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Notes on slavery and stripping black agency
2/05/2025

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On slave ships, hurling ourselves into oceans.
Slitting the throats of our captors.
We took their whips and their ships.
Blood flowed in the Atlantic and it wasn't all ours.
We carried it on.

— Assata Shakur

“Autonomous Submersion” a term coined by BARS members (Charlie and Semiyah) is described as a courageous act of resistance by enslaved Afrikans that chose death by sea or ocean, rather than enduring white involuntary captivity on slave voyages to the Americas. It is viewed as the ultimate act of disobedience and defiance. This term is used in reference to the mutinies, uprisings, and self-sacrifices that took place on ocean vessels throughout the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Autonomous because to be defiant and disruptive gave them back their autonomy, their choice. To rebel and go against the grain knowing they were surrounded by nothing but whites and water was an act of the ultimate refusal. An ancestral form of direct action. A refusal to be docile, civil, or passive in the face of insurmountable violence. The privilege of imagining

new beginnings was no more. There was now only time to take back what little autonomy they had left and choose their endings. Submersion because the water would put an end to the endless horrors of being subdued to someone else's sinister whims. For our ancestors, perhaps the ocean invoked a plethora of emotions like fear, comfort, or relief. Fear because if one chose to engage in autonomous submersion, the ocean would either sink them under its dark depths or guide them to shore somewhere. Comfort because some believed water spirits would take them back home. Relief because when they jumped or fought it would cause a disruption and sabotage their enslaver's scheme to profit off their bodies.

To be black, to be enslaved, was to be stripped of your agency in a way that no human being should ever be. The oppressor did not believe the enslaved was capable of choosing how they lived, when they ate, let alone who to mate. And yet, after all possible forms of autonomy had been stripped, our ancestors found a loophole in this sinister clause. They knew they were more valuable to their captors able-bodied and alive. They also knew that death may be inevitable, not even a choice at all, considering their inhumane conditions. Therefore, if your oppressor is hellbent on choosing how the rest of your life will be lived, then the only option left could be to choose how you die—autonomous submersion.

In an article titled “The Spanish Slave Ship *Carlotta* ‘De-nounced’ by a Shark,” Afro-Brazilian historian Aderivaldo Ramos de Santana discusses how it is estimated that about 1.8 million bodies were consumed by sharks over three centuries of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. This transpired due to enslaved Afrikans who became ill from the inhumane conditions and were thrown overboard, jumped after deciding that a watery grave was better than bondage, and many who chose insurrection. Slave ships left behind copious amounts of blood to the point it altered the shark's migration patterns.

Whether through autonomous submersion or the stripping of black agency, our ancestors throughout the Afrikan diaspora en-

dured some of the most horrific crimes against humanity, both on land and at sea. Enslaved afrikans did not have many choices once they were kidnapped, shackled, and stacked upon one another. Their options, outside of sitting in fear and wading in the grief of what was stolen from them, were few. Many came to the dark realization that they do have a choice: they can choose to perish. They need not wait for approval or confirmation from their oppressor on how or when they died, how high they jumped from the ship's deck, if they fought back in groups or resisted alone. This was them reckoning with death and coming to terms with their current situation. An untimely and unfair ultimatum.

Self-immolation (sacrificing oneself by fire as protest) obviously differs from Autonomous Submersion as it is a method more commonly practiced by modern social justice activists to raise awareness about global injustices. Additionally, it involves death by fire rather than by water. However, the key difference is that unlike those bound and subjected to slavery, self-immolators are not physically restrained or viewed as property. While modern protesters have multiple resistance options, enslaved people on ships, had very few due to constant surveillance and physical constraints.

Autonomous Submersion doesn't seek to embellish, but rather emphasize that in a world drenched in anti-blackness, Afrikan freedom has always come with a price and a sacrifice. The ultimate cost being one's life as a means of freeing themselves from the oppression they face. Our ship bound ancestors exemplified some of the first visions of black autonomy. Their ability to reconcile with death and resist in the midst of struggle is beyond worthy of recognition. May we all be as brave and resilient as the original black autonomists.

Notes On Slavery and The Stripping Of Black Agency

Stealing away one's right to decide for themselves how they will live, use their labor, use their body is the act of stripping their agency. The enslaved experienced what it means to no longer have ownership of themselves. The moment they were kidnapped,

chained, and confined all autonomy ceased to exist. The black body was now a spectacle; a thing to be broken, worked, raped, paraded, and subdued. The black womb was no longer the enslaved's own, it was now her master's meant to be used for producing more "property." The broad black body was only meant for lynching, lifting, and lashes when it stepped out of line.

Black enslaved children had their purpose pre-determined before even coming out of the womb. They did not need to wonder about what they would do because their labor and body had already been accounted for. There is no childhood for the slave since that would insinuate an environment where a child is free to do childlike things. For example, girls as young as twelve and thirteen (and even younger) were subjected to sexual exploitation. Forced reproduction was a dehumanizing act that many young women endured. This despicable and unforgiving practice was created to increase the plantation owner's power and pockets. In this mass raping event, motherhood was not a choice—it was a literal demand.

Enslaved disabled Afrikans (those who were physically disabled, blind, or deaf) faced severe oppression because they couldn't work in the same way as able-bodied Afrikans. After the American Civil War and the alleged "abolition of slavery" during the Reconstruction period, state governments abandoned and ignored them simply because they deemed them useless and unprofitable. Many former slaves who were unable to work were left vulnerable and remained under the control of former slaveholders who still held power over them. Ableism and eugenics still persist today so imagine what it must have looked like during slavery. Some of our ancestors were unable to participate in a rebellion, an uprising, unable to even attempt to escape the hell they endured on stolen land. Many had no choice but to stay with the immoral slave master who would continue to find ways to utilize their existence. A foolish and abhorrent enslaver who would somehow consider themselves "charitable" for allowing a disabled negro to stay with them. Meanwhile the able-bodied free slave would struggle to

find their way in a world intent on making sure that subjugation would follow them, even after the law claimed they were allowed to live life on their own accord.

In Saidiya Hartman's book "Lose Your Mother" she writes: "In every slave society, slave owners attempted to eradicate the slave's memory, that is, to erase all the evidence of an existence before slavery. This was as true in Africa as in the Americas. A slave without a past had no life to avenge. No time was wasted yearning for home, no recollections of a distant country slowed her down as she tilled the soil, no image of her mother came to mind when she looked into the face of her child."

This highlights how during slavery the stripping of Black agency wasn't solely about physical domination, it was also an attack on the human psyche as well. Clearly, this was a form of psychological warfare. Memories were reserved for the whites, the well-born, and the well-to-do, not for Black folks. After all, what good is a book to a negro who isn't legally allowed to read and write? The evil brilliance of white supremacy has always been this method of mental manipulation. The palm coloreds knew it would be a dangerous thing if the enslaved ever realized they were the product of centuries of genocide, rape, exploitation, forced subjugation, Westernized religious indoctrination, and pseudo-scientific racism used to justify anti-Blackness.

Slavery has left an immovable stain on this country. Any attempts to wash it are futile as blood will forever be imbedded in this land. No amount of atonement could ever heal the wounds colonization has left on enslaved black folks and their descendants. For some, the ultimate sacrifice was made with their lives and for others, freedom was deferred by disability. The history of the enslaved begs the question: what are we willing to relinquish? And if not that, are we prepared for what we will have to endure? The answers to these are not easy, but thankfully our ancestors allow us the privilege of using our history as a light. A light to guide us towards liberation from the dark plantation we currently inhabit.