

The Vexed Position of the Black Secret-Bearer: Concealments and Revelations in Hannah
Crafts' *The Bondwoman's Narrative*

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The publication history of Hannah Crafts' 1850s novel *The Bondwoman's Narrative* is a lesson in the ambivalent nature of concealments and revelations. Inadvertently pointing to the presence of these structures, Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s Introduction to the novel presents the work as a discovery that "has found [its] way, a century or two later, to a place where [it] can be preserved and made available" to modern readers (ix). Gates—the implicit discoverer of the hitherto concealed text—had bought the original handwritten manuscript at an auction by Swann Galleries in 2001 and until then, the novel was relatively unknown. Crafts' book follows the enslaved narrator Hannah as she helps Mrs. Vincent, the biracial wife of her enslaver, flee her home to avoid slavery, and chronicles the travails that ensue—fugitivity, Mrs. Vincent's death, and Hannah's re-enslavement under the Henrys and the Wheelers—until Hannah herself finally escapes to freedom. For Gates, the unearthing of this novel is momentous because it is hinged on another interrelated revelation: by virtue of its author's racial identity, the holograph is the first known novel by an enslaved woman. In outlining the meticulous process through which he authenticated Hannah Crafts' elusive identity, Gates persistently uses the metaphors of a search,ⁱ further characterizing the saga through a language of uncovering the hidden. The revelation that Crafts was formerly enslaved is crucial to Gates because her unedited manuscript, then, reveals "the mind of a slave in an unmediated fashion heretofore not possible" (xxxiii). Not everyone, however, shares Gates' enthusiasm to pry into what is concealed. His desire to uncover the racial identity of Hannah Crafts has been challenged by critics like Rebecca Soares, who sees his "all-

consuming attention to the woman behind the manuscript” as invasive in its “attempt to construct a racially totalizing narrative” (3). For her, Gates’ desire to pin down the author’s race risks putting into play power structures in which the critic manipulates the interpretation of the text and appropriates it by stifling what the text itself has to say (5). Soares’ problem with Gates pivots on questions regarding the ethics and affordances of concealment and exposure. What the latter sees as a revelation of “great historical importance” (Gates xxxiii), Soares sees as marred by Gates’ obsession as a “discoverer” (Soares 5).

The ethically ambivalent nature of concealments and revelation—oscillating between beneficial and racially subjugating—finds a textual resonance within *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*. Like the equivocal nature of the critical tug-of-war between Soares and Gates, Hannah Crafts’ novel eschews attaching a simple binary of good/evil and desirable/undesirable onto either concealments or exposure. Focusing on the portrayal of secrecy and revelation within *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*, this essay shows that the moral and functional value of both is contingent on the workings of slavery. Hannah, the novel’s narrator, proudly dubs herself “the repository of secrets” (11) early on in the text, willingly taking on the secrets of her enslaved community while at Lindendale. Her gratification in this role, however, is short-lived. Later, at the Henrys’ house, Hannah refuses to keep the secret of the escape of her enslaved friends and even informs Mrs. Henry, the enslaver, of their plot. Why this astonishing betrayal? Why this about-turn in Hannah’s attitude regarding the power of secrecy? The answers to these questions reveal that the affordances of concealment for the enslaved is inflected by its use as a tool for racial oppression under slavery. I argue that Hannah’s transformation occurs because she gradually becomes aware of the vexed position of the communal secret-bearer. While she initially uses secrecy to facilitate intimacy within her community and resistance against slavery’s

dictates, Hannah becomes increasingly hesitant towards bearing the secrets of others. Her crucial encounter with the other secret-bearer in the story, the villainous Mr. Trappe, exposes to her how secrecy is a technology for racial control and that communal secrets can endanger the enslaved. At the same time, this does not mean that Hannah rejects secrecy altogether. As this paper shows, while wary of shared secrets, Hannah still uses personal secrets for her own survival. Escape, Hannah knows, is impossible without concealment. In the end, her freedom is tied not only to her legal status but also to the shackles of secrecy and its concomitant consequences. Crafts shows us that while secrecy can be used for resistance, this is not always such a simple solution for those trapped in slavery.ⁱⁱ

In examining secrecy as a potent facilitator of violence under slavery, this essay veers away from the traditional concerns when considering slave narratives in general and Crafts in particular—that of the racial identity of the author and consequently, the veracity of the experiences portrayedⁱⁱⁱ. Spirited debates concerning Crafts' identity (some for and some against Gates' formulation) and the intertextual echoes of Charles Dickens and Harriet Beecher Stowe in her work has led to extensive scholarship on whether Crafts truly was a formerly enslaved woman and if, as a self-proclaimed slave narrative, *The Bondwoman's Narrative* really was based on real-life incidents. While these discussions are undoubtedly important in the field of African-American literary studies, my aim is different. Even though Hannah Crafts' identity is somewhat shrouded in mystery^{iv}, her text still speaks incisively about how the stakes are high when even mundane social practices such as secrecy operates within slavery. As the central framework undergirding the protagonist's life, secrecy is at once freeing, enslaving, and necessary. This many-layered portrayal confirms Sissela Bok's observations on the expansive power of concealment. In *Secrets: On the Ethics of Concealment and Revelation*, Bok posits that

“secrecy may accompany the most innocent as well as the most lethal acts; it is needed for human survival, yet it enhances every form of abuse. The same is true of efforts to uncover or invade secrets” (xv). *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* cogently displays the nuances of Bok’s argument for those living under slavery: Hannah longs both for the freedom attainable only through secrecy and for freedom from the chokehold of secrecy. Through the functioning of this dialectic relationship, secrecy assumes a status that is beneficial enough for the enslaved to embrace and powerful enough for the enslaver to wield.

In addition to examining the nature of secrecy, this essay will also consider Crafts’ use of literary form, specifically sentimental and gothic tropes, to convey her ideological content. Several critics have theorized the political work that these genres accomplish. For example, Jane Tompkins argues that women’s sentimental fiction, which has often been criticized for its overly emotional tenor, saccharine plots, and stereotypical characters, is valuable because its purported “defects” (xii) offer “a blueprint for survival under a specific set of political, economic, social, or religious conditions” (xvii). Furthermore, she notes that these texts are obsessed with the nature and location of power since women looked for ways to define themselves through covert resistance as they lived in a world that took power away from them (160-1). Following Tompkins, one sees how Hannah’s gushing description of her relationship with the enslaved community at Lindendale, a relationship she establishes through secrecy, is more than just a flowery stylistic device; it points emphatically to the community’s strategy for survival and their implicit resistance through interpersonal relationships. Tompkins’ advocacy of sentimental literature is paralleled by Bridget M. Marshall’s espousal of gothic fiction, another genre often dismissed as an object of serious study. Marshall argues that tropes such as ghostly hauntings, dark prisons, and dangerous chases generate the “unease” characteristic of the gothic novel (1) to

comment on the very real terror felt by marginalized characters. Secrecy in this novel activates all the gothic tropes Marshall identifies and in fact, it too is a trope that ensures page-turning suspense. However, Crafts shows that secrecy is also a *social* form through which the enslaver asserts cruel control over the enslaved, thus using the gothic form to comment on discursive structures. Both sentimental and gothic conventions mingle in the novel's happily-ever-after ending. Modern readers may see as unrealistic and sappy Hannah's blissful marriage and her reunion with her mother and friends after escaping to New Jersey. However, this narrative conclusion, we see, comes at a steep price—one that is a result of the psychological effect of secrecy on the enslaved. Even a happy ending, Crafts seems to say, contains the shadow of slavery's abuse. The novel taps into the political efficacy that lies at the intersection of sentimental and gothic conventions to critique slavery and provide a vision of survival in it.

Crafts establishes the profound social implications of a gothic device like secrecy right in the opening pages when Hannah hints at her role as a secret-bearer, a role she prizes until her extraordinary transformation midway through the narrative. After Hannah confesses to a lack of any “natural” ability—she is not clever, learned, or talented—and believing that as an enslaved orphan she would be “forever [excluded] from the higher walks of life” (6), she pinpoints a certain astonishing and instinctive skill she possesses: an ability to “read” people beyond what they present outwardly. As she explains, “I had ... rather a silent unobtrusive way of observing things and events, and wishing to understand them better than I could” (5). Later, she writes,

I have said that I always had a quiet way of observing things, and this habit grew upon me, sharpened perhaps by the absence of all elemental knowledge. Instead of books, I studied faces and characters, and arrived at conclusions by a sort of sagacity that closely approximated to the unerring certainty of animal instinct. (27)

Hannah's description establishes an atmosphere of gothic suspense but more importantly, it presents her skill in reading people as a scholarly enquiry through which she studies and evaluates others with accuracy. Hannah has what I am inexpertly calling a sort of "inner eye" that allows her to perceive what is hidden. This inner eye provides an alternative mode of knowledge, consistently reliable in its judgement of people and a counterbalance to the deficiencies Hannah acutely feels as an enslaved person. It is the primary mode through which Hannah's role as a secret-bearer takes shape and in its incipient form, this role does not involve the *intentional* harboring of key information—intentionality develops later—but a keen "natural" insight into what lies beneath another's surface.

In what is the first of many scenarios, we see Hannah's inner eye assisting her in making important social judgements when she meets Aunt Hetty, the old white woman who teaches her to read. In the scene, Hannah is a child surreptitiously leafing through a book a little distance away from the Lindendale mansion. When a stranger, Aunt Hetty, asks her why she is reading in concealment, Hannah informs her that she was teaching herself to read since her master had forbidden her education. Hannah then writes, "She stood for a few moments apparently buried in deep thought, but I interpreted her looks and actions favorably, and an idea struck me that perhaps she could read, and would become my teacher" (7). There is nothing in Aunt Hetty's behavior to indicate that she warrants the kind of trust Hannah puts in her. Aunt Hetty might as well have been like Hannah's master Mr. Vincent. But Hannah's judgment is right even before the old woman has verbally responded. She has perceived Aunt Hetty's willingness not only to *not* report Hannah to Mr. Vincent but also to take the punishable step of teaching an enslaved child to read. In effect, Hannah not only acquires formal literacy but also the kind of maternal affection that had been missing thus far from her upbringing. Her inner eye also kicks into action

in a similar way upon her first meeting with Mrs. Vincent, the new wife of her enslaver. As Hannah explains, “I was studying her ... I did not see, but I felt that there was a mystery, something indefinable about her” (27). This “mystery,” as we find out later, is Mrs. Vincent’s true identity as the biracial daughter of an enslaved woman but Hannah has already identified the presence of a crucial secret.^v

That Hannah is an astute reader of people rather than books (and, indeed, *as* books) is a textual strategy that elevates her role as a secret-bearer but more importantly, it is also a radical reworking of traditional notions of what constitutes knowledge. Crafts is implicitly making a comparison with and broadening the slave narrative model set by her famous contemporary, Frederick Douglass. In his 1845 autobiography *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Douglass locates the “acquisition” of literacy as a key moment in his search for freedom and autonomy (Drake 54), and with good reason, since the ability to read and write helped enslaved people to access abolitionist texts and pen their own narratives of resistance. But Crafts supplements the definition of literacy by showing that knowledge is not only garnered from the written word but also from the unwritten, sometimes hidden narratives of desire, fear, and conflict that compose a human being. People themselves are social texts and the novel asserts what current Black critics argue, that “social literacy and the power of interpretation are as necessary as, and perhaps even more important than, formal literacy itself” (Foreman 3). Hannah’s inner eye provides her with the social literacy that helps her navigate life within the structures of slavery, equipping her with a sort of powerful radar that guides her judgements about others and that cannot be acquired from conventional education.

In addition to reframing *what* constitutes knowledge, Crafts also offers an alternative conceptualization of *how* that knowledge is constituted. Hannah’s “reading” is never an inward-

looking study that seeks to understand what lies beneath her own surface. It is always outward-focused and in this respect, Hannah's insight into what is concealed is different from the kind of insight writers like Douglass describe. Douglass too points to certain momentous revelations that changed the course of his life, but these are often epiphanies that reveal something of the nature and potential of his own being that had been hidden until then. Thus when he hears Mr. Auld, the Baltimore enslaver, chide his wife for teaching Douglass to read, Douglass realizes that "the pathway from slavery to freedom" lay within his ability to acquire education for himself (Douglass 33). Heather Andrea Williams notes that while Douglass' model for self-knowledge through literacy is important, enslaved peoples often made use of other clandestine ways of knowing that relied on gathering information from others—oral and aural systems of information that honed the skill of eavesdropping and reading tossed-out newspapers (9-10). Hannah's inner eye, with its acute perception of hidden knowledge through a focus on others, is yet another example of a creative mode of acquiring information. Moreover, as we have seen, Hannah uses this outward focus to empower the enslaved community and forge affinities rather than to advance purely personal motives. In other words, Crafts use of secret-bearing envisions a relational model in which an enslaved individual's knowledge actively affects her community and transforms the status quo.

While this potential for relationality is visible when Hannah's inner eye *instinctively* uncovers truth about others, as with Aunt Hetty, it is most emphatic when she becomes an *intentional* secret-bearer. Hannah uses secrecy as a way of maintaining communal intimacy within the oppression of slavery and uses sentimental language to impress upon her readers the intensity of Hannah's happiness at being part of a community who respects her. Thus, while still at Lindendale, she attains local fame as a confidant who gladly takes on the hidden struggles and

desires of her enslaved community, noting, “I was quite astonished to see how much I was trusted and confided in, how I was made the repository of secrets, and how the weak, the sick, and the suffering came to me for advice and assistance” (11). Hannah’s ability to keep secrets makes her a central figure in her marginalized community not only because it offers comfort but also because it produces staggering character transformation among her group.^{vi} Crafts broadens Bok’s claim that “handl[ing] secrecy with discretion blends with and reflects moral development” (44) by showing Hannah’s ethical discernment as a loyal secret-keeper effecting similar moral development in those to whom she ministers. Secrecy is a form through which Hannah persistently facilitates communal bonds and a covert resistance to the dehumanization of enslaved peoples by placing others front and center in her ethical paradigm. At this stage of the novel, Hannah sticks to this relational emphasis even when there are potential repercussions. In one of the text’s most significant moments, when Mrs. Vincent hesitantly reveals to Hannah about how the former has been passing for white and that Mr. Trappe has been blackmailing her using this unearthed information, Hannah tells her, “I implore you to confide in me, to entrust me with this dreadful secret, that knowing I may more deeply sympathize with your woes and wrongs” (44). Hannah is deeply moved by Mrs. Vincent’s suffering and offers comfort and companionship through the act of secret-bearing. Hannah goes to the extent of ignoring her own safety, helping Mrs. Vincent escape Lindendale to avoid enslavement, hiding with her in the woods for months, and tending to her mental and physical health. Like Hannah’s other-focused framework for defining and acquiring knowledge, her notion of identity and freedom too at this stage of her life is not an individualized category but is connected to others in her community.

While, as we have been seeing, Hannah extensively uses secrecy’s affordance to create intimacy among insiders, a startling transformation takes place after she escapes Lindendale and

lands in Mrs. Henry's house after Mrs. Vincent's death. When Charlotte, an enslaved woman at Mrs. Henry's house, confides in Hannah her plan to escape to freedom along with her husband William, Hannah wants no part whatsoever in their secret and is downright cold towards their entreaties.^{vii} At the end of their conversation, she tells Charlotte, "don't tell me anything more. Let me remain in utter ignorance of all the circumstances you have connected with your flight" (143). In stark contrast to her readiness to share the burden of Mrs. Vincent's secret and offer her every assistance possible, Hannah avoids any association with Charlotte's secret, viewing, for the first time in the novel, her knowledge of another's secret as undesirable.

This change in Hannah's attitude of pride in being the "repository of secrets" is even more strange because even before Charlotte and William make her their confidant, Hannah has taken active steps to probe into their secret. In a scene before the above takes place, we see how Mrs. Henry's house is rumored to be haunted by a ghost. Hannah is determined to find out whether the "ghost" is in reality William meeting Charlotte in disguise, a conjecture she formulates knowing that William had been reported missing from his master's estate. Motivated by sheer curiosity, she steals away in the night to spy into Charlotte's room and finds that she has guessed correctly. However, Hannah is racked with the complexity of the ethical dilemma of probing into something she has no business knowing:

I began to question the use, or necessity, or even the expediency of my instituting an espionage on the actions of one every way my equal, perhaps my superior. Wherefore should I attempt to unravel a mystery that did not concern me, or to interfere in affairs, of which I should only be an observer. Then would not ignorance be more consistent with my own peace? How could I acquit my conscience of cruelty and wrong if through discoveries made and information given by me the happiness of Charlotte and her husband should be destroyed, by his subjection for the second time into servitude? (136)

Hannah's concern that she is interfering in affairs unrelated to her through her attempts to know Charlotte's secret was hardly a matter of discomfort with Mrs. Vincent. The problem arises here because she seems to think that knowing a secret necessitates revealing it. She would rather be ignorant of the details of the secret because she cannot but imagine what would happen if she informed the Henrys of this discovery. Astonishingly enough, despite all these torturous musings, Hannah still goes ahead and informs Mrs. Henry that the "spirit" haunting the estate is William in disguise.

How do we read this change in Hannah's attitude about being a communal secret-bearer? Her initial willingness to use secrecy as a way of fostering intimacy in the face of slavery's dehumanization corroborates Dong L. Isbister's claim that *The Bondwoman's Narrative* exhibits "a clear sense of resistance" (173) against the oppression of slavery. However, Hannah's reluctance to take on Charlotte and William's secret and even her betrayal of it to Mrs. Henry problematizes an overly optimistic view of the extent of Hannah's resistance. On the other hand, Stephanie Li goes so far as to see Hannah's loyalty to Mrs. Henry over Charlotte as indicative of Crafts' embrace of the dominant values of the cult of true womanhood in which white middle-class women espoused domesticity and submission (44). Li argues that Crafts reflects the values of sentimental fiction when she shows Hannah as preferring bondage within the Henrys' home to a chance at rebellious freedom. This argument, however, fails to take into account the crucial event that underlies Hannah's change of attitude towards secrecy and her resultant choice to be unattached to Charlotte's secret: her encounter with the other secret-bearer in the story, the nefarious Mr. Trappe. By the time Hannah and Mrs. Vincent are captured after their escape from Lindendale and held in Mr. Trappe's cottage, Hannah has seen firsthand the terrible psychological and physical effects structures of secrecy can wield on the enslaved. Moreover,

Hannah comes to realize that the consequences for sharing secrets with a fellow enslaved person can be life-threatening. Thus, Hannah's hesitation towards bearing Charlotte's secret plan arises less from a sentimental attachment to Mrs. Henry, as Li contends, and more from a very real fear of the ramifications of reprising her role as a secret-bearer. But before we explore the details of Hannah's transformation, let us look a little more closely at Mr. Trappe himself.

Like Hannah, Mr. Trappe too is described in terms of one who probes for what is hidden beneath the external person but to vastly different ends. If Hannah's inner eye is instinctive in its capacity to see through people's motivations and assist her in navigating life under slavery, Mr. Trappe's is meticulously cultivated to see through racial secrets for economic profit and racial control. When Mrs. Vincent first reveals to Hannah that Mr. Trappe, as the family solicitor, had discovered the papers that indicated "the secret of her birth" (45), she describes him as one who "has spent his life in hunting, delving, and digging into family secrets, and when he has found them out he becomes ravenous for gold" (45). His ultimate goal being profit places him squarely within what historians Sven Beckert and Seth Rockman have delineated as slavery's essential role in contributing to the growth of an American economy predicated on capitalist greed. However Crafts does not, as Beckert and Rockman do, reveal this through avenues like plantation labor (Beckert and Rockman 5) but rather through the much more insidious psychological arena that is secrecy. Moreover, as Mrs. Vincent indicates, her story—a woman passing for white and extorted for money with the guillotine of revelation hanging over her head—is representative of Mr. Trappe's method of operation^{viii} and is common knowledge in the society. The repeated display of his weapon of choice serves as constant reminders (to anyone who dares forget) of the unequal social relations he can instantly facilitate through secrecy and thereby assert racial dominance. As a tool for oppression, secrecy is a form with terrifying

possibilities for the enslaved even if no blood is shed and no physical scar remains. Crafts preempts Saidiya Hartman's observation that scenes of subjection occurs not only through the kind of spectacular corporeal violence with which Douglass opens his *Narrative* when he writes of the beating of Aunt Hester but also through "the terror of the mundane and quotidian" (4). Through Mr. Trappe, Crafts reveals the affordance of secrecy within slavery to subjugate in ways that might otherwise be deemed unremarkable and inconspicuous and thus escape notice.

For Hannah, the terrifying effects of the connection between secrecy and racial subjugation is made visible through her relationship with Mrs. Vincent as they hide in the woods after their escape from Lindendale and then when they are caught and sent to Mr. Trappe's cottage. These effects stem from the fact that secrecy has the potential to fully divest an enslaved individual of agency and proves Bok's point: "With no control over secrecy and openness, human beings could not remain either sane or free" (24). *The Bondswoman's Narrative* shows both results Bok identifies—insanity and/or bondage. In the woods, not only is her futile attempt at escape beset with severe physical deprivation, Mrs. Vincent's helplessness over controlling Mr. Trappe's knowledge of her identity leads her into madness as she imagines herself "pursued by an invisible being, who sought to devour her flesh and crush her bones" (67). Clearly, however, her delusions are not entirely delusional since Mr. Trappe can be easily seen as the material embodiment of the "invisible being" pursuing her. As Bridget M. Marshalls points out, Crafts details a cycle of horror that reinscribes a narrative of imagined story on top of a history of very real horrible events (131)—that is to say, Mrs. Vincent's insanity is more than just a gothic trope that creates discomfort; it is a representation of the very real destructive effects of secrets concerning racial identity. Moreover, along with insanity, Crafts also portrays the bondage arising from secrecy's power over the enslaved. When Hannah first suggests that they escape,

Mrs. Vincent cries, “Oh: to be free, to be free” (48), and later, when Mrs. Vincent dies while held at Mr. Trappe’s cottage from a ruptured blood vessel upon hearing that she is to be sold, Hannah observes poignantly, “There was a gasp, a struggle, a slight shiver of the limbs and she was free” (100). That Crafts does not indicate the specific object from which to be free in both statements is noteworthy because the ambiguity points to multiple possibilities. For Mrs. Vincent, escape and death is freedom from bondage, both in terms of physical slavery and the abusive hold of secrecy. Hannah echoes this broadened definition of bondage when she ruminates at Mr. Trappe’s cottage, “those who think that the greatest evils of slavery are connected with physical suffering possess no just or rational ideas of human nature. The soul, the immortal soul must ever long and yearn for a thousand things inseparable to liberty” (94). Connecting liberty to the desire of an intangible soul, not only to the fleshly body, points to the underlying assumption that the structures of slavery distribute power in ways that exceed what is immediately seen. Through the character of Mr. Trappe, Crafts shows how secrecy can intensify servitude by adding an insidious psychological dimension to violence.

I suggest that it is Hannah’s firsthand experience with Mr. Trappe’s abusive wielding of secrecy that causes her attitude towards being a voluntary secret-bearer to shift by the time she reaches the Henrys.^{ix} Through this encounter, Hannah has a novel understanding of how “conflicts over secrecy ... are conflicts over power: the power that comes through controlling the flow of information” (Bok 19). Secrecy, in other words, is a discursive structure that sustains unequal power relations. Initially, of course, Hannah is a foil to Mr. Trappe: while the latter uses secrecy to magnify the oppression set into motion by slavery, Hannah uses it to foster intimacy and restore a sense of purpose to Mrs. Vincent’s life. As opposed to Mr. Trappe’s selfish pecuniary ends, Hannah bears secrets for no self-serving motives. This lack of ill intent or selfish

gain is true even when she probes into Charlotte's secret by spying on her. Nevertheless, the protracted ethical dilemma that seizes Hannah's mind possibly reveals her intense anxiety at how her proclivity towards discovering what is hidden parallels Mr. Trappe's mode of operation. Yet, while Hannah is struck by guilt, this does not stop her from betraying Charlotte and William's secret to Mrs. Henry. This disquieting moment evinces the painful lesson she has learnt through her relationship with Mrs. Vincent: that secrecy is no trouble-free undertaking because it is a technology for racial abuse. Hannah finds that recovered information in the hands of the enslaver, a constant threat for the one who is a loyal communal secret-bearer, crushes all the hopeful possibilities that secrecy affords. Because of this danger, Hannah is unwilling to engage in whatever sense of communal relations and intimacy her role as a repository of secrets fostered earlier, cutting loose her ties with Charlotte and William and even rejecting their offer to help her escape along with them. Moreover, through her experience with Mrs. Vincent and Mr. Trappe, she has realized the practical implication of what she had heard behind the curtains at Lindendale: when Mrs. Vincent asks Mr. Trappe, "Why have you kept my secret so long only to reveal it now...?" and Mr. Trappe responds, "It is not your secret, but mine" (38), the boundary between "my" secret and "your" secret is blurred between those who are insiders to a shared secret. This blurring is a source of power for Mr. Trappe but, as Hannah eventually learns, for an enslaved person, shared secrets equal shared consequences. This is why with respect to Charlotte's secret, Hannah seems to equate knowing a secret with revealing it. Hannah has already once witnessed and borne the tremendous consequences of knowing and guarding a racially-inflected secret and is unwilling to hide any more of the kind.

Crafts' critique of how secrecy reinforces power and smothers its positive affordances nuances the extent of Hannah's heroics as a secret-bearer. After her encounter with Mr. Trappe,

Hannah exhibits a pronounced aversion to and fear of shared secrecy. Thus, readings such as the one offered by Ann Fabian is unsatisfactory in its unbridled optimism. Fabian sees Hannah's role as a repository of secrets as effective to the end:

Mr. Trappe, the rival keeper of secrets, is undone. By the end of the story, it's really the Bondwoman who could be the blackmailer. She knows the gossip, the secrets, the sins and sexual histories, the humiliation of everyone ... But she is, of course, too good a Christian to deploy those weapons of the weak she possesses. (Gates quoting Fabian, xxvii).

According to Fabian, Mr. Trappe is "undone" because the sons of another woman he had revealed as passing for white eventually murder him, and Hannah is ultimately triumphant over him because she possesses knowledge about various people in the novel. My own understanding, however, is that while Hannah does know others' secrets, she has no desire for them anymore and views them as something to be avoided for the sake of survival. We have already seen this in her relationship with Charlotte, but we also see this in the particular case Fabian refers to—that of her final enslaver, Mrs. Wheeler. Hannah is the *unwilling* bearer of Mrs. Wheeler's embarrassing secret when the latter's face turns black after using a spurious beauty product. Fearing gossip and shame if the debacle is revealed, Mrs. Wheeler threatens Hannah into silence. Later, in a fit of jealousy, Maria, an enslaved person at Mrs. Wheeler's house, uses the burden of secrecy thrust onto Hannah to ensure that Mrs. Wheeler punishes her—she lies about Hannah having exposed Mrs. Wheeler's secret. The result of Hannah's knowledge of Mrs. Wheeler's secret looks far from a moment of victory: Hannah is sent away from the relative security of the domestic space to work in the harsh space of the cotton fields. Secret-keeping, in this case, gives Hannah no agency, as Fabian contends, but cements Mrs. Wheeler's power over her. It is not simply that Hannah is "too good a Christian" to use the secrets against her but that to use secrets against Mrs. Wheeler would result in further suffering. Hannah's relationship with Mrs. Wheeler,

which occurs after her stay with the Henrys, further reveals that shared secrets lead to oppression, whether the secret “belongs” to the enslaved (as in the secret of Mrs. Vincent’s identity) or to the enslaver (as in Mrs. Wheeler’s secret about her facial transformation).

While Hannah is reluctant to bear the burden of shared secrets, she does not reject the power of secrecy altogether for herself. She concludes that survival necessitates a hesitation to take on the secrets of others but also that for the enslaved, survival is impossible without at least some personal secrets. We see this in the very beginning when she learns to read by going to Aunt Hetty’s home. Even in this early scene of her childhood, Hannah realizes that the enslaved person needs to use secrecy for self-upliftment and progress. This “discreet resistance” (Isbister 163) embodied in the pursuit of literacy becomes an overt resistance when she attempts escape. Hannah knows that escape is predicated on staying hidden in multiple ways and by using secrecy through and through. When she attempts, for the second and last time, to flee, this time from the Wheelers’ plantation in hopes of getting to New Jersey, she disguises herself as a white man, relies on the secrecy offered by nighttime, and journeys through the concealed spaces of the woods. Hannah’s fear of the consequences of sharing another’s secret also extends to sharing her own secret with anybody else and she confides in no one about her plans to escape (Crafts 207). Even when she meets a fugitive named Jacob, who becomes a sort of companion to her in the woods, she never reveals her true identity to him. Kimberly Drake’s observation rings true here as we see Hannah’s simultaneous need for individuality and companionship. Drake points out that black women mediated a tension between the desire to maintain connection with the enslaved community and the need to portray a “masculine” self who throws off societal restraints to gain freedom—a Benjamin Franklin-inspired ideology of self-made individualism that Douglass modeled in his narratives (46-47). Crafts shows this tension most through Hannah’s

transformation from a communal secret-bearer to a bearer of solely her own secrets. While Hannah initially delights in using secrecy's affordance to generate a relational paradigm, by the novel's end, Crafts seems to suggest that the necessity for survival requires a singular focus.

Hannah's journey from Lindendale to New Jersey is a journey from slavery to freedom in a very physical and legal sense, to be sure. But it is also a growing realization of the dangerous affordances of secrecy within slavery and an attempt to be free from them. While I agree with Bok that a life without secrecy is impossible (18), I see in Hannah's statements in the final chapter aptly called "In Freedom" the peace of a life in which racially-inflected secrets cannot control her: "There is a hush on my spirit these days, a deep repose a blest and holy quietude. I found a life of freedom all my fancy had pictured it to be" (237). William A. Gleason points out that the book's closing picture of a happy home indicates that for Hannah, freedom and self-ownership implies a free and safe homeownership (44). While this might be true, it does not account for the more nonmaterial undertones that Crafts has set into the narrative when depicting freedom. Hannah has finally found the liberty she yearned for in Mr. Trappe's cottage but this is a liberty which includes psychological emancipation from the bondage of secrecy. There is no longer any need to hide in order to acquire or impart literacy, and her relationship with her mother, her husband, Charlotte and William, and her neighbors—in short, her community—are tied neither to the concealment of any dangerous knowledge nor to the threat of their revelation. Modern readers may scoff at this sentimental textual closure but the surprising reappearance of Charlotte and William is a reminder of the extent to which, forced by the functioning of secrecy within slavery, Hannah had to reject her community to attain this final happiness. The gothic leaves its persistent shadow on the happily-ever-after ending in a way that points to the lasting effects of the abuse of slavery.

If slavery is a political category that refers to the distribution of power in society, as James Oakes argues (xvi), Crafts' novel theorizes how secrecy assists in distributing that power. Unlike other more overt modes of domination like violence, secrecy occupies an ambivalent position that affords a variety of possibilities. Sissela Bok notes that "secrecy is as indispensable to human beings as fire, and as greatly feared. Both enhance and protect life, yet both can stifle, lay waste, spread out of all control. Both may be used to guard intimacy or to invade it, to nurture or to consume" (18). Crafts displays these multiple workings and consequences of secrecy in *The Bondwoman's Narrative* by showing Hannah's changing attitude to secrecy—from unbridled pride in being a secret-bearer to a fear of taking on others' secrets. At once, secrecy is the form through which covert resistance and emotional bonding takes place, terror and villainy find their embodiment, and overt resistance to slavery through escape is facilitated. Sentimental and gothic literature have often been accused of superficiality in their treatment of social reality due to their reliance on saccharine representations of relationships, unrealistic happily-ever-after endings, ghostly hauntings, and page-turning suspense through textual secrecy. Crafts uses precisely these criticized tropes to narrativize Hannah's simultaneous desire for community and her wariness at being a secret-bearer. Concealment becomes a political form and the novel becomes a project in revealing its layered complexity for the enslaved.

Notes

ⁱ To name a few instances: “I decided to embark tentatively upon a slow and careful quest to examine Dorothy Parker’s suspicions and claims” (xxvii); “I have to confess that this aspect of my pursuit of Hannah Crafts ...” (xxviii); “... how could I ever find Hannah Crafts?” (xxxiv); “How was I to proceed with the search for Hannah Crafts?” (xxxv)

ⁱⁱ A quick word about linguistic choices: I use the word “concealment” as an umbrella term that refers to all manners of hiddenness, whether intentional or unintentional; and following Sissela Bok, I use the word “secrecy” to indicate specifically that which is intentionally hidden. Thus, revelation may refer to the exposure of that which is purposefully hidden or a knowledge of things that had been veiled in some way. This wide definition of hiddenness allows for a thorough analysis of the affordances of different forms of concealment and exposure.

ⁱⁱⁱ See for examples Parramore, Bernier and Newman, Baym, Soares, Yellin, Robbins.

^{iv} What we do know beyond doubt, thanks to the authentication of the material text by Dr. Joe Nickell, the report of which is included in Gates’ Introduction, is that the book was written in the 1850s and that it was highly unlikely that it was written by a man.

^v Similarly, when Hannah observes the interaction between Mr. Trappe, the white gentleman revealed later to be the villain, and Mrs. Vincent at the party at Lindendale, she perceives immediately (and accurately) that a structure of secrecy frames their relationship: “They never conversed except to exchange a few customary courtesies, never seemed to note or regard each other, but somehow and quite intuitively I arrived at the conclusion that each one watched and suspected the other, that each one was conscious of some great and important secret on the part of the other, and that my mistress in particular would give worlds to know just what that old man knew” (28). Other examples of Hannah’s inner eye at work: when she observes Mrs. Vincent in her room: “As the waiting maid of my mistress I was always near to attend her, and soon ascertained that she was not happy ... She seemed to be always looking for somebody and expecting something that never came. Though she never said so I knew that she feared the approach of a stranger” (33); of the cottage in the woods: “There was a charm about this house and its appointments ... Slavery dwelt not there. A thing so utterly dark and gloomy could not have remained in such a place for a day” (60); of the old man before Hannah knew him as Mr. Trappe’s steward: “There could be nothing of sunshine to his spirit, nothing of love in his soul” (92); of her first impressions of Mrs. Wheeler: “I felt a certain presentiment that ~~by acquaintance with her~~ she must be less good” (152).

^{vi} Shortly after Hannah recounts how she became the “repository of secrets” at Lindendale, she says, “How much love and confidence I won it is impossible to describe. How the rude and boisterous became gentle and obliging, and how ready ~~they~~ all were to serve and obey me, not because I exacted the service or obedience, but because their won loving natures prompted them to reciprocate my love” (12).

^{vii} In fact, before William begins to tell Hannah his story of suffering in the hands of his enslaver and their secret plan, Charlotte assumes that Hannah will be moved by empathy but Hannah is dismissive:

“Oh, Hannah: you must hear him tell his story, and all that he has suffered; you will pity him then I know, you cannot help it. {“} ~~and will be ready~~

“Very likely, and yet my pity would not be available to any useful purpose.”

...

“You must not talk so” said Charlotte. “We require your assistance, and more, your company...” (140-1, ~~strikethrough in the original~~).

^{viii} Mr. Trappe himself admits to his role as a secret-bearer: upon capturing Hannah and Mrs. Vincent after their escape from Lindendale, he boasts, “Many and many are the family secrets that I have unraveled as women unravel

a web. You may think of it as you please, you may call it dishonorable if you like, but it brings gold—bright gold” (98).

^{ix} Interestingly, as the story progresses from her stay with the Wheelers, Hannah makes almost no mention of the use of her inner eye to read what is hidden. In stark contrast to the first half of the novel, Hannah relies increasingly on reading concrete external evidence to draw conclusions about what she sees. For example, when she writes, “I soon ascertained that gradually yet surely [Maria] was supplanting me in Mrs. Wheeler’s favor” (203), she follows this up with her observations of Mrs. Wheeler’s actions that corroborate this statement. Similarly, when she escapes disguised as a man towards the end of the novel, her meetings with people are devoid of statements in which she “reads” them through abstract intuition. Instead, for example, she writes, “I was not long in discovering that the females were far less inquisitive and curious about my affairs” (213), where she relies on observing actions to formulate her conclusions.

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