

Review Symposium on Christopher Tomlins's *In the Matter of Nat Turner*

## “Hearing Nat Turner”: Within the 1831 Slave Rebellion

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TOMLINS, CHRISTOPHER. *In the Matter of Nat Turner: A Speculative History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020.

*In this chef d'oeuvre, Tomlins offers a heuristic for how to extract the words, ideas, and actions of Nat Turner, the Black, enslaved man who led the most important slave rebellion in American history. Tomlins makes such an effort from within a cluster of different kinds of sources, each one a small window on the past, none of which Turner personally wrote. How to see beyond these particularly distorted glass windows on the past is not obvious. Tomlins's *In the Matter of Nat Turner* provides a key not only to Turner, and to his powerful sense of how to fracture the fragile legitimacy of the southern slaveholding elite, but also a metaphysics of interpretive strategy that can serve as a theoretical model.*

So many voices of the past are silent, especially those of the enslaved and dispossessed. How to listen for such voices and perspectives, as part of a broader analysis of the past, is a challenge that many historians have wrestled with, not least Christopher Tomlins, who has struggled to find answers to such questions, using different approaches over the course of his career. Since Nat Turner's voice was transcribed by others, can we actually use those words to understand his rebellion, antebellum Virginia, or the fraught history of US slavery? This is an acute question, since the same lawyer, Thomas Ruffin Gray, both recorded Turner's Confessions and tried to justify his punishment. To what extent can we recover Turner's words and thoughts and even actions, and why does it matter? Tomlins argues that with careful, contextual reading, especially a reading that puts Turner within his landscape, both intellectual and geographical, we can recover his voice. He grew up in a profoundly religious place, and his writing was infused with it. He figured out a way to make religious claims for rights, for lives, that proved impossible for Gray to completely suppress. Ultimately, Tomlins's *Speculative History* is a book about how to read silences, in the vein of Rolph Trouillot's *Silencing the Past* (1995), Saidiya Hartman's *Lose your Mother* (2007), Marisa Fuentes *Dispossessed Lives* (2016), and Kirsten Weld's *Paper Cadavers* (2014). All of these focus on fractional evidence, and on how the archived material, what remains saved, can offer glimpses into the lives of those without much voice in the past. What Tomlins offers is a remarkably nuanced pathway into how to read through the potential distortions.

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Tomlins uses critical theory productively. While many scholars tout critical theory, others have argued that it can lead toward nihilism: toward no truth, toward absence altogether, or indeed to a too-rigid application of current truths that are imposed awkwardly upon the past, square pegs into round holes.<sup>1</sup> Tomlins offers a strategy that balances those oppositions, reading Turner's truths through Grey's texts, newspapers, religious sermons, and other contextual sources.

Through such a lens, a vibrant Turner emerges, one whose resistance, even his death, are made on some level on his own terms, despite his dispossession. Despite his own inability to hold a pen, to literally write his own narrative, his actions did it for him; the efforts of others to silence him, to frame him, efforts which were made necessary by his actions, in many ways backfired upon those who sought to silence him. Tomlins's Turner was no crazy man but a visionary, who realized that the only way to tear the fabric of power that elites sought to create in the antebellum South, the only way to illuminate the injustice in their courts of justice and their religious gospels of truth, was to challenge their principles of legitimacy on its own terms.

Law and legitimacy are central to Tomlins's story: on a fundamental level each side was struggling for the upper ground in law, in religion, and in social structures. Gray (the lawyer who interviewed Turner and took part in his prosecution) sought to portray Turner as merely crazy—a traitor and a frightening threat to the social order. Tomlins is able to show, via painstaking reconstruction of legal and moral legitimacy, that Turner was not crazy, but instead both inspired and almost magical in the allegiance he inspired from others. He was therefore much more threatening. Turner was able to embody his assigned role as a slave, a subaltern, a meek and humble man to such a degree that he was thereby able to remind his listeners of Christ himself: a victim, doing the Lord's work, in an apocalyptic age, of exposing and destroying the sinful. But Turner changed the terms of his service; he was an instrument, a true slave—not of his master, but of Christ. As a servant of Christ he was toppling the biblical Tower of Babel as then built, in the form of the churches and social structures of antebellum Virginia.

Tomlins positions Turner's eschatology within the millennial Protestantism that burgeoned after the revolution, reaching its apogee in the Second Great Awakening, those great revivals in the beginning of the nineteenth century US. In Turner's mental world, slave uprising thus becomes, as it were, the arrival of the longed-for apocalypse and second coming. In perhaps his most telling exposition, Tomlins rereads Turner's famous vision of "black against white" as more biblical than racial, as the forces of darkness against light, in which Turner arrays himself with the light. It is a stunning reading of Turner's apologetics, and a powerful one. Turner, who grew up and lived in St. Luke's Parish, used verses from Luke, in the New Testament to justify his actions as he and his men moved from house to house toward the county seat in Jerusalem. When Christ returns "judgement will appear suddenly and obviously like lightning. . . . It will be a day of separating people, and it will be a place of death, where vultures gather" (Tomlins 2020, ch. 3, esp. 66 and n. 113).<sup>2</sup>

I found myself most riveted by Tomlins's chapter on legalities: "The Work of Death: Massacre, Retribution." Here Tomlins argues that Turner successfully created

1. For one recent criticism of such attempts, see Pluckrose and Lindsay (2020).

2. Tomlins was here inspired by the interpretation of Brodhead (2002).

a “counter-sovereignty,” not only with his words and deeds during the massacre, but in his successful escape from detection for so long, and in his words and actions while imprisoned, at trial, and on the scaffold. Most shockingly, Tomlins found evidence that Turner had successfully directed the fate of his physical body after death. Knowing that his body would be sold after death for the purposes of science, that it had happened to others after their conviction, and sure that he would be convicted, he sold himself first. That is, according to one account, Turner contacted a physician, and sold him his body after death on his own terms. He received money in exchange that he used, while imprisoned, to purchase ginger cakes. He then bragged about his deed. He told a reporter this was his own idea: “Nat sold his body for dissection and spent the money on ginger cakes” (ibid., 121). Tomlins acknowledges that we cannot know whether this report entirely represented Turner’s words, it is telling regardless. Nat’s sheer bravery and bravado, his insistence on self-ownership in the face of such rituals that would bring terror to most mortals, became part of the mythology surrounding him, even in the newspapers and tellings framed by the antebellum elite. He thus avowed his own possession of his soul and in many ways his legacy, even as his body was dismembered. He emerges from these records with some of the power of those burned by Queen Mary, as John Foxe described them in his *Book of Martyrs*: dead but not gone.<sup>3</sup>

One small point that Tomlins did not excavate but that adds to his portrayal of the court as a ritual space of almost theater, is that the court timed his trial so that it coincided with November 5, Guy Fawkes Day.<sup>4</sup> In Britain even today, the ritual burning of the “Guy” referring to the traitor who tried to blow up Parliament in 1605, marks their equivalent of the fourth of July in the US. In the antebellum South, much more than in the modern US, this was a day still marked and celebrated as one when people posing deep threats to the health of the nation (a judgment that might depend on one’s party) were ritually executed. By timing his trial to coincide with that crucial remembrance, they were implicitly comparing his treason to that of Fawkes.<sup>5</sup>

Turner’s metaphorical power survived despite the court’s formal rituals to suppress and negate his actions. The court answered his work of death—he led his many followers to murder about sixty men, women, and children who belonged to the plantation families in St. Luke’s Parish, Virginia—with their own ritual execution. The very rituals of trial, of sentencing, of execution, embedded the awesome power of the state in justifying and condemning such horrific acts. The judges’ purpose was to restore the “sovereign legality” of the state in the ritual of punishment, to destroy the “insurrectionary force [that] called the regime’s own sovereign legality into question” (ibid., 119). Law in this reading becomes a conscious act not simply of restoring order, but of restoring legitimacy, rightness, to this slaveholding regime. On some level that is Tomlins’s most important point.

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3. John Foxe’s *Acts and Monuments* (1563) was the most popular book (aside from the Bible) in late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century England and contained details of the religious fortitude, persecutions, and grisly deaths of Protestant martyrs. For more, including the full text, see <https://www.dhi.ac.uk/foxes>.

4. The court date is mentioned in the quotation from the court record on page 203.

5. On the popularity of Fawkes in early America, see, e.g., McConville (2000). For information about the plot itself, see Fraser (1996).

Tomlins places this rereading of order within the larger political context. His chapter on “Revolutions of Capital,” compellingly argues that Turner’s rebellion must be understood in terms of the failure of Virginia’s constitutional convention the prior year to initiate meaningful reform. While it helped to create a new social order that gave poorer whites (adult men) the vote and also expanded, relatively speaking, their control over government, it did nothing in terms of slavery. However, it had provoked the most intense debates about the abolition of slavery in Virginia since the revolution, something I had not before appreciated. In the process of exploring how the elite retained enough control in Virginia to make sure that abolition was rejected—remember this is only two years before Britain abolished slavery—Tomlins explores the main ways that planters continued to downplay Turner’s threat and to legitimate slavery.

After Turner’s uprising, elite justifications of slavery required belittling the threat of even Turner. Thomas Roderick Dew, one of Virginia’s most important intellectuals, described Turner’s uprising as “trifling and farcical” when it was not (*ibid.*, 201). Why? Tomlins argues that it was because elites realized that the poorer whites, many of them only just silenced the year before, would use it as an excuse to justify further abolition. Elites especially turned to financial calculations to explain how wealth, as measured in human bodies, was only possible if ownership of people were legitimate. John Thompson Brown, for example, described slaves as “the net proceeds of the labor of our ancestors and ourselves, [from] the foundation of the colony at Jamestown to the present moment” (*ibid.*). Brown thus performed the classic confidence trickster’s shell game: making the viewer think the ball was hidden under one cup when it was under another. Whose labor? I suppose masters might be granted some credit in a vast storehouse of value-added that conveys their role in trade and correspondence, planning, and advising. But surely by whatever measure, most of the labor was by the enslaved.

Benjamin Franklin described that tension long before Dew and Brown, in a joke supposedly first told by an enslaved man from Virginia but repeated by many Americans during the revolution:

They are pleas’d with the Observation of a Negro, and frequently mention it, that *Boccarorra* (meaning the Whiteman) make de Blackman workee, make de Horse workee, make de Ox workee, make ebery ting workee; only de Hog. He de Hog, no workee; he eat, he drink, he walk about, he go to sleep when he please, *he libb like a Gentleman*. According to these Opinions of the U.S., one of them would think himself more oblig’d to a Genealogist, who could prove for him that his Ancestors & Relations for ten Generations had been Ploughmen, Smiths, Carpenters, Turners, Weavers, Tanners, or even Shoemakers, & consequently that they were useful Members of Society; than if he could only prove that they were Gentlemen, doing nothing of value, but living idly on the Labour of others, mere *Fruges consumere nati*,\* and otherwise good for *nothing*, till by their Death, their Estates like the Carcase of the Negro’s Gentleman-Hog, come to be *cut up*.<sup>6</sup>

6. From the essay “Information to Those Who Would Remove to America” (available at <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-41-02-0391#:~:text=%E2%80%9CInformation%20to%20Those%20Who%20Would,date%20%5Bbefore%20January%207%5D.>). According to the editors of

According to Franklin, therefore, ordinary people in the US were often siding with the “Blackman,” or at least thought his labor of more value than that of a gentleman, whose contributions were no more than those of a hog.

Tomlins’s chapter adds to the emergent work on capitalism and slavery, situating the debate over possible abolition firmly with a kind of financial legitimacy based on law, and embedded in profits. As John Thompson Brown continued his accounting lesson: all planters had invested the proceeds of their harvests, some \$100 million, in slaves: “it now forms our capital stock. It is the sum total of the hard earnings of successive generations.” Tomlins thus builds on important scholarship such as Walter Johnson’s *Soul by Soul* (1999), Caitlyn Rosenthal’s *Accounting for Slavery* (2019), and Stephanie E. Jones-Rogers’s *They were Her Property* (2020), but with a twist that embeds such financial reasonings into the law and makes their contingency clear. What was at stake was legitimation, and Turner’s premeditated act had exposed such calculations. By Tomlins’ reading, slavery is less an inherent element of capitalism than part of a stifling, drawn-out tragic struggle over who should rule and the terms of that sovereignty, one in which the subaltern, the enslaved, was not only laboring but acting; in some cases, using their very subjection to amass the power of legitimacy.

In Turner’s Virginia, and Tomlins makes it as much Turner’s as that of any Virginian’s, legitimacy is much more fragile than it appears in most histories. Turner’s axe has sliced through more than flesh: it inspires powerful arguments against the existing social order. Authority should not be based on the possession of land or on one’s race: Nat Turner’s rebellion encouraged a slew of pamphlets and petitions that sought to dissolve the authority of the ruling elite. “If we are sincerely republican, we must give our confidence to the principles we profess. We have been taught by our fathers, that all power is vested in, and derives from, the people; not the freeholders: that the majority of the community, in whom abides the physical force, have also the political right of creating and remolding at will, their civil institutions” (*ibid.*, 147).

Arguments for participation by a broader citizenry, by a range of peoples, not merely landowners, transcended racial divisions. Pamphlet authors noted that the fear of extending the franchise extended to the idea that poor men would vote against slaveholding: indeed, many participants in these debates argued for enfranchising free blacks, for abolishing slavery, and (less radically) removing freed blacks from the state, for fear of their engaging in activities like those of Turner and his followers. “What of paupers, what of convicts? What of free blacks?” There was no right rule for their exclusion (*ibid.*, 149). More than two thousand people signed petitions arguing for substantial changes along these various lines; while these petitions, represented only a fraction of the larger debate they point towards Turner’s political influence.

Thus, Turner’s case becomes more than just his story. It is, to paraphrase Walter Benjamin’s words that Tomlins quotes at the beginning: “One might . . . speak of an unforgettable life or moment even if all men had forgotten it. If the nature of such a life or moment required it be unforgotten, that predicate would not imply a falsehood but merely a claim not fulfilled by me, and probably also a reference to a realm in which it is fulfilled: God’s remembrance” (*ibid.*, vi). Elsewhere, in emphasizing the power of the law and legal

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the Franklin papers, it was one of two essays he wrote and originally printed at Passy in 1784. It was reprinted many times including in *Works of the Late Dr. Benjamin Franklin* (1793, 282).

ritual over legitimacy, Tomlins quotes Benjamin: “In the exercise of violence over life and death, more than in any other legal act, the law reaffirms itself” (ibid., 120).

Indeed, the theorist most influential on Tomlins in this book is Benjamin, as in Tomlins’s other work. It is worth pondering how and why Benjamin has shaped the entire arc of Tomlins’s mature historical and legal work and his larger contribution to critical theory. Critical theory is at once a strength of the modern academy and also its potential downfall. It can offer layers of insight but potentially an irreducible nihilism, which is where prior readings of Nat Turner’s *Confession* have often ended: with Gray’s voice, the interlocutor’s voice, the only one that echoes in the reader’s mind. Can we really hear Turner’s words at all? In Tomlins’s deft hands, using Benjamin as his guide, critical theory is a finely honed scalpel that allows him to pare away the irrelevance and shine a light on what is most essential. It speaks to a larger truth, perhaps, that not all critical theory is created equal, especially for historians who think there is some truth to find. Most of all, Tomlins urges: “We who are readers of texts, who are historians, if we are to read as true historians, we must always be ready to read what was never written. Always” (ibid., 218). It is thus that in this book, Tomlins’s reincarnation of Nat Turner is not merely about Turner, or slavery, or antebellum southern history. It is an ode to method, to silences, and to ways we can hear the voices of those in the past whose bodies and own voices left so little trace and are long gone. It provides a reason why we should listen, even those who care most about only the powerful. It is on such fields that the wars of legitimacy are still fought.

To return for a moment to Benjamin’s world of the 1930s, where fascism reigned triumphant and the survival of truth as well as life was a will of the wisp, a pretense, it becomes clear that we should always question what records survive, what was promoted, what was omnipotent. How do we even begin to count those who, like Benjamin himself, perished too young? And how do we hear such voices, even when it hurts to listen? In *Paper Cadavers*, Kirsten Weld (2014) details the war of words in US and Latin American newspapers during the last half of the twentieth century, over whether in fact Guatemalan police, aided by US funds and trained by units of the US military to suppress anti-communism, were in fact engaging in mass killings. For the most part, such evidence was discounted by authorities in the US and international reporters as sensationalist, overblown.

Only after the discovery of a massive trove of documents, which included, especially, the driver’s licenses of those missing, did the full scope, the full horror, of such activities become clear, counted in bodies that could be seen through the pictures on the licenses in the archives. This evidence only emerged after a change in regime in Guatemala; even then those who volunteered to become the archivists worked in fear of their lives, furtively posting internet images of the recovered documents as quickly as they could. But that larger reality: the actions of the death squads, the many people killed, the role of US advisors and US money in such activities: it was there all along. It could be heard and listened to, in many voices. Why did it take the discovery of literal heaps of moldering paper documents to make it real? How can historians strategically speculate about how to translate missing voices so that their meaning speaks clearly and persuasively about the past? How can historians—all of us—listen to silences?

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