



*Journal of American Studies*, 57 (2023), 5, 637–676

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doi:10.1017/S0021875823000567

# Ellen Craft’s “Spanish” Masquerade: Racially (Mis)Reading Hispanicism in Her Cross-Dressing, Feigning Disability, and Running to Sea

ROSA MARTINEZ

An overlooked advertisement, entitled “An Incident at the South” (1849), calls attention to Ellen Craft’s Spanish masquerade during her 1848 escape from American slavery. The author underscores her masculine costume, feigning disability, running to sea, and “a darkness of complexion that betokened Spanish extraction.” Despite contemporary criticism, the advertisement asserts Spanish-ness in the production history of Ellen’s escape; thus the essay considers a reinterpretation of Ellen’s transnational masquerades by reexamining the advertisement (1849) and in relation to her portrait (1850) and slave narrative (1860). Of emphasis is a history of hemisphere conflict – over land, at the borderlands, and at sea – during Anglo-American expansion, Spanish/Mexican displacement, and antebellum enslavement. Ellen’s story is also contextualized with rising literary traditions of the mid-nineteenth century.

## INTRODUCTION

We arrived at Charleston, and I there lost sight of Mr. Johnson, an acquaintance at my elbow remarking that he was either a “*woman* or a *genius*.”

This morning I cut from the New York Herald the accompanying extract, and there is no doubt in my mind but that William and Ellen Craft are no other than my travelling companions, Mr. Johnson and servant.

Anonymous, “An Incident at the South” (1849)<sup>1</sup>

Although advertisements of runaway slaves were commonly published in American newspapers, whether to reveal their whereabouts or to report unusual encounters or incidents, the passage above captures a rare glimpse into what has been called the most notorious and ingenious escape from

Department of English, California State University Sacramento. Email: [rosa.martinez@csus.edu](mailto:rosa.martinez@csus.edu).

<sup>1</sup> Anonymous, “An Incident at the South”, *Daily Mercury*, 19 Jan. 1849, 1.

American slavery.<sup>2</sup> Entitled “An Incident at the South” and anonymously published in Newark’s *Daily Mercury* (1849–63), here is an extravagant performance of passing as rendered by a young married couple, Ellen Craft (1826–91) and her husband, William Craft (1824–1900). As further revealed in the advertisement, the Crafts, or “Mr. Johnson and servant,” were spotted on 23 December 1848, while on board the steamer *General Clinch*, and traveling from Savannah to Charleston. While a fair-skinned Ellen, twenty-two, dressed the part of a southern planter’s ailing son, a darker-skinned William, twenty-four, played the part of the ever-credulous loyal servant. The plan: to travel by railroad, steamboat, and carriage in search of a cure for Mr. William Johnson’s so-called “complication of diseases.”<sup>3</sup> With her face bandaged in poultices, her right arm held in a sling, and her eyes hidden by a pair of enormous green spectacles, the “invented” masculine costume – from the trousers she herself had sewn to the top hat and cloak that her husband bought – all still looked fashionable even if in the uncanniest sense. It is Ellen’s performance of an invalid gentleman that provoked a racial (mis)reading of Spanish masquerade. Viewed through a thin veil of sexual desire, here is captured the antebellum racial imaginary: “From the better opportunity afforded by daylight, I found that he was a slight built, apparently handsome young man, with black hair and eyes, and of a darkness of complexion that betokened Spanish extraction.”<sup>4</sup> By the mid-nineteenth century, although Spanish descendants were “ambiguous at best” (according to Julia Stern’s correspondence with Elizabeth Boone) and perceived as “dark skin ... Mexican mestizos who, it was generally agreed, had inherited the worst qualities of Spaniards and Indians to produce a ‘race’ still more despicable than that of either parent” (as David J. Weber puts it), the figure of “Spanish extraction” was made central to the story of European colonialism and American slavery.<sup>5</sup> The Crafts’ escape, which began in Macon, Georgia and ended in free Philadelphia on Christmas morning, gained unique transatlantic popularity, not only as a female version of transformation but also as a harrowing and romantic leap for liberty with a female lead. The genius, to borrow the term applied to Ellen by the “acquaintance” (not masked like the author but made even more obscure), is the “invention” of a costume that transcended

<sup>2</sup> R. J. M. Blackett, “The Odyssey of William and Ellen Craft,” in William Craft and Ellen Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom: The Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999), 55–57.

<sup>3</sup> “An Incident at the South.”

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> I am indebted to American studies scholar Katheen Donegan for numerous conversations on the intersection of English histories and Spanish *historias*. Elaine K. Ginsberg, ed., *Passing and the Fictions of Identity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 126 n. 16; David J. Weber, *Foreigners in Their Native Land: Historical Roots of the Mexican Americans* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1973), 59–60.

the binary terms of the antebellum color line. The phrasing "Spanish extraction" thus holds a powerful historical texture and racial construct, as well as a complex geographic history that demands an untangling and mapping in order to glimpse the potential of Ellen's transnational masquerades.

Until now, no historian or literary critic has seriously considered the significance of the advertisement and its relation to Ellen's portrait (1850) and slave narrative (1860).<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, major writers of the mid-nineteenth century took their cue from the advertisement, deliberately appropriating their passing plots, modeling their cross-dressing heroines (and skin-darkening heroes) after Ellen herself, and pursuing "Spanish masquerade" in their meditations on light-skinned slaves and their racial passing. Harriet Beecher Stowe, in her anti-slavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life among the Lowly* (serialized in the US 1851–52), depicts George Harris's skin dyeing and transformation into Mr. Henry Butler in the following terms: "He was very tall, with a dark, Spanish complexion, fine, expressive black eyes, and close-curling hair, also of a glossy blackness. His well-formed aquiline nose, straight thin lips, and the admirable contour of his finely-formed limbs, impressed the whole company instantly with the idea of something uncommon."<sup>7</sup> William Wells Brown, in his novel *Clotel; or, The President's Daughter* (Britain 1853), actually includes an excerpt from "An Incident at the South" and depicts Clotel's racial passing and cross-dressing into Mr. William Johnson in the following terms:

This time she had more the appearance of an Italian or Spanish gentleman. In addition to the fine suit of black cloth, a splendid pair of dark false whiskers covered the sides of her face, while the curling moustache found its place upon the upper lip. From practice she had become accustomed to high-heeled boots, and could walk without creating any suspicion as regarded her sex.<sup>8</sup>

Hannah Crafts (or Hannah Bond) not only pays homage to Ellen and William Craft with her pen name, but also, in her fictional autobiography *The Bondwoman's Narrative* (US 1853–61), recalls Ellen's escape and appropriates Spanish passing for her protagonist of the same name:

<sup>6</sup> R. J. M. Blackett, *Beating against the Barriers: Biographical Essays in Nineteenth-Century Afro-American History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), 85–137; Barbara McCaskill, "'Yours Very Truly': Ellen Craft—The Fugitive as Text and Artifact," *African American Review*, 28, 4 (Winter 1994), 509–29; Elaine K. Ginsberg, ed., *Passing and the Fictions of Identity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 37–56; Ellen Samuels, "'A Complication of Complaints': Untangling Disability, Race, and Gender in William and Ellen Craft's *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*," *MELUS*, 31, 3 (Fall 2006), 15–47.

<sup>7</sup> Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life among the Lowly*, ed. Ann Douglas (New York: Penguin Books, 1981), 180–81.

<sup>8</sup> William Wells Brown, *Clotel; or, The President's Daughter*, ed. M. Giulia Fabi (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 145–46, 161.

Ellen felt that she must go, and go she would and did. She had attained her fifteenth year, and was really a beautiful girl, in complexion approaching the Spanish with dark sparkling eyes, and a profusion of hair, jet black, and curling around a neck and over shoulders of exquisite grace.<sup>9</sup>

Whereas Bond, Brown, and Stowe remove disability and illness from their appropriations of Ellen Craft's Spanish passing, another narrative during this mid-century period examines racial passing, fugitive slave rebellion, and the declining power of an ailing Spanish master alongside the slave-turned-master.

Melville, in his historical novella "Benito Cereno" (serialized in the *US* 1855), reimagines a historical account of slave mutiny and masquerade aboard a Spanish slave ship in Pacific waters. Melville's portrait of the invalid Spanish/Chilean master-turned-slave and loyal African slave-turned-master is overwhelmed by allusions to Spanish decadence, primarily the pejorative rhetoric of *la leyenda negra* ("the Black Legend") and the Spanish Inquisition. The Gothic racial fantasy played out through each character – Captain Amasa Delano (emerging Anglo-American nationalism), Captain Benito Cereno (declining Spanish threat), and Babo (shocking slave rebellion) – allows Melville to repeatedly craft allusions through each perspective that accentuates Cereno's psychic suffering and South American gentlemen's dress, both of which are tied to his invalidity. At the outset, Melville draws attention to Cereno's "nervous suffering," stating, "He was rather tall, but seemed never to have been robust, and now with nervous suffering was almost worn to a skeleton ... His voice was like that of one with lungs half gone, hoarsely suppressed, a husky whisper," and then turns attention to Cereno's attire in an elaborate depiction, stating, "The Spaniard wore a loose Chili jacket of dark velvet; white smallclothes and stockings, with silver buckles at the knee and instep; a high-crowned sombrero, of fine grass; a slender sword, silver mounted, hung from a knot in his sash," but then in a final statement points to how both are tied to Cereno's invalidity: "there seemed something so incongruous in the Spaniard's apparel, as almost to suggest the image of an invalid courtier tottering about London streets in the time of the plague."<sup>10</sup> Seminal to the portrait of the Chilean master's decline is the performance of the African as "slave" and his control of both Spanish decadence and Anglo-American nationalism: "No wonder that, as in this state [Cereno] tottered about, his private servant apprehensively

<sup>9</sup> Hannah Crafts, *The Bondswoman's Narrative*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2014), 84.

<sup>10</sup> Herman Melville, *The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces 1839–1860*, ed. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle (Evanston, IL and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and The Newberry Library, 1988), 57–58, 52.

followed him. Sometimes the negro gave his master his arm, or took his handkerchief out of his pocket for him."<sup>11</sup> Prefiguring the portrait of ailing Spanish master and loyal African slave is the performance of Ellen and William Craft. In Melville's classic, however, we find an intersection between Hispanicism and disability/invalidity that requires explanation.

María DeGúzman, in her book *Spain's Long Shadow*, reflecting on Melville's "Benito Cereno" and asking "Where is Spain?" in the antebellum racial imaginary, discusses a mid-nineteenth-century fixation with Spain and maps the "hemispheric conflict":

"Spain" and "Spaniards" were north and south, east and west. Increasingly from mid-century onward, "Spain" and "Spaniards" signaled within this Anglo-American context hemispheric conflict, particularly over the lands, borderlands, and even seas of all of the Americas, South as much as North, and the presence of "Other Americans" (whether Native American or Spanish American or both) within that "New World." It is no accident that Benito Cereno and his boat are connected with Chile, with Buenos Aires, and with Lima. Nor is it any accident that the everywhere-ness of "Spain" and the everyone-ness of "the Spaniard" should have become a growing obsession within Anglo-American culture at the time (late 1840s–early 1850s) that the tide of Anglo expansion began to rise and shadow, with its own breaking wave, the borderlands – Texas, California, and so on – once claimed for the king of Spain.<sup>12</sup>

DeGúzman's reading of the well-known touchstone "Benito Cereno" helps illuminate a historical narrative of and literary interest in Spanish America, which also provides a lens through which to understand the racial (mis)reading in "An Incident at the South." The mid-nineteenth century saw an intersection of influences: the rise of Hispanism studies in the 1840s (led by George Ticknor, William Hickling Prescott, and Washington Irving); geographical changes due to Mexican independence, the Mexican–American War, and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo; and major authors (Charles Brockden Brown, Edgar Allan Poe, Richard Henry Dana Jr., Herman Melville) appropriated Spain's so-called "tyrannical legacy or shadow and the Spanish Inquisition, corresponding to the well-known tropes of the Black Legend," to craft various reading experiences.<sup>13</sup> Central to DeGúzman's argument is how authors "morphed" *la leyenda negra* and molded it into a range of myths. The darkening of the Spaniard became the antagonist to the Anglo-American protagonist or, as DeGúzman puts it, "the Spaniard suffers in his very body the unfathomable shame of the Black Legend. The

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> María DeGuzmán, *Spain's Long Shadow: The Black Legend, Off Whiteness, and Anglo-American Empire* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 64–65.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 40.

Anglo-American remains afloat; the Spaniard sinks into the shadow of death but does not die – that is, does not die as a figure, a stereotype.”<sup>14</sup> It is the figure of the loyal slave-turned-master and his ability to make extravagant the Spanish masquerade that thus dupes the Anglo-American captain and plays deeply into the period’s racial (mis)readings of Spaniards and Africans.

Additionally, DeGúzman explains the specific pathway between Hispanicism and disability/invalidity into mythmaking and thus “handy contraptions” of the literary and life itself:

The degree to which Spain and things Spanish are allowed to terrify is the measure of burgeoning Anglo-American imperial confidence in the face of Spain’s loss of actual economic, military, and territorial power. Furthermore, not only are these tales a gauge or reflection of Anglo-American imperial confidence; they are also productive of an ideology of superiority and mastery to the extent that they use historical elements (such as the Inquisition) to timeless effect, as types of evil. In so doing, the tales continue the project of turning history into myth – the Inquisition into the damning legend against Spain. By turning history into myth, the tales turn themselves into handy contraptions for the conversion of a private experience of the egoistic sublime into a national one with expanding ambitions.<sup>15</sup>

Melville’s plot of racial passing concerns how the reader reads and the ways in which his prose toggles between Spanish threat, Anglo-American confusion, and the brilliant engineering of Spanish masquerade by the African slave, Babo. Melville’s amalgam renders a familiar image that is central to the Crafts’ passing plot: the invalid Spanish gentleman, the loyal African slave, and the Anglo-American passenger whose lens of white supremacy cannot fathom Black fugitivity because of Spain’s shadows upon shadows.

Years before these fictions and nonfictions, however, the author of “An Incident at the South” brought attention to the ambiguous position of the light-skinned slave in the United States, at a time of emerging geographies and conflicting histories with Spanish *historias*.<sup>16</sup> It is no accident that Ellen and William Craft’s performance – and on a boat – is connected with the Spanish *historia* at South Carolina, the island of St. Helena, and southern Atlantic waters. During US expansion, Anglo-Americans struggled to categorize a mixed Mexican lineage. Gregory Rodriguez, in *Mongrels, Bastards, Orphans, and Vagabonds*, explains that Castilian blood (or “Spanish extraction”) was singled out, even in South Carolina: “In a famous speech before the Senate on January 4, 1848, South Carolina senator John C. Calhoun ... felt obliged to concede that some Mexicans had ‘Castilian blood in their veins – the old Gothic, quite equal to the Anglo-Saxon in many respects – in

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>16</sup> Stephan Talty, *Mulatto America: At the Crossroads of Black and White Culture. A Social History* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), 7, 20.

some respects superior.”<sup>17</sup> The “old Gothic” is bound to Castilian blood. In the case of the Crafts, the advertisement substantiates Ellen’s transnational masquerades. It also captures the genius behind the mask. Ellen, the light-skinned female slave from Macon, Georgia, is the daughter of Anglo-American enslaver, Major James P. Smith, and African American slave, Maria (also mixed-race and light-skinned, and with a name with roots in Latin languages – Spanish, Italian, and German). Because Ellen was frequently mistaken for the child of Mr. and Mrs. Smith, McCaskill writes, “Instead of selling her, [Mrs. Smith] presented Ellen in April 1837 as a wedding present to Ellen’s eighteen-year-old half-sister, Eliza Cromwell Smith (1819–79). Ellen was then eleven years old.”<sup>18</sup> Not until Ellen was twenty-two years old did she escape, in her father’s/master’s whiteness and likeness, but also in her mother’s/slave’s Black-ness and likeness. Ellen’s transformation into “Mr. William Johnson,” whose name is not Spanish, sets into motion a Black female fugitivity that moved outside familiar Black-to-white passing plots of the antebellum era.

Instead, the Black female subject of miscegenation, and thus the Black daughter of the Anglo-American master, evades his Black/white racial categories that enslaved and sexually victimized her. She engineers a costume with William Craft and, in their extravagant performance of master and slave, provoked the racial stereotypes associated with the other master in the historical narrative of European colonialism and American slavery. Ellen not only conjures a major figure in American history, indeed a history that includes Spain and is marked by the transformative period of frontier conflict between Mexico and Anglo-American westward expansion, but also cripples the body of the rising master and inheriting son of American slavery. In her wrapping of poultices around his head, putting his right and writing arm in a sling, covering his eyes with enormous green spectacles, feigning weakness in his legs, and leaning on the able-bodied slave, she immobilizes the “white” master to mobilize her Black self. In the Black daughter’s imagination, then, Ellen feminizes the father’s son with her voice, castrates him with her anatomy beneath his clothes, and Hispanicizes him with his own indignity and “Anglo-Americans’ own fears and fantasies about miscegenation as national and, moreover, imperial degeneration onto the Spanish empire in the New World and the Old.”<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Gregory Rodriguez, *Mongrels, Bastards, Orphans, and Vagabonds* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2007), 95.

<sup>18</sup> Barbara McCaskill, *Love, Liberation, and Escaping Slavery: William and Ellen Craft in Cultural Memory* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2015), 18–19.

<sup>19</sup> DeGuzmán, xxviii.

In this reinterpretation of the advertisement, this essay examines the ways in which Ellen Craft borrows Anglo-America's ever-evolving conception of Hispanism, places it on its ear, and uses it to escape the southern father's/master's institution of slavery. Unfortunately, a major implication derived from the advertisement is that when both historical and contemporary critics project onto Ellen a simple passing binary of Black-to-white transcendence – whether in the sighting (1849), the portrait (1850), or the slave narrative (1860) – they mistakenly occlude the blind spot and the opportunity afforded by the expansionist, racist, and sexist ideology that Ellen herself seized, thus re-creating the opportunity for her to slip past them and us. Critics have depended on newspaper accounts that focus on Ellen Craft's "whiteness" and then work backwards to reflect on her performance as "Mr. William Johnson." In this reconsideration of "An Incident at the South" and reinterpretation of Ellen's escape, the interest is to propose the potential of her transnational masquerades. At best, "An Incident at the South" prods at a fluid indeterminacy between whiteness and Blackness, masculinity and femininity, and mastery and slavery, and calls attention to a major figure who speaks to America's *historia*.

#### THE ADVERTISEMENT (1849)

Thanks to a librarian at the Newark Public Library, who printed the advertisement, sealed it in a manila envelope, and mailed it to me, I finally held in my hands the newspaper clipping that became central to the historical and cultural production of the Crafts' escape. Anticipating its arrival, which is from an extensive inventory of New Jersey papers on microfilm, here is documented the famous escape of the so-called "Georgia Fugitives." Significantly, it was William Wells Brown (1814–84), a fugitive slave himself and a major figure to the abolitionist cause, who came upon the advertisement in mid-January 1849, and read it aloud at the seventeenth annual meeting of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society at Faneuil Hall in Boston on 24 January 1849.<sup>20</sup> Before the pair joined him onstage, which in previous years had hosted Frederick Douglass, Henry "Box" Brown, Henry Bibb, and Brown himself, Brown, the report for the meeting reveals, "read an extract from a New Jersey paper, a correspondent of which had observed this fugitive couple on board of one of the steamboats, and had been struck by something unusual in their appearance."<sup>21</sup> With Brown's help, the advertisement is made

<sup>20</sup> *Seventeenth Annual Report, Presented to the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, By Its Board of Managers, January 24, 1849* (Boston: Andrews & Prentiss, 1849), 80–82.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.



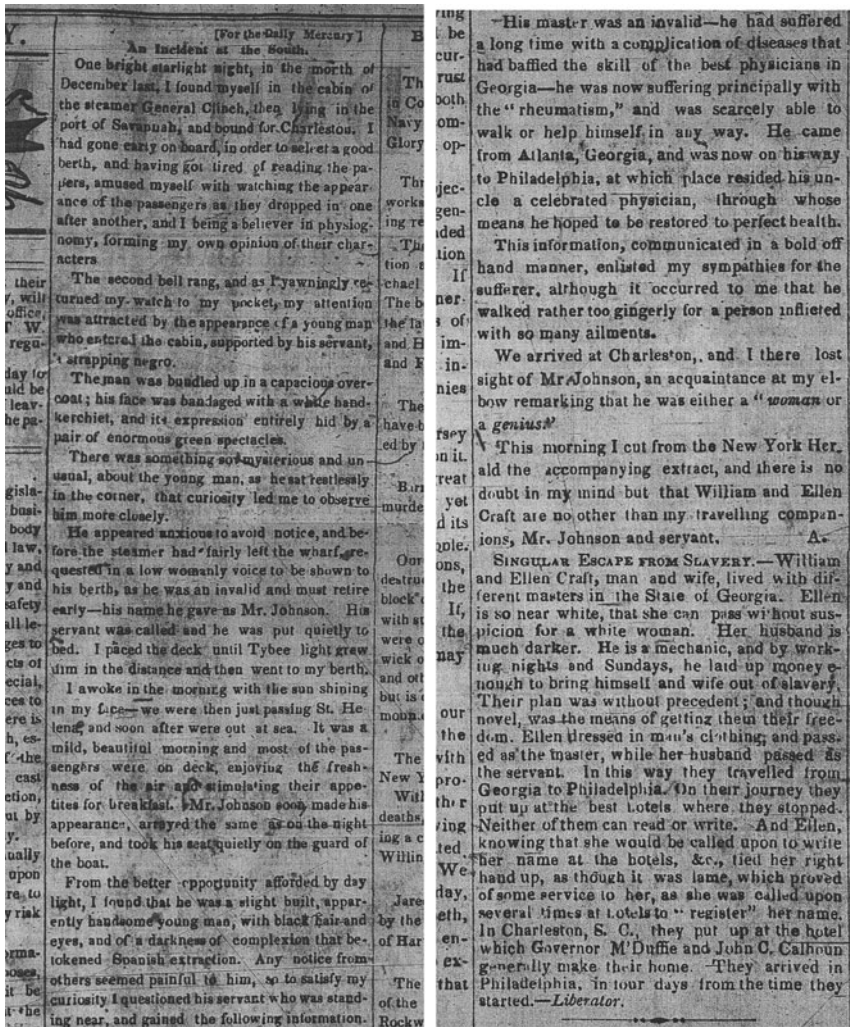


Figure 1. Advertisement, "An Incident at the South," anonymously published in the *Daily Mercury*, 19 Jan. 1849. Microfilm. Courtesy of the Newark Public Library.

central to the first telling of the Crafts' escape and their introduction to the world. Figure 1 shows the entirety of "An Incident at the South," just as Brown would have seen it. Included at its end is an "accompanying extract," which Brown wrote earlier that month, on 4 January 1849, after meeting the Crafts in Pineville, Pennsylvania.

In the final lines, the author admits to having come upon the story of the Crafts' escape in the *New York Herald*, which had been originally published in *The Liberator* on 12 January 1849. Brown's description of the Crafts' escape,

entitled “Singular Escape from Slavery,” was originally a letter penned on 4 January 1849, and sent to William Lloyd Garrison (1805–79), the leading abolitionist in Boston. In his letter, Brown emphasizes Ellen’s ability to pass for “white” in the first line, yet not the costume: “Ellen is so near white, that she can pass without suspicion for a white woman.”<sup>22</sup> Brown also discusses Ellen’s cross-dressing and feigning disability to access public spaces reserved for major politicians supporting US slavery:

Neither of them can read or write. And Ellen, knowing that she would be called upon to write her name at the hotels, &c., tied her right hand up, as though it was lame, which proved of some service to her, as she was called upon several times at hotels to “register” her name. In Charleston, S.C., they put up at the hotel which Governor McDuffie and John C. Calhoun generally make their home.<sup>23</sup>

Removed from the description are details from Brown that inform Garrison that the Crafts will attend the seventeenth annual meeting later that month. It was Garrison who shortened the letter, titled it, and published it in *The Liberator*. A week later, on 17 January 1849, Brown’s letter appeared in the New York *Herald*, and it was then that the author of “An Incident at the South” learned of his “traveling companions,” penned the advertisement, and published it two days later in the *Daily Mercury*.

Supported by Garrison’s Anti-Slavery Society and escorted into the popular imagination by Brown, the Crafts and their riveting tale circulated throughout the United States and Britain, well into the 1850s.<sup>24</sup> Their story appeared in newspapers like New York’s *North Star* (February 1849, Brown’s letter), Iowa’s *Anti-slavery Bugle* (February 1849, letter and advertisement), Wisconsin’s *The Chronicle* (February 1849, letter), and Virginia’s *Richmond Enquirer* (June 1849, brief summary). Some newspapers recall the thrill of the escape with a female lead and offer a range of titles, such as “A Negro Romance” (Iowa), “Boston Excitement” (North Carolina), “Daniel Webster and Slavery” (Missouri), “American Slavery” (England), and “Ellen Craft, the Macon Fugitive” (Arkansas). By September 1850, references to the Crafts’ escape emphasize the threat of the Fugitive Slave Act, and by December of the same year, the Crafts made their second escape, also by boat, to Liverpool, England. Newspapers across and beyond the United States continued to track the Crafts, including Washington, DC’s *Daily Republic* (November 1850), North Carolina’s *Wilmington Journal*

<sup>22</sup> William Wells Brown, “Singular Escape from Slavery”, *The Liberator*, 12 Jan. 1849, 1.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Blackett, *Beating against the Barriers*, 97–98; William Edward Farrison, *William Wells Brown: Author and Reformer* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1969), 135–37, 178–80.

(November 1850), Aberdeen's *Aberdeen Journal* (February 1851), England's *York Herald* (March 1851), South Carolina's *Edgefield Advertiser* (November 1852), Arkansas's *Southern Shield* (October 1852), Missouri's *Hannibal Journal* (December 1852), and Alabama's *Tuskegee Republican* (September 1852). Three major voices are repeatedly cited: William Wells Brown and his introduction of the Crafts at Faneuil Hall with "an article from a Newark paper"; Frederick Douglass and his statement of support while on the abolitionist stage with the Crafts – "What an exhibition! ... What an appearance is here presented! ... Their escape shows that they are worth to be freemen"; and Harriet Beecher Stowe and her publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, to quote one writer: "We would respectfully suggest to Mrs Harriet Beecher Stowe, that this incident in the life of Ellen Craft, furnishes abundant material out of which, with her *vivid imagination*, she might elaborate a romance as interesting and as truthful as 'Uncle Tom's Cabin.'"<sup>25</sup>

The Crafts were central to anti-slavery societies on both sides of the Atlantic. According to HollyGale Millette, Ellen's stage performances adhered to specific strategies of the anti-slavery cause, in which the female slave's "white" body either presented the horrors of miscegenation or mirrored back to the spectator a "whiteness" of privilege not meant for her.<sup>26</sup> Surely, in the fugitive slave's transatlantic reinvention, as influenced by abolitionist circles, we find other masks donned and manipulated by Ellen. However, as McCaskill explains, "For myriad cultural purposes, audiences down the generations have loaded onto the Crafts both dreams and anxieties of race and freedom, yet William and Ellen are more complex than that."<sup>27</sup> Their flight to freedom in the US depended on how Ellen's performance of cross-dressing and feigning disability led to confounding gender and race. The complexity of

<sup>25</sup> Williams Wells Brown mentioned in "William and Ellen Craft", *Anti-slavery Bugle*, 23 Feb. 1849, 1; Frederick Douglass mentioned in "The 'Running' of Slaves: The Extraordinary Escape of Henry Box Brown, and of William and Ellen Craft", *Enquirer*, 12 June 1849, 1; Harriet Beecher Stowe mentioned in "Ellen Craft", *Tuskegee Republican*, 2 Sept. 1852, 1, original emphasis.

<sup>26</sup> Millette notes that "William Wells Brown used Ellen to stir his audience into imagining her meeting the worst of these bodily fates and he used her to constitute a piece of cultural memory ... Ellen's silent presence on the lecture platform did offer the spectator a reference point wherein they could inscribe their empathy; a reference point for the unspoken: rape, indignity, horror, courage and so on." Additionally, Millette explains the cross-Atlantic differences of "passing 'up'": "Ellen's whiteness permitted her to pass 'up' in terms of class both in America and in Britain, but in Britain this passing connected with the contemporaneous trend to embrace mulattoes as middle class." See HollyGale Millette, "Exchanging Fugitive Identity: William and Ellen Craft's Transatlantic Reinvention (1850–69)," in Cora Kaplan and John R. Oldfield, eds., *Imagining Transatlantic Slavery* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 61–76, 69–70, 65.

<sup>27</sup> McCaskill, *Love, Liberation, and Escaping Slavery*, 13.

their flight, however, which upholds an autonomy from the many writerly efforts that attempt to capture their passing plot, begins with “An Incident at the South” because the Crafts resisted its transnational implications to protect their story and rewrite their own history. What exactly does the advertisement narrate and capture of the fugitives’ story?

The beginning lines of the advertisement play a critical role. They establish a historical setting for imagining the “incident” or encounter with Crafts in the South:

One bright starlight night, in the month of December last, I found myself in the cabin of the steamer General Clinch, then lying in the port of Savannah, and bound for Charleston. I had gone early on board, in order to select a good berth, and having got tired of reading the papers, amused myself with watching the appearance of the passengers as they dropped in one after another, and I being a believer in physiognomy, forming my own opinion of their characters.<sup>28</sup>

Cartographically speaking, the Crafts’ escape is inextricably tied to the sea; that is, southern transatlantic waters. The sea is vital to the racial (mis)reading of Ellen’s costume, her performance of disability, and the image of Spanish master and loyal servant. According to Matthew Brown, “The strong presence of the sea is grossly under-examined in American literature, doubly so in African American literature.”<sup>29</sup> Citing the work of Haskell Springer, Brown’s reinterpretation of Olaudah Equiano’s life of sailing and at sea emphasizes the “cultural consciousness” of mid-nineteenth-century America and the important role of the sea: “the sea hardly registers today in our cultural consciousness as setting, theme, metaphor, symbol, or powerful shaper of literary history.”<sup>30</sup> In the case of Equiano, according to Brown, “When Equiano is in Savannah, for instance, he is taken into custody by men,” yet escapes enslavement because he speaks perfect English and, Brown continues, “Equiano is clearly identifiable as a sailor, with his queue haircut and sailor’s clothes.”<sup>31</sup> Thus Equiano’s freedom and mobility lie in a power within Atlantic sailor culture, which Brown carefully identifies: “That power Equiano gains by going to sea, however, is not simply limited to his ability to free himself. The freedoms sailors enjoyed, even in conditions that were almost the equal of literal slavery for all common sailors – white and black – potentially made them agents of freedom for others.”<sup>32</sup> Although

<sup>28</sup> “An Incident at the South.”

<sup>29</sup> Matthew D. Brown, “Olaudah Equiano and the Sailor’s Telegraph: The Interesting Narrative and the Source of Black Abolitionism,” *Callaloo*, 36, 1 (Winter 2013), 191–201, 191.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 199–20 n. 1. Haskell Springer, ed., *America and the Sea: A Literary History* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), ix.

<sup>31</sup> Brown, “Olaudah Equiano and the Sailor’s Telegraph,” 194.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.

not in the disguise of a sailor, Ellen gains a power by running to sea. Because of the poultices around her head (to muffle her speaking and hide her feminine face), her short haircut (which William cut square at the back of the neck), and her capacious overcoat (which was black and decorated with thick tassels and colorful sashes), Ellen is clearly identifiable as a Spanish gentleman. These southern transatlantic waters permit "Mr. Johnson and servant" access to a cross-racial terrain, and a history in which the Spaniard on a boat (conquistador or master) is forever wed to its Spanish descendants and even a major character in American sea literature.

Previous book-length literary studies have turned attention to the dominant and looming Spanish presence that persisted for centuries in southern transatlantic waters, but also in the greater American Souths. Stanley T. Williams, in *The Spanish Background of American Literature* (1955) – and the first of its kind to examine a "Spanish influence" in US literatures – points to how Spanishness resurfaces in American letters and evolved into a powerful narrative device to declare US nationalism and superiority. Following Williams's lead, María DeGúzman, in *Spain's Long Shadow: The Black Legend, Off-Whiteness, and Anglo-American Empire* (2005), explores how the rhetoric of the Spanish Inquisition and *la leyenda negra* allowed Anglo-Americans to construct an imaginative relation of antagonism toward Spain and its descendants. More recently, John C. Havard, in *Hispanicism and Early US Literature: Spain, Mexico, Cuba, and the Origins of US National Identity* (2018), identifies stock narratives in which an emerging discourse thus contributed to the developing sense of American exceptionalism. Havard, DeGúzman, and Williams examine works by major authors whose writings further Spanish stereotypes, motifs, and figurations, including Charles Brockden Brown, Joel Barlow, James Fenimore Cooper, Washington Irving, Edgar Allan Poe, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Herman Melville. Williams encourages us to consider a different cartographic axis in accordance with the racial anxieties of the early nineteenth century and a rapidly transforming landscape: "We did *not* possess all America; this fact, in one mood or another, was in many minds, particularly those of our leaders. Although we might keep aloof or simulate superiority or indifference, still, there it was to the south, that mighty and alien civilization."<sup>33</sup> Influenced by Williams, DeGúzman tracks "Spain's long shadow" beginning with the transatlantic voyages of Cristóbal Colón, his arrival at the nexus of *las Américas*, and the emergence of an anti-Spanish rhetoric toward Spain and its conquistadores by Dominican friar Bartolomé de Las Casas, who introduced what Williams calls "la crueldad y el fanatismo

<sup>33</sup> Stanley T. Williams, *The Spanish Background of American Literature*, Volume I (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), 12, original emphasis.

español,”<sup>34</sup> and DeGuzmán calls a “presumed blackguardism of the Spaniards”:

Promulgated by Spain’s religious and economic rivals in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries – primarily England and the Netherlands, but also France, Italy, Portugal, and Germany – the Black Legend or *la leyenda negra* elaborated a story or legend about the essential character of Spain around the historical facts of Spain’s imperial sway, Inquisition, and treatment of indigenous peoples of the Americas.<sup>35</sup>

The racist discourse persisted into the nineteenth century and became a major literary device in which, DeGuzmán states, “In this legend, ‘the Spaniard’ became a typological emblem of religious and political intolerance, tyranny, misrule, conspiracy, cruelty, barbarity, bloodthirstiness, backwardness, slothfulness, and degeneracy. However fragmented, this ‘historical’ story – the Black Legend with its culturally and racially stigmatizing implications – gives a determining shape to the power of blackness haunting ... ‘American’ fictions.”<sup>36</sup> According to Havard, “Anglo-American concern with Spain and Spanishness goes back to the nation’s very roots, indeed predating the revolutionary period, but it became increasingly significant as the nineteenth century progressed.”<sup>37</sup> Together, and chronologically speaking, Williams, DeGuzmán, and Havard create a history from the sixteenth century to the end of the twentieth, uncovering an intrigue with Spain’s discovery of *las Américas*, their influence on rivaling nations, and how Spanish-ness was utilized to great narrative effects.

Placed alongside Brown’s attention to the sea in African American literature, Williams, DeGuzmán, and Havard help us to understand a Spanish influence that in turn helps us to make sense of the racial (mis)reading in Ellen’s cross-dressing, feigning disability, and running to sea. There is an incomplete history and there are erased heritages across this vast southern region, at and around the land, borderlands, and sea that, as Martha Menchaca discusses in *Recovering History, Constructing Race: The Indian, Black, and White Roots of Mexican Americans* (2001), must be examined by reassembling documents of various types that piece together the mixed racial history of Mexican Americans, including Spanish colonial history and African slavery. Depending on Mexican anthropologists Aguirre Beltrán and James Diego Vigil, Menchaca traces the construction of race from the Spanish colonial period, to the introduction of slavery, to Anglo-American expansion, and turns attention to the intersections across the Souths between Spanish ancestry, Indian descent, and African blood, emphasizing

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.      <sup>35</sup> DeGuzmán, *Spain’s Long Shadow*, 4, original emphasis.      <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 4–5.

<sup>37</sup> John C. Havard, *Hispanicism and Early US Literature: Spain, Mexico, Cuba, and the Origins of US National Identity* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2018), 14.

the ambiguity of *mestizo* and *mulatto* identities.<sup>38</sup> Menchaca – as well as Williams, DeGúzman, and Havard – provides an appropriate historical lens through which to understand Ellen's running to sea. From the port at Savannah, to passing the island of St. Helena, to arriving at Charleston, these southern transatlantic waters help to set the stage for the racial (mis)reading of Ellen's "Mr. William Johnson" on a boat. Her large black coat and feigning disability, which is accentuated by "William" the loyal slave, both in his conversations with inquiring passengers (for example, his declaring that Mr. Johnson suffers from "a complication of diseases," "principally with the 'rheumatism,' and was scarcely able to walk or help himself in any way"), and also his overt performance of helpful servant, all coincide and intersect to render familiar tropes of "Spanish-ness" and Spanish masquerade.

The passenger, upon first seeing Mr. Johnson enter the cabin "supported by his servant, a strapping negro," had found "something so mysterious and unusual about the young man," not only his "low womanly voice," but, more, Mr. Johnson "was bundled up in a capacious overcoat; his face was bandaged with a white handkerchief, and its expression entirely hid by a pair of enormous green spectacles."<sup>39</sup> The passenger brings race into view (not white/Black, but master/slave) and its intersection with gender ("low womanly voice"), dress ("capacious overcoat"), and disability ("bandaged with a white handkerchief"). The passenger signals further attention to Mr. Johnson having appeared "anxious to avoid notice" and to the importance of his own servant declaring him "an invalid," and surmises that invalidity causes his need to "retire early."<sup>40</sup> According to Ellen Samuels, disability in Ellen's performance is accentuated by William:

By appearing to assist Ellen in walking, William functions as a sign of her impaired legs, much as the bandage on her hand signifies its impairment. This apparent interchangeability of William with nonverbal signs such as a cane, crutch, or invalid (wheeled) chair at once objectifies him and undermines that objectification through the reader's knowledge that he is in fact a speaking subject engaged in a daring rebellion.<sup>41</sup>

While Samuels offers us the significance of a conjoined performance of invalidity between Ellen and William, her reading of disability remains within a Black–white binary, whereas the passenger declares a race that challenges the North–South paradigm. "Spanish extraction" thus gains a powerful rhetorical effectiveness because of numerous intersecting variables – the extravagance of

<sup>38</sup> Martha Menchaca, *Recovering History, Constructing Race: The Indian, Black, and White Roots of Mexican Americans* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 16–17, 161–86.

<sup>39</sup> "An Incident at the South."

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Samuels, "A Complication of Complaints," 46.

the “invented” costume, the over-display of disability and illness, the ambiguity and uncanniness of the pose on a boat, alongside a dark-skinned slave, and at sea. What materializes for the passenger is a familiar figure of the southwest, southern borderlands, and southern transatlantic waters; that is, the other master in the history of antebellum America. As historian Kathleen Donegan put it to me during our correspondence, “This was not a figure that the American did not know or could not read, but a figure made integral to the story of European colonialism and American slavery.”

John Disturnell’s (1801–1877) famous map, entitled *Mapa de los Estados Unidos de Méjico* (1847), and used by Nicolas Trist during territorial negotiations with Mexico, offers a cartographic glimpse into the intricate web of cross-cultural contact as the contours of the United States and Mexico were being established. The map helps us to grapple with how southern states understood their relationship to Spanishness. It also encourages us to understand migration, displacement, and incidents of (tres)passing across the Greater Souths (Figure 2).<sup>42</sup>

Not far removed from the vast space that we now call the “southern borderlands” was an expansive region at the southeastern corner of what is now the United States, which conquistadores roamed, colonized, and settled. Known as *la Florida* or Spanish Florida, this terrain is often referred to as the first major region explored and settled by Europeans, and it encompassed present-day Florida but also portions of Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana. The history of Spanish arrival, exploration and settlement across this terrain was common knowledge to rivaling European powers. According to J. Randolph Anderson, and what he calls “The Spanish Era in Georgia,” the acquisition of this territory and English settlement includes Charles Town, South Carolina, and Savannah, Georgia.

It was not until the year 1670 that any English settlement was made on the South Atlantic coast, when Governor William Sayle landed his colony of some 200 persons at Charles Town. Spain had for several years been vigorously protesting to Great Britain against the Carolina charters and the contemplated English intrusion into her territory. Finally, in the same year that Charles Town was founded, a treaty was made and signed between England and Spain by which the possession of Charles Town by the English and of the country to the south by the Spaniards was recognized and each of the high contracting parties bound itself to respect the territory of the other.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>42</sup> David Weber, “Mexico’s Far Northern Frontier, 1821–1854: Historiography Askew,” *Western Historical Quarterly*, 7, 3 (July 1976), 279–93.

<sup>43</sup> J. Randolph Anderson, “The Spanish Era in Georgia, and the English Settlement in 1733,” *Georgia Historical Quarterly*, 17, 2 (June 1933), 91–108, 102–3.





Figure 2. John Disturnell's *Mapa de los Estados Unidos de Méjico: segun lo organizado y definido por las varias actas del congreso de dicha républica y construido por las mejores autoridades* (1847), published in Nueva York by J. Disturnell. Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division.

The region of Georgia was a dividing border between English presence in South Carolina and Spanish presence in *la Florida*. While the English persisted in territorial expansion into the South, Spain used *la Florida* as a buffer to protect its Caribbean colonies and peninsula from the English. Even after 1821, when Spain ceded this territory to the United States through the Adams–Onís Treaty of 1819–21, Spanish descendants still inhabited and traversed the region. Paul Cohen reminds us that *la Florida* was a refuge for runaway slaves, and although Mexico did not abolish slavery in its own territories until 1829, Mexicans played a significant role in protesting slavery in the United States by aiding fugitive slaves, well before 1821.<sup>44</sup>

Beyond *la Florida* and into the frontier region, including Texas, Carrie Gibson explains in *El Norte: The Epic and Forgotten Story of Hispanic North America*, slaves “were sometimes aided by Tejanos, to the annoyance

<sup>44</sup> Paul Cohen, *Mapping the West: America's Westward Movement 1524–1890* (New York: Rizzoli, 2002), 141–45.

of Anglo owners, though other Tejanos were slave owners themselves.”<sup>45</sup> According to Gregory Rodriguez, however,

Not only did Mexico and Mexicans present a challenge to slavery, but the acquisition of a vast portion of Mexican territory – first Texas and then, after the conclusion of the Mexican–American War in 1848, the remainder of the Southwest – pushed the United States down the road to civil war and the end of slavery.<sup>46</sup>

In the decade before the Civil War, this southeastern, southern, and southwestern region also still carried with it that “hemispheric conflict” between Anglo-America and Spain/New Spain/Mexico. During this mid-nineteenth-century period of political and cultural conflict between developing nations, here is the presence of Spanish descendants, including Mestizos, Tejanos, Californios, Españoles, and/or Mexican and Mexican American travelers, both in the cultural imaginary and as historical figures gaining passage through dangerous “white” spaces of a racialized slave economy. This “reinterpretation of Ellen,” Anna Brickhouse states in correspondence, “might very well uncover a submerged history of knowledge about the hemisphere that was used to powerful narrative effects [and] that could in fact change historical outcomes.”<sup>47</sup>

Although the Crafts knew about the racial (mis)reading in the advertisement, in addition to the many appropriations of their passing plot into Spanish (or Italian) masquerades, both Ellen’s portrait (1850) and their slave narrative (1860) refuse to unmask a specific racial performance. Instead, the use of Ellen’s portrait at the front of their narrative further complicates Ellen’s racial passing in relation to her cross-dressing, feigning disability, and running to sea as narrated in “An Incident at the South.” Intriguingly symbolic is how Ellen’s performance of disability (or what Mel Y. Chen described for me in terms of “the neurasthenia condition” and disabling conditions during this historical period) “might be cross-racially intervening into the figure of the Spanish decadent colonial.”<sup>48</sup> Spanish-ness was a property of classed whiteness and it became increasingly medicalized. While Chen suggests that we must “inquire into the specific kinds of qualities that converge or mingle, however intermittently and unorganized, in the Spanish

<sup>45</sup> Carrie Gibson, *El Norte: The Epic and Forgotten Story of Hispanic North America* (New York: Grove Press), 276.

<sup>46</sup> Rodriguez, *Mongrels, Bastards, Orphans, and Vagabonds*, 87–88.

<sup>47</sup> Anna Brickhouse, in correspondence and during a C19 Seminar on the Hemispheric Souths in 2014, encouraged a wider cartographic examination of the western hemisphere to address what she called a “reinterpretation of Ellen.”

<sup>48</sup> The significance of “the neurasthenia condition” during the nineteenth century was brought to my attention in correspondence with Mel Y. Chen. Also see Mel Y. Chen, “Racialized Toxins and Sovereign Fantasies,” *Discourse*, 29, 2–3 (Spring–Fall 2007), 367–83, 382 n. 21.

figure," Brickhouse points to "a history of knowledge about the hemisphere" – and about Spanish-ness – that must be uncovered and examined for its "powerful narrative effects," like Spanish shadows or presence on the page. How the Black female subject of miscegenation engineered this looming *historia* through her costume and performance is made somewhat visible in the partial disguise she dons in her famous portrait.

### THE PORTRAIT (1850)

In 1850, Ellen dressed in the partial disguise of "Mr. Johnson" and posed for an engraved portrait. In the same year as US Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Act and at a time when the Crafts conducted lectures with William Wells Brown, three (white) Bostonians collaborated to create an engraving of Ellen: Joseph Andrews (1806–73) and Stephen Alonzo Schoff (1818–1905) engraved the portrait of Ellen from a daguerreotype made by Luther Holman Hale (1823–85).<sup>49</sup> The engraving was first published in the *London Illustrated News* on 19 April 1851, yet before its publication it was distributed at anti-slavery meetings and began offering mid-nineteenth-century audiences a glimpse into her escape. "To abolitionists, these engravings or pictorial texts authenticated Ellen's trauma and inaugurated written testimony of her escape," as McCaskill explains, "in the same manner that male and female fugitives legitimized their pain and retorted detractors through what Houston A. Baker, Jr., calls the 'Negro exhibit' – public displays of scars and signs of torture that escaped slaves, in silence, presented during their lectures to white Northern audiences."<sup>50</sup> According to McCaskill, Ellen's "decision to sit for the picture may have been inspired by Douglass, William Wells Brown, and other famed and fabulous runaways," and the transatlantic circulation of the portrait at anti-slavery meetings helped "market Ellen's story."<sup>51</sup> Examining the portrait in light of the racial (mis)reading in "An Incident at the South" further complicates Ellen's pose, because it reveals the invalid gentleman now nearly recovered. By 1860, however, when the engraving becomes the frontispiece portrait to the Crafts' long-awaited slave narrative, the Crafts set out to reclaim Ellen's "invented" costume, not only from the authors who made them famous (and who removed disability entirely from their fictions, but perhaps influenced by the portrait), but also from the author of "An Incident at the South" who declared a Spanish masquerade. The Crafts thus complicate previous versions of their escape, including the

<sup>49</sup> McCaskill, *Love, Liberation, and Escaping Slavery*, 40–42.

<sup>50</sup> McCaskill, "'Yours Very Truly': Ellen Craft," 509–29, 515.

<sup>51</sup> McCaskill, *Love, Liberation, and Escaping Slavery*, 42.

altered costume in the portrait which removes layers of disability that Ellen herself engineered and that are linked to Spanish-ness.

Upon opening the 1860 edition of *Running*, staring back at the reader is Ellen's "Mr. Johnson." Although Ellen sits for white artists, her pose returns a mirroring and mockery of the master by the light-skinned female slave who was made subject to the horrors of miscegenation. Not only does Ellen challenge the act of reading male fugitive slave portraiture (think of Douglass, Bibb, or Brown), but her racially mixed body displaces the narcissistic viewer who sees his/her sex and race performed by the daughter of the master. Jasmine Nichole Cobb, in *Picture Freedom*, explains Ellen's possession of the master's body through a Du Boisean sense of "double consciousness" or how the female fugitive slave realizes an ability to reconstruct "outward constructions" in her transformation and performance.<sup>52</sup> Considering her "genius of fugitivity," and what exactly "it revealed to Whites," Cobb states that "Black visuality was not simply Black visibility – that the social fact of Blackness in the visual field entailed surprising complications."<sup>53</sup> Ellen's transformative abilities persecute her white rapist, and in her gazing back at the viewer Ellen becomes the master's wife, his daughter, his sister, his mother, and the master himself. The effect of Ellen's portrait in relation to "An Incident at the South" adds further ambiguity and androgyny.

Not until the reader is immersed in *Running* – and just before the account of the escape – does William Craft explain the changes to Ellen's costume in the portrait: "The poultice is left off in the engraving, because the likeness could not have been taken well with it on"; that is, the poultice would have covered "the smoothness of her face," "the expression of the countenance, as well as the beardless chin."<sup>54</sup> Also missing are the "enormous green spectacles" that covered her eyes, which the passenger in "An Incident at the South" detects and which William discusses in the narrative: "My wife, knowing that she would be thrown in a good deal into the company of gentlemen, fancied that she could get on better if she had something to go over the eyes; so I went to a shop and bought a pair of green spectacles."<sup>55</sup> William then cut Ellen's long hair and, in the often-quoted line of their narrative, states, "I found that she made a most respectable looking gentleman" (Figure 3).<sup>56</sup>

Now that the poultices are removed, and "Mr. William Johnson" appears recovered from some ailments, is this the pose of a Spanish gentleman and/or can we still detect, as the passenger aboard the *General Clinch* detected,

<sup>52</sup> Jasmine Nichole Cobb, *Picture Freedom: Remaking Black Visuality in the Early Nineteenth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 9–10. <sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>54</sup> William Craft and Ellen Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom: or, the Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery*, ed. Barbara McCaskill (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1999), 24. <sup>55</sup> *Ibid.* <sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*



Figure 3. Frontispiece engraving of Ellen Craft in disguise, by Stephen Alonzo Schoff after Luther Holman Hale's daguerreotype, in *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom* (London: William Tweedie, 1860). Courtesy of the Mary Evans Picture Library.

"a darkness of complexion that betokened Spanish extraction"? Yes, if it were not for the gender and race trouble initiated by the title below the portrait: "ELLEN CRAFT, *The Fugitive Slave.*"

Alongside the removal of the poultices, the title unmask's Ellen's gender and destabilizes the racial (mis)reading of "An Incident at the South." In McCaskill's words, the "facial monstrosity is omitted in the frontispiece

engraving,” which downplays a significant layer of disability that coincided with “a darkness of complexion” and rendered a figuration of “Spanish extraction.”<sup>57</sup> The whiteness of the poultices may have created the necessary contrast to Ellen’s light skin – that “Mr. Johnson” is not “white” or Anglo-American, but of another European lineage. What the viewer sees is a constructed process of Ellen’s racial, gendered, disabled, and transnational (un)becoming. However, there is nothing accidental about the staging of this ambiguity either, especially with the absence of Ellen’s autograph and the presence of three white and male Bostonian autographs. After all, as Douglass stated in the *North Star* (1849), “Negroes can never have impartial portraits at the hands of white artists.”<sup>58</sup> Here, in this constructed frame, Ellen sits in a transformative state that declares a resistance of capture, and because the poultices are removed from her face and she dons clear spectacles, she now speaks to the duped and perplexed viewer. She forces the viewer to accept the light-skinned female slave’s “possession” of the master’s likeness. As Cobb argues, “Free Black women provide the most robust examples of the cultural work required to imagine freedom during slavery.”<sup>59</sup> Here, the female fugitive slave declares her freedom. Although this is only the partial disguise, what begs to be read is Ellen’s threatening potential to the patriarch, the phallus, and US slavery. Essential to Ellen’s abilities to “pass” is the female fugitive slave’s extreme efforts to imagine the unimaginable: her desire to birth daughters far from the white man’s power of possession. The engraving is yet another glimpse into Ellen’s transnational masquerades, here upstaged by the seasoned fugitive slave.

Still, the racial (mis)reading of “Spanish extraction” also looms in the portrait. In Joseph M. Bennett’s *The Illustrated Toilet of Fashion* (1850), a description of the “Spaniard’s costume” illuminates the racial stereotype inherited by descendants in Mexico, South America, and also the United States:

The most important part of the Spaniard’s costume is the *capa*, or cloak. The lower orders wear it of a dark chocolate color, faced with crimson plush, or cotton velvet; while that worn by the higher classes is of blue or black cloth, faced with rich black silk velvet, and frequently lined throughout with taffety. The cloak is not a winter garment alone; in the hottest days of summer it is often worn. The rest of the costume consists of a short round jacket, with an upright collar, trimmed with braid and velvet and lined with silk. The generally prevailing fashion for the hat is a high sugar-loaf with a broad rim, and among the peasantry, a bright silk handkerchief is folded over the beard diagonally, and tied with a knot behind, and over this they wear the hat. They wear tight breeches of various colors; their boots and shoes are also made of colored leather. A large clasp-knife is considered a part of a Spaniard’s

<sup>57</sup> McCaskill, “‘Yours Very Truly’: Ellen Craft,” 520.

<sup>58</sup> Frederick Douglass, “A Tribute to the Negro”, *North Star*, 7 April 1849, 2.

<sup>59</sup> Cobb, 7.



Figure 4. "The Spanish hat and cloak" from Joseph M. Bennett, *The Illustrated Toilet of Fashion; Or Annals of Costume, from the Earliest Period to the Present Time* (New York: Booth & Foster, 1850).

costume. The costume of Portugal, Mexico, and their descendants in South America, and the various Spanish possessions, differs but little from that of Spain.<sup>60</sup>

Placing Bennett's description alongside Ellen's portrait and "An Incident at the South" allows us to grapple with similar narrative depictions of the "Spaniard's costume" and thus explore the patterns replicated in Ellen's "invented" costume (Figure 4).

<sup>60</sup> Joseph Bennett, *The Illustrated Toilet of Fashion; Or Annals of Costume, from the Earliest Period to the Present Time* (New York: Booth & Foster, 1850), 27–28.

Ellen's costume thus follows the racial performative traditions of the "Spaniard's costume," yet her version is anchored in the textiles of southern and Anglo-American culture. Ellen dons a capacious black cloak. Draped over it is a light-colored patterned sash that is decorated with elegant black tassels. Resting on her chest is a lustrous black cravat, in a loose taffeta of fine silk, and perfectly set over a tall-standing white collar. Hanging around her neck is a white cloth, which looks like a second sash but upon closer inspection here is a poultice made into a sling that holds and hides her right and writing arm (which excuses Ellen from signing the engraving). Sitting on her head is an exceptionally tall silk hat, in the likeness of Abraham Lincoln. Through clear spectacles, "the fugitive slave" returns the viewer's gaze, and from the shade of her hat's brim, what begs to be read is her skin tone in relation to the costume. The white cloth that holds and hides the right and writing hand of the master – the hand that wields the law – helps to demarcate the off-white and transnational potential. Significantly, the pose is not locked into any single race (or gender). Rather, Ellen inhabits the contradiction and occupies the vast space of possibility between the mask and the real. Part of the complexity is that Ellen confounds the "experience" of the daguerreotype because the fugitive slave behind the mask – ELLEN CRAFT – masters and manipulates the illusion. According to Sarah Blackwood, drawing upon Douglass, "the figure depicted is, indeed, 'a human being,' while simultaneously destabilizing the relation between representation and reality – 'as *if* in the act of running'." (emphasis added)<sup>61</sup> Above all, the master's slave-daughter achieves passage out of her abject position of Blackness to find passage in other abject positions, including Spanishness, to become the conquistador's inheriting son.

Coincidentally, Bennett's illustration also conceals the left arm of his Spanish gentleman with garments and sashes that cross his chest. Lindon Barrett, in "Hand-Writing: Legibility and the White Body in *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*," shifts attention from "[l]ight or racially ambiguous skin" to the "'ontological' marker of whiteness": "Their solution is to underscore what would amount to the betraying illegibility of Ellen's handwriting were she to attempt to write. They highlight, in sum, the very incapacity that would render them suspect."<sup>62</sup> Barrett states that "the bandaging of Ellen's hand is anything but an arbitrary

<sup>61</sup> Sarah Blackwood, "Fugitive Obscura: Runaway Slave Portraiture and Early Photographic Technology," *American Literature*, 81, 1 (March 2009), 93–125, 103.

<sup>62</sup> Lindon Barrett, "Hand-Writing: Legibility and the White Body in *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*," *American Literature*, 69, 2 (June 1997), 315–36, 324–25.



element of the Crafts' escape" and should not be read as "a substitute for literacy," but rather "it is the indispensable correlate to Ellen's racially ambiguous skin."<sup>63</sup> Although disability is downplayed in the portrait, both in "An Incident at the South" and later in *Running* disability and racial passing are inextricably linked and are articulated as such: Ellen puts her arm in a sling (to avoid signing her name to board trains), feigns deafness (to avoid speaking with passengers), adds poultices around her head (to hide a beardless chin), wears green spectacles (to hide her eyes and avoid eye contact), and leans on her loyal slave (to display difficulty walking). Jenifer L. Barclay, in *The Mark of Slavery: Disability, Race, and Gender in Antebellum America*, provides a critical lens onto the influences of disability on race (and gender) that help realize the potential of Ellen's Spanish masquerade:

Across the political spectrum, antebellum Americans persistently wrapped the pliable, emotive rhetoric of disability around race, often also invoking dominant ideas about masculinity and femininity in the process. Ultimately, these practices deeply intertwined the socially constructed, mutually constitutive categories of race, disability, and gender in profound and enduring ways.<sup>64</sup>

Although the decision to remove disability from the portrait tampers with the historicity of disability as linked to race, Barclay reminds us that "perceptions of, attitudes toward, and beliefs about disabilities ... change over time and depend on culture."<sup>65</sup> Ellen's costume and performance are intertwined in a period of the late 1840s that saw dramatic geopolitical anxieties over land, the borderlands, the vast South, and southern transatlantic waters, because of the Mexican–American War, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, and the Fugitive Slave Act. The female fugitive slave not only troubles slavery's visual culture; she also creates what Paul Ricoeur calls the "surplus of meaning" of an object or symbol. In other words, Ellen's extravagance underscores "meaning" and "double meaning" in terms of an excess, that is "to be both as broad and as precise as possible," and in the extravagance of her passing and performance lies the ambiguity, or what I like to call Ellen's extravagant passing.<sup>66</sup> The extravagance helps prompt the potential of Ellen's transnational masquerades.

In 1860, as the Crafts set out to reclaim their story from the abolitionists and novelists who made them famous, *Running* pursues its own trajectory

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 326.

<sup>64</sup> Jenifer L. Barclay, *The Mark of Slavery: Disability, Race, and Gender in Antebellum America* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2021), 14.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 18.  
<sup>66</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Forth Worth, TX: Christian University Press, 1976), 45.

to play out for the reader Ellen's racial ambiguity and feigning disability, running to sea, and without precedent. In the years before their narrative's publication, McCaskill explains, "English abolitionists advertised copies of Ellen's portrait for sale, alongside notices of *Uncle Tom* in their publications,"<sup>67</sup> and while it may have been Stowe's book "that reminded audiences of the Crafts' tenacious escape – and probably left them wondering where the firsthand version was,"<sup>68</sup> the firsthand version was published in London, like Brown's *Clotel*, and written for a British audience. Although Ellen would never set into writing her version of the escape, William did and most likely with Ellen by his side. When nineteenth-century readers finally held in their hands that firsthand version, and as they gazed at its frontispiece portrait, there was no question whether this freewoman existed. Still, her illusive quality, now in the hands of the Crafts, prodded readers to ask, "Is it true?" And it prods us to ask, "Is it a Spanish masquerade?"

#### THE SLAVE NARRATIVE (1860)

Placed at the start of *Running*, the engraved portrait is meant to confound its spectators and engage them in a fictional exploration and the transformative power of the light-skinned female slave, well before the narrative account of her transformation and escape. To borrow the words of Ellen M. Weinauer, in her chapter "A Most Respectable Looking Gentleman': Passing, Possession, and Transgression in *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*" (1996), "It is this image that introduces the text and haunts it."<sup>69</sup> In every which way, the frontispiece portrait challenges the narrative presentation of Ellen's extravagant passing, while also introducing the potential of the mulatta in her transnational masquerades – her many masks – versus the tragic characterization of the African American woman in literature. At work in the frontispiece portrait is a dynamic play on the reader at the border where image-as-text and text-as-image meet. Although the frontispiece portrait interferes with the narrative telling of Ellen's "invention" of the costume, one thing is for sure: the frontispiece portrait visually problematizes a spectrum of notions in reading and seeing, that of naming, identity, and performance, in addition to authenticity and deceit, but also definitions of the "real" and the methods or system by which identity is invented. After all, when the pair sat down to write their slave narrative, they knew of "An

<sup>67</sup> McCaskill, *Love, Liberation, and Escaping Slavery*, 40.

<sup>68</sup> Craft and Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*, ed. McCaskill, xvi.

<sup>69</sup> Ellen M. Weinauer, "'A Most Respectable Looking Gentleman': Passing, Possession, and Transgression in *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*," in Ginsberg, *Passing and the Fictions of Identity*, 53.

Incident at the South" and the many versions that followed the cue of Ellen's Spanish masquerade. Submerged in various scenes throughout *Running* is the potential of racially (mis)reading Ellen's extravagant passing in terms of "Spanish extraction."

Unlike other slave narratives, *Running* discloses the complete costume that Ellen invented, the passing plot that she asserted, and the masquerade that she mastered. Similar to "An Incident at the South" and the portrait, *Running* confirms Ellen's transnational masquerades. In *Running*, William pursues a "narrative aesthetic" that represented a culmination of more than a decade of public speaking and education. Put simply, William is hard at work in reclaiming the escape from abolitionists. While the start of *Running* draws upon the discourse of the abolitionist stage, in tone and in a style that includes seminal tropes found in the slave narrative tradition (for example, the separation of families, the loss of children, the desires for sanctioned marriages), William also turns to the methods of fiction that defined the period, including London's literary culture. Whereas Brown may have provided guidance in the transition from the abolitionist stage to the literary world, three years of study with the wife of the famous Romantic poet and the woman who was "educating England" at the Ockham School, Lady Byron, would have exposed the Crafts to "an extensive library" and the opportunity to prepare a different kind of manuscript versus that of predecessors.<sup>70</sup> Writing a dozen years after their 1848 escape, William may very well have been trying to write a best seller that brought together techniques from the abolitionist stage, strategies from slave narratives, and tropes from classic and popular fictions. *Running* thus emerges as its own authority to bear witness to a different kind of narration and a different kind of experience of fugitivity. Whereas writing for an American readership would have demanded an entirely different perspective, writing for a British audience allowed the opportunity to reengineer the escape and make extraordinary the mutability of Ellen's passing. Perhaps, too, the aim was to restore the figure of the mulatta from tragic heroine (since *Clotel* is based on Ellen herself) to that of genius.

*Running* thus contains a carefully calculated literary edge that is concerned with reconfiguring the role of the light-skinned heroine of American slavery. Its hybrid visual-textual experience is also meant for an audience obsessed with the sentimental tradition, the genre of Gothic horror, and the classic plots from the Elizabethan stage. There is also a textual and visual craftsmanship to *Running*, and a closer look at its 111 pages reveals a narrative trajectory propelled by the multiple and conflicting ways of seeing the subject of its

<sup>70</sup> Dorothy Sterling, *Black Foremothers: Three Lives* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1988), 42–43.

frontispiece portrait. Unlike other slave narratives, the narration of *Running* is not tucked in between pages and pages of documentary proof and/or letters written on behalf of the Crafts, by either abolitionists, editors, or publishers. Readers of slave narratives expected a “careful layering of heterogeneous material into a collective and invulnerable whole,” as John Sekora phrases the process in “Black Message/White Envelope” (1987): “If the story of a former slave was thus sandwiched between white abolitionist documents, the story did carry the aegis of a movement preaching historical veracity.”<sup>71</sup> Instead, and because *Running* was published in London, British readers did not need to flip through any proselytizing documents, like those found in master texts by Frederick Douglass or William Wells Brown. The reason: an abolitionist army had already escorted the Crafts into the popular imagination. Additionally, the narrative is uniquely divided into two parts that center on two escapes, not the lives of the fugitives. Briefly put, Part I provides the details of the first escape from Georgia to Philadelphia, and Part II discusses the second escape from Nova Scotia to England. In each part, William is aware of his audience and deliberately positions the British reader as a central character, always connecting the British reader to the story of escape, and in intimate ways, such as parenthetical whispers, puns, and brief explanations of American perspectives.

In Part I, William carefully introduces and discusses the first escape by crafting arguments pertaining to Ellen’s subversive potential. He begins by exposing the horrors of white slavery and passing in the wrong direction in American slave culture. From the start, William turns the figure of the mulatta into a spectacular figure of racial mobility. He discloses Ellen’s accidental “white” passing in childhood, then turns attention to her becoming Mr. Johnson, and then provides insight into her transformation into a “white” woman. In Part I, *Running* emphasizes Ellen’s transformations from the master’s daughter to the master himself to the master’s wife. Part of the narrative complexity pertains to the fact that William never calls Mr. Johnson “white” and while there is mention of Ellen’s “white” passing (as a child and woman), it is never in reference to Mr. Johnson. These instances appear in the opening and final sequence of the narrative but never during the escape from Macon to Philadelphia. First, William writes, “it occurred to me that, as my wife was nearly white, I might get her to disguise herself as an invalid gentleman,” and then, a few pages later, he mentions her “fair complexion”; though he speaks of it in terms of her passing as a white woman, “it would have been a very difficult task for my wife to have come

<sup>71</sup> John Sekora, “Black Message/White Envelope: Genre, Authenticity, and Authority in the Antebellum Slave Narrative,” *Callaloo*, 10, 3 (Summer 1987), 482–515, 497.

off as a free white lady, with me as her slave."<sup>72</sup> Part of the imaginary force attached to descriptions of the "invented" costume is the "whiteness" that it suggests but which William never confirms.

Perhaps critics have used newspaper accounts that emphasize Ellen's "whiteness" to work backwards and reflect on her performance as Mr. Johnson. This may include a few seminal voices as well: William Wells Brown's reference in a US newspaper that "Ellen is so near white, that she can pass without suspicion for a white woman," or Stowe's comment in her book entitled *Sunny Memories of Foreign Lands*, which was quoted in the *Bury and Norwich Post, and Suffolk Herald* (28 February 1855) in England, and after she met the Crafts: "Had it not been for my introduction, I could never have fancied Ellen to have been any other than some English girl, with rather a paler cheek than common."<sup>73</sup> Perhaps repeated descriptions of the "white slave" in the British press (when Ellen Craft, William Craft, and Brown toured the United Kingdom) may have prompted critics to consider "white" in terms of Anglo-American-ness: McCaskill states that Ellen transformed into a "free, privileged, primary, racially pure, genetically superior *white man*"; Garber describes Ellen as "the light-skinned wife disguised as a white man"; Sterling Lecater Bland Jr. calls Ellen's passing that of a "white young gentleman"; Charles Heglar, who includes the layer of disability in his description, presents Ellen's pose as that of "an invalid 'white' planter"; and Ellen Samuels, who also examines the role of disability in the performance, claims that Ellen assumes the disguise of a "white invalid gentleman."<sup>74</sup> Although these critics appropriately frame their arguments with *Running's* opening critique, their textual and discursive analyses of the "whiteness" that Ellen performs do not contextualize the repression of Mr. Johnson's racial identity in light of the opening narrative argument concerned with the arbitrariness of "whiteness" in mid-nineteenth-century America.

In the opening pages, William recalls stories of kidnappings and the disappearances of "white" children and adults, introducing a new portrait of slavery. As Stephan Talty states in *Mulatto America* (2004), "The white slave added another kind of bad dream to the repertoire."<sup>75</sup> Drawing upon the strategy of "imaginative substitution," often used on the stage and in slave narratives,

<sup>72</sup> Craft and Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*, ed. McCaskill, 20, 35.

<sup>73</sup> Anonymous, "Sudbury", *Bury and Norwich Post, and Suffolk Herald*, 28 Feb. 1855, 1.

<sup>74</sup> McCaskill, "'Yours Very Truly': Ellen Craft," 510–11, original emphasis; Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 282; Sterling Lecatur Bland Jr., *Voices of the Fugitives: Runaway Slave Stories and Their Fictions of Self-Creation* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000), 150; Charles Heglar, *Rethinking the Slave Narrative: Slave Narrative and the Narratives of Henry Bibb and William and Ellen Craft* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001), 94; Samuels, "A Complication of Complaints," 15.

<sup>75</sup> Talty, *Mulatto America*, 13.

William relates the kidnappings of immigrant children (such as Salomé Müller, and the tanning of an Ohio son) to the horrors suffered by slave mothers. After all, William writes, “he who has the power, and is inhuman enough to trample upon the sacred rights of the weak, cares nothing for race or colour.”<sup>76</sup> William also connects Ellen’s accidental passing as a daughter of her father–master, James C. Smith, to the kidnappings. First, William explains the conflict with the master’s wife:

Notwithstanding my wife being of African extraction on her mother’s side, she is almost white – in fact, she is so nearly so that the tyrannical old lady to whom she first belonged became so annoyed, at finding her frequently mistaken for a child of the family, that she gave her when eleven years of age to a daughter as a wedding present.<sup>77</sup>

Then William comments on the conflict with racial miscegenation and (mis)reading complexion – “It may be remembered that slavery in America is not at all confined to persons of any particular complexion; there are a very large number of slaves as white as any one” – culminating in an argument that emphasizes Ellen’s conversion experience and her refusal to relegate her children to the “peculiar institution.”<sup>78</sup> William writes the following just moments before he explains how the pair planned their escape:

My wife was torn from her mother’s embrace in childhood, and taken to a distant part of the country. She had seen so many other children separated from their parents in this cruel manner, that the mere thought of her ever becoming the mother of a child, to linger out a miserable existence under the wretched system of American slavery, appeared to fill her very soul with horror; and as she had taken what I felt to be an important view of her condition, I did not, at first, press the marriage, but agreed to assist her in trying to devise some plan by which we might escape from our unhappy condition, and then be married.<sup>79</sup>

Perhaps to demonstrate effectively the female slave’s experience and introduce the fugitive heroine and her voice to the escape narrative genre, the narrative tone departs from the opening critique to experiment with more coded and subversive rhetorical and literary strategies. Not until the following year would the experience of Harriet Jacobs emerge in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), and Hannah Bond’s autobiographical fiction has been only recently discovered and was published in 2002.

Unlike his contemporaries, William divulges the details of the escape, explaining where the couple devised the plan, how they collected the costume, and Ellen’s transformation. In the space of several pages, the British reader is given access to the space of the mulatta’s cottage, which

<sup>76</sup> Craft and Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*, ed. McCaskill, 4.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

was becoming a seminal trope in African American literature. William writes, "She being a ladies' maid, and a favourite slave in the family, was allowed a little room to herself; and amongst other pieces of furniture which I had made in my overtime, was a chest of drawers; so when I took the articles home, she locked them up carefully in these drawers."<sup>80</sup> Like a nefarious Pandora's box, the Crafts hide the master's masculine costume – while Ellen sews his trousers, William acquires his hat, glasses, and cloak in town. The pair also obtain holiday "passes" from their masters in order to spend Christmas with family on nearby plantations. On the eve of the escape and in a moment of brilliant inspiration and inventiveness, Ellen decides to disable the costume in order to mobilize it in public space. Although ventriloquized through William, here is her voice whose brain engineers the passing plot of invalid master and loyal slave: "I think I have it!" she tells William, and then she says, "I think I can make a poultice and bind up my right hand in a sling, and with propriety ask the officers to register my name for me."<sup>81</sup> Thus Ellen's voice makes visible the function of the white cloth in the frontispiece portrait. However, William is quick to mention the articles missing from the portrait: "It then occurred to her that the smoothness of her face might betray her; so she decided to make another poultice, and put it in a white handkerchief to be worn under the chin, up the cheeks, and to tie over the head," and even requested "something to go over the eyes" – a "pair of green spectacles."<sup>82</sup> After William cuts her hair "square at the back of the head, and got her to dress in the disguise and stand out on the floor," he then declares, "I found that she made a most respectable looking gentleman."<sup>83</sup> In a playful tug at the sleeve of the British reader, this is not the gentleman of the frontispiece portrait. Rather, Ellen made a most rheumatic-looking gentleman. Here, like in the advertisement, disability/invalidity and racial passing coincide and collide. Yet, and as stated, William never draws attention to a specific racial impersonation. However, in a seminal scene of the narrative, we find Ellen's Spanish masquerade.

With the physical transformation complete, William narrates a series of incidents to display their passing plot. Upon arriving at Charleston, and following the encounter in "An Incident at the South," the Crafts board a train to Richmond, Virginia, where the pair meet two young women and their father. Narrated in two pages, the encounter occurs in a first-class compartment and what occurred there only Ellen could have known since William was forced to travel in a separate car for baggage. Throughout the scene, the Crafts are hard at work in its narration and refuse to relegate their escape to the interpretations and limitations in "An Incident at the South," *Uncle*

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 23–24.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

*Tom's Cabin*, and *Clotel*. Instead, the Crafts empower Ellen's racial passing in a narrative reconstruction that prods what is known (the racial (mis)reading of "Spanish extraction") against what is unknown (the potential of her transnational masquerades). The ways in which the Crafts render Ellen's experience might be the closest to her version that we will ever have.

William sets the American stage for a British audience, especially for readers familiar with cross-dressing plots and mistaken love from the Elizabethan stage. He carefully articulates how the American railroad, in particular the unthinkable space of the first-class train compartment, is intercepted by Black fugitivity and made an option for escape. Like the remarkable mailing of Henry "Box" Brown or the incredible sailing of Olaudah Equiano, Ellen finds passage in first-class trains.<sup>84</sup> William writes,

I have stated that the American railway carriages (or cars, as they are called), are constructed differently to those in England. At one end of some of them, in the South, there is a little apartment with a couch on both sides for the convenience of families and invalids; and as they thought my master was very poorly, he was allowed to enter one of these apartments at Petersburg, Virginia, where an old gentleman and two handsome ladies, his daughters, also got in, and took seats in the same carriage. But before the train started, the gentleman stepped into my car, and questioned me respecting my master.<sup>85</sup>

Like in "An Incident at the South," William provides the father (and reader) a language through which to interpret Ellen's costume and performance of the ailing body beneath it. After recruiting the father into the ruse, William returns to Ellen and informs the reader of a dangerous occurrence: "During the gentleman's absence, the ladies and my master had a little cosy chat."<sup>86</sup> Because William, the slave, is in another car, he pauses the flirtatious interaction between Mr. Johnson and the daughters to accentuate the passing plot for the inquiring father. William explains that his master, Mr. Johnson, suffers from "inflammatory rheumatism" and is traveling north to be cured by a family physician.<sup>87</sup> That "little cosy chat" may very well have been the foreplay before the comic bed scene, which reads as a sort of bed trick on the ladies, their father, and the reader. Because the father is so taken by the performance of invalidity, he further recruits his daughters into the passing plot and orchestrates a more intimate encounter between his daughters and the available bachelor, Mr. Johnson.

William's narrative treatment of the encounter thus demonstrates to a British audience the bonded effort and theatrical performance of "Mr.

<sup>84</sup> Miriam Thaggart, *Riding Jane Crow: African American Women on the American Railroad* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2022), 18–19, 24–26.

<sup>85</sup> Craft and Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*, ed. McCaskill, 38.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*



Johnson and servant" in which Ellen must have a keen awareness of categories of identification (gender, race, class, sexuality, and disability/invalidity) in order to execute the respective role of a most rheumatic gentleman. William writes,

The gentleman thought my master would feel better if he would lie down and rest himself; as he was anxious to avoid conversation, he at once acted upon this suggestion. The ladies politely rose, took their extra shawls, and made a nice pillow for the invalid's head. My master wore a fashionable cloth cloak, which they took and covered him comfortably on the couch.<sup>88</sup>

The encounter would have also reminded British readers of the cross-wooing heroines from classic English romantic comedies, who had audiences roaring with laughter when the transvestite figure fortuitously duped the unbeknownst and then desperately tried to evade any sexual advances. Although Mr. Johnson jumps at the suggestion of a nap, his nap proves to be more trouble than he bargained for, which William is all the more willing to entertain. While a nap protects the ruse, the layers of race, gender, and invalidity are further entangled when the ladies undress Mr. Johnson and cover his body with his "fashionable cloth cloak" or rather cloak-turned-blanket. With their shawls under his head, the two women watch Mr. Johnson sleep, gazing and fetishizing over a supposedly masculine and ailing body now further concealed by the black cloak. Just as the nap aims to protect the passing plot, it also helps exaggerate the performance. Alongside the two women, the reader watches gender and sexuality in operation with disability and race but also class and transnationalism, where empathy (and love) encourage the women to partake of the servant's role for the master. The suspense of the scene lies in the separation of Ellen from William, and the danger of Ellen maintaining all the categories in her extravagant passing. The mulatta figure beneath the "fashionable cloth cloak" is similar to Henry "Box" Brown's coffin-like escape and resurrection. Ellen is also playing near-dead, and lies there on the couch wrapped by the Spaniard's signature cloak (like a coffin), while disability/invalidity is magnified by her act of "passing out" that is made possible through her art of seduction.

The scene ends with William shuffling between accurately recalling the encounter and poking fun at the love trouble. In a climactic moment of female love play across the page, the daughters break their silence, which Ellen would have heard and later recalled for William:

After he had been lying a little while the ladies, I suppose, thought he was asleep; so one of them gave a long sigh, and said, in a quiet fascinating tone, "Papa, he seems to be

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

a very nice young gentleman.” But before papa could speak, the other lady quickly said, “Oh! dear me, I never felt so much for a gentleman in my life!”<sup>89</sup>

The narrative break in William’s “I suppose” encourages wonderment around female perspective during the passing plot. After one daughter releases a “long sigh” and expresses joy, William stresses her reaction with the free indirect adoption of the endearment “papa,” which coincides with the father being further *quiet-ed* by female desire: “Oh! dear me,” the other daughter confesses, “I never felt so much for a gentleman in my life!” Here we find not antebellum fears toward the light-skinned slave (or the Black female body and her sexuality) but a suppressed desire and the fantasy of cross-race relations from the perspective of two young southern belles. In the final comment of the scene, William tells the reader, “To use an American expression, ‘they fell in love with the wrong chap’” – but who exactly was this “wrong chap”?<sup>90</sup> Beneath the comedy of the encounter, William marks something about Ellen’s mastery over masquerade. Even William Lloyd Garrison, in his personal copy of *Running* that was gifted to him by the Crafts, responds to the “American expression” in the margin with “rats” and “oh fudge.”<sup>91</sup> In the use of “wrong chap” is William Craft pointing to the wrong gender, the wrong race, or both? Is he commenting on disability/invalidity? Or is he referring to the fact that this bachelor is not the heir of his father’s estate? At best, the phrasing points to Ellen’s mastery over the master’s key instruments of authority and all that is afforded to the invisible phallus. What comes together in the scene is Ellen’s potential of a Spanish masquerade, which “An Incident at the South” suggests, yet which William withholds in direct ways to embolden what actually lies beneath that “fashionable cloth cloak” – the performative genius of Black female fugitivity.

Harking back to the final line of “An Incident at the South” – “he was either a ‘woman or a genius’” – the acquaintance calls attention to an arbitrary structure that delineates Ellen’s gender yet allows her to evolve Frederick Douglass’s famous formula into her own. In an entirely different binary – of woman/genius – its nonlinear terms break the binary of man/woman to propose a reading of the paradoxical that hinges on the notion of queer. Although the use of either/or renders any woman inherently not genius (a term typically reserved for men and denied to women), Ellen confounds what it means to be “woman” (physical) in relation to what it means to be “genius” (spiritual). Long before “genius” became a creative impulse, it was defined as “either” a

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> William Craft and Ellen Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom; Or, the Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery* (London: William Tweedie, 1860), 60. Boston Public Library, Boston, MA, call number 3999906673328.

spiritual attendant "or" a transcendent personification, where the potential of the latter also includes an "element of eccentricity," "romantic vision," and "infirmaries of genius," such as lameness, rheumatic fever, and hypochondria, which, Marjorie Garber argues, is related to brilliance and creativity.<sup>92</sup> If illness and disability/invalidity evoke genius, then Ellen's performance allows her to provoke a cultural knowledge and social agency that also reverberate through categories of race, but also gender. According to Rosemary Garland-Thomson, because "disability feminizes all disabled figures," Ellen's disabling of the master's body thus feminizes him, and she presents a body whose mark of otherness is only further complicated by the racial and geographical debates of the period.<sup>93</sup> As Ellen is capable of conjuring the deception of the Spaniard's mask, the author of "An Incident at the South" confesses that the women/genius behind the mask is now dabbling in the art of theatrical alchemy, an art form long associated with the natural genius of another William, England's William Shakespeare. Instead, her genius emerges from a range of wooden and steel stages of antebellum America. And from these stages the Black female fugitive slave voices an outrageous critique and threatens the master's ailing son, his inheritance, and rites of passage.

Above all, Ellen's transformation moves away from the masculine "experience" of transformation to introduce a feminine "experience" that complicates the traditional male-centered paradigm. Instead, Ellen – the light-skinned female slave of miscegenation – becomes of significant value to the anti-slavery cause as the other voice of slavery in opposition to the linear plot of transformation set by male fugitive slaves, in particular the voice of Douglass, who set the trajectory for northern white audiences when he said, "You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man."<sup>94</sup> Ellen's transformation – from slave to Mr. Johnson to *free-woman* – introduced a new trajectory: you have seen how a woman was made a slave; you shall see how she was made a man and master; you shall see how *he* was then made a *woman* or a *genius*.

## CONCLUSION

Without her sole interpretation of the escape, Ellen remains elusive, uncaptured, and authoritative. Because of the many elaborate efforts that aim to capture her racial passing, cross-dressing, class passing, sexual ambiguity,

<sup>92</sup> Marjorie Garber, "Our Problem with Genius", *Atlantic Monthly*, Dec. 2002, 1–9.

<sup>93</sup> Rosemary Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 9.

<sup>94</sup> Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (Boston, MA: Bedford Books, 1993), 75.

feigning disability, and traversing transnational borders, her historical and literary influence has shaped the broader transatlantic anti-slavery movement. In the arguments that are held by each title of the texts studied in this essay – “An Incident at the South”; “ELLEN CRAFT, The Fugitive Slave”; *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom: The Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery* – perhaps it is in the last title and the slave narrative coauthored by the Crafts themselves that we come the closest to her sole perspective on the experience of the escape and the transnational meanings of her running. McCaskill, in her observations on their 1848 escape (from Georgia to Boston) and then their 1850 escape (from Boston to Britain), also points to the importance of a “hemispheric conflict” to contextualize their escapes and the specific “foreign havens” known to runaway slaves: “Soon, however, they discovered that ‘running a thousand miles for freedom’ did not mean running from Georgian bondage to genuine emancipation. Other fugitives could attest that only in Canada, England, or one of the foreign havens – Mexico, Haiti – could their escape engender lasting liberty for the formerly enslaved.”<sup>95</sup> McCaskill’s attention to “lasting liberty” beyond US borders is seminal, including also slaves running to sea. For the Crafts, both escapes depended on running to sea and gaining passage via boats through southern transatlantic waters. Here, too, is defiance of the Middle Passage of the transatlantic slave trade. Because of the extravagance in the performance of the master, Ellen’s escapes continue to challenge our interpretations, but also to highlight the potential of Black female fugitivity and her many masks that still evade us.

Such reinterpretations of Ellen’s escape challenge us to reconsider how certain texts must be examined and brought together for the unexpected connections between historical contexts, literary tropes, and transnational perspectives. The study of racial passing’s histories and *historias* in antebellum America also requires a different kind of transnational approach to explore its full complexity. What emerges for historians and literary critics alike is that same destabilizing enactment of unmasking, where one must create extravagant passages across numerous texts in order to seek the reinterpretation that can challenge our own (mis)readings. Scholars have shown us how texts of specific kinds can come together to uncover and pursue new angles into the fugitive slave’s story. By opening up the Black–white binary and rethinking Ellen’s escape, specifically in terms of the *historias* of Spanish contact and conquest across the US South, we also come to rethink how we understand her fugitive slave narrative.<sup>96</sup> The declarations of Amy Kaplan and Shelley

<sup>95</sup> McCaskill, “‘Yours Very Truly’: Ellen Craft,” 511.

<sup>96</sup> Correspondence with Barbara McCaskill has encouraged this reconsideration of Ellen’s slave narrative in American literature.

Streeby encourage us to look at the longer history of empire in *las Américas*, including the numerous events in the United States that reached a boiling point in 1848 and led to establishing US imperialism and "American nationality."<sup>97</sup> According to Streeby,

The sensational literature of 1848 America responds, in other words, to a double vision of northeastern cities divided by battles over class, race, national origin, and religion, on the one hand, and on the other, to scenes of US nation and empire building in Mexico, which were increasingly forgotten or viewed as shameful in the years following the war. Even during the late 1840s, however, the war was extremely controversial.<sup>98</sup>

Submerged in the production history of Ellen's escapes is this looming sentiment toward the war and also an international conflict that had already been in use to great narrative effect. And while we see Ellen as inventing this extravagant passing figure of transnational masquerade, this is not an invented figure: this figure has a narrative, and it has this whole other life, both within and beyond the nineteenth century.<sup>99</sup>

The genius behind the mask is Ellen's many masks. She turns full attention to Black female fugitivity and a different kind of "running" (versus familiar forms of escape) that speaks directly to matters of female enslavement, the horrors of miscegenation, and the extreme attempts Black female slaves make to escape in order to birth free children. In addition to Ellen's collaborative contribution to African American literature with her husband William, another outcome of their slave narrative is its influence on Black (and white) female authors of the 1850s and 1860s, in terms of reexamining the fugitive slave story in other emerging traditions of writing that transformed abolitionist and memoir writing in the mid-nineteenth century. For instance, Bond's fictional autobiography *The Bondwoman's Narrative* (1850s) turns the personal experience and sentimental into a Gothic style that reinterprets the terrifying details of her own (and Ellen's) enslavement, fugitivity, and masquerade as romance. Lydia Maria Child, in *The Stars and Stripes: A Melodrama* (1858), renders a play that contests the realities of southern plantations against the promises of America's freedom in celebrating the Fourth of July. Child includes in her drama yet another adaptation of the Crafts' incredible escape. That Child and Bond, among other writers, choose to write about the Crafts' story indicates how enmeshed their influence had become in various traditions (of women's and men's) writings in the 1850s. Furthermore, the Crafts are also at the center of the shift of the Gothic form into sensational

<sup>97</sup> Shelley Streeby, "American Sensations: Empire, Amnesia, and the U.S.–Mexican War," *American Literary History*, 28, 4 (Spring 2001), 1–40, 3.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>99</sup> Correspondence with Kathleen Donegan has led to this specific phrasing of examining the figuration that Ellen "invents" and tracking its narrative history and literary representation.

fiction and the semi-autobiographical into historical romance, as well as influential in establishing the literary trope that explored various forms of female disguise and masquerade that extended from the 1860s to the 1870s.<sup>100</sup>

Ellen, in her coauthored slave narrative, draws upon sentimental and Gothic styles, yet when considering her text alongside female authors of the 1860s and 1870s, who are also writing about female masks, deception, and escape, we begin to open up the possibility of Ellen's influence during the transition of African American literature and its themes. The representation of her masks and their contradictions (light-skinned slave; "white" woman, or Anglo-American; British woman; gentleman of "Spanish extraction"; slave master; and so forth) called for multilayered artistic forms in order to capture her complexities. Through irony, experimentalism, and intertextuality, in addition to the need to cobble together appropriate literary strategies for new novel forms, there is a link to be made regarding Ellen's many masks and the meta-narrative mechanisms to capture her transnational masquerades. This 1840s period of intrigue with racial passing and cross-dressing coincides with the rise of sensational fiction, especially its attention to female masquerades, the proliferation of characters performed by single protagonists, and the need for an episodic structure to sustain her multiple subplots. By recontextualizing Ellen's story alongside traditions of writing like sensational fiction, we begin to value the strategic representations of the slave's story, primarily Black female fugitivity. For example, in the sensational fiction by Louisa May Alcott – such as *Behind the Mask: Or, a Woman's Power* (1866), which was published under the pseudonym A. M. Barnard, the emphasis on her protagonist's creative abilities to perform numerous female characters and triumph in her manipulation and deception of gendered constructs that are embedded in an English culture of masculine birth privilege (the transformation of a thirty-year-old woman into a nineteen-year-old Scottish governess to dupe a wealthy English family in the countryside) – the idea of unmasking is made central to the tale.<sup>101</sup> Sensational fiction also turned to a variety of racial masquerades (including Spanish), which share a profound relation to enslavement, the genius of Ellen's many masks, and thus Black female fugitivity.

Similar to Alcott, but to return to Anglo-America and female masks pertaining to transnational masquerade, the Mexican American author María Amparo Ruiz de Burton, in her semi-autobiographical historical romance that is like sensational fiction, *Who Would Have Thought It?* (1872), which

<sup>100</sup> The inclusion of Lydia Maria Child was encouraged by Barbara McCaskill. See her *Love, Liberation, and Escaping Slavery*, 43–48.

<sup>101</sup> The parallel with Louisa May Alcott and inclusion of sensational fiction was suggested by reviewers for the *Journal of American Studies*. Debra Ryals encouraged Alcott's later writings and other racial masquerades.

was also published anonymously, turns attention to the racial (mis)readings of a young Spanish Mexican heroine, Lola Medina. Because of the fading skin dye that is used by marauding Indians to hold Lola captive and to make her look Black or of African extraction, Burton is able to explore Lola's various racial transformations – from little Black girl to *la india* to blue-eyed Mexican to pure Spanish blood – across the transforming landscapes of California, the Southwest borderlands, New England, and northern Mexico. Similar to the historical and geographic context that revolves around Ellen Craft's escape(s), through Lola's escape(s) (from Indian captivity in California, and then Anglo-American captivity in Boston) Burton is able to articulate the dangerous displacement of Spanish descendants in the United States and the many threatening racial discourses that overlap and intersect. Burton's transnational critique of female enslavement is insistent on decentering what José David Saldívar in *Border Matters* calls "Anglocentric historiography."<sup>102</sup> In other words, Lola's life narrative is not from East to West but from West to East, not from South to North but from North to South. Placing Burton alongside Alcott, while both write female experiences from behind their own masks, these two authors open up literary traditions to explore the idea of female unmasking and the potential of female bodily transformation, and make central to their novels the ways in which gender, class, and race are engineered and performed.

Ellen Craft's story and her many masks also participate in broader discussions of female unmasking and her numerous deceptive disguises in the literature of the nineteenth century. Her Black performance and its influence across genre are also about her continued ability to inhabit both the margin and the center of power. Perhaps my ending here is merely a beginning in the effort to track Ellen's inspiration. Although we only have some writing in Ellen's own hand, in the letter below, which is written by Ellen and entails her response to a claim made about her marriage and freedom in England (that she married an American gentleman in London whom she begged to return her to enslavement in Georgia), lie her continued transnational masquerades. Ellen signs her name (which recalls the all-capital letters of the portrait), offers an endearing valediction, and ends with a postscript that mentions her dear husband, William Craft. Here, in her letter, titled "Letter from Ellen Craft," dated 29 December 1852 and first published in the *Massachusetts Spy*, we find Ellen at her desk, with a pen in her hand, declaring freedom in England. Hers is a rather famous letter that was circulated on both sides of the Atlantic:

<sup>102</sup> José David Saldívar, *Border Matters: Remapping American Cultural Studies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 170.

So I write these few lines merely to say that the statement is entirely unfounded, for I have never had the slightest inclination whatever of returning to bondage; and God forbid that I should ever be so false to liberty as to prefer slavery in its stead. In fact, since my escape from slavery, I have gotten much better in every respect than I could have possibly anticipated. Though, had it been to the contrary, my feelings in regard to this would have been just the same, for I had much rather starve in England, a free woman, than be a slave for the best man that ever breathed upon the American continent.

Yours very truly,  
ELLEN CRAFT

P.S. Mr. Craft joins in kind regards to yourself and family.<sup>103</sup>

### AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Rosa Angélica Martínez is Associate Professor of English at California State University, Sacramento. She holds a doctorate in English from the University of California, Berkeley. She teaches and writes about American literature before 1900, focussing on comparative, hemispheric approaches that find precedence in the texts of early America. She has published a book chapter for *A New Companion to Herman Melville* (2022) titled “Melville’s Cervantes,” and also book reviews in the *Journal of Lesbian Studies*. She is grateful to Kathleen Donegan, Genaro M. Padilla, and Darieck Scott for their feedback on earlier versions of this work; to Matthew D. Brown for his expertise in American sea literature; to colleagues at MIT (Arthur Bahr, Wyn Kelley, Sandy Alexandre) and Sac State (Christine Montgomery, Torsa Ghosal) for comments on drafts; to the readers at the *Journal of American Studies* for strengthening the work; and to Barbara McCaskill for listening, for feedback, and for encouraging the work. Correspondence with Kathleen Donegan during the earlier stages of the manuscript (2009–10) encouraged further study of this historical figure.

<sup>103</sup> Ellen Craft, “Letter from Ellen Craft”, *Massachusetts Spy*, 29 Dec. 1852, 1.