Political Necrophilia

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1. Thinking against Freedom

> FREE' DOM, *n*. A state of exemption from the power or control of another . . . exemption from slavery.
> —Noah Webster, *An American Dictionary of the English Language*

Setting his sights on an intellectual position that would announce U.S. cultural independence from European tradition, Ralph Waldo Emerson prescribed a revolutionary, if not iconoclastic, nominalism: "Free should the scholar be, free and brave. Free even to the definition of freedom."[1] This

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1. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The American Scholar," in *Essays and Lectures* (New York: Modern Library, 1983), 65. Discussion of the vocabulary of freedom takes on added complexity because writers, critics, and theorists often use *freedom* and *liberty* interchangeably. See Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, "Are Freedom and Liberty Twins?" *Political Theory* 16 (November 1988): 523–52, for a discussion of these confusions as well as an etymo-

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desire, for a citizen whose speech is unpolluted by historical precedent and whose thoughts are unfettered by tacit ideological assumptions, led the author of "The American Scholar" (1837) on a well-worn search for a linguistic utopia where freedom could be mined—theoretically but not experientially—in a pure state. Almost a decade earlier, Noah Webster embarked on a similar journey to claim a pristine political vocabulary. The project of his famous lexicon is, as his title suggests, to create *An American Dictionary of the English Language* (1828) that will cleanse the citizen's tongue of foreign inflection. Despite such intentions to liberate "freedom," the *American Dictionary* fails to achieve ahistoricity, its entries burdened with connotations peculiar to U.S. institutions and racial history. This paradox that seeks to define freedom freely, without regard to prior context, does more than enjoin Emerson's scholar to articulate politics as a tautology: Such constraint at the level of the word reveals the material conditions of a freedom that is supposed to have neither history nor context.

The abiding negativity that permeates Emerson's and Webster's statements—each searches for a "freedom from"—echoes with the struggle of liberalism to divest political vocabulary of history.[2] But promulgating an innocent freedom comes under the purview of the nation-state. Rather than fall back on English authors, Webster trusts in his countryman John Adams to provide an American definition: "There can be no *free* government without a democratical branch in the constitution." The *American Dictionary* spells out a federal pedagogy, establishing freedom as isomorphic to the juridical origins of the state. "Free" becomes demonstrable by a state memory that does not bear the weight of antecedence simply because it is believed that history has not yet debauched America, that political decay has not outmoded Adams's meaning. A subsequent example garnered from

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logical treatment of freedom. Also see Michael G. Kammen, who, in *Spheres of Liberty: Changing Perceptions of Liberty in American Culture* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986), identifies "languages of liberty" (9) from the early republic to the post-Reconstruction era.

2. On this idea of "freedom from" or "negative liberty," see Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," in *Four Essays on Liberty* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 118–72. John Gray, in *Isaiah Berlin* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996), discusses freedom as a lack of impediments, not in terms of motion but in terms of selecting values and formulating choices. But see also Quentin Skinner, "The Idea of Negative Liberty: Philosophical and Historical Perspectives," in *Philosophy in History: Essays on the Historiography of Philosophy*, ed. Richard Rorty, J. B. Schneewind, Quentin Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 193–221, who turns to Machiavelli in an effort to uncouple negative liberty from individual rights.

Chaucer is thus reported as "*Not in use*," while appearances of "free" in John Dryden are made cumbersome by associations with crime and "slavish conditions." Although Adams provides a virtuous context for freedom, other illustrations from U.S. situations are invoked only to be rejected, to say what freedom is not: "Not enslaved; not in a state of vassalage or dependence" defines the adjective *free*; as a verb, *free* means "to manumit; to release from bondage; as, to *free* a slave." Even though Webster collects thirty-five definitions of *free* and *freedom* to give his citizen-reader plenty of linguistic liberty, his list nonetheless freights this ideal with overdetermined referents, including "fetters," "restraint," "servitude," and "bondage." The American tongue—despite Emerson's injunction—was hardly at liberty to propose its own definition of freedom. Harmony between the lexical and political senses breaks down, signaling that the messy materiality of history has intruded after all. Citizen, scholar, and lexicographer all find that freedom is an unfree concept, alternately elaborated and confined by the untranscended particularities of national culture.

Thinking against freedom negates a lingua franca that simultaneously empties freedom of cultural specificity and ensconces it in a nationalist framework. This negative genealogy works against prescription even as it privileges a material register too often ignored or derided by definitions of freedom—the terror of the particular. Excavation of material histories buried by modern citizenship, as Marx implies, attends to the repressed contexts of political systems: "In democracy the *formal* principle is at the same time the *material* principle. Only democracy, therefore, is the true unity of the general and the particular."[3] Within this dictum, however, aesthetics intrudes on politics, committing Marx to an ultimate notion of "true unity" that harmonizes democracy at the risk of overlooking its excluded or forgotten discordances. To the extent that this "true unity" depends on the state's organizing framework, it precludes the scraps of memory and remainders of experience—the messy materials left over from articulations of freedom and democracy—that do not adhere to the crisp, well-ordered lines of an official, aesthetic history. And for so much of U.S. history, race has been at the center of this mess.

Slavery muddles freedom, yoking it to meanings that interfere with the tautological simplicity of Emerson's definition or the self-evident charac-

3. Karl Marx, *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law*, in *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels: Collected Works*, trans. Richard Dixon et al., 50 vols. (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 3:30.

ter of Adams's example. Desire for an unencumbered vocabulary endures both in contemporary and nineteenth-century cultural criticism, fueling narratives that theorize a noncultural language of freedom. Efforts to liberate freedom from context encourage abstracted definitions, which eviscerate the plenitude of citizenship by making freedom the property of a disembodied and historically impoverished subject. The United States puts an exceptionalist spin on Edward Said's argument that "we need to acknowledge frankly that individual freedoms and rights are set irrevocably in a national context."[4] For once installed in a "national context," U.S. freedom pretends that it has no context: no race, no gender, no memory.

This aspiration toward a noncontingent or "free" definition of citizen rights, this longing for a journey back to a virginal liberty, enforces an "ontological cleansing" of the democratic subject.[5] Purged of content, the self seems pristine, verging on recovery of unconditional personhood. For Wai Chee Dimock, this encounter with the "absolute" impoverishes subjectivity, alienating all that is not universal "so that the category of the person can finally be categoric."[6] Not only Emerson and Webster but, as we shall see, a wide range of citizens and noncitizens, including white antislavery activists, proslavery apologists, and black abolitionists, defined freedom with a nationalized vocabulary devoid of any accretions of memory or context. As set out by "The American Scholar," freedom would then be truly free.

Theoretically unfettered yet conceptually bound, freedom answers to questions of syntax, discarding the texture of semantics as a hindrance. As Dimock explains, liberalism sustains a syntactic subject, one whose being is "generalizable," recognizable to the social order only to the extent of his

4. Edward W. Said, "Nationalism, Human Rights, and Interpretation," in *Freedom and Interpretation*, ed. Barbara Johnson, Oxford Amnesty Lectures, 1992 (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 199. From the antebellum era through the Civil War years, articulations of freedom demand national contexts. For Henry Ward Beecher speaking in March 1862 on "The Beginning of Freedom" just after Lincoln endorsed the idea of compensated emancipation, freedom itself supplied the energy to make one's countrymen into national subjects: "Liberty has been at work breeding citizens at the North. They are national. They love the whole country" (*Freedom and War: Discourses on Topics Suggested by the Times* [Boston: Tickner and Fields, 1863], 231). In such an example, liberty provides the grist of national narrative. My purpose here, however, is not to uncover an already blatant nationalist script but rather to examine how this universalist-nationalist appeal conditions freedom.

5. Wai Chee Dimock, *Residues of Justice: Literature, Law, Philosophy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 114.

6. Dimock, *Residues of Justice*, 114, 116.

or her ability to exist abstractly.[7] Structured by this political syntax, citizens adhere to a lexicon that governs without regard to "irregular" conditions that particularize subjects such as institutional location or racial ancestry. U.S. democracy deploys a freedom that operates above culture, or, better yet, that makes culture a hindrance to citizenship. Such ecumenical thinking precludes the possibility that the subject instead might be semantic, understood only by urges, remainders, and details that diverge from the universal. Clogged with connotations of the past, a semantic subject is made unwieldy by the weight of memory, antecedence, and context. But once ensconced in a language of syntax, as opposed to a language of semantics, freedom has no earthly awkwardness and flits about effortlessly as both premise and promise.

2. Reading the Social Contract . . . The Fine Print

This longing for the discarnate does more than lodge a bloodless abstraction at the heart of freedom. As Charles Mills contends in *The Racial Contract*, the problem with "mainstream political theory is not with abstraction *itself* . . . but with an *idealizing* abstraction that abstracts *away* from the crucial realities of the racial polity."[8] Building on Carole Pateman's assertion that (men's) civic individuality stems not from a social contract but a "sexual contract" that enforces women's subjection, Mills contends that white men establish lives of freedom through the civil, social, and biological deaths of nonwhites.[9] Along with recent critiques of citizenship and

7. Dimock, *Residues of Justice*, 110. My thinking about political syntax as opposed to political semantics stems from Dimock's contextualization of justice (119–20). See also Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics: A Review of Contemporary Criticism* 17 (summer 1987), who links projects of African American liberation to disrupting the syntax of American legal identities and introducing "a new semantic field/fold" (79). But see Mary Ann Glendon, *Rights Talk: The Impoverishment of Political Discourse* (New York: Free Press, 1991), who writes, "Our rights talk is like a book of words and phrases without a grammar and syntax," a complaint that has the effect of pushing for Marx's "true unity" by not grappling with the incomplete histories and unspoken critiques that lie beneath U.S. rights discourse (14).

8. Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1997), 76.

9. Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1988). Pateman writes that men "share a common interest in upholding the original contract which legitimizes masculine right and allows them to gain material and psychological benefit from women's subjection. . . . The civil individual and the public realm appear universal only in relation to and in opposition to the private sphere, the natural foundation of civil life. Similarly, the meaning of civil liberty and equality, secured and distributed im-

rights,[10] his argument reveals that airy abstractions legitimate practices that exclude and oppress women, enslave and colonize nonwhites, and dispossess and exterminate indigenous peoples. Thus, for Lauren Berlant, "the rhetoric of the bodiless political citizen, the generic 'person' whose political identity is a priori precisely because it is, in theory, non-corporeal," warrants obsessive embodiments of "American women and African-Americans."[11] As Dana Nelson's discussions of craniology and gynecology show, this targeting of bodily difference effects equality for those accorded full membership in the state. Freedom does not record how its construction depends on sexual and racial contracts; it is this forgetting that allows for citizenship's naturalization. Disavowal of the repressed matter of the social contract has an insidious double effect: Not only does it identify the corporeality of women and minorities as signs of political illegitimacy and civic disqualification, but these embodied signs also work inversely to secure, in Robyn Wiegman's words, "the corporeal abstraction accorded white masculinity that underwrites a host of civic entitlements."[12]

Liberal reform projects to redistribute such entitlements are flawed because they pivot on appeals to extend abstract freedom to particular bodies denied the privilege of disembodiment rather than on tactics to concretize freedom by making its usage specific, historical, and material. The example of Emerson reveals the failure of remaining within a national idiom that thinks for and not against freedom. As abolitionism roused his reluctant sympathies, Emerson modified his earlier commitment to a wholly syntactic freedom by imagining a definition that could be put into practice. To the 1854 antislavery compendium *Autographs for Freedom* he contributed a poem entitled "On Freedom," which offers a self-critical meditation on attempts to

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partially to all 'individuals' through the civil law, can be understood only in opposition to natural subjection (of women) in the private sphere" (113–14).

10. Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997); Robyn Wiegman, *American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995); and Dana D. Nelson, *National Manhood: Capitalist Citizenship and the Imagined Fraternity of White Men* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1998). See also Patricia J. Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991); and Maggie Montesinos Sale, *The Slumbering Volcano: American Slave Ship Revolts and the Production of Rebellious Masculinity* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997).

11. Lauren Berlant, "National Brands/National Body: *Imitation of Life*," in *Comparative American Identities: Race, Sex, and Nationality in the Modern Text*, ed. Hortense J. Spillers (New York: Routledge, 1991), 112, 113.

12. Wiegman, *American Anatomies*, 70.

write poetry in support of black emancipation. The Concord sage recalls a former undertaking to "rehearse / Freedom's paean in my verse," an effort that failed because, as he understands it, abstract political qualities refuse translation to the slave's specific institutional condition. The sticking point is not that slaves may be unfit for freedom; rather, the uncertainty is whether freedom, absolute and unconditional, can be negotiated so that its promise will touch the highly mediated body and being of the slave. Can freedom endure the historical accents of African America that give voice to experiences so discordant to white Americans that freedom no longer seems "self-evident?"

Meditations "on freedom" stumble against material contexts that saturate the slave's condition. Unlike the limitless tautology of freedom in "The American Scholar," black freedom, for Emerson, is an impossible paradox that founders on tangible meanings of race: The slave is sentenced to a social condition, his rights not absolute but conditional on a master's will. The slave's distance from "natural" rights explains why the poem's title is "On Freedom" as opposed to "Freedom." Lacking the preposition, the title would adduce a direct, unmediated knowledge so clearly abrogated by the disturbing richness of the semantic field (civil statutes, ethnological justifications, proslavery exegesis of scripture, and so forth) that circumscribes slave populations. A more simple title—"Freedom"—tends toward isomorphism, reducing meaning to formalities of syntax. That would be freedom without narrative, without context, a culturally abstract value resistant to encroachments of law or custom. Ignoring the "Spirit," who says that freedom is unutterable in this world, the poet tries to embody freedom. To quote Emerson's poem in full:

> Once I wished I might rehearse
> Freedom's paean in my verse,
> That the slave who caught the strain
> Should throb until he snapt his chain.
> But the Spirit said, "Not so;
> Speak it not, or speak it low;
> Name not lightly to be said,
> Gift too precious to be prayed,
> Passion not to be exprest
> But by heaving of the breast;
> Yet,—would'st thou the mountain find
> Where this deity is shrined,

Who gives the seas and sunset-skies
Their unspent beauty of surprise,
And, when it lists him, waken can
Brute and savage into man;
Or, if in thy heart he shine,
Blends the starry fates with thine,
Draws angles night to dwell with thee,
And makes thy thoughts archangels be;
Freedom's secret would'st thou know?—
Right thou feelst rashly do.[13]

The speaker's project to distill freedom's essence founders because his search involves the nonessential world of the slave. As a confession of Emerson's fumbling to endorse abolition, this poem does not celebrate attempts to realize freedom upon black flesh; rather, it does the opposite, critiquing the desire to embody freedom. He turns to "the Spirit," who discourages corporeal politics, urging the speaker not to defile freedom by speaking its name. The poet's consciousness must be purified, ascending from mountains to stellar climes to heaven itself. Stripped of earthly trappings, he encounters a generalized citizenship. As "brute" and "savage" evolve into "man," the speaker achieves an impregnable perspective, as many critics have approvingly noted. Emerson conjoins "liberty *and* solitude," according to David Bromwich, envisioning an autonomous position that ensures an uncorrupted subjectivity by virtue of its aloneness.[14] George Kateb reaches similar conclusions, suggesting that Emerson's political philosophy seeks a "less contingen[t]" identity that "must find its location elsewhere than in worldly appearance or activity."[15] Following the lead of these scholars, we find that "On Freedom" registers failure because of its activist desire to implement the ideal of freedom in an imperfect world. Yet such interpretations hinge on a slippage that confuses political liberty with personal independence: to cite Bromwich, "What [Emerson] did was to de-

13. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "On Freedom," in *Autographs for Freedom*, ed. Julia Griffiths (Rochester: Wanzer, Beardsley, and Company, 1854), 235–36. For a thorough treatment of Emerson's slow acceptance of the abolitionist agenda, see Len Gougeon, *Virtue's Hero: Emerson, Antislavery, and Reform* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990).

14. David Bromwich, *A Choice of Inheritance: Self and Community from Edmund Burke to Robert Frost* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 143.

15. George Kateb, *Emerson and Self-Reliance* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 1995), 25. See also his *Inner Ocean: Individualism and Democratic Culture* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1992), esp. 90–96.

scribe, with sufficient plainness and sufficient profoundness, a condition of personal independence. And that was enough."[16] When freedom requires neither justification nor explanation, when syntactic hermeticism provides sole validation, rights withstand mediation and negotiation because they lack realization. Freedom seems most complete when most disembodied.

Envisioned as word and not flesh, construed as syntax and not an accretion of semantic meaning, freedom is best defined by itself. This tautology captures the dictum of "The American Scholar" that citizens enjoy perfect freedom in defining freedom. Or, to rephrase Bromwich, this construction of freedom seems to be enough: Thus conceived, freedom seems "sufficient" because it does not admit complicating semantics—for example, a slave straining against chains—that confuse simple, straightforward definitions. This vague, nonideological freedom nonetheless plays an ideological role by administering a nationalized pedagogy that unites even the most politically disparate groups. Slave narratives, antislavery poetry, and proslavery novels share a conceptual idiom that figures freedom as a disembodied proposition. As a theoretical premise, freedom displaces politics by relying on a language whose broad tones mute local disturbances, anomalous remainders, and private memories that make messy the order of national definition. Northern liberal and southern conservative, abolitionist and slaveholder, former slave and free white citizen articulated politics via a vocabulary that surpasses, even annihilates, consideration of everyday practice, entrenched custom, economic exploitation, and ideological belief—all the material and immaterial conditions specific enough to particularize and fracture freedom into a disorganized archive of incommensurate experiences and frustrated expectations. Because abolitionists, both black and white, advanced a definition of freedom that grasped for absolutes and turned away from accidents of the flesh, their texts reproduced a nationalized vocabulary of disembodiment that made the agitation for freedom at times uncannily consistent with proslavery defenses.[17] Spoken without con-

16. Bromwich, *Choice of Inheritance*, 148. But see Christopher Newfield, *The Emerson Effect: Individualism and Submission in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), on the ways in which "personal independence" leads to authoritarian management of the self (6–13).

17. This is not to ignore the experiential base that differentiates black abolitionism and white antislavery views. See, for instance, C. Peter Ripley, who argues, in *The Black Abolitionist Papers*, 5 vols. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), "By 1840 two distinct abolitionisms existed. Whites approached slavery and freedom on an abstract ideological plane; blacks defined slavery and freedom in more concrete, experiential

text, freedom has little difficulty in providing the same content to conclaves with warring interests.

3. Give Me Liberty *and* Death

> The blacks, once you get them started, they glory in death.
> —David Walker, *David Walker's Appeal . . . to the Colored Citizens of the World*

"The thought of suicide flashed in my brain," says an Indian princess in "The Daughter of the Riccarees," a short story included in the antislavery annual *The Liberty Bell*. Captured into slavery, this chief's daughter looks to escape by overturning the canoe that carries her deeper into bondage: "A sudden movement to the side—the boat would upset and I should be free."[18] Trapped by forged documents that "prove" her a slave, she invokes a familiar American formula that equates freedom and death. The Indian princess gains easy access to Patrick Henry's patriotic arsenal because Native Americans had been processed by an iron rhetoric that made the choice between two absolutes, freedom and death, the same option. Entire tribes, according to romantic works in the vein of James Fenimore Cooper's *Last of the Mohicans* (1826) or Ann Stephens's *Malaeska: The Indian Wife of the White Hunter* (1860), pursued death in order to preserve natural liberty rather than endure a life hemmed in by fences and property markers. This voluntaristic logic marks a subtle yet important departure from Henry's ultimatum: It is not that death is a realistic alternative to an unrealizable freedom but rather that death figures and acts *as* freedom. The daughter of the Riccarees construes death as freedom because suicide—a self-chosen autonomous act—has all the trappings of liberty.[19] Indeed, by

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terms. White abolitionism drew largely upon evangelical theology and theories of universal reform; black abolitionism was grounded in political philosophy, and shaped by daily experiences in a racist society" (3:24).

18. Juliet Bauer, "The Daughter of the Riccarees," in *The Liberty Bell: By Friends of Freedom* (Boston: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1849), 10:65–66.

19. By equating suicide and freedom, the daughter of the Riccarees anticipates Maurice Blanchot's reading of suicide as an act that resounds with the possibility of "absolute freedom," in "Death and Possibility," in *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 99. Blanchot's explanation that a self-chosen death "would be an apotheosis of the instant . . . an event which one can look neither back upon nor forward to" (103) gestures to the annihilation of history so crucial to freedom.

1853, William Wells Brown could assert in the first African American novel, "Death Is Freedom."[20]

The Indian princess employs a perfectly balanced metaphor; death substitutes for freedom because unconditionality and absolutism are the general conditions of each. Her stoic resistance limns a nationally pleasing narrative by confirming freedom as a noncultural, eternal value and by making the fate of Native Americans a matter of individual proclivity, ahistorical and natural. For the daughter of the Riccarees, the severe dichotomy orchestrated by Henry implodes as the specter of death becomes the promise of freedom; the opposition between the two terms evaporates because their exchange occurs in a generalizable framework in which specific issues of federally mandated removal, tribal autonomy, and racial heritage evaporate as well. Whereas the challenge of "liberty or death" registers American colonial resistance to British rule, by the mid-nineteenth century, the metaphor of death as freedom epitomizes American resistance to culture and its contexts.

Despite an anticultural stance, the metaphor of death as freedom saturates nineteenth-century culture, recurring across a range of texts from African American narratives to the moonlit, magnolia settings of proslavery novels. With little connection to social or material life, an inert freedom fits the diverse agendas of black abolitionist, white antislavery activist, and slaveholder. Although divided by race, background, and education, free white citizen and black noncitizen adhere to a vocabulary whose abstruseness best suits the normative legal identity of white manhood. Freedom's morbid stakes help sow what Berlant calls "an ideology of dead citizenship," a political subjectivity impervious to historical life in the public sphere.[21] Legitimate citizens of the state—white propertied males—reap tremendous advantage from this gruesome metaphor, namely, the advantage of displacing disavowed material and corporeal encumbrances onto other bodies condemned to death. When the daughter of the Riccarees, for instance, ventriloquizes "liberty or death," she deploys a "prosthetic body" of whiteness and maleness that acts as "an apotropaic shield against penetration and further delegitimation."[22] Yet this virtual embodiment of Henry's nationally sanctioned white male slaveholding privilege protects only her fictive

20. William Wells Brown, *Clotel; or, The President's Daughter: A Narrative of Slave Life in the United States* (New York: Carol, 1969), 216.
21. Berlant, *Queen of America*, 80.
22. Berlant, "National Brands/National Body," 133.

identity while it threatens her actual enslaved body with annihilation. The Indian princess sold into bondage, her racially commodified body a condensation of histories of the slave trade and Native American genocide, risks death to leave citizenship free of memory.

The authors and editors who narrate and append slave autobiography give prosthetic performances—blacks employ classical tropes associated with white letters while whites vicariously imagine the slave's feelings—that allow speakers to transcend "restrictive" affiliations of racial ancestry. *The Narrative of Lunsford Lane* (1842) stages this racial ventriloquism by prefacing an African American autobiography with a white-authored poem purporting to be the lament of a black woman. "The Slave Mother's Appeal to Her Infant Child" searches after an invulnerable freedom by rehearsing a familiar metaphor. Dressed in blackface, as it were, the poet describes an ironic enfranchisement:

> And gladly would I lay thee down
> To sleep beneath the sod,
> And give thy gentle spirit back,
> Unmarr'd with grief, to God:
> The tears I shed upon that turf
> Should whisper peace to me,
> And tell me in the spirit land
> My lovely babe was free.[23]

Infanticide not only defeats the slaveholder, who views motherhood as the reproduction of capital; it also thwarts history. Forcibly releasing her child from the struggles of existence, the slave mother ensures that he or she will never accrue historical weight, instead remaining innocent of experience, memory, and trauma. The poet-as-slave mother idealizes infant purity in an effort to withstand the traffic of worldly context. Death extricates the innocent from an institutional circulation that leaves the flesh scarred and the spirit "marr'd." Rescued from physical existence before the disorderly accumulation of slave experience sets in, the subject of this poetic address achieves emancipation through a severe final estrangement. Emancipation

23. "The Slave Mother's Appeal to Her Infant Child," in *The Narrative of Lunsford Lane, Formerly of Raleigh, N.C.*, in *Five Slave Narratives: A Compendium*, ed. William Loren Katz (New York: Arno Press, 1968), 4. Interracial circumstances surrounding the production, publication, and distribution of the slave narrative, while certainly not unconflicted, suggest that white and black abolitionists participated in a common rhetorical field.

occurs when there is no subject left to emancipate. Within the lines of this poem and within the limits of ideology, freedom is readily realized because the infant's life itself lacks realization.

A morbid politics holds out the promise of returning the subject to an absolute existence; in psychoanalytic terms, death defines an inorganic state impervious to change where satisfaction is permanent. Freud's idea of the death instinct as "the most universal endeavor of all living substance" can be honed to provide insight into the *political* desire that freights the drive for death within emancipatory rhetoric.[24] Whereas Freud offers thanatos as a transcendent key to human behavior, an understanding of death as inescapably historical and discursive impedes the naturalization of liberty as a matter of instinct or choice. Death, as an abstract final category, attracts citizens because it abnegates the constant struggle to secure freedom as well as the enduring anxiety that this freedom will vanish. This oscillation expresses *fort/da*: the dismaying recognition that the source of pleasure is gone (*fort*) alternates with the satisfaction that the source of pleasure is here (*da*). In death, no need exists to play this *fort/da* game because the inorganic state ensures that no source of pleasure will ever disappear, as pleasure itself has been removed beyond a dynamic world of change and fluctuation. Thanatos so infuses the citizen's desire because death makes freedom irrelevant by locating the subject in a realm beyond striving or contention. Death offers noncontingent political satisfaction by promising that the subject will not have to enter a material world that historicizes, modifies, and makes liberty conditional. Death exempts the slave mother's child from the institutional *fort/da* game he is destined to lose; his original freedom suffers no abridgment from the daily demands of masters and overseers. Death secures "absolute repose," ensuring that neither law nor custom will impinge on "innate" rights.[25] The slave child's freedom never becomes semantic; it never accrues texture or weight, and instead remains as pure as the sublime heights of Emerson's verse. For the slave child, freedom is uncompromised, but it is necessarily also without substance, purely a question of syntax.

However maudlin, this infanticide suggests the unsentimental workings of liberal freedom as secured by the social contract. The fantasy of a

24. Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle,* trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1961), 57.

25. J. Laplanche and J. B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Norton, 1973), 102.

dead slave child enables the disidentification of racial particularities, barring corporeal matter from enfranchisement while authorizing a bodiless, transparent subject—not uncoincidentally the subjectivity that white men enjoy—as the sharer of liberty. Because the slave child literalizes the death drive crucial to negative freedom, the white citizen escapes that fatal injunction. Citizen and slave child are cemented by a death pact that, as with Berlant's logic of prostheses, safeguards the abstracted person from the degradations of institutional exposure. Though earlier the daughter of the Riccarees deploys the voice of white masculinity as protection and here the ventriloquized slave body shields the white poet, the effects are the same: In both cases, racial and gendered bodies incur the crushing weight of history, thus freeing the unmarked, entitled subject from an encounter with culture that would definitely leave its marks.

The African American voice of Lunsford Lane that follows the strained pathos of the white-authored "Slave Mother's Appeal" also pursues thanatos on its quest toward emancipation. His *Narrative* is similar to Ben Franklin's accounting, which memorializes the slave's economy to redeem wife, mother, and seven children from bondage. Lane offers a strict tally of slavery's capitalist contradictions that allow commodities to liberate, if not humanize, themselves through purchase. His participation in this "slave trade" pursues a teleology that outstrips the material circumstances of freedom, leaving only a metaphysical impression lacking contour and definition: "When the money was paid to my mistress . . . I felt that I was free. And a queer and a joyous feeling it is to one who has been a slave. I cannot describe it, only it seemed as though I was in heaven."[26] Sublimity and transcendence suffuse his arrival in the North: "I felt when my feet struck the pavements of Philadelphia, as though I had passed into another world."[27] Readers "may possibly form some distant idea, like the ray of the setting

26. *Narrative of Lunsford Lane*, 17. The echoes to Ben Franklin extend beyond Lane's financial accounting to encompass an accounting of the self and the self's appearance. Much as Franklin worried over his dress and demeanor as they would be perceived by his fellow citizens, Lane takes care that North Carolina citizens—though not his fellows—receive a pleasing public persona: "Ever after I entertained the first idea of being free, I had endeavored so to conduct myself as not to become obnoxious to the white inhabitants, knowing as I did their power, and their hostility to the colored people. . . . I had made no display of the little property or money I possessed, but in every way I wore as much as possible the aspect of poverty" (31). William L. Andrews also discusses the Franklinesque aspects of Lane's autobiographical persona in *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760–1865* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 116–81.
27. *Narrative of Lunsford Lane*, 51.

sun from the far off mountain top," but the "heaven" of the slave's emancipation remains beyond description, imprint, and legibility in ways that contrast the supple flesh of the bondsman.[28] Unlike the slave mother's child, who can be "marr'd," Lane envisions a liberated self residing beyond *fort/da* politics, a positionality in which freedom defies the caprices and demands of slaveholders. As William Andrews explains, Lane hits on an "inner self, apparently unfixed and unitary, [that] seems untouched, inviolable."[29] Yet he fails to bask in a hermetic definition of freedom, prompting what must have been a troubling question for his audience: "I cannot describe my feelings to those who have never been slaves; then why should I attempt it?"[30] Even as his *Narrative* accesses abstract rights, Lane particularizes freedom with the material accents of unspeakable black experience. He confronts the problem of Emerson's "On Freedom," watching the disappearance of freedom amid a practical struggle to express it. His social existence forces on him a painful knowledge that never encumbers the "free" child of the "Slave Mother's Appeal." What remains inviolable is not the self represented in *Narrative of Lunsford Lane* but the freedom that neither the former slave nor his audience can fully grasp.

Much as white antislavery verse prefaces Lane's autobiography, Grace Greenwood's poem "The Leap from the Long Bridge" sutures the climax of *Clotel* when the title character jumps to her death to escape slavery's clutches. Because Clotel's act is final—even after her body floats ashore, it is not reclaimed by her pursuers—Greenwood's eulogy ends with an ecstatic description of freedom:

> Joy! the hunted slave is free! . . .
> Hurrah for our country! hurrah!
> To freedom she leaped, through drowning and death—
> Hurrah for our country! hurrah![31]

As Clotel leaves her body, all that remains is the defiled national body, the object of the poet's sardonic praise. She prevails because her physical exis-

28. *Narrative of Lunsford Lane*, 17–18.

29. Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story*, 118.

30. *Narrative of Lunsford Lane*, 17.

31. Brown, *Clotel*, 221–22. As Robert S. Levine observes in his forthcoming *Clotel: A Bedford Cultural Edition* (New York: St. Martin's, 2000), this poem acquires a new final stanza when Brown incorporates it into his novel. The quoted text, then, most probably begins with Greenwood's words and ends with Brown's, a transition that evidences racial ventriloquism.

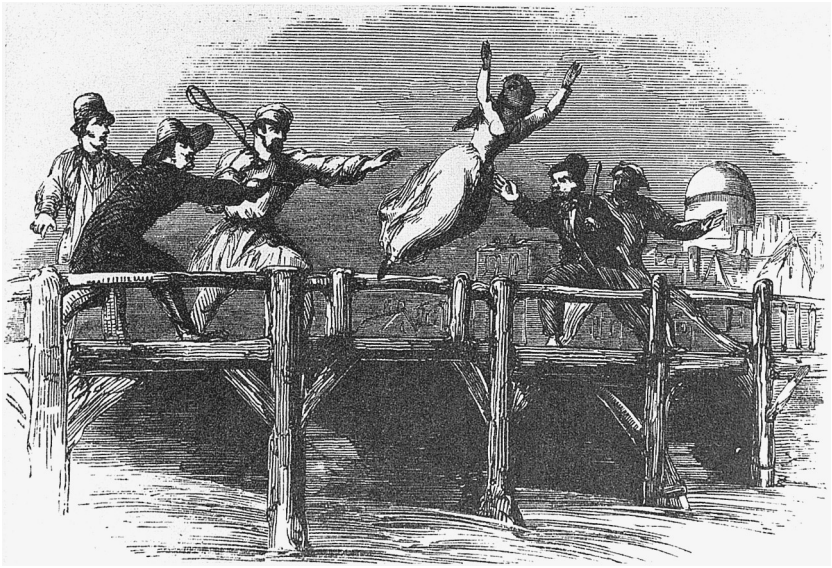

Figure 1. Clotel's emancipation/deathly leap into the Potomac. Source: William Wells Brown, *Clotel; or The President's Daughter: A Narrative of Slave Life in the United States* (London: Patridge and Oakley, 1853). Illustration courtesy of the Photographs and Prints Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, the New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

tence drops away as an encumbrance, liberating her spirit. The illustration of her suicide equates freedom and death by picturing her body at the moment of disembodiment, a contradictory pose echoed by a simultaneous insistence on and disavowal of her blackness (Figure 1). Even though Brown repeatedly states that Clotel—while crossdressing—is so close to white that she can pass as an Italian or Spanish gentleman, the illustration darkly shades her face, disputing verbal description. Disjunctions between visual and written body encapsulate her struggle to escape both the slave catchers and social incrustations that encode her body. The legal significance of maternal ancestry bears her downward, but the gossamer dress propels her above racial legacies. Vested with black blood, Clotel futilely flees her history, but dressed in the costume of white womanhood, she has neither history nor body to worry about. In mock address to Clotel's frustrated jailers, Greenwood's abolitionist dirge revels in a twin triumph over

racist institutions and racial heritage: "The form thou would'st fetter—returned to its God."[32] An embrace of thanatos enables a "return to the quiescence of the inorganic world," where the laws of men have no purchase on Clotel.[33] Although the illustration freezes an episode from Brown's narrative, importantly it acts less as a narrative itself and more as a timeless moment, insulated from change and continuation. Clotel never falls in this image; she is always ascending the brutelike men who would bind her to a system upheld by legal precedent and social custom.

This mosaic of African American narrative, white poetry, and the blackface depiction of a near-white quadroon is unified by Brown's title to this chapter—"Death Is Freedom." Death liberates the subject from social meanings of race, granting her an unencumbered freedom. Suicide secures a necrophilic fantasy of innate natural liberty by discounting history: Both Clotel's maternal legacy as a slave woman's daughter and the national traditions of slaveholding fail to signify in a culturally lifeless vacuum. After all, it is the juridical weight of embodiment, specifically her genealogy and the inscription of legal codes on her complexion, that fetters her to a system of apartheid. Death allows her to emulate Emerson's scholar and be free of such social definitions. This vocabulary endeavors to emancipate political being from the social contingencies of *fort/da*.

Necrophilic scenarios arise when the formal principles of freedom are compromised by material histories that attenuate and embed political subjectivity. The autobiography of fugitive slave Henry Bibb explores thanatos as a means of cauterizing traumatic memories linking him to his family still held in bondage. Bibb is so caught in the tensions of *fort/da* that he risks recapture, stealing back across the Mason-Dixon line in an effort to lead his wife and daughter, whom he calls the "bone of my bone, and flesh of my flesh," to liberty.[34] Frustrated in his first attempt to rescue his family,

32. Brown, *Clotel*, 221. Eric Lott marks this desubstantialization of black bodies as a widespread cultural repression of homoerotic desire and miscegenationist anxiety—two phenomena deeply rooted in intimate corporealities—in *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 58–59.

33. Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 57.

34. Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave, Written by Himself* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969), 44. Bibb's commitment to kinship and intersubjectivity departs from notions of freedom as independence by situating freedom in a shared context that reaches beyond the borders of self. Intersubjective conceptions of freedom—whether based in familial or communal contexts—have often been overshadowed by notions of negative liberty, which address social limitations upon the subject. Yet slave narratives such as Bibb's and Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of*

Bibb plans on trying again, until he "learned, on inquiry, and from good authority, that my wife was living in a state of adultery with her master, and had been for the last three years. . . . She has ever since been regarded as theoretically and practically dead to me as a wife."[35] His *Narrative* (1850) issues a death sentence that liberates its author, disencumbering subjectivity of painful attachments. He longs to articulate an identity shorn of affiliation, to inscribe a self that will be as hermetic as a definition of freedom that needs neither reference nor antecedence.

Bibb's necrophilic musings fulfill his resolution to secure freedom in noncontingency. He struggles against not only the arbitrary will of slave owners but also the lure of domestic entanglements, which he fears will extinguish the "fire of liberty within my breast" by freighting his quest with specific, culturally demeaning markers. These markers are gendered, embodied in the "charms and influence of a female," who soon becomes his wife.[36] He rebukes himself for allowing marriage to "obstruct my way to the land of liberty": "To think that after I had determined to carry out the great idea which is so universally and practically acknowledged among all the civilized nations of the earth, that I would be free or die, I suffered myself to be turned aside by the fascinating charms of a female, who gradually won my attention from an object so high as that of liberty; and an object which I held paramount to all others."[37] He does not have to overcome *his* gender as a male; after all, masculinity is already so culturally transparent that it does not bear on identity. Instead, his autobiography suggests that he has to transcend his wife's gender, which imbricates him in the reproduction of capi-

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a Slave Girl (1861) powerfully reveal subjects who experience their own freedom as diminished by the enslavement of others. For a reading of Jacobs in this light, see Stephanie Smith, "The Tender of Memory: Restructuring Value in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*," in *Harriet Jacobs and Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: New Critical Essays*, ed. Deborah M. Garfield and Rafia Zafar (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 251–74. Recent theoretical attempts to posit freedom as a collective experience can be found in Wayne Booth's thoughts on "*philiation*," in "Individualism and the Mystery of the Social Self; or, Does Amnesty Have a Leg to Stand On?" in *Freedom and Interpretation*, ed. Johnson, 81; in Orlando Patterson's study of love and friendship in the classical world, in *Freedom in the Making of Western Culture*, vol. 1 of *Freedom* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), esp. 126–29; and in Jean-Luc Nancy's meditations on freedom as a sharing of being, in *The Experience of Freedom*, trans. Bridget McDonald (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1993), esp. 68–80.

35. Bibb, *Henry Bibb*, 188–89.

36. Bibb, *Henry Bibb*, 17, 34.

37. Bibb, *Henry Bibb*, 34, 33.

tal at the heart of slavery. How can he pursue abstraction, Bibb asks, when he particularizes himself with gendered attachments? His official status as chattel is a social designation, but his "freely" chosen acceptance of the additional role of husband and father further impinges on his subjectivity. When Bibb represents "the society of young women" as a threat to freedom, he objects to society first and foremost; he resorts to misogyny only because woman—much more so than man—has a social body, which he conflates with the constraint of the South's domestic institution. The problem with his slave wife, Malinda, is that she is preeminently social, a tempting embodiment that burdens him with contingency.[38] By declaring her "theoretically and practically dead," Bibb divorces himself from the bondage she has come to represent as a participant, however reluctant, in an adulterous affair with a figure of white domination. Freedom, in the terms of his *Narrative*, enforces emancipation from all contexts (and the persons who inhabit those contexts) that formerly mediated his being.

Bibb's morbidly stated alienation from his own wife (and thus his own historicity) puts an additional wrinkle in the social contract revised as the "racial contract" by Mills: The social/racial contract functions as a death pact. He agrees to a fantasy of her death because it frees him. Her death enables him to live, even if only via a temporary indulgence in necrophilia, as a white male blessed with the power to displace his own encumbered social body onto an illegitimate (in this case, sexually illegitimate) body. Bibb has a contract out on his wife, not in the Lockean sense but in the "good fella" parlance of a "hit" used to dispose of people whose fidelity and loyalty are in doubt. Much as a suspected associate poses a threat to the "organization's" insular unity, so too Bibb's wife, as a representative of slaves and women, embodies an excessive and possessed corporeality that endangers his illusion of autonomous subjectivity. The solution, in effect, is to put the social contract out on Malinda: He introduces the facts of her adultery and appeals to "the law of God and man" to obtain a judgment that renders "my

38. For recent projects to uncover the contingency and historicity that lie behind political rights, see Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995); Judith Butler, "Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of Postmodernism," in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, ed. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (New York: Routledge, 1992); Bonnie Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993); and Kirstie McClure, "On the Subject of Rights: Pluralism, Plurality and Political Identity," in *Dimensions of Radical Democracy: Pluralism, Citizenship, Community*, ed. Chantal Mouffe (London and New York: Verso, 1992), 108–27.

former wife as dead to me."[39] I draw this perhaps sensational analogy of the social contract as a murderous contract or "hit" in order to remark on the lethal underside of liberalism. Targeted by the social/sexual/racial contract, the slave wife, as shorthand for historically abjected populations, materializes the institutional and corporeal encumbrances from which white male freedom divorced itself. The social death of these other bodies leaves the citizen free.

While marriage, especially a legally unsanctioned marriage like Bibb's, can be annulled precisely because it is a contract, paternity remains. Blood refuses either abridgment or denial. Bibb laments that "I was a husband and am the father of slaves who are still left to linger out their days in hopeless bondage."[40] For the fugitive slave, a nationalized vocabulary dictates disturbing conjugations of temporality: Unlike the social designation of "husband," which slips into the past, its inflection on his identity now dissipated, fatherhood persists, burdening his "freed" self with regret and responsibility. Bibb's trek toward freedom stumbles against context, because it is less of a physical journey than a story of psychological indebtedness: "But oh! when I remember that my daughter, my only child, is still there, destined to share the fate of all these calamities, it is too much to bear."[41] Bibb's painfully rendered thoughts of his wife and daughter document a genealogical sense of freedom, one forced to contend with obligations that cannot be relegated to the past. Unlike the American scholar, his experience of defining freedom is a most unfree affair. His story reveals a pivotal grammatical principle of nationalized vocabularly: Freedom cannot "bear" the weight of memory.

4. Killing Off Free Citizens; or, The Logic of Political Necrophilia

Death obviates substance, liberating freedom from bodies that give flesh to responsibility, family, and, above all, remembrance. Reliance on thanatos to evade institutional unfreedom signals, for Paul Gilroy, a revolutionary aesthetic: The "preference for death fits readily with archival ma-

39. Bibb, *Henry Bibb*, 189, 188. Or, to return to an earlier example, the daughter of the Riccarees accepts the terms of this death pact that frees white America from the history of Indian removal. Her suicidal resolve grants the psychological freedom of forgetfulness to a nation bent on Manifest Destiny.
40. Bibb, *Henry Bibb*, 35.
41. Bibb, *Henry Bibb*, 44.

terial on the practice of slave suicide and needs also to be seen alongside other representations of death as agency that can be found in early African American fiction."[42] Looking to fugitive slave Margaret Garner's "emancipatory assault on her children," Gilroy describes an African American liberty that disdains the "formal logic and rational calculation characteristic of modern western thinking" in favor of an ecstatic irrationality. Although predicated on the contention that this freedom withstands a dominant epistemology, Gilroy's position repeats a nationalized vocabulary infused with necrophilia. Pinpointing the impulse toward death as a "moment of jubilee" that resists rational politics, Gilroy nonetheless adheres to a grammar that is operative on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line and on both sides of the color line.[43] While I do not dispute the archival evidence on slave suicide or discount the heroic resistance to bondage that death implies, the fact that proslavery narratives (as I will show) adduce moments of deathlike freedom leads to questions about what Gilroy sees as the distinctiveness of African American notions of freedom and invites speculation about a freedom that appeals equally to slave and slaveholder. Disconcerting convergences among white abolitionist, African American, and proslavery writers suggest a conceptual vortex that renders immaterial the differences between various perspectives on black enslavement, because all make recourse to an infinitely porous and eternally lifeless political subject.

Clotel's revolutionary enactment of Patrick Henry's words are also mouthed by the benevolent masters of plantation novels who hold forth a millennial vision that idealizes freedom as a final unyielding refuge. When Dinah, a slave in the procolonizationist tale *Frank Freeman's Barber Shop* (1852), dies, religious and political rhetoric merge to sketch an innocuous black emancipation acceptable to all factions of a Christian country: "An idolater was saved! A slave was free!"[44] Dinah no longer contends with the

42. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 63. See also his " 'After the Love Has Gone' ": Bio-Politics and Etho-Poetics in the Black Public Sphere," in *Back to Reality? Social Experience and Cultural Studies*, ed. Angela McRobbie (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 1997), 83–115.

43. Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*, 66, 68. This episode of slave infanticide is the kernel of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. While slave infanticide is not at all uncommon in antislavery materials, few actual cases have been verified. See Steven Weisenburger's treatment of the Margaret Garner tragedy, *Modern Medea: A Family Story of Slavery and Child-Murder from the Old South* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998).

44. Baynard Hall, *Frank Freeman's Barber Shop: A Tale* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1852), 121.

frustrations of *fort/da*; death—to recall a phrase from Gilroy—represents a "moment of jubilee" in which emancipation is eternal because her historical existence as a slave has been laid to rest. The New England maiden in *The Planter's Northern Bride* (1852), who seeks to be true to her abolitionist upbringing, finds solace in this sort of thinking when she comes to the South. After watching at the death bed of the slave Dilsey, she is encouraged by her slaveholding husband to view this departed faithful servant, exiled for life from any prospect of democratic community, as being "now enfranchised" in the heavenly host.[45] As Lane makes clear, freedom entails a spiritual dimension, but, for complacent figures like Dinah and Dilsey, as well as for disgruntled transgressors like Clotel, this transcendent state excludes the very materiality that makes freedom a meaningful relation lived among others.

As a triumphant aversion to contingency, a political necrophilia radiates from a widespread anxiety over the specifics of blackness that mediate the lives of the unfree. Ironically, however, it is the apologist text that perceives how commitment to an abstract freedom derives from discomfort with racial bodies. In an attack on *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and other antislavery novels, the narrator of *Frank Freeman's Barber Shop* discerns a racial contract that underpins a topos of death. His incisive comments, though perhaps disingenuous in their concern for blacks, reveal freedom's antagonism to accidents of the flesh: "It is remarkable that writers of *fictions* make their heroes and heroines beautiful mulattoes; always so, if they are to come North among the free! But surely a black person is the best representative of the blacks; and our sympathies should be enlisted for the slave! and that, if ugly and black, with crisped and matted hair; and not only for those whose blood can be seen blushing through their cheeks, and their hair wavy and glossy and rich as floss silk. Writers of *fiction kill off* the jet black—not knowing exactly how to *work them* advantageously to the North."[46] Even as this passage promotes stereotypical characterizations, the apologist narrator deconstructs the prejudicial logic that holds racial markings as impediments to liberty. Hence the need to cast off the corporeal textures imprinted by legal and economic systems; death becomes mandated for all whose features are not muted or bland enough to be socially transparent. Because allusions to slavery are quiescent in "beautiful mulattoes," their freedom seems purely syntactic, abiding the universal rules governing political sub-

45. Caroline Lee Whiting Hentz, *The Planter's Northern Bride* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1970), 352.
46. Hall, *Frank Freeman's Barber Shop*, 185–86.

jectivity. But for blacks, for persons without nationally normalized appearances, existence is profoundly semantic, burdened with the accumulated weight of ethnological, juridical, and biblical justifications of African servitude. To achieve freedom, one must not simply escape to the North; one must also escape all material remainders that give substance to subjectivity and encumber freedom. Blacks are manumitted by annihilating all textures that impair unconditional being. Freedom can be the subject only of "*fiction*," because any infusion of social matter—for example "crisped and matted hair"—enslaves the body to cultural contexts disdained by an ideology of abstraction and noncontingency. National vocabulary is more comfortable with freedom as fictional proposition than as material embodiment.

Even as apologist fiction assents to the incendiary formula "liberty or death," proslavery representations question if all persons can endure the harsh absolutism that this choice entails. Is the escaped slave ready for the airy rights of freedom? Hitherto confined within a communal nexus of plantation life, forced to be at home within a highly regimented patriarchy, the self-emancipated slave seems abandoned to an abstract being, forlorn and isolated, on arrival in the North. The plantation novel features the recurring scene in which a runaway begs to be reenslaved so that he or she once again my enjoy a life of embodiment and substance. Too often, however, the planter refuses to encroach upon the fugitive's liberty and instead uses the occasion to spell out a lesson that Saxon hardiness is the only suitable ground for enfranchisement. The master displays an unwillingness to reintegrate his quondam slave into what proslavery sentimentalism represents as the evangelical richness and communal bounty of plantation life. The fugitive's rashly chosen freedom leaves him or her shorn of social context in ways that are as absolute and as final as death. The genteel planter of *Aunt Phillis's Cabin* traveling in the North is beseeched by his former slave, Simon, now destitute, "Oh, master . . . won't you take me back?"[47] The slave longs for kin and context; he desires a contingent identity that discovers political significance in relation to others. This desire to forfeit the hallmarks of abstract rights in favor of familiar circumstances demonstrates, in the terms of the proslavery universe, a peculiarly "African" distaste for an unconditional existence necessary for democratic privileges. Such episodes concretize the argument of apologists who labored to justify southern institutional life as a setting of mutual dependence between masters

47. Mary Henderson Eastman, *Aunt Phillis's Cabin; or, Southern Life as It Is* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1968), 217.

and bondsmen that created affiliations unknown in the wolfish liberty of the North. The planter in *Aunt Phillis's Cabin*, displacing very real efforts to recover escaped chattel, thus refuses to intrude on the desolate sanctity of the fugitive: "Can't trust you, Simon . . . none of your fellow-servants want you back. You have no relations." [48] Condemned to having "no relations," deprived of the putatively heart-felt bonds cementing master and "servant," the freed slave of the proslavery novel proves himself unfit for a nationalized freedom that balks at reference and contingency.

"Liberty or death" seemingly presents an option, but for the slaves of abolitionist as well as proslavery fiction no choice exists. Whether the slave receives disembodied enfranchisement as Dilsey and Dinah or is "kill[ed] off" by antislavery writers, whether the result is freedom or death, makes little difference, since each fate forever seals the subject in a depthless existence beyond kin and community. When, in thick dialect, a runaway in *Uncle Robin, in His Cabin in Virginia, and Tom without One in Boston* (1853) laments his lack of institution or place—"what shill I do? I does wan' go back so much to Fugginy, to see my daddy an' my mammy, my masser and my missis, an' all de black folks"—he despairs the aloneness of freedom.[49] Proslavery literature effectively rewrites American revolutionary dictum, much as *Clotel* does, so that liberty *is* death. The slaves of proslavery literature who fear freedom's lack of context as alienation and abandonment perversely echo the isolation felt by slave narrators. As Frederick Douglass recalled in 1845, "The motto which I adopted when I started from slavery was this—'Trust no man!' " [50] In *The Fugitive Blacksmith* (1849), former slave James Pennington remembers his escape with ambivalence: "No consideration, not even that of life itself, could tempt to give up the thought of flight. . . . I now found myself . . . a solitary wanderer from my home and friends." [51]

48. Eastman, *Aunt Phillis's Cabin*, 217. Vindictive sentences of deathlike freedom recur in several proslavery texts. "She is dead to us," says the white mistress of *Frank Freeman's Barber Shop* in reference to the runaway slave who has abandoned the mistress and her children (251).

49. J. W. Page, *Uncle Robin, in His Cabin in Virginia, and Tom without One in Boston* (Richmond, Va.: J. W. Randolph, 1853), 246.

50. Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself* (New York: Signet, 1968), 111.

51. James Pennington, *The Fugitive Blacksmith; or, Events in the History of James W. C. Pennington*, in *Five Slave Narratives*, ed. Katz, 14–15. These two examples are indicative only of a large pattern in which freedom figures as alienation. See also Bibb, *Henry Bibb*, 48, and Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 62, for other instances of slaves and former slaves who describe the loneliness of freedom.

Notwithstanding the difference between *Uncle Robin's* minstrel-like complaint of a proslavery fugitive and the integrity of Douglass and Pennington, these articulations all associate freedom with what Orlando Patterson calls "social death"—a condition that severs self from kin and community. The staggering aspect of this conjunction between freedom and social death is that, for Patterson, alienation from family, tribe, or clan describes not freedom but slavery.

The ranks of the socially dead are populated by "permanent stranger[s]," beings cut off from kin and unattached to others.[52] The socially dead reside in the negativity of "genealogical isolation" and "natal alienation," trapped in a thin, shallow autobiographical performance.[53] For the author of *Clotel*, necrophilia makes freedom more accessible; recalling his own flight across the Mason-Dixon line, Brown wishes to cauterize personal history with the balm of forgetfulness: "The love of a dear mother, a dear sister, and three brothers, yet living, caused me to shed many tears. If I could only have been assured of their being dead."[54] My purpose in marking an unlikely convergence between social death and freedom is not to suggest that Patterson incorrectly defines slavery as the negation of communal and familial identification. Nor is my point to question the resolve of slaves who undertook flight. Rather, the intent is to argue that antislavery as well as proslavery narratives nationalized freedom in deathlike terms. Social death tokens slavery as well as freedom because the ideological parameters of each—unconditional and uncompromising—are the same. As estrangement, freedom echoes with the dissociation of (social) death, revealing the hostility of American political definitions to context. So expendable are the specifics that it becomes irrelevant whether one is advocating slavery or freedom; in theorizing either possibility, one suggests death.

This political necrophilia seeks to put to rest conditions that force human actors to play a political *fort/da* game, in which historical, material, legal, and institutional circumstances restrict access to the pleasures of abstract liberty. Blackness and commodification wash away with Clotel's leap

52. Patterson, *Freedom*, 11.

53. Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 337.

54. William Wells Brown, *The Narrative of William W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave*, in *Five Slave Narratives*, ed. Katz, 93–94. Later, however, Brown modifies this position, seeking to invest his freedom with the contexts of memory: "I wanted to see mother and sister, that I might tell them 'I was free!' I wanted to see my fellow slaves in St. Louis, and let them know that the chains were no longer upon my limbs" (103).

into the Potomac; memory and obligation are repressed by Bibb's deathly fantasy; a master's rights to a slave woman's child are nullified by infanticide in "The Slave Mother's Appeal"; a weary soul's earthly burden is laid aside in *The Planter's Northern Bride*: Each event locates politics beyond the socius. The desire to return to what Freud calls "inorganic existence" is also a political desire of national dimension to acquire subjectivities freed from the necessity of grappling with factors that impinge on an "essential" self.[55] Freedom is then truly free of all context. Employed by persons with radically different positions in the social hierarchy, such as slave and slaveholder, this nationalized vocabulary traps experiences of freedom and unfreedom in a vague lexicon that expunges signs of systemic injustice, social trauma, private anguish, or any other remainders that refuse to fit a general definition.

5. Strategies of Antifreedom

A few extraordinary cultural documents, however, avoid freedom's compulsive ideology by refusing to theorize political subjectivity. Two works that I have in mind—Emerson's "On Freedom," specifically the final line, and Douglass's *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855)—practice a strategy of thinking against freedom. As Gayatri Spivak explains, " 'Strategy' is an embattled concept-metaphor and unlike 'theory,' its antecedents are not disinterested and universal."[56] Strategy entails contentious understandings because it owns up to memories and experiences that challenge freedom's ability to reproduce itself without regard to social practice or historical context. Unlike theory, which abhors the ceaseless flux of political *fort/da*, strategy acknowledges material constraints such as racial and economic abjection that counter freedom, making it finite, a thing of this world. Strategy burdens freedom with encumbrances, accidents, and failures that thwart its sublimity.

"On Freedom" cunningly captures this sense of embattlement, as the bulk of the poem details a theoretical climb after an unreachable liberty. Yet the final line resists pure contemplation. Responding to the gnomic question, "Freedom's secret would'st thou know?" the poet offers a concrete answer that begins to flesh out political subjectivity. Freedom consists not

55. Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 33.

56. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 3.

in knowing but in the sensuousness of doing: "Right thou feelst rashly do" is the prescription for gaining this intimate knowledge. He qualifies this action, noting that it must occur "rashly," before it is abstracted as nonexperiential, self-evident truth. Emerson breaks with a theory of freedom and instead offers a strategy responsive to context, emerging from passions of the local and momentary. His convoluted syntax, stating that citizens must impetuously act on latent convictions in order to conceive freedom, leads to a semantics of culture, because this action demands contact with an external materiality. No longer isomorphically defined, freedom ceases to be both immanent and imminent. It is instead deferred, awaiting the human actor's participation in culture.

"Right thou feelst rashly do"—these five words enigmatically strung together, rather than conclude Emerson's ode, disrupt the contemplative cast of the preceding lines. For the citizen who "would'st know" the essence of freedom, knowing must be forsaken in preference for the uncertain results of doing. Praxis works against poetic notions of politics by enmeshing the citizen in an unavoidable contingency. As Bonnie Honig argues, freedom belongs in "the contingent world of action"; thus dislocated from the inflexible identity of a national subject, politics emerges, not in the rights of a legal self but in connection to material existence.[57] But the poet stops short, lounging in the comfort of a hypothetical posture that hesitates to consider exactly how sensuous commitment to action will flesh out a liberatory agenda.

More aggressive thinking against freedom motivates *My Bondage and My Freedom*. Offering a more practical, experiential narrative than Emerson, Douglass agitates for liberation by relentlessly critiquing freedom, suggesting that the subject needs to withstand noncontingent politics. No doubt this strategy is mined with crippling irony, placing the former slave in the position of narrating a story that dismisses the value of traditional American liberty. Douglass, however, assails U.S. freedom without sacrificing a position committed to human emancipation. *My Bondage and My Freedom* instigates a strategy of *anti*freedom to speak against the theoretical imperatives and abstraction of nationalized vocabulary. To understand how an argument against freedom does not necessarily participate in a repressive apparatus but in fact furthers an emancipatory agenda, it is first nec-

57. Honig, *Political Theory*, 79. See also her remarks on "performative freedom" (124) in conjunction with Jacques Derrida, "Declarations of Independence," trans. Tom Keenan and Tom Pepper, *New Political Science* 15 (summer 1986): 7–13.

essary to examine how freedom depoliticizes persons by deeming so many elements of subjectivity—memory, racial heritage, bodily experience—as irrelevant to citizenship. Marx's richly disturbing essay "On the Jewish Question" can help us accomplish this goal.

While acquisition of rights such as freedom of the press and religion encouraged his contemporaries to take heart in the pace of political emancipation, Marx pauses before this celebration, preferring instead to contest the desirability of political emancipation in the first place. Emancipation, according to Marx, involves dismemberment: Political elements interwoven and diffused throughout social relations are cut out of daily existence and then abstracted as fundamental universal rights, protected and guaranteed by the state. The investment of liberty, in this way, actually divests liberty from usages that flesh out political experience at the level of the everyday. Bourgeois emancipation desubstantializes freedom by identifying elements of "species being" deemed to have political worth and extirpating these aspects from their textured and highly mediated position in culture. The state founds rights by depoliticizing culture. A "formally free and equal human being" emerges, writes Wendy Brown, only to be "*practically resubjugated*" in ways that disavow "the material constituents of personhood."[58]

As a revolutionary technology, liberal contractarian society depoliticizes culture by subsuming specific activities of the popular under the formal workings and abstract protections of the state. The modern state "*abolished the political character of civil society*," once rich in variegated and meaningful political forms and practices—guilds, corporations, privileges—now decreed as nonpolitical by the state.[59] Freedom liberates the subject from spheres of social action, abandoning him or her to the few rights (freedom of the press, religion, speech) guaranteed by civil society. The timeless, unabridgeable aura surrounding these rights removes the citizen from the arena of *fort/da*; promise of a few liberties encourages the subject to extricate himself or herself from contexts crisscrossed by messy and often temporary incarnations of the political. Uncompromised by everyday entanglements, the subject becomes historically lightweight and ancestrally

58. Wendy Brown, *States of Injury*, 106. For more on this recognition of depoliticization, see also Brown, *States of Injury*, 112; and Michael Maidan, "Marx on the Jewish Question: A Meta-Critical Analysis," *Studies in Soviet Thought* 33 (1987): 27–41.

59. Karl Marx, "On the Jewish Question," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2d ed., ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978), 45. Also helpful here is Marx's criticism of Bruno Bauer in Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels, *The Holy Family; or, Critique of Critical Critique*, trans. R. Dixon (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1956), 117–59.

unmarked, ready for interpellation within the general frame of rights. In effect, political emancipation shuns culture. The state does not so much embody liberty in the people as it sponsors a necrophilia that disembodies persons by creating the citizen as an abstract entity. This deadened subject has a political existence separate from the "*material and cultural elements* which formed the life experience and civil situation of these individuals."[60] The state forges the citizen by stripping away the flesh to expose a legal person. Discarded are the sediments of memory, the everyday, and belonging—all the semantic wealth that makes the subject excessive to the citizen, all the frustrating specificity that stands in the way of bourgeois universality.

Sight of this eviscerated subject, starved of history and culture, provokes questions about the desirability of political emancipation. The "Jewish Question" responds by telling an ambivalent story of freedom. Once upon a time, as it were, the creation of the bourgeois state "set free the political spirit which had, so to speak, been dissolved, fragmented and lost in the various culs-de-sac of feudal society; it reassembled these scattered fragments, liberated the political spirit from its connexion with civil life and made of it the community sphere, the *general* concern of the people, in principle independent of these particular elements of civil life. A *specific* activity and situation in life no longer had any but an individual significance."[61] At first glance, this passage valorizes the transition from feudal to civil society. Freedom depends on a unifying "spirit" that offers the citizen a distinct political realm that had been previously lacking. But in carving out a separate sphere, in reassembling the diffuse activities of quotidian life into durable structures, the subject is inevitably carved up as well. Forcibly extracted from a material "sphere" and "reassembled" into a calculable, recognizable subject, the citizen is deprived of more intimate contact with the political. The narrative of political investment is also one of loss: The state "set free" the subject, but it left him or her deserted as well. Citizenship is saturated with necrophilic longing: The birth of the political individual signals the death of a "species-being." Freedom enforces the reduction of human subjectivity to formal personhood.

The freedom that emerges by emancipating politics from the gamut

60. Marx, "Jewish Question," 45.

61. Marx, "Jewish Question," 45. Marx's faith in historical dialectic explains this ambivalence, in which political emancipation, while limited, is nonetheless a necessary stage in the ultimate breakdown of bourgeois class rule. As Wendy Brown explains, "Political emancipation in the form of civil and political rights can be embraced precisely because it represents a 'stage' of emancipation" (*States of Injury*, 120).

of human subjectivity allows the state to jettison social remainders that make ontology anything more evocative than the formalities of legal syntax. To be free, as Webster's *American Dictionary* defines it, means "not to be encumbered with," not to be weighted down by the semantic components—embodiment, local contexts, and historical conditions—of being. Freedom streamlines subjectivity, forging a nationalized vocabulary that privileges word over flesh and exalts utopia over history.

6. Blacks and Jews

Because slavery intrudes on Webster's definition of freedom, because social interpretations encroach upon Clotel's identity, because the institutionality of maternal reproduction affixes itself to Bibb's daughter, in short, because context disrupts unfettered subjectivity, Americans employ abstract political definitions that repress material conditions. For Douglass, however, noncontextual definitions leave freedom without meaning. "The dictionary afforded me little help," remembers Douglass, when he sought to understand the word *abolition* and its connection to emancipation. He learns that *abolition* is " 'the act of abolishing'; but it [the dictionary definition] left me in ignorance at the very point where I most wanted information—and that was, as to the *thing* to be abolished."[62] Dissatisfied with a tautological lack of reference, he desires context. Much as Douglass begins to discern the significance of *abolition* through the guarded and bitter tones of southerners who speak the word, *My Bondage and My Freedom* investigates freedom by examining its cultural accents and historical inflections.

Like its 1845 prototype, Douglass's second autobiography at times pursues universals, searching for "that freedom, which . . . I had ascertained to be the natural and inborn right of every member of the human family" (273). But *My Bondage and My Freedom* also opposes this ideology of freedom, contesting its naturalness and innateness by encumbering the slave's and freeman's story with an awareness of the history that makes freedom seem "natural" and the material conditions that make it seem "inborn." Ten years later, Douglass adds more narrative to his *Narrative*; an accretion of detail and circumstance not found in his 1845 slave autobiography glom on to freedom, relocating foundational "truths" in a language whose grammar

62. Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (Salem: Ayer, 1968), 164. Subsequent references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text by page number only.

is conditional, definitions contingent, and meanings semantic.[63] With tactical awareness of his situation, Douglass recovers memories that supply once-repressed contexts to political definitions. He offers a strategy in which embattled concepts take precedence over abstractions.

Even though James McCune Smith prefaced *My Bondage and My Freedom* with praise for its "abstract logic, of human equality," Douglass implicitly discourages such conclusive assessments by exceeding prior definitions of freedom, including definitions he advances in both the *Narrative* and its 1855 revision. As he opens the final chapter of his expanded autobiography, he announces: "I have now given the reader an imperfect sketch of nine years' experience in freedom" (392). Although this pose of humility at first seems an apology for his own rhetorical skills, it is more precisely "freedom" and his "experience" of it that are "imperfect." He hedges on freedom because to do otherwise, to claim full freedom—whatever that is—would be to disdain the material conditions that circumscribe African American existence. A completely defined freedom would forget violations that mark body and consciousness. Supplementing his 1845 celebration of free labor in the North, the section entitled "Life as a Freeman" records incident upon incident in which "American prejudice against color" obstructs workable conceptions of freedom (398). While New Bedford appears wondrously sober and industrious to the newly escaped fugitive, a decade later the scene lacks such sublimity: "Here in New Bedford, it was my good fortune to see a pretty near approach to freedom on the part of the colored people" (346–47). Syntactically, Douglass is a free man, but semantically, ejection from railway cars, expulsion from churches, and separation from family members and friends ambiguate this vocabulary. Whereas Emerson's "American Scholar" heralds a freedom independent of referentiality, Douglass proposes a culturally material primer, where meaning is never absolute but always subject to revision, contradiction, and antithesis.

Douglass quite literally modifies the vocabulary of freedom. *My Bondage and My Freedom* does not invoke a simple "freedom" but rather speaks more complexly of "partial freedom," "half-freedom," an "approach to freedom," and "comparative freedom" (330, 346, xx, 247). Such linguis-

63. For further treatment of the differences between Douglass's 1845 and 1855 autobiographies, see Priscilla Wald, *Constituting Americans: Cultural Anxiety and Narrative Form* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995), 76; and Eric J. Sundquist, who states, "The second autobiography is therefore a book not just about what it means to be a slave in the South but rather what it means to be a slave in America" (in *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993], 96).

tic couplings estrange the word from Emerson's comfortable isomorphism. His description of "comparative freedom" refutes noncontingent notions of subjectivity at the heart of antebellum discourse—of which his *Narrative* is a prime example. In 1845, Douglass cast his two-hour battle with the slave breaker Covey as an epiphany: "It was a glorious resurrection, from the tomb of slavery, to the heaven of freedom" (83). Revisiting this heroic resistance in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, he simultaneously expands and scales back his earlier declaration: "It was a resurrection from the dark and pestiferous tomb of slavery, to the heaven of comparative freedom" (247). The added words do not complete the episode but supplement it. These modifications extend the chain of reference, imbuing Douglass's experience with a "comparative" aspect, wresting freedom from verbal autonomy and placing it at the site of a relational conjuncture. Freedom retains its links to the prior history of slavery, acquiring significance only through reference to what comes before, in this case, both the words of the sentence and the portion of his life that they encapsulate. In 1845, "freedom" merely proceeds upward, but by 1855, its ascent remains bound to a slave past and, in fact, has meaning beyond only the vagueness of evangelical metaphor through a historical comparison shaped by the two distinct stages in Douglass's life. "Heaven" remains tied to the "tomb": In place of liberating deaths that annihilate body and context in proslavery and antislavery writing, *My Bondage and My Freedom* proposes a subjectivity in which rebirth never fully sheds residues of antecedence.

This persistent modification undermines the articulation of politics as a discourse independent of culture. In *My Bondage and My Freedom*, circumstances of race, gender, and class accent the former slave's struggle so that he can never declare liberty in universalist tones that have no debt to social considerations. Moreover, Douglass does not desire access to the freedom shared by proslavery and antislavery writers because its absolute quality offers little distinction from the nonconditionality that structures power on the plantation. For the slaveholding class, one maxim governs all situations: "*Everything must be absolute here*" (121). This iron principle explains the conduct of overseers who administer correction to slaves without regard for circumstance or consequence. The guilt or innocence of the accused offender is irrelevant; all that matters is the arbitrariness of the overseer's will to justice. It is this insistence on the absolute that legitimates the brutal treatment of black bodies, specifically Gore's murder of the slave Denby. Refusing to be whipped for some unnamed infraction, Denby challenges Gore's authority to wield total control. The overseer responds, how-

ever, with the absolute nature of death and shoots Denby in the head, justifying his action by appealing to a nationalized, deathly logic of slavery and freedom: "He argued, that if one slave refused to be corrected, and was allowed to escape with his life, when he had been told that he should lose it if he persisted in his course, the other slaves would copy his example; the result of which would be, the freedom of the slaves, and the enslavement of the whites" (123–24). On the plantation, political stakes are absolute, the outcomes final and noncontingent. Personal desire and distaste—such as Denby's aversion to a "few stripes"—are idiosyncratic impediments to an agenda that views anomalous wants, accidents of the flesh, and private pleas for justice as inimical to the search for undiluted political value. Proslavery and antislavery narratives equally pursue a deathlike freedom, not because they agree on the content of emancipated subjectivity but because they agree that a truly free subjectivity has no content. Narrative thins to an unsedimented, unconditional schema that seems democratic because it is a story so general as to apply to all.

The overseer's theory of power does not have a merely southern accent; Gore adheres to a national sensibility in which freedom and slavery do not exist as relational or historical concepts. Douglass's talk about "comparative freedom," in contrast, prepares a nonnational subjectivity, forfeiting claim on an abstract, state-recognized identity. As political critique, *My Bondage and My Freedom* does not define freedom beyond ideology but rather, like Marx's "Jewish Question," uncovers historical antecedents and material conditions that make freedom ideological. Each is an archaeology of emancipation to reveal the destructiveness of abstracting persons from relations textured by memory, obligation, and belonging. For Marx, freedom equated with the "right of the *circumscribed* individual, withdrawn into himself," decimates "the relations between man and man."[64] Similarly, for Douglass, freedom entails the loss of familiar and intimate associations: As he says of his escape to the North, "I was not only free from slavery, but I was free from home as well. The reader will see that I had something more than the simple fact of being free to think of" (340). Both Marx and Douglass counteract the depoliticizing effects of freedom by offering strategies that resediment the subject back in an environment susceptible to accident, change, and contingency. What they seek is a strategy of freedom—as opposed to a theory—that refuses the alienation at the core of emancipation.

Specifics, although they puncture the insularity of general descrip-

64. Marx, "Jewish Question," 42.

tions, lead to increasingly democratic practices. After lamenting the processes by which the abstract logic of bourgeois emancipation erodes "the community sphere," Marx calls for a materially specific analysis that recognizes "everyday life" as concomitant with political power.[65] "The Jewish Question" endeavors to dignify "everyday life," but it is precisely at this point that the argument takes a disturbing turn. The "*everyday Jew*" concretizes for Marx the mystified workings of capital: Critical analysis of systemic abuses acquires a specific thrust by targeting Jewish culture. Economic critique doubles as anti-Semitism because the essay's latter portion revolves around a pun of the German *Judentum*, meaning "Judaism" but also "commerce."[66] Capitalism becomes reified as a set of practices embodied in a minority population. Resistance to political abstraction leads Marx to reorient being in specific relations—and he does so with a vengeance, savaging what he takes to be practices specific to Jewish communities. The fight against alienation laces "everyday life" with the venom of prejudice.

The problem of Marx's anti-Semitism implies the former slave's difficulty in specifying an antifreedom without making oneself or one's brethren racial targets. Considerable hesitation surrounds the effort to flesh out political subjectivity for a person whose flesh had been subject to commodification and abuse. Upon his arrival in the North, the climate of philanthropic, liberal reform seems to provide a haven, offering the fugitive a nonparticular identity that overcomes the particulars associated with servitude. Among the "ranks of freedom's friends," Douglass writes, "I was made to forget that

65. Marx, "Jewish Question," 45, 46.

66. David McLellan and Paul Lawrence Rose each remark upon the double sense of *Judentum* but draw different conclusions on the issue of Marx and anti-Semitism. For McLellan, this double meaning "saves" Marx, allowing McLellan to argue that Marx is invoking *Judentum* only as commerce and is unconcerned with its religious or ethnic connotations (*Marx Before Marxism* [Middlesex: Penguin, 1970], 183). Rose, in contrast, more convincingly suggests that Marx appeals to both meanings: Jews "are the demonic personification of capitalism and the actual agents who have produced capitalism with its attendant distortion of human relations and freedom" (*Revolutionary Antisemitism in Germany from Kant to Wagner* [Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990], 302). Indeed, it is difficult to understand pace McLellan's argument how only half—the socially progressive half—of a double meaning can be invoked. For a sense of the critical debates surrounding Marx's anti-Semitism, see Rose, *Revolutionary Antisemitism*, 301. Wendy Brown provocatively intervenes in this debate to "suggest that in objecting to his [Marx's] anti-Semitism, we may not know the real nature of our objections, what unique place the charge of anti-Semitism occupies in our psyches, what psychic place is held by the self-hating Jew, and why it is this and not Marx's terrible remarks about Africans or silences about women that is at issue" (*States of Injury*, 101n).

my skin was dark and my hair crisped" (360). In language reminiscent of the ironic defense of blacks in *Frank Freeman's Barber Shop*, where characters with "crisped and matted hair" are killed off by antislavery authors, Douglass implies that ascription to an abstract humanity entails compulsion: In being "made to forget" his racial heritage, he hints at how national rights impinge on free subjects. He remembers his forgetting of racial detail; he documents a freedom that alienates and momentarily annihilates nonwhite, nongeneric African aspects of his corporeality. This equivocation registers the danger of insisting on an embodied subjectivity when the body suffers demeaning interpretations. As *My Bondage and My Freedom* charges, white abolitionists played up the corporeality of the slave narrator's being, introducing Douglass as a "*thing*" (360) with a history of bondage "*written on my back*" in order to impress on audiences the harsh reality of the peculiar institution (359). Like Marx, who personifies capitalism in the body of the Jew, abolitionists use Douglass to embody a system that remained for many northerners vague and remote. While the trappings of the flesh lead abolitionists to seek a condescending universalism, Douglass finds impoverishing a general existence that rises above semantic, culturally resonant details that texture his own lost memories. No less than nine times in the space of two pages, the refrain "*We don't allow niggers in here*" is repeated as Douglass tries to enter churches, zoos, lecture halls, and restaurants. Despite initial optimism, then, northern racism forces Douglass's admission that "my enthusiasm had been extravagant" in ever thinking that he could claim the generic identity of a citizen as white men do (360).

The abstract thinking of abolitionists, however enlightened, foists amnesia on the fugitive slave, insisting that he forget his mother's legacy and African heritage. A specific existence is no more encouraging: U.S. society fixates on racial inheritance in order to deny Douglass the rights accorded to citizens blessed with complexions that seemingly have no history. Douglass responds by thinking against freedom, making its theoretical promises contingent on historical delimitations that circumscribe African American subjectivity. *My Bondage and My Freedom* translates a nationalized vocabulary to a set of particulars in ways that significantly reaccent liberty. Still, like so many of his generation, Douglass invokes a common deathly topos: "Patrick Henry, to a listening senate, thrilled by his magic eloquence, and ready to stand by him in his boldest flights, could say, 'GIVE ME LIBERTY OR GIVE ME DEATH,' and this saying was a sublime one, even for a freeman; but, incomparably more sublime, is the same sentiment, when *practically* asserted by men accustomed to the lash and chain—men whose sensibilities must

have become more or less deadened by their bondage" (284). Reiteration of this patriotic articulation does not transmogrify politics as a spectral retreat from social existence as in proslavery and antislavery visions of emancipation. Unlike invocations of liberty that promote necrophilic aversion to embodied subjectivity, Douglass links these words to the institutional context that housed his own body. He "*practically*" resituates freedom amid the materiality of "the lash and chain," not simply to ironize founding principles but also to embed political concepts in a lived history of enslavement. His narrative burdens freedom with antecedence: Whereas Henry's enthusiasm encourages "flights" of political imagination, the practicality of the former slave's memory returns to constraints of law and custom. His version of freedom is "more sublime," but not because it represents a higher theoretical clime. Rather, Douglass's opposition of liberty and death reverses the trajectory of the patriotic sublime, descending to grasp remainders that exceed standard political formulas. A semantic liberty emerges from a world of degraded "sensibilities," from a band of conspirators who gauge political action not by recourse to abstractions but by embracing their own difficult embodiment under slavery.

Douglass thinks against freedom, tethering it to cultural and institutional remainders so often judged excessive political language and theory. To think against freedom is to refuse the depoliticization that is at the heart of naturalized national rights. To think against freedom is to remember the very bodies alienated and abused by slavery. In contrast to the range of American "scholars," including abolitionists, slave narrators, and proslavery pastoralists who propose definitions independent of precedent and culture, Douglass asks us to make sense of political rights by context. We are to construe freedom by all that surrounds it rather than instantly divine its meaning. Political literacy is thus as slow and as laborious as the slave's struggle to read and write: To become fluent in freedom, the citizen needs to think about what freedom *is not* in at least two respects. First, action against freedom requires archaeological practices—a sort of material etymology of culture—that link present use to past abuse. Second, a strategic position against freedom commits us to modes of political being that are remaindered by nationalized rights. To think what freedom is not, then, asks for more than a remembering of slavery; it also asks us to document and imagine all the experiences and expressions not recognized as or included in freedom. Resistance to freedom forces on us the difficult awareness of the violence that freed the citizen from everyday life.