



THE HOLD OF SLAVERY

SAIDIYA HARTMAN

THE HOLD OF SLAVERY

SAIDIYA HARTMAN

First published online in *The New York Review* October 2022

A version of this essay appears as the preface to the twenty-fifth anniversary edition of *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (W.W. Norton, 2022)

Cover artwork by Torkwase Dyson

The conviction that I was living in the world created by slavery propelled the writing of *Scenes of Subjection*, my first book. I could feel the force and disfigurement of slavery in the present. The life of the captive and the commodity certainly wasn't my past, but rather the threshold of my entry into the world. Its grasp and claim couldn't be cordoned off as what happened then. For me, the relation between slavery and the present was open, unfinished.

In rereading *Scenes of Subjection* twenty-five years later, I am struck by the breathlessness of the prose, by its ardent desire to say it all, to say everything at once. If it were possible, I might have written it as a 345-page-long sentence. This sentence would be written in the past, present, and future tense. Temporal entanglement best articulates the still open question of abolition and the long-awaited but not yet actualized freedom declared over a century and a half ago.

The hold of slavery was what I sought to articulate and convey. The category crisis of human flesh and sentient commodity defined the existence of the enslaved and this predicament of value and fungibility would shadow their descendants, the blackened and the dispossessed.¹ I also hoped to change the terms in which we understood racial slavery, by attending to its diffuse terror and the divisions it created between life and not life. The scenes of subjection I endeavored to unpack were not those of spectacular violence—the thirty-three lashes at the whipping post, the torture, rape, and brutality ubiquitous on the plantation, the public rituals of lynching and dismemberment, the vast arsenal of implements employed to harm and maim, the Sadeian pursuits, the endless variations of humiliation and dishonor, and the compulsive displays of the broken and violated body—

all of which were endemic to slavery and key to the cultivation of antislavery sentiment and pedagogy.

My interest lay elsewhere. To be subjected to the absolute power of another and to be interpellated as a subject before the law were the dimensions of subjection that most concerned me. I intended to bring into view the ordinary terror and habitual violence that structured everyday life and inhabited the most mundane and quotidian practices. This environment of brutality and extreme domination affected the most seemingly benign aspects of the life of the enslaved and could not be eluded, no matter the nature of one's condition, whether paramour, offspring, dutiful retainer, or favored nursemaid. By shifting from the spectacular to the everyday, I aimed to illuminate the ongoing and structural dimensions of violence and slavery's idioms of power.

I was determined to name and articulate the character of this power, which was an assemblage of extreme domination, disciplinary power, bio-power, and the sovereign right to make die. The dimensions of subjection traversed the categories of human, animal, and plant. Slavery's modes of accumulation and exploitation failed to be explained by precapitalist modes of production or the factory floor. The character of gendered and sexual difference, and negated maternity and severed kinship, bore no resemblance to the intimate arrangements of the white bourgeois family and cast out the enslaved from the nomenclature of the human.

At the same time, *Scenes* endeavored to illuminate the countless ways in which the enslaved challenged, refused, defied, and resisted the condition of enslavement and its ordering and negation of life, its extraction and destruction of capacity. In creating an inventory of ways of doing and a genealogy of refusal, I tried to account for extreme domination *and* the possibilities seized in practice. Black performance and quotidian practice were determined by and exceeded the constraints of domination. This dimension has received less attention in the reception of the book. The focus on its arguments about empathy, terror and violence, subjection, and social death has overshadowed the discussion of practice.

Yet these everyday practices, these ways of living and dying, of making and doing, were attempts to slip away from the status of commodity and to affirm existence as not chattel, as not property, as not wench. Even when this other state could not be named, because incommensurate or

untranslatable within the conceptual field of the enclosure, the negation of the given was ripe with promise. The wild thought and dangerous music of the enslaved expressed other visions of the possible and refused captivity as the only horizon, opposed the framework of property and commodity, contested the idea that they were less than human, nurtured acts of vengeance, and anticipated divine retribution.

The subjugated or speculative knowledge of freedom would establish the vision of what might be, even if it was unrealizable within the prevailing terms of order. It explains why a commodity might describe itself as human flesh, or a fugitive trapped in a garret write letters describing a free life in the North, or a hand laboring in the field read the signs and take note of “the drops of blood on the corn as though it were dew from heaven” and in the woods discern in the arrangement of leaves a hieroglyph of freedom coming, or an ex-slave prove capable of imagining an “auspicious era of extensive freedom,” as does Olaudah Equiano in *The Interesting Narrative*: “May the time come—at least the speculation is to me pleasing—when the sable people shall gratefully commemorate the auspicious era of extensive freedom.” It is a curious and prescient formulation. How does one commemorate what has yet to arrive?

In the context of social death, everyday practices cultivated an imagination of the otherwise and elsewhere, cartographies of the fantastic utterly antagonistic to slavery. The enslaved refused to accept the order of values that had transformed them into units of currency and capital, beasts and crops, breeders, incubators, lactating machines, and sentient tools. At secret meetings and freedom schools, hidden away in loopholes of retreat and hush arbors, gathered at the river or dwelling in the swamp, the enslaved articulated a vision of freedom that far exceeded that of the liberal imagination. It enabled them to conceive other ways of existing, flee the world of masters and invite its fiery destruction, anticipate the upheaval that would put “the bottom rail on top,” nurture a collective vision of what might be possible when no longer enslaved, and sustain belief in the inevitability of slavery’s demise.

A messianic vision of the last days and the end of the world was articulated in a range of quotidian practices, from work songs to the ring shout, a circle dance of worship and divine communion. Such practices shaped the contours of the day-to-day. An expansive register of minor gestures,

ways of sustaining and creating life, caring for one another, undoing slavery by small acts of stealth and destruction, communal dreaming, sacred transport, redress, and faith in a power greater than master and nation made it possible to survive the unbearable while never acceding to it. The arrangement of stars in the night sky, the murmur and echo of songs traveling across a river, the revered objects buried near a prayer tree, the rumors of fugitives in the swamp or maroons in the hills nourished dreams of a free territory, or an existence without masters, or a plot against the plantation, or reveries of miraculous deliverance.



In the archive of slavery, I encountered a paradox: the recognition of the slave's humanity and status as a subject extended and intensified servitude and dispossession, rather than conferring some small measure of rights and protection. The attributes of the human—will, consciousness, reason, agency, and responsibility—were the inroads of discipline, punishment, and mortification. This paradox foreshadowed the subject of freedom and the limits of personhood bound indissolubly to property.

The recognition of the formerly enslaved as a newly endowed subject of rights was not the entry to the promised land. This should not have been a surprise. Western humanism was born in the context of the Atlantic slave trade and racial slavery. It became apparent that being a subject was not the antidote to being a slave, but rather that these figures were intimate, twinned. I wanted for some other end: a true abolition of property, a leveling of the vertical order of life, a messianic cessation, a way of keeping terror at bay, a rampart against devastation and the dangers of what lived on.

Any certainty about the historical divide between slavery and freedom proved to be elusive. The exclusion and hierarchy of the discourse of rights and man and the racism of the white republic and the settler nation were robust and not to be eradicated by acts or proclamations or field orders or amendments. The movement from slave to “man and citizen” would be impeded, thwarted. The restricted vision of freedom offered by the liberal imagination, a vision even more attenuated and hollowed out by counter-revolution, economic predation, antiblack violence, and white supremacy,

would not transform the plantation, or abolish racial slavery and its badges or indices, or eradicate caste, or negate the legacy and stigma of having been chattel.

With the advent of Emancipation, only the most restricted and narrow vision of freedom was deemed plausible: the physical release from bondage and the exercise and imposition of the contract—this and little more. In the aftermath of slavery’s formal demise, the old relations of servitude and subordination were recreated in a new guise. The signs of this were everywhere apparent: The enslaved failed to be compensated for centuries of unremunerated labor. They never received the material support or resources necessary to give flesh to words like “equality” and “citizen.” The gulf between blacks, marked and targeted as not human or as lesser humans and social inferiors, and white citizens only widened.

A wave of revanchism and counterrevolution engulfed the nation. Racist violence intensified and white citizens committed a series of massacres with the goal of returning the newly freed to their proper place. The “gift of freedom” gave birth to the landless tenant and the indebted worker. The enslaved were transformed into a new kind of property—alienable labor or property in the self—but in all other ways they were without resources. This property in the self was to be sold and exchanged, at least as an ideal. Again, one entered the world as fungible object and the social relations of violence and domination congealed as the circulation of goods and things.

The contract enabled the transition from slavery to involuntary servitude, and the much-lauded exercise of choice was shored up by the threat of punishment and imprisonment. The liberty to sell one’s labor resulted in sharecropping, peonage, and immiseration, and the failure to exercise this liberty led to the chain gang or being leased as a convict. Coercion rather than consent defined the free market and free labor. Equality was interpreted and adjudicated to enforce segregation, the regime of separate but equal, and the hierarchy of racially differentiated life. The enormity and tragedy of this stopped me in my tracks.

It was the restricted scope of freedom, especially when contrasted with what might have been or could be, that made me pause and ask: What, exactly, were the social arrangements envisioned and desired after Emancipation? Was captivity the prevailing schema not by default but design?

Could an idea of freedom fundamentally bound to property do anything other than reproduce dispossession and confirm the alienability and disposability of life and capacity? Could democracy built on racial slavery and settler colonialism ever sustain freedom, repair what has been broken, return what has been stolen, release land to earth, provide to each according to their needs, and enable all to thrive? The answer remains a resounding “no.” As many ex-slaves remarked, freedom without material resources was another kind of slavery. So when my attention turned to freedom and its philosophical and legal foundations, I realized how formative and enduring the hold of slavery continued to be. The liberal conception of freedom had been built on the bedrock of slavery.

Abolition remained an aspiration, rather than a feat realized and completed. I didn’t yet have the language of the “afterlife of slavery” to describe the structural hold of racial slavery. Yet it is clear I was writing toward this concept, which would be developed in my second book, *Lose Your Mother* (2006), and my essay “Venus in Two Acts” (2008).² As I wrote,

Black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that was entrenched centuries ago. This is the afterlife of slavery—skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment. I, too, am the afterlife of slavery.

—

Scenes of Subjection was a radical departure from the extant historical literature. Conservative scholarship had minimized the role of racial slavery in the making of capitalist modernity, failed to theorize race, characterized slavery as a premodern mode of production, denied the magnitude of the violence required to produce the human commodity and reproduce the relations of master and slave, and replicated the assumptions of romantic racialism and the plantation pastoral by describing slavery as a paternal institution characterized by reciprocity and consent, an approach which James D. Anderson has called “Aunt Jemima in Dialectics.”³

The work of radical historians and intellectuals was devoted to refuting such assertions and celebrating slave agency, excavating slave culture,

demonstrating black resilience in the face of dehumanization, recognizing the enduring totality of African beliefs and values despite the rupture of the Middle Passage, and fundamentally challenging the idea of the damaged person or psyche produced by centuries of enslavement. They did so by emphasizing the vitality of black culture, the autonomous zones created in the slave quarters and the provision grounds, and the strength of the black family. The goal of these radical scholars was to affirm black humanity in the confines of racial capitalism and the plantation's brutality.

Scenes was indebted to their work, but mine was a different task. I set out to detail the entanglement of humanity and violence, liberal philosophy and racial reason, the human and its devalued others. If the conventional narrative trajectory "from slavery to freedom" failed to capture the temporal entanglement of racial slavery as our past and our present, the lasting effects of the slave's exile from and precarious belonging to the category of the human, the recursive character of violence and accumulation, and the long duration of unfreedom, then how might I frame and approach such matters? How might I interrupt the traditional account, revise historical chronology, cast doubt on the progressive arc and telos of narrative, and blast open the time of slavery?

I searched for a critical lexicon that would elucidate slavery and its modes of power and forms of subjection, and challenge the widespread understanding of the enslaved as a constricted or impaired version of the worker and the individual—terms which seemed to obscure the state and condition of enslavement rather than clarify it. This framework, even as amended for the black worker and newly minted subject, failed to convey or comprehend the modes of domination, the distribution of death, the role of reproductive labor, and the forms of gendered and sexual violence that sustained racial slavery.⁴

So how best to describe this anomalous existence distributed between the category of subject and object, person and thing? Or the figurative capacity that enabled the captive to fulfill any and every need, from cotton production to fellatio? The plantation was hell, factory, killing ground, and Sodom. In attempting to explicate the violence of slavery and its idiom of power, *Scenes* moved away from the notion of the exploited worker or the unpaid laborer toward the captive and the fungible, the commodity and the dominated, the disposable and the sexually violated, to describe

the dynamics of accumulation and dispossession, social reproduction and social death, seduction and libidinal economy, and to highlight the vexed relation of the enslaved to the category of the human. It emphasized the violence of reciprocity and mutuality in the context of extreme domination, the ruses of power, and the nonevent of Emancipation. And it advocated embracing temporal entanglement and affirming other ways of knowing or subjugated knowledge. My peers as well as a generation of younger scholars have extended and elaborated this critical vocabulary. It is impossible for me to read the book today without hearing these other voices, without reading between the lines for the contributions of my interlocutors.

In *Scenes*, I first wrestled with questions of the archive—what it enabled and what it prevented us from knowing or discerning. Could I use its statements, yet destroy the master’s tools? It was in these pages that I initially used the term “fabulation,” but the term was latent, not yet emergent. Even then, I wanted to use the archive to create another order of statements, to produce a different account of what had happened and what might be possible. Here the work of novelists and poets provided a model.⁵ I sought to create a method that acknowledged and comprehended the violence of the archive and the forms of silence and oblivion it produced, and yet endeavored to use the archive for contrary purposes. It was an engagement that reckoned with the power of the archive but dared attempt to exceed the limits it imposed and render a radically different account of black existence. For the archive is also a repository of practices, a textual trace of the repertoire that transforms and refuses the given.

The matters engaged in *Scenes*—the domain of practice, the everyday forms of making and doing, black performance, the imagination of freedom, social death and the afterlife of slavery, the violence of the archive and methods for transposing its statement, involuntary servitude and the longstanding struggle to elude and defeat it, the antagonism to capitalist discipline, the refusal of work, the movement of the unsovereign, dispossession and racialized enclosure, transfiguration, and a language for black existence not bound to property or the subject—would preoccupy me for two decades. The freighted last paragraph of the book attempted to underscore the incompleteness of freedom and the hold of slavery. What did it mean to exist between the “no longer” enslaved and the “not yet” free?

What awaited us was another century of extreme domination, precarious life, dispossession, impoverishment, and punishment. What awaited us were centuries of struggle animated by visions that exceeded the wreckage of our lives, by the avid belief in what might be.

Notes

- 1 See Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (1961; Grove, 2005); and Sylvia Wynter, "Black Metamorphosis" (unpublished manuscript).
- 2 *Small Axe*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (June 2008).
- 3 "Aunt Jemima in Dialectics: Genovese on Slave Culture," *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 61, No. 1 (January 1976).
- 4 The work of Orlando Patterson, Hortense Spillers, and Patricia Williams was critical to thinking beyond this impasse. See Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death* (Harvard, 1982); Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," *Diacritics*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (Summer 1987); and Williams, "On Being the Object of Property," *Signs*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (Fall 1988). As important were Edouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, trans. J. Michael Dash (University of Virginia, 1989); Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (Knopf, 1987); and Sylvia Wynter, "Beyond the Categories of the Master Conception: The Counterdoctrine of the Jamesian Poiesis," in Paget Henry and Paul Buhle, eds., *C.L.R. James's Caribbean* (Duke, 1992).
- 5 The work of Paule Marshall, Toni Morrison, Maryse Condé, David Bradley, Jamaica Kincaid, Caryl Phillips, Derek Walcott, Robert Hayden, Edouard Glissant, and Kamau Brathwaite was indispensable to my thinking.

In the archive of slavery, I encountered a paradox: the recognition of the slave's humanity and status as a subject extended and intensified servitude and dispossession.