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HORTENSE SPILLERS

In the 21st chapter of William Wells Brown's *Clotel, or the President's Daughter*, published in London in 1853,[1] the reader is suddenly confronted with what appears to be an out-of-text experience, a stunning interruption that breaks in on the continuity of the novel's plot-line. For one thing, the spatio-temporal referents of the narrative at hand mark a radical departure from the story of Currer and her two daughters Clotel and Althesa, who are the illegitimate issue of a fictional character named 'Thomas Jefferson' modelled on the historical personage of the same name. The events of the novel, though Brown is said to have taken considerable licence with the historical chronology of *Clotel*, unfold roughly between the 1830s and the 1850s, but the intervening text places its events over two centuries earlier, in juxtaposing 'one little solitary, tempest-tost and weather-beaten ship', the *Mayflower*, and 'a low rakish ship hastening from the tropics, solitary and alone, to the New World', 'on the last day of November, 1620, on the confines of the Grand Bank of Newfoundland', nearly a continent's span away from the mid-Atlantic setting of the Virginia/Washington, D.C. area of what will become the United States. Furthermore, the visual perspective of the scene is so skewed that the logic of it exceeds even fictional treatment in its glance toward the world of dreams, as we are commanded to 'look far in the South-east' at the second vessel, speeding to convergence with the first. In short, an avatar of the *Mayflower* is entering the same waters and navigating toward the same destination as an avatar of a slave ship; both vessels are in sight of the New World, and both of them are negotiating passage through a transatlantic crossways. The privileged angle of vision is the reader's.

What the author is 'choreographing' in this scene, long before an explanatory critical economy for 'problem' fiction is available to readers, is nothing short of an allegory of slavery and freedom. The oppositional rhetorical and imagistic moves that the scene elaborates instruct us in its meaning, for which the tale proper is only a flash of recognition: 'These ships are the representation of good and evil in the New World, even to our day.' It is clear that this Manichean rendering of opposing forces suggests that we recognize the lineaments of freedom only in its radical contrast to the lineaments of slavery. In that regard, slavery is not so much the 'other' of freedom but, rather, becomes the invisible portion of its field of vision.

This essay probes the relationship between 'public' and 'private' spheres of interest, the erotic and the political, the free and the enslaved, on the dangerous borderline between the 'citizen' and the 'other'. The 'conversation' that we wish to stage here takes place in a zone of the impossible, which signals, for precisely that reason, the historical possibility that revolution dared to imagine in the very teeth of enslavement. Making use of a paradoxical moment as a paradigmatic example to think with, we foreground the liaison of the story of Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson, in history and in fiction, that commences in 1787, or, more generally speaking, in the era of the republican formation of the United States, the modern French state and the advent of the Haitian Republic. What was occurring on the intimate and erotic ground of birth and death, where Sally Hemings and all her children are located, ought to have been reflected and replicated in the political arena of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Declaration of Independence, wherein the heroic stature of Thomas Jefferson is fixed. But these registers of the human remain strangely discordant and misrecognized from one to the other, and, in such violent discordance, the modern world is birthed in fear and crisis. To this day, the latter is still vivid in the mind's eye as the border between 'free' and 'unfree' continues to shift across the bodies of the world's peoples.

Whether we are addressing the dilemma of undocumented cadres of the South, from the Horn of Africa to Latin America, or refugees in flight from tyrannical regimes across the developing

world, the one clear narrative thread that claims our attention here is the condition of 'homelessness' of subjects displaced by inhuman forces, as lethal now as they were more than a half century ago when Hannah Arendt described the 'statelessness' engendered in the ruins of World War II. But in a very real sense, the forced march of many thousands, seeking life anew, or simply to stay alive, is one of the oldest of human tragedies, of which the archives of freedom and slavery are a special case in point. The enmassification of the movement from slavery to freedom, in its multiplicity and variety, puts the modern state and our attention to it in motion.

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II

The movement of the problematic before us begins several centuries before William Wells Brown, a former American slave himself, sets pen to paper; but, interestingly, the long arc of history that we trace in the transatlantic African slave trade that opens toward Europe in the mid-15th century in commercial transactions between African and Portuguese operatives only projects personalities *as* and *in* an act of writing. From that point of view, literature and history are not the fictional and non-fictional vocations that stand at odds with one another, but are, rather, conjoined at the hip in a single body of narrative motivation that lends a name and a countenance to the legends of commodities, to the activities of profit margins and markets that are conducted over the heads of human flesh rendered inert by economic rationalization and abstraction. Quite simply, when we call a name, follow a body through a material scene, examine motives, weigh an outcome, we enter irretrievably that human element whereby the reading 'I'/'eye' comes to command centre-stage. It might well have been me, a reader thinks, which thought gives him or her a stake in the plight of the fugitive, or in the category mistake that translated a human being into a *thing*.

Wells Brown, then, belongs to a visionary company that I would call, after African-Canadian writer Lawrence Hill, the

'book of names',[2] writings that first appear in the North American colonial experience of the mid-18th century, gain density in the 19th, when the contradictions between the new republican ambitions of a constitutional order and the sanctity of private property are dramatically highlighted, with figures like Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, Harriet Wilson, and William and Ellen Craft, and continue through the 20th and 21st centuries in the writings of Edward P. Jones, Charles Johnson, Toni Morrison, and Barbara Chase-Riboud, among others.[3] These writers contribute to the legitimacy of historical imagination brought to witness against injustice within plain sight of the law; in some cases, the injustice was itself enshrined in the law. But we must also attribute to them the *humanation* of the bonded, the tortured human flesh bereft of name, kin and culture, who inhabit the realm of the 'body in pain'. We also see in these works the occasion for transformation and redemption that render the eras of slavery a paradigmatic example of human becoming — from the most dreadful circumstances imaginable emerges a transformative event, so that the story of the enslaved is, in a very real sense, the story of Everyone, insofar as he or she must effect a breakthrough from the given to the possible, from a first or natural birth, to the breach of 'double consciousness'. Frederick Douglass sums up this vital movement in a notable chiasmic figure from his 1845 *Narrative*, when he relates his determination to put an end to torture directed against his person: 'You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man.'[4]

The novel that William Wells Brown writes is related fictitiously to the story of Sally Hemings through the historical record. Clotel, or the 'President's Daughter', is a fictional figure that Brown creates on the basis of subterranean gossip that is available to the public ear as early as the fall of 1802. Allegations of Thomas Jefferson's sexual liaison with Sally Hemings, a slave at Monticello, Virginia — one of Jefferson's plantations — 'were first publicly circulated' by one James Callender, a journalist writing for the Richmond (Virginia) *Recorder*.[5] The story appeared in the 1 September 1802 edition of the paper: 'It is well known,' Callender writes, 'that the man, whom it delighteth the people to honor, keeps and for many years has

kept, as his concubine, one of his slaves. Her name is Sally. . . . By this wench Sally, our president has had several children'.[6] As this episode is described by scholars, Callender did not only charge Jefferson 'with sexual immorality but also with having committed egregious crimes against the state and the nation'.[7] The early September story was followed by a sequel on 22 September, when Callender implied that Jefferson had fathered five children with Hemings and that if this example were repeated by every white man in the state of Virginia, the outcome would be 400,000 mulattoes in addition to the current number, which eventually would make the country no longer habitable until after civil war 'and a series of massacres'.[8] These stories swirled around for several months, but ended abruptly when their author, an alcoholic journalist, it was said, drowned in the James River later on, apparently in a drunken stupor. In any event, Jefferson, early on in his first term as the third president of the new nation when the gossip originally surfaced, won re-election to office quite handily in 1804, despite the rumours.

By the time Jefferson reached presidential office, he had served the young nation as ambassador to France during 1785–89 and, later on, after his return to the United States, as secretary of state. A widower since the death of his wife, Martha Wayles, in 1782, Jefferson was joined in the French capital during his embassy by his surviving daughters, Martha and Maria, both little girls then, accompanied by their ladies' maid, a very young Sally Hemings. Jefferson's ambassadorial duties, more precisely, his residence in France, lasted some 26 months. Sally Hemings not only remained in service to the family through Jefferson's French itinerary, but returned with them to Monticello and slavery in 1789. Barbara Chase-Riboud's 1979 novel *Sally Hemings* offers a fictional account of the Jefferson–Hemings liaison,[9] an account that also projects a vivid instance of age disparity, to say nothing of the other inequalities that scored the alleged union. Hemings was all of 14 years old at the time of her arrival in Paris — in today's terms, she would have been a legal minor, just as marriage between black and white in the state of Virginia would be illegal until the 1960s — while Jefferson himself was 44 years old. Furthermore, Sally Hemings

was, by blood, a half-sister of Jefferson's late wife, Martha Wayles, by virtue of the fact that Martha Wayles's father John had several children himself, one of whom was Sally Hemings, with his slave Elizabeth Hemings. Upon John Wayles's death, some of his human property was inherited by his daughter, who brought Sally's mother Elizabeth and her children by her father to Monticello. By the laws of *coverture*, the marriage contract 'incorporated the wife's person into that of her husband, making them one at law'.[10] According to the practice of coverture, 'the wife was not only bound to serve and obey the master of the household, she was also obliged to yield all she owned — her person, her body, her "being".'[11] Jefferson, then, by marital prerogative, inherited the Hemingses, who became intimately tied to the Jeffersons by blood and structurally merged with them according to the conduct of private property. Under such circumstances, Jefferson's mastership was unchallenged — if the stories were true, and today there is a good deal of evidence, circumstantial as well as genetic, that they were, then Jefferson was both father and owner of Hemings's children, and the owner of Hemings herself, so that, in theory, he was allowed to do with them as he willed.

These complex genealogical entanglements, which might strike some observers as much ado about nothing, come down through generations of Americans as an undeniable aspect of legacy. In the particular instance, it exposes Jefferson as a figure riddled with contradiction and ambivalence, which psychical and spiritual elements, I believe, pass right over into the national bloodstream as aspects of the nation's identity. In other words, 'race' has never ceased to play a vital role in the national imaginary both as an idea and as historical and material reality. Though the principle of caste was never formalized in the social order of the United States, a colour-based hierarchy emerges nevertheless in the slave regime, as in the case of Sally Hemings. Her mulatto-ness becomes a function of status or stature among the slave community of Monticello; as the narrative of Chase-Riboud's novel would have it, Sally Hemings inhabited a priority of status within the slave order because she was favoured by Jefferson and sexually 'off limits' to others as a result.

Though the fictional Sally Hemings has been accorded a great deal of renown and quite likely played a key role in reanimating interest some 30 years ago in the Jefferson–Hemings connection, the actual Hemings clan has captured the imagination of historians, who, since the late 1990s, have subjected the old gossip to systematic historiographical scrutiny. Annette Gordon-Reed's researches in this field have produced two important texts that lend credence to the conjecture that Jefferson fathered Sally Hemings's children.[12] Gordon-Reed's studies have garnered grudging recognition in some quarters and appreciation in others. But it is now generally conceded that the conclusions that she draws are highly plausible. Even before Gordon-Reed's projects, Fawn Brodie's 1974 *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History* chronicled sexual congress between Jefferson and Hemings.[13]

By the time that this toxic material seeps its way to the desk of William Wells Brown in the middle of the 19th century, the Jefferson–Hemings story is already old, recycled news that has not dried up. Robert Levine contends that the rumours persisted and that in the 1830s, anti-slavery British and American writers echoed the old charges.[14] In *Clotel* (the name that Brown assigns to the imagined Sally Hemings's daughter), the figure of the mother Currer soon cedes the fictional stage to her daughter, Clotel, whose story inhabits the major part of the novel. In the next century, Chase-Riboud returns to the maternal figure in her first novel of this historical episode,[15] and the character that she creates is an exquisitely beautiful, spirited figure whom we track from her teens to old age and the execution of Nat Turner in 1831. In the afterword to the 1994 reprint of *Sally Hemings*, Chase-Riboud tells us that the form she is making use of is that of the 'nineteenth century American Gothic novel',[16] 'whose very essence', she believes, 'is embedded in the American psyche'. The form is especially apt, goes the argument, for dealing with what Chase-Riboud calls 'our overweening and irrational obsession with race and color' in America.[17] Consequently, 19th century Romance 'has always served in America for . . . the metaphysics of race'.[18]

If the story of Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson can only grant the contemporary world access to its particular historicity

and to its structures of feeling, its grammars of sentiment, in the form of Romance (which posits a mystery at the heart of things), then I suppose we will have to make do with that. But one wonders what other imaginative alignments and forms of possibility might be available to creative writers, not excluding historians, in an effort to think their way back to the late 18th century, en route to the 19th and the seeds of modern revolution embedded in the complex birth of the state. My own interest in the Jefferson–Hemings entanglement, for all its erotic character, is much less fired by the personal angle than oriented toward its historical quiddity — that it occurs against the backdrop of radical change and that it provokes attention to itself precisely because it is charged with the rich reverberations of *publicness*, given Jefferson's status and representability, while it would itself remain submerged in the shadows of heroic, outsized doings. What is it about this tale, not at all unique in the annals of slavery, that vividly highlights all the contradictions of the 'peculiar institution' — its pretences to intimacy that directly close off the route to freedom and independent personhood? Actually, this tale is rather common, for all the aroma of scandal that hounds it, for its cross-racial traffic continues on the mainland of the United States from those interstitial spaces, created along the coastline of West Africa, that headquartered the early movement of the flow of goods from the continental African interior to the ships scheduled for the Middle Passage.[19] Finally, we might ask what the erotic here, which gains added interest because of its inter-racial and forbidden character, in express defiance of legislation designed to relegate activity of the sort to criminal and carceral constraint, might tell us about the era of its emergence and the forces that brought its still half-hidden elements to stand before us now.

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III

We know well that the leading descriptive feature of the eras of slavery was economic in the most pointed sense of the term — balance sheets and accounting procedures, gains, losses, and

profit margins in the flow of goods, etc. — while our most sustained focus on the phenomenon comes to rest in what Pierre Bourdieu might have called a 'general science of the economy of practices'.[20] In other words, the argument based on narrow economic considerations defines the enslaved as a 'species of property'. By contrast, the argument that seeks to mobilize an understanding of the position of the enslaved and of the world that 'unmakes' him as a culminative instance of a 'general science of the economy of practices' attempts to grasp the circumstance of the bonded as a *type* of historical subject/ivity. In both arguments, 'species of property' and 'type of historical subject/ivity', we recognize in their very naming the *ambivalence* of status that would prohibit the enslaved from standing in either as a pure or legible example of property, or as an untrammelled and unforeclosed instance of the subject of history, as the paradigmatic norms from which deviation might be gauged. The enslaved is already a categorical error, whose subject, then, begins his or her human odyssey in paradox, as a mark or an inscription of the catachrestic dilemma that would reconcile irreconcilable or incommensurate postures. The mind refuses the human as a version of objects, and even the mind that allows it suspects error; therefore the slaveholder's utter dread that one of these days . . . not only might there be, but by God, as Jefferson once trembled that He is just, there would *have* to come the moment when . . .

But it is also true that the Declaration of Independence, the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Constitution of the Haitian Republic,[21] in unfolding the drama of an *equality of men* and, in the French cases, of the *citizen*, all posit a historical subject/subjecthood unmarked by particularity, partiality, equivocation, hesitation, or any sort of 'typeness'. The abstraction of 'equality' in each of these transformative public gestures — could we say that they evince the creative force of the subjunctive, 'Let there be', and, therefore, conduce to producing something that was not there before? — creates all at once and ineluctably, it seems, a subject that we have not known before, even though we might call his name, insofar as he emerges by decree: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal' (the Declaration of Independence), or

'Law is the expression of the general will. Every citizen has a right to participate personally, or through his representative, in its foundation. It must be the same for all, whether it protects or punishes' (Article 6 of the Declaration of the Rights of Man), or yet, 'No other distinctions exist than those of virtues and talents, nor any other superiority than that granted by the law in the exercise of a public charge. The law is the same for all whether it punishes or protects' (from Title II of the Constitution of 1801, Haiti, Article 5, 'On Its Inhabitants').

In all three instances, particularity and modification are etiolated in a grand universal narrative of sameness and replication. By its lights, whatever the enslaved might be, crossed as he is by an ambivalence of bearing, will have to be decided apart from these untrammelled instances of judicial and political personality. As an *undecidable* — person or thing, or person-as-thing and vice versa — the enslaved would find it impossible that these documents or sentiments would refer to him or her; to seal the impossibility, which was, in truth, a measure of the level of anxiety created by the enslaved's shadowy, ghastly existence, differential laws were enacted, verse by verse, century by century, with the aim of excising doubt — no access to the contract, to trial by jury, to the benefit of the wage and the fruits of individual labour and initiative, the bar on literacy, and, most strikingly, the determination of the status of the newborn by the 'condition of the mother'. As we see it played out in the case of the Hemingses of Monticello, three generations of children born to enslaved women bore the mother's last name — Sally Hemings might have been a Wayles by patronymic courtesy, having been fathered by John Wayles, but, as if unilaterally engendered by the female parent, Sally will pass 'Hemings' along to her sons and daughters. In this instance, it is as if the name were a kind of ventriloquist mask or protective covering for an outcome that required concealment.

Sally Hemings was not emancipated during Jefferson's lifetime, though it has been pointed out that Jefferson left instructions for the manumission of his people after his death; it is reported that a couple of Sally's children did, indeed, 'stroll', or abscond, as in the case of Harriet Hemings. In William Wells Brown's *Clotel*, the story of Currer and her daughters opens with

the 'Negro sale', which we come upon after a rather lengthy disquisition on slavery and demography regarding the prevalence of inter-racial sexual commerce. In fact, the practice was so common by the 1850s that Brown could observe that 'in all the cities and towns of the slave states, the real Negro, or clear black, does not amount to more than one in every four of the slave population.'[22] Himself the child of such a union, Wells Brown wishes to elaborate on what he calls the 'degraded and immoral condition of the relation of master and slave in the United States of America'.[23] *Clotel* fulfils Brown's project sufficiently well, as it might be considered the first historical novel on the controversy, long before Chase-Riboud enters the lists, and advances, as well, the opening gambit of fiction writing by African-Americans.

The striking mimetic feature of Brown's *Clotel* and Chase-Riboud's *Sally Hemings* is their insistence on the intimacy of contact between master and slave; in fact, the characters of Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson so successfully stage a love story in Chase-Riboud's work that no trace of the violence of slavery's coercive regimes can be detected in the years that represent Jefferson's French embassy and the immediate aftermath. In that regard, Brown's project seems more proximate to the threat of whimsy and the dangers of vicissitude that must have characterized the master's relationship to his concubine and the attitudes of concubinage that apparently traversed the range of sentimental response, from brutality to the protective devices of surrogate marriage, if we could call it that. Hemings, the character, is accorded certain courtesies, for example, in *Sally Hemings*; among them, a degree of sophisticated indifference shown by the embassy staff to matters of the boudoir, whereas Brown's Currer and her daughters are subjected to the indignities of the auction block, despite the maternal figure's status as a 'housekeeper'. In short, the differences that prevailed between 'house Negroes' and 'field Negroes' mattered occasionally, even though the slave codes of the southern states made no distinction whatsoever with regard to caste, or skin colour, or proximity to the master class.

It could be said, then, that the *social distance* between the races made the location of the 'colour line' strikingly clear, while

the mulatto/a figure, falling athwart the difference, sustained no legally defined social identity, as, according to the law, no cognizance was taken of the mulatto/a. A Sally Hemings, for instance, was roughly analogous to white women, to all intents and purposes, insofar as she, like they, 'remained within households bound together by ties of affection'.[24] If white women, who embodied the concept of *sex* difference, gained 'no individual entitlements' in relationship to contract theory and practice, then their deficiency of judicial personality was predicated on the fact that they were 'a part of the family'.[25] This belonging is enough for Chase-Riboud's Sally: overlooking Marly, hand in hand with one of the world's most powerful men, Sally Hemings thinks this:

> How did it matter that he was master and I slave? That he loved me and risked much for me? That he took more space in the world than most men did, did not concern me, neither his fame nor his power. I cherished him.[26]

That Chase-Riboud's Sally incredibly chooses love over freedom — slavery was prohibited on French soil, and Sally's brother, James, attempts to prevail on her to escape Jefferson's clutches while there is still time — brings us to the heart of the matter and the central conundrum that I wish to pose concerning black women and state formation. In effect, black women, customarily and emphatically *not* the Sally Hemingses, can only broach the territory of citizenship status as members of a *race*, in the same way as their brethren; their entire historical apprenticeship as a result, is contextualized on the muddy ground that falls between sex/gender distinction on the one hand and race difference on the other, between the private realm and the erotic, on the one hand, that depends on sex/gender difference, and the public realm and the historical, on the other, that is predicated on race difference. The problematic is articulated starkly in chapter 23 of *Sally Hemings*. The character Nathan Langdon, a census-taker in Albemarle County, Virginia, becomes a 'Washington lawyer' in the course of the narrative. Having at one time fallen beneath the magical sway of Sally Hemings's vaunted charms, Langdon, years later, goes on a private mission to solve the puzzle of

Hemings by interviewing several people who have known her. Among them are the notorious Aaron Burr, tried for treason, John Quincy Adams, son of the second president of the United States and a future president himself, and artist John Trumbull, the famous painter of the US Founders, including Jefferson. In an attempt to find out whether or not Trumbull ever painted the young Sally Hemings, Langdon, paying the painter a visit in his studio, is determined to capture the impression of her for himself, explaining to his host that he actually wants the sketch for one of Sally's sons. The mission fails, as Trumbull rejects Langdon's solicitation, although he, in fact, has preserved several sketches of 'dashing Sally', which work he will tear to shreds after Langdon departs. But shortly before, the guest is treated to a patriotic little speech:

> Mr. Langdon, the greatest motive I had, or have, for engaging in or for continuing my pursuit of painting is the wish to commemorate the great events of our country's Revolution, to preserve and diffuse the memory of the noblest series of actions which have ever presented themselves in the history of man. This is an enormous responsibility, Mr. Langdon, and I carry it out to the best of my ability as an artist. *The history of private passions has no place in public history.*[27]

Though the world that we inhabit today has turned the wisdom of this fictional figure on its head, there is yet a vague echo of such practice as the truth of things; if not the truth, then certainly the desirable norm. In the annals of political theory, as historian J. G. A. Pocock sketches the impression points, the 'community of citizens' replaces the 'primitive culture of blood, guilt, and kinship' and adopts in its place deliberation within a circle of equals. Alongside deliberation, over and against 'an archaic tribal society of blood feuds and kinship obligations', a few key distinctions obtain, and implement, as a result, a rigorous separation of public and private spheres — of the *polis* from the *oikos* — and persons and actions from things — the realm of production and reproduction over and against that of contemplation and decision making.[28] One of the crucial definitions of what it means to be human is, thus, tied to *political* life, to public life, as what 'matters is the freedom to

take part in public decisions',[29] to govern and to be governed. By these lights, in their Aristotelian reflection, the political is valued as a good within itself, which supposedly yields a 'nonoperational or noninstrumental definition of politics'.[30] The liberal conceptualization of citizenship, which may be traced back to the theories of Hobbes and Locke as well as to the classical models, evolves out of the republican paradigm, but among the differences between the classical democratic outline and the modern liberal one is the idea that liberal man is 'a bundle of passions and interests which he satisfies chiefly in market relations and private sociability'.[31] From this vantage point, 'the political or public realm is a necessary evil — the institutional arrangements necessary to protect, and enhance private freedom.'[32] But long before the emergent world of markets and contracts, which thinking comes to dominant influence in the era of the Enlightenment, *homo legalis* — juridical man — announces the advent of 'possessive individualism'; here, jurisprudence perceives the universe as divisible into persons, actions and things, as the world of things 'claimed the status of reality', insofar as 'persons acted upon things, and most of their actions were directed at taking, or maintaining possession.'[33] In jurisprudential personality, we climb down from the Aristotelian heights of the classical ideal to the valley of the modern real, 'from the citizen as political being to the citizen as legal being, existing in a world of persons, actions, and things regulated by law'.[34] Defined by his action upon things, the individual becomes the 'proprietor or possessor of things', and it is 'through the possession of things and the practice of jurisprudence' that the individual would become a citizen.[35]

This momentous change, which comes to substitute the contractual form and legal procedure for relations of dominance and subservience, taking its inspiration from Enlightenment thought, offers a rationale for both 'the mysteries of political obligation and the logic of individual rights'.[36] In place of the subjection and domination that governed pre-modern relationships between master and servant, or dominant and subordinate positionalities, the contract assumes the centre of a new 'social cosmology', whose measure is taken in the rationalistic milieu of 'formally equal and autonomous individuals'.[37] The 'equality' invoked in the founding documents to which we

have alluded briefly here emanates from the notion of the self-willing, self-owning one, whose interest in property is now a matter of law; another like himself is neither more nor less than he, as access to markets and money and the law arbitrate between and among *legal* personalities. Therefore, to call the founding revolutions the rearrangement of property relations between the wealthy and an emergent 'bourgeoisie' robs the moment of its poetry, indeed, but the conclusion appears to reflect a great deal of historical accuracy. But the long historical horizon of the bonded moves us closer to the assumptions with which we begin our thinking about the import of radical change. Transitory and fleeting, the contractual relationship did not extend beyond its reason for being; for some observers, the contractual world is set solidly against the sentimental realm. Belonging to the 'sphere of private and personal relations',[38] sentiment opposes contract and comes to inscribe the woman's sphere and its grammars of feeling, including the sexual and erotic gesture, that mark it off from the public world of action over things.

As the slavery debate intensifies, even before the instauration of the United States, and proceeds through the decades that lead up to the Civil War, contract theory plays a crucial role in configuring the conceptualizations of the abolitionist campaign. Amy Stanley even goes so far as to contend that 'contract became the language of insurgent popular politics,'[39] and much of the force of its appeal is adopted from black women's experience in bondage. Two key principles obtain here, as we have suggested before: slavery denies contractual ability in the enslaved, but, even before that, the enslaved is divested of *self-ownership* and, therefore, must suffer the convoy of evils that follows in the wake of such a deficiency. The experience of African-American women under slavery's regime advanced the notion of a double threat, insofar as they were vulnerable to sexual torture and abuse, as well as the repertory of normative discipline and punishment that attaches to the travails of violently coerced labour. Not that the male bonded were not subject to the very same hell. I would argue, however, that the rights of the master of the household placed women in power's orbit in a systematically provocative way; the sexual abuse of black women in slavery was the *rule*, a motif scored into the

fabric of everyday life, not the exception, and, under the circumstances, it was neither shocking nor unexpected to the coeval world that they would have been so. Stanley argues that 'the flesh of female slaves thus took center stage in abolitionist propaganda.'[40] It is the scourged body of the bonded woman that we recall most vividly, for example, from Douglass's 1845 *Narrative* and the powerful tale of flight, in the avoidance of sexual persecution, that animates the long, torturous journey of Harriet Jacobs: 'In accounts tinged with eroticism', abolitionists across the race divide 'evoked a *corporeal* slave economy that was diametrically opposed to the sexual order of free society, in which female purity', as Harriet Jacobs pleads her case, 'was valued as a priceless possession'.[41] In short, the bondswoman, subjected to tortures of the flesh in the discipline of the sexual and the labouring body, becomes the quintessential image of the terrors of the 'peculiar institution'.

To say, then, that the bodies of black women were translated into a kind of data in the struggle for full *manhood* rights would be apposite to one's understanding of the matter, even though their utility in this regard would be laced with ironical accents, given how long their own campaign for the status of the subject would actually last. We could think of African-American women, then, in their arduous historical apprenticeship as the 'last man standing' — the living embodiment of the crimes of slavery in their most undiluted form — who modelled *in the flesh* the 'paradigmatic chattel': 'Through her image, abolitionists sanctified, by negation, the ideal of self ownership as the essence of freedom.'[42]

Most immediately, the plight of women in enslavement defined in the starkest, barest and most uncompromising terms what freedom was *not*; the condition of enslaved women, therefore, marked an *actual*, rather than a *fetishized*, border across which and on either side of which the social order was organized, and it is fair to say that subjects caught on their side paid with their lives. Under the 'condition', the erotic and the sexual are meaningless, except that we recognize them by their *absence*. Not protected by the ties of sentiment, which could be interrupted for any reason, often narrowly economic, in the case of payment for a master's debt, for example, the enslaved confronted in her person what living was in the absence of love

and the very withdrawal of *private* and *privacy* as a human right, at the same time that she belonged to public history only insofar as she was the ambiguous subject owned like things by others. What our writers have paid imaginative witness to is the fact that there was no human loneliness and alone-ness remotely comparable to that of the enslaved beyond the reach and scope of love and freedom.

In Barbara Chase-Riboud's *Sally Hemings*, the Hemings character *opposes* love and freedom in the mute sum of her embodiment, when she believes that unlike her mother Elizabeth, also a concubine, she is going to choose love by returning to Virginia with the fictional character of Thomas Jefferson. She might have concluded her bondage by running away and residing on French soil, but Sally is in love, convinced that it is mutual, and she will remain so virtually through the birth of five children — in love, she is safe, protected and well cared for, just as a wife would be, although she is hardly accorded the dignity of the marital state. But what is a woman in freedom? What is a woman, no longer enslaved, in freedom? This is the question that all emancipations are designed to answer, but before we come to celebrate the jubilee of emancipation, we must pass through the blood-stained gates — in other words, bondage is so terrible, as is freedom for a whole other array of reasons, that the cost of deliverance from it might be death itself. The day that the enslaved decides to act out the threat of death that always hangs over her by risking her life is the first day of wisdom. And whether one survives it or not is perhaps less important than the recognition that unless one is free, love cannot and perhaps will not matter.

◈

IV

We wait for it, and, finally, the fictitious Sally Hemings, at 36 years old, reaches an epiphany 36 chapters later. At the height of their love, as she thinks, and at the end of a late summer's day, she is suddenly riveted by a sliver of light that breaks through her consciousness, opened momentarily by the off-chance of an unwonted occasion. Returning to Monticello, deeply indebted at the conclusion of his presidency, the former chief executive,

now alone with Sally, laments the death of Meriwether Lewis (perhaps a suicide), whom he had adored. 'All my hopes were in Meriwether. He was the last. Why must I always lose what I love? Why can I never hold what I cherish? Why have I no sons of my own?'[43] Recalling her five children with the president, four of them sons, Sally replies: 'But you have four sons.' Could not one of them, she thinks in what we imagine might be a kind of rising fever, 'be instructed in botany, astronomy, in surveying; could not Madison or Eston learn natural history, mineralogy, Indian affairs?' She wants to scream, but the joint, for all the capaciousness of Monticello, is just a bit too small for all that; besides, it is taking the president, it seems to her, an eternity to respond, and when he does, the answer emerges emphatically in a pair of jagged monosyllables: 'I don't have four sons. You have four sons.'[44]

So much for 'love'.

It is appropriate that Jefferson's back is turned to Hemings at the moment, because what he might have seen would not have cheered him, though it is never clear to the reader that Jefferson's back was ever *not* turned to Sally Hemings, if we interpret the gesture to signal the measure of distance between master/owner and enslaved/owned. For the first time in the story, Sally's thoughts and emotions — narrated in episodic sequences that alternate between omniscient and first-person postures — split off from the continuity of agreement with the logic of capture and, in that regard, a new narrative movement — classically called 'reversal' — threatens to close with menace and danger: 'I had burned for him,' she ponders,

> And I had birthed for him. Seven times I had descended into that valley from which neither his wife nor one of his daughters had returned. And my sons stood as testament and hostage to a body I could never call my own. I felt an explosion of insulted motherhood, all red and brown, like the leaves scattered on the lawn outside the window.[45]

Seeking the iron poker within her reach near the chimney, Sally wants to strike

> that broad blue-sheated back . . . to strike and strike again . . . for now, after all these years, [she] understood what he had understood from the beginning, but had not had the courage to tell [her]. He had renounced his sons from the day of their birth![46]

Feeling horror at the revelation, Sally strikes and strikes, but only in the mind's eye, lacking 'the courage to kill Thomas Jefferson'. Instead, she would free his sons.[47]

Perhaps it is too much to ask of Hemings what the reader awkwardly (and anachronistically) *demands* of the protagonist all along, that is to say that she should have known 'in the beginning' what was knowable only in the fullness of time of the fabula itself and on the pulse of the nerve in confrontation with the anguish of struggle — that Jefferson, exactly like any other male of his stature and place in the coeval order of things, could no more have claimed his sons with her than Sally Hemings could have waltzed into the White House as the president's wife. But the coming to knowledge is absolutely foreclosed in this case by a social calculus that engendered no choice at all, as even the grammar attests: '*Love me and remain a slave.*'[48] On the one hand, the 'concubine' is 'petted and pampered and hidden and lied to'.[49] As her daughter Harriet recalls, Sally has access to a room in the inner sanctum of Monticello,

> filled with private treasure: silk dresses and petticoats, satin and kid shoes, and gloves, muslin and lawn dressing gowns, books, sheet music, a beautiful onyx pendulum clock, a green morocco leather chest, tooled in intricate designs and filled with linens, silk, and lace . . . a delicate French writing table, a *coiffeuse*, bolts of velvet, and most extraordinary of all, a hammered copper bathing tub called a *baignoire*.[50]

On the other hand, Sally is as disposable as the goods — or perhaps we could say more accurately, Sally is disposable goods: 'you don't understand white men. They loves you. Sometimes all they lives. But when you go up against they real life, they white life, white friends, white children, white power, you got to lose.'[51] On this dimension, Sally Hemings extends the Monticello household; indeed, she becomes its finest open secret, or, to put it another way, she embodies a primary actor in a local politics of intimacy, circumventing the most palpable terrors of enslavement in the surrogacies of gender. But this sequence of relations is overtaken or undercut

by another that might be thought of as an alibi of finality — 'a body I could never call my own' (which would lend the master class *two* cracks at mortality — his own and his *owned*), or, in cases pursuant to the death of the master, 'I was to go on the block.'[52] Along this dimension, slavery's hardest charge — to divest the human relation of its defining and divining sentiment — so cross-hatches the body and being of Sally Hemings that the instant alienation that it installs 'translates' her into 'race', both the mark and the knowledge of slavery. To that extent, Hemings doubles the jeopardy for which her age had no mind or attention or language beyond the precincts of the fearful and anonymous humanity on which ground the declarers of the modern state stood.

In the *internalization* of slavery's logic, here called 'love', Sally Hemings pays, in effect, in bondage to a superior will. Her character indexes one of the forms that mastery might take, that is to say, the inducement to identity with the master class and its repertoire of interests. The insurgent enslaved, putting her life at risk, makes of the 'master' precisely what he is — the 'enemy'. The successful arrival at this fundamental determination marks the red line between slavery and freedom.

What the Founders wrought in their founding documents unfolded rather like the insinuation of a virus — by mirroring and replication, although *who* were repeated, *ad infinitum*, were others exactly like the signatories. However, the world would come to notice such limit and constraint only slowly and by slow-witted degree. Meanwhile, what we must conjure with is that the *words* of the documents were 'unmade' in the very moment of their inscription because 'Everyone' was not in the room. In fact, it is said of the Constitutional Assembly of Saint Domingue, convoked by Toussaint L'Ouverture on 4 February 1801, that it was comprised of 'three mulattoes and seven whites',[53] a rather odd outcome, if one is banking on the ideal arrangement. In any case, the words of the documents, so bright and clarion on the pages of history, create a 'dead zone' at the very centre that will threaten the efficacy of the intended will. In effect, the declarations and the constitutions could be consolidated only by constant rotation — cutting women onto the replicative stage, as well as the Sally Hemingses' darkest

friends. The insurgent and the revolutionary gesture provides the test of truth that is always being won. It is either not easy to say, or all too easy to say, that the ratification of the historical seems to require that it be signed in blood, which is also our tragic circumstance today in the democracies and beyond. But we dream of circumventing the blood-lust, and in dreams begin responsibilities.

Notes

1. William Wells Brown, *Clotel, or the President's Daughter*, ed. Robert Levine, Bedford Cultural Editions (Boston: Bedford/St Martin's, 2000), p. 180. All references in this article to the novel come from this source.
2. Lawrence Hill, *The Book of Negroes* (Toronto: Harper Collins, 2007). In the US, this novel appears under the title *Somebody Knows My Name*. I thank the author very much for a hardbound copy of the exquisite illustrated edition of the novel.
3. The following titles might be thought of as significant contributions to a virtual genre of black writing, insofar as they are aligned with a distinctive cluster of thematics related to slavery: Edward Jones's *Known World*, Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and *Amercy*, to name a few of them.
4. Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, ed. Houston A. Baker Jr (New York: Penguin Classics, 1986), p. 107.
5. Brown, *Clotel*, p. 13.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Barbara Chase-Riboud, *Sally Hemings* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1979).
10. Amy Dru Stanley, *From Bondage to Contract: Wage Labor, Marriage, and the Market in the Age of Slave Emancipation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); see 'Legends of Contract', p. 11.
11. Ibid.
12. Annette Gordon-Reed, *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1997), and Annette Gordon-Reed, *The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2008).

13. Fawn Brodie, *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1974).
14. Brown, *Clotel*, p. 14.
15. Chase-Riboud's second novel concerning the Jefferson–Hemings connection imagines the fortunes of the pair's daughter, Harriet, who is permitted to 'escape' to freedom, taking up her new life in Philadelphia across the 'colour line'. See Barbara Chase-Riboud, *The President's Daughter* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1994).
16. Chase-Riboud, *Sally Hemings*, p. 345.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid., p. 350.
19. Ira Berlin traces an arc of origins of the African-American life-world not from Africa or America, 'but in the netherworld between the continents'; Berlin's 'Atlantic creole' comes about 'in the historic meeting of Europeans and Africans on the west coast of Africa'. See Berlin, 'From Creole to African: Atlantic Creoles and the Origins of African-American Society in Mainland North America', *William and Mary Quarterly*, third series, vol. 53, no. 2, April 1996, pp. 251–88; quoted passage at p. 254. This thesis is rehearsed in Berlin's *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003); see especially 'Charter Generations', pp. 21–51.
20. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice, Cambridge Studies in Social Anthropology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977). In brief, to regard the practice of slavery as a narrowly defined economic thematic — which would underscore 'the dichotomy of the economic and the non-economic' — would miss its wider import as a moment of convergence between allomorphic elements that accrue to 'symbolic capital'. See especially ibid., 'Structures, Habitus, Power', pp. 182–83.
21. The Declaration of Independence: A Transcription, US National Archives and Records Administration, www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/print, 1 of 4; Avalon Project, Declaration of the Rights of Man (1789), http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/rightsof.asp, 1 of 1; Constitution of 1801, Haiti, www.marxists.org/history/haiti/1801/constitution.htm, 1–2 of 13. All quotations from the documents come from these sources, all of which were accessed on 2 December 2009.
22. Brown, *Clotel*, p. 81.
23. Ibid., p. 82.
24. Stanley, *From Bondage to Contract*, p. 58.
25. Ibid.
26. Chase-Riboud, *Sally Hemings*, p. 144.

27. Ibid., p. 174; emphasis added.
28. J. G. A. Pocock, 'The Ideal of Citizenship since Classical Times', in Ronald Beiner, ed., *Theorizing Citizenship* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995), pp. 29–52; quoted passages at pp. 30 and 32.
29. Ibid., p. 32.
30. Ibid.
31. Michael Ignatieff, 'The Myth of Citizenship', in Ronald Beiner, ed., *Theorizing Citizenship* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995), pp. 53–77; quoted passage at p. 53.
32. Ibid.
33. Pocock, 'The Ideal of Citizenship', p. 35.
34. Ibid., p. 34.
35. Ibid., p. 35.
36. Stanley, *From Bondage to Contract*, p. 4.
37. Ibid., p. 1.
38. Ibid., p. 2.
39. Ibid., p. 18.
40. Ibid., p. 25.
41. Ibid., p. 26.
42. Ibid., p. 27.
43. Chase-Riboud, *Sally Hemings*, p. 276.
44. Ibid.
45. Ibid.
46. Ibid.
47. Ibid., p. 277.
48. Ibid.
49. Ibid., p. 284.
50. Ibid., p. 315.
51. Ibid., p. 246.
52. Ibid., p. 327.
53. Constitution of 1801, Haiti; see also C. L. R. James's *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989); especially ch. 13, 'The War of Independence', pp. 289–377.