual code associated with the black woman. Existing outside the definition of true womanhood, black female sexuality was used to define what those boundaries were." See Hazel V. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 30.

35. Craft and Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles to Freedom*, 28.

36. See Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003): 5.

37. David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso, 1999), 13. It is worth noting that Roediger attributes this argument to Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction*.

38. Ibid., 25.

39. Ibid., 52, 53, 56, 57.

40. I thank Hazel Carby here for continually pushing me to think more explicitly about the multiple class dimensions of Ellen Craft's performance.

41. I acknowledge and thank Kellie Jones for this insight and its importance.

42. Craft and Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles to Freedom*, 38.

43. Barrett, "Hand-Writing," 327.

44. For more on whiteness as property, see Harris, "Whiteness as Property."

45. Joseph R. Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 2. Roach's theory of surrogation draws on French philosopher René Girard's trope of the "monstrous double."