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Working the People, Working the Earth: The Exploitation of Humans and the Environment in North American Slave Narratives

Johannes Fehrle

Slave narratives have only relatively recently come into the focus of (postcolonial) ecocriticism and green postcolonialism. Such readings explore the representation of "nature" in slave narratives, but often do not consider what is perhaps the most central relation between the narratives' protagonists and nature: the work relation between slaves and their environment. Beginning from an eco-Marxist perspective that understands humans and non-human nature (or society and "nature") as part of a dialectical relationship, my chapter looks at the interactions between slave workers and the non-human environment. An examination of how the relation between slaves and "nature" (under which racist ideology subsumed slaves) is represented in slave narratives reveals the many ways in which the labor of slaves transformed the environment. An understanding of "nature" not merely as wilderness or pastoral space, but as humanity's "inorganic body" (Marx) engaged with through work can shed light on how African American slaves were part of the long transformation of the North American continent into a human-made "nature." While this is true for both male and female slaves, the attempts to colonize Black women's bodies for the (re)production of new slaves shows a unique oppression and resistance of Black women under slavery.

Keywords: slave narratives, ecocriticism, eco-Marxism, work, nature

Recent interest in the Anthropocene (or, as some critics prefer to call it, the Capitalocene, see e.g., Moore; Altvater) call our attention to the long history of appropriation and valorization of nature and the connected exploitation of human beings. The unintended and unforeseen backlash of climate change, however, drives home that we cannot ignore the interdependence of humanity and non-human nature. This has called to the fore so-called "new materialist" approaches (e.g., Alaimo; Barad; Jane Bennett; Coole and Frost), which, correctly, point to the lack of attention paid to the material aspects of the world around us and of human history in most schools of thought, including classical Marxism. Unfortunately, however, such "materialism" often abandons a rigid and concrete analysis of human society and its interdependence with non-human nature and instead provides a de-hierarchized "relationism" lacking, in many cases, the instruments of concrete political analysis of the realm on which we exert the most influence: namely, human societies (see Noys, "Matter without Materialism"; Hornborg). In the following, I thus suggest tracing the interrelation between human work and non-human nature not through a new materialist but through an eco-Marxist approach and suggest how this approach can shed a new light on our understanding of how canonical 19th–century slave narratives represent the slave experience.

While, on some level, most historical materialists know that human labor bears a necessary relation to the non-human environment,[1] "nature" has long been sidelined in leftist analyses of work and society. Looking only at human labor and often only at paid work, scholars have too often overlooked capital's dependence on the dual consumption of (unpaid) labor as well as (supposedly) free natural resources used up in production and distribution processes. Surprisingly, for many who still see Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels as anthropocentrists interested exclusively in human societies (e.g., Morton), an awareness of humanity as part of nature lies at the bottom of the Marxist critique of capitalism and human history. Even if it was never the main focus of Marx's analysis, we can see this dialectical understanding present in such early texts as the "Paris Manuscripts" of 1844 (*Ökonomisch-Philosophische Manuskripte*), and we see his awareness of scientific discourse, such as Justus von Liebig's work on soil exhaustion and fertilization recur throughout the *Grundrisse* and *Capital* vols. 1 and 3. Engels, on the other hand, in *Dialectics of Nature*, tried—in some instances more, in others less successfully—to bring historical materialism into dialogue with the natural sciences. In a passage

[1] See, for instance, Marx's chapter on the work process in *Capital 1* (283–292) or his scathing opening to the "Critique of the Gotha Program."

that sounds surprisingly contemporary and clairvoyant, he points to the unintended consequences of the collective action of human societies on non-human nature and, in a second step, back on humanity itself—the very process underlying what scientists now call the "Anthropocene":

> Let us not, however, flatter ourselves overmuch on account of our human conquest over nature. For each such conquest takes its revenge on us. Each of them, it is true, has in the first place the consequences on which we counted, but in the second and third places it has quite different, unforeseen effects which only too often cancel out the first. The people who, in Mesopotamia, Greece, Asia Minor, and elsewhere, destroyed the forests to obtain cultivable land, never dreamed that they were laying the basis for the present devastated condition of these countries, by removing along with the forests the collecting centres and reservoirs of moisture.

In many ways, this passage sounds similar to the opening of Andreas Malm's recent *Fossil Capital,* in which he describes global warming as "the unintended by-product par excellence":

> A cotton manufacturer of early nineteenth–century Lancashire who decided to forgo his old waterwheel and invest in a steam engine, erect a chimney and order coal from a nearby pit did not, in all likelihood, entertain the possibility that this act could have any kind of relationship to the extent of Arctic sea ice, the salinity of Nile Delta soil, the altitude of the Maldives, the frequency of droughts on the Horn of Africa, the diversity of amphibian species in Central American rain forests, the availability of water in Asian rivers or, for that matter, the risk of flooding along the Thames and the English coastline. (Malm 1–2)

Following such thinkers as Marx, Engels, and more recently Malm, John Bellamy Foster, and Paul Burkett, I contend that the framework of "old" historical materialism, when brought into conversation with new scientific findings and new methodological developments in eco-Marxist thought, provides a tool to analyze work relations as human/nature relations in a way that is dialectical and relational rather than one-directional and anthropocentric.

In the following, I will bring this framework to bear on the analysis of literary representations of the work/nature relation in 19th–century North American slave narratives. The goal is to identify how the connection between the "use" and "destruction" of slave laborers and the environment in the 19th–century U.S. South is reflected in these texts. While Christine Gerhardt pointed to the benefit of a combination of, in her case, ecocriticism and postcolonial studies to read slave narratives as a new

frontier in ecocritical scholarship as early as 2002, this work has only barely begun. One reason why this endeavor has lagged behind the broader rise of ecocriticism as a field is that texts by former slaves, such as Frederick Douglass, Samuel Northup, or Harriet Jacobs, were not "ecocritical" in the sense of "nature writing" underlying the field's early focus. The narratives are, in other words, not interested primarily in non-human, pristine nature as an object for contemplation, although such passages do occur (see Finseth).

As critics like Gerhardt, Paul Outka, Ian Finseth, Lance Newman, and others have shown, non-human nature nevertheless plays a central part in the narratives, both as ideologically charged, discursive construct and material reality. Although "nature" as construct is the concept to which white supremacist culture turns for the erasure of the human status of Black people under slavery, leading some critics to read slave narrative primarily as an "anti-pastoralism" championing the city (Michael Bennett), the ways in which representations of the natural, material world function in slave narratives is ultimately more complex. Pastoral scenes recur, for instance, in descriptions of the protagonists' unspoiled childhood (see Outka's discussion of Douglass's childhood, 62–68) and as visual metaphors for making sense of and relating to the world and slavery (Finseth 248; 252–53). "Nature" furthermore appears as a geography that needs to be traversed on the protagonists' road to freedom (Finseth 253–61; Gerhardt 524), and it functions as a hiding place and one in which the protagonist can become aware of his subjectivity and "recenter the narrative voice as a black voice" (Gerhardt 524). Significantly, in these "wild" spaces there is a tension in many authors' accounts of their relative safety as social beings (Black Americans away from slave-holding society) that stands in contradiction to their vulnerability as *species* beings, unprotected human bodies in a natural world that holds both beauties and dangers. Jacobs, for instance, describes her experience in both her "loophole of resistance" (Burnham in Jacobs 278) in her grandmother's attic and the "Snaky Swamp," to which she attempted to escape first, as one marked with suffering from cold, heat, insect bites, and snakes (Outka 75; 79). Charles Ball relates being pursued by an alligator (Smith 326) and meditates on the dangers of the swamp through the story of a fellow escaped slave who hangs himself there in a fashion that Newman calls an "anti-slavery gothic" (39).

What is perhaps the most central locus of human-nature relations, namely, work as an engagement with and a transformation of the natural world, however, remains an undercurrent in most narratives and—as a result—absent in most ecocritical analyses. Although Douglass's first

autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845), particularly in its rural episodes, describes a diegetic world in which non-human nature is everywhere, it is always on the textual periphery, omnipresent, but largely uncommented upon. When Douglass describes his work-free Sundays, for instance, he writes: "I spent this [leisure time] in a sort of beast-like stupor, between sleep and wake, under some large tree" (48). Firstly, the "beast-like stupor" evokes Douglass's own material, "animal" body exhausted from being driven to work from morning until after nightfall six days a week by the "slave breaker" Mr. Covey. The "large tree" furthermore hints at a non-human natural world surrounding Douglass as a source of rest, cover (e.g., when he flees from Covey's punishment through a cornfield and into the woods), and, most central to his state as a field slave, yet most marginally treated in the text, material to be transformed for the slave masters' enrichment. This latter relation to nature that structured Douglass's daily life most centrally during his year working for Covey is, however, not the focus in *Narrative*. In this respect, as in so many others, Douglass's first autobiography is representtative for the slave narrative tradition rather than exceptional. As Finseth notes, the narrative aims "to have readers conjure up in imagination the cruelty and violence intrinsic to the slave system" (252). Douglass's text therefore describes the social dimension of slavery—the relation to his various masters, the punishments he and other slaves endured, their interactions and strategies of resistance, and his own growth into manhood—while largely disregarding the *natural* base of his everyday labor.

This is not terribly surprising. For one, the narrative's implied audience was quite likely not particularly interested in lengthy descriptions of agricultural work processes and more interested in the customary condemnations of the evils of slavery, such as the ripping apart of families, the ceaseless repetitions of descriptions of physical violence, and the institution's supposed negative effect on the Christianity of Southern slaveholders. Furthermore, the author's labor with the land occurred in a social relation that "alienate[d] slaves from the land and the natural world by associating farming with brutality and coercion" and left many "ambivalent about working the land, expressing both pride in their agricultural labor and a desire to escape the violence, drudgery, and low status associated with field work" (Smith 318).

On top of this ambivalence, there existed the larger struggle extending throughout the 19th century about "the intertwined meanings of 'nature' and 'race'" (Finseth 2), in which racist distinctions between African and European Americans often formed along the dichotomy of human and

"natural" that portrayed the former as part of nature. This struggle to move away from associations with nature that haunt African Americans even today (e.g., Collins 147) as well as a tendency to see African Americans only as victims of environmental transformation[2] perhaps explains why slave narratives (and African American literature as a whole) were not regarded as sources for ecocritical approaches for the longest time. Such an exclusion, however, continues the obfuscation of the part African Americans have played in the transformation of the American nation (for better and worse), even if it was a participation forced by direct violence under slavery. As Gerhardt writes, it is possible "to conceptualize the ways in which a Black speaker in a white supremacist context is both a marginalized other, colonized on the basis of his or her association with nature, and a social subject involved in the collective human exploitation of nature" (520). Despite the danger of disregarding differences in individuals' transformative reach depending on economic power in class societies that always comes with speaking of human collectivity, Gerhardt's call nevertheless points to a central location of this larger transformation in African American texts: namely work with and on nature. After all, slavery in the antebellum U.S. South was, at its economic base, organized around the cheapest possible production of agrarian goods for a rapidly evolving world market. As relatively simple agricultural work, it was furthermore more immediately than other work "a process between man and nature" (Marx, *Capital 1*, 283). As such, an examination of the transformation of non-human nature through the work process should take a more central position in the "broader inquiry into how plantation slavery organized human and nature relations in the American South during the first half of the nineteenth century" (Smith 317).

A critical reading of slave narratives interested in work relations between slave and nature nevertheless often encounters this relation not in explicit description of the land and its transformation through labor, but expressed in the social dimension in which this labor transforms the lifeworld of the slave. When Houston A. Baker Jr. identifies Colonel Lloyd's garden as "the most significant economic sign in the initial chapters

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[2] This is, of course, in no way meant to deny that African Americans are among the main victims of environmental devastation in the U.S. or to downplay the importance of work done in environmental justice criticism (e.g., Bullard). Environmental justice critics have been essential in providing evidence of the highly uneven ways in which communities of color, particularly Black neighborhoods, are affected by toxic substances and other harmful environmental influences (noise, smog, threats of natural disasters, etc.) both in the U.S. and globally. Many have also provided a model for activist scholarship.

of the *Narrative*" in which "the [literal] fruits of slave labor are *all* retained by the master," we find the economic relation of an agrarian slave economy materialized in cultivated nature. The garden with its fruit trees forms an "image of vast abundance produced by the slaves but denied them through the brutality of the owner of the means of production (i.e., the land [but also the slaves themselves; J.F.]) [that] suggests a purely economic transformation of a traditional image of the biblical garden and its temptations" (Baker 45). Significantly, the garden is not only a transformed biblical image, but a part of nature transformed by human (slave) labor, whose access is restricted through legalized physical violence to those whose labor has shaped the land; a "natural" expression of the social relation of slavery. It is this unwritten and often unremarked relation that shapes "nature" as a space already transformed through past labor. Although it is often left unaddressed, this transformation most prominently shapes occurrences of work on "nature" in the text's early passages. These occurrences of "nature" to be worked are most immediately visible as fields of corn, cotton, or tobacco—at once places of future and present work and materialization of past labor. In a more removed form, however, we can also regard wooden fences, slave huts, or even the opulent houses of the slave master as "nature" transformed. This transformation occurred either directly through labor or through a global capitalist market on which the slaveholders sell the products of the slaves' labor in exchange for other goods, including the labor of white overseers, solidifying a material and social relation that manifests in a class relation in which slaves are forced to work for free.

If we thus de-essentialize "nature" from notions of "pure" (wild or pastoral) landscapes and take seriously the dialectic dimension of humans in and as nature, in which external, non-human nature forms the "inorganic body" of humanity, we need not limit our examination to direct interrelations with (supposedly) "undisturbed" nature.[3] In fact, an eco-Marxist approach should not fall into a trap of fetishizing agrarianism or pastoralism by regarding only seemingly *immediate* work with nature as

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[3] In one of the most intriguing passages from the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx describes human life in and with nature as follows: "Nature is man's inorganic body [unorganischer Leib]—nature, that is, insofar as it is not itself human body. Man *lives* on nature—means that nature is his body, with which he must remain in continuous interchange if he is not to die. That man's physical and spiritual life is linked to nature means simply that nature is linked to itself, for man is a part of nature" (emphases in original). This idea of an "inorganic body," which reappears later in *Grundrisse* (396 and as "anorganischer Leib" 399), has recently been taken up in eco-Marxist circles and beyond to reenter the debate about Marx's supposed anthropocentrism and his theory's adaptability to current environmental concerns (e.g., Foster and Burkett; Butler).

its proper material.[4] Instead, we can see all modes of being in the world as an extended interrelation with "nature," although one that is, crucially, negotiated and transformed through the social and economic relations that these labor processes presuppose and reproduce; the more so, the more developed societies become. At bottom, however, humanity remains within nature, and all work remains at the end work on nature. Even advanced labor processes (i.e., ones using tools, machines, and processed materials) at their material basis come back to "nature" transformed manifold. Furthermore, all work has a greater or lesser impact on "nature" and the Earth's ecosystems, as the Anthropocene drives home. It is, after all, the work of big industry with its reliance on fossil fuel that has transformed "nature" in the form of the ecosystem most dramatically (see Malm). This realization applies to the U.S. slave economy in two ways. From the present-day Anthropocene perspective with which we began, the slave economy of the U.S. South fueled fossil capitalism's growth by providing part of the raw material for the first Industrial Revolution. Secondly, and more immediately, the monocultural agriculture of the slave economy exhausted soils rapidly, leading slave owners to either continuously search for new land or change their economy from an agricultural slave economy to an economy "producing" slaves as wares for other slave owners. In this sense, "slaveowner capitalism" was, in part, also an ecological problem, as 19th–century observers already knew.[5] In this sense, the labor of slaves can be regarded in a larger ecological context in a number of ways.

Firstly, all work inescapably forms a part of human-nature relations. This is because all human activity is activity in which humanity faces nature as its "inorganic body," or as the later Marx would prefer, occurs based on a metabolism between "man" and "nature"—even if increasing urbanization and civilizational development creates an ever-increasing distance (or rift) between the individual human benefits of the extraction and processing of raw materials and its effect on other human beings and non-human nature elsewhere. Each act of production, including the more

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[4] It is worth noting that even in this seemingly immediate process, 1; "external nature" has already been changed (see Marx, *Capital 1*, 283), and 2; with the development of societies, even agriculture "becomes merely the application of the science of material metabolism, its regulation for the greatest advantage of the entire body of society" (Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations* 705). While agricultural labor in the *antebellum* South was much closer to a direct engagement, even its non-social conditions were, of course, already shaped by previous human labor, including the development of knowledge regimes about agriculture and disciplinary regimes forcing humans to work under slavery.

[5] On this point, as well as Marx's engagement with slavery, see Foster, Holleman, and Clark.

mediated, seemingly less "natural" work Douglass takes as a caulker in the shipyards of Baltimore, and even the reproductive work done by house slaves for masters or within the slave community, work that features more prominently in Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), constitutes an interaction with nature.[6]

This reconceptualization allows a refocusing of the ecocritical debate from questions of perceived "naturalness" to ones about who benefits from appropriations of nature through work and who (including non-human agents) pays the costs. These costs can be locally and temporally transposed—showing up years later as toxic dumps or climate change—or more immediately visibly locally, such as the cutting down of a forest. Cristin Ellis recently addressed the ecological problem of monocrop slave economy in a reading of Douglass's *My Bondage and my Freedom* (1855) against the backdrop of the antebellum South's increasing soil exhaustion, as a result of which planters became "increasingly less economically dependent on the agricultural products of slave labor than on the value of those slaves themselves" (276)—a transformation of social relations as a response to the transformation of "nature" through the past labor of slave under owners interested only in maximizing their profit.

Secondly, slave labor forms part of the network of a rapidly expanding world market fueling the processes of industrialization, primarily in Europe and the northern U.S. This is, of course, not a dimension usually reflected in the personal accounts of suffering, resistance, and empowerment that provide the slave narratives' traditional material. A realization of the degree of connectedness of human societies under a capitalist world market shines through, however, in some debates comparing the exploitation of industrial workers in England or the northern U.S. states with that of Southern slaves, albeit often in a grotesque contortion designed to justify slavery through paternalism.

Thirdly, the "landscape" of slavery, as described by critics like Finseth or Gerhardt, can be reconceptualized in a manner following the logic in which Marx traces the continual (re)production of capitalist class relations as following necessarily from a production process into which participants enter unequally. Just as in capitalism "[i]t is not only workers' products which are transformed into independent powers, the products as masters and buyers of their producers" (*Capital 3*, 953–54), so, too,

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[6] On this point see Schmidt 86 (and more generally 76–93): "[E]ven if the naturally determined productivity of labour ceases to form the equally naturally determined source of the domination of man over man, even if what arose historically can no longer perpetuate itself as something 'natural,' life still remains determined by its most general necessity, the metabolism between man and nature."

does this apply in other class societies, including the slaveholding capitalism of the Southern U.S. Although these class relations are more immediately visible in the form of a legal framework justifying slavery and the brutal coercion continually necessary to force the maximum amount of work from the slaves, these societies, too, reproduce their inequalities materially. Thus in capitalism, the "independent powers" of the wealth created by workers materializes in a class relation that leaves owners of means of production on one side and workers with nothing to sell but their labor on the other. It also materializes in the work process itself, at least when it has undergone real subsumption, where machines—made by past labor—dictate the present work process, making workers their appendages (e.g., *Capital 1*, 508, 526–27; *Grundrisse* 592–600). Although the way in which power is maintained and surplus labor forced out of those who work is "first and foremost 'a relation of domination'" (Patterson 2; citing Marx) under slavery, the idea that the "workers' [slaves'] products [...] are transformed into independent powers" is a crucial realization. The altered "natural" geography of fields and fences, as well as a social relation, in which profits are squeezed from slave laborers, then reinvested to hire overseers and slave catchers, is, likewise, the materialized past labor of slaves, transformed into a whole range of forces keeping slave workers under control in the present.

Fourthly, social and economic relations are ideologically masked as "natural" relations for male and female slave workers alike. Most centrally, these relations include the reproduction of a slave system through the reproduction of an army of slave laborers at the slave masters' disposal. For this reason, relations of domination also play out biologically through human "nature," so to speak, subjecting female slaves to a gender-specific oppression under slavery while denying the status of full human to both male and female slaves on pseudo-biological grounds.

For the remainder of my chapter, I will turn to this last aspect and look at the social construction of the relation between slaves and nature, including the gender-specific oppression of slave women. As noted by Baker, there is a division between slave laborer and non-human nature through the ownership of the means of production, including the garden they themselves have to cultivate. It is crucial to note, however, as Marx and many critics after him do, that the slave laborers are themselves a part of these means of production (and by extension the 19th–century concept of nature):

> The slave stands in no relation whatsoever to the objective conditions of his labour; rather, *labour* itself, both in the form of the slave and in that of the serf, is classified as *an inorganic condition* [*unorganische Bedingung*] of production

> along with other natural beings, such as cattle, as an accessory of the earth. (Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations* 489, emphases in original)

The equation of slaves with animals hinted at by Marx in the above passage recurs so frequently in slave narratives that we have to assume it was a common conception during the 19th century. Slave narratives suggest that—apart from whippings and other physical and symbolic punishments—equating slaves to animals was one of the ideological sites of the continual reenactment of dishonoring that was necessary, according to Orlando Patterson, to uphold slavery as a "*permanent, violent domination of natally alienated and generally dishonored persons*" (13, emphasis in original). In the 19th–century U.S., this dishonoring apparently took the form of a "conflation of slaves with domesticated animals, rather than capital or property or 'thingdom'" (Outka 55). According to Outka, this notion subsumed the question of the treatment of slaves in a capitalist society founded on a notion of human equality under "a subset of the (non)question of animal rights." In this fashion, [r]ather than confronting the question of rebellious property, the slave holder dodged it, subsuming it under the related, but much less pressing, question of animal rights" (ibid.).

The comparison between animals and slaves abounds in slave narratives. It takes the form of signs for a "public sale of negroes, horses, &c" (Jacobs 14), Northup's sarcastic remark that the keeper of a slave pen "was out among his animals" (48), or Douglass's comparison of himself to "a wild young working animal" (*My Bondage* 147). In his usual brilliance, Douglass takes up this symbolic division and pushes it beyond its breaking point. When he, the young slave sent to Covey to be "broken," is himself sent to "break" a team of oxen—an endeavor in which he fails spectacularly—the absurdity of the situation does not escape him:

> I now saw, in my situation, several points of similarity with that of the oxen. They were property, so was I; they were to be broken, so was I. Covey was to break me, I was to break them; break and be broken—such is life. (*My Bondage* 150)

This short paragraph contains several ironies. The fact that there is a qualitative difference between the "young working animal" Douglass and the oxen is highlighted by the fact that Douglass can be ordered to conduct the work of breaking the animals, whereas the oxen cannot break anything except the wagon they pull and the gate they crash into. Secondly, the central point of Douglass's narrative is, of course, that he *resists* being broken, as readers knew from his first autobiography, his

public persona, and the generic codes of the slave narrative. The seemingly resigned "such is life" thus gains a dimension that contradicts its seeming absoluteness, just as Douglass's following actions contradict his supposed belonging to animal kind, taking 19th–century conceptions of race *ad absurdum*.

While the denial of entry into the category of full "human," forms the experience of the agricultural slave laborer regardless of gender, female slaves were in another relation to nature in at least one sense. Under slavery their bodies became an "extension of nature" (Davis 84) in another fashion. The degradation to means of production they shared with male slaves met with their "biological destiny" (Davis 86), which under the system of *partus sequitur ventrem* made them "means of production" in a different, particularly cruel way: their childbearing served to create more slave laborers. Both male and female writers documented this practice, whose violence extended beyond the forceful separation of women and children that became a trope in more "decorous" anti-slavery literature like Harriet Beecher-Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). Douglass, in his *Narrative* and again in *My Bondage, My Freedom*, mentions in a few lines each the twenty-year-old Caroline whom Covey buys, "as he said, for a *breeder*," hiring a man "to fasten up with her every night!" The language used in the short passage to describe the serial rape—despite adhering to some extent to 19th–century dictates of decorum—hints at the dehumanizing condition of Caroline, whose twins, once born, are regarded only as "quite an addition to his [Covey's] wealth" (*Narrative* 47, emphasis in original).

"Bred" like animals, many slave women thus had to endure a particular, gendered form of the erasure of the relation between worker and means of production inherent in the economic logic of slavery. Through the sexual violence perpetrated against slave women, a violence that carries the economic incentive of their children becoming the property of their owners, the women themselves, reduced to their biological capacity to bear children, "become nature" in a sense that confounds the distinction between humanity, human work, and nature. Although in a sense, nature—through these women's bodies—itself seems to "do the work" of creating new slaves, as evidenced by its procreative function regardless of the woman's desire, the woman herself of course has to bear the pain and labor of childbirth and rearing. Moreover, this form of reproductive work put slave women in particularly fraught situations. Often violated sexually, they had to navigate the contradictory demands of partners, community, and masters from a position that was at once vulnerable and simultaneously, if maneuvered

carefully, capable of providing them some potential leeway in a highly fraught power relation. Patricia Hill Collins notes how "[e]fforts to control Black women's sexuality were tied directly to slave owner's efforts to increase the number of children their female slaves produced." Consequently, pregnant women were sometimes assigned lighter tasks or received better provisions, whereas "[i]nfertile women could expect to be treated 'like barren sows and be passed from one unsuspecting buyer to the next'." As a result, motherhood afforded a "relative security" and "a way for enslaved Black women to anchor themselves in a place for an extended period" (51). At the same time, of course, slaveholders' economic interests constantly endangered motherhood as a personal relation between mother and child. As Hortense Spillers notes, in a striking parallel to Patterson's notion of the loss of "natal claims" by enslaved people (9–10), "if 'kinship' were possible, the property relations would be undermined, since the offspring would then 'belong' to a mother and a father" (75). While establishing the legal status of the offspring, motherhood was thus always contested. At the same time, it afforded some women some control. This ambivalent position is perhaps nowhere more visible than in Jacobs's unwillingness to flee and her later playing with Dr. Flint's desire for her return. Jacobs notes early: "I could have made my escape alone; but it was more for my helpless children than for myself that I longed for freedom" (73)—demonstrating how her motherhood potentiates the struggle all slaves fight when deciding to sever the ties to their community through flight, as noted by many writers of slave narratives. At the same time, Jacobs later "play[s] on" Flint's "hope [...] that by allowing the children to live freely with their grandmother, who is not a slave, Jacobs will return to her family and thus be subject to his control" again (Cook 36–37). She is therefore able to protect her children by navigating Flint's desires, allowing her children a unique protection albeit at the cost of seven years of hiding in her grandmother's attic. Jacobs's hiding and letter writing nevertheless allows, as Jean Fagin Yellin notes, "a sophisticated version of power reversal in which the slave controls the master" (xxviii; qtd. in Cook 37).

As Douglass's tale of Caroline and Ellis's contextualization of the shift from a slave economy to an "economy" that "produces" slaves makes clear, "the institutionalized pattern of rape during slavery" was not only a "weapon of domination" and "repression," (Davis qtd. in Collins 147; see also Davis 97), but also stemmed from economic desires. Whether the "breeding" of slaves occurred within the Black community or through rape or abuse of power by white masters, both served the reproduction of slaves, rather than merely the sexual urges of white masters, although,

here as in all things, economic violence and social interaction overlap. It is worth noting, however, that while the majority of Jacobs's *Incident*, following the manner of the sentimental novel, is about Linda's Pamela–like resistance of Dr. Flint's advances, the second chapter already makes clear that Flint is a serial offender. He first whips the husband of a slave who, following his promises to "treat [her] well" (15), ends up pregnant by him. Flint then breaks his promise to the woman, because—as Jacobs comments—"she had forgotten that it was a crime for a slave to tell who was the father of her child" (16).

The comparisons between slaves and animals thus extends further for female slaves, encompassing not merely their treatment as "beasts of burden" in labor and punishment, but the biological one of their reproductive capacities as women. This, indeed, may be the ultimate dimension of "personality swallowed up in the sordid idea of property" (Douglass qtd. in Davis 85) and the breakdown of the fraught distinction between humans (as non-nature) and nature (as non-human), which biologically or ecologically was never tenable, but plays a huge part in societal discourse and the (un)equal treatment of humans in a slave society.

As this chapter has shown, the distinction between humans and "nature" (a category that within the logics of race-based slavery includes Black people) collapses in many areas. It does so despite the extreme violence of a white supremacist system structured in almost every aspect to uphold this very distinction to deny slaves participation in the circle of a supposedly civilized humanity while using them, including the body of slave women, to work on/as "nature." No one sees this clearer, of course, than those authors of slave narrative who, like Jacobs or Douglass, were subjected to this system and found ways to resist this "special form of human parasitism" (Patterson 14), even within their limited range of power. Exploring how African Americans were both subject to the valorization of "nature," forced participants in the economization of non-human nature, and resisted their subjugation in a work process in which they had almost no say, adds an important chapter to the rise of North American capitalism, slavery's role in it, and to African American (literary) history.

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