Introduction

The "terrible spectacle" that introduced Frederick Douglass to slavery was the beating of his Aunt Hester. It is one of the most well-known scenes of torture in the literature of slavery, perhaps second only to Uncle Tom’s murder at the hands of Simon Legree. By locating this "horrible exhibition" in the first chapter of his 1845 Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, Douglass establishes the centrality of violence to the making of the slave and identifies it as an original generative act equivalent to the statement "I was born." The passage through the blood-stained gate is an inaugural moment in the formation of the enslaved. In this regard, it is a primal scene. By this I mean that the terrible spectacle dramatizes the origin of the subject and demonstrates that to be a slave is to be under the brutal power and authority of another; this is confirmed by the event’s placement in the opening chapter on genealogy.

I have chosen not to reproduce Douglass’s account of the beating of Aunt Hester in order to call attention to the ease with which such scenes are usually reiterated, the casualness with which they are circulated, and the consequences of this routine display of the slave’s ravaged body. Rather than inciting indignation, too often they immure us to pain by virtue of their familiarity—the oft-repeated or restored character of these accounts and our distance from them are signaled by the theatrical language usually resorted to in describing these instances—especially because they reinforce the spectacular character of black suffering. What interests me are the ways we are called upon to participate in such scenes. Are we witnesses who confirm the truth of what happened in the face of the world-destroying capacities of pain, the distortions of torture, the sheer unrepresentability of terror, and the repression of the dominant accounts? Or are we voyeurs fascinated with and repelled by exhibitions of terror and suffering? What does the exposure of the violated body yield? Proof of black sentience or the inhumanity of the "peculiar institution"? Or does the pain of
the other merely provide us with the opportunity for self-reflection? At issue here is the precariousness of empathy and the uncertain line between witness and spectator. Only more obscene than the brutality unleashed at the whipping post is the demand that this suffering be materialized and evidenced by the display of the tortured body or endless recitations of the ghastly and the terrible. In light of this, how does one give expression to these outrages without exacerbating the indifference to suffering that is the consequence of the benumbing spectacle or contend with the narcissistic identification that obliterates the other or the prurience that too often is the response to such displays? This was the challenge faced by Douglass and other foes of slavery, and this is the task I take up here.

Therefore, rather than try to convey the routinized violence of slavery and its aftermath through invocations of the shocking and the terrible, I have chosen to look elsewhere and consider those scenes in which terror can hardly be discerned—slaves dancing in the quarters, the outrageous darky antics of the minstrel stage, the constitution of humanity in slave law, and the fashioning of the self-possessed individual. By defamiliarizing the familiar, I hope to illuminate the terror of the mundane and quotidian rather than exploit the shocking spectacle. What concerns me here is the diffusion of terror and the violence perpetrated under the rubric of pleasure, paternalism, and property. Consequently, the scenes of subjection examined here focus on the enactment of subjugation and the constitution of the subject and include the blows delivered to Topsy and Zip Coon on the popular stage, slaves coerced to dance in the marketplace, the simulation of will in slave law, the fashioning of identity, and the processes of individuation and normalization.

**Human Flesh**

When Charlie Moses reflected on his years of slavery, the "preacher’s eloquence" noted by the Works Progress Administration interviewer who recorded his testimony did not blunt his anger. In recounting the harsh treatment received by colored folks, he emphasized that the enslaved were used like animals and treated as if they existed only for the master’s profits: "The way us niggers was treated was awful. Master would beat, knock, kick, kill. He done ever’ thing he could ‘cept eat us. We was worked to death. We worked Sunday, all day, all night. He whipped us ‘til some jus’ lay down to die. It was a poor life. I knows it ain’t right to have hate in the heart, but, God almighty!” As if required to explain his animosity toward his former owner who “had the devil in his heart,” Moses exclaimed that “God almighty never meant for human beings to be like animals. Us niggers has a soul an’ a heart an’ a min’. We ain’ like a dog or a horse.”

In some respects, Tom Windham’s experience of enslavement was the opposite of that described by Charlie Moses; he reported that his owner had treated him well. Nonetheless, like Moses, he too explained the violation of slavery as being made a beast of burden. While Moses detailed the outrages of slavery and highlighted the atrocity of the institution by poignantly enumerating the essential features of the slave’s humanity—a soul, a heart, and a mind—Windham, in conveying the injustice of slavery, put the matter simply: “I think we should have our liberty cause us ain’t hogs or horses—us is human flesh.”

The flesh, existence defined at its most elemental level, alone entitled one to liberty. This basic assertion of colored folks’ entitlement to freedom implicitly called into question the rationales that legitimated the exclusion of blacks from the purview of universal rights and entitlements. As Moses and Windham were well aware, the discourse of humanism, at the very least, was double-edged since the life and liberty they held in esteem were racial entitlements formally denied them. In short, the selective recognition of humanity that undergirded the relations of chattel slavery had not considered them men deserving of rights or freedom. Thus in taking up the language of humanism, they seized upon that which had been used against and denied them.

However, suppose that the recognition of humanity held out the promise not of liberating the flesh or redeeming one’s suffering but rather of intensifying it? Or what if this acknowledgment was little more than a pretext for punishment, dissimulation of the violence of chattel slavery and the sanction given it by the law and the state, and an instantiation of racial hierarchy? What if the presumed endowments of man—conscience, sentiment, and reason—rather than assuring liberty or negating slavery acted to yoke slavery and freedom? Or what if the heart, the soul, and the mind were simply the inroads of discipline rather than that which confirmed the crime of slavery and proved that blacks were men and brothers, as Charlie Moses had hoped.

Here I am interested in the ways that the recognition of humanity and individuality acted to tether, bind, and oppress: For instance, although the captive’s bifurcated existence as both an object of property and a person (whether understood as a legal subject formally endowed with limited rights and protections, a submissive, culpable or criminal agent, or one possessing restricted capacities for self-fashioning) has been recognized as one of the striking contradictions of chattel slavery, the constitution of this humanity remains to be considered. In other words, the law’s recognition of slave humanity has been dismissed as ineffectual and as a valse-face of an imperiled institution. Or, worse yet, it has been lauded as evidence of the hegemony of paternalism and the integral relations between masters and slaves. Similarly, the failure of Reconstruction generally has been thought of as a failure of implementation—that is, the state’s indifference toward blacks and unwillingness to ensure basic rights and entitlements sufficed to explain the racist retribution of the postwar period. I approach these issues from a slightly different vantage point and thus consider the outrages of slavery not only in terms of the object status of the enslaved as beasts of burden and chattel but also as they involve notions of slave humanity. Rather than declare paternalism an ideology, understood in the orthodox sense as a false and distorted representation of social relations, I am concerned with the savage encroachments of power that take place through notions of reform, consent, and protection. As I will argue later, rather than bespeaking the mutuality of social relations or the expressive and affective capacities of the subject, sentiment, enjoyment, affinity, will, and desire facilitated subjugation, domination, and terror precisely by preying upon the flesh, the heart, and the soul.
Likewise, in considering the metamorphosis of chattel into man catalyzed by the abolition of slavery, I think it is important to consider the failure of Reconstruction not simply as a matter of policy or as evidence of a flagging commitment to black rights, which is undeniable the case, but also in terms of the limits of emancipation, the ambiguous legacy of universalism, the exclusions constitutive of liberalism, and the blameworthiness of the freed individual. Therefore I examine the role of rights in facilitating relations of domination, the new forms of bondage enabled by propertorial notions of the self, and the pedagogical and legislative efforts aimed at transforming the formerly enslaved into rational, acquisitive, and responsible individuals. From this vantage point, emancipation appears less the grand event of liberation than a point of transition between modes of servitude and racial subjection. As well, it leads us to question whether the rights of man and citizen are realizable or whether the appellation “human” can be borne equally by all.  

In response to these questions, I contend that the recognition of the humanity of the slave did not redress the abuses of the institution nor the wanton use of the captive warranted by his or her status as chattel, since in most instances the acknowledgment of the slave as subject was a complement to the arrangements of chattel property rather than its remedy; nor did self-possession liberate the former slave from his or her bonds but rather sought to replace the whip with the compulsory contract and the collar with a guilty conscience. But differently, I argue that the barbarism of slavery did not express itself singularly in the constitution of the slave as object but also in the forms of subjectivity and circumscribed humanity imputed to the enslaved; by the same token, the failures of Reconstruction cannot be recounted solely as a series of legal reversals or troop withdrawals; they also need to be located in the very language of persons, rights, and liberties. For these reasons the book explores the forms of violence and domination enabled by the recognition of humanity, licensed by the invocation of rights, and justified on the grounds of liberty and freedom.  

In exploring these issues, I do not intend to offer a comprehensive examination of slavery and Reconstruction or to recover the resistances of the dominated but to critically interrogate terms like “will,” “agency,” “individuality,” and “responsibility.” As stated previously, this requires examining the constitution of the subject by dominant discourses as well as the ways in which the enslaved and the emancipated grappled with these terms and strived to reconstitute them in fashioning themselves as agents. For these reasons, the scenes of subjection at issue here consider the Manichaean identities constitutive of slave humanity—that is, the slavish subordinate and/or willful criminal, the calculation of humanity, the fabrication of the will, and the relation between injury and personhood. While the calibration of sentence and terms of punishment determined the constricted humanity of the enslaved, the abased and encumbered individuality of the emancipated resulted largely from the equation of responsibility with blameworthiness, thereby making duty synonymous with punishment. The enduring legacy of slavery was readily discernible in the travestied liberation, castigated agency, and blameworthiness of the free individual. By the same token, the ubiquitous fun and frolic that supposedly demonstrated slave contentment and the African’s insouciance for slavery were mirrored in the panic about idleness, impecunious consumption, and fanciful expressions of freedom, all of which justified coercive labor measures and the constriction of liberties. Apparent here are the entanglements of slavery and freedom and the dutiful submission characteristic of black subjectivity, whether in the making and maintaining of chattel personal or in the fashioning of individuality, cultivation of conscience, and harnessing of free will.  

In light of these concerns, part I examines a variety of scenes ranging from the auction block and the minstrel stage to the construction of black humanity in slave law. In this part, issues of terror and enjoyment frame the exploration of subjection, for calculations of socially tolerable violence and the myriad and wanton uses of slave property constitutive of enjoyment determine the person fashioned in the law and the blackness conjured up on the popular stage. Part II interrogates issues of agency, willfulness, and subjection in the context of freedom. In particular, it examines the liberal discourse of possessive individualism, the making of the contractual subject, and the wedding of formal equality and black subjugation. The period covered thus extends from the antebellum era to the end of the nineteenth century. Despite the amazing tumults, transitions, and discontinuities during the antebellum period, Reconstruction, and the Gilded Age, I feel this scope is justified by the tragic continuities in antebellum and postbellum constitutions of blackness. The insurmountable of racism and the antipathy and abjection naturalized in Plessy v. Ferguson recast blackness in terms that refigured relations of mastery and servitude. Thus, an amazing continuity belied the hypothesized discontinuities and epochal shifts installed by categories like slavery and freedom.  

The first chapter, “Innocent Amusements: The Stage of Sufferance,” examines the role of enjoyment in the economy of chattel slavery. Specifically it considers enjoyment in regard to the sanctioned uses of slave property and the figurative capacities of blackness. In this chapter, I contend that the value of blackness resided in its metaphorical aptitude, whether literally understood as the fungibility of the commodity or understood as the imaginative surface upon which the master and the nation came to understand themselves. As Toni Morrison writes, “The slave population, it could be and was assumed, offered itself up as surrogate selves for meditation on problems of human freedom, its lure and its elusive.” Indeed, blackness provided the occasion for self-reflection as well as for an exploration of terror, desire, fear, loathing, and longing. In examining the torturous constitution of agency and the role of feelings in securing domination, the chapter looks at popular theater, the spectacle of the slave market, and the sentimental amusements of the plantation. At these sites, the enactment of subjection occurs by way of coerced agency, simulated contentment, and the obliteration of the other through the slipping on of blackness or an empathic identification in which one substitutes the self for the other.  

In these instances, the exercise of power was inseparable from its display because domination depended upon demonstrations of the slaveholder’s dominion and the captive’s abasement. The owner’s display of mastery was just as important as the legal title to slave property. In other words, representing power was essential to reproducing domination. As James Scott states, a significant aspect of maintaining relations of domination “consists of the symbolization of domination by demonstrations and enactments of power.” These demonstrations of power consisted of
of formal equality and rights gesture toward an unrealized freedom and emphasize
the stranglehold of slavery and the limits of emancipation. In this and in other ways,
these practices reveal much about the infrapolitics of the dominated and the contesta-
tions over the meaning of abolition and emancipation.

The intervention made here is an attempt to recast the past, guided by the conun-
drums and compulsions of our contemporary crisis: the hope for social transforma-
tion in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles, the quixotic search for a
subject capable of world-historical action, and the despair induced by the lack of
one. In this regard, it is hoped that the instances of insurgency and contestation
narrated herein and the relentless proliferation of small acts of resistance perhaps
offer some small measure of encouragement and serve to remind us that the failures
of Reconstruction still haunt us, which in part explains why the grand narratives
continue to hold sway over our imagination. Therefore, while I acknowledge his-
tory’s “fiction of factual representation,” to use Hayden White’s term, I also recog-
nize the political utility and ethical necessity of historical fiction. As Walter Ben-
jamin remarked, “Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope
in the past who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe if the enemy
wins.” 22

PART ONE

Formations of Terror
and Enjoyment
I

Innocent Amusements

The Stage of Sufferance

Innocent amusements, when under proper regulations and when partaken of with moderation, conduce to morality and virtue. . . . Negroes are naturally prone to gaiety, and I conceive it a duty to ourselves as well as them not to change this inclination in them, but rather to promote it by every prudent and allowable means.

—N. Herlomont, On the Moral Discipline and Treatment of Slaves (1836)

Everything like rational enjoyment was frowned upon, and only those wild and low sports peculiar to semicivilized people were encouraged.

—Frederick Douglass, Life and Times of Frederick Douglass (1892)

In an epistle to his brother, John Rankin illumined the "very dangerous evil" of slavery in a description of the coffle, detailing the obscene theatricality of the slave trade: "Unfeeling wretches purchased a considerable drove of slaves—how many of them were separated from husbands and wives, I will not pretend to say—and having chained a number of them together, hoisted over the flag of American liberty, and with the music of two violins marched the woe-worn, heart-broken, and sobbing creatures through the town."¹ Rankin, aghast at the spectacle and shocked by "seeing the most oppressive sorrows of suffering innocence mocked with all the lightness of sportive music," declared: "My soul abhors the crime." The violation of domesticity, the parody of liberty, and the callous defiance of sorrow define the scene in which crime becomes spectacle. The "very dangerous evil" of slavery and the "agonizing groans of suffering humanity" had been made music.²

Although Rankin conceded that the cruelty of slavery "far exceed[ed] the power of description," he nonetheless strove to render the horrors of slavery. And in so doing, Rankin makes apparent that the crimes of slavery are not only witnessed but staged: This is a result of the recourse to terms like "stage," "spectacle," and "scene" in conveying these horrors, and, more important, because the "abominations of slavery" are disclosed through the reiteration of secondhand accounts and circulating stories from "unquestionable authorities" to which Rankin must act as surrogate witness. In the effort to "bring slavery close," these circulating reports of atrocity, in essence, are reenacted in Rankin epistles. The grotesqueries enumerated in documenting the injustice of slavery are intended to shock and to disrupt the
comfortable remove of the reader/spectator. By providing the minutest detail of macabre acts of violence, embellished by his own fantasy of slavery's bloodstained gate, Rankin hoped to rouse the sensibility of those indifferent to slavery by exhibiting the suffering of the enslaved and facilitating an identification between those free and those enslaved: "We are naturally too callous to the sufferings of others, and consequently prone to look upon them with cold indifference, until, in imagination we identify ourselves with the sufferers, and make their sufferings our own. . . . When I bring it near, inspect it closely, and find that it is inflicted on men and women, who possess the same nature and feelings with myself, my sensibility is roused" (56–57). By bringing suffering near, the ties of sentiment are forged. In letter after letter, Rankin strove to create this shared experience of horror in order to transform his slaveholding brother, to whom the letters were addressed, as well as the audience of readers. In this case, pain provides the common language of humanity; it extends humanity to the dispossessed and, in turn, remedies the indifference of the callous.

The shocking accounts of whipping, rape, mutilation, and suicide assault the barrier of indifference, for the abhorrence and indignity roused by these scenes of terror, which range from the mockery of the coffle to the disembowelment and incineration of a slave boy, give rise to a shared sentiment between those formerly indifferent and those suffering. So intent and determined is Rankin to establish that slaves possess the same nature and feelings as himself, and thereby establish the common humanity of all men on the basis of this extended suffering, that he literally narrates an imagined scenario in which he, along with his wife and child, is enslaved. The "horrible scenes of cruelty that were presented to [his] mind" as a consequence of this imagining aroused the "highest pitch of indignant feeling." In addition, this scenario enables Rankin to speak not only for but literally in the place of the enslaved. By believing himself to be and by phantasmically becoming the enslaved, he creates the scenario for shared feelings:

My flighty imagination added much to the tumult of passion by persuading me, for the moment, that I myself was a slave, and with my wife and children placed under the reign of terror. I began in reality to feel for myself, my wife, and my children—the thoughts of being whipped at the pleasure of a morose and capricious master, aroused the strongest feelings of resentment; but when I fancied the cruel lash was approaching my wife and children, and my imagination depicted in lively colors, their tears, their shrieks, and bloody stripes, every indignant principle of my bloody nature was excited to the highest degree. (56)

The nature of the feelings aroused here is rather complicated. While this flight of imagination enables a vicarious firsthand experience of the lash, excoriates the pleasure experienced by the master in this brutal exercise of power, and unleashes Rankin's fiery indignation and resentment, the phantasmic vehicle of this identification is complicated, unsettling, and disturbing. Although Rankin's fantasy culminates in indignant outrages against the institution of slavery and, clearly, the purpose of this identification is to highlight the crimes of slavery, this flight of imagination and slipping into the captive's body unlashes a Pandora's box and, surprisingly, what comes to the fore is the difficulty and slipperiness of empathy. Properly speaking, empathy is a projection of oneself into another in order to better understand the other or "the projection of one's own personality into an object, with the attribution to the object of one's own emotions." Yet empathy in important respects confounds Rankin's efforts to identify with the enslaved because in making the slave's suffering his own, Rankin begins to feel for himself rather than for those whom this exercise in imagination presumably is designed to reach. Moreover, by exploiting the vulnerability of the captive body as a vessel for the uses, thoughts, and feelings of others, the humanity extended to the slave inadvertently confirms the expectations and desires definitive of the relations of chattel slavery. In other words, the ease of Rankin's empathic identification is as much due to his good intentions and heartfelt opposition to slavery as to the fungibility of the captive body.

By making the suffering of others his own, has Rankin ameliorated indifference or only confirmed the difficulty of understanding the suffering of the enslaved? Can the white witness of the spectacle of suffering affirm the materiality of black servitude only by feeling for himself? Does this not only exacerbate the idea that black servitude is inconceivable and unimaginable, but, in the very case of possessing the abused and enslaved body, ultimately elide an understanding and acknowledgment of the slave's pain? Beyond evidence of slavery's crime, what does this exposure of the suffering of the bondsman yield? Does this not reinforce the "thingly" quality of the captive by reducing the body to evidence in the very effort to establish the humanity of the enslaved? Does it not reproduce the hyperembodiment of the powerless? The purpose of these inquiries is not to cast doubt on Rankin's motives for recounting these events but to consider the precariousness of empathy and the thin line between witness and spectator. In the fantasy of being beaten, Rankin must substitute himself and his wife and children for the black captive in order that this pain be perceived and experienced. So, in fact, Rankin becomes a proxy and the other's pain is acknowledged to the degree that it can be imagined, yet by virtue of this substitution the object of identification threatens to disappear. An order to convince the reader of the horrors of slavery, Rankin must volunteer himself and his family for abasement. Put differently, the effort to counteract the commonplace callousness to black suffering requires that the white body be positioned in the place of the black body in order to make this suffering visible and intelligible. Yet if this violence can become palpable and indignation can be fully aroused only through the masochistic fantasy, then it becomes clear that empathy is double-edged, for in making the other's suffering one's own, this suffering is occluded by the other's obliteration. Given the litany of horrors that fill Rankin's pages, this recourse to fantasy reveals an anxiety about making the slave's suffering legible. This anxiety is historically determined by the denial of black servitude, the slave's status as object of property, the predicament of witnessing given the legal status of blacks, and the repression of counterdiscourses on the "peculiar institution." Therefore, Rankin must supplant the black captive in order to give expression to black suffering, and as a consequence, the dilemma—the denial of black servitude and the obscenity of suffering—is not attenuated but instantiated. The ambivalent character of empathy—more exactly, the repressive effects of empathy—as Jonathan Boyarin notes, can be located in the "obliteration of otherness" or the facile intimacy that enables identification with the other only as we "feel ourselves into those we
imagine as ourselves. As a consequence, empathy fails to expand the space of the other but merely places the self in its stead. This is not to suggest that empathy can be discarded or that Rankin’s desire to exist in the place of the other can be dismissed as a narcissistic exercise but rather to highlight the dangers of a too-easy intimacy, the consideration of the self that occurs at the expense of the slave’s suffering, and the violence of identification.

As well, we need ask why the site of suffering so readily lends itself to inviting identification. Why is pain the conduit of identification? This question may seem to beg the obvious, given the violent domination and dishonor constitutive of enslavement, the acclimated transformative capacities of pain in sentimental culture, the prevalence of public displays of suffering inclusive of the pageantry of the trade, the spectacle of punishment, circulating reports of slavery’s horrors, the runaway success of Uncle Tom’s Cabin, and the passage through the “bloodstained gate,” which was a convention of the slave narrative, all of which contributed to the idea that the feelings and consciousness of the enslaved were most available at this site. However, what I am trying to suggest is that if the scene of beating readily lends itself to an identification with the enslaved, it does so at the risk of fixing and naturalizing this condition of pained embodiment and, in complete defiance of Rankin’s good intention, increases the difficulty of beholding black suffering since the endeavor to bring pain close exploits the spectacle of the body in pain and oddly confirms the spectral character of suffering and the inability to witness the captive’s pain. If, on one hand, pain extends humanity to the dispossessed and the ability to sustain suffering leads to transcendence, on the other, the spectral and spectacular character of this suffering, or, in other words, the shocking and ghostly presence of pain, effaces and restricts black sentence.

As Rankin himself states, in order for this suffering to induce a reaction and stir feelings, it must be brought close. Yet if sentiment or morality are “inextricably tied to human proximity,” to quote Zygmunt Bauman, the problem is that in the very effort to “bring it near” and “inspect it closely,” it is dissipated. According to Bauman, “Morality conform[s] to the law of optical perspective. It looms large and thick close to the eye.” So, then, how does suffering elude or escape us in the very effort to bring it near? It does so precisely because it can only be brought near by way of a proxy and by way of Rankin’s indignation and imagination. If the black body is the vehicle of the other’s power, pleasure, and profit, then it is no less true that it is the white or near-white body that makes the captive’s suffering visible and discernible. Indeed, the elusiveness of black suffering can be attributed to a racist optics in which black flesh is itself identified as the source of opacity, the denial of black humanity, and the effacement of sentence integral to the warrant use of the captive body. And as noted earlier, this is furthercomplicated by the repressive underside of an optics of morality that insists upon the other as a mirror of the self and that in order to recognize suffering must substitute the self for the other.

While Rankin attempts to ameliorate the insufficiency of feeling before the spectacle of the other’s suffering, this insufficiency is, in fact, displaced rather than remedied by his standing in. Likewise, this attempt exacerbates the distance between the readers and those suffering by literally removing the slave from view as pain is brought close. Moreover, we need to consider whether the identification forged at the site of suffering confirms black humanity at the peril of reinforcing racist assumptions of limited sentience, in that the humanity of the enslaved and the violence of the institution can only be brought into view by extreme examples of incineration and dismemberment or by placing white bodies at risk. What does it mean that the violence of slavery or the pain experienced by the enslaved, if discernible, is only so in the most heinous and grotesque examples and not in the quotidian routines of slavery? As well, is not the difficulty of empathy related to both the devaluation and the valuation of black life?

Empathic identification is complicated further by the fact that it cannot be extricated from the economy of chattel slavery with which is at odds, for this projection of one’s feeling upon or into the object of property and the phantasmic slipping into captivity, while it is distinct from the pleasures of self-augmentation yielded by the ownership of the captive body and the expectations fostered therein, is nonetheless entangled with this economy and identification facilitated by a kindred possession or occupation of the captive body, albeit on a different register. In other words, what I am trying to isolate are the kinds of expectations and the qualities of affect distinctive to the economy of slavery. The relation between pleasure and the possession of slave property, in both the figurative and literal senses, can be explained in part by the fungibility of the slave—that is, the joy made possible by virtue of the replaceability and interchangeability endemic to the commodity—and by the extensive capacities of property—that is, the augmentation of the master subject through his embodiment in external objects and persons. Put differently, the fungibility of the commodity makes the captive body an abstract and empty vessel vulnerable to the projection of others’ feelings, ideas, desires, and values; and, as property, the dispossessed body of the enslaved is the surrogate for the master’s body since it guarantees his disembodied universality and acts as the sign of his power and dominion. Thus, while the beaten and mutilated body presumably establishes the brute materiality of existence, the materiality of suffering regularly eludes (re)cognition by virtue of the body’s being replaced by other signs of value, as well as other bodies.

Thus the desire to don, occupy, or possess blackness or the black body as a sentimental resource and/or locus of excess enjoyment is both founded upon and enabled by the material relations of chattel slavery. In light of this, is it too extreme or too obvious to suggest that Rankin’s flight of imagination and the excitements engendered by suffering might also be pleasurable? Certainly this willing abasement confirms Rankin’s moral authority, but what about the pleasure engendered by this embrace of pain—that is, the tumultuous passions of the flighty imagination stirred by this fantasy of being beaten? Rankin’s imagined beating is immune neither to the pleasures to be derived from the masochistic fantasy nor to the sadistic pleasure to be derived from the spectacle of suffering. Here my intention is not to shock or exploit the perverse but to consider critically the complicated nexus of terror and enjoyment by examining the obviated and debased diversions of the capricious master; the pleasure of indignation yielded before the spectacle of suffering; the instability of the scene of suffering; and the confusion of song and sorrow typical of the coiffé, the auction block, performing before the master, and other popular amusements.

By slipping into the black body and figuratively occupying the position of the enslaved, Rankin plays the role of captive and atester and in so doing articulates the
crisis of witnessing determined by the legal incapacity of slaves or free blacks to act as witnesses against whites. Since the veracity of black testimony is in doubt, the crimes of slavery must not only be confirmed by unquestionable authorities and other white observers but also must be made visible, whether by revealing the scars left by the whip—or through authenticating devices, or, better yet, by enabling reader and audience member to experience vicariously the "tragic scene of cruelty." 12 If Rankin as a consequence of his abolitionist sentiments was willing to occupy the "unmasterly" position, sentimentality prescribed the terms of his identification with the enslaved, and the central term of this identification was suffering. For Rankin, the pageantry of the coffee and sportive music failed to disguise "the sorrows of suffering innocence." However, for others who also possessed antislavery sentiments, the attempt to understand the inner feelings of the enslaved only effaced the horrors of slavery and further circumscribed the captive's presumably limited capacity for suffering. For many eyewitnesses of the coffle, the terrors of slavery were dissipated by song and violence was transformed into a display of agency and good cheer.

What concerns me here is the spectacular nature of black suffering and, conversely, the dissipation of suffering through spectacle. In one respect, the combination of imagined scenes of cruelty with scenes culled from unquestionable authority evidences the crisis of witnessing that results from the legal subjection of slaves. At the same time, the spectacular dimensions of slavery engender this crisis of witnessing as much as the repression of black testimony since to the degree that the body speaks it is made to speak the master's truth and augments his power through the imposition and intensification of pain.13 All of this is further complicated by the "half-articulate" and "incoherent song" that confounds the transparency of testimony and radically complicates the rendering of slavery. In light of these concerns, this chapter wrestles with the following questions: Does the extension of humanity to the enslaved ironically reinscribe their subjugated status? Do the figurative capacities of blackness enable white flights of fantasy while increasing the likelihood of the captive's disappearance? Can the moral embrace of pain extricate itself from pleasures borne by subjection? In other words, does the scene of the tyrannized slave at the bloodstained gate delight the loathsome master and provide wholesome pleasures to the upright and the virtuous? Is the act of "witnessing" a kind of looking no less entangled with the yielding of power and the extraction of enjoyment? Does the captive's dance allay grief or articulate the fraught, compromised, and impossible character of agency? Or does it exemplify the use of the body as an instrument against the self?

The scenes of spectacle considered here—the coerced spectacles orchestrated to encourage the trade in black flesh; scenes of torture and festivity; the tragedy of virtuous women and the antics of outrageous darkies—all turn upon the simulation of agency and the excesses of black enjoyment. The affiliation of performance and blackness can be attributed to the spectacularization of black pain and racist conceptions of Negro nature as carefree, infantile, hedonistic, and indifferent to suffering and to an interested misreading of the interdependence of labor and song common among the enslaved.14 The constitution of blackness as an abject and degraded condition and the fascination with the other's enjoyment went hand in hand. More-

over, blacks were envisioned fundamentally as vehicles for white enjoyment, in all of its sundry and unspeakable expressions; this was as much the consequence of the chattel status of the captive as it was of the excess enjoyment imputed to the other, for those forced to dance on the decks of slave ships crossing the Middle Passage, step it up lively on the auction block, and amuse the master and his friends were seen as the purveyors of pleasure. The amazing popularity of the "darkies" of the minstrel stage must be considered in this light. Contending variants of racism, ranging from the proslavery plantation pastoralism to the romantic racialism of abolitionists, similarly constituted the African as childish, primitive, confined, and endowed with great mimetic capacities. Essentially, these characteristics defined the infamous and renowned Sambo. This history is of central importance when evaluating the politics of pleasure, the ways of slave property, the constitution of the subject, and the tactics of resistance. Indeed, the convergence of terror and enjoyment cannot be understood outside it.

The pageantry of the coffle, stepping it up lively on the auction block, going before the master, and the blackface mask of minstrelsy and melodrama all evidenced the entanglements of terror and enjoyment. Above all, the simulated jollity and coerced festivity of the slave trade and the instrumental recreations of plantation management document the investment in and obsession with "black enjoyment" and the significance of these orchestrated amusements as part of a larger effort to dissipate the extreme violence of the institution and disavow the pain of captivity. Indeed, the transubstantiation of abjection into contentment suggested that the traumas of slavery were easily redressed and, likewise, the prevalence of black song confirmed blacks' restricted sentence and immunity to sorrow. Most important, enjoyment defined the relation of the dominant race to the enslaved. In other words, the nefarious uses of chattel licensed by the legal and social relations of slavery articulated the nexus of pleasure and possession and bespoke the critical role of diversion in securing the relations of bondage. In this way, enjoyment enclosed the sentiments and expectations of the "peculiar institution."

The Property of Enjoyment

From the vantage point of the everyday relations of slavery, enjoyment, broadly speaking, defined the parameters of racial relations, since in practice all whites were allowed a great degree of latitude in regard to uses of the enslaved. Before proceeding to limn the important features of antebellum enjoyment, a gloss on enjoyment and its relation to use and possession would be helpful here. Black's Law Dictionary defines the term "enjoy" as "to have, possess, and use with satisfaction; to occupy or have the benefit of." While enjoyment encompasses these rudimentary features, it also denotes more extensive capacities. It entails "the exercise of a right; the promise and function of a right, privilege or incorporeal herediatem. Comfort, consolation, contentment, ease, happiness, pleasure and satisfaction. Such includes the beneficial use, interest, and purpose to which property may be put, and implies rights to profits and incomes therefrom." At the outset, is it clear that to take delight in, to use, and to possess are inextricably linked and,
moreover, that enjoyment entails everything from the use of one's possession to the value of whiteness, which can be considered an incorporeal hereditament or illusory inheritance of chattel slavery.

Since the subjection of the slave to all whites defined his condition in civil society, effectively this made the enslaved an object of property to be potentially used and abused by all whites; however, to speak at all of the civil condition of the slave, as George M. Stroud remarked, is a kind of solecism.46 It is a tricky matter to detail the civil existence of a subject who is socially dead and legally recognized as human only to the degree that he is criminally culpable. Yet it is the anomalous status of the enslaved that determines the specific uses of the slave as object of property and the relation between citizens and those who can be identified as civil subjects in the most circumscribed and tentative fashion. Hence what is striking here are the myriad and nefarious uses of slave property and the ways in which slaves become the property of all whites, given their status in civil society. In this effort, let us turn to William Goodell's American Slave Codes and Stroud's A Sketch of the Laws Relating to Slavery in the Several States of the United States of America. In chapter 3, Stroud examines the condition of the slave as a member of civil society. As identified by Stroud, the notable features of this anomalous civil condition are: the slave cannot be a witness against a white person, either in a civil or criminal cause; the slave cannot be a party to a civil suit; the benefits of education are withheld from the slave; the means for moral or religious education are not granted to the enslaved; submission is required of the slave, not to the will of his master only but to that of all other white persons; the penal codes of the slave-holding states bear much more severely upon slaves than upon white persons; and slaves are prosecuted and tried upon criminal accusations in a manner inconsistent with the rights of humanity.17

Here I want to focus on a singular aspect of the slave's existence in civil society—the submission of the slave to all whites. As Stroud notes, the great concession to the power of the master and to all whites was evidenced by laws that prohibited the slave from defending himself from the master to avoid vindictive punishment or from striking any white in self-defense. Such laws not only exacted strict submission extending to bloodshed and murder but also furnished a pretext and an inducement to oppress and tyrannize the enslaved. Consequently, the enslaved were forced to "patiently endure every species of personal injury, which a white person, however brutal or ferocious his disposition . . . may choose to offer."18 Along similar lines, Goodell, after reviewing state statutes that prohibited the slave from defending himself against the assault of any white person and punished such offenses by cropping ears, inflicting thirty lashes on a bare back, or bringing about death, concluded that "if civil government were designed for human demoralization and torture, it is not easy to see how its ends could be more effectually reached."19

To be sure, the laws of slavery subjected the enslaved to the absolute control and authority of any and every member of the dominant race. At the very least, the relations of chattel slavery served to enhance whiteness by racializing rights and entitlements, designating inferior and superior races, and granting whites' dominion over blacks. In light of such considerations, the contours of antebellum enjoyment reveal less about "the nature of the Negro" than the terms of interracial interaction that engendered the understanding and imputation of black excess. Given this, let me suggest that not only were the rights and privileges of white citizens undergirded by the subjection of blacks but, moreover, that enjoyment in turn defined the meaning of subjection. The interdiction against self-defense and the inability of a slave to testify against whites permitted the slave to be used in any capacity that pleased the master or whomever. And as Goodell noted, in a rather indirect fashion, the uses of property also included the sexual violation of the enslaved. The few restrictions placed upon the uses of slave property concerned only the master's rights of property.20 Indeed, the dissolute uses of slave property came to define the identity of the captive and hence the nature of the Negro. As well, these actual or imagined usages established the parameters of interracial association.

Indeed, there was no relation to blackness outside the terms of this use, entitlement to, and occupation of the captive body, for even the status of free blacks was shaped and compromised by the existence of slavery. Although, as I have argued, enjoyment was predicated on the wanton uses of slave property, it was attributed to the slave in order to deny, displace, and minimize the violence of slavery. As a result, in spectators like the cofle, it appeared not only that the slave was indifferent to his wretched condition, but also that he had nonetheless achieved a measure of satisfaction with that condition. Thus the efficacy of violence was indicated precisely by its invisibility or transparency and in the copious display of slave agency. Like the imputation of lasciviousness that dissimulated and condoned the sexual violation of the enslaved, and the punitive recognition of will and responsibility that justified punishment while denying the slave the ability to forge contracts, testify, or sustain natal and conjugal relations, enjoyment registered and effaced the violence of property relations.

Thus, as I have tried to suggest, the fixation on the slave's "good times" conceals the affiliations of white enjoyment and black subjection and the affective dimensions of mastery and servitude. From this perspective, the seemingly casual observations about black fun and frolic obscure this wanton usage and the incorporation of the captive body in realizing the extensive and sentient capacities of the master subject. As Slavoj Zizek notes, fantasies about the other's enjoyment are ways for us to organize our own enjoyment. In this context, he asks: "Does not the Other's enjoyment exert such a powerful fascination because in it we represent to ourselves our own innermost relationship toward enjoyment?"21 What is revealed about this innermost relationship toward enjoyment? An indifference to suffering or a keen investment in it? Whose unease was allayed by the dance? If the excess of enjoyment imputed to the enslaved displaced what we would think of as disturbing circumstances, it did so only by obscuring violence and conflating it with pleasure.

(In)sufferable Pleasures

Rankin was not alone in his desire to slip into blackness and experience the suffering of slavery "firsthand," so to speak. On the contrary, the popularity of Uncle Tom's Cabin and The Octoroon indicates the willingness of others to suffer, too. The elasticity of blackness and its capacious affects enabled such flights and becomings. Moreover, in this case, the figurative capacities of blackness and the