

Abstract This essay establishes similarities between control over Black bodies' movement under chattel slavery and social distancing measures employed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Its primary concern is how protecting public health necessitates undesired movement on the part of marginalized, historically disenfranchised populations to secure supply chains and ensure access to basic goods, foodstuffs, and medicines for those sheltering at home. Structuring its claims within the critical race theories of Saidiya V. Hartman, Achille Mbembe, and Elizabeth Maddock Dillon, it draws attention to how an enslaved condition in which one lacked the right to choose to move or hold still is now being extended to a class of workers deemed essential.

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It is not every day that the average citizen is asked to emulate Prince Prospero (Poe 1845). And yet, in the era of COVID-19, it is considered de rigueur to self-isolate with an abundance of provisions and the best of modern entertainments, albeit with our friends joining us remotely via video chat, to serve the greater good rather than to thwart it. When I re-read Edgar Allan Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death" (1845) while obeying my county's stay-at-home order in the spring of 2020, what I noticed was unexpected and unsettling. I began to see how its pleasure-seeking protagonist, who locks himself away in luxury to outlive the plague, seems a forebearer to those who have come to signify in our public discourse what model citizenship looks like amid the spread of coronavirus. We've all seen the memes of lazy-guy-on-couch, for instance, being held up as a drain on society in 2019 but a national hero in 2020 or the exhortations to embrace staying at home to watch Netflix just like our grandparents answered the call to war in the early twentieth century. Obviously, these are jokes meant to chivvy us into compliance with public health measures

by recognizing the sacrifices social distancing demands while keeping in perspective their relatively lower levels of hardship. Situate these jokes within what Saidiya V. Hartman (1997: 49) has described as American politics' reliance on "pleasure . . . ensnared in a web of domination," however, and it becomes clear we are not just dealing with the themes of vulnerability, sacrifice, mortality, and fear of disease that might be the basis of our analysis of either these memes or "The Masque of the Red Death."

Instead, we are confronting the task of delineating how comforts, methods of relaxation, indulgences, and foods and other things we enjoy can be mobilized to reinforce the very inequitable political structures we seek to undermine when we act in ways aimed at protecting the most vulnerable. Therefore, I find "The Masque of the Red Death" posing a question it didn't necessarily mean to ask, which is as pressing a concern for the twenty-first century United States as Hartman showed us it was for the nineteenth century. How do we account for a political scenario in which privation entangles with pleasure, rendering one indistinguishable from the other?

To pursue this line of inquiry, we need to range further afield in the nineteenth century to a narrative that deserves to be invoked with as much sense of its unquestioned relevancy in times of pandemic: *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs (1861). This slave narrative, with its now-iconic story of how Jacobs hid in a garret measuring nine-by-seven-by-three feet for seven years to escape her condition of bondage, supplies the critical framework needed to contextualize the larger political implications of global isolation measures. Jacobs running from slavery by sheltering in place reminds us that the United States has long been mired in a power structure derived from who has the freedom to make choices about their movement.¹ When her family built for Jacobs her loophole of retreat, the specific regime of domination they challenged was what Achille Mbembe (2019: 99) has recently dubbed "borderization." Hiding in her garret, Jacobs resisted "the process by which world powers permanently transform certain spaces into impassable places for certain classes of populations" (Mbembe 2019: 99). Whereas staying put meant the North would become a place to which Jacobs and her children could go as an essential step in eventually obtaining their freedom, laws such as the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 were precisely that "process" attempting to render the North permanently "impassable." If freedom of choice about one's movement could be secured, then the groundwork would also be laid for liberation. Now we begin to see why being able to quarantine

has ties to slavery's structures of oppression.² Our ability to hold still depends on others moving about—and often that movement is not voluntary.

Just because Jacobs sheltered in place and we are likewise staying at home doesn't mean we are necessarily instigating our own loophole of retreat—quite the opposite, in fact. Rather, if we are someone who can choose to obey a stay-at-home order, we enjoy a kind of freedom enslaved individuals fought to obtain, and if we are someone deemed an “essential” laborer or someone living paycheck-to-paycheck who must go to work, our condition represents a new iteration of a centuries-old privation. That privation is the flipside of the power to restrict others' movements, which Mbembe (2019: 103) has described as “granting Europeans alone the privilege of the rights to possession and free movement across the whole of the planet.” If times of health and prosperity in the West give us images of the slave, the migrant, and the refugee deprived of access to the planet, then the onset of a novel infection reveals a corollary power in forcing others to move about in ways they wouldn't choose and at great personal risk, all so a privileged group can stay still in relative security. This kind of power is what fictional Prince Prospero abused in Poe's red death scenario, and more importantly, it is what Jacobs appropriated in her loophole of retreat, granting to herself the right to hold her body still while her letters and other means of misdirection precipitated undesired movement on the part of Dr. Flint as he searched for her first locally and then in the Northern states. It is also the kind of power that thrives in our current global crisis.

A more amenable set of circumstances for curtailing the specific civil liberty of being able to choose how one's body moves—or not—through the world is hard to imagine. What this pandemic has proven is that our well-being depends on a significant number of people moving about to harvest food, distribute necessary goods to stores, sell groceries, deliver packages and mail to homes, produce medical equipment and personal protective equipment (PPE), care for the sick and the elderly, and so on. To be able to hold up the essentiality of certain labors puts the workers who must undertake them at one remove from the question of rights. More to the point, we can perceive more easily how those workers find themselves in the category of “burdened individuality” Hartman (1997: 112) sees as “prefigured” by Jacobs in her loophole of retreat. Freedom found its limits, she points out, in the fact that the newly emancipated person's “only resource” was “property in the self” (Hartman 1997: 112). Often paid the lowest

of wages, likely without access to benefits (such as paid sick leave), and without the ability to save up emergency funds, these workers are not so much on the frontlines providing essential services as they are obliged to rely on their body-which-goes-to-work as their only resource, just as they always have. If we want to put a name to the crises on which US Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (2020) says the virus has “poured gasoline” and which she hopes we don’t “unsee” later, then we should call them what Hartman described as being free while also free of resources (1997:117). Only now this condition is at risk of being rewritten as unprecedented, positioned as a state of exception rendered ahistorical by its ties to the pandemic, and as a result, evacuated of the kind of revolutionary potential Ocasio-Cortez references in her tweet.

It is imperative, therefore, that we understand outbreaks of COVID-19 as representing more than an acute public health crisis. They constitute iterations of a chronic, endemic state no less damaging to the health of the people, which Mbembe (2017: 4) identifies as the “emergence of new imperial practices . . . tied to the tendency to universalize the Black condition.” In making this claim, Mbembe (2019:11) delineates how European “re-populating” of the planet from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, which took the form of imperialism, settler colonialism, the transatlantic slave trade, and chattel slavery, for instance, established practices of domination through its constructions of Blackness and Africa as Other. Those practices are now evolving to extend tactics of oppression to more identities in ways adapted to the twenty-first-century milieu. Which is to say that, while people identifying as being someone with a disability, chronically ill, Latinx, Indigenous, Asian American, immigrant, poor white, Muslim, or Jewish should in no way be considered reducible to “the Black condition,” the structural oppressions they navigate are caught in its wake.³ So far, we’ve been able to gesture to a couple dimensions of the Black condition that have revealed themselves converging on one another and impacting diverse subject-positions in our present moment: restrictions on the basic human right to choose how and when their body moves across the planet and a socioeconomic hierarchy determined by one part of the population being obliged to serve the pleasure of another. The global spread of SARS-CoV-2 provides, surprisingly perhaps, an effective mechanism for attempting to universalize these specific inequities.

It might seem odd to think of navigating a pandemic as a new imperial practice on par with, say, ubiquitous surveillance technologies or

establishing military bases on foreign soil. Yet, when approached from the perspective of what kind of labor makes it possible for an epidemiological best practice such as social distancing to be followed, it becomes clear how it replaces “old colonial divisions . . . with various forms of apartheid, marginalization, and structural destitution,” and its “spread has resulted in new forms of insecurity, undermining the capacity of many to remain masters of their own lives” (Mbembe 2017: 161). That loss of mastery, in this case, is an inability to hold still to preserve one’s own health because one’s body must be out working not only to pay the bills in order to subsist but also to keep supply chains intact so the stay-at-home population has access to the consumable goods it needs and *wants*.

No doubt everyone’s experience of quarantine lands somewhere on a continuum from privation to pleasure. My purpose is not to comment on the variety of those experiences nor to ignore the dire financial straits in which so many millions of people have found themselves nor to erase the hardships even Americans privileged enough to stay at home face when they are caregivers or separated from loved ones who are sick or dying. Instead, I’m suggesting that we can draw on Hartman (1997) to begin to situate those diverse range of experiences within longstanding political apparatuses developed during slavery, which allow regimes of domination to intersect with daily life through both “routinized violence” and “scenes in which terror can hardly be discerned” (4). In particular, I am concerned with how certain quarantine modalities qualify as spaces in which terror is difficult to discern while also allowing forms of routine violence to emerge amongst certain classes of workers.

How can we parse, for instance, a new sourdough bread-making hobby, the wine paired with that special home-cooked meal one has finally had the time to prepare, that extra hour of screen time, the increasingly regular naps, the long walks, and the pizza delivery after a particularly trying day while attending to the fact that enjoyment, pleasure, and wants, in the slaveholding history of the United States, “facilitated subjugation, domination, and terror” (Hartman 1997: 5)? How can we adopt a critical vantage point that allows us to interrogate how the small pleasures on which we rely to make prolonged social distancing bearable or even the good feeling we enjoy in simply doing the right thing by staying home cannot be extricated from how they mime and normalize systemic efforts being made to reserve indulgence, comfort, and financial security for an increasingly small class of individuals while the rest of humanity labors in their service?

What we're talking about is a form of structural destitution sufficiently molecularized to allow necropower's reach into the spaces of individual lives in ways unfathomed by, yet genealogically linked to, the American system of chattel slavery. One of Mbembe's (2019: 70; 80–82) points is that necropower, which “labors to produce . . . exceptions, emergencies, and fictionalized enemies” as justification of its “work of death,” operates by allowing separate geographies to define one space. Inhabitants of one geography are subject to violence, war, disorder, and death, while in the other geography privileged bodies benefit from wealth extraction and myriad security measures (Mbembe 2019: 80–82). From the nineteenth century to the twenty-first century, this duality consistently applies, although with a change in scope. For example, what's the difference between Edwin Epps taunting Solomon Northup ([1853] 2017: 142) before giving him a beating for wanting to be purchased by a tanner, saying “You're fond of moving round—traveler—ain't ye? Ah, yes—like to travel for your health, may be?” and Lieutenant Governor of Texas Dan Patrick going on Fox News to say, “My message is that let's get back to work. Let's get back to living. Let's be smart about it. And those of us who are 70 plus, we'll take care of ourselves. But don't sacrifice the country” (Morris and Garrett 2020)? Northup gestures to the fact that there were likely few to no places a Black man could travel in the United States in the 1850s to escape the climate of anti-Blackness in order to improve his health in addition to not being able to claim rights over his body's movements while free nor while enslaved;⁴ Lt. Gov. Patrick's perspective equates the country's health with getting back to work, ignoring the right to health of the elderly and other at-risk groups.⁵ Both statements communicate that those in power live because capitalism is not constrained by an obligation to *universal* health. Both demarcate who occupies which space of exception, whether it is that of being Black in America or elderly shopping at Walmart. Both rely on the implicit warrant that there are, ostensibly, only two kinds of people: those who serve and those who enjoy being served. The difference lies, therefore, in how easily today an individual might find themselves in that category of exception based in servitude. Your local grocery clerk, for instance.

This pandemic shows us how a novel infection to which no body has immunity can become a part of the infrastructural apparatus of war needed to reduce greater swaths of the population to “bare labor” (Dillon 2019). Recently coined by Elizabeth Maddock Dillon (2019:

626), the concept of bare labor describes the biopolitical condition of the enslaved: “the dehumanized body of the enslaved African is *forced* to live in order to work without respite.” The desire on the part of politicians such as Lt. Gov. Patrick or President Donald Trump to keep America open for business are just the most recent examples of attempts to normalize “work without respite” as part and parcel of slavery’s afterlives in the United States. When President Trump said, “I would love to have the country opened up and just raring to go by Easter,” he was speaking neither in defiance of medical commonsense nor in ignorance of epidemiological projections (Samuels and Chalfant 2020). Rather, he was fantasizing a world order in which, when it pleased him to so declare it, as many laboring bodies as possible would be moving within capitalist networks of profit and exchange with no regard for the risks to individual bodies. Likewise, members of his base, who in late April 2020 staged anti-stay-at-home protests in Michigan, Ohio, and other states (Andone 2020) and who garnered the president’s support via tweets demanding those states’ liberation (Cummings 2020), effectively refused the truth of their own burdened individuality and opted instead to normalize the idea that some people’s labor should come at the expense of their flesh so an elite ruling class might profit. In such a fantasy, it’s not just that the privilege of quarantine would be accorded to a few, but that humanity’s fundamental right of quarantine would be—is being—revoked.

None of us is immune to the allure of this particular fantasy, not when we live in a society in which public health is ensnared in a regime of domination that relies on some bodies being used as vehicles of enjoyment for others (Hartman 1997: 23; 49). Hartman (1997: 115–24) once taught us that emancipation was a nonevent precisely because it did nothing to undo the sociopolitical structures that ensured Black bodies would be made to serve white pleasure. Now we are facing the consequences of this in the weapons we have at our disposal for combatting the spread of a novel infection. We can’t escape the fact that for some of us to stay home, others must deliver food, ring up orders at the cash register, stock toilet paper, and so on. Nor can we escape the fact that those laborers are disproportionately of color, blue collar, undocumented, or otherwise the inheritors of racialized legacies of disenfranchisement. And we cannot ignore the fact that our economy invites that legacy to extend further with every Favor we hire someone to run or curbside delivery order we pick up. Let’s not be tempted, then, by the likes of Poe, who entices us with a story

of a corrupt government falling before the great equalizer that is communicable disease. COVID-19 isn't coming for all of us equally, and the tendency to narrate outbreaks only in terms of the seemingly comprehensive demographic boxes they check only obscures that fact. As it did before the passing of the Fourteenth Amendment, our health continues to depend on the extent to which we can use an extractive economy to maximize the pleasure of those who have the luxury of staying home.

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Notes

- 1 This point is informed by Hartman's (2019: 242–43) discussion of how vagrancy laws in the 1910s and 1920s created surrogate enslavement that restricted movement and obstructed the ability of the property-less to subsist.
- 2 This point extends what is becoming common knowledge about the disproportionate effect the pandemic has had on Black communities in the United States. With the comments by Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, Dr. Anthony Fauci, in April 2020 about the health disparities between Blacks and whites in the United States, the national media began to discuss the structural inequities that led to African Americans suffering more from COVID-19 (Lovelace 2020). Indeed, some have made the case that racism in general is the root of the problem. For example, on white supremacy as a preexisting condition that can be blamed for Black Americans' higher death rate from COVID-19, see Michael Harriot 2020.
- 3 For the wake as a way to understand the outbreak of slavery's violence today, see Sharpe 2016, especially 4–15.
- 4 See Sharpe 2016: 102–34.
- 5 The anti-Black climate Northrup navigated during the nineteenth century laid the groundwork for both the labor and the underlying health

conditions that have disproportionately imperiled Black and Latinx populations during the pandemic. See Scott 2020 and Villarosa 2020.

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