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Controlling Death: Exploring the Discourse of Suicide in Antebellum America

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Abstract

Antebellum America represents a time and place of horrific injustices imposed on Black individuals. While many of the injustices that occurred and were directed towards free and enslaved Black Americans are well documented, the topic of suicide and discourses surrounding suicide within this context remains largely unacknowledged. This article considers how Black suicide was understood by contemporaries in Antebellum America and how perceptions of Black suicide were constructed by both sides of the abolitionist debate. It examines how conceptions of suicide evolved throughout the Antebellum Era, how these conceptions reflected and contributed to racism as a social construct, and how Black suicide was used to influence public opinion about both race and the institution of slavery. In doing so, it emphasizes the relationship between discourse, racism, and perceptions of reality.

Many of the methods used to control enslaved individuals in post-Revolutionary America have been well documented. Historians have observed and recognized how both enslavers and those who were economically reliant on the institution of slavery influenced the sexuality, reproduction, spirituality, and social structures of enslaved Black individuals to make such practices acceptable on the terms of the oppressors, if not beneficial to them.[1] Physical punishments and torment were often considered paramount to the process of exerting such control over enslaved individuals in Antebellum America. However, those were not the only means to ensure the compliance of enslaved individuals. Racialization through discourse was a crucial element in controlling both enslaved and free Blacks in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America. The process of othering Black Americans was critical to not only exerting control but also maintaining it, despite increasing global and domestic calls for emancipation in the nineteenth century.[2]

Efforts to control the deaths of enslaved peoples, and more specifically, manage self-destruction, have largely been ignored by historians as an element of control. Enslavers took various measures to reduce how many enslaved individuals escaped captivity. This was done in an attempt to mitigate the loss of vital labour resources. Enslavers showed persistence and enterprise in their efforts to prevent escape by enacting harsh punishments for those who attempted to flee and by lobbying for legislation such as the Fugitive Slave Acts. But what of suicide? Suicide, as far as any enslaver was concerned, was similarly detrimental to production when compared to escape and was prevalent enough in the South to require attention. By the Civil War, suicide in communities of enslaved peoples was "endemic" in North Carolina despite the measures enslavers took to prevent it.[3] This spurred enslavers to engage in discourse that emphasized perceived differences between white and Black suicide.

This paper will explore why conceptualizations of suicide differed between white and Black populations in the United States during the Antebellum Era. In doing so, it argues that both internal and external factors affected responses to, and understandings of, suicide and that there was a level of consciousness in the shaping of those understandings. This work will first compare contemporary discourses about Black and white suicide to demonstrate how such dialogues helped establish and proliferate racialized perceptions that emphasized the constructed ethnically-based differences between Black and white populations. After establishing that these race-based perceptions existed, this paper will consider how enslavers responded to instances of self-destruction by enslaved people in the presence of other enslaved individuals, as well as how this differed from their public responses. This will demonstrate how enslavers and pro-slavery elites attempted to control suicides in communities of enslaved peoples through both discursive and physical means. Finally, it will link evolutions in public discourses espoused by pro-slavery elites about enslaved peoples and Black suicide to abolitionist discourses that increasingly used self-destruction of enslaved persons in their advocacy for emancipation. This reveals that pro-

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1. Herbert G. Gutman, "Taken from Us by Force," in *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976), 331-333.
2. Edward Rossiter, "The Abolition of Slavery in the Western Hemisphere: Its Consequences for Africa," *OAH Magazine of History* 7, no. 4 (1993), 46.
3. Diane Miller Sommerville, *Aberration of Mind: Suicide and Suffering in the Civil War–Era South* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 121.

slavery elites actively and intentionally used discourse to maintain control over perceptions of race, as well as public opinion toward the institution of slavery throughout the Antebellum Era.

This paper will draw heavily upon the theories explained by Teun A. van Dijk in his chapter on "Discourse and Racism" in *A Companion to Racial and Ethnic Studies* (2001). These theories will help identify how racist discourse was applied to discussions of suicide in the Antebellum South and how that discourse was so influential in controlling both narratives and enslaved individuals. This paper will rely on van Dijk's definition of racism "as a complex societal system of ethnically or 'racially' based domination and its resulting inequality."[4] Additionally, it will consider core principles of van Dijk's theories on racist discourse. Specifically, these principles dictate that examinations of racist discourse should focus not only on those most directly responsible for racist acts – in the case of this paper, the enslavers – but also on political, bureaucratic, media, and scholarly elites. Van Dijk's theories also suggest that racist discourse can be exposed through a structural analysis of interactions, including nonverbal structures such as headline sizes or page layouts, selections of words, and the use of rhetorical devices. A final consideration of van Dijk's work that will be present in this paper is the proposition that racist interactions are often characterized by "ingroup favoritism… on the one hand, and outgroup derogation or negative Other-presentation, on the other."[5]

It is worth noting that this is still a relatively young topic of study. Terri Snyder, whose book, *The Power to Die: Slavery and Suicide in British North America*, remains a rare work of such length and depth of research on the subject, forefronts this study. Diane Sommerville has drawn on Snyder's research to explore the causes of suicide in communities of enslaved peoples in the South with a focus on those that occurred during the American Civil War. Others, like Richard Bell, have studied suicide as a form of resistance. His work examines several instances of suicide by enslaved individuals and their representations in abolitionist literature. Katherine Gaudet has taken an interdisciplinary approach to learn more about suicide in communities of enslaved peoples and how it was understood by nineteenth-century contemporaries. Her work examines how nineteenth-century literature reflects popular attitudes about and interpretations of self-destruction by free and enslaved Black Americans. Meanwhile, Marc Hertzman has studied how suicide and perceptions of suicide by enslaved individuals have helped "create and emphasize racial differences" throughout North and South America.[6] Such research has revealed the economic and logistical realities that suicide imposed on enslavers, namely, that losing enslaved individuals to suicide equated to a loss of production. Additionally, enslavers feared that acts of suicide and their economic consequences could escalate by inspiring other enslaved individuals to imitate any such acts that they might witness.[7]

This paper will expand on such research to draw new lines that connect the concerns and interpretations about Black suicide by Antebellum contemporaries with discourses that focused on, or at least leveraged, both real and imagined instances of suicide by enslaved individuals. It

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4. Teun A. van Dijk, "Discourse and Racism," in *Companion to Racial and Ethnic Studies*, ed. by John Solomos and David Theo Goldberg (Hoboken, New Jersey: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2001.), 145.

5. Van Dijk, "Discourse and Racism," 145 and 147.

6. Marc A. Hertzman, "Fatal Differences: Suicide, Race, and Forced Labor in the Americas," *The American Historical Review* 122, no. 2 (2017), 321.

7. Terri L. Snyder, *The Power to Die: Slavery and Suicide in British North America* (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 33.

is important to emphasize that the following comparisons and determinations focus on discourse about self-destruction, not the occurrence of suicide. Examining discourses about enslaved persons and Black suicide in Antebellum America reveals an under researched method that pro-slavery elites used to exert and maintain control over labour resources in the American South.

We must first demonstrate how perceptions of white and Black suicide differed during this period. In his historiographical analysis of the concept of "social death," Vincent Brown notes that "the enslaved 'lived and breathed, but they were dead in the social world of men.'"[8] This provides important context to help us understand that enslaved Black individuals had limited influence over contemporary views that were imposed by white elites about the self-destruction of enslaved individuals and perceived racial differences. For example, in his 1787 *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Thomas Jefferson describes some of these differences. Here, he presents as fact that Black individuals had "a want of fore-thought."[9] Further, he compares the emotions of Blacks and whites, stating that "[Black] love seems with them to be more an eager desire, than a tender delicate mixture of sentiment and sensation."[10] As Sommerville observes, such perceptions "precluded the possibility of [black] suffering" and led to conclusions that since Blacks were incapable of feeling emotions the same way whites did, the enslaved lacked the awareness and impetus to commit acts of self-destruction.[11] When instances of suicide were acknowledged, they were often used to reinforce perceptions of enslaved individuals as being "ethnically predisposed to suicide, superstitious or fearful, or temperamental and stubborn."[12] Explanations of Black suicide were broadly based on perceived racial characteristics, not individual ones.

On the other hand, white suicide in the eighteenth century was attributed to individual character flaws or external factors. Attitudes about suicide evolved dramatically in Antebellum America. What was once viewed as a heinous act of self-homicide was increasingly explained as the result of mental illness and individual flaws. People who succumbed to suicide were to be pitied rather than vilified.[13] White people who committed suicide were individually deemed not of sound mind and therefore, not "accountable" for the act.[14] Others were "killed" by alcohol induced delirium.[15] Early medical understandings of white suicide were also gendered, with women being viewed as "more immune" to self-destruction since white suicide was seen to be the result of social factors stemming from the public sphere and thus concluded to be "a male behaviour."[16] Indeed, an important distinction between Antebellum conceptualizations of white and Black suicide was that whereas white suicide was consistently perceived to be caused by external factors, perceptions of Black suicides were consistent only in that they were deemed the result of

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8. Vincent Brown, "Social Death and Political Life in the Study of Slavery," *The American Historical Review* 114, no. 5 (2009), 1237.
9 Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (Boston, Massachusetts: Lilly and Wait, 1832), 145.
10. Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, 145.
11. Sommerville, *Aberration of Mind*, 6.
12. Snyder, *The Power to Die*, 12.
13. Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, 152.
14. A, B. G., "SUICIDE.: ANSWER," *Evangelical Magazine and Gospel Advocate* (1830-1848), Nov 10, 1837, 358.
15. Temp Rec, "SUICIDE: WHO KILLED JOSEPH PHILLIS?" *Christian Secretary* (1822-1889), Oct 12, 1838, 1.
16. Howard I. Kushner, "Suicide, gender, and the fear of modernity in nineteenth-century medical and social thought." *Journal of Social History* 26, no. 3 (1993), 461.

internal racial factors and were otherwise elastic in terms of what racial factors played a role.[17] Such contrasting views of white and Black suicide are consistent with characteristics often present in racist discourses according to van Dijk.[18] This is an example of van Dijk's disclaimer of "Apparent Concession" being rhetorically reversed to indicate that while some whites could face conditions that led to suicide, all Blacks had either the inability to commit suicide or innate negative attributes that would cause them to do so. [19] White elites who engaged in discourse about Black self-destruction opted for whichever explanation best fit their narrative at the time. Regardless of which narrative they chose, discourse on suicide looked much different depending on the culprit's (or victim's) skin colour.

As discussed above, suicide by enslaved individuals was a known phenomenon and a recognized issue for enslavers. While many of the methods used to address this issue went well beyond discourse, such methods deserve attention here since they reveal patterns that are relevant to this discussion. Before the end of the Atlantic slave trade, netting was often seen installed around ships to catch anyone attempting to jump into the ocean.[20] Despite the best efforts of enslavers to enact a social death, which included the elimination of communal memory, traditions, and spiritual beliefs, some enslaved individuals of African descent maintained and acted on their traditional beliefs about suicide and death.[21] While those who sought suicide were not homogenous in their motivations, nor their beliefs, there are several accounts of Africans turning to suicide due to their convictions that death would return them to Africa. Such beliefs were common enough for enslavers to address them directly. In one instance in 1712, the corpse of an enslaved individuals who had hanged himself was promptly beheaded by their enslaver who then displayed the severed head atop a pole. This served as a message to the remaining enslaved individuals that those who committed suicide would not rest in peace, and as such, would not return home to Africa.[22] In some cases, the terror of such displays were enhanced by ordering an enslaved individual to commit the acts of desecration.[23] Such instances were recorded through to the Civil War, even as "desecration practices in general had fallen out of favor."[24]

As generations of enslaved individuals became more distant from African beliefs that death would return them to Africa, suicide continued to be an issue. Increasingly, enslavers painted enslaved individuals who sought escape through self-destruction as having traits that were undesirable even to others who were enslaved, stigmatizing the act. A ploughboy who described suicide as a "murderous and vile deed," reveals that such tactics were effective to some extent.[25] Such responses to suicide can only be understood as attempts to limit resulting economic losses. Regardless of the motivations an enslaved person might have to commit suicide, any such acts

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17. Hertzman, "Fatal Differences," 344.
18. Van Dijk, "Discourse and Racism," 147.
19. Van Dijk, "Discourse and Racism," 151.
20. Terri L. Snyder, "Suicide, Slavery, and Memory in North America," *The Journal of American History* 97, no. 1 (2010), 40.
21. Brown, "Social Death and Political Life," 1233.
22. Snyder, "Suicide, Slavery, and Memory," 50.
23. Snyder, *The Power to Die*, 7-9.
24. Snyder, "Suicide, Slavery, and Memory," 50.
25. The Water Cure Journal, "The Suicide's Graves," *Voice of the Fugitive* (Sandwich and Windsor, ON), June 17, 1852.

were perceived by enslavers as a "dramatic attack against white wealth" that necessitated elaborate schemes to prevent.[26]

In public, the responses of enslavers were much different. For much of the eighteenth century, the common tactic was to "[divorce] slave suicide from the processes of enslavement."[27] It was often publicly discussed as little more than a regrettable result of temperaments that distinguished racialized Blacks from whites. Often, the temperament chosen to explain these suicides was that of stubbornness, a label, which as Snyder suggests, was "placed on the socially and economically marginalized" and simultaneously "equated with servile disobedience and even criminality."[28] In doing so, elites used public discourse to associate enslaved persons who turned to suicide with crime and deviance. This association is one of van Dijk's identifiers for racist discourse.[29] However, such narratives would shift. After the American Revolution, popular American discourse turned suicide into an alternative to slavery and in turn, a justification for the institution of slavery by reasoning that enslaved individuals had consented to their bondage by not choosing death.[30] As Katherine Gaudet acknowledges, such points were carefully designed to not encourage suicide by reminding the American public that suicide was not a Christian act.[31] Such emphasis on Christian piety is a point that further served to highlight cultural differences between Blacks and whites, another of van Dijk's identifiers.[32] By the Civil War, enslavers would increasingly deny instances of suicide among enslaved populations, prompted to do so by changing laws and the risk of turning public opinion against the institution of slavery. Yet, abolitionists use of suicide in arguments for emancipation was increasingly difficult to ignore.

The rise of abolitionist activism in the nineteenth century saw public discourse about suicide by enslaved individuals drastically change. Rather than justifying the institution, suicide would be used by abolitionists to highlight the cruelties of slavery. This shift coincided with changing attitudes toward suicide in general. By the end of the eighteenth century, medical explanations for suicide began to establish a common sense that self-destruction was the result of stresses stemming from an increasingly urbanized civilization.[33] This offered a convenient opportunity for enslavers and their supporters who were more frequently denying instances of suicide by enslaved individuals in public. As Hertzman explains, pro-slavery elites began to proliferate the idea that enslaved Black individuals "were too backward to understand, much less succumb to, the pressures of modern society."[34] That message would not be enough to slow the influence of abolitionists who sought to evoke public sympathy toward enslaved Black individuals through portrayals of those who had turned to self-destruction.

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26. Hertzman, "Fatal Differences," 321 and 328.

27. Snyder, *The Power to Die*, 12.

28. Snyder, "Suicide, Slavery, and Memory," 49.

29. Van Dijk, "Discourse and Racism," 153.

30. Richard Bell, "Slave Suicide, Abolition and the Problem of Resistance," *Slavery & Abolition* Vol 33, No 4 (December 2012), 527–28.

31. Katherine Gaudet, "Liberty and Death: Fictions of Suicide in the New Republic," *Early American Literature* 47, no. 3 (2012), 601.

32. Van Dijk, "Discourse and Racism," 153.

33. Kushner, "Suicide, Gender, and the Fear of Modernity," 463.

34. Hertzman, "Fatal Differences," 319.

In 1795, South Carolina banned the abolitionist book turned play, *Oroonoko.* This marked the start of a change from the use of pro-slavery tactics that largely used discourse to publicly deflect instances of suicide in enslaved communities, to tactics that facilitated the outright denial of such instances.[35] This shift occurred as abolitionist tactics evolved. An 1803 pamphlet, *Reflections on Slavery*, described a man who committed suicide to allow his family to escape from enslavement. It presented this man as noble and virtuous, not backwards or as someone who had succumbed to society's pressures. This drew attention to the injustices that pushed the man toward his fate rather than the act of self-destruction itself.[36] In 1817, anti-abolitionist focus went from highlighting the virtuosity of suicide by enslaved men to evoking sympathy for enslaved women who turned to suicide. Jesse Torrey's *Portraiture of Domestic Slavery* chronicled enslaved individuals who had turned to self-destruction in response to being torn apart from their families. In doing so, "he implied that any feeling person in the same position would have done the same" as the Black women he wrote about.[37] Southern elites initially dismissed this chronicling by means of deflection; since the details collected by Torrey were largely taken from the North, it was deemed not their problem to solve. Still, abolitionists continued to appeal to public sympathy with stories from Southern plantations that planted the blame for suicide by enslaved individuals firmly at the feet of cruel enslavers rather than at the hands of those who commit acts of self-destruction. [38]

Suicide by enslaved individuals was beginning to play a role in building public awareness of the violence of slavery.[39] Increasingly, pro-slavery advocates had little choice but to turn deflection into public denial. Contemporary scholarship may have supported this endeavour to cover up suicide through conclusions that since suicide was "propagated by newspapers," instances of suicide should be "kept from the public eye."[40] By the mid-nineteenth century, any strategy other than outright denial of instances of suicide by an enslaved individual would risk acknowledgement that the conditions these individuals lived through were anything less than humane, which was an "unthinkable concession" as the slavery debate became more polarized.[41] In a way that is consistent with van Dijk's theories, any unhappiness or discontentment that may have existed, could only have existed "elsewhere."[42] Throughout the Antebellum Era, pro-slavery elites drastically and repeatedly adapted their discourse to counter abolitionist rhetoric in order to maintain their control over both enslaved peoples, as well as popular narratives about slavery and race.

The reasons for these innovations in discourse are not difficult to imagine. Antebellum America relied on slavery for its economic prosperity and rapid growth as a world power. Pro-slavery elites "understood suicide as a drag on production," making it an economic priority.[43] In response, they adopted strategies to mitigate suicide through violent desecrations and

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35. Hertzman, "Fatal Differences," 331.
36. Bell, "Slave Suicide, Abolition, and Resistance," 329–30.
37. Bell, "Slave Suicide, Abolition, and Resistance," 531.
38. Bell, "Slave Suicide, Abolition, and Resistance," 531–533.
39. Snyder, *The Power to Die*, 13-14.
40. Benjamin Rush, *Medical Inquiries and Observations. Volume 2*, (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Printed by T. Dobson, 1793).
41. Sommerville, *Aberration of Mind*, 121 and 5.
42. Van Dijk, "Discourse and Racism," 153.
43. Hertzman, "Fatal Differences," 321.

demonstrations. Meanwhile, those same anti-abolitionists initially leveraged narratives of suicide to justify the institution of slavery and reinforce racialized perceptions amongst the wider public. Abolitionists would similarly adopt stories of suicide to fit their own narratives, and in response, pro-slavery elites began to downgrade instances of these suicides "to the dubious status of allegations" whenever they could not outright deny their occurrences.[44] Indeed, discourse was intentionally used by pro-slavery elites to influence perceptions of racial differences and in turn, exert and maintain dominance over enslaved individuals. Such uses of discourse have contributed to understandings of race that have lasted well into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Racist discourse establishes "common sense as well as consensus," both of which are difficult to change even with the passage of time and generations.[45] Hertzman's claim that "in the Americas, our knowledge of suicide has been irrevocably shaped by the particular interests and views of white elites, who sought to understand and control self-destruction on their own terms and in the process deny the humanity of non-whites," points to the modern relevance of this topic.[46] Perhaps by better understanding how discourse that focused on something so seemingly off-limits or sensitive as suicide was used to construct narratives that propagated harmful racialized perceptions, modern observers can better identify both means of addressing the harms such discourse continues to inflict and the uses of discourse to sow race-based divisions.

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44. Van Dijk, "Discourse and Racism," 154.
45. Van Dijk, "Discourse and Racism," 148.
46. Hertzman, "Fatal Differences," 322.

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