

Response to Distinguished Faculty Lecture of James Noel
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Thank you, James, for your beautiful words, and for these sublime and horrific images and stories, and for the invitation to reflect on them.

In a week in which we may well be wondering whether we are living in an Age of Revolution, James has reminded us what it meant to live in such the Age: His map of the Black Atlantic in the Age of Revolution draws a wide arc around the circulation of ships and bodies, and the emergence of an aesthetic and political ideology in whose shadow we still stand. On this map, Enlightenment, freedom, and aesthetic experience take shape not in blissful isolation from the Middle Passage but rather thoroughly interconnected with it. In his boldest move, James Noel exposes the secret dependence of Enlightenment aesthetics on the ideological and economic system that enslaved, dehumanized and murdered Africans. The questions James raises, for himself and for us, revolve around this proximity: What do we make of the simultaneous projects of the construction of a theory of the sublime, and the transport of Africans across the Middle Passage? How do we understand the coexistence of beauty and horror, aesthetics and brutality? Where, for a slave, is the sublime?

It is the wonder of the story James Noel has told us tonight that he does not resolve but rather deepens this jagged paradox. The theory of the sublime is not constructed in some European elsewhere, far from the suffocating slave holds, in mere indifference to the suffering of others; in the story James tells, these theorists, Burke, Kant, Hegel show themselves to be living in the same universe, announcing the whiteness of their aesthetic theory by declaring Africans immune to the power of the sublime. James's question—does the slave have access to the sublime?—suggests an even more insidious connection: The transport of slaves across the Atlantic does not produce, as a *side effect* of economic calculation, the stink and abjection of an overcrowded ship; this effect, the production of a human being stripped of dignity and participation in beauty, is what makes slavery possible. Slave traders and concentration camp guards *produce* stink in order to eradicate it. Thus is the aesthetic implicated in slavery and extermination.

There is yet another way in which the sublime is implicated in the slave trade, in the sublime fascination with terror, horror, mortality, the charge by which it transcends mere beauty. The philosopher, safe in his study, secure in his access to such higher experiences, nevertheless is easily bested here by the slave who first steps foot on the slave ship, just as the terror of the slave inevitably produces the terror of the slaveholder who despite all efforts recognizes the human being within the tortured body of the returned runaway. In the economic, spiritual, psychological dependence of the sublime on the terrors of slavery, James suggests, is also the power of an aesthetics born of slave experience, however strenuous the attempts to draw the line between the two.

That eighteenth century Age, in which the slave trade and the theory of the sublime made their secret compact, was also the age of the first glimmers of Jewish emancipation and Enlightenment; the central figure in that drama, Moses Mendelssohn, wrote a treatise on aesthetics and one on civil liberty. Was this emancipation in some way *also* reliant on the enslavement of others? Has James Noel taught us the way to think through to its culmination, in the inmate orchestra playing Beethoven before the doors of the gas chambers? And if 2012, with its Arab Spring and with the events of the first week of November 2012, is a new era of Revolution, what can we learn from this earlier Age of Revolution, in which horror and beauty formed so powerful and enduring a pact?