

# **Governance and Resistance**

Biopolitical Readings of the 19th Century

Essays by Kaitlyn Abrams, Sarah Doucette, Richard Fortuna, Ryan Gonyar,  
Mushira Habib, Elizabeth Hornsey, and Saveena Veeramoothoo,  
with a preface by Benjamin Friedlander



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Kaitlyn Abrams

Sarah Doucette

Richard Fortuna

Ryan Gonyar

Mushira Habib

Elizabeth Hornsey

Saveena Veeramoothoo

Department of English

University of Maine

2016

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Department of English, 304 Neville Hall, University of Maine, Orono ME 04469-5752

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# Preface

*Benjamin Friedlander*

Contemplating certain histories, it sometimes seems that time is a mass grave, though deep enough to obscure the facts. Yet even without seeing clearly, one can sense that the dead are everywhere present, too numerous to quantify; that violence was inflicted, too traumatic for words to share; and that the past is dirt, shoveled over the evidence. One begins, then, with a stunned apprehension of enormity, and the mind's struggle to grasp the particulars. This is the problem *in nuce* of history. With slavery and colonialism, for instance, we approach from a vantage—the present—too close to encompass the whole, too distant to make out details. Only by descending into the dark, adjusting our eyes to pick through the archive, can we begin to distinguish the crucial facts and so know with surety the horror merely sensed before. Here, however, another form of limited comprehension occurs, for if the details are vivid, their place in the whole is not. Disjunct from the whole, details have a tendency to distort, if not mislead. Slavery and colonialism are not only experiences undergone by the individual, but systems that produce the individual, as Mushira Habib shows in her essay for this volume. Experience is but one of the system's effects, which also include the eradication of experience, the social death taken up by Saveena Veeramoothoo in her own contribution. The system has a scale that cannot be grasped directly in its details, a problem of comprehension especially acute for the literary scholar, who engages history by way of the detail—the singular text—and holds to it more tenaciously than any historian would do. How situate individual experience—or its eradication—within a totality no

individual *can* experience? And how address the problem without succumbing to a discourse of the sublime, which aestheticizes incomprehension, drawing pleasure from the horror?

These questions are familiar in Holocaust Studies, in recent years an important precedent for scholars of slavery and colonialism, though the terms of approach have shifted far from Adorno's classic formulations and focus on culture. A generation ago, the crucial issue was representation—its aesthetic and ethical determinants, its ideological character, its epistemological limits. Today, the questions are more likely to be addressed through the discourse of biopolitics, which brackets the methodological problem of representation—of how to conceive, articulate, and share a comprehension of the whole—so as to engage the task of comprehension directly. Various defined as a matter of body and population, individual and bureaucracy, experience and system, the correlation of part and whole provides biopolitics with a fundamentally relational itinerary. The governance of one by the other, its management if not subjugation, is always at issue, though different thinkers work the issue from different ends. For Michel Foucault, the broad end is dominant; he defines biopolitics as

the attempt, starting from the eighteenth century, to rationalize the problems posed to governmental practice by phenomena characteristic of a set of living beings forming a population: health, hygiene, birthrate, life expectancy, race.  
*(The Birth of Biopolitics 317)*

Ever concerned with epochal shifts, Foucault saw the older forms of social control giving way to the new, though he allowed that the “two technologies of power” (a disciplinary sovereignty and regulatory biopolitics) could coexist, mutually reinforcing, occasionally at

odds (“Society Must Be Defended” 69). This topography of power matches well with slavery and colonialism, where distinct if overlapping regimes govern distinct classes of subject.

For Foucault’s influential interpreter Giorgio Agamben, the overlap is crucial. Finding resources for understanding in ancient, even forgotten forms of sovereignty, Agamben emphasizes continuity, not epochal shift. He differs also in perspective, giving fresh scrutiny to the status of the subject, though regimes of control are hardly ignored. If population is Foucault’s key category, indicating his interest in the whole, Agamben’s is bare life, with its representative figure, *homo sacer*, the most precarious of parts. A relic of Roman law, *homo sacer* (sacred man) is abject twice over: killed with impunity, unfit for sacrifice, stripped of protection and dignity by state and religion alike. Nonetheless, Agamben’s *homo sacer* is constitutive of the sovereignties that exclude it, a paradox that might seem purely theoretical were it not corroborated by the U.S. Constitution. Infamously, for the purposes of representation, that founding document counted a slave three-fifths of a person, swelling the legislative power of states that excluded the slave from humanity.

With Foucault and Agamben at its poles, biopolitical discourse affords a variety of perspectives on 19th-century history. The essays in *Governance and Resistance* reflect that variety. Following Agamben, though not always adopting his categories, many inquire into the status of the subject. The volume begins with such an inquiry. In “Social Death in the 19th-century U.S. Slave Population,” Saveena Veeramoothoo adopts Achille Mbembe’s postcolonial perspective, which looks at contexts in which death is managed, not life, a necropolitics in place of biopolitics. What sort of life is maintained under these conditions? To answer, Veeramoothoo returns to Orlando Patterson’s influential notion of *social* death, which, following Vincent Brown, she nonetheless sees as “an impetus to resistance and

perhaps even political action,” a “social birth” to counter social death, producing a will to action in the direst of necropolitical regimes.

This will to action is intrinsic to political life, from which the bare life of Agamben’s analysis is excluded. Following Hannah Arendt’s reading of Greek and Roman tradition, and her sharp distinction between the political and social, he places bare life under a domination that severs even successful action from the political sphere. How slaves might move into that sphere—from action to agency—is a persistent question in this volume. In “Literacy as a Way Out,” Richard Fortuna gives the practical answer, attested to in slave narratives and confirmed by slaveholders, who restricted its access: through the power of language. That this power should be an issue for biopolitics is perhaps surprising, but, as Fortuna notes, racism—a discursive formation—is crucial for Foucault in the segmentation of populations. Resistance to this segmentation necessarily involves struggle in language. The effectiveness of struggle is the subject of Ryan Gonyar’s contribution, “Resistance Is Futile?” His titular question is not rhetorical, but Gonyar remains dubious about the prospects of opposition. Enumerating the possibilities and their effects on slavery understood as a system, he notes, “Ultimately...none of these methods of resistance really contributed much to the fall of slavery,” which was brought down by the South’s own secession and subsequent invasion by the North, not by slave rebellions, work stoppages, or escapes. Such small-scale and individual actions can only effect structural change when they belong to a structure of their own. This structural opposition is the subject of Sarah Doucette’s essay, “Religio-Biopolitics and American Slavery.” In Agamben’s account, *homo sacer* is made abject by human and divine law alike, a collaboration of society and religion that also occurs in slavery—a sore point for Frederick Douglass, who wrote in his *Narrative*:

Were I to be again reduced to the chains of slavery, next to that enslavement, I should regard being the slave of a religious master the greatest calamity that could befall me. For of all slaveholders with whom I have ever met, religious slaveholders are the worst. (334)

Yet religion provides hope for the slave as well as justification for the master, a contesting power as well as collaborating one. This counter-authority was crucial to the abolitionist project of Harriet Beecher Stowe, which Doucette presents in biopolitical perspective, drawing on the work of theologian John Milbank. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is an excellent test case, presenting slavery as a national system. Foucauldian in her appreciation of how individual agency is nullified by this system, Stowe finds resistance effective only by way of religion—an evangelical Christianity, to be precise.

The high bar Arendt sets for political agency is marked in Aristotle by the difference between *zoē* (bare life) and *bios* (a particular form of life), but what happens to this difference, already blurred in the will to action of the slave, when *zoē* is appraised in full measure, when the population under domination includes domesticated animals as well as slaves? This line of inquiry is followed by Kaitlyn Abrams in “Animals in Slave Narratives: A Biopolitical Analysis.” As she notes, the analogy between slave and animal—the notion that humans reduced to bare life are made bestial—has a philosophical lineage and vernacular persistence. Is it indeed useful? Does it yield insight into the status of either? Subjected alike to disciplinary and regulatory control, human slaves and domesticated animals are in fact bound up in different forms of deprivation, with humans excluded from political life, animals from the wild. Harnessed together in slavery, their fates would be better diverged, and their encounters often lead to “antagonism,” even “enmity and violence.” As

pure categories, then, *zōē* and *bios* are insufficient; when nonhuman animals are included, more complex terms are needed.

Population thinking is also evident in Elizabeth Hornsey's essay, "The Biopolitics of the Slave Child in Early American Slave Narratives." After the abolition of the slave trade in North America, birth rates and the management of childhood became crucial components of the system, with children themselves, though seemingly neglected, a locus of action by its two technologies of power, the disciplinary and regulatory. The former, focused on individual bodies, involves all the lurid degradations of slavery, "whippings, starvation, and other forms of physical and mental discipline." The second, focused on the population as a whole, is more nebulous but also more lasting in effect: a modification of the very concept of childhood, transforming each generation's young, "a particularly vulnerable and powerful target," into a durable, terrorized workforce.

Generational transformation is further engaged by Mushira Habib, who turns from slavery to colonialism, though borrowing terms from Alexander G. Weheliye, a scholar of slavery and its post-traumatic effects. For Weheliye, the issue is not race, a reification, but racializing, a "conglomerate of sociopolitical relations that discipline humanity into full humans, not-quite-humans, and non-humans" (3). This approach is clearly relevant for the British Empire, where ideologies and institutions were generated precisely to establish a stratified society. In "Colonizing Assemblages and Colonial Biopolitics in Postcolonial India," Habib focuses on educational ideology. A colonial project taken up and continued in the nationalist project that succeeded, its effects have been even longer lasting than the redefinition of childhood under slavery. "[D]ividing humanity into... 'full humans, not-quite-

humans, and non-humans,” the empire’s “artificially constructed subjectivities ripple through...postcolonial realities all over the world today.”

In this preface I have emphasized theoretical perspectives, but *Governance and Resistance* is concerned above all with the enormities of its topic, engaged most emphatically through primary sources. Biopolitical *readings*, the essays collected here are built on careful study of slave narratives, both canonical and neglected, and such other documents of the period as David Walker’s *Appeal*, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, and Macaulay’s “Minute on Indian Education.” Literary scholarship of a new sort, reading through a theoretical lens to bring history into sharper focus.



## Governance and Resistance



# Social Death in the 19th-Century U.S. Slave Population

*Saveena Veeramoothoo*

Death is an important concept to consider as we think of the control of bodies in various societies, such as the 19th-century U.S. Southern states. The relationship of death to bodies brings up the key notions of sovereignty and the state of exception. In “Necropolitics,” Achille Mbembe positions sovereignty as the right to kill and examines the state of exception, which is a space where the normal state of law is suspended. Mbembe takes several examples of states of exception, such as concentration camps and the 19th-century slave plantation. He goes beyond Foucault’s biopolitics and biopower and introduces the term necropolitics and necropower “to account for the various ways in which, in our contemporary world, weapons are deployed in the interest of maximum destruction of persons and the creation of death-worlds, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead” (186). Mbembe argues that the concept of biopower as described by Foucault (which focuses on life) is not sufficient to describe our situation today and that necropower and necropolitics offer new insights that go beyond the definition of biopower (i.e. the control of bodies and the sovereign’s right to kill or let live). Thus, he shifts from focusing on life to focusing on death and its machinery. In one particularly interesting passage, Mbembe analyzes the plantation system in depth as a state of exception, where necropower is acting. He sees the slave as a paradoxical figure – both subordinate to others, existing in a “state of injury” (170) while also being able to maintain a sense of self through their own bodies and

adaptations of everything around them. Mbembe sees the slaves as facing a triple loss, namely “loss of a ‘home,’ loss of right over his or her body, and loss of political status” (169). Therefore, Mbembe shows that even within a state of loss, slaves can gain a certain agency. From Mbembe then, we can argue that while death is a significant issue, the other conditions of death are as important. It is those other moments of death (that is, not physically dead but dead in other ways) that will be discussed here. To do so, I turn to Orlando Patterson who introduced the notion of social death in *Slavery and Social Death*. Social death is, I believe, a useful concept to think of slavery in the 19th-century U.S. For Patterson, there are two ways to think of social death: intrusively and extrusively. He describes these two categories thus: “in the intrusive mode the slave was conceived of as someone who did not belong because he was an outsider, while in the extrusive mode the slave became an outsider because he did not (or no longer) belonged” (Patterson 44). This definition makes it hard to categorize 19th-century U.S. slaves. The latter were outsiders and yet, they shared a very close relationship to their white counterparts – at least on plantations or within the Southern households. We can argue that slaves never actually belonged to society because they were never afforded any rights, as William and Ellen Crafts’ narrative showed.<sup>1</sup> As such, they could never quite cease belonging to society. Yet, being born on American soil, having family roots near their homes and being part of a community (the slave community of the household to which they belonged) make these slaves not quite

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<sup>1</sup> The Crafts’ narrative includes snippets of laws from several Southern states, such as Louisiana, South Carolina, etc., detailing how the laws gave almost all rights to slave owners and almost none to slaves. See Craft and Craft 701-3 for details.

outsiders.<sup>2</sup> So, on the one hand, they are legal outsiders and on the other, they form part of the daily life of the community. Perhaps then, we may categorize them as better fitting Patterson's intrusive category for social death.

Patterson argues that slaves existed in a state of marginality. For him: "institutionalized marginality, the liminal state of social death, was the ultimate cultural outcome of the loss of natality as well as honor and power" (Patterson 46). Thus, social death emphasizes the natal alienation of slaves.<sup>3</sup> However, even as we acknowledge the potential

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<sup>2</sup> I am aware, of course, that many, if not most, slaves were taken away from their families at a young age. However, there were some slaves who did not quite fit this description, such as Harriet Jacobs who had strong familial ties to her place of residence. After all, she lived in a neighborhood where her grandmother, for instance, was well loved. Thus, even if not many, at least some slaves had family connections near their home.

<sup>3</sup> Patterson describes natal alienation as "the loss of ties of birth in both ascending and descending generations . . . a loss of native status, of deracination" (7). He goes on to say: "it was this alienation of the slave from all formal, legally enforceable ties of "blood," and from any attachment to groups or localities other than those chosen for him by the master . . . the slave was the ultimate human tool, as imprintable and as disposable as the master wished" (7). Natal alienation then seems to accurately describe 19th century slavery in the Southern states. Of course, as I have noted elsewhere, there are exceptions to this alienation, as in Jacobs' case. It is true that she had no legally enforceable ties of blood to some people like her grandmother and she could not form any legal attachment to anyone, such as the young free black man she loved as a girl. However, I would argue that once she turns into a mother,

for natal alienation and social death in 19<sup>th</sup>-century society, I think we can turn to Vincent Brown as there seems to be more at play there. Brown, in “Social Death and Political Life in the Study of Slavery,” offers a critique of Patterson by suggesting that there we might see the slaves’ fear of social death as a generative force. He writes:

The violent domination of slavery generated political action; it was not antithetical to it. If one sees power as productive and the fear of social death not as incapacity but as a generative force—a peril that motivated enslaved activity—a different image of slavery slides into view, one in which the object of slave politics is not simply the power of slaveholders, but the very terms and conditions of social existence (Brown 1244).

Therefore, Brown suggests that we can change perspective by seeing social death, not as end in and of itself but, as an impetus to resistance and perhaps political action. In this chapter, I will take precisely this line of thinking and apply it to various slave narratives, including Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, and Nat Turner’s *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. Therefore, I will attempt to trace those moments that could signify social death, but instead leads to the empowerment of slaves. Thus, I would like to take the strategies for maintaining social death that Patterson lists and examine how these strategies are enacted in these narratives as well as how slaves are reacting against these strategies. Some of these moments of reaction against

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she does form legally enforceable ties of blood – even if those ties were only allowed by law to help slave owners gain control of the children born of slave mothers (I will discuss this in more depth later on).

these strategies for maintaining social death may be considered action, in Hannah Arendt's sense. In "The Perplexities of the Rights of Man," Arendt offers a thorough discussion of political action and describes its meaning and connection to the political life, mainly through the Greek *polis* before extrapolating it to our contemporary society. She sees action as "the exclusive prerogative of man . . . [that] is entirely dependent upon the constant presence of others" (113). She goes on to say that action is political action and that "to be political . . . meant that everything was decided through words and persuasion and not through force and violence" (115). That is, speech is action such that "finding the right words at the right moment, quite apart from the information or communication they may convey, is action" (115). Further, to engage in political action is to be free (freedom being both a prerequisite and a consequence of political action). So, going back to social death, I will attempt to trace places where social death or the threat of it leads to political action. As I do so, I will still examine those moments of empowerment that do not quite fit Arendt's concept of political action as I believe that they're still worth examining for they often depict slaves gaining agency.

Naming is a fundamental process of identity creation. Patterson argues that part of creating the state of the enslaved is through removal of one's name. In the case of the slave states in the 19th-century, there was no stripping of slaves' names as the transatlantic slave trade ended. However, the naming of slaves was still problematic. For instance, Frederick Douglass was born with the name Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey – Bailey being the last name of his mother. His father was white, probably his owner, and never acknowledged him. Thus, he does not know his patrilineal lineage. As he escaped to the North, he changed his name several times, from Bailey to Johnson to Douglass. However, he says, "I gave Mr.

Johnson the privilege of choosing me a name, but told him he must not take from me the name of 'Frederick.' I must hold on to that, to preserve a sense of my identity" (358). He goes on to say that "as [he is] more widely known by that name than by either of the others, [he] shall continue to use it as [his] own" (358). In this case then, it seems that Douglass associates just the name "Frederick" with his identity; his last name can change without affecting who he is. He does not seem to attach much importance to his last name even as we can say that he gains agency in being able to choose a name for himself. This is a somewhat different experience of naming than with Jacobs. The latter, in writing her memoirs, chose a pseudonym to protect herself from prejudice. She felt she needed this, especially as her narrative involved scenes of sexual harassment and having children out of wedlock. In this sense, choosing another name may not be social death as Patterson describes it as a new name might offer protection to those seeking to escape slavery. If slavery deprived people of identity through names, it also gave them the freedom to choose their own names when freed from the system; it gave them a chance to start over. Thus, naming can be a process of social birth as much as social death.

Patterson states that creating fictive kinship is another key factor in creating social death. Patterson describes fictive kinship as "the distinction drawn between the genuinely adopted outsider . . . and the quasi-filial slave [who is encouraged to use the language of kinship to enforce the authority between master and slave]" (63). Thus, fictive kinship only reinforces the status of the slave and promotes their social death. Slave owners would pretend to form relationships with the enslaved so that they would be in a better position to require their loyalty while also clearly showing how the slaves are different from those who truly belong to the family. In the case of the Southern U.S. states, I would argue that fictive

kinship acted in a different way, in that slave fathers tended to deny their paternity when they had children with slave women. In fact, Douglass writes about slaves whose fathers are their white owners:

[The mistress] is ever disposed to find fault with them; they can seldom do any thing to please her; she is never better pleased than when she sees them under the lash, especially when she suspects her husband of showing to his mulatto children favors which he withholds from his black slaves. The master is frequently compelled to sell this class of his slaves, out of deference to the feelings of his white wife. (Douglass 283)

Then, the actual kinship is denied in these instances. To do otherwise would perhaps disrupt society as the owner could no longer financially profit by sleeping with his female slaves.

Kinship brings me to think of motherhood, which might actually function to oppose social death. As slaves, people's marriages were not legal. However, throughout various slave narratives, we read of slaves caring for their partners (whom they considered as spouses). Their love for their children also gave them a sense of belonging that social death attempts to take away. Jacobs provides a brilliant example of how her love for her children led to her running away and hiding in her grandmother's attic. Even if she had been suffering before (mostly from sexual persecution), she only escaped after her owners threatened her children. Thus, motherhood became the pivotal point for her to take action and take matters of her life into her own hands. At the same time, motherhood made her acutely aware of her status as a slave, and as her children's status as slaves and therefore belonging to her owners rather than to herself. Therefore, by highlighting her lack of freedom, motherhood also gave her the courage to take action to counter that lack. In so doing, she also binds herself to her

children so that she is no longer a non-entity in society—she is now a mother. This is an interesting phenomenon, for on the one hand, we have white fathers denying paternity and thus destroying kinship in an effort to keep slave children enslaved (as the law required), thereby maintaining the children’s social death; and on the other, we have slave mothers gaining agency and breaking out of social death through the birth of their children (regardless of who the father is).<sup>4</sup> This creates an interesting tension, worth examining through more slave narratives.

Along with motherhood, there is the inevitable question of degradation. For the purposes of this essay, I will focus on sexual degradation. For Patterson, degradation of slaves is another way of creating and maintaining social death. In the Southern states, this degradation took many forms, including whipping, etc. However, I’m mostly interested in sexual degradation and how slaves tried to counter such degradation. Jacobs describes in detail her experience of sexual harassment from Dr. Flint. Yet, despite continuous harassment, Jacobs managed to resist his advancements. That resistance lay partly in choosing who her lover would be. Thus, Jacobs writes:

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<sup>4</sup> Here, we might also think of the numerous slave mothers who ended up being more threatened because of their children. After all, there are numerous cases of children being torn from the arms of their mothers even as the mothers helplessly watch. Jacobs’ grandmother herself saw her children and grandchildren being sold and separated from her. Thus, we must consider motherhood with caution, as it can function as a double-edged sword: giving agency but also able to even better confine one to social death.

It seems less degrading to give one's self, than to submit to compulsion. There is something akin to freedom in having a lover who has no control over you, except that which he gains by kindness and attachment. A master may treat you as rudely as he pleases, and you dare not speak; moreover, the wrong does not seem so great with an unmarried man. (801)

Jacobs then chose Mr. Sands as her lover rather than give in to Dr. Flint's advances. However, the language she uses to describe that relationship is filled with shame. Even if she managed to counter degradation by not sleeping with Dr. Flint, she still felt degraded by sleeping with Mr. Sands and having his children out of wedlock. It seems then that she only managed to change one degradation for another of her own choosing. However, the idea of choice is key here, for Jacobs reclaims agency by choosing her mode of degradation. She is no longer an object to be used, but a subject with a will of her own and ability to act. After all, her relationship with Mr. Sands undoubtedly helped her better feather Dr. Flint's advances.

In terms of action that seems to better follow Arendt's definition of political action in terms of scope, I turn to Nat Turner's narrative *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. In his case, social death is actively fought as slaves fight to take power. As Brown argues, "two generations of social history have demonstrated slaves' remarkable capacity to forge fragile communities, preserve cultural inheritance, and resist the predations of slaveholders" (1239). While my earlier discussions focused on individual agency as slaves fought social death, Nat Turner offers us an example of slaves actively resisting the predations of slaveholders. He completely reversed his state of non-entity by not only gathering a group of men to fight with him. He moreover claimed divine guidance, thus breaking away from the prevalent religious

beliefs of the time (at least among slaveholders) that slaves were meant to be slaves as God created them so. But he also breaks away from the religious requirements that demands stoic acceptance of their condition from slaves. As Patterson argues, slaves and slaveholders held onto the same religious system that served both groups simultaneously through the Pauline dualism present in Christianity. In Paul's theology, two seemingly opposite views could be taken on Jesus' crucifixion where he gave his life for the sins that led to his followers' spiritual enslavement (71). The first perspective would be that Jesus died so that the sinners could live and be free. The second would be that Jesus died and in so doing, allowed the sinners to die anew in Christ. This meant that Christ became their new master and that they now were divinely enslaved (rather than enslaved by sins). Patterson argues that, in moving from one viewpoint to another as convenient, both slaveholders and slaves could practice Christianity. He writes, about the slaves' take on Christianity:

As with the masters, the slave dualism had another pole. This is the ethic of law, judgment, and obedience, the ethic that found symbolic expression in the other Jesus, the more Judaic Messiah King who judges, who demands obedience, and who punishes the wicked and rewards the righteous. This is the Jesus who saves not by annulling slavery but by divine enslavement. To live with this Jesus demands, as Goguel tells us, watchfulness, obedience, and stoic acceptance. Both masters and slaves held also to this conception of Jesus and, like Paul and the early Christians, shifted to this symbolic code in dealing with, and coming to terms with, all authority relations (76).

If to be religious meant to obey and accept one's condition, then Nat Turner deviated from that belief. Yet, interestingly, in claiming divine guidance, he suggests that to be religious

does not necessarily mean stoic acceptance. In fact, it meant fighting for freedom for him. This view subverts the power that religion has to subdue slaves. And indeed, through this new view of religion, Turner manages to break free from his bonds for a while as he reverses the role of power; he becomes the powerful predator while the slave owners become the helpless prey. However, instead of creating a condition of social death for the slave owners (as that would be impossible given the larger societal structure and laws), Turner and his followers simply kill them—a physical death. I wonder if they gain the sovereign right to kill at this moment, which we can perhaps describe as a new state of exception.

Therefore, social death offers us an interesting way of looking at slavery in the 19th-century Southern states. It offers us a way to analyze slaves' conditions and their reactions to these conditions. While slaves were kept in a state of social death, they sometimes act beyond that state or perhaps push back against that state. In these moments where they seem to directly counter social death by taking political action, they gain agency. It is important to note though that different slaves had different experiences with social death. While some, like Jacobs, took political action on a personal scale (at least until she published her narrative), others, like Turner, attempted to take political action on a larger scale. Perhaps it would be worthwhile to examine in a future study what conditions (material, physical, emotional, etc.) led to how slaves chose to resist social death.



# The Biopolitics of the Slave Child in Early American Slave Narratives

*Elizabeth Hornsey*

Most successful employment of biopower requires a modicum of control over the youngest of citizens in order to continue to strengthen and grow in forcefulness and control. Slavery, one of the most obvious methods of exerting biopower, is no exception to this rule: slaveowners exercised control and power over the child slave to try and engender ideas about the naturalness of slavery into them, which often endured well into adulthood. Much of the work they did to effect this mindset was done by controlling not only the child's physical presence, but also by altering how and when those children got to experience childlike things or act in a childish way, limiting their experience of childhood. The distinction between and linkage of the child and childhood are important to understanding how slaveholders utilized this source of power. The child, perhaps somewhat obviously, is the physical body of a pre-adolescent (or even adolescent) person, who has not yet fully developed physically and mentally. This is a fairly uncontested definition, though the age at which one transitions from undeveloped to fully developed has raised and lowered itself according to the society the child inhabits. Childhood, however, is harder to define, but one thing is certain: childhood is something that is controlled, defined and dictated by a society which children inhabit, influenced by their physical body's race and gender, which changes the amount and type of innocence and value that a child has in the eyes of a particular method of biopower.

Building from these ideas, I intend to argue that under the forces of biopower employed by slavery, childhood becomes a state of being that can be carefully controlled and envisioned a particular way by those who have a stake in how the child develops—their parents, but particularly and especially the slaveholders. While being a child physically is not something that can be changed or altered, how a society treats that child’s childhood is dictated by how they view that child’s position in society, whether based on gender or race or some other qualifier. While both free and slave children were offered a type of childhood as children, the ways in which they were allowed to be childlike and experience that childhood differed greatly based on their status. This, I argue, was a method of control for slaveholders, a way in which they could implant and suggest certain inherent disparities between the slave child and the free child, and a method by which they could position themselves to their liking in the slave’s childhood experience and manipulate the child’s self-conception. Anne McGillivray writes, “How we envision and regulate childhood tells us as much about ourselves as a people or a state as it does about the lives of children” (282). It follows, then, that while the narratives of slaves tell us about their experiences as children, the way their childhood was influenced and dictated by slavery within their narratives tells us just as much about how slavery functioned as an employer of biopower over a population.

While all slaves were obviously initially brought to the Americas from their native land, slavery eventually was forced, by the abolition of slave trade, to continue solely on the creation of future slaves using current slaves. This means that many slave narratives were primarily written by those born as a slave, and this provides the most fertile insight into how slave children were brought up in (or under) the biopolitical control of slavery. Four narratives in particular present vivid and detailed pictures of this childhood: *The Story of*

*Mattie J. Jackson, Memories of Childhood's Slavery Days, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, and Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave.* Each narrative features a different child and different childhood, but commonalities and moments in each narrative allow for patterns to emerge. By discussing how these narratives reinforce and illuminate the ways in which slavery was forced upon the slave child, we can discover how these individual moments better illustrate the ways in which slaveowners conceived of and created the slave's childhood, which was designed to continue slavery and create future slaves who fit neatly and unquestioningly into the biopolitical system that controlled them. Essentially, by using Michel Foucault's definition of the technologies of utilizing biopower and Hannah Arendt's understanding of slavery's impact on its subject, it becomes possible to dissect the ways in which children and childhoods are controlled and monitored by slaveowners to continue and strengthen slavery's power. Focusing on the narratives of Mattie Jackson, Annie Burton, Harriet Ann Jacobs and Frederick Douglass as case studies provides real life examples of the types of physical and mental control slaveowners had over each subject's time as a child and their childhoods.

Foucault, in his lecture "Society Must Be Defended," set out to define the nebulous concepts of biopolitics and biopower, things which he perceived as having already arisen and become a reality for modern societies. While discussing the ways in which biopower can be utilized, Foucault laid out the dual techniques by which biopower could be used to exert control: "One technique is disciplinary; it centers on the body, produces individualizing effects, and manipulates the body as a source of forces that have to be rendered both useful and docile" (69). This technique seemingly maps effectively onto the slave child, who is controlled and manipulated via whippings, starvation and other forms of physical and mental

discipline. The child, in the eyes of the slaveowners, represents both the potential for profit and future slaves as well as a potential loss of profit if allowed to grow resentful and escape or rebel. The physical body is the source of these potentialities and therefore must become the focus of attempts to control and subdue these forces. The child represents, within the system of slavery, the moment in which certain attitudes and habits can be subtly or violently engendered within the child, to render them a useful and docile part of the biopolitical institution. While the method of controlling and manipulating these attitudes into place is the choice of the slaveowners, the narratives and other studies of slavery allow us some insight into common methods, which range from violence to extreme kindness and benevolence in order to create feelings of familial bondage and even love.

Foucault's second technology for using biopower, which is meant to supplement and enhance the first, is "a second technology which is centered not upon the body but upon life: a technology which brings together the mass effects characteristic of a population, which tries to control the series of random events that can occur in a living mass, a technology which tries to predict the probability of those events (by modifying it, if necessary), or at least to compensate for their effects" (69). So, while the first technology is focused upon disciplining the body to suppress individuals, and corresponds with directly disciplining the child's body by controlling it, this second concept is a more nebulous technology. While it still often has an impact on the child's body, its focus is more general: it aims to impress upon a population, by taking advantage of and repurposing natural events, the status of that population under the use of the biopower in question. The method by which slavery does this is generally by modifying societal concepts of slave childhood: slavery makes clear to slave children, as early as possible, that they cannot be childish and childlike in the same ways as

free children and they are fated to a different life from birth, which they cannot avoid and should just accept. The aim of these technologies, according to Foucault, is to “establish a sort of homeostasis, not by training individuals, but by achieving an overall equilibrium that protects the security of the whole from internal dangers” (69). This is how these two technologies operate in tandem: by exerting control at both a societal and individual level using generalized methods, slaveowners could satisfactorily control many slaves, even if a few slipped through the cracks, and prevent slavery from crumbling.

Children were a particularly vulnerable and powerful target for this method of control for various reasons, but particularly because they were among the first to be born enslaved, which meant that “slaveholders and planters saw in black children’s youth and inexperience a homegrown means to dilute the collective and troubling power of their elders, that savvy and largely native born population of adult slaves whose labor and lives underwrote both regional and national power” (Donovan 89). While many of the methods employed on children’s bodies mimicked the methods used on those of their elders, using them heavily during childhood to teach children their life positions gave slaveowners an incredible power to indicate an inherent distinction between slaves and free citizens, often before slave children could even be truly aware of their positions in society. The slaveholders saw in the “slight and inexperienced” bodies of slave children an opportunity to impose order on plantations before trouble even started, which was important to them post-1808 as slave children were their only method of maintaining slavery without the ability to bring in fresh slaves from overseas (Donovan 98). Instead of relying on indoctrinating older slaves into the system, slaveowners turned their eyes and methods towards their new generation of children, seeing their opportunity to manipulate the chance events of a slave’s childhood to increase the

probability that the slave child would become a docile and downtrodden cog in the system with little difficulty, accompanied through childhood into adulthood by psychological and physical proof of their inherent inferior status, seeing themselves as fit only to be a slave.

The slave narratives themselves provide ample evidence of both technologies, working often in conjunction. One of the clearest methods of controlling and making docile the body of a slave child was by limiting the amount of nutrition they had, and this is evidenced in multiple narratives, but most particularly in Douglass's. He writes: "Our food was coarse corn meal boiled. This was called mush. It was put into a large wooden tray or trough, and set down upon the ground. The children were then called, like so many pigs, and like so many pigs they would come and devour the mush;...few left the trough satisfied" (299). This dehumanizing experience would have immediately begun working on the bodies of slave children, who would be weak and often unable to physically mount resistance to slavery because of their malnourishment. This, an obvious employment of Foucault's first technology, would also have an effect on the slave population as a whole, particularly as they grew older: their constant underfeeding would not only lead to physical deficiencies, but a mindset of being worth as much as (or less than) a pig, being fed by the same method and using the same sort of mush, generally. This mindset would not just pervade an individual, but an entire plantation's slave population.

Scholars point us towards another bodily mortification used to separate and degrade slave children from free children: not only were slave children forced to wear ill-fitting and unsuitably cold or hot clothes, there was an institutionalized practice among slaveholders that insured children would advance into adulthood never being allowed underpants (Parent and Wallace 394). While the previously mentioned control over what and how slaves ate was

degrading in the ways it weakened and dehumanized the bodies and hunger of the slaves, this method was more visually obvious, forcing slave children to know that they were in some way unworthy of the same clothes worn by free children. Many slave narratives reference this humiliation in some form, ranging from Jackson's three weeks of wearing the same bloodstained, crusty dress she wore during her beating (13), to more general and constant unsuitable clothing, as Douglass mentions: "I suffered much from hunger, but much more from cold. In hottest summer and coldest winter, I was kept almost naked—no shoes, no stockings, no jacket, no trousers, nothing on but a coarse tow linen shirt, reaching only to my knees" (299). The lack of proper protection from the elements, Douglass claims, bothered him even more than the misfortune of how they were fed, and by pointing out the items he was not given, Douglass highlights that even as a child he knew those things were afforded to free children, but he was a slave child and therefore could not have them. As Jacobs points out in her narrative, these single piece clothes made of rough fabric, like her linsey-woolsey dress, were "one of the badges of slavery" (756). By disallowing slave children adequate and proper wardrobes, slaveowners not only exerted direct control over the bodily condition of slaves to keep them from escaping (lack of proper footwear being a particular part of this, as well as an inability to stay warm or cold) but also were able to impress upon slaves, by visual comparison of their own clothes to that of free children, that they were somehow fundamentally different in the eyes of society.

Whipping and physical punishment was an obvious and often employed method of physical control over the bodies of children, even when the whipping wasn't done on the child themselves. Jackson provides an example of a mistress whipping a little slave girl almost every night in order "to learn the little girl to wake early to wait on her children"

(Jackson 7). This seems to have a double-pronged effect mirroring Foucault's two technologies: by whipping the child's body it creates a fear of physical pain and lowers the probability of disobedience in the future, while also making explicit the difference in rank of this slave girl and the mistress' white children. Douglass remarks explicitly that witnessing a whipping was the moment in which he truly realized his status as a slave, and his enslavement started to weigh heavily on his soul. He writes that the violence of the whipping was "the blood-stained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery, through which I was about to pass. It was a most terrible spectacle. I wish I could commit to paper the feelings with which I beheld it" (284). In Douglass's case, the threat of physical violence in the future was enough to begin to subdue him, effectively achieving the lowering of probability that Foucault's technologies seek to accomplish by subduing slave children early in life. Later on, Douglass encounters his own physical punishments, which only further serve to crush his spirit:

I was somewhat unmanageable when I first went there, but a few months of this discipline tamed me. Mr. Covey succeeded in breaking me. I was broken in body, soul, and spirit. My natural elasticity was crushed, my intellect languished, the disposition to read departed, the cheerful spark that lingered about my eye died; the dark night of slavery closed in upon me; and behold a man transformed into a brute. (324)

While it's obvious that the method Covey used to break Douglass was employed entirely upon Douglass's physical body as a child, this seems a clear cut elaboration on how these physical controls can also effect and work in conjunction with the deeper and more societally aimed control the second technology works towards: the physical punishments lead Douglass

to lose any feelings of rebelliousness and fire he had held previously, even after his aunt's whipping, replacing them with the broken spirit of what Douglass calls a brute, something that views itself as less than man. This defeated spirit and dehumanization is exactly what slavery as a biopower sought to accomplish by the physical degradations mentioned prior and in this section, creating control not just at an individual level, but over an entire population starting with its children.

These physical controls were only the beginning of how slavery used biopower to manipulate children, and oftentimes these physical punishments, humiliations and deprivations were meant to highlight how different a slave's childhood was from that of free children, to further cement unconsciously in a slave child's head that they were fundamentally not the same as their master's children.

The negro child and the white child knew not the great chasm between their lives, only that they had dainties and we had crusts. My sister, being the children's nurse, would take them and wash their hands and put them to bed in their luxurious bedrooms, while we little slaves would find what homes we could. My brother and I would go to sleep on some lumber under the house”  
(Burton 37-38)

As Burton implies here, while slave children were often unaware what their status as a slave meant early in their lives (see also Jacobs 751), they were indoctrinated early into recognizing differences between their childhoods and those of free children: their interactions allowed them to witness that they were given scraps while free children were fed full meals and so on, though perhaps the significance of this wouldn't sink in until the damage was already done to a child's psyche.

Since slave parents were often considered a volatile force in a yet-to-be-controlled slave child's life, slaveowners employed their power to both ensure that they were not allowed too much control over their child's childhood, and to manipulate slave children into seeing their owners as a parental figure (something made more vile by the fact that slave owners often were biological parents to their slaves, even if the children themselves were unaware of it). Slaveowners gave themselves greater control over how a child experienced their childhood, scholars explain, by "imposing themselves between parent and children, with dangerous consequences for the children's personal adjustment" (Parent and Wallace 382). While often the parents were removed out of common practice as opposed to any actual possibility of them subverting slavery's power, Jacobs' father provides an example of a parent removed from a slave child's life because of his actions. He taught his children, Jacobs writes "to feel that they were human beings. This was blasphemous doctrine for a slave to teach; presumptuous in him, and dangerous to the masters" (Jacobs 756). Because of this, when he is dying Jacobs' masters refuse to allow her to be with him, likely hoping to drive psychological distance between herself and her slave father in an attempt to crush Jacobs' spirit. Douglass, in his narrative, keyed in on the devastating effects of tactics such as these, which craft distance between parent and child and put a child's childhood in total control of a slaveowner. When speaking of being separated from his mother very early in life he says: "For what this separation is done, I do not know, unless it be to hinder the development of the child's affection toward its mother, and to blunt and destroy the natural affection of the mother for the child. This is the inevitable result" (Douglass 2). As Douglass notes, the only conceivable (and worryingly successful) goal of separating parent and child is to remove a support system and destroy familial affections that allow a parent to shape their

child—leaving a convenient hole which slaveowners could fill with poisonous notions about the rightful relationship between slave child and master, to lower any potential chance that the child will grow up and attempt to defy this natural status quo.

If slave children understood anything about their childhood status in relationship to free children, it was that their childhood was not valued for its innocence or sweetness, like that of free children. Slave children knew that their youth was valued for its economic and labor-producing potentials. While slave children were interestingly usually spared the gruesome details of sex itself in spite of a lack of respect for any slave's conventional childhood innocence, "they did know where the value of the babies went—to the owner. Slaveowners were quick to speak of their slave children within their earshot as potential breeders" (Parent and Wallace 387). Slaveowners often treated child slaves differently not because of any romantic notions of needing to preserve their childhood innocence, but because of the chances they offered for more money or even, in a near future, more new child slaves. Jacobs herself comments on this demoralizing system in her narrative: "They regard such children as property, as marketable as the pigs on the plantation" (782). She is speaking particularly here of the mixed children of slave masters, a disturbing system which Douglass himself was a product of, which allowed slave masters to control both mother and child simultaneously. However, this idea of children as pig on the market applied to most slave children, who were valued not for being children but for their future potential as labor and breeders for their masters. Every physical control applied to these children, especially things like forcing them to eat like pigs from a trough, was meant to brainwash them into believing they were more animal than human and therefore subject to any whim of their supposedly more enlightened master.

Jacobs almost falls victim to her master in this way (among others), as he makes it clear he wishes to use her from an early age as a producer of new slaves. Interestingly, Jacobs seems to pinpoint in this moment when exactly a slave passes beyond childhood while discussing her master's attempts to seduce her: "She will become prematurely knowing in evil things. Soon she will learn to tremble when she hears her master's footfall. She will be compelled to realize that she is no longer a child. If God has bestowed beauty upon her, it will prove her greatest curse" (774). As mentioned previously, the slave child's childhood was dictated not necessarily by their physical age, but by the way a society (in this case, slaveholders) treated them. A slave's childhood was viewed purely as the time during which a slave master could most easily use degradation methods, physical and mental, to prevent future rebellion and convince the slave child of their position in relation to the master and to free children. For Jacobs in particular, and likely many slaves overall, childhood represented the time in which they were mostly potential to their slaveowners: potential money, potential breeding stock, potential hard laborers. Once the slave owners saw this potential as being ready for harvest, so to speak, like Jacobs' ability to bear children presumably was here, then any vestiges of a childhood for the slaves was ended and as Jacobs put it, they were no longer in any way shielded from the cruelties of their particular master or from the slaveholding society at large.

Jacobs' narrative also provides us with an upsetting yet incredibly summative glimpse into the ways in which slavery places free and slave children alongside one another, only in order to highlight the chasm between them and their childhoods, as well as the future those children faced once reaching their adult status in the eyes of slaveholding society. She writes:

I once saw two beautiful children playing together. One was a fair white child; the other was her slave, and also her sister. When I saw them embracing each other, and heard their joyous laughter, I turned sadly away from the lovely sight. I foresaw the inevitable blight that would fall on the little slave's heart. I knew how soon her laughter would be changed to sighs. The fair child grew up to be a still fairer woman. From childhood to womanhood her pathway was blooming with flowers, and overarched by a sunny sky. Scarcely one day of her life had been clouded when the sun rose on her happy bridal morning. How had those years dealt with her slave sister, the little playmate of her childhood? She, also, was very beautiful; but the flowers and sunshine of love were not for her. She drank the cup of sin, and shame, and misery, whereof her persecuted race are compelled to drink. (775-76)

The insight Jacobs provides here into the seemingly unbreachable divide between the childhoods and maturing of black and white children is undeniably evidence of the forces biopower exerts upon slave children. While white children are allowed to run free and continue to maintain a childish innocence, slave children are exposed at a very young age to horrors and trials that break their spirits long before free children are ever forced to reconsider their own childlike perspective on life. It is this gulf of experience that slaveowners exploited in order to create and maintain the “systematic and deliberate degradation and discipline designed to prepare the youth for a life of perpetual slavery. This pattern of abuse had implications for issues of development, autonomy, individuality, identity, personality, and sense of self” (Parent and Wallace 381). The end results of these tactics are undeniable after examining these slave narratives, and provide a real world case study of how Foucault’s

technologies were employed to help slavery maintain and use biopower most effectively: by striking at the heart of the slave population—its children.

# Religio-Biopolitics and American Slavery

*Sarah Doucette*

Michel Foucault, quite possibly the most spoken of theorist of biopolitics and biopower, is known for having brought forward considerable conversation through his varying theories. In “The Right of Death and Power Over Life,” he argues, “Biopolitics will derive its knowledge from, and define its power's field of intervention in terms of, the birthrate, the mortality rate, various biological disabilities, and the effects of the environment” (66). Therefore, according to Foucault, the concept of biopolitics has arisen to revolve around three main principles: the establishment, maintenance, and destruction of life by a sovereign, whether an individual or entire government. Through his conceptions of biopolitics (or biopower), a clear connection can be made between his theories and moments within the course of human history where humanity has, for one reason or another, dominated, oppressed, or banished another faction, whether due to race, religion, or other varying degrees of discrepancies.

The institution of slavery within the United States, predominantly that of the 18th and 19th century, and how the South punished their slaves, even to the point of death without impunity, would exemplify the theory of biopolitics within a sect of the country. Giorgio Agamben argues,

Slavery's fundamental offense against human right was not that it took liberty away... but that it excluded a certain category of people even from the possibility of fighting for freedom—a fight possible under tyranny, and even

under the desperate conditions of modern terror... Slavery's crime against humanity did not begin when one people defeated and enslaved its enemies... but when slavery became an institution which some men were "born" free and others slave, when it was forgotten that it was man who deprived his fellow-men of freedom, and when the sanction for crime was attributed to nature.

(89)

Due to the creation and establishment of this institution, slaves were either purchased or they were born into slavery, some as a result of rape by the slave owner to gain a profit with the increased birth rate among their slaves. Slavery was not something created and supported by the country as a whole, but it was established and maintained throughout the south due to labor that was "needed, used and exploited" (89).

Some may argue that biopolitics can only appear in one form, that of human law written into a political government created by man. However, I would like to argue that there is a challenging authority to mankind's biopolitical power, for religion creates another "sovereign" (God) which may supersede what an established government has set forth. For people of religion, their established beliefs hold a power over their actions and inactions which may or may not interfere with the established biopolitics within their region. It can be said, "The God of monotheism may not authentically be armed, but he has often been deemed so when invoked to underwrite the authority of 'single' sovereign powers on earth" (Milbank 131). With the two established sovereigns, that of a government and that of God, religio-biopolitics acts as a counter to the biopolitical norm.

Yasmeen Arif first establishes the term religio-biopolitics in the article "Religion and Rehabilitation: Biopolitics, City Spaces and Acts of Religion":

the proposition that when the provision of secure domicile, which in times of real threat translates into sustainable survival, becomes a monopoly of a religious organization, it stands to reason that a state-like governmentality of disciplinary, regulatory power — a religio-biopolitics — can be expected... I am persuaded that the politics of sustaining life, especially when that sustenance comes from religiously motivated identification and activity, is a powerful politics of religion. (679-80)

Religio-biopolitics is introduced as a form of “power” which contends with manmade governments, especially, as Arif establishes, in times of mortal turmoil. Such instances may include that of war, famine, pandemics, etc., when people turn to religious organizations to seek help, whether emotionally or physically. In this way, the power of religion, while dormant at varying times among the masses, will rise up and supersede certain governmental expectations when humanity deems it necessary.

The institution of slavery in the United States is one such event in history to which southern slave owners feared religio-biopolitics. Religious identity and practices tied in heavily with the decisions of slave owners, for many feared the power struggle religion, specifically Christianity, would create if the doctrines were taught to the slaves, for religion among slaves would generate a controversial power dynamic. Yasmeen Arif, explains, “[Religion] is a splitting of sovereign power that either in short bursts or in extended programs make possible the conceptualization of a biopolitics based on religious identity, that is, a religio-biopolitics” (673). Thus, many slave masters were unwilling to allow religio-biopolitics to interfere with their own biopolitical power. Some alternatives were thus enforced in order to avoid any shift in obedience; for instance, some slave masters chose to

completely disallow any form of religion to be spoken within hearing distance of any slaves on the plantations. Others managed by limiting or manipulating verses of the Bible the slaves were exposed to. These practices evolved from the idea that “Christian slaves would prove unruly because they would expect the equality of all people” (7).

Using this power dynamic, I would like to utilize Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1851 fictional novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, first published in forty-one installments by the anti-slavery newspaper *National Era*, to discuss the varying ways religio-biopolitics affected slave owners and slaves alike. One such example includes when Uncle Tom's third and final master of the novel, Mr. Legree, exclaims: “Well, I'll soon have that out of you. I have none o' yer bawling, praying, singing niggers on my place; so remember. Now, mind yourself,' he said, with a stamp and a fierce glance of his gray eye, directed at Tom, 'I'm your church now! You understand,—you've got to be as I say’” (Stowe 492). Within this excerpt, Mr. Legree is enforcing his biopolitical strength over his slave by disallowing any competition from God and the religio-biopolitics God imposes to interfere with the actions and behavior of Tom's physical being.

As the antebellum period grew in the United States, it offered new technologies to allow for communication which caused a boom in religion throughout the South known as the Second Great Awakening. Religion became part of an everyday society for the white community, whether slave owner or not, but religion did not change the opinions of many slave owners and the right to own another human being. In fact, Blake Touchstone, author of “Planters and Slave Religion in the Deep South,” suggests,

Slave owners [continued to maintain] extensive control over the activities of their bondsmen, and, until the last fifteen years of the antebellum period, they

generally opposed ecclesiastical schemes for slave conversion, instruction, and worship... southern planters feared that converted blacks would become unruly servants or might even demand freedom and equality... The shift in planters' attitudes was closely linked to the political, social, and religious developments of the final antebellum years. (99-100).

Despite various attempts of Christian religious leaders, such as that of Georgia Bishop James O. Andrew, to preach against the institution of slavery, the overwhelming number of slave owning parishioners chose to create a different path in their interpretation of the Christian Bible and “greatly altered their church's views on human bondage” (100), which provided an outlet against the Christian religio-biopolitics. Evidence of this can be seen in the ever changing disciplines taught in Andrew's church fifty years after his death: “Thus during the 1840's virtually all southern clergymen publicly approved of slavery” (100).

As religion proceeded to develop throughout the South, some slave owners became convinced slavery was an institution granted to them by God; in this manner, slave masters attempted to maintain the governance established by religio-biopolitics for themselves rather than allow it to act as an opposable force. Iveson L. Brookes, a preacher and planter of the South, argued, “the more I have investigated the subject the more I have become convinced of the true character of African Slavery as an Institution of God and fraught with the highest degree of benevolence to the Negro race ... the Biblical argument in support of slavery must be considered the most important defense of that Institution” (Touchstone 107). Brookes' argument is attempting to justify the institution of slavery through the use of the Christian Bible. Through this interpretation, a person who upholds and maintains slavery is only doing

their religious duty and using their physical being to participate in the religio-biopolitics laid down upon them.

This belief is one Stowe personifies through the use of her character Marie St. Clare, the wife of Uncle Tom's second slave master. Marie's understanding of the Bible is a representative of many around her, in the novel and in the true South. Marie's opinion is clearly ascertained when she firmly defends her religious and slave owning beliefs to her sister-in-law, a Northerner, through one of the sermons she received while at mass:

The text was, 'He hath made everything beautiful in its season;' and he showed how all the orders and distinctions in society came from God; and that it was so appropriate, you know, and beautiful, that some should be high and some low, and that some were born to rule and some to serve, and all that, you know; and he applied it so well to all this ridiculous fuss that is made about slavery, and he proved distinctly that the Bible was on our side, and supported all our institutions so convincingly. (Stowe 279)

Marie's beliefs exemplify the attitudes of a substantial number within the South during her time, for many appeared to truly believe that God had mandated them the right to own the lives of others.

Various religious conferences began to spring up throughout the South, and by “the early nineteenth century, the Evangelical Protestants were preaching the benefits of religion as a means of improving slavery for masters and slaves” (7). With the growth of religion within the South, plantation owners became receptive to the teachings of the Christian Church (Touchstone 101). Slave owners began to believe that “it would... improve the master-slave relationship of both parties by encouraging slaves to be honest and diligent

laborers, promote public safety by checking or diverting the passions of blacks, and refute abolitionist criticism by demonstrating that slavery in the South was a Christian institution” (101). Through these notions, the mindset of the South shifted because of the idea for “the promise of obedience and orderly behavior, of the curtailment of lying and stealing, was one of the strongest inducements whites had for supporting the religious instruction of slaves... and that religion promoted good behavior better than fear of the whip” (103). Therefore, many slave owners began to promote God's teachings on their plantations, but in limited forms in an attempt to better control the behavior and actions of the slaves.

An effigy of religio-biopolitics began to be practiced by slave owners to create a new form of power. This was often done by exposing slaves to limited verses of the Bible which would justify the slaves work and behavior; in fact, “many slaveholders determined that they ought to shape any religion slaves might receive to limit its dangerous potential” (“Slaveholder Opposition to the Practice of Religion” 7). Whitemarsh Seabrook argued slaves should be exposed to religion: “Slaves need only understand those parts of the Bible supporting their obedience and submission” (7). Therefore religion had become a tool to control and justify the actions and punishments of the slaves based on their behavior as taught and deemed by “God.” The limited religious excerpts slaves were exposed to included messages such as, “God wants you to be good, humble servants, patiently bearing your burdens on earth until your reward comes in the hereafter” (Touchstone 121). Other lessons included concepts that would keep slaves virtuous and honest, for slave masters wanted to maintain their power over their slaves in order to avoid misconduct, such as theft, failure to perform duties, and rebellion. In performing in such a way, “they would avoid not only the devil but also the master's lash” (121).

In Stowe's novel, when Tom refuses to perform as Mr. Legree demands because it would put Tom in mortal harm from God's power, Mr. Legree struggles voraciously against the power dynamic Tom's religion has created for him against his master:

Here, you rascal, you make believe to be so pious,—didn't you never hear, out of yer Bible, 'Servants, obey yer masters'? An't I yer master? Didn't I pay down twelve hundred dollars, cash, for all there is inside yer old cussed black shell? An't yer mine, now, body and soul?" he said, giving Tom a violent kick with his heavy boot; "tell me!" (Stowe 508)

By establishing with Tom a biblical verse as a means of reason, Legree is trying to validate with Tom the religiously ordained right slave owners have to control and punish slaves; thus, Mr. Legree is attempting to manipulate religio-biopolitics against a man who only truly recognizes God as his sovereign.

Though *Uncle Tom's Cabin* may be a piece of fiction, Harriet Beecher Stowe is known to have drawn on true life experiences of those around her. The examples in this piece assist well in establishing the power dynamic between biopolitics and religio-biopolitics by portraying the varying reactions slave owners held to the opposing controlling force of God. Religio-biopolitics, acting as a power set down by God to control, maintain, and end lives, interferes with the power any sovereign, slave owner, or government, may have against its people in the form of biopolitics. Religio-biopolitics is, and will continue to be, a force which challenges any sovereign's power as long as religion remains in practice amongst humanity.

# Animals in Slave Narratives: A Biopolitical Analysis

*Kaitlyn Abrams*

Among the terms foundational to biopolitical conceptions of slavery is that of bare life. In “Biopolitics and the Rights of Man,” Giorgio Agamben defines “bare natural life” as “the pure fact of birth” (153). Similarly, in his distinction between *zoē* and *bios* in “Introduction to *Homo Sacer*,” Agamben presents *zoē* as “the simple fact of living common to all living beings (animals, men, or gods)” (134). As opposed to the political life of *bios*, then, bare life and *zoē* may be categorized as mere biological life, which includes animals as well as humans.

Bare life encompasses individuals whose access to “the political” has been preempted by biopolitical governance, such as slaves under the American system of slavery. According to Agamben, bare life exists in a “state of exception” or exclusion—in other words, bare life exists outside of the law, in a state of exception from the *polis* or any legal representation within the city-state. “Politics,” Agamben asserts in “Introduction to *Homo Sacer*,” is “founded on the exception of bare life” (142). This leads to a significant point of Agamben’s, which is that bare life and *zoē* are necessarily included in the political by the very means of their exclusion: “In Western politics, bare life has the peculiar privilege of being that whose exclusion founds the city of men” (139). Further, Agamben is preoccupied with “the relation between politics and life, if life presents itself as what is included by means of an exclusion” (139).

In “Perplexities of the Rights of Man,” Hannah Arendt corroborates the simultaneous political inclusion of those existing in a state of exception, describing this possibility as it applies to slavery. “To be a slave was after all to have a distinctive character, a place in society—more than the abstract nakedness of being human and nothing but human” (89). Following this argument, it is this “distinctive character” and “place in society” that differentiates the slave from the savage, despite the exclusion of both from the body politic. Within this context, *zoē* and bare life could be used to describe slaves whose mere existence is political in that it “founded the city of men,” but who possess no political agency of their own.

However, the application of *zoē* and bare life, whose existence occupies a state of exception but is also foundational to society, is not restricted to human slaves; the same can be said for domesticated animals. As the “distinctive character” and “place in society” distinguish the slave from the savage, so do they distinguish the domesticated animal from the wild one. Slavery and animal husbandry are similar in that they help to define *bios politikos*, and humanity in general, by what they are not; during the time of American Slavery, slaves and domesticated animals were also alike in that their labor was largely a basis for society’s function. In her second chapter of *Animalia Americana: Animal Representations and Biological Subjectivity*, Colleen Glenney Boggs writes, “Both animal husbandry and slavery are premised on the physical exploitation of unfree bodies and on the harnessing of their reproductive capacities for the generation of biological capital” (80).

Without the state of exception as it applies to men, the distinction between *bios* and *zoē* would be the distinction between man and animal. What is the result, however, when a

state generally perceived reserved for animals is also occupied by humans? Arendt qualifies that,

If a Negro in a white community is considered a Negro and nothing else, he loses along with his right to equality that freedom of action which is specifically human. . . he has become some specimen of an animal species, called man. (95)

While there is nearly unanimous agreement in both biopolitical and American slavery scholarship that humans restricted to bare life and the state of exception are forced to exist like animals, the biopolitical picture is made more interesting when animals are considered alongside slaves as subjects of biopolitical governance. In *Animal Capital: Rendering Life in Biopolitical Times*, Nicole Shukin maintains that there is “an inescapable contiguity or bleed between *bios* and *zoē*, between a politics of human social life and a politics of animality that extends to other species” (9). Shukin’s assertion of an un-dichotomous relationship between bare life and political life emphasizes the importance of “inclusion by exclusion” as stated by Agamben and Arendt, even as it broadens the conversation in its relevance to multiple species. However, it is the logic of this very collapse of the dichotomies between human and animal within bare life that this exposition intends to interrogate.

This essay will investigate what occurs when *zoē* is occupied by both slaves and domesticated animals, who are forced to work alongside each other in a shared state of exception and under comparable biopolitical harnesses. “What happens,” asks Boggs, “when we include animals in concerns over population and politics?” (80). While many scholars have chosen to base their analysis on similarities between the slave and the animal’s respective conditions, this essay will investigate the full authenticity of this common analogy

by primarily concerning itself with the effect that slaves and domesticated animals have on *one another*. Therefore, a question more specifically to the purposes of this essay is: what is the relationship between man and beast, when both exist in a state of exception?

*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb* are all slave narratives that provide extensive representation of the role of domestic animals in the lives of American slaves. As has been canvassed in numerous writings, *Slave Narratives* contains countless similes, analogies, and metaphors that liken the condition of slaves to that of animals. However, despite possible assumptions to the contrary, as represented in these narratives, there is virtually no sense of comradeship or solidarity amidst shared suffering between the slaves and their animal counterparts. Rather, the relationship between slaves and domesticated animals in *Slave Narratives* is largely one of resentment, pain, and fear, with animals continually worsening the condition of and occasionally even threatening slaves' lives. These findings both complicate and call into question the ubiquitous animal-slave comparison: the consistent cross-purposes of and mutual aggravation between slaves and animals in *Slave Narratives* emphasizes their distinctness from one another, even within a shared state of exception.

It would be remiss to ignore the slave-animal analogy altogether, particularly as it frequently appears not only in scholarship surrounding slavery but also in the original narratives of the slaves themselves. Examples from *Slave Narratives* show former slaves making a comparison between the respective sales of animals and slaves, with unmistakable resentment at their being allotted a similar condition to animals. In *Narrative of the Life of Fredrick Douglass*, Douglass recalls,

We were all ranked together at the valuation. Men and women, old and young, married and single, were ranked with horses, sheep, and swine. There were horses and men, cattle and women, pigs and children, all holding the same rank in the scale of being, and were all subjected to the same narrow examination. (312)

Further, in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Jacobs laments that human beings are “liable, by the laws of a country that calls itself civilized, to be sold with horses and pigs!” (901). Both of these descriptions indicate a distaste for the law’s similar treatment of slaves and animals as merchandise. Additionally, the comparison of the condition of slaves with that of animals in *Slave Narratives* is marked by an indignation that contains evident underpinnings of anxiety. Describing groups of people consigned to a state of exception in “The Politicization of Life,” Agamben explains, “The abstract nakedness of being nothing but human was their greatest danger. Because of it they were regarded as savages and, afraid that they might end by being considered beasts” (92). Within the American institution of slavery, slaves faced an all-too-similar threat of complete dehumanization. Treatises were commonly being written on the inherently “savage” nature of the African race, and the lack of legal protections for slaves might have made the distance from a socially-designated “savage” to a socially-designated “beast” appear short. However, does Douglass’s assertion hold that animals and slaves belonged to “the same rank in the scale of being”?

In his famed philosophical work, *Politics*, Aristotle posits that “the use made of slaves . . . departs but little from that made of other animals; for both slaves and tame animals contribute to the necessities of life with the aid of their bodies” (552). Here, Aristotle likens slavery to animal husbandry because both are predicated on compelled physical labor. The

forced “aid of bodies” that Aristotle references may be framed more precisely as what Michel Foucault in “Right of Death and Power over Life” calls “an anatomic-politics of the human body,” which “centered on the body as a machine: its disciplining, the optimization of its capabilities, the extortion of its forces, the parallel increase of its usefulness and its docility” (44). Foucault juxtaposes anatomic-politics with biopolitics, which “focused on the species body, the body imbued with the mechanics of life and serving as the basis of the biological processes: propagation, births and mortality, the level of health, life expectancy and longevity” (44).

While sovereign power over life and death certainly figured in the lives of slaves and domesticated animals, this analysis concerns itself principally with the “disciplining” and “extortion of forces” in the hopes of increasing “usefulness and docility” that anatomic-politics entails, these being the very forms of body-governance that so clearly applied to both animals and slaves. Boggs contends that “Slaves and animals jointly inhabit an ambiguous position in which the shift from discipline to biopolitics is not linear,” providing what could very easily be used as a description of anatomic-political governance (80-81). This is one undeniable commonality between animal husbandry and slavery; the physical labor of both domesticated animals and slaves was managed and compelled by a sovereign. However, Boggs goes further to say that “animals are . . . an instrument for slaves’ animalization” and that the violent proximity between animals and slaves serves to collapse species distinctions and “produce animality” among slaves (101). Here is an assertion with which this essay will take issue, for while slaves might have been said to share somewhat in domesticated animals’ anatomic-political circumstances, the same cannot be as handily claimed of their mentality or behavior. To the contrary, examples of animal-slave interactions in *Slave Narratives* will

illustrate a key point: that humans could be made to work like animals while still resisting animality.

In *Slave Narratives*, the authors' recollections of domesticated animals are almost universally tinged with antipathy, particularly when emphasizing the seemingly greater worth that slave-masters placed on domesticated animals and the punishments associated with a slave's neglecting them. In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet Jacobs writes,

They had a pet dog, that was a nuisance in the house. The cook was ordered to make some Indian mush for him. He refused to eat, and when his head was held over it, the froth flowed from his mouth into the basin. He died a few minutes after. When Dr. Flint came in, he said the mush had not been well cooked, and that was the reason the animal would not eat it. He sent for the cook, and compelled her to eat it. He thought that the woman's stomach was stronger than the dog's; but her sufferings afterwards proved that he was mistaken. (759)

This punishment of the slave for the dog's death illustrate not only the slave-owner's villainy but also that domestic animals could be indirectly used to intensify slaves' suffering.

Bloodier punishments than this were inflicted on the bodies of slaves who failed to follow their masters' orders regarding animals. Jacobs states that "another slave, who stole a pig from this master, to appease his hunger, was terribly flogged" (Jacobs 793). In *Slave Narratives*, floggings are also commonly inflicted on slaves by slave-masters for supposedly negligent treatment of animals they own. Note the following description of a slave-owner's ruthless particularity regarding the caretaking of his horses, as related by Douglass:

In nothing was Colonel Lloyd more particular than in the management of his horses. The slightest inattention to these was unpardonable, and was visited upon those, under whose care they were placed, with the severest punishment; no excuse could shield them, if the colonel only suspected any want of attention to his horses . . . If a horse did not move fast enough, or hold his head high enough, it was owing to some fault of his keepers . . . “This horse has not had proper attention. He has not been sufficiently rubbed and curried, or he has not been properly fed; his food was too wet or too dry; he got it too soon or too late; he was too hot or too cold; he had too much hay, and not enough of grain; or he had too much grain, and not enough of hay; instead of old Barney's attending to the horse, he had very improperly left it to his son.” To all these complaints, no matter how unjust, the slave must answer never a word . . . I have seen Colonel Lloyd make old Barney, a man between fifty and sixty years of age, uncover his bald head, kneel down upon the cold, damp ground, and receive upon his naked and toil-worn shoulders more than thirty lashes at the time. (291-92)

By virtue of their specificity and length alone, passages like these highlight an interesting point about relations between slaves and animals: years after the fact, former slaves recall these animal-related incidents in minute detail, and the authors' devoting such time and attention to these incidents stresses their importance to the reader. What was it about animal-related encounters like these that merited their lengthy and forceful inclusion in *Slave Narratives*? Boggs offers one explanation, contending that “Douglass . . . emphasizes animals' and human beings' shared sensibility” (84). Yet, the rancorous and meticulous

energy with which these violent cases are dwelt upon does not seem intended to communicate an awareness of mutual suffering within a state of exception, but rather to accentuate suffering at the hands (so to speak) of domesticated animals.

A still more striking instance of this emphasis occurs as Douglass, when explaining why “Mr. Covey gave me a very severe whipping, cutting my back, causing the blood to run, and raising ridges on my flesh as large as my little finger,” offers the following detailed recollection:

Mr. Covey . . . gave me a team of unbroken oxen . . . He then tied the end of a large rope around the horns of the in-hand ox, and gave me the other end of it, and told me, if the oxen started to run, that I must hold upon the rope. I had never driven oxen before . . . I had got a very few rods into the woods, when the oxen took fright, and started full tilt, carrying the cart against the trees, and overstumps, in the most frightful manner. I expected every moment that my brains would be dashed out against the trees . . . they finally upset the cart, dashing it with great force against a tree, and threw themselves into a dense thicket. How I escaped death, I do not know . . . before I could get hold of my ox-rope, the oxen again started, rushed through the gate, catching it between the wheel and the body of the cart, tearing it to pieces, and coming within a few inches of crushing me against the gate-post. Thus twice, in one short day, I escaped death by the merest chance. (321)

Interestingly, this scene shows the failure of a slave to bring animals under the very anatomopolitical governance that he is subject to, and his failure to act as an extension of the sovereign's governance results in acts of anatomo-political violence against his own body.

Moreover, if the cruel flogging that followed this harrowing incident did not already establish this, the scene itself clearly presents an antagonism between domesticated animals and slaves. Not only does Douglass barely escape from the oxen with his life, but injuries are also inflicted on him as a result of the animals' actions. In "The Politicization of Life," Agamben writes that "Corpus is a two-faced being, the bearer of both subjection to sovereign power and of individual liberties" (150). The escape of the oxen from sovereign power, however temporary, and almost at the cost of Douglass's life, designates their bodies as the bearers of individual liberties; and as Douglass experiences resultant punishment from sovereign power, having exercised his own body's individual liberty to escape death rather than serve as an implement of sovereign governance, we see evidenced a kind of violent and even deadly mutuality between the slave and the domesticated animal that firmly situates them as adversaries.

The hostile relationship between slaves and domesticated animals is made all the more evident in the cases of direct violence between them. Jacobs writes with ghastly vividness of bloodhounds at a plantation:

His bloodhounds were well trained. Their pen was spacious, and a terror to the slaves. They were let loose on a runaway, and, if they tracked him, they literally tore the flesh from his bones . . . If a slave resisted being whipped, the bloodhounds were unpacked, and set upon him, to tear his flesh. (792-95)

Jacobs' powerful language makes manifest what a figure of horror the bloodhound presented for the American slave. Bloodhounds comprise the most universal depictions of the hostility between slaves and domesticated animals in *Slave Narratives*, and Jacobs' description of them also presents a sort of complement to Douglass's oxen scene. While the oxen scene

showed a slave attempting to bring *animals* under a sovereign's biopolitical governance (and violence at the failed outcome of this), the motif of the bloodhound shows an animal violently forcing a *slave's* return to that same governance.

Another compelling instance of a "tame" animal's attack on a slave occurs in the case of Jacobs' own son.

One day the screams of a child nerved me with strength to crawl to my peeping-hole, and I saw my son covered with blood. A fierce dog, usually kept chained, had seized and bitten him. A doctor was sent for, and I heard the groans and screams of my child while the wounds were being sewed up . . . Before night Benny was bright and lively, threatening the destruction of the dog; and great was his delight when the doctor told him the next day that the dog had bitten another boy and been shot. Benny recovered from his wounds; but it was long before he could walk. (868)

Again, Jacobs' choice of words makes clear her forceful feeling of antipathy toward the dog in this scene. Her son's "delight" at the subsequent death of the dog additionally underscores the narrative's positioning of slaves and domesticated animals as enemies, or at least rivals in the game of survival.

One final and fascinating example pertinent to this rivalry occurs in *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb*, following Bibb's unsuccessful bid for freedom:

The third day I was brought out of the prison to be carried off with my little family to the Louisville slave market. My hands were fastened together with heavy irons . . . my old master thought I was not quite safe enough, and ordered one of the boys to bring him a bed cord from the store. He then tied

my feet together under the horse, declaring that if I flew off this time, I should fly off with the horse. The horse appeared to be much frightened at the appearance of things in the city, being young and skittish. A carriage passing by jammed against the nag, which caused him to break from the man who was leading him, and in his fright throw me off backwards. My hands being confined with irons, and my feet tied under the horse with a rope, I had no power to help myself. I fell back off of the horse and could not extricate myself from this dreadful condition; the horse kicked with all his might while I was tied so close to his rump that he could only strike me with his legs by kicking. The breath was kicked out of my body . . . No one who saw my situation would have given five dollars for me. It was thought by all that I was dead and would never come to life again. (488)

Much like Douglass's encounter with the oxen, this scene is a telling one when viewed through a biopolitical lens. There can be no doubt of Bibb's having been reduced to an utter state of *zoē* or bare life here; he has not only been deprived of freedom and political agency, but can also no longer even enjoy the free movement of his body. What makes this instance so remarkable, and perhaps even unique, however, is that this scene shows Bibb's own governed body (existing within bare life) literally strapped down to *another* body that also exists within bare life but belongs to an animal species. The two bodies are forced into painfully intimate proximity; the strength of the rope is such that neither of the poor subjects can remove themselves from the other's body, or vice versa. The horse's response to this shared subjugation is to inflict direct harm on the body he is tied to—*zoē* wounding *zoē*—

which in turn causes Bibb physical anguish and reduces him to a state that is (at least outwardly) like death.

Perhaps most powerfully of all illustrations, this instance establishes that, when humans and animals are confined *together* to a state of exception and bare life, their relationship to one another is grounded in violence and fear. This clear antagonism and opposition evidences a demarcation between man and beast, even when both are subject to analogous anatomo-political forms of governance.

Such a demarcation significantly complicates Boggs's assertion that Douglass turns "animality into a shared . . . biopolitical site" that "collapses the binaries between "the human" and "the animal" (106). To the contrary, even as the authors of Slave Narratives emphasize the indignities of mutual anatomo-political subjectivity with domesticated animals, this very emphasis in conjunction with the consistent representations of enmity and violence between slaves and animals only serves to further delineate their distinction from one another.

Even when within the shared dearth of political agency that characterizes *zōē*, the dissimilarities between man and animal have been corroborated by theorists. In *History of Animals*, Aristotle maintains that, "Of all animal, man alone has the ability to deliberate. Many animals participate in memory and are capable of instruction, but none but man can recall the past" (306). This differentiation is pertinent in light of the ruminations on animals in Slave Narratives, as they were written years after the authors had escaped from slavery and are therefore recollections of the past. Moreover, in Foucault's summation of Aristotle in "Right of Death and Power Over Life," man is "a living animal with the additional capacity for a political existence" (47). Regardless of the comparable positioning of slaves and

domesticated animals in relation to *zoē* and bare life, it is the capability of *entering bios* that distinguishes the slave from the animal; an animal will always and ever remain an animal, but slave need not always and ever remain a slave.

Among the best examples of a figure who escapes the imposed constraints that confine them to bare life and *zoē* and enters the realm of *bios* and political agency are, of course, the authors of *Slave Narratives*. At a political rally in England, Frederick Douglass gave the following speech on his identity as man rather than animal:

Why, sir, the Americans do not know that I am a man . . . they speak of me in connexion with sheep, horses, and cattle. But here, how different! Why, sir, the very dogs of old England know that I am a man! [Cheers.] I was in Beckenham for a few days, and while at a meeting there, a dog actually came up to the platform, put his paws on the front of it, and gave me a smile of recognition as a man. [Laughter.] The Americans would do well to learn wisdom upon this subject from the very dogs of Old England; for these animals, by instinct, know that I am a man; but the Americans somehow or other do not seem to have attained to the same degree of knowledge.

(Douglass, Foner, and Taylor 74)

Having read the above excerpts of slave-animal interactions from *Slave Narratives*, one can't but notice the comparatively pleasant and companionable language that Douglass, now a freedman, uses to describe the dog in question. No longer relegated to a state of exception himself, it seems that his relationship to domesticated animals has changed. Douglass's intent with this speech is in accord with all of the authors in *Slave Narratives* when likening their lot to that of animals: the intent to communicate the sheer perversity of

their shared subjection alongside animals. By Douglass's description, animals as well as humans recognize the separation between the two, regardless of what state the human might occupy. Rather than, as Boggs contends, illustrating the "bleed" of animality between man and animal within a state of *zoē*, the authors of *Slave Narratives* provide detailed recollections of hostility between animals and slaves in order to confirm that similarity of condition by no means indicates a shared sensibility. Resistance to animals is representative of resistance to *animality*, and the perpetual restriction to *zoē* and the state of exception that animality entails.

This understanding may merit a reassessment of—or at the very least an addendum to—the omnipresent comparison of animals and slaves in biopolitical theory and scholarship on American slavery. As shown by the depictions of the acrimonious relationship between animals and slaves in the narratives, simply likening the life of a slave to that of an animal signifies a failure to grasp the complex picture of slave-animal relations as well as respective shapes of biopolitical governance. The consistent antipathy between slaves and beasts in *Slave Narratives* is ultimately a manifestation of the slaves' ardent refusal, despite the imposition of bare life, to become beasts themselves.



# Resistance Is Futile?

*Ryan Gonyar*

Giorgio Agamben implicates biopolitics in the greatest world tragedies of the last few hundred years. From slavery in the Americas to the rise of fascism in Europe, biopolitics has played a role. Despite this fact, biopolitics is still the primary form of control in the modern world, and it would not take much to transform a country like America into a neofascist state. Given all of this, one has to wonder if there is not a way to resist biopolitics, to fight back against a system that does not care one way or the other about you as an individual. In this paper, I will be examining the ways in which it is possible (assuming that it is) to resist biopolitics, taking the case of North American slavery as my prime example.

To start, we need to figure out what resistance to biopolitics (defined by Michel Foucault as the management of populations) would look like. In doing so, however, we run into a few problems. First, we have to examine the role of the individual in all of this. One of the most common critiques of biopolitical thinking is that it does not allow much room for the individual. Since biopolitics deals with the management of populations, individual actions tend to get overlooked in favor of a wider viewpoint. The question, then, is whether or not the actions of one person can even be counted as resistance in the grand scheme of things. Is a single escaped slave resisting biopolitics, or does escape have to be done in large groups to count as such? How big would the group have to be? Regardless, even from this perspective, only large scale escapes or revolts would be counted as resistance, and while those things are important I believe there is a different way of looking at things that opens up

more avenues of resistance. You see, while one slave escaping may not seem to have much effect on the biopolitical regime, hundreds of thousands of slaves attempted escape in some form or another. One slave may be just a drop in the bucket, but with enough drops, that bucket will eventually be full. In this way, even if a slave escapes alone, they are joining an unspoken community of escaped slaves. This huge group will obviously have some kind of effect on the biopolitical system as a whole. Thus, individual action, insofar as it contributes to a greater effect, can be considered resistance.

The second issue we encounter is whether or not simply resisting slavery counts as resisting biopolitics. If biopolitics is the management of populations, are slavery and biopolitics inextricably linked? Slavery obviously involves managing a certain population in order to extract work from it. Given this, do all the actions taken by slave owners in regards to their slaves become biopolitical, whether or not they were taken with the intention of controlling the population? Once mired in a biopolitical system, the slave owners have no choice but to be biopolitical. Each action they take towards their slaves will in some way shape how those slaves act. Even if a slave owner is motivated by rage when he lashes out against a slave, the other slaves will still take note of the action and amend their behavior based on it. In this way, slavery and biopolitics become intertwined such that, if resisting slavery and resisting biopolitics are different, trying to suss out which is which and how they differ would be an exercise in futility. For the purposes of this paper, we will consider any resistance to slavery to also be resistance to the biopolitical regime as a whole.

A good starting point for a discussion of the different forms of resistance is the most common form: day-to-day resistance. While not as glamorous as escape or revolt, many slaves did try to resist slavery from within the confines of it. They would break tools, pretend

to be sick, organize slowdowns, and sometimes even commit arson or other forms of sabotage. The slaves were very good at getting as little work done per day as possible. As Raymond and Alice Bauer note in their paper “Day to Day Resistance to Slavery,” there were “many recurring comments at the time] that a slave did not do half a good day’s work in a day” (391-392). While it might be easy to overlook such comments as just further evidence of racism in the time, they are actually indicative of the type of resistance that slaves offered up when escape and revolt were not available to them. Just because they were forced to work did not mean they were going to take it lying down. Whether or not this slowing down of the work was intentional or merely a result of being forced to do a menial task which would not benefit them is unknown, but in much the same way we determined that any action the slave owner takes, regardless of intention, can be considered a management of the population, we do not necessarily need to take intentionality into account when looking at resistance. Whatever the reason behind the slow work pace, the fact of the matter is that it would negatively impact the slave owners. If each slave is only doing half the amount of work that they could be, then the slave owner needs double the amount of slaves he otherwise would need, costing him more and not increasing his profits at all. One has to wonder, however, how much effect this had overall. Obviously, despite all the setbacks the slaves caused for the masters, the system of slavery survived. Did the slaves’ resistance do enough economic harm to the slave owners to make slavery a less viable system? It is possible that it did, but that by then the system was so ingrained in the culture that a different system could not even be fathomed. Economically viable or not, slavery might have persisted simply because tradition or just simple racism. However, it also possible compared the system of slavery with the alternative, that of free people being paid to do the work, and determined that

slavery made them more money overall, despite all attempts at resistance. If this is the case, do the actions still constitute resistance? I would argue that they do, if only because they still affect the bottom line of the slave owners, one way or another. Even if they are making more money than they would via other systems, they are still making less than they would if the slaves did not resist at all. That might seem like small comfort, and perhaps it is, but at the end of the day, it is better than nothing.

While day-to-day resistance focused on reducing one's value to the slave owner, two other forms of resistance revolved around eliminating one's value altogether: escape and suicide. The former was obviously the preferred method. Not only would the slave be able to harm the slave owner, they would also get to live out their days in relative peace, assuming their escape was successful. The caveat, however, was that not all slaves that attempted escape were successful. While exact numbers are unknown, the number of slaves who successfully escaped was likely far lower than the number of slaves who attempted escape. Escape was not necessarily easy, and even after escaping, there was always the chance of being captured and brought back. Many slaves made multiple attempts at escape, and while some did eventually escape, many found their escape attempts foiled. In addition to this, escape came with other consequences. Often, escape meant leaving behind one's loved ones, be it children, parents, or friends. While most slaves would likely have been happy to see someone they loved escape, even if meant separating, there was likely still a lot of pain involved. Lastly, even once a slave had escaped, he or she would have to live the rest of his or her life in fear of being found and brought back. Though this may have been better than actually being enslaved, it certainly was not ideal. The freedom they had fought so hard for

was tenuous at best. It could be taken away at the drop of the hat, and with that constant spectre looming over their heads, could they really ever find peace?

On the other hand, suicide was not necessarily any better. Sure, death may be better than slavery itself, and there may be some measure of peace in it, but at the end of the day, the slave had still removed him or herself from the world, depriving him or herself of any possibility of future happiness, whether in the form of escape or complete emancipation. That might be the one advantage slavery has over death: no matter how bad things are under slavery, there is always the possibility that something might change in the future to make things better. Death, however, is a different story. Once someone is dead, they are gone for good. No coming back, no chance at a better life. From a religious perspective, there might be a better life after death, but suicide is generally seen as a sin akin to murder. This, then, raises an interesting question: does allowing oneself to be killed constitute suicide? Take, for instance, the case of Demby in the Frederick Douglass's narrative:

[Mr. Gore] had given Demby but few stripes when, to get rid of the scourging, he ran and plunged himself into a creek, and stood there at the depth of his shoulders, refusing to come out. Mr. Gore told him he would give him three calls, and that, if he did not come out at the third call, he would shoot him. The first call was given. Demby made no response, but stood his ground. The second and third calls were given with the same result. Mr. Gore then, without consultation or deliberation with any one, not even giving Demby an additional call, raised his musket to his face, taking deadly aim at his standing victim, and in an instant poor Demby was no more. (296)

Rather than accept punishment, Demby chose to die. He knew that if he stayed in the water, he would be killed, and yet he chose to remain there. Is this suicide, then, or murder? It may seem obvious that the blame lies with Mr. Gore, who chose to kill Demby in cold blood, and it does to a degree, but one has to wonder if Demby's knowledge of his impending death, his ability to do something to prevent it, and his refusal to do so could be seen as a form of suicide. Is the event paradoxically both murder and suicide? Suicide by murder? Suicide by slave owner?

Regardless of whether we call it suicide or allowing oneself to be killed, the fact of the matter remains that this was a path that was occasionally taken by slaves. While not, perhaps, as common as the other forms of resistance that have been examined so far, it may be more meaningful. Michel Foucault, in his essay "Right of Death and Power Over Life," asserts that "one of the characteristic privileges of sovereign power was the right to decide life and death" (41). Thus taking one's own life or forcing the sovereign to kill you gives you some of the power of the sovereign, or at least takes away some of their power. Suddenly it is no longer the slave owner making the decision to kill the slave or to let him/her live, it is the slaves themselves that are making that decision. Once again, this fact would likely have been small comfort to the slaves themselves, and probably would not have crossed their minds, but it is true nonetheless. It is a decision that undermines the power of the slave owner, that shows them that they do not have quite as much control as they would like. Escaping slavery does not really have the same effect. The slave may have shown the master that he does not necessarily have the power to contain all of his slaves, but since there is always the possibility that the slave can be recovered, it is kind of a moot point. Until the slave dies free, his or her escape does not prove quite as much as suicide does. Once the slave is dead, the

slave owner can never get him or her back, and thus is proven not to have any power over them.

The final form of resistance, and the one that, at the least, had the most potential to actually destroy the biopolitical regime, is revolt. Rebellions like that of Nat Turner proved that when slaves banded together, they could pull off noteworthy things. For the oppressed class to cause such damage to the ruling class truly demonstrated the power that the slaves could achieve, even with very little planning and organization. The slaves had strength in numbers, and when given weapons, they were able to put up a fight against their oppressors. Had more of the slaves they freed taken up arms and fought alongside them, the revolt might have lasted far longer than it did, and might have accomplished far more. This is often the mystery of history: when the oppressed outnumber their oppressors, why do they not just rise up? In some cases, they do, and sometimes they are successful, but in many cases they just come to terms with their lot in life or, as in the case of most slaves, find ways to resist that, while significant at least symbolically, may not actually help to change anything. So often oppressed groups do not realize that, just by the simple fact of their overwhelming numbers, they are the ones that ultimately have the power. Was Nat Turner's Rebellion the most ethical way to go about resisting biopolitics? No, not by a long shot, but was it not the most effective? It struck fear into the hearts of the slave owners, showed the other slaves what they were capable of, and, in the end, served the same purpose as suicide: since the slaves were executed afterwards, their value was removed from the biopolitical regime.

Ultimately, however, none of these methods of resistance really contributed much to the fall of slavery. The South brought down slavery itself when it decided to secede from the Union, which gave Lincoln all the excuse he needed to march in and free the slaves. Does

this mean that all those forms of resistance were useless, or that they could not have effected change over a longer period of time? If only results matter, then no, those resistances were pointless and could perhaps not even be called resistances at all. However, one could also choose to look at it as making a statement. The slaves may not have changed their own lot in life, but they at least did not take it lying down. They did everything they could to resist the biopolitical regime, and their success lies in the symbolic value of that resistance and not necessarily on the effects it had on the system as a whole.

# Colonizing Assemblages and Colonial Biopolitics in Postcolonial India

*Mushira Habib*

African-American Studies scholar Alexander G. Weheliye, in his book, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*, criticizes the theories of biopolitics put forth by Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben for placing racism outside the realm of European modernism as an always already external concern of biopolitics. However, Weheliye argues that racism is often at the heart of biopolitical configurations of power and knowledge, and the “philosophical unseeing of racializing assemblages” (65) in the Western discourse of biopolitics and bare life is only suggestive of its theorized authorization through biopolitics. The same can be said about colonization and what I am calling colonizing assemblages, which differentiated the colonized racial groups from their colonizers in the name of development and civilization. Coupled with the racializing assemblages, the colonizing assemblages would give rise to new forms of subjectivities in the colonized lands among the colonized peoples, constructing a new social order. Weheliye bases his discussion of racism on Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s definition of it “as not resting on phenotype or culture, but as “the state-sanctioned and/or extra-legal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerabilities to premature death” (55). Drawing from this definition of racism, Weheliye argues that racism is “the political exploitation and (re)production of race” and that “the biopolitical function of race is racism; it is the establishment and maintenance of caesuras, not their abolition” (56). He goes on to discuss that Foucault theorizes how biopolitics authorizes caesuras “within the

biological continuum addressed by biopower” and how it creates a decidedly modern mode of

racism [that] justifies the death-function in the economy of biopower by appealing to the principle that the death of others makes one biologically stronger insofar as one is a member of a race or a population, insofar as one is an element in a unitary living plurality. (56)

Weheliye identifies racialization “not as a biological or cultural descriptor,” but as a “conglomerate of sociopolitical relations that discipline humanity into full humans, not-quite-humans, and non-humans” and finds the racial discrimination to bring about “a changing system of unequal power structures that apportion and delimit which humans can lay claim to full human status and which humans cannot” (3). Thus he introduces the idea of “racializing assemblages,” which “construes race not as a biological or cultural classification but as a set of sociopolitical processes that discipline humanity into full humans, not-quite-humans, and non-humans” (4). Weheliye complicates Foucault and Agamben’s propositions of biopolitics, claiming that “placing racial difference in a field prior to and at a distance from conceptual contemplation, [they] inscribe race as a “real object” or a “primitive notion”“ (7). This process of situating “race” always already outside the realm of biopolitical schema, “the coloniality of Man<sup>1</sup> suffuses the disciplinary and conceptual formations of knowledge we labor under, and how far we have yet to go in decolonizing these structures” (7). This paper advances Weheliye’s conceptualization of racial assemblages as the rationale behind biopolitical apparatuses exercising their authority on the subjects under their governance. The

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<sup>1</sup> Man representing the privileged group of people classified as “full humans” by Weheliye

paper extends the idea of assemblages in terms of colonialism, to claim that in the name of enlightenment, development and civilization, colonial assemblages can also be held accountable for dividing humanity into newer perceptions of “full humans, not-quite-humans, and non-humans.” Weheliye proposed:

Racializing assemblages represent, among other things, the visual modalities in which dehumanization is practiced and lived. In this way, the conceptual tools of racialized minority discourse augment and reframe bare life and biopolitics discourse, because they focus on devising new forms of human life that are not constructed from the noxious concoction of racialization and/as political violence. (6)

Expanding Weheliye’s arguments, I attempt to establish in this paper how colonizing assemblages propagated through the linguistic, cultural and epistemological modalities of the lives of the colonized populations, in order to construct new hierarchies among these postcolonial subjectivities. I will primarily address the case of colonial (1757-1947) and postcolonial India (1757-present),<sup>2</sup> ruled by the British East India Company for almost a hundred years before taken over by the British Crown in 1857 and eventually gaining independence in 1947. Thomas Babington Macaulay, the educational and legal reformist of the East India Company in colonial India, (in)famously decides the fate of its colonized people to be educated in the English system of education. Justifying the “intrinsic

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<sup>2</sup> Contemporary postcolonial discourses argue that the postcolonial status of the once-colonized nations is marked by the act of colonization itself as the lives of the colonized people are altered since the first step towards their colonial occupation.

superiority” of “Western literature” in the “Minute on Indian Education” of 1835 he has the following to say about this civilizing mission:

I have no knowledge of either Sanscrit or Arabic.—But I have done what I could to form a correct estimate of their value. I have read translations of the most celebrated Arabic and Sanscrit works . . . a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia.

(6)

This document was a policy statement for the governance of an entire population, at the heart of which we can find racist, orientalist assumptions about the Indians and their culture, which Macaulay finds to be in desperate need of reformation. He shows no signs of hesitation declaring how he will take up the “white man’s burden” as he deems himself best-suited to serve these people for their own good. Hence he asserts:

We have to educate a people who cannot at present be educated by means of their mother tongue. We must teach them some foreign language. The claims of our own language it is hardly necessary to recapitulate. It stands pre-eminent even among the languages of the west. (6)

Gesturing at the hegemonized acquisition of English by the privileged classes serving the government or maintaining liaison for international trade and communications, Macaulay predicts hegemonic acceptance of English as the lingua-franca for a greater, useful population—

In India, English is the language spoken by the ruling class. It is spoken by the higher class of natives at the seats of Government. It is likely to become the language of commerce throughout the seas of the East. (7)

Implied in this assertion of a select few is the discarding of the rest of the population, which is substitutable and insignificant. His knowledge of prior colonial ventures in the world assures him that the larger population will soon aspire to assimilate with the uplifted class and embrace their decisions or fade away in the process of resistance. Hence he focuses his energy on just the privileged group to further their relations and alliances:

We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect. To that class we may leave it to refine the vernacular dialects of the country, to enrich those dialects with terms of science borrowed from the Western nomenclature, and to render them by degrees fit vehicles for conveying knowledge to the great mass of the population. (13)

The implications of such artificially constructed subjectivities ripple through the postcolonial realities all over the world today. Part of Sub-Saharan Africa suffers a similar scene of postcolonial crisis occasioned through the implementation of English as part of their imperial fate. The debate on the language of African literature bear some of the most prominent traces of postcolonial caesuras. Before resorting to writing in his native language, Gikuyu, Kenyan scholar Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, in his article, "The Language of African Literature," discusses how the imposition of English as the official language in the everyday lives of the African children distorted their sense of reality for life. Giving an autobiographical account of his experience of English education, he writes, "In Kenya, English became more than a language; it was the language, and all the others had to bow before it in deference" (438). He recalls his schooldays describing how

[O]ne of the most humiliating experiences was to be caught speaking Gikuyu in the vicinity of the school. The culprit was given corporal punishment—three to five strokes of the cane on bare buttocks—or was made to carry a metal plate around the neck with inscriptions such as I AM STUPID or I AM A DONKEY. Sometimes the culprits were fined money they could hardly afford. And how did the teachers catch the culprits? A button was initially given to one pupil who was supposed to hand it over to whoever was caught speaking his mother tongue. Whoever had the button at the end of the day would sing who had given it to him and the ensuing process would bring out all the culprits of the day. Thus children were turned into witch-hunters and in the process were being taught the lucrative value of being a traitor to one's immediate community. (438)

Not only was the language new for these children, the culture the language carried with itself was also alienating, dividing the subjects internally and leaving them dissociated from their realities. The domino effect of consequences and penalties for disobeying the colonial authority is exemplary of a biopolitical system, where the epistemological violence exercised on the young minds transcended their psychological affects and took the form of physical punishment. As Thiong'O mentions his feeling of imbalance between the language of his lived experiences and his intellectual pursuit regretfully, "And then I went to school, a colonial school, and this harmony was broken. The language of my education was no longer the language of my culture" (438). The subjects produced through these processes of "divide and rule" are always already othered, not only by the external colonizing assemblages, but

also within themselves because of their interiorization of the colonial gaze. Thiong’O then describes the privileged treatment the children competent in English would receive:

The attitude to English was the exact opposite: any achievement in spoken or written English was highly rewarded; prizes, prestige, applause; the ticket to higher realms. English became the measure of intelligence and ability in the arts, the sciences, and all the other branches of learning. English became the main determinant of a child's progress up the ladder of formal education.

(438)

Also:

The requirements for a place at the University, Makerere University College, were broadly the same: nobody could go on to wear the undergraduate red gown, no matter how brilliantly they had performed in all the other subjects, unless they had a credit—not even a simple pass!—in English. Thus the most coveted place in the pyramid and in the system was only available to the holder of an English language credit card. English was the official vehicle and the magic formula to colonial elitedom. (439)

Thinking back to Macaulay’s vision, this is the exact kind of division between people he inspired in India. Thiong’O’s systematic breakdown of this process of creating a culture based off of competition and jealousy, just through the use of the colonial language captures the traumatic effects of English as the official language in a colonial land. Thus the society Macaulay constructed through his racist, colonial visions, became the realities of the people and was intensified even more through other racializing and colonizing assemblages that continued to carry forth the torch of development, in multiple, deceptive discursive forms. In

the book, titled, *The Biopolitics of Development: Reading Michel Foucault in the Postcolonial Present*, Sandro Mezzadra, Julian Reid, and Ranabir Samaddar discuss how Foucault's theories of biopolitics and biopower had been influential in India long before he had gained popularity in Europe as he seemed to have resonated with the ways in which governance and development in India has functioned for a long time. They argue that "while Foucault's thought has been inspirational for the interrogation of colonial biopolitics, as well as governmental rationalities concerned with development in the postcolonial era, his works have too often failed to inspire studies of the forms of political subjectivity that such regimes of power incite" (1). They think Foucault's biopolitical concerns could be of significance "in a time when fundamentally human capacities to think, to know and to act purposively in the world are being pathologized as expressions of the hubris and 'underdevelopment' of postcolonial peoples" (2). Mezzadra et al argue that both "liberalism and development are biopolitical doctrines," conceptualized through "the insistence on the need to develop 'life' which has permitted liberalism to proliferate . . . generating displacement, homelessness and deprivation" (3). These authors discussing the contemporary power dynamics in India seem to be reinforcing Weheliye's interpretation of the impact of racializing assemblages. As Weheliye points out how the discussion of biopolitics often fail to acknowledge its applicability in racial, colonial spaces, Mezzadra et al appear to be complaining of the same lack of attention given to the intentions of reconstructing a conflict-based social order in any given society. They write,

Less understood, however, is how its claims to be able to increase wealth and freedom became correlated with claims to develop life itself, moving beyond

and blurring the very boundary between public and private established and so carefully policed by classical liberalism. (3)

This book can thus be considered a reevaluation of the relationships between racializing/colonizing assemblages and biopolitics, attempting to achieve the same goals of systemic management of a population through utilization of caesuras. When thinking about current socio-political concerns, we tend not to fill in the gaps between these assemblages that can all be traced back to similar biopolitical agendas:

Classically, we are taught to think of liberalism, following Foucault included, as a form of humanism. It is a form of humanism that in preaching the value of a particular account of human life denies elements of humanity the ability to claim inclusion within the human community. (4)

Further, David Chandler, in his chapter titled “Where is the Human in the Human-Centered Approaches to Development” in *The Biopolitics of Development*, discusses how

when we look at the fine print of the account of ‘the human’ within neoliberal development discourse, we discover a highly biopoliticized and much degraded view of what it is to be human. In essence, neoliberal development discourse strips the human of the very properties that distinguish it from other living beings, by denying it, especially, any capacity for autonomy. (4)

Interestingly though, the next level of impoverished subjectivity in India after the successful construction of the class of gentlemen as opposed to laymen, was formed under the umbrella of nationalism, instead of liberalism. Postcolonial theorist Partha Chatterjee discloses this fascinating aspect of the nationalist movement in India, in his insightful work.

One of Chatterjee's essays, titled, "Colonialism, Nationalism, and Colonized Women: Contest in India," traces how

Colonial texts condemned the treatment of women in India by identifying a scriptural tradition. The nationalist response was to construct a reformed tradition and defend it on the grounds of modernity. In the process, it created the image of a new woman who was superior to Western women, traditional Indian women and low-class women. This new patriarchy invested women with the dubious honor of representing a distinctively modern national culture. (622)

Chatterjee's research on the representation of the Indian women in English texts exemplifies the "women's question" becoming a major cause in the colonial pathos. As a gesture towards holding on to traditions and resisting Westernization, the newly-enlightened gentlemen of India turned women into the carriers of their nationalist resolutions. Chatterjee discusses this striking outcome of a colonialist discourse in an evocative manner:

the so-called women's question in the agenda of Indian social reform in the early 19th century was not so much about the specific condition of women within a determinate set of social relations as it was about the political encounter between a colonial state and the supposed "tradition" of a conquered people—a tradition that . . . was itself produced by the colonialist discourse. (623)

He elaborates on the process of compromising women's subjectivities, disguising it as protection from the colonial power. This new class of gentlewomen were now constructed to assist preservation of the traditional private lives of the Indian men, by now who were either

participating in the public landscape that Macaulay had envisioned for them or projecting rebellious attitudes, using their English education to fight for independence. It was left up to these repurposed Indian women to carry the burden of the image that the nationalist movement sprung out of anti-colonial sentiments, which nevertheless was a product of colonialism still. The women remained Indian, or became further “Indianized,” and were placed further down in the hierarchy of being human, and losing their claim to a full-human status in the new order of beings. Thus the colonizing assemblages and biopolitical discourses of development in India initiated and redefined the social order of its population effectively and irrevocably.



# Literacy as a Way Out

*Richard Fortuna*

“A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master—to do as he is told to do. Learning would *spoil* the best nigger in the world. Now,” said he, “if you teach that nigger (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master. As to himself, it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontented and unhappy”

Fredrick Douglass

*Narrative of the Life*

Literacy, according to the narrative of Fredrick Douglass, is a key component on “the pathway from slave to freedom.” Upon discovering a burgeoning knowledge of letters in Douglass under Mrs. Auld’s tutelage Mr. Auld declares that a slave who can read and write is ruined. Why? What power does language, and by extension literacy, contain that can free the oppressed or even oppress a group to begin with? Language is not power in a traditional sense, it is not might, force, or control that constrains a body. Instead, language creates the possibilities for the use of might, force, and physical control over selected bodies within a

social or political group. Aristotle explores how language functions in this way.<sup>1</sup> The power contained in language, for Douglass access to language through literacy, is one of the hidden aspects of biopower. Nations choose to identify themselves partially through a common language; the State is usually complicit in maintaining limits on what is an acceptable use of the national language.<sup>2</sup> In America language and literacy have been a pathway to legitimacy for decades. If one wants to be taken seriously one must speak and write in “proper” English. In this way, political and social access can be extended or withheld as desired for marginalized populations, slaves for example.

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<sup>1</sup> In *Rhetoric* Aristotle says “It is clear, then, that rhetorical study, in its strictest sense is concerned with the modes of persuasion ... The true and approximately true are apprehended by the same faculty” (22). For Aristotle the modes of persuasion were concerned primarily with law and politics, for our purposes the modes of persuasion are concerned with public policy and perception. Note that “the true and approximately true” work equally well for both Aristotle and modern society.

<sup>2</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin sees the language of any given society as an ongoing competition between “centrifugal as well as centripetal forces ... What we have in mind here is not an abstract linguistic minimum of a common language ... but rather language conceived as ideologically saturated, language as a world view, even as a concrete opinion” (270-71). Centripetal forces suggest an element of hegemonic control in language, what constitutes allowable speech. It also points in the general direction of who may speak, how they may speak, and how they may access speech (or literacy in our case).

Michael Foucault introduced the term biopolitics to account for the range of structures, power systems, norms, and disciplinary measures that deal “with the population as a political problem” (66). The population is not “the social body ... nor is it the individual-as-body. It is a new body, a multiple body, a body with so many heads that, while they might not be infinite in number, cannot necessarily be counted” (66). Foucault contends that biopolitics arises when the sovereign right to take life or let live becomes a right to make live or let die, a right he associates with the rise of democratic ideals found in the American and French revolutions.

Those democratic ideals contained a koan: How can all men be created equal and an institution like slavery still exist? Racism, as Foucault rightly suggests, allows for division of a population. “It is, in short, a way of establishing a biological-type caesura within a population that appears to be a biological domain ... That is the first function of racism: to fragment, to create caesuras within the biological continuum addressed by biopower” (74). A key word in Foucault’s statement is “appears.” Biology, and now genetics, is presented as a given that remains *a priori* to any definition of Man.

Weheliye contends that the very notion of Man, and the concurrent ideas of not quite Man,

figures as a master code within the genre of the human represented by Western Man, because its law-like operations are yoked to species-sustaining physiological mechanisms in the form of a global color line—instituted by cultural laws so as to register in human neural networks—that clearly distinguish the good/life/fully-human from the bad/death/not-quite-human. This, in turn, authorizes the conflation of racialization with mere biological

life ... it creates sociogenically instituted physiological reactions against their own existence and reality. (27-28)

Weheliye draws on the work of Sylvia Winters and her discussion of gender formation as genre to arrive at this formulation. What he concludes, is that race (as Foucault indicates) is entirely a function of language and is disingenuously presented to allow oppression based on non-negotiable scientific evidence without further examination. Access to the work of other thinkers and writers outside of one's own society is the first step towards divining the truth of the matter. Even a basic standard of literacy in slave populations would allow access to the founding documents of America and passages in the Bible that contradict scientific race.

The denial of legitimacy within a society, or the absolute expulsion from society, is conveyed by the Agamben notion of bare life. In antiquity there was a distinction between life (*zoē*) and good or qualified life (*bios*). The Aristotelian definition of *bios* presupposed a freedom from procuring the necessities of life for oneself and consequent free time to attend to matters of the city state resulting in a *bios politikos* later the Roman *vita activa*. Both of these terms convey a sense of active participation in public or political life. Borrowing Arendt's formulation of *bios* as political and social life and legitimacy Agamben seizes upon the notion of *zoē* to represent the life that is created equal for all men but can be denied political legitimacy in any given society. While much critical discussion is given to the exact relation of the terms to Agamben's notion of bare life the functional idea is the life denied

recognition but nonetheless assimilated in some form (even if the assimilation is an exclusionary one within a larger society).<sup>3</sup>

The obvious, and invisible, force at work in these discussions of biopower and bare life is language; whoever defines and names the categories creates the standards that all others will be oppressed by. As a medium of communication language has a tripartite structure: what is said, what is unsaid, and what cannot yet be said. Denial of literacy to a subject group certainly limits what can be said by its members, especially if saying is expanded to the realm of written works. Alternatively, literary mastery can give voice to those who heretofore have been mute. Hochman notes that Fredrick Douglass “consistently foregrounds the difference between his own rhetorical panache and the ungrammatical, vulgar language of his masters and overseers” (66) and how “moral autonomy is more closely identified with rhetorical control than with force. Violence characterizes the brutal overseers; literacy is identified with more lasting and legitimate authority” (66). This connects literacy with both Aristotle’s view of rhetoric and Foucault’s definition of biopolitics as authority that makes live.

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<sup>3</sup> *Zoē* is commonly thought to be synonymous with bare life but problems arise immediately in trying to picture a life *a priori* to political and social influence. Agamben himself says “we no longer know anything of the classical distinction between *zoē* and *bios*, between private life and political existence, between man as a simple living being at home in the house and man’s political existence in the city” (187). Arendt attributes this loss largely to the infiltration of the social and the political into each other, there is no longer a space, as in the classical sense of home, where man is largely ungoverned.

Arguments against educating slaves were not presented in terms of control, instead they were based on essentialist arguments similar to the ones that established racial categories to begin with. Robert Toombs presented the southern view in an 1856 speech in Boston:

I maintain that so long as the African and Caucasian races co-exist in the same society, that the subordination of the African is its normal, necessary, and proper condition, and that such subordination is the condition best calculated to promote the highest interest and the greatest happiness of both races, and consequently of the whole society: and that the abolishment of slavery, under these conditions, is not a remedy for any of the evils of the system. I admit that the truth of these propositions, stated under the second point, is essentially necessary to the existence and permanence of the system. They rest on the truth that the white is the superior race, and the black the inferior, and that subordination, with or without the law, will be the status of the African in this mixed society, and, therefore, it is in the interest of both, and especially the black race, and of the whole society, that this status should be fixed, controlled, and protected by law. (Townes 58)

While this is not an argument specifically against education, it is an argument for why the current system (which included a general ban on education and literacy) should be maintained. From our current twenty-first century vantage point there are significant flaws in

the above argument, I suspect that many of those flaws were apparent to careful readers in the nineteenth century as well.<sup>4</sup>

Atticus Greene Haygood terms the fear that educating slaves, freed at the time of this speech, bossism.

Put into form, it says this: ‘I am, by virtue of money, or shrewdness, or learning a sort of ‘boss’ among my fellow-men. I must keep them in ignorance that I may keep them down and be better able to play the ‘boss’. But there is nothing in the argument; it is false all through. For no man is better for anything in the world to be done because he is ignorant ... And were it otherwise, what right before God has one human being to keep another human being in ignorance in order to keep him in slavery? (Towns 190)

Keeping one’s fellow man in ignorance, illiterate, is acknowledged here as both a power play and social control that can prop up a system like slavery. Access to language through the written word is feared by the boss in Haygood’s formulation and a key ingredient in subjugating an entire race.

David Walker explicitly addresses why slave-owners should fear literacy among their slaves,

I pray that the Lord may undeceive my ignorant brethren, and permit them to throw away pretensions, and seek after the substance of learning. I would

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<sup>4</sup> If slaves were taught to read and write unilaterally at the time what might the response to such an argument look like? There would almost certainly be a refutation about the “greatest happiness of both races,” I suspect.

crawl on my hands and knees through mud and mire, to the feet of a learned man, where I would sit and humbly supplicate him to instil (sic) into me, that which neither devils nor tyrants could remove, only with my life—for colored people to acquire learning in this country, makes tyrants quake and tremble on their sandy foundation. Why, what is the matter? Why, they know that their infernal deeds of cruelty will be made known to the world. Do you suppose one man of good sense and learning would submit himself, his father, mother, wife and children, to be slaves to a wretched man like himself, who, instead of compensating him for his labours, chains, hand-cuffs and beats him and family almost to death, leaving life enough in them, however, to work for, and call him master? No! no! he would cut his devilish throat from ear to ear, and well do slave-holders know it. The bare name of educating the coloured people, scares our cruel oppressors almost to death. (37)

For Walker literacy is power in two distinct ways, the power to make known the “infernal deeds” to the world—a participation in the political and social world of biopower—and the individual power that Walker links with knowledge, the power to stand up physically to a slave holder and “cut his throat from ear-to-ear.”

A power that is withheld is a power that is desired even if the power is not quite understood.

I now understood what had been a most perplexing difficulty—to wit, the white man’s power to enslave the black man. It was a grand achievement, and I prized it highly. From that moment I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom . . . It gave me the best assurance that I might rely with the utmost

confidence on the results which, he said, would flow from teaching me to read. What he most dreaded, that I most desired. What he most loved, that I most hated. That to him which was a great evil, to be carefully shunned, was to me a great good to be diligently sought; and the argument which he so warmly urged, against my learning to read, only served to inspire me with a desire and determination to learn. (303-4)

Henry Lewis Gates explores the “trope of the Talking Book” in *The Signifying Monkey* devoting an entire chapter to the subject. Numerous anecdotes in this chapter reference a recognition of the power contained in the written word that could be accessed by a person who could talk—and listen—to books.<sup>5</sup>

Talking and listening to books is another way of conceiving literacy if one is from a culture where reading and writing are either unknown or uncommon. The Oxford English Dictionary defines literacy as:

1. The quality, condition, or state of being literate; the ability to read and write. Also: the extent of this in a given community, region, period, etc. Cf. numeracy n. In earliest use as an antithesis to illiteracy. adult literacy, mass literacy: see the first element. 1880–2008

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<sup>5</sup> A typical piece: “I had often seen my master Dick employed in reading; and I had a great curiosity to talk to the books, as I thought they did; and so to learn how all things had a beginning: for that purpose I have often taken up a book, and have talked to it, and then put my ears to it, when alone, in hopes it would answer me; and I have been very much concerned when I found it remained silent” (155).

2. In extended use (usually with modifying word). The ability to ‘read’ a specified subject or medium; competence or knowledge in a particular area.

computer literacy, cultural literacy, etc.: see the first element. 1943–2003

Reading, making the book talk, is the first step in literacy. While it is a very important step and has historically been acknowledged as a danger to those in power it is a largely personal and singular power.<sup>6</sup> Consider the character of Tom in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Tom can read, he can even annotate his copy of the bible for his own use, but he cannot write proficiently. Being able to read and internalize the scriptures gives Tom the power to stand up to Simon Legree and refuse to whip another slave. Tom undoubtedly has some personal power here; he has what Foucault might classify an anatomo-political power—control over his body to some degree (although Legree still holds a much larger share of this power). What Tom lacks here and Legree has is recourse to biopower; Tom’s singular stand cannot resonate with the public at large (that is if we are viewing Tom not as a character in a widely distributed novel but as a singular person in a singular situation). Legree has the legal backing and social permission, Foucault’s “power systems, norms, and disciplinary measures” to discipline Tom as he sees fit.

For all the importance Douglass places on learning to read in his narrative it is really the ability to write, and to write well, that places him in the biopolitical arena. In the preface to Douglass’s narrative William Lloyd Garrison first notes the extraordinary power of Douglass’s public speaking, its shades of Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*: “fortunate for the multitudes,

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<sup>6</sup> I am thinking specifically of the reaction of the Catholic Church to the printing and distribution of bibles amongst the general public.

in various parts of our republic, whose minds he has enlightened on the subject of slavery, and who have been melted to tears by his pathos, or roused to virtuous indignation by his stirring eloquence against the enslavement of men” (269).<sup>7</sup> Eloquence is primarily associated with oral speech. Eloquence often, but not always, is also associated with learned speech as opposed to dialect. As impressive as Douglass’s speaking was for Garrison the fact that “Mr. Douglass has very properly chosen to write his own Narrative... according to the best of his ability.... [It is] highly creditable” (273).

Wendell Phillips, in a letter to Douglass included in this edition, references an old fable about lions and history, “I am glad the time has come when ‘the lions [slaves] write history.” (277) Mr. Phillips may be glad but he also “shall read your book with trembling for you ... [for] there is no single spot,—however narrow or desolate,—where a fugitive slave can plant himself and say ‘I am safe.’ The whole armory of Northern Law has no shield for you. I am free to say that, in your place, I should throw the MS into the fire” (278-279). Phillips is afraid for Douglass not because he has spoken out against slavery but because he has committed his thoughts to print for distribution. As Walker would say he is making known the infernal deeds of slavery.

In writing and publishing his narrative in the accepted literate language of American discourse Douglass has made a biopolitical statement. He has entered the nineteenth century equivalent of the *bios politikos* in American letters. He has not been invited, he has instead

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<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., Aristotle: “The man who is in command [of rhetoric] must, it is clear, be able (1) to reason logically, (2) to understand human character and goodness in their various forms, and (3) to understand the emotions” (*Rhetoric* 25).

accessed the biopower of the normative literate speech of the day. He has spoken in the voice that Hochman identified as “more legitimate and lasting.” Douglass is not the only nor the first slave with a published work. He is not the first slave to acquire literacy. His narrative is, however, one of the best known and most frequently used. His narrative is in the canon as it were, it has power and a form of legitimacy that has been conferred upon it.

This admittance to some canon or other, some recognition of the role of Douglass’s essay in American history, is also an admission into the biopolitical. Douglass’s words live on in this realm and participate in the shaping and molding of what normative means.

Douglass’s access was not available through force, not through might, not through any sort of control over others; Douglass’s access was only available through literacy, the biopower of language that makes possible other biopowers. As a slave Douglass was “ruined” by literacy; as a voice for slaves and a call to America to heed her own founding values literacy was indeed a great power for Douglass. Is it any wonder slaveholders fought so hard to deny those skills?

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Department of English

University of Maine

2016