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## On Agency

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Sitting down to write a paper about the New Social History has been hard for me. Hard because it has made me face some of the manifest tendencies in my own work, and consign them to the purgatorial category of "my past," which allows me to keep believing, at least for the moment, that I am making progress. But harder still because it has made me re-think and re-evaluate the work of the historian whose example drew me to this field in the first place, and whose words seemed like a beacon of intellectual clarity and ethical righteousness as I tried to sort through the dreary muddle in my own mind. I am speaking, of course, of Herbert Gutman, and particularly his injunction, drawn from Sartre and central to his influential rethinking of labor history, that the essential task of the humanist intellectual is to determine not "what 'one' has done to man, but what man does with what 'one' has done to him." <sup>1</sup> I want to counterpoise that formulation with what I have come to see as a very different way of thinking, one which I think allows for a better understanding of the two-sidedness of the relationship between what Gutman might have called "power" and "culture," and one which I think helps me see the way to a better, more useful, and I'd even say more radical version of history: the formulation offered by Karl Marx at the outset of *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*: "Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living." <sup>2</sup>

I want to try to develop this contrast through a reconsideration of what I take to be the master trope of the New Social History: "agency." It seems important to specify the stakes of the critique, because I am not at all interested in diminishing the accomplishment of historical work that has been done under the sign of "agency." Indeed, as I argue in the last section of this paper, the call to write a history of the "agency" of the enslaved did important intellectual and political work in the formative years of the New Social History. The quality and success of that work, as well as the changing political context of academic work generally, however, have made it both possible and necessary to ask a new set of questions of the past. And this, I believe, will be easier to do if we lay aside the jargon of "agency" even as we try to make good on the New Social History's promise of a history rooted in the experience of enslaved people. I say all this not because I am somehow against writing a history which emphasizes the "agency" of enslaved people or of dispossessed people generally; I remain passionately committed to that project. Nor because I believe that all who set out to write social history in general or the social history of slavery in particular (as, indeed, have I) use the idea of "agency" in the way I am going to be describing, or that even when they do they do so consistently or evenly throughout their scholarship. It is rather because I think that there is a thread in the way we write and talk about history that nobody has tugged very hard for quite some time: the idea that the task [End Page 113] of the social historian is to "give the slaves back their agency." Indeed, though the idea of an unvariegated "slave agency" has been implicitly and explicitly critiqued in any number of books written over the past twenty-five (even seventy-five) years in, for example, the intellectual traditions of Black Marxism, Black Nationalism, and Black Feminism, the New Social History's "agency" remains, in residuum, the master trope around which historians understand arguments about slavery. It has, I am arguing, become impossible to read W. E. B. Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction* or C. L. R. James' *The Black Jacobins*, John Blassingame's *The Slave Community* or Lawrence Levine's

*Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, Deborah Gray White's, *Ar'n't I a Woman?* or Nell Irvin Painter's *Sojourner Truth* (or, even, perhaps Gutman's *Black Family*) apart from a discussion about "agency," which overcodes their complex discussions of human subjectivity and political organization and presses them into the background of a persistently mis-posed question:

African-American slaves: agents or of their own destiny or not? <sup>3</sup> As such, I think, it has come to obscure a set of questions, some old and some new, about the contexts and consequences of human activity we very much need to ask.

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The common, indeed, one could by now say the canonical, way to frame an argument under the sign of "agency" is to emphasize, as does the final sentence of the final paragraph of the introduction to one recent and influential account of American slavery, the fact that enslaved people successfully "stroved to preserve their humanity." <sup>4</sup> The reiteration of a commitment to the furtherance of Black humanity in the age of Amadou Diallo, AIDS in Africa, *The Bell Curve*, and the structured "choice" between the Super Max prison and the "volunteer" army is an understandable gesture. But framing it as the defining contribution of our studies rather than as the simple predicate for any historical investigation seems to me to reproduce, through the very act of repudiating, a set of arguments that historians have long since agreed should be simply laid to rest (most notably those advanced by Stanley Elkins in his *Slavery*). <sup>5</sup> By continuing to frame their works as "discoveries" of Black humanity, indeed, historians unwittingly reproduce the incised terms and analytical limits of a field of contest (black humanity: for or against) framed by the white-supremacist assumptions which made it possible to ask such a question in the first place.

If it is to say anything at all, to say that enslaved people "preserved their humanity" is to say that they acted in ways that the author recognizes as the ways that human beings would act in a given situation. The actions of enslaved people are thus emptied of any specific meaning beyond the bounded terms of the author's own definition of "humanness"—emptied of personal meaning, political meaning, and cultural meaning, and metaphysical meaning and so on. To say that, however, is to ask what historians mean (and what they miss) when they talk about "agency."

To take a first cut at that question I would argue that the humanity/agency circuit formulates enslaved people's actions in much too abstract a manner. If the important thing about people—the thing that makes them human—is that **[End Page 114]** they are agents, then the specific political and cultural contexts of their actions are less important than the fact that they are actions *per se*. Indeed, by putting the words "agency" and "humanity" side-by-side, it becomes possible to excavate a hidden cavity of meaning within the trope of "agency." The word "agency" itself has a long, complicated, and polysemous history, but as employed in the New Social History it has generally been used in its primary sense as self-directed action, the type of action that the *Oxford English Dictionary*, quoting Coleridge, terms "personal free agency" or, in the words of another recent historian of slavery "independent will and volition." <sup>6</sup> That definition is, of course, saturated with the categories of nineteenth-century liberalism, a set of terms which were themselves worked out in self-conscious philosophical opposition to the condition of slavery. To put this another way: the term "agency" smuggles a notion of the universality of a liberal notion of selfhood, with its emphasis on independence and choice, right into the middle of a conversation about slavery against which that supposedly natural (at least for white men) condition was originally defined. By applying the jargon of self-determination and choice to the historical condition of civil objectification and choicelessness, historians have, not surprisingly, ended up in a mess. They have, in the first instance, ended up with what is more-or-less a rational choice model of human being, and shoved to the side in the process a consideration of human-ness lived outside the conventions of liberal agency, a consideration, that is, of the condition of enslaved humanity (to which we will return). And out of this misleading entanglement of the categories of "humanity" and (liberal) "agency" has emerged a strange syllogism in which the bare fact (as opposed to the self-conscious assertion) of enslaved "humanity" has come to be seen as "resistance" to slavery.

To begin to sort this mess out, we need to disentangle the categories of "humanity," "agency," and "resistance" which frame a sentence like the following one: "Whenever and wherever masters, whether implicitly or explicitly, recognized the independent will and volition of their slaves, they acknowledged the humanity of their bondpeople. Extracting this admission was, in

fact, a form of slave resistance, because slaves thereby opposed the dehumanization inherent in their status." As hard as it is to see when the category of "humanity" is conflated with the category of free will, there were many ways for enslaved people to be human which it is hard to reconcile with the idea of as being "agency" *necessarily* resistant to slavery. Posing the question as a question about the condition of enslaved humanity (rather than as a search for evidence of that humanity as indexed by the presence of acts of self-determination) seems to me to open up a new way of thinking about slavery. And to invoke the idea of the condition of enslaved humanity is, for me, to try to think, at once, about the bare life existence of slaves, the ways they suffered in and resisted slavery, and the ways they flourished in slavery, not in the sense of loving their slavery, but in the sense of loving themselves and one another. To speak of "enslaved humanity" in this context is to try to imagine a history of slavery which sees the lives of enslaved people as powerfully conditioned by, though not reducible to, their slavery. For enslaved people the most basic features of their lives—feeling hungry, cold, tired, needing to go to the bathroom—revealed the extent to which even the bare life sensations of their physical bodies were sedimented with their enslavement. So, too, with sadness and humor and love and fear. And yet those **[End Page 115]** things were never reducible to simple features of slavery. <sup>7</sup> They cannot simply be reformatted as resistance in a liberatory gesture which paradoxically reduces even the most intimate actions of human beings to (resistant) features of the system that enslaved them. The condition of enslaved humanity, it could perhaps be said, was a condition that was at once thoroughly determined and insistently transcendent.

Several other sets of arguments might help us to undo the imposed isomorphism of "humanity," "agency," and "resistance" in the slavery scholarship. To begin with, there is the secondary meaning of the word "agency," generally subsumed in the scholarship on slavery into the dominant meaning described above, which speaks of "agency" as an "instrumentality" of another's purpose. And then there is the fact that slaveholders made use of enslaved people's "humanity" to keep them enslaved: they terrorized them with threats coded to produce an effect in neurological and psychological subjects along an axis of power which can only be understood according to the terms in which we conventionally describe human being: hatred, fear, desire, etc. The fact that we, as historians, want to label slaveholders' behavior "inhuman" should not be confused with either slaveholders' goals (often misunderstood as a loosely intentioned or even flatly functionalist desire to "dehumanize" the slaves) or allowed to obscure the fact that terror, torture, rape, and exploitation are activities which are elementally human and which depend upon the sentience of a suffering human object to produce the effect desired by their (all-too) human perpetrators. Finally, and perhaps most obviously, the way to begin to sort "humanity" from "agency" from "resistance" is to remain aware of forms of human "agency" which can in no way be seen as resistant to slavery, specifically collaboration and betrayal. I mention this not to give succor to those who wish to "de-romanticize" the history of African-American resistance to slavery, for the presence of collaborators within the slave community seems to me only to magnify our notion of the accomplishments of resistant slaves: there were powerful reasons to simply go along and time and again resistant slaves overcame them. <sup>8</sup> The point is rather to highlight the absence of a detailed consideration of politics in any notion of "agency" which conflates activity with "resistance."

In the absence of a discussion of the internal politics of the slave community, the question of the relationship of "agency" to "resistance" has generally been framed as a question of the relation of "everyday" forms of resistance to "revolutionary" forms of resistance, a misleading opposition which has triumphed over even the most insistent efforts to displace it. For example, when historians argue that day-to-day resistance posed an "implicit threat" to the system of slavery, they leave unanswered the question of how isolated acts of sabotage and subterfuge might have grown into an *explicit* threat to slavery. Similarly, when they tell you that slave criminals exposed "latent contradictions" in the philosophy of slavery, they never really tell you if slaveholders cared that their ideology was philosophically incoherent, or if asserting that it was only something that only matters to us as we seek to reassure ourselves of the distance that lies between them and us, whistling in the dark perhaps. What these and countless similar quotations skate over with their invocation of "implicit" threats and "latent" meanings is precisely the relationship between individual and collective acts of resistance, the relationship, as it were, between breaking a tool and being Nat **[End Page 116]** Turner. These are both instances of "agency" and yet they are very different in their causes and their consequences, though to say so is not to valorize one over the other, nor to claim that one was "resistent" while the other was not, but to call for clear thinking about their complex inter-relation.

You have probably guessed that Eugene Genovese was going to come up somewhere in all this. *Roll, Jordan, Roll* has provided a foil for many of those, including Herbert Gutman, who have organized their accounts under the sign of "agency." There are a lot of things to say about the failings of *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, but the commonplace that it is a book which ignores the "agency" of enslaved people—captured in Gutman's beguilingly acerbic but I think ultimately misleading comparison of *Roll, Jordan, Roll* to an imagined history of steelworkers called *Roll, Monogahela, Roll* beginning with a 150-page biography of Andrew Carnegie—is not one of them. *Roll, Jordan Roll* is a book that is substantially about enslaved people's "agency" and resistance, but in a very specific way. <sup>9</sup> Genovese makes a hard-and-fast distinction between individual acts of resistance that negated a slaveholders' direct authority and collective acts of resistance which were theorized as attacks upon the system of slavery itself. In this formulation, and this is at the heart of the notion of "hegemony" around which the book is framed, slowing down, playing sick, mouthing off, burning down buildings, and even, assaulting and murdering masters and overseers did not weaken the system of slavery, but actually strengthened it. This because, first, these types of resistance formulated the problem of slavery as one that occurred upon an individual plantation or farm and between a master or overseer and a slave—they localized and personalized what Genovese believes could only properly be understood as a hemispheric system of class exploitation. And, second, because they bled away resistant energy which might otherwise have been gathered into the collective fury of revolution.

Whatever else this is, it is not an argument that denies enslaved people's "agency" or the frequency of their daily resistance. It is, however, an argument that seems to me to be predicated upon (at least) three faulty premises: first, the idea that there was not a revolutionary aspiration among North American slaves; second, the notion that this alleged "failure" to revolt must somehow be explained in reference to the slaves' own culture rather than the balance of force in the society—by reference, that is, to "hegemony" rather than simple "rule"; and, third, that there is a contradiction rather than a continuum between individual and collective acts of resistance (an argument to which we will return). <sup>10</sup> Most importantly for our purposes at the the moment, it is also an argument which begs the question of the identities of the historical subjects of these actions by transposing them into the set of terms provided by Genovese's version of western Marxism—a teleology in which "African" forms of resistance are seen as "roadblocks" on the way to the elaboration of a properly revolutionary notion of a slave revolt, one, that is, which recognized "the individual" as the subject of history and the language of rights as the only acceptable idiom of revolution, a teleology, that is, which ultimately reproduces the idea of a liberal agent as the universal subject of history. <sup>11</sup>

Which brings us to my final point about "agency." Historians' use of "agency" as a framing device has reduced historically and culturally situated acts of resistance to manifestations of a larger, abstract human capacity—"agency"—thus **[End Page 117]** obscuring important questions about both the way in which enslaved people theorized their own actions and the practical process through which those actions provided the predicate for new ways of thinking about slavery and resistance. If breaking a tool and being Nat Turner were not identical manifestations of human "agency," nor were being Nat Turner and being Harriet Jacobs. Put in this light, the elision of all sorts of actions into the abstract category of "slaves' agency" seems to presume the identity of the subject of history—i.e. "an individual slave" rather than "a Christian" or "a mother" or "the Igbo" or "the Blacks." <sup>12</sup> It represents the alienation of enslaved people from the historical circumstances and ideological idioms of their own resistance, from Marx's "circumstances" and "traditions" which interpellated them as subjects and conditioned the meaning of their actions.

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So: where does that leave us? Given the perplexity about the category of "revolt" evident in the literature on slavery today and the exigency of formulating responses to our own moment of history, we might begin by sorting out the question of "agency" in relation to collective action. <sup>13</sup> How, we might ask, did enslaved people set about forming social solidarities and political movements at the scale of everyday life? How did they talk to one another about slavery, resistance, and revolution? How did they sort through which of their fellows they could trust and which they could not? As I hinted above, the terms "everyday" and "revolutionary" have, at least in the literature on slavery, been allowed for too long to stand in unproductive opposition to one another rather than being thought of as dialectically inter-related. Collective resistance is, at



bottom, a process of everyday organization, one that, in fact, depends upon connections and trust established through everyday actions: covering for a friend, slowing down on the job, stealing things and sharing them, providing for runaways when they were "out," taking a beating, or telling the right story in the right language at the right time. But, if it is to be successful, collective resistance also depends upon the remapping of everyday life—of longing and hope and sadness and anger—in historical terms: it is the *system* of slavery which is the cause of our shared condition.

Highlighting the everyday processes by which enslaved people formed social and political solidarities, of course, brings the question of the relation of cultural forms—be they African, African-American, or even just American—to the history of slavery and resistance into sharper focus. Much of the literature on African culture in the New World has concentrated on mapping the transformation in enslaved people's cultural and material life from African forms to African-American ones. Less time has been spent on trying to think about the way that cultural forms functioned as mechanisms of creating the political solidarity necessary to collective action—how did enslaved people employ a shared register of terms to make arguments to spur (or put off) collective action. In a strange echo (or displacement) of the idea of liberal "agency" as such as resistance to slavery, cultural autonomy has been seen as in-and-of-itself a form of resistance to slavery, without careful attention to the ways that it could undermine as well as facilitate the formation of political solidarities among slaves. **[End Page 118]** However important they were to the survival of enslaved people generally, and there is no doubt that they were crucial, neither African nor African-American cultural forms were *inherently* resistant to the *system* of slavery. And yet it was through employing shared cultural forms—arguments, prayers, fables, etc.—that enslaved people flourished even in their slavery, and set about forming the alliances through which they helped one another resist it. <sup>14</sup>

Part of thinking about the relation of political organization and collective action to culture is re-thinking the relation between the past and the present. Arguments about the fate of African culture in the New World have generally been framed by historians' efforts to find a continuous relation between the past and the present, to find a present at any moment in history, that is, which flows out of its past. This approach has the virtue of vitalizing the Marxian imagery of "traditions" (and even "nightmares") with the histories and ideas that enslaved Africans brought with them to the New World: it impossible to imagine enslaved people as being, in any simple sense liberal "agents." <sup>15</sup> But, the displacement of the "agent" as the universal subject of history comes at the risk, as I suggested above, that he (for that is part of the problem with "the agent") will simply be replaced by "culture" as the universal subject of history. However African or African-American culture at any given moment was less an achieved state, the end-result of a historical process, than an ongoing argument about what elements of a shared past were relevant to a current situation. And different African and African-American slaves had differential degrees of access to shaping that argument as they tried to incorporate the residuum of their past into the circumstances of their present. The epochal transformation of African into African-American culture was at the level of its everyday enactment cross-cut by politics of gender, age, origin, etc, by a present struggle, that is, over who had the power to define the relevant elements of a shared past. History after "agency" might be written around a "Copernican revolution" of memory, an intellectual inversion of the relation of past and present, by focusing attention on the present-life of the past, on what elements of the past are drawn upon at any given moment in history and the power-structured processes through which they are selected and enforced. <sup>16</sup>

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I want to return, in closing, to the oft-repeated injunction to "give the slaves back their agency" as an accounting of the relation between our own present and the past. There is embedded within this account of the unidirectional trade between present and past an idea of history writing as a mode of redress. The claims of the past upon the present are registered in terms of stolen "agency" and addressed through the writing of history which returns that "agency" to its rightful owners. Or, more accurately, through accounts which represent that agency being as returned, since the rightful owners in question have long since passed on. Which raises the question of what is really at stake in the repetition of this phrase: why don't historians invoke their colleagues or their students or their tenure files or their pocketbooks as the beneficiaries of the work they undertake? Framing the question that way seems to me to highlight what is **[End Page 119]** at

stake: the injunction to "give the slaves back their agency" functions as an advertisement of good will. As such it has a similar function to the knowing laughter you hear at conference panels when someone reads out the remarks of the racist other or the moment when the author of a book addresses the readers across the proscenium of standard historical narration to assure them that even if the slaveholders or racists or colonialists in question did not see the error of their ways he or she does.

I have nothing against the advertisement of good will, the recognition that scholarship is political, or, indeed, to the linkage of historical work to the political project of redress (something I address in a companion piece to this one which takes up the question of reparations for slavery). But I think that in order to understand the work of this particular gesture we need to imagine its history. I can imagine a time, say in the 1960s or perhaps the 1970s or even the 1980s when these gestures were important ways for white scholars to use a declaration of their alignment with Black slaves in order to signal their alignment with the ongoing struggle for Black Freedom.<sup>17</sup> Such a gesture of affiliation, of course, would not have been as pressing for Black scholars, for whom it was an inescapable and presumably sometimes agonizing, fact of life. By imagining these gestures in that context, I can understand them as gestures which were, in some small measure, brave and charged with political effectivity. And that seems to me to clarify what is at stake. It suggests to me that the statement "give them back their agency" is a "white" form of address which originally served the purpose of admitting the speaker to a "Black" conversation. It was, that is, a form of address which had embedded in it a politics which inter-related the past and the present in a way that was genuinely political: in a climate of overt discrimination and intellectual segregation making these historical gestures of alignment with slaves and, through them, with Black scholars, served a purpose and had a cost, even if that cost was only a little ridicule over dinner at the faculty club.<sup>18</sup>

I suppose what I am suggesting is that the present has changed and with it have the implications of our form of address to the past. While I certainly do not want to argue that chimeric promises of Official Academic Multiculturalism have solved the problems of white overprivilege and Black disadvantage, I think that it is fair to say that the political stakes of white alignment with the cause of Black freedom within the academy have changed. Such gestures today enter a well-grooved field: making them has very few costs and, for white scholars at least, more than a few benefits. The politics of solidarity they ostensibly represent seem to me to be correspondingly diminished. Indeed, in the absence of the type of hard and clear thinking about the relation of history-writing to history that characterized Gutman's decision to respond to the Moynihan Report by writing *The Black Family*, these rhetorical and performative gestures seem to me today to liquidate their ethical and political obligations in the very act of asserting them: even as they assume a posture of present engagement in the political struggles of the past they do so on a closed circuit by which historians and their audience together share in the knowledge that they have transcended the past. Left it behind. By formulating, through the terms of scholarly address, a pat notion of a community of believers who have made it far enough beyond slavery or racism (or whatever) in order to look back on them with the condescension of the converted they establish a set of terms in which the present is washed **[End Page 120]** clean of the sins of the past (rather than doggedly implicated in them). And it is this that I want to highlight. If we are to draw credibility by doing our work in the name of the enslaved and then seek to discharge our debt to their history by simply "giving them back their agency" as paid in the coin of a better history, some knowing laughter, and a few ironic asides about the moral idiocy and contradictory philosophy of slaveholders, then I think that we must admit we are practicing therapy rather than politics: we are using our work to make ourselves feel better and more righteous rather than to make the world better or more righteous.

Hidden behind the ritualization of the injunction "to give the slaves back their agency," behind the capacity of repeated performance to empty a gesture of the meaning it once had, is a history of why the idea of "agency" in slavery mattered so much to the New Social History. Writing of Black humanity as self-determination and resistance in the era of Civil Rights made sense as an intellectual and political engagement. It enabled historians to see and say things that were new and important. In so doing these delineated an optical field, which, as powerful as it was, made it hard to see some other things—even things which were already known—beyond the categories of the "agency" debates. Their categories are the historically structured "traditions" which weigh upon our own minds as we try to sort past, present, and future into better relation. Indeed, the very ambiguity of the success of the Civil Rights project—the fact that we inhabit institutions in

which multicultural inclusion is the reigning official ideology at the very same time as an unprecedented global assault on the living conditions and even bare existence of the very people whose cultures are being feted in our lecture halls and seminar rooms—seems to me to call for new ways of trying to think about the past. <sup>19</sup> If we are to acknowledge the claims of the past upon the present and to frame our scholarship as an act of redress, it seems to me important that we do so in ways which engage the exigencies of the present—the globalization of racialized and feminized structures of exploitation, rates of black incarceration in the United States that are unprecedented in world history, the resurgence of slavery—plain and simple slavery—as a mode of production, and, importantly, the emergence of new forms of (global) political solidarity and collective action—with terms other than those produced by an earlier struggle. It requires, that is, that we re-immense ourselves in the nightmare of History rather than resting easy while dreaming that it is dawn and we have awakened.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup>. Herbert Gutman, "Labor History and the 'Sartre Question'" reprinted in Ira Berlin, ed., *Power and Culture: Essays on the American Working Class* (New York, 1987), 326-28.

<sup>2</sup>. Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York, 1963), 15. For an earlier critique of the New Social History which made use of Marx, although by means and to ends quite different from mine see Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene D. Genovese, "The Political Crisis of Social History: A Marxian Perspective," *Journal of Social History*, vol. xx (1982), 205-217. I will describe some of my differences with this account in what follows.

<sup>3</sup>. W. E. B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction; an essay toward a history of the part which black folk played in the attempt to reconstruct democracy in America, 1860-1880* (New York, 1935); C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Overture and the San Domingo Revolution*, 2nd edition (New York, 1963); John Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*, revised edition (New York, 1979); Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York, 1977); Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York, 1985); Nell Irvin Painter, *Sojourner Truth: a Life, a Symbol* (New York, 1996); Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (New York, 1977) For Gutman's effort to re-work some of this literature (including, remarkably, *The Black Family*) into the terms of the "agency" discussion see Berlin, ed., *Power and Culture*, 329-359. A complete re-thinking of Gutman's work would involve reconsidering the trope of "the family" which sneaks normative definitions of gender and sexuality into the discussion of "resistance."

<sup>4</sup>. After thinking and worrying about it a lot, I have decided against including specific citations of the works I quote critically in relation to the "agency" question. While I realize this traduces some of the set conventions of scholarly debate, I am much less interested in trying to critique the work of individual scholars than in excavating the hidden limitations of a set of terms which frame the way that most of us think, talk, and write about what we do. Indeed, I think that there are many ways in which many of the books from which I have drawn the quotations around which I have

organized the paper call a pat notion of "agency" into question. And yet they are nevertheless either explicitly framed in their writing or unwittingly reframed in their reading as making their primary contribution in the coin of recovered "agency." I can, on request, make complete citations available to anyone who would like to see them. In the interest of total disclosure I would say that my own article entitled "The Slave Trader, the White Slave, and the Politics of Racial Determination in the 1850s," *Journal of American History*, Vol. 87, number 1 (2000), 13-38 poses a set of questions about the politics of "agency" without fully being able to answer them. I have subsequently (for the book was actually completed after the article) been trying to work my way towards what I think are a better set of formulations in my *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, 1999), especially 189-220, in my "A Nettlesome Classic Turns Twenty-Five," *Commonplace* vol. 1, number 4 (July 2001), and in my essay "The Future Store" which will introduce Walter Johnson, ed., *The Chattel Principle: Internal Slave Trades in the Americas, 1808-1888* (New Haven, forthcoming). None of this work has dealt with the question of historical subjectivity—of the identity of "the agent" of history—as well as it might have, something I have tried to do in "Time and Revolution in African America: Temporality and the History of Atlantic Slavery" in Thomas Bender, ed., *Rethinking American History in a Global Age* (Berkeley, 2002), 148-167. Finally, I'd say that *Soul by Soul* also contains quite a bit of material on the often-taken-for-granted question of slaveholder agency; see especially pages 78-118 and 189-220.

5. Stanley Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (Chicago, 1959). Writing in the shadow of the death camps, Elkins argued that slavery [End Page 122] had been a total institution which so thoroughly deracinated slaves from the cultural resources of their African past that they came to understand themselves according to the degraded terms in which their masters saw them. Hence the label "Sambo thesis."

6. *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd Edition (Oxford, 1989).

7. This seems to me to be a direction suggested in Nell Irvin Painter's "Soul Murder and Slavery: Toward a Fully Loaded Cost Accounting" recently reprinted in her *Southern History Across the Color Line* (Chapel Hill, 2002), 15-39. There is ample documentation for many arguments about the condition of enslaved humanity (although it is there framed according to a different analytical purpose) in Philip D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill, 1998).

8. For recent calls to "deromanticize" see Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, xxiv, 442-443 and Michael P. Johnson, "Denmark Vesey and his Co-Conspirators," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Series, volume LVIII, number 4 (2001), 915-976. See also Bertram Wyatt-Brown, "The Mask of Obedience: Male Slave Psychology in the Old South," *American Historical Review*, XCIII (1998), 1228-1252 and Clarence Walker, *Deromanticizing Black History: Critical Essays and Reappraisals* (Knoxville, 1991).

9. Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York, 1976). For Gutman's joke see Herbert Gutman, *Power and Culture: Essays on the American Working Class*, Ira Berlin, ed. (New York, 1987), 50. To say that *Roll, Jordan, Roll* has something interesting to say about enslaved people's "agency" is not to imply that it is a good book about enslaved people generally; it has often seemed to me that the modal enslaved person in *Roll, Jordan, Roll* was based upon Redd Foxx.

10. For a fuller treatment see my "A Nettlesome Classic Turns Twenty-Five" [www.commonplace.com](http://www.commonplace.com)

11. This argument is fully elaborated in Genovese's *From Rebellion to Revolution: Afro-American Slave Revolts in the Making of the Modern World* (Baton Rouge, 1979). For a pointed critique of arguments of the type Genovese makes see Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, 2000).

12. On the question of the subject of History see Stuart Hall, "The Toad in the Garden: Thatcherism among the Theorists" in Lawrence Grossberg and Cary Nelson, eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana, 1988), 35-73 and, from a different perspective, Joan Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," *Critical Inquiry*, 17 (1991), 773-797.



[13.](#) For the perplexity about revolt see Johnson, "Denmark Vesey and his Co-Conspirators," 915-976. While interestingly attentive to the internal politics of "the slave community," Johnson's argument seems to me to hinge on a fairly evanescent distinction between being actively engaged in the promotion of "heresy" and being involved in a "conspiracy." That, however, is a topic for another time.

[14.](#) I have developed these ideas at greater length in "Time and Revolution in African America" Bender, ed., 148-167.

[15.](#) See, for instance, the detailed discussion of the persistence of "African identities" in the United States well into the nineteenth century in Michael Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill, 1998).

[16.](#) For the theoretical framework see Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, trans. (Cambridge, 1999), especially 456-488, Harry Harootunian, *History's Disquiet: Modernity, Cultural Practice and the Question of Everyday Life* (New York, 2000), especially 1-23. Wonderful recent examples of this sort of work, **[End Page 123]** to my mind, are James Sidbury's *Ploughshares into Swords: Race, Rebellion, and Identity in Gabriel's Virginia* (Cambridge, 1997), especially 1-147 and Emilia Viotti da Costa, *Crowns of Glory, Tears of Blood: the Demerara Slave Rebellion of 1823* (New York, 1994). Each of these books treats the everyday planning of slave revolts alongside an acute sensitivity to the dynamics of cultural transmission and contest within the "African" and "African-American" groups at the center of their stories—to the idioms of political organization, the spaces in which they were argued about, and the gendered power relations which framed access to arguments about who the "we" who revolted were going to be.

[17.](#) That many of the scholars in question were Jewish, and thus enmeshed in patterns of discrimination and disaffiliation that were concurrent with, if not coextensive to, those faced by African Americans within the academy further deepens the meaningfulness of these gestures. My thanks to Tom Bender for pointing this out.

[18.](#) For a fuller account of this moment in the history of academic knowledge and politics see George Lipsitz, *American Studies in a Moment of Danger* (Minneapolis), 57-82.

[19.](#) See Lipsitz, *American Studies in a Moment of Danger*, 3-30, 83-114.