



Research Article

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Harriet Tubman and Andrew Jackson on the Twenty-Dollar Bill: A Monstrous Intimacy

<https://doi.org/10.1515/culture-2018-0038>

Received July 10, 2018; accepted October 25, 2018

Abstract: The controversy surrounding the announcement by the US Treasury, in April 2016, that the portraits of Harriet Tubman and Andrew Jackson will “share” the twenty-dollar bill—which the latter has embodied for almost a century—highlights a glaring incongruity: A formerly enslaved black woman and abolitionist leader is being placed in iconic proximity with an exemplary historical representative of the United States as a national experiment built on whiteness, slavery, and genocide. Our essay revolves around three basic questions: Why Tubman? Why Jackson? Why Now? The Treasury’s decision and its subsequent vicissitudes allow insights into the blurring of Barack Obama’s avowed “post-racialism,” which presided over the idea to redesign the currency, into the overt white supremacy and anti-black violence at the onset of the Trump regime, which has de facto frozen the implementation of the new bill. The story serves, namely, as a commentary on paradigmatic antiblackness as a force that, being constitutive of American civil society, has been fortified by the “post-racial” pretences of the Obama era. With reference to Christina Sharpe’s notion of “monstrous intimacy” and Saidiya Hartman’s theorization of “fungibility,” we argue that the twenty-dollar bill affair reflects the ways in which the interlocutory life of civil society is fortified by the continuous positioning, in popular imagination and discourse, of the black female body as inert matter in modes of appropriation, violence, and representation that sustain America’s political and libidinal economy.

Keywords: blackness, anti-blackness, Harriet Tubman, reparations, memory

Introduction: Whose Reparations?

In April 2016, the United States Treasury Department announced that the portrait of Harriet Tubman would be gracing the front of the twenty-dollar bill, displacing to the back the effigy of the denomination’s sole occupant for more than ninety years, seventh president Andrew Jackson (1829-1837). The decision rewarded the two-year campaign conducted by “Women on 20s,” a non-profit organisation seeking to convince the Obama administration to include—by 2020, the centenary of the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution, which granted the vote to women—the portrait of a woman on the twenty-dollar bill. Tubman was selected as the winner (the other finalists were Eleanor Roosevelt, edged out into second place, Rosa Parks, and Cherokee Nation Chief Wilma Mankiller) of a poll, convened by Women on 20s, for which more than 600,000 votes were cast (Women on 20s). The poll and subsequent petition induced President Obama—who had privately expressed support for a rebalancing of the gender representation on the currency—and the Treasury to finally agree to Tubman’s presence on the front of the banknote.

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Figure 1. One of the proposed designs for the twenty-dollar bill featuring Harriet Tubman on the front.

Initially, the administration had opted for redoing the ten-dollar note, but Alexander Hamilton, who was accordingly scheduled for the move, regained popularity as a result of the eponymous Broadway show. So, in accordance with Women on 20s' demand, it would be up to Jackson to leave the monetary front stage. Other bills, including the ten-dollar, would also be rejuvenated by the injection, on their backs, of iconic scenes featuring protagonists of the feminist and civil-rights struggles. In the age of Black Lives Matter and *in the wake* (to recall the title of Christina Sharpe's important book) of endless gratuitous, often lethal, state violence on Black communities and the steady erosion of all the gains of the Civil Rights era, the Tubman-Jackson (un)coupling was exemplary of the displacement of attention from the structural to the rhetorical and from material conflict to imaginative consensus, the hallmark strategies in Obama's avowed "post-racialism." The White House's new occupant, Donald Trump, brought to power in November 2016 by electorally capitalising on white racial revanchism, did not reverse Obama's decision, despite repeatedly stating the hope that his personal hero, Andrew Jackson, would retain prominent placing in the twenty-dollar bill. Trump rather let the whole issue slide to the sidelines. Thus, in an interview in September 2017, less than a month after white nationalists and extreme right-wingers rioted in Charlottesville, Virginia, at the cry "you will not replace us," Trump's Treasury secretary, Steven Mnuchin, froze the replacement of Jackson, a step, he said, on which he was "not focused at the moment" (Belvedere) and has not resumed at the time of writing.

At the core of the controversy lies the possibility that Harriet Tubman, a formerly enslaved Black woman and armed resister against the very institution of slavery, which was central to the constitutional dispensation Jackson represented, would adorn the means through which captive property was transacted. Amid the general praise of the bill's redesign as a form of recognition for anti-slavery activism, there were those who expressed doubts about having Tubman depicted on the instrument, money, which sanctioned the status as possession and commodity of the very people she worked so tirelessly to liberate. For example, Steven W. Thrasher ("To Put Harriet") wrote 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." Thus framed, the question revolves on what would be the most appropriate way of monumentalizing Tubman. Read alongside the establishment of the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, DC as well as the presidential reassertion of a racialised definition of the nation, the debate hints at the role of memory as a site of symbolic compensation and institutional stability. Thrasher ("The Smithsonian") himself pointed out that much in his critique of the African American national museum, which he called a monument to a "politics of respectability" requiring amnesia for the sake of reconciliation.

Thrasher's commentary on Tubman's portrait on the bill, however, invokes reparations as a compensatory gesture within a political economy framework. The "still" he refers to alludes to a legacy of slavery unfolding on the terrain of employment relations, whereby white women and Tubman's "Black and brown" descendants share the injustice of exploitation and poor remunerations. Thrasher's argument

usefully highlights the hypocrisy of the Treasury's symbolic operation, yet does not allow an inquiry into how the evolving monetary semiotics of the state continues to sanction forms of anti-Black violence and erasure that are not primarily legible in terms of work, employment, kinship, ethnicity, and political economy. What remains obscured is the *gratuitousness* of anti-blackness in its structurally obliterating effects and absolute incommensurability with the exploitation and subjugation of those (white women or workers, and non-Black people of colour) whose oppression is the result not of annihilating violence, but economic forces encroaching on subjective capacities to operate across time and space.

We assess the twenty-dollar bill as spectacle, the staging of a performance and narrative through which the image of Tubman as a Black woman is required to do rhetorical labour for the sustenance of anti-Black civil discourse translated into institutional dilemmas. Therefore, we would rather start by suggesting that the affair is, in fact, a “non-event” (Hartman, *Scenes*) existing in a paradigmatic mode of temporal “freezing” in which gestures aiming at closure and resolution inescapably return to the scene of Black captivity (Murillo). Resolution is, in particular, impossible as a dialectical recomposition of equilibrium based on restoring the integrity of workers and women, which is what Thrasher aspires to. The very State that prints currency and underwrites its value also defined Tubman as a socially dead yet sentient object of property, gratuitous violence, and sexual terror, hence “neither a worker nor a woman” (Wilderson, “Afro-Pessimism”). Rather than the limitations of an empty symbolic gesture (placing her portrait on the bill) as the incomplete “recognition” of Tubman's status or contribution to the making of the Nation, at stake here is how the nation itself makes and remakes Black female flesh accessible as inert matter in circuits of appropriation, violence, and representation that sustain America's political and libidinal economy. The question is then not one of delayed recognition, but rather of continuing structural fungibility—which Saidiya Hartman (*Scenes* 21) defines as “the replaceability and interchangeability endemic to the commodity”—of Black women. Since fungibility implies the unlimited possibility of forceful practical or imaginative access to Black being turned into a “thing,” it is also a non-relational category, for objects cannot have a relation with subjects. As such, the register of fungibility renders both recognition and the symbolic inadequate notions for a critical analysis of Tubman's imaginative conscription in national representation.

The story of the death and rebirth of the twenty-dollar bill—whose agency as a thing, an inert object, is made to far outstrip Tubman's or the radical politics she stood for—is not about misrecognition and inadequate reward, or iconographic celebration *sans* practical reparation. It rather speaks to the powerfully material effects of reinventing America's “arsenal of raciality,” the term with which Denise Ferreira Da Silva (*Toward*) characterizes the adaptability of anti-blackness, across time and space, from bygone scientific racism to the contemporary discourses of the “national” and the (multi-) “cultural” in neoliberal and post-civil rights contexts. The conjuring of Tubman's ghost at a time when the state aims to obscure anti-Black violence and defuse its antagonisms under the pageantries of a “post-racial” America gives new flesh to a long-established rhetorical patrimony, which places Black femaleness as its invisible yet irreplaceable core. Tubman's name is then a secondary signifier of forces that made Black womanhood nameless, recalling Hortense Spillers' (203) reflections on the “mark”:

Let's face it. I am marked woman, but not everybody knows my name... I describe a locus of confounded identities, a meeting ground of investments and privations in the national treasury of rhetorical wealth. My country needs me, and if I were not there, I would have to be invented.

The (re)invention of Harriet Tubman for a “post-racial” age and its interlocutory life (including progressive invocations of “reparations”) reflects what Saidiya Hartman (“Venus”) calls a “second order of violence,” the violence of narrative and, in Kara Walker's terms, a “burden of representation” (cit. in Sharpe, *Monstrous* 158) allowing the enlisting of Black women in national catharses that obscure and silence Black experience in the same gesture of avowed celebration of Black “resilience.” If anything, it is indicative that—in contrast to the Trump administration's furious and explicit revocation of much of the symbolic apparatus of the Obama years and despite the fact that the Treasury backtracked on defining a schedule for the introduction of the new bill—the government has not thwarted it as a possibility (Rappeport). Even if, however, the framing of the twenty-dollar bill controversy in terms of “reparations” was to hold, what type of reparations

would it amount to? Would they be compatible with or antagonistic toward American institutionality as the rebar for past and present Black captivity? Is it imaginable for Tubman to regain the last word?

The “Women on 20s” initiative with regard to the twenty-dollar bill—especially to the extent it has exclusively framed Tubman as part of a feminist pantheon—has paid little attention to how the inscription of Black being in institutionalized memory re/presents enslaved bodies, which, incidentally, would require one to ponder what it would mean for Jackson to remain on the back of the bill. Written in the wake of the election of Donald Trump as the nation’s forty-fifth president and a tidal wave of white racial violence, this paper works through Christina Sharpe’s notion of “monstrous intimacies” to argue that the bill’s coupling is made thinkable by an iconography that has recursively (re)inscribed, mystified, and routinized the monstrosity of close encounters between enslaved and slaveholders, encounters structurally determined by racial and sexual violence underwritten by the quotidian circulation of currency in the commodification of human-like property. As a site of memory, therefore, money is uniquely suited to both alluding to the place of intimacy in the reproduction of anti-Black terror and disavowing it, through the continuous, banal familiarity of economic exchange as well as its quintessentially national symbolism. Both ratify monumentality as the unsurpassable horizon for the place of abolition in popular imagination, and only on condition that its travestied outcomes and persistent Black captivity in what Saidiya Hartman calls the “afterlife of slavery” remain unquestioned. The specific suitability of money for an operation of national self-celebration predicated on amnesia is well dissected by Lindon Barrett’s (*Blackness* 93) analysis of the intersection of Blackness and the monetary as a place where valuelessness is reinstated in the very gesture of apportioning value:

[I]t is paradoxically the very valuelessness assigned to African American bodies that enables them to stand as the ground on which speculations of and concerning value are made. Because African Americans are positioned outside the value of the fully human, they become instruments and signs by which great value is produced and measured. In sum, the valuelessness of African Americans is always proclaimed unreasonably in the name of value.

The inclusion of Tubman’s image on American money, once offered as bounty for her capture, rallies civil society around a spectacle of reconciliation. Yet, the affective investment in whiteness culminating in Trump’s election underpins the precarity, lethality, and disposability confronting demands that “Black lives matter.” As the now embattled white liberalism and the left seek in a language of racial justice and allyship with peoples of colour a coalitional path to fight back on the terrain of civil society, the question of what type of “value” is actually being circulated clearly exceeds political economy and touches upon libidinal processes, where the objectification of Blackness finds its fullest accomplishment. Jared Sexton (30) writes:

If, in the economy of race, whiteness is a form of money—the general equivalent or universal standard of value—then Blackness is its gold standard, the bottom-line guarantee represented by hard currency.¹

Like gold, which has no intrinsic monetary value, the symbolic and libidinal accumulation of Blackness makes possible the circulation of whiteness in America’s neoliberal ethico-political “marketplace of ideas.” The rest of the paper will, therefore, question the anti-blackness of American institutionality as the actual “value” circulated by the currency’s redesign. We will, in particular, first theorise how post-abolition narratives rest on making Black femaleness fungible as the quintessential object of a persistent paradigm of Black captivity. Then the proposed combination of Tubman’s and Jackson’s images in the redesigned currency will be analysed as a monstrous intimacy, or a cultural inscription of blackness in a proximity to white iconography geared at disguising enslavement into reassuring national representations. Finally, we shall reflect on the specificity of money as a cultural artefact inscribing historical memory, in this case through the production of civic controversy, into mythology and spectacle. Our conclusions will remark on the ethical and political quandaries facing the memorialization of chattel slavery, with a

¹ Jared Sexton defines “libidinal economy” as “the economy, or distribution and arrangement, of desire and identification (their condensation and displacement), and the complex relationship between sexuality and the unconscious” (qtd. in Wilderson, *Red* 9).

view at proposing Tubman's relevance to the present in the form of a yet unfinished radical questioning of American institutionality.

The Changing Same: History and Paradigm

The opening quote highlights that the incorporation of Harriet Tubman's likeness on US currency subordinates Black freedom struggles to the myth of reconciliation with America's history of enslavement. @BlakeDontCrack correctly calls out neoliberalism, which has often touted itself to be anti-racist, although a deeper reading of white liberalism, past and present, reveals how its anti-Blackness perpetuates the imago of white benevolence by symbolically gesturing at equal opportunities to sanitise the crimes of enslavement. It also eschews the acknowledgement that the dehumanisation of Black people did not cease with emancipation and civil rights legislation. The past is not past (Sharpe, *In the Wake* 9) especially to the extent that, as Frank Wilderson (*Red* 316) eloquently writes, “[N]o 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 conviction that slavery was abolished.” The failure of Reconstruction after the Civil War serves as one example of this, as well as the introduction of convict leasing and the reinscription of Blackness into criminality for carceral purposes (Haley; Childs; Browne).

Wilderson (*Red* 23) complicates notions of slavery and freedom by emphasising how they position Black people ontologically rather than historically and experientially. In that sense, Wilderson writes, human subjects have associated Blackness with abjection, objectification, and violability since before American chattel slavery and continue to anchor the freedom of non-Blacks in capacity, relationality, and social life that are not exposed to gratuitous violence and permanent dereliction. As Sharpe (*Monstrous* 15) eloquently writes, “the term *freedom* does not stand on its own, but is always freighted with being freed from something.” In contrast to the human subject's master narrative, Wilderson (*Red, White, and Black* 23) suggests that “there is no philosophically credible way to attach an experiential, a contingent, rider onto the notion of freedom when one considers the [B]lack....” The historical occurrence of emancipation changed the experiential dynamics of Black life. It has, not, however, removed enslavement as the paradigmatic condition of Black existence.

Saidiya Hartman (*Scenes* 12) describes emancipation “as both a breach with slavery and a point of transition to what looks more like the reorganisation of the plantation system than self-possession, citizenship, or liberty for the ‘freed.’” It cannot be disputed that the legalised institution of chattel slavery was abolished with the passing of the Thirteenth Amendment. The question becomes, then, what took its place? Douglas Blackmon documents how convict leasing, and all its horrors, replaced slavery. The fact that convict leasing as a general practice could develop in the face of the amendment's purported granting to Black people of citizenship and human rights, destabilizes the historical analysis of emancipation and reaffirms the need for an ontological definition of slavery, one where Blacks are “always already” non-human, redefining the question of freedom for the former slave (Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black* 18.) A more contemporary example of this phenomenon is the wanton police violence against Black, unarmed victims.

Hartman (*Scenes* 6) 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 gratuitous terror, which complicates what it means to be free and revisits 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. Regardless to the historical referents of staging the spectacle of Harriet Tubman and Andrew Jackson on the twenty-dollar bill, the discussion of what the spectacle means must be rooted in the understanding of the paradigmatic experience of Blackness in America. As Frantz Fanon (90) 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 in spectacles of subjection where the promise of Black inclusion in American civil society is mostly functional to the white effort to work through the ethical dilemmas of reconciling the monstrosity of American history (Wilderson, *Red* 249; Barchiesi 134). In this sense, Tubman does indeed “describe a locus of confounded identities, [as well as] a meeting ground of investments and privations in the national treasury of rhetorical wealth” (Spillers 203). And, while her country did not “invent” her per se, to recall Spillers formulation, Tubman’s memory has been operationalised to meet America’s needs of redemption. In order to think through Tubman’s inclusion and its racialised and gendered implications, we intend to escape history while remaining in conversation with it (Marriott 50).

Monstrous Intimacies

To grasp the imaginative performativity of Harriet Tubman’s inclusion on US currency, one must explore how it validates categories of gender and culture that inform America’s racialised gaze and its reflection of what constitutes “acceptable” Blackness:

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 favoured 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 (Lewin).

This account from *The New York Times* makes the controversy about Tubman’s monetary representation completely about gender, eluding the apparent issues of race and enslavement as pertaining to the legacy of Tubman, a Black woman. This kind of erasure is not unusual for white women’s discourses on gender that appropriate the struggles of Black women as a useful analogy. Black women’s—and womanist—indictments of such machinations have crucially verged on attempts at reclaiming Tubman, for example in the name itself of the Combahee River Collective, not as a feminist icon, but as a revolutionary operating within the incomparable and inextricable conjunction of enslavement and sexual violence that defines the paradigm of Black women’s existence outside and beyond the boundaries of gender oppression (James). Yet the erasure of Blackness by virtue of a gendered politics of claims was as true when Tubman found herself lobbying for suffrage, as it is when white women voted decisively 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 [following Trump’s election]” (cit. in Rhodan) all the more problematic. While white women may, in fact, be victims of abuse by their fathers and husbands, and make strong cases against patriarchy, those cases rest on the political capacity they have demanded on the basis of not being Black (Broeck). Gender fails, historically and contemporarily, as a unifying force for Black (and other women of colour) and white women. Beyond the fact that Tubman did not have the luxury of tailoring her gendered propriety while risking her life in liberating herself and others, as well as spying for the Union Army, the complete lack of regard for Tubman’s Blackness casts questions on her institutional incorporation into the league of national heroes, questions reinforced by a cursory review of Tubman’s relationship with the US government.

Milton C. Sernett (99), for example, 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: “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 compensation for her military service. There is an additional irony in having her image on the twenty-dollar bill since that was the exact monthly amount she was denied (Paquette). Hartman explains that reparations to the former slaves after the Civil War were pre-empted by the assumption that it was Blacks themselves to be indebted to the Union for their freedom, a “debt” that was not merely symbolic

but rather provided justification for the coercive enforcement of labour contracts. Far from repaying the debt owed to Tubman for her military service, the compensatory intentions behind her representation on the bill confirm, in travestied and offensive ways, the unpayability of what is actually due to the enslaved. Again, the United States government finds itself perpetuating a myth of inclusivity that reifies white benevolence while completely excluding the multifaceted ways in which Black people are dehumanised in the process. The myth hides the fact that Blacks must suffer in order for whites to have redemption (Wilderson, *Red* 259.) Thus, Tubman's image is appropriated to recreate the very scene of her own subjection to the anti-Blackness of the government for which she risked her life, so that America can feel "great again" as it would make money, now with Tubman's image, available for predatory lending to Black students and prospective homeowners.

The tangle of free economic enterprise and continuous Black captivity, which underpins monetary circulation, questions not only the iconic status of currency but its place in American memory. In 2000, the Associated Black Charities of Baltimore rejected a mural, depicting a gun-wielding Tubman, commissioned to artist Mike Alewitz. Commenting on the contrasting monumentalizing impulses—to avoid a celebration of weapons by a Black civic organization working in a violent area and to reclaim armed struggle as part of the legacy of the left by a white artist—Sernett (73) 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." 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; yet adding firearms to representation would harm the master's narrative, for which such details are specifically troubling to the extent they hint to the radical agency of Black people. Harriet Tubman cannot be, without disrupting America's white popular narrative, the palatable "Moses" of the Underground Railroad, and an armed fugitive who liberated other bonded people. 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 characterised as an American hero (Sernett 73). While it is well documented that she met with John Brown, Tubman is still somehow remembered as non-violent, docile even (Larson 302). Though it is important to note that there is no historical evidence to support that Tubman ever discharged her weapon, she was ready for it. 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...." (cit. in Bradford 29; see also Larson 267). Her very memorialization requires forgetting, as white abolitionists are praised for their efforts to make Tubman the representative freedwoman for their political project centred not on Black revolutionary self-determination, but on the empathy and benevolence of civil society. Distance from Blackness and Black self-determination, and the exorcising of Black revolution (Wilderson, *Red* 290), is what makes Tubman legible enough to be memorialised.

Last, but certainly not least in the repertoire of dilemmas and erasures surrounding and enabling the embrace of Tubman in the nation's imaginary intimacies, is the question of Tubman's fugitivity. Over the years, different amounts have been suggested as Tubman's bounty. Kate Larson writes that "[t]hrough 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 significant catch for southern bounty hunters" (Larson 191). From the time of her birth (perhaps from the time of her rumoured African grandmother's capture), Tubman's life was overdetermined by American money. She was purchased, sold, denied wages for her labour, and money was offered for her recapture or murder. Given the nature of this relationship, one wonders how Tubman might have possibly felt compensated by having her image on American money. Regardless, many of her living descendants (in the broad sense, since she had no children) have determined that this is nothing to celebrate; we are aligned with them.

Tubman's troubled relationship with money as a conveyor of national imagination points at a reckoning both with the role of economics in Black oppression and its articulation with forces that make Black lives

disposable and endangered. While it is clear that the wealth gap between Blacks and whites cannot easily be closed, since the bulk of the wealth amassed by white families came from the coerced labour 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 (Sharpe, *In the Wake* 8). Christina Sharpe opens her path-breaking *In the Wake* with a personal description of tending to her ailing brother as a call to the ethical demands of “wake work” for the too many Black people who have a brother, an uncle, a father, or a mother, a sister, a son, a daughter, or a cousin who have been worn down by premature deaths as well as economic oppression. Like the other forms of oppression mentioned here, an erasure occurs around why white households’ wealth is sixteen times that of Black ones (Shin). Racially segregated homeownership, education and labour markets are usually mentioned as causes of this gap. 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 economic forces are integral to the “skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment,” which for Hartman (*Lose* 6) mark the “afterlife of slavery.” Consequently, money should be read as a site of terror for Black people in the historical and the contemporary sense. Not only does Tubman’s image on money reify Black bondage, but naturalises it through the symbolic and optimistic coupling with its perpetrators. Pairing this already loaded 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.

On Spectacle

Why Jackson? Why Tubman? Especially: Why now? Christopher Lloyd suggests that the contemporary moment—the departure of Barack Obama, the election of Donald Trump and the gratuitous violence against unarmed African American by police and civilians alike—warrants “attempting to grapple with [slavery’s] memory now.” Lloyd continues: “With Tubman’s face now set to adorn the twenty-dollar bill, it attests to the widespread 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 railroad. This is a cultural memory Americans can perhaps feel good about.” While Lloyd may be onto 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, and cannot celebrate 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 financial predation, families devastated by social policy, and communities ravaged by environmental racism). It does, however, contribute to the never-ending labour of white American catharsis. Tubman must thus be appropriated as an American icon and further, “her redemption as incorporation [is] allow[ing] continued injustice to be rewritten as freedom” (Sharpe, *Monstrous* 109.) Currency, literally a symbolic down payment on a constantly deferred promise, is the ideal vehicle for this purpose, not least because of the relationality of exchange it alludes to.

Discussing Olaudah Equiano’s narrative of his transition from bondage to citizenship, Lindon Barrett (*Racial* 86-88) emphasises the central place of manumission as a contractual transaction, the quintessential relation, which, under capitalism secures violence by mystifying it as exchange. Equiano christened the birth of his new legal self as an American by pointing at the Black slave’s head impressed on the coin (named, for this reason, a “Guinea”) exchanged for his freedom. Paying in “Guineas” for his expected deliverance from social death marks, in Equiano’s words, the story of his becoming a Subject, which, however, Barrett comments, was premised on a figurative surrender and literal effacement of Equiano’s own Blackness, consigned from the brutality of the hold to the brutality of the nation-state. Tubman’s effigy in the twenty-dollar bill would similarly confirm money’s validity as a vehicle of civil relationality and citizenship, on condition of erasing Blackness and slaveness. The state-sanctioned fetishism of currency sanitises in both cases national history by reinscribing the slave’s image on the instrument of transaction to

signify a contractual “freedom” and its grounding in the very institutions that simultaneously preside over slavery and citizenship, bondage and manumission. In Tubman’s case, and, one might say, as an extreme example that confirms the general validity of our point, it is remarkable that institutionality is embodied by Andrew Jackson, a quintessential keystone for the convergence of slavery, genocide, and empire, the forces that paradigmatically define the American national experiment.

Jackson is the ultimate founding father. Having served as a soldier in the American Revolution and a general in the War of 1812, America’s seventh president was the founder of the Democratic Party, a major slave owner, and one of America’s most fervent advocates for manifest destiny and Native American removal. Indigenous genocide and Black enslavement are the structural forces, as distinct from the mere ideological or policy agendas, that made the Jacksonian Era. In the time span between the Battle of New Orleans (1815), which gave Jackson enduring fame, and his death (1845), the slave population of the United States more than doubled, to 2.5 million (it was less than half a million at Jackson’s birth.) He deployed the full strength of the federal armed forces to violently displace the Cherokees, Chickasaws, Choctaws, Creeks, and Seminoles, opening the way for the Southern plantation economy structuring the very white society that, ironically, would later appeal to states’ rights against federal encroachment on slaveowners’ power (Gudmestad.) His brutality toward those he personally owned is well documented, even by sympathetic historians. Thus Robert Remini (*Andrew Jackson* 133) writes that he ordered his family’s servant, Betty, to be publicly whipped after his wife informed him that she had been “putting on some airs, and been guilty of a great deal of impudence.” He also frequently resorted, Remini continues, to the spectacular display of recaptured escapees in chains. While primary accounts of Jackson’s behaviour 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 (Remini, *The Jacksonian* 62.) 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 limb to distribute such “incendiary” materials speaks to his own courage, and very likely, to the miserable nature of his condition as Jackson’s property.

Similarly, the first major piece of legislation passed under Jackson’s administration was the Removal Act of 1830 (Remini, *The Jacksonian* 46.) As an eyewitness account of the Cherokee “trail of tears” by a militiaman later recalled: “I fought through the Civil War and have seen men shot to pieces and slaughtered by thousands, but the Cherokee removal was the cruelest I ever saw” (cit. in Remini, *The Jacksonian* 51). In other words, by overtly aligning his own persona and the nascent American nation with racial violence and terror, Jackson paradigmatically opposed everything Tubman stood for², which is why their combination can only perpetuate the monstrosity of the (non)relationship between Black and White generally, and the enslaved and slaveowners specifically. In Wilderson’s (*Red* 5) terms,³ Jackson finds himself in an antagonistic lockstep not only with Black people, owning three hundred slaves on his Tennessee plantation, the Hermitage (and half that number at one time, more than even the average wealthy planter), but also with Native Americans, having overseen their forced removal, thus setting the tone for the simultaneously “ongoing tragedy” of anti-Black violence and the environmental devastation today most visible in the predicament of the Sioux “water protector” resisting the Dakota Access Pipeline project.

The public canonisation of Jackson and his era has decisively contributed to making its violence “as American as apple pie,” to recall the famous quote often attributed to H. Rap Brown. Historical memory has thus sanctioned for Black people an enduring reality where in Christina Sharpe’s (*In the Wake* 15) words,

² Remini well represents a mainstream Jacksonian historiography, which has for long disguised the public and private horrors of Jackson’s beliefs and actions through the professional quest for a balanced historical contextualization. Therefore, he praises, in the paragraph before the episode here recounted, that “Jackson treated his slaves decently,” giving authority to his late will that “My negroes shall be treated humanely.” Remini refers to Hannah, a woman enslaved at the Hermitage, as a “faithful servant,” while describing the plantation itself as a functional and productive workplace.

³ Wilderson defines antagonism as “an irreconcilable struggle between entities, or positions, the resolution of which is not dialectical but entails the obliteration of one of the positions” and conflict as “a rubric of problems that can be posed and conceptually solved.”

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.

Thus, remembering Jackson as an American hero requires that the terror and murder his nation perpetrated against African Americans and Native Americans become familiar and “everyday” while their consequent practical realities are erased.

As for Tubman’s image joining Jackson’s on the bill, Wilderson (*Red* 42) 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, only contrived and mendacious recognition in a *tableau* of comparison with one of America’s founding fathers. Jackie Calmes writes 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 Tubman as formerly enslaved and once fugitive from the United States. Similarly, it is forgotten that Jackson held slaves and was a staunch advocate for the citizens’ 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, which is necessary to the monstrosity of this monetary intimacy as it sanctifies the very device—money—slaveowners like Jackson used to transact Black flesh. In eluding Tubman’s marronage and Jackson’s pro-slavery position, Calmes not only endorses the weaponisation of money as a tool against Black fugitivity but also forgets the significance of the overseeing 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 in order to free her niece and her niece’s children (Larson 301.) Yet, the ultimate escaped 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 “celebration” on the twenty-dollar bill that confirms her status and that of her living descendants as enslaved persons, always already suspect and thus always already policed, as Tubman is figuratively *disarmed* and policed by Jackson.

In her book, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, Hartman (4) wants to “illuminate the terror of the mundane and quotidian rather than exploit the shocking spectacle.” Following this line of reasoning, 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 “staged.” Tubman was not just appointed; she was entered into a competition with other historical female figures. Apparently, a representative sample of the same white American population that supported overwhelmingly Donald Trump’s rhetoric also responded positively to Tubman, which is why, the public is told, she was selected. Significantly, Trump announced his qualms with 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 (Rhodan). 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 on equal footing into the nation’s master narrative, as well as its making good on a long overdue debt to Tubman for her service. But it is Jackson to be “the bearer of civil society’s discontents; he stages its ethical dilemmas” (Wilderson, *Red* 290.) 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” (Rhodan), as well as the contemporary subjection of Black people.

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 has seen mass incarceration enslave more African Americans than in 1850 (Alexander 180). Bresha Meadows, a fourteen-year-old girl, was criminally charged for killing her abusive father and imprisoned in a juvenile detention

centre (Jeltsen.) Yet all six police officers involved in the murder of Freddie Gray were acquitted (Stolberg and Bidgood), the case of Walter Scott’s killing by police ended in a mistrial (Berman), and, while Donald Trump and vice-president Mike Pence have praised the civility of Nazis and white supremacists defending Confederate monuments in Charlottesville, the state underwrites societal power to legally, verbally, and physically harm Blacks and other marginalized people. The effect of “monument time” is in all these cases to “freeze” American history in the uneventfulness of white self-congratulation and anti-Black violence. The spectacle of Tubman’s effigy on the bill acts, in relation to this frozen temporality, as an illusory “event” portending as a celebration of freedom what in fact is a civic pageant of diversity and multiculturalism, where Black presences are admitted insofar they serve white ethical dilemmas and suffocate the radicalism of Black voices as well as the plight of Tubman’s descendants. 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” (Sharpe, *In the Wake* 12). Black people (women especially) will still be compensated for their labour inequitably vis-a-vis their white counterparts and will inevitably see less Tubmans, as some hip hop artists—as in John Fuggin Dough’s *We Want Them Tubmans* (2018)—are already referring to the new bill. Money, then, will still be a site of oppression.

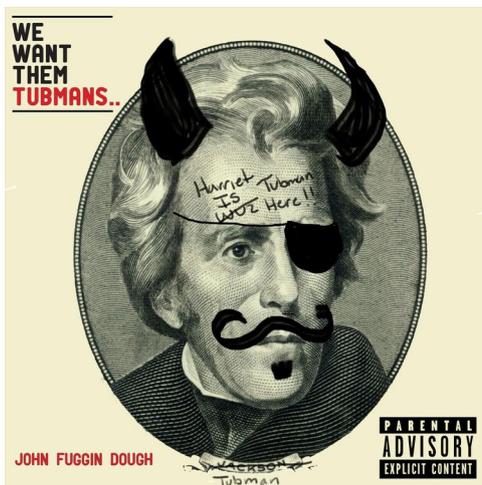


Figure 2. Cover art for John Fuggin Dough’s *Tubmans*.

Conclusion

In honour of her own fugitivity, how can Tubman’s Black descendants take her memory and run with it? It can be doubted whether protesting the bill, hence participating in civil society’s conflicts, is a meaningful way to honour Tubman’s life and legacy, although we are not against it. We prefer, however, the way collective energy has been used to rally for Black Lives Matter, a cause Tubman would surely support, as well as the use of social media as a unifying platform for mobilisation against the various forms of state-sanctioned tyranny against people of colour, women, and the LGBTQIA community. Counternarratives are important and, despite their overshadowing by mass media and racialised and gender-based marginalisation, they are being written. Mainstream opinion makers in outlets like the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* have hailed Tubman and Jackson symbolically joining forces as a gesture consonant with the progressive feelings of a majority of Americans. Black voices, especially in the social media but also sometimes in the more established press, have lambasted the monetary operation for its hypocritical piousness, in the best-case scenario, when not an assault on what Tubman represented. Thus the new bill has been called “chump change” (Mannie), an act of “erasure” (Savali), and distorting symbolism aimed at using Tubman as a brand for racial capitalism and its inequalities (Jones). 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?” (*In the Wake* 20.) Perhaps the most meaningful intervention that could be made on behalf of Harriet

Tubman is to correct the record, excavate her voice from the annals of history, promote fugitivity, and lastly, disavow the multilayered monstrosity of the intimacy alluded to by pairing her with Jackson on money once used to sanction her purchase, bounty, and bondage.

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