Sanctuaries of Lust and Legacies of Dust in William Wells Brown's *Clotel*; *or, The President's Daughter*

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Abstract: William Wells Brown's *Clotel* (1853) depicts the tragic experience of a family of biracial female slaves, viewing their familial separation and dehumanization in antebellum American South as a cross-generational struggle that cannot be dismissed when defining and contextualizing biracial identity in the cultural milieu of the nineteenth century. This historical-cultural context, we believe, represents the total value of Brown's narrative, which neither romanticizes nor mischaracterizes the struggle of racially mixed people, but instead authentically historicizes their experience and ordeal in the white American South that once advocated for slavery. By interpreting key and relevant textual and contextual clues in *Clotel*, we argue that the biracial female slaves' racial precariousness, their half-white lineage and perceived racial superiority, increasingly affirm, to the contrary, their state of tragic wretchedness, their sexual vulnerability and marketability, and especially their sustained inferiority. In *Clotel*, this state of precariousness, we conclude, emerges not only as an embodiment of intergenerational unresolved conflict but also as a central narrative arc of denouncing miscegenation. Strongly tied to these insights is the claim that miscegenation in *Clotel* is eventually revealed to be a form of racially targeted sexual exploitation normalized by the enslavers' sexualized fixation on a specific race category, that of mixed-race.

Keywords: *Clotel*, identity, miscegenation, mixed race, 'tragic mulattas', William Wells Brown

1. Introduction

At the intersection of American Race Studies and American Literary History, there emerges a surge of regained interest in mixed-race identities not only in antebellum and post-antebellum slave narratives but also in the current global stage.[1] Given the substantial and pioneering contribution of William Wells Brown's *Clotel*; *or, The President's Daughter*[2] to the literary corpus of African American literature, especially to the genres of historical and abolitionist fiction, scholars continue to pay special attention to the racial ambiguities that are characteristically integral to all occurrences of sexual victimization within the community of slaves and masters in the American South. For instance, Levine (2000: 19-22) understands the problem of 'the tragic mulatta,'[3] the mixed-raced character type in Brown's *Clotel*, as institutionally anchored in the cultural politics and "cross-racial" ideologies of gender and color during the nineteenth-century, arguing that Brown's *Clotel* intends to undermine the "essentialist claims of racial difference regularly invoked to defend the practice of slavery." Especially aligned with Brown's project of destabilizing cross-racial politics, Levine remarks (22-23), is his "literary and

political strategy" of deploying the trope of 'the tragic mulatta' (the half-white female slave) in a considerable effort to not only represent instances of targeted oppression and categorical exploitation of a particular gender and color but also to ultimately denounce "supremacist" "notions of biological or blood difference" between all groups and races.

Within the ultimate dismantling of all these unsubstantiated claims of white supremacy emerges the trope of the 'tragic mulatta' which was first portrayed in the writings of the Native American abolitionist author Lydia Maria Child, specifically in her short story "The Quadroon" which was published in 1842. Along with their antislavery contemporaries and social reformists, such as Fredrick Douglass (1818) and Harriet B. Stowe (1811), Child and Brown had strongly responded to the turmoil and constitutional anxieties over the racial politics and institutional legacy of slavery in antebellum multiracial American culture. By strategically deploying Child's trope of the 'tragic mulatta,' Brown, our interpretation indicates, correspondingly shows susceptibility to the cross-racial politics that shape the culture and experience of slavery in all American colonial and decolonial states and (significantly so) in antebellum South, which had vastly for decades, as can be inferred from *Clotel*, propagated discriminatory and predatory practices against mixed-race slaves through acts of miscegenation. Incurred by the repercussions of the Fugitive Slave Act (1850) and a few concurrent political campaigns, such as the abolitionist movement (1830s) and the Anti-Slavery Society (1823–1838), Brown, for his part, as we interpret it, directed his attention to the biracial dynamics and the cultural and psychological impact of miscegenation within the institution of slavery, effectively supporting as such all efforts to expose the atrocities and the horrors of mixed-race unions between master and slave. By following in the footsteps of precedent and contemporaneous abolitionist figures of mid-nineteenth century, Brown, to use Levine's words (2000: 3), sets in motion a counternarrative to the "nations patriotic narratives, particularly those that celebrate Thomas Jefferson's America as a nation of freedom and equality."

It is widely acknowledged as a truism that Brown's *Clotel* is based on rumors surrounding the American President Thomas Jefferson's sexual escapades with his female black slave Sally Hemings, whose fictional descendants of three generations of mixed-race female slaves tragically suffer specifically owing to their condition as biracially and sexually commodified objects on display. It is characteristically this condition of sexual fragility, Raimon argues (2004: 8), that allows these mixed-race slaves in *Clotel* to "personify the anxieties and the fantasies about the ascendant nations' interracial future." Brown's utilization of this contextually significant biracial trope is not simply for rhetorical purposes; instead, this "appropriation" speaks to his desire to "unsettle categories of identity at work in the construction of U.S. ideologies of national origin and identity [and] to interrogate contemporary orthodoxies of race…at midcentury" (Raimon 2004: 63-64). This interrogation of racial commodification is equally resonant within the context of today's global affairs, especially within the commercial film and marketing industries. Collins (2021: 130), for instance, explores the biracial dynamics operating in the American animated show *Steven Universe*, eventually contesting

the tendency amongst enthusiasts and reviewers—in their evaluation of biracialism and gender diversity in the series—to mobilize a racially stereotypical discourse grounded in the regressive notions of "mixed-race exceptionality" and "multiracial beauty." As far as Collins' contention implicates within the context of *Clotel*'s antebellum politics of race, the culturally ingrained and psychologically entrenched construct of cross-racial desirable beauty is being cinematically repurposed for mass consumption and corporate business profits. Pervasively hypersexualized in media and entertainment industry, mixed-race individuals thus continue to be promoted—and exploited—as categories of alleged racial superiority owing to their fair complexion and white European ancestry.

Analogous to the exploitation of biracial slaves in antebellum American culture, which is inscribed in prejudiced and oppressive ideologies of racial division, the contemporary patterns of systematic exploitation of mixed-race people nowadays reveal an obsession with cultural appropriation, racial and gender commodification, and exoticization.[4] What was once initially ingrained into the fabric of a decolonial Southern domesticity as a pathological fixation on a singular racial type has by now even more crudely morphed into a globally popularized fetishization of biracial sexuality. In this state of cultural regression into, and perpetuation of, these patterns of objectification, *Clotel's* biracial paradigms of marketability and exploitation thus continue to raise major and serious apprehensions about the chronically deep-seated sexual glamorization of race and color. Conceptually repurposed as the "fancy girl episteme" in Fuleihan's fairly recent exploration of the socioeconomic "motivations" for fetishizing and violating mixed-race slave women, these biracial paradigms, and even more relevantly today, "remain integral to society both in America and overseas long after the end of enslavement" (2022: 133).

Being so embedded into the formation of nineteenth-century civic unions such as interracial marriages, these forms of biracial exploitation and marketability continue to relentlessly and intergenerationally reinforce oppressive racial hierarchies of power not only in the public sphere (the slave marketplace) but also within the beguiling comfort and security of domestic spaces, aka, in the household of the owner-husband slave master. In *Clotel*, the discussion will show, this intersection of racial hierarchies between the public space and the privately intimate sphere not only frames the narrative as a whole but also more uniquely guides the mixed-race heroines' defiance and instances of resilience within this specific context of interracial mixing. No matter how the domestic trials and the perils at the slave marketplace converge, they still consistently point to this intersection as an important factor that shapes the characters' mixed-race identities. In *Clotel*, the overlap of the oppressively public and the intimately domestic, this interpretation holds, considerably informs the construction of biracialism in ways that notably echo Brigitte Fielder's main argument in *Relative Races: Genealogies of Interracial Kinship in Nineteenth-Century America* (2020), a fairly recent seminal contribution to Black feminism and antebellum mixed-race scholarship. In this book, Fielder argues for an interpretation of race as a construct "(re)produced" by points of convergence between "individual bodies, familial relationships, and domestic

spaces" (Sheffer 2022: 679). Engaging questions about race as a construct mediated by equivalent instances of convergence, including sexual abuse, family estrangement, oppression, cross-generational struggle, racial inequality, and dehumanization, Brown's *Clotel*, the analysis below reveals, calls attention to race to challenge its monolithic representations and to trace its sustained reproduction or fluid construction through unequal interracial ties, aka, miscegenation. In *Clotel*, biracialism is thus not a category of race determined only by biology; rather, it is a racially liminal identity constructed by interracially exploitative practices.[5]

2. Review of related literature

Clotel is widely read by critics from different perspectives, each gaining insight into the cultural and historical dynamics of the enslaving system in the American South during the nineteenth-century. Robert Stepto (1979:30) argues that *Clotel* is an autobiographical narrative that tends to "authenticate" Brown himself, proposing the view that "Brown's personal narrative functions [...] as a successful rhetorical device, authenticating his access to the incidents, characters, scenes, and tales which collectively make up *Clotel*." This suggests that *Clotel* is an embodiment of the collective ordeal of black slaves in the American South, as personally depicted by Brown, whose own experience of slavery attests to the credibility and authenticity of *Clotel*. On a similar vein, Robert Fanuzzi (2001: 294) explains that *Clotel* is a historical novel "deeply embedded in the most critical issues of the American antislavery movement and invested particularly in the question of national identity." These perspectives confirm Brown's repudiation of "proslavery advocates' contention that slavery in the United States was markedly distinct from the international trade in African people" (Johnson 2014: 12). However, whether or not the consequences and cultural dynamics of slavery in nineteenth-century America were different from those in Europe (Schweninger 1999: 21-23), *Clotel* continues to consolidate Brown's condemnation of proslavery discourse and to advocate instead for a serious examination of the complex cultural repercussions of slavery and of the psychological ordeals as experienced by black and especially interracial slaves in nineteenth-century American South.

In alignment with these views, numerous critics contend that the novel is historically significant for its acknowledgment of the struggle of black people and for its endorsement of the abolition of slavery. While Helene Christol (1999: 165) argues that the novel is dedicated to "heal the community," Lynn Johnson (2014:11) explains that *Clotel* authentically documents the history of slavery in the American South in an attempt to "mitigate the perennial traumas of enslavement— terror and confinement." Similarly, Mary Ganster (2015: 431) reviews a substantial body of criticism on *Clotel*, confirming that the novel is an antislavery narrative in which Brown "documents his own experiences of slavery [… and] his goal is to 'lay bare the institution, so that the gaze of the world may be upon it." In the same vein, Elena Ingemannsen (2015:5) views *Clotel* as a narrative of "racial passing," a narrative that "would depict a light- skinned character, who against all odds manages to escape slavery, hiding his slave identity and living a double life in a society where purity or whiteness were quite important." To a few critics, *Clotel* is a unique story

about a brave mixed-race female slave who challenges the institution of slavery, serving as a model for the black community now and then to follow and embrace in their struggle against racial oppression. As argued by Christopher Stampone (2018: 207), *Clotel*, Brown's "most audacious aesthetic," is distinctly informed by "revolutionary presentations of African American agency in emancipation" devoted by and large to the creation of a sovereign "African American identity." This view suggests that *Clotel* is a significant antislavery model of resistance and political struggle against the injustices of oppression and enslavement in a nation professing democracy and championing equal rights for all. Brown's political narrative, its intertextualizing of presidential speeches about freedom and personal happiness, its representing the tragic history of a family descending from a passionate exponent of impartiality, does unmask the hypocrisy by which most of the rhetoric on freedom covertly operates.

Clotel's contribution to the history and abolitionist discourse of antislavery in the American South during the nineteenth-century is substantially pertinent and cogent, allowing for a more nuanced exploration of the dynamics of oppression and sexual exploitation that is contingent upon miscegenation. In what follows, we trace the precarious ramifications of the tragic story of Clotel and her family, whose biracial experience not only attests to the injustices of the enslaving system in the American South in general but also, we claim, dramatically exacerbates their sexual exploitation and community estrangement as mixed-race individuals in particular.

3. Discussion

The tragic fate of mixed-race heroines in William Wells Brown's *Clotel* (1853) shows how female slaves of mixed blood increasingly endure the consequences of racial oppression and miscegenation due to their especially desirable interracial traits. In chapter 15 of *Clotel*, the narrator recounts that Mr. French, an enslaver putting his human property for a marketplace auction of slaves, "found no difficulty in getting a purchaser for the quadroon woman, for such are usually the most marketable of property" (Brown 2000: 51). This quote reflects Clotel's precarious situation as a biracial female slave, stressing the marketability and the vulnerability of mixed-race individuals. It also highlights her grief and desperation following the separation from her child Mary, the offspring of an interracial relationship with her purchaser Horatio Green. By recounting Clotel's story of cross-generational and interracial struggle, Brown not only challenges the legitimacy of slavery as a white-sanctioned institution but also protests against the perpetuation of miscegenation in the American South, which is typically revealed to be a form of sexual exploitation.

Through a representation of the tragedy of Clotel and her family, Brown showcases the evils perpetrated by the slaveholding system against Black people in general and the mixed-race slaves in particular. The narrative depicts how members of a family of biracial female slaves, in contrast to other Black groups, are constantly subjected to degrading conditions of racial oppression resulting from their being sexually exploited by the white slave-masters. Not only do these near-white female slaves find it difficult to be accepted as non-slaves in a white community and therefore enjoy the privilege of being recognized as free women,

but also, they have to tolerate the mistreatment of some “clear black” servants who view them either as the posterity of an Anglo-Saxon inequity or as the markedly different slaves, whose alleged biracial superiority provokes the animosity of other black slaves. This antagonism, as clearly shown in *Clotel*, explains why mixed-race female slaves are predominantly despised, maltreated, and denied the opportunity of cultivating a close relationship with either their white masters or their fellow Black slaves.

Throughout its various chapters and scenes, *Clotel* stresses the link between Clotel’s fairness of complexion and the oppression directed against her by the white slave masters and by other Black slaves. Owing to her precarious condition of "in-betweenness," her half-white racial features, Clotel is seen as a rival not only of her mistress but also of her fellow Black servants. As described in the novel, "the fairness of Clotel's complexion was regarded with envy as well by other servants as by the mistress herself" (Brown 2000: 150). Clotel poses a threat to her mistress in terms of her physical attractiveness, and at the same time provokes the resentment and envy of her Black fellow slaves. On one occasion, Clotel's hair is cut on the pretext that she must look more like a slave than a white woman, much to the satisfaction and ridicule of her fellow slaves: “she thinks she white, when some come here wid dat long her of hers” (Brown 2000: 150). While Clotel's biracial beauty is seen as a biological symbol of supremacy over the blackness of other slaves, her mistress the enslaver perceives it as threat to the sovereignty of whiteness (Lemire 2002: 35-40).

To further underscore the biracial heroines' position of sustained precariousness, aka, their unresolved conflict of interracial identity, Brown portrays their state of "in-betweenness" as cross-generational. Similar to the despicable situation of Clotel the mother, the daughter Mary, as we are told, endures long hours of work under the sun without a moment's pause, much to the depraved satisfaction of her white mistress Gertrude and the malice of her fellow Black slaves. The novel reports that Mary’s fellow slaves are always poised to inform their mistress of Mary’s “lying in the sun, seasoning” (Brown 2000:156). Tormented and humiliated by an incident of betrayal, Gertrude despises Mary more than any other slave because the girl's near-white complexion reminds the white mistress that she has once been disgraced and cheated on by her husband with the latter's enslaved mother Clotel. Gertrude, in turn, thinks it is her chance to make her husband Mr. Green feel the same amount of disgrace by making his own daughter work as a servant maid in the kitchen:

> At first Mary was put to work in the kitchen, where she met with little no sympathy from the other slaves, owing to the fairness of her complexion. The child was white, what should be done to make her look like other Negroes, was the question Mrs. Green asked herself (Brown 2000: 156).

Thus, degraded and her racial privilege undermined as a white woman, Mrs. Green projects her feelings of anguish and vindictiveness onto Mary, degradingly subjecting her to long hours of work and toil to assert her racial superiority and authority as a white slave owner. To reinforce these boundaries of racial difference, Mrs. Green makes Mary work under the sun without a head cover to protect the

latter from the sweltering heat. Mary's complexion, Mrs. Green thinks, should soon turn blacker, and that would make her look like a predominantly typical Black slave. In Mrs. Green's estimation, erasing this degree of physical similarity can thus reinforce her racially entrenched feelings of dominance and power. As the story unfolds, this physical affinity with the white enslaver, this sustained state of racial liminality, not only dramatically augments Mary's misery (and her family's) but also culminates in an identity crisis prompted by the exclusion from the community of Black slaves and from the circle of white enslavers (Zuraikat and Mansouri 2023: 61-73; Zuraikat and Sahnoune 2023: 259-262).

Clotel and the other biracial heroines are not recognized as distinctly white or as slaves of predominantly black racial identity; therefore, they constantly and precariously struggle with their sense of identity, thus failing to incur sympathy from their white masters as well as from their black counterparts. This explains why Clotel and Mary are marginalized and dismissed first from their racially black community and second from the dominant white community as racially acknowledged inheritors of the white privilege and status. Moreover, the enslaving class denies females of mixed-race identities the privileges of social accommodation due to their black bloodline but allows them few minor benefits on the basis of their sexual attraction.[6] Addressing the biracial female slaves' sustained precariousness, aka, their racial liminality, with respect to the white masters and their black counterparts, Sterling Brown (2000: 280) remarks that they are fundamentally "victim[s] of divided inheritance and therefore miserable." Given their physical attractiveness and gentility, the miserable racially ambiguous female slaves in *Clotel* are objects not only of attraction to male slaveholders but also of envy from white women and resentment from other slaves. Their wretchedness is due to the fact that their racially superior Caucasian features and their access to few aspects of social and economic privileges do not preclude them from being enslaved and treated like slaves.

Most auction scenes in the novel demonstrate the debasing treatment of near-white women. Slaves with a fair complexion are sold with higher prices than those with a darker one, and this does not mean that these mixed-race slaves hold a higher social status. At the slave market, Black fairness is commodified; the racially ambiguous female slaves are exposed to different instances of dehumanization and consequently suffer because of their whiteness. At one point in the story, Currer and her daughters, particularly Clotel, are represented as vulnerable to the *watching* eyes of the slaveholders, who gather to have a stake in this process of slave marketing:

> The appearance of Clotel on the auction block created a deep sensation amongst the crowd. There she stood, with a complexion as white as most of those who were waiting with a wish to become her purchasers; her features as finely defined as any of her sex of pure Anglo-Saxon; her long black wavy hair done up in the neatest manner; her form tall and graceful, and her whole appearance indicating one superior to her position (Brown 2000: 87).

As Kimberly Hicks (1997:41) points out, Clotel in this scene is exposed to the public "gaze" of the enslavers, who are present at the marketplace to sexually scrutinize Clotel rather than actually taking it as an "opportunity to buy." Not only does this episode stress the marketplace as a spectacle of pleasure and sexual commodification for the white enslaver, but it also points to Clotel's self-conscious awareness of herself as a cross-racially fetishized object of beauty and as a marketable property on display. The hypersexualized representation of Clotel's body in this scene mirrors the voyeuristic temperament of the racist onlookers, ones whose enjoyment becomes a necessary component of the whole process of marketing the slaves. In the same scene, one of the purchasers is shown a document which proves that Clotel is a "devoted Christian and perfectly trustworthy" (Brown 2000: 87). Her devotion and trustworthiness constitute major elements in this bargain besides the high bid on her beauty. As the auctioneer points out to the "enlightened and Christian" spectators who stand in appreciation of the human property which they are about to buy, Clotel's "chastity is pure; she has never been from under her mother's care, she is a virtuous creature" (Brown 2000: 88). The narrator is indignant that this Southern auctioning of a human being takes place in a "city thronged with churches, whose tall spires look like signals pointing to heaven, and whose ministers preach that slavery is God-ordained institution" (Brown 2000: 88). The missionary Hontz Snyder preaches that slavery is an institution sanctioned by God, and the slaves should succumb to the will of the Almighty and accept their lot as servants of the white master. The master's whipping his disobedient slaves is a "Christian duty," and the slaves should not complain when they are whipped because "the Lord has commanded that they should be whipped" (Brown 2000: 115).

Recognizing that her femininity is vulnerable to these 'God-ordained' slaveholding ceremonies, Clotel decides to cross-dress in order to find a passage, which implies that she negotiates her way not only through race but also gender. In her attempt to escape to Richmond to find her daughter, Clotel understands the necessity of a family union—one that would allow mixed-race female slaves to re-establish a sense of racial identity.[7] Nonetheless, when captured and imprisoned, Clotel is denied this familial togetherness owing to the enslaver's acts of perpetuating forced patterns of family separation. Clotel thus remains a racially liminal and disoriented female slave experiencing an identity crisis and confronting a tragic conclusion to her life. In his historically accurate representation of the primary conflict of these biracial female slaves, Brown describes this problem of intergenerationally ruined family relations in ways that subtly expose the evils of this slaveholding institution. Over a course of ten years, a family is shattered and is denied birthright and inheritance. In the course of this narrative, slavery and miscegenation are shown to incur a chaotic world of injustice and prejudice. Clotel's vaulting herself from the railings of a bridge shows how "suicide," to use Giulia Fabi's own words (1993: 643), "elevates her individual defeat into an exemplum of the evils of slavery and miscegenation."

In the novel, the opponents' views on slavery represent Brown's own repudiation of the legitimacy of the slaveholding system. As is made clear by

Georgiana, a female detractor of this religiously unjustifiable system, “God and the Christian religion are opposed to slaveholding and its principles” (Brown 2000: 127). She says,

> [This system of injustice] classes men-stealers among murderers; and it is the duty of all who wish to meet God in peace, to discharge that duty in spreading these principles. Let us not deceive ourselves into the idea that slavery is right, because it is profitable to us. Slaveholding is the highest possible violation of the eighth commandment [...] and we who profess to follow in the footsteps of our Redeemer should do our utmost to extirpate slavery from the land (Brown 2000: 127).

Those conflicting views about slavery demonstrate two ideologies. One is deceptive and based upon misleading claims, and the other is egalitarian and based upon notions of equality between the master and slave. Echoing the abolitionist sentiments of antislavery writers and civil rights proponents at the time, Brown's *Clotel* thus endorses equality as the basis of man's relationship with other people, which necessarily implies the abolition of racist ideologies of white supremacy and black inferiority. This implies the dismantling of professed attributes of difference that have to do with color, intellectual capacity, physical stature, and race. Brown embraces and sees this as pointing to the freedom of black slaves in a state where “gangs of human cattle,” as is described in Chapter V, undergo humiliating procedures of inspection before being auctioned off at the slave market in New Orleans. It is at this slave market where Clotel's sister Althesa, who was "scarcely less beautiful than her sister" (Brown 2000: 87), is sold as a maidservant for James Crawford. By virtue of her genealogy, Althesa's racial precariousness equally affirms the tragic and exploitative ramifications of mixed-race marriages. Upon her appearance on the auction block with her sister Clotel, the slave masters are immediately drawn to the young slave sisters' white "complexion," "chastity," "intelligence" and their racially superior appearance (Brown 2000: 87). This perceived racial superiority ironically validates Althesa's value as an "article" for sale (a designation used by one of the auctioneers at the market) and as a human property subject to oppressive and disempowering transactional slave market business deals. In Yoriko Ishida's terms (2010: 96), these auctioneering deals egregiously reinforce "the injustice and the unreasonableness of slavery," especially that Althesa and her sister Clotel are the American president's daughters. Auctioned off at the slave market along with her family members and a few despairing and emotionally distraught slaves, Althesa is exposed to the relentless and demeaning bargaining rituals and auctions bids, her "pale countenance and dejected look" (Brown 2000: 103) suggesting "a ceaseless, multigenerational loop of display, purchase, and exploitation" (D'Alessandro 2022: 152). These rituals involve ruthless and disparaging acts of inspection and examination at the "slave pen," where Althesa is "exhibited for sale" amid the loud cries and intense shouts of the spectators (Brown 2000: 105).

Parallel to Althesa's commodification in the New Orleans slave market is her lack of agency as a biracial slave wife in Dr. Henry Morton's house. Moving from the marketplace to the lodgings of her purchaser and husband Dr. Henry Morton,

Althesa slightly enjoys better conditions than her sister Clotel does. However, her forced relocation to another place of residence and her legally unrecognized marriage to Dr. Henry Morton do not change the fact that she is still a slave. Even all the more reinforcing of this grim reality of objectification and exploitation is her racial precariousness, her half-whiteness: "Althesa, although as white as the most white women in a southern clime, was, as we already know, born a slave" (Brown 2000: 196). Dr. Henry Morton's admiration for Althesa, who has by now become the mistress of her new abode, reveals in a great measure an infatuation with her marketable physical attributes as a biracial slave woman rather than simply as an attractive female. Dr. Morton, we are told, is confounded to "behold with no composure a beautiful young white girl of fifteen in the degraded position of a chattel slave" (Brown 2000: 124). Degraded as she grimly appears, Althesa invites the sympathy of the young physician Dr. Morton, only to purchase her and make her his wife. Though made to be the mistress of her new abode, Althesa is still owned as a slave since this marriage between a white master and a slave is not sanctioned or even recognized by law. As benevolent and redeeming as this act of union may appear, it still shows how slaveholding and ownership dictate the terms of communication and connection between the slaves and the masters. As a mixed-race slave, Althesa ironically realizes at such a young age her market value as a human property owned and sold by slaveholders whose occasional benevolence and sympathy can minimally guarantee few minor entitlements, such as security and social mobility.

The slaveholding institution thus invests in these biracial marriages for transactional and sexually exploitative reasons, especially given the high bids offered by the slave masters to purchase mixed-race young female slaves who are auctioned off at the slave market or, if they slightly have minor privileges, sold for a higher price at social gatherings. In the American South, miscegenation then is encouraged as one way to sustain the enslaving institution economically and to allow for personal advantages on the part of the enslavers. Even Althesa's and Clotel's mother, Currer, realizes how mixed-race marriages can provide her two daughters with minimal social advantages sustained by the slaveholding oppressive norms. As we are told, Currer is careful to escort Clotel and Althesa to parties where the "the attendants are often white," intending to attract white owner-husbands, aka, potential slave masters (Brown 2000: 86). Herself a slave, Currer fully recognizes the norms of marketability in the slave market, unjustly and largely confined by life choices and social customs imposed upon her. At some point, Brown describes how marriages between black slaves themselves are not legitimately endorsed by law while biracial unions are strongly supported and catered for by this system of oppression. To the slaveholders, the narrative clearly shows, marriage between black slaves is a matter of no "importance" or "of any binding force with their slaves" (Brown 2000: 83). Maintained as a practice to take advantage of mixed-race female slaves, miscegenation, even when perceived as a biracial custom of establishing social ties with the black community of slaves, does not in the least offer the slave wives personal freedom or allow them to negotiate new roles or expectations in a society entirely ruled by racial prejudice and white supremacy.

Dr. Henry Morton's reciprocation of genuine feelings of love and admiration for Althesa does not eventually allow for a transformation of status or change of condition, the latter's racial precariousness persisting in an unequal relationship between an owner and a mistress. Quite ironically, Althesa's quest for ultimate freedom is halted on account of her "passive acceptance of slavery" through such legally unrecognized marriage (Heglar 2001: 120). Domesticity in this context should provide for the biracial heroine, as she complacently and falsely assumes, a room for freedom; however, this unsanctioned relationship, though based in mutual sincere love, constitutes no basis for eventual emancipation since the law does not routinely grant the biracial slave wife freedom from slavery by virtue of her marriage to a white person.

As Charles Heglar remarks (2001: 130), in Brown's narrative, "the hope for manumission through domestic relations is central to the cycle that is repeated across three generations of women," creating as such "a central tension" through the course of events. The birth of Ellen and Jane, the biracial offspring of Althesa and Dr. Henry Morton, further reinforces this tension, aka, this failure of domesticity to provide room for eventual freedom, self-assertion, and agency. Being the granddaughters of Thomas Jefferson, the two daughters, like their mother, remain shackled to the chains of slavery and equally experience the volatile repercussions of this generational biracialism. While strongly echoing the abolitionist sentiments of James Crawford who "opposed to the holding of slaves" and who vehemently professes to secure their release, Dr. Henry Morton is confronted with the fact that his own daughters Ellen and Jane, quite ironically, legally remain his own slaves along with their mother Althesa (Brown 2000: 83). Even all the more reinforcing of this conflicting situation is the fact that his daughters' biracialism increases "their monetary value" at the slave market (Ellis 1999: 104). After the death of Dr. Henry Morton, it happens that his debtors assume possession not only of his property but also of his two daughters. As an “extra article,” Ellen and Jane are taken over by the creditors to be sold at auction. Despite Dr. Henry Morton's brother's offering his little farm as a mortgage to save the girls, the creditors turn back the offer and say that these near-white slaves would make more money because they “usually sell for more than common slaves” (Brown 2000: 197).

To paraphrase R. J. Ellis's main contention (1999: 104), such acts of commodifying and sexually objectifying the mixed-race daughters affirm the existing irony inherent in the slaveholding institution, where not only the institutional sanctions along with the cultural racist mores but also quite paradoxically the familial dynamics within the biracial household of the Mortons all merge to validate "the sale" and the possession of *human property* [particular meanin*g* indicated by authors]. Even for the innocent young daughters, domestic ties eventually serve to perpetuate the injustices of the slaveholding system in the American South, where even the institution of marriage cannot offer either protection or minor privileges or rights for a category of slaves who have a racial affinity with a white progeny. Lacking agency and tolerating episodes of depersonalization as biracial heroines, Ellen and Jane eventually experience the

harrowing and degrading auctioning procedures of what Brown describes as a "fierce contest" at the slave market, where both agonizingly shrink "from the rude hands that examined the graceful properties of their beautiful frames" (Brown 2000: 197). Analogous to the distressful destiny of Clotel is the destiny of her nieces. Ellen commits suicide after realizing how great her mental and physical collapse is, and Jane dies of a broken heart and sadness over her secret lover Volney Lapuc whom the planter shoots dead the night he discovers his emotional relationship with Jane. Though Brown recounts in fewer details the complementary fictive story of Ellen and Jane, he brings to light the enduring inferiority of the biracial descendants of Thomas Jefferson, whose presumed racial superiority, his filial link to three generations of slaves, and his official endorsement of the ideals of freedom and equality, all provide no basis for moral progress or for cultural and institutional reformation to transpire in the lives of these biracial female slaves or in the community of slaves they partly belong to. With actual moral progress and active political reinforcement of abolitionist agendas lacking in, Ellen and Jane along with other victims of oppression are "left to regressively repeat the fate" of their grandmother and their aunt Clotel (Heglar 2001: 132). This regression comes to eventually describe a tragic conclusion to the lives of these two biracial children who are "doomed," as Brown narrates, "by the laws of the Southern States" to be slaves and to die gruesomely as slaves (Brown 2000: 199).

By charting this narrative of tragedy, Brown shows how vulnerable those mixed-race female slaves are. A whole family is shattered, tormented over the course of more than ten years, and faces a catastrophic end. Anna Shannon's own identification of the main problem that most racially mixed characters encounter has a direct bearing on Brown's racially mixed female slaves:

> As the product of three successive generations of illicit but enforced miscegenation, the fictional octoroon was the North's favorite emblem of slavery, since her whiteness made her a perfect object for tearful sympathy combined with moral indignation (qtd. in Hicks 1997: 24).

It is this whiteness that exposes Clotel and her family members to the injustices of the slaveholding system. Whiteness, Brown wants to suggest, does not guard against the ills of slavery. It is supposedly expected that the biracial heroines' color and physical correspondence to the racial features of white people invite from the enslaver a treatment different from that which most Black slaves are forced to agonizingly tolerate through their association with the institution of slavery. However, those alleged traits of superiority expose Clotel and the other racially mixed heroines to constant affliction and hardship, with the straight hair, the light-complexion, and the Anglo-Saxon facial traits perpetuating a more racist attitude towards them. Rather than invite the enslavers' sympathy and admiration and allow them to attain the privileges of their biracialism, these biracial female slaves endure racial discrimination by the white masters and also abusive practices of social exclusion within the community of black slaves.

Brown underscores the sexual exploitation that most of these racially liminal female slaves consistently tolerate. The marketplace perpetuates recurrent patterns of sexual exploitation. On the auction marketplace, the half-white female slaves

have to endure long hours of physical pain to be sold for an enslaver. The demeaning sexualizing of their bodies, Brown's narrative makes clear, bespeaks the tyranny and the cruelty of the institution of slavery. The marketplace for Brown, its property, its spectators, its price negotiations, its owners, demonstrates an inveterate racism on the part of the enslaver and does call into question the democratic and the liberal notions of a political system which claims that equality, freedom and impartiality are its standards of judgment. The auction in Brown's novel is simply marketing humanity. Those who have to tolerate more than others the inhumane treatment are the ones that attract *sympathy* and stand as paragons of alleged white beauty. Thus, it is the president's daughters who have to suffer more than the other slaves. It is their inheritance of the genetic traits of the father, their being the progeny of a supporter of "inherent and inalienable rights" that makes them suffer.

4. Conclusion

Brown's *Clotel* represents the mixed-race female slaves' domestic experiences of miscegenation and marketability in the antebellum society of the South, reflecting as such the persistent anxieties about race and color not only in the decolonial era but also onwards into the twenty-first century of American history. This resonance across the historical span of two centuries demands serious attention to the question of race mixing in *Clotel*, an antislavery historical novel which describes unlawfully instituted norms amongst slaveholders of exploiting a specific category of race and gender, namely, the biracial female slaves. In Brown's fictional account, the offspring of the American President Thomas Jefferson and his enslaved black slave housekeeper Currer—based on the historical figure Sally Hemings—are sold into slavery and consequently have to live through cycles of sexual abuse especially owing to their biracially attractive color and physical constitution. At the slave auctions, Currer's daughters, Clotel and Althesa, are scrutinized like items for sale to be eventually picked by two white masters whose vile infatuation for the female slaves' biracial color is pointed out in their verbal cues and expressions. A reiteration of this instance of dehumanization occurs when Jane and Ellen, Althesa' biracial daughters, are auctioned off at the slave market and subjected to a sexually appalling routine of inspection by the lustful enslavers whose obsessiveness with the half-white features of the targeted sisters is also prominently signaled in their hints and prods. The biracial identities of these female slaves, as the earlier interpretation reveals, is always thus detrimentally tethered to their sexual desirability. Even more so, as the analysis highlights, their racial precariousness, ironically enough, not only invites more systemic racism and oppression against them but also (as in Althesa's family) leads to a dire end of familial breakup and a morbid tragedy of suicide and death.

Highly pertinent and key to this cross-generational morbid tragedy is Brown's denunciation of the tendency within the slaveholding institution to maintain the practice of miscegenation. The exploration above addresses Brown's treatment of this practice within the context of normalizing sexual exploitation of a specific race category, namely the mixed-race identities. In plain terms, Brown's *Clotel* answers to the question of racial inequality through recounting the repercussions of such

practice in the decolonial American South. As mixed-race female slaves negotiate possibilities for freedom—mostly domestically—they are met with oppressive challenges which erode their short-term periods of relative security. A concubine at her slave master's house, Clotel, for instance, is soon abandoned by the master Horatio Green, and their daughter Mary is enslaved. Later, she escapes to Ohio and consequently returns to Richmond to rescue her enslaved daughter. Her life concludes with a tragedy when she tries to escape again from a prison in Washington. As the story goes, she jumps into a river trying to flee from slave owners. This eroded domestic dream of self-assertion, agency, and freedom speaks to the unjust conditions which Clotel and her family of three generations have to confront, as mixed-race female slaves are relentlessly subjected to exploitation, maltreatment, dehumanization, and objectification. A gender and race category in *Clotel* and in today's world as well, biracialism brings about even more psychologically and physically exacerbating consequences, especially with respect to the perpetual and regressive cycles of exploitation which were once sustained by miscegenation, now normalized and promoted by hypersexualization, and once sanctioned by ideologies of race rooted in entrenched racial hierarchies. As the novel demonstrates, interracial ties are characteristically informed and shaped by these hierarchies which do not allow the community of female black slaves or female mixed-race ones to freely navigate choices or independently make decisions. From within this hierarchy of racism and prejudice, lack of action, the uncertainty of racial identity, powerlessness, and subjugation emerge the abolitionist decolonial and contemporary resonances of Brown's *Clotel*, an emancipation novel engaging serious questions about racial equality and the value of freedom.

Endnotes

[1]See, for instance, Kuortti, Joel, Jopi Nyman and Mehdi Ghasemi. (2023). *Engagements with hybridity in Literature: An Introduction*; Chen, Hsiao-Wen. (2023). 'Black cosmofeminism: commodity, sexuality, and the transnational mixed-race subject in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*'. *Journal of Modern Literature*, 46 (4):146-166; Todd, Lenore. (2025). *Beyond the Mulatta: Haunted Hybridity in Advertising*.

[2]Hereafter abbreviated as *Clotel*.

[3]Though outdated, this term is used in this article only when it is contextually and historically relevant or when it is referenced as a literary trope.

[4]For a recent critical evaluation of these prevailing attitudes toward mixed race identities in contemporary global economy, see Weiß, Ana-Nzinga., Florian Primig and Hanna Dorottya Szabó. (2025). "'Eyo, mixed girl check': The commodification of embodied performance in the #mixedgirlcheck trend on TikTok." *Platforms and Society*, 2(12): 1-13.

[5]The fluid reproduction of biracialism can also be examined in instances of sustained convergence between other significant cultural dynamics, such as

"knowledge, power, and representation" (Kuraiem 2024: 250). See References for full publication information.

[6]The engendered understanding of notions of blackness and whiteness is based upon two foundational essays: William Andrews's "Miscegenation in late nineteenth-century American fiction," and Werner Sollors's "The mulatto, an American tragedy." See References for full publication information.

[7]In his "Cross-Dressing and forgetfulness of the self," Michael Berthold (1993: 26) views Clotel's escape as a "maternal quest". He says that the reclamation of the sense of motherhood among the biracial slaves is one way by which they can overcome their confused gendered and racial realities.

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