

Stories Impossible to Tell
Meditations on the History of Slaveholding
at First Church in Cambridge

by James Ramsey¹

Preface

In this archival project, we are, to paraphrase scholar and historian Saidiya Hartman, trying to tell stories which are impossible to tell. These stories have been, barring some major historic discovery, lost in the cracks of or severely disfigured by the annals of history. They are stories of the victims of slavery, and so they must include violence. Even if the stories do not include physical violence, the same forces of constriction, captivity, and erasure endured—and still being endured—by these peoples have themselves shaped the very archive we mine to critique them. History, after all, is not merely a collection of facts, but the continual painting of a vision of reality, and, just as art depends on the perception and experience of the artist, history also comes forth from our own experiences and positionality. In other words, a story told by a hammer will look very different from a story told by a nail. History told and shaped by white supremacy (which is to say the structural reality, not merely impolite attitudes toward the non-white) and its beneficiaries will always bear its marks and serve its aims, as do our assumptions of what constitutes beauty, intelligence, and virtue.

But how do we tell these impossible stories of violence and conquest without reproducing it? Is it possible to meditate on the horrors endured by a people without normalizing those horrors, desensitizing readers of privilege and traumatizing readers who are the descendants of these people, living in the wake of their slavery? Are there possibilities for storytelling that can responsibly speak of the inner realities of the victims of slavery? If so, what are the limits of the archive, and how can we, in Hartman's words, avoid transgressing them? In our quest to see things as they are and should be, we seek to articulate the truth without perpetuating violence while working within the boundaries of our sources and their foundations. While this may not be attainable in this project, these questions are important framing considerations for the stories we argue ought to be told and the stakes of that telling.

Additional stakes, as mentioned, are in not only our telling of these stories but in their hearing. Hartman speaks of and enacts what she calls “critical fabulation”, where she tells stories of

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enslaved people in creative ways that attempt to be more true to the fullness of their experiences. How do we tell stories of violence, even if we tell them as responsibly and creatively as possible, without inflicting violence on the hearer? How do we avoid adding to the kind of, as Christina Sharpe discusses, atmospheric violence against Black people, a kind of violence which is seemingly as omnipresent as our weather? How do we avoid the spectacle-making of public lynchings, bodies strewn across the internet, and America's obsession with grotesque slave films in our speaking and writing? Perhaps this, too, is impossible. Nevertheless, we embark on this project and these reflections with these questions and hesitations in mind because we believe these stories, heretofore buried under the centuries, must be told.

CICELY

Cicely was a child for all of her life—she died at the age of thirteen. She was enslaved by Reverend William Brattle, minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and died under his care, earning her a headstone in a local cemetery. All of these facts holding together might seem paradoxical: a child was stolen and captured as property, a thing to be had; a clergyperson was not only culpable, but, in fact, her captor; this child was buried in a cemetery with the unenslaved, free and integrated and human in death even if not in life. As we meditate on the life of Cicely, it becomes apparent that these paradoxes, puzzling and contradictory as they seem, have both a foundation and a cost.

What kind of moral foundations underlie them? How can it be possible that children would be treated as object, robbed of self-determination and subject to ineffable psychological, physical, and spiritual torment until they died? What kind of theological calculations took place for Reverend Brattle to be able to justify this behavior?

We may never know for sure, but it is conceivable that Reverend Brattle and people in his position appealed to some of the scriptures attributed to Paul: “Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as you obey Christ;” (Ephesians 6:5) and “Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything, not only while being watched and in order to please them, but wholeheartedly, fearing the Lord.” (Colossians 3:22). Indeed, uncritically extracted from its context and from the overarching narrative of scripture as we have received it, thinkers like Reverend Brattle may very well have plentiful theological fodder for chattel slavery from this kind of reading. However, in order to arrive at such a reading, there had to have existed an undergirding, persistent framework that could read certain people as *perpetually* not only property, but as ultimately disposable. Such a framework existed long before the advent of chattel slavery, but the innovation of such conquest and the imperialism that accompanied it—a profoundly theological one—was the centering of the universe around

the condition of whiteness. In other words, it wasn't so much that, in a faulty reading of scripture, white peoples had merely considered themselves as stand-ins for the slave owners Paul talked about. Rather, they had also, tacitly and not, positioned themselves as stand-ins for God.

In their reconstruction of the world, white persons consolidated for themselves the power and authority to reorganize bodies and space around them however they saw fit, a kind of power that is profoundly godlike. Lands foreign to them became theirs forever. The peoples found within them were threats to be removed or resources to be exploited and, harrowingly, they were forcibly grafted into a framework of existence that could only ever bring death; they were subject to an alternative anthropology, one in which white people were stationed at the pinnacle of human development—the most human—and everyone else was reclassified beneath them—less human. And of course, as Christians were in power, this proximity to “true” humanness—whiteness—ran parallel to proximity to God and the authority granted by God. The inevitable question follows: if whiteness is at once the most human and most divine, what is blackness? It is the least human and the least divine, which is to say of a demonic people forever destined for God's correction and cleansing through God's chosen vessels.

This kind of spiritual framework is what has made possible the systematic kidnapping and murder of children, and it is one that persists today. We see the insistence of this moral and theological calculus beyond the gates of Christendom into the West's beloved “rationalism”; in our increasingly secular society, Black people and non-white people generally are still routinely discriminated against, starved, and killed with impunity. It is a calculus that continues to ravage our subconscious, conditioning us to also see Black people as little more than resource and/or threat—think of gentrification, prisons, predatory loans, nervous glances shot toward hooded figures in the dark—despite our best intentions. Cicely and her family were sentenced to a lifetime of sub-humanity by Christians who had aligned themselves with white supremacy, and the brutality which they suffered lives on.

And what of her family? Who were they, and what happened to them? Could Cicely's headstone, a thing not granted to most Black people, be evidence of Reverend Brattle's regret? Is it a way that Reverend Brattle intended to show his “adoption” of Cicely as a child of his own, even as her family is lost, fallen through the cracks of the annals of history? Does the inscription of her memory suggest a connection, the grief of her master? What does the grief of someone who was likely complicit in her captivity—which may have led to her early death—mean? And what happened to this grief—how long did it live after Cicely had died? Was it passed to his children as the non-humanness of Black people was passed to theirs? What came of it?

Further, if the theological foundations for this kind of durable, pervasive white supremacy were established with a few corrupted, cherry-picked interpretations of biblical servitude and chosenness in mind, what kind of theological resources were elided? What divine inspiration was ignored to make such violations of the God-image of marginalized persons possible? While the narrative arc of our holy texts suggests a broad movement toward holistic freedom for and restoration of all, some particular omissions are striking. One—an especially important one—is that of the words of Jesus Christ, who throughout his ministry, identified strongly and often with those in the most vulnerable positions in our prevailing power structures, uplifting them constantly—the poor, the disabled, the women, etc. He bound his spirit and his body to those which were routinely crushed by Roman and Israelite alike, in fulfillment of the witness of the prophets of the Hebrew Bible such as Isaiah and Jeremiah, so much so that he even proclaimed that an offense done to the “least of these” was an offense done to himself. This messianic mission to, in the words of Isaiah, set the captives free is simply mutually exclusive with the oppressive atmosphere which enabled the capture and enslavement of the child Cicely and anyone who looked like her. In other words, the kind of white supremacy—not merely as a set of racist attitudes, but rather the objective facts of the physical and existential horror endured by nonwhite people in general and Black people in particular—which enables slavery and its present afterlife requires the concealment of the Spirit of Christ, our God. Cicely’s story, though short, is emblematic of this tortured moral and theological imagination of her day and ours.



Headstone in the Old Burial Ground outside of First Parish in Harvard Square.

“HERE LYES YE BODY OF CICELY,
NEGRO LATE SERVANT TO
Revd. Mr. WILLIAM BRATTLE.
SHE DIED April 8, 1714
BEING 13 YEARS OLD.”

William Brattle was the fifth minister of First Church in Cambridge.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- What other kind of lies have we believed about Black people?
- What are some other ways in which people on the margins are crowded out of a full, safe existence?
- How might we envision a different humanity for us all, one that is not founded on some people being less human than others? What resources can help us do this?

MARK AND PHYLLIS

On September 18th, 1755, two Black slaves in Charlestown, Massachusetts named Mark and Phillis were executed for killing their owner, Captain John Codman, by poison. The crime they were convicted of was not only murder, but petit treason, and it was the only time in New England someone had been convicted of that crime. The punishment for Mark was hanging and gibbetting, whereby his body was hung up in a cage for all to see. The punishment for Phillis was execution by fire. These punishments were relatively rare and unusual (the only other time a woman had been burned to death in Massachusetts was in the case of another Black slave, Maria, who had burned down her masters' house), but completely within the bounds of the letter of the law; there was a trial heard by a judge and decided by a jury, and the punishment was administered according to the written law of the land.

The crime of petit treason was generally reserved for three kinds of cases: a servant killing their master, a wife killing her husband, and a clergyperson killing their superior. In other words, petit treason was considered a specially heinous form of aggravated murder because it was a violation of authority, of the established order made to be natural. This act of ultimate defiance gave the courts cause to torture Mark and Phillis with unusual cruelty.

The violence of the captivity of Mark and Phillis pushed them to kill their captor, and this killing resulted in their execution; violence had begotten violence. We do not know exactly what kind of master Captain Codman was, whether he was cruel or kind. We do not know the extent, if at all, of the physical violence Captain Codman inflicted upon his slaves. However, what is true is that the existential violence of being classified and contained within a system that deems one subhuman was enormous, a crushing weight. The "natural" order of things was for servants to be beneath their masters, and, for a people to be forever destined to be property, their lives were circumscribed and made disposable, fleeting things by the letter and rule of law. It is difficult to fully articulate the depth of psychic violence this entails, to experience a world which continuously tells a person that they are not a person, to have this denial form the foundations

of structures that can reproduce it en masse. No matter how kind Captain Codman was, the existential horror perpetually endured by his slaves at his hand was a violence too great for them to bear. And, harrowingly, the aspirations of Mark and Phillis were not lofty; they were not pining for grand ideals of liberation. *They, in their words, simply wanted to be subject to some other master.* This is the darkness of white supremacy—not merely racist ideals or impoliteness, but the structuring of a world in which some people can sustain their humanity by denying it to others in perpetuity, and the constructing of systems to maintain this difference in essence not only in the psyches and possibilities for those in power, but for those who are not. True liberation did not and perhaps could not enter the minds of Mark and Phillis as something obtainable, and it did not because the structuring of the worlds within them and around them would not allow it. Their desperation and dread led them to take extreme measures for a modicum of peace.

So, in the eyes of the law, Mark and Phillis were deserving of the kinds of punishment they were each given. This legal system fulfilled one of its primary purposes: to administer punishment to transgressors of its organizing order with devices—prison, execution, torture—meant to deter others. It was not created to analyze itself nor those in power critically or morally, nor was it meant to promote a consideration of the conditions of the enslaved. No—it was a cold system of calculation created to preserve the status quo, and it was by no means neutral. The faces of the creators and arbiters of this system were set against blackness, not to eliminate it entirely, but to use it for profit, to use it to define and elevate whiteness as superior, and to criminalize others for the moral posturing and positioning of the “non-criminals” such as Captain Codman. Criminalization and racialization have, from the very start of the project of whiteness, been soldered together with the fires of our punitive legal system. There was no mercy for Mark and Phillis in their punishment as there had been for (white) others who had been convicted of petit treason in their day, nor was a lens of punishment applied to their own actions in their *high* treason against the British monarchy. Such mercy was impossible for Mark and Phillis—the maintenance of the system depended on the annihilation of alternative possibilities, particularly ones in which those in those who were called white could be challenged by those were not.

This fusion of the construct of criminality and Black flesh reaches into our present day. Black bodies are still on display in cages, a pedagogical tool for Black people as well as for white people. The destruction of deviant Black flesh and the torment of the lives it contains is still standard—think mass incarceration, death penalties applied most often to Black people, the widening wealth gap between Black people and white people, the brutality of gentrification and displacement, the impunity with which Black people are killed by police and civilian alike. All of these are structures of domination meant to regulate Black being and make it pliable to the systems and whims of the more powerful. This colonial violence, as Mark and Phillis show us, manifests in a will to survive—whether physically or in persisting in one’s present status—and it

flows from the most powerful to and through the least, stretching across generations, regardless of good intentions.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- What are other ways in which “fair” trials obscure some of the inner workings of society? How does this extend beyond mass incarceration?
- How might we disentangle what we notions of “criminal behavior” and Black bodies? How do we dismantle the very idea of criminality as an immutable characteristic? Should we?
- How might we pay back the hidden injustices that fuels incarceration and the subhumanity spoken about in the passage on Cicely?

TITUS

“An Indian Man Servant belonging to Presid. Wadsworth.” These are the few words dedicated to one named Titus, a slave of Benjamin Wadsworth, one of the presidents of Harvard². Their brevity and the silence that surrounds them are, much like the stories of the other slaves of this community, necessary elements of his oppression. However, as disturbing as this lack of information is, this very lack along with the few words we have tell a story on their own. Here, I focus on the first six: “An Indian Man Servant belonging to.”

In *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race*, theologian Willie Jennings deals extensively with the effects—physical, psychic, spiritual, theological—of European colonialism on not only indigenous peoples, but on the Christians themselves and on their various doctrines. The first effect he mentions in his book is the separation of the human from her land. This is not mere kidnapping or an inconvenient relocation. Jennings provides ample evidence from anthropologists and their primary sources that attempt to explain the sheer violence of this act, what it would mean to rip a person from the very source of their identity, replacing the ground they walk on with strange, foreign principles. As he summarizes in another writing, “Many native peoples understood their bodies as deeply connected to the earth and what walked and grew upon it. The notion of being simple bodies floating through space was pure chaos. These European settlers viewed people as separate from land and viewed land for its development potential as private property. Europeans taught the peoples of the new world that they carry their identities completely on their body, detached from any specific land or animals

² According to First Church membership records, Titus was admitted to “full communion” on September 21, 1729.

or agriculture or place.” In other words, to sever the indigene’s connection to her land was itself an act of breathtaking violence.

We return, then, to Titus. The violence of forced captivity, of Blackness deemed chattel and subhuman, is largely a visible kind of horror. What shall we say of the invisibility that has plagued Native Americans from the moment of their first contact with European colonizers? It is true that they, like Africans, were called savages and beastlike heathens. It is also true that they suffered unfathomable violence. However, it is a different kind of violence which yet shares a space with that which is suffered by Black people: the slave chamber. Here, the Red and the Black meet, one suffering attempted genocide and the other maintained for its contrasting value (for what is the stronghold of whiteness absent the caricature of blackness?). It is necessary to hold the horror that faces Black people while also recognizing that the first step in accomplishing it was the transport of one indigene and the removal of another, manifest here in the captivity of both. Manifest Destiny is the instantiation of this. Titus was a man, likely a part of the Wampanoag nation, and we inhabit his land, and the flesh of his people fertilizes the crops which feed us, enabling us to trample on their graves.

They suffered a truly gruesome fate, one which is shared by Native Americans of other tribes today. Think of the trials endured by the Native Americans at Standing Rock, being tortured and imprisoned for protecting their water and lands from the expansion of corporate empire. Reparations and the cessation of such capitalistic and racist practices might be helpful for Native Americans and instructive for the rest of us. They might force us to accept the injustice that characterizes every step we take on this continent. We might finally realize that the very essence of what America is and has been is forever tied to the continuous wiping out of a multitude of people groups. However, as Jennings teaches us, no amount of capital can restore what has been destroyed. Even if we stopped everything and started over, what has been lost cannot be given back—bodies and land are stripped of one another. Titus being accepted into the full communion of First Church, then, was no remedy; it was an indictment against every brick and plank and body of the church, from the steeple to its pastor to its very foundations in the earth. The body and blood of Jesus was made unclean—it was, after all, made with stolen wheat and grapes. God may have met Titus and invited Titus into God’s holy presence, but it was in spite of the violence of the settlers, not because of it.

What, then, do we do? What is the alternative, and how might we support the mighty remnants of a victimized people like Titus’s? What kind of communion would be authentic and life-giving in the midst of their systematic genocide? I do not know, and I will not speak their solutions for them, but I exhort us all to truly listen to their voices today, and to their blood which has cried out to us from the ground for centuries.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Reflect on the land beneath you and those to whom it belongs.

- What can you do to listen more carefully to the stories and perspectives of Indigenous Persons?