

Pearl as Metaphor

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The Pearl was the name of the vessel on which 77 African Americans sought to escape from enslavement in Washington DC. Thinking of what a pearl is and how it is made can serve as a metaphor to help us become conscious of the historical importance and contemporary significance of that courageous act in 1848. It can also be a basis for understanding the story of African Americans in Washington and the nation—a hidden history now coming to light.

Pearls are hidden

- Like the hidden planning of the escape;
- Like how the major significance of the “incident” was hidden by historiography

Pearls are valuable and beautiful

- The most valuable “merchandise” commercialized in the Atlantic World for centuries was African human beings.
- Pearl diving by enslaved Africans was a source of colonial European enrichment in the Americas before silver and gold—highlighting the transfer of knowledge and technology from Africa to the Americas that was characteristic of the Trans-Atlantic commerce in African lives, but is not the story we are taught. Place names such as Panama’s Pearl Archipelago and Nicaragua’s Pearl Lagoon bear witness.
- Beautiful iconic buildings in Washington were built by the skills and unpaid labor of enslaved African Americans.

A natural pearl begins with an irritant

- When an irritant is introduced into an oyster or other mollusk, it begins to protect itself by secreting around it layers of calcium carbonate.
- One of the irritants that provoked the daring attempt by these courageous African Americans was the immediate threat of being “sold down the river,” an expression whose origins most people who use it surely don’t know. It literally meant being sold and taken by boat to more brutal and ruthless life on plantations of the Deep South.
- Another irritant that started this process was hearing the stories of successful revolts against enslavement elsewhere in the Americas. Especially significant was the revolution that made Haiti the first free Black republic in the world and first government to outlaw slavery, which inspired enslaved people throughout the Americas to acts of resistance.
- The capture and harsh treatment of the people on *The Pearl* was a protective response by the system of enslavement.
- The *Pearl* revolt was an irritant in the body of the system of slavery, which secreted around it layers of silence and ignorance—covering up the event and its significance such that people who live where it took place don’t know about it, and it is not taught as a significant event in the history of Washington, DC.

What other meanings do you find in the metaphor of *The Pearl*?