

Two

**Suspended Absences and the Substrates
of Naming the Female Slave**

“She is a lusty wench . . .” These words were written by George Somerville to describe a female slave who ran away from a plantation, owned by a George Fox, near a copper mine. Sarah, Somerville claims, had taken, among several articles of men’s clothing, “a molatto boy, about 6 or 7 years old.” Upon the successful return of Sarah, Somerville guarantees a reward of ten pounds, along with “all reasonable charges” necessary to ensure her return. One cannot begin to imagine with certainty the world Sarah inhabits. Yet try to imagine what it may have meant to inhabit the category of a “lusty wench.” Is she this by action or by her structural position as a slave in temporary flux between freedom and captivity? Sarah is suspended by her absence and by her racial sexual marking. Lusty connotes an insatiable appetite for sex. Wench equivocates slave femaleness with sexual laborer, in a manner that inextricably binds the terms such that one cannot exist without thinking of the other. Wench, a medieval term used to connote a child or a woman, is ushered into the slave archive as a racial gender marker to overdetermine the sexual uses and availability of female slaves.¹ In this sense, lusty and wench are redundant statements. Or, perhaps, lusty is employed to illustrate that Sarah has a more forceful sexual appetite than the natural proclivities of the everyday sexualized female slave. Under this designation, Sarah is sex exponentialized. Somerville insists the reader, capturer, or sympathizer understand that what Sarah has to offer is the raw pleasure and angst of sexual deception.

Sarah oscillates through gender and sexual narratives, as both sexually loose and available, to potentially passable as a male slave, having taken men’s clothing. Her gender is confounded by competing desires and forces

TEN POUNDS REWARD.

January 24. 1778.

RAN away, on the evening of the 14th instant, from George Fox's plantation, near Dr. Stevenson's copper mine, in Frederick county, a likely molatto wench, named SARAH; she took with her a molatto boy, about 6 or 7 years old; she also stole and carried off a man's sartout coat, and a straight bodied ditto, both light colour'd, three mens white shirts, a sum of money, a bed and bedding, and many other articles.— She went off in company with Valentine Lind, by trade a taylor, who had been employed in that neighbourhood; 'tis supposed they have one or more horses with them, and may possibly attempt to pass for man and wife.—She is a lusty wench, speaks good English and Dutch, has plenty of good clothes with her, and a large sum of money.——Whoever apprehends said woman and boy, and brings them to the copper mine, or to the subscriber in Baltimore, shall have the above reward, and all reasonable charges, paid by

GEORGE SOMERVILLE.

Figure 1. "Ten Pounds Reward," Maryland Journal and Baltimore Advertiser, published January 27, 1778. Source: Collection of the Maryland State Archives. Reprinted with Permission.

that suspend her in time and space. The function of her gender, like the function of her sex, is determinable by whomever orchestrates her capture. Is marking her a lusty wench authorization to sexually violate her upon contact, designating carnal knowledge as her truth, or is it for visible assertion that upon seeing her you know her as sex personified? Any further details about Sarah are unknown, though there are some assumptions that can be inferred. She is potentially a mother, having stolen away a mixed-race child whose conception is only perceivable through the context of forced copulation.² The existence of the child exposes that to be a lusty wench has reproductive and future consequences that the slave carries. The child is representative of the stain of racial mixture borne under the violence of captivity, and the ubiquity of sexual violence that engulfs plantation life.

Sarah is only one of many slaves who traffics through the remanences of archival documents as a wench or named for her sexual availability to others. Cultural historians approach suspended absences, like Sarah, by producing a rhetorical tradition that seeks to locate the agentic subjectivity of the slave that power excises from the archive. By suspended absences, I mean historical objects that are only spoken of, but do not speak on their own behalf to identify themselves other than the pejorative names they are given by others who possess power over their existences. The counter gesture seeks to provide proper names to the unnamed or maligned.

Sarah is emblematic of a milieu of female slaves that are unknowable beyond their sparse violated presentations in the historical record. The intention of counternarratives is to recognize and represent female slaves as Black women who are cultural and political agents within the history of slavery. This political approach to reading history pushes against the objectification of the female slave as lusty wenches or seductresses by nature. However, the desire to apply agentic logics as counter forces of redress to the existence of Sarah and others like her critically underscores the level of violence waged against them. Sarah is not simply silenced by the historical record. Nor is the demand to determine her status as property solely represented by Sommerville or her master. Sarah is situated at the nexus of a continuously unfolding *history*, comprised of slavery and its afterlife, which situates the Black slave, gender, and sex within a rupture. She does not possess a name all her own nor does she have a fixed gender. This is precisely the problem. However, it is not a problem of history but one that continues to reemerge each time the female slave is spoken into existence, or one attempts to engage her suffering. Each engagement with the female slave, whether in the historical record, mundane discourse, or even Black feminist historiography, illustrates her as lacking a substance, yet she is serviceable towards the naming and recognition of conditions of existence that she is structurally barred from. Naming the female slave otherwise does not upend this relation; rather, it glosses over it. History and contemporary theory continue to reveal an unbearable truth, which is that the female slave is not a woman or an inevitable historical revolutionary martyr, but a suspended absence upon which her status as pure violation cannot be undone. Does Sarah possess her own story where the power of the master class pauses or ceases to confound her existence? Or does Sarah possess a name

that disembowels the structural presence and permanence of the master's prerogative?

I would argue that the female slave is not written improperly, despite the harsh connotations of the terms written onto her existence, because the pejorative is what constitutes being a slave. Attempting to write the female slave as a counterforce within the sexual paradigm of slavery relies on dialectical inverses to unwrite pejorative terms that are used to classify the slave as inherently sexually open. Feminist legal theory has spent a considerable amount of time grappling with how the adjudication of rape under the law and in cultural discourse writes the victims/survivors wrongly, where the character of the rape victim/survivor is maligned in order to extend the life of sexual violence and its justifications.³ What continuously appears in these reengagements with history is the racial violence that undergirds and buttresses the language and concepts used to describe agency as contradistinction to passivity, complacency, or objecthood are themselves racially coded. To counteract the structural designation of the slave as a wench or seductress by noting her status as a wife or charting her subversive act to repulse unwanted sex does less to undo the antiblack prescripts of slavery as it does to reinforce them. When individual action is levied as evidence to unwrite how individual slaves were misclassified by the archive, what is uncontested or left unattended are the ontological constrictions of racial sexual classification. Sexual deviance or violability are not wagers on slave actions but constitutions of their (non)ontology. Rather than repulsing the pejorative in favor of more seemingly palatable connotations, which themselves are written in racial sexual violence, moving with and through the pejorative to psychologize the labor they perform in racializing sexual choice and agency provides clarity on the deployment of sexual violence as the modality through which slaves are named and unnamed.

Thinking through the preconditions of naming, this chapter tarries with how the female slave transmutes into the Black woman in Black feminist projects. I argue that in these works, the violating sexual quality of slavery is undertheorized in service of offering Black womanhood as a transformative subjective quality. This heroic image of Black womanhood seeks to undo the deracination of unrapeability through the deployment of the Black woman as the revolutionary subversive subject of the plantation, par excellence. While such gestures attempt to challenge the devaluation of the

female slave in philosophies and theories of the violence of modernity, this position inadvertently redoubles the erasure of the particularities of sexual violence under slavery. Notably, as I detail, this theorization favors a reliance on terms such as rape, injury, motherhood, and woman, which are structurally antithetical to the condition of being a slave.

Historically, to rape a slave was not recognized as an offense under law or in social customs.⁴ The interest here is with how the female slave is made to occupy the quintessential exemplar of rape. Black feminist theory and historiography have sought to contend with the unthinkable dimensions of a suffering that is refused the ascription of injury in the historical record. What sits at the merger of Black feminist investigations is charting how the slave experienced their sexual injury in contradistinction to the structural refusal to name forced copulation as a violation. The arrival of the female slave in the position as the meaning of rape exists primarily in a manner that retroactively represents her as the historical figure of an experience she was structurally barred from claiming. These recuperative projects seek to preserve or locate the spirit of the female slave; her interior dimensions, feelings, affects, and responses to her exclusion from the right to name her injury.⁵ In these discussions she is both affected by sexual violation yet transcends the structural designation of being held captive to her sexual objecthood.

This investigation is less interested in adjudicating the terms of history, where sexually violating slaves was legally and culturally permissible. Rather, the interrogation centers on how the female slave becomes the meaning of rape. Given that sexual force against a slave was unremarkable, how does her unrapeability translate to possible injury and subject making? What we see is resurrecting the female slave as able to be raped (which is a particular legal and political framework) requires a leap of judgment. In the instances where rape or gendered violation are read onto the female slave as injury, her status as a slave, an object of force, is subdued or subordinated to the perception that there is a natural state of sexual integrity available to all sentient beings that supersedes the racial sexual ordering of slavery.

It is important to note that the gestures taken up here are not intended to deny the pervasiveness of forced copulation and other forms of sexual force for the millions of slaves held under bondage. The intention is to home in on how attempts to evacuate the obliqueness of this condition do not undo

or unwrite the structure that made the slave the antithesis to sexual choice and freedom. By turning towards the unrapeable status of the female slave rather than repulsing this designation, we can see how the terms granted to the female slave as agency and freedom from, and against, rape reinscribe the ontology of sexual violence as it coheres for the non-slave. Which is to say, the gestures that articulate rape as ontologically possible for the slave inevitably reinscribe the very terms of gender, volition, and sexual capacity that were inaugurated by the racial strictures of slavery. To be raped or unrapeable, then, are not dialectically oppositional but rather circulate within a structure of being that sustains and upholds the antiblack sexual violence upon which they cohere.

Black Feminist Theoretical Dissemblance

In a 1994 article entitled “The Occult of True Black Womanhood,” Ann duCille wonders what will Black feminist studies look like in the face of the postmodern draw to oversaturate various milieus with Black women as a supreme form of otherness.⁶ She likens the over theorization and marketing of Black women, in the academy and beyond, to what bell hooks termed “eating the other” or “the commodification of otherness.”⁷ For duCille, her primary concern was to interrogate how Black women were being engaged and defined from outside of the field of Black feminist studies by people other than Black women.

duCille was responding to the 1980s and 1990s retreat from the racially distinct power movements of the 1960s and 1970s and the push to universalize subjects in theory. What resulted was a multiculturalist propensity to engage conditions of suffering as amalgams devoid of specificity for the purposes of performing theoretical sophistication and reach. Feminist theory, as well as other fields, were implicated in this maneuver. For duCille, contemporary theoretical approaches were in tension with Third Wave feminisms, where theories by Black and other feminisms of color unapologetically centered race in feminist discourses on gender and sexuality, which was set in motion by 1970s women of color feminist activists.⁸ This particular move against the subsumption of race into generalized discussions about gender and sex is an ongoing attempt at carving out a distinct space for the discussion of racialized gender and sexuality and its attendant violences.

In the thirty-year span since the publication of “The Occult of True Black Womanhood,” Black feminist theory has enacted a response and position to duCille’s concerns. The field has taken up Black womanhood or the Black woman as its political signifier, such that, to speak of Black feminist issues signifies to the listener or reader that the primary subject of concern is the Black woman and the object of inquiry is the particularity of her suffering. This focus speaks back against eating the other such that Black womanhood is not tangential to other disciplinary concerns, but a serious field or condition of inquiry situated on its own terms. In this respect, Black feminist theory contends with the status of the female slave in a manner that seeks to locate her elided or erased gendered Humanity both in and outside of the historical archive.

While Black feminist scholarship’s centering of Black women made crucial interventions in feminist and race theorizing, this chapter takes a departure from this work by exploring the plight and fantasy of the female slave while refusing the category of womanhood as constituent of this condition. Identifying the female slave as distinct from the category of woman or from the imposition of Black womanhood is not to suggest that woman is not a descriptor used in the historical archive to identify slaves. In fact, some gendered terms or descriptors used to describe female slaves included girl, female, wench, slave, and, at times, woman. However, the argument here parses out a conversation on gender and gendering by refusing to assume that the female slave is gendered *ab initio* as a woman based on assumptions that align with biological organs. The complications of this argument are that female and woman are both terms that exist within the biological assumptive framing of binary gendering. Such that the female is not natural or untainted by sociogenic principles embedded in beliefs about gender as locatable at the level of the physical body and in perceptions about inherent forms of difference.

Additionally, Black woman is not intended to be read equivalently with the category of woman. Black as a qualifier fundamentally changes the quality of woman. However, as will be discussed later, Black woman is a retroactive ascription placed upon the female slave post-emancipation. When applied to the slave, Black woman performs a labor of retelling and reimagining that demands its own interrogation. The female slave is not primarily Black in the archive, but is also African, negro, negress, or slave. While these

terms overlap and bleed into one another, it is important to maintain their distinctions. Despite the Black being the slave of modernity, slave signifies on its own terms. By refusing the conflation of two undefinable affectable categories, the point is to consider how they are structured by converging and competing forces. It is also to ask, how does the female slave become the Black woman? Essentially the distinction between these two categories lies in a question of capacity.

In her groundbreaking book *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourse*, Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí argues that “the distinction between sex and gender is a red herring.”⁹ The argument that sex is biological and gender is socially constructed is an untenable argument when considering how biology is manufactured by the structures of power and fantasy that give gender meaning, matter, and form. Engaging biology as fixed, immutable, and/or universal disavows that biology is mutable, and thus shifts and reinforces its assumptions based on the social constructs and violence of race, as well as gender and ability. While social constructionist theory has prevailed in discussions around the convergent and divergent uses of sex and gender, it is critical to foreground violence, *and particularly antiblack violence*, in theorizing the modern preoccupation with these distinctions in feminist theory, as well as in general discourse. In this respect, the female slave as the conceptual framework that guides this chapter is less insistent on considering femaleness in relationship to the physical body of the slave. However, this position is a priori embroiled with inescapable flaws insofar as every slave spoken of in this context is, based on genitals, sexed as female by the plantation system. Nonetheless, in the context of racial slavery, what female unearths is a designation of an object that is categorizable by its utility and quantifiable arrangements rather than as a psychosexual stage of potentiality toward womanhood as a form of ontological becoming. Rather, the female slave is permanently fixed as oppositional and distinct from woman as a subject constitution. The female slave is a stasis. Femaleness for the slave is rendered legible not on its own terms but through the forced affixing of the violent injuries attributed to womanhood, like rape, onto the slave as explanatory of its suffering. Woman is a violable subjectivity insofar as her ontological pursuit of self-possession seeks to dislodge her from being property for and of man. Her injury is located at the crux of self-possession and property status, where man forcibly dispossesses her

consent, will, and agency by acting upon her subject based upon his possessive desire for power. Yet capacity for property status does not make her a slave, as property and slaveness are not inherently the same. Rather, property marks many relations and “proprietary claims and powers are made with respect to many persons who are clearly not slaves.”¹⁰

The interrogation of womanhood and femaleness that informs this chapter is preoccupied with Blackness and slaveness as they are dynamized by gender imposed under pure violation. The intent of this position is to wager how slavery, as an arrayed condition, is productive for unthinking the primacy of gender with respect to sexual violence and rape. The imposition of the slave into the sexual and the violent erodes preconceived perceptions of what constitutes the arrangements of history, but also has implications for how our engagements with history may impact the present. Furthermore, the argument here refuses to hold stridently to gender categories in an attempt not to reproduce biocentrism.

To be clear, the call is to not assume gender integrity, unless such can be proven to exist in the objects of analysis. Rather, it is to consider how, according to some gender theorists, gender can, even under oppressive conditions, be a space for freedom or self-making. Yet while non-slave bodies might be a target of gender and sexual violence, they are not inherently sites of containment for what one’s body can and should be and do for others. More, to be marked as non-slave is to be gendered as having a capacity and relation to slaves. The description of slaves as gendered subjects does not determine that the discourse and narrative of gender is explanatory of their conditions. As Sylvia Wynter has argued,

If the Black-White Distinction functioned to fix the Major Referent and optative identity for all groups and races, the gender-distinction, man/woman functioned to replicate the representation of “natural Difference” which bonds the order, enabling it to function as a sociodicy, i.e., an order whose empirical everyday praxis justifies the ways of the order to itself. Both the Black-White and the Gender distinction as well as the related “naturalness” of heterosexuality to the “unnaturalness of all forms of nonheterosexuality, served to *substantialize* the order’s *discourse of justification*.”¹¹

Gendered categories are both reinscribed as natural and as the logical terms to make sense of their violent arrangements. Which is to say, gendered

categories are upheld as the predicating reason for injury, *the why*, and the explanatory reason for the violence, *the because*. However, relying on gender, its terminology and conceptual frameworks as the order of all things, as a form of primacy for thought, reifies it as the essential sociodicy of violence. While this may be the case for the Human, the Black slave disfigures the gender canon with respect to violence. Simply stated, one cannot definitively assert that gender functions as the *why and because* of the sexual perversity of slavery (though it may texture the analysis), it does not impart reason. The sexual(ized) violations of slavery, as a structure of violence rather than an experience, betrays rather than reifies the sociodicy of feminist frameworks. The assumptive logic of the feminist project is that gender degrades the subject upon and after arrival. The Black feminist tradition presented here asks how natal alienation, general dishonor, and gratuitous violence dispossess the slave of *being*, structurally occluding the possibility of the arrival of a subject. As such, there is no slave gendered subject, insofar as the slave is a violent projection and captive possession of Human gender ontology.

Over the past two decades, the literature written on race, gender, and slavery centers Black women as the predominating lens of analysis. With the exception of a limited number of recently published works, the female slave as a category has largely been abandoned by Black feminist elaborations in favor of the use of enslaved Black woman or simply enslaved woman.¹² Although even in cases where the female slave is concretely theorized, the term is also deployed interchangeably with enslaved woman. The unspoken or silent contention present in the privileging of the Black and/or enslaved woman over female slave involves perceptions about dehumanization, where designating female slaves as Black women is an attempt at a humanizing or re-humanizing gesture that stakes a claim on her gendered subjectivity as inalienable and innate. Framing slavery as such contends that violation for the slave harkens on denied Humanity that is reclaimed through a possessive investment in gendering through naming. However, this guarding of “woman” as the slave’s gendered Human right is rooted in a biocentric association wherein genitals are taken as the content of proof upon which the politic is staged. Which is to say, gender in this respect is a claim on the perceived biological instantiation of what it means to be a woman that is then particularized through the racialization of the slave, which is maintained at the level of bodily experience. The historiography of Black womanhood

is propped up by reading slave gendering as a marked bodily constitution that is degraded in a hegemonic struggle for power and recognition with the master, mistress, and male slave. What lies beneath this assumptive logic is that in order to grant the female slave credence as a speaking and acting subject, her suffering must be mimetically ciphered through the representational schemas of the contractual schisms of cis-centrism, such that patriarchy, rather than her Blackness, becomes the essential quality of her (un)gendered or unnamed suffering. Additionally, theories of slavery and gender that speak against cis-binarism are not immune to having to contend with a structure that forcefully upholds gender as a fact of the body while denying how gendering is made real through racial social sexual relations that are oriented by antiblackness.

Marking Black womanhood as the essence of the female slave that must always be returned to is emblematic of what I call a *theoretical politics of dissemblance*, which is a term drawn in part from the work of Darlene Clarke Hine. “By dissemblance,” Hine argues, “I mean the behavior and attitudes of Black women that created the appearance of openness and disclosure but actually shielded the truth of their inner lives and selves from their oppressors.”¹³ Hine is interested in how certain puritanical ways of being are performed by Black women to counteract narratives of their inherent sexual perversity that were used as justification for their sexual violation in antebellum and postbellum life. Additionally, Hine charts how a “cult of secrecy” around sexuality was also a tactic employed by Black women to help secure jobs in the unskilled and semiskilled labor markets to move their labor out of domestic spaces where they were subjected to wanton sexual violations in the intimate spaces of white homes. Hine theorizes dissemblance as a complicated arrangement of racial, class, and gender responses and associations that are enacted by Black women to ascend racial, sexual, and social statuses and ascriptions. In a sense, dissemblance can be understood as a practice through which Black women attempted to contest their social conditions to enter new and, seemingly, more safe spaces. However, what emerged in the context of secrecy around sex are various new forms of exclusion where Black women created women’s clubs and social societies to support their new senses of self and social stature.

Evelynn M. Hammonds interrogates dissemblance and secrecy as not only means to an end for self-protection but also ways Black women themselves

created exclusionary practices that, through silence, center Christian heteronormativity as the predominant form of Black sexual presence. For Hammonds, these practices in essence leave Black women's sexuality underdefined. Additionally, as Hine and Hammonds make clear, these practices leave the contexts of sexual violation and violence that Black women are up against veiled behind a politics that cannot tell nor confront the contours of the very thing it is resisting. Additionally, these silences, as Hammond critically argues, demonstrate how black women's sexuality is a belated and reductive consideration where the complexities and potentials are crowded out by the automatic assumption of compulsory heterosexuality.

Dissemlance is theoretically rooted and socially performative. The former emerges most clearly in theoretical spaces centrally concerned with the pain constitution of the Black woman. Hammonds argues that in Black feminist theory, the theorists themselves inure a relation to Black women and their sexuality that imparts an extension of dissemlance and silence. She contends that "the goal should be to develop a 'politics of articulation' that would build on the interrogation of what makes it possible for black women to speak and act."¹⁴ Black feminist theory is sutured by a double bind where its approach to exposure can symptomatically reveal its entrapment to a theoretical politics of dissemlance. This dualism appears through a performed refusal to contend with the obscene, as a way to protect Black women, or the category of Black woman, from being overdetermined by pejorative and perverse ascriptions of her sexual beingness. To say this otherwise, the impetus to hold Black womanhood as separate or distinct from its inhabited conditions reinforces understandings of gender and sexual difference that extend the very logics of violence this political gesture seeks to escape from. Imbued within the structural predicaments of womanhood, despite its Blackening by terminological associations, is that the cult of silence is parasitic upon slave sexual openness to announce its distinction and ontological right within the Western epistome. However, in order for woman to be distinct from man it must also be distinct from slave, which makes up the triumvirate of modern racial gender violence. What distinguishes woman from slave is precisely how each category is made intelligible or is obliterated by sexual violence.

The entrapment of Black feminism within the triumvirate of woman-man-slave is that its theoretical politics of dissemlance reveals that its

move toward a claim on womanhood does not resolve the slave—because it cannot disintegrate its historical presence. Rather, the qualities of womanhood that are upheld in theory partake in a theoretical politics of dissemblance by refusing to ask, with respect to the above provocation by Hammonds, “what makes it possible for the black woman to speak and act” that is impossible for the female slave? Some might argue that the distinction between the categories is simply semantic and that across time, female has become supplanted with woman/women as a casual progression emblematic of a shift in political language. However, what has also occurred with this shift is a deputization of womanhood to the ends of forms of speech and action that challenge the absence of these qualities in the historical record for the female slave. Which is to say, the female slave as a fixed recipient of violation is countered by presenting the Black woman of history as a speaking and acting willful agent. Again, the question remains, what makes the agentic Black woman possible?

With respect to the woman–man–slave relation, theoretical dissemblance is eerily silent about gender intelligibility as a form of violent subjectivity. Gender is not a given but is a form of structural making and integrity between the dualism of woman–man, which is clarified through how each of these categories violently relates to the slave. Lastly, if womanhood is taken up as a category, politic, or term against femaleness as a state of pure violation or nascent form, then what makes the woman cohere demands interrogation.

Zakiyyah Iman Jackson argues that Blackness is not figured solely by a relation to the subhuman but is made to occupy multiple inflections of the Human in simultaneity. Jackson identifies this as ontological plasticity, wherein “the enslaved, in their Humanity, could function as infinitely malleable lexical and biological matter, at once sub/super/human.”¹⁵ Countering femaleness with womanhood as a resistant strategy against dehumanization is a maneuver that attempts to resist what Jackson puts forth here, which is that antiblackness is contained in each formulation of the Human, which the predicament of the slave clarifies. I would argue that the shift from taking stock of the violence of slavery—what is the violating quality of female slaveness—to projecting the willful capacity of the Black woman as resistant historical actor is a conceptual leap that intends to impose or center the Human as a particular freedom from the violence of ontological obliteration.

While the Human is free from gratuitous violence, it is also parasitic on Blackness simply because it cannot rid itself of the slave. Black womanhood, as imagined by historiographic accounts of slavery, is a morphological imposition of the superhuman into theories of slave gender. The female slave is evacuated in service of the buoyancy of the Black woman as an unrelenting and infinitely resistant Human designation. The violation of the female slave is not refigured or proven inessential to the Black woman but is repositioned as a different type of permanence. In this respect, the female slave as the zero degree of abstractive matter is not resolved, because it cannot be. Rather, she is morphed into the supreme political actor, a super Human type. As such, the enslaved Black woman is a phantasmic figure of superhuman resiliency against the toils and strife of daily domestic and intimate violation all while resisting the sexual architecture of the plantation and the sexualization of her existence indefinitely. All of this demonstrates Jackson's point about ontological plasticity.

Aware of the entrapments of the category woman, Jessica Marie Johnson offers the black femme as an alternative model, stating, "Invoking black femme instead of (black) women or womanhood remembers the slipperiness of the category of woman in a multilingual world of slaves."¹⁶ Using this analytic to theorize the forms of self-possession taken by "women of African descent" against sexual and intimate violence in New Orleans, Johnson contends,

Black femme freedom points to the deeply feminine, feminized, and femme practices of freedom engaged in by women and girls of African descent. In the practice of refusal, whether in rejected labor demands or sexual advances, and even refusal to concede to officials in manumission disputes, black women and girls claimed ownership over themselves. Their claims superseded that of their owner; it even rejected claims of their bodies and labor by their husbands. Black woman created black femme freedoms by stepping into the fray on each other's behalf.¹⁷

Johnson is expressively careful in her prose to not over assume or assert womanhood or the woman as the signifier in this arrangement. Black femme is privileged here as an actionable response to violation rather than as an identity that rests on ontological grounds. Despite this refusal to center womanhood, the figure of the black femme is represented as someone who

still must fight endlessly and overcome gargantuan vectors of force such as possessing the capacity to superseded or overwrite the labor demands and sexual claims of the master. Claiming this fight as the action of freedom continues to maintain a single-axis existence for the female slave or manumitted former slave and reproduces objecthood and terror but by other means. If freedom from sexual captivity is indexed by the female slave's capacity to fight back, then sexual violence is not destabilized as the primary modality of her condition. Rather, sexual violence is silently acknowledged as unbending such that the female slave must be armored against its force in perpetuity. It is an exhausting and morally astute positionality to assume. One that never rests. Furthermore, it is more of a fantasy of undoing than it is a paradigmatic undoing of the racial sexuation that produces the ontological absence of agentic gendering for the slave.

Examining infanticide, abortion, and marronage as forms of resistance and revolt in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Jennifer L. Morgan argues,

Enslaved women carried a set of experiences that attuned them in particular ways to the perverse logics of early modern Atlantic slavery: these experiences began on the slave ships, where their relative freedom of movement exposed them to the sexual violences of Europe an crewmen and at the same time enabled them to be conduits of information and occasionally of rebellion, and continued in slave sales, when women's fecundity became part of the calculation of their value and, in the case of those with children in arms, also part of their anguish.¹⁸

While Morgan does not overemphasize resistance as fundamentally subversive and paradigmatically transformative, this argument still maintains that from violation, and particularly sexual violence, Black women acquired "critical perspectives on the new world they were situated within."¹⁹ Morgan essentially maintains that through violability a subjectivity for Black women arose that is attuned to the emergence of a New World order situated in the crises of race, capital, and kinship. Sexual violence thus imparts an unintended positivist consequence of a New World racial and gendered subjectivity that contains the information to unwrite the violence of its emergence. At the same time, one must wonder, is this subjectivity or a fantasy projection of an object that is violated in perpetuity toward the advancement of

its kind and the broader world? Which is to say, how is the belief that the slave becomes a perfected subject by way of slavery a fundamentally different logic than the one advanced by pro-slavery advocates who believed that the treatment of slaves assisted them in becoming better, more productive Humans? Instead, it seems what Morgan illustrates—which is a deeply held Black feminist association between violation and subject insight—is a subjectivity that cannot emerge despite deep desires for it to be. If the Black woman is tethered to sexual violence and its consequences that are refracted and amorphous, there is no coherent collective knowledge that can be contained and expounded upon as a result of this condition.

Simply, sexual violability for the slave is a static condition that cannot be written or thought against by approaching the archive from a different lens. Rather, theorizing objecthood as the permanent status of the female slave over the leap towards subjectivity as an assumed given would render more damning conclusions about how our current reliance on gendering as an explanatory model of suffering, perseverance, and power is reproduced as desirable out of an ontological angst of becoming the transmutation of nonexistence that was inhabited by slaves. In this respect, Black feminism is bound up in anxiety about female slaveness, or sexual objecthood, because it is an inescapable relationship to violability. It is an unavoidable anxiety that is either embraced or disavowed by theory.

The forceful shift to rewriting or retooling the female slave into gendered categories such as the enslaved Black woman or into an agentic selfhood such as *femme-ness* falls critically short of conceptualizing the racial violence that subtends slavery and gender. In theory, the Black woman is positioned as the superhuman savior, where her volition is served up as the antidote to the real and fantasied enactments of violence and violation. According to this calculation, what makes the Black woman distinct from the female slave is that her will and action are assumed as a tactfully political and supremely intentioned slight against the structure of slavery, where her existence is not confounded by her condition but resists it always and unendingly. The catch is that there is no other way to enter gender than to enter by way of relations of violence. Entering gender, as in entering its representational folds, does not unwrite violence as much as it stakes a quiet claim on authorizing or accepting its permanence. Allegiances to gendered categories are not enacted through benign performances or the implementation

of cultural or daily rituals and customs. These boundaries are possessed by a claim to the usages of violence as a right of self-making rather than one of totalizing sexual dispossession.

Ontological Absence Follows the Slave

In her re-engagement with William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Wynter situates her argument in "Beyond Miranda's Meanings: Un/Silencing the Demonic Grounds of Caliban's Woman" as a departure from, and critique of, Luce Irigaray's "purely western assumption" of the term woman as a universal position silenced by patriarchal discourse. This insistence of a universal woman is emblematic of the core split between womanism and feminism more generally.²⁰ Written as an afterword to the edited volume *Out of Kumbla: Caribbean Women and Literature*, "Beyond Miranda's Meanings" ponders if the labors of womanism demonstrate the impossible metaphysical emergence of its subject of concern. Which is to say, womanism as a thought pursuit may reveal the absence rather than the presence of the Black woman.²¹ Wynter argues that the question of sameness and difference is paradoxically exposed by the imposition of womanist concerns. For Wynter, the topos "race" unearths a totemic schema that challenges gender difference or patriarchal order as the mimetic order of Human relations. "The *physiognomic* model of racial/cultural difference" ushered in a paradigmatic shift from premodern sex-gender attributions, or sex-anatomical difference, to a system of white racial power that subsequently stratifies gender along racial lines. *The Tempest* animates this order, clarifying the illusive nature of paradigmatic violence with respect to race. Wynter argues that "race" as a qualifier imposed against feminist modes of thought presupposing gender as universally constituted inserts a contradiction into the frame of thought. Like feminism's insertion of gender into previous epistemological frameworks that subsequently assumes the presence of racialized gender as a form of "positive knowledge," it adds to and complicates the universalist tendencies of thought.

The Tempest sets the stage for the interrogation of racially distinct gender positions. The play is allegorical and revealing as "one of the foundational endowing texts of both Western Europe's dazzling rise to global hegemony, and, at the level of human 'life'."²² Arguably, the fantasy that grounds the

narrative and the desire for its production and replication are structurally enabled by the same conscription of power and violence that produce the possibility of race and gender in the New World. In the play, the relationship between Miranda and Caliban concretizes a psychic gender power relation that mirrors an almost complete simulation of the libidinal subscripts of the Maryland slave law of 1664 that will be discussed at length in Chapter 3. Miranda is the representative figure of white womanhood. She is granted power over the native population by her father Prospero, the white patriarchal colonizer. Caliban, the native, is marked by nascent manhood, which Wynter recasts as the most primal native, the nigger. Wynter foregrounds this relationship to demonstrate a series of problems for Western feminist thought. The first of such demands is that thought contends with Miranda's power, rejecting the universal Western feminist notion that Miranda is silenced. While white women may experience silence in the face of white male patriarchy, they are granted power over the racial other. Wynter acknowledges that one need not be figured as "rational," like Prospero, to possess power. Having the capacity for rationality in a racial order, like Miranda, is power. Secondly, under these conditions, Miranda is figured as the desired form of beauty for Caliban. For Wynter, Miranda is the idealized form of beauty, with "features of straight hair and thin lips is canonized as the 'rational' object of desire, as the potential genitrix of a superior mode of human 'life,' that of 'good natures.'"²³ Miranda's form is juxtaposed against what Wynter identifies as "the most significant absence of all, that of Caliban's Woman, of Caliban's physiognomically complimentary mate."²⁴

For Wynter, the ontological absence of Caliban's woman creates a cesura for Western feminist thought, and the point where Black feminism unsettles the demonic grounds of thought. Wynter writes,

It is within this latter 'real' imperative that the absence of Caliban's woman as Caliban's sexual reproductive mate functions to ontologically negate their progeny/population group, forcing this group to serve as the allegorical incarnation of 'pure' sensory nature . . . As such too, as Caliban's women, are reduced to having no will or desire that has not been prescribed by Prospero/Miranda in the name of the existential interest of the population group for whom the 'images' of Prospero/Miranda, stand. Given that the idealization/negation of both groups is effected precisely by the dominant group's imposition of its own mode of volition and desire (one necessarily generated from the *raison d'être*

of its group—existential interests) upon the dominated; as well as by its stable enculturating of the latter by means of its theoretical models (epistemes) and aesthetic fields, generated from its increasing hegemonic and secularizing systems of meanings.²⁵

Wynter precisely details the violence of white filial order, as resonating in epistemic, aesthetic, and ontological form. However, the extent of violence, I argue, is more totalizing than Wynter accounts for here. Wynter lays forth a racialized gendered schematic of white supremacy, where whiteness is positioned as superior to all other beings, objects, and things, or the epitomizing of whiteness and white life as Human life. Thus, whiteness is idealized, desired, justified in its dominance, given theoretical privilege and pristine aesthetic form. Wynter identifies this as an increasing hegemonic hold. In Gramscian terms, for hegemony to develop, consent (in the form of Caliban's betrayal of his physiognomic mate), coercion (in the form of Caliban's woman desire to be Miranda), and force (through Prospero and Miranda's power) must take concretized form. However, what does Black ontological resistance mean in the absence of totalizing white domination? When the Black breaks free, or is emancipated from chains, presenting to the world its own aesthetic fields, theoretical models, reproductive desires, *raison d'être*, what, then, constitutes Black gendered relation?

The complications of thinking ontological absence unfold infinitely. When the question is posed, why doesn't Caliban's woman exist, inquiry into that question reveals that no Black gender exists under these conditions. By these conditions, I mean ontological erasure. By attending to the question of Black female absence, extended interrogations arrive at a point to suggest even the most overrepresented presentations of Black gender are not presence. They are projections of Human libidinal desire. Black presence and/or absence remarks upon the necessities of Human life. Caliban reaffirms the all-encompassing power of Prospero, contained within the sexual capacities of the captive relation. Miranda's position is, however, more challenging to apprehend. Miranda represents the locus of sexual desire; however, this is not her most possessive quality. Miranda also writes and produces the master narrative for what it means to suffer, making her logic—which is what Wynter contests in the work of Irigaray—the component of proof necessary to elevate one from flesh to an intelligible injured/able to be injured body.

To say this otherwise, Miranda completes the script of Human life. Her sexuality is inessential to this problem. She is the perfection of the Nietzschean principle “Man, the bravest animal and one most inured to suffering, does *not* repudiate suffering in itself: he *wills* it, he even seeks it out, provided that he is shown a meaning for it, a *purpose* of suffering.”²⁶ Miranda gives female form the value of womanhood, even if that form is presented in a semi-deracinated state. In a war of positions, Caliban’s woman is needed to expose Miranda’s lie, that she, like Prospero, is also empowered. This amounts to nothing more than a hegemonic recoupling. However, this exposé does not unhinge Black gender from a zone of non-being. The emergence of Caliban’s woman, if, in fact, *she* can emerge, is not the redress of the originating violence of her obsolescence.

Wynter sounds the call to move beyond Miranda’s meanings. She asserts that the essays she is responding to in her afterword assert womanism as a response to Black erasure in feminist literature, and thus “enabled the move, however preliminary, on to the ‘demonic’ and now unsilencing trans-‘isms’ ground of Caliban’s woman.”²⁷ In this respect, revealing the trans inhabitations and speech registers of Caliban’s woman begins the process of offsetting Miranda’s power. However, Wynter pushes this call further by stating, “This terrain, when fully occupied, will be that of a new science of human discourse, of human ‘life’ beyond the ‘master discourse’ of our governing ‘privileged text’, and its sub/versions. Beyond Miranda’s meanings.”²⁸ When this demonic terrain is “fully occupied,” a rupture or break will orchestrate a new narrative or narratology of human life, which expands the frame to include the trans-“isms” ground of Caliban’s woman. This final moment in the text offers an impending teleological optimism situated in a revelation of truth and power. As time moves forward, and Black feminists, or womanists, completely occupy the demonic ground of Caliban’s woman, a representational and Humanist shift will usher in a new epoch of human relation.

In their work on Blackness and political demonology, Cecilio M. Cooper invites Black studies to take up a demonological approach to thinking how Christian theologies saturate the logics of the field’s understandings. Thinking against and through the field’s interpretations of gender matter(ing), Cooper offers a counter demonological conscription of Blackness and gender, where a primary gender position or degree of signification is

nullified or canceled out such that no singular sex-gender position quantifies nor qualifies the condition. Cooper argues,

Blackness spirals out in too many directions to be definitively domesticated—in other words, territorialized—as mere matter orbiting one sex-gender structural position. Matter is among blackness’ potential incarnations rather than its only predestination. Blackness is the agender chaotic fullness that precipitates femaleness, maleness, epicene, and any other prospective sex-gender particularity. Blackness is an inimitable cosmological medium for sexuated (re)generation itself.²⁹

Rather than centering Black femaleness or maleness—which, curiously, scales up in theoretical equivocation to Black woman or man—Cooper theorizes Blackness as “agender,” which opens up space to think beyond teleological inscriptions of transcendence or mutation of the epistemic or epochal violation. Cooper’s theorizing helps us construe Blackness as such that its post or prior inscriptions are immutably fixed yet chaotic and (re)generative via its sexuation into the Atlantic world. Blackness, rather than gender particularity, is figured as quaquaversal, which overdetermines its shift into another terrestrial terrain or threshold of conceptualization of matter(ing). Which is to say, the violation of Blackness cannot be contained by the unearthing or demonological uprooting of a singular sex-gender positionality as the true terrain of matter or meaning. Caliban’s woman as a representational figure of Black womanhood or Black femaleness figures but one example of a multitude of ontological absences and erasures.

As complex as Wynter’s argument is, the explanatory power of this proposition rest upon a set of truisms about gender and Blackness that remain uncontested after the epistemic rupture that is being privileged. Black womanhood factors as the tabula rasa of the racial gendered order given its silenced position in the present epistemic order. As David Marriott has argued in the context of other works by Wynter,

this rupture can only appear *out of order* to the narratives it interrupts, and so bound to those narratives as content. Further, that breakthrough is meaningful—to humanity, to history—only when a breakthrough is adduced to have reordered codes that cannot themselves be historicized.³⁰

Caliban's woman cannot be historicized as the essential element of an on-to-epistemological privileging of her mattering.

Katherine McKittrick argues in her engagement with Wynter, "the *place* of black women is deemed unrecognizable because their ontological existence is both denied and deniable as a result of the regimes of colonialism, racism-sexism, transatlantic slavery, European intellectual systems, patriarchy, white femininity, and white feminism."³¹ For McKittrick, the stakes of unsettling the demonic grounds—which are arguably distinct from Wynter's calculus—are about marking the geographies of Black women's existences such that if "Caliban's woman is inhabited," it opens up the terrain to be "part of a larger human geography story."³² In this respect, the demonic exposes what already stands before in the sense that the project is one of uncovering or uprooting what is unseen and unsaid about Black women's existences and potentials. These untapped possibilities are carried forward into a new epoch that is shifted given the reordering of Black women's significance. However, the terrain of Black womanhood is not contested by McKittrick, which is an inherited stance from Wynter. The geographic coordinates of mapping new Human relations are established upon biocentric conscriptions of and investments in Black womanhood as the racialization or Blackening of sex-gender, which is codified as radicality based purely on scopophilic assertions of her capacity for existence.

What arises as a limit-point for Wynter's calculation on ontological absence is the placement of the physiognomic Black female as the privileged site of contradiction. This recognition of the absence of a Black physiognomic female form is too narrow to account for the innumerable absent presentations of Black gender. In fact, Wynter's position is broadened and challenged if Blackness is inserted as that which is ontologically absent rather than a Black physiognomic representation of womanhood. She is not Caliban's woman, because she is not. If womanhood is constituted by Miranda "as the only symbolically canonized potential genitrix,"³³ Caliban's woman cannot possess this status. Caliban's woman is not womanhood awaiting emergence but gender under erasure. *She* is allegorical. Provocatively, the same can be said for Caliban, who is nothing more than a projection of white libidinal investments. He too is allegorical. Caliban is not imbued with the capacity to possess anything, even himself. Is it a misaligned gesture to *name* the missing element, Caliban's woman? Does Caliban, his "woman," repressed

queers, gender in drag, or trans actualizations even possess bodily form? Or are they phantasms of fantasies, desires, and phobias that can also speak back—what some call resistance—but are trapped in the violence of their antiblack unmaking?

Gendered form, as in physiognomic representation or positionality, does not matter here. However, there is something particular and distinct about Blackness that does. Whereas ontology is a concern with being, physiognomy is a particular representation of presence. The concern this book places on historicizing and politicizing Black female gender as the quintessential attribute of gendered sexual violence is that it crowds out and seemingly rationalizes the myriad ways that gender violence performed against the Black slave escapes reason. This reliance on the corporeal schema, to use Frantz Fanon's words here, and biologically heterosexual couplings unwittingly presupposes Caliban and Caliban's woman role in *The Tempest* as degraded beings.

However, *The Tempest* enacts a grand-scale fantasy. While Caliban's woman is perceptively absent at the level of physiognomic progenesis in a matrix of racial sexual ordering, she is overrepresented at the level of violence. Caliban's place in the ontological arrangement positions him at the helm of patriarchal desire. Locating Caliban solely as a desiring benefactor of patriarchal promises occludes an unflinching engagement with Caliban's violation. *The Tempest* allegorically remarks upon the peculiar status of Black gender through and by way of opaque violation, which gives the play its coherence. Only under these circumstances can *The Tempest* be deployed as theoretical armor to imagine Black procreation as metaphysically barren, when the material realities of slavery and colonialism speak an entirely different tune. *The Tempest* writes its own script of truth based in the Western metaphysical imposition that holds the Black as a fungible object to the projection of an all-empowered Human world. This affects the problem. The problem is not how Caliban and Caliban's woman are physiognomically made and unmade, present or erased, but that they can be made operable for many desires even if or when those desires are competing.

Developed as a theory of species in the seventeenth century, physiognomy—the judgment of facial features, the bodily form, and biocentric essentialisms—is how ontology or the lack thereof is mapped onto the terrain of the body granting features intellectual and affective visibility. Johann

Caspar Lavater later interpreted physiognomy into a science of racial sexual difference that was located on the face. Contrary to phrenology, which maps the texture of the skull, physiognomy takes stock of facial features, using approximation of distance between various poles of the face, shapes of noses, lips, eyebrows, chins, cheekbones to determine the virtue and intellectual capacity of people along racial lines. Regarding the negro, Lavater expresses many views and concerns about their featural and intellectual inferiority. He ruminates,

The most beautiful complexion may become jaundiced, may be lost; but the negro cannot be washed white. I shall not become a negro, because, to imitate him, I blacken my face; nor a thief, because I assume the appearance of a thief.³⁴

Lavater invites the physiognomist to use the visual as a conduit to think beyond what of the face may be fleeting, with aging and other circumstances of choice or imposition, to consider “what would be visible, under various other circumstances.”³⁵ On these terms, the concern of this scientific exploration is with the question of ontology as a racial demarcation where the surface levels expose the depths of existential matters. For the negro, who is marked as an agender species, the appearance is immutable, that of a thief, one for whom mimesis is its only form, which is rather Black formlessness. The negro can only take from but cannot be the proper physiognomic subject. However, in commenting on gender, Lavater contends that “even single bones in the female are more tender, smooth, and round; have fewer sharp edges, cutting and prominent corners.”³⁶ The form of non-negro female gender is a terrain of its own marked by lesser degrees of physical intensity.

The physiognomist’s gendering of featurism is also a container for reproduction. As Mary Olmstead Stanton argues in her nineteenth-century study on how to read faces, “Love or amateness, is the fundamental faculty of the human organism.”³⁷ The appropriate measure of amateness produces “love of the opposite sex, procreative energy, physical passion, conjugality, manliness and womanliness, sexual perfection, energetic individuality, fecundity, base of mentality.”³⁸ Stanton lays bare physiognomy as fundamentally invested in the facialization of heterosexual desire and sexuality. She argues that attractiveness, or the science of attraction, connotes how the face offers

a mirror into the internal function of the organ systems and the soul of the individual. Intellect or morality as a scientific measure operationalizes the sexual beingness of the superior race(s) by deploying their sexuality to territorialize sexual features as mechanisms for policing the racial sexual boundaries of gender. Amativeness thus only has value or meaning insofar as its gendered classificatory schemas are buttressed by what it means to be overdetermined or underdetermined by its deployment. In the case of excessive amativeness, one “tends to immodesty, unchastity, and to unbridled licentiousness, lust, prostitution, obscene language and slight regard of sexual ethics.”³⁹ Inversely, a

deficient amativeness makes the character narrow, unsocial and unlovable, with no power to attract the opposite sex . . . Those deficient in love of the opposite sex are wanting in magnetism, and often exhibit a morbid, shrewish, suspicious manner, and angularity of body.⁴⁰

Despite the inclusion of various poles of sexual (dis)functions, physiognomy is not a science of, or for, the wayward or homosexual subject, who in nineteenth-century American discourse is conceived in relation and contradistinction to the negro. Siobhan B. Somerville notes that “it was not merely a historical coincidence that the classification of bodies as either ‘homosexual’ or ‘heterosexual’ emerged at the same time that the United States was aggressively constructing and policing the boundary between ‘black’ and ‘white’ bodies.”⁴¹ In defining the parameters of physiognomic heterosexual mating, modern physiognomists are explicit in crowding out the use-value of this science for the darker races. Simply, the negro is not a physiognomic subject but an object deployed for the purpose of racial distancing. As Stanton argues, “The fusion of white with black is detrimental in every way, while the crossing of dark Caucasians with negroes or Indians almost always creates low, criminal, and brutal types.”⁴² Physiognomy is a science of locating virtuosity, which, given its mimetic character, Blackness is *ex nihilo* matter except as a commentary on the extremity of its comparison.

Despite introducing physiognomy with a critical articulation of the embeddedness of racial othering within its deployment “as the primary ‘totemic operator’ of the principle of Sameness and Difference” from the

nineteenth-century onward, in Wynter's theoretics, the "primacy of the anatomical model of sexual difference" continues to overdetermine the relationship of power and conscription Caliban "possesses" in relationship to his so-called woman.⁴³ If the project of moving beyond Miranda's meaning is sutured by Caliban and Caliban's woman as signifiers of "'native' human subordination" on the premise of their physiognomic relation, then the urgency of their ontological predicament is elaborated on the basis of their epidermal genital schema that is referential to the statuses of Prospero and Miranda.⁴⁴ Under this schematic, Caliban occupies the position of the "native" sovereign head who, like Prospero, can and will be supplanted with the reason of a racial sexual genetrix, his woman the figure of the demonic grounds. Caliban's woman as a radical transformative demonstrative figure is buttressed on an assumptive premise of Caliban and his suprapositional racial sexual ontological presence.

The demonological approach offered by Cooper, however, forces a pause on this point. The erasure or obscuring of the sexual for Caliban brings into focus the following convention offered by Hortense J. Spillers, that the Black male "must regain as an aspect of his own personhood—the power of 'yes' to the 'female' within."⁴⁵ This, I submit, is not a statement about identity, but one about proximate distance to sexual violence and violability. Spillers provides the preconditions for eroding the metaphysical presuppositions of the gender binary. Distinction, or "symbolic integrity," does not apply to the socially dead. In the case of slavery, not only does the gender binary fail to apply to material realities of the slave's existence, but the sexualized conditions of the slave put tremendous pressure on the assumed explanatory power of gender as a framework. How might a "*black descensus*," a term elaborated by Cooper, lead interrogations of Caliban's role in the native/Black racial sexual order to entirely different conclusions that may "dissolve sex-gender coherence" for Blackness writ large, not just for the anatomical physiognomic cis-Black woman?⁴⁶ How does Blackness conscript Caliban such that his replicated racial sexual epistemological understanding buttresses him with the credence of mutated empowerment that grants primacy to the cis-anatomical model as explanatory of his assumed possessive potentials? How might we understand the sexuality of Caliban's woman as disimbricated from Caliban? Under what conditions does her sexuality emerge?

Genital Fantasies

“Genital fantasies” is a term Gayl Jones offers in her 1975 novel *Corregidora*, about the sexual perversity of white enslavers. Jones animates the dizzying dysfunction of the protagonist, Ursa Corregidora, a blues singer who obsesses about bearing generations to undo the sexual taint of slavery that bore her maternal lineage. Ursa is introduced in violence by way of an assault or an accident, which pushes her or assists her in falling down a flight of stairs. The details of this encounter are unclear; however, what is evident is the exchange with her husband Mutt results in Ursa suffering a miscarriage and a subsequent hysterectomy. The politics of this seemingly personal loss weighs heavily on Ursa, and arguably the reader. She seeks to make sense of and rectify her place in the world as someone who cannot bear children while carrying a deep neurosis to do so as a means to remedy her family’s history of racial sexual terror. Ursa’s reproductive foreclosure clarifies how the desire to deploy Black sex to undo the structural predicaments of slavery and sexual violence is an impossibility.

The surname Corregidora was branded onto Ursa by a Portuguese enslaver who owned and fathered multiple generations of her maternal lineage in Brazil. Corregidora, described as a whoremonger, owned Great Gram, with whom he fathered Gram, with whom he fathered Mama who birthed and mothered Ursa. This relation is ever so complex and vexing, as Ursa explains, “Their survival depended on suppressed hysteria. She went and got her daughter, womb swollen with the child of her own father. How many generations had to bow to his genital fantasies?” Ursa is painfully aware that these fantasies live longer than the mortal lives of their creators. Through her own life events she comes to understand the inescapable structural force of how slavery made her through haunting sexual possessiveness. The text repeats that the evidence of slavery was buried such that no one can “say nothing” about what occurred. Yet, as Mama explains to Ursa about the spectacular nature of violence exhibited towards slaves, “all them beating and killing wasn’t nothing but sex circuses, and all them white peoples, mens, womens, and childrens crowding around to see . . .”⁴⁷ In explicit candor, Mama opens the line of thought to think about the sexual implications of all forms of violence enacted upon Black bodies. The sexual and gendered (mens, womens, and childrens) realms of being are locked within the emergence

of identity through the libidinal economy of phallic and phobic associations with Blackness.⁴⁸

After leaving Mutt and struggling through another failed marriage where she is unseen and disregarded, Ursa returns to the scene of her first marriage, however this time on different terms. She is no longer attempting to disassociate from her maternal past but embraces the terror of its paradigmatic grip over her existence, twenty-two years after the push-fall. Ursa and Mutt reunite not on romantic terms as lovers but by way of the mutual non-existence of their self-possessed sexuality. The point here is not to look past the bodily and mental harms Mutt perpetuated against Ursa but to think of the hysteria of her inability to bear generations with Mutt as an impossibility bestowed upon them before that fateful night. There is nothing to idealize by marking these two as bound through a condition beyond their individual actions. Ursa is drawn to Mutt because there is a structural misalignment, a paradigmatic necessity as to why they cannot coexist. To make generations means to bring forth life that is free from a condition of gratuitous violence; such would necessitate producing heirs who have access to the preconditions of gender arrangements and subjectivity bestowed by a kinship structure, “our father’s children,” as opposed to “mama’s babies and papa’s maybes.” It would mean transgressing the limits of slave law into the symbolic structure of the white patriarchal law. Neither Ursa nor Mutt, pre the push-fall nor post the event, have the capacity to circumvent a paradigm of sexual (non) relation set forth by the auspices of the peculiar institution.

In the end, Ursa and Mutt come together. Her blues performance is where Mutt finds her. He reconnects by reminding Ursa of his great-grandfather, gesturing to suggest his loss of Ursa gave him the same feeling his great-grandfather had when he lost his wife. “After they took her, when he went crazy he wouldn’t eat nothing but onions and peppermint . . . I tried it but it didn’t do nothing but make me sick.”⁴⁹ Mutt, however, had the option to return, so he did. Ursa had no choice but to be found.

The thoughts that led Ursa to accept a physical reconnection with Mutt are revelatory and haunting. Ursa wants to know what drew Corregidora into this perverse generational narrative:

It had to be sexual, I was thinking, it had to be something sexual that Great Gram did to Corregidora. I knew it had to be sexual: “What is it a woman can do

to a man that make him hate her so bad he wont to kill her one minute and keep thinking about her and can't get her out of his mind the next?" In a split second I knew what it was, and I think he might have known too. A moment of pleasure and excruciating pain at the same time, a moment of broken skin but not sexlessness, a moment just before sexlessness, a moment that stops just before sexlessness, a moment that stops before it breaks the skin: "I can kill you."⁵⁰

With these thoughts of sex stifled by death, or more aptly social death, Ursa begins removing the value judgments she inscribed on her sexual making. Finding that what Corregidora had done was implicated in all of the consensual Black sexual relations in her life; her mama and daddy, as well as she and Mutt.

Ursa and Mutt embrace following the repetition of the words "I don't want a kind of woman that hurts you," to which Ursa responds, "Then you don't want me." Mutt shakes Ursa until she falls crying. She relays that, "I don't want a kind of man that'll hurt me neither."⁵¹ A sexual embrace occurs in this moment, where it feels good to avow a disavow in moving forward that such could not be true. They are hurting one another in the truth of speech and the context of the embrace. Blackness hurts. It is hurt. It is (en)gendered that way.

In the final scene of *Corregidora*, when Ursa and Mutt come together in hurt and an act of fellation Jones presents a moment steeped in the nonre-lationality that haunts and violates them. What occurs between them over the course of their relationship is a metacommentary on the belief that there is a primary and innate sexual relationality between Black men and Black women. The haunting to make kin or bear generations for Ursa, which is a paradigmatic burden placed on her by slavery, exposes the relation between the female slave and male slave, Caliban and Caliban's woman, as a force produced by a shared relation to sexual violability. Ursa's biological and ontological barrenness propels her into the realization that Black genitals cannot combine to make Humans but instead conjoin out of obligation to make more slaves. The heritability of this predicament does not stop with emancipation but is buried in the evidence "they" did or did not leave behind, as Ursa ruminates, about how the sexual thing that was done is immutably rooted in Blackness. While the "they" references white men like Corregidora it is not confined to his racial sexual positionality and thus expands to include others, like Miranda from *The Tempest*, or even Black people themselves.

By drawing on *Corregidora* as an example, I want to contextualize the complex genital fantasies at play in acts of mutilations as well as fantasies of sexualization, sexual aggressiveness, and punishment. *Corregidora* is situated within a tradition of Black feminist writing that rejects one-for-one descriptions of gender that reduce Black gendered violability to that of patriarchy alone. Blackness has the explanatory power to reveal endless accounts of the itemization of the flesh through deracinating forms of sexual(ized) violence in ways isolated gender categories fail to apprehend. While sexual violence can be, and has been, largely theorized as a terrorizing facet of Black life under slavery, the concept of genital fantasies gestures towards marking sexual violence as a paradigm of relations between Blackness and the making of Human kinship and differentiation, rather than an individual violator. Christina Sharpe argues that,

In *Corregidora* we are made to see that more complex elaborations of slavery “as the ghost in the machine of kinship” of post-slavery American subjectivity are long overdue and that the spaces for witnessing through particular kinds of disavowal, repetition, reoccupation, and reanimation are already long past.⁵²

Corregidora amplifies the contradictions of what the content of the novel can and cannot do in terms of retracing history. As readers and theorists, we are left to wallow in the inconsistencies that arise from being pushed to imagine a history that is simultaneously present and absent, silent and pervasive.

The intention here is to not assert *Corregidora* as a pure rendering of slavery. It is worth considering how *Corregidora* succeeds and fails, not by the fault of Jones, but by the narrative constraints of attempting to write a story so grandiose it structurally cannot be told, not even in the realm of the imaginary. In this respect, what are the stakes of grappling with the implications of sexual violence and slavery for Black existence when it must be imagined unsuccessfully? Can we confront the force of racial sexualization if it renders Blackness illegible and gratuitously open for intrusion and re-conceptualization? Is it possible to stay with the inconclusiveness of the previous two questions without retreating into the recourse of possibility and alterity as optimism? Additionally, what is Black sexuality without slavery? Can Black sex exist without the stain of violation?

Genital fantasies, as Jones articulates, provide a context for considering the vexed relationality between Black women and Black men. Ursa and

Mutt's relationship starkly highlights Black sexuality and relation as violation born from their fraught gendered embodiments thrust forward from slavery. Black gender is confounded by a psychic structure upon which fantasies of its lack are redoubled to entrench ideas of binary gender as just, legitimate, and essential forms of sexual coexistence. As such, Black women and men are perceived as inverse gendered conditions; however, all Black genders are reproduced in forced relations steeped in violent subsumption. Genital fantasies and the violence of their operationalization are not the possession of singular actors or binary relations, such as man–woman. Rather, the inability for Black gender to emerge is present in all interactions or invocations of Blackness as a gendered substance. What I mean by substance is something that is less a form or matter but relegated to a thing or an object inhabiting multiple permutations. Thus, the violence that conditions the (en)gendering of Blackness is situated by the overdetermination of gender as an essence based in a biologically rooted sociogenic principle of sexual mutuality, which always returns to a Human homeostasis parasitic on Black exclusion for its terrain of intelligibility and subject making. The excising of Blackness from the Human condition of gendering and its conflicts is buttressed and maintained by the gratuity of Black bodily mutilations that are explored throughout this book and described as a structure of racial sexuation.

Blackness was ushered into the New World as the stained and marked flesh of sexual openness and violability, a condition that prevails regardless of sex or gender designations or attempts at self-making. Which is to say, perceivable womanhood or manhood for Black people does not make up the essential quality or differentiation of sexual suffering. Instead, the attempt at fixing violation within those categories leads to a neurosis that turns back on itself and leans on binary expectations in an attempt to make sense of suffering that cannot help but to fall outside of the assumptive logics of cis-gendering.

Black Feminism Beyond Binarism

The framing of the primary intervention of Black feminist theory as redeeming the status of the “silent and suffering Black woman” is an interpretive ghettoization that some Black feminists have spent well over half a century theorizing against.⁵³ The foregrounding of some, rather than all, Black

feminists here is to acknowledge that there are divergent approaches, intellectual schisms, and various methods of thought encapsulated under the rubric of Black feminism.⁵⁴ This point does not challenge or change the argument offered in this chapter, but maintains that Black feminist theory is and has been operable towards other modes of analyzing sexual force that do not uphold Black cis-womanhood as its historical makings, present assumptions, and theoretical longings. I contend that contemporary Black thought has entered a vexed relationship with the deification of, rather than critical engagement with, Black feminist theory and its predominate anchors, Black women, transmasculine, non-binary, and queer people.

Theory, especially when produced by highly regarded thinkers, is left unmoved and seemingly considered untouchable. From my position, Black feminist theory is a critical analysis of the world, and not a practice in perfecting theoretical replication. How does one think with, through, and against vectors of Black feminist thought as a political commitment towards undoing the hold of the slave ship? How does one perform this work while also being mindful of the conditions of gender that may render some thought more disagreeable because of the positionality of its producers? I will say that no single theory or theorist, including me, has their pulse situated completely on the problem. Though some shatter previously held perspectives in a manner that produces new portals and entry points for critical analysis. Lastly, one can find value in thought, while maintaining that aspects require additional critique to respect that there may be other ways of seeing that serve to further disrupt the opacity of antiblackness.

Nonetheless, privileging *the* contribution of Black feminism as the re-fashioning of Black womanhood anew misaligns fleshly form for structure. Although the status of the Black/slave female, most specifically in the contexts of slavery, colonialism, and their afterlives, amplifies the contradictions of prevailing discourses of racial, gendered, and sexual violence, this figure should not be held as the permanent fixture or truth of Black feminist thought. Black feminism need not be a placeholder to perform demonstrative concern for Black women as sympathetic, additive, and inclusive subjects who are misaligned or forgotten. Interrogations that ask how the Black woman came to *be*, rather than presuppose an inherent naturalness to her to levy arguments against erasure, precondition the possibility to deterritorialize orders of thought. Which is to say, Black feminisms contain a potential

disruption to knowledge, the capacity to critically move with, through, and against questions relating to ontology as it relates to sex/gender emergences and foreclosures. This serves to disimbricate theory from a reliance on womanhood as critical emphasis while not discounting the importance of the labors of critical analyses that substantiate and/or undo the assumed value of form and meaning.

The conceptual necessity of writing a radically different script on Black gender serves to embody antagonistic agitations as productive for thought. What would it mean to lead with the unknown rather than to refuse it? Reflecting upon the matter of the female slave does not necessitate that theory hold onto gender categories as fixed presuppositional renderings of “real” forms. Black feminist theories that contend with fungibility and the fluid status of Black gender must in many ways provide space for the expansion of gendered (im)possibilities in the order of thought. This must occur beyond the inadvertent or intentional upholding of cis-binarisms, as the (un)spoken given and assumed locus from which the policed boundaries of Blackness emanate. Appearances of Black people and discussions of Blackness in the historical record in fact suggest quite otherwise: that the prolonged fixation with and mutation of Blackness disallowed Black people to exist uncontested in cis-gendered identities.⁵⁵ In this respect, the pliability of Black feminist theory represents the embrace of a fungible order of thought that is malleable in attending to the (dis)appearances of relational, competing, and unnamed fleshly forms. Thus, when the technologies of violence shift from slavery, to reconstruction, Jim Crow, mass incarceration, and unbri-dled fascism, what constitutes the violence of Black gender cannot presuppose a form. Furthermore, there should be a weariness about projecting womanhood or manhood as biocentric constitutions, lived experiences, or possessed identities in thought. Rather, if we are to attune to suffering, Black womanhood and manhood demand disaggregation from the order of things. That is, these categories should not be privileged as sacred but understood as conditions that are produced from violence. They also carry the potential to obscure violence when elevated in thought as incontestable through the desire to extend care and protection to conditions that have been so often violated. What emerges here is that the polarity of gender, in its binary form, will not allow thought to erode its contended importances. If categories like Black woman and Black man are figured in the order of thought as erosive

rather than redemptive, Black gender theory, or Black feminism, functions to provide a more expansive and nonexclusive discussion on Black engendering. In this respect, asking what the conditions of Black suffering are, from a Black feminist perspective, has the potential to move with a very different current.