

REDEMPTION AND HOME IN THE AFRICAN AMERICAN CITY UPON A HILL: HANNAH CRAFTS'S *THE BONDWOMAN'S NARRATIVE*¹

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ABSTRACT

The Bondwoman's Narrative (1857) is a novel in which the black female slave Hannah Crafts aims at the remodeling of her society and to gain self-assertion through a deeply Christian commitment and a total and honest respect to the values it impinges drawing broadly on the Bible and reshaping biblical imagery to convey her message and to submit her subjectivity and her Americanness. By using the national continuum of jeremiad rhetoric and her attachment to the values of the Christian creed, the novel partakes and yet takes a different direction from slave narratives by cagily forerunning Du Bois's praised theory of the double consciousness. In so doing, it positions its protagonist as the first black female that absorbs and displays an identity that eventually becomes successful for it installs herself within the realm of home premised on the longed Puritan myth of the (African) American City upon a Hill which allows her to be a proper (African) American citizen.

RESUMEN

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The Bondwoman's Narrative (1857) es una novela en la que la esclava negra Hannah Crafts se propone remodelar su sociedad y redefinirse a través de una férrea adhesión cristiana y un absoluto respeto a los valores que de ella se coligen basándose en la Biblia y remodelando el imaginario cristiano para vehicular su mensaje y propugnar su subjetividad y su americanidad. Al utilizar el resorte nacional de la jeremiada y su adhesión a los valores del credo cristiano, la novela se basa en, y a la vez diverge de, las narraciones de esclavos adelantándose subrepticamente a la aclamada teoría de la doble conciencia de Du Bois. De este modo, sitúa a la protagonista como la primera esclava negra que absorbe y presenta una identidad que, al final, deviene en triunfo puesto que la instala en la esfera del hogar dentro de su anhelada Ciudad sobre la Colina (afro)americana y le permite ser una ciudadana americana *per se*.

INTRODUCTION

The Bondwoman's Narrative (1857), recently acclaimed to be the first fictional account written by a fugitive African American woman, is a novel² in which the black slave Hannah Crafts presents herself as a Christian in the eyes of her white readership leading them to establish a great amount of connection and empathy toward black slaves. Thus, religion acts as an important outlet to promote Crafts's abolitionist ideal at the same time that it becomes a literary weapon in the slave narrator's hands to attack the antebellum slavery system from within. Religion is also used to launch a jeremiad to reclaim identity and to secure Crafts a place in the country as a proper American. Thus, Crafts aims at the remodeling of her society and to gain self-assertion through a deeply Christian commitment and a total and honest respect to the values it impinges drawing broadly on the Bible and reshaping biblical imagery to convey her message and to shape her subjectivity and her Americanness.

²Discovered in 2001 and edited in 2002, *The Bondwoman's Narrative* became the center of a literary controversy as some critics (Baym, Parramore) were adamant to believe that the novel had indeed been written by a black female slave. However, a front-page article in *The New York Times* in September 2013 ignited a new wave of interest in *The Bondwoman's Narrative* as Winthrop professor Gregg Hecimovich claimed to have found evidence of Crafts's real identity. He asserted that Hannah Crafts stands as the pseudonym of Hannah Bond, a fugitive slave who did write *The Bondwoman's Narrative*. Hecimovich is meant to publish a book soon in which he gives account of Hannah Crafts's story and whereabouts.

In *The Bondwoman's Narrative* Crafts insists that "(b)eing the truth" her novel needs "no pretension to romance" (3) and such commitment to the truth articulates the jeremiad rhetoric that will be used throughout the whole text. The religious overtones that will propel the novel are set from the very beginning through the use of the doleful African American jeremiad rhetoric that Crafts uses to describe the "warnings issued by blacks to whites, concerning the judgment that was to come for the sin of slavery" (Moses, 30-31). Of the three stages that the American jeremiad considers, –"citing the promise; criticism of present declension or retrogression from the promise; and a resolving prophecy that society will shortly complete its mission and redeem the promise" (Howard-Pitney 2003: 8)– Crafts's novel is directly rooted in the first stage since her main goal is to get hold of the promise to live in an egalitarian and religious nation. By using the jeremiad rhetoric alongside the reframing of the biblical message and her attachment to the values of the Christian creed, I will try to demonstrate how the novel partakes of and yet takes a different direction from slave narratives by cagily advancing Du Bois' praised theory of the double consciousness and positioning its protagonist as the first black female that absorbs and displays an identity that aims to be accommodated within the Puritan myth of the (African) American City upon a Hill. In so doing, the novel's literary strategy also exhibits Crafts's adherence to the sanctioned discourse of the nation's exceptionalism though putting into action the African American rhetoric that, simultaneously, reveals its shortcomings. So, prior to Du Bois's acclaimed theory, and although both writers claim their sense of double consciousness in a different stage of the jeremiad, Crafts forges ahead the idea that (also) black women felt the need "to be both a Negro and an American" (Du Bois 3). For Crafts, the achievement of a secured and fulfilled (African) American identity is ineluctably ascribed to the concept of home and a house. In a foundational conception linked to John Winthrop's sermon at the *Arabella*, the concept of a private sphere "was not fundamentally contractual or political in nature; it had to be familial," therefore "the guiding analogy, or model, of American life for Winthrop was to be the family, embodied for him most dramatically (and typologically) in the figure of Eve, transported by selfless love for her spouse" (Anderson 1). Hannah's exceptionalist creed will remodel the jeremiad rhetoric tradition to take part in the American society as a complete citizen to get rewarded with the national gift of a home and a family. Her devoted Puritan drive

permeates her ideology and certifies her disgust with the illicit practices of incest and miscegenation that mark a social system tainted by slavery and its pervasive aftereffects.

Thus, this essay aims to read this recently discovered novel that presents a Puritan black female slave and intends to corroborate Crafts's specific Puritan commitment to a Christian message used to stand out as a proper (African) American citizen and to legitimize her behavior in search of her true identity. Consequently, the religious reading of *The Bondwoman's Narrative* balances its interpretation between a critique of slavery and the ultimate move towards the acceptance of American exceptionalism by African Americans. By merging the exceptionalist ethos and the literary trope of the African American jeremiad, Crafts's novel stands out as a doubly native output and –now that has been brought to light– appears as a foundational narrative that inaugurates a tendency cultivated by African American writers from the nineteenth century to the present.

THE RELIGIOUS PATH OF A FEMALE SLAVE TOWARDS A BLACK CITY UPON A HILL

Slave narratives embraced Christianity to make it profitable to their condemnation of the slave system because “the slave knew that the master’s religion did not countenance prayers for his slaves’ freedom” (Raboteau 219). If only for a literary strategy, the humanity of the slave had to be established within the narrative just to make them worthy of the reader’s empathy. The strategy was a subtle one, deeply American and religious-based. In this way, slaves galvanized this jeremiad rhetoric to spread their critiques and speak against the system. David Howard-Pitney gives a complete definition of the American jeremiad as a “rhetoric of indignation, expressing deep dissatisfaction and urgently challenging the nation to reform” (5). He goes on explaining that “the term *jeremiad*, meaning a lamentation or doleful complaint derives from the biblical prophet, Jeremiah, who warned of Israel’s fall and the destruction of the Jerusalem temple by Babylon as punishment for the people’s failure to keep the Mosaic covenant” (Howard-Pitney 5). This is exactly what John Winthrop stated for America in 1630 with his sermon “A Model for Christian Charity” in which he announced to the Puritans that America was an earthly paradise. Equally, as Sacvan Bercovitch explains, he also warned that if Puritans fell prey to temptations and missed out of

their way, "God would surely withdraw their "special appointment," weed them out, pluck them up, and cast them out of His sight" (4).

African Americans reinterpreted and personified such jeremiad rhetoric convinced that "liberty, equality, and property were not merely civic ideals. They were part of God's plans" therefore "America, as the home of libertarian principles, was the lasting 'habitation of justice, and mountain of holiness' [...] quoting Jeremiah 31" (Bercovitch 111). Thus, the African American jeremiad sprang forth due to the nation's collective sin as a warning issued by blacks to whites alerting for the judgment that was to come due to the violence impinged on the black slaves. This way, black slaves used the African American jeremiad with the double aim of asserting themselves as Americans and to demand a fair treatment as inhabitants of the American paradise on earth. As Howard-Pitney sums up, "the African American jeremiad expressed black nationalist faith in the missionary destiny [...]and was a leading instrument of black social assertion in America" (11). The African American jeremiad became also the tenet for black people to capitalize their efforts on the necessity to expand –and participate– in American exceptionalism. Indeed, from the era of the American Revolution, the consolidation of a national identity was born relegating blackness to a covert presence. As Toni Morrison has explained, "Americans choose to talk about themselves through and within a sometimes allegorical, sometimes metaphorical, but always choked representation of an Africanist presence" (*Playing in the Dark* 17). This "choked" presence definitely confirms the nation's betrayal of its foundational character and will be remodeled in black literature to harmonize it into a proper American product.

The Bondwoman's Narrative is modelled in this context and follows this national continuum of the jeremiad tradition by being premised on the biblical typology. Every chapter is framed by a biblical quote with a twofold goal as it embodies the message that Crafts tries to convey and, at the same time, it gives her the opportunity to use religion to apply for mercy and persuade her potential white audience that black people were also worthy of God's grace. Hence, the sacred aesthetics are unfolded from the outset and the novel itself becomes a black jeremiad that progresses in every chapter and that is enacted to the white audience to shield African American's exceptionalism. The story revolves around a black female slave on a North Carolina plantation who is taught how to read by a kind old couple –Uncle and Aunt Hetty– that live nearby. They also

convert her to Christianity. However, the couple's illegal actions are discovered and Crafts, with the intrinsic power of religious knowledge, will attempt to flee the plantation with her mistress, Mrs. de Vincent, once the latter discovers her real racial status: she is biracial, and therefore, under North Carolina law, she is a slave. After a series of episodes in which Hannah fights against the odds to break free from slavery (relieving herself from the gothic villain Mr. Trappe who tries to rape her mistress and overcoming an obligatory marriage) she manages to get to the North where she reunites with her mother and gets married. All along the narrative Crafts stands as a committed Christian that will judge every single move in religious terms and will use this keen adherence to the Christian morals to justify her many breakings of the civil law.

Articulating the novel in religious tones right from the start, Crafts shows the North as the new Canaan, the land of freedom for African Americans in Aunt Hetty's words: "I am, or rather was a northern woman, and consequently have no prejudice against your birth, or race, or condition" (8). For Crafts, in Wilson Jeremiah Moses's words, "(s)lavery was therefore to be understood as a 'Providence,' a seeming disaster, from which God would draw forth some greater good" (32). The protagonist acknowledges her status thanks to the embracing and religious upbringing of the old couple. The redemption is triggered from the novel's inception.

Soon after, Crafts's deep engagement with Christianity and its values is brought forward when her mistress acknowledges herself to be a black woman *de facto* because her mother was a former slave. The revelation of the mistress's racial identity serves Hannah to censure a terrible sin that takes place in the plantation: the miscegenation. Crafts's devoted commitment to Christianity and its moral values leaves no possible room to accept the sexual intercourse between a black slave woman and her master and, consequently, labels that act of misfortune as a sin. In so doing, Crafts envisions her mistress with Christological references and posits her "as a Christ within periscopes of the Woman with the Issue of Blood (Matthew 9:20, 21) and the Woman with the Alabaster Box (7:37, 38)" (Bassard 75), a literary move that destabilizes the concept of illicit mixed-race subjectivity through biblical scriptures. By resorting to biblical feminine figures that epitomize the religious trope of the "fallen woman," Crafts separates her firm beliefs to her mistress' fate but persists on being by her side as a sign of loyalty, which in the novel equates righteousness.

Indeed, the chapter in which Crafts sets forth her mistress's personal story is preceded by a quote attributed to Moses who states that "The sins of the fathers shall be visited on the children" (43). The sin Hannah refers to through the framing quote is the opprobrious sexual exchange between the white master and the black slave resulting in mixed-raced offspring as a product of miscegenation. For the religious Hannah, who uses this critique to keep on conjuring the African American jeremiad, miscegenation is utterly immoral and so the mistress' destiny is naturally doomed from the beginning. Consequently, the mistress has no other choice but to escape and Crafts –in a proven act of Christian loyalty– does not hesitate to accompany her in the quest for freedom evoking a faithful scene that, once again, echoes the Bible:

"I will my dear mistress."

"Call me mistress no longer. Henceforth you shall be to me as a very dear sister" she said embracing me again [...]

"My dear Mistress."

"There: there, mistress again when I have forbidden it."

"Well then, my dear friend, let us weigh this matter well." (48)

Crafts reinterprets here "the words of Christ in a composite evocation of John 13, when he washes the disciples' feet, and John 15, the beginning of the Olivet discourse, in which he issues them his 'final instructions' before going to the cross" (Bassard 75). Also, Crafts epitomizes the living example of the representation of "the slave in accordance with Christian mimetic tradition as a suffering servant" (186) as Theophus H. Smith explains in his work *Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formations of Black America*. This loyalty molded through the aesthetics of the Bible stands as the author's call for legitimization expressed to the American society. Furthermore, in this act of moral authority, Crafts enacts the jeremiad rhetoric informing her readers about the positivity and grateful feelings a slave can possess and thus, before the escape, she exposes: "though a slave, I had known many happy days. I had been the general favorite of the young people on the state, but though I loved them much, I loved my mistress more" (50). Crafts demonstrates that, as Bercovitch theorizes, the essence of the jeremiad is passed on through "its unshakable optimism" (6) to achieve America's national mission and redemption to all its inhabitants. With this move, and following William Andrews' studies on the characteristics of slave

narratives, it can also be argued that Hannah Crafts resorts to the so-called “Eden State,” a rite of passage in the lives of some slaves who claim their sense of being using biblical imagery to achieve, and claim, their Americanness. This trope was a literary strategy aimed to show faithfulness and to entreat acceptance. Resultantly, by fusing this hopeful ethos that characterizes the African American jeremiad with the Christian loyalty that defines her, Crafts is trying to justify their escape –otherwise definitely punishable– and hints at the understanding and forgiveness of the readership.

When, after the escape, things start to go rough for Mrs. de Vincent and herself, Crafts insists on her rhetoric of hope and wraps her wings around her mistress openly mastering the aesthetics of the African American jeremiad:

I would soothe and compassionate with her, and tell her how much I loved her, and how pleasant her society was to me; that even there and then I found motives for consolation and encouragement, that we must exercise faith and patience and an abiding trust in God. Oh, the blessedness of such heavenly trust– how it comforts and sustains the soul in moments of doubt and despondency– how it alleviates misery and even subdues pain. (258)

This moment is issued to blacks and whites because through the African American jeremiad Crafts directly prompts black people to “hold firm to their faith that it was God’s will that they be free and to act with confidence in their destiny and with determination to achieve it” (Howard-Pitney 21-22). In addition, with the direct reference to the American society in positive terms, Crafts implies that African Americans hold a legitimate place in America and thus admonishes her white readership to put an end to the historical denial of such right. In *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* religion stands as the bedrock of Crafts’s social vision and her jeremiad is based on the faith in America’s transracial mission and promise. Moreover, Crafts’s sermon-like language is used here in a dialogic sense since, as critic Pam Morris puts it, “this sense of language as dialogic...allows a writer to ‘enter history’ as a participative consciousness” (qtd in King 4).

Down at luck and doomed to a fatal destiny, both black women seek refuge in a house filled with peace and quiet to learn soon that the tyrannical Mr. Trappe has kept track of them and lives near the premises because he happens to be the proprietor’s brother. They are prompted to make another move out into the woods and to

find shelter at a gothic cabin decked with bloodstains and a gloomy halo. Drifting away and utterly weak, Mrs. de Vincent's mind falters and she starts to go crazy. To overcome such a situation, Hannah invokes her faith in God: "Father, if it be possible let this pass for me [...] Not my will but thine be done" (67). This lament echoes Jesus's words in the Garden of Gethsemane begging God to spare him from the passion (Crafts 251), as Henry Louis Gates rightly suggests. Equally, Crafts's biblical words relate to those uttered in Matthew 26:39: "O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass for me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt." However, just as Jesus himself experienced, Crafts prays in vain because the coming destruction has taken over. When they are discovered by a group of white men Crafts is inquired whether they are or are not runaway slaves. Refusing to pass (a move she could have done due to her light skin) and, once again, favoring the truth, the author confesses: "I tremblingly answered that I was or had been a slave" (69). Although this scene can be read as Crafts's capitulation to the slavery system, through the aesthetics of the religious message the protagonist remains faithful to the Christian value of truth and does not consider lying about her true identity and status, and demonstrates how "slaves distinguished the hypocritical religion of their masters from true Christianity" (Raboteau 1978: 294) with a twofold purpose: her commitment to God serving as a quest for freedom and as a religious message to white abolitionists. As Lyn McCredden and Frances Devlin-Glass observe in *Feminist Poetics of the Sacred*: "if the narratives that construct the sacred can be modified, then they can be made to resignify in ways that celebrate women's investment as women in the sacred" (12). By doing so, Crafts stands as a proper Christian –behaving accordingly to the moral law– who calls forth to admit religion as a spiritual way of resistance and as a propagandistic way to warn her audience about the necessity to urge a change in American society. Conversely, Mrs. de Vincent does not admit her racial origins and ends up losing her mind while Crafts presents herself as a black slave hoping to receive the godly and readership appraisal of such bold move while fostering the equal consideration of American citizens simply because, as Roselyne M. Jua warrants, "passing [...] would concede belief in the superiority of the White dominant race" and in refusing to pass "Hannah affirms her recognition of the equality of the Black woman with humanity" (317).

Accordingly, Crafts makes use of this chapter to boldly pose her critique inside the African American community by opting and suggesting that black slaves should remain faithful to their origins and devote themselves to religion as a means to fuel the efforts for freedom. It is my argument that this (conservative) move in the novel may well foreground W.E.B. Du Bois's double consciousness theory. Religion stands as the line that divides the African Americans' own subjectivity while it simultaneously opens their way into the acceptance of their true Americanness and, in this way, Crafts forges the double consciousness based on religious grounds. Nevertheless, the time span that separates Crafts and Du Bois as well as the different aims they try to attain offer their own and different side to the double consciousness theory. In Crafts's case, her double consciousness is inscribed within the first step of the jeremiad rhetoric –citing the promise– whilst Du Bois's postulation, after Jim Crow and segregation, is premised on the second step of the jeremiad – “criticism of present *declension*, or retrogression from the promise” (Howard-Pitney 8). Subsequently, spirituality, as it is read through Crafts's behavior, paves the way for a nuanced conception of a genuine black literary tradition that attests to retrieve religion to configure it in a cultural token rather than consider it solely a protest tool. So, Crafts's nineteenth-century religious-based double consciousness applies to her goal because it creates a “twofold set of possibilities within the discursive universe of the term, either as a valid alternative to racism, or as a parodic and rhetorical instrument to subvert the dominant racial and social order” (“Du Bois, Bakhtin” 14), as Mar Gallego rightly explains. In this regard, Du Bois's theory *signifies* upon *The Bondswoman's Narrative* for Hannah Crafts appears as the perfect representation of the nineteenth-century double consciousness since, according to Gallego, “the origins of double consciousness allow us to grape Du Bois's attempt to appropriate and adapt the concept in order to devise a positive representation of African Americanness as the perfect union of the two identities in a so-called “third self,” whose main attribute is its spirituality” (“Du Bois, Bakhtin...” 17). By placing a critique within the African American community Crafts is claiming a precise double consciousness understood in religious terms as a way to fully participate in American society because she grasps, earlier than Du Bois did, that being American for black people implies “a positive representation of the black race wherein African spirituality is judged

more favorably than the relentless materialism that allegedly prevails in white society” (Gallego, “Revisiting the Harlem Renaissance” 153).

Contrary to what Mrs. de Vincent represents as a black woman unable to grasp her reality, Crafts accommodates her spiritual needs, by accepting God’s will, to triumph over her double minority status. The mistress cannot accept being placed in the lowest rung of the American social ladder and surrenders, through craziness, to a society that renders black women powerless and insignificant. Again, Crafts extends her idea of double consciousness to make use of her double status. Her literary strategy foregrounds Du Bois because, as Mar Gallego remembers, “(t)he idyllic vision of the possibility of a pacific and harmonious coexistence [...] is taken as reference to formulate the idea of double consciousness as an inclusive racial theory, capable of merging both worlds –black and white– in an indissoluble whole” (“Revisiting the Harlem Renaissance” 20-21). So, the author’s critique falls inside the black culture as a message not to be ignored. It is a message that exhorts blacks to stand for themselves using religion and a hopeful ethos, something that links her literary purpose to the African American jeremiad which, in Sacvan Bercovitch’s words, is called upon “to create anxiety, to denounce backsliders, to reinforce social values, and (summarily) to define the American consensus” (164).

Moreover, the mistress’s death echoes biblical modes of representation by presenting Crafts as a virgin mother to her sister of race pointing to a redeeming purpose. With this move, the author establishes a connection with Mary and not with Eve, as Winthrop envisioned in his seminal sermon previously cited, and relates her subjectivity to the virtuous woman per excellence in the Christian tradition. So, when Mrs. de Vincent is in her final agony Hannah gets stained with blood to finally lament: “I stooped yet lower to embrace her, and kissed her pallid brow, now damp with dews of death” (100). The scene is reminiscent of the Virgin Mary’s behavior toward Jesus Christ once he dies at the cross. Mrs. de Vincent dies as a double act of freedom before going back to slavery and also to thwart Mr. Trappe’s desire of getting her back in his life as a bondwoman. This act of redemption follows that of Christ and showcases a black female sacred aesthetics that sends a message to both the white and black community completing the biblical imagery of Isaiah 53:11, 12 to justify once more the attachment of African Americans to religion as a rightful path toward Americanness. Crafts embodies the (black) Virgin mother and is characterized with her purity and

compassionate force. Moreover, to fully consummate the biblical analogy, seconds away from deceasing the mistress whispers the sentence: “The Lord bless you and sustain you” (100) which also mirrors Jesus Christ’s words in his last minutes of agony related in Luke 23:34: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” These words are also uttered to Hannah to validate her path towards Americanness. In this regard, Bassard also notices how the mistress’ death recalls “Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane, where ‘sweat great drops of blood’ (Luke 22:44)” (76) which confirms that death is the ultimate step of Mrs. de Vincent’s spiritual mission in *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*. In other words, subjectivity is, at bottom, unconceivable without religious beliefs. Contrarily, Crafts contests her mistress’ self-exclusion through her religious adherence which reinforces her subjectivity as an African American woman.

Later in the novel, Crafts’s profound and moral depth resulting from her Christian adherence is also diffused when she wages a direct attack against the marriage between two black slaves. When her new mistress’ favorite slave, Charlotte, “a beautiful Quadroon” is to be married to “a young man,” William, “belonging to a neighboring state” (119), Crafts’s religious morals acquaint this marriage as sham for she defends that in the “world of slavery, companionate love is an impossible indulgence because it does not come in conjunction with freedom” (108), in line with Erin Elizabeth Smith’s contention. Hence, in *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* love and slavery cannot be paired and Crafts, shielded behind her Christian lens, sends out a direct message to her white and black readership summed up in Smith’s words: “Without freedom there is no way to actually protect the bonds of matrimony, even if they are based in mutual love” (108). The author’s drive towards the exceptional path that will lead her to actually live in her ideal projection of the City upon a Hill makes her admit to being “quite confused” (119) at such behavior. The jeremiad rhetoric is here unfolded and addressed, yet again, to black people to rethink the terms in which they should compose themselves in society as it is purveyed by the American foundational principles. It is no wonder that this chapter is propitiously framed by a biblical quote by Jeremiah. Besides, Crafts seems to privilege the idea of true love as a means to achieve racial equality and as another way to fight back the corrupted society and to ameliorate her path towards

Americanness³. Trying to stymie the sexual violence between masters and slaves she openly concludes that the slave “if he or she decides to be content, should always remain in celibacy” (131). Crafts seems to bear in mind that “the historical role played by the mother in the economy of slavery makes sense of her insistence upon celibacy of the slave” (Ballinger et al. 215).

However, and despite Crafts's passionate defense of the Puritan creed revolving around celibacy and manners, she will be, again, betrayed and this will give her the opportunity to expose her faith and creed. So, although her new mistress Mrs. Henry and her family are described as possessing a “true Christian politeness which springs from kindness of heart” (124), when it comes to real salvation the white woman turns her back on Hannah and informs her that she is to be sold to the heir of her previous dead master. Crafts implies that despite the friendliness of some white people, the nineteenth-century North American “dreaded reality” strikes her “like a thunderbolt” (125). The writer resorts to a religious rhetoric of lamentation and appeals to Mrs. Henry's religious morals to save her from America's greatest sin by extolling the doleful jeremiad: “you can save me from this. I have an inexpressible desire to stay with you. You are so good, accomplished, and Christian-like [...] my dear good madam be mindful of what I have suffered, and what I will still must suffer, thus transferred from one to another, and save; for you can” (125). Crafts's mastery of literature prompts her to making use of sentimentality as an also valid means of literary expression for female writers. Fittingly, Crafts's black jeremiad is directed towards the core of African Americans suffering the ills of slavery simply to express, as Wilson Jeremiah Moses clarifies, that “their enslavement did not necessarily symbolize a curse or a mark of God's disfavor; it

³ Indeed, this literary move also resonates with the Puritan message that John Winthrop aimed at the American community, as instructed in Romans 1:31: “Without understanding, covenant breakers. Without natural affection, implacable, unmerciful.” Thus, what makes this act of mercy possible is its foundation in love within the American society:

Love is the bond of perfection. First it is a bond or ligament. Secondly, it makes the work perfect. There is no body but consists in parts and that which knits these parts together, gives the body its perfection, because it makes each part so contiguous to others as thereby they do mutually participate with each other (Winthrop)

boded rather that He had some great plan in store for them” (32). This plan represents Crafts’s path to exceptionalism and Americanness.

To continue illustrating the author’s exceptional moral values, Lizzy, Crafts’s fellow slave, unfolds the story of Lindendale just to surface the malediction of the haunted mansion. The chapter in which Lizzy recalls her story is premonitorily framed by the biblical quotation: “The dark places of the earth are the habitations of cruelty” (172). Again, Hannah employs immoral alliances to showcase her individual stance towards them. In this way, she confirms her commitment to the exceptionalist attitude and her detachment from the impure modes of behaving of fellow slaves. This literary tactic is used when Crafts learns that Mr. Cosgrove, Lizzy’s new master and current owner of Lindendale, also abuses his female slaves to the extent of having a harem with several offspring of his own. Mrs. Cosgrove gets frantic when she figures it out and addresses her fury to her female slaves, the ultimate victims. When Mrs. Cosgrove’s favorite slave is about to be dismissed the young slave stabs both her child and herself to death.⁴ To cap this terrible incident and justify its reasons just suiting it to white expectations, Crafts enacts the African American jeremiad to inform that: “(s)he [the young slave] lived only long enough to say that she prayed God to forgive her act dictated by the wildest despair” (178). It seems reasonable to acknowledge that Crafts’s jeremiad rhetoric at the death of a fellow slave points to the Slave Fugitive Act (1851) chiefly because the author directs her lament not only to her readership but to the politicians of the young nation:

Dead, your Excellency, the President of this Republic. Dead, grave senators who grow eloquent over pensions and army wrongs. Dead ministers of religion, who prate because poor men without a moments leisure on other days presume to read the newspapers on Sunday, yet who wink at, or *approve laws that occasion such scenes as this* (178, my italics)

⁴ Interestingly, the case of Lizzy echoes –or perhaps mirrors– the case of Margaret Garner (1834-1858), also a runaway slave who killed her baby girl using a knife in 1856, one year before the publication of *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*. Toni Morrison found inspiration in this case to write her masterpiece *Beloved*.

Lizzy finishes her story and closes up a cycle in *The Bondwoman's Narrative* as Crafts and her new masters, the Wheelers, travel to their plantation in North Carolina. Once there, her exceptionalist reading of society is, again, brought to the front through her description of the conditions under which the field slaves live:

There was not that divisions of families I had been accustomed to see, but they all lived *promiscuously* anyhow and every how; at least they did not die, which was a wonder. Is it a stretch of imagination to say that by night they contained a swarm of misery, that crowds of foul existence crawled in out of gaps in walls and boards, or coiled themselves to sleep on nauseous heaps of straw fetid with human perspiration (199, my italics)

Crafts enacts a direct critique to the African American community by emphasizing how in such mayhem slaves cannot lead a decent life and, especially, she is contemptuous over the lascivious nature that this situation showcases. Again, the double consciousness to which Crafts appeals is brought to the forefront. In fact, in his seminal essay *The Souls of Black Folk* Du Bois's preeminence of black exceptionalism makes him reject the same perversion within the black community that Crafts is fighting against. Mirroring, as I suggest, Craft's own lament, Du Bois complains that "the old ties of blood relationship and kinship disappeared, and instead of the family appeared a new polygamy and polyandry, which, in some cases, almost reached promiscuity" (119). Thus, regardless of the time span and the differences in context, as Crafts attempts to remodel the behavior of African Americans, likewise does Du Bois in his towering essay. Hence, both authors aestheticize religion aiming to foster a new generation of African Americans that can live up to the American social values. They try to ignite "an elite few who understand correct living in the world, modes of action, and right conduct should act as examples of the majority" (Davidson 45) which at length would constitute Du Bois's *Talented Tenth*,⁵ a group of

⁵ In his hallmark essay "The Talented Tenth," Du Bois "believed that African Americans should be led by a chosen few who were both wise and benevolent" (Davidson 36). He adds that for the African American intellectual, "the black race would be 'saved' by that one-tenth of the population who were intellectually gifted enough to uplift the entire race" (Davidson 39).

African Americans in which Hannah Crafts could have belonged, a possibility that reinforces my contention of Crafts anticipating Du Bois's theories.

As it has been discussed, Crafts stands for true love in freedom and therefore she rejects intercourse under slavery. As Henry Louis Gates Jr. comments, "Crafts's critique of the social system of the antebellum South is quite consistent with abolitionist and Protestant Christian rhetoric of the period" (273). Crafts's appropriation of God's messages is a prevalent theme throughout the novel as it is crucial not only to Hannah's survival and resistance but for the entire African American community, an idea that W.E.B. Du Bois will also expose in *The Souls of Black Folk* where he admits that only religion is the "real conserver of morals, a strengthener of family life, and the final authority on what is Good and what is Right" (118). Religion, and holding on to Christian beliefs, is a cornerstone in her quest for freedom. So, when Crafts is punished by her mistress for a presumed act of betrayal in which she accidentally powdered her mistress' face with the wrong product that makes her look like a black woman, her religious beliefs are the only tool needed to pray for redemption. Accordingly, when the mistress speaks out the punishment to be inflicted on her –to go into the fields to work and marry a field slave, which is in open opposition to her moral values– Crafts's woebegone response presents a twofold purpose: to critique how black people could possibly live in such inhuman conditions and to expose her dignified sense of morality and integrity:

Most horrible of all doomed to association with the vile, foul, filthy inhabitants of the huts, and condemned to receive one of them for my husband my soul actually revolted with horror unspeakable. I had ever regarded marriage as a holy ordinance, and felt that its responsibilities could only be suitably discharged when voluntarily assumed (205).

This passage is filled with religious horror and has an echo more than forty years later in Du Bois's groundbreaking essay when he aligns with Crafts and asserts that African Americans should get over "the lax moral life of the plantation, where marriage was a farce, laziness a virtue, and property a theft" (121). Again, Crafts's description of the heinous behavior of black slaves echoes the description of Du Bois's concept of double black identity which "recreates a hierarchy where the educated few are on the top and the

marginalized black masses,” as in this case the field slaves, “stand as the bottom waiting to be uplifted” (Davidson 47). Consequently, for both Crafts and Du Bois, morality and integrity are of paramount importance to become a proper (African) American. This divinely inspired resistance turns into unflinching power and thus refusing to miss out her Christian path Crafts decides to make her most irreverent move: escape. The only way out is fleeing that horrible milieu because the “desire for freedom seized the black millions still in bondage, and became their own ideal of life” (Du Bois 121). Her resolution is clear as she turns an act of disobedience into an act of virtue and justice when she duly explains: “it seemed that rebellion would be a virtue, that duty to myself and my God actually required it, and that whatever accidents or misfortunes might attend my flight nothing could be worse than what threatened my stay” (206). Despite her misfortunes and tribulations under slavery, it is only when her religious values are jeopardized when she determines to get away. In fact, just before escaping, Crafts opens her Bible and reads, randomly, “at the place where Jacob fled from his brother Esau” (207) which, as a message to God himself, legitimizes her confidence to be doing the right thing. The chapter is framed by the biblical quote “In Thee is my trust” (206) that not only resonates with the American national motto but also extols that God is a life-sustaining figure and the key to salvaging her dignity and justifying her act of disobedience. For Crafts, freedom can only be bolstered by religion because, as Patricia R. Hill implies, “[t]hose whose spiritual force should be shaping public opinion must be shown where their religious duty lay” (n.p.). In fact, in her way to the North direct references to the Bible, religious invocation and the use of the African American jeremiad are a must for the aesthetic definition of her narrative. For example, stranded in the middle of nowhere she wakes up to find a cow nearby and recalls the biblical episode of “Elijah and the ravens” (212) in 1 Kings 17:6. She even shows her deep knowledge of Christianity by referring to the rosary with the avowed purpose to ask for the abolitionist’s empathy and support: “as the Catholic devotee calls over the names of his favorite saints while counting his beads” (214).

Providence rewards Crafts for being and acting as a committed Christian when a woman, who happens to be Aunt Hetty, appears to help her in her way to freedom. She encourages and helps Crafts to travel to New Jersey, which stands as a biblical city of refuge and is “reconfigured as a specific locus of the American

‘Promise Land’” (Smith 68).⁶ As the biblical quotation that opens this chapter remarks, “I have never seen the righteous forsaken” (224); the righteous people will finally get their literary recognition and the social redemption in the eyes of the readership. In the last chapter, the “hand of Providence” caresses Crafts once again by unexpectedly making her meet her own mother, an unexpected encounter that leads Crafts to achieve her desired quest for a proper home. Relying on and accepting God’s mercy has its benefits the moment Crafts gets her most beseeched reward. The message is clear-cut: the author feels totally legitimized by a deity more powerful than man’s law. The “citing promise” that the first step of the jeremiad conceives has been accomplished. Feeling complete and free, Crafts manages to find a partner and gets married. The ultimate reward as a proper African American citizen is to be given the familiar space of a house and a home which symbolizes the model of American life –that is, “the family” Winthrop highlights. Home equates Americanness, while the created family stands for the exceptionalist virtue that opens the nation’s doors to embrace social and cultural acceptance in full comfort. *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* closes with Crafts’s every front line completely sealed. Christianity and spirituality become entangled to proclaim that the seed for “the American Dream of social mobility,” as Lauren Berlant expresses in *Compassion: The Culture and Politics of an Emotion*, relies on nothing “but faith, faith in the highly symbolized, relatively immobile structures of intimate attachment from the family and the nation to God” (3).

CONCLUSION

Hannah Crafts’s greatest literary achievement banks on the fact that she starts off as a slave to wind up embodying an African American puritan whose main goal is to fully participate and be part of the American society by means of conjuring a spiritual reading of the alleged American exceptionalism. The inscription of *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* in the national idiosyncrasy of the African American jeremiad, that helps to develop the double consciousness,

⁶ New Jersey reconstitutes itself as the Puritan American city accommodating to the African American typological tradition that Crafts embraces. Therefore, the northern city echoes the biblical cities of refuge in Joshua 20:4, which aptly serve to mirror Crafts’s welcome in the New Jersey black community.

links the novel to the Puritan colonial experience that lies at the core of Crafts's model of society, for she longs to live and be part of America understood as a "City upon a Hill," echoing John Winthrop's words. Thus, Crafts resorts to the national continuum of the jeremiad tradition to transmogrify its meaning so that it could apply to the living experience of African Americans and hence places it within the matrix of black culture. By using the national cultural outlets that the nation offers, Crafts takes part in and reasserts the American exceptionalism while at the same time the former African American slave and author aestheticizes it into an African American exceptionalism understood in religious terms.

Hannah Crafts's link to John Winthrop's sermon is of high importance in this matter. Crafts takes her cues from this seminal ur-text and, accordingly, the idyllic ending of her novel resonates with Winthrop's disquisition in a wily move to assert herself as a perfect (African) American able to inherit the Puritan's biblical figures of America to procure herself a sense of place and home that can guarantee the rehabilitation of her identity as both black and American. Aiming to posit a critique to the racist society while ascertaining herself as an American citizen also chosen by a merciful God, her objective has been accomplished because she has come to identify the North "as 'God's New Israel', as 'Canaan' and as a 'Promise Land' " for African Americans "in order to create their group identity as a New World 'chosen people' " (Smith 56). The alluded "promise" of the jeremiad –which permeates the novel's message– is ultimately attained. In so doing, Crafts illustrates the practicability of the directions ushered by the foundational mother of African American literature Phyllis Wheatly –"Remember, *Christians, Negros*, black as *Cain*, May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train"– and secures a place in the pedestal of African Americanness. So, if American exceptionalism, as it is propounded in Winthrop's sermon, "is a doubly theological vision, in which all of history prior to the formation of the Euro-American 'New World' was pointed toward this formation as a goal, in which that 'New World' is not simply a place but a mission" (Byers 46), Crafts adds up a third theological vision by highlighting the racial perception in this mission and advocating for the inclusion of black people who follow the moral values of Puritanism within the realms of this "New World." She eventually stands as a Puritan African American woman, both black *and* American.

I have argued that the ascertainment of this paradoxical double identity may act as the forerunner of W.E.B. Du Bois's theory labeled as the double consciousness of the African American community. Crafts positions her double consciousness in the first step of the African American jeremiad to live up to the yearned promise of Americanness while Du Bois's double consciousness is situated in the second step of the jeremiad rhetoric. Yet, and despite such difference in the appraisal, Crafts forges Du Bois's double consciousness by pinpointing, and finally sharing, the religious grounds that support the notion of an identity for black people that simultaneously claims the African Americans' Americanness while asserting the singularity of the black culture or the "Africanist presence decidedly not American, decidedly other" ("The Site of Memory" 48), in Toni Morrison's words. As *The Bondswoman's Narrative* shows, religion encourages Crafts to foster African Americans to struggle "to find their way between the Eurocentric canon promulgated by the white community [...] and the wish to explore the alternative African one upheld by their African American community of origin" (Gallego, "Revisiting the Harlem Renaissance" 154). This is what Du Bois himself would arrogate and expand some decades later. Thus, the novel reproduces and participates in the universalizing thrust of American exceptionalism applied to African Americans since the perspective of the jeremiad accommodates dissent within the American exceptionalist ideology while its focus on hopefulness acts upon the collective American consciousness. Not surprisingly, the ending of the novel is a sentimentalized picture of a perfect (African) American family. In this light, Crafts inaugurates a black female literary tradition linked to the aesthetics of African American jeremiad literary tradition that will be followed by black female writers as noteworthy as Harriet Jacobs, Pauline Hopkins, Zora Neale Hurston, or Toni Morrison.

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