



THE POSITION OF THE UNTHOUGHT

Author(s): Saidiya V. Hartman and Frank B. Wilderson, III

Source: *Qui Parle*, Spring/Summer 2003, Vol. 13, No. 2 (Spring/Summer 2003), pp. 183-201

Published by: Duke University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20686156>

REFERENCES

Linked references are available on JSTOR for this article:

https://www.jstor.org/stable/20686156?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents

You may need to log in to JSTOR to access the linked references.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



Duke University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Qui Parle*

JSTOR

THE POSITION OF THE UNTHOUGHT

An Interview with Saidiya V. Hartman Conducted by Frank B. Wilderson, III

Frank B. Wilderson, III — One of the first things I want to say is how thankful I am that you wrote *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. And I want to say a little bit about how meaningful the book is to me as a black graduate student — a so-called aspiring academic — and as someone caught in the machine but not of it. Because in general, when one reads the work of black scholars — if one is another black scholar or a black student — one prepares oneself for a disappointment, or works a disappointment into the reading. And one doesn't have to do that with this particular book.

What I mean, is that so often in black scholarship, people consciously or unconsciously peel away from the strength and the terror of their evidence in order to propose some kind of coherent, hopeful solution to things. Your book, in moving through these scenes of subjection as they take place in slavery, refuses to do that. And just as importantly, it does not allow the reader to think that there was a radical enough break to reposition the black body after Jubilee.¹ That is a tremendous and courageous move. And I think what's important about it, is that it corroborates the experience of ordinary black people today, and of strange black people like you and me in the academy [*laughter*].

Qui Parle, Vol. 13, No. 2 Spring/Summer 2003

But there's something else that the book does, and I want to talk about this at the level of methodology and analysis. If we think about the registers of subjectivity as being preconscious interest, unconscious identity or identifications, and positionality, then a lot of the work in the social sciences organizes itself around preconscious interest; it assumes a subject of consent, and as you have said, a subject of exploitation, which you reposition as the subject of accumulation.² Now when this sort of social science engages the issue of positionality — if and when it does — it assumes that it can do so in an un-raced manner. That's the best of the work. The worst of the work is a kind of multiculturalism that assumes we all have analogous identities that can be put into a basket of stories, and then that basket of stories can lead to similar interests.

For me, what you've done in this book is to split the hair here. In other words, this is not a book that celebrates an essential Afrocentrism that could be captured by the multicultural discourse. And yet it's not a book that remains on the surface of preconscious interest, which so much history and social science does. Instead, it demands a radical racialization of any analysis of positionality. So. Why don't we talk about that?

Saidiya V. Hartman — Well! That's a lot, and a number of things come to mind. I think for me the book is about the problem of crafting a narrative for the slave as subject, and in terms of positionality, asking, "Who does that narrative enable?" That's where the whole issue of empathic identification is central for me. Because it just seems that every attempt to emplot the slave in a narrative ultimately resulted in his or her obliteration, regardless of whether it was a leftist narrative of political agency — the slave stepping into someone else's shoes and then becoming a political agent — or whether it was about being able to unveil the slave's humanity by actually finding oneself in that position.

In many ways, what I was trying to do as a cultural historian was to narrate a certain impossibility, to illuminate those practices that speak to the limits of most available narratives to explain the position of the enslaved. On one hand, the slave is the foundation

of the national order, and, on the other, the slave occupies the position of the unthought. So what does it mean to try to bring that position into view without making it a locus of positive value, or without trying to fill in the void? So much of our political vocabulary/imaginary/desires have been implicitly integrationist even when we imagine our claims are more radical. This goes to the second part of the book — that ultimately the metanarrative thrust is always towards an integration into the national project, and particularly when that project is in crisis, black people are called upon to affirm it.

So certainly it's about more than the desire for inclusion within the limited set of possibilities that the national project provides. What then does this language — the given language of freedom — enable? And once you realize its limits and begin to see its inexorable investment in certain notions of the subject and subjection, then that language of freedom no longer becomes that which rescues the slave from his or her former condition, but the site of the re-elaboration of that condition, rather than its transformation.

F.W. — This is one of the reasons why your book has been called “pessimistic” by Anita Patterson.³ But it's interesting that she doesn't say what I said when we first started talking, that it's enabling. I'm assuming that she's white — I don't know, but it certainly sounds like it.

S.V.H. — But I think there's a certain integrationist rights agenda that subjects who are variously positioned on the color line can take up. And that project is something I consider obscene: the attempt to make the narrative of defeat into an opportunity for celebration, the desire to look at the ravages and the brutality of the last few centuries, but to still find a way to feel good about ourselves. That's not my project at all, though I think it's actually the project of a number of people. Unfortunately, the kind of social revisionist history undertaken by many leftists in the 1970s, who were trying to locate the agency of dominated groups, resulted in celebratory narratives of the oppressed.⁴ Ultimately, it bled into this

celebration, as if there was a space you could carve out of the terrorizing state apparatus in order to exist outside its clutches and forge some autonomy. My project is a different one. And in particular, one of my hidden polemics in the book was an argument against the notion of hegemony, and how that notion has been taken up in the context of looking at the status of the slave.

F.W. — That’s very interesting, because it’s something I’ve been thinking about also in respect to Gramsci. Because Anne Showstack Sassoon suggests that Gramsci breaks down hegemony into three categories: influence, leadership, and consent.⁵ Maybe we could bring the discussion back to your text then, using the examples of Harriet Jacobs,⁶ a slave, and John Rankin,⁷ a white anti-slavery Northerner, as ways in which to talk about this. Now, what’s really interesting is that in your chapter “Seduction and the Ruses of Power,” you not only explain how the positionality of black women and white women differs, but you also suggest how blackness disarticulates the notion of consent, if we are to think of that notion as universal. You write: “[B]eing forced to submit to the will of the master in all things defines the predicament of slavery” (*S*, 110). In other words, the female slave is a possessed, accumulated, and fungible object, which is to say that she is ontologically different than a white woman who may, as a house servant or indentured laborer, be a subordinated subject. You go on to say, “The opportunity for nonconsent [as regards, in this case, sex] is required to establish consent, for consent is meaningless if refusal is not an option. . . . Consent is unseemly in a context in which the very notion of subjectivity is predicated upon the negation of will” (*S*, 111).

S.V.H. — Once again, trying to fit into the other’s shoes becomes the very possibility of narration. In the chapter “A Perilous Passage in the Slave Girl’s Life,” the question for Jacobs is how she can tell her story in a way that’s going to solicit her white readership when she has to efface her very condition in order to make that story intelligible to them. I look at this messy moment as kind of a vortex in Jacobs’ narrative, where in order to fashion herself as a desir-

ing subject, she has to deny the very violence, which elsewhere she said defines her position as a slave: her status as a thing and the negation of her will. In one sense, she has to bracket that so she can tell a story about sexuality that's meaningful in a white dominant frame. And I think this is why someone like Hortense Spillers raises the question of whether gender and sexuality are at all applicable to the condition of the captive community.⁸

That's what I was working with there, that impossibility or tension between Jacobs as an agent versus the objective conditions in which she finds herself. This is something you talk about in your work as well, this existence in the space of death, where negation is the captive's central possibility for action, whether we think of that as a radical refusal of the terms of the social order or these acts that are sometimes called suicide or self-destruction, but which are really an embrace of death. Ultimately it's about the paradox of agency for those who are in these extreme circumstances. And basically, there are very few political narratives that can account for that.

F.W. — And we have to ask why. In my own work, obviously I'm not saying that in this space of negation, which is blackness, there is no life. We have tremendous life. But this life is not analogous to those touchstones of cohesion that hold civil society together. In fact, the trajectory of our life (within our terrain of civil death) is bound up in claiming — sometimes individually, sometimes collectively — the violence which Fanon writes about in *The Wretched of the Earth*, that trajectory which, as he says, is "a splinter to the heart of the world"⁹ and "puts the settler out of the picture."¹⁰ So, it doesn't help us politically or psychologically to try to find ways in which how we live is analogous to how white positionality lives, because, as I think your book suggests, whites gain their coherence by knowing what they are not. There is tremendous diversity on the side of whiteness and tremendous conflict between white men and white women, between Jews and gentiles, and between classes, but that conflict, even in its articulation, has a certain solidarity. And I think that solidarity comes from a near or far relation to the black body or bodies. We give the nation its coherence because we're its underbelly.¹¹

S.V.H. — That's what's so interesting for me about Achille Mbembe's work, the way he thinks about the position of the formerly colonized subject along the lines of the slave as an essential way of defining the predicament. Essentially, he says, the slave is the object to whom anything can be done, whose life can be squandered with impunity.¹²

F.W. — And he's suggesting that what it means to be a slave is to be subject to a kind of complete appropriation, what you call "property of enjoyment." Your book illustrates the "myriad and nefarious uses of slave property" and then demonstrates how "there was no relation to blackness outside the terms of this use of, entitlement to, and occupation of the captive body, for even the status of free blacks was shaped and compromised by the existence of slavery" (S, 24). So. Not only are formally enslaved blacks property, but so are formally free blacks. One could say that the possibility of becoming property is one of the essential elements that draws the line between blackness and whiteness. But what's most intriguing about your argument is the way in which you demonstrate how not only is the slave's performance (dance, music, etc.) the property of white enjoyment, but so is — and this is really key — the slave's own enjoyment of his/her performance: that too belongs to white people.¹³

S.V.H. — Right. You know, as I was writing *Scenes of Subjection*, there was a whole spate of books on nineteenth-century culture and on minstrelsy in particular. And there was a certain sense in which the ability to occupy blackness was considered transgressive or as a way of refashioning whiteness, and there were all these radical claims that were being made for it.¹⁴ And I thought, "Oh, no, this is just an extension of the master's prerogative." It doesn't matter whether you do good or you do bad, the crux is that you can choose to do what you wish with the black body. That's why thinking about the dynamics of enjoyment in terms of the material relations of slavery was so key for me.

F.W. — Yes, that's clarifying. A body that you can do what you want

with. In your discussion of the body as the property of enjoyment, what I really like is when you talk about Rankin. Here's a guy — like the prototypical twentieth-century white progressive — who's anti-slavery and uses his powers of observation to write for its abolition, even to his slave-owning brother. He's in the South, he's looking at a slave coffle, and he imagines that these slaves being beaten could be himself and his family. Through this process it makes sense to him, it becomes meaningful. His body and his family members' white bodies become proxies for real enslaved black bodies and, as you point out, the actual object of identification, the slave, disappears.

S.V.H. — I think that gets at one of the fundamental ethical questions/problems/crises for the West: the status of difference and the status of the other. It's as though in order to come to any recognition of common humanity, the other must be assimilated, meaning in this case, utterly displaced and effaced: "Only if I can see myself in that position can I understand the crisis of that position." That is the logic of the moral and political discourses we see everyday — the need for the *innocent* black subject to be victimized by a racist state in order to see the racism of the racist state. You have to be exemplary in your goodness, as opposed to . . .

F.W. — [*laughter*] A nigga on the warpath!

S.V.H. — Exactly! For me it was those moments that were the most telling — the moments of the sympathetic ally, who in some ways is actually no more able to see the slave than the person who is exploiting him or her as their property. That is the work Rankin does and I think it suggests just how ubiquitous that kind of violence, in fact, is.

F.W. — You've just thrown something into crisis, which is very much on the table today: the notion of allies. What you've said (and I'm so happy that someone has come along to say it!) is that the ally is not a stable category. There's a structural prohibition (rather than merely a willful refusal) against whites being the allies

of blacks, due to this — to borrow from Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* again — "species" division between what it means to be a subject and what it means to be an object: a structural antagonism. But everything in the academy on race works off of the question, "How do we help white allies?" Black academics assume that there is enough of a structural commonality between the black and the white (working class) position — their mantra being: "We are both exploited subjects" — for one to embark upon a political pedagogy that will somehow help whites become aware of this "commonality." White writers posit the presence of something they call "white skin privilege," and the possibility of "giving that up," as their gesture of being in solidarity with blacks. But what both gestures disavow is that subjects just can't make common cause with objects. They can only become objects, say in the case of John Brown or Marilyn Buck, or further instantiate their subjectivity through modalities of violence (lynching and the prison industrial complex), or through modalities of empathy. In other words, the essential essence of the white/black relation is that of the master/slave — regardless of its historical or geographic specificity. And masters and slaves, even today, are never allies.

S.V.H. — Right. I think of the book as an allegory; its argument is a history of the present.

F.W. — Thank you! I'm so glad you said it's an allegory of the present. Because now we've got two problems on the table, two crises — or rather, we have many crises, but only two that I can identify at the moment. One is how we deal with the common sense around allies, whether it be in teaching literature to undergraduates or going to hear Cornel West speak with Michael Lerner, or listening to KPFA, since, in point of fact, it may be that the progressive community is actually as big an enemy to black revolution as Newt Gingrich. And the other I could put as, "How do you go to the movies?" How does one, knowing what one knows, sit through anything? Because it seems like every film — if it is in any way going to communicate some type of empathy that the audience can

walk away with — has to have black death as its precondition.

S.V.H. — Yes, yes. *Monster's Ball* is a great example.¹⁵ Not only is Leticia's husband executed, but *her son must also die* as the precondition for her new life with her husband's executioner. And the death requirement is rendered as a romance. Rather than closing with a note of ambivalence, the film actually ends with her smiling over the romantic music, as if to suggest that she's gotten over it, and the future awaits them. And I think *that* is the frightening hypocrisy of the context we are living in.

There's also the film *Unfaithful* where the lover has to be murdered in order to protect the heterosexual family.¹⁶ The white bourgeois family can actually live with murder in order to reconstitute its domesticity.

F.W. — Well, why *does* white supremacy seem to be so bound up in the visual?

S.V.H. — I think that visually, the threat of blackness is somehow heightened. Fanon's "Look! A Negro": that's the formulation, and within the racial classificatory schema that is how much of the work is done, especially in terms of the way racialization has operated: how it disposes of bodies, how it appropriates their products, and how it fixes them in a visual grid. I think those are the three ways I would explore that problem, as well as, again, this whole dimension of the empathic.

F.W. — One of the things I wanted to bring up is how your book is talking to other very important books. It's talking to Fanon as you've said, and it's talking to Patterson's *Slavery and Social Death*.¹⁷ And you talked about the leftist discourses of the '70s, and the universalizing of Gramscian hegemony that really falls short of helping us understand a position *in* civil society, but not *of* civil society. It has to do, I think, with how the idiom of power that black people experience has different kinds of manifestations as we move from slavery into the era of the Freedmen's Bureau, but there's an umbrella of despotism that remains. And when you suggested earlier that the

book is an allegory of the present, it was so refreshing, because one can read this book and begin to metaphorize the manifestations of despotism in the past, and also to think about how it continues in the present.

S.V.H. — It really is the pressing question of freedom. That's why for me, the last lines of the book summon up that moment of potentiality between the no longer and the not yet. "Not yet free": that articulation is from the space of the twenty-first century, not the nineteenth, and that's the way it's supposed to carry — the same predicament, the same condition.

F.W. — And in those terms we might think about how Rodney King was accused of inviting his own beating; you know, he shook his ass in an aggressive manner at a white woman. So maybe you could sketch out the way in which the black woman functions similarly in slavery, as somehow outside the statutory, or inside it: she cannot be raped because she's a non-person yet she is presumed to invite the rapist.

S.V.H. — Yes. No crime can occur because the slave statutes recognize no such crime. Often when I'm looking through the criminal record of the nineteenth century, I'm seeing the text of black agency. The people who are resisting their masters and overseers appear in the records as they're prosecuted for their crime, creating this displacement of culpability that enables white innocence. In the case of *State of Missouri v. Celia* (1855), Celia is raped repeatedly by her owner from the moment she's purchased. She begs him to stop; he doesn't, so she kills him. *Her crime* is the crime on record: *she* is the culpable agent.¹⁸ So in this formulation of law and its punishment, blackness is on the side of culpability, which makes the crimes of property transparent and affirms the rights to property in captives.

And you're right, that displacement functions more generally. Who is the responsible and culpable agent? For the most part, it's always the slave, the native, the black.

F.W. — Which brings your allegory of the present to the prison industrial complex.

S.V.H. — Actually, I've got an interesting tidbit. I think that Denmark Vesey was the first person ever imprisoned in the South Carolina Penitentiary.

F.W. — Really? It's like a seamless transition from slavery to prison.

S.V.H. — Right. And this is where the larger narrative of capitalism comes into play. Because, basically, in most places in the world, you have a transition from slavery to other modes of involuntary servitude. In my work, I critique the received narrative about the transition from slavery to freedom in the American context, but we could also look at that same kind of transformation in relation to the anti-slavery rhetoric that comes to legitimize the colonial project in Africa. By the nineteenth century, slavery was the dominant mode of production in West Africa. Eventually, the European nations decided "This is an awful institution and we need to stop it," so we get King Leopold masking his atrocities in the Congo in the discourse of anti-slavery, or British colonial figures in Ghana effectively saying, "Well, we saved you from the slave raider so you should be grateful."¹⁹ In both cases, it's the same notion: "We've given you your freedom, so now you're in our debt."

F.W. — And that brings us to Reconstruction in your book where you're talking about post-Jubilee:

The good conduct encouraged by such counsels eased the transition from slavery to freedom by imploring the freed to continue in old forms of subservience, which primarily entailed remaining on the plantation as faithful, hardworking, and obedient laborers, but also included manners, styles of comportment in work relations, objects of consumption, leisure, and domestic relations. In their emphasis on proper conduct, these schoolbooks resuscitated the social roles of slavery, not unlike the regulation of behavior in labor contracts or

the criminalization of impudence in the Black Codes. The pedagogical injunctions to obedience and servility cast the freed in a world starkly similar to the one in which they had suffered under slavery. On the one hand, these texts heralded the natural rights of all men; and on the other, they advised blacks to refrain from enjoying this newly conferred equality. Despite proclamations about the whip's demise, emergent forms of involuntary servitude, the coercive control of black labor, the repressive instrumentality of the law, and the social intercourse of everyday life revealed the entanglements of slavery and freedom. (*S*, 151)

So. There's this whole army of white people — missionaries, educators, and the like — who go down South to help rehabilitate the Negro after slavery. And in reading that, a wave of cynicism swept over me, because all of a sudden I thought of Freedom Summer, and the white students in SNCC, which is a blasphemous thought to have.

S.V.H. — It's too immediate, but yes. I mean, it's incredible: these people have been working — have made the nation rich — and suddenly there's this question of whether or not they can actually be productive. And here as everywhere else in the world, you need violence to make a working class. So what you see are the various means utilized to do that: forms of state violence, extra-state violence, and the values propagated by moralizing and religious discourses. And what's interesting is that the black elites become the purveyors of those very values. Kevin Gaines has shown in *Uplifting the Race* how in many ways the agenda of the black elite is reactionary and they are, in effect, the handmaidens of the state.²⁰

For example, in the black feminist work on marriage, I think there's been a one-sided assessment of the institution: the enslaved were denied marriage, so now they have access to it and can secure the bonds of their love.²¹ But it's also being *enforced* as part of an agenda of social control. And it's also being utilized — since

interracial marriages are prohibited — to force black men to assume the responsibility for the offspring of white men and black women. So in that context, what does it actually mean to make the ex-slave into a certain kind of subject? And, again, who does that serve? It is an agenda for creating dutiful workers, and instilling in them a desire for consumption so that they become dependent upon wages, as opposed to the self-sufficient peasants that they would otherwise *choose* to be.

F.W. — Now, it's really tricky here for us, as black intellectuals, because if we stay with the second half of the book, as you've said, we've got this wave of do-gooders moving down to the South with these tomes — these Freedmen Bureau books on everything from hygiene, to how to speak and what to do. Some are white and some are black. And this *is* very much like 1964 with SNCC and the white Freedom Riders, and maybe very much like 1999, with the prison abolition movement.²² But, you know, the black . . .

S.V.H. — If I'm clear about what you're getting at, I think it's the difference between those who wanted to aid the newly freed to fit into the social order and those who had a vision of black freedom that was about transforming the social order, about the promise of the revolution, and ultimately, about Jubilee. So I think that's one way to think about the different models of community imagined by the solidarity forces in relation to the ambitions and desires of the formerly enslaved community.

F.W. — But there is something that the people producing this liberal discourse of accommodation don't seem to understand that I want to bring to the fore. Evelyn Hammonds in her article on black female sexuality suggests that there is some kind of conflict — a conflict on the level of ideas — between the Ida B. Wells prototype and the Bessie Smith prototype.²³ But both prototypes are doing work on black female sexuality under the umbrella of despotism. And in terms of how that despotism manifests itself visually, we might try to deconstruct what I call settler narratives, and by that I mean films like *Erin Brockovich*, which was really about how

PG&E messed over brown and black people, but whose *mise-en-scène* is reinscribed, at the level of the bodily code, with a whole plethora of Jacksonian white people.²⁴

S.V.H. — You're right, because 99.5% of U.S. cinema is a totally instrumental pernicious propaganda machine. You're the only one who seems to realize that [*laughter*]!

F.W. — You know! I'm categorically uninterested in those horrific scenes of Rambo killing colored people. What I'm interested in is the despotism, *the white supremacy*, of Erin Brockovich trying to get a job.²⁵

S.V.H. — It's in those moments of seeming innocence where the pernicious social text is revealed. I don't know if you've seen *Minority Report*?²⁶

F.W. — I went to see it, but it was sold-out. It seems like another allegory.

S.V.H. — It is, and, of course, what's interesting is that you're placed in this future where one can pinpoint the "pre-crime." Spielberg, trying to be liberal, doesn't have criminals represented as black, but we know that the state machine is a racializing machine, yet this fact is effaced in the film. It's interesting that every crime that occurs in the film is a crime against the family. And like every Spielberg film, family values support a eugenics agenda — the reconstitution of the white bourgeois family. Even the white working class is pathologized. The space of the working poor is rife with nineteenth-century metaphors that could be right out of one of my Freedmen's primers: disorder, dirt, sexual impropriety [*laughter*]. This is the twenty-first century anticipation of the future.

So, I agree with you. And as a black intellectual living in this culture, I think that there is a struggle to maintain one's sanity in a context in which your consciousness is at war with the given. There's nothing that's simple or taken for granted.

F.W. — No, it's all very complicated. And this is why Africans say

we're just too complex. They think black Americans are complex and moody and depressive. I'm very jealous of the African position in many ways. There are all these therapeutic grounding wires, so when apartheid is slapping them down, they've got this whole other psychic space that they just go into.

S.V.H. — Although I'm very suspicious of the notion that the African doesn't also occupy that depressive personality. In *In My Father's House*, Anthony Appiah says that African-Americans are angrier at white people than Africans because colonialism didn't exact the same psychic damage.²⁷ I don't believe that, I think that's an untrue statement. I think that there's definitely a difference between we who are of the West and people elsewhere, but I really challenge that supposition because the psychic damage of apartheid is tremendous. When you look at certain African writers, say Achille Mbembe and the other so-called "Afro-Pessimists" who are diagnosticians of their society, you see the consequences of the colonial project. The trauma may not be as extreme or radical as in our case because we're literally living inside this order, but I would still greatly qualify these positive assessments of African subjectivity.

F.W. — And living in this order, black people are still doing the work in those innocent scenes. They're doing the work of dying; black women are doing the work of recognizing white women in their quests as in *Mildred Pierce*;²⁸ and black men are performing the work of recognizing the sexual virility of white men. That's really important work that we're called upon to do and still live under the specter of despotism.

So maybe we're still — and this is very tragic — where the Ida B. Wells club was. We're trying to make ourselves over so that they don't kill us.

S.V.H. — And I think the underlying question is, "Where do we go from here?"

F.W. — Is that leading us to reparations?

S.V.H. — Yes. I've been thinking about the notion of focusing one's

appeal to the very state that has inflicted the injury. The reparations movement puts itself in this contradictory or impossible position, because reparations are not going to solve the systemic ongoing production of racial inequality, in material or any other terms. And like inequality, racial domination and racial abjection are produced across generations. In that sense, reparations seem like a very limited reform: a liberal scheme based upon certain notions of commensurability that reinscribe the power of the law and of the state to make right a certain situation, when, clearly, it cannot.

I think too that such thinking reveals an idealist trap; it's as if once Americans know how the wealth of the country was acquired, they'll decide that black people are owed something. My God! Why would you assume that? Like housing segregation is an accident! I think that logic of "if they only knew otherwise" is about the disavowal of political will. Why is the welfare state dismantled, even though it's actually going to affect more white women and children than black people? Because it has to do with that political will and an antipathy to blackness that structures . . .

F.W. — That structures institutions. And your work on empathy shows that; it helps us to understand how important blackness is to the libidinal economy of white institutionality. Now, I think I'm fair in generally characterizing the reparations debate and those who've renewed it — Randall Robinson and company — by saying that they got a tiger by the tail, and then didn't want the tiger to do its thing.²⁹ The reparations people present the issue to blacks as though slavery is an essentially historical phenomenon that ended, but the effects of which put blacks at what they call, you know, "an unfair disadvantage" to those in other positions who are also chasing the American dream. Through such a move the reparations folks literally waste a political weapon, they dull the knife, they keep the tiger in the cage, because here is a weapon which could spew forth in untold directions: I'm thinking here of Nat Turner's greatest night. Instead, that weapon is a denuded or, maybe a policed method of conveyance. They're trying to simultaneously *mobilize* and *manage* black rage. If reparations were thought of not as some-

thing to be achieved, but as a weapon that could precipitate a crisis in American institutionality, then it could be worked out a lot differently from the way it's presented. One could present a reparations agenda in the way in which you present your book, dealing with the despotism of black positionality as it moves from generation to generation, from historical moment to historical moment — with despotism being the almost ahistorical constant. Unleash the tiger and let it do its thing.

S.V.H. — At the very least that would entail a transformation of the social order.

F.W. — Yes, they would have to call for revolution.

Berkeley, California, July 6, 2002

-
- 1 Rather, Hartman argues that the contiguity of forms of subjection troubles any absolute division between slavery and freedom, so that the text of freedom must be understood as laden with the vestiges of slavery. Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). Hereafter cited parenthetically as *S*.
 - 2 For Hartman, the slave as subject unsettles the distinction between commodity production and primitive accumulation, because the slave embodies the changing commodity form. The slave is thus the object that must be de-animated in order to be exchanged and that which, by contrast, defines the meaning of free labor.
 - 3 Anita Patterson, "Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America," *African-American Review*, vol. 33, no. 4 (Winter 1999): 683.
 - 4 See, for example, George Rawick, *From Sundown to Sunup: The Making of the Slave Community* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1973); John Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979); Herbert Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom* (New York: Pantheon, 1976); Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture, Black Consciousness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977); Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).
 - 5 Anne Showstack Sassoon, *Approaches to Gramsci* (London: Writers and Readers, 1982).
 - 6 Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*, ed. Jean Fagan Yellin (1861; reprint, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987).
 - 7 John Rankin, *Letters on American Slavery* (1837; reprint, Westport, CT: Negro Universities Press, 1970).

- 8 Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17 (Summer 1987): 65–81.
- 9 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967), Hereafter cited parentetically as *B*.
- 10 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1968), 44.
- 11 Wilderson expands: It's interesting to note how, in the nineteenth century, as the Jacksonians — Scots, Irish, Catholics, yeomen farmers, cowboys, etc. — are demanding access to civil society, those demands are enabled by the question: What does it mean to be white? But what's remarkable is the diversity of opinions surrounding that question: as each territory debates this question on its way to statehood, one finds no uniform definition regarding the inside/outside, the boundaries of whiteness, or even quasi-whiteness. But from territory to territory there is absolute consistency in the relegation of blackness to what Fanon calls a position of absolute dereliction. Even the dereliction of the Native American is often best understood, libidinally, through the black body. I'm thinking of graffiti in a men's bathroom: *The Indian is living proof that the nigger fucked the buffalo*.
- 12 See Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).
- 13 Hartman writes: "[E]njoyment was attributed to the slave in order to deny, displace, and minimize the violence of slavery. . . . Thus the efficacy of violence was indicated precisely by its invisibility or transparency and in the copious display of slave agency. . . . As Slavoj Žižek notes, fantasies about the other's enjoyment are ways for us to organize our own enjoyment" (25).
- 14 See, for example, Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).
- 15 Marc Forster, *Monster's Ball*, 35mm, 111 min., Lion's Gate Films, 2002.
- 16 Adrian Lyne, *Unfaithful*, 35mm, 124 min., Epsilon Motion Pictures in association with Fox 2000 Pictures, 2002.
- 17 Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).
- 18 *State of Missouri v. Celia, a Slave*, File 4496, Callaway County Court, October Term, 1855, Callaway County Courthouse, Fulton, MO.
- 19 See Patrick Manning, *Slavery in West Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), and Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost* (New York: Mariner Books, 1999).
- 20 Kevin Gaines, *Uplifting the Race* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).
- 21 See Ann DuCille, *The Coupling Convention* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), and Claudia Tate, *Domestic Allegories of Female Desire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).
- 22 Wilderson expands: At a certain level, the prison abolition movement refuses to be led by the energy and esprit de corps of prisoners themselves — it sometimes even refuses to be led by the agenda of prisoners, i.e., abolition. The Freedom Riders were part of a civil rights exercise — an exercise in racial

uplift, in access to institutionality (civil society). In both these twentieth-century gestures, just as Hartman points out with respect to the Freedmen's Bureau of the nineteenth century, the oppositional force and desire of black antagonism, the force and desire of objects in a world subjects, is *not* what leads, is *not* that demand to which all other positions must succumb, and be assimilated by or perish beneath (the way it is agreed, on the Left, that Marx's dictatorship of the proletariat, or Gramsci's Modern Prince, the revolutionary party, should assimilate or crush the capitalists). Therein lies the historical continuity between the Freedmen's Bureau and the Freedom Riders and prison abolition movements of the twentieth century.

- 23 Evelynn, M. Hammonds, "Toward a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality: The Problematic of Silence," in *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*, eds. M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (New York: Routledge, 1997).
- 24 Steven Soderbergh, *Erin Brockovich*, 35 mm, 130 min., Universal Studios, 2000.
- 25 Wilderson further suggests: In real life, white supremacy was foundational to the story of California's largest utility poisoning and killing its consumers who were people of color. But in the film, literally of all the cases that Brockovich investigates (as a white working class woman trying to be a single mom and a paralegal), and 99% of the bodies which she and the attorney speak to at mass meetings of the plaintiffs, are *white* — the white American rural working class. We're right back to the nineteenth century with small merchants and yeomen farmers, homesteaders, tyrannized by the big corporations, the railroads, and the national bank: a national tragedy made possible only by the disavowal of slavery's intensification and the Trail of Tears.
- 26 Steven Spielberg, *Minority Report*, 35mm, 146 min., 20th Century Fox, 2002.
- 27 Anthony K. Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).
- 28 Michael Curtiz, *Mildred Pierce*, 35 mm, 113 min., Warner Bros., 1945.
- 29 Randall Robinson, *The Debt: What America Owes to Blacks* (New York: Plume, 2001).