

Counter-Production: Noise as Critical Research in Sound Studies  
UCLA Meeting, "Illegible: Literary Audiation"  
13-14 January 2018  
Chip Badley

## THE DOUGLASS DOSSIER

"The Douglass Dossier" assembles documents from one of American literary history's early entries into sound studies: Saidiya Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection: Terror: Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford University Press, 1997) and Fred Moten's *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (University of Minnesota Press, 2003). Hartman and Moten address perhaps the most infamous scene in antislavery literature: Aunt Hester's whipping in Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845). In the scene, the notoriously articulate and rhetorically effective Douglass struggles to "commit to paper the feelings with which [he] beheld" the "heartrending shrieks" of his aunt. Because the scene pivots upon axes of gender, sexuality, witnessing, and trauma, it has played a seminal role in the debate over the testimonial nature of slave narrative. The tension between the said and unsaid, the seen and the heard, the known and suspected, centers on Douglass' ability, or lack thereof, to represent the sound (noise?) of Hester's screams.

Hartman consciously omits the passage in *Scenes of Subjection*: in line with her argument regarding "the consequences of this routine display of the slave's ravaged body" (3), she focuses her attention on underscoring the quotidian nature of performing the atrocities of slavery. Racism relies on the frequency and ubiquity of violence in order to desensitize, and thus justify, race-based oppression. Moten, in contrast, actively embraces the recalcitrance of Hester's screams, because for him they iterate an early

instance of black radicalism couched in opacity, illegibility, and discordance. The sweeping historical arc of *In the Break*—from Douglass and Marx in the 1840s to jazz in the 1950s and eventually the postmodern 1980s avant garde—sutures together sound studies, deconstruction, and critical race and ethnic studies in an attempt to locate the transgressive productivity afforded by screams, cries, shouts, yells, syncopated beats, and disruptive rhythmic variation. Sonic disruption indexes, for Moten, political subversion.

In the spirit of *In the Break*, I've reproduced Douglass, Hartman, and Moten in their entirety, hence the lengthy PDF. Please, skim around! The bulk of Hartman's discussion of Douglass appears on pgs. 3-4, and Moten explicitly addresses Hartman and Douglass from pgs. 1-7, though I wanted to present his chapter in full for those unfamiliar with his dazzling work. (His elliptical writing style always reminds me of the music he discusses...) As a nineteenth-century Americanist, I wanted to introduce this group to an early, though still ongoing, debate as to how sound and noise can enrich literary studies by offering a way to account for what remains irreconcilable with the written word.

NORTON CRITICAL EDITIONS  
 AMERICAN REALISM & REFORM

ALCOTT, LITTLE WOMEN  
 ALGER, RAGGED DICK  
 ANDERSON, WINESBURG, OHIO  
 CHESNUTT, THE CONJURE STORIES  
 CHESNUTT, THE MARROW OF TRADITION  
 CHOPIN, THE AWAKENING  
 CRANE, MAGGIE: A GIRL OF THE STREETS  
 CRANE, THE RED BADGE OF COURAGE  
 DOUGLASS, NARRATIVE OF THE LIFE OF FREDERICK DOUGLASS  
 DREISER, SISTER CARRIE  
 DU BOIS, THE SOULS OF BLACK FOLK  
 EMERSON, EMERSON'S PROSE AND POETRY  
 FULLER, WOMAN IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY  
 HAWTHORNE, THE BLITHEDALE ROMANCE  
 HAWTHORNE, THE HOUSE OF THE SEVEN GABLES  
 HAWTHORNE, NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE'S TALES  
 HAWTHORNE, THE SCARLET LETTER AND OTHER WRITINGS  
 HOWELLS, THE RISE OF SILAS LAPHAM  
 JACOBS, INCIDENTS IN THE LIFE OF A SLAVE GIRL  
 JAMES, THE AMBASSADORS  
 JAMES, THE AMERICAN  
 JAMES, THE PORTRAIT OF A LADY  
 JAMES, TALES OF HENRY JAMES  
 JAMES, THE TURN OF THE SCREW  
 JAMES, THE WINGS OF THE DOVE  
 LINCOLN, LINCOLN'S SELECTED WRITINGS  
 MELVILLE, THE CONFIDENCE-MAN  
 MELVILLE, MELVILLE'S SHORT NOVELS  
 MELVILLE, MOBY-DICK  
 MELVILLE, PIERRE  
 MONTGOMERY, ANNE OF GREEN GABLES  
 MOODIE, ROUGHING IT IN THE BUSH  
 NORRIS, McTEAGUE  
 NORTHUP, TWELVE YEARS A SLAVE  
 POE, THE SELECTED WRITINGS OF EDGAR ALLAN POE  
 RIIS, HOW THE OTHER HALF LIVES  
 SINCLAIR, THE JUNGLE  
 STOWE, UNCLE TOM'S CABIN  
 THOREAU, WALDEN, CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE, AND OTHER WRITINGS  
 TWAIN, ADVENTURES OF HUCKLEBERRY FINN  
 TWAIN, THE ADVENTURES OF TOM SAWYER  
 TWAIN, A CONNECTICUT YANKEE IN KING ARTHUR'S COURT  
 TWAIN, PUDD'NHEAD WILSON AND THOSE EXTRAORDINARY TWINS  
 WASHINGTON, UP FROM SLAVERY  
 WHARTON, THE AGE OF INNOCENCE  
 WHARTON, ETHAN FROME  
 WHARTON, THE HOUSE OF MIRTH  
 WHITMAN, LEAVES OF GRASS AND OTHER WRITINGS

For a complete list of Norton Critical Editions, visit  
[www.norton.com/nortoncriticals](http://www.norton.com/nortoncriticals)

A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION

Frederick Douglass  
 NARRATIVE OF THE LIFE  
 OF FREDERICK DOUGLASS,  
 AN AMERICAN SLAVE,  
 WRITTEN BY HIMSELF



AUTHORITATIVE TEXT

CONTEXTS

CRITICISM

SECOND EDITION

*Edited by*

WILLIAM L. ANDREWS

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT CHAPEL HILL

and

WILLIAM S. McFEELY

UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA



W • W • NORTON & COMPANY • New York • London

the penalty of not being in the field at sunrise, unless a slave has special permission from his or her master to the contrary—a permission which they seldom get, and one that gives to him that gives it the proud name of being a kind master. I do not recollect of ever seeing my mother by the light of day. She was with me in the night. She would lie down with me, and get me to sleep, but long before I waked she was gone. Very little communication ever took place between us. Death soon ended what little we could have while she lived, and with it her hardships and suffering. She died when I was about seven years old, on one of my master's farms, near Lee's Mill. I was not allowed to be present during her illness, at her death, or burial. She was gone long before I knew any thing about it. Never having enjoyed, to any considerable extent, her soothing presence, her tender and watchful care, I received the tidings of her death with much the same emotions I should have probably felt at the death of a stranger.

Called thus suddenly away, she left me without the slightest intimation of who my father was. The whisper that my master was my father, may or may not be true; and, true or false, it is of but little consequence to my purpose whilst the fact remains, in all its glaring odiousness, that slaveholders have ordained, and by law established, that the children of slave women shall in all cases follow the condition of their mothers; and this is done too obviously to administer to their own lusts, and make a gratification of their wicked desires profitable as well as pleasurable; for by this cunning arrangement, the slaveholder, in cases not a few, sustains to his slaves the double relation of master and father.

I know of such cases; and it is worthy of remark that such slaves invariably suffer greater hardships, and have more to contend with, than others. They are, in the first place, a constant offence to their mistress. She is ever disposed to find fault with them; they can seldom do any thing to please her; she is never better pleased than when she sees them under the lash, especially when she suspects her husband of showing to his mulatto children favors which he withholds from his black slaves. The master is frequently compelled to sell this class of his slaves, out of deference to the feelings of his white wife, and, cruel as the deed may strike any one to be, for a man to sell his own children to human flesh-mongers, it is often the dictate of humanity for him to do so; for, unless he does this, he must not only whip them himself, but must stand by and see one white son tie up his brother, of but few shades darker complexion than himself, and ply the gory lash to his naked back; and if he lip one word of disapproval, it is set down to his parental partiality, and only makes a bad matter worse, both for himself and the slave whom he would protect and defend.

Every year brings with it multitudes of this class of slaves. It was doubtless in consequence of a knowledge of this fact, that one great statesman of the south predicted the downfall of slavery by the inevitable laws of population. Whether this prophecy is ever fulfilled or not, it is nevertheless plain that a very different-looking class of people are springing up at the south, and are now held in slavery, from those originally brought to this country from Africa; and if their increase will do no other good, it will do away the force of the argument, that God cursed Ham,<sup>1</sup> and therefore American slavery is right. If the lineal descendants of Ham are alone to be scripturally enslaved, it is certain that slavery at the south must soon become unscriptural; for thousands are ushered into the world, annually, who, like myself, owe their existence to white fathers, and those fathers most frequently their own masters.

I have had two masters. My first master's name was Anthony. I do not remember his first name. He was generally called Captain Anthony—a title which, I presume, he acquired by sailing a craft on the Chesapeake Bay. He was not considered a rich slaveholder. He owned two or three farms, and about thirty slaves. His farms and slaves were under the care of an overseer. The overseer's name was Plummer. Mr. Plummer was a miserable drunkard, a profane swearer, and a savage monster. He always went armed with a cowskin<sup>2</sup> and a heavy cudgel. I have known him to cut and slash the women's heads so horribly, that even master would be enraged at his cruelty, and would threaten to whip him if he did not mind himself. Master, however, was not a humane slaveholder. It required extraordinary barbarity on the part of an overseer to affect him. He was a cruel man, hardened by a long life of slaveholding. He would at times seem to take great pleasure in whipping a slave. I have often been awakened at the dawn of day by the most heart-rending shrieks of an own aunt of mine, whom he used to tie up to a joist, and whip upon her naked back till she was literally covered with blood. No words, no tears, no prayers, from his gory victim, seemed to move his iron heart from its bloody purpose. The louder she screamed, the harder he whipped; and where the blood ran fastest, there he whipped longest. He would whip her to make her scream, and whip her to make her hush; and not until overcome by fatigue, would he cease to swing the blood-clotted cowskin. I remember the first time I ever witnessed this horrible exhibition. I was quite a child, but I well remember it. I never shall forget it whilst I remember any thing. It was the first of a long series of such outrages, of which I was doomed to be a witness and a participant. It struck me with

1. The specious argument referred to is based on an interpretation of Genesis 9.20–27, in which Noah curses his son Ham and condemns him to bondage to his brothers.

2. A whip made of raw cowhide.

awful force. It was the blood-stained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery, through which I was about to pass. It was a most terrible spectacle. I wish I could commit to paper the feelings with which I beheld it.

This occurrence took place very soon after I went to live with my old master, and under the following circumstances. Aunt Hester went out one night,—where or for what I do not know,—and happened to be absent when my master desired her presence. He had ordered her not to go out evenings, and warned her that she must never let him catch her in company with a young man, who was paying attention to her, belonging to Colonel Lloyd. The young man's name was Ned Roberts, generally called Lloyd's Ned. Why master was so careful of her, may be safely left to conjecture. She was a woman of noble form, and of graceful proportions, having very few equals, and fewer superiors, in personal appearance, among the colored or white women of our neighborhood.

Aunt Hester had not only disobeyed his orders in going out, but had been found in company with Lloyd's Ned; which circumstance, I found, from what he said while whipping her, was the chief offence. Had he been a man of pure morals himself, he might have been thought interested in protecting the innocence of my aunt; but those who knew him will not suspect him of any such virtue. Before he commenced whipping Aunt Hester, he took her into the kitchen, and stripped her from neck to waist, leaving her neck, shoulders, and back, entirely naked. He then told her to cross her hands, calling her at the same time a d—d b—h. After crossing her hands, he tied them with a strong rope, and led her to a stool under a large hook in the joist, put in for the purpose. He made her get upon the stool, and tied her hands to the hook. She now stood fair for his infernal purpose. Her arms were stretched up at their full length, so that she stood upon the ends of her toes. He then said to her, "Now, you d—d b—h, I'll learn you how to disobey my orders!" and after rolling up his sleeves, he commenced to lay on the heavy cowskin, and soon the warm, red blood (amid heartrending shrieks from her, and horrid oaths from him) came dripping to the floor. I was so terrified and horror-stricken at the sight, that I hid myself in a closet, and dared not venture out till long after the bloody transaction was over. I expected it would be my turn next. It was all new to me. I had never seen any thing like it before. I had always lived with my grandmother on the outskirts of the plantation, where she was put to raise the children of the younger women. I had therefore been, until now, out of the way of the bloody scenes that often occurred on the plantation.

## Chapter II

My master's family consisted of two sons, Andrew and Richard; one daughter, Lucretia, and her husband, Captain Thomas Auld. They lived in one house, upon the home plantation of Colonel Edward Lloyd. My master was Colonel Lloyd's clerk and superintendent. He was what might be called the overseer of the overseers. I spent two years of childhood on this plantation in my old master's family. It was here that I witnessed the bloody transaction recorded in the first chapter; and as I received my first impressions of slavery on this plantation, I will give some description of it, and of slavery as it there existed. The plantation is about twelve miles north of Easton, in Talbot county, and is situated on the border of Miles River. The principal products raised upon it were tobacco, corn, and wheat. These were raised in great abundance; so that, with the products of this and the other farms belonging to him, he was able to keep in almost constant employment a large sloop, in carrying them to market at Baltimore. This sloop was named Sally Lloyd, in honor of one of the colonel's daughters. My master's son-in-law, Captain Auld, was master of the vessel; she was otherwise manned by the colonel's own slaves. Their names were Peter, Isaac, Rich, and Jake. These were esteemed very highly by the other slaves, and looked upon as the privileged ones of the plantation; for it was no small affair, in the eyes of the slaves, to be allowed to see Baltimore.

Colonel Lloyd kept from three to four hundred slaves on his home plantation, and owned a large number more on the neighboring farms belonging to him. The names of the farms nearest to the home plantation were Wye Town and New Design. "Wye Town" was under the overseership of a man named Noah Willis. New Design was under the overseership of a Mr. Townsend. The overseers of these, and all the rest of the farms, numbering over twenty, received advice and direction from the managers of the home plantation. This was the great business place. It was the seat of government for the whole twenty farms. All disputes among the overseers were settled here. If a slave was convicted of any high misdemeanor, became unmanageable, or evinced a determination to run away, he was brought immediately here, severely whipped, put on board the sloop, carried to Baltimore, and sold to Austin Woolfolk, or some other slave-trader, as a warning to the slaves remaining.

Here, too, the slaves of all the other farms received their monthly allowance of food, and their yearly clothing. The men and women slaves received, as their monthly allowance of food, eight pounds of pork, or its equivalent in fish, and one bushel of corn meal. Their yearly clothing consisted of two coarse linen shirts, one pair of linen trousers, like the shirts, one jacket, one pair of trousers for winter,

RACE AND AMERICAN CULTURE

Arnold Rampersad and Shelley Fisher Fishkin, *General Editors*

*Love and Theft:*

*Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*

Eric Lott

*The Dialect of Modernism:*

*Race, Language, and Twentieth-Century Literature*

Michael North

*Bordering on the Body:*

*The Racial Matrix of Modern Fiction and Culture*

Laura Doyle

*"Who Set You Flowin'?"*:

*The African American Migration Narrative*

Farah Jasmine Griffin

*"Doers of the Word"*:

*African-American Women Speakers and Writers in the North (1830-1880)*

Carla L. Peterson

*Race, Rape, and Lynching:*

*The Red Record of American Literature, 1890-1912*

Sandra Gunning

*Scenes of Subjection:*

*Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*

Saidiya V. Hartman

*Scenes of*  
**Subjection**

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

Saidiya V. Hartman

New York Oxford  
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS  
1997

## *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.”<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>

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?<sup>3</sup> Or are we voyeurs fascinated with and repelled by exhibitions of terror and suffering? 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 of slavery, and this is the task I take up here.

Therefore, rather than try to convey the routinized violence of slavery and its aftermath through invocations of the shocking and the terrible, I have chosen to look elsewhere and consider those scenes in which terror can hardly be discerned—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 pleasure, 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 us. 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’ a heart an’ a min’. We ain’ like a dog or a horse.”<sup>4</sup>

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 atrocity 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.”<sup>5</sup> 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 proprietorial 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.<sup>6</sup>

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 fabrication of the will, and the relation between injury and personhood. While the calibration of sentence 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."<sup>7</sup> Indeed, blackness provided the occasion for self-reflection as well as for an exploration of terror, desire, fear, loathing, and longing.<sup>8</sup> 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."<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> 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.’”<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup>

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.<sup>14</sup>

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.<sup>15</sup>

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.<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup> 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."<sup>20</sup> 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."<sup>21</sup> 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 unrepresentable. 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."<sup>22</sup>

## PART ONE

# *Formations of Terror and Enjoyment*

Fred Moten

in the

# Break

THE AESTHETICS OF THE BLACK

RADICAL TRADITION

# **In the Break**

*The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*

**Fred Moten**

University of Minnesota Press  
Minneapolis • London



Copyright 2003 by the Regents of the University of Minnesota

Portions of chapter 1 were originally published as "Voices/Forces: Migration, Surplus, and the Black Avant-Garde," in *Writing Aloud: The Sonics of Language*, edited by Brandon LaBelle and Christof Migone (Los Angeles: Errant Bodies Press, 2001); reprinted by permission of Errant Bodies Press. Portions of chapter 1 also appeared as "Sound in Florescence: Cecil Taylor Floating Garden," in *Sound States: Innovative Poetics and Acoustical Technologies*, edited by Adalaide Morris (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); copyright 1998 by the University of North Carolina Press; reprinted by permission of the University of North Carolina Press. An earlier version of chapter 2 appeared as "From Ensemble to Improvisation," in *Hambone 16* (Fall 2002); reprinted by permission of *Hambone*. An earlier version of chapter 3 appeared as "Black Mo'nin' in the Sound of the Photograph," in *Loss*, edited by David Kazanjian and David Eng (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); copyright 2002 by the Regents of the University of California; reprinted by permission of the University of California Press.

Translated poetry by Antonin Artaud in chapter 1 originally appeared in *Watchfiends and Rack Screams: Works from the Final Period*, edited and translated by Clayton Eshleman and Bernard Bador (Boston: Exact Change, 1995); reprinted courtesy of Exact Change. *Lush Life*, by Billy Strayhorn, copyright 1949 (renewed) by Music Sales Corporation (ASCAP) and Tempo Music Corporation (BMD); all rights administered by Music Sales Corporation (ASCAP); international copyright secured; all rights reserved; reprinted by permission. Lines from "The Dead Lecturer," by Amiri Baraka, in chapter 2 are reprinted by permission of Sterling Lord Literistic, Inc.; copyright 1964 by Amiri Baraka.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Published by the University of Minnesota Press  
111 Third Avenue South, Suite 290  
Minneapolis, MN 55401-2520  
<http://www.upress.umn.edu>

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Moten, Fred.

In the break : the aesthetics of the Black radical tradition / Fred Moten.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p. ) and index.

ISBN 0-8166-4099-8 (HC : alk. paper)—ISBN 0-8166-4100-5 (PB : alk. paper)

1. African Americans—Intellectual life. 2. African Americans—Politics and government. 3. Radicalism—United States. 4. African American aesthetics. 5. African American arts. 6. Arts—Political aspects—United States. I. Title.

E185 .M895 2003  
700'.89'96073—dc21

2002151661

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

The University of Minnesota is an equal-opportunity educator and employer.



*for B*

black radicalism cannot be understood within the particular  
context of its genesis . . .

—Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism*

. . . an insistent previousness evading each and every natal occasion . . .

—Nathaniel Mackey, *Bedouin Hornbook*

# Contents

Acknowledgments	XI
Resistance of the Object: Aunt Hester's Scream	1
<b>1. The Sentimental Avant-Garde</b>	
Duke Ellington's Sound of Love	25
Voices/Forces	31
Sound in Florescence (Cecil Taylor Floating Garden)	41
Praying with Eric	63
<b>2. In the Break</b>	
Tragedy, Elegy	85
The Dark Lady and the Sexual Cut	102
German Inversion	122
'Round the Five Spot	149
<b>3. Visible Music</b>	
Baldwin's <i>Baraka</i> , His Mirror Stage, the Sound of His Gaze	171
Black Mo'nin' in the Sound of the Photograph	192
Tonality of Totality	211
Resistance of the Object: Adrian Piper's Theatricality	233
Notes	255
Index	307

## **Resistance of the Object: Aunt Hester's Scream**

The history of blackness is testament to the fact that objects can and do resist.<sup>1</sup> Blackness—the extended movement of a specific upheaval, an ongoing irruption that anarranges every line—is a strain that pressures the assumption of the equivalence of personhood and subjectivity. While subjectivity is defined by the subject's possession of itself and its objects, it is troubled by a dispossessive force objects exert such that the subject seems to be possessed—infused, deformed—by the object it possesses. I'm interested in what happens when we consider the phonic materiality of such propriative exertion. Or, to invoke and diverge from Saidiya Hartman's fundamental work and phrasing, I'm interested in the convergence of blackness and the irreducible sound of necessarily visual performance at the scene of objection.

Between looking and being looked at, spectacle and spectatorship, enjoyment and being enjoyed, lies and moves the economy of what Hartman calls hypervisibility. She allows and demands an investigation of this hypervisibility in its relation to a certain musical obscurity and opens us to the problematics of everyday ritual, the stagedness of the violently (and sometimes amelioratively) quotidian, the essential drama of black life, as Zora Neale Hurston might say. Hartman shows how narrative always echoes and redoubles the dramatic interenactment of "contentment and abjection," and she explores the massive discourse of the cut, of rememberment and redress, that we always hear in narratives

where blackness marks simultaneously both the performance of the object and the performance of humanity. She allows us to ask: what have objectification and humanization, both of which we can think in relation to a certain notion of subjection, to do with the essential historicity, the quintessential modernity, of black performance? Whatever runs off us, a certain offense runs through us. This is a double ambivalence that requires analyses of looking and being looked at; such game requires, above all, some thinking about the opposition of spectacle and routine, violence and pleasure. This thinking is Hartman's domain.

A critique of the subject animates Hartman's work. It bears the trace, therefore, of a movement exemplified by an aspect of Judith Butler's massive theoretical contribution wherein the call to subjectivity is understood also as a call to subjection and subjugation and appeals for redress or protection to the state or to the structure or idea of citizenship—as well as modes of radical performativity or subversive impersonation—are always already embedded in the structure they would escape.<sup>2</sup> But if Hartman moves in this field she also moves in another tradition that forces another kind of questioning. Consulting Frederick Douglass on all of this is mandatory and the best place to consult him is in the moments when he describes and reproduces black performance. But this is to move in the tradition of a mode of reading Douglass that conflates his story (and its graphic and emblematic primal scene) with the story of slavery and freedom; this is to risk an uncritical covering of the assertion of Douglass's originarity; this is to approach the natal occasion that our musico-political tradition must evade. In order to sidestep this problematic, Hartman has both to avoid and to arrive at Douglass, must both repress and return to him.

Everything moves, for Hartman, after an opening decision regarding these questions of comportment:

The “terrible spectacle” that introduced Frederick Douglass to slavery was the beating of his Aunt Hester. . . . 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.” 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.

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. . . . 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 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 benumbing 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 the other foes of slavery, and this is the task I take up here.

Therefore, rather than try to convey the routinized violence of slavery and its aftermath through invocations of the shocking and the terrible, I have chosen to look elsewhere and consider those scenes in which terror can hardly be discerned. . . . 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 pleasure, paternalism and property.<sup>3</sup>

The decision not to reproduce the account of Aunt Hester's beating is, in some sense, illusory. First, it is reproduced in her reference to and refusal of it; second, the beating is reproduced in every scene of subjection the book goes on to read—in both the ritual performances combining terror and enjoyment in slavery and the fashionings and assertions of citizenship and “free” subjectivity after emancipation. The question here concerns the inevitability of such reproduction even in the denial of it. This is the question of whether the performance of subjectivity—and the subjectivity that Hartman is interested in here is definitely performed—always and everywhere reproduces what lies before it; it is also the question of whether performance in general is ever outside the economy of reproduction.<sup>4</sup> This is not to say that Hartman tries but cannot make disappear the originary performance of the violent subjection of the slave's body. Indeed, Hartman's considerable, formidable, and rare brilliance is present in the space she leaves for the ongoing (re)production of that performance in all its guises and for a critical awareness of how each of those guises is always already present in and disruptive of the supposed originality of that primal scene. What are the politics of this unavoidably reproducible and reproductive performance? What is held in the ongoing disruption of its primality? What shape must a culture take when it is so (un)grounded? What does this disturbance of capture and genesis give to black performance?

Douglass's *is* a primal scene for complex reasons that have to do with the connectedness of desire, identification, and castration that Hartman displaces onto the field of the mundane and the quotidian, where pain is alloyed with pleasure. However, this displacement somehow both acknowledges and avoids the vexed question of the possibility of pain and pleasure mixing in the scene and in its originary and subsequent recountings. For Hartman the very specter of enjoyment is reason enough to repress the encounter. So lingering in the psychoanalytic break is crucial in the interest of a certain set of complexities that

cannot be overlooked but must be traced back to this origin precisely in the interest of destabilizing its originarity and originarity in general, a destabilization Douglass finds in his original recitation, which is also an originary repression. It's the ongoing repression of the primal scene of subjection that one wants to guard against and linger in. Douglass passes on a repression that Hartman's critical suppression extends. Such transfer demands that one ask if every recitation is a repression and if every reproduction of a performance is its disappearance. Douglass and Hartman confront us with the fact that the *conjunction* of reproduction and disappearance is performance's condition of possibility, its ontology and its mode of production. The recitation of Douglass's repression, the repression embedded in his recitation, is there in Hartman as well. Like Douglass, she transposes all that is unspeakable in the scene to later, ritualized, "soulfully" mundane and quotidian performances. All that's missing is the originary recitation of the beating, which she reproduces in her reference to it. This is to say that there is an intense dialogue with Douglass that structures *Scenes of Subjection*. The dialogue is opened by a refusal of recitation that reproduces what it refuses. Hartman swerves away from Douglass and thereby runs right back to him. She also runs through him into territory he could not have recognized, territory no one has charted as thoroughly and as convincingly as she has done. Still, this turn away from Douglass that is also a turn to and through Douglass is a disturbance that is neither unfamiliar nor unfamiliar. *In the Break* addresses such resemblance by way of the following questions: Is there a way to disrupt the totalizing force of the primality Douglass represents? Is there a way to subject this unavoidable model of subjection to a radical breakdown?

My attempt to address these questions will, I hope, justify another engagement with the terribly beautiful music of Douglass's recitations of the beating of his Aunt Hester. The engagement moves initially through and against Karl Marx, by way of Abbey Lincoln and Max Roach. I want to show the interarticulation of the resistance of the object with Marx's subjunctive figure of the commodity who speaks. According to Marx, the speaking commodity is an impossibility invoked



only to militate against mystifying notions of the commodity's essential value. My argument starts with the historical reality of commodities who spoke—of laborers who were commodities before, as it were, the abstraction of labor power from their bodies and who continue to pass on this material heritage across the divide that separates slavery and “freedom.” But I am interested, finally, in the implications of the breaking of such speech, the elevating disruptions of the verbal that take the rich content of the object's/commodity's auralty outside the confines of meaning precisely by way of this material trace. More specifically with regard to Douglass's prefatory scene and its subsequent restagings, I'm interested in establishing some procedures for discovering the relationship between the “heart-rending shrieks” of Aunt Hester in the face of the master's violent assault, the discourse on music that Douglass initiates a few pages after the recitation of that vicious encounter, and the incorporation or recording of a sound figured as external both to music and to speech in black music and speech.

In his critical deployment of such music and speech, Douglass discovers a hermeneutic that is simultaneously broken and expanded by an operation akin to what Jacques Derrida refers to as “invagination.”<sup>5</sup> This cut and augmented hermeneutic circle is structured by a double movement. The first element is the transference of a radically exterior auralty that disrupts and resists certain formations of identity and interpretation by challenging the reducibility of phonic matter to verbal meaning or conventional musical form. The second is the assertion of what Nathaniel Mackey calls “‘broken’ claim(s) to connection”<sup>6</sup> between Africa and African America that seek to suture corollary, asymptotically divergent ruptures—maternal estrangement and the thwarted romance of the sexes—that he refers to as “wounded kinship” and the “the sexual ‘cut.’”<sup>7</sup> This assertion marks an engagement with a more attenuated, more internally determined, exteriority and a courtship with an always already unavailable and substitutive origin. It would work by way of an imaginative restoration of the figure of the mother to a realm determined not only by verbal meaning and conventional musical form but by a nostalgic specularly and a necessarily endogamous, simultaneously

virginal and reproductive sexuality. These twin impulses animate a forceful operation in Douglass's work, something like a revaluation of that revaluation of value that was set in motion by four of Douglass's "contemporaries"—Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, and Saussure. Above all, they open the possibility of a critique of the valuation of meaning over content and the reduction of phonic matter and syntactic "degeneracy" in the early modern search for a universal language and the late modern search for a universal science of language. This disruption of the Enlightenment linguistic project is of fundamental importance since it allows a rearrangement of the relationship between notions of human freedom and notions of human essence. More specifically, the emergence from political, economic, and sexual objection of the radical materiality and syntax that animates black performances indicates a freedom drive that is expressed always and everywhere throughout their graphic (re)production.

In *Caribbean Discourse* Edouard Glissant writes:

From the outset (that is from the moment Creole is forged as a medium of communication between slave and master), the spoken imposes on the slave its particular syntax. For Caribbean man, the word is first and foremost sound. Noise is essential to speech. Din is discourse. . . . Since speech was forbidden, slaves camouflaged the word under the provocative intensity of the scream. It was taken to be nothing but the call of a wild animal. This is how the dispossessed man organized his speech by weaving it into the apparently meaningless texture of extreme noise.<sup>8</sup>

Lingering with Glissant's formulations produces certain insights. The first is that the temporal condensation and acceleration of the trajectory of black performances, which is to say black history, is a real problem and a real chance for the philosophy of history. The second is that the animative materiality—the aesthetic, political, sexual, and racial force—of the ensemble of objects that we might call black performances, black history, blackness, is a real problem and a real chance for the philosophy

of human being (which would necessarily bear and be irreducible to what is called, or what somebody might hope someday to call, subjectivity). One of the implications of blackness, if it is set to work in and on such philosophy, is that those manifestations of the future in the degraded present that C. L. R. James described can never be understood simply as illusory. The knowledge of the future in the present is bound up with what is given in something Marx could only subjunctively imagine: the commodity who speaks. Here is the relevant passage from volume 1 of *Capital*, at the end of the chapter on “The Commodity,” at the end of the section called “The Fetishism of the Commodity and Its Secret.”

But, to avoid anticipating, we will content ourselves here with one more example relating to the commodity-form itself. If commodities could speak they would say this: our use-value may interest men, but it does not belong to us as objects. What does belong to us as objects, however, is our value. Our own intercourse as commodities proves it. We relate to each other merely as exchange-values. Now listen how those commodities speak through the mouth of the economist:

“Value (i.e., exchange-value) is a property of things, riches (i.e., use-value) of man. Value in this sense necessarily implies exchanges, riches do not.”

“Riches (use-value) are the attribute of man, value is the attribute of commodities. A man or a community is rich, a pearl or a diamond is valuable. . . . A pearl or a diamond is valuable as a pearl or diamond.”

So far no chemist has ever discovered exchange-value either in a pearl or a diamond. The economists who have discovered this chemical substance, and who lay special claim to critical acumen, nevertheless find that the use-value of material objects belongs to them independently of their material properties, while their value, on the other hand, forms a part of them as objects. What confirms them in this view is the peculiar circumstance that the use-value of a thing is realized without exchange, i.e. in a social process. Who would not call to mind at this point the advice given by the good Dogberry to the night-watchman Seacoal?

“To be a well-favoured man is the gift of fortune; but reading and writing comes by nature.”<sup>9</sup>

The difficulty of this passage is partly due to its dual ventriloquizations. Marx produces a discourse of his own to put into the mouth of dumb commodities before he reproduces what he figures as the impossible speech of commodities magically given through the mouths of classical economists. The difficulty of the passage is intensified when Marx goes on to critique both instances of imagined speech. These instances contradict one another but Marx comes down neither on the side of speech he produces nor on that of the speech of classical economists that he reproduces. Instead he traverses what he conceives of as the empty space between these formulations, that space being the impossible material substance of the commodity’s impossible speech. In this regard, what is at stake is not *what* the commodity says but *that* the commodity says or, more properly, that the commodity, in its inability to say, must be made to say. It is, more precisely, the idea of the commodity’s speech that Marx critiques, and this is because he believes neither in the fact nor in the possibility of such speech. Nevertheless, this critique of the idea of the commodity’s speech only becomes operative by way of a deconstruction of the specific meaning of those impossible or unreal propositions imposed upon the commodity from outside.

The words Marx puts into the commodity’s mouth are these: “our use value . . . does not belong to us as objects. What does belong to us as objects, however, is our value,” where value equals exchange value. Marx has the commodity go on to assert that commodities only relate to one another as exchange-values, that this is proven by the necessarily social intercourse in which commodities might be said to discover themselves. Therefore, the commodity discovers herself, comes to know herself, only as a function of having been exchanged, having been embedded in a mode of sociality that is shaped by exchange.

The words of the commodity that are spoken through the mouths of the classical economists are roughly these: riches (i.e., use-value) are independent of the materiality of objects, but value, which is to say

exchange-value, is a material part of the object. “A man or a commodity is rich, a pearl or a diamond is valuable.” This is because a pearl or a diamond is exchangeable. Though he agrees with the classical economists when they assert that value necessarily implies exchange, Marx chafes at the notion that value is an inherent part of the object. “No chemist,” he argues, “has discovered exchange-value either in a pearl or a diamond.” For Marx, this chemical substance called exchange-value has not been found because it does not exist. More precisely, Marx facetiously places this discovery in an unachievable future without having considered the conditions under which such a discovery might be made. Those conditions are precisely the fact of the commodity’s speech, which Marx dismisses in his critique of the very idea. “So far no chemist has ever discovered exchange-value either in a pearl or a diamond” because pearls or diamonds have not been heard to speak. The impossible chemical substance of the object’s (exchange-)value is the fact—the material, graphic, phonic substance—of the object’s speech. Speech will have been the cutting augmentation of the already existing chemistry of objects, but the object’s speech, the commodity’s speech, is impossible, that impossibility being the final refutation of whatever the commodity will have said.

Marx argues that the classical economists believe “that the use-value of material objects belongs to them independently of their material properties.” He further asserts that they are confined in this view by the nonsocial realization of use-value—the fact that its realization does not come by way of exchange. When he makes these assertions, Marx moves in an already well-established choreography of approach and withdrawal from a possibility of discovery that Douglass already recited: the (exchange-)value of the speaking commodity exists also, as it were, *before* exchange. Moreover, it exists precisely as the capacity for exchange and the capacity for a literary, performative, phonographic disruption of the protocols of exchange. This dual possibility comes by a nature that *is* and at the same time is social and historical, a nature that is given as a kind of anticipatory sociality and historicity.

To think the possibility of an (exchange-)value that is prior to exchange, and to think the reproductive and incantatory assertion of

that possibility as the objection to exchange that is exchange's condition of possibility, is to put oneself in the way of an ongoing line of discovery, of coming upon, of invention. The discovery of the chemical substance that is produced in and by Marx's counterfactual is the achievement of Douglass's line given in and as the theory and practice of everyday life where the spectacular and the mundane encounter one another all the time. It is an achievement we'll see given in the primal scene of Aunt Hester's objection to exchange, an achievement given in speech, literary phonography, and their disruption. What is sounded through Douglass is a theory of value—an objective and objectional, productive and reproductive ontology—whose primitive axiom is that commodities speak.

The impossible example is given in order to avoid anticipation, but it works to establish the impossibility of such avoidance. Indeed, the example, in her reality, in the materiality of her speech as breath and sound, anticipates Marx. This sound was already a recording, just as our access to it is made possible only by way of recordings. We move within a series of phonographic anticipations, encrypted messages, sent and sending on frequencies Marx tunes to accidentally, for effect, without the necessary preparation. However, this absence of preparation or foresight in Marx—an anticipatory refusal to anticipate, an obversive or anti- and anteimprovisation—is condition of possibility of a richly augmented encounter with the chain of messages the (re)sounding speech of the commodity cuts and carries. The intensity and density of what could be thought here as his alternative modes of preparation make possible a whole other experience of the music of the event of the object's speech. Moving, then, in the critical remixing of nonconvergent tracks, modes of preparation, traditions, we can think how the commodity who speaks, in speaking, in the sound—the inspirited materiality—of that speech, constitutes a kind of temporal warp that disrupts and augments not only Marx but the mode of subjectivity that the ultimate object of his critique, capital, both allows and disallows. All of this moves toward the secret Marx revealed by way of the music he subjunctively mutes. Such aurality is, in fact, what Marx called the “sensuous outburst of [our] essential activity.”<sup>10</sup> It is a passion wherein “the senses have . . .

become theoreticians in their immediate practice.”<sup>11</sup> The commodity whose speech sounds embodies the critique of value, of private property, of the sign. Such embodiment is also bound to the (critique of) reading and writing, oft conceived by clowns and intellectuals as the natural attributes of whoever would hope to be known as human.

In the meantime, every approach to Marx’s example must move through the ongoing event that anticipates it, the real event of the commodity’s speech, itself broken by the irreducible materiality—the broken and irreducible maternity—of the commodity’s scream. Imagine a recording of the (real) example that anticipates the (impossible) example; imagine that recording as the graphic reproduction of a scene of instruction, one always already cut by its own repression; imagine what cuts and anticipates Marx, remembering that the object resists, the commodity shrieks, the audience participates. Then you can say that Marx is prodigal; that in his very formulations regarding Man’s arrival at his essence, he has yet to come to himself, to come upon himself, to invent himself anew. This nonarrival is at least in part an ongoing concealment internal to a project structured by an attunement to the revealed secret. What remains secret in Marx could be thought as or in terms of race or sex or gender, of the differences these terms mark, form, and reify. But we can also say that the unrevealed secret is a recrudescence of an already existing notion of the private (or, more properly, of the proper) that operates within the constellation of self-possession, capacity, subjectivity, and speech. He can point to but not be communist. What does the dispropriative event have to do with communism? What’s the revolutionary force of the sensuality that emerges from the sonic event Marx subjunctively produces without sensually discovering? To ask this is to think what’s at stake in the music: the universalization or socialization of the surplus, the generative force of a venerable phonic propulsion, the ontological and historical priority of resistance to power and objection to subjection, the old-new thing, the freedom drive that animates black performances. This is all meant to begin some thinking of the possibility that the Marxian formulation of sociality-in-exchange is grounded in a notion of the proper that is disrupted by the essential impropriety of the (exchange-)value that precedes exchange.

Part of the project this drive animates is the improvisation through the opposition of spirit and matter that is instantiated when the object, the commodity, sounds. Marx's counterfactual ("If the commodity could speak, it would say . . .") is broken by a commodity and by the trace of a subjectivity structure born in objection that he neither realizes nor anticipates. There is something more here than alienation and fetishization that works, with regard to Marx, as a prefigurative critique. However, according to Ferdinand de Saussure, and in extension of Marx's analytic, the value of the sign is arbitrary, conventional, differential, neither intrinsic nor iconic, not reducible to but rather only discernible in the reduction of phonic substance.

In any case, it is impossible that sound, as a material element, should in itself be part of the language. Sound is merely something ancillary, a material the language uses. All conventional values have the characteristic of being distinct from the tangible element which serves as their vehicle. It is not the metal in a coin which determines its value. A crown piece nominally worth five francs contains only half that sum in silver. Its value varies somewhat according to the effigy it bears. It is worth rather more or rather less on different sides of a political frontier. Considerations of the same order are even more pertinent to linguistic signals. Linguistic signals are not in essence phonetic. They are not physical in any way. They are constituted solely by differences which distinguish one such sound pattern from another.<sup>12</sup>

The value of the sign, its necessary relation to the possibility of (a universal science of and a universal) language, is only given in the absence or supercession of, or the abstraction from, sounded speech—its essential materiality is rendered ancillary by the crossing of an immaterial border or by a differentializing inscription. Similarly, the truth about the value of the commodity is tied precisely to the impossibility of its speaking, for if the commodity could speak it would have intrinsic value, it would be infused with a certain spirit, a certain value given not from the outside, and would, therefore, contradict the thesis on value—that it is not intrinsic—that Marx assigns it. The speaking



commodity thus cuts Marx; but the shrieking commodity cuts Saussure, thereby cutting Marx doubly: this by way of an irruption of phonic substance that cuts and augments meaning with a phonographic, rematerializing inscription. That irruption breaks down the distinction between what is intrinsic and what is given by or of the outside; here what is given inside is that which is out-from-the-outside, a spirit manifest in its material expense or aspiration. For Saussure such speech is degraded, say, by accent, a deuniversalizing, material difference; for Chomsky it is degraded by a deuniversalizing agrammaticality, but Glissant knows that “the [scarred] spoken imposes on the slave its particular syntax.” These material degradations—fissures or invaginations of a foreclosed universality, a heroic but bounded eroticism—are black performances. There occurs in such performances a revaluation or reconstruction of value, one disruptive of the oppositions of speech and writing, and spirit and matter. It moves by way of the (phono-photo-porno-)graphic disruption the shriek carries out. This movement cuts and augments the primal. If we return again and again to a certain passion, a passionate response to passionate utterance, horn-voice-horn over percussion, a protest, an objection, it is because it is more than another violent scene of subjection too terrible to pass on; it is the ongoing performance, the prefigurative scene of a (re)appropriation—the deconstruction and reconstruction, the improvisational recording and revaluation—of value, of the theory of value, of the theories of value.<sup>13</sup> It’s the ongoing event of an antiorigin and an anteorigin, replay and reverb of an impossible natal occasion, the performance of the birth and rebirth of a new science, a phylogenetic fantasy that (dis)establishes genesis, the reproduction of blackness in and as (the) reproduction of black performance(s). It’s the offset and rewrite, the phonic irruption and rewind, of my last letter, my last record date, my first winter, casting of effect and affect in the widest possible angle of dispersion.

It is important to emphasize that the object’s resistance is, among other things, a rupture of two circles, the familial and the hermeneutic. The protocols of this investigation demand the consideration of that

resistance as we'll see Douglass both describe and transmit it. More precisely, we must be attuned to the transmission of the very materiality that is being described while noting the relay between material phonography and material substitution.

Impossible, substitutive motherhood is the location of Aunt Hester, a location discovered, if not produced, in Hortense Spillers's improvisational audition of sighting, non-sight, seen; of the heretofore unheard and overlooked (overseen) at the heart of the spectacle. Spillers explains what Douglass brings in his prefigurative disruption of and irruption into a fraternal science of value that emerges in a "social climate" in which motherhood is not perceived "as a legitimate procedure of cultural inheritance":

The African-American male has been touched, therefore, by the *mother*, handled by her in ways that he cannot escape, and in ways that the white American male is allowed to temporize by a fatherly reprieve. This human and historical development—the text that has been inscribed on the benighted heart of the continent—takes us to the center of an inexorable difference in the depths of American women's community: the African-American woman, the *mother*, the daughter, becomes historically the powerful and shadowy evocation of a cultural synthesis long evaporated—the law of the Mother—only and precisely because legal enslavement removed the African-American male not so much from sight as from *mimetic* view as a partner in the prevailing social fiction of the Father's name, the Father's law.

Therefore, the female, in this order of things, breaks in upon the imagination with a forcefulness that marks both a denial and an "illegitimacy." Because of this peculiar American denial, the black American male embodies the *only* American community of males which has had the specific occasion to learn *who* the female is within itself, the infant child who bears the life against the could-be fateful gamble, against the odds of pulverization and murder, including her own. It is the heritage of the *mother* that the African-American male must regain as an aspect of his own personhood—the "power" of "yes" to the "female" within.<sup>14</sup>

Listen to the echo of Douglass’s performative reproduction of a performance inextricably bound to his attempts to repress the learning that Spillers describes. But note that this attenuated covering of the maternal mark in Douglass is itself part and parcel of a kind of counterinscription before the fact, a prefigurative rematerialization constitutive of his recitation that returns as an expansive, *audiovisual* discourse on music. Meanwhile, note the indistinctness of the conditions of “mother” and “enslavement” in the milieu from which Douglass emerges and which he describes and narrates. This is to say that enslavement—and the resistance to enslavement that is the performative essence of blackness (or, perhaps less controversially, the essence of black performance) is a *being maternal* that is indistinguishable from a *being material*. But it is also to say something more. And here, the issue of reproduction (the “natural” production of natural children) emerges right on time as it has to do not only with the question concerning slavery, blackness, performance, and the ensemble of their ontologies but also with a contradiction at the heart of the question of value in its relation to personhood that could be said to come into clearer focus against the backdrop of the ensemble of motherhood, blackness, and the bridge between slavery and freedom.

Leopoldina Fortunati puts it this way: “The conflicting presence of value and nonvalue contained within individuals themselves obviously creates a specific and unresolvable contradiction.”<sup>15</sup> She is speaking of a certain dematerialization that marks the transition from precapitalist to capitalist production and that works analogously to a dematerializing operation animating the movement from slave labor to “free” labor. These transitions are both characterized by

the *commodity*, [as] *exchange value*, taking precedence over *the-individual-as-use-value*, despite the fact that the individual is still the only source of the creation of value. For it is only by re-defining the individual as non-value, or rather as pure use-value, that capital can succeed in creating labor power as “a commodity,” i.e. an exchange value. But the “valuelessness” of free workers is not only a consequence of the new mode

of production, it is also one of the preconditions, since capital cannot become a social relation other than in relation to the individuals who, divested of all value, are thus forced to sell the only commodity they have, their labor power.

Secondly, under capitalism, *reproduction is separated off from production*; the former unity that existed between the production of use-values and the reproduction of individuals within precapitalist modes of production has disappeared, and now the general process of commodity production appears as being separated from, and even in direct opposition to, the process of reproduction. While the first appears as the *creation* of value, the second, reproduction, appears as the creation of non-value. Commodity production is thus posited as *the* fundamental point of capitalist production, and the laws that govern it as *the* laws that characterize capitalism itself. Reproduction now becomes posited as “natural” production.<sup>16</sup>

Fortunati joins Marx in a minute but crucial declension from use-value to nonvalue. The individual, enslaved laborer is characterized as use-value that, in the field of capitalist production, is equivalent to no-value, which is to say operative outside of exchange. But if this theoretical placement of the enslaved laborer outside of the field of exchange positions her as noncommodity, it does so not by way of some rigorous accounting but rather as a function of not hearing, of overlooking. This is despite the inescapable fact of the traffic in slaves. And because neither Marx nor Fortunati is able fully to think the articulation of slave and commodity, they both underestimate the commodity’s powers, for instance, the power to speak and to break speech. And yet, Fortunati, in her analysis of reproduction and in her submission of Marxian categories to the corrective of feminist theory, sees, along with and ahead of Marx, that the individual contains value and nonvalue, that the commodity is contained within the individual. This presence of the commodity within the individual is an effect of reproduction, a trace of maternity. Of equal importance is the containment of a certain personhood within the commodity that can be seen as the commodity’s

animation by the material trace of the maternal—a palpable hit or touch, a bodily and visible phonographic inscription. In the end, what I'm interested in is precisely that transference, a carrying or crossing over, that takes place on the bridge of lost matter, lost maternity, lost mechanics that joins bondage and freedom, that interinanimates the body and its ephemeral if productive force, that interarticulates the performance and the reproductive reproduction it always already contains and which contains it. This interest is, in turn, not in the interest of a nostalgic and impossible suturing of wounded kinship but is rather directed toward what this irrepressibly inscriptive, reproductive, and resistant material objecthood does for and might still do to the exclusionary brotherhoods of criticism and black radicalism as experimental black performance. This is to say that this book is an attempt to describe the material reproductivity of black performance and to claim for this reproductivity the status of an ontological condition. This is the story of how apparent nonvalue functions as a creator of value; it is also the story of how value animates what appears as nonvalue. This functioning and this animation are material. This *animateriality*—impassioned response to passionate utterance—is painfully and hiddenly disclosed always and everywhere in the tracks of black performance and black discourse on black performance. It is both for and before Marx in ways delineated by Cedric Robinson's historical analysis of "the making of the black radical tradition." This book is meant to contribute both to the aesthetic genealogy of that line and to the invagination of the ontological totality whose preservation, according to Robinson, inspires a tradition whose birth is characterized by an ancient pre-maturity.<sup>17</sup>

Here, then, is one such disclosure, famously and infamously made by Frederick Douglass in his 1845 *Narrative*. By way of a set of resonant nodal points along the massive trajectory it extends, I want to think about this disclosure as an unavoidable anticipation, the prefigurative response to an epochal counterfactual, the always already belated origin of the music that ought to be understood as the rigorously sounded critique of the theory of value.

I have often been awakened at the dawn of day by the most heart-rending shrieks of an own aunt of mine, whom he used to tie up to a joist, and whip upon her naked back till she was literally covered with blood. No words, no tears, no prayers, from his gory victim, seemed to move his iron heart from its bloody purpose. The louder she screamed, the harder he whipped; and where the blood ran fastest, there he whipped the longest. He would whip her to make her scream, and whip her to make her hush; and not until overcome by fatigue, would he cease to swing the blood-clotted cowskin. I remember the first time I ever witnessed this horrible exhibition. I was quite a child, but I well remember it. I shall never forget it whilst I remember anything. It was the first of a long series of such outrages, of which I was doomed to be a witness and a participant. It struck me with awful force. It was the blood-stained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery, through which I was about to pass. It was a most terrible spectacle. I wish I could commit to paper the feelings with which I beheld it. . . .

Aunt Hester had not only disobeyed his orders in going out, but had been found in company with Lloyd's Ned; which circumstance, I found, from what he said while whipping her, was the chief offense. Had he been a man of pure morals himself, he might have been thought interested in protecting the innocence of my aunt; but those who know him will not suspect him of any such virtue. Before he commenced whipping Aunt Hester he took her into the kitchen, and stripped her from neck to waist, leaving her neck, shoulders, and back entirely naked. He then told her to cross her hands, calling her at the same time a d—d b—h. After crossing her hands, he tied them with strong rope, and led her to a stool under a large hook in the joist, put in for the purpose. He made her get upon the stool, and tied her hands to the hook. She now stood fair for the infernal purpose. Her arms were stretched up at their full length, so that she stood upon the ends of her toes. He then said to her, "Now, you d—d b—h, I'll learn you how to disobey my orders!" and after rolling up his sleeves, he commenced to lay on the heavy cowskin, and soon the warm, red blood (amid heart-rending shrieks from her, and horrid oaths from him) came dripping to the floor. I was so terrified

and horror-stricken at the sight, that I hid myself in a closet, and dared not venture out till long after the bloody transaction was over. I expected it would be my turn next. It was all new to me. I had never seen anything like it before. . . .<sup>18</sup>

Now consider that passage's relation to an almost equally well-known one that closely follows it:

The slaves selected to go to the Great House Farm, for the monthly allowance for themselves and their fellow slaves, were peculiarly enthusiastic. While on their way, they would make the dense old woods, for miles around, reverberate with their wild songs, revealing at once the highest joy and the deepest sadness. They would compose and sing as they went along, consulting neither time nor tune. The thought that came up, came out—if not in the word, in the sound;—and as frequently in the one as in the other. They would sometimes sing the most pathetic sentiment in the most rapturous tone, and the most rapturous sentiment in the most pathetic tone. Into all of their songs they would manage to weave something of the Great House Farm. Especially would they do this, when leaving home. They would sing most exultingly the following words:—

“I am going away to the Great House Farm!  
Oh, yea! O, yea! O!”

This they would sing, as a chorus, to 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 those 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 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. The mere recurrence to those songs, even now, afflicts me; and while I am writing these lines, an expression of feeling has already found its way down my cheek. To those songs I trace my first glimmering conception of the dehumanizing character of slavery. I can never get rid of that conception. Those songs still follow me, to deepen my hatred of slavery, and quicken my sympathy for my brethren in bonds. If any one wishes to be impressed with the soul-killing effects of slavery, let him go to Colonel Lloyd's plantation, and, on allowance-day, place himself in the deep pine woods, and there let him in silence analyze the sounds that shall pass through the chambers of his soul;—and if he is not impressed, it will only be because “there is no flesh in his obdurate heart.”<sup>19</sup>

What does it mean to move in the tradition of these passages, a tradition of devotion both to the happy and the tragic possibilities embedded in passionate utterance and response? Passionate utterance and response together take the form of an encounter, the mutual, negative positioning of master and slave. This encounter is appositional, is shaped by a step away that calls such positions radically into question. In this sense utterance and response, seen together as encounter, form a kind of call wherein Hester's shrieks improvise both speech and writing. What they echo and initiate in their response to the oaths—that must be heard as the passionate utterance or call—of the master helps to constitute a questioning, musical encounter.

Having been called by call and response back to music, let's prepare our descent: let the call of call and response, passionate utterance and response—articulated in the scene Douglass identifies as “the blood-stained gate” through which he entered into subjection and subjectivity; articulated, more precisely, in the phonography of the very screams that open the way into the knowledge of slavery and the knowledge of



freedom—operate as a kind of anacrusis (a note or beat or musicked word improvised through the opposition of speech and writing before the definition of rhythm and melody). Gerard Manley Hopkins’s term for anacrusis was encountering. Let the articulation of appositional encounter be our encountering: a nondetermining invitation to the new and continually unprecedented performative, historical, philosophical, democratic, communist arrangements that are the only authentic ones.

In the long advent of a movement called “free jazz”—a beginning as long as the tradition it extends—Abbey Lincoln, Max Roach, and Oscar Brown Jr. collaborated in making a recording/performance called “Protest.” Lincoln hums and then screams over Roach’s increasingly and insistently intense percussion, moving inexorably in a trajectory and toward a location that is remote from—if not in excess of or inaccessible to—words. You cannot help but hear the echo of Aunt Hester’s scream as it bears, at the moment of articulation, a sexual overtone, an invagination constantly reconstituting the whole of the voice, the whole of the story, redoubled and intensified by the mediation of years, recitations, auditions. That echo haunts, say, Albert Ayler’s “Ghosts” or the fractured, fracturing climax of James Brown’s “Cold Sweat.” It’s the re-en-gendering haint of an old negation: Ayler always screaming secretly to the very idea of mastery, “It’s not about you”; Brown paying the price of such negation, a terrible, ecstatic, possessive, dispossessive inability to stop singing; both performing historical placement as a long transfer, a transcendental fade, an interminable songlike drag disrupting song. The revolution embedded in such duration is, for a moment, a run of questions: What is the edge of this event? What am I, the object? What is the music? What is manhood? What is the feminine? What is the beautiful? What will blackness be?<sup>20</sup>

Where shriek turns speech turns song—remote from the impossible comfort of origin—lies the trace of our descent. That place—locus of an ongoingly other recording of event, object, music—is Abbey Lincoln’s narrative. This is a recording, an improvisation, of her words, troubled by the trace of the performance of which she tells and the performance of which that performance told.

I was born the tenth of twelve children . . . /I visited a psychiatric hospital 'cause Roach said there was madness in the house. He said it wasn't him, so I figured it must be me/They had me hollering and screaming like a crazy person; I ain't hollering and screaming for my freedom. The women I come from will take something and knock you . . . /Monk whispered in my ear, "Don't be so perfect." He meant make a mistake; reach for something/I didn't think a scream was part of the music/We were riding in the car with my nephew who was eight years old and who said, "The reason I can scream louder than Aunt Abbey is 'cause I'm a little boy/Went all over the world hollering and screaming; it increased my depth as an actress and a singer/I didn't write it, I didn't conceive it; I'm just the singer on it/I got rid of a taboo and screamed in everybody's face/We had to go to court; somebody thought Roach was killing me in the studio/My instrument is deepening and widening; it's because I'm possessed of the spirit/I learned it from my mother—the preacher, that's what they called her/Betty Carter: we came to the stage about the same time; it was a great surprise when she died; she was a year older than me and I've been feeling frail ever since . . . It's easy for me to cry; I'm an actress/You gotta sing a song; you can't sing jazz/When Bird was around he knew he wasn't playing jazz. He was playing his spirit. And I think that's the problem for a lot of the musicians on the scene now. They think that they're playing jazz. But there's no such thing, really/I'm possessed of my own spirit/This is the music of the African muse/I just want to be of use to my ancestors/It's holy work and it's dangerous not to know that 'cause you could die like an animal down here.<sup>21</sup>

Lincoln demands another rethinking, of "Protest" along lines I only thought I knew, lines I never thought I knew. Her relation to Roach disturbingly and rightly echoes Hester's relation to the master and to Douglass. Roach's double identification and desire link him to Douglass and are all bound up with Lincoln's political, musical, and intellectual lingering in a quite specific and brutal kind of horror as Roach's object, accessing and performing, recording, that history, moving in the doubleness of possession, the sexuality of spirituality and the anoriginality of black performances. Not the reduction of but the reduction to phonic

materiality where re-en-gendering prefaces and works itself. No ordinary configuration of attributes but an ongoing shiftiness, a living labor of engendering to be organized in its relation to a politico-aesthesis. It's always going on and has been. Abbey Lincoln starts, in classic (anti-, ante-[slave]) narrative fashion. That black radicalism cannot be understood within the particular context of its genesis is true; it cannot be understood outside that context either. In this sense, black radicalism is (like) black music. The broken circle demands a new analytic (way of listening to the music). So we move with but also out and outside of Douglass's repressive, annular attunement to the secret, the audio-visual materiality of a maternal substitution, identification, and cathexis that he tries to forget, the ongoing re-entry into a vexed self-knowledge that he covers by entering into a discourse on music. Douglass (and, by extension, Roach and Brown and the entire line of mastery's disruptive, oppositional, anoriginal recording) was already sexually cut and augmented, already anticipated and improvised, already re-en-gendered by the sound of the one who comes before him, the one we keep calling on to arrive again, here and now, so we can get to the content of the epigraph.