‘This Horrible Exhibition’: Sexuality in Slave Narratives
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Abstract and Keywords

Reviewing scenes from canonical narratives of slavery, this essay analyzes sexuality as encoded in the disciplining and display of enslaved bodies in exhibitionary spaces (i.e., on the floor, at auction, stripped and suspended for whipping, etc.). While visual, pictorial, and theatrical renderings of slave subjection lend themselves to voyeuristic consumption, they also contain an ethical imperative to witness. This essay attends to the life-world of slaves made perceptible through an ocular register that incorporates and implicates readers in momentary acts of such witnessing. It proceeds by showing the ways in which first-person accounts of enslavement juxtapose spectacular and mundane depictions of slave bodies in use and in pain in order (1) to reveal the institutionalization of sadism in slavery’s quotidian apparatus, (2) to expose scopic terror as standard practice within the disciplinary regime of slavery, and (3) to challenge culturally dominant notions of racialized sexual difference that undergirded the institution and supported its expansion. This essay emphasizes ultimately the ways in which slave narratives utilize the rhetorical potency, the political immediacy, and the consumptive pleasure of sight to transform disparate individual readers into a galvanized community of first-hand witnesses to slavery’s everyday terror.

Keywords: sexuality, scopic terror, theatricality, testimony, witnessing

It is noteworthy that William Lloyd Garrison’s “Preface” to The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave (1845/2004) exceeds the standard function of authentication. Going beyond a simple attestation of his personal familiarity with Frederick Douglass, Douglass’s authorship of Narrative, and the veracity of the events therein recounted, Garrison instructs the implicitly solitary nineteenth-century white northern reader in the proper method of experiencing Douglass’s powerful tale of tyranny and triumph in the Slave South. Garrison exemplifies the suitable response to Douglass’s autobiography as he recounts his first encounter with Douglass’s live narration.

[T]he extraordinary emotion it excited in my own mind—the powerful impression it created upon a crowded auditory, completely taken by surprise—the applause which followed from the beginning to the end of his felicitous remarks. I think I never hated slavery so intensely as at that moment; certainly my perception of the enormous outrage which is inflicted by it, on the god-like nature of its victims, was rendered far more clear than ever. There stood one, in physical proportion and stature commanding and exact—in intellect richly endowed—in natural eloquence a prodigy—in soul manifestly “created but a little lower than angels—yet a slave, ay, a fugitive slave,—trembling for his safety” (1845/2004, 4).

According to Garrison, the details of Douglass’s enslavement are awe-inspiring and illuminating. Garrison is stirred both by the story and by the sight of the speaker to an even more fervently committed anti-slavery stance. I call attention to Garrison’s strategy of visualizing slavery to illuminate a common textual practice in antebellum narratives of African American enslavement, one in which pictorial prose and visual iconography have significant ideological and narratological utility for slavery’s veracious documentation and for political mobilization. As first-hand testimonies to slavery’s monumental disregard of (black) humanity, slave narratives carry within them an implicit mandate for readers to act, to abolish—not with the waveringsubjection lend themselves to voyeuristic consumption, they also contain an ethical imperative to witness. This essay thus reckons with the slave narrative’s dual generic composition as story of survival and as theater of horror in antebellum U.S. literary and political culture.

By the mid-nineteenth century, the slave narrative was a formal and popular literary genre. It was designed not only to document and publicize the evils of slavery in support of the abolitionist movement but also to generate capital to help finance it. In order to sell well, slave narratives had to appeal to audience expectations. Scenes of sadistic horror were a standard feature and main attraction of the narrative. Typically, first-person accounts of slavery departed from the central narrative of the author’s life to describe, vividly and pictorially, heinous crimes committed against other slaves, which the authors had themselves beheld. Murder, mutilation, torture, thwarted escape, and (insubinned) rape were both horrifying and titillating to genteel audiences and became necessary elements to drive the popularity and sales of slave narratives. Important to note, however, is that even as they trafficked in the macabre, appealing to readers’ prurient interests in slavery’s underbelly, slave narratives presented irrefutable testimony of the totalized exploitation and deep psychological pain of enslavement and, by transforming readers into witnesses, placed them under the ethical obligation to effect its end. As experts on world-historical trauma and the ethics of bearing witness, Robert Brinkley and Steven Youra contend, “To receive the words of a witness is to find that one has also become a witness, that one’s responses are there for others to witness as well. Once the transmission begins, one cannot stand outside its address” (1996, 123). By communicating the injury and, furthermore, the ethical injunction to behold, authors of slave narratives initiated the transmission of witnessing upon which abolitionism relied.

It is in precisely this transmission of witnessing that Garrison engages by staging the shared reception of Douglass’s life story. By invoking a live audience and combining his own sensory perceptions with spatio-visual phenomena, Garrison draws readers of Douglass’s Narrative into an imagined collective as an audience for a play—or, more precisely, participants in an abolitionist rally—in which Douglass’s life in bondage unfolds in a series of enchanting, if harrowing, pictures. Like a savvy master of ceremonies or a seasoned pedagogue, Garrison attunes readers to the proper
perceptual register for interpreting—and responding to—the picture-scenes unfolding before them. In a textual maneuver that both deploys and districulates Hortense Spillers’s (2003) brilliantly named pornotrope, Garrison both envisions and exhibits the beautiful, commanding, eloquent, “god-like,” though trembling, slave. Outraged and aroused, the militant white abolitionist summons readers of Douglass’s Narrative into the gripping scene of his initial encounter with Douglass, one in which the totalized sociopolitical, fiscal, and juridical degradation of enslavement signals and is signaled by the surface value and sexual surplus of African American embodiment. As if the thrill were communicable, Garrison performs—and thereby models—the requisite conversion from reader to listener to spectator to witness.

The title of this essay is taken from the primal scene in Douglass’s life and in his narrative: the brutal beating of Aunt Hester. Douglass laments: “I remember the first time I ever witnessed this horrible exhibition. I was quite a child, but I well remember it. I never shall forget it whilst I remember anything. It was the first of a long series of such outrages, of which I was doomed to be a witness and a participant. It struck me with awful force. It was the blood-stained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery, it was a most terrible spectacle” (1845/2004, 20–21; emphasis mine). I have argued elsewhere that the beating of Aunt Hester signifies not simply her brutal rape by a jealous slave owner but, more generally, the shaping of slave subjectivity through susceptibility to the manifold violations of life on the slave plantation, particularly the sexual abuse and reproductive exploitation of enslaved black people (Abdur-Rahman 2006, 227–228). Rape and coerced concubinage augmented the population of the enslaved and guaranteed, thereby, the very means of production and profit-making at the heart of New World slavery. As it was a main feature in the daily catastrophe of slavery and as it excluded African Americans from the domain of socially intelligible and civically entitled citizen-subjects, sexuality functioned as a crucible in the lives of the enslaved and as a main point of interest for readers of their narratives. Notably, in Douglass’s recollection, sexual violence and what I am calling scopic terror operated dually, centrally in the formation of slave subjectivity: he was doomed to witness and to participate. Routinized displays of corporeal debasement and sexual vulnerability operated in tandem with racialized notions of sexual pathology to determine the very meaning of enslavement. For Douglass, incorporating readers into the transmission of witnessing sheds light on the process by which slaves were made—even as the transmission of witnessing supported the political aims of the slave narrative by publicizing the intimate abuses of plantation life. In narratives of enslavement accounts of sexual violation (whether endured or observed) express the pain of bodily dispossession and social/racial subjection, functioning as powerful metaphors for the condition of captivity itself and for the numerous violations engendered thereby. Moreover, the macabre parade of ravaged bodies filling the pages of slave narratives reveal the extent to which both slavery and slave narratives function as theaters of horror, with familiar and operable codes for telling and for witnessing.

Reviewing scenes from canonical narratives of slavery, what follows is an analysis of sexuality as encoded in the disciplining and display of enslaved bodies in exhibitionary spaces (i.e., on the floor, at auction, stripped and suspended for whipping, etc.). As I show in my opening discussion of Garrison’s “Preface,” while visual, pictorial, and theatrical renderings of slave subjection lend themselves to voyeuristic consumption, they also contain an ethical imperative to witness. My reading attends to the life-world of slaves made perceptible through an ocular register that incorporates and implicates readers in momentary acts of such witnessing. I proceed by showing the ways in which first-person accounts of enslavement juxtapose deftly spectacular and mundane depictions of slave bodies in use and in pain in order to (1) reveal the institutionalization of sadism in slavery’s quotidian apparatus, (2) to expose scopic terror as standard practice within the disciplinary regime of slavery, and (3) to challenge culturally dominant notions of racialized sexual difference that undegirded the institution and supported its expansion. This essay emphasizes ultimately the ways in which slave narratives utilize the rhetorical potency, the political immediacy, and the consumptive pleasure of sight to transform disparate individual readers into a galvanized community of first-hand witnesses to slavery’s everyday terror.

Black Theatricality and (on or) the Auction Block

In order to theorize the significance of the visual—specifically the stunningly visual, in which language is rendered momentarily ineffective or obsolete—it is important to first understand the interplay between revelation and reticence in slave testimonies, particularly in narrating the sexual and reproductive lives of enslaved persons. Despite the suggestive potency of sexual violation for anatomizing the deep personal despair and enduring trauma of slave subjection, it is often in matters of sexuality that authors of slave narratives contend with discursive foreclosure. Generally, in first-person testimonies of New World slavery, one scene in which the pictorial and the theatrical supplant simple narrative recall is in depictions of the slave auction. Promising the complete utilization of purchasable persons for uses and illicit pleasures untold, the auction block functioned under the regime of institutional slavery as both a slave market and an unregulated brothel. The sexual underbelly of the slave market is everywhere implicated in the muted but Picturesque representations of slave sale in narratives of enslavement.

In his landmark study of the antebellum slave market, Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market, Walter Johnson explores the significance of slave sale in the material and psychological experiences of the enslaved. It was on the auction block, Johnson contends, that “broad trends and abstract totalities thickened into human shape” (2001, 8). The auction block gave the meaning of enslavement literal and spatial form. At auction black bodies, white prerogatives, and hard cash coalesced into rituals of exchange and consumption that were performed unambiguously on stage. For the enslaved, the auction block threatened permanent familial rupture and potentially worse iterations of individual slave experience. Given its incredible symbolic, experiential, and monetary significance, a glimpse of the auction became a standard feature in slave narratives. Whether the author has been auctioned herself, lost a family member to sale at auction, or simply wishes to present a full account of slave experience, most canonical slave narratives dramatize this harrowing event.

I turn now, for exemplification, to the auction scene, which very nearly opens The History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave (1831/1988) and, in effect, inaugurates Prince’s life in slavery. It is her narrative’s primal scene. Prince recounts:

My mother, weeping as she went, called me away with the children Hannah and Dinah [Prince’s sisters]…. We followed my mother to the market-place where she placed us in a row against a large house, with our backs to the wall and our arms folded across our breasts. I, as the eldest, stood first, Hannah next to me, then Dinah; and our mother stood beside, crying over us. My heart throbbed with grief and terror so violently that I pressed my hands quite tightly against my breast, but I could not keep it still, and it continued to leap as though it would burst

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(1978, 27). According to Foucault, voluntary omission and other meaningful silences neither breech nor nullify communication. In fact, the interplay

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unbounded commodification and consumption of enslaved persons. Walter Johnson gives us, for example, the case of Bruckner Payne, who

bought a young, black woman presumably to assist his wife with sewing. The young woman was soon returned to the slave market from which she

was purchased for sadistic sexual use and eventual sacrifice. The fact that Bruckner Payne, who

purchased her only on a trial basis, did not need to give a truthful account of his wishes when he purchased her or of his abuses when he brought her back nearly dead exemplifies what

"scenes of subjection" within the hegemonic order of slavery. Legal slavery secured every slaveholder's individual discretionary and otherwise

unbounded commodification and consumption of enslaved persons. Walter Johnson argues, "By law and by custom, white women had little business being in the slave market.

... The slave market was a site of perceived sexual and social disorder, not any place for a white lady to be" (2001, 89–90). Black women and girls

are, however, present, and their presence at the scene/site divests them of normative gender. In other words, the public—and necessarily theatric—

display and examination of black female persons renders them inadequate in terms hegemonic norms of womanhood even as enslaved black women are

are resigned for unnamed and unbounded, but explicitly female, sexual labor.

Prince's narration of her sale at auction opens with a focus on her mother. Without irony or bitterness, Prince describes the painful complicity of the

enslaved mother leading here children to the site of their sale, arranging them neatly for presentation and purchase. Evident in her neat and careful

arrangement of her children and her weeping are the enslaved mother's love and her loss. Neither, Prince nor her mother speak; the woman and her

young daughter are too grief stricken. In moments like these, speech is futile. It is the failure to utter a single word that reveals the devastating toll of

being sold. The narration of this moment thus becomes one of description, punctuated with meaningful silence that pays homage to the solemnity of

familial dissolution and the despicable sale of human beings.

The auction was a public event with routine and predictable procedures; it was also an exciting, sexualized spectacle. Prince notes that she is spun

slowly, which insinuates her potential, multidimensional utility. Under the presumed cover of assaying property, men are allowed to engage in acts of

lewd tactile handling. Despite the inscription that her treatment is sexually violating, and that she is improperly and prematurely sexualized by virtue of being brought to public sale, Prince is careful to avoid insinuating that she is for sexual service. The rhetorical strategies of aporia and understatement are common in representing slavery, particularly its sexual dimensions, as authors attempt to shield themselves and members of their race from accusations of innate sexual degradation. Regard for one's own chastity is a common feature of slave narratives penned by women. Prince's use of the simile "as a calf or a lamb" to describe the method by which she was tactically inspected/invaded implies a bland sexual disinterest on the part of her handlers. Nonetheless, her self-positioning as a lamb or a calf—youthful, innocent, unknowing, and yet a potentially fertile creature—in the hands and under the purview of a butcher bespeaks the destruction that awaits her. Prince thus alludes to sexual enslavement as a distinct and pervasive purpose of slavery. In the end, Prince's body gives the testimony her tongue cannot—she conceals her chest.

Heavy reliance on the pictorial and the picturesque textualizes the excision of the enslaved from modes of literary signification—considering, for example, the legislative mandate against slave literacy and legal testimony—even as it recuperates them within the domain of the social by staging "scenes of subjection" within the hegemonic order of slavery. Legal slavery secured every slaveholder's individual discretionary and otherwise unbounded commodification and consumption of enslaved persons. Walter Johnson gives us, for example, the case of Bruckner Payne, who

purchased a young, black woman presumably to assist his wife with sewing. The young woman was soon returned to the slave market from which she

was purchased by her owner for some supposed defect and died a mere two weeks later, the result of severe "brutalization." The implication here is that the woman was purchased for sadistic sexual use and eventual sacrifice. The fact that Bruckner Payne, who purchased her only on a trial basis, did not need to give a truthful account of his wishes when he purchased her or of his abuses when he brought her back nearly dead exemplifies what

embodied black slavery meant in its most basic form. Enslaved persons were proprietary benefit and pleasure of the individual slaveholder.

Slaveholders frequently purchased slaves for illicit and/or deranged uses. Those uses required no articulation; they had neither to be rendered in

language nor subjugated to the regulation that discursivity necessarily entails. And what was not spoken was not subject to the governance of social

order. Thus, the particularity of the uses to which slaveholders subjected their human property exceeded the provinces of language, legality, custom, and law.

Sites of professed unspeakability within slave testimonies are notable sources of meaning in that, acting as both trope and narrative device, silence provides a usable supplement to what is manifestly narrated. As Michel Foucault explains, "Silence itself—the things one declines to say, or is forbidden to name, the discretion that is reserved between different speakers—is less the absolute limit of discourse, the other side from which it is separated by a strict boundary, than an element that functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within over-all strategies" (1978, 27). According to Foucault, voluntary omission and other meaningful silences neither breech nor nullify communication. In fact, the interplay between the utterance and the meaningful silence reveal the social relations of the speakers. "There is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say," he continues:

[Instead,] we must try to determine the different ways of not saying such things, how those who can and those who cannot speak of them are

distributed, which type of discourse is authorized, or which form of discretion is required of them in either case. There is not one but many

silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses. (1978, 27)

Strategic silence is a powerful rhetorical device for conjuring what is indirectly referenced or merely insinuated because silence is itself an element or particular mode of communication. Moreover, silence can be a powerful form of resistance when used by the oppressed in defense against those whose domination is assisted and legitimized through language. In other words, by resisting subjectivization via discursive production, enslaved persons could assert the primacy of individual, embodied, and interiorized selves that necessarily exceeded the terms used to define—and to enslave—them. Because the sexual dimension of slave life was cloaked in a veil of silence created and protected by slave statutes and repressive cultural
conventions, enslaved subjects had to negotiate prohibitions on their speech to provide potent and enduring testimony against the institution. They did this in part by convening a community of witnesses to scopic terrors so ghastly and yet so routine in the system of bondage that they left onlookers frequently and quite literally speechless.

**Sexual and Scopic Terror: Slavery as Theater**

Representations of sexuality in slave narratives function both epistemologically and mimetically to expose the sadistic protocols and quotidian operations of institutional slavery. Whether in terms of the sexual and reproductive exploitation of enslaved black persons or in terms of those enslaved persons’ defiant acts of sexual autonomy, depictions of sexuality in slave narratives constitute a representational apparatus that necessitates specific writing and reading practices. In particular, readers are made aware of the fundamental vulnerability and serviceability of the slave’s body to the master’s whim by the sheer frequency with which slave bodies are presented in subjugated poses or mangled decomposition in slave narratives. To get at the fundamental violation of enslavement and its innumerable abuses, authors of slave narratives engage in what I have elsewhere theorized as textual masochism, the willful and theatrical display of the subdued or the violated slave in order to highlight the intrinsic sadism of slavery and of slaveholders (Abdur-Rahman 2006, 231).

I continue my reading of Mary Prince’s *History*, turning my attention to another scene that has become standard in the canonical slave narrative, the sexualized beating of an enslaved black woman. Prince recalls:

> [Mr. D____] would stand by and give orders for a slave to be cruelly whipped, and assist in the punishment, without moving a muscle of his face; walking about and taking snuff with the greatest composure. Nothing could touch his heart—neither sighs, nor tears, nor prayers, nor streaming blood; he was deaf to our cries and careless of our suffering. Mr. D____ has often stripped me naked, hung me up by the wrists, and beat me with the cow-skin, with his own hand, till my body was raw with gashes. Yet there was nothing remarkable in this; for it might serve as a sample of the common usage of slaves.…. (1831/1988, 10)

Though the scene purportedly reveals an aspect of her own suffering as she is savagely beaten, Prince directs the reader’s attention principally to Mr. D____. In particular, she emphasizes his performance of mastery. Notably, as he orders, witnesses, and partakes in the brutal castigation of the slave, he shows no guilt, compassion, nor any discernible emotive response. In fact, he surveys the scene with a composed and icy demeanor that belies the savagery of the beating, even as he orchestrates it and alone can bring about its end. Each howling plea of the suffering slave and each ringing tear in her flesh signifies and in this very moment solidifies the white slave master’s subjectivity, his particular and legally authorized sovereignty.

Notably, Prince’s narration does not dwell on her nakedness, nor does it explicitly name as such the sexual sadism clearly enacted in the ritual of stripping, binding, suspending, and beating of an enslaved woman. The sexual depravity of the event is, nonetheless, everywhere implicated in its performance. As Kimberly Juanita Brown succinctly puts it, “Willing or not, aggressive or submissive, the slave body is the sexual body, imprinted with the fixations of hegemonic desire and branded with the significance of all-encompassing acquiescence” (2007, 45; emphasis in the original). Prince exposes her own tortured body to expose a common procedure in slavery, a routinized form of torture used to ensure slave compliance. The account is mainly visual, emphasizing the composition of bodies and spatial positioning—the setting of a stage. There is no dialogue, and no explanation of Prince’s internal psychic processes is granted. Our attention is thereby, diverted away from the shaping of the enslaved persona through ritualized acts of shame and bodily torture to the subjectivization of the master-subject by virtue of those very processes.

In her seminal essay, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” Hortense Spillers’s describes poignantly the psychic and social formation of the master-subject vis-à-vis the brutalization of captive slaves, focusing specifically on the pleasure relation obtaining in it. She posits:

> This profound intimacy of interlocking detail is disrupted, however, by externally imposed meanings and uses: (1) the captive body as the source of an irresistible, destructive sensuality; (2) at the same time—in stunning contradiction—it is reduced to a thing, to being for the captor; (3) in this distance from a subject position, the captured sexualities provide a physical and biological expression of “otherness”; (4) as a category of “otherness,” the captive body translates into a potential for namotroping and embodies sheer physical powerlessness that slides into a more general “powerlessness.” (2003, 206)

As Spillers makes clear, the social and political situation of slaves is emblazoned by their sexual positioning. Specifically, slaves’ fundamental disempowerment—their enforced disappearance from the realm of the social, the economically self-sustainable, and the politically recognizable—reinforced and was reinforced by a wide open and vulnerable sexuality. In other words, the sexual subjectivity of enslaved persons, in particular its outward-directed “pansexual potential,” reflected both the political status of black people prior to legal abolition and the racial difference that putatively justified their enslavement—their being for others. As “being[s] for the captor,” the labor, production, human capacity, and pleasure-making ability of slaves supplied the architecture of master’s identity and his society. Or, to state the case plainly, the establishment of each slave owner as a sovereign unto himself via the structural disenfranchisement and the bodily dispossession of the enslaved black person was both the fundamental point and the fundamental ruse of American slavery.

It is important to note that bloody spectacles of slave subjection were designed not only to establish but more specifically to showcase the master’s dominance. In this way, slavery proceeded not simply through technologies of terror but through technologies of terroristic viewing. Before proceeding in this particular discussion, I must acknowledge that much has been made about the ethical and intellectual responsibility of scholars to avoid pandering to prurient interests in slavery’s spectacular sadism. Most prominently, Saidiya Hartman opens *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, arguably the most authoritative text on this subject, by declaring her refusal to reproduce scenes of obscene terror. She explains:

> At issue here is the precariousness of empathy and the uncertain line between witness and spectator. Only more obscene than the brutality
unleashed at the whipping post is the demand that this suffering be materialized and evidenced by the display of the tortured body or endless recitations of the ghastly and the terrible.

Therefore, rather than try to convey the routinized violence of slavery and its aftermath through invocations of the shocking and the terrible, I have chosen to look elsewhere and consider those scenes in which terror can hardly be discerned. (1997, 3–4)

Hartman’s decision to take up “the ghastly and the terrible” operations of slavery by reproducing and examining not the most gruesome expressions of slavery’s horror but its quotidian manifestations is incredibly instructive. In fact, I want to go so far as suggesting that, since the publication and wide circulation of Hartman’s seminal book, critics who write about slavery and its representation in a variety of cultural forms from the nineteenth century onward must now grapple with the very choice that Hartman put before herself and articulated in the opening pages of her brilliant and quite unparalleled text. Even as I heed Hartman’s call for greater respectfulness toward the bodies and the suffering of black people, I want to recognize two important points: (1) textual masochism operates as a specific, utilizable narrative procedure in the slave narrative and (2) under the coercive force of New World slavery there was no meaningful distinction between the terrible and the quotidian in the daily lives of the enslaved. Not only did authors of slave narratives intentionally depict the ruined bodies of slaves as an (ultimately generic) textual maneuver to foster abolitionist sentiment among readers, but they also communicated the experience of slavery by converting readers into witnesses of spectacular horrors that occurred with such frequency that they acquired, in effect, the status of the mundane. Again, Prince writes of her own awful whipping, “there was nothing remarkable in this; for it might serve as a sample of the common usage of slaves” (1831, 1888, 10).

Finally, it is important to recognize spectacular violence as a standard feature of slavery’s apparatus. I refer here to the theatrical display of white mastery through routine public enactments of the destruction of the black body. In this way, slave torture anticipates lynching—as the destruction of one black body is meant to represent, terrify, and subdue the entire witnessing black community. Frederick Douglass provides in his Narrative a poignant example of terroristic viewing as a disciplinary procedure. He narrates the murder of an enslaved black male, named Demby, who was killed by wretched overseer, Mr. Gore, for running away from him in fear of punishment.

Mr. Gore then, without consultation or deliberation with any one, not even giving Demby an additional call, raised his musket to his face, taking deadly aim at his standing victim, and in an instant poor Demby was no more. His mangled body sank out of sight, and blood and brains marked the water where he had stood. A thrill of horror flashed through every soul upon the plantation, excepting Mr. Gore. He alone seemed cool and collected. (1845/2004, 36–37)

Notably, Douglass provides a ghastly but surface description—that is, without emphasis on the internality of the subjects of the scene. Mr. Gore evinces the same cool and distant demeanor after mercilessly killing Demby that Prince observes of her master during whippings. As readers, we read/see Demby’s body stand, then fall. We read/see his disintegrated corporeal matter rise to the surface of the water. Finally, we share the “thrill of horror” of the enslaved onlookers in the scene, and thereby join their community of horrified witnesses, which, I argue, is the very point of Douglass’s textual reproduction of the despicable murder of Demby.

When interrogated by Colonel Lloyd about the murder of Demby, and thus the decrease in his slave property, Gore reasons that Demby “had become unmanageable. He was setting a dangerous example to other slaves,—one which, if suffered to pass without some such demonstration on [Gore’s] part, would lead to a total subversion of all rule and order upon the plantation. … the result of which would be, the freedom of the slaves and the enslavement of the whites” (1845, 2004, 36). Under the regime of slavery the master’s dominance over enslaved persons was perpetually at risk because the supremacy of the white slaveholder was neither a natural nor an ethically justifiable, perpetually sustainable sociopolitical and economic arrangement. It was, rather, held in place by judicial precedent, customary procedure, the legal disenfranchisement of African Americans, and routine public spectacles of black demise. The overseer Gore acknowledges the precariousness of slave mastery. He, moreover, readily admits that torture, terror, and terroristic viewing worked as corrective measures to procure slave compliance. For writers of canonized slave testimonies, such as Frederick Douglass and Mary Prince, these same measures assume the status of evidence in their narrative reconstructions of life in bondage.

And Worst of All: Sexuality and the Circulation of Corpses

An essay that analyzes sexuality under the regime New World slavery as well as its theatrical reproduction in the codified genre of the slave narrative would be incomplete without a consideration of Harriet Jacobs’s Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (1861/2004). In fact, it would not be an overstatement to say that of the many extant slave testimonies and the few prominent and canonized slave narratives Incidents provides the most developed and generative exposition on sexuality’s primacy in the structuration and maintenance of racial slavery. For Jacobs the negation of personhood secured by chattel status is best characterized, if not analogized, by the loss of basic sexual freedom: the right to experience and exercise longing, the right to legally recognized bonds of intimacy, the right to possess progeny and to have them recognized as legitimate heirs. Jacobs’s tale of bondage is narrativized as a struggle for sexual autonomy. Her journey is one that moves from sexual harassment, sexualized abuse, sexual compromise, and finally to sexual freedom and redemption. Incidents is, furthermore, one of the first African American literary texts to theorize explicitly the sexual politics of race-based social asymmetries. It is important to reiterate here that Hartman’s critical refusal to examine or to reproduce those ghastly (generally sexualized) spectacles recorded in slave narratives risks overlooking an important aspect of their narrative design and their political purpose. As I argue in the previous section, intimate and violent displays of damaged slave bodies are presented strategically by narrators. Working with and through the voyeurism of readers, narrators willfully and sophisticatedly harness the representational power of sexual difference to highlight the evils of the institution in support of their efforts to abolish American slavery. Noting that Jacobs deploys transgressive erotics toward liberatory ends, this final section examines how the generic, muted features of the African American slave narrative allow readers to see sexuality on the slave plantation, and in so doing, to understand the essential sadism that undergirds the very logic and machinery of human bondage.

Jacobs opens her chapter, entitled “Sketches of Neighboring Slaveholders,” by providing a fairly detailed description of a nearby plantation owned by a wealthy slaveholder, pseudonymously called Mr. Litch. Jacobs’s fascination with this particular plantation has to do with its tremendous size and
abundance of enslaved persons. She notes that the plantation boasts its own whipping post and jail. In her description of Mr. Litch’s plantation, Jacobs foregrounds its carceral features and disciplinary procedures. In so doing, she exposes the brutality of slavery, even in its most systematic and impersonal manifestation. “[W]hatever cruelties were perpetrated on there,” she announces, “they passed without comment.” Jacobs recognizes the impotence of language to provide adequate description, justification, or emotive response to the standard procedures of this slave plantation. Here, the spectacularly awful is commonplace, and speechlessness is thematized. Jacobs narrates:

A freshet once bore his wine cellar and meat house miles away from the plantation. Some slaves followed, and secured bits of meat and bottles of wine. Two were detected; a ham and some liquor being found in their huts. They were summoned by their master. No words were used, but a club felled them to the ground. A rough box was their coffin, and their internment was a dog’s burial. Nothing was said (1861/2004, 181–182).

Jacobs then proceeds to provide a virtual tableau of stomach-turning cruelties that were perpetrated regularly on various neighborhood plantations: all-night floggings, mutilation by dogs, death by starvation, child theft, bodily decomposition, improper or altogether absent burial, etc. Distinctly pictorial, the retellings operate through an ocular register that makes the reader want to turn away, to stop reading, to avoid envisioning the tithe offenses, despicable punishments, and finally decayed flesh that fill this chapter. Jacobs’s litany of plantation abuses has a clear reparative function: to name and to give witness to quotidian horrors that were so commonplace that they warranted neither reflection nor commentary but which were in and of themselves—and certainly for the nineteenth-century, white, northern reader—spectacular and inhumane.

Importantly, it is never clear from Jacobs list of horrid plantation occurrences whether or not she herself witnessed firsthand any of them. This observation is noteworthy, as witnessing is conferred in *Incidents*, as in African American slave narratives generally, not through spectatorship but through the transmission of testimony. As is Jacobs herself, readers are legitimated as viewers by participating in Jacobs’s narrative circulation of harrowing pictures. She concludes her list by declaring, “I could tell of more slaveholders as cruel as those I have described. They are not exceptions to the general rule” (1861/2004, 185). Through her vivid descriptions of mutilation and murder and the pictorial circulation of black corpses, Jacobs disavows ultimately any finite distinction between the awful and the everyday in slavery.

In a maneuver that returns the narration to its overarching preoccupation with sexuality, Jacobs insinuates that sexual corruption both epitomizes and outdoes all of the cruelties heretofore listed. She declares:

No pen can give adequate description of the all-pervading corruption produced by slavery. The slave girl is reared in an atmosphere of licentiousness and fear. The lash and the foul talk of her master and his sons are her teachers. When she is fourteen or fifteen, her owner, or her sons, or the overseer, or perhaps all of them, begin to bribe her with presents. If these fail to accomplish their purpose, she is whipped or starved into submission to their will. (1861/2004, 187)

Jacobs thus concludes what is arguably the most gruesome chapter of *Incidents* with an understated reference to the rampant sexual abuse and reproductive exploitation that were endemic to embodied black slavery. Those earlier scenes of torture, dismemberment, and bodily decay serve as an anteroom in a theater in which sexual enslavement, coerced concubinage, and mediated reproduction take center stage, exceeding all of the other cruelties of slavery.

To conclude, the exhibition of suppliant, suffering, or ruined black bodies operate in *Incidents* as in other African American slave narratives to call our attention to the embodied and the sexual dimensions of enslavement, particularly as the various uses to which enslaved bodies were put exceeded both nineteenth-century conventions on public speech and the capacities of language itself. Appeals to the visual, the pictorial, and the theatric in slave narratives challenge the hegemony of written word on behalf of a population that was legally denied access to literacy and literary expression. Writers of slave narratives sought to challenge the commodification and totalized exploitation of enslaved black persons by emphasizing the hurt of bodily and sexual assault. In so doing, they convened an expanded community of readers/witnesses who, with better comprehension of black enslavement, could and did assist in devising ethical, rhetorical, and legal strategies to bring about the abolition of New World slavery.

**Works Cited**


‘This Horrible Exhibition’


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