

**Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 42-43**

[On the omnipresence of terror:]

...the most invasive form of slavery's violence lie not in [the] exhibitions of "extreme" suffering or in what we see but in what we don't see. Shocking displays too easily obfuscate the more mundane and socially endurable forms of terror. In the benign scenes of plantation life (which comprised much of the Southern and, ironically, abolitionist literature of slavery) reciprocity and recreation obscure the quotidian routine of violence. The bucolic scenes of plantation life and the innocent amusements of the enslaved, contrary to our expectations, succeeded not in mollifying terror but in assuring and sustaining its presence.

Rather than glance at the most striking spectacle with revulsion or through tear-filled eyes, we do better to cast our glance at the more mundane displays of power and the border where it is difficult to discern domination from recreation. Bold instances of cruelty are too easily acknowledged and forgotten, and cries quieted to an endurable hum. By disassembling the "benign" scene, we confront the everyday practice of domination, the nonevent, as it were. Is the scene of slaves dancing and fiddling for their masters any less inhumane than that of slaves sobbing and dancing on the auction block? If so, why? Is the effect of power any less prohibitive? Or coercive? Or does pleasure mitigate coercion? Is the boundary between terror and pleasure clearer in the [slave] market than in the quarters or at the "big house"? Are the most enduring forms of cruelty those seemingly benign? Is the perfect picture of the crime the one in which the crime goes undetected? If we imagine for a moment a dusky fiddler entertaining at the big house, master cutting a figure among the dancing slaves, the mistress egging him on with her laughter, what do we see?... (42)

Behind the façade of innocent amusements lay the violence the master class assiduously denied; but what else could jigs danced in command performances be but the gentle indices of domination? (43)