Early African American Print Culture

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CHAPTER 8

Bottles of Ink and Reams of Paper: 
Clotel, Racialization, and the Material 
Culture of Print

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Stereotypical

William Wells Brown carried stereotypes with him. So we learn in an 1849 letter from William Lloyd Garrison to a British abolitionist who had inquired about the American Anti-Slavery Society’s role in Brown’s English lecture circuit. Brown carried letters of introduction and other credentials from influential Americans, but he went to England a free agent, relying on the generosity of friends and book sales to pay his way. “Mr. Brown does not go out officially from any anti-slavery society, simply because he prefers to stand alone responsible for what he may say and do,” Garrison replied. “Nor does he go out to be a pecuniary burden or to make himself an unwelcome guest to any one; but he hopes that, by the sale of his Narrative, (the stereotype plates of which he takes with him,) he shall be able to meet such expenses as may arise beyond what the hospitality of friends may cover.”1 Existing interpretive frameworks for early African American literature tend to privilege literacy and writing in the attainment of agency and subjectivity, exploring how, William L. Andrews writes, “the writing of autobiography [is] in some way self-liberating.”2 As Garrison explains, however, Brown’s freedom in Europe from the reaches of kidnappers and from the management of white abolitionists alike depended on his relation to the material conditions
of print production as much as it did his own literacy. The stereotype plates in Brown’s traveling case remind us that producing oneself as a free subject in print and in life is embedded within a set of material textual practices—practices that are (as the double meaning of stereotype suggests) also constitutive in processes of racialization.

Contrast Brown’s carrying stereotype plates of his narrative as a sign and source of his independence with an event Brown recounts in the narrative itself. He describes an incident that occurred while enslaved in Saint Louis, during the period when he was hired out to Elijah Lovejoy, the publisher of the *Saint Louis Times* who would, years later, become an abolitionist printer and famous First Amendment martyr. Brown recounts how he was often sent to the office of another newspaper to retrieve forms of standing type and on one occasion was stopped and harassed by local youth. “Once while returning to the office with type, I was attacked by several large boys, sons of slaveholders, who pelted me with snow-balls. Having the heavy form of type in my hands, I could not make my escape by running; so I laid down the type and gave them battle. They gathered around me, pelting me with stones and sticks, until they overpowered me, and would have captured me, if I had not resorted to my heels. Upon my retreat, they took possession of the type; and what to do to regain it I could not devise.”

Just before this passage, Brown notes that his first acquaintance with literacy was made while working at Lovejoy’s press, probably while sorting or setting type. “I am chiefly indebted to [Lovejoy], and to my employment in the printing office, for what little learning I obtained in slavery.” To perform basic tasks in the shop Brown would have needed, at minimum, the ability to recognize basic letter shapes in order to sort pieces of type in the cases.

The beginning of literacy, commonly associated with the beginning of freedom in nineteenth-century African American narrative, does seem to stem from Brown’s access to letters, but it is an alphabet in the type cases before it is an alphabet in the mind. And while Brown’s literacy grows out of the material practice of print production, it is the awkward heft of these materials that encumbers him physically. As an enslaved person, Brown’s movement is already restricted to the circuit between two newspaper offices, but the wooden form, furniture, quoins, and leaden type only frustrates his “escape” and exposes him to threat of “capture.” Compared to frames of type, the stereotype is freeing. Of course, I am intentionally stressing the similarities and differences between stereotype printing plates and stereotypical representations in order to highlight the links between technologies of print...
and technologies of racialization. A stereotype plate is created from a mold of moveable type, producing a lightweight replica in a single piece of metal; while the thousands of pieces of movable type are redistributed for new uses, the stereotype can be reprinted over and again, unchanged. Thus Brown can carry his stereotypes across the Atlantic and around England without remaining tethered to a publisher or a particular print shop’s type. This mobility is documented in an edition of Brown’s narrative from 1849 that lists Charles Gilpin as publisher and London as place of publication on the title page, yet on the very next page we find: “Printed, chiefly from the American Stereotype Plates, by Webb and Chapman, Great Brunswick-street, Dublin.”

This essay argues that greater attention to the significance of the material culture of print, especially in early African American print culture, shows how technologies of racialization emerge in conjunction with technologies of printed words and images. The stereotype is perhaps the most familiar case. In one sense it offers quick reproduction of legible text, and in another it offers quick reproduction of a legible social type. In the rest of this essay, I examine how another technology of legibility, black/white dualism, structures both print legibility and racial legibility. This essay proposes that the material culture of whiteness in antebellum print culture participates in nineteenth-century racial formation by modeling how whiteness is to be seen while unseen, providing the structural backdrop against which marks or types become legible. I will focus on the materiality of paper (and to a lesser extent, ink) because, as Brown himself suggests in the opening sentences of the 1867 edition of Clotel, these materials transmit the author’s writing about racial categorizations of blackness and whiteness while they also shape the sensus communis about whiteness, blackness, and structures of legibility and visibility. Reading print relies on making meaning out of the difference between black and white, and in the antebellum period where black ink and white paper were racially coded, the black/white dualism underwriting print legibility further naturalized black/white racial dualism by implying the possibility of “reading” bodies in relation to one another. Finally, I turn to “The Death of Clotel,” a wood engraving providing the only illustration of Brown’s novel’s namesake, as a moment when the materiality of the text, and the racialized meaning of whiteness in paper, forces a foreclosure of the novel’s exploration of racial ambiguity by “filling in” Clotel’s face with ink, signifying racial content instead of the absence implied in white paper (see Figure 8.1).
"The Death of Clotel," the only illustration of the novel's eponymous character, was printed in each bound edition of Clotel.

Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.
On display in such a moment is print’s role in the construction and maintenance of dualism as a technology for making sense out of difference both in print culture and antebellum racial discourse.9

Black and White and Read All Over

The minstrel riddle “What’s black and white and re(a)d all over? (Answer: the newspaper)” turns on the multiple meanings of white and black and is complicated by the homophonic “red”/“read.” It is a racially inflected joke, not only in its formal use of minstrelsy’s comic indirection but also in the way it trades in the racialized meanings of color. The demand to think these colors together is frustrated by the assumption that a body is ultimately identified only by one color, or racial identification, “all over.”10 The resolution arrives in the replacement of racial significations with a printed thing that can, without contradiction, be black and white simultaneously. Titles of scholarship in African American literature that announce a focus on American literature “in black and white” also play on the heart of this riddle. Such play retraces the historical process in which, through the printed page, black and white became sensible as binary opposites. Print provided a binary black/white structure that would later be used as a key form for the articulation of racial difference.

The emergence of the printed letter and image between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries precipitated the partitioning of black and white from the domain of the full color spectrum, setting them in their now-familiar opposition. The visual experience of the codex shifted from the medieval manuscript culture’s rich illuminations to modern print culture’s black/white contrast. John Calvin, for example, saw in the stark contrast of black print against white paper the model for an aesthetic in which “the most beautiful ornament in the church must be the word of God.” For the “people of the Book,” the word of God appeared in black and white. Michel Pastoureau places ink, paper, and the engraved image at the center of a modern revolution in perception:

It was the circulation of the printed book and engraved images that . . . led to black and white becoming colors ‘apart.’ And even more than the book itself, it was undoubtedly the engraved and
printed image—in black ink on white paper—that played the primary role. All or almost all medieval images were polychromatic. The great majority of images in the modern period, circulated in and outside of books, were black and white. This signified a cultural revolution of considerable scope not only in the domain of knowledge but also in the domain of sensibility.\textsuperscript{11} The printed book, then, quite literally redefined “black” and “white.” According to the Oxford English Dictionary, in 1594 “white” began to mean “blank space between certain letters or types . . . space left blank between words and lines,” and four years later, “black” began to signify both “writing fluid” and “characters upon . . . paper; writing.”\textsuperscript{12} Black/white dualism is assumed in these definitions: white is sensible between black marks, and black against paper, which is white by definition.

If the black/white binary of print is an analogue of the black/white binary of race, then it seems important to ask how much cultural work this analogue performed. In other words, does the material contrast between black ink and the white page really have significant meaning with respect to the ideological contrast between black and white racially identified bodies in the period during which Brown was writing? The archives of paper mills, stationers, and publishers reveal the degree to which professionals of the material text were occupied with the production and preservation of whiteness. Professional roles in the print shop such as the “printer’s devil” were part of the daily practice of maintaining the purity of paper from staining ink, and even a surprising amount of children’s literature was produced to discipline children’s experience of the page. The paper industry’s preoccupation with and protection of whiteness as a valuable commodity cannot be seen in isolation from the production of what George Lipsitz calls the “possessive investment in whiteness.”\textsuperscript{13} Print legibility does indeed require contrast, but the adoption of whiteness as a central metaphor makes paper inextricable from the processes by which blackness becomes difference and whiteness the unmarked center. In what follows, I offer a range of contexts for the use of whiteness in the paper industry, suggest its convergences with racial discourse, and read how these convergences are at work in parts of Clotel.

In his 1814 American Artist’s Manual, James Cutbush states a fact about papermaking so well known that it seems axiomatic in its presentation: “I will suppose that the object of the manufacturer is to obtain paper of a
beauty.

Despite actual differences in the color of finished product, the paper industry adopted white and brown as signifiers of quality loosely related to appearance. The idea of white as pure, unmarked, and beautiful lent itself well to the purposes of an industry in search of an unobtrusive background that contrasted with black ink. “White” was adopted to signify paper with a suitably light and refined surface for printing, and “brown” to signify darker and coarser paper for wrapping and other uses. Until 1867, paper in the United States was still primarily produced from cloth rags, a perpetually scarce resource. Because of the further scarcity of rags considered clean enough to make white paper for printing, both white paper and the “white rags” used to make it commanded high prices.

Writing to Boston papermakers Tileston and Hollingsworth, one salesman explicitly linked whiteness to quality and the promise of great profit: “If you continue to send in as good an article as the first 50 reams, I have a prospect of selling a considerable amount of it. . . . I hope you will keep up the quality, make it as white as possible.” But white paper wasn’t necessarily visually white; “white” served as a metaphor for refinement and lightness in tone. The way whiteness functions in white paper begins to look like the function of whiteness under racial dualism: it is representative of supposed refinement and desirability and only loosely associated with the visual experience of a certain color.

The first order of business in the papermaking process was to distinguish between rags that could be used to make “white” paper from those that would make “brown.” This was known not only to millworkers or printers, but also to the general public. The separation and appraisal of rags was taught even to children and linked to literacy itself. For example, in an 1837 version of “Jack and the Beanstalk,” an illiterate Jack does not find a giant in the clouds, but rather a paper mill, a type foundry, printing press, bindery, and a schoolhouse. While at the paper mill, Jack joins a group of children working in the rag pile: “[Jack] found himself in a room where there were a great many boys and girls sitting round, and picking among huge piles of cloth of every size, shape, and color, and as they picked they sang,—Pick, pick the black from the white, Assort the whole bundle before it is night. . . . The mill and the water and man with care have turned dirty rags into paper fair.” Jack selects white from black through equation with dirtiness and fairness. The story’s rhyming refrain, “pick, pick the black from the white,” shows that metaphors of dualism structured the perception of rags and the paper they
would become, despite whatever actual color the linens were. Upon returning to his mother, Jack says, “I should like to know what they are going to do with all this white paper,” and later learns about writing that distinguishing black from white is also the most basic skill required in the acquisition of literacy: “I see some strange-looking things of black on a white board . . . but I do not know what they mean.”

The professional practices of the print shop were shaped by the need to maintain white paper’s virginal state, keeping ink away except for intentional marks. Shops were set up such that workers who touched ink never touched paper. The apprentice who applied ink to the type and who touched the leaden forms was called the “printer’s devil,” a “term [that] originated in reference to the fact that the young apprentice would inevitably become stained black from the printing ink.” Paper mills and print shops were structured by metaphors of purity/deviance and cleanliness/filth constructed and circulated in the service of preserving white from black.

One papermaker, however, suggested that the orientation toward whiteness distracted from making the best quality paper, showing the preference for whiteness to be ideological, not functional. The focus on cleanliness and whiteness of rags and paper is misplaced, he claimed, and the rage for whiteness predominated other important qualities: “The degrees of fineness and whiteness, distinguished with little care, are thought to be the only objects of importance; whereas the hardness and softness, the being more or less worn, are very essential in this selection.” Instead of obsessing over color as a determinant of quality, papermakers are here urged to make stronger paper by selecting rags for their texture, not color. Some readers even took a contrary position on what made for the most legible paper color, arguing that the contrast of white and black was painful to the eye and that brown paper was superior. “Brown paper preserves the eye better than white,” argued one reader, “and when authors and readers agree to be wise, we shall avoid printing on a glaring white paper.”

These indicate that white color in paper was less a utilitarian need than a reflection of the importance of whiteness in the antebellum imagination. Toni Morrison suggests that Herman Melville, when writing *Moby-Dick*, “was overwhelmed by the philosophical and metaphysical inconsistencies of an extraordinary and unprecedented idea that had its fullest manifestation in his own time in his own country, and that . . . idea was the successful assertion of whiteness as ideology.” In a similar deployment, the desire to have
paper “as white as possible” made papermakers, printers, and readers into actors in the production of this pervasive ideology of whiteness in the nineteenth century.

Bottles of Ink and Reams of Paper

The widespread and repeated experience of ink and paper established black and white in the binary opposition that gave substance and support to the logic of racial dualism that dominated social and legal understandings of race in the nineteenth-century United States inhabited by African American writers such as William Wells Brown. The reliance of racial discourse on the binary black/white color metaphor—and the critique of this racial binary—is a key subject in much of Brown’s work.

*Clotel* was first published in London in 1853 while Brown was on the aforementioned European lecture circuit. Tracing the lives of women (Clotel, Althesa, and their daughters) who are descended from Thomas Jefferson and an enslaved woman named Currer (a thinly veiled Sally Hemings), Brown devotes much of the novel to parsing the different forms of whiteness that these figures simultaneously do and do not inhabit. Clotel and Althesa are described in the novel as white women when whiteness refers to a tone of skin, but as the novel unfolds, their legal and social status as blacks under enslavement reveals itself, like the logic of hypodescent, as prevailing over all else. Though Clotel’s light skin color and refined manners allow her temporary inhabitance of white domesticity, she and her daughter are abandoned by the white man who, though he has promised to be a husband and father, cannot finally overcome the legal and social structures that make him their owner. After Althesa’s death from fever, her daughters learn of their “true” racial status and are sold into sexual slavery to pay debts. In this way, the novel both bends binaries by indicating how unstable the chromatic metaphors for race are and explores how antebellum U.S. practices forcibly insisted that racial legibility be maintained by settling racial identification into the binary relation of black and white.²⁴

As critics in the field of race studies have shown, racial binaries are unstable and socially constructed, yet nonetheless are embedded in legal and social discourse. Addressing the rigidity of racial and symbolic dualisms compared to the slipperiness of the visual, Richard Dyer writes that “white as a symbol, especially when paired with black, seems more stable than white as
a hue or skin tone.” “White as a skin colour,” he explains, “is [an] unstable, unbounded . . . category,” a “category that is internally variable and unclear at the edges.”25 As a symbol adopted by law, however, white is, as Cheryl Harris describes, more rigidly defined: a legal construct that “defined and affirmed critical aspects of identity (who is white); of privilege (what benefits accrue to its status); and of property (what legal entitlements arise from that status).”26 Brown never misses an opportunity to complicate supposed congruities between the visual and legal syntaxes of race implied in the terms “black” and “white.” Characters dwell in the spaces between apparent skin color and the legal/social privilege metaphorized through racial color. Clotel has a “complexion as white as” white men and features “as finely defined as any” white women. Clotel appears to be “Anglo-Saxon,” even “Real Albino,” which stresses the congruence between racial whiteness and extreme visual whiteness, while also confusing that congruence by locating it in Clotel’s “black” body.27 Althesa is “as white as most white women in a southern clime,” but “was born a slave.”28 Brown turns a phrase that puts white next to white, elegantly demonstrating the difference between visual and legal registers of race.

Despite Brown’s interest in deconstructing a black/white racial binary, as a writer and printer, he traded in a material world structured by a black/white binary. And indeed, success in that world—printing—depended, one might say, on his ability to present ideas in black and white. Brown seems attuned to the contradiction that his work as a racial theorist constantly interrogated the decipherability of whiteness and blackness in opposition to one another, but that as a writer/printer his work would always depend upon this very structure. Yet, in the final revision of his novel in 1867, Brown seems to capitalize on this irony. In order to theorize the difference between print legibility and racial legibility, Brown figures printing, the putting of black ink onto white paper, as racial intermixture, describing “Quadroon women” as products of ink and paper.

These lines open the 1867 edition:

For many years the South has been noted for its beautiful Quadroon women. Bottles of ink, and reams of paper, have been used to portray the “finely-cut and well-moulded features,” the “silken-curls,” the “dark and brilliant eyes,” the “splendid forms,” the “fascinating smiles,” and “accomplished manners” of these impassioned and voluptuous daughters of the two races.29
As Brown suggests, “mulatta” narratives were quite popular, and one in particular rewrote the limits of the possible in the book industry.30 “One hundred thousand volumes issued in eight weeks!” exclaimed the New York Independent on the publication of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin, “The demand continues without abatement. . . . It has taken 3000 reams of medium paper, weighing 30 lbs. to the ream—90,000 lbs. of paper.”31 But, Clotel’s final opening passage does more than highlight the expanding scale of print production. Brown opens with print production in order to theorize the concept of legibility. Where earlier editions of Clotel begin with a discussion of racial intermixture under slavery, this one discusses the production of representations of racial intermixture. The first edition begins with a description of an actual population of people, described as a “fearful increase of half whites, most of whose fathers are slaveowners, and their mothers slaves.”32 In 1867, however, white fathers and black mothers are replaced with black ink and white paper, and the defining characteristics of “Quadroon women” are put under quotation: “silken-curls,” “dark and brilliant eyes,” and so on. Brown shifts from discussing the birth of actual mixed-race people to the production of the literary trope of the mulatta that over “many years” of “portray[al]” has become synonymous with these features. As Ann duCille has written, this passage seems concerned with the problem of representation, or the hypervisibility of the mulatta trope in antebellum popular culture, and that Brown is unlikely, for example, to have uncritically figured mixed-race women as “voluptuous.” Even the replacement of “half whites” with “Quadroon women” recalls “The Quadroons,” the 1842 short story by Lydia Maria Child out of which Brown built Clotel. Brown suggests that racial mixture is most legible, then, as a set of literary tropes as the appearance of “silken-curls,” “dark . . . eyes,” and “voluptuous” bodies immediately orients readers to a set of standard characteristics and plots.33 These figures are mixtures of black and white both because they have “fathers [who are] slaveowners, and . . . mothers [who are] slaves,” and because they are formed from “bottles of ink, and reams of paper.” It is only in print, however, in assembling lists of features like “silken-curls,” that these figures are legible within a structure of black/white dualism, for, as Brown emphasizes in Clotel, the mixture of “black” and “white” in mixed-race people does not produce the legibly “black” body demanded by the laws and logics of hypodescent.

If the portrayal of mixed-race figures like Clotel involves the mixture of black ink and white paper, then Brown’s 1867 introduction also begs a practical question: how does an illustrator visually represent racial ambiguity when
the tools at hand are contrasting fields of white paper and black ink? The question is particularly pertinent in the case of *Clotel* because the only illustration of Brown’s eponymous heroine, “The Death of Clotel” (see Figure 8.1), contradicts the author’s repeated descriptions of the character’s light skin and the importance of her whiteness in the narrative. Clotel looks, Brown writes, “as white as . . . those who . . . wish to become her purchasers,” yet, in the engraving she is visibly darker than the men surrounding her. This disconnect between the verbal and visual text has not escaped scholars. Russ Castro-novo, for example, notes that “even though Brown repeatedly states that Clotel . . . is so close to appearing white that she can pass as an Italian or Spanish gentleman, the illustration darkly shades her face.”

It is not uncommon for the visual and verbal texts within a work to create tension; “The Death of Clotel” presents what W. J. T. Mitchell calls “image/text,” or “relations of the visual and verbal” that create a “problematic gap, cleavage, or rupture in representation.” In this instance, the rupture arises out of the link between black/white dualism in print legibility and racial legibility. Brown’s deconstruction of dualism threatens to eradicate the system of black/presence and white/absence through which engravers make meaning.

Mixed-race figures break down the false logic of black/white dualism, presenting a problem for artists whose renderings are dependent upon engraving as a practice of presence and absence that cannot easily mix black and white. What engravings, or “finely-cut” portrayals, like “The Death of Clotel” reveal in their attempts to depict mixed-race women is the problem of racial presence and absence, the idea of blackness as raced and whiteness as normalized, neutral, or transparent, which racial theorists ultimately expose as false. For the illustrator, though, these structures of race and legibility constitute the very form of engraving. In wood engraving, the whiteness of the page literally is the racial whiteness of legally white figures who go unmarked in two senses: their faces are not inked, and they are not generally understood to be “raced.” The whiteness of the page makes type legible at the same time as it naturalizes the social structure of whiteness as absence, making race appear “present” on the body of its others. Working out this binary on the surface of the body was even part of an engraver’s training (see Figure 8.2).

Michael Gaudio argues that instead of “explain[ing] away the physical substance of the engraving as the neutral agent of symbolic meaning,” literary scholarship must grant attention “to the peculiar materiality of the engraver’s art.” Engravings have “a syntax,” according to Gaudio, a system of meaning making constructed through “the visible sign of a wood-engraver’s
concentrated efforts with his tools,” the “insistently present, insistently interfering, insistently material lines of the engraver.” The material lines marking Clotel’s face actualize the racial coding of the whiteness of paper and the blackness of ink, rendering Clotel’s racial status legible by making it readable on the surface her skin (see Figure 8.3).

“The Death of Clotel” was originally engraved for the first edition of the novel published by Partridge and Oakey, the same Protestant press that a year before had issued one of the first illustrated London editions of Uncle Tom’s Cabin. In sharing a publisher, Brown’s and Stowe’s novels also had a common illustrator, Henry Anelay, and an engraver, James Johnston, a team recognizable enough to attract top billing alongside Stowe on the edition’s

title page. Their images may even have surpassed Stowe’s prose in the eyes of literary tastemakers:

All criticism on the subject of the story of Uncle Tom is superfluous; the public have settled the matter effectually by accepting the book as a sort of anti-slavery Bible not to be spoken against. The question among publishers now is, who can sell the best edition for the money? So far as real art is concerned in the illustrations, the volume before us, to our thinking, answers that question most satisfactorily. The designs of Anelay, engraved by Johnston, which adorn this edition, are alone worth the money it sells for.

The pair of well-known illustrators applied the same representational strategies in their depictions of both Eliza Harris and Clotel (see Figure 8.4).

Anelay and Johnston’s Clotel and Eliza each have faces similarly marked by striations designed to index a racial difference located in “blood” but not skin color. Not all engravers approached Eliza similarly. George Cruikshank, for example, does not use such lines to mark Eliza’s complexion. Anelay and Johnston’s lines try to register a “tint” between white and black, both visually and racially. “At one time, cross-hatching was much employed in representing flesh, which is now generally cut in tints, with white lines crossing,” instructed one manual for engravers. “The lines that are [not cut away] receive ink in printing, and the lines that are cut out appear white. The quality of the plain tint depends on the evenness of the lines, which make it both black and
Anelay and Johnston’s attempt to present Clotel and Eliza in “both black and white” goes beyond Brown’s and Stowe’s texts in order to present racial nonwhiteness as always legible on the surface of their white bodies and the surface of the white paper they inhabit. This poetics of racial representation in which “color” must be registered on the surface of the skin reflects popular thinking about the visibility of race.

It is useful here to recall how strongly white paper was associated with meanings of whiteness that overlap with racial significance. A poem attributed to Benjamin Franklin demonstrates the extent to which white paper was associated with white femininity, the status ultimately denied Clotel. Franklin’s “Paper: A Poem” explicitly connects white paper and white femininity. Reprinted in the popular oratorical schoolbook *The Columbian Orator*, the poem was widely circulated during the first half of the nineteenth century. Expanding on John Locke’s comparison of the human subject to paper (“white Paper receives any characters”), the poem organizes social types as types of paper in varying degrees of quality and purpose: “Men are as various; and, if right I scan, / Each sort of paper represents some man.”
Some wit of old,—such wits of old there were,—
Whole hints show’d meaning, whose allusions, care,
By one brave stroke, to mark all human kind,
Called clear blank paper every infant mind;
Where still, as opening sense her dictates wrote,
Fair virtue put a seal, or vice a blot.

After several stanzas classifying different social types according to different kinds of paper (fools/foolscap and so on), the reader comes to a stanza that aligns fine white paper with white femininity:

Observe the maiden, innocently sweet,
She’s fair white paper, an unsullied sheet;
On which the happy man, whom fate ordains,
May write his name, and take her for his pains.42

The clean white sheet signals virtuous white femininity: the virginity, innocence, and purity of spirit that awaits the writing of a man’s name in marriage and sexual consummation. Locke’s tabula rasa takes on a sense of feminine passivity as the clean white sheet awaits the receipt of a man’s “character.”43

Despite her appearance as a white woman in the texts, Clotel is denied even the visual status of nineteenth-century white womanhood. That intersection of race and gender depends on ideas of racial unmarkedness and spiritual/genetic purity largely denied to mixed-race women, and incompatible with the metaphorical construction of paper most clearly articulated when Franklin equates the “unsullied sheet” of “fair white paper” to “the maiden, innocently sweet.” The material lines of the engraver externalize the racial blackness forbidding Clotel from entering into legal marriage with Horatio Green and indexing the sexual history of her parentage that disallows her ever having been a properly “unsullied sheet.”

Given the senses of purity, beauty, refinement, and even overt white femininity sedimented on the surface page, it then seems like no surprise that Anelay and Johnston cannot, within these racial logics, let the whiteness of the page equal the whiteness of Clotel’s face described in the text. What happens on the surface of Clotel’s skin here becomes inextricable from the processes of wood engraving. The wood engraver works by cutting away wood where the “white” should show, preserving the whiteness of the page from the
impression of ink. Wood left raised accepts the ink and impresses it into the paper. The wood engraver, then, works by producing absences, cutting away voids that create the “invisible” whites that structure the visible blacks. Following Dyer and Lipsitz, from a visual standpoint, race, especially when articulated in color metaphors, is commonly held to be a “content” or “presence” that nonwhites carry on the surface of their bodies, a content that becomes legible as racial difference against the “background” of whiteness that claims for itself the privilege of invisibility or absence. This describes the same structure through which wood engravings negotiate the figure/ground relationship: a passive, yet structuring whiteness makes visible the black marks that contrast it. But the work of the engraver actively produces these absences, just like the papermaker engages in great effort to produce a whiteness that purposefully fades out of sight. On the surface of the engraved woodblock, areas carved away (absence) “print” white, maintaining the whiteness of the page, whereas areas left raised (presence) “print” black because, they accept ink from the press marking the surface of the page. Illustrating Clotel “as white as most of those . . . waiting to become her purchasers” would have required Anelay and Johnston to cut away the wood within the borders of the figure’s face, creating a void, or making actual the ideology of whiteness as the absence of marking. Indeed, this is how the faces of the white men surrounding her are crafted. Leaving the wood in place to transfer ink to Clotel materially creates racial marking as presence, a “face” filled with wood on the engraving block and color on the page. Anelay and Johnston’s illustrations of Clotel and Eliza demonstrate the extent to which the ideology of a racially marked blackness and a racially unmarked whiteness, reinforced in the legal institutions of “blood,” guided the work of engravers for whom whiteness was literal absence and blackness literal presence.

In *Pictorial Victorians*, Julia Thomas suggests that black figures were perfect subjects for Victorian engravers seeking to demonstrate their talent:

At a time when wood engraving was the most popular form of illustration, the reproduction of the Negro provided an opportunity for the artist and engraver to demonstrate their skills. The technique of cutting away the white parts of the image on the block and leaving the part to be inked in relief seemed designed specifically for the representation of whites. The skin could be cut away more or less in its entirety, while the inked lines served to demarcate the features. . . . Manipulating the wood engraving process and leaving
all the skin in relief and therefore black, however, not only blurred the distinction between outline and content, but could obliterate the features, making the appearance of the figure too dark. The solution was to produce tonal effects by cross-hatching, cutting the wood between sets of crossed lines. . . . Such techniques . . . tested the skill and patience of the engraver, but they also showed wood engraving at its best, giving the Negro more visual impact than his white counterpart.  

Thomas’s reading fails in its assumption that there is a discernable visual difference between “the Negro” and “whites.” The image most resonant with this reading is that of Eva sitting in Uncle Tom’s lap, one white and one black in visual contrast. As Brown and several other nineteenth-century writers (including Stowe) point out, however, visually identifying the legal construct of “the Negro” by complexion is not viable. Illustrating mixed-race figures that complicate the notion of racial dualism pressures both the technological limits of engraving and the tendency to equate racial status with the presence of “color.” Perhaps, when he wrote the opening to the final revision of Clotel, Brown meant to emphasize that his title character challenged the duochromatic media through which she had been represented since the novel’s first edition. Victorian engravers may have felt that “the Negro” figure was a showcase for the richness and possibility of the art, but once the dualisms that premise the form come under question, the figure of the mulatta collapses the binaries upon which wood engravings are encoded.

In “The Quadroon’s Home,” a chapter in Clotel that strategically edits Child’s “The Quadroons,” Brown repeats Child’s characterization of Clotel’s daughter, Mary, as an “octroon.” “Their first-born was named Mary, and her complexion was still lighter than her mother. Indeed she was not darker than other white children. As the child grew older, it more and more resembled its mother. The iris of her large dark eye had the melting mezzotinto, which remains the last vestige of African ancestry.” Though Mary has the “dark and brilliant eyes” of her mother, she is imagined outside of the black/white ink/paper dualisms. Mezzotint is a different process of engraving that produces more refined shades of gray than wood or copper engraving. Rather than black lines and white lines, mezzotint creates its effects in “tones” and “halftones.” In place of wood engraving’s rigid separations, the mezzotint “melts” between shades. In the illustration this use of the term “mezzotint” imagines, then, that Mary’s whiteness can be represented outside the black/
white binary of the printed page. In place of white and black are shades of darkness and lightness. Capable of producing more mimetic representations of skin tone than the black/white dualism of wood engraving’s presences and absences, the “melting mezzotinto” seems better suited to work outside the boundaries of a racial dualism never adequate to represent the people it nonetheless inscribed. William Wells Brown worked in this material world of print, a world saturated with ideological meanings related to racial difference. *Clotel* works in, through, and against these materialities and ideologies when it thematically, verbally, and visually trades in forms of legibility and illegibility—in their construction and deconstruction—and the forms of freedom and unfreedom they afford.
Enquirer article cites don't precisely align with what we know about Grimes's life in Litchfield. Other Grimes references refer to the poem as based upon an entirely separate character, Ephraim Grimes of Hubbardstown, Massachusetts. But whatever the source, the fact that the real William Grimes appropriated a poem to signify his own heritage (in the form of his grandfather), to signify his own role in the community (such as when he used it to advertise his business), and later to cement his role in the historical and cultural imagination of the Yale community (by having the poem used in his own obituary) is telling. Grimes, as picaresque fugitive, was quite appropriately conflating his identity with a well-loved American trickster. See “ ‘Old Grimes,’ of Ancient Elegiac Fame; A Nonagenarian with an Inconvenient Memory Tells Some Sad Things About Him,” New York Times, July 7, 1912; and “Old Grimes House Burned; A Landmark of Hubbardston, Mass. Is Destroyed,” New York Times, February 4, 1907. See also “Old Grimes,” Litchfield Enquirer, September 4, 1851.

CHAPTER 8. BOTTLES OF INK ANDREAMS OF PAPER

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3. William Wells Brown, Narrative of William W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave, Written by Himself (Boston: Anti-Slavery Office, 1847), 29. Lovejoy’s story was a national sensation in the late 1830s and in this passage Brown may be casting himself in Lovejoy’s role in the well-known story. Brown is attacked while ferrying type and readers would remember Lovejoy’s murder by an anti-abolitionist mob while defending his printing press.

4. Ibid., 27.


7. Michael Omi and Howard Winant theorize racial formation as a “process of historically situated projects in which human bodies and social structures are represented and

8. This use of “common sense” owes to Jacques Rancière’s concept of the distribution of the sensible (le partage du sensible), or the “implicit law governing the sensible order. . . . The distribution of the sensible . . . produces a system of self-evident facts of perception based on the set horizons and modalities of what is visible and audible as well as what can be said, thought, made, or done.” See The Politics of Aesthetics, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (New York: Continuum, 2004), 85.


10. For further discussion of this joke’s history, and a reading of its racial significance in terms of print, publicity, and visual culture, see Marjorie Garber, Shakespeare and Modern Culture (New York: Pantheon Books, 2008), 154–77.


12. Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd ed., s.vv. “black” (n., def. 2a; adj., def. 15b) and “white” (n., def. 7a).


15. The “brownness” of brown paper takes on added racial significance in the twentieth century with “paper bag societies” and “paper bag parties,” colorist African American associations that are said to have used brown paper bags to test the tones of a potential
member’s skin. People with skin darker than the bag were ineligible for inclusion. See Audrey Elisa Kerr, *The Paper Bag Principle: Class, Colorism, and Rumor and the Case of Black Washington D.C.* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2006).


17. The ideological value of whiteness that is constructed in relation to the paper trade appears in remarkably similar terms in relation to the slave trade, as Brown demonstrates in Clotel. The ragman’s receipt documents whiteness as a valuable property in ways similar to the way whiteness functioned at the slave auction depicted in *Clotel*. The “still wet from the press” advertisement that includes notice of Clotel and Althea’s sale reads: “Notice: Thirty-eight negroes will be offered for sale. . . . Also several mulatto girls of rare personal qualities: two of them very superior.” This marketing of “superiority” comes just before Brown’s description of Clotel as having “a complexion as white as those who were waiting with a wish to become her purchasers.” Here, too, the possession of whiteness has quantifiable value. When Clotel is sold to Horatio Green, the narrator offers an itemized list of her worth. Her body is worth only five hundred dollars, but the virtues of white womanhood that she is said to possess are worth one thousand more: “This was a southern auction, at which the bones, muscles, sinews, blood, and nerves of a young lady of sixteen were sold for five hundred dollars; her moral character for two hundred; her improved intellect for one hundred; her Christianity for three hundred; and her chastity and virtue for four hundred dollars more.” The itemization does not explicitly include her white skin, but shows Clotel’s whiteness to be both physical and metaphysical, tying her physical whiteness to the trope of true white womanhood. The possession of whiteness, whether in the commodity of paper or in the body, is a promise of purity and refinement carrying with it quantifiably higher market value. Brown, *Clotel*, 84, 85, 88.


24. I am aware that the question of racial identification in the nineteenth century can be cut different ways depending on local contexts, laws, customs, and so on, and that these do not always result in categorization as either black or white. I remain interested here, however, in Brown’s exploration of black and white as racial signifiers that are...
flexible or ambiguous in certain registers like the visual, yet which are, in *Clotel*, in the end answerable to the legal constraints of hypodescent, or “one drop” logic.


26. See Cheryl Harris, “Whiteness as Property,” *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (1993): 1707–91. While stating that legal whiteness is more defined than visual whiteness, I do not mean to suggest that it is homogeneous. Indeed, as Ian Haney-López has shown, local differences in population and power structures have mediated which populations are invited to participate in the property rights of whiteness. See *White by Law: The Legal Construction of Race* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).


28. Ibid., 196.


30. Since the term “mulatto/a” is historically pejorative, I use it only to quote or paraphrase another text or when addressing the figure of the mulatta, which I take to be a cultural trope, not a descriptive term.


33. Ann duCille writes of this passage that Brown’s reference to ink and paper and his “use of quotation marks around the defining phrases he cites, indicate that he is himself is addressing the problem of representation” and how fiction “position[s] . . . black women as objects of the white male gaze.” Ann duCille, *The Coupling Convention: Sex, Text, and Tradition in Black Women’s Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 22–23. In his annotations to the 1867 *Clotelle* in the Electronic Scholarly Edition, Christopher Mulvey notes, “The passage . . . is possibly taken from a printed source, but, if so, it has not been identified. [Brown] uses quotation marks for six of its phrases. These express stereotypes of exotic, particularly of mixed race, beauty. The quotation marks may indicate that they are quotations, or they may indicate that they are simply stock expressions.” I would argue that Brown does not need a specific source for these lines because he is quoting print culture’s habitual representation of mixed-race women. See Mulvey, ed., *Clotel: An Electronic Scholarly Edition* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006), http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu:8080/clotel/.


40. For more on the nineteenth-century idea that race would always be manifest on the surface of the body, see Walter Johnson, “The Slave Trader, the White Slave, and the Politics of Racial Determination in the 1850s,” *Journal of American History* 87 (June 2000): 27, 34. Johnson describes the case of *Morrison v. White*, in which the defendant successfully sued for her freedom using her white-looking body as evidence and arguing that “colored blood will stick out.”


42. Benjamin Franklin, “Paper: A Poem,” in *The Works of Benjamin Franklin*, vol. 2, ed. Jared Sparks (Boston: Hilliard, Gray, and Company, 1836), 161–62. The editor of this volume registers his skepticism of Franklin’s authorship. “This poem has been printed in nearly all the collections of Dr. Franklin’s writings, and for that reason it is retained in the present edition; but I have seen no evidence which satisfies me that he is the author of it. In the *American Museum*, where it was printed in 1788, it was said to be ‘ascribed to Dr. Franklin’; and, on that authority, it was taken in Robinson’s and then into Longman’s edition, and then transferred, under Franklin’s name, to various other publications in England the United States. It is not contained in W. T. Franklin’s edition.” Whether or not Franklin actually wrote the poem, it was widely reprinted in *The Columbian Orator*, a text most readily remembered, perhaps, as the one from which Frederick Douglass learned the master-slave dialectic.

43. Contemporary art is beyond the scope of this essay, but Glenn Ligon’s 1990 *Untitled (I Feel Most Colored When I Am Thrown Against a Sharp White Background)* is worth mentioning because it compares the whiteness of writing surfaces to racial whiteness and the blackness of text to racial blackness. The phrase “I FEEL MOST COLORED WHEN I AM THROWN AGAINST A SHARP WHITE BACKGROUND” is stenciled in black and repeated down the length of a white door. The text is taken from Zora Neale Hurston’s 1928 essay “How It Feels to Be Colored Me.” As the border between white background and black text blurs, the repeated phrase becomes increasingly illegible toward the bottom of the panel. In this piece, racial legibility and print legibility depend on the distinction between black marks and white surfaces, and whiteness is constructed as the background against which all else becomes readable. For a reproduction of the painting, see Scott Rothkopf, ed., *Glenn Ligon: AMERICA* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2011), 98, published in conjunction with the exhibition of the same name, shown at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City.

44. Jean Genet also makes this connection between critical race theory and print legibility explicit: “In white America the Blacks are the characters in which history is written. They are the ink that gives the white page a meaning.” See Genet, *Prisoner of Love* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2003), 245.


### Chapter 9. Notes from the State of Saint Domingue

1. Robert S. Levine’s Bedford Cultural Edition of *Clotel* (2000, rev. 2011) offers the best available documentation of Brown’s citations. However, forthcoming work by Dawn Coleman and Geoffrey Sanborn locates many other instances, and with the help of digital tools scholars may discover still more.


9. I thank Jordan Stein for some of the wording of this sentence—not to mention for contributing more to this essay than its own authorial attribution conveys.

10. See R. B. Lewis, *Light and Truth: Collected from the Bible and Ancient and Modern History*, rev. ed. (Boston: By a Committee of Colored Gentlemen, B. F. Roberts, printer, 1844); and David Walker, *Walker’s Appeal, in Four Articles; Together with a Preamble, to the Coloured Citizens of the World*, 3rd ed. (Boston: David Walker, 1830). The same patchwork aesthetic governs a book with a title similar to Lewis’s that appeared a few years later, from an author who identifies himself only as “Aaron”—*The Light and the Truth of Slavery: Aaron’s History* (Worcester, Mass.: Printed for the author, ca. 1845), a work that