

## UNCOVERING NORTH CAROLINA'S EARLY LITERARY HISTORY

a review by Jessica Cory

Gregg Hecimovich. *The Life and Times of Hannah Crafts: The True Story of The Bondwoman's Narrative*. Ecco, 2023.

Originally from southeastern Ohio, **JESSICA CORY** teaches in the English Department at Appalachian State University and is a PhD candidate specializing in Native American, African American, and environmental literatures at UNC Greensboro. She is the editor of *Mountains Piled upon Mountains: Appalachian Nature Writing in the Anthropocene* (West Virginia University Press, 2019) and a co-editor (with Laura Wright) of *Appalachian Ecocriticism and the Paradox of Place* (University of Georgia Press, 2023). Her creative and scholarly writings have been published in *NCLR*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Northern Appalachia Review*, and other publications.

**GREGG HECIMOVICH** received his PhD in English from Vanderbilt University and is a Professor of English at Furman University in Greenville, SC. He has also served as a Hutchins Family Fellow at Harvard University and has received fellowships from the National Endowment for the Humanities. He is the author and editor of five other scholarly books. Read his early essay on the beginning of his journey to identify Hannah Crafts in *NCLR* 2007.

Hannah Crafts's *The Bondwoman's Narrative* has been considered by scholars to be the first novel written by an African American woman, likely penned in 1856–1857, closely followed chronologically by Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig* (1859) and Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). Following Dorothy Porter Wesley's safekeeping of the manuscript, Henry Louis Gates Jr. purchased the original document at auction and later edited and crafted an introduction to the novel, which became a *New York Times* best seller. In his introduction to Crafts's work, Gates describes the steps he took to authenticate the manuscript and properly date it, as well as research he conducted in his attempt to identify the pseudonymous author, including some of his evidence in three appendices. Gates and other scholars over the last two decades managed to narrow down the pool of potential authors to a handful of women enslaved by the Wheeler family, slaveholders with plantations in North Carolina and many connections to state and federal government officials. In his biography of the novel's author, *The Life and Times of Hannah Crafts: The True Story of The Bondwoman's Narrative*, Gregg Hecimovich identifies the woman writing under the likely pseudonym, "Hannah Crafts."

Hecimovich's thorough research argues, in addition to Crafts's identity, that she is also a forerunner in the lengthy history of North Carolina literature, setting forth a precedent for not only North Carolina's African American writers but all of the talented writers of

the state, especially since she captures so much Southern history in her novel. North Carolina features front and center in many of the chapters, as the settings for much of Crafts's novel occur in eastern and central North Carolina plantations. While there are scenes which take place in Washington, DC, and other areas, the bulk of the text is set in and around Murfreesboro, NC, in Hertford County not far from the Virginia state line. Hecimovich engages other scholars, such as Hollis Robbins, who have noted that Crafts utilizes Southern Gothic tropes in her novel as well as bases some passages on Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* (1852), which Crafts scholars allege she would have heard female boarders from Chowan Baptist Female Institute reciting, as well as having access to the text through her captors' ample library.

While Crafts's text is certainly not the only early freedom narrative, sometimes called slave narrative, to heavily feature North Carolina (Harriet Jacobs's work, for instance, takes place largely in Edenton, NC), it is unique in that, because it was not published during her lifetime, the text avoided the sometimes heavy-handed editorial practices of white editors and publishers. This lack of white intervention in her text and Gates's limited editing for the novel's 2002 release allow Hecimovich the hints required to delve more into the people, places, and events Crafts depicts throughout the novel. Had the volume been published in the author's lifetime (a speculation Hecimovich addresses near the end of his book), perhaps the real Hannah Crafts would still be a mystery.

Like other freedom narratives, Crafts chose to fictionalize particular aspects of her story to protect both herself and her abettors, yet Hecimovich reveals that much of the plot is based on either her real-life experiences or the experiences of other enslaved women with whom Crafts was acquainted, including her own family members. Moreover, the environmental details Crafts includes not only match her lived experience serving on North Carolina plantations, but actually helped Hecimovich accurately pinpoint particular locales mentioned in the novel. Hecimovich notes that many of Crafts's descriptions, such as her mentions of orange trees, fig trees, and rice cultivation on the Wheeler plantation matched what records show was grown on the grounds of the Wheeler's Murfreesboro, NC, estate, a historical corrective to scholars who supposed that Crafts had instead served at the Wheeler's Ellangowan plantation in Lincoln County, NC, near Charlotte.

While Crafts does name North Carolina in her book, it is Hecimovich who adds the specific places and people, providing a sort of behind-the-scenes look into not only Crafts's world but also how these properties changed hands often within the same family, and how the family's captives were passed down from family member to family member as well. Hecimovich's inclusion of images of the buildings and plantations in question, as well as occasional portraits of people, bring this history to



PHOTOGRAPH BY ALTON PARKER.  
COURTESY OF MURFREESBORO HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

life for readers. In addition to engaging his audience through images, Hecimovich's work also departs in some notable ways from much scholarly work in that it is fairly accessible, both ideologically and linguistically. This observation is not to lessen the importance of the book; indeed, the fact that a broader audience can read and understand the text only adds to how useful it can be to many fields of study and to a general interest readership.

While I want to avoid any spoilers, such as revealing Hannah Crafts's true identity, I will say that *The Life and Times of Hannah Crafts* reads as part mystery, part history, and moves with a well-developed narrative arc. The book is a surprisingly refreshing mixture of eloquent and nuanced storytelling combined with in-depth literary scholarship. While readers may expect the book to be a straightforward biography of the writer known as Hannah Crafts, Hecimovich tells her story not only through historical records

and facts but also through engaging narratives of the communities and people with whom Crafts built her life. This method of including the context and relationships behind Crafts's life helps the

reader gain a better understanding of who she was and how the situations she encountered shaped her novel.

Certainly, Hecimovich's work will be critical in any future discussion of Crafts's novel, and it will also prove crucial for discussion of North Carolina's literary history, including the difficult and tragic realities captured by writers enslaved within the state. *The Life and Times of Hannah Crafts* is a must-read for anyone interested in early African American literature, North Carolina literary traditions, freedom narratives, or early political histories, as Hecimovich ties the politics of the day beyond North Carolina to more northern states as well as foreign countries, such as Nicaragua. Hecimovich rises to the challenge Gates posed with the publication of this novel just over twenty years ago and in doing so, illuminates for his audience not only the true identity of the first African American female novelist but also the complex and fascinating life she led. ■

ABOVE: Gregg Hecimovich with Benjamin Speller, Dean of the School of Library and Information Sciences at NC Central University, and James Moore, Murfreesboro Historical Association President, at the Wheeler House in Murfreesboro, NC, 6 Nov. 2023