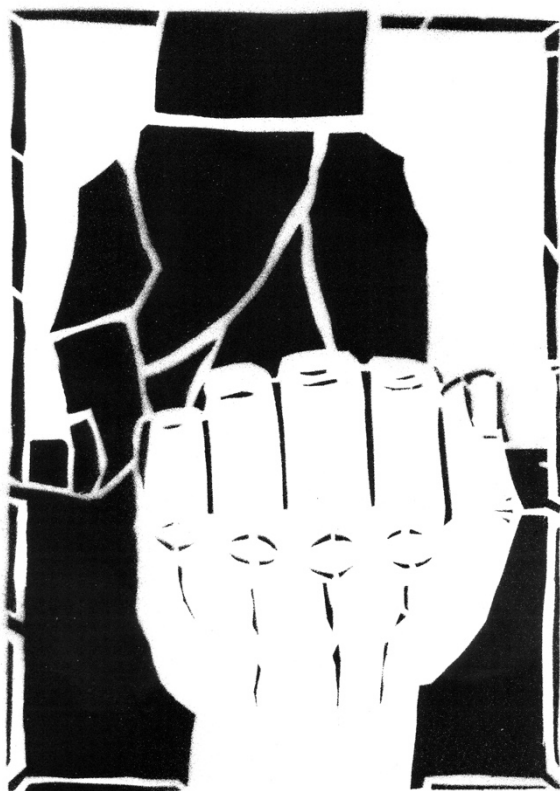


RADICAL TEACHER

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Ethical Considerations on Representing Slavery in Curriculum

by Bennett Brazelton



"UNITY" BY COLIN MATTHES VIA JUST SEEDS

They burned all the documents, Ursa, but they didn't burn what they put in their minds. We got to burn out what they put in our minds, like you burn out a wound. Except we got to keep what we need to bear witness. That scar that's left to bear witness. We got to keep it as visible as our blood.

- Gail Jones, *Corregidora*

Slavery here is a ghost, both the past and the living presence; and the problem of historical representation is how to represent the ghost.

- Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*

This is not a story to pass on.

- Toni Morrison, *Beloved*

The circulation of media depicting anti-Black violence and murder have become something of a cultural fixture in recent years. On the one hand, this imagery has forced many to recognize the four-centuries-old fact of racial violence. Yet on the other, there seems to be an ease and comfort with which videos of police and extra-legal white supremacist violence are disseminated, digested, and forgotten. In this cultural context, many have begun to question the ways in which (racial) violence is represented, as well as the risk that representing violence may in fact (re)traumatize those surviving under the heel of an empire. From activist spaces to the classroom, the challenge is not just to resist racism, but to represent violence in ways that do not reinforce the same dehumanization as in the initial instance. In other words, one must balance the imperative for *truth* (however violent it may be) with an ethical question of representation; this is particularly true, I argue, in teaching Trans-Atlantic slavery.

The history of slavery bears heavily in its "afterlife" (Hartman, 2006); the question Trouillot (1995) raises of representing the ghost of slavery in spite of its living presence should be of deep concern for critical educators attempting to grapple with and diffuse this history. In other words, the legacy of slavery is by no means something that is past us but rather something that pervades our present social/political/economic reality. The maintenance of these ongoing structures of exploitation depends upon "a refusal to remember" (Graff, 2014, p. 181) the atrocities of slavery, and thus decontextualize contemporary oppression. Thus, slavery is so often addressed in terms of minimization, justification, or denial (Greenlee, 2019; Murray, 2018). This is evident in the landmark examinations of slavery, which set the tone for following historiographies: Ulrich Bonnell Phillips (1918) wrote the first and most widely received of these, which essentially took up Lost Cause propaganda of the former Confederacy and argued as an apologist paean of chattel slavery. Stanley Elkins (1959) revived and broadly popularized this myth of paternalism—that enslaved people functioned as child-like dependents.

The history classroom refracts and reflects dominant historiographical tendencies: consequently, the presence of paternalist mythology is not uncommon in classrooms today. Even if slavery is not discussed on apologist terms, the general tendency to totally dissociate the history of slavery from present conditions of oppression persists, thereby severing a crucial analytic for understanding contemporary racism. This kind of narration may also build triumphant narratives of how Abraham Lincoln (or even U.S. society) eradicated slavery and preserved liberty; or how racism is an unfortunate and anomalous artifact in the otherwise unblemished face of U.S. public life. This post-racial narration falls in the time-honored tradition of irresponsible (or even antagonistic) representations of race and Black people; this constitutes a kind of curricular violence—a reinscription of the same violent and racist ideology that underscores notions of Black inferiority. Throughout these narrations, the brutality of slavery is occluded and thus the historical context of contemporary oppression is concealed.

Many have responded to this historiography through calls for *truth* and *complexity* with verbiage like *face up to*, *confront*, and *reckon with*. This discourse includes valuable calls for reparations (Coates, 2014), truth and reconciliation commissions (Margarrell & Wesley, 2008; Reddock, 2017; Torpey, 2001), interrogating representation in museums and public spaces (Brooms, 2011; Levenson, 2014), memorializing the violence of slavery (Holpuch, 2019; Robertson, 2018), and—the subject of analysis here—reconfiguring the memory of slavery in public school curriculum (Anderson & Metzger, 2011; Araújo & Maeso, 2012; Sojoyner, 2016; Swartz, 1992). Yet inherent to this discourse are tragedy and violence—that is to say, one *reckons with* shame or injury. In many ways, the broader tendency to reclaim slavery as a site of brutality tends to produce (in schools) what Berry and Stovall (2013) describe as a "curriculum of tragedy"; that is to say, a particular narration in which Black suffering, pain, and trauma take the center stage. Calls for "truth" and narrations of brutality thus become interchangeable—photographs of lynchings, whippings, lurid descriptions of violence and rape, and graphic discussions of torture and control function as modes of capturing student interest.

Yet the focus on a hegemonic truth of Black suffering brings about a set of ethical questions: that is, what *truth* can or should be passed on? By ethics, I mean the responsibility of educators and historians to (1) the historical subjects represented in narratives of subjection and (2) the students to whom these narratives are diffused. These questions are particularly prescient given the increasing interest nationwide in Trauma-Informed education, and the potential for curriculum to aid or abet the social-emotional health of students (Cavanaugh, 2016; Crosby et Al., 2018; Morgan et Al., 2015). Thus, while these questions are broadly relevant and applicable in guiding historical research, policymaking, and activism, I focus explicitly on the history classroom.

Outside of educational scholarship, increasing attention has been paid, particularly following what Stephen Best (2011) calls "the archival turn", to the circulation of violent imagery and narrative for a variety of

reasons: the normalization and regularization of Black suffering (Sharpe, 2016); the spectacle of Black death (Brown, 2017; Hartman, 1997; Mirzoeff, 2017); the ethical ramifications for historical subjects (Hartman 2006, 2008); and the ontological consequences for Black people (past and present) in this unfolding history (Sharpe, 2016; Warren, 2018). The work of Saidiya Hartman and Christina Sharpe, in particular, offer insights into the historical and contemporary representation of slavery and race. As Hartman (2008) asks, "How does one revisit the scene of subjection without replicating the grammar of violence?" (p. 4). We might frame this question alternatively: how does one create a Trauma-Informed curriculum to teach about history that is, by its very nature, traumatic?

The ethical consideration which unfolds: how can a curriculum balance a commitment to truth without making Black suffering the normative and exclusive narration of Black life in the U.S.? The balance for critical educators: how can one describe, contextualize, and offer vocabulary for the lived conditions of oppression experienced by students, while recognizing their right to live as children, as unburdened as the world allows? The suggestions, questions, and considerations raised here are not limited to the history of slavery but apply generally to resonant histories of trauma; I take slavery as the focus due to its centrality in the foundation of U.S. society, the large role (however flawed) in social studies curriculum, its ongoing relevance to contemporary racialization, and the brilliant interventions already made within its study. I argue here that, while centering brutality in narrations of slavery is crucial to understanding contemporary oppression, incautious approaches reify and reproduce historical trauma upon students and historical subjects alike. In the final section, I outline a dialectical focus on slavery and violent struggles in opposition as a means of mediating this historical trauma. Rather than equating a totalizing brutality with objective truth, I argue that unearthing the subjectivity and agency of Black historical subjects produces a counterhistory to slavery—that is, an intersubjective knowledge out of the "scraps of the archive" (Hartman, 2008, p. 4). Such a pedagogical project is and must be radical: not only does it call focus to radical movements against capitalism, white supremacy, and domination, but it involves teaching in a way that both affirms Black life and every student's capacity for action.

Trauma in History, Traumatizing History

Atlantic slavery constitutes a "historical trauma." Though historians generally disambiguate cultural and historical trauma from the somatic and psychological, I find this distinction somewhat superfluous in this context. The "historical trauma" of slavery is constituted by violence of all forms and of the greatest severity. This historical trauma endures in large part due to the ongoing reproduction of white supremacy, as was constructed under plantation slavery: the economic and material gains of slavery largely reside with whites, unreturned to the descendants of the workers to whom they are owed (Coates, 2014; Feagin, 2004); there remains profound economic exploitation of people of color (Desmond, 2019); Black people are still

subject to routine violence with apparent impunity (Marshall, 2012); carceral structures, violent punishment, torture, still affect a massive incarcerated population (Davis, 2003; Gilmore, 2007); all that is to say, race remains almost as prescient a structure of power in slavery's afterlife as it ever has been (Bell, 1992). Slavery as historical trauma thus comes to describe a kind of zero degree of exploitation from which racial oppression unfolds. In this way, the historical experience of racial violence entangles with that of the contemporary lives of students, who face different but interrelated trauma. I take historical trauma, here, to include two primary dimensions: first, the trauma experienced by Afro-diasporic subjects in the unfolding aftermath of slavery (the students); second, the trauma experienced by those enslaved people who become the objects of study/curriculum (the enslaved historical subjects). Different but intertwined ethical questions emerge when considering each.

Students

If the objective of critical educators is to develop "the ability of students to engage in the shaping and making of decisions about our shared world" (López, 2020, p. 17), then offering context, history, and vocabulary so that students can better understand their lived experiences and thus become actional is of the utmost importance for educators working to dismantle oppression. Freire articulated this context as a fundamental aspect of critical pedagogy; "reading the world," as he called it, enables students to develop and deepen vocabulary describing their lived experiences (Macedo & Freire, 1987). From this point of knowledge, students are able to become efficiently actional in upending structures of oppression (Freire, 1970/2014). Freire thus articulated an existentialist pedagogy which places experience, agency, and becoming actional at the center of education. Consciousness and context are thus necessary requisites to action within racial struggles from Frantz Fanon (Burman, 2018) to W.E.B. Du Bois (Aptheker, 1973) to the Black Panther Party (Bloom & Martin, 2013).

Key to a Freirean method of "conscientization" is dialogue—a deconstructed, mutual, and consensual relationship between teacher and student; however, this is rarely the reality in schooling. As Ann Arnett Ferguson (2000) writes, "The work of school is compulsory labor: children must, by law, attend school. They have no control over the materials they work with, what they produce, the nature of the rewards for their exertions and performance" (p. 165). As many other scholars have demonstrated, schooling largely functions as "a system that rewards order and rote compliance with whatever authority delivers as instruction" (Stovall, 2016, p. 1). The violence exercised against children of color held captive in these spaces is coercive by nature, and it can constitute a form of trauma (Adams, 1995; Dumas, 2016; Kruegger-Henney, 2019; Sojoyner, 2016; Vaught, 2017). I do not argue that schooling is unredeemable or poses no possibility of rupture or resistance; however, the already coercive context can reproduce a traumatic history as trauma for children (very much in the present) (Brazelton & López, forthcoming).

When a dialogic process is neither encouraged, desired, nor allowed in curriculum development and pedagogy, abusive practices can still be justified through the rhetoric of truth, complexity, and context. Certain methods of social studies instruction--when used in the context of historical trauma--risk replicating these violent encounters. Despite arguments to the contrary (Kros, 2017), historical reenactment and simulation as a teaching strategy is particularly fraught. One should not need to recount the horror stories--teachers in blackface (Gutierrez, 2018; White, 2019), Black students treated as slaves (Lockhart, 2019; Mahbubani, 2020), white students as masters (Holley, 2017), offensive school plays (Bery, 2014; Branigin, 2017)--to understand that the simulation of this violence does not develop consciousness and context so much as underscore the violability of Black youth. (1) In this way, even supposed attempts at developing "critical consciousness" (Freire, 1973) can risk reanimating and recreating historical instantiations of violence. The extent to which simulations of slavery are used in classrooms prompted a report from the Southern Poverty Law Center (2018) that cautioned against their use while lambasting teaching methods and state standards on the whole.

There is an inherent ethical issue, I would argue, in asking students of color to imagine themselves as slaves or masters; there is a related issue in asking white children to do the same thing. In each of these instances, slavery is necessarily reimagined and reinterpreted; the intention is to capture the affective dimension of slavery (i.e., what did it *feel like* to be a slave?); thus violence may be rematerialized as students are made to imagine themselves as victims or perpetrators of such profound violence. For white students, as Bery (2014) demonstrates, imagining oneself in this capacity does not always entail critical reflection or consciousness--in fact, asking a student to imagine *themselves* in slavery suggests that slavery is imaginable, and thus limits (rather than expands) the domain of knowledge and consciousness. (2)

Beyond reenactment, some teachers interpret the development of consciousness as the circulation of narratives of unfiltered obscenity and violence without regard for age or audience. This was the case of a student teacher in Tennessee who asked fourth-graders to recite graphic and violent descriptions of slave control from the famous and apocryphal William Lynch speech (Li, 2020). The intention, ironically, was to develop awareness of slavery as an historical atrocity; yet interviews with those involved showed that it only served to alienate and disturb Black students. The affective dimensions of this history are too great to ignore, and the manner in which this history is diffused (if it is to be taught at all) surely matters a great deal. This instance is merely an extreme example of daily practice visible in classrooms all across the country. Invocations of brutality, shocking photographs, disturbing anecdotes are all deployed to capture and hold student attention. In the teaching of traumatic histories, violence often becomes instructive and its reinstatement serves as curriculum. The example in Tennessee evidences an attempt at historical consciousness-building when dialogue and mutual understanding is absent--it is clear enough that in each instance of reenactment or circulating graphic

content, little attention is paid to the affective dimensions of student learning.

The mere recitation of slavery's brutal "truths" can constitute a traumatizing (or retraumatizing) experience for students living in slavery's afterlife. As Gordon Lewis (2013) explains, the integrity of the slave system in the Caribbean was maintained by a constant threat (or enactment) of "terror"--that is to say, the violence used to coerce enslaved people needed to constantly contain a dimension of surprise and shock. If this violence would startle those already attuned to the lived conditions of enslavement--one only needs to look at the archives of Caribbean slavery for descriptions of this brutality (Harris, 2017)--how is it to be understood by children? The recantation of brutal histories in classroom settings may remanifest the physical/psychological/sexual trauma of enslaved subjects as psychosomatic trauma for students in the present. My contention is not just that these methods of instruction are without merit, but that they may constitute a violent encounter (not equal but) related to the history itself, and that such an ethical dilemma must be taken seriously.

Historical Subjects

To move beyond these violent instantiations in curriculum, to suppose a fully dialogic and consensual encounter between a teacher and student, a complicated encounter between the student and subject emerges. That is, as students identify with and as historical subjects, there is a kind of slippage between the two, whereby students may identify themselves in historical narratives. When the social studies curriculum is constrained solely to the discussion of Black suffering without an emphasis on agency (as discussed in the following section), the history of slavery comes to form something of an epistemological trap--that is, knowledge of slavery appears to only reveal a historical connection to suffering rather than freedom. We might then pose the question: how does one represent the fact of Black humanity working from an archive that denies its existence? The imperative then becomes writing history against or in spite of (rather than from) the historical archive.

Hartman (2008) puts this contradiction succinctly, asking "how does one rewrite the chronicle of a death foretold and anticipated, as a collective biography of dead subjects, as a counter-history of the human, as the practice of freedom?" (p. 3). "Rewrite" should not be taken to mean a totally subjective rendering of history, so much as a rejection of Euromodern subjectivity which has predominated the archive. The imperative to recover Black agency/humanity should be read instead as a move toward an *intersubjective* approach to history. Hartman's intervention deals with the interpretation of the facts as laid out in the archive, as well as how/if they are reproduced. To this latter point, the epigraphs--written by Gayl Jones and Toni Morrison, respectively--offer two apparently contradicting ethics regarding the circulation of the violence of slavery.

Jones's (1975) book, *Corregidora*, tells of a blues singer named Ursa who experiences and survives routine sexual and physical violence. Ursa's present is intimately linked with slavery, just as the sexual violence she experiences resonates with that of her grandmother and great-grandmother, both of whom faced rape and incest at the hands of the Brazilian plantation owner, Old Corregidora (from whom they take their surname). Ursa's matrilineal line holds that the only possible thing to be done in the wake of this violence is to "bear witness." While the official records may be erased, the memory of it cannot be, and it is necessary to hold and pass on as an act of justice to the women who survived.

Morrison (1987) offers an opposite ethic in the final chapter of *Beloved*. The novel focuses on Sethe, a fugitive from slavery who kills her baby daughter so as to prevent her reenslavement; Sethe's other children abandon her following this, and she is believed to have gone mad. Morrison's text, which focuses on Sethe's recollection, guilt, and survival, seems to suggest that some violence is too deep to heal from, some stories too terrible to hear. Édouard Glissant (1997) articulates this concept as a "right to opacity" (p. 194); that is, a right to privacy, ambiguity, and confidentiality that is owed to historical subjects. While the fact of publication makes clear Morrison's intention to share this narrative, her writing suggests an ethic of care and restraint. Much like Jones, the engagement with the past is cautious, careful, and powerfully aware of the depths of its misery: "we got to keep what we need to bear witness"; "this is not a story to pass on."

While the humanity of Afro-diasporic people should not be reduced by or defined in terms of death or suffering, encountering traumatic histories like slavery incurs a kind of emotional labor. Sharpe (2016) frames the affective dimension of (living in) this history as "the wake": that is, the wake of a (slave) ship and the keeping watch with the dead. A component of Sharpe's formulation of life "in the wake" is "wake work," an analytic of care that is distinct from but responsive to mourning and melancholia. "Wake work" heeds the call of M. NourbeSe Philip (2008): "defend the dead." These affective moves involve bearing witness as well as a refusal to pass on certain stories in certain ways. An example of this is Hartman's (1997) celebrated opening to *Scenes of Subjection*, in which she refuses to reproduce Frederick Douglass's account of the rape of Aunt Hester "in order to call attention to the ease with which such scenes are usually reiterated" (p. 3). In this way, wake work might be thought of as labor of (celebration, mourning, eulogizing, fact-finding) performed by the living on behalf of the dead.

If "wake work" constitutes a kind of labor, we might join this hermeneutic with the development of critical consciousness: what kind of "wake work" should be expected of children, and by whom? Who should be expected to bear witness and in what capacity? The question of age, maturity, and affect must certainly alter this equation. Though, following Hartman's analysis, I choose not to reproduce (even textual descriptions of) atrocities through and after slavery here, the violence of slavery generates another destructive encounter in its recitation. Should children learn about Derby's Dose?

Should they learn what happened to Nat Turner *after* the revolt? Aunt Hester? Hazel Turner? The *Zong*? At what age ought it become routine knowledge? At what point does the grotesquery of violence trespass into that which should not be circulated? At what point does one bear witness or refuse to pass on the story? And in what detail?

Sharpe makes clear that life in the wake is not constituted by a voluntary engagement with grief and mourning. This "wake work" or "black care" (Warren, 2016) is not something voluntary or "curricular"—it is not an assignment that agents of the state can distribute, collect, and evaluate. Rather, it is an affective labor that may accompany the process of discovering and bearing witness to traumatic histories. It is a necessary point of consideration for educators dedicated to critical consciousness and student wellbeing. These parallel (and perpendicular) ethics must be held at once: defending students from the violence of history; giving context so that they may become actional and defend themselves; the work of bearing witness and defending the dead; recognizing the right of opacity owed to victims of slavery. My intention is not to resolve these contradictions, so much as raise them—to complicate the ease with which we equate "slavery's truths" with "black suffering." In the following section, I offer affective interventions which may mediate some of these tensions as they emerge in the classroom.

Retrospective Revenge, Becoming Actional

If the teaching of certain histories might best be described as traumatic, then a Trauma-Informed approach to curriculum is necessary. My argument is not that images or narratives depicting brutality or coercion should be silenced, but that educators must think deeply before choosing *how* traumatic histories ought to be represented. Thus the *modus operandi* for teaching these histories must involve affective dimensions of mediation and coping. There is broad consensus that control and safety are necessary preconditions to any kind of healing from trauma. Yet how can we provide control and safety when teaching about events that have already happened? Moreover, how can contemporary subjects claim control over historical trauma when violence is continually reproduced through contemporary racialization? Here I suggest affective interventions that do not rewrite traumatic histories but offer frameworks to reorient them such that agency and control can be recuperated.

Authors in visual studies, cultural studies, and Black Feminist Theory, particularly citing the work of Hartman and Hortense Spillers (1983), have made especially valuable contributions concerning to this end. Critical works regarding the role of sight and sound in the circulation and reproduction of racial violence include Simone Browne (2015), Fred Moten (2003), Alexander Weheliye (2005), Kimberly Juanita Brown (2015), and Tina Campt (2017), in addition to Hartman and Sharpe. While I do not go into great detail regarding these analytical interventions here, I include their work as a means of highlighting potential

directions for considering traumatic histories within curriculum studies.

These authors demonstrate methods of representing the past (and present) in more humanizing ways. Camp (2017), for instance, expands the boundaries of what can be considered 'curricular' through an incisive method of "listening to" everyday photographs of Afro-diasporic peoples. Sharpe (2018) discusses a method of "black redaction" and "black annotation" by which the optics of an archive can be reoriented through perspective shifts; she, for instance, crops coerced photographs of enslaved subjects to just the eyes, unearthing an entirely different affective register through which the pictures can be understood. Brown (2018) put "black redaction" into practice while discussing the ethics of reproducing photographs of lynchings--she suggested removing the mutilated body from the frame and focusing instead on the white onlookers. All of these intervening methods share two objectives: first, they attempt to deemphasize the zero degree narrative of Black suffering; second, they highlight Black people as agents--rather than objects--in history. This is accomplished by highlighting the interiority of Black life, or that which is not immediately visible within the archive as it is normatively constructed. Not only do these historical methods unearth previously invisible interpretive registers, but they also reflect a coping process of revisiting and attempting to restructure trauma to afford some measure of comfort or control for historical subjects and onlookers. The reclamation of Black interiority and humanity is one such intervention against the totalizing dehumanization of chattel slavery.(3)

This reclamation also deepens our understanding of historical truth. If the archive has centered the voices of white observers, if those archives were assembled by white people, and if histories were subsequently written by white historians, then to understand Black history requires a kind of epistemological resistance to the archive itself. Archival history has relied upon a self-conceived notion of 'objectivity'--that is, fidelity to the historical record. These authors confront the question of narrating a historical record which is created to dehumanize Black people. Much can be learned from the brutality, erasure, violence, and narcissism of slavery's archives--yet to access Black subjectivity requires deeply creative and interpretive methods of perception. The replacement of overdetermined and objective "History" with an intersubjective understanding of the past (as it relates to and unfolds into the present) demands centering Black life and actors in historical representation. Put another way, by abandoning a contractual relationship with the archive as an objective set of facts and focusing instead on the lives that are excluded or marginalized, historical consciousness may be deepened. This could be framed in the contrapositive as well: by seeking Black life, one encounters truth; by seeking truth, one encounters Black life.

The converse of fabulatory methods, reading history *accurately* thus centers Black agency; as Moten (2003) writes, "The history of blackness is testament to the fact that objects can and do resist" (p. 1). Beyond interiority, agency suggests the capacity to make decisions and act independently. Agency is a necessary aspect of healing

from or coping with trauma as it allows for the reclamation of one's own body and self. This is especially pertinent in the context of slavery, wherein enslaved people were fully alienated from possession of their own bodies, which became chattel. The philosopher, psychiatrist, and revolutionary Frantz Fanon (1963) wrote, however, that the colonial subject, "never stops achieving his freedom from nine in the evening until six in the morning" (p. 52). Historians have tended to erase this agency and resistance (Roberts, 2015; Trouillot, 1995), in spite of its ubiquity: fugitivity, marronage, revolts, sabotage, absconding, feigning illness, poisonings, insurrection, arson, and revolution were all present in varying degrees of frequency. The famous "general strike" thesis is one such intervention: W.E.B. Du Bois (1935) soundly demonstrated that it was not the North that freed enslaved people, but that they freed themselves through mass resistance and flight--what he termed "the general strike."

If slavery as an object of curriculum can produce a psychological transference for students experiencing descendant conditions of oppression, then action on the part of the enslaved must similarly figure into the curriculum such that students may identify their own capacity to act.

For Fanon, the capacity for action was central to liberation. He wrote, "To educate man to be actional, preserving in all his relations his respect for the basic values that constitute a human world, is the prime task of him who, having taken thought, prepares to act" (Fanon, 1952, p. 222). The dialectic of decolonial action and liberation in Fanon's work proceeds from this point of realizing what he calls "actionality" (Burman, 2018). If slavery as an object of curriculum can produce a psychological transference for students experiencing descendant conditions of oppression, then action on the part of the enslaved must similarly figure into the curriculum such that students may identify their own capacity to act. As Erica Burman (2018) writes, "An act transforms symbolic coordinates; it does not simply effect changed conditions, but also how we understand the limits to those conditions" (p. 30). Given the conceptual slippage between student and subject, an *historical* act transforms the interpretive limits of *contemporary* conditions.

Fanon was specific in disambiguating different forms of action. He argued that violence against colonialism was a psychological necessity for the colonial subject: "At the level of individuals, violence is a cleansing force. It frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect" (Fanon, 1963, p. 94). For Fanon, any action that seeks to radically transform the world will be seen as inherently violent, thus his understanding of violence exceeds the iconography of armed militant struggle. However, in Fanon's anticolonial dialectic, *physical* violence occupied a central role in the reclamation of colonized humanity; put another way, Fanon understood a

prerequisite to liberation and decolonization as “the violent violation of the colonizer” (Roberts, 2004, p. 142).

Similarly, psychological researchers writing on healing from trauma have underscored the important dimension of “revenge fantasy” as an important method through which victims can start to reclaim agency: Gäbler and Maercker (2011) write, “In the context of coping and restoration of self-concept and self-worth, it seems that revenge emotions and cognitions can be regarded as useful reactions to trauma that positively impact the mental processes triggered by injury and suffering” (p. 45-46). Revenge, in the psychological sense, entails a dimension of retribution through which agency can be visualized and reclaimed. Following this, I suggest that special attention be given to anticolonial violence as a mediating dimension of trauma response.

I characterize revenge, here, as a psychological process whereby selfhood can be reclaimed through material/physical resistance; this includes, for the purposes of this discussion, actions that were not necessarily motivated primarily by a desire to pay back the violence of slavery, but still serve that affective purpose in their retrospective and symbolic reconstruction. Actions such as Nat Turner’s Revolution, Stono, the burning of Old Montreal, and the Haitian Revolution were primarily motivated by liberation (rather than a desire to ‘get even’), however they satisfy the generative demands of revenge in retrospective narration. Marilyn Ivy (1995) argues that “events” are only determined as such through their recollection: “The second event—when the originary moment emerges as an event to consciousness—is thus the first instance” (p. 22). In this way, revenge (in an affective and historiographical sense) involves those historical moments which are imbued with anticolonial retribution (in this case, violence against slaveholders); that which disrupted or resisted the violence of slavery may, in its recollection and reconstruction, serve as repayment. This serves an important role in mediating the instantiation of historical trauma; actions which claim agency clearly and violently offer an escape route to the closed loop of traumatic histories.

The immediate implications for curriculum studies would involve placing a greater emphasis on actions which involve an affective dimension of retrospective revenge against the slave system. What actions would qualify under this framework should be determined through its capacity to afford the catharsis of anticolonial vengeance. Shipboard insurrections like the *Amistad* and *Creole* should be alongside the Middle Passage (Rediker, 2013; Taylor, 2009); the arrival of enslaved Africans in 1619 should be preceded by the revolt at San Miguel de Gualdape in 1526 (Maura, 2011); statistics of sugar plantation death rates should be balanced with the *quilombos*, maroons, and *palenques* which harassed the slave system (Price, 1973); the profits of cotton plantations must be balanced with the daily sabotage and disruptions (Cartwright, 1851). By focusing on the actions of enslaved people which were felt and feared by slaveholders, a route for positive transference is opened such that students can understand their own capacity for action. That is to say, in reorienting

the *limits* of action during slavery, its wake becomes visibly susceptible to rupture and destruction. (4)

In my practice as a teacher, this involves very intentionally centering Black resistance and organization when teaching traumatic histories. When teaching the Red Summer of 1919, I encourage students to investigate articles in magazines like *The Messenger* and *The Crusader*. In the editorial, “How to Stop Lynching,” A. Philip Randolph (1919) argued for Black self-defense as an effective means of interdicting lynch mobs: “A mob of a thousand men knows it can beat down fifty Negroes, but when those fifty Negroes rain fire and shot and shell over the thousand, the whole group of cowards will be put to fight” (9). Not only does this wrest agency from white violators to Black communities, the student-driven inquiry (the actual process of investigation) gives students control and agency in their own learning.

The desire to retrospectively construct or emphasize retributive justice risks obscuring the social and political coordinates of enslaved people; that is to say, one might walk away thinking that ending slavery was well within the capacity of the enslaved, and therefore continuing conditions of oppression would become a choice. Afropessimists like Wilderson (2010), Sexton (2017), and Warren go so far as to disavow the agency of Black subjects in the present and past, opting to depict racism as an immutable and ontological death experienced by Black people. Warren (2018) suggests an indictment of action, opting instead for a nihilist critique. The Afropessimists draw important conclusions. However, the justification for a wholesale critique of actionality comes from selective and myopic citations of Fanon’s (1952) arguments in his chapter, “The Fact of Blackness.” Beyond confusing Fanon’s existential and relational claims for ontological and immutable ones, they interestingly choose to ignore the central role of action in Fanon’s philosophy. While educators emphasizing affective dimensions of action and revenge should be careful to discourage presentist and revisionist ideologies (i.e., “if I were there, I would have...”) or claims that racial violence is within the capacity of enslaved subjects to end (i.e., “slavery was a choice”), highlighting the capacity for action should still be a critical dimension of consciousness-building. In this way, the intersubjective truth and centrality of Black resistance to slavery is essential to developing actionality in the present.

Toward Ethical Representation

The resonance of racial trauma in contemporary public life demands attention within social studies curriculum as these questions are continually refreshed by the ongoing spectacle of police and white supremacist violence. How the “the ghost” of slavery is portrayed matters greatly in surviving and resisting racial violence. Calls for “truth” and “complexity” which depict the true brutality of slavery are critical responses to the overwhelming silence of paternalist, Lost Cause, or apologist historiographies. Yet staking out “truth” as a curricular territory is implicitly preceded by another set of questions: whose truth? According to what sources? Who made the sources? What determines the “whole” truth? At what point does detail

become extraneous? More importantly, at what point does the recitation of history reproduce historical trauma in the present? How does the emotional maturity of a student determine what "truth" is appropriate? Who decides? How does one balance a student's right to remain unburdened by the past with the necessity of providing vocabulary to understand contemporary conditions of oppression? How does one balance the importance of understanding and bearing witness to historical atrocities with the "right to opacity"--that is, the privacy owed to historical subjects in their darkest moments?

The call, then, is for *ethical* representation of slavery's ghost and enduring afterlives within educational spaces; that is, a process of learning which recognizes and acts upon the mutual responsibility between educator, student, and historical subject. Without upholding these obligations, educators risk reproducing or triggering trauma for students who already live under conditions of unfreedom, violence, and oppression. A Trauma-Informed approach, then, demands special attention be given to the affective dimensions of student learning. In addition to only briefly highlighting affective interventions building from other fields of visual studies and Black Feminist Theory, I argue that "revenge" is a critical dimension of Trauma-Informed pedagogy. For students who live under conditions of ongoing racial violence and control, the seemingly immutable history of racial violence constitutes a kind of epistemological trap; offering routes of departure from these closed narratives involves highlighting the actional capacity of historical subjects, and historical instances where vengeance is realized. Following Fanon's dialectic of "actionality," this violence against oppression comes into focus as a critical dimension of student learning, whereby their own capacity for action can be seen in historical context. While overemphasizing the capacity for violent action risks obfuscating the social and political coordinates of enslaved subjects, I argue that this remains an important intervention in social studies curriculum.

Notes

1. One student of mine shared with me that her fifth grade teacher, in order to teach about the slave trade, had all of the students lie under their desks. The teacher then turned off the lights and proceeded to spritz water on the kids from a spray bottle. My student told me that she repaid that lesson by trying (and at times succeeding) to make her teacher cry at every available opportunity.
2. I would like to clarify, here, what 'imagination' entails in this point. 'Imagining' the brutality of slavery (as to form a mental image) is something that all historians do as a necessary process of understanding the conditions, geographies, etc. of a particular subject. This might further entail empathetic approaches to history, such as attempting to imagine what one might have felt under certain historical conditions. This is distinct, as I see it, from imagining oneself as enslaved, thereby displacing the actual historical subject and learning from self-conceived 'experiential' knowledge. While conditions of unfreedom related to or even comparable to slavery persist in the United States, to claim experiential knowledge of slavery (as these simulations attempt to provide) by displacing historical subjects limits the potential for an empathetic relationship with historical subjects/the archive. Hartman (1997) makes this point clearly.
3. I argue (against many historians) that historical omission or redaction can be an important dimension in narrating more humanizing histories. While there is no set rule about when omission becomes necessary or even desirable, there is a simple litmus test that historians so often fail to use when representing Black life: does the reproduction/narration do justice to the victim of violence? This is just as true for victims of police brutality--is it ethical to circulate someone's dying moments? What does it do for them? Would they have wanted that? Oftentimes this question remains opaque and open to interpretation; other times it is more clear. Emmett Till's mother, for instance, wanted the world to see the reality of racial violence; this is the case for many graphic narratives of slavery and brutality, which are produced for a specific purpose. In other cases, the instance of fact collection (such as body camera footage) is nonconsensual; therefore the circulation of the imagery may further violate the right to privacy and opacity owed to diasporic subjects. Refusing to reproduce certain images, details, or aspects of narratives (such as Hartman's treatment of the rape of Aunt Hester) can better call attention to Black humanity by highlighting that very right to privacy.
4. Fiction presents another domain through which lines of revenge can be accessed. Dave Chappelle's skit, "The Time Haters," demonstrates an absurdist approach to depicting slavery; as the character "Silky Johnson," Chappelle travels back in time to visit a plantation, only to insult and shoot the slaveholder. The skit was cut as, according to Chappelle, "Apparently shooting a slave master isn't funny to anybody but [...] If I could I'd do it every episode." Other examples, more serious than Chappelle's, that represent this retrospective revenge include Colson Whitehead's (2016) *The Underground Railroad*, Octavia Butler's (1979) *Kindred*, Fred D'Aguiar's (1997) *Feeding the Ghosts*, Herman Melville's *Benito Cereno* (1855/2008), M. NourbeSe Philip's (2008) *Zong!*, John Keene's (2015) *Counternarratives*, and Dionne Brand's (1999) *At the Full and Change of the Moon*. Fiction cannot stand in for historical analysis, but it can supplement the archive in providing the affective release of revenge.

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