

INTRODUCTION

Slavery's Hereafter

There may not be a more aspirational word in the modern West than *freedom*. But its sordid twin, *slavery*, furnishes freedom with its starry luster and glowing sentiment. Preeminent historian John Hope Franklin knew this and named the arc of African American life in the United States an epic journey *From Slavery to Freedom* (1947). Sociologist Orlando Patterson's major study of slavery throughout recorded history appeared as a necessary precursor to his equally acclaimed book *Freedom* (1991). Toni Morrison, perhaps the foremost artistic voice on slavery and its aftermath, wrote that "the slave population . . . offered itself up as surrogate selves for meditation on the problems of human freedom."¹ These iconic voices confirm the fundamental entanglement of slavery and freedom. When it comes to making sense of either concept, whether in modernity's edifices or in the ruins of ancient worlds, one rarely finds freedom without slavery or slavery without freedom. If one is missing, the other lies in wait nearby. From Georg W. F. Hegel's description of lordship and bondage to Harriet Jacobs plotting her liberation from a tomb-like crawl space to Nat Turner's violent uprising, slavery and freedom are inseparable.²

As 1862 neared its end, President Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, which freed most slaves. The Thirteenth Amendment, ratified in 1865, outlawed slavery. Yet what scholars call “the afterlife of slavery” continued to appear in the form of convict leasing, sharecropping, domestic work, and other abhorrent labor practices, in addition to widespread lynching, sexual violence, and political disenfranchisement.³ Whether scholars are discussing slavery or its afterlife, it typically becomes an opportunity to address freedom achieved, delayed, or obstructed.

When we approach historical or aesthetic representations of slavery, this opposition between slavery and freedom usually defines the lens of discovery.⁴ In fact, it is challenging to discuss, even to contemplate, the lives of enslaved Africans or depictions of slaves in art without also addressing how what they are doing and thinking somehow bends toward or away from the arc of freedom—toward or away from acts that disrupt whites in power. The slavery/freedom opposition informs dominant conceptual rubrics—such as agency/power, social death/social life, damage/resistance, and haunting—that scholars have used to guide, explain, and legitimize the importance of slavery research. There is no doubt that these rubrics organize and underscore a wide and rich body of work on slave culture and representations of slavery in modern art. But despite the profundity of nuanced microhistories and theoretical models of what it is to be a slave, scholars have yet to fully address the question this book seeks to answer: can we analyze the depictions of enslaved Africans—which contain physical violence, psychic terror, spiritual deliverance, and artistic genius—without the critical perspectives that emphasize slaves’ success or failure to disrupt their masters’ control over them?

For instance, “Steal Away” is a beautiful spiritual that was composed and performed by enslaved Africans. The lyrics testify to the singers’ spiritual commitment and claim to heaven’s kingdom: “My Lord calls me . . . I hain’t got long to stay here. Steal away. . . .”⁵ While scholars appreciate the rich poetic lyricism and the theological and folkloric sophistication of this spiritual, they repeatedly return to the song’s political imprint: by patiently waiting on the Lord, rather than resisting bondage, slaves reinforced the interests of white masters.⁶ Other scholars, though, insist the title phrase “Steal Away” and the line “I hain’t got long to stay here” reflect a rejection of white dominance because slaves used the song to secretly refer to resisting and escaping slavery.⁷ Joseph A. Brown explains that gatherings of enslaved Africans to sing spirituals like “Steal Away” were communal calls to conversion.⁸ From this insight, one can draw on the vast records of ex-

slaves' conversion narratives from books such as Clifton H. Johnson's collection *God Struck Me Dead* (1969) or the slave autobiographies John Blasingame put together in *Slave Testimony* (1977) to rethink "Steal Away" in the context of how slaves thought about being called by God and the challenges of accepting new forms of spiritual identity. Thinking "Steal Away" as a spiritual and communal activity opens up a different set of questions and narrative possibilities: Who gathers to sing and why? How did slaves create and revise their performances to balance the necessities of individual expression with the needs of the group? By addressing "Steal Away" in this social, performative, and ethnographic sense we can bypass former rubrics of accommodation and resistance because the inquiry's focus is re-discovering how slaves produced transformative meaning for themselves; the answers do not necessarily become more or less significant based on how precisely they can indicate slaves' level of resistance or complicity with white dominance. Sifting through conversion narratives, accounts of slaves singing spirituals like "Steal Away," and other slave religious gatherings, we discover daunting yet inspiring possibilities for figuring the meaning slaves produced in their performance of songs.

This idea captures the spirit and method of this book, which is to tarry in the daunting possibilities of enslaved Africans' lives as they appear in various artistic texts in the United States from the time of slavery to the present. This book recommits to the idea that the lives of enslaved Africans are provocatively enigmatic or, as Ralph Ellison puts it, "infinitely suggestive."⁹ Ellison's phrasing lies at the heart of what I call the *counterlife of slavery*.

Counterlife: Slavery after Resistance and Social Death thinks through and beyond an imperative to examine slave texts for political freedom or the mining of slaves' thinking for remedies to contemporary racialized collective projects of repair, recovery, and redemption. These very important critical approaches currently dominate the field, and this book contributes to a different story in the study of slavery, one that focuses on philosophical, aesthetic, and historical conundrums and contradictions of slavery without an emphasis on political progress.

This book conceptualizes slave social life and art discourse as *counterlife*. Counterlife unsettles singular narratives, teloses, fixed categories, oppositions, and what it means to be or have a self. The counterlife of slavery has to do with realizing that slaves' lives, across art and media, exceed the explanatory force of the terms that currently define the field. Through the counterlife lens, when slaves acquire philosophical insights, create art,

seize religious meaning, commit acts of violence, or perform historical memory, they prompt simultaneous and multiple points of critical view—a profound irreducibility—which take on their own importance. Reading for counterlife helps us discover how slave texts reveal the “disorderly flux of life” and thinking inside violent oppressive environments to which conventional terms and frames do not fully attend.¹⁰

The term *counterlife* originates with Philip Roth’s novel *The Counterlife* (1986). Roth never defines the term explicitly. Through the lives of its characters the novel challenges readers’ expectations about what makes good or normal life. Roth’s novel is not just about upending surprises on the course and direction of characters’ lives, but it is about a complete undoing of expected conventions. *The Counterlife* has inspired me to make every effort to abandon my expectations when I approach the social lives of slaves in various art and media. Without rediscovering slavery outside the conventional frames and rubrics, we run the risk of treating the intense social frictions that slave texts capture as “life proof”—what Roth calls “well-prepared discourse, . . . cunningly selected, self-protecting words.”¹¹ *Counterlife* is my signal to experiment with abandoning these rubrics and trajectories.¹² In doing so, this book is my way to revisit slavery’s sociality and its artistic representations. I deploy *counterlife* to realize profound instability and mystery anew in the relations among Black social life, artistic expression, and oppressive institutions. The counterlife of slavery, then, is my call to be vulnerable to what is undoubtedly enigmatic and irreducible in slave texts—to bear witness to the force of slavery’s artistic representations without measuring their importance on scales of political efficacy.

Breaking through frames, rubrics, and normative conventions is certainly not original to Roth. The relentless self-questioning and unmaking of heavily choreographed racial prescriptions occurs throughout modern Black texts, such as Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952). Like Ellison, James Baldwin repeatedly railed against using familiar categories, frames, and stereotypes for insight into slavery and modern Black life because the familiar served only to protect us from the social and psychological chaos we find most challenging to grasp. Baldwin argues that we use the clarity of categorical thinking to fend off the parts of life that are multifaceted, unstable, and above all intractable.¹³ Trey Ellis called for a “new black aesthetic” at the dawn of the 1990s that rejected the moral imperatives of Black Nationalist art. For Ellis the new Black aesthetic required no imperative beyond proclaiming that “anything goes.”¹⁴ Even more recently, when Thelma Golden put together innovative exhibits with Glenn Ligon, her

effort was “to think outside existing paradigms” for contemporary Black art practices. Ligon and Golden used *post-black* to describe their efforts to unburden Black artists’ installations from previous Black aesthetic movements.¹⁵ From Baldwin’s rejection of neat categorizations to Ligon’s and Golden’s post-Black aesthetic curations for art galleries and museums, Black artists have found a rhetoric and practice of both bearing a Black tradition and harnessing the courage to reinvent it.

I deploy *counterlife* in this book as a way to galvanize radical imperatives—thus, I draw on the transformative currents offered by art curators like Golden, visual artists like Mark Bradford and Radcliffe Bailey, and writers like Ellis, Baldwin, and Ellison. I find counterlife liberating as a theoretical point of departure because I use the concept to call on a constellation of irreverent and rambunctious thinkers to return to the slave archive as a way to bear witness to how slaves repeatedly outstrip the labels and the horizons we’ve orchestrated for them.¹⁶

This book is certainly not the first to claim that the way we discuss slavery is too prescriptive. Critics have a recurring preoccupation with addressing the long-standing limitations of slavery studies. In fact, there is no generation of scholars since the 1950s that has not imagined itself as outstripping narrow “either/or” categories and dialectics that hauntingly recur. Decades ago, Herbert Gutman said it best: scholars have “encased” slave life in “snug and static ahistorical opposites.”¹⁷ More recent work by historians such as Stephanie Camp and Edward Baptist insists that other scholars push beyond “accommodation/resistance” as way to evaluate slaves’ social life. Piggybacking off Camp and Baptist, Walter Johnson critiques the ever-present sliding scale between *agency* and *power*.¹⁸ In addition to the former historians, art historian Darby English claims that when scholars approach contemporary art exhibitions that feature slavery, such as those of Ligon and Kara Walker, they focus on evidence of Black resistance. English sees current conversations about these artists’ exhibits as constrained by “dynamic oppositional entanglements” rooted in Black politics.¹⁹

In anthropology, David Scott argues that studies of colonialism and slavery tend to be written as agential narratives of overcoming and vindication—“stories of salvation and redemption.”²⁰ Literary and cultural critic Stephen Best sees in Black studies a conflict between two modes of inquiry: critics seeing their own agency vested in the recovery of enslaved Africans’ “political agency,” and a “melancholy historicism” that sees the articulation of slave subjectivity as constituted by white dominance’s re-

fusals of it.²¹ These scholars register the persistent problem of an oppositional framing that stakes its significance on political outcomes or calls attention to the shadowy guise of Black freedom's unrealized horizon.

One important way Scott claims to get beyond romantic dyads of political triumph and disappointment is to analyze slavery's artifacts, texts, and conflicts in terms of tragedy. The tragic, as Scott renders it, focuses on "unstable and ambiguous" aspects of historical conflict and events and takes human action as "ever open to unaccountable contingencies."²² I am fully sympathetic to Scott's encouragement to move scholarship beyond the failures and successes of romantic horizons, but he prompts a more direct rendering of a conundrum that continues to challenge us. Most cultural critics of slavery would argue that they address slave social life as unsettled and ambiguous already. I can think of almost no critic or thinker who believes they fail to see complexity and ambiguity.

For instance, Daphne Brooks analyzes slave texts for "ruptures and blind spots where . . . performers defy expectations and desires," and as such, Brooks zeroes in on "fraught and volatile dynamics" between self and other, audience and performer.²³ In a similar vein with a different focus, Uri McMillan explains how slave texts speak back to and disrupt objectifying forces.²⁴ Both McMillan and Brooks pointedly attend to the nuances, vicissitudes, and ambiguities of Black performances' entanglement with abjection. What I am struck by in McMillan's examination of "multiple identifications and hoaxes" in slave texts is how he grounds his claims squarely within the presence and import of "subjectivity and agency."²⁵ Brooks's study of dialectics between performers and audiences also draws its salience from finding a "bridge out of abjection."²⁶

Brooks's and McMillan's crucial work is not diminished by this emphasis on how Black subjects express subjectivity, demonstrate agency, and forge pathways through abjection. Yet their work does prompt me to ask how we can discuss what is radical about slave texts without bracketing such texts in critical conventions such as "subjectivity and agency" or escapes from abjection. Can we have a commitment to oppositional categories as definitive framing devices and also see the very slave texts within those frames as *beyond* boundaries? When it comes to rubrics, frames, and overall emphases, the critical tradition around slavery seems to want to have its cake and eat it too: slave texts capture the unbridled force of instability and improvisation that transcends our forms and modes of thinking; yet, we hold on dearly to rubrics that frame how we approach slave texts. This book takes its cue from scholars who seek to transform the im-

mediate “political-imperative” of a “black political present” but also take seriously the idea of Black radical imagination(s).²⁷ In order to do this, we need to heed more faithfully Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s call to “change the terms of the debate.”²⁸

Counterlife builds on the work of Brooks, Scott, McMillan, Best, and others to enrich further our understanding of slaves’ experiences and performances across texts and media. My readings deprioritize political transformation as a goal in and of itself and instead focus on how slaves establish religious practices, recall and perform historical memory, and find personal meaning in artistic creation. Slave texts also offer a crucial opportunity to witness the wide-ranging duality and multiplicity of life perspectives in the most degrading and hostile of conditions.²⁹ I look to films, television cartoons, literature, and slave music to demonstrate that their aesthetic and philosophical legitimacy does not need to be assessed in relation to political utility. Rediscovering enslaved Africans through counterlife gives us an opportunity as scholars to push in new directions. This book’s pages stretch, deform, and reimagine how we approach slavery by reveling in the unsettling and troubling force I identify across a myriad of texts and media.³⁰

Through a rich array of cultural forms—literature, music, comedy sketches, and film—*Counterlife* deepens and broadens how we view portrayals of enslaved Africans in the United States. This book’s archival tapestry draws from artistic episodes both real and imagined. There are many reasons—ethical, political, and methodological—for distinguishing between actual enslaved Africans’ experiences and artists’ portrayals of enslaved Africans, but this book is most interested in shifting the terms critics use to frame and analyze representations of slavery. Hence, a contemporary film such as Quentin Tarantino’s *Django Unchained* (2012), Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved* (1987), and performed spirituals such as “Go Down, Moses,” all get treated similarly as opportunities to get us beyond oppositional rubrics. I use *counterlife* as a rubric to mine paradigmatic slave texts (by or about slaves), from slave narratives to spirituals to cartoons to film, for moments when I can raise and highlight the importance of how slaves seek, find, and lose meaning in their own spiritual affirmation, philosophical conundrums, and artistic creativity. I examine the tropes, beliefs, and strategies for interpreting social reality that for decades constituted the terrain for discussions of slavery.

What is more, *Counterlife* answers these crucial yet often overlooked scholarly questions: What role did debates between artists and social sci-

entists concerning aesthetic form and modern Black life play in these definitive early years of slavery scholarship? How did scholars imagine the plantation spatially, geographically, and culturally when they debated the degree to which slaves were damaged or capable of resistance? I submit that debates about modern Black social reality from the 1930s to the 1960s—when artists like Baldwin and Ellison were especially influential—had a major impact on how scholars have imagined and still imagine the conditions of slaves. Ellison and other artists focused on the irreducible capacity of how people think and live within the confines of formidable institutions. I turn this aesthetic and social insight into a philosophical emphasis on psychological and social irreducibility that thinks through slave texts across a variety of works and periods.

In the first chapter, “Sambo’s Cloak,” I continue my interest in loosening the more rigid rubrics that shape discussions of slavery by thinking about the ungraspable aspects of personal expression that reveal themselves in social conflict. To this end, I begin with a salient moment from the last century that gives historical and conceptual texture to how discussing slavery in terms of power and agency began and why it is important now to explore and demonstrate alternative points of view. In this chapter I identify Stanley Elkins’s book *Slavery* (1959) as a historical prism through which we can see how debates by artists and social scientists about modern space, mass culture, and socialization impacted critics’ portrayals of Black social relations. Elkins’s infamous book inspired fierce debate in Black cultural studies for decades and helped to crystallize oppositional frames like resistance/damage and agency/power. But what I demonstrate in this historical chapter is Elkins’s ongoing impact: how his techniques of re-creating the antebellum plantation, which appear outdated to us, produced a critical *slavery aesthetic* that remains with us. Elkins’s contribution, then, is not just polemical and dialectical, as we may understand, but seminal in the way he influenced how we imagine slave social life.

“Kaleidoscope Views,” chapter 2, reads crucial moments in Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative* (1845, 1855), Edward Jones’s *The Known World* (2003), and Radcliffe Bailey’s art installations (2007–18) for instances of counterlife. I locate a critique of aesthetic and sociological norms in the work of Douglass and recent art by Jones and Bailey. This section examines Douglass’s *Narrative* to see how Douglass uses his relationship to his friend Sandy’s conjuring practices to obscure his own cultural knowledge and clarify his moral commitments. Likewise, in Jones’s *Known World* the character of Alice seems crafted as a nightmare of social theory, a vessel of compre-

hensive geography and historical detail, yet at the same time a complete enigma as a free person and slave. Bailey's art installations that feature slavery show mixtures of styles, medium, and materials and a capacious subject that exceeds all logics of time, space, and memory. Like Alice, Bailey's embrace of the materiality of specific historical concepts and events illustrates the tragic power of slavery, yet it contains a seemingly infinite combination of subject positions that elude traditional designations. Douglass, Jones, and Bailey demonstrate key aspects of counterlife: the more we uncover the myriad ways to conceptualize the slave, the more we realize that slave life points to the elusiveness of personhood altogether. I flesh out how these artists signal and unmake established norms for depicting slave social life and use them to define and deepen our understanding of counterlife.

In "Sounds of Blackness," chapter 3, I begin with a basic question: when enslaved Africans sang spirituals, what were they saying, what did it mean, and why is it important? Spirituals demonstrate a commitment to biblical themes, spiritual deliverance, and musical performance, yet their meaning can be elusive. On one hand, scholars claim that the songs reveal slave opposition to their masters; on the other hand, slave singing can be read as making slaves more fit for labor. While such debates have been definitive and important, this chapter addresses neither of these positions. Instead, I focus on the sense of irreconcilable contradiction at the heart of spirituals: the tensions between group history, belief, and tradition and spontaneous, improvisational, and individual differences. By examining slaves' performances in the writings of Douglass, Frederick Law Olmsted, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Zora Neale Hurston, as well as in video performances of Aretha Franklin and lesser-known singing and praying bands, I show how tradition can be remembered and kept but also defined by ungraspable dynamism. I advance that irreconcilable contradiction defines the counterlife that spirituals make available—a sense of vibrant mutuality that makes subject/object distinctions unreliable. My goal is to use this sense of conflict to thwart the subject/object debates that critics rely on when they discuss spirituals and other types of Black musical performance. My claim is that "thingness" is a viable lens to engage the sense of contradiction in spiritual slave performances even though thing/subject/object designations do not sufficiently depict what it means to be a slave.³¹

Part of the import of slaves singing spirituals stems from slaves' desire to embody, perform, and redefine their own sense of history; spirituals

often contain their own counterhistories. Fiction, film, and cartoons also have been a crucial source for histories that counter racism and images of degraded enslaved Africans. In the final chapter, “The Last Black Hero,” I turn to fictional exemplars of iconic Black male heroism. I examine Douglass’s novella *The Heroic Slave* (1852), Tarantino’s *Django Unchained* (2012), and an episode of Aaron McGruder’s *Boondocks* cartoon, “The Story of Catcher Freeman” (2008). These artists all deploy history as countercontext—and masculine heroic romances as counterhistory. Counterhistory is also a crucial rubric for slavery scholars looking to redress inaccuracies in the archives of slavery and the absence of the voices and contributions of enslaved Africans. Counterhistories often aim to retell the past with new information and perspectives in the hope to inspire and reform social life and political acts in the present. I argue in this chapter that counterhistory as an aesthetic genre is committed more to the form of storytelling than to history, and as much as heroic romances rely on gendered, stable categories (e.g., good/evil), moral clarity, and predictable emotions, they also reflect the dissonance and unpredictability in social relations. This instability initiates alternative narratives of counterlife in lesser figures in the art that are equally crucial yet void of mythic and heroic qualities. Their stories threaten the cogency and necessity of the heroic counterhistory. What is more, I examine how the masculine heroic form of romance actually expresses what is troubling to people about formlessness, what we fear about an ongoing sense of chaotic uncertainty that is always available in social life—one that makes all subjects unexpectedly subject to one another.

While some critics and artists ponder various counterhistories and counternarratives, others think the United States has a more fundamental problem with slavery. Critics commonly refer to the United States as haunted by slavery; as a country, we repress slavery and do so at a great cost to truth and reconciliation with our nation’s past. Given the proliferation of texts, websites, discussion boards, and institutional resources for the study and publication of works on the topic of slavery, does slavery still haunt us? The coda of the book, “Chasing Ghosts,” addresses this seemingly never-ending question.

Pheoby’s Redress

In writing this book, I found it difficult to escape the terms that have defined much of slavery studies as a field. Here I want to linger a little longer with the challenges of thinking through and beyond the conceptual dyads

that grip how we talk about slavery and its residue. Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) contains a key figure that gets little attention. Janie, the novel's protagonist, tells her entire story to Pheoby Watson. What kind of listener does Pheoby need to be in order to absorb, understand, and learn from Janie's rich and contradictory experiences? Thinking seriously about what Pheoby offers as a patient and open listener can help us approach counterlife in slave texts.

More recently, scholars and activists have taken quite seriously the idea of listening to texts and people more attentively. Asha Bandele, Tina Campt, and David Scott's conceptions of listening are all instructive for helping us get beyond the impasse of insurgent resistance or slavery's endless residues. For example, in her book *When They Call You a Terrorist* (2018) Bandele explains that community members need to demonstrate better care for one another through listening. When discussing her book at a public library, Bandele was asked to "speak to what it meant . . . to tell this amazing story."³² Bandele responded: "The deep and abiding lesson was about doing something we do far too little of these days and that's actual deep listening and being present to someone."³³ Scott takes listening as pivotal for revision and new approaches to critical expression. In his meditation on Stuart Hall, he proposes an ethics of listening as a pathway toward considering the more contingent and unsettling aspects of social life. Scott's "listening self" addresses the unpredictability of the world and endeavors to cultivate an "ethos of self-revision and recurrent readjustment to its possibilities."³⁴ This revision and readjustment relies on being "receptively present to others."³⁵ In her critical work, Campt uses the idea of "listening to images" as a way to find a "deeper engagement with forgotten histories and suppressed forms of diasporic memories."³⁶ Campt refashions listening as a way to challenge and expand "what constitutes sound and sonic perception."³⁷ Campt's formulation insists on a patient engagement with art texts that challenge our initial reactions and critical practices. Bandele, Scott, and Campt all offer their version of listening as a mode of entering into a greater sense of depth, thoughtfulness, attentiveness—a calm fortitude that is intent on moving past initial impressions.

What sets Pheoby apart as a listener in *Their Eyes*? Pheoby is part of the community, but Janie sees the community as largely not interested in her beyond an object to be judged, discussed, and giggled about like an estranged scapegoat that they secretly envy. Pheoby does not objectify Janie and instead connects with her through caring and empathetic intensity. Pheoby does not unfairly judge what Janie has gone through but instead

listens to her attentively. Hurston writes: Pheoby is “eager to feel and do through Janie.”³⁸

Pheoby listens as Janie explains how she felt nourished by her grandmother Nanny’s love but was ultimately constrained by Nanny’s influence and the trauma of the slave past she embodies. Nanny tells Janie about the violent abuse and coercion she experienced as a slave and also recounts how her daughter, Janie’s mother, was raped and tortured after emancipation. Even after emancipation, historian Sarah Haley explains, the rape of Black women continued to reduce “black female bodies to objects of violation and therefore reinforced their social position as flesh, rather than persons.”³⁹ The weight of Black women’s bondage and freedom explains why Nanny insists that Janie marry her first suitor, Logan Killicks, as a form of protection. Her marriage to a man she doesn’t love and who sees her silence and arduous labor as key to their partnership reveals how her own choice (or the illusion of it) effaces the subject she is and wants to be. In trying to avoid the precarity of the slave past, Janie tragically ends up being treated like Killicks’s voiceless mule. Janie detests what her Nanny embodies: enslavement’s weighty residue and the violent oppressive social reality that Janie cannot escape.

The most celebrated part of the book, however, is not the reality of slavery’s power in Janie’s unfreedom but when Hurston’s protagonist finds her inner voice, desire, and volition and chooses Teacake. Janie and Teacake choose a new community in the Florida Everglades where they can love, converse, and labor. Here, we witness something akin to freedom for Janie: voice, choice, and agency register powerfully against the brutal regime Nanny survived, yet Janie’s agential conquest cannot displace all forms of power. Thus, Janie is both agent and clearly subject to encroaching social constraints—although these are limitations of Janie’s choosing along with the freedoms and validation she celebrates.

This is the tug-of-war that one can easily recognize in current critical terms. How can Janie resist, overcome, and transform racist, sexist, and patriarchal structures? Does her sometimes-abusive relationship with Teacake reveal the inescapability of her encroaching past? One could informatively and interestingly rewrite this scenario in a variety of ways, but we still end up weighing the scales of agency and power. What is more, nature, as an environmental, historical, biological, and social force, indubitably shapes Janie. One can read Janie’s love for Teacake as a final blossoming, like the vibrant pear tree at the beginning of the novel, her embodiment of sexual longing that becomes as existential and unavoidable as

birth and death. Her development is an unstoppable force that entangles social life and biological fact. Hence, Janie is both agent and powerless, victim and victor, existentially cornered yet evidencing the power of choice. There is no way to attribute Janie's being to slavery or its afterlife or what inspires her agential voice overall. The novel speaks so powerfully beyond these oppositional questions.

Pheoby's task as a listener is not to contemplate whether Janie achieves true freedom or the right kind of unfreedom but rather to observe and accept the manifold layers of Janie's experience as a historical subject; slavery, its afterlife, nature, and her inner voice collude and conflict. Pheoby is unsettled and energized by Janie's story. "Ah done growed ten feet higher from jus' listenin' tuh you, Janie. Ah ain't satisfied wid mahself no mo."⁴⁰ Pheoby embodies our ideal capacity for receptive listening. She is the receptive listener I hope to emulate in this book. Pheoby empowers Janie as she relays the mutuality, intimacy, and obfuscation between persons. Pheoby is a hungry, curious, and humble listener who may be after the gems of gossip that draw us into the immediacy of storytelling, but she also shows us something to be gained by being patient with the profound enigmas Janie offers.

Approaching slave texts without insisting on political utility is akin to listening like Pheoby, with the realization that a lack of a compelling sense of redress or code of revolution does not diminish the profundity of slave texts. In conceptualizing counterlife throughout this book, I address slave texts aesthetically and philosophically and slaves' experiences as assemblages, amalgams of positions and perspectives that do not have a dogmatic thump of life or death, slavery or freedom but help clear the dead brush away from old pathways for new knowledges and points of view.