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Eccentric Agency: Women 'Remembering' Chattel Slavery

1 Introduction

One of Ann Rigney's memorable conceptual metaphors is her description of cultural memories as a "self-perpetuating vortex of symbolic investment" (2005, 18). Sites of memory, she argues, are not at all holdovers from the past whose relevance slowly erodes (the "plenitude and loss model" (Rigney 2005, 12), but instead are constantly invested in as people attentively engage with new cultural representations of stories from, and about, the past. This cultural model for the study of vicarious memory at first seems counter-intuitive, as Rigney points out, as it accords rather little agency to past events. Over time, media-based and cultural mechanisms in the present, such as artists' relationship to formal traditions, the drive towards repetition, and the "agency of the aesthetic" (Rigney 2021b), become increasingly important factors in the dynamic patternings of cultural memory. Rigney's naturalist image of a vortex of currents, which not only maintains a balance of impersonal opposing forces but begins to exert its own, independent drawing power, provocatively illustrates how shifting constellations of existing stories and models both maintain the cherished and produce the new. The seeming gravitational pull of sites of memory (the "weight of history") is in fact the result of a dynamic cluster of active forces.

Striking as the naturalist first half of the image is, the more abstract second half is equally important. Though the vortex is self-perpetuating, investments in it are not: the powerful cultural forces called up in the vortex are the result of people's continuous efforts. As Rigney writes, sites of memory "elicit intense attention" on the part of people participating in remembrance (2005, 18), and individual investments of attention and creative effort can leave significant and often unexpected marks in the cultural record. Ultimately, it is this space for the agency of individual expression that makes this model electrifying – sites of memory are charged with creative, social, and political possibility. Picking up on this thread of Rigney's work, I would like to use this occasion to reflect on the power of what, in keeping with the logic of her metaphor, one might call "ex-centric agency": investments of memory work that work obliquely to the center of the vortex, or resolutely miss the point. What part do they have to play in the construction of memory, and where and why might we want to look for them? I will discuss three examples of eccentric agency among women recalling the historical institu-

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tion of chattel slavery over the past two centuries. Ana Araujo has chronicled how since the 1990s, there has been an increasing drive around the world to create public, official, and institutional memories of the kidnapping and enslavement of Africans (2020), and the ways in which the African diaspora has pioneered new modes of representing this history. My cases represent other engagements with this world history, which also shape its legacy in the Western world, including the personal, the appropriative, and the libidinal, involving different women's attempts to think together histories of race and gender.

2 Idiosyncratic selections: the archives of Anne Knight

The first case of eccentric agency worth considering is that of personal archiving. Archiving has long been overlooked as a practice of political activism (see also Salerno and Rigney's 2024 volume), as its effects work in a different, generally much longer timespan than more ostentatious actions often associated with protest. Yet as the case of Anne Knight illustrates, despite being an undervalued or even criticized individual undertaking, it has powerful potential to shape memory down the line. Knight (1786–1862) was a small-town Quaker and one of England's most radical voices both for the abolition of slavery and for the equality of women. In keeping with social and religious gender expectations of her circle, she did not speak in public until later in life, choosing to support the cause of antislavery by gender-appropriate activities such as contributing to fundraising bazaars and driving petitions. In her sixties, two events catalyzed her development of a more public persona. In 1840, she attended the World's Antislavery Convention in London, where she witnessed the participation of women delegates from the US as well as the fierce debate this drew. In 1848, she was on one of her regular visits to Paris, when revolution overthrew the July monarchy and paved the way for immediate abolition in the French colonies. Seeing this, she became convinced that the year could prove a window of opportunity for women's rights, and she became a public advocate for the cause.

When she made this transition, she relied on an archive of anti-imperial, abolitionist, and feminist materials which she had been amassing since the 1820s. She excerpted relevant tracts in her notebooks and rearranged and recombined quotes and information in deliberate ways, in order to have them printed onto colorful labels to attach to her correspondence, or to hand out in the form of little pamphlets from a workbag which she was to carry on her hip. Within her familial and coreligionist transatlantic antislavery circles her efforts were intensely scrutinized and

denounced as embarrassing to the antislavery campaign: they were thought to miss the point at several levels. Her intensified efforts took on a different significance in Paris, 1848. She began consistently introducing herself as a living link between the emancipatory struggles of the enslaved and of women, and she reprinted her labels in the French feminist press. These included, for instance, the following text:

> That Which Is
> *Young women of the Gauls* had the right to make laws, they were *legislators.*
> *African women* have in some tribes, *the right to vote.*
> *Anglo-Saxon women* participated, in England, *in the legislature.*
> *Women of the Hurons*, one of the strongest tribes in North America, formed a *council, and the elders followed their advice.*
> See, in antiquity and with people who have been barely civilized, women enjoyed rights which modern peoples refuse them, in the countries where Christianity reigns, *where universal brotherhood is proclaimed, without distinction of sex.*
> We fight for liberty!

As this historically far-reaching and, for the period, cosmopolitan statement suggests, Knight mobilized decades of her personal memory work at a crucial moment in time. In the context of the Parisian women's rights campaign of the late 1840s, Knight's efforts made a concrete contribution: she helped to contextualize women's striving in a broader world-historical movement for emancipation, rather than a French Republican frame. Viewed over the long term, the eccentric agency she exerted in her memory work of selecting, preserving, recombining, and reprinting, bore rare fruit.

3 Multidirectional projections: the productive reception of Hiram Power's *The Greek Slave*

A second form of eccentric agency worth considering is that which, with Michael Rothberg, one might call "multidirectional projection." As Rothberg explored in *Multidirectional Memory* (2009), the stories of marginalized groups can serve both as catalysts and as models that allow stories of an unconnected marginalized group to take shape. This process is made explicit on the rare occasions that people explicitly compare histories, but rather than a fringe phenomenon, this deliberately eccentric move is an engine of what Rigney, in her study of the reception of Walter Scott, terms "productive remembrance" (2012a). The transatlantic feminist reception of Hiram Powers' sculpture *The Greek Slave*, considered the most well-known American sculpture of the nineteenth century, illustrates this force, as throngs of viewers projected onto her white marble their own world-historical concerns (Fig. 1).

Figure 1: Hiram Powers' *The Greek Slave.* From the Washington National Gallery of Art's collection. Wikimedia. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:The_Greek_Slave#/media/File:Hiram_Powers,_The_Greek_Slave,_carved_1846,_NGA_166484.jpg. https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/legalcode.

Completed in 1844, *The Greek Slave* depicts an Orientalist, fantastical scene from the Greek War of Independence (1821–1829). It shows a nude young woman who stands with her arms bound in chains. She is about to be sold into a Turkish harem, but her demure gaze and the locket and Christian cross draped over her discarded clothing indicate her chastity, stoicism, and inner resistance. As Joy Kasson has detailed, Powers and his agents provided copious commentary and documentation to manage audiences' attitudes towards the nude, as well as the titillating subject matter of Oriental sex slavery, which was a popular theme in the West at the time (1990, 48–51). Nevertheless, in its reception in both the US and the UK, where it was displayed in the Chrystal Palace Exhibition of 1851, the statue provoked mnemonic associations and a powerful productive reception of its own. Disregarding the professed Greek reference of the work, *Punch Magazine* commented on the irony of this statue's furore against the backdrop of the inten-

sifying struggle against slavery when it published a cartoon of a "Virginian Slave, Intended as a Companion to Powers" (Kasson 1990, 66). The record of prominent women's response to the sculpture is especially intriguing. Abolitionist Lucy Stone described her epiphany upon viewing the statue as emblematic of womanhood as a whole needing to be freed, with a delicate chain of historical associations directing her to redouble her efforts for the women's cause, as well as that for the enslaved. Meanwhile, English poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning used the "alien Image" to direct attention from the Greek context to that of the West: "To so confront man's crimes in different lands / with man's ideal sense/ [. . .] Catch up in thy divine face not alone / East griefs, but West, and strike and shame the strong / by thunders of white silence, overthrown" (ll. 7–14). Browning recontextualized the work in a tradition of Anglo-American philanthropy, and with her gendered description of "man's crimes" and the passivity of the female subject also questioned the gender dynamics of this history.

Possibly less susceptible to the sculptor's intended male gaze, women projected onto the image alternative histories. They saw reflected in it their own perceptions of historical parallels between the position of women and that of the enslaved, in the case of Stone, as well as the question of women's role in nineteenth-century moral reform, in the case of Browning. The overwhelming popularity of the sculpture was rooted in these eccentric multidirectional gestures, which lent it its power.

4 Defiant appropriation: Kara Walker's artistic reflections

The imaginative legacy of chattel enslavement has not at all abated, as descendants of its victims and its perpetrators continue to contend with its world-historical effects. The final gesture of eccentric agency I would like to consider here is that of defiant appropriation, which contemporary artist Kara Walker displays throughout her work and artistic reflection. Her carnivalesque silhouetted animations, sometimes presented as life-sized installations, play with the plot conventions and stereotypes of nineteenth-century melodrama and historical media to present grotesque, often scatological tales of violent Southern plantation life. Rather than engaging in an outright collision with nineteenth-century forms, Walker intimately appropriates them, producing unsettling satirical works which are dense with social and psychological critique. Her 2014 colossal sculpture of a sphinx with stereotyped African-American facial features and a knotted headdress may serve as an example of these aspects of her work. Fashioned from white sugar, it commented on the slave-

powered sugar industry, and Walker simultaneously invoked both obscure nineteenth-century confectionary art and modern-day sexual stereotype as she titled it *A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby*.

By appropriating near-obsolete media, Walker visualizes how her imagination of entanglements of race and gender is steeped in historical plots and conventions. In this ultimately highly personal artistic expression, sometimes verging on exhibitionism, she simultaneously probes the collective historical imagination to question how deep the roots of cultural stereotype and received tradition reach. As she wrote in a typescript displayed at her 2022 exhibition "A Black Hole is Everything a Star Longs to Be":

> "No, no, don't do that" [the intellect] seems to say "Yee-haw! Jes'you try n' stop me!" is the reb's reply
>
> "How," you might be inclined to ask, "do you get from a slave mistress to a *yankee/reb*?" Simple, they're all in me or their shadows have been in me at some point or another– stroking me up and stabbing me in the head.

Walker's polarizing work passionately engages with the history of enslavement, but at an angle which appears directly at odds with contemporary attempts to create a common language of national commemoration. Her art arrestingly visualizes a wider dynamic of defiant appropriation, another form of oblique memory work worth considering when pondering the further reaches of mnemonic actors' symbolic investment.

The vortex is a phenomenon of what is known as "turbulent flow." Rather than smooth layers and steady streams, its centrifugal power is created by the enduring frictions of contrary forces. In this essay, I have reflected on memory dynamics that are eccentric, and contribute to the vortex by exerting their power outside of the center, at an angle or even in collision course. Idiosyncratic selections, multidirectional projections and defiant appropriations are clear examples of such forces. Attending to them brings into view a broader sense of the agency of "intense attention" to sustain memory.