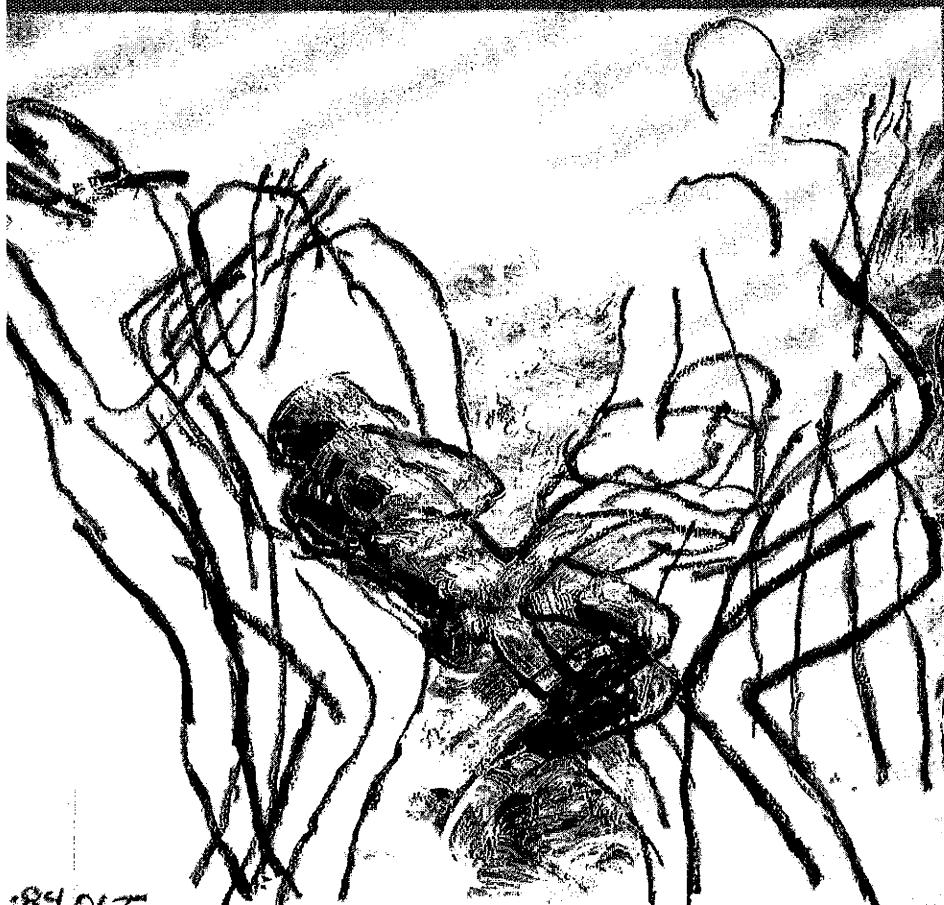


Scenes OF Subjection

TERROR, SLAVERY, AND SELF-MAKING
IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY
AMERICA



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SADDIYA W. HARTMAN

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IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICA**

Saidiya V. Hartman

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Contents

Introduction 3

I FORMATIONS OF TERROR AND ENJOYMENT

- 1 Innocent Amusements: The Stage of Sufferance 17
- 2 Redressing the Pained Body: Toward a Theory of Practice 49
- 3 Seduction and the Ruses of Power 79

II THE SUBJECT OF FREEDOM

- 4 The Burdened Individuality of Freedom 115
- 5 Fashioning Obligation: Indebted Servitude
and the Fetters of Slavery 125
- 6 Instinct and Injury: Bodily Integrity, Natural Affinities,
and the Constitution of Equality 164

Notes 207

Selected Bibliography 255

Index 277

Introduction

The “terrible spectacle” that introduced Frederick Douglass to slavery was the beating of his Aunt Hester. It is one of the most well-known scenes of torture in the literature of slavery, perhaps second only to Uncle Tom’s murder at the hands of Simon Legree. By locating this “horrible exhibition” in the first chapter of his 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Douglass establishes the centrality of violence to the making of the slave and identifies it as an original generative act equivalent to the statement “I was born.”¹ The passage through the blood-stained gate is an inaugural moment in the formation of the enslaved. In this regard, it is a primal scene. By this I mean that the terrible spectacle dramatizes the origin of the subject and demonstrates that to be a slave is to be under the brutal power and authority of another; this is confirmed by the event’s placement in the opening chapter on genealogy.²

I have chosen not to reproduce Douglass’s account of the beating of Aunt Hester in order to call attention to the ease with which such scenes are usually reiterated, the casualness with which they are circulated, and the consequences of this routine display of the slave’s ravaged body. Rather than inciting indignation, too often they immure us to pain by virtue of their familiarity—the oft-repeated or restored character of these accounts and our distance from them are signaled by the theatrical language usually resorted to in describing these instances—and especially because they reinforce the spectacular character of black suffering. What interests me are the ways we are called upon to participate in such scenes. Are we witnesses who confirm the truth of what happened in the face of the world-destroying capacities of pain, the distortions of torture, the sheer unrepresentability of terror, and the repression of the dominant accounts?³ Or are we voyeurs fascinated with and repelled by exhibitions of terror and sufferance? What does the exposure of the violated body yield? Proof of black sentience or the inhumanity of the “peculiar institution”? Or does the pain of

the other merely provide us with the opportunity for self-reflection? 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. In light of this, how does one give expression to these outrages without exacerbating the indifference to suffering that is the consequence of the numbing spectacle or contend with the narcissistic identification that obliterates the other or the prurience that too often is the response to such displays? This was the challenge faced by Douglass and other foes ofavery, and this is the task I take up here.

Therefore, rather than try to convey the routinized violence of slavery and its terror 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—slaves dancing in the quarters, the outrageous darky antics of the minstrel stage, the constitution of humanity in slave law, and the fashioning of the self-possessed individual. By defamiliarizing the familiar, I hope to illuminate the terror of the mundane and quotidian rather than exploit the shocking spectacle. What concerns me here is the diffusion of terror and the violence perpetrated under the rubric of leisure, paternalism, and property. Consequently, the scenes of subjection examined here focus on the enactment of subjugation and the constitution of the subject and include the blows delivered to Topsy and Zip Coon on the popular stage, slaves coerced to dance in the marketplace, the simulation of will in slave law, the fashioning of identity, and the processes of individuation and normalization.

Human Flesh

When Charlie Moses reflected on his years of slavery, the “preacher’s eloquence” noted by the Works Progress Administration interviewer who recorded his testimony did not blunt his anger. In recounting the harsh treatment received by colored folks, he emphasized that the enslaved were used like animals and treated as if they existed only for the master’s profits: “The way us niggers was treated was awful. Marster would beat, knock, kick, kill. He done ever’ thing he could ‘cept eat s. We was worked to death. We worked Sunday, all day, all night. He whipped us til some jus’ lay down to die. It was a poor life. I knows it ain’t right to have hate in the heart, but, God almighty!” As if required to explain his animosity toward his former owner who “had the devil in his heart,” Moses exclaimed that “God almighty never meant for human beings to be like animals. Us niggers has a soul an’ heart an’ a min’. We ain’ like a dog or a horse.”⁴

In some respects, Tom Windham’s experience of enslavement was the opposite of that described by Charlie Moses; he reported that his owner had treated him well. Nonetheless, like Moses, he too explained the violation of slavery as being made a beast of burden. While Moses detailed the outrages of slavery and highlighted the atrociousness of the institution by poignantly enumerating the essential features of the slave’s humanity—a soul, a heart, and a mind—Windham, in conveying the injustice of slavery, put the matter simply: “I think we should have our liberty cause us

ain't hogs or horses—us is human flesh.”⁵ The flesh, existence defined at its most elemental level, alone entitled one to liberty. This basic assertion of colored folks’ entitlement to freedom implicitly called into question the rationales that legitimated the exclusion of blacks from the purview of universal rights and entitlements. As Moses and Windham were well aware, the discourse of humanism, at the very least, was double-edged since the life and liberty they held in esteem were racial entitlements formerly denied them. In short, the selective recognition of humanity that undergirded the relations of chattel slavery had not considered them men deserving of rights or freedom. Thus in taking up the language of humanism, they seized upon that which had been used against and denied them.

However, suppose that the recognition of humanity held out the promise not of liberating the flesh or redeeming one’s suffering but rather of intensifying it? Or what if this acknowledgment was little more than a pretext for punishment, dissimulation of the violence of chattel slavery and the sanction given it by the law and the state, and an instantiation of racial hierarchy? What if the presumed endowments of man—conscience, sentiment, and reason—rather than assuring liberty or negating slavery acted to yoke slavery and freedom? Or what if the heart, the soul, and the mind were simply the inroads of discipline rather than that which confirmed the crime of slavery and proved that blacks were men and brothers, as Charlie Moses had hoped.

Here I am interested in the ways that the recognition of humanity and individuality acted to tether, bind, and oppress. For instance, although the captive’s bifurcated existence as both an object of property and a person (whether understood as a legal subject formally endowed with limited rights and protections, a submissive, culpable or criminal agent, or one possessing restricted capacities for self-fashioning) has been recognized as one of the striking contradictions of chattel slavery, the constitution of this humanity remains to be considered. In other words, the law’s recognition of slave humanity has been dismissed as ineffectual and as a volte-face of an imperiled institution. Or, worse yet, it has been lauded as evidence of the hegemony of paternalism and the integral relations between masters and slaves. Similarly, the failure of Reconstruction generally has been thought of as a failure of implementation—that is, the state’s indifference toward blacks and unwillingness to ensure basic rights and entitlements sufficed to explain the racist retrenchment of the postwar period. I approach these issues from a slightly different vantage point and thus consider the outrages of slavery not only in terms of the object status of the enslaved as beasts of burden and chattel but also as they involve notions of slave humanity. Rather than declare paternalism an ideology, understood in the orthodox sense as a false and distorted representation of social relations, I am concerned with the savage encroachments of power that take place through notions of reform, consent, and protection. As I will argue later, rather than bespeaking the mutuality of social relations or the expressive and affective capacities of the subject, sentiment, enjoyment, affinity, will, and desire facilitated subjugation, domination, and terror precisely by preying upon the flesh, the heart, and the soul. It was often the case that benevolent correctives and declarations of slave humanity intensified the brutal exercise of power upon the captive body rather than ameliorating the chattel condition.

Likewise, in considering the metamorphosis of chattel into man catalyzed by the abolition of slavery, I think it is important to consider the failure of Reconstruction not simply as a matter of policy or as evidence of a flagging commitment to black rights, which is undeniably the case, but also in terms of the limits of emancipation, the ambiguous legacy of universalism, the exclusions constitutive of liberalism, and the blameworthiness of the freed individual. Therefore I examine the role of rights in facilitating relations of domination, the new forms of bondage enabled by proprietary notions of the self, and the pedagogical and legislative efforts aimed at transforming the formerly enslaved into rational, acquisitive, and responsible individuals. From this vantage point, emancipation appears less the grand event of liberation than a point of transition between modes of servitude and racial subjection. As well, it leads us to question whether the rights of man and citizen are realizable or whether the appellation "human" can be borne equally by all.⁶

In response to these questions, I contend that the recognition of the humanity of the slave did not redress the abuses of the institution nor the wanton use of the captive warranted by his or her status as chattel, since in most instances the acknowledgment of the slave as subject was a complement to the arrangements of chattel property rather than its remedy; nor did self-possession liberate the former slave from his or her bonds but rather sought to replace the whip with the compulsory contract and the collar with a guilty conscience. Put differently, I argue that the barbarism of slavery did not express itself singularly in the constitution of the slave as object but also in the forms of subjectivity and circumscribed humanity imputed to the enslaved; by the same token, the failures of Reconstruction cannot be recounted solely as a series of legal reversals or troop withdrawals; they also need to be located in the very language of persons, rights, and liberties. For these reasons the book examines the forms of violence and domination enabled by the recognition of humanity, licensed by the invocation of rights, and justified on the grounds of liberty and freedom.

In exploring these issues, I do not intend to offer a comprehensive examination of slavery and Reconstruction or to recover the resistances of the dominated but to critically interrogate terms like "will," "agency," "individuality," and "responsibility." As stated previously, this requires examining the constitution of the subject by dominant discourses as well as the ways in which the enslaved and the emancipated grappled with these terms and strived to reelaborate them in fashioning themselves as agents. For these reasons, the scenes of subjection at issue here consider the Manichaean identities constitutive of slave humanity—that is, the sated subordinate and/or willful criminal, the calculation of humanity, the fabulation of the will, and the relation between injury and personhood. While the calibration of sentience and terms of punishment determined the constricted humanity of the enslaved, the abased and encumbered individuality of the emancipated resulted largely from the equation of responsibility with blameworthiness, thereby making duty synonymous with punishment. The enduring legacy of slavery was readily discernable in the travestied liberation, castigated agency, and blameworthiness of the free individual. By the same token, the ubiquitous fun and frolic that supposedly demonstrated slave contentment and the African's suitedness for slavery were mirrored in the panic about idleness, intemperate consumption, and fanciful expressions

of freedom, all of which justified coercive labor measures and the constriction of liberties. Apparent here are the entanglements of slavery and freedom and the dutiful submission characteristic of black subjectivity, whether in the making and maintaining of chattel personal or in the fashioning of individuality, cultivation of conscience, and harnessing of free will.

In light of these concerns, part I examines a variety of scenes ranging from the auction block and the minstrel stage to the construction of black humanity in slave law. In this part, issues of terror and enjoyment frame the exploration of subjection, for calculations of socially tolerable violence and the myriad and wanton uses of slave property constitutive of enjoyment determine the person fashioned in the law and the blackness conjured up on the popular stage. Part II interrogates issues of agency, willfulness, and subjection in the context of freedom. In particular, it examines the liberal discourse of possessive individualism, the making of the contractual subject, and the wedding of formal equality and black subjugation. The period covered thus extends from the antebellum era to the end of the nineteenth century. Despite the amazing tumults, transitions, and discontinuities during the antebellum period, Reconstruction, and the Gilded Age, I feel this scope is justified by the tragic continuities in antebellum and postbellum constitutions of blackness. The intransigence of racism and the antipathy and abjection naturalized in *Plessy v. Ferguson* recast blackness in terms that refigured relations of mastery and servitude. Thus, an amazing continuity belied the hypostatized discontinuities and epochal shifts installed by categories like slavery and freedom.

The first chapter, "Innocent Amusements: The Stage of Sufferance," examines the role of enjoyment in the economy of chattel slavery. Specifically it considers enjoyment in regard to the sanctioned uses of slave property and the figurative capacities of blackness. In this chapter, I contend that the value of blackness resided in its metaphorical aptitude, whether literally understood as the fungibility of the commodity or understood as the imaginative surface upon which the master and the nation came to understand themselves. As Toni Morrison writes, "The slave population, it could be and was assumed, offered itself up as surrogate selves for meditation on problems of human freedom, its lure and its elusiveness."⁷ Indeed, blackness provided the occasion for self-reflection as well as for an exploration of terror, desire, fear, loathing, and longing.⁸ In examining the torturous constitution of agency and the role of feelings in securing domination, the chapter looks at popular theater, the spectacle of the slave market, and the instrumental amusements of the plantation. At these sites, the reenactment of subjection occurs by way of coerced agency, simulated contentment, and the obliteration of the other through the slipping on of blackness or an empathic identification in which one substitutes the self for the other.

In these instances, the exercise of power was inseparable from its display because domination depended upon demonstrations of the slaveholder's dominion and the captive's abasement. The owner's display of mastery was just as important as the legal title to slave property. In other words, representing power was essential to reproducing domination. As James Scott states, a significant aspect of maintaining relations of domination "consists of the symbolization of domination by demonstrations and enactments of power."⁹ These demonstrations of power consisted of

forcing the enslaved to witness the beating, torture, and execution of slaves, changing the names of slave children on a whim to emphasize to slave parents that the owner, not the parents, determined the child's fate, and requiring slaves to sing and dance for the owners entertainment and feign their contentment. Such performances confirmed the slaveholder's dominion and made the captive body the vehicle of the master's power and truth.

The innocent amusements and spectacles of mastery orchestrated by members of the slaveholding class to establish their dominion and regulate the little leisure allowed the enslaved were significant components of slave performance. Consequently, it is difficult, if not impossible, to establish an absolute and definitive division between "going before the master" and other amusements. Moreover, this accounts for the ambivalent pleasures afforded by such recreations. The vexed character of good times and the reelaboration of orchestrated amusements for other ends are the focus of the second chapter, "Redressing the Pained Body: Toward a Theory of Practice." In "going before the master," the enslaved were required to sing or dance for the slave owner's pleasure as well as to demonstrate their submission, obsequiousness, and obedience. What was demanded by the master was simulated by the enslaved; yet the capitulation of the dominated to these demands must be considered as pragmatism rather than resignation since one either complied with the rules governing socially sanctioned behavior or risked punishment. In addition, these performances constituted acts of defiance conducted under the cover of nonsense, indirection, and seeming acquiescence. By virtue of such tactics, these performances were sometimes turned against their instrumental aims; at the same time, the reliance on masquerade, subterfuge, and indirection also obscured the small acts of resistance conducted by the enslaved. After all, how does one determine the difference between "puttin' on ole massa"—the simulation of compliance for covert aims—and the grins and gesticulations of Sambo indicating the repressive construction of contented subjection? At the level of appearance, these contending performances often differed little. At the level of effect, however, they diverged radically. One performance aimed to reproduce and secure the relations of domination and the other to manipulate appearances in order to challenge these relations and create a space for action not generally available. However, since acts of resistance exist within the context of relations of domination and are not external to them, they acquire their character from these relations, and vice versa. At a dance, holiday fete, or corn shucking, the line between dominant and insurgent orchestrations of blackness could be effaced or fortified in the course of an evening, either because the enslaved utilized instrumental amusements for contrary purposes or because surveillance necessitated cautious forms of interaction and modes of expression.

The simulation of agency and the enactment of willful submission in the domain of law are examined in the third chapter, "Seduction and the Ruses of Power." It contends that the rhetoric of seduction—the power ascribed to the dependent and the subordinate—deployed in the law licensed extreme acts of violation in the name of feelings, intimacy, and reciprocity rather than recognizing the influence of the weak. Issues of sexual violation and domination are the particular focus of the chapter, and in this regard, seduction is considered "a meditation on freedom and slavery" and willfulness and subjugation in the arena of sexuality.¹⁰ In effect, seduction is consid-

ered a story of intimacy and power that dissimulates the violence of the law and the violation of the enslaved. In exploring these issues, the chapter reads Harriet A. Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*, as an effort to deform the masterful rhetoric of seduction by positioning the "slave girl" as a willful agent determined to obtain freedom rather than her owner's affection and employing cunning and duplicity in the narrative. In this regard, the reversibility of seduction both legitimates violence and enables an enactment of rebellion and a usurpation of power in Jacobs's narrative.

Jacobs's narrative is also instructive regarding the issue of freedom. The critique of freedom exemplified by the loophole of retreat—a space of freedom that is at the same time a space of captivity—and the difficulties experienced in trying to assume the role of free and self-possessed individual prefigure the critique of emancipation advanced by former slaves in the postbellum context.¹¹ The entanglements of slavery and freedom underlined by Jacobs's continued servitude and vastly improved yet far from ideal condition are the central issues examined in the second half of the book. Part II focuses on the extended servitude of the emancipated, the fashioning of the obligated and blameworthy individual, and the injurious constitution of blackness. In this section I consider the changes wrought by emancipation and the shifting registers of racial subjection. Chapter 4, "The Burdened Individuality of Freedom," serves as an introduction to part II. Primarily it focuses on the legacy of slavery in the postbellum context and the instability and ambivalence of rights discourse. The fifth chapter, "Fashioning Obligation: Indebted Servitude and the Fetters of Slavery," extends this discussion by examining the contractual subject represented in pedagogical manuals for the freed. Basically, it contends that will and responsibility replaced the whip with the tethers of guilty conscience. Of particular interest are liberal notions of responsibility modeled on contractual obligation, calculated reciprocity, and, most important, indebtedness since debt played a central role in the creation of the servile, blameworthy, and guilty individual and in the reproduction and transformation of involuntary servitude.

Chapter 6, "Instinct and Injury: Bodily Integrity, Natural Affinities, and the Constitution of Equality," examines issues of rights, equality, and exclusion. Based upon the argument advanced in the preceding chapters regarding the entanglements of slavery and freedom, I maintain that the vision of equality forged in the law naturalized racial subordination while attempting to prevent discrimination based on race or former condition of servitude. What concerns me here are the corporeal politics spanning the divide between slavery and freedom—the bodily degradation of the African espoused in the majority opinion of *Dred Scott v. Sanford* by Judge Roger Taney (which Taney insisted excluded blacks from the "person" of the Constitution imagined by the founding fathers and was sufficient reason for their continued exclusion) and the feared loss of white bodily integrity that upheld the separate-but-equal doctrine in *Plessy v. Ferguson*. I argue that *Plessy* exemplifies the corporeal anxieties of the liberal order and illuminates the double bind of equality and exclusion that distinguishes modern state racism from its antebellum predecessor rather than simply providing an instance of the dismantling of the civil rights agenda legislatively enacted in the years 1865–1875. Thus this reading does not consider *Plessy v. Ferguson* an aberration of liberal ideals but rather a striking

example of the commonplace—the wedding of equality and exclusion in the liberal state. Of signal importance in *Plessy* are the strategies of disavowal that remove the state from the domains that it in effect constitutes, the primacy granted to affect in determining the scope and enjoyment of rights and the duties of the state, and the reinscription of degradation in the elaboration of the separate-but-equal doctrine.

In short I argue that despite the shift from the legal-status ascriptions characteristic of the antebellum period, the emphasis on the blood, sexuality, and commingling in postemancipation racial discourse ultimately refigured the status-race of chattel slavery. Here again, sentiment sanctions black subordination because affinity and desire ultimately eclipse equality. While the inferiority of blacks was no longer the legal standard, the various strategies of state racism produced a subjugated and subordinated class within the body politic, albeit in a neutral or egalitarian guise. Notwithstanding the negatory power of the Thirteenth Amendment, racial slavery was transformed rather than annulled. As suggested earlier, this transformation was manifested in debt-peonage and other forms of involuntary servitude that conscripted the newly emancipated and putative free laborer, an abiding legacy of black inferiority and subjugation, and the regulatory power of a racist state obsessed with blood, sex, and procreation. The encumbrances of emancipation and the fettered condition of the freed individual, at the very least, lead us to reconsider the meaning of freedom, if they do not cast doubt on the narrative of progress.

A Note on Method

How does one tell the story of an elusive emancipation and a travestied freedom? Certainly, reconsidering the meaning of freedom entails looking critically at the production of historical narratives since the very effort to represent the situation of the subaltern reveals the provisionality of the archive as well as the interests that shape it and thereby determine the emplotment of history. For example, the imperative to construct a usable and palatable national past certainly determined the picture of slavery drawn in the testimonies gathered by the Works Progress Administration, not to mention the hierarchical relations between mostly white interviewers and black interviewees. Bearing this in mind, one recognizes that writing the history of the dominated requires not only the interrogation of dominant narratives and the exposure of their contingent and partisan character but also the reclamation of archival material for contrary purposes. As Gayatri Spivak remarks, “The ‘subaltern’ cannot appear without the thought of the ‘elite.’”¹² In other words, there is no access to the subaltern consciousness outside dominant representations or elite documents. Accordingly, this examination of the cultural practices of the dominated is possible only because of the accounts provided by literate black autobiographers, white amanuenses, plantation journals and documents, newspaper accounts, missionary tracts, travel writing, amateur ethnographies, government reports, et cetera. Because these documents are “not free from barbarism,” I have tried to read them against the grain in order to write a different account of the past, while realizing the limits imposed by employing these sources, the impossibility of fully recovering the experience of the enslaved and the emancipated, and the risk of reinforcing

ing the authority of these documents even as I try to use them for contrary purposes.¹³

The effort to “brush history against the grain” requires excavations at the margins of monumental history in order that the ruins of the dismembered past be retrieved, turning to forms of knowledge and practice not generally considered legitimate objects of historical inquiry or appropriate or adequate sources for history making and attending to the cultivated silence, exclusions, relations of violence and domination that engender the official accounts. Therefore the documents, fragments, and accounts considered here, although claimed for purposes contrary to those for which they were gathered, nonetheless remain entangled with the politics of domination. In this regard, the effort to reconstruct the history of the dominated is not discontinuous with dominant accounts or official history but, rather, is a struggle within and against the constraints and silences imposed by the nature of the archive—the system that governs the appearance of statements and generates social meaning.¹⁴

My interest in reading this material is twofold: in interpreting these materials, I hope to illuminate the practice of everyday life—specifically, tactics of resistance, modes of self-fashioning, and figurations of freedom—and to investigate the construction of the subject and social relations contained within these documents. Consequently, this effort is enmeshed with the relations of power and dominance that it strives to write against; in this regard, it both resists and complies with the official narratives of slavery and freedom. My reliance on the interviews conducted by the Works Progress Administration raises a host of problems regarding the construction of voice, the terms in which agency is identified, the dominance of the pastoral in representing slavery, the political imperatives that informed the construction of national memory, the ability of those interviewed to recall what had happened sixty years earlier, the use of white interviewers who were sometimes the sons and daughters of former owners in gathering the testimony, and so on. The construction of black voice by mostly white interviewers through the grotesque representation of what they imagined as black speech, the questions that shaped these interviews, and the artifice of direct reported speech when, in fact, these interviews were transcribed non verbatim accounts make quite tentative all claims about representing the intentionality or consciousness of those interviewed, despite appearances that would encourage us to believe that we have gained access to the voice of the subaltern and located the true history after all.¹⁵

With all this said, how does one use these sources? At best with the awareness that a totalizing history cannot be reconstructed from these interested, selective, and fragmentary accounts and with an acknowledgment of the interventionist role of the interpreter, the equally interested labor of historical revision, and the impossibility of reconstituting the past free from the disfigurements of present concerns.¹⁶ With all these provisos issued, these narratives nonetheless remain an important source for understanding the everyday experience of slavery and its aftermath. Bearing the aforementioned qualifications in mind, I read these documents with the hope of gaining a glimpse of black life during slavery and the postbellum period while remaining aware of the impossibility of fully reconstituting the experience of the enslaved. I don’t try to liberate these documents from the context in which they were collected but do try to exploit the surface of these accounts for contrary purposes and

to consider the form resistance assumes given this context. My attempt to read against the grain is perhaps best understood as a combination of foraging and disfiguration—raiding for fragments upon which other narratives can be spun and misshaping and deforming the testimony through selective quotation and the amplification of issues germane to this study.

Of course the WPA testimony is interested, provisional, and characterized by lapses of forgetting, silences, and exclusions, but what sources are immune to such charges? John Blassingame has detailed the difficulties inherent in using the WPA sources because of the power differential between white interviewers and black interviewees, the editing and rewriting of these accounts, and the time lapse between the interview and the experience of slavery; nonetheless he concedes that they are an important source of information about slavery.¹⁷ I agree with Blassingame's assessment and would also add that there is no historical document that is not interested, exclusive, or a vehicle of power and domination, and it is precisely the latter that I am trying to bring to the fore in assessing everyday practices, the restricted confines in which they exist, and the terms in which they are represented. Besides, contemporaneous narratives and interviews are no less selective in their representations of slavery. The WPA testimony is an overdetermined representation of slavery, as are all of the accounts. Therefore, the work of reconstruction and fabulation that I have undertaken highlights the relation between power and voice and the constraints and closures that determine not only what can be spoken but also (the identity of) who speaks. In so many words, I approach issues of subjectivity and agency by examining the possibilities and constraints of various practices from performance to the rhetorical strategies of law. Again, my reading of slave testimony is not an attempt to recover the voice of the enslaved but an attempt to consider specific practices in a public performance of slavery that encompasses the slave on the auction block and those sharing their recollections decades later.¹⁸ In this regard, the gap between the event and its recollection is bridged not only by the prompting of interviewers but also by the censored context of self-expression and the uncanny resemblance between "puttin' on ole massa" and the tactics of withholding aimed at not offending white interviewers and/or evading self-disclosure.

The effort to examine the event of emancipation is no less riddled by inescapable ironies, the foremost of these being the discontinuity between substantial freedom and legal emancipation. Inevitably one is forced to confront the discrepant legacy of emancipation and the decidedly circumscribed possibilities available to the freed. In short, how does one adequately render the double bind of emancipation—that is, acknowledge the illusory freedom and travestied liberation that succeeded chattel slavery without gainsaying the small triumphs of Jubilee? Certainly one must contend with the enormity of emancipation as both a breach with slavery and a point of transition to what looks more like the reorganization of the plantation system than self-possession, citizenship, or liberty for the "freed." In the place of the grand narrative of freedom, with its decisive events and incontrovertible advances, I offer an account that focuses on the ambivalent legacy of emancipation and the undeniably truncated opportunities available to the freed. Lacking the certitude of a definitive partition between slavery and freedom, and in the absence of a consummate breach through which freedom might unambivalently announce itself, there is at best

a transient and fleeting expression of possibility that cannot ensconce itself as a durable temporal marker. If periodization is a barrier imposed from above that obscures the involuntary servitude and legal subjection that followed in the wake of slavery, then attempts to assert absolutist distinctions between slavery and freedom are untenable. Fundamentally, such assertions involve distinctions between the transient and the epochal, underestimate the contradictory inheritance of emancipation and the forms of involuntary servitude that followed in the wake of slavery, and diminish the reign of terror that accompanied the advent of freedom. Put differently, does the momentousness of emancipation as an event ultimately efface the continuities between slavery and freedom and the dispossession inseparable from becoming a "propertied person"? If one dares to "abandon the absurd catalogue of official history," as Edouard Glissant encourages, then the violence and domination perpetuated in the name of slavery's reversal come to the fore.¹⁹ From this vantage point, emancipation seems a double-edged and perhaps obfuscating label. It discloses as well as obscures since involuntary servitude and emancipation were synonymous for a good many of the formerly enslaved. This is evidenced in "common-sense" observations that black lives were more valuable under slavery than under freedom, that blacks were worse off under freedom than during slavery, and that the gift of freedom was a "hard deal." I use the term "common sense" purposely to underline what Antonio Gramsci described as the "chaotic aggregate of disparate conceptions" that conform with "the social and cultural position of those masses whose philosophy it is." It is a conception of world and life "implicit to a large extent in determinate strata of society" and "in opposition to 'official' conceptions of the world."²⁰ In this case, common sense challenges the official accounts of freedom and stresses the similarities and correspondencies of slavery and freedom. At a minimum, these observations disclose the disavowed transactions between slavery and freedom as modes of production and subjection.

The abolition of chattel slavery and the emergence of man, however laudable, long awaited, and cherished, fail to yield such absolute distinctions; instead fleeting, disabled, and short-lived practices stand for freedom and its failure. Everyday practices, rather than traditional political activity like the abolition movement, black conventions, the struggle for suffrage, electoral activities, et cetera, are the focus of my examination because I believe that these pedestrian practices illuminate inchoate and utopian expressions of freedom that are not and perhaps cannot be actualized elsewhere. The desires and longings that exceed the frame of civil rights and political emancipation find expression in quotidian acts labeled "fanciful," "exorbitant," and "excessive" primarily because they express an understanding or imagination of freedom quite at odds with bourgeois expectations. Paul Gilroy, after Seyla Benhabib, refers to these utopian invocations and the incipient modes of friendship and solidarity they conjure up as "the politics of transfiguration."²¹ He notes that in contrast to the politics of fulfillment that operate within the framework of bourgeois civil society and occidental rationality, "the politics of transfiguration strives in pursuit of the sublime, struggling to repeat the unrepeatable, to present the unpresentable. Its rather different hermeneutic focus pushes towards the mimetic, dramatic and performative." From this perspective, stealing away, the breakdown, moving about, pilfering, and other everyday practices that occur below the threshold

of formal equality and rights gesture toward an unrealized freedom and emphasize the stranglehold of slavery and the limits of emancipation. In this and in other ways, these practices reveal much about the infrapolitics of the dominated and the contestations over the meaning of abolition and emancipation.

The intervention made here is an attempt to recast the past, guided by the conundrums and compulsions of our contemporary crisis: the hope for social transformation in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles, the quixotic search for a subject capable of world-historical action, and the despair induced by the lack of one. In this regard, it is hoped that the instances of insurgency and contestation narrated herein and the relentless proliferation of small acts of resistance perhaps offer some small measure of encouragement and serve to remind us that the failures of Reconstruction still haunt us, which in part explains why the grand narratives continue to hold sway over our imagination. Therefore, while I acknowledge history's "fiction of factual representation," to use Hayden White's term, I also recognize the political utility and ethical necessity of historical fiction. As Walter Benjamin remarked, "Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe if the enemy wins."²²

PART ONE

*Formations of Terror
and Enjoyment*

I

Innocent Amusements

THE STAGE OF SUFFERANCE

Innocent amusements, when under proper regulations and when partaken of with moderation, conduce to morality and virtue. . . . Negroes are naturally prone to gaiety, and I conceive it a duty to ourselves as well as them not to change this inclination in them, but rather to promote it by every prudent and allowable means.

—N. Herbemont, *On the Moral Discipline and Treatment of Slaves* (1836)

Everything like rational enjoyment was frowned upon, and only those wild and low sports peculiar to semicivilized people were encouraged.

—Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1892)

In an epistle to his brother, John Rankin illuminated the “very dangerous evil” of slavery in a description of the coffle, detailing the obscene theatricality of the slave trade: “Unfeeling wretches purchased a considerable drove of slaves—how many of them were separated from husbands and wives, I will not pretend to say—and having chained a number of them together, hoisted over the flag of American liberty, and with the music of two violins marched the woe-worn, heart-broken, and sobbing creatures through the town.”¹ Rankin, aghast at the spectacle and shocked by “seeing the most oppressive sorrows of suffering innocence mocked with all the lightness of sportive music,” decried: “My soul abhors the crime.” The violation of domesticity, the parody of liberty, and the callous defiance of sorrow define the scene in which crime becomes spectacle. The “very dangerous evil” of slavery and the “agonizing groans of suffering humanity” had been made music.²

Although Rankin conceded that the cruelty of slavery “far exceed[ed] the power of description,” he nonetheless strove to render the horrors of slavery. And in so doing, Rankin makes apparent that the crimes of slavery are not only witnessed but staged. This is a result of the recourse to terms like “stage,” “spectacle,” and “scene” in conveying these horrors, and, more important, because the “abominations of slavery” are disclosed through the reiteration of secondhand accounts and circulating stories from “unquestionable authorities” to which Rankin must act as surrogate witness. In the effort to “bring slavery close,” these circulating reports of atrocity, in essence, are reenacted in Rankin epistles. The grotesqueries enumerated in documenting the injustice of slavery are intended to shock and to disrupt the

comfortable remove of the reader/spectator. By providing the minutest detail of macabre acts of violence, embellished by his own fantasy of slavery's bloodstained gate, Rankin hoped to rouse the sensibility of those indifferent to slavery by exhibiting the suffering of the enslaved and facilitating an identification between those free and those enslaved: "We are naturally too callous to the sufferings of others, and consequently prone to look upon them with cold indifference, until, in imagination we identify ourselves with the sufferers, and make their sufferings our own. . . . When I bring it near, inspect it closely, and find that it is inflicted on men and women, who possess the same nature and feelings with myself, my sensibility is roused" (56–57). By bringing suffering near, the ties of sentiment are forged. In letter after letter, Rankin strove to create this shared experience of horror in order to transform his slaveholding brother, to whom the letters were addressed, as well as the audience of readers. In this case, pain provides the common language of humanity; it extends humanity to the dispossessed and, in turn, remedies the indifference of the callous.³

The shocking accounts of whipping, rape, mutilation, and suicide assault the barrier of indifference, for the abhorrence and indignity roused by these scenes of terror, which range from the mockery of the coffle to the dismemberment and incineration of a slave boy, give rise to a shared sentience between those formerly indifferent and those suffering. So intent and determined is Rankin to establish that slaves possess the same nature and feelings as himself, and thereby establish the common humanity of all men on the basis of this extended suffering, that he literally narrates an imagined scenario in which he, along with his wife and child, is enslaved. The "horrible scenes of cruelty that were presented to [his] mind" as a consequence of this imagining aroused the "highest pitch of indignant feeling." In addition, this scenario enables Rankin to speak not only for but literally in the place of the enslaved. By believing himself to be and by phantasmically becoming the enslaved, he creates the scenario for shared feelings:

My flighty imagination added much to the tumult of passion by persuading me, for the moment, that I myself was a slave, and with my wife and children placed under the reign of terror. I began in reality to feel for myself, my wife, and my children—the thoughts of being whipped at the pleasure of a morose and capricious master, aroused the strongest feelings of resentment; but when I fancied the cruel lash was approaching my wife and children, and my imagination depicted in lively colors, their tears, their shrieks, and bloody stripes, every indignant principle of my bloody nature was excited to the highest degree. (56)

The nature of the feelings aroused here is rather complicated. While this flight of imagination enables a vicarious firsthand experience of the lash, excoriates the pleasure experienced by the master in this brutal exercise of power, and unleashes Rankin's fiery indignation and resentment, the phantasmic vehicle of this identification is complicated, unsettling, and disturbing. Although Rankin's fantasy culminates in indignant outcries against the institution of slavery and, clearly, the purpose of this identification is to highlight the crimes of slavery, this flight of imagination and slipping into the captive's body unlatches a Pandora's box and, surprisingly, what comes to the fore is the difficulty and slipperiness of empathy. Properly

speaking, empathy is a projection of oneself into another in order to better understand the other or "the projection of one's own personality into an object, with the attribution to the object of one's own emotions."⁴ Yet empathy in important respects confounds Rankin's efforts to identify with the enslaved because in making the slave's suffering his own, Rankin begins to feel for himself rather than for those whom this exercise in imagination presumably is designed to reach. Moreover, by exploiting the vulnerability of the captive body as a vessel for the uses, thoughts, and feelings of others, the humanity extended to the slave inadvertently confirms the expectations and desires definitive of the relations of chattel slavery. In other words, the ease of Rankin's empathic identification is as much due to his good intentions and heartfelt opposition to slavery as to the fungibility of the captive body.

By making the suffering of others his own, has Rankin ameliorated indifference or only confirmed the difficulty of understanding the suffering of the enslaved? Can the white witness of the spectacle of suffering affirm the materiality of black sentience only by feeling for himself? Does this not only exacerbate the idea that black sentience is inconceivable and unimaginable but, in the very ease of possessing the abased and enslaved body, ultimately elide an understanding and acknowledgment of the slave's pain? Beyond evidence of slavery's crime, what does this exposure of the suffering body of the bondsman yield? Does this not reinforce the "thingly" quality of the captive by reducing the body to evidence in the very effort to establish the humanity of the enslaved? Does it not reproduce the hyperembodiment of the powerless? The purpose of these inquiries is not to cast doubt on Rankin's motives for recounting these events but to consider the precariousness of empathy and the thin line between witness and spectator. In the fantasy of being beaten, Rankin must substitute himself and his wife and children for the black captive in order that this pain be perceived and experienced. So, in fact, Rankin becomes a proxy and the other's pain is acknowledged to the degree that it can be imagined, yet by virtue of this substitution the object of identification threatens to disappear. In order to convince the reader of the horrors of slavery, Rankin must volunteer himself and his family for abasement. Put differently, the effort to counteract the commonplace callousness to black suffering requires that the white body be positioned in the place of the black body in order to make this suffering visible and intelligible. Yet if this violence can become palpable and indignation can be fully aroused only through the masochistic fantasy, then it becomes clear that empathy is double-edged, for in making the other's suffering one's own, this suffering is occluded by the other's obliteration. Given the litany of horrors that fill Rankin's pages, this recourse to fantasy reveals an anxiety about making the slave's suffering legible. This anxiety is historically determined by the denial of black sentience, the slave's status as object of property, the predicament of witnessing given the legal status of blacks, and the repression of counterdiscourses on the "peculiar institution." Therefore, Rankin must supplant the black captive in order to give expression to black suffering, and as a consequence, the dilemma—the denial of black sentience and the obscurity of suffering—is not attenuated but instantiated. The ambivalent character of empathy—more exactly, the repressive effects of empathy—as Jonathan Boyarin notes, can be located in the "obliteration of otherness" or the facile intimacy that enables identification with the other only as we "feel ourselves into those we

imagine as ourselves." And as a consequence, empathy fails to expand the space of the other but merely places the self in its stead.⁵ This is not to suggest that empathy can be discarded or that Rankin's desire to exist in the place of the other can be dismissed as a narcissistic exercise but rather to highlight the dangers of a too-easy intimacy, the consideration of the self that occurs at the expense of the slave's suffering, and the violence of identification.⁶

As well, we need ask why the site of suffering so readily lends itself to inviting identification. Why is pain the conduit of identification? This question may seem to beg the obvious, given the violent domination and dishonor constitutive of enslavement, the acclaimed transformative capacities of pain in sentimental culture, the prevalence of public displays of suffering inclusive of the pageantry of the trade, the spectacle of punishment, circulating reports of slavery's horrors, the runaway success of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and the passage through the "bloodstained gate," which was a convention of the slave narrative, all of which contributed to the idea that the feelings and consciousness of the enslaved were most available at this site. However, what I am trying to suggest is that if the scene of beating readily lends itself to an identification with the enslaved, it does so at the risk of fixing and naturalizing this condition of pained embodiment and, in complete defiance of Rankin's good intention, increases the difficulty of beholding black suffering since the endeavor to bring pain close exploits the spectacle of the body in pain and oddly confirms the spectral character of suffering and the inability to witness the captive's pain. If, on one hand, pain extends humanity to the dispossessed and the ability to sustain suffering leads to transcendence, on the other, the spectral and spectacular character of this suffering, or, in other words, the shocking and ghostly presence of pain, effaces and restricts black sentience.

As Rankin himself states, in order for this suffering to induce a reaction and stir feelings, it must be brought close. Yet if sentiment or morality are "inextricably tied to human proximity," to quote Zygmunt Bauman, the problem is that in the very effort to "bring it near" and "inspect it closely" it is dissipated. According to Bauman, "Morality conform[s] to the law of optical perspective. It looms large and thick close to the eye."⁷ So, then, how does suffering elude or escape us in the very effort to bring it near? It does so precisely because it can only be brought near by way of a proxy and by way of Rankin's indignation and imagination. If the black body is the vehicle of the other's power, pleasure, and profit, then it is no less true that it is the white or near-white body that makes the captive's suffering visible and discernible.⁸ Indeed, the elusiveness of black suffering can be attributed to a racist optics in which black flesh is itself identified as the source of opacity, the denial of black humanity, and the effacement of sentience integral to the wanton use of the captive body.⁹ And as noted earlier, this is further complicated by the repressive underside of an optics of morality that insists upon the other as a mirror of the self and that in order to recognize suffering must substitute the self for the other.

While Rankin attempts to ameliorate the insufficiency of feeling before the spectacle of the other's suffering, this insufficiency is, in fact, displaced rather than remedied by his standing in. Likewise, this attempt exacerbates the distance between the readers and those suffering by literally removing the slave from view as pain is brought close. Moreover, we need to consider whether the identification forged at

the site of suffering confirms black humanity at the peril of reinforcing racist assumptions of limited sentience, in that the humanity of the enslaved and the violence of the institution can only be brought into view by extreme examples of incineration and dismemberment or by placing white bodies at risk. What does it mean that the violence of slavery or the pained existence of the enslaved, if discernible, is only so in the most heinous and grotesque examples and not in the quotidian routines of slavery?¹⁰ As well, is not the difficulty of empathy related to both the devaluation and the valuation of black life?

Empathic identification is complicated further by the fact that it cannot be extricated from the economy of chattel slavery with which is at odds, for this projection of one's feeling upon or into the object of property and the phantasmic slipping into captivity, while it is distinct from the pleasures of self-augmentation yielded by the ownership of the captive body and the expectations fostered therein, is nonetheless entangled with this economy and identification facilitated by a kindred possession or occupation of the captive body, albeit on a different register. In other words, what I am trying to isolate are the kinds of expectations and the qualities of affect distinctive to the economy of slavery. The relation between pleasure and the possession of slave property, in both the figurative and literal senses, can be explained in part by the fungibility of the slave—that is, the joy made possible by virtue of the replaceability and interchangeability endemic to the commodity—and by the extensive capacities of property—that is, the augmentation of the master subject through his embodiment in external objects and persons.¹¹ Put differently, the fungibility of the commodity makes the captive body an abstract and empty vessel vulnerable to the projection of others' feelings, ideas, desires, and values; and, as property, the dispossessed body of the enslaved is the surrogate for the master's body since it guarantees his disembodied universality and acts as the sign of his power and dominion. Thus, while the beaten and mutilated body presumably establishes the brute materiality of existence, the materiality of suffering regularly eludes (re)cognition by virtue of the body's being replaced by other signs of value, as well as other bodies.

Thus the desire to don, occupy, or possess blackness or the black body as a sentimental resource and/or locus of excess enjoyment is both founded upon and enabled by the material relations of chattel slavery. In light of this, is it too extreme or too obvious to suggest that Rankin's flight of imagination and the excitements engendered by suffering might also be pleasurable? Certainly this willing abasement confirms Rankin's moral authority, but what about the pleasure engendered by this embrace of pain—that is, the tumultuous passions of the lightly imagination stirred by this fantasy of being beaten? Rankin's imagined beating is immune neither to the pleasures to be derived from the masochistic fantasy nor to the sadistic pleasure to be derived from the spectacle of sufferance. Here 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; the pleasure of indignation yielded before the spectacle of sufferance; the instability of the scene of suffering; and the confusion of song and sorrow typical of the coffle, the auction block, performing before the master, and other popular amusements.

By slipping into the black body and figuratively occupying the position of the enslaved, Rankin plays the role of captive and attester and in so doing articulates the

crisis of witnessing determined by the legal incapacity of slaves or free blacks to act as witnesses against whites. Since the veracity of black testimony is in doubt, the crimes of slavery must not only be confirmed by unquestionable authorities and other white observers but also must be made visible, whether by revealing the scarred back of the slave—in short, making the body speak—or through authenticating devices, or, better yet, by enabling reader and audience member to experience vicariously the “tragical scenes of cruelty.”¹² If Rankin as a consequence of his abolitionist sentiments was willing to occupy the “unmasterly” position, sentimentalism prescribed the terms of his identification with the enslaved, and the central term of this identification was suffering. For Rankin, the pageantry of the coffle and sportive music failed to disguise “the sorrows of suffering innocence.” However, for others who also possessed antislavery sentiments, the attempt to understand the inner feelings of the enslaved only effaced the horrors of slavery and further circumscribed the captive’s presumably limited capacity for suffering. For many eyewitnesses of the coffle, the terrors of slavery were dissipated by song and violence was transformed into a display of agency and good cheer.

What concerns me here is the spectacular nature of black suffering and, conversely, the dissimulation of suffering through spectacle. In one respect, the combination of imagined scenes of cruelty with those culled from unquestionable authority evidences the crisis of witnessing that results from the legal subjection of slaves. At the same time, the spectacular dimensions of slavery engender this crisis of witnessing as much as the repression of black testimony since to the degree that the body speaks it is made to speak the master’s truth and augments his power through the imposition and intensification of pain.¹³ All of this is further complicated by the “half-articulate” and “incoherent song” that confounds the transparency of testimony and radically complicates the rendering of slavery. In light of these concerns, this chapter wrestles with the following questions: Does the extension of humanity to the enslaved ironically reinscribe their subjugated status? Do the figurative capacities of blackness enable white flights of fantasy while increasing the likelihood of the captive’s disappearance? Can the moral embrace of pain extricate itself from pleasures borne by subjection? In other words, does the scene of the tyrannized slave at the bloodstained gate delight the loathsome master and provide wholesome pleasures to the upright and the virtuous? Is the act of “witnessing” a kind of looking no less entangled with the wielding of power and the extraction of enjoyment? Does the captive’s dance allay grief or articulate the fraught, compromised, and impossible character of agency? Or does it exemplify the use of the body as an instrument against the self?

The scenes of subjection considered here—the coerced spectacles orchestrated to encourage the trade in black flesh; scenes of torture and festivity; the tragedy of virtuous women and the antics of outrageous darkies—all turn upon the simulation of agency and the excesses of black enjoyment. The affiliation of performance and blackness can be attributed to the spectacularization of black pain and racist conceptions of Negro nature as carefree, infantile, hedonistic, and indifferent to suffering and to an interested misreading of the interdependence of labor and song common among the enslaved.¹⁴ The constitution of blackness as an abject and degraded condition and the fascination with the other’s enjoyment went hand in hand. More-

over, blacks were envisioned fundamentally as vehicles for white enjoyment, in all of its sundry and unspeakable expressions; this was as much the consequence of the chattel status of the captive as it was of the excess enjoyment imputed to the other, for those forced to dance on the decks of slave ships crossing the Middle Passage, step it up lively on the auction block, and amuse the master and his friends were seen as the purveyors of pleasure. The amazing popularity of the "darkies" of the minstrel stage must be considered in this light. Contending variants of racism, ranging from the proslavery plantation pastoralism to the romantic racialism of abolitionists, similarly constituted the African as childish, primitive, contented, and endowed with great mimetic capacities. Essentially, these characteristics defined the infamous and renowned Sambo. This history is of central importance when evaluating the politics of pleasure, the uses of slave property, the constitution of the subject, and the tactics of resistance. Indeed, the convergence of terror and enjoyment cannot be understood outside it.

The pageantry of the coffle, stepping it up lively on the auction block, going before the master, and the blackface mask of minstrelsy and melodrama all evidenced the entanglements of terror and enjoyment. Above all, the simulated jollity and coerced festivity of the slave trade and the instrumental recreations of plantation management document the investment in and obsession with "black enjoyment" and the significance of these orchestrated amusements as part of a larger effort to dissimulate the extreme violence of the institution and disavow the pain of captivity. Indeed, the transubstantiation of abjection into contentment suggested that the traumas of slavery were easily redressed and, likewise, the prevalence of black song confirmed blacks' restricted sentience and immunity to sorrow. Most important, enjoyment defined the relation of the dominant race to the enslaved. In other words, the nefarious uses of chattel licensed by the legal and social relations of slavery articulated the nexus of pleasure and possession and bespoke the critical role of diversion in securing the relations of bondage. In this way, enjoyment disclosed the sentiments and expectations of the "peculiar institution."

The Property of Enjoyment

From the vantage point of the everyday relations of slavery, enjoyment, broadly speaking, defined the parameters of racial relations, since in practice all whites were allowed a great degree of latitude in regard to uses of the enslaved. Before proceeding to limn the important features of antebellum enjoyment, a gloss on enjoyment and its relation to use and possession would be helpful here.¹⁵ *Black's Law Dictionary* defines the term "enjoy" as "to have, possess, and use with satisfaction; to occupy or have the benefit of." While enjoyment encompasses these rudimentary features, it also denotes more extensive capacities. It entails "the exercise of a right; the promise and function of a right, privilege or incorporeal hereditament. Comfort, consolation, contentment, ease, happiness, pleasure and satisfaction. Such includes the beneficial use, interest, and purpose to which property may be put, and implies rights to profits and incomes therefrom." At the outset, is it clear that to take delight in, to use, and to possess are inextricably linked and,

moreover, that enjoyment entails everything from the use of one's possession to the value of whiteness, which can be considered an incorporeal hereditament or illusory inheritance of chattel slavery.

Since the subjection of the slave to all whites defined his condition in civil society, effectively this made the enslaved an object of property to be potentially used and abused by all whites; however, to speak at all of the civil condition of the slave, as George M. Stroud remarked, is a kind of solecism.¹⁶ It is a tricky matter to detail the civil existence of a subject who is socially dead and legally recognized as human only to the degree that he is criminally culpable. Yet it is the anomalous status of the enslaved that determines the specific uses of the slave as object of property and the relation between citizens and those who can be identified as civil subjects in the most circumscribed and tentative fashion. Hence what is striking here are the myriad and nefarious uses of slave property and the ways in which slaves become the property of all whites, given their status in civil society. In this effort, let us turn to William Goodell's *American Slave Codes* and Stroud's *A Sketch of the Laws Relating to Slavery in the Several States of the United States of America*. In chapter 3, Stroud examines the condition of the slave as a member of civil society. As identified by Stroud, the notable features of this anomalous civil condition are: the slave cannot be a witness against a white person, either in a civil or criminal cause; the slave cannot be a party to a civil suit; the benefits of education are withheld from the slave; the means for moral or religious education are not granted to the enslaved; submission is required of the slave, not to the will of his master only but to that of all other white persons; the penal codes of the slave-holding states bear much more severely upon slaves than upon white persons; and slaves are prosecuted and tried upon criminal accusations in a manner inconsistent with the rights of humanity.¹⁷

Here I want to focus on a singular aspect of the slave's existence in civil society—the submission of the slave to all whites. As Stroud notes, the great concession to the power of the master and to all whites was evidenced by laws that prohibited the slave from defending himself from the master to avoid vindictive punishment or from striking any white in self-defense. Such laws not only exacted strict submission extending to bloodshed and murder but also "furnish[ed] a pretext" and an inducement to oppress and tyrannize the enslaved. Consequently, the enslaved were forced to "patiently endure every species of personal injury, which a white person, however brutal or ferocious his disposition . . . may choose to offer."¹⁸ Along similar lines, Goodell, after reviewing state statutes that prohibited the slave from defending himself against the assault of any white person and punished such offenses by cropping ears, inflicting thirty lashes on a bare back, or bringing about death, concluded that "if civil government were designed for human demoralization and torture, it is not easy to see how its ends could be more effectually reached."¹⁹

To be sure, the laws of slavery subjected the enslaved to the absolute control and authority of any and every member of the dominant race. At the very least, the relations of chattel slavery served to enhance whiteness by racializing rights and entitlements, designating inferior and superior races, and granting whites' dominion over blacks. In light of such considerations, the contours of antebellum enjoyment reveal less about "the nature of the Negro" than the terms of interracial interaction that engendered the understanding and imputation of black excess. Given this, let

me suggest that not only were the rights and privileges of white citizens undergirded by the subjection of blacks but, moreover, that enjoyment in turn defined the meaning of subjection. The interdiction against self-defense and the inability of a slave to testify against whites permitted the slave to be used in any capacity that pleased the master or whomever. And as Goodell noted, in a rather indirect fashion, the uses of property also included the sexual violation of the enslaved. The few restrictions placed upon the uses of slave property concerned only the master's rights of property.²⁰ Indeed, the dissolute uses of slave property came to define the identity of the captive and hence the nature of the Negro. As well, these actual or imagined usages established the parameters of interracial association.

Indeed, there was no relation to blackness outside the terms of this use of, entitlement to, and occupation of the captive body, for even the status of free blacks was shaped and compromised by the existence of slavery. Although, as I have argued, enjoyment was predicated on the wanton uses of slave property, it was attributed to the slave in order to deny, displace, and minimize the violence of slavery. As a result, in spectacles like the coffle, it appeared not only that the slave was indifferent to his wretched condition, but also that he had nonetheless achieved a measure of satisfaction with that condition. Thus the efficacy of violence was indicated precisely by its invisibility or transparency and in the copious display of slave agency. Like the imputation of lasciviousness that dissimulated and condoned the sexual violation of the enslaved, and the punitive recognition of will and responsibility that justified punishment while denying the slave the ability to forge contracts, testify, or sustain natal and conjugal relations, enjoyment registered and effaced the violence of property relations.

Thus, as I have tried to suggest, the fixation on the slave's "good times" conceals the affiliations of white enjoyment and black subjection and the affective dimensions of mastery and servitude. From this perspective, the seemingly casual observations about black fun and frolic obscure this wanton usage and the incorporation of the captive body in realizing the extensive and sentient capacities of the master subject. As Slavoj Zizek notes, fantasies about the other's enjoyment are ways for us to organize our own enjoyment. In this context, he asks: "Does not the Other's enjoyment exert such a powerful fascination because in it we represent to ourselves our own innermost relationship toward enjoyment?"²¹ What is revealed about this innermost relationship toward enjoyment? An indifference to suffering or a keen investment in it? Whose unease was allayed by the dance? If the excess of enjoyment imputed to the enslaved displaced what we would think of as disturbing circumstances, it did so only by obscuring violence and conflating it with pleasure.

(In)sufferable Pleasures

Rankin was not alone in his desire to slip into blackness and experience the suffering of slavery "firsthand," so to speak. On the contrary, the popularity of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *The Octoroon* indicates the willingness of others to suffer, too. The elasticity of blackness and its capacious affects enabled such flights and becomings. Moreover, in this case, the figurative capacities of blackness and the

fungibility of the commodity are directly linked. The fungibility of the commodity, specifically its abstractness and immateriality, enabled the black body or blackface mask to serve as the vehicle of white self-exploration, renunciation, and enjoyment.²² Therefore, the ability to put on blackness must be considered in the context of chattel slavery and the economy of enjoyment founded thereupon. Antebellum formations of pleasure, even those of the North, need to be considered in relation to the affective dimensions of chattel slavery since enjoyment is virtually unimaginable without recourse to the black body and the subjection of the captive, the diversions engendered by the dispossession of the enslaved, or the fantasies launched by the myriad uses of the black body. For this reason the formal features of this economy of pleasure and the politics of enjoyment are considered in regard to the literal and figurative occupation and possession of the body. This reading attempts to elucidate the means by which the wanton use of and the violence directed toward the black body come to be identified as *its* pleasure and dangers—that is, the expectations of slave property are ontologized as the innate capacities and inner feelings of the enslaved, and moreover, the ascription of excess and enjoyment to the African effaces the violence perpetrated against the enslaved. In light of these issues, the schematic analysis of minstrelsy and melodrama that follows focuses on the convergence of violence and pleasure, which is identified as one of the primary attributes of this economy of enjoyment, rather than providing a close reading of the texts of minstrelsy and melodrama. Scant attention is paid to the white spectator's identification with blackface characters. Instead, the major issue explored is the relation between pleasure and violence—that is, the facility of blackness in the other's self-fashioning and the role of pleasure in securing the mechanisms of racial subjection. In other words, this economy of enjoyment is interrogated through a consideration of the dynamics of possession and close scrutiny of the object of property and its uses.

Despite differences between their respective conventions and stylistic devices, the uses made of the black body established continuities between minstrelsy and melodrama that surpassed their generic differences.²³ Although the ethical valence of such violence differed, it nonetheless delivered a significant pleasure. Blows caused the virtuous black body of melodrama to be esteemed and humiliated the grotesque black body of minstrelsy. Uncle Tom's tribulations were tempered by the slaps and punches delivered to Topsy. The body's placement as ravaged object or as the recipient of farcical blows nonetheless established a corporeal language that marked Zoe, Tom, and Topsy as identifiably black and exposed the affiliations between the auction block and the popular theater.²⁴ Affect, gesture, and a vulnerability to violence constituted blackness. Thus, despite the antislavery blackface of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the violation of the ersatz black body engendered pleasure, whether a monopathic wholeness engendered by the Manichaean struggle of good or evil or the bawdy pleasures of Topsy's comic antics and the brutish response to them.²⁵ Torture and torment both generated enjoyment.

Not unlike the legal interpellation of slave humanity, injury and punishment defined the personhood of these characters. Whether venerated as an opportunity for Christian endurance or legitimated by darky pretensions and trespasses, violence nonetheless engendered blackness. The virtuous suffering and ethical submission of

sentimentalism and the social transgression enacted and punished in farce conspired to make the corporeal enactment of blackness a pained one.²⁶ Melodrama presented blackness as a vehicle of protest and dissent, and minstrelsy made it the embodiment of unmentionable and transgressive pleasures. In both instances, the fashioning of blackness aroused pity and fear, desire and revulsion, and terror and pleasure. And as we shall see, this ambivalent complex of feelings describes not only the emotional appeals of the popular stage but also the spectacle of the auction block.²⁷

Black characters rarely appeared as heroes or heroines in melodrama, except in the moral drama of antislavery plays. As dictated by convention, slavery was staged as the clash of villainy and virtue. "The very dangerous evil" of slavery and, in particular, the crimes of the slave trade were well suited to the stage of melodrama. The crime of the trade was seen as a crime of the heart—"the outrages of feelings and affection." (For example, Professor E. A. Andrews, in his treatise on the slave trade, argued for the abolition of the trade on the grounds that "domestic relations [were] the foundation of all virtue, and consequently of all the happiness of society, and everything inconsistent with the perpetuity of these relations ought at once, everywhere, and forever, to cease."²⁸ The offense against virtue perpetuated in the sundering of families offended sentiment and easily transformed slavery's crimes into the stuff of melodrama. Thus when one is considering the crimes of slavery, the popular theater is as central as the courthouse.) Virtue, imperiled and unrecognized, positioned slaves as innocents held captive by the pernicious institution, and blackness was the emblem of this tortured innocence. Melodrama provided the dramatic frame that made the experience of slavery meaningful in the antinomian terms of the moral imagination. The emotional power of melodrama's essential language of good and evil armed antislavery dissent with the force of moral right and might. Abolitionist discourse shared melodrama's obsession: virtue, virginity, and the sanctity of the family. After all, what was the coffin but a drama of moral life accompanied by the music of violins? The descriptions of Rankin and other nineteenth-century observers rendered the trade and the coffin in the style of the melodramatic tableau—the frozen moment in which gestures and attitudes take the form of moral emblems.²⁹ Woe-worn, "loaded with chains," and driven by "unfelling wretches," the slaves are mute while their music conveys the message of anguish. Song, therefore, became the emblem of oppression, and in these songs, sorrow was as palpable as the chains that bound the flesh, and yet it was ineffable, too.

Yet melodramas were also replete with minstrel fare; the antics of plantation darkies provided levity amid catastrophe. Generally, representations of blackness were restricted to stock "darky" characters or low-comedy types, with the exceptions of the tragic mulatto and the dignified, pathetic, and suffering slave.³⁰ In antislavery dramas, beleaguered slave heroes and heroines supplemented rather than replaced darky fanfare. Ironically, the maintenance of racial boundaries occurred through the donning of the blackface mask or the display of tragically bifurcated racial bodies. For example, in the case of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the grammar of sentiment and the rhetoric of minstrelsy set the stage for a performance of slavery that wed cruelty and festivity.³¹ Abolitionists' politics allied with blackface techniques created an ambivalent portrait of slavery that denounced the institution as it supplemented minstrelsy's range of darky fare.

Blackness was a masquerade in melodrama no less than in minstrelsy since the roles of the black subjects of melodrama were usually performed by white actors in blackface.³² Like the mask of blackness on the minstrel stage, melodrama's black mask was ambivalent and contradictory. While it proclaimed truth and virtue, which were manifested in bodily expression, since the body was to be read as an ethical allegory, it, too, manipulated the disparity between substance and surface. The pleasures of duplicity were inextricably linked with its dangers. Melodrama explored the pleasures and dangers of racial travesty in tales of distressed quadroons and octofoons. Moreover, while mulatto figures, who were usually women, represented a crisis of racial legibility, they nonetheless made blackness more palatable. At the same time, the disparity between identity and appearance contributed to the hero's or heroine's affliction and his or her usually tragic end. In these moral dramas, the battle of good and evil was waged at the site of the tortured and chaste black body; suffering announced virtue. Tom's chained and beaten body proclaimed his saintliness; Zoe's self-immolation conveyed her great love and humility. Meanwhile, black characters bearing a striking resemblance to Zip Coon, Jim Crow, and Coal Black Rose, the bumbling, loyal, and childish Sambos and wenches of minstrel fare, provided the comic backdrop of virtue's triumph.

Blackness in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *The Escape*, *Dred*, and *The Octoroon* was also delineated by darky antics—lying, loafing, stealing, and breakdown dancing. Even saintly Tom's performance was embellished with minstrelsy.³³ The convergence between abolitionism's sentimental structure of feeling with that of proslavery discourse was evidenced in the stage productions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Uncle Tom sang a rendition of "Old Folks at Home," a popular minstrel song written by Stephen Foster, and even "Uncle Tom's Religion" resembled a minstrel air. The lyrics to "Old Folks at Home" clearly make the case:

Way down upon de Swanee ribber,
Far, far away
Dere's wha my heart is turning ebber,
Dere's wha de old folks stay.
All up and down de whole creation,
Sadly I roam,
Still longing for de old plantation,
And for de old folks at home.
All de world am sad and dreary,
Ebry where I roam,
Oh! darkeys how my heart grows weary,
Far from de old folks at home.³⁴

Dissembling tricksters, fools, and wenches also populated the stage of melodrama. Fancy footwork, sexual flourishes, and deceit were accompanied by the blows that grounded the body and returned the trespasser/dissembler to his place. On stage, Topsy was as great an attraction as Tom. As much as the audience enjoyed scenes of suffering innocence, terrifying villainy, and the triumph of virtue, they enjoyed the bawdy and outrageous acts of minstrelsy no less. The imperiled body of melodrama and the dangers of the lower bodily realms gratified the audience's desire to witness and experience the prohibited and the repressed. The indiscriminate use of the black

body made possible the pleasure of terror and the terror of pleasure. Within this framework, suffering and shuffling were complementary.

The convergences between the bodily politics of minstrelsy and those of melodrama might be said to center on the redemptive and recreational use of violence.³⁵ Certainly, the disciplinary vengeance of farce exercised in minstrelsy reproduced black subjection, albeit accompanied by laughter.³⁶ On the minstrel stage, the comic inversions, bawdy humor, and lampooning of class hierarchies nonetheless operated within the confines of the tolerable, particularly since this transgression of order occurred by reproducing the abject status of blackness. While the dynamics of "romance and repulsion," to borrow Eric Lott's terms, enabled acts of transgression licensed by the blackface mask, blackness was also policed through derision, ridicule, and violence; thus, in the end, the white flights of imagination and transgressive exploits facilitated by donning blackface ultimately restored the racial terms of social order.³⁷ The abrogation of social order and the loosening of the strictures of identity enabled by the blackface mask in turn fortified a repressive and restrictive reception of blackness, which, although elastic enough to permit white self-exploration, could not trespass the parameters established to maintain racial hierarchies. Thus minstrelsy flouted high culture and cultivated a common sense of whiteness only as it reinforced the subjugated status of blacks. As David Roediger notes, minstrelsy articulated a white working-class consciousness "by racializing conflict more than directly articulating class grievances."³⁸ The Manichaeanism at the heart of minstrelsy was the division between the races. The seeming transgressions of the color line and the identification forged with the blackface mask through aversion and/or desire ultimately served only to reinforce relations of mastery and servitude. As Michael Rogin observes, "Far from being a failed union of black and white workers, minstrelsy realized the Jacksonian dream of allying the northern popular classes with slave labor."³⁹ It is no surprise that the relations of mastery and servitude, which determined the meaning of white identity, the character of citizenship, and the scope of rights and entitlements, were also essential to antebellum formations of pleasure.⁴⁰

Minstrelsy's plantation nostalgia returned Jim Crow to his happy home and affirmed the institution of slavery in happy scenes of the plantation and carry-me-back-to-the-old-plantation songs of ex-slaves; moreover, those who entertained foolish aspirations of being like white men were summarily punished.⁴¹ Songs like "Away Down Souf," "My Old Kentucky Home," and "Old Folks at Home" all celebrate the glories of the South and the desire to return to the plantation home where "de corn-top blossom and de canebrake grow." Stephen Foster's renowned "Massa's in de Cold Ground" was replete with the sentimentalism of plantation nostalgia:

Massa made de darkeys love him, cayse he was so kind
Now de sadly weep above him, mourning cayse he leave dem behind.
I cannot work before tomorrow, cayse de tear drops flow
I try to drive away my sorrow, pickin on de old banjo.⁴²

The most famous of these Southern pastorals was Dan Emmett's "I Wish I Was in Dixie's Land," which was written in the spring of 1859. Years later Emmett, clarifying the origin and authorship of the tune, stated that "Dixie" "is nothing but

a plain simple melody with plantation words, the purport of which is that a negro in the north feels himself out of place, and thinking of his old home in the south, is made to exclaim, in the words of the song—I wish I was in Dixie.”⁴³ The purport of this simple tune, as succinctly outlined by Emmett, was to return the Negro to his proper place, which brings to mind George Fredrickson’s observation that in the antebellum world, the “good negro” was always in his place and the “bad nigger” outside it.⁴⁴ By extension, this dominative logic of return and suitable placement can also be applied to tunes like “Loozyanna Low Grounds,” “De Ole Jaw Bone,” “De Floating Scow of Ole Virginia,” and other “carry-me-backs” whose typical themes were recollection of the good old days on the plantation, the separation from family and home as a result of the move north, and a fervent desire to return to the old home.⁴⁵ The sentiment of the carry-me-backs is illuminated by the following stanzas of “I’m Going Home to Dixie,” written by Dan Emmett in 1858.

There is a land where cotton grows, a land where milk and honey flows
I’m going home to Dixie! Yes! I’m going home.

I’ve got not time to tarry, I’ve got no time to stay.
‘Tis a rocky road to travel, to Dixie far away.

I’ve wander’d far both to and fro'
But Dixie’s heaven here below
I’m going home.

O list to what I’ve got to say
Freedom to me will never pay!
I’m going home.

In Dixie Land the fields do bloom
And color’d men have welcome room
I’m going home.

I will proclaim it loud and long
I love old Dixie right or wrong.
I’m going home.⁴⁶

Thus the representations of slavery rendered in the minstrel show created a plantation pastoral in which “Gayly de Niggas Dance[d].”⁴⁷ Even sentimental plays and tunes that explored issues of separation implied that the loss of family and friends was the result of Cuff’s or Sambo’s choice.

Thus minstrelsy dramatically resolved the tension between domination and intimacy by recourse to sentimental tropes of reciprocity, domesticity, and kinship. Like the orchestrated amusements of the master, minstrelsy elaborated and fixed blackness in a theatrical presentation both violent and celebratory. Whippings were to minstrelsy what tears were to melodrama. If grotesque bodily acts like rolling eyes, lolling tongues, obscene gestures, shuffling, and the like animated the body, blows invested it with meaning. Beatings, blows, and brawls reestablished the identity of those who defied the boundaries of race and status. The vain displays of Zip Coon and the inept self-promotion of would-be strivers like Jim Dandy were the source of ridicule. Plays like *Oh, Hush!* and *Old Zip Coon* and songs like “Dandy

Jim from Caroline," "Pompey Squash," "Jim along Josey," and "High Daddy" mocked such pretensions.⁴⁸ In the same vein, characters like Sambo Johnson, Doctor Quash, or 'Meriky, a colored fashion plate, put on airs and, more important, strove to be something greater than they were and thereby trespassed the racist logic of suitable placement. In the end, however, these vain aspirations were punished and blacks returned to their proper stations.⁴⁹ Whenever Zip Coon slipped out of place, he was brutally returned there. When 'Meriky converted to Episcopalianism, she was beaten by her father until she regained her senses and declared that she was "a deep-water Baptist." By the same token, Doctor Quash, the sham physician and mangler, is beaten, murdered, revived, and forced to run a gauntlet.⁵⁰ Moreover, his name alone obviates the inextricable link between fashioning blackness and violence. Sambo Johnson's pretense of literacy and buffoonish display of skill and learning are rewarded with a humiliating unmasking and whipping by Cuff. In this fashion, the duplicitous and the pretentious were herded into the acceptable confines of the social. As it turned out, these performances of blackness regulated the excess they conjured up with the threat of punishment and humiliating discovery.

The pretensions of high culture and the society of manners were lampooned by focusing on black buffoonery and the ridiculously impossible aspirations, or should I say perspirations, of blacks trying to improve themselves—that is, putting on airs and trying to be white. According to the tenets of minstrelsy, the only ambition fitting for blacks was "showing de science of his heels."⁵¹ "High Daddy" mocked the aspirations to be white and, in this case, free in a more direct fashion:

I know a darkie and his name it was Joe,
I met High Daddy in the morning.
I know it was, for he once told me so;
I met High Daddy and I wont go home any more, any more.
He used to hoe and dig up all the land,
I met High Daddy in the morning.
But now he says that work is contraband.
I met High Daddy and I wont go home any more, any more.

He drank skimm'd milk from morn 'till night,
I met . . .
Somebody said that it would make him white;
I met . . .
But let him drink until he gets his fill,
I met . . .
He always bound to be a darkie still!
I met . . .⁵²

"Bound" to be a darky, whether slave, contraband, or free, is at the very nexus of the economy of enjoyment I am trying to elaborate here. Within this economy, the bound black body, permanently affixed in its place, engenders pleasure not only ensuant to the buffoonery and grotesqueries of Cuff, Sambo, and Zip Coon but above all deriving from the very mechanisms of this coercive placement; it is a pleasure obtained from the security of place and order and predicated upon chattel slavery. In this regard, the donning of blackface restaged the seizure and possession

of the black body for the other's use and enjoyment. The culture of cross-racial identification facilitated in minstrelsy cannot be extricated from the relations of chattel slavery.

Overwhelmingly the donning of the blackface mask reiterated racial subjection, however much this subjection might provide a liberatory vehicle for white working-class consciousness or a sense of white integrity and wholeness effected by the policing of racial boundaries.⁵³ In blackface, as elsewhere in antebellum society, the fashioning of whiteness in large measure occurred by way of the subjugation of blacks. The illusory integrity of whiteness facilitated by attraction and/or antipathy to blackness was ultimately predicated upon the indiscriminate use and possession of the black body. The appropriation of Sambo's affect, the donning of blackface, and the audience's consequent identification with the minstrel mask provided whiteness with a coherence and illusory integrity dependent upon the relations of mastery and servitude and the possession of a figurative body of blackness, whether to incite abolitionist passions or cultivate white working-class consciousness.

As it turned out, both minstrelsy and melodrama (re)produced blackness as an essentially pained expression of the body's possibilities. Paradoxically, racial subterfuge and the exploration of artifice reproduced essential and repressive definitions of blackness. The punitive pleasures yielded through the figurative possession of blackness cannot be disentangled from the bodily politics of chattel slavery. Blackness facilitated prohibited explorations, tabooed associations, immodest acts, and bawdy pleasures. The terror of pleasure—the violence that undergirded the comic moment in minstrelsy—and the pleasure of terror—the force of evil that propelled the plot of melodrama and fascinated the spectator—filiated the coffle, the auction block, the popular stage, and plantation recreations in a scandalous equality. At each of these sites of performance, suffering was transformed into wholesome pleasures. As Zoe, the heroine of *The Octoroon*, imagined it: “Our race has at least one virtue—it knows how to suffer!”⁵⁴

The Coffle

Upon observing a mournful procession of slaves “loaded with chains,” singing a “little wild hymn of sweet and mournful melody,” and headed to market, George Tucker could only wonder: “What is their crime? And what is to be their punishment?”⁵⁵ Astonished by the gross incongruence of the display, we are also left to ponder how sweet wild hymns and crime coexist, whether the origin of American theater is to be found in a no-longer-remembered primal scene of torture, and whether song bears the trace of punishment. The pageantry of the trade, the unabashed display of the market’s brutality, the juxtaposition of sorrow and mirth, and the separation of families accounted for the trade’s declared status as the most horrible feature of the institution of slavery.⁵⁶ The coffle was described by nineteenth-century observers as a domestic middle passage, piracy, a momentous evil, and, most frequently, a crime. George W. Featherstonhaugh, though revolted by the coffle, could not help but exclaim that it was “the most striking spectacle ever witnessed.” The incongruity of those shackled and bound for market being cajoled

to sing "Old Virginia Never Tire," a minstrel tune no less, to the accompaniment of a banjo inspired his incredulity and amazement. Although the procession of the coffle, in Featherstonhaugh's words, was "disgusting" and "hideous," the march of despair was obviously not without its festivities. As Featherstonhaugh observes, the slave drivers, aware of the slaves' disposition to mutiny, "endeavor to mitigate their discontent by feeding them well on the march, and by encouraging them to sing 'Old Virginia never tire,' to the banjo." Given that the "poor negro slave is naturally a cheerful, laughing animal, and even when driven through the wilderness in chains, if he is well fed and kindly treated, is seldom melancholy," the lively stories, oranges, and sugar to be had achieved their ends and effected a singular docility.⁵⁷

Although this "melancholy spectacle" aroused Featherstonhaugh's revulsion and sympathy, what is interesting for my purposes is the movement from the "disgusting" and "hideous" display to the cheerful laughing Negro, who seems conjured up rather than situated within the spectacle, or from repulsion to romance. Although Featherstonhaugh definitely recognizes the driver's instigation of song and provides ample details of the hideous scene, he nonetheless suggests that the enslaved are cheery and contented, based upon his musings about black character and the slave's minimal longing for animal comforts—sufficient food, kind treatment, and warmth. The incongruence first attributed to the spectacle is no less marked in Featherstonhaugh's divergent assessments. He both decries the revolting and the hideous and projects comfort and cheer, and as a result the ghastly scene is itself severed from the characters shackled within it. Moreover, despite the initial revulsion that the coffle induced, the melancholy spectacle remains at an emotional and contemplative distance, and musings about Negro character displace the hideous with the entertaining. This is all the more disturbing precisely because this scene gives expression to Featherstonhaugh's abolitionist sentiments. In other words, the fixation on comfort and gratification is not indifferent to suffering. Although Featherstonhaugh winds up reconciling the two, it is not by virtue of the promiscuous coexistence of song and shackle in the spectacle but by way of speculations about character and animal comforts. The gaze shifts from the spectacle to the inner recesses of feeling and desire—that is, the emotional substrate that presumably resides within the "poor slave," which mutes the shock of the scene and mitigates its ghastly incommensurability with the suggestion of contentment.

The profane association of song and suffering raises a host of issues that exceed the fascination or disapprobation incited by the apparently unsettling juxtaposition of the festive and the obscene. Foremost among these issues is the thorny status of pleasure, given such instrumental uses, the instability of agency when conspicuous displays of willfulness only serve to undermine the subject, and the perviousness of pain and pleasure at various sites of amusement, inclusive of slaves striking it smart on the auction block, the popular stage, and the breakdown performed in the quarters. The affiliations between these diverse sites of performance outline a problematic of enjoyment in which pleasure is inseparable from subjection, will indistinguishable from submission, and bodily integrity bound to violence. The observations of Tyrone Power, an Irish traveler journeying through the United States in the 1830s, are revealing in this regard. Upon encountering a caravan of fifty to

sixty slaves moving southwest with their owners, Power surmised: "Judging fairly by their deportment and loud merriment, despite the great fatigue and constant exposure, the affair was taken in a sort of holiday spirit, no way warranted by their half-naked miserable appearance."⁵⁸ If the holiday spirit is, as Power asserts, unwarranted, judging by the miserable appearance and the wretched condition of the enslaved, it leads us to interrogate whose pleasure is being considered at the site of such encounters—the observers' or that of the fettered slaves within this hideous parade—as well as the relation of song and suffering.

When Lincoln encountered a slave coffle aboard the steamboat *Lebanon* en route to St. Louis, he was prompted to consider "the effect of condition upon human happiness," not the crime of the trade or the distress of the slaves:

A gentleman had purchased twelve negroes in different parts of Kentucky and was taking them to a farm in the South. They were chained six and six together. A small iron clevis was around the left wrist of each, and this fastened to the main chain by a shorter one at a convenient distance from the others; so that the negroes were strung together precisely like so many fish upon a trot-line. In this condition they were being separated from the scenes of their childhood, their friends, their fathers and mothers, and brothers and sisters, and many of them, from their wives and children, and going into perpetual slavery where the lash of the master is proverbially more ruthless and unrelenting than any other where; and yet amid all these distressing circumstances, as we would think of them, they were the most cheerful and apparently happy creatures on board. One whose offence for which he had been sold was an over-fondness for his wife, played the fiddle almost continually; and others danced, sung, cracked jokes, and played various games with cards from day to day. How true it is that "God tempers the wind to the shorn lamb," or in other words, that He renders the worst of the human condition tolerable, while He permits the best, to be nothing but tolerable.⁵⁹

Lincoln's observations would suggest that song, dance, and game discredit any and all claims of pain. However, it is interesting to note that the cheerful disposition of the enslaved not only established the suitedness of the slave's nature to the condition of slavery but provided the occasion on which to muse about the adequacy of the human condition. Lincoln surmises, based upon this scene, that the worst of the human condition mirrors the best in being simply bearable. What I am trying to get at here are the dimensions of this investment in and fixation with Negro enjoyment, for these encounters with the enslaved grant the observer access to an illusory plentitude of fun and feeling. I contend that these scenes of enjoyment provide an opportunity for white self-reflection, or, more broadly speaking, the elasticity of blackness enables its deployment as a vehicle for exploring the human condition, although, ironically, these musings are utterly indifferent to the violated condition of the vessel of song. The utility of what Toni Morrison has described as the "Africanist persona" resides in these reflexive capacities; in short, it enables meditations on the self and explorations of dread and desire.⁶⁰ While it is not surprising or unusual that the extreme and incongruous display of the coffle prompted reflection upon the human condition, what is remarkable is the way violence becomes neutralized and the shocking readily assimilated to the normal, the everyday, the bearable. In effect, reflection acts to normalize the scene and deny the presence of violence by characterizing it as within the context of the socially endurable; and, accordingly, the scene

shifts from one of despair to one of contentment and endurance. Remarkably, the emotional resources, animal needs, and limited affections of the enslaved are made responsible for this shift.

Worse yet, the liberal extension of feeling to those shackled like a herd of cattle or strung together like a line of fish only serves to efface violence and circumscribe the captives' sentience through such attributions of contentment or evaluations of the bearable. As reported, either their feelings seem unwarranted considering their condition—holiday spirit incongruously paired with a half-miserable and wretched condition—or this proverbial cheer especially suited them for enslavement. As a consequence of this, the very effort to engage the predicament of slavery culminates in a selective acknowledgment of sentience that only reinforces the tethers of subjection. Certainly Lincoln's discernments of sentiment harmonize chattel slavery with the verities of the human condition. In order to understand the condition of the enslaved, Lincoln basically likens them to himself to address the human condition. The assimilative character of empathy can be blamed in part for this, for approximation overtakes the proximity essential to ethical conduct and the violence of this obliteration and assimilation is no less great, albeit of a different character, than the racist antipathy that can only envision the enslaved as object and dehumanized other. Those shackled to one another do not document the disparities of the human condition or, most obviously, the violation of natural liberty or cause Lincoln to reflect on the liberties and entitlements that he enjoys but merely provide an opportunity for self-reflection and a narrative digression within an otherwise "most dull and silly" letter. The separation of fathers and children, the lash, the small irons attaching the enslaved like so many fish upon a trotline, ruthless masters, et cetera, et cetera, although distressing conditions as "we" might imagine them, appear to have little effect on these apparently happy creatures. Songs, jokes, and dance transform wretched conditions into a conspicuous, and apparently convincing, display of contentment. As a result, this circumscribed recognition of black humanity itself becomes an exercise of violence.

For the moment, suffice it to say that such indulgence in song reflected neither an embrace of slavery nor a unity of feeling but, when not simply prompted by the sting of the whip, was a veiled articulation of the extreme and paradoxical conditions of slavery, often mistaken for nonsense or joy. Yet as Douglass remarked, these seemingly meaningless and incoherent songs, though difficult for those outside and within the circle of slavery to understand, revealed more about the horrors of the institution than did volumes of philosophy. While I will undertake a more extensive discussion of the politics of cultural production later, here let me stress the complexity and opacity of black song and the difficulty of clarifying, with any degree of certainty or assuredness, the politics of slave song and performance when dissolution and redress collude with one another and terror is yoked to enjoyment. This investigation, following the path laid by Douglass and W. E. B. Du Bois, turns upon the veiled and half-articulate messages contained in song, or, to quote Paul Gilroy, the politics of a lower frequency and the "unsayable claims to truth" that can never be communicated.⁶¹ Hence my task is neither to unearth the definitive meaning of song or dance nor to read song as an expression of black character as was common among nineteenth-century ethnographers but to give full weight to the opacity of

these texts wrought by toil, terror, and sorrow and composed under the whip and in fleeting moments of reprieve. Rather than consider black song as an index or mirror of the slave condition, this examination emphasizes the significance of opacity as precisely that which enables something in excess of the orchestrated amusements of the enslaved and which similarly troubles distinctions between joy and sorrow and toil and leisure. For this opacity, the subterranean and veiled character of slave song must be considered in relation to the dominative imposition of transparency and the degrading hypervisibility of the enslaved, and therefore, by the same token, such concealment should be considered a form of resistance. Furthermore, as Glissant advises, “the attempt to approach a reality so hidden from view cannot be organized in terms of a series of clarifications.”⁶² The right to obscurity must be respected, for the “accumulated hurt,” the “rasping whispers deep in the throat,” the wild notes, and the screams lodged deep within confound simple expression and, likewise, withstand the prevailing ascriptions of black enjoyment.

Disavowing the Claims of Pain

For those forced to “step it up lively,” the festivity of the trade and the pageantry of the coffle were intended to shroud the violence of the market and deny the sorrow of those sold and their families. These extravagant displays elided the distinction between submission and willfulness in the purposive denial of pain. This disavowal of the captives’ pain operates on a number of levels, from simple denial of pain to the stipulation of an excessive enjoyment.⁶³ The terms of this disavowal are something like: No, the slave is not in pain. Pain isn’t really pain for the enslaved, because of their limited sentience, tendency to forget, and easily consolable grief. Lastly, the slave is happy and, in fact, his happiness exceeds “our” own. As a consequence of this operation, the initial revulsion and horror induced by the sight of shackled and manacled bodies gives way to reassurances about black pleasure.

Sellie Martin, who was sold at age six along with his mother and ten-year-old sister, described the “heart breaking scene” when the coffle departed for market: “When the order was given to march, it was always on such occasions accompanied by the command, which slaves were made to understand before they left the ‘pen,’ to ‘strike up lively,’ which means they must sing a song. Oh! what heartbreaks there are in these rude and simple songs! The purpose of the trader in having them sung is to prevent among the crowd of negroes who usually gather on such occasions, any expression of sorrow for those who are being torn away from them; but the negroes, who have very little hope of ever seeing those again who are dearer to them than life, and who are weeping and wailing over the separation, often turn the song demanded of them into a farewell dirge.”⁶⁴ By turning the song into a farewell dirge, the coerced performance becomes a veiled articulation of the sorrow denied the enslaved by the demand for song.

Martin’s account of his experiences was echoed by that of William Wells Brown. As a speculator’s assistant, Brown prepared the slaves held in the pen for inspection and sale. In effect, he set the scene for the buyers’ entry: “Before the slaves were

exhibited for sale, they were dressed and driven out into the yard. Some were set to dancing, some to jumping, and some to playing cards. This was done to make them appear cheerful and happy. My business was to see that they were placed in those situations before the arrival of the purchasers, and I have often set them to dancing when their cheeks were wet with tears."⁶⁵ Brown's account of the rituals of the marketplace, like that of Martin, frames the ersatz merriment of the enslaved as an inducement to exchange. Likewise, Stephen Dickinson remembered being paraded about the streets for an hour by an auctioneer who compelled one slave to carry a red flag and the other to ring a bell.⁶⁶ Jollity from this perspective is not an index of the expressive capacities of the enslaved but rather a means toward the enhancement of value, the emblem of coercion, and an incident of fungibility.

Contrary to our expectations, gaiety articulates the brutal calculations of the trade. The self-betrayal enacted by stepping it lively and enthusiastically assisting in one's sale underscores the affiliations of spectacle and sufferance. And, accordingly, fun and frolic become the vehicles of the slave's self-betrayal and survival.⁶⁷ By stepping it lively and "acting smart," the captive was made the agent of his or her dissolution.⁶⁸ The body of the slave, dancing and on display, seemingly revealed a comfort with bondage and a natural disposition for servitude. Those observing the singing and dancing and the comic antics of the auctioneer seemed to revel in the festive atmosphere of the trade and thus attracted spectators not intending to purchase slaves. According to Cato Carter, "They used to cry the niggers off just like so much cattle and we didn't think no different of it. . . . Everybody liked to hear them cry off niggers. The cryer was a clown and made funny talk and kept everybody laughing."⁶⁹ Catherine Slim remembered seeing a coffle of slaves chained together, going south, some were singing and some were crying.⁷⁰ Mary Gaffney ironically described the "fun" of the trade as "all the hollering and bawling."⁷¹ Others, like James Martin, remarked upon the coerced theatricality of the trade: "And we sees others sol[d] on the auction block. They're put in stalls like pens for cattle and there's a curtain, sometimes just a sheet in front of them, so the bidders can't see the stock too soon. The overseer's standin' just outside with a big black snake whip and a pepper box pistol in his hand. Then they pulls the curtain up and the bidders crowd 'round. The overseer tells the age of the slaves and what they can do. . . . Then the overseer makes 'em walk across the platform. He makes 'em hop, he makes 'em trot, he makes 'em jump."⁷² Polly Shine recalled being driven with others like cattle to the marketplace: "Our master would put us in the road ahead of them and they would be on horses behind us as we traveled and they would follow and we had to travel pert, no laggin behind if we did, he always had whip that he would tap us with boy! when he hit us across the legs we could step real lively and I don't mean maybe either."⁷³ True to form, this theater of the marketplace wed festivity and the exchange of captive bodies. The distribution of rum or brandy and slaves dancing, laughing, and generally "striking it up lively" entertained spectators and give meaning to the phrase "theater of the marketplace." James Curry noted the disparity between the journey to market and the "studied nicety" of the slave. When the coffle is being driven, "no attention is paid to the decency of their appearance. They go bare-headed and bare-footed, with any rag they can themselves find wrapped around their bodies. But the driver has clothing prepared for them to

put on, just before they reach the market, and they are forced to array themselves with studied nicety for their exposure at public sale.”⁷⁴

The stimulating effects of intoxicants, the simulation of good times, and the to-and-fro of half-naked bodies on display all acted to incite the flow of capital. The centrality of amusement to the slave trade is confirmed by an article in the *New Orleans Daily Picayune*: “Amusements seldom prove attractive here unless music is brought to the aid of other inducements to spend money. So much is this the custom and so well is this understood, that even an auctioneer can scarcely rai[lly] a crowd without the aid of the man with the drum. We do not feel called upon personally to be responsible for the character of all the music, but it is a solemn fact, that to rise in the world it is necessary to make a big noise.”⁷⁵ Jollification was as standard to the trade as greasing black bodies to create an enhanced and youthful appearance. As well, this spectacle reconciled the self-evident truths of a liberal social order—liberty, equality, and property—with the existence of chattel slavery through the coerced enactment of indifference and the orchestration of diversions. As L. M. Mills stated, “When a negro was put on the block he had to help sell himself by telling what he could do. If he refused to sell himself and acted sullen, he was sure to be stripped and given thirty lashes.”⁷⁶ By the same token, these displays of excess enjoyment seemed to suggest that the same natural law that established the liberty of all men also authorized slavery since the natural inclination of the enslaved was good cheer and they seemingly endured horrendous circumstances with ease.

Counterpoised to the intensity of this laughter were the lamentations of the enslaved. Dave Bryd recalled that “when one of them buyers bought a slave you never did hear such bawling and hollering in your life that would take place because they did not want to leave each other as we probably would not see them again.”⁷⁷ As well, the shame and humiliation experienced in being paraded and sold like cattle at the market, in addition to being disrobed publicly, provide a stark contrast to the festive goings-on of the traders. Ethel Dougherty stated that at slave sales women were forced to stand half-naked for hours while crowds of rough-drinking men bargained for them, examining their teeth, heads, hands, et cetera, at frequent intervals to test their endurance.⁷⁸ According to Edward Lycurgas, enslaved women “always looked so shame[d] and pitiful up on dat stand wid all dem men standin’ dere lookin’ at em wid what dey had on dey minds shinin’ in they eyes.”⁷⁹ Shining in their eyes and expressed in “indecent proposals” and “disgusting questions,” according to Tabb Gross, was the power, acquired and enjoyed by the owner, to use slave women as he pleased.⁸⁰ Millie Simpkins stated that before they were sold they had to take all their clothes off, although she refused to take hers off, and roll around to prove that they were physically fit and without broken bones or sores.⁸¹ Usually any reluctance or refusal to disrobe was met with the whip.⁸² When Mattie Gilmore’s sister Rachel was sold, she was made to pull off her clothes. Mattie remembered crying until she could cry no more, although her tears were useless.⁸³

The simulation of consent in the context of extreme domination was an orchestration intent upon making the captive body speak the master’s truth as well as disproving the suffering of the enslaved. Thus a key aspect of the manifold uses of the body was its facility as a weapon used against the enslaved. It can only be likened to torture, which, as noted by Elaine Scarry, destroys the integral relation of body and

belief.⁸⁴ Here I would like to underline the disarticulation of body and belief without presupposing an a priori integral relation but by explicating the denotative capacities of the captive body. In *Slave Life in Georgia*, John Brown, in his as-told-to narrative, illuminates this chasm between truth and the body by elaborating the role of violence and ventriloquy in enhancing slave value. In order to penetrate the simulated revelry of the trade, he painstakingly described the New Orleans slave pen in which he was held:

The slaves are brought from all parts, are of all sorts, sizes, and ages, and arrive in various states of fatigue and condition; but they soon improve in their looks, as they are regularly fed, and have plenty to eat. As soon as we were roused in the morning, there was a general washing, and combing, and shaving, pulling out of grey hairs, and dyeing the hair of those who were too grey to be plucked without making them bald. When this was over—and it was no light business—we used to breakfast, getting bread, and bacon, and coffee, of which a sufficiency was given to us, and that we might plump up and become sleek. Bob would then proceed to instruct us how to show ourselves off. . . . The buying commenced at about ten in the morning, and lasted till one, during which time we were obliged to be sitting in our respective companies, ready for inspection. . . . After dinner we were compelled to walk, and dance, and kick about in the yard for exercise; and Bob, who had a fiddle, used to play up jigs for us to dance to. If we did not dance to his fiddle, we used to have to do so to his whip, so no wonder we used our legs handsomely, though the music was none of the best. . . .

As the importance of "looking bright" under such circumstances may not be readily understood by the ordinary run of readers, I may as well explain that the price a slave fetches depends, in great measure, upon the general appearance he or she presents to the intending buyer. A man or woman may be well made, and physically faultless in every respect, yet their value be impaired by a sour look, or dull, vacant stare, or a general dullness of demeanor. For this reason the poor wretches who are about to be sold, are instructed to look "spry and smart": to hold themselves up, and put on a smiling, cheerful countenance.

When spoken to, they must reply quickly, with a smile on their lips, though agony is in their heart, and the tear trembling in their eye. They must answer every question, and do as they are bid, to show themselves off; dance, jump, walk, leap, squat, tumble, and twist about, that the buyer may see they have no stiff joints, or other physical defect. . . . Not a word of lamentation or anguish must escape from them; nor when the deed is consummated, dare they bid one another good-bye, or take one last embrace.⁸⁵

An entire chapter of the narrative is dedicated to detailing the activities of the slave pen. For the most part, this enormous effort is expended in demystifying the ruses of the trade, attuning the reader to the difference between the apparent and the actual, narrating the repression of the "real" that occurs by way of this costuming of the contented slaves—hair dyed, faces greased, preening, primping, smiling, dancing, tumbling, et cetera. By now what is familiar in Brown's account is the use of the body against the slave in the enhancement of value and the masking of anguish—in other words, the possession of the captive body by the owner's intentions, which forces the poor wretches to look "spry and smart"; this conspiracy of appearances acts to repudiate the claims of pain. As well, Brown wrests with the legitimacy of slavery, particularly as it is grounded in such compulsory displays of good cheer;

therefore each detail of the chapter counters the “disposition for slavery” argument and anxiously unmasks the captive’s good cheer as the trade’s artifice.

While *Slave Life in Georgia* “dare[d] not—for decency’s sake—detail the various expedients that are resorted to by dealers to test the soundness of a male or female slave,” instead preferring to settle for understatement and indirection in outlining the “horrible picture” of slavery, the WPA testimony is replete with the details of these indecent tests for soundness. As one former slave recounted, the woman displayed on the block “would have just a piece around her waist; her breast and thighs would be bare. De seller would turn her around and plump her to show how fat she was and her general condition. Dey would also take her breasts and pull dem to show how good she was built for raisin’ chillun.”⁸⁶ The sexual dimensions of the enjoyment of slave property were unashamedly expressed in regard to issues of breeding and in the prices fetched for “fancy girls.”⁸⁷

The sale of Sukie, as recounted by Fannie Berry, a fellow slave, illuminates the sexual dimensions of possession. On the auction block, Sukie calls attention to the gaze—that is, the power exercised in looking that opens the captive body to the lewd desires and pecuniary interests of would-be owners. By defying the studied nicety of the trade, Sukie underscores the violence of the spectacle, issuing a threat of her own to those so intent on looking and probing. As Fannie Berry tells it:

Sukie was her name. She was a big strappin nigger gal dat never had nothin’ to say much. She used to cook for Miss Sarah Ann, but ole Marsa was always tryin’ to make Sukie his gal. One day Sukie was in the kitchen making soap. Had three gra’ big pots o’ lye just comin’ to a bile in de fireplace when ole Marsa come in for to git arter her ‘bout somep’n. He lay into her, but she ain’t never answer him a word. Den he tell Sukie to take off her dress. She tote him no. Den he grabbed her an’ pulled it down off’n her shoulders. When he done dat, he fo’got ‘bout whippin’ her, I guess cause he grab hold of her an’ try to pull her down on de flo’. Den dat black girl got mad. She took an push ole Marsa an’ made him break loose an’ den she gave him a shove an’ push his hind parts down in de hot pot o’ soap. Soap was near to boilin’, an it burnt him near to death. He got up holdin’ his hind parts an’ ran from the kitchen, not darin’ to yell, ‘cause he didn’t want Miss Sarah to know ‘bout it.

Well, few days later he took Sukie off an’ sol’ her to de nigger trader. An’ dey ‘zamined her an’ pinched her an’ den dey opened her mouf, an’ stuck dey fingers in to see how her teeth was. Den Sukie got awful mad, and she pult up her dress an’ tole de nigger traders to look an’ see if dey could find any teef down dere.⁸⁸

The events that lead to Sukie’s sale as well as the event staged on the auction block raise a number of issues critical to the scene of subjection, the foremost of these being the issues of will, agency, and consent, which, in this particular instance, are emplotted as seduction—from Berry’s description of the master’s attempted rape as “trying to make Sukie his gal,” which illustrates the conflation of rape and concubinage in the sexual economy of slavery, to Sukie’s threatening striptease, in which the interdiction, ironically, is issued as invitation. The next set of issues concerns the capacities of the performative in doing (as in making) and undoing the subject and, lastly, the status of the enslaved as a curious hybrid of person and property.

Let us first consider the issue of will as it relates to seduction. In one respect, Sukie’s performance can be understood as an arrogation of the will that undermines

her social existence as an object of property. This dramatic seizure of the will figuratively expropriates the power of the (would-be) master that animates and annexes the captive body. In this regard, Sukie's actions place her outside the law because she defies the fundamental tenet of slavery: the slave is subject to the master's will in all things. This breach of law enacted in the insolent disregard of the block's decorum, interestingly enough, provides the only possibility for the emergence of the subject, since criminality is the only form of slave agency recognized by law. Thus the fashioning of the subject must necessarily take place in violation of the law, and consequently, will, criminality, and punishment are inextricably linked. Furthermore, Sukie's performance exploits the charged linkage of property and sexuality, challenges the will-lessness of the object of property, and induces a category crisis for the spectators whose enjoyment is defined by wanton acts and the promiscuous uses of property.

This performance on the auction block defies the tricks of the trade and, by extension, the related practices that secure and reproduce the relations of mastery and servitude through a parodic enactment of the auction's devices. By staging this rebellion in the domain of sexuality, Sukie fills in the details of the "horrible picture," that which dare not be spoken without risk of breaching decency, in service of contesting the uses of slave property. The subversive reiteration of the potential buyer's splaying of the body, specifically Sukie's gesture to the teeth down there, delineates the debasing exhibition of the black body as object of property, as it was common for bidders to feel between women's legs, examine their hips, and fondle their breasts.⁸⁹

By contrast, Sukie's gesture to the teeth down there launched a threat and explicitly declared the dangers that awaited further probing and pulling. In this case, the vagina *dentata* and the threat of castrating genitals transpose the captive body in its dominated and ravaged condition into a vehicle to be used against the would-be slave owner rather than in the service of his interests, wants, and desires. This threat of castration echoes the foiled attempt of her former master, whose "hind parts" were also placed in jeopardy, and promises retaliation for further efforts at examination and against those anticipating the sexual uses of property. By lifting her skirts, Sukie complies with the demand to expose herself and display her body to potential buyers, but she subverts this act of submission and compliance by alluding to the hazards that awaited the buyer or trader who would venture to make her "his gal." The gesture to the teeth down there calls attention to the bestializing display of black bodies in the market, the sexual violation of slave women, and the intersection of enjoyment and terror. This revolt staged at the site of enjoyment and the nexus of production and reproduction exposes the violence of the trade's spectacle in what merits being called a deconstructive performance. In this instance the infamous propensity of the Negro for mimicry and imitation is tantamount to insurgency.

As it turns out, what was being staged in these varied renderings of the coffle and the auction block was nothing less than slavery itself, whether in the effort to mute the extreme domination of slavery and the violence that enabled this sale of flesh through the simulated jollity of the enslaved or the clownish antics of the auctioneer, reconcile subjugation and natural law, document the repressive totality of the institution, or fashion a subject who might triumphantly negotiate her debasements. An

anxiety about enjoyment distinguishes the site of exchange. This can be seen in assurances to buyers about the jollity of the slaves on display and the intensity of abolitionist efforts to prove the commonplace that slaves were neither happy nor indifferent to being sold like cattle and separated from their families.⁹⁰ The apprehensive estimations and discriminating evaluations of the captives' myriad uses and the fear that black suffering would remain unnoticed bespeak concerns about the insufficiency and complicity of pleasure.

The Pleasant Path

The parade of shackled bodies to market captured not only the debasements of slavery but also its diversions. Yet the convergence of pleasure and terror so striking in the humiliating exhibitions and defiling pageantry of the trade was also present in "innocent amusements." The slave dancing a reel at the big house or stepping it up lively in the coffle similarly transformed subjugation into a pleasing display for the master, albeit disguised, to use Pierre Bourdieu's terms, by the "veil of enchanted relationships."⁹¹ These "gentler forms" extended and maintained the relations of domination through euphemism and concealment. Innocent amusements constituted a form of symbolic violence—that is, a "form of domination which is exercised through the communication in which it is disguised."

When viewed in this light, the most invasive forms of slavery's violence lie not in these exhibitions of "extreme" suffering or in what we see but in what we don't see. Shocking displays too easily obfuscate the more mundane and socially endurable forms of terror.⁹² In the benign scenes of plantation life (which comprised much of the Southern and, ironically, abolitionist literature of slavery) reciprocity and recreation obscure the quotidian routine of violence. The bucolic scenes of plantation life and the innocent amusements of the enslaved, contrary to our expectations, succeeded not in mollifying terror but in assuring and sustaining its presence.

Rather than glance at the most striking spectacle with revulsion or through tear-filled eyes, we do better to cast our glance at the more mundane displays of power and the border where it is difficult to discern domination from recreation. Bold instances of cruelty are too easily acknowledged and forgotten, and cries quieted to an endurable hum. By disassembling the "benign" scene, we confront the everyday practice of domination, the nonevent, as it were. Is the scene of slaves dancing and fiddling for their masters any less inhumane than that of slaves sobbing and dancing on the auction block? If so, why? Is the effect of power any less prohibitive? Or coercive? Or does pleasure mitigate coercion? Is the boundary between terror and pleasure clearer in the market than in the quarters or at the "big house"? Are the most enduring forms of cruelty those seemingly benign? Is the perfect picture of the crime the one in which the crime goes undetected? If we imagine for a moment a dusky fiddler entertaining at the big house, master cutting a figure among the dancing slaves, the mistress egging him on with her laughter, what do we see?

"Dance you damned niggers, dance," Epps would shout. Usually his whip in his hand, ready to fall about the ears of the presumptuous thrall, who dared rest a moment, or even

to stop to catch his breath. When he himself was exhausted, there would be a brief cessation, but it would be very brief. With a slash, crack and flourish of the whip, he would shout again, "Dance, niggers dance," and away they would go once more, pell-mell, while I, spurred by an occasional sharp touch of the lash, sat in a corner, extracting from my violin a marvelous quick stepping tune. . . . Frequently, we were thus detained until almost morning. Bent with excessive toil—actually suffering for a little refreshing rest, and feeling rather as if we would cast ourselves upon the earth and weep, many a night in the house of Edwin Epps have his unhappy slaves been made to dance and laugh.⁹³

This passage from Solomon Northrup's *Twelve Years a Slave* exemplifies the permeability of pleasure and punishment in the ceremonies of slavery. The humiliations delivered the conscripts of Master Epps's terrorizing bacchanals and the brutal command to merrymaking suggest that the theatricality of the Negro emerges only in the aftermath of the body's brutal dramatic placement—in short, after the body has been made subject to the will of the master.⁹⁴ The uproarious behavior of Epps, slashing limbs with his whip while gaily dancing a quick step with the slaves, casts a different light on the dusky fiddler in the golden days of Southern glory. And the spree, as narrated by Northrup, resonates with the evil of twice-told tales about fiddlers abducted by Satan and the fiendish revels of hell.

Behind the facade of innocent amusements lay the violence the master class assiduously denied; but what else could jigs danced in command performances be but the gentle indices of domination? It was as much the duty of slaves "to devote themselves to the pleasure of their masters" as to work for the master's benefit, commented Jacob Stroyer.⁹⁵ He noted rather cryptically that "no one can describe the intense emotion in the negro's soul on these occasions when they were trying to please their masters and mistresses."⁹⁶ Such performances cast the slave as contented bondsman and elide the difference between volition and violation. However, as Northrup's narrative indicated, the contented slave appeared only after he had been whipped into subjection. In short, Sambo did not engender the stagecraft of slavery, as apologists would have it, but was one of its effects.

In the effort to cultivate docile and dutiful slaves, slaveholders promoted the slaves' "natural gaiety" by "all allowable means." Innocent amusements were designed to promote gaiety by prudent means, ameliorate the harsh conditions of slavery, make the body more productive and tractable, and secure the submission of the enslaved by the successful harnessing of the body. In effect, plantation ceremony endeavored to make discipline a pleasure, and vice versa.⁹⁷ Innocent amusements supplemented other methods of managing the slave body. According to Douglass, these ostensibly benevolent forms of management were designed to better secure "the ends of injustice and oppression."⁹⁸ In fact, such diversions were an important element of plantation management, as the internalization of discipline and reward was considered essential to the good order of the plantation, for the ideal model of plantation management stressed humanity and duty. Prizewinning essays on the ideals of management held that "industry and good conduct should be encouraged [and] the taste for innocent amusements gratified."⁹⁹ These designs for mastery troubled distinctions between leisure and labor and employed an extensive notion of discipline that included everything from the task system to the modes of singing

allowed in the field. As one planter commented, "When at work, I have no objection to their whistling or singing some lively tune, but no drawingl tunes are allowed in the field, for their motions are almost certain to keep time with the music."¹⁰⁰ In light of these remarks, it is clear that productive diversions were also a means of cultivating particular forms of conduct. In this case, power extended itself in the form of recreation.

By encouraging entertainment, the master class sought to cultivate hegemony, harness pleasure as a productive force, and regulate the modes of permitted expression. Slave owners managed amusements as they did labor, with a keen eye toward discipline. According to Guion Griffis Johnson, promoting fun and frolic could alleviate unrest: "One South Carolina planter who was having trouble disciplining his slaves supplied his people with fiddle and drums and 'promoted dancing.' To his gratification the ill temper of the slaves disappeared and the peace was once more established on the plantation."¹⁰¹ Nonetheless, the diversions the planter considered as placating ill temper created conflicts no less unsettling. When slaves were required to perform before the master and even when they eagerly partook of entertainment, such pleasures were tempered by their fettered condition and the ever-threatening exercise of the master's power.

Yet despite the forethought given to and the energy expended in orchestrating such diversions, proponents of these paternal forms of management nonetheless insisted that Africans' natural propensity for song did, in fact, reflect a disposition for servitude. A Georgia physician who fancied himself a physiologist of culture remarked that Negroes possessed a sixth sense—a musical sense—and that despite their kinship with hogs in nature and habit, the Negro has music in his soul. This physician described the enslaved as without regrets for the past or anxieties about the future and "full of fun and frolic," which were the standard assessments of black character shared by proslavery discourse and romantic racialism.¹⁰² Whether this was the result of nature or condition was difficult for him to discern: "Our Southern negroes seem to have a natural gift for music, and such a thing as a non-singing negro is almost unknown. Now, whether this is peculiar to the negroes of the Southern states, and as a result of the happifying influences of slavery, we are not prepared to say; but certainly it does appear that music—and that, too, of a cheerful kind—would not be likely to become a passion, a very second nature, with a people so debased and downtrodden as Southern slaves are represented in certain quarters."¹⁰³ The physician therefore advised planters to encourage music because it added to the enjoyment and fitness of the slave. Put simply, music was the antidote to black sloth and torpidity.

In the June 1851 edition of *De Bow's Review*, a Mississippi planter recommended a management plan that he thought would contribute to the happiness of both master and slave. After offering suggestions regarding the arrangement of the quarters, meals, clothing, et cetera, he noted that he had "few sour looks and as little whipping" as was possible on a plantation of his size. Attributing the good-naturedness of his slaves to more than adequate care, he confessed that in addition to providing for the basic needs of his slaves, he literally "fiddled" them into contented submission: "I must not omit to mention that I have a good fiddler, and keep him well supplied with catgut, and I make it his duty to play for the negroes every

Saturday night until 12 o'clock. They are exceedingly punctual in their attendance at the ball, while Charley's fiddle is always accompanied with Ihurod on the triangle, and Sam to 'pat' [patting juba]."¹⁰⁴ According to the planter, the whip used sparingly, the fiddle, and the Bible formed the holy trinity of plantation management.

Even though "church brethren might think hard of it," a small farmer also confessed that he encouraged the playing of the fiddle in his quarters. He bought the fiddle and encouraged slaves to play it "by giving the boys [fiddlers] occasionally a big supper."¹⁰⁵ Plantation management plans clearly demonstrated that within the confines of the plantation and slaveholding society there were no "innocent" amusements. The hours from sundown to sunup were as important as those spent in the field in cultivating the productivity of the plantation household and maintaining social control. Slaveholders' managing of slave "leisure," surveillance of parties and dances, and financial investment in slave amusements, which were important enough for masters to provide fiddles for their slaves, teach them to play, and purchase slaves because they were musicians, document the value of pleasure. The testimony of the enslaved also confirms the utility of diversion. Adeline Jackson's master bought a slave just because he could fiddle: "Master Edward bought a slave in Tennessee just 'cause he could play de fiddle. Named him 'Tennessee Ike' and he played long wid Ben Murray, another fiddler. Sometime all of us would be called up into de front yard to play and sing and dance and sing for Miss Marion, de chillun and visitors."¹⁰⁶ Gary Stewart's owner taught his slaves to play the fiddle.¹⁰⁷ Henry Bland's owner furnished him with a fiddle, which he played at square dances, the chief form of entertainment on the plantation, and at weddings, frolics, and other special occasions.¹⁰⁸

The master's role in these revels, whether as an observer, manager, or participant, is mentioned repeatedly in slave narratives. D. Davis's owner arranged Saturday frolics for the slaves where he filled the role of fiddler. Davis described the occasion as "going before the king": "Every person on de place, from de littlest child to de oldest man or woman, would clean deyselves up and put on dey best clothes for to 'go before de king.' Dat's what us called it. All would gather in back of de big house under de big oak trees and Marse Tom, he would come out with a fiddle under he arm . . . and set himself down in de chair what Uncle Joe done fetched for him. . . . Den Marse Tom, he start dat fiddle playin' right lively and all dem niggers would dance and have de best kind of frolic. Marse Tom, he get just as much fun otен de party as de niggers themselves."¹⁰⁹ In this case, the slave's good times were at the same time a performance for the slaveholder. To go before the king demonstrated the master's power and hinted at the affinities of pleasure and mortification—the day of judgment. With each step of the Virginia reel, domination was extended and reproduced, although on occasion, the reel was turned to contrary purposes.

It was not uncommon for slave owners to participate in the frolics they organized. They indulged the slaves with whiskey, sang and danced with them, served as musicians, and frequently were spectators. Slave owners loved to watch their slaves performing. Ed Shirley recalled that at Saturday dances "some old negro would play the banjos while the young darkies would dance and sing. The white folks would set around and watch; and would sometimes join in and dance and sing."¹¹⁰ Ann

Thomas's master's son played the music for slave frolics: "He played the fiddle and liked to see the slaves dance 'cutting the pigeon wing.'"¹¹¹ According to Marinda Jane Singleton, anyone who could dance and sing well was taken to the big house to entertain the master's guests.¹¹² These performances pleased not only because of the abilities of those who performed but also because they served to display the owner's power and property since the captive body was an extension of the imperial body of the master and the prized object of his enjoyment. Moreover, the master's gaze served as a reminder that diversion could not be extricated from discipline or domination. In this regard, the owner's pleasure in looking was without question a form of surveillance and a way of policing the slave population.

Essays in *De Bow's Review*, *Southern Planter*, and other agricultural journals unanimously concurred on the importance of docile and contented slaves to the successful management of the farm or plantation. These essays enumerated the responsibilities of slaveholders and methods for promoting slave productivity. Plantation journals, guided by paternalistic ideals and anxious about the image of the institution of slavery, particularly in light of mounting opposition to slavery, not surprisingly were much more forthright about the use of rewards and recreation rather than violence to achieve submission. The kindly master cognizant of his duty to slaves need not make recourse to the whipping post but instead fostered docility via the pleasant path. Herbemont opined that guiding the pleasures of the slave was a task equivalent to the sovereign's direction of his subjects. Attending to the recreation of slaves was for their general good and therefore not beneath the dignity of the master, since the path of pleasantness was "much more likely to be followed willingly" than the path covered with thorns and briars.¹¹³

Yet when the less thorny road was pursued, the enslaved had little difficulty discerning in "beneficial recreations" another form of coercion. Eda Harper described her owner's promotion of song as malevolent: "My old master mean to us. He used to come to the quarters and make us chillum sing. He make us sing Dixie. Seems like Dixie his main song. I tell you I don't like it now. But have mercy! He make us sing it."¹¹⁴ The ironies of the pleasant path are highlighted in Harper's case. Forcing the enslaved to sing "Dixie," a tune from the minstrel stage adopted for the cause of Confederate nationalism, discloses the collusion of coercion and recreation. According to Drew Gilpin Faust, "The adoption of 'Dixie' as the emblematic Confederate song underlined the emotional centrality of these pseudo slave performances as affirmations of the Confederate national mission and the master-class's cherished self-image of benevolent paternalism."¹¹⁵ The self-representation of the slaveholding South depended upon such performances of blackness. Conceivably this explains why minstrelsy reached its zenith in the South during the Civil War.

Despite the general consensus regarding the efficacy of slave amusements, slaveholders' discussions of "slave culture" were tautological and fraught with contradictory assertions about nature and culture. On one hand, slave culture or, more aptly, the antics of administered amusements demonstrated the inferior and slavish nature of the African. Moreover, this "sixth sense" ill-equipped blacks for freedom. On the other, the necessity of encouraging forms of beneficial recreations revealed planter anxiety about restlessness, if not rebellion. After all, if the slave was natu-

rally predisposed to song, why the need to stimulate merrymaking? At whatever cost, nature and condition were to be made compatible, and innocent amusements, in concert with combined forms of torture, punishment, and discipline, were to affect this union. Indeed, the slave would be made to appear as if born to dance in chains.

Fraught Pleasures

The slaveholder's instrumental use of entertainment was duly criticized by abolitionists. Douglass, at the forefront of such criticism, argued that the abjection of slave amusements "appeared to have no other object than to disgust the slaves with their temporary freedom, and make them as glad to return to work as they had been to leave it."¹¹⁶ Although he was speaking specifically of the holiday period between Christmas and New Year's, his condemnation of these diversions for cultivating submission, debasement, and docility is no less relevant to the routine amusements addressed above.¹¹⁷ In this regard, his criticisms were not unlike those of Henry Bibb and others. Abolitionists emphasized the degraded character of these escapades and stressed the confluence of brutality and merrymaking in such activities. Bibb held slaveholders responsible for prompting demeaning sport: "When they wish to have a little sport of that kind, they go among the slaves, to see them dance, 'pat juber,' sing and play on banjo."¹¹⁸ If slaves, unfortunately, participated in these debased amusements, their condition, not their nature, was to blame. Theodore Parker was less certain in this regard: "If the African be so low that the condition of slavery is tolerable in his eyes and he can dance in chains, then it is all the more a sin in the cultivated and strong, in the Christian, to tyrannize over the feeble and defenseless."¹¹⁹ The permeable, shifting, and elusive boundary between instrumental amusements and the expressive culture of the enslaved was troubled and unsettling. Moreover, for those like Parker the ability of Africans to dance at all was unfathomable.

However, Douglass's searing criticism of these amusements concentrated on their function as "safety-valves to carry off the explosive elements inseparable from the human mind when reduced to the condition of slavery," as well as exposing a longing for a culture of resistance in this condemnation.¹²⁰ In order to disentangle the skeins of disapprobation and desire, Douglass's decrial of slave holidays needs to be considered alongside his commentary on slave song. For the most part, his objections to these holidays pertain to the derailing of "dangerous thought" by diversion. In other words, these pleasures thwart the emergence of an oppositional consciousness: "To enslave men successfully and safely it is necessary to keep their minds occupied with thoughts and aspirations short of the liberty of which they are deprived. . . . These holidays served the purpose of keeping the minds of the slaves occupied with prospective pleasures within the limits of slavery. . . . A certain degree of attainable good must be kept before them. . . . But for these the rigors of slavery would have been forced to a dangerous desperation. . . . Not the slave's happiness but the master's safety was the end sought."¹²¹ What Douglass yearns for is dangerous music and dangerous thought. As well, the relentlessness of

the critique and its broad strokes are intent upon destroying the discourse on indolence, servility, and contentment that licensed the institution. However, even in the context of this ruthless encounter with the pleasures afforded within the confines of slavery, he manages to catch hold of glimmerings of opposition—in this case “the sharp hits against slaveholders” in “jubilee patting.”

This search for an oppositional culture, or a symbolic analogue of Douglass’s physical confrontation with Covey, the overseer and “nigger breaker,” alights on slave song:

They would sing . . . words which to many would seem unmeaning jargon, but which nevertheless, were full of meaning to themselves. I have sometimes thought that the mere hearing of these songs would do more to impress some minds with the horrible character of slavery, than the reading of whole volumes of philosophy on the subject could do. I did not when a slave, understand the deep meaning of those rude and apparently incoherent songs. I was myself within the circle; so that I neither saw nor heard as those without might see and hear. They told a tale of woe which was then altogether beyond my feeble comprehension; they were tones loud, long and deep; they breathed the prayer and complaint of souls boiling over with the bitterest anguish. Every tone was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains. The hearing of those wild notes always depressed my spirit, and filled me with ineffable sadness. I have frequently found myself in tears while hearing them. . . . To those songs I trace my first glimmering conception of the dehumanizing character of slavery.¹²²

Yet these songs insufficiently meet the requirements of an oppositional culture, one capable of combating ostensibly beneficial diversions and poised to destroy these designs for mastery. While every tone testifies against slavery, sorrow rather than resistance characterizes such songs; furthermore, they are emblems of the “soul-killing effects of slavery.” The mere hearing of these songs impresses one with the horrible character of slavery. Above all, these songs are valued as dirges expressive of the social death of slavery and inchoate expressions of a latent political consciousness. In this regard, they belie popular portraits of happiness and contentment. The opacity of these sorrowful and half-articulate songs perplexes and baffles those within and without the circle of slavery. When a slave, Douglass was unable to see and hear as those without might have, yet those without too often misinterpreted these songs as evidence of satisfaction. Anticipating Du Bois’s assessment of the sorrow songs as “the music of an unhappy people, of the children of disappointment; they tell of death and suffering and unvoiced longing toward a truer world, of mist wanderings and hidden way,” Douglass emphasized the singularity of sorrow, thus hoping to establish an absolute line of division between diversion and the glimmerings of protest.¹²³ Yet this distinction could not be sustained, for the promiscuous exchanges of culture and the fraught terms of agency muddled the lines of opposition, and as Douglass himself recognized, on rare occasions the pleasures available within the confines of slavery indeed possessed glimmerings of insurgency and transformation.

Notes

INTRODUCTION

1. Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself* (Boston, 1845; reprint, New York: New American Library, 1968), 25–26.
2. J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: W.W. Norton, 1973), 332.
3. Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); Dori Laub, “An Event without a Witness: Truth, Testimony, and Survival,” in *Testimony: Crisis of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, ed. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (New York: Routledge, 1992).
4. George Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, vol. 7, pt. 2 (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1973), 117.
5. Ibid., vol. 11, pt. 7, p. 211.
6. Sylvia Wynter, “On Disenchanting Discourse: ‘Minority’ Literary Criticism and Beyond,” in *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse*, ed. Abdul R. JanMohamed and David Lloyd (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 447.
7. Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 37.
8. Ibid., 17.
9. James Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1991), 45.
10. John Forrester, *The Seductions of Psychoanalysis: Freud, Lacan, Derrida* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 86. For an extended discussion of mastery and deformation, see Houston Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).
11. Valerie Smith, *Self-Discovery and Authority in Afro-American Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 28–32.
12. Gayatri Spivak, “Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography,” in *Selected*

- ubaltern Studies*, ed. Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 11–12.
13. Lata Mani, “Cultural Theory, Colonial Texts: Reading Eyewitness Accounts of Widow Burning,” in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1992), 392–408.
 14. Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan (New York: Pantheon, 1972), 130–131.
 15. Gyanendra Pandey, “In Defense of the Fragment: Writing about Hindu-Muslim Riots in India Today,” *Representations* 37 (Winter 1992): 27–55; Gayatri Spivak, “The Rani of Jirmur: An Essay in Reading in the Archive,” *History and Theory* 24.3 (1987): 247–272; Renato Rosaldo, “From the Door of His Tent: The Fieldworker and the Inquisitor,” in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, ed. James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).
 16. Ranajit Guha, “The Prose of Counter-Insurgency,” in Guha and Spivak, *Selected Subaltern Studies*, 77.
 17. John Blassingame, ed., *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, and Autobiographies* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), xvi–lxv; C. Van Woodward, “History from Slave Sources,” in *The Slave’s Narrative*, ed. Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 48–58.
 18. According to Paul Escott, the race of the WPA interviewers determined what was said or revealed as well as variances in the representation of those statements. Paul Escott, *Slavery Remembered: A Record of Twentieth Century Slave Narratives* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979).
 19. Edouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, trans. J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1989), 89.
 20. Antonio Gramsci, *The Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 419–425; David Forgacs and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, eds., *Selections from Cultural Writings*, trans. William Boelhower (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1895), 189.
 21. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 37; Seyla Benhabib, *Critique, Norm, and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 13, 41.
 22. Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), 255.

CHAPTER ONE

1. John Rankin, *Letters on American Slavery* (1837; reprint, Westport, Conn.: Negro Universities Press, 1970), 45–47. In *An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans*, Lydia Maria Child in her condemnation of the internal trade describes a similar scene: “In the summer of 1822, a coffle of slaves, driven through Kentucky, was met by Rev. James H. Dickey, just before it entered Paris. He describes it thus: ‘About forty black men were chained together; each of them was handcuffed, and they were arranged rank and file. A chain, perhaps forty feet long, was stretched between the two ranks, to which short chains were joined, connected with the handcuffs. Behind them were about thirty women, tied hand to hand. Every countenance wore a solemn sadness; and the dismal silence of despair was only broken by the sound of two violins. Yes—as if to add insult to injury, the foremost couple were furnished with a violin apiece; the second couple were ornamented with cockades; while near the center our national standard was carried by hands literally in chains.’” *An Appeal in*

Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans, ed. Carolyn Karcher (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996), 32. The descriptions of the coffle found in abolitionist texts, like this example from Child, were frequently secondhand accounts rather than firsthand reports of encounters with the coffle. This citational practice was a response to the crisis of slave testimony and a means of assembling “a thousand witnesses” against slavery in every text and documenting the woe and misery of slavery.

2. Rankin, *Letters on American Slavery*, 45.

3. Philip Fisher, *Hard Facts: Setting and Form in the American Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 100.

4. Peter A. Angeles, *Dictionary of Philosophy* (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 1981); *Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary*, 2d ed., unabridged ([Cleveland]: Collins World, 1976).

5. Johnathan Boyarin writes that “the hegemony of empathy as an ethic of the obliteration of otherness . . . occurs where humanism demands the acknowledgement of the Other’s suffering humanity . . . [and] where the paradoxical linkage of shared humanity and cultural otherness cannot be expressed.” *Storm from Paradise: The Politics of Jewish Memory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 86. See also Karl Morrison, *I Am You: The Hermeneutics of Empathy in Western Literature, Theology, and Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

6. In “The Politics of Translation,” Gayatri Spivak outlines a politics of translation that is useful in thinking about ethical relations and the terms of one’s identification with others. She remarks that as ethical agents “it is not possible for us to imagine otherness or alterity maximally. We have to turn the other into something like the self in order to be ethical.” Instead of ethical similitude, she suggests an erotics of surrender that is cognizant of the impossibility of translation. *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

7. Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 192.

8. Karen Sanchez-Eppler, *Touching Liberty: Abolition, Feminism, and the Politics of the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

9. Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on Virginia* (1787; reprint, New York: W. W. Norton, 1982), 138.

10. The most gruesome of the tragic scenes described by Rankin involves the dismemberment and incineration of a slave boy.

11. See Stephen R. Munzer, *A Theory of Property* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 61, 63. In a discussion of incorporation and projection theories of property, Munzer notes that the incorporation theory holds that external things become property by being brought into the body. The projection theory maintains that they become property by embodying the person in external things.

12. Rankin, *Letters*, 57. Slave narrators were literally and figuratively forced to display themselves in order to tell their stories. See Houston Baker, *Workings of the Spirit* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Robert B. Stepto, *From behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979); William L. Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986); and Valerie Smith, *Self-Discovery and Authority in Afro-American Narrative* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987).

13. Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

14. It has been argued that this intimacy of work and song is typically African. See Leroy Jones, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: William Morrow, 1963); Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford

University Press, 1977); and John Miller Chernoff, *African Rhythm, African Sensibility* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

15. Enjoyment, as defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, encompasses taking delight or pleasure in; having sexual intercourse; as well as having the use or benefit of something. The various dimensions of having the use of or possessing, from holding the title to property or sexual intercourse, is what I want to explore here.

16. This argument will be fully explicated and substantiated by case law discussed in chapter 3.

17. George M. Stroud, *A Sketch of the Laws Relating to American Slavery in the Several States of the United States of America* (1827; reprint, New York: Negro Universities Press, 1968), 65.

18. *Ibid.*, 98.

19. William Goodell, *The American Slave Code* (1853; reprint, New York: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1968), 308.

20. I submit that even laws designed to protect the lives of slaves were framed in terms of the loss of property and, moreover, could not be reinforced since neither slaves nor free blacks could act as witnesses against whites.

21. Slavoj Zizek, *Tarrying with the Negative* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 206.

22. See Karl Marx, "The Commodity," in *Capital*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Vintage, 1977), 125–177.

23. The melodrama's structure is basically Manichaean, with the struggle between good and evil forming its dramatic core. Virtue, the heroine, and the threat of catastrophe provide its essential ingredients. The dramatic language it utilizes is emblematic, relying on a gestural and sometimes inarticulate language, which Peter Brooks describes as aesthetics of muteness, to provide a moral clarity that supersedes the word. The yearning for moral visibility culminates in the tableau. In some respects, minstrelsy is quite the opposite of melodrama, although it frequently utilized sentimental devices. However, generally minstrelsy luxuriates in dissemblance and in playing upon the unreliability of appearances, and by the same token, it violates moral and social boundaries. Formally, minstrelsy was a hodgepodge of songs, dances, interacts, short skits, stump speeches, comic dialogues, and a narrative afterpiece; it was generally composed of short farces, Shakespearean burlesques, or theatrical lampoons. See David Grimsted, *Melodrama Unveiled* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 171–203; Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1985), 27–62; Bruce A. McConachie, *Melodramatic Formations* (Des Moines: University of Iowa Press, 1992), 163–197; Carl Wittke, *Tambo and Bones: A History of the American Minstrel Stage* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1930), 135–209; Hans Nathan, *Dan Emmett and the Rise of Early Negro Minstrelsy* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1962), 50–69, 123–134, 227–242; and Robert C. Toll, *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 25–65.

This discussion of melodrama is confined to the texts that explore issues of race, gender, and slavery: William Wells Brown, *The Escape; or, A Leap for Freedom*, in *Black Theatre U.S.A.*, ed. James V. Hatch and Ted Shine (New York: Free Press, 1974); Dion Boucicault, *The Octoroon*, in *18th and 19th Century British Drama*, ed. Katharine Rogers (New York: New American Library, 1979); and George Aiken and Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, in *American Melodrama*, ed. Daniel C. Gould (New York: Performing Arts Journal, 1983).

24. Although Karen Sanchez-Eppler in the insightful essay "Bodily Bonds: The Intersecting Rhetorics of Feminism and Abolition" rightly argues that the mulatto body undermines the surety of racial legibility, I contend that Zoe's body becomes legible as a black one by virtue of the violence that threatens it. *Representations* 24 (Fall 1988): 41. Hazel Carby notes

the liminal status of the mulatto figure as a vehicle for exploring the relationship between the races. *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 89–91.

25. In the dualistic world of melodrama, identification was absolute or not at all, for good and evil could not be reconciled. Unwavering convictions and absolute distinctions permitted the spectator an undivided state of being, which Robert Heilman defines as “the monopathic—the singleness of feeling that gives one a sense of wholeness.” *Tragedy and Melodrama* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1968), 84. Similarly, Peter Brooks describes the “wholesome pleasures” of melodrama as the “joy of full emotional indulgence.” *The Melodramatic Imagination*, 56–80.

26. Within the worldview of sentimentalism, the subordinated exercised their power through such acts of self-immolation and submission. See Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790–1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 128. Ann Douglass contends, to the contrary, that sentimentalism merely naturalizes the social order by asserting the power of the most subordinate. *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Avon, 1977), 11–13.

27. Grimsted, *Melodrama Unveiled*, 206.

28. E. A. Andrews, *Slavery and the Domestic Slave Trade* (1836; reprint, Detroit: Negro History Press, n.d.).

29. According to Brooks, the motive of the tableau is to “give the spectator the opportunity to see meanings represented, emotions and moral states rendered in clear visible signs.” The reliance on gesture, muteness, and the inarticulate cry marks the inadequacy of the conventional code “to convey a full freight of emotional meaning.” *The Melodramatic Imagination*, 62.

30. Grimsted, *Melodrama Unveiled*, 191.

31. J. C. Furnas, *Goodbye to Uncle Tom* (New York: William Sloane Associates, 1956), 257–284; Toll, *Blacking Up*, 90–96; William L. Van De Burg, *Slavery and Race in American Popular Culture* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984), 47–49; Stephen Hirsch, “Uncle Tomitudes: The Popular Reaction to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*,” in *Studies in the American Renaissance*, ed. Joel Myerson (Boston: Twayne, 1978), 303–330; Eric Lott, *Love and Theft*, 211–233.

32. Sam Lucas was the first black actor to play Tom in nonminstrel versions of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Ironically, Lucas was not famous for this role but for his minstrel performance of Uncle Tom’s death.

33. The promiscuous circulation of these forms is especially clear in Brown’s work. *My Southern Home* was chock-full of darky fare. Furnas has noted that Tom’s rendition of “Old Folks at Home” had recently been made popular by the Christy Minstrels and that “Uncle Tom’s Religion” resembled a minstrel air, though it was also melodramatic, with heavy bass tremolo effects to evoke whipping. Hirsch, “Uncle Tomitudes,” 315.

34. “Old Folks at Home,” in Stephen Foster, *Minstrel Show Songs*, ed. H. Wiley Hitchcock (New York: Da Capo Press, 1980).

35. Generally critics have described the development of minstrelsy in terms of the triumph of the common man. The attack on pretentiousness, the pastoral romance, and issues of identity and nationhood were also significant themes. See Toll, *Blacking Up*, 3–21, 160–194; and Eric Lott, *Love and Theft* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 63–88.

36. Farce “invites laughter by the violation of social taboos” but “nevertheless avoids giving offence . . . by adhering to a balanced structure in which the characters and values under attack are ultimately restored to their conventional positions.” Jessica Milner Davis, *Farce* (London: Methuen, 1978), 85. See also Eric Bentley, *The Life of Drama* (New York: Atheneum, 1964).

37. As Houston Baker observes, the minstrel mask “is a space of habituation not only for

expressed spirits of sexuality, ludic play, id satisfaction, castration anxiety, and a mirror stage of development, but also for that deep-seated denial of the indisputable humanity of inhabitants of and descendants from the continent of Africa. See *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 17.

38. David Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness* (London: Verso, 1991), 127.

39. “Two Declarations of Independence: The Contaminated Origins of American National Culture,” in Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 34.

40. See Edmund Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1975); and Theodore Allen, *Invention of the White Race* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

41. Antislavery themes in minstrelsy were rare. “Ambivalence” best describes the representations of slavery that didn’t glorify the plantation. By the 1850s any traces of antislavery sentiment had disappeared. For a discussion of antislavery themes in minstrelsy, see William Stowe and David Grimsted, “White-Black Humor,” *Journal of Ethnic Studies* 3 (Summer 1975): 78–96; and Toll, *Backing Up*, 81–88, 112–114.

42. Foster, *Minstrel Show Songs*.

43. *New York Clipper*, April 6, 1872, cited in Nathan, *Dan Emmett*, 288.

44. George Fredrickson, *The Arrogance of Race* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1988), 215.

45. Sam Dennison, *Scandalize My Name: Black Imagery in American Popular Music* (New York: Garland, 1982), 102.

46. Hans Nathan, *Dan Emmett and the Rise of Early Negro Minstrelsy* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1962). The authorship of “Dixie” is contested. Thirty-seven white composers claimed authorship as well as a black family, the Snowdens. The mother of Ben and Lou Snowden, Ellen Cooper Snowden, has been identified as the author. See Howard L. Sacks and Judith Rose Sacks, *Way Up in Dixie: A Black Family’s Claim to the Confederate Anthem* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian, 1993). The Sackses contend that “Dixie” can be read as protest by way of parody based on Ellen Snowden’s authorship. In any case, the controversy over authorship doesn’t affect the political uses of “Dixie.”

47. “Gayly de Niggas Dance,” reprinted in *The Negro Forget-Me-Not-Songster* (Philadelphia, 1855), cited in ibid., 94.

48. “Dandy Jim from Caroline” (New York: Firth and Hall, 1843) and “Pompey Squash,” in *The Negro Forget-Me-Not-Songster*, both cited in ibid., 138–140.

49. *Oh, Hush! or, the Virginny Cupids, The Quack Doctor, and Meriky; or, The Old Time Religion*, in *This Grotesque Essence: Plays from the Minstrel Stage*, ed. Gary D. Engle (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978).

50. See *Oh, Hush! or, the Virginny Cupids, The Quack Doctor, Old Zip Coon, and Meriky; or, the Old Time Religion*, in ibid. See also T. Allston Brown, *History of the American Stage* (1870; reprint, New York: Benjamin Blom, 1969).

51. “Jim Along Josey,” reprinted in Nathan, *Dan Emmett*, 437.

52. Ibid., 399.

53. In his brilliant and masterful study, *Love and Theft*, Eric Lott forwards a reading of minstrelsy that focuses on the ambivalence of the minstrel texts and the transgressive identifications operative in donning blackface and cross-dressing. While much is to be admired in Lott’s deft and comprehensive examination, I take issue with his claims about cross-racial solidarity and the subversive effects of minstrelsy.

54. Boucicault, *The Octoroon*, 427.

55. George Tucker, *Letters from Virginia*, trans. F. Lucas (Baltimore: J. Rubinson, 1816), 29–34.

56. American Anti-Slavery Society, *American Slavery As It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses* (1839; reprint, New York: Arno, 1968); Jesse Torrey, *American Slave Trade* (1822; reprint, Westport, Conn.: Negro Universities Press, 1971); Theodore D. Weld, *Slavery and the Internal Slave Trade in the United States* (1841; reprint, New York: Arno, 1969).
57. George W. Featherstonhaugh, *Excursion through the Slave States*, vol. 1 (London, 1844), 119-124.
58. Tyrone Power, *Impressions of America during the Years 1833, 34 and 35*, vol. 2 (Philadelphia, 1836), 80-83, cited in *A Documentary History of Slavery in North America*, ed. Willie Lee Rose (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 154.
59. Letter to Mary Speed, September 27, 1841, in Abraham Lincoln, *Abraham Lincoln: Speeches and Writings, 1832-1858* (New York: Library of America, 1989), 74-75.
60. Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 39.
61. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 37.
62. Edouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, trans. J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1989), 2, 4, 161.
63. Gilles Deleuze discusses the operation of disavowal as "the point of departure of an operation that consists in neither negating nor even destroying, but rather in radically contesting the validity of that which is; it suspends belief in and neutralizes the given in such a way that a new horizon opens up beyond the given and in place of it." *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty* (New York: Zone, 1991), 28-29.
64. Sellie Martin's narrative in John Blassingame, ed., *Slave Testimony* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), 704.
65. William Wells Brown, *Narrative of William Wells Brown, a Fugitive Slave, in Puttin' On Ole Massa*, ed. Gilbert Osofsky (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968), 194.
66. Blassingame, *Slave Testimony*, 691.
67. Torture, according to Elaine Scarry, "converts the vision of suffering into the wholly illusory but . . . wholly convincing display of agency." *The Body in Pain*, 27.
68. *Ibid.*, 47.
69. Cato Carter, in George P. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, 41 vols. (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1973), suppl. 2, vol. 3, pt. 2, p. 646.
70. Catherine Slim, in *ibid.*, vol. 16, pt. 4, p. 74.
71. Mary Gaffney, in *ibid.*, suppl. 2, vol. 5, pt. 4, p. 1445.
72. James Martin, in *ibid.*, suppl. 2, vol. 5, pt. 3, p. 63.
73. Polly Shine, in *ibid.*, suppl. 2, vol. 9, pt. 8, pp. 3514-3515.
74. Blassingame, *Slave Testimony*, 138.
75. *New Orleans Daily Picayune*, March 26, 1853, cited in Richard Tansey, "Bernard Kendig and the New Orleans Slave Trade," *Louisiana History* 23.2 (Spring 1982): 160.
76. Blassingame, *Slave Testimony*, 503.
77. Bave Byrd, in Rawick, *The American Slave*, suppl. 2, vol. 3, pt. 2, pp. 564-565.
78. Ethel Dougherty, in *ibid.*, suppl. 1, vol. 5, pt. 1, p. 63.
79. Edward Lycurgas, in *ibid.*, suppl. 1, vol. 17, pt. 1, p. 206.
80. Blassingame, *Slave Testimony*, 347.
81. Millie Simpkins, in Rawick, *The American Slave*, suppl. 1, vol. 16, pt. 6, p. 66.
82. Winger Vanhook, in *ibid.*, suppl. 2, vol. 10, pt. 9, p. 395.
83. Mattie Gilmore, in *ibid.*, suppl. 2, vol. 5, pt. 4, p. 1492. See also Emma Taylor, in *ibid.*, suppl. 2, vol. 9, pt. 8, p. 3762.
84. Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 152.

85. *Slave Life in Georgia: A Narrative of the Life, Sufferings, and Escape of John Brown*, ed. L. A. Chamerovzow (London: W. M. Watts, 1855), 112–118.
86. Charles L. Perdue, Jr., Thomas E. Barden, and Robert K. Philips, eds., *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Ex-Slaves* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 325.
87. Chamerovzow, *Slave Life in Georgia*, 117.
88. Mrs. Fannie Berry, in Perdue, Barden, and Philips, *Weevils in the Wheat*, 49.
89. Ibid., 166.
90. Michael Tadman remarks that “the real evils of the trade lay, not with physical experiences, but with the deeply racist white assumptions on which the traffic was built, and with the emotional sufferings of slaves callously separated from parents, offsprings, siblings, and other members of their community.” Between 1830 and 1850, over a quarter of a million slaves were moved due to sales and planter migration. According to Tadman, teenagers and young adults constituted the staple of trade. For slaves in the upper South, the chance of being sold in the first forty years of their life was as high as 30 percent, and forcible separations of slaves for sale destroyed about one in three of all first marriages. *Speculators and Slaves: Masters, Traders, and Slaves in the Old South* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 82, 113, 133–178. See also Herbert Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom* (New York: Vintage, 1976).
91. Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (London: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 191.
92. Peter Sloterdijk, “Pain and Justice,” in *Thinker on Stage: Nietzsche’s Materialism*, trans. Jamie Daniel Owens (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 77. Sloterdijk skillfully argues that the construction of the socially endurable engenders the spectacle of error.
93. Solomon Northrup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, in Osofsky, *Puttin’ On Ole Massa*, 323–324.
94. Being forced to dance before the master was a common occurrence, according to the testimony of the enslaved.
95. Jacob Stroyer, *My Life in the South*, in *Four Slave Narratives: A Compendium*, ed. William Loren Katz (New York: Arno and New York Times, 1968), 45.
96. Ibid., 45.
97. Discipline, as Foucault has defined it, “is a technique of power which operates primarily on the body.” It creates a docile body that can be “subjected, used, transformed and improved.” Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1979), 136.
98. Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (New York: Collier, 1962), 147.
99. J. Hamilton Couper, Theo B. Bartow, and George Adams, “Premium Essay on the Treatment of Slaves,” *Soil of the South* 3 (March 1853): 458–459, cited in *Advice among the Masters: The Ideal in Slave Management in the Old South*, ed. James O. Breeden (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1980).
100. Tattler, “Management of Negroes,” *Southern Cultivator* 8 (November 1850): 162–164. See also Breeden, *Advice among the Masters*, 65.
101. Guion Griffis Johnson, *A Social History of the Sea Islands with Special Reference to St. Helena Island* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1930), 143.
102. According to George Fredrickson, romantic racialism “projected an image of the Negro that could be construed as flattering or laudatory in the context of some currently accepted ideals of human behavior and sensibility. . . . The romantic racialist view endorsed the ‘child’ stereotype of the most sentimental school of proslavery paternalists.” The notable traits of the African from this vantage point were lightheartedness, a natural talent for

Index

- Agency
 - and itinerant practices, 126–128, 146, 183
 - and resistance, 9, 11–12, 14, 48–56, 61–70
 - and unbecoming conduct, 3, 6, 145, 148–149, 150–151
 - and will, 4, 6–8, 9, 41, 53, 56, 80, 85–88
- Alfred v. State*, 84
- American Revolution, 121, 169–170
- American Tract Society, 128
- Arendt, Hannah, 169, 242 nn.11, 14, 252 n.132
- Bhabha, Homi, 154
- Black Codes
 - and civil rights, 183, 186
 - and manhood, 151, 173, 175
 - and proper conduct, 145–147, 151
- Black cultural practices
 - as distinguished from Africanity, 73–75, 223 n.102
 - and juba, 70, 75–76, 220 n.78, 221 nn.83–84, 224 nn.112–113
 - and the shout, 67–68
- Blackness
 - constructions of, 7, 9, 61, 101, 116–118

as contagious, 116, 136, 161–164, 168,
177, 183–197

performing of, 22, 25–34, 51, 56–58
and racial taxonomy, 162–163, 173,
178, 187, 193–196, 205, 245 n.32,
250 n.103

Body

of the enslaved, 3–4, 19–23, 26, 42, 49,
95, 117, 191–195, 250–251 n.115
and pain, 3–4, 19, 22, 28, 32, 38–39,
50–56
and pleasure, 58, 66, 71, 77–78
as vehicle for redress, 41, 50–52, 75–
77

Brinckerhoff, Isaac W.

Advice to Freemen, 125, 128–130, 133–
135, 142–143, 154, 158

Brown, Helen

John Freeman and His Family, 123,
128–130, 134–135, 142–143, 153–
155, 158

Brown, John, 39–40

Brown v. Board of Education, 163

Cable, George Washington

and interracial association, 164–169,
187

and racial taxonomies, 197, 203–204

Index

- ls Act of 1866
inctions of class and race, 163,
82, 184, 200
egation, 118, 170, 173, 175,
78
ls Act of 1875
l rights, 171, 176
racial association, 163, 165
al rights, 183, 200
ls Cases, 139, 165, 167, 200
t, 130
r, 138, 172
onstruction legislation, 118, 154,
mas
into the Law of Negro Slavery,
1, 101
Health v. Jerry Mann, 99
n
citizen-subject, 153, 176,
very, 116, 122, 183, 191
social, 171, 174, 181, 191
vid Brion, 138
science, 126, 130–137
or, 10, 140, 151
Frederick, 3, 35, 43, 78, 164
ve culture, 43, 47–48, 50, 54,
1
t v. Sanford, 9, 117
ial taxonomies, 192, 198
construction legislation, 174,
179
W. E. B., 35, 48
- tion, 6, 12
pared to slavery, 115–116, 119,
bt, 131, 140
people
mes of the state, 82–86
inal, 24, 55, 80–90, 94–101,
107, 109, 126
dered subjects, 101
ple and property, 5, 24, 40–41,
80, 93–98, 101, 110
- Featherstonhaugh, George W., 32–33
Fitzhugh, George
Cannibals All! or, Slaves without Masters, 89–90
Foucault, Michel, 116, 138
Fourteenth Amendment, 163, 170, 173–
175, 176–177
and distinctions of class, 180–182,
184
and segregation, 200–201
Fraser, Nancy, 154, 202, 220 n.75, 240
n.83
Freedmen's Bureau
and conduct control, 145, 147
and labor, 127–128, 137, 141, 173
Freedmen's Bureau Bill, 176–178
Freedom
as compared to slavery, 12–13, 132,
135–145, 171–173, 192
constraints of, 10–14, 117–124
exercises of, 126–128, 143, 146, 148,
150–151, 183
expressions of, 13, 67–70
and self-making, 5–7, 120
Freedpeople
and citizenship, 123, 129, 153
as criminals, 125, 159
and labor, 7, 10, 120, 122, 127, 135,
137, 141, 143, 146, 239 n.60
and labor relations, 129, 146
and the poor, 138–139, 157, 162
and primers for the emancipated, 128–
134, 140, 143–163
and vagrancy laws, 127, 138, 145
and women, 156–161, 179, 181
Fugitive Slave Law, 174
George v. State, 80, 96
Gilroy, Paul, 13, 35, 62
Glissant, Edouard, 13, 36, 75, 139
Grandison (a Slave) v. State, 99
Green v. State, 188
Gurteen, Rev. S. Humphreys
A Handbook of Charity Organization,
157–158, 160
Humphrey v. Utz, 97
Idleness, 136, 143, 146, 156^a
and itinerant practices, 126–127

- Individuality
 as burdened, 116–121, 123, 132, 134, 206
 as liberal, 5–6, 116, 122, 124
 and pain, 6, 26
- Injury
 and race, 176–179
 and subjectivity, 97–98, 176, 180–186
- Jacobs, Harriet A., 9
Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl as Written by Herself, 102–112
- Johnson, Andrew, 176, 178, 184
- Keckley, Elizabeth, 107–108
- Ku Klux Klan, 134, 140, 161
- Lincoln, Abraham, 34–35, 184
- Lowell, Josephine Shaw, 128
Public Relief and Private Charity, 157–158
- Marx, Karl, 115–116, 120, 172
- Melodrama, 4, 26–28, 32, 210 n.23
- Men
 and the citizen-subject, 153–163, 175–179, 190
 and constructions of masculinity, 135, 152–157, 162–163, 175, 190
 and rape, 81, 96, 229 n.32
- Middle Passage, 23, 72–74, 77
- Minstrelsy, 26–32, 210 n.23
 Sambo, 7, 23, 28, 30–31, 43
 Topsy, 4, 26, 28
 Zip Coon, 4, 30–31
- Miscegenation, 183–184
 and interracial association, 175, 184–187, 197, 206
 statutes, 183–190, 202–203
 and white women, 99–100, 104, 189–190
- Morrison, Toni, 7, 34
- Moses, Charlie, 4–5
- New Deal, 168
- Nietzsche, Friedrich, 125–126
- Octoroon, The*, 25, 28, 32
- Pace v. Alabama*, 188
- Paternalism, 46, 52–54, 88–89, 121, 143, 150
 and the pastoral, 52–54, 216 n.14
- Pleasure, 4–5, 7
 as coerced, 21–23, 25–26, 35–38, 42–46
 of mastery, 18, 21, 23
- Plessy v. Ferguson*, 7, 9–10, 139
 and natural affinities, 167, 182
 and racial taxonomies, 158, 189–206
See also Segregation
- Poovey, Mary, 243 n.16, 251 n.123
- Post, Amy, 108
- Property
 and enjoyment, 23–25
 and the self, 65–69, 110, 112
 and slave law, 90–97
 slaves as, 5, 7, 38–40, 102, 173
 whiteness as, 24, 118–119, 189, 195–196, 234 n.8
- Race
 and the deployment of sexuality, 3, 84, 99–101
 the law, 9, 83, 172, 175, 205, 244 n.26
 legal codification of, 84, 170, 174–206, 247 n.64, 250 n.103
 racial taxonomy, 57, 86, 191–195, 205, 250 n.103
- Rankin, John, 17–22, 25
- Rape
 and consent, 80, 87–88, 102, 105, 109, 226 n.6
 and desire, 57
 and enslaved men, 80–81, 85, 96
 and enslaved women, 81–90, 95–105, 107–108, 227 n.9
 and slave law, 80, 88–89, 96
 and white women, 84, 99–100, 104
- Reconstruction, 5–6, 137–138, 151, 158
 and the law, 116–118, 121, 139, 170–201, 243 n.22
- Redress, 50–51, 62, 67
 as cultural memory, 23, 72–77, 222 n.90, 223 n.102
 as diverse from Turner's definition, 77
 and pleasure, 58–59, 71–72, 78, 86
- Responsibility, 9
 and conduct, 68, 134, 146, 148
 and duty, 122–123, 125–130, 135, 146

Index

- lity (*continued*)
t, 125, 135, 141
r, 132–139, 141–143
City of Boston, 191–192
 5, 7
ily romance, 89–90
ance, 102–107, 109–112
y of power, 81, 88–89, 226 n.6
n
ral affinities, 161–162, 164–
190–192, 203–204
ery, 194–195
state, 190–192, 198–206
ning, 4–6, 11, 152
stery, 68, 134, 140
alism
pathy, 7, 19–22, 121, 162, 184,
198, 203
athy, 3–4, 17–23, 35, 106
law, 8, 10, 193, 198, 203
e, 83–84, 99–101, 104–105
olation, 8, 40–44
ider, 86–90, 229 n.32
law, 82–86, 226 n.6
itation of, 105–109
ure
tural memory, 73–76
ntation life, 45–47, 78
ntation songs, 29–33, 46, 48
, 7, 9–10, 80, 176
ck humanity, 4, 90, 93–96
formance, 7–8, 12
asure, 42–47, 77–78
jection, 32–35, 54–56
ferring, 22–23, 36–48
 auction block, 7, 21, 32, 37–42
ice to, 5, 8, 64–66
fe, 11, 59–60, 66–68, 73, 128,
136, 138, 140, 150, 151, 155
de
 coffle, 17, 21–23, 27, 32–38, 42
ive markets, 4, 7, 32, 37–42
arity, 158–160
giene, 156–161
e poor, 138, 158–160, 166–167,
 and primers for the emancipated, 128–
 129, 131, 137, 141, 148, 151, 156–
 161
and the state, 128–129, 131, 137, 141,
 148, 151, 156–157, 168–171, 173–
 175, 180–183, 186–206, 243 n.22,
 252 nn.130, 132
Spectacle, 22, 32–44, 57
Spillers, Hortense, 85, 155
State of Missouri v. Celia, a Slave, 80, 82,
 85–86
State v. Gibson, 188
State v. Jowers, 148
State v. Mann, 91–92, 101, 112, 198
State v. Tackett, 83, 148
Stowe, Harriet Beecher
 Uncle Tom's Cabin, 3, 20, 25–28, 183
Subjection
 and consent, 38, 53, 80, 87–88, 96,
 102, 109–111
 and criminality, 41, 55, 80–86, 90
 and desire, 103–105
 and will, 33, 54–58, 80–87, 90, 140
Terror, 62–64, 68
 and pleasure, 4, 7, 21, 29, 34, 42
 representations of, 3–4, 17–21, 107
 and subjection, 33–34, 39, 41–44
Thirteenth Amendment, 10, 121, 151,
 154
 and the constraints of freedom, 171–
 174, 176–177, 244 n.26
 and property relations, 189–191, 193–
 194
 and segregation, 180, 183
Tourgee, Albion, 193, 195, 197
Trumbull, Lyman, 174–175, 181–182,
 184
Turner, Victor, 77–78
Waterbury, Jared Bell
 Advice to a Young Christian, 126
 Friendly Counsels for Freedmen, 128–
 130, 136, 141–142, 144, 158, 160
 Southern Planters and Freedmen, 142,
 161, 163, 177–178
Werley v. State, 97
Westley, Robert St. Martin, 250 n.103
White, Hayden, 14, 216 n.14

- Whiteness, 24–25
and bodily integrity, 9, 168, 177–178,
183–190, 202–203
and criminality, 9, 82–83, 227 n.11
and mastery, 7, 23–25, 35, 41, 44–
49, 57–58, 120, 190, 195, 197,
199
Windham, Tom, 4–5
Women, 87–89, 96
in bondage, 38–42, 97, 156
and citizenship, 179, 181–182
and the construction of gender, 85–86,
97–102, 228 n.26
as criminals, 80–87
and domestic hygiene, 159–161
and labor primers, 156–159
and motherhood, 98, 102
and slave law, 80, 95, 105
Works Progress Administration, 4, 10–12,
40, 140

provocative and original exploration of racial subjugation during slavery and its

, Saidiya Hartman illuminates the forms of terror.



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Scenes of Subjection examines the forms of domination, the encroachments of power that take place through notions of humanity, enjoyment, rights, and consent. By looking at slave narratives, plantation diaries,

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