

Towards a Slave Future

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Abstract: Tragic history is never irrecoverable. The history of black slavery in the United States is considered with shame and regret, and it is reasoned that it should have never happened. This essay argues that this manner of characterization deeply limits transformative possibilities. I attempt to reexamine this characterization of slavery in America with a subversive, morbid gratitude and with a will towards a grotesque triumph. I will explore how an alternative to the prevailing interpretation of the history of slavery allows much more to be elaborated on the subject than the predominant contemporary approach.

I. Prologue. A Complete Circle of Autobiography

Academic philosophy usually discards the autobiographical when discussing ideas. It is maybe a failure of character and a habit of slovenliness that prevent me from practicing this principle. I would have nothing to write if the autobiographical were not squarely at the center of my efforts. The empirical truths of my experience bear no obvious resemblance to the content of the ideas presented here. Perhaps, therein lies the activity of this work that may be deemed a form of philosophy—a clarification of reality that may avail alternative possibilities if we allow our representation of history to be restructured.

I have revisited the slavery of persons of African descent in the United States from a somewhat sparse historical perspective. My intent is not exhaustive accuracy, although there is a minimum standard, but rather to present a way of structuring of the facts, such that they are organized in interest of a principled demonstration. What I am attempting is not propaganda, I am not attempting to convince anyone of one particular perspective of history, or even further, to say that this history “means something” in a finished and settled sense. Nor am I saying that this given summary and interpretation of the past means that we must do one particular thing as the only natural consequence of this presentation.

What this essay attempts to do, is to make clear that what is assumed as the natural meaning and

appropriate attitude towards the history of slavery in America is only a limited alternative among many others. It is steeped in morals that believe that lamentation, regret, or anger is the only earnest way to honor tragedy. I resist this; and would even further argue, that the prevailing sense of solemnity towards the tragic past of slavery in America precludes a certain set of possibilities, which may be attractive to some if given a closer look.

Although at first glance, vulgar; I am trying to inject a kind of grotesque optimism into our historical outlook—even more so, a tortured and triumphant gratitude. I am attempting to recognize the pain our past as horrifically as possible so that the gauntlet is thrown. I maintain that in some sense, solemn reverence for the past is an admission of weakness. To look back on the struggle of our ancestors and conflate it to an impossible task, but no less accomplished, is to imply you could not have done it yourself. It is to say that the legends of the past and the people of today are not the same. Or, that the struggle is different now, easier. I could not disagree more. It is only easier now if you hide yourself from the full reality of the world. The struggles of the world as far as we have seen, are timeless.

However, the point here is to draw an illustration of the ugliest and vilest things of the past, but paint them only as shadows that accentuate our light—to turn

tragedy into something too glorious to ever be sad. The goal is not an erasure of pain, humiliation and torment. I intend to reanimate the horror, but this time with a different attentiveness. I wish to re-present our history as something more robust, something that holds a promise unexamined.

II. Introduction

Slavery was and still continues to be a definitive episode in American history. It is mostly surmised as our nation's shame, as the past that we must overcome. We recollect it always in the mode of moving away, of denial. Only the monstrous and the stupid have the gall to valorize it—to clamor for its reinstatement. The intent here is not to suggest that we resurrect the practice of slavery. But, perhaps the aim is morbid enough to say that the only salvation that can be seen is in the practice of repetition.

History never leaves; it sticks to us with an adhesive of infinite elasticity no matter how fast or far we run. Slavery is here with us today: in police shootings, mass incarceration, and colorism. It is the belief expressed here that it will be with us tomorrow and long after. The future is bleak—it appears that slavery's legacy and its subsequent manifestations are chronic and will never be cured. However, should we not be sickened by and admonishing towards anyone who would even ask for a cure? Those who wish to escape the past are the

ones who have learned nothing, and worst of all, pray that they may be spared of ever learning.

The task here is to revisit the history of slavery with a new eye of attentiveness, to burst open its hidden resources that have been trapped in the typification of regret—to reclaim our most sorrowful memory with the intent of up-building and renewal.

Slavery has been a badly typified encounter. The abductor and the victim, the proprietor and the chattel, and most centrally the slave and the master, are the cemented bifurcated schemas that dominate our understanding of this history. The dichotomous poles have been cleaved along a line that aggressively divides qualities and perspectives. The fluidity of self-understanding that resonates waves of new possibilities has been congealed within the hard cramped roles of rigidly cast encounters. A thin, flat portrait of encounter has taken the place of an amorphous interpersonal encounter. This thinness of interpretation has reproduced and rendered itself replete throughout our stale, sorrowful understanding of slavery in America.

As Americans of African descent, we take it for granted that slavery damaged, or at least corrupted us. That we most certainly came out less than before, and if not, we certainly persevered and grew in spite of slavery. We honor our ancestors for having persevered, draw on their strength, and continued their resistance. In gratitude of their sacrifice, we are always struggling to make ourselves more, to prove that we are more, and

therein we lose sight of the obvious: the incorruptible powers within us, the grace that was never interrupted, the pain that could not poison us, and the bondage that only freed us.

I will explore the roles and interactions of the actors within the slave context (typified as the slave and the master) and reveal their relationship to be complex rather than one-sided in any direction or consolidated towards negative or positive interpretation. The roles of each actor have a cyclical mutually reinvesting and supplementing relationship. The essence of the slave can be found in the master, and vice versa.

I will then move on to examine the posed «pathologies» left behind in the wake of slavery and expose the promise therein. Slavery left a vulgarized and denigrated image of people of color. My point is not to cleanse and polish black people so they may become «respectable» and «clean» again, but to harvest the resources gained through struggle and pain. Jewels after all, do not fall from the sky, but rather all gems are first buried in the dirt. The vulgar, the obscene, the immoral, and the impotent were categories within the great «humanity» of people that were sequestered and truncated by a spoiled humanism that was more poisonous than the supposed perversion or frailty. That pain and ugliness that was invested in blacks was but the rejection of what whites did not understand in themselves. A heavy and painful gift was offered

through the violent self-purging of whiteness. This exposition is the claiming of that gift.

Finally, I will examine the recapitulation of slavery as a mode of freedom, not as flat despair, but as the form of despair where only true freedom lies.

III. On the Future of Slavery

What does it mean to be a slave? Certainly, any analytical definition that we could give to the category of the enslaved would differ from the living experiences of such a given group of people. I will not herein delve into a genealogy on how such a category came to be conceived or an examination of autobiographical accounts in this regard. Therein, perhaps these efforts may be a bit impoverished, but that is not the aim of this text. In any analytical definition of the «slave», there is a consolidation around what is sufficient and necessary to such a definition. And even within autobiographical accounts there is at least some determination of what the experiences amounted to—a final saying of what the «reality» was. My concern for the position of the slave is to examine it as a context or an ontological field of potentials that is no less impoverished than any other ontological space given to humans. Of course, here it is relevant to consider what kind of realization of «potentials» is honestly possible for a person demoted to the status of property, even from birth, who may or may not have any coherent understanding of themselves as authentically being human at all. However, in the strict

sense, I am not wholly concerned with the concrete empirical existences of slaves as much as I am with the slave as a loose formative context and archetype for a future of behaviors and reflective self-consciousness affecting African-Americans and America itself today.

The historical insistence of slavery in the present is far from being antiquated. However, my insistence here is not a dismantling of that history. I do not wish to cleanse and baptize black people out of their slave history and all the damage and trauma it imposed on us. The destruction of the black family, the emasculation of black men, the denigration of black respectability, the vulgarization of the black female body, the sexual animalization of black men and women, etc. is a troubled and maddening legacy to inherit, to say the least. Conversely, for whites the quantification of human worth, the subjugation of labor, the impersonalization of labor, the problem of self-possession being predicated on authority, and self-worth being derived from material possession and deference gained from others, are developments within the legacy of slavery in the United States that has deeply psychologically disfigured white people as well. The history is surely problematic, pernicious, and painful, so the first instinct is to discard it, to disassociate from it, to declare that it is dead and do everything in your power to make it so.

The preoccupation with materialism that developed out of the European age of exploration disfigured the

sense of self-worth and prestige as being verifiable in the form of accumulated possessions. African chattel was an extension of this, but they were not a form of property that could be passively held. In order to truly own and possess other human lives, the owner had to develop a new spiritual power. The slave owner had to be able to exact his will over another human being, intimidate other people, and instill fear and respect. A source of his self-worth became the reflection of himself that he saw in the eyes of the dominated. Their subservient behavior, their shuddering posture and fearful gaze confirmed that they were thoroughly objects of his world. He owned them. They were not indifferent features of reality like a cliff that a person may one day climb and then the next day fall from to their death. They were objects within and of his volition. He could move them with an utterance and eradicate them capriciously if he so desired.

This idea of ownership, of possessing and commanding, dispersed the sense of self into objects and reflections. The self, found its verisimilitude from without in the form of items in the world branded with its name. Even when actions and accomplishments were the source of its self-esteem, their value was not intrinsic; these actions were impersonalized since their worth was only confirmed in terms of the world's response to such efforts. Thereby, the connection of the self to itself, by means of itself, was severed. The slave master and the descendants of his type became

completely external beings. The self only recognized itself in the form of its talents, powers, possessions, esteem, authority, and fame. The self, did not possess its powers; it became a function of it. The self was only recognizable in its powers, and not before it.

And therein, the slave master became a self of projections and reflections. His self-identification was with of his role not his self. His sense of himself was in others' eyes; he recognized himself in the imprint of his efforts, not their source. He became the substance of subsequent effects, detached from what was primary, original, and motivational.

However, although detached from a primordial, unmediated perception of self, the master became attached to a phantasmal, fantasy-driven perception of self. He was bathed in the ever redeeming life of his potential, intangible omnipotence of talents. He was not his body or the things he possessed, he was infinite, but those things were indeed reflections of the power he possessed. But, it was not that "he" possessed these powers, it was that "he" was "possession". The master was possession, control, capture, and dominance, and that was what was made him infinite and immortal, not his spirit. Indeed, he did not live in his body in any authentic sense; he possessed it.

The corporeal represents limits of finite power and determinative context. There is time closing in on all sides, restless uncertainty putting pressure on every second to mean something. Without the pressure of

mortality, finitude, and limitation, there is no spiritual will. There is no bearing for it emerge. It is the very circumstance of choice, as thinkers like Kierkegaard, Heidegger, or Sartre would insist, that what makes us what we are. Without choice, there is no self.

The sense of historicity given by heritage, is in fact a self-abstracting proposition. It leads the individual away into fantasies and bad logic about what was, and therein ought to be, and will be. The paradox is that slave who is without this heritage, believes herself not to know herself. There she is, viscerally rebounded at every limit of her imagination back to her presence in the present, because denigrating and discouraging contingencies of the now always drag her back to this moment, this second. All of her fantasies where she is anything more than ugly chattel are more fantastic and absurd than the musings of the average rube, because history has declared no precedent for her self-love. There is no antecedent fantasy, called heritage, to be an excuse for optimism. There are no excuses, every hope for the future must be earned and grasped from within.

What is longed for is a fixed origin to ground all future actions and determinations, however, what is sacrificed in this narrow yearning is the mutability of the immediate circumstance. With a preoccupation with the past, the presence assumes the fixed quality of the past longed for. Somehow, a fixed and cemented origin is believed to be the basis of a free future. The

authority of what was, gives permission to all that wishes to be.

The irony is when an actual anchoring point of origin to define the angle of all future trajectories is absent, the future is viewed as determined. The contingencies of the present are given more reality, because it is thought that there are no internal resources to transform them. The unfortunate contingencies of the present are perceived to possess a kind of predatory verisimilitude—reality is a hostile truth. The slave is a kind of phantom that betrays the logic of empirical causality. She is a present without a past, who is further denied a future. This phantom, is a natural enemy to reality. The empirical world is phobic to her presence. Raw to the heavy touch of the world, she is sensitive to all insistences of the concrete. The light of the world is a disparaging set of rays that illuminates everything in a downcast. Every presence is a barrier because everything in the world is but one more piece in the assemblage of a reality that has written in its substratum the cause of her denigration and worthlessness.

History, is not just merely a matter of support for the slave, history is the basis of possessing a quality of “likeness” to the world. It is the idea that you belong in some sense because the order of the world entertained, validated, and rewarded your ancestors, that you are a leaf in fold of the world’s order, that you are an expression of it, and guaranteed a place in it. The arc of history, which is a component of reality, is not a broken

piece of the world's mirror in which your reflection is effaced.

Heritage is a kind of humanism that draws upon the resources of the petrified inertia of past human excellence. At best, it is a pattern of forms that give disciplined direction to more original expression. Heritage was within the Anglo-Saxon myth promulgated by white men like Thomas Jefferson, who made heritage a kind of spiritual inspiration. Rather being something already present and inherited, heritage was something invented. Heritage didn't guarantee greatness, it seduced people toward greatness.

For the master, a kind of imaginative self-delusion of the past, became a daily re-enacted fantasy. Something in himself, or perhaps even something about the world, resisted his assumption of authority. Somewhere, there was a sneaking suspicion of unworthiness, of not having the license, of not being owed power and privilege. He could not grapple with it—his imitations, the absence of reasons, the world out of his power. So then, amazingly, the world that resisted, denied him, was shed and abandoned, and somehow by an inverse principle, gained. He denied to himself that he was what he was in his own flesh; a man bastardized to some extent by the European heritage so dear to him, finite and limited in his power, and became the Anglo-Saxon man—a European par-excellence, man with infinite power over his captives, and an infinite future. His body was baggage to the spiritual power that he

found theoretically in infinite intellect and a perversion of Christianity, and practically through the oppression and exploitation of his captives. Like impurities distilled from an elixir, the master shed his body and the insistence of finitude.

From there, everything that was lost to the slave master through the spiritually impoverishing extension of his powers was reinvested into the slave. The slave master, a microcosm of the baseless infinite self of European rationalism that posited a corporeally abstracted observer, interpreter, and analyst, whose pronouncement was so potent and final that he was even the final appraiser of himself, bled and dispersed himself like an aerosol into his wild visions of power. The identity of the slave master expanded and thinned itself into a megalomania, while the slave was increasingly concentrated, congealed, and fixed to its immediacy, and therein ascribed an essence. The slave was therein forced to grapple with what “it was”, before any self-affirming exploit of self-appraising glance of deference.

What resource can be drawn upon when your own body becomes chattel; when you can lay no claim to the ground underneath your feet; when you are not your name; and, there is not anything anywhere that you can call your own? From this space of complete destitution and desolation, the very power of selfhood was drawn back on itself, and made to reflect on itself from within itself, and not in the form of its effects.

Deprivation was revitalization, and a new humanism and spirituality was realized.

In some respect I think this is the potency and pervasiveness of African American culture throughout the world. Black art and media usually, at least at first, is a possession of its condition. Black artists have mastered pain and redeemed it. Blacks, denied the ability and right to empirically invest in spaces, objects, and time were forced to exist somewhere beyond these entities. They were a people said to have no history, from the «dark continent», with no knowledge or civilization, whose geographies were maroon communities and paths for runaway slaves, whose own bodies could not be said to be their own, and who were lost to all the superficialities of identity and the illusory anchoring of historical time. The slave was made to reflect with no place to hide, no impersonal account of themselves to appropriate in the form of great men and women before them as role models, no civilization or nationhood to dissipate amongst themselves into a general and abstract form of self-worth, no geographical home or origin to stay sheltered in, no shore to tepidly stare at future from. The universe was not an indifferent nauseating blankness that stared back in silence, but an apoplectic omnipresent intent that icily declared to every modicum, pocket, and moment of your Being: «No»—You were not, you are not, you cannot, you will not.

There was no «yes» by example, nor by imitation, nor contrivance. There was nothing to take hold of except one's self; no position to stand on but the ground of your very presence; no example to follow but the very one you were authoring through your contemplation. In the aesthetic existence of outwardness, the self was only reached through substitution, reflection, and derivation. The individual saw itself in a conglomeration of examples from others and baseless hypothetical constructions. It searched for itself in the glances of others—whether the wincing of fear or the shining of praise—or searched for itself in objects of possessions and acts of accomplishment that were derivative of the self and its powers. But with the withering of all, one was forced to retreat back into that that had come before all. For lack of a better word, we may deem it spirit—the spirit that moves all. The spirit was inextinguishable, and the spirit that was pushed to the edge of existence not only persisted and recovered, but shined so bright that not a single eye could turn away.

Blackness through the impositions of white supremacy was declared deficient, vulgar, and ugly. However, this development is almost always considered as the denigration and victimization of blacks. The rarest perspective ever taken is to see the denigrating impositions of whiteness as an activity of self-alienation and psychic self-mutilation. To cast the «the black» as constituted by pure animalistic sex and vulgar passion, then sequester oneself in the deficient

capitalistic productive and morally sanctioned activity of wed-locked baby-making; to withdraw into the self-censorship of polite society and fraught appropriateness and decry the wild utterances of the negro spirituality, the profound patterns of Ebonics, and the frank transparency of black rhetoric; to lose connection to the visceral verisimilitude of one's body and then speak apoplectics towards African dance—these were nothing more outward excesses that reveal inner deficiencies.

All that was in the soul of whiteness that was not commensurate with the mission of glory, exultation, progress, and cleanliness was surrendered. Whiteness refused any longer to be human in the robust, troubled and complicated sense, but human as only in the manner that was responsive to its goals. So as much as the slave was denigrated as being sub-human, the project of white supremacy was surprisingly to make the slave human—the humanity that whiteness would rather forget. Therein, the potential for humanity for wretched peoples was always preserved. In fact, the goal was always to make blacks more human, more synonymous with the flesh, the fallen, the animalistic. Whiteness was to become one with God, to be a pure agent of reason abstracted from its body, to be Spirit in a completed and permanent sense.

IV. Conclusion

So therein, I see the slave as the only possible paradigm of a true realization of humanity, and beyond that, any possible approach to spirit. Humanity was truncated, despoiled, abstracted, and impersonalized through the project of constructing whiteness and a new sense of humanity, absorbed into the abstraction of their projections. They depleted any substantive value to their humanity.

Only by grappling with corporeal can the spiritual be reached. That challenge was failed and fled from in the construction of whiteness. Therein, the slave is the only answer to the suspension of authentic humanity from this construction of whiteness and projection of self-hatred onto blackness.

The goal is to recover the past where the answer of our future was already buried. We in the present already live the past. We remain too hasty to say that we are on our way towards dawn. All our evils and our mistakes are only opportunities. Tragedy and salvation are intertwined and inextinguishable, and neither is our enemy. The pain of reliving the torment of our history seems more of a task than any one of us could hope to surmount, but we are not here to perish. With an ounce more courage, a seed of faith, then all that was rendered asunder and flamed to ashes can be reclaimed and renewed better than before.