

Saltwater Insurgency: Gender and Drowning during the Middle Passage

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Abstract

This article resurfaces an enslaved female whom we encounter, drowning, in the archive of the Middelburgse Commercie Compagnie (MCC). To unfold a reading beyond the transcription of her commodified death, I investigate the five localities that conditioned her bodily inscription into history: the archive, the law, the ship, the ocean, and the womb. Traveling through these localities, I disclose, at once, the historical violence against black females through the transatlantic slave trade system and the excess black females proved to be to this very system. Excessive thus, black female lineage provides an alternative to white, patriarchic systems of relation.

Keywords

Dutch Slavery; Archive; Gender; Drowning; Hortense Spillers; Oceanic.

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Introduction

In one sense, the Dutch archive of the transatlantic slave trade is a closed system. The archival documents it harbors are finite. Bound to a specific time and place, these documents are forged by those historically in power: those affiliated to the Dutch colonial government and slave trading enterprises such as the Middelburgse Commercie Compagnie (MCC) and the Verenigde West-Indische Compagnie (WIC). Their ship logs, trade books, resolutions, and letters present a one-sided, biased, and violent account of the history of slavery. All relate the dehumanizing slaving practices and discourses that erased enslaved Africans from the historical record. Yet this is not the entire story. The archive contains histories that are, ultimately, irreducible to the dehumanizing purposes archival documents historically served. The power and thus the responsibility of selecting which stories to attend to is consigned to us. For each time we open up archives, we make choices. These choices—of ways of reading, of topics of attention, of narration—change how we come to see historical events. And conversely, reimagination of historical events circles back to shape our present worldly imaginations. Ethically, revisitation of the archive becomes a matter of doing justice to erased histories and subsequently of opening up new contemporary imaginations. History, in a very real sense, is in our hands; and with it, the future as well.

In an attempt to resurface black life from unritualized, dehumanized death, this article is dedicated to an enslaved female whom we encounter, drowning, in a witness statement provided by the crew of the Dutch slave ship *Zanggodin* [“Singing Goddess”]. This witness statement was provided in the context of an insurance claim in respect to which it had to be determined whether the loss of slave lives during a revolt that had taken place aboard was justified or not. The witness statement dedicates only one sentence to the drowning female—her existence is attested to in no more than 25 words. In this one sentence, in these 25 words, we read how she drowned after having jumped overboard, together with a young boy. To focus on her in this article is a choice. I could have focused on the boy or their relation, the mass revolt, or the people who fled ashore. Choosing not to do so has consequences for what history is written and how this is done. Described below is thus only one potential reading of her act of drowning. My narration withholds narrative impeccability; it is necessarily incomplete, necessarily partial, but therefore infinitely open to other possibilities and alternatives.

Even though her archival transcription only served a financial purpose, the drowning female breaks through the testimony in what I read as an act of resistance. The alternative reading of her transcription that I propose to perform travels through five spaces that condition her bodily inscription in history: the archive, the law, the ship, the ocean, and the womb. These five spaces are crucial as they historically formed the substrata through which black, enslaved humans in general and females specifically were dehumanized. Retracing these spaces, I attempt to disclose, on the one hand, the historical violence done to black females by the slave trade system and, on the other, the

excess that black females represented in this very system. Starting with the archive—our primary (textual) access to history—I describe the skewed power dynamics of archival construction that condition the writing of history by the historically dominant by virtue of the erasure of those they enslaved. Proceeding to a consideration of the law of “partus sequitur ventrem,” or “through the womb,” I show that the stipulation that slave status was inherited through the female line meant the emptying out of indigenous symbolic ties and secured the superior social positions of white men in patriarchic, colonial societies. Thereafter, I unfold how this colonial order of human difference manifested itself aboard slave ships. Based on this understanding, two interpretations of the act of jumping overboard are presented: one from the slavers’ perspective (jumping overboard) and one from the captives’ perspective (jumping into the ocean). The section on the ocean, then, expands on the idea of jumping into the ocean in order to argue that the undifferentiated identities forced upon enslaved females lend themselves to the possibility of going beyond colonial epistemic regimes. Due to black females’ forced exclusion from humanity as determined by patriarchic, colonial societies, their experiences give them the potential to tap into forms of meaning-making outside of the colonial order. In the final section, dedicated to the womb, I reconnect the drowning female with the drowning boy and argue that the offspring of enslaved females were also stamped with their mothers’ undifferentiated identities. This historically imposed genealogical inheritance of undifferentiated identity consigns to the black female lineage the potential to overcome colonial logics and epistemic regimes.

Before imparting my alternative reading of the black female act of drowning through the five spaces mentioned above, I want to express my own emotional investment in this article, because writing this article was devastating. What struck me most while writing this was pain. It is hard reading an archive for traces that lead only to the repetitious erasure of people and it is hard when, if finding them, they appear only in their death. I had hoped to find the drowning female and boy in the captain’s letters or in the ship’s journal. I had hoped to see them reappear: to see them witnessed. But to face the fact that, once again, enslaved individuals were only registered to account for financial loss undermines the promise of archival retrieval and the historical reconstructions based upon retrieval. In the face of the impossibility of historical recollection through archival retrieval, yet motivated by the desire to see this black female witnessed, in the following text I provide another narration: one based on historical contextualization and critical fabulation (Hartman 2008). Both aspects are necessary for retelling the drowning female’s story. Historical contextualization is, firstly, needed to provide an account of the violent conditions in which she had to exist. Critical fabulation, a writing practice conceived of by Saidiya Hartman, goes beyond historical contextualization in that it attempts to envision the structures of and conditions for archival representation (Hartman 2008). Straining against the limits of the archive, I set out to write a history of gender and drowning under slavery while, simultaneously, acknowledging the partiality of the archive and my narrative account based thereupon. In so doing, I hope to make visible both the drowning female and the production of her disposability. If this article succeeds, even to the slightest degree, in writing a history “about what an archive does not offer” as well as a history of archival non-offering, I’d find hope in that (Fuentes 2016, 146).

The Archive

The ship that hauled the enslaved female and boy from their places of origin, the *Zanggodin*, sailed for the MCC, a free trading company founded in 1720 that started trading almost exclusively in human bodies from the 1740s onwards. The ship was a snow. Snows were relatively small sailing vessels with two main sails.¹ Whereas snows were commonly fully dedicated to trading and trafficking human bodies during the transatlantic slave trade, the *Zanggodin's* main cargo was ivory. For this reason, during the voyage under discussion, it shipped the relatively small number of 45 enslaved individuals and a crew of 28 men from the West African coast to Suriname before making its return to the Dutch Kingdom.² Before it set sail to Suriname, however, the ship had confined 67 individuals. Twenty-two had been killed in the deadly revolt initiated by the enslaved individuals aboard in an attempt to break out of their captivity.

In the morning of the 18th of October 1769, the *Zanggodin* lay anchored in the Gabon River (currently known as the Ogooué river in Gabon).³ Despite the fact that four crewmembers lay ill, and seven others had gone to shore, business aboard went apace as usual. At ten o'clock, Captain Jan van Sprang went up to the deck and inquired with boatswain Jan van der Wouw if the latter was ready to feed the captives. As he was making his way back to his quarters, the captives, who had been moved on deck for the fresh air, attacked the captain. Van der Wouw then shot at the captives to save his captain. During the upheaval, some of the captives managed to get into a sloop and started escaping from the *Zanggodin*. While several crewmembers were taking aim at the sloop, others tried to save the captives, who had jumped overboard but had not managed to get into the escape boat, from drowning. With the help of ropes, the crew tried to get those floating in the ocean water back onboard. Although in the witness statement, the crew is presented as a band of rescuers, this narrative is interrupted abruptly when we read: "regardless all help brought, a negress and a boy would rather drown themselves as a means of help." Immediately after this assertion, the witness statement jumps to another event.⁴

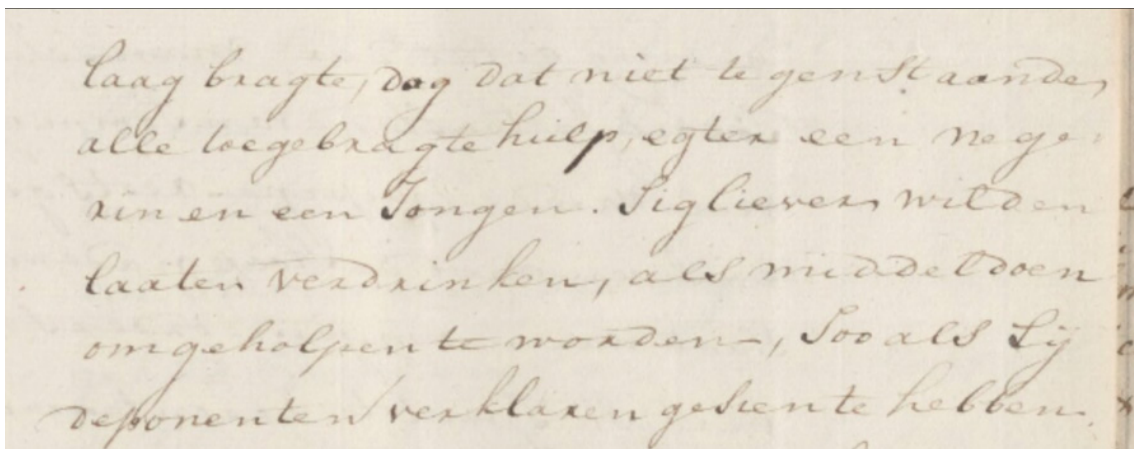


Figure 1. Extract from witness statement relating the revolt aboard the *Zanggodin*: "regardless all help brought, a negress and a boy would rather drown themselves as a means of help." Source: MdbZA, 20, 2, 1366.3, fol. 124.

In the single sentence articulating the fact that she exists, the drowning female is found dying and generically un/named as “negress,” in what may be considered a double death encompassing both the physical and the symbolic. Choosing to remain within archival limits, I am bound to the generic and dehumanizing terms of her symbolic transcription. In the absence of any personal qualifications and choosing to remain within archival bounds, I cannot refer to her otherwise than in the terms of her symbolic transcription. Adopting the concept of the “female” to refer to the drowning female, I risk committing a symbolic appropriation—or violation, even. In doing so, I potentially repeat the historical reduction of black females to their sexual reproductive organs and capacity. Secondly, it should be taken to heart, as Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí (1997) explains, that many African communities did not organize themselves according to a Western gendered framework. Caught within a dominant academic linguistic field that has been constructed, historically, upon sexual and gendered human difference, my own narrative does not escape “the economy of statements that it subjects to critique” (Hartman 2008, 13). In taking on the concept of “female,” my aim is not to comply with Western sexual and gendered identity, but to make space for the specific social subject enslaved black females proved to be.

Besides slave insurgencies and illnesses, slave deaths were the only events slave captains recorded about them. The sole reason for this lay in the ledger: profit and bodies needed to add up. Commodified, the loss of the enslaved female’s life signified a financial loss that required explanation to the ship’s insurers (Lurvink 2019).⁵ If justified—that is, if the violence against and violations of enslaved individuals were judged to have prevented further damage to the ship and the white lives upon it—the financial losses were often reimbursed by the insuring party. Deaths were thus registered not out of respect, but as a bureaucratic requirement. This “violence of arithmetic” is the reason that so many enslaved individuals appear only in their disappearance (Snorton 2017, viii). In the slave trade system, their deaths were the only things ‘worth’ mentioning.

Sylvia Wynter (2003) draws attention to the organization of power underlying the iniquitous evaluation of human life that characterizes the archive of slavery. In the 18th century, Wynter argues, the idea of the human was defined as Man, an abstraction that corresponds roughly to white Christian European males. Organized by differentiation strategies such as gender, race, and religion, this conception of humanness was deemed to pertain in various degrees to different gendered and racialized human subjects. Following Man’s self-referential code of human difference, degrees of humanness were stratified phenotypically according to a value distinction between life and death, distinguishing Christian, white Western European man as human par excellence, allocating him livable positionalities, qualities, and geographies. His non-European, black, and pagan others were correspondingly deemed lesser humans or nonhumans and relegated to unlivable and deadly positionalities, qualities, and geographies. It follows from this reading of social differentiation that gender and race were (and still are) symbolic codes rather than biological determinants. Man’s determination and distribution of power and human life and death is, however, not the entire story. Since the drowning female is not reducible to the narrative her enslavers upheld to justify her enslavement, it is not *her* story.

The Law

Before presenting an alternative narration of the enslaved female's act of drowning, it is first necessary to account for the specific forms of violence enslaved black females encountered during slavery. Focusing on enslaved females during the slave trade era, I aim to disclose the centrality of black femaleness for the propagation of slavery. The transition from the singular case of the drowning female to the experience of enslaved female *as a whole* is justified in part because, as I show below, the slave trade system worked by virtue of the homogenization and reduction of black females to reproductive vessels. Thus, the drowning female encountered violence *like* (but not identical to) that encountered by other enslaved females.

The slave system that organized societies in the 18th century was structured to give exclusive property rights to white males. Based on a differential and hierarchical idea of humanity, this system secured the superior social and legal positions of white men. Included in patriarchal authority were "slavery's technologies of violence through marking," technologies that consisted in the power to replace African family names and roles in the interest of white society (Spillers 2003, 21). Branded and demarcated within the Dutch colonial symbolic regime, the enslaved were usurped by a cultural symbolic that dehumanized them through generic depictions: "slave," "negress," "*f*300." By denigrating the enslaved through New World typifications, patriarchal white societies attempted to destroy African indigenous cultural markings. In doing so, the kinship relations articulated in African (familial) names and the power of African indigenous ties were destroyed.

Hortense Spillers' distinction between the "body" and the "flesh" in her seminal work "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" (1987) helps decode slavery's technologies of marking as they pertained specifically to black females. Bodies were ruled by a culturally normative script that prescribed, amongst other things, gender, racial, and religious markings and performances. In the transatlantic slave trade system, however, the appropriation of captive bodies by the symbolic order of white society involved a "theft of the body" (Spillers 1987, 67). This meant that enslaved individuals lost the power to decide over their own bodies, so that their bodies could serve the symbolic interests of slaveowners. Reading the history of slavery through Spillers' framework, one can see how Western bodily identities and the social and legal privileges anchored in these identities developed in tandem with the appropriation of enslaved people for material as well as symbolic purposes. As such, the body within Western societies became tied specifically to a white, male idea of the body—Man—in contrast with his black others (Weheliye 2014, 39-40; 77). Whiteness and maleness thus comprised the nuclei of cultural identity and personhood and, as such, regulated the symbolic organization of all bodies. Accordingly, enslaved individuals were excluded from a notion of proper embodiment and their bodies were either overvalued (e.g., as strong) or devalued (e.g., as ugly).

Spillers coins the term "flesh" in order to account for the specific form of dehumanization through ungendering that took place under slavery. An assemblage of calculated violence consisting of iron chains, whips, knives, ropes, bullets, and brandings together with processes of dehumanization, thingification, and commodification turned enslaved individuals into flesh by displacing them from their own bodies and reducing

them to homogenous amassments (Césaire 2001, 42). Transformed into flesh, enslaved individuals were deindividuated, undifferentiated even (a point I will return to later on). Excluded from cultural norms of the body, enslaved individuals were regarded as fungible objects whose status as flesh precluded their capacity for intersubjective relations and their entry into the private and domestic contexts in which such relationships could be secured.

Through the thingification, metrification, and monetarization of enslaved individuals in the slave trade system, enslaved individuals were ungendered in the flesh. Gendered subject positions no longer referred to domestic roles but were ungendered to translate instead to metric values indicating the amount of space their bodies took up aboard slave ships or to certain monetary amounts (gulden) as shown in figure 2.⁶ Decoupled from the private, domestic sphere, kinship was dismantled and relations amongst the enslaved were dispersed in a network of property relations. This total commodification of interrelations was underscored by the fact that slave owners could invalidate the captives' claims of kinship at any given moment, rendering the enactment of familial relationships practically impossible (Spillers 1987, 74). Children and parents could be sold off without notice, enslaved males and females were prohibited from performing their parental roles, and intermarriage was forbidden.

Hortense Spillers' distinction between the "body" and the "flesh" in her seminal work "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" (1987) helps decode slavery's technologies of marking which pertained specifically to black females. Spillers coins the "flesh" to account for the specific form of dehumanization through ungendering that took place under slavery. In the transatlantic slave trade system, the appropriation of captive bodies by the symbolic order of white society involved a "theft of the body" (Spillers 1987, 67). This meant that enslaved individuals lost the power to decide over their own bodies in order for their bodies to serve the symbolic interests of slaveowners. Their private and particular bodily spaces, in other words, were made public. Assemblages of calculated violence displaced enslaved individuals from their own bodies and reduced them to homogenous amassments (Césaire 2001, 42). What remained of the enslaved beyond the theft of their bodies was the flesh. Transformed into flesh, or surplus sites of meaning for white society, enslaved bodies were at once physically and symbolically appropriated to serve white imaginations of self and other (Lowe 2015).

In contradistinction to the flesh, the body formed the nucleus for social and legal recognition. Reading the history of slavery through Spillers' framework, Western bodily identities and the social and legal privileges anchored upon these identities developed in tandem with the appropriation of enslaved people for material as well as symbolic purposes. A twofold reconceptualization of the body follows. Firstly, the body is not a natural entity but a symbolic one. Bodies are not empirical givens, but discursive instances belonging to specific contexts. Secondly, the body is never neutral; it is invested with cultural descriptions from the West: the gendered, racialized, classified body.

Deployed as an anchor point of capital, captivity, and reproduction, black female flesh was specifically crucial for the (re)production of the order of human bodies that secured the perpetuation of the slave trade system. Among the multifarious forms of oppression black females were subjected to, the exploitation of their reproductive

capacities with the aim of producing new slaves was especially notorious. Exemplary in this regard was the legal doctrine “partus sequitur ventrem,” which translates as “through the womb.” This British law was instituted in 1662 and mandated that all captive offspring were to inherit their enslaved mothers’ legal slave status (Morgan 2018). Even though “partus sequitur ventrem” legally covered only then-British territory, ideologically, the heritability of slave status through the female line governed Western slave trading nations and their colonies at large. Violently marking enslaved females as reproductive vessels, what “partus sequitur ventrem” conditioned was the symbolic violation and resignification of black motherhood: black females were reduced to flesh in order to capitalize on their objectified sexual and reproductive capacities.

Due to the markedness of black females as bearers of “slave status,” the black female lineage was subjected to the white man’s grammar of marking; yet, conversely, the Law of the Father—the white man’s name, property, lineage, inheritance, and legal personhood—directly depended on black female flesh. For, through the objectification of captive females and by controlling their flesh, the racial-sexual colonial order organizing free and unfree positionalities that justified (the propagation of) the slave system could

The image shows a handwritten document titled "Lijst Der Vijf de hand verkoghte Negeren in Suriname" (List of five slaves sold out of hand in Suriname). The document is a table with columns for buyer names, descriptions of captives, and prices in guildens. The descriptions include gender (M for male, V for female), age (Js for boy, Md for girl), and overall status (A for all). The prices range from 675 to 10000 guildens.

Buyer Name	Description	Price (Guildens)
De heer J. D. Gochenaar	M " " 17	675
Van den Oever en Schelling	V 3 " " 6	3750
Dorckwijk waarden van	" " " " 2	612
J. D. Benkjen	" " " " 1	280
Wai Fermanand	V 1 " " 2	883
Juda Salob! Polak	" " " " 1	550
Baarent Goubke	V 16 ? 8 32	10000
Totaal		225 8 10 15 16750

Figure 2. “List of slaves sold ‘out of hand’ in Suriname.” Selling the enslaved “out of hand” means “on the spot.” On the left side, the names of the buyers are written down. On the right, the captives bought are described, followed by the number of guildens paid for them. From left to right, the headings read: “M” (male), “V” (female), “Js.” (boy), “Md” (girl), and “A” (all). Source: MdvZA, 20, 1387, f. 56.

be controlled as well. By locating the source of enslavement in black females through “partus sequitur ventrem,” the originary white, patriarchal violence of the slave trade system that, in fact, enforced this symbolic reality remained concealed. In this, we can see how “the expectations of slave property are ontologized as the innate capacities and inner feelings of the enslaved” (Hartman 1997, 27). Put differently, the external symbolic imagination of the slaveholding class is deemed to spring forth from the innate nature

of enslaved females. By disconnecting the violent use of black females' flesh from (the development of) white, male subjecthood, what took place is a material and archival erasure of the foundational violence against black female flesh during the slave trade era.

What is furthermore important to make explicit is that, in coining the term "flesh," Spillers reveals the intricate relation between the material and the semiotic. Since our linguistic field has been (and still is) geared towards the expression of dominant society, words are lacking to describe suppressed realities. Giving articulation to the flesh, not only does Spillers provide the terminology through which the hitherto invisible realities of the high crimes against enslaved flesh can come to expression. It also becomes possible to see that the Western linguistic field and its corresponding symbolic order developed itself by tapping into the black flesh' surplus site of meaning. Concepts such as "freedom" and "property," for example, evolved within the context of slavery by operating on enslaved individuals, establishing their unfree status as property over and against their free and propertied white counterparts (Hartman 1997; Karskens 2017; Patterson 1991). The symbolic dispossession of African subjects then consists in the demolition of African self-marking and the conversion of this emptied ground into a foundation of the symbolic surplus used for white imagination and self-understanding (Spillers 1987, 68). Importantly, however, even though black female flesh secured white freedom and black captivity, and therewith Man's grammar of life, their symbolic surpluses at the same time form the condition of this order's demise. This fleshy capacity to distort and exceed the order of the human as determined by Man is the topic of the following sections.

The Ship

When performing an alternative reading of the act of drowning by the drowning female, it is important to take note of the twofold directionality of drowning. On the one hand, the act of drowning signifies jumping *overboard*, while on the other, it means jumping *into* the ocean. This dual aspect is incredibly important because it reveals a similarly dual account of the drowning female's oceanic leap. Our choice of narrative focus, then, is constitutive of how we come to understand the drowning female and the greater narrative of slavery wherein she is placed. In this section, I focus on the significance of jumping *overboard* as a refusal of the colonial order of Man manifested aboard the ship. In the following section, the ocean is centered as an at once alternative view and vantage point into which the female plunged.

One thing stands out with respect to the ship's name, *Zanggodin*: the name of the ship is gendered. Ships, in general, were classified as female and the *Zanggodin*'s name underscores this fact (Mellefont 2000, 6). In the case of the transatlantic slave trade, this gendering makes sense symbolically. In all its destructiveness, the slave ship functioned as a generative vessel insofar as it performed the rite of passage for those becoming "saltwater slaves." The name "saltwater slave" was used by enslaved Africans to describe those individuals abducted from the African mainland, over and against enslaved creole subjects who were born in the colonies (Smallwood 2007, 7). To repeat, slave ships aligned with feminine generative capacities. In line with this, Edouard Glissant writes of the slave ship: "this boat is your womb, a matrix, and yet it expels you. This boat: pregnant with as many dead as living under the sentence of death" (Glissant 1997, 6). Designating

the slave ship as womb, Glissant explicates the naturalized connection between female reproductive capacities, the slave ship, and slave status. In doing so, he draws attention to how slave ships still carried a generative potential within their utterly destructive spaces.

A slave ship's spatial distribution was a manifestation of colonial human difference. As Jordan Winthrop explains, the ostensible difference between white Europeans and enslaved Africans "provided the mental margin absolutely requisite for placing the European on the deck of the slave ship and the Negro in the hold" (Winthrop 2012, 171). On deck, white Europeans were protected against deadly environments in a twofold spatial way. Firstly, railings enacted a barrier between what were deemed livable and unlivable spaces. Beyond the ship's boundaries, the ocean's water and the African coast presented a deadly environment that took the lives of many Europeans and Africans because of sickness (such as yellow fever or malaria), warfare, or drowning (Behrent 1997). In addition, the ship's hatch, preventing uninterrupted mobility between deck and hold, entrenched the crew's liberated positions on the livable deck while securing the captivity of the enslaved in the deadly hold. Within this symbolic order, the crew as a manifestation of Man regulated who would live and die: in their hands lay the amount of food rationed to enslaved subjects; their punishments amounted to a death-penalty; and when an enslaved person jumped overboard, all their power and means were geared towards prevent the loss of life—even if this was unwanted by the captive who had jumped.

Since railings enacted the boundary between free and captive positionalities, slave ship crews made sure that railings were incredibly difficult to jump over. Due to the many attempts made by enslaved individuals, slavers had increasingly put nettings around ships and chains around captives' limbs to keep them from doing so—to keep them in their place, captive in the deadly hold aboard the slave ship. From the enslaver's perspective, slaves jumping overboard was silliness. As the symbolic world order organized along Man's supposed superiority justified the enslavement of his ostensible lesser human, black others, their slave status was regarded as incontestable. On this view, jumping overboard amounted to foolishness since it contested the slave system's order as it was upheld aboard. Therefore, actions of revolt were often ascribed to passions, illness, or godless intentions, to avoid acknowledging the inhuman foundation of the slave trade system: the fact that humans, not commodities, were traded.⁷

Railings, however, signify differently if viewed from the perspective of the enslaved. These wooden walls were the main obstructions for individuals who wanted to escape the deadly organization of human life aboard. In their case, jumping over the railings could be seen as a performance of freedom; a way to escape a deadly slave ship *into* the ocean. Reading the drowning female's transcription in this sense, her "dismissal" of the crew's "means of help" represents a refusal to exist in the colonial organization of human life epitomized by the ship's spatial organization. Recalibrating the drowning female's oceanic leap accordingly, I make recourse to Achille Mbembe's reading of suicide as a form of symbolic disinvestment:

To willingly take leave of one's own existence by committing suicide is not necessarily to make oneself disappear. Rather, it is willingly to abandon the risk

of being touched by the Other and by the world—a gesture of disinvestment that forces the enemy to confront his own void. The person who commits suicide no longer wishes to communicate, ... no longer seeks to participate in the world as it is ... The person who commits suicide ... shows how, as far as the political is concerned, the true contemporary fracture opposes those who cling onto their bodies, who take their bodies as the basis of life itself. (Mbembe 2019, 49-50)

The above quotation ties together the themes of the body, symbolic investment, and the life-death symbolic discussed before. Having a (white male) body secured “life,” personhood, and property and worked both to prioritize white bodies and, from this superior position, to reduce black individuals to flesh. Following the subject positions of the body and flesh respectively, suicide can be read on different interpretive levels. Whereas for enslavers, the destruction of the white, male body was identical to the dissolution of life, the destruction of an enslaved individual, reduced to flesh, translated not to the dissolution of life but to the destruction of property. For the enslaved, however, suicide was, in some instances, an attempt to escape the dominant symbolic system organized around white bodily personhood. Since the body is not a natural but rather a naturalized determinant for life, suicide can be seen as an act of disinvestment from this bodily stipulated world order (Moten 2013, 754). Attempting to attain a place beyond Man’s order, the black female’s suicide by drowning may then come to signal a disinvestment from a world that reduced her being to a bodily insignificance grounded on white imaginations.

Moreover, the drowning female’s suicide intimates a refusal to be “touched by the Other,” that is, to function as symbolic surplus on Man’s terms. Refusing the deadly shipboard order of life and death, the female’s act of drowning is a form of what Hartman calls “stealing (oneself) away,” in reference to long-term as well as shorter-lived escapes from slavery, ranging from escape into marronage to secret marriages (Hartman 1997, 66). The phrase “stealing (oneself) away” reveals the paradoxical situation wherein captives, as property, exert self-possession and agency to steal themselves away. To use Hartman’s words, by stealing herself away, the drowning female engendered “nothing less than a fundamental challenge to and breach of the claims of slave property—the black captive as object and the ground of the master’s inalienable rights, being, and liberty” (Hartman 1997, 69). Disinvestment by suicide, then, is a political act and a concrete social logic insofar as it signifies an interrogation and refutation of dominant bodily symbolics and points to an alternative understanding of human life. By extension, the drowning female’s refusal can be read at once as a refutation *within* this order as well as *of* this order (from outside this order); not only does her drowning act signify the refusal of the body as stipulated by white imagination, it also forms a refusal of the notion that the body ought to be the ultimate guarantee for life in the first place.

The Ocean(ic)

In this section, I delve further into the significance of jumping *into* the ocean. The ocean, as a site, is crucial to understanding the alternative vantage points of enslaved individuals during the transatlantic slave trade. Oceanic death during the Middle Passage or the forced migration from Africa to the Americas could be read in at least two ways. As

demonstrated in the above section, the ocean was, on the one hand, used by enslaved individuals as a site to escape from the deadly organization of life aboard the slave ship. In addition, it was furthermore believed by some African communities that one could return to Africa by committing suicide (Pierson 1977, 151). Considering suicide as a way to “return to Africa,” these enslaved exerted an irreducible belief in African community and black life when committing suicide. On the other hand, the crew made use of this oceanic sphere and its inhabitants (sharks) to deter the enslaved from fighting to their deaths and disrupting Man’s world order (Rediker 2008; Bennet 2018). For example, slavers tried to repel the enslaved from jumping overboard by mutilating captive bodies, because it was believed that a defaced body would make returning to the African homeland undesirable (Pierson 1977, 154).

Through the unritualization of black deaths during the Middle Passage and the demonization of the ocean as a deadly space, blackness and the ocean became intricately linked in their deadliness. Bench Ansfield clarifies the relation between oceanity (the uninhabitable) and blackness (the inhuman): “the essential condition for the spatial status *uninhabitable* is the occupier’s inhumanity, and conversely, the implication of the occupier’s inhumanity is the production of an uninhabitable place” (Ansfield 2015, 133). In this mutual construction of (non-)identity and (non-)place, the uninhabitable ocean spatializes the otherness of black people, thereby spelling out the uninhabitability of the ocean, the deadliness of the enslaved within it, and the supposed transparent translation between the two (McKittrick 2006, 130). Thus, the ocean, as an uninhabitable place of residence, became an ostensibly natural locality of belonging for enslaved individuals.

I propose that the black female’s drowning troubles the naturalized identification between black inhumanity and oceanic uninhabitability and attests instead to an oceanic *habitation* of black *humanity*. During the Middle Passage, the enslaved found themselves in the Atlantic Ocean, situated between the littorals of African land that was “no-longer” and American land that was “not-yet.” Due to the uncertainty of where the coerced ocean journey would lead, the enslaved found themselves suspended in the oceanic. This suspension is “oceanic” because African subjectivities were reduced to fleshy undifferentiated identities that were forcibly excluded from land-locked cultural identity formations such as gender (as described in Section 1) and nationality (Spillers 1987, 72). Following Spillers, however, the violent displacement of human beings as undifferentiated cargo simultaneously allowed “for a wild and unclaimed richness of *possibility* that is not interrupted, not ‘counted’/‘accounted,’ or differentiated until its movement gains the land” (1987, 72). Despite—or maybe, in some twisted form of brutality, by virtue of—the brutal attempts to efface African names and indigenous social roles and marks, the slave vessel’s human cargo carried, as undifferentiated identities, the possibility to go beyond gendered and racialized ideas of the human and, therewith, offers “a counter-narrative to notions of the domestic” (1987, 72). What Spillers reminds us of is that cultural norms which seem natural were constructed and exceeded by enslaved individuals whose enforced fleshy exclusion from these norms enabled them to envision alternative orderings of the human and human bodies.

The potential of undifferentiation manifested itself in the material interplay between the drowning female’s body of water and the ocean as well. Her underwater

submergence allowed for a convergence of aquatic lifeforms and elements in a nutrient cycle that recycles the water and the substances of which our bodies are composed in(to) the ocean's water. In this underwater world, organisms disintegrate and are consumed by other organisms, growing life from oceanic deaths; either eaten by sharks or decomposed on the ocean floor, 'human' remains, reduced to shark excrement or bone gravel, enable the growth of coral, plankton, and algae (Sharpe 2016, 74-76; MacLeod 2013, 48-49). And these plankton and algae, in turn, (re)produce the air human beings and other earthbound mammals breathe as aquatic photosynthesizers (Falkowski 2012; Fink 2020; Tynan 2010, 145). The view of the human body as an isolated entity distinguished from its environment that guarantees life becomes complicated since the drowning female's convergence with these lifeforms reveals that there is life beyond the (physical) body. As such, her oceanic leap potentially attests to life as untied to determinations of life in terms of bodily, land-locked identities.

If the body as an isolated form is regarded as symbolically constructed and finds itself implicated—or in other words, enfolded—within a living, organic network, then the boundaries between what is self or other, life or death, become porous. The reality of oceanic livability, that is, the nutrient cycle recycling marine life thus directly contradicts the ocean's depiction as "suffocating," "deadly," and "uninhabitable" as understood through Man's symbolic order. Rehearsing such intricate mutual implications of oceanic life and death in his *Poetics of Relation*, Glissant writes:

Whenever a fleet of ships gave chase to slave ships, it was easiest just to lighten the boat by throwing cargo overboard, weighing it down with balls and chains. These underwater signposts mark the course between the Gold Coast and the Leeward Island. Navigating the green splendor of the sea—whether in melancholic transatlantic crossings or glorious regattas or traditional races of yoles and gommiers—still brings to mind, coming to light like seaweed, these lowest depths, these deeps, with their punctuation of scarcely corroded balls and chains. In actual fact the abyss is a tautology: the entire ocean, the entire sea gently collapsing in the end into the pleasures of sand, make one vast beginning, but a beginning whose time is marked by these balls and chains gone green. (Glissant 1997, 6)

While enslavers' techniques of dehumanization might have attempted to kill the African subject, the quotation from Glissant above draws attention to the new forms of black life that appeared within its destruction. Arguing against the idea that slavery eradicated enslaved subjects' humanity completely, the "balls and chains gone green" in the above quotation represent the irreducibility of life as it renews in marine spaces and as new diasporic forms of life. As such, the "underwater signposts" reveal a historical markedness that at once confers transoceanic violence *and* generation—a generation of life symbolized as a flourishing "green splendor of the sea" that is "light like seaweed." In this sense, the oceanic reveals how undifferentiation is filled with a richness of possibility often obscured by the violence of impossibility. Similarly, we read with Glissant: "Then the sea, never seen from the depths of the ship's hold, punctuated by drowning bodies

that sowed in its depths explosive seeds of absence” (Glissant 1997, 9). These drowning bodies, Glissant asserts, do not signify in disappearance only. Their “seeds of absence,” elsewhere dubbed “invisible presence,” (1997, 67) imprint themselves in memory and matter: in remembrance made heritage and in the oceanic nutrient cycle of life.

Rereading the female’s drowning act in accordance with the above exposition, leaping into the ocean was a way for enslaved subjects to exert, albeit in extremely terroristic and distressful situations, a belief in themselves—in their black, fleshy, oceanic existence beyond the bounds of white bodily imagination (Piersen 1977; Stevenson Jr. 2018). Her suicide, then, reveals a fleshy detachment from the world order in which she is at once constitutive of, constructed by, and secluded from ideas of the body, personhood, and humanity. In so doing, she allowed for a reclamation of the saltwater on her own terms: her drowning resignifies, simultaneously, the ocean’s saltwater status and her own in terms of possibility rather than deadliness. Leaping into the ocean, the drowning female refused the world order and its dominant symbolics in which she, as a black female, was marked to belong in terms of “deadliness,” in the likewise “deadly” and “uninhabitable” ocean.

The Womb

As established above, oceanically and fleshy beyond the white Man’s order of humanity, black females carry an exceptional potential for conceptualizing alternative forms of human being. Such regenerative potential, I propose in this section, is anchored in a figure that has been present in the background—or should I say, the depth—of this article: the drowning boy. In the following, I explore the relation between the drowning boy and the drowning female to argue that enslaved offsprings’ inherited status of being undifferentiated further enfleshes the counter-narrative against the white patriarchal cultural norms.

What is unique about black males as heirs of enslaved Africans is that, even though the kinship relations and gender attributions of enslaved offspring were undone during the Middle Passage, enslaved males were touched in an inescapable manner by their mother: “partus sequitur ventrem” reflected the uncertainty of fatherhood (Papa’s Maybe) and the certainty of black or enslaved motherhood (Mama’s Baby). In the precarious situation of breached kinship and undetermined gender status, the mandate of “partus sequitur ventrem” enforced the condition of ungendered flesh to be passed on to captive offspring. Subsequently, their status became one of “man/woman on the boundary” (Spillers 1987, 74). On the one hand, enslaved males were rendered invisible, since society, tuned to the Law of the Father, was organized around white men whose property (land, commodities, name, hiteness) regulated social relations. In this situation, black males were prevented from acquiring bodily recognition and the manhood anchored thereon. On the other hand, when kinship, however precarious, was tied to the female slave lineage, enslaved males, foreclosed from lawfully maleness, became the only group of ‘males’ in society that “had the specific occasion to learn *who* the ‘female’ is within itself” (1987, 78).

Thus touched by their mothers, the inherited indetermination of man/woman on the boundary fosters in the heirs of slavery a similar potential of imagining a counter-narrative to colonial, patriarchal identity formations. It then becomes imperative to

withstand the cultural pressure for gendered performance and to transform flesh into a well-ordered body. Rather than striving for inclusion in a patriarchal society that expels them, it is by tapping into the enforced symbolic surplus on their own terms that enslaved heirs can possibly subvert the racial-sexual difference inherent in the patriarchal institution of naming and placing. Thus, by acknowledging “the ‘female’ within,” black heirs of the history of slavery are capable of embracing the undifferentiated oceanic space of ‘femaleness’ that allows for conceiving humanity outside of the “patronymic, patrifocal, patrilineal, and patriarchal order” (Snorton 2017, 103). Finding extension in their children’s lives, it is in their *flesh* (and blood) that black females sowed an invisible, fleshy presence, stimulating new generation(s) of humanity beyond its determination by European Man.

In my reading, which is only one reading, the drowning boy was with us all along. Grounding his oceanic features. Attempting to affirm the ‘female’ within. Breathing out his final breath near her, with her, picking her oceanic counter-narrative over the white crew’s (t)ropes for getting him back in place on board the slave ship to refraction according to their schemes. Choosing the female lineage of undifferentiation over patriarchy’s colonial symbolic shipboard order, the boy claims what Spillers calls “the monstrosity (of a female with the potential to ‘name’),” which is the monstrous because disordering potential of black females to forge lineages, create flesh, and mark humanity (differently) (Spillers 1987, 80). By diving into the depths of the ocean(ic), the drowning boy reclaims his mother—whether *she* is his mother or not—and exhibits a belief in another form of living beyond the social order organized by the white crew. Their cooperative drowning acts, I suggest, can be regarded as a faith in the potential of black humanity to forge lineages. Carrying the “female within,” black fe/males on the boundary (re)present the vantage points from which to think lineage, kinship, and humanity otherwise, which become open, unbounded, fluid: oceanic.

Conclusion

In this article, I have presented various threads of stories that all, to some extent, weave together a narrative account of the drowning of an enslaved female. Wanting to imagine her oceanic leap differently than in the one sentence, the 25 words dedicated to her existence in the witness account that transcribed her act, I made choices. Having done so, I acknowledge that my narration is, necessarily, incomplete. For when illuminating one thing, I overshadow another. There is always a dimension of subjectivity in the writing of history and, therefore, a demand for responsibility, which renders the notion of neutrality a violently illusionary aim.

Above, I have aimed to show how the drowning female’s suicide signals at once a disinvestment from the dominant symbolic order that reduces enslaved individuals to flesh and an attestation of black life. As such, the black female transcends her death as stipulated by the colonial world order dominated by Man. Accordingly, her act of drowning challenges the life-death symbolic that organized this order. Opting for some form of being beyond physical death, the black female’s oceanic leap reveals how illusionary, how culturally invested and even species-related any such life-death distinction is. In an at once literal and symbolic sense, I have argued, the black female *lives on* not just in

the oceanic cycle but also in her offspring. For the inheritance of ‘female’ enfleshment by enslaved offspring ensured the carrying on of her disfranchised, undifferentiated identity. With this condition of undifferentiation, what was simultaneously inherited was the specific oceanic vantage point from which it is possible to ground new imaginaries of what it means to be human. And this regenerative possibility is, if my writings have managed to touch you, further conferred to us as readers. If our present relating to history shapes the conditions of our contemporary as well as future times, then the construction of our future potential is anchored in witnessing our histories otherwise. With the seeds to reimagine archivally imbalanced historical narratives thus sowed within us, it is within us that the drowning female and boy get to live on. To keep them from dying (again), please cultivate carefully.

Notes

- 1 For an example of a “snow,” see: <https://eenigheid.slavenhandel.mcc.nl/trajecten-van-de-reis/oversteek>.
- 2 Slaving vessels shipped somewhere between 100 and 600 African people.
- 3 The following transcription is based on Zeeuws Archief (MdbZA), Middelburgsche Commerce Compagnie (MCC), 1720-1889, 20, Inventaris, Het bedrijf, 2, Uitreding der schepen, De reizen, Snauw Zanggodin, 1764-1778, Algemeen., 1366.3, “Rekening van Averij Gros gevallen op t’Schip De Zang-godin met Laading,” fols. 120-128.
- 4 Zeeuws Archief (ZA), Middelburgse Commerce Compagnie (MCC), 20, 2, Uitreding der schepen, De reizen, Zanggodin, Algemeen, 1366.3, Instructies, inventarissen, facturen en overige stukken betreffende dit schip, Rekening van Averij Gros, fol. 118-128.
- 5 The *Zanggodin’s* insurance status, see MdbZA, 20, 1366.3, fols. 124-125; “Verklaaring wegens Tumult onder de slaaven op ’t schip de Zang Godin,” fols. 130-131.
- 6 The infamous diagram and description of the Brookes shows how spatial inhabitation of slave ships was allocated according to gender assignments. See <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/diagram-of-the-brookes-slave-ship>.
- 7 See Middelburgs Welvaren, Nationaal Archief (NA), Inventaris van het archief van de Sociëteit van Berbice (SvB), 1.05.05, Ingekomen Stukken, Uit de kolonie, Algemeen, 108, brief 25 februari 1751, scans 252-256.

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Biography

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