



## Countervisuality in Black Resistance and Abolition of Slavery in America

Simi Nath

Research Scholar, Department of English, University of Delhi

[Siminath4@gmail.com](mailto:Siminath4@gmail.com)

**Abstract:** This paper explores the political mobilization and Black resistance in America from 1830s to 1860 that led to abolition of slavery and seeks to link it to Nicholas Mirzeof’s idea of visuality and counter visuality. The term visuality, now a popular keyword for the study of visual culture, is redefined by Nicholas Mirzeof in his essay “The Right to Look: Counterhistory of Visuality” (2011). The term visuality is coined by Scottish historian Thomas Carlyl in 1840 to mean the “Hero’s” visualizing the history where people do not have any subjectivity but are represented. Defensive mobilization occurred among black people due to years of alienation, political exclusion and hostile racism. This defensive mobilization is a result of collective consciousness which Mirzeof calls “visual commons” – a means for social change. Black agitation for the support of abolition of slavery and freedom of African-Americans, led to an emerging leadership which can be decoded as counterheroism of what Thomas Carlyl means by the “Hero”.

**Key Words:** Visuality, Countervisuality, Resistance, Slavery.

**Introduction:** According to Mirzeof, the source of the resonance of visuality with visual culture is that both are modes of representing imperial culture and a means of resistance. This resistance is the accumulation of what Mirzeof calls countervisuality.

Visuality has three domains- slave plantations, the battlefield and the imperial missions. He writes – “Visuality’s first domains were the slave plantations, monitored by the surveillance of the overseer, the surrogate of the sovereign...From the late eighteen century onward, visualizing was the hallmark of the modern general as the battlefield became too extensive and complex for any one person physically to see...British imperial visuality was organized by an army of missionaries bringing light to darkness by means of the Word, actively imagining themselves to be heroic subjects” (Mirzeof, 475). Countervisuality is the visualization of subjectivity by the black people and their refusal to be represented. Countervisuality is the writing of history from the perspective of the other through a collective engagement in prolonged protests, spearheaded by the leaders or the counterheroes of slave emancipation and supported by the Northern power elite. This resistance of the commons challenged the apparatus of the sovereign, demanded for freedom as well as a redistribution of property.

With a collective Black consciousness, emerged a Black nationalist ideology with emphasis on unity among black people throughout America, based on their common traditions, ancestry and their common goal for liberation. This national ideology and collective consciousness brought all



black people under the same rubric of struggle that led to greater mobilization. Black resistance not only demanded for liberation from oppressive forces, but at the same time a reconciliation with the democratic values of America. Early Black resistance thus became a powerful dynamic of black history, a counter force against the oppressive capitalist system.

The Visuality of slavery constitutes of the elongated slave plantations, jailhouses for the runaway slaves, and spectacular punishment. Here the black people only stand as a representation of hardcore labour enforced upon them by the white authorities who stand as the subjects that visualizes the whole doctrine of slavery and the fate of the slaves. But there existed a dialectic force between oppression and resistance to that oppression. The countervisuality of the black people amalgamates into a Black mobilization that gained momentum both in the newly formed African-American communities in the North as well as among the Slave communities in the South. The kind of oppression determined the form of resistance in both North and Southern states of America. In the north the oppression chiefly culminated in the form of racism while in the South, oppression of the Black community was intrinsically in the form of forced labour, sexual harassment, economic exploitation etc. that led to the formation of the institution of slavery. Slave rebellion in the South was not only in the form of political protest but actual political violence. In the North, the slave rebellion was marked by underground railroad construction, slave rescue and political protest. The slave rebellion is a kind of “visual commons” that Mirzoeff talks about in his “The Right to Look: Counterhistory of Visuality”. This rebellion is an outright refusal to be represented, and an overt assertion of Black subjectivity. The slave rebellion and consequent abolition of slavery is thus very integral to the Black resistance.

The nature of resistance varied depending upon the strictness of the White masters, the personalities of both the slaves and the masters and the nature of oppression. The slaves resisted both on an individual basis and as a collective on a day to day basis. Not attending to commands, slowing down their pace of work, not working when overseers are not supervising, faking sickness, attacking the overseer and running away from the site of work were the mostly used defense mechanism by the slaves. Running away was the most conspicuous among them, visible as an outright form of protest. These kinds of resistance, though may seem insignificant on individual level, triggers a bigger revolution. Political scientist James C. Scott, in his *Weapons of the Weak*, explains that in a society where with hugely unbalanced power hierarchy, the weak often fight back with “small arms of fire”. Their methods could range from “foot dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance” (Scott, p.36) etc. Slaves often engaged in illicit trade-buying liquor from whites and selling them, to strengthen the slave economy. Another means used by them was that they exploited the disunity among White slave-owners, specially between couples, and between slave-owners and overseers, to strengthen their own cause. These methods do not end the oppression but they impact the cause of resistance though in a marginal way. The slave-owners controlled the movement of the slaves by employing poor White men as patrols. Often, the fugitives had to kill these patrols to run away from the bondage. However, women didn't



get the liberty of free movement as much as men as concerns about keeping close to one's child restricted women from that choice. Men were found as fugitives mostly running away alone. Escaping from the surveillance of the Whites didn't always mean running to the Northern districts as it was always a risky business. Fugitives often moved a small distance and hid in some forest area. Running away doesn't only mean protesting at an individual level, it de established the regime of slavery pillar by pillar. As the slaves started to run away with the help of slave rescue organizations and underground railways, the economy of the slave regime which was fully dependent on the labor of the slaves started to fall apart. Most of the slaveowners had undergone bankruptcy after the slave resistance gained the form of a mass rebellion.

Despite being free, the legacy of slavery among African-Americans determined their way of life, with racism woven into the social fabric of America. Economically and politically exploited free slaves got a subordinate position in American society with minimal citizenship rights to exercise. Because of restricted laws against racial discrimination, Black lives were almost invisible, at the edge of existence, with constant fear of re-enslavement and day to day racial discrimination. There existed a dialectical relationship between White supremacy and Black subordination. "Legal and extralegal discrimination restricted northern Negroes in virtually every phase of existence. Where laws were lacking or ineffectual, public opinion provided its own remedies." (Litwack, p.64). Oppression worked in accordance with the economic and political sphere. In the North, with growing industrialization, a complex economic structure developed where many skilled White as well as Blacks worked as industrial labour. But Whites' protest against the existence of the Blacks in the work place led to further impoverishment of the Black community. This economic quandary could not be represented at the State because of restricted suffrage. "In 1835, with an estimated population of 15,061, a mere 84 could exercise [voting] right, and in 1855, only 100 of the 11,840 Blacks in New York could cast ballots." (P.S. Foner, p. 207).

The legacy of slavery kept alive by social alienation, political discrimination and economic exploitation were the causes of Black counter-resistance, at the heart of which lied collective mobilization. Black church and Black press were some institutions that were formed due to a collective mobilization. These spaces were used as a political arena as well as a space for moral redemption to call for a unified Black consciousness and political protest. Racial unity was called for in order to protest for material rights of the Blacks such as right to education, job, suffrage, o property rights. The Black churches spearheaded in mobilizing political protests, raising funds for social organizations of the Blacks and abolition movements. This Black unity and collective mobilization worked as a vehicle of political empowerment and social change. With several Black ministers at the forefront, the Blacks as a collective, engaged in a continuous agitation for abolition of slavery and political empowerment. For economic empowerment, the Black community as a collective mass, formed various mutual benevolent societies in the north. These societies became the economic backbone of the Black communities. These separate apparatuses were needed because of severe competition at the workspace with the Whites. With European migration, jobs



for Black people almost became extinct. These societies helped in upgrading the economic condition of the Blacks by offering pensions for the old and widows, loan for Black entrepreneurs, funding for schools for Black children, raised funds for abolitionist organizations in tandem with black churches. These societies worked as a vehicle for collective resistance and political struggle by the Blacks with a common goal of abolition.

Black Visuality came to the forefront with the establishment of the black press from where spearheaded political activism and struggle for liberation. In 1827, the first Black Newspaper *Freedom's Journal* came out. The newspaper became a mouthpiece for the freedom struggle of the Blacks. Collective resistance and a denial for being represented is clearly visible in the agendas of the paper. "We wish to plead our own cause. Too much have others spoken for us." (*Freedom's Journal*, 16-03-1827). The newspaper also criticized the government for the superficial freedom of the free Blacks together with overtly agitating the cause of abolition.

The abolition movement persisted with the dual effort of overt organizational support, as well as covert operations of illegal slave rescue committees. The underground railroads, the vigilance committees were an integral part of struggle for abolition. In 1838, for example, an all-female vigilance committee was formed with supplied food, shelter and financial aid to the fugitives. These illegal operations helped in the success of this collective effort at a faster pace. Black social organizations and these vigilance channels directed thousands of enslaved to the way of liberation. With the help of this mass, Black resistance gained a stronger momentum for political struggle.

### **Bibliography**

- Foner, P. S., *History of Black Americans: From the Emergence of the Cotton Kingdom to the Eve of the Compromise of 1850*, Vol 2, Greenwood Press, Westpot, CT, 1983.
- James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, New Heahen: Yale University Press, 1985, pp. 27-36.



- Jones, Kelly Houston. ““A Rough, Saucy Set of Hands to Manage’: Slave Resistance in Arkansas.” *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, vol. 71, no. 1, 2012, pp. 1–21. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23187813>. Accessed 15 Aug. 2022.
- Litwack, L.F., *North of Slavery: The Negro in the Free States, 1790-1860*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1961.
- Mirzoeff, Nicholas. “The Right to Look.” *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 37, no. 3, 2011, pp. 473–96. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.1086/659354>. Accessed 12 Aug. 2022.
- Mirzoeff, Nicholas. “On Visuality”, *Journal of Visual Culture*, Vol.5, Sage Publication, London, 2006.
- Oakes, James. “The Political Significance of Slave Resistance.” *History Workshop*, no. 22, 1986, pp. 89–107. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4288720>. Accessed 15 Aug. 2022.
- Paquette, Robert L. “Social History Update: Slave Resistance and Social History.” *Journal of Social History*, vol. 24, no. 3, 1991, pp. 681–85. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3787851>. Accessed 15 Aug. 2022.