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# “From the Slave’s Point of View”: Toward a Phenomenology of Witnessing in Frederick Douglass’ 1845 *Narrative*

BY Jennifer Lewis

Aunt Hester’s whipping, which is inflicted by Aaron Anthony, witnessed by a young Frederick Bailey, and narrated by an older, self-named Frederick Douglass, has become a hypercanonical scene in the hypercanonical text, Douglass’ *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845). Douglass presents this incident as an initiation, for himself directly and for the reader vicariously, into “the hell of slavery.” And, consequently, critics have reproduced it countless times in their own narratives; it has become, as Saidiya Hartman has written, “one of the most well-known scenes of torture in the literature of slavery.” Douglass describes this passage as “the blood-stained gate” through which both he and the reader must pass to access, in complicated ways, slavery’s “terrible” scenes (*N*, 18). Yet in the *Narrative* and its surrounding criticism, Hester’s whipping stands apart from other violent episodes rather than leading toward them. It is exceptional rather than typical: a darkly specific “vivid ... image” with remarkable power to “endur[e].”

The question of what this scene’s power rests upon, and what it achieves, forms a controversy that has troubled critics for at least thirty years. In 1991, Deborah McDowell first drew attention to the scene’s difficult and complex sexual politics. She argued that the way Douglass “looks on” while Hester is stripped and whipped is sexualized and vicariously violent: while “he watches,” he “becomes voyeur.” Critics such as Jenny Franchot, Gwen Bergner, and Lindon Barrett have followed, reading Douglass’ witnessing as a form of collusion with the abusers of slave women. Barrett, for example, argues that Douglass’ “rendition” of Hester’s whipping “reinstates” the Master’s violence, and places Douglass in what McDowell describes as “symbolic complicity with the sexual crime he witnesses.” More recently, Hartman has raised the stakes, arguing that scholars should no longer analyze or even reproduce such scenes because reading them means entering into the same “symbolic complicity” as Douglass: “At issue here is the precariousness of empathy and the uncertain line between witness and spectator” (*S*, 4). This “uncertain line” lies at the heart of these critiques. All are concerned with how viewing might be a form of exploitation.

Douglass himself seemingly acknowledges such an “uncertain line,” ending the passage with an ambivalent declaration that draws attention to this precariousness. He writes that such scenes make him “doomed to be” both “a witness and a participant” (*N*, 18). Douglass’ statement simultaneously establishes two distinct roles available to him in this violent scene and collapses this distinction; he makes otherwise passive witnessing active and otherwise active participation passive. He creates narratorial uncertainty here, and it is my contention that in doing so he discloses a difficult, unstable, embodied experience. The difficulty of the passage is therefore Douglass’ own, as he struggles both to manage and convey a witnessing that effects violence on his own body. Douglass’ ambivalence, therefore, forms my essay’s central focus. I reevaluate his difficult statement and reconsider what it

means to be “doomed to be a witness and a participant.” What emerges is that Douglass’ struggling, unstable narration questions what it means to witness, especially from a slave’s point of view.

Section one begins by exploring different kinds of witnessing and their relation to empathy, and reveals how Douglass distinguishes his witnessing and empathizing from others’ in his abolitionist circle. My interest here is not so much in the spectacles Douglass portrays, but rather how he describes his own seeing, what kind of empathic experience these descriptions engender, and what they tell us about what it means to see and to feel. To develop a vocabulary for discussing these experiences, and to uncover their complexities, in section two I introduce some principal concepts of Hans Jonas’ phenomenology of sight. Jonas analyzes visibility as an embodied experience and focuses on the responses to the world sight enables. This discussion leads, in section three, to my phenomenological analysis of Douglass’ witnessing, which argues that a focus on *how* Douglass sees, rather than on *what* he sees, reveals that the author looks in various and distinct ways—some exploitative, but some not. Finally, in sections four and five, I return to the subject of empathy and demonstrate the difference a focus on embodied experience makes to how we understand the “uncertain line” between witnessing and participation. I show not only how the phenomenological method I sketch here transforms the way we interpret Douglass’ *Narrative*, but also how this critical method, which emanates from the embodied presence of any point of view, might augment how we understand a range of literary and historical texts.



#### I. VIOLENT SCENES AND THE “SLIPPERINESS OF EMPATHY”

In her influential *Scenes of Subjection* (1997), Hartman questions both the ethics and efficacy of witnessing violent scenes. She is repelled by what she views as the “casualness” with which “terrible spectacles” like Hester’s whipping are “circulated” and “reiterated” in criticism, and concludes that this “casualness”—enjoyment even—demonstrates the failure of witnessing to engender productive empathy (*S*, 3). Following Jonathan Boyarin and Eric Cheynitz, Hartman argues that a politically useful empathy would produce an “expan[sion of] the space of the Other” and would initiate a troubling “translation” of experience. An empathic experience, according to these writers, should force one to confront Otherness and should disrupt one’s sense of self. For Hartman, the ease with which narratives “display” the “slave’s ravaged body” and the ease with which critics interpret such displays embody the failure of such a disruption. “The act of ‘witnessing’” is synonymous with a “kind of looking” that is “entangled” with the violence itself (*S*, 22); witnessing, and its “materializ[ation]” in narrative form, “obliterates” rather than engages with the tortured body: “Only more obscene than the brutality unleashed at the whipping post is the demand that this suffering be materialized and evidenced by the display of the tortured body or endless recitations of the ghastly and the terrible. In light of this, how does one give expression to these outrages without exacerbating the indifference to suffering that is the consequence of the numbing spectacle or contend with the narcissistic identification that obliterates the other?” (*S*, 4).

Rather than investigating how Douglass portrays violence, Hartman looks to the abolitionist John Rankin's *Letters on American Slavery* (1833) and finds evidence of what she suggests is "the difficulty and slipperiness of empathy" (S, 18). Rankin's words demonstrate how problematic empathy can be:

Let me recall this harsh expression, which has been dictated by the tumultuous passions of my soul, aroused to the highest pitch of indignant feeling by the horrible scenes of cruelty that were presented to my mind! My flighty imagination ... persuad[ed] me, for the moment, that I myself was a slave, and with my wife and children placed under the reign of terror. I began in reality to feel for myself, my wife, and my children—the thoughts of being whipped at the pleasure of a morose and capricious master, aroused the strongest feelings of resentment; but when I fancied that the cruel lash was approaching my wife and children, and my imagination depicted in lively colors, their tears, their shrieks, and bloody stripes, every indignant principle of my nature was excited to the highest degree.

This passage stands as a clear example of what Marcus Wood terms "solipsistic" pseudo-identification, in which an apparently empathic gesture actually crowds out the persecuted Other, in the process "extracting" a perverse form of pleasure (S, 22). As Hartman rightly states, Rankin imaginatively "volunteer[s] himself and his family for abasement," making the slaves' suffering his own. As a result, whatever his intentions, he "obliterat[es]" the slaves, "slipping on [their] blackness" and substituting his "self for the other" (S, 7).

However, what Hartman misses here is the fact that Rankin is not really describing witnessing. He has not, in the scene he conjures up, *seen* slaves beaten. His letters generally emphasize visual experience—with "bloody scenes," "look[ing] upon," and his "soul sicken[ing] at the sight"—yet he is repeatedly imagining these scenes rather than witnessing them; creating them in his mind's eye rather than recalling them. As a result, the "feeling" he describes in the passage above, and in many letters, emanates not from a step toward an observed Other, but rather from a Romantic step inward, toward the privileged self. And this feeling ends there, closing a circle that excludes rather than confronts Otherness. Rankin's reliance on his "flighty imagination," therefore, compromises his empathy from the start.

Douglass' text uses much of the same language and many of the same rhetorical strategies as Rankin's. Dwight McBride has shown that the "narrative and rhetorical strategies of [antebellum] black-authored texts" were "over-determined" by white abolitionist discourses, and Douglass' own writing shows the influence of texts such as Rankin's *Letters*. Douglass had been on the road with abolitionists for some years before writing his *Narrative* and had absorbed their sentimental techniques. By 1845, he had become a speaker and a journalist whose texts were strategically, as one listener observed, "spirit-stirring": designed, with their "lofty sentiment," "to move, justify, and persuade" rather than "to tell." It is an uncomfortable fact that violent scenes, and particularly those that presented violence against women, informed what Peter Walker calls Douglass' "platform style." In fact, Douglass often entreated white readers to empathize with black slaves in much the same way as Rankin. In an

1842 article published in the *Liberator*, for example, Douglass wrote: “Men, husbands and fathers of Massachusetts—put yourselves in the place of George Latimer; feel his pain and anxiety of mind; give vent to the groans that are breaking through his fever-parched lips, from a heart emerged [*sic*] in the deepest agony and suffering; rattle his chains; let his prospects be yours, for the space of a few moments.” Neither Douglass’ text nor his descriptions of witnessing were therefore unmediated. Like Rankin’s, they were rhetorical and strategic.

Yet Douglass’ and Rankin’s writing differ fundamentally. For while Douglass often encouraged his white readers to make a sentimental imaginative leap, he also repeatedly reminded them that his own relation to his texts’ subjugated men and women was more intimate: “I can sympathize with George Latimer, having myself been cast into a miserable jail, under suspicion of my intending to do what he is said to have done.” Douglass entreated the white “men, husbands and fathers of Massachusetts” to use their imagination and bridge the distance between their experience and Latimer’s. But he also emphasized that he required no such act because, for him, there was no distance. He did not need imaginatively to “put [himself] in the place of George Latimer,” or any other slave, because he had literally occupied it. Though, like the white abolitionist, he dealt in sentiment and imagination, then, Douglass always drew attention to the fact that his engagement—his “sympath[y]”—had a different root. It developed through the proximity of shared embodied experience, not at a distance, through a problematic, “solipsistic” imaginative leap.

The “ruined bodies” of slaves that fill abolitionist tracts—particularly the bodies of women—are undoubtedly troubling. The fact that they are sometimes present, as Aliyyah I. Abdur-Rahman has shown, as little more than “an (ultimately generic) textual maneuver” that stimulates what Wood calls the “promiscuous emotional dynamics” of “sentimental empathy” only adds to the argument that they are scenes written through a perspective that exploits. But Douglass’ position in relation to these scenes is complex. He is often in some way entangled in what he describes. Consequently, his witnessing has at least the potential to be something other than an “obliterat[ing]” act (*S*, 19). Rather than turning away from the scene of Hester’s beating, therefore, I carefully explore it here, in an attempt to understand fully what Douglass communicates about the nature of the “terrible spectacle[s]” as experienced by a witness allowed no distance from them (*N*, 18): a witness who might at any time be “cast into” his own violent scene.



## II. “THE UNIQUE DISTINCTION OF SIGHT”:

### A PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Hester’s beating appears very early in the *Narrative*; it is, in many ways, as George Cunningham and others have argued, its “primal scene.” But before Douglass presents this spectacle to the reader, he complicates sight as a perceptual faculty. The *Narrative* begins, as Michelle Kohler has also noted, with a series of visual negations. In its first paragraphs, which establish the plantation as a place where absences are more marked than presences, Douglass writes that he has “never ... seen” the record of his birth, that he “never saw [his] mother,” that he

cannot “recollect of ever seeing [his] mother by the light of day” (*N*, 16). He is, in part, meeting generic conventions here: the slave narrative as a form demanded that fugitive narrators draw attention to slaveholders’ practice of denying slaves knowledge of their birth date and parentage. But when Douglass states that “the means of knowing was withheld from [him],” he implies that more is being denied him than “authentic record[s]” (*N*, 15).

To tease out precisely how these visual negations affect Douglass’ embodied selfhood, we must establish a baseline with which we can compare his experiences. We need, then, to clarify how humans experience sight under normal conditions to determine the difference the plantation’s cruel organization makes. However, while many writers have recognized that Western culture has long been “ocularcentric” or “dominated by vision,” few have attempted such a clarification. Many phenomenologists and cognitive scientists have attempted to answer James J. Gibson’s question: “How do we see the world around us?” But most have been interested in critiquing rather than accounting for the “unique distinction of sight” in our everyday experience. When Maurice Merleau-Ponty examined sight, for example, he was, as Martin Jay has argued, “hostil[e] to visual primacy,” and interested primarily in demonstrating how misleading visual experience can be. For him, as for many others, investigating sight meant undermining its status as the “noblest” sense by revealing how thoroughly embedded it is within a more various sensory experience.

Hans Jonas is the exception here, for though he shared with many phenomenologists the understanding that sight is “incomplete by itself” and that it actually “requires the complement of other senses and functions for its cognitive office,” he also recognized that there is something distinct about our visual experience that gives it the quality of a more durable, more dependable sense. Consequently, Jonas investigated this experience and its contribution to our sense of self, others, and the world. Jonas’ analyses, therefore, provide a framework for understanding Douglass’ own narrated experiences.

Jonas argues that while sight is dependent on the entire body, it generates an experience that appears to us to be more authoritative than the other senses. He argues that humans generally experience these senses as fleeting events: we cannot capture a sound in our ear or a taste on our tongue; we cannot keep these sensations as something to behold in their completeness. We can only retain them as a memory, creating as we reflect a synthesis that was not present in our experiencing. Consequently, what these sensory experiences “disclose” to us “is not an object but a dynamical event.” The sense of touch is more complex; as Jonas writes, it has a “visual faculty”—we feel “we can ‘see’ by touch.” Yet even this sense is processual, requiring “movement and changing situations.” Sight, on the other hand, offers the “simultaneous representation” of objects in the visual field. When we look we see whatever is under our gaze all at once; objects have the quality of “co-existence” in a “common present.” So, rather than being “a pointlike experience,” the present, in sight, becomes “a *dimension* within which things can be beheld at once and can be related to each other by the wandering glance of attention.”

Sight, therefore, “discloses a world of stable identities” so that even if what we see changes—if, for example, people or animals move physically beyond vision’s range—we do not experience this movement as fleeting images

that succeed and replace each other. Instead, the stability of the scene's other elements ensures that change is literally "seen" as "time ... rolling visually." As Jonas points out, such an experience, which "enable[s] us to see the momentary as an integral part of a larger whole, which unfolds in a sequence," is due to "cognitive performance of high complexity." But we do not, under normal circumstances, interpret this experience as highly complex, or even particularly cognitive. Rather, we construe this vision as a property of the world that is simply available to us through the windows that we generally experience our eyes to be.

Because sight offers us the world as coherent display, it is also experienced as possessing the quality of "self-containment." Jonas argues that, because of their dynamic temporal quality, nonvisual sensations are "trespassers by nature": "intrude[rs]" that impose themselves upon us through experiences in which we are relatively passive. When sounds reverberate, for example, we cannot will our ears to stop hearing; when something brushes against us, we cannot stop our skin feeling. Except when we deliberately create sensations, by making sounds, or reaching out to touch objects, we are "exposed" to them; we are essentially traversed by the sensory event.

Although sight also depends on a kind of trespass—we only see because light penetrates our eyes—day-to-day visual experience is not one which we feel to be intrusive. In fact, rather than reminding us of the ways in which we are penetrated by the world, sight "suppresses" the activity that creates a visual scene. Sight "expurg[ates]" "all traces" of its engagement with the world as well as the activity that generates it (*P*, 146–147). We "cannot see the eye seeing," as Sartre points out, and we cannot, except in extreme circumstances, feel it. As a result, not only does seeing generally appear neutral and disengaged, but so does the image seeing produces. The objects we view appear unaffected by us. They seem simply to be—not there because we are looking, not in need of our looking in order to be. Consequently, we generally experience sight as the sense that distinguishes the self from the world and the world from the self. It "separates and delineates" ("T," 123); it provides us with a sense of distance and difference from the object beheld; it "reveal[s] what is Other."

Furthermore, sight typically engenders the experience of an unencumbered selfhood. As the world, through sight, seems to offer itself to us, we generally experience our engagement with it as active rather than passive. "Vision rests," Drew Leder writes, "upon an unknown but unproblematic 'I can'" that enables a "turn ... towards" the world, as a "subject in an active stance" ("T," 123). We visually experience the world, then, as a dimension within which we can act if we choose, and which seems to appear to us apparently without demand and without risk: "It lets me be as I let it be" (*P*, 145).

With this analysis of sight's experiential properties in mind, Douglass' decision to begin the *Narrative* with descriptions of frustrated looking becomes even more interesting. The first passages reveal that, for a slave, the experience of seeing, and therefore the experience of the self in the world as an "I can," is complex and compromised. The *Narrative*'s opening repeatedly negates the visual field. Douglass presents himself as quite naturally looking about him in an attempt to orient himself within his environment; he looks to receive knowledge about it, himself, and others. But this looking is unfulfilled, even opposed: "I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record containing it.... I never saw my mother, to know her as such, more

than four or five times in my life.... I do not recollect of ever seeing my mother by the light of day.... The means of knowing was withheld from me" (*N*, 15–16).

These descriptions mark the plantation as a place of awful absences. But more than this, they reveal that slave owners organize the plantation in such a way as to prohibit slaves from developing a fundamental, even structural "means of knowing." As Douglass looks about him, he is unable to know what he is seeing. It is not that he never physically sees his mother as he grows up, for example, but that the plantation's structure forces him to see her in such a way that it becomes a nonseeing: "I never saw my mother, to know her as such." And so he loses a fundamental orientation in the world.

Douglass presents plantation life, therefore, as deliberately, sensorially, disruptive, and it is this disruption that underpins his troubling descriptions of Hester's whipping. This scene, which he describes as "the entrance to the hell of slavery," demonstrates how slave owners choreograph "terrible spectacle[s]" (*N*, 18)—travesties of patriarchal domestic life—to fill the perceptual void that they have created in young slaves' experiences. Hester's beating therefore is not only Douglass' first example of the violent scenes that slaves are "doomed" to observe, but also the "entrance" into a kind of looking that slaves cannot experience without engagement or without risk (*N*, 18).

Douglass communicates this disruption in complex, disorderly ways. His point of view does not simply collapse; his self-containment does not simply crumble. From such a position, narration would surely be impossible. Rather, what emerges is a conflicted, contradictory telling and retelling of the event that both asserts a self-contained, self-controlled seeing and undoes it. In what follows, I will analyze the ways in which Douglass engages in the easeful, "free" observation that Jonas and Leder describe (*P*, 148). But I will also show how he undermines both self-containment and the seeing that secures it: how he reveals that the "slave's point of view" is radically unstable.



### III. THE "MOST TERRIBLE SPECTACLE": WITNESSING HESTER'S WHIPPING

In his description of witnessing Hester's beating, Douglass ultimately foregrounds the active seeing I have been describing. He narrates the scene twice, in quick succession, and the second, final iteration firmly establishes a seeing subject that can stand back from the scene and regard it from a secure distance. For example, in the second telling, Douglass uses a visual perspective that "separates and delineates" to describe how the master strips and restrains Hester:

Before he commenced whipping Aunt Hester, [Captain Anthony] took her into the kitchen, and stripped her from neck to waist, leaving her neck, shoulders, and back, entirely naked. He then told her to cross her hands, calling her at the same time a d——d b——h. After crossing her hands, he tied them with a strong rope, and led her to a stool under a large hook in the joist, put

in for the purpose. He made her get upon the stool, and tied her hands to the hook. She now stood fair for his infernal purpose. Her arms were stretched up at their full length, so that she stood upon the ends of her toes.” (*N*, 19)

Here, the graphic details that Douglass lists (which are all the more concrete in contrast to the indefinite soundscape) fix Hester and the master in space, arranging them, alongside the stool and the rope and the joist, as stable objects available to what Jonas calls the “wandering glance of attention” (*P*, 144). The chronology that Douglass creates, working methodically through a sequence of events that move inexorably toward the moment when he presents Hester standing “fair,” further stabilizes the scene by linking each visible action. This “enable[es] us,” to use Jonas’ words, “to see the momentary as an integral part of a larger whole, which unfolds in a sequence.”

The viewpoint that Douglass establishes in relation to what he describes here conjures up an “ideal” visual experience through which, as Leder suggests, “a world of stable identities is arrayed in definite positions” (“T,” 123). Douglass narrates from a unified, stationary position. The place from which he views the scene seems secure, stable, and commands a complete view. Moreover, it is a place that is unpressurized: he does not present himself as visible, or as seen to be seeing. He is all-seeing in this passage, then, but unseen. The spectacle is thus “present” to the narrating Douglass—and to the reader—without “drawing [him or us] into its presence” (*P*, 146). His viewing position separates him from what he views and creates distance between him as perceiver and that which he perceives. This distance consolidates him as a self-contained, separate, perceiving subject.

Therefore, Douglass’ perspective here, and the perspective of the reader that is formed by Douglass’ narrative eye/I, establishes Hester as Other. Because it represents an active turning toward the scene, and emanates from a relatively safe temporal, spatial, and sensorial distance, his view of her engenders a witnessing that is voyeuristic, making the exploited black woman’s body present to us without demanding our reciprocal presence. This narrative perspective creates the unease critics like Bergner, Franchot, and Hartman experience. Franchot, for example, detects “control, irony, and distance in the narrative voice” due to Douglass “observ[ing] the scene from [Captain Anthony’s] point of view.” Franchot’s argument indicates how “masterful” Douglass’ looking is by this passage’s end; she assumes that his gaze is identical with the “Master’s.”

But Franchot’s reading elides how other parts of the narrative destabilize point of view. For the voyeuristic seeing in evidence in this section is not the only visual experience Douglass represents in the episode. In fact, this second iteration departs significantly from the perspective Douglass recalls inhabiting during the experience. The episode begins:

I have often been awakened at the dawn of day by the most heart-rending shrieks of an own aunt of mine, whom [the Master] used to tie up to a joist, and whip upon her naked back till she was literally covered with blood. No words, no tears, no prayers, from his gory victim, seemed to move his iron heart from its bloody purpose.... I remember the first time I ever witnessed this horrible exhibition. I was quite a child, but I well remember it. I never shall forget it whilst I remember a

thing. It was the first of a long series of such outrages, of which I was doomed to be a witness and a participant. It struck me with awful force. It was the blood-stained gate, the entrance into the hell of slavery, through which I was about to pass. It was the most terrible spectacle. I wish I could commit to paper the feelings with which I beheld it. (*N*, 18)

Even though in this passage Douglass covers the same ground and retains the same visual spectacle as in his subsequent retelling, his representation shifts away from establishing a visual scene and toward recalling a visual experience. And this shift is transformative. For example, in the second iteration, Douglass confidently establishes a linear chronology that controls and contains the events. To augment his authority, he even includes events that happened prior to the immediate scene: events, like Hester's meeting with Ned Roberts, that the young Douglass could not then have known about.

His first telling, however, disrupts chronology and presents time as uncertain and unstable. The very first passive phrase—"I have often been awakened"—muddies the distinction between past and present. Douglass' use of the present perfect tense with the noncontinuous verb "to be" brings the past close, while the qualifying "often" evokes persistence, encouraging a sense that this experience permeates the present. In this way, Douglass complicates any sense we might otherwise have developed of the safe distance the narrating Douglass has achieved—both in time and space—from this event. Douglass' statements about its persistent presence in his memory—"I well remember it. I never shall forget it"—amplify his inability to separate himself from the event or contain it within a linear narrative. The event refuses to remain safely in the past. His narrative at this point also fragments and its fluency disappears. Sentences become shortened and repetitive. Language—which also depends upon separation and delineation—gives way even before (ironically in language) Douglass asserts that it must, as he cannot "commit to paper the feelings" with which he "beheld" the spectacle.

What engenders this dissolution is, of course, what Douglass is beholding: the sadistic violence enacted on his "graceful" aunt's body (*N*, 19). But something about the manner of beholding is also important. Douglass briefly articulates not only the violence that has become commonplace in his slave world, but also the idea that violence is spectacle. The way that Douglass describes the scene expresses how the body becomes captivated, not just from the outside, as he becomes conscious that his enslaved body has become an object for others' use, but also from the inside, as a perceiving unit. Douglass' fragmenting narration reveals that he was experiencing his body not just as something that is vulnerable to external threats, open to misuse by others, but also as an intrinsically vulnerable space to occupy, to look out from. This vulnerability helps make this scene "the blood-stained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery" (*N*, 18). For in Douglass' first account, the incident represents not just an example of masters demonstrating power on the plantation. Hester's whipping also compels Douglass into a perceptual engagement that strips him of all power to "separate and delineate" and replaces the distance and mastery that sight normally secures the perceiving self with a state of decentered and disempowering passivity ("T," 123).

This subjugated witnessing results partly from the fact that sight becomes secondary here; the episode actually begins with sound. “Heart-rending shrieks” form the first sensory experience Douglass describes in his initial narration. These “trespass[ing],” inescapable sounds penetrate his sleep and drive him to consciousness (*P*, 139), and as the scene unfolds it becomes, in Jeannine DeLombard’s words, “notable for its noisiness.” Hester’s cries and prayers and Anthony’s curses set the scene as powerfully as Douglass’ descriptions of what he sees.

Yet this representation of violent sounds creates more than just a vivid scene for the reader. The depiction also articulates a new, more fully embodied, more entangled visual experience. For, awakened in this way, Douglass represents himself as the antithesis of an active viewing subject. There is no willed “turning towards” a scene that is “present to [him] without drawing [him] into its presence” (*P*, 146). Rather, startled into consciousness by sudden, intrusive sound, Douglass presents himself as assaulted by a spectacle that he cannot evade. The scene appears through the “cracks” of the “unplanned boards” against which he sleeps (details Douglass adds in *My Bondage and My Freedom*), and forces itself upon him. Confined within a “little, rough closet,” he cannot escape it. He looks from an intensely powerless place, and, as a result, the separation and delineation—the illusion that vision generally secures of safe distance between the perceiving body and the scene perceived—crumbles. With it, the distance between Douglass the viewer and Hester the viewed collapses, so that even though his physical distance from the unfolding scene is secure—he is comparatively safe in his “closet” and will remain there “till long after the bloody transaction [is] over” (*N*, 19)—Douglass recalls it as a spectacle that penetrates this distance and even penetrates him: “It struck me with awful force.”

Even in the terms I am using to interpret Douglass’ *Narrative*, this passage remains problematic. Even in this first disoriented telling, Douglass presents Hester intermittently as a half-naked bloody spectacle that he—and readers—view at a distance. More disturbingly still, he obscures her own embodied perspective. He depicts her as crying, and tears, of course, emanate from the eyes. But the list into which he inserts her tears renders them as aural rather than visual traces—“No words, no tears, no prayers from his gory victim, seemed to move [the master’s] iron heart” (*N*, 18)—and no sense of her face or her own eyes emerges. Douglass fails, then, to depict what Hester sees or even to acknowledge that she does see. He gives her no “point of view,” and consequently prevents her from entering the narrative as a perceiving subject. This aspect of his “rendition” of Hester, as Barrett argues, denies her “the possibility of extending into the world the self . . . her body houses.” Ultimately, Douglass’ presentation of her ensures that she is looked at—“intruded upon”—not only by Anthony, but also by Douglass and the reader.

It is also important to register how this scene sits with the rest of the *Narrative*, particularly in relation to the autobiography’s other iconic violent scene—the fight with Covey. In many ways, this scene bookends the Hester scene. It is the passage in which Douglass famously declares that his “sense of [his] own manhood” is “rekindled,” so that if watching Hester being beaten marked his “entrance” into an existential understanding of the enslaved experience, beating the master marks his exit: “You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man” (*N*, 65, 18, 60). The scene with Covey also reenacts the earlier Hester scene; it is the point

in the *Narrative* when it is finally, literally, Douglass' "turn" to be beaten. Just as Anthony tied Hester, so Covey catches hold of Douglass and "was about tying [him]"; just as Anthony "t[ook] great pleasure" whipping Hester, so Covey is bent on "do[ing] what he pleased" with Douglass (*N*, 64). Douglass, though, is determined not to share Hester's fate and "resolve[s] to fight." He is "made a man" at least partly through his determination not to become, like Hester, a sight and site of subjugation (no one watches Douglass' whipping; all potential spectators leave). The fight with Covey, therefore, symbolizes Douglass' release from the viewpoint that the Hester scene forced him to inhabit. In repeating the scene, and effectively undoing it, Douglass substitutes himself for Hester in such a way as to erase her and her pain.

There are undeniably, therefore, elements surrounding Douglass' representation of Hester's whipping that remain troubling. Nevertheless, his descriptions do reveal something important about what it is to witness violence. His depiction of Hester's beating insinuates that being subject to such sights—the "horrible exhibition[s]" that masters endlessly and deliberately produce—creates an embodied experience that challenges any delineation and separation, even that between individual bodies (*N*, 18). Implicitly, subtly, Douglass' narrative entangles his traumatized, experiencing body with Hester's own so that he becomes, to borrow Dori Laub's words, "inside the event" rather than merely an external witness. Just as Hester is "hush[ed]" by the violence, so, in his inability to find words or "commit [them] to paper," is he (*N*, 18). And when he closes the episode, his description of the whipping's effects draws Hester's participating body and his own witnessing body into the same space: "After rolling up his sleeves, [Anthony] commenced to lay on the heavy cowskin, and soon the warm, red blood (amid heart-rending shrieks from her, and horrid oaths from him) came dripping to the floor" (*N*, 19). What and how he sees destabilizes Douglass' separateness in this passage. The blood's warmth, which must be felt and cannot be seen, pulls Douglass closer to Hester's body, as does the jarring use of the word "came" that suggests the blood's approach and seemingly places him in its path. These confused sensory experiences, which make sight tangible, draw Douglass into the scene as though Hester's suspended body has become the "blood-stained gate" of slavery that Douglass is forced to pass through.

Consequently, the perspective Douglass represents himself as experiencing as the scene unfolds before him does not emanate entirely from his own body, or from the space he occupies. Rather, his point of view materializes from both the hiding place where he witnesses and the exposed place, in the middle of the room, where Hester "participat[es]." The violence is experienced both in Hester's flesh and in Douglass', which is also "struck with awful force" (*N*, 18).

Douglass concludes this description by saying that he was "doomed to be a witness and a participant" (*N*, 18). Critics have read this assertion as evidence of how Douglass objectifies Hester—his "participation" has been interpreted as a vicarious, voyeuristic identification with the man enacting the beating rather than the woman suffering it. But if witnessing is understood phenomenologically as always an embodied experience, the "ambiguity of 'participa[tion]'" in Douglass' description articulates a new mode of suffering in which witnessing becomes a fully embodied participation in others' pain. Therefore, Douglass' equally controversial statement—"I expected it

would be my turn next”—appears almost redundant; the shifting narrative point of view has already asserted that this moment was “his turn” just as it was Hester’s.

Douglass thus establishes the “hell of slavery” as both a literal place—an enclosed “circle” within which “bloody scene[s]” are enacted and experienced (*N*, 24, 20)—and a conceptual space within which slaves suffer visual experiences that are assaults on the self. He presents enslavement, then, as an experience that transforms bodies. The habits enslaved bodies are forced to acquire, and the injuries they are forced to endure and habituate effect, in part, this transformation. But, more fundamentally, slaves’ bodies are damaged by the way they, as percipients, are made to be entangled with things perceived, so that the environment seems not to sit still for them but rather to threaten to penetrate them with arbitrary and unpredictable violence. Douglass’ representation of Hester’s whipping reveals that the place from which a slave’s point of view emanates is radically unstable, decentering, and disempowering. It is a kind of nonplace that devastates the slave’s experiential relation with the world. From it slaves cannot, to quote Leder, turn toward the world in “an active” and self-contained “stance” (“T,” 123). Instead, slaves can only look out from a passive viewpoint as they are intruded upon by spectacle after spectacle. The infamous statement that appears shortly after Hester’s whipping, and that critics have often interpreted as Douglass’ denigration of slaves’ knowledges, now reads as a phenomenological description rather than a metaphorical flourish. When he states that as a slave in the “circle” of Great House Farm he “neither saw nor heard as those without might see and hear,” Douglass asserts that enslavement fundamentally alters the very way in which a body perceives (*N*, 24).



#### IV. “HOW PAINFUL WAS THE SIGHT”: LOOKING AND LOOKING AWAY

Comparing Douglass’ *Narrative* to John Rankin’s letter clarifies just how different the former’s experience and understanding is. Rankin’s proximity to the spectacles, for example, is only imaginative, never material, and he controls how he sees and understands them. A scene never intrudes upon him; rather, he calls it into his imaginative presence: “I bring it near,” he states, in direct contrast to Douglass’ reluctant remembering. Even the white people who are his sources and who do experience violence do so in a way that differs fundamentally from Douglass’ experience. For rather than observing violence as a process, as masters and mistresses abuse the people they have enslaved, Rankin’s witnesses generally only see it as results that manifest themselves upon damaged black bodies. The whites’ witnessing is therefore never a participation. They suffer distress when they are confronted with violence’s visible aftermath, but they are too well protected by social structures they scarcely comprehend to experience it directly. Compare, for example, this description of a white woman’s experience with Douglass’ description of witnessing Hester’s abuse:

A respectable young lady of my acquaintance ... visited the house of a certain Kentuckian, who was considered reputable.... In the parlor everything appeared comfortable and decent—every

countenance was so cheerful that one might have imagined that good nature and happiness resided in the bosom of each member of the family. But, alas! she unfortunately stepped into the kitchen. And, ah! how changed was the scene. The most doleful aspect saluted her delicate eyes; there sat a poor old black woman with one of her eyeballs hanging on her cheek! it had been torn from the socket by the hand of her mistress! how painful was the sight.... how little did the young visitant expect to witness such a scene! She could not conceal her feelings—she wept, and she retired with emotions of horror!

There is more to say about this scene than I have room for here: the way it uses sentimental discourse for political and moral effect; the way the narration struggles to maintain the idealized innocence of the white woman who “witness[es],” and presumably bears witness; the way the scene unintentionally participates in what DeLombard describes as the “distinctly antebellum tendency to represent the brutalized” black woman as “a foil for genteel, idealized white womanhood.” But we should acknowledge how the scene contrasts with the witnessing that Douglass constructs. Here Rankin conjures up the scene as a still, silent tableau presented to the “delicate” eye rather than as a violent process. When the white woman enters the kitchen, the beating has already taken place. Rankin briefly imagines the mistress’ actions, but no one witnesses them except the slave herself, and the narrative registers neither her status as a witness nor her actions and reactions to the violence. Instead, the “poor old black woman”—unnamed, and to all effects still, speechless, and sightless—appears purely as a terrible spectacle, quite separate from the woman who sees her and from the man who recreates the scene in his letter.

Perhaps the most striking difference between Rankin’s and Douglass’ representations of witnessing, however, lies in the physical response Rankin’s scene engenders. As in Douglass’ witnessing, the white woman is “horror-stricken at the sight” of the violence (*N*, 19). And like Douglass she finds it repellant; they share a desire to get “out of the way of the bloody scenes” (*N*, 20). But because she is not a slave, the white woman in Rankin’s telling can act on this feeling. She immediately withdraws, first through the retreat that her weeping performs—as her tears presumably obscure the scene—and then through her “retire[ment],” as she leaves the room and decisively removes the slave from her field of vision.

This scene underscores what the physical experience of sight endlessly obscures, and that this essay has until this point left virtually unsaid: “the basic fact ... that vision is the part-function of a whole body which experiences its dynamic involvement with the environment in the feeling of its position and changes of position” (*P*, 154). The white woman in Rankin’s account is of course hemmed in by what Deborah Garfield calls “the cult of compliant Womanhood,” and consequently she has only a limited range of physical movements and expressions available to her. However, when forced briefly to encounter the slave woman’s radical Otherness, the white woman is literally free to remove herself from the scene and the sight it represents. This freedom, which is, in effect, power, is masked through the language Rankin uses to describe this woman and her actions. Every adjective stresses her vulnerability: she is “young,” “delicate,” a “lady,” and apparently without protection from exposure to

the “most painful shock.” Yet, for all her delicacy, for all her feminine subordination within the patriarchal frame of her “social circle,” even for all her “horror” of slavery, white hegemony secures her. Because she is white and, at least in comparison with slaves, free, she can turn away from the spectacle, act on “her feelings,” and “retire.” And because she can, she avoids full contact with the Othered black woman and flees from “the work involved” in what Boyarin describes as “the paradoxical linkage of shared humanity and cultural Otherness” (*SP*, 86).

As a result, no meaningful contact between the two women, or between the slave woman and the reader, occurs. As she looks and quickly looks away, the white woman disavows any connection between her “delicate eyes” and the slave woman’s hanging eyeball. As Rankin’s narration symbolically turns its back on the slave and quickly “conceal[s]” her, the reader is left looking at the sentimental, picturesque, purposefully reorienting spectacle of the delicate “young visitant” and her corporeally expressed, unconcealed “feelings.”

In sentimental discourse, tears supposedly signify emotional proximity to others’ suffering. When read through this phenomenological framework, though, both the feelings the woman indulges in, and the fact that she can reveal them, signify her difference and her distance from the enslaved woman. That she can allow her body’s responses demonstrates how far apart her experience is from the slave’s. For, in the Hester scene, Douglass has no such freedom either to move or express himself. As Douglass reminds us repeatedly throughout the *Narrative*, a slave seldom experiences her corporeal self as a “dynamic” willed “involvement with the environment.” A slave, he tells us, learns early on that a “crouching servility” is what slave owners demand of the enslaved body (*N*, 37). Masters require a comportment that literally disavows “involvement” and presents itself as passive, penetrable, unseeing: “A slave must stand, listen, and tremble,” he writes, adding as emphasis, and to correct any interpretation that would construe this description as a metaphorical flourish, “such was literally the case” (*N*, 26).

In the kitchen, watching Hester’s suffering, Douglass cannot leave. He cannot show himself because if he does, then surely he will “be ... next” (*N*, 19). Like the slave woman in Rankin’s text, who sits silently, prohibited from acting or from revealing anything other than subjugation, Douglass must learn to resist the body’s natural movement and its impulses. As a result, in the closet, unwillingly looking on, he shares the suffering woman’s space. But because of this forced intimacy, because he must (again quoting Boyarin) “feel [himself] into” Hester’s place, Douglass must enact a form of empathy that “translate[s]” her pain through his own suffering (*SP*, 86). Whereas in Rankin’s text the space surrounding the brutalized black woman shrinks as the witness flees, in Douglass’ narration, however briefly, the space of the suffering Other seems literally to expand, enfolding and disorienting a “stunned,” helpless Douglass.

What creates the difference between these two experiences of violent witnessing, then, is the place the witness inhabits in the network of power relations that, as Boyarin argues, are always lurking behind the appeal of, and the call for, empathy. The very fact that the white woman expresses her feelings—the fact, therefore, that she displays conventional empathy—demonstrates a displacement in which the witness retreats into “feel[ings] for [her]self” rather than the slave (*S*, 19). This displacement is most fully apparent in the darkly ironic phrase “how painful was the sight,” a phrase that references, figuratively, only the white woman’s experience, wholly

obliterating the slave woman's literal pain. Douglass, on the other hand, shares to a great extent Hester's "cultural Otherness" (*SP*, 86). He is subordinate; he has no freedom of movement; he is vulnerable to arbitrary corporeal assault. And so, none of the escapes that the white woman has available to her are possible for him. He cannot choose to leave or put himself "out of the way" (*N*, 20). And he cannot retreat into his feelings, as they are themselves violent—he is "stricken" by them—and can only anticipate more violence: "I expected it would be my turn next" (*N*, 19). His feelings, therefore, pull him ever closer to Hester and her experience; they are no refuge at all.



In my reading of Douglass' *Narrative*, I have generated a framework to enable a new understanding of what is involved in witnessing violence. I have argued that sight perception, particularly in moments of crisis, is not static, fixed, and inevitably voyeuristic, but rather various, contingent, and "saturated" in complex ways "with experience." I have shown that to see is to be caught up in an embodied experience that shifts and settles, reveals and conceals, that engenders subjectivity and can undo it. This phenomenological method opens up Douglass' famous text, demonstrating the ways in which, despite being "overdetermined" by abolitionist generic conventions, his *Narrative* contains intense remembrances of embodied experience that reveal something profound about the kinds of participation witnessing can demand. In turn, this method offers a critique, both explicitly, of the literature that assumes that looking means being a voyeur, and implicitly, of a phenomenology that posits a normative, "ideal" visual experience that elides where the seeing subject resides within a social hierarchy.

This method, therefore, has implications that go beyond Douglass' *Narrative*. A phenomenological approach expands innovative possibilities for exploring diverse texts. Such explorations might involve investigating other testimonies that address the perceiving body in crisis: captivity narratives, American Indian autobiographies, war literature, and, of course, other slave narratives. Through them we might develop a more nuanced understanding, not only of how the subjugated body sees, but also of how different subjugations manifest themselves through something as fundamental as sensory perception. For example, how might a reading of the "peeping" that Harriet Jacobs repeatedly describes compare with both the "delicate" viewing that Rankin's white woman engages in and Douglass' pressurized looking? What might an investigation of the ways gender and race intersect add to our understanding of what it means to look? Furthermore, how might this phenomenological lens illuminate narratives that represent less coercive sensory experiences? What might it reveal about seeing from a more privileged subject position? Reading Emerson's famous account of his poet's eye as an embodied experience (an experience, as David Greenham argues, Emerson simultaneously acknowledges and resists) might enable an interpretation that could contest the pull of his narrative toward metaphorical, metaphysical transformation and root the reader back in the perceiving body that enables, by its own "magic," such transformations.

For now, though, other questions demand a more immediate response. I began this essay by interrogating Saidiya Hartman's decision to deal with the "obscen[ity]" of violent scenes by "look[ing] elsewhere" (*S*, 4). I began, in part, by setting aside her question of whether it is possible to even read such scenes without voyeuristically participating in a way that vicariously exploits the subject: in this case, the already abused Hester. Viewing the concern through this essay's phenomenological lens, I suggest that the disorienting way Douglass relates the violence against Hester means that the participation reading engenders is not as stable as Hartman asserts. Elements of Douglass' narrative remain troubling. Inevitably, elements of our reading must too. But other aspects demand a different participation than the one that Hartman advances. If we consider our reading phenomenologically, we understand that our only view on the scene is Douglass'; we vicariously see through his eyes throughout. And because Douglass presents his position in relation to the suffering Other as radically unstable, the reader also becomes unsettled. When Douglass fleetingly represents himself as pulled into Hester's physical and ontological space, his narrative compels the reader to witness, not only how the violence appears to us from our safe position, but also how it appears to a viewer who knows he will be next. Douglass suggests that he cannot fully express his experience, that his suffering is, in fact, untranslatable: "I wish I could commit to paper the feelings with which I beheld it" (*N*, 18). Yet by carefully manipulating point of view, he effectively expresses his difficult, self-threatening empathic response to an Other's suffering. Ultimately, however briefly, the passage articulates a "difficult poetics of translation" both for Douglass and for the reader (*SP*, 86).

*Bath Spa University*

#### NOTES

1. Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave. Written by Himself*, in *Autobiographies*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. (New York: Library of America, 1994), 18; hereafter cited parenthetically as *N*.
2. Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford UP, 1997), 3; hereafter cited parenthetically as *S*.
3. Jeannine DeLombard, "Eye-Witness to the Cruelty': Southern Violence and Northern Testimony in Frederick Douglass's 1845 *Narrative*," *American Literature* 73, no. 2 (June 2001): 245.
4. Deborah E. McDowell, "In the First Place: Making Frederick Douglass and the Afro-American Narrative Tradition," in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself*, ed. William L. Andrews and William S. McFeely, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 2017), 156–58.
5. Lindon Barrett, "African-American Slave Narratives: Literacy, the Body, Authority," *American Literary History* 7, no. 3 (Fall 1995): 432; and McDowell, "In the First Place," 158. For similar arguments, see also Jenny Franchot, "The Punishment of Esther: Frederick Douglass and the Construction of the Feminine," in *Frederick Douglass: New Literary and Historical Essays*, ed. Eric J. Sundquist (New York: Cambridge UP, 1990), 141–65; and Gwen Bergner, *Taboo Subjects: Race, Sex, and Psychoanalysis* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2005). Arguments that conclude in more general terms that Douglass' narrative serves to distance himself from black women and the kind of victimized black subjectivity they come to represent include Valerie Smith, *Self-Discovery and Authority in Afro-American Narrative* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1991), 26–28; Stephanie A. Smith, "Heart Attacks: Frederick Douglass' Strategic Sentimentality," *Criticism* 34, no. 2 (Spring 1992): 193–216; and Richard

- Yarborough, "The Masculine Ideal in Frederick Douglass' 'The Heroic Slave,'" in *Haunted Bodies: Gender and Southern Texts*, ed. Anne Goodwyn Jones and Susan Van D'Elden Donaldson (Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 1998), 159–84.
6. Hartman is not the only critic to raise questions about how effectively sentimental narratives engender empathy. See for example Barrett, "African-American Slave Narratives"; P. Gabrielle Foreman, "Sentimental Abolition in Douglass' Decade: Revision, Erotic Conversion, and the Politics of Witnessing in 'The Heroic Slave' and *My Bondage and My Freedom*," in *Sentimental Men: Masculinity and the Politics of Affect in American Culture*, ed. Mary Chapman and Glenn Hendler (Berkeley: U of California P, 1999), 149–62; and Marcus Wood, *Slavery, Empathy, and Pornography* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002). Critics who in different ways defend Douglass' use of the sentimental include Philip Fisher, *Hard Facts: Setting and Form in the American Novel* (New York: Oxford UP, 1987); Smith, "Heart Attacks"; Arthur Riss, *Race, Slavery, and Liberalism in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006); and Aliyyah I. Abdur-Rahman, "'This Horrible Exhibition': Sexuality in Slave Narratives," in *The Oxford Handbook of The African American Slave Narrative*, ed. John Ernest (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2014), 235–47.
  7. Recently, critics have addressed the issue of witnessing in Douglass' narratives. Lindon Barrett, Jeannine DeLombard, and Michelle Kohler have all engaged with what they argue is Douglass' struggle with an embodied narrative persona. See Barrett, "African-American Slave Narratives"; DeLombard, "Eye-Witness to the Cruelty"; and Kohler, *Miles of Stare: Transcendentalism and the Problem of Literary Vision in Nineteenth-Century America* (Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 2014). Dwight A. McBride, Gregg D. Crane, and DeLombard have developed readings of Douglass' witnessing in relation to the discourses of natural rights and law. See McBride, *Impossible Witnesses: Truth, Abolitionism, and Slave Testimony* (New York: New York UP, 2001); Crane, *Race, Citizenship, and Law in American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002); and DeLombard, *Slavery on Trial: Law, Abolitionism, and Print Culture* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2007).
  8. Jonathan Boyarin, *Storm from Paradise: The Politics of Jewish Memory* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1992), 86; hereafter cited parenthetically as *SP*; and Eric Cheyfitz, *The Poetics of Imperialism: Translation and Colonization from "The Tempest" to "Tarzan"* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1997), xxii.
  9. John Rankin, *Letters on American Slavery, Addressed to Mr. Thomas Rankin, Merchant at Middlebrook, Augusta Co., Va.*, 5th ed. (Boston: Isaac Knapp, 1838), 50, <https://books.google.com>.
  10. Wood, *Slavery, Empathy, and Pornography*, 13–14.
  11. Rankin, *Letters*, 51–52.
  12. McBride, *Impossible Witnesses*, 16. For other work that explores these connections between slave narratives and wider abolitionist discourses, see James Olney, "I Was Born': Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature," *Callaloo: A Journal of African American and African Arts and Letters* 7, no. 1 (Winter 1984): 46–73; William L. Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760–1865* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1986); and P. Gabrielle Foreman, "Sentimental Abolition."
  13. "The Horrors and Abominations of American Slavery," *Liberator*, May 14, 1847, 79, Fair Use Repository.
  14. Peter Walker, *Moral Choices: Memory, Desire, and Imagination in Nineteenth-Century American Abolition* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1978), 224–26.
  15. Frederick Douglass, "Frederick Douglass in Behalf of Geo. Latimer," *Liberator*, November 18, 1842, 182, Fair Use Repository. Not all of Douglass' empathic gestures avoid exploitation. Six years later, Douglass was still attempting to evoke an empathic response in readers by asking them to imagine themselves and their families as victims of violence. In his open "Letter to Thomas Auld" in the *Liberator*, he asks Auld to imagine "a band of hardened villains" entering Auld's "elegant dwelling and seiz[ing] the person of [his] own lovely daughter Amanda, and carry[ing] her off." Douglass invites him to imagine his daughter "compel[led]" to work, "coarsely" fed, "scantly" clothed, and "whip[ped] on the naked back." Douglass, *Selected Speeches and Writings*, ed. Philip S. Foner (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 116. Interestingly and uncomfortably, here Douglass

imagines, rather than recalls, a scene, and in the process duplicates not only Rankin's tactic of imaginative identification, but also his willingness to use women's bodies as sites of brutality.

16. Wood, *Slavery, Empathy, and Pornography*, 14.
17. Abdur-Rahman, "This Horrible Exhibition," 243.
18. Abdur-Rahman, "This Horrible Exhibition," 243; and Wood, *Slavery, Empathy, and Pornography*, 13–14.
19. George P. Cunningham, "Body Politics: Race, Gender, and the Captive Body," in *Representing Black Men*, ed. Marcellus Blount and Cunningham (New York: Routledge, 1996), 137.
20. Kohler also examines Douglass' representation of sight and produces an insightful, persuasive reading. But though she covers much of the same ground as I do here, she typically reads Douglass' allusions to sight metaphorically and as a self-conscious rhetorical strategy designed to develop what she terms "literary sight." Thus, she is interested in Douglass' negotiations in this early passage as "a kind of syntactical trick" designed to "cast his difference" rather than as a way of expressing a complex embodied experience. Kohler, *Miles of Stare*, 57–58.
21. Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1994), 3.
22. James J. Gibson, *The Perception of the Visual World* (Boston: Riverside P, 1950), vii. See also Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (1958; repr., New York: Routledge, 2006); Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, ed. James M. Edie (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1964); Jay, *Downcast Eyes*; and Shaun Gallagher, *How the Body Shapes the Mind* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005).
23. Hans Jonas, "The Nobility of Sight," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 14, no. 4 (June 1954): 507, JSTOR.
24. Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, 14.
25. René Descartes, "Optics," in *Descartes: Selected Philosophical Writings*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988), 57. See for example Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1968).
26. Hans Jonas, "Sight and Thought: A Review of 'Visual Thinking,'" in *Philosophical Essays: From Ancient Creed to Technological Man*, ed. L. E. Long (New York: Atropos P, 2010), 228. I am condensing Jonas' ideas here and in what follows because of space limitations. He makes a more complex case for each of the senses, especially touch.
27. Jonas, "The Nobility of Sight," 508, 511, 512–13; original emphasis.
28. Drew Leder, "A Tale of Two Bodies: The Cartesian Corpse and the Lived Body," in *Body and Flesh: A Philosophical Reader*, ed. Donn Welton (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 123; hereafter cited parenthetically as "T."
29. Jonas, "The Nobility of Sight," 513.
30. Jonas, "Sight and Thought," 228.
31. Jonas, "The Nobility of Sight," 515.
32. Hans Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life: Toward a Philosophical Biology* (1966; repr., Evanston: Northwestern UP, 2001), 139; hereafter cited parenthetically as *P*.
33. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (London: Routledge, 1993), 316.
34. Drew Leder, *The Absent Body* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1990), 15.
35. Leder, *The Absent Body*, 20.
36. Jonas, "Sight and Thought," 228.
37. Franchot, "The Punishment of Esther," 148.
38. DeLombard, *Slavery on Trial*, 114.
39. Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, in Douglass, *Autobiographies*, 176.

40. Analyzing Douglass' comment that he expects it will be "[his] turn next," Caroline Levander also argues that this scene "collaps[es] bodily boundaries between" Douglass' "surrogate mother, child, and overseer." Levander, "Witness and Participant: Frederick Douglass's Child," *Studies in American Fiction* 33, no. 2 (Autumn 2005): 188. I certainly agree that Douglass problematizes bodily boundaries here, but I argue that, through a disruption in normal modes of seeing, it is specifically Douglass' "boundary" that he questions. In fact, Douglass presents the master in such a way as to hold him outside of what becomes a revelatory moment.
41. Barrett, "African-American Slave Narratives," 432.
42. Dori Laub, "An Event without a Witness: Truth, Testimony and Survival," in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, ed. Shoshana Felman and Laub (New York: Routledge, 1992), 81.
43. Stephanie A. Smith also identifies this passage as one that articulates a strangely compromised experience. She reads it in psychological rather than phenomenological terms, though, as a "spectacle [that] crams Douglass backwards into a near fetal position, through a bloody gateway into a 'womb' of slavery." See Smith, "Heart Attacks," 199.
44. This sentence has repeatedly caused critics to question the politics of the use to which Douglass puts Hester. Deborah McDowell, for example, argues that Douglass "derive[s] a vicarious pleasure from the repeated narration." McDowell, "In the First Place," 158. More recently, she has stressed that in the scenes that depict violence against women, "Douglass looks on voyeuristically in a fashion tinged with eroticism." McDowell, introduction to *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*, by Frederick Douglass (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999), xxi. Such readings imply that "the challenge" Hartman argues all authors face, in any attempt to "give expression to ... outrages" without in some way exploiting them, was one that Douglass failed to surmount. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 4.
45. Bergner, *Taboo Subjects*, 34.
46. Rankin, *Letters on Slavery*, 51.
47. Rankin, *Letters on Slavery*, 54–55.
48. DeLombard, *Slavery on Trial*, 89.
49. Deborah M. Garfield, "Earwitness: Female Abolitionism, Sexuality, and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*," in *Harriet Jacobs and "Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl": New Critical Essays*, ed. Garfield and Rafia Zafar (New York: Cambridge UP, 1996), 111.
50. Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 177.
51. See Boyarin, *Storm from Paradise*, 77–98.
52. Jonas, "Sight and Thought," 231.
53. McBride, *Impossible Witnesses*, 16.
54. Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, ed. Nellie Y. McKay and Frances Smith Foster (New York: Norton, 2001), 98. Jacobs uses the term "peeping" repeatedly throughout her narrative.
55. Focusing on language and the prevalence in Emerson's writing of metaphors whose vehicle is the body, David Greenham has also argued that embodied experience is a "vital aspect" of what he calls "Emerson's epistemology of form." He writes of Emerson's eyeball: "There is no transcendence without embodiment because the very forms that transcendence takes are only possible because of the embodied basis of thought itself." Greenham, "The Embodied Eye: Emerson, Metaphor and the Epistemology of Form" (PowerPoint presentation, American Literature and the Philosophical Conference, Paris, France, March 23, 2017). Greenham extends these ideas in "The Work of Metaphor: Ralph Waldo Emerson's 'Circles' and Conceptual Metaphor Theory," *ESQ: A Journal of Nineteenth-Century American Literature and Culture* 64, no. 3 (2018) : 402–34.
56. Merleau-Ponty describes the body's ability to efface itself from our consciousness as the "secret and magic life" of the body. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 56.