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The Last Place They Thought Of

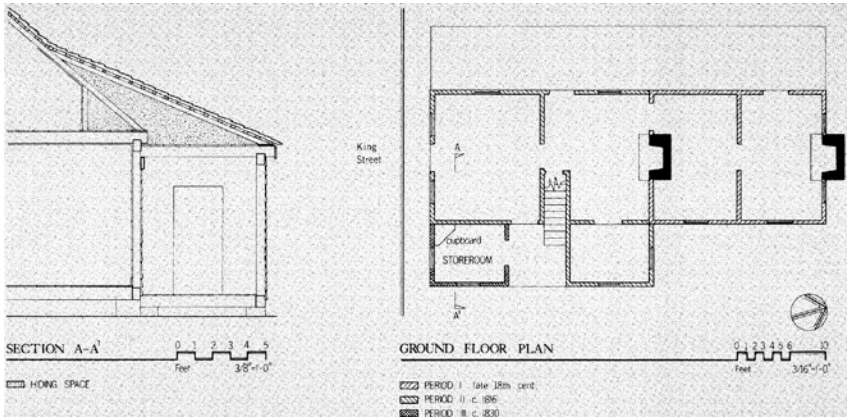
Black Women's Geographies

A small shed had been added to my grandmother's house years ago. Some boards were laid across the joists at the top, and between these boards and the roof was a very small garret, never occupied by any thing but rats and mice. It was a pent roof, covered with nothing but shingles, according to the southern custom for such buildings. The garret was only nine feet long and seven feet wide. The highest part was three feet high, and sloped down abruptly to the loose board floor. There was no admission for either light or air.

—Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

I begin this discussion of black women's geographies with the hiding place Harriet Jacobs [Linda Brent] describes in her slave narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself*, her grandmother's garret. Learning from her slave owner, Dr. Flint, that her children would soon be "broken in" and that his abuses of her would escalate, Linda Brent devised a plan to flee his plantation in Edenton, North Carolina, with the purpose of saving herself and her children.¹ After concealing herself in neighbors' homes and a local swamp, Brent fled to the small 9 × 7 × 3-foot attic above her grandmother's house. She describes the garret as her "loop-hole of retreat," a hideaway that set in motion her escape to the North and the emancipation of her children.² After she hid for two years in the garret, her children were sold to their white father, Mr. Sands, and permitted to stay with Brent's grandmother; they were later taken north with Sands's family. After seven years in the garret, and unsuccessful searches by Dr. Flint, Brent escaped to New York—her body and soul still suffering from the long imprisonment in the attic.³

The life story of Linda Brent has been described as an antecedent black feminist narrative.⁴ The central themes in the slave narrative—family, sex-



Reconstruction to scale of Harriet Jacobs's hiding place. Drawing by Carl R. Lounsbury.

ual violence, mothering, love, emancipation, community, womanhood—and Linda Brent's resistances to racial-sexual domination are some of the fundamental issues black women experienced during transatlantic slavery. Several theorists, such as Hortense Spillers, Saidiya Hartman, Valerie Smith, and Hazel Carby, have taken up the issues Jacobs describes in her narrative.⁵ What *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* has offered these and other theorists includes: models of early black U.S. women's literary devices and genres; evidence of black women's unique gendered relationship to slavery; patterns of racist-sexist domination and gendered resistance, which can be traced into the present; and a critical engagement with the project of slavery, including Brent's critique of femininity, motherhood, selfhood, and whiteness. Jacobs's narrative thus makes possible an examination of the ways in which some black women write and express their existence through and beyond slavery.

Additionally, the story Linda Brent tells is extremely complex. Theorist Jenny Sharpe suggests Brent's actions in the narrative are a conundrum because her resistances to slavery and Dr. Flint are necessarily bound up in the legalities of bondage.⁶ The ideological and legal validation of rape, punishment, and racial-sexual subordination, and the terrifying threats made by her owner, Dr. Flint, shroud Brent's resistant choices—such as her retreat to the garret—in processes of subjugation. This does not mean that Brent is simply a victim, but rather that her story and her actions blend black female oppression and captivity with glimpses of individual control and agency.⁷ This blending of oppression, captivity, control, and agency underscores what Brent

describes as “the shape of mystery”: the racial-sexual captivity she experiences (enforced by Dr. Flint and the legalities of slavery), the life-threatening strategies she must execute while in bondage (to avoid and undermine slavery), and the irrational workings of slavery, which operate to delimit and disclose Brent’s humanity and self-liberation.⁸ Underpinning the shape of mystery, then, is a commentary on “how the realm of freedom is conceptualized by those who have never been free.”⁹ Geographically, the shape of mystery can be identified as a mapping of the terror and transparency of slave spaces that incorporates Brent’s unique spaces of self-confinement (particularly in the attic), strategy, and critique.

The shape of mystery is also the space of pain Brent avoids and experiences in the garret: she remembers Dr. Flint’s aggressive sexual advances; she witnesses slave suicides and punishments; her limbs are benumbed by inaction; she loses the power of speech; she remains unconscious for sixteen hours; she questions her spiritual beliefs and the seeming indifference of God; she becomes delirious; and dark thoughts fill her mind.¹⁰ Linda Brent’s experiences in her grandmother’s garret exact, geographically, what she describes as the shape of mystery: Brent must suffer to avoid self and familial sufferings. The question of geographic freedom is wrapped up in the racial, sexual, and bodily constraints before and during her retreat to the attic. That which is outside the garret—human bondage and racial-sexual hierarchies, imminent and actual rape, the links between property, ownership, and racist-sexist punishments—are, for seven years, connected to the physically disabling perimeters of the $9 \times 7 \times 3$ -feet cell.

Brent’s spatial experiences and strategies illustrate how the geographic workings of slavery simultaneously produce spatial boundaries and subject-knowledges that can subvert the perimeters of bondage. That which is used to geographically displace and regulate black women during slavery, specifically patriarchal ways of seeing and white colonial desires for lands, free labor, and racial-sexual domination, rest on a tight hierarchy of racial power and knowledge that is spatially organized. This organization assumes white masculine knowledge and the logic of visualization, which both work to objectify Brent and her community and negate their unique sense of place.¹¹ For a black woman such as Linda Brent, the logic of visualization and patriarchal knowledge means that her place and body are seen to be, and understood as, naturally subordinate to whiteness and masculinity; it also means that her seeable presence is crucial to Dr. Flint’s sense of place. Race, sex, and gender—

her seeable body-scale—inscribe Brent as worthy of captivity, violence, punishment, and objectification; her bodily codes produce her slave master's surroundings. If the geographies of slavery are primarily about racial captivities and boundaries, and the garret is both a site of self-captivity and a loophole of retreat, it becomes increasingly clear that it is Brent's different sense of place that allows her to explore the possibilities in the existing landscape. This is especially relevant given the lack of authority black women's geographic knowledges and experiences are given during (and after) transatlantic slavery. The spaces Brent discloses, both in the landscape of slavery and through her sense of place, demonstrate an unresolved, but workable, opposition to geographic domination.

Under slavery, geographic options such as escape, concealment, and racial-sexual safety can be, as Brent explains, bound up with troubling spatial strategies. Of the garret she writes, "[t]he continued darkness was oppressive. It seemed horrible to sit or lie in a cramped position day after day, without one gleam of light. Yet I would have chosen this, rather than my lot as a slave . . ."¹² Brent's spatial options are painful; the garret serves as a disturbing, but meaningful, response to slavery. Disabling, oppressive, dark, and cramped surroundings are more liberatory than moving about under the gaze of Dr. Flint who threatens her "at every turn."¹³ Importantly, she claims that in the garret she is *not* enslaved and that her loophole of retreat is a retreat to emancipation. For Brent to declare that her emancipation begins in the garret—which she also repeatedly refers to as her dismal cell, her prison, and this dark hole—is evidence of how she uses the existing landscape and architecture to name the complicated geographies of black womanhood in/and slavery.

The garret makes available a place for Brent to articulate her lived experiences and emancipatory desires, without losing sight of the dehumanizing forces of slavery. She bores holes in the garret with a gimlet, in order to allow air in and observe her surroundings and her children's activities; this, along with her location within her grandmother's house, allows her to partially listen, see, and feel her immediate surroundings without formally participating in the daily activities of the town. While in the garret, Brent accentuates what Gillian Rose calls "paradoxical space." Brent's self-captive location in the garret is far from a passive space. In fact, her position in and outlook from the garret evidence several material, experiential, and representational spaces "that would be mutually exclusive if charted on a two dimensional map . . . [but are] occupied simultaneously."¹⁴ The garret is transformed into a

paradoxical space because Brent creates its meaning, and its geographic work, through her memories, experiences, and observations:

Through my peeping-hole I could watch the children, and when they were near enough I could hear their talk . . . O, those long, gloomy [winter] days, with no object for my eye to rest upon, and no thoughts to occupy my mind, except the dreary past and the uncertain future! I was thankful when there came a day sufficiently mild for me to wrap myself up and sit at the loophole to watch passers by . . . I heard many conversations not intended for my ears. I heard slave-hunters planning how to catch some poor fugitive. Several times I heard allusions to Dr. Flint, myself, and the history of my children . . . The opinion was expressed that I was in the Free States. Very rarely did any one suggest that I was in the vicinity . . . [my grandmother's attic] was the last place they thought of. Yet there was no place, where slavery existed, that could have afforded me so good a place of concealment.¹⁵

The 9 × 7 × 3-foot space discloses different, often contradictory, forms of captivity, concealment, and resistance. Brent hears of slave escapes (including her brother's flight), slave captures, and the reward for her capture; she marks the place-meaning of the Free States; she listens as her grandmother and children are questioned by her slave holder; through the peeping-hole she views punished bodies, running slaves, her children's play, and Dr. Flint; she recalls the dreary past and anticipates the uncertain future; she listens to family Christmas festivities and hears of Dr. Flint's repeated excursions north, in search of her; she witnesses her grandmother's illness, her Aunt Nancy's slow murder, and her children's move north. Indeed, the paradoxical space of the garret is advanced even further when Brent arranges to have several letters posted to Dr. Flint from New York and Boston. When the letters from the north arrive in Edenton, Dr. Flint is thrown off by Brent's geographic trick and continues to pursue her where she does not exist, in New York and Boston.¹⁶ Brent is everywhere and nowhere, north and south, unvisibly present across the landscape, in the last place they thought of.

For seven years Brent holds her body captive while observing and hearing activities not always meant for her eyes or ears. There is both a separation from and connection to the world outside the attic; she is both inside and

outside, captive and free. The garret can be conceptualized as usable paradoxical space, which opens up a different way to observe slavery and underscores the geographic shape of mystery. That is, Brent is a black woman who is positioned across (rather than inside or outside, or inevitably bound to) slavery while in the garret. The garret locates her in and amongst the irrational workings of slavery as a witness, participant, and fugitive. These multiple subject positions—formulated in “the last place they thought of”—gesture to several different geographic possibilities and experiences, such as places seen, remembered, hoped for, and avoided by Brent. At the same time, there is the constant reminder that “the last place they thought of” is also spatializing one realm of freedom through witnessing the terrible lives of other slaves, enforced family separation, and bodily pain. Her “freedom” is arranged according to: the outer geographies of slavery, which remain life-threatening and violent; the tight and disabling garret; and necessary child abandonment.

Yet Brent’s position in the garret—above ground level, unseen while being able to see within and across the plantation—quietly critiques and undoes traditional geographies. While she is in the garret, Brent undermines the patriarchal logic of visualization by erasing herself from the immediate landscape and *knowing* what she terms “a different story.”¹⁷ The combination of seeing and knowing the self and the irrational workings of bondage from “the last place they thought of,” in part, privileges Brent’s geographic perspective. While she is attending to the painful contradictoriness of slave geographies, she is also not unlike a disembodied master-eye, seeing from nowhere.¹⁸ Paradoxical space is therefore highlighted once again, through Brent’s concealed, elevated positioning: she provides the primary geographic knowledge through which the reader, or more significantly Dr. Flint, engages with her enslavement; her concealed sense of place looks outward, offering a different perspective through which slavery can be mapped.

In the garret, in the last place they thought of, Linda Brent articulates the hidden spaces that are antagonistic to transparent space. The combination of perspective, disabling bodily pain, emancipation, and the racial-sexual violence outside the garret allows Brent to tell a different story, which is in the shape of mystery, a conundrum, a sense of place that explores alternative geographic options within and through racial-sexual oppressions. That black women’s geographies are not easily resolvable for Brent is not surprising. The ways in which the paradoxical space of the garret and her individual spatial predicaments are presented in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* mark the

tensions of geography rather than a simple solution to geographic domination. While Brent is concealed, looking outward into the landscape of terror and transparency, it is also very clear that her oppositional place in the garret remains punishable. What her geographies tell us—about the shape of mystery, spatial conundrums, a different sense of place, and racial-sexual particularities—are relevant, in part, because the question of geographic freedom is tied to the dismal perimeters of the garret and the threat of actions that would be taken by Flint *if* Brent were to be found and recaptured. Brent's desired place cannot be fully resolved on the existing geographic terms laid out for her; she rightly notes that, where slavery exists, there is no place that is wholly liberatory.¹⁹ Thus, while the geographic organization of blackness and black femininity are not dramatically shifted in Brent's narrative, her sense of place is useful in introducing the workings of racial-sexual displacement because her story is not only multifaceted, her geographic accounts from the garret illustrate what can and is manifested in "the last place they thought of," particularly when her oppositional geographies are caught up in violent geographic arrangements.

The last place they thought of hides Jacobs's/Brent's body, but the garret does not foreclose her geographic strategies and critiques. Indeed, this story presents a new kind of spatial positioning, through which her body is painfully protected deep within the crevices of power. A critical geographic reconfiguration is exposed—a terrain of struggle, which spans seven years and centralizes the terms under which Jacobs/Brent can bring her self into being across uneven geographies.

How Bodily Geography Can Be

The history of the black diaspora converges with bodily schemas and racial codes. Most obviously, the geographies of transatlantic slavery were geographies of black dispossession and white supremacy, which assumed racial inferiority and justified enslavement. Geographies such as the slave ship, the slave auction block, slave coffles, and the plantation are just some of the sites that spatialized domination under bondage. In particular, the ties between ownership and blackness rendered the black body a commodity, a site of embodied property, through ideological and economic exchanges. For black women, this legacy of captivity and ownership illustrates how bodily geography can be. Ownership of black women during transatlantic slavery was a spatialized, gendered, often public, violence; the black female body was viewed as a

naturally submissive, sexually available, public, reproductive technology. The owned and captive body was thus most profitable if it was considered to be a healthy, working, licentious, reproductive body. These characteristics were considered measurable and quantifiable, seeable sites of wealth, sexuality, and punishment. Geographically, in the most crude sense, the body is territorialized—it is publicly and financially claimed, owned, and controlled by an outsider. Territorialization marks and names the scale of the body, turning ideas that justify bondage into corporeal evidence of racial difference.

Once the racial-sexual body is territorialized, it is marked as decipherable and knowable—as subordinate, inhuman, rape-able, deviant, procreative, placeless; or, to borrow from Dionne Brand, “the exposed, betrayed, valiant, and violated female self, the vulnerable and fearful, the woman waiting for the probable invasion” is made known through her bodily markings.²⁰ Challenging these knowable bodily markers—asserting, for example, that blackness does not warrant rape-ability—was/is punishable. Objectified black female sexualities represent the logical outcome of a spatial process that is bound up in geographic discourses, such as territory, body/land possession, and public property. Geographic conquest and expansion is extended to the reproductive and sexually available body. Black women’s own experiential and material geographies, consequently, indicate a very complex and difficult relationship with space, place, and dispossession.

Narratives such as *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, as alluded to, make inextricable the links between black feminine bodies, ownership, and geography. The unresolved spaces Harriet Jacobs/Linda Brent presents—on the Flint plantation, in the garret, with and among her family—are complexly linked to her unprotected, public, and unfree body as a black woman. Jacobs’s/Brent’s retreat to the garret is a geographic tactic designed to protect her body and her children’s future bodies—from rape, violence, auctions, coffles, and labor that is analogous to “a slow murder.”²¹ What is made clear—by Jacobs’s/Brent’s “garreted” body and the legacy of racism and sexism—is that the stories of black women contain in them meaningful geographic tenets, but these are often reduced to the seeable flesh and unseeable geographic knowledges. However, Jacobs’s/Brent’s retreat to the garret gets in between the seeable and the unseeable. In doing this, she creates a way to think about the histories of black women as they are wrapped up in a legacy of unprotected public bodies situated across the logic of traditional spatial arrangements—on slave ships and auction blocks, in garrets, under a white supremacist gaze, in white and nonwhite places. The very close ties among and between geography, race,

gender, class, and sexuality become apparent through this history, and consequently develop new questions for our present social organization.

I am interested in thinking about the “close ties” between black women and geography because the connection reveals, as mentioned, how bodily geography can be. While the geographies of black women are certainly not always about flesh, or embodiment, the legacy of racism and sexism demonstrates how social systems organize seeable or public bodily differences. The creative work of poet and theorist nourbeSe philip illustrates how black femininity, as a seeable body-scale, comes to be understood through uneven geographies and resistances. Specifically, philip’s work illustrates the ways that racial-sexual difference is produced vis-à-vis an ongoing bodily history, which is both entrenched and alterable. Her important essay “Dis Place—The Space Between” reveals the kinds and types of geographies black women disclose and reinvent.²² Asserting that the black female body and black female subjects are unquestionably geographic, and that a black sense of place is linked to what she calls “bodymemory,” philip uses real and poetic geographies to map a world that is necessarily infused with racial-sexual discourses. philip uses the legacy of captivity and dispossession to write a historical present that cannot exist without black femininity and flexible geographies. She connects material geographies, such as the plantation, the nation, public streets, and legal borders, to a poetic geography of black femininity in order to show that the scale of the body, for black women, is both illustrative of public racial-sexual disavowal and a location of politicization. That is, the body is understood by philip as a historically produced terrain through which a different story is told—a geographic story produced from the last place they thought of, from the “place in between” the legs: the seemingly silenced and expendable black feminine body/parts and selves.

nourbeSe philip’s figuring of black women’s geographies moves between two important bodily processes: the social construction of “the space between the legs” and the racial-patriarchal uses of the space between the legs. Because female slave bodies are transformed into profitable sexual and reproductive technologies, they come to represent “New World” inventions and are consequently rendered axiomatic public objects. Black women are *the* mechanics of slavery:

Between. The legs. The Black woman comes to the New World with only the body. And the space between. The European buys her not

only for her strength, but also to service the Black man sexually—to keep him calm. And to produce new chattels—units of production—for the plantation machine. The Black woman. And the space between her legs. Is intended to help repopulate the outer space.²³

By centralizing black women's reproductive organs, capacities, and sexualities—units of production—philip locates where, and how, black women are situated in the creation of New World spaces. The spatialization of black femininity as “only the body” and “service” shows how black women's sense of place *and* those who see/consume the black body can be ensnared by the racial workings of sex and sexuality. She positions black women firmly in a body space that not only repeats Western Enlightenment binaries of sexual difference (female = passive, all body) but also one that emphasizes the strong working body purchased for arduous physical and reproductive labor. philip's analysis of the black body and the space between the legs shows how the logic of visualization, or the seeable black female body, naturalizes sexual difference and distinguishes black women from white women and men and black men. But the construction and uses of the space between the legs also disrupts normalized gender categories (male-aggressive, female-passive, male-public, female-private), which are predicated on whiteness. Specifically, the kind of black femininity philip describes moves “between” white and non-white patriarchal gender categories. Not an innocent site of private passivity and respectability nor a wholly public and/or rational self, but rather a collection of ideological scripts that assert objecthood: usable, public, psychologically empty, working-technology.²⁴ This puts forth a complicated bodily geography, which troubles discussions outlined by some feminists and feminist geographers because it cannot easily reside within white gendered dichotomies.²⁵ Importantly, philip denaturalizes and subverts sites of white femininity and masculinity by outlining the complexities of naturalized and resistant black selves. She identifies the space between the legs as a real and an analytical geography, one which can name and/or alter body hierarchies. philip places “displacement” and the “in between” by giving it flesh, violence, a history, and a voice.

The links nourbeSe philip makes between racist ideologies and embodiment, or social constructions and lived experiences, are also crucial. She emphasizes the different ways gender is lived via the experiential scale of the body in order to further denaturalize essentialist black places and spaces.

the past—the historio-racial schema at work. She achieves this by considering how race/gender informs the white and patriarchal logic of visualization: the black body is seen and inscribed under the rubric of privileged visual ideology; the black woman is seen, rather than heard, and her position in the New World, as *knowable* racial-sexual object invokes “[b]ody memory bodymemory.”²⁷ Bodymemory and body silence, philip argues, are:

inscribed with the texts of events of the New World. Body becoming text. In turn the Body African—dis place—place and s/place of exploitation inscribes itself permanently on the European text. *Not* on the margins. But within the very body of the text where silence exists.²⁸

Bodymemory is passed down and reinterpreted through generational remembrances, teachings, forewarnings, and advice: “The body must re/ member to/re/member the forgotten/the not-known yet known . . .”²⁹ Bodymemory is a corporeal continuity, which moves through time and recognizes where “permanent” racial-sexual time-spaces appear in dominant texts. philip allows silence and invisible body histories to be seeable, spatial, and ontological. She spatializes the New World differently; she identifies the paradox of the space between the legs through a poetics that calls into question, but holds steady, racism-sexism. That is, she produces new spaces, and New World spaces, by showing where black femininity actually *takes place*.

The space in between the legs symbolically, materially and physically goes several directions at once: it moves *out* of the body and reinscribes the invention of the black woman/woman-slave as knowable reproductive machine; it re-enters her body and shapes her captivity and other geographic material conditions; it subverts inner/outer and active/passive dichotomies by speaking through time/place/histories; it reproduces New World children; and, it signifies threat, reclamation and violation. So while the feminine black body is seemingly kept in place via “the space in between her legs” (inner space, oppressive definitions of the racial-sexual body), the space between the legs constructs contextual and subjective outsides. Gender position is rewritten and contested; the speaking body is unsilenced through the invention of S/Place:

S/Place. Where the inner space is defined into passivity by, and harassed to, the needs and functions of the outer space—the place of oppression. Run it down even further into Caribbean English:

s/place mutates into “dis place.” “*Dis place*”: the outer space—the plantation, the New World. “*Dis Place*”: the result of the linking of the inner space between the legs with the outer space leading to “dis placement.” “*Dis Place*”—the space between. The legs. For the Black woman “dis placed” to and in the New World, the inner space between the legs would also mutate into “*dis place*”—the fulcrum of the New World.³⁰

S/Place, dis place, this place, is the body and mind coalescing to represent the places of black women in the New World. The geography of the body touches elsewhere—it moves between the local (the inner space between the legs), the outside (the place of oppression, the plantation), the New World, and circles back again to reinvent black (female/New World) diaspora histories. philip negotiates her way out of transparent or knowable flesh by mobilizing bodily histories that demonstrate how identity and place are mutually constructed. While she notes the ways in which identity, space, and place are flexible and socially produced, geography remains a struggle for black women because racist-sexist schemas are also recyclable, lasting, and spatially rigorous. philip’s historicization, sites of bodily memory, and linguistic reinventions break the silence of black femininity and make seeable, and sometimes fleshy, black women’s complex geographies.

The history of silence and racist-sexist disavowal is renamed and respatialized as a “permanent” geographic body on the terrain of the New World:

body as text
 body inscribed
 on text
 on body
 to interrupt
 disrupt
 erupt
 the text of the new world
 is a text of
 a history of
 Inter/ptions
 Of bodies . . .³¹

Body disruptions, texts, histories, and inter/ptions demonstrate that the space between the legs is an analytically, historically, and socially produced category. Understood this way, terrains *outside* black women's bodies and produced by and through black femininity are also analytical, historical, socially produced—and therefore alterable. This alterability is clarified through philip's excerpts from her play *The Streets*. *The Streets* illustrates how different black women understand geography and use their bodies to refashion and reclaim the material landscape.³² Briefly, *The Streets* takes place in 1865 in a lower-class area of Port of Spain. The play traces the experiences of two gangs of Jamettes/stick-fighters (women "hanging about" the street, in public). After a public battle between the two groups of women, and police attempts to control the fight, Boadicea, the leader of one of the gangs, reveals her naked body to the authorities/men. The stick-fighters, from both gangs, follow her lead.

The women, momentarily, reclaim the streets and their bodies ("the streets is we own . . . de space between the legs is we own and we not frighten of these streets") and fearlessly dismiss the police, men, and the geographic meaning of Port of Spain. Soon after, Boadicea is disgraced—deemed an inappropriate un-colonized woman by the community—and arrested. Her trial is interrupted by the Jamettes who forcefully liberate and release Boadicea from the barristers and judge.³³ Although this refashioning, or reclamation of body/space by the Jamettes is policed, the characters and their bodies are reinvented by philip during the play's process: black women *and* their sense of place, *dis place*, *de space*, indicates their struggle with the legal, social, economic, and political structures imposed on them. The women, Jamettes, whores, disposable, expendable, inappropriate, un-colonizable, do not necessarily transform the space between the legs into a site of absolute resistance; rather they show how the history of the body is connected to a way of being, and therefore a viable site through which black femininity can sometimes transform bodily and non-bodily geographies of domination.

"Dis Place—The Space Between" is, for this reader, a radical geographic text. philip's representation of the history of geography and its connections to black femininity and bodymemory are developed through a poetics of landscape that is unforgettable, in part because she is so attentive to the ways in which the public black body documents where erasure and dispossession takes place; the connection with the public refuses a private, quiet, undocumented geography. philip therefore insists that black women have always engaged in a struggle, which can be seen in *dis place*, *this place*. The ways in

which philip re-languages space maps an intimate and conspicuous geography; she considers that historic formulations of black public space disclose embedded political concerns, right before our eyes, between the legs, across and beyond classificatory racial-sexual schemas.

The Margin: Black Feminism and Geography

The linkages between black feminism and human geography are not forthrightly clear in social theory.³⁴ I have been trying, however, to present a frame through which the complex (paradoxical, bodily, poetic, “in the last place they thought of,” mysterious, “in between”) locations of black women might be analyzed. While the work, ideas, and geographies I have presented thus far are to some degree limited (bodies, garrets, legs, memories, seeable-public-unvisible women, in and across the black diaspora) and do not exemplify the breadth and particularities of black women’s geographies in the diaspora, identifying some of the spatial themes black women draw attention to indicates how traditional geographies continually arrange uneven spatial practices. This unevenness, which is predicated on the logic of visualization and seeable body-flesh, is underlined by continuities and ruptures: black femininities that continually call into question the possibilities and limitations of space and place. To put it another way, the spatial and bodily remnants of transatlantic slavery are unresolved. Yet that which is unresolved is recast as a geographic struggle, which points to the tensions and gaps in existing landscapes. This can be seen on, through, and outside black women’s body-spaces, throughout the innovative poetics of bodymemories and “in betweens,” in the last place they thought of, and through the shape of mystery—the critical attic-space Harriet Jacobs/Linda Brent hides in. Furthermore, if the body clarifies the “close ties” between black women and geography, what deep space and poetics of landscape open up—as nourbeSe philip puts forward—is a way to express and politicize otherwise absent, or “garreted,” histories and lives. Bodily geographies are not only unfinished and incomplete, they must have a place. Recognizing black women’s knowledgeable positions as integral to physical, cartographic, and experiential geographies within and through dominant spatial models also creates an analytical space for black feminist geographies: black women’s political, feminist, imaginary, and creative concerns that re-spatialize the geographic legacy of racism-sexism.

In the introduction to *The Black Feminist Reader*, editors Joy James and T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting provide a brief genealogy of black feminist

thought. Beginning with the antislavery activism of Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman, and concluding with heterogeneous political perspectives of black women in the late twentieth century, James and Sharpley-Whiting argue that black feminism is an important site of inquiry, which has created a space for a more “viable democracy.”³⁵ The preliminary points James and Sharpley-Whiting outline in their introductory remarks trace the ways in which U.S. black feminist thought has developed during and after transatlantic slavery.³⁶ Within and through structural and ideological racism-sexism, black feminists have provided texts, theories, activist work, and political agendas that specify the resistances and accomplishments of black women. Rebellions, slave narratives, fiction, political work, feminist/womanist criticism, and academic endeavors, are just some of the ways in which black feminists have responded to and analyzed unequal sociopolitical relations. Black feminism and black women, the editors argue, have critically and creatively intervened in how liberty has been, and is, perceived: the unique perspective of black women, what bell hooks calls a “special vantage point,” indicates a long-standing critique of racial-sexual marginalization.³⁷ This critique is important because it discloses the multiple realities of racial, economic, and sexual oppressions and advances a progressive politics that conceptualizes “difference” beyond domination.

The Black Feminist Reader collects several black feminist analyses—what some might call “classic” or “canonical” texts, such as the work of Angela Davis, Toni Morrison, bell hooks, Barbara Christian, Hortense Spillers, Patricia Hill Collins—which were written in the United States during the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. While the reader privileges U.S. thought, the ideas compiled by Joy James and T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting in their introduction point to the ways in which black feminist thought—manifested in the margins, or, in the last place they thought of—is implicitly underpinned by a spatial politics. If black geographies and black women’s geographies are imaginable, through recognizing the displacement of difference, a different sense of place, and the powerful connections between landscape, body, and imagination, what kinds of geographic strategies are asserted by black feminists and black feminism? I suggest that black feminism can, and in many cases has, contributed to geography through meaningful political practices and agendas. What I mean by this is that black women have an investment in space, and spatial politics, precisely because they have been relegated to the margins of knowledge and have therefore been *imagined* as outside of the production of space. But as nourbeSe philip reminds us, this position outside is just

that, imagined and socially produced. As mentioned, symbolic and material captivity during and after transatlantic slavery, the social regulation of black femininity, and the regulatory terms of economic injustices have implied that black women's relationship to geography is negligible. And, in relation, like other black geographies, black women's geographies are rendered absent in broader geographic debates.

The political trajectories of black feminist thought, particularly those that are underpinned by spatial language and processes (such as the margin, erasure, the body) but also those that are not, are critically engaged with the outcome of uneven geographies: domestic violence; homelessness; racial-environmental injustices; prisons; racism in the media; legal, medical, political, and economic restrictions; academic inequalities and knowledge marginalizations; resistances, activisms, reclamations.³⁸ If social displacements and reclamations help clarify the materiality of black lives, it follows that black feminism is also a spatial project that works to rethink and respatialize structural inequalities. Further, imagining the margins and other black feminist concerns as manifested in a "permanent" place—although sometimes from the last place they thought of—reorients the geographic work of black feminism. I am therefore not as interested in detailing the contents of *The Black Feminist Reader* as I am in thinking about the kinds of possibilities black feminism opens up in terms of geography. I want to look fairly closely at the ways in which the margin (or periphery) underpins a political agenda that gives authority to self-body perspectives but, due to its racially inhabitable materiality, simultaneously denies deep geographic inquiries. The geography of black feminism holds in it the possibility of thinking about how margin-politics are, in fact, underacknowledged geographies bound up in embodiment, metaphor, knowledge, and ownership.

Explained at length in bell hooks's *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* but also evident in other black feminist texts, such as Patricia Hill Collins's *Black Feminist Thought* and the 1982 reader *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave*, marginalization is an experiential geography that highlights ideological confinement and the peripheral place of black gendered bodies. The Combahee River Collective writes, for example, that black women's experiences on the periphery have been a "life-and-death struggle for survival and liberation" and that peripheral and marginal lives incite a political stance that is adversarial, oppositional, resistant, experiential, valuable, and hard-working.³⁹ The identity-location of particular black

women, fostered by a legacy of racism and sexism, is thus refashioned as a politics that is underpinned by geographic metaphors, lived experiences, and different worldviews.⁴⁰

The margin, then, is not straightforwardly metaphoric; it is, Iris Marion Young reminds us, about processes of *marginalization* and the exclusion of particular groups from various arenas of social justice.⁴¹ If we read bell hooks closely, we can unpack how she uses the language of the margin to spatialize U.S. feminist debates around positionality, power, race, and equality. She writes, for example, that “[a]ttempts by white feminists to silence black women are rarely written about. All too often they have taken place in conference rooms, classrooms, or the privacy of cozy living room settings, where one lone black woman faces the racist hostility of a group of white women.”⁴² Thus, the margin is a descriptor for women’s politics that simultaneously marks place and takes place. Indeed, for hooks, the margin is also about living black femininity and black feminism and disrupting the geographic tenets of white Euro-American feminism. The margin is thus indicative of and produced in relation to: the place of the classroom, the theoretical and activist space(s) of feminism, neighborhoods, nation-spaces, political venues, bodies, the psyche, and so forth.

Periphery and margin positions locate the ways in which identity and subjectivity can politicize absences, erasures, and oppressions. This politicization, while often cast as “talking back” or metaphoric, occurs in place, within and through dominant discourses and social systems:

... marginality [is] much more than a site of deprivation . . . it is also the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance. It was this marginality that I was naming [in *From Margin to Center*] as a central location for the production of counter-hegemonic discourse that is not just found in works but in habits of being and the way one lives. As such, I was not speaking of a marginality which one wants to lose—to give up or surrender as part of moving to the center—but rather a site one stays in . . . It offers to one the possibility of radical perspective from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds.⁴³

The work of hooks and some other second-wave black feminists—while certainly developing very different political agendas—calls attention to the ways in which the subaltern self attends to and creates workable material

and imaginary geographies. Ways of being, real lives, seeing, creating, oppositional discourses, resistances—these are indicative of black women's everyday struggles.

As a descriptive and analytical tool, “the margin” and other places “outside” the dominant discourse allow black feminists and other subaltern communities to locate the complexities of their unique relationship to patriarchy, whiteness and white femininity, struggles for liberation, and feminism. By insisting that black femininity is a location, their geographic politics reveal how racial-sexual displacements are experiential, historical, and specific to and among diverse black women. And hooks, importantly, stakes a claim to the margins, and in doing so—because it is a location of selfhood—speaks back to processes of bodily territorialization, ultimately reclaiming the body through the self and self-knowledge. The self-body perspectives—the outcome of marginal places and placements—implicitly suggest that black feminist politics are *where* one speaks from and that the “where” of black femininity disrupts a variety of metanarratives (feminist, black, national, academic, bodily, and so forth). The “where” of black femininity locates and demands all sorts of political positions and connections without distorting the theoretical possibilities and material realities of spaces unheard, silenced, and erased.

But is the margin too marginal? Is hooks's terminology too Manichaean, too reminiscent of black women being hemmed in on the outside? Or is the margin, as Patricia Hill Collins argues, “a flattened theoretical space” which fails to divulge real structural differentiation?⁴⁴ Or is it both—a hemmed in, empty, black body/theory? While black feminist theory, and black women's struggles in general, are underwritten by a radical disruption of white patriarchal space, it should be emphasized that we think of this disruption not simply through the *language* of space. And I say this because, as mentioned, all too often black women, or their experiences, or their ideas, are momentarily called on to raise some painful questions, or complicate an otherwise white space. Indeed, metaphors like the margin are repetitively and sporadically called on to name difference: the margin is emptied out, placeless, just theory, just language, and seemingly the *only* black feminist geography available in wider social theories. Collins importantly traces margin/center debates and argues that these theoretical/political positions have effectively decentered all sorts of hegemonic knowledge claims. However, she also makes the important observation that because “the margin” is fundamentally understood as a metaphor, it is “recast as yet another ahistorical, ‘universal,’ construct applied to all sorts of power relations.” With this, she continues, “[c]onceptions of power

shifted—talk of tops and bottoms, long associated with hierarchy, was recast as flattened geographies of centers and margins.”⁴⁵

Collins’s plea to rethink the “flat” geographies of black feminism and other radical social theories is interesting. And it becomes clear that Collins imagines the margins as flat precisely because she is frustrated with the theoretical inattentiveness to actual geographic displacements, those lived and living bodies that were/are fundamentally entwined with unequal multiscale political and economic systems. I would add to her discussion that the trouble with the margin is also connected to its geo-conceptual spatial stasis; theoretically, the margin is always already marginal, peripheral, because it also carries with it—in its metaphorical utterance—the materiality of real margins and real centers. The margin is the edge or border of a surface, the ignored or unimportant sections of a group, the blank border on each side of a page, adjacent to or in opposition to the center. This language, the where of the margin, shapes it as an exclusively oppositional, unalterable site that cannot be easily woven into the ongoing production of space because the bifurcating geographies—margins are *not* centers—prohibits integrative processes. This is demonstrated often through the body and ideas of bell hooks. The margin hems in bell hooks; her claim to this space is radically disconnected from the new worlds she intends to imagine and create. Her body is a margin, which is an empty metaphor for “difference.”

I think Collins and I have similar concerns, but I would like to push her geographic imagination even further to suggest that one additional reason the margin is so consistently cast as metaphor is precisely because it is actually inhabited by subaltern communities—and within feminism, black and other nonwhite women’s bodies occupy this space. The margin is therefore not a legitimate area of deep social or geographic inquiry—it is a site of dis-possession, it is an ungeographic space, it is all too often a fleeting academic utterance and therefore easy to empty out, ignore, and add on in times of multicultural crises. Like hooks herself, it is an additive, metaphoric, inhuman stand-in for “difference.” In terms of geographic theory in particular, I ask, what difference has the margin actually made to the political and theoretical concerns of geographers? Or is there no geographic difference made at all, just a margin on the margins? We need to pay attention to the ways in which the margin stays on the intellectual, disciplinary, and geographic borders because it is simultaneously empty and nonwhite. And we need to think about the theoretical spaces of the margin simultaneously “hemming in” and flattening out black women’s geographies.

Indeed, Barbara Christian's discussion of peripheral theory demonstrates my concerns, as her ideas are deeply connected to the soil and the placement of ideas:

"Periphery" too is a word I heard throughout my childhood, for if anything was seen as being at the periphery, it was those small Caribbean islands which had neither land mass nor military power. Still I noted how intensely important this periphery was, for U.S. troops were continually invading one island or another if any change in political control even seemed to be occurring. As I lived among folk for whom language was an absolutely necessary way of validating our existence, I was told that the minds of the world lived only in the small continent of Europe. The metaphysical language of the New Philosophy, then, I must admit, is repulsive to me and is one reason I ran from philosophy to literature, since the latter seemed to me to have the possibilities of rendering the world as large and as complicated as I experienced it, as sensual as I knew it was.⁴⁶

For Christian, three important issues arise and bring together poetics, geography, and politics. First, the periphery is a sociospatial and intellectual struggle, which cannot be understood outside military conquests and Eurocentric geographic determinism. Second, she importantly suggests that we be cautious about articulating "difference" without also understanding the ways in which particular geographic and historical contexts underwrite intellectual and imaginary politics. And finally, Christian brings together poetics and politics—feeling and knowing the large sensual world—to reconfigure the spatial and ontological limitations of periphery theories, geographic determinism, and feminist politics.

The periphery, she continues, reveals the "tendency to want to make the world less complex by organizing it according to one principle, to fix it through an idea which is really an ideal . . . one major element of ideologies of dominance, such as sexism and racism, is to dehumanize people by stereotyping them, by denying their variousness and pleasure."⁴⁷ Christian's attentiveness to the limitations of peripheries and margins, understood alongside small Caribbean islands, the small continent of Europe, troops invading, philosophical binaries, and feeling/knowledge, also opens up other geographic imaginations, poetic and otherwise, which might not be so tightly bound to stasis. Here we can return to Christian's useful understanding of the breadth

of black women's theory and theorizing—which encompasses fiction, stories, folklore, ideas both “sensual and abstract,” daily experiences—as they are entwined with lives that have always been political and geographic.

Garreting

Can black feminist geographies be differently conceptualized as heterogeneous, alterable political sites that are continually intervening in, rather than reinscribing, the ongoing legacy of racism-sexism? Can bodymemories refuse the simultaneity of “all-body” geographies and empty metaphoric margins? What, then, is geographically at stake in black feminism? And what do we learn if we put metaphorical margins into conversation with the poetic and experiential ways of being that black women are interested in exploring? I want to suggest that there are three intertwining processes that we should take note of. First, as mentioned, that we consider that black feminist theory, like other theories, can be erased because it is often relegated to a conceptual arena, rather than through the imbrication of material and metaphoric space; the margin can stand in for the black female body and the body itself is rendered conceptual rather than a site of humanness and struggle. It is necessary to think about our politics of citation and the margin/hooks as the only black feminist “space” seemingly available in wider social and political theories. This critique is not meant to discredit hooks or the margin but rather to notice the geographic processes that are taking place underneath and throughout black feminist politics and feminism in general. That is, regardless of what we think of hooks's margin and her politics, these issues are also spatial issues with telling spatial consequences. Second, and Harriet Jacobs helps us think about this, black women have always had a meaningful relationship with geography. In addition to important contemporary feminist theories and their interruption in white Euro-American social theories, black women's lives are underwritten by ongoing and innovative spatial practices that have always occurred, not on the margins, but right in the middle of our historically present landscape. *nourbeSe philip* makes this ongoing geographic relationship very clear when she sites the space between the legs as a location through which the material New World is socially and materially produced. But we can see this elsewhere. There are other maps and other “non-hooksian” geopolitical strategies. In addition to discussing feminism, and black feminist theory, several black women are talking and writing about environments, landscapes, geographies of pleasure and pain. To think about

black feminist geographies, we need to return not only to those “classic” black feminist texts “housed” in the *Black Feminist Reader*, but also to art (Ellen Driscoll’s 1990 camera obscura installation titled the “Loophole of Retreat” would be an interesting start), fictional geographies, activist spaces, musics, poetry.⁴⁸ These creative and theoretical spaces are not just words, images, or ideas; they locate real social struggles. Here, the work of Carole Boyce Davies is notable. Davies’s theoretical and poetic concerns transgress boundaries; her interests in collective and collaborative diasporic writings, as well as multiple and interdisciplinary theoretical positionings, unsettle monolithic understandings of black femininity and black bodies. It is impossible to keep blackness statically “in place” in Davies’s work, while it is equally impossible to ignore historical and geographic specificities. Carole Boyce Davies also asks us to “hear” black women, and therefore hear geography differently, suggesting that space and place are always connected to audible demands and political action.⁴⁹ That black women allow their particular surroundings to speak, and be heard, reorients existing spatial practices, asking us to think not only about the “where” of politics but how the production of space is not a silent process. Finally, and related to both, geography, as we know, is always about knowledge. And the ways in which we know and are taught geography, now, are connected to powerful processes of colonialism, exploration, and conquest. So the geographies of black feminism, and the geographies of feminism in general, also need to be interrogated for the ways in which they spatialize politics. I am thinking about ownership here, about who can and cannot be a feminist, a black feminist, or an Afrocentric feminist, or a womanist and how this is also a geographic political project, which may be underwritten by the very ideas—specifically, discursive territorialization—that we are working against.

In “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” Hortense Spillers writes that the life of Harriet Jacobs/Linda Brent is a story of “garreting.” Spillers argues that Jacobs’s slave narrative enables an exploration of black women’s histories and lives, which are in “not-quite spaces.”⁵⁰ Without casting aside Jacobs’s/Brent’s specific attic-confinement, Spillers addresses a geographic process that locates how captivity, racist-sexist regulation, bodily objectification, and black femininity exist through and beyond the garret. Several black feminist theorists have suggested that the terrain of the racial-sexual body continues to insinuate itself onto post-slave geographies. While the terrain of the racial-sexual is garreted, or “in the last place they thought of,” Spillers proposes, not unlike nourbeSe philip, that these geographies

intervene in and are already inscribed onto the (racial) cultural landscape. Black women's geographies and black feminist geographies underscore what Spillers describes as "insurgent grounds" of difference.⁵¹

The "not-quite" spaces of black femininity are unacknowledged spaces of sexual violence, stereotype, and sociospatial marginalization: erased, erasable, hidden, resistant geographies and women that are, due to persistent and public forms of objectification, not readily decipherable.⁵² As mentioned above, these geographic processes and experiences are also emphasized by the paradoxical space of the garret in Linda Brent's story. What I am more interested in here, however, is Spillers's suggestion that the "not-quite" are the projected spaces of black femininity through and beyond the garret, and how that which is "not-quite"—new and different kinds of garretings—have been transformed into a black feminist politic. The not-quite spaces of black women provide alternative paths through traditional geographies and take into account a political agenda concerned with racism-sexism, objectification, captivity, and respatialization(s).

The process of garreting begins to get at the geographic projection of black femininity by locating what black women bring to bear on geographic negotiations: racist-sexist ideologies that mark black women as "not-quite" legitimate world citizens; practices of domination that regard black women's histories and lives as expendable; unacknowledged body-geographies that are integral to the production of white and nonwhite spaces; and oppositional paradoxical spaces. What is even more interesting to me about Spillers's essay are ways in which she signals how black women's geographies (post-Jacobs) are garretings—they are still unresolved because of the impact the black female body does and does not have upon traditional geographic arrangements. Black women's geographies still rest on those "not-quite" spaces and the "different stories" of displacement—but this a workable and "insurgent" geography, which is produced in tandem with practices of domination. While "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" is not a treatise on garreting per se, Spillers's grammatical decision—to transform the garret into a verb—within the context of her essay is important to address, in that it sets up the aforementioned tensions (the conundrums and antagonistic hidden geographies) as a genealogical geographic practice specific to black women. Ultimately, she identifies the meaningfulness of Jacobs's/Brent's garret and opens up the question of symbolic, imaginative, and/or political geographic work the garret can do beyond the attic. Black women's knowable sense of place is often still found "in the last place they thought of," across the logic of white and patriarchal

maps. But this different sense of place has been cast as a politicized location—peripheral standpoints, special vantage points, margins—through which the violence, the bodily histories, and the limitations of traditional geographic arrangements are mapped. I have recast it as “the last place they thought of”; geographies of black femininity that are not necessarily marginal, but are *central* to how we know and understand space and place: black women’s geographies are workable and lived subaltern spatialities, which tell a different geographic story.