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## Social Death and Political Life in the Study of Slavery

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VINCENT BROWN

ABOARD THE *HUDIBRAS* IN 1786, in the course of a harrowing journey from Africa to America, a popular woman died in slavery. Although she was “universally esteemed” among her fellow captives as an “oracle of literature,” an “orator,” and a “songstress,” she is anonymous to historians because the sailor on the slave ship who described her death, the young William Butterworth, did not record her name. Yet he did note that her passing caused a minor political tumult when the crew herded the other enslaved women below decks before they could see the body of their fallen shipmate consigned to the water. This woman was no alienated isolate to be hurled over the side of the ship without ceremony. She had been, according to Butterworth, the “soul of sociality” when the women were on the quarterdeck. There she had knelt “nearly prostrate, with hands stretched forth and placed upon the deck, and her head resting on her hands.” Then, “In order to render more easy the hours of her sisters in exile,” the woman “would sing slow airs, of a pathetic nature, and recite such pieces as moved the passions; exciting joy or grief, pleasure or pain, as fancy or inclination led.”<sup>1</sup> Around her the other women were arranged in concentric circles, with the innermost ring comprising the youngest girls, and the elderly on the perimeter—a fleeting, makeshift community amid the chaos of the slave trade.

The first to die on that particular voyage, the woman was laid out on the deck while the sailors awaited flood tide to heave her overboard. The other women commenced a “loud, deep, and impressive” rite of mourning, often speaking softly to the corpse in the belief that the woman’s spirit would hear and acknowledge their wish “to be remembered to their friends in the other country, when they should meet again.” Before the ceremonies could reach a conclusion, the women and girls were ordered below, with the body left on the deck. Convinced that whites were cannibals and that the sailors “might begin to eat their dead favourite,” the Africans began a vehement protest. Fearing a general insurrection, the captain let several of the women out of the hold and had the corpse lowered into the water in their presence, “with the observance of rather more decency in the manner of doing it, than generally appeared in the funeral of a slave.” The protest subsided, the slaver eventually de-

The author wishes to thank Glenda Carpio, Laurent Dubois, Walter Johnson, Susan E. O’Donovan, Michael Ralph, and Ajantha Subramanian, as well as six anonymous readers for the *AHR*, for comments and suggestions regarding earlier drafts of this essay.

<sup>1</sup> William Butterworth, *Three Years Adventures of a Minor, in England, Africa, the West Indies, South Carolina and Georgia* (Leeds, 1822), 93–96; Marcus Rediker, *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (New York, 2007), 280–281. I am grateful to Professor Rediker for drawing this source to my attention. Voyage #81890, Voyages: The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, <http://www.slavevoyages.org/tast/database/search.faces>.

livered its captives on the American side of the Atlantic Ocean at Grenada, and it is likely that the remaining passengers lived and died as slaves.<sup>2</sup>

What happened aboard the *Hudibras* was an uncommon but not unimportant event. If slave funerals occasionally occurred on slave ships, they were hardly ever mentioned. Bodies were usually dumped unceremoniously into the ocean, cast to the sharks that followed the slavers with anticipation. Generally, there was no recognized ritual at all, no closure, only the continuation of disorientation on a cosmic scale. As historian Stephanie Smallwood has observed, captives on slave ships “confronted a dual crisis: the trauma of death, and the inability to respond appropriately to death.”<sup>3</sup> Partly because they were uncommon, episodes such as the one aboard the *Hudibras* have been viewed as unlikely stories. Yet stories about slave ship funerals are unlikely not only because such ceremonies occurred infrequently, but because discussions of them have been seen as unpromising, likely to fail as explanations for any significant developments within the history of slavery. In other words, scholars are not well prepared to understand such funerals, because they do not really suit the prevailing ways we write about slavery’s past—and its presence in our concerns.

Certainly, the popular woman’s rite of passage could be seen as evidence of African cultural retention, following the interpretive path hewn by Melville J. Herskovits and his admirers; or one might see it as an act of resistance against dehumanization, especially if one takes the view of scholars such as David Brion Davis, who sees dehumanization or “animalization” as the key characteristic of enslavement. In this sense, one could see the event as an example of the agency of the enslaved. The protest leading up to the burial at sea could also be interpreted as an act of resistance against the constraints of enslavement, or at least of claim-making; but this was not a claim that threatened slavery as such, and so it rests uncomfortably within the terms that have traditionally governed the analysis of political activity on the part of the enslaved.<sup>4</sup>

In fact, the funeral was an attempt to withstand the encroachment of oblivion and to make social meaning from the threat of anomie. As a final rite of passage and a ritual goodbye, the ceremony provided an outlet for anguish and an opportunity for commiseration. Yet it also allowed the women to publicly contemplate what it meant to be alive and enslaved. The death rite thus enabled them to express and enact their social values, to articulate their visions of what it was that bound them together, made individuals among them unique, and separated this group of people from others. The scene thus typifies the way that people who have been pronounced socially dead, that is, utterly alienated and with no social ties recognized as legitimate or

<sup>2</sup> Butterworth, *Three Years Adventures*, 95–96.

<sup>3</sup> Stephanie E. Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge, Mass., 2007), 152. For a sensitive examination of “serial displacement” wrought by the slave trade in the Bight of Biafra, see Alexander X. Byrd, *Captives and Voyagers: Black Migrants across the Eighteenth-Century British Atlantic World* (Baton Rouge, La., 2008), 17–56.

<sup>4</sup> Melville J. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (1941; repr., Boston, 1990); David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (New York, 2006), 31–32; Walter Johnson, “On Agency,” *Journal of Social History* 37, no. 1 (Fall 2003): 113–124. For excellent recent studies of claim-making by the enslaved, see Laurent Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens: Revolution and Slave Emancipation in the French Caribbean, 1787–1804* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2004); and Alejandro de la Fuente, “Slave Law and Claims-Making in Cuba: The Tannenbaum Debate Revisited,” *Law and History Review* 22, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 339–369.

binding, have often made a social world out of death itself. The funeral was an act of accounting, of reckoning, and therefore one among the multitude of acts that made up the political history of Atlantic slavery. This was politics conceived not as a conventional battle between partisans, but as a struggle to define a social being that connected the past and present. It could even be said that the event exemplified a politics of history, which connects the politics of the enslaved to the politics of their descendants.

Although the deaths of slaves could inspire such active and dynamic practices of social reconnection, scholars in recent years have made too little of events like the funeral aboard the *Hudibras* and have too often followed Orlando Patterson's monumental *Slavery and Social Death* (1982) in positing a metaphorical "social death" as the basic condition of slavery. In a comparative study of sixty-six slaveholding societies ranging from ancient Greece and Rome to medieval Europe, precolonial Africa, and Asia, Patterson combined statistical analysis and voluminous research with brilliant theoretical insights drawn from Marxian theory, symbolic anthropology, law, philosophy, and literature in order to offer what he called a "preliminary definition of slavery on the level of personal relations." Recognizing violence, violations of personhood, dishonor, and namelessness as the fundamental constituent elements of slavery, Patterson distilled a transhistorical characterization of slavery as "the permanent, violent domination of natively alienated and generally dishonored persons." In this way the institution of slavery was and is a "relation of domination," in which slaveholders annihilated people socially by first extracting them from meaningful relationships that defined personal status and belonging, communal memory, and collective aspiration and then incorporating these socially dead persons into the masters' world. As a work of historical sociology concerned primarily with the comparative analysis of institutions, the book illuminated the dynamics of a process whereby the "desocialized new slave" was subsumed within slave society.<sup>5</sup>

*Slavery and Social Death* was widely reviewed and lavishly praised for its erudition and conceptual rigor. As a result of its success, social death has become a handy general definition of slavery, for many historians and non-historians alike. But it is often forgotten that the concept of social death is a *distillation* from Patterson's breathtaking survey—a theoretical abstraction that is meant not to describe the lived experiences of the enslaved so much as to reduce them to a least common denominator that could reveal the essence of slavery in an ideal-type slave, shorn of meaningful heritage.<sup>6</sup> As a concept, it is what Frederick Cooper has called an "agentless abstraction" that provides a neat cultural logic but ultimately does little to illuminate the social and political experience of enslavement and the struggles that produce historic transformations.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, it is difficult to use such a distillation to explain

<sup>5</sup> Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982), 13.

<sup>6</sup> As the historian Herman Bennett has observed, "As the narrative of the slave experience, social death assumes a uniform African, slave, and ultimately black subject rooted in a static New World history whose logic originated in being property and remains confined to slavery. It absorbs and renders exceptional evidence that underscores the contingent nature of experience and consciousness. Thus, normative assumptions about the experiences of peoples of African descent assert a timeless, ahistorical, epiphenomenal 'black' cultural experience." Bennett, "Genealogies to a Past: Africa, Ethnicity, and Marriage in Seventeenth-Century Mexico," in Edward E. Baptist and Stephanie M. H. Camp, eds., *New Studies in the History of American Slavery* (Athens, Ga., 2006), 127–147, quotation from 142.

<sup>7</sup> Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley, Calif., 2005), 17.

the actual behavior of slaves, and yet in much of the scholarship that followed in the wake of *Slavery and Social Death*, Patterson's abstract distillates have been used to explain the existential condition of the enslaved.

Having emerged from the discipline of sociology, "social death" fit comfortably within a scholarly tradition that had generally been more alert to deviations in patterns of black life from prevailing social norms than to the worldviews, strategies, and social tactics of people in black communities. Together with Patterson's work on the distortions wrought by slavery on black families, "social death" reflected sociology's abiding concern with "social pathology"; the "pathological condition" of twentieth-century black life could be seen as an outcome of the damage that black people had suffered during slavery. University of Chicago professor Robert Park, the *grand-père* of the social pathologists, set the terms in 1919: "the Negro, when he landed in the United States, left behind almost everything but his dark complexion and his tropical temperament."<sup>8</sup> Patterson's distillation also conformed to the nomothetic imperative of social science, which has traditionally aimed to discover universal laws of operation that would be true regardless of time and place, making the synchronic study of social phenomena more tempting than more descriptive studies of historical transformation. *Slavery and Social Death* took shape during a period when largely synchronic studies of antebellum slavery in the United States dominated the scholarship on human bondage, and Patterson's expansive view was meant to situate U.S. slavery in a broad context rather than to discuss changes as the institution developed through time. Thus one might see "social death" as an obsolete product of its time and tradition, an academic artifact with limited purchase for contemporary scholarship, were it not for the concept's reemergence in some important new studies of slavery.<sup>9</sup>

WIDELY ACKNOWLEDGED AS AMONG the most onerous of social institutions, slavery has much to tell us about the way human beings react to oppression. At the same time, the extreme nature of the institution naturally encourages a pessimistic view of the

<sup>8</sup> Robert Park, "The Conflict and Fusion of Cultures with Special Reference to the Negro," *Journal of Negro History* 4, no. 2 (1919): 116. Park's assumptions continued to inform the work of influential sociologists, including E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Family in the United States* (Chicago, 1939); and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (Washington, D.C., 1965).

<sup>9</sup> Reacting to the static nature of the historiography of slavery in the United States during these years, studies of colonial slavery by Peter Wood and Ira Berlin, among others, drew attention to variation over time and space and successfully shifted the main focus of slavery studies toward the era of the transatlantic slave trade, making it easier to see slavery in Atlantic perspective and as a phenomenon that changed markedly over time. Thereafter it became as important to describe historic transformations in slavery as it had been to define the essential nature of slavery. At the same time, as mainstream historians became increasingly aware of the black freedom struggles in the U.S. and elsewhere, they took greater note of anti-slavery activities among the enslaved. See especially Peter H. Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion* (New York, 1974); Ira Berlin, "Time, Space, and the Evolution of Afro-American Society on British Mainland North America," *American Historical Review* 85, no. 1 (February 1980): 44–78. The year 1998 represented a kind of watershed in U.S. academe for studies of slavery, which witnessed the publication of several very important works: Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998); Michael A. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1998); Philip D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1998); and John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400–1800*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, 1998).

capacity for collective agency among subjugated people. As a result, trends in the study of slavery, as with the study of dominance more generally, often divide between works that emphasize the overwhelming power of the institution and scholarship that focuses on the resistant efforts of the enslaved. In turn, this division frames a problem in the general understanding of political life, especially for the descendants of the powerless. It might even be said that these kinds of studies form different and opposing genres—hopeful stories of heroic subalterns versus anatomies of doom—that compete for ascendance. In recent years, if the invocation of Patterson’s “social death” is any indication, the pendulum seems to have swung decidedly toward despair.

A fascinating book by Ian Baucom has illuminated the persistence of slavery’s forms of being in our own time. *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History* excavates the history of the massacre aboard the slave ship *Zong* in 1781, which came to light as a dispute over an insurance claim for lost cargo, and the reactions to that event in subsequent legal trials, social movements, and literary and artistic discourses. Writing against the view that would see the massacre as an isolated tragedy, Baucom situates the story of the *Zong* within a logic of violence that underpins a long Atlantic cycle of speculative capital accumulation that began in the eighteenth century and continues today. Indeed, the logic that governed the transformation of slaughtered human beings into modern abstract forms of property derives in part from social death, which Baucom glosses as the state of being permanently subject to death by the master’s hand.<sup>10</sup> Human life is still a commodity—as a brief glimpse at a life insurance policy or a credit score will instantly show—and the abolition of chattel slavery has not solved the problem Baucom has identified. It is therefore within reason for him to identify the *Zong* as a tragic part of our present and future.

*Specters of the Atlantic* is a compellingly sophisticated study of the relation between the epistemologies underwriting both modern slavery and modern capitalism, but the book’s discussion of the politics of anti-slavery is fundamentally incomplete. While Baucom brilliantly traces the development of “melancholy realism” as an oppositional discourse that ran counter to the logic of slavery and finance capital, he has very little to say about the enslaved themselves. Social death, so well suited to the tragic perspective, stands in for the experience of enslavement. While this heightens the reader’s sense of the way Atlantic slavery haunts the present, Baucom largely fails to acknowledge that the enslaved performed melancholy acts of accounting not unlike those that he shows to be a fundamental component of abolitionist and human rights discourses, or that those acts could be a basic element of slaves’ oppositional activities. In many ways, the effectiveness of his text depends upon the silence of slaves—it is easier to describe the continuity of structures of power when one downplays countervailing forces such as the political activity of the weak. So Baucom’s deep insights into the structural features of Atlantic slave trading and its afterlife come with a cost. Without engagement with the politics of the enslaved, slavery’s history serves as an effective charge leveled against modernity and capitalism, but

<sup>10</sup> Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History* (Durham, N.C., 2005), 188–189. In this formulation, Baucom is reading Patterson alongside Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford, Calif., 1998).

not as an uneven and evolving process of human interaction, and certainly not as a locus of conflict in which the enslaved sometimes won small but important victories.<sup>11</sup>

*Specters of the Atlantic* is self-consciously a work of theory (despite Baucom's prodigious archival research), and social death may be largely unproblematic as a matter of theory, or even law. In these arenas, as David Brion Davis has argued, "the slave has no legitimate, independent being, no place in the cosmos except as an instrument of her or his master's will."<sup>12</sup> But the concept often becomes a general description of actual social life in slavery. Vincent Carretta, for example, in his authoritative biography of the abolitionist writer and former slave Olaudah Equiano, agrees with Patterson that because enslaved Africans and their descendants were "stripped of their personal identities and history, [they] were forced to suffer what has been aptly called 'social death.'" The self-fashioning enabled by writing and print "allowed Equiano to resurrect himself publicly" from the condition that had been imposed by his enslavement.<sup>13</sup> The living conditions of slavery in eighteenth-century Jamaica, one slave society with which Equiano had experience, are described in rich detail in Trevor Burnard's unflinching examination of the career of Thomas Thistlewood, an English migrant who became an overseer and landholder in Jamaica, and who kept a diary there from 1750 to 1786. Through Thistlewood's descriptions of his life among slaves, Burnard glimpses a "world of uncertainty," where the enslaved were always vulnerable to repeated depredations that actually led to "significant slave dehumanization as masters sought, with considerable success, to obliterate slaves' personal histories." Burnard consequently concurs with Patterson: "slavery completely stripped slaves of their cultural heritage, brutalized them, and rendered ordinary life and normal relationships extremely difficult."<sup>14</sup> This was slavery, after all, and much more than a transfer of migrants from Africa to America.<sup>15</sup> Yet one wonders, after reading Burnard's indispensable account, how slaves in Jamaica organized some of British America's greatest political events during Thistlewood's time and after, including the Coromantee Wars of the 1760s, the 1776 Hanover conspiracy, and the Baptist War of 1831–1832. Surely they must have found some way to turn the "disorganization, instability, and chaos" of slavery into collective forms of belonging and striving, making connections when confronted with alienation and finding dignity in the face of dishonor. Rather than pathologizing slaves by allowing the condition of social death to stand for the experience of life in slavery, then, it might be more helpful to focus on what the enslaved actually made of their situation.

<sup>11</sup> Cooper, *Colonialism in Question*, 26–32.

<sup>12</sup> Davis, *Inhuman Bondage*, 31. This assertion may not hold as well for Iberian-Atlantic slavery, wherein the law did recognize the religious personhood of slaves. See especially Frank Tannenbaum, *Slave and Citizen* (New York, 1946); Herman L. Bennett, *Africans in Colonial Mexico: Absolutism, Christianity, and Afro-Creole Consciousness, 1570–1640* (Bloomington, Ind., 2003); de la Fuente, "Slave Law and Claims-Making in Cuba." For the legacy of social death in the "civil death" of today's prison population, see Joan Dayan, "Legal Slaves and Civil Bodies," in Russ Castronovo and Dana D. Nelson, eds., *Materializing Democracy: Toward a Revitalized Cultural Politics* (Durham, N.C., 2002), 53–94; and Colin Dayan, "Legal Terrors," *Representations* 92, no. 1 (Fall 2005): 42–80.

<sup>13</sup> Vincent Carretta, *Equiano, the African: Biography of a Self-Made Man* (New York, 2005), 23, 367.

<sup>14</sup> Trevor Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire: Thomas Thistlewood and His Slaves in the Anglo-Jamaican World* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2004), 178–179, quotations from 179, 195.

<sup>15</sup> As Alexander X. Byrd has shown in *Captives and Voyagers*, the multi-staged process of migration was itself crucial to the formation of "ethnic" categories of belonging.

Among the most insightful texts to explore the experiential meaning of Afro-Atlantic slavery (for both the slaves and their descendants) are two recent books by Saidiya Hartman and Stephanie Smallwood. Rather than eschewing the concept of social death, as might be expected from writing that begins by considering the perspective of the enslaved, these two authors use the idea in penetrating ways. Hartman's *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route* and Smallwood's *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* extend social death beyond a general description of slavery as a condition and imagine it as an experience of self. Here both the promise and the problem with the concept are most fully apparent.<sup>16</sup>

Both authors seek a deeper understanding of the experience of enslavement and its consequences for the past, present, and future of black life than we generally find in histories of slavery. In Hartman's account especially, slavery is not only an object of study, but also the focus of a personal memoir. She travels along a slave route in Ghana, from its coastal forts to the backcountry hinterlands, symbolically reversing the first stage of the trek now commonly called the Middle Passage. In searching prose, she meditates on the history of slavery in Africa to explore the precarious nature of belonging to the social category "African American." Rendering her remarkable facility with social theory in elegant and affective terms, Hartman asks the question that nags all identities, but especially those forged by the descendants of slaves: What identifications, imagined affinities, mythical narratives, and acts of remembering and forgetting hold the category together? Confronting her own alienation from any story that would yield a knowable genealogy or a comfortable identity, Hartman wrestles with what it means to be a stranger in one's putative motherland, to be denied country, kin, and identity, and to forget one's past—to be an orphan.<sup>17</sup> Ultimately, as the title suggests, *Lose Your Mother* is an injunction to accept dispossession as the basis of black self-definition.

Such a judgment is warranted, in Hartman's account, by the implications of social death both for the experience of enslavement and for slavery's afterlife in the present. As Patterson delineated in sociological terms the death of social personhood and the reincorporation of individuals into slavery, Hartman sets out on a personal quest to "retrace the process by which lives were destroyed and slaves born."<sup>18</sup> When she contends with what it meant to be a slave, she frequently invokes Patterson's idiom: "Seized from home, sold in the market, and severed from kin, the slave was for all intents and purposes dead, no less so than had he been killed in combat. No less so than had she never belonged to the world." By making men, women, and children into commodities, enslavement destroyed lineages, tethering people to owners rather than families, and in this way it "annulled lives, transforming men and women into dead matter, and then resuscitated them for servitude." Admittedly, the enslaved "lived and breathed, but they were dead in the social world of men."<sup>19</sup> As it turns out, this kind of alienation is also part of what it presently means to be African

<sup>16</sup> Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York, 2007); Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery*.

<sup>17</sup> Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 85.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 67–68.

American. “The transience of the slave’s existence,” for example, still leaves its traces in how black people imagine and speak of home:

We never tire of dreaming of a place that we can call home, a place better than here, wherever here might be . . . We stay there, but we don’t live there . . . Staying is living in a country without exercising any claims on its resources. It is the perilous condition of existing in a world in which you have no investments. It is having never resided in a place that you can say is yours. It is being “of the house” but not having a stake in it. Staying implies transient quarters, a makeshift domicile, a temporary shelter, but no attachment or affiliation. This sense of not belonging and of being an extraneous element is at the heart of slavery.<sup>20</sup>

“We may have forgotten our country,” Hartman writes, “but we haven’t forgotten our dispossession.”<sup>21</sup>

Like Baucom, Hartman sees the history of slavery as a constituent part of a tragic present. Atlantic slavery continues to be manifested in black people’s skewed life chances, poor education and health, and high rates of incarceration, poverty, and premature death. Disregarding the commonplace temporalities of professional historians, whose literary conventions are generally predicated on a formal distinction between past, present, and future, Hartman addresses slavery as a problem that spans all three. The afterlife of slavery inhabits the nature of belonging, which in turn guides the “freedom dreams” that shape prospects for change. “If slavery persists as an issue in the political life of black America,” she writes, “it is not because of an antiquated obsession with bygone days or the burden of a too-long memory, but because black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago.”<sup>22</sup>

A professor of English and comparative literature, Hartman is in many respects in a better position than most historians to understand events such as the funeral aboard the *Hudibras*. This is because for all of her evident erudition, her scholarship is harnessed not so much to a performance of mastery over the facts of what happened, which might substitute precision for understanding, as to an act of mourning, even yearning. She writes with a depth of introspection and personal anguish that is transgressive of professional boundaries but absolutely appropriate to the task. Reading Hartman, one wonders how a historian could ever write dispassionately about slavery without feeling complicit and ashamed. For dispassionate accounting—exemplified by the ledgers of slave traders—has been a great weapon of the powerful, an episteme that made the grossest violations of personhood acceptable, even necessary. This is the kind of bookkeeping that bore fruit upon the *Zong*. “It made it easier for a trader to countenance yet another dead black body or for a captain to dump a shipload of captives into the sea in order to collect the insurance, since it wasn’t possible to kill cargo or to murder a thing already denied life. Death was simply part of the workings of the trade.” The archive of slavery, then, is “a mortuary.” Not content to total up the body count, Hartman offers elegy, echoing in her own way the lamentations of the women aboard the *Hudibras*. Like them, she is concerned with the dead and what they mean to the living. “I was desperate to

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 87–88.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 6.



reclaim the dead,” she writes, “to reckon with the lives undone and obliterated in the making of human commodities.”<sup>23</sup>

It is this mournful quality of *Lose Your Mother* that elevates it above so many histories of slavery, but the same sense of lament seems to require that Hartman overlook small but significant political victories like the one described by Butterworth. Even as Hartman seems to agree with Paul Gilroy on the “value of seeing the consciousness of the slave as involving an extended act of mourning,” she remains so focused on her own commemorations that her text makes little space for a consideration of how the enslaved struggled with alienation and the fragility of belonging, or of the mourning rites they used to confront their condition.<sup>24</sup> All of the questions she raises about the meaning of slavery in the present—both highly personal and insistently political—might as well be asked about the meaning of slavery to slaves themselves, that is, if one begins by closely examining their social and political lives rather than assuming their lack of social being. Here Hartman is undone by her reliance on Orlando Patterson’s totalizing definition of slavery. She asserts that “no solace can be found in the death of the slave, no higher ground can be located, no perspective can be found from which death serves a greater good or becomes anything other than what it is.”<sup>25</sup> If she is correct, the events on the *Hudibras* were of negligible importance. And indeed, Hartman’s understandable emphasis on the personal damage wrought by slavery encourages her to disavow two generations of social history that have demonstrated slaves’ remarkable capacity to forge fragile communities, preserve cultural inheritance, and resist the predations of slaveholders. This in turn precludes her from describing the ways that violence, dislocation, and death actually generate culture, politics, and consequential action by the enslaved.<sup>26</sup>

This limitation is particularly evident in a stunning chapter that Hartman calls “The Dead Book.” Here she creatively reimagines the events that occurred on the voyage of the slave ship *Recovery*, bound, like the *Hudibras*, from the Bight of Biafra to Grenada, when Captain John Kimber hung an enslaved girl naked from the mizzen stay and beat her, ultimately to her death, for being “sulky”: she was sick and could not dance when so ordered. As Hartman notes, the event would have been unremarkable had not Captain Kimber been tried for murder on the testimony of the ship’s surgeon, a brief transcript of the trial been published, and the woman’s death been offered up as allegory by the abolitionist William Wilberforce and the graphic satirist Isaac Cruikshank. Hartman re-creates the murder and the surge of words it inspired, representing the perspectives of the captain, the surgeon, and the aboli-

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., quotations from 31, 17, 6.

<sup>24</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993), 63.

<sup>25</sup> Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 67.

<sup>26</sup> In Hartman’s earlier work, she calls for precisely the kind of approach to the history of slavery that might illuminate the politics of the enslaved. She has argued persuasively that memory in black cultural practice “incessantly reiterates and enacts the contradictions and antagonisms of enslavement, the ruptures of history, and the disassociated and dispersed networks of affiliation.” But even here she remains focused on slavery as social death: “the quotidian articulates the wounds of history and the enormity of the breach instituted by the transatlantic crossing of black captives and the consequent processes of enslavement: violent domination, dishonor, natal alienation, and chattel status.” Her insight would suggest that such quotidian practices constitute the most elemental dimensions of slaves’ collective politics, and not just slavery’s forms of subjectivity. See Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, 1997), 72.

tionist, for each of whom the girl was a cipher “outfitted in a different guise,” and then she puts herself in the position of the victim, substituting her own voice for the unknowable thoughts of the girl. Imagining the experience as her own and wistfully representing her demise as a suicide—a final act of agency—Hartman hopes, by this bold device, to save the girl from oblivion. Or perhaps her hope is to prove the impossibility of ever doing so, because by failing, she concedes that the girl cannot be put to rest. It is a compelling move, but there is something missing. Hartman discerns a convincing subject position for all of the participants in the events surrounding the death of the girl, except for the other slaves who watched the woman die and carried the memory with them to the Americas, presumably to tell others, plausibly even survivors of the *Hudibras*, who must have drawn from such stories a basic perspective on the history of the Atlantic world. For the enslaved spectators, Hartman imagines only a fatalistic detachment: “The women were assembled a few feet away, but it might well have been a thousand. They held back from the girl, steering clear of her bad luck, pestilence, and recklessness. Some said she had lost her mind. What could they do, anyway? The women danced and sang as she lay dying.”

Hartman ends her odyssey among the Gwolu, descendants of peoples who fled the slave raids and who, as communities of refugees, shared her sense of dispossession. “Newcomers were welcome. It didn’t matter that they weren’t kin because genealogy didn’t matter”; rather, “building community did.” *Lose Your Mother* concludes with a moving description of a particular one of their songs, a lament for those who were lost, which resonated deeply with her sense of slavery’s meaning in the present. And yet Hartman has more difficulty hearing similar cries intoned in the past by slaves who managed to find themselves.<sup>27</sup>

*Saltwater Slavery* has much in common with *Lose Your Mother*. Smallwood’s study of the slave trade from the Gold Coast to the British Americas in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries likewise redeems the experience of the people traded like so many bolts of cloth, “who were represented merely as ciphers in the political arithmetic,” and therefore “feature in the documentary record not as subjects of a social history but as objects or quantities.”<sup>28</sup> Each text offers a penetrating analysis of the market logic that turned people into goods. Both books work with the concept of social death. However, Smallwood examines the problem of social death for the enslaved even more closely than Hartman does.<sup>29</sup>

Like Hartman, Smallwood sees social death as a by-product of commodification. “If in the regime of the market Africans’ most socially relevant feature was their exchangeability,” she argues, “for Africans as immigrants the most socially relevant feature was their isolation, their desperate need to restore some measure of social life to counterbalance the alienation engendered by their social death.” But Smallwood’s approach is different in a subtle way. Whereas for Hartman, as for others, social death is an accomplished state of being, Smallwood veers between a notion of social death as an actual condition produced by violent dislocation and social death as a compelling threat. On the one hand, she argues, captivity on the Atlantic littoral *was* a social death. Exchangeable persons “inhabited a new category of mar-

<sup>27</sup> Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 136, 152, 225.

<sup>28</sup> Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery*, 2.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 58–60.

ginalization, one not of extreme alienation *within* the community, but rather of absolute exclusion from *any* community.” She seems to accept the idea of enslaved commodities as finished products for whom there could be no socially relevant relationships: “the slave cargo constituted the antithesis of community.” Yet elsewhere she contends that captives were only “menaced” with social death. “At every point along the passage from African to New World markets,” she writes, “we find a stark contest between slave traders and slaves, between the traders’ will to commodify people and the captives’ will to remain fully recognizable as human subjects.”<sup>30</sup> Here, I think, Smallwood captures the truth of the idea: social death was a receding horizon—the farther slaveholders moved toward the goal of complete mastery, the more they found that struggles with their human property would continue, even into the most elemental realms: birth, hunger, health, fellowship, sex, death, and time.

If social death did not define the slaves’ condition, it did frame their vision of apocalypse. In a harrowing chapter on the meaning of death (that is, physical death) during the Atlantic passage, Smallwood is clear that the captives could have no frame of reference for the experience aboard the slave ships, but she also shows how desperate they were to make one. If they could not reassemble some meaningful way to map their social worlds, “slaves could foresee only further descent into an endless purgatory.” The women aboard the *Hudibras* were not in fact the living dead; they were the mothers of gasping new societies. Their view of the danger that confronted them made their mourning rites vitally important, putting these at the center of the women’s emerging lives as slaves—and as a result at the heart of the struggles that would define them. As Smallwood argues, this was first and foremost a battle over their presence in time, to define their place among ancestors, kin, friends, and future progeny. “The connection Africans needed was a narrative continuity between past and present—an epistemological means of connecting the dots between there and here, then and now, to craft a coherent story out of incoherent experience.” That is precisely what the women on the *Hudibras* fought to accomplish.<sup>31</sup>

THE PREMISE OF ORLANDO PATTERSON’S MAJOR WORK, that enslaved Africans were natively alienated and culturally isolated, was challenged even before he published his influential thesis, primarily by scholars concerned with “survivals” or “retentions” of African culture and by historians of slave resistance. In the early to mid-twentieth century, when Robert Park’s view of “the Negro” predominated among scholars, it was generally assumed that the slave trade and slavery had denuded black people of any ancestral heritage from Africa. The historians Carter G. Woodson and W. E. B. Du Bois and the anthropologist Melville J. Herskovits argued the opposite. Their research supported the conclusion that while enslaved Africans could not have brought intact social, political, and religious institutions with them to the Americas, they did maintain significant aspects of their cultural backgrounds.<sup>32</sup> Herskovits ex-

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., quotations from 189, 30, 101, 56, 5.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., quotations from 189, 191.

<sup>32</sup> Carter G. Woodson, *The African Background Outlined; or, Handbook for the Study of the Negro* (Washington, D.C., 1936); W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Negro* (1915; repr., Philadelphia, 2001); Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past*; Robin D. G. Kelley, “‘But a Local Phase of a World Problem’: Black History’s

amined “Africanisms”—any practices that seemed to be identifiably African—as useful symbols of cultural survival that would help him to analyze change and continuity in African American culture.<sup>33</sup> He engaged in one of his most heated scholarly disputes with the sociologist E. Franklin Frazier, a student of Park’s, who emphasized the damage wrought by slavery on black families and folkways.<sup>34</sup> More recently, a number of scholars have built on Herskovits’s line of thought, enhancing our understanding of African history during the era of the slave trade. Their studies have evolved productively from assertions about general cultural heritage into more precise demonstrations of the continuity of worldviews, categories of belonging, and social practices from Africa to America. For these scholars, the preservation of distinctive cultural forms has served as an index both of a resilient social personhood, or identity, and of resistance to slavery itself.<sup>35</sup>

Scholars of slave resistance have never had much use for the concept of social death. The early efforts of writers such as Herbert Aptheker aimed to derail the popular notion that American slavery had been a civilizing institution threatened by “slave crime.”<sup>36</sup> Soon after, studies of slave revolts and conspiracies advocated the idea that resistance demonstrated the basic humanity and intractable will of the enslaved—indeed, they often equated acts of will with humanity itself. As these writers turned toward more detailed analyses of the causes, strategies, and tactics of slave revolts in the context of the social relations of slavery, they had trouble squaring abstract characterizations of “the slave” with what they were learning about the enslaved.<sup>37</sup> Michael Craton, who authored *Testing the Chains: Resistance to Slavery in*

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Global Vision, 1883–1950,” *Journal of American History* 86, no. 3 (December 1999): 1045–1077. This line of research was by no means limited to scholars in the United States. See Kevin A. Yelvington, “The Invention of Africa in Latin America and the Caribbean: Political Discourse and Anthropological Praxis, 1920–1940,” in Yelvington, ed., *Afro-Atlantic Dialogues: Anthropology in the Diaspora* (Santa Fe, N.Mex., 2007), 35–82.

<sup>33</sup> Melville J. Herskovits, “Problem, Method and Theory in Afroamerican Studies,” in Frances S. Herskovits, ed., *The New World Negro: Selected Papers in Afroamerican Studies* (Bloomington, Ind., 1966), 43–61.

<sup>34</sup> Jerry Gershenhorn, *Melville J. Herskovits and the Racial Politics of Knowledge* (Lincoln, Neb., 2004), 93–120.

<sup>35</sup> See especially Thornton, *African and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World*; Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*; Paul E. Lovejoy, ed., *Identity in the Shadow of Slavery* (London, 2000); Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Slavery and African Ethnicities in the Americas: Restoring the Links* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2005); James H. Sweet, *Recreating Africa: Culture, Kinship, and Religion in the African-Portuguese World, 1441–1770* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2003). Among the most useful recent essays on this topic is Joseph C. Miller, “Retention, Reinvention, and Remembering: Restoring Identities through Enslavement in Africa and under Slavery in Brazil,” in José C. Curto and Paul E. Lovejoy, eds., *Enslaving Connections: Changing Cultures of Africa and Brazil during the Era of Slavery* (Amherst, N.Y., 2004), 81–121. For a newer perspective on the making of “Black Atlantic” cultures focusing on “dialogue” between Africans and African Americans rather than retention and re-creation, see J. Lorand Matory, “The ‘New World’ Surrounds an Ocean: Theorizing the Live Dialogue between African and African American Cultures,” in Yelvington, *Afro-Atlantic Dialogues*, 151–192.

<sup>36</sup> Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts* (New York, 1943); Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, *American Negro Slavery: A Survey of the Supply, Employment and Control of Negro Labor as Determined by the Plantation Regime* (1918; repr., Baton Rouge, La., 1969). Even the Haitian Revolution is listed among the events discussed by Phillips as “slave crime” on 454–488.

<sup>37</sup> Eugene D. Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution: Afro-American Slave Revolts in the Making of the Modern World* (Baton Rouge, La., 1979); Michael Craton, *Testing the Chains: Resistance to Slavery in the British West Indies* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1982); David Barry Gaspar, *Bondmen and Rebels: A Study of Master-Slave Relations in Antigua* (Durham, N.C., 1985); Gary Y. Okihiro, ed., *In Resistance: Studies in African, Caribbean, and Afro-American History* (Amherst, Mass., 1986); Norrece T. Jones, Jr., *Born a*

the *British West Indies*, was an early critic of *Slavery and Social Death*, protesting that what was known about chattel bondage in the Americas did not confirm Patterson's definition of slavery. "If slaves were in fact 'generally dishonored,'" Craton asked, "how does he explain the degrees of rank found among all groups of slaves—that is, the scale of 'reputation' and authority accorded, or at least acknowledged, by slave and master alike?" How could they have formed the fragile families documented by social historians if they had been "naturally alienated" by definition? Finally, and perhaps most tellingly, if slaves had been uniformly subjected to "permanent violent domination," they could not have revolted as often as they did or shown the "varied manifestations of their resistance" that so frustrated masters and compromised their power, sometimes "fatally."<sup>38</sup> The dynamics of social control and slave resistance falsified Patterson's description of slavery even as the tenacity of African culture showed that enslaved men, women, and children had arrived in the Americas bearing much more than their "tropical temperament."

The cultural continuity and resistance schools of thought come together powerfully in an important book by Walter C. Rucker, *The River Flows On: Black Resistance, Culture, and Identity Formation in Early America*. In Rucker's analysis of slave revolts, conspiracies, and daily recalcitrance, African concepts, values, and cultural metaphors play the central role. Unlike Smallwood and Hartman, for whom "the rupture was the story" of slavery, Rucker aims to reveal the "perseverance of African culture even among second, third, and fourth generation creoles."<sup>39</sup> He looks again at some familiar events in North America—New York City's 1712 Coromantee revolt and 1741 conspiracy, the 1739 Stono rebellion in South Carolina, as well as the plots, schemes, and insurgencies of Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vesey, and Nat Turner—deftly teasing out the African origins of many of the attitudes and actions of the black rebels. Rucker outlines how the transformation of a "shared cultural heritage" that shaped collective action against slavery corresponded to the "various steps Africans made in the process of becoming 'African American' in culture, orientation, and identity."<sup>40</sup>

Like scholars of resistance before him, Rucker effectively refutes any contention that the enslaved were socially dead. At the same time, his focus on the making of African American culture obscures a crucial dimension of the politics of slavery. In *The River Flows On*, resistance is the expression of culture, and peoplehood is the outcome of resistance, but Rucker places much less emphasis on the kinds of existential problems highlighted by Hartman and Smallwood. He does not ignore the

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*Child of Freedom, yet a Slave: Mechanisms of Control and Strategies of Resistance in Antebellum South Carolina* (Middletown, Conn., 1989). It must be noted that Orlando Patterson himself did some of the best early work on slave revolts in Jamaica, though even here he was interested in distilling a hypothesis that took relatively little account of the experiences and priorities of the enslaved. For example, see his explanation of the Jamaican maroon wars between 1655 and 1740: "Large-scale, monopolistic slave systems with a high rate of absenteeism will, geographical conditions permitting, exhibit a high tendency toward slave revolts." Patterson, "Slavery and Slave Revolts: A Sociohistorical Analysis of the First Maroon War, 1665–1740," *Social and Economic Studies* 19 (1970): 289–325, quotation from 325; italics in the original.

<sup>38</sup> Michael Craton, Review of *Slavery and Social Death*, *Journal of American History* 70, no. 4 (March 1984): 862–863.

<sup>39</sup> Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 42; Walter C. Rucker, *The River Flows On: Black Resistance, Culture, and Identity Formation in Early America* (Baton Rouge, La., 2006), 5.

<sup>40</sup> Rucker, *The River Flows On*, 7.

violence of slavery, but he invokes bondage and its depredations as the antithesis of black self-making, rather than as a constitutive part of it. If for Hartman dispossession “had made *us* an *us*,” Rucker believes that resistance was the crucible in which black people forged identity from a vital inheritance.<sup>41</sup> How might his approach account for the dislocations, physical violations, and cosmic crises that preoccupy Hartman and Smallwood? Here is where scholars of retention and resistance may yet have something to learn from the concept of social death, viewed properly as a compelling metaphysical threat.

African American history has grown from the kinds of people’s histories that emphasize a progressive struggle toward an ultimate victory over the tyranny of the powerful. Consequently, studies that privilege the perspectives of the enslaved depend in some measure on the chronicling of heroic achievement, and historians of slave culture and resistance have recently been accused of romanticizing their subject of study.<sup>42</sup> Because these scholars have done so much to enhance our understanding of slave life beyond what was imaginable a scant few generations ago, the allegation may seem unfair. Nevertheless, some of the criticisms are helpful. As the historian Walter Johnson has argued, studies of slavery conducted within the terms of social history have often taken “agency,” or the self-willed activity of choice-making subjects, to be their starting point.<sup>43</sup> Perhaps it was inevitable, then, that many historians would find themselves charged with depicting slave communities and cultures that were so resistant and so vibrant that the social relations of slavery must not have done much damage at all. Even if this particular accusation is a form of caricature, it contains an important insight, that the agency of the weak and the power of the strong have too often been viewed as simple opposites. The anthropologist David Scott is probably correct to suggest that for most scholars, the power of slaveholders and the damage wrought by slavery have been “pictured principally as a negative or limiting force” that “restricted, blocked, paralyzed, or deformed the transformative agency of the slave.”<sup>44</sup> In this sense, scholars who have emphasized slavery’s corrosive power and those who stress resistance and resilience share the same assumption. However, the violent domination of slavery generated political action; it was not antithetical to it. If one sees power as productive and the fear of social death not as incapacity but as a generative force—a peril that motivated enslaved activity—a different image of slavery slides into view, one in which the object of slave politics is not simply the power of slaveholders, but the very terms and conditions of social existence.

WRITING THE HISTORY OF SLAVERY in a way that emphasizes struggles against social alienation requires some readjustment in commonplace understandings of culture

<sup>41</sup> Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 74. One of Rucker’s likely inspirations here is Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (New York, 1987).

<sup>42</sup> Many of the recent critiques echo those made in a more general way by Lila Abu-Lughod, “The Romance of Resistance: Tracing Transformations of Power through Bedouin Women,” *American Ethnologist* 17, no. 1 (February 1990): 41–55.

<sup>43</sup> Johnson, “On Agency,” 113–124.

<sup>44</sup> David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham, N.C., 2004), 111.

and politics. Historians and social scientists have often debated the question of slave cultures and the cultures of slavery through residual Victorian understandings of culture as the civilizational achievements of “the West,” “Africa,” or various other groups, to be attained, lost, or re-created. The meanings attributed to things are often taken to indicate complete and integrated systems of belief and behavior, even identities, that corresponded to distinct population groups. This approach has been subjected to critical scrutiny in a number of disciplines.<sup>45</sup> While culture may still refer to what William Sewell, Jr. has called “the particular shapes and consistencies of worlds of meaning in different places and times” that somehow fit together despite tension and conflict, the fluidity of this definition would suggest that practices of meaning are better seen as tools to be used than as possessions to be lost.<sup>46</sup> And though culture is still sometimes portrayed as a holistic set of worldviews or attitudes commensurate with circumscribed populations, historical writers should begin from a different point of departure, highlighting instead particular meanings as situational guides to consequential action—motivations, sometimes temporary, that are best evaluated in terms of how they are publicly enacted, shared, and reproduced. The focus would be less on finding an integrated and coherent ethos among slaves and more on the particular acts of communication that allowed enslaved people to articulate idioms of belonging, similarity, and distinction. The virtues of this method are on display in James Sidbury’s *Becoming African in America: Race and Nation in the Early Black Atlantic*, which shows how Anglophone black people expressed their sense of being African “in tension with, and in partial opposition to, memories and experiences of the indigenous cultures of Africa, rather than directly out of them.”<sup>47</sup> The meaning of the category “African” was not merely a reflection of cultural tenacity but the consequence of repeated acts of political imagination.

Slaves needed such acts of imagination to do much more than conserve cultures or create identities. They had to make the threat of social chaos meaningful. On this point, Smallwood is especially helpful. The cultures produced by enslaved Africans in the Americas did not reflect a “simple transfer and continuation” but were based rather on the “elaboration of specific cultural content and its transformation to meet the particular needs of slave life.” Most important was “their need to reassert some kind of healthy relationship to ancestors; to manage death; to produce social networks, communities, and relations of kinship; to address the imbalance of power between black and white; to stake a claim to their bodies to counter the plantation economy’s claim to ownership.”<sup>48</sup> To do these things, slaves undoubtedly drew upon what they had experienced in Africa, along their Atlantic journey, and under the particular conditions of their enslavement in America. But what is more important here is the emphasis on the contextual needs of the enslaved, which compelled them

<sup>45</sup> Sherry Ortner, “Theory in Anthropology since the Sixties,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 26, no. 1 (1984): 126–166; Richard G. Fox, “For a Nearly New Culture History,” in Fox, ed., *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present* (Santa Fe, N.Mex., 1991), 93–113; Michel-Rolph Trouillot, “Adieu, Culture: A New Duty Arises,” in Trouillot, *Global Transformations: Anthropology in the Modern World* (New York, 2003), 97–116.

<sup>46</sup> William H. Sewell, Jr., “The Concept(s) of Culture,” in Sewell, *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation* (Chicago, 2005), 152–174, quotation from 174.

<sup>47</sup> James Sidbury, *Becoming African in America: Race and Nation in the Early Black Atlantic* (Oxford, 2007), 14–15.

<sup>48</sup> Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery*, 190.

to make their cultural practices from the stuff of death and dissolution.<sup>49</sup> As Alexander Byrd has urged, scholars must recognize “how central violence and disaster, and emigrants’ responses to duress and catastrophe, were to the formation and articulation of black migrant society.”<sup>50</sup>

This view of the cultural challenges facing the enslaved certainly has implications for the way we think about slaves’ resistance, or better yet, *politics*. Scholars have commonly treated retention of African cultural forms as an index of black agency, which could in turn be cited to prove the retention of basic humanity in an inhuman system. What if instead, as Walter Johnson has suggested, we treated agency not as a thing to be discovered or assigned by historians hoping to redeem the humanity of slaves, but as an aspect of existence to be assumed even under conditions of “bare life”?<sup>51</sup> It might be even clearer then that the struggles of slaves were not simply beset by the depredations of slavery but were shaped and directed by them. The activities of slaves could be more easily understood as having been compelled by the very conditions that slaves have been described as resisting. This would imply a politics of survival, existential struggle transcending resistance against enslavement.

This is an admittedly capacious conception of the political, encompassing efforts to make the kinds of self-definition that concern Hartman, to maneuver socially by using the cultural practices considered by Rucker, as well as the elemental struggles to maintain bodily and cognitive integrity depicted by Smallwood. Such an expansive definition might be accused of trivializing politics by stretching the meaning of the term too far—if everything is political, then nothing is. Yet surely in slavery, where the nature and terms of social being were at stake, these kinds of struggles composed the immediate political life of the unfree. The danger of broadening the political to include efforts to abate the pervasive threat of social death is countermanded by the greater danger that we will fail to fully understand how conflicts over the most elemental aspects of social life informed even the most elevated artifacts of political history.<sup>52</sup>

For example, few serious scholars now doubt the political significance of the Haitian Revolution. Over the course of nearly fifteen years of deadly turmoil in the French Atlantic culminating in genocidal warfare, a hardened country of former slaves emerged as the first nation in the Americas to conclusively abolish slavery and white supremacy. Although the legacy of the revolution is much debated, its initial

<sup>49</sup> An influential call for such an approach can be found in Hortense J. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1987): 64–81. Following the anthropologist Michael Ralph, one might imagine, for example, how the high mortality rates afflicting black populations have created an experience of “surplus time” among the living, “the sense that, according to perceived life expectancies, [the survivors] should already be dead.” This phenomenon may partly explain behavioral patterns that conform to our expectations of neither continuity nor disruption, but rather arise from people’s estimations of their predicament. Michael Ralph, “‘Flirt[ing]’ with Death’ but ‘Still Alive’: The Sexual Dimension of Surplus Time in Hip Hop Fantasy,” *Cultural Dynamics* 18, no. 1 (2006): 61–88.

<sup>50</sup> Byrd, *Captives and Voyagers*, 10.

<sup>51</sup> Johnson, “On Agency”; Agamben, *Homo Sacer*. This approach is put into practice in Susan Eva O’Donovan, *Becoming Free in the Cotton South* (Cambridge, Mass., 2007), 10–58. See also the essays collected in Baptist and Camp, *New Studies in the History of American Slavery*.

<sup>52</sup> For helpful discussions of informal political activity, see especially Michael Hanchard, *Party/Politics: Horizons in Black Political Thought* (New York, 2006); Robin D. G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York, 1994); James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, Conn., 1985).



success is incontrovertible evidence that the political acts of the enslaved helped to shape the evolution of slavery, the metropolitan antislavery movements in Europe, and the intellectual history of “the West.”<sup>53</sup> If the American Revolution was the pivotal event in the world of imperial reform, the Haitian Revolution has emerged as the catalyst for important transformations in the larger world of Atlantic slavery and anticolonial nationalism.<sup>54</sup> The Haitian Declaration of Independence should therefore be of general interest to all students of history.<sup>55</sup>

The author of that declaration was Louis Boisrond-Tonnerre, a wealthy free man of color from a well-established creole family who had received his education in France. So the momentous announcement would not at first glance seem to represent the priorities of former slaves. Yet Boisrond-Tonnerre was chosen for the task and overseen by Jean-Jacques Dessalines, who had risen from the lower ranks of the enslaved into the command of the new nation-state, and who read the declaration publicly on January 1, 1804. At its heart is a remembrance of the death and suffering caused by the former colonial masters: “Native citizens, men, women, girls, and children, let your gaze extend on all parts of this island: look there for your spouses, your husbands, your brothers, your sisters. Indeed! Look there for your children, your suckling infants, what have they become? . . . I shudder to say it . . . the prey of these vultures.” The declaration then calls for vengeance, but in such a way as to appeal strongly to the particular sensibilities of the former slaves. “What are you waiting for before appeasing their spirits?” Dessalines asked. “Remember that you had wanted your remains to rest next to those of your father after you defeated tyranny; will you descend into their tombs without having avenged them? No! Their bones would reject yours.”<sup>56</sup> Seen in the light of their preoccupation with the threat of social death, this passage looks like something more than a simple call for revenge, and quite different from a proclamation of national autonomy and enlightened self-government. Rather, it would seem to enshrine the political importance of ancestry, mourning, and commemoration in the slaves’ struggle against social alienation. In this way, the Haitian Declaration of Independence hints that the events aboard the *Hudibras* in 1786 may tell us as much about political life among the enslaved as what happened on the *Zong* in 1781 or the *Recovery* in 1791.

<sup>53</sup> Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 2004); Julius S. Scott, “The Common Wind: Current of Afro-American Communication during the Era of the Haitian Revolution” (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 1986); Carolyn E. Fick, *The Making of Haiti: The Saint Domingue Revolution from Below* (Knoxville, Tenn., 1990); David Patrick Geggus, *Haitian Revolutionary Studies* (Bloomington, Ind., 2002). See also Jeremy Adelman, *Sovereignty and Revolution in the Iberian Atlantic* (Princeton, N.J., 2006); Susan Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History* (Pittsburgh, 2008); Sibylle Fischer, *Modernity Disavowed: Haiti and the Cultures of Slavery in the Age of Revolution* (Durham, N.C., 2004); David Barry Gaspar and David Patrick Geggus, eds., *A Turbulent Time: The French Revolution and the Greater Caribbean* (Bloomington, Ind., 1997); Aline Helg, *Liberty and Equality in Caribbean Colombia, 1770–1835* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2004); Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, 1995).

<sup>54</sup> Christopher Leslie Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2006); Cassandra Pybus, *Epic Journeys of Freedom: Runaway Slaves of the American Revolution and Their Global Quest for Liberty* (Boston, 2006); Robin Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery, 1776–1848* (London, 1988); C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Overture and the San Domingo Revolution* (1938; repr., New York, 2001).

<sup>55</sup> The text has recently been translated, reprinted, and made widely available in a remarkable collection of documents edited by Laurent Dubois and John D. Garrigus, *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean, 1789–1804: A Brief History with Documents* (New York, 2006), 188–191.

<sup>56</sup> “The Haitian Declaration of Independence, January 1, 1804,” *ibid.*, 189.

ORLANDO PATTERSON DESCRIBED SOCIAL DEATH in its broadest sense as the absence of meaningful links to the past. “Formally isolated in his social relations with those who lived,” Patterson wrote of the archetypal slave, “he also was culturally isolated from the social heritage of his ancestors.” *Slavery and Social Death* focused on the relative inability of slaves to “reclaim the past” as against the standard set by their owners. There can be no doubt that the power of slaveholders and the disadvantages heaped on the enslaved stacked the odds in favor of masters, and that they did not believe themselves to be bound by any obligation to recognize the social and cultural genealogies of the enslaved. So Patterson was certainly correct to argue that the enslaved “were not allowed *freely* to integrate the experience of their ancestors into their lives, to inform their understanding of social reality with the inherited meanings of their natural forebears, or to anchor the living present in any conscious community of memory.”<sup>57</sup> Yet everything in this assertion hangs on the word “freely,” a fatal qualification for a theory of the social relations of slavery. As the Haitian Declaration of Independence teaches us, social connections and communities of memory had to be created in struggle, and alienation had to be overcome by political action. This is a truism that Patterson did indeed recognize: “Because [a slave’s] kin relations were illegitimate, they were all the more cherished. Because he was considered degraded, he was all the more infused with the yearning for dignity. Because of his formal isolation and liminality, he was acutely sensitive to the realities of community.”<sup>58</sup>

But this was not the emphasis of Patterson’s argument. As a result, those he has inspired have often conflated his exposition of slaveholding ideology with a description of the actual condition of the enslaved. Seen as a state of being, the concept of social death is ultimately out of place in the political history of slavery. If studies of slavery would account for the outlooks and maneuvers of the enslaved as an important part of that history, scholars would do better to keep in view the struggle against alienation rather than alienation itself. To see social death as a productive peril entails a subtle but significant shift in perspective, from seeing slavery as a condition to viewing enslavement as a predicament, in which enslaved Africans and their descendants never ceased to pursue a politics of belonging, mourning, accounting, and regeneration.

In part, the usefulness of social death as a concept depends on what scholars of slavery seek to explain—black pathology or black politics, resistance or attempts to remake social life? For too long, debates about whether there *were* black families took precedence over discussions of how such families were formed; disputes about whether African culture had “survived” in the Americas overwhelmed discussions of how particular practices mediated slaves’ attempts to survive; and scholars felt compelled to prioritize the documentation of resistance over the examination of political strife in its myriad forms. But of course, because slaves’ social and political life grew directly out of the violence and dislocation of Atlantic slavery, these are false choices. And we may not even have to choose between tragic and romantic modes of storytelling, for history tinged with romance may offer the truest acknowledgment of the tragedy confronted by the enslaved: it took heroic effort for them

<sup>57</sup> Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 5–6; emphasis added.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 337.

to make social lives. There is romance, too, in the tragic fact that although scholars may never be able to give a satisfactory account of the human experience in slavery, they nevertheless continue to try. If scholars were to emphasize the efforts of the enslaved more than the condition of slavery, we might at least tell richer stories about how the endeavors of the weakest and most abject have at times reshaped the world. The history of their social and political lives lies between resistance and oblivion, not in the nature of their condition but in their continuous struggles to remake it. Those struggles are slavery's bequest to us.

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**Vincent Brown** is Professor of History and of African and African-American Studies at Harvard University. He is the author of *The Reaper's Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery* (Harvard University Press, 2008), which was co-winner of the 2009 Merle Curti Award and received the 2009 James A. Rawley Prize and the 2008–2009 Louis Gottschalk Prize. He is also Producer and Director of Research for *Herskovits at the Heart of Blackness* (Vital Pictures, 2009), an award-winning television documentary about the pioneering anthropologist Melville J. Herskovits, broadcast as part of the PBS series *Independent Lens* and distributed by California Newsreel.