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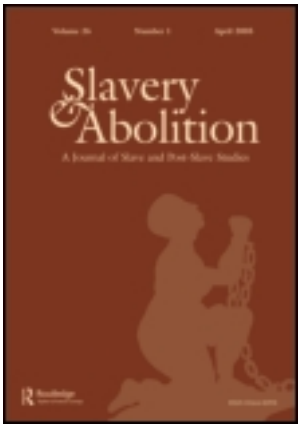

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Slave Suicide, Abolition and the Problem of Resistance

Richard Bell

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Shifting calculations about the political palatability of representing slave suicide in American abolitionist print culture reveal the extent to which debates about agency, power and consent – and thus about self-destruction – lay at the heart of that new nation's struggle over the future of slavery. Was a slave's suicide an act of principled resistance to tyranny that challenged the hypocrisy of the revolutionary settlement? Or was it a measure of abject victimhood that begged for humanitarian intervention? That representations of black suicide oscillated so dramatically between these opposing interpretive frameworks testifies to deep divides between moderates and militants, and between whites and blacks, as to who had the power to bring slavery to its knees.

Pinning his master to the ground, Quashi sat astride his chest and drew a blade from his belt. His master had chased him across this stone-strewn field for a crime he had not committed, and when Quashi had tripped and fallen, they had struggled for what seemed like hours, 'wrestl[ing] for mastery'. At last, the stout black overseer got the better of his white owner, 'the elevation of his mind add[ing] vigour to his arm'. His pinioned young master now guessed his fate. As the two men's eyes met, the slave brought down the blade. But his owner was not its target. Instead, Quashi plunged its cutting edge into his own flesh, tearing a wide gash across his throat 'with all his strength'. He died without a groan, his body slumping across his childhood playmate's chest, 'bathing him in his blood'.[1]

Although the original events had purportedly taken place on the sugar island of St Kitts, accounts of Quashi's final moments found a ready readership in the early United States. When reports turned up in American newspapers and anti-slavery pamphlets in the late 1780s and early 1790s, editors stripped away all traces of its Caribbean setting, transforming it instead into a plausibly continental example of the unconquerable nobility of a black man brought low by plantation despotism. In order to excuse and explain his suicide, each reprise glossed the story with a layer of testimony to

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Quashi's lifelong dignity and unimpeachable sense of honour. The effect was to frame his dramatic suicide as a stern rebuke to the liberal-republican idea that African slaves lacked the natural virtue to stand firm against tyranny. 'Such greatness of mind!', mourned a writer for Philadelphia's *Independent Gazetteer* in a typical eulogy.[2]

In these retellings, activist writers and editors represented Quashi's suicide as part and parcel of his struggle for mastery. Wrestling in the dirt with his owner, Quashi is seen violently asserting his selfhood and his manhood by depriving his master of his labour and depriving himself of his life. The account, one of the most frequently reprinted descriptions of a slave choosing liberty through death to populate the press at the turn of the century, stands in stark contrast to the way that abolitionists of the 1820s and 1830s interpreted the meaning of subsequent suicides committed by enslaved people. In order to try to stir evangelical readers to immediate intervention to destroy the peculiar institution, Benjamin Lundy, William Lloyd Garrison and Lydia Maria Child each reimagined slaves' self-inflicted deaths as acts of utter humiliation – final and peculiarly feminine capitulations to the inescapable, toxic hegemony of the Slave Power. It was not until militant black abolitionists like Henry Highland Garnet and Joshua Bowen Smith muscled their way onto the national stage in the 1840s and 1850s that men who dispossessed their owners by behaving like Quashi were restored to heroic status.

These shifting calculations about the political palatability of representing slave resistance in polemical writing reveal the extent to which debates about agency, power and consent – and thus about self-destruction – lay at the heart of the new nation's struggle over the future of slavery. Was a slave's suicide an act of principled, yet costly, resistance to tyranny that challenged the hypocrisy of the revolutionary settlement? Or was it a measure of abject victimhood that begged for humanitarian intervention? That representations of black suicide oscillated so dramatically between these opposing interpretive frameworks testifies to abolitionists' persistent need to match their message to their changing audiences and transforming mission. Ultimately, these shifting portrayals reflect deep differences within the movement between moderates and militants, and between whites and blacks, as to who had the power to bring slavery to its knees: white evangelicals, who might be moved by displays of slave suffering, or black slaves with the courage to fight and die for their freedom.

Cato's choice

In America, concerted efforts to leverage the spectre of slave suicide for activist purposes began in the early 1780s. There, on the fringes of organised anti-slavery societies committed to gradualist legislative action and legal aid, a group of white ministers, poets and ex-slavers, including Hartford lawyer Zephaniah Swift, New Haven preacher Jonathan Edwards and Rhode Island provocateur William Patten, started to vocally criticise the international slave trade and the plantation system it supported. Focusing on the subject of suicide proved to be a timely tactic, a means to render slaves' torments in forms that catered to readers captivated by both mortality and sentimentalism. Take Thomas Branagan, the author of *Avenia* (1805), an epic poem

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that imagined the headlong plunge to her death of an Angolan slave raped and beaten by her West Indian master. Branagan was an American John Newton, a former planter and slave trader since drawn to Christ. Now haunted by the barbarities he had seen and so often sanctioned, Branagan moved to Philadelphia in 1798 to 'bear testimony against slavery, from the press'. He had little talent for romantic poetry, but forced himself into rhyme because, he reasoned, 'many will read a performance in poetry; who could not be induced to peruse the same materials, however well arranged and digested in prose'. Thus, when Thomas Jefferson was first deliberating whether to support a Senate proposal to prohibit the further importation of slaves, he received a letter from Branagan requesting that the president subscribe for a copy of *Avenia*. Jefferson did not write back.[3]

Whether intended to stir public support for the federal abolition of the slave trade or for gradualist schemes to exterminate racial bondage in northern states like New York, a great many depictions of slaves dead by their own hands emphasised the just cause and classical virtue of their protagonists. A short piece that made the rounds of the New England papers in 1789, for instance, imagined the fate of a West Indian slave reminiscent of Quashi's. 'Tortured for a slight offence, of which he was not even guilty', the unnamed man had climbed to the roof of his master's house and then leaped to his death. Likewise, in the *Preliminary Essay* (1804) that he wrote to promote *Avenia*, Branagan reported having once seen Antiguan slaves 'scourged in the cruellist manner. One slave, to escape the fury of his cruel master, plunged into a copper of boiling sugar, and immediately expired'.[4]

While fresh converts to Christ like Thomas Branagan appealed to Christian charity in the margins of these stark stories, the figures at their centre were typically secular. In keeping with the new republic's suspicion of organised religion and fetish for classicism, anti-slavery advocates eschewed the imagery of Christian martyrdom. Instead, they offered up a corpus of tales that framed each black suicide as the last act of an Aristotelian hero, with the suicide's nobility of spirit offering the most affecting testimony to slavery's disgrace. For instance, in 1792, the final moments of Fidlao, an African king, 'in whose soul, although uncultivated by science, humanity and every social virtue flourished', appeared in no less than 10 different sheets. Defeated in battle by a rival leader in league with American slave traders, Fidlao 'thrust[s] a dagger into his breast' so that he will not have to endure the indignity of capture and enslavement.[5]

When we add Quashi's often reprinted story to this catalogue of distressed righteousness, the insistence of claims that slaves commit suicide to protect their dignity and protest their treatment becomes unmistakable. This was no coincidence. As activists such as Branagan knew all too well, early national political discourse was full of insidious assumptions about who deserved freedom and who did not. Revolutionary-era claims that the colonists had fought bravely to resist (perhaps literal) enslavement by the British had bequeathed the new nation a powerful language to normalise the perpetuation of race slavery. Spread by school books, reading manuals such as the *Columbian Orator* and hagiographical sketches of patriots like George Washington,

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the understanding that liberty rested on principled resistance to tyranny achieved common currency after the war ended. Patrick Henry's cry of 'Liberty or Death' captured the essence of this mythological view of the Revolution. Yet, as historian François Furstenberg has recently demonstrated, this liberal-republican view of the nation's founding implicitly validated planters' arguments that their black slaves had consented to their own exploitation by failing to fight to the death to resist it.[6]

This view was so widely held among the reading populace that early national anti-slavery activists – even the few ex-slave authors among them – rarely challenged its logic. Instead, they constructed stories in which exceptional bondsmen like Quashi proved their worth by playing by Patrick Henry's rules. These attempts at cultural reprogramming grew ever more audacious over time. On 4 July 1791, Dr George Buchanan rose to speak at a public meeting. Addressing the Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery in Baltimore, Buchanan conjured a vision of the middle passage that equated the shipboard suicides of African slaves with acts of courage and statesmanship committed by ancient republicans such as Cato and Seneca. 'Like a noble Senator of old', Buchanan declared, 'death is their choice in preference to lingering out their lives in ignominious slavery – and often do we see them meet it with a smile'. Delivered on Independence Day, Buchanan's remarks made calculated swipes not only at the insidiousness of revolutionary rhetoric, but also at Thomas Jefferson – slave owner, drafter of the Declaration and author of a recently published indictment of the debased character of New World slaves, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787).[7]

Buchanan was hardly alone in alluding to classical suicide in order to attack the Virginian's maddening brand of racism. A few years later, in his *Observations upon Certain Passages in Mr. Jefferson's Notes on Virginia* (1804), Clement Clarke Moore, a New York linguist, challenged the new president to revise his dismissive view of bondsmen's natural incapacity for virtue in light of claims that another proud island slave had recently jumped into a boiler of melted sugar to escape an unwarranted whipping. This was, Moore assured his readers, an indisputable example of a black man's 'nobleness of spirit, and delicate sense of honour'. 'If Roman Cato has been extolled for ages, because he could not endure to survive the liberty of his country', Moore continued, 'surely a poor untaught slave, whose only glory was an unbroken skin, showed equal magnanimity when he chose to die in torment, rather than live and bear about him what he thought an indelible disgrace'.[8]

By framing slave suicides like these as potent political gestures worthy of approbation, activists such as Buchanan and Moore offered the reading public a reason to question Jeffersonian prejudice. Furthermore, by elevating enslaved African men to the heights of moral aristocracy – *Avenia* excepted, the debate did not typically extend to their sisters, mothers, wives or widows – they positioned their advocacy in opposition to those who argued that the only prospects for the dismantling of slavery in America lay in the repatriation of blacks back to Africa. Rejecting the bigotry that undergirded such exclusionary schemes, early national writers who injected Roman nobility into stories of slave suicide seemed to gesture towards a

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post-slavery politics in which men named Cato, Caesar and Pompey might one day play the roles to which their slave names had mockingly referred.

Activists' attempts to forge a link in the public imagination between black male suicide and virtuous resistance to the ignominies of slavery reached a zenith in 1803 when booksellers began promoting *Reflections on Slavery*, a sensational new pamphlet that offered an expansive retelling of a news story which had swept through the pages of many northern papers the previous fall. According to its author, a writer calling himself Humanitas, 27-year-old Romain, his wife and their young child had only had a few hours' rest at Howell's Inn on Philadelphia's Second Street when they were hustled from their cots and shepherded back towards the coach in which they had arrived. En route to the West Indies from Trenton, New Jersey, Romain and his family travelled under the prodding supervision of a hired constable and an associate of their French owner. Monsieur Salaignac had sought safety on the mainland for himself and his most valuable slaves during the violence in Saint-Domingue a decade earlier. Now, he was planning to start over on a neighbouring Caribbean island. Romain and his wife could remember 'from fatal experience' that Salaignac's plantation regime 'was calculated to produce nothing but misery and wretchedness', and had resolved to save their youngster from the same suffering. So, when the constable was briefly distracted, Romain's wife took a chance and darted out into the street with her child, disappearing into the dawn bustle before the constable could catch

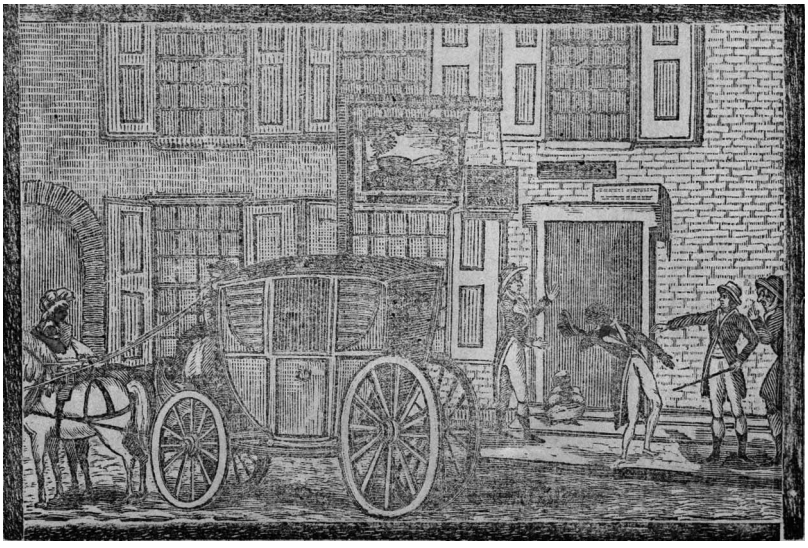

Figure 1. This haunting and intricate woodcut was perhaps the first image of a slave committing suicide to be published in North America and brought the realities of the rising interstate commerce in slaves home to northern readers.
Source: Humanitas, *Reflections on Slavery; with Recent Evidence of Its Inhumanity. Occasioned by the Melancholy Death of Romain, a French Negro* (Philadelphia: Printed for the author by R. Cochran, 1803).

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them. Angry and humiliated, Romain's French escort bellowed at him to get into the carriage. But he refused (see Figure 1):

> Determined to be free, he adopted his dernier [last] resort, took a pruning knife from his pocket, and dreading a spark of life should remain, whereby he might be restored, he three times cut his throat across, and fell dead on the pavement.[9]

In a long, muscular commentary, Humanitas condemned the laws that allowed men like Salaignac to transport their human cargoes in and out of the country 'as [one] would a peice [*sic*] of furniture'. In order to do so, he painted a picture of the character of the dead man that emphasised his classical manhood. Though unlettered and 'benumbed by oppression', Romain had possessed a 'noble soul' and 'virtue sufficient to prove to the world – that he felt the injustice and degradation with which he was treated'. Humanitas would brook no dissent on this point, and went so far as to model the reaction he expected from readers in his description of the crowd that had gathered at the scene:

> Many of those who witnessed the lifeless monument of oppression, remembering their own arduous struggles for Liberty, seemed to say, 'In vain have we rejected the tyranny of kings, while we permit in our country a domestic despotism, which involves in its nature most of the vices and miseries we have endeavoured to avoid: for domestic slavery is repugnant to the principles of Christianity.'

Deftly exploiting a rich vein of patriotic self-regard, Humanitas here flattered readers' pride while simultaneously using Romain's suicide to condemn their continued indifference to racial tyranny. Configuring this bloody violence as a lonely, principled strike for liberty, Humanitas challenged readers to recognise in Romain's self-destruction the hypocrisy of post-revolutionary society.[10]

* * *

The notion that a male slave's suicide could mark him out post-mortem as a person of elevated moral stature amounted to a bold step forward in the way the urban reading public confronted the black subject after the Revolution. Yet, despite such deliberate and crafty appeals, it is difficult to gauge what cumulative effect this reading diet had upon north-eastern constituents and their elected representatives. On the one hand, historian David N. Gellman has argued that the passage of New York's gradual emancipation law in 1799 was substantially aided by precisely this sort of material. In addition, a debate about a prospective ban on imports of Africans in the House of Representatives in 1806 took suggestive notice of some saltwater slaves who 'commit suicide through terror or despair'. Yet, on the other hand, the bloody insurrection that consumed Saint-Domingue between 1791 and 1804, sending shockwaves throughout the Atlantic world, likely limited any possible gains in public sympathy for blacks willing to use violence to resist their enslavement.[11]

The fate of suffering servants

Heartened by the eventual passage of gradual abolition legislation in most northern states and the federal ban on the importation of slaves finally signed into law in

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1807, anti-slavery activists did not immediately realise the limits of their achievements. Because it was confined wholly within the southern states, the rapid escalation of the domestic slave trade after 1807 was not immediately obvious to northern observers. During a visit to Washington, DC, in 1816, one Philadelphia physician literally stopped in his tracks when he caught sight of a miserable convoy of roped slaves trudging across Capitol Hill on their way from Maryland to Georgia.[12]

Reasoning that his fellow Philadelphians, and northerners further afield, probably shared his ignorance of the scale and perversity of this new middle passage, Jesse Torrey rushed back to his lodgings and took up his pen. Over 62 pages, the doctor's *A Portraiture of Domestic Slavery, in the United States* (1817) declared a new front in the war against American slavery. In order to condemn the illegal kidnappings and legal break-ups of families that were, to his mind, the twin hallmarks of this mass forced migration south and west, Torrey eschewed the flights of imagination and poetic forms that many anti-slavery predecessors like Branagan had favoured. Instead, he stocked his pages with a series of carefully sourced descriptions of members of slave families who had killed themselves after being 'dragged asunder, never to behold each other' again. While he copied several of these accounts from newspapers in and around the federal city, the doctor spilled the most ink reporting the details of the failed suicide of a woman he had interviewed himself. Tipped off by a lodger at his Washington boarding house, Torrey had learned that a black woman in another coffle of slaves destined for Georgia had jumped out of the third-floor window of a tavern on F Street (see Figure 2). The fall had broken her back and both of her arms, leaving her apparently mortally wounded. Soon, Torrey was by her deathbed, offering his services first as a doctor, but then as an amanuensis:

> Asking her what was the cause of her doing such a frantic act as that, she replied, '*They brought me away with two of my children, and would'nt let me see my husband – they did'nt sell my husband, and I did'nt want to go; – I was so confus'd and 'istracted, that I did'nt know hardly what I was about – but I did'nt want to go, and I jumped out of the window.*

This pitiful tale of a wife snatched from her husband, only to be driven to distraction and self-harm, formed the crux of Torrey's indictment of the domestic slave trade. In a marked shift from revolutionary-era activists' understanding of suicide as the prerogative of men of exceptional character, the doctor instead placed a wife and mother's desperate last act front and centre. He made no claims as to this poor woman's virtue, nor did he fête her as a champion of liberty. On the contrary, he implied that any feeling person in the same position would have done the same.[13]

Intended as a clarion call, Torrey's pamphlet was quickly dismissed. Despite his documentarian instincts, rumours swirled that, 'in his philanthropic zeal', he had made up many of the outrages he had described. The correspondingly limp sales reflected most northerners' lack of appetite for renewing the campaign against slavery in the aftermath of the costly war of 1812. As the threats of secession made by Federalist delegates to the Hartford Convention in 1814–1815 demonstrated, many New Englanders did not consider the domestic slave trade to be their concern. The problem of slave suicide was not

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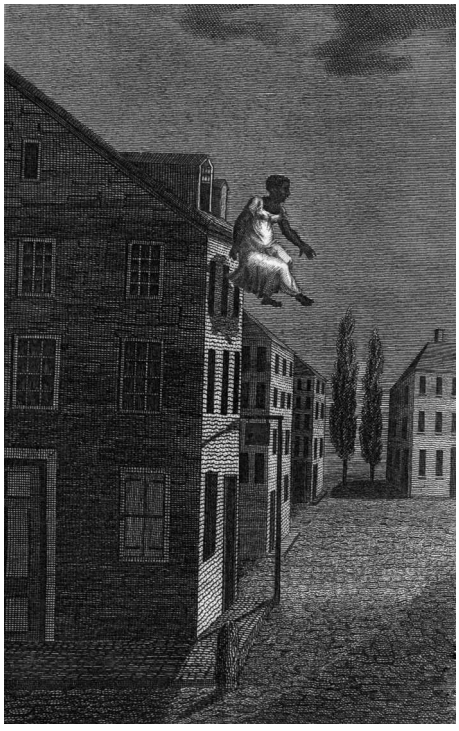

Figure 2. A caption reads: 'but I did not want to go, and I jump'd out of the window'. The author himself designed the strange, ghostly image of the woman falling to earth that accompanied the text in Torrey's original 1817 pamphlet, and in the 1822 London reprint. Source: Jesse Torrey, *A Portraiture of Domestic Slavery, in the United States: With Reflections on the Practicability of Restoring the Moral Rights of the Slave...* (Philadelphia: Published by the Author, 1817), 43–44.

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theirs to solve. 'We are not slave-holders here in New-England', a writer in Boston's *Galaxy and Masonic Magazine* snarled: 'Why does he inundate our towns and villages with his trash?'[14]

Although Torrey's whistle-blowing pamphlet was roundly snubbed by the general public, at least three young readers seem to have studied its contents with care. In later life, Benjamin Lundy, William Lloyd Garrison and Lydia Maria Child each wrote admiringly of Torrey's pioneering effort to document sufferings caused by the internal traffic in slaves. Lundy, in particular, seems to have studied it closely. There are powerful resonances between the *Genius of Universal Emancipation*, the apostolic anti-slavery paper Lundy founded in 1821, and the pamphlet he once applauded for its unflinching 'description of the cruelties and misery as [Torrey] there witnessed them, produced by the internal slave trade'. In fact, one of the signature features of Lundy's eclectic newspaper was the 'Black List', a special section that specialised in accounts of slaves driven to suicide after being torn from their families and sold south. A Black List

entry for August 1821, which drew on a brief report that had first appeared in a Maryland paper, was typical:

> 'A few days ago, a negro woman near Snow Hill, in this state, on being informed that she was sold, first cut the throat of her child, and then her own, by which both of them immediately died'. Is there no blame to be attached to the murderous conduct of the villain who can thus with impunity drive the victims of rapacious power to the commission of such a horrid deed? Methinks I now see the creature smiling with the most perfect indifference at a relation of the fatal transaction, apparently no further concerned about it than what the idea of his loss in property suggests. O my country! truly dost thou nurse within thy bosom a scorpion which it is to be feared will yet sting thee to death.[15]

Whether the scene was a Maryland plantation, a Richmond jail, a steamer bound for Natchez or a whipping post in New Orleans, the portrayals of slave self-destruction that peppered the Black List throughout the 1820s and 1830s marked a striking departure from earlier anti-slavery writing about suicide. Following Torrey's example, Lundy largely rejected the impulse to frame these deaths as freely chosen acts that betokened exceptional character. Instead, he went in the opposite direction, muting black agency by absolving distressed mothers from responsibility or guilt for their actions, and dividing the blame between 'the wretch who induced the death of the inoffensive black' and the slave system itself.[16]

By the time William Lloyd Garrison published the first issue of the *Liberator* in January 1831, the Black List had become an irregular feature of the *Genius*. Although Lundy's paper never achieved a mass circulation, it served as an important model for some of the motifs central to the far broader moral suasion campaign Garrison spearheaded in the 1830s. In fact, Garrison himself got his start writing copy for the *Genius*'s Black List when Lundy brought the paper to Baltimore in the late 1820s.[17]

Garrison did not stay long in Lundy's shadow. He did not share his mentor's enthusiasm for black repatriation schemes and he lacked confidence in Lundy's willingness to negotiate with southern legislatures. Powerfully affected by David Walker's *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World* (1829), Garrison instead proposed nothing less than immediate emancipation. With the financial support of the wealthy Manhattan silk importer Arthur Tappan, he set to work. By 1833, Garrison had initiated a massive print campaign designed to flood the nation – the North and the South – with material that challenged slaveholders' moral authority. The scale of this campaign was entirely unprecedented. Within a few years, there were, according to one society official, 'upwards of a hundred' anti-slavery papers in circulation, alongside a growing deluge of message-laden songbooks, hymnals, poetry collections, broadsides, tracts, circulars, prints, annual almanacs and all manner of stand-alone pamphlets.[18]

With a convert's zeal, Garrison spent the 1830s encouraging his growing throng of supporters to fill these pages with witness testimony that would put American slavery on trial. In order to rebut pro-slavery depictions of well-cared-for black labourers too brutish and dull to feel pain, grief and sorrow, Garrison's American Anti-Slavery Society (AASS) poured its resources into doggedly detailing the bitter truth of the

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slave experience for detached and disinterested readers. The overwhelming theme of this extraordinary flood of ink was the veritable agony of slavery. Reflecting lessons learned from Lundy, and perhaps Torrey and Humanitas too, Garrison and his disciples perfected a style of writing and reporting best described as humanitarian realism. This tactic was carefully chosen to tie the cause at hand to emerging public sensibilities. What the literary historian Elizabeth Clark calls the 'gruesome tribulation of the body' became the primary staple of moral suasion literature in the 1830s, as writers discovered that the gains made by evangelical and liberal faiths in many northern states over the past two decades had brought with them a tender-minded revulsion for bodily violence. Depictions of the instruments of physical cruelty, graphic illustrations of their use, and distressing elaborations of the emotional and spiritual scars borne by suffering black servants thus came to dominate these accounts. So voyeuristic, fetishistic and ubiquitous were these descriptions that southerners quickly complained that abolitionists were exaggerating the extent of slavery's cruelties.[19]

But Garrisonians refused to relent, holding firm to the belief that their strategy would turn neutrals into partisans. Their efforts included considerable outreach to women, as well as men. Given the demographics of evangelical Christianity and the much trumpeted successes other reform movements were having persuading female supporters to cajole their fathers, brothers, husbands and sons towards acceptance of, or advocacy for, causes such as temperance, to have done otherwise would have beggared reason. Although many abolition societies did not admit women as full voting members during the 1830s, they encouraged and sometimes sponsored writing by Lydia Maria Child, Abigail Mott and Elizabeth Chandler, and worked hard to feminise the image of the American slave.[20]

Governed by these imperatives, abolitionists pushed proud Caribbean Catos like Quashi to one side. In their place, authors paraded a procession of suffering slaves – a majority of whom were female. Desperate and distracted wives or mothers, torn from their children or otherwise abused, now took centre stage. Rather than wrestle their owners for mastery, these wounded women knelt in submission, beckoning good Christian readers to rush in and rescue them. Out went the laboured encomiums about black virtue. In came language that stripped enslaved people of their dignity in order to flatter evangelical readers' self-image as these afflicted victims' last best hope.

Depictions of women driven to suicide loom predictably large in this pageant of humiliated humanity. In fact, the image of a female slave lying dead by her own hand became one of the pre-eminent icons of Garrisonian anti-slavery writing. This iconic status derived in great measure from the fact that three of the most generic scenes in abolitionist print culture encompassed the possibility of the subject's suicide. Whenever white activists or ex-slave authors described black women and men subjected to unwarranted beatings, or sold away from their loved ones, or cornered or captured having tried to flee, the outcome was often their self-inflicted death.[21]

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A long statement from a sworn eyewitness that appeared in an 1832 issue of the *Liberator* offers an example of how suicide often punctuated the first of these pitiful set pieces. Reporting the testimony of Tennessee Presbyterian John Rankin, the Boston paper introduced northern readers to six young African girls recently arrived on a Georgia plantation. Set to labour in the fields, the adolescents were confronted by a vicious cycle of work and whippings designed to break their will. The girls were quickly defeated by this unrelenting system – they could not meet the daily production targets and so the number of lashes they received each night grew from one day to the next. On the third morning, they could take no more and resigned themselves to suicide. 'This appeared to be the only means of escaping the most terrible cruelty', Rankin noted with obvious sympathy. When dinner was called, all six girls lingered behind and, while the other slaves gratefully left the fields, they ducked into a thicket and, one by one, hanged themselves. 'Who can estimate the sum of similar cruelties that are practised upon the poor Africans, by the many thousand tyrants, who, from the slaveholding states, have literally received license for tyrannical exercise?', Garrison asked in a postscript that accompanied Rankin's report in most subsequent reprintings.[22]

Visions of equally outrageous beatings, whippings and hamstringings in and around other plantations in the Deep South were common sights in the torrent of testimony that poured forth from AASS presses in the 1830s. Yet, they were easily overshadowed by a far greater number of descriptions of Chesapeake slaves taking their own lives to avoid transportation to the Cotton Kingdom in the first place. 'It is an awful thing to a Virginia slave to be sold for the Alabama and Mississippi country', James Williams, an ex-slave, wrote in his autobiography. 'I have known some of them to die of grief, and others to commit suicide, on account of it'. Evidence of this awful truth became so prevalent in the moral suasion literature after 1833 that in a single issue of New York's *American Anti-Slavery Reporter*, the editors published no less than four different accounts of men and women surrendering to suicide after becoming ensnared in the domestic slave trade.[23]

Although every Chesapeake slave dreaded the day that his or her turn might come, families divided in these sales felt the terror of long-distance migration most acutely. 'There is nothing in slavery, perhaps, more painful, than the unavoidable separation of parents and children', the ex-slave William Grimes once mournfully remarked. By way of proof, in 1837, Lydia Maria Child brought juvenile readers in Massachusetts news that the mother of three little boys on a Missouri plantation had decapitated her children with an axe and then taken her own life when she learned her sons would be sold to a Texas slave trader. In an imagined dialogue between a girl named Caroline (Car.) and her uncle (Mr S.), Child ventriloquised her belief that the distraught mother should not be blamed for these murders or for her own suicide:

> Car. My mother loves me, too, but she wouldn't kill me.
> Mr S. You ought to thank God that your mother is not a slave . . . You can judge from this what slavery is. The mother, who had tried it, preferred death.[24]

In addition to cataloguing the fatal consequences produced by fierce plantation discipline and the division of slave families, Garrisonians wrung equal pathos from the

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suicides of thwarted runaways. The Boston minister and anti-slavery almanac editor Nathaniel Southard presented a typical example of this third archetype in a pamphlet the AASS published in New York in 1838. The entry began with a transcription of a news item that had first appeared in two southern papers:

> The negro woman, (Lucy) confined in our jail as a runaway, put an end to her existence on the 28th ult. by hanging herself. Her master came to this place the day on which it occurred, and going to the jail, was recognized by the woman as her master. He had left the jail but a short time when it was discovered that the woman had destroyed herself. We have never known an instance where so much firmness was exhibited by any person, as was by this negro. The place from which she suspended herself was not high enough to prevent her feet from touching the floor, and it was only by drawing her legs up and remaining in that position, that she succeeded in her determined purpose.

While the southern papers emphasised Lucy's 'firmness' and cast her hanging as an insolent yet 'determined' challenge to those entitled to enslave and imprison her, Southard led readers of his pamphlet, *Why Work for the Slave?*, in the opposite direction. In a coda, Southard reoriented responsibility for her suicide, apportioning liability to the southern slave owners and traders who drove her to her death, and, by implication, to every northerner not already committed to immediate abolition. 'Lucy', he lamented,

> was, in effect, murdered by slavery. She cannot now describe to us the horrors from which she tried to escape, nor speak of the apprehension and despair which impelled her, thus, to seek the 'king of terrors' as a shelter from American slavery.

Of course, there was no need for Lucy to speak. Southard spoke for her. In his account, the desperate actions she had been 'impelled' to spoke volumes. She had had no choice.[25]

Southard's wilful interpretation of the broader meaning of this slave's suicide was no aberration. Throughout the 1830s, abolitionist presses turned out account after account of the last moments of failed fugitives, framing each self-destructive act as inevitable capitulation to the pervasive power of the slave system. The effect was to strip runaways of the courage many had surely mustered and to turn proud souls into submissive ciphers whose plights pleaded for humanitarian intervention. Even male slaves, a group that revolutionary-era activists had worked hard to associate with honour and virtue, were brought low by this treatment.[26]

Among the many frustrated fugitives eulogised in Garrisonian outreach literature, none was more pathetically rendered than Paul, a Congolese man found hiding in a Carolina swamp, having fled his master. According to Charles Ball, the author of a popular 1836 ex-slave narrative, the man he discovered in the swamp was walking wounded; his back 'was seamed and ridged with scars of the whip'. Captured and transported to the Americas five years earlier, Paul had had to leave his large family in Africa. Ever since, he had been at the mercy of a drunk and violent owner. This master had formed a particular dislike for Paul, forcing him to flee to the swamp, where Paul had lived on the meagre meat of frogs and tortoises for more than three

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Figure 3. This simple woodcut accompanied an abridged version of Paul's story that Nathaniel Southard included in his popular abolitionist almanac the following year: 'The slave Paul had suffered so much in slavery, that he chose to encounter the hardships and perils of a runaway. He exposed himself, in gloomy forests, to cold and starvation, and finally hung himself, that he might not again fall into the hands of his tormentor. (See Ball's Narrative, 2d Edit. p. 325)'.
Source: Nathaniel Southard, ed., *American Anti-Slavery Almanac for 1838*, vol. 1, no. 3 (Boston:, 1837), 13.

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weeks, afraid to move much or search for food in daylight in case someone heard the bells on the iron collar in which his master had encased him as punishment for previous escapes.[27]

Paul's thoughts had long since turned to suicide, and Charles Ball reported to readers of his autobiography that, on their first meeting, Paul 'reasoned with me upon the propriety of destroying a life which was doomed to continual distress'. Ball did all he could to ease his companion's burdens: he lit a fire, helped Paul to food and implored him to 'bear his misfortunes as well as he could', before promising to come again the following Sunday with tools to release him from his fetters. But when he returned, the ravens and buzzards were circling ominously. Ball soon discovered why (see Figure 3).[28]

Intended to appal and affront readers' delicate sensibilities while simultaneously playing upon the Old Testament story of the suffering servant (Isaiah 53), the endless recycling of reports like this one defined the moral suasion campaign at the moment it achieved a national profile. Garrisonian abolitionists distanced themselves from revolutionary-era associations between self-destruction and principled resistance to tyranny, and offered instead a remarkably consistent vision of subaltern suicide as the inexorable product of a culture of oppression – what Durkheim later termed 'fatalistic' suicide. When he had been sold south years earlier, Ball himself had often thought of hanging himself, a fact he now believed said more about his circumstances than about his character. 'Such an act, done by a man in my situation', Ball wrote, looking back, 'could not be a violation of the precepts of religion, nor of the laws of God'.[29]

* * *

In retrospect, the publication of Charles Ball's affecting autobiography in 1836 marked the apotheosis of organised moral suasion. After the financial crash of 1837 wiped out much of most abolition societies' assets, operations came to a temporary halt. The pause paralysed the movement, giving rise to second-guessing among the leadership as to whether their vast investment in moral suasion was paying off. In 1840, after three years of increasingly angry recriminations within the society, the AASS split in two. A majority of its leaders, including Lewis Tappan and corresponding secretary James Birney, concluded that moral suasion was a utopian delusion that woefully underestimated the political influence of the slavocracy. They abandoned the persuasive print campaign that had defined organised abolition for the better part of a decade and turned instead to direct political action in the shape of the Liberty Party.

A minority of perfectionists, including Garrison himself, remained behind to carry on their programme of moral education. As their depictions of black suicide over the previous decade attest, these die-hard Garrisonians were under no illusion about how far the tentacles of the Slave Power reached. Quite the contrary – those who stayed by Garrison's side after the schism did so precisely because of their distrust of a political system that they had long regarded as constitutionally pro-slavery, and thus fundamentally corrupt.

Samson in America

In one sense, the split of 1840 had scant effect on the function of black suicide in anti-slavery persuasive writing. Whether allied with the remnant of the AASS or operating independently, activists still committed to moral suasion resumed their work in earnest. The only marked change was the appearance of novels that attempted to fictionalise the most affecting aspects of documentary testimony – a neat inversion of the debt to fictional tropes evident in many popular slave narratives of the time. Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), which found examples for many of the atrocities it described in Weld's *American Slavery As It Is* (1839), epitomised the way literary abolitionists of this generation invoked slaves' suicides to remind white northern readers of their social responsibility. In a dramatic set piece aboard a steamer bound for New Orleans, the slave trader Haley sells a black infant to a fellow passenger. Later, as Tom looks on, the child's distraught mother learns of her loss and then hurls herself from the deck, drowning in the swirling waters below (see Figure 4). 'The poor bleeding heart was still at last', Stowe wrote by way of benediction. Similar episodes, likewise calibrated to appeal to the maternal instincts of evangelical female readers, popped up in many other books, plays, newspapers and pamphlets authored by white abolitionists between 1840 and the eve of the Civil War.[30]

Yet, when we examine the full spectrum of portrayals of slave suicide emanating from abolitionist presses during the 1840s and 1850s, it is clear that this Stovian brand of humanitarian realism did not reign unopposed. On the contrary, a dramatic reversal in the way these last acts were understood and represented in abolition's public sphere was already under way, a shift indicative of the emergence of an important new force in American anti-slavery activity.[31]

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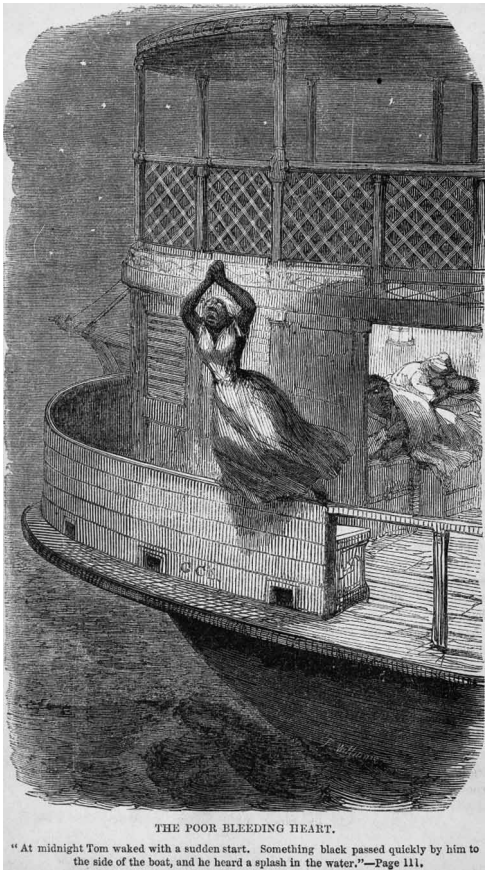

Figure 4. The clenched hands, elevated above her head, telegraph this woman's desperate mental state as she reaches out in pleading prayer both to the heavens and to readers for help. 'Poor Bleeding Heart', read the caption accompanying George Cruikshank's famous illustration.
Source: Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Negro Life in the United States of America* (London: John Cassell, 1852), f. 111.

The moment of the schism had coincided with the arrival in the North of several talented and vocal fugitives such as Frederick Douglass, Henry Highland Garnet and William Wells Brown, and the political maturity of freeborn black activists like Joshua Bowen Smith and Martin Delany. Heartened by rising numbers of fugitives arriving in cities like Boston, and two successful shipboard revolts (the *Amistad* in 1839 and *Creole* in 1841), one by one these iconoclasts broke with the national movement's age-old commitment to pacifism and began openly encouraging bondsmen to seize their freedom and dispossess their masters, or die in the attempt. Reaching back to the rhetoric long used to justify planters' exploitation of black life and labour, this small but largely uncoordinated band of black militants set about turning Patrick Henry into the hero of their own revolution. 'LIBERTY OR DEATH. Oh what a

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sentence was that!', the fugitive-turned-preacher Henry Highland Garnet cried in a speech ostensibly addressed 'to the Slaves of the United States of America', delivered at a convention of 'colored citizens' in Buffalo in 1843:

> Brethren, arise, arise! Strike for your lives and liberties. Now is the day and the hour. Let every slave throughout the land do this, and the days of slavery are numbered. You cannot be more oppressed than you have been – you cannot suffer greater cruelties than you have already. *Rather die freemen than live to be slaves.*

Importantly, Garnet, who was trying to secure votes to endorse his motion to appeal to slaves to use violence, did not differentiate between slaves who took their own lives or those killed while trying to flee or to raze the plantation. 'What kind of resistance you had better make, you must decide by the circumstances that surround you', he advised. To Garnet, the distinctions were merely contextual. Flight, insurrection and suicide were co-equal testimonies to slaves' capacity to sacrifice everything in the pursuit of freedom.[32]

Although Frederick Douglass voted against Garnet's 1843 motion, his published writings suggest a growing sympathy for his position. When his first autobiography appeared in 1845, it redefined the rules for ex-slave writing, draining the genre of the pathos that authors such as Charles Ball had cultivated throughout the 1830s. Instead, Douglass instilled a new breed of masculine heroics that placed the slave's challenge to the master's authority at the heart of an egocentric narrative. Douglass's three autobiographies are thus rife with scenes in which the author and other male slaves put their lives on the line to protest their subjection. 'We did more than Patrick Henry, when he resolved upon liberty or death', Douglass wrote as he described an early attempt to flee his owner's estate. 'With us it was a doubtful liberty at most, and almost certain death if we failed. For my part I should prefer death to hopeless bondage'.[33]

Douglass larded his account of his fight with Covey – a display of machismo unthinkable in ex-slave writing a decade earlier – with similar bravado and signalled his obvious approval when a fellow rebel slave committed an indirect form of suicide rather than be recaptured. Facing a lashing from an overseer for some prior infraction, Denby had fled to the safety of a creek, and stood there, shoulder-deep, refusing to come out. Despite the overseer's repeated promises 'that, if he did not come out at the third call, he would shoot him', Denby 'stood his ground', preferring the certainty of death to the certainty of taking his punishment and remaining a slave (see Figure 5). 'If there was meaning, beyond the mere sound of a rhetorical imprecation, in the exclamation of Patrick Henry, "Give me Liberty, or give me Death!"', Douglass wrote in a column published in his *North Star* newspaper three years later, then any bondsman who 'has hurried his soul into the presence of its God' must be regarded in the same 'spirit of Roman chivalry' as the nation's founding generation.[34]

In the wake of the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act on 18 September 1850, more and more black leaders began to speak of suicide as a robust defence against the tyranny of the Slave Power. At an emergency meeting in Boston's Belknap Street Church two weeks later, on 5 October, Joshua Bowen Smith, a freeborn black member of the

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GORE SHOOTING DENBY.

Figure 5. Standing his ground, Denby waits for the overseer to shoot. This illustration appeared in many editions of Douglass's third autobiography.
Source: Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (Hartford, CT: Park, 1881), 56.

city's new Committee of Vigilance, told the anxious ex-slaves gathered there that if he was ever in their situation and a slave catcher came calling, 'he should not be taken alive'. After quoting Patrick Henry, he advised every man present 'to arm himself with a revolver' and prepare to defend his liberty by dying for it. Three weeks later, the men gathered at a meeting in Philadelphia made an almost identical promise to themselves: 'Resolved, That we endorse, to the full, the sentiment of the Revolutionary Patriot of Virginia, and should the awful alternative be presented to us, will act fully up to it – "Give me Liberty or give me Death"'.[35]

Many men seem to have kept their promise. In fact, on 5 December, two months to the day after Bowen Smith's address to Boston's fugitives, ex-slave Lewis Hayden could be heard threatening to blow up his booby-trapped house rather than allow slave catchers to arrest the fugitive William Craft inside. The following September, William Parker, leader of a band of fugitives holed up in a Pennsylvania farmhouse, hollered something similar to the marshals preparing to torch the place to flush

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them out: 'You can burn us, but you can't take us; before I give up, you will see my ashes scattered on the earth'. While Hayden's tormentors retreated and the marshals besieging Parker in Christiana were routed in a firefight with an armed posse of local free blacks, both events demonstrate that reactions to the Fugitive Slave Act served to invest black suicide with a defiant, revolutionary aura not accorded to it since the turn of the century.[36]

As dark threats like those made by Parker and Hayden multiplied, they became familiar moments in press accounts of northern fugitives struggling to protect their freedom. In fact, when Anthony Burns was arrested under the powers of the Fugitive Slave Act in Boston in 1854, some city residents fully expected him to pull a pistol or draw a knife across his throat rather than be dragged back to slavery. 'I cry for shame that he will not kill himself!', one inconsolable young black woman reportedly wailed as she watched Burns shuffle resignedly towards the steamer that would return him to his Virginian master. 'Oh! why is he not man enough to kill himself!'[37]

The emerging conviction that black men 'man enough' to kill themselves were striking a decisive blow against slavery was wrapped up in a broader attempt to reconstitute African American masculinity in antebellum America. By contrast, black leaders rarely voiced enthusiasm for the idea that slave women had the courage and virtue to mount the same revolutionary opposition. Such racialised sexism reflected an assumption shared by many within the abolition movement that black women lacked the capacity for self-determination. For decades now, moral suasionists from Lydia Maria Child to Harriet Beecher Stowe had painted almost every black wife's or mother's suicide as a humiliating submission to a culture of oppression – the act of a victim, not of a rebel. Indeed, this understanding remained largely unquestioned until the spring of 1856, when abolitionist papers began to buzz with news of the trial of the fugitive ex-slave Margaret Garner, who had displayed terrible determination to prevent recapture by slitting the throat of one of her beloved daughters, before attempting to kill her other children and then herself.[38]

In this respect, then, William Wells Brown's novel *Clotel; or, The President's Daughter* (1853), published three years prior to Garner's forthright and fatal defence of her family, marks an important early challenge to this gendered double standard. *Clotel* – often hailed as the first novel by an African American author and written in apparent response to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* – culminates as the titular female fugitive races to the banks of the Potomac River, pursued by slave catchers. Bereft of a revolver, but otherwise in lockstep with Joshua Bowen Smith's advice, Clotel leaps from a bridge as the catchers close in, and drowns in the waters below (see Figure 6). A closing chapter – titled 'Death Is Freedom' – then follows the bloated corpse of Jefferson's illegitimate mixed-race daughter as it is swept downstream and eventually disgorged on the banks of George Washington's Mount Vernon estate. Clotel's body washes up within sight of the revolutionary hero's tomb, leaving readers to consider the caustic juxtaposition.[39]

Regardless of the gender of the slave in question, there were, at first, very few antebellum whites willing to entertain the idea that the suicides of enslaved people could echo the patriotic struggles of the nation's founders. Only slowly, as pro-slavery

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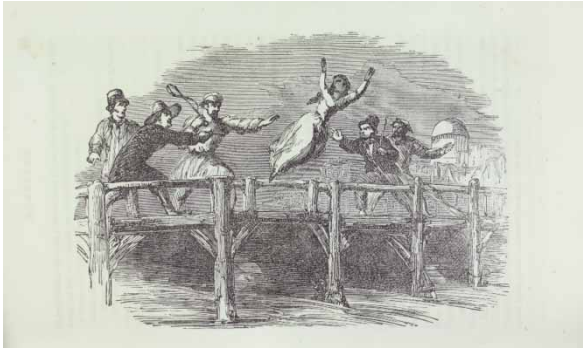

Figure 6. Arms raised and spread, as if in triumph and thanks, Clotel escapes imminent capture by darting over the railing at the last possible second. This illustration, titled 'The Death of Clotel', was a standard feature in several popular editions of Brown's novel. Source: William Wells Brown, *Clotel; or, The President's Daughter* (London: Partridge and Oakey, 1853), frontispiece.

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interests in Congress achieved a string of legislative victories in the 1840s and 1850s, did one white abolitionist after another begin to consider the possibility. Ironically, the most famous pacifist in America was in the vanguard. Stung by criticism that his long-standing objection to violence was hamstringing a proper response to anti-abolitionist riots and lynchings, William Lloyd Garrison briefly set aside his conscientious objections in the chaotic years after the 1840 schism and opened the pages of the *Liberator* to pieces that valorised violent martyrdom. Just two months after Henry Highland Garnet's August 1843 plea to the nation's slaves, the *Liberator* featured a story that distilled Garnet's heroic understanding of the meaning of slave suicide to its essence. 'Liberty or Death' ran the headline, accompanied by a story of a black mechanic who had been promised manumission on the death of his owner, only to be sold south by a cheating executor. Snatched from the cusp of freedom, George had been hastily herded onto a steamship by his new owner. But as dawn broke the next day, George was nowhere to be found, and the ship's grindstone was missing. The crew found both at the bottom of the river. 'Death before slavery! George had tasted liberty!!!' read the last line of the report.[40]

The *Liberator* and its sister paper the *Emancipator* kept up a steady stream of similarly styled news items throughout the 1840s. These reports struck indignant notes more often than not, demanding that readers interpret each Samson-like suicide as a proof positive of the hypocrisy of southerners proud of Patrick Henry's eloquent call to resist tyranny at all costs, yet unwilling to credit the heroism of 'a rude and almost savage African [who] attempts to put in practice this principle of the great Virginian'.[41]

By the time Garrison ended the *Liberator*'s flirtation with righteous violence in 1851, the cause had taken on a life of its own. The Compromise of 1850 and the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act and the Kansas–Nebraska Act in 1854 each marked gigantic victories for pro-slavery interests in Congress. In the face of this onslaught, several

prominent members of the Liberty Party endorsed militant action as a last resort. Turning Patrick Henry's revolutionary rhetoric into a plan of action, men like James Redpath, Henry Ward Beecher and Gerrit Smith proposed smuggling pistols and pocket compasses into Virginia, the Carolinas and Georgia in hopes of encouraging their black brothers to escape to safety in the North, rise up in armed revolt or summon the courage to die in the attempt.[42]

Planters and other pro-slavery interests watched the rise of a militant biracial coalition with horror and anger. During the 1830s, long before the abolition movement's disciplined commitments to pacifism and humanitarian realism had begun to waiver, supporters of the Slave Power had regularly (and mistakenly) accused Garrison and his allies of encouraging slaves to revolt. Now, as calls for violent resistance to slavery swept from the free states towards the Cotton Kingdom, planters had genuine reason to lose sleep. As Kansas bled, some there even imagined that itinerant abolitionists were sneaking onto their plantations to talk their slaves into acts of mass suicide:

> Circumstances have transpired within a few weeks past in this neighborhood which have placed beyond doubt the existence of an organized band of Abolitionists in our midst . . . Mr. Graffam Thompson of this place lost a valuable Negro about a week ago, and we have not the least doubt that she was persuaded by one of this lawless band to destroy herself rather than remain in slavery. In fact, one of this gang was heard to remark, 'that she did perfectly right in drowning herself', and just as he would have done, or 'what any negro who is held in bondage should do'.

While the scene strains credulity, this notice from an 1855 issue of the *Kansas Herald* demonstrates planters' acute awareness of the recent sea change in abolitionist engagement with slave suicide and the problem of resistance. Since the late seventeenth century, southern slaveholders had worked to shore up their power over their human property by brutally punishing every slave they discovered trying to kill themselves. In fact, deterring suicide on the plantation (and concealing the truth of its extent from northern visitors) was fundamental to preserving the grand illusion that bondsmen had consented to their enslavement and were powerless to resist it. Now planters came to a dreadful realisation: that militant abolitionists now considered acts of suicide in pursuit of liberty worthy of the same assistance and encouragement they gave to slaves willing to risk their lives as rebels or runaways.[43]

* * *

By the eve of the Civil War, militant abolitionists had dug in everywhere. John Brown's repeated attempts to spark slave revolts across the South after 1855 were simply the most extreme manifestations of the growing belief that blood sacrifice was a just and purifying rite for blacks as well as whites. As this study of the role of slave suicides in anti-slavery writing makes clear, Brown's ideas about the role of righteous resistance to race slavery had their roots in a decades-long debate about who had the power to challenge its corrupt and insidious authority. In this debate, perceptions of slave suicide played a central role.

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In the immediate aftermath of the American Revolution, a handful of insurgent anti-slavery activists had used the pages of the new nation's literary magazines to forge a lyrical link between suicide and self-determination. They used this understanding of self-destruction as a noble and forceful response to slavery in order to try to undermine the pernicious mythology that the country's non-free population had, through non-resistance, effectively consented to their enslavement. Stories of men imbued with what college-educated observers understood to be classical virtue, men who chose death over tyranny, thus dominated late eighteenth-century attempts to harness popular print culture for the limited, gradualist goals of early national anti-slavery.

These images of slaves committed to principled, yet violent, resistance did not disappear from anti-slavery writing in the nineteenth century. Activists resurrected stories of men like Quashi from time to time throughout the Jacksonian era. Yet, by the 1830s, fear of slave revolts and the restrictions on representation that Garrisonians believed were necessary to effect a nationwide moral revolution capable of delivering immediate emancipation ensured that these Caribbean Catos were banished to the margins of the movement. A growing cast of suffering servants instead took their place, many of them tearful women whose abject victimhood was rendered in pitiful descriptions of how they surrendered to death to staunch physical and emotional wounds. Constructed so as to make evangelical readers feel like Good Samaritans and compel them to intervene, these fatalistic and utterly unthreatening portrayals of slave suicide were so widespread in abolitionist writing during the 1830s that they came to define nationwide efforts to undermine slavery's moral authority.

Following the forced retrenchment of moral suasion activity after the Panic of 1837 and the fissuring of the abolitionist movement in 1840, the trope of the suicidal slave was remade once more. While writers such as Harriet Beecher Stowe would continue to trade on images of slave mothers trembling on the verge of oblivion until the eve of the Civil War, militant abolitionists active in the 1840s and 1850s rejuvenated the revolutionary-era connection between self-destruction, mastery and manhood to serve a new and more radical liberationist creed that would settle the question of consent once and for all. First black and then white militants of the antebellum generation fused the example of Samson, the mighty Old Testament slave who brings down the temple roof upon the Philistines as he dies, to the rhetoric of Patrick Henry, the Virginia patriot who brooked no capitulation in the face of tyranny. In doing so, they reached out to southern slaves and fearful fugitives alike with a simple and direct message: death is freedom, so declare your independence.

Notes

[1] 'The Desperate Negroe', *Massachusetts Magazine*, October 1793.

[2] *New-York Journal*, 21 June 1788, 2; *Massachusetts Spy*, 17 July 1788, 4; *Independent Gazetteer*, 9 June 1788, 3.

[3] Thomas Branagan, *The Charms of Benevolence* (Philadelphia: Johnston and Patterson, 1813), 296; Thomas Branagan, *A Preliminary Essay, on the Oppression of the Exiled Sons of Africa*

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(Philadelphia: Printed for the author by J.W. Scott, 1804), 26; Debbie Lee, *Slavery and the Romantic Imagination* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 35; Lorenzo Dow Turner, *Anti-Slavery Sentiment in American Literature prior to 1865* (Washington, DC: Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, 1929), 25.

[4] *Norwich Packet*, 20 February 1789; Branagan, *Preliminary Essay*, 54. See also *New-Hampshire Recorder*, 5 March 1789; *American Moral and Sentimental Magazine*, 11 September 1797, 162. This output betrayed an obvious debt to the tropes of slave suicide established in Thomas Day and John Bicknell's sorrowful poem 'The Dying Negro'.

[5] *New York Packet*, 29 May 1786; *New-Hampshire Mercury*, 5 July 1785, 4; *Massachusetts Gazette*, 5 October 1787, 2.

[6] François Furstenberg, 'Beyond Freedom and Slavery: Autonomy, Virtue, and Resistance in Early American Political Discourse', *Journal of American History* 89, no. 4 (2003): 1295–1330 (*passim*). Black-authored descriptions of slave suicide are rare in this period.

[7] George Buchanan, *An Oration upon the Moral and Political Evil of Slavery. Delivered at a Public Meeting of the Maryland Society, for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, and the Relief of Free Negroes, and Others Unlawfully Held in Bondage. Baltimore, July 4th, 1791* (Baltimore: Philip Edwards, 1793), 10.

[8] Clement Clarke Moore, *Observations upon Certain Passages in Mr. Jefferson's Notes on Virginia Which Appear to Have a Tendency to Subvert Religion, and Establish a False Philosophy* (New York, 1804), 23–24; David N. Gellman, 'Race, the Public Sphere, and Abolition in Late Eighteenth-Century New York', *Journal of the Early Republic* 20, no. 4 (2000): 607–636 (628).

[9] Humanitas, *Reflections on Slavery; with Recent Evidence of Its Inhumanity. Occasioned by the Melancholy Death of Romain, a French Negro* (Philadelphia: Printed for the author by R. Cochran, 1803), 14, 17.

[10] Ibid., 14–15; Rachel Hope Cleves, *Reign of Terror in America: Visions of Violence from Anti-Jacobinism to Antislavery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 108–109.

[11] Gellman, 'Race', 625; United States Congress, *The Debates and Proceedings in the Congress of the United States* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1834), 201.

[12] Steven Deyle, *Carry Me Back: The Domestic Slave Trade in American Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 21, 283–296; Josephine F. Pacheco, *The Pearl: A Failed Slave Escape on the Potomac* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 15–47; Steven Mintz, *Moralists & Modernizers: America's Pre-Civil War Reformers* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 120; Jesse Torrey, *A Portraiture of Domestic Slavery, in the United States: With Reflections on the Practicability of Restoring the Moral Rights of the Slave…* (Philadelphia: Published by the Author, 1817), 33, 41.

[13] Torrey, *Portraiture*, 31, 42–44.

[14] *New-England Galaxy and Masonic Magazine*, 19 December 1817, 3.

[15] *Liberator*, 2 November 1833, 175; Lydia Maria Child, *An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans* (Boston: Allen and Ticknor, 1833), 190; *Genius of Universal Emancipation*, March 1832, 160; August 1821, 20.

[16] *Genius of Universal Emancipation*, 5 March 1830, 3; June 1822, 192.

[17] Deyle, *Carry Me Back*, 178–179; Merle L. Dillon, *Benjamin Lundy and the Struggle for Negro Freedom* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1966), 44, 69; Henry Mayer, *All on Fire: William Lloyd Garrison and the Abolition of Slavery* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 51–91; Trish Loughran. *The Republic in Print: Print Culture in the Age of U.S. Nation Building, 1770–1870* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 315–319.

[18] Dwight Lowell Dumond, *Anti-Slavery: The Crusade for Freedom in America* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1961), 264–267 (264); Merle L. Dillon, *Slavery Attacked: Southern Slaves and Their Allies, 1619–1865* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 178; James Brewer Stewart, *Holy Warriors: The Abolitionists and American Slavery*

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