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DIGNITY AMIDST DEVASTATION:  
POLITICS, AESTHETICS AND THE SLAVE SUBLIME

by

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Drucilla Cornell

and

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and approved by

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Dignity amidst Devastation: Politics, Aesthetics and the Slave Sublime

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Drucilla Cornell and Cynthia R. Daniels

Burke, Kant, and Schiller used aesthetic categories to connect politics with ethical ideals of sympathy, dignity, and freedom. Although they extended these ideals to all human beings regardless of sex, color, or nation, this dissertation argues that representations of human difference in the realm of the aesthetic undermined the universal intent of their political philosophies. A new approach to aesthetics is needed in order to re-imagine difference from an ethical standpoint. This project identifies one such approach in selected works of art and literature by women from different parts of the African diaspora. In representing the dignity of women who were enslaved or colonized, these creative works revise our conceptions of political community, humanity, and the meaning of freedom.

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## Chapter One

### Introduction: Black Female Embodiment and the Idea of the Sublime

*Sublimity is the echo of a great soul*

Longinus<sup>1</sup>

*I wish you had commended the Negro sit-inners and demonstrators of Birmingham for their sublime courage, their willingness to suffer and their amazing discipline in the midst of great provocation. One day the South will recognize its real heroes. They will be the James Merediths, with the noble sense of purpose that enables them to face jeering and hostile mobs, and with the agonizing loneliness that characterizes the life of the pioneer. They will be old, oppressed, battered Negro women, symbolized in a seventy-two-year-old woman in Montgomery, Alabama, who rose up with a sense of dignity and with her people decided not to ride segregated buses, and who responded with ungrammatical profundity to one who inquired about her weariness: "My feets is tired, but my soul is at rest."*

Martin Luther King, Jr.<sup>2</sup>

Courageous responses to violence and injustice raise several questions about the capacity of human beings to remain dignified in the most devastating circumstances. It is not only courage, but also the tragedy of human suffering, the pain of broken bodies, and the fragility of battered spirits that prompt reflection on the meaning of human dignity in the context of violence. In what exactly does dignity inhere, and how do images of dignified responses to violence become politically significant? This dissertation considers the political implications of representing pain, suffering, courage and endurance in art and literature that deal with the difficult history of Africans in the diaspora. I am particularly interested in the ways in which black women from different regions of the

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<sup>1</sup> Longinus, *On the Sublime*, transl. W. Rhys Roberts, ed. Leonardo Taran (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1987), 61.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," reprinted in *Twentieth Century Political Theory*, ed. Stephen Eric Bronner (New York: Routledge, 2006), 339.

world have recognized and represented one another's courage in the context of suffering, and the disruptions that occur when these images are brought into political discourses on the racialized and gendered body. Because various understandings of human difference have been integral to modern systems of oppression and exclusion, black women's representations of themselves and their experiences are of great political significance. In the absence of full rights of belonging in the political communities into which black women have been thrown by historical processes of slavery and colonization, what are the implications of representing one another's dignity and moral resistance to injustice? Do images of suffering carry with them a moral obligation to respond? If so, who must respond, and how?

The question of what it means to be a human being who lives in a finite body that is vulnerable to violation, pain, suffering, and death is of course timeless. Yet this is also an exceedingly important time to revisit this question given that the past decade has brought a heightened attentiveness to human frailty in advanced democracies. The rise of terrorism and the devastation of hurricane Katrina have created a stronger consciousness of vulnerability, and for this reason empathy with the victims of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami and the recent earthquakes in Haiti and Chile has been especially deep and heartfelt. The experience of unexpected or overwhelming violence, whether through natural disasters or political cataclysms, raises questions about how and why human beings find the strength to endure such suffering with an unshakeable confidence that their lives are still worthwhile. Political philosophy, especially in the Kantian tradition, has been attentive to the experience of insecurity while recognizing that the violation of human beings raises special ethical questions. Yet it is the rare philosopher who turns to

black women as co-thinkers of the great questions facing *humanity*, ostensibly because the particularity of the black female experience has nothing at all to offer anyone else. I argue, on the contrary, that any consideration of human finitude that does not take black women's ideas into account is a poor one indeed. As Martin Luther King Jr. reminds us in his *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, black women's exemplary courage represents one of the longest and the most sustained examples in modern history of the resistance of the human spirit to violence and degradation. I will take a moment to reconsider this history before I explain the significance of black female embodiment for aesthetic theory and moral philosophy.

From the slave-trading coasts of Africa to the interior that was robbed of its natural resources and human life, and from the plantations in the West Indies and the Americas where Africans were held in slavery for centuries to their experience of second-class citizenship after emancipation, the history of the African diaspora since the eighteenth century tells a mixed tale of terror and transcendence. For black women in particular, the experience of forced migration began a journey of economic exploitation, assaults on historical memory, sexual violence, forced reproduction, involuntary sterilization, and the breakup of families. As Historian Darlene Clark Hine notes, "virtually every known nineteenth-century female slave narrative contains reference to, at some juncture, the ever present threat and reality of rape."<sup>3</sup> Yet black women's stories of their own and their foremothers' journeys through this landscape do not tell only of the devastation. Within those experiences of terror, we find a continuous affirmation of their humanity in the face of soul-destroying fear. We are presented with images of brutality,

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<sup>3</sup> Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West: Preliminary Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance," *Signs* 14, 4 (Summer 1989), 912-20 at 912.

but we sense nevertheless a heightened anticipation of liberation, a jubilee that is awaited with unshakeable certainty by people who had no indication whatsoever that the oppression would cease. How is this sense of hopefulness created, sustained, and passed on whilst the violence persists? And how can stories of transcendence uphold those who did not actually “triumph” over injustice, but have sunk nameless into history, “disremembered and unaccounted for?”<sup>4</sup>

This dissertation approaches these questions by considering art and literature as one avenue of response to pain and suffering. Looking at the work of contemporary writers and artists from Jamaica, Guyana, South Africa, and the United States, I argue that the creative imagination can return ethical principles of freedom and dignity to public discourses, thus influencing political institutions in line with a vision of what the world *ought* to look like. The focus of this study, therefore, is on the representational practices and aesthetic ideals that push ethical concerns to the foreground in art and literature that take black female embodiment as their central theme. The close interconnections between black women’s experiences on different continents have made certain cultural signs and historical figures clearly recognizable across borders, creating an artistic convergence around such figures. The artwork and writing discussed in the chapters that follow focus on three historical characters: Queen Nanny of the maroons, who led a guerilla war against British occupation and plantation slavery in Jamaica in the early eighteenth century; Sarah Bartmann, who was transported from southern Africa to Britain and France and exhibited as a curiosity at the turn of the nineteenth century, reportedly on account of her “extraordinary shape”; and Margaret Garner, who escaped from slavery in Kentucky in the middle of the nineteenth century and later killed her

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<sup>4</sup>Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Vintage Books, 1987), 323.

daughter rather than have her returned to slavery. While the subjects are historical, I argue that the vision of the artists and writers is projected into the future.

This introductory chapter describes the scope and outlines the argument of the dissertation, providing an overview of the ideational framework in which I will situate my questions and concerns. The epigraph at the beginning of this chapter, in which Martin Luther King Jr. pays tribute to the “sublime courage” of the women and men of the Civil Rights Movement, invokes an aesthetic ideal that deserves extended analysis. The idea of the sublime has a long history in Western letters, and it is this accumulated meaning that adds force to King’s description of the “amazing discipline amidst provocation” that was displayed by thousands of black women and men in the American South. I go back to eighteenth-century conversations on the sublime in order to explain how this aesthetic idea has gathered its weight as a descriptor of the black experience of suffering and the transcendence of that suffering. I then explain how other theorists writing today are making contemporary political sense of the sublime and discuss the main attributes of diaspora art and literature that I am interested in. This is followed by a detailed review of the feminist literature on the idea of the sublime, in which I note the continuing inattention to black female embodiment. I end this chapter with a statement on the importance of intersectional analysis in feminist critiques of the sublime and outline the chapters that will follow.

## **I. The idea of the sublime in eighteenth-century philosophy**

The discourse on sublimity has its roots in a first-century treatise attributed to Longinus, a Greek rhetorician. In his original formulation, sublimity was described as

the revelation of the nobility of the human soul through poetry, the power of which he sought to describe in his treatise. Longinus' treatise saw a great revival during the eighteenth century under circumstances that will be explained further below. Amongst the most influential writers on the sublime in the age of Enlightenment were Edmund Burke a British philosopher and Member of Parliament, and Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Schiller, who were some of the most influential thinkers in Germany at the time. These philosophers used the idea of the sublime to advance ethical ideals of sympathy, dignity, and freedom. For Burke, the sublime derives from mixed feelings of terror and delight, a combination that persuades us to draw near to other people in their suffering even as we are completely horrified by their pain.<sup>5</sup> Burke's understanding of sympathy as a sublime passion was central to his concerted campaign to drum up public support for the victims of colonial excesses in British India.<sup>6</sup> In a different approach to the sublime, Kant and Schiller focused on the consciousness of our own dignity that arises when we confront threats to our bodies or the limits of our understanding with an inner certainty that we are greater than the challenges before us.<sup>7</sup> "Dignity" in Kant's sense refers to something that is of "unconditional, incomparable worth," without price, and which is not simply a means to some other end.<sup>8</sup> Although Kant insisted on the autonomy of aesthetic ideas of the beautiful and sublime from practical activity, he also

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<sup>5</sup> Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. David Womersley (New York and London: Penguin Books, 2004).

<sup>6</sup> See Jennifer Pitts, *A Turn to Empire: The Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), discussed in Chapter Two.

<sup>7</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, transl. James Creed Meredith, ed. Nicholas Walker (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) and *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, transl. John T. Goldthwait (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003); Friedrich Schiller, "On the Sublime" and "Concerning the Sublime," in *Essays*, transl. Daniel O. Dahlstrom, ed. Walter Hinderer and Daniel O. Dahlstrom (New York: Continuum, 1993).

<sup>8</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant: Practical Philosophy*, transl. and ed. Mary J. Gregor, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 84-5. Also see, in the same volume, the *Metaphysics of Morals*, 557.

understood the sublime as making reference to and harmonizing with the moral law. Thus his idea of the sublime becomes aligned with notions of freedom as well as an ethical vision of the inalienable humanity in each and every person. Schiller's reading of Kant takes the moral vision of the Kantian sublime and links it to tragedy as a dramatic form, thus creating a more direct link between images of suffering and their influence on the thoughts and actions of those who bear witness. These elements of the sublime help to illuminate various aspects of women's resistance to racial and sexual violence and explicate the influence that images of that struggle can have on political activism.

Although the sublime is clearly a useful category for analysis, I also explore the ethical and political implications of representing the black female body using an aesthetic idea that developed within a racial economy that did not recognize the basic humanity of black people, and did not offer an equal moral standing to women and men. Although Burke, Kant, and Schiller opposed slavery and extended their ethical ideals to all human beings regardless of sex, color, or nation, this dissertation argues that representations of human difference in the realm of the aesthetic undermined the universal intent of their political philosophies. The eighteenth century was a time of European colonialist expansion into other regions of the world, and constructions of the subject of aesthetics (the observer) in relation to the racialized and gendered object (the observed) permeate the work of the three thinkers. In other words, we find a tendency toward both liberation and domination when Enlightenment ideas of the sublime are linked to the specific question of black female embodiment and the struggle for freedom from enslavement and colonization. The ambivalence can be understood as follows.

On the one hand, the eighteenth century was a revolutionary era: the French and American Revolutions, which were preceded by the Glorious Revolution in Britain and followed by the Haitian Revolution, gave rise to new types of political ideals, social aspirations, economic processes and forms of knowledge. These were celebrated by thinkers like Kant, Schiller, Adam Smith, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Denis Diderot and other philosophers of the Enlightenment (here conceived as a distinct intellectual movement rather than as a term referring broadly of the age in which they lived). What these thinkers had in common was an emphasis on reason as the basis of human progress, a rejection of arbitrary power, and a cosmopolitan sensibility based on ideals of freedom and dignity. The obverse of this movement was the conservative politics of thinkers like Burke who were opposed to the revolutionary ideals of the Enlightenment, which threatened to deprive tradition of its legitimacy by substituting reason for custom. For Burke and other conservatives, all this upheaval was a form of social fracturing, leading to feelings of alienation and the loss of the securities of tradition and religion.<sup>9</sup>

Regardless of their political allegiances, what these eighteenth-century philosophers had in common was the search for a model that could address the requirements of the modern state. Whether such a state were to be based on well-regulated monarchical traditions, as Burke proposed, or a radically new constitution in which all citizens would play an equal role in governance—the vision of Enlightenment philosophers, the basic problem was that no perfect model could be identified either in the past or in the present. The state that these thinkers were trying either to restore or to construct anew simply had to be *imagined*, along with the type of people who would give

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<sup>9</sup> For the debate between Enlightenment philosophers and the counter-Enlightenment, see Stephen Eric Bronner, *Reclaiming the Enlightenment: Toward a Politics of Radical Engagement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

life and character to that state.<sup>10</sup> That process of reconstructing the world is reflected in Burke, Kant and Schiller's articulations of sympathy, dignity, and freedom—aesthetic ideals around which they imagined new or renewed moral communities. And although Europeans who were trying to transform their lives from subjects to citizens were certainly not doing so under the same conditions as African slaves, their struggle to create new subjectivities and imagine new communities generated aspirations that enslaved Africans in Haiti and elsewhere took up and rearticulated.

On the other hand, the quest for a renewal or stabilization at home was accompanied by a disruptive set of social and political relations abroad. The eighteenth century was characterized by rising imperial ambitions and an outward push by European powers to gain dominance in other parts of the world. Although somewhat inchoate and lacking the boldness of nineteenth-century imperialism, eighteenth-century expansionism challenged the political imagination once again. Where exactly were the newly acquired territories and colonies in relation to Europe? What did they represent in comparison to European customs and ideas? Who were their inhabitants in relation to the leading men of Europe? Images of the “savages” that were said to inhabit far-off lands came flooding back to Europe through travel journals and reports from colonial settlers and administrators.<sup>11</sup> There was a constant exchange of information between men (and some women) of learning and their counterparts who had found their way to “exotic” regions of the world. Parts of the world that were closed off to European experience, either because

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<sup>10</sup> For the historical dilemmas that called for aesthetic/imaginative responses, see Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford, UK and Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1990) ; Siraj Ahmed, “The Theater of the Civilized Self: Edmund Burke and the East India Trials,” *Representations* 78 (Spring, 2002): 28-55.

<sup>11</sup> See Gustav Jahoda, *Images of Savages : Ancients Roots of Modern Prejudice in Western Culture*. (London and New York: Routledge, 1999).

they had yet to be reached by explorers or because they were found to be “impenetrable” upon arrival, simply fanned the flames of the philosophical imagination. Images of freedom and images of savagery became two sides of the same coin, often quite literally. Simon Gikandi presents evidence of the use of the image of the shackled slave in abolitionist campaigns—Josiah Wedgwood’s medallion with the inscription “Am I not a Man and a Brother?” being one famous example—and the simultaneous use of such images to symbolize the wealth and power of slaveholders. The English pirate John Hawkins, knighted by Elizabeth I, chose as his crest “bound figures of enslaved Africans with cords around their neck.” Gikandi explains that “for Hawkins, who had become a member of the aristocracy through trafficking in Africans, displaying the black’s tortured body was a source of pride rather than shame.”<sup>12</sup>

Keeping these contradictions in mind, the dissertation employs a feminist critical analysis throughout in order identify those ideas in Burke, Kant, and Schiller that help us to understand the sublime in black women’s history, while making clear the problems arising from elements of eighteenth-century aesthetics that deny the humanity and dignity of women and blacks. My central claim is that a new critical theory of the sublime is needed in order to account for the ways in which “race”<sup>13</sup> and gender shaped the modern

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<sup>12</sup> Simon Gikandi, “Race and the Idea of the Aesthetic,” *Michigan Quarterly Review* 40, 2 (2001): 318-350 at 328.

<sup>13</sup> Scholars have debated the applicability of this term to eighteenth-century ideas concerning different types of human being. There was an abundance of theories concerning the origins and mutability of human difference; blackness, for example, was thought to be located in an inner layer of the skin, in the color of the bile, or in an attribute attached to the germ from which human beings grew. There were questions about the common versus separate origins of the “races”, and the relationship of “race” to geography and climate. All these questions were dealt with at considerable length by the eighteenth-century thinkers whose ideas are discussed in this study. Following Emmanuel Eze, I shall continue to use the term “race” for the purposes of marking patterns of racial prejudice and the preoccupation with race-thinking in the eighteenth century. European philosophers could not agree on what “race” meant, but they certainly spent a lot of time trying to figure it out, and black people were immeasurably worse off for all this activity (Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, ed., *Race and the Enlightenment: A Reader* [Cambridge, MA and Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 1997]).

experience of terror, violence, and injustice, as well as the strategies of resistance that enabled black women to transcend their devastating circumstances. I show how black women's creative imagination contests the limits of aesthetic ideals in order to revise our conceptions of political community and the meaning of humanity, dignity and freedom.

## **II. Making contemporary political sense of the sublime**

My turn to eighteenth-century aesthetics is prompted by several recent studies in feminist thought, critical race theory, and postcolonial studies. In search of the elusive figures of women whose lives were buried beneath structures of imperialist and racist domination, Drucilla Cornell reworks ideas from Kant and Schiller in order to put forward an idea of the sublime as the imagined moral resistance of the enslaved and the colonized. Cornell emphasizes that writers and artists must imagine and re-present this resistance because the historical record does not give us direct access to the ideas or consciousness of women who were subjected to violence.<sup>14</sup> Postcolonial critic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has famously captured the impossibility of a full recovery of the lives that have been lost by stating that “the subaltern cannot speak!” Spivak's whole body of work is concerned with marking the sites of disappearance of the subaltern (who is typically but not exclusively the poorest woman in the global south) by following the trace of her expulsion from key texts in philosophy, literature, and history.<sup>15</sup>

Although she engages Kant's writings on the sublime, Spivak also uses the politics of reading proposed by Jacques Derrida through his idea of deconstruction in

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<sup>14</sup> Drucilla Cornell, *Between Women and Generations: Legacies of Dignity* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 71-94.

<sup>15</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1999), 6.

order to illuminate the possibilities for feminist interventions in history and philosophy. “The challenge of deconstruction,” she explains, is “to examine with painstaking care if the protocols of the text contains a moment that can produce something that will generate a new and useful reading.”<sup>16</sup> The silences and absences in the text where women have been muted and disappeared are obviously moments of despair for feminists who are trying to retrieve lost histories; however, Spivak points out that these moments can also produce something useful because they disclose the limits of the text and outline the possibilities for a feminist anti-imperialist politics of reading.

The feminist alliance with deconstruction provides a useful approach for this dissertation because it speaks to one of the greatest challenges facing feminist researchers who have set out to excavate black women’s history. To name only a few, we can now see the extraordinary innovations in historiography that scholars like Deborah Gray White, Darlene Clark Hine, Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, and Nell Irvin Painter had to undertake in order to recover black women’s voices for posterity.<sup>17</sup> Yet it is not always possible to piece together a history from the fragments of broken lives. Literary theorist Cheryl Wall calls our attention to the ways in which black women novelists use memory, music, dreams and ritual to mark or bridge historical gaps that resist closure. Encountering overwhelming silences regarding racial and gendered violence in western myths that take modernity as a sign for freedom, the black literary imagination unshackles itself from traditional historiography—even from the conventions of modern(ist) literature—to creatively reconstruct a history of resistance that would

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<sup>16</sup> Spivak, *Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, 98.

<sup>17</sup> See Deborah Gray White, ed., *Telling Histories: Black Women Historians in the Ivory Tower* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

otherwise be inaccessible to us.<sup>18</sup> In a further explication of this project, Abena Busia shows how poetry, sculpture, and rituals of mourning and remembrance in the African diaspora create a rapport between the dead and the living in order to enable individuals to fashion themselves out of fragments; the pieces can be brought together so that they create meaning and coherence, but they could never form a seamless whole.<sup>19</sup> These literary theorists as well as the historians previously mentioned do not suggest a simple triumph of speech over the unspeakable, full disclosure in the place of what could not be represented, wholeness substituted for brokenness. In their approaches to history and the literary imagination, they instead propose a way of working creatively with contradictions that offer us an insight into the sublime as a representation of dignity amidst devastation.

Paul Gilroy sees the political implications of sublimity with exceptional clarity. In introducing his idea of the “black Atlantic” as a webbed network of cultures of people of African descent in the Americas, Europe, and the Caribbean, Gilroy shows how writers and musicians established a productive “rapport with death” in their remembrance of past suffering. He refers to this imaginative mediation of death and unspeakable, incomprehensible terror as the “slave sublime.”<sup>20</sup> Gilroy also calls attention to the modern subjectivities that emerge at the points of (often violent) contact between cultures, suggesting that the intellectual heritage of blacks in the West stands in a

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<sup>18</sup> Cheryl A. Wall, *Worrying the Line: Black Women Writers, Lineage, and Literary Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

<sup>19</sup> Abena P. A. Busia, "What is Africa to Me? Knowledge Possession, Knowledge Production, and the Health of our Bodies Politic in Africa and the Africa Diaspora." *African Studies Review* 49, no. 1 (April, 2006): 15-30; "Fashioning a Self in the Contemporary World." *African Arts* 37, no. 1 (Spring, 2004): 54-63; "What is Your Nation?" Reconnecting Africa and Her Diaspora through Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*," in *Changing our Own Words: Essays on Criticism*, ed. Cheryl A. Wall (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989).

<sup>20</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1993), 198, 203.

relationship of “antagonistic indebtedness” to the Enlightenment.<sup>21</sup> Although he does not examine the antecedents of his conception of the sublime in eighteenth-century philosophy, this dissertation will make clear the points at which the slave sublime intercedes in an ongoing conversation and transforms it. This is not to say that Gilroy is simply reiterating an old idea from European philosophy; rather, he gives us new insight into modernity as the temporal consciousness of those who have lived through it in pain, and focuses on the power of the creative imagination in writers like Toni Morrison whose work moves through a meditation on “terror and memory, sublimity and the impossible desire to forget the unforgettable.”<sup>22</sup> This work of memory and ethical resistance against racial terror becomes political in the manner in which it constitutes new communities that respond to pain and suffering with courage, compassion, and hope for the recovery of nonviolative relations between peoples.<sup>23</sup>

These strong interconnections between art and history notwithstanding, it is important to note that they differ in one crucial respect. While the historian’s primary (but not only) questions are “What happened? What did they make of it?” the creative writer and artist who takes history as her subject asks, first and foremost, “What do *I* make of it, what does it make of me now, and what can I hope for in future?” Given the fierce resistance of artists to the subsumption of their work under political headings, it is perhaps ironic that art is more readily politicized than history. At stake in the cultural production of the African diaspora is black women’s understanding of the world they inhabit, how they came to be where they are, and thus how they can act in the world.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 30 and 191.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 217.

<sup>23</sup> This definition of the ethical relation is taken from Drucilla Cornell, *The Philosophy of the Limit* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 13.

Toni Morrison, whose novel *Beloved* is one of the works I will be discussing, recalls the circumstances under which she began to write the novel as one such moment of historical self-reflection:

In 1983 I lost my job—or left it. One, the other, or both... I think now it was the shock of liberation that drew my thoughts to what “free” could possibly mean to women. In the eighties, the debate was still roiling: equal pay, equal treatment, access to professions, schools...and choice without stigma. To Marry or not. To have children or not. Inevitably these thoughts led me to a different history of black women in this country—a history in which marriage was discouraged, impossible, or illegal; in which birthing children was required, but “having” them, being responsible for them—being, in other words, their parent—was out of the question as freedom.<sup>24</sup>

Morrison comes to black women’s history through her own experience and interpretation of female embodiment, her unique path in life, and her grappling with a very particular set of career “choices” in relation to a contemporary movement for women’s freedom. What freedom might mean for her would inevitably reflect the circumstances of her own life; but just as inevitably, her circumstances called to mind the experiences of other women with whom she identified across time and space. Every woman’s story is unique, but each situation and each search for agency within that situation becomes representative in that others come to understand themselves and situate themselves in the world in relation to that story.

Postcolonial theorist Trinh T. Minh-ha argues that there is a particular “truth” in storytelling of this kind that could not be brought to light by the mere repetition of historical “facts.” What is required for truth, as she explains it, is the insight of the creative imagination that Aristotle exalted in his *Poetics*. “Poetry, Aristotle said, is truer than history. Storytelling as literature (narrative poetry),” Minh-ha argues, “must then be truer than history. If we rely on history to tell us what happened at a specific time and

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<sup>24</sup> Morrison, *Beloved*, xviii.

place, we can rely on the story to tell us not only what might have happened, but also what is happening at an unspecified time and place.”<sup>25</sup> Storytelling allows us to splice different timeframes, to insert ourselves into other worlds in order to rework the meaning of what happened and to reconfigure our own lives by recovering the unfulfilled possibilities of the past.<sup>26</sup>

Working with this understanding of identity-formation as storytelling and recollection, I use the designation “black women” to refer to an ongoing process of recognition where one person (in this case the artist/writer) identifies with particular historical and contemporary others whose experience of the world is similarly gendered and racialized, and whose ways-of-being in the world can be creatively adopted as her own mode of self-writing. Thus the literary and cultural texts I will be reading are political not simply because they offer important insights into the structure of power and the dependence of power on aesthetic ideas and representational practices, but more so because the artists and writers are constituting a political and moral community through their work. In her analysis of several novels by African-American women writers of the nineteenth century, Hazel Carby notes that the creative imagination was at the same time a form of political vision and activism to realize that vision. For these novelists, “Organizing to fight [oppression] included writing to organize. The novels do not merely reflect constituencies but attempt to structure Afro-American struggles in particular

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<sup>25</sup> Trinh T. Minh-ha, “Grandma’s Story,” in her *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989), 120.

<sup>26</sup>Cf. Walter Benjamin’s statement: “To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it ‘the way it really was’ (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.... Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious” (Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in his *Illuminations*, transl. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt [New York: Schocken Books, 1969], 255).

directions...<sup>27</sup> Similarly, the photographs, poems, novels, drama, and artwork that I will look at all pull together an affirmative community of black women, at the same time creating a borderless community that includes anyone who is willing to respect the dignity of other persons working out the meaning of being a “black woman” in different places and times.

Therefore, in addition to offering a critical analysis of the sublime, this study shall examine the manner in which art and literature concerned with black female embodiment are received and taken up by other political actors. I will pay particular attention to the act of “bearing witness,” which engages both the writer/artist and the reader/viewer’s moral imagination and gives rise to an aesthetic community as suggested in Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*. While Kant’s idea of the *sensus communis aestheticus* refers more strictly to a common sensibility, or an ethical disposition that makes it possible to universalize subjective judgments of “taste,” I take up Cornell’s more expansive notion of the *sensus communis* as “a community that arises in the aesthetic judgment that we are before a sublime or beautiful object or person.”<sup>28</sup> This aesthetic community opens up the possibility for feminists to practice solidarity with other women in their suffering, and does so without reference to an elusive biological or sociological “essence” that unites women on political questions. I argue, also, that the African diaspora can be understood as one such aesthetic community, based not primarily on blood or kinship ties (which

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<sup>27</sup> Hazel V. Carby, “‘On the Threshold of Woman’s Era’: Lynching, Empire and Sexuality in Black Feminist Theory,” *Critical Inquiry* 12, 1 (Autumn 1985): 262-272 at 264.

<sup>28</sup> Cornell, *Between Women and Generations*, 82.

have been lost to history in many cases) but on an ethical ideal of a nonviolative relationship to the other and the inviolability of human dignity.<sup>29</sup>

### III. Feminists rethink Enlightenment aesthetics

In order to better understand feminists' philosophical interventions in aesthetic theory, it is useful to consider the intellectual climate in which the idea of the sublime became a "minor obsession" for eighteenth-century thinkers.<sup>30</sup> The first-century Greek writer Longinus, whose work became the reference point for Enlightenment philosophers, was concerned with articulating the techniques used and the effects produced by a speaker or writer who could "transport" his audiences, sweeping them along by force of language rather than persuading them through logical argumentation. Longinus wrote:

The effect of elevated language upon an audience is not persuasion but transport. At every time and in every way imposing speech, with the spell it throws over us, prevails over that which aims at persuasion and gratification. Our persuasions we can usually control, but the influences of the sublime bring power and irresistible might to bear, and reign supreme over every hearer....Sublimity flashing fourth at the right moment scatters everything before it like a thunderbolt, and at once displays the power of the orator in all its plenitude."<sup>31</sup>

This idea of being transported, enraptured, and elevated out of one's body and immediate circumstances persists through all subsequent articulations of the sublime. The reference

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<sup>29</sup> In *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, Eagleton laments the weakness of our conceptions of the political if such an aesthetic community is all we can lay claim to. In my view, however, this idea of community is the best we have got. Best not because we are incapable of making stronger claims, but because it sets forth and defends the finest ethical ideals that Africans in the Diaspora have aspired toward. It is worth noting, also, that my approach intersects with recent scholarship on the African diaspora as an "imagined community," particularly those studies that build on Benedict Anderson's thesis that the development of the modern nation can be traced through the rise of the realist novel. However, my focus is on an aesthetic and ethical *ideal* rather than a nationalist consciousness. I offer no specifications of its technological preconditions or institutional arrangements, and make only very tentative claims as to its sociological foundations (See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* [London; New York: Verso, 1991]).

<sup>30</sup> Andrew Ashfield and Peter De Bolla, eds., *The Sublime: A Reader in British Eighteenth-Century Aesthetic Theory* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 129.

<sup>31</sup> Longinus, *On the Sublime*, 43.

to the thunderbolt indicates the primacy of nature in the Longinian tradition. Descriptions of high cliffs hanging over great depths, wide heavens, thunder, earthquakes, the rolling sea, fire, and darkness all feature prominently in his treatise and the work of eighteenth-century thinkers who followed his precedent. In addition, Longinus and his followers drew from classical poetry, quoting Homer's descriptions of death, the gods, epic battles, heaven, and hell. All of these were declared to be irresistibly "awe-inspiring."<sup>32</sup>

It is important to note, however, that Longinus treated nature's grandeur and sublime oratory only as a reflection of what was in the souls of human beings: "As if instinctively," he wrote, "our soul is uplifted by the true sublime; it takes a proud flight, and is filled with joy and vaunting, *as though it had itself produced what it has heard.*"<sup>33</sup> The moral character of the sublime is fully captured in his own summary of what his treatise had set forth: "sublimity is the echo of a great soul" or, in an alternative translation, "the sublime is an image reflected from the inward greatness of the soul."<sup>34</sup> The sublime is therefore an image of the greatness of humanity that we are reminded of by the greatness we see in nature.

This moral dimension was all but eclipsed by the fascination with objects of nature that accompanied the modern rediscovery of Longinus. Although a number of Latin translations of Longinus' text were produced in the sixteenth century, the treatise only saw a major revival when it was translated into French by Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux in 1674. Boileau gave his translation the title *Du Sublime*, using a latinized form of the original Greek title, *Peri Hypsous* ("on elevation"). Anne T. Delehanty suggests that the enthusiasm with which Boileau's translation was received owes much to

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 63-65.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 55. (my emphasis)

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 61; Longinus, "On the Sublime," transl, William Smith, in Ashfield and De Bolla, *The Sublime*, 24.

the fact that the sublime seemed to work outside the limits of Cartesian rationalism, which many literary figures were becoming impatient with. The idea of the sublime offered a consolation for those writers who did not wish to be restricted by rules and method, for the sublime suggested that there was something in the human passions that could not be rationally explained, something that defied human reason and understanding, and yet this something could be appealed to by the writer to produce a particular affective experience.<sup>35</sup> The enthusiasm for the indefinable sublime soon spilled over from literature and poetics into moral theory, political philosophy, and the natural sciences, and from France these ideas spread outward to Britain, Germany, and other parts of Europe. “In just a few years,” Delehanty notes, “the sublime moved from being an effect of rhetoric that had been rediscovered in an obscure antique text to being a means to depict the transcendental in art, the divinity of the King, and the grandeur of nature.”<sup>36</sup> In short, sublimity took the form of any idea or personage that eighteenth-century thinkers wanted to elevate above the commonplace or remove from the reach of rational reflection. The sublime moved out of the soul of the observer, where Longinus had placed it, and took possession of various animate and inanimate objects.

In an age that vaunted reason above all else, this insulation of the aesthetic from rational reflection proved difficult to sustain.<sup>37</sup> German philosopher Alexander Baumgarten, whose widely influential *Aesthetica* (1750) is credited with founding the

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<sup>35</sup> Ann T. Delehanty, "From Judgment to Sentiment: Changing Theories of the Sublime, 1674-1710," *Modern Language Quarterly* 66, 2 (June 2005): 151-172 at 151.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

<sup>37</sup> While the idea of the sublime was certainly made appealing by its anti-rational element, Enlightenment philosophers soon developed complex theories relating it to reason and moral judgment. Jonathan Lamb notes that some of the literary commentators also emphasized the fact that Longinus' treatise had an inner harmony, that Longinus was himself a philosopher who was systematic in his method, and that his approach to the chaos of the sublime was actually rule-governed ("The Sublime" in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism: The Eighteenth Century*, ed. George Alexander Kennedy, Hugh Barr Nisbet, and Claude Rawson [New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997]).

modern study of aesthetics, resolved the tension between rational and nonrational forms of knowledge by recourse to gender distinctions. Baumgarten wrote that aesthetic judgment is not the highest order of reason of which human beings are capable; however, as a “sister” of logic, he thought aesthetics was well worth serious study. In his thinking, aesthetics lay between pure (manly) reason and the body’s immersion in the senses, uniting the two in a manner that could be accounted for through scientific enquiry. Thus Terry Eagleton notes, in *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*,

Aesthetics is born of the recognition that the world of perception and experience cannot simply be derived from abstract universal laws, but demands its own appropriate discourse and displays its own inner, if inferior, logic. As a kind of concrete thought or sensuous analogue of the concept, the aesthetic partakes at once of the rational and the real, suspended between the two somewhat in the manner of the Lévi-Straussian myth. It is born as a woman, subordinate to man but with her own humble necessary tasks to perform.<sup>38</sup>

In the eighteenth century, this gendered ideology of the aesthetic presented itself through celebrations and critical appropriations by those who followed in Baumgarten’s footsteps. Along with gendered distinctions between reason and unreason came a developing consciousness of “race” and nation as categories that were relevant to the study of aesthetics. These three ways of understanding difference—race, gender, and nation—were thought to condition the tastes and senses of human beings, making them differently capable of experiencing the beautiful and sublime. Like Baumgarten, Burke, Kant, and Schiller were interested in exploring the possibility of systematic inquiry into non-rational experiences through aesthetic ideas. Their approaches were all ostensibly philosophical in nature, but ended up incorporating prevailing social sentiments (and prejudices) concerning human difference in order to make sense of the sublime.

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<sup>38</sup> Eagleton, *Ideology of the Aesthetic*, 16.

a. *Edmund Burke*

Burke employed a “scientific” method based on the empirical investigation of the properties of objects and their effects on the human senses. In *A philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1750), he argued that objects act immediately upon the senses to produce affect without the intervention of reason or reflection. This allied his aesthetic theory with British empiricism, particularly the “moral sense” theories of Adam Smith and David Hume.<sup>39</sup> The centrality of conceptions of human difference to Burke’s thinking emerges in the categorization of aesthetic objects, virtues, and related passions. Beauty is identified with the feminine and the sublime with the masculine. The neat gender distinction is disrupted, however, by considerations of race. Using what he considered to be incontrovertible clinical evidence, Burke “demonstrated” that the black female figure naturally induces terror and a sense of dread, and hence is seen as sublime. The clinical evidence cited by Burke involved a (presumably) European boy who was born blind and had his sight restored upon the removal of a cataract from his eye. It was reported that soon afterwards, the boy was filled with terror when he caught sight of a “negro woman.”<sup>40</sup> White women, in contrast, are described in Burke’s *Enquiry* as beautiful and lovable objects, with none of the characteristics of terror associated with the sublime. As applied to black women’s bodies, the idea of the sublime therefore has strongly negative connotations. As a representation of male power, the sublime has the opposite effect and becomes a source of delight and elevation.

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 31-69.

<sup>40</sup> Burke, *Enquiry*, 173.

Mary Wollstonecraft, Burke's contemporary in British eighteenth-century philosophy, was quick to take him to task for his exclusion of European women from the positive description of the sublime. Wollstonecraft rejected all associations that Burke made between delicacy and femininity, arguing that his conception of the beautiful stripped women of their capacity for thought and therefore precluded women from making aesthetic and moral judgments.<sup>41</sup> It is clear that the experience of the sublime she wished to reclaim for European women is that which empowers the white male observer rather than that which ascribes terror to the black female body.

Recent feminist criticism develops Wollstonecraft's critique but is somewhat more attentive to the function of "race" as well as gender in Burke's aesthetics. Barbara Claire Freeman notes that Burke's black woman is a "doubled figure" of race *and* gender," although she does not go on to elaborate on the significance of her insight.<sup>42</sup> Offering a more extended discussion of the political implications of Burke's figurations of human difference, philosopher Christine Battersby looks at the possibility of an immanent critique of his aesthetics. In view of the fact that terror and power are both fundamental elements of the Burkean sublime, Battersby suggests that we might draw the following conclusion from Burke's story of the "negro woman": perhaps the black woman not only terrifies, but also wields power in relation to white bodies.<sup>43</sup> However, what this would mean for black power or women's freedom, or simply for her conception of the sublime, is not clearly spelled out. Meg Armstrong goes furthest, perhaps, to think

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<sup>41</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the rights of Men* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008) 44-46.

<sup>42</sup> Barbara Claire Freeman, *The Feminine Sublime: Gender and Excess in Women's Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 150 n 5.

<sup>43</sup> Christine Battersby, *The Sublime, Terror and Human Difference* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 25.

through the intersections of race and gender in Burke's sublime by focusing on the contradictions in his thought. If women are associated with beauty by a "scientific" principle independent of social determinations, then the sublimity of a black woman's body signals the variability of what Burke earlier presented as a necessary and universal aesthetic judgment. If we were to follow his rules, either she is female and therefore beautiful, or black and sublime, but Burke does not tell us how he resolved this contradiction in favor of the sublime. "In short," Armstrong argues, "these contradictions suggests the work of an ideological process of making what is contingent and local, perhaps even idiosyncratic in matters of taste appeared to be natural, and thus beyond dispute."<sup>44</sup> There are very clear political implications to Armstrong's characterization of aesthetic discourse as an ideology that conceals its partial interests while making claims as to its own universality. Her analysis suggests an approach to the eighteenth-century idea of the sublime that takes into account the investments of this discourse in the reproduction of racial and gender differences, even as it masks the gesture by which the idea of the sublime produces difference. This is the line of argument that this dissertation will follow.

*b. Immanuel Kant*

Burke's writings on aesthetics had an enormous influence not only within Britain, but also in the far reaches of the British Empire and amongst philosophers in continental Europe. Although Kant would later distance himself from empiricist approaches to aesthetics, his early work, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*

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<sup>44</sup> Meg Armstrong, "'The Effects of Blackness': Gender, Race, and the Sublime in Aesthetic Theories of Burke and Kant," *Journal of Aesthetics & Art Criticism* 54 (1996): 213-236 at 215.

(1763), bore some striking resemblances to Burke's. Most notable is the gendered distinction between beauty and sublimity, characterized as female and male respectively. Kant ascribed a greater moral significance to the sublime, which he saw as closely aligned with masculine reason, as against beauty's immersion in the senses. He worked extensively with imagery drawn from nature, including "snow-covered peaks," "raging storms," and lonely deserts. Unlike Burke, though, Kant was interested less in the objects that evoke certain feelings than the disposition of the observer himself to make aesthetic judgments. Thus Kant made distinctions between different "national characters" based on their capacity for "fine feeling." This additional consideration of national characteristics led to an elaboration of differences between European and non-European peoples ranging from the English to the Spanish, and from "orientals" to blacks. While Arabs and other "oriental" types were identified as having overly-inflamed passions, predisposing them to all kinds of excess and indulgence in grotesque spectacles, the African was simply incapable of making aesthetic judgments: "by nature [the African has] no feeling that rises above the trifling," Kant declared.<sup>45</sup>

The overwhelming tendency among commentators on Kant's philosophy is to exclude this early work from consideration in order to highlight the notions of dignity and universality that emerge in his later writings, particularly the second and third installments in his critical philosophy, the *Critique of Practical Reason* and the *Critique of Judgment*.<sup>46</sup> In the third *Critique*, many of the outlandish claims regarding "race" and sex seem to have dropped out entirely. In their place is a (nondetermining) harmony

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<sup>45</sup> Kant, *Observations*, 110.

<sup>46</sup> See Robert Bernasconi, "Will The Real Kant Please Stand Up: The Challenge of Enlightenment Racism to the Study of the History of Philosophy," *Radical Philosophy* 117 (January/February 2003): 13-22; Eze, *Race and Enlightenment*.

between aesthetic ideals and moral law, which Kant extends to all humanity without qualification.<sup>47</sup> Thus notions of “dignity” and “freedom” developed in his practical philosophy are frequently referenced in his idea of sublime. He reaches the definitive conclusion that sublimity rests not in an object or in nature, but in humanity. It is our capacity to form ideas of objects too great to be grasped by the senses, and our confidence that we consist of more than our natural bodies, that Kant calls sublime.<sup>48</sup> It might seem reasonable, therefore, to ignore his *Observations* like a bad smell, especially as Kant himself made it very clear in the opening lines of the earlier treatise that none of those observations were to be considered philosophical, or even minimally systematic. “I shall cast my gaze upon only a few places that seem particularly exceptional in this area,” he wrote, “and even upon these more with the eye of an observer than a philosopher.”<sup>49</sup>

Feminist philosophers have been less willing, however, to exclude the early writings on aesthetics or Kant’s equally problematic lectures on anthropology and physical geography from their analyses of his mature philosophy. Cornelia Klinger argues that the gendered dichotomy of the beautiful and the sublime in Kant’s *Observations* persists in the subtext of the third *Critique*, where Kant distances man from nature in his “Analytic of the Sublime.”<sup>50</sup> Bonnie Mann also argues that “gender goes largely, not completely, underground” in the third *Critique*, and can be found within what Carolyn Korsmeyer has called the structures of “deep gender”—philosophical assumptions that draw on understandings of male and female difference even when

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<sup>47</sup> “The pleasure in the sublime in nature...lays claim also to universal participation,” Kant writes, “but still it presupposes another feeling, that, namely, of our super-sensible vocation, which feeling, however obscure it may be, has a moral foundation.” (*Critique of Judgment*, 122).

<sup>48</sup> Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 76.

<sup>49</sup> Kant, *Observations*, 45.

<sup>50</sup> Cornelia Klinger, “The Concepts of the Sublime and the Beautiful in Kant and Lyotard,” in *Feminist Interpretations of Immanuel Kant*, ed. Robin May Schott (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997).

masculinity and femininity are not explicitly invoked.<sup>51</sup> Mann makes a case that the sociological commentary in Kant's *Observations*, where women are turned into objects to be observed and men are subjects who make aesthetic judgments, maps onto his epistemology where (masculine) reason attains a primacy over (feminine) nature and the senses.<sup>52</sup>

Feminists have also found that racial thinking persists in Kant's mature philosophy. Concurring with Emmanuel Eze's thesis that Kant's preoccupation with "race" in the *Anthropology* and *Physical Geography* significantly inform his critical philosophy, Mann also identifies structures of "deep race" in the third *Critique*. Going a step further to relate Kant to the racial politics of the modern era, Kim Hall analyzes a number of colonial imaginaries that inform Kant's aesthetics. She focuses especially on the ideological similarities between Kant, who was writing in the eighteenth century, and earlier explorers like Christopher Columbus and Hernán Cortés who brought some of the first reports on indigenous populations from the New World back to Europe. Hall argues that the examples of "savages" and women that Kant uses to underpin judgments of the beautiful are not just unsavory images that can be excised from his aesthetics or moral philosophy. Rather, these understandings of human difference give rise to a *sensus communis* (aesthetic common sense) based on racialized and gendered violence.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Bonnie Mann, *Women's Liberation and the Sublime: Feminism, Postmodernism, Environment* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 26.

<sup>52</sup> Mann, *Women's Liberation and the Sublime*, 42. Also see Freeman, who describes the misogyny she sees in Kant by drawing a literary parallel: "in the theory of the sublime the imagination must yield itself to reason, while in many novels women, or a feminine surrogate such as Frankenstein's monster, challenge but ultimately submit to powerful, dominating men" ( *The Feminine Sublime*, 72).

<sup>53</sup> Kim Hall, "Sensus communis and Violence: A Feminist Reading of Kant's *Critique of Judgment*," in Schott, *Feminist Interpretations of Kant*. Contrast this with Sankar Muthu's claim that "In later years, when [Kant] developed his theory of humanity as cultural agency and his anti-imperialist political thought, the hierarchical and biological concept of race disappears in his published writings" ( *Enlightenment Against Empire*, [Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003], 183).

Also paying attention to sex and “race” as they inform Kant’s aesthetics, Battersby argues that problems of exclusion and violation have bearing on his moral philosophy. However, she cautions against the inclination to correct this, as it were, by returning to a “pure” universal conception of the aesthetic that makes no reference to empirical attributes of the body. Calling for a notion of the sublime that responds to the experience of female embodiment, Battersby argues that “We need to resist the Kantian tendency to theorise a mode of observation and response that is cut off [from] emotion and mood, and that also fails to register the social, historical and political contexts.”<sup>54</sup> This corresponds closely with Klinger’s argument that a feminist critique of traditional philosophy must resist the dichotomization of reason and emotion that she sees in Kant. This dualism is reflected in his aesthetics, where the beautiful is mapped onto female sentimentality and the sublime refers us back to rationality as a male prerogative.<sup>55</sup> As we will see below, the opposition that Kant sets up between reason and the senses also troubled Schiller, even though he did not explicitly take up the racialized and gendered aspects of this dichotomy.

Yet feminist theorists do not uniformly find an exclusionary ideology in Kant. Marcia Moen finds that the third *Critique* “reorients one’s thinking about Kant, as it reoriented Kant’s own thinking” toward empathy, interconnectedness, embodiment, and narrative complexity.<sup>56</sup> Correspondingly, Cornell holds that there is no necessary conflict between real and ideal in Kant’s larger body of work: we can defend ideals of freedom,

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<sup>54</sup> Battersby, *The Sublime*, 67.

<sup>55</sup> Klinger, “The Concepts of the Sublime and the Beautiful.”

<sup>56</sup> Marcia Moen, “Feminist Themes in Unlikely Places: Re-Reading Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*,” in Schott, *Feminist Interpretations of Kant*, 214. Note especially her remark that Kant’s dyadic problematics are not dichotomies (216).

humanity, and dignity *as well as* a feminist politics that addresses the situated body.

Indeed, our attentiveness to one presupposes a concern for the other. Cornell explains:

When we think of our freedom as irreducible to the limits of the empirical world, the idea of humanity endlessly frees itself. (This is crucial for understanding why it does not make philosophical sense to try—as many still do—to hold freedom to a strictly ontological horizon. Freedom will continue to thwart each and every containment policy of *presence*.)... Yet, in the end, it is also the matter of recognizing the way in which this ideal of freedom consists in the permanent radicalization of the idea of humanity, thereby collapsing the theoretical distance between them.<sup>57</sup>

With this notion of freedom, Cornell is able to find the trace of humanity that survives amidst the ruins of colonial rule in India, Apartheid in South Africa and slavery in the United States. Her conception of dignity as a radicalized ideal leads her directly to the “sixty million and more” that Morrison references in her dedication of *Beloved*—those bodies and souls whose hopes and aspirations we cannot recover unless we impute dignity to the disappeared. This work of feminist witnessing and mourning simply cannot rely on empirical data, and thus cannot be confined to reality. At the same time, the broken dreams of women whose names we will never know are actualized by the insistence that we continue to *act* as if each woman were a person of incomparable worth, holding others always as an end and never merely as a means (Kant’s categorical imperative). To illustrate, Cornell reiterates the words of Nanny, a character in Zora Neal Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*: “You can’t beat nobody down so low till you rob ‘em of they will,” Nanny asserts. “Ah didn’t want to be used for a work-ox and a brood-sow and Ah didn’t want mah daughter used dat way neither.”<sup>58</sup> For Cornell, this resistance by enslaved women against inhumane treatment testifies to their dignity. As Nanny shows, pain and despair are not necessarily an end point but could also be the

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<sup>57</sup> Cornell, *Between Women and Generations*, 195n4.

<sup>58</sup> As quoted in Cornell, *Between Women and Generations*, xviii.

seeds of hope for their daughters' future. Ethical ideals matter for how we make sense of embodiment, and yet these ideals are not destroyed when the body itself is broken.

We can see, therefore, that even though feminist readings of Kant have highlighted his complicity in racial thinking and the reproduction of gender difference in his work, there are also strong arguments for the appropriation of Kant's aesthetic categories and insights from his moral philosophy for thinking about the indestructibility of women's dignity even under the most devastating circumstances.

*c. Friedrich Schiller*

Schiller was deeply troubled by what he saw as an unbridgeable gap between reason and the senses in Kant's critical philosophy.<sup>59</sup> The *Critique of Judgment* was intended to find a way of passing from one to the other, or at least harmonizing ideas of freedom with unyielding necessity, but Schiller was not convinced that a true harmony had been achieved. In his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, he wrote that a mind given to philosophical abstractions—the kind of genius capable of producing a *Critique of Pure Reason*—could never grasp the concrete individuality of phenomena or allow “the free movement of the poetic faculty.”<sup>60</sup> Schiller sought, therefore, to go further than Kant to unite the freedom of the will with the arbitrariness inherent in man's precarious existence as a natural creature and thus bring freedom into the world of the senses. This he set out to accomplish this not theoretically, by reason alone, but through the attunement of the senses to delight in what is most beautiful in humanity—namely,

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<sup>59</sup>“Between the realm of the natural concept, as the sensible, and the realm of the concept of freedom, as the supersensible, there's a great gulf fixed, so that it is not possible to pass from the former to the latter...” (Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 11).

<sup>60</sup>Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters*, transl. and ed. Elizabeth M Wilkinson and L.A. Willoughby (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 43.

our capacity to be unconditionally self-legislating. He argued that we have to make our principles concrete and place them within an affective register if they are to triumph in the “real” world: “If Truth is to be victorious in her conflict with forces, she must herself first become a force and appoint some drive to be her champion in the realm of phenomena; for drives are the only motive forces in the sensible world.”<sup>61</sup> Proceeding in this manner, Schiller attempted to work his way to political freedom through aesthetic ideals by educating the sensibilities of men and women towards freedom.

Schiller approaches the sublime in much the same fashion as he does beauty. His aim is to go beyond the description of the sublime as a mode of aesthetic judgment in order to offer an explication of how we might prepare ourselves to realize our freedom under the most adverse conditions. As Klinger notes, “Schiller elaborates on a question that was so self-evident for Kant that he did not even put it, namely, why independence from nature is so extremely important and highly valued.”<sup>62</sup> But for Schiller, independence from nature does not require that we be severed from our natural bodies. In his two essays on the sublime (1793 and 1801) and in various writings on tragedy and poetry, Schiller emphasized that man’s intelligence may create a buffer between him and necessity, but at the end of the road death awaits him with all certainty and inevitability. The question is how man can maintain his superiority against physical forces that will annihilate him as a natural creature while at the same time enlisting sensory experiences for an apprehension of the meaning of freedom.

The answer Schiller puts forward is that man’s moral resistance allows him to annihilate violence as an *idea* even as that violence overwhelms him in fact. Drama, and

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<sup>61</sup> Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, 48.

<sup>62</sup> Klinger, “The Concepts of the Sublime and the Beautiful,” 198.

more specifically tragedy, educates us to act *as if* we were free when our bodies are subjected to violence. It is of utmost importance that where Kant was concerned in a very immediate way with consciousness of one's own sublimity in confrontation with nature's might and the limits of the imagination, Schiller was thinking about how to elicit that consciousness by staging and mediating confrontations that the audience had yet to encounter.

Some of Schiller's more recent critics have taken his preoccupation with the dramatic representation of terror as a political machination—let us *actually* subject human beings to the most spectacular violence in order to behold their marvelous capacity to overcome it. James Kirwan, for example, argues that Schiller confuses real with symbolic threats to one's person, which led him to put forward a theory of terror rather than one of sublimity.<sup>63</sup> Similarly, Battersby sees Schiller creating a link between “redemption,” “spiritual mission,” and the terrors of the sublime by pushing human beings through terrifying experiences *in order to* demonstrate the elevation of reason above sensuousness. What Schiller understood as a way of representing the challenge of physical vulnerability is now brought as a charge against him, along with a more general claim that his writings on the sublime bowdlerize Kant. “It would be difficult to overemphasise the influence of Schiller,” Battersby writes, “since, in the history of philosophy, it is Schiller's Kant who has often come to displace what Kant himself said. Thus, for example, both Hegel and Nietzsche seemed to read Kant through *spectacles*

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<sup>63</sup> James Kirwan, *Sublimity: The Non-Rational and the Irrational in the History of Aesthetics* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 67-83.

borrowed from Schiller.”<sup>64</sup> Whether or not the double-entendre is intended, it certainly conveys her understanding of Schiller as a theorist of spectacular and terrifying displays.

What is often forgotten, I believe, is that Schiller discusses poetry and tragedy as an artist, and comes expressly as a poet to the study of philosophy. It is a difficult combination, and Schiller himself confessed to experiencing no small measure of distress in finding the right balance.<sup>65</sup> I will attempt to offer an alternative reading of Schiller not as the “mystagogue” portrayed by Battersby, but as theorist who takes artwork seriously and returns considerations of embodiment to an overly-epistemologized discourse on the sublime. I draw inspiration from Cornell, who uses Schiller’s writings on “pathos” in drama to explain the significance of bearing witness to other women’s sublimity by physically miming their movement through history. What happens when we not only think, but also use our bodies to witness to the dignity of others and to mourn their losses and our own loss of them? These questions are especially important in considering the special contributions that photography and drama have made to the way that black women are marking the sites of disappearance of women from previous generations. Through these creative media, the suffering, courage and transcendence of those whose bodies are unrecoverable can be made sensible once again through the bodies of the living.

In addition to his focus on the natural body, Schiller is important for this dissertation because he was able to see the world as a stage on which everyone has their

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<sup>64</sup>Battersby, *The Sublime*, 9-10, 14 (my emphasis).

<sup>65</sup> Note, for example, that Schiller “would complain that when he was trying to write poetry the philosopher got in the way, and when he was supposed to be philosophizing the poet caught him unawares” He turned down a chair in philosophy at the university in Tübingen soon after some of his *Aesthetic Letters* were published (Wilkinson and Willoughby, eds., “Introduction” to Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, xxix).

exits and entrances.<sup>66</sup> He was conscious of historiography as dramaturgy long before it became fashionable for philosophers to take such a view. He borrows themes from Kant's *Idea for a Universal History* and brings out the sublimity inherent in our ability to construct a narrative of progress out of the chaos of human events. Contemporary theorists Hayden White and Hans Kellner, most prominently, have focused on this element of Schiller's "historical sublime," although they place an accent on the chaos of history rather than the capacity to find order in disorder. My discussion in Chapter Four explains in more detail in why I think that they have stood Schiller on his head. For now, I wish only to point out that Schiller's historical sublime reveals how black women's ability to make sense of the broken and fragmented past involves aesthetic judgment and puts up a moral resistance to violation. For people of African descent, modernity entails a consciousness of spatial and temporal fracture. Scattered within and between continents, their bodies fragmented and the idea of time as continuity completely shattered, they have had few resources with which to reconstruct their lives. Yet we find a strong historical consciousness in the selected works of art and literature, a consciousness that we cannot take for granted once we consider these works in view of Schiller's sublime.

#### **IV. In search of a feminist sublime**

If the foregoing seems to suggest that feminist theorists have only a negative interest in the sublime, I must emphasize that there is also a very important affirmative project that prompts their engagement with Burke, Kant and Schiller. Cornell's effort to

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<sup>66</sup>William Shakespeare, *As You Like it*, ed. Alan Brissenden. (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), Act 2 Scene 7.

find the trace of humanity that survives violence and degradation has already been explained. For Mann, the problem that the sublime addresses itself to, more or less adequately within different paradigms, is that of the alienation of human beings from one another and from the natural world. The experience of the sublime that Mann militates against is the “frenetic exhilaration” that attends our destruction of the environment; this idea of sublimity has become a “way of naming and describing what it feels like to live dependent on the world we are in the process of destroying; the terror comes from the destruction, and the exhilaration from our power to destroy.”<sup>67</sup> In contrast, the experience of sublimity that she wants to take back for feminism is the return to consciousness of human limitation, frailty and vulnerability; our dependence on the planet and on one another, and the need for relations of care that tear down the barriers constructed against the “other.” “The ethical and political implications of this vulnerability to others can be temporarily denied or thwarted by the subject who flees dependence,” Mann argues, “but they must ultimately be affirmed if we are to live these relations in aesthetically, ethically, and politically sustainable ways.”<sup>68</sup> Thus her idea of the liberatory sublime invokes a feminist ecological vision.

Battersby, on the other hand, takes up the question of the sublime in order to decenter the (usually male) subject and recover the “female sublime” as an affirmation of women’s presence in art, history, literature and philosophy. Like Mann, she relates the sublime to the experience of female embodiment— women’s “fleshy” bodies—and rejects the opposition between self and “other” that she identifies in the Kantian sublime. What she searches for, instead, is “a model for subjectivity which is appropriate to the

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<sup>67</sup>Mann, *Women’s Liberation and the Sublime*, ix.

<sup>68</sup>*Ibid.*, 132-3.

female subject who is capable of birthing the other within her own embodied self.”<sup>69</sup>

Although there are several implications of Battersby’s argument as regards terror, transcendence, and the construction of human difference, for the purposes of this discussion it is sufficient to note that her version of the sublime intersects with what Patricia Yaeger calls the “maternal sublime.”

The idea of the maternal sublime emerges from Yaeger’s resistance to versions of the sublime that are based on a manner of occupying and dominating space that has traditionally been preserved for men. She explains that the idea of the beautiful in aesthetic theory in the western tradition has been used to confine women to a diminished physical and social space through their comportment, gestures, and restricted types of movement. This confinement is intensified during pregnancy and childbirth.<sup>70</sup> Yaeger’s concern, therefore, is to find out how we can recover for women “the joy and vaunting” that accompanies the experience of sublimity from which women have been excluded: can labor and childbirth also be judged sublime?<sup>71</sup> Yaeger responds in the affirmative, and shows that this would transform both aesthetic theory and the politics of reproduction. The maternal sublime requires an attentiveness to the vulnerability of the body, a refusal of the male appropriation (sublimation) of metaphors of reproductive labor for the purposes of domination, and a recognition of the cultural power that inheres in childbearing.

One could protest, against Yaeger, that she is engaging in an affirmation of an experience that has been made obligatory for many women and in which many others

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<sup>69</sup> Battersby, *The Sublime*, 130.

<sup>70</sup> Patricia Yaeger, “The ‘Language of Blood’: Toward a Maternal Sublime,” *Genre* XXV (Spring 1992), 5-24.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

have no interest at all, or have experienced in an entirely different fashion. For black women especially, pregnancy and childbirth have been fraught with all manner of injustices, as Morrison noted in her reflections on what freedom would have meant to previous generations of African-American women. We can think, too, of the character in Hurston's novel who stated categorically that she did not want to be treated as a "brood-sow." Anticipating this critique, Yaeger argues that her "invocation of the maternal sublime is not meant to mandate euphoria at birth, nor to provide a political program or manifesto for the birthing woman. Women's experiences in childbirth are multiple and various; they run the gamut from agony to ecstasy, from tragedy to comic pleasure."<sup>72</sup> In recognition this multiplicity of experiences, Yaeger connects her idea of the sublime to movements for women's reproductive freedom and the ideals defined through that activism. Thus, potentially, there is room within the maternal sublime to take into account the kinds of experiences that black women have had with reproduction and their modes of resisting exploitation and injustice.

Given the differences in these approaches to the sublime, the question arises: what is distinctively "feminist" about all these ideas? Is there a common project or interest among them? As I see it, the common thread that runs through Mann, Battersby, Yaeger, and Cornell is an effort to explicate the relationship between aesthetics, the imagination, social relations of power, and the material conditions of women's lives. Secondly, their ideas of the sublime are articulated in the context of political struggles for freedom, justice, and women's self-actualization in concrete situations: in other words, they are movement-centered. In keeping with these thinkers, one of my central preoccupations is with the ethical import of aesthetic ideas as defined in the context of political struggles in

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 22.

the particular situations in which black women have lived out their lives. I remain especially close to Cornell and Mann's efforts to think the sublime as a struggle to actualize a "beyond" to the given reality. Another world is possible; women's liberation is emphatically not passé—it is yet to come.

## **V. The importance of intersectional analysis**

Liberation must have seemed and continues to seem far off for many black women who have not been allowed a place in the striving toward aesthetic ideals. Their belonging in "humanity" was questionable in the eighteenth century, and it is still not clear that black women are "women" today, even in feminist writings on aesthetics. While offering incisive critiques of constructions of race and gender difference in Kant, Burke, and Schiller, the feminist texts reviewed above do not engage in a sustained analysis of the intersections of all these notions of human difference. Feminist criticism of aesthetics, and especially the commentary on Kant, has focused on the fact that his autonomous or transcendental self is constituted from the outside by an imagined "other"—women, nature, Africans, "Orientals," and so on. This catch-all category of "other" has been shown to work analogously so that, for example, dominant white men's attitudes towards women are replicated in their exploitation of nature while certain men of color are seen as effeminate and therefore subordinate to white men. Yet little has been said about the point where the analogy, which organizes the work of European theorists and is not simply an invention of the feminist critic, reaches a crisis of superfluity. The crisis occurs at the point where the objects of comparison coincide completely, so that it is no longer possible to understand one category of difference by

making reference to another. If nature is thought through women's bodies, and "the oriental" and "the black" are made recognizable by their inability to rise above nature and effeminacy, what are the points of reference from which to think the black woman who lives in a respectful relationship with nature and other human beings? Immersed in blackness *and* the feminine *and* nature *and* heteronomy, she is lost to philosophical reflection in a tradition that relies on analogy to make sense of objects that cannot be known in themselves. This dissertation attempts to speak to those black holes at the threshold of which all thinking and feminist criticism has stopped.

More work therefore needs to be done to discover how the intersections of race and gender can be addressed within various ideas of the "feminine", "female" or "maternal sublime." Battersby's analysis, for example, could be extended a good deal further to explore the possibility that black women represent *women's* power just as much as they signify black power. I pick up on what was only a minor point in Battersby's discussion of Burke for a simple reason: taken as a whole, we find that feminist theories of the sublime strongly emphasize vulnerability and dependency and maintain a deep suspicion of power, transcendence, and autonomy, which are seen as the bulwark of male domination.<sup>73</sup> Without a doubt, some of the most influential articulations of power, autonomy and transcendence in European philosophy have been masculinist and imperialist and deny the connections among human beings and between human beings and nature. Yet a consideration of black women's history suggests that these ideas are also indispensable to the struggle for women's freedom. The ability to mobilize various

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<sup>73</sup> This is of course only a description of a tendency, and different theorists differ on specific points. Yaeger, for example, is very concerned with women's power even as she highlights the fact that the body bleeds; Cornell discusses ethical responses to suffering through the "transcendental imagination," refusing to divorce Kantian ideals from questions of female embodiment (Drucilla Cornell, *At the heart of freedom: Feminism, Sex, and Equality* [Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998]).

forces in order to shape the world in accordance with their vision (power); freedom from subjection to/existence at the arbitrary will of another (autonomy); and the struggle to transcend their immediate circumstances through action, thought, imagination or even death are key features of the slave sublime. These ideas cannot simply be discarded in the name of critique.

Another way in which the intersections of race and gender have been eclipsed in feminist theory is through the examination of “race” solely as an attribute of Europe’s “other,” with very little attention to the ways in which black women’s abjection brings out the beauty of white women (with all the qualifications that must come along with such a notion of beauty). Part of my task in the chapters that follow is to explicate the processes of racialization of black *and* white women through the ideology of the sublime, as well as to show how black/brown men’s barbarity and white men’s civilization is represented as a function of their relationship to the female sex. My analysis is based on the black feminist conception of “intersectionality,” which refers to the ways in which various categories of difference and systems of social exclusion interact and mutually constitute one another. Intersectional analysis, as initially proposed by Kimberlé Crenshaw, resists the reduction of social experiences and political phenomena to their race-only or gender-only dimensions.<sup>74</sup> The methodological specification of the concept by political scientists Ange-Marie Hancock, Evelyn Simien, Lisa Garcia Bedolla, Julia Jordan-Zachery, and Julie Anne White suggests that a truly intersectional approach to the

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<sup>74</sup> Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity, Politics and Violence against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review* 43 (6): 1241–99.

sublime would need to address the *co-constitution* of various racial, gender, and social categories (such as class).<sup>75</sup>

While this dissertation does not claim to offer a comprehensive analysis of all the socially significant categories, I believe that the following issues must be addressed, at minimum, in order to fulfill the tasks I have set for a feminist critique of the sublime.

Historian Deborah Gray White tells us:

The rape of black women, their endless toil, the denial of their beauty, the inattention to their pregnancy, the sale of their children, were simultaneous manifestations of racism and sexism, not an extreme form of one or the other. For black women, race and sex cannot be separated. We cannot consider who black women are as black people without considering their sex, nor can we consider who they are as women without considering their race.<sup>76</sup>

This necessarily shapes the way black women contest the race-gendered ideology of the sublime, even as they seek to fulfill the liberatory ideals of the aesthetic. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries such contestation took place not within the exclusionary and alienated conversation of western political philosophy, but in a struggle against the materialization of these discourses in slavery and colonial relations. Black women had to simultaneously resist aesthetic discourses and socio-economic structures that perpetuated their bondage and exploitation. Represented as savages incapable of reason, women of African descent were deprived of the power to read, write and express their vision of the world; depicted as invulnerable to pain and lacking in affection, they were denied the

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<sup>75</sup> Lisa García Bedolla, "Intersections of Inequality: Understanding Marginalization and Privilege in the Post-Civil Rights Era," *Politics & Gender* 3, 2 (2007): 232-248; Ange-Marie Hancock, "Intersectionality as a Normative and Empirical Paradigm," *Politics & Gender* 3, 2 (2007): 248-254; Julia S. Jordan-Zachery, "Am I a Black Woman Or a Woman Who is Black? A Few Thoughts on the Meaning of Intersectionality," *Politics & Gender* 3, no. 02 (2007): 254-263. Evelyn M. Simien, "Doing Intersectionality Research: From Conceptual Issues to Practical Examples," *Politics & Gender* 3, 2 (2007): 264-271; Julie Anne White, "The Hollow and the Ghetto: Space, Race, and the Politics of Poverty," *Politics & Gender* 3, 2 (2007): 271-280.

<sup>76</sup> Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, Revised Edition (New York: Norton, 1999), 5-6.

right to sustain family bonds and subjected to cruel beatings and inhuman punishments; visualized as lascivious and hypersexual, or merely as chattel, rape became invisible and reproductive abuses were rampant.<sup>77</sup>

Black women's resistance was, at one level, a struggle to physically escape these cruelties by placing their bodies outside the reach of European mastery—survival strategies of African-American women in the plantation south ranged from flight to aggressive defense of their bodily integrity and evasions of forced labor, including resistance to forced pregnancy.<sup>78</sup> At another level, this resistance was enacted through the deconstruction of racist ideology and by spiritual transcendence; black women appropriated and reconceived ideals of the Enlightenment just as they reconfigured Christian theology, music, even the English language, and redirected them toward liberation for people of African descent. They found ways to transmit knowledge through memory and ritual, they loved their children powerfully and sought to protect them from the pain of separation, and they expressed suffering and loss through their sorrow songs.<sup>79</sup> The aesthetic dimension of these modes of resistance is already evident in the context of the immediate struggle for survival, and it emerges ever more powerfully in the reiterations and reenactments of black women's resistance by later generations, including the artists and writers whose work I discuss in this dissertation.

My explication of black women's creative imagination in relation to eighteenth-century ideas of the sublime proceeds as follows. Chapter two uses Burke's *Enquiry* to

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<sup>77</sup> See Dorothy E. Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, reproduction, and the meaning of liberty* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1997).

<sup>78</sup> See Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?*

<sup>79</sup> See W. E. B. Du Bois, "Of the Sorrow Songs," in *The Souls of Black Folk*, (New York: Fawcett Publications, 1961); Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998).

frame my discussion of a series of photographs by Renee Cox and poetry by Michelle Cliff and Grace Nichols. As described above, Burke associates the sublime with the terrifying “effects of blackness” as well as with forces of nature displayed by rugged mountains, hurricanes, torrents, and the like. I show how similar descriptions of an untamed landscape were combined with the fearsome images of wild runaway slaves to create a picture of Nanny in the imagination of British colonialists in Jamaica in the eighteenth century. I argue that Cox’s photographs of herself as Queen Nanny rely on these associations, but invert the image by representing Nanny’s strength and command of the territory as a liberating force rather than an evil to be overcome.

Chapter three reads Toni Morrison’s novel, *Beloved*, through the idea of the sublime in Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*. According to Kant, the ability of the mind to transcend the limits of our natural bodies allows us to preserve our dignity as human beings even when the body is subjected to violence. This recognition that one’s humanity is not reducible to the body offers one possible reading of the infanticide committed by Garner as a liberation of her daughter from slavery. I argue, however, that Morrison also puts forward a vision of the liberation of the body that troubles Kant’s location of the sublime in the noumenal (non-corporeal) self.

Chapter Four uses Schiller’s essays on tragedy and the sublime to frame contemporary representations of Sarah Bartmann. For Schiller, world history is a sublime object because it consists of capricious forces and tragic events that cannot be explained using scientific laws. In his view, we become conscious of our own dignity when we are able to piece together the fragments of history in such a way as to yield a meaning that is not internal to the events themselves. Chaos, tragedy, and fragmentation are seen in the

case of Bartmann, whose body was dissected by scientists upon her death in Paris in 1816. Her brain and genitalia were preserved in jars, a plaster cast made of her body, and her skeleton put on display at the Musee de l'Homme for many years. This chapter argues that re-membering Bartmann through art and literature involves not only the imaginative recollection of her body parts, but the piecing together of her journey from Africa to Britain and France as an analogue for the reconnection of Africans scattered in the diaspora. In 2001, a poem by Diana Ferrus was entered into the record of the French parliament, influencing the passage of legislation that allowed the return of Bartmann's remains to South Africa. Thus the images of the sublime in black women's art can be seen to build bridges from the past to a better future.

Chapter Five concludes with reflections on what black women's representations of the history of slavery and colonialism can add to previous conceptions of the sublime. I address the need for a stronger response to gendered and racialized embodiment in the Kantian sublime and a stronger ethical ideal than Burke's "sympathy". I also assess the prospects for creating transnational feminist solidarity and influencing traditional political institutions through art. My position throughout is that black women's creative reflection on the history of slavery and colonialism opens up spaces for the establishment of ethical relations that respect the freedom and dignity of humanity in every person.

## Chapter Two

### Edmund Burke and Colonial Technologies of the Sublime

*Black bodies, reflecting none, or but a few rays, with regard to sight, are but as so many vacant spaces dispersed among the objects we view.*

Edmund Burke<sup>80</sup>

*They like to pretend we didn't fight back. We did: with obeah, poison, revolution. It simply was not enough.*

Michelle Cliff<sup>81</sup>

This chapter analyzes Burke's theory of the sublime in relation to representations of the black female body in historical documents produced by British colonialists in the eighteenth century. Burke associated the sublime with the feeling of terror evoked by "dark" and "black" things, identifying a Negro woman as sublime on account of the fear and pain that her blackness was reported to induce in a white male observer. The stated task of Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful* was to explicate the conditions under which the confrontation with terror—whether in the black female form or in the forbidding aspect of an untamed landscape—would produce a "delightful horror" or "a sort of tranquility tinged with terror."<sup>82</sup> Towards this end, his *Enquiry* offered a detailed account of the tastes and sensibilities of civilized subjects who could somehow, through their fine tastes, turn objectively overwhelming forces into safer and more controlled affective experiences. This concern with turning terror into delight, as we saw in the last chapter, is closely tied to eighteenth-century anxieties regarding the fate of civil society under the combined assault of market forces, religious apostasy, and

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<sup>80</sup> Burke, *Enquiry*, 175.

<sup>81</sup> Michelle Cliff, "If I Could Write This in Fire, I Would Write This in Fire," in her *The Land of Look Behind: Prose and Poetry* (Ithaca, N.Y: Firebrand Books, 1985), 67.

<sup>82</sup> Burke, *Enquiry*, 165.

anti-monarchical sentiment.<sup>83</sup> If the “chaos” that threatened to break the bonds of the political community could be analogized in the form of nature and then deprived of its most terrifying qualities, the idea of the aesthetic might perhaps mirror the ideal constitution of political and social relations in which pre-Enlightenment tranquility had been restored. As noted in Chapter One, Burke’s attempt to secure the bonds of fellow feeling between Britain and the colonies relied on a notion of sympathy articulated through the sublime. This chapter asks whether Burke’s notion of sympathy can be extended to include black women, given that Burke casts them immediately in the language of the sublime. Further, is sympathy an adequate moral response to the exploitation and erasure of the black female body?

For colonial settlers in the far reaches of the British Empire, the promise of tranquility and stability that attends the aestheticization of political life was highly desirable and made no reference to sympathy with populations targeted for subjugation. Facing the chaos of uncharted territory and hostile populations that refused to submit to colonial rule, Burke’s theory of the sublime took on a very particular and heightened importance. It is worth noting that even though Burke took a passionate stand against slavery and abuses perpetrated by British colonial administrators, he had a strong following among some of the West Indian planters who were at the forefront of the settlement of islands in the Caribbean and the use of captive black labor for agricultural production.<sup>84</sup> One of his greatest admirers was Bryan Edwards, a wealthy planter,

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<sup>83</sup> For the political questions that inspire aesthetic reflection, see Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* and Ahmed “The Theater of the Civilized Self.”

<sup>84</sup> For Burke’s criticism of British rule in India, see Ahmed, “The Theater of the Civilized Self.”; Jennifer Pitts, *A Turn to Empire: The Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); and Conor Cruise O’Brien, *The Great Melody: A Thematic Biography and Commented Anthology of Edmund Burke* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992). For a

slaveholder, and Member of the Assembly in Jamaica.<sup>85</sup> Edwards publicly praised Burke's sympathy, rhetorical style, and his ability to unite aesthetics with science. He suggested that Burke went perhaps a little too far in his condemnations of slavery, but felt that there was a way, even from Burke's perspective, to appreciate the dilemmas of Jamaican planters whom he characterized as largely "innocent" of cruelty or prejudice.<sup>86</sup> Edwards wrote a widely influential *History of the West Indies* that used Burkean categories to chart the landscape that was staked out for conquest, combining the interests of a botanist and anthropologist with the political ambitions of a colonialist.<sup>87</sup> His descriptions of rebellious slaves in Jamaica employed an aesthetic of the sublime that relied heavily on the element of terror at the heart of Burke's theory. These dehumanizing representations of black slaves appeared even more prominently in the *History of Jamaica* written by Edward Long, whose work is filled with the most egregious examples of early scientific theories of "race."<sup>88</sup> Edwards and Long's histories of Jamaica are presented below in conjunction with the memoirs of a colonial adventurer,

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critical reading of Burke's criticism of empire, see Sara Suleri, *The Rhetoric of English India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

<sup>85</sup> Olwyn M. Blouet, "Bryan Edwards, F.R.S., 1743-1800," *Notes and Records of the Royal Society of London*, 54, 2 (May, 2000): 215-22.

<sup>86</sup> In a speech to the Jamaican Assembly on the question of slavery, Edwards expounded:  
Of Mr. Burke its maybe said, in the language of scripture, that "he extracts honey and oil from the flinty rock." Every question on which he displays his eloquence, he traces through its various relations and dependencies: He ranges through all the regions of science for images and illustrations, and pours on his audience clearness, information and delight, even from subjects the most barren and uninstrusive ("A speech delivered at a free conference between the Honourable the Council and Assembly of Jamaica, held the 19th of November, 1789. on the subject of Mr. Wilberforce's propositions in the House of Commons, concerning the slave trade. By Bryan Edwards, ..."London, 1790. [Eighteenth Century Collections Online. Gale. Rutgers State University of New Jersey], 56)

<sup>87</sup> Bryan Edwards, *The History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies, in Two Volumes*, Dublin, 1793, (Eighteenth Century Collections Online. Gale. Rutgers State University of New Jersey).

<sup>88</sup> Edward Long., *The History of Jamaica. Or, general survey of the antient and modern state of that island: with reflections on its situation, settlements, inhabitants, ... In three volumes. Illustrated with copper plates*, London, 1774 (Eighteenth Century Collections Online: Gale. Rutgers State University of New Jersey).

Philip Thicknesse, in order to show how Burke's theory of the sublime resonated within the colonial projects of his age.

Seen in the context of their production, images of blackness and femininity in all of these writings reveal the mutually constitutive relationship between political projects and representational practices. This chapter argues that such writings were not simply descriptive, but also produced the subjects and objects of aesthetic discourse through colonial laws, military expeditions against fugitive slave communities, and imperialist relations of domination.<sup>89</sup> In their critical survey of British eighteenth-century aesthetic theory, Andrew Ashfield and Peter de Bolla argue that “this analytic discourse [of the sublime] is not merely concerned with ascertaining the precise location of affects—it is also productive of them.”<sup>90</sup> As technology, the discourse in which Burke's theory participated did not simply “discover” the origins and workings of taste and the human passions; rather, it produced the subjects whose feelings would conform to the aesthetic laws that were discovered, and the objects that would have the effects with which the discourse was concerned. This insight into the ways in which discourses on aesthetics are materialized has important implications for our understanding of politics. By linking a feminist, post-colonial analysis to Ashfield and de Bolla's thesis, we can see how the discourse on the sublime produces not only its subject—the colonial adventurer, plantation owner, or administrator, but also its object—the “negro woman” in Burke's *Enquiry* and her various incarnations in the colonial context.

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<sup>89</sup> Although the terms ‘colonialism’ and ‘imperialism’ will be used somewhat interchangeably in this discussion, as in much of the secondary literature on the British Empire, I would like to call attention to a subtle but important distinction. I see colonialism as a political project arising from British imperial ambitions, in which the will or desire to dominate (imperialism) manifests as the settlement and control of overseas territories (colonialism). For a similar but more detailed explication of the terms, see Robert J.C. Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (Oxford, UK and Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 2001).

<sup>90</sup> Ashfield and De Bolla, *The Sublime*, 5.

The technologies of the sublime are nowhere more evident, perhaps, than in descriptions of Queen Nanny, the military, cultural and spiritual leader of the Windward or Eastward Maroons.<sup>91</sup> As the force behind a guerilla war against British occupation and plantation slavery in Jamaica in the early 1700s, Nanny put up a formidable resistance to the pacification of the island and its inhabitants. The terror that Nanny inspired in her enemies was readily translated into an aesthetic of the sublime in historical accounts, revealing an attempt to contain subjectively, through affective experience, what resisted mastery at an objective level. The discussion below considers not only the colonialists' histories of Jamaica, but also the ways in which contemporary artists are contesting those images. A case in point is the work of a Jamaican-born American artist, Renee Cox, who takes Queen Nanny as the subject of a series of photographs shot against the dramatic backdrop of the Jamaican landscape. Viewing Cox's photographs through Burke's sublime illuminates the power and strength of the historical figure of Nanny, but does so in ways that challenge the subject position of the colonial adventurer whose point of view is assumed in Burkean aesthetics. I argue that Cox's representation of Nanny restores to black women the territory of their own bodies that was violated by colonial ventures and representational practices, and moves the black female body from an object position to a subject position in making aesthetic judgments.

The first section of this chapter presents Burke's theory of the sublime, explicating the understanding of human difference that came to define his aesthetics. I explain how his notion of "sympathy" emerges from the analysis of the sublime, asking whether sympathy offers a viable counter to the injustices that typified the colonial

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<sup>91</sup> Karla Lewis Gottlieb, *The Mother of Us All: A History of Queen Nanny, Leader of the Windward Jamaican Maroons* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2000).

situation. The second section describes the processes by which aesthetic theory produced its own subjects and objects in the colonial context, drawing on Ashfield and de Bolla's analysis of the discourse of the sublime as a type of "technology." The third section of the chapter discusses Cox's representation of Queen Nanny, viewing her photographs as part of a counter-discourse that contests the colonial sublime using its own technologies, while at the same time producing a completely new set of meanings of the black female body based on the history of the struggle for liberation in Jamaica. In conclusion, I return to the question of sympathy as a response to colonial injustices, arguing that it depends on a notion of female delicacy that removes women, both black and white, from the moral community, thus failing to recognize their demands for freedom and justice.

## **I. Terror, sympathy, and blackness in Burke's sublime**

### *a. Defining the problem of aesthetic discourse*

In writing the *Enquiry*, Burke set out to uncover the properties of objects that produce the feelings we associate with beauty and sublimity. In so doing, Burke hoped to correct what he saw as a glaring error in the work of Longinus and eighteenth-century British commentators on his treatise. In these commentaries, Burke claimed, the discrete categories of the sublime and the beautiful had been confused beyond all reason, and it was common to find love, fear, pain, and admiration all proceeding from the same objects. To clear up the confusion, Burke made a distinction between pleasure and pain, which he designated as the most basic building blocks of sensation. Of the two, he

argued that pain has the stronger pull on human emotions, thus making an element of pain essential to the intense passions associated with the sublime.<sup>92</sup>

Burke's idea of the sublime is thus based on the most powerful evocations of physical and metaphysical pain that can be found within human experience. Even when the experience of pain is not direct, he argues, the *idea* of pain produces affect through terror. Outlining his basic approach, Burke wrote: "Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*."<sup>93</sup> In this definition, Burke also accounted for the key distinction he would make between beauty and sublimity: beauty gives rise to pleasurable sensations, and the sublime proceeds from terror and various gradations of pain.

Yet Burke was keen to preserve widely-accepted notions of the sublime as a "mixed passion." Rather than turning the sublime into a one-dimensional affective experience, Burke sought to distinguish it from the beautiful in a manner that preserved the conflicting sensations associated with epic poetry. Following Longinus, eighteenth-century theorists had raised the question of the ancient poets' ability to move and delight audiences with descriptions of war, death, famine, God, angels, devils, heaven, hell and nature unleashing its fury upon defenseless beings.<sup>94</sup> While he rejected previous combinations of pleasurable and painful sensations, Burke retained the question of how the feeling of the sublime could be terrible and at the same time uplifting—an effect of epic poetry primarily, but also of the best works in landscaping and architecture. The solution that Burke adopted was to distinguish delight from true pleasure, noting that the

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<sup>92</sup> Burke, *Enquiry*, 80-81.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

passion that accompanies the feeling of the sublime is entirely different in nature from the positive pleasure occasioned by the enjoyment of sweet tastes, for example, or the contemplation of a beautiful object. For Burke, the feeling of delight in the sublime is “a sort of tranquility shadowed with horror”; it refers to the state of mind and body into which one falls after a narrow escape from danger or the release from great pain.<sup>95</sup> Delight would thus be closer in sense to relief than to pleasure. This allowed Burke to make a distinction between pleasure and pain while preserving the idea of the sublime as a “mixed delight.”<sup>96</sup>

The political and moral significance of Burke’s sublime derives from this ability to unite pleasure with pain while retaining the distinct sensations of each. It is the mixed passion of the sublime, he explains, that draws us to witness the pain of others and sympathize with them in their troubles. Yet we are not so disturbed by the scene that we turn away entirely. “[T]here is no spectacle we so eagerly pursue, as that of some uncommon and grievous calamity,” Burke observes.<sup>97</sup> Indeed, other people’s misery seems to draw us in and fill us with horrified delight, and this is how Burke explains the attraction of tragedy. We adore a tragic hero who does not deserve the pain he is subjected to, and the less the hero deserves his misfortunes, the more exquisite the delight of the audience. In addition, he claims that that this delight in others’ misfortunes applies equally to real and fictitious tragedies. On the balance, however, a real-life tragedy will always draw the largest collection of onlookers. Burke demonstrates this using an experiment in imagination:

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 92-3.

Chuse a day on which to represent the most sublime and affecting tragedy we have; appoint the most favorite actors; spare no cost upon the scenes and decorations; unite the greatest efforts of poetry, painting and music; and when you have collected your audience, just at that moment when their minds are erect with expectation, let it to be reported that a state criminal of high rank is on the point of being executed in the adjoining square; in a moment the emptiness of the theater would demonstrate the comparative weakness of the imitative arts, and proclaim the triumph of the real sympathy.<sup>98</sup>

The high appetite that human beings have for spectacle, if Burke's experiment holds true, might seem callous, or even morbid. However, it will be recalled that Burke's "delight" is no positive pleasure. In the case of tragedy, delight is produced only as a sense of appreciation for our own safety and security, which we are made conscious of by the perils that other people are facing. More than in any other case, the delight experienced in witnessing tragedy is experienced as a mixed passion. This is explained by the fact that the spectators are filled at once with a sense of their own security and a profound sympathy for the endangered hero.

Burke defines sympathy, therefore, as "a sort of substitution, by which we are put into the place of another man, and affected in many respects as he is affected."<sup>99</sup> This idea serves as the all-important bridge between the sublime and Burke's moral philosophy. His argument is that love for one another, or social affection, is the foundation of sympathy and the basis of all social bonds. Sympathy on its own, however, does not give us the capacity to act in response to each other's pain in order to relieve it. In other words, sympathy is an insufficient motivator for people to perform their moral duty by attending to the suffering of those befallen by tragedy. Witnessing the pain of

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 91. For more on the relationship between Burke's aesthetic theory and moral philosophy, see Luke Gibbons, "The Sympathetic Sublime: Edmund Burke, Adam Smith, and the Politics of Pain," in his *Edmund Burke and Ireland: Aesthetics, Politics, and the Colonial Sublime* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

others would be too much to bear, Burke argues, if there were no intimations of delight to cause us to gaze steadily upon other people in their sorrow. As he explains it, a mixture of sympathy and delight is needed in order to cause us to attend to our duties, and to do so by instinct rather than through reason: “The delight we have in [witnessing tragedy], hinders us from shunning scenes of misery; and the pain we feel, prompts us to relieve ourselves in relieving those who suffer; and all this antecedent to any reasoning, by an instinct that works us to its own purposes, without our concurrence.”<sup>100</sup> Its independence from reason invests sympathy with a political significance that is foundational for Burke’s political theory.

Several recent studies explicate the role of sympathy in Burke’s political thought. Jennifer Pitts argues that his impassioned speeches in Parliament highlighting the atrocities committed by the British East India Company were an attempt to revive the moral sensibilities of the British public through representations of suffering. In keeping with what Pitts calls his “peculiar universalism”, Burke argued that distance and cultural differences ought not to make British people impervious to the suffering of colonized people. He was the political force behind a bill to impeach Warren Hastings, the former governor-general of Bengal, who had supreme authority over the Company’s administration in India from 1773-1785. Burke asked parliament to hold Hastings responsible for crimes committed under his watch by his officers as well as agents recruited in India to serve as the native vanguard of colonial conquest. In the impeachment proceedings before the House of Lords, Burke described the rape and sexual torture of Indian women in such agonizing detail that few commentators, even in

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<sup>100</sup> Burke, *Enquiry*, 93. In this regard, Burke differs entirely from Kant’s moral philosophy, because Kant was concerned with the good will and not simply with good deeds produced by instinct.

the twentieth century, have been willing to reproduce his remarks in full.<sup>101</sup> Those who were witness to the proceedings reported that Burk collapsed in a faint at the end of that description—so affected was he by the agonies he described.<sup>102</sup> Burke's detractors claimed that his actions were disloyal to Empire and motivated by political self-interest. In response to one such charge from an acquaintance, Burke penned a letter to clarify his motives in taking up the "India business" and disavow all claims to partisanship in the matter. He wrote, "I have no party in this business, my dear Miss Palmer, but among a set of people, who have none of your lilies and roses in their faces, but who are the images of the great Pattern as well as you or I. I know what I'm doing; whether the white people like it or not."<sup>103</sup> Here Burke seemed to express an almost humanistic outlook on politics and the colonized, identifying a common origin for people of all cultures and holding them in equal esteem regardless of skin color. This would be the power of Burkean sympathy in all its "peculiar universalism"—the substitution of himself for the other and the sharing of suffering in defiance of spatial and cultural barriers.

Conor Cruise O'Brien and Luke Gibbons trace the roots of Burke's sympathy with the colonized to his identification with Ireland, the land of his birth, where native Irish Catholics were discriminated against by English settlers and excluded from political participation by law.<sup>104</sup> This interpretation of the roots of his "universalism" fits well with his idea of the sublime and sympathy as experiential rather than arising from conscious reflection on tragic scenes. Against this move to tie Burke's political

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<sup>101</sup> The opening of Ahmed's "Theater of the Civilized Self" contains one of the lengthiest excerpts, but with certain omissions that originate in his source: P.J. Marshall, ed., *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, vol. 6: *India: The Launching of the Hastings Impeachment, 1786-1788* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 419-20. See Chapter Four for a detailed discussion of the ethics of representing suffering.

<sup>102</sup> See Ahmed, "Theater of the Civilized Self," 44.

<sup>103</sup> Edmund Burke, "To Miss Palmer (19 January 1786)," in his *On Empire, Liberty, and Reform: Speeches and Letters*, ed. David Bromwich (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), 374.

<sup>104</sup> Gibbons, *Edmund Burke and Ireland*.

philosophy to his identity, biography, and experience, Pitts argues that his opposition to injustice in the colonies was based on principle. Indeed, she holds that:

Burke's criticism of the British Empire as it was emerging in his day was both broadly liberal—above all in its suspicion of the exercise of arbitrary and unaccountable power and its commitment to the moral equality of all human beings—and rooted in a concern to overcome the political and moral exclusions that underlay British imperial practices.<sup>105</sup>

Pitts contends, further, that Burke's notion of sympathy and the theatricality of its presentation have a part to play in a broader theory of *justice* that prescribes universal duties. Burke's theory of justice based on the "law of nature" is contrasted against Hastings' "geographical morality," which arbitrarily suspended moral obligations to Indian people simply because they were located at a great distance from Britain.<sup>106</sup> She explains how sympathy and the moral imagination come to define a principled politics in Burke:

Burke's rhetorical strategy throughout the Hastings trial conveys his belief in the importance of sympathy in moral judgment. Burke believed that justice is impossible where there is a failure of moral imagination, and he fought the exclusions of imperial politics—most dramatically in the case of India but also in Ireland—by calling on his British audience to exercise moral imagination and to extend sympathy beyond the traditional circle of moral concern.<sup>107</sup>

In view of his writings on aesthetics, the moral imagination can be understood as a dimension of the sublime, thus connecting the sublime to his criticism of the conduct of the British administration in India. It is important to note, of course, that Burke was not interested in ending imperialism but in reforming its practice.<sup>108</sup>

In Pitts' exceedingly generous reading of Burke as a principled liberal and a moral universalist, she concedes that some objections to her thesis might emerge from

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<sup>105</sup> Pitts, *A Turn to Empire*, 63.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

considerations of Burke's political writings. In his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Burke came to the chivalrous defense of Marie Antoinette and the *ancien régime*, this time turning his considerable rhetorical skills against ordinary people. Extolling the virtues of tradition, custom, and social hierarchies, Burke painted Marie Antoinette as a sublime figure who bore her troubles "in a manner suited to her rank and race...with the dignity of a Roman matron."<sup>109</sup> This provoked Thomas Paine's famous remark that Burke "pities the plumage but forgets the dying bird."<sup>110</sup> In my view, however, the more direct critique of Pitts' view of Burke as a moral universalist comes from the analysis of the racialized and gendered content of Burke's aesthetic writings which, after all, ground his notion of sympathy.

In contrast to Pitts' discovery of a strong theory of justice in Burke, Mary Wollstonecraft decried Burke's propensity to substitute compassion and fine sensibilities for political justice. Wollstonecraft's critique should suggest to us that no matter how honorable Burke's motives in the East India trials might have been, his "law of nature" throws us back on moral sensibilities in the final analysis. We are simply supposed to *feel* the right thing to do. As Wollstonecraft put it, "sensibility is the *manie* of the day, and compassion the virtue which is to cover a multitude of vices, whilst justice is left to mourn in sullen silence, and balance truth in vain."<sup>111</sup> Recent studies that revisit the Hasting debacle support such a reading of Burke as a moral sense theorist who lacks a strongly principled notion of justice. Siraj Ahmed argues that the East India trial was concerned not so much with the fate of Indian women and men as with refining the

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<sup>109</sup> Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. L. G. Mitchell (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 75.

<sup>110</sup> As quoted in Pitts, *A Turn to Empire*, 75.

<sup>111</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Vindication*, 6.

sensibilities of the British in order to produce the civilized nation they purported to be. “The very theatricality of the trial and Burke’s conscious participation in the spectacle suggested that the basis of civil society lies neither in reason nor in historical development, but rather in social mimicry,”<sup>112</sup> Ahmed writes. Burke’s fainting spells and others theatrics provided a demonstration of moral sense that could be imitated or donned like a mask to cover the face of incivility in British society. Sara Suleri also calls attention to the depiction of the suffering of the colonized as an occasion for the moral development of the spectator in Britain. Suleri notes, “Sympathy...is a dynamic of alienation rather than of association, in that it constitutes the empowerment of the spectator at the expense of the spectacle, unleashing an economy of gain and loss at the center of the aesthetic experience.”<sup>113</sup> What is at stake in the staging of the colonial sublime is not the humanity of the colonized but the civilization of the colonizer.

If sympathy (and justice reduced to a moral sensibility) is dependent on the senses and implicated in relations of power and subjugation, how does the black female body figure within Burke’s idea of the sublime?

*b. Explaining “the effects of blackness”*

Burke’s analysis of the sublime proceeds by applying the empirical and experimental methods used in such fields as physics and physiology in order to draw clear conclusions about sense experience. While he emphasized that his conclusions on “taste” and the passions were not incontrovertible, Burke clearly understood himself as participating in the production of knowledge that could provide a reliable explanation of

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<sup>112</sup> Ahmed, “Theater of the Civilized Self,” 44.

<sup>113</sup> Suleri, *The Rhetoric of English India*, 38.

the workings of the natural world and of human beings' interaction with it.<sup>114</sup> In the preface to the first edition of the *Enquiry*, Burke described his book as “a careful survey of the properties of things which we find by experience to influence [the] passions.” Further, he placed himself at a dispassionate distance from the affective experiences he sought to explain, calling for “a sober and attentive investigation of the laws of nature, by which those properties are capable of affecting the body, and thus of exciting our passions.”<sup>115</sup> Indeed, the discoveries of Isaac Newton in the study of optics and reports from practicing physicians who explicated the functioning of the human body formed the basis for many of the claims that Burke made regarding the sublime, and particularly his explanation of the effects of blackness.

From optics and physiology, Burke drew the principles that he used to determine the terrifying and therefore sublime nature of the black female body. In a clinical case history published in the *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* in 1729, a physician by the name William Cheselden described his treatment of a boy who was born blind.<sup>116</sup> The boy recovered his sight at the age of thirteen or fourteen years when a cataract was removed from his eye. Shortly after regaining his sight, he was deeply disturbed when he gazed upon a black object, an incident that on the face of it suggested to Burke that blackness induces some degree of terror in the observer. The most “irrefutable” evidence of the effects of blackness came, however, from Dr. Cheselden’s report that “sometime after [the first incident], upon accidentally seeing a negro woman,

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<sup>114</sup> The discourse on the sublime in Britain in the middle of the eighteenth century could therefore be seen as part of the rise of distinct fields of knowledge within the “sciences,” with aesthetics taking its place beside other discourses like economics and psychology. Ashfield and de Bolla, *The Sublime*, 5-7.

<sup>115</sup> Burke, *Enquiry*, 51.

<sup>116</sup> William Cheselden’s article appeared in *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* 35 (1729): 447-50. As cited by Womersley, ed., in Burke, *Enquiry*, 451 n77.

[the boy] was struck with great horror at the sight.”<sup>117</sup> According to Burke, it is clear that the boy’s emotions did not proceed from prior associations between black objects and the feeling of terror—after all, the young boy was seeing objects for the very first time in his life. The clinical evidence seemed to demonstrate that blackness “naturally” induces terror in the viewer, here a young British male. The task was then to explain these “effects of blackness.”

For an explanatory model, Burke turned to Newtonian optics in order to suggest that blackness induces pain by causing the contraction and straining of the iris. When the eye passes from light into darkness, Burke claims, “it is reasonable to think, that the contraction of the radial fibers of the iris is proportionably greater; and that this part may by great darkness come to be so contracted, as to strain the nerves that compose it beyond their natural tone; and by this means to produce a painful sensation.”<sup>118</sup> Blackness offers a slightly modified form of this painful effect because it consists of only a “partial darkness.” When surrounded by colored bodies, black objects cause the eye to fall violently from the adjacent colors into the “vacant spaces” caused by the failure of black objects to reflect the light rays that fall upon them. This produces a kind of shock that Burke described as “very violent,” “rude” and “disagreeable,” arguing that black objects produce their effects by setting off painful convulsions in the eye.<sup>119</sup>

Burke is certainly aware that there are possible objections to this thesis. Indeed, he goes so far as to offer a response to the likely objection that these effects arise not from blackness, but from the preconceived notions of the observer. He concedes that it may be true, to a degree, that the effects of blackness are all in the mind, but argues that

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<sup>117</sup> Burke, *Enquiry*, 173.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

all affective experience is produced by a mind-body connection, and it must certainly be the case that the *initial* effect is on the body and the sensory organs.<sup>120</sup> Even when he allows that the *idea* of terror plays a significant role in the experience of the sublime, he nevertheless traces affective experience back to sense-memory and the external object rather than to ideas of reason. Thus we see Burke adopting the empiricist to view that all knowledge and mental reflection proceeds directly from experience, and its application in the development of a theory of the sublime. This is in marked contrast to Kant's understanding of aesthetic judgment, as we will see in the next chapter.

It is tempting to dismiss Burke's foray into optics as the typical masquerade, sometimes premeditated but often not, of racial prejudices in scientific garb. Enlightenment philosophers across Europe were full of confidence that they could apply the scientific method of disinterested inquiry and law-governed analysis to sociological and anthropological questions, with the kind of results described above. Burke's pseudo-scientism is an important indicator, however, of the primacy of the body and sensation in his aesthetic theory. The greatest challenge in reading the Kantian sublime is to return the fleshy body to discussions of aesthetic judgment, but this is simply never the case with Burke. Eyes, nerves, even necks and breasts are at the center of his *Enquiry*.

This insistence on the centrality of bodily sensation notwithstanding, Burke does not hesitate to invoke the metaphysical dimensions of blackness for rhetorical effect. To illustrate the extreme sublimity of everything associated with darkness, Burke reproduces a stanza from John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Milton makes a famous attempt in this poem to describe the fall of Satan, any event that is horrifying but delightful in its retelling. The challenge is to represent with clarity what is only a shadowy, disjointed form of Satan.

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 175.

Milton's great achievement is the portrayal of an intensely frightening and spectacular figure. The blackness that Burke comes to identify with the sublime appears in this poem in the shapeless, substanceless form of Satan:

The other shape,  
If shape it might be called that shape had none  
Distinguishable, in member, joint, or limb;  
Or substance might be called that shadow seemed,  
For each seemed either; *black he stood as night*,  
Fierce as ten furies; terrible as hell;  
And shook a deadly dart. What seemed his head  
The likeness of a kingly crown had on [my emphasis].<sup>121</sup>

Following this quotation, Burke makes a declaration that is perhaps even more passionate than Milton's words: "In this description [of the fall of Satan] all is dark, uncertain, terrible, and sublime to the last degree."<sup>122</sup> The quintessence of sublimity, therefore, it is terrifying darkness.

Various attributes of blackness contribute to this ultimate sublime experience of the sublime. As Burke explains, Milton's portrait achieves its terrifying effects by casting a shadow over the devil and making the outline of his form indistinguishable. The effect of obscuring the subject of the poem is to intensify our fear of what remains unseen. "To make anything very terrible, obscurity seems in general to be necessary," Burke explains, the reason being that the imagination is pushed to conjure up the immeasurable dangers that lurk beyond what the senses can grasp. It is precisely because darkness represents the unknown that it has the power to arouse feelings of fear and anxiety. The blackest of nights thus produces the most terrifying effects:

For in utter darkness, it is impossible to know in what degree of safety we stand; we are ignorant of the objects that surround us; we may every moment strike

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<sup>121</sup> As quoted by Burke, *Enquiry*, 103

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

against some dangerous obstruction; we may fall down a precipice the first step we take; and if an enemy approach, we know not in what quarter to defend ourselves; in such a case strength is no sure protection; wisdom can only act by guess; the boldest are staggered, and he who would pray for nothing else toward his defense, is forced to pray for light.<sup>123</sup>

Writing at the heart of a British Empire on the march, it is not surprising that Burke theorizes from the standpoint of battle scenes taken from Homer's *Iliad*. These references to military operations over rugged terrain and under an impenetrable blanket of darkness serve as a reminder that Burke's idea of the sublime is developing in a political climate in which the conquest of new and unknown territory is firing up the political imagination. The sublime becomes that which resists capture not only in terms of the senses, but also in terms of the physical acquisition of new territory. This element of Burke's aesthetic theory resonates powerfully with colonial imaginaries in Jamaica, where a terrifying blackness in the form of Maroon resistance and slave revolts combines with the resistance of the rugged landscape to frustrate British efforts of domination and domestication. What is of course required to unite such an experience of terror with delight in order to yield the mixed feeling of the sublime is the triumph of domination over resistance.

Blackness has yet another sublime element, which is its tendency towards infinity. Figures shrouded in darkness have no clear outlines, and hence seem to extend limitlessly away from the viewer. The progression from obscurity to infinity is explained in this way: "Hardly anything can strike the mind with its greatness, which does not to make some sort of approach towards infinity; which nothing can do whilst we are able to perceive its bounds.... A clear idea is therefore another name for a little idea."<sup>124</sup> When

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 172.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 106.

the object itself is black, this impression of infinity is particularly striking. As explained above, Burke sees black bodies as vacant spaces that swallow all the light that is cast upon them.<sup>125</sup> These black holes, so to speak, become bottomless depths that threaten to overwhelm the imagination. Ideas of obscurity, vastness, greatness, danger, terror and infinity, all fundamental elements of Burke's sublime, thus coalesce in the satanic black body.

In summary, it is important to recall that Burke's description of the effects of blackness is authorized by its claim to scientific validity, even as he employed metaphysical categories taken from poetic fantasy. Burke never abandoned the claim that he was conducting an investigation of the laws of nature based on sense experience. Not only did he insist that the effects of blackness could be explained by an appeal to natural laws, but he also presented the perspective of the white male subject as the "natural" posture of the aesthetic subject. In her commentary on Burke's *Enquiry*, Meg Armstrong argues makes visible the ascription of particular identities to the aesthetic subject that are masked by claims a universal or natural way of seeing. Burke is not alone here: his *Enquiry* merely reflects a set of broader social and political questions that trouble eighteenth-century aesthetics. Armstrong lays out these issues in relation to the production and subsequent erasure of bodily difference within the discourse of the sublime:

...the philosophical discourses of sublimity turn away from such embodied (and often "exotic" forms) at the same time that they abjure the relevance of historical and cultural contingencies which have thrown them into the line of vision. The repetitive motions with which the national, cultural, racial, or gendered bodies of the sublime are erased in order to assert the 'naturalness' of aesthetic vision indicates a persistent anxiety and ambivalence surrounding the relationship

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 175.

between subjectivity, aesthetics, and the production of images—one could even say stereotypes—of difference.<sup>126</sup>

The perception of difference requires that an observer position himself in relation to the people or things that he takes as his objects, followed by the denial that any such posturing took place. My contention is that the preconditions for affective experience of Burke's sublime are the formation of colonialist subjectivities and the aestheticization of black bodies by making them objects of the senses.

The necessity that the observer in Burke's sublime be not simply male but also in a position to survey and dominate foreign landscapes is best demonstrated, ironically, by looking at his discussion of the bodies of European women. It is in his analysis of the passions arising from "the society of the sexes" that the latent interest in domination in Burke's theory becomes clear. In addition, the discussion of the society of the sexes reveals the sources of pleasure and delight in the ability to gaze upon black bodies and white female bodies without impediment. To the degree that the black female body approximates the wildness of untamed nature rather than mirroring the gentle submission that Burke associates with European femininity, it participates in the sublime rather than the beautiful and drops off the register of the human. Black women's bodies disappear into black holes from which they cannot be extracted because they can never be viewed directly, but only through obscure images of satanic terror.

*c. Pleasure and domination*

While the efficient cause of the sublime is terror, setting off violent contractions in the sensory organs, the feeling for the beautiful turns on a pleasurable sensation of

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<sup>126</sup> Armstrong, "The Effects of Blackness," 213.

“melting” and “languor.”<sup>127</sup> Sublime objects produce fear and its lesser gradations— awe, wonder, and astonishment, but beauty is represented only in “that quality or those qualities in bodies by which they cause love, or some passion similar to it.” Like the terrifying effects of blackness, this love does not spring from some prior association between the object and a secondary quality that the spectator values, but comes from “the direct force which [beautiful objects] have merely on being viewed.”<sup>128</sup> In Burke’s *Enquiry*, therefore, the description of the qualities of a beautiful object is always a positive description that implies its negative counterpart in the sublime. And like the idea of the sublime, beautification has its own technological dynamic, working to produce the sexually desirable European woman—the beautiful woman—through a careful enumeration of the properties of the beautiful object.

Each description of what is beautiful in nature or the landscape has its counterpart in the disposition, attitude, manners and comportment of European women. Strong and powerful is what the beautiful woman is not. For example, the robustness and strength of oak, ash, and elm trees are described as awful and majestic, while the delicacy of fragile plants like the orange, almond, jessamine, vines, and other flowery and fleeting species are said to be beautiful.<sup>129</sup> By the same token, a woman who displays a fragility of constitution is the epitome of beauty for Burke. “Beauty in distress is much the most affecting beauty,” he avers, and such distress is just as pleasurable when it is imitated as when real. Thus women who affect a lisp, blush frequently, and totter about as they walk, tend to inspire love in the observer. Burke concludes: “The beauty of women is considerably owing to their weakness, or delicacy, and is even enhanced by their timidity,

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<sup>127</sup> Burke, *Enquiry*, 177.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 150.

the quality of mind analogous to it.” If a woman happens to be genuinely ill, from this perspective, the weakness of her body is not itself a problem from an aesthetic viewpoint; however, sickness will ruin her color and make her skin wrinkle, thus destroying beauty by affecting its other attributes.<sup>130</sup>

This aestheticization of illness discloses the assumption of a distanced relationship to the female body that is afflicted. In a passage that clearly outlines the relationship between the male observer and his beautiful object, Burke writes: “When we have before us objects of love ... the head reclines something on one side; the eyelids are more closed than usual, and the eyes roll gently with an inclination to the object, the mouth is a little opened, and breath drawn slowly, with now and then a low sigh...”<sup>131</sup> This melting on the part of the observer depends on the passivity of the object and the absence of impediments or resistance to the eye passing over the beautiful surface. Whatever is smooth, polished, and gently undulating thus inspires the greatest love. The example that Burke produces is again taken from the (white) female body:

...observe that part of a beautiful woman where she is perhaps the most beautiful, about the neck and breasts; the smoothness; the softness; the easy and insensible swell; the variety of the surface, which is never for the smallest space the same; the deceitful maze, through which the unsteady eye slides giddily, without knowing where to fix, or whither it is carried. Is not this a demonstration of that change of surface continual and yet hardly perceptible at any point which forms one of the great constituents of beauty?<sup>132</sup>  
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The gentle swell of the breast described here is in contrast to the sudden projections of rocky mountains and the hanging precipices, rugged, and broken surfaces that Burke classifies as sublime.<sup>133</sup> Beauty, thus, is distinguished from the sublime by its association

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 150.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 177.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 114.

with submission to surveillance. While dramatic scenery may be a cause of wonderment, it could never inspire love, according to Burke, for “we submit to what we admire, but love what submits to us.”<sup>134</sup> The white female figure becomes representative of a beautiful, gentle yielding to the motions and attentions of a dominant male observer.

Not content to fix the gaze, Burke’s aesthetic theory touches upon all the senses in turn, and the idea of the beautiful comes across just as strongly in his description of the effects of sound. Beauty is characterized by peaceful silence, or soft, sweet, continuous and even sounds. In contrast, sounds that “imitate the natural inarticulate voices of man or any animals in pain or danger” are terrifying and sublime. Amongst the most horrible sounds identified by Burke are the “angry tones of wild beasts” and the “the cries of animals”<sup>135</sup> The idea of the jungle all but roars out of his *Enquiry* in descriptions of experiences that are distant from civil society both geographically and in terms of taste, sensation and affect. With regard to taste, sugar and sweet things are said to be relaxing on account of the roundness and smoothness of the particles. Bitter tastes and “intolerable stench,” on the other hand, have a clear reference to the sublime. (Burke is reluctant to dwell on the topic of smells, as it invites unrefined people to make rude jokes.)<sup>136</sup> In relation to the sense of touch, Smoothness is declared beautiful because it eases the tensions in the body: “gentle stroking with a smooth hand allays violent pains and cramps, and relaxes the suffering parts from their unnatural tension...”<sup>137</sup> It is not by chance that this example is based on the work of the nurse and healer, who is gendered female in European society of that period. The aesthetic of the beautiful defines a role

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 147.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 125-126.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 179

for white women as much as it prescribes their dispositions and attitudes, which are in marked contrast to the untouchable terror of the black female body.

The contrast between the sublime and the beautiful extends even further to include moral sensibilities, and here the gendered nature of morality becomes clear: those virtues which are the source of admiration, such as fortitude, justice, wisdom are said to be sublime on account of the fact that they produce a feeling of terror rather than love. The terror derives from the power of those who possess these virtues to exact punishment on wrongdoers, and to prevent undesirable behaviors or immoral actions instigated by others. Burke associates these types of terrifying virtues with the authority of the father, whereas the virtues of maternal love—compassion, kindness, and indulgence, are beautiful.<sup>138</sup> This discussion of moral virtue in aesthetic terms is, again, not simply descriptive, but prescribes the proper attitude and moral comportment of women and men in their familial roles. At another level, Burke is addressing himself to the question of political authority that so greatly troubled eighteenth-century thinkers. Favoring metaphors of familial relations over the social-contract theories of Enlightenment philosophers, Burke was keen to identify law, justice and social order with the authority of the father—a relationship that he assumes to be so deeply ingrained in human society that it requires no theoretical framework or political process to justify it. The self-evidence of the rightness and naturalness of monarchical power is now declared to strike any observer with the immediacy of an aesthetic judgment of the beautiful and the sublime.<sup>139</sup> To question the structure of familial relations or the self-evidence of

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>139</sup> For an extended discussion of the relationship between aesthetic theory and political philosophy in the eighteenth century, see Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*.

aestheticized politics, as feminist theory has so often done, is therefore to strike at the foundations of Burke's political philosophy.

*d. The sublime as resistance to beautification*

The unstated argument of the *Enquiry* is that it may be possible to render an object beautiful by controlling its sound, causing it to yield itself to the gaze, reigning in its wildness, and suppressing its rough, rugged peaks to the point where it becomes pleasurable to the spectator. Indeed, what delight there is in the sublime arises from the mixture of a spirited resistance with a sudden yielding to an irresistible force applied against it. In eighteenth-century literary criticism, the "mixed delight" that Burke referred to in the *Enquiry* was most commonly captured in metaphors of sexual violation. In John Dennis's famous formulation, the sublime is a "pleasing rape." According to Dennis, "no passion is attended with greater joy than enthusiastic terror, at the very time that we see it before us," and the joy is increased in proportion to the irresistibility of the assault on one's senses.<sup>140</sup> Following along with the theme of ravishment, Sir Richard Blackmore wrote of the noble poems that "strike the imagination with resistless force, break in upon the soul and excite generous and divine passions suitable to the subject."<sup>141</sup> Similarly, for Tamworth Reresby, the effect of the sublime was that "we feel ourselves pleased and ravished..."<sup>142</sup> Thus the idea of the sublime in circulation at the time had at

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<sup>140</sup> John Dennis, from *The grounds of criticism in poetry* (1704), in Ashfield and de Bolla, *The Sublime*, 37-38.

<sup>141</sup> Sir Richard Blackmore, from *Essays upon several subjects* (1716), in Ashfield and de Bolla, *The Sublime*, 40.

<sup>142</sup> Tamworth Reresby, from *A miscellany of ingenious thoughts and reflections* (1721), in Ashfield and de Bolla, *The Sublime*, 43.

its heart a notion of violent conquest producing wonder, awe, astonishment, and ultimately, a rapturous submission on the part of the reader, listener or spectator.

Feminist philosopher Christine Battersby calls attention to the cross-gendering of the speaker and audience in these metaphors of ravishment. While the *maleness* of the speaker/writer and audience/reader was always taken for granted, these roles were at the same time feminized in aesthetic discourse. “In mid eighteenth-century Britain,” Battersby explains, “the spectator of the sublime was theorised as passive; but so also was the genius himself, so that the genius took on many stereotypically ‘feminine’ characteristics, including imagination, intuition, strong emotions and frenzy.”<sup>143</sup> The feminization of male spectatorship in the work of Dennis, Blackmore, and others does not undo the structure of masculine dominance, of course, but only allows men access to the affective experiences that are usually restricted to women. The real violence of assault is aestheticized and defanged through simulation. In Burke’s *Enquiry* the last tenuous link between white women and wildness or strength through the idea of the frenzied feminine is completely destroyed, leaving women subordinate to white male spectators who have the freedom to cross-dress and commit violent acts at will.

Masculine *and* male dominance are reinforced by Burke when he spells out the social implications of his aesthetic theory. In his view of social relations, there is no question that the bodies of the ravisher and the ravished are sexed male and female respectively. Burke locates the pleasures of the “society of the sexes” at precisely that point where resistance yields to violence. He identifies the passions that cause a male and female to reproduce as “gratifications and *pleasures*,” and notes that this pleasure “is of a lively character, rapturous and violent, and confessedly the highest pleasure of

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<sup>143</sup> Battersby, *The Sublime*, 7.

sense.”<sup>144</sup> The function of beauty in the society of the sexes, he explains, is to fix the affections of the male (observer) on some particular female (object), and tame the sexual passions in men that would otherwise be out of control, given that the sexual urge is so powerful. “Men are carried to the [female] sex in general,” Burke hypothesizes, “as it is the sex, and by the common law of nature; but they are attached to particulars by personal beauty.”<sup>145</sup> Indeed, it is this submission that works to fix the affections of the male and discipline his giddy eye, making women’s submission a precondition for civil society. Armstrong notes, very perceptively, that the *Enquiry* is concerned not simply with explaining aesthetic judgments of taste, but, more importantly, producing well-governed sentimentalities:

If the eye is kept steady on the “direct visual force of things,” the gaze will not follow distracting indirections and will (prefer to) remain within this “natural” love of beauty (of the feminine; metaphorically, of submission), such preference in turn preparing the way for a universalization of the laws and principles of the aesthetic.<sup>146</sup>

The aesthetic subject whose senses are perfectly governable is produced, further, by contrasting the passions of the civilized man against those of “brutes.” Presumably, it is because “brutes” have no beautiful women among them, or because they are unable to make aesthetic judgments of beauty, or both, that their sexual urges remain ungoverned.<sup>147</sup> Regardless of the cause of the “unmixed” passion of lust that drives brutes, Burke’s implication is clear: brutes—a common descriptor for blacks and indigenous peoples in colonial literature—are devoid of beauty and incapable of making aesthetic judgments of taste.

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<sup>144</sup> Burke, *Enquiry*, 87.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>146</sup> Armstrong, “The Effects of Blackness,” 216.

<sup>147</sup> Burke, *Enquiry*, 88.

The inability to make aesthetic judgments applies to white women as well, but for entirely different reasons. In her *Vindication of the Rights of Man*, Wollstonecraft was highly critical of Burke's theory, arguing that he denied white women's moral agency by removing from them the experience of the mixed passions of the sublime. She writes from an Enlightenment perspective that emphasizes the use of reason, which serves to cast Burke's strict empiricism in relief. These are not simply two different approaches to aesthetics but two contrasting moral philosophies that have clear to political implications. Addressing her critique directly to Burke, Wollstonecraft wrote:

...you have clearly proved that one half of the human species, at least, have not souls; and that Nature, by making women *little, smooth, delicate, fair* creatures, never designed that they should exercise their reason to acquire the virtues [such as truth and fortitude] that produce opposite, if not contradictory, feelings. The affection they excite, to be uniform and perfect, should not be tinctured with the respect which moral virtues inspire, lest pain should be blended with pleasure, and admiration disturb the soft intimacy of love."<sup>148</sup>

For Wollstonecraft, Burke's theory of the sublime was therefore an immoral theory, stripping virtue not only from women, but also from the "good-natured man" whose qualities inspire love rather than fear.

Burke's approach to aesthetics also implied that white women could not demand justice or be held to account for the suffering of enslaved Africans. Once again,

Wollstonecraft took Burke to task on the moral implications of his aesthetic writings:

Where is the dignity, the infallibility of sensibility, in the fair ladies, whom, if the voice of rumour is to be credited, the captive negroes curse in all the agony of bodily pain, for the unheard of tortures they invent? It is probable that some of them, after the sight of a flagellation, compose their ruffled spirits, and exercise their tender feelings by the perusal of the last imported novel.—How true these tears are to nature, I leave you to determine. But these ladies may have read your Enquiry concerning the

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<sup>148</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Vindication*, 46.

origin of our ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful, and convinced by your arguments, may have laboured to be pretty, by counterfeiting weakness.<sup>149</sup>

Thus Wollstonecraft pointed to white women's participation in the enslavement of blacks and their own moral responsibility for the suffering of other human beings. At the same time, she showed Burke's complicity in creating a class of women in the colonies who trivialized the suffering of enslaved Africans.

Wollstonecraft not only refused to countenance an aesthetic theory that denied women access to the sublime, but through her collection of travels letter, *A Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark*, as well as her writings on the revolution in France, she claimed a position for herself as an aesthetic subject making judgments of the sublime. Other European women also used travel writing to represent their experience of the sublime, sometimes writing as residents of settler colonies in Africa and Asia. While this writing was not simply a replication of the dominant perspective of the white male colonialist, the class and racial positioning of many of these women reflected their colonizing perspective on native peoples. With regard to women who traveled within Europe, it must also be noted that that was a class dimension to the experience of the sublime: not everyone had access to leisure time and means to travel and observe distant places and faces. Thus Sarah Mills argues that even though Wollstonecraft was a woman, and even in the absence of a colonial relationship between Britain and the Nordic countries she visited, her account of that visit was "supremely imperialist" in its treatment of peasants as part of the local flora and fauna.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 45

<sup>150</sup> Sarah Mills. *Gender and Colonial Space* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2005), 89.

## II. Technologies of the sublime and the colonization of Jamaica

The elision of the distinction between landscape and humanscape is a distinctive feature of eighteenth-century travel writing, and has its roots in an intellectual current of that period. The study of physical geography had not yet emerged as an entirely distinct field from anthropology, and both climate and topography were thought to have a determining influence on human and animal characteristics.<sup>151</sup> Just as John Milton's Satan emerged from hell in the middle of the blackest night, so the sublime black female figure would have been associated with a particular location, climate, and topography from which she seemed strangely displaced in Burke's discussion of the effects of blackness. It is not by accident that Dr. Cheselden described the visual apprehension of this dislocated black woman as an accident. Her appearance before the terrified white boy in a presumably English environment would have been anomalous, and it took no special genius to reunite the black terrors of landscape and humanscape in descriptions of the colony of Jamaica.

### *a. Colonial histories of Jamaica*

By most historical accounts, the native people of Jamaica, the Arawaks, had been exterminated by the time the British drove the Spanish off the island in 1655. Jamaica was very sparsely populated at this point in time, and the British saw an opportunity to settle the rich arable land and establish a plantation economy.<sup>152</sup> As the Spanish fled, many former slaves dispersed into the mountainous countryside, where they set up their

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<sup>151</sup> See Jahoda, *Images of Savages*.

<sup>152</sup> Mavis C. Campbell, *The Maroons of Jamaica, 1655-1796: A History of Resistance, Collaboration and Betrayal* (Granby, MA: Bergin & Garvey Publishers, 1988).

own communities with independent systems of government and military defenses against British incursion. These bands of “wild Negroes” and “rebellious Negroes,” as they were often described by colonialists, raided British-owned plantations for livestock, arms, provisions, and to free enslaved Africans.<sup>153</sup> By the middle of the eighteenth century, the word “Maroon,” had come into common usage as a reference to the fugitive slave communities that had taken root in many parts of the West Indies and the Americas. Historians trace the roots of this term back to the Spanish word *cimarron*, which referred to domestic animals that had escaped into the wild. Prevailing “scientific” discourses on the animality of blacks ensured that the term retained most of its original sense even when it came to apply exclusively to those who had fled slavery.<sup>154</sup>

Apart from the maroons, Bryan Edwards tells us that other inhabitants of the island were European whites, Creole or native whites; Creoles of mixed blood; free blacks; imported Africans or blacks in the state of slavery; and a small community of Jews. As in the rest of the islands of the West Indies, the black inhabitants of the island far outnumbered the whites, but the white population had economic and political dominance.<sup>155</sup> Among the British settlers were many prominent men of learning—lawyers, physicists, and theologians—who had supported Cromwell and fled to Jamaica after the restoration of King Charles II. Other Europeans included army and navy officers, who subsequently became planters, merchants and tradesmen who also turned to agriculture, and, finally, plantation administrators and overseers of various sorts.<sup>156</sup>

Recording this information in the second part of his two-volume *History of the West*

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<sup>153</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>154</sup> Gottlieb, *The Mother of Us All*, xiii.

<sup>155</sup> Bryan Edwards reported that the population of Jamaica consisted of approximately 30,000 Whites and 250,000 Blacks in the 1790s (*History of the West Indies* Vol. 2, 4)

<sup>156</sup> Edwards, *History of the West Indies* Vol. 2, 6, 8.

*Indies* (1793), Edwards, was keen to point out that British settlers were not the vagabonds and shiftless adventurers that they were reputed to be back in Britain. He argued that it was the most industrious whites who emigrated to Jamaica, searching for fresh opportunities to engage in profitable enterprises. Edwards himself was well educated, wealthy, and, as a Member of the Assembly in Jamaica, he represented the interests of the slave-holding planter elite. He went on to become a Fellow of the American Philosophical Society, was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society, and secured a seat in the British Parliament where he continued to represent the interests of colonialists.<sup>157</sup>

Fellow historian Edward Long, who wrote an even more influential three-volume *History of Jamaica* (1774), certainly fit the image of the colonists that Edwards wanted to project. Trained in the legal profession, Long served as Lieutenant-Governor of Jamaica and later as a judge.<sup>158</sup> In contrast, Philip Thicknesse, who has been described as a colonial adventurer and “collector of exotica,” was the kind of character who came most readily to mind when members of the British public thought of their counterparts in the colonies.<sup>159</sup> After a series of misadventures in Britain, Thicknesse sailed for Jamaica where he was soon sent out at the head of a militia to fight the windward Maroons. His *Memoirs* record those violent encounters in detail, showing how the Maroons and their women leaders were imagined by the men who were sent out to fight them.

Long’s *History* reports that the Maroons were the very worst kind of nuisance to the British, seriously frustrating imperialist ambitions in Jamaica. A tone of irritation is

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<sup>157</sup> Blouet, “Bryan Edwards.”

<sup>158</sup> Howard Johnson, “Introduction,” in Edward Long, *The History of Jamaica : Reflections on its Situation, Settlements, Inhabitants, Climate, Products, Commerce, Laws, and Government*, Volume 1 (Montreal; Ithaca: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002).

<sup>159</sup> According to Campbell, “Thicknesse was obviously a collector of exotica, which found a ready market in England at that period. He also visited the United States and collected vignettes of ‘Red Indians.’ (*The Maroons of Jamaica*, 123).

used to mask the fact that the Maroons represented a formidable enemy and were actually winning the military battle for control of the most productive land in Jamaica. Citing correspondence between British colonial officials, Long describes the Maroon problem as follows:

Major-general Sedgewick prophesied, in his letter to Thurloe (1656), that these Blacks would prove thorns in our sides; living as they did in the woods and mountains, a kind of life natural and agreeable to them. He adds, that they gave no quarter to his men, but destroyed them whenever they found opportunity, scarce a week passing without their slaying one or two; and, as the soldiers grew more secure and careless, they became more enterprising and bloody. “Having no *moral sense*,” continues he, “nor understanding what the laws and customs of civil nations mean, we neither know how to capitulate or discourse with them, nor how to take, any of them. But, be assured, they must either be destroyed, or brought in upon some terms for other; or else they will prove a great discouragement to the settling of people here.” What he foretold actually came to pass. At the latter end of the same year (1656), the army gained some trifling success against them; but this was soon afterwards severely retaliated by the slaughter of 40 soldiers...<sup>160</sup>

Making frequent references to the “barbarities” and “outrages” committed upon whites by these “savage” Maroons, Long documents the series of unsuccessful military efforts to destroy Maroon communities. Expeditions were sent out after them, including both white and black militias, and a proclamation was made offering twenty acres of land to any Maroon who would surrender. Nobody took up the offer. Laws were eventually passed offering rewards to British militias for hunting the wild Negroes like rats (Thicknesse’s analogy), but to little effect.<sup>161</sup>

As a result of the strength of the Maroon resistance, many plantations were abandoned and new settlement was prevented.<sup>162</sup> British agents attempting to sue for peace were met by false emissaries, and the clashes continued unabated. Long reports:

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<sup>160</sup> Long, *History of Jamaica* Vol. 2, 338.

<sup>161</sup> Thicknesse, *Memoirs*, 50.

<sup>162</sup> Long, *History of Jamaica* Vol. 2, 339.

They continued to distress the islands for about forty-seven years; and, during this time, forty-four acts of assembly were passed, and at least 240,000/- expended, for their suppression. In 1730, they were grown so formidable, that it was found expedient to strengthen the colony against them by two regiments of regular troops, which were afterwards formed into independent companies, and employed, with other hired parties, and the whole body of militia, towards their reduction.”<sup>163</sup>

Although Long claims that there were significant military victories for the British in the years that followed, this is not borne out by the account of Thicknesse, who was an officer in one such militia in the 1730s and reported a resounding defeat for the British troops. The end to the conflict came not from a military victory for the British, but from the signing of a series of treaties between the colonial government and Maroon communities on the eastward and windward sides of the island. As Thicknesse notes in his *Memoirs*, “all the regular troops in Europe, could not have conquered the wild Negroes, by force of arms; and if [Governor] Trelawney had not wisely given them, what they contended for, LIBERTY, they would, in all probability have been, at this day, masters of the whole country.”<sup>164</sup> In light of the fact that some of the Maroon communities in Jamaica have endured to the present day, it can be concluded that this prediction was borne out by history.

But how did the British account for the ability of the Maroons to hold out for so many years and cause so much damage to the armed forces of one of the world’s greatest empire? It is here that a version of Burke’s sublime comes into play, uniting images of blackness and animality with descriptions of a wild and rugged terrain that *almost* refuses to yield itself to force. The landscape is an integral feature in representations of the Maroons, as illustrated by Sedgewick’s report that they lived a life “natural” to them in

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<sup>163</sup> Long, *History of Jamaica* Vol. 2, 340.

<sup>164</sup> Thicknesse, *Memoirs*, 56.

the mountainous territory. Describing his own arrival in Jamaica in the year 1759 or 1760, Edwards represents himself as a disciple of Christopher Columbus. Columbus, he imagines, must have been “filled with delight and admiration at the novelty, variety, and beauty of the prospect.”<sup>165</sup> His first impression of the island is that it is beautiful in a feminine, yielding way. The hills close to the shore present themselves to the viewer as “beautiful swells with rounded tops,” and here Edwards uses the language of Burke’s eye wandering over a woman’s breasts:

The country at a small distance from the shore rises into hills, which are more remarkable for beauty than boldness; being all of gentle acclivity, and commonly separated from each other by spacious vales and romantic inequalities; but they are seldom craggy, nor is the transition from hills to the valleys often-times abrupt. In general, the hand of nature has rounded every hill towards the top with singular felicity. The most striking circumstances tending these beautiful swells are the happy disposition of the groves of pimento, with which most of them are spontaneously clothed...<sup>166</sup>

The hills are apparently modest enough to cover their nakedness with greenery. Drawn in by the smoothness and gentleness of it all, Edwards reports that the eye “passing over the beauties” of this scenery experiences a kind of attraction, much like the giddy eye of Burke’s observer.<sup>167</sup>

This romantic impression is, however, rudely interrupted by the violent impression made by the rest of the terrain. Moving from the northern to the southern side of the island, beauty gives way to “grandeur and sublimity.”<sup>168</sup> Edwards reports:

When I first approached the side of the island by sea, and beheld, from afar, such of the stupendous and soaring ridges of the blue mountains, as the clouds here and there disclosed, the imagination (forming an indistinguishable idea of what was concealed, by what was thus partially displayed) was filled with admiration and wonder. Yet the sensation which I felt was allied rather to terror than delight.

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<sup>165</sup> Edwards, *History of the West Indies*, Vol. 1, 176.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

Though the prospect before me was in the highest degree magnificent, it seemed a scene of magnificent desolation. The abrupt precipice and inaccessible cliff, had more the aspect of a chaos than a creation; or rather seemed to but exhibit the effects of some dreadful convulsion, which had laid nature in ruins.<sup>169</sup>

Here Edwards employs the standard imagery of the sublime: obscurity, greatness, chaos, inaccessibility, and terror. Thankfully, in his view, there were indications here and there that nature could be pacified and caused to submit. Edwards soon came upon the vast sugar cane plantations where the hills descended to the plains, and finally at the coast, numerous ships and boats that attested to human enterprise. The agricultural and mercantile economy is what opens up this landscape for reflection and forces it to submit to the steady gaze. “Such a prospect of human ingenuity and industry, employed in exchanging the superfluities of the Old World, for the productions of the New, opens another, and, I might add, an almost untrodden field, for contemplation and reflection,” Edwards noted with relief.<sup>170</sup> Although Edwards makes no direct comment on the Maroon wars at this point in the *History*, his praise for European industry and agriculture runs aground on the fact that as of November, 1789 only two of the four million acres of land in Jamaica had been located (taken up by grants from the Crown). Of that two million, he reports that only one million was in actual cultivation.<sup>171</sup> The reason for this to can be surmised from Long’s account of the Maroon Wars.

The second volume of Edwards’ *History* takes up the neglected question of the inhabitants of Jamaica, and here his descriptions of Karomantyn or Gold Coast Negroes, who formed a large part of the Maroon communities, once again fall into the rhetoric of the sublime. He explains that a slave rebellion that took place in 1760 was fomented by

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<sup>169</sup> Ibid., 178.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid., 178-9.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid., 182.

rebellious characters from this ethnic group. According to Edwards, the Karomantyn Negroes “may be said to constitute to the genuine and original unmixed Negro, both in person and character.” They are characterized by their “glossy black” skin, “wooly hair,” the “strong and fetid odour, which exhales from the skin,” and “a ferociousness of disposition”<sup>172</sup> Edwards allows, however, that the Karomantyn Negro also demonstrates the more noble elements of the sublime: “activity, courage, stubbornness, or what an ancient Roman would have deemed an elevation, of soul, which prompts them to enterprizes of difficulty and danger; and enables them to meet death, in its most horrible shape, with fortitude and indifference.”<sup>173</sup> This description of the stoic manner in which the Negro confronts death is following by Edwards’ “eye-witness” account of the events of 1760. In Edwards’ narration of the tale, the slave rebellion began on the very plantation that he had inherited from his uncle, spreading death and devastation across the island as other slaves joined the revolt. The rebellious slaves marched from one plantation to the next, “butchered [Whites, including babies] in the most savage manner, and literally drank their blood mixed with rum.”<sup>174</sup> The revolt was eventually suppressed and the slaveholders regained control. Some of the ringleaders of the rebellion had been killed in the conflict, but the slave owners saw fit to make an example of those who survived. Here begins a story that ended up circulating widely among intellectuals in Europe and the colonies:

Of three [Karomantyn Negroes] who were clearly proved to have been concerned in the murders committed at Ballard’s Valley, one was condemned to be burned, and the other two to be hung up alive in irons, and left to perish in that dreadful situation. The wretch that was burned was made to sit on the ground, and his body being chained to an iron stake, the fire was applied to his feet. He uttered

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<sup>172</sup> Edwards, *History of the West Indies* Vol. 2, 58-9.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

not a groan, and saw his legs reduced to ashes with the utmost firmness and composure; after which one of his arms by some means getting loose, he snatched a brand from the fire that was consuming him, and flung it in the face of the executioner.”<sup>175</sup>

In the version of this story that appeared in the work of Christoph Meiners, an Eighteenth-century German philosopher, the slave lights a pipe and begins to smoke it calmly as he watches his body burn. Meiners was less willing to attribute this to the nobility of the Negro or a sublime confrontation with death, instead arguing that blacks have skin so thick and nerves so coarse that they feel no pain at all.<sup>176</sup> As we will see in Chapter Three, Kant also responded to these types of stories by denying the moral significance of the courage of blacks who were publicly tortured to death. The story is completely reconfigured in Toni Morrison’s fictive account of a man who escaped from slavery but was recaptured and killed in this manner.

Long claimed in his *History of Jamaica* that black women experience no pain in childbirth. Rejecting the sublime of nobility, he resorted to animalistic imagery. “Their women are delivered with little or no labour,” Long wrote, “they have therefore no more vocation for midwives, than the female oran-outang, or any other wild animal.”<sup>177</sup> He goes further to establish the animality of blacks by claiming that black women mate with apes. Apart from his own vicious prejudices, this racist invective reveals the insecurity of British colonial rule at the time. There is a constant threat of insurrection and, even after the Maroon treaties were signed, a sense that the British retained their hold on the island only because the Maroons tolerated them. Thus there is a very active racist imagination

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<sup>175</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>176</sup> As cited in Jahoda, *Images of Savages*. 67.

<sup>177</sup> Long, *History of Jamaica* Vol. 2, 380.

that conjures up the danger of blacks on the attack both during and after the Maroon Wars.

To a great degree, the kind of war conducted by these ferocious people, who confronted death without the slightest fear, and whose women could “bring forth twins without a shriek, or a scream,” could only be imagined. Indeed, their methods of warfare *had* to be imagined, because the Maroons conducted the war with such stealth that no British soldier ever caught sight of them. Thicknesse attributed the success of these stealth tactics to the rugged terrain: “The mountains and that island are exceedingly steep and high, much broken, split and divided by earthquakes, and many parts inaccessible... if those people, ever stand their ground, it is upon such, as is almost inaccessible by white men, and the first notice of their attack, is a heavy fire, from invisible hands!”<sup>178</sup> Sent on an expedition against the windward Maroons, Thicknesse and his men were easily caught in an ambush set for them in the Spanish River Valley. The Maroon fighters were so well concealed from sight in the surrounding foliage that Thicknesse writes that they could hear and engage in conversations with the enemy, but the Maroons nevertheless remained unseen.<sup>179</sup>

Reluctant to concede the superiority of Maroon fighting tactics, the British ascribed this to nature rather than strategy. Long claimed that they “skulked about the skirts of remote plantations” under cover of night, and “seized the favorable opportunity, that darkness gave them.”<sup>180</sup> Of their continually shifting positions which enabled Maroons to evade the bullets of their enemies, Long expressed only contempt, saying that the Maroons “skip about like so many monkeys” and make “wild and warlike capers” of

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<sup>178</sup> Thicknesse, *Memoirs*, 56-58

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, 62

<sup>180</sup> Long, *History of Jamaica* Vol. 2, 341.

“savage fury.”<sup>181</sup> He concluded that their fighting methods were “horrid” and “dastardly.” Writing in the twentieth century, Historian Mavis C. Campbell calls these types of dismissive remarks into question and argues that they arise as much from a “frenzied hostility” to the Maroons as much as from the embarrassment of an empire brought to its knees by an enemy they consider to be uncivilized and poorly equipped. Campbell suggests, provocatively, that we might understand the Maroon war as “the first Vietnam.”<sup>182</sup> It was in the context of this type of guerilla war that Nanny rose to prominence in the British colonial imagination.

*b. The legend of Queen Nanny*

While more recent histories have noted the difficulty of separating myth from fact in order to identify the historical Nanny, my own view is that her legend constituted her as a historical figure insofar as British settlers and militias understood their own subjectivities and directed their activities against the person that they took her to be. From the point of view of professional historians, there are four basic sources that provide evidence of Nanny’s existence,. Firstly, there is an entry into the record of the Assembly of Jamaica on March 29 and 30, 1733, detailing the rewards offered to militiamen who fought against the Maroons. One of these men was listed as William Cufee, “a very good party Negro,” who was rewarded for “having killed Nanny, the rebels’ old obeah woman.” *Obeah* was a term that the British used to refer to the spiritual practices of the Maroons, which were based on African cosmologies. Among present-day Maroons, the term most commonly used in reference to these spiritual practices is that of

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<sup>181</sup> Ibid., 349.

<sup>182</sup> Campbell, *The Maroons of Jamaica*, 116.

“science.”<sup>183</sup> Although the British colonialists dismissed Obeah as “witchcraft,” they nevertheless took stringent measures to outlaw its practice on account of the centrality of African religious practices to the Maroon resistance. There was no distinction between Nanny as a spiritual leader and as a military strategist. For example, she was believed to have it in her power to catch the bullets of her enemies and spirit slaves away from plantations without detection. She was said to keep a bubbling cauldron in the vicinity of the mountain refuge of the Maroons, and any white man who ventured too close would fall into her cauldron and be lost forever.<sup>184</sup> She was also reported to be the mastermind behind the guerilla tactics that the Maroons used to wage war against the British. Uniting spiritual and physical resistance in her person, Nanny presented a major threat to British colonialism. Yet very few actual sightings of Nanny by British soldiers were recorded. It was this larger-than-life figure that Cuffee was reported to have killed.

The Assembly record of 1733 noted that the slaves who fought on behalf of the British received money for each Maroon captured or killed, as well as military-style clothing. “A common silver laced hat,” and “a good blue baize coat, with a red cross upon the breast” were to be awarded to them annually. Yet roughly one year later, in 1734 or 1735, a member of the windward Maroons who became a British informant reported that three white males had been captured and were taken to Nanny’s town, where she ordered them put to death.<sup>185</sup> Campbell attempts to explain these discrepancies by speculating that there may have been more than one historical Nanny, as women took many prominent leadership roles in Maroon communities at the time, and Nanny was a

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<sup>183</sup> Jenny Sharpe, *Ghosts of Slavery: A Literary Archaeology of Black Women's Lives* (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 3.

<sup>184</sup> Campbell, *The Maroons of Jamaica*, 51.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

fairly common appellation.<sup>186</sup> However, it is much more interesting, for the purposes of this study, to note that British officials were confronted with a dark, obscure figure, not unlike Milton's Satan, who was invulnerable to death even as she slaughtered the white men who fell into her hands. That the British had to *imagine* an explanation for Nanny's reappearance is more significant than any particular rationalization that they might have come up with at the time.

The third and most detailed portrait of Nanny, or a woman who closely resembles the legendary figure, comes from Thicknesse's own *Memoirs*. Thicknesse had arrived in Jamaica with the express purpose of taking up a commission as Lieutenant to a company of soldiers. His company received order to march upon the town of the windward Maroons, but found the outer ring of the settlement had been abandoned by the time they arrived. Following a trail that had been left deliberately by the Maroons, they found themselves caught in an ambush in the Spanish River valley, with armed Maroons concealed in the trees and bushes surrounding them. The British militia scattered in every direction, many were killed, and Thickness reports that he and a number of his men were fortunate to find refuge behind a rock. The cause of their terror was not imminent death, according to his *Memoirs*, but the prospect of being captured and delivered to Nanny:

Finding that we were fired upon from both sides, and apprehensive that the Negroes would have rushed in upon us, and taken us alive, alive, for that *only* was our fear, we would have compounded for immediate death; but we dreaded the sentence of death, and the executions of it, from the hands of that horrid wretch, their *Obea* woman.<sup>187</sup>

Although he managed to escape on this occasion, he received orders soon afterwards to march upon the steep mountain refuge of Nanny's people. This time, the British had in

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<sup>186</sup> Ibid.. The evidence of women's prominent role in Maroon history is in the names of the towns to which they bequeathed their identities: Molly's Town, Diana's Town, Nanny Town and so forth.

<sup>187</sup> Thicknesse, *Memoirs*, 77.

their possession a captured Maroon whom they asked to communicate their desire to reach a peace settlement. An exchange of emissaries was arranged and Thicknesse was chosen to remain as a hostage among the Maroon's while the terms of the peace treaty were concluded. The report of his stay among the windward Maroons constitutes the only "clear" portrait of Nanny (or a woman very like her) from a colonialist perspective.

By signaling his dread of Nanny early in the narrative and portraying an encounter with this obscure figure as a fate worse than death, Thicknesse sets Nanny up as a supremely sublime figure. His actual encounter with Nanny and other women in the community is every bit as terrifying as could be expected. Thicknesse claims that, during his stay with the Maroons, he saw the under jaw of a British soldier who had gone missing at Spanish River, now turned into an ornament on a horn (or *abeng*) that was used for communication among the Maroons. In a footnote to this narrative, Thickness explains how he made the positive identification: "the lairds teeth were so very particular that some of our men could have sworn to the identity of the jaw bone." In addition, he reports that the upper teeth of the men who had been killed in the ambush on Spanish River "were drilled thro' and worn as ankle and wrist bracelets by their *Obea women*, and some of the *ladies of the first fashion in town*."<sup>188</sup> Adorned with the remains of their enemies, exhibiting a cavalier attitude towards death, the Maroon women present a terrifying figure to the British. The most striking description, though, is reserved for Nanny:

The old Hagg, who passed a sentence of death upon this unfortunate man, had a girdle round her waste, with (I speak within compass) nine or ten different knives hanging in sheaths to it, many of which I have no doubt, had been plunged in human flesh and blood; the susceptible reader therefore can better conceive, than I

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<sup>188</sup>Ibid., 73 (emphasis in original).

can describe, what my feels [sic] were, who had so lately escaped from some of her horrid operations in the use of them.”<sup>189</sup>

Thicknesse suggests that even with the figure of Nanny before his very eyes, her form still remains shadowy and indescribable: he is incapable of completing this frightening portrait, and the reader must try to imagine the rest of it. The effects of obscurity, the craggy, steep, and narrow mountain pass by which Thicknesse ascended into Nanny’s presence, her association with pain and death, and Thicknesse’s frequent references to “those black people” as “wild Negroes” combine to render Nanny a sublime figure in the terrifying sense of the term proposed by Burke.

However, above all else, Thicknesse’s narrative is a self-portrait of his courage in the face of extreme danger, and a narrative of his personal triumph over an enemy who had bested the almighty British Empire. Embarrassed by widely circulating reports that British militias had turned tail when ambushed by the Maroons, Thicknesse used the pages of his memoirs to redeem his reputation. He intended that readers should come away with the idea that greater than Britain, greater even than Nanny of the Maroons, was Philip Thicknesse the colonial adventurer. “I never heard of any party, whether of militia, or regulars, that could stand against the ambushes of those people,” Thicknesse averred. At the same time his *Memoirs* are intended to communicate the he, Philip Thicknesse, withstood not only the ambushes, but also a face-to-face confrontation with Nanny.<sup>190</sup> If the sublime is defined, at its very limit, by a courageous confrontation with terror and death, Thicknesse appears as the most sublime figure of all. His narrative concludes with the signing of the peace treaty between the colonial government and the windward Maroons in 1740; in the fourth and final instance in which Nanny appears in

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<sup>189</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid., 64.

the colonial record, a grant of 500 acres of land is made by King George II “to a certain Negro woman called Nanny and the people residing with her.”<sup>191</sup> The war is over, at least for a moment.

In her history of the Maroons of Jamaica, Campbell notes that even though legend and history are inextricably intertwined “what is certain about Nanny is that she was a freedom fighter of the first order, reminiscent of the great African queen, Nzinga (c. 1580-1663), the death-defying ‘Black Terror’ who stoutly repulsed Portuguese rule in her country, Angola, and who was feared by them as “the greatest military strategists that ever confronted the armed forces of Portugal.””<sup>192</sup> She is a figure who readily calls to mind other black women in history who have resisted slavery and colonialism.

Constructing what she calls a “literary archeology of black women’s lives,” scholar Jenny Sharpe argues that narratives of these women’s lives intersect in meaningful ways:

“Although each woman was singular, she was not unique, and it is possible to trace a narrative path from each one to other, more anonymous slave women.”<sup>193</sup> The challenge in reclaiming Nanny for black women’s history is in representing her death-defying power in the interests of the liberation of her own people, rather than as the object against which the colonial adventurer constructs his own subjectivity. It is clear from the narratives written by Edwards, Long, and Thicknesse that descriptions of untamed territory and the black bodies that occupied those spaces did not begin on a blank page. Widely circulating ideas about savages and the “missing link” between human beings and apes embellished accounts of Jamaica that were presented as “scientific” surveys of the island, purporting to rely on sense experiences rather than myth or conjecture in the

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<sup>191</sup> Campbell, *The Maroons of Jamaica*, 175.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>193</sup> Sharpe, *Ghosts of Slavery*, xiii.

production of knowledge. That whole history must be upended to reclaim Nanny. It is also clear that while these historical and geographical narratives participated in the discourse of the sublime, they did not take the black female body or the landscape as *subjects* of the sublime. To see black women and the natural world as sublime subjects would have called for an ascription of an affective capacity to enslaved blacks and maroon communities in Jamaica, and the recognition of a purposiveness in nature that is irreducible to the economic interests of plantation owners.<sup>194</sup> Instead, Long and Thicknesse's accounts assumed that affective experience was the exclusive domain of white men, who could then use their surveys of sublime objects as an occasion for reflecting on their own subjectivity.

It is from an abyss of darkness, therefore, that black women exercised an immense terror on the British colonial imagination, and it is from these black holes that they must be reclaimed. Thicknesse's *Memoirs* do nothing to dispel the fog surrounding the figure of Nanny, instead intensifying the obscurity in which she was shrouded. Nanny can spring up anywhere at any time, and yet she does not appear clearly to anybody; least of all to Thicknesse, who, in his narration of the encounter with the "old Hagg," does not have the temerity to call Nanny by name. Yet the figure of Nanny shadows militiamen through the mountains and haunts their every step, giving rise to the term applied to Jamaica's mountainous territory: the "Land of Look Behind." In search of the "real" Nanny in the colonial archive, historians are left with an image of a black void that is nothing at all, and then it splits into two, three or four Nannys, gradually taking form in the lives of women across the African diaspora.

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<sup>194</sup> On the natural sublime, see Bonnie Mann, *Women's Liberation and the Sublime*.

The idea of “vacant spaces” in Burke’s *Enquiry* is therefore particularly engaging with regard to the figure of Nanny. It is worth noting that there is a presentiment of the “postmodern sublime” in Burke’s description of the vacuity of the black body, which, ironically, offers a possible way of countering Burke’s racial thinking. In *The Postmodern Condition*, Jean-François Lyotard uses Kantian aesthetics to describe artwork that “present[s] the fact that the unrepresentable exists.”<sup>195</sup> Modern art, he argues, puts forward an image of something that cannot actually be brought into view. For Lyotard, terror is not the unknown, but rather its extreme and dogmatic the opposite—the totalitarian claim that everything is sensible, knowable, and communicable, or that the “real” world we have before our eyes is everything that the world could ever be. The claim to total knowledge is a form of terror, in Lyotard’s view, because it closes the door to different ways of being, seeing, and acting, and denies that another world is possible.<sup>196</sup> The capacity to respect human difference and the possibility of change in Lyotard’s philosophy of the limit<sup>197</sup> therefore resides in what has been abjected, or the things that cannot be made to appear within the prevailing social order.<sup>198</sup>

The post-modern sublime (*avant la lettre*) in Burke’s *Enquiry*, where he puts forward the unrepresentable in his presentation of the black body, could therefore be seen as creating a space in which the colonial technologies that his work participates in might be dismantled or disrupted. The photographs by Cox work in this space of the

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<sup>195</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Transl. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 80.

<sup>196</sup> See also Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, (London and New York: Verso, 1989).

<sup>197</sup> The philosophy that is concerned with the question of what is knowable through human reason, as explained by Cornell in *The Philosophy of the Limit*.

<sup>198</sup> Thus Lyotard concludes: “It must be clear that it is our business not to supply reality but to invent allusions to the conceivable which cannot be presented....Let us wage a war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unrepresentable; let us activate the differences and save the honor of the name” (*The Postmodern Condition*, 81-82).

unrepresentable in order to recover the black female body in the figure of Queen Nanny of the Maroons. Cox takes the obscure character that appears in the historical archive and adds power to Nanny's haunting of the colonial text, using well-known images of the sublime to bring Nanny's courage and transcendence out of the void.

### III. Nanny's Return

Nanny's legend has been kept alive by the Maroon communities that have survived to the present day. Her name is invoked in various contexts of Jamaican life, from sacred to rituals to ordinary, every-day interactions. Historian Karla Gottlieb notes that "towns, rivers, birds, and a particular type of house are named after her; praise songs in her name are sung. Nanny Town, the historic place where she lived and served as a General of the Maroon army, is the most sacred place on Earth the Windward Maroons."<sup>199</sup> She is claimed not only by the Maroons, but also as a national hero in Jamaica: her image appears on the country's \$500 note.<sup>200</sup> Beyond Jamaica's shores, Nanny has been embraced by people of African descent in other parts of the Caribbean and elsewhere in the world.

Guyanese poet Grace Nichols writes of "The Return" of Nanny to mark the opening up of freedom for women of African descent in the New World. Her praise song for Nanny is included in a volume of poetry that traces the journey of black women across the ocean, recounting the pain of separation, the warm memories of lost kin, the struggle to hold onto dreams in a hostile climate, the backbreaking labor on cane plantations, the constant cruelty, the arrival of new slaves from Africa, the memory of the

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<sup>199</sup>Gottlieb, *The Mother of Us All*, xiv.

<sup>200</sup>*Ibid.*, 80. The poet Edward Kamau Brathwaite, who was born in Barbados and has lived in England, Ghana, Jamaica, and the United States, was instrumental in recovering Nanny from the colonialist history.

Middle Passage, the pain of childbirth, the terror of sexual violence, the prayers, the cries, the groans, and the joy of new love. In the midst of these varied snapshots of women's lives under slavery, Nichols searches for the figure of Nanny, stopping at two different points in the collection to ask, "Is that you Nanny?" Significantly, she represents Nanny's courage and sublimity in what have become, by now, very familiar terms:

Maroonic woman  
of courage  
and blue mountain rises

Standing over valleys  
Dressed in purple robes  
bracelets of your enemy's teeth  
curled around your ankles in rings of ivory bone  
.....

As you watch the hissing  
foaming cauldrons spelling strategies  
for the red oppressors' blood  
willing them to come  
mouthing a new beginning song

*Is that you Nanny—Is that you Nanny?*<sup>201</sup>

The closing query calls into question the representational devices that she appropriates from colonialist descriptions of Nanny. Can the colonial imagination, in the style of Thicknesse's *Memoirs*, really represent Nanny? At the same time, the appropriation of the rhetoric of the sublime *does* change the direction of the signs—teeth, bones, blood, and cauldrons—so that they now point towards liberation from the pain and oppression that Nanny and other women have so courageously borne. The continual querying of Nanny's identity also suggests that any of the women in Nichols' collection of poems might be Nanny, and those who lay claim to these legacies might also become Nanny.

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<sup>201</sup> Grace Nichols, "Nanny," in her *I is a Long Memored Woman*, (London: Karnak House, 1983), 72-73.

The appropriation and inversion of the discourse on the sublime, as well as the suggestion of a potentially infinite reincarnation of Nanny, is put forward just as strongly in the photographs of Renee Cox. In a recent interview, Cox explained her motivation in visualizing Nanny:

I discovered Queen Nanny, which was when I was going to school in Jamaica—because she’s a national hero. That was the first time I had heard of her, but it stuck. So for me, in my unconscious or double consciousness, she was always a figure there. But the thing is, a lot of these histories don’t get any credit because they weren’t written, or what was written was written by the colonizers. So you get a really skewed view of the history...

[F]or me the whole thing was about creating imagery of Nanny—taking artistic license, because there were no images of her to speak of. So what Nanny would have been in the past, and, more importantly, who would she be today.<sup>202</sup>

Cox’s photographs of Nanny, in which she uses her body to represent the historical figure, resonate with the power of the legend: Nanny’s spirituality, military strength, leadership, and symbiotic relationship with her environment are presented in a series of photographs taken in Jamaica in 2004. The mystic savagery in which Thicknesse had shrouded “their *Obea* woman”<sup>203</sup> is dispelled in order to allow Nanny to appear clearly before the viewer, and yet she is never fully captured in any one image or even in the series of her appearances. We see Nanny as a river goddess; as a supplicant who is blessed by the hand of another; as the mother of us all, surrounded by a group of children; Nanny as a teacher; Nanny as a military leader; Nanny as a lover with her companion on a riverbank, and so on. The series appears unfinished so long as there are women who can incarnate Nanny in their every-day lives, embodying the various aspects of the

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<sup>202</sup> Renée Cox interviewed by Nicole Plett, Rutgers University Inn, New Brunswick, NJ. 10/21/2008. Published online by the Rutgers University Libraries, [http://www.libraries.rutgers.edu/rul/exhibits/dana\\_womens\\_misc/Cox\\_interview\\_by\\_Plett\\_Oct\\_2008.pdf](http://www.libraries.rutgers.edu/rul/exhibits/dana_womens_misc/Cox_interview_by_Plett_Oct_2008.pdf) (accessed March 10, 2010).

<sup>203</sup> Thicknesse, *Memoirs*, 77.

courage and strength attributed to Nanny by Jamaicans, and particularly the Maroon communities who see themselves as continuing her proud legacy.<sup>204</sup>

In its visual effects, Cox's photographic series creates an illusion of the infinite and eternal reincarnation of Nanny. For Burke, the infinite is always sublime because it extends far beyond anything we can grasp with our senses.<sup>205</sup> The strength, courage, and endurance of Nanny are shown by her refusal to die in contemporary world, in the same way that she refused to die after being killed twice in the colonial record.<sup>206</sup>

Cox's photographs respond to colonial discourses of the sublime, taking clearly recognizable elements from the terrifying sublime of the eighteenth century and inverting them in order to change their signification. Rather than pointing towards the rapacious colonial adventurer whose interest is domination, she uses images of the sublime to point towards the recapture of the territory of a black woman's own body and her self-representation in defense of herself. The colonial sublime is not only refigured, it is also magnified and exaggerated in the photograph *Red Coat* (figure 1).<sup>207</sup> While Thicknesse spread dread among his readers by adorning Nanny with the bones of her victims, Cox gives us a still more powerful image of Nanny resplendent in the shiny uniform of her defeated enemy. The red coat she wears is complete with the gold braiding, gleaming buttons, and white cuffs that came to represent the power of the British Empire on the march.

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<sup>204</sup> See Gottlieb, *The Mother of Us All*.

<sup>205</sup> Burke, *Enquiry*, 105, 160.

<sup>206</sup> Campbell and other historians have tried to determine whether there was one or several historical Nannys, given her propensity to rise again after she was reported killed in battle. However, this question becomes immaterial in Cox's visionary landscape where Nanny's incarnations and the self-representation of black women of the twenty-first century coincide in a transcendence of death.

<sup>207</sup> For an analysis of black women's art that uses the technique of "exaggeration of exaggerated entertainments," see Michael D. Harris, *Colored Pictures: Race and Representation* (Chapel Hill; London: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 220.

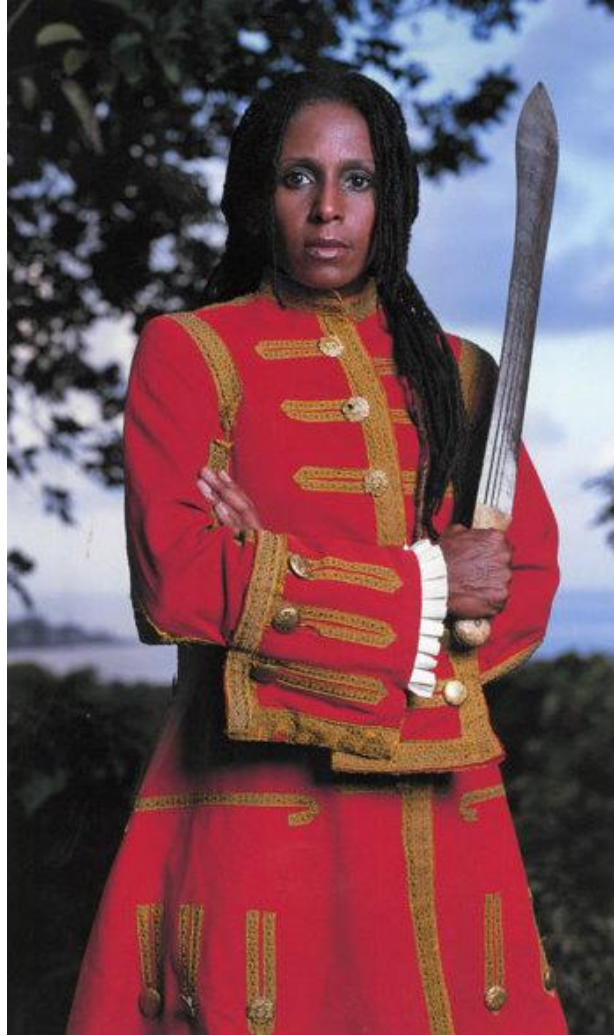


Figure 1. Renee Cox. *Red Coat*, 2004. Color photograph. ReneeCox.net. Web. 14 Apr. 2009

What did this twenty- first century Nanny do with the man that used to be inside that red coat? The element of dread is amplified by the missing body. Instead of the “nine or ten different knives” that Thickness claims to have seen hanging about Nanny’s waist,<sup>208</sup> Cox has a machete in hand with the edge of the blade pointed outward. Because the flat side of the blade is held against her body and her arms are crossed, it could be a sign of peace or harm, a readiness to strike or to embrace. This Nanny could be your liberator or your

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<sup>208</sup> Thicknesse, *Memoirs*, 77.

nemesis, and the multiple perspectives that are the signature of Cox's photographic style are in clear evidence in this image.<sup>209</sup>

In *Nanny Warrior* (figure 2) and *Ambush* (figure 3), we see elements of the wildness and animality that were thought to place maroons very close to nature, nature in turn offering them cover from the preying eyes of British militiamen. The use of black and white photography flattens the images into subtle variations of shadow and light and seamlessly blends the figure of Nanny into the background.



Figure 2. Renee Cox. *Nanny Warrior*, 2004. Black and white photograph. ReneeCox.net. Web. 14 Apr. 2009

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<sup>209</sup>Cox explained the circumstances under which this image was created and the strong sense of Nanny's presence as she tried to imagine herself as this legendary figure: "Well, this may sound a little bit weird, but I learned that her presence is still very much there. I'm not a cosmic person or anything. But I can say... I may sound a little bit like Shirley MacLaine. But at one point, there's one photograph that totally did not look like me. I'm wearing the Red Coat and I'm standing at Nanny Falls and I swear there is something going on there... in the photograph. You feel that presence there. It's strong, it's there – You know what I'm saying?" (Interview with Plett, 10/21/2008).



Figure 3. Renee Cox. *Ambush*, 2004. Black and white photograph. ReneeCox.net. Web. 14 Apr. 2009.

In *Ambush*, Cox literally *is* the bush, camouflaged in leaves and branches that conceal everything except a part of her face and a drawn machete held at the ready. She is virtually indistinguishable from the landscape, and yet prepared to strike out at any moment. The viewer has a sense of being hunted by the subject of the photograph because one of Nanny's eyes remains uncovered, returning an unflinching stare long after the spectator has turned away from the picture.

Cox represents not only the side of Nanny that would be familiar to anyone versed in the colonial archive, but also shows the dimensions of Nanny's leadership that make her a unifying cultural figure, connecting New World Africans to the past generations and

the continent of Africa. It is this life-giving spiritual, political, and cultural role that is referred to in Nanny's title as "the mother of us all."<sup>210</sup> In her spiritual and cultural role, Nanny's symbolism can be compared to that of Yemanji (also known as Yemaja or Yemoja), an *orisa* or goddess from Yoruba tradition who features prominently in spiritual practices of the African Diaspora from the Caribbean to Brazil and the United States.<sup>211</sup>

Grace Nichols pays homage to Yemanji in her poetry:

*Yemanji*  
 Mother of seas  
 Goddess of rivers  
 I will pay homage to you  
 You who bless your followers  
 with an abundance of children  
 you whose temple rests like a lotus  
 in Ibadan, you whose water flow down down  
 the River Ogun, past the cities of Abeokuta  
 and Oyo<sup>212</sup>

Here we see the waters of river and sea, already central to West African cosmologies, taking on even greater significance in New World belief systems that aim to make a connection to old familiar places. Hymns to a goddess of the water become most powerful when they also seek to honor the lost souls who passed into the water during the middle passage. This is the manner in which Michelle Cliff invokes the Yoruba goddess Oshun in her poem *I-tie-all-my-people-together*:

*Mo so awon enia mi po*

Oshun makes of her people one  
*Mo so awon enia mi po*

healer	destroyer of cruelty
mother	bringer of judgment

<sup>210</sup> See Gottlieb, *The Mother of Us All*, 67-79.

<sup>211</sup> See Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature, and the African World* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press), 1990.

<sup>212</sup> Nichols, "Yemanji," in her *I is A Long Memored Woman*, 65.

lover	excelling in tenderness
guardian	punishing foolishness

She lives at the bottom of the river  
*She greets the most important matter in the water*<sup>213</sup>

The multiple roles that Cliff assigns to Oshun can be compared to the incarnation of Nanny in widely differing forms in Cox's photographs.

Like Oshun and Yemanji, Nanny appears as a river goddess in Cox's photograph, *River Queen* (figure 4). Several elements of the photograph work to represent Nanny using the same imagery with which the poets pay homage to the goddesses. Nanny's face is positioned at the point where all lines from earth and sky meet, and the wide river seems to flow from underneath her skirts and out into the world. The rock she is perched on could be compared to the temple of Yemanji, which sits like a lotus upon a river. The title of the image, *River Queen*, is an allusion to the British monarch, who claimed the territory that Nanny now reclaims. But, above and beyond that, Nanny is deified in this image in a way that ties New World communities to the African continent. If Burke's sublime is read as a hymn of praise to a God from whom all wondrous things flow—as he intended it to be<sup>214</sup>—Cox's inversion of the sublime raises an equally powerful image of divinity, and one that proves, on the balance, to be infinitely more kind to the black female body.

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<sup>213</sup> Cliff, "I-tie-all-my-people-together," in her *The Land of Look Behind*, 117.

<sup>214</sup> Burke terms his work "a hymn of praise to god the creator," (*Enquiry*, 98).



Figure 4. Renee Cox. *River Queen*, 2004. Black and white photograph. ReneeCox.net. Web. 14 Apr. 2009

#### IV. Rethinking the colonial sublime in Burke

The perennial debates on Burke's political identity began within his lifetime, and it appears that an examination of his aesthetic theory deepens rather than resolves the contradictions in his work. His critical stance on colonialism did not, it seems, extend sympathy or the capacity for moral feeling to blacks, for they were deemed incapable of making aesthetic judgments. Whether (white) women can be considered members of

“society in general,” where the bonds of sympathy unite all human beings to relieve one other of suffering, is also questionable, for it is impossible to sympathize with a woman in distress. In her pain, she simply becomes a supremely beautiful object, unless her pain should cause her to have too many wrinkles and ruin her color. What is clear from the foregoing discussion is that the idea of the sublime in Burke cannot stand on its own as a bridge between a painful past and action that can be taken to relieve that pain. What is required is an intervention that re-humanizes the black body in the terms of Burke’s aesthetics, as Cox has done in her series on Queen Nanny.

## Chapter Three

### Dignity, Death and the Kantian Sublime

*Montesquieu is correct in his judgment that the weakheartedness that makes death so terrifying to the Indian or the Negro also makes him fear many things other than death that the European can withstand. The Negro slave from Guinea drowns himself if he is to be forced into slavery. The Indian women burn themselves. The Carib commits suicide at the slightest provocation. The Peruvian trembles in the face of an enemy, and when he is led to death, he is ambivalent, as though it means nothing. His awakened imagination, however, also makes him dare to do something, but the heat of the moment is soon past and timidity resumes its old place again...*

Immanuel Kant<sup>215</sup>

*The faded faces of the Negro children tell too plainly to what degradation female slaves submit. Rather than give her little daughter to that life, she killed it... With my own teeth I would tear open my veins and let the earth drink my blood, rather than to wear the chains of slavery. How could I blame her for wishing her own child to find freedom with God and the angels, where no chains are?*

Lucy Stone Blackwell<sup>216</sup>

*I took and put my babies where they'd be safe.*

Sethe, in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*<sup>217</sup>

How does one “choose” between slavery and death? Is it a moral dilemma, a legal dispute, or an aesthetic judgment? What circumstances forced those “choices” for enslaved African-American women, and what modes of moral reasoning did they use to make such difficult decisions? This chapter considers how aesthetic judgments of the sublime can frame and recast the moral and legal questions arising in the case of Margaret Garner, who freed herself and her children from slavery in the middle of the nineteenth century. Her manner of freeing her children—by putting a knife to their

<sup>215</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Physical Geography*, excerpted in Eze, ed., *Race and the Enlightenment*, 64.

<sup>216</sup> Cincinnati *Daily Gazette*, February 14, 1856. As cited by Julius Yanuck, “The Garner Fugitive Slave Case,” *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* (Now Journal of American Historians) XL, 1, (June 1953). Reprinted online by the Detroit Opera House,

[http://www.michiganopera.org/mg\\_ed/educational/Garner%20Slave%20Case.pdf](http://www.michiganopera.org/mg_ed/educational/Garner%20Slave%20Case.pdf)  
Feb 7, 2010.

<sup>217</sup> Morrison, *Beloved*, 193.

throats—was singular but not unique in the history of women’s resistance to New World slavery, and was analogous to other forms of self-emancipation that appeared in the colonized world.<sup>218</sup> Kant and other eighteenth-century European philosophers puzzled over the reported behavior of blacks facing their deaths: was the legendary calmness of those who were lynched or chose to kill themselves a testament to their great courage, or was it, instead, the mark of cowardice and simple-minded indifference to life? Did enslaved Africans who stared unflinchingly at death have a sublime sense of dignity, or did they just lack a consciousness of their worth as human beings (perhaps because they were not really human)?

The significance of human embodiment, violence, and death in Kant’s sublime can be explicated by considering his thoughts on slavery. In the margins of the text and on loose sheets of paper inserted between the pages of his *Observations*, Kant added several remarks on subjects pertaining to aesthetic judgment, including the following: “...every person must sense in himself that even if there were many discomforts that he might not want to cast off at the risk of his life, nevertheless, in the choice between slavery and the risk of death one will have...no reservations in preferring the latter.”<sup>219</sup> In his text, such striving toward freedom against all odds is described using the language of the sublime. Yet if we pay attention to his *Physical Geography*, as quoted in the epigraph above, we know that Negroes, Indian women, Peruvians, and Caribs are exempted from such considerations. It is not for the sake of freedom that they choose death, according to Kant, but as a result of their timidity and inability to face up to tough conditions in life.

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<sup>218</sup> The idea of particularity within commonality is taken from Sharpe, *Ghosts of Slavery*, xiii.

<sup>219</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Kant’s Remarks on the Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, transl. Matt Cooley and Patrick Frierson. {72, sheet inserted after Ob 52, front side, at 2:230} [http://people.whitman.edu/~frierspr/kants\\_bemerkungen2.htm](http://people.whitman.edu/~frierspr/kants_bemerkungen2.htm) (accessed February 10, 2010).

Clearly, what is missing from the Kantian sublime is not a consideration of the body, as some feminist thinkers have suggested<sup>220</sup>; nor does Kant neglect the experience of suffering and death. What he excludes, rather, is certain *types* of bodies, which are not admitted to the experience of the sublime. This chapter argues that a closer examination of the criteria for inclusion and exclusion will reveal that there is an anthropology and physiology that underpins Kant's aesthetics, invalidating his claims regarding the autonomy of the aesthetic. In the final analysis, the approximation of people of different sexes and national origins to a European male-defined humanity becomes the most important factor determining whether they can be seen as sublime and make judgments of the sublime.

Kant's work is riddled, therefore, with the contradictions of Enlightenment thinking that make the idea of the aesthetic both a refuge and a graveyard for the black female body. It becomes a graveyard particularly in the way that the humanity of blacks is never taken as self-evident, but is always a question for scientific investigation. The manner in which blacks face death thus appears as just another datum in the quest for scientific knowledge on human difference, which is then used as the basis for moral and aesthetic judgments. Toni Morrison's novel, *Beloved*, intervenes retrospectively against that scientific enterprise by raising up the voices of those whose human and animal characteristics were endlessly disputed by philosophers. Her creative retelling of Garner's story departs from the historical events in order to bring to the surface what could not be seen or heard in the legal drama that first brought national attention to

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<sup>220</sup> See Robin M. Schott, "Kant's Treatment of Sensibility," in *New Essays on Kant*, ed. Bernard den Ouden and Marcia Moen (New York: Peter Lang, 1987).

Garner's case in 1856. Situating *Beloved* in relation to legacies of Enlightenment

thought, Paul Gilroy notes:

The desire to return to slavery and to explore it in imaginative writing has offered Morrison and a number of other contemporary black writers a means to restage confrontations between rational, scientific, and enlightened Euro-American thought and the supposedly primitive outlook of prehistorical, cultureless, and bestial African slaves.<sup>221</sup>

The novel certainly puts forward a counter-narrative, as Gilroy suggests, but it also represents those worldviews that were sidelined and maligned in the making of the modern world. Morrison gives us a glimpse into the souls of black women—souls made flesh and returned from the dead, as well as the heartbreaking moral dilemmas that were particular to women's experiences of motherhood and reproduction in the shadow of slavery. The discussion below attempts to make clear how those womens' worlds become visible within the slave sublime, discussing the implications of such a reading of the novel for aesthetics and moral theory.

Morrison's retelling of the story of a woman who confronted racial terror with courage, a courage that moved her to the point of killing her child, reveals not indifference to the "incomparable worth" of humanity but a supreme commitment to uphold dignity in dehumanizing circumstances. For Kant, the commitment to fight for one's rights and the rights of others even unto the death is sublime, and yet he would not have granted a judgment of the sublime in Garner's case because various racial and gendered exclusions limited his vision. This suggests that a feminist reading of the Kantian sublime must be both critical of his exclusionary body politics and hopeful about the future of dignity, which calls us to see beyond Kant's own restrictions. In other words, this chapter thinks against Kant in order to think with him.

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<sup>221</sup> Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 220.

But do questions of dignity in ethics and aesthetics slip so readily into each other? After all, Kant is famous for separating dissimilar types of questions and placing an unbridgeable gap between them. And can race and gender exclusions be expunged so easily from Kant's sublime? The discussion below proceeds in four parts to explicate the link between aesthetics and moral ideas in Kant and outline the possibility of critically appropriating his approach for a reading of the slave sublime. The first section locates Kant's aesthetics within his broader critical project in order to show how the *Critique of Judgment* connects the various parts of his philosophical system. I go in search of the fleshy body in his writings and explain the significance that Kant attaches to race and gender differences. Moving on to the legal drama surrounding the historical Margaret Garner, the section that follows analyzes news reports from the case in order to show how ethical questions, aesthetic representations, and legal considerations intersected to determine the fate of Garner and other fugitive slaves. Ideas from Kant's "Analytic of the Sublime" are applied in order to make sense of the unsuccessful struggle by abolitionists to represent Garner's moral agency and personhood in the public discourse. Finally, in the last section of the chapter, I show how Morrison's novel recasts the historical debates, allowing the moral dilemmas that were buried by abolitionist rhetoric to rise to the surface. I argue that her depiction of women's journeys to self-possession radicalizes the Kantian idea of dignity by representing the black female body sublime; as well, *Beloved* transforms our understanding of the connection between ethics and aesthetics, body and soul in the context of the struggle to free oneself from violence.

## I. Aesthetic judgment in the context of Kant's transcendental philosophy

### a. Reason and the Imagination

For Kant, the delight in the beautiful and the sublime proceeds from the mere presentation of an object in the imagination. Aesthetic judgment is not concerned with determining *what* an object is or what it is good for, and thus affords delight in the object while producing no knowledge of it. The inconsequentiality of judgments of the beautiful and the sublime becomes, ironically, their great strength in holding together the various parts of Kant's transcendental philosophy. I will offer a brief overview of Kant's theory of human cognition because it is highly relevant to feminist critiques of his "Analytic of the Sublime" and suggests the connection I will be making between the sublime and moral ideas of freedom and dignity.

Transcendental philosophy is concerned with finding the (*a priori*) conditions of knowledge and judgment that are both universal and necessary. Kant's critical philosophy can be summarized in three non-interchangeable questions: What can I know? What should I do? What can I hope for?<sup>222</sup> In the first *Critique*, the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant reorients Western philosophy by proposing that the object of knowledge is shaped by the transcendental imagination. He identifies the *a priori* conditions of the possibility of any experience of an object—what he calls the transcendental categories of apperception—as space and time. All phenomena intuited through the senses and presented in the imagination appear to the observer as located somewhere in space and at some point in time, otherwise they could not be thought at all. Cognition of objects (always taken as phenomena/appearances rather than the thing-in-itself) requires more

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<sup>222</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, transl. and ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 677.

than intuition, however, for these presentations in the imagination must be organized by theoretical concepts into a synthetic unity of what would otherwise appear as bits and pieces of disconnected experiences.<sup>223</sup> *What* a thing is (rather, what it appears to be) can be determined only by bringing it under a concept that unifies the multiplicity of appearances: this tulip that now appears red, now pink, now yellow, is made recognizable by the concept of a tulip.

A statement that “this tulip is beautiful,” on the other hand, cannot tell you that it is a tulip. Aesthetic judgment does not involve the cognition of this object as an instance of the general concept of a tulip. *This* tulip is beautiful because it is singularly and immediately pleasing with no reference at all to any concept or need to determine what caused the pleasure. Nor does the judgment that this tulip is beautiful tell us what it is *good for*, because here we are not concerned with teleology—aesthetic judgments are not related to a notion of an end. They are based on the mere presentation of the object in the imagination, and have to do with the pleasure that accompanies this presentation.

However, judgments of the beautiful and sublime *do* go beyond statements concerning the sensation of pleasure or pain in one respect; added onto this is the demand that everyone else agree with this judgment. It is precisely this universality and necessity of aesthetic judgment that constitutes the puzzle Kant is trying to solve in the third *Critique*. He starts by explaining what an aesthetic judgment is *not* in order to arrive at the poetic attitude he is looking for:

[I]n the transcendental aesthetic of judgment there must be no question of anything but pure aesthetic judgments. Consequently examples are not to be selected from such beautiful or sublime objects as presuppose the concept of an end. For then the purposiveness would be either teleological, or based upon mere sensations of an object (gratification or pain) and so, in the first case, not

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<sup>223</sup> Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 256-257.

aesthetic, and, in the second, not merely formal. So if we must call the starry heavens *sublime*, we must not found our judgment of it upon any concepts of worlds inhabited by rational beings.... Similarly, as to the prospect of the ocean, we are not to regard it as we, with our minds stored with knowledge on a variety of matters (which, however, is not contained in the immediate intuition), are accustomed to represent it as *thought*, as, let us say, a spacious realm of aquatic creatures, or as the mighty reservoirs from which are drawn to the vapours that fill the air with clouds of moisture for the good of the land.... Instead of this we must be able to see sublimity in the ocean, regarding it, as the poets do, according to what the impression upon the eye reveals.... The same is to be said of the sublime and beautiful in the human form.<sup>224</sup>

Aesthetic judgments concerning human subjects are therefore to have no recourse to medical sciences—the particular functions of various limbs and organs and the ways in which the body parts fit together. It is clear, already, that Kant is proceeding in a different direction from Burke. Indeed, he considered Burke’s *Enquiry* to be a valuable text in empirical anthropology, but completely inadequate as a theory of aesthetic judgment.<sup>225</sup>

Some of Kant’s basic assertions also prove to be inadequate in certain respects for his own purposes in the third *Critique*. Taking the presentation of the object in the imagination as the basis for aesthetic judgments works perfectly well in relation to the beautiful, but it immediately presents a problem with regard to the sublime. The distinguishing feature of the sublime, according to Kant, is that it arises *beyond* the limits of the imagination, at the point where the imagination collapses under the assault of intuitions too large to be comprehended as a whole. Take Kant’s example of a visitor to St. Peter’s in Rome: the first feeling upon entering the basilica is one of “bewilderment” and “perplexity” because the visitor cannot take in everything at once in order to gain an impression of the whole in a single image. The observer is surprised, however, to

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<sup>224</sup> Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 100.

<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

discover an alternative source of pleasure in resisting the limits of the imagination. Kant explains the progression of these sensations: “[A] feeling comes home to him of the inadequacy of his imagination for presenting the idea of the whole within which that imagination attains its maximum, and, in its fruitless efforts to extend this limit, recoils upon itself, but in so doing succumbs to an emotional delight.”<sup>226</sup> The recoil that Kant speaks of is a throwing back upon a faculty of the human mind that “transcends every standard of the senses” in order to form a complete picture of something that could never be completely comprehended. This supersensible faculty is the “voice of reason,” coming to the rescue when imagination fails.<sup>227</sup>

Because the sublime relies on reason, in the final analysis, rather than the senses, we arrive at Kant’s famous claim that “true sublimity must be sought only in the mind of the judging subject, and not in the object of nature that occasions this disposition by the judgment formed of it.”<sup>228</sup> To attribute sublimity to the object, as Burke does, is to engage in a form of “subreption,” where the faculty of reason that gives humanity its dignity and freedom is projected onto an object, before which the subject then bows down.<sup>229</sup> The implication of Kant’s move against subreption is that a judgment of the sublime does not even require a sensible object. By this point, it should be clear that “we have no interest whatever in the object, i.e. its real existence may be a matter of no concern to us.”<sup>230</sup>

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<sup>226</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>227</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>230</sup> Ibid., 80. The question of what happens to the fleshy body when “we” are disinterested in objects and have made sense experience irrelevant has been taken up by many feminist philosophers, as discussed in Chapter One. I will argue, however, that Kant’s aesthetic disinterestedness and distance from the body is not quite borne out in other aspects of his argument— and certainly not in his early writings on the beautiful and the sublime.

Having established the primacy of reason over sensibility in judgments of the sublime, Kant offers an important qualification: reason acts not independently but *through* the imagination that had previously failed in order to make a successful presentation of its own ideas. He acknowledges a logical contradiction in this statement, because it goes against his general rule that ideas are, by definition, unrepresentable.<sup>231</sup> The first *Critique* had made a very persuasive argument for keeping ideas distinct from their possible manifestations in the world, especially where moral reasoning is concerned. “With respect to moral laws,” he wrote, “experience is (alas!) the mother of illusion, and it is most reprehensible to derive laws concerning what I **ought to do** from what **is done**, or to want to limit it to that.”<sup>232</sup> If moral ideas of freedom were thought to be fully presented in any existing human relations, the regulative role of morality would be entirely dispensed with, the notion of progress towards freedom would collapse, and ethical ideals would be always already exhausted. The third *Critique* therefore appears for a moment as a dangerous reversal of the strict separation that Kant had placed between real and ideal.<sup>233</sup>

The reassurance is that this philosophical muddling is entirely intentional on Kant’s part, for he is looking for a way to unite the two distinct realms of cognition that were mapped out in the first two *Critiques*. Kant explains the task of the *Critique of Judgment* as follows:

B]etween the realm of the natural concept, as the sensible, and the realm of the concept of freedom, as the supersensible, there is a great gulf fixed, so that it is not possible to pass from the former to the latter (by means of the theoretical to employment of reason), just as if there were so many separate worlds, the first of

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<sup>231</sup> Ibid., 99

<sup>232</sup> Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 398 (emphasis in original).

<sup>233</sup> For Kant’s ambivalence on the imagination and the shifts in his thinking from the first to the third *Critique*, see Drucilla Cornell, *Moral Images of Freedom*, 30-36.

which is powerless to exercise influence on the second: still the latter is meant to influence the former—that is to say, the concept of freedom is meant to actualize in the sensible world the end proposed by its laws; and nature must consequently also be capable of being regarded in such a way that in the conformity to law of its form it at least harmonizes with the possibility of the ends to be effectuated in it according to the laws of freedom.—There must, therefore, be a ground of the *unity* of the supersensible that lies at the basis of nature, with what the concept of freedom contains in a practical way...<sup>234</sup>

The role of aesthetics, therefore, is that it “renders possible the transition from the mode of thought according to the principles of the one to that according to the principles of the other.”<sup>235</sup> In this transition, aesthetic judgment remains merely reflective and is not “tainted” by judgments of understanding or concepts of reason. But if the aesthetic remains “disinterested” as to ends and independent from concepts, how does Kant make possible the transition from the sublime to some of the ethical questions that were posed at the beginning of this chapter?

*b. The Kantian sublime and moral reasoning*

The terms that Kant uses most frequently to explain the link between aesthetics and ethics are “harmony,” “agreement,” “conformity,” “accord,” or simply “reference.” The terminology has an almost musical quality to it, and indicates the lack of force or coercion. All associations between the sublime and moral law are consensual and indeterminate, with each working analogously but without a causal link to the other. Aesthetic feeling refers to concepts of the understanding in making judgments of the beautiful, without the object being determined thereby; with judgments of the sublime, the nondetermining referents are practical ideas of reason, which “induce a disposition of the mind conformable to that which the influence of definite (practical) ideas would [but

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<sup>234</sup> Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 11-12.

<sup>235</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

do not actually] produce upon feeling, and in common accord with it.”<sup>236</sup> From a historical perspective, this free conformity between the sublime and moral law could be read as Kant’s version of the eighteenth-century quest to dress up coercion as consent via the aesthetic: I am acting in obedience to the law, but there is no need for force because I am doing so entirely at my pleasure. Kant is very careful, however, to sidestep the aestheticization of moral law. The most that the beautiful and the sublime can do is *dispose* us to approach moral questions in a particular way; what one ought to do is ultimately a question for moral reason, which makes no consideration of subjective interests, pleasures, or desires. The role of the aesthetic is explained as a sort of purposiveness purposelessness: the purposiveness lies in the manner in which it disposes us to make purposeless, disinterested judgments. “The beautiful prepares us to love something, even nature, apart from any interest: the sublime to esteem something highly even in opposition to our (sensuous) interest.”<sup>237</sup> In an alternative expression, Kant speaks of the sublime as “broadening the mind” by moving beyond the limits of sensibility and the imagination, a move that empowers practical reason indirectly by creating a broadened capacity for moral reasoning.<sup>238</sup>

This cautious manner of proceeding reflects a certain ambivalence in Kant regarding the place of feelings and passions in moral reasoning. Kant has nothing favorable to say about those philosophers who import “enthusiastic” sentiments into the serious business of determining one’s duties: “Not only novelists and sentimental educators...but sometimes even philosophers—and even the most austere of all—the Stoics—have ushered in *moral enthusiasm* instead of a sober but wise moral

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<sup>236</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid., 85.

discipline,”<sup>239</sup> Kant complains in his *Critique of Practical Reason*. The moment people begin to determine what they ought to do by what feels good, morality becomes a farce. Although Burke is not singled out for criticism, the claim that sympathy offers a direct path from sublime feeling to moral sentiment is taken to pieces in Kant’s various writings on aesthetics and moral philosophy. In the *Observations*, published in 1763, Kant wrote what could be read as a direct attack on a passage concerning Marie Antoinette’s troubles that would appear in Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* thirty years later.<sup>240</sup>

With uncanny precision, Kant wrote:

Upon a closer consideration one finds that as amiable as the compassionate quality [of sympathy] might be, it still does not have the dignity of a virtue. A suffering child, an unfortunate though upright lady will fill our heart with this sadness, while at the same time we hear with indifference the news of a terrible battle in which, obviously, a considerable number of the human species must suffer undeservedly under horrible evil. Many a prince who has averted his face from sadness for a single unfortunate person has at the same time, and often from a vain motive, given the command to make war. Here there is no proportion in the results; how then can anyone say that the universal love of man is the cause?<sup>241</sup>

What sympathy lacks, according to Kant, is a regard for justice in relation to one’s total duty, and a respect for humanity in every person rather than obsequiousness to the dazzling few. Justice demands a great deal more than a particular response to a particular individual for whom one feels compassion.

For Kant, the only thing that can be called good without limitation is the good will.<sup>242</sup> Beginning in his *Observations*, he starts to outline the aesthetic dimension of

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<sup>239</sup> Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 209.

<sup>240</sup> Burke wrote: “I hear, and I rejoice to hear, that the great lady, the other object of the triumph, has borne that day (one is interested that beings made for suffering should suffer well) and that she bears all the succeeding days, that she bears the imprisonment of her husband, and her own captivity, and the exile of her friends, and the insulting adulation of addresses, and the whole weight of her accumulated wrongs, with a serene patience, in a manner suited to her rank and race...” (*Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 75).

<sup>241</sup> Kant, *Observations*, 59fn.

<sup>242</sup> Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 49.

virtuous actions, which are regarded as noble and sublime. “[T]rue virtue,” he argues, “can be grafted only upon principles such that the more general they are, the more sublime and noble it becomes.”<sup>243</sup> The following passage from the *Critique of Practical Reason* provides a further elaboration on his *Observations*:

Duty! Sublime and mighty name that embraces nothing charming or insinuating but requires submission, and yet does not seek to move the will by threatening anything that would arouse natural aversion or terror in the mind but only holds forth a law that of itself finds entry into the mind and yet gains reluctant reverence (though not always obedience), a law before which all inclinations are dumb, even though they secretly work against it...<sup>244</sup>

Duty is sublime because it throws us back on reason in order to present to the imagination an ideal of “humanity” that we cannot grasp with our senses. When we subordinate our actions to the principle of universal affection for this ideal humanity, our actions are both virtuous and sublime.

It is not a warm feeling that one has for humanity, but a stern and cooler regard for one’s duty to treat others always as an end and never merely as a means (the categorical imperative).<sup>245</sup> “[T]hese Principles are not speculative rules,” Kant insists, “but the consciousness of a feeling that lives in every human breast and extends itself much further than over the particular grounds of compassion and complaisance. I believe that I sum it all up when I say that it is the *feeling of the beauty and the dignity of human nature*.”<sup>246</sup> In other words, duty requires respect for the incomparable worth of each

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<sup>243</sup> Kant, *Observations*, 60 (emphasis in original).

<sup>244</sup> Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 209.

<sup>245</sup> Kant, *Observations*, 58; *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 82-83. Note, however, that although cooler, this does not make the moral law devoid of all feeling when judged aesthetically (*Critique of Judgment*, 104).

<sup>246</sup> Kant, *Observations*, 60 (emphasis in original).

person that places him or her beyond price or exchange value. For Kant, this is what constitutes our humanity.<sup>247</sup>

The idea of humanity offers us one of the best illustrations of what Kant calls the mathematical sublime. Even though individual human beings can be apprehended one by one in a sequence—through a census, for example—the Kantian sublime, considered mathematically, responds to the inadequacy of the imagination in comprehending humanity as a totality. There is an imaginative impossibility (whose mind can form a picture of 6 billion people?) and a logical impossibility (humanity is in fact an infinite series that could never be captured by the most inclusive census) of comprehending the *whole* of humanity. Kant does not think we should despair, though. Reason intervenes to present the idea of humanity in its totality through the expanded imagination.

Kant recognized, however, that few people are virtuous enough to act always in accordance with duty and with respect for our common humanity. In the *Observations*, he hypothesized that it is for this reason that nature introduces other drives that enable us to conform to the moral law where we find ourselves indisposed to act on principle. This is where sympathy comes in, for although sympathy is based on feeling rather than principle and is therefore lacking in sublimity, it is nevertheless valued for its beauty. Sympathy belongs to a class of pseudo-virtues that he calls “adoptive virtue”—the virtues that are produced by the hand of providence to compensate for human weaknesses. Adoptive virtues are based on beautiful, charming feelings that move us to act in response to pleasure, producing actions that accord with the moral law by happy

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<sup>247</sup> Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 79-85.

accident.<sup>248</sup> This distinction between true virtue and its approximations later becomes the all-important division between men and women's forms of moral reasoning.

At yet one more degree of remove from true virtue, we find the gloss of sublimity and nothing at all of its substance. Revenge, for example, may appear sublime on account of the boldness that accompanies vengeful actions, but it lacks both the nobility of a moral foundation and the beauty of complaisance, and thus can only shine with the *gloss* of sublimity. At the bottom of the moral scale, then, are those actions that arise from "ambition" and excessive regard for the opinions of others—it is these that Kant denotes as bearing only the gloss of virtue and sublimity. As we will see, these types of actions are purported to be characteristic of people of color.

Given the variability of judgments of the beautiful and sublime, some of them genuine and some not, how can any one person's judgment be taken as necessary for everyone else? In the case of the sublime, Kant believes the necessity and universality of these judgments to have already been demonstrated by definition. If the sublime involves a consciousness of human dignity and moral freedom, it returns us to the very basis of moral law and gains its universal validity thereby. Does this mean that every single person looking at a pile of mountains thrusting toward the sky will spontaneously be filled with the feeling of the sublime? Not at all, but we can make an indeterminate reference to the moral law in order to show that this judgment is necessary for everyone:

[T]here is absolutely no authority for my presupposing that others will pay attention to this, and take a delight in beholding the uncouth dimensions of nature (one that in truth cannot be ascribed to the sight of it, which is terrifying rather than otherwise). Nevertheless, having regard to the fact that attention ought to be paid upon every appropriate occasion to this moral predisposition, we may still

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<sup>248</sup> Kant, *Observations*, 61.

demand that delight from everyone; but we can do so only through the moral law, which, in its turn, rests upon concepts of reason.<sup>249</sup>

In the case of the beautiful, however, other considerations come into play. Without recourse to moral law or concepts of the understanding, Kant proposes the *sensus communis*. This is an implicitly political idea that refers to a “public sense, i.e. a faculty of judging which in its reflective act takes account (a priori) of the mode of representation of everyone else, in order, as it were, to weigh its judgment with the collective reason of mankind...”<sup>250</sup> Without waiting to see how other people would judge a particular object, an observer can declare that object beautiful by thinking from the standpoint of everyone else. However, a political reading of the *sensus communis* begs the question of the power of surveillance and representational privilege in aesthetic judgment. The problems of exclusion that are inherent in Kant’s aesthetic theory would thus need to be placed at the center of a political interpretation of the *sensus communis*. It remains to be considered, then, how race and gender structure Kantian aesthetics and how the body itself comes to matter for the Kantian sublime.

## II. The body politics of Kant’s aesthetics

### a. *The dynamical sublime*

In the same way that the mathematical consideration of the sublime demonstrated the power of reason to move beyond the limits of the imagination, so the dynamical sublime reveals that same power at work in overcoming the limits of our physical capacity to withstand assault. Kant’s discussion of the dynamical sublime in nature begins with power and violence. The “might” of nature is described as its power to

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<sup>249</sup> Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 122.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid., 123.

annihilate a human being, but this might is not greater than the human power of resistance against it. The violent destructiveness of storms, volcanoes, hurricanes and the like may threaten the body but these natural phenomena do not become objects of fear if one is disposed to resist their power through ideas of reason:

...the irresistibility of the might of nature forces upon us the recognition of our physical helplessness as beings of nature, but at the same time reveals a faculty of judging ourselves as independent of nature, and discovers a pre-eminence above nature that is the foundation of a self-preservation of quite another kind from that which may be assailed and brought into danger by external nature.<sup>251</sup>

One pre-eminent idea that empowers human beings to resist violence is the idea of the immortality of the soul. Once again, Kant emphasizes that what is judged sublime is not the natural phenomenon that endangers a human life but humanity's independence from it. What is to be resisted is located both internally, in our fear of mortality, and externally, in a harsh landscape and extreme weather patterns. Understood dynamically, therefore, the feeling for the sublime is what "saves humanity in our own person from humiliation, even though as human beings we would have to submit to external violence."<sup>252</sup>

Unlike Burke, who took the body as the sole determinant of aesthetic feeling, Kant's sublime addresses primarily that part of humanity that is not extinguished even when the body is overwhelmed. It is important to note, however, that the violent phenomenon in nature remains a "fearful" object nonetheless. An object is fearful when we can imagine that all resistance against it would be futile, even though we may not choose to put up a resistance against that particular force. Alternatively, being safe from a confrontation with the fearful object at a particular moment does not erase the

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<sup>251</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid., 92.

consciousness of the *potential* of that object to do harm. An example of the first situation would be the fear of God in a righteous person, who recognizes the futility of resisting God's law even though he does not actually wish to go against it. The second situation, where one gazes upon a fearful object from a position of safety, has given rise to what I consider to be a misreading of Kant's dynamical sublime. Kant states that "One who is in a state of fear can no more play a part of a judge of the sublime of nature than one captivated by inclination and appetite can of the beautiful. He flees from the sight of an object filling him with dread; and it is impossible to take delight in terror that is seriously entertained."<sup>253</sup> This has been read as a categorical statement that *physical* distance and bodily safety are requisite for aesthetic judgments of the sublime; that the danger has to be merely imaginary or, if real, posing a threat to somebody else who can be observed from a distance.<sup>254</sup> This is certainly the case in Burke's version of the sublime,<sup>255</sup> but it is not Kant's own position. According to Kant, the feeling of the sublime can arise in a morally upright person who draws near to God while recognizing the power of God to strike down anybody at any moment; the righteous man recognizes that being in the presence of God "need cause *him* no anxiety."<sup>256</sup> The danger is not objectively removed but subjectively transcended through moral resistance or, in this case, moral rectitude. Similarly, the person who is forced to submit to external violence can nevertheless experience a feeling of self-esteem and elevation in moral ideas of freedom, dignity, and

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<sup>253</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>254</sup> Kirwan, for example, argues that the object of fear is only in *thought*, and that "the resistance, and therefore the courage, is entirely hypothetical" (*Sublimity*, 55). The argument in this chapter suggests that this interpretation of Kant is not supported by a closer reading.

<sup>255</sup> Burke states: "When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful, as we every day experience" (*Enquiry*, op. cit., 86). Having said this, though, Burke is very clear that distance from that site of suffering is not the *cause* of the feeling of the sublime, it is simply a prerequisite (*Enquiry*, op. cit., 94).

<sup>256</sup> Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 91 (emphasis in original).

the immortality of the soul. Yes, safety is a necessary condition for judgments of the sublime in Kant, but no, safety does not require physical distance from danger. It is moral safety that concerns Kant—the sense that although one is determined externally as a creature of nature, the will remains undetermined and free and the soul is immortal. This is what leads Kant to declare that accepting danger in the struggle for one’s rights or the rights of others is sublime—sublime because it discloses the human capacity to confront an objectively fearful phenomenon without subjectively giving in to that fear.<sup>257</sup> If this seems incredibly abstract, it is worth remembering Martin Luther King Jr’s *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, where he gives us the words of an African-American women who lived this “abstraction”: “My feets is tired,” she said, “but my soul is at rest.”<sup>258</sup>

*b. Kant’s physiology of dispositions*

The liberatory potential of the dynamical sublime is dissipated, however, by various gendered and racialized structures of exclusion. As already hinted at in the foregoing discussion, Kant places great emphasis on the *disposition* to make judgments of the sublime. While “disposition” primarily refers to one’s receptivity to intuition and the mental expansiveness to admit ideas of reason into the imagination, it quickly becomes associated with certain gender and national characteristics. Kant considers the power of aesthetic judgment to be inborn—embedded in the faculties of the human mind, but at the same time he sees it as a product of cultivation through culture and education. This introduces certain questions regarding those whose humanity is still being debated in the eighteenth century, as well as those whose culture or education is deemed inferior for

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<sup>257</sup> Kant, *Observations*, 57.

<sup>258</sup> See epigraph to Chapter One above.

whatever reason. It is in his discussion of aesthetic dispositions that we find the structures of “deep race” and “deep gender” that Korsmeyer and Mann referred to in their critiques of Kant.

The *Observations* sets up a hierarchy of taste, or approximations to the sublime, along with corresponding moral characters and physiological types. As previously explained, virtues can be either true virtues, adoptive virtues, or merely have the gloss of virtue. Among those who are truly virtuous, sensations are ordered under principles of reason, and this gives the virtuous man a stronger feeling for the sublime than the beautiful. Mapped onto the humors that European physicians borrowed from ancient Greek thought, Kant finds that the feeling for the sublime is most common in those who have the melancholic humor. The warm feelings of sympathy and complaisance, which are beautiful, harmonize with a sanguine humor. Those who seek honor in the opinions of others and are constantly involved in chivalrous and vengeful actions are most often choleric, while those whose feeling for the beautiful and sublime is so trifling that they totally lack virtue are phlegmatic.

All this might appear as nothing more than a mildly humorous medievalism in Kant, except that he uses it to comment on political issues of the day. The description of the melancholy man gives us an insight into Kant’s republicanism and shows his readiness to condemn slavery, at least in theory:

[The melancholy man] has a high feeling of the dignity of human nature. He values himself and regards a human being as a creature who merits respect. He suffers no depraved submissiveness, and breathes freedom in a noble breast. All chains, from the gilded ones worn at court to the heavy irons of galley slaves, are abominable to him.<sup>259</sup>

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<sup>259</sup> Kant, *Observations*, 66.

A choleric humor, on the other hand, reveals the character of the monarchist: “In insults he falls back upon duels or lawsuits, and in civic relations upon ancestry, precedence, and title.”<sup>260</sup> The choleric is therefore devoid of all true virtue and sublimity. The degradation of the sublime from one physiological type to the next is used in this manner to present a picture of the corruption of political forms from their ideal states to their degenerate forms. This creates a typology of political forms that is roughly modeled on classical texts like Plato’s *Republic* and Cicero’s *Commonwealth*. Kant is ready to see a correspondence between aesthetics, physiology, and politics, and turns next to the characters of various nationalities and the two sexes.

*c. Bearded ladies and unruly harems*

As mentioned in Chapter One, Kant did hardly any traveling himself. He engaged in debates on human difference through his readings of travel narratives and other philosophers’ gleanings from colonial exotica. This leads to what Mann has called “paradoxes of space and time.” The paradox of space creates confusion about where others are in relation to the “Euro-masculine subject,” who tries to establish himself by drawing boundaries between inside and outside. The lines cannot be fixed, however, and “external others often reappear on the inside of the subject.”<sup>261</sup> Supremacy is then reasserted by appropriating nature and women as part of the inner life of the subject, rationally introjected at the same time as they are objectively violated or destroyed. The paradox of time, on the other hand, means that the Euro-masculine subject is “continually pushing others who are present with him now back in time so that they come to occupy a temporal point in his past. The repression of this paradox rests on a deeply racialized

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<sup>260</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>261</sup> Mann, *Women’s Liberation and the Sublime*, 32.

structure of temporal relations.”<sup>262</sup> These paradoxes are largely responsible for Kant’s atrocious writings on race and gender—reactionary even within his historical context,<sup>263</sup> alongside some of the most radically humanist and broadly liberal views—which feminist thinkers have used to argue against sexism and xenophobia.<sup>264</sup>

The categories of sex and nationality in the *Observations* are not discrete, and neither category relies exclusively on its own rules of classification. Sex defines the national character as much as “race” defines the characteristics of the sexes with regard to the beautiful and the sublime. This is not immediately apparent from the organization the *Observations*: the distinctions between the two sexes are presented in the third section, and the various national characters are presented later, in the fourth section. The interactions, contradictions, and complications between the two systems of defining human difference therefore require explication.

To begin with, Kant makes a fairly simple distinction: the female sex is beautiful, and the male sex is noble and sublime.<sup>265</sup> He concedes that women may have some noble qualities, and men may have some beautiful characteristics, but the total effect in each of the sexes is to enhance the respective feelings with which they are most *naturally* associated. Any attempt to change the characteristics of women, who “have a strong inborn feeling for all that is beautiful, elegant, and decorated,” would result in the superficial masking of nature rather than a truly altered character. Kant speaks here not

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<sup>262</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>263</sup> See Hannelore Schröder, “Kant’s Patriarchal Order,” transl. Rita Gircour, in Schott, *Feminist Interpretations of Kant*, 275-296.

<sup>264</sup> See Adrian Piper, “Xenophobia and Kantian Rationalism,” in Schott, *Feminist Interpretations of Kant*, 21-73; also see Cornell, *Moral Images of Freedom*.

<sup>265</sup> Kant, *Observations*, 76.

of black, brown, or oriental women, but simply of women, who by default are European and therefore beautiful.

The female sex performs all actions with facility, making no appearance of labor. It belongs to the male sex to engage in “strivings and surmounted difficulties” that are judged sublime. Women have a “beautiful understanding,” and men a sublime and “deep understanding.” It is therefore fitting for men to meditate deeply, an exercise that is both “noble and difficult.” While women could presumably aspire to some of these depths (or heights), Kant notes that “laborious learning and painful pondering” are guaranteed to strip a woman of her charms. This is why women should not engage in philosophizing or trouble themselves with the experience of the sublime:

A woman who has a head full of Greek, like Mme Dacier, or carries on fundamental controversies about mechanics, like the Marquise de Chatelet, might as well even have a beard; for perhaps that would express more obviously the mien of profundity for which she strives....the fair can leave Descartes his vortices to whirl forever without troubling themselves about them...<sup>266</sup>

Kant thus calls forth a fairly typical image of the sublime in nature—the whirling vortex—in defense of men’s exclusive access to knowledge and science. He engages the technologies of the sublime to produce his gendered knowing subject in what is a clear cross-contamination of the new regimes of knowledge that were emerging in the age of Enlightenment. As Ashfield and de Bolla observe, “The boundaries between distinctive discourses begin to lose their definition as the sublime transforms both itself and its neighboring discursive forms.”<sup>267</sup> In Kant, the transformative power of the sublime reaches not only into physiology, anthropology, politics, and moral theory but also into physics. Indeed, the paragon of aesthetic sensibility would be the astronomer Johannes

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<sup>266</sup> Ibid., 78-9.

<sup>267</sup> Ashfield and de Bolla, *The Sublime*, 6.

Kepler, whose delight in the stars and planets was enhanced by his capacity to reflect with wonder on their law-governed nature. However, few people are possessed of Kepler's delicate sensibilities, and Kant resolved therefore to confine his discussion to more commonplace feelings of the sublime and the beautiful.<sup>268</sup>

According to Kant's *Observations*, "the virtue of a woman is a *beautiful virtue*. That of the male sex should be a *noble virtue*."<sup>269</sup> The implications of this distinction become clear when he shows that women cannot be expected to base their actions on moral principle, although they may perhaps be guided by their feelings of the beautiful in such a way as to produce actions that are in approximate conformity with moral law. Thus he claims,

Women will avoid the wicked not because it is unright, but because it is ugly; and virtuous actions mean to them such as are morally beautiful. Nothing of duty, nothing of compulsion, nothing of obligation! Woman is intolerant of all commands and all morose constraint. They do something only because it pleases them, and the art consists in making only that please them which is good.<sup>270</sup>

This observation on women's imperviousness to principled thinking is used to propose a particular type of gendered education. Since the best that can be hoped for is that a woman's feelings will be guided by a sensitivity to the beautiful, they should be offered "never a cold and speculative instruction but always feelings, and those indeed which remain as close as possible to the situation of her sex."<sup>271</sup> The purpose of education shall therefore be to bring out and enhance the natural beauty (domesticity) of women.

In mitigation of these strong claims, Kant states: "I hardly believe that the fair sex is capable of principles, and I hope by that not to offend, for these are also extremely rare

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<sup>268</sup> Kant, *Observations*, 46.

<sup>269</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>270</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>271</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

in the male.”<sup>272</sup> And yet to deny women’s *potential*, to deny them a sublime *striving* for moral perfection, is to exclude them entirely from the argument in his practical philosophy where virtues are regulative ideals whose significance lies in the continual striving rather than the complete actualization of the ideal. Cornelia Klinger reveals the devastating implications of Kant’s gender bias when she notes that his argument, in effect, dehumanizes women: “As woman is exempted from the moral law, she is excluded from the full status of humanity; in Kant’s view the true sense of being human is defined by the capacity for moral principles.”<sup>273</sup>

Interestingly, however, Kant allows that European women should be introduced to the role of the fair sex in cultures around the world and the different characters of people of various nationalities. For this purpose, a map may be put before “the ladies”; but by no means should they receive a more detailed instruction in geography or history. They need no knowledge of astronomy, apart from a basic idea that “yet more worlds, and in them yet more beautiful creatures, are to be found.” In art, they are to learn not the techniques of painting and music, but only a proper sensitivity to these art forms.<sup>274</sup> Only when age has destroyed all her beauty and charms is it fitting for a woman to read complicated books, and even then only under her husband’s tutelage.<sup>275</sup>

The significance of educating women in the national characteristics of other peoples is elucidated in the last section of Kant’s observations, where women’s positioning in relation to men becomes a marker of national identity. Amongst European peoples, Kant finds the feeling for the beautiful in Italians and the French. The English, Germans

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<sup>272</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>273</sup> Klinger, “The Concepts of the Sublime and the Beautiful,” 195.

<sup>274</sup> Kant, *Observations*, 80.

<sup>275</sup> Ibid., 92.

and Spanish have the feeling for the sublime, and therefore little need be said about their women, who could presumably only possess themselves of the national character by growing beards. The French however, constantly refer to their women in expounding upon their national qualities: women, after all, display the best of the French feeling for beauty. In his regard for women's role in shaping the national character, the Frenchman will treat the ladies with marked *politesse* and gallantry, unlike the Englishman who "displays to [women] far more respect, and perhaps carries this too far, as in marriage he generally grants his wife an unlimited esteem."<sup>276</sup> Respect, esteem and admiration are feelings associated with the sublime, while the beautiful produces only love. The Englishman's respect for his wife would therefore be against nature and the institution of marriage in Kant's understanding, and domestic imbalances thus become national problems for Kant.

These gendered formations of national character are inverted in the most remarkable way when Kant turns his attention to non-European peoples. Here Kant takes a keen interest in the fate of black and "oriental" women, advocating their interests against those of black and oriental men. He finds that Arabs are the most noble in the orient, adventurous, hospitable, generous, truthful, good poets, and possessed of a "fairly fine taste." Because they are so similar in their national character to certain Europeans (Arabs are "the Spaniards of the Orient") it becomes necessary to scrutinize their relations with their women in order to delineate the distinctively oriental character of the Arab. If it weren't for the way they treat women, we might make the mistake of elevating Arabs to the aesthetic sensibilities of the Spaniard. But because he lacks a sense of the

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<sup>276</sup> Ibid., 104.

morally beautiful, Kant tells us, the Arab tries in all the wrong ways to control his women and ultimately fails:

...his harem is a constant source of unrest. He thrives on all sorts of amorous grotesqueries, among which the imaginary jewel is only the foremost, which he seeks to safeguard above all else, whose whole worth consists only in smashing it, and of which one in our part of world generally entertains much malicious doubt—and yet to whose preservation he makes use of very unjust and often loathesome means. Hence there a woman is always in a prison, whether she may be a maid, or have a barbaric, good-for-nothing and always suspicious husband.<sup>277</sup>

The “imaginary jewel” mentioned by Kant belongs more properly to the sexual fantasies of European men, who associated the harem with everything deliciously exotic and forbidden, than to actual cultural practices in the regions Kant caricatured.<sup>278</sup> Kant is seemingly unaware of his own participation in the race to control women’s sexuality—safeguarding the “imaginary jewel” is after all based on the same principle as restricting women to a particular type of aesthetic education. Yet Kant frames the Oriental-Occidental divide as a matter of moral principle. He speaks against the imprisonment of Arab women with far more conviction than he showed in the case of white women, whose virtue he was perfectly ready to “safeguard” by keeping European women away from whirling vortices. His apparent concern for brown women extends to the women of India, where he expresses his distaste for “the despotic sacrifice of wives in the very same funeral pyre that consumes the corpse of the husband.”<sup>279</sup> In the *Physical Geography*, this is taken as clear proof of the cowardice of Indian women and their insensitivity to the dignity and sublimity of their own persons.<sup>280</sup>

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<sup>277</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>278</sup> See Joanna de Groot, “‘Sex’ and ‘race’: The construction of language and image in the Nineteenth Century,” in Susan Mendus and Jane Rendall, eds, *Sexuality and Subordination: Interdisciplinary Studies of Gender in the Nineteenth Century* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989).

<sup>279</sup> Kant, *Observations*, 110.

<sup>280</sup> See epigraph above.

As for Africans, Kant takes David Hume as his authority in order to draw the conclusion that blacks have no capacity for aesthetic feeling.<sup>281</sup> According to Hume, blacks have no achievements in the arts or sciences that we can speak of. The purported proof of this is that enslaved Africans, even when set free, do not rise to the same stature as Europeans, who can ascend from lowly beginnings to great accomplishments without too much trouble. “So fundamental is the difference between these two races of man,” Kant concludes, “and it appears to be as great in regard to mental capacities as in color.”<sup>282</sup> This statement has all the hallmarks of the ideology of “race” that emerges in the nineteenth century, for Kant pins intelligence to outward attributes of the body. We see in Kant, also, a sanctioning of the brutality of slavery in the statement that blacks are “so talkative that they must be driven apart from each other with thrashings.”<sup>283</sup> His concern for the welfare of black women, as for Indian women, therefore seems at odds with his general observations on their “race.”

The treatment of black women in Kant’s *Observations* closes the circle that shows the complex interaction of “race,” sex, and the colonial technologies of the Kantian sublime. In the usual mixture of myth and reported speech with which Africa is described in European texts of the eighteenth century, Kant offers the following account:

In the lands of the black, what better can one expect than what is found prevailing, namely the feminine sex in the deepest slavery? .... Of course, Father Labat reports that a Negro carpenter, whom he reproached for haughty treatment toward his wives, answered: “You whites are indeed fools, for first you make great concessions to your wives, and afterward you complain when they drive you mad.” And it might be that there were something in this which perhaps deserved to be considered; but in short, this fellow was quite black from head to foot, a clear proof that what he said was stupid.<sup>284</sup>

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<sup>281</sup> Kant, *Observations*, 144.

<sup>282</sup> Ibid., 111. For the provenance of these ideas, see Gikandi, “Race and the Idea of the Aesthetic.”

<sup>283</sup> Kant, *Observations*, 111.

<sup>284</sup> Ibid., 113.

What has been missing in much of the commentary on the last two lines of this passage<sup>285</sup> is the race-gendered politics of the sublime that precedes Kant's observation on the black man's "stupidity." Not only does Kant dismiss the possibility of an African embodying reason and knowledge, but he simultaneously turns the white male into the enlightened advocate of women's liberation as against black men's brutality towards their own women. The purported stupidity of the black man is a statement on the black man's intellectual capabilities as well as his masculinity. Like the Arab, the black cannot find a civilized manner in which to maintain order in his harem. In a quasi-psychoanalytic fashion, Kant notes that the brutality of black men towards black women increases in direct proportion with their own experience of subordination. "A despairing man is always a strict master over anyone weaker," Kant observes, just as with us that man is always a tyrant in the kitchen who outside his own house hardly dares to look anyone in the face."<sup>286</sup> It rests on the man who has dominion over everyone else, the European man, to treat black and brown women with a measure of indulgence. The implication is that only the white man can treat women of color in a well-moderated manner, precisely because he is not a despairing man but the master over all.

A critical reading of race *and* gender in Kant reveals that the seeming magnanimity of the European man towards black and brown women increases when his superiority over black and brown men is contested. In order to secure the racial hierarchy among men, white men take on a self-styled role as black women's chivalrous defenders. In this process, the strong position that Kant had taken against slavery and despotism unravels, and it becomes clear that all his observations on the feeling of the

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<sup>285</sup> See, for example, Gikandi, "Race and the Idea of the Aesthetic."

<sup>286</sup> Kant, *Observations*, 113.

beautiful and the sublime are shoring up a particular national and masculine identity. The chivalry and “magnanimity” shown towards women of color thus ends up reinforcing their subordination. As Spivak explains, “white men saving brown women from brown men” are often engaged in an effort to secure their dominance over both.<sup>287</sup>

Spivak makes this observation in view of the impossibility of uncovering a history of consciousness of scores of Indian women who became the targets of British colonial efforts to save them from the practice of widow self-immolation. The practice of self-sacrifice of widows upon the death of their husbands, although not required, was sanctioned within Hinduism as a praiseworthy choice of a devoted wife. In contrast, the British colonial government viewed *Sati* as a harmful “religious prejudice” of the natives and actively discouraged the practice, ultimately outlawing it altogether. Spivak begins her essay on “History” by marking the point beyond which the details of the everyday life of colonized women cannot be captured. An assumption was made that widows were completely submerged within Hindu patriarchy and could hardly be taken to have a will of their own. It is these *satis* that Kant refers to in his dismissal of the courage and moral freedom of “Indian women [who] burn themselves.”<sup>288</sup>

Spivak was specifically interested in bringing a nineteenth-century woman, the Rani of Sirmur, within visibility by following her trace in the colonial record. The Rani belonged to the indigenous nobility in India and she appeared briefly in the archives because she declared her intention to be a *sati*. What caused the British to be alarmed in the case of the Rani was not simply that they were opposed to *Sati* in their mission to “save brown women from brown men”; the chief concern, rather, was that her death

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<sup>287</sup> Spivak, *Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, 284.

<sup>288</sup> See epigraph above.

would interfere with the British economic interest in carving up the territories controlled by the House of Sirmur. Spivak's "miming" of the Rani's journey through history foregrounds the use of *Sati* by this nineteenth-century woman as a form of resistance against the colonial project. However, we cannot know this as a historically documented certainty because the Rani appears in the colonial archive only fleetingly as both an impediment to and justification for the consolidation of British colonial domination. No mention is made of her life before and after the flurry of activity surrounding the issue of *Sati*, nor are her motives in contemplating self-immolation explored with any seriousness. Like other satis who appear briefly in the colonial archive, not even the proper name of the Rani can be brought to the surface.

Evidently, the problem encountered in feminist historiography is not simply the absence of women from the historical record. Spivak reinforces this point by bearing witness to the death of a twentieth-century woman, Bhubaneswari Bhaduri. Bhubaneswari was a young Indian woman who committed herself to the armed struggle for independence but found that she could not follow through with a political assassination entrusted to her. She committed suicide, taking care to explain her actions both verbally, in a letter to her sister, and symbolically, by waiting until she was menstruating before she hanged herself. Notwithstanding these attempts to speak unambiguously in her own voice and with her body, Bhubaneswari's suicide was read as the stereotypical desperate act of a woman who got involved in an illicit love affair and wound up pregnant. In this case, it was not simply the colonialist text but also the mindset of Bhubaneswari's more "emancipated" granddaughters that frustrated her attempt to

speak. It was in utter despair in the face of the total silencing of women's voices that Spivak declared: "the subaltern cannot speak!"<sup>289</sup>

The resounding silence of the subaltern is everywhere to be heard precisely because the colonial text (with which postcolonial theory is sometimes complicit) contains the traces of what has been suppressed or expunged. In the case of African women, speechlessness is not only a refusal of voice but also a conversion of the black female figure into something like the terrifying Burkean sublime that haunts the colonial subject. Busia shows how black women are turned into silent objects of dread and horror through a sequence of representations that strip them of voice and agency in colonialist discourses on Africa. This unvoicing or silencing of African women recurs through the literature of empire but is illustrated particularly strongly in her comparison of three successive versions of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Busia uses the term "symbolic laryngectomy" to refer to the active deprivation of black women's power of speech, an act that can actually be traced through its entire sequence of omissions and erasures. She therefore concludes that "the systematic refusal to hear our speech is not the same thing as our silence. That we have hitherto been spoken of as absent or silenced does not mean we have been so."<sup>290</sup> She goes on to challenge Spivak to listen to women's voices outside of the colonial texts, pointing out that Spivak is herself creating a new representation of Bhubaneswari's struggle by reading Bhubaneswari's body as a text and allowing her to speak as she would have wanted at the time of her death.<sup>291</sup>

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<sup>289</sup> Spivak, *Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, 308.

<sup>290</sup> Abena P.A. Busia, "Silencing Sycorax: On African Colonial Discourse and the Unvoiced Female," *Cultural Critique* 14 (Winter, 1989), 103.

<sup>291</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

There is thus a distinct sublimity to what the Rani and Bhubaneswari were able to represent against all odds, a mode of speaking that is recovered through Spivak's miming of their struggle. Cornell foregrounds this sublimity by bearing witness to Spivak as Spivak bears witness to their courage and resistance. Like Busia, Cornell notes that what is being witnessed here is a great deal more than a missing history or a gap in the colonial record. Rather, by telling the stories of those who were silenced and disappeared in history, and more specifically by telling these stories *as if* the women in question continuously resisted such erasure, Spivak represents the sublimity of these historical figures. Cornell explains:

My interpretation of Spivak is that the "miming"—her word—of her journey is the dramatization of the sublime aspect of what remains of these women, a sublimity that shows their own struggle to preserve something of how they identified themselves. Both women are buried under the legacy of imperialism. And yet, something of them remains. Spivak gathers the remains and gently blows the precarious ashes into their ghostly shape.<sup>292</sup>

Cornell thus draws attention to the recovery of women's histories as an ethical engagement with the mass atrocities of the past. It is not the scientific recovery of something whole and unbroken that simply sits in the past, awaiting retrieval by feminists. As we will see in Chapter Four, the imaginative and redemptive approach to history that is prefigured by Spivak takes on special significance in the lives of black women in the diaspora because their history is characterized by rapture, fragmentation, and the impossibility of the restoration of a seamless whole.

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<sup>292</sup> Cornell, *Between Women and Generations*, 88.

d. *Kant on the balance*

It might be argued, by way of situating Kant in his own historical moment, that the kinds of prejudices in his *Observations* are ubiquitous in colonial literature, and that they disappear in any case by the time he writes his more mature philosophy. This might be a useful qualification to a critical reading of Kant, but I shall grant it only in order to withdraw it. Consider, for example, that for one moment in the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant opens up the sublime to “savage” men as much as to those whose civilization has reached a “high pitch.”<sup>293</sup> The reason for such equalization of feeling in spite of the hierarchy of civilization is this: savage men are just as warlike as their civilized counterparts, if not more so. Although it is difficult to get universal agreement on the feeling of the sublime, the judgment across all ranks of civilization is that soldiers, statesmen, generals, and well-conducted wars are sublime. But apart from this warlike feeling that unites masculinity within the sublime, the hierarchy of cultural progress reasserts itself. Kant argues that the feeling for the sublime demands high culture and a well developed imagination, an imagination expensive enough to admit ideas of reason. “In fact, without the development of moral ideas, that which, thanks to preparatory culture, we call sublime, merely strikes the untutored individual as terrifying,” Kant claims.<sup>294</sup>

Kant subsequently introduces a qualification of this statement to indicate that his regard for the role of culture and aesthetic education does not displace the foundation of the sublime in human nature and moral ideas. However, such a statement cannot eliminate the tension between his moral universalism and his notion of the supremacy of

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<sup>293</sup> Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 93.

<sup>294</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

European civilization and the domination of masculine reason. Spivak calls attention to the very language that Kant uses to speak of the “untutored individual” who has no feeling of the sublime: *dem rohen Menschen*, which translates directly as “man in the raw.” Whereas the “uneducated” or untutored generally applies to a child or the poor and women are “naturally ineducable,” Spivak explains that “*de rohe Mensche*, man in the raw, can, in its signifying reach, accommodate the savage and the primitive. To claim that the moral impulse in us is cognitively grounded is, then, to fail to recognize that its origin is a supplement.”<sup>295</sup>

A feminist and critical approach is therefore needed in order to bring to light that sublimity of those people of color whose resistance to domination could appear to Kant only under the mark of cowardice. Black feminist theorists must go back and retrieve their dead not only from history, but also from an idea of the aesthetic that continually misjudges their experiences of suffering and transcendence.

### III. The Garner Case

On Sunday January 29<sup>th</sup> 1856, a family of eight escaped from slavery in Kentucky and fled to Ohio across the ice that covered the Ohio River.<sup>296</sup> The family, consisting of three adults and four children, found refuge in the house of a man named Kite who lived in the Cincinnati area. In very rapid succession, the slaveholders who claimed ownership of the fugitives tracked them down in Cincinnati, secured the assistance of the United States Marshal and his forces in order to apprehend the runaways, and stormed the house where the eight were in hiding. The events that followed—a murder, legal wrangling

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<sup>295</sup> Spivak, *Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, 15-16.

<sup>296</sup> See Yanuck, “The Garner Case.”

over the custody of the recaptured fugitives, two parallel court proceedings at federal and state level, and a battle between abolitionists and pro-slavery advocates, drew national attention to the unfolding drama in Cincinnati. The following account is based on the press coverage of those events as summarized in a tract published by the American Anti-Slavery Society that same year.<sup>297</sup> The tract documents the pain and suffering caused by the Fugitive Slave Law enacted by Congress in 1850, which provided that the claimant of any fugitive slave had the right to seize and return the fugitive to the state from which he or she had escaped.<sup>298</sup> The abolitionist tract is chosen both for its comprehensiveness and because I am interested in analyzing sympathetic representations of the suffering of enslaved African-Americans during this period. Other contemporaneous sources are introduced for comparative purposes at various points in the narrative. My questions are as follows: Was sympathy an adequate frame in which to represent the dignity of those fugitives? How did the legal judgments that were handed down facilitate or foreclose an aesthetic judgment of the sublimity of those figures?

Of the eight in the party of escaped slaves, we are told that three “belonged” to Archibald K. Gaines and the rest were the property of a John Marshall, who did not appear in person but sent his son to recover his missing belongings. Marshall was in pursuit of an elderly couple, Simon and Mary, as well as their son Simon Jr., who was reported to be in his early twenties. Simon Jr was married to Margaret Garner, who belonged Archibald Gaines, the owner of a nearby plantation. Gaines also claimed

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<sup>297</sup> American Anti-Slavery Society, “The Fugitive Slave Law and Its Victims,” in *Anti-Slavery Tracts No. 18*, Reprinted in *Anti-Slavery Tracts*, Series 1: Nos. 1-20, 1855-1856 (Westport, Connecticut: Negro Universities Press, 1970).

<sup>298</sup> To assist claimants and recovering their property, a warrant could be obtained from the United States Commissioner preventing any third party or corporate interfering with the recapture and return of the slave. In addition, United States Marshals and deputy marshals were required to provide assistance under penalty of fine. See synopsis provided by the American Anti-Slavery Society, *Anti-Slavery Tracts*, 1-2.

ownership of the four children born to Margaret and Simon. Having once identified the adult members of the family by name, the abolitionist tract reverts to generic references: “the Negroes,” “the woman,” “the men,” “the grandmother,” and so on. Their names disappear as soon as the narrative gets underway because the case is presented from the very start on the terms set by the slaveholders, using the language of ownership, belonging, and property. Thus the point of view of the slaveholders structures the narrative despite the fact that the abolitionists are writing in protest against slavery.

It is not clear from the news reports why the family, having made the difficult escape across the river, took refuge in a house only a few miles away from the plantations where they had been enslaved. Perhaps they placed confidence in the fact that Ohio was a “free state” and upheld a law recognizing the free status of all its black residents without regard to prior history of enslavement. In any event, it took only “a few hours of diligent inquiry” by the slaveholders to learn the location of the fugitives’ hideout.<sup>299</sup> The necessary warrants were obtained and an armed contingent with sent to round up the runaways barely 24 hours after they had liberated themselves. The United States Marshal and his officers were well armed and the precaution appears to have been necessary because they were met with considerable resistance when they arrived at Kite’s house. Surrounded by a large crowd of onlookers, the officers called out to the fugitives to surrender. “A firm and decided negative was the response.”<sup>300</sup> The officers broke down the doors and were met with gunfire and cudgels. One of the Marshal’s deputies was injured in the exchange of fire, but the fugitives were soon subdued.

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<sup>299</sup> American Anti-Slavery Society, *Anti-Slavery Tracts*, 37.

<sup>300</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

According to a report published in the *Cincinnati Enquirer* the next day, it is not the initial battle but a discovery that was made afterwards that “imparted a degree of horrible interest to the affair different to that which usually attends a stampede of Negroes.”<sup>301</sup> On the floor in one corner was a “nearly white child bleeding to death. Her throat was cut from ear to ear, and the blood was spouting out profusely, showing that the deed was but recently committed.”<sup>302</sup> In this description of the scene the abolitionist tract borrows language from a coroner’s report that would be produced on the day following the tragic events. The coroner’s report stated: “The murdered child was almost white, and was a little girl of rare beauty.”<sup>303</sup> The equation of whiteness with beauty racializes what is actually an anesthetic judgment while investing it with the authority of a scientific-legal determination. In the reiteration of this report, the abolitionist narrative gains a reflected authority along with the added benefit of producing a highly sympathetic version of the story, which was the desired effect of this tract.

The Anti-Slavery Society was well aware of the need to evoke sympathy for suffering slaves by passing them off as almost white, thus creating an identification between the intended audience and the victims of slavery. Elsewhere in the tract, we read of former slaves who escaped recapture because crowds of citizens came to the defense of those who looked very nearly white, expressly for that reason. Consider this item, for example:

*New Albany, Indiana.* A woman and boy given up, and taken to Louisville. They were so white that, even in Kentucky, a

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<sup>301</sup> *Cincinnati Enquirer*, January 31, 1856. Reprinted by the Detroit Opera House at [http://www.motopera.org/mg\\_ed/educational/MS\\_Act\\_1\\_Comp.html](http://www.motopera.org/mg_ed/educational/MS_Act_1_Comp.html) (Accessed January 22, 2010).

<sup>302</sup> American Anti-Slavery Society, *Anti-Slavery Tracts*, 37.

<sup>303</sup> As quoted in Yanuck, “The Garner Case.”

strong feeling arose in their favor on that ground. They were finally bought for \$600, and set free.<sup>304</sup>

The racial basis for sympathy is also evident in descriptions of Margaret Garner and other members of her family. The Anti-Slavery Society elevates Garner, who had been described as a “hearty black woman”<sup>305</sup> in the less sympathetic account in the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, to the hue of a “dark mulatto.”<sup>306</sup> It is noted that “her countenance is far from being vicious,” and Simon Jr. is also distanced from any possible imputations of savagery. He is said to have “a very lithe and active form, and rather a mild and pleasant countenance.”<sup>307</sup> The comment on his body also hints at the reasons why the slaveholders were so intent on recovering their property. It appears that the Anti-Slavery Society, in its efforts to elicit sympathy for the fugitives, reverted to the instrumental rationality of a society rife with racial prejudice, taking whiteness as the source of the value of a human being and labor power as the measure of the black body.

Proceeding with the narrative, we learn that no sooner had the officers caught sight of the child bleeding on the floor than they heard screams coming from an adjoining room. Upon investigating, they found a young woman threatening the lives of two little children with a knife “literally dripping with gore.”<sup>308</sup> The children appeared to have sustained several cuts to the head and shoulders. In alternative reports of the incident, it is claimed that the children were found under a bed with slashes at the throat and cuts on the head, bleeding profusely but very much alive, and that the woman took hold of a shovel and delivered a brutal blow to the head of the first child who lay dying in the

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<sup>304</sup> American Anti-Slavery Society, *Anti-Slavery Tracts*, 8.

<sup>305</sup> *Cincinnati Enquirer*, January 31, 1856.

<sup>306</sup> Ibid.

<sup>307</sup> American Anti-Slavery Society, *Anti-Slavery Tracts*, 38.

<sup>308</sup> American Anti-Slavery Society, *Anti-Slavery Tracts*, 37.

corner.<sup>309</sup> No details or fantasy were spared in recreating the horror of that scene in newsrooms all over Cincinnati, and the abolitionist tract tells us that “rumors of the story soon circulated all over the city. Nor were they exaggerated, as is usually the case. For once, reality surpassed the wildest thought of fiction.”<sup>310</sup>

Immediately following the vivid description of the murder scene, the Anti-Slavery Society provides an explanatory framework within which the tragedy is to be understood: “The woman avowed herself the mother of the children, and said that she had killed one and would like to kill the three others, rather than see them again reduced to slavery!”<sup>311</sup> This report is confirmed by a Baptist minister who visited the family in jail as they awaited the court’s decision on their return to slavery in Kentucky:

Last Sabbath, after preaching in the city prison, Cincinnati, through the kindness of the Deputy Sheriff, I was permitted to visit the apartment of that unfortunate woman, concerning whom there has been so much excitement during the last two weeks. I found her with an infant in her arms only a few months old and observed that it had a *large bunch* on its forehead. I inquired the cause of the injury. She then proceeded to give a detailed account of her attempt to kill her children... I asked if she was not excited almost to madness when she committed the act. No, she replied, I was as cool as I now am; and would much rather kill them at once, and thus end their sufferings, than have them taken back to slavery, and be murdered by piece-meal.<sup>312</sup>

The minister emphasizes that she was a kind and loving mother and looked after her infant with great tenderness. To provide a context for her murderous act, he tells of the horrors and trials of slavery that she recounted to him. He portrays her as a selfless and courageous mother who would endure anything, but would not put her child through the experience of enslavement.

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<sup>309</sup> *Cincinnati Enquirer*, January 31, 1856.

<sup>310</sup> American Anti-Slavery Society, *Anti-Slavery Tracts*, 38.

<sup>311</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>312</sup> P.S. Basset, “Visit to the Slave Mother,” *The American Baptist*, February 12, 1856. Reprinted in *The Black Book*, compiled by Middleton Harris, with the Assistance of Morris Levitt, Robert Furman and Ernest Smith 1st ed. (New York: Random House, 1974), 10.

That Garner's actions could be interpreted differently and in a less sympathetic light is evidenced by the *Cincinnati Enquirer's* report:

The Abolitionists regard the parents of the murdered child as a hero and heroine, teeming with lofty and holy emotions, who would rather cover their hands in the blood of their offspring than allow them to wear the shackles of slavery, while others look upon them as brutal and unnatural murderers.<sup>313</sup>

In an effort to circumvent the latter judgment and show that she was resolute and righteous in her actions, the abolitionists paid little attention to the personal anguish, confusion and despair of Margaret Garner regarding those events. For example, it is remarked in passing that she and other members of her family sat in sad silence in the Marshal's office, refusing to answer the questions that were put to them, and that she appeared "partially stultified" by her experience.<sup>314</sup> Yet none of this is allowed to interrupt the narrative of a righteous heroine untroubled by moral dilemmas.

In any event, the legal machine was already at work to fix the meaning and determine the outcome of the events. The fugitives had been taken into custody by the U.S. Marshal, and the case for their return was to be presented before a commissioner appointed by the Federal Government to consider petitions for the repatriation of fugitive slaves to their owners under the Fugitive Slave Law. Commissioner Pendry, who had issued the original warrant for the capture of Garner and her party, proposed to listen to arguments in the case the following day, on Tuesday morning. Meanwhile, on Monday afternoon, abolitionists filed an application for a writ of *habeas corpus*, requiring that the captured fugitives be produced before an Ohio state court. One of the principal objections that abolitionists had to the Fugitive Slave Law was that it allowed arbitrary

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<sup>313</sup> *Cincinnati Enquirer*, January 31, 1856.

<sup>314</sup> American Anti-Slavery Society, *Anti-Slavery Tracts*, 38.

seizure and detention without due process.<sup>315</sup> Thus the application carried with it a demand that Garner and her family be recognized as persons before the law, fully entitled to be presented with the charges that warranted their continued detention. The writ was issued and, after a tug of war between federal and state officers, the prisoners were transferred to the custody of the state and moved to the county jail. The following day, the Commissioner moved quickly to reassert his authority over the case (on account of the fact that the prisoners came into his custody first), but the prisoners stayed where they were by mutual agreement.

In protest against federal interference in the case, the state of Ohio proceeded to hold an inquest into the child's death and insisted on the right to adjudicate the case on its own terms. It is in the records of the inquest into the child's death that the voice of the grandmother is heard for the first time:

She testified that the mother, when she saw they would be captured, caught a butcher knife and ran to the children, saying she would kill them rather than to have them return to slavery, and cut the throat of the child, calling on the grandmother to help her kill them. The grandmother said she would not do it, and hid under a bed.<sup>316</sup>

In the interview with the church minister mentioned previously, more details of the grandmother's moral reasoning and a fuller measure of her ambivalence emerge. Rev. Basset reports that "She witnessed the killing of the child, but said she neither encouraged nor discouraged her daughter-in-law, —for under similar circumstances she would probably have done the same."<sup>317</sup> These statements by a witness who was also a

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<sup>315</sup>The Detroit Opera House, "Understanding the Fugitive Slave Law," published online at [http://www.michiganopera.org/mg\\_ed/educational/UnderstandingFugitive.html](http://www.michiganopera.org/mg_ed/educational/UnderstandingFugitive.html) Accessed January 22, 2010.

<sup>316</sup> American Anti-Slavery Society, *Anti-Slavery Tracts*, 39.

<sup>317</sup> Basset, "Visit to the Slave Mother."

victim and a potential perpetrator of violence become highly significant for Morrison's creative reconstruction of these events.

While giving his sympathy to the women he interviews, Basset does not go so far as to declare that he would have acted similarly in the same situation, perhaps because he simply could not imagine himself in that position. The gender dimensions of the case came out in a strong public statement that Lucy Stone Blackwell, a prominent anti-slavery advocate and suffragist, made in support of the Garner women. Rather than the grotesque action of the "unnatural" monster portrayed in sections of the news media, Blackwell sought to demonstrate that it was in fact the most natural instinct of a mother to protect her girl child from a fate worse than death—the fate of almost certain sexual abuse. She declared, with great passion: "With my own teeth I would tear open my veins and let the earth drink my blood, rather than to wear the chains of slavery."<sup>318</sup> Blackwell registered her sympathy with Margaret Garner by visiting the family in jail, where she is said to have requested permission to give Garner a knife to use in the event that she and her children were sent back to slavery in Kentucky.<sup>319</sup>

When the grand jury returned its verdict, the responsibility for the child's death was placed squarely on Garner. Their finding was that "said child was killed by its mother, Margaret Garner, with a butcher knife, with which she cut its throat." This finding is important because it is the first time that the proper name of Margaret Garner, as opposed to "she," "the woman," or "the mother" resurfaces in the abolitionist tract. While we do not know what Garner would have chosen to call herself if she had the power of self-naming in defiance of established conventions, the reappearance of her

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<sup>318</sup> See note 2 above.

<sup>319</sup> Yanuck, "The Garner Case."

given name in the context of the legal proceedings is significant. In holding her answerable for her actions, the jury verdict makes a public recognition of Margaret Garner as a person. She is no longer a piece of property or a sympathetic figure in an epic battle between pro- and anti-slavery forces, but a legal *person* who is held responsible for her actions, thereby also attaining moral personhood.

All this legal activity at the state level notwithstanding, Commissioner Pendry made a decision to return the Garner family to the slaveholders. Archibald Gaines wasted no time in putting them on a steamboat and sending them downriver to the Arkansas slave market. The story has an ending that once again surpasses fiction. Along the way, the boat carrying the Garners was involved in a collision with another vessel, and Margaret Garner and her baby were tossed into the river. Garner was rescued, but the baby drowned. It was reported that Garner "exhibited no other feeling than joy at the loss of her child."<sup>320</sup>

In the final analysis, it is clear that the unsuccessful attempt by the county prosecutor to try Garner for murder was, at one level, simply tactical. Prosecuting Garner for murder would require that her case be placed under the jurisdiction of Ohio courts, where the state could treat the matter in a manner consistent with its own position on slavery and resist the encroachment upon its territory by a neighboring state and the Federal Government. In other words, it was a question of state sovereignty and local pride.<sup>321</sup> A murder trial would also ensure that the Garner family remained in the state in which they had sought refuge, making good the promise of Ohio's anti-slavery laws. At

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<sup>320</sup> American Anti-Slavery Society, *Anti-Slavery Tracts*, 44.

<sup>321</sup> Note, for example, the following remarks by Rev. H. Bushnell of Cleveland, Ohio, in a sermon: "the death-knell of freedom tolled heavily. The sovereignty of Ohio trailed in the dust beneath the oppressor's foot..." (in American Anti-Slavery Society, *Anti-Slavery Tracts*, 47).

a deeper level, a murder charge would convey the ethos of the anti-slavery position, which was making a fundamental claim regarding the humanity and thus the inalienable freedom of blacks. The murder charge would be a tacit pronouncement of Garner's free status, since only a free, willful, and mentally sound person could be held legally responsible for a crime whose victim would also thereby be accorded the status of a person under the law. The other implication, then, would be that the little black girl was a person who could be violated, rather than a piece of fungible property that had been destroyed. The more "serious" charge of murder thus carried with it, ironically, the redemption of Garner's desperate act. Under the Fugitive Slave Law, in contrast, her actions appeared morally inconsequential. Thus the enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law cancelled Garner's attempt to escape and free herself along with her children, and at the same time denied the moral significance of her killing the child.

Purely speculatively, it could be argued that a murder trial would have allowed Garner to gain public recognition for her "moral image of the world,"<sup>322</sup> and perhaps to work through the feelings that left her stunned after the murder. It is far more likely, of course, that a murder trial under those circumstances would have been extremely hostile to her mode of reasoning and would have reduced moral responsibility to legal guilt and hanged her for her pains. The intersection of racial and gender prejudices would surely have counted against her: infanticide was then, as now, subject to the politics of horror

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<sup>322</sup> Dieter Henrich, *Aesthetic Judgment and the Moral Image of the World: Studies in Kant* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992), as cited in Cornell, *Moral Images of Freedom*.

and disgust, and women who committed such “monstrous” acts were deemed completely unnatural.<sup>323</sup>

Did Garner do the right thing in “choosing” immediate death for her daughter instead of the slow death of slavery? That this constitutes a moral dilemma in the strict sense only emerges in light of a community that wrestles with these questions within that historical moment and out of a great love for the people involved. It is such a community that Morrison gives to her character Sethe. With Morrison’s creative retelling of Garner’s story, the moral agency and dilemmas that were suppressed even within the sympathetic abolitionist narrative are finally brought to the surface, along with the possibility of redemption within a worldview and in a community that bears witness to the dignity and sublimity of black women.

#### **IV. *Beloved* and the Slave Sublime**

##### *a. An endless trial*

*Beloved* could be read as the long trial and mitigation that Garner was denied in her own lifetime. The main character Sethe lives suspended in a court of public opinion, a court whose right to judge her actions she has categorically denied.<sup>324</sup> In holding that judgment at bay, Sethe shuts out the community she lives in and her life becomes restricted to a haunted house in an ever-tightening circle. How this haunting gains a chokehold on Sethe and the manner in which she finally breaks free constitute the ethical

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<sup>323</sup> See, for example, Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, “Monster Stories: Women Charged with Perinatal Endangerment,” in Faye Ginsburg, and Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, eds., *Uncertain Terms: Negotiating Gender in American Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990).

<sup>324</sup> For Morrison, the “figure most central to the story” is *Beloved* rather than Sethe, but the novel also provides a great deal of room for a reading that takes Sethe as the primary subject (*Beloved*, xviii).

message in the novel. I will argue that the courage to confront painful memories and death itself convey the meaning of the slave sublime in Morrison's novel.

Sethe's isolation seems nearly complete at the beginning of *Beloved*. We learn that the newspapermen, preachers, abolitionists, and a "good-willed whitewoman" have come and gone, and none too soon for Sethe. She cared little for them and they in turn could barely mask their contempt behind sympathetic glances. Sethe has finally been left alone in the company of those who can bear the trials of her memory and the ghosts of the past, a domestic agony that has shut out the world for the other inhabitants of 124 Bluestone Road as much as for Sethe. Indeed, the angry ghost that haunts 124 has managed to drive out some of the members of her family already—Sethe's young boys, Howard and Bugler. Her teenage daughter, Denver, is too frightened to leave the house; her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs has retreated into her bed to contemplate color and wait for death.

Sethe's own movement outside the house is limited to holding down a job and putting food on the table. She brings home meals and provisions from the restaurant in which she works, effectively avoiding the contemptuous stares that follow her when she attempts to shop at the local store. Sethe responds to the rejection she senses from her neighbors with a proud aloofness and disdain for their judgment. The community, in turn, counters her pride with disapproval and disgust. Yet Sethe seems to have found a way of living with, indeed welcoming, this never-ending trial from the outside—by not engaging her neighbors—and from the inside, by putting up with a haunted house. When the ghost in 124 breaks or destroys anything in a fit of rage, Sethe picks it up and patiently repairs it. The women in 124 know without a doubt that the house is being laid

to ruins by a baby's ghost. "For a baby she throws a powerful spell," Denver remarks, but the three women agree that the baby is not an evil ghost.<sup>325</sup> She is either sad, lonely, feeling rebuked, or simply angry. Whatever the case, Morrison tells us that "124 was spiteful. Full of a baby's venom," and the three of them lived with that knowledge.<sup>326</sup>

This uneasy acceptance of the situation changes when Paul D, who was enslaved on the same plantation from which Sethe escaped with her children, shows up and "with a table and a loud male voice" rids the house of its ghost. It is only then that the women's attachment to the ghost is made plain—Denver because she is so painfully lonely and yearns for a sister, and Sethe for reasons that emerge as the novel unfolds and the status quo ante is restored by the "miraculous resurrection" of the baby ghost.<sup>327</sup> The resurrection happens one day as Sethe, Paul D, and Denver are returning from a carefree afternoon at a carnival. As they approach the yard of 124, they see a young woman sitting upon a stump. The woman appears to have come out of nowhere and can give no account of her origins, except for a name: Beloved. Sethe's water breaks as soon as she sets eyes on Beloved, but she does not immediately identify the mysterious woman as the baby she killed eighteen years earlier. The signs are more obvious to Denver: soft skin, unlined palms, the propensity to fall asleep at the drop of a hat, Beloved's fondness for sweet things and storytelling, and her curious memory for minute details from Sethe's past.

Indeed, Beloved opens up as Sethe's past and calls up her memory in a way that nobody else had been able to do. Eighteen years previously, there were the preachers, journalists, abolitionists and townspeople that Sethe refused to make herself answerable

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<sup>325</sup> Morrison, *Beloved*, 10.

<sup>326</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>327</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

to. The only person to whom she felt an obligation to explain her actions was Baby Suggs. Suggs was for her not only a loving mother-in-law, but also a spiritual guide and source of support. It was Suggs who welcomed her to freedom after her long trek across unknown territory, with painfully swollen feet, a back ripe with fresh wounds from a whipping, and a baby born on the run strapped to her chest. Suggs washed Sethe's body and tended her wounds before reuniting Sethe with the three children who had been sent ahead via the Underground Railroad. By tacit agreement, Suggs and Sethe did not discuss the past, and when Sethe killed one child and attempted to kill the others to save them from slave catchers, Suggs handled the situation as best she could and then retreated to her bed. The only person whose moral judgment Sethe recognized thus refused to put her on trial.

Suggs certainly passed judgment on Sethe's actions, but she refused to engage her daughter-in-law in rituals of justification. Her mode of judging was simple but not simplistic: under the same circumstances in which Sethe had found herself, Suggs recognized that she would have done the very same thing: "There was nothing to be done other than what she had done."<sup>328</sup> At the same time, Suggs loved the child dearly, loved Sethe intensely, and loved them not just metaphysically but also in the flesh. She recognized that freedom and self-possession involved an imaginative and spiritual act that demanded love of the black body as much as the soul. In the days when 124 was still the heartbeat of the community, Suggs would gather everyone together in a Clearing in the woods and tell them that "the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine." That grace was envisioned by loving their own bodies: arms, legs, mouths, necks, shoulders, backs and feet, and especially the heart.

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<sup>328</sup>Ibid.,105.

“Here,” she said, “in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it....What you say out of it they will not heed. What you scream out of it they do not hear....*You* got to love it, *you*!”<sup>329</sup>

For Suggs, spirituality is embodied. There are no claims to grace, the imagination, speech, or love that can be separated from the body. But she does not thereby confine the spiritual to the body. Suggs calls the heart the highest “prize” of all, for it is both a physical organ and an imaginary location where black people can picture themselves as whole persons, with all the parts that have been violated being lovingly rejoined in a single body.<sup>330</sup>

The demand that black people hold themselves and each other’s bodies sacred prompted Suggs to take moral responsibility for the killing of her granddaughter, even though she did not personally commit the act. On that fateful day, her first response was to cleanse the blood from the children who survived, whispering the whole time, “Beg your pardon, I beg your pardon.” Suggs was not calling for the children to remove her own or Sethe’s responsibility for the act, but making an effort to restore the right order of things between the living and the dead. The bathing ritual that she engaged in attests to the endurance of African spiritual practices in the New World, and illustrates Suggs’ pivotal role in bridging past and present. Anthropologist Donald Hill explains that the “Beg pardon” is a ritual of remembrance that is often incorporated into Big Drum dances in Carriacou, Grenada. “If the Big Drum dance is meant to restore order after some calamity—disease, misfortune at sea, or some other disaster—then a special Cromanti

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<sup>329</sup> Ibid., 103-4.

<sup>330</sup> Ibid., 104.

song [of Ghanaian origin] is played. Such songs, called "beg pardons," ask that the dead forgive the living for their transgressions.<sup>331</sup>

To better understand the significance of the beg pardon in Morrison's novel, it is important to consider the *meaning* invested in rituals of remembrance by Africans in the diaspora. Busia takes up this question, arguing that there is a desire for "moral health" that runs through various practices of remembrance that exhibit "sameness in difference" across time, space, and circumstance.<sup>332</sup> Commemoration expresses a desire for wholeness; "Yet it also acknowledges the unspoken, the things that cannot be said over which a narrative of wholeness is attempted—just as the actions of the priestess rituals of remembrance cannot obliterate the past, they can only serve as recompense for that past in communities that accept such ceremonies as recompense."<sup>333</sup>

In Paule Marshall's novel *Praisesong for the Widow*, the main character Avey finds healing for her psychic rupture in the beg pardon, rediscovering her rootedness in the African diaspora and connections to a larger community. But unlike Avey, Sethe is too proud and (understandably) too wary of accepting the hostile judgment of others to recognize that the beg pardon, "though a triumph in humility, is not a humiliation."<sup>334</sup> Understanding Sethe's position as much as the need for appropriation in order to "set all worlds aright,"<sup>335</sup> Suggs finds herself overwhelmed by the moral dilemmas and her imagination fails. "There was no grace—imaginary or real—and no sunlit dance in a

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<sup>331</sup> Donald R. Hill, "West African and Haitian Influences on the Ritual and Popular Music of Carriacou, Trinidad, and Cuba," *Black Music Research Journal*, 18, 1/2 (Spring - Autumn, 1998), 183-201 at 187.

<sup>332</sup> Busia, "What is Africa to Me?" 24.

<sup>333</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>334</sup> Barbara Christian, "Ritualistic Process and the Structure of Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for The Widow*," *Callaloo* 18 (Spring - Summer, 1983): 74-84 at 83; Also see Busia "What is Your Nation?"

<sup>335</sup> Busia, "What is Africa to Me?" 19.

Clearing could change that,” Morrison tells us.<sup>336</sup> At this point, she gives up her spiritual leadership in the community and retires to her bed in a haunted house to await her death: “Suspended between the nastiness of life and the meanness of the dead, she couldn’t get interested in leaving life or living it...”<sup>337</sup>

Thus there was nobody left but the ghost to put Sethe on trial and give her a chance to work through her sense of moral responsibility and the pain of her loss. The one time that Denver asked her mother for an explanation of the death of her sister, shattered by the claims made by a classmate, Denver’s ears closed up and she did not catch Sethe’s or her grandmother’s words. Nor did she ever ask again. Denver stopped going to school and implored her mother to tell her only those stories from the past that concerned her own miraculous birth in the bottom of a leaky boat on the Ohio River while Sethe was on the run. Paul D, with his tenderness and loving acceptance, had seemed like the person who would change all that by giving Sethe a chance to unburden herself. But the conversation ended up being forced upon them by the interference of a neighbor before either of them were ready to broach the subject. Paul D, still struggling to take ownership of himself and define his own worth, responded with uncharacteristic cruelty to Sethe’s efforts to explain what happened, and thus could provide no acknowledgment of Sethe’s moral anguish.

Morrison sketches the failed attempt at communication between Sethe and Paul D in fine detail. Spinning round in circles, Sethe tells him of her efforts to raise her children without the benefit of other women’s advice at Sweet Home, the ironically named plantation where they were enslaved. Sethe gave her children the only thing she

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<sup>336</sup> Morrison, *Beloved*, 105.

<sup>337</sup> Morrison, op. cit., 4.

had to sustain them—the milk from her body, and did her best to protect them from danger. Sethe also tells Paul D of the dehumanizing labor that was required of her, leaving aside the backbreaking chores to emphasize the seemingly innocuous work of making ink for Schoolteacher, who became master of the plantation after Garner’s death. It was this ink that Schoolteacher used to keep a record of his study of the human and animal characteristics of his slaves, and to instruct his nephews to do the same. The inhumanity of Schoolteacher’s science was connected in Sethe’s mind with the incident that she recounted as the most brutal violation of her person on the day that she was to run away from Sweet Home. On that day, Schoolteacher’s nephews cornered her in a barn, held her down, and sucked the milk from her breasts, just as if she were a cow. When they found out that she had told Mrs. Garner what happened, Schoolteacher had one of his nephews whip her back raw. What Sethe chooses to emphasize in the retelling is significant:

“They used cowhide on you?” [Paul D asks]  
 “And they took my milk.”  
 “They beat you and you was pregnant?”  
 “And they took my milk.”<sup>338</sup>

If this was the violation that jarred the most in Sethe’s memory, it was also the dehumanization that broke the spirit of her husband Halle. Sethe learns from Paul D that Halle witnessed the incident in the barn and lost himself in contemplating that degree of inhumanity.

It is only after days of revisiting such difficult memories that Sethe begins to tell Paul D what happened on that tragic day four weeks after she arrived at 124 Bluestone Road, when she looked up and caught sight of Schoolteacher’s hat as he made his way up

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<sup>338</sup> Ibid., 20.

to the house accompanied by slavecatchers. Morrison describes Sethe's instinctive reaction as follows:

Little hummingbirds stuck their needle beaks through her headcloth into her hair and beat their wings. And if she thought anything, it was No. No. Nono. Nonono. Simple. She just flew. Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them. Over there. Outside this place, where they would be safe.<sup>339</sup>

Listening to Sethe's version of the events, and particularly the way in which she makes sense of her actions, Paul D hears a "roaring" in his own head. It is the claims she makes about the meaning of a mother's love that alarmed him the most. "This here Sethe talked about love like any other woman; talked about baby clothes like any other woman, but what she meant could cleave bone," he thinks. Equally, Paul D is shaken by her notion of safety, because for him the condition in which he found the inhabitants of 124 and the state of their house implied anything but security. "This here Sethe talked about safety with a hand saw. This here Sethe didn't know where the world stopped and she began. Suddenly he saw what Stamp Paid wanted him to see: more important than what Sethe had done was what she claimed. It scared him." In the end, Paul D delivers a judgment that Sethe cannot accept. "Your love is too thick," he says, and Sethe's unequivocal response is, "Love is or it ain't. Thin love ain't no love at all."<sup>340</sup>

Against Paul D's attempts to introduce a more pragmatic evaluation of her actions—were the consequences as intended or were they counterproductive?—Sethe remains resolute, insisting that the action she took "worked." Paul D is forced to state his position in the simplest terms: "What you did was wrong, Sethe." But like Baby Suggs, he cannot figure out what she should have done instead. Faced with the enormity of a

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<sup>339</sup> Ibid., 192.

<sup>340</sup> Ibid., 193-4.

moral dilemma that he cannot resolve one way or another, and this in the context of his personal struggles to work out his own worth as a man who had been degraded and brutalized almost beyond his capacity to endure, Paul D unleashes his pain on Sethe. She could have figured out another way, he insists. “What way?” Sethe asks. “You got two feet, Sethe, not four,” he retorts. And that reference to the method of valuation that Schoolteacher had applied to black bodies closes the door on their relationship.<sup>341</sup>

After Paul D’s departure, Sethe throws herself fully upon the mercy of her only remaining judge, whose authority she recognizes and who she feels has the exclusive right to try her. As Morrison confirmed in an interview, the question at the heart of the novel is how something as grotesque as the murder of the child could spring from a mother’s love, and the circumstances under which that would have moral legitimacy. “While I was writing it,” Morrison explains, “I was sort of trying to think of situations in which that would be a good thing to do; I couldn’t come up with anything. And then I thought the person who ought to answer that question would be the girl she killed. Nobody else had that legitimacy.”<sup>342</sup> Sethe stops blocking out all the evidence that Beloved is her dead child miraculously resurrected, and owns her as her daughter. In short order, she devotes herself to explaining her actions and trying to make amends, even though she feels that Beloved already understands why she did it. The explanations Sethe offers are simply an expression of her joy at getting another chance to hold her lost daughter in her arms, to unburden herself, and to reassure Beloved of her eternal love. Nothing is good enough or sweet enough for Beloved, and Sethe makes endless sacrifices

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<sup>341</sup> Ibid., 194.

<sup>342</sup> Toni Morrison, interview on *BBC World Book Club*, First broadcast January 3, 2009. Available at [http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/arts/2009/03/000000\\_worldbookclub.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/arts/2009/03/000000_worldbookclub.shtml) (Accessed February 23, 2010).

to make sure her daughter is comfortable and happy. On her part, Beloved soaks up the loving care while subjecting Sethe to the kinds of trials that only a two-year old in a grown up body could. "I loved you," Sethe says tenderly. "You hurt me," Beloved sulks, as endearments are traded for accusations in an endless trial.<sup>343</sup>

The futility of the cycle of prosecution and justification becomes evident as Beloved's body swells and Sethe's diminishes. The two become so absorbed in each other that Sethe shuts out the world entirely and no longer goes to her job at the restaurant. Denver once again finds herself lonely and, almost from the outside, looking in on the proceedings in her home. "[I]nstead of looking for another job," Denver observes, "Sethe played all the harder with Beloved, who never got enough of anything: lullabies, new stitches, the bottom of the cake bowl, the top the milk. If the hen had only two eggs, she got both. It was as though her mother had lost her mind..."<sup>344</sup> Soon enough, Sethe's efforts to make it up to Beloved and Beloved's persistent accusations turn into an all-out battle.

Beloved accused her of leaving her behind, of not being a nice to her, not smiling at her. She said they were the same, had the same face, how could she have left her? And Sethe cried, saying she never did, or never meant to.... Beloved wasn't interested. She said when she cried there was no one. That dead man lay on top of her. That she had nothing to eat. Ghosts without skins stuck their fingers in her and said beloved in the dark and bitch in the light. Sethe pleaded forgiveness, counting, listing again and again her reasons: that Beloved was more important, meant more to her than her own life. That she would trade places any day. Give up her life, every minute and hour of it, to take back just one of Beloved's tears.<sup>345</sup>

What begins to unravel in these exchanges is Sethe's unshakeable confidence that she had placed her child in a safe place. Rape and violation extended beyond the grave, and

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<sup>343</sup> Morrison, *Beloved*, 256.

<sup>344</sup> *Ibid.*, 282.

<sup>345</sup> *Ibid.*, 284.

white men—the ghosts without skin—continued their reign of terror in a place where Sethe could not reach her daughter to protect her. The notion that the merciful violence of killing her child might have been futile, the doubt that Paul D had planted in her mind, begins to take root and grow, threatening to destroy Sethe.

Until that point, Denver had focused on protecting Beloved from Sethe, terrified that “the thing that happened that made it all right for [her] mother to kill [her] sister could happen again.”<sup>346</sup> Now, with a battle in full swing, it becomes clear to Denver that this kind of fight would have to end in a fatality: Sethe seemed unable to reach a place where she felt she had acquitted herself of the charges brought against her, and Beloved’s prosecution was only intensifying. Indeed,

[Denver] had begun to notice that even when Beloved was quiet, dreamy, minding her own business, Sethe got her going again. Whispering, muttering some justification, some bit of clarifying information to Beloved to explain what it had been like, and why, and how come. It was as though Sethe didn’t really want forgiveness given; she wanted it refused. And Beloved helped her out.<sup>347</sup>

In the end, it seems that Sethe has become her own harshest judge, and no justification is adequate in the trial of her conscience. While appearing prideful and overconfident to outsiders, her internal critic interrogates her relentlessly: Did I do the right thing? Sethe retreats to her bed, a mere shadow of herself, and the end seems inevitable.

*b. Sublime endings: The confrontation with death*

In order to understand what finally pulls Sethe out of the dizzying circle of accusation and retribution, I would like to propose a particular reading of the final section of the novel through images of the slave sublime. These representations of the sublime

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<sup>346</sup> Ibid., 242.

<sup>347</sup> Ibid., 296-297.

are recognizable through Kantian ideas of dignity, but also move beyond the Kantian sublime to posit the inseparability of the fleshy body from the immortal soul, and the living from the dead.<sup>348</sup> To paraphrase the message of Baby Suggs' sermon in the Clearing, the souls of black folk cannot be saved without according respect and attributing incomparable worth to their bodies. My contention is that Sethe's recovery depends on a consciousness of her own dignity and sublimity, as well as the establishment of a new rapport with death other than an endless struggle with the baby's ghost.

Sethe's unshakable confidence as she was tried in the court of public opinion and even later, in her exchange with Paul D, rested on a deep consciousness of her daughter's dignity. She was confident that her daughter was worth infinitely more than the money her body could fetch on the slave market, and that the little girl's value could not be calculated on a balance sheet of her human and animal characteristics. That this confidence is itself sublime can be seen when we consider that nothing in Sethe's world attested to the incomparable worth of a little black girl: only in Sethe's imagination could her daughter appear dignified. Indeed, a strong man like Paul D whose labor power was priced much more highly within the slave economy than a young girl was not spared the struggle to imagine himself as a person of infinite worth. The assaults on his body were at the same time an assault on his psyche, intentionally designed to break down his power of imagination. The bit that was placed in his mouth as punishment for trying to escape was meant to cause physical pain, but also to remove from him the sense of his differentiation from animal life. It is for this reason that the thing that finally broke Paul

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<sup>348</sup> The novel places the relationship between living and dead within a spiritual frame, using the language of "haunting," but there is also a secular frame that captures ideas of memory and historical consciousness.

D, even after he managed to look on unflinchingly as his friend Sixo was burned alive, what broke him even after he endured the pain of the bit, was the contrast of his captivity against the freedom of a rooster on the plantation. Paul D explained to Sethe:

Mister [the rooster] was allowed to be and stay what he was. But I wasn't allowed to be and stay what I was. Even if you cooked him you'd be cooking a rooster named Mister. But wasn't no way I'd ever be Paul D again, living or dead. Schoolteacher changed me. I was something else and that something was less than a chicken sitting in the sun on a tub.<sup>349</sup>

In place of his beating heart, the heart that Baby Suggs had called on her congregants to love deeply, Paul D finds only a "tobacco tin.... Its lid rusted shut."<sup>350</sup>

The important point here is that the mind matters in the embodied experience of slavery and the body matters for the consciousness of one's incomparable worth. It was noted above that Sethe remembered the stealing of her milk with more pain than the feeling of the whip tearing into her flesh, a relationship between body and mind that shows their interdependence. Similarly, her fear that she had caused irreparable harm to her children came not simply from their birth into slavery, but also from the fact that she made the ink with which Schoolteacher drew the line between animal and human. Her notion of harm was not just physical, but also incorporated a notion of what is now termed epistemic violence. Sethe's final defense for killing her baby was that she was setting right the injury to her children caused by making ink. "No notebook for my babies and no measuring string either," Sethe declared to Beloved.<sup>351</sup> She herself had lived through the measurement of her head, hips, and teeth, but now she tells Beloved that she would not allow Schoolteacher to "measure [her] behind before he tore it up."<sup>352</sup> Again,

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<sup>349</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>350</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>351</sup> Ibid., 233.

<sup>352</sup> Ibid., 239.

Sethe makes a link between a certain kind of scientific thinking and the rape of black women, a connection that will become exceedingly clear when we consider the life of Sarah Bartmann in Chapter Four. To recognize the dignity of a little black girl under these circumstances, therefore, was to imagine her beyond the limits of what could be represented through sensible intuitions, and certainly to place her outside the dehumanizing logic of racist science. It was a purely aesthetic judgment, undetermined by concepts of the understanding and envisioned as a protest against the given reality.

There is most certainly a moral dimension to such a judgment. Within a Kantian frame, it is possible to recognize the sublimity in Sethe's confidence that she spared her daughter the kind of existence that would have made it impossible to sustain a consciousness of her own dignity and humanity. Kant recognizes that slavery represents an assault on the body and psyche that demands a radical rethinking of his moral philosophy. In *The Metaphysics of Morals* and the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant argued strongly for a moral prohibition against suicide.<sup>353</sup> Yet in his notes on the sublime, Kant decided the dilemma between slavery and death in favor of death. Why this exception to the suicide prohibition? Drucilla Cornell shows how we can rethink dignity in relation to the question of mortality by bearing witness to her mother's decision to end her life after a long illness that offered no possibility of recovery. Although the time and circumstances of her mother's decision were different than the "choices" facing Sethe, Cornell's discussion shows us that "dignity inheres in the evaluations we all have to make of our lives, the ethical decisions we consciously confront, and even the ones we

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<sup>353</sup> Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, 546-8; *Groundwork of The Metaphysics of Morals*, 73-74; *Critique of Practical Reason*, 175, 196.

ignore,” both in daily life and when forced to confront the eventuality of death.<sup>354</sup> Such an evaluation of one’s life requires the space to freely determine the meaning we give to our bodies, who we understand ourselves to be, and to envision what we would like to become. Cornell calls this space the “imaginary domain.” The manner in which we confront death within the imaginary domain offers us a chance to claim ourselves and become the source of our own value even in those final moments, and to bear witness to the dignity of others as they do the same.<sup>355</sup> Cornell explains:

...once we understand that the concept of the person has an imaginary dimension to it, then we can make sense of how the shaping of one’s own demise does not destroy the humanity of oneself understood as an ideal because we can, in the psychoanalytic sense...claim our autonomy by doing so. This imaginary dimension also allows us to protect our dignity past the point of death through the image we leave behind for others.<sup>356</sup>

For Sethe, the question was not so much the manner of her own death as that of her daughter’s. Considering the great love that she had for the child, however, we can see that she protected her daughter’s dignity with as much, or even more care than she did her own.

My argument is that Sethe’s action needs to be understood as an effort to protect both the body and the imaginary domain. The cutting of her baby’s throat puts an end to a physical existence that would, in all probability, have deprived the girl of her power to represent herself as a dignified whole within her own imagination. Under slavery, as Paul D’s experience attested to, the survival of the body did not necessarily mean the preservation of the imaginary domain. Even after the physical chains of slavery fall away, the characters in *Beloved* all struggle to claim themselves and their freedom in

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<sup>354</sup> Cornell, *Between Women and Generations*, xviii.

<sup>355</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>356</sup> Drucilla Cornell, “Thinking the Future, Imagining Otherwise,” in Renee J. Heberle and Benjamin Pryor, eds., *Imagining Law: On Drucilla Cornell* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), 235.

accordance with an idea of infinite worth. Sethe's new fear, now that her baby had returned to her, was that she would not have enough time to explain the significance of what she, Sethe, and other formerly enslaved people had endured. Sethe wanted to explain to Beloved that

[W]orse than [having her throat cut]—far worse—was what Baby Suggs died of, what Ella knew, what Stamp saw and what made Paul D tremble. That anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or main you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were or couldn't think it up. And though she and others lived through and got over it, she could never let it happen to her own."<sup>357</sup>

Sethe's first act after escaping from slavery was to claim her children and make it possible for them to claim their own freedom to project an image of themselves into the world or, if necessary, on "the other side." In placing her daughter outside the reach of Schoolteacher, Sethe's assurance was that she saved her daughter from losing her soul and sense of worth, not just her bodily integrity.

The difficulty and the doubt arise when Sethe starts to consider the reality, as opposed to the ideality, of what she has done. She tries to place Beloved beyond racial terror, but the beyond (ideality) that Beloved's spirit inhabits takes on a frightening aspect of the real when she is violated by men without skins. Clearly, racial and sexual terror reaches well beyond the grave, and historicity matters in considering the dignity of the dead. We might think of Walter Benjamin's warning that "even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious."<sup>358</sup> Here too we arrive at the limits of the Kantian sublime, which cannot tell us what happens when the soul, that last refuge for the tortured person, is itself in danger. Since Kant's idea of the sublime ultimately relies on some notion of safety, moral even if not physical,

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<sup>357</sup> Morrison, *Beloved*, 295-296.

<sup>358</sup> Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 255.

all we would have before us in representing the history of slavery is an image of terror. How does Morrison turn this scene of devastation into a representation of the slave sublime?

Realizing that her mother and Beloved are locked in a battle to the death, Denver gains the courage to save herself and save them by seeking food and sustenance in the world outside 124 Bluestone Road. She ventures past the porch of 124 not because the outside world has been made safe—it could never be, but because she remembers the words of her grandmother. Baby Suggs held that there was no safety from the cruelty of white people in a slave society: “they could prowl at will, change from one mind to the other, and even when they thought they were behaving, it was a far cry from what real humans did.” Baby Suggs recognized that not even the most heartfelt sympathy could shake the foundations of the power that whites held to determine the value of the lives of those placed in a subordinate position.

“They got me out of jail,” Sethe well once told Baby Suggs.

“They also put you in it,” she answered.

“They drove you ‘cross the river.”

“On my son’s back.”

“They gave you this house.”

“Nobody *gave* me nothing.”

“I got a job from them.”

“He got a cook from them, girl.”

“Oh, some of them do all right by us.”

“And all the time it’s a surprise, ain’t it?”

“You didn’t used to talk this way.”

“Don’t box with me. There’s more of us they drowned than there is all of them ever lived from the start of time. Lay down your sword. This ain’t a battle; it’s a rout.”<sup>359</sup>

And yet as Denver hesitates on the porch, afraid to take the next step, Baby Suggs’ encouraging laughter reaches her from beyond the grave. Her grandmother wonders why

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<sup>359</sup> Morrison, *Beloved*, 287.

Denver won't step on out. "But you said there was no defense," Denver reminds her. "There ain't," Baby Suggs confirms. "Then what do I do?" Denver asks in despair. "Know it, and go on out the yard. Go on."<sup>360</sup>

This, then, is the slave sublime: not the assurance of safety, but the moral strength to proceed with full awareness of the danger one faces. Fundamentally, it involves the establishment of a productive "rapport with death," or what Gilroy describes as a particular adaptability to the "condition of being in pain."<sup>361</sup> Gilroy is concerned with the role of (blues) music and narrative in mediating the confrontation with racial terror, such that the reader or listener's encounter with death is not immediate but imaginative. We can see this in Morrison's representation of the death of the character Sixo, one of the men held in slavery at Sweet Home. Caught in the act of escaping by a party of slaveholders, Sixo lays hold of his life by grabbing the mouth of a rifle trained on him. Then he begins to sing. His joyous self-possession conveys to Schoolteacher that this is not a man from whom he could ever hope to extract another day's work. The slave catchers light a fire at Sixo's feet and start to burn him alive. Sixo sings and laughs as the flames rise around him, shouting "Seven-O! Seven-O!"—for the woman he loves has escaped to freedom, pregnant with their child.<sup>362</sup>

The sublime courage with which Sixo frees himself parallels Sethe's courage in freeing her daughter in that same manner, by taking the child's life into her own hands. But the novel challenges us to consider the broken parallel between Sixo and Sethe as regards the question of the future. For Sixo, the hope for the future rests in his child, a part of himself that will be reborn in the flesh, and his love for a woman who will shape

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<sup>360</sup> Ibid., 289.

<sup>361</sup> Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 198, 203.

<sup>362</sup> Morrison, *Beloved*, 270.

the future through her body and her relationship with that child. There are no guarantees of their safety. In fact, the danger they face is overwhelming: we can see already the punishment that awaits captured runaways. But still Sixo holds onto hope and laughs at death. Sethe, on the other hand, deals only in firm assurances. She had made certain that Schoolteacher would not turn her daughter into an animal: “Maybe Baby Suggs could worry about it, live with the likelihood of it; Sethe had refused—and refused still,” Morrison tells us.<sup>363</sup> When Paul D asks her what will happen when she is no longer alive and there to protect Denver, Sethe replies: “Nothing! I’ll protect her when I’m live and I’ll protect her when I ain’t.”<sup>364</sup> This is why Sethe is completely shattered when Beloved says she has experienced violence beyond the grave. Contrary to what she said to Paul D, it appears that killing the baby has not “worked” and her children are *not* safe, either in this world or beyond. What Sethe must accept in order to end her battle with Beloved is her own limitations, a kind of humility that, for Baby Suggs, is part of sublime courage.

Sethe’s acceptance of finitude and limitation sets the scene for the end of the war between herself and Beloved. In order to let go of the illusion of safety and “lay down [her] sword,” however, she must also accept that she cannot do it alone. Help comes to 124 slowly at first, in the form of baskets of food that Denver picks up from the edge of the yard. The neighbors start to give up their disdain when Denver has the humility and courage to explain the situation in her household and accept their gifts. Her openness unlocks a set of memories other than the haunting experience of slavery: some neighbors remember caring for Denver when she was a baby, others recall the warmth of 124 when it was a meeting point for the community, and yet others speak of Baby Suggs’ love for

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<sup>363</sup> Ibid., 296.

<sup>364</sup> Ibid., 54.

them all when she called out to them in the Clearing. Whatever meanness there might have been in their condemnation of Sethe, it was set aside to deal with the crisis at 124 Bluestone Road.

A great deal of the willingness to come to Sethe's aid can be attributed to the highly inflated version of events that circulated within the community. Beloved's emotional trial of Sethe was reported as a physical beating, and she was said to have literally tied Sethe to a bed in order to torture her. The rumor was that Sethe's daughter had returned from the dead to "fix her."<sup>365</sup> For Ella, who had made a moral judgment regarding Sethe's killing of her child and the pridefulness with which she turned away from the community, this report of Beloved's towering rage was equally unacceptable. "Whatever Sethe had done, Ella didn't like the idea of past errors taking possession of the present. Sethe's crime was staggering and her pride outstripped even that; but she could not countenance the possibility of sin moving on in the house, unleashed and sassy....Nobody needed a grown-up evil sitting at the table with a grudge."<sup>366</sup> Ella demonstrates the subtlety of moral reasoning that Baby Suggs showed in her judgment of Sethe's "crime." Although she thought that Sethe was wrong in her actions at the time, Ella is clear that "what's fair ain't necessarily right" as regards the consequences.<sup>367</sup> Ella was at the forefront of a movement to rescue Sethe, and the women converged on 124 just in time to save her from driving an ice pick into a white man who had come to pick up Denver and take her to work in the home he shared with his sister.

A re-enactment of the first crime scene was averted, and this restores Sethe to the community that was broken when she killed her child. However, the sublimity of an

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<sup>365</sup> Ibid., 301.

<sup>366</sup> Ibid., 303.

<sup>367</sup> Ibid., 301.

acceptance of finitude still eludes Sethe and can only be found in the process of gaining consciousness of her own infinite worth. For more than eighteen years, she had understood her value in terms of her ability to provide what her children needed and protect them from harm through the power of her love. Sethe's mission to bring her milk safely to the child she had sent on ahead kept her going when all the well-laid plans for her escape from slavery fell apart. She was not planning to leave without her husband Halle, or to give birth in the bottom of a leaky boat, but she kept moving because she was dedicated to preserving "the life of her children's mother."<sup>368</sup> So completely did she devote herself to her children that she once told Baby Suggs that she "wouldn't draw breath without [her] children."<sup>369</sup> As such, giving up her omnipotence as the mother would mean extinguishing her sense of self entirely.

Unable to value herself within the uncertainty of motherhood in the shadow of slavery, Sethe only recovers herself with the help of others who can show her an image of her infinite worth as a whole person distinct from her children. When she sees a sublime image of herself reflected in the eyes of Paul D, who returns to her at the end of the novel, Sethe is able to transform her image of herself in her own imagination. Paul D reminds Sethe of something that she learned in the Clearing in the early days of her freedom when Baby Suggs was still alive and calling the community to love their bodies: that "Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another."<sup>370</sup> Only when Paul D bears witness to her struggle to define herself under deadly circumstances does Sethe find a way to claim her freed self. "You your best

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<sup>368</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>369</sup> Ibid., 239-240.

<sup>370</sup> Ibid., 112.

thing, Sethe. You are,” Paul D tells her, giving her the gift of an image of her own dignity and sublimity.<sup>371</sup>

## V. Revisions and Reflections

This chapter has considered the implications of gender and race for the central question of the third *Critique*: how is it possible to hold aesthetic judgments as necessary and universal? Or, for the purposes of this dissertation, how can we find agreement on the judgment that the dignity of black women transcends the conditions of their subjugation? We already know that the majority of Europeans for most of modern history, Kant among them, have not recognized the sublimity of women and blacks. This prevented Kant from seeing the full moral significance of the way in which colonized and enslaved people confronted death. *Beloved* shows us that for those who were brutalized and enslaved, it was a constant struggle to come to consciousness of their own sublimity. Sethe’s journey to a full realization of her incomparable worth depends on the formation of an aesthetic community that sees her as sublime and reflects that image back to her. What makes the demand for a judgment of Sethe’s sublimity both universal and necessary is a reference to the moral law—in Baby Suggs terms, it is love that calls each member in the community to value their own and one another’s’ hearts and bodies absolutely. In Kantian terms, it is respect for dignity that creates the *sensus communis* that bears witness to the dignified resistance of enslaved women to the degrading circumstances in which they lived and died.

What remains to be accounted for, then, is the strength of love in *Beloved* whereas the Kantian *sensus communis* fell apart in judgment of the black body. My contention is

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<sup>371</sup> Ibid., 322.

that the call to love in *Beloved* has a more integrated conception of the ideality of the body and the this-sidedness of the soul than what Kant envisioned. Morrison's choice to make the soul sensate by placing it in a black woman's body, at the same time depicting the pain of race-gendered violence experienced by the soul beyond the grave, ends all dichotomous thinking about the moral person. There is no safe place for the soul to take flight while bodies are violated, and the unquiet soul returns to inhabit the body that has been freed from slavery. The slave sublime is the consciousness of the dignity that endures and the courage that persists while terror is everywhere triumphant. The question is whether we can move from narrative mediation of the encounter with death and violence, which Morrison offers us in her novel, to immediacy in "real" political struggles—a question that will be taken up in the next chapter.

## Chapter Four

### Tragedy, Historical Consciousness, and Schiller's Sublime of Redemption

*Humanity has lost its dignity. But Art has rescued it and preserved it in significant stone.*

Friedrich Schiller<sup>372</sup>

*[I]t was precisely in these moments when the aesthetic ideology and the system of art were enmeshed in the economy of slavery that they were deemed to hold the utopian possibility that the artwork might detach itself from bourgeois capitalism and play a redemptive role. It is this utopian possibility, the dream that the work of art might actually be separated from the slave economy that sustained it, that made the aesthetic central to the slave's attempts to claim the central categories of bourgeois culture, including freedom, morality, and subjectivity.*

Simon Gikandi<sup>373</sup>

*I have come to wrench you away  
away from the poking eyes of the man-made monster  
who lives in the dark with his clutches of imperialism  
who dissects your body bit by bit,  
who likens your soul to that of satan  
and declares himself the ultimate God!*

Diana Ferrus<sup>374</sup>

It is a cold new year's day in 1816, the coldest winter in living memory, and Sarah Bartmann sits alone in a bathtub in a filthy room in Paris. Trembling on the cusp of death, she thinks of her home on the Cape of Good Hope, 6,000 miles and a lifetime away. "How come I here?" she asks herself, "How come I here?" Thus begins Barbara Chase-Riboud's *Hottentot Venus*, a fictional autobiography of Sarah Bartmann, recounting her journey from childhood in the Khoe ancestral grazing lands of southern Africa to domestic servitude in Cape Town; from Cape Town across the sea to London

<sup>372</sup> Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, 57.

<sup>373</sup> Gikandi, "Race and the Idea of the Aesthetic," 344.

<sup>374</sup> Diana Ferrus, "I've Come to Take You Home (Tribute to Sarah Bartmann Written in Holland, June 1998)," in Deborah Willis, ed., *Black Venus 2010: They Called Her "Hottentot"* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010), 213.

where she is put on display as the “Hottentot Venus,” dressed in a skintight costume to emphasize her “extraordinary shape and make”; from London through town and country and then on to Paris for further exhibition and ultimately, her death and dismemberment. This not the end of the story, for Bartmann’s body and spirit continue to haunt science, art, and politics up to and beyond the return of her remains to the new South Africa in 2002.<sup>375</sup>

How, indeed, did Bartmann come to cross all those borders and inhabit such a wide range of spaces in the course of her very short life? What kinds of historical circumstances propelled her across borders, only to return “home” in fragments for what could be called a state funeral two centuries later? How did her afterlife come to span such a lengthy period of time, and why is she at the center of feminist debates today? Bartmann’s body and biography have taken shape and come apart through political turbulence, shifting geographical boundaries, massive historical realignments, and debates about the meaning of Enlightenment ideals of liberty, dignity, and humanity. This chapter is concerned with the imaginative recollection of the fragments of her body and the effort by women artists and writers of the African diaspora to redeem Bartmann’s moral personhood from the ruins of history. My argument is that the possibility of remembering Bartmann within a framework that gives her life purpose and meaning cannot be taken for granted. Like other ghosts of slavery and colonialism, Bartmann reappears in order to dignify the lives of the living insofar as those who are living take action to redeem the unfulfilled promise of the past and find hope for the future.

As we saw in the last chapter, the rapport between the dead and the living is not established without a struggle. This struggle takes place at the limits of the Kantian

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<sup>375</sup> Barbara Chase-Riboud, *Hottentot Venus: A Novel* (New York: Anchor Books, 2003).

sublime, positing the ideality of the body and corporeality of the soul in a way that radically challenges Kant's division between reason and sensibility. The critique of the Kantian sublime that I advanced is based on the particularity of black women's experiences of slavery, but at the same time it demonstrates a philosophical problematic that is not unique to African-based cosmologies and the diaspora experience. Friedrich Schiller was as sharply critical of disembodied rationality in Kant, and struggled to find a way to reconcile this critique with a fundamental respect for the role of reason in Kant's philosophy. In search of a theory of the sublime that could speak to humanity in its fullness, Schiller turned to Greek tragedy, where heroic suffering combined the pathos of physical affliction with representations of the hero's moral resistance against forces beyond human control. In Schiller's view, the problem with Kant's transcendental idealism was that it lost sight of the "whole person," thus giving up one of the most important inheritances from classical Greek culture. "However high the mind [of the Greeks] might soar, it always drew matter lovingly along with it; and however fine and sharp the distinctions it might make, it never proceeded to mutilate," Schiller wrote.<sup>376</sup> His elaboration of themes taken from Kant's third *Critique* was intended to outline an idea of sublimity that does not mutilate the human being.

While Schiller favored the unified vision of ancient Greece over the modern propensity to divide human beings from their sensual nature and from the natural world, he was equally convinced that the spirit of the Greeks could be recovered in an even fuller form by uniting the classical worldview with similar ideas that were latent in Kant's philosophy but were yet to be fully developed. Thus, in the name of the wholeness of humanity, Schiller sought to rescue the spirit of Kant's third *Critique* from

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<sup>376</sup> Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, 31.

the stifling letter of the text.<sup>377</sup> His quest to unite the best of modern philosophy with the best of the ancients led Schiller to develop a theory of world history in which the past is recovered within the present in order to project hope into the future. History itself becomes an object of philosophical and aesthetic reflection, leading to a conception of the historical sublime that will be explicated in this chapter.

In the discussion that follows, historical consciousness as well as a particular historical personage—Sarah Bartmann, will be used to rethink the idea of the sublime that was put forward in previous chapters. The first section presents Schiller as a thinker who is much closer to black women’s imaginaries than either Burke or Kant, especially as far as the central problematics of his aesthetics are concerned: the yearning for wholeness as against the modern tendency toward fragmentation, the focus on human suffering and resistance, the role of fate and tragedy in determining the course of human life, and the meaning of existence in view of temporality. Following an explication of Schiller’s views on these subjects, I argue that his approach to history as the progress of freedom speaks to the project that artists and writers in the African diaspora have undertaken in piecing together the fragments of a scattered life.

On the other hand, European narratives of historical progress have almost always been inimical to the black female body, and the violation of Sarah Bartmann’s dignity and bodily integrity was tightly connected with moral and scientific theories about the progress of the human races. I elaborate on some of these degrading notions of progress in order to underscore the challenges in extracting the message of hope from Schiller’s historical sublime.

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<sup>377</sup> Ibid., 87fn.

The second part of the chapter turns to the political struggle for the recognition of Bartmann's humanity, the attempt to ascribe meaning to her senseless death, and the effort to give form to the fragments of her body. So historically conscious is the effort to reclaim Bartmann that the boundaries between history, politics, and fiction have been almost entirely erased. Rather than discussing the historical Bartmann separately from her imagined character, I look at representations of her life in two movements. In the first movement, the attempt to uphold her humanity and construct a narrative of her life is thwarted by the failure to represent her as a tragic figure who suffers intensely and yet remains dignified in her suffering. Here I discuss the English court case of 1810 brought by abolitionists who wished to save her but were unable to represent her sublimity. These frustrations are reflected in Suzan-Lori Parks' *Venus* play, which opened on a New York stage in 1996 while Bartmann's remains were still in captivity at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris. The court case and the play demonstrate the limits of representation in the absence of a political movement or institution that can radicalize aesthetic ideals. In the second movement I show how the tragedy of Bartmann's life becomes visible when the vision of artists and writers is taken up by institutional actors who use that image to reflect on and change the history of colonial relations. I provide evidence from the Senate debate in France in 2001-2002 and the poem by a South African artist who inspired the parliamentary bill seeking the return of Bartmann's remains to the land of her birth. I argue that this new mode of representing Bartmann both invokes and contests the ideal of "humanity," thus redeeming Bartmann from the racist and sexist history in which she was suspended.

## I. Schiller and the Historical Sublime

### a. *Modernity and its fragments*

The central task in Schiller's writings on aesthetics was to find "a way out of the material world and a transition to the world of spirit" without losing the connection to the former.<sup>378</sup> His concern for maintaining a connection between materiality and the spirit was in many ways a comment on his times. Germany at the end of the eighteenth century was certainly not as close to economic revolution as Scotland or England, but Schiller had an incredibly clear insight into the social effects of modernization and the fragmenting tendencies that would become increasingly salient over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In writing his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1794-1795), Schiller sought to identify the causes of the increasing separation of human beings from their own achievements and capabilities, pointing first of all to civilization and learning, and secondly to the new spirit of government. New pushes towards the specialization of knowledge and the rationalization of government functions were splitting human beings into fragments, he argued.

State and Church, laws and customs, [are] now torn asunder; enjoyment [is] divorced from labour, the means from the end, the effort from the reward. Everlastingly chained to a single little fragment of the Whole, man himself develops into nothing but a fragment; everlastingly in his ear the monotonous sound of the wheel he turns, he never develops the harmony of his being, and instead of putting the stamp of humanity upon his nature, he becomes nothing more than the imprint of his occupation or of his specialized knowledge.<sup>379</sup>

Even without the benefit of the terminology that would become the hallmark of Marx's critique of modernity, Schiller was beginning to develop a theory of alienation and reification. In his account, we see human beings not only separated from what makes

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<sup>378</sup> Ibid., 185.

<sup>379</sup> Ibid., 35.

them truly human, but at the same time they are turned into cogs in a wheel that turns out the modern worker and citizen as products with a specific market value.

Schiller argues that this necessarily shapes social relations and how human beings value one another, ultimately impacting how we view ourselves and what we can aspire towards.

When the community makes his office the measure of the man; when in one of its citizens it prizes nothing but memory, in another a mere tabularizing intelligence, in a third only mechanical skill; when, in one case, indifferent to character, it insists exclusively on knowledge, yet is, in another, ready to condone any amount of obscurantist thinking...can we wonder that the remaining aptitudes of the psyche are neglected in order to give undivided attention to the one which will bring honor and profit?<sup>380</sup>

The exclusive focus on increasing the profitability of one's aptitudes has a pernicious effect on politics as well. Citizenship no longer calls for spontaneous legislation in concert with other citizens, as it did in ancient Greece, but is broken down into bureaucratic forms of "fragmentary participation."<sup>381</sup> What is lost in this process is our regard for the "wholeness" of human beings and the unity of our existence as natural creatures *and* moral persons with connections to one another and the natural world.

While Schiller lamented the diminished quality of work, leisure, and citizenship for European men, the situation was infinitely graver for black women who were being brought into the western world as alien captive labor. Whereas political citizenship offered Enlightenment philosophers a platform to argue for their quality of life and against the fragmentation of human beings, this platform was not offered to black women. Instead, black women's major public appearances in the new world were limited to the spectacle of the auction block or perhaps, like Sarah Bartmann, a stage on which to

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<sup>380</sup> Ibid., 36-7.

<sup>381</sup> Ibid., 35.

perform at a colonial exposition. While Schiller gives us an important starting point for thinking about the assault of instrumental rationality on the wholeness of human being, any analysis of the meaning of modernity for black women must begin with an examination of the unique and intensified forms of fragmentation, alienation and objectification that they experienced.

In her legal and social history of race and reproduction in United States, Dorothy Roberts highlights the separation and alienation of various parts of the black female body during slavery. The plantation economy of the southern United States in the nineteenth century rested on the conflicting duality of black women's productive and reproductive capacity. On the one hand, slave owners had an interest in achieving the maximum level of productivity by working their slaves quite literally to death; on the other hand, the long-term interest in maintaining a stable supply of captive labor necessitated some measures to preserve the health and strength of slaves. The search for a "balance" between productive and reproductive capabilities became especially difficult when an enslaved woman was pregnant: slaveholders were reluctant to slow agricultural production for the sake of the woman's health, and yet needed to attend at least minimally to her wellbeing because childbirth ensured the renewal of the labor force. This was a particularly important consideration in the years following the abolition of the slave trade. Thus when whipping a pregnant woman to force her to submit to white mastery, a mastery that may already have asserted itself through rape and forced pregnancy, a curious device was invented to prevent harm to the fetus. Slave narratives

tell of holes dug in the ground to accommodate the stomachs of pregnant women who would be made to lie face-down on the ground while their backs were whipped.<sup>382</sup>

Not only did this dual interest in enslaved women's bodies set up a "maternal-fetal conflict," as Roberts points out, but it also severed one part of a woman's body from another. Barbara Omolade explains that the enslaved black woman can be understood as a "fragmented commodity":

Her head and her heart were separated from her back and her arms and divided from her womb and vagina. Her back and muscles were pressed into field labor where she was forced to work with men and work like men. Her hands were demanded to nurse and nurture the white man and his family.... Her vagina, used for his sexual pleasure, was the gateway to the womb, which was his place of capital investment—The capital investment being the sex act and the resulting child the accumulated surplus, worth money on the slave market.<sup>383</sup>

While she was made to perform a somewhat different kind of sexual labor as a colonial curiosity in London and Paris, Sarah Bartmann's body was also divided into parts that could be used to generate profits in various markets ranging from the erotic to the imperial and the "scientific." This degree of fragmentation poses a significant challenge for black women artists and writers who are trying to forge a narrative coherence out of their past. Apart from a jar containing Bartmann's genitalia, her brittle skeleton, and a mold of her missing body, there is very little evidence that a person existed who held together a life under precarious circumstances and lived in/as that body. To imagine Bartmann's wholeness requires the piecing together of her life out of the fragments of history. I will argue that such an achievement depends on the power of the historical sublime as put forward in Schiller's writings on aesthetics.

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<sup>382</sup> Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, 40.

<sup>383</sup> Barbara Omolade, "Hearts of Darkness," in *Powers of Desire: the Politics of Sexuality*, edited by Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson (New York : Monthly Review Press, 1983), 365.

In order to understand Schiller's conception of the historical sublime, it is useful to follow the series of steps by which he derives this form of historical consciousness, beginning with the individual's moral resistance to suffering and building up to a theory of how human beings wrestle with fate and struggle to make sense of the temporality of their being.

b. *The practically-sublime and moral resistance*

Schiller's effort to complete the Kant's project of bridging the gap between reason and sensibility prompted him to articulate some of Kant's aesthetic categories in new terms and further subdivide them according to the modalities of their operation. Very much in keeping with Kant, Schiller begins his discussion of the sublime by stating:

We call an object *sublime* if, whenever the object is presented or represented, our sensuous nature feels its limits, but our rational nature feels its superiority, its freedom from limits. Thus, we come up short against a sublime object *physically*, but we elevate ourselves above it *morally*, namely, through ideas.<sup>384</sup>

Precisely speaking, Schiller is not attributing sublimity to the object; the object that resists comprehension in thought or threatens our physical is only the occasion for reflection on humanity's moral vocation for freedom, which enables us to rise above limitation. Again borrowing from Kant, Schiller notes that sublimity lies in our capacity to establish our independence from nature in two ways: "*first*, because (in the theoretical sense) we pass beyond natural conditions and can *think* more than we know; second, because (in a practical sense) we set ourselves above natural conditions and, by means of our will, we can contradict our *desires*."<sup>385</sup> What Kant had called the mathematically sublime Schiller now renames the theoretically-sublime, and Kant's dynamical sublime is

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<sup>384</sup> Schiller, "On the Sublime," in his *Essays*, 22.

<sup>385</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

labeled the practically-sublime.<sup>386</sup> The question is, what does Schiller stand to gain from this substitution of terms?

For Schiller, the distinction between what is simply theoretical and what is practical matters a great deal. In changing the Kantian terminology, he makes an argument for privileging one understanding of the sublime over the other. It would make no sense, in Schiller's view, to wrestle with the question of cognitive limitation without first attending to the existence of the human being who thinks.

The theoretically-sublime contradicts the cognitive instinct, the practically-sublime the preservation instinct. In the first case what is contested is only an individual expression of the cognitive power of the senses. In the second case, however, what is contested is the ultimate basis of any possible expression of this power, namely, its very existence.<sup>387</sup>

Indeed, nature alerts us to the priority of survival by making the self-preservation instinct stronger than the cognitive instinct or the search for knowledge. Thus we are pushed to attend more urgently to those objects that pose a threat to survival rather than those that are merely incomprehensible. This prioritization of the question of being in time and space distinguishes Schiller's reading of Kant from most of what has been produced in literary criticism in recent years as concerns "the textual sublime."<sup>388</sup>

When our physical existence is in danger, the threatening object causes pain and the image of such an object often becomes "frightful."<sup>389</sup> Pain alerts us to the need to remove ourselves from danger, and fear comes with the realization that all physical resistance or avoidance is in vain. To be forced to live in fear, for Schiller, is the ultimate form of oppression, for "nothing matters more to a human being as a sensuous being than

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<sup>386</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>387</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>388</sup> See, Hugh J Silverman and Gary E.Aylesworth, eds., *The Textual Sublime: Deconstruction and its Differences* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990).

<sup>389</sup> Schiller, "On the Sublime," 25.

his existence, and no dependency is more oppressive to him than this, to regard nature as the very power reigning over his existence.”<sup>390</sup> Although he makes reference to nature itself as the source of terror, it should not be forgotten that the problem of political terror hangs over Schiller’s writings on the sublime, composed in the years following the French Revolution when the promise of liberation seemed to have been lost to violence and bloodshed. Schiller is concerned with safeguarding aesthetic ideals in the face of terror and preserving the consciousness of humanity’s moral vocation awakened by the feeling of the sublime.<sup>391</sup> In contrast, the frustration of our efforts to comprehend an object that defeats the cognitive faculties is simply that—frustrating. It has no direct physical or moral consequences, Schiller claims, for we neither feel pain nor lose our self-respect in such an effort.<sup>392</sup>

The prioritization of the practically-sublime does not, however, discount the role of reason in human affairs nor does Schiller give up Kant’s distinction between noumenon and phenomenon. Although Schiller’s admiration for the classical Greek worldview led him to decry the fragmentation of the human being and reach for wholeness, he recoils from nature at the point where its forces threaten to extinguish moral freedom. “No human being is obliged to be obliged!” he declares, borrowing a line from Lessing’s play *Nathan the Wise*. “All other things must; the human being is the entity that wills.”<sup>393</sup> For the most part, human beings are able to pit their will against the forces of nature through “physical culture.” The Dutch, for example, have built dykes and insulated themselves from harm by using tools and technological invention. But physical

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<sup>390</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>391</sup> For Schiller’s thoughts on the French revolution, see Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L.A. Willoughby’s “Introduction,” in Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, xv-xx.

<sup>392</sup> Schiller, “On the Sublime,” 25.

<sup>393</sup> Schiller, “Concerning the Sublime,” in his *Essays*, 70.

culture can only secure human life to a point, Schiller argues, because painful illnesses and death defy every artifice and attempt at control. To summarize the problem that Schiller is trying to isolate, we are not free at all so long as we are not free in respect to death. “This singular, terrifying case of simply being necessitated to do what he does not want to do, will haunt [man] like a ghost and hand him over to the blind terrors of the imagination.”<sup>394</sup> What physical culture cannot secure must therefore be sought exclusively in ideas of reason.

If [man] can no longer oppose physical forces with a corresponding physical force, then nothing else remains for him to do to avoid suffering violence than to *do completely away with a relation* so deleterious to him and to *destroy conceptually* a brute force that he in fact must endure. However, to destroy a force conceptually means nothing other than to submit to it voluntarily.<sup>395</sup>

This is Schiller’s understanding of “moral culture,” the cultivation of which yields the disposition of the practically-sublime. Only moral culture can lead human beings to assert their will in the face of death—not by escaping death, which would be impossible, but by determining the manner in which we will face our deaths.

Schiller’s morally cultivated person who remains free even in relation to death is described as follows: “Nothing that nature does to him is violence, since it has already become his own action before it gets to him, and the dynamism of nature never reaches

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<sup>394</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>395</sup> Ibid., 71-72. For the most part, Schiller maintains the Kantian distinction between ideas of reason and concepts of the understanding. However, “concept” is the term he uses in this particular passage, for which reason it might be useful to compare the translation with the original text.

*Kann er also den physischen Kräften keine verhältnismäßige physische Kraft mehr entgegensetzen, so bleibt ihm, um keine Gewalt zu erleiden, nichts anders übrig, als: ein Verhältnis, welches ihm so nachteilig ist, ganz und gar aufzuheben, und eine Gewalt, die er der Tat nach erleiden muß, dem Begriff nach zu vernichten. Eine Gewalt dem Begriffe nach vernichten, heißt aber nichts anders, als sich derselben freiwillig unterwerfen.*

To abide by Kant’s strict use of terminology, it seems to me that the intended reference here is to the idea [*idee*] rather than the concept [*begriff*]. (Original German text made available by Project Gutenberg/De Spiegel Online. [http://gutenberg.spiegel.de/?id=5&xid=2441&kapitel=1#gb\\_found](http://gutenberg.spiegel.de/?id=5&xid=2441&kapitel=1#gb_found). Accessed March 10, 2010.)

him, since he deliberately cuts himself off from everything that nature can reach.”<sup>396</sup> This might appear, on the surface, to be equivalent to saying to the boss who has just fired you from your job, “In that case I quit.” But Schiller is making a much more serious point, the understanding of which is the key to the slave sublime as discussed in Chapter Three. Schiller’s notion of the practically-sublime speaks directly to the frame of mind of Toni Morrison’s character Sethe, who snatched away her daughter’s life just as the slave catchers were about to grab the child. Sethe’s neighbor Stamp Paid said of her action, “She ain’t crazy. She love those children. She was trying to out-hurt the hurter.”<sup>397</sup> This may seem contradictory, and Paul D. certainly questioned whether Sethe’s way of freeing her child “worked,” but the moral import of her action could not be denied. We can think also of Sixo, who grabbed the rifle that was pointed at him and took hold of death with both his hands. Sethe and Sixo’s way of meeting death on their own terms is very close to Schiller’s idea of the practically-sublime, which depends on giving up certain illusions of safety:

[A]ny object that shows us our impotence as natural beings is practically-sublime, as long as it also discloses the capacity within us to resist that is of a completely different order. This capacity does *not*, of course, remove the danger of our physical existence, but (what is infinitely more) separates our physical existence from our personhood. Hence, when something sublime is represented or entertained, we become conscious, not of *material* security in a single instance, but rather of an *ideal* security extending over all possible instances.<sup>398</sup>

For *Beloved*, of course, there was no easy separation of personhood from physical existence, and we learn from Sethe’s struggle that vulnerability cannot be vanquished by a flight into the ideal while bodies remain in pain. Thus Schiller’s practically-sublime may address the encounter with death more squarely than Kant, but he ultimately

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<sup>396</sup> Schiller, “Concerning the Sublime,” 72.

<sup>397</sup> Morrison, *Beloved*, 276.

<sup>398</sup> Schiller, “On the Sublime,” 35.

embraces the same disembodied notion of the sublime that fails to address the haunting memory of slavery.

Schiller's quest to bring physicality under the unyielding force of the will raises yet another concern for feminist thinkers. Although his idea of the sublime may appear in one aspect as a call to freedom at death's doorstep, it is in another aspect a move to make sensuousness subject to the will. To the degree that women are thought to be immersed in nature and sensuality, they are then excluded from any possible experience of the sublime. Klinger calls our attention to the following passage in which Schiller moves from his discussion of sublimity to a denouncement of beauty and women's sensual charms. The trouble with women, from Schiller's point of view, is that they ensnare men in the realm of the phenomenal. Thus his idea of sublimity seems to call for a violent break not just from death and danger, but from everyday forms of entrapment in beauty and the feminine.

The sublime... fashions for us a point of departure from the sensuous world in which the beautiful would gladly detain us forever. Not gradually (since there is no transition from dependency to freedom), but only suddenly and through a kind of shock, does something sublime tear the independent spirit loose from the net a sophisticated sensuousness uses to ensnare it.

Schiller then embodies his thoughts in myth.

Beauty in the shape of the goddess Calypso had enchanted the courageous son of Ulysses, and by the power of her charms she long held him captive on her island. Although he was simply lying in the arms of lust, he long believed that he was paying homage to an immortal divinity. But suddenly, in the shape of Mentor, the sublime impression took hold of him; he recalled his higher calling, dove into the waves, and was freed.<sup>399</sup>

Klinger's analysis of this passage gives us an insight into the ambivalence that Schiller harbors toward nature itself and toward women, who are supposedly closer to nature than

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<sup>399</sup> Schiller, "Concerning the Sublime," 77.

men. On the one hand, “nature is viewed as benign and nurturant, a meaningful whole, an organic order in which man, nature’s beloved son, takes the supreme place” (this would be the part of Schiller that fights fragmentation); “equally present, however, is nature as chaotic, constantly threatening man’s life and liberty, or rather, an iron cage ensnaring man in a relentless life-and-death cycle completely inconsiderate of his aims and aspirations, indifferent to his suffering” (and here we find the Schiller who tries desperately to separate personhood from the body).<sup>400</sup> This ambivalence only begins to be resolved in his discussion of the significance of suffering in tragic drama. It is in Schiller’s understanding of tragedy and the historical sublime, therefore, that we find the richest resources for thinking through black women’s attempts to come to terms with the past through art and literature.

*c. Suffering (pathos) and the moral significance of tragedy*

Given his prioritization of the practically-sublime over the theoretically-sublime, it is easy to see why Schiller is more attentive than Kant to the dynamics of embodied artwork. It is not the question of presentation in the imagination but *representation* on stage the Schiller takes as his point of departure for a new theory of tragedy inspired by the classical poets. We can trace the emergence of his theory of tragedy out of the practically-sublime by looking at three elements that Schiller deems essential to any representation of the sublime: “*first*, the power of some natural object; *second*, the relation of this power to our capacity to resist it physically; *third*, the relation of this power to the moral person within us.”<sup>401</sup> The sublime is the effect produced by the

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<sup>400</sup> Klinger, “The Concepts of the Sublime and the Beautiful,” 200-1.

<sup>401</sup> Schiller, “On the Sublime,” 35-36.

combination of these elements in either one of two arrangements: either the frightful object is clearly portrayed, leaving it up to the observer to imagine the suffering it would cause and how a human being in that situation might resist it; or, alternatively, the frightful object and the suffering it produces are both represented, and the observer need only relate it to his consciousness of an inner capacity for resistance. If only the objective cause of suffering is portrayed, Schiller calls this the contemplative-sublime. When the suffering of human beings is also represented, we have an image of the pathetically-sublime. The pathetically-sublime is the domain of tragedy, which portrays the pathos (deep suffering) of heroic characters in order to invoke a particular kind of sympathetic response in the audience.

Schiller's essay *On the Art of Tragedy* provides something like a manual or guide for the dramatist who sets out to achieve this effect. "All sympathy presupposes *images* of suffering," Schiller writes. "The degree of sympathy depends upon the vividness, veracity, completeness, and length of the suffering."<sup>402</sup> Each of these elements is then explicated in turn in order to give form to tragedy as a literary genre. For the purposes of this discussion of the moral significance of tragedy, it is enough to note that the portrayal of suffering and the invocation of sympathy are its goal. The sympathy invoked by such portrayals of deep suffering should not, however, be confused with Burkean spectacles. While it is absolutely essential that the pain of the hero be imagined or actually portrayed, Schiller emphasizes that this is *not* the source of the feeling of the sublime. The representation of the body in pain is only the occasion for our reflection on the human capacity for resistance. Suffering can never itself be aesthetic.

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<sup>402</sup> Schiller, "On the Art of Tragedy," in his *Essays*, 11.

For this reason, those very artists and poets who believe that pathos is achieved merely by *sensuous* force of passion and by the most vivid possible depiction of suffering have a rather shabby understanding of their art. They forget that suffering itself can never be the alternate purpose of the depiction or the *immediate* source of pleasure we feel in what is tragic. The pathetic is aesthetic only insofar as it is sublime.<sup>403</sup>

The sublime, Schiller reminds us, is based on moral ideas of freedom and arises from “the part of human nature that transcends the senses.”<sup>404</sup> Thus Burke’s idea that sympathy is produced immediately by physical sensations of pleasure and pain cannot be supported in Schiller’s approach to tragedy.

This does not by itself exempt Schiller from the possible charge that images of other people’s pain and suffering are merely serving the purpose of elevating the observer in his own opinion.<sup>405</sup> This was overwhelmingly the case for enslaved black women in nineteenth-century America whose bodies appeared in spectacles that white men and women could use to reflect on their own freedom and superiority. The self-interest of white observers accounts for a good deal of the public interest in the staging of the black female body in pain, a practice whose platform was the auction block or the coffin—a procession of slaves moving in chains to or from the slave market. Saidiya Hartman’s groundbreaking study of such “scenes of subjection” shows how white observers would draw self-inflating conclusions from the “good cheer” and “joviality” of the enslaved, taking inspiration from the supposedly clear evidence of Africans’ “endurance” and “contentment” with the condition of slavery. Of course, much of the singing and dancing so commonly described was produced on pain of death or by the lash of the whip, but this

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<sup>403</sup> Schiller, “On the Pathetic,” in his *Essays*, 49.

<sup>404</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>405</sup> For a general discussion of the dangers of the “commodification of suffering” and the risk in allowing a “traffic in sorrow and grief,” see Elizabeth V. Spelman, *Fruits of Sorrow: Framing Our Attention to Suffering* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997).

was seldom mentioned in nineteenth-century texts. What was highlighted, instead, were facile lessons on “human happiness” preached at the expense of the tortured black body. “Indeed,” Hartman argues, “blackness provided the occasion for self-reflection as well as for an exploration of terror, desire, fear, loathing, and longing.”<sup>406</sup>

The problem that Hartman identifies in the discourse on the sublime (it is not named directly but certainly figures in her discussion of the black female body in pain) is that it threatens to purge all societal responsibility for violating black women by claiming that blacks are “strong,” “happy,” and can endure anything. The claim was made that even though slavery would be unendurable for a white person, those black people were just fine—look at how they sing and dance! The white observer could come away from the slave market feeling elevated by his experience.<sup>407</sup> Hartman shows how “the reenchantment of subjection occurs by way of coerced agency, simulated contentment, and the obliteration of the other through the slipping on of blackness or an empathic identification in which one [white, free] substitutes the self for the other [black, enslaved].”<sup>408</sup> Indeed, Schiller aptly defines sympathy as a “mistake” in which an observer confuses the observed for himself.<sup>409</sup> This type of sympathy readily turns into a form of dehumanization within the racial economy of slavery.

In defense of Schiller and the idea of the sublime it must be said, however, that the pleasurable shudders around the auction block or at the sight of the coffle lack two of

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<sup>406</sup> Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 7.

<sup>407</sup> The narratives that Hartman analyzes “...discredit any and all claims of pain...In effect, reflection acts to normalize the scene and deny the presence of violence by characterizing it as within the context of the socially endurable; and, accordingly, the scene shifts from one of despair to one of contentment and endurance. Remarkably, the emotional resources, animal needs, and limited affections of the enslaved are made responsible for this shift” (*Scenes of Subjection*, 34-35).

<sup>408</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>409</sup> Schiller, “On the Art of Tragedy,” 3.

the three essential elements of tragedy and the pathetically-sublime: firstly, the acknowledgement of the real and unmitigated pain of the suffering person and, secondly, a recognition of the moral resistance of the enslaved, which makes us conscious of their dignity without erasing the fact of their suffering or our political responsibility for the conditions that produced it. In Schiller's understanding of the sublime, the attribution of dignity to the person who suffers is the condition for the observers' reflection on his own sublimity. In this respect, what we find in nineteenth-century narratives of the black body in pain (produced from the perspective of white racial dominance) is completely contrary to Schiller. The message in Hartman's reading of these narratives—that racist reflections on the “endurance” of the enslaved deny the reality of suffering and deprive survival of its moral significance—has already been argued in previous chapters. I reiterate it here in order to underscore Schiller's attentiveness to the body in pain, and to insist that any supposed representation of the “sublime” that denies the overwhelming pain and suffering that black women endured during slavery is dehumanizing and grotesque. Equally, images that depict the pain while ignoring the moral resistance of those who suffer bear no resemblance to Schiller's sublime or his idea of tragedy. The more appropriate term for the scenes of subjection described by Hartman would be those that she proposes: minstrelsy and grotesque melodrama.<sup>410</sup>

*d. Is Sublimity real or ideal?*

At this point, it becomes necessary to address directly the question that recurs through this and the previous chapter. How is the body related to the soul within the sublime? I noted above that Schiller holds the two together and stares death in the

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<sup>410</sup> Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 26.

face only to revert to a Kantian dualism at the very last moment. Further, his eagerness to escape not just physical pain but also ensnarement in beauty and sensuousness alienates the fleshy body from the moral person and women from the sublime. It would not be incorrect to conclude that Schiller does *not* succeed in bridging Kant's divide between reason and sensibility. The clearest evidence that Schiller falls short of aesthetic "wholeness" is his statement that "actual suffering does not permit an aesthetic judgment, since such suffering overcomes the mind's freedom."<sup>411</sup> This implies that a certain ease of dissociation from sensation is required in order to become conscious of moral freedom—a mind-body split once again. It could reasonably be assumed that Schiller is withdrawing the possibility of moral resistance from the body in pain (at least for people who are not exceptionally heroic), and that this is the end of the story.

As I indicated above, however, there is a great deal of ambiguity in Schiller's thought as regards nature and the physical body, and his theory of tragedy proposes a rather different and significantly more integrated relationship between reason and sensibility. I will now substantiate the claim that his theory of tragedy resists dualism far more effectively than other formulations of the sublime.

My contention is that we should see Schiller's act of withdrawing the capacity for making aesthetic judgments from the person in pain as a recognition of the enormous psychic and spiritual toll of suffering on the individual. The capacity (or responsibility) that he takes away from the suffering individual is transferred to an aesthetic community that has the responsibility of upholding the dignity and freedom of the person who suffers. Not everybody can be a hero in the manner of Sixo, who had his gaze fixed firmly on the future as the flames licked at his feet. Sixo, or even Sethe in her moments

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<sup>411</sup> Schiller, "On the Sublime," 41.

of sublime courage and determination, is not entirely representative of Schiller's understanding of the sublime. With an eye on the ordinary person, Schiller presents another view of the sublime as the possibility rather than the actuality of resistance:

It is not absolutely necessary that one actually feel the strength of soul within oneself to assert one's moral freedom in the face of a seriously immanent danger. We are talking here, not about what *happens*, but rather about what *should* and *can* happen; in other words, we are talking about our *calling*, not about what we actually *do*; about our power, not about its use.<sup>412</sup>

This is why he insists that the tragic hero does not, in fact, actually have to overcome adversity. It is necessary only that he be depicted within a situation in which we can imagine how a person might act freely without being determined by the external forces that threaten to overwhelm him. "Hence, the aesthetic power with which the sublimeness of character and action take hold of us rests in no way upon reason's interest in things *being* done rightly, but rather upon imagination's interest in it *being possible* that things are done rightly," Schiller argues.<sup>413</sup> While his primary subject is the tragic hero, his ultimate focus is on the capacity of all human beings to become conscious of and claim their freedom under difficult circumstances. What he is interested in, essentially, is neither purely ideal nor fully captured by the real, but lies between the two in the realm of the possible.

Schiller sees himself as continuing to work within the spirit of Kant's philosophy, but with elaborations on the idea of the sublime that allow us to take suffering more seriously insofar as we see it impacting on a tragic hero's ability to form an image of himself as a free person. The individual whose courage fails in a difficult situation may not be immediately conscious of his or her own sublimity, but an observer who bears

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<sup>412</sup> Ibid., 43 (emphasis in original).

<sup>413</sup> Schiller, "On the Pathetic," 67.

witness to that person's suffering can find the dignity that has been "lost" and mirror it back to the person in pain. "As a dramatist," Cornell explains, "Schiller helps us understand why we need others if we are to bear witness to our moral freedom. We cannot do it alone. By evoking the *sensus communis aestheticus*, we are called to witness on behalf of the person or dramatic personae."<sup>414</sup> My contention, then, is that Schiller is reading Kant in such a way as to acknowledge the vulnerability of human beings, both morally and physically, while upholding the Kantian idea that we do not "lose" our dignity even in those times when the body or spirit is broken.

To return to the overarching interest of this study in representations of black women who were enslaved or colonized, it is now clear how we might come to attribute dignity to those who were overwhelmed by racial and sexual terror. Such a judgment of the sublime would depend on a particular conceptualization of dignity that has been put forward by Cornell. She argues,

[Dignity] remains no matter how the human being acts or does not act when confronted with heart-wrenching torture and brain-deadening pain. The trace of dignity within a person cannot die out even with the death of the human being. It is the dignity that remains even in the face of the dead piled up as corpses that calls us to witness to the full horror of what we have done to each other. It is because dignity remains that there is a call to all of us to reaffirm our own humanity and our responsibility before something as grand as the ideal of humanity itself. One of the most profound expressions of human dignity is in the ability to grieve, to recognize the horror of an event even against our inability to do anything about it.<sup>415</sup>

This notion of dignity stands against mass atrocities, widespread race-based and sex-based oppression, and deep suffering, all of which must be confronted if we are to address the painful legacies of slavery, colonialism and Apartheid. Cornell addresses each of these historical challenges in depth in the larger body of her work, but the

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<sup>414</sup> Cornell, *Between Women and Generations*, 87.

<sup>415</sup> Cornell, "Thinking the Future, Imagining Otherwise," 233.

following example that she draws from post-Apartheid South Africa is especially important as an illustration of the dignity that remains amidst devastation.

The Constitutional Court of South Africa displays in its art gallery and other parts of the building a number of creative works that represent the hopes and challenges of building a new South Africa. The artist Judith Mason has contributed a three-part piece that honors a woman who was tortured to death during the Apartheid era. This woman, whom Mason lovingly addresses as “Sister,” was executed by the security police and buried in a shallow grave, her face beaten beyond recognition and her body bare except for the underpants she had fashioned for herself out of blue plastic. Her story was told during the hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The officer who executed this woman made a statement to this effect: “I turned to my colleague before putting the gun to her head and shooting her, and said, ‘God she is brave’, because she asked if she could kneel and sing Nkosi Sikelele before she was killed.”<sup>416</sup> The title of Mason’s triptych is *The Man Who Sang and The Woman Who Stayed Silent*; its centerpiece is a blue dress made up of plastic bags, which Mason offers as a way of redressing the tortured body. The following words concealed within the folds of the dress:

Sister, a plastic bag may not be the whole armour of God, but you were wrestling with flesh and blood, and against powers, against the rulers of darkness, against spiritual wickedness in sordid places. Your weapons were your silence and a piece of rubbish. Finding that bag and wearing it until you were disinterred is such a frugal, common-sensical, house-wifely thing to do, an ordinary act... At some level you shamed your capturers, and they did not compound their abuse of you by stripping you a second time. Yet they killed you. We only know your story because a sniggering man remembered how brave you were. Memorials to your courage are everywhere; they blow about in the streets and drift on the tide and

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<sup>416</sup> Constitutional Court of South Africa, *Art Collection*, <http://concourt.artvault.co.za/collection.php> (Accessed March 9, 2010).

cling to thorn-bushes. This dress is made from some of them. Hamba kahle. Umkhonto.<sup>417</sup>

Bearing witness to the sublimity of the woman for whom the blue dress was made, Cornell addresses the following questions: “What if she had not resisted? What if there was no notation that she was a brave one? Would we still attribute dignity to her and seek to address her as worthy of our respect rather than the defilement she underwent through torture and sexual violence?”<sup>418</sup> Cornell insists that dignity cannot be destroyed even when human beings are assaulted, tortured, broken and killed. There is clear evidence that in the case of the woman honored by the blue dress, she remained courageous to the very last moment. The artwork pays tribute to that courage, but at the same time reminds us of her vulnerability and the fragility of her tortured body. It is in recognition of both, Cornell shows, that we become conscious of the dignity of the woman that Mason calls “Sister”—dignity defined here as “as the trace of the face even when it has been literally destroyed.”<sup>419</sup> These understanding of dignity will be central to my reading of various efforts to represent Sarah Bartmann as a sublime figure, tragically heroic not only insofar as she symbolizes black women’s courageous struggle for freedom, but also in her fragility and vulnerability to exploitation and dismemberment.

What are we to make, then, of Schiller’s statement quoted at the opening of this chapter, in which he assigns to art the role of redeeming the “lost” dignity of humanity? This statement follows upon his very important commentary on Roman sculpture: “The Roman of the first century had long been bowing the knee before his emperors when statues still portrayed him erect...” Schiller writes. What the statues show, he argues, is

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<sup>417</sup> Ibid.

<sup>418</sup> Cornell, “Thinking the Future, Imagining Otherwise,” 245.

<sup>419</sup> Ibid., 246.

that art continues to pay tribute to the dignity of humanity long after actual human relations have ceased to respect freedom. Although he speaks of humanity having “lost its dignity” (*Die Menschheit hat ihre Würde verloren*), what Schiller actually points to is its eclipse in political institutions and social practices. As already mentioned, the Terror that followed the French Revolution cast its shadow over Schiller’s writings. He was deeply dismayed by the degeneration of revolutionary dreams into violence and bloodshed, but he also felt convinced of the rightness of the goals that remained unrealized. A unique historical opportunity to make real the promise of freedom had been lost, but dignity itself could never be “lost” because it is what constitutes our very humanity. The task of the artist under such circumstances, he believed, is to present images of freedom as a constant challenge to prevailing political institutions and processes. “Truth lives on in the illusion of Art, and it is from this copy, or after-image, that the original image will once again be restored,” Schiller contended.<sup>420</sup> This argument is central to my claim, below, that representations of Sarah Bartmann as a sublime figure were instrumental to the recovery of France’s self-image as a republic founded on respect for the dignity and equality of all human beings. The meaning of 1789 became, as we will see, a decisive factor in the decision of the French Parliament to return Bartmann’s remains to South Africa.

*e. From tragedy to world history as a sublime object*

Tragedy raises the consciousness of the dignity of humanity by presenting an incongruity between the hero’s vocation for freedom and what is actually achieved. The

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<sup>420</sup> Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, op. cit., 57.

same can be said of the history of humankind in general.<sup>421</sup> In the first instance, we are presented with a painful image in which the purposes of the tragic hero are frustrated by a force that threatens to overwhelm him or her. However, the incongruity is subsequently resolved through a redemption of moral purposiveness, and there we discover the pleasurable element in tragedy. Pleasure and pain in watching tragic drama refer not to physical sensations but our sympathy with the frustrations and triumphs of human beings in their efforts to assert their will against all odds. The cause of frustration that induces the hero's suffering could be another character—the villain of the drama—or simply the hero's flaws and mistakes. But Schiller tells us that the best sort of tragedy does not rely on either a villain or a tragic flaw in order to generate pathos. Rather, tragedy in the strictest sense is a reflection on the human condition:

A writer who knows where his best interests lie will bring the misfortune about, not through a malicious will intending it and still less through a lack of understanding, but through the force of circumstances. If the misfortune springs, not from immoral sources, but rather from external things that neither have a will nor are subject to one, then our compassion is purer and, at least, is not diminished by any image of moral incongruity.<sup>422</sup>

The point is to remove tragic drama from the realm of moral reasoning (even though it remains morally significant) and make it subject to aesthetic judgments alone. Rather than preoccupying the audience with question of who is righteous, who is villainous, wherein lies duty, and who is worthy of blame, we are presented simply with the sublime image of a human being pitting his or her will against blind fate.

The greatest pathos in tragedy therefore arises from humanity's resistance against *ideal* objects that are frightful. Schiller's essay *On the Sublime* suggests that one such ideal object would be time itself:

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<sup>421</sup> Schiller, "On the Art of Tragedy," 7.

<sup>422</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

...time considered as a power working quietly but inexorably, necessity with its rigorous laws from which no natural being can escape, and even the moral idea of duty that behaves often enough like an inimical power toward our physical existence, become fearful objects as soon as the imagination relates them to the preservation instinct, and they become sublime as soon as reason applies them to its supreme laws.<sup>423</sup>

Time appears as a frightful object on account of its function as the transcendental category within which contingency, mortality and blind fate are demarcated. All of these have their role in tragedy because they threaten to negate humanity defined as free will, a negation that can be resisted only through a sublime confrontation with our own being in time.

Schiller takes the lesson of the individual hero confronting his or her fate and extends it to humanity as a whole in a powerful articulation of his views on history. We can no longer pretend that history is in some way consonant with humanity's vocation for freedom or that it is responsive to our moral purposes. Such happy views of history are simply insupportable, according to Schiller, for when we look around us all we see is the triumph of cruelty and devastation:

Away, then, with the coddling that is based upon a false understanding and with the frail, pampered taste that throws a veil over the stern face of necessity and, in order to put itself in a seriously advantageous position, *lies* about some sort of harmony between well-being and good behavior, a harmony of which there are no traces in the real world. On brow after brow cruel fate shows itself to us. There is salvation for us, not in ignorance of the dangers camped around and us—for ultimately this ignorance must come to an end—but only in the *acquaintance* with those dangers. To make this acquaintance we are helped along by the terrifying and magnificent spectacle [*Schauspiel*] of change destroying everything and re-creating it and then destroying it once again, a spectacle of ruin at times eating slowly away at things, other times suddenly assaulting them. History provides ample examples of the pathetic picture of humanity *wrestling* with fate, a picture of the incessant flight of fortune, of confidence betrayed, injustice triumphant, and innocence violated.<sup>424</sup>

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<sup>423</sup> Schiller, "On the Sublime," 37.

<sup>424</sup> Schiller, "Concerning the Sublime," 83.

This image of chaos and ruins over which we must no longer throw a veil of comforting lies has become Schiller's identifying mark in the philosophy of history.

Hans Kellner and Hayden White, who are some of the most important contemporary writers on meta-history, present ideas of chaos and disorder as Schiller's "historical sublime."<sup>425</sup> To summarize the part of Schiller's argument that has received the most attention in recent years, "the world as the historical object is at bottom nothing but the conflict of natural forces among themselves and with human freedom."<sup>426</sup> Note, however, that what we have here is the pathos of history, but nothing yet of a moral image of freedom. When Kellner tells us that "Friedrich von Schiller scorned any view of the past that made it orderly, rational, explicable, and satisfyingly meaningful,"<sup>427</sup> we should suspect that he is telling us only half of the story and fixing his gaze on the pathetic rather than the sublime. For Schiller, acknowledging the chaos and laying bare the struggle between freedom and necessity is a necessary step, but it is not enough. In the case of tragic drama, suffering caused by external forces that have no will of their own presents us with an incongruous image where what is achieved is always far less than the hope that has been frustrated. "[T]he participating spectator cannot be spared the unpleasant feeling of an incongruity in nature, which in this case only moral purposiveness can redeem."<sup>428</sup> Moving from the personal to the political, Schiller also looks to redeem the frustrated purposes of humanity as a whole. As an antidote to the unfreedom of temporality, he finds redemption in the power of reason to make sense of

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<sup>425</sup> Hayden V. White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 68-80; Hans Kellner, "However Imperceptibly: From the Historical to the Sublime," *PMLA* 118, 3 (May, 2003): 591-596.

<sup>426</sup> Schiller, "Concerning the Sublime," 81.

<sup>427</sup> Kellner, "However Imperceptibly," 592.

<sup>428</sup> Schiller, "On the Art of Tragedy," 8.

time, reflect on finitude and confront contingency. Schiller's historical sublime is not about chaos per se, but the sublimity of a humanity that can set its own ends in accordance with freedom and have hope for the future despite the fact that we stand amidst the ruins of history.

It is this fuller understanding of the historical sublime that forges the connection between individual tragedy and the struggle of humanity as a whole to find a greater purposiveness than what is represented by wars, genocides, and endless assaults on human dignity. Tragic drama gives us pleasure because it moves us to reflect on individuals' resistance against time and fate in the context of our collective striving toward freedom:

[E]very hint of displeasure disappears at the highest and final stage to which a morally formed person can ascend and to which the art that touches us can elevate itself. This happens when even that dissatisfaction with fate falls to the wayside, losing itself in the presentiment or rather in a distinct consciousness of a teleological connection among things, a sublime order, a benevolent will. Then, allied with our pleasure in moral harmony there is the invigorating image of the most perfect purposiveness in the entire expanse of nature. Its apparent violation, which in a single case caused pain, becomes simply a goad to our reason to search out general laws for a justification of this particular case and to resolve the isolated dissonance within the grand harmony."<sup>429</sup>

Schiller goes on to say that Greek tragedy did not reach this highest pinnacle, where the particularity of suffering becomes significant and is redeemed by being brought under a general idea. In other words, modern tragedy supercedes classical forms because the individual case moves us to create an overarching narrative of world history even as we remain acutely aware of the fictiveness of the relation that is built between events. For Schiller, history itself remains inscrutable, and it is our capacity to find purposiveness within the chaos and hope amidst the devastation that is sublime. It is in the context of an

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<sup>429</sup> Ibid., 9.

extended discussion of our independence from nature as much as from fate that Schiller states the following: “Considered from this perspective and *only* from this perspective, world history is for me a sublime object.”<sup>430</sup>

The importance of this perspective for black women’s history cannot be overemphasized. In reflecting with Schiller on world history as a sublime object, we can take up the task of giving form to the chaos of the past and ascribing meaning to the senseless deaths of those who were brutalized and buried under the ruins of slavery, colonialism and Apartheid. For women who are heirs to this history, the collective memory of physical and psychological fragmentation creates a particularly intense yearning for wholeness, spurring efforts to weave together a plausible narrative of the past. However, no single person has the entire story: black women must put together a narrative identity by collecting together the pieces of their own and other women’s bodies, memories, experiences, and material cultures. Even with the valuable contributions that historians have made in finding the trace of lost souls in the archives, the work of writing black women’s history still remains a difficult task of assembling fragments, meshing together the lives of lost people scattered across time and space, and imbuing them all with hope and moral purposiveness.

*f. The politics of progress*

The creation of an overarching narrative of world history as a sublime object leads Schiller to a hopeful future only by way of an encounter with the past. Like Rousseau’s famous *Discourse on the Origins and Foundations of Inequality Among Men*, Schiller’s is a “purely” conjectural account. It represents an attempt to comprehend in

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<sup>430</sup> Schiller, “Concerning the Sublime,” 81 (emphasis in original).

thought the multiplicity of human action and experience over time and to give it a purposiveness towards freedom and the full realization of human capabilities. He suggests that man has progressed from immersion in the merely physical world to independence from determination by nature in a series of steps. According to Schiller, we can distinguish between “three different moments or stages of development through which both the individual and the species as a whole must pass, inevitably and in a definite order, if they are to complete the full cycle of their destiny.” The three stages are as follows: “Man in his *physical* state merely suffers the dominion of nature; he emancipates himself from this dominion in the *aesthetic* state, and he acquires mastery over it and the *moral*.”<sup>431</sup>

In the physical state, the world appears as fate rather than object, and time seems discontinuous. Man can neither find purpose in his relationship to the natural world nor dignity in himself and others:

Each phenomenon stands before him, isolated and cut off from all other things, even as he himself is isolated and unrelated in the great chain of being. All that exists, exists for him only at the behest of the moment; every change seems to him an entirely new creation, since with the lack of necessity within him there is none outside him either, to connect the changing forms into a universe and, though individual phenomena pass away, to hold fast upon the stage of the world the unvarying law that informs them.<sup>432</sup>

Schiller reminds us that this description of the physical state does not apply to actual groups of people that lived in any particular age. “It is purely an idea”; but this idea helps us define, in stages, the unique character of man as a moral person who is distinct from the rest of the natural world. In the moral state, human beings finally achieve a consciousness of their independence from nature. The purpose of the aesthetic state is to

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<sup>431</sup> Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, 171.

<sup>432</sup> Ibid.

preserve the character of the other two states of being intact as human beings make the transition from one to the other. In the gap between the physical and the moral, the aesthetic state offers the hope for reconciling the dualities that result from the assertion of human being's freedom from a natural state in which they are nevertheless embedded.

Although he describes the progress of man in stages that proceed in strict order from one to the other, Schiller cautions his readers against drawing the conclusion that "there ever was a time when man found himself purely at the physical stage, or another when he had entirely freed himself from it." The three stages are with us always and are "the necessary conditions of all knowledge that comes to us through the senses."<sup>433</sup> His stage theory of history not only prescribes the conditions for our experience of the world, but it also allows us to think human beings' independence from nature without giving up our yearning for wholeness and the demand for the respect of our bodies as essential to a dignified life and a dignified death.

There is no escaping, however, the fact that Schiller's conjectural account of human progress could only have been conceived from his particular social and political location. The caveats are all well and good, but this is emphatically not a view from nowhere. For example, Schiller sometimes describes the reconciliation of freedom and necessity within the aesthetic as a recovery of our "childlike" naïveté, a return to the stage when "our" minds were fresh, open, and our total being consisted of as-yet undetermined and unfulfilled possibilities. It is not a simple return to childhood, however, but the recovery of childlikeness at a later stage when the unfulfilled potential can be realized by the fullest possible development of human capabilities. It is a recovery of childhood with all the advantages of adult use of reason. Schiller is a poet who excels

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<sup>433</sup> Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, 183fn.

at finding the perfect metaphor, and he does not restrict himself to children, childhood and childlikeness. The undetermined state of naïveté is also represented by country folk and primitive peoples. By gazing upon the primitive and naïve, “we” discover how to redeem ourselves from the alienation of modern living.<sup>434</sup>

It is a very small step from the celebration of a contained primitivism to the paradoxes of space and time that Mann described in her critique of the Kantian sublime. Children, natural objects, and “primitive” peoples who are seen across space in Schiller’s present moment are somehow thrust back in time, and there is a great deal of confusion about where the European male ends and the “other” begins. It suggests that a European man can recapture his childhood simply by looking at an image of a “primitive” person in an ethnographic text. Schiller’s writing is completely unselfconscious with regard to these paradoxes of space and time. The following passage is a case in point:

They [nature, children, country folk, primitives] *are* what we *were*; they are what we *should become* once more. We were nature like them, and our culture should lead us along the path of reason and freedom back to nature...in *them* we forever see what eludes us, something we must struggle for and can hope to approach in an endless progress, even though we never attain it. In *ourselves* we see an advantage that they lack, something that they either could never participate in at all, as in the case of beings devoid of reason, or can participate in only in as much as they proceed down the same path that *we* did, as in the case of children.<sup>435</sup>

Women, too, are numbered among these naïve creatures who remind “us” of our lost childhood. “Nature,” Schiller claims, “has assigned to the opposite sex its highest perfection as far as the naïve character is concerned. The feminine addiction to being pleasing strives after nothing so much as the illusion of being naïve; proof enough, if one

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<sup>434</sup> Schiller, “On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry,” in his *Essays*.

<sup>435</sup> *Ibid.*, 180-181.

had been no other evidence, that the greatest power of the sex rests upon this characteristic.”<sup>436</sup>

Yet Schiller is not always paternalistically indulgent of women and primitive peoples—he can be considerably harsher. In his *Aesthetic Letters*, he tells us that the “savage,” the “nomad,” and “troglodyte” man who lives in caves remain in a state of dependence on nature because nature has denied them the feeling of the beautiful.<sup>437</sup> The savage and the troglodyte Schiller refers to are not philosophical abstractions but biological/anthropological terms that were applied to specific people in the eighteenth century.<sup>438</sup> It is important to explicate these terms because they have some bearing on the category of “Hottentot,” which was the pejorative term used to describe Sarah Bartmann and her people. Historian of science Stephen Jay Gould explains that the founder of taxonomy, Carolus Linneaus (1707-1778), was interested in finding a way to classify the different types of human being that were “discovered” by European explorers. The theory of the “great chain of being” suggested that all living things formed a single chain of increasing complexity, with fixed gradations from one species to the next. However, significant gaps such as that between human beings and apes challenged the validity of the claims that were being made. The “discovery” of the *Homo troglodyte* in the eighteenth century therefore seemed serendipitous. Although the troglodyte was quickly incorporated into theories of the great chain, Gould tells us that “this second species, active at only at night and speaking in hisses, offered little information to back up its

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<sup>436</sup> Ibid., 190.

<sup>437</sup> Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, 191.

<sup>438</sup> Paul de Man takes issue with Schiller’s anthropomorphism in the discussion of tragedy and, by implication, in this kind of substitution of the empirical for the philosophical. Spivak argues, on the other hand, that “the best we can do is *attempt* to account for it. Not to do so is to stop at Kant’s tropology or figurative practice and ignore the dissimulated history and geography of the subject in Kant’s text (*Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, 16).”

existence. *Homo troglodytes* emerged as a compound of exaggerated travelers' reports based on imperfect observations of anthropoid apes humanized or native peoples degraded."<sup>439</sup> The existence of the troglodyte was eventually discredited, but other types of "savages" were found to fill that gap, among them the "Hottentot." What exactly was to be learned about "ourselves" from viewing Bartmann's body? Gould explains:

On the racist ladder of human progress, Bushmen and Hottentots vied with Australian aborigines for the lowest rung, just above chimps and oranges....In this system, Saartjie [Bartmann] exerted a grim fascination, not as a missing link in a later evolutionary sense, but as a creature who straddled that dreaded boundary between human and animal and thereby taught us something about a self still present, although submerged, in "higher" creatures.<sup>440</sup>

Some of the lessons that Schiller extracted from "savages" have already been discussed, but it is useful to put these in the context of broader intellectual and political movements of his day.

Before the French revolution, the image of the savage provided a model of a free human being (albeit with the paternalistic overtones of Schiller's celebration of naiveté). Gustav Jahoda argues that it was mostly anti-Enlightenment philosophers and other thinkers who were greatly invested in slavery—men like Edward Long whose *History of Jamaica* was discussed in Chapter Two—who set out to denigrate "savages" and blacks. Long's disparagement of blacks did not represent the dominant view during the Enlightenment, but this began to change at the turn of the century as descriptions of Africans as ape-like creatures became the "leitmotif of 19th-century thought on race."<sup>441</sup> Among those responsible for this shift was Georges Cuvier, a naturalist who is considered to be the inventor of biology. Cuvier believed that anatomical structure could

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<sup>439</sup> Stephen Jay Gould, *The Flamingo's Smile: Reflections in Natural History* (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1987), 263.

<sup>440</sup> Ibid., 294.

<sup>441</sup> Jahoda, *Images of Savages*, 57.

give insight not only into the source of diversity among the human “races,” but also serve as an indicator of intangible characteristics. According to Cuvier, there was “a relationship between the perfection of the spirit and the beauty of the face.”<sup>442</sup> “Facial angles,” dimensions of the cranium, “eye-ear planes” and all manner of anatomical measurements were devised in order to determine the proximity of blacks to apes. He therefore took a keen interest in Sarah Bartmann’s anatomy, studying her in Paris while she was alive and dissecting her body soon after her death. His measurement and published descriptions of her body parts can be read as a long list of Bartmann’s animal characteristics as against her human characteristics. At all times, therefore, the humanity of Bartmann and other “Hottentots” was in question.

The slippage between humanity a regulative ideal and its particular representations in time and space is apparent from even a cursory reading of eighteenth and nineteenth century texts.<sup>443</sup> However, it is not enough to point this out and hope that a stricter enforcement of Kantian distinctions will get rid of problems of exclusion in Enlightenment thought. What is required, in addition, is a critical approach to ideals themselves. As Cornell acknowledges, “So many of us—women, blacks, Chicanas, gays, lesbians, and the transgendered—have been thrown out of the ideal of humanity because we did not purportedly have the positive attributes associated with that ideal.”<sup>444</sup> She calls for a continual vigilance against the use of ideals to exclude and degrade certain groups of people, but she also goes further to show us what a critical idealism would entail:

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<sup>442</sup> As quoted in Jahoda, *Images of Savages*, 77.

<sup>443</sup> For the distinction between taking humanity as a regulative ideal and treating it as a constitutive ideal, see Drucilla Cornell, *Defending Ideals: War, Democracy, and Political Struggles* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 96-97.

<sup>444</sup> Cornell, “Thinking the Future, Imagining Otherwise,” 237.

There is always more to what it might mean to be human. As we envision women to be human beings, for example, the configuration of the ideal itself changes... Thus the acceptance of human finitude, which relinquishes any notion that God's eyes are ours, does not mean that we have to relinquish ideals, but it does mean that we have to recognize the limits of any configuration before us in the world.<sup>445</sup>

We must therefore understand the approach to "humanity" in ethical feminism as doing two things at once: firstly, defending the ideal of "humanity" against slippage into a set of positive attributes that are used to dehumanize the "other," and secondly, remaining conscious that our respect for the dignity of those who have been excluded requires that we rework the very ideal of "humanity" that we invoke.

## II. The Tragedy of Sarah Bartmann

### *The First movement: chaos and dismemberment*

#### *a. The 1810 trial*

Most of what is now "known" about Bartmann's early life is taken from sworn affidavits filed during a trial in 1810 to determine whether Bartmann had come to England as a free person and whether she consented to be put on display on a London stage as the "Hottentot Venus."<sup>446</sup> Members of the African Institution, an abolitionist organization, brought suit against Bartmann's exhibitor claiming that he was putting Bartmann on show against her will. They described her as "a woman of most extraordinary or unnatural shape" and recreated the "public spectacle" of her exhibition in their testimony. The three men wished to take her under the protection of the African Institution in order

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<sup>445</sup> Ibid., 248.

<sup>446</sup> Transcripts of sworn affidavits filed during the trial of 1810 are published in Z. S. Strother, "Display of the Body Hottentot," in *Africans on Stage: Studies in Ethnological Show Business*, ed. Bernth Lindfors (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 41-48.

to “restore her to her Country and friends.”<sup>447</sup> The man accused of being her captor, Henrick Cesar (or Caesar), vigorously disputed these charges. The question of “free will” and “consent” was therefore put to Bartmann herself, who did not testify before the court in person but was interviewed at “her residence” by representatives from both sides of the case in the presence of the Coroner of the Court. She spoke in Dutch and stated that she could neither read nor write: we hear her voice only as transmitted through court interpreters.<sup>448</sup>

It was thought at the time that a reconstruction of Bartmann’s journey from southern Africa to Britain would give a clear indication as to her status either as a free or enslaved person, so this was the line of questioning with which the deposition proceeded. Bartmann said that she left the place of her birth in the inland regions of southern Africa at a very young age and was taken by a Peter Caesar to the Cape where she became a nursery maid to Caesar’s brother, Henrick. Incredibly, the record indicates that this was “with her own consent,” even though Bartmann states that she was too young at the time to recall the details of her journey to the Cape. What could the “consent” of a child possibly mean, especially when her people had been dislocated and dispossessed by colonial expansion? South African historian Yvette Abrahams tells us that Bartmann’s journey to the Cape coincided with a period of increased enslavement of the Khoekhoe in the 1790s and the early 1800s. She argues that it is overwhelmingly unlikely that Bartmann could have passed through “the heartland of Khoekhoe slavery” as a free

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<sup>447</sup> Transcript of affidavit signed by Zachary Macaulay, Thomas Gisborne Babington, and Peter van Wageninge, published in Strother, “Display of the Body Hottentot,” 43.

<sup>448</sup> For a detailed discussion of the politics of speaking for Sarah Bartmann See Janell Hobson, *Venus in the Dark: Blackness and Beauty in Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 55-87.

person.<sup>449</sup> Although the British government made it illegal to enslave the Khoekhoe when they took over the Cape Colony from the Dutch at the end of the eighteenth century, conditions on the ground were hardly improved by these laws. The “Hottentot Proclamation” of 1809 required the payment of wages and outlawed debt bondage for all Khoe laborers, but it then tied them even more securely to their masters by requiring the formal registration of all Khoe servants and authorizing corporal punishment without affording them the right to a court trial. There were no provisions, either, for enforcing the wage requirement. Arguably, the Khoekhoe were worse off after the law came into effect than they were prior to its enactment.<sup>450</sup>

From this kind of servitude at the Cape, the court record states that Bartmann came “by her own consent” to England in the company of Henrick Cesar and Alexander Dunlop, who was a ship’s surgeon and a dealer in exotica. The stated arrangement was that Bartmann would remain in England for six years (other witnesses in the case claimed it was two years) and that half of the proceeds from her exhibition would be hers to keep. As soon as the trio arrived in London, however, Dunlop attempted to sell Bartmann off to the owner of the Liverpool Museum, an exhibition hall that presented various wonders of natural history to the general public. Dunlop tried to convince the museum owner of “the extraordinary shape and make of the Woman and that she was an object of great curiosity and would make the fortune of any person by exhibiting her (for the said two years) to

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<sup>449</sup> Yvette Abrahams, “Ambiguity is My Middle Name: A Research Diary,” in *Women in South African History: They Remove Boulders and Cross Rivers* = Basus’imbokodo, Bawel’imilambo, ed. Nomboniso Gasa, (Cape Town and Chicago: HSRC Press, 2007), 443.

<sup>450</sup> Timothy J. Keegan, *Colonial South Africa and the Origins of the Racial Order* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996), 54. Also see Vivian Bickford-Smith, “Black Ethnicities, Communities and Political Expression in Late Victorian Cape Town,” *The Journal of African History* 36, 3 (1995): 443-465.

the public.”<sup>451</sup> The offer was declined. Dunlop then somehow succeeded in divesting himself of his share in Sarah Bartmann, leaving Caesar to manage and exhibit her single-handedly.

The advertisements for the exhibition declared that Bartmann was a “truly interesting object of natural history,” and that “the public will have an opportunity of judging how far she exceeds any description given by historians of that tribe of the human species [the ‘Hottentot’].”<sup>452</sup> This indicates that there was already an established way of representing the Hottentot in Europe by the time Bartmann made her appearance on a London stage (I use the term “Hottentot” to refer to a creation of the colonial imagination rather than the Khoekhoe themselves). Because the Khoekhoe language has a number of distinctive click sounds, European travelers and colonialists portrayed them as a people without language and devoid of reason—the term “Hottentot” is a compound word of Dutch origin that refers to stuttering or stammering.<sup>453</sup> One of the earliest European travelers to the Cape reported that “if there is any medium between a rational animal and a beast, the Hotantot lays the fairest claim to that species.”<sup>454</sup> Illustrators sketched the Hottentot wearing a variety of animal skins or nothing at all, with disheveled hair, eating raw meat from butchered carcasses and displaying other signs of savagery. Z. S. Strother calls our attention to “the radical dissymmetry of Hottentot men and women” in these images: while the male was sometimes drawn in the posture of a noble warrior, the woman was always depicted in a state of unqualified savagery. This mode of

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<sup>451</sup> Transcript of affidavit signed by William Bullock, published in Strother, “Display of the Body Hottentot,” 47.

<sup>452</sup> As quoted by Strother, “Display of the Body Hottentot,” 25.

<sup>453</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>454</sup> John Ovington, *A Voyage to Surrat in the year 1689*, as quoted in Robert Launay, “Writes of Passage The Cape of Good Hope in Late Seventeenth-Century Narratives of Travel to Asia,” *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 36 (2001), 421.

representation took on a “scientific” validity, so that Diderot’s famous *Encyclopedie* described Hottentots as “the most barbarous [of the] savages.”<sup>455</sup> These and other claims laid the groundwork for the exhibition of Sarah Bartmann in 1810.

The record of Bartmann’s deposition indicates that she had “no complaints” about her treatment, apart from the fact that “her dress [was] too cold.”<sup>456</sup> It seems that that Henrick Cesar was determined to present her in such a manner as to make her instantly recognizable as a “Hottentot,” while emphasizing her backside for the pleasure of the audience. Thus Bartmann would be displayed in a tight costume that closely matched the color of her skin, adorned with various “rude ornaments” and accessories that marked her as a Hottentot.<sup>457</sup> Apart from the one complaint about her dress, the record states that she was “perfectly happy” in her situation and had “no desire whatever of returning to her country not even for the purpose of seeing her two Brothers and four sisters.”<sup>458</sup> The court was also informed that both her parents were dead and that Bartmann had once been married to a drummer at the Cape and had given birth to a child who died shortly thereafter. At the time of the deposition, she said she was 22 years old, which would suggest that she was born in 1789 or thereabouts. This date would later become central to the debate in the French Senate regarding Bartmann’s captivity in their own country.

Against this report of “perfect happiness” the members of the African Institution emphasized the indecency of Bartmann’s display in a flesh-colored dress that was “so tight that her shapes above and the enormous size of her posterior parts [were] as visible

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<sup>455</sup> Strother, “Display of the Body Hottentot,” 3.

<sup>456</sup> Transcript of the deposition of the Hottentot Venus, 27<sup>th</sup> Nov. 1810, published in Strother, 41.

<sup>457</sup> Strother, “Display of the Body Hottentot,” 25-7.

<sup>458</sup> Deposition of the Hottentot Venus, in Strother, 41.

as if the said female were naked...”<sup>459</sup> They also put it to the court that Bartmann was ill-treated and degraded by her exhibitor, Henrick Caesar. “The said Exhibitor sometimes would call the said female to him, and when she came would desire heard to turn around and would invite the spectators to feel her posterior parts...”<sup>460</sup> the representatives of the African Institution reported. When Bartmann refused to respond to his commands, Cesar was observed to shake a stick threateningly until she complied. The abolitionists attempted to question Bartmann directly, but she would not respond to their questions in the exhibition hall. In the absence of Bartmann’s voice, these men read her face and gestures. They insisted that she looked “unhappy,” “dejected,” that she sighed frequently and she “gave evident signs of mortification and misery at her degraded situation in being made a spectacle for the derision of the bystanders without the power of resistance.”<sup>461</sup>

In response to these charges, Cesar produced a contract showing that Bartmann agreed to display herself in exchange for half the earnings from her exhibition. This document may have been backdated to give his actions an appearance of legitimacy, but the court was nevertheless convinced of its validity. The judge found that there was a contractual relationship between Caesar and Bartmann, and that she clearly understood and was satisfied with its provisions. The case was dismissed.

It is my contention that the African Institution was frustrated in its quest to rescue Bartmann both as a result of the court’s narrow conception of freedom and the Institution’s own interests in the matter, which precluded a serious consideration of Bartmann’s will and desires. On its part, the court reduced free will and consent to the right, made sacred under capitalism, to commodify and alienate one’s labor. For better or

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<sup>459</sup> Affidavit signed by Macaulay, Babington, and van Wageninge, in Strother, 43.

<sup>460</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>461</sup> Ibid.

for worse, all questions of slavery under capitalism are decided not to the basis of the nature and conditions of work but on the mere fact of payment for one's labor. Just as the British government had "abolished" Khoes slavery at the Cape by proclaiming that slaves must be paid, a London court now placed the price of Bartmann's freedom at one penny—half the price of admission to the spectacle of the "Hottentot Venus." This raises questions about the commodification of the female body and the significance of women's sexual labor in racialized "economies of the flesh," to borrow a term from Lisa Gail Collins.<sup>462</sup> It is no coincidence that the image of the female Hottentot (as distinct from Khoekhoe women) came to be closely associated with that of "the prostitute" in European visual culture. In one of the most frequently cited studies of Bartmann's life and times, Sander Gilman tells us that "in the course of the nineteenth century, the female Hottentot comes to represent the black female *in nuce*, and the prostitute to represent the sexualized woman."<sup>463</sup> Reading famous works of art iconographically, Gilman shows how the two images come together: the figure of a black servant in the background of Edouard Manet's *Olympia* (1863), for example, is enough to give the white female nude reclining on the couch an air of illicit sexuality. While the white woman is sexualized by this association with blackness, the black woman is always already signifying sexual deviance and availability.<sup>464</sup>

My argument that the court should have considered the sexual labor that

Bartmann performed as evidence of the foreclosure of her freedom is not intended as a

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<sup>462</sup> Lisa Gail Collins, *The Art of History: African American Women Artists Engage the Past* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002).

<sup>463</sup> Sander L. Gilman, "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature," *Critical Inquiry* 12, No. 1 (Autumn, 1985), 204-242 at 206. Also note Zine Magubane's critique of Gilman's central claim in "Which Bodies Matter? Feminism, Poststructuralism, Race and the Curious Theoretical Odyssey of the 'Hottentot Venus,'" *Gender and Society* 15, 6 (Dec 2001): 816-34.

<sup>464</sup> Gilman, "Black Bodies, White Bodies" 209.

definitive statement on sex work in the abstract. Sexual labor *may* be consonant with women's freedom in theory, but that question does not arise when the female body is assumed to be available for anybody to poke and prod because it is racialized in a particular way. Where is the space for freedom when it is assumed that if you are black/brown you *must* be selling sex?<sup>465</sup> The assumption of black/brown women's sexual availability invalidates both the "choice" to sell one's sexual labor and the resistance against it because it makes no reference to the will in either case.

The African Institution, on its part, was too preoccupied with its stated mission of "civilizing Africa" to view Bartmann as capable of expressing her own will. In addition to their skepticism regarding Bartmann's "consent" to be exhibited, their dismissal of her wish to remain in Britain was evidence of their reluctance to allow an "uncivilized" African to participate in her own rescue.<sup>466</sup> The Institution was paternalistic in its organization and mission and was seeking not her freedom to decide her own fate but authorization to take her into its custody and transport her overseas. In her fictional account of the court case, Chase-Riboud represents Bartmann's "choice" as a choice between two different sets of captors and between two different ways of dying: "Everyone was determined to set me free even if it killed me," Chase-Riboud's Sarah remarks.<sup>467</sup>

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<sup>465</sup> See Lorraine Hansberry's reflections on this conundrum, quoted in Abrahams, "Ambiguity is My Middle Name," 422.

<sup>466</sup> The full name of the African Association was the "African Association for Promoting the Discovery of the Interior of Africa." For further analysis of the commercial interests of the organization, see Magubane, "Which Bodies Matter?" 828.

<sup>467</sup> Chase-Riboud, *Hottentot Venus*, 150.

*b. From spectacle to specimen*

After the court case was decided, the “Hottentot Venus” show continued on tour through England and eventually Bartmann was transported to France where she was put on display for another five years, sketched and studied by scientists, and dissected immediately upon her death. Georges Cuvier cut up her body, preserved her genitalia and brain in jars, made a plaster cast of her body, then removed the flesh in order to study her skeleton more closely. He published his findings in 1817, focusing on the similarities and differences between her body and that of the highest ape.<sup>468</sup>

Cuvier’s report also described “the female Hottentot’s organ of generation,” which was the subject of as much speculation in science as in popular culture. Sander Gilman explains that the fascination with Bartmann’s body was not only because her buttocks were deemed abnormally large, but also because they were seen as an indicator of yet more shocking genital anomalies concealed from public view. The rumor circulated by white men who had traveled to the Cape region was that the female Hottentot had an “apron” that she hid between her legs, a purported anomaly that was soon assigned a medical description along with a cultural explanation. Gilman reproduces both of these for a contemporary readership: “the so-called Hottentot apron [is] a hypertrophy of the labia and nymphae caused by the manipulation of the genitalia and serving as a sign of beauty among certain tribes, including the Hottentots and Bushmen as well as tribes in Basutoland and Dahomey,” Gilman informs us.<sup>469</sup> When Bartmann had stood naked before a group of scientists and the four artists who sketched

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<sup>468</sup> For a synopsis of this report, see Gould, *The Flamingo’s Smile*, 295-301.

<sup>469</sup> Gilman, “Black Bodies, White Bodies,” 213.

her body in the *Jardin du Roi* in Paris, she resisted all their attempts to confirm or disprove the existence of a “Hottentot apron.” Thus there was a note of triumph when, after her death, Cuvier presented to ‘the Academy the genital organs of this woman prepared in a way so as to allow one to see the nature of the labia.’”<sup>470</sup>

If the central failure of the legal examination of Sarah Bartmann was the inability to make her suffering visible, the scientific examination yields a superfluity of pathetic images all cast in a grotesque light. The cause of Bartmann’s suffering is said to be the abnormal extension of her buttocks and genitals. Cuvier’s report establishes the conventions for the portrayal of Bartmann as a primitive creature who suffers from a variety of diseases, conditions, and deficiencies, and these conventions are followed in contemporary studies as well. While Strother and Gilman are very attentive to the construction of “hottentotism” as a linguistic deficiency in the medical literature, their analyses of other forms of illnesses pinned to Bartmann’s body are far less critical.<sup>471</sup> Echoing the nineteenth-century studies, Strother tells us that Bartmann “suffered from steatopygia, enlargement of the behind.”<sup>472</sup> There is no mention that this “condition” results from a colonial mode of judgment where everything black appears painful and anomalous, as we saw in Burke’s discussion of the effects of blackness on the white observer. Strother again: “Bartmann suffered to an unusual degree from steatopygia, a condition common but by no means restricted to Khoisan people.”<sup>473</sup> Bernth Lindfors simply refers to Bartmann as a “steatopygous woman.”<sup>474</sup> To pile one pathology upon another, there is also the “fact” that Bartmann was afflicted with “hypertrophy of the

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<sup>470</sup> Ibid., 215-6.

<sup>471</sup> Strother, “Display of the Body Hottentot,” 3.

<sup>472</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>473</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>474</sup> Lindfors, “Introduction,” in *Africans on Stage*, ix.

*labia minora*,” an ostensibly more objective way of referencing the Hottentot apron.<sup>475</sup>

Gilman and Stephen Jay Gould attempt to offer a cultural explanation for the disease, suggesting that Khoekhoe produce the hypertrophy through a “manipulation of the genitalia.”<sup>476</sup>

This medical terminology is so pervasive and authoritative that it shapes feminist criticism as well. Deborah Willis and Carla Williams, who have made some of the most important contributions towards the recovery of the black female body in visual culture, have great trouble breaking out of nineteenth-century discourses. Their statements that “Bartmann’s most obvious [sexual and racial] difference was the shape of her buttocks due to steatopygia,” and that “her other distinctive physical feature was her extended labia minora” leave the established view of Bartmann’s suffering unquestioned.<sup>477</sup> With sympathy and wry humor, but nevertheless lacking in mindfulness, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting writes, “Standing a mere four feet six inches tall, Bartmann’s miniature frame was weighed down by her abundant buttocks. It was this riveting attribute, ‘large as a cauldron pot,’ as one bawdy English ballad attests, that Europeans paid to see.”<sup>478</sup> Cuvier’s conclusions about the cause of Bartmann’s suffering are revalidated, and the autopsy report is placed beyond the field of feminist criticism.

Clearly, there has been a general acceptance of what Abrahams calls the “genital lie.”<sup>479</sup> Her analysis of the historiography of Sarah Bartmann suggests that the cycle of pathologizing and then attempting to explain the anomalous shape, structure, size, and

<sup>475</sup> Strother, “Display of the Body Hottentot,” 21.

<sup>476</sup> Gilman, “Black Bodies, White Bodies,” 213; Gould as quoted in Abrahams, “Ambiguity is My Middle Name,” 425.

<sup>477</sup> Deborah Willis and Carla Williams, *The Black Female Body: A Photographic History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 61.

<sup>478</sup> T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, *Black Venus: Sexualized Savages, Primal Fears, and Primitive Narratives in French* (Durham, N.C: Duke University Press, 1999), 18.

<sup>479</sup> Abrahams, “Ambiguity is My Middle Name,” 424.

length of Bartmann's genitalia is not based on empirical "facts" but on political and unethical claims about the value of certain people's bodies. Nor can the genital lie be in/validated by a return to the scene of the dissection, because no autopsy can tell us the truth about the humanity of a person.

In recognition of the impossibility of contesting racist and sexist depictions of Bartmann within the established discourse, Abrahams takes a new approach to recovering Bartmann's humanity. She abandons the scientific "objectivity" of the dissecting table and revivifies Bartmann by locating her within the Khoekhoe community of which she herself is a part. From a now familiar location within a moral community of persons, Abrahams refers to Bartmann respectfully as "auntie Sarah." She then takes on the problem of the genital lie. "I did not want to do the disproving by referring to the physical evidence; that was not the respectful thing to do," Abrahams writes. "Rather, I thought, if I could discuss the history of ideas about the Khoekhoe I could show that this history had an existence unrelated to anatomical realities."<sup>480</sup> In this chapter, I have traced some of that history as outlined by Abrahams. But ultimately, Abrahams finds that the recovery of Bartmann is not a task for historians alone. Medical discourses are authorized not by the unassailability of their knowledge claims, but by sets of interests backed by political power. "Some victories just cannot be won in the academic sphere, but only on the streets outside," Abrahams concludes. "It gave me a curious feeling of satisfaction when the Griquas, a section of Khoekhoe people who can trace their tradition of resistance way back to 1656, took up auntie Sarah's cause."<sup>481</sup>

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<sup>480</sup> Ibid., 429.

<sup>481</sup> Ibid., 442.

In Kantian terms, what is missing from much of the historiography of Sarah Bartmann is respect for her dignity as a person of unconditional worth, a respect that must be accorded independently from any empirical analysis of her bodily dimensions. Indeed, dignity does not admit of this type of measurement. We can understand this aspect of dignity through one of the formulations of Cornell's "imaginary domain," a heuristic device that was introduced in Chapter Three. Thinking through the difficulties of addressing questions of embodiment and sexual difference in feminist theories of freedom, Cornell proposes the imaginary domain as "the place of prior equivalent evaluation that must be imagined no matter what historical and anthropological researchers tell us is 'true' about women's nature."<sup>482</sup> This space gives us a way of resisting the degradation of women that results from the devaluation of their bodies, as happened in Bartmann's case. Cornell suggests that "we can deploy the imaginary domain to interpret what it means for a sexed being to be included in the moral community of persons as an initial matter. This inclusion demands that our sexual difference be equivalently evaluated so that no one's sex can be dispositive of the denial of personhood."<sup>483</sup> This releases feminist critics from the perceived imperative of proving or disproving the existence of the "Hottentot apron" and the enormity of Bartmann's buttocks as a prerequisite for recognizing her personhood. The type of imaginative recovery that Cornell proposes calls for a re-symbolization and re-presentation of "the self not ensnared in the matrix of abuse."<sup>484</sup> The task of creatively reimagining Bartmann would therefore require a new representation of her suffering and

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<sup>482</sup> Cornell, *At the Heart of Freedom*, 15.

<sup>483</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>484</sup> Ibid., 9.

resistance in order to disentangle Bartmann from imagined hypertrophies and bear witness to her struggle against the colonial imagination itself.

*c. The tragic suspension of time*

The horrors that unfolded after the 1810 case suggest that the African Institution's intervention served as an accelerant rather than a check on Bartmann's exploitation. The effort to construct a plausible narrative of her life ended in a dystopia where her freedom was declared to be fully realized in a contract that gave her a penny for her pains. To be more precise, her pain was rendered invisible by dismissing her either as a laborer who chose to work in degrading conditions or a primitive creature who manipulated her genitals into the hypertrophic state that pinned her body to Cuvier's autopsy table in a kind of permanent presence. It is Abrahams who issues the call to address the question of temporality in academic writing on Sarah Bartmann: how and where do Khoekhoe women enter into history? How do black and brown women become historical subjects?

Abrahams observes that in most studies, Bartmann "is presented in a timeless, unstable present in which all connections to her history and selfhood are lost."<sup>485</sup> What appears in place of a historical personage is the repeated illustration and examination of her genitalia, severed from the body of which they are a part, and that body dislocated from a culture, a worldview, and a vibrant community. Further, the dissected genitalia are assumed to contain the entire historical relevance of Khoekhoe women. The conclusion, as Abrahams says, is "not only that Khoekhoe women play with themselves, but that this is what matters about us. This is our point of entry into academic discourses," or, one might add, into world history. Given the richness of Khoekhoe

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<sup>485</sup> Abrahams, "Ambiguity is My Middle Name," 425.

history, this reductivism and distortion is atrocious. “The Khoekhoe are the native South Africans. Our history here stretches back some 25 millennia, and yet how are we brought into white male history? The answer, in my native idiom, is unprintable...” Abrahams writes.<sup>486</sup>

The inexpressible being the domain of the sublime, it is perhaps more fitting to look at the attempt by artists to present the ideas that Abrahams could not print. The grotesque spectacle of the defeat of ideals, the extreme exposure of the body, and the ruin of history that characterized the 1810 case become the stuff of Suzan-Lori Parks’ *Venus* play. Through the freakish staging of Bartmann’s “Bottoms and bottoms and bottoms pilin up/like 2 mountains,” the play challenges the audience to search for order and meaning amidst the chaos. In what is surely a parody of the natural sublime celebrated by eighteenth-century philosophers from Burke to Schiller, Bartmann’s mountainous bottoms are described as “magnificent. And endless.”<sup>487</sup> These lines in the *Venus* play invoke the kind of horrified interest that Burke took in the black female body, a horror that unfolds through out the play.

The sense of chaos is heightened by the presentation of the scenes in reverse chronology. The Overture at the beginning of the play introduces characters drawn mainly from the 1810 trial and loudly proclaims the death of the Venus Hottentot: “I regret to inform you that the Venus Hottentot iz dead/ There wont b innny show tonite,” declares The Brother, Later The Mother-Showman.<sup>488</sup> The Venus echoes this pronouncement of her death, first in a whisper and then more decisively, but the show proceeds nonetheless. The Hottentot Venus who we can now only imagine as an

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<sup>486</sup> Ibid., 425.

<sup>487</sup> Suzan-Lori Parks, *Venus* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1995), 16.

<sup>488</sup> Ibid., 11.

exhumed body (a Negro Ressurrectionist is on hand to announce the scenes one by one) is joined by a Chorus of 8 Human Wonders who represent a variety of “freakish” human beings: a bearded woman, a flame eater, a spotted boy, and a fat man, amongst others. When the Negro Resurrectionist announces Scene 31, the opening scene, we are told that The Hottentot Venus, would “make a splendid freak.”<sup>489</sup> The vaudeville show that we are then treated to shows the extreme devaluation of those whose bodies are deemed so anomalous that they fell entirely off the register of the human. The freaks in the freak show are so undesirable as to be unloved even by their parents. “When I was birthed intuh this world/ Our Father cursed our Mother and spat/ SPAT!” the Chorus of 8 Human Wonders chants.<sup>490</sup> What The Hottentot Venus longs for most is to be gazed upon with love rather than derision. However, the only person who claims to love her ends up cutting her body to pieces.

While the scenes are presented sequentially in reverse, the action disrupts the illusion of either progress or regress by returning us to the beginning at the very end of the play:

**Scene 1**  
**Final Chorus**  
 THE NEGRO RESSURECTIONIST.  
 I regret to inform you that Thus Venus Hottentot iz dead.  
  
 ALL  
 Dead!  
  
 NEGRO RESSURECTIONIST.  
 There wont be innny show tuhnite.

Does anything happen between Scene 31 and Scene 1, the Final Chorus? Certainly there is dramatic action of some variety, but while the action can be pictured in tableaux

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<sup>489</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>490</sup> Ibid., 41.

(moments when actors freeze in position), it cannot be narrated. There are pictures from Miss Sartje Bartmann's life, ranging from her childhood at the Cape to the freak shows in London and Paris. There are even portraits of a love affair with Cuvier, who is portrayed in the role of the Baron Docteur. But there is no overarching narrative to give meaning to the horrible displays of her body and make the action purposive either in terms of exploitation or resistance.

Causality is completely denied by delinking motive and intention from action. The Mother-Showman who exhibits the Hottentot Venus by day and prostitutes her by night speaks the language of care and nurturance: "Shes got 9 ugly mouths to feed/She works day in day out, folks/ As to any questions concerning the Goddess Venus H./ If Mothers been unkind she swears to mend her evil ways!"<sup>491</sup> The Baron Docteur declares his love for the Venus Hottentot but nevertheless spends the intermission ripping her to shreds in a verbal dismemberment of her body, reading from the autopsy report in a voice so loud that he reaches the audience out in the hallway. Finally, the "choices" of the Venus Hottentot are presented as the pursuit of unreflective desire without any reference to the will, freedom, and dignity. The Venus grasps after fame, money, and chocolate and she asks Cuvier repeatedly: "Love me?" "Kiss?" "Another kiss."<sup>492</sup> As critic Jean Young observes, Parks' play could very well be seen as a "re-objectification and re-commodification of Saartjie Bartmann."<sup>493</sup>

My own approach to the *Venus* play, in contrast, is to view it as a dramatization of the contemplative sublime. We can see the conditions under which Bartmann would

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<sup>491</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>492</sup> Ibid., 106-7.

<sup>493</sup> Jean Young, "The Re-Objectification and Re-Commodification of Saartjie Bartmann in Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus*," *African American Review* 31, 4 (Winter 1997): 699-708.

suffer intensely, but her suffering must be imagined because it is not fully presented to the viewer. It is left up to the audience to create for themselves the images of suffering that are not staged and to transform the dramatic action into a context within which Bartmann's unvoiced resistance could be imagined. After all, she has no voice but is forced to continually re-enact the freak show of her life and the dismemberment of her body long after her death. This reading of the *Venus* through Schiller's sublime is supported by the signals that Parks sends to remind her audience of the unrepresentable sublimity of Bartmann's suffering and resistance. "Do I have a choice?" The Venus asks when she is compelled to journey to London and then, later, to Paris. But without a lock on her door and the terror of nightly violation by the drunken patrons of the bar next door, The Venus "chooses" to go with Cuvier rather than stay with the Mother-Showman. When questioned, The Venus says that she has no desire to go back home. However, when she finally tells the story of her life towards the end of the play, in Scene 2, she confesses to the Negro Resurrectionist: "I always dream of home/ in every spare minute."<sup>494</sup> If we miss these small signals, it is because we, like the on-stage audience of the freak show, have failed to imagine her sublimity. Scene 24 is titled, quite aptly, "But No One Ever Noticed/Her Face Was Streamed with Tears." The suffering that cannot be expressed, let alone represented, was part of the experience of more than 150 years of a mutilated existence far away from home.

*The second movement: sublime remembrance*

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<sup>494</sup> Parks, *Venus*, 158.

d. “What is this ‘I’ which feels pain?”<sup>495</sup>

South African poet Diana Ferrus was also far away from home, studying in The Netherlands, when she came across Bartmann’s story in a course on sexuality in the colonies. Having recently lost her own mother, she identified with Bartmann’s experience of separation from family and familiar places. She was also attentive to the specificity of the conditions under which Bartmann had been turned into a public spectacle, becoming a symbol of sexual deviance and an object of scientific speculation. In a 2003 documentary film, Ferrus spoke of how she came to feel Bartmann’s pain “on my skin, in my bones, in my heart,” after seeing the places Bartmann had been and what she went through.<sup>496</sup> She wrote a poem in honor of Bartmann titled “I’ve Come to Take You Home”:

I have come to take you home  
Home! Remember the veld  
And the lush green grass beneath the big oak trees?  
The air is cool there and the sun does not burn.

[.....]

I have come to soothe your heavy heart,  
I offer my bosom for your weary soul.  
I will cover your face with the palms of my hands,  
I will run my lips over the lines in your neck,  
I will feast my eyes on the beauty of you  
And I will sing for you,  
For I have come to bring you peace.<sup>497</sup>

Her poem is not written in Bartmann’s voice but in the voice of somebody close to her who can make an aesthetic judgment of her sublimity, offering comfort as well as redemption. She takes the pieces of Bartmann’s body and remembers her with a sense of

<sup>495</sup> Abrahams, “Ambiguity is My Middle Name,” 450.

<sup>496</sup> Maseko, Zola, Gail Smith, Black Roots Pictures, and First Run/Icarus Films. *The Return of Sarah Bartman [Videorecording]*. (Brooklyn, NY: First Run/Icarus Films, 2003).

<sup>497</sup> Ferrus, “I’ve Come to Take You Home,” 213.

touch that restores the wholeness that was destroyed by centuries of abuse. She also returns Bartmann to a community that can finally bear witness to and represent her sublimity, transforming Bartmann from a museum exhibit into a historical personage with a past, present and future, and somewhere to call home. This suggests a historical trajectory and a progressive journey for Bartmann toward her homecoming. Whereas Parks' *Venus* play was a chaotic amalgamation of obstacles and frustrations along with a barely-voiced longing for home, Ferrus gives the promise of a peaceful ending and redemption against all odds.

As with Ferrus, Yvette Abrahams creates an identification with Bartmann that is deeply personal and political. The points at which she identified most closely with Bartmann were those moments where the pain of gendered and racial violence was made invisible and unrepresentable in language and image. She describes her engagement with the historiography of Sarah Bartmann as

...a quest for self-understanding and self-retrieval from the obscurities of a language not created for my benefit, a turnaround polemic against racist and sexist cultural texts which silenced me through their animosity, and a contribution towards the communal project of creating a more hospitable mental environment for African creativity.<sup>498</sup>

As noted earlier, Abrahams argues that the struggle to affirm the humanity of people of color is a political struggle to represent *publicly* the pain and suffering that has been denied. In South Africa, the movement to bring Bartmann's remains back "home" was inseparable from activism to put an end to the country's history of racial injustice and create a new ethos of respect for humanity in every person. It was through her involvement in protests by indigenous peoples in South Africa against the exhibition of their ancestors in their own country's museums that Abrahams was able to articulate the

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<sup>498</sup> Abrahams, "Ambiguity is My Middle Name," 421.

broader ideals that are at stake in recovering Sarah Bartmann. “It hurts us,” Abrahams said publicly, naming the suffering that had been made invisible by racism, sexism and colonial science. Further, Abrahams believed that bearing witness to Bartmann’s suffering could transform pain into a representation of an idea of humanity out of which a new political order might be envisioned. “To write the history of pain, hatred and anger, without replicating and passing on the heavy burden of those unresolved emotions, would be a truly humane history of Africa” she writes.<sup>499</sup> This is the humane history that she sees being constructed in the struggle for freedom in South Africa, which is at heart “a struggle to remained human” despite a brutal and divisive past.<sup>500</sup>

The public character of this struggle cannot be overemphasized, for although Sarah Bartmann’s story is singular, it is not unique in the history of women’s lives in the African diaspora. From the auction block and the coffle to the freak-show stage and the published autopsies of one “Hottentot” after another, the desecration of the black female body has had a long public life. Writing on black female sexuality in the Euro-American imagination, Beverly Guy-Sheftall notes:

Being Black and female is characterized by the private being made public, which subverts conventional notions about the need to hide and render invisible women’s sexuality and private parts. There is nothing sacred about Black women’s bodies, in other words. They are not off-limits, untouchable, or unseeable.<sup>501</sup>

This history of overexposure creates, on the one hand, a tendency among black women to guard their privacy as a protest against historical degradation. This is the reason why many black women remain ambivalent about the repeated staging of Sarah Bartmann’s

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<sup>499</sup> Ibid., 450.

<sup>500</sup> Ibid.

<sup>501</sup> Beverly Guy-Sheftall, “The Body Politic: Black Female Sexuality and the Nineteenth-Century Euro-American Imagination,” in *Skin Deep, Spirit Strong: The Black Female Body in American Culture*, ed. Kimberly Wallace-Sanders (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 18.

tragedy, even when this is done in the name of reclaiming her. The risk or re-objectifying black women seems entirely too high. On the other hand, we can also understand the reasoning of those artists who risk their own vulnerability in order to dignify the black female body in full view of its historical desecration. Renee Cox and Carla Williams' work, for example, includes self-portraits in which they are unclothed. Both artists have made visual references to the Hottentot Venus in these portraits, including a famous image in which Cox wears prosthetic breasts and buttocks.<sup>502</sup> Williams uses elaborate gilded frames to focus on certain parts of her body, juxtaposing close-up images of the buttocks against nineteenth-century texts and illustrations of Bartmann's figure. Significantly, neither of them uses models, choosing not to place black women in positions where the gaze of another defines their representation.<sup>503</sup>

What these artists recognize is that, at some level, the black female body must enter into public space once again if the humanity of black women is to be recovered from a violent history. In making the black female body vulnerable once again, the illusion of security is given up in order to return that basic humanity to bodies that have been treated as insensate objects for centuries. Bearing public witness to one another's suffering is a way of recognizing the humanity of those who were violated and defending the ideal of humanity against the lingering violence of colonial imaginaries.

Framed as a defense of the ideal of humanity in the context of degradation, the identification of women of African descent with Sarah Bartmann's story can be seen as more than a question of body image (without discounting the centrality of the body in the

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<sup>502</sup> Lyle Ashton Harris with Renee Cox, *Venus Hottentot 2000* (1994). Illustration in Deborah Willis, *Venus 2010*, g26.

<sup>503</sup> Carla Williams, *Untitled* from *How to Read Character* (1990-91). Illustration in Deborah Willis, *Venus 2010*, g15. Also see Collins, *The Art of History*, 27-30.

experience of one's humanness). Abrahams describes the process of creating such an identification through a response to the call to bear witness to Bartmann's sublimity as a historical figure who represents both suffering *and* transcendence. In feeling Bartmann's pain, she also finds a way of confronting the colonial legacies that plague contemporary South Africa:

What is this 'I' which feels pain? It is the hurt I feel when any of my people are objectified which forms the meeting between auntie Sarah Bartmann and myself. I do not seek to claim her suffering. There is more than enough of that going around to need to take another's share. I do identify with it... As a brown woman, I know it must come to an end. As an academic, my particular part in this process has been to write the history of dehumanized colonial imaginings, but also the history of humanness against all odds. *The former matters only because it measures the obstacles which we have overcome.*<sup>504</sup>

Thus we can find in Abrahams a reflection on tragedy and the historical sublime as defined by Schiller: the representation of pathos and moral resistance, as well as the confidence that there is a history that can be written of the struggle for freedom and humanity in South Africa. We are not fated to gaze forever at a pile of ruins.

Abrahams also demonstrates the complex process of identification with Sarah Bartmann, rejecting the fixed identity that is thrust upon her by Apartheid categories but also understanding that her position within that social matrix sets up obstacles that she must struggle to overcome in remembering Bartmann. Abrahams describes herself as a Black woman who is a womanist, a Brown woman, a Khoekhoe, a daughter and granddaughter of women who survived a life she herself might not have endured. Her identifications are both local and transnational: She draws equally from Khoekhoe traditions and African-American women's reflections on the history of enslavement of African people in the New World. Thus even though Bartmann was not classified as a

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<sup>504</sup> Abrahams, "Ambiguity is My Middle Name," 450 (my emphasis).

Black woman in the Cape Colony of her own lifetime, this diasporic process of identifying-with makes her a powerful symbol of black womanhood in the twenty-first century. This does not exhaust the symbolic power of Sarah Bartmann today, for large-scale national identities have also been forged through reflections on her tragic life.

*e. Homecoming*

When Nelson Mandela became President of South Africa in 1994, his government requested the return of the remains of Sarah Bartmann from France. The French government employed a strategy of non-response and denial of all requests that were received. In 2001, Senator Nicolas About raised the matter on the Senate floor by putting a question to the Minister of Culture and Communication. About began by acknowledging his personal implication in the sad story (*l'histoire pathétique*) of Saartjie Bartmann, recalling that he often visited the Musée de l'Homme in Paris as a child. At that time, her preserved body parts were still on display. In framing his question, About recreated a narrative of Bartmann's life, beginning in her native land and ending with the exhibition of her corporeal remains at the Musée de l'Homme "like a crude trophy brought back from Africa." However, About also proposed that a different history could be written about Bartmann if the Government of France would only return her remains to South Africa. "It is shocking to think that this sordid exhibition continued in France up to 1974!" he protested.<sup>505</sup> Exposing the perversity of the fact that Bartmann's remains

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<sup>505</sup> "Son corps fut disséqué, son cerveau et ses organes conservés dans le formol, et son squelette exposé au musée de l'Homme, tel un vulgaire trophée ramené d'Afrique. Il est stupéfiant de penser que cette sordide exhibition a duré en France jusqu'en 1974." (Sénat Français. "Séance Du 6 Novembre 2001." *Journal Officiel De La Republique Française. Débats Du Sénat* [http://www.senat.fr/seances/s200111/s20011106/s20011106\\_mono.html#chap17](http://www.senat.fr/seances/s200111/s20011106/s20011106_mono.html#chap17) [accessed March 1, 2010]). (My translation)

continued to gather dust in the museum's storage, About then contrasted the image of Bartmann in France against her image in South Africa: "Long presented in Europe as an example of the inferiority of Africans, Saartjie Bartmann has become, in her country, the symbol of exploitation and humiliation experienced by South Africans during the painful period of colonization,"<sup>506</sup> About noted. He argued that restoring Bartmann to her country would therefore be a symbol of the recovery of the dignity of an entire people (*le symbole de la dignité retrouvée d'un peuple*).

The debate in the Senate shows how the erasure of the suffering of the black female body becomes a political issue, because we can see very clearly how judgments of what we think is morally wrong and are willing to stand against are perceptually shaped. In response to About's question, Michel Duffour, a Secretary of State in the Ministry of Culture, made a complete and thorough mockery of Enlightenment ideals that are embedded in the constitution of the French Republic, including dignity, humanity, inalienability, and cosmopolitanism. In order to continue to desecrate the body of this one woman, Duffour was forced to recant everything that the French Revolution stood for, while rattling the empty shells of Enlightenment ideals:

The remains of miss Saartjie Bartmann are preserved in an appropriate and dignified manner, as with all the human remains that are held in reserve collection at the National Museum of Natural History [...] These items form part of the national collections, which, according to French law, are inalienable. The director of National Museum of Natural History is responsible for ensuring the preservation of the integrity of these collections, which constitute the heritage of humanity [*le patrimoine de l'humanité*]. They form a scientific collection that is available to researchers from the entire international community.<sup>507</sup>

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<sup>506</sup> "Longtemps présentée en Europe comme un exemple de l'infériorité africaine, Saartjie Bartmann est devenue, dans son pays, le symbole de l'exploitation et de l'humiliation vécues par les ethnies sud-africaines, pendant la douloureuse période de la colonisation" (Sénat Français. "Séance Du 6 Novembre 2001."). (My translation)

<sup>507</sup> "Les restes de miss Saartjie Bartmann sont conservés d'une façon correcte et digne, comme tous les restes humains qui sont gardés dans les réserves du Museum national d'histoire naturelle [...] Ces pièces font partie des collections nationales, lesquelles, selon la loi française, sont inaliénables. Le directeur du

Duffour stated that only the passage of a law could compel the government to return Bartmann's remains to South Africa, and that this should not be seen as an admission of guilt on the part of France, which he claimed had done nothing wrong to Sarah Bartmann.

In expressing his solidarity with women who have been colonized and brutalized, About found himself suffering what black women have experienced for centuries in the West: "I am left almost speechless," was his first response to Duffour. Then, directing his comments to the Secretary of State for Women's Rights, About protested, "This is an insult to women!" By disregarding Bartmann's right to a dignified life and a dignified death, About implied, the French government was disregarding the very humanity of women, particularly colonized women. "Everybody knows that our museum collections, that of the Musée de l'Homme in particular, cannot be considered dignified graves for a human being," he protested. "I repeat, Saartjie Bartmann is a symbol, a very powerful symbol, as our South African friends, whether ministers or ordinary citizens, have confirmed for us."<sup>508</sup>

Emphasizing the symbolic role that Bartmann has come to play in the new South Africa, About set out to draft a bill that would convey "from a spiritual and human point of view"<sup>509</sup> the pain and suffering of Bartmann and the struggle of twenty-first century South African women to redeem her body. Diana Ferrus's poem was brought to his

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*Museum national d'histoire naturelle a la charge d'assurer la conservation et l'intégrité des collections, qui constituent le patrimoine de l'humanité. Elles forment un ensemble scientifique à la disposition des chercheurs de la collectivité internationale tout entière*" (Sénat Français. "Séance Du 6 Novembre 2001.").

[My translation]

<sup>508</sup> "En effet, chacun sait que les réserves de nos musées, du musée de l'Homme en particulier, ne peuvent pas être considérées comme des sépultures dignes pour un être humain. Je le répète, Saartjie Bartmann constitue un symbole, un symbole très fort ainsi que nos amis sud-africains, qu'ils soient ministres ou simples citoyens, nous l'ont confirmé" (Sénat Français. "Séance Du 6 Novembre 2001."). (My translation)

<sup>509</sup> Interview with Nicolas About in Zola Maseko and Gail Smith, *The Return of Sarah Bartman* [Videorecording].

attention as a way of conveying two sets of concerns that were raised by Duffour's atrocious comments. Firstly, the need for recognition of the dignity and humanity of black women; secondly, the meaning of the French Revolution and its legacy for the twenty-first century. About explains how the two issues intersect in the figure of Sarah Bartmann:

The irony of the story of Sarah Bartmann is that she was born in 1789, a year of great symbolic significance for France. In the end she was a victim of all the things 1789 was to abolish. She was a victim of racism, sexism and colonialism. And the contrast between what that year stood for and what happened to Sarah Bartmann must make us see the distance between affirming principles and making them a reality.<sup>510</sup>

In order to shift the perception of Bartmann from that of a museum piece that could be exploited by scientists from all around the world, About attached Ferrus's poem to the bill proposing the return of Bartmann's remains. It was the first time in the history of the French parliament that a poem had been introduced in a proposal for a law. By humanizing Bartmann, Ferrus had reconfigured an ideal that had been used to exclude and denigrate black women. Thus her poem challenged France to radicalize an ideal that remained very distant from the relations of that country with the ("formerly") colonized world.

In About's proposal for the law to restore Bartmann to South Africa, the context within which Ferrus's poem was written is emphasized.<sup>511</sup> The text of the bill notes that the poem is one of many such creative works that has emerged out of a political movement in South Africa that was seeking a different ending to Bartmann's story.

Although About names only South African efforts to symbolize their aspirations as a

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<sup>510</sup> Ibid.

<sup>511</sup> Sénat Français. "*Proposition De Loi N° 114 . Sénat Session Ordinaire De 2001-2002. Présentée Par M. Nicolas About.* " [http://www.senat.fr/seances/s200111/s20011106/s20011106\\_mono.html#chap17](http://www.senat.fr/seances/s200111/s20011106/s20011106_mono.html#chap17). (accessed March 1, 2010).

nation struggling to emerge from a violent past, it is clear that this is equally a struggle for France and for many other Western nations. This is why Bartmann's story resonates across the diaspora, and why black women's effort to represent, with dignity, the unspeakable pain and tragedy of their history holds the promise of a different relationship between Western countries and the legacies of the Enlightenment.

The bill was passed by a unanimous vote and in 2002, Bartmann's remains were returned to a new South Africa. On the occasion of her return, President Thabo Mbeki made the following remarks:

The struggle for the return of the remains of Saartjie Bartmann to her motherland was a struggle to uproot the legacy of many centuries of unbridled humiliation. It was a struggle to restore to our people and the peoples of Africa their right to be human and to be treated by all as human beings. Her return stands out as a defining moment in the continuing process of our emancipation.<sup>512</sup>

The important point that Mbeki makes is that the struggle for the recognition of the dignity of people of African descent continues beyond the homecoming of Bartmann. Her journey symbolizes not the end of historical tragedy, but an inspiration for what can be achieved in the name of ideals.

### **III. Revisions and Reflections**

The ease with which Enlightenment ideals can be emptied of their ethical import is apparent. In the name of the discovery of the positive attributes of humanity, Bartmann's body and spirit were torn to pieces. From Schiller's description of humanity's progress from the troglodytic caveman to Duffour's shocking discourse on

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<sup>512</sup>Thabo Mbeki, "Letter from the President: Saartjie's Return Restores Our Common Dignity," 2002. Published online by RaceSci, [http://web.mit.edu/racescience/in\\_media/Bartmann/Bartmann\\_mbekiletter.htm](http://web.mit.edu/racescience/in_media/Bartmann/Bartmann_mbekiletter.htm) (Accessed March 21, 2010.)

the “dignity” conferred by the jar in which Bartmann’s genitalia were preserved, we see the prohibition against degradation ignored over and over. Yet, as I have tried to show in my discussion of the movement to reclaim Bartmann, the response from those who identify most closely with her has not been to reject ideals of dignity and humanity wholesale, but to reconfigure them through feminist (womanist) and anti-racist imaginaries. This is why a French Senator in the twenty-first century finds the “lost dignity” of humanity not in the French constitution and the political officers charged with defending it, but in an image of Bartmann preserved in a poem by a South African woman. Neither by politics alone nor by art alone could history be rewritten towards freedom. Only that act (law) that bears witness to the sublimity of those who were lost to history can redeem the unfulfilled promise of past struggles for dignity, freedom, and respect for humanity in every person. Thus there are two types of progress at war in the Enlightenment tradition, and this is the tragedy of Sarah Bartmann.

In the contemporary movement to recover Bartmann’s body, a struggle that continues beyond her burial, there is an effort to represent the tragedy of what she has suffered as a human being who both is and is irreducible to her body. The three elements of the pathetically-sublime that Schiller outlined are presented: the conditions that caused her suffering, the pain she underwent, and her dignity despite the violence she had to endure. It is her dignity and humanity that are shown to be inalienable, rather than France’s “right” to hang onto its colonial bone collections. No country has the inalienable right to degrade anybody whose physical attributes it chooses to pathologize. While ideals of liberty, dignity and equality may be enshrined in a constitution, they remain politically meaningless without representations of what those ideals would mean

in practice. At the same time, those representations cannot be said to exhaust the meaning of ethical ideals. Thus the idea of the sublime, which posits our capacity to make visible and tangible the aspirations that were articulated during the Enlightenment, plays a crucial part in undoing the brutal legacies of colonialism and racial injustice.

## Chapter Five

### The Future of the Slave Sublime

*At the center of the debate on the relationship between art and questions of social justice, then, is the strategic mobilization of art for or against social causes, rather than its immanent quality.*

Simon Gikandi<sup>513</sup>

*Unless we transform images of blackness, of black people, our ways of looking and our ways of being seen, we cannot make radical interventions that will fundamentally alter our situation.*

bell hooks<sup>514</sup>

Political theorists have typically been reluctant to connect politics too directly with aesthetics, and with good reason. An examination of various articulations of the sublime in the context of racist, sexist and imperialist projects of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries reveals the ideological dimension of aesthetics. The connection between Burke's terrifying portrait of the black female body and what such images "justified" in the colonization of Jamaica has been explained. Similarly, the analysis of "scenes of subjection" in nineteenth-century Europe and the United States revealed a disturbing link between representational practices, the torture and fragmentation of the black female body, and the failure of law and society to recognize and redress black women's suffering. But these observations relate only to that aspect of the sublime that has been used to degrade people who were thought to be sexually deviant and racially suspect. What can we say of the other face of the sublime, which gives expression to ethical ideals of dignity and freedom that inspire black women's resistance to degradation? To begin with, we saw the transubstantiation of the Burkean sublime in the resurrection of Queen Nanny, where artists converted a symbol of terror into a tribute to

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<sup>513</sup> Gikandi, "Race and the Idea of the Aesthetic," 328-9.

<sup>514</sup> bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 7.

the courage of millions of women who resisted colonial subjugation. Similarly, the representation of black women's dignity amidst devastation made it possible to uphold, imaginatively, the humanity of Margaret Garner and Sarah Bartmann against the endless lists of their animal characteristics. Should we seek to anchor this vision permanently in the political, or is the danger that Enlightenment ideals will be turned against the black female body too great?

Kant knew only too well the danger in claiming that ideals could ever be fully realized in existing institutions or reduced to the positive attributes of particular human beings. Such claims always end up turning against the very ideals that are championed—hence, for example, the French government's description of the Musée de l'Homme as a "dignified" repository for Bartmann's remains, and her pickled genitalia as the cosmopolitan "heritage" that France holds in trust for all humankind. In making these statements, the government of France made its colonialist policies the final word on the meaning of dignity and humanity. Senator About was absolutely right to protest that these claims are sordid. Without his call for a distinction between the institutions of the French Republic and ethical ideals of dignity and humanity, and without his integrity in seeking out the person who could most closely speak to Bartmann's experience at the intersections of race, gender and empire, the institutional history of France would be rather different today. This is not to say that the movement for the return of Sarah Bartmann was dependent on this one man's contributions, or that France has been cured of all imperialist pretensions by doing what it would very likely have been forced to do anyway. Rather, I want to present this case as an insight into the possibility of institutionalizing freedom while preserving the ideal character of humanity.

Mindful that there are two sharply conflicting modes of representing (or erasing) the figures of Queen Nanny, Margaret Garner and Sarah Bartmann, and attentive to the battle that black women must wage in public spaces and in the realm of the imagination to make the sublimity of these figures visible, my key contention in concluding this study is that we can no longer afford to insist on the absolute autonomy of the aesthetic. Rather than denying its ideological character, feminist anti-racists need to be more purposive about orienting the sublime towards their ethical vision of human dignity and freedom.

Against my move to politicize aesthetics, it could be argued that Kant had a perfectly adequate approach in the third *Critique*, where he kept aesthetics free from determination by theoretical and practical reason but nevertheless established a strong *referentiality* between judgments of the sublime and moral ideas of freedom. This would protect images of black women from being used as “proof” of anthropological, medical, political or even moral arguments, while still allowing for the harmonization of the sublime with ethical ideals. Philosophically, this argument has great merit. Politically, it falls apart even in Kant himself. While insisting on the autonomy of the aesthetic on one end, he was busy on the other end making claims about the diminished moral capacity of women and people of color through the very same aesthetic categories. Feminist theorists must therefore remain conscious that there can be no purely philosophical or purely aesthetic resolution to the problem of black women’s expulsion from the human. There is nothing in the idea of the sublime itself that can ensure respect for the dignity of all persons, precisely because moral personhood as an attribute of particular beings that exist in space and time is an aesthetic representation influenced by social and political relations. We not only make judgments of the sublimity of another person, but we make a

judgment that the other is a type of being that can be the subject of such a representation. There is a prior aesthetic judgment that is already assumed in judgments of the sublime, and that is the humanity of the other. The passing unnoticed of this prior judgment and its movement from consciousness to the inaccessible sub-conscious is what I am referring to as the ideological character of the sublime.

My argument, therefore, is that aesthetic ideals must be opened up to an ideology critique, and I believe that the artists and writers whose work is discussed in the preceding chapters create precisely these kinds of openings. It is through political contestation that seizes those moments that liberal institutions<sup>515</sup> come to be regulated by ethical ideals, as happened in France for a brief moment in 2002. Politics consists of more than a set of aesthetic judgments, of course, but it is not insulated from them. Similarly, an imaginative space where we can freely represent our selves and our hopes for the future (the imaginary domain) is essential for a feminist conception of freedom, but that space is in danger of being closed off without political freedom. These interconnections among politics, ethics, and aesthetics are what the slave sublime is addressing.

To give a clear outline of the contributions of this study to feminist theory, the first section of this chapter returns to Gilroy's original idea in order to show how I am fleshing it out in consideration of black female embodiment. I explain how a feminist reading of the slave sublime has recast eighteenth-century philosophy and could potentially enlarge the ethical vision of Kant and Schiller. Burke, I argue, has only a preliminary set of questions to offer feminist anti-colonialism, because his focus on the

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<sup>515</sup> Here I am using the term "liberal" to refer to institutions that make reference to Enlightenment ideals of freedom and seek to anchor them in contemporary politics.

body helps us to negatively illuminate what is inadequately addressed in Kant and what Schiller is trying to reconcile. Schiller's belief in the necessity of holding together fragments that cannot cohere brings him closest to the hope expressed by the slave sublime.

The second section of the chapter addresses the political dimensions of the slave sublime and my specific contributions to feminist aesthetics. Can judgments of the sublime bear the weight of constituting a political community, particularly that of the "African diaspora" or "transnational feminism"? How does the slave sublime build on and transform conceptions of the "female," "feminine," or "maternal sublime" in contemporary feminist thought?

## **I. The Slave Sublime and Enlightenment thought**

### *a. Fleshing it out*

The idea of the slave sublime has taken on increasing significance throughout this study, but has so far appeared as a shadowy form of protest against a much more strongly articulated Enlightenment philosophy. In attempting to capture the complex relationship between diaspora Africans and the dominant modes of seeing and reasoning in the worlds that they have been forced to inhabit, the slave sublime risks capture by the discourse in which it participates in protest. On the other hand, my view is that any attempt to extract and address the "purely" Africanist or feminist part of the slave sublime would be to deny the types of double-consciousness and relationships of antagonistic indebtedness that Gilroy set out to elucidate in proposing the term. What must be to be accounted for, instead, is the power of one discursive construction to set the terms against which all

other ideas can be articulated only as a reprise or in reprisal. There are therefore two levels at which this dissertation has contributed to the philosophical elaboration of sublimity. At one level, there is the call to address the paradoxes and conundrums that the sublime as an aesthetic category is concerned with: the transfiguration of terror into courage, the consciousness of dignity amidst devastation, and the narrativization of chaos, which were presented in that order in the preceding chapters. At a higher level of abstraction, we must consider carefully whether the idea of the sublime should have a future given its contradictions as a category that has been used both to free and enslave black women.<sup>516</sup>

My elaboration of the slave sublime offers something less and yet something more than Gilroy's explication of the term. The richness and depth of his discussion of cultural production in the black Atlantic world was set aside in order to investigate in more detail the discursive precursors to his idea of the sublime. What I have preserved is his conceptualization of the slave sublime as inextricable from the black experience of modernity. Thus I have retained his sense of the centrality of this aesthetic category to a black philosophy of history. Gilroy proposes that there are at least two fundamental historical issues at stake in the slave sublime: firstly, the creation of traditions that accord ethical significance to rather than deny the fragmentary experience of modernity; and secondly, the possibility of a productive engagement of diaspora Africans with Enlightenment legacies.<sup>517</sup> This requires nothing less than the development of a productive rapport with death and with the condition of being in pain. A correspondence between engaging Western rationality with a view to its ethical reconstruction and

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<sup>516</sup> Battersby offers a fuller discussion of this question (*The Sublime*, 14-15)

<sup>517</sup> Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 187-201.

confronting death with an unshakable consciousness of dignity arises because modern (Enlightenment) rationality has sanctioned slavery at least as often as it has provided the ideals that inspire its subversion. His emphasis firstly on tradition and secondly on double consciousness defined as a mode of thinking both through and against Enlightenment ideas, has greatly informed my own reading of black women's cultural production.

The analysis of the experience of black female embodiment does, however, call for a broader approach than Gilroy's predominantly mathematical sublime. The experience of irreplaceable loss, unspeakable pain, invisible suffering, and ineffable terror are certainly definitive of the modern experience of slavery, and the mathematical sublime addresses this crisis of representation specifically.<sup>518</sup> However, Gilroy does not offer an extended dynamical reading of the slave sublime—the crisis of embodiment—the analysis of which could only begin at the point where the invisible, the lost, and the disappeared become flesh. Where Gilroy leaves off is where my reading of *Beloved* begins: with the flesh and blood presence of the ghost of the lost child. My contention is that the racial terror of slavery and the attendant fragmentation of consciousness are branded on the body through gendered acts of violence. In order to speak the unspeakable terrors, however impossibly and inadequately, it requires the presentation of the body that has been violated and yet recovered and dignified through judgments of the sublime. The scars on the throat that was slit in this world, the body that was violated “on the other side”—these painful experiences are marked on the resurrected body. They are voiced by a woman who could be held close or pushed aside and who, as in *Beloved*'s

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<sup>518</sup>The paradox Gilroy points to, through a discussion of Morrison's *Beloved*, amongst other novels, is that what cannot be spoken must nevertheless be told. Racial terror is unrepresentable and yet there is an ethical demand in Morrison's work for the telling and retelling of stories of loss and suffering (*The Black Atlantic*, 187-223).

case, could be both loving and destructive in her physical encounters with others. The ethical demand for the representation of what cannot be brought into visibility is a demand that makes reference to the body as much as the consciousness, and it must therefore be thought mathematically *as well as* dynamically through the slave sublime.

This study has focused on pushing not only Gilroy's but also eighteenth-century theorists' ideas of the sublime into a reflection on black female embodiment. As such, the very important discussion of the mathematical sublime appears to be displaced by a focus on suffering, but this is a question of analytical emphasis and should not be taken for a completely different idea of sublimity or a fundamentally new account of black women's lived experience. The unspeakable experience (Gilroy's emphasis) and what is spoken by the body (my emphasis) are of equal significance in the representation of the slave sublime.

*b. Re-enacting the Burkean sublime*

It should not be assumed, therefore, that there is something more truthful (in Minh-ha's sense) about dealing with the body rather than the mind. In this regard, my reading of Burke acts as a foil that not only brings out what is missing in the Kantian sublime, but also shows that a retreat from Kant's ethical vision back to a purely empirical definition of the sublime would be counterproductive. The paradox of eighteenth-century representations of the black female body was that the closer the observer approached his object, the more it tended to disappear (Burke) or fragment (Cuvier). For Burke, black women could appear only as painfully, terrifyingly vacant spaces (*painful for the observer*, he claimed, without even the slightest hint of irony). Yet

the protocols of the appearance and disappearance of the black female body from the field of vision of the white male observer were so strongly corporeal that the Burkean sublime could be transfigured simply by re-enacting it. The characteristics of obscurity and the effects of blackness that made Nanny a terrifying figure to British militiamen in the eighteenth century were also the characteristics that showed her to be an effective military strategist and leader of a guerilla army.

Of course, the violent struggle for Maroon sovereignty in its historical context was not as simple as donning a costume to re-enact Nanny's sublimity in the twenty-first century. The Maroon Wars involved incredible sacrifices and devastating encounters with death at every turn. Nor do Cox's photographs take a simplistic approach to the embodied sublime. The figure of Nanny that reappears in time and space also transcends both. My basic point is however still valid: the image of Nanny as a terrifying phenomenon (matter) can do double duty as a celebration of her courage "simply" by a shift in the perspective from which one receives light waves reflected from her body. Taken at a visceral level, and that is where Burke's sublime operates, nothing more is needed than to present empirical evidence that a different kind of feeling of the sublime is possible. It is a classic case of "your terrorist, my freedom fighter."

What can be recovered from a "simple" inversion of Burke's empirical aesthetics is certainly not nothing, but it is also no great prize. Nanny's courage, after all, was not only a matter of pitting physical force against physical force. To fully represent Nanny's resistance to colonial rule, we would also have to be able to imagine the consciousness that produced her rebellion. The Maroons had guns, yes, but it was primarily their courage, sense of dignity, and mode of living in concert with an undomesticated terrain

that enabled them to resist the efforts of the British to domesticate them as if they were so many wild animals. The remembrance of Nanny by black women artists and poets could be seen as switching signs on the Burkean sublime, but to reduce it to this inversion alone begs the question of the slave sublime: what enabled the enslaved and the colonized to resist overwhelming force with the certainty that they could hold out against the full power of the British Empire unleashed upon them? The interest of the slave sublime is not only in the reincarnation of those who were (almost) lost to history, but also in the persistence of their moral vision. If at all the slave sublime recasts Burke's aesthetics in a philosophically and politically significant light, it is by disclosing the empty core of his moral sense theory. No sense of sympathy for the colonized, no matter how strong, can recognize their moral resistance. Sympathy speaks to corporeality, but it could never register transcendence. This is why the staging of the colonial sublime at Hastings impeachment proceedings collapsed into spectacle as Burke himself collapsed in a faint, too overcome by his sympathy for the tortured female body to bear witness to the sublimity of Indian women.

*c. Revisioning Kant*

Kant's third *Critique* recommended itself to a reading of the slave sublime because he makes constant reference to moral ideas of freedom. Even though aesthetic judgments are not determined by moral principles or by concepts of the understanding, the feeling of the sublime discloses to us our expanded capacity to think what we cannot know. This allows us to imagine the freedom and dignity of humanity even in the midst of devastation and under physical attack. Kant does not require the brute force and

military victory necessitated by Burke's sublime.<sup>519</sup> On the other hand, my reading of *Beloved* showed that it is not sufficient to displace the requirement of physical safety onto a notion of moral security. Within the racial economy of slavery, not only the physical body is violated, but also the consciousness of one's dignity. Racial terror and sexual violence reach beyond the body and beyond the grave to prevent the recovery even of the memory of those we have lost (what Morrison calls "rememory").<sup>520</sup>

The denial of a dignified death and a fitting memorial (cutting off historical consciousness) is physically and ideologically enforced. We can see this enforcement in Kant's cancellation of the moral action of the thousands of Africans who leaped overboard during the middle passage, the rebels who were tortured to death, and many others who found ways to resist enslavement in the very manner of their death. The mothers who dispatched their infants to "the other side" in defiance of the slow murder of slavery must surely be counted among their numbers.<sup>521</sup> But Kant stubbornly denies the ethical import of these actions. The resulting erasure of their sublimity is so total that it requires a critical race feminism to mark the erasure. Only then do we know where to begin the recovery of the missing bodies and, if we are so inclined, the recovery of a Kantian notion of dignity from Kant himself. Chapter Three was an attempt to make a case for the latter as a worthwhile project for black feminist theorists—not for Kant's sake, but because his strong conception of dignity can help us to think through what we are aiming for and the challenges we face in recovering black women's history.

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<sup>519</sup> Again, this is not to discount Nanny's victories, but to insist that we attend to her moral vision as well

<sup>520</sup> Morrison, *Beloved*, 43.

<sup>521</sup> There is an image of the mathematically sublime here as well: the "Sixty Million and more" to whom Morrison dedicates *Beloved*.

*d. Reconstructing Schiller*

Stories of resistance to degradation come in as many varieties as there are women. Even with a Kantian idea of dignity in view, the tragic life and death of Sarah Bartmann poses a significant challenge to the idea of the slave sublime—a challenge which, I have shown, is better addressed by Schiller than either of the other theorists. The difficulty as I see it is that black feminist theory has relied on the historical record (however flimsy and compromised it might be) to surreptitiously back up aesthetic representations of women's courage and resistance. Out of four fleeting appearances in the official archive, we have been able to construct a narrative of Queen Nanny as a woman who resisted and rebelled against colonial rule. The numerous abandoned plantations and defeated armies of the British Empire in Jamaica “demonstrate” Nanny's power of resistance to imperialism. The historical evidence does the work, and we can step back and disavow our responsibility for selecting the evidence and imbuing it with meaning. Because the ethical has been so thoroughly subordinated to the empirical in academic scholarship, and because black women's moral standing is still suspect even today, it is easier for black feminist theorists to let self-evident “evidence” stand in for our judgment.

This is a necessary strategy of survival in hostile territory, but it can become self-defeating when we lose sight of our own moral vision as scholars. For example, feminist scholars can find evidence of Margaret Garner's resistance in statements recorded by the abolitionists who interviewed her in her jail cell. We can then use that record to “authenticate” Morrison's portrait of Garner's life, failing to note that Morrison's reading is what infused the historical record with meaning in the first place. Even though I have tried to remain vigilant, I know that this dissertation is not exempt from such surreptitious

motions. It becomes very easy to forget that the hard-won evidence that feminist historians have been able to gather for us out of the archives is subsequent, not prior, to a judgment of black women's sublimity. This is not to say that historians who are recovering black women's histories come to their work through literature alone. I am only attempting to pay tribute to the profound ethical vision—rather than empirical data—that sustains their labor in the mass graves of slavery, colonialism and Apartheid.

Bartmann's case is the jarring reminder that history is not sitting somewhere in the past simply waiting to be uncovered in order to authenticate our dreams for the future. The court records from the 1810 case are damning. If they authenticate anything about Bartmann, it is her love of money, her monstrous proportions, and perhaps that she had enough decency to feel cold in her skimpy costume. The numerous caricatures, bawdy ballads, and advertisements that made a mockery of her body reduced Bartmann to a big bottom with a titillating suggestion of a hidden genital anomaly. Cuvier's autopsy took the entire cultural phenomenon of the Hottentot Venus and gave it the scientific stamp of approval: there you have it, gentlemen, the reproductive parts of the Hottentot Venus prepared in such a way as to leave no doubt as to her monstrousness. This two-hundred-years-and-counting atrocity has every kind of authorized, institutionalized knowledge to back it up: law, history, natural science and medicine.

This is why Schiller becomes integral to my conception of the slave sublime. Of the three eighteenth-century philosophers I discussed, it is Schiller who was most conscious that narrations of history are *necessarily* conjectural. Masking the fictiveness of those stories with the language of natural history and science turns the idea of the sublime into an ideology. The irony is that Schiller was writing in an age when the

protocols for the foreclosure of the black body from western consciousness were already being established through colonial historiography, but he could not see this process for what it was. But I have a broader interest in Schiller than exposing these ironies. A feminist reading of his idea of the historical sublime not only yields a critique of colonialism, but also a critique of postcolonial reason. It reminds us that we have no direct access to the experience of *any* of the women whose lives I have discussed—not even where there appears to be a clear and unambiguous historical record of their resistance. Whatever historical consciousness we have as anti-colonial thinkers, whatever narrative we have constructed (extracted, we often think), whatever rememory is possible, it is always dependent on a sublime ordering of chaos. Bartmann's life and body have no historical or moral significance until we make an aesthetic judgment of her sublimity.

The premise of tragedy as defined by Schiller is that moral resistance, even when it is ineffable, must be imagined if we are to attribute dignity to a tragic character. As we saw, part of that moral imagination is the recognition of the suffering of the enslaved and the affirmation of their dignity amidst devastation. The official archives cannot show us suffering or resistance as mere historical facts; we can only acknowledge the tragedy of black women's history by making aesthetic judgments of other women's sublimity. Of course, the colonialist imagination and racist fantasy are always at work, busily reinscribing the authoritative text in order to shore up a dehumanizing narrative. What stops these racist, sexist constructions from also being sublime in Schiller's sense? The answer is simple: narrative is sublime only when it points us towards freedom, and is sordid when it aims to degrade. The point of the historical sublime from Schiller's point

of view is not simply to make stories out of happenings. The ethical vision of the storyteller is decisive.

## II. Feminist futures

### a. *Black feminist theory at the crossroads*

The tragedy of Bartmann's life poses a challenge to black feminist theorists because, like postcolonial critics (or because we are one and the same), we slip all too easily into the assumption that what we have recovered is "women's lived experience." Solidarity with one another in recognition of a shared history of suffering and resistance is mistaken for something uncovered rather than achieved. In her *Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, Spivak warns against such claims to have recovered the seamless whole. She argues that "...the epistemic story of imperialism is the story of a series of interruptions, a repeated tearing of time that cannot be sutured. As I have urged,...today's cultural studies should think twice before acting on a wish to achieve that impossible seam..."<sup>522</sup> Having thought at least twice, Schiller nevertheless proceeds to map a historical consciousness that envisions continuity against all odds. We are speaking here not of historical *knowledge*, but of an aesthetic judgment that posits humanity's progress towards freedom. I will explain why I support this teleological view of history even in view of the enormous toll it has taken on human lives, particularly the lives of Africans, and why I do so despite Spivak's warning.

The danger is clear and I do not deny it. We need look no further than Schiller's *Aesthetic Letters* to see the damage that can be done by teleological views of history. Schiller constructs, via the troglodyte, a degrading narrative that throws "primitive"

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<sup>522</sup> Spivak, *Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, 208.

people back in time to serve as a rear view image of European progress. Primitive others who embody the savage fantasies of a civilized Europe are cast in the role of nature that must be turned into object in order for men to move from the purely physical to the moral state. It was such images that created a context for the exploitation and violation of Bartmann and many unnamed others. The danger, then, is not just hypothetical. It is the violence that black women have faced for centuries. I can see this and I have attempted to foreground it in the preceding chapters.

And yet the protest against that violation has also been in the form of a sublime historical consciousness that narrativizes and gives purpose and an end to a ruinous history. Diana Ferrus's conviction that Bartmann's story was other than what was being told, and further, that Bartmann's journey was *incomplete* as her remains lay in a museum in Paris, is both teleological and sublime.<sup>523</sup> Teleology can be used to sanction domination and there are millions upon millions of corpses that can attest to that, but the slave sublime takes our narrative impulse and bends it towards freedom. We need not live without hope for fear that hope inevitably turns to violence. An aesthetic idea can do no such thing all by itself: to claim that it does is to deny our moral responsibility. This is why Gikandi urges us to speak not of the immanent quality of art but of our own moral vision. Ferrus not only restored Bartmann to her home and affirmed black women's dignity, but she also made the ultimate gesture of reconciliation with France by generously providing her story to aid them in their struggle to recover their lost humanity.

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<sup>523</sup> The journey is yet to be completed. Bartmann does not rest entirely in peace, for she is resurrected over and over again in situations where black women's bodies are troubled and tormented. To this day, Queen Nanny of the Maroons conducts such a powerful haunting against continuing racial injustice that, according to Maroon beliefs, a white man cannot step near her grave and live to tell the tale. Progress towards freedom is asymptotic. (See Gottlieb, *The Mother of Us All*, for Maroon political consciousness; see Bronner, *Reclaiming the Enlightenment* for a broader discussion on teleology, hope, and freedom).

She had no guarantee that her poem would fare better in the France's Parliament than Bartmann did on Cuvier's dissecting table. Her courage, moral vision, and willingness to place herself in danger in order to create a better future should give us hope that a world that respects black women's dignity is possible, and teleology is worth risking after all.

Whether the French Republic has remained true to the ethical vision of its revolutionary beginnings is a separate question; what I want to point to is the *possibility* of harmonizing the freedom of humanity in Europe with the freedom of the other wherever she is to be found. Kant and Schiller failed to live up to this vision of an ethical relation in their writings. However, they did sketch out its possibilities with enough hope that we can link their vision to the slave sublime. In engaging Kant and Schiller's writings on the sublime, we prepare ourselves to join Ferrus as she travels from South Africa to the Netherlands, France, and back to South Africa in an effort to radicalize her moral image of the world. The risk of the slave sublime being hijacked by the dominant discourse is ever present, but it seems to me that it must be risked in the struggle for freedom and the respect for humanity in every person.

*b. Diaspora consciousness*

Although the yearning for wholeness is at the heart of our humanity and its illusion preserves our dignity inviolate within a highly fragmented universe, this dissertation has focused on the importance of attending to the sublimity of historical consciousness itself. This has important implications for our understanding of the political community that arises from representations of the experience of Africans in the diaspora. Black women artists and writers have not only reconstructed history through

their representations of the courage of past generations, but they have also created a system of signs by which women in the diaspora can recognize one another and build community. The *sensus communis* of diaspora feminism arises in our judgment of Nanny, Garner, and Bartmann as sublime figures whose dignity makes us conscious of our own and attentive to our moral ties to past generations and to one another. Although we as “black women” are objectively positioned in ways that force us to confront certain questions of vulnerability and finitude in a very particular way (i.e. we are positioned as black holes within the matrices of power), what we make of those confrontations belongs to our moral vision alone. In other words, diaspora consciousness, like historical consciousness, is a sublime achievement. Experience properly understood is not given to us by the mere fact of our existence in the (brutal) world of things. We construct ourselves out of the fragments.<sup>524</sup>

The ever-present danger then, in celebrations of diaspora consciousness among black women, is that we can easily erase our sublimity when we resort to the language of blood, kinship and origins without acknowledging the aesthetic judgment that precedes the recognition of kin. When Yvette Abrahams calls Bartmann “Auntie Sarah,” or the artist Judith Mason embraces the tortured body of her “Sister” who was killed in the twentieth-century struggle against Apartheid, they do so in recognition of a moral bond that recasts the ethnic or national relation. Khoekhoe traditions are of course integral to the connection that Abrahams makes with Bartmann; the herbal blankets of buchu and mint with which Diana Ferrus imaginatively covers Bartmann are not at all incidental to her own activism.<sup>525</sup> And yet what I want to emphasize is that the relationship of these

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<sup>524</sup> I refer here once again to Busia’s important argument in “Fashioning a Self.”

<sup>525</sup> Ferrus, “Tribute to Sarah Bartmann.”

twenty-first century activists to Bartmann is irreducible to material culture. My contention is that we cannot follow the trail of cultural signs that leads us to recognize one another as sisters if we cannot at the same time recognize our ideal humanity that appears in the world through particular cultural expressions—art, burial rituals, and so on—but also transcends them.

To put this in stronger terms, Gilroy sets the slave sublime apart from the kind of “Africentricity” that uses notions of cultural purity to establish itself as “modernity’s polar opposite”—polar opposite because it claims to be untouched by the violence of history and replaces the paradox of dignity-amidst-devastation with a seamless image of a time when we were kings and queens.<sup>526</sup> This desublimated version of tradition is based on forgetting the pain of slavery, colonialism and Apartheid. While such ideas of tradition can offer much-needed relief from the constant battle for survival, they can also perpetuate a different type of violence by wiping out the record of moral resistance along with the painful past. Gilroy shows us that there is an alternative to distancing ourselves from suffering, an alternative that becomes clear in the works of “black writers who held out against this form of retreat and opted instead to embrace the fragmentation of self (doubling and splitting) which modernity seems to promote.”<sup>527</sup> The point is emphatically not to celebrate suffering and fragmentation for their own sake, but to establish a productive rapport with death and the condition of being in pain in order to recover the dignity and humanity of those (ourselves) who would otherwise be lost to us forever.

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<sup>526</sup> Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 188.

<sup>527</sup> Ibid.

To distinguish his idea of the diasporic community from notions of Africanity founded on cultural purity, Gilroy uses the term “black Atlantic.” I have chosen to retain the more widely recognized concept of diaspora throughout this dissertation, but with the understanding that it is not “founded” but arises from aesthetic judgments of the sublimity of those who were lost in the struggle for freedom and justice. In summary, I see diaspora consciousness as a *sensus communis* that gives rise to a fragile but very hopeful community that can act politically.

*c. Transnational feminism*

It often goes unremarked that black women’s theories of diaspora are at the same time a search for the protocols of transnational feminist solidarity. If diaspora is conceived purely in nationalist terms—the desublimated form of tradition that Gilroy problematized—it stands against rather than works through the contradictions of modern history that disrupt the processes of identity formation even as they create new imperatives and opportunities for solidarity. What does this mean for feminist political theory? It means that the *sensus communis* of the slave sublime, by redefining sisterhood as an ethical relationship, shows us how feminists can act in solidarity with one another by giving new meaning to traditionally defined identities. What “woman” is or can be is as much an open signifier as Africanity, which is to say that we have some space but are greatly constrained in putting together our body parts and consciousness of ourselves as “women” who have widely differing histories of fragmentation. The difference in feminism is this: whereas white women have tended to have the disadvantage and privilege of maintaining an unconscious illusion of wholeness, black women have the

disadvantage and achievement of having to consciously create a coherent self against all odds.

Black feminist theorists are very often engaging in an ideology critique of the aestheticization of the self that is simply not sustained in other feminist theories of the sublime. The primary subject of Anglo-American feminist scholarship on the sublime has been women whose humanity, however qualified, has never been in question. To be positioned as a white woman in a racialized economy of the flesh is to come pre-approved for sublimity, even though the judgment is ultimately withheld. All that is needed for Wollstonecraft to claim her sublimity is to pack her bags and go trekking through Sweden and Norway while making notes on the natives and the vegetation. Admittedly, this experience was not readily accessible to European women in her day and the trip marked a sort of victory on her part (her class position helped), but my point is that nobody doubted that a human being made that trip. The quarrel only arises over whether she should be granted admission to the boys' club where those with refined tastes can experience the sublime. In contrast, Bartmann's journey from the Cape to London and then Paris left Europeans asking, "What was that?" and the question still echoes two hundred years after that tragedy. Indeed, the uncertainty regarding her humanity is what propelled her across time and space and inscribed her tortured body in all kinds of documents, from scientific journals to playbills. Thus when feminists who take white women as their default category ask questions about the sublime, they are not forced to begin with the question of what a human being is or what humanity means. They take up these questions only intermittently and obliquely, if at all.

The idea of the slave sublime put forward in this dissertation is not opposed to but builds on those unsustained moments of reflection on our common humanity in previous discussions by feminist philosophers. Mann's attentiveness to human limitation, frailty and vulnerability has a clear resonance with the slave sublime, and she is a particularly strong ally in thinking through the paradoxes of space and time in Kant. The slave sublime demands, however, that we go a step further to explicate black women's resistance to being thrown back in time. Representing their resistance then requires a complication of Mann's thesis: it is not enough to acknowledge our dependence on the planet and on one another, nor is "care" an adequate response to injustice if it does not entail a corresponding reconfiguration of structures of power that perpetuate the violation of women and people of color and the ruin of the planet. In other words, resistance to the aestheticization of the degradation of women's bodies and environmental devastation ultimately requires institutional interventions. It will come as no surprise that a political theorist is calling for the politicization of feminist philosophy, but my conclusions are not only informed by my disciplined thinking. There is also the question of how black women artists and writers are using their creative imagination to make precisely these kinds of political interventions.

Battersby and Yaeger's argument for an idea of the sublime that takes female embodiment seriously, particularly their focus on the experience of labor, pregnancy and childbirth, was the inspiration for my turn to the dynamically sublime. However, the "joy and vaunting" Yaeger claimed through the maternal sublime and the experience of a splitting, non-unified self that Battersby discusses are both radically reconstructed by a consideration of motherhood in the shadow of slavery. The slave sublime forces the

juxtaposition of images of life and death, and the representation of the tortured experience of giving birth only to turn around and give to the grave. Motherhood in the slave sublime cannot be thought without an ethics of ambiguity, relating women's fleshy bodies to the intangible dignity of their moral personhood. The more we think the phenomenal the more we must touch on the noumenal—there is no other way to preserve our humanity.

In conclusion, I would like to note the contributions that black feminist theory has made and can still make to our understandings of what is broadly termed “the human condition.” The work of black feminist theory is in many places at many different levels, and I do not claim that the appropriation and redirection of Enlightenment legacies is (or should be) a priority. But considering the intimate and frequently violent connection between black women's bodies and Euro-philosophy, this is clearly an area where our intervention is needed. This dissertation, then, is an extended argument for working through and with the unique forms of double-consciousness that relate body and mind, sense and reason, chaos and narrative, and the complicated history of African women's encounters with Enlightenment philosophy.

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## CURRICULUM VITAE

**WAIRIMU NJOYA****EDUCATION**

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- Ph.D. **Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey**  
Political Science (May 2010)  
Fields: Women and Politics, Political Theory
- M.A.(hons) **University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands**  
Social Sciences (2004)  
Track: Governance, Public Policy and the State
- B.A. (*Magna Cum Laude*) **Macalester College, St. Paul, Minnesota**  
Political Science (2002)

**PUBLICATIONS**

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**W. Njoya.** "Mindful of the Sacrifices Borne by our Ancestors': Terror, Historical Consciousness, and the Slave Sublime" (proposal accepted for December 2010 special issue of *New Political Science*; paper in progress).

A.P.A. Busia, P. Dongala, M. Gueye, O. Jolaosho, and **W. Njoya**, "Roundtable: African Women Envision the Future," in J. Browdy de Hernandez, P. Dongala, O. Jolaosho and A. Serafin, eds., *African Women Writing Resistance: Contemporary Voices* (University of Wisconsin Press, forthcoming 2010).

**W. Njoya.** "Review of Murambi: Book of Bones, by Boubacar Boris Diop," *Logos: A Journal of Modern Society and Culture* 6, 2 (Winter/Spring 2007).

**TEACHING**

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*Instructor, Department of Political Science, Rutgers University*

Nature of Politics (Summer 2009)  
Contemporary Feminist Theory (Spring 2009)  
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*Instructor, Department of Women's and Gender Studies, Rutgers University*

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*Instructor, Department of English/ Rutgers Writing Program, Rutgers University*

Expository Writing (Fall 2008, 2 sections)  
Expository Writing (Fall 2007, 2 sections)

*Teaching Assistant, Department of Political Science, Rutgers University*  
Nature of Politics (Spring 2008, 3 sections)  
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*Grader, Department of Political Science, Rutgers University*  
The Politics of Reproduction (Spring 2009)  
Gender, Public Policy and Law (Fall 2008)  
Politics of Bigotry (Fall 2007)  
Contemporary Political Theory (Fall 2006)  
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