

Ghostly and Vernacular Presences in the Black Atlantic: Representations of Slavery and Abolition Beyond the Slave Narrative, 1750-1830

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[G]hosts are never innocent: the unhallowed dead of the modern project drag in the pathos of their loss and the violence of the force that made them, their sheets and chains Following ghosts is about making a contact that changes you and refashions the social relations in which you are located. It is about putting life back in where only a vague memory or a bare trace was visible to those who bothered to look. It is sometimes about ghost stories, stories that not only repair representational mistakes, but also strive to understand the conditions under which a memory was reproduced in the first place, toward a counter-memory of the future. Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters* (1997)

...heard the groans and cries of many and saw some of my fellow-captives. But when a vessel arrived to conduct us away to the ship, it was a most horrible scene; there was nothing to be heard but the rattling of chains, smacking of whips, and groans and cries of fellow men. Some would not stir from the ground, when they were lashed and beat in the most horrible manner. I have forgot the name of this horrible fort; but we were taken in the ship that came for us, to another that was ready to sail from Cape Coast...ⁱ

...contextualising slavery situates it within the exploitative networks of global industrial capitalism, showing it not as an anomaly but as part of other forms of involuntary labor. Slavery thus is not as an aberration of modernity, as liberal humanists claim, but rather essential to its paradigm.ⁱⁱ

ⁱⁱⁱI'll desist as our black cattle are intolerably noisy and I'm almost melted in the midst of five or six hundred of them.

What kind of case is a case of a ghost? It is a case of haunting, a story about what happens when we admit the ghost – that special instance of the merging of the visible and the invisible, the dead and the living, the past and the present – into the making of worldly relations and into the making of our accounts of the world. It is a case of the difference it makes to start with the marginal, with what we normally exclude or banish, or, more commonly with what we never even notice.^{iv}

I would make a distinction in this case between “body” and “flesh” and impose that distinction as the central one between captive and liberated subject positions. In that sense, before the “body” there is the “flesh” that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse or the reflexes of iconography.... If we think of the flesh as the primary narrative, then we mean its seared, divided, ripped-apartness riveted to the ship's hold, fallen or escaped overboard.^v

The recognition of loss is a crucial element in redressing the breach introduced by slavery. This recognition entails a remembering of the pained body, not by way of a stimulated wholeness but precisely through the recognition of the amputated body in its amputatedness ... in other words it is the ravished [ghostly] body that holds out the possibility of restitution, not the invocation of an illusory wholeness.^{vi}

[T]hese traces of memory function in a manner akin to a phantom limb, in that what is felt is no longer there.... The recognition of loss is a crucial element in redressing the breach introduced by slavery. This recognition entails a remembering of the pained body, not by way of a stimulated wholeness but precisely through the recognition of the amputated body in its amputatedness ... in other words it is the ravished [ghostly] body that holds out the possibility of restitution, not the invocation of an illusory wholeness.^{vii}

Full sixty years the angry winter wave
Has thundering dash'd this bleak and barren shore,
Since Sambo's head, laid in this lonely grave,
Lies still, and ne'er will hear their turmoil more.

Full many a sand-bird chirps upon the sod,
And many a moon-flight Elfin round him trips;
Full many a Summer's sunbeam warms the clod,
And many a teeming cloud upon him drips.

But still he sleeps, till the awak'ning sounds
Of the Archangel's Trump new life impart;
Then the great Judge his approbation founds,
Not on man's colour, but his worth of heart.^{viii}

P.S. In those foreign countries where the Kings are mere drones, sunk in debauchery and licentiousness, troubling themselves with nothing but their own pleasures, and so completely absorbed in luxury and effeminacy that they leave the management of state affairs to the knaves and parasites by whom they are surrounded, signing every paper at random which the minister lays before them, - in such cases as these I think a CAST-IRON KING would answer every purpose and be a great saving.^{ix}

... centrality of diasporic Africans to the building of modernity. Black bodies were the indispensable coerced mechanisms of labor, the Other against whom the whiteness of the imperial subject was formed. Diaspora Africans are both inside and constitutive of modernity and outside and negated by modernity: both haunted and haunting.^x

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ⁱ Cugoano, Quobna Ottobah, 'Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species...' (1787)

ⁱⁱ Hershini Bhana Young, *Haunting Capital*, 11

ⁱⁱⁱ Irving, James. *Slave Captain: The Career of James Irving in the Liverpool Slave Trade*.

^{iv} Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*

^v Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe,"

^{vi} Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*

^{vii} Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*,

^{viii} Poem on Sambo's Grave, Sunderland Point, Lancaster by James Watson (1796)

^{ix} Robert Wedderburn, 'Cast Iron Parsons'. 1820.

^x Hershini Bhana Young, *Haunting Capital*