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The Yale Review, Volume 108, Number 4, Winter 2020, pp. 128-145 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/tyr.2020.0018>



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The hauntologies of slavery

Jonah Mixon-Webster



WHILE AT A DINNER PARTY in New Orleans on October 22, 2017, a seer named Sarah Barnes whom I'd just met days before in Alabama asks me, "Can I tell you something?" Says she can see everyone's ancestors, guardian spirits, and for some reason mine are coming through clear with a message. Says something like, "They're all men. They all stand one by one in a line without end, with one hand reaching forward to hold the shoulder of the man in front. They all stand like this — a link — until they get to you."

IN FLINT, Michigan, during the summer of 1995, I sat at a kitchen table eating something, or doing something, playing with something,

when looking down and without reason I reach over my chest to my right shoulder and find fingers, a few knuckles, then the entire hand. I shudder-slink and look back and see my mother at the counter a few feet away; spinning my head forward, I see my sister at the table sitting before me. No one else around.

The next day in New Orleans, after I wake, Sarah writes to me: “Your guardians appeared to me in a dream. They all stood on the walls of a wooden room around your mother. A question was asked before I arrived. But then next, your mother placed a baby Moses in a basket, and that was the only answer.” She had no way of knowing that my father’s name is Moses, so I took the dream and ran with it. Hungry for the vision and its tattered sight of box-braided figures, signaling the causal chain of my body and its namesake of settlements. And how can I not see any of this as a call toward lineage and other intimacies, given that the majority of men on the Mixon side of my family were some type of non-existent—either never-born or dead. Uncles, grandfathers, other cousins, would-be brothers, etc., and nowhere. In time since, I still imagine them—a clear, recursive folding in my headframe—a sheet of Black specters after, and most certainly, before me—in warped wading hymn-haw—waving.

ON DECEMBER 5, 2019, I drive to Ann Arbor from Lansing to meet another man—another African American in his thirties named Marc, who ends up inviting me to go to Africa with him while he’s on the continent for work. Two weeks before Marc and I met for the first time, I dreamt that I was riding in a jeep with a man who looked like him, and that we were so distracted by laughter that we ended up crashing into an African safari kiosk. This seems like another unction to go along with, and we arrange for me to meet him in Dakar, Senegal. Moved by the anticipation of going back to Africa for the first time, I begin to further look for and uncover the histories of my body which have been lost through the machinations of slavery and abandon.

My mother had told me that during the 2015 All Mixon Family

Reunion (a reunion of the Black and white Mixons) it was discovered that our family originated from the Mixon Family Plantation, which was first located in South Carolina and then, via additional government land grants, spread to Alabama. Searching for as much information as possible about the plantations, I discovered the last will and testament of Micah Mixon, the founding patriarch, and the slave narrative of Eliza Evans, a formerly enslaved person on the Mixon Plantation in Selma, Alabama, documented through the Federal Writers' Project. I draw my eyes all over and through, back and forth between the texts, endlessly possessed, imagining—unable to see otherwise—

From the Will of Micah Mixon
Darlington District, South Carolina
March 14, 1805

In the name of God Amen. I Micah MIXON of the State of South Carolina in Darlington District Planter Being in perfect mind and memory Thanks be given unto God calling into mind the mortality of my body and knowing that it is appointed for all men Once to die I make and ordain this my last will and testament. That is to say, Principally and first of all I give and Recommend my Soul unto the hands of Almighty God that gave it and my Body I recommend to the Earth to be Buried in a Christian decent Burial at the discretion of my Executors. Nothing doubting but at the general Resurrection I shall receive the same again by the Mighty power of God. And as touching such Worldly Estate wherewith it has pleased God to bless me in this life; I give, Demise and dispose of the same in the following manner and form;—

...Item. I give and bequeath to my son Jehu MIXON one half the use profit and increase of one Negro man called BIG SAM one Negro woman called RACHEL to him and his heirs forever. I also give and bequeath to my son Jehu MIXON my black smith tools.

...Item. I give and bequeath to my son John MIXON one

hundred acres of land called HEARON's old place and fifty three acres joining that lying part in the cypress bud tract Act. It being part of Seventy Eight acres that I had Rights signed by Elias DUBOSE, One Bright Bay Horse and one bay year old horse. One feather bed and Boulster two blankets & two sheets. Also one hundred acres of land more or less on the upper side of the Long Branch it being the remainder contained in the deed that William MIXON's land is taken out off all on the upper side of said Branch in said deed. Also one Negro girl called LILL and her issue and increases to him His heirs forever —

From the Slave Narrative of Eliza Evans

McAlester, Oklahoma

Age 87

I sho' remember de days when I was a slave and belonged to de best old Master what ever was, Mr. John Mixon. We lived in Selma, Dallas County, Alabama.

My grandma was a refugee from Africa. You know dey was white men who went slipping 'round and would capture or entice black folks onto their boats and fetch them over here and sell 'em for slaves. Well, grandma was a little girl 'bout eight or nine years old and her parents had sent her out to get wood. Dey was going to have a feast. Dey was going to roast a baby. Wasn't that awful? Well, they captured her and put a stick in her mouth. The stick held her mouth wide open so she wouldn't cry out. When she got to de boat she was so tired out she didn't do nothing.

They was a lot of more Colored folks on de boat. It took about four months to get across on de boat and Mr. John Mixon met the boat and bought her. I think he gave five hundred dollars for her. She was named Gigi, but Master John called her Gracie. She was so good and they thought so much of her dat they gave her a grand wedding when she was married. Master John told her he'd never sell none of her chillun. He kept dat promise and he never did sell any

of her grandchillun either. He thought it was wrong to separate famblys. She was one hundred and three years old when she died. I guess her mind got kind of feeble 'cause she wandered off and fell into a mill race and was drowned.

In no way am I even sure, listener, how to attend to this matter and give you the full host of affects I must contain in attempt to reconcile these narratives. I can confess, I am still in pain from touching this archive that now lives in my body, this micro—grand narrative of American slavery now, and *now* in this particular and peculiar way, I have a map to a true and resonant sadness of my findings. And yet what I found, found me in return—with my face toward the water.

ON JANUARY 20, 2020, I began the seventeen-hour trip to Dakar. To be honest, I didn't necessarily think that Dakar was the start or would be the end of tracing my familial heritage. All I knew was that I was being sent to Africa regardless, that my body needed to be there. And perhaps what I feel I should now share about this voyage, listener, is that everything happened as it should.

With America's mouth, Marc greets me outside the airport and asks (just after I step from the plane, just after I smile gibberishly through immigration, just after customs), "How do you feel, being in Africa for the first time?" After an hour and fifteen minutes I say, "Insignificant." And of course, I feel like an American, and yes, the smog and its steadied fumes sticking up my nosebrush backfire. A halo of dust around the city—the same matte black hole in our heads. Small clearing of tiny air to breathe. We share that too.

—Item. I give and bequeath to my Son Micah MIXON two hundred acres of land that I had Rights signed by William BELK and two hundred acres secured by myself lying on both sides of the Long Branch, also one Negro girl called Rose & her issue & increase also one Negro boy called CUFFY for the term of ten years. Then for the said Negro boy CUFFY to be returned unto

my estate & to be disposed of as is to be mentioned herein afterwards. One Bright Bay Horse. One Feather bed and Boulster, two blankets & two sheets to him & his heirs forever.

...Item. I give and Bequeath unto my son Samuel MIXON the plantation and tract of land whereon I now live & all my other lands lying joining of it on the side of the Long Branch except some land in the bypass to be mentioned herein afterwards. Also one Negro woman called PATT and one boy child call'd LEWIS with their increase & issue one feather bed & Boulster two Blankets & two sheets also one half the use profit and increase of one gray mare & one bay filly that came of said mare to him & his heirs forever.

Master John Mixon had two big plantations. I believe he owned about four hundred slaves, chillun and all. He allowed us to have church one time a month with de white folks and we had prayer meeting every Sunday. Sometimes when de men would do something like being sassy or lazy and dey knowed dey was gonna be whipped, dey'd slip off and hide in de woods. When dey'd slip back to get some food dey would all pray for 'em dat Master wouldn't have 'em whipped too hard, and for fear the patroller would hear 'em they'd put their faces down in a dinner pot. I'd sit out and watch for the Patroller. He was a white man who was appointed to catch runaway niggers. We all knew him. His name was Howard Campbell. He had a big pack of dogs. The lead hound was named Venus. There was five or six in the pack, and they was vicious too.

AGAIN, everything happened as it should. Since the apartment Marc and I shared in Guediawaye didn't have Wi-Fi, he secures me a taxi to take me to work on the computer at the hotel Café de Rome on the Dakar Plateau. That night, Marc texts me to let me know that he will not be back to the hotel and that we will connect the following day. Two mornings later, I'm sitting at the

hotel bar drinking Grand Marnier figuring out how I'll get out of Africa now that I haven't heard from him, when a security guard named Cheikh approaches me and says that I remind him of his friend from America who is a writer. After telling him I am a writer as well, he shows me his friend's book, *Full Circle: AfricaAmerica* by Roderick Batson. The inscription reads, "To my main man Cheikh, Thanks for the friendship and hospitality!" Cheikh invites me back to his home, where we have a meal with his wife who's celebrating her twenty-fourth birthday, and then to his dojo to train in Tae Kwon Do and gymnastics. We finish the night off singing our way back to the hotel.

I never imagined this voyage going this way, but Cheikh (a teacher, healer, and polyglot who was a speaker of Wolof, French, Arabic, and English) became a source of deep kinship and celebration, making sure I was treated like family everywhere I went. Cheikh wanted me to see as much of Dakar as I could. He got us a taxi so we could make it to the ferry station that gives you access to Gorée Island—the westernmost port in Africa, the last departure point for many enslaved people, and the location of the former slave dungeon turned tourist attraction Maison Des Esclaves (House of Slaves). As my body rocked on the ferry, for the first time seeing and feeling the ocean on our way to Gorée Island, I'm reminded that for Black people in America, the water where our history starts.

...Item. I give and Bequeath unto my Daughters namely Susanna & Frances one Negro man called LITTLE SAM & one Negro woman called BELL. Each of them to have an equal right to the use and profit and increase of the said two Negroes to them & the heirs of their bodys forever.—

... Item. I give and Bequeath unto my Daughter Anna Fifteen Dollars to be raised out of my estate. Also unto my said daughter Anna, one Negro boy called HEROD during her natural life. For her own use and profit; at her death I give and Bequeath the said Negro Boy HEAROD unto my grandson Elisha BELK to him and his heirs forever—

Once the Yankee soldiers come. I was big enough to tote pails and piggins then. These soldiers made us chillun tote water to till their canteens and water their horses. We toted the water on our heads. Another time we heard the Yankee's, was coming and old Master had about fifteen hundred pounds of meat. They was hauling it off to bury it and hide it when the Yankees caught them. The soldiers ate and wasted every bit of that good meat. We didn't like them a bit.

I SHOOK WALKING AROUND the stone path making it toward Maison Des Esclaves. I enter the attraction with my swollen jowls holding water and huffing breath into the dungeons and am enraged by the slave-house selfies of pushed-up ponytails in slack and puckered smooch faces I begin to imagine as graves to spit upon. The French garçons wearing dashikis and cowrie shells see me documenting them for posterity and I study my own Black gaze through the film, and their discomfort at me watching them be this trapped would almost be a pleasure I could share with you if it weren't for how uncomfortable I was made by their presences, period. I hated seeing their faces—one of which I caught a vision of in a daydream being knocked off and beaten into the hole in his neck.

Not long after we joined the English-speaking tour they were part of, the one with the face jockeys for position by attempting to move me out of the way with his body, but since he was too small to move my frame, he found himself behind me as I stooped down to look at the rabbit box that enslaved children were stuffed into, packed and drawn together, dying in wait. Some other life hits me through the contrast of where my body has been and where my body is now. As we walk to the next holding cell, the Frenchman bump-brushes my body again.

Facing the Door of No Return pushes my body to a new brink. I am completely beside myself looking at the Atlantic and the clouds, whose nature begins again to ring despair. The Frenchman walks into the sightline of the video I am recording of the shore.



Door of No Return, at the memorial of the Atlantic slave trade, House of Slaves, in Dakar, 2020.

When he moves back in my direction, I almost push him off the steps standing before the Door. A *scene*. “Dude!” the Frenchman yells, and I bark back, not recognizing the voice coming from my mouth. “You’re on our tour!” the Frenchman, yelling again. “Your tour? You’re on our land!” I yell back with ten million mouths. The tour guide separates us and says, “My brother, white people are crazy! We must cooperate, the struggle is still going on! You are my brother!” He then hugs me, breaking the spectacle.

I fall into tears not long after walking away from the Door, thick air on my back. Cheikh walks me outside and the tour guides follow. I stand outside barely breathing. The tour guide hugs me again, saying over me, “It’s okay, you must get it out, brother! You are home. You just got a new power.” I stand doubled over as Cheikh and two other tour guides form a circle around me. Those walking past and those entering La Maison place a brief hand on my back. I take a breath – returning.

...Item. I give and Bequeath unto my Daughter Mary one Negro girl called AMEY & one Sorrell mare with her Bay colt and issue and increase. One feather bed & Boulster two blankets & two sheets unto her & the heirs of her body forever.

...Item. I give and Bequeath unto my Daughter Elizabeth one Negro girl called CLOE & her increase & issue one half the use and profit and increase of the aforesaid iron gray mare and filly one feather bed two blankets two sheets and one Boulster to her & the heirs of her body forever. Also money raised out of my estate to purchase her a good saddle.

One time some Yankee soldiers stopped and started talking to me—they asked me what my name was. “I say Liza, and they say, “Liza who?” I thought a minute and I shook my head, “Jest Liza, I ain’t got no other name.”

He say, “Who live up yonder in dat Big House?” I say, “Mr. John Mixon.” He say, “You are Liza Mixon.” He say, “Do anybody ever call you nigger?” And I say, “Yes Sir.” He say,

"Next time anybody call you nigger you tell 'em dat you is a Negro and your name is Miss Liza Mixon." The more I thought of that the more I liked it and I made up my mind to do jest what he told me to do.

MY FEET DRAG over the sand like two popped balloons as we tour the rest of the island, reaching other monuments of African freedom and relics of France's colonial establishments. On the return ferry, Cheikh and I talk about the helldungeons we saw on the island, and Cheikh tells me that we must stick together: "My brother, African American and African...we are better together!" Cheikh talks, locking two fingers together like fishhooks. We embraced on the boat rocked by the water sway of the Atlantic. The color of the ocean nauseated me. I said, "You know what meeting you lets me know, Cheikh? Slavery worked, but it didn't work that well." Which was the only way I had to say at the time that in some ways this shouldn't be possible.

Cheikh gets us a taxi to the Monument de la Renaissance Africaine. The three-figure statue of an African King, Queen, and Prince orients me toward certain possibilities. All the eyes are in awe at the site and the almost quarter-mile of steps taking the crowd to the monument/exhibit. Cheikh and I walk up, taking pictures of each other and interacting with other people who don't understand our languages, and we smile and nod and hope we didn't offend. We enter the base of the monument, ride the elevator within and up the body to the King's crown looking over—taking a thousand glances.

AS I REFLECT on my trip with Cheikh, I begin to research the etymology of the word *monument*, derived from the French, where it denotes a type of burial place or a grave, and from the Latin *monumentum/monere* which translates into "something that reminds"/"to remind," and I begin to consider what structures could justly constitute true remembrances of the subjection and death wrought by the transatlantic slave trade. Would they only be these gigantesque



Cheikh Aidara and Jonah Mixon-Webster at the African Renaissance Monument, Dakar, 2020.

structures and sites of detainment? I wonder if the Atlantic itself should be considered the largest commemoration of slavery and the casualties of freedom. The land too? Earth in its entirety.

But then, how do you commemorate something that isn't quite over? For despite what I may have mentioned in passing to Cheikh, slavery did work and it is *still* working. Though slavery's immediate and artful efficiencies may not be as *placeable* today, its aftermaths are quite intact. My father asks me how to spell my name when writing out a birthday card or a check, filling out the previous year's tax information. My father's education ended in the eighth grade. Though he had trouble reading and writing throughout his life, he always knew how to count money, he says, reminding everyone always. "Have you ever thought about teaching your father how to read?" a friend asked once a few years ago. I shook my head no, knowing we both would never let that happen.

... Item. I give and Bequeath unto my five sons hereafter named Jehu, William, John, Micah & Samuel an equal part according to the real value of a piece of land that I had a deed for from Elias DUBOSE in the Big Cypress containing one hundred and twenty five acres more or less —

... Item. It is my will and (desire) that Jonathan WILLIAMSON should have a reasonable maintenance out of my estate according to contract. It is also my will that after the _____ is taken out all the remainder of my estate real and personal be sold to the highest bidder and divided or else divided without selling first paying my five youngest children John, Micah, Samuel, Mary and Elizabeth fifty dollars each one and then equally divide the remainder between my ten children Susanna, Jehu, Anna, Frances, William, Mary, John, Micah, Elizabeth and Samuel. —

My job was minding the calves back while the cows was being milked. One evening I was minding the calves and old Master come along. He say, "What you doin' nigger?" I say real pert like, "I ain't no nigger, I'se a Negro and I'm Miss

Liza Mixon." Old Master sho' was surprised and he picks up a switch and starts at me.

Law, but I was skeered! I hadn't never had no whipping so I run fast as I can to Grandma Gracie. I hid behind her and she say "What's the matter of you child?" And I say, "Master John gwine whip me." And she say, "What you done?" And I say, "Nothing." She say she know better and 'bout that time Master John got there. He say, "Gracie, dat little nigger sassed me." She say, "Lawsie child, what does ail you?" I told them what the Yankee soldier told me to say and Grandma Gracie took my dress and lift it over my head and pins my hands inside, and Lawsie, how she whipped me and I dassen't holler loud either. I jest said dat to de wrong person.

A FEW WEEKS AFTER RETURNING from Senegal, I inexplicably find myself at the Legacy Museum in Montgomery, an "artfully" curated site replete with a photo booth and interactive installations which threads the history of racist violence in America from enslavement through reformation, to the Jim Crow and Civil Rights eras, to present day mass incarceration. It took me an hour and a half after I arrived at the museum to decide I was ready to go in. At the Legacy Museum, I stand in front of jars of lynchsoil holding a Black woman in tears, holding her in tears of my own. We part as we know, can feel the people around us eyeing the time tick-tocking countdown before everyone's really starting to get uncomfortable now and learning so much, and it's all so powerful until it comes to mind that no one memorialized here ever had power, or a name, or anything else now.

Later, I get called to go alone to the Peace and Justice Memorial, which commemorates the Black victims of lynching, and it is an uneasy site of rust-colored boxes stamped with the territories where lynchings took place and the available names of those who were lynched are counted, and I see the surname Perkins on one of the first boxes while searching through the installation and I

immediately think of the Perkins side of my family in Flint. As a child, I was constantly told stories about my cousin Dameon Perkins being arrested while riding with a group of friends. There was a gun in the car. Though my cousin had nothing to do with said gun, he was arrested along with his friends. At seventeen years old, he was sentenced to over seven years in prison, and during his time incarcerated he was attacked always, violently treated by inmates and correctional officers, and who knows what other tortures he endured. After his release, I saw him once at a funeral and twice at a funeral and thrice during a holiday before he ended his life in Florida. I imagine him now with hands covering his entire body, holding him toward a possibility we don't understand yet.

I cry walking the gauntlet of surrogate bodies as the floor drops beneath my feet and there they are, the box-bodies hanging above, neckcrank to see them as Donny Hathaway sings "Be Real Black For Me" in my head and white people won't stop touching my back and a white woman comes up hugging me as I cry looking for more names of my family in and between the counties marking sites of lynch, and I would shake like a stick in a dog's mouth begging for death to get the woman off of me if it weren't for the bodies we were in, and what a pity. I arrive at a box that breaks me the most. It is a cuboid with a dense text etched holding space for the hundreds of thousands of Black people whose lynchings went undocumented. No state markings, no county names, no names at all—an exigence adjacent, slanted among the ledgers. This is what imagination makes itself good for, though it brings a sorrow to the body; language and a visage wholly absent.

A white child sits on a rail playing a video game as my wet face cuts into his action. I make my sullen trod, and he doesn't stop staring. A young couple skips around the garden tucked inside the installation holding hands, and I don't get it. I sit on a plank reading the information placards which affirm the arbitrariness of these sudden deaths: a complaint in a white-only restaurant, walking too close behind the boss's wife, looking at a white woman, being the only nigger the lynch mob could find when they were looking



National Memorial for Peace and Justice, Montgomery, Alabama, 2020. Each pillar symbolizes a lynching victim and indicates the location of each instance of racial terror.

for someone else, or some white people got bored and couldn't find shit else better to do, and well they had no other choice but to lynch somebody that day. After my body witnesses all of this, I am torn open from a split in my sternum unfolding along the grain of a single lash and my body peers over the world, one-eyed and open bellied, now seeing everything *natural* as an attack, and the trees cause me to vomit and the stones and water in and out of native soil feel formed against us all.

... Item. It is my will & I bequeath a Negro boy named CHARLES to Jehu William and John MIXON-----

I do hereby constitute ordain make and appoint my sons Jehu MIXON, William MIXON, John MIXON, and Micah MIXON full and sole executors of this my last will and Testament hereby Revoking discontinuing making void all former wills and bequeaths made by me, and deliver this only & no other to be my last will and Testament.

In witness whereof I have hereunto set my hand & seal this fourteenth day of March in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred & five: And in the twenty ninth year of American Independence.

{Signed sealed Published Pronounced and delivered} Micah MIXON
{seal}

Old Master had his slaves to get up about five o'clock. Dey did an ordinary day's work. He never whipped them unless they was lazy or sassy or had a fight. Sometimes his slaves would run away but they allus come back. We didn't have no truck with railroaders 'cause we like our home.

...I'se getting old now and can't work no more. I jest sits here and thinks about old times. They was good times. We didn't want to be freed. We hated the Yankee soldiers. Abe

Lincoln was a good man though, wasn't he? I tries to be a good Christian 'cause I wants to go to Heaven when I die.

THE PARALLELS ON THIS PATH cause me to consider those I cannot think about; those I cannot yet imagine. The echoic divides of slavery which have torn Black families apart for almost half a millennium impose limits on the way Black people form familial and social imaginaries now. Recognizing that one of slavery's most enduring projects was dissolution—the division of families and the separation of Black bodies from their histories—it appears to me that the most decolonizing act individuals can take is to gain an embodied sense of their subject positions within the lineages in this country, and to apply that knowledge historiographically in their daily life of labor—tracing the parallels and permutations of such. To recognize, in the affirming words of Saidiya Hartman, that “I, too, am the afterlife of slavery.”

Dissolution is a shade that partitions the self, the other, the women and the men, mother and children, sister and sister—and one that casts indeterminacies throughout my family now. And perhaps what I've truly discovered so far on my journey is that chattel slavery and its effects on the spirit of Black people is a curse in and of itself, spreading out into a plague of confinement, chains, and strung-up dreambodies of forever. The methods of enslavement and freedom were and are rootwork—a practice of conjuring an immaterial force onto or out of an object—a spell cast over the mind to make it believe whatever its master wants it to, believing it doesn't exist even and truly. To subvert the spell, to break the magic, one must find the buried root amongst the loam and waters of the Earth and resist the colonization not only of the body, but of the imagination, too; seeing the world as it is and the worlds we must destroy in order to be.