

CHRYSLIS

[kris-uh-lis]

from Latin chrȳsallis, from Greek khrusallis

1. the obtect pupa of a moth or butterfly
2. anything in the process of developing

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CHRYsalis was created by Dr. Charmaine A. Nelson as a vehicle to showcase the most innovative, rigorous, and sophisticated research produced by students within the context of her Art History courses at McGill University (Montreal). Over the years, Nelson observed that undergraduate students in her courses were more than capable of producing exceptional research on par with that of graduate students, and at times even professional academics. Disappointed that the majority of these students were faced with a negligible audience (if any) for their incredible work, with the help of her MA Art History student Anna T. January, Nelson came up with the idea to provide another platform for their research dissemination. CHRYsalis is that platform!

In this the third issue of CHRYsalis, we say goodbye to the founding Managing Editor, Anna T. January, without whom this publication would simply not exist. Anna has been a wonderful colleague and the success of this publication is due in large part to her intelligence and dedication. Good luck in your future endeavours Anna!

CHRYsalis is an open access, electronic journal that will be published in seven special issues on Nelson's research website: www.blackcanadianstudies.com The goal of CHRYsalis is transformation: to publish scholarship that seeks answers to exciting new questions, to encourage students to undertake primary research and to open the discipline of Art History in ways that make it more welcoming to a diverse population of students. For more information please contact: charmaine.nelson@mcgill.ca

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AN UNLIKELY PAIRING: A STUDY ON SLAVERY & ORAL HYGIENE

Bruno Bertilotti Barreto

One of the problems that slavery inflicted upon Africans, as well as their descendants, was the lack of access to self-representation. Unable to illustrate themselves and their history in images or written texts and faced with prohibitions against cultural practices, the enslaved faced tremendous difficulties in preserving their cultures. Most representations that they consumed were created by the whites who enslaved them, and thus did not represent them in a truthful or respectful manner. Today there is a considerable body of critical literature, which challenges the histories of misrepresentation of enslaved Africans. However, amongst all of the negative stereotypes, there is a reoccurring positive trait associated with slaves, which sparks our curiosity due to the frequency of its citation. In different parts of the Americas, the whiteness and good health of the slaves' teeth seemed to be a commonality which white colonialists deemed worthy of note.

Dental hygiene was a domain the African people successfully mastered, especially in comparison to Europeans and Euro-Americans, who arrogantly viewed themselves as superior to Africans in every way. It is significant that a tradition of self-care such as this one was sustained, despite the prevalence of white interference in every dimension of slave culture. The African maintenance of traditional oral hygiene practices in the "New World" is extraordinary given the extent to which the enslaved were strategically prohibited from pursuing their cultural practices and, as Charmaine A. Nelson has argued, were "socialized into deprivation."¹ The enslaved were routinely discouraged, if not prohibited, from pursuing their traditional practices, and from maintaining a positive representation through physical appearance.² This chapter explores the dental hygiene of enslaved Africans as a form of self-care that demonstrates their ongoing resistance to white dominance and cultural interference.

Dentistry consists of the general health of the inside of the mouth, which involves the teeth and the gums. Although oral hygiene has always been an issue that has impacted humanity, its professionalization is relatively recent, especially for Europeans. Artzney Buchlein was the first European to write a complete body of work dedicated to dentistry in 1530,³ and although some discoveries were made in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, it was not until 1728 that



Figure 5: François Malépart de Beaucourt, Portrait of a Haitian Woman (Also referred as Portrait of a Negro Slave, or The Negress) (1786), Oil on Canvas, 72.7 x 58.5 cm, McCord Museum, Montreal, Canada

Pierre Fauchard published *Le Chirurgien Dentiste* (1746), the first detailed book on dental diseases.⁴ Between 1700 and 1550 BC, an Egyptian text known as *Ebers Papyrus* had already referred to this subject and even included remedies for toothaches.⁵ Although Hippocrates and Aristotle had written about teeth and surgical treatments in 500 to 300 BC, it took Europeans much longer than Africans to discover the art of dentistry. The development of oral health in Europe was one that was long and arduous, easily visible by a gap in scholarship, consisting of almost two hundred years, where little to no progress was made until the eighteenth century.

As a profession, dentistry started a few years after the scholar Fauchard published his body of work. Before this, the only procedures relating to dentistry consisted of breaking and removing teeth with some sort of pincer, causing great pain to a patient. Although doctors could perform the procedure, it was not exclusive to their profession since many other professions such as cooks or barbers also offered such services. The toothbrush itself was not adopted in Europe until the 1600's. Originally developed in China, it was introduced from one continent to the other by travellers.⁶ It is documented, that toothpick-like objects existed which were widely used in order to extract pieces of food and other things from between one's teeth.⁷ However, this barely prevented the formation of plaque on the teeth and gums, which cause teeth to become yellow. Plaque consists of bacteria, which converts certain residual qualities of food into an acidic product, which harms teeth by causing the possibility of cavities as well as other more serious, but less likely, negative outcomes.⁸ Given all this information, it is safe to assume that the oral health of Europeans was poor as they began the process of colonization and enslavement of Africans, which began in the 1500's.

Europeans at the time, had a rudimentary conception of dentistry, limited to the simple removal of objects from the inside of the mouth, rather than the cleansing of bacteria. Of course the European standards of a clean and healthy mouth were extremely far from our standards today, but they were also far behind the standards of Africa and Asia at the time. As time went on, the profession of dentistry started to evolve, and professionals with more expertise in the area of human teeth started to evolve into dentists, as we know them today.⁹ Although the frequency to which people had their teeth checked remains uncertain, we must remember that during the 1700's, access to the profession of dentistry was limited to people of a certain status or wealth. Therefore, the majority of the population would not have improved their oral health and thus continued to carry on with their lives with dangerous and antiquated practices.

It is widely known that enslaved Africans in various parts of the Americas had very white teeth, especially in comparison to their European colonisers.¹⁰ The whiteness of teeth was taken as a sign of good health and therefore could be the price of an enslaved person. Theoretically, the healthier a slave was, the more work their owner could extract before they died of exhaustion or other causes. In figure 1 (1861), we see a slave auction. A white man in the forefront of the image is inspecting the mouth of a slave. Such inspections were common practice at the point of purchase since buyers wanted to ensure the "quality" of the enslaved person for which they were paying. The health of the body, as indicated through a visual inspection of the mouth and the

whiteness of the teeth, was a factor that was used to sell slaves, a way to brag about their positive physical attributes, and was also used as a characteristic to help identify slaves.

In a picture of a businessman trying to rent out slaves [fig. 2], his promotional sign states “niggers for hire, workers sound in tooth,” which announces the enslaved people’s oral hygiene as a focal point; an assessment of their values as a commodity for exchange. In runaway slave advertisements, a common attribute that would be included in the description of an enslaved person was their teeth.¹¹ For example, an advertisement for an enslaved man named Bel Fast, who escaped from his owner Michael Wallace in Halifax, Nova Scotia in the early half of 1794 described him as having “very white teeth.” Two other advertisements, one for the city of Baltimore in 1849, and the other in Mississippi County in 1852, included three different slaves with this same quality. These advertisements come from geographically different areas, and one of them has a significant fifty-year gap between the two others. From this, one can see that the good oral hygiene of Africans was not a mere coincidence, but the result of a practice that was shared across various locations of the Americas by more than a small group of slaves.¹²

Additionally, the dental hygiene of enslaved Africans was so good that the teeth of the enslaved were used to replace the teeth of whites.¹³ By the second half of the 1700’s, while dentistry was still in its nascent stages as a profession, dentists were able to wire fake teeth into an individual’s mouth. The first president of the U.S., George Washington, who is known to have suffered from bad teeth, had the teeth of an enslaved person wired into his mouth, as well as fake teeth made out of other materials.¹⁴ In 1784, he purchased several “Negro” teeth to replace his own. While he could have chosen to have his teeth made out of range of new materials, one of the forefathers of the U.S. preferred to use the teeth of the very enslaved Africans that were considered by many colonialists and pro-slavery advocates to be on the same level as animals.

Figure 6: Theodor Kaufmann, *On to Liberty* (1867), Oil on Canvas, 91.5 x 143.3cm, American Paintings and Sculpture, New York, United-States.



Although price could have been an incentive to do so, a man of his status would not have bought these replacements if they were not up to a certain level of quality.

Visual representations of the whiteness of the teeth of the enslaved do exist, but they are rare and not particularly trustworthy. The rareness is due to the fact that artwork seldom illustrated

slaves with enough detail to allow for an analysis of the teeth. Artists like the English James Hakewill created picturesque landscape representations of the regions where the enslaved worked and resided. However, his works emphasize the environment more than the individuals. In these images, individual slaves are merely present as staffage and too small to render their faces in detail, their teeth even less so. The works that do concentrate on enslaved individuals, mainly genre and portraits, rarely portrayed smiling slaves. Then, there is also the problem of deducing whether the images truly represent with accuracy how white the teeth of slaves actually were. Inaccuracies and misrepresentation could be attributed to romanticization of the slave body but also to technical and artistic limitations.

In figure 3, although we can detect the white and detailed smiles of the recently freed slaves, it is a print. Prints were largely circulated in black and white, leaving little choice to the color which would represent the teeth. Thus, such a print does not necessarily depict reality, since such a rendering was not meant to represent individual slaves and since the default colour for teeth was white. Although paintings such as Francois Malepart de Beaucourt's Portrait of a Negro Slave (1786) (formally known as Portrait of a Haitian Woman) [fig. 5], or John Singleton Copley's Head of a Negro (1778) [fig. 4] would appear to provide a much more realistic representation of teeth, this is not necessarily true. In most cases the patron of such portraits was the enslaved person's owner who had ultimate control over the image. Furthermore, the goal of portraiture in general was the creation of a flattering likeness. To the extent that an unhealthy or unkempt slave reflected poorly on the owner, western painters may have strategically corrected the health of the sitter's teeth. The representation of healthy teeth in historical western portraiture surely coincides with the evolution of dentistry and the advancement of oral hygiene as a priority in Europe.¹⁵ However, historically, across various mediums, teeth were seldom a main focus of artists.

Regardless, there are three artworks that share the secret for Africa's oral hygiene, Theodor Kaufmann's On to Liberty (1867) [fig. 6], Eyre Crowe's After the Sale: Slaves Going South from Richmond (1853) [fig. 7], and François-Auguste Biard's The Slave Trade (1833) [fig. 8]. In these three paintings, there is at least one character who has a type of branch or stick in their hand. Although there is no way to be completely sure, one possibility is that these branches are chewing sticks. In Kaufmann's artwork, it is the women, presumably the individual in charge of their children's health, who carry these sticks, as opposed to Crowe's painting where a child carries the stick, as her mother seems occupied. Biard's painting is the one most obviously related to dentistry since one the slaves, sitting down on the right side of the painting, has the stick in his or her mouth. In the other two paintings, the artists do not provide a narrative to explain the presence of the sticks. However, they must have a purpose. These sticks are quite small, so they would very much coincide with the description of chewing sticks.¹⁶



Figure 8: Francois-Auguste Biard, *The Slave Trade* (1833), Oil on Canvas, 162 x 58.5cm, Wilberforce House Museum: Hull Museums, United Kingdom.

Chewing sticks, also known as miswak or a teeth-cleaning twig, were the equivalent of toothbrushes in Africa. Literally a stick of wood, they were used to clean one's teeth. The way to use them properly is to begin by simply chewing on one of the two extremities of the stick in order to soften it and to proceed to rub it on the teeth. By performing this action, there is a liquid that drips away from the stick into one's mouth, and this liquid serves as an equivalent to toothpaste. In order to be a chewing stick, these branches were harvested from a particular set of trees, which consist of *salvadora persica*, lime tree, orange tree, senna, laburnum, sassafras, gumtree, tea tree, neem, *gouania lupuloides*, and some others.¹⁷ All of these types of trees contain liquids which may vary in their composition, but they all cleanse the bacteria found in the mouth and improve the health of teeth.¹⁸

The use of these sticks developed in various cultures independent from each other and, although their origins might be unknown, certain Islamic communities have also adopted the use of these sticks. Islam promotes its followers to have a sense of cleanness, amongst other things, and this helped the popularization of chewing sticks.¹⁹ Various studies have concluded that the twigs are more effective than toothbrush.²⁰ Chew sticks reduce a greater amount of plaque bacteria, while causing less bleeding from gum irritation. Africans have been using these twigs long before their first interactions with Europeans and thus it is not surprising that they would have better oral health than their colonizers, who did not yet know of the existence of the toothbrush during the early stages of European imperialism. Unlike the European tradition where

one brushes his or her teeth three times a day or once after every meal, the use of a chew stick was much more ubiquitous. Unlike toothpaste, the liquids of the stick do not create the same urgency to be spit out of one's mouth because of their taste and the act of chewing the stick was an activity that people could practice in public. Thus, it is common that people who use these sticks clean their teeth for longer periods of times than those who use the toothbrush. Africans were familiar with the types of sticks that could be used as chewing sticks. Thus, when Africans were transported to the Americas, they carried on these healthy habits and passed the information down to their descendants. Moreover these traditions were adapted to the new locations as there were trees in the "New World" with the same qualities as those in Africa. The enslaved began using plants native to the Americas, like the sassafras. A variety of plants and other vegetation were artificially transplanted from Africa and other regions by European colonizers, and thus diasporized Africans found trees they were familiar with in the "New World".²¹

Although uncommon to many westerners, this form of traditional dentistry is still practiced in areas such as Africa and the Caribbean.²² Some communities prefer these sticks not only due to tradition or custom, but also due to cost. The World Health Organization actually promotes the use of the sticks in poorer countries, in part because they are cheaper than toothbrushes and can be bought for less than half the price, if not procured free of cost in many areas. The chewing stick also eliminates the cost of toothpaste.

In conclusion, although the enslaved were systematically denied the ability to represent themselves, a positive practice of their culture survived four hundred years of oppression and was even lauded by whites across the Americas, despite their claims of cultural superiority. It is no small feat that an enslaved people were able to maintain their oral health through remembered practices of self-care. It is ironic too, that in the case of dentistry, the oral hygiene practices of white oppressors were undoubtedly less developed than the enslaved. Today, after so many years of technological advancement, techniques and knowledge, discovered thousands of years ago, are still very much relevant and active. Chewing sticks are part of African culture, which has spilled over into post-slavery culture, and will continue to have an impact over certain parts of the world.

ENDNOTES:

¹ Charmaine A. Nelson, *Representing the Black Female Subject in Western Art* (New York: Routledge, 2010), pp. 43, 88-102.

² During my research, I was unable to find any concrete evidence that showed any type of awareness of the oral hygiene practice of the enslaved by the white slave owners. Although it is likely that white owners noticed parts of this practice (as is evidenced in their frequent observation of the whiteness of the enslaved population's teeth), it seems unlikely that they were able fully to understand what the slaves were doing. If that were the case, they would have surely studied and written about this practice, and might have adopted it as well.

³ "BDA Museum," British Dental Association, <http://www.bda.org/museum/> (date of last access 9 April), "History of Dentistry," Complete Dental Guide, <http://completedentalguide.co.uk/history-of-dentistry/> (date of last access 9 April)

⁴ The English translation is *The Surgical Dentist*. Although various transcripts have been written in Europe, Africa, and Asia by this time, this is the first academic book written on the subject. "BDA Museum," British Dental Association, <http://www.bda.org/museum/the-story-of-dentistry/timeline.aspx> (date of last access 9 April)

⁵ "History of Dentistry," Complete Dental Guide, <http://completedentalguide.co.uk/history-of-dentistry/> (date of last access 9 April)

⁶ The toothbrush was originally developed as early as 3500 B.C. by Babylonians, and as early as 1600B.C. in China. The Chinese toothbrush was originally inspired by chewing sticks (which I will discuss below), and was conceived with bamboo or bone for the handle and wild boar hair for the brush. Zhong-Rong Zhou, Hai-Yang Yu, Jing Zheng, Lin-Mao Qian & Yu Yan, *Dental Biotribology* (New York: Springer, 2013) pp.18-19.

⁷Originally, toothbrushes had an end, which would be used as a toothpick, made out of the same trees used in order to create chewing sticks. Zhou et al., *Dental Biotribology*, pp.18-19.

⁸ Zhou et al., *Dental Biotribology*.

⁹ The care of teeth would have been a matter for which doctors were primarily responsible. Over time, dentistry became a distinct specialization, creating a new branch of medicine. Richard P. Suddick and Norman O. Harris, "Historical Perspectives of Oral Biology: A Series," *Critical Reviews in Oral Biology and Medicine*, vol. 1, no. 135 (January 1990), pp. 15-51.

¹⁰ However, the details regarding the amount of slaves with white teeth, or the regions of origin would be difficult to estimate. Whether some African ethnicities were more knowledgeable of, or had better oral health than others, is a subject, which is not developed in this paper. It is a topic, which must be analyzed in a context prior to Trans Atlantic Slavery. Since people from different ethnic groups and areas were mixed on slave ships, it would be impossible to associate good oral health to particular ethnicities or areas in Africa in this context.

¹¹ Another attribute, which was common in this type of advertisement were to mention whether or not an enslaved person had all of his or her teeth. Throughout various advertisements, how many teeth the slave was missing and in what part of the mouth, was not mentioned in great detail. "Carolina Watchman Runaway Slave Ads, 1837," *The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill*, http://www.learnnc.org/lp/media/uploads/2008/06/slave_ads_1837.pdf (date of last access 9 April)

An assessment of slave advertisements reveals that it was not surprising for slaves to be missing teeth, particularly due to the ubiquity of corporal punishment. After all, many of the enslaved in such advertisements had detailed descriptions of scars or wounds that they had due to the violence to which they had been subjected. It is safe to assume that for the slave owners, teeth were a part of the body like any other, by which they could inflict pain upon the enslaved if they deemed it necessary.

¹² Since these advertisements are from North America only, further research should be conducted to see whether the enslaved in Latin America and the Caribbean shared this quality as well. It is important to note that these people who ended up in areas such as Halifax, Baltimore, and Mississippi may not have been from those places and may have been born in other sites of diaspora. However, not enough details on the past locations of these enslaved people are present in the advertisements to make such determinations. "Runaway Slave Ads: Baltimore County, Maryland 1849," *Afri Geneas Library*, http://www.afriogeneas.com/library/runaway_ads/balt-1849.html (date of last access 9 April); "Runaway Slave Advertisement," Nova Scotia Canada, <http://www.novascotia.ca/nsarm/virtual/Africanns/archives.asp?ID=51&Language> (date of last access 9 April) & "Runaway Slave Ad, 1852," The Gilder Lehrman: Institute of American History, <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/slavery-and-anti-slavery/resources/runaway-slave-ad-1852> (date of last access 9 April)

¹³ No information was available on whether or not the slaves would have been compensated for their loss of teeth, although it seems unlikely due to their submission by white slave owners.

¹⁴ If artificially constructed, the common materials from which professionals would make teeth would be the following: elephant ivory, walrus, and hippopotamus tusk. Whether it was the dentist or another professional who would create these fake teeth is not something that can be confirmed by my research. Philip D. Morgan, " 'To Get Quit of Negroes': George Washington and Slavery," *UCD Clinton Institute for American Studies*, <http://www.ucd.ie/amerstud/archives/Morgan.htm> (date of last access 9 April)

¹⁵ It is also important to keep in mind that, as opposed to photography, a painting is more subject to the biased vision of the artist. This applies even more for portraits, due to the fact that portraiture was customarily supposed to represent the individual in a positive manner. Even if the artist wished to create an image that was as close to reality as possible, the ultimate control of the image rested with the patron.

¹⁶ These sticks may appear to be too big to be chewing sticks, but it would seem common for one individual to have a relatively large stick, which he or she would break into pieces in order to share it with others. "Brushing Your Teeth with a Twig in Kenya," *Metropolisweb.tv*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TPZ7kOxo9II> (date of last access 9 April)

¹⁷Ra'ed I. Al Sadhan & Khalid Almas, "Miswak (Chewing Stick): A Cultural and Scientific Heritage," *Saudi Dental Journal*, vol.11, no.2 (1999), pp.80-88; Cyril O. Enwonwu & Rosemary C. Anyanwu, "Traditional Medicine: The Chewing Stick in Oral Health Care," *World Health Forum*, vol.6, n.a. (1985), pp.232-34.

¹⁸ Apart from the flavours being different when one is chewing, no research has been done on whether there is a difference between these types of trees in the way they work chemically within one's mouth, or of the results produced.

¹⁹ Islam's promotion of the chewing stick is also due to the fact that it is completely natural, as opposed to the artificially made toothpaste that is common today. Al Sadhan et al., "Miswak (Chewing Stick)," pp.80-88.

²⁰ Mashari Al-Otaibi; Mohammed Al-Harthy; Birgitta Soder; Anders Gustafsson & Birgit Angmar-Mansson, "Comparative Effect of Chewing Sticks and Toothbrushing on Plaque Removal and Gingival Health," Oral Health Prev Dent, vol.1, no.4 (2003), pp.301-307. & Cyril O. Enwonwu & Rosemary C. Anyanwu, "Traditional Medicine: The Chewing Stick in Oral Health Care," World Health Forum, vol.6, n.a. (1985), pp.232-34.

²¹ Jill H. Casid, "Chapter 1: The Hybrid Production of Empire," Sowing Empire: Landscape and Colonization (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005) pp.1-45.

It is likely that the enslaved would have had a transitional period where they had to experiment with various trees in the Americas.

²² I have personally found and purchased a packet of chewing sticks at the Jean-Talon Market (Montreal, Canada). It is an accessible object to buy and can also be found online. Montreal's large African and Caribbean communities comprise a substantial market for chewing sticks. Of course, one is not required to buy "commercial chewing sticks" per say. As long as one can find the right type of wood, one can simply make chewing sticks.

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PLATE LIST

Pictured

Figure 5: François Malépart de Beaucourt, Portrait of a Haitian Woman (Also referred as Portrait of a Negro Slave, or The Negress) (1786), Oil on Canvas, 72.7 x 58.5 cm, McCord Museum, Montreal, Canada

Figure 6: Theodor Kaufmann, On to Liberty (1867), Oil on Canvas, 91.5 x 143.3cm, American Paintings and Sculpture, New York, United-States.

Figure 8: Francois-Auguste Biard, The Slave Trade (1833), Oil on Canvas, 162 x 58.5cm, Wilberforce House Museum: Hull Museums, United Kingdom.

Not Pictured

Figure 1: n.a., untitled #1 (1861), n.a., n.a., Mary Evans Picture Library, London, United Kingdom.

Figure 2: n.a., untitled #2 (Unknown), n.a., n.a., Mary Evans Picture Library, London, United Kingdom.

Figure 3: n.a., untitled #3 (1838), n.a., n.a., Mary Evans Picture Library, London, United Kingdom.

Figure 4: John Singleton Copley, Head of a Negro (1778), Oil on canvas, 53.3 x 41.3cm, Detroit Institute of Art, Detroit, United-States

Figure 7: Eyre Crowe, After the Sale: Slaves Going South from Richmond (1853), Oil on Canvas, 68.6 x 91.5cm, Chicago History Museum, Chicago, United-States.

REMINISCENCES OF SLAVES DANCES OF CONGO SQUARE, NEW ORLEANS.

Daisy De Montjoye

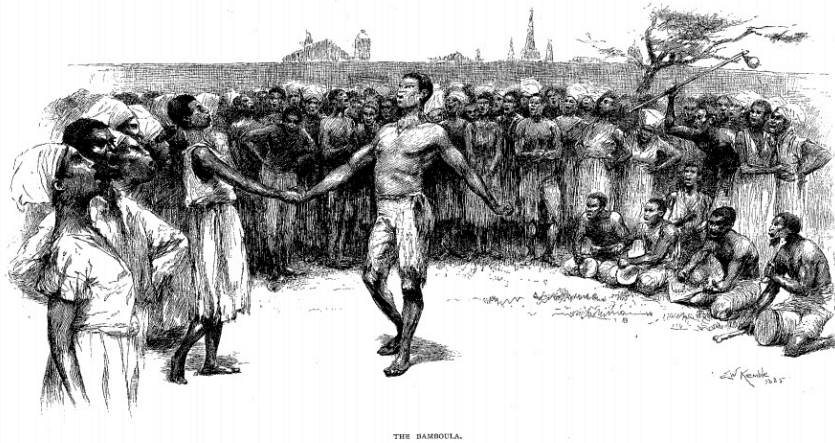


Figure 1: Edward Windsor Kemble, *The Bamboula* (1885), Pen and Ink, published in “Dance at Place Congo” in the *Century Magazine*, vol. 31, (1886).

New Orleans’ colonial history has created a fascinating cultural mix still visible today. Colonized by the French in 1718,¹ they were the first to introduce slavery during their earlier conquest of Louisiana. During French rule, the majority of Louisiana’s imported slaves came from Senegambia and the Bight of Benin.² In 1763 France ceded the colony to the Spanish after their defeat in the Seven Years War, and in 1803 Louisiana was purchased by the United States.³ Under French and Spanish Catholic rule, the enslaved were given Sundays as a “day of rest”. Though this was not uncommon in the American South, what made French Louisiana different was that slaves were given the right to use their free time as they saw fit, “with little or no supervision.”⁴

As far back as the 1740’s, the African-descended population of New Orleans was using a clearing on Rampart Street for Sunday gatherings, where they would dance, sing and remember their African heritage.⁵ As the Sunday festivities continued even after the Louisiana Purchase,⁶ complaints about noise and other related problems resulted in an ordinance, passed sometime around 1817, that restricted dancing to Sunday afternoons and only in Congo Square, a parade ground outside the original city walls.⁷ The enslaved would gather in large number, (from five to six hundred - according to Benjamin Latrobe, a witness to these gatherings),⁸ for “social, cultural, economic and religious interaction.”⁹ It was a place where they could hear the music and language of Africa, and even practice tribal differentiation.¹⁰

A very limited number of accounts exist of this specific festival on Congo Square, and hardly any images were produced. George Washington Cable published an article for the

Century Magazine in 1886, where he described in detail the events at Congo Square. Edward Windsor Kemble illustrated the article based on Cable's description [fig. 1]. While this illustrated account attempted to portray the extraordinary cultural gatherings which used to occur in New Orleans from French colonization to a few years before the outbreak of the Civil War, there is something essentially problematic in the way that this document was produced. Within the post-Reconstruction context of the United States, this paper will argue that Kemble and Cable re-appropriated this unique slave festivity as memorabilia of the antebellum era for the educated classes of a nation struggling for political unity, thus portraying African-Americans as an "exotic" Other, unable to fully identify themselves within a nation that had just granted them freedom. Before analyzing the visual and literary culture of the slave dances of Congo Square, the historical and political context of the North-South divide of the Civil War until the "post-Reconstruction" era needs to be discussed.

A "fundamentalist" view on the causes of the American Civil War emphasizes the centrality of slavery in creating two radically different societies – North and South – with opposing interests that made the division of politics and Civil War inevitable.¹¹ When Republican leader Abraham Lincoln came to power in 1861 he made clear his opposition to the expansion of slavery, which caused a crisis in America's southern states.¹² The South relied almost entirely on the stolen labour of the enslaved due to its plantation economy, while the North was powered by industrialization. Following Lincoln's election, eleven slave states seceded from the Union in order to form the Confederacy, thus, as Eric Foner has noted, "precipitating in 1861 the bloodiest war the Western Hemisphere has even seen."¹³ The Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 and the defeat of the Confederate States by the Union brought freedom to four million slaves, and for a brief moment the country experimented with genuine interracial democracy.¹⁴

During this period known as Reconstruction, various social legislation in Louisiana and the South was introduced that granted political and civil rights to newly freed African-Americans.¹⁵ However, post-Civil War era did not prove to be a success, in particular since these rights disappeared as if they had never existed.¹⁶ The devastating effects of the war on the South, the difficulties encountered by freed slaves in their "quest for land"¹⁷ and finding jobs,¹⁸ and the "white southern reluctance to accept the reality of Emancipation" caused economic crisis throughout the 1870's.¹⁹ In addition, while Northerners were largely opposed to slavery, they were not accustomed to the idea of freed blacks moving out of the South. Since the crisis did not improve, white Americans started looking for a scapegoat – the "Negro."²⁰ This caused a rise in racism and violence both in the North and the South though which black communities were utterly abandoned by their nation, thus ending the Reconstruction Era.²¹ Post-Reconstruction is understood as an overall process of reconciliation between North and South that gathered force in the 1880's and 1890's,²² but during which campaigns of extreme violence by the state and citizens were launched in an attempt to restore racial subordination in every aspect of Southern life.²³ It is within this period that "Dances at Congo Square" was written by George W. Cable and published in The Century Magazine.

The Century Magazine was first published in 1881 as a continuation of Scribner's Monthly, "the second of the greater illustrated periodicals in point of time."²⁴ Editor Richard Watson Gilder was a man of "greater literary ability and finer taste," to whom the high rank of the Century is largely due.²⁵ The Century was considered a "national" magazine, focussing increasingly on American writers (from both the North and the South), domestic history, and advocating a unified nation. An article published in the "Topics of the Time" section of the Century in May 1885 exemplifies this developing stance: "As between East and West it knows no difference; as between North and South it knows no difference."²⁶ After the disastrous failures of the Reconstruction Era, popular literature and magazines such as the Century attempted to appease tensions between both regions of the United States. This same article clearly puts on the table the "pressing question [of] the reorganization of society in the Southern States of our Union,"²⁷ advocating the indispensability of "[m]utual respect, sympathy, [and] knowledge"²⁸ in order to try and find a unified solution. The magazine was accommodating to the "divergences in local opinions, customs, and legislations,"²⁹ publishing contradictory views. For instance, Henry W. Grady wrote his article "In Plain Black and White" as a reply to George W. Cable's "The Freedman's Case in Equity" an essay that urged that full civil rights be extended to the free African-Americans.³⁰

George W. Cable was originally from New Orleans, where he was born in 1844. He joined the Confederate army when he was only nineteen years old, where he served despite the ultimate result of the Civil War.³¹ An attack of malarial fever after the war, from which he did not fully recover for two years, gave him time to "read widely and thoughtfully,"³² and revive his old interest in writing. This period of enlightenment was crucial in his career as it gradually changed his opinions and behaviour when it came to issues of the "Negro."³³ While his Creole fictions had been accepted as picturesque of a unique, exotic people and "romantic glimpses of a decadent past," his essays advocating the rights of African-Americans evidently produced vehement criticism from his Southern readers.³⁴ Such an uncongenial atmosphere as well as the impracticality of living in the South while being published in the North pushed him to leave New Orleans

Figure 2: Agostino Brunias, *The Handkerchief Dance* (ca. 1770-80), Oil on Canvas, 31.7 x 25.4 cm, Carmen Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid, Spain.



and move to Northampton, Massachusetts with his family in 1885.

“The Dance of Place Congo” was published in 1886 in the *Century* along with a second article on “Creole Slave Songs,” for which he engaged illustrator E.W. Kemble to produce more or less twenty illustrations.³⁵ It is uncertain whether or not Cable saw the events of Congo Square himself as an adolescent just before the Civil War, though since he was living in New Orleans at that time it is highly likely.³⁶ However, his article draws largely on previous accounts of Sunday gatherings written by earlier witnesses such as Moreau de Saint-Méry and Benjamin Latrobe, among others.³⁷ His description of the event is highly detailed and he even differentiates the various regions from which the enslaved originated: “Senegalese from Cape Verde” and “Mandingoes from the Gambia River.”³⁸ Cable describes the physical traits of the African slaves, but also the music, instruments and dances. The “Congo” for instance was “a kind of Fandango, [...] in which the Madras kerchief held by its tip-ends played a graceful part.”³⁹ He mentions the “sudden frenzy” which seizes the musicians, and the ecstasy rising to madness.⁴⁰

While Cable is referring to a real historical event, this particular text can be seen in the same romantic light as his Creole fictions, with a focus on the “exotic” aspects of this moment in New Orleans’ history. Cable wrote, “[s]till a glamour hangs over its dark past. There is the pathos of slavery, the poetry of the weak oppressed by the strong.”⁴¹ Events such as those of Congo Square were one aspect “of the larger resistance-focused ethos found in the expressive culture of people of African-descent living in slave societies.”⁴² This was the only place where the enslaved could freely represent themselves, since the majority could neither read, nor write.⁴³ Within a few years however, even these last remnants of “freedom” were institutionalized, with an increasing rise in tourists coming to watch the slave dances.⁴⁴

Despite his attempts at putting forward racial equality, within the context of appeasing tensions between North and South, this article can be interpreted as Cable essentially re-appropriating a cultural practice of resistance from his hometown through a white male lens, and publishing it in a manner that expresses a nostalgia about the antebellum era before the United States was ripped apart by Civil War. After the intense critical opposition he received two years earlier, this article appeals to both the North and the South in its romantic traits and its portrayal of a specific moment in the history of slavery where the enslaved were offered a relative amount of freedom – though still within a controlled space.

The images produced by E. W. Kemble for this article only reinforce this idea of cultural re-appropriation. While it is uncertain if Cable witnessed the festivities of Congo Square in his youth, Kemble undoubtedly did not. Illustrator and cartoonist Edward Windsor Kemble was a self-taught artist whose work reveals an acute observation of character.⁴⁵ He is best remembered for his cartoons of African-Americans, which were characterized as sympathetic though also exploiting stereotypical conventions.⁴⁶ Kemble paid attention to “the real urban and rural environs and living conditions of blacks [and] [h]is caricatures were never absurdly exaggerated.”⁴⁷ His drawing of Congo Square, along with the other drawings which accompany the article rely entirely on Cable’s account as well as other witnesses. By representing what

Cable has written for the high-ranking magazine in which the article was published, Kemble has contributed to the creation of a memento of a romanticized, decadent past.

This tradition of white artists making memorabilia and mementos of the cultural practices of enslaved Africans was not limited to post-War America. In fact it was rather widespread in various colonial empires. For instance, Agostino Brunias was an eighteenth-century Italian painter who produced a large amount of ethnographic and genre paintings of the free and enslaved African populations of the Ceded Islands including Dominica, St. Vincent, and Tobago.⁴⁸ The artist spent nearly three decades in the West Indies, “painting scores of scenes depicting the social life of slaves, free people of color and Carib Indians.”⁴⁹ Within his collection are paintings of slave dances, not unlike Kemble’s illustrations and those described in Cable’s text.

Brunias’s paintings are dominated by a “meticulous attention to the details of dress,”⁵⁰ as well as complexion, accessories and activities such as dancing. *The Dance of the Handkerchief* (ca. 1770-1780) [fig. 2] is in accordance with Cable’s description of the “Congo” dance (also known under different names depending on the colonies, such as “Chica” in San Domingo).⁵¹ A *Negroes Dance in the Island of Dominica* (ca. 1779) [fig. 3] depicts a similar event of music and dance within a slave community, where the women are shown with different complexions.

Throughout the eighteenth century in the colonies, deep-rooted hierarchy of complexion meant that “mulatto” slaves were generally regarded as superior to free blacks.⁵² According to Moreau de Saint-Méry, “the label ‘mulatto’ meant that 49-70 parts of one’s blood were white” – which was “better” than being a “sacatra” or a “marabou,” but not as “good” as being a “quarteron” or a “metis.”⁵³ However, overall, whites would still consider anyone of mixed blood as inferior, different, and therefore “exotic.” For instance, according to Helen Weston “the whites of Saint-Domingue insisted on the notion of slavery as an inherited stain that would forever mark anyone of mixed blood.”⁵⁴ Mulattos were singled out within the ranks of the enslaved, but not among the free.⁵⁵

According to Beth Fowkes Tobin, Brunias’s paintings and drawings had the purpose of recording “types” of people, producing “taxonomic images of specimens, not representations of individuals.”⁵⁶ His pictures have been, until very recently, mainly categorized within ethnographic art depicting “exotic” peoples, and genre paintings of the lower classes – both objects of fascination for the elite white upper classes. Such works rarely depict the enslaved labouring (or at least at their most arduous physical labour in the plantation fields), but rather showed them conversing, dancing, or washing laundry in the rivers, contributing to them being marked as “curiosities” by white audiences.⁵⁷ Brunias was invited to the colonies by Sir William Young, “Commissioner and Receiver for sale of lands in the islands of Dominica, St. Vincent, and Tobago,” and Kay Dian Kriz suggests that he was commissioned by planters and colonial officials who had left the region to produce these images which served as mementos and reminders of the Caribbean.⁵⁸

However, in addition to producing paintings for colonial officials, Brunias’s works were made into prints and circulated widely in Britain and France.⁵⁹ Similarly, the memento produced



Figure 3: Agostino Brunias, *A Negroes Dance in the Island of Dominica* (ca. 1779), Engraving, 26 x 33.2cm, Christie's, London, United Kingdom. Copyright: © Christie's Images Limited (2013)

by Kemble and Cable for the Century was for public dissemination – though still reserved for the higher classes. An ethnographic and genre category can be applied to Kemble due to his attention to detail, accurately depicting the elements described in Cable's text such as the racist comparison made between slaves and monkeys.⁶⁰ The figures in Kemble's drawings

have distinct simian features, especially those on the right-hand

side, crouching and yelling out. The man standing in the centre bears a faint hint of the "long tattoo from the temples to the neck,"⁶¹ almost like knife-gashes, identifying him as "of the Bambaras,"⁶² a Malian tribe. Kemble represented details gathered from second hand information, in order to produce an image of an "exotic" event in American history.

Towards the end of the peak of Congo Square dances, the events had already become a tourist attraction. A writer for the *Picayune's Guide to New Orleans* wrote: "the scene, so picturesque and animated, was very interesting, and hundred of the best class of whites used to promenade in the vicinity of the square to see the Negroes dance 'Congo.'"⁶³ He is producing a reminder of this "exotic," African cultural heritage that used to be present in New Orleans through a Western perspective, reiterating the entertainment aspects experienced by white visitors to the city for the educated classes reading and viewing this article – both of the North and of the South – during the post-Reconstruction Era. It is important to note as well that since then, similar events were transpiring in New Orleans, Louisiana and other states for decades, if not centuries. The idea of their strangeness or exoticism facilitated the neutralization of whiteness as normal, unraced, and citizen, while the African subject was expelled as non-American. Finally, not only was he producing a Eurocentric depiction of a cultural event of African heritage which he never even witnessed, but this image is the only one available to the African-Americans descendants of the enslaved seeking to get in touch with their ancestors and African cultural inheritance, something which in itself is extremely problematic in terms of self-identification within the new order of society produced by emancipation.

The post-War and post-Reconstruction Eras in America produced huge tensions and violence between the North and the South, as well as between Euro-Americans and newly freed African-Americans. While George W. Cable had left the South due to the hostile reception of his social critiques advocating for the rights of blacks in America, this historical account of the dances of Congo Square in his hometown of New Orleans produced an “exotic,” romanticized memento of antebellum America, just like Brunias did for his British planter-commissioners in the West Indies. The specific moment he chose to write and represent (through his text and the illustrations of E.W. Kemble) is one of performative expressive freedom – one of the few public expressions of African identity and heritage allowed in Louisiana during its slave history, due to the remnants of French and Spanish colonial culture. By emphasizing the details of the slave’s African origins, their customs, dances and music, not only were Cable and Kemble creating a ethnographic account of these slave gatherings, but especially within their temporal context they are endorsing the idea of blacks in the United States as being always from Africa rather than creolized in America. They took it upon themselves to represent the cultures and histories of a people as outsiders, imposing these “exotic” ideals onto them, in a way that makes it impossible for “a man to be both Negro and an American.”⁶⁴ The very small black upper class formed after emancipation,⁶⁵ if even able to access this article from the Century, would have felt this “double-consciousness” described by W.E.B. Du Bois which prevented them from identifying fully as African *Americans* despite having been granted civil rights only a few decades before. The re-appropriation of their own cultural heritage through a Eurocentric lens took away any agency they had in their own African history, while simultaneously portraying them as different, as “exotic,” and as non-American.

ENDNOTES:

¹ Shannon L. Dawdy, “Introduction,” Building the Devil’s Empire: French Colonial New Orleans (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 2.

² Shannon L. Dawdy, “La Ville Sauvage: Nature and Urban Planning,” Building the Devil’s Empire: French Colonial New Orleans (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 80.

³ Ripley Hitchcock, “Introduction,” Louisiana Purchase and Exploration, Early History and Building the West (Boston: Ginn & Company, 1903), p. v.

⁴ Jerah Johnson, “New Orleans’s Congo Square: An Urban Setting for early Afro-American Culture Formation,” Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association, vol. 32 no. 2 (Spring 1991), p. 124.

⁵ Daniel E. Walker, “El Día de Reyes and Congo Square: Links to Africa and the Americas,” No More, No More: Slavery and Cultural Resistance in Havana and New Orleans (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), p. 2; Gary A. Donaldson, “A Window into Slave Culture: Dances at Congo Square in New Orleans, 1800-1862,” The Journal of Negro History, Vol. 69, no.2 (Spring 1984), p. 63.

⁶ Louisiana was purchased from France by the USA in 1803, Peter J. Kastor, “Empires, Republics, and Nations,” The Nation’s Crucible: The Louisiana Purchase and the Creation of America (New Haven & London: Yale University Press), p. 19.

⁷ Donaldson, “A Window into Slave Culture,” p. 64.

⁸ Benjamin Henry Latrobe, Impressions Respecting New Orleans, Diary and Sketches, 1818-1820, ed. Samuel Wilson Jr. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1951), pp. 49-51; also cited in Walker, “El Día de Reyes and Congo Square,” p. 3.

⁹ Donaldson, “A Window Into Slave Culture,” p. 63.

¹⁰ Donaldson, “A Window Into Slave Culture,” p. 70.

¹¹ Edward B Rugemer, “Introduction,” The Problem of Emancipation: The Caribbean Roots of the American Civil War (Baton Rouge Louisiana State University Press, 2008), p. 8.

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- ¹² Seceding States include (in order of secession): South Carolina, Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Texas, Virginia, Arkansas, North Carolina, and Tennessee. Eric Foner, "The World the War Made," A Short History of Reconstruction: 1863-1877 (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), p. 2.
- ¹³ Foner, "The World the War Made," p. 2.
- ¹⁴ Eric Foner, "Prologue," A Short History of Reconstruction: 1863-1877 (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), pp. xix-xx.
- ¹⁵ Joe Gray Taylor, "Louisiana: An Impossible Task," Reconstruction and Redemption in the South, ed. Otto H. Olsen, (Baton Rouge Louisiana State University Press, 1980), p. 205.
- ¹⁶ Joe Gray Taylor, "Louisiana," p. 205.
- ¹⁷ Eric Foner, "The Meaning of Freedom," A Short History of Reconstruction: 1863-1877 (New York: Harper & Row, 1988) p. 46.
- ¹⁸ Eric Foner, "Ambiguities of Free Labor," A Short History of Reconstruction: 1863-1877 (New York: Harper & Row, 1988) p. 63.
- ¹⁹ Eric Foner and Joshua Brown, "An American Crisis," "The Abandonment of Reconstruction," Forever Free: The Story of Emancipation and Reconstruction (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), pp. 107, 192.
- ²⁰ Foner and Brown, "The Abandonment of Reconstruction," p. 192.
- ²¹ Eric Foner, "The Making of Radical Reconstruction," A Short History of Reconstruction: 1863-1877 (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), p. 123.
- ²² Eric Foner and Joshua Brown, "Introduction," Forever Free: The Story of Emancipation and Reconstruction (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), pp. xx-xxi.
- ²³ Eric Foner, "The Challenge of Enforcement," A Short History of Reconstruction: 1863-1877 (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), p. 184.
- ²⁴ A.W. Ward, W.P. Trent et al., "XIX Later Magazines: Scribner's Monthly; The Century Magazine," The Cambridge History of English and American Literature in 18 Volumes, Vol. XVII, Part II, (1907-21), p. 22.
- ²⁵ A.W. Ward et al., "XIX Later Magazines," p. 23.
- ²⁶ "The Century' a National Magazine," Century Illustrated Magazine, Vol. 42, no. 6 (Oct 1891), p. 950.
- ²⁷ "A New Volume of The Century," The Century Magazine (May 1885), p. 164.
- ²⁸ "A New Volume of The Century," p. 164.
- ²⁹ "A New Volume of The Century," p. 164.
- ³⁰ Philip Butcher, George W. Cable: The Northampton Years (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), p.16.
- ³¹ Butcher, George W. Cable, p. 6.
- ³² Butcher, George W. Cable, p. 7.
- ³³ Butcher, George W. Cable, p. 14.
- ³⁴ Butcher, George W. Cable, p. 16.
- ³⁵ Eileen Southern and Josephine Wright, "Everyday Slave Life in the United States," Images: Iconography of Music in African-American Culture, 1770-1920s, (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2000), p. 34.
- ³⁶ Southern and Wright, suggest that Cable was among the writers who wrote about Congo Square despite not having witnessed the dances first hand. Southern and Wright, "Everyday Slave Life," p.34; Meanwhile, G. A. Donaldson wrote that, "Cable probably drew on his own knowledge of the place as he observed it as an adolescent in they years just before the Civil War". Donaldson, "A Window Into Slave Culture," p. 68.
- ³⁷ Southern and Wright, "Everyday Slave Life," p.34.
- ³⁸ George W. Cable, "The Dance in Place Congo," Century Magazine, 31 (1886), p.522.
- ³⁹ Cable, "The Dance in Place Congo," p. 527.
- ⁴⁰ Cable, "The Dance in Place Congo," p. 523.
- ⁴¹ Cable, "The Dance in Place Congo," p. 528.
- ⁴² Walker, No More, No More, p. 1.
- ⁴³ Charmaine A. Nelson, "Race and Geography: The Four Continents," (Lecture, The Visual Culture of Slavery, presented at McGill University, Montreal, QC, 16 January 2014).
- ⁴⁴ Donaldson, "A Window Into Slave Culture," p. 64.
- ⁴⁵ Walt Reed, The Illustrator in America, 1860-2000 (New York: The Society of Illustrators, 2001), p. 77.
- ⁴⁶ Maurice Horn and Richard Marschall, "E. W. Kemble," The World Encyclopedia of Cartoons Vol. 1 (Detroit: Gale Research Co., 1980) p. 333.
- ⁴⁷ Horn and Marschall, "E. W. Kemble," p. 333.

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- ⁴⁸ Kay Dian Kriz, "Marketing *Mulâtresses* in Agostino Brunias's West Indian Scenes," *Slavery, Sugar, and the Culture of Refinement: Picturing the British West Indies, 1700-1840* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008).
- ⁴⁹ Kriz, "Marketing *Mulâtresses*," p. 37.
- ⁵⁰ Beth Fowkes Tobin, "Taxonomy and Agency in Brunias's West Indian Paintings," *Picturing Imperial Power: Colonial Subjects in Eighteenth-century British Painting*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), p. 144.
- ⁵¹ Cable, "The Dance of Place Congo," p. 527.
- ⁵² M.-L.-E. Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Description topographique, physique, civile, politique et historique de la partie française de l'Isle de Saint-Domingue*, 2 vols. (Paris: Société Française d'Histoire d'Outre-mer, [1797] 1984). Cited in Helen Weston, "The Oath of the Ancestor by Lethière 'le mulâtre': celebrating the black/mulatto alliance in Haiti's Struggle for Independence," eds. Geoff Quilley and Kay Dian Kriz, *An Economy of Colour: Visual Culture and the Atlantic World, 1660-1830* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 182.
- ⁵³ Weston, "The Oath of the Ancestor," p. 182.
- ⁵⁴ Weston, "The Oath of the Ancestor," p. 182.
- ⁵⁵ Shannon L. Dawdy, "La Renommée: From Colonial Experiment to Creole Society," *Building the Devil's Empire: French Colonial New Orleans* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 176.
- ⁵⁶ Tobin, "Taxonomy and Agency," p. 140.
- ⁵⁷ Kriz, "Marketing *Mulâtresses*," p. 38. Furthermore, the absencing of field labour gave the false impression to white viewers (many who had never or would never visit the Caribbean) that the labour of the enslaved was not dangerous and physically taxing.
- ⁵⁸ Kriz, "Marketing *Mulâtresses*," p. 37; Tobin, "Taxonomy and Agency," pp. 140, 145.
- ⁵⁹ Kriz, "Marketing *Mulâtresses*," p. 37.
- ⁶⁰ "Often his neck and arms, thighs, shanks, and splay feet were shrunken, tough, sinewy like a monkey's". Cable, "The Dance of Place Congo," p. 519.
- ⁶¹ Cable, "The Dance of Place Congo," p. 523.
- ⁶² Cable, "The Dance of Place Congo," p. 523.
- ⁶³ *Picayune's Guide to New Orleans*, (New Orleans: Picayune Job Print, 1900), p. 63.
- ⁶⁴ William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, "Strivings of the Negro People," *Atlantic Monthly* vol. 80 (August 1987), pp. 194-95.
- ⁶⁵ Foner, "Reconstruction: Political and Economic" p. 172.

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Figure 1: Edward Windsor Kemble, The Bamboula (1885), Pen and Ink, published in “Dance at Place Congo” in the Century Magazine, vol. 31, (1886).

Figure 2: Agostino Brunias, The Handkerchief Dance (ca. 1770-80), Oil on Canvas, 31.7 x 25.4 cm, Carmen Thyssen–Bornemisza Collection, Museo Thyssen–Bornemisza, Madrid, Spain.

Figure 3: Agostino Brunias, A Negroes Dance in the Island of Dominica (ca. 1779), Engraving, 26 x 33.2cm, Christie’s, London, United Kingdom. Copyright: © Christie's Images Limited (2013)

TRINIDAD CARNIVAL AND SLAVERY: HAS THE TRUE MEANING OF THE MASQUERADE BEEN LOST? AN ART HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Sade Francois

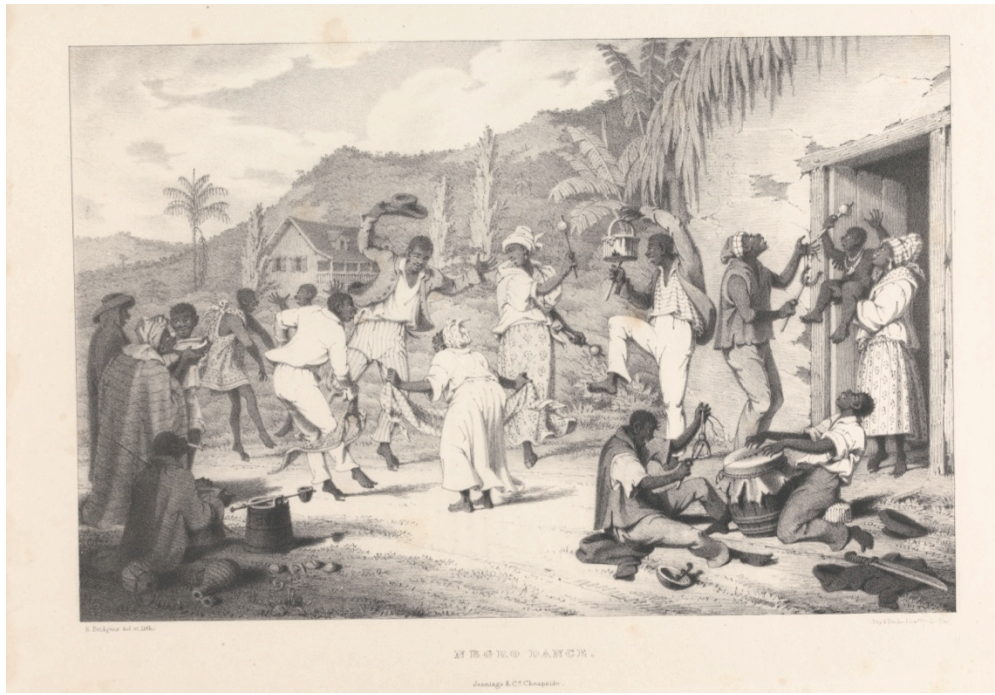


Figure 1: Richard Bridgens, "Negro Dance," from his West India Scenery with Illustrations of Negro Character, London, R. Jennings [1836?], lithograph, Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.

Carnival in Trinidad is one of the most extravagant festivals in the world and has been called "The Greatest Show on Earth."¹ Its bright colours, lively music and endless dancing make Trinidad Carnival an event anticipated each year by people residing both in and outside of Trinidad. Over the years, it has developed the reputation of being one of the most well-known and frequented Carnival celebrations throughout the Americas. In fact, the Carnivals taking place in many of other countries take their inspiration, form, and structure directly from Trinidadian Carnival.² There are many aspects of Trinidadian history that contributed to the Carnival displayed today, with many of these elements having their roots in Trans Atlantic Slavery. For this reason, Carnival is supposed to be a reminder of the brutal history that existed for hundreds of years in Trinidad, as well as in many other European colonies. However, during the past several years, aspects of Carnival such as the music and costumes have largely changed forms. I would argue that the loss of Carnival's connection to slavery is very problematic since it has allowed people to make their own inaccurate perceptions on the relevance and purpose of Carnival. It has also led to a disavowal of the racial issues that existed during Carnival's development and that still exist today.

Christopher Columbus encountered Trinidad during his third voyage to the “New World” on 31 July 1498.³ Columbus re-named the island “La Trinidad” after the Holy Trinity because of the three mountain peaks he saw upon entering the coast.⁴ Although indigenous Carib and Arawak people already inhabited Trinidad, Columbus claimed it for the King of Spain. The Spanish used the indigenous people for labour, overworking them to the point that by 1826, only six hundred fifty-five indigenous people remained in Trinidad.⁵ The drastic decline in the workforce and a desire to properly settle the island of Trinidad led the Spanish to devise the “Cedula of Population” in 1783, which invited men from neighbouring French colonies such as Martinique, Guadeloupe, Dominica, and present day Haiti to migrate to Trinidad with their slaves.⁶ Since this occurred during the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) and Napoleonic Wars (1799-1815), many French planters took advantage of this opportunity to move to the free, fertile lands that were being offered to them in Trinidad.⁷ After the success of the Cedula of Population, importing slaves from neighbouring colonies and directly from Africa became a lucrative business for British merchants.⁸ However, Trinidad was one of the last West Indian colonies to develop an African slave plantation economy.⁹ As a result of this French migration, many French customs and traditions were brought to Trinidad even though the island was never actually under French control. In 1797, Trinidad was surrendered to the British Empire and it became a British Crown colony in 1802.¹⁰

Today, Trinidad Carnival is officially held on the Monday and Tuesday preceding Ash Wednesday. It consists of masqueraders parading and dancing down the streets next to trucks loaded with speakers playing the latest Carnival music. Originally, Calypso – a type of music originating from West Africa that was a reaction to political and social injustices – was the predominant Carnival music.¹¹ Although Calypso can still be heard around Carnival time, the heavy-bass Soca music has taken over in recent years. Pre-Carnival festivities, however, begin as early as Boxing Day, at which point the new songs and costumes are unveiled to the public in preparation for Carnival Monday and Tuesday celebrations. J’ouvert (jour ouvert, French for Opening Day) commences before dawn and in the darkness on Monday morning. This is the opening parade of the festival and is characterized by participants coating their bodies with paint, mud, and oil, which were traditionally used in order for participants to disguise themselves.¹²

Carnival originated from a combination of historical events occurring in Trinidad from the start of slavery. One of the conditions of the “Cedula of Population” was the maintenance of the Roman Catholic faith.¹³ The French planters who migrated upheld this belief system, evidenced by the celebrations of what they then called Carnival. From Christmas until Ash Wednesday, upper class, white, French citizens went from house to house in masks, danced, and promenaded in the streets. On Shrove Tuesday (the Tuesday just before Ash Wednesday), the French would have “Masquerade Balls.”¹⁴ Free persons of colour were permitted to mask, but could not participate in the other activities.¹⁵ However, the enslaved did not let this prohibition stop them from having their own Carnival celebrations. Frederick Urich, a young, German merchant’s clerk in the 1820’s and 1830’s, recorded in a diary of going to see Negroes dance, saying that “the dances [were] usually African dances... these dances [were] stupendous.”¹⁶

Therefore, it is incorrect to think that Carnival originated solely from European festivals. Upon being forced to leave Africa and surviving the terrible crossing of the Middle Passage, the enslaved were stripped of all forms of identity; this included musical instruments and even clothes. Music and dance, however, were two things that could not be stripped from Africans since they were intangible.¹⁷ Negro Dance (1836) [fig. 1] was drawn by Richard Bridgens, an Englishman who came to Trinidad with his wife in 1826 to run a plantation.¹⁸ In his book West India Scenery: with illustrations of Negro character... (1836), he depicts many images of the enslaved working in the sugar cane fields.¹⁹ Negro Dance (1836), however, displays a common form of resistance; the fact that the enslaved continued to entertain and sustain themselves through music and dance while living in the inhumane conditions of slavery was a form of resistance. It is clear that the individuals depicted in this lithograph are enslaved from their lack of shoes. Since plantation owners wanted to extract the most labour from their slaves at the least cost, slaves were given only the bare essentials.²⁰ This included the smallest quantities of food required to keep them alive as well as minimal clothing.²¹ The climate in Trinidad was warm, so shoes were not seen as essential and were not given to the enslaved, making bare-footedness a symbol of slave status.

The small hut on the right side of the image is likely a slave hut where the enslaved individuals resided. This can be concluded from the grass/leaves on the roof of the structure, especially when compared to the nicer house in the background, likely the Big House where the plantation owners lived. Musical instruments can be seen in the hands of many individuals in this image, including the drum. Since slaves were stripped of all of their belongings boarding the slave ship, they had to reconstruct all of their musical instruments upon arrival into the “New World.” Many slaves in the centre of the image are dancing and some, such as the man playing the drum on the bottom right corner, are singing as well. Even without elements of the French Masquerade Balls, slaves were singing, playing instruments and dancing on their own, which are the largest components of Trinidad Carnival.

Of particular interest in this image is the object resembling either a maracas or a torch in the hands of the small child, who is being held by the woman in the doorway. If this object were in fact a torch, it would coincide well with the history of Canboulay in Trinidad. When the British took over Trinidad, sugar cultivation became one of the booming parts of the economy.²² On occasion, fires would break out on plantations in the night – often lit by the enslaved in the process of resistance– and slaves from neighbouring estates would be brought to the burning plantations to cut and grind the burnt sugar canes before they soured.²³ As they proceeded to these burning plantations, slaves would carry burning torches to guide their way in the dark as well as drums for musical accompaniment. This event of assembling and marching to the burning plantations was known as *cannes brulées* (cane burning in French) or Canboulay (in French Creole).²⁴ After Emancipation, this symbolic march became a common form of yearly celebration and later became incorporated into Trinidad Carnival. It is celebrated the night before Carnival Monday as the parade now known as J’Ouvert.

Also worth noting in this image is the object that resembles a pitchfork in the hands of one of the adult male slaves who stands on the right side of the image, facing the woman's child in the doorway. Upon the end of the apprenticeship period in 1838 (after the emancipation of slavery in 1833), the African and Creole slaves brought their Carnival celebrations to the streets. Many of their costumes, however, were meant to mock the plantation owners. Common masques included the devil, the molasses devil, and whiteface.²⁵ The devil often carried with him a pitchfork and a whip, mocking the white slave owners. The molasses devil incorporated the fact that sugar cultivating was one of the most arduous tasks of the enslaved in Trinidad. These represented the most common types of costumes worn in Carnival parades in Trinidad, until recent years.



Figure 2: Melton Prior, "Carnival in Port of Spain, Trinidad," (1888), Sketch, Illustrated London News (London, England), vol. 92, no. 2559, 5 May 1888, pp. 496-497, Rare Books and Special Collections, McGill University Library, Montreal, Canada.

It is now clear that Trinidad Carnival has its roots in slavery, incorporating both European and African customs – an example of the creolization of traditions, which was very common in this time period. However in recent years, Carnival has changed. The music has changed from Calypso to Soca, a faster paced music often with

less social relevance. The costumes have changed from devils and actual masks to shorts and bikini tops. In addition to these changes, people from all around the world now celebrate Carnival in Trinidad. Diasporic Africans continue to "play mas" but many people of other races and nationalities celebrate the Carnival as well. Unfortunately, many people both inside and outside of Trinidad, have come to "play mas" or watch the spectacle viewing it simply as a big party and forgetting the significance of the history from which Carnival originated.

Over the years, as an understanding of the centrality of the slave histories surrounding Carnival has declined, some view Carnival as a hyper-sexualized street party. Without the obvious reminders of the true origin of the festival, this idea has been perpetuated and

encouraged by many. Carnival in Port of Spain, Trinidad (1888) by Melton Prior [fig. 2] displays Trinidad Carnival as it was in 1888. The costumes worn by these masqueraders resemble some of the traditional Carnival costumes, such as the two devil costumes and the woman in the front dressed in whiteface. In contrast, the costumes in the photograph of Trinidad Carnival 2013 [fig. 3] have little resemblance to the traditional costumes. While there are certain bands in Trinidad Carnival that still parade in classical costumes, their presence has greatly diminished; most people, especially the younger generations, prefer to play in the “pretty” masquerade.²⁶ These new popular costumes, in addition to the dancing and music in today’s Trinidad Carnival, have contributed to the increasingly popularity of the parade as a hyper-sexualized party. Hyper-sexuality as it is recognized today is a colonial construction from the days of slavery when Europeans hyper-sexualized the black body.²⁷ A return to the more traditional Carnival costumes and/or educating people about origins of Carnival – its purpose as form of resistance and celebration of Emancipation – will go a long way in remedying the perception of Carnival.

Even though French Europeans played a part in the “creation” of today’s Trinidad Carnival, it is largely a celebration of enslaved African and their descendants. Today, people from a variety of different races and nationalities participate in the celebration that is Carnival. A careful examination of Carnival in Port of Spain, Trinidad (1888) reveals that most of the masqueraders are of African descent. The individuals that appear to have white faces actually have black arms, indicating that they are simply dressing in whiteface. In contrast, figure 3, depicting Trinidad Carnival 2013, includes participants of various races, including black, white, Indian, and Spanish. While it can be seen as great progress that so many people are celebrating the emancipation of slaves in Trinidad, it is a somewhat misleading suggestion of progress if the participants are unaware of the festivals colonial history and its roots in slave resistance. The erasure of slavery from Trinidad Carnival, results in people of various races participating in an event without

understanding its roots. An understanding of these roots would raise awareness of and help to provide an explanation of many present day problems, such as the continued anti-black racism that exists in the Americas as well as poverty rates amongst the diasporic community. A celebration should have an underlying cause and it is imperative that this cause is not lost in the merriment.

Figure 3: Studio 381, untitled (2013), Photograph, 960 x 640 pixels, Port of Spain, Trinidad.



The two dominant populations in Trinidad today are black Trinidadians and the East Indians. Upon the abolition of slavery in 1833 and the end of apprenticeship system in 1838, the European plantation owners needed a means of maintaining a reliable and relatively cheap labour force. Since the newly freed Creole people of colour were not willing to do so, free Africans and many East Indians were encouraged to migrate to Trinidad to work as indentured labourers, resulting in a dramatic increase in the Indian population in Trinidad.²⁸ Unfortunately, there has been tension between these two populations for many years, tension that still exists today, largely in the political sphere.²⁹ Although the largest racial problems during Trans Atlantic Slavery were between whites and blacks, the danger of racial rivalries is still an important take-away from slavery. By omitting slavery in education and celebrations such as Carnival, the tragic consequences of these racial rivalries are forgotten, which may unfortunately fuel their perpetuation in the future.

Carnival is an extremely beautiful and entertaining event that attracts hundreds of thousands of revellers each year. Although it has some roots in European tradition, Carnival as it is celebrated today is derived mainly from slave traditions both pre and post emancipation. However, it is imperative that we do not forget its origins and its purpose. Remembering Trans Atlantic Slavery while participating in Trinidad Carnival will allow people to appreciate it for its true purpose, instead of their assumed perceptions of it. It also ensures that celebrators are aware of the history behind Carnival, so that the multiracial participation of Carnival is of greater significance. Finally, remembering slavery during the Carnival celebrations forces people, especially Trinidadians, to remember the serious implications of racial hierarchies, which will hopefully help address the racial issues that still plague the country today. Carnival is a beautiful celebration commemorating a tragic history but a hopeful future. Reflecting on this fact will allow for a greater appreciation for the “Greatest Show on Earth.”

ENDNOTES:

¹ “Trinidad Carnival,” Trinidad & Tobago: The True Caribbean,

<http://www.gotrinidadandtobago.com/trinidad/carnival/> (date of last access 08 April 2014).

² Collen Ballerino Cohen, “Trinidad carnival Today: Local Culture in Global Context,” Anthropological Quarterly, vol. 80, no. 3 (Summer 2007), p. 898.

³ A. Meredith John, The plantation slaves of Trinidad 1783-1816: A mathematical and demographic enquiry (Cambridge: University Press, 1988), p. 8.

⁴ John Cowley, Carnival, Canboulay and Calypso (Cambridge: University Press, 1996), p. 9.

⁵ Hollis Urban Liverpool, “Origins of Rituals and Customs in the Trinidad Carnival: European or African?” TDR (1988-), vol. 42, no. 3 (Autumn 1998), pp. 25-26.

⁶ J. D. Elder, “Color, Music and Conflict: A Study of Aggression in Trinidad with Reference to the Role of Traditional Music,” Ethnomusicology, vol. 8, no. 2 (May 1964), p. 131.

⁷ John, The plantation slaves of Trinidad 1783-1816, p. 13.

⁸ Bridget Brereton, A History of Modern Trinidad 1783-1962, (Port of Spain: Heinemann Educational Books, 1981), p. 25.

⁹ Errol Hill, “On the origin of the Term Calypso,” Ethnomusicology, vol. 11, no. 3 (Sept 1967), p. 361.

¹⁰ “Trinidad and Tobago: History,” The Commonwealth, <http://thecommonwealth.org/our-member-countries/trinidad-and-tobago/history> (date of last access 08 April 2014).

Trinidad’s sister island, Tobago, has quite a different history. Columbus did not “discover” Tobago; Englishmen are thought to have encountered it on their way to Barbados in 1580. However, European empires were quite unconcerned with Tobago until the seventeenth century, when the Dutch, French, Spanish and English began a competition for the island that lasted nearly two centuries. It finally become a British colony in 1763 and flourished

with sugar plantations. However, with emancipation in 1833, there was a decline in sugar cultivation, resulting in an economic decline of the island. Against the desires of the two colonies, the British made the decision to amalgamate the two islands to alleviate themselves of financial responsibility for Tobago. On 1 January 1889, Tobago became a ward of Trinidad.

¹¹ Hollis Urban Liverpool, "Researching Steelband and Calypso Music in the British Caribbean and the U. S. Virgin Islands," Black Music Research Journal, vol. 14, no. 2 (Autumn 1994), p. 181.

¹² "Trinidad Carnival," (date of last access 08 April 2014)

¹³ Cowley, Carnival, Canboulay and Calypso, p. 9.

¹⁴ Susan Campbell, "Carnival, Calypso, and Class Struggle in Nineteenth Century Trinidad," History Workshop Journal, no. 26 (Winter 1988), p. 8.

¹⁵ Cowley, Carnival, Canboulay and Calypso, pp. 20-21.

¹⁶ Martin Munro, Different Drummers: Rhythm and Race in the Americas (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2010), unpaginated.

¹⁷ Lecture by Dr. Charmaine A. Nelson, Professor, "Cultures of Resistance: Music," The Visual Culture of Slavery, McGill University, Montreal, 08 April 2014.

¹⁸ Judy Raymond, "Out of Sight," The Caribbean Review of Books, <http://caribbeanreviewofbooks.com/crb-archive/24-november-2010/out-of-sight/> (date of last access 08 April 2014).

¹⁹ Full title: West India Scenery: with illustrations of Negro character..., the process of making sugar, &c. from sketches taken during a voyage to, and residence of seven years in, the island of Trinidad

²⁰ Lecture by Dr. Charmaine A. Nelson, Professor, "The Middle Passage: Of Trauma and Commemoration," The Visual Culture of Slavery, McGill University, Montreal, 21 January 2014.

²¹ For more on the food and clothing rations of the enslaved in the Caribbean see: Charmaine A. Nelson, Slavery, Geography, and Empire in Nineteenth-Century Marine Landscapes of Montreal and Jamaica (Surrey, UK: Ashgate Publishing, forthcoming 2016).

²² John, The plantation slaves of Trinidad 1783-1816: A mathematical and demographic enquiry, p. 16.

²³ Campbell, "Carnival, Calypso, and Class Struggle in Nineteenth Century Trinidad," p. 10.

²⁴ Cowley, Carnival, Canboulay and Calypso, p. 20.

²⁵ Campbell, "Carnival, Calypso, and Class Struggle in Nineteenth Century Trinidad," pp. 9-10.

²⁶ Philip W. Scher, "Copyright Heritage: Preservation, Carnival and the State in Trinidad," Anthropological Quarterly, vol. 75, no. 3 (Summer 2002), p. 454.

"Pretty" masquerade is characterized by colourful and ornamental costumes such as the ones depicted in Figure 3.

²⁷ Lecture by Dr. Charmaine Nelson, Professor, "Race and Geography: The Four Continents," The Visual Culture of Slavery, McGill University, Montreal, 16 January 2014.

²⁸ Cowley, Carnival, Canboulay and Calypso, p. 5.

²⁹ Glyne A. Griffith, Caribbean Cultural Identities (Cranbury: Bucknell University Press, 2001), p. 70.

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Figure 1: Richard Bridgens, “Negro Dance,” from his West India Scenery with Illustrations of Negro Character, London, R. Jennings [1836?], lithograph, Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.

Figure 2: Melton Prior, “Carnival in Port of Spain, Trinidad,” (1888), Sketch, Illustrated London News (London, England), vol. 92, no. 2559, 5 May 1888, pp. 496-497, Rare Books and Special Collections, McGill University Library, Montreal, Canada.

Figure 3: Studio 381, untitled (2013), Photograph, 960 x 640 pixels, Port of Spain, Trinidad.

SLAVERY, STAMPED: REPRESENTATIONS OF SLAVERY ON TUCK POSTCARDS, 1900—1910

Emma Hambly

At the height of their popularity, souvenir postcards turned distorted images of the past into commodities. In the first decade of the twentieth century, postcards sold by Raphael Tuck and Sons in the United States dug up the bones of the past, and re-presented historical sites and ideas using state-of-the-art communication technology. Postcards were introduced to the United States in 1873 and soon made use of cutting-edge printing techniques developed in 1900.¹ The rapid communication that cards afforded was characteristic of turn-of-the-century modernity and progress, which saw the advent of automobiles, the electricity, and the telephone. Series of postcards might include images of a bustling, modern city street, and a former slave market. The juxtaposition may seem jarring today, but such representations were not out of place in the years 1900-1910. Tourist cards featuring sites implicated in Trans Atlantic Slavery, with an implied

Figure 1: Anonymous, Old Slave Market Within St. Louis Hotel (1907), Oilette Postcard, 17.5 x 11 cm, Raphael Tuck and Sons.



“wish you were here” sentiment sanitized the horrors of enslavement for the sake of a pleasing image. The countless exaggerated and fiercely racist depictions of African American figures record contemporary perceptions of race, while their mass production gave these offensive caricatures both a stamp of legitimacy and a sense of omnipresence. Postcards published by Raphael Tuck and Sons erase the true history of former slave sites and perpetuated and propagated detrimental African American stereotypes.

Postcards took off as a form of communication after the year 1902, when publishers introduced the divided back card.² This development allowed for a full-bleed image on one side, and the message and address to be written on the reverse. Millions of postcards sold annually in the United States in the so-called “Golden Age of Postcards,” between the years 1905-1915. In the apex year 1906, 700 million cards were sold.³ Wayne Martin Mellinger notes that at the time, postcards “with images of African Americans were among the most popular sellers.” To contrast, the

markets consuming these cards were predominantly white.⁴ Mellinger argues that due to their mass production and appeal, “Postcards can be seen as highly representative of popular culture.”⁵ In fact, their very production reflects the opinions of multiple people, as it was characterized by a “division of labour”⁶—featuring separate designers, illustrators, and printers for most cards. Although there were multiple workers involved in the process, the postcard publishing company Raphael Tuck and Sons “printed, published, and distributed much of its own product.”⁷ The popular and prolific firm introduced its postcard line in England in late 1899,⁸ and soon expanded to the United States. The postcards examined in this article were published by Raphael Tuck and Sons between the years 1901—1907, and were thus a part of the Golden Age postcard boom.

Contemporaneous with the popularity of postcards at the turn-of-the-century were the growing

problems facing the African American community. Mellinger writes, “Lynchings reached an all-time peak in 1892, a year before the [picture] postcard was introduced, with at least 162 African Americans lynched. ... Segregation became the norm between 1901 and 1920 when the majority of Southern states implemented Jim Crow laws.”⁹ In his study of twentieth-century material culture illustrative of black stereotypes, Steven C. Dubin argues that ‘Jim Crow’ laws “attempted to minimize the shift in the balance of power by approximating the formerly stable and predictable controls of the plantation system.”¹⁰ He writes, mass-produced items portraying African Americans in a negative light “may have been an additional attempt at reasserting white control by symbolically allaying white status anxiety.”¹¹ The very same thing might be said about picture postcards. As we will see, at a time of social and legal difficulties for African Americans, Tuck cards disseminated harmful stereotypes and addressed the legacy of slavery in a revisionist, guilt-absolving manner.

The tourist-oriented image of a landscape or landmark is the subject most easily associated with the postcard medium, from its beginnings as the *Gruss Aus*, or “wish you were here” illustrated card to the tacky vistas we still see at convenience stores.¹² In the introduction to *Postcards: Ephemeral Histories of Modernity* (2010), editors Mendelson and Prochaska write that view cards which picture landscapes and urban environments “are successors to earlier visual and photographic genres, from especially eighteenth- and nineteenth-century prints, drawings, maps, paintings, and topographical atlases to mid-nineteenth-century topographical cartes de visite and stereocards.”¹³ These genres were problematic in their depictions of sites and



Figure 2: Anonymous, Lee Monument (1907), Oilette Postcard, 17.5 x 11 cm, Raphael Tuck and Sons.



Figure 3: Anonymous, *All De World am Sad and Dreary* (1907), Oilette Postcard, 17.5 x 11 cm, Raphael Tuck and Sons.

regions implicated in Trans Atlantic Slavery. A touristic postcard is an act of witnessing, a testimony to having been somewhere. Such images fix the tourist gaze onto a permanent form. In the early twentieth century, when addressing the difficult parts of history, they were euphemistic. Early postcards turned former sites of slavery into places made for visiting rather than hiding. By acknowledging slavery without crediting its injustices or

cruelties, Tuck postcards purposefully erased crucial aspects of the past.

Postcards depicting slave markets from southern states such as South Carolina and Georgia were common, especially cards illustrating the “Old Slave Market” in St. Augustine Florida.¹⁴ The Tuck card participating in this tradition is interesting for its representation of a former slave market as a site of the white tourist gaze, and for the disconcerting postcards sold along with it. The card *Old Slave Market Within St. Louis Hotel* [fig. 1] by Raphael Tuck and Sons, was printed in England, and sold in the United States and Great Britain. The earliest known date of use is October 1907.¹⁵ The copy on the back of the card describes the activity of the slave market “before the Civil War.”¹⁶ It offers no indictment of slavery, but rather echoes some of its dehumanizing ideology. The phrase, “there were two stands, one for males and one for females,” could just as well be describing cattle as human beings. The well-dressed white adult couple gazes upon the historical site with mild interest, as if it is any other benign attraction. The former slave market has become a place of wealthy white visitation, a space of leisure and entertainment. The card was sold in packages of six cards, each depicting a destination in New Orleans.¹⁷ *Old Slave Market* (1907) was sold in two different series, each with three cards in common. It sits conspicuously within each of the sets. The first grouping includes *Old Slave Market*, *Canal Street* (1907), *St. Charles Hotel* (1907), *U.S. Customs House* (1907), *Union Station* (1907), and *Ursuline Convent* (1907).¹⁸ The surrounding cards form a portrait of modernity, depicting contemporary fashions, streetcars, telephone wires, and automobiles. The figures are pedestrians, and almost all have white skin. Union Station features two exceptions: a well-dressed but un-chaperoned woman with dark skin, and the sole labouring body in the image, a dark-skinned man sweeping the sidewalk.

Taken as one vision of a city, the postcard series frames New Orleans as a space of modern technology and leisurely white activity. This aesthetic serves to distance a present-day New Orleans from the past, compartmentalizing slavery into a foreign and bygone era. That *Old Slave Market* is nonchalantly included along with such images demonstrates a glossing-over of

the history of slavery and the re-presentation of one of its spaces as a site for entertainment. The second series is even more troubling. It replaces Ursuline Convent, U.S. Customs House, and Canal Street, with Lafayette Square (1907), Tugs on the River (1907), and Lee Monument (1907) [fig. 2].¹⁹ Thus the Tuck series offers an image of a former slave market alongside a towering image of Robert E. Lee, general of the Confederate Army. The 1884 monument participates in a certain romanticization of history, and the “Lost Cause of the Confederacy”²⁰ movement, the supporters of which desired an expansion of slavery.²¹ The pairing of these two images in the Tuck set demonstrates a sanitized, tourist-friendly version of New Orleans that picks and chooses which fragments of its slavery-implicated history to present to the world.

The Tuck series Negro Melodies pictures two African American stereotypes dating back to the era of American slavery: the “Mammy” and the “Uncle Tom”. The set of six cards was printed in Germany, and sold in the United States, Canada, and Britain from the earliest known date of June 1907 onwards.²² The set of cards, including All De World am Sad and Dreary [fig. 3], depict three middle-aged black women, and three elderly black men. The women are caught at a break in their labour, one is scrubbing at a washbasin, one is churning, and one is resting on a wooden fence with an indeterminate tool.²³ The women are wearing work clothes, aprons, and head wraps. The three belong to the Mammy archetype of an overweight, maternal black woman nonplussed by her enslavement. In her book Clinging to Mammy (2007), Micki McElya writes that the “mammy narrative... dates back at least to the 1830s, when members of the planter class began using these stories to animate their assertions of slavery as benevolent and slave owning as honorable.”²⁴ McElya argues that the mammy figure affirms the myth of “a world in which African Americans are not angry over past and present injustices, a world in which white people were and are not complicit” in the injustices themselves.²⁵ The Tuck card Ole Mammy [fig. 5] makes the “Mammy” stereotype even more literal, giving a tinted photograph of an elderly woman of African descent the debasing title. The photograph by F. L. Howe ascribes this stereotype to the woman in place of her name or any other identifying information. The image was copyrighted in 1901 and sold in sets of six or twelve, whose date of first known use was July 1905.²⁶

Other cards in the series include vicious stereotypes such as African American male violence, the leisurely enjoyment of

Figure 4: Anonymous, I'm Comin', For My Head Is Bending Low (1907), Oilette Postcard, 17.5 x 11 cm, Raphael Tuck and Sons.



watermelons, and the racist slur “coon.”²⁷ I’m Comin’, For My Head Is Bending Low [fig. 4] depicts a prime example of the “Uncle Tom” stereotype. The figure accords with the image of a “shuffling older man with receding gray hair.”²⁸ He sits slouched on a step, weariness recorded in his posture, hair, and frowning wrinkled countenance. In Black Masculinity and the U.S. South (2007), Riché Richardson writes that the Uncle Tom, “a character on theatrical and minstrel circuits, epitomized an innocuous and neutered model of black masculine sexuality and came to be signified primarily in relation to an aged, black, masculine body.”²⁹ The two Tuck cards representing clear Uncle Tom characters propagate this type meant to diminish black masculinity. The use of broken English in the song lyrics accompanying these stereotypical images, likely “Anglo mockings of Gullah English” contributes to the narration of African Americans as intellectually inferior.³⁰ The abstract backgrounds and lack of grounding detail suggest these images could be from nearly any place or time. In the introduction to Delivering Views: Distant Cultures in Early Postcards (2007), editors Christraud M. Geary, and Virginia-Lee Webb argue that many postcards contain stereotypical imagery because they “had to conform to popular taste and market forces,” and for these reasons “reconstruct and repeat “similar visual tropes across the globe.”³¹ Thus the Tuck series “Negro Melodies” reflects that the Mammy and Uncle Tom tropes were both popular, not considered offensive by the white masses, and had the potential to sell.

The songs pictured on the “Negro Melodies” postcard series also participate in a process of erasing the truth from slavery. Five of the six songs on the cards were written by songwriter Stephen C. Foster in the decade before the Civil War: Massa’s In De Cold Ground (1852), Old Black Joe (1853), My Old Kentucky Home (1853), and Old Folks at Home (1851), which is represented twice.³² Lyrics such as, “The sun shines bright in my old Kentucky home. ‘Tis summer, the darkies are gay”³³ refer to contented and de-humanized slaves working on a plantation. In many of Foster’s lyrics we can see nostalgia for a past that never existed. His songs about the antebellum

Figure 5: F.L. Howe, Ole Mammy (1901), Photochrome Postcard, 17 x 11 cm, Raphael Tuck and Sons.



south promote “his own conventional, Democratic, middle-class values,”³⁴ at the expense of the African Americans he represents. For example, Ken Emerson writes that the eponymous subject of “Old Black Joe” is “simply another white man’s possession prized solely for its loyalty,” and the song “epitomizes Foster’s racial condescension.”³⁵ The pairing of Foster’s songs with stereotypes dating from the era of slavery engages in the antebellum trend of white slave owners taking singing as a sign of slave contentment. In The Music of Black Americans: A History (1997), Eileen Southern writes, “often the whites saw the blacks on their plantation as ‘a large flock of cheerful and contented slaves... ever merry and ever working with a song.’”³⁶ As a counterpoint, former slave and abolitionist Frederick Douglass writes of slave singing in his autobiography, My Bondage and My Freedom (1855): “Every tone was testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains.”³⁷ The pairing of these songs and images demonstrates a yearning for a false past of slavery, one free of moral conundrums and guilt.

Raphael Tuck and Sons’ other US postcards from the first decade of the twentieth century depicting African Americans contributed to this perpetuation of negative stereotypes. Some cards picture white minstrel actors in blackface.³⁸ Brutally racist caricatures were especially prevalent, most characterizing African Americans as racially inferior, with literal black skin, oversized lips, tattered apparel denoting poverty.³⁹ Many cards picture the impoverished “Negro Cabin,”⁴⁰ contributing to contemporary representations of African Americans as second-class citizens without reference to the societal prejudices responsible for economic inequality. The rare positive portrayals took the form of celebrations of Abraham Lincoln and Emancipation.⁴¹ However, the negative depictions far outnumbered the positive.

These postcard representations dating from 1900-1910 reflect the structural racism and disavowal of the realities of slavery commonplace at the time. As art objects, the Tuck postcards engage in other destructive processes. One such process is the concept of “symbolic annihilation,” outlined by Jennifer L. Eichstedt and Stephen Small in Representations of Slavery: Race and Ideology in Southern Plantation Museums (2002) as “both the erasure and marginalization of slavery, the enslaved, or legally free African Americans.”⁴² Their work refers to the presentation of history in southern plantation museums, but similar ideological processes may be found on the Tuck postcards discussed above. Old Slave Market sanitizes a site implicated in the forcible sale of human beings, re-appropriating it as a white tourist destination. The Negro Melodies set pictures African American men and women, in indeterminate space and time, as stereotypical “Mammies” and “Uncle Toms”. Their pairing with the racist songs of Stephen Foster re-enacts the great lies of American slavery: that it was a benevolent institution, that slaves were happy. Mellinger argues that postcards depicting racist caricatures “can be thought of as *status degradation ceremonies*, which Garfinkel defines as ‘communicative work directed to transforming an individual’s total identity into an identity lower in the group’s scheme of social types.’”⁴³ Postcards and other derogatory pieces of material culture “helped to allay status anxiety and promoted a sense of social solidarity and superiority among whites.”⁴⁴ That such problematic images and concepts associated with slavery could be sold and sent in the year

1900-1910, and beyond, demonstrates the oppressive power of popular media. Postcards were cheap, fast, and widespread. Their makers would capitalize on contemporary opinions of race and slavery for the sake of a sale, often to the degradation of African Americans. In the first decade of the twentieth century, Tuck postcards stamped racist and euphemistic revisions of slavery with popular approval and mass appeal.

ENDNOTES:

¹ Toni and Valmai Holt, Picture Postcards of the Golden Age: A Collector's Guide (London: Granada Publishing, 1971), p. 189.

² Holt, Picture Postcards of the Golden Age, p. 171.

³ Wayne Martin Mellinger, "Postcards from the Edge of the Color Line: Images of African Americans in Popular Culture, 1893–1917," Symbolic Interaction, vol. 15, no. 4 (Winter 1992), p. 415.

⁴ Mellinger, "Postcards from the Edge of the Color Line," p. 415.

⁵ Mellinger, "Postcards from the Edge of the Color Line," p. 415.

⁶ Jordana Mendelson, and David Prochaska, eds. Postcards: Ephemeral Histories of Modernity (Pennsylvania State University Press: University Park, 2010), p. xii.

⁷ Eds Christraud M. Geary, and Virginia-Lee Webb, eds., Delivering Views: Distant Cultures in Early Postcards (Smithsonian: Washington, D.C, 1998), p. 24.

⁸ Holt, Picture Postcards of the Golden Age, p. 171.

⁹ Mellinger, "Postcards from the Edge of the Color Line," p. 416.

¹⁰ Steven C. Dubin, "Symbolic Slavery: Black Representations in Popular Culture," Social Problems, vol. 34, no. 2 (April 1987), p. 131.

¹¹ Dubin, "Symbolic Slavery," p. 131.

¹² Richard Carline, Pictures in the Post: The Story of the Picture Postcard and its Place in the History of Popular Art (London: Gordon Fraser, 1971)

¹³ Mendelson and Prochaska, Postcards, p. xii.

¹⁴ "Collectibles > Postcards," eBay, <http://www.ebay.ca/sch/Postcards-/914/i.html> (date of last access 10 April 2014)

¹⁵ "Old Slave Market Within St. Louis Hotel," Tuck DB, <http://tuckdb.org/postcards/117437> (date of last access 9 April 2014)

¹⁶ "Old Slave Market," (date of last access 9 April 2014)

¹⁷ "Set: New Orleans, LA., U.S.A.," Tuck DB, <http://tuckdb.org/sets/19937> (date of last access 9 April 2014)

¹⁸ "Set: New Orleans," (date of last access 9 April 2014)

¹⁹ "Set: New Orleans, LA., U.S.A.," Tuck DB, <http://tuckdb.org/sets/18745> (date of last access 9 April 2014)

²⁰ Edward Branley, "NOLA History: New Orleans, Robert E. Lee and the 'Lost Cause,'" GoNOLA.com, <http://www.gonola.com/2012/09/03/nola-history-new-orleans-robert-e-lee-and-the-lost-cause.html> (date of last access 30 June 2014)

²¹ Caroline E. Janney, "The Lost Cause," Encyclopedia Virginia, http://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Lost_Cause_The (date of last access 30 June 2014) Arguably, Lincoln's opposition to the southern expansion of slavery into more states was an important cause of southern secession.

²² "Set: Negro Melodies," Tuck DB, <http://tuckdb.org/sets/19771> (date of last access 10 April 2014)

²³ "Set: Negro Melodies," (date of last access 10 April 2014)

²⁴ Micki McElya, Clinging to Mammy: The Faithful Slave in Twentieth-Century America (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 4.

²⁵ McElya, Clinging to Mammy, p. 3

²⁶ "Ole Mammy," Tuck DB, <http://tuckdb.org/postcards/114833> (date of last access 10 April 2014)

²⁷ "Ole Mammy," (date of last access 10 April 2014)

²⁸ Riché Richardson, Black Masculinity and the U.S. South: From Uncle Tom to Gangsta (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007), p. 3.

²⁹ Richardson, Black Masculinity and the U.S. South, p. 3.

³⁰ Mellinger, "Postcards from the Edge of the Color Line," p. 424.

³¹ Christraud M. Geary, and Virginia-Lee Webb eds., Delivering Views: Distant Cultures in Early Postcards (Smithsonian: Washington, D.C, 1998), p. 4.

³² Ken Emerson, Doo-dah!: Stephen Foster and the Rise of American Popular Culture (Hoboken: De Capo Press, 1998), p. 181.

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- ³³ “Set: Negro Melodies,” (date of last access 10 April 2014)
- ³⁴ Steven Saunders, “The Social Agenda of Stephen Foster’s Plantation Melodies,” American Music, vol. 30, no. 3, (Fall 2012), p. 286.
- ³⁵ Emerson, Doo-dah!, p. 257.
- ³⁶ Eileen Southern, The Music of Black Americans: A History, (New York: Norton, 1997)
- ³⁷ Southern, The Music of Black Americans, p. 84.
- ³⁸ “Mr. Bert A. Williams ‘A Jolly Coloured Coon’,” Tuck DB, <http://tuckdb.org/postcards/62503> (date of last access 10 April 2014)
- ³⁹ “ ‘There’s No One Just Like You, Lu Lu’ ,” Tuck DB, <http://tuckdb.org/postcards/70702/> (date of last access 10 April 2014)
- ⁴⁰ “Negro Cabin, Near Salisbury, N.C.,” Tuck DB, <http://tuckdb.org/postcards/109260> (date of last access 10 April 2014)
- ⁴¹ “Emancipation,” Tuck DB, <http://tuckdb.org/postcards/53069> (date of last access 10 April 2014)
- ⁴² Jennifer L. Eichstedt and Stephen Small, Representations of Slavery: Race and Ideology in Southern Plantation Museums (Washington: Smithsonian Books, 2002)
- ⁴³ Authors italics, Mellinger, “Postcards from the Edge of the Color Line,” p. 430.
- ⁴⁴ Dubin, “Symbolic Slavery,” p. 210.

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PLATE LIST

Figure 1: Anonymous, Old Slave Market Within St. Louis Hotel (1907), Oilette Postcard, 17.5 x 11 cm, Raphael Tuck and Sons.

Figure 2: Anonymous, Lee Monument (1907), Oilette Postcard, 17.5 x 11 cm, Raphael Tuck and Sons.

Figure 3: Anonymous, All De World am Sad and Dreary (1907), Oilette Postcard, 17.5 x 11 cm, Raphael Tuck and Sons.

Figure 4: Anonymous, I'm Comin', For My Head Is Bending Low (1907), Oilette Postcard, 17.5 x 11 cm, Raphael Tuck and Sons.

Figure 5: F.L. Howe, Ole Mammy (1901), Photochrome Postcard, 17 x 11 cm, Raphael Tuck and Sons.

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IN THE SHADOW OF THE BIG HOUSE: MOUNT VERNON'S ARCHITECTURE OF SLAVERY

Ryan Kluftinger

Mount Vernon is most commonly regarded as “the home and last resting place of George Washington” (1732-1799).¹ The Revolutionary War hero and first President of the United States, however, was not the only person to live and die there. At the time of Washington’s death, the plantation estate was also home to three hundred and sixteen enslaved people.² Thus, we must complicate the simplistic notion of Mount Vernon as Washington’s home. Rather, it was a farming complex that was deeply indebted to the institution of Trans Atlantic Slavery. Washington employed a plantation system that hinged on the perpetuation of racial hierarchy. His building style reflects this ideology. Specifically, the mansion house, servants’ hall, slave quarters, and outbuildings create an architectural discourse of power. The analysis of these four units will illustrate this claim. That is, the architecture of Mount Vernon was designed to naturalize the institution of slavery.

A brief discussion of Mount Vernon – and the enslaved people who laboured there – will frame the architectural analysis to follow. George Washington inherited Mount Vernon in 1754, following the death of his brother Lawrence.³ Though Washington was trained as a surveyor, he quickly abandoned his career plans in order to manage the plantation. The twenty-two year old was eager to take advantage of the land holdings, which he needed in order to “enter the upper echelon of Virginia society.”⁴ His new status as a landed gentleman would springboard his military and political ascent.⁵ The estate also included twenty-seven slaves.⁶ This number grew to sixty-four by 1763,

largely due to Washington’s marriage to Martha Custis.⁷ Custis was the widow of a wealthy planter, and brought her plantation experience – along with dozens of slaves – to Mount Vernon.⁸ Washington was taxed on eighty-seven slaves in 1770, and “all but ceased purchasing slaves” after 1772.⁹ Thus, the presence of three hundred and sixteen slaves in 1799 was “almost solely due to

Figure 1: George Washington, Mount Vernon Mansion House – Front View (after 1787), Wood, brick and limestone, approximately 90 ft. wide, 55 ft. tall, Alexandria, VA, United States. Photo credit: Ad Meskens [CC-BY-SA-3.0 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0>)], via Wikimedia Commons.



natural increase.”¹⁰ This population jump is suspiciously high for “natural increase.” Thus, it suggests the practice of breeding, whereby slaves were sexually assaulted in order to produce enslaved children.¹¹

Unfortunately, the cruelty at Mount Vernon went beyond sexual abuse. Washington preferred to buy West Indian (Caribbean) slaves, who were “thought to be preferable to Africans since they were already familiar with plantation ways.”¹² Regardless, this practice necessitated the

continual flow of captured Africans across the Middle Passage. Besides Washington’s investment in the overseas capture and murder of Africans, he also enacted hardships at home. Contemporaneous plantation records show that roughly 50% of the enslaved died before age fifteen, and the swampy climate at Mount Vernon could have pushed this figure even higher.¹³ The number of runaways also illustrates the harsh treatment of slaves at Washington’s estate. Five field slaves escaped in 1760 alone.¹⁴ One of them, Boson, was recaptured only five days later, although “he seems to have tried again and succeeded, for the same year his name was subtracted from the list of tithables.”¹⁵ While this outcome is optimistic, it neglects the possibility of Boson’s sale or execution.

The mistreatment of the enslaved was not limited to field labourers, as Martha’s personal maid and the house cook both escaped.¹⁶ As revealed in one of Washington’s letters, he had unsuccessfully hunted the cook for months.¹⁷ Slaves were also sold away from their families, as noted by Washington’s plantation manager and cousin, Lund Washington: “Am very sorry to part her [Jack’s wife] from Jack. He Cryes and Begs, sayg. he had rather be Hang’d than separated.”¹⁸ Throughout his life, Washington was ambivalent towards the plight of the people that he held in bondage. While lamenting their destitution, he prioritized Mount Vernon’s production of tobacco, wheat, barley and corn – all of which was made possible by slave labour.¹⁹ In 1799, only six months prior to his death, Washington made preparations to free his slaves.²⁰ However, he owned just one hundred and twenty three of Mount Vernon’s three hundred and sixteen slaves; the rest still belonged to the Custis line.²¹ Rather than deal with the complicated procedure of emancipating his half – many of who were intermarried with the Custis



Figure 2: George Washington, Mount Vernon Mansion House – Rear View (after 1787), Wood, brick and limestone, approximately 90 ft. wide, 55 ft. tall, Alexandria, VA, United States. Photo credit: Martin Falbisoner [CC-BY-SA-3.0 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0>)], via

slaves – Washington arranged for them to be freed after Martha’s death.²² However, upon Washington’s death, Martha immediately liberated Washington’s chattel, as she “felt unsafe living among a people whose freedom hinged on her demise.”²³ The Custis slaves, now separated from their freed relatives, remained enslaved.²⁴

As we have seen, Washington sympathized with his slaves only insofar as it was socially and economically convenient. In general, Mount Vernon was a place of extreme racial hierarchy and slave abuse. As noted by Orlando Patterson, the perpetuation of this power relation “rests on the control of those private and public symbols ... that induce (and seduce) people to obey because they feel satisfied and dutiful when they do so.”²⁵ That is, the master-servant, white-black dichotomy can be naturalized by one’s cultural surroundings. The architecture of Mount Vernon fulfills this function. The buildings convey – and subsequently maintain – racial inequality.

The first point of interest is the Big House. Washington designed the architectural alterations for the mansion house, which served as the focal point for his “model plantation for a



Figure 3: George Washington, Mount Vernon Servants’ Hall (Left) (1775), Wood and limestone, approximately 45 ft. wide, 35 ft. tall, Alexandria, VA, United States. Photo credit: David Samuel [CC-BY-SA-3.0 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0>)], via Wikimedia Commons.

republic based on agricultural pursuits.”²⁶ Lawrence’s original residence was a one-and-a-half story structure, which Washington began to modify only three years after inheriting the property.²⁷ He made five main changes to the structure: increased height, increased width, the pediment, cupola, and portico [figs. 1 and 2]. These alterations were indebted to neo-Palladianism, which Washington admired and studied from pattern books.²⁸

Neo-Palladianism is derived

from classical Roman architecture and is meant to form a hybrid between a royal palace and a countryside retreat: “the goal was to create ... ‘a little city,’ complete and all-sufficing, where the gentleman could be truly his own master, truly free.”²⁹ For Washington, the appeal of this style was twofold. First, his architectural quote of the great Roman Republic echoed his vision for America. The central pediment was crucial in creating this language of republican power [fig. 1]. The enclosed tympanum, complete with a relief design and a rose window, is an archetypical symbol of this classicized design.³⁰ Second, the resulting palatial style conveyed his regal and absolute power as master.

The enlargement of the Big House naturalized slavery in several ways. First, the



Figure 4: George Washington, The Greenhouse and the Adjoining Slave Quarter Wings (1792), Brick and tile, approximately 130 ft. wide, 45 ft. tall, Alexandria, VA, United States. Photo credit: Caitlin Childs (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/legalcode>), via Flickr Commons.

Palladian style required that the mansion be the widest and tallest building. This allowed the structure to form the entire base of the U-shaped complex: “the house [was] attached with two dependencies to create a five-part Palladian façade.”³¹ Thus, the mansion’s enlargement embodied the Palladian style that, in turn, emphasized the master’s power over his “little city.” Moreover, the immense size of the building – complete with

two large chimneystacks – advertised its warm and spacious comfort. This fact was not lost on one visitor to Mount Vernon in 2007: “As we completed our walk through the quarters and rounded a bend, there in the snow, with candles burning in each window, was Washington’s huge mansion, looking warm and secure, and inviting.”³² This luxury solidified racial inequality, as Washington insisted on the exclusion of slaves: “There are a great number of Negro children ... but they have always been forbid ... from coming within the Gates of the Inclosures of the Yards.”³³ In fact, the only Africans allowed within the mansion house grounds were “two or 3 young ones belonging to the Cook, and the Mulatto fellow Frank in the house, her husband.”³⁴ While the cook is not racially specified, all the other enslaved people who were allowed on the mansion grounds were partially white. Thus, the Big House aligned luxury with whiteness. By limiting access, Washington ensured that the “truly free” space of neo-Palladian architecture was inaccessible to the people that he enslaved. Moreover, the numerous symmetrical windows ensured that the far-off slaves could gauge the mansion’s vast size. To further solidify the notion of black subservience, the enslaved were forced to build this white palace.³⁵

The increased height of the Big House played another important role: surveillance. The mansion sits on a key promontory. It overlooks the slave quarters to the north, the front grounds to the west, tobacco fields to the south, and the Potomac River to the east. Thus, one could observe the enslaved while they rested, laboured, and loaded shipments onto barges.³⁶ Moreover, Washington could ensure that they kept off the mansion grounds. To facilitate this three hundred and sixty-degree surveillance, a windowed cupola was installed to the roof [fig. 1]. The turret-like structure recalls military architecture, and would have conveyed the threat of constant

surveillance to the enslaved.

The colossal order portico plays a similar function [fig. 2]. Washington created a “gallery” of two-story pillars in order to frame the mansion’s rear porch.³⁷ This creates an imposing surveillance platform, which was easily visible to the slaves working at Washington’s Potomac docks. Moreover, the squared columns are too thin, “in about a 13:1 ratio ... rather than the Renaissance ratio of 7:1 more commonly used for this order.”³⁸ The overly narrow pillars create the illusion of even more height. Thus, the portico conveyed size, power, and surveillance to the slaves below. The design also plays an exclusionary role. The porch is lined with “fancy paving stones acquired from England,”³⁹ despite the fact that “in Virginia such places were almost always built of brick.”⁴⁰ Washington’s conspicuous use of paving stones helps to racialize this space. Since the slave quarters and stables were made from brick, Washington chose to construct the mansion primarily from wood and stone.⁴¹ Thus, the building materials helped to differentiate between white and black spaces. In the Big House, the use of brick is confined to areas of slave labour, such as the storage spaces beneath the portico: “the paving lies atop three subterranean rooms, each with a brick barrel vault.”⁴² The location of the basement storage – beneath the portico – is also relevant. The layout narrates an ideology of stone over brick, master over slave, white over black. The design is not coincidental, as the surviving basement plans are “in Washington’s hand.”⁴³ He also specified that there be a “Door, and window over it to give a light into ye Passage.”⁴⁴ The two windows at each door are insufficient for lighting the entire basement level, which runs the length of the mansion. In contrast, the upper level contains nineteen windows. Moreover – since the building runs north to south – the basement rarely receives direct lighting. Thus, Washington’s design ensured that the area of slave labour was also a space of darkness.

One of the most curious buildings at Mount Vernon is the servants’ hall [fig. 3]. Located just north of the mansion house, this building was erected in 1775 “for the occasional use of the servants of visitors.”⁴⁵ Unlike the slave quarters, which will be discussed later, this building was finished in the style of the Big House. Washington noted that the building “has two good rooms below (with tiled floors) and as many above, all with fireplaces.”⁴⁶ Why would a house for servants, which usually sat empty, contain such luxury? As D.J. Pogue claims, “the significance of the possession of such a specialized structure certainly would not have been lost on the gentlemen whose African American slaves and white servants periodically resided there.”⁴⁷ That is, Washington used this building to impress visitors. However, Pogue’s statement belies a subtler motive. The fact that “white servants” also utilized this structure is relevant. The luxurious servants’ hall, when compared to the decrepit slave quarters that only housed African Americans, sends a hateful message: whiteness is superior to blackness, even within servitude.

Beyond delineating white and black spaces, the servants’ hall also functioned as a venue of sexual abuse. As Pogue claims, “the precipitous growth of the Mount Vernon slave population [after 1772] was almost solely due to natural increase.”⁴⁸ Thus, the presence of “about twenty mulattoes” at Mount Vernon in the late 1780’s suggests the prevalence of cross-racial sex.⁴⁹ One visitor’s frustrated remark suggests the disturbing normality of this practice: “Will you believe it,

I have not humped a single mulatto since I am here.”⁵⁰ The architecture of the servants’ hall is especially conducive to this institutionalized rape. First, the luxurious décor and façade suggests that white men used the structure. Second, the segmented rooms – which nearly always sat empty – create privacy. As a servants’ hall, slaves could be brought to the building without raising suspicion. The most convincing element, however, is its physical location. The servants’ hall is directly adjacent to the Big House, whereas the other slave quarters are much further off. Moreover, a covered colonnade links the servants’ hall directly to the mansion [fig. 3]. This sheltered archway allowed guests to quickly and discretely walk between the servants’ hall and the Big House. Washington may have designed the colonnade for this exact purpose, as his own sexual morality is doubtful: “allegedly, about this time – c.1785 – George Washington fathered a mulatto child ... with a slave woman.”⁵¹ It may not be coincidental that Mrs. Washington’s room is on the opposite side of the Big House. From here, any observation of the walkway and servants’ hall is impossible. Thus, the servants’ hall provided a space for sexual abuse. If not for this purpose, the grandeur of the servants’ hall and its privileged walkway makes little architectural sense.

George Washington also designed the new slave quarters (1791-92). [fig. 4]⁵² The slave quarters consists of two wings, which are attached on either side of the greenhouse. This building was specifically designed to denigrate its inhabitants. First, the Palladian style – which Washington admired – requires vertical symmetry between windows and doors.⁵³ This ideal was abandoned in the case of the slave quarters, where the tiny windows create an imbalance. In contrast, the central greenhouse – which was used by white people – employs Palladian pilasters, large windows, a pediment, rose window and tympanum. [fig. 4] Thus, the design explicitly excludes the slaves from palatial prestige and useful lighting. Furthermore, as noted above, the slave quarters was made from brick. This dissociates the slaves from the luxurious white spaces, which are made from wood and stone. Moreover, the use of brick aligns the slave quarters with the stable, which is also made of brick and sits directly opposite the lawn. Thus, the exterior architecture associates the enslaved with animals.

The interior space fulfills a similar

Figure 5: Anonymous Architect, Restored Outbuilding Slave Quarter at Mount Vernon (ca. 1790), Wood, approximately 12 x 12 ft., Alexandria, VA, United States. Photo credit: James Walsh (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/legalcode>), via Flickr Commons.



role. Despite the growing number of slaves, Washington's new slave quarters encompassed only 2,800 square feet – 1,200 *less* than the previous structure.⁵⁴ The desire to cram more slaves into a smaller space led Washington to adopt a two-room layout with no subsequent partitions. This communal system offered no privacy. Each barracks had “only one fireplace and only one entry,” so winter heating and summer ventilation would have been poor.⁵⁵ This architecture “defies a strong regional trend for smaller dwellings occupied by family groups.”⁵⁶ Therefore, Washington purposely deviated from plantation norms in order to create greater surveillance and discomfort: “a desire on [Washington's] part to institute a greater degree of control over the actions of his slaves seems to have been central to this plan.”⁵⁷ Moreover, we have already noted Washington's frustration with slaves who played on the grounds. Thus, the slaves' free time was confined to a dark, claustrophobic, poorly heated and non-private space, which was constantly under surveillance.

Finally, the outbuilding slave quarters naturalized the exploitation and surveillance of slaves. Washington “demolished and replaced most of the outbuildings” shortly after inheriting the property.⁵⁸ The 2,100-acre estate was split into five farms and outbuilding slave quarters were used to minimize walking time and maximize labour.⁵⁹ Also, an “unreasonably large number” of slaves were housed together to better facilitate surveillance.⁶⁰ At one of Washington's outlying farms, “as little as 15 square feet of space would have been available for each of the seventy-six slaves residing there.”⁶¹ Due to the cramped floor space, a half-story architecture was used.⁶² That is, the single story building was segmented into two floors. This allowed the slaves enough room to lie down, although it meant that they could no longer stand up.⁶³ Evidence of this construction method is visible in the protruding mid-wall joists of an old slave cabin [fig. 5]. Building costs were also minimized at the expense of the enslaved. The slaves had to build the structures themselves and used un-milled logs to speed up construction.⁶⁴ This resulted in dangerously poor insulation, especially considering that “the children [slept] on the ground.”⁶⁵ In a 1775 letter, Lund Washington lamented, “some of our negro quarters are so very bad, that I am obliged to have them mended, so as to last the winter.”⁶⁶ Moreover, the lack of masonry in these structures led to the use of wooden chimneys.⁶⁷ This was a fire hazard and would have diminished air quality considerably. The enslaved were also “allowed small garden plots” at the outlying quarters.⁶⁸ This freedom was granted so that slaves could feed themselves, which resulted in extra labour beyond the day's fieldwork. Washington notes this fact himself: “every labourer (male or female) does as much in the 24 hours as their strength ... will allow of.”⁶⁹ Finally, Washington's map of the Union Farm complex shows five slave cabins directly opposite the overseers' cabin.⁷⁰ Thus, the design for the outbuilding quarters facilitated the twenty-four hour surveillance of the enslaved.

As I have argued, the architecture of Mount Vernon created spaces of whiteness, blackness, sexual abuse, surveillance, and denigration. This physical framework reflects the ideologies of racism and slavery. The extreme inequality imposed on slaves was mirrored in the very buildings that surrounded them. Thus, the institution of slavery was naturalized by Washington's architecture. Structural styles were deliberately manipulated towards this end.

Indeed, Washington once noted, “it would be as impossible to manage a farm without a regular system as it would ‘for an Architect to erect an Edifice without a Plan.’”⁷¹ Here, Washington tacitly associates plantation slavery and architecture. This quote is a poignant reminder of architecture’s ability to function as a tool of racial power.

ENDNOTES:

¹ Paul Wiltach, *Mount Vernon, Washington's Home and the Nation's Shrine* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Page & Co, 1916), p. 3.

² D. J. Pogue, “The Domestic Architecture of Slavery at George Washington's Mount Vernon,” *Winterthur Portfolio*, vol. 37, no. 1 (Spring 2002), p. 5.

³ Pogue, “The Domestic Architecture of Slavery,” p. 5.

⁴ Pogue, “The Domestic Architecture of Slavery,” p. 5.

⁵ Pogue, “The Domestic Architecture of Slavery,” p. 5.

⁶ Pogue, “The Domestic Architecture of Slavery,” p. 5.

⁷ Pogue, “The Domestic Architecture of Slavery,” p. 5.

⁸ “Martha Washington and Slavery,” *George Washington’s Mount Vernon*, <http://www.mountvernon.org/node/7871> (date of last access 4 April 2014).

⁹ Pogue, “The Domestic Architecture of Slavery,” p. 5.

¹⁰ Pogue, “The Domestic Architecture of Slavery,” p. 5.

¹¹ For more on the issue of slave breeding see: See: Herbert S. Klein and Stanley L. Engerman, “Fertility Differentials between Slaves in the United States and the British West Indies: A Note on Lactation Practices and Their Possible Implications,” *The William and Mary Quarterly, Third Series*, 35, no. 2 (April 1978), pp. 357-74; Richard H. Steckel, “Birth Weights and Infant Mortality among American Slaves,” *Explorations in Economic History*, vol. 23 (April 1986), pp. 173-98; Deborah Gray White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1999); Hilary McD. Beckles, “Property Rights in Pleasure: The Marketing of Enslaved Women’s Sexuality,” *Caribbean Slavery in the Atlantic World*, eds. Verene Shepherd and Hilary McD. Beckles (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers Limited, 2000) and Charmaine A. Nelson, “Racing Childhood: Representations of Black Girls in Canadian Art,” *Representing the Black Female Subject in Western Art* (New York: Routledge, 2010); Charmaine A. Nelson, *Slavery, Geography, and Empire in Nineteenth-Century Marine Landscapes of Montreal and Jamaica* (Surrey, UK: Ashgate Publishing, forthcoming 2016).

¹² R. F. Dalzell and L.B. Dalzell, *George Washington's Mount Vernon: At Home in Revolutionary America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.130.

¹³ Dalzell and Dalzell note the prevalence of malaria, hypothermia, and drowning, which resulted from the moist conditions at Mount Vernon. See Dalzell and Dalzell, *George Washington's Mount Vernon*, p. 131.

¹⁴ Dalzell and Dalzell, *George Washington's Mount Vernon*, p. 131.

¹⁵ Dalzell and Dalzell, *George Washington's Mount Vernon*, p. 131.

¹⁶ Dalzell and Dalzell, *George Washington's Mount Vernon*, p. 132.

¹⁷ Dalzell and Dalzell, *George Washington's Mount Vernon*, p. 132.

¹⁸ Dalzell and Dalzell, *George Washington's Mount Vernon*, p. 132.

¹⁹ Angela D. Mack and Stephen G. Hoffius, *Landscape of Slavery: The Plantation in American Art* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 2008), 97.

²⁰ Jennifer Wallach, “The View from the Slave Quarters,” *Reviews in American History*, vol. 36, no. 3 (2008), p. 384.

²¹ Wallach, “The View from the Slave Quarters,” p. 384.

²² Wallach, “The View from the Slave Quarters,” p. 385.

²³ Wallach, “The View from the Slave Quarters,” pp. 384-85.

²⁴ Wallach, “The View from the Slave Quarters,” p. 385.

²⁵ Orlando Patterson, “The Constituent Elements of Slavery,” *Caribbean Slavery in the Atlantic World: A Student Reader* eds. Verene Shepherd and Hilary McD. Beckles (Kingston, Jamaica: Ian Randle, 2000), p. 32.

²⁶ Mack and Hoffius, *Landscape of Slavery*, p. 98.

²⁷ Joseph Manca, *George Washington's Eye: Landscape, Architecture, and Design at Mount Vernon* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), p. 14.

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- ²⁸ D.J. Pogue, "Washington and Architecture," *George Washington's Mount Vernon*, <http://www.mountvernon.org/educational-resources/encyclopedia/washington-architecture> (date of last access 5 April 2014).
- ²⁹ Dalzell and Dalzell, *George Washington's Mount Vernon*, p. 83.
- ³⁰ John R. Lenz et al, "Pediment," *Grove Art Online*, <http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T065984> (date of last access 5 April 2014).
- ³¹ Pogue, "Washington and Architecture," (date of last access 5 April 2014).
- ³² Jennifer Wallach, "The View from the Slave Quarters," *Reviews in American History*, vol. 36, no. 3 (2008), p. 382.
- ³³ Dalzell and Dalzell, *George Washington's Mount Vernon*, p. 137.
- ³⁴ Dalzell and Dalzell, *George Washington's Mount Vernon*, p. 137.
- ³⁵ Dalzell and Dalzell, *George Washington's Mount Vernon*, p. 129.
- ³⁶ Mack and Hoffius, *Landscape of Slavery*, p. 104.
- ³⁷ Manca, *George Washington's Eye*, p. 56.
- ³⁸ Manca, *George Washington's Eye*, p. 56.
- ³⁹ Manca, *George Washington's Eye*, p. 57.
- ⁴⁰ Dalzell and Dalzell, *George Washington's Mount Vernon*, p. 5.
- ⁴¹ "Mount Vernon," *George Washington's Mount Vernon*, <http://www.mountvernon.org/educational-resources/encyclopedia/mount-vernon> (date of last access 5 April 2014).
- ⁴² Manca, *George Washington's Eye*, p. 58.
- ⁴³ Manca, *George Washington's Eye*, p. 19.
- ⁴⁴ Manca, *George Washington's Eye*, p. 19.
- ⁴⁵ Pogue, "The Domestic Architecture of Slavery," p. 20.
- ⁴⁶ Pogue, "The Domestic Architecture of Slavery," p. 20.
- ⁴⁷ Pogue, "The Domestic Architecture of Slavery," p. 20.
- ⁴⁸ Pogue, "The Domestic Architecture of Slavery," p. 5.
- ⁴⁹ Philip D. Morgan, "To Get Quit of Negroes: George Washington and Slavery," *Journal of American Studies*, vol. 39, no. 3 (2005), p. 420.
- ⁵⁰ As quoted from a letter by Captain William North, who visited Mount Vernon as Baron von Steuben's aide in 1784. See Morgan, "To Get Quit of Negroes," p. 420.
- ⁵¹ Morgan, "To Get Quit of Negroes," p. 419.
- ⁵² Manca, *George Washington's Eye*, p. 32.
- ⁵³ Manca, *George Washington's Eye*, p. 20.
- ⁵⁴ Pogue, "The Domestic Architecture of Slavery," p. 11.
- ⁵⁵ Pogue, "The Domestic Architecture of Slavery," p. 11.
- ⁵⁶ Pogue, "The Domestic Architecture of Slavery," p. 11.
- ⁵⁷ Pogue, "The Domestic Architecture of Slavery," p. 11.
- ⁵⁸ Pogue, "Washington and Architecture," (date of last access 5 April 2014).
- ⁵⁹ Dalzell and Dalzell, *George Washington's Mount Vernon*, p. 133.
- ⁶⁰ Pogue, "The Domestic Architecture of Slavery," p. 15.
- ⁶¹ Pogue, "The Domestic Architecture of Slavery," p. 15.
- ⁶² Pogue, "The Domestic Architecture of Slavery," p. 17.
- ⁶³ This situation recalls the claustrophobic conditions of slave ship tight-packing schemes. Beyond the physical trauma inflicted by Washington's outbuilding slave cabins, the half-story architecture also invokes the cultural trauma of the Middle Passage. See Marcus Rediker, *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (New York: Penguin Books, 2008).
- ⁶⁴ Pogue, "The Domestic Architecture of Slavery," p. 16. The consequences of building with un-milled logs are twofold. Since rounded beams do not sit flush to one another, there would have been many gaps for cold air to leak in. Moreover, narrow contact points result in an increased risk of building collapse.
- ⁶⁵ Pogue, "The Domestic Architecture of Slavery," p. 18.
- ⁶⁶ Pogue, "The Domestic Architecture of Slavery," p. 18.
- ⁶⁷ Pogue, "The Domestic Architecture of Slavery," p. 17.
- ⁶⁸ Dalzell and Dalzell, *George Washington's Mount Vernon*, p. 134.

On Caribbean plantations in colonies like Jamaica, such plots were referred to as provision grounds. See: Philip D. Morgan, "Slaves and Livestock in Eighteenth-Century Jamaica: Vineyard Pen, 175-1751," The William and Mary Quarterly, vol. 52, no. 1 (January 1995), pp. 47-76.

⁶⁹ Mack and Hoffius, Landscape of Slavery, p. 96.

⁷⁰ Pogue, "The Domestic Architecture of Slavery," p. 13.

⁷¹ Manca, George Washington's Eye, p. 19.

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PLATE LIST

Figure 1: George Washington, Mount Vernon Mansion House – Front View (after 1787), Wood, brick and limestone, approximately 90 ft. wide, 55 ft. tall, Alexandria, VA, United States. Photo credit: Ad Meskens [CC-BY-SA-3.0 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0>)], via Wikimedia Commons.

Figure 2: George Washington, Mount Vernon Mansion House – Rear View (after 1787), Wood, brick and limestone, approximately 90 ft. wide, 55 ft. tall, Alexandria, VA, United States. Photo credit: Martin Falbisoner [CC-BY-SA-3.0 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0>)], via Wikimedia Commons.

Figure 3: George Washington, Mount Vernon Servants' Hall (Left) (1775), Wood and limestone, approximately 45 ft. wide, 35 ft. tall, Alexandria, VA, United States. Photo credit: David Samuel [CC-BY-SA-3.0 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0>)], via Wikimedia Commons.

Figure 4: George Washington, The Greenhouse and the Adjoining Slave Quarter Wings (1792), Brick and tile, approximately 130 ft. wide, 45 ft. tall, Alexandria, VA, United States. Photo credit: Caitlin Childs (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/legalcode>), via Flickr Commons.

Figure 5: Anonymous Architect, Restored Outbuilding Slave Quarter at Mount Vernon (ca. 1790), Wood, approximately 12 x 12 ft., Alexandria, VA, United States. Photo credit: James Walsh (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/legalcode>), via Flickr Commons.

SLAVE DRESS AS A METHOD OF RESISTANCE

Amanda Leibovitch

For many years, historians believed that enslaved females played only a minor role in slave resistance in the American South.¹ Due to the fact that more men fought in large-scale revolts and rebellions, it was believed that women were uninvolved in the efforts to resist slavery.² However, enslaved women engaged in more subtle acts of resistance, such as how they dressed. Slaves were given plain clothing in order to instill a sense of hierarchy through dress.³ In order to retain African cultural practices, enslaved people modified the clothing they were given by their masters and mistresses in order to display an African American aesthetic. By wearing more elaborate, colourful, and even expensive clothing, they altered their social representation and relations of power.⁴ Masters routinely sexually exploited their female slaves and thus women as a group experienced oppression through their bodies.⁵ Therefore it was important for the body to be used as a site of resistance. Although social historians Mary Ellen Roach-Higgins and Joanne Eicher define dress as “an assemblage of modifications of the body and/or supplements to the body,” for the purpose of this article I will focus solely on women’s apparel as a method of resistance in the United States.⁶ After explaining the type of clothing given to the enslaved by their masters, I will demonstrate, using various artworks, how slaves resisted by wearing European clothing, dyeing their clothing, weaving new pieces, and ultimately wearing their fanciest outfits on special occasions.

In order to further ingrain the social hierarchy between enslaved individuals and their superiors, the majority of owners gave their slaves meager, plain clothing. As stated in the Memorial of the Citizens of

Figure 1: Isaac Mendes Belisario, “Creole Negroes,” (1838), Color lithograph, 37.5 x 26 cm, *Sketches of Character: In Illustration of the Habits, Occupation, and Costume of the Negro Population in the Island of Jamaica* (Kingston: Isaac Mendes Belisario, 1837), Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, Connecticut, USA



Drawn from Life and Lith. by J. M. Belisario

CREOLE NEGROES.

Kingston Jamaica.

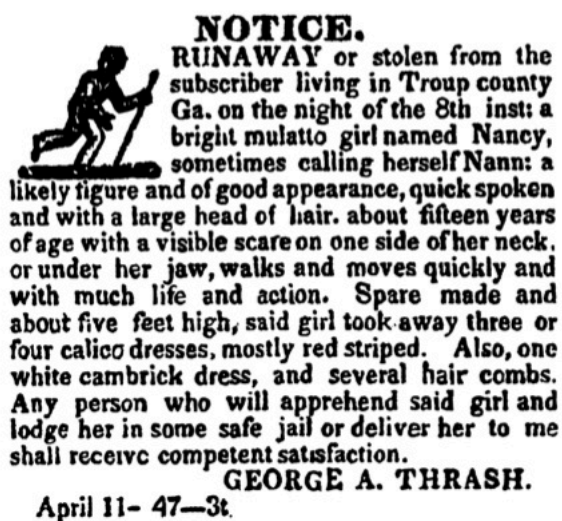
Printed by A. Duford

Charleston to the Senate and House of Representatives of the State of South Carolina, “every distinction should be created between the whites and the negroes, calculated to make the latter feel the superiority of the former”.⁷ South Carolina, along with many other states, went as far as to prescribe what materials were suitable for slave clothing.⁸ It was believed that slaves should only be allowed to wear coarse materials.⁹ Slave owners in Georgia usually supplied their slaves with clothing once or twice a year.¹⁰ An excellent source for information about slave dress is runaway slave advertisements due to their exhaustive descriptions of how the enslaved fugitives looked. There is less information available in newspaper notices about female slaves’ clothing due to the fact that fewer women ran away.¹¹ However, women were often described as wearing dresses. Most dresses were made of homespun, or calico cloth. Homespun was usually constructed on the plantation by a local weaver and was made of cotton or wool yarns of a plain weave.¹² Dress fabrics were plain, checked or striped and plain in colour as well. Dresses were straight and stingingly cut in order to avoid wasting fabric.¹³ However, slaves repeatedly contested established ideas of what they should wear.¹⁴

The image Creole Negroes (1838) shows that wearing expensive, European clothing was a form of resistance [fig. 1]. The painting by Isaac Mendes Belisario, which was created in Kingston, Jamaica, consists of four sketches of creole black men and women.¹⁵ This image provides a sense of the different fashion styles for men and women during the 1830’s. Their outfits are a mix of European and African-style dress. The woman in the upper left corner of the painting sold sausages on the streets, which was considered one of the lowest occupations.¹⁶ However, it is clear through the head-tie, jewellery, European apparel, and small blue purse that she carries, that this woman is very committed to appearing respectable. Although this image depicts slaves from Jamaica, it illustrates a common style of dress in the United States as well.

Upon transitioning from African to American culture, many enslaved people happily appropriated European-style clothing.¹⁷ Authors Shane White and Graham White state: “it appears that in the 18th century the creativity of Africans and African Americans in shaping their appearance lay...in the way they combined in their clothing ensembles items made elsewhere”.¹⁸ Possessing European-style clothing was a sign of status.¹⁹ The clothing of elite women consisted of silk gowns and lace accessories. However, it was very difficult for the enslaved to get their hands on these expensive items. There is ample evidence that slaves stole from their masters, as well as from other slaves.²⁰ Slave owners often gave extra clothing or hand-me down clothing to slaves that they favoured.²¹ Furthermore, they also allowed the enslaved to earn small amounts of money on the side.²² After their day’s work on the plantation, enslaved women would perform a second shift of work.²³ Many created goods such as baskets and clothing to sell, while others grew produce on the little bit of land that they were allotted to grow their own food.²⁴ Slaves could spend the extra money they earned on clothing. This desire to buy apparel was parallel to the interest of the elite and middle classes in consumption and fashion.²⁵ However, White and White argue, “generally the point of slaves wearing such clothes was not so much that they were adopting white values, but that they were subverting white authority”.²⁶

In runaway slave advertisements found in the Columbus Enquirer (1838) and the Baltimore



Columbus Enquirer, April 27, 1833.

Figure 2: George A. Thrash, "NOTICE," *Columbus Enquirer* (Columbus, GA), 27 April 1833, p. 4. Presented online by the Digital Library of Georgia.

Sun (1858), one can see that another way enslaved women resisted white values was by dyeing their clothing [fig. 2 and fig. 3]. The slave advertisement from the *Columbus Enquirer*, a Georgia newspaper, describes "a bright mulatto girl named Nancy", who took with her "three or four calico dresses, mostly red striped".²⁷ She also had "one white cambrick dress, and several hair combs".²⁸ The slave advertisement from Baltimore, Maryland, discusses a girl named Sophia, who "took with her a green jersey and a red skirt, with other clothing".²⁹ Slave owners distributed very plain clothing to their slaves.

Since the clothes that they were given were either white or blue,³⁰ Nancy's and Sophia's red striped dresses, green jersey, and red skirt, all point to the fact that slaves often dyed their clothing.

Author Patricia Hunt-Hurst found black, brown, claret, gray, orange, pink, red, and yellow dresses in runaway slave advertisements.³¹ The dye generally came from a variety of natural sources. For example blue came from indigo, while brown came from tree bark and nut hulls.³² Tempie Durham from North Carolina recounted her mother's skill of dyeing clothing. She said, "dey wuzn' nothig' se didn' know 'bout dyein'. She knew every kind of root, bark, leaf an' berry dat made red, blue, green, or whatever color she wanted".³³ After a full day of work on the plantation, women would spend their evenings turning the plain, uncoloured fabrics into decorative cloth. They were able to set the colors fast in the cloth with saline solutions, vinegar and water, or urine.³⁴ As discussed in Steeve O. Buckridge's book *Language of Dress: Resistance and Accommodation in Jamaica, 1760-1890* (2004), the usage of plant substances in the production and care of clothing was a way of retaining African culture.³⁵

The painting *Dressing for the Carnival* (1877) shows the importance of weaving and patchwork in preserving an African American aesthetic [fig. 4]. The image, which was originally titled *Sketch - 4th of July in Virginia*, depicts the lives of former slaves during the first decade of emancipation.³⁶ Two women are altering the clothes of the central male figure, while many children look on. The central figure of the image is being dressed up as a clown for the festival. However, the strips of cloth being sewn onto his costume came from African ceremonial dress. The painting reflects the "dislocation of traditional African culture and the beginnings of its transformation into a new tradition".³⁷ It was not uncommon for favoured slaves and those

working as servants, to receive second hand clothing from their owners. Therefore, in some cases, patching up the clothing was a matter of necessity.³⁸

Slaves needed to alter the clothing in order for it to fit properly. African American women also believed that it was inappropriate to have one's feet and ankles show below the dress, and therefore they mixed new and old cloth.³⁹ However, during the latter stages of the Civil War, patching was considered stylish among African Americans.⁴⁰ They

used varied materials and patterns, and contrasting colors. Robert Farris Thompson, author of *Flash of the Spirit: African Art and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (1984) argues that “‘visual aliveness’ and vibrancy are achieved in textile production by the deliberate clash, not only between colours, but between the variously patterned and unpatterned narrow strips of which the material is made”.⁴¹ In contrasting these colors, women aimed to create unpredictability and movement in their patterns.⁴² These were the same designs used to make African American quilts. Although women in the American South did not have access to West African narrow-strip looms, they were able to weave irregular patterns into broad-strip cloth that were similar to West African designs.⁴³ These African textile traditions that were handed down to African American women, helped shape dress practices during antebellum slavery.

However, the image *A Live Oak Avenue* (1859) demonstrates that slaves only wore the fancy European-style clothing, as well as the colourful African-style dresses, on special occasions. The major differentiation in African American dress was between what slaves wore during their work days on Monday to Saturday, and what they wore to outlawed slave parties, Sunday church, the slave festival Jonkonnu, and other special occasions.⁴⁴ The print *Live Oak Avenue*, found in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* (1859), shows three people walking along a narrow path to get to an outlaw slave party [fig. 5]. The path is lined with very tall trees. Enslaved people used secret paths around the plantation to escape into hidden areas in the woods where illicit parties were held.⁴⁵ Although one cannot see the details of their clothing, one can assume that they are wearing their finer clothing to the party. These parties occurred sporadically, based on the availability of resources, and the emotional climate of the slave community.⁴⁶ Women went through a great deal of trouble to create, earn or steal good quality

\$400 REWARD.—Ran away, or was enticed away from the subscriber, on the night of the 27th Dec'r, (inst.) my NEGROES GEORGE, SOPHIA, and GRASON. George is a light color, about 5 feet 9 or 10 inches high, round face, fat and good-looking. Sophia is about 20 years of age, rather dark color, and is lame in the left leg from a sprain of the ankle, which has turned her foot out much more than is natural; took with her a green jockey and a red skirt, with other clothing. Grason is about 12 or 13 years of age, and a brother of the girl, and about the same color; had on when he left green pants and a buff-colored frock coat, and a cloth cap. George had on when he left a green coat, (servant's wear,) mixed pants, (cassinet,) black cloth cap, and a red neck tie.

I will give the above reward if said Negroes are brought home to me, or secured in jail so that I get them again; or I will give \$200 for George, \$100 for Sophia, and \$100 for Grason.

S. S. BOGGS,
Prospect Hill, near Mount de Sales,
Baltimore county, Md.

Ed 29 St*:

Figure 3: S.S. Boggs, “\$400 REWARD,” *Baltimore Sun* (Baltimore, MD), 27 December 1858, p. 3, Maryland State Archives



Figure 4: Winslow Homer, Dressing for the Carnival (1877), Oil on canvas, 50.8 x 76.2 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, New York, USA

clothing in order to dress up.⁴⁷ They wore their best clothing in order to demonstrate the difference between “the time that belonged to the master and the time that was their own”.⁴⁸ They took advantage of these opportunities to reclaim their bodies from the exploitation and degradation of their masters. They used their bodies for personal expression, pleasure, and resistance.⁴⁹ The danger involved in attending such parties demonstrates how important it was for slave women to reclaim their own bodies.⁵⁰

The enslaved often engaged in courting rituals at these parties. For slave weddings, attendees wore cleaner and newer versions of their everyday garments. The bride and groom often wore the type of apparel that whites associated with weddings.⁵¹ Slave brides wore white dresses that had small, significant, hints of an African American aesthetic.⁵²

However, women’s skills with dyeing and weaving cloth were displayed to their full effect at Church on Sundays.⁵³ Due to the fact that most slave owners were white Christians, in the eighteenth century, Sunday had become the slaves’ day off. However, by the 1840’s and 1850’s many slaves had adopted the Christian religion or used Church services as an outlet to engage in African religious traditions.⁵⁴ Another interesting and revealing use of more elaborate clothing during this period occurred during Jonkonnu. This was a slave festival that took place between the 1820’s and the Civil War, in a small area of North Carolina as well as certain parts of southern Virginia and the Caribbean.⁵⁵ During these festivals slaves exposed their most extreme forms of style.

One can see that enslaved people used these various outlets to express themselves, retain their African culture, and subvert the plantation hierarchy. For enslaved women, clothing constituted more than mere body covering, but rather it became an important means of exhibiting their individuality.⁵⁶ One must acknowledge that the whole process of acquiring extra clothing, dyeing clothing, and weaving and patching clothing in poorly lit cabins after a long day of work in the fields, was an extraordinary achievement of enslaved females.⁵⁷ The body was a significant site of suffering for women.

Therefore, reclaiming their bodies and expressing themselves using their bodies

was of utmost importance to enslaved women.⁵⁸ Although slave dress might not be the most extreme method of resistance, by dressing up for special occasions and providing clothing for the people of their communities, women found a way to retain their dignity as human beings, rather than solely obedient slaves.



Figure 5: Anonymous, "A Live Oak Avenue," Harper's New Monthly Magazine (New York City, NY), Vol. 19, Issue 114, November 1859, p. 733, Courtesy of Cornell University Library, Making of America Digital Collection

ENDNOTES:

¹ Amrita Chakrabarti Myers "'Sisters in Arms': Slave Women's Resistance to Slavery in the United States," Past Imperfect, vol. 5 (1996), p. 141.

² Chakrabarti Myers "'Sisters in Arms'," p. 141.

³ Shane White and Graham White, "Slave Clothing and African-American Culture in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," Past and Present, no. 148 (August 1995), p. 153.

⁴ Jessica Zlotnik, "Women Seeking Freedom: Gender, Oppression & Resistance in Caribbean Slave Society," Caribbean Quilt, vol. 2 (2012), p. 156.

⁵ Stephanie M. H. Camp, "The Pleasures of Resistance: Enslaved Women and Body Politics in the Plantation South, 1830-1861," The Journal of Southern History, Vol. 68, No. 3 (August 2002), p. 540.

⁶ Mary Ellen Roach-Higgins, Joanne Eicher, and Kim K.P. Johnson, eds., Dress and Identity (New York: Fairchild, 1995), pp. 7-10.

⁷ "Strategies and Forms of Resistance," Women – Making History (2011), p. 17. The citation is from the "Memorial of the Citizens of Charleston to the Senate and House of Representatives of the State of South Carolina [Charleston 1822]."

⁸ White and White, "Slave Clothing and African-American Culture," p. 154.

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- ⁹ "Strategies and Forms of Resistance," p. 17.
- ¹⁰ Patricia Hunt-Hurst, "'Round Homespun Coat & Pantaloon of the Same': Slave Clothing as Reflected in Fugitive Slave Advertisements in Antebellum Georgia," *The Georgia Historical Quarterly*, vol. 83, no. 4 (Winter 1999), p. 728.
- ¹¹ Hunt-Hurst, "'Round Homespun Coat & Pantaloon of the Same'," p. 733.
- ¹² Hunt-Hurst, "'Round Homespun Coat & Pantaloon of the Same'," p. 733.
- ¹³ Camp, "The Pleasures of Resistance," p. 559.
- ¹⁴ White and White, "Slave Clothing and African-American Culture," p. 155.
- ¹⁵ "Creole Men and Women, Jamaica, 1838," *The Atlantic Slave Trade and Slave Life in the Americas*, <http://hitchcock.itc.virginia.edu/Slavery/details.php?categorynum=18&categoryName=&theRecord=3&recordCount=65> (date of last access 9 April 2014)
- ¹⁶ "Creole Men and Women," (date of last access 9 April 2014)
- ¹⁷ White and White, "Slave Clothing and African-American Culture," p. 163.
- ¹⁸ White and White, "Slave Clothing and African-American Culture," p. 165.
- ¹⁹ White and White, "Slave Clothing and African-American Culture," p. 153.
- ²⁰ White and White, "Slave Clothing and African-American Culture," p. 159.
- ²¹ Patricia Morton, *Discovering the Women in Slavery: Emancipating Perspectives on the American Past* (University of Georgia Press, 1996), p. 228.
- ²² White and White, "Slave Clothing and African-American Culture," p. 159.
- ²³ Camp, "The Pleasures of Resistance," p. 562.
- ²⁴ White and White, "Slave Clothing and African-American Culture," p. 159.
- Similarly, plots of undesirable agriculture land known as provision grounds were also loaned to the enslaved in Caribbean contexts like Jamaica where they were expected to grow much of their food. See: Philip D. Morgan, "Slaves and Livestock in Eighteenth-Century Jamaica: Vineyard Pen, 175-1751," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, vol. 52, no. 1 (January 1995), pp. 47-76.
- ²⁵ White and White, "Slave Clothing and African-American Culture," p. 160.
- ²⁶ White and White, "Slave Clothing and African-American Culture," p. 162.
- ²⁷ George A. Thrash, "NOTICE," *Columbus Enquirer* (Columbus, GA), 27 April 1833, p. 4.
- ²⁸ Thrash, "NOTICE," p. 4.
- ²⁹ S.S. Boggs, "\$400 REWARD," *Baltimore Sun* (Baltimore, MD), 27 December 1858, p. 3, Maryland State Archives.
- S.S. Bogg's "\$400 REWARD" was found on Maryland State Archive's online database. Runaway slave advertisements are organized by date, newspaper, names, and slave owners. The issue is not provided.
- ³⁰ Hunt-Hurst, "'Round Homespun Coat & Pantaloon of the Same'," p. 734.
- ³¹ Hunt-Hurst, "'Round Homespun Coat & Pantaloon of the Same'," p. 734.
- ³² Hunt-Hurst, "'Round Homespun Coat & Pantaloon of the Same'," p. 734.
- ³³ White and White, "Slave Clothing and African-American Culture," p. 167.
- ³⁴ Camp, "The Pleasures of Resistance," p. 563.
- ³⁵ Steeve O. Buckridge, "The Role of Plant Substances in Jamaican Slave Dress," *The Language of Dress: Resistance and Accommodation in Jamaica, 1760-1890* (Kingston: The University of the West Indies Press, 2004), pp. 61-73.
- ³⁶ "Dressing for the Carnival," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/22.220> (date of last access 9 April 2014)
- ³⁷ "Dressing for the Carnival," (date of last access 9 April 2014)
- ³⁸ White and White, "Slave Clothing and African-American Culture," p. 168.
- ³⁹ White and White, "Slave Clothing and African-American Culture," p. 169.
- ⁴⁰ White and White, "Slave Clothing and African-American Culture," p. 168.
- ⁴¹ Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African Art and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York, 1984), pp. 209.
- ⁴² Michelle R. Malson et al. (eds.), *Black Women in America: Social Science Perspectives* (Chicago, 1990), p. 11.
- ⁴³ White and White, "Slave Clothing and African-American Culture," p. 170.
- ⁴⁴ White and White, "Slave Clothing and African-American Culture," p. 174.
- ⁴⁵ Camp, "The Pleasures of Resistance," p. 534.
- ⁴⁶ Camp, "The Pleasures of Resistance," p. 535.
- ⁴⁷ Camp, "The Pleasures of Resistance," p. 560.

⁴⁸ Camp, "The Pleasures of Resistance," p. 558.

⁴⁹ Camp, "The Pleasures of Resistance," p. 561.

⁵⁰ Camp, "The Pleasures of Resistance," p. 566.

⁵¹ White and White, "Slave Clothing and African-American Culture," p. 181.

⁵² White and White, "Slave Clothing and African-American Culture," p. 181.

For example, along with her mistress's white dress, the enslaved woman Harriet Jones wore a red sash with a big bow in the back, red stockings, and a wide brim hat on her wedding day. It is highly unlikely that Harriet Jones's mistress would have worn a red sash and red stockings to her wedding.

⁵³ White and White, "Slave Clothing and African-American Culture," p. 174.

⁵⁴ White and White, "Slave Clothing and African-American Culture," p. 180.

⁵⁵ White and White, "Slave Clothing and African-American Culture," p. 182.

⁵⁶ Morton, Discovering the Women in Slavery, p. 236.

⁵⁷ White and White, "Slave Clothing and African-American Culture," p. 172.

⁵⁸ Camp, "The Pleasures of Resistance," p. 558.

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PLATE LIST

Figure 1: Isaac Mendes Belisario, “Creole Negroes,” (1838), Color lithograph, 37.5 x 26 cm, Sketches of Character: In Illustration of the Habits, Occupation, and Costume of the Negro Population in the Island of Jamaica (Kingston: Isaac Mendes Belisario, 1837), Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, Connecticut, USA

Figure 2: George A. Thrash, “NOTICE,” Columbus Enquirer (Columbus, GA), 27 April 1833, p. 4. Presented online by the Digital Library of Georgia.

Figure 3: S.S. Boggs, “\$400 REWARD,” Baltimore Sun (Baltimore, MD), 27 December 1858, p. 3, Maryland State Archives

Figure 4: Winslow Homer, Dressing for the Carnival (1877), Oil on canvas, 50.8 x 76.2 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, New York, USA

Figure 5: Anonymous, “A Live Oak Avenue,” Harper’s New Monthly Magazine (New York City, NY), Vol. 19, Issue 114, November 1859, p. 733, Courtesy of Cornell University Library, Making of America Digital Collection

“PARTED, PLAITED, AND PILED”: HISTORICIZING SONYA CLARK'S USE OF BLACK HAIR AS SIGN, SUBJECT, AND MEDIUM

Kristen Pye



Figure 1: Sonya Clark, *Heritage Pearls*, (2010), Hair. Photo credit: Taylor Dabney, courtesy of artist.

If the body functions as a site for constructing both self and social identity, the “hypervisibility” of hair, as Angela Rosenthal writes, renders it a malleable and “highly communicative” medium of cultural production.¹ As it inscribes meaning on the body's most prominent surface, a hairstyle characterizes and codes its bearer in the “most corporeal of fashions” within a semiotic discourse subject to the sign's intrinsic volatility.² Kobena Mercer considers hair “second only to skin” as a mark of racial otherness, and by extension, a site for the historical devaluation of the enslaved body in a trans Atlantic economy forged on the basis of blackness as capital.³ Within this system, a slave's hair, the renewable quality of its roots, provided a rare space for the expression of individual agency against a system that worked to control and commodify the slave body. It is this cultural tradition that Sonya Clark, an African American textile artist, reconstructs in her work through the reimaging and repurposing of black hair as both “her medium and her message.”⁴ In this article, I will show that through the valorization of black hair as art in Clark's work, its connection, biological and imagined, to the artists’ African roots, and her material use of actual black hair as fibre, Clark's art acts as legacy to, and site for, considerations of black cultural production, preservation, and resistance in the American slaving paradigm. In her crafting of the cultural politics of black hair, Clark assigns contemporary meaning and value to a subject and medium through which African American slaves historically asserted cultural agency and preservation against systems of racial oppression.

Hair, as an "alterable sign" of phenotype, constructs racial difference by a less fixed process than that of skin colour or facial features and functions as a key, albeit unstable, "ethnic signifier."⁵ This mutability is evidenced in the "popular" hair binary of "good hair/bad hair," by which Ginetta Candelario notes, "Bad hair is hair that is perceived to be tightly curled, coarse, and kinky. Good hair is hair that is soft and silky, straight, wavy, or loosely curled."⁶ The obvious implication of Candelario's description is that typically European hair textures trump and usurp in value hair that is typically African within a culture, which has historically constructed female beauty as a function of whiteness.

Mary Cathryn Cain writes that in the antebellum period, white women emphasized and asserted "moral leadership and...republican virtue" through an obsessive maintenance of those traits which signified their manifest removal from the "labors and degradation of slavery."⁷ Moreover, Vetta L. Sanders Thomas suggests that,

The reality of violent enforcement of slave status, and primary and secondary gains possible through submission made internalization of this ideology a viable option for some enslaved and bonded Africans. Included in this process was a denigration of African features and attributes....[T]he characterization of hair as "good or bad" represents the degree that the oppressive system has been internalized.⁸

It is this culture, which Rose Weitz writes necessitates that "to be most feminine and hence most attractive, women's hair should be long, curly or wavy...preferably blonde [and] definitely *not*...gray or kinky," a prejudice to which Clark makes reference in her work Extensions in Blonde (1997).⁹

With cloth, thread, fringe, and hair baubles, Clark constructs an imitation of a crown of black hair into which is braided dozens of short golden yellow plaits. The discordant contrast of colour, which results in Clark's combination of hair types on a single wig, underscores the inanity of conformity to the "fair [and] sinuous" European ideal.¹⁰ In Extensions in Blonde (1997), yellow braids do not function to improve the hairstyle, but rather, are the very element that produces "bad" hair, inverting an "ethnic scale" which ranks typically European hair as "fairest" and therefore, most desirable.¹¹ In satirizing the European aesthetic of blondness, Extensions in Blonde (1997) reaffirms the aesthetic value of black hair alone.

Elsewhere, Clark rejects the notion of black hair as lack in Heritage Pearls (2010) [fig. 1], wherein actual black hair is sculpted into the shape of a string of cultured pearls, appropriating a symbol of classic all-American whiteness while simultaneously assigning value to black hair as a precious keepsake. In casting black hair as jewellery, Heritage Pearls (2010) furthermore conceives of black hair as an heirloom to be shared between generations, and valued as one would a gemstone. Candelario writes that it is "at the salon [where] girls and women learn to transform their bodies—through hair care...and so forth—into socially valued, culturally specific, and race-determining displays of femininity," a process Clark rejects through the making of "unsocialized" black hair into fine art.¹² The artistic distinction Clark assigns to black hair affirms it as a symbol not of racial inferiority but of empowerment and one to be ennobled aesthetically as an emblem of intergenerational relationships and ancestral roots.

Invoking a double meaning of the concept of roots, Clark speaks to the tendency of her work to summon, through the subject of black hair, questions of chronology and family wisdom, writing, "As carrier of DNA, hair is the essence of identity. Deep within each strand, the vestiges of our roots resound."¹³ Born in Washington, DC to a Trinidadian father and Jamaican mother, Clark's art is a reflection of her African American experience, African Caribbean heritage, and travels in West Africa, where she learned how to weave and dye textiles in the tradition of the Yoruba people.¹⁴ In Yoruba culture, the head, as the site of the soul, is considered a point of sacrality, or *ashe*, into which hair is literally rooted, a belief shared by many African diasporic cultures.¹⁵

Clark, as a diasporic artist, seeks to represent this belief, testifying to a perception of the head as "the center where cultural influences are absorbed, siphoned, and retained...the site where we process the world through the senses."¹⁶

Shane White and Graham White note that,

...in African cultures, the grooming and styling of hair have long been important social rituals...reflecting tribal affiliation, status, sex, age, occupation, and the like....[T]he cutting, shaving, wrapping, and braiding of hair were centuries-old arts.¹⁷

Knowing this, slave owners used head shaving as a form of punishment, sadism, and social control in plantation society.¹⁸ Where possible then, many enslaved African American, as evidenced in testimony from runaway slave advertisements, defiantly styled their hair in ways that preserved and hybridized African hair practice. The runaway William Carroll of Williamsburg, for instance, wore his hair thick and "cut on the fore part of his head;"¹⁹ a runaway named Jacob wore "his Hair cut short on his Crown, but curls round his Neck...".²⁰ Acknowledging the provenance of African American hairstyle practice, Clark develops this ancestral relationship in her work Roots (2003), in which she sculpts from linen and wire dozens of locks of black hair spliced at the root and hung in rows along a tapestry. The composition is one of an abstracted family tree, whereby Clark uses the locks of her ancestors, rather than their names, to invoke their legacy and situate herself within it through the shared trait of hair, thick, and dark.

In Roots and Branches (2002), Clark weaves human hair and copper into the shape of branches, again making reference to the notion of hair as both root and medium of her

Figure 2: Sonya Clark, Mom's Wisdom, (2011), Hair. Photo credit: Sonya Clark, courtesy of artist.



family tree. Just as Clark braided her sister's hair as a youth, and had hers braided in kind, so she repeats the ritual of weaving and twisting black hair into twigs on each branch of her work.²¹ Monica A. Coleman considers the process of hands working in hair as a ritual foundational to ancestral ties:

Hands working in hair are clearly ritual symbols.... Just as a woman's hair was done by her mother or grandmother, so she also does the hair of her daughter and granddaughter.... As hands move through hair, they link the past, present, and future, connecting ancestors, elders, and youth....²²

As a fibre artist, Clark's hands are embedded in her craft, a link, as the artist notes, to the enslaved who arrived to the "New World" empty-handed but for remembered methods of cultural expression, "empty handed but not empty headed."²³ Mom's Wisdom (2011) [fig. 2], depicts the artist's hands cradling between them a ball of her mother's hair, turned light grey with age. Within her hands, Clark protects her mother's roots, and the strands of continuity between her ancestors' and her own conception of hair as a site for cultural preservation and production. Clark's imaging of roots thereby works to create within her ancestral line a common cultural history through the medium of the hair which genetically unites them, a lineage preserved in Roots and Branches (2002) in a durable casing of copper metal, and throughout Clark's work with real human hair.

Of her lived experience with black hair, Clark writes, "Short, cropped, and natural. That was my hairstyle for many years. When I started allowing it to grow, hair, which had long been a subject in my work also became my medium."²⁴ In

utilizing both her own hair and that of close friends and family in her fibre art, Clark privileges the fundamental material properties of black hair that similarly grounded the communality of hair culture significant to enslaved African Americans, wherein men assisted each other in styling and shaving, and mothers tamed the unruly hair of children with "cards".²⁵

Clark's use of black hair in her work is a rejection of the colour caste system imposed by the hegemonic processes of slavery, and cultivated, Cain suggests, by "antebellum middle-class



Figure 3: Sonya Clark, Adrienne's Tale, (2008), Hair.
Photo credit: Taylor Dabney, courtesy of artist.

white women [who] threw up ideological obstacles that their female descendants—both black and white—would later struggle to overcome.”²⁶ In Clark's work *Adrienne's Tale* (2008) [fig. 3], for instance, she repurposes the shorn dreadlocks of a biracial friend who identifies as black.²⁷ In not discarding her friend's locks, but instead recycling them as an artwork, Clark “countervalorizes” connotations of “nappiness,” since the sculpting of *Adrienne's Tale* (2008) relies on the materiality unique to black hair which allows it to be “matted” into dreadlocks-cum-art.²⁸ *Adrienne's Tale* (2002) is a celebration of the texture that “white racism had devalORIZED, a texture that alone is capable of being shaped into the dreadlocks' distinctive configurations.”²⁹ Namita Gupta Wiggers applauds Clark's embrace of “the specificities of her hair, challenging the preconceived cultural notions embedded in such polarities as rough versus silky,” a task the artist revisits in *Self-portrait* (2005).³⁰ Weitz reflects on the relationship between hair and slave resistance in writing that,

Like slaves' rebellious songs, women's rebellious hairstyles can allow them to distance themselves from the system that would subordinate them, to express their dissatisfaction, to identify like-minded others, and to challenge others to think about their own actions and beliefs.³¹

By reducing herself in *Self-portrait* (2005) to a single twisted lock of her own black hair, Clark does not undercut the depth of her character, but to the contrary, points to the singular significance of hair in constructing the semiotic self. By weaving actual black hair into works of art, Clark bridges the space between her medium, her message, and her literal and symbolic roots as artist.

Mercer writes that while hair is “merely a raw material,” it is “constantly processed by cultural practices which thus invest it with meanings and value.”³² In her work with black hair as both culture and fibre, Sonya Clark crafts a contemporary artistic legacy for the hair culture and practice of enslaved African Americans. As a site for cultural production, preservation, and resistance, hair provided the enslaved black person a rare space for the assertion of individual agency against systems of racial oppression. In uplifting black hair to the realm of art, underscoring its genetic and symbolic meanings for the African diasporic community, and employing it as fibrous material, Clark constructs an aestheticized heir to a trans Atlantic hair heritage.

ENDNOTES:

¹ Angela Rosenthal, “Raising Hair,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol. 38, no 1, Hair (Fall, 2004), pp. 6, 11.

² Shane White and Graham White, “Slave Hair and African American Culture in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries,” *The Journal of Southern History*, vol. 61, no. 1 (Feb., 1995), p. 48.

³ Kobena Mercer, “Black Hair/Style Politics,” *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p.

⁴ Ashley Kistler, “Authentic Obsessions,” *Sonya Clark*, (San Antonio: Accurate Litho & Printing, 2011), p. 19.

⁵ Mercer, “Black Hair/Style Politics,” p. 103.

⁶ Ginetta Candelario, “Hair Race-ing: Dominican Beauty Culture and Identity Production,” *Meridians*, vol. 1, no. 1 (Autumn, 2000), p. 129.

⁷ Mary Cathryn Cain, “The Art and Politics of Looking White: Beauty Practice among White Women in Antebellum America,” *Winterthur Portfolio*, vol. 42, no. 1 (Spring 2008), pp. 28, 32.

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- ⁸ Vetta L. Sanders Thompson, "African American Body Image: Identity and Physical Self-Acceptance," *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations*, vol. 30, no. 2, *Black Psychology: African-Centered Epistemology* (2006), pp. 44-51.
- ⁹ Rose Weitz, "Women and Their Hair: Seeking Power through Resistance and Accommodation," *Gender and Society*, vol. 15, no. 5 (Oct., 2001), p. 672.
- ¹⁰ Rosenthal, "Raising Hair," p. 4.
- ¹¹ Mercer, "Black Hair/Style Politics," p. 103.
- ¹² Candelario, "Hair Race-ing," p. 135.
- ¹³ Sonya Clark, *hair series*, nd., np.
- ¹⁴ Sonya Clark, "Biography," Sonya Clark, <http://sonyaclark.com/bio/biography/> (date of last access 5 April 2014)
- ¹⁵ Marlisa Sanders, "Cultivated Hair," *The International Review of African American Art Plus*, <http://iraaa.museum.hamptonu.edu/page/Cultivated-Hair> (date of last access 5 April 2014)
- ¹⁶ Beverly Gordon, "Sonya Clark: References to Metaphor and History," *Fiberarts*, vol. 25, no. 4 (Jan/Feb., 1999), p. 23.
- ¹⁷ White and White, "Slave Hair," pp. 49-50.
- ¹⁸ Tracey Owens Patton, "Hey Girl, Am I More Than My Hair?: African American Women and Their Struggles with Beauty, Body Image, and Hair," *NWSA Journal*, vol. 18, no. 2 (Summer, 2006), p. 28.
- ¹⁹ [No headline], *Virginia Gazette (Williamsburg, Virginia)*, no. 228, Thursday, 20 September, 1770, p. 4.
- ²⁰ [No headline], *The New-York Mercury (New York, New York)*, no. 672, Monday, 20 September, 1764, p. 2.
- ²¹ Sanders, "Cultivated Hair," (date of last access 5 April 2014)
- ²² Monica A. Coleman, " 'The Work of Your Own Hands': Doing Black Women's Hair as Religious Language in Gloria Naylor's 'Mama Day'," *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, vol. 85, no. 1/2 (Spring/Summer 2002), pp. 133-134.
- ²³ Jean Robertson, "Sonya Y. S. Clark," *Sculpture*, vol. 21, no. 10 (Dec., 2002), p. 71.
- ²⁴ Clark, *hair series*, np.
- ²⁵ A card is a comb-like tool used to create a woolly surface on cloth; White and White, "Slave Hair and African American Culture in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," pp. 69-70.
- ²⁶ Cain, "The Art and Politics of Looking White," p. 50.
- ²⁷ Marissa Hermanson, "Crowning Craftsmanship," *R Home*, (Sep/Oct., 2013), np.
- ²⁸ Mercer, "Black Hair/Style Politics," p. 108.
- ²⁹ White and White, "Slave Hair," p. 51.
- ³⁰ Namita Gupta Wiggers, "Sonya Clark: Corporeal Materiality," *Sonya Clark*, (San Antonio: Accurate Litho & Printing, 2011), p. 10.
- ³¹ Weitz, "Women and Their Hair," p. 670.
- ³² Mercer, "Black Hair/Style Politics," p. 100.

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PLATE LIST

Figure 1: Sonya Clark, Heritage Pearls, (2010), Hair. Photo credit: Taylor Dabney, courtesy of artist.

Figure 2: Sonya Clark, Mom's Wisdom, (2011), Hair. Photo credit: Sonya Clark, courtesy of artist.

Figure 3: Sonya Clark, Adrienne's Tale, (2008), Hair. Photo credit: Taylor Dabney, courtesy of artist.

**GRUELLING RECOVERIES: HEALING AND UNEARTHING THE SOUTHERN
U.S. FEMALE SLAVE'S LABOUR IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY INSTALLATIONS OF
ALISON SAAR AND TANISHA MAPP**

Emily Wing

Alison Saar and Tanisha Mapp resist the infectious aesthetic current certain critics harshly but duly call “postmodern nothingness” on the basis of the current’s repudiation of representation.¹ Perhaps this is why Tanisha Mapp, a Montreal artist that explicitly invokes themes of slavery and who also exhibited at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts for (and only for) Black History Month has assumed very little media—let alone scholarly—coverage.² Conversely, Californian artist Alison Saar who similarly embraces the representational potential of art has been embraced by critics and thus established for decades. Saar’s prolificacy has nevertheless incited a reductive approach to the analysis of her work: scholars have repetitively



Figure 1: Alison Saar, *Weight* (2012), iron, wood, rope, scythe, skillet, chains, boxing gloves, cotton balance, Otis's Ben Maltz Gallery, Los Angeles, United States.

examined her work *en masse*; close visual readings of her individual pieces are scant.

It is my intention to locate one of Saar and Mapp’s works in the context of Trans Atlantic Slavery. Since psychic trauma (and the artistic process in general) are a-linear and thus resist geographic and temporal fixity, it is perhaps a

nonsensical task to pinpoint the geographic origins of the slavery themes found in Saar’s *Weight* (2012)

[fig.1] and Mapp’s *Africa Gave Life* (early 21st c.).³ I will, however, conduct a very close visual reading of both works. The minimal commentary on Mapp’s artwork in conjunction with a close visual reading of both works elicit the particular points of focus for this paper. I will frame my focus with two valences of *recovery*. Saar’s *Weight* and Mapp’s *Africa Gave Life* prompt “the recovery of a ... thing to a healthy or normal condition or to consciousness” and secondly—or by extension—engender “cure or healing.”⁴

I will use the symbols of the enslaved female’s labour located in both Saar and Mapp’s works as points of entry. For Mapp, this means focusing on the sweet grass baskets of her display in conjunction with the allusion to rice in her artist statement. Saar’s piece recovers less

coherently a particular labour; its generic symbols serve to emphasize the conflation of the enslaved and de-individualized female body with her labour. I will further limit my geographic scope to slavery in the Southern United States, as Mapp explicitly invokes her piece's theme, rice, as "the main [eighteenth-century] cash crop in South Carolina."⁵ Nowhere does Saar specify the geographic context of her piece. Moreover, her physical experience of slavery is certainly not attributable to one site. However, for the sake of this piece, I will likewise ground my examination in her birthplace and site of current residence in the Southern U.S. since it is almost unquestionable that the artist would have internalized the collective memories and traumas of that region.

Africa Gave Life is Mapp's excavation of African agricultural practices that survived the Middle Passage. Her focus on the cultivation of rice in her artist statement incites the viewer to speculate whether the baskets displayed in Weight contain not only eggshells, but also grains of rice, unintelligible in the low-resolution photographs of the installation.⁶ Whether or not the artist incorporated the fanner basket used for winnowing rice in Africa is unspecified, but they are plausible surrogates.⁷ Also notable is Mapp's incorporation of layers of multi-colored strings draped around the figure. These strings, along with the eggshells, are the sole objects unrelated to slavery in the installation; they constitute a contemporary and creative elaboration of an historical event. Indeed, the continuity of the coloured stings from figure to basket vividly forms a *link*. They are the formal manifestation of the abstract "life" to which the title refers and the colours uphold by virtue of their vibrancy.

But who is this figure that breathes "life" into the baskets plausibly containing rice? The answer to this question is indeed blatantly revealed in the title, but it is also more subtly found within Mapp's engagement with a neoclassical tradition that used the woman's body to personify the four continents. In such a tradition, Africa was typically depicted kneeling as to symbolize her "superstition, paganism and barbarity."⁸ In Frank Leslie's Four Continents, for instance, Africa not only kneels, but also shields her eyes from the glare of so-called white civilization.⁹ Although Mapp's figure is seated, her central position and veneration by way of the multi-coloured strings serve to deify rather than debase her. Mapp subverts - and arguably redeems - a racist artistic tradition of allegorizing Africa that would have affirmed the institution of slavery. Instead, the artist recovers an Africa that introduced rice to South Carolina.

Geographer Judith Carney likewise elucidates the myth of the unskilled labour of the enslaved by positing the "Eurocentric bias in historical reconstructions of the agricultural development of the Americas" that engendered "commentaries [that] documented the lifeway of the planters, their achievements as well as their ingenuity in shaping a profitable landscape."¹⁰ A pro-slavery print portraying South Carolina's Hampton rice plantation exemplifies the myth of the unskilled slave: the subtle but performative inclusion of the Big House in the background signifies the supremacy and pioneer status of its dwellers [fig. 4]. Indeed, the structure rests atop an elevated hill, its façade, a glistening white. The insinuation is that the Big House is both the source of enslavement and knowledge that sustains and regulates the slaves' labour; here, the hoeing of rice. In a print by A.R. Ward, knowledge has virtually been personified not by the



Figure 2: Anonymous, Rice Threshing, U.S. South, Using Wooden Sticks with Flails to Separate Grain from Stalk (Oct. 20, 1866), print, (New York: Leslies Illustrated Newspaper), p. 72, Image Reference NW0088, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, USA, as shown on www.slaveryimages.org, compiled by Jerome Handler and Michael Tuite, and sponsored by the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities and the University of Virginia Library.

central yet de-individualized mass of slaves, but by the planter. His body is the focal point of the print insofar as his outstretched arm signifies first and foremost, the discernment of an overseer.

As Carney's meticulous research and Mapp's artistic recovery suggest in two disparate yet critically intersecting ways, these images are fallacious. African women from Sierra Leone and Senegambia possessed the expertise that would enable the transference of rice technologies to South Carolina in the eighteenth century.¹¹ The "African practice of pounding rice in a mortar with a two-ended pestle remained [in South Carolina] the principal way of breaking the husk that encloses the grain."¹² Moreover, winnowing in South Carolina preserved African materials, forms and rhythms: in order to allow the wind to blow away the chaff, the rice was either tossed from a flat basket into the air, or dropped from such a basket to its counterpart below.¹³

Moreover, Mapp's assertion that, "a man or woman who made baskets was worth more than one who did not, age, strength and other skills being equal" juxtaposed with the visual properties of her installation gives rise to another crucial aspect of the artwork's recovery.¹⁴ Indeed, Mapp's effigy of a *woman* "giving life," (or perhaps more accurately - giving her livelihood) duly traces the cultivation of rice to its gendered roots insofar as African women traditionally performed the roles of both cultivator and vendor.¹⁵ Conversely, in South Carolina's eighteenth-century rice plantations, grain milling was no longer performed daily and uniquely by women but constituted the seasonal labour of both female and male slaves.¹⁶ Under the institutional pressure to be efficient, male planters coerced African women into transferring their knowledge to male slaves and in so doing relinquished a sacred feminine virtue within their culture. As Jennifer Morgan cogently remarks, "not unlike the birth of a child, the agricultural

work that gave meaning to one's life now gave meaning to someone else's life."¹⁷ Mapp recuperates the ways that gender was fundamental to African rice economies. As such, the artist unearths the brutal reality that besides being institutionally subject to rape, women, on account of their sex, also endured the loss of integrity of their agricultural practice.

Mapp thus evokes a very specific and nuanced labour through her discussion of rice in her statement and also through the piece's surrogate fanner baskets. These two elements collectively constitute a site of stark contrast between Africa Gave Life and Weight. Indeed, the affect of the latter work is largely a result of the de-specification of the figure's labour. Although a scythe and skillet symbolize specific tasks—namely work in the wheat fields and domestic quarters, respectively—a slew of miscellaneous objects from within and without the constellation of material culture of slavery remove the figure from a recognizable realm of labour and in turn, geography. Most notably, a pair of boxing gloves are enmeshed with the more historically significant items—ropes, chains, skillet, a hoe—that culminate with the installation's fundamental form, a cotton balance. Needless to say, the balance does not weigh iron and cotton; rather, the cluster of objects suspended by a chain occupies one side while the figure atop a swing-seat affixed to rope occupies the other. The iron beam at the top of the balance is almost perfectly horizontal, signalling the figuratively balanced weight of the two objects. In contrast to Mapp's installation, Saar does not posit the labour of her figure as "life." Rather, the figure's equalization with a cluster of objects along with her eyes sealed shut - they are almost concave and pupil-less - serve to situate her on par with the tools of her toil; Weight is a tableau of dehumanization.

I posit that Saar recovers a more generic but equally palpable intersection of the woman's body and labour: her sculpture indeed is a surrogate for a female slave, but her particularly jarring equalization with an array of tools in conjunction with the figure's aura of death conjures first and foremost what Judith Butler has coined the "ungrievable" body. Arguably among the most important critics of the twentieth-century, Butler claims that such a body cannot be adequately mourned (or mourned at all) because they were never adherent of "culturally viable notions of the human."¹⁸ By law, slaves were considered chattel: for the slave owner, their death was losing a significant piece of property: an economically unfortunate happening, but not "grievable" per se.¹⁹

As much as the emotions built into a "grievable" body would have been elicited for a fellow slave's death, those especially in the Southern U.S. did not have access to the spatio-temporal landscape for such mourning. Moreover, as David R. Roediger writes regarding American slave masters from 1700-1865, "although a so-called patriarchal impulse perhaps moved some masters to tolerate and even encourage slave funerals - racism and fallen authority led others to oppose and circumscribe them."²⁰ As Charton McLwain puts forward in Death in Black and White, however, a more severe rendition of the latter seems to have prevailed. As an enslaved person recounted of Texas, "They jes' put 'em in a box, no preachin' or nothin'. Bu, of course, if it was Sunda the slaves would follow out there and sing. No, if they didn't die on Sunday, you couldn't go; you went to that field."²¹ (sic) As much as the enslaved resisted the

severity of a tenacious labour program by way of shouting, singing, and wailing, the above allusion to the hurriedness of slave burials and the preclusion of slaves from such proceedings bespeak the negated life that is both the slave and “ungrievable body.”²²

Even the linguistic connotations of Saar’s piece invokes the “ungrievable.” Indeed, Weight is one of twelve pieces comprising the 2012 exhibit, “Still”; both words compliment and also construct the artwork in their offering of a double connotation. The two words certainly gesture toward the paralysis that slavery has inflicted upon those directly and indirectly linked to the institution, but they also evoke an unwavering presence. By using bronze, copper, iron and other visually ponderous materials for her installation, Saar exemplifies one of her trademark affects: the dark—and often paralyzing—confrontations fundamental to being.²³ But Weight does not solely elicit a morbid confrontation between spectator and art object owing to the subject’s macabre aesthetic: the sculpture, distilled to its very medium, manifests Andre Bazin’s concept of the “mummy complex.”²⁴ Weight is not a monument that inspires pride and flatters the viewer.²⁵ Rather, both Mapp and Saar’s installations fall into Bazin’s “mummy” category that promulgates the magical plastic arts, which “help to remember the subject and to preserve him [her].”²⁶

Saar’s Weight is the paradoxical excavation of an “ungrievable” body. Indeed, the installation itself undermines the laws undergirding said body by virtue of medium; the artist’s figure is a “mummy,” that is to say a preserve of life. The narrative of the piece - the female slave equalized with her labours - however calls the viewer into mourning the depicted figure’s former status as “ungrievable.” Moreover, Weight as Saar’s very own artistic labour, however incomparable to that performed by the subject, still compels the artist to mentally endure a gruelling historical chapter within the process of recovery. Olivia Cousins, medical sociologist, and community history advocate asserts, “stories of dehumanization, torture, resistance, struggle, freedom” are fragments of the sequence that is healing. Saar likewise asserts through Weight that mourning and healing are inextricable.²⁷

Saar unearths a body from the past to elicit contemporary healing: the public space of the gallery - here, the Otis Bent Maltz - is akin to the graveyard insofar as it acknowledges a body that would not have been held *still* long enough to be subject to the lamentation of her fellow enslaved. Weight defies a tyrannical postmodernism that diminishes the act of representation: Saar’s belated mourning is contingent on the chronicled reality of the slave’s body valued solely for her labours.²⁸ Mapp similarly unburies a part of the past related to Trans Atlantic Slavery in the Southern U.S. Africa Gave Life does not mourn the female body’s equalization with labour, but instead restores the origins of a specific agricultural practice, rice cultivation in South Carolina, to an equally restored figure, the allegorized Africa. Africa is goddess-like; her feminized figure recalls the transference of African rice cultivation to slave practice. Contrary to current agricultural fallacies, African women introduced the use of the mortar and pestle, the hoe, and winnowing baskets to both their enslaved male counterparts and American rice planters. In response to lingering doubts regarding the validity of unearthing the past, always arduous but perhaps crucial, Saar notes, “we don’t just remember the things we’ve experienced.”²⁹ Indeed,

Saar and Tanisha Mapp boldly recover the forgotten, which gives rise to healing diverse wounds that the Western populace has multifariously inherited from slavery - black, white, and all the colours in between.

ENDNOTES

¹ bell hooks, *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics* (New York: New Press, 1995), p. 14.

² I persistently endeavored to contact Tanisha Mapp: I called Lauren Hill Academy where Mapp used to work only to discover she left the institution. I contacted Thomas Bastien, Press Officer of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts and coordinator of the exhibit that featured Mapp. Bastien emailed Mapp, and when this elicited no response, he shared her email with me. To date, Mapp has not responded to either of our emails. I contacted Peter Flegel, Director of Fondation Michaëlle Jean Foundation, who phoned the artist with no response. Mr. Flegel duly resisted offering me her coordinates. I did, however, locate the artist statement for *Africa Gave Life* online. This statement guided my research by virtue of its detailed composition.

³ I accredit my conception of the impossibility of anchoring artistic conduct to one region to Geoff Quilley and Kay Dian Kriz, namely in their intent to extend English and French art beyond that which was produced in the so-called motherlands; Geoff Quilley and Kay Dian Kriz, "Introduction: Visual Culture and the Atlantic World, 1660-1830," *An Economy of Colour: Visual Culture and the Atlantic World, 1660-1830*, eds. Geoff Quilley and Kay Dian Kriz, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 14.

⁴ "Recovery, n." *Oxford University Press*. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/159940?redirectedFrom=recovery> (date of last access April 1, 2014).

⁵ Tanisha Mapp, "Africa Gave Life," *Artist Statement*, (Early 21st c.).

⁶ The artist did not intend for the eggs to carry a symbolic value pertaining to slavery, but rather used both dark and light-shelled eggs with their common yoke as a metaphor for the underlying humanity of black and white individuals; Mapp, "Africa Gave Life."

⁷ Judith Ann Carney, "Rice in the New World," *Grass Roots: African Origins of an American Art*, (New York: Museum for African Art, 2008), p. 100.

⁸ Charmaine A. Nelson, "Allegory, Race and the Four Continents: Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux's *Les quatre parties du monde soutenant la sphere celeste*," *Representing the Black Female Subject in Western Art* (New York: Routledge, 2010), p. 175.

⁹ Nelson employs this trope in her discussion about Anne Whitney's *Africa* (c. 1863-64). I was unable to locate an image of Leslie's piece online and thus it does not appear in my plate list.

¹⁰ Judith Ann Carney, "Landscapes of Technology Transfer: Rice Cultivation and African Continuities," *Technology and Culture*, vol. 7, no. 1 (January 1996), p. 9.

¹¹ Carney, "Rice," p. 99.

¹² Carney, "Rice," p. 99.

¹³ The term winnow refers to the separation of chaff from grain. Carney, "Rice," p. 99.

¹⁴ Tanisha Mapp, "Africa Gave Life," *Artist Statement*, (Early 21st c.).

¹⁵ Jennifer L. Morgan, "'Woman's Sweat': Gender and Agricultural Labor in the Atlantic World," *Labeling Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), p. 163.

¹⁶ Judith Ann Carney, "Rice Milling, Gender and Slave Labor in South Carolina," *Past & Present Society*, no. 153 (November 1996), p. 133.

¹⁷ Morgan, "'Woman's Sweat,'" p. 160.

¹⁸ Judith Butler, "Violence, Mourning, Politics," *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*, vol. 4, no. 1, (2003). p. 21.

¹⁹ Charlton McIlwain, *Death in Black and White: Death, Ritual and Family Ecology* (Cresskill, N.J.: Hampton Press, 2003), p. 35.

²⁰ David R. Roediger, "And Die in Dixie: Funerals, Death, & Heaven in the Salve Community 1700-1865," *The Massachusetts Review*, vol. 22, no. 1 (Spring 1981), p. 164.

²¹ McIlwain, "Death in Black" p. 43.

²² Butler, "Violence," p. 22.

²³ bell hooks, *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics* (New York: New Press, 1995), p. 18.

²⁴ André Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," *What is Cinema?*, vol. 1, (1967), p. 9.

²⁵ Alois Riegl, "The Modern Cult of Monuments," *The Nineteenth-century Visual Culture Reader*, eds. Vanessa R. Schwartz and Jeannene M. Pryzblyski, (New York: Routledge, 2004).

²⁶ Bazin, "The Ontology," p. 10.

²⁷ Delores M. Walters, "Art and Memory: Healing Body, Mind, Spirit," Gendered Resistance: Women, Slavery and the Legacy of Margaret Garner, (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2013), p. 212.

²⁸ Charles Molesworth, Salmagundi, "Installations," no. 120 (Fall 1998), p. 45.

²⁹ hooks, "Art," p. 19.

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PLATE LIST

Figure 1: Alison Saar, Weight (2012), iron, wood, rope, scythe, skillet, chains, boxing gloves, cotton balance, Otis's Ben Maltz Gallery, Los Angeles, United States.

Figure 2: Anonymous, Rice Threshing, U.S. South, Using Wooden Sticks with Flails to Separate Grain from Stalk (Oct. 20, 1866), print, (New York: Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper), p. 72, Image Reference NW0088, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, USA, as shown on www.slaveryimages.org, compiled by Jerome Handler and Michael Tuite, and sponsored by the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities and the University of Virginia Library.