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“But a Contraband is a Free Man:” Civil War Literature and the Figure of the “Contraband”

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English from
William & Mary

by

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"Those tearful eyes often looked up to me with the language, 'Is this freedom?'"

Harriet Jacobs, "Life Among the Contrabands" (1862)

Introduction

On May 24, 1861, a group of enslaved men, women, and children, escaped to Fortress Monroe in Hampton, Virginia with the hope that the Union Army would protect them against their Confederate enslavers. With sentiments of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 still coursing through the veins of American law, Union General Benjamin F. Butler had a decision to make, one that would change the course of their lives: would he return these refugees to the enemy and back to bondage, or would he allow them to stay within the safety of his Union fort? Quickly referring to both constitutional and military law, Butler decided "there was no sense in returning 'this species of property,'" and these individuals could be of use to the Union Army (Taylor 3). He thus labeled them "contrabands of war" to ensure their legal protection in Union possession.

Butler's discovery of this favorable loophole allowed him to legally confiscate these individuals as property, on behalf of military necessity, which consequently allowed refugees the legal protection to "stay," or, rather, be *forced*, to remain within the Union. Before making the command, Butler consulted President Abraham Lincoln, but his Cabinet left the decision entirely to Butler's discretion. The Executive Branch deferred to Butler because, at first, the policy was perceived as a mere stopgap for a particular set of events. However, the letter of the law eventually fell into alignment: just three months after General Butler's decision took effect, the United States Congress passed the First Confiscation Act of 1861, which officially authorized the Union to seize any Confederate property and freed those enslaved persons who fought or worked for the Confederacy of further obligations to their enslavers (Gerteis 26). One year later, in July of 1862, the Second Confiscation Act pushed Butler's "contraband" policy even further to ensure enslaved persons “shall be forever free of their servitude, and not again held as slaves” (qtd. in Taylor 50).

Nevertheless, for Butler, this 1861 decision was a spur-of-the-moment strategy when confronted by this living, breathing ‘problem:’ quite literally a group of fugitive enslaved persons on Fort Monroe’s doorstep, waiting for an answer. He was not necessarily prepared for the response, one “unprecedented in scale:” during the Civil War, an estimated five hundred thousand refugees fled their place of enslavement, and nearly three-hundred refugee camps were created to accommodate these individuals (Taylor 5-6). On an even larger scale, Butler likely did not anticipate how this decision would affect public attitudes toward freed enslaved peoples, now “contrabands,” through the popular literary discourse of the Civil War.

In the months following Butler’s decree, a public debate concerning the legal intricacies of this decision ensued, often in the form of non-fiction, journalistic works. Although this fiery debate over legalese within popular literature fizzles out after just a couple of months, the term “contraband” does not dissolve with it. Beginning mainly in late 1861, early 1862, the literature shifts away from arguments over the “contraband” term and policy and toward the creative debate over the function of the “contrabands” within the American social order. The exact moment when or why this occurred is decidedly unclear, yet the shift away from the semantics of the decision underscores a reformulation of the term itself in popular culture, where it took on a profound life of its own. The uniquely transitory nature of the “contraband,” wherein a person is considered both property and free, allowed the term to become a creative vessel through which Black and white authors could investigate the changing American landscape in the face of emancipation. As a response to sentiments of fear, anxiety, and prejudice, the literary “contraband” allowed a diverse array of authors to struggle with the implications of freedom and racism in America. The manifestation of these sentiments in Civil War literature carries with it far-ranging ramifications, as it delays freedom through this purgatorial category and depicts formerly enslaved persons as both intellectual and literal property of white America.

One of the most famous iterations of the “contraband” figure in literature is the “contraband” soldier. The image of the “contraband” soldier was exceedingly popular during the Civil War, which might explain the copious amount of scholarship on the subject. Civil War fiction often highlights the honor, valor, and sacrifice of African American soldiers, which, despite its overly sentimental nature, adds nuance to the conventionally white American ideals of citizenship and freedom. The co-mingling of the larger ideas at play during the Civil War – enslavement, freedom, honor, and sacrifice – often intersect squarely within the figure of the “contraband” soldier, as Don Dingledine, author of “The Whole Drama of the War: The African American Soldier in Civil War Literature,” also underscores: “the historical transition from slave to contraband to soldier and eventually to citizen carries profound ideological implications that cut to the heart of the nineteenth-century debates over race, rights, and reform” (1114).

However, the “contraband soldier” largely dominates the scholarly conversation surrounding “contraband” individuals, largely due to the popularity of Louisa May Alcott’s “My Contraband,” first published in the November 1863 issue of *Atlantic Monthly*, which tells the story of a Union nurse and her desire for Bob, her “contraband” servant. While the soldier is one aspect of the “contraband” story, I do not believe it is the only important identity or configuration of the “contraband” figure in popular literature. The large cultural breadth of the figure in Civil War-era literature entails a more inclusive story, one which includes those who walked the path toward citizenship differently. There is a larger, more nuanced story to be told: in an analysis of the scholarship surrounding American abolitionists, Corey Brooks notes that while scholars “now widely agree on the general importance of war-time self-liberation, [they] are once again debating the relationship between military emancipation and the enslaved men, women, and children whose arrival at U.S. army lines helped spur it” (299). Much of the literature of the time casts “contraband” individuals as many other figures beyond the soldier, and while it is the most studied iteration of the “contraband,” a heavy emphasis on the soldier ignores the variety of individuals who fell under the “legal veneer” of “contraband” (Masur 1051). While recognizing the influence of the “contraband soldier” figure, this thesis focuses on other iterations of “contraband” to include those who were not conscripted;[1] unconventional stories of conscription; and stories entirely unrelated to enlistment.[2]

While American abolition is a deeply studied and analyzed topic of scholarly discussion, the figure of the “contraband” is seldom discussed in depth across historical and literary discourse – it is “a phenomenon contemporaries acknowledged but rarely analyzed” – and analysis focused on the contribution of Black authors is even rarer (Masur 1083). For this reason, whenever possible, I endeavor to use and centralize Black voices in both my primary and secondary sources. I pay special attention to publications such as *The Anglo-African* and *The Christian Recorder*, where it became very clear that African American writers extensively debated and wrote on the figure of the “contraband.” This thesis directly attempts to broaden the scope of the possible representations of “contrabands” in literature and specifically amplify these Black authors and publications.

At times, because of the nature of the historical moment, this analysis must rely on papers, letters, and literature relating to Black identity and experiences written by white authors. Where noted, the experiences of Black “contraband” individuals filter through the white consciousness, biases, and experiences. Additionally, many of the interactions between "contraband" individuals and white abolitionists, as described by white authors, cannot be verified from the Black individual's perspective. While this tension reflects the larger operational issues at hand in the representation of Black identity and agency in literature, this mediation is central to the reality of many different works, as many of the publishers and periodicals of the time were run by white individuals.

The landscape of the country during war was fast-paced and ever-changing, and it is often the case that surveying popular literature provides the most comprehensive picture of the literary culture of the time. Partaking in war changed all modalities of "normal" life, thus altering and multiplying the many forms literature could take: it "changed what people read, what was available to read, and how, where, and with what expectations they read it" (Fahs 18). This change means literature took on many new and different forms during the war, including poetry, essays, speeches, novels, illustrated envelopes, sketches, and cartoons, all of which, in some form, this thesis analyzes.

Even in the moment of the Civil War, popular literature, particularly the periodical, was deemed significant in enacting change and action in the war. Specifically discussing the importance of the *Liberator*, a newspaper published by one of the most preeminent, Northern abolitionists, William Lloyd Garrison, author Charlotte Forten Grimké illustrates the newspaper's essential role in the Union's military and moral success, in a personal diary entry:

> It is fighting that we sh'ld give to this - the pioneer paper in the cause of human rights - [the Liberator] a hearty welcome to the land where, until so recently, those rights have been most barbarously trampled upon. We do not forget that it is in fact directly traceable to the exertions of the editor of this paper and those who have labored so faithfully with him, that the Northern people now occupy in safety the S. [outh] C. [arolina] shore; that freedom now blesses it, that it is, for the first time, a place worth living in. (407)

In this passage, Forten Grimké draws a direct line between the *Liberator* and Union military victories in the South and, perhaps more importantly, to newly forged freedom. Previously, the

South had not even been “a place worth living in,” and it was due to publications like the *Liberator* that freedom was ultimately granted. Charlotte Forten Grimké’s characterization of the abolitionist newspaper as encompassing the sole power to alter the course of the war and inform public attitudes demonstrates just how indispensable popular literature was in initiating favorable military outcomes and eventually emancipation. Ultimately, the effect of the Civil War on literary production epitomizes how modalities of literature morph and change over time and most pointedly displays how its various iterations diversely impact culture and the social order.

Although contemporary understandings and analysis may conflate abolitionism with anti-racism, the two were often mutually exclusive. The figure of the “contraband,” easily manipulable and malleable in the Northern imagination, seemed to leave abolitionists’ visions of slavery and whiteness in America undisturbed. Using the term “contraband” for “living breathing, entities with a status that [fell] somewhere between persons and property” became increasingly palatable and widely accepted by Northern, abolitionist audiences (McWilliam 54). Contrary to popular belief, much of the abolitionist literature of the time that pertains to “contrabands” commonly demonstrates that “some abolitionists. . . failed to question the validity of commonly accepted stereotypes of the Negro character; they contended instead that these peculiar racial qualities constituted no just grounds for denying Negroes freedom of equal political rights” (Litwack 59).

Leon Litwack’s “The Abolitionist Dilemma: The Antislavery Movement and the Northern Negro” (1961) explicates this contradiction, highlighting that “while deploring racial prejudice and endorsing the Negro’s claim to full citizenship, many white abolitionists hesitated to carry their views to the point of social intercourse” and into the cultural sphere (51). In literature, this “dilemma” is often presented as a problematic denigration of “contrabands” by self-proclaimed abolitionists who actively and openly deplore slavery, yet often fail to display those views beyond the abstraction of politics. In Frances E. W Harper's 1892 novel, *Iola Leroy, Or Shadows Uplifted,* Harper epitomizes this dilemma and boldly challenges white abolitionists and their feeble attempt to combat such a strong institution. After marrying and freeing one of the women he enslaves, Eugene Leroy, a Southern enslaver, no longer believes in the institution of slavery and is quietly "in favor of gradual emancipation" (86). Leroy, like many abolitionists, lacks the resolution and unwavering devotion it takes to enact change, perhaps because he would not experience personal gain through emancipation. He remains with the sustained status quo, for the sake of it being the less demanding option:

> But so strong was the force of habit, combined with the feebleness of his moral resistance and the nature of his environment, that instead of being an athlete, armed for a glorious strife, he had learned to drift where he should have steered, to float with the current instead of nobly breasting the tide. (86)

This antithetical thought exercise is a central concept in "contraband" literature: as, "neither a slave nor a free person, the contraband represented a new kind of subject brought into being by the war, and as such became a key figure in the debate over the war's contradictory meanings" (Cohen 274). While attempting to schematize a reformed concept of freedom or citizenship in America, many of these abolitionist literary works reinforce a continued and marked presence of separation, rather than unification, between "contrabands" and white individuals.

This concept is not unique to one author and is present in this literature in a myriad of ways, including abolitionist writers' tendency to deploy racist characterizations and imagery and undertake naming practices popularized by enslavers. This thesis does not exclusively focus on abolitionist works, but when comparing the literature of abolitionists to non-abolitionists, the similarities are surprisingly striking. There is often an expectation when reading Civil War-era literature that authors fall into a binary – that they are either abolitionist or pro-slavery – but this "abolitionist dilemma" strictly complicates this notion. Many authors, abolitionist or not, portrayed "contrabands" as a problem to shape, solve, and square, rather than understand as one of the greatest humanitarian crises of the current moment. The "contraband" discourse demonstrates an almost universal struggle to reform American definitions of freedom, citizenship, and the role of an "abolitionist." While modern standards for abolitionist works should not always demand "perfection," it is still important to note both the achievements and shortcomings of all social justice literary works at all points of American history.

Current analysis of "contraband" literature can also be quite easily reframed and distorted by the contemporary moment. In his essay "Race, Race-making, and the Writing of History," Thomas Holt describes what he calls the "historico-racial schema" present in primary and secondary writings of history (2). Holt notes how these "powerful, even archetypal, narratives remind us how deeply impersonal racism is, how automatically, reflexively, race and racism are learned, [and] how strong and tenacious the struggle [is] to be freed of its imprisoning constructs" (2). Because events in history often feel distant and far-removed, there is often the presupposition that contemporary analysis can be especially and entirely objective, but it is important to acknowledge the strong remnants of racism and history that continue to shape contemporary life, institutions, language, and literature. While the "historico-racial schema" is present within the literature of all the authors discussed in this project, as a white author, I am also operating in a time fraught with ingrained and sustained systemic racism, and I strove to remember these facts throughout the research and writing process of this project. What impedes Civil War-era writers impedes contemporary writers, too: how we currently analyze and understand racism in the context of the Civil War and the "contraband" cannot be divorced from current historical moments and the writer's embeddedness in American understandings of race(ism) and citizenship. The “contraband” discourse is perfectly exemplary of these concepts: this intermediary term between enslavement and freedom, one which would become thousands of people’s social identifier in the years during the American Civil War, somehow receded into the echelons of postbellum American literary and social traditions, either erased, dissolved, or forgotten about, yet its silent echoes remain etched into American concepts of freedom and citizenship.

The Literary Fight Against “Contraband” Policy, or “A Good Professional Joke”

General Butler’s legal justification in claiming enslaved persons as “contraband of war,” or as Kate Masur writes, the particular “legal veneer for the holding of men that avoided challenging their status as property,” was not widely accepted without some passionate literary debate, even amongst prominent abolitionists (1050). In the months following the “contraband decision,” many individuals took to publications to circulate their disdain for the soundness and validity of Butler’s legal rationale. This first era of writings on the “contraband,” which unfolded between May 1861 and early 1862, is characterized by nonfiction, journalistic pieces which mainly debate the validity of General Butler’s decree and its future impact on American concepts of slavery and freedom. While, later in the war, authors took creative liberties with their characterizations, fashioning the symbolic and figurative “contraband” individual, authors first had to debate the “contraband” policy.

Both African American and white abolitionist writers discussed their distress with the legalities of Butler’s decision through various mediums, such as periodicals, books, and speeches. In one July 1861 *Liberator* piece entitled “The Logic of the ‘Contraband of War,’” an anonymous writer focuses on the confusing, legal nature of Butler’s decision: “where there is no logic, either honor or understanding is wanting. The policy. . . is lacking in both, and the poor slaves must shortly suffer for it" (108). Indicative of the early "contraband" discourse, this argument focuses on the unsound legal standing of the "contraband" distinction: since the South has seceded, Southern states no longer derive any authority from the Constitution, or therefore, the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, thus the Union has no obligation to 'return' enslaved peoples or thereby declare them as "property" confiscated by the Union. This argument would presume that Butler's decision was useless in legal terms yet carries incredibly harmful social consequences that could have been avoided if the United States government wielded its constitutional power to emancipate all enslaved persons.[3]

David Lee Child, lawyer, journalist, and the husband of prominent abolitionist and activist Lydia Maria Child, used this logic in his scathing criticism of Butler's legal decision to depict and label escaped enslaved persons as "contrabands of war." In his four-part book *Rights and Duties of the United States Relative to Slavery Under the Laws of the War* (1861), Child's argument against General Butler focuses primarily on the legal rationale of the "contraband" policy. Child deconstructs and analyzes the unequal application of federal and state war and property laws to build up his legal defense against Butler: "There is no principle or rule of war which authorizes us to treat slaves, flying to us from traitors and rebels, in any other manner than we would white deserters and refugees from their armies and hangmen, their lynch law and prison-houses" (19). Child's litany of evidence further cites the Rules and Articles of War and a United States Circuit Court case.

Simultaneously, however, Child's focus on the lawlessness of the "contraband" policy does not diminish his most important argument: the United States government has not only the total and unalienable right to emancipate all enslaved persons but also a duty to do so; he writes, "Not only has our government a right to employ slaves, captured or escaped, in building fortifications, to enlist them in our armies, or let them go free under their protection, but it is their positive duty and the country, and [the government] will be guilty of a high misdemeanor for which impeachment will lie for every case of neglect or refusal to do so" (9-10). Another essay, "The Contrabands," published in February 1862 in the *Christian Advocate and Journal*, illuminates a similar idea: "if we violate the Constitution to accomplish deeds of imprisonment and cruelty, and are justified, why not works of freedom and humanity? It is as constitutional to free Black men as to shoot down white ones" (52). New York lawyers Charles C. Nott and Charles Pinckney Kirkland were, similarly, unconvinced in their 1862 book *The Coming Contraband*: "when their rendition was demanded by their enemy and ours, the commanding officer replied that they were 'contrabands of war.' Waiving its legal inaccuracy, this between lawyers and soldiers was a clever hit – a sharp retort – a good professional joke" (2). They further declare that "slavery must fall and the Constitution must be maintained" (5).

The Black abolitionist, Frederick Douglass, spoke on his detestation of the despicable "contraband" label in speeches. In a speech named "The Reason for our Troubles," delivered in January of 1862 in National Hall, Philadelphia, Douglass publicly and vehemently condemns the use of the term "contraband" to describe human beings:

> There must be no calling things by their right names, no going straight to any point, which can be reached by a crooked path. When slaves are referred to, they must be called persons held to service or labor. When in the hands of the Federal Governments, they are called contrabands—a name that will apply better to a pistol, than to a person… [The Washington Government] has not had the boldness to recognize the manhood of the race to which I belong. It only sees in the slave an article of commerce, a contraband. (Douglass)

The decision surrounding the "contrabands" did indeed create "a crooked path," one where no one could guarantee freedom for enslaved persons. Ultimately, Douglass rebukes the US government's claim that the label of human beings as "contraband" is salvific, that it saves them from the atrocities of enslavement, when the decision subjects these refugees to continuing subjugation. He also condemns the sustained commercialization of Black bodies, even amidst a war that is ostensibly being fought for their freedom. To Douglass and many others, the Government's actions are sordid and antithetical, and recognition of the "contrabands'" personhood is the first necessary step to truly ending slavery in the United States. This critical step is blocked by Americans' and the Government's hesitance to accept the "manhood of the race to which I belong:" not as "contrabands," not as "enslaved persons," but as fellow citizens and humans (Douglass).

Moreover, Douglass' suggestion that the term "contraband" refers better to a "pistol" than a human refers both to the extraneous violence against Black lives that had existed for hundreds of years and the inclination that the Union might use the decision to conscript Black soldiers on their behalf, which did officially begin just six months later in July 1862. In Douglass' description, Black individuals are both the victims of violence and the violence itself.

This metaphorical comparison of "contraband" bodies to "pistols" is made explicit in an illustration printed in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* on October 26, 1861, entitled "Dark Artillery, or, How to Make the Contrabands Useful" (Fig. 1). In the image, presumed formerly enslaved persons are depicted as strapped to various weaponry as if they *are* the weapons, many of which are in the process of firing. Union soldiers are pictured in their uniforms, while the "contrabands" are in ragged clothes and barefoot, their facial features drawn as inhuman racist caricatures. One Union soldier is seen loading a cannon attached to an African American man, who is splayed on the ground with a large, comical grin, unaware of what is occurring around him, presuming racist stereotypes of ignorance and docility. Not only are the "contrabands" treated as objects, but as objects that are aimed to kill and defeat an enemy, which underscores a sad truth of the "contraband" decision: the continuation of subjugation and a delayed hope of freedom and emancipation for the benefit of the Union military.

The title, indicating the illustration is didactic in that it delineates a "contraband's" utility, is emblematic of many concerns with the "contraband" decision: there exists no magnanimous recognition of their humanity or a recognition of their future contributions to the social order as individuals with thoughts, opinions, and skills. Douglass' remarks and this illustration are indicative of the future treatment of Black lives within the "contraband" discourse: as literal and intellectual property for the taking and distorting in the author's imagination, often eliciting racist stereotypes, themes, and images. Even before the Union began conscripting Black soldiers, Douglass was aware of this dynamic, one where any if not all compassionate recognition of personhood is shed for the Union's gain.

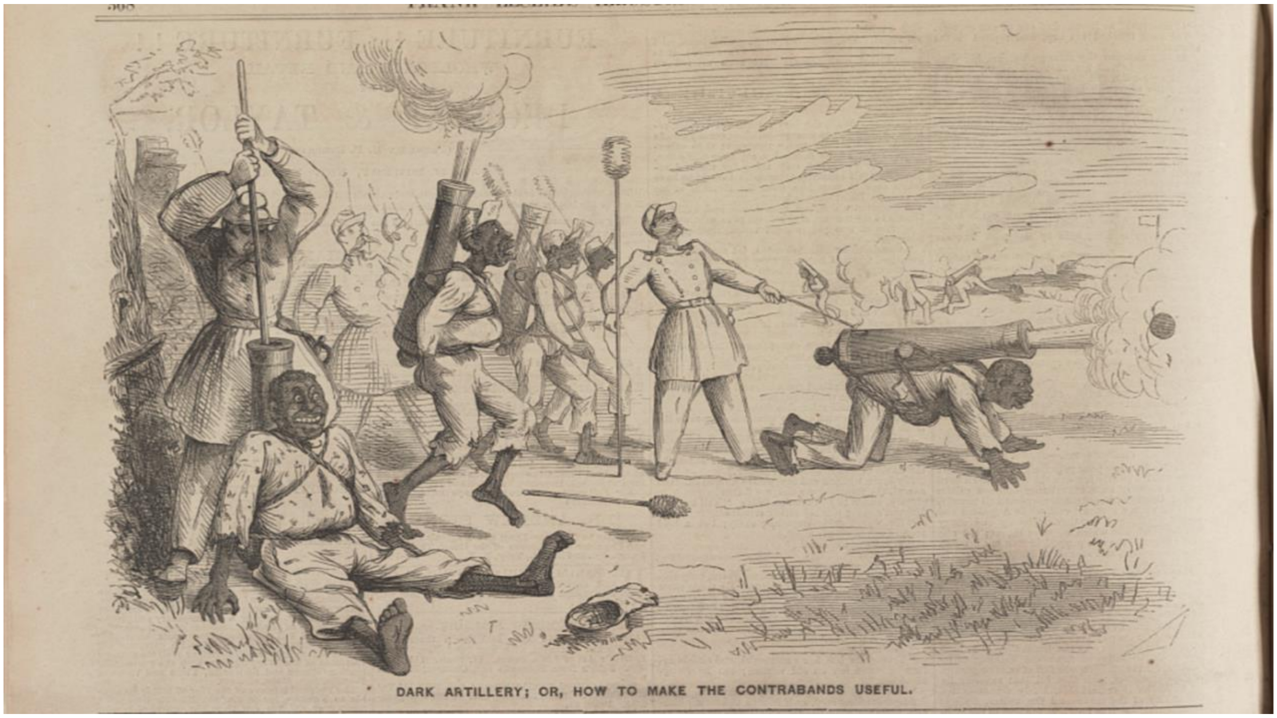
DARK ARTILLERY; OR, HOW TO MAKE THE CONTRABANDS USEFUL.

Fig. 1: *Dark Artillery, or, How to Make Contrabands Useful*, Library of Congress.

However, these unclear motives behind the "contraband" decision were often discussed in African American periodicals as having positive yet unintended consequences. As the title of their article suggests, the author of "Indirect Results" (June 1861), a piece published in the oldest continuously published African American newspaper in the United States, *The Christian Recorder,* writes that despite any ambiguity surrounding Butler's intentions, "indirect results" are *results,* nonetheless. They "understood that the Government endorses [Butler's] previous course, which has been *to protect the negroes*, refuse to give them up, and employ them in constructing the defences" ("Indirect Results"). However, the author also recognizes inconsistencies with this notion and quotes the contradictory instructions from Lincoln's Cabinet directly below their piece: the Cabinet writes that Butler's action is "Approved. . . [but] Among these Federal obligations, however, *none can be more important than that of suppressing and dispersing armed combinations* formed for the purpose of overthrowing its whole constitutional authority" (emphasis added). The response from the Government does not seem to endorse the author's position that the "contraband" policy is based in humanitarianism, to "protect," rather, it proves that any semblance of "protection" was not a priority but a favorable consequence. The report even ends with uncertainty about what "will be done" with the "contrabands:" "the question of their final disposition will be reserved for future determination" ("Indirect Results"). Because of these ambiguous motives, it is understandable why some might view the decision as a protection from the cruelty of enslavement, while others scrutinize it as a weakening military tactic, as Douglass and the "Dark Artillery" illustration suggest.

The author of "Indirect Results" continues to disagree with Douglass' all-encompassing discontent, as they believe, despite any unclear motives, the positive outcomes of Butler's decision outweigh the negative effects. For the unnamed author, Butler was the antidote to the federal government's complacency regarding the 'slavery question.' While complicated, the author understands Butler's action as a step in the right direction: "no person among the volunteer forces, or their officers, which have responded to the call on the President, has surpassed in promptness, energy, and efficiency. . . as General B.F. Butler" ("Indirect Results"). Another anonymous piece, also published a month after the 1861 decision in *The Christian Recorder*, similarly acknowledges the encouraging results of Butler's action, despite ongoing procedural debates. In "The Growing Anti-Slavery Sentiment," the Philadelphia author writes:

> Nobody pretends that this Democratic general [Butler] has put any violent constructions upon the laws of war. In fact it is hard to see how he could have acted differently without strengthening the hands of the public enemy...now [the slaves'] fate depends solely upon the use the Federal Government may choose to make of its war power. ("The Growing Anti-Slavery Sentiment")

Though the author implies that Butler may have bent the law, they argue his interpretations were not "violent" but necessary. In comparison to General Butler's inclination to act, to open his fort to refugee enslaved persons, the author emphasizes and alludes to the *inactivity* of the government, and they noticeably commend Butler for forcing the government's hand in deciding on refugee enslaved persons' fate in the U.S. Their larger argument points to the arbitrariness of debating the questionable actions of one man, General Butler, especially when the arc seems to be pointed towards justice. The focus, rather, should be on the Federal Government's lack of involvement in emancipation.

Most likely written by African American authors, the pieces published in *The Christian Recorder* tend to put a more positive spin on the policy because of its move toward emancipatory progress. Becoming absorbed in the legalities of a decision does not seem to matter as much, merely because the spotlight should illuminate the formerly enslaved persons' lives, rather than the white Union general at the center of it. Still, both authors place a great onus on the North as the main provider of freedom and a future for the formerly enslaved population, no matter what

Butler decrees. However, in their eyes, whatever his intent, Butler did nudge the US government towards the more humanitarian choice, thus making his decree honorable.

For some white abolitionists, too, including the famous author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), Harriet Beecher Stowe, Butler's decision inherently signaled "freedom," righteousness, and heroism. In contrast to *The Christian Recorder* pieces, Stowe's September 1861 essay in the *Liberator* entitled "The Hour and the Man," generously foregrounds General Butler:

> That genuine military ring, that martial directness, for which the heart of the people in disturbed times always longs. They long for the man without fear - whose sword divides all meshes of compromise, all fine-spun legal doubts and hesitations - who is not afraid to take the responsibility of a thorough movement in a critical hour, and who does something splendid and decided, while the rest of the world are feebly and perplexedly making up their minds what to do. (150)

Stowe interestingly capitalizes on Butler's inclination toward action instead of complacency, while other white authors, like Child, argue that *through his actions*, Butler settled for complacency. Her language mimics that of epic poetry: an outstanding, brave hero overcoming a large, seemingly indomitable challenge. Her use of wartime imagery – "military ring," "martial directness," and "whose sword divides all meshes of compromise" – mirrors a writing style very indicative of the Civil War: sentimental and laced with heroism. In such "disturbed times" of national uncertainty, one could sympathize with why Stowe might have been so elated to see someone "take responsibility of a thorough movement in a critical hour," but she fails to mention the consequences of this action and its impacts on the "contrabands" themselves (150). The "contraband" decision was not "decided" at all but was inherently transitory, as the refugees "were neither property with a clear owner (as in slavery) not free people, but something in between" (Masur 1051).

Despite Stowe's indications otherwise, this military decision did not free any enslaved persons. Although they were able to stay within Union lines away from the vicinity of their previous enslavers, “contrabands” remained entrapped in a military fort, forced to work for the Army. Both the legal rationale and the conditions of the term insinuate their existence as “property,” now in the possession of the Union Army; therefore, Stowe was not entirely correct in forecasting that, through this decision, “we [the North] have freed a great many slaves, and got very little credit for it – we have freed them, as it were, under protest, by pretext, and by ingenious subtleties” (150). *The Christian Recorder* authors were more precise in discerning this decision as the beginning of a long and painful road to freedom.

In reality, the Union army gained more power and a larger labor force, and, while “free” in a sense, “contraband” individuals still could not be guaranteed total emancipation. The decision prevented Butler and the United States government from having to make a definitive answer early in the war concerning the future of enslavement in the U.S.: as Child writes in another July 1861 piece for the *Liberator*, “[the supposititious and absurd doctrine] is a tub thrown to the whale, to divert from his craft, the threshing and flouncing provoked by his inhuman, unmilitary and demagogical spread...it is a shuttling and discreditable expedient to stave off the only question of any real importance involved in this mighty and unexampled moral quaking” (Child, “The Contraband of War Doctrine,” 114). The decision was meant to be “a tub thrown to the whale,” or a diversion to prevent the American public from discussing the “real importance” of the issues of emancipation and slavery. It clearly succeeded, as a throng of authors dedicated hundreds of pages in writing dedicated to debunking and reckoning with this legal policy – but why? Or, as David Lee Child asks, “why seek to explode Gen. Butler’s doctrine of ‘contraband of war’ when you yourself cannot but rejoice in the result of its application, inasmuch as it has been the means of rescuing a goodly number of human beings from wicked thraldom?” (28).

The answer to this question for early writers on the "contraband" lies squarely in the legal and metaphorical process which would render the United States government into an official slave-trader: "thus human chattel would remain chattel, with only a change of masters, the cities and towns of Free States would be converted into slave marts, and the United States into a regular slave-trader" (28). Child's proposed solutions to the "contraband" quandary point to the letter of the law: either the United States must relinquish its claim on these individuals or obtain a decree of a prize court, thus re-selling and putting a price on human lives (Child 29). These entirely grave consequences are a direct result of Butler's decision to name all escaped enslaved persons to Union forts "contraband," as there "is no freedom nor justice for the slave, only a change of masters" (40). Or, put another way, by New York lawyers Nott and Kirkland in 1862, this objectionable policy creates a country where, with his absolute disposal, the President can "like another Caesar, buy off, or punish his recent subjects, the present enemies of the United States . . . By what constitution, statute, natural or divine law, *he* became the owner, possessor and disposer, of so many slaves?" (1). As it turns out, "contrabands," too, were also using a language of possession to make sense of their cruel, intermediary position.

Metaphorical and Literal Northern Ownership of Black Individuals

These authors were not completely off base in their representations of the North as new "owners" of enslaved persons. Many "contraband" individuals are represented or recorded as understanding the North, or, in many cases, President Abraham Lincoln, as their new "master," or enslaver. In January 1863, for example, the *Liberator* published an original poem written by "an [unnamed] aged contraband" who had been taught to read and write during the war, presumably in a refugee camp ("Contraband Literature"). His poem, which outlines the emancipation of enslaved people in the U.S., begins with the declaration, "Good Massa Abe / He free de slabe!" ("Contraband Literature" ll. 1-2). The phrase "Good Massa" could merely indicate formerly enslaved people's gratitude for President Lincoln's goodness and honor in initiating emancipation, but the use of a cognate of "master" cannot be ignored within the context of American slavery and abolition.

This linguistic choice feels very specific: the "contraband" poet does not view President Lincoln as their political representative – their elected official, their president – but as an enslaver, perhaps because that was the most accepted and circulated expression of hierarchical relationships available for formerly enslaved persons. Formerly enslaved persons, as "property," were never accepted as full human beings and were unable to vote, thus the President never truly represented their existence as citizens. Therefore, the political decisions relating to emancipation were not viewed by this "contraband" as done *on his behalf* but rather done *for* him. This poem evidences the pervasive and continuing, enslaver-enslaved power dynamic: a white, Northern man making decisions to alter the course of another individual's life, wherein the enslaver controls all aspects and decisions of their life. Nevertheless, his poetic expression, whether a symbol of his gratitude or literal feelings towards President Lincoln, illuminates some "contrabands'" continued feelings of subjugation by the North, even after they were free by virtue of escape, relocation to Union forts, or occupation by Union forces.

This same sentiment repeats across "contraband" literature, thus highlighting the dominance of a new notion of American emancipation: the feeling of transference of ownership rather than freedom. According to an April 1863 letter written by Lucy Chase, a white, Northern teacher who taught in various "contraband camps" during the Civil War, when a "contraband" woman was asked "to whom she belonged," she responded, "I don't know, I reckon I'm Massa

Lincoln's slave now," accordingly designating a deep and continuous feeling of subjugation to a new enslaver: President Lincoln (*Dear Ones at Home* 61).

Lincoln accordingly symbolizes the North and the Union at large, and many "contrabands" are recorded as suggesting they were not free but in fact property of the North. In the same April 1863 letter, Chase writes of a conversation with "contrabands" who were enslaved by the F.F.V.'s, or the First Families of Virginia. "They chuckle with satisfaction, and a feeling of reverence when they say, 'The Union-folks own all the States now.' Proud as they are of speaking of the wealth of their old masters…their pride and importance is greatly increased, now they are in the hands of the 'Union,' who owns all the estates of their masters!'" (*Dear Ones at Home* 61). A few months before, on January 20, 1863, Chase records this same idea that many formerly enslaved people understood white Northerners, often those who had some sort of authority in the refugee camps, as a new enslaver: "now, and again, and almost perpetually, comes a black-face to the Dr's wooden window pane, 'Massa Dr, I-' 'Not massa, I'm not your master, you're not a slave now.' 'No massa. But I'm so used to it'" (*Dear Ones at Home* 28).

This interaction also suggests there is more to the story that may have been excluded or gone unnoticed by Lucy Chase and other abolitionists. Formerly enslaved persons were quickly placed into unexplored terrain that perhaps felt extremely puzzling or risky to these individuals. This uncertainty is markedly present in a January 15, 1863 letter where Chase details a conversation that ostensibly occurred between a "contraband" and the camp doctor:

> A boy named Friday gave [the Dr.] his name. "Friday is it," said the Dr. "Yaas, Sir, Friday," was the reply. "You said your name was Saturday, did you," said the Dr. "Yaas sir." "You are sure it's Saturday, are you?" "Yaas sir." He says the habit of the Negro is to say whatever he thinks his interrogator wishes him to say. (22)

This interaction displays a possible sense of trepidation on the part of the refugee, but, importantly, there is also a lack of a broader perspective on behalf of the camp doctor. The immediate historical reasoning behind the refugee’s acquiescence to the doctor’s continued line of questioning is not just obvious but imminent. Nevertheless, racist characterizations of formerly enslaved people’s “habits,” related to naming or otherwise, are not uncommon and mark an attempt to make sense of an increasingly transitory time and place.

The “contraband” camps seemingly created and re-created a hierarchy related to enslavement, as they were mainly operated by white individuals, provided less than optimal living conditions, and often forced “contrabands” to take part in unpaid labor. The North was not necessarily challenging many of the foundational notions of enslavement, and there was little evidence to prove to these individuals that “freedom” looks and feels different from their experiences on Southern plantations or “contraband” camps. This murkiness could have made it difficult for “contraband” individuals to know how their relationships with these white individuals were to play out; they were, in effect, carefully testing the waters of emancipation within the confines of their refugee camp. This new supposed subversion of hierarchy was never clearly delineated, which perhaps is why the literature reflects “contrabands’” intense ambiguity over how to name, refer to, and conceptualize these white Northerners.

Many white Northerners also sought to better conceptualize “contraband” individuals. As a form of entertainment, traveling “contraband” individuals captured Northerners’ attention, allowing audiences to gain even more control and power over the “contraband” narrative. In January of 1862, a “contraband” man named William Davis traveled with the renowned Reverend Lockwood of Fortress Monroe to tell his story, as a “representative contraband” to Northerners (“The Story of a Contraband.; Interesting Lecture by an Escaped Slave from Fortress Monroe.”). On January 16, 1862, an unnamed writer for *The New York Times* reported on Davis’ speech given to the Cooper Institute in New York City the night before, in which he spoke with "attendant embellishments of vocal and instrumental music" as background accompaniment. Towards the end of the article, the author relays a part of Davis' speech:

> The North was losing its cause because it would not avail itself of the efforts of those who would go forth conquering and to conquer, [applause;] but, if they would not let the ******* fight, would they not let them go? [Cries of 'Yes, yes.'] He stood before them *their slave -- the slave of the Government* -- would they let them go! [Cries of 'Yes.']. ("The Story of a Contraband," emphasis added)

According to Davis, "contrabands" are no longer held captive to a Southern enslaver but are "slave[s] of the Government." While he captures the general equivalence between the Northern government obtaining ownership of enslaved persons and their subjugation in the South, Davis was, himself, also "held captive" by the Union in a different way: through his position as "a representative" and traveling entertainment ("The Story of the Contraband"). While this event seems to have been marketed as informational (a formerly enslaved man telling his story of escape from enslavement to the Northern fort), the added "embellishments of vocal and instrumental music" insinuate this event was also a form of entertainment. The author explicitly describes one of the "highlights" for the audience: "the Waters vocalists in several patriotic songs, and…a solo [musical performance], [which] drew considerable applause" ("The Story of a Contraband").

Throughout the reporting of the event, the audience continually laughs, cheers, applauds, and exudes "sensation" during Davis' story. While his speech includes his feelings of embarrassment in his lack of education and mention of his five children held captive by "Secessionists," the story is largely punctuated by laughter, and it is not entirely clear what the laughs are a response to; as is the case when Davis states his past experiences of enslavement, as conveyed by the reporter: "But that overseer was turned away, and the next overseer was worse. [Laughter.] . . . He was promoted to do work around the house…and then the hands found fault with him, and said he was worse than the overseer [Laughter].” The author even underlines the audience's intense rapture with Davis’ story when

> The speaker gave a most inimitable and unreportable description of his feelings on being shaved by a white barber, and said, “Oh, Lord, if this is what freedom does, give us freedom all the time." This, and his energetic illustration of the bustle, and hurry, and industry of the North, as contrasted with the lassitude of the South, brought down the house in roars of laughter and rounds of applause. (“The Story of a Contraband”)

Davis was carted all around the North to divulge these stories to Northerners, spread awareness of “the contraband,” and help raise money for the American Missionary Association. The light and entertaining undertone of the speech calls into question the quiet surrender of Davis’ serious and tragic story of enslavement as a comedic night of entertainment for white Northerners’ consumption.

Northern audiences also began to understand the “contraband” through illustrated envelopes, or “Civil War patriotic covers,” which were essential to the distribution of nationalistic propaganda for the Union. Northern designers created thousands of distinct images for these envelopes during the Civil War, almost all of which were “icons associated with the United States [and] were the *intellectual property* of the Union” (Berry 64, emphasis added). The production of an envelope entitled “Contrabands [at] Fortress Monroe” represents just another example of the North’s metaphorical and literal capture of the “contrabands” in both their imagination and in printed illustrations that were officially marketed as intellectual property of the North. Whip in hand, the illustration depicts a white enslaver yelling “Come back here, you black rascal!,” and the “contraband’s” reply, “Can’t come back nohow massa; Dis chile’s contraban’” (Fig. 2). The illustration depicts many enslaved persons watching others escape, perhaps in surprise or confusion, while they continue laboring. Those who seem to be escaping are barely clothed, given no facial detail or features, and frantically run from a cotton field towards Fort Monroe.

The illustration does not give the viewer much understanding of who these individuals are, only that they seem to be mostly men, although one woman is running with a child in hand. Many of the refugees' bodies are faced away, and their faces are not detailed and individualized. The racist artistic and linguistic representations of this image parallel with the label "contraband" itself: unparsed, with very little recognition of an individual's full and complete humanity. The proximity of the cotton field to the Fort and the many enslaved people still working in the fields illustrate the fine line between the power and control of Union protection over Confederate enslavers. This illustrated envelope portrays the Northern desire to retain a past of enslavement, one where "even in freedom African Americans remained no more property," and racist images

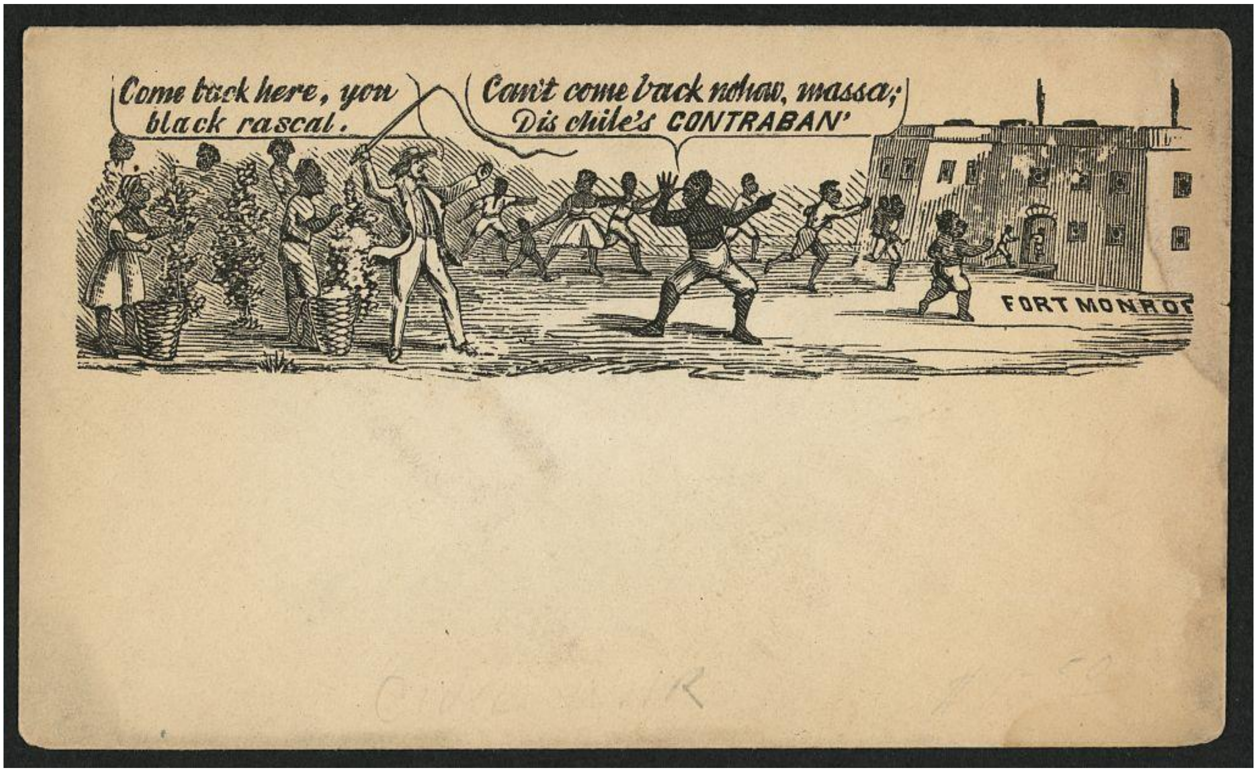
Come back here, you black rascal.
Can't come back nohow, massa; Dis chile's CONTRABAN'
FORT MONROE

Fig. 2: *Contraband, Fortress Monroe*, Library of Congress.

could continue to serve “as a mode of imagining blacks” (Fahs 154). This messaging is packed within this symbolic image, one, which, just like the “contrabands,” the Union legally owns.

The “contraband” legal decision did not just *theoretically* create the likeness of Northern ownership, as some early writers suggested, but, in many cases, it felt and *was* incredibly real to the “contraband” individuals who were affected by the decision. This literature, which contains language laced with nods to ownership and possession, follows from the acceptability of the term “contraband:” “it poses no threat to the current order of things. The term is more or less the best of both worlds: it is not enslavement, but it is not absolute freedom, either” (McWilliam 55). For the time being, the “contrabands” remained outside of the white North’s social order, only entering the discourse as a molded figment of their collective imagination.

Refugee “Contraband” Camps in Literature

Civil War refugee camps, more popularly known as “contraband camps,” first emerged in 1861 to house thousands of refugees scattered throughout the Union-occupied South.[4] These camps often contained the spaces where many “contrabands” learned to read and write, performed labor for little to no pay, and began to forge the beginnings of a new identity and future in a life of freedom. In literature, the camps functioned as both a physical and metaphorical space of transformation, education, and freedom – a microcosm of a possible American, post-war future: “it was in shelters that freedom could be seen, felt, touched, lived in, and experienced. But it was also where freedom could become endangered and lost, because the wartime transition from slavery to freedom was rarely a linear one” (Taylor 60).

Northern employees of the camps also noticed this puzzling indeterminacy; as described by Lucy Chase, who taught literacy in “contraband camps” throughout Craney Island

(Portsmouth, Virginia), Mainland Virginia, and the Deep South: “every hour of my life here is strange: it is not the past; it is not the future, and, with all the chances and changes of war it does not seem to be the present either” (58). As a white Northerner, Chase’s letters display many contradictions, and, like the transitory title of “contraband,” she wavers between understanding these individuals as free (an indicator of the “future”) and enslaved (a token of the “past”).

In a June 13, 1863 letter, while at first innocuously describing her residence in a Portsmouth, Virginia refugee camp, Lucy Chase illustrates the heat of a sweltering Southern summer and perhaps the comparable suffocation she feels as a white author:

> While I write, I listen to the music of falling grains of rice which the flies work from a dish to the floor. If the sugar bowl is uncovered for a moment, the blackness of blackness enshrouds it, and, like lumps of (negro) sugar the flies lie piled to its mouth. . . The flies make their mark, emphatically, upon current literature. They work faster than I do, and fill all my sheets in advance of my pen.
>
> Our other dark little friends, who swarm about us do their best to relieve us of the pests. They fan us while we eat, and while we sleep. Oh! Give me a slave to fan me while I sleep! (as the poet did not say) They fain worship us, the little things. (81)

In this passage, Chase equates refugee “contrabands” to the flies she sees around the kitchen. They are annoying, pest-like creatures, who, at the sight of something sweet, “(negro) sugar,” flock all at once and “enshroud it…[and] lie piled at its mouth.” Not only do they quickly congregate, but Chase writes of the flies as workers, constantly and diligently stealing from their food supply, “the grains of rice.” They are “the blackness of blackness,” which conceivably suggests a superlative sense of evil. Her description is eerily reminiscent of the attitudes towards “contraband” individuals “flooding” Union forts: once the Union began allowing in refugee “contrabands,” thousands quickly made their way to various camps and forts to the chagrin of many Northerners and Southerners.

Chase also displays frustration towards the influence of the flies, or “contraband:” “the flies make their mark, emphatically, upon current literature.” Not only have Black individuals crowded white physical space but also their publication space: Chase seems to feel as if she is not in control of her narrative, and the newly popularized “contraband” literary figure obstructs the reality she wishes to portray. The “contrabands” provide her with endless stories, they “fill my sheets in advance of my pen,” and Chase seems to feel frustrated with the flourishing “contraband” discourse written by authors who are physically distant, unknowledgeable, and disconnected from the “contrabands” themselves. However, she immediately proceeds to denigrate the Black individuals in the camp, “our other dark little friends, who swarm about us…[and] fan us while we eat, and while we sleep.” Chase characterizes working “contrabands” as if they are enslaved, even going as far as to say, “Give me a slave to fan me while I sleep.” This line, which she notes “the poet did not say,” is an intentional misquote of the six-book poem “The Task” (1785), in which the English, anti-slavery poet, William Cowper, writes

> I would not have a slave to till my ground,
> To carry me, to fan me while I sleep,
> And tremble when I wake, for all the wealth
> That sinews bought and sold have ever earned.
> No: dear as freedom is, and in my heart’s
> Just estimation prized above all price,
> I had much rather be myself the slave
> And wear the bonds, than fasten them on him.

While, as an abolitionist, Chase would likely align herself with Cowper’s anti-slavery position, her writing instead acknowledges her contrasting desire to be served, “to fan me as I sleep,” as if she were an enslaver. Chase retains an expectation to remain not only in control of the “contraband” narrative but of the “contrabands” themselves. She delineates her authority as a white teacher in the refugee camp, someone who is “worshipped” and superior to those, “the little ones,” she teaches. “Contrabands” are characterized as physically small, pandering, subjugated, and a mere subject of her and her literature. Chase's language suggests that these individuals are both controlled by and a nuisance to the white individuals who are employed to help them: a contradiction made possible by the malleable position of the "contraband."

This shocking paragraph seems out of place within her letter. It is unclear what spurs this discussion, and it can only be imagined that while looking around the kitchen, she catches sight of a sugar bowl crawling with flies. Nevertheless, it is jarring within her otherwise innocent survey and tour of her physical location. Notably, other refugee camp writers, such as Harriet Jacobs and Charlotte Forten Grimké, also, at first, utilize pest-like metaphors to describe the "contrabands," but, unlike Chase, who had been working in refugee camps for over a year at this point, their descriptive language becomes much more humanizing the longer they remain in the camps.

Through her writing on "contrabands," Harriet Jacobs, best known for her 1861 autobiography *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, distinctively attempts to reverse the harmful conceptions and images created by many white authors. Born into slavery in 1813, Jacobs later escaped to the North and acted as one of the most influential Black abolitionists and philanthropists of her time. Some of her most critical work focused on providing relief to "contrabands" in refugee communities during and after the Civil War. Concerning her work in Alexandria, Virginia, she "carefully built and maintained a northern support system, repeatedly travel[ed] to New York and Boston to collect supplies and money, [and] enlist[ed] the aid of black women's organizations and of white antislavery women" (Yellin et al. 397). At the same time, Jacobs reported and wrote on her experiences working with "contrabands" at the zenith of the destruction of slavery in the United States. Her writing is unique, and "unlike most northern correspondents, who pointed out the differences between their middle-class readers and the ‘contraband,’ Jacobs wrote that the freed people would make worthy citizens” (Yellin et al. 397).

In her September 1862 “Life Among the Contrabands,” published in the *Liberator*, Jacobs notes how she was struck by a dismal scene in the Duff’s Green Row refugee camp in Washington, D.C.: “I found men, women, and children all huddled together, without any distinction or regard to age or sex…many were sick with measles, diphtheria, scarlet and typhoid fever...[the Superintendent’s] office was thronged through the day by persons who came to hire these poor *creatures*, who they say will not work and take care of themselves” (Jacobs 400, emphasis added). Jacobs’ choice of the word “creatures,” though reminiscent of association with animals, diverges from Lucy Chase’s similar comparison, as it does not necessarily reflect Jacobs’ position on the humanity of “contrabands.” Rather, she refers to how they are forced to live. She pointedly frames the camp as dismal, chaotic, and not fit for human life, as many “suffer much from confinement in this crowded building. The little children pine like prison birds for their native element. It is almost impossible to keep the building in a healthy condition” (400). She uses this demoralizing, inhuman characterization again, later in the piece: “the poor *creatures* seemed so far removed from the immediate sympathy of those who would help them” (401, emphasis added). Jacobs expects a triumphant atmosphere, as she notes when traveling to “where the shackles had just fallen, I hoped that the glorious echo from the blow had aroused the spirit of freedom, if a spark slumbered in its bosom,” yet she faces these contrasting, dismal images in freedom’s midst (400). Her surprise might explain this immediate characterization of the “contrabands;” their subhuman treatment allows them to become almost unrecognizably inhuman to the observer.

Thus, Jacobs' characterization of the "contrabands" as "creatures" reflects the perspective of those members of the Union who worked in "upkeeping" the refugee camps: as evidenced by the inhospitable living conditions, they do not see the "contraband" individuals as fully human. Upon her request to "a lady in New York" for some charitable support, however, Jacobs explains that soon "every man, woman, and child with clean garments, [was] lying in a clean bed" and "*they seemed different beings*" (Jacobs 401, emphasis added). This immediate switch from "creatures" to "beings" reflects the shift in the treatment of the "contrabands," thus readers of the *Liberator* could internalize the impact of treating "contrabands" not as objects or property but as human beings.

In contrast to many white authors who wrote about these "contraband" refugee camps, Jacobs expresses the nuances and complexities of the "contraband" identity. Her text details the differences in physicality and experience within the previously perceived, unitary "contraband" identity. She visits the housing of more privileged "contrabands," or "what the people call the more favored slaves, and [who] would boast of having lived in the first families of Virginia," many of whom had lighter skin or a higher status having worked in elite Virginia families (Jacobs 403). Jacobs notices "their houses had an inviting aspect. The clean floors, the clean white spreads on their cots, and the general tidiness throughout the building, convinced me they had done as well as any other race could have done, under the same circumstances" (404). These descriptions vastly differ from those of Duff's Green Row. Jacobs does not shy away from the effects of miscegenation on the opportunities of "contraband" individuals, as "certain slaves had benefitted from miscegenation…[and] lighter skinned blacks like herself were given more desirable positions in slavery and afforded more opportunities in freedom," an important facet of "contraband" freedom that remains untouched by most, if not all, white authors (Yellin et al.

412). As a free, Black abolitionist, Jacobs inhabits a unique position: she acknowledges that “the contrabands” are not homogenous, and she points to a myriad of peripheral problems to grapple with when it comes to freedom in the United States. Jacobs’ descriptions demonstrate a particular and often ignored reality of the “contrabands:” any discourse surrounding universal freedom for all “slaves” or “contrabands” cannot merely discuss how the white North will accept formerly enslaved persons but also how this conflict could result in severe inequalities *within* the emancipated group.

Harriet Jacobs ends her piece with a plea directly to her *Liberator* audience: “Trust [the “contrabands”]. Make them free . . . You have helped to make them what they are; teach them civilization. You owe it to them, and you will find them as apt to learn as any other people that come to you stupid from oppression” (406). Jacobs’ use of the second person places a sense of responsibility on Northerners, a burden many try to ignore or place solely on the South. While they began as “creatures,” the “contrabands” emerge as individuals – family units, single mothers, orphans – who “are innocent and helpless of God’s poor” and deserve the North’s compassion, attention, and humanitarian assistance (407).

Like Jacobs, Charlotte Forten Grimké’s writings on the “contrabands” follow a similar trajectory and begin with pest-like language. Forten Grimké, a free, African American abolitionist from Philadelphia, is best known for her unique diaries that describe her experience as a free, Black woman in the North and her work as a teacher in the Sea Islands in “contraband” refugee camps. Forten Grimké was one of the first Black teachers to arrive in Port Royal, where she taught formerly enslaved persons how to read and write. Her diaries are steeped in beautifully detailed and picturesque memories of her reality in the Sea Islands, her interactions with “contrabands,” and the everyday difficulties and rewards of teaching. Through her writing, she humanizes "contraband" persons as individuals, and she makes a marked note of their personalities, vitality, and willingness to learn.

On October 28, 1862, Forten Grimké recounts her first sight of the "contrabands" as she arrives in Beaufort, South Carolina: "T'was a strange sight as our boat approached the landing at Hilton Head. On the wharf was a morley assemblage – soldiers, officers, and 'contrabands' of every hue and size. They were mostly black, however, and certainly the most dismal specimens I ever saw" (Forten Grimké 388). Forten Grimké puts quotation marks around the term "contraband," which signals her initial questioning of how to refer to these individuals and uncertainty in the use of the word "contraband" for human beings. Forten Grimké also seems to write about this group of people as one large conglomeration, an "assemblage," the soldiers, officers, and "contrabands" together, which indicates her future treatment of these individuals; she intends to attend to and recognize their different needs and backgrounds but also embrace the entire community as one. Nevertheless, her recognition of these individuals as "dismal specimens" represents her first position in the Sea Islands: an outsider. Like Harriet Jacobs' use of the word "creatures," Forten Grimké's reference to individuals as "specimens" mirrors a perspective any outsider might have. The sense of humanity she attempts to emphasize in her later entries is absent in this first contact with "contrabands," perhaps simply because she is still at a distance from the community. Her position as a free, Black woman might lend itself to a flawed assumption of immediate connection with the "contrabands," but her writing indicates otherwise. Understandably, many different backgrounds and experiences still stand in the way of any immediate affinity. These individuals are not yet personalized and "full" to Forten Grimké, although that reality changes very rapidly.

Forten Grimké quickly immerses herself in teaching and learning, herself: just one day later, on October 29, 1862, she writes that "the negroes on the place are very kind and polite. I think I shall get on amicably with them" (391). She no longer uses the terms "specimen" or "contraband" once she meets, speaks to, and acquaints herself with these individuals. However, her distinction of the "contrabands" as "the negroes" still indicates at least some level of separation. This distinction continues from her initial observation that "they were mostly black" (388). Forten Grimké constantly negotiates between her position as a Black, free woman and the experience of the Black "contrabands" she has come to help. Like Harriet Jacobs, as a light-skinned Black woman, Forten Grimké constantly attempts to reckon with her more privileged place in society, especially while residing in the Sea Islands.

While exhibiting empathy in its greatest sense and personally recognizing their trials and tribulations, Charlotte Forten Grimké also demonstrates how her specific, nuanced role could be of great help to the "contrabands:" "It is well that they sh'ld know what one of their own color c'ld do for his race. I long to inspire them with courage and ambition (of a noble sort), and high purposes" (Forten Grimké 397-98). Forten Grimké recognizes she contains multitudes, that she belongs to the same "race," yet her difference in background allows her the opportunity to express her "courage, ambition, and high purposes," thus epitomizing her influential impact as a writer and teacher of "contrabands."

Forten Grimké's accounts of teaching formerly enslaved persons are uniquely humanizing and expansive. On her first day, she writes: "We went into the school, and heard the children read and spell. The teachers tell us that they have made great improvements in a very short time, and I noticed with pleasure how bright, how eager to learn many of them seem" (Forten Grimké 391). Very rarely does she mention any physical and mental differences (or superiorities) between herself and the "contrabands," and the self-established hierarchy present in Lucy Chase's letters is markedly absent in Forten Grimké's accounts. In this entry, she does not relay any dubiousness that these children genuinely desire to learn and grow, and she embraces them in their totality: "Dear children! Born in slavery, but free at last? May God preserve to you all the blessings of freedom, and may you be in every possible way fitted to enjoy them. My heart goes out to you. I shall be glad to do all that I can to help you" (Forten Grimké 391). Forten Grimké recognizes their intermediary status – she is not blind to the fact that they are living in a refugee fort with Union soldiers, yet she embraces the "contrabands" in her writing as if they were fully free. As Dickson Bruce highlights, "Forten [Grimké] joined a number of abolitionists who saw in the voices of the slaves, and the freedmen and freedwomen, a testimony to their humanity and, both within and outside the conventions of romantic realism, their fitness for freedom" (309).

While some authors attempt to rewrite and re-name Black identity, Grimké specifically takes the opposite approach. In an address to her diary, she writes, "I will give to you...a more minute description of the people around than I've yet given to anyone. *I shall write down their names too, that I may remember them always*." (Forten Grimké 410-11, emphasis added). She exhibits a sense of openness and awe at the diversity of narratives and individuals she meets and articulates their stories in her personal diary. She writes about Celia, who is "one of the best women of the place," "a cripple [whose] feet and limbs were so badly frozen by exposure" that they were amputated, yet "she manages to get almost as active as any of the others" (411-12). Her entry also introduces Harriet, "a very kind, pleasant old soul [who] comes from Darien[,] Georgia…[whose] three children have been sold from her," and Harriet's mother:

> Bella, is rather a querulous body. But who can blame her? She has had enough to try her sorely. One by one her children at a tender age have been dragged from her to work in the

> cotton fields. She herself has been made to work when most unfit for it. She has had to see her own children cruelly beaten. Is it strange that these thing sh'ld embittered her? But she has much of the milk of human kindness left her yet. (411)

Forten Grimké not only recognizes these individuals with a fullness that is absent in almost every other narrative but also cares deeply enough to write their stories down, with their real names attached, in hopes that their stories will always be remembered in posterity.

Despite many other portrayals, Jacobs' and Grimké's descriptions of these individuals did not render them as lazy or inept, rather they highlighted that "contraband" individuals often expressed "a willingness to work, and were anxious to know what was to be done with them after the work was done" (Jacobs 402). Perhaps, this willingness became twisted in the Northern imagination to indicate a sense of nostalgia for their past in enslavement, as this notable theme began to materialize in the burgeoning fictional literature related to the "contraband."

The Romanticization of Slavery and Nostalgia for Plantation Life

Most authors of the time were not privy to life in refugee camps and thus reconciled with the entrance of the "contraband" into the American social order through imaginative, creative fiction. Many stories tend to portray these individuals as preferring a position in enslavement over freedom, a further indication of the "contraband" figure's ability to reside in the American imagination as both free and enslaved. In many different "contraband" stories penned by white authors, such as "Liberty: A Romance" (1863), *Contraband Christmas* (1864), and "My Contraband" (1863), "contraband" characters are often nostalgic for their time in enslavement, thus demonstrating some white authors' resistance and inability to imagine free, Black Americans as equal citizens.

In the short piece "Liberty.: A Romance," published in *Vanity Fair* in February 1863**,** an "Intelligent contraband" from Arkansas feels wistful for his life in slavery when traveling "Northward:" "I felt that I was free. . . yet, somehow, fond memory would persist in reverting to the warm savannas of the old plantation" (22). As this unnamed man journeys through the North, "over dreary plains of frosty herbage; through forest deserts; among wild copses of laurel and rhododendron that bruised my shins," he hopes to find a home amongst people who he assumes will accept him ("Liberty" 22). Instead, he finds the North "cold, dark, [and] forbidding," not just in climate (although the character does note "I was very cold. My race are not fitted for low temperatures") but in sociability. This story is riddled with racist stereotypes and characterizations, such as Black individuals' "genetic" preference for warm climates over cold. Given its publication in *Vanity Fair*, which tended to exhibit anti-abolition sympathies, the story is most likely not one meant to triumph abolitionism. Instead, it discourages "contrabands" from aligning themselves with the North, who the piece argues do not have their interests and equality in mind.

As the "Intelligent contraband" moves further North, it becomes "colder, more inhospitable," and "vague doubts and half-regrets" supersede his entire consciousness, until he reaches the Northern home of "Mrs. Negrophile." When he does not have a card to indicate his freedom, which demonstrates his informal freedom and "contraband" status, the lackey at the door remarks "[Mrs. Negrophile] doesn't see *that kind*" (22). This somewhat provocative title, "Mrs. Negrophile," critiques the Union, which outwardly markets itself as pro-emancipation yet does not extend courtesies to all, if not most, formerly enslaved people, particularly "contrabands," who often had little documentation of their intermedial status. The piece suggests that, despite its image, the North is cold, bitter, and callous and has no intention to proclaim true equality. This idea is foreshadowed early in the piece, when the unnamed main character travels to a plantation to inform his lover, Phyllis, of their newly forged freedom. He instead finds himself removed from the premises by “two large and muscular slaves” when Phyllis’ enslaver informs him that the Emancipation Proclamation only applies to the seceded states, and they were technically in Union territory. For not the last time, he finds himself “weeping, alone” (22).

While, according to the piece, the North at large has an extreme disregard for the formerly enslaved, this sentiment reaches a critical point when the main character is confronted by the Northern man who helms the most power and supposedly epitomizes freedom: President Lincoln. In the story, a striking conversation occurs when the “contraband” arrives in Washington, D.C., on the steps of the Capitol, and murmurs, “I am free!:”

> A very tall, homely man, with black whiskers and honest eyes, came down the steps. I caught his hand. He looked at me as if surprised, and spoke:
>
> “Well; what is it!”
>
> “I am a free man. I come from Hog-hole Swamp, Arkansas. I am hungry and cold.”
>
> “O, go ‘way!” replied the man. “Don’t bother me. I’m sick of the very sight of you *******!”
>
> “Sir,” I said. “You insult your equal. I am your peer. The Proclamation….”
>
> “Confound the Proclamation! I almost wish I had never issued it!”
>
> I turned away, weeping. (22)

In this story, a fictionalized Lincoln wishes he had never issued the Emancipation Proclamation at all, perhaps insinuating emancipation was a military necessity rather than a moral one. The “contraband” insists that he is a white man’s equal, his peer, yet this version of Lincoln makes it very clear that he never intended for the Emancipation Proclamation to have that effect. The story represents Lincoln as racist and, quite frankly, exasperated by the Black people he freed, specifically those who might require help or assistance from the government. This “contraband” relays that he is “hungry and cold” and far from home, and Lincoln could not be bothered: “Don’t bother me. I’m sick of the very sight of you ******!” (22). His harsh comments have an even deeper effect with the mention of his “honest eyes,” which suggests that his anger and vitriol in facing this man reflects the salient reality of the fight for emancipation. Portrayed as a “homely,” angry man, this character acts in opposition to the traditionally strong “Honest Abe” figure conventionally attached to President Lincoln. This scene, which takes place physically within the heart of the Union, standing on the steps of the Capitol Building, effectively criticizes the Union’s falsely proclaimed ideals of freedom and equality.

This fact is only emphasized when, shortly after, the “contraband” approaches a group of Congressmen, one of whom is “Mr. Lovejoy,” or Owen Lovejoy, a Republican, abolitionist Illinois congressman who served in Congress from 1857 to 1864. The group derides the “contraband” and insists this “lazy fellow” go to work, to which he replies, “Mock me not!...am I not a man and a brother?...‘Sir,’ I answered scornfully, ‘I am free.’” (22). Despite this group containing a politician known for his anti-slavery speeches and abolitionist beliefs, “they laughed, vulgarly, and I went away with a heavy heart” (22). Everywhere the “contraband” turns, those who he expects to accept and assist him instead turn a blind eye.

Thus, this “Intelligent Contraband” does not buy into the “false narrative” that the North offers something superlative to the South; he discovers an empty reality Northward and eventually decides to head back to his region of former enslavement. He reflects on the disappointment of freedom when confronted by a group of Northern, white railroad laborers: “These were free men. They worked harder than I did when a slave, and for a bare living…. worse food, worse clothes, and more beastliness on Saturday night…. for I had never been able to kill myself with bad whiskey" (22). When he realizes that life in freedom is no better, if not worse, than his life in enslavement, he "was satisfied. I begged a few coppers, and set my face sternly Southward. O Liberty!" (22). While the story does present an essence of truth – not everyone in the North was accepting of refugee persons from slavery and gaining and maintaining freedom was often extremely trying – the story perpetuates harmful narratives concerning enslavement and does little to foreground real "contraband" experiences and their conceptions of freedom and citizenship.

The novel *Contraband Christmas,* written by Nathaniel W.T. Root in 1864, portrays a similarly romanticized South, as Christmas, the "contraband" character, often also finds himself reminiscing about his previous "mild and merry kind of bondage...the 'institution' [that] had been...paternal, just and kind" (Root 32). In the entirety of the novel, "Chrismus" never speaks ill of his time in enslavement, nor his enslaver. He refers to the South Carolina plantation where he lived as "heben" (heaven) and oftentimes desires to return: "freedom among strangers, or bondage among friends? He more than half wished himself back again" (Root 32). He even tells his Northern "family" how enjoyable holidays were on the plantation: "Down in 'heben,' Missy Green, dey allers hab great time in de holiday. No work dat week, 'tween Chris'mas and New Year, go visitin', stay home, jes you please; hab a dance ebery night" (Root 84). While this narrative might not be entirely false for a select few, as a Northern writer, Root's "abolitionist" literary choice, in 1864, amidst the bloody fight for freedom and emancipation, to portray slavery in this manner is nothing short of peculiar. More than once, the Northern family Christmas resides with assumes he would rather *not* be in the North, where he has achieved freedom, asking him questions such as "Wouldn't you rather be back in 'heben' to-day?" (96). Not only does Christmas seem to reminisce about his past, but he also actively and decisively carries his memories of bondage with him into his new life of freedom, most notably through a Christmas gift, given to him by the Greene family, “and next, a ‘Frank Leslie,’ which contained a large picture of Port Royal,” a Southern location of former enslavement and now, for many, emancipation (Root 94). This image notably appears in a pictorial publication, *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*, known for its “tendency toward sensationalism” and “tell-alls” (“Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper”).

Christmas also forever carries his noticeably unusual name. His name points to traditional enslavement practices wherein white enslavers consistently stripped those who they enslaved of their names, perhaps one of the most important referential markers in establishing one’s self-, familial-, and cultural- identity. “Naming imparts meaning and often represents a distinctive knowledge or family communication,” and when that identifier relates solely to one’s enslaver, those who were enslaved could only be identified within their position in enslavement (Thompson-Miller et al. 38). Many formerly enslaved persons adopted entirely new names in freedom, while many others chose just a new surname, as their family name had been removed or replaced by their enslaver. While it was not unprecedented for newly freed individuals to keep the name their enslaver gave them, “self-naming by slaves, which also occurred, is likely to be underreported in the records, which were mainly created by and for slaveholders” (Williamson).

This self (re)naming practice is twisted and romanticized in *Contraband Christmas*, as Christmas recognizes the importance of his name and, with awe and gratitude, “touched the pen which wrote his name, ‘*Chrismus Greene King*’” on his marriage certificate (Root 103, emphasis added). Instead of renaming himself in freedom, he preserves his name, one he received by way of his former enslaver, Mr. King; since he was given to the family as a Christmas present, the name was only “natural:”

> The captain introduced him as ‘Chrismus.’
>
> “What made them call you that name?” asked Mrs. Greene.
>
> “Cause I was a Chris’mas present, Missy. Old Massa King had a little new ****** Chris’mas-day, twenty years ago, an’ so dey call ‘im Chrismus…”
>
> “His full name, Ma,” said Captain Abijah, “is Christmas D. King.”
>
> “What does the ‘D’ stand for?’ asked Dave. . .
>
> ‘Oh, *Day*! *Day*! Christmas *Day* King!” (Root 8-9)

In the story, Christmas proudly carries this name, one ironically and simultaneously formed in the context of both slavery and holiday celebration. His name, a result of a perception of his life as an object to be “given” as a Christmas gift, becomes ingrained in his identity – one that, if he were to rename himself, could be reclaimed and reformed. Even in his emancipatory move from Hilton Head to Boston, Christmas never questions this decision because of his often-fond memories of enslavement. Moreover, his only attempt to name himself illustrates his continued namelessness and forced, white-created identity, as his two chosen surnames originate in his continued position of subjugation (Greene) and former enslavement (King). This white-controlled naming practice reflects Northerners’ certain understanding that “naming the people then emerging from bondage was a critical step in cementing their future,” and the grip that the label “contraband” had on the North demonstrates a hesitation to accept these individuals' eventual freedom and integration into the United States (Masur 1084).[5]

This control over the self-narratives of those emerging from bondage is perhaps best epitomized by the main character in Louisa May Alcott’s “My Contraband” (1863), a white, Northern nurse who romanticizes a “contraband’s” time in enslavement and reinforces her preference of his subjugation over any semblance of freedom. First published in *Atlantic Monthly*, the story follows a Union nurse Faith Dane, who reinforces racist divisions as she sees

Bob's face as quite literally divided: one side remains unscathed and beautiful, the other mutilated by the literal and metaphorical scars of slavery. When she first sees Bob, Faith perceives a face with "Saxon features…color in lips and cheek, waving hair, and an eye full of passionate melancholy" and imagines his brokenness may be "some deep sorrow… mourned for the dead master to whom he had been faithful to the end" (Alcott 71). By romanticizing the tragedies of slavery and assuming Bob's pain is associated with love for his white enslaver, Dane creates a false reality that enables her to feel comfortable and guiltless when meeting Bob. This sentiment stems from the palatability of the term "contraband." Because Bob is in an "in-between state" between enslavement and freedom, Dane's treatment of him oscillates between how she would treat an enslaved person and how she would treat a free man. Ultimately, though, rather than reckon with the brutality and violence perpetrated against enslaved persons by her race, which as an abolitionist she would be fully aware of, her false perceptions help her ignore the subjugation. She instead attempts to reckon with Bob's position within her narrow definition of "personhood" and "freedom," a place where, in her mind, he does not truly fit.

Upon touching him, Bob turns his entire face toward Faith, and "the slave appeared" (Alcott 71). Despite her initial impression of Bob, Faith cannot overcome her repulsion at his "ghastly wound[s]" of slavery, foregrounded by a large scar on Bob's face (71). "Robert's wound…frustrates Dane's intentions and confuses her desire to categorize Robert as either man or slave" – the two sides of his face cannot, in her eyes, be united (Putzi 195). If Bob is anything, he is a former *slave*, not a *man*. Her romanticization of slavery does not conquer any physical evidence of torture; therefore, she regresses to executing the same subjugation and racism she is against as an abolitionist. With this encounter, Dane strictly glorifies Bob's oppressive past. As typified by Faith Dane's behaviors, while the North sought to end slavery as an institution, they did not necessarily always pursue this belief beyond abstractions – in literature, or otherwise.

Reminiscent of Christmas' naming in *Contraband Christmas,* an accepted and celebrated process of (re)naming also occurs in Alcott's "My Contraband." Faith Dane disapproves of the "contraband" character's chosen name, Bob, and instead requests to call him "Robert:" "Tom, Dick or Harry would pass, when lads rejoice in those familiar abbreviations; but to address men...in that style did not suit my old-fashioned ideas of proprietary" (Alcott 72). Bob is then stripped of his identity – he does not even have a surname at this point – merely because Faith Dane decides it suits *her* needs best. Faith even acknowledges that her ideals are "old-fashioned," yet her position as a white individual with systemic power allows her to ignore the progressive and transitory nature of the time and remain cemented in the past. In this case, Faith Dane repudiates the "contraband's" attempt to define his identity and new life in freedom, thus demonstrating white individuals' fear of their eclipsing control. In "Reconstructing the Nation," Azelina Flint suggests, too, that "while Faith's motivation for renaming 'Bob' 'Robert' [is] ostensibly to treat him with the same respect that she would offer a white man, this respect is nevertheless rooted in her social mores and does not defer to Bob's personal preferences" (132-33). Even with abolitionist authors, there remains a sense of superiority and reclamation of power they feel unable to renounce in this moment of transition.

Ultimately, at his death, it is revealed that Bob takes Dane's surname to become "Robert Dane," and he exists in eternity as her namesake. Faith effectively renamed Bob and so strongly believes in the irrelevance of his chosen name, that she erroneously believes that he was nameless before they met: "when, turning to the ticket just above his head, I saw the name, 'Robert Dane.' That both assured and touched me, for, remembering that he had no name, I knew that he had taken mine" (Alcott 84). Alcott further characterizes Bob as so forcibly influenced and touched by this white, Northern woman that he lives in "eternal liberty" as her namesake (Alcott 86).

These characterizations of "contrabands" continually reflect a harmful and denigrating narrative that "contraband" individuals preferred enslavement over freedom, which represents a certain reluctance to shift American conceptions of freedom and citizenry during the war. This trope is repeated across literature, despite countless accounts written by and about "contrabands" relaying the contrary: one anonymous "contraband" reports they "had no wish to see [their enslaver] back again; and they spoke of him with little affection" (*Dear Ones At Home* 79). Similarly, Edward Pierce, a Union soldier who published his observations of "contrabands" in his November 1861 piece entitled "Contrabands at Fortress Monroe" in the *Atlantic Monthly* confirms this same sentiment:

> There is a universal desire among the slaves to be free. Upon this point my inquiries were particular, and always with the same result. When we said to them, "You don't want to be free - your masters say you don't" - they manifest much indignation, answering, "We do want to be free - we want to be for ourselves." We inquired further, "Do the house slaves who wear their master's clothes want to be free?" "We never heard of one who did not," was the instant reply. There might be, they said, some half-crazy one who did not care to be free, but they had never seen one. (637)

The adopted worldview of these stories, that freed enslaved persons have an innate desire to remain enslaved or reunite with their enslaver, quells abolitionists' worries that *their* world and reality might change for the benefit of freedom for others. While their worries would be accurate, and the discomfort of change and reformation has never once escaped a single generation, it is simultaneously grounded in ingrained racism.

Rosa Barnwell affirms her love of freedom in one of the rare accounts written by a "contraband," entitled "Slavery, by a Female Contraband" published in the *Liberator* in

November of 1862. In her piece, she details her enslavement in Charleston, South Carolina and her hopes for the future as a newly free person. Barnwell describes both the fair and harsh treatment of enslaved persons by “the persons who claimed me as their slave” and accounts for being relatively “well treated” (180). While outlining what “I have witnessed, showing the cruel effects of slavery,” including instances of whipping and lashing, Rosa attempts to uplift others’ stories, as well as her own. Despite her treatment being “not as bad as the other hands,” she makes very clear that her miraculous circumvention of violence does not diminish her own experiences of enslavement and insists that freedom is still sweeter than life in bondage: “Yet though I did not suffer from cruel treatment, I preferred freedom to slavery; and this desire to reach a land where whips and chains are not found caused me to leave my former home” (Barnwell 180).

Barnwell recognizes the power of language in naming other individuals’ realities. She avoids words like “owner” or “master” and instead settles for “the persons who claim me as their slave” (180). The use of this phrase demonstrates her attempt to reclaim her past and identity as an individual first: a person who was unfairly claimed, rather than something with a natural state of being “owned.” Rosa similarly does not call the other individuals “slaves” but instead “hands.” In defining her present and future self, she does not ignore and rewrite her past but reflects on the heartbreak that it has caused her, and these language choices are specific to her profound understanding of a past dictated for her versus a future open for her determination.

While many white-authored pieces contain a certain conflation between “well treatment” and love for the institution of slavery, Barnwell demonstrates that the two are not tethered. In the first lines of her piece, she even appeals directly to the Northerners who believe they can easily describe experiences in slavery: “No one who has not been in slavery knows the real curse of it.

A *Northern* person cannot tell *half* how bad it is" (Barnwell 180). This statement, as a separate paragraph itself in the piece, seems to act as a prelude or disclaimer to her story, which she begins immediately in the next paragraph. Rosa is aware that there are individuals who will read her story and try to find the good, positive aspects of her experience in slavery, so she assertively and unquestionably states her only literary purpose: to “show the cruel effects of slavery.”

The mere existence of the practice of slavery, Barnwell argues, whether it encompasses acts of violence or not, is reprehensible and deplorable. One does not have to endure direct violence to experience the vicious, cruel effects of a life in bondage, and this experience should determinably not be romanticized. This bridged gap – the visceral ability to empathize with experiences that are not her own – feels painfully absent in white-authored writing; rather, many seem to search for any reason why the institution of slavery is not entirely evil. So many “contraband” stories centralize feelings of nostalgia for enslavement or a romanticization of experience, despite the supposedly agreed-upon standard that slavery is atrociously cruel and diabolical, pervaded with unjustified violence. It isn’t to say that some enslaved persons did not have less violent and cruel experiences, but the institution of slavery, or the “contraband” experience, should not be judged by a set of outliers that might fit with a certain emotional and personal agenda.

Contrary to conventional presuppositions about abolitionism, these literary patterns reflect that many white individuals, knowingly and unknowingly, gripped onto a racist power hierarchy and often did not allow Black characters – or real Black lives, for that matter – to have a significant role in establishing their identity in freedom.

Hope and Forgiveness in Frances E.W. Harper's Abolitionist Writing on the "Contraband"

Despite the complexities and often racist, harmful, and denigrating images perpetuated throughout "contraband" literature, Frances E. W. Harper, a prominent abolitionist, suffragette, and one of the first African American women to publish a novel, wrote of a promising future that was to emerge out of the past of American enslavement. While there are nuances within white authored- "contraband" literature, these works typically do not showcase Black individuals' full humanity: as noted by Albion Tourgée, a white Union soldier, author, and emancipationist, in 1888, "about the negro as a man, with hopes, fears, and aspirations like other men, our literature is very nearly silent" (qtd. in Blight 220). Harper shifts the narrative towards a recognition of a brighter future and promise for Black individuals who have been subjected to enslavement, endured the hardships and negative implications of the "contraband" label, and struggled towards emancipation against all odds, one step at a time.

Frances E. W. Harper's poem "The Contraband's Answer" was first published in the African American periodical *The Anglo-African* on December 19, 1863. Perhaps as a response to the "contraband question," this poem stands in stark contrast to many other similar works of the time. Harper's outlook on the refugees' future is positively optimistic and forward-looking. As a result of newly forged freedom, the natural world around the speaker in the poem seems to have been altered:

> The blue sky arching overhead,
> The green turf 'neath my daily tread,
> All glorified by freedom's light,
> Grow fair and lovely to my sight
>
> The very winds that sweep along,
> Seem burdened with a lovely song;
> Nor shrieks, nor groans of grief or fear,
> Float on their wings and join my ear (ll. 1-8)

In the poem, freedom is transformative, all-encompassing, and embedded within the natural world, and it has the power to brighten and shift the world toward a natural utopia. For Harper, the notion of freedom is so powerful that it transcends and revolutionizes the nature of the world. Freedom creates an expanse of future possibilities, as large as the “sky arching overhead,” and lives within the air that surrounds and sustains human life. In this way, freedom is also now an endowed right to all, as natural as the sky, grass, and wind. The poem’s epigraph relays this idea best: “Everything is Lovely.”

Harper also looks to the younger generations and family to find the joy and possibility in a life of freedom: “For darling child and loving wife, / I toll with newly-wakened life; / The light that lingers ‘round her smile / The shadows from my soul beguile” (ll. 13-16). Harper suggests that while many older individuals have endured much of their life in enslavement, the discovery of hope and light may come from a glance at a child, one who will live much of their life as a free person, or the smile and intimacy of a “loving wife.” While this hope should not take away the undeniable challenges they will still face, “his laughter, mirth and song, / fade out long scores of grief and wrong” (ll. 19-20). A child’s innocence and outlook on the world is one that adults should try to emulate, as it will provide the best and most enlightening angle on the capacity for change in this new time of freedom and emancipation.

Frances Harper continues to heal the divisive wounds of enslavement and American history with her 1892 novel *Iola Leroy, Or Shadows Uplifted*, one of the first novels published by an African American woman. With this novel, Harper revisits the “contraband” figure almost thirty years after the end of the Civil War, long after the term was in popular circulation. Some critics argue Harper’s return to an antebellum and postbellum setting allows her to “ignore the pressing problems of the 1890s to write of the heroism of an earlier era” (Lewis 316). However, when considering the novel as a return to the "contraband" discourse, Harper can be seen as reformulating the current moment – not by highlighting the "heroism" of the Civil War but by fully recognizing its shortcomings. While other authors were writing on the "contraband" between 1861 and 1865, Harper's temporal distance from the Civil War allows her to reflect on the effects of the "contraband" decision having already lived through them. This reexamination of the "contraband" narrative also allows her to remold the characters' outlooks on the war to reframe the ongoing struggles of the 1890s. For example, in the novel, one Union General pines for the time "when some faithful historian will chronicle all the deeds of daring and service these people [the "contrabands"] have performed during this struggle, and give them due credit therefor" (Harper 130). In reply, another General comments on the Union's "great mistake," an admission that, in reality, could only have been gleaned from the war's conclusion but is stated in its midst: the "long delay in granting [Black persons] their freedom, and even what we have done is only partial" (130). In the novel, these admissions, which are given in real-time during the war, allow the characters to recognize the historical consequences of the Union's actions without the realistic passage of time; a gift, within the "contraband" discourse, only Harper could grant her characters. Harper even fulfills the Union General's wish by highlighting the "contraband" figure. Her choice to voice her hope for a united future through a retrospective "contraband" story demonstrates that, like the intermediary position of the "contraband," full emancipation and equality remained unfulfilled, even in 1892.

In *Iola Leroy* Harper grapples with and addresses many prominent themes emerging out of the Civil War, ranging from racism and white supremacy to gender roles, religion, forgiveness, and optimism in the face of a tragic history. The story begins in 1861 with Robert Johnson, the uncle of the title character. Robert is enslaved on a North Carolina plantation, until his friend, Tom, brings up the possibility of escaping to refuge: “[These generals] sed dat de slaves dat runned away war some big name - I don’t know what he called it. But it meant dat all ob we who com’d to de Yankees should be free” (Harper 16). When Tom asks Robert if being “contraband” “is…somethin’ good for us,” Robert hesitates, not exactly sure how to respond: “I think…if a slave runs away…he is called a contraband, just the same as if he were an ox or horse. They wouldn’t send the horses back, and they won’t send us back” (16). Robert, Tom, and a host of others decide to leave for a Union fort shortly thereafter, where they enlist in the military. In the novel, these “contraband” characters are heroic figures: Tom sacrifices himself to save the lives of his comrades (“Someone must die to get us out of this. I might’s well be him as any. You are soldiers and can fight. If they kill me, it is nuthin’”), and Robert, despite being offered a promotion to the white regiment because of his “white skin” and “intelligence, courage, and prompt obedience,” refuses, saying “I think my place is where I am most needed. You do not need me in your ranks, and my company does” (53, 43). Harper’s writing does not exhibit “contrabands” within the confines of a racist trope but rather allows them to live and die in the name of their high moral standards and righteousness.

However, Robert and Tom are not necessarily the only “contraband” characters. Iola Leroy, who lives her early life as a free, educated woman in the North, believes she is white – she has a fair complexion, blue eyes, and has no reason to believe otherwise. However, her family history reveals a different story: her father, a former Southern enslaver, marries one of the women he enslaved (Iola’s mother, Marie), and sets her free. When Iola’s father suddenly dies, her uncle brings Marie’s manumission to court, seeking revenge against his brother, who he detested for marrying an enslaved person. The court judges Marie’s freedom illegal, and she and her children, including Iola, become legally enslaved and sold. Shortly thereafter, the Union

Army rescues Iola, and she works as a nurse and later as a teacher in a school for freed enslaved persons. While both Harper and scholars alike do not conventionally consider Iola as a “contraband” character, her circumstances closely align her with this label. Scholars tend to view Iola as markedly separate from the “contrabands.” Vashti Lewis, for example, notes Iola is “rescued by contraband slaves” but does not suggest she, too, becomes one (317). If Iola were considered “contraband,” she would be one of the only major female “contraband” characters in Civil War literature, yet she remains uncategorized by Harper and the other characters. Iola’s pathway to freedom demonstrates the elusive and disproportionate granting of the “contraband” title, especially pertaining to women and non-conscripted individuals.

In stark contrast to Alcott and Root, Harper capitalizes on the theme of forgiveness in the face of tragedy while simultaneously exposing the atrocities of enslavement and treatment of Black individuals throughout American history. *Iola Leroy* does not romanticize enslavement but allows space for Black characters to move through their past into a new future. Iola, too, believes in the same positively hopeful trajectory for Black individuals in the United States: when hearing her students sing, she thinks to herself “I am not despondent of the future of my people; there is too much elasticity in their spirits, too much hope in their hearts, to be crushed out by unreasoning malice” (147).

Even characters who have not yet experienced the sweet taste of freedom feel this same sense of optimism and hope. While passing through with his Union regiment, Robert secretly visits his former place of enslavement and speaks with his older loved ones, Daniel and Katie, who remain enslaved. After Katie discusses her recent maltreatment, which includes being sequestered and physically assaulted, Robert asks if she feels bitter towards the Confederate soldiers who fight to keep her enslaved. In response, Katie looks at Robert, calm and peaceful, with

> A face which expressed the idea of a soul which had been fearfully tempest tossed, but had passed through suffering into peace. Very touching was the look of resignation and hope which overspread her features as she replied, with the simple child-like faith which she had learned in the darkest hour, "The Lord says, we must forgive." And with her that thought, as coming from the lips of Divine Love, was enough to settle the whole question of forgiveness of injuries and love to enemies. (28)

For Black individuals in 1892, after the weak efforts of Reconstruction and the establishment of the Black Codes, it is not unsurprising or unexpected that sentiments of anger and bitterness remain at the surface. In the face of this denigrating and disheartening reality, Harper suggests hope and forgiveness are the only way to move forward and heal. With this theme of forgiveness, Harper expands the imperfect narrative that many writers of the "contraband" experience began years before, a narrative that forced "contraband" characters to desire a past of subjugation, violence, and horror over emancipation.

Harper reminds her readers of the immediate feelings of emancipation, a time long gone yet bursting with cautious hope and optimism; thus, for her characters, the promise of freedom is upheld as the sole motivation to persevere through any hardship. When Robert arrives at the Union Army fort, he cannot fathom the reality of freedom that possibly lies ahead:

> Had the army, with freedom emblazoned on its banners, come at last to offer them deliverance if they would accept it? Was it a bright, beautiful dream, or a blessed reality soon to be grasped by his willing hands? His heart grew buoyant with hope; the lightness of his heart gave elasticity to his step and sent the blood rejoicingly through his veins. Freedom was almost in his grasp, and the future was growing rose-tinted and rainbow-hued. All the ties which bound him to his home were as ropes of sand, now that freedom had come so near. (35)

Harper writes of the precipice of freedom as strong enough to biologically alter a person, as it sends the blood rushing "though his veins," causes his heart to feel light, and "gave elasticity to his step." While, in "The Contraband's Answer," the power of freedom transforms the physical geography, in this novel, it can change a person's body, too; the idea of freedom is so transformative that it is not only embedded in the world around them but is internalized in their body. The image of a colorful, buoyant hope feels palpable and real, rather than distant and diminished. Rather than act as a critique, this novel serves as a reminder of the dream that once felt possible, one that, at least to Harper, is very much still achievable, even though there are continued efforts in post-Reconstruction America to subjugate and disenfranchise Black Americans. Frances Harper so eloquently writes of these hopes in her endnote:

> From threads of fact and fiction I have woven a story whose mission will not be in vain if it awaken in the hearts of our countrymen a stronger sense of justice…Nor will it be in vain if it inspire the children of those upon whose brows God has poured the chrism of that new era to determine that they will embrace every opportunity, develop every faculty, and use every power God has given them to rise in the scale of character and condition, and to add their quota of good citizenship to the best welfare of the nation. (282)

By the time this novel is published, the Civil War and Reconstruction have come and gone, and the recent and ongoing challenges of emancipation and equality would not have been lost on Harper. In 1892, however, the word "contraband" might have seemed unusual to some, as the label quite quickly lost meaning by the end of the Civil War. For others, it might have spurred memories of the past. Nevertheless, Harper presents this story as a reminder of the hope once felt and the remaining potential to fulfill. The future she speaks of in the novel has, effectively, already begun and continues to be forged by readers beyond Harper's time.

Conclusions

> "At some point it is no longer a question of whether we can learn this history but whether we have the collective will to reckon with it."
>
> Clint Smith, *How the Word Is Passed* (2021)

In 2022, it is perhaps too easy to feel far divorced from the times of slavery, the Civil War, and the "contrabands." Perhaps it is even easier to feel that, in hindsight, these are straightforward moral dilemmas: there is a belief that history cannot and is not repeating itself, that we can read back these texts and easily delineate racist characterizations from true representations. The truth is that American history and modernity are "inextricably tied to the story of human bondage," and while the historical landscape has changed around us, the undercurrents of racism remain (Smith 289). Racism exists on a cellular level in America: it is rampant and ingrained and systemic, as evidenced by the works of even self-proclaimed abolitionists in a time when their writing was a mainstay of the anti-slavery movement. This history and its representations in literature need to be deeply and thoughtfully analyzed and examined, and that begins with how we engage with the subject – on the page, in real life, in 1861, and in 2022.

While recognition of the literary history of the "contraband" does not change the face of American progress, it does help us better understand the complex and serpentine nature of emancipation and equality. We can better see how even those who fought for emancipation often kept Black individuals from freedom for as long as possible, out of fear or prejudice. The "American paradox – the meaning of freedom in a land pervaded by inequality – still bedevils our society today," and as the years continue to build up and separate us from our past, it becomes even more imperative to read and analyze this type of literature (Foner 460).

We now live in a time where over a quarter of the states in America have introduced legislation to ban the teaching of "Critical Race Theory" in schools (Ray and Gibbons). Recently defined by one of the term's original coiners, Kimberlé Crenshaw, the theory is "a way of looking at law's role platforming, facilitating, producing, and even insulating racial inequality," though it is often incorrectly conflated with the broad American history of enslavement and racism (qtd. in Kendi). In Virginia, where the "contraband" label was born just over one hundred and sixty years ago, "Critical Race Theory" has come under strict fire. One school board chairman in Chesterfield County recently remarked that "critical race theory is not supported by members of the board. In Chesterfield, our goal is unity, not division" (Nocera). This comes just one year after their public condemnation of racism following the 2020 protests spurred by the heinous and heartbreaking murder of George Floyd.

Literature that deals with racism and enslavement not only deserves but demands to be read and analyzed. If we do not read and learn about past atrocities, we are doomed to repeat them. This "contraband" literature, which often includes racist epithets, slurs, and offensive imagery, is essential to read, as a didactic tool, for the very reason many argue it should be ignored: we must first understand the complex, historical webs of racism, hatred, and prejudice to foster the language and behaviors we hope will encourage a more kind and just world. In fact, writers such as Frederick Douglass and Frances E.W. Harper exposed enslavement for all that it was to promote exactly what Chesterfield County suggests it promotes, "unity, not division." Excluding racism from classroom conversations only excludes the important history, perspectives, and voices that demand to be heard. As Bernard Bell writes, we must "historicize, contextualize, and problematize" texts – put simply, we must examine the ash the phoenix will rise from (303).

Historical literature is not a thing of the past, rather, life is breathed into it in the present moment. As readers, knowledge-seekers, and participants in society, we choose whose stories, voices, and existence live on. It cannot be overstated that, more often than not, the literature we uphold reveals the existence and very sanctity of those lives and stories we value and uplift. Studying the "contraband" discourse allows us to amplify Black lives and those whose voices were not heard. We can sing the unfinished song of those stories that never made it to pen and paper.

Notes

[1] Though not discussed at length in this thesis, women and children were very much a part of the "contraband" community but were very rarely represented in "contraband" literature. The portrayal of "contrabands" often emphasizes masculinity, as the "contraband" identity legally relates to one's ability to work and serve in Union forts, yet that characterization excludes an entire population of individuals forging new identities in camps across the South. Some firsthand stories and illustrations represent women and children in these refugee camps; see "Stampede among the Negroes in Virginia – their arrival at Fortress Monroe," *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Magazine*, June 1861; "Contrabands Coming into Camp on the Federal Lines" *New-York Illustrated News*, 10 May 1862, p. 5; and "****** Quarters Within the Federal Lines at Hilton Head, S.C.," *New-York Illustrated News*, 16 Feb. 1862. For further reading on the importance and role of these illustrations in defining "contrabands," see Gonzalez, "Stolen Looks, People Unbound: Picturing Contraband People During the Civil War." Women were also described in letters written by Lucy Chase (ed. Swint, *Letters From Home*) as domestic workers in refugee camps; see letter from February 7, 1863 (41-43). For further reading on the critical role of women in refugee "contraband" camps, see Manning, "Working for Citizenship in Civil War Contraband Camps;" Taylor, *Embattled Freedom*; and Grant, "When the Fires Burned Too Close to Home."

[2] For further primary reading on the "contraband" soldier, see W.D. Gallagher, "Take No Step Backward!;" *Liberator*, "The Little Contrabands;" *William Gladstone Collection, Library of Congress*, "The Little Contraband;" Bell, "The Triumph of Liberty" and "What Shall We Do With the Contrabands?;" Douglass, "The Great Speech;" *The New York Times*, "The Story of a Contraband;" and Harper, *Iola Leroy: Or, Shadows Uplifted*.

[3] The discourse concerning whether the Constitution grants the United States government the power to emancipate slaves was also very highly debated. Many abolitionists, like those discussed in this section, believed that the Constitution did grant the government the right to free enslaved persons without opposing the Constitution, hence their capitalization on the arbitrary yet harmful nature of General Butler's decree. It is important to note that some individuals did not agree with this legal stance.

[4] For further reading on "contraband camps," see Cooper, "Lord, Until I Reach My Home;" and "Away I Goin' to Find my Mamma;" Manning, "Working for Citizenship in Civil War Contraband Camps;" Taylor, *Embattled Freedom*; Voegeli, "A Rejected Alternative;" and Walker, "Corinth: The Story of a Contraband Camp."

[5] Issues related to naming practices also appear in firsthand accounts of the refugee "contraband" camps; in a letter from Craney Island (Portsmouth), Virginia dated January 29, 1863, Lucy Chase writes "All the officials use many precautions before registering names, as the negroes often give false names. Perhaps, after all, no false motives influence them, as they may bear many names in a lifetime. They usually need to be asked, repeatedly, for their surnames. They are Judith or John, and nothing more" (*Dear Ones at Home* 37). Chase categorizes formerly enslaved persons' renaming as "false," thus perpetuating her white authority, their former enslaved status, and the preferences of their former enslavers.

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