

Lose Your Mother

A Journey Along the
Atlantic Slave Route

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AS I TRAVELED through Ghana, no one failed to recognize me as the daughter of slaves, so the few stories people shared were kinder and less severe than they would be otherwise. No one said things like slaves were a bunch of stupid and backward people, or confided they were fit only for manual labor that required strong arms, or called them barbarians or criminals. If you believed that slavery was a relatively benign institution in Africa, then you certainly would not expect to hear such things, but in fact, masters and traders spoke about their slaves in exactly these terms and people continue to do so today. In my company, the polite refrained from such remarks and instead made jokes about how I had found my way back home or teased me about searching for my roots. They were used to Americans with identity problems. None openly expressed surprise or amazement that nearly two centuries after the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade, I was still hoping to find a hint or sign of the captives. If they experienced a twinge of remorse, no one let on. And even if I was indiscreet enough to mention my slave origins, most refused to follow me down this dangerous path and responded with studied indifference to all my talk of slavery. But silence and withholding were not the same as for-

getting. Despite the dictates of law and masters, which prohibited the discussion of a person's origins, everyone remembered the stranger in the village, everyone recalled who had been a slave and with a discerning glance just as easily identified their descendants.

As it turned out, the slave was the only one expected to discount her past. It surprised me at first. Why would those who had lost the most be inclined or likely to forget? Clearly even someone like me, who was three generations away from slavery and who had neither a country nor a clan to reclaim, hadn't been deterred from searching. But as I traveled along the slave route, I soon found out about all the elaborate methods that had been employed to make slaves forget their country.

In every slave society, slave owners attempted to eradicate the slave's memory, that is, to erase all the evidence of an existence before slavery. This was as true in Africa as in the Americas. A slave without a past had no life to avenge. No time was wasted yearning for home, no recollections of a distant country slowed her down as she tilled the soil, no image of her mother came to mind when she looked into the face of her child. The pain of all she had lost did not rattle in her chest and make it feel tight. The absentminded posed no menace. Yet more than guns, shackles, and whips were required to obliterate the past. Lordship and bondage required sorcery too.

EVERYONE TOLD ME a different story about how the slaves began to forget their past. Words like "zombie," "sorcerer," "witch," "succubus," and "vampire" were whispered to explain it. In these stories, which circulated throughout West Africa, the particulars varied, but all of them ended the same—the slave loses mother. Never did the captive choose to forget; she was always tricked or bewitched or coerced into forgetting. Amnesia, like an accident or a stroke of bad fortune, was never an act of volition.

When I asked, "What happened to the ones taken across the waters?" people passed on twice-told tales in which herbs, baths, talismans, and incantations transformed slaves into blank and passive automatons. In

Ouidah, a town that had been a significant port on the Slave Coast, a university student told me that slaves were marched through a grove that induced forgetting, or that they encircled a tree of forgetfulness. Women had to circle the tree seven times, and men had to circle it nine times in order to forget their origins and accept their slave status.

The student joked, "The tree didn't work because now you are back." He pointed out the tree of return on the slave route.

"It doesn't make sense," I replied. "Why did they want the ones who had forgotten to return?"

He just smiled.

"Well, how do you say tree of return in the Fon language?" I asked.

"There's no word for it in our language because it's just something we tell foreigners."

Every part of West Africa that trafficked in slaves possessed its own Lethe, rivers and streams whose water made slaves forget their pasts, dense groves that trapped old memories in the web of leaves, rocks that obstructed entrance to the past, amulets that deafened a man to his mother tongue, and shrines that pared and pruned time so that only today was left. Traditional healers devised herbal concoctions that could make the most devoted husband forget his wife in the blink of an eye, marabouts applied potions and dispensed talismans that erased the trail home, priests forced captives to vow oaths of allegiance to their captors, sorcerers tamed recalcitrants with the powers of the left hand. European traders, too, employed occultists to pacify and entrance slaves with medicinal plants.

A famous slave trader on the Rio Pongo subdued his captives with the aid of an enchanted rock. He lined them up and forced each in turn to take a seat on the rock, which drained away all will. After this treatment, the prisoners no longer resisted their bonds, recalled their pasts, or attempted to flee the trader. After being washed with a brew distilled from plant roots, the slave was integrated into a group of the newly pacified.

In Ghana, captives were given ceremonial baths before sale to wash them clean of old identities. Medicine men, fetish priests, and slave traders recited songs and incantations that lulled the captive into embracing servitude and that eradicated all visions of home. In Ewe country, on

the eastern coast, people still told stories of a brew or tonic that prevented slaves from retracing the path back to their country.

In the north, they possessed medicine so powerful that it transformed able-bodied men and women into vacuous and tractable slaves. The plant *Crotalaria arenaria*, a leguminous undershrub found in the savanna, was called *manta uwa*, which means "forget mother" in Hausa. Traders boasted that slaves ingesting the plant soon forgot their origins and no longer attempted to run away.

Manta uwa made you forget your kin, lose sight of your country, and cease to think of freedom. It expunged all memories of a natal land, and it robbed the slave of spiritual protection. Ignorant of her lineage, to whom could the slave appeal? No longer able to recall the shrines or sacred groves or water deities or ancestor spirits or fetishes that could exact revenge on her behalf, she was defenseless. No longer anyone's child, the slave had no choice but to bear the visible marks of servitude and accept a new identity in the household of the owner.

It was one thing to be a stranger in a strange land, and an entirely worse state to be a stranger to yourself.

This was the fate from which the boys in Elmina were trying to rescue me. Through their letters, they were trying to call me back from *donkor-land*, not the territory raided for slaves but the land of oblivion. But what, if anything, could I remember after hundreds of years of forgetting?

THE PATHS LEADING from the hinterland to the coast, to listen to slave traders tell it, swarmed with amnesiacs, soulless men, and walking corpses. As early as the fifteenth century, European traders had described their black captives as absentminded and innately servile. "In time," one traveler observed, "they soon forgot all about their own country." And by the eighteenth century these accounts had been repeated so often that they were accepted as truth. These people of no country were called "negroes" and "donkors." In the end these names were just another way of identifying them as the living dead. Race, Hannah Arendt observed, "is, politically speaking, not the beginning of humanity but its end . . . not the natural birth of man but his unnatural death."

Like the term "Negro," *donkor* was a badge of servitude, a stamp of those who had been uprooted, an earmark of dead men. It did not refer to any home or country or history but only to a dishonored condition. Like the term "nigger," *donkor* implied that "the human pulse stops at the gate of the barracoon."

Donkor was used as an epithet in Asante, the powerful inland state that controlled the traffic in slaves to the coast. It was "synonymous with the barbarian of the Greeks and Romans," a European factor explained, "which they [the Asante] apply to all people of the interior but themselves, and implies an ignorant fellow." A tome on Asante law and custom held that *donkor* was "applied strictly to any man or woman, other than an Asante, who had been purchased with the express purpose of making him or her a slave."

With the knowledge gained from ten slaving voyages to Africa, in which he traversed the territory from Cape Palmas to the Congo River, Captain John Adams judged "the Dunco" to be the most passive of all the people he encountered north of the equator. He first noted their appearance—"they were middle size and the color of their skin is not of so deep a black as those of the Fantee or Asshantee"—and then provided an assessment of their character: mild, tractable, and inoffensive. "They may be called a simple people, who never exhibit any sullenness of manner, but a uniform willingness to do to the best of their ability whatever they are desired; and the term Dunco, which in the Fante language signifies stupid fellow, or ignorant man, from the back country, is invariably given to them by the Fantees, as a term of derision, in consequence. To the Fantees, as well as to the Asshantees, they have a strong aversion, because they consider these people as the authors of their misfortunes."

In the opinion of Ludewig Roemer, a trader at Fort Christiansborg, a Danish settlement, "One could hardly call them human . . . The farther up in the land the slaves come from, the more stupid they are." But contrary to the prevailing view of northerners as a "well-mannered nation," Roemer insisted they were wilder and more savage than other slaves. To his eyes, they possessed a physiognomy like that of a tiger with comparable teeth in their mouths. Notwithstanding their wild nature and feral ap-

pearance, Roemer conceded that the fear of men like him hid behind their truculence. "The slaves who come from far north in the land think we Europeans have bought them to be fattened like swine, and that we eat them when they become fat. I cannot describe to what degree of desperation this fear drives them, so they seek to kill us."

Roemer was not the only trader fearful of slaves set upon destruction and revenge. The occult practices to induce forgetting were attempts to avert rebellion and forestall retribution. It wasn't only the memory of their kin and country that royals and merchants wanted the captives to forget but, as well, those responsible for their wretched circumstances.

AN ELDERLY AKAN MAN RUMINATED about the cost of enrichment while conducting business with Roemer.

"It is you, you Whites," they say, "who have brought all the evil among us. Indeed, would we have sold one another if you, as purchasers, had not come to us? The desire we have for your fascinating goods and your brandy, bring it to pass that one brother cannot trust the other, nor one friend another. Indeed, a father hardly his own son! We know from our forefathers that only those malefactors who had thrice committed murder were stoned or drowned. Otherwise the normal punishment was that anyone who had committed a misdeed had to carry to the injured party a large piece of firewood for his house or hut, and ask on his knees for forgiveness, for one, two, or three days in a row. In our youth, we knew many thousands of families here and at the coast, and now not a hundred individuals can be counted. And what is worse, you have remained among us as a necessary evil, since if you left, the Negroes up-country would not let us live for half a year, but would come and kill us, our wives and our children. That they bear this hatred for us is your fault."

This man was not alone in fearing the punishment to be meted out by slaves. Others shared his apprehension. By the middle of the eighteenth century, African merchants had begun to ponder the consequences of the

Atlantic trade. While many weren't aware of the population decline occurring in West Africa as a result of the slave trade, which has been likened by scholars to the demographic impact of centuries of war, they had started to experience the social disruptions of the trade. The state of emergency caused by predatory greed was becoming slowly apparent and fears of social collapse or personal affliction haunted the ruling class. Royals, big men, and merchants feared the revenge of slave spirits, the envy of their inferiors, and the indictment of their riches. Like ruling men everywhere, they dreaded the hewers of wood, the rabble, the multitudes. They fretted about the course of events that might place the bottom rail on top. They nervously anticipated the retribution of slaves. The lives sacrificed for cloth, guns, rum, and cowries left their traces in the anxieties of the ruling class.

In the Congo, a group of traders formed an association called Lemba, which was a therapeutic cult for those afflicted with the disease of wealth. Lemba, which means "to calm," contained the disruptions caused by the slave trade with ritual and medicine. Like Keynesian economists, Lemba priests tried to cure capitalism by regulating the violence of the market and redistributing wealth to their kin and community. The members of the Lemba cult were the elite: healers, chiefs, judges, and the affluent. They were the ones vulnerable to the envy of the less fortunate and blamed for the social ills associated with the trade. Infirmary, sterility, and witchcraft tainted those allied with merchant capital. Gifts offered to high-ranking priests and riches shared with subordinates provided the remedy.

In Senegambia, the Diola built altars to their captives. Shrines adorned with wooden fetters (*hudjenk*) and consecrated with palm wine and the blood of animal sacrifice protected raiders and their captives and also determined who could and could not be seized as a captive. The priests who tended these shrines were required to have captured at least one slave with their own hands. A shrine was named after the first slave taken so that his or her name would perdure and the songs performed at the altar invoked the name of the man or woman responsible for the family's prosperity. The Diola traders recognized that slaves produced their wealth and for this reason they committed the names of their captives to memory. (In Antwerp or Lisbon, Nantes or Bristol, Charleston or Provi-

dence, no one invoked the names of the persons responsible for their riches.)

The spirit shrines of the Diola protected the communities involved in slave raiding from internal disruption. If the rules governing raiding were violated, traders were afflicted with a disease called *hupila*, which "made one feel like all one's limbs were bound in a rope." The disease replicated the bonds and immobility of the captive.

On the Slave Coast, the Ewe incorporated the *donkor* into their pantheon of spirits. In the Gorovodu religious practice, the spirits are *amefleflewo*—bought-and-sold people. This practice of spirit possession by slaves, explains an anthropologist, was a form of sacred debt payment by which the stolen lives of captives were redressed. The Ewe host offered her body as a vessel for *donkor* spirits. Possession, as a form of spiritual expenditure or loss, reversed the theft and accumulation of slave trading. By honoring slave spirits, the Ewe endeavored to amend the past and to make a place for strangers.

Even if the captives had managed to forget the acts of violence that made them slaves, ironically the traders could not. They remembered the riches and debts they had incurred by their participation in the trade. Apprehension regarding what they had done and how it might come back to them motivated these rituals of atonement. Royals and merchants could not afford to forget, at least not without risking all they had gained and being engulfed by the chaos and disorder of the slave trade.

FEW OF THE ENSLAVED forgot the royals, merchants, and thieves responsible for their captivity, even when they had forgotten their country. Each generation passed on tales of men who bled dry the lives of other men, who stank from the smell of corpses, and who gorged themselves on human flesh. The ones made property didn't take pleasure in the great wealth of ruling men, so their stories recounted the gruesome means by which the big men had acquired coffers of gold and cowries. In a volume of folktales titled *Nigger to Nigger*, collected in South Carolina by a white amateur folklorist, E.C.L. Adams, there is a portrait of a slave-trading king. The storytellers called him a "big nigger."

Way back in slavery time and way back in Africa, there had been a chief who betrayed his own tribe by helping white folks catch and entrap slaves. White folks used to give him money and trinkets, and, for this the king sent thousands into bondage. He would trick them onto the boat where the white men trapped and chained them. The last time the white men came to the coast, they "knocked dat nigger down an' put chain on him an' brung him to dis country."

When the king died, he was not desired in heaven and was barred from hell. God, the Greatest Master, condemned the king to roam the earth for all times. As retribution for having killed the spirits of men and women as well as their bodies, he would never be permitted any resting place. He would forever wander with the other marauding spirits of the bush. Banished to the dismal swamp, he was forbidden from ever touching a living thing and allowed to feed only off the dead. As he had sucked away the life of men, so he would spend the rest of his days as a buzzard with carrion as his only food.

Sometimes he would appear before those wandering or lost in the swamp, but his doom had been settled. He wouldn't ever hurt another person again. His evil beak and claw would never poke, scratch, or wound any creature still alive. Known all over the spirit world as the King Buzzard, he would travel forever alone.

IF IN THE ERA of the trade the enslaved had been forced to *forget mother*, now their descendants were being encouraged to do the impossible and reclaim her. In the 1990s, Ghana discovered that remembering the suffering of slaves might not be such a bad thing after all, if for no other reason than it was profitable. So contrary to the legal precedents and prohibitions of three centuries, the state was now trying to create a public memory of slavery. Under the stewardship of Shell Oil, USAID, and a consortium of North American universities, the Ghanaian Ministry of Tourism and the Museum and Monuments Board crafted a story for the ten thousand black tourists who visited the country every year hungering for knowledge of slave ancestors. Tourism provided a ready response with a tale of the At-

lantic slave trade as a distinctly African American story, with no mention of the expansion and increasing severity of African slavery in response to the Atlantic trade or of destitute commoners.

Local cottage industries in slave route tourism began sprouting up all over Ghana. In 1998, the Ministry of Tourism encouraged every district to form a Tourism Development Committee. Every town or village had an atrocity to promote—a mass grave, an auction block, a slave river, a massacre. It was Ghana's equivalent to a fried chicken franchise. McDonald's had already organized McRoots tours to Senegal and Gambia. No one knew for sure, but Ghana might be next. Few of the tour operators, docents, and guides put any stock in the potted history of the "white man's barbarism" and the "crimes against humanity" that they marketed to black tourists or believed the Atlantic trade had anything to do with them. They only hoped that slavery would help make them prosperous.

For Ghana, the slave route was a desperate measure to generate needed revenue and to develop a viable economy. For towns and villages scattered throughout the countryside, it was the possibility of digging new wells, building a school, or buying a vehicle to transport the sick to the small hospital one hundred miles away. For the jobless, it was the opportunity for employment in the tourism industry. For petty traders, it was an expanded market for their goods. For dreamers, it was the chance of a ticket to America.

Door of No Return rituals, reenactments of captivity, certificates of pilgrimage, and African naming ceremonies framed slavery primarily as an American issue and as one of Africa's relation to her "lost children." The biennial Panafest Historical Theatre Festival (Panafest), which began in 1992, attracted participants from all over the African diaspora. The reunification of the African family and the return of its children to the homeland were the animating themes of the festival. On the ground, this often translated into a comedy of errors, as in 1994 when the Ghanaian Concert Party Union decided to welcome black Americans to Ghana and pay homage to their culture with an old-style blackface performance. (A bureaucratic obstacle prevented the show from being performed.) A "take their heads" crusade was the response of taxi drivers, peddlers, and merchants.

Most recently, the Ministry of Tourism launched an advertising campaign to change the common perception of African Americans from one of rich tourists to one of brothers and sisters. This effort to make Ghana feel more like Jerusalem and less like Disneyland required Ghanaians to strike *obruni* from their vocabulary and welcome their African American kin back home.

"Remembering slavery" became a potent means of silencing the past in the very guise of preserving it, since it effectively curbed all discussion of African slavery and its entailments—class exploitation, gender inequality, ethnic clashes, and regional conflict. The sorcery of the state, like the sorcery of marabouts and herbalists, was also intended to wash away the past (at least those aspects that might create conflict) and to pacify the heirs of slaves, except that now this process was described as memorializing rather than forgetting. The arrival of "the ones who had been taken away" did not encourage a working through of this history but a bittersweet celebration of return, reunion, and progress.

So the descendants of slaves were welcomed with the red carpet treatment. They mourned their ancestors in great public ceremonies where chiefs assembled to atone for the past and to collect alms. And the brothers and sisters gave generous donations and shopped vigorously, perhaps hoping that the breach of the Atlantic would be bridged by their new roles as consumers. It was to everyone's advantage to believe this.

The heirs of slaves wanted a past of which they could be proud, so they conveniently forgot the distinctions between the rulers and the ruled and closed their eyes to slavery in Africa. They pretended that their ancestors had once worn the king's vestments and assumed the grand civilization of Asante as their own. They preferred to overlook the fact that the Asantehene (king of Asante) had helped to shove their ancestors onto slave ships and refused to admit royal power emanated from "the abuse of human beings and things." It was comic and tragic at the same time. The children of slaves were as reluctant to assume their place among toilers, laborers, and peasants as the elites. The irony of this was suggested by Aime Césaire: "We've never been Amazons of the King of Dahomey, nor princes of Ghana with eight hundred camels, nor wise men in Timbuctu

under Askia the Great, nor the architects of Djenné, nor Madhis, nor warriors . . . I may as well confess that we were at all times pretty mediocre dishwashers, shoeblacks without ambition, at best conscientious sorcerers and the only unquestionable record that we broke was that of endurance under the chicote [whip]."

And even if African Americans were seduced by tourism's promise of an African home and willing to dance joyfully around trees of return and eager to experience solidarity with their newfound kin through freshly minted memories of slavery, most Ghanaians weren't fooled by the mirage, even when their survival necessitated that they indulge the delusion. The story of slavery fabricated for African Americans had nothing to do with the present struggles of most Ghanaians. What each community made of slavery and how they understood it provided little ground for solidarity. African Americans wanted to regain their African patrimony and to escape racism in the United States. Ghanaians wanted an escape from the impoverishment of the present, and the road to freedom, which they most often imagined, was migration to the United States. African Americans entertained fantasies of return and Ghanaians of departure. From where we each were standing, we did not see the same past, nor did we share a common vision of the Promised Land. The ghost of slavery was being conjured to very different ends.

IN THE UNITED STATES, black people's insistence on reckoning with slavery in the face of national indifference, if not downright hostility, has been an effort to illuminate the crushing effects of racism in our lives. It is less a historical exercise than an ethical and political mandate. Simply put, the "legacy of slavery" is a way of saying that we had been treated badly for a very long time and that the nation owes us. Martin Luther King, Jr., employed the language of creditor and debtor races to underscore the elusive quest for racial justice. In the speech delivered at the March on Washington, he said, "America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked with insufficient funds." The promissory note to which King referred was the Constitution and the Declaration of

Independence. As he saw it, the civil rights movement was an effort to “cash this check, a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice.”

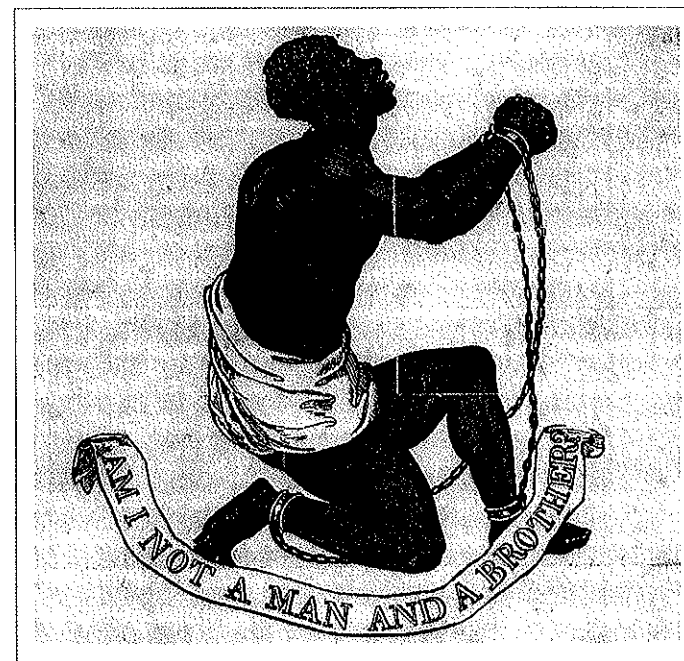
No one has ever been able to make the case persuasively enough to convince the government that this was true or even to be granted a day in court, despite the recent flurry of lawsuits for reparations. In overturning the use of affirmative action in granting city contracts, Justice Antonin Scalia wrote, “Under our Constitution there can be no such thing as either a creditor or a debtor race . . . We are just one race here. It is American.” In the eyes of the court, no enduring harm had been passed across generations. And, even if it had been, we had slumbered on our rights for too long. Too much time had passed between the injury and the claim for redress. But for us the opposite was true. The time passed had only intensified the injury. History was an open wound, as Jamaica Kincaid writes, that “began in 1492 and has come to no end yet.”

Who could deny that the United States had been founded on slavery or disregard the wealth created by enslaved laborers? Or brush aside three centuries of legal subjection? Yet I remain agnostic about reparations. I fear that petitions for redress are forms of political appeal that have outlived their usefulness. Did the bid to make a legal or political claim in an officially “post-racist” society require us to make arguments in a moral language that appeals to the abolitionist consciousness of white folks, who accept that slavery was wrong *and* believe that racism has ended? Are reparations a way of cloaking the disasters of the present in the guise of the past because even our opponents can’t defend slavery now? Did we want a Federal Bureau of African American Affairs to decide and manage what we were owed? Or did we hope that the civil suits could accomplish what a social movement had failed to do, that is, to eradicate racism and poverty?

I had grown weary of pleading our case and repeating our complaint. It seems to me that there is something innately servile about making an appeal to a deaf ear or praying for relief to an indifferent and hostile court or expecting remedy from a government unwilling even to acknowledge that slavery was a crime against humanity.

In 1817, the black abolitionist Robert Wedderburn had warned of the dangers of appeal. In an address to the slaves of Jamaica, he encouraged them to stage a general strike to win their liberty. “Union among you, will strike tremendous terror to the receivers of stolen persons. But do not petition, for it is degrading to human nature to petition your oppressors.” In 1845, Frederick Douglass echoed this sentiment when he described the slave’s appeal as “a privilege so dangerous” that anyone exercising it “runs a fearful hazard” of inviting even greater violence.

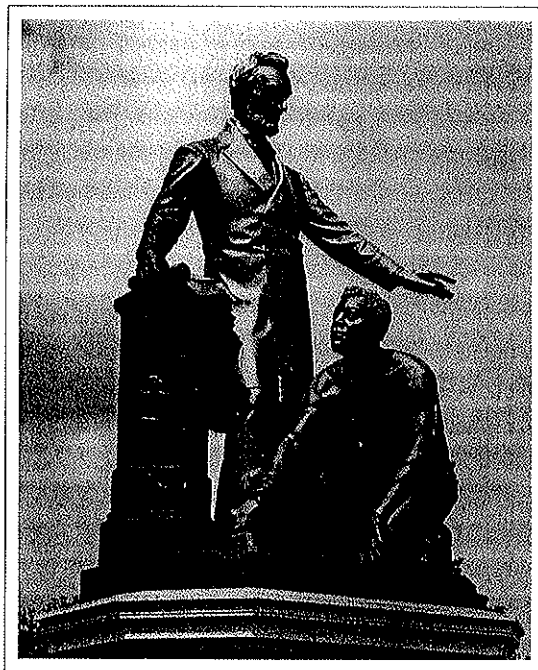
I couldn’t help but think of Josiah Wedgwood’s famous antislavery medallion of the chained slave on bended knee, begging in supplication, “Am I not a man and a brother?” The medallion had enjoyed such popularity that it became the favored icon of the abolition movement and was worn as a brooch or hairpin by women of fashion in the 1780s and ’90s. But the bid for emancipation reproduced the abject position of the slave. And the pleading and praying for relief before the bar struck me in exactly



the same way—it was as an act of state worship. I didn't want to get down on my knees as a precondition to arriving at freedom. I didn't want to plead my case, "Yes, I have suffered too." I didn't want to display my scars.

When I envisioned the slave I didn't think of this fellow on bended knee, trying to maintain his dignity as he made the case for his humanity. His clasped hands were folded as if he were praying and his head was upturned slightly as if he were looking for God, but I understood that it wasn't God to whom he was looking and praying but to the people of England or France, who might as well have been God. And anyone looking down upon his naked figure could see that this man was helpless and needed their assistance despite his rippling muscles and broad chest and mighty shoulders. His humiliation moved them and made them feel guilty and excited their sympathy.

Of course, once you have assumed the position of supplicant and find



yourself genuflecting before the court or the bar of public opinion, then, like the strapping man on the medallion, you have conceded the battle. It is hard to demand anything when you are on bended knee or even to keep your head raised. And you can forget trying to counter the violence that had landed you on your knee in the first place. Being so low to the ground, it is difficult not to grovel or to think of freedom as a gift dispensed by a kind benefactor or to imagine that your fate rests in the hands of a higher authority, a great emancipator, the state, or to implore that you are human too. "Am I not a man and a brother?" Having to ask such a question, no doubt, would have made the petitioner's nostrils flare with anger and perspiration bead on his forehead and the bile rise to the back of his throat.

Needing to make the case that we have suffered and that slavery, segregation, and racism have had a devastating effect on black life is the contemporary analogue to the defeated posture of Wedgwood's pet Negro. The apologetic density of the plea for recognition is staggering. It assumes both the ignorance and the innocence of the white world. If only they knew the truth, they would act otherwise. I am reminded of the letter that James Baldwin wrote his nephew on the centennial anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation. "The crime of which I accuse my country and my countrymen," he wrote, "and for which neither I nor time nor history will ever forgive them, that they have destroyed and are destroying hundreds of thousands of lives and do not know it and do not want to know it . . . It is not permissible that the authors of devastation should also be innocent. It is the innocence which constitutes the crime."

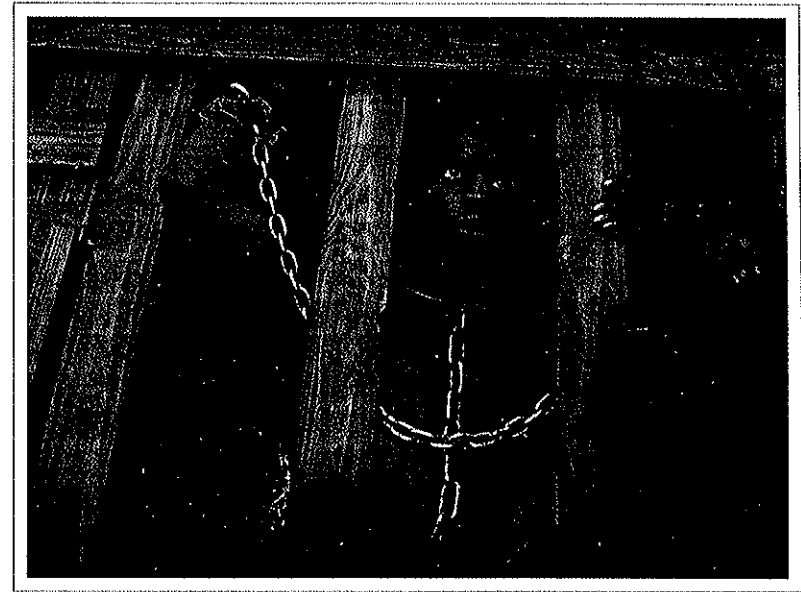
To believe, as I do, that the enslaved are our contemporaries is to understand that we share their aspirations and defeats, which isn't to say that we are owed what they were due but rather to acknowledge that they accompany our every effort to fight against domination, to abolish the color line, and to imagine a free territory, a new commons. It is to take to heart their knowledge of freedom. The enslaved knew that freedom had to be taken; it was not the kind of thing that could ever be given to you. The kind of freedom that could be given to you could just as easily be taken back. Freedom is the kind of thing that required you to leave your bones

on the hills at Brimsbay, or to burn the cane fields, or to live in a garret for seven years, or to stage a general strike, or to create a new republic. It is won and lost, again and again. It is a glimpse of possibility, an opening, a solicitation without any guarantee of duration before it flickers and then is extinguished.

The demands of the slave on the present have everything to do with making good the promise of abolition, and this entails much more than the end of property in slaves. It requires the reconstruction of society, which is the only way to honor our debt to the dead. This is the intimacy of our age with theirs—an unfinished struggle. To what end does one conjure the ghost of slavery, if not to incite the hopes of transforming the present? Given this, I refuse to believe that the slave's most capacious political claims or wildest imaginings are for back wages or debt relief. There are too many lives at peril to recycle the forms of appeal that, at best, have delivered the limited emancipation against which we now struggle.

IN GHANA, they joked that if a slave ship bound for America docked off the coast today so many Ghanaians would volunteer for the passage that they would stampede one another trying to get on board.

But who would ever envy slaves or view a cargo hold as an opportunity or risk death to arrive in the Americas? Every year Ghanaians stowed away in packing crates, cargo holds, and ship containers trying to make their way to the United States or Europe. Twenty-three men arrived in New York in 2003 hidden in a cargo ship. The year before, two Ghanaian boys were found dead in the baggage compartment of a plane at Heathrow Airport. The subzero temperatures and lack of oxygen killed them. Each year young men and boys risked deadly voyages to escape poverty and joblessness, while girls fled to Abidjan and other cities and were trafficked internationally as prostitutes. It was the dire circumstances of the present that caused Ghanaians to make wisecracks about volunteering for the Middle Passage and to view black tourists as the fortunate heirs of Kunta Kinte.



What they didn't discern were the two decades of political setbacks and economic decline that had inspired these trips to the dungeon; what they didn't understand was that many of us also lived in poverty. (It didn't look the same, but the assault of poverty was life threatening in the United States too.) A growing sense of despair and an exhausted political imagination incapable of dreaming of radical change had everything to do with the busloads of black strangers looking to shed tears in a slave fort. There were no obvious signs of this diminished hope for the future. The grief of African Americans was opaque here. We were encouraged to mourn because it generated revenue, but our grief struck no common chord of memory, no bedrock of shared sentiment.

To most Ghanaians the government's efforts to commemorate the Atlantic slave trade were irrelevant. Besides, what had Jamaicans and Americans to do with their lives? When President Rawlings declared that on August 1, 1998, Ghana would celebrate Emancipation Day to commemorate the abolition of slavery in the British Caribbean, Ghanaians retorted, "Has slavery ended in Africa?" The British had also abolished

slavery in Ghana, but President Rawlings had not planned any public celebrations of the colonial ordinances that ended slavery in the Gold Coast in 1874 and in the Northern Territories in 1897. Had Rawlings asked, "Are we yet free?" most Ghanaians would have answered with a resounding, "No."

This "no" resonated on both sides of the Atlantic. It was the reminder of what abolition and decolonization had failed to deliver. This "no" was the language we shared, and within it resided a promise of affiliation better than that of brothers and sisters.

The Dark Days

"OPEN YOUR EYES," John had been scolding me for months. Now, through no fault of my own, I spent most of my time in the dark. In the mornings, I was bleary-eyed as I labored to make out the world concealed beneath the blustery gray sky of harmattan. In the evenings, the city slowly disappeared as the light shifted from the color of ash to a charcoal black, as if Accra had been buried under a mound of soot. From my terrace, I watched the city vanish at nightfall, straining my eyes to make out the human forms hidden in the shadows, training myself to discern the subtle intimations of life in the sea of blackness.

I had scoffed at the December headlines in the *Daily Graphic* and the *Ghanaian Times*, "Power Cut in Half," and dismissed the articles warning of the severity of the energy crisis. I didn't imagine that it would be possible to go without electricity for three and a half days of the week. I didn't worry about living in darkness, because I was convinced the headlines had to be mistaken or that the news reports were a scheme intended to increase readership by alarming the public about an event that would never come to pass. I hadn't stopped to think that at least 60 percent of Ghanaians regularly lived without electricity. So I was unprepared when the middle classes were also plunged into darkness.