

Emanuel Stults

Historical Studies

Thesis Advisor: Hal Holladay

Representation and Violence in Antebellum New Orleans Slavery

I am focusing on antebellum slavery and how description was used as a political tool within that society, particularly descriptions of black slaves and their bodies. My interest is primarily in Newspapers and other mass-distributed printed ephemera, looking at the implicit threats of violence, the violence of description and the portrayals of violence. My method will be to survey bodies of sources in an attempt to both look at trends as well as various mannerisms in the media themselves. I already know that I will be focusing in part on New Orleans newspapers during the two decades leading up to the civil war, so I will have to begin with a history surrounding those newspapers as well as limit my other research to be within that same timeframe. However, I am not situating my thesis within a greater narrative of American history; instead I am exploring slavery within a Marxist metanarrative of the 19th century's reconfiguration of American Capital.

By the end of this thesis I will have some understanding of how description could be used by social groups to achieve their ends. However, I also want to address the theoretics of how description can be a violent act; how it can be both destructive and productive and how it can remake human bodies. In my thesis, I want to explore how description can be used as a violent act against another human being. For this I will need both theoretical aptitude as well as an extensive knowledge of the discipline of slave studies. My work will also be very heavily influenced by doctrine Marxist dialectical materialist methodology of history, and will draw on many theorists such as Gramsci. Conversely, I am convinced by the arguments of those who discuss the so-called "erotics of power;" those who claim that power is not solely about enacting agendas but instead is about the desire and the pleasure associated with wielding power. This focus of study leads me to another set of theorists who may help provide me with theoretical underpinnings and, in the case of some, methodological guidance as well.

I have already done research on the runaway slave ads and the advertisements for the sale of slaves in two antebellum New Orleans newspapers. This summer I spent eight weeks in New Orleans reading issues of the *Daily Picayune* and the *New Orleans Bee* published between the years of 1840 and 1865. I studied the demographics of the slaves who ran away, looking at amount of reward, frequency of occurrence over time, and the written description used to identify the slave in question. I also looked at the way newspapers treated slaves and African Americans in articles, and looked at how they covered or failed to cover slave rebellions. I will use these sources both to inform theoretical inquiries but also to serve as a backbone for the rest of the thesis. I will use them to explore the delusions and desires of slave masters concerning their slaves, and I will link those to the various factors that laid the conditions for these advertisements.

From here I will delve into comparative work, comparing the portrayals of slaves in New Orleans papers against those in other cities. I will also examine the imagery in pictures and descriptions of bodies with an emphasis on violence. My comparative work will have to reach beyond just southern newspapers, though. I will have sections on political cartoons and slave narratives as a way of balancing any analysis of southern descriptive apparatuses. This analysis will make room for discussion of the various levels of conflict in which description is both a tool and a battleground—both between North and South and between masters and slaves. These are struggles that got played out in newspapers, advertisements, propaganda and other printed media.