

Caroline A. Jones, Massachusetts Institute of Technology / Max Plank Institute Greek Slave / Virginia Slave: Segregated Art History

When Hiram Powers's 1843 Greek Slave was exhibited at the Great Exhibition in 1851, it already possessed a nimbus of praise and discourse. But the obvious association with US slavery only emerged in the popular press, when Punch magazine asked US exhibitors to add "choice specimens" ... "in living ebony" to the white marble. As a scholar trained in supposedly "American art history," I was ashamed to discover a deeply significant performance by fugitive blacks and abolitionists, enacting "the Virginian Slave" on a busy Saturday (June 21, 1851) in front of Powers's statue. How could such an incendiary performance have been absent from the Powers literature? How could supposedly "American" art history have failed to record this significant act of performative reception for one of the hoary chestnuts of our canon? The answer can only be segregation. Agnatology (the study of how ignorance is produced) must be brought to bear.