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A PHRENOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT OF REBECCA HARDING DAVIS'S SKETCH,
"BLIND TOM"

by

LEANNE M. DAVIS

Under the Direction of Dr. Janet Gabler-Hover

ABSTRACT

In this essay, I examine how the nineteenth-century cultural phenomenon of phrenology is made apparent in the abolitionist arguments of Rebecca Harding Davis's "Blind Tom" (1862), a nonfiction character sketch of the popular blind slave and idiot savant-musician. The first portion of my argument constructs a probable reality that allows for the influence of Davis's exposure to phrenology first as a student, then later as a writer. I then perform a critical assessment of "Blind Tom," revealing how Davis relies upon phrenological terminology, such as that employed by famous phrenologist Orson Squire Fowler, in her descriptions of the musician's physical appearance in order to call for his freedom, from not only slavery on the Georgian plantation he called home, but also, from being paraded as an sideshow and a spectacle before audiences across America.

INDEX WORDS: Phrenology, Rebecca Harding Davis, Blindness, Thomas Bethune, Orson Fowler, Realism, Physiognomy, Abolitionism

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"BLIND TOM"

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LEANNE M. DAVIS

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2013

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LeAnne Marie Davis
2013

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by

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Office of Graduate Studies

College of Arts and Sciences

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December 2013

DEDICATION

To those who fall down:

Get back up again.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

When I first began this journey toward obtaining an advanced degree, I had so many lofty ideas of becoming an artist, of living the writer's life I had always dreamed of, and of remaining on this scholarly path for the rest of my career. While the academic experience of seminar classes, conferences, and publication exceeded all of my expectations, I found early my road forward was much more difficult than I had originally imagined. Over the course of the last two years, I have stumbled, lost my way, started over, and discovered myself anew. The culmination of all of this tumult is manifested in and represented by this master's thesis.

Without any doubt, I can say that the driving force pushing me toward the finish line of the degree program has been the relentless support of my faculty advisors, my family, and my friends. Every step of the way, I have found myself comforted by your words of encouragement, challenged by your standards, and motivated by your never-ending positivity. While a few words of acknowledgement on this page cannot begin to express my gratitude and appreciation of your collective efforts to see me through, I want to extend heartfelt thanks to those who have helped me achieve this goal.

To my committee members, Dr. Goodman and Dr. Caison – thank you for your continued support and enthusiasm for my project, for your patience, and for your ever-timely responsiveness. To Dr. Gabler-Hover, my advisor – thank you for understanding, and for never leaving my corner as I felt my way through the writing process. Your steadfast encouragement has meant more to me than you know. I appreciate our Saturday morning meetings over coffee, your determination to keep me engaged with the project, and your flexibility as I explored and changed my trajectory. You have served as an exemplary mentor and role model to me as a professional educator. To Gaby, thank you for your inspirational spunk, and of course, your

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In closing, two thoughts come to mind: “And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28), and the verse from the beloved song, “Never once did we ever walk alone.”

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INTRODUCTION

Argument Overview

Identified as one of the founding authors of the American realism movement that swept through the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Rebecca Harding Davis and her prolific career as a fiction writer, essayist, avid social reformer, and journalist have only come into focus in the modern academic scene over the last few decades. Probably most well known for her 1861 novella, “Life in the Iron Mills,” in which she exposes the societal and spiritual ills of the effects of rapid industrialization on small, rural American towns in the mid-1800s, Davis composed more than 500 short stories, essays, articles, and novels from 1861 up until her death in 1910. While “Life in Iron Mills” positioned her as an early realist because of her stark, vivid portrayals of real life¹, removed from the previous emotional styles of sentimentalism and without the promotion of certain philosophies such as transcendentalism, later studies of Davis and her writing portfolio at large have revealed a more complete image of the author as a fascinating and active member of nineteenth-century American society. In this essay, I explore how one such story, “Blind Tom,” Davis’s third major publication written in 1862, positions her as more than just a realist, economist, or social reformer – this sketch also presents Davis phrenologist, as she uses her descriptions of the sketch’s main character to join in one of the leading scientific conversations of her time.

Following the immense success of “Life in the Iron Mills,” which appeared in print in 1861, Rebecca Harding Davis, known only by her maiden name Rebecca Harding at the time, set

¹ According to the *Oxford Encyclopedia of American Literature*, “realism may be equated with verisimilitude or the approximation of truth. A mimetic artist, the literary realist claims to mirror or represent the world as it objectively appears.”

off from her home in Wheeling, Virginia, on a tour across the northeastern United States to promote her novella, as well as kick-start the longevity of her career as a writer². On this tour, she met and became intimate friends with the preeminent literary circles of the mid-nineteenth century, spending weekends with the Alcotts, traveling with the Hawthornes, and developing a deep friendship with Annie Fields, who was the wife of famous magazine proprietor, and Davis's editor, James Fields. While on tour during 1861 and 1862, Davis served as a regular contributor to Fields' magazine, *The Atlantic Monthly*, as well as *Peterson's Magazine*, and during the same timeframe, she published her first full-length novel, *Margret Howth* (1862). As Davis wrote and toured the northern lecture circuit promoting "Life," she often stayed overnight in various locations, experiencing whatever the city had to offer before resuming her travels. One such evening, while stopping over in Baltimore in route to Boston, Davis attended a local concert hall to hear "Blind Tom, the Most Marvelous Musical Genius Living³."

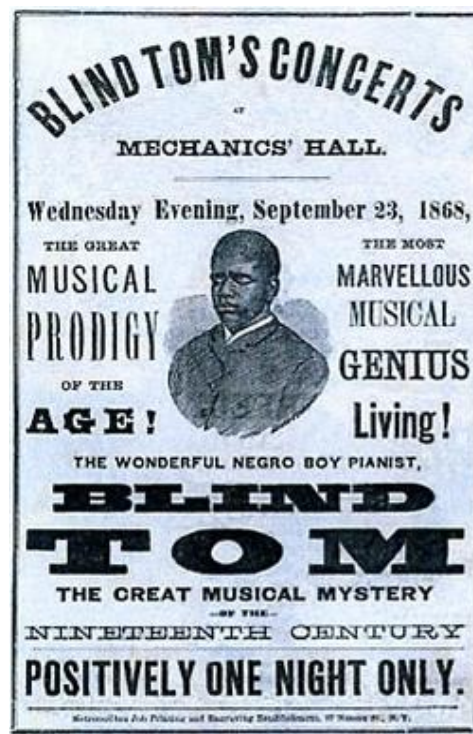


Figure 1. "Blind Tom" handbill, 1868

Source: www.Americanbluesscene.com

Hailed by scholar Darold A. Treffert as the "most celebrated black concert artist of the nineteenth century," Thomas Greene Wiggins Bethune, also known more universally as "Blind

² RHD biographers Sharon Harris, Jean Pfaelzer, Janice Lasseter, and Robin Cadwallader agree on the timeline of her travels throughout the Northeast in promotion of "Life in the Iron Mills," as they were cited in detail in Davis's personal papers and letters.

³ No specific citation exists for this generic title; rather, it appeared on the multiple handbills and posters distributed throughout whatever city Bethune performed in as a form of advertisement. For this paper, a generic reprint of one such poster from 1868 serves as the referent.

Tom,” amazed audiences for more than forty years with his impressive and unexplainable musical talent as a pianist (88). Unlike any other concert pianist before him, Bethune stood out as a spectacle and a side show – for not only was he an untrained black classical musician, seen as the first and best in this particular line of entertainment, but he was also blind and considered mentally retarded (88). Taken, or rather, placed, on tour by his Southern owners at a very young age, Bethune played piano to the wonderment and delight of audiences who filled concert halls all over the South, and eventually, the nation at large⁴. Every song he played was based entirely on his ability to recall it from memory, as he was blind and had no formal training. Upon hearing a song played or sung to him once, he could sit at a piano and play or sing it back verbatim (89). Davis scholar Jean Pfaelzer adds that Bethune possessed an “astonishing capacity to mimic and memorize, playing works of Beethoven, Verdi, Thalberg, Gottschalk, and Mendelssohn,” and that he could also compose perfect, on-the-spot accompaniments to any piece currently being played (100). He could even play these songs by contorting his arms, with his back to the piano. (100).

Nineteenth-century magazines and handbills reported that Bethune was so mentally delayed that his vocabulary only averaged around 100 words, not including long speeches or conversations that he could parrot to an audience upon hearing them once; his repertoire of musical pieces played purely from memory was estimated to include nearly 7,000 songs (Treffert 88). Bethune could sing songs in any language, repeating them verbatim in style and tone, “without the loss of a syllable” or note (88). Promoted in advertisements as “The Great Musical Prodigy of the Age: A Plantation Negro Boy,” and “The Most Marvellous [sic] Musical Genius

⁴ For the first few years of his career, Bethune only performed in concert halls as far north as Baltimore, Maryland, as his owners feared abolitionist protest if they took him too far into the North. After the Civil War, he traveled coast to coast on tour (Southall 3).

Living,” Bethune’s performances became the vogue of any city in which he played.

Upon hearing Bethune perform in Baltimore⁵ in 1862, Rebecca Harding Davis wrote a letter to James Fields, remarking that she was “quite interested in the ‘Tom’ question,” and that she wanted to learn more about him, his unusual talents, and his unfortunate upbringing as a slave (Letter to James Fields). According to Pfaelzer, Davis occupied herself with researching Bethune’s controversial status as a slave child of the deep South and his seemingly faulty biology that reduced him to the ranks of idiocy in the societal spectrum (100). In true journalistic fashion, she gathered any information she could find, compiling the results into a story-length character sketch that appeared in the November 1862 edition of Fields’ *Atlantic Monthly*. Because Bethune had only been traversing the concert hall circuit for about two years, very little had been published regarding his background or the extent of his mental capabilities other than his generic public introduction as an idiot savant and a slave. Davis’s account of how Bethune’s amazing musical abilities were discovered, and her commentary on his astonishing public performances combine in her character sketch to represent one of the first mainstream reviews of Bethune to be featured in a literary magazine. In fact, historian Deirdre O’Connell cites Davis’s sketch as one of the first biographical articles printed about Thomas Bethune in a major publication (88). O’Donnell cites Perry Oliver, Bethune’s stage manager, as the presumable source of the biographical information used by Davis in the story, thus establishing a relatively firm credibility of the facts she uses to make her case that “Blind Tom” is more than a side-show ape “clawing” at a piano. Rather, Davis saw Bethune as a human with a soul in need of acceptance, self- expression, and ultimately, freedom, as explained later in my argument (Davis

⁵ The exact year that Davis attended the performance is unknown. The narrator in the story says she first heard Bethune play in 1860 (Davis 91), but Jean Pfaelzer suggests that Davis attended his concert in the same year that she composed the sketch, 1862.

88)⁶.

Fields considered Davis's "Blind Tom" to be so extraordinary that he forwarded it on to Charles Dickens in London that same year; thus, her sketch also became one of the first reviews of the musical genius to be shared with an international audience (Pfaelzer 104). Multiple stories would enter circulation later in Bethune's career, ranging from musical reviews that attempted to capture the cadence and emotion of his performances and stories of his childhood that incited abolitionist ire, to scientific speculations about the nature and degree of his handicaps (O'Donnell 29). The various tidbits of information featured in these later reviews and articles all resonate with the story of "Blind Tom" captured in Davis's sketch, reinforcing the degree of accuracy in her research as she composes her account.

Although factually sound in accordance with the other writings about Thomas Bethune that would appear later on, Davis's sketch stands out as unusual in its tone and in its usage of highly scientific terminology, specifically in her descriptions of Bethune's outward physical appearance. While other nineteenth-century articles and stories focus more on his emotive musical expression, his unusual movements and surprising outbursts, and his status as an uneducated slave, Davis instead presents her audience with a contrast of his outward, animalistic appearance and the impassioned expression of his music that she believes reveals his inner soul and calls into question the inhumane way in which he had been placed on tour to perform. When she describes his ability, she carefully selects words rooted in science, measuring Bethune's capacity to not only memorize and perform, but also feel and perceive as any other person. In this way, Davis stretches the parameters of realism, writing about what she outwardly sees but

⁶ O'Donnell suggests that Davis's account records the night of Bethune's performance at the White House for the niece of President James Buchanan, Harriet Lane in 1860; however, the narrator in Davis's sketch distinctly references the White House performance as an historical event without being actually present. Pfaelzer suggests Davis attended the concert in 1862.

also speculating about what she cannot see, arguably drawing upon the cultural influence of the popular pseudosciences physiognomy and phrenology. As argued later in this article, she relies upon a heavily-scientific vocabulary to raise questions about Bethune that only a nineteenth-century audience, deeply familiar with these pseudoscientific fads, would understand.

When examined from the surface of the plot, Davis's sketch falls into line with the stylistic themes of her other works – she positions Bethune's enslavement and forced public display in such a way as to argue her antislavery beliefs and the extreme unfairness imposed by society upon the disabled and the lower classes. Pfaelzer compares her treatment of Bethune to Davis's characters Deb Wolfe in "Life in the Iron Mills" and Lois Yare in *Margret Howth*, to the degree that all three characters are restricted from realizing their true ability to self-express by their deformed bodies (101). Pfaelzer draws valid parallels between these characters, but I argue that in "Blind Tom," Davis experiments with the language of phrenology to raise deeper questions about his right to self-expression and to freedom; neither Deb Wolfe nor Lois Yare are considered mentally retarded or extraordinarily gifted in any capacity, and although both are repressed by the American social hierarchy, neither one is enslaved. As such, the implications of this sketch go beyond a typical literary realist's exploration of the correlation between body and class. Representing an "uncommon exploration of the rage and repression of slavery and its powerful impact on white identity," the account is most often categorized by Davis scholars as "a study of white projection and a critique of popular assumptions about the black performer" and his role within civilized society, and I argue that Davis relies upon phrenology to make her case (99)⁷.

⁷ It is important to note early on in the argument that Davis's "Blind Tom" employs highly racist rhetoric, often referring to the musician as an "ape," a "dog," and classifying him according to the color of his skin. According to scholars Jean Pfaelzer and Sharon Harris, Davis uses this terminology because it is the common language employed

While these overarching themes are obviously present in this story, as they are in many of Davis's other antislavery works including "John Lamar" (1862), *Waiting for the Verdict* (1867), and an array of nonfiction essays⁸, in "Blind Tom," I argue that she employs the specific terminology of phrenology in an attempt to encourage her readers to make a deeper assessment of the performing phenomenon that is Thomas Greene Wiggins Bethune, seeing him as more than just an idiot savant, and more than just a talented slave. Pfaelzer suggests that the scientific, animalistic descriptions of Bethune trace back to Charles Darwin's *Origin of the Species*, which entered circulation in 1858, but she admits that if Davis is indeed paying reference to social Darwinism in this work, it is merely a "conventional abuse of the notion of natural selection, shaped here to define the wrongs of slavery" (102). While it is possible that Davis's descriptions of the child, many of which liken him to a dog or an ape, connect back to Darwin's newly introduced and highly controversial theory of evolution and the "missing link," I offer evidence in this essay suggesting that Davis could also be drawing from Johann Kaspar Lavater's *Essays on Physiognomy* (1778), one of the key physiognomic texts that was widely circulated during Davis's lifetime and used as guide to practicing nineteenth-century physiognomists and phrenologists. More specifically, I argue that Davis's rhetorical choices more closely align to language of phrenology that permeated American culture in the 1800s through the works of well-known scientists Orson and Lorenzo Fowler, and their wives, Charlotte Fowler and Lydia Fowler Wells – mid-century phrenologists whose overwhelming popularity made them commonplace names in middle- and upper-class American homes. My essay presents evidence that in "Blind

when speaking about matters of race in the 1860s. Davis relies in phrenology in this sketch to humanize Bethune and to call for his freedom from slavery – ideas that support her political views as a abolitionist – but she is still trapped within the cultural tendency to label and to rely upon highly racial language in order to make her case. I discuss this in greater detail in Chapter 4, outlining how this position fits within my overall argument.

⁸ Political articles that focus on Davis's pro-abolitionist causes include "Some Testimony in the Case" (1885), "Two Points of View," (1897), "Two Methods with the Negro" (1898), and "The Black North" (1892).

Tom,” Rebecca Harding Davis not only referencing the science⁹ of phrenology, but also that she uses the principles of this scientific mode of observation to humanize Bethune¹⁰, encouraging her readers to see him as more than just a Darwinian “missing link” and ultimately, more than just a slave, in a true reflection of her abolitionist and reformer beliefs.

Before moving forward, I need to assert that in this essay I am not suggesting that Davis, or her narrator in “Blind Tom,” examines the shape of Thomas Greene Wiggins Bethune’s head, or feels the “bumps” of his skull. Rather, I aim to read her article from a phrenological perspective, performing a detailed assessment of the ways in which Davis’s descriptions and conclusions vibrate with the cultural resonance of phrenology. John Davies writes that during Davis’s career,

Phrenology had spread through the stream of American thought, and nineteenth-century literature is filled with phrenological interpretations and expressions; for, as *Harper’s*¹¹ bitterly complained, the new science had infected thought at its very source, through language. (119)

In this manner, by examining the specific scientific language Davis employs in “Blind Tom,” and referencing a letter she wrote to James Fields in 1862 requesting that a phrenologist weigh in on Bethune’s case, I argue that Davis was not only familiar with phrenology but also that she relied upon its principles to bolster her argument for Bethune’s astonishing abilities, humanity,

⁹ Throughout this argument, I refer to phrenology and physiognomy as a pseudoscience when viewed from a modern angle, but as a science in the context of Davis and Orson Fowler’s assessments of Bethune. From our perspective, these methodologies have been effectively debunked as sciences, but to nineteenth century Americans, the practice of physiognomy/phrenology were considered reliable methods rooted in actual science.

¹⁰ While most sciences rarely “humanize” their subjects, the methods of phrenology and physiognomy were specifically designed to reveal and classify universal traits of character; thus, in her phrenological descriptions of Bethune, Davis’s reliance upon these sciences draws attention away from his status as a slave, encouraging the reader to analyze and appreciate the child’s character and soul.

¹¹ John Davies references *Harper’s Monthly* magazine in this quotation, but does not provide the volume number, issue number, or year for his statement. Phrenology often appeared in *Harper’s* from 1840s through the 1870s as a topic in both fictional stories and nonfiction articles.

dignity, and right to freedom.

While Davis does not provide a specific phrenological diagnosis of Bethune's skull in the sketch, I argue that the descriptions she provides of his physicality in contrast with his unusual capacity for music take root in phrenology. John Davies writes, "Although it is remembered today only as a method of reading character from the contour of the skull, its true foundation was the theory that anatomical and physiological characteristics have a direct influence upon mental behavior," explaining further that American [and British] fascination with phrenology went deeper than a classification of skulls and their various shapes. Lucy Hartley, author of *Physiognomy and the Meaning of Expression in Nineteenth-Century Culture*, says the science of phrenology and its sister science physiognomy were extremely popular across many venues in the 1800s, literature not excluded, writing that they "offered a spiritual guarantee that anyone could read the appearances of things in the world and then form a judgment on the basis of their essential hidden value" (2). According to Davies and Hartley, phrenology, which measured and studied the bumps of the human head, and physiognomy, which added into the mix the form of facial and other bodily features, both extensively fed into the scientific discourse of man's place within nature and societal class in America as well as in Britain (Davies 5, Hartley 5). This theme frequently surfaces in Davis's broader short fiction portfolio, explored in her travel fiction through her portrayals of rugged mountaineers and wild Native Americans, and touched upon in her exposés of the hardships experienced by working class Americans. The cultural influence of phrenology and physiognomy also appears in literature throughout the nineteenth century, as discussed later in my argument. Thus, to find the scientific terminology of physiognomy and phrenology in "Blind Tom," one of Davis's earliest works written just after the heyday of the two sciences in American history, sets the stage for the applications of the sciences in her later

pieces.

Scholar Graeme Tytler supports Davies' and Hartley's assertions that phrenology and physiognomy provided more than a mere physical description of a person, opening doors for judgments of the unseen parts of man, including his genius, his aptitude, his ability, and his very soul. Tytler suggests it is no surprise that these methodologies appeared in both American and British nineteenth-century literature, serving as a major factor in literary character creation throughout all of written history (1). Davies adds, "The greatest object of curiosity to any human is himself, the second is to his neighbor – and to these problems phrenology proposed explanations that were simply and logical, if specious" (5). Examining this trend of critical analysis applied to "literary portraits" (1), or character sketches such as Davis's "Blind Tom" is thus an engaging academic endeavor that sheds new light on Davis as a prominent literary figure. As such, I am diving deeper into the literary portrayal of "Blind Tom" from an historical perspective, exploring how the cultural influence of phrenology is imprinted in the sketch as a critical exercise in understanding Davis's realistic exploration of the musician's unusual abilities, and the message she aims to convey to her audience about the value of the artist's life and his right to freedom.

By associating the science of phrenology with her observations of Bethune as he plays the piano at one of his concerts, Davis connects to the cultural awareness of her nineteenth-century audience. More importantly, she plays upon the implications of these observations, suggesting that while the readers can use phrenology and physiognomy to make assumptions about Bethune's capabilities, they must also, by default, acknowledge that he is human, and worthy of the social and spiritual freedom. She specifically uses phrenology and physiognomy to create a common denominator between her privileged, white audience and the repressed, abused

genius child whose talents captivate and mesmerize all who encounter them. Pfaelzer categorizes one of Davis's possible motivations to write the sketch as a contribution to her "ongoing critique of domesticity," in that "his story showed how love and protection can be defined in terms of ownership, how the body can be at once a source of creative freedom and an object in an involuntary transaction, the physical hunger for artistic expression," and an overall representation of Davis's "racist assumptions about black nature" (101). Certainly, Davis's tone and style in "Blind Tom" raise the social questions highlighted by Pfaelzer, touching on issues of race, class, and man's inherent spirituality, but I argue in my thesis that the manner in which Davis introduces and approaches within these stories springs from more than just her ability to write what she observed in a cool, naturalistic manner with the limited racial vocabulary of her time.

Chapter Outlines

Below, I have outlined the various components of my argument. First, I trace the popularity of phrenology as it trickled and then rapidly flowed through American culture during the middle of the nineteenth century. As I create this timeline, I interlace Davis's academic and professional experiences to suggest her familiarity with this cultural phenomenon. Following this foundation, I present my phrenological assessment of Davis's "Blind Tom," drawing upon the works of Orson Fowler in comparison for support. Then, in conclusion, I explore how this reading expands our understanding of Davis, her style and tone, and her unique authorial voice as a realist and as an abolitionist.

Chapter 1. Setting the Stage

As I begin my argument, I examine the history of phrenology and physiognomy as they first rose to popularity in Europe in the latter portion of the eighteenth century. I then explain how the trend infiltrated American society in the early and middle nineteenth century through a multitude of periodical publications and as a featured subject on the American lecture circuit. I discuss Rebecca Harding Davis's access to this information, also highlighting how her literary contemporaries such as Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allan Poe incorporated discussions of phrenological principles into some of their most popular works. Overall, this chapter provides a clear case for Davis's familiarity with the field of phrenology and thus serves as probable cause in support of my argument that she applies this scientific approach to "Blind Tom."

Chapter 2. Introducing Thomas Greene Wiggins Bethune

In this chapter, I present the details of Davis's account, starting with the opening in which she provides an overview of Bethune's birth and upbringing on the Bethune plantation. After reviewing the details of his birth into slavery and touching upon his disabilities, I then examine Davis's physical descriptions of Bethune as a young boy. In the first half of Davis's sketch, the narrator spends a significant amount of time reviewing his outer appearance, and I present research explaining how these physical descriptions are possibly based upon phrenology. Observing the path of the narrative, I highlight key descriptive passages where I argue Davis draws upon her phrenological and physiognomic awareness, and I explain how this scientific terminology prepares her audience to receive the second half of the sketch, which goes into far more detail about Bethune, his appearance, and the physicality of his musical performances.

Chapter 3. “Blind Tom’s” Phrenology

In this chapter, I move on to a discussion of the second half of Davis’s sketch, where the narrator attends one of Bethune’s performances and transcribes the striking visual spectacle of his playing that goes hand-in-hand with the overwhelming emotive nature of his music. Specifically, I focus in on the terminology of “development” that Davis employs, explaining how this language ties into phrenology by referring to the works of phrenologist Orson Fowler to strengthen my argument. The performance section of Davis’s sketch reflects a cultural awareness of phrenology and the various organs of the brain, which I also review in this portion of the essay. This chapter also explores how Davis was not the only nineteenth-century author fascinated with Bethune’s astonishing musical abilities; in the years that followed the publication of her sketch, multiple reviews and articles poured forth from a variety of sources, all eager to assess Bethune from one perspective or another. In this final chapter of my argument, I examine the reviews of Bethune that circulated in the various phrenological publications, as early as 1866 through the end of the nineteenth century.

Chapter 4. Interpreting “Blind Tom”

While Davis’s sketch remains the first to rely upon the scientific terminology of phrenology in her vivid and heart-wrenching descriptions of Bethune’s repression as a slave and as a sideshow act, the basic lines of scientific thinking she employs fall very much in line with the official phrenological position concerning his capabilities. The way in which Davis employs this science, however, appears to strategically support her strong abolitionist views, which she was beginning to form during the early years of her writing career before the Civil War. In this chapter, I discuss the possible implications of Davis’s phrenology, exploring how she relies upon the

science to humanize the performer whom she believes society views as an animalistic, ape-like creature. By using phrenology, Davis establishes Bethune as human, and as such, she argues that he deserves his freedom.



Figure 2. “Blind Tom” handbill, year unknown
Source: www.blindtom.org

CHAPTER 1: SETTING THE STAGE

A Literary Introduction to Rebecca Harding Davis

As a young girl, Davis grew up calling Wheeling, Virginia, now West Virginia, her hometown. Biographers including Sharon Harris and Robin Cadwallader maintain that Davis's rural upbringing in this specific location provided her with a multitude of creative fodder for her later writing career, as Wheeling essentially sat on the border between the North and the South, and thus was peopled with both slave owners as well as abolitionists (Harris 68). Although Davis spent her youth in a somewhat isolated region, she had multiple means of access to upper-class circles of American society, receiving her formal education as a student of Washington Female Seminary in Pennsylvania and traveling with her family (23). Upon graduation, Davis gained employment with the *Wheeling Intelligencer* (24) and began her lifelong career as a journalist. Upon meeting and marrying L. Clarke Davis in 1863, she relocated to Philadelphia to support her husband's own journalistic endeavors (71). In 1861, *The Atlantic Monthly* published "Life in the Iron Mills," jumpstarting Davis's career as a writer. At the height of her popularity, "Her work was published in such prestigious journals as the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's New Monthly*, *Scribner's Monthly*, as well as in more widely circulated magazines like *The Independent*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Lippincott's* and *Peterson's*," according to Pfaelzer (2).

Canonically, critics recognize Davis as an author whose direct, pragmatic literary style aligns best with the realism and naturalism movements of the latter half of the 1800's. General modes of study frequently categorize her among the literary realists because of the far-reaching effects produced by her uncommon, exposé-like writing style employed in "Life in the Iron Mills." In the text *Parlor Radical: Rebecca Harding Davis and the Origins of Social Realism*

(1996), Pfaelzer hails Davis as one of the founding authors of American realism, the prominent nineteenth-century literary movement (33). Some scholars go so far as to suggest that “Life in the Iron Mills” inaugurated literary realism nearly twenty years prior to the critically measured advent of the movement (Cadwallader 1). Realist authors attempted to portray society from an accurate, though sometimes harsh and striking, angle that greatly differed from the previous generation’s preference for sentimentality¹². Davis, writing in the era when realism first took root as a literary movement, employed what Pfaelzer describes as “the available vocabulary for her feelings,” coupled together as social realism with sentimental overtones, to express her “bitterness” towards the real miseries of poverty, industrialism, and women’s repression (5). From this rhetorical platform, Davis built her literary reputation as one of the champions of the realism movement.

Pfaelzer suggests that Davis uses realist techniques in her writing in order to shed light on “women's economic, social, and political suffering” (2). Likewise, Harris emphasizes in the book *Rebecca Harding Davis and American Realism* that the writer expressed her uncommon realistic vision through her fictional works. Her short stories and essays exemplify the shift from American romanticism to a more straightforward, cold, even harsh critique of humanity, especially through their examination of class, social uplift, and women’s rights (1). Harris classifies Davis as a writer whose “artistic abilities [played] a pivotal role in the development of American realism and naturalism” (2) and as a female regional correspondent of sorts who aimed to “give her readers an illusion of actual experience” (6). Not only in “Life” but also in her fiction portfolio at large, “Davis struggled to represent reality against competing and contradictory traditions of representation,” says Harris (3). In combining the direct approach of

¹² Childs, Peter. *The Routledge Dictionary of Literary Terms*. New York: Routledge, 2006. Print.

realism to the auditory and visual experience of entertainment at Thomas Bethune's expense in her 1862 sketch, "Blind Tom," Davis stands above other nineteenth-century spectators, commentators, and sentimentalists in that she skirts the common tendency to romanticize or vilify the performer simply based on stereotypes of his race or his handicap; instead, she impugns scientific methods to provide the what she, and her nineteenth-century audience, considered to be the most accurate, realistic, and holistic portrayal of the performer possible.

Most critical reviews of Davis's writing portfolio beyond "Life" join the realism/naturalism refrain, portraying her as a writer whose role in the American canon champions the various causes of the lower classes and rises above the sentimental fiction popular among other women writers of this time. Pfaelzer describes Davis as the "voice of David decrying the Goliaths of slavery, industrialism, and patriarchy from the safe confines of a bourgeois home" (3). In this mode of thought, scholars such as David Dowling (2010) and Janice Milner Lasseter (2003) appreciate Davis's fiction for its political sway, reinforcing her style of writing as predominantly naturalistic in its style as well as its societal aims. Extending this trend, Jean Fagan Yellin (1990), Rosemarie Thomson (1996), Michele L. Mock (2002), and Jeffrey Miller (2003) build upon this critical foundation by adding in a gendered angle, pursuing the manifestation of feminism in relation to realism and naturalism in Davis's commonplace treatment of the average post-bellum middle-class American woman.

More recent studies of Davis examine her lesser-known short fiction and novellas from newer critical subgenre of Civil War fiction. Within this subgenre, Davis still maintains her roots in the realism movement, bringing her Civil War stories to life in a candid, journalistic manner, and revealing the harsh actualities of life in the rural mountain regions of unsettled Southern territory. Pfaelzer writes that in her fiction, Davis "compels her readers to conceive of the

destruction of slavery as the true role of the Civil War” (106). Harris, in conjunction with Robin Cadwallader, has reexamined Davis’s works under this historical revisionist microscope in the anthology, *Rebecca Harding Davis’s Civil War Stories: Selected Writings from the Borderlands*. In line with Harris and Cadwallader’s study of Davis as a literary war correspondent, research by Stephen Knadler (2002) and Mark Canada (2012) contributes to the discussion of Davis’s influence as a social reformer, examining not only her controversial political stance on the Civil War but the impacts her investigative nonfiction essays left on an array of American social institutions. In light of this recent revival of Davis’s writing as a journalist of the Civil War and a voice for social reform, I aim to broaden the cultural lens by which her realist style contributes to her message against not only slavery but of human repression at large in “Blind Tom.”

Pseudoscience in the Nineteenth Century

Although viewed as pseudosciences in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the study and application of physiognomy and phrenology thrived in the nineteenth century. By the late 1800’s, the concept of phrenology, which is a representative branch of the larger study of physiognomy, had achieved significant exposure, with societies appearing dedicated to the furthering of the field, and publications such as the *The American Phrenological Journal* (1838-1869) circulating its methods to mass audiences. These sciences became such a popular topic in academic discussion that their methods surfaced in American literature far before Davis began writing her short stories. The trend of connecting the physicality of a character with his personal potential and individuality thus was not new when Davis first began to make these connections in “Blind Tom,” but Davis’s account is considered the first detailed review of Bethune’s phenomenal abilities, and that makes her connection to his phrenology unprecedented in 1862.

Although the two terms “physiognomy” and “phrenology” represent different systems of scientific method, with physiognomy focusing on physical traits of the body at large and phrenology primarily dealing with the shape of the human skull, Graeme Tytler explains in his text *Physiognomy in the European Novel: Faces and Features* (1982) that to the average reader in this literary period, the two studies fused together as a generalized scientific concept (97). Scholars such as Hartley, John Davies and Charles Colbert (1997) agree with Tytler’s claim that the two areas blended into a singular scientific system in the public opinion. Under this overarching umbrella of comprehension distributed in scientific articles as well as fictional literature, nineteenth-century audiences would have been familiar with the ways in which physiognomy and phrenology could be projected onto any given individual, and a fictional work that included a detailed physical description would lend more to their understanding of the character than modern critics may notice without that connective knowledge. Tytler explains further, “Physiognomy, then, is a science of human understanding in the profoundest sense of the term,” “the art of knowing the inner man through the outer” (64, 68). As such, the leap to associate physiognomy and phrenology with the manner in which Davis purposefully portrays Bethune from mere conjecture to a measurable comparative study of cultural influence. For the purposes of this argument, I cite phrenological as well as physiognomic sources, but mostly refer to the sciences under the overarching arm of phrenological terms according to popular social scientist and Davis’s contemporary, Orson Fowler, who is introduced in the next section.

Phrenology and the Mainstream Media

Originating in late eighteenth-century Western culture in the works of German scientist and sociologist Johann Kaspar Lavater, and carried over into the works of Franz Joseph Gall and

Johann Gaspar Spurzheim the ideas behind physiognomy and phrenology took root in the 1770's and continued to be widely debated and explored until their decline in the late 1880's (Tytler xiv). During the height of the Victorian era, these pseudosciences began popping up in art and culture, and the trend spread westward to the United States just prior to the Civil War. In this section, I explore the history of phrenology and physiognomy in America as it appeared in literary and academic circles, demonstrating how Rebecca Harding Davis's childhood education and professional networks contributed to her own understanding of the body's connection to the characteristics of personality as manifested in her short fiction.

Phrenology and physiognomy, grouped together for this chapter under the overarching classification in this essay as just "phrenology," can be traced throughout history, appearing in ancient Greek, Egyptian, and Chinese civilizations (Tytler 35), but the trend did not begin to morph into a Western scientific pursuit until after 1775 with the publication of Johann Kaspar Lavater's work, *Physiognomische Fragmente zur Beförderung der Menschenkenntnis und Menschenlieb*, or *Essays on Physiognomy; for the Promotion of the Knowledge and the Love of Mankind*. For Lavater, physiognomy not only allied closely with medicine and physiology, but also contributed to man's increased awareness of himself and of others as functioning members of society. In his opinion, the tendency to judge others based on physical appearance was rooted in natural instinct; if this instinct could be parsed and then honed, man could grasp a better understanding of human potential.

The study of phrenology, a branch of Lavater's physiognomy that focused on the distinct shape of the skull and the supposed functions of the brain, gained momentum in the latter portion of the eighteenth century in a vein of scientific inquiry spearheaded by German scientists Franz Joseph Gall and Johann Gaspar Spurzheim. Although the principles of phrenology that trace their

roots back to classical antiquity in regards to man's curiosity about the functional relationship between the body and the mind had existed for centuries, the science of measuring skulls and classifying the stages of development of the human brain rose to popularity as an offshoot of the Enlightenment, and served as the predecessor for the naturalism movement that would follow in the next century. John van Wyhe offers that the history of phrenology can be effectively traced from Germany to England, and from England to the America, where it rose to the height of its vogue as both a science and a cultural phenomenon (23). Van Wyhe writes, "The deep order of Nature had to be visible, and individual observations revealed that order" (13). This initial curiosity behind phrenology continued to resonate in all of its incarnations as the science began to spread across geographies and decades (13).

To provide an historical overview of the phrenological timeline, Gall introduced the science of phrenology and began to study the unique shapes of human skulls. Spurzheim branched off from Gall, applying the same general scientific methodologies but disseminating the information in a more universally-accepted format, by numbered charts presenting the measurements of the skulls he collected. British phrenologist George Combe then built upon Spurzheim's attempt to make the principles of phrenology available to the general public by writing books, touring lecture circuits, selling charts, and collaborating with American scientists, and the American Fowler brothers, Orson and Lorenzo, took the science mainstream, turning the mapping of skulls into a profitable industry that became an overnight sensation. John Davies describes the expansion of the science, writing,

...there was a spate of publicity [in America] as the cheap and readily available editions of Gall, Spurzheim, the Combes, and others were published by American firms; references to them became common in the magazines and newspapers as

they were advertised and read and reviewed, and many articles and books of native authorship appeared on phrenology and allied subjects. (19)

By the time the Fowler brothers entered the phrenological scene, the American public was ready to receive, many to embrace, their scientific ideas. At the time Rebecca Harding Davis composed “Blind Tom,” Orson Fowler had just reached the height of his popularity as a phrenologist, and was basically a household name. Referred to by John Davies as “the chief figure in American phrenology during the 1840’s and thereafter,” Orson Squire Fowler not only practiced phrenology, but took the science to new heights through careful marketing and promotion (46). Alongside his brother Lorenzo, his sister Lydia, and his sister-in-law Charlotte¹³, Orson Fowler opened a phrenology office in New York City in 1835, and over the course of the next

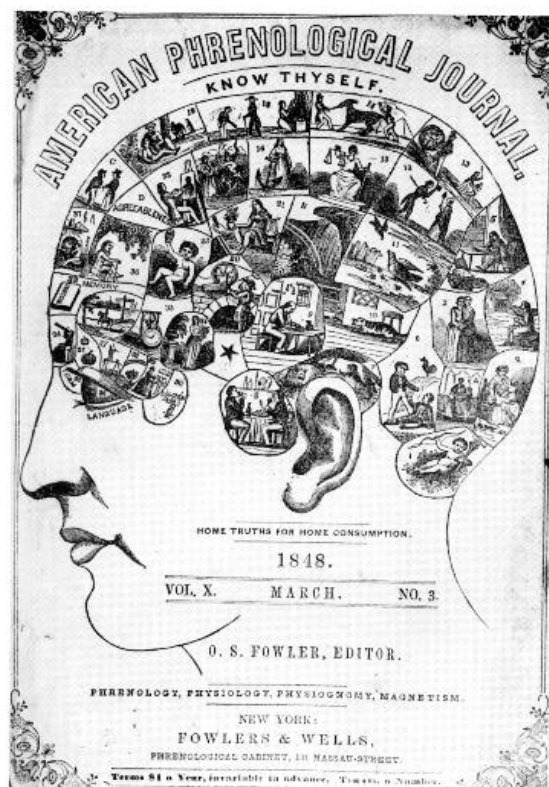


Figure 3. Front cover of *The American Phrenological Journal* from 1848, edited by Orson Squire Fowler. The cover depicts the organs of the head that were measured in size and connected to capability, also known as feeling the “bumps” on one’s head.

Source: GoogleBooks.

decade, he expanded his phrenological empire. Touring the country, the Fowlers printed and distributed phrenological charts of various historic skulls, created new charts for customers upon request, and lectured in venues from academic lyceums to town hall meetings held in barns (47).

¹³ The Fowlers were joined by Samuel R. Wells in 1843. He strongly supported their practice and edited many of their publications. He married Charlotte in 1844 (Davies 47).

They operated a small museum of famous skulls and collaborated with other phrenologists on ways in which to connect the science to the American public, reducing it to an easy-to-understand practice that enabled everyone, in some basic manner, to become a phrenologist.

The Fowler brothers based their practical phrenology upon the works of Johann Gaspar Spurzheim and Franz Joseph Gall, early followers of Johann Kaspar Lavater, the physiognomist. Together, they took over the *American Phrenological Journal* in 1838, and published numerous tracts and books throughout the course of their career, advising readers on everyday matters ranging from how to educate their children according to the development of their specific phrenological organs to how to choose an appropriate marriage partner based on the size of one's skull. Across all of their various mediums employed to distribute the science, "the theses of these various books are remarkably consistent and run something like this: the mind cannot function without the brain, and the brain is intimately connected with the body; therefore a healthy body is a necessity and is to be obtained by following the laws of physiology and health" (Davies 81).

Extending the self-searching theme of the Enlightenment and embracing scientific method, the efforts of these scholars opened ideological doors for the likes of Darwin later on in the nineteenth century; the Western world at large was embarking on journeys of natural exploration and welcomed the theories of physiognomy and phrenology. As interest in the science increased, articles began appearing in journals and the scientists themselves began to tour lecture circuits, presenting speeches on their postures and deflecting questions about the science's conflicts with religious morality. American readers were constantly inundated with European ideas disseminated from the cross-circulation of multicultural literature between British and American shores (Davies 120).

Embodied in the forms of character portraiture and science, phrenology crossed the

Atlantic and entered into the mainstream media via modes of periodical articles, scientific tracts, oral presentations in recital halls, as well as in novels and short stories. John Davies offers, “evidence of acquaintance with phrenology [and physiognomy] began to appear in the 1820’s” (12) as a new “philosophy of universal scope” (118). In an 1834 edition of *The Boston Examiner*, an article appeared that acknowledged the spreading of the phrenological way of thinking in American society, with advice included as to how neighbors could engage in a common evaluation of the shape of one another’s heads (12). Similar articles, reviews of major phrenological texts, and commentary on lectures appeared in *The American Journal of Education*, *The Knickerbocker*, *The Southern Review*, *New England Magazine*, *The Boston Medical and Surgical Journal*, *Godey’s Ladies’ Magazine*, *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, and *The Literary Gazette*, among others (15-19). Davies suggests that articles such as these put the new, “peculiar” scientific language of phrenology into the popular modes of American speech made accessible to the general population (xi).

Phrenology and Literature

Scholars have noted evidence of phrenological influence in works by Edgar Allan Poe¹⁴, Mark Twain¹⁵, Ralph Waldo Emerson¹⁶, and Nathaniel Hawthorne¹⁷, among others. In the post-Enlightenment era, Western culture remained fascinated with developing a better understanding of the connection between the physical body and the invisible, immaterial soul. Decades

¹⁴ Hungerford, Edward. “Poe and Phrenology.” *American Literature: A Journal of Literary History, Criticism, and Bibliography* 2.3 (1930): 209-31. *MLAIB*. Web. 28 Jan. 2013.

Grayson, Erik. “Weird Science, Weirder Unity: Phrenology and Physiognomy in Edgar Allan Poe.”

¹⁵ Gribben, Alan. “Mark Twain, Phrenology, and the ‘Temperaments’: A Study of Pseudoscientific Influence.”

¹⁶ Stern, Madeleine. “Emerson and Phrenology.” *Studies in the American Renaissance* (1984): 213-228. *MLAIB*. Web. 28 Jan. 2013.

¹⁷ Stoehr, Taylor. “Physiognomy and Phrenology in Hawthorne.”

removed from these early innovative discussions about the purpose and nature of man, phrenology served as a sort of resurrection of this broad interest man took in understanding himself and others. This cycle of interest manifested itself again later in the nineteenth century in the spiritualism movement, and even later in the twentieth-century in modes of criticism such as psychoanalysis. Tytler writes, “Like transcendentalism, [phrenology] had a one-generation career,” but trace evidence of this scientific method remains until this day in common literature (172). As such, discovering this same mode of self and scientific exploration in the popular nineteenth century literature read and studied by Rebecca Harding Davis should not be a surprise.

Particularly, Edgar Allan Poe stands out as one of many popular authors at the forefront of the scientific exploration of literary portraiture. Poe relied heavily on phrenological techniques in his fiction, according to Eric Grayson. The most popular and most obvious reference to the two sciences appears in “The Imp of the Perverse” (1845) in which the narrator of the story calls into question the direct correlation between a man’s outward appearance and his inner soul (2). Grayson writes, “Poe's characters reveal their spiritual and psychological tendencies via skin tone, hair texture, clothing, and ‘airs’” (2). Other scholars such as Edward Hungerford noticed this correlation far before the era of new historicism began to revisit the cultural influences of phrenological ideas in literature. In an essay penned in 1930, he writes, “...decades of changing scientific theory have all but obliterated the meaning which Poe and his readers attached... [to character descriptions]. Only a few modern readers will understand that Poe is using the language of what was once a science” (209). Poe’s interest in these topics extended beyond literary parameters, as biographers note that he wrote reviews of major phrenological texts, such as a review for *The Southern Literary Messenger* of the popular book *Phrenology, and the Moral*

*Influence of Phrenology: Arranged for General Study, and the Purposes of Education, from the First Published Works of Gall and Spurzheim, to the Latest Discoveries of the Present Period*¹⁸ in 1836 (Hungerford 211). In reviews such as these, Poe often simplified the complex methodologies of character assessment via phrenology into concise synopses for easy consumption by the general reader (Tytler 120).

Other mainstream nineteenth-century authors commonly associated with phrenology include Mark Twain, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Henry Thoreau. Tytler notes in his research that tidbits of Emerson refer to Combe's book *The Constitution of Man*, and adds that Thoreau's detailed description of the American character in "Odd Fellow" draws almost entirely upon phrenological ideas (15). Scholars Madeline Stern and Alan Gribben note in their biographical research on Twain that he visited a phrenologist himself at multiple times during the height of his literary career, and Twain, like Davis, also took a special interest in the musical abilities of Thomas Bethune¹⁹.

Perhaps the most profound application of phrenology that might have influenced Rebecca Harding Davis's writing arises in the fiction of Nathaniel Hawthorne²⁰. Multiple biographers such as Harris, Cadwallader, Lasseter, and Pfaelzer acknowledge that Davis considered herself an avid reader of Hawthorne's works prior to the start of her writing career; Davis even writes

¹⁸ Gall, Joseph, L. Miles and Johann Gaspar Spurzheim. *Phrenology, and the Moral Influence of Phrenology: Arranged for General Study, and the Purposes of Education, from the First Published Works of Gall and Spurzheim, to the Latest Discoveries of the Present Period*. Philadelphia: Carey, Lea, and Blanchard, 1835. *GoogleBooks*. Web. 10 Sept. 2013.

¹⁹ Stern, Madeleine. "Emerson and Phrenology."

²⁰ Janice Milner Lasseter has researched Davis's relationship with the Hawthornes extensively, writing about their connectivity in her article "Hawthorne's Legacy to Rebecca Harding Davis," published in a 1999 edition of *Hawthorne and Women: Engendering and Expanding the Hawthorne Tradition* as well as in her article, "Hawthorne's Stories and Rebecca Harding Davis: A Note" that appeared in a 1999 issue of *Nathaniel Hawthorne Review*.

about this passion for his works in her autobiography *Bits of Gossip*²¹ (49-51). Like Poe, Hawthorne also engaged in editorial review work for *The Southern Literary Messenger* in the 1830s, according to scholar Taylor Stoehr, like Poe, he often commented favorably on the growing popularity of phrenological practices (360). Hawthorne's most well-known application of these methodologies appears in the story "The Birthmark" (1843). According to Stoehr, Hawthorne maintained a close relationship with two leading phrenologists, Andrew and George Combe, and the influences of their works left a strong imprint on this story in particular that tells the tale of a mad scientist in search of human perfection (364). Other stories that rely on phrenological approaches include "Alice Doane's Appeal" (1835), "Roger Malvin's Burial" (1832), "My Kinsman, Major Molineux" (1831), and many others as well (366). With Davis's favorite author embracing these modes of thought with such fervor, we can connect her to indirect knowledge of phrenology on behalf of her own literary tastes.

Phrenology and Davis

Rebecca Harding Davis's introduction to the principles of phrenology likely began during her formal education at Washington Female Seminary in 1845, although she had been tutored at home until the age of 14 (Cadwallader 22). Gregory Hadley says that during her three years of professional education at the Seminary, Davis began to develop the skills necessary to artistically express her strong opinions on the sociopolitical matters she had observed in the mill town of Wheeling, Virginia, as a child. According to Hadley, Washington Female Seminary prepared young women for lives devoted to the greater good, training them to be missionaries, pastors'

²¹ Renamed and republished as *Writing Cultural Biography* in 2001 by Janice Milner Lasseter and Sharon M. Harris.

wives, and before achieving marriage, teachers (14). The education Davis received at this institution was heavily influenced by popular modes of scientific thought that pervaded American culture at the time, in spite of the fact that the school devoted its efforts to a decidedly gender-constrictive outcome. As phrenology dominated scientific discussions of the 1840s during Davis's enrollment, there exists a strong likelihood that she had exposure to basic phrenological/physiognomic teachings, if not full coursework in these subjects. Hadley writes, "Washington, Pennsylvania, was also on the American lecture circuit, which meant that scholars and political thinkers regularly came to the city to lecture on abolitionism, human rights, women's rights and the plight of immigrants," adding that Davis was "challenged to explore ideas, read widely, and think for herself about social as well as religious issues" (14). Correspondingly, John Davies notes in his research that in the 1840s, many academic societies began focusing on phrenology, speaking on the subject in major cities such as Philadelphia and New Haven in addition to smaller audiences on the American lecture circuit (24). Speakers such as George Combe²², Alexander Bain²³, and Orson Fowler toured recital halls, delivering speeches at various public venues and presenting at lecture series sponsored by universities (33). Even a handful of female activists joined in the touring intellectual conversation, such as Mrs. E.H. Sanford who was known for her visits to women's schools, using the principles of phrenology to caution her listeners against the dangers of promiscuous behavior (33). Because Washington, Pennsylvania, the home of Washington Female Seminary, was a common stop for these touring lectures, a strong likelihood exists that Davis was exposed to phrenology as a

²² Combe, George. *Elements of Phrenology*. 7th ed. Edinburgh: Maclachlan and Stewart, 1824. *GoogleBooks*. Web. 6 Oct. 2012.

²³ Bain, Alexander. *On the Study of Character, Including an Estimate of Phrenology*. London: Parker, Son, and Bourn, 1861. Print.

leading scientific practice pertinent to the 1840s.

In 1848, Davis graduated from the seminary as valedictorian of her class and returned home to live with her parents in Wheeling. In spite of her removal to the country once again, Davis did not cease to continue her education; biographers maintain that her regular pastimes included studying the books her brother Wilse brought home from his own collegiate courses, even learning German from him during one of his summer vacations (Cadwallader 22). If Davis had, for some unlikely reason, not been directly exposed to the phrenological lecture circuit or if she had not read any one specific phrenological text by this point in her education, there exists an even greater likelihood that she experienced these concepts second-hand from her absorption in her brother's studies. Davis's desire to improve her mental faculties while simultaneously gaining a clearer understanding of the society in which she lived presents itself thematically in many of her short stories and as such, modern readers should not be surprised to find solid evidence of cultural phenomenon, such as phrenology, in her writing.

After the publication of "Life in the Iron Mills" in 1861, Davis found herself immersed in a circle of ongoing intellectual conversation that included the opinions of highly respected writers. From a young age, Davis mentioned in her journals a profound respect for the works of Nathaniel Hawthorne, and shortly after her novella "Life" became a hit, she found herself not only a fan, but a friend of Hawthorne and his wife (Cadwallader 9). Biographers note that Davis also spent a significant amount of her free time socializing and appearing publicly with Louisa and Bronson Alcott, Annie Fields, and Ralph Waldo Emerson²⁴ (11). Nevertheless, her involvement and argument with these major literary figures exposed Davis to a wide berth of cultural influences. From these acquaintances, Davis welcomed new, challenging perspectives

²⁴ Studies of Davis's career also suggest that Davis did not care for the principles of the transcendental movement, arguing openly against Emerson and Thoreau in works such as *Margret Howth* (Cadwallader 41).

that helped her hone her own sociopolitical beliefs that would ultimately shape her view as a realist writer. Any gaps in her education would most likely have been filled via experience, discussion, and perhaps argument with these writers whose own works employed the principles of phrenology repeatedly, such as Poe's critical reviews, Emerson's essays, and Hawthorne's fiction. In the plethora of articles appearing in mainstream periodicals alone, one can assume that Davis, at some point during her formal education or in her professional tenure as a literary figure, encountered the basic principles of phrenology. In addition to this likely exposure, Davis's probable experience with phrenology as a course of study in her childhood education as well as her close connection to other authors during her career who also employed physiognomic methods to their own character creations presents more than the necessary evidence required to assume cultural influence.

While the topic of phrenology was easing into a steady decline by the time Davis's last collection of stories *Silhouettes of American Life* went into publication in 1893, the imprint of the trend remained strong in American literary culture in the 1860s when she published "Blind Tom." "The treatment of outward man... which is most commonly designated as 'character description' or 'the literary portrait,' has long been thought a proper subject for critical analysis," notes Tytler, and even to an audience of twenty-first century readers, this analysis begins with the physical description of the character in question (1). Although a direct interest in the further exploration of phrenology as a science faded, the evidence of its former popularity still resonated throughout American society and in many ways, still does to this day. Tytler claims that even modern readers generally "know what physiognomy entails, and many of us might pretend to some capacity for judging character by appearances, be it based on little more than proverbial

interpretations of thin mouths, small eyes, high foreheads, prominent chins, red hair, and the like” (xiii). Just as the tendency to draw assumptions about character recurs in our current ideology, even more so would readers and writers of Rebecca Harding Davis’s nineteenth century-audience who had studied and practiced the phrenology in daily action for decades.

The audience of *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1862 would likely readily recognize the phrenological terminology that Rebecca Harding Davis weaves into “Blind Tom,” but they might not have been expecting the reformist’s tone that she applies to the account, as explained later in the argument, after I perform an in-depth phrenological assessment of her descriptions of the musician. Davis sections her sketch of the artist in two parts: an historical background and an artistic interpretation. Although brief, the account represents Davis’s experience as a journalist, as the majority of the article presents the reader with a brief biography of the slave Thomas Bethune and his origins; she lays the foundation for her overall message by first presenting a thorough backdrop of Bethune’s upbringing in captivity before situating the reader alongside the narrator in the audience of one of his famed performances. In the second half of the sketch, she recreates one of his piano concerts, capturing with emotion and attentiveness a snapshot of the prodigy’s outward physicality. In both portions of the account, Davis interweaves scientific terminology, making frequent references to physiognomic principles and methods, and draws a conclusion that falls within phrenological parameters.

CHAPTER 2. INTRODUCING THOMAS GREENE WIGGINS BETHUNE

Thomas Bethune's biographical background

Born in 1849 to Charity Greene, also known as Charity Wiggins, a slave on a Georgian plantation, Thomas Greene Wiggins Bethune accompanied his mother when she was sold to the neighboring plantation of Southern lawyer General James N. Bethune (Treffert 88). In the biography, *The Ballad of Blind Tom, Slave Pianist*, Deirdre O'Connell points out modern attempts to specifically categorize Bethune's disabilities within any one diagnosis presents a challenge because his history of symptoms exists only as a collection of anecdotes (29). She writes, however, that "after assessing the sum of total evidence, one school of thought would point, with some confidence, to Early Infantile Autism, which is defined by *Campbell's Psychiatric Dictionary* as "a pervasive developmental disorder" manifested in the following symptoms: withdrawal, an anxious, obsessive desire to maintain the status quo, exceptional object relationships, intelligent, pensive faculties despite low intelligence, language disturbances, and monotonously repetitive motor behavior²⁵ (101). Unable to see and generally unable to communicate other than in repetitive strings of mimicked words and phrases, Bethune was considered a burden to the other enslaved persons on the Bethune plantation because he required almost constant attendance and could not fend for himself in any capacity (28). In fact, Bethune spent the majority of his childhood confined to a wooden box, where he could be kept safe from harm without the continual presence of a caretaker (29). O'Donnell posits that this "penning" at such a young age further sharpened his auditory sense, as sounds became Bethune's only

²⁵ Campbell's definition also notes a fear of loud noises, or a predisposition to auditory impairment as two other symptoms of this disorder; however, these two were not present in Thomas Bethune. Because biographers are attempting to apply a historical diagnosis, the exact nature of his disabilities cannot be accurately determined.

interaction with the world around him (29).

Darold Treffert describes him from a young age as a child who “loved nature and was fascinated with sounds of all types – rain on the roof, the grating of corn in the sheller, but most of all the sound of music” (88). When the child reached an age where he could walk and communicate on a basic level with others, he was often treated as a pet of the white Bethune children who played with him, taught him games, and frequently brought him into the family mansion; it through his interaction as a playmate of the Bethunes that young Thomas Bethune encountered the sounds of the piano (88). According to O’Donnell, the child’s ability to play did not suddenly appear in an overnight miracle; rather, it took many thwarted attempts to even gain access to the piano in the Bethunes’ parlor before he was able to experiment with the keys, and many more before he could repeat any chords, let alone a full song (37). O’Donnell explains that the “publicity machine” took hold of the boy’s story and transformed it into a sensational, “single watershed” account of sudden musical genius (39). In fact, O’Donnell cites Rebecca Harding Davis’s *Atlantic Monthly* sketch as one of the key contributors to this sensationalized version of Bethune’s story. Davis describes the scene of his prodigious discovery, writing,

Going down, they found Tom, who had been left asleep in the hall, seated at the piano in ecstasy of delight, breaking out at the end of each successful fugue into shouts of laughter, kicking his heels and clapping his hands. This was the first time he had touched the piano. (87)

Nearly all biographical sketches of Thomas Bethune published over the course of his lengthy career reflect this same romanticized and instantaneous discovery, where the Bethunes walk into the parlor one morning and unexpectedly find the young blind boy seated at the family piano, playing songs that he had overheard during the children’s piano lessons (Treffert 88).

A shapeless form

Davis's sketch "Blind Tom" begins with an early description of his physical appearance as an infant when she describes his arrival at the Bethune plantation. Given his obvious disabilities, Davis's narrator speculates that only a sense of human charity could have motivated the successful plantation owner²⁶ to purchase the infant along with his mother, writing that the baby was "but a lump of black flesh, born blind, and with the vacant grin of idiocy, they thought, already stamped upon his face" (85). This description, which seems somewhat generalized to modern readers, carried a deeper significance to a reader in the nineteenth-century. By the time that Davis's account appeared in 1862, the presence of physiognomic and phrenological thinking had disseminated throughout the general American readership; people readily drew conclusions based on the physical facial features, head shape, and overall outward appearance of both characters and as well as live people, as I have discussed earlier in my argument. Especially in cases of individuals with extraordinary talents, crimes, phenotype, skin color, or other unusual traits, the public eye had been trained to scan the face for outward signs of inward oddity, representative of the overarching judgment enabled by physiognomy.

In the introductory description of Bethune, we find a distinctive vacancy of physiognomic principles, a portrait of him in the negative as far as his physical indicators were concerned. Thus, in her brief description Thomas Bethune as a baby as "a lump of black flesh," Davis prevents her readers from making any physiological or phrenological assumptions of the boy's abilities. In this opening passage, I believe she avoids these specific physical descriptions in order to draw attention to the atrocity of his plight as a slave child, completely dependent on

²⁶ Davis cites Bethune's owner as Perry Oliver, but her reference is incorrect. James Bethune is listed as the official purchaser of Bethune and his mother. Davis's discrepancy likely ties to the fact that Perry Oliver was his travelling stage manager for his tours, and is reportedly the man who appeared on stage with him during his 1862 Baltimore performance when Davis was in attendance.

his owners, and at their mercy. She implies that his disability or “vacant grin of idiocy” was a mere interpretation of his owners, based on nothing more than the assumption of his blindness and apparent delayed social and mental development (85). Without allowing the reader to assess the baby’s features for himself, she places the burden of judgment on the opinions of his purchasers. Davis hints at this by inserting the phrase, “they thought,” because neither the layman nor the phrenologist would have had any outward indication of the child’s unrevealed personality or undeveloped talents at this young age, when he was a mere, shapeless form (85). She restricts her audience from drawing any conclusions about Bethune other than the misconception that he was destined, in the minds of his owners, to be a useless dependent for the rest of his life.

An outward examination

In the passage that follows, Davis presents the reader with the physiognomic information she previously withheld, allowing a connection to be formed between his outward appearance the assumption of his extreme disability and overall uselessness. Building anticipation of Bethune’s revelation as a musical prodigy, the narrator starts to describe his physicality, detailing the features in the previously described “lump” of a form, not unlike the unformed heaps of black kohl in Davis’s “Life in the Iron Mills” (85). She reminds her audience that his owners and family still only saw the child as “stupid, flabby, and sleepy,” remaining completely unaware of his latent abilities (86). As he ages, his status in the Bethune household does not change, but the narrator records a shift in his outward shape. Davis writes,

The boy, creeping around day after day in the hot light, was as repugnant an object as the lizards in the neighboring swamp, and promised to be as of little use

to his master. He was of the lowest negro type, from which only field-hands can be made, -- coal black, with protruding heels, the ape-jaw, blubber-lips constantly open, the sightless eyes closed and the head thrown far back on the shoulders, lying on the back in fact, a habit which he still retains, and which adds to the imbecile character of his face. (86)

While Bethune's owners still see him as a lump, the readers are now equipped with a striking account of his physical features, and as such, empowered to begin casting judgment on his abilities, his personality, as well as his status and value as a human. Pfaelzer suggests that this descriptive passage, in addition to the others that follow in the sketch, connects to the cultural influence of Charles Darwin's *Origin of the Species* (1858) which had been in print for nearly four years by the time Davis published "Blind Tom." Arguably, the terminology she employs contains direct animalistic parallels and uses the term "ape" in her descriptions, but I argue that the conclusions Davis draws in contrast to these physical descriptions also fall closely in line with the

sciences of physiognomy and phrenology, as explained further below.

Instead of Darwin, Davis could also be referencing the writings of Lavater's popular scientific text, *Essays in Physiognomy*, which appeared in the late 1790s and remained in



Figure 4. Thomas Bethune, age 10.
Source: *The Ballad of Blind Tom, Slave Pianist* by Deirdre O'Connell (12).

circulation well into the nineteenth-century. Within this work, Lavater not only discusses the physiognomic traits of humans, but also of animals, including snakes, elephants, and monkeys. He also introduces a sketch of what man might be like in his natural state, providing a description that presents natural man in close parallel with an ape, but then argues that the power of the human mind in connection to the presence of the soul still sets him apart from any potential animal counterparts. The connection between Davis's description of Bethune and Lavater's description of the natural man fall closely in line. Lavater's man "in a state of nature," loses the "majesty of his appearance," – his eyes would be obscured by his hair, "the lips would be thick and projecting," the skin "hard, like to black or brown leather" (196-97). As such, it is probable Davis is referencing Lavater just as easily as she might have been referencing Darwin.

For scientists such as Lavater, phrenology and physiognomy handled matters of race as an additional level of formal classification, just as gender or age (223). While many of their results placed African races on the lower end of the spectrum of mental development, the shapes of their skulls still classified on the human scale, and the measurement of their abilities was considered worthy of physiognomic study. Many results, as exhibited in the works of George Combe and his associates, ranked "Negro" as "mentally inferior," and Indians even lesser so, but still held nonwhites within the phrenological scale of measurable mental capacity and the development of a corresponding personality (Davies 146). Still, it is important to note here that phrenology is not synonymous with nineteenth-century racial anthropology, another pseudoscience that involved the assessment of physical anatomy in connection to race in order to make determinations about ability and class. While physiognomy and phrenology were not sciences of race alone, even though they included race as a factor in their physical observations, other nineteenth century social philosophers and supporters of racial segregation of labor often

employed physiognomic and phrenological terminology because it was part of the mainstream cultural and scientific vocabulary of the time.

In this particular passage of Davis's account, I argue the narrator relies entirely on the practice of physiognomy rather than on the actual measurement of Bethune's head in phrenological terms, perhaps because as a mere observer at one of his performances, Davis could only assess the boy's physicality as a whole. She could not measure the bumps on his head from her seat in the audience, but she was keenly curious to understand the boy's phrenology. In a letter to James Fields on 12 July 1862 after she began research for "Blind Tom," she writes, "I am quite interested in the 'Tom' question. This morning I received a present of a large full length likeness of him from a musician here. If I cannot find a chart of his 'bumps,' I will have Fowles see the photograph and say what he thinks" (Letter to James Fields). While the referent "Fowles" in her letter cannot be specifically determined, in the mid-1800s, two of the most popular phrenologists, Orson and Lorenzo Fowler, were touring the country²⁷. Deemed "practicing phrenologists," Orson Fowler, and his brother Lorenzo, coauthors of *Fowler's Practical Phrenology: Giving a Concise Elementary View of Phrenology* (1840), measured heads out of their local offices in New York and Boston, in addition to traveling the lecture circuit of the northeastern states (Davies 47).

Although no follow-up documentation exists regarding the "Fowles" in Davis's letter and his assessment of Bethune's bumps, Davis's letter to Fields serves as evidence that she was not only aware of phrenology, but also that she found its principles worthy of some degree of consideration, especially in regards to the idiot savant slave. Thus, in her account, Davis focuses in descriptively on as much of the child's physiognomy as possible, in lieu of being able to

²⁷ "Fowles" might also be a reference to a lesser-known phrenologist W.B. Fowle.

properly assess his “bumps” before the sketch appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly*. Phrenology serves as only a smaller branch of the larger study of physiognomy, as established earlier in this argument, and Davis applies the lens of this science of observation-at-large to the musician in her story. John Davies writes, “The central message of phrenology, then, was that man himself could be brought within the purview of science and that the mental phenomena could be studied objectively and explained by natural causes...” (171). Those who heard Bethune play claimed that he was a prodigy, a miracle that could not be fully understood, only appreciated, but in her sketch, Davis suggests that his abilities can be measured and explained by phrenology. By describing the child savant in these highly phrenological terms, as I continue to explore in later chapters of this argument, she effectively draws her audience into viewing Bethune as a human with a tremendous potential to add value to the world through his abilities as an artist, while reminding them that it is their close-minded and selfish perspectives on matters of race, and ultimately of slavery, that unjustly repress his soul and cheapen the miracle of his music.

Inward conclusions

In this first descriptive passage of Bethune as a young child, following his earlier description as a shapeless lump, Davis provides the reader with the color of his skin, and the narrator speculates that the extreme darkness of this shade makes him well-suited for outdoor work (86). The passage implies that he has little to no control over his head or his facial features, with his lips hanging constantly open and his head tilted backward, facing upward but resting on his shoulders (86). This description provides a clearer picture than the previous one that positions Bethune only as a fleshy “lump,” but both descriptions categorize him as useless and helpless. As an infant, he had been deemed wholly dependent upon and of no real value to his owners, and

as a young boy, the specific examination of his outer physicality seems to share this implication. Both portrayals invite the reader to draw the same conclusion: the child will meet a tragic end because he has no place in the world due to his status as a slave, and a disabled one, at that. Rather than illness, poverty, and death, however, Bethune finds success and tremendous fame.

After providing this first full physical assessment of the child, Davis resumes the narrative-like structure of her sketch, retelling the details of his musical discovery and the proceeding validations of his musical talents. She takes care to emphasize the reality of Bethune's upbringing; in no way does she attempt to cloak that he is a slave on a traditional Southern plantation (87-89). She encourages the reader to pity the boy not only for his physical handicaps but also his status in life as a human being deemed to be petted and treated like a family pet, frequently comparing him to a "dog" in the eyes of his owners and of his spectators (87-89). To his owners, and arguably, to his audience, in the first portion of Davis's sketch, he is presented as mindless and soul-less, without a place in the world other than underfoot or on display. To Davis, even his unanticipated abilities as described in the first half of the sketch are carefully selected and measured according to the scientific theme of her earlier presentation of his physical characteristics. On multiple occasions when referencing music, rather than referring to it as mere entertainment or as an art form, she refers to it as a "science," at one point even deeming it a "language" (87, 88).

The narrator notes that when listeners first encounter Bethune's piano playing, they are "bewildered" by his interpretation of the music he has heard played by others, as he clearly possesses the ability to apply his own emotional, passionate flair to each song he performs. To Davis, this creative ability stands as evidence that there is "Something" within him, a soul that seeks expression, acknowledgement, and acceptance – qualities of humans and not of apes, and

simultaneously, qualities that should be respected in any human, even slaves. By presenting Bethune as an artist, who forms a cognitive connection with the piano and uses it as a form of communication, he exceeds the strict standards of Darwinian thought that might classify him as a missing link in a long evolutionary chain or cheap labor on a Southern plantation. Davis adamantly rejected the slavery in the Southern states and frequently spoke out against the institution in her Civil War fiction, and in “Blind Tom,” we see her positioning her abolitionist stance from a phrenological platform, attempting to engage her audience by means of human-to-human sympathy.



BLIND TOM, THE PIANIST.

BLIND TOM.

Figure 5. Blind Tom in *The Phrenological Miscellany*, 1865-1873.

Source: *GoogleBooks*.

CHAPTER 3. “BLIND TOM’S” PHRENOLOGY

“Blind Tom” Takes the Stage

With the unexplainable phenomenon of Thomas Bethune fully introduced, Davis switches the narrator’s perspective from an historical angle to one in the present day, in the year 1862. As the narrator sits in the audience of one of his concerts, observing the scene before her, she offers another physical description of the musician, this time building upon the direct contrast between his outward shape and the manifestations of inward capability that is on display for all to hear and enjoy. As in the previous description, Davis begins by describing the “rank” of his race in both his physical stature and “temperament,” as the “lowest of the Guinea type,” associating him again with the slaves designated on a plantation for pure, outdoor physical labor (Davis 89). Referring to Bethune as a “type,” Davis again falls into a language of strict classification, building the anticipation of the surprise to be revealed when Bethune, who is of the physiognomic “type” only deemed suitable for hard labor, sits at the piano and mesmerizes the audience with his impassioned music.

In the passages that follow, the narrator steps in and offers commentary on the situation as a whole, sharing her amazement at the wonder and odd spectacle of the blind boy and his incredible talents. Playing on the scientific terminology used throughout the sketch thus far, the narrator shares,

His dead, uninstructed soul has never been tampered with by art critics who know the body well enough of music, but nothing of the living creature within. The world is full of these vulgar souls that palter with eternal Nature and the eternal Arts, blind to the Word who swells among us therein. Tom, or the daemon within

Tom, was not one of them. (90)

She continues in her descriptions, noting that Bethune played the piano with “scientific precision,” and a “touch [that] is always accurate,” defying categorization within the previously imposed parameters (89). More importantly, though, the child could create his own art, as well as repeat with precision the art of others, as noted when the narrator shares, “Stranger still [were] the harmonies which he had never heard, had learned from no man...uncertain, sad minors always...[with] one inarticulate unanswered question of pain in all...How sorry Tom’s music was!” (88). Davis sees Bethune’s talent to be more than just a random feat of nature, a miracle of chance; instead, she hears in his music an expression of his inner soul that he has no other means of releasing, and in that expression, she hears undeniable sadness.

Davis was not the first researcher to call into question a person’s ability/disability by observing his remarkable phrenological capabilities; rather, her comments fall in line with those of Orson Fowler and his fellow phrenologist, S. Kirkham. In 1837, Fowler and Kirkham visited the “House of Refuge,” an asylum for the blind, deaf, and dumb, “for the purpose of making phrenological observations” (Fowler 295). While researching the size and shapes of heads of children with these disabilities, they also recorded detailed notes of the impressive mental strengths that had developed in these children in spite of their various sensory deprivations (295). In the published version of their notes, Fowler and Kirkham share the case of a blind boy named “Michael” who possessed the astonishing ability to calculate numbers in his head (295). Mathematical problems presented to Michael orally would be solved in a matter of minutes without the aid of pen or paper; the phrenologists tested him repeatedly to check for any variance in his performance, and were floored by the results of how “prodigiously developed” his mental powers proved (295). In “Blind Tom”, we see Davis capturing in a similar manner the degree of

oddity in Bethune's case. She goes on to describe the unusual facets of his music, including a description of his own compositions. The narrator joins the audience in her astonishment at the blind child's incredible power of memory and at his ability to apply his own artistic turn to each song that he hears and then replays (91).

In spite of his immeasurable talents when seated at the piano, Davis notes that after a certain point in the concert performance, Bethune exhibits signs of outward weariness in which "his whole bodily frame gives way, and a complete exhaustion of the brain follows, accompanied with epileptic spasms" (91). In this brief description of Bethune's physical limitations, Davis again references a frequently discussed in connection with phrenology: epilepsy. Explained by Fowler's contemporary Nahum Capen in his 1835 publication, *Annals of Phrenology*, the physical manifestation of epileptic seizures drew upon certain organs of the brain that were not functioning in balance (477). As explained later in this chapter, all organs of the brain had to be properly exercised in order to function normally, and in Bethune's case, many of the organs were vastly ignored and underdeveloped, opening him to the dangers of physical manifestations of idiocy and epilepsy. To Capen, these types of seizures could almost always be tied to the presence of mental disability, as this too, no matter the nature or the severity of the degree, also resulted from some failure of certain phrenological organs (477). Researcher Taurik Valiante validates Davis's reference and Capen's explanation, offering that in the early- to mid-nineteenth-century, "there was an ongoing debate as to whether the bumps on an individuals' head could be used to localize brain function, and explain the conditions of epilepsy and other disorders of the nervous system" (8). Deirdre O'Connell contradicts Davis's 1862 research, arguing that hers is the only account that connects Bethune's various twitches and jerks while playing the piano to the condition of epilepsy, and she suggests that this information might have

been presented to her by Perry Oliver, his stage manager, as a weak attempt to explain the child's unusual, uncontrolled physical behavior on stage (88). While we do not know definitively if Davis witnessed Bethune experience an actual epileptic seizure while on stage in Baltimore, her reference to this illness ties into popular threads of phrenological argument taking place in the mid-1800s, as evident by Capen's research.

A "Curious Problem"

In the paragraphs that follow, Davis takes a few pages to explore the breadth of Bethune's musical gift. Not only was the music sad and beautiful, but it was technically profound. Noting frequently his "scientific precision" of touch and tone, she emphasizes that his degree of accuracy did not waver whether it was his first performance of a new piece or a repetitive performance of a favorite (90). He did not miss a note, as if he had been properly taught and trained for years. This startling degree of accuracy combined with his emotive performances only adds to the complexity of the phenomenon. She writes, "We know of no parallel case to this in musical history" (90). The narrator then lists a few examples of his profound performances of musical selections "fourteen and sixteen pages in length," others reaching up to twenty, where he exhibits a "creative power equal to that of the master composers" (91). Davis expresses the opinion of the general public through the voice of her narrator – a person such as Thomas Bethune has never existed, even arguing that Mozart's young display of musical talents paled in comparison (91).

As she presents this evidence to her audience, Davis switches into the mode of phrenological speech, relying again on scientific terminology associated with phrenological methods to give strength to her case. Specifically, she uses phrenology as a basis to lend

credibility to the generalized sense of awe that everyone experiences when they first hear Bethune play. She writes,

I wish to draw especial attention to this power of the boy, not only because it is, so far as I know, unmatched in the development of any musical talent, but because, considered in the context of his entire intellectual structure, it involves a curious problem. The mere repetition of music heard but once, even when, as in Tom's case, it is given with such incredible fidelity, and after the lapse of years, demands on a command of mechanical skill, and an abnormal condition of the power of memory. (91)

The language in this paragraph, although it does not imply the actual measuring of the shape of Bethune's head, heavily employs the language used to talk about the brain in a phrenological context. John Davies explains that phrenologists believed that each person's unique abilities and various levels of aptitude drew upon a specific portion of the brain, and that the brain was divided into thirty-seven separate portions, or "organs." (4). He writes, "The development of these thirty-seven organs affects the size and contour of the cranium, so that a well-developed region of the head indicates a correspondingly well-developed faculty (propensity) for that region" (4).

While Davis does not describe for her readers the size of these specific regions of Bethune's brain, she discusses his astounding abilities in terms related specifically to these organs. Phrenologists believed that each man entered the world with a unique proportional balance between his thirty-seven mental organs; some would combine to show a greater propensity to spirituality, others to criminality, for example. They also held that these organs, through extensive mental exercise via study and practice, could be increased or reduced

accordingly, resulting in a disciplined shift in a person's overall capabilities and personality (5). Davis's narrator is fixated on the issue of how the musician's unique abilities have developed. Since he is blind and had no formal training, his phenomenal propensity for playing the piano could not have been a learned skill; rather, these were propensities he was born with and that had been further developed (Davis 91). For Davis, this poses a problem when she considers his "entire intellectual structure." Seeing that his other mental organs were deemed so severely inefficient, the fact that he presented evidence of this "unmatched" musical talent raises fascinating questions about the "power" of his memory (91).

When Davis references Bethune's musical ability and impressive memory, she is calling upon the mental organs of tune and imitation. Phrenologist Orson Fowler explains,

...hearing cannot produce musick [sic], and more than seeing can give a just conception and judgment of colours, but that a conception of the melody arising from a succession of sounds, those, indeed, who possess an equally perfect auditory and vocal apparatus, differ widely in their musical talents, is proved by every votary of harmonious sounds, as well as by every common observer. (217)

The organ of tune determines a person's unique capacity to produce music, whether by imitation of music heard played on a musical instrument or in a vocal performance. To phrenologists such as Fowler and his predecessor, Franz Joseph Gall, music represented a natural language that is processed in the brain in the same manner as words; thus the principles of music exist not only in nature, but within the human mind (218). Davis references this premise in the first half of her sketch when she tells the story of how the child's musical talents were discovered, writing that his first fans, the rich Southerners of the neighboring Georgian plantations "were not people who would be apt to comprehend music as a science, or to use it as a language: they only saw in the

little negro, therefore a remarkable facility for repeating the airs they drummed on their pianos” (87).

The organ of tune, which houses one’s “sense of melody and harmony of sounds, the ability to learn turns and detect discords,” sits in the lower portion of the brain on both sides of the head, resting above the ear (Fowler 217). To gain a better understanding of the organ of tune, phrenologists historically studied the busts and portraits of great musicians such as Mozart, Viotti, Rosini, Handel, and Haydn among many others (218). The average person often possessed a small or regular-sized organ of tune, enabling him to enjoy the performance of music, and with proper lessons and practice over time, cultivate and strengthen his organ enough to be able to play an instrument. Those individuals with large or extra-large organs of tune were the great performers whose musical ability amazed all who experienced it. Fowler explains,

One having very large tune, with large ideal., [another mental organ] will not only be extremely fond of good musick, but will impart a richness, and paths, and melody to his musical performances which are calculated to move the heart...One having tune very large, will be able to learn tunes by hearing them once or twice repeated and will never forget them; is filled with ecstasy, or completely carried away with good musick...produces a powerful impression upon the feelings of those who listen to his performances, and literally charms them. (219)

He goes on to add that children with large organs of tune are able to “catch and turn tunes soon after they begin to talk,” and specifically that, “authors have noticed, that this organ is generally very large in negroes; which exactly corresponds with their wonderful musical propensity and talent” (219). In another one of his popular phrenological texts, he continues this observation, writing of Africans,

Their large, or very large, tune, which inspires them with melody, with their smaller reasoning organs, which give them but few thoughts, and their large language, would furnish exactly such a composition as we meet with in Negro songs, doggerel rhymes glowing with vivacity and melody, and containing many words and repetitions with but few ideas. (32)

As shown in these key passages describing the organ of tune, phrenologists considered race to be a discerning factor in the natural development of specific organs within the mind. In Thomas Bethune's case, however, these other corresponding organs, such as time, language, and ideality, were more than just "smaller," in many ways – they were obsolete (32).

In Bethune's brain, the narrator senses that a strong connection exists between the organ of tune and the organ of imitation, or the "power of memory." Again, Davis's language describing his memory and his musical ability circle back to the published results of the visit to the asylum for the blind, deaf, and dumb recorded by Fowler and his fellow phrenologist Kirkham in 1837. When describing the boy Michael who possessed astounding abilities to calculate large sums in spite of the fact that he had been blind since birth and had no formal education aside from basic arithmetic, Fowler writes, "His organ of calcul. is prodigiously developed, corresponding fully with his astonishing computing powers" (295). The terminology of "development" and "powers" of the mind are key terms related to phrenological assessments of character and ability, and although to a modern reader they resonate more with the field of psychology or perhaps physiology, to Davis's nineteenth-century audience, they would instead call to mind the methods phrenological assessment.

The Power of Memory

For Davis, Thomas Bethune represents just such a phrenological prodigy, as blind Michael of Fowler's research at the New York asylum. In the sketch, she calls into question the "curious problem" of his "intellectual structure," asking open-endedly how it is that his musical ability could manifest so profoundly in concordance with his "power of memory," which is attributed to the organ of imitation, while so many of his other mental faculties were outwardly defunct. Fowler and Kirkham record a similar incongruence in the results of the research at the New York asylum. Fowler writes,

Here, again, in the heads of one hundred and sixty young misses and masters, caus. and compar. [other mental organs] are generally developed in an uncommon degree; but the most astonishing of their phrenological developments is their imitat. [another mental organ]. Nearly all of them have the organ large, and very many have it bumped up above the surrounding organs, to one-half, and frequently three-fourths, the thickness of a man's finger. In other words, they show a development of the organ three or four times as large as it appears in youth generally... (295)

Fowler and Kirkham believed that because of their sensory disabilities, these children learned to mimic the world around them as an attempt to make up for their deficiencies in other areas, although the way in which these other senses were developed remained a mystery to them, much as it did to Davis as she observed the child's amazing and unexplainable power to repeat any song he had heard.

Fowler defines the organ of imitation as the "ability to represent, copy, describe, and do what we see done," or as in Bethune's case, the ability to represent or copy what he had heard

(120). Fowler suggests that all humans possess the organ of imitation, and that it is through imitation that we begin to form vital skills for survival and socialization. In individuals where this organ is larger than usual, impressive artistic abilities abound (120-21). He writes,

One having imitat. large, will find it easy and natural for him to copy and represent, and possess both the ability and the disposition successfully to exercise this faculty, either in his gesticulation, his manner of description, his talent for drawing and writing, his desire to adopt the manners of others, or in almost any thing else demanded by his circumstances in life and his other faculties... (121)

Thus, the multiple references in Davis's sketch to Bethune's impressive "power" to repeat and mimic songs he had heard once can be accounted for in Fowler's own language. Describing the child, Davis writes,

His memory is so accurate that he can repeat, without the loss of a syllable, a discourse of fifteen minutes in length, of which he does not understand a word. Songs, too, in French or German, after a single hearing, he renders not only literally in words, but in notes, style, and expression. (89)

Phrenology maintained that no matter the size of any one organ of the mind, its propensity was affected and shaped by the size of the organs around it. Fowler argued that in a person who possessed a large organ of imitation, the organ of language would be smaller, making the person less individually creative and instead more intelligent in repetition, adding that this person's performance of mimicry "will make a far deeper impression than language along could produce, and be able to heighten the effect by the addition of elegant, even eloquent, delivery" (121). In a young boy whose mental faculties were likened to those of a dog by his owners and his family due to his multiple disabilities, to find such a striking incongruity was a

truly unusual case to the amateur phrenologist, and just such a “curious problem” is likely what motivated Davis to request Fowler examine a photo of Bethune so she could learn more about his “bumps” (Letter to James Fields).

Development by Practice

Although Davis’s narrator maintains that Bethune had never received any formal musical instruction, a point which Deirdre O’Connell disagrees with Davis’s biographical details, she does write that after his raw musical talents were discovered, his owner encouraged him to develop his skills further (O’Connell 49 Davis 89). Davis shares,

No sooner had Tom been brought before the public than the pretensions put forward by his master commanded the scrutiny of both scientific and musical skeptics. His capacities were subjected to rigorous tests. Fortunately for the boy: for, so tried, -- harshly, it is true, yet skillfully – they not only bore the trial, but acknowledged the touch as skillful; every day new powers were developed, until he reached his limit, beyond which it is not probable he will ever pass. That limit, however, establishes him as an anomaly in musical science. (89)

This portion of the sketch, too, parallels the Fowler’s account of his research at the asylum for the blind, deaf, and dumb. Phrenology held that no matter the original size of a mental organ, it could be developed further through exercise and repetitive practice. In Davis’s passage, she not only cites an assessment of Bethune’s abilities by both “scientific and musical skeptics,” but she also notes that through these exercises, “every day new powers were developed” (89). In phrenological terms, this is a theory “rendered evident from the established and familiar, physiological principle that the exercise of any corporeal organ, causes its

increase,” and to the nineteenth-century scientist, the brain was a corporeal organ comprised of multiple other smaller corporeal organs (Fowler xxvii). Fowler believed that memory, maintained in the organ of imitation, could be the most profoundly developed by exercise, as it supported a “plurality of faculties,” playing a vital role in the increased development of the other mental organs (xxx). As such, Fowler strongly supported this type of assessment of imitative ability, and he found the children at the asylum to provide strong evidence for his case. He writes,

Since, then, we have no reason to suppose, that these children were born with any thing more than an ordinary endowment of imitat., we can explain the stubborn fact here stated only by admitting that phrenology is true. The same fact also teaches us the immense influence which habit, education, or training exerts upon the character and talents. (120)

Davis’s passage follows Fowler’s phrenological assumption, not only that the child’s “powers” relied heavily upon his organ of imitation, but also that through the tests of his ability, his powers were only increased. She suggests, however, that there was a limit to this development, a threshold eventually reached in all of these assessments, adding that even when he reaches his “limit,” his ability still stands far above that of any other tested before him (89).

“Blind Tom’s” Performance

In the second portion of the sketch, Davis sets out a story-like description of Bethune as he performs. Before moving to an account of his physical appearance or his profound performance, she pauses to reassure her audience that although she has described his amazing faculties in scientific terms throughout the account, one did not need to be a skilled phrenologist, physiognomist, or any other type of scientist in order to enjoy his performance. She tells them,

“The peculiar power which Tom possesses, however, is one which requires no scientific knowledge of music in his audiences to appreciate” (90). She reiterates that he can repeat a piece “intact in brilliancy and symmetry,” and that any song played by him would be ultimately enjoyable to the listener (90).

Bethune takes the stage and sits at the piano, preparing to play, and Davis again presents a visual assessment for her readers, employing the same phrenological, animalistic language as in the earlier passage. The narrator records, “The boy’s head, as I said, rested on his back, his mouth wide open constantly; his great blubber lips and shining teeth, therefore, were all you saw when he faced you” (92). She adds,

He seated himself at last before the piano, a full half-yard distant, stretching out his arms full-length, like an ape clawing for food, -- his feet, when not on the pedals squirming and twisting incessantly, -- answering some joke of his master’s with a loud ‘Yha! yha!’ Nothing indexes the brain like the laugh; this was idiotic.
(92)

The phrase “indexes the brain” resumes the thematic cadence of phrenology, emphasizing that in spite of his incredible talents, Bethune’s brain, overall, was dysfunctional, although his organs of tune and imitation were incredibly well-developed, true to the principles of phrenology that suggested each organ of the brain had its own mode and degree of development and function. Then, she again compares the child to an ape with claw-like hands, not unlike Lavater’s depiction of man in an unsocialized, natural state (90). While the sketch up until this point has been positioned from an historical angle, the narrator now brings his performance directly to the reader, alive through her words, and she takes great care to complete the phrenological connections between the account of his upbringing and discovery, and his current performance.

At this point in the account, the narrator shifts her descriptions to broader physiognomic terms, examining Bethune's full physicality. The narrator shares that as he began to play a piece from Verdi, "The head fell further back, the claws began to work" (93). Later in the performance, he was asked to play very difficult pieces, most of which he had never heard before, in an attempt to validate the rumors of his immense genius, "to put the boy's powers to the final test" (93). Bethune performed flawlessly:

Songs and intricate symphonies were given, which it was most improbably the boy could have ever heard; he remained standing, utterly motionless, until they were finished, and for a moment or two after, -- then, seating himself gave them without the break of note. (93)

The narrator notes that the longer he participated in this "trial," the more "wearied" he became, implying the mental strain of these types of repetitive tests took a distinct physical toll on his body (93). Just as the performance is about to conclude, the audience member calls for him to play a song of his own composition, to ultimately prove that his powers of repetition were beyond comparison, or otherwise to prove him a fraud (93). For the child to hear this new composition once through and to play it back immediately would offer undeniable proof that his organs of tune and imitation were raw and truly phenomenal. Davis writes that, "Mr. Oliver refused to submit the boy's brain to so cruel a test," but the musician insisted, taking a seat on stage, intent on disproving Bethune's musical genius (94). After only hearing a few bars, he sits at the piano beside the musician and begins to play the secundo, the bass, without having heard the composition once all the way through. Moments later, he shoves the musician off the bench and finishes the composition in his own style, giggling and yelling in triumph (93). The audience roars in applause and Bethune is set off into fits of "hysteric agitation" (93).

Orson Fowler and Bethune's Phrenology

While we have no further record from Rebecca Harding Davis that indicates the success of her attempt to contact Orson Fowler in order to obtain an assessment of Bethune's "bumps" in 1862 prior to the publication of her sketch, Deirdre O'Connell cites that Fowler did meet the boy in 1866, and he performed a full examination of his head and of his faculties (135). She writes that according to Fowler, Bethune's organs of tune and time "were exceedingly developed," reminding us that to the nineteenth-century American, the phrenological ideas of "organs" of the mind were part of the common lexicon, and that the child posed a particularly fascinating case to phrenologists at large (135). Fowler himself composed an article prior to the one cited by



Figure 6. The Phrenological Head

Source: *Phrenology Proved, Illustrated, and Applied, Accompanied by a Chart, Embracing an Analysis of the Primary Mental Powers ... Together with a View of the Moral and Theological Bearing of the Science* – Orson Squire Fowler, Lorenzo Niles Fowler, Samuel Kirkham, page xv.

O'Connell, that appeared in the December 1865 issue of *The American Phrenological Journal*. The article is written in response to multiple readers who had contacted Fowler to inquire about the prodigy they were reading about in the newspapers. Fowler opens the article with a full physical description of the boy, and citing him as "sound and healthy – the vision alone excepted – as a human being can well be" (188). Then, he provides the measurements of Bethune's head,

writing,

His head measures with the tape 21 ½ inches in circumference. By caliper measurement, from the center of the forehead to the center of the back-head, the distance is 7 ½ inches. From ear to ear, it is 5 ½ inches – showing that in disposition, as far as [the organs of] Combativeness and Destructiveness are concerned, he is amiable. (188)

The list of measurements continues on in detail, along with a description of how the measurements were performed. Fowler's account also includes a retelling of the story in which a random, unnamed musician stood up in the audience at one of the concerts and challenged Bethune to play a music work of his own composition that he could have never encountered before, and as in Davis's sketch, the child not only rose to the challenge but performed with such talent and zeal that the audience was completely shocked by the result (188).

O'Donnell writes of Bethune that Orson Fowler "imbues him with a rare dignity" throughout his phrenological assessment, and he requests that the boy's skull be preserved upon his death for phrenological study, just as he and his brother collected the skulls of other great artists and American figures. In Fowler's professional opinion as a phrenologist, there existed a clear cause and effect relationship behind his phenomenal ability; rather than seeing him as an idiot, he relies upon his phrenological assessment to determine that some of his mental organs are larger than others, thus explaining his strengths and weaknesses (O'Donnell 136). She records Fowler's observations, sharing, "Looked at then from all standpoints it must be confessed that Tom is a remarkable person" (136).

Bethune continued to be a phrenological sensation for the rest of his life. In an 1869 issue of *The American Phrenological Journal*, Reverend John Cummings, a practicing phrenologist,

included a review of Bethune's show, and in an issue from 1870, another reference to the idiot savant slave musician appears. The unnamed author, likely Fowler, cites Bethune's case as a prime example of how some organs of the mind develop above others. He writes, "Everybody in America, or at least in the United States, has heard of Blind Tom, the wonderful musician, whose chief talent seems to lie in the great activity of Tune, while in other respected he is said to be but little removed from the idiot" (336). In a consolidated edition of *The Phrenological Miscellany*, 1865-1873²⁸, a full account of Bethune's life and phenomenal abilities appears, this time written in strict concordance with the principles of phrenology. This article was written when the blind musician was 20 years old, and cites him as only being "partially blind" (199). The author presents a shortened account of Bethune's biography and discovery that matches that in Davis's sketch, adding in the specific measurements of his head that Davis's article lacked. The author records,

This head measures 21 ½ inches, and is remarkably developed in the region of the perceptive faculties. All the organs of these faculties are large, except [the organ of] Color. He has a surprising memory of facts, places, magnitudes, configurations, and order, sound, and language. There is a prominent ridge running from the root of the nose to the top of the forehead, indicating large [organ of] Individuality, and very large Eventuality or memory of facts, large [organ of] Comparison, and excellent power to appreciate character. His [organ of] Causality is not large, which gives the forehead something of a receding appearance when viewed in front. The organ of Tune is large, but Causality has not been duly exercised; and by the non-development of the organs above and in the region of Tune, that organ

²⁸ While no author is attributed to this passage about Bethune in the *Phrenological Miscellany*, the article has likely ties to Orson Fowler himself, who edited and published the journal.

has ample room without making so prominent a lateral development as might otherwise have been the case. If his Causality had been cultivated as much as the perceptives have been, it would have tended to compel a greater later expansion of the head downward in the region of Time and Tune. (200)

The article continues, citing that when Bethune was a child, if anyone pressed outwardly on his skull where his organ of tune was located, the boy would cry out in pain, “indicating that the skill was very thin at that point” (200). The phrenologist also cites large organs of Constructiveness and Ideality, which combine with his organ of imitation to affect the melodies that he reproduces, adding an artistic flair to his performances (200). The article concludes with this diagnosis: “The pretension that he is in any respect idiotic is simply preposterous. He is as sensible as his manager” (200).

Another article appeared in the founding edition of *The Phrenological Magazine* in 1880, presenting a similar study of Bethune but contradicting the conclusions about his intellectual capacity. The author, identified only as C.N., writes, “He had the narrow retreating forehead of the natural idiot, and his general mentality was in accordance with his phrenological developments; but, as regards music, he was certainly a prodigy (30). He adds, “Mr. Fowler made an examination of his head, and found the organs of Tune, Time, Order, and Calculation – all of which are necessary in a good musical performer – all large” (31). This article lacks the physical descriptions of the previous one, and concludes by categorizing Bethune as an idiot, blessed with unusual talents via mental faculty by nature (31).

CHAPTER 4. INTERPRETING “BLIND TOM”

Despite his early classification as an idiot from infancy, Thomas Bethune represents to both Davis and Fowler a human soul capable of art and of contributing value to society, though perhaps in a diminished degree because of his mental disabilities combined with his blindness. In fact, it is through examining him from the phrenological perspective that both writer and scientist find the true phenomenon of his case – in their respective opinions, Bethune represents more than a mere spectacle. To Fowler, the child represents the complexity of the human mind and the underlying truth behind the principles of phrenology in that the various mental organs combine in their strengths and weaknesses to shape the overall personality of a human being, and that through proper diagnosis and practice, the personality can be shifted through the development of these organs. To Davis, the child represents an exception to the social rule as a disabled slave who could not work, he should be deemed useless in American society, and yet through marvelous development of “powers” in musical ability, he commands audiences and touches hearts.

Fowler’s Phrenological Conclusions

According to the article published by Fowler in 1865, an examination of Bethune’s phrenology revealed far more than just an overtly large organ of tune, time, or imitation; instead, it offered a full view of him as a person, particularly of what he might have been had his childhood circumstances been different, if he had not been forced to live his life as an uneducated slave. He writes that “The head shows good moral developments, more than ordinary kindness of disposition, and a full degree of the social faculties” (188). He suggests that if

Bethune had been brought up as a white child with the same disabilities, he would have sought out normal modes of education, entertainment and social interaction, adding that his “reasoning powers” were not missing, more than they were “uncultivated” (188). Instead, the only exercise available to his brain has been the physical lifestyle of slavery on a Southern plantation, most of which was spent in total sensory deprivation inside of a wooden box, the cultural exposure and social isolation of a life on the stage, and the practice of music. As such, his other mental faculties never had the proper chance to develop, and perhaps even atrophied from lack of use.

Examining Bethune holistically, Fowler sees more than an idiot-savant; in fact, he does not consider the child to be an idiot at all. He writes,

...he is quite as far from being an idiot as are other sensible persons who can not make music. It is richly worth the while of all to see and to hear this musical prodigy. A visit will tend to encourage the philanthropic in their efforts to educate and elevate the colored race. Go and see musical Tom. (188)

Not only does he acknowledge Bethune’s musical genius, but he also positions Bethune’s case as one strongly supportive of abolitionist causes, encouraging others to see the boy as a person with a range of capabilities and potential beyond his current place at the bench of a piano.

Davis, Race, Disability, and “Blind Tom”

Over the course of the last two chapters, I have provided ample evidence proving how the phrenology manifests as a cultural influence in Rebecca Harding Davis’s “Blind Tom.” In this section, I explore some of the implications that arise from her reliance on this phrenological language, in accordance with what we know about Davis and her public stance as an abolitionist in Civil War America. Pfaelzer records in her research that Davis did not add her name to the

sketch when it first appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1862 because she anticipated the backlash that she would receive in response to her controversial arguments within the account, but in later works, she positioned her abolitionist views in her literature with more confidence, writing under her own name (104). Even with this anonymous accreditation, Sharon Harris considers “Blind Tom” to be “one of Davis’s most vivid indictments of slavery,” adding that her account “received an extraordinary response from both its American and English audiences,” (98). Young and outspoken, riding the publicity wave engendered from the positive reception of her bold, realist messages presented in “Life in the Iron Mills,” Davis, uses “Blind Tom” to solidify her antislavery position by describing his physicality in universal, humanistic terms.

If we are too quick to judge, we might assume that Davis is doing exactly the opposite of this possible abolitionist motive through her use of phrenology, as phrenology was often tied to racial classifications in the 1700 and 1800s. According to Anthony S. Wohl, in the nineteenth century, physiognomy and phrenology reflected different conclusions based on a person’s ethnic backgrounds, whether African, Irish, French, German, Chinese, or Welsh (*The Victorian Web*). The classification of skulls and the examination of brains of individuals with different ethnic backgrounds did not equate with racial anthropology, however, which focused on an examination of the body according to issues of ethnicity alone²⁹. Rather, race served as another layer of classification for the phrenologist that enabled them, or so they thought, to understand the structure and functionality of the human brain. Certainly, some of Davis’s statements appear to be in line with phrenological principles when applied to Africans, as manifested in her multiple references to the development of Bethune’s organ of tune, but her statements fall only within basic physiognomic and cultural parameters. Her observation of and repetitive commentary on his phenom-

²⁹ Some popular nineteenth-century racial anthropologists include Darwin, Josiah Nott, Arthur de Gobineau, Samuel Morton, Charles White, and Ernst Haeckel.

enal musical abilities builds upon these physical descriptions, bolstering her case for Bethune's spiritual and literal freedom.

By using this phrenological terminology, Davis brings her audience into a familiar understanding of Bethune and the way that his mind works; once she gains this common ground, she steps beyond the boundaries of phrenology to express her abolitionist cause. As Pfaelzer admits, Davis is clearly limited, still, in her expression of these abolitionist views by the cultural mannerisms of the nineteenth century, such as in her reference to "pickaninnies" in the opening of the story (Davis 85, Harris 98). While she supports the emancipation of slaves in the South, her language is not one of equality that we would associate with modern antiracial views. It is important to remember here that during the Civil War, the press toward abolitionist reform is not necessarily equitable with racial equality. Rather, Davis still employs the mindset that differences between the races exist, a common understanding based on a lack of biological and sociological information available in the 1860s. Harris writes that "Blind Tom" "reveals how far she was from escaping the prejudices of her own time" (98). While her writing was bold and out of the ordinary in comparison to her nineteenth-century literary predecessors and contemporaries in its call for universal recognition of the human soul despite hierarchal class, it still fell within the societal parameters of racial assumptions.

Still, Pfaelzer and Harris consider Davis's sketch to be one of her strongest anti-slavery, anti-social repression works in her entire portfolio. Considering this work is one of her earliest, Davis was still forming her style and her position on social positions in regards to the abolition of slavery and problems posed by a rapidly rising lower class of impoverished, disabled Americans. Through the development of her stark stance on social matters such as the ills of

industrialization and slavery in the South, Davis introduces the nineteenth century to the new literary genre of realism, shocking her middle- and upper-class audiences with the cold facts of life of the average poor worker. As a realist, Davis attempted to empower her characters, including Bethune, by writing about their desire for the freedom of expression and fulfillment of individual will, and subsequently, the weight of social institutions that kept them from achieving their full potential as human beings. Although Pfaelzer says Davis still “relied on social stereotypes that persistently [seem] to undermine her belief in free will, human rationality, conscience, and the capacity for self-improvement,” in stories such as “Blind Tom,” she “invokes the sentiment” of her audience to “deconstruct the cultural stereotypes” of the black and the disabled by emphasizing the contrast of Bethune’s “talent, deformity, isolation, and haunting pain” to society’s commonly held, demeaning, and repressive beliefs (83, 102).

As noted earlier in my argument, Davis structures her account “Blind Tom” in a very specific manner, first sharing his biographical background and the story of how his musical talents were discovered, all the while interweaving in phrenological terminology but without drawing any conclusions for her audience until the second half of the sketch when the narrator records the events in a play-by-play from one of Bethune’s performances. As she begins the account, she does share some commentary on the institution of slavery, which at the time in 1862, had not yet been abolished, but she focuses her disparaging opinions on the lower classes at large, grouping slaves together with poor whites, writing that society has repressed both free and enslaved people from hoping to ever attain their full potential (86). After this introductory commentary, she continues with her story, sharing the account of Bethune’s upbringing on the plantation, frequently likening the child to the status of a dog, a favored pet of the Bethune family.

It is only when Bethune first encounters the piano that the narrator records him expressing joy of his own volition, not relying upon the attention, rebuttal, or instruction of others; as soon as he begins to play the instrument, he discovers a part of himself and subsequently, is overwhelmed with pleasure at the expression he is suddenly afforded. Davis writes that the family found him “seated at the piano in an ecstasy of delight” (87). The music he played was full of “startling beauty and pathos,” revealing a level of comprehension in the child that had never been made apparent, or had been encouraged in him before (87). Other accounts of his musical abilities record his phenomenal ability to repeat a song in cadence and tone, but few connected Bethune’s playing of the piano to an expression of the soul in the way or to the degree reflected in Davis’s account. As the article continues, she takes creative liberty to associate Bethune’s love of the piano and the mode of expression that this newfound musical ability affords him as an extension of his own disabled body. She writes, “Tom was allowed to have constant access to the piano; in truth, he could not live without it; when deprived of music now, actual physical debility followed: the gnawing Something had found its food at last” (88). Here, Davis introduces one larger theme of her brief account – the piano functions as an extension of Bethune, enabling his innate need for expression that had been repressed by his defunct biological outlets.

Davis argues that the child uses the language of music to express his emotions and thoughts to a degree that it makes the listeners uncomfortable. Up until he discovered this mode of communication, his Southern owners preferred to think of him as an unfeeling animalistic being without the capacity to form thoughts similar to their own. Davis adds that soon after Bethune’s musical discoveries came to light, his owner “began to wonder what kind of a creature this was which he had bought, flesh and soul” (88). It is only in the context of Bethune’s art that

his owners begin to see him as human – an argument which Davis has been proclaiming to her audience through her phrenological descriptions.

Davis continues, “At last the time came when the door was to be opened, when some listener, not vulgar, recognizing the child as God made him, induced his master to remove him from the plantation” (88). Invoking the phrase “the child as God made him” encourages readers to accept Bethune as he is, and more importantly, as she has described him in the sketch – as whole person with a complex personality, with a mind that can be developed further and a soul that is attempting to express itself through the language of music. Once taken on tour, his talents become “befogged by exaggeration” in her opinion, steering away from his astounding technical ability and biological curiosity to a more sensational side-show act performed in front of town halls filled with skeptical gawkers (89). Then, again, she returns to the theme of artistry, writing,

His comprehension of the meaning of music, as a prophetic or historical voice which few souls utter and fewer understand, is clear and vivid: he renders it thus, with whatever mastery of the mere material part he may possess, fingering, dramatic effects, etc.: these are but means to him, not an end, as with most artists.
(89)

As Fowler has indicated, according to the principles of phrenology, Bethune is an individual whose talents have been underdeveloped up until this point in his life, and as such, his mannerisms mimic those of Lavater’s man in his supposed natural state. Still, he possesses a soul which Davis sees as in need of expression. She continues, describing his playing by suggesting that “One would fancy that the mere attempt to bring this mysterious genius within him in bodily presence before the outer world woke, too, the idiotic nature to utter its reproachful, unable cry. Nor is this the only bar by which poor Tom’s soul is put in mind of its foul bestial prison” (91).

Confined by his disabled body and robbed of the opportunity to develop his phrenological faculties like other men, his only mode of self-expression becomes the piano.

In the second half of the sketch when Bethune begins to play, the narrator observes that “his harmonies which you would have chosen as the purest exponents of passion began to float around the room,” even though he was merely repeating pieces he had heard played for him before and repeated before audiences such as this on numerous occasions (93). Music, for Davis, and ultimately for phrenologists such as Fowler, existed as more than just a representation of the organ of tune, located in the lower brain just a few centimeters above the ear. The ability to perform music to such an incredible degree implied that some deeper faculty was at work within Bethune, be it God, or a phrenological connection between his mental organs that had not yet become explainable by the science. His skills, though measurable in terms of phrenology and approachable from a religious position, remained an unexplainable miracle. Davis concludes her account by calling to her audience to help not only Bethune but other people such as he – slaves in the South and persons confined to the walls of an asylum – those considered beyond the need of self-expression and those deemed without value of any sort to upper-class society. She writes, “Some beautiful caged spirit, one could not but know, struggled for breath under that brutal form and idiotic brain. I wonder when it will be free. Not on this life: the bars are too heavy” (94).

Both Pfaelzer and Harris agree that in this sketch, Davis is clearly speaking out against slavery, and also the mistreatment of disabled persons. Davis’s discussion of abolitionism and the rights of blacks, both the Civil War as in Bethune’s case, and after emancipation, where the majority of her career as a writer falls, continued to surface in articles, letters, and essays throughout the rest of her life, though her most prominent reliance upon phrenological language to position her argument against racism appears singularly in “Blind Tom.” Other black

characters from her Civil War fiction including *Waiting for the Verdict* (1868), “David Gaunt” (1862), and “John Lamar” (1862), are described in straightforward terms regarding their outer physicality, but it is only in “Blind Tom” that Davis invokes the principles of phrenology in order to argue the presence, and ultimately the value, of Bethune’s soul. In these fictional pieces as well as her nonfiction articles³⁰ written in this same vein, Davis “points to the economic and psychological damage of demeaning racial stereotypes,” also calling into question society’s understanding of art and who has the capacity to create it (Pfaelzer 14).

In “Blind Tom,” we therefore see Davis making a cause for freedom and the equation of human rights rather than arguing for racial equality. Throughout this sketch, she carefully pairs each physical description with a soulful snapshot of Bethune’s emotional and spiritual capacity. She uses phrenology to humanize him, to emphasize that his brain has been designed to function like her reader’s brain, and that his capacities can be trained and improved upon just as anyone else’s. In Bethune’s case, however, society has dehumanized him, and it is the result of this dehumanization that the narrator of the sketch observes with so much angst. The narrator opens the sketch by admonishing her audience for the child’s terrible situation; had he been brought up with access to the proper medical care and formal education that blind white children received [for example, as noted in Orson’s frequent visits to the New York Asylum for the blind, deaf, and the dumb], then he might have turned out differently.

Davis leaves this implied difference open for interpretation – she offers no other probable outcome for Bethune other than peace of mind and a more desirable, contented life. She calls attention to his misery on multiple occasions in the sketch, writing that he plays the piano for himself, he breaks out into “shouts of laughter, kicking his heels and clapping his hands,” but when

³⁰ Political articles written in the vein of pro-abolitionist causes by Davis include, “Some Testimony in the Case” (1885), “Two Points of View” (1897), “Two Methods with the Negro” (1898), and “The Black North” (1892).

he is forced to perform on stage, there is “never, by any chance, a merry, childish laugh of music in the broken cadences,” but rather a “tired cry breaking down into silence” (94). This state of misery, she argues, is not a result of his blindness, as her audience might expect. Instead, he is “caged” by the “evil” of slavery and of the forced reduction of his art to a minstrel-like performance that in Davis’ opinion designates him as chattel whose only purpose in this world is to acquiesce to the needs of others. His blindness renders him useless for labor on a plantation, and it is only through the “charity” of his owners that he is given a chance to remain with his mother, even though he is only a burden to the working slave population on the Bethune plantation. Davis asserts that his value to American society is only weighed through the degree in which he can be used by them – not unlike the lower working classes of the rising industrial centers across the country at the time that she focuses on in “Life in the Iron Mills” and *Margret Howth*.

The narrator implies that Bethune’s musical talents redeem him in some way, as nothing is worse than a blind slave who cannot work, as discussed earlier in her descriptions of him as the “lowest negro type” of slave (Davis 86). Had the child been born white, his value as a human would not have been immediately diminished; he would still have had access to an education, acceptance within a family, and the hope of a future. In the opening of the sketch, she calls attention to the fact that he does not have the same genealogical history of the desire for personal satisfaction or advancement that is found in the more privileged classes and races (85). Instead, “generations of heathendom and slavery have dredged the inherited brains and temperaments of such children tolerably clean of all traces of power or purity – palsied the brain, brutalized the nature,” and with this statement, Davis indirectly blames her upper-class white audience for not just his enslavement, but for his mental and physical handicaps as well as his lack of awareness or desire for a better life (87).

CONCLUSION

When Rebecca Harding Davis first saw Thomas Greene Wiggins Bethune take the stage in 1862, she found his performance so moving that she determined not only learn more about this unusual, exceptionally talented slave child from a Georgian plantation, but she also set out to share his story with the world, thus calling upon her American and British audiences to see Bethune as a human and as an artist instead of a puzzling, fascinating freak of nature who deserved enslavement. Encouraging them to see the child as a victim of the ills of society by humanizing him through descriptions of his emotional musical performances and by the ways in which she employs phrenology to describe him, she then argues in favor of his freedom, offering layer upon layer of proof that the spectacle of his life on tour before them was beyond inhumane. By describing his strange and bold physicality in such minute detail, and associating his capabilities with terms frequently employed by nineteenth-century phrenologists, she reminds her audience that in addition to his highly-developed organs of tune, time, and imitation, the boy also possessed 30-some odd other organs in various states of development, just like their own brains. The shape and content of the brain, from a phrenological perspective, comprised the components of one's personality, and some might argue even one's soul. As such, in "Blind Tom," we see Davis calling to her readers, pleading with them from a strong, scientific perspective to see this blind performer as a whole person who deserved freedom to express himself and live his own life, not remain enslaved on a plantation to be treated like a deformed or defective animal. By God's design, the musician was trapped within his body, but he found means to express the artistic desires of his soul; by man's design, he was enslaved and held captive to both an owner on a plantation and the hungered masses who craved entertainment –

from these chains, Davis writes that the child genius will never be free (93).

In this sketch, we see Davis repeatedly rely upon phrenology in relation to Bethune's outward appearance. She clearly believes that a physical assessment of the child needs to be made in order to fully understand the miracle of his musical talents, and in order to issue her call for his dualistic freedom of self and soul. While she describes in detail the emotive response of his audiences when they hear him play, and the wide range of his abilities, she devotes the majority of her sketch to presenting a visual assessment of the phenomenon, both as a young child and later as a sensational performer. While the sketch does not directly reference phrenology in that Davis does not specifically talk about the shape of Bethune's skull, her writings closely parallel those of phrenologist Orson Fowler, and echo the scientific principles of Johann Kaspar Lavater's physiognomy. She provides her reader with a plethora of physical evidence and allows him to assume the role of social pseudoscientist. Nineteenth-century phrenology contributed more to Western culture than a system of strict classifications based upon rigorous, calculated standards – rather, it empowered the public to more freely vocalize their questions and theories about human nature by providing them a unified vocabulary based on a standardized research approach. When viewed from the modern perspective, too often we brush off the deeper cultural significance of physiognomy and phrenology, dismissing them as pseudosciences built on sensational fluff, and although their methods and conclusions were largely debunked in the latter decades of the nineteenth century, at the time when Fowler and Davis composed their accounts about Bethune, phrenology enabled them to draw specific conclusions rooted in research and measured observation, and to disseminate these conclusions to their various audiences in a commonly-understood lexicon.

While most of Davis's antislavery fiction emerges as a blend of realism, Quakerism,

transcendentalism, the Social Gospel and domestic ideology according to Pfaelzer, I maintain that her writing also takes on a colder, scientific angle that harkens to an audience just as familiar with phrenology and physiognomy as they were with these other movements (83). John Davies and Lucy Hartley, among other modern scholars, maintain that in nineteenth-century society, literary analysis performed via the modes of physiognomy and phrenology were highly commonplace; every person with access to printed periodicals considered themselves an amateur physiognomist of some degree, judging others based on outward physical appearance and making assumptions about intellect, spirit, and character based on the size of their students', spouses', and employees' heads (Davies 38). Davis's own likely exposure to these pseudosciences through her education at the Washington Female Seminary, her tutelage from her older brother, her early career as an editor of a newspaper, and her mainstream success as a prominent literary figure not only equipped her with a deep awareness of the principles purported by physiognomy and phrenology but also positioned her as one of these amateur assessors of outward countenance.

Undoubtedly, multiple themes abound in this sketch; the overarching focus raises questions about race and competence. Very little research has been conducted involving "Blind Tom," and what exists mostly examines the account from the perspective of Civil War abolitionist thinking. Scholars continue to question what exactly Davis is saying about slavery in this story, because although she disparagingly blames the institution for Bethune's lack of cultural or educational exposure, she also frequently implies that his potential is limited by his classification as "black." Although "Blind Tom" represents one of many instances where Davis shares her mission as a writer to bring to light the true lives of the repressed and underrepresented American classes, this sketch reflects that she "is still trapped in the era's

reductive stereotypes of African Americans...” (Harris 77).

While “Blind Tom” continues on in the theme of “Life in the Iron Mills” and *Margret Howth*, both published in the same timeframe as this sketch, by exposing the brutality of the American social hierarchy when imposed upon the enslaved or the poor, and ultimately, the physically disabled, the sketch stands out as unique in Davis’s immense writing portfolio. Not only is this her first nonfiction sketch to receive mainstream attention, but it also foreshadows the works to follow later in her career when she began to comment on other social institutions, such as prison systems and insane asylums. In this sketch, we see her beginning to come into her own voice as a “David” fighting against the “Goliaths” of these institutions she witnessed repressing Americans at a rapid rate (Pfaelzer 3). The overwhelming outrage of the narrator in “Blind Tom” presents us with a curious reflection of Rebecca Harding herself – written from a nonfictional angle, based upon her own, in-depth journalistic research, and overflowing with her passionate commentary on spectacle Thomas Bethune’s talents. In this sketch, we see her forging a path into the realm of social protest, discovering her “reformer’s zeal,” simultaneously planting the seeds for the genre of literary realism while proclaiming her strong abolitionist beliefs (Harris 98). Things are exactly as they seem, according to Davis’s perspective, even when what is seen proves shocking and inhumane. In Bethune’s case, she builds her argument relying on the mode of literary realism, but bolsters her case with the cultural presence of phrenology – thus ingraining in the young, new genre deep-rooted foundations in nineteenth-century science. In later decades, this scientific manner of thinking, writing, and creating art morphed beyond the boundaries of literary realism into the genre of naturalism. While we frequently associate the latter with Darwinism, as Pfaelzer assumed in the instance of Davis’s “Blind Tom,” I have shown in this article that the cultural sway of phrenology carried significant weight, and the

evidence is there, waiting in unrenowned works such as this sketch, to be excavated.

Thomas Bethune continued to perform in music halls up until his death in 1908 (Southall 137). Multiple stories acclaiming his genius appeared in magazines for as long as he toured, including the founding issue of *Ladies' Home Journal* in 1883. Among his biggest fans counted none other than Mark Twain, who frequently commented with amazement and a bit of skepticism on Bethune's abilities in his personal letters and journals (O'Donnell 183, 253). Davis's own take on the child's miraculous musical aptitude stands out as the only work that bridges the gap between these forms of sensational reviews in lighthearted magazines and the scientific examinations printed by Fowler and his fellow phrenologists. Harris describes Davis's article as a "painful account of the abuse of this child genius," and Pfaelzer adds that Davis viewed Bethune as a "tragic victim of dependency and exploitation" (Harris 98, Pfaelzer 100). Both scholars agree, though, that Davis's tone is sympathetic, expressing anger at the child's repression as an artist and as a human. Whereas other articles published after 1862 focused on the immense, perplexing enjoyment that Bethune's performances provided white, privileged audiences, Davis's take on his life and his abilities maintains a haunting air. In her measured, phrenological observations, she pays reference to the cultural framework of phrenological ideals that supposedly regulated and explained his phenomenal talents, but in her soul-searching questions that her narrator poses to the audience about the child's greater happiness and overall value to society, she remains true to her voice as an American realist – painting a portrait of Bethune exactly as she sees him, and revealing his undeniable tragedy. In Davis's portrait of the musician, through self-expression awakened and enabled by a seat in front of a piano, he unwittingly frees his consciousness, but his body remains enslaved, and will always be so until

the focus of society shifts away from class and spectacle. The narrator writes,

But in your own kitchen, in your own back-alley, there are spirits as beautiful, caged in forms as bestial, that you *could* set free, if you pleased. Don't call it bad taste in me to speak for them. You know they are more to be pitied than Tom, -- for they are dumb. (94)

With this admonishment issued to her audience, we are left with only the effects of Davis's sketch on the greater public as they rippled throughout other publications about Bethune, and the eventual follow-up phrenological exam performed by Fowler to conclude this chapter in Davis's portfolio. Harris writes, "In September of 1865, David noted that Bethune was still on the circuit tour. She declined seeing him again" (98). In only a short sketch, we find Davis manifesting herself as an artist, and abolitionist, and ultimately, even a phrenologist, and our understanding of her as a writer continues to grow.



Figure 7. Thomas Bethune, in adulthood, seated at the piano.

Source: www.johndavis pianist.com

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