**Performing Ellen: Mojisola Adebayo’s *Moj of the Antarctic: An African Odyssey* (2008) and *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom; or, the Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery* (1860)**

**Suzanne Scafe**

**Abstract**

The subject of Mojisola Adebayo’s one-woman performance, *Moj of the Antarctic: An African Odyssey*, is Ellen Craft, an ex-slave whose escape from the slave-owning state of Georgia to England in the late 1840s is recounted in the escape narrative *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom; or the Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery.* Rather than using her performance to present her biographical subject with an interiority the original slave narrative scarcely offers her, Adebayo reconstitutes Ellen, and relocates her in an auto/biographical work that self-consciously blurs the boundaries between autobiography, biography, and biofiction, thus exposing the overlap and interdependency of these textual forms. Through a detailed analysis of both texts and their contexts, this essay argues that Adebayo constructs a figurative, first person auto/biography of Ellen Craft, a “call and response” production (Bowen, 1984), originating in an “intimate, somatic engagement with the body of another”, whose “touch” sets up a fluid process of identification (Pineau, 2003: 41–43). Her work performs a textual revision of the slave narrative genre and its rich, socio-cultural contexts. As a performed, auto/biographical reimagining of Ellen Craft’s flight from slavery, *Moj of the Antarctic,* like *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom,* transgresses multiple borders, and in the process subverts expectations of what constitutes an authentic self. It deconstructs conventionally defined categories of race, gender, and sexuality and radically extends the Crafts’ own examination of the meaning of freedom.

**Keywords**

*Moj of the Antarctic*;William and Ellen Craft; slave narrative; auto/biography; performance; race; gender

Although the name “Ellen Craft” does not appear in the title of Mojisolo Adebayo’s *Moj of the Antarctic: An African Odyssey,* her one-woman performance was developed, she has said, as a way of recovering the remarkable story of Ellen Craft’s escape from slavery. Adebayo’s performance, however, constructs a complex relationship with an already complex narrative: rather than using the performance to present her subject, Ellen, with an interiority the original narrative scarcely offers her, it reconstitutes and relocates her within the context of other nineteenth-century narratives and within Adebayo’s autobiographical account of her own journey to Antarctica. She explains: “It was important to me that the play was inspired by her but wasn’t her exclusively […] so, in a sense, it’s as much about me, about who you can become as much as it is about who anyone is or was” (Goddard, 2008: 144). Central to both texts — the slave narrative and Adebayo’s drama — is the concept of identity as an embodied performance: both texts exploit concepts of gendered and racial passing in order to expose the constructedness of race and gender and to subvert the ideological underpinning of the institution of slavery. Both works use and problematize history’s exclusions; both transgress multiple borders, and in the process subvert expectations of what constitutes an authentic self. Although Ellen Craft’s life is illuminated in *Moj of the Antarctic*, Adebayo’s is not a mimetic biography: rather, this is a figurative, first person auto/biography of Ellen Craft, a “call and response” production (Bowen, 1984), originating in an “intimate, somatic engagement with the body of another” (Pineau, 2003: 41–43), while reflecting simultaneously the bodies of multiple others. Devised in dialogue with the Crafts’ text and with the traditions of nineteenth-century slave narratives in which it is situated, Adebayo’s performance addresses black women’s absence in nineteenth-century histories.[[1]](#endnote-1) It repeats and extends nineteenth-century practices of radically revising escape narratives and through its dense intertextuality, her work self-consciously mirrors and exploits the escape narrative’s instabilities and performative strategies, constructing new forms of African diasporic subjectivity and establishing and strengthening ties to a lost or misrepresented past.

**Traditions of nineteenth-century slave narratives**

Autobiographical theorists have long been preoccupied with the intersection of the slave narrative and the autobiographical genre, in part because of the slave narratives’ function as a testament and “I-witness” (Andrews, 1988: xxxii) to the earliest experiences of Africans in the diaspora. As such, and in their formulaic opening statement, “I was born” or “My wife and myself were born” (Craft, 1999/1860: 3), they represented a “simple, existential claim” to existence (Olney, 1985:155) and the achievement of a “‘place’ within society” (Smith, 1974: ix). The voice of the former slave, “recounting, exposing, appealing, apostrophizing, and above all remembering his ordeal in bondage”, is historically significant because the “acquisition of that voice is quite possibly his only permanent achievement once he escapes and casts himself upon a new and larger landscape” (Stepto, 1991/1979: 3).Whereas, as several critics have argued, Frederick Douglass’ *Narrative of the* *Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (2009/1845) is distinguished by the control Douglass exerts over the “literary strategy of self-representation” (Stepto, 1991/1979: 16) and by his insistence on claiming authority over the means of representation, the focus of most slave narratives, including the Crafts’, was “almost never the intellectual, emotional, moral growth of the narrator” (Olney, 1985: 154). Instrumental in obstructing the emergence of subjectivity in these narratives was the paraphernalia of authenticating documents — testaments from white abolitionists, verifications of the slave narrator’s identity and experiences of slavery, and even testaments from the former slave owner — all of which were treated as evidence of the narratives’ historical reliability (Stepto, 1991/1979: 3). These texts functioned as what Robert Stepto (1991/1979: 8) terms “race rituals”, whose purpose was to address white America “across the text and figurative body of a silent former slave”. So while the function of the slave narrative was primarily political, many of the now well-known narratives have themselves demonstrated a self-conscious awareness of the incommensurability of past experience and the inadequacy of language as a means of representing a self.

As Stepto’s insistent use of the male pronoun suggests, however, there has been with some exceptions a gendered aspect to the treatment of these narratives. This is in part because, as the textual reproduction of Ellen Craft’s own life story demonstrates, the representation of slaves’ lives was frequently authorized by male intermediaries, and in part because of the gendered and racialized assumptions that resulted in the marginalization of black women’s voices in the abolitionist cause. Notwithstanding these textual exclusions, the successful attempt by critics such as Dorothy Sterling (1988), R. J. M. Blackett (1986, 1999), Barbara McCaskill (1999, 2010, 2015), and Sarah Brusky (2000) to bring Ellen “out of the shadow of her husband, William” (Sterling, 1988: x) and to ground American literary traditions in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century black women’s writing is a recognition both of these women’s presence and centrality as well as their absence in literary and cultural histories (Stetson, 2015/1982, Andrews, 1988, Gates Jr, 1989).

***Moj of the Antarctic’s* call and response structure**

Adebayo uses call and response strategies within her performance as a way of structuring the work’s dialogue with accounts of Ellen Craft’s life and the contexts of the slave narrative genre. In this way, she connects her work to the performative elements of those narratives, to traditions of African American blues performances, and to African-diasporic religious practices. In her analysis of Jean Toomer’s *Cane* (1923) Barbara E. Bowen (1984: 197) defines call and response as a “classic blues pattern of statement, variation and response, in which both variation and response intensify the meaning of the statement”. At the centre of the call and response performance is the figure of the listener, she who hears the call and responds in her own voice, narrating not the message but her “own discovery of voice”, which constitutes simultaneously an “affirmation of presence” (1984: 188). The response invites membership of a community, the audience who hears the voice of the listener as singer and witnesses the effects of her communication with the spirits. Using the example of King Barlo, the protagonist of the first section of “Esther”, one of *Cane*’s short narratives, Bowen argues that:

For the blues singer, the importance of the call-and-response pattern is its continual affirmation of collective voice. As antiphonal phrases repeat and respond to each other, the singers are assenting to membership in a group and affirming that their experience is shared. […] The crowd hears his [Barlo’s] vision of the past as a vision of the future; they turn his story of oppression into a prophecy of regeneration. (1984: 189)

Bowen argues that Barlo’s vision of his connection with Africa, one that transforms him, for his audience, into a “symbolic ancestor”, empowers both him and his listeners (1984: 188). The opening scene of *Moj of the Antarctic* heralds a call and response performance and similarly works to connect Adebayo’s black characters to West Africa. Before the character herself appears, the audience hears the voice of The Ancient, immediately recognizable as a West African griot or keeper and recorder of the community’s past, whose words fill the darkness, a sign both of the earth’s beginning and the “dark” unknown of the Middle Passage. As the lights slowly come up, the audience sees and hears Adebayo repeating and reframing the voice of Phillis Wheatley, “Planets on planets run their destin’d round/And circling wonders fill the vast profound” (2008: 151). These lines connect this twenty-first-century drama to a tradition of letters that begins with Wheatley, one of the earliest American poets, who arrived from Senegal and had her first collection of poetry published when she was eighteen and still a slave. Although Wheatley is connected to an African past, The Ancient as mystic or prophet connects the poet’s vision of the eighteenth-century cosmos to a contemporary vision of climate change: “Coasts/Erosion/Forest/Deforestation” and to the loss of a past, “Washing away/Sea and land and memories”, which the play seeks to recover (2008: 152–53). Like Toomer’s Barlo, The Ancient transforms a history of loss, disconnection, and oppression into the possibility of “regeneration” through a performance which uses the blues pattern of variation in order to intensify the meaning of the original message.

One of the play’s many preoccupations is naming. In an interview for the *National Theatre’s Black Plays Archive* (2012b), Adebayo discusses the use of Mojitsola to name the protagonist of a later, more conventionally autobiographical production, *Muhammad Ali and Me* (Adebayo, 2011), explaining that changing a single consonant in her name had given her the distance she needed to be both herself and not herself. In *Moj of the Antarctic* her use of the diminutive performs a similar function. It creates a distance from her autobiographical self while placing her in ironic relation to Ellen’s courage and daring. Adebayo’s auto/biographical inversion of Ellen’s courage and “s/heroism” remaps Ellen’s flight on to her own journey to the Antarctic, but she explains: “The title was a joke at myself […] I’m no great Scott of the Antarctic, I’m just Moj, Moj of the Antarctic. But I was really interested in heroism and remembering forgotten heroes — sheroes” such as Ellen Craft (*National Theatre*, 2012a). Throughout the performance, however, “Moj” is Moj only to herself: in affective scenes of un-naming, she is Americanized, named by all the characters including her lover as Maaaaj — pronounced Marge. Even as Adebayo speaks to Ellen’s African past through the figure of Moj as griot, through her attenuated Yoruba name, and through the play’s inclusion of Yoruba lyrics, Moj is also experiencing Ellen’s loss of identity. As Hortense Spillers (1987: 65) argues, the names by which “‘the black woman’” is called “in the public place render an example of signifying property *plus*”. The effort to “strip down, through layers of attenuated meanings” (1987: 65) are fraught at all points.

Audience interaction is a key element in Adebayo’s stage performances, and in this way her work acknowledges and exploits the complexity of the performance space, where actor and audience combine to create differently perceiving subjects in a single space. In *Moj of the Antarctic* the perceptual object — the actor — becomes multiple not only by virtue of the roles she performs but also because of the audience’s multiple perceptions of the single figure on a single stage. This multiplicity is of course intensified by Adebayo’s performance of her work’s vast array of nineteenth-century characters. She is, among many others, Ellen Craft, Ellen’s fictional lover May, Ellen’s white master and father, a judge in the Southern States named, as in the Crafts’ narrative, “Scallywag”, and William Augusto Black, a character based on William Brown, an African woman who, in 1815, cross-dressed as a “seaman in the Royal Navy for upwards of eleven years” (Adebayo, 2008: 176). The single body of the performer is augmented not only by this multitude of roles, and by the audience, who are a key constituent of the play’s meaning (Osborne, 2013), but also by the multi-mediality of the staging, which allows Adebayo to reproduce herself in the filmed images that form the backcloth to the stage. When Moj, with the help of the audience, prepares to transform herself into a white man, images of Adebayo in the Antarctic, performing an authoritative version of white masculinity, appear on stage behind her.

**Auto/biography as performance**

Several critics have pointed to the interrelatedness of biography and autobiography (Banner, 1993; Marcus, 1994): indeed the term “auto/biography” has long been used to denote an autobiographical presence even in “factual” biographies. This presence reveals itself in biography’s point of view, its attitudes, its “perceptions and feelings toward the subject” (Banner, 1993:162), as well as in biography’s tendency to address or incorporate the contemporary concerns of its readers. As Banner (1993: 162) concludes, critics “are coming to agree that no biographer can keep his or her own autobiography distinct from the biography being written”. In addition, the process of constructing a conventional autobiography necessarily involves the transformation of self as subject into object: thus the autobiography’s author is always and also her own biographer. Describing the ten-year process of developing an auto/biographical performance of Anaïs Nin, Elyse Lamm Pineau (2003: 34) uses the concept of “generative autobiography” to help her to theorize “the ways in which life-tales perpetually give birth to new persons, both narrative and lived” and to describe her performance’s engagement with characters associated with Nin and with herself as performer. This form of theatre uses “contiguous selves that ‘touch’ one another literally and metaphorically”, selves that Pineau has encountered in her “life and scholarship”, and all of whom have become woven into the performance in a “shifting dance of identification”. These characters “seem to get under the skin, setting up residence within our own personal histories” (2003: 43). Contiguous to the characters Adebayo performs are the voices of more than twenty nineteenth-century writers whose words she interweaves into the drama. There are shifts in tone and register as she quotes from *Moby Dick* repeatedly, from Darwin, Frederick Douglass, Harriet E. Wilson, and so on: her “somatic engagement” (Pineau, 2003: 34) with her performed others extends beyond the bodies of the play’s characters, to the writers of the texts whose words she uses. It is an engagement, Adebayo suggests, that is akin to spirit possession, a point emphasized in her repeated use of the word “inspired” to describe the development of her play. She describes immersing herself in a wide range of nineteenth-century writing, “especially anything to do with whaling in the southern ocean or the slave trade. I tried to get that kind of voice in my head so the writing would be truthful” (Osborne, 2009: 10). *Moj of the Antarctic* is the performance of an archive. She explains:

Yes, almost like a talking archive, somehow. There were points at which I felt like I was in communion with the dead. Alice Walker writes about the role of the writer as a kind of medium. It was incredibly emotional to read slave narrative after slave narrative and very humbling then to choose the lines and fragments that were going to be in the play […]. I’d look at the cover of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* or Phillis Wheatley’s poetry and ask ‘Is it OK? Can I use your words?’ (Osborne, 2009: 10)

Adebayo’s auto/biographical performance-as-response is also yet another call, to which an audience is invited to respond by remembering personal and collective histories and the interconnectedness of our storied pasts. She fosters the multiple perceptions that her performance generates by, as she explains, limiting herself to spaces where the audience will be diverse: “I want to look out to the audience and see a mixed audience. I want to see black elders. I want to see gay men. I want to see straight people” (Osborne, 2009: 17). In this way the play’s staging reproduces a public-seeming performance space and its interactivity provides an echo of the performative element of slave narratives, many of which were written many years — in the case of the Crafts twelve years — after the flight from slavery and after several oral recitations in front of large, boisterous, critical, and even sceptical audiences. These recitations fostered in the ex-slave narrators an “audience-consciousness” that necessitated an awareness of, as I demonstrate below, the body politics of performance, and as Adebayo’s revisionist work reminds us, these narrators knew that the “autobiographies were not their own” (Andrews, 1986: 106); that the self they crafted had to be made “conducive to the instruction, edification, and entertainment” of the abolitionist audience (McCaskill, 2015: 5).

Although the story of William and Ellen Craft’s escape from slavery in Georgia was widely celebrated and even written and performed as drama within abolitionist circles during the late nineteenth century, their narrative has received much less critical attention than those of Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown, or Harriet Jacobs. It was not until the publication, in 1999, of Barbara McCaskill’s edited version, in which she draws on the biographical research of Dorothy Sterling (1988) and R. J. M. Blackett (1986), whose use of “Odyssey” in his title Adebayo shares, that the text of the narrative became widely available. First published as a discrete text in London in 1860, *Running a Thousand Miles for* *Freedom* tells the story of the escape from slavery of Ellen Craft who, dressed up as a rheumatic white Southern gentleman and accompanied by her husband, in the disguise of a black male slave servant, crossed a thousand miles of slave states in order to achieve freedom in Philadelphia and then Boston. After having settled in Boston where, as the narrative states, “I remained for nearly two years, employed as a cabinet maker and furniture broker, and my wife at her needle” (1999/1860: 43), their freedom was imperilled by the passing of the Fugitive Slave Bill (1850) which granted owners the right to force their slaves’ return despite having escaped to free states in the North. In the Crafts’ case military force was sent to reinforce the arresting officers. By that time, however, the Crafts’ near celebrity status in abolitionist circles prompted the intervention of several influential figures including “George Thompson, Esq., late M.P. for Tower Hamlets [London, UK] and the slave’s long-tried, self-sacrificing friend” (1999/1860: 46), who arranged for their passage across the Atlantic to Liverpool, where they arrived in the winter of 1850. They remained in Britain for nineteen years. Theirs is not a coherent narrative: the story of their lives barely emerges in this text but is interrupted throughout by accounts of the lives of other slaves, by details of legislation such as the anti-literacy laws, by extracts from newspaper reports, letters, sermons, literary quotations, and so on. The text’s inclusion of the Crafts’ encounters with, and of letters written by, named abolitionists perform the “race rituals” so characteristic of other slave narratives and, unlike Moj as griot’s authenticating preface, their presence is evidence that “the narrative lives of the ex-slaves were as much possessed and used by the abolitionists as their actual lives had been by slaveholders” (Olney, 1985: 154), a possession evidenced in the Crafts’ later struggles to free themselves from the abolitionist script (Blackett, 1999: 71–78). Like other well-known narratives, theirs seems not to have been written solely by William Craft, as some editions suggest, but with some degree of collaboration with William Wells Brown, ex-slave and author of several books, plays, and of his own memoirs.[[2]](#endnote-2) Brown also published one of the earliest written accounts of the Crafts’ escape in an article for *The Liberator* (1849), where he reports the couple’s re-telling of “the singular and romantic story” of their escape (Craft, 1999/1860: 75), and a version of their story also appeared in Brown’s novel *Clotel, or the President’s Daughter* (1970/1853).

**Variation and response: Re-purposing the slaves’ narrative**

Brown encloses borrowed scenes from the Crafts’ escape narrative and other components of Ellen’s family history into his 1853 novel *Clotel*,and as with most fictional variations of biographical “facts” Brown’s novel adds emotional intensity to the Crafts’ narrative’s representations of love, loss, and separation, and reflects his own preoccupations with the sexual exploitation and abuse of mulatto, quadroons, or near white slave women who, although “distinguished for their fascinating beauty”, are doomed in his fiction (Brown, 1970/1853: 39). Although he keeps William’s name, he renames Ellen and recasts her as Clotel, a daughter of Thomas Jefferson, exploiting what was then a rumour that Jefferson had fathered numerous slave children and had sold one at auction for $1,000. Abolitionists such as Theodore Parker, who also retold the Crafts’ story, similarly changed the details of their lives to address individual or contemporary preoccupations and to make a larger, abolitionist statement and Lydia Maria Child, the famous abolitionist and editor of Harriet Jacobs’ narrative, reproduced the Crafts’ life story first in *The Freedmen’s Book* (1865) and later as a play, *The Stars and Stripes; A Melo-Drama* (1858). Child’s play changes the Crafts’ narrative quite substantially: there is a closer focus on the Crafts’ identity and a desire to emphasize their gentility. In both *The Stars and Stripes* (1858) and Georgia Douglas Johnson’s much later play, *William and Ellen Craft* (1935), the Crafts are distinguished from other African American characters by their diction, the result, the plays suggest, of their proximity to the white slaveholders. In both plays William and Ellen are literate; both plays emphasize their emotional closeness and both substantially change the account of their escape. Both dramatize concerns with racial ambivalence and, as with Brown’s *Clotel*, with the sexual exploitation of near-white female slaves by their white masters/family members.

It is in keeping with this revisionist tradition that Adebayo uses *Moj of the Antarctic* to extend the slave narratives’ dramatic potential and their generic instability in order to produce a more intense variation and response to the call of the original text. As Adebayo explains, the journey to find Ellen also involved a journey into her own life experiences as a black person in Britain, which, much like the experience of being an African slave in nineteenth-century North America, is a “microcosm of homelessness, of being displaced, estranged, a foreigner in your own country” (Osborne, 2009: 14). The performance is thus a meditation both on twenty-first century Britain and its continual displacing of black people and on Adebayo’s personal displacements and journey into her interiority. Ellen’s loss of family at the auction block resonates with Adebayo’s own experience of being in care and losing her biological family. She explains: “[It’s] Moj’s own pain, grief, self-hatred and depression that she travels to. The autobiographical stuff for me was about my own history of being a black kid brought up by white people” (Osborne, 2009: 14). And like the nineteenth-century revisions of Ellen Craft, Moj’s desire for freedom also reflects contemporary preoccupations: “Freedom. How to take it and at what cost? Much as I hated myself […] I wanted to live, though I did not know why. […] And so it was whilst dreamily dusting the words of European scholars that I had my first revelation” (Adebayo, 2008: 167). Such an introspective, meditative tone is nowhere evident in the Crafts’ narrative; in fact there is little in the narrative on which to base representations of Ellen’s subjectivity. As McCaskill (2015: 12) notes, there is no existing “personal correspondence between the couple […] or […] reminiscences that recall first-hand what either may have thought about the other”, and there are only two items of formal correspondence authored by Ellen. Biographers and literary historians, McCaskill (2015: 12) has argued, should, therefore, approach existing material as “generative rather than thin” and should look to less conventional sources for evidence of a life. That Ellen was seemingly unperturbed at her repeated reconfiguration within abolitionist circles and in abolitionist texts, however, can be read as a sign of agency, suggesting an unwillingness on her part to commit to textual self-inscription and to become an auto/biographical commodity, even in the service of abolition. Her own activism on the anti-slavery circuit, in the fledgling Women’s Suffrage Association in London, and as schoolmistress in charge of her own school in Woodville, Georgia, is evidence of a strength of character and courage beyond her celebrated escape (Blackett, 1999), a strength, forcefulness, and spirit of adventure that Adebayo recreates in her drama.

In addition to using the Antarctic figuratively to present Ellen’s risky journey and experience of a deep Nova Scotia and mid-winter Atlantic crossing, Adebayo uses the white of the Antarctic snow to contextualize the privileging of whiteness, a whiteness which in fact enabled the Crafts’ escape. The play also explores the interdependence of the black/white binary, which again the Crafts’ escape exploited. Ellen’s liberating whiteness as well as her physical achievement of freedom is represented through her occupation, in Adebayo’s performance, as a whaler accompanying, the play implies, Melville’s crew aboard the *Pequod*. In a voice that commands authority, Moj repeats from *Moby Dick*:

Though in many natural objects, whiteness refiningly enhances beauty, as if imparting some special virtue of its own […] and though this pre-eminence… applies to the human race itself, giving the white man ideal mastership over every dusky tribe: […] there lurks an elusive something in the innermost idea of this hue, which strikes more panic to the soul than the redness which affrights in blood… (2008: 167)

What Adebayo’s protagonist discovers on her journey to Antarctica is blackness at the heart of its whiteness: she says, “And under all this white/Antarctica is a broken rock as Black as my great-/grandfather” (2008: 185). Moj sees that a black rock makes possible an illusion of whiteness, whose value as the binary other of blackness is enabled by the labour and oppression of “my great-/grandfather”. Through these frequent performances of canonical white and African American texts, Adebayo responds to the slave narrative’s own self-conscious literariness. A bookcase is the dominant prop in the play’s first scenes and is used to reflect the escape narrative’s own concern with textual authority and with the experience of being racially constructed through discourse. The raced binary that these encased narratives construct is complicated by Adebayo who, having been brought up in care “know[ing] how to be white”, has had to learn how to be “black” (Osborne, 2009: 15). The bookcase, and all it signifies, represents not a “resistance to the so-called white canon, but absolutely [a] fulfilment of it” (Osborne, 2009: 15). It dramatizes the reach of racialized discourse but also of course traditions that, in revealing the instabilities and gaps in those representations, counterwrite them.

**Performing race, gender, and freedom**

In *Moj of the Antarctic*, Adebayo’s abolitionist, Lars Homer, exclaims: “The testimonies of Negroes will be our greatest weapon […]. The public will be crying out to hear a tale such as yours, think of the funds you could raise – just look at you!!!” (2008: 171). This reflects the drama’s recognition both that performed identities were the mainstay of escape narratives and that performativity is central to auto/biographical expression. The conjunction of both types of performance is analysed in Sidonie Smith’s (1995) essay on autobiography as performance, which argues, building on Butler’s theory of gender performance, that the autobiographical subject finds herself in and through the multiple sites of autobiographical storytelling: “interiority became an effect, and not a cause, of the cultural regulation of […] already identified bodies, bodies that were sexed and gendered [and] racialized” (1995: 19). Autobiography thus functions as one of the disciplinary mechanisms by which identities are regulated and normalized. In the context of abolitionism’s theatricality, the performativity required by the slave/ex-slave as narrator of her own autobiography speaks to the importance of what Harry J. Elam Jr (2001: 290) describes as the “third-person consciousness of the black body, of being black in relation to the white world”.

There is a recognition in abolitionist literature and in accounts of the Crafts’ life after slavery of the body’s significance to the “visual rhetoric” of freedom (Merrill, 2012: 323). In a “Motion” by Lydia Maria Child at the first interracial convention of American Women in 1837, she proposed “having all our colored friends seated promiscuously among us in all our congregations” (Sterling, 1993: 24). Reflecting this motion in practice, William Wells Brown and William and Ellen Craft attended the Great Exhibition in Crystal Palace, London, in the summer of 1851, each parading in turn, arm in arm with distinguished white abolitionists. This spectacle was intended to confront and unsettle white American slaveholding visitors but it was also a clear indication of an awareness in the slave and ex-slave community of the importance of spectacle and of the control the black performer could and did exert by exploiting the “slippage […] between the sociohistorical constructions and cultural uses of race […] the real, material conditions of oppression” and the experiences of subjectivity and individual self-creation (Elam, 2001: 289).

In a scene set in a pub in Deptford, Adebayo’s William Augusto Black asks, “You’re an African, like me, correct?”, to which Moj replies, “Yes, no. I mean I was. Then I wasn’t, and now in London it seems I am an African again” (2008: 175), and this is followed by Black’s “I was a woman once” (2008: 175). In addition to these more explicit statements suggesting the instability of identity categories, Adebayo’s use of direct quotations from existing slave narratives, and the work’s echoes of the performances of celebrated escaped slaves such as Henry “Box” Brown, Clarissa Davis, or Maria Weems demonstrate that, in response to the injunction, “Just look at you!!!”, the accounts of ex-slaves necessarily exposed the instability of the very identity categories they were required to perform. Indeed, several accounts serve as evidence that the slave as protagonist fully understands not only that performativity is required to successfully inhabit the role or disguise in which s/he escapes, but that identity is itself a performance. Representations of such performed identities are everywhere evident in William Still’s 1872 collection of the voices of the Underground Rail Road, which includes extracts from the Crafts’ narrative of escape and reproduces the then famous daguerreotype of Ellen in her disguise as a white man. Some of his accounts describe men dressed as women, and several more of women dressed as men. Clarissa Davis, for example, disguises herself in “male attire” and was therefore able to escape “unmolested” (Still, 1872: 60) and Maria Weems escaped as “Joe”. Each of these performances is celebrated in Still’s account for its ingenuity but also for the determination of the African slaves to reclaim their humanity. For the abolitionists, black and white, however, the importance of these performances was also in their value as spectacle. Still, commenting on fifteen-year-old Maria Weems’ cross-dressed performance, exclaims:

Before this examination, neither of the individuals present for a moment entertained the slightest doubt but that she was a ‘lad’, so well had she acted her part […]. To send off a prize so rare and remarkable, as she was, without affording some of the stockholders and managers of the Road the pleasure of seeing her, was not to be thought of. (1872: 185)

After repeated exhibitions, Maria “was carefully forwarded on to Canada” (Still, 1872:186). Still’s descriptions of the abolitionists as “stockholders and managers” of the railroad, his reference to Weems as a “prize”, as goods that can be “forwarded”, reveal the ex-slaves’ and abolitionists’ awareness of the figurative, temporary, and context-specific nature of the Africans’ identity under slavery. His accounts’ consistent references to the slaves as “light freight” (1872: 179), “merchandise” (180), “hard coal” (183), “fancy articles” (188), and so on, and to the railroad as a business, emphasize the figurative character of the railroad itself and the operators’ commitment to secrecy long after Emancipation. The sustained use of a metaphoric identity keeps in view both the institution that had defined the slaves and their identities within that institution: it expresses a mindfulness of the reach of the slave system and the inevitable difficulties the ex-slaves would face transitioning to freedom. And most importantly it suggests that the slaves understood that this erasure of their identity, their status as non-human, as chattel was, in fact, a trope that could also be subverted and re-purposed. It was a requirement of the performance of slavery, or what Elam Jr (2001: 294) describes as “strategic blackness”, but functioned to destabilize racial meanings (2001: 289). These well-judged performances and Still’s counter-discursive narratives of grief, loss, friendship, and family loyalty were used to overwrite slavery’s degradations and represent the African ex-slaves’ intention to reclaim their humanity beyond the white gaze

As these and many other historical examples of black performativity demonstrate, the experience of being black in nineteenth-century America and England necessitated an awareness both of the self as a construct, disciplined within existing discourses of identity-making, and the self that exists outside of those constructs. Adebayo’s performance both intervenes in that history and connects it to contemporary concerns about identity categories. Although Moj reconstructs her freedom, masculinity, and whiteness as a set of attitudes and postures, she also attends to the physical appearance of the body. As she prepares to transform her self by attaching a penis, bandaging her breasts and “whitening” her African body by flattening her bottom, pinning her nose, and so on, she says:

It occurred to me that the only creatures to walk truly free upon the earth were men. White men. Rich white men. […] Free to take a long drive, free to take a long bath. […] And so my plan was simply to divest the cloth of victimhood and transvest to liberty. Having ‘nothing to lose but my chains’, I decided to play a white man for a while… Sojourner Truth? I would Sojourn for fiction! But I would have to learn how… Naturally, I looked to their books. (2008: 167)

The ironic use of “simply” to describe the process of “transvesting” to freedom heightens the difficulties of making that crossing: in fact, as Amani Marshall (2010: 166) notes, because of the demands of a performance that required the slave to be a “shrewd psychologist”, only small numbers of slaves escaped by passing as free. Moj learns to be a “white man” by absorbing white European epistemologies but as later scenes demonstrate, Adebayo’s confident athleticism, her freedom to cross geographical borders, to choose the identities she performs, are reminders of African slaves’ unfreedom. And though Ellen Craft might have had the appearance of a free white man, as her elaborate disguise demonstrates, her ability to pass as one required a practised authority she neither possessed nor was able to learn: the upright carriage of freedom, the habit of looking another person in the eye — habits Ellen might have learnt from a proximity not only to white masters, but also to free mulattoes (Marshall, 2010: 166). As the freed character Moj demonstrates, freedom was, in nineteenth-century contexts, a complex identity, one that reflected both the “chaos” of race (Ernest, 2006: 469) and its rigid classifications.

Adebayo resists defining her performance as “drag”, saying instead that “I’m more interested in how we all are […] black people are always dragging. I think we’re queerer than queer and I don’t think it’s to do with sex” (Osborne, 2009: 12). She adds that “an unconscious kind of queer theory weaves itself into the show” (Osborne, 2009: 12). This is evident in Moj’s depiction of her lover, May, in her celebration of Moj’s male identity as a whaler among sailors in an East London pub and in the Antarctic. This queerness also surfaces in the play’s presentation of a queer or disruptive, Africanized version of the European past (Rademeyer, 2012). Adebayo’s representations of racial and gender fluidity are also used to comment on the multiply disciplined body of the African woman under slavery and the complex gender categories used to construct her identity. Slavery, as Hortense Spillers (1987: 72) has argued, was the “dehumanizing, ungendering, and defacing project of African persons” . Suspended as captives in the darkness of the Middle Passage, “one is neither female nor male, as both subjects are taken into ‘account’ as *quantities*” (1987: 72, italics in original). Spillers recognizes the irony, in the context of the contemporary theoretical move towards “gender undecidability”, of claiming the slave woman’s “ungendered” identity as an effect of oppression and brutalization (1987: 66), but her work would suggest that in order to move beyond symbolic categories of identification in the present, we need first to acknowledge the history of black women’s position as non-subjects under slavery and thus outside those gendered categories. Though problematic even in the context of slavery’s “ungendering”, identification within accepted gender norms became, historically, one way of recovering subjectivity.

This process of recovering subjectivity through an insistence on conforming to conventional gender categories is evident in the Crafts’ narrative’s representations of Ellen’s “violent sobs” at the moment they began their escape (1999/1860: 21) and at significant moments thereafter; in her timidity on arriving at the house of white abolitionists and her feelings of weakness following her journey to the North. An example of gender’s symbolic value is also quite startlingly revealed in William’s insistence on referring to Ellen as “my master” and his use of the male pronoun throughout his description of their escape, even when relating their private encounters. This strict observation of gender categories provides Ellen, in her role as his wife, with a gendered status occupied only by white women during slavery, even as white Abolitionist women were resisting this categorization. The complex, contradictory position that black women like Ellen, or her near contemporary Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, occupied (Still 1872: 757–64) is evidence not only that black women’s acceptance in civil society depended on conforming to strict gender norms, thus the need to situate previously ungendered subjects within discourses of whiteness, but that adherence to those norms required yet another kind of performance, one that threatened to undermine the “sheroism” so celebrated in narratives of escape and beyond.

In the final scenes of *Moj of the Antarctic*, we see Ellen Craft’s iconic top hat resting on a globe. The play thus remembers her through this sign of her performativity and agency, rather than through her re-embodied self. Making a similar theatrical point, Elyse Lamm Pineau describes her desire to leave behind her mimetic reproductions of Anaïs Nin in order better to perform Nin’s significance as an author and feminist, whose own life was interwoven into her best known work. Of her own performance Pineau (2003: 45) writes that it does not “call selves into existence so much as it calls them into significance in a moment remembered and a memory embodied”. Adebayo too eschews mimetic representation in order to engage with the historical importance of Ellen Craft, the slave narrative genre, and the immense achievement of escape. In letting go of Ellen, her work is better placed to direct her audience to the ways in which, during slavery, its aftermath, and in the play’s present, black subjects have perfected the act of manipulating the borders between racialized and gendered categories of identity. Adebayo’s one-woman performance perfectly dramatizes the black body’s restlessness as it performs, subverts, and opposes the endlessly shifting demands of a regulated identity. As Elam (2001: 289) observes, the solo performer, moreover, “is always mediating among different levels of subjectivity, reality, and meaning”, and *Moj of the Antarctic* exploits both the concealed or overlooked meanings of the slave fugitive narrative and its significance to contemporary audiences. Adebayo’s very physical performance, her presence on stage in many guises, forces the audience’s engagement with that presence, its sameness and its difference. Her cross-dressed, transgressive Moj plays with the blurred boundaries between Self and Other and the possibilities that masking offers. As a response to the call of Ellen Craft’s life, Adebayo’s performance is generative, giving voice not only to Ellen but to the many other less celebrated accounts of resistance. Its short form enacts an interconnection of past and present and suggests the potential for future transformation.

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1. **Endnotes**

   This essay uses Adebayo’s 2008 playtext and a recording of the performance in May 2013 (Adebayo 2014). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. In her edited version of the Crafts’ narrative, McCaskill states that William Wells Brown was the Crafts’ amanuensis (Craft 1999/1860: 75). In her monograph and journal articles she adds that Wells Brown wrote “at least a third” of the Crafts’ text (2013: 79). R. J. M. Blackett (1999: 73) argues that William Craft “possessed all the necessary tools to write *Running*”. His edition, the one I use, cites William Craft as the narrative’s author. As Marcus Tribbett (2017: 10) explains, however, “the current trend has been to focus on the text as a multi-vocal collaborative project rather than to see it as representing the circumscription of Ellen’s voice or to look for the encoding of gender issues in particular parts of the story”. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)