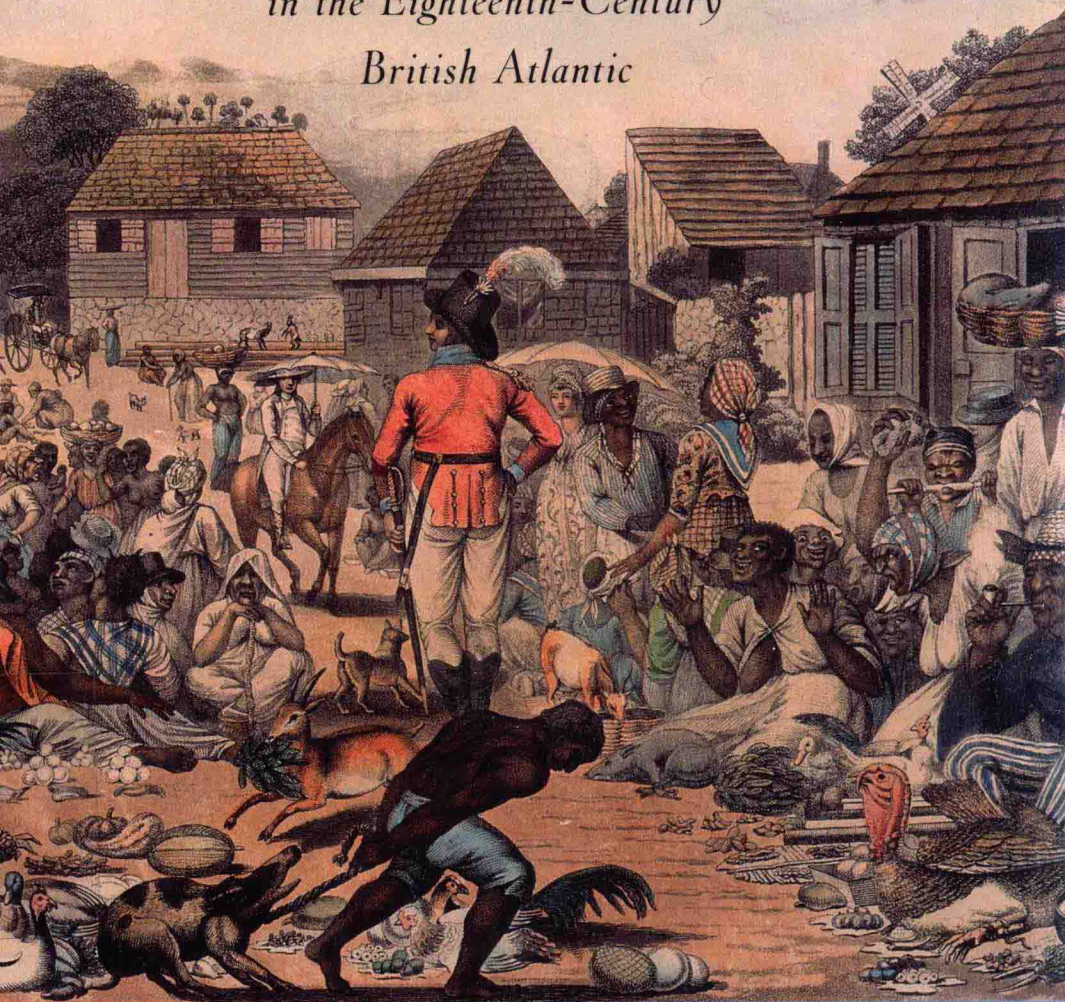


Spectacular SUFFERING

*Witnessing Slavery
in the Eighteenth-Century
British Atlantic*



RAMESH MALLIPEDDI

Spectacular Suffering



WITNESSING SLAVERY
IN THE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY
BRITISH ATLANTIC

Ramesh Mallipeddi



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Introduction



SENTIMENTAL MELANCHOLY, CAPITALIST MODERNITY, COLONIAL SLAVERY

Arriving in Barbados in 1773 as private secretary to Governor Edward Hays, William Dickson encountered an African slave whose body was covered with scars and whose leg was burdened with an iron boot. When asked by what authority his owner had thus punished him, the slave replied that “he was his owner’s property, who had a right to treat him as he pleased.” These routinized private punishments, Dickson observed, were horrific enough to “throw even the most unconcerned spectator into deep melancholy.”¹ It was the visceral sight of the enslaved body, rather than so many “general descriptions” he had read and heard about, that confirmed for Dickson the crime of slavery: the exorbitant, unlimited, and absolute rights of masters to discipline their slaves. For Dickson, as for many fellow abolitionists, the evils of slavery arose from being a “private” institution, impervious to external influences like law or public opinion. Africans in the British Caribbean, in other words, were not subjects or citizens but slaves. Hence Dickson’s antislavery work, *Letters on Slavery* (1789), aimed to bring the private authority of the masters—“the sovereign arbiters of the liberties and the lives of the enslaved Negroes”—under public scrutiny and, by extension, legal regulation. By documenting slave abuse and urging British subjects “to step between the violators of the rights” of Africans and the “innocent victims of their brutality,” Dickson explicitly sought to harness his readers’ emotion for reformist ends.²

On Caribbean plantations, where blacks constituted nearly four-fifths of the total population, legal terror remained a principal means

of governance, and observers documented exemplary punishments for the most part with unconcern and indifference. The specificities of Dickson's encounter become clearer when his response is contrasted with another description of corporal punishment from a century before: Hans Sloane's *Natural History of Jamaica*, which was published in two volumes in 1707 and 1725 and based on the author's fifteen-month residence in Jamaica as the personal physician to the new governor, the Duke of Albemarle, between 1687 and 1689. In this canonical account, Sloane observes how masters burned slaves for rebelling, "put Iron Rings of great weight on their ankles" for running away, and whipped them "with Lance wood Switches, till they be bloody" for negligence.³ The resulting "pains are extravagant" and the "Cicatrices" from the floggings "are visible on their Skins for ever after; and a Slave, the more he have of those, is the less valu'd."⁴ Sloane describes penal practices together with other natural and cultural phenomena, such as the indigenous flora and fauna, trade, religion, livestock, and tropical disease. Consequently, the enumeration of punishments and the tortured body emerges as just another ethnographic fact. In this detached, unemotional account—or what James Delbourgo has elegantly termed the "clinical topography of suffering"—punishments are integral to, if not altogether necessitated by, the day-to-day operations of the plantation: "these punishments are sometimes merited by the Blacks, who are a very perverse Generation of People."⁵ The scars on the body are not so much markers of slaveholder brutality as evidence of its diminished pecuniary value. Dickson's later account, however, transforms these ethnographic "facts" of plantation life into melancholic "proofs" of slaveholder cruelty. While Sloane is neither outraged nor offended by the bodily infliction of pain, Dickson presents the same from the standpoint of an aggrieved, melancholy, and sentimental witness.

This desire to witness and to document physical punishment in the interests of legislative reform is an attribute not only of metropolitan observers but of African British authors as well. In *The Interesting Narrative*, Olaudah Equiano, too, conveys his subjective vulnerability in terms of punishment, as when he confesses to his dread of whipping and being scarred:

I was therefore much embarrassed, and very apprehensive of a flogging at least. I dreaded, of all things, the thoughts of being stripped, as I never in my life had the marks of any violence of that kind. At that instant a rage seized my soul, and for a while

I determined to resist the first man that should attempt to lay violent hands on me, or basely use me without a trial; for I would sooner die like a free man, than suffer myself to be scourged by the hands of ruffians, and my blood drawn like a slave.⁶

Equiano understands the unremitting savagery of slavery as, first and foremost, a violation of bodily integrity. Because whipping is an invasion of corporeal autonomy, reasserting some measure of power over the body and preserving it from marks of violence constitutes one of the meanings of freedom. Moreover, in viewing punishment not as a fact of plantation life or proof of masters' cruelty, but as a threat to one's embodied personhood, Equiano speaks not as an observer but as a victim. In a more ambitious vein, he also combines the roles of victim and advocate, recollecting for instance how, while working for his Quaker master, Robert King, he "was often a witness to cruelties of every kind, which were exercised on unhappy fellow slaves," and how, in Montserrat and St. Kitts, slaves "are loaded with chains, and often other instruments of torture," such as iron muzzles and thumb-screws, "on the most trifling occasion." In terms reminiscent of Dickson's *Letters on Slavery* (which he commended for exposing "the horrid cruelties practiced on the poor sable people in the West Indies"), to mobilize public opinion Equiano describes the statutes enacted by the colonial assemblies as "bloody West India code[s]."⁷ By making subjective experience the basis of political advocacy, and speaking both as a sufferer and as a spectator of legal violence—as both victim and witness—Equiano at once draws on, marks the limits of, and extends the metropolitan antislavery project.

I begin with a juxtaposition of Dickson and Equiano because they encapsulate this book's two central lines of inquiry. *Spectacular Suffering* focuses on moments of witnessing slavery in the long eighteenth century and the structures of sentimental affect that invariably attend these moments. First, my analysis approaches the problem of slavery as a problem of embodiment, evidenced both in Dickson's visceral response to the scarred, fettered slave and in Equiano's rage against the potential flogging he may receive. This foregrounding of bodily experience is a central element in sentimental representations of slave distress, since the two features of Atlantic slavery—commodification and punishment—are fundamentally concerned with the transformations of the body, with the subjection of the raced body to the regimes of the market and to plantation discipline. From its inception, the Atlan-

abolition of the slave trade rather than the full emancipation of slaves. Yet, upon returning to England, he not only became an ardent activist, traveling extensively in Scotland to gather signatures during the nationwide petitionary campaign against the slave trade, but also published *Letters on Slavery*, with the expectation that it would “contribute to prevent the repetition of such execrable tortures.”⁸ More importantly, as the passage from Equiano’s *Interesting Narrative* reveals, it was not only white metropolitan authors who utilized the tropes of sentimental witnessing in their accounts of slavery. In their autobiographies and polemical tracts, African British authors such as Equiano, Ottobah Cugoano, and Mary Prince foreground bodily punishment as a defining feature of slavery, recounting their experiences of suffering—and those of their fellow Africans—in terms reminiscent of Dickson’s third-person account. The African British authors’ concern for and advocacy of the cause of fellow slaves also operates, to some extent, within the victim-witness dyadic structure of sentimentalism that we see concurrently at work in metropolitan representations. I undertake a redefinition of the politics of sentimentalism in the interests of theorizing embodied slave agency, since by designating emotional responsiveness to slave sufferance as always politically suspect and compromised, our critical frameworks have made it hard to grasp the embodied dimensions of black experience in slave narratives and in black cultural and aesthetic forms more generally.

Previous studies on the connections between slavery and sentimentalism have tended to focus on the late eighteenth century—in particular, the abolitionist era—yet the literary-historical period designated as the long eighteenth century is roughly coextensive with the rise, consolidation, and overthrow of racial slavery in the British Caribbean. Indeed, as Christopher Leslie Brown has recently observed, a “complex of values, sentiments, opinions, beliefs, and assumptions critical of some or all aspects of the Atlantic system” had already existed from the mid-seventeenth century onward.⁹ This book consequently extends the chronological span of analysis to provide an extended genealogy of the intersections between the institutional contexts of slavery and the affective structures of sentiment. Focusing on Aphra Behn’s novella *Oroonoko*, the circulation of the “Yarico-Inkle” story in the eighteenth-century public sphere, and the novels and sermons of Laurence Sterne, the first half of the book reads specific encounters—real as well as imaginary—between metropolitan observers and colonial slaves to analyze the ways in which spectatorial sympathy acts as

a mediating vehicle in these texts. The second half of the book conversely examines the slaves' embodied responses to dispossession by looking at now-canonical narratives by African British authors (Equiano's *Interesting Narrative*, Ignatius Sancho's *Letters*, and Ottobah Cugoana's *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery*) as well as a range of archival materials, including slave ship captains' journals, tracts of nautical medicine, and the British parliamentary committee's investigations into the slave trade. In attempting to excavate the various histories of the economic and social activities of the slaves themselves—an archival and methodological challenge that I will subsequently address—I aim to show how slaves generated a melancholic counter-knowledge of slavery, an affective response to the forces of abstraction and the commodification of their bodies. The semantic doubleness of the term “witness”—an observer or bystander who offers evidence at a trial and a victim who testifies after having undergone an experience—suggests that the slave must be read as both an object of sympathy and a testatory subject of his or her own making. The two axes of the book, attending to metropolitan representations and to slave accounts and activities, allow us to inquire into how the enslaved subject is constructed in accordance with a set of ideological imperatives, but also into his or her own efforts at self-constitution—in short, into the dual figuration of the slave as both victim and agent.

SENTIMENTALISM AND EMPIRE

The intersections between sentiment and empire in the eighteenth century, especially in relation to the processes of ameliorative reform and commercialization, have of course been subject to intensive scrutiny in extant scholarship. Markman Ellis's 1996 *Politics of Sensibility*, for instance, argues that the sentimental novel's engagement with slave pain, although spurred by a recognition of human beings' shared capacity for sentience, seldom moves beyond images of individual suffering to a more systemic questioning of the actual institution; rather, these authors voyeuristically dwell on “the powerless resigned to their powerlessness.” Plantation reformers, he insists, attempted to transform a system “based on violence into one based on trust,” exhibiting “no interest in destroying or even destabilizing slavery as a hegemonic system of coercion.”¹⁰ Ellis's account of conservative metropolitan efforts to envision hierarchical relations between masters and slaves as reciprocal ties is rigorously historicized in George Boulukos's 2008

The Grateful Slave. For Boulukos, the trope of the grateful slave is an attempt to recast asymmetry as mutuality, where ties of benevolence and obligation bind planters and slaves to each other. Within the confines of such a trope, slaves are divested of a “complex psychic interiority,” rendered passive and subordinate, and “never chafe against their masters’ demands, never try to assert their own independence or maturity, and never seek to renegotiate their contract of gratitude.”¹¹ Situating metropolitan emotional concern within the wider context of imperial encounters, Lynn Festa’s *Sentimental Figures of Empire* argues that, in an era of global expansion, the “sentimental mode allowed readers to identify with and feel for the plight of other people while upholding distinctive cultural and personal identities.” In recasting “conquest into commerce” and turning “scenes of violence and exploitation into occasions for benevolence and pity,” sentimentalism becomes a form of “affective piracy,” deployed to secure “the singularity of the sentimental self.”¹² In her extended reading of Yorick’s snuffbox in Laurence Sterne’s *A Sentimental Journey*, for instance, Festa argues that Sterne’s protagonist invests the object with sentimental value to reverse the threat posed to his singular self by the tide of commercialization.

Sentimental constructions, as Ellis and Boulukos have argued, often generate images of abject submission, but historically, slaves were by no means always hapless victims of power, passive objects of plantocratic beneficence, or mere vessels for their masters’ desire. Reforms to the plantation systems in the colonies, I show in this book, were expedients catalyzed by and intended to quell mounting slave disaffection. The symptomatic readings advanced by these critics do not explain how amelioration was a site of perpetual contestation between masters and slaves. It is by attending to the contradictory and antithetical aspirations of the planters and the enslaved that we can begin to activate alternative forms of slave subjectivity. Festa’s work avoids strict symptomacy, given her attention to objects and affect, but her primary focus nevertheless remains on the metropolis. Yet not only metropolitan subjects like Yorick but colonial slaves, too, endeavored to reclaim a measure of singularity in the face of the corporeal and social extinction unleashed by commodification: for instance, against the English Yorick’s investment in his snuffbox we can counterpose colonial slaves’ attachments to their tobacco pipes during plantation burial ceremonies (a topic I briefly consider in chapter 5)—attachments that likewise demonstrate slave attempts to reconstitute their selves as defenses

against abstraction. In studies of empire, the experiences of colonized subjects ought to have priority, and my focus on slaves' socioeconomic activities and cultural practices aims to attend to such experiences.

Charlotte Sussman's *Consuming Anxieties* (2000), in contrast to these other studies, treats sentimental affect vis-à-vis the eighteenth-century abstention movement to demonstrate the ways in which visceral responses triggered by the ingestion of tropical products (sugar in particular) shaped metropolitan perceptions of the periphery and how these embodied reactions were harnessed, in turn, by British women's antislavery societies to mobilize public opinion. Sugar is a product of concrete (i.e., physiological) slave labor whose thingly characteristics are erased as it enters the market as a commodity, because the exchange process renders physical properties immaterial, subjecting qualitatively different objects to the common measure of money. But antislavery rhetoric, Sussman argues, reversed this logic of abstraction by investing the commodity with sensuous particulars so as to reveal its embeddedness in the racially exploitative social relations of the colony. It is within domains typically considered passive and feminine, such as reading (of literary texts) and consumption (of imperial goods), that women's antislavery activism took shape. Sussman's study employs gendered consumption to interrupt classical political economy's preoccupation with production and exchange, on the one hand, and racial difference to mark the limits of metropolitan gendered identification on the other. By revealing (especially in her splendid analysis of Mary Prince's *History*) how bourgeois women's extension of sympathy was invariably predicated on an erasure of the historical specificity of enslaved women's laboring lives, Sussman calls attention to the precarious, ambivalent nature of identification and emphasizes the distinctive experiences of the enslaved in the colonies.¹³

The recurrent tension between the abstract, deterritorializing logic of capital and the embodied, local practices of historical subjects is a defining feature of Sussman's approach to the dynamic, albeit contradictory, operations of sentimental affect. In a similar vein, this book does not provide a typical literary-historical account but instead relies on a conceptual definition, viewing sentimentalism as a mode of historical epistemology, a form of counterknowledge that emerged in response to profound social and economic transformations set in motion by modernity. Like Romanticism, its literary-historical successor, sentimentalism can be read as a protest against the forces of capitalist modernity: against relentless commodification, abstract or instrumen-

tal reason, and market quantification. For Michael Löwy and Robert Sayre, the Romantic critique “is bound up with an experience of loss,” with “the painful and melancholic conviction” that “certain essential human values have been alienated”;¹⁴ as the title of their monograph—*Romanticism against the Tide of Modernity*—suggests, these critics read the “content” of this experience of loss or alienation as internal to modern European societies. Sentimentalism may also be thought of as a counterdiscourse of capitalist modernity that counterposes the particular to the general, the qualitative to the quantitative, the singular to the typical, and the abstract to the concrete. Although inspired by values antithetical to modern society, sentimentalism, like Romanticism, emerges as a “modern critique of modernity” or as “modernity’s self-criticism.”¹⁵

Scholars inspired by the pathbreaking interventions of Eric Williams and C. L. R. James have argued that capitalism and colonialism were historically convergent phenomena.¹⁶ The plantation system was a by-product of the alliance between capitalist modernity and colonial slavery, an alliance that contributed to the rise of a disjunctive, structurally plural, and heterogeneous transnational formation known as the Atlantic world. Commerce and trade, genocide and conquest, fundamentally restructured the socioeconomic relations of non-European societies on a planetary scale in what Michel-Rolph Trouillot has termed the “first moment of globality,” when “capital, labor, and the commodities they generated circumscribed a world in which the various subparts were increasingly intertwined.”¹⁷ This restructuring produced uneven geographies of freedom and unfreedom that developed concurrently and coexisted together: chattel slavery was institutionalized in the Caribbean even as slavery had virtually faded from metropolitan societies. Eighteenth-century English and other European societies viewed labor as a contractual relation, existing independently of the laboring person; the individual’s right to his or her labor and its exchange had legal recognition. In England especially, these evolving notions of social and economic rights were also intimately connected with the nation’s self-definition as a land of liberty and freedom. At the very same time, assemblies in the colonies enacted laws empowering masters with absolute rights over the lives and labor of their black slaves.

In Ian Baucom’s theoretically ambitious genealogy of the melancholic witness in *Specters of the Atlantic*, he reads sentimental melancholy as a counterdiscourse emerging out of the uneven geography of colo-

nial modernity. Following Walter Benjamin, Baucom sees allegory as the representational counterpart of the commodity inasmuch as allegory's devaluation of the phenomenal world is structurally analogous to the commodity's erasure of the concrete materiality of things. In subsequent historical periods (from the nineteenth century onward), the operation of finance capital intensifies and expands the commodity's logic of abstraction, with speculative realism—a generic mode that subordinates the singular to the general—its discursive equivalent. Immanent to and concurrent with the emergence of allegorization, however, is a counterallegorical melancholic discourse that advances a critique of the procedures of abstraction and typification. The allegorical is troubled and haunted by the counterallegorical such that melancholy realism—a discourse that, in reverse, privileges the singular over the general—stands as the aesthetic, epistemological, and ethical counterunit to speculative realism and its forms of knowledge.

For Baucom, the violence of Atlantic slavery is intensified in its allegorical vehicles of representation, such as ship manifests and logbooks, in which individual slaves figure as “little more than a chain of numbers.”¹⁸ However, by romanticizing and sentimentalizing allegorical facts—that is, by particularizing abstract numbers—antislavery activists such as Granville Sharp and William Wilberforce generate a counterallegorical, melancholic knowledge about slavery: “Antislavery discourse also bears witness to the emergence, internal to the speculative culture of our long contemporaneity, of the figure of the interested historical witness *and* so testifies to the emergence, internal to a Euro-Atlantic modernity, of a testamentary counterdiscourse on and of modernity: a recognizably romantic counterdiscourse; a melancholy but cosmopolitan romanticism that sets itself, in Michael Lowy and Robert Sayre's evocative phrase, ‘against the tide of modernity.’”¹⁹ Indeed, the antislavery movement's attack on the repression of slaves and on the masters' claims to the proprietorship of slave labor and persons was driven by its perception of the uneven and disjunctive juridico-economic systems haunting colonial modernity wherein metropolitan liberty and colonial slavery existed side by side. Similarly, as I shall show in subsequent chapters, in the writings of metropolitan authors such as Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* and Richard Steele's *Yarico-Inkle* story, the figure of the melancholic witness emerges at the moment of the raced body's conversion into an article of commerce and its categorization as chattel—that is to say, as a response to bodily commodification; sentimentalism, then, is mo-