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Le Mélange of Francophone Culture in William Wells Brown's *Clotel*

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In *Clotel; Or, The President's Daughter*, William Wells Brown argues that for fugitive African American slaves France represented freedom. This connection between African Americans and France that is familiar to many Americans in the twentieth century was existent at the time of Brown's own escape. The Francophone culture became a major motivator in the author's personal life and also in his writings. This project covers many themes, including the "tragic mulatta", American identity, American freedom and slavery, and explores readings from Anna Brickhouse's *Transamerican Literary Relations and the Nineteenth-Century Public Sphere*, and Eve A. Raimon's *The Tragic Mulatta Revisited*. Brown questions not only the impossibility of being accepted in the American society as a person of mixed race but argues that the French are better interpreters of the Declaration of Independence than the Americans. In France, Brown found a secure home among French elites and his positive experience with francophone culture helped shape his most well-known work of literature, the novel *Clotel*. In this sentimental novel, Brown creates a character whose hope for freedom is based upon the author's experiences in France. Being the first western European nation to abolish slavery in its colonies, France provided hope to many African Americans.

The French and Haitian Revolutions

To better understand the abolishment of slavery in the French colonies, it is vital to understand the French Revolution, which began in 1789. The recent, successful American Revolution influenced the French during their revolution. A new form of government was created, the National Assembly, which drafted the first French constitution, known as *Déclaration des Droits de l'Homme et du Citoyen de 1789* (The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen). In 1794, the National Assembly abolished slavery in all French colonies.

During the French Revolution, across the Atlantic Ocean, the French colony known as Saint-Domingue (Haiti) began their own pursuit of freedom. Haiti's successful revolt against slavery from the French stood as a threatening example to other colonizing nations and served as an inspiration to many slaves who hoped for freedom. By 1800, Toussaint L'Ouverture, leader of the Haitian slave revolt, had taken over the whole colony, leaving the French with only one alternative, freeing all the slaves. However, the Haitian Revolution created anxiety in France, the United States and other slave holding countries. On January 1, 1804 Haiti became the first and only black colony to have

succeeded in gaining their independence in the world. The Republic of Haiti became the first black Republic.

The Haitians' Success Becomes the Anxiety of the Americans

In the United States, Americans were aware of the Haitian Revolution. Not only was Haiti a threat to slaveholders in the US, but the independent country was also viewed as a danger by President Thomas Jefferson. By 1806, all maritime connections were abolished between Haitians and Americans by the US government. After the Haitian Revolution, Louisiana inspired American anxiety as well. In this case, an isolation of the territory and the US was impossible. The Haitian Revolution accented the French's power and threat towards the US. Many Americans thought that the French would install on the territory. This concern would be resolved in 1803 with the Louisiana Purchase.

Anna Brickhouse's *Transamerican Literary Relations And the Nineteenth-Century Public Sphere* demonstrates the importance of Haitian and African American fellowship through print culture. Brickhouse argues that "though much less studied than its Anglophone counterpart, a dissenting francophone print culture emerging in the early nineteenth-century United States became the logical scapegoat for a slaveholding South already terrorized by the history of Haiti and convinced of the dangers of mass migrations from the French West Indies" (85). She alludes to the *Revue*, a newspaper that "was devoted explicitly to material of and about the colonies of Western imperialism, largely those of Americans" developed by Caribbean scholars (Brickhouse 86). The *Revue* addressed thoughts, ideas, problems and the injustice that Africans and African American slaves were enduring during the nineteenth century.

Many American slaves tried to escape or revolt against the unjust system. William Wells Brown was one such slave. The author escaped slavery in 1834, with "the love of liberty that had been burning in his bosom for years" (*Clotel* 17). Brown was born in Lexington, Kentucky in 1815 to an enslaved mother and a relative of his owner. After enduring much harsh treatment from several masters, he decided to try to escape slavery twice, once alone and once with his mother, both resulting in failure. He finally escaped on January 1, 1834 from the help of a Quaker, from whom Brown would adopt his name Wells Brown. Soon the fugitive slave reached Canada and resided there for a few years before joining the Western New York Anti-Slavery Society. Brown would go on to publish major works such as the *Narrative of Williams W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave, Written By Himself* (1847), *Three Years in Europe: Or, Places I Have Seen and People I Have Met* (1852) and *The Black Man: His Antecedents, His Genius, and His Achievements* (1863). At the end of his

life, Brown devoted his life to fight for the struggles of African Americans. He died in 1884 in Chelsea, Massachusetts

France Represents Freedom

In *Clotel*, the reader finds many references to France being a safe haven for fugitive slaves. Brown refers to great French philosophers such as Rousseau in the novel, and the novel's famous ending terminates in France. These examples suggest that Brown's connection with France is much more than a simple historical context. His earlier work of nonfiction, *Three Years in Europe: Or, Places I Have Seen and People I Have Met*, provides an enhanced perspective on the significance of Brown's interest in France.

Three Years in Europe, published in London in 1852, became the first African American travel narrative. This collection of letters written by Brown gives an account of his experience in Europe and dedicates three letters out of twenty-three to France. This book later leads him to write *Clotel*, in which he is able to transcribe certain European thoughts and ideas about liberty. In this manuscript, "Brown's deliberate repudiation of his homeland and the construction of an interracial nation elsewhere" is perceived (Raimon 13). A comparison of the European nations with United States allowed Brown to show his appreciation of his acceptance in Europe. The author was allowed to assist at many conventions throughout Europe and share his own belief of abolishing slavery with many "friends of peace" (*Three Years in Europe* 17). One of the main reasons why the author travelled to France was to assist at the Second International Peace Conference in 1849. As Brown states in his travel narrative, "my coloured face and curly hair did not prevent my getting the invitation" (*Three Years in Europe* 50). Brown's exhilaration at his color not being a factor of refusal was a major influence on his impression of the French culture. The conference raised global awareness of the injustice in the world and also established a global engagement to abolish slavery. Amongst the crowd "of a good sprinkling of the French" Brown was able to meet Victor Hugo, the President of the Congress (*Three Years in Europe* 23). After the reception, Brown was introduced to many French delegates, most importantly Madame de Tocqueville, the wife of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, who states to Brown, "I hope you feel yourself free in Paris" (*Three Years in Europe* 36). Although Brown was known as "an American slave," no French man or woman denied his welcome into the country (*Three Years in Europe* 36). Another episode that allowed Brown to compare the Americans and the French was during the convention. Americans were invited to the convention, and at the sight of Brown, two Americans continued to insult him by stating, "That nigger had better be on his master's farm" (*Three Years in Europe* 24). Brown demonstrates the ability of the French to

accept a person of color. However, he obviously demonstrates that certain Americans are still not prepared for this change. To Brown, France represented the “progress of civilization, and the refinement of the nineteenth century,” a growth that the United States was not experiencing (*Three Years in Europe* 20). This “progress of civilization” was happening in the ex-colonies of France. Brown’s experience in France was not his only link to francophone culture. In the next few paragraphs, I will connect Brown’s life and his experiences with three dominant centers of francophone culture during this era, Haiti, New Orleans, and Canada. These former colonies of France had a different connection with Brown than the “motherland,” which remained significant in his life.

Brown’s courage to escape increased after Haiti’s great revolution for freedom. Later in his career Brown would express his gratitude towards the Haitian Revolution in his book *The Black Man: His Antecedents, His Genius and His Achievements*. This book, published in 1863, expressed Brown’s revolutionary mindset, and in it he dedicates a section to Toussaint L’Ouverture. Brown goes as far as to compare L’Ouverture to the United States’ first president George Washington and the American struggle for freedom. Brown states,

Toussaint’s career as a Christian, a statesman, and a general, will lose nothing by a comparison with that of Washington. Each was the leader of an oppressed and outraged people, each had a powerful enemy to contend with, and each succeeded in founding a government in the new world. Toussaint’s government made liberty its watchword, incorporated it in its constitution, abolished the slave trade, and made freedom universal amongst the people. Washington’s government incorporated slavery and the slave trade, and enacted laws by which chains were fastened upon the limbs of millions of people. Toussaint liberated his countrymen; Washington enslaved a portion of his. When impartial history shall do justice to the St. Domingo revolution, the name of Toussaint L’Ouverture will be placed high upon the roll of fame. (*The Black Man* 105)

Brown’s struggle for freedom continued far into New Orleans. Brown’s most tragic moments occurred during his employment as a “superintendent of the slave gangs” (*Clotel* 7). Brown’s job consisted in preparing slaves for the New Orleans market to be sold. This was not only “a subsequent period of forced employment for a slave trader in New Orleans [which] induced [Brown] to flee the South” (Hodges v). For the author it was a period of terrible separation from his siblings, the sale of his own mother in the New Orleans market, deaths, abuse and the injustice towards slaves.

Brown escaped in 1834 where he follows the North Star to lead him to what was once referred to as New France, Canada. Thousands and thousands of slaves had found their freedom in Canada. As a worker on the steamers on Lake Erie, Brown continued to help other slaves cross the border to freedom. In 1842 he “conveyed no less than sixty-nine runaway slaves across Lake Erie, and placed them safe on the soil of Canada” (*Clotel* 24).

***Clotel* and France**

By analyzing *Clotel*’s thoughts and feelings and different episodes in the novel, we understand how Brown’s thoughts about freedom and race develop in the 1850s. *Clotel* was written in 1853. *Clotel* is not only the name of the novel, but also one of the main characters. She is the daughter of the former president Thomas Jefferson. Throughout the novel we follow the life of *Clotel* and her sister, Althesa, both of whom are sold into slavery as sexual objects. Brown recreates the impossible situation in which society’s laws do not allow *Clotel* to escape slavery. She is able to escape the South, but is unable to continue her journey to freedom because of her attachment to her daughter, Mary. She returns to the South where she is captured and soon chooses death over slavery.

At the beginning of the novel, we are presented with *Clotel*’s family, the mother Curren and her two daughters, *Clotel* and Althesa. Although all three females are slaves, Curren manages to situate herself in what the author refers to as a “higher aspiration . . . that of becoming the finely-dressed mistress of some white man” (*Clotel* 45). The impossibility of *Clotel*’s escape from slavery is due to society and generational inheritance. Brown challenges his readers when he doesn’t give Curren just any slaveholder as her partner. Being the mistress of Thomas Jefferson, Curren gives the reader false hopes that freedom from slavery is possible. The use of Thomas Jefferson, one of the Founding Fathers of America, as the father of *Clotel* “was a strategic literary choice” (Fabi 8). The paradox between American liberty and the acceptance of slavery is an essential theme in *Clotel*.

In the novel “Jefferson being called to Washington to fill a government appointment,” is soon contrasted with the selling of his mistress and his two daughters (*Clotel* 45). By using Thomas Jefferson as a character in the novel, Brown is able to compare the French constitution and the American constitution. The Declaration of Independence was a model for the Déclaration des droits de l’Homme et du Citoyen. Although the Declaration of Independence heavily influenced the French constitution, Brown argues that the French are better interpreters than the Americans of their own constitution. In the French constitution, “men are born and remain free and

equal in rights” regardless of color whereas in the Declaration of Independence, “all men are created equal” except black Americans. After the Déclaration des droits de l’Homme et du Citoyen was established, the liberty of all people, whites blacks, men, women, farmers and slaves was secured. However, the Declaration of Independence only protected the liberty of white Americans.

Arriving at the Conference in Paris, Brown immediately compares both constitutions when he states, “Had I been in America, where colour is considered a crime, I would not have been seen at such a gathering, unless as a servant” (*Three Years in Europe* 35). His invitation to a gathering of white and black men demonstrated that he was accepted. In Brown’s narrative, the French already understand the importance of African Americans in the US nation and culture. Even if blacks were not accepted in the US their opinion was of importance elsewhere. The participation of blacks in important international and national affairs occurred at a slower pace in the US. Clotel’s fate shows the consequences of the slow progression of American mentality during the nineteenth century and her biracial background represents that “America’s identity is both interracial and tragic from its earliest beginnings” (Raimon 12).

Brown claimed France to be a safe refuge compared to the US, and he rejoiced in the philosophy of the French philosopher, Rousseau. In the novel the author discusses the French ideology of freedom that dates back to eighteenth century Europe. A conversation between two old school friends, Mr. Peck, Curren’s slaveholder, and Carlton, a Northerner, demonstrates Brown’s learning from Rousseau. Brown explains in *Three Years in Europe*, “the love of freedom is one of the those natural impulses of the human breast which cannot be extinguished. Even the brute animals of the creation feel and show sorrow and affection when deprived of their liberty. Therefore is a distinguished writer justified in saying, “Man is free, even were he born in chains”” (163). As Mr. Peck defends the reasoning of slavery through the Bible, Carlton answers, “I regret I cannot see eye to eye with you, [...] I am a disciple of Rousseau, and have for years made the rights of man my study; and I must confess to you that I can see no difference between white men and black men as it regards liberty” (*Clotel* 71). Here Brown shows that both men studied in Northern states but one has been transformed by slavery while the other has remained untouched by slavery. Slavery has influenced Mr. Peck to believe that the Bible supports the idea of inhumane treatment towards blacks. On the other hand Carlton, who remained in the North, continued to support the French philosopher’s idea that liberty has no color because every man is free and becomes a slave due to the injustice of society. Rousseau’s

philosophy, best known by the phrase “Man is born free, but he is everywhere in chains,” helps support Brown’s idea that society’s pressure or chains shouldn’t allow one human to have control over another.

Clotel and the Tragic Ending

The tragic fate that Brown announces in the beginning of the book through Curren is a prime example of the fate of an American “mulatta” woman compared to what is shown at the end of the novel, a “mulatta” woman living in France. As we learn in *The Tragic Mulatta Revisited*, the definition of a “tragic mulatta” is “a single drop of midnight in her veins, [she will] go down to a tragic end” (5). With this description of a “tragic mulatta” Brown is able to demonstrate a never-ending cycle of the females in the *Clotel* until Mary reaches France. Before learning the tragic ending of Clotel, Brown prepares his readers in the chapter “To-Day A Mistress, To-Morrow A Slave” of his novel. Curren has offspring from a powerful man but cannot escape slavery due to her predestined future. Although Althesa’s future was promising, she dies also, leaving the harsh ruling of slavery on her two daughters, Ellen and Jane. Their doom would begin like their ancestors, “after a fierce contest of the bidders, the young ladies were sold, one for 2,300 dollars and the other for 3,000 dollars” and end like a ‘tragic mulatta,’ both ladies preferring death than slavery (*Clotel* 171).

This inescapable fate drove Clotel to marry her white lover Horatio and hope to leave the US. Soon after her marriage “Clotel now urged Horatio to remove to France or England where both her and her child would be free and where colour was not a crime” (*Clotel* 64). The novel is not only about escaping slavery but also about escaping the traditional “tragic mulatta” theme. Removing to France would end the lineage of slavery at Clotel and not be passed onto Mary. The curse of the “tragic mulatta” was already in Mary’s veins. Her existence was already a crime, “[Mary’s] complexion was still lighter than her mother,” but would still not permit her from enduring slavery; her only hope was to escape (*Clotel* 63). Clotel already knew her future by looking at her mother’s future. She also knew her daughter’s future; “as [Mary] grew older, [she] more and more resembled [her] mother” (*Clotel* 63). In the original sentence Mary is not even given a name in the description but is referred to as “it.” Clotel’s daughter is already referred to as insignificant to US society. Clotel’s fear is not imaginary; it is real.

Clotel dreams of escaping, but as the novel develops it becomes clear that France offers greater freedoms than England. One of the novel’s characters, the fugitive slave George Green, offers some answers to why the author would prefer France to England. George, a former slave belonging to Horatio, also “could boast that his father was an American statesman. His

name was George. His mother had been employed as a servant in one of the principal hotels in Washington, where members of Congress usually put up. ... George was as white as most white persons. No one would suppose that any African blood coursed through his veins" (*Clotel* 187). Through George's love for liberty and a possible free life with Mary, George escapes slavery. An interesting passage struck me in George's story. After reaching England, "George was so white as easily to pass for a white man, and being somewhat ashamed of his African descent, he never once mentioned the fact of his having been a slave" (*Clotel* 195). Brown situates the character in England, where he could be free. However, George didn't feel comfortable enough to mention his African background. Instead the fugitive slave resented his ancestors. An episode in *Three Years in Europe* made me think that not only was George's episode important to take into consideration but also that Brown's own experience was different in France than in England. Brown wrote while in Edinburgh, "I saw the changed experienced by every fugitive slave in his first month's residence in his country. A sixteen months' residence has not yet familiarized me with the change" (*Three Years in Europe* 115). Brown's stay in England was difficult, and the author continued to think about his stay in France. Although he travelled all over England, the author wrote, "I have seen nothing in the way of public grounds to compare with the gardens of Versailles, or the Champs Elysses at Paris" (*Three Years in Europe* 113). Brown's connection with France seemed far greater than with England. Paul Gilroy states, "some speak of, like Wells and Wright, in terms of a rebirth that Europe offered them," I believe that Europe didn't give Brown a rebirth but more confidence in his struggle with slavery (*The Black Atlantic* 19). The author and George were connected to France. George was able to reveal who he was when he visited France and not when he was living in England. The story of George Green is not only told in *Clotel* but also in *Three Years in Europe*, demonstrating its importance.

Clotel and her niece Jane foresee the future that France could provide for them. Jane had hoped for freedom when she was trapped into slavery after her mother's death; "Jane though only in her fifteen year, had become strongly attached to Volney Lapuc, a young Frenchman" who she put her hope for escape into. Her expectation died along with her and her lover, who was killed by her owner (*Clotel* 172). In this episode in the novel, an American kills a Frenchman, metaphorically signifying the destruction of freedom. The author asserts clearly through Mary that even though her two previous family members didn't reach France and freedom that she would. In this passage Brown speaks of the reunion of both slaves, "We can both but blush for our country's shame when we recall to mind the fact, that while George and Mary Green, and numbers of other fugitives from American slavery, can receive protection

from any of the governments of Europe, they cannot return to their native land without becoming slaves" (*Clotel* 205). France provided Mary with a happy ending. Brown's summary of the country clearly explains his approval of France, "Few nations are more courteous than the French. Here the stranger, let him come from what country he may, and be ever so unacquainted with the people and language, he is sure of a civil reply to any question that he may ask. ... I was not laughed at once while in France" (*Three Years in Europe* 58).

In *Clotel's* final episode, Brown demonstrates freedom and the overshadowing of a racist society as Clotel jumps off the Long Bridge in Washington D.C., preferring death over slavery. He leaves his readers with a paradoxical thought. Clotel controls her life not society. Brown's situation was similar. He escaped slavery and ended up in Europe. Brown's slaveholder, Enoch Price, conveyed to Brown that if he wanted his freedom it would cost 100 pounds. Brown demonstrated his control over his life and answered Enoch Price by saying, "But I cannot accept of Mr. Price's offer to become a purchaser of my body and soul. God made me as free as he did Enoch Price, and Mr. Price shall never receive a dollar from me, or my friends with my consent" (*Narrative ix*).

Both fictional and non-fictional individuals are at odds with American society. Death may be a solution for Clotel, and escape may be a solution for Brown and Mary. Nonetheless, Brown questions if the decisions were of personal choice or was there no solution out of society's chains? In this first African American novel and the author's personal life, the only possible solution is to go where there is acceptance of color and freedom for all.

Conclusion

As Brown put forth in his novel, *Clotel*, France was freedom. At the end of his novel Mary and George Green experience freedom and acceptance in France. A century later, many important African Americans migrated to France hoping to find a more suitable life. Many know of Josephine Baker, the entertainer and actress, Victor Séjour, a playwright and the author of *Le Mulâtre* (The Mulatto) and Barbara Chase-Riboud, a novelist and poet. All these African Americans travelled to France in search for a new life. A life of freedom to sing, entertain, write, and be acknowledged.

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