# Breathing Free: Environmental Violence and the Plantation Ecology in Hannah Crafts's *The Bondwoman's Narrative*

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SINCE Henry Louis Gates first brought it to light almost twenty years ago, Victorianist and Americanist literary critics have sought shared custody of Hannah Crafts's *The Bondwoman's Narrative*: the only known novel by a formerly enslaved African American woman. Gates purchased the mid-1850s manuscript at auction in 2001, and it swiftly became a *New York Times* best-seller upon its publication the following year. Scholars have noted the novel's engagement with a wide range of nineteenth-century British and American intertexts—in particular, its explicit allusions to, revisions of, and verbatim quotations from Charles Dickens's *Bleak House,* which was serialized on both sides of the Atlantic in 1852–53, including in *Frederick Douglass' Paper.*[1] Resituating the squalor and depravity of Dickens's Victorian London in the antebellum South, Crafts's novel exposes a mental, moral, and physical degradation that is engendered, in this context, not by English industrial capitalism but by American chattel slavery.

Whether deeming her strategy citation, revision, or "renovation,"[2] many critics have remarked upon the ways in which Crafts adapts *Bleak House* for an American audience, though most have focused on the formal or political questions raised by mobilizing the Victorian social reform novel in the service of American abolitionism. In other words, extant scholarship has primarily been concerned with the literary, rather than the literal, environments that inform Crafts's text. This essay attempts to remedy this oversight by offering an ecocritical analysis of *The Bondwoman's Narrative,* examining how Crafts provocatively reenvisions Dickens's ecology in a way that illuminates the radical openness of nineteenth-century geographies, bodies, and texts. If Dickens's novel can be called "ecological" in that "character, event, and environment are mutually shaping, reciprocally expressive, and systematically

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interconnected," as Allen MacDuffie suggests,[3] this essay investigates how *The Bondwoman's Narrative* reconsiders the interconnection of these characters, events, and environments in the plantation context.

As scholars working at the intersection of Victorian studies and ecocriticism have observed, Dickens's attention to the material ecology of the nineteenth-century city indexes his attunement to the complex interconnections and interpenetrations of the human and nonhuman, offering a view that inaugurates what John Parham calls "a more *ecological* sense of matter permeating down through social life and into the dwellings, things, and bodies of the people themselves."[4] In *Bleak House*, this sense of permeation works to frame the Victorian urban ecology as a fundamentally open one, as Jesse Oak Taylor notes: "Rather than a closed system nested within an environment, the novel presents a tangled thicket of interrelated assemblages and multitiered systems at once legal, bodily, and economic, with all of the systems open to and affected by others."[5] Understanding how Dickens envisages the openness of these *bodily* systems, in particular, is essential to analyzing how Crafts reimagines the operation of these "interrelated assemblages" in the American South. In what follows, I argue that, through its engagement with Dickens's rhetoric of environmental health and illness—and concomitant ethic of mutual susceptibility—Crafts's transatlantic transplantation of *Bleak House* posits the plantation as an open ecology in which both black and white subjects are constituted by the violence of slavery and its systems of transplantation.

I use "transplantation" deliberately here, as a way to acknowledge the long history of racial anxiety surrounding the interpenetration of bodies and environments in the Atlantic world. As scholars such as Susan Scott Parrish have shown, the potential degeneration or "creolization" of the European body in the American climate was a source of fear for many settler-colonialists, who subscribed to the belief that "transplantation to a new environment altered the temperament, the corporeality, and the mental disposition of the person so situated."[6] More recently, ecocritical theorizations of plantation colonialism by scholars like Britt Rusert and Monique Allewaert have examined the ways in which the geographies and bodies of the American tropics unsettled various fantasies of colonial enclosure. For example, responding to the "fragile colonial fantasy" that demarcated the eighteenth-century plantation "as an ecologically enclosed, protected space of British cultivation and experimentation," Rusert demonstrates how this ecology was in fact precariously open to the influence of the agents it purported to contain, "always on the

verge of being 'infected' and creolized by indigenous plants, animals, and diseases, as well as by Africans both within and outside the plantation."[7] But while the colonial imagination struggled to frame the plantation system as a circumscribed ecology in the face of infectious forces, writes Rusert, disease simultaneously offered a way of conceptualizing ecological coherence, as "equalizing vectors of contagion" were understood to "organize plants, animals, and slaves into one plantation ecology."[8]

According to the most prominent explanation of disease causation in the eighteenth and early to mid-nineteenth centuries, miasma theory, the atmosphere was one such "equalizing vector." Maintaining that pestilential agents arose from the decomposition of organic matter and were spread via the inhalation of contaminated air, miasma theory promoted an ecological understanding of disease causation, emphasizing the openness of human bodies to environmentally generated infections. While the porosity of the European body was a source of particular anxiety in the American colonies, the African body was often regarded as immune to many of the diseases of the tropical climate.[9] Placing the ethical and ontological status of the black body in a state of exception, medico-environmental theories of African immunity reinscribed the plantation ecology as a closed system of symbiotic exchange, one in which enslaved people were invulnerable to the sorts of miasmic penetrations that threatened the corporeal integrity and health of their white counterparts. In the antebellum era, outspoken proslavery ideologues like Louisiana physician Samuel Cartwright seized on these theories to argue that persons of African descent were "slave[s] by nature"—as evidenced, in part, by their supposed immunity to tropical diseases like yellow fever.[10] As we shall see, insisting on the innate invulnerability of the black body to the environmental causes of disease allowed slavery apologists not only to supply a "scientific" justification for slavery but to perpetuate a politics of neglect.[11]

Building on earlier analyses of the colonial plantation as an open ecology—an assemblage in which infectious permeations and conveyances exploit the somatic receptivity of bodies to the violence of natural and built environments—this essay argues that *The Bondwoman's Narrative* adapts Dickens's depiction of what Jesse Oak Taylor calls the "miasmic ecology" of Victorian London to demonstrate the ways in which the air itself constitutes a literal and metaphoric vector of violence in the plantation South (36). In the first section, I discuss how Crafts repurposes *Bleak House*'s miasmic rhetoric to figure slavery itself as an open ecology,

one that transcends the dual sites of the enslaved body and the southern plantation to produce systemic effects. Reading the novel alongside mid-nineteenth-century discourses of British sanitary reform and American abolitionism, both of which mobilized miasma as a trope to expose the impossibility of geographical containment, I argue that Crafts engages with these discourses as a way to disrupt antebellum fantasies of enclosure that would seek to isolate the social ills of slavery in the South.

In the second section, I examine how the more open, ecological account of violence facilitated by miasma theory informs *The Bondwoman's Narrative*'s critique of antebellum racial politics. Specifically, I analyze how Crafts's explicit invocation and revision of Dickens's description of Tom-all-Alone's works to resist the fiction of racialized immunity that normalized and legitimated conditions of neglect and degradation on the southern plantation. Yet more than merely asserting the vulnerability of the black body to the "natural" agents of disease causation—a tactic that risks reifying the proslavery conceptualization of Africans as inferior subjects in need of white protection—Crafts emphasizes how the deliberate degradation of the built environment serves as a technology of racism. I argue that, in eschewing the scenes of physical brutality that characterize many nineteenth-century narratives of enslavement, Crafts unsettles the spectacles of corporeal violence that directed abolitionist politics of white witness and sympathy, instead depicting what Rob Nixon has memorably termed "slow violence": "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all."[12] By pointedly repurposing Dickens's rhetoric of environmental health—and attendant ethic of mutual susceptibility—*The Bondwoman's Narrative* offers a counterdiscourse to nineteenth-century scientific racism, reorienting attention from theories of innate racial difference and toward ecologies of degradation.

I conclude by considering *The Bondwoman's Narrative* in terms of what Taylor calls "atmospheric thinking" or "atmospheric reading": an interpretive method that "considers the way that bodies of all kinds influence the conditions of possibility in their vicinity," by considering "the interpenetrating contexts of composition, production, and reception as the work moves through the world, accumulating new meanings and spawning unanticipated effects" (7, 8). I ask what it might mean to inculcate a "miasmic" strategy, attending to the vulnerable body as the site where such "unanticipated effects" manifest. Ultimately, by approaching

this mid-nineteenth-century manuscript novel as anticipating the environmental racism that continues to constitute an underexamined technology of racialized violence in the United States, I suggest that Crafts's text invites a way of reading both the atmospheric and miasmic as latent symptomatologies of environmental violence, registers of the permeable bodies that make up an open ecology.

## "Gloom everywhere": Antebellum Atmospheres and the Fantasy of "Free Air"

By the time he penned *Bleak House* in the early 1850s, Dickens was deeply invested in issues of environmental health, having served alongside Edwin Chadwick in the campaign to institute the 1848 Public Health Act, often leveraging his magazine *Household Words* as a platform to address the necessity of urban sanitation.[13] As reformers like Chadwick insisted, the connection between squalor and sickness was self-evident: "The majority of the cases of epidemic diseases," Chadwick asserted in his 1842 *Report on the Sanitary Population of the Laboring Classes of Great Britain*, "may decidedly be ascribed to the want of cleanliness and ventilation."[14] When Mr. Bucket and Mr. Snagsby make their inaugural excursion to Tom-all-Alone's in search of the orphan boy Jo, they are thus confronted with a scene fit to set Chadwick in a frenzy: a "villainous street, undrained, unventilated, deep in black mud and corrupt water," rife with both moral and material degeneration. As the pair pass the "stinking ruins" of the fever-houses, a wan, repulsed Snagsby "feels as if he couldn't breathe the dreadful air."[15]

Snagsby's visceral aversion to the "dreadful air" of the fever-infested slum is simultaneously an expression of disgust—a reflexive revulsion at the immediate olfactory experience—and an affirmation of his fear of infection.[16] According to the miasmatic (or "anticontagionist") theory of disease—an etiology that was regularly championed by British and American medical authorities to explain the midcentury cholera pandemics that plagued both nations—individuals were susceptible to infection through atmospheric exposure, even in the absence of contact with an infected other.[17] This theory not only undergirded the agenda of Victorian sanitary reform but supplied a means for authors like Dickens to represent their environmental and social surroundings as an open ecology characterized by distributed agency and omnipresent threat of infection.

Dickens's depiction of Victorian London as an open ecology, one in which bodies and built environments are susceptible to permeation by miasmic matter, is perhaps nowhere more memorably showcased in *Bleak House* than in the "Fog everywhere" passage of its opening pages, which charts the promiscuous mobility of a fog that "flows among green aits and meadows" and "rolls defiled among the tiers of shipping and the waterside pollutions of a great (and dirty) city" (49).[18] Significantly, Crafts's most overt invocation of *Bleak House* consists of a rewriting of this passage, employed here to describe the dispiriting environs of Washington, DC, where her self-emancipated narrator, Hannah, is reenslaved by the Wheeler family after her initial escape from the De Vincent estate in Virginia:

> Gloom everywhere. Gloom up the Potomac; where it rolls among meadows no longer green, and by splendid country seats. Gloom down the Potomac where it washes the sides of huge warships. Gloom on the marshes, the fields, and heights. Gloom settling steadily down over the sumptuous habitations of the rich, and creeping through the cellars of the poor. Gloom arresting the steps of chance office-seekers, and bewildering the heads of grave and reverend Senators; for with fog, and drizzle, and a sleeting driving mist the night has come at least two hours before its time.[19]

Like Dickens, Crafts engages an atmospheric imaginary to emblematize the grasp of social injustice, evoking an animate entity that sets upon all strata of society, provocatively swallowing the seat of government. Yet in Dickens's novel, at the site "where the dense fog is densest, and the muddy streets are muddiest," we find "the Lord High Chancellor in his High Court of Chancery" (50). In Crafts's, "[j]ust where the gloom was densest, and the muddy street the muddiest," the narrator reports, "there was I" (162). Here it is the enslaved individual, not the legal institution or its representative, that emerges as the nucleus of the scene: a revision that suggests that the miasmic ecology of slavery is not simply an issue of history or politics but an ethical dilemma surrounding the fate of African American people. Moreover, substituting the Dickensian fog, a readily perceptible environmental phenomenon, with a more nebulous American "gloom," Crafts's revision emphasizes the psychic, rather than the material, ecology of slavery—seemingly anticipating John Ruskin's 1884 polemic on industrial pollution, "The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century," which decries the interconnected conditions of spiritual and material degradation: "Of states in such moral gloom," Ruskin warned, "every seer of old predicted the physical gloom."[20]

Echoing a term Olaudah Equiano uses in his 1789 narrative—"the gloom of slavery"[21]—Crafts's "gloom" could be understood as a reference to the psychological effects of enslavement, suggesting one kind of violence that tends to fall below white audiences' threshold of perception. Read this way, Crafts's account offers an implicit rejoinder to proslavery polemicists like George Fitzhugh, who argued that the paternalistic ethos of the southern economy rendered slaves "cheerful, happy and contented"[22]—an argument that was cemented in the caricature of the contented slave that became a staple of the "anti-Tom" novels of the 1850s and was vehemently rejected by northern abolitionists who toured the plantation South in the antebellum era.[23] In his account, for instance, Union Army chaplain George Hughes Hepworth dismissed popular depictions of "the light-hearted, merry slave" as "all rhetoric," attesting instead to "the universal gloom of the negro character."[24] Rather than pursue the psychological aspects of Crafts's text, however, I would instead like to suggest that Crafts's "gloom" functions in a more ecological sense; rewriting Dickens's description of the ubiquitous, indiscriminate fog, Crafts suggests that "gloom" is not the exclusive purview of the enslaved psyche but a kind of systemic infection.

Notably, "gloom" is also a word that Dickens not only uses liberally in *Bleak House* to describe everything from the London sky to Tulkinghorn's office to Lady Dedlock's affect, but one that he had employed to elucidate the atmosphere of the antebellum South in his own travelogue, *American Notes* (1842). But if, in *Bleak House*, "gloom" serves expansively as an atmospheric descriptor, in *American Notes* "gloom" is used more precisely to refer to a particular institutional effect (and affect). Remarking on the scenery along the railway line between Fredericksburg and Richmond, Dickens wrote:

> In this district, as in all others where slavery sits brooding, there is an air of ruin and decay, which is inseparable from the system. The barns and outhouses are mouldering away; the sheds are patched and half roofless; the log cabins . . . are squalid in the last degree. There is no look of decent comfort anywhere. The miserable stations by the railway side; the great wild woodyards, whence the engine is supplied with fuel; the negro children rolling on the ground before the cabin doors, with dogs and pigs; the biped beasts of burden slinking past; gloom and dejection are upon them all.[25]

Where Hepworth posits gloom psychologically, as inherent to the "negro character," Dickens views the "gloom and dejection" of the American South ecologically, as an encompassing atmospheric force. This gloom

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is not only *produced by* the constituent elements of the plantation ecology —its natural and built environments, its animal and human chattel—but simultaneously *constitutive of* this ecology, insofar as it is "inseparable from the system."

If southern "gloom" was not an exclusive purview of the enslaved psyche, neither was it containable to the plantation, as Dickens discovered upon continuing his tour. In Richmond, he found himself unsettled by inescapable reminders of "decay and gloom" that undercut the would-be grandeur of the city: "jostling its handsome residences, like slavery itself going hand in hand with lofty virtues, are deplorable tenements, fences unrepaired, walls crumbling into ruinous heaps," Dickens noted; "Hinting gloomily at things below the surface, these, and many other tokens of the same description, force themselves upon the notice, and are remembered with depressing influence, when livelier features are forgotten."[26] Unlike his character Harold Skimpole, who views slaves as aesthetic objects for the white gaze,[27] Dickens is receptive to the "depressing influence" of the built environment; conditions of decay that "force themselves upon notice," disrupting the picturesque aesthetic and putting the white observer "gloomily" in mind of the depths of degradation that lie "below the surface."

In *Bleak House*, Dickens does more than "notice" these conditions of decay; he employs the logic of miasma theory to propose a democracy of degradation, one that places the observer at risk: "There is not an atom of Tom's slime, not a cubic inch of any pestilential gas in which he lives," Dickens writes, "but shall work its retribution through every order of society up to the proudest of the proud and to the highest of the high" (682). If Dickens's use of the term "pestilential gas" emphasizes the agency of air as a contaminating medium—it is the same phrase his brother-in-law, Henry Austin, used in an 1848 report of the Metropolitan Sanitary Commission to describe the "evils of neglect" in sewer systems—his speculation that "every order of society" will be thereby mediated demonstrates the ways in which miasma opens the artificial borders of the class quarantine in the Victorian urban ecology.[28] The effects of urban decay could not be contained to the slums, as Dickens suggested in a speech delivered to the Metropolitan Sanitary Association in 1851: "That no one can estimate the amount of mischief which is grown in dirt; that no one can say, here it stops, or there it stops, either in its physical or its moral results," Dickens asserted, "is now as certain as it is that the air from Gin Lane will be carried, when the wind is Easterly, into May Fair, and that if you have a vigorous pestilence raging furiously in Saint

Giles's, no mortal list of Lady Patronesses can keep it out of Almanack's."[29]

Victorianist scholars have been eager to point out the ways in which Dickens mobilizes miasma theory to situate the atmosphere as an agent whose deleterious effects are both "physical" and "moral," illuminating "connections between the physical condition and the social pathology of urban England."[30] However, the deployment of miasmic imagery to evoke social infection was not unique to Dickens nor to the context of Victorian urban ecology; in fact, it constituted a well-established rhetorical tactic in nineteenth-century abolitionist writings. Long-held beliefs about the sickening influence of the southern climate rendered miasma a readily accessible metaphor to express the threat of social contamination; just as the early national northern press routinely characterized the South as "disease-ridden, swampy, and inimical to animal and human development,"[31] abolitionist writers regularly figured the social and moral "atmosphere of slavery" as "pestilential," "polluted," "poisonous," and "pestiferous."[32] Slavery was a "moral miasma," the Methodist minister William Hosmer intoned in 1855, "spreading everywhere, and corrupting the life-blood of the whole country."[33]

Invoking the mechanisms of miasmatic etiology that had been pressed upon public attention during the cholera epidemics of 1832 and 1849, abolitionists represented slavery as an inconspicuous yet pernicious contaminant poised to infect the unsuspecting: "The miasma that broods over Carolina in the summer seems to me but the emblem of the invisible, unrecognized, blindly guessed at moral miasma that rests over the lands where slavery exists," Hosmer's fellow Massachusetts social reformer, Charles Eliot Norton, wrote from Charleston that same year. If the literal miasma of the American South was understood as particularly deleterious to the fragile European constitution, so too was its "moral miasma"; like many of his contemporaries, Norton emphasized the dangers slavery posed, not to enslaved people, but to those who perpetuated the institution through both activity and complicity: "If I ever write against slavery," Norton continued, "it shall be on the ground not of its being bad for the blacks, but of its being deadly to the whites."[34]

Foregrounding the precarity of the white population, this miasmic conceptualization of slavery exploited the ways in which whites were, in Hazel Carby's words, "not immune to the effects of the slave system or to the influence of being able to wield a racist power,"[35] but deeply susceptible to these effects. Accordingly, it disrupted the sentimental politics that encouraged white affiliation with black suffering through acts of

imaginative transposition but principally understood the effects of slavery as bound to the black body. As Allewaert observes, "the bounded body is the implicit metaphor undergirding sentimental discourses" in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; thus a minoritarian view of the "disaggregated and opened body" worked to "challenge this sentimental fantasy" by proposing a materialism characterized by somatic openness. "Despite the terror this openness evokes," Allewaert continues, "it offers grounds for an ethics of relationality": "an engagement in which a body is recognized as a medium that extends into (and is extended into by) media that are proximate to it, and sometimes even into media that are not proximate to it."[36] The miasmic strain of abolitionist argumentation sought to offer one such "ethics of relationality," figuring the white subject as acutely open to and mediated by the institution.

While clergymen feared for the fate of a nation that would "continue to breathe the atmosphere of the pest-house of slavery,"[37] antebellum metaphors of miasmatic disease transmission did more than facilitate warnings about the imperiled moral integrity of white Americans. The figuration of slavery as an open ecology—one that transcended imposed geographic borders in its indiscriminate, atmospheric advancement—also served a pointedly political purpose on the eve of the Civil War, as the continuing expansion of the country necessitated the ongoing negotiation of "slave" and "free" territories. Just as the destruction wrought by the cholera epidemics had demonstrated the inefficacy of quarantine as a public health strategy, abolitionists insisted that the evils of slavery could not be contained by forms of geopolitical quarantine: "like the miasma of some pestilential pool," wrote Angelina Grimké,"[slavery] spreads its desolating influence far beyond its own boundaries."[38] Following the defeat of the Wilmot Proviso in 1846, Unitarian reformer Theodore Parker similarly worked to imaginatively unmoor slavery from its southern environs, warning that its "subtle and unseen" influence posed an imminent threat to the ostensibly immune North, as "its deadly spray and miasma gradually invade all our institutions."[39]

As Parker's admonition illustrates, slavery itself was conceived as a kind of slow violence: an "attritional catastrophe" whose invasion was enacted in both proximate and nonproximate geographies not only invisibly but "gradually" (Nixon, 7). By rewriting Dickens's description of the insurgent expansion of an atmosphere that extends its influence "everywhere," Crafts similarly suggests that the dangers of slavery transcend the immediate context of the plantation, progressively infiltrating supposedly "free" space. Hannah learns this lesson cruelly when she attempts to

escape the Lindendale plantation along with De Vincent's new wife, who is revealed to be the mixed-race daughter of a slave. Threatened with exposure by the aptly named Trappe—a reimagining of Dickens's sinister lawyer Tulkinghorn—the imperiled pair escape the estate but are anxious about seeking shelter with strangers and accordingly flee into the wilderness: "Under the broad heaven with the free air, the free leaves, the free beauties of nature about us," Hannah explains, "we could breathe freer than there" (65).[40]

Crafts's use of the phrase "free air" is especially evocative of transatlantic abolitionist discourse; if the concept of "free soil" maintained an especial significance in antebellum debates about the territorialization of slavery in the United States, "free air" admitted its own rhetorical force, having enjoyed a long history from as early as 1569, when English legal proceedings ruled that "*England* was too pure an Air for Slaves to breathe in."[41] In the nineteenth century, abolitionists on both sides of the Atlantic evoked the transformative properties of the atmosphere; William and Ellen Craft, for instance, would use well-known lines from William Cowper as the epigraph for their narrative *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom* (1860): "Slaves cannot breathe in England: if their lungs / Receive our air; that moment they are free; / They touch our country, and their shackles fall."[42] In the antebellum United States, however, the hope of this breathable freedom seemed increasingly improbable. As the passage of the Fugitive Act of 1850 made clear, slavery could extend its reach "everywhere."

Thus, although Hannah initially imagines the natural environment as immune to the contamination of slavery, the narrative quickly reveals that she is sorely mistaken. The "free air" into which she escapes in fact proves fraught with peril, leading to her own reenslavement and to the tragic fate of Mrs. De Vincent, who is rendered "decidedly insane" after suffering "[w]ant, fatigue, exposure, and the long agonies" (69). Ultimately, Mrs. De Vincent dies of a ruptured blood vessel: a condition, Crafts suggests, that is not simply instigated by psychological distress but hastened by the austere conditions the pair must suffer—including, ironically, "exposure" to the very air that had been invested with the false promise of freedom. As Crafts's narrative shows, "free air" was a political fantasy that prompted localist and escapist responses to a national crisis: no inoculating elixir, but a medium of exchange open to the miasmic infiltration of slavery.

Indeed, as the aftermath of emancipation and the failures of Reconstruction made clear, nominal freedom was no panacea for the

suffering of emancipated people. As historian Jim Downs has demonstrated, the Civil War ushered in "the largest biological crisis of the nineteenth century,"[43] as formerly enslaved people faced risks of exposure, starvation, sickness, and death—risks that resulted from a catastrophic failure of care at a federal level. For instance, when a major smallpox epidemic plagued the South from 1862 to 1868, the government did little to intervene in the public health emergency, instead contributing to a racist discourse that sought to "interpret the high mortality rates among freedpeople as signs of the extinction of the black race," thus "turning a biological crisis into a discourse about racial survival."[44] Reconstruction-era discourse effectively fulfilled the prophecy of antebellum proslavery ideologues, framing African American illness as a failure of self-care, rather than as the failure of the state to protect the rights to life and health.

The conclusion of *The Bondwoman's Narrative* uncannily anticipates this biological crisis. During her ultimate escape from the Wheeler plantation, Hannah crosses paths with a fellow fugitive, Jacob, and his sister, who is suffering from "dreadful fever" (221). After the woman dies, Hannah and Jacob discover that her body bears "the unmistakable signs of an infectious disease, at once malignant and dangerous." While Crafts does not name this "infectious disease" outright, both the "unmistakable signs" of its symptomatology and its hypothesized mechanism of transmission—Jacob suspects his sister "caught it in an old deserted house where they had remained a day or two, and in which they discovered and appropriated a bundle of old garments" (227)—indicate smallpox, the (similarly unnamed) disease that wreaks destruction in *Bleak House*. But if, in Dickens's novel, smallpox performs a democratizing function, in *The Bondwoman's Narrative* smallpox serves as a reminder of the ways in which preventable environmental illness operates as a form of racialized violence.

## "Legitimate effects": Environmental Violence and the Politics of Witness

The intrusion of disease in *The Bondwoman's Narrative,* as in *Bleak House,* reminds us that the "miasmic ecology," more than a convenient metaphor, is a structure of pathological conveyance and exchange that produces profound effects on human bodies. In Dickens's miasmic ecology, as we have seen, the threat of infection lies not simply in the atmosphere's geographical ubiquity—in the fact that it is, as the opening pages of *Bleak House* so memorably remind us, "everywhere"—but in its democratic potentiality: that it encompasses and constitutes *everyone.*

Accordingly, as Taylor suggests, the answer to the novel's pressing question—"What connexion can there be?"—is ultimately supplied "not by genealogy but by the urban climate, which claims both the crossing sweeper and the great lady for its own as the two characters who explicitly die from exposure" (36). At the same time, equal susceptibility does not necessarily entail equal risk; as both Taylor and Parham have noted, Dickens is keen to demonstrate the ways in which "the impacts of toxicity and ecological devastation are borne disproportionately by the poor," as evidenced by the fate of Jo.[45] The built environment of Tom-all-Alone's, the "ruinous place" where Jo lives—or rather, as Dickens quickly qualifies, where "Jo has not yet died"—is especially conducive to sickness, with its "crazy houses" open to the pathological influence of the air:

> Now, these tumbling tenements contain, by night, a swarm of misery. As on the ruined human wretch vermin parasites appear, so these ruined shelters have bred a crowd of foul existence that crawls in and out of gaps in walls and boards; and coils itself to sleep, in maggot numbers, where the rain drips in; and comes and goes, fetching and carrying fever. (272–73)

As Dickens demonstrates, susceptibility to fever is directly influenced by the structural conditions of poverty, which render some bodies more vulnerable than others. Crafts explicitly invokes this passage to describe the living conditions Hannah witnesses on the Wheeler plantation, repurposing this structural account of environmental violence to disrupt the racialized risk assessments of the plantation South:

> It is a stretch of the imagination to say that by night they contained a swarm of misery, that crowds of foul existence crawled in out of gaps in walls or boards, or coiled themselves to sleep on nauseous heaps of straw fetid with human perspiration and where the rain drips in, and the damp airs of midnight fatch [fetch] and carry malignant fevers. (204–5)

In transplanting the Dickensian ecology to the plantation South, Crafts achieves two key ends. First, she insists on the vulnerability of black bodies to the miasmic influences of the southern climate, disrupting the theory of racial immunity that was wielded by slavery apologists. Revising Dickens's passage to emphasize that these "malignant fevers" are actively transmitted by "damp airs," Crafts directly implicates the humid, swampy southern atmosphere as the cause and conduit of disease. Second, in emphasizing the deficiencies of the built environment, she redirects attention from scenes of spectacular violence toward the "slow violence" perpetuated by the structural conditions of slavery. As both Dickens and

Crafts suggest, it is the porosity of these dwellings in particular—the "gaps in walls and boards"—that imperils the health of their inhabitants. Like Dickens's "tumbling tenements," Crafts's shoddy slave huts, "ruinous with decay" (205), allow the miasmic agents of disease causation to insinuate invisibly into domestic space.

Hollis Robbins, who first identified these intertextual resonances in Crafts's text, has argued that Crafts's "borrowing" from *Bleak House* in this passage invites parallels between the enslaved black population of the United States and the Victorian working class in order to establish a "kinship of suffering, of squalor, of subjugation, of servitude."[46] Indeed, gestures toward transatlantic "kinship" were common among both nineteenth-century abolitionists and labor reformers who sought to affirm the mutual subjugation of these demographics;[47] at the same time, proslavery polemicists like Fitzhugh mobilized this rhetorical pairing for opposite ideological ends, contrasting the benevolent paternalism of the southern slave economy with the cruelties of industrial capitalism.[48] However, a more nuanced reading of this passage must attend not only to the comparison Crafts implicitly draws here but also to the terms in which she explicitly couches it. Crafts does not apply the Dickensian rhetoric of urban decay to the context of the southern plantation uncritically; rather, she deems it "a stretch of the imagination" to do so. Crafts might thus be understood to offer metacommentary on the task of literary transplantation: to resituate the Victorian slum in the American South is to make certain imaginative demands, she suggests—though for whom, she does not specify. Given how commonly enslaved black people were used as foils for the English working class—and vice versa—in nineteenth-century transatlantic print discourse, however, it seems somewhat strange to imagine that this parallelism itself would necessitate a "stretch of the imagination" either on the part of the author or her prospective readership. Pointing to the fact that the subject of this passage is not the enslaved person per se but rather the slave *quarters*, I would argue that the imaginative plasticity Crafts alludes to here relates specifically to the difficulty of a white readership to envision slavery in terms of a violence that is structural and environmental, rather than spectacular and corporeal.

The American slave narrative is rife with scenes of physical brutality. The whipping of Frederick Douglass's aunt Hester, for instance, has served as a primal scene for the genre, witnessing to the inhumanity of the enslaver—and indeed, Crafts herself includes just such a scene in the opening chapters of her novel, when we learn that Lindendale is

haunted by the legacy of an enslaved woman named Rose, who was tortured at the hands of the estate's late founder. As Saidiya Hartman has influentially argued, white audiences have historically latched onto these spectacular and grotesque images—the beatings, whippings, and torture readily evidenced in widely circulated images of scarred and brutalized flesh[49]—in order to formulate a sentimental politics of affiliation, in which black suffering is effectively eclipsed by the white imagination.[50] Rather than reaffirm the preoccupation with corporeal violence that has problematically functioned to essentialize suffering as a condition of black embodiment, Hartman calls for critical attention to "the diffusion of terror and the violence perpetuated under the rubric of pleasure, paternalism, and property."[51] Hartman's metaphor of "diffusion" is especially evocative, I would suggest, insofar as it intimates that terror operates via an ecological mechanism of atmospheric dispersal and permeation. This more expansive and "diffusive" understanding of violence is precisely what Crafts's narrative illuminates in its turn from the early scene of physical torture to the depiction of the Wheeler plantation as a site of environmental violence: a violence that is deliberately deployed by stakeholders in the slave economy.

As it makes its geographical move from the De Vincent estate to the Wheeler plantation, Crafts's novel also makes a theoretical move from the consolidated agency of the enslaver to the sort of distributed agency suggested by the model of miasma theory. This reorientation of agency is also marked by a distinct generic shift; while the overtly spectacular tale of Rose's abuse is presented as a gothic legend that engenders superstition, Crafts's account of the Wheeler plantation adopts the alternative model of Dickensian exposé. In so doing, the novel works, in Hartman's words, "to illuminate the terror of the mundane and quotidian rather than exploit the shocking spectacle,"[52] complicating nineteenth-century expectations that understood the effects of slavery in terms of immediate corporeal brutality. Framed from a more explicitly ecocritical perspective, it reveals what Nixon has similarly termed the "quotidian terrors" of environmental violence, highlighting the ways in which racism manifests not just in spectacular acts of violence against enslaved people but in the neglect of the environments they inhabit (149).

If it was corporeal violence in particular that rendered black pain legible to white readerships by way of shock, revulsion, and/or sentimental affiliation, the southern plantation functioned in the antebellum imagination as the site where the effects of slavery were most readily

perceptible: a trope persistently articulated in the travelogues of northern writers who toured the plantation South. In his 1855 *Inside View of Slavery*, for example—a volume contained in the library of John Hill Wheeler, the owner of the plantation on which the author of *The Bondwoman's Narrative* was enslaved[53]—the physician Charles Grandison Parsons reported that the "legitimate effects of slavery" were less pronounced in cities, where masters tend to "care for the condition of their servants" (although, he conceded, "the slaves probably experience great sufferings in the best condition, which the stranger cannot perceive, nor even the master know"). It was rather on the plantations of the Deep South, Parsons asserted, that one could "see slavery as it is. No where else are its legitimate results and real influences so fully disclosed."[54] Here, Parsons clearly demarcates the plantation as the locus of "legitimate" violence: that is, a violence that is clearly and indisputably visible to the white witness.

Prefaced by an enthusiastic endorsement from Harriet Beecher Stowe, Parsons's exposé is typical in its movement from the veiled violence of urban environments to the manifest barbarity of the plantation—in fact, *The Bondwoman's Narrative* rehearses precisely this path as Hannah is transported from Washington, DC, to rural North Carolina. However, what Hannah witnesses on the Wheeler plantation is not the corporeal or sexual violence typical of accounts of southern depravity but rather the "slow violence" of environmental degradation. As Nixon explains, in contrast to the popular understanding of violence as "an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, and as erupting into instant sensational visibility"—like, for instance, the whipping of Douglass's aunt Hester—slow violence is insidious, gradual, and cumulative (2). While Crafts clearly does not deny the fact of corporeal brutality, she ultimately situates spectacular violence within a broader structural context, using the passage from *Bleak House* to shift attention toward the ordinary environments in which the spectacular occurs.

As we have seen, nineteenth-century theories of racialized immunity framed the black body as abstracted from, rather than open to, the southern ecology. In repurposing Dickens's rhetoric of miasmic infection, then, Crafts asks us not only to imagine the invisible machinations of the "malignant" atmosphere but to understand black bodies as susceptible to such malignancies. "If the huts were bad, the inhabitants it seemed were still worse," Hannah reflects; "Degradation, neglect, and ill treatment had wrought on them its legitimate effects" (205). Here, the readily

apparent abasement of the field hands is presented as the consequence of a structural, systemic condition, one evidenced by the condition of the huts themselves.[55] While many critics have remarked on the narrator's "surprisingly extreme"[56] and "exceptionally severe"[57] assessment of the other black characters—in particular, the field hand Bill, to whom the threat of forced marriage precipitates her final flight to freedom[58]—I suggest that Crafts alerts us to the ecological tenor of her critique by directing Hannah's revulsion not just toward her prospective husband but toward his cabin, which is situated beside "a large pool of black mud and corrupt water" and "reeking with filth and impurity of every kind" (215). Hearkening to the "black mud and corrupt water" that Bucket and Snagsby observe on their inaugural excursion to Tom-all-Alone's, she figures Bill as the pathological outgrowth of his environment—much like Dickens's Jo, who suffers from "native ignorance, the growth of English soil and climate," and is evocatively likened to "a growth of fungus or any unwholesome excrescence produced there in neglect and impurity" (696, 687).[59] Confronting the imaginative deficiencies of an abolitionist sympathy that could conceive the violence of slavery only in terms of physical violence, Crafts argues that material conditions of enslavement produce attritional consequences that are no less "legitimate"—that is, not only no less "real" but no less *witnessable*—than more immediate corporeal ones.[60]

By insisting on the resilience of the African constitution in the face of the plantation environment, southern medical theorists legitimized the material conditions of enslavement—grueling labor, prolonged exposure to the elements, squalid living quarters—that produced and perpetuated disease and debility.[61] At the same time, they worked to *de*-legitimize black testimonies of embodied experience, frequently accusing enslaved people—particularly women—of feigning and exaggerating illness in order to escape forced labor.[62] If Crafts's narrative argues that the deleterious effects of enslavement are "legitimate" insofar as they are wrought upon the bodies and minds of enslaved people in ways that are witnessable, it also shows that these effects are legitimate—or rather, *legitimized*—insofar as they are lawful, socially sanctioned, and supported by the institutions that sustain them. As Daniel Hack has demonstrated, *The Bondwoman's Narrative* works to disrupt and deconstruct *Bleak House*'s localist politics by launching its critique at an institutional level—specifically, by countering its "frequent retreat from institutions to individuals, the social to the domestic, and politics to ethics."[63] Indeed, the very possibility of such a "retreat" underscores the position of privilege

from which Dickens writes, given that the enmeshment of black people in structures of institutionalized violence means that they do not have the luxury of "retreat" from the political; here, the ethical is always-already political. By presenting the suffering of the enslaved not as "the direct result of inattention, the way it is for Dickens's lumpenproletariat," but rather as "a matter of policy on the part of their owner," argues Hack, "Crafts is attacking institutions and attitudes—and institutions more than attitudes—that promote subordination and exploitation rather than disorder and neglect, as in *Bleak House*."[64]

In Dickens's novel, Hack suggests, "disorder and neglect" arise as a kind of atmospheric condition, a byproduct of "inattention," whereas Crafts's novel attacks the direct and identifiable antagonist of "policy." Yet I would suggest that Crafts's account of plantation violence combines a miasmic model of dispersed (and malevolent) agency *and* a model of willful subordination. Thus, while Hack's analysis helpfully directs our attention to the ways in which Crafts's novel does not simply ventriloquize or mimic Dickens's but critically interrogates its care politics, I would revise his claim to argue that what Crafts's rewriting of *Bleak House* illuminates is not subordination *instead of* neglect, but rather subordination *by* neglect. This distinction is crucial, I argue, because it allows us to understand how environmental violence does not simply operate adjacent to the institutional manifestations of racism but is leveraged and perpetuated by those institutions. When Crafts asserts that "[d]egradation, neglect, and ill treatment" produce "legitimate effects" on enslaved people, she identifies "neglect" as a technology of racial subordination. In other words, the violence Crafts identifies is not what we might term "benign neglect"; it is criminal negligence.

Understood this way, the violence of the plantation ecology is characterized not by "inattention" or "misdirected attention," as per Hack's assessment of Dickens, but rather by a calculated politics of "indirection."[65] Building on what Rachel Carson deemed "death by indirection" as well as Johan Galtung's concept of "indirect or structural violence," Nixon's theorization of "slow violence" specifically attends to the ways in which the "indirection" surrounding often-imperceptible forms of violence contains a distinct temporal dimension, as it demands the tracking of causality (10). Crafts alludes to the temporality of violence in the plantation ecology when she suggests that the effects of degradation will be borne out in the long term, as the shoddily constructed slave huts will inevitably topple and fall. And yet, she grimly continues, neither the destruction of the huts nor their inhabitants will compromise the

integrity of the institution, since human collateral is expendable in this economy: "if a head gets bruised or a limb broken, heads and limbs are so plentiful that they seem of small account. So true it is that if a great man sneezes the world rings with it," writes Crafts, "but if a poor man dies no one notices or cares" (205).[66] Of course, while Crafts employs the Dickensian rhetoric of class in this aphorism, what she exposes in her novel is not indifference toward the "poor" but the operation of antiblack racism in particular—thus offering not just an argument about environmental justice broadly writ but, more specifically, about what we would today call environmental racism.

Coined by Reverend Benjamin Chavis in 1982 during protests against the placement of a PCB landfill in Warren County, North Carolina—a predominantly African American community some sixty miles west of Murfreesboro, where the author of *The Bondwoman's Narrative* was once enslaved—"environmental racism" refers to a range of discriminatory practices, including "racial discrimination in the official sanctioning of the life-threatening presence of poisons and pollutants in communities of color."[67] Yet as I am suggesting here, the term might also be employed to describe the culture of neglect in the antebellum South. After all, nineteenth-century scientific racism supplied precisely this sort of "official sanctioning" of systemic violence, encouraging the disproportionate exposure of black bodies to the environmental causes of morbidity, mortality, and disability. As Crafts's novel shows, the "neglect" of the enslaver is intentional, deliberate, and exactingly rationalized by nineteenth-century scientific ideologies: "Mr. Wheeler had neglected his plantation as well as his slaves for several reasons," Hannah explains. "In the first place he didn't think it worth while to take pains with such brutalised specimens of humanity. They could work just as well, and it might be even better to leave them alone in their degradation" (207). Wheeler's assumption that his slaves "could work just as well" regardless of the care taken for their preservation typifies the logic of proslavery arguments, which posited the black body as impervious to the hazards of the plantation ecology—hazards that are not only "natural" but enabled and exacerbated by the social and material conditions of enslavement. Further, the suggestion that "it might be even better to leave them alone in their degradation" demonstrates the willful nature of the enslaver's neglect.

As a form of slow violence defined by causal and temporal "indirection," environmental racism demands a politics of witness that seeks not spectacle of the immediate and proximate but to expose the hazards

inherent in the environment as they manifest over time. Of course, as Nixon reminds us, the challenges inherent in exposing the invisible and durational operations of slow violence consist not only in rendering these operations manifest but in asserting "the social authority of witness": "To address violence discounted by dominant structures of apprehension," Nixon writes, "is necessarily to engage the culturally variable issue of *who counts as a witness*" (16). Critiquing the ideological investments of a culture that routinely sought, and seeks, to question and delegitimize and render suspect the experience and testimony of black people—from the medical institution's dismissal of pain and sickness to the "requisite act of authentication" routinely demanded of nineteenth-century narratives of enslavement, typically via the corroborating paratext of a white patron—Crafts's text taps into epistemological and ontological questions that preoccupied debates about both science and slavery in the nineteenth-century United States: what ideologies, methods, and forms of evidence—and whose bodies, testimonies, and experience—constituted "legitimate" modes of knowledge or ways of being?[68]

Through her critical engagement with *Bleak House*, Crafts deploys an idiom of ecological witness characteristic of the emergent Victorian discourses of public health and environmental justice and critically revises it for the plantation South. While a predominant strain of antebellum medico-environmental discourse presented the black body as radically dissociated from southern ecology, immune to its manifold forms of environmental violence—including both the miasmic atmosphere itself and the structural conditions of housing and labor—*The Bondwoman's Narrative* challenges this view to offer an ecological account of violence, disrupting the racist view of the plantation as a sphere of paternalistic protection to situate it instead as a Dickensian "swarm of misery" characterized by the precarious interpenetration of racialized bodies and physical environments. These strategic citations serve as a way to infuse the text with the expert discourse of Victorian sanitary reform, inviting the reader to identify correspondences between the English working class and the enslaved black population of the United States, not simply in the vague pathos of their predicaments, but in the specific mechanisms of violence to which they are subjected. Thus, rather than claim that the author of *The Bondwoman's Narrative* "performs the voice of a middle-class, Dickensian reformer,"[69] I would argue that she leverages Dickens's social authority as a sanitarian to witness to the realities of slow violence in the plantation ecology. Ultimately, in asserting this ecological view of

racialized violence, she argues for a recognition of the legitimacy of risk in a culture of systemic neglect.

## Conclusion: Miasmic Reading

*The Bondwoman's Narrative*'s reimagining of *Bleak House* shows us how the nineteenth-century transatlantic print sphere itself can be imagined as an open ecology: a realm in which texts are conspicuously fluid and mutable, susceptible to manifold acts of transplantation, reinterpretation, and reincarnation. More than illuminating the malleability of the novel as a genre, though, *The Bondwoman's Narrative* also explores and exposes "the permeable boundaries and surprising cross-fertilizations between what we today rigidly categorize as 'art' and 'science,'" to borrow Britt Rusert's description of the nineteenth-century African American practice she calls "fugitive science." When interpreted in terms of the "fugitive understanding of empiricism" that framed scientific investigation as experimentation, Rusert argues, "experimental aesthetic practices like assemblage, collage, and juxtaposition, which populated the antebellum African American print sphere," may be seen as something other than plagiaristic. Instead, she reads such practices as mobilizing the "Baconian method" of investigation in their "incorporation and accumulation of different factual sources and forms of empirical evidence."[70] Adapting Rusert's argument, I would argue that *The Bondwoman's Narrative* does not simply "incorporate" *Bleak House* as a form of empirical evidence; rather, it resituates *Bleak House* to interrogate the racialized understandings of corporeality that informed the very meanings and uses of evidence in the antebellum United States.

If Dickens successfully exposes the miasmic hazards of the Victorian urban ecology, Crafts faces a more complex challenge in her recontextualization of that ecology by positing racialized bodies as similarly susceptible to those hazards—a representation, she suggests, that may a require "a stretch of the imagination." But Crafts's novel not only resists deep-seated beliefs about racialized immunity in the antebellum United States; it also challenges entrenched conceptions about what constituted racialized violence. As Nixon argues, to confront these terrors "requires that we complicate conventional assumptions about violence as a highly visible act that is newsworthy because it is event focused, time bound, and body bound."[71] And one of the fundamental challenges to achieving this reorientation, Nixon notes, is "representational": "how to devise arresting

stories, images, and symbols adequate to the pervasive but elusive violence of delayed effects" (3).

In response to the challenge Nixon articulates, Jesse Oak Taylor has proposed that narrative may offer a "potential antidote" to slow violence, as it encourages us to establish connections across time. The practice of "[r]eading atmospherically," Taylor writes, "calls our attention to the interconnection of characters, spaces, objects, formal attributes, and the contexts of both writing and reading" (16, 17). To approach Crafts's previously unpublished manuscript at a remove of more than a century and a half is to invite consideration of these multiple contexts, prompting us to note the ways in which contemporary media still largely conceives of antiblack racism solely in spectacular and "event focused" terms, encouraging us to consume infinitely repeatable scenes of police brutality while largely ignoring the quotidian manifestations of environmental racism. Yet in order to not simply recognize but *redress* what Nixon terms the "elusive violence of delayed effects," we must do more than trace connections and issue predictions about the manifestation of these effects; rather, like Crafts, we must affirm the legitimacy of the *causes*. Heeding the models of both African American literary scholars like Hartman and ecocritics like Nixon, white audiences in particular can become more ethical witnesses to stories of readers of racialized violence by resisting the spectacular publicity of the wounded and mutilated body as the only "legitimate" manifestation of racism and, concomitantly, as the only "legitimate" grounds for action.

If what Taylor terms "atmospheric reading" is a method that "revises the common notion that the novel is a genre predicated upon (and formative of) the human individual as the key locus of agency, ethics, and subjectivity," such that "[t]he work of the novel becomes not to account for individual subjects but to materialize the climates of history" (14, 15), one way to understand *The Bondwoman's Narrative* is in terms of what we might alternatively and more specifically deem "miasmic reading." While miasma theory conceptualized the infectious air, and not the infected body, as the vector of violence, the body was nevertheless the site on which miasma was made visible, as its latent operations were ultimately announced in the eventual manifestation of somatic symptomology. Miasmic reading, then, is a strategy that similarly resists an emphasis on individual subjectivity by examining the distributed agency of the plantation ecology but specifically attends to the body as a site in which these "climates of history" materialize.[72]

Miasmic reading offers an alternative way of approaching nineteenth-century African American texts, acknowledging how their authors witness not only to scenes of corporeal violence on the plantation but to the slow violence of the plantation ecology.[73] On the southern plantation, as accounts like Crafts's remind us, the effects of scientific racism were wrought on the bodies of enslaved people; just as legacies of state negligence—in Flint, Michigan, and around the country—have been rendered legible in the blood lead levels of poisoned children. Rather than approaching the body as spectacle or fetish, however, miasmic reading asks us to witness to the ways in which bodies are elements of an open ecology defined and sustained by racialized violence. Attending to the "legitimate effects"—and legitimate causes—of racial health disparities, it calls for an ethics and politics of care by which those who have been denied the right to health may "breathe freer."

## Notes

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1. In 2013 Gregg Hecimovich offered archival evidence indicating that "Hannah Crafts" was most probably the pseudonym of Hannah Bond, an African American woman who escaped enslavement from the plantation of North Carolinian politician John Hill Wheeler in or around 1857. Wheeler's plantation boarded students from a neighboring girls' school where students were required to memorize passages of *Bleak House*. See Bosman, "Professor Says."
2. As Daniel Hack has argued, Crafts does more than reproduce *Bleak House* but "renovates the novel—in part, paradoxically, by deconstructing it." Hack, *Reaping Something New,* 38. In her contribution to the inaugural volume of essays on the novel that she co-edited with Gates in 2004, Hollis Robbins termed Crafts's strategy of "literary alchemy" a kind of "textual transfiguration, extraction, and transmutation" that is intended, Robbins argues, to call attention to self-consciousness of the text's fictionality. Robbins, "Blackening

*Bleak House*," 74. In the decade since, other scholars have explored Crafts's reproductions and revisions of Dickens more rigorously, investigating how the novel's engagement with *Bleak House* shapes our understandings of Crafts an author, reader, and would-be reformer. See, for example, Ballinger, Lustig, and Townshend, "Missing Intertexts"; Bernier and Newman, "'The Bondwoman's Narrative'"; Ellis, "'so amiable and so good'"; Gleason, *Sites Unseen*; Soares, "Literary Graftings"; Teukolsky, "Pictures in Bleak Houses"; and Hack, *Reaping Something New*.

3. MacDuffie, *Victorian Literature,* 89.
4. Parham, "Bleak Intra-Actions," 122.
5. J. Taylor, *The Sky of Our Manufacture,* 33. All subsequent references to this edition are noted parenthetically in the text.
6. Parrish, *American Curiosity,* 91. In his *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785), Thomas Jefferson famously defended "the race of whites, transplanted from Europe" against such charges of degeneration, while his contemporary J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur celebrated "the power of transplantation" by which European colonizers had "taken root and flourished" like so much flora upon American soil. Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia,* 67; Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer*, 53. For more on creolization, see Goudie, *Creole America*.
7. Rusert, "Plantation Ecologies," 346. As a result of this inability to maintain a healthful coherence, Rusert writes, "the New World plantation was transformed from an imagined idyllic ecology of botanical bounty and pure soil to a tainted geography that enclosed usable bodies and usable lands to be put in the service of increasingly experimental purposes at the hands of the planter class." Rusert, "Plantation Ecologies," 343. Similarly, in her analysis of a minoritarian ecological imagination, Allewaert addresses colonial anxieties of openness, noting how the Anglo-European "fantasy of the bounded body" was disrupted in the colonized tropics by an "alternate materialism of the body" marked by "disaggregation and dispersal" rather than coherence and enclosure. Allewaert, *Ariel's Ecology,* 18, 3.
8. Rusert, "Plantation Ecologies," 366.
9. According to one popular line of proslavery reasoning, "the physical condition of the [African] race has greatly improved by transplantation," since "the climate of our temperate and torrid zones, is much more suitable to the African constitution, than even their own climate." Dew, *Review of the Debate,* 40. For more on environmental

theories of racial difference, see Livingstone, "The Moral Discourse of Climate"; Weiner and Hough, *Sex, Sickness, and Slavery;* and Hogarth, *Medicalizing Blackness*. For a discussion of the theories of black invulnerability in the early national period as a refutation of geographically determinist theories of race, see Rusert, *Fugitive Science,* 33–64.

10. Cartwright, "Report on Diseases," 698. The theory of African immunity to yellow fever had been popularized by the South Carolinian physician John Lining in his account of the 1748 outbreak in Charleston and promoted (though later rescinded) by Benjamin Rush during the 1793 Philadelphia yellow fever epidemic in a bid to encourage free black people to volunteer as nurses and gravediggers. For more on theories of African immunity, see Savitt, *Medicine and Slavery;* Kiple and King, *Another Dimension;* and Willoughby, *Yellow Fever*.
11. In the 1840s and '50s, in particular, a cohort of southern physicians struggled to assert the legitimacy of "states'-rights medicine": an ideological program that merged medico-environmental theories of racial difference with the interests of the southern slave economy to argue that the regional idiosyncrasies of the southern climate necessitated geographically specific theorizations of disease susceptibility, immunity, and treatment. See Savitt and Young, *Disease and Distinctiveness;* and Duffy, "States' Rights Medicine."
12. Nixon, *Slow Violence,* 2. All subsequent references to this edition are noted parenthetically in the text.
13. Parham, "Bleak Intra-Actions," 119.
14. Chadwick, *Report on the Sanitary Population*, 228.
15. Dickens, *Bleak House,* 364. All subsequent references to this edition are noted parenthetically in the text.
16. Though invisible, miasma was nevertheless considered to be conspicuously perceptible by the senses, as suggested by Chadwick's contention that "all smell is, if it be intense, immediate acute disease." Select Committee on Metropolitan Sewage Manure, *Report,* 109.
17. As Taylor points out, the miasmic resonances of *Bleak House* are particularly strong, given Dickens's choice to locate Tom-all-Alone's in a section of London that had suffered the acute effects of the recent cholera epidemic of 1849. J. Taylor, *The Sky of Our Manufacture,* 35.
18. As Taylor argues, Dickens's fog is a "a vehicle bound up in the traffic between human and nonhuman systems": a kind of agent that "materializes the networks, ideologies, and interconnections of the

metropolitan economy." Reading *Bleak House* through the lens of new ecological materialism, Parham classes the Dickensian fog not as an agent but, in Latour's terms, an "actant," drawing in particular on what Karen Barard calls "intra-actions"—encounters with material ecology that demonstrate how "human selves cannot be extricated from the networks of matter in which we are entangled." See J. Taylor, *The Sky of Our Manufacture,* 43; and Parham, "Bleak Intra-Actions," 115.

19. Crafts, *The Bondwoman's Narrative,* 162. All subsequent references to this edition are noted parenthetically in the text.
20. Ruskin, *Storm Cloud*, 62. As Brian J. Day notes, Ruskin's lecture has become "perhaps the best-known piece of nineteenth-century 'environmental writing' by an English author." Day, "Moral Intuition," 917.
21. Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative,* 44. In nineteenth-century medical discourse, "gloom" was frequently employed diagnostically to describe melancholy, insanity, and other species of mental disease. According to the British physician James Cowles Prichard, the condition of "moral insanity" was primarily characterized by "a tendency to gloom or sorrow." Prichard, *Treatise on Insanity,* 24.
22. Fitzhugh, *Sociology for the South,* 37.
23. For more on "anti-Tom novels," see Meer, *Uncle Tom Mania.*
24. Hepworth, *The Whip, Hoe, and Sword*, 159.
25. Dickens, *American Notes,* 167.
26. Dickens, *American Notes*, 170.
27. Although slaves may have "an unpleasant experience on the whole," Skimpole asserts, "they people the landscape for me, they give it a poetry for me, and perhaps that is one of the pleasanter objects of their existence." Dickens, *Bleak House,* 307.
28. Metropolitan Sanitary Commission, *First Report,* 309.
29. Dickens, *Speech,* 8.
30. Schwarzbach, "*Bleak House,*" 95.
31. Greeson, *Our South,* 14. Indictments of southern insalubrity would continue in the Reconstruction-era "sick South," as Natalie Ring has demonstrated. See Ring, *The Problem South,* 72.
32. See, for example, Child, *The Patriarchal Institution,* 43; Price, *Slavery in America,* 276; Brown, *American Slavery,* 30; and Treadwell, *American Liberties and American Slavery,* 451.
33. Hosmer, *Slavery and the Church,* 198–99.
34. Norton, *Letters,* 122.

35. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood,* 55. As Harriet Jacobs argued in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, all persons were equally susceptible to the "contaminating atmosphere" of slavery. Jacobs, *Incidents,* 179.
36. Allewaert, *Ariel's Ecology,* 19.
37. Bowen, *Slavery,* 160.
38. Grimké, *Appeal to the Women*, 14.
39. Parker, *Letter to the People*, 6.
40. William Gleason reads these lines as a suggestion that Crafts equates the state of being "unfree" with the state of being "radically unhoused," drawing parallels to Esther Summerson's "housekeeper-to-homeowner" trajectory in *Bleak House* to argue that "Crafts narrates . . . a search for black homeownership that is linked to self-ownership." Gleason, *Sites Unseen*, 44, 28. Of course, as an environmental justice perspective would point out, it is not only the state of being *unhoused* that poses risks to the black body, but being ill-housed, insufficiently housed, unsafely housed, etc.
41. Quoted in Weiner, *Black Trials,* 83.
42. Cowper, *The Task,* 2.40–42.
43. Downs, *Sick from Freedom,* 4.
44. Downs, *Sick from Freedom,* 15.
45. In conversation with Ulrich Beck, Taylor highlights Dickens's awareness that "the democracy of smog lies in its effects; its causes are quite the opposite." J. Taylor, *The Sky of Our Manufacture*, 37.
46. Robbins, "Blackening *Bleak House*," 81.
47. For more on the cross-pollination of abolitionist and class politics, see Fisch, *American Slaves in Victorian England.*
48. Fitzhugh contrasted the ethos of "domestic affection" that bound master and slave in symbiosis with the cruelties of industrial capitalism: "The usual, the ordinary, the normal condition of the whole laboring class, is that of physical suffering, cankering, corroding care, and mental apprehension and pain." Fitzhugh, *Sociology for the South,* 165.
49. The photograph "The Scourged Back," for example, published in *Harper's Weekly* in 1863, was received as an emblem of corporeal brutality. For discussions of "The Scourged Back," see Jackson, *Violence;* and Strick, *American Dolorologies.*
50. "The effort to counteract the commonplace callousness to black suffering required that the white body be positioned in place of the black body in order to make this suffering visible and intelligible," Hartman writes; thus "empathy is double-edged, for in making the

other's suffering one's own, this suffering is occluded by the other's obliteration." Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection,* 19.

51. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection,* 4.
52. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection,* 4.
53. Wheeler's library was sold at auction in 1882; scholars have used the accompanying catalog to make claims about the range of texts to which the author of *The Bondwoman's Narrative* may have had access. See *Catalogue of the Library of John H. Wheeler.*
54. Parsons, *Inside View of Slavery,* 19.
55. Hannah imaginatively projects this abjection over a period of generations: "The greatest curse of slavery," she asserts, "is it's [*sic*] hereditary character. The father leaves to his son an inheritance of toil and misery, and his place on the fetid straw in the miserable corner, with no hope or possibility of anything better. And the son in turn transmits the same to his offspring and thus forever" (205). Here, Crafts consolidates the logics of hereditary and infectious transmission, suggesting that the transhistorical reach of slavery's abasement consists not only in the reproduction of bodies but in the infinite reproduction of the structural conditions of misery. Martha Cutter has similarly pointed to the ways in which Crafts "mimics and inverts the discourse of racial inheritance" in this passage in order to demonstrate that "what is inherited is actually circumstantial (poverty, toil, and misery), not biological." Cutter, "Skinship," 123.
56. Levine, *Dislocating Race and Nation,* 173.
57. Li, *Something Akin to Freedom,* 59.
58. Writing in 2005, for instance, Celeste-Marie Bernier and Judie Newman cited the "racist overtones" of the novel's plantation scenes—in particular, Hannah's horror at the threat of forced marriage to Bill—to raise skepticism about the novel's African American authorship, arguing that the narrative is atypical of African American texts insofar as it "condemns the race en masse for their depravity" and "is concerned not with reclaiming black humanity or redeeming individuals but with exposing their condition at the bottom of society." Bernier and Newman, "'The Bondwoman's Narrative,'" 162. However, if Crafts's strategy consists of "exposing" the conditions of black subjugation rather than "redeeming individuals," it is perhaps not because she is insufficiently empathetic to the suffering of enslaved people but because she is rejecting the terms of individual subjectivity by which this suffering is most often rendered legible. Crafts does not condemn the

African *race*, I would argue, but rather the ideological structures of scientific and environmental *racism* that produce, perpetuate, and legitimate conditions of physical and mental degradation.

59. In their essay "North American Slavery," published in *Household Words* in September 1852, Dickens and his co-author Henry Morley would use similar imagery, describing enslaved Africans as "[d]ebased by education under a demoralizing system, which acts as a blight on every wholesome growth in every slave's mind." Dickens and Morley, "North American Slavery," 267.
60. The "legitimate effects" are especially evident in the "mental condition" of the field hands, Hannah suggests: a condition that can be "summed up in the phrase that they know nothing," as they "toil beneath the burning sun, scarcely conscious that any link exists between themselves and other portions of the human race" (206). Here, of course, Crafts evokes Dickens's Jo, who professes that he "don't know nothink" and toils away "unconscious of the link, if any link there be," between the disparate classes of Victorian society. Dickens, *Bleak House,* 696. Tellingly, though, Crafts's revision does not allow for the equivocation of Dickens's conditional "if" but instead affirms "that" a "link" exists. In Crafts's novel, the link between the field hands and "other portions of the human race" is not merely defined by sympathetic attachment but by mutual susceptibility to environmental violence.
61. "Although more exposed to the cold dews and hot sun of autumn, as well as having more filth about their habitations," the Georgia physician E. M. Pendleton declared, "[the African race] seem to be less liable to periodic fevers, and more readily recover than the white." Pendleton, "On the Susceptibility," 337–38. To account for the occasional disease outbreak among enslaved people, some physicians were wont to cite racialized failures of self-care: "There can be little doubt that the dreaded typhoid fever, which has of late been so destructive on some plantations, owes its origin largely to the accumulated filth of years about negro cabins," one doctor asserted in 1859; "for negroes, like hogs, are not remarkably cleanly." Wilson, "The Negro," 92. Others acknowledged the necessity of the enslaver's intervention to ensure healthful conditions; responding to outbreaks of "ship fever" in slave quarters, for instance, an article reprinted in *De Bow's Review* in 1850 admitted "it may be concluded that it is important that planters should adopt some system or rule under the operation of which their negro houses shall be properly

constructed, their quarters adequately ventilated and dried, and the manner of living among their negroes regulated." "Houses for Negroes," 325.

62. "The negro is prone to dissemble and feign disease," the Georgia physician Henry Ramsay asserted in 1852; "probably no race of human beings feign themselves ill so frequently, and are so incapable of concealing their duplicity." Ramsay, *Necrological Appearances*, 14. Historian Sharla Fett identifies the practice of "playing possum" as a "strategy of resistance" among enslaved people; Hartman, too, includes "feigned illness" as one of the "small-scale and everyday forms of resistance" that "interrupted, reelaborated, and defied the constraints of everyday life under slavery and exploited openings in the system for the use of the enslaved." See Fett, *Working Cures,* 182; and Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection,* 51.
63. Hack, *Reaping Something New,* 39. As Hack points out, Dickens's satirical indictment of Mrs. Jellyby's program of "telescopic philanthropy" promotes a "race-based localism" that Crafts ultimately complicates by dismantling "its defining opposition between attention to people of color and attention to family and friends." Hack, *Reaping Something New*, 38.
64. Hack, *Reaping Something New*, 38.
65. Hack, *Reaping Something New,* 38.
66. In short, then, we might say that Crafts's text illuminates the operation of racism as Foucault defines it: "the indispensable precondition that allows someone to be killed." The act of "killing," Foucault explains, encompasses not only "murder as such, but also every form of indirect murder," including "exposing someone to death" and "increasing the risk of death for some people." Foucault, *"Society Must Be Defended,"* 256.
67. In addition to "the deliberate targeting of communities of color for toxic waste disposal and the siting of polluting industries," Chavis's definition includes the practices of "racial discrimination in environmental policy making" and "racial discrimination in the history of excluding people of color from the mainstream environmental groups, decision making boards, commissions, and regulatory bodies." Chavis, Foreword, 3. For a discussion of contemporary environmental racism, see D. Taylor, *Toxic Communities.*
68. Stepto, *From Behind the Veil,* 12.
69. Teukolsky, "Pictures in Bleak Houses," 515.
70. Rusert, *Fugitive Science,* 21.

71. Rusert, *Fugitive Science,* 3. My argument in this essay departs somewhat from Nixon's, in that its particular concern with environmental health and illness in *The Bondwoman's Narrative* necessitates an understanding of violence that is to some extent "body bound." In this way, it also departs from much of the first wave of scholarship on *The Bondwoman's Narrative,* which tended to remark on the ways in which the novel "emphasizes slavery's psychological effects over its physical effects." Buell, "Bondwoman Unbound," 22. While it is indeed true that Crafts's narrator repeatedly rejects the emphasis on "physical suffering" as the preeminent metric by which we assess the malignity of the institution—instead, she contends, the "evils of slavery" consist in "the fear, the apprehension, the dread, and deep anxiety attending that condition"—I would suggest that view that the psychological ramifications of slavery are more pronounced in Crafts's text than its "physical effects" relies on an overly narrow understanding of what constitutes the "physical." Specifically, this argument seems to take for granted that slavery's "physical effects" must be immediate, brutal, and indisputable—that is, "physical" in ways that are readily legible to and authenticable by white audiences. However, as Crafts's narrative shows, the institution of slavery relied on forms of systemic violence, both environmental and psychological, that are invisible and incremental but whose effects are ultimately no less "physical" in their ultimate impact upon morbidity and mortality—and, in her terms, no less "legitimate," or legitimized, as technologies of racism. Crafts, *The Bondwoman's Narrative,* 97.
72. J. Taylor, *The Sky of Our Manufacture,* 14. Taylor's argument hinges on a distinction between the concepts of "atmosphere" and "climate": "Where atmosphere is immediate and immersive," Taylor explains, "climate is an abstraction that can only be apprehended in and through time, which makes narrative a vital mechanism for understanding it." Considered in terms of nineteenth-century miasma theory, atmosphere is "immediate and immersive" in that it provides the context and mechanism of infection—yet it, too, "can only be apprehended in and through time" in that its deleterious effects on the human body must manifest as symptoms.
73. We might note, for instance, that *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth* (1850) begins with a description of the cellar in which Truth slept during her enslavement: "the space between the loose boards of the floor, and the uneven earth below, was often filled with mud and water, the uncomfortable splashings of which were as annoying

as its noxious vapors must have been chilling and fatal to health. She shudders, even now," the account continues, "as she goes back in memory, and revisits this cellar, and sees its inmates, of both sexes and all ages, sleeping on those damp boards, like the horse, with a little straw and a blanket; and she wonders not at the rheumatisms, and fever-sores, and palsies, that distorted the limbs and racked the bodies of those fellow-slaves in after-life." Explicitly identifying a causal link between these degraded living conditions—in particular, prolonged exposure to "noxious vapors"—and the production of disease and disability, Truth's *Narrative* proposes a distinct etiology as it elucidates the effects of enslavement on the body. The formerly enslaved person continues—"to this day" and "even now"—to bear the burden of this violence, bearing witness to its effects even in the emancipated "after-life." Truth and Gilbert, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth,* 14–15.

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