Maggie Bryant

Jesse Goldberg

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RRP: *Scenes of Subjection* Chapter 1

Throughout history, white people have used the black body both as a means of reflecting on themselves and their own humanity and as a source of entertainment. They did this through performances and recreations of the slave stories, such as Uncle Tom’s Cabin and John Rankin’s epistle and through the spectacle created by the entire process of slave trades, coffle processions, and frolics. Watchers of these performances and readers of these texts were able to have their sadistic desires met while simultaneously making themselves feel better by “empathizing” with the slaves. Hartman states that replacing the slave with a white person, such as is done by Rankin, erases the reality of the suffering experienced by slaves. This method of empathizing only perpetuates the usage of black bodies as entertainment, as the reader or writer of this type of text gains a sort of sadistic pleasure from the recreation of the horrendous violence. This can be summed up when Hartman writes that there exists a “problematic of enjoyment in which pleasure is inseparable from subjection, will indistinguishable from submission, and bodily integrity bound to violence” (33).

I am glad that Hartman brought up the sadistic element of Rankin’s writing. I have not read his epistle, but in the small portion that Hartman included, I noticed a sadistic tinge right away. Hartman writes, “Rankin’s imagined beating is immune neither to the pleasures to be derived from the masochistic fantasy nor to the sadistic pleasure to be derived from the spectacle of sufferance” (21).I think this point is extremely important because of its obvious truth. Even as children and young adults, humans are fascinated with the grotesque and the horrific. We watch movies we are told not to as kids, and as we grow older, we watch more and more horror movies because we simply love to be horrified. I believe that while Rankin may have written his epistle with good intentions, he probably enjoyed envisioning the horrible things being done, because, as Hartman implies, no mind is immune to at least a shred of sadistic tendencies, however cynical it may sound. This makes me think about how I read narratives intended to educate about slavery. I have always been repulsed by the extremes of the violence the slaves were subjected to. However, reading this chapter and this passage in particular made me question if I was always repulsed by these kinds of incidents, or if there is a small part of me that is fascinated by the horrendousness of them.

While Saidiya Hartman does not write verbatim that blackface was just another form of slavery, this is all I could think while reading pages 25-32. She writes, “The donning of the blackface mask reiterated racial subjection…provided whiteness with a coherence and illusory integrity dependent upon the relations of mastery and servitude” (32). This passage specifically struck me as significant, as this is an aspect of slavery “retellings” that I never considered before. I was always taught that it was important to share the story of slavery in order to ensure that nothing like it ever took place again. Now, I am wondering if maybe by telling these kinds of stories repeatedly we are in fact causing it to reoccur and reiterating the ideals so prominent at that time. If Hartman is correct that every retelling of a slavery narrative, such as Uncle Tom’s Cabin (a book I never read but was widely encouraged to at my school by both faculty and student) really reinforces the “correct” social order of domination and subjugation, then we need to stop retelling them. That sounds obvious, but it is just all I could think as I read this section of the chapter. This idea is also reinstated when Hartman writes, “The white flights of imagination and transgressive exploits facilitated by donning blackface ultimately restored the racial terms of social order” (29).

Another passage that stood out to me is the idea of how the “happiness” of the slaves was viewed. These were people forced into mental and physical torture, yet even people who were supposedly fighting for their freedom justified this torture to themselves. The example of this that Hartman references is Abraham Lincoln’s account of seeing a slave coffle on a ship, found on pages 34-35. I believe that whether Lincoln was aware of it or not, he was justifying to himself the fact that these people were chained up in front of him and he did nothing to help them. He told himself that they were fine because they looked happy; Saidya Hartman echoes this when she writes, “The initial revulsion and horror induced by the sight of shackled and manacled bodies gives way to reassurances about black pleasure” (36). White people watching these spectacles are able to convince themselves that the enslaved people are not really worse off but on the contrary, that they are thoroughly enjoying their enslavement! This seems preposterous to me. Hartman expands on this concept on page 37, writing, “The body of the slave, dancing and on display, seemingly revealed a comfort with bondage and a natural disposition for servitude” (37).