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Andrew Jackson and Harriet Tubman: A Monstrous Intimacy

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Harriet Tubman and Andrew Jackson: A Monstrous Intimacy
Sheneese Thompson
Putting Harriet Tubman on the $20 bill is a disgrace to what she fought for. It's the ultimate neo-liberal co-opt of the Black struggle.¹

- @BlakeDontCrack

The Treasury Department’s announcement in March of 2016 that Harriet Tubman would be gracing the front of the twenty-dollar bill was met with mixed reviews as the public considered what it would mean for Tubman, a formerly enslaved Black woman, to grace the front of the bill. While some considered it a move in the right direction to have the anti-slavery activist on the bill, others considered the fact that Tubman herself would likely be against being represented on money that was once used to buy and sell the very people she worked so tirelessly to liberate, including herself. One person to correctly broach this topic, Steven W. Thrasher of The Guardian, writes that, “Tubman wasn't a sentimentalist, or an incrementalist. She was an abolitionist. Until they're willing to talk reparations, leave the white guys on the money as a reminder that they created a national economy where men still get paid more than women and Tubman's black and brown descendant daughters are hit the worst.”² Still, it seems that very few pondered what it would mean for Jackson to remain on the back of the bill, placing a heralded abolitionist and a proud slave owner in close quarters. In the wake of this announcement, as well as the recent election of Donald Trump as the nation’s 45th president, this paper employs Christina Sharpe’s notion of monstrous intimacies to assert that the coupling of the two on the bill (re)inscribes the monstrosity of the intimate encounters between the enslaved and their masters, even though Jackson did not own Tubman herself. Further, the appropriation of

¹ Tweeted by the user on April 20, 2016 at 2:25PM
² Steven W. Thrasher, “A Slavery Abolitionist Has No Business Being on the $20 Bill; I don't Want to See Harriet Tubman Commodified with a Price, as She Once Was as a Slave,” The Guardian, May 15, 2015. go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?p=AONE&sw=w&u=colu44332&v=2.1&id=GALE%7CA413766080&it=r&asid=ff658cf366b66ccf06b14720c5e65f5b.
Tubman’s image and the revisionist underpinnings of her inclusion on American money, once offered for her bounty, serves no other purpose than to rally Americans around the spectacle of a false national narrative of reconciliation. A reconciliation, that at this historical and cultural moment, has been proven to be a farce by the election of Trump and the spike of racially and ethnically motivated crimes immediately following.

The Changing Same: History and Paradigm

As mentioned in the epitaph, the incorporation (or appropriation) of Harriet Tubman’s likeness on U.S. currency is a cooptation of not only Black struggles toward freedom, but also the myth of reconciliation with America’s dark past of enslavement. @BlakeDontCrack correctly calls out Neo-Liberalism which has often touted itself to be anti-racist, however, a deeper reading of white liberalism (historically and contemporarily) reveals liberalism as nothing more than a travesty. One that, in many ways, still relies quite heavily on anti-Blackness to perpetuate myths of white benevolence, and legitimizes poor attempts at bestowing equality upon Black people, as in the case of Harriet Tubman and her memory. While America has publicly reconciled with itself, not Black Americans, for the crimes against the humanity of Black people during enslavement, it avoids the mirror that would require it to acknowledge and rectify the fact that the dehumanization of Black people did not cease with emancipation and civil rights legislation. The past is not past.³ Or as Frank Wilderson eloquently writes, “…no Marxist theory of social change and proletarian recomposition, and no feminist theory of bodily resignification, has been able (or cared) to demonstrate how, when, and where Abraham Lincoln freed the

slaves. Yet, they remain, if only by omission, steadfast in their own conviction that slavery was abolished.”

In short, Lincoln did not have the will or the power to do so.

In fact, Orlando Patterson challenges the entire notion of slaves being confined to an official institution of enslavement. Rather, Patterson challenges suggests that slavery is more aptly defined as a social death that is either intrusive (external) or extrusive (internal). Here, Patterson lays the groundwork for delinking the condition of being a slave from the institution of slavery. Patterson makes a broader statement about the non-existence of the slave that makes it more difficult to terminate the condition by granting “freedom,” from the institution. Particularly in the American case, one could argue that Abraham Lincoln ended the formalized institution of chattel slavery, and consequently freed the enslaved from the institution. This however, does not mean that emancipation granted the enslaved freedom from the paradigm of social death. After emancipation, Black people were (and are) still treated as if they were socially dead. The failure of Reconstruction serves as one example of this, as well as the introduction of convict leasing, which challenges the fact that the institution of slavery itself was ever abolished. In fact, Ava Duvernay’s newest documentary 13th, highlights the caveat in the Thirteenth Amendment that allows and fosters the mass incarceration (read (re)enslavement) of Black and other marginalized peoples.

Further, Frank B. Wilderson, III complicates the notions of slavery and freedom, arguing that both are ontological instead of experiential for Black people. To apply Wilderson’s definitions, the condition of slavery predates American chattel slavery, and has thus, outlived it.

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5 Orlando Patterson, Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 39.
6 Wilderson, Red, White & Black, 23.
Freedom on the other hand, is more complex. As Christina Sharpe eloquently writes, “the term *freedom* does not stand on its own, but is always freighted with being freed from something.”\(^7\) In contrast to the master narrative, Wilderson suggests that, “there is no philosophically credible way to attach an experiential, a contingent, rider onto the notion of freedom when one considers the Black….\(^8\) Accordingly, the terms slave and free are incompatible as one is paradigmatically bound and unchanging, whereas the other is experiential and most often occurs as a historical event. Certainly, the historical event of emancipation changed the experiential dynamic of Black life. If it has shifted the paradigm of Black enslavement, however, remains to be seen. I would argue that it has not.

Saidiya V. Hartman describes emancipation “as both a breach with slavery and a point of transition to what looks more like the reorganization of the plantation system than self-possession, citizenship, or liberty for the ‘freed.’”\(^9\) It cannot be disputed the legalized institution of chattel slavery was abolished with the passing of the Thirteenth Amendment, the question becomes then, what took its place? Douglas Blackmon would argue that convict leasing, and all its horrors, replaced slavery.\(^10\) The fact that convict leasing as a general practice could develop in the face of the amendments purporting to grant Black people citizenship and human rights, destabilizes the historical analysis of emancipation and reaffirms Wilderson’s ontological definition of slavery, where Blacks are “always already” non-human applies to this question of

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7 Christina Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subject* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 15. Authors emphasis
freedom for the slave. A more contemporary example of this phenomenon is the wanton police violence against Black, unarmed victims. Hartman argues that, “the barbarism of slavery did not express itself singularly in the constitution of the slave as object but also in the forms of subjectivity and circumscribed humanity imputed to the enslaved….” Black people, the world over, are still being subjected to terrorism that can only be explained by complicating what it means to be free and revisiting what it means to be held captive. Black peoples’ humanity is still largely circumscribed by the paradigm of captivity, where the Black body can be (and largely is) subjected to acts of White violence with impunity. While the historical is important to anchoring the significance of this spectacle of Harriet Tubman and Andrew Jackson on the twenty-dollar bill, the discussion of what the spectacle means must be anchored in the understanding of the paradigmatic experience of Blackness in America. This does not, however, mean that the ontological and paradigmatic notions of Black and White do not need to be complicated. As Frantz Fanon makes clear, what “[o]ntology does not allow is to understand the being of the black man, since it ignores the lived experience.” Ontology and paradigm, do however help to think through the circumscribed nature of the lived experience of the Black man and woman, the methods by which the Black-White antagonism can be eliminated, and in this instance, how to think through this spectacle of subjection on the twenty-dollar bill that has been presented as the long sought after inclusion of Black people in American civil society when it is actually an effort on behalf of whites to work through the ethical dilemma of reconciling the monstrosity of American history. In this sense, Tubman “describe[s] a locus of confounded identities, [as well

11 Wilderson, 18.
12 Hartman, Scenes of Subjection, 6.
13 Frantz Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks (New York: Grove Press, 1952), 90.
14 Wilderson, 249. See also Franco Barchiesi, “The Problem with ‘We’: Affiliation, Political Economy, and the Counterhistory of Nonracialism,” In Ties That Bind: Race and the Politics od
as] a meeting ground of investments and privations in the national treasury of rhetorical wealth.” And while her country did not “invent” her per se, Tubman’s memory has been operationalized to meet America’s needs of redemption. In order to think through Tubman’s inclusion and its racialized and gendered implications, I intend to escape history while remaining in conversation with it.

**Monstrous Intimacies**

Before engaging the monstrosity of pairing Harriet Tubman and Andrew Jackson on the same bill, it is significant to note the many ways in which Tubman being on U.S. currency at all raises major issues.

At a summit meeting that included Treasury Secretary Jacob J. Lew and representatives of the Smithsonian Institution, Dr. [Catherine] Clinton said, there had been discussion of the aesthetics of putting a woman on the currency, and whether Americans would accept it. She said she herself had strong feelings about not using one of the images showing Tubman in the turban that she wore when she was trying to blend in, but rather in the prim white lace collar she favored most of the time. “Harriet Tubman could be a cover girl for American history,” she said. “I’m glad the invisible woman is becoming visible now.”

In the quote above taken from a *New York Times* article, the author makes the controversy about Tubman being on the bill completely about gender, totally sanitizing the apparent issues of race and enslavement as it pertains to the legacy of Tubman, a Black woman. This kind of erasure is not unusual, as white women typically appropriate the struggles of Black women as long as it is

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convenient. Interestingly enough this solidarity tends to fall apart along the lines of race, hence the advent of Black Feminism, Womanism and other splinter groups to support the specific needs of Black women. This was true when Tubman found herself lobbying for suffrage, and was also true when white women voted overwhelmingly for Donald Trump in the 2016 election. This makes the commentary of Susan Ades Stone, executive director of Women on 20s, that “[i]t would be a slap in the face of women to reverse the decision [in lieu of Trump’s election] in our opinion,”19 all the more questionable. While white women may in fact be victims of abuse by their fathers and husbands, and make strong cases against patriarchy, it should not be forgotten that they now, and have always, had agency over Black bodies. Gender fails, historically and contemporarily, as a unifying force for Black (and other women of color) and white women. Accordingly, I don’t suspect the many white women who voted for Trump will bat an eyelash at a reversal of the decision, and I don’t suspect the many Black women who understand the anti-blackness in the United States will be surprised. Further, Clinton would have Tubman be a neat, white-collared “cover girl” for American History, which is largely about the dehumanization of people that look like her. Beyond the fact that Tubman did not have the luxury of being well put together while engaging in the hard work of liberating herself and others, as well as spying for the Union Army, this complete lack of regard for the intersectionality of Tubman, and the complexity around her incorporation into the league of national heroes is enough to give one pause. But, as a cursory review of Tubman’s relationship with the U.S. government would reveal, the plot thickens.

Historian, Milton C. Sernett, for example, eloquently details the various appeals made on Tubman’s behalf for her to receive monetary recompense for her military service as a spy and a nurse. Sernett sums up the case writing that, “Tubman ended up receiving eight dollars per month as a veteran’s widow and twelve dollars a month for her services as a wartime nurse, plus the compensatory lump sum of about five hundred dollars in October 1895.”

Tubman was never granted veteran status or compensated for her military service. As if putting her image on the twenty-dollar bill was not problematic enough, it becomes more ironic (or intentional) because that is the exact monthly amount she was (under) compensated.

While @BlakeDontCrack gets it right by opening up this blunder to the broader Black struggle for freedom, it is important to note and meditate upon the personal affront to Harriet Tubman herself. It is offensive to think that putting her image on money somehow rectifies the debt she is owed for her military service; let alone the money she would be owed if she were compensated retroactively for the forced labor she did while enslaved. Again, the United States government finds itself perpetuating a myth of inclusivity that reifies the benevolence of whites while completely excluding the multifaceted ways in which Black people are dehumanized in the process. In fact, the myth hides the fact that Black must suffer in order for whites to have redemption. Thus Tubman’s image is appropriated to recreate the very scene of her own

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22 Wilderson, 259.

Here, Wilderson makes an important intervention about how Black suffering functions in reference to white redemption in *Monster’s Ball*. He argues that quite literally, Black flesh must be devoured in order for white people to reach catharsis in ethical dilemmas. While Harriet Tubman’s flesh is not being devoured in the literal sense, her memory is being consumed in

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subjection to the antiblackness of the government for which she risked her life, so that America can feel great again.

Sernett provides yet another important example that proves the United States is simply unprepared to honestly incorporate Tubman and what she represents into American memory. Regarding a mural designed by Mike Alewitz for Baltimore’s Associated Black Charities, Sernett writes, “[t]hat a public debate should erupt over having Harriet Tubman depicted as armed and dangerous in 2000 [or 2016] is not altogether surprising, for Americans are not in agreement as to how she should be remembered—or, to be more precise, how the memory of her should be used as leverage by special interest groups today.”23 While Sernett is correct in noting that Americans disagree on how Tubman should be remembered, it should be noted that contention does not arise about whether or not she should be depicted helping enslaved people abscond. It has been documented that when liberating enslaved persons, Tubman was in fact armed. The contention is not about how Tubman should be remembered, as much as it is about telling the truth about Black history when it harms the master narrative, grants agency to Blacks and removes the opportunity for white benevolence. Harriet Tubman cannot both be the palatable “Moses” of the Underground Railroad, and an armed fugitive ex-slave who liberated other bondsmen in the American popular narrative. I would argue, that if Harriet Tubman was nationally remembered as “armed and dangerous” her name would not have come up as a candidate to grace American currency, and she certainly would not be characterized as an American hero.24 And while it is well documented that she met with John Brown, remembered

order for the national narrative to reach repair on the issue of enslavement. Blacks are granted no such courtesy in reference to white flesh and their own healing.

23 Sernett, Harriet Tubman, 73.
24 Ibid., 72.
specifically for his violent raid on Harper’s Ferry, she is still somehow remembered as non-violent, docile even.\textsuperscript{25} Though it is important to note that there is no historical evidence to support that Tubman ever discharged her weapon, it is safe to assume that she probably was not against it if the need arose. Tubman speaks for herself on this issue, saying that “I had reasoned dis out in my mind; there was one of two things I had a right to, liberty, or death; if I could not have one, I would have de oder; for no man should take me alive; I should fight for my liberty as long as my strength lasted…”\textsuperscript{26} Her very memory requires forgetting. White abolitionists are owed thanks for their revisionist tendencies, as it was their efforts to make Tubman the representative freedwoman for their abolitionist agenda that allows her current sanitization and appropriation to take place at the contemporary moment. The past is not past. I would argue further that it is this distancing from Blackness, or Black self-determination that makes Tubman legible enough to be memorialized in this way.\textsuperscript{27}

Lastly, but certainly not least, is the issue of her fugitivity. Over the years, different numbers have been presented as amounts offered for Tubman’s bounty. Kate Larson sets the record straight writing that “[t]hough a reward notice for Tubman’s capture has yet to be found, it is likely that there was one; whether it was $1,200 or $12,000, Tubman would have been a

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Although Larson has proved that Bradford changes Tubman’s words in at least one instance, it is safe to assume that the words quoted above convey the general sense of what Tubman meant: freedom was worth dying, or perhaps, killing.
\cite{Wilderson2009} Wilderson, 290.
significant catch for southern bounty hunters.”

From the time of her birth (perhaps from the time of her rumored African grandmother’s capture), Tubman’s life was overdetermined by American money. She was purchased, sold, denied wages for her labor, and not least of all, money was offered for her recapture or murder. Given the nature of this relationship, and though it is mere speculation, the likelihood that Tubman would want or be happy about her image on American money is slim. Regardless, many of her living descendants (in the broad sense, since she had no children) have determined that this is nothing to celebrate; I am aligned with them.

While Tubman’s personal (tenuous) relationship with money deserves due weight, the significance of the broader historical and contemporary economic oppression of Black people cannot be avoided here. While it is clear that the longitudinal wealth gap between Blacks and whites cannot easily be closed, since the bulk of the wealth amassed by white families came from the free labor of Blacks, there is something a bit more profound about the “grinding down of poverty—the poverty of the work-too-hard-and-still-can’t-make-ends-meet kind,” that far too many Black people experience. Like the other forms of oppression mentioned here, an erasure occurs around why white households have sixteen times the wealth of that of Black one.

In a Forbes Magazine article about this very wealth gap, author, Laura Shin, mentions

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28 Larson, 191.
29 Sharpe, In the Wake, 8.
Sharpe gracefully offers this personal description of the labor of her ailing brother. While I do not intend to overwrite the deeply personal and specific pain and suffering that her late brother, and her family experienced, I do think the parallel here is worth noting. Too many Black people have, a brother, an uncle, a father, or a mother who have been worn down by economic oppression.
homeownership, education and labor markets as the cause of this gap. Shin even mentions discrimination, but somehow overlooks the ways in which wealth is inherited and how, a 300 year head start in building wealth might contribute to the gap. And just as Sharpe mentions, this simultaneous (economic) terror and erasure of that terror, wears on the physical body. Not just because Black people are more likely to be physically overworked and underpaid, but because the experience of terror itself causes strain. Consequently, money, should be read as a site of terror for Black people in the historical and the contemporary sense. Tubman’s image being included on this money not only reifies her own economic bondage, but makes a mockery of that of Black people. Pairing this already layered and nuanced appropriation of Tubman’s image and memory with that of Andrew Jackson, on the twenty-dollar bill simply makes this scene of subjection all the more spectacular.

One could ask, why Jackson? Why Tubman? And further, why now? An article by Christopher Lloyd entitled, “Why the History of Slavery in the US South is Taking Centre Stage Once Again,” the author suggests that the contemporary moment—the departure of Barack Obama, the election of Donald Trump and the gratuitous violence against unarmed African American by both police and civilians—warrants that filmmakers, television producers and other creators would be “attempting to grapple with its [slavery’s] memory now.” Lloyd continues, noting that “[w]ith Tubman’s face now set to adorn the US$20 bill, it attests to the widescale interest and investment in this part of American history. No doubt, the narrative of escape – of potential freedom and an ostensible happy ending – plays into the desire to remember the

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32 Ibid.
railroad. This is a cultural memory Americans can perhaps feel good about.”

While Lloyd may be on to something about this historical and cultural moment, he misses the mark regarding American memory as it pertains to enslavement. Tubman’s face “adorning” the twenty-dollar bill does not serve the purpose of paying homage to the underground railroad, or underscore some happy ending that African Americans never experienced since they are still being terrorized by the United States government (from the sanctioning of physical white violence against black bodies, to environmental racism), however it does serve the purpose of making white Americans feel good by selling that narrative. Unfortunately, for white Americans to reach catharsis about the peculiar institution, Tubman must be appropriated as an American icon and further, “her redemption as incorporation [is] allow[ing] continued injustice to be rewritten as freedom.”

As for why Jackson, I would argue that Jackson is the quintessential founding father. Having served as a soldier in the American Revolution and a general in the War of 1812, America’s seventh president, founder of the Democratic Party, a slaveowner, and perhaps one of America’s most fervent advocates for manifest destiny and Native American removal, who better to pair with Harriet Tubman? That is, if the goal is to create a spectacle and perpetuate the monstrosity of the relationships between Blacks and whites generally, and the enslaved and slaveowners

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35 Sharpe, 109.
36 Robert V. Remini, The Jacksonian Era (Wheeling: Harlan Davidson, 1997). Though Remini is a leading authority of the life and times of Andrew Jackson, and is used here as the primary historical source, Remini’s scholarship is not without critique. Remini often qualifies the horrific nature of Jackson’s beliefs and actions as needing historical context. Further, Remini makes the blunder of referring to Hannah, a woman enslaved at the Hermitage, as a “faithful servant.” Though it is beyond the scope of this paper to take Remini to task for his contributions to the memory of Andrew Jackson as anything other than a terrorist of Native Americans and Blacks, it is absolutely worth noting. Additionally, the irony of Jackson founding the Democratic Party, favoring majoritarian rule and the dissolution of the electoral college should not be overlooked since the electoral college is wholly responsible Trump’s election.
specifically. In this sense, Jackson embodies Wilderson’s notions of white antagonism and conflict.\textsuperscript{37} Not only does Jackson find himself in an antagonistic lockstep with Black people, owning 300 slaves on his Tennessee plantation, the Hermitage (owning half that amount at one time, more than even the average wealthy planter), but also in a conflictual relationship with Native Americans, overseeing their forced removal, perhaps setting the tone (or at the very least, meaningfully influencing it) for what is currently happening to the Dakota Sioux who are being forced to protest the Dakota Access Pipeline, which would run through their reservation.\textsuperscript{38}

While primary accounts of Jackson’s behavior on his plantation are scarce, it is documented that one of his “mulatto slave[s],” Augustus, was found to be distributing abolitionist propaganda in 1835.\textsuperscript{39} While Augustus’ mixed parentage suggests that either Jackson himself engaged in the rape of slave women, or condoned it from his overseers, the fact that Augustus would risk life and/or limb to distribute such “incendiary” materials speaks to his own courage, and very likely, to the miserable nature of his condition under the ownership of Jackson. Similarly, the first major piece of legislation passed under Jackson’s administration was the Removal Act of 1830.\textsuperscript{40} An eyewitness account of the Cherokee Trail of tears describes by a militiaman recalls it thusly, “I fought through the Civil War and have seen men shot to pieces and slaughtered by thousands,

\textsuperscript{37} Wilderson, 5. Wilderson defines an antagonism as “an irreconcilable struggle between entities, or positions, the resolution of which is not dialectical bit entails the obliteration of one of the positions.” Wilderson defines a conflict as, “a rubric of problems that can be posed and conceptually solved.” Wilderson continues to argue that Blacks and whites are in an antagonistic relationship whereas Native Americans and whites are in a conflictual one. This argument is extended here however, the latter part of it has its conceptual and actual limits.

\textsuperscript{38} Remini, \textit{The Jacksonian Era}, 57. See also, \textit{The Hermitage.com}, http://thehermitage.com/learn/mansion-grounds/slavery/

\textsuperscript{39} Remini, 62. Remini does not feel compelled to tell us the fate of Augustus after his discovery, only that Jackson was not easily swayed by a mob that wanted to take lynch law into their own hands.

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid, 46.
but the Cherokee removal was the cruelest I ever saw.” Suffice it to say, Jackson is as American as apple pie, but his memory too requires forgetting. Sharpe eloquently writes the implications of this for Black people at the contemporary moment,

Living in the wake means living in the history and present of terror, from slavery to the present, as the ground of our everyday Black existence; living historically and geographically dis/continuous but always present and endlessly reinvigorated brutality in, and on, our bodies while even as that terror is visited on our bodies the realities of that terror are erased.

Remembering Jackson as an American hero requires the active erasure and subsequent forgetting of the injustices he perpetrated against African American and Native Americans, or at the very least, requires their denial (read acceptance).

As for Tubman’s image joining Jackson’s on the bill, Wilderson gets at the root of the problem in reference to Fanon’s Black Skin, White Masks, reiterating that Black people are “nothing more and certainly nothing less” than comparison. Despite Tubman’s own historical achievements, her Blackness does not allow her sovereignty and thus she has been relegated to a comparison with one of America’s most notorious founding fathers. In a New York Times article, Jackie Calmes describes the pairing of the two writing that, “Tubman, an African-American and a Union spy during the Civil War, would bump Jackson — a white man known as much for his persecution of Native Americans as for his war heroics and advocacy for the common man — to the back of the $20, in some reduced image along with the White House.” Here, in identifying Tubman’s historical significance, the author does not deem it necessary to identify Harriet

41 Ibid, 51.
42 Sharpe, In the Wake, 15.
43 Wilderson, 42.
Tubman as formerly enslaved and once fugitive from the United States. Perhaps Calmes forgot. Similarly, it is forgotten that Jackson held slaves and was a staunch advocate for the right to do so. Additionally, the title of the article and the language of “ousting” is misleading at best, as Jackson will still be on the back of the bill. In forgetting Tubman’s fugitivity and Jackson’s pro-slavery position, Calmes also open the door for forgetting the significance of the supervisory role Jackson plays on the back of the bill. Tubman, about twenty-seven years old when she flees in 1849 obtains her own freedom before the passing of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, but risks her life and/or being sold back into bondage in order to free her niece and her niece’s children. The penultimate runaway slave cannot be left to her own devices in American history or on American currency. Instead, 103 years after her death Tubman must be subjected to a monstrous intimacy on the twenty-dollar bill that harkens back to her life as an enslaved person, and illuminates that of her living descendants: always already suspect and thusly, always already policed—in this case Tubman is policed by Jackson and his legacy of terror. And though this paper is centered on Tubman, I doubt sincerely that Jackson would want his own legacy tarnished by a woman he would not have considered to be human, let alone a part of America’s great history.

On Spectacle

In her book, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, Hartman “illuminate[s] the terror of the mundane and quotidian rather than exploit the shocking spectacle.” Following this line of reasoning, I suggest that including Harriet Tubman on the twenty-dollar bill with Andrew Jackson is both mundane and quotidian as well as a shocking spectacle. Not unlike the crimes of slavery Hartman describes in the first chapter of her book, this kind of usurpation of Tubman’s memory and iconography was in fact

45 Larson, 301.
46 Hartman, 4.
“staged.”^47 Tubman was not just appointed, she was entered into a competition with other historical women like Margaret Sanger, Eleanor Roosevelt, Rosa Parks and Sojourner Truth to name just a few representatives. Apparenty, the same American populace that responded overwhelming to Donald Trump’s divisive rhetoric, also responded overwhelmingly to Tubman, which is why (the public is told), she was selected. Interestingly enough, Trump announced his criticism of Tubman’s inclusion on the twenty-dollar bill, calling it “pure political correctness,” and suggesting that she be put on a lower bill, like the rare two-dollar bill. Though offensive on its face, Trump’s comment in this instance, points to both the emptiness and the fullness of Tubman’s appropriation. Tubman’s selection was staged to look very much like an incorporation of African Americans into the master narrative of America on equal footing, as well as the nation making good on a long overdue debt to Tubman for her service. Similarly, and differently, Jackson, “is the bearer of civil society’s discontents; he stages its ethical dilemmas.”^50 Despite the thorough staging of this spectacle of reparation, any attempt at historical reconciliation falls flat against what Trump calls, Andrew Jackson’s “great history,” as well as the contemporary subjection of Black people. Further, ignoring Jackson’s staging here, like it has been ignored in many of the mainstream media reports about the new bill, perpetuates what Sharpe has called.

^48 http://www.womenon20s.org/candidates
^49 Rhodan, “The Harriet Tubman $20 Bill.”
^50 Wilderson, 290
Though Wilderson writes this as a description of Billy Bob Thornton’s character in Monster’s Ball, important parallels can be drawn regarding the ways in which white people are staged vis a vis Black ones, in cinema, and in life. Here, Jackson requires equal amounts of staging as Tubman, but his staging simply is not the focus of this paper.
^51 Ibid.
“crimes of omission.”\textsuperscript{52} Though this paper is not necessarily about Andrew Jackson, it cannot not be about him without letting him, and his legacy off the hook.

Just as Tubman is being touted as the face of freedom and justice for all, alongside Jackson who believed in the enslavement of Blacks and the extermination of Native Americans, this cultural moment that has seen mass-incarceration enslave more African Americans than enslaved in 1850—put shortly, injustice for most.\textsuperscript{53} Bresha Meadows, a fourteen-year-old girl is being criminally charged for killing her abusive father, and is currently being held in a juvenile detention center.\textsuperscript{54} All six police officers involved in the murder of Freddie Gray were acquitted, there was a mistrial in the case of Walter Scott’s murderer and to reiterate, Donald Trump is the president-elect (and probably more horrifying is thought of vice president-elect Mike Pence) and has empowered bigots of all sorts to legally, verbally and physically harm Black and other marginalized people.\textsuperscript{55} While this is certainly a short representative overview of the state of American affairs, it serves to show that Tubman’s inclusion on the bill must be read as a spectacle—as a mockery of Tubman’s legacy and an attempt at the erasure of her descendants’ current condition. The injustice of her inclusion on the twenty-dollar bill rewritten as freedom is but a white Liberal platitude, another instance where Whiteness compels them to bestow honor upon Harriet Tubman, rather than giving her memory and legacy the autonomy it deserves.

\textsuperscript{52} Sharpe, \textit{Monstrous Intimacies}, 173.

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Perhaps most importantly, it does not change anything. “The means and modes of Black subjection may have changed, but the fact and structure of that subjection remain.”⁵⁶ Black people (women especially) will still be compensated for their labor inequitably vis a vis their white counterparts and will inevitably see less Tubmans.⁵⁷ Money, then, will still be a site of oppression. Though the bills are not set to be printed for another four years, granted the Treasury Secretary does not decide to roll them earlier for fear of Trump’s administration reversing the decision, the likelihood that the median income gap between Black and white families will close any time soon is doubtful.⁵⁸

**Conclusion**

In honor of her own fugitivity, how can we, her descendants, take Tubman’s memory and run with it? I do not see protesting the bill as a meaningful way to honor Tubman’s life and legacy, although I am not against it. I do however, see utility in the way collective energy has been used to rally for Black Lives Matter, a cause I am sure Tubman would support, as well as the use of social media as a unifying platform for mobilization against the various forms of state-sanctioned tyranny against people of color, women, and the LGBTQIA community. I suppose another way, one that Black people have been fancying as of late, is Twitter, from where the epitaph of this paper is taken. Counternarratives are important and despite their overshadowing by mass media and racialized and gender-based marginalization, they are being written. While the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* would have their readers believe that most

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⁵⁶ Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 12.
⁵⁷ Rhodan, “The Harriet Tubman $20 Bill.” Apparently, rappers have already begun to refer to the twenty-dollar bill as Tubmans instead of Jacksons. This behavior could be read as a subversive (re)appropriation and excitement for “dead presidents” (See, Nas, “The World is Yours,” *Illmatic*, Columbia Records, 1994) to represent them, but still falls short of addressing the larger issues around Tubman’s image on the bill.
⁵⁸ Ibid.
segments of America are pleased with the outcome of Harriet Tubman and Andrew Jackson
joining forces, smaller Black-owned newspapers, media outlets, and individual social media
users have sounded the alarm of dissatisfaction among those familiar with Harriet Tubman’s
story. They have noted how Tubman being represented on US currency is wholly incompatible
and how sharing a bill with Jackson is nothing short of an insult. Furthermore, the attempt at
Tubman’s memorialization fails because as Sharpe points out, “how does one memorialize
chattel slavery and its afterlives, which are unfolding still?”59 Perhaps the most meaningful
intervention that could be made on behalf of Harriet Tubman is to correct the record—to take
this wave of publicity to speak truth to power, excavate her voice from the annals of history,
promote fugitivity, and lastly, disavow the multilayered monstrosity of the intimacy created by
pairing her with Jackson on money once used to for her purchase, bounty, and financial bondage.

59 Sharpe, In the Wake, 20.
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