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SLAVERY, MODERNITY AND
VISUAL CULTURE

THE FIRST ENCOUNTERS that we looked at in the last chapter were at once succeeded by expansion into the Americas to settle, mine and plant. The repeated epidemics caused by the introduction of exogenous viruses into the Americas reduced the native population to below a level where it could sustain the forced labor required to develop these new enterprises. The Atlantic triangle was formed by the forcible expatriation of Africans to the Americas by European slave-traders in order to sustain the colonial labor force. The enslaved were set to work in the plantation system, cultivating cash-crops like sugar cane, coffee and indigo. Those products were taken back to Europe by traders to complete the triangle, setting in motion the perpetual circulation that is characteristic of capitalism. This circulating network of bodies, goods and ideas created modern capitalist society in the "West." There is no modernity without slavery, even if slavery has also existed in other times and in different modes of production. Slavery operated behind a certain invisibility, as far as its European beneficiaries were concerned, that allowed abolitionists to challenge the system with simple but highly effective forms of visual propaganda. Those enslaved had already introduced their own visual forms to the Atlantic world, notably the circle created by African-influenced performance and the crossroads, the place of intersection and challenge. These counter-images refused slavery's efforts to reduce meaning and control difference, inflecting the new "objective" medium of photography in the Americas with its dramas of race and power. Such connotations linger in present-day visibility, emerging from time to time as a disruptive and scandalous presence that is supposed to have been laid to rest.

The sense that slavery is over or should be forgotten leaves out of consideration its formative role in shaping modernity, especially Western capitalism, whose moment is far from complete. As the Caribbean historian and politician Eric Williams argued in his classic 1944 account *Capitalism and Slavery*, the forces that

drove modern capitalism into being were those set in motion by slavery. The examples that follow are taken from his text. In 1718, the British economist William Wood declared that the slave trade was "the spring and parent whence the others flow." The one small sugar island of Barbados, 166 square miles in extent, produced more revenue for Britain than New England, New York and Pennsylvania combined. There were vast profits to be made for elite families like the Beckfords of Fonthill and the Buckinghamhs. The famous residence of the British monarchy in London, Buckingham Palace, was one product of this spectacular wealth, ostentatiously given by the Duke of Buckingham to the monarchy as if to express his superiority. The planter Christopher Codrington of Barbados gave his library to All Souls College of Oxford University, marking his claim to be a man of culture as well as cultivation. Thus the eighteenth-century French abolitionist, the abbé Raynal saw that slavery "may be considered as the principal cause of the rapid motion which now agitates the universe." The sudden shift from feudalism to modernity was and is characterized above all by speed of circulation, rather than depending solely on a type of production process, just as our own era of globalization is characterized by speed of travel and communications, whether electronic or actual.

By today's standards, agriculturally based colonial capitalism was a slow process indeed but it allowed for the generation of profit that was extraordinary at the time. The "Great Gang," as the enslaved who worked in the fields were known, formed what the Caribbean historian C.L.R. James called the first modern proletariat, that is to say, a working class (1968). By the same token, the highly technical and coordinated processes involved in sugar production, entirely reliant on the labor of the enslaved, were the first "factories" in both the modern sense and in eighteenth-century terminology. The Cuban film *L'Ultima Cena* (1976) contains an evocative representation of these modern production techniques, leading to a revolt that is depicted as a precursor to the Cuban Revolution of 1959. By the same token, James argued that the revolution in Saint-Domingue (modern Haiti) of 1791 was the first modern proletarian revolution. According to Adam Smith, the eighteenth-century theorist of capitalism, labor was the basis of wealth. With the Great Gang concentrating labor as never before, he noted: "The profits of a sugar plantation in any of our West Indian colonies are generally much greater than those of any other cultivation that is known either in Europe or America." The process of profit-making began with the enslaved themselves. In 1710, an African person could be bought for £3 and then sold for £15, a dramatic multiple. In the 1730s, the margin had narrowed somewhat as a person was bought for £12 and sold for £25. Such rate of profit encouraged the notorious packing of slave ships with people that in turn led to a horrifying mortality rate on the infamous "Middle Passage" from Africa to the Americas. In 1771, 195 ships went to Africa from Britain shipping 47,146 people. In addition, 70 American and West Indian ships took another 57,000. Revenues amounted to £1.5 million for the people plus £500,000 for gold, mahogany and ivory. A ship named the *Lively* sailed from Liverpool in 1737 carrying cargo worth £1,307 and returned with £3,080 in cash plus a cargo of cotton and sugar. Note that

slavery started capitalist society

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the goods exchanged for people in Africa were not wholly worthless, as is often said, but represented a significant investment. The three-fold return experienced by ships like the *Lively* was the origin of British naval power as one Liverpool slave trader acknowledged: "whenever it is abolished, the naval importance of this kingdom is abolished with it." Slave ships needed to be fast, secure and capable of taking hard use. However, there was one Liverpool shipmaker named William Rathbone who refused to make slave ships. He deserves to be remembered for showing that it was possible to refuse to be involved with slavery.

By 1798, the British Prime Minister William Pitt assessed revenues from the West Indies as £4 million, compared to the rest of the British empire producing just £1 million. When Marx claimed in 1846 that slavery was the root of modern industry it was simply common sense for most people:

Direct slavery is as much the pivot of our industrialism today as machinery, credit, etc. Without slavery, no cotton; without cotton, no modern industry. Slavery has given value to the colonies, the colonies have created worldwide trade; world trade is the necessary condition of large scale machine industry.

(Lewis, 1983: 95)

If the first famous example of capitalist production was what William Blake called the "dark, satanic mills" of England, the cotton woven in those mills had been cultivated by American slaves. Further, the rather meager diet of the new factory workers, usually displaced from the land into the growing cities, increasingly relied on colonial products, such as sugar, tea and tobacco, to stay alive and have the energy required for long hours of work. In Van Gogh's *Potato Eaters*, a depiction of nineteenth-century peasant life, the entire scene was dependent on colonial products. The peasants cultivate and eat the American potato, while they drink coffee perhaps grown in the Dutch East Indies and illuminate their meal with a lamp burning sperm whale oil. Far from being timeless workers on the land in the style of painters such as Jean-François Millet, Van Gogh's peasants were resolutely modern, living in the modernity that slavery made.

For the most part, slavery itself was invisible to Western eyes, or at least kept as far out of sight as possible, rendering slave economies peculiarly vulnerable to visual propaganda. To take one significant example, in Joseph Vernet's (1714-89) extensive series of French port paintings, commissioned by the monarchy in the 1750s, the vital contribution of enslaved African labor to the French economy was reduced to a single figure. These large-scale (typically 165 x 265 cm) panoramic views teem with detail that requires careful and extensive viewing to absorb. In all his canvases of the fifteenth leading ports of France, I can see only one African at work. He is placed in the center foreground of Vernet's *Third View of Toulon* (1756). Even here his presence is displaced by comparison with the group of white prisoners condemned to the galleys at extreme right. While the African works freely by

supplied colonies a lot



Figure 3.1
 Vincent Van Gogh,
The Potato Eaters
 (1884). Courtesy
 Van Gogh
 Museum,
 Amsterdam/The
 Bridgeman Art
 Library

himself, and indeed under French law he would have been “free” while in France, the galley slaves are weighed down with heavy chains and under the supervision of a soldier. It seems likely that the African was not enslaved but was simply depicted as a reference to Toulon’s proximity to North Africa. In the background, a long row of covered vessels can be seen that served as accommodation for the galley slaves. In short, white coerced labor finds a stronger visual presence than the Atlantic slave trade on which France’s modern prosperity was based.

In British abolition campaigns of the period, this invisibility and erasure was countered by the abstract representation of the enslaved as the idea of slavery. In 1787 the potter Josiah Wedgwood, noted for the quality of his work as well as for the originality of his processes, created a medallion for the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade. It was made from the jaspera process that Wedgwood



Figure 3.2 Josiah Wedgwood, *Am I Not A Man And A Brother?* (c. 1787). Enamel medallion, American Philosophical Society Museum, Philadelphia

saw as being suitable for "Cabinet pictures, or ornamenting Cabinets, Book-Cases, Writing-Tables &c," (Bermingham, 2000: 153), placing its market as that of the intellectual. The motif depicted a kneeling African man in chains, raising his hands in supplication, beneath the motto "Am I Not A Man And A Brother?" As Mary Guyatt has argued: "the silhouette-like effect heightened the slave's shadow-like existence and depersonalized him," a strategy that nonetheless proved very effective (2000: 99). Indeed, Wedgwood's design was so successful that the medallion became a fashion item, appearing on snuffboxes, as bracelets and even as an ornament for hair (Honour, 1989: 62-3). This success gave force to Wedgwood's argument in a catalog of the same year that:

Nothing can contribute more effectually to diffuse a good taste through the arts, then the power of multiplying copies of fine things, in materials fit to be applied for ornaments; by which means the public eye is instructed, good and bad works are nicely discriminated, and all the arts receive improvement.

(Bermingham, 2000: 153)

The repeated shadow figure came to be an effective tool of abolition campaigns.

In the famous engraving, *Description of a Slave Ship* (1789), British abolitionists found a means of representing slavery that challenged the codes by which slavery was made acceptable (Finley, 1999). The engraving, in the words of Marcus Wood, "represented in cross-section, front-view and side-view, and in a series of over views of both slave decks, the manner in which slaves could legally be packed onto the Liverpool slaver the *Brookes*" (2000: 17). The still-horrifying image shows people packed into every available space, with no room to stand or sit. Each figure is represented in an abstract manner, equal in height and size. The *Description* placed abstract representations of African bodies in an apparently precise naval architectural plan that is "perhaps best understood as a memorial to a disaster, not as a representation of whatever happened" (Wood, 2000: 32). The *Description* claimed to show only how the ship was used in general rather than on a specific occasion, symbolically enacting what the leading anti-slavery campaigner Thomas Clarkson elsewhere described as the desire to enable the viewer to "comprehend the whole of [slavery] in a single view" (Wood, 2000: 4). It was consistently difficult to obtain such a view, as slavery was designed to prevent it.

The Atlantic triangle brought the two other forms of Atlantic visual culture to the Americas: the circle and the crossroads. The arts of the Atlantic world were created from the erasures, overlaps and intersections of these three competing figures. The cultural studies theorist Stuart Hall has called a culture a "distinctive repertoire of practices," exemplified by the performances of the enslaved. Performed in a circle, the "ring shout" was a key performative form for the remembering of African culture in diaspora (Stuckey, 1988: 3-98). Performers gathered in a circle, where, to the accompaniment of songs and drums, dance and ritual performance

slavery is
elusive
(in terms of getting
people to judge
its effects)



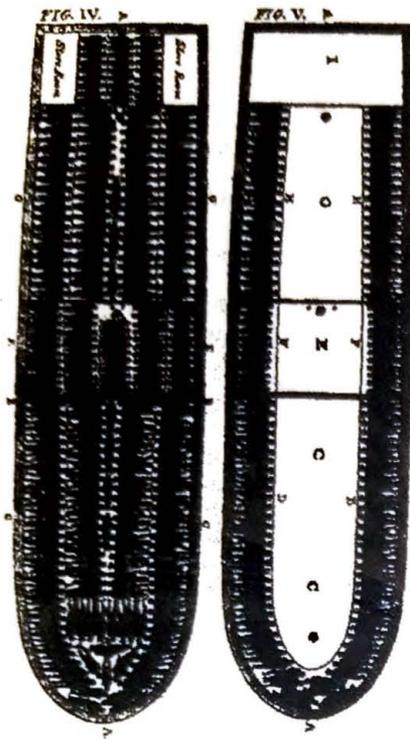


Figure 3.3
Description of a Slave Ship (1789)

were carried out. Just as nineteenth-century European proletarians challenged their own status by reading in the only time available to them, the night, so were these performances enacted at night. Slave-owners constantly wondered at the way in which the enslaved would use all their allotted rest in dancing and other performance. While they saw it as indicative of Africans' supposed lack of restraint, this reclaiming of the one available time given to the enslaved was a striking affirmation of culture as a means of sustaining identity in the most challenging circumstances. Combining African languages with perspective-resistant circles, diaspora performances of this kind resisted the means by which colonizers sought to dominate the lived environment of the plantation. Performances today commemorate the dead of the Middle Passage with a ring shout memorial ceremony. Nor were such performances in the period of slavery limited to outdoors gatherings. In Le Cap, the principal city on Saint-Domingue, there was a theater seating 1,500 people built in the 1760s that featured performers of African as well as European descent.

Often these actors were people of so-called mixed race who had obtained their freedom and were highly visible as evidence that the strict division between "black" and "white" on which slavery rested was frequently crossed in practice, whether voluntarily or not. Not for nothing was the crossroads a key location in popular African and European culture alike. In Europe, the crossroads was a powerful magical location, where murderers and other evil figures were buried to prevent their returning after death to haunt the living. London's notorious site of execution Tyburn Tree, now Marble Arch, was situated at an old crossroads. In Yorubaland

ring
shout
circle

(Nigeria), the god Exu, a powerful trickster figure, presides over the crossroads. If the circle was a form to preserve cultural memory, the crossroads was the place of cultural fusion and intersection. Perhaps the most striking visual embodiments of the Atlantic crossroads are the altars and other objects created by the syncretic religions of the Caribbean that use African and European elements in synthesis. In present-day Haiti, the practice of Vodou involves performative ceremonies in which the spirits such as Baron Samédi or Erzuli descend to earth and “ride” one of their adepts. The possessed person embodies the spirit regardless of apparent clashes of gender or personality. That is to say, a woman could perform the sexually avaricious (male) Baron Samédi and so on.

The figure of the horse-rider became a visual crossroads in the Atlantic world. The first painter to emerge from enslavement in the Caribbean was José Campeche y Jordán (1751–1809), the son of a formerly enslaved African who had purchased his own freedom on the island of Puerto Rico. Campeche’s mother was from the Canary Islands, a colony in the Western Atlantic near the coast of Africa, where Spanish sugar cultivation had first been practiced. Truly a child of the Atlantic world, Campeche worked for the colonial government, the church and for local people of means. His work is noticable for a series of finely observed portraits of women at leisure, including one of a *Woman on Horseback* (1785). The picture shows a woman dressed in the remarkably elaborate style associated with the court of Louis XVI of France prior to the revolution. Puerto Rico was gaining in importance in the period



Figure 3.4 José Campeche, *Woman on Horseback* (1785). Museo de Ponce, Puerto Rico



Figure 3.5 Isaac Belisario, *Jonkonu* (1836). Courtesy of the National Library of Jamaica

and extensive sugar plantations, with their accompanying wealth creation and enslaved population, had been developed. The horse has its mane and tail braided with ribbons, matching the drama of its rider's hat. The painting has the air of being created in a studio as if against a backdrop. Is there a double meaning hidden in the painting, an allusion to the "riding" of the spirits in Atlantic world religions that were certainly known in Puerto Rico? Like all syncretic religions during active slavery, such meaning can only be alluded to rather than made explicit. In the language of criticism, one would say that a possible African reading is connoted rather than denoted. That is to say, while nothing can be seen that is simply "African," whatever that would mean, a possibility of seeing that meaning nonetheless exists, if the viewer perceives the connotation. In a print from Jamaica made just before the emancipation of the enslaved, the Jewish artist Isaac Belisario (the first known Jamaican-born artist) depicted a carnival character called *Jonkonu*, or John Canoe, whose immensely elaborate house-shaped hat clearly parodied the Rococo fashions of the slave-owners. If such parody could be shown directly with emancipation at hand, it would seem reasonable to suggest that such double meanings had been in circulation for some time.

In other Caribbean visual images from the period, such allusions can be seen more clearly. For example in the best-known print of Toussaint Louverture, leader of the revolution in Saint-Domingue (1791–1804), he is seen on horseback. Toussaint's pose at once suggests a mastery of the animal that above all others was associated



Figure 3.6 *Toussaint Louverture*. From a group of engravings done in post Revolutionary France (c. 1802)



Figure 3.7 Jacques-Louis David, *Napoleon Crossing the Alps at the Saint-Bernard Pass* (1800). Courtesy of Musee Nat. du Chateau de Malmaison/Lauros/Giraudon/The Bridgeman Art Library



Figure 3.8 Joseph Turner, *The Slave Ship* (1840). Courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

with European settlement of the Americas that he as a former slave was not supposed to possess. The print shows by connotation and denotation alike his ability to “ride” the spirit, referring to the Vodou associations of the revolution, which began in 1791 with a Vodou ceremony led by the *oungan* (priest) Boukman, still remembered in Haitian art and religion today. At the same time, the image of Toussaint also makes iconographic reference to the Neo-Classical painter Jacques-Louis David’s portrait of *Napoleon at the Saint-Bernard Pass* (1799). Both riders master their rearing steeds, both wear the military uniform of the French Revolution and have sufficient control to do all this with one hand. Nor have such motifs been forgotten. Jean-Michel Basquiat, the New York graffiti artist of Haitian descent, represented a scene of riding the spirits in his evocative painting *Riding With Death* (1988) that the African-American critic bell hooks has interpreted in terms of the Vodou spirits. At the same time, the painting is clearly visually influenced by Leonardo da Vinci’s *Allegorical Composition*, and the street style of graffiti “tagging” from 1980s New York (Mirzoeff, 1995: 185). Basquiat’s work collides intersection into intersection, refusing to limit itself to a single meaning.

Such undecidable alternance between denotation and connotation was consciously attached to slavery. In his ground-breaking analysis of the black Atlantic, Paul Gilroy called attention to Joseph Turner’s 1840 painting, *The Slave Ship*, and its reception. This stunning canvas depicted one of slavery’s most notorious scenes (1993: 13–14).

Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhon Coming On, to give the painting its full title, depicted the notorious voyage of the slave ship *Zong* in 1781, whose captain ordered 132 Africans to be thrown overboard during a storm, thereby at once lightening the ship and enabling its owners to file an insurance claim for lost "cargo" (Baucom, 2005). The painting shows a moment just after the weighted-down prisoners have been thrown into the sea and just before they finally sank. Chains, hands, arms and one leg are visible in wake of the ship, leading to the bottom right corner. In his commentary, the Victorian critic John Ruskin asserted that there was no point of identification with these bodies: "we are not allowed to tumble into it, and gasp for breath as we go down." Recent accounts of the painting have also insisted on this border policing, arguing that there is no spectatorial position within the painting (Baucom, 2005: 292). In fact there are three. One can look from the point of view of those about to drown, not yet dead, who can still see through the water. Second, there is the viewpoint of the sea creatures, both the fish and the creature on the far right. Finally, there is the place marked by the pillar of light, the place of the angel of history. This light cannot be the sun unless it represents the passing of divine time, which would be in dialectical contradiction with the instant of human time that is seen in the water. History, the commodification of people, the actuarial rendering of that property and the doubled visualities resonate across this painting to the outrage of Turner's contemporaries.

In that same year, 1839, the processes now known as photography were finally perfected after many years of effort (Batchen, 1997). Far from being an unmediated depiction of exterior reality, or denotation, photography was from the first inflected by the connotations of race and slavery. If photography turns time into an object, slavery turned a person into an object. While William Henry Fox Talbot (1800–77), the legendary pioneer of British photography, was a Reform Member of Parliament in 1832 and voted for the emancipation of the enslaved in the British Empire, his photographs contained no allusions to the issue. In the Americas, where slavery was still in force when photography came into being, matters were necessarily different. Unlike painting, photography rendered slavery visible. The French artist Hercules Florence (1801–78) was the first man to use the term "photography" in 1833 in Campinas, now part of São Paulo, Brazil, a district of slave-maintained coffee plantations. According to his own account, in "1832, on August 15, while strolling on my verandah an idea came to me that perhaps it is possible to capture images in a *camera obscura* by means of a substance which changes color through the action of light. . . . I captured a negative view of the jailhouse" (Kossov, 1977: 16). His verandah would have given a view of a world created and sustained by slavery and the jail would have housed runaways and otherwise disobedient slaves. In Brazil, slaves were often punished in the jailhouse, making it a central part of the plantation system. In the United States, the best-known early experimenter with photographic processes was Samuel B. Morse, the painter and later inventor of the famous code that bears his name. Morse experimented with silver nitrate in New Haven, probably in 1821, but once he succeeded in generating what we would now call a negative

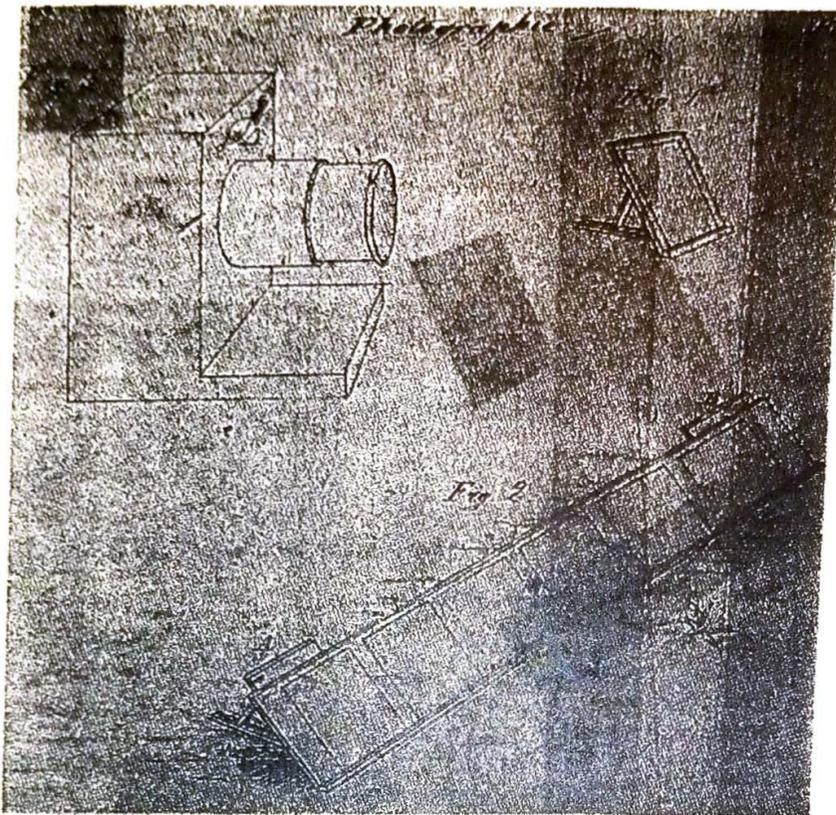


Figure 3.9
Hercule Florence,
Sketch from Brazil
(1833)

image, he abandoned his researches. Morse was also a convinced advocate of slavery, based on his constantly reasserted opinion that it was no sin but rather “a social condition ordained from the beginning of the world for the wisest purposes, benevolent and disciplinary by Divine Wisdom” ([1914] 1973: 331). There was, then, no contradiction between being modern and being pro-slavery.

So by the time that the *New Yorker* magazine ran the story of Talbot and Daguerre’s discoveries on April 13, 1839, it was no surprise to see that the specter of slavery was prominent:

Wonderful wonder of wonders!! Steel engravers, copper engravers, and etchers, drink up your aquafortis and die! There is an end of your black art – “Othello’s occupation is no more.” The real black art of true magic arises and cries avaunt. All nature shall paint herself.

(Foresta and Wood, 1995: 223)

The black arts of engraving and etching (in part a pun on black and white images) no longer had enough power to resist the “true black art” of photography. This magical transformation is explicitly racialized with the quotation taken from Shakespeare’s drama of the African soldier Othello at the very moment when he discovers Desdemona’s apparent infidelity in the form of the infamous handkerchief, proffered to him by Iago, and declares “Othello’s occupation’s gone” – the *New Yorker* writer misquoted. In the play, Othello follows his lament with a demand that Iago

provide "the ocular proof" that so many private investigators would later offer suspicious spouses in the form of photographs. This quotation from Shakespeare suggested far more than a simple transposition of reproductive technologies from engraving to photography. It set in play an ambiguous range of dangerous ideas from the foundational Western drama of cross-ethnic relationships to emancipation, performance, betrayal and deception. The reference to *Othello* had a specific connotation in New York of the period. The role was famously performed by the African-American actor and Abolitionist Ira Aldridge, who had begun his career in New York's African Theater. Moving to Britain in 1825, he made his debut as *Othello* in 1833, where he was identified as a "native of Senegal." A subsequent burlesque on this performance in Liverpool claimed to feature as *Othello* an actor "formerly an Independent Nigger from the Republic of Haiti" (MacDonald, 1994: 231). For non-slave audiences in the decade of emancipation in the British Empire, seeing a black actor in the role of *Othello* was a visible reminder of the diverse society that was being created. The subject matter of *Othello* was also read as a warning to white spectators concerning the imminent prospect of miscegenation that was endemic to slavery but always denied. As if to confirm this suspicion, an 1832 performance of the play in New York was followed by Thomas "Daddy" Rice jumping "Jim Crow," the minstrel character he popularized that came to be synonymous with segregation in the United States. Aldridge himself performed a version of Jim Crow from 1840 onwards.

American photography was characterized in its first 30 years by the peculiar longevity of daguerreotypy, the single-plate process devised by Daguerre. By the 1851 Crystal Palace exhibition in London, American daguerreotypes were held to be the best examples on display. One then obscure example of daguerreotypy has now come to take a prominent role in the history of African Americans and enslavement. In 1850, the Swiss scientist Louis Agassiz (1807–73), well-known for his theory of the Ice Age, employed a daguerreotypist named J.T. Zealy to take a series of plates of enslaved Africans in South Carolina. These were forgotten for over a century until their accidental rediscovery in 1975 led them to become some of the best-known images of slavery. As Brian Wallis (1995) has shown, Agassiz was engaged in attempting to find evidence for his controversial thesis of polygenesis, that is to say, the idea of entirely separate human races. He had photographs taken of what he took to be the dominant African racial groups, such as a man called Renty who was taken to depict the Congo. By Congo, slavers meant a vast area incorporating modern Congo, Angola and the Congo Republic that contained a wide array of language and cultural groups. In many of the photographs, such as those of Drana, Delia, Fassena and Renty, Agassiz's desire to see the half-naked body is fulfilled but the clothes worn by the enslaved men and women are still visible. In the cases of Drana and Delia, we can see that the women were wearing quite elaborate print dresses. The half-on, half-off dresses highlight the absurdity of the project and, taken together with the apparent "refusal to engage with the camera or its operator," noted by Wallis, contribute to the failure of the daguerreotypes to



Figure 3.10 J.T. Zealy, *Renty Congo* (1850). Courtesy of the Peabody Library, Harvard University

signify what Agassiz had hoped to show. That is to say, these images fail to perform race in a satisfactory manner, meaning a visual depiction of inferiority, which perhaps contributed to their being forgotten. As a series, they constitute an attempt to call a mode of identification into being that was, for the time being, unsuccessful. Perhaps the most important aspect of the photographs was the refusal of the enslaved to perform as racialized human property.

To gain a sense of why Agassiz's images failed to perform, it is necessary to look at other deployments of enslavement in American daguerreotypes. In the account of her life in and out of slavery, Louisa Picquet detailed an exchange of photographs across the Mason-Dixon line. By 1859, the formerly enslaved Picquet had reached freedom in Cincinnati and was able to locate her mother Elizabeth Ramsey in Texas. In a dictated letter of March 8, 1859, Ramsey requested that: "I want you to have your ambrotype taken also your children and send them to me" (Picquet, [1861] 1988: 31).¹ The ambrotype was a cheap form of photographic reproduction, invented in 1855, and Ramsey's request shows that enslavement did not keep African Americans in ignorance of new technical developments. A. C. Horton, her owner, did later send a more expensive daguerreotype, as part of his bid to sell Ramsey to Picquet for \$1,000, a not unusual price at the time – Picquet herself had sold for \$1,500 (Picquet, [1861] 1988: 17). Describing the photograph, the abolitionist Mattison reported: "mother and son . . . are set forth in their best possible gear, to impress us in the North with the superior condition of the slave over the free colored people." This reading ironically seems to evacuate the people from the image. It is not hard to imagine Elizabeth Ramsey wanting to impress her daughter, who had requested the image, even as Horton was trying to justify his price. At the same time, of course, the photograph was in itself a bill of sale. In this sense it extends Allan Sekula's argument that the photograph was a form of currency, whose

value was based on “the archive as an encyclopedic repository of exchangeable images” (Sekula, 1986: 352). What was exchangeable in this instance was Elizabeth Ramsey herself. Surviving photographs attest to this usage. In one image, produced as a carte-de-visite around 1860, an African-American woman stands barefoot and with an utterly blank expression, wearing the number 251 to identify her as an inventory lot (Duggan, 1996: 29).

Abolitionists circulated a photograph known as *The Scourged Back* (1863) that depicted a half-naked African man, whose horribly scarred back is turned to the camera. It was intended to highlight the evils of enforced labor and human bondage, made visible as the scars of whipping(s) inflicted by a cruel slave-owner. In the plantation world-view, *The Scourged Back* was simply evidence of a crime committed and properly punished. The wider point to be drawn, in this view, was the irrepressible malfeasance of Africans, who, therefore, could only be controlled by force (Greenberg, 1996: 15). In two key sets of photographs from the moment of abolition these tensions became fully visible. After Union forces took New Orleans in 1863, schools were established for African-American children, often for the first time. As funds to support the project were low, a series of photographs, such as M.H. Kimball’s *Emancipated Slaves* (1863), were created for sale. In an oval frame, two rows of people face the camera directly. In front are five children, four seeming to be “white” (namely Charles Taylor, Augusta Broujey, Rebecca Huger and Rosina



Figure 3.11 M.H. Kimball, *Carte-de-Visite of Emancipated Slaves Brought from Louisiana by Colonel George H. Hanks* (1863). The New York Historical Society

Downs) standing on either side of a "black" child, Isaac White (Collins, 1985). The children are smartly dressed, carefully disposing their hands so as not to create a blur for the camera. Behind them stand three adults, whose dark skin and servants' clothing leaves no apparent doubt as to their African-American origins. Wilson Chinn, standing on the left, had several letters branded into his forehead as a mark of being chattel. As he was branded in a place that could not be concealed, he may very well have been an apprehended runaway. No such visible marks appear on the four white children in the front row. The selling point and scandal of the photograph was precisely the fact that all the children, by virtue of their status as former slaves, were African American. The very whiteness of the children's skin was the sign that they had no place in slavery. Slavery was to be abolished, then, not only because it was violent and inherently immoral, but also because the "wrong" kind of people were being enslaved. The older enslaved people shown in these photographs were all dark-skinned, whereas dark-skinned children only appeared as a minority, and many photographs showed just the light-skinned children. These compositions were designed to tell a story of rampant miscegenation by the Southern planters, creating an emergent generation of slaves that was more white than not. Reinforced by abolitionist newspapers and slave narratives, these photographs present slavery as a scandal of miscegenation, rape and violence, without needing to address the fundamental issues of owning people as property or distinguishing people into distinct races.

These images can be contrasted with the *cartes-de-visite* sold by the abolitionist Sojourner Truth to fund her activities (Painter, 1996). In these carefully posed images, Truth sought to counter the ambivalence of earlier abolitionist photography with a series of well-chosen signs. Dressed in respectable middle-class attire, Truth posed as if caught in the middle of knitting. Her gender-appropriate activity and dress allowed her to signify her engagement with ideas and learning, shown by her glasses and the open book. The caption that she provided for the cards showed her awareness of the ambivalences of photography: "I sell the shadow to support the substance." Here the emancipated woman makes her image the object of financial exchange in place of the substance, her whole person, which had once been for sale. It indexes freedom rather than question whether we see race. Her re-commodification of her "shadow" was justified by its substantive use in campaigning for the abolition of the ownership of people. Following the antebellum use of daguerreotypy as a means of documenting African-American freedom, Truth's use of photography shows that another "shadow archive" was possible. By insisting on her control over the financial process, Truth further asserted a freedom to dispose of her own image that the "emancipated slaves" did not possess. Truth made her shadow claim the substance of freedom, even beyond her person.

Historian Deborah Willis has identified 50 African-American daguerreotypists who emerged before the Civil War (and no doubt more await identification). One of these was James Presley Ball, a committed abolitionist, who came to Richmond, Virginia, in 1846, where according to a contemporary account: "Virginians rushed



Figure 3.12 Photograph of Sojourner Truth

in crowds to his room; all classes, white and black, bond and free” (Willis, 2000: 4–5). So while there is no doubt that African Americans, free and enslaved, both took and commissioned daguerreotypes, the meanings of the resulting images were subject to dispute. Perhaps in order to resolve such ambiguities, Ball created a remarkable 600 yard panorama that presented a visual history of enslavement from Africa to Alabama. According to Willis, “operated by rotating the canvas between two poles as in a scroll, the panoramas told stories in picture form,” looking forward to the cinema (2000: 7). At the same time, the daguerreotype was in itself a form of emancipation. For those condemned to the natal alienation of slavery, simply maintaining a record of one’s family was a challenging and liberating act. But there were other views at the time. Writing in the immediate aftermath of the Fugitive Slave Law (1850), which made it legal for Southern slave-owners to recapture escaped slaves in the North, Augustus Washington, an African-American daguerreotypist working in Hartford, Connecticut, wrote to the abolitionist newspaper, *The New York Tribune*, in 1851 that: “Strange as it may appear, whatever may be a colored man’s natural capacity and literary attainments, I believe that, as soon as he leaves the academic halls to mingle in the only society he can find in the United States, unless he be a minister or a lecturer, he must and will retrograde” (Johnson, 1996: 269). Washington was as good as his word: he emigrated to Liberia in 1853, where he took a series of portraits of local leaders, his only known images of African Americans (Shumard, 2000).

In the world of enslavement, visual recognition was phantasmagorical. In Lewis Clark's narrative of his escape from slavery, he described his predicament on needing to find a place to spend the night before he could reach Ohio. To travel at night would excite suspicion. To sleep in the open risked detection by dogs and arrest as a thief if not as a runaway. So he decided to stay at a tavern:

After seeing my pony disposed of, I looked into the bar-room and saw some persons that I thought were from my part of the country, and would know me. I shrank back with horror. What to do I did not know. I looked across the street and saw a silversmith. A thought of a pair of spectacles, to hide my face, struck me. I went across the way and began to barter for a pair of double-eyed green spectacles. When I got them on they blind-folded me, if they did not others. Every thing seemed right up in my eyes. Some people buy spectacles to see out of; I bought mine to keep from being seen.

(Clark, 1999: 621)

The simple disguise was enough to prevent him from being recognized precisely because it covered his eyes, perhaps the one feature that might have identified the light-skinned Clark as being of African descent in the racially charged plantation state.

Precisely because the enslaved were denied the status of visual subjects, any visual agency on their part could be effective in evading capture. In a general sense, learning to read was for Frederick Douglass and many others the means to escape "mental darkness" and to achieve freedom even within slavery (Douglass, 1999: 553). As slavery became more controversial, proponents and abolitionists even debated its effects on sight itself. In 1856, the British popular science writer Joseph Turley published a volume called *The Language of the Eye* that fused seventeenth-century notions of the expressive body with Victorian morality. In Turley's view, "the eye gives the promptest and securest indication of mental motion." A key example was the effects of enslavement: "Look on the nations under slavery; how dull, sullen, dissatisfied is the expression of the eye, as though rapture and real temperament were put back for want of exercise of independence" (Flint, 2000: 26). Freedom is, then, understood to be indispensable for the proper exercise of vision. However, for the plantation owner, the opposite was the case, so that James Hammond, a well-known proponent of slavery in the United States, asserted that the senses of the slave were "dull" (Tadman, 1996: 213). Just before the Civil War a New Orleans-based doctor went so far as to claim that "the inner canthus of the negro's eye is anatomically constructed like that of the orang-outang, and not like that of the white man" (Smith, 2006: 44). Again, one slave narrative of the period asserted the opposite, claiming that "the two senses of seeing and hearing in the slave are made doubly acute by the very prohibition of knowledge" (Smith, 2006: 31). At stake here was the question posed repeatedly from the Valladolid debate of 1555 to Wedgwood's

medallion: were the enslaved and colonized human or not? Abolition affirmed that all were human but did not sufficiently challenge the internal distinction to the human that came to be known as "race." Indeed, abolitionists often argued that because Africans were a weaker "race," slavery was immoral on the grounds that it took advantage of the inferior. Absolute distinction, whether between monarch and subject or slave-owner and enslaved, was now replaced with gradated distinctions centered around the idea of the "norm" and the "normal." The rise of the disciplinary society was the direct corollary and descendant of the abolition of slavery.

Coda: slavery and psychogeography

No issue seems to enrage certain people of European descent more than the suggestion that the consequences of slavery still persist. At the level of economics and politics, such as the debate over reparations for slavery in the United States, such discussions are often conducted in quantifiable terms. At the level of affect or emotion, it seems harder to set these connotations aside. Take the Tate Gallery, now known as Tate Britain, the home of the most substantial collection of Turner paintings in the world – except for *The Slave Ship*, which, with a degree of appropriateness, is in America, Boston to be precise. The gallery now houses a state-owned collection of British art, concentrating on painting, from 1500 to the present. The presence of diaspora peoples (other than the Anglo-Saxons, of course) intrudes only in special exhibitions. For example, a 2007 photography show called *How We Are Now* showed the back of a man's head who appeared to be black but otherwise offered the familiar Britain of heritage, rural beauty and observational detail, with counterpoints from a council estate and a young white man throwing up in the street. The building in which these works are housed was constructed on the site of the former Millbank Prison, designed by the Utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham, from where many were deported to Australia and other locations. The current building was paid for by Henry Tate (1819–99), the sugar magnate, who made a fortune from his 1872 patented method to make sugar cubes. As the Tate website discreetly tries to suggest by means of a timeline, he was not directly engaged in plantation and his sugar manufacturing process postdated British slavery. On the other hand, the modernity in which Britain came to play so great a part was figured and shaped by the circulation of capital that plantation slavery set in motion. Tate Britain can be seen as a thought-exercise in association, connection and causality. The radical Situationist movement of the late 1950s and 1960s called such linkages of physical location with private and public meaning "psychogeography" (Debord, 2006: 283).

This multi-dimensional imaginary has been depicted by the contemporary African American artist Kara Walker (b. 1969) in her controversial cut-outs, animations and drawings. Her work represents the obscenity of slavery in its sexual violence and corporal excess, seen only in silhouette form, made from black paper or vinyl. The scenes refuse to resolve into simple narratives, although Walker often uses titles

end of slavery ⇒ outright racism
the other vs "norm"

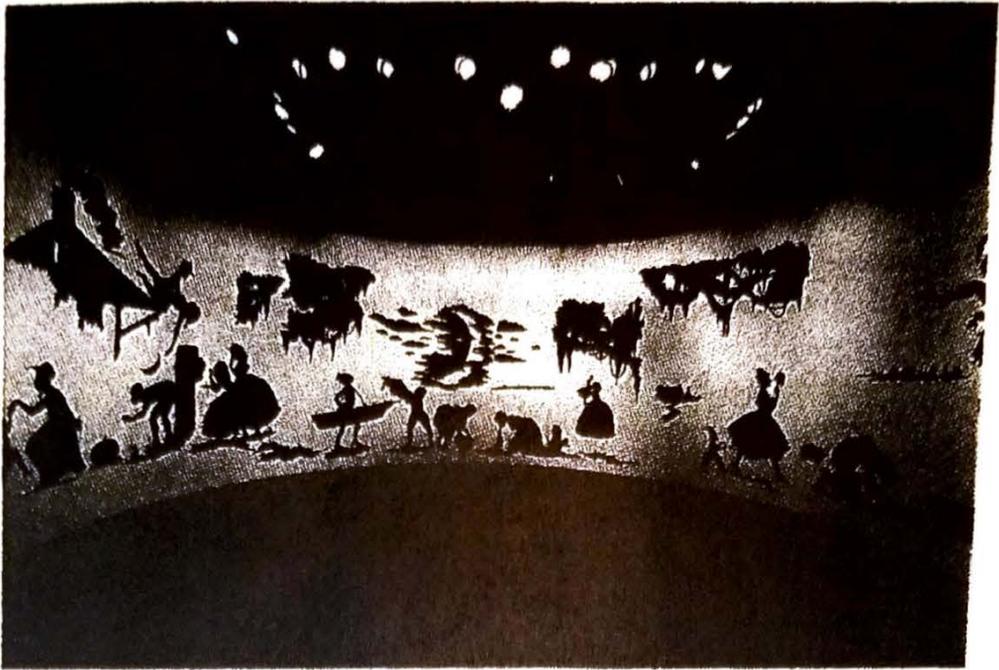


Figure 3.13 Kara Walker, *Slavery! Slavery! Presenting a GRAND and LIFE LIKE Panoramic Journey into Picturesque Southern Slavery* (1997) or *Life at Ol' Virginy's Hole* (Sketches from Plantation Life). "See the Peculiar Institution as never before! All cut from black paper by the able hand of Kara Elizabeth Walker, an Emancipated Negress and leader in her Cause". Cut paper on wall, 12 × 85 ft (3.7 × 25.9m). Installation view at The Hammer Museum, LA, 2008. Image courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins & Co

for her pieces that seem to be parodies of nineteenth-century slave narratives, such as *Slavery! Slavery! Presenting a GRAND and LIFE LIKE Panoramic Journey into Picturesque Southern Slavery* (1997). By using the white walls of the gallery space as the space in which these scenes are situated, Walker calls our attention to the normally "invisible" space that has been called the "white cube," referring both to the minimalist aesthetics of the art gallery and its racialized practice. The space is circular, evoking what she terms a "cyclorama," a form of nineteenth-century moving-image projection device that preceded cinema and was popular across the Anglophone colonial world from Australia to the Virgin Islands. At first, the dramatic bodies catch our attention, like that of a woman extruding fluid from her mouth, breast, armpit and vagina. A child hatches from an egg, another has two sets of legs. Then we notice details, such as the paper chains that rise in three dimensions from the wall, breaking the illusion of projection. Walker sees herself as a blank space onto which the dramas of race are projected and literally stand out. She visualizes the contradictory time and space of the American present, still split across the color line. By way of confirmation of the importance of her project, it was discovered that New York city schools were more segregated in 2007 than they were before the *Brown vs. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision of 1954. At the entrance to her 2007 mid-career retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, Walker posted a letter (reproduced here as she wrote it with spelling "mistakes"):