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Clotel or, The President's Daughter: "Binary Constructs"

The novel *Clotel or, The President's Daughter* (1853) by William Wells Brown tackles the nuanced identity of the "mulatto" slave — a biracial slave born into slavery whose father was most often the 'master', and mother the slave. Brown, as a biracial person himself, offers a unique perspective on the nature of being biracial in the early to mid-1800s. Brown's goal in writing this work appears to be to convince the white moderate of the shared humanity between slaves and whites, advocating for the eventual abolition of slavery. However, Brown's depiction of biracial characters does not lend itself to this goal. By empowering the white elements of the biracial identity while simultaneously degrading and demeaning the black, Brown fails at his purpose of an argument for the liberation of slaves on the warrant of shared humanity in the face of all shades of colors, and instead maintains the status quo of white superiority at the expense of the mixed identity. Brown's primary methods of doing so are contingent on gender. For "mulattas", Brown employs hyper-sexualization or romanticization of their ethnic bodies on the basis of their whiteness as well as utilizes the elevation of their "white" intellectualism and status — dismissing or ignoring the validity of their mixed identity as a whole. In the case of "mulattos", Brown demonizes the African ancestry and "blood" of their mixed identity. In maintaining as well as perpetuating these specific racial dogmas, Brown reveals his own hand: the author portrays his mixed characters in such a way that reflects a tone of self-hatred of his own mixed identity.

The start of *Clotel* is prefaced with the first definition of biraciality in the context of the novel and in the lense of Brown's own feeling on the matter. The novel reads, "...[T]here is a fearful increase of half whites, most of whose fathers are slaveowners and their mothers slaves... This fact is, of itself, the best evidence of the degraded and immoral condition of the relation of master and slave in the United States of America" (Brown 43). This excerpt from *Clotel* introduces the concept of biraciality as something evil from the very onset of the book. This introduction presents biraciality as representational of the rape of slaves, using words such as "degraded" and "immoral". There are tones of forwardness about in this passage that seem almost apologetic for the existence of biracial people; it is as if the introduction to chapter 1 of *Clotel* serves to apologize or excuse the notion of being biracial before any mixed race characters are even introduced. Such an excerpt sets the tone for what is to come in later chapters — for Brown's condemnation of the white/black identity.

When Brown introduces the protagonists of the book, he does so in a way that almost immediately objectifies them; this pattern of objectification based on the exoticism of the intersection of whiteness and blackness continues throughout the first section of the book and serves to elevate the idea of (semi-diluted) whiteness. Brown writes, "[t]hese are mulatto women, or quadroons, as they are familiarly known, and are distinguished for their fascinating beauty. The handsomest usually pays the highest price of her time" (46). Brown utilizes the specific language of "distinguished for their fascinating beauty", which creates a tone of novelty in combination with physical attractiveness. This type of language alienates mixed race women from the thus 'unfascinating' nature of blackness; instead, Brown creates a new plain of sexualization that is contingent on the addition of whiteness to the banal black identity. The

beauty of the female slave therefore requires a mixture of whiteness to be distinguished or praised in a way that sets it apart from the masses. Brown's romanticizing of the "mulatta" appearance serves to elevate the white part of the "mulatta" identity while also insinuating that the black part, on its own, is inferior.

Brown continues with the elevation of white beauty, but adds a seemingly more complex layer to his content: that white beauty is deserving of a higher status and thus better treatment. Brown writes, "[t]he appearance of Clotel... with a complexion as white as most of those who were waiting with a wish to become her purchasers; her features as finely defined as any of her sex of pure Anglo-Saxon; her long black wavy hair done up in the neatest manner: her form tall and graceful, and her whole appearance indicating one superior to her position" (49). Brown's tactic in this excerpt differs slightly from the last: with this text, Brown begins to praise Clotel's beauty on account of her white features, but then moves to the argument that this white appearance warrants a greater respect for Clotel. Brown uses the word "superior" to describe the station in life which Clotel is deserving of due to Brown's previous sexualization and romanticization of her white features. The language Brown uses redeems "mulatta" women only for the sake of the whiteness that is a part of them — an argument contrary to the idea that slaves are human beings, warranted humane treatment, not in spite of their blackness, but including their blackness.

Clotel's 'white' beauty is not the only feature that redeems her and grants her a higher status in the social hierarchy; Brown also attributes special intelligence to Clotel on account of her whiteness. The book reads, "[t]he tenderness of Clotel's conscience, together with... her high poetic nature regarded reality rather than a semblance of things... she replied, 'If the mutual love

we have for each other, and the dictates of your own conscience do not cause you to remain my husband, and your affections fall from me, I would not, if I could, hold you by a single fetter” (65). In comparing Clotel’s eloquent, articulate and intelligent words with that of a monoracial black female slave, one immediately noticing a disparity: “[d]ees white n*ggers always tink dey sef good as white folks... I don’t like dees mularter niggers, no how; dey always want to set dey sef up for something big” (129). The way in which Brown conveys the language of the black slave is in very broken English; even though she is speaking aloud, Brown misspells many words in an effort to convey her ignorance. It is in this comparison to Clotel’s speech, along with Brown’s outright statement that Clotel has a tender conscience and a poetic nature, that reveal the effect that whiteness has on Brown’s portrayal of slaves. The only difference between the two slaves, in general terms, is their race: Clotel’s whiteness allows her intellectual superiority that conveys even a class difference from the black slave. In this way, Brown degrades blackness and elevates whiteness to a level of intellectualism that only white women are permitted to achieve in his book. In doing this, Brown, whether purposefully or not, argues that stupidity is attributed to blackness and that whiteness goes hand-in-hand with an advanced mental capacity. This, in turn, downplays the blackness that is just as much a part of Clotel as her whiteness. One of the primary arguments for the maintaining of slavery in this novel is the lack of intellectual abilities in black slaves — their supposed inability to understand their position as wrong. In attributing intelligence to whiteness and the lack thereof to blackness, Brown plays into this argument in favor of maintaining the system in place.

Brown’s perpetuation of language advocating for maintenance of the status quo continues with the male gender; Brown utilizes shame in association with the blackness of his male,

biracial characters, thus degrading and shaming the black part of the mixed identity. Brown first does this with the character Sam, “[b]ut there was one great drawback to Sam, and that was his colour. He was one of the blackest of his race. This he evidently regarded as a great misfortune. However, he made up for this in his dress... ‘I don’t like to see dis malgamation of blacks and mulattoes, no how,’ continued Sam. ‘If I had my rights I would be a mulatto too, for my mother was almost as light-coloured as Miss Sally,’ said he. Although Sam was one of the blackest men living, he nevertheless contended that his mother was a mulatto, and no one was more prejudiced against the blacks than he... he wished to convince others that he was part Anglo-Saxon” (106-107). The character Sam becomes almost an archetype for the self-hating biracial, black character that Brown introduces and reuses throughout the latter portion of his book. In this excerpt, Brown introduces Sam by saying that the great drawback to him is his blackness; Brown then moves on to describe Sam’s belief that his mother was white in a way that conveys a tone of humor or condescension — as if Sam is not telling the truth. In doing so, Brown not only erases the mixed identity, but presents Sam in a way that represents the black part of the mixed, male identity as supersedes the white element — a direct contradiction to Brown’s female characters. With the female characters, the white identity takes precedence over the black in a way that elevates the whiteness and either demeans or ignores the blackness. In Brown’s male characters, the blackness engulfs the whiteness and is also presented as something to be ashamed of. The blackness of Sam’s skin not only absorbs any other elements of his racial identity, but absorb all of the elements of his identity as a whole. Sam thus becomes a character that serves only to convey the inferiority that *should be* associated with blackness in biracial men, rather than having other facets of his personality besides Brown’s insistence of the demonization of the male

“mulatto”. The greatest elevation that Sam can think of is the erasure of his black identity in favor of some element of whiteness. In writing this, Brown conveys that black characters are not worthy of attention or personality outside of the shame that their blackness brings to them. The novel presents the common religious argument for slavery in that G-d commanded the black ‘race’ to be enslaved, and that this was an honor because it freed black people from the life of having to be ‘barbarous’ people in Africa (76-82). A central component to this argument is the idea of shame: specifically, shame at one’s black origins. The notion presented is that the black ‘race’ lead a shameful existence in Africa until the white ‘race’ enslaved them under the command of G-d. Thus, when Brown presents a character whose basis lies in shame at his blackness — at the root of one side of Sam’s identity — the author plays into the notion that it is the role of slaves to be ashamed of their inherent black inferiority. And in doing this, Brown must then, by the argument of shame, support the notion that slavery is freedom from the shameful existence in Africa. This argument is continued later in the novel as Brown again presents this idea of black shame in association with male “mulatto” blackness most starkly towards the very end of the book with the character, George. Brown writes, “George was so white as easily to pass for a white man, and being somewhat ashamed of his African descent, he never once mentioned the fact of his having been a slave” (197). In this passage, Brown links blackness with African descent, and then links both of those things to slavery through George’s shame; this again lends support for the idea of slavery as an institution.

One question that surfaces in the mind of the reader when observing Brown’s depiction of “mulatto” characters is as follows: is this elevation of the white part of the mixed race identity and demonization of the black part reflective of Brown’s own feelings with regard to his own

racial makeup? In pondering such an analysis of the book, one might look to Brown's personal narrative at the front of *Clotel: Narrative of the Life and Escape of William Wells Brown*. In this narrative, Brown repeatedly recounts stories of mothers being separated from their young sons — one story being his own separation from his mother: “[a]s I thought of my mother, I could but feel that I had lost ‘The glory of my life, / My blessing and my pride! / I half forgot the name of slave, / When she was by my side’” (16). This separation from his mother, a black woman, marks his separation from the root of his black identity; furthermore, given the fact that Wells was not granted a relationship with his father, there existed separation from his white roots. Thus, Brown himself experienced dissonance from his identity as a biracial person, this then culminating in his depiction of biracial slaves in *Clotel* — particularly male, “mulatto” slaves. Brown's depiction of Sam and George, for example, illustrate that Brown himself did not feel a strong connection to the African side of who he was, this perhaps resulting in some form of shame or self-hatred. This makes more sense when given the racial climate of the time; as Wells notes in his introduction to chapter 1 of *Clotel*, biracial slaves found no solace with either race, as they represented something “immoral” to both sides (44).

William Wells Brown does not allow for the biracial slave to exist in harmony with both sides (often with either side) of his/her identity. Instead, Brown cultivates language and context that maintains the social hierarchy of slavery in that he fosters white superiority and black inferiority in his characters. Such an identity crisis, or example of the warring biracial identity is a topic that has not died away with time. As globalization, immigration and colonization continue to prosper in today's world, so too does the existence of more and more biracial individuals. Thus, into the mainstream discussions about race and racial politics comes the

modern Clotel: the biracial individual, with growing attention, is begging for positive recognitions of validity from all sides of her identity. Brown caught an American identity at its very start over one hundred fifty years ago. Though how far has the conversation with regards to inclusion really come? In order to establish a sense of internal peace, today's Clotel, or even today's William Wells Brown, requires *still* abolition — freedom from the exclusive dialogue surrounding the racial binary.

Works Cited

Brown, William W., and M G. Fabi. *Clotel, or, The president's daughter*. New York: Penguin Books, 2004. Print.