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### Saidiya Hartman and Representations of Slavery

In Saidiya Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection*, she explores an innovative angle pertaining to the horrors of slavery that took place every day. When Hartman writes that she wants to focus on the "terror of the mundane and the quotidian" in slavery in order to avoid contributing to the reproduction of the "spectacular nature of black suffering and, conversely, the dissimulation of suffering through spectacle," she implies that she wishes to observe the twisted aspects of slavery that are hidden in plain sight rather than exhausting the well-known parts of slavery such as the physical abuse that took place so frequently (Hartman 4, 22). Hartman chooses to explore slavery through a lens that reveals the correlation between domination and the joy a slave master felt while inflicting grotesque amounts of pain, suffering, and humiliation upon other human beings. In order to elaborate on what she meant by "terror of the mundane and the quotidian," Hartman writes: "my intention is not to shock or exploit the perverse but to consider critically the complicated nexus of terror and enjoyment by examining the obviated and debased diversions of the capricious master" which emphasizes her argument that one of the most frightening aspects of slavery was the sheer pleasure a slave owner had in torturing their slaves (Hartman 4, 21). The author hopes that by exposing the methods in which slaveholders hid the torment of their slaves, she can provide a fuller understanding of this abominable chapter in American history. When Hartman mentions "the dissimulation of suffering through spectacle," I believe that she is

referring to how slave masters reduced their slaves to the lowest common denominator of humanity by forcing them to participate in humiliating acts in order to create the facade of having an enjoyable life. For example, Hartman notes that “The body of the slave, dancing and on display, seemingly revealed a comfort with bondage and a natural disposition for servitude” (Hartman 37). This line sheds light on how the slaves were forced to appear as if they had more autonomy and agency in order to deceive the white spectators that attended slave auctions. This, in itself, contributes to another terrifying aspect of slavery that often goes unheard of in modern day. The film, *12 Years a Slave*, directed by Steve McQueen, supports Hartman’s argument by highlighting the subtle horrors of slavery while simultaneously presenting the blatant violence inflicted upon slaves on a daily basis. In one scene of the film, Solomon Northup is nearly lynched by Tibbeats but is eventually left to hang from the tree on the very tips of his feet for an indiscernible amount of time. The “terror of the mundane and the quotidian” presents itself in this scene when, in the background of Solomon struggling to breathe, the audience sees the other slaves as well as the other slave owners carrying on with their lives, completely disregarding the man at the brink of death. Children began playing behind Solomon, other slaves continued with their work (with the exception of one woman who aided him by bringing water), and Mistress Epps watched from the patio of her deck as Solomon fought to stay alive. These blasé reactions are precisely what Hartman means when she states: “what is remarkable is the way violence becomes neutralized and the shocking readily assimilated to the normal, the everyday, the bearable” (Hartman 34). The terrors of slavery lie within the realization that these scenes of violence happened so often that they became a part of normality and were accepted as such for years to follow.

Hartman's argument provides a comprehensive understanding of slavery that many people are not taught when learning about this time period in school. Most people today are only exposed to the most outwardly brutal acts of slavery (whippings, hangings, etc.) because those are the atrocities that are most likely to stay in a person's mind. In a cruder sense, these scenes of abuse are used as "shock value" by teachers in order for students to try and grasp how severe the treatment of other human beings was in a time period not long ago. However, in doing this, students are seldom taught to see past the physical aspect of slavery. By examining slavery from Hartman's approach, students are able to understand that there was more to fear than the agony of slaves brought upon by the lash of a whip or the blunt force of a white man in a state of rage. The enjoyment of inflicting misery upon another person delves into the psychological realm of slavery which I believe should also be taught in schools because it causes the scenes of whippings and lynching to be that much more impactful. Studying anti blackness and racism in modern day cannot be done in a singular way. Meaning, there exists too many histories and roots behind each subject to be taught through one lens or another. There must be a combination and a balance between studying the mundane and the quotidian like Hartman's approach, and there must be time to study the horror of the spectacular because slavery was not a one dimensional act— it was comprised of constituents that were both apparent and concealed but equally important.

The afterlife of slavery still remains in today's modern climate. It can be observed through police brutality, racial profiling, and the outright hatred for people of color within groups such as the KKK. Today, people still take pride in diminishing people of color because they firmly believe they are of a dominant race. These individuals' words, actions, and mindsets are

reminiscent of the slavery era which, in itself, is a “terror of the mundane and the quotidian” because this means that race is likely to be a dividing factor among people for the rest of humanity. The psychology of white supremacy is not something that can be stopped with organized protests or any amount of education. It is something that will continue to be passed down by generations of the ignorant and the racist because history never truly disappears.

## Works Cited

Hartman, Saidiya. *Scenes of Subjection-Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. Oxford University Press, 1997

McQueen, Steve, director. *12 Years a Slave*. Annapurna Pictures, 2013