

Purpose of Project Statement:

For this essay I was tasked with creating a 10 page paper focusing on a topic, object, or phenomenon of interest within Black culture. There are many aspects of Black culture which are of both personal and academic interest to me, but ultimately I decided that I wanted to write about what I believe to be one of the most concerning and least addressed inequalities between cultures across racial lines within America; that being the right to appreciate the quotidian. Black Americans are frequently barred from enjoying the mundane, quiet and interior aspects of day to day life. This is the result of both directly racist efforts, as well as the monolithic nature ascribed by the media and many 'well meaning' individuals to Black suffering. The latter issue is, I believe, becoming an increasingly large problem, with the usage of social media and increased efforts to focus on Black history and literature (utilizing curriculum created and often taught by White educators) continuing to overemphasize the spectacle of Black pain. With this essay, I gesture towards the problematic history and nature of such inequalities, arguing in favor of the quotidian and the quiet as counters to the issue of the spectacle.

The Issue of the Spectacle: Considerations and Alternatives

In the social media age, the threat of spectacular displays of black suffering and violence towards black individuals has heightened due to increased circulation and awareness of the structures of racial violence and prejudice that are foundational to the United States. While this may appear to be productive and progressive in that it illuminates the issue of racism, it would be a societal disservice to not investigate further into the limitations, and dangers, of this spectacularization. What might critical inquiries into the production of these images and accounts reveal about the reproduction of race and racism? First and foremost they reveal that

such issues have existed long before the digital age or the inventions of photography and film; abolitionist correspondence, literature, theater and the history of coerced performances of enslaved individuals within the United States all show that spectacles of suffering have played an essential role in shaping the dominant white culture's understanding of, and connection with, blackness. Furthermore, with the establishment of such a historical background comes the tools and capacities to recognize the ways in which the focus on spectacular portrayals of violence obscures not only the more mundane acts of violence that threaten blackness and black individuals on a daily basis, but the system of anti-blackness in its entirety. This allows for the additional acknowledgment of the cultural and philosophical hazard that is connecting with, or attempting to understand, blackness only through the lens or at the site of suffering and violence. Ultimately, this brings up the question of what alternatives may be theorized, and perhaps more importantly put into practice, that might allow for rethinking to occur regarding the relationship of both the dominant white culture, as well as the subjugated black minority, to blackness. Here, the mundane, quotidian, quiet, and 'everyday' aspects of black life, both the saddening and joyous ones, the celebrations, mournings and everything in between, that which is taken for granted or glossed over by non black individuals, are of the utmost importance; such moments provide opportunities for more intimate and authentic comprehensions of, and conversations about, blackness, black history, culture and communities. What might the preservation of routine or seemingly unremarkable moments within the black lifeworld, both the violent and peaceful ones, reveal about our mass disconnection from it and the role of the spectacle in that severance?

It is by no mistake that Saidiya Hartman begins the introduction to her book *Scenes of Subjection* by discussing the "'terrible spectacle' that introduced Frederick Douglass to slavery" (3), that being the beating of his aunt Hester. What makes Hartman's allusion to this moment so

powerful lies, seemingly paradoxically, in her decision *not* to recreate or “reproduce Douglass’s account of the beating...in order to call attention to the ease with which such scenes are usually reiterated, the casualness with which they are circulated, and the consequences of this routine display of the slave's ravaged body” (3). As she so poignantly puts it, “rather than inciting indignation, too often they immure us to pain by virtue of their familiarity—the oft-repeated or restored character of these accounts and our distance from them are signaled by the theatrical language usually resorted to in describing these instances—and especially because they reinforce the spectacular character of black suffering” (Hartman 3). What Hartman is attempting to illuminate here is that there is something deeply troubling about the relative ease with which we resort to these grotesque descriptions of the desecration of enslaved black individuals; something about our relationship to this imagery, and the frequency with which we rely upon it, is rather troubling and has significant implications regarding our culture.

It is not a stretch to suggest that the dominant white culture’s relationship to black individuals, communities and notions of blackness are defined by the ease with which they disseminate and utilize spectacular acts and displays of violence and suffering directed towards them. Presumably it feels somewhat intuitive that the system of slavery is dependent upon spectacular displays of violence; certainly whippings, beatings, lynchings, and unimaginable punishments are understood contemporarily on a universal level to have undergirded slavery in the United States, and it would be highly difficult to argue that such events were not spectacular acts of violence. What is more obscured, however, are the ways in which the spectacles of violence hid within plain sight, being overlooked or even used by abolitionists as well as slave masters. One of the places in which this was most apparent was the coffle. While certainly a spectacular display of violence towards the enslaved people being marched along shackled,

starved and hardly clothed, the coffle was made into a performance for the enjoyment of those it passed by. Enslaved people were forced to sing and act as free entertainment accessible to all white individuals who inhabited, or came to visit, the places through which the coffle passed. Hartman notes, however, that it is not only those who led or shamelessly endorsed the coffle who found it spectacular, but those who utilized its imagery in an attempt to draw attention towards the dire importance of abolition as well. Hartman examines correspondence between abolitionist John Rankine and his slave owning brother and notes that the former “makes apparent that the crimes of slavery are not only witnessed but staged. This is a result of the recourse to terms like ‘stage,’ ‘spectacle,’ and ‘scene’ in conveying these horrors” (17). Even the language utilized by abolitionists furthered this connection between blackness, slavery and the spectacle, as they attempted to draw attention towards the dangers of slavery only by recreating and commenting on the most extreme examples of its spectacular violence.

The issue that arises from Hartman’s astute observation of abolitionists’ reliance upon, and tendency towards reproducing, the spectacle of black suffering and its theatrical nature is two pronged. On the one hand, “we need to consider whether the identification forged at the site of suffering confirms black humanity at the peril of reinforcing racist assumptions of limited sentience, in that the humanity of the enslaved and the violence of the institution can only be brought into view by extreme examples of incineration and dismemberment” (Hartman 21), and we must question what it means “that the violence of slavery or the pained existence of the enslaved, if discernible, is only so in the most heinous and grotesque examples and not in the quotidian routines of slavery” (Hartman 21). There is something societally hazardous and existentially dreadful about the fact that the dominant white culture is unable to connect with blackness and black communities, even when attempting to defend them, at any site other than

that of suffering. Certainly, it runs the risk of reproducing the same racist rhetoric utilized by slaveholders to justify the continued subjugation of people of African descent, which is that their humanity is limited to expressions of pain. Admittedly, slave owners believed that such suffering was short lived, likely to cease swiftly and give way to jovial spectacles of song and dance, which they asserted were natural for black individuals, while abolitionists argued that the misery of slavery was long lasting. Rather than recognize it is all encompassing or even ineffable, however, abolitionists frequently viewed this pain as being restricted to the most spectacular moments of violence; even they failed to recognize that every aspect of slavery was painful.

Both the belief that song and dance were natural states of being for black individuals, a nature which would continue in an ignorant bliss in spite of the horrid conditions of slavery, as well as the belief that enslaved people's sorrows could only be accessed or understood by, and explained to wider audiences through, the spectacularization of suffering actively reproduced the obscuring of the quotidian violence of slavery. It might seem strange in the present age to suggest that any act of violence associated with slavery could be quotidian or mundane in any sense of the word, and as such, retheorization surrounding the notion of violence itself becomes necessary. Performance is one of these violent elements of slavery that Hartman argues must be reconsidered. This may, reasonably, bring to mind the previous images of the coffle, but on the plantation slaves' performances were also deeply tied to their subjugation, with "the innocent amusements and spectacles of mastery orchestrated by members of the slaveholding class to establish their dominion and regulate the little leisure allowed to the enslaved" (Hartman 8) being "significant components of slave performance" (Hartman 8). Hartman further argues that the historical and longstanding "affiliation of performance and blackness can be attributed to the spectacularization of black pain" (22), and questions if instances enslaved people performing for

their masters really are “any less inhumane than that of slaves sobbing and dancing on the auction block” (42). Within the system of slavery, no performance or act of amusement was truly innocent, and the lines between violence and performance became blurred, it became, for example, “difficult, if not impossible, to establish an absolute and definitive division between ‘going before the master’ and other amusements” (Hartman 8). These more quotidian moments of misery are made to seem insignificant or benign in comparison to the spectacle of beatings and lynchings, when in fact they were likely equally as traumatic for the enslaved people, and certainly became an essential part of the maintenance of the system of slavery.

By extending this argument to contemporary white supremacy, which no longer has upon its belt the tool of slavery but rather the remnants of it, those being the police, the 13th amendment and numerous other political, medical and cultural structures of racism, it becomes clear that the system of anti-blackness, in fact, hides behind spectacular displays of black suffering and violence. As Martinot and Sexton have illuminated, “most theories of white supremacy seek to plumb the depths of its excessiveness, beyond the ordinary; they miss the fact that racism is a mundane affair. The fundamental excess of the paradigm of policing which infuses this culture is wholly banal. Those theories overlook that fact in favor of extant extravagance, spectacle” (paragraph 14). The notion that racism is in any way mundane may seem counterintuitive in that it trivializes the suffering caused by it, but in fact it does the opposite work; it allows for the recognition of the fact that anti-blackness undergirds all aspects of life in the Western world, and especially within the United States. Racism is not simply these wild displays of police brutality, racialized beatings, slurs or even microaggressions, it includes the quotidian acts of racial profiling, the slick comments, the passive aggression and the violence that goes unnoticed. Moreover, no events can capture anti-blackness in their entirety, because it

is a structure that is foundational to society as we know it; politics, religion, law, all of these places and more are institutions which are essential to anti-blackness, and to focus on particular instances within any one or even all of those areas is to lose sight of the issue of the structure itself, to become strangely complicit in its camouflaging.

Perhaps no better example can be given than the problem of the police as an institution within the United States. As Sexton and Martinot argue, “to focus on the spectacular event of police violence is to deploy (and thereby reaffirm) the logic of police profiling itself. Yet, we can’t avoid this logic once we submit to the demand to provide examples or images of the paradigm. As a result, the attempt to articulate the paradigm of policing renders itself non-paradigmatic, reaffirms the logic of police profiling, and thereby reduces itself to the fraudulent ethics by which white civil society rationalizes its existence” (paragraphs 12-13). The camouflage of the spectacular, which we reproduce in our attempts to draw attention to the white supremacy of policing, is ironically where it hides most often. The structures of white supremacy and anti-blackness force us, quite cleverly and often without our own knowledge, to lose track of them among a sea of eye catching and anger inducing examples, so that they may continue to function, in a quite silent and quotidian manner, in broad daylight.

The coercion of our focus towards these particular spectacles of anti-blackness by the structures of white supremacy have the added effect of conflating black expressiveness with public displays of resistance, so much so that the interior life of black individuals and the inwardly focused aspects of black culture are lost among exterior expressions. Black individuals are, in the ongoing fight for equality, forced to continuously point towards these spectacular examples of black suffering and violence in an effort to reach the mainstream with their concerns; this, in accordance with the goals of the structures of anti-blackness and white

supremacy, ultimately diverts attention from the underlying issues, and moreover causes black culture as a whole to be “overidentified with an idea of expressiveness that is geared toward a social audience and that has political aim” (Quashie 11). As Quashie notes, “such expressiveness is the essence of black resistance” (11), and “resistance, then, is the dominant framework for reading black culture. One result of this dominance is that the major concepts used to discuss black culture...are engaged largely for their capacity to support the idea of resistance” (14). Black individuals are effectively faced with the decision to either avoid the spectacle, limiting the overall recognition of the suffering black people face, or draw attention to it and, for all intents and purposes, further obscure the system of anti-blackness and limit the perceptions of black culture to resistance and resilience. In other words, “the options are few—accept the racist characterization and become all the inferiority it imagines you to be, or resist it fiercely” (Quashie 14). Black individuals are seemingly not offered any more nuanced response.

It is this dilemma, this chokehold which black culture, individuals and communities are being held in that creates the need for new ways of thinking about blackness. In particular, the quiet and the quotidian, as insignificant as they may seem at first glance, arise as powerful alternatives for deeper expressions of blackness and as necessary authentic points of connection with it. The mundane and the interiorly focused aspects of the black lifeworld are overlooked largely “in favor of what is publicly expressive” (Quashie 16), but also because the dominant white culture takes for granted these elements of daily life; they are not something that white individuals have to fight to experience or preserve. It is troubling that, “in the face of the inviolable relationship among publicness, expressiveness, and resistance, black cultural studies lacks a metaphor for characterizing the inner life” (Quashie 20). Indeed it is not just black studies but also the entirety of non-black society that lacks any relevant metaphors for such a project.

It is here that Quashie asserts, “the quiet of a person represents the broad scope of his or her inner life; the quiet symbolizes—and if interrogated, expresses—some of the capacity of the interior” (21). It is important that this notion of the quiet not be conflated with silence; on the contrary, it is not that blackness needs to be hushed or become soundless, but rather that black individuals need to be allowed new modes of thinking about themselves and their culture that are not reliant upon publicity for validation, that move away from spectacular demonstrations that attempt to gain mainstream approval and towards interiorly focused and introspective work. Certainly attention needs to be given to the issues plaguing black individuals within an anti-black world, but by focusing only on the monolith of outward expression we lose sight of the fact that “there is a strong contemplative tradition in black culture, a tradition inspired by the existential struggle of living with the confines of racial identity” (Quashie 24). Even more harmful is that we risk fundamentally limiting notions and expressions of blackness to resistance, and subsequently we lose the nuances of black interior life, experience, and thought.

What emerges is a need for an appreciation of the black quotidian. The task at hand is to begin to take very seriously the day to day experiences of black individuals and communities; not just the moments or figures that make the mainstream white news, not just spectacular moments of suffering or even the moments of internal resistance, but the smallest victories and defeats, the mundane and seemingly benign moments which white America is conditioned to glance over. Such moments may be small, they may be localized or not appear to have had any major philosophical or societal impact, but they are far from insignificant. An important shift in our understanding of and connection with blackness and black culture occurs when we reevaluate the importance of quotidian aspects of the black lifeworld. It is this precise work that Matthew Delmont has been attempting to do with his digital project *Black Quotidian*, an

extensive online archive of excerpts from predominantly black newspapers. *Black Quotidian* emerged out of Delmont's concerns that his students "only see black history as a story of tragedy and struggle, without appreciating the joyous complexity of everyday black lives and communities" (Introduction, paragraph 3), and the project effectively serves as a counter to the white history of blackness which focuses only on spectacular suffering and, at best, occasional moments of monumental victory or national pride.

Delmont asserted that, "by emphasizing that black history can be mundane, not only triumphant or tragic, *Black Quotidian* offers a thematically diverse foundation from which to research and teach African-American history" (Introduction, paragraph 4), something that has become increasingly important in the post Black Lives Matter age, in which the growing inclusion of black history as an educational and social requirement has focused largely on the spectacular aspects and events. Delmont, by highlighting the ways in which black newspapers have historically documented, celebrated and preserved daily occurrences such as dances, high school and collegiate sports victories, underappreciated achievements by black individuals, and even advertisements geared towards black audiences, offers ample material through which the nuances of the black lifeworld may be engaged with. As Delmont himself notes, "it would have been possible to fill *Black Quotidian* with only examples of the daily racial terror black people have fought against. I elected not to do this because I wanted to illustrate how joy and the threat of violence have always been part of the quotidian lives of black people in America" (Racial Violence, paragraph 3). It is the dual nature of the quotidian lives described here, the emphasis placed on both joy and the threat of violence, rather than on spectacular displays of violence only, that best capture the potential of the black quotidian as a new mode of comprehending and expressing blackness, as well as a new method for appreciating the black interiority.

The current emphasis being placed on the interior and daily lives of black individuals by notions of the quiet and black quotidian are long overdue. Their potential for disrupting the dominance of the spectacle as the primary method of perceiving blackness may have fundamentally altered race relations within our society had they been historically been taken seriously. It is no mistake, however, that these alternatives are being increasingly offered contemporarily. Perhaps now, more than ever, we must reconsider the spectacle of black violence, as it has come to dominate our social media feeds, political discourse, educational curriculum, and subsequently embedded itself deeper within our collective consciousness. It is time that black individuals are afforded equal rights to nuance, mundanity and the quotidian.

Works Cited

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