

COMMENTS FROM THE FIELD

The Belly of the World: A Note on Black Women's Labors

Saidiya Hartman

The slave ship is a womb/abyss. The plantation is the belly of the world. *Partus sequitur ventrem*—the child follows the belly. The master dreams of future increase. The modern world follows the belly. Gestational language has been key to describing the world-making and world-breaking capacities of racial slavery. What it created and what it destroyed has been explicated by way of gendered figures of conception, birth, parturition, and severed or negated maternity. To be a slave is to be “excluded from the prerogatives of birth.” The mother’s only claim—to transfer her dispossession to the child. The material relations of sexuality and reproduction defined black women’s historical experiences as laborers and shaped the character of their refusal of and resistance to slavery.¹ The theft, regulation and destruction of black women’s sexual and reproductive capacities would also define the afterlife of slavery.

Most often when the productive labor of the slave comes into view, it is as a category absent gender and sexual differentiation. In two of the greatest works of the black radical tradition, W.E.B. Du Bois’s *Black Reconstruction* and C.L.R. James’s *Black Jacobins*, the agency of the enslaved becomes legible as politics, rather than crime or destruction, at the moment slaves are transformed into black workers and revolutionary masses fashioned along the lines of the insurgent proletariat. However, representing the slave through the figure of the worker (albeit unwaged and unfree), obscures as much as it reveals, making it difficult to distinguish the constitutive elements of slavery as a mode of power, violence, dispossession and accumulation or to attend to the forms of gendered and sexual violence that enable these processes. In *Black Reconstruction*, women’s sexual and reproductive labor is critical in accounting for the violence and degradation of slavery, yet this labor falls outside of the heroic account of the black worker and the general strike.

Black women, too, refused the conditions of work on the plantation, and Du Bois notes their presence among the “army of fugitives” rushing away from the fields. Yet, in the shift from the fugitive to the striking worker, the female slave becomes a minor figure. Neither “the potentialities for the future” represented by the fugitive nor the text engendered by flight and refusal and furnished for abolition idealists embraced her labors.² Marriage and protection rather than sexual freedom and reproductive justice were the only ways conceived to redress her wrongs, or remedy the “wound dealt to [her] reputation as a human being.” The sexual violence and reproduction characteristic of enslaved women’s experience fails to produce a radical politics of liberation or a philosophy of freedom.

Black women’s labors have not been easy to reckon with conceptually. Feminist thinkers, following the path cleared by Angela Davis’s groundbreaking essay “Reflections of the Black Woman’s Role in the Community of Slaves,” have considered the significance of gender, sexuality and reproduction in defining the constitutive relations of slavery and the modes of its violence.³ It has proven difficult, if not impossible, to assimilate black women’s domestic labors and reproductive capacities within narratives of the black worker, slave rebellion, maroonage, or black radicalism, even as this labor was critical to the creation of value, the realization of profit and the accumulation of capital. It has been no less complicated to imagine the future produced by such labors as anything other than monstrous. Certainly we know that enslaved women fled the plantation, albeit not in as great numbers as men; poisoned slaveholders; plotted resistance; dreamed of destroying the master and his house; utilized abortifacients rather than reproduce slaves; practiced infanticide rather than sentence their children to social death, the auction block, and the master’s bed; exercised autonomy in suicidal acts; gave birth to children as testament to an abiding knowledge of freedom contrary to every empirical index of the plantation; and yearned for radically different ways of being in the world. So where exactly does the sex drudge, recalcitrant domestic, broken mother, or sullen wet-nurse fit into the scheme of the general strike? If the general strike is a placeholder for political aspirations that Du Bois struggles to name, how does the character of the slave female’s refusal augment the text of black radicalism? Is it at all possible to imagine her as the paradigmatic slave or as the representative black worker?

Reproductive labor, as the scholars Hortense Spillers, Jennifer Morgan, Dorothy Roberts, Alyss Weinbaum, and Neferti Tadiar note, is central to thinking about the gendered afterlife of slavery and global capitalism.⁴ Yet attending to the status of black women’s labors has confounded our conceptual categories and thrown our critical lexicon into crisis. On the slave ship, captive women were accounted for as quantities of greater and lesser mass, and the language of units and complete cargo eclipsed that of the subject, the person or individual. The “anomalous intimacy of cargo,” according to Stephanie Smallwood, represented a new social formation. Those African persons in Middle Passage, writes Spillers, were “literally suspended in the oceanic.” They were “culturally unmade.” “Under these conditions one is neither female, nor male, as both subjects are taken into account as quantities.”⁵ For Spillers, the categories of flesh and body are deployed to describe the mutilation,

dismemberment, and exile of captivity and enslavement. Flesh provides the primary narrative rather than gendered subject positions. The flesh is produced by the violence of racial slavery and yet it brings into view a new mode of relation.

On the plantation, black women were required to toil as hard as men, and in this way “ungendered,” according to Spillers, by which she means that “female and male adhere to no symbolic integrity.” *Partus sequitur ventrem* negated kinship and denied it any “legal or social efficacy.” The condition of the mother marked her offspring and was “forever entailed on her remotest posterity.” We carry the mother’s mark and it continues to define our condition and our present.

The role of gender and sexual differentiation in the constitution of labor are especially complex in the context of slavery. On one hand, the category of labor insufficiently accounts for slavery as a mode of power, domination and production. The fungibility of the slave, the wanton uses of the black body for producing value or pleasure, and the shared vulnerabilities of the commodity, whether male or female, trouble dominant accounts of gender. Depending on the angle of vision or critical lexicon, the harnessing of the body as an instrument for social and physical reproduction unmakes the slave as gendered subject or reveals the primacy of gender and sexual differentiation in the making of the slave. Natal alienation is one of the central attributes of the social death of the slave and gendered and sexual violence are central to the processes that render the black child as by-product of the relations of production.⁶ At the same time, the lines of division between the market and the household which distinguished the public and the domestic and divided productive and reproductive labor for propertied whites does not hold when describing the enslaved and the carceral landscape of plantation. Reproduction is tethered to the making of human commodities and in service of the marketplace. For the enslaved, reproduction does not ensure any future other than that of dispossession nor guarantee anything other than the replication of racialized and disposable persons or “human increase” (expanded property-holdings) for the master. The future of the enslaved was a form of speculative value for slaveholders. Even the unborn were conscripted and condemned to slavery.

“Kinship loses meaning,” according to Spillers, “since at any moment it can be invaded at any given and arbitrary moment by property relations.” Extending and revising this line of argument, Morgan notes the importance of maternity and reproduction in the evolution of the legal codification of slavery. “Women’s bodies became the definitional sites of racial slavery.” In North America, the future of slavery depended upon black women’s reproductive capacity as it did on the slave market. The reproduction of human property and the social relations of racial slavery were predicated upon the belly. Plainly put, subjection was anchored in black women’s reproductive capacities. The captive female body, according to Spillers, “locates precisely a moment of converging political and social vectors that mark the flesh as a prime commodity of exchange.”⁷

Forced to labor for the “satisfaction of the immediate needs” of their owners and overseers, however, those needs were defined, the captive female body was subjected to innumerable uses. It could be converted into cash, speculated and traded as commodity, worked to death, taken, tortured, seeded, and propagated like any other crop,

or murdered. The value produced by and extracted from enslaved women included productive labor—their labors as farm workers, cotton pickers, tobacco hands, and rice cultivators—and their reproductive capacities created “future increase” for farms and plantations and human commodities for markets, yoking the prospect of racial slavery to their bodies. Even the unborn figured into the reproductive calculus of the institution. The work of sex and procreation was the chief motor for reproducing the material, social, and symbolic relations of slavery. The value accrued through reproductive labor was brutally apparent to the enslaved who protested bitterly against being bred like cattle and oxen. This reproductive labor not only guaranteed slavery as an institutional process and secured the status of the enslaved, but it inaugurated a regime of racialized sexuality that continues to place black bodies at risk for sexual exploitation and abuse, gratuitous violence, incarceration, poverty, premature death, and state-sanctioned murder.

The sexuality and reproductive capacities of enslaved women were central to understanding the expanding legal conception of slavery and its inheritability. Slavery conscripted the womb, deciding the fate of the unborn and reproducing slave property by making the mark of the mother a death sentence for her child. The negation or disfigurement of maternity, writes Christina Sharpe, “turns the womb into a factory reproducing blackness as abjection and turning the birth canal into another domestic middle passage.”⁸ *Partus sequitur ventrem*—replicates the fate of the slave across generations. The belly is made a factory of production incommensurate with notions of the maternal, the conjugal or the domestic. In short, the slave exists out of the world and outside the house.

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Labor remained a category central to the fashioning of gender and sexuality in the context of slavery’s aftermath. In *The Negro American Family*, Du Bois writes that the slave ship and the plantation revolutionized the black family primarily by destroying kinship and negating conjugal relations. Invariably the remedy proposed for this wounded kinship converged on the figure of the (restored) husband–father as the primary breadwinner. The problem of black women’s labor made apparent the gender non-conformity of the black community, its supple and extended modes of kinship, its queer domesticity, promiscuous sociality and loose intimacy, and its serial and fluid conjugal relations.

The “lax moral relations, promiscuity, easy marriage and easy separation,” which Du Bois identified as the consequences of slavery, continued in the aftermath of emancipation, extending the plantation to the city. “Plantations holdovers,” to his dismay, shaped life in the emergent ghettos of northern cities. The ghetto became the third matrix of black death and dispossession, after the slave ship and the plantation, and anticipating the prison.⁹ The urban enclosure produced another revolution of black intimate life, another rupture in the social history of the Negro.¹⁰ Mothers and wives and daughters were forced into unskilled and low-paid work, with the overwhelming majority confined to labor as domestics. Black women served as the primary breadwinners in households that bore no resemblance to the patriarchal nuclear family. These black laboring women troubled gender conventions by

being “outfitted like men,” as was the case with their enslaved mothers and grandmothers. The independence granted by wages, even low wages, made them less willing to marry or live with men unable to provide and granted them a degree of sexual autonomy that made Du Bois shudder. He longed for a future where the “betrayed girl mothers of the Black Belt,” while retaining their economic independence, would be transformed into virtuous wives and married mothers.

The continuities between slavery and freedom were underwritten by black women’s domestic labor. Their “success or frustrations in influencing the character of domestic labor,” writes Tera Hunter, “would define how meaningful freedom would be.”¹¹ Slave women working as domestic laborers in white households experienced forms of violence and sexual exploitation that troubled simple distinctions between the privileges of the house and the brutalities of the field. Nowhere was the heterogeneity or discontinuity or instability of the category gender more apparent than in the plantation household. No uniform or shared category of gender included the mistress and the enslaved. The white household, as Thavolia Glymph documents in *Out of the House of Bondage*, was a space of violence and brutality for the black women forced to serve as housekeepers, caretakers, nannies, and wet-nurses. The domestic space, as much as the field, defined their experience of enslavement and the particular vulnerabilities of the captive body; and it continued to define the very narrow horizon and limited opportunities available to black women in the first decades of the 20th century.

Black women regularly complained about being forced to labor as domestics. Domestic work carried the taint of slavery. While black women’s physical and affective labors were central to the reproduction and security of the white household, their own lives and families remained at risk. As free workers in the North and South, black women continued to labor as poorly paid workers in white households, tended and cared for white families, endured the exhaustion and the boredom part and parcel of caring for children, cooking, cleaning, and servicing the lives of others.

In northern cities like Philadelphia and New York, the overwhelming majority of black women were confined to domestic and service labor. Besides the arduous toil that characterized this work, black women experienced great isolation and were vulnerable to sexual abuse and exploitation by the men of the household. While social reformers and Progressive intellectuals encouraged domestic work as a form of moral tutelage and training, black women knew first-hand that they were safer in the streets and the tenements of the ghetto than in white homes. Domestic work subjected them to forms of intimate violence as well as exploitation as low-wage workers.

The systematic violence needed to conscript black women’s domestic labor after slavery required locking them out of all other sectors of the labor market, a condition William Patterson described as economic genocide. Race riots, the enclosure of the ghetto, the vertical order of human life, and the forms of value and debt promulgated through emergent forms of racism, what Sarah Haley terms “Jim Crow modernity,” made it impossible for black women to escape the white household.

As domestic workers, black women were conscripted to a role that required them to care for and replenish the needs of the white household, and tend to the daily

activities necessary for its maintenance. They were forced to perform the affective and communicative labor necessary for the sustenance of white families at the expense of their own; as surrogates, they were required to mother children who held their children in contempt; to cook, clean, and comfort white men enabling them to go out into the world as productive laborers; and submit to intimate relations with husbands and sons and brothers or be raped by them—you cannot choose what you cannot refuse. In this labor of service to the white household, the domestic worker struggled to enable the survival of her own.

Her lover, her spouse, and her kin depend on this labor for their subsistence, as does her community. As a consequence, she comes to enjoy a position that is revered and reviled, essential to the endurance of black social life and, at the same time, blamed for its destruction. The care extracted from her to tend the white household is taken at the cost of her own. She is the best nanny and the worst mother. Yet this labor remains marginal or neglected in the narratives of black insurgency, resistance, and refusal.

Where does the *impossible domestic* fit into the general strike?¹² What is the text of her insurgency and the genre of her refusal? What visions of the future world encourage her to run, or propel her flight? Or is she, as Spillers observes, a subject still awaiting her verb? Strategies of endurance and subsistence do not yield easily to the grand narrative of revolution, nor has a space been cleared for the sex worker, welfare mother, and domestic laborer in the annals of the black radical tradition.¹³ Perhaps understandable, even if unacceptable, when the costs of enduring are so great. Mere survival is an achievement in a context so brutal. If we intend to do more than make the recalcitrant domestic, the outcast, and insurrectionist a figure for our revolutionary longing, or impose yet another burden on black female flesh by making it “a placeholder for freedom,”¹⁴ then we must never lose sight of the material conditions of her existence or how much she has been required to give for our survival.

Those of us who have been “touched by the mother” need acknowledge that her ability to provide care, food, and refuge often has placed her in great jeopardy and, above all, required her to give with no expectation of reciprocity or return. *All we have is what she holds in her outstretched hands.*¹⁵ There is no getting around this. Yet, her freedom struggle remains opaque, untranslatable into the lexicon of the political. She provides so much, yet rarely does she thrive. It seems that her role has been fixed and that her role is as a provider of care, which is the very mode of her exploitation and indifferent use by the world, a world blind to her gifts, her intellect, her talents. This brilliant and formidable labor of care, paradoxically, has been produced through violent structures of slavery, anti-black racism, virulent sexism, and disposability.¹⁶ The forms of care, intimacy, and sustenance exploited by racial capitalism, most importantly, are not reducible to or exhausted by it. These labors cannot be assimilated to the template or grid of the black worker, but instead nourish the latent text of the fugitive. They enable those “who were never meant to survive” to sometimes do just that. This care, which is coerced and freely given, is the black heart of our social poesis, of making and relation.

Notes

1. See Eduoard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 6, 75; Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982); Jennifer Morgan, *Laboring Women* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004). *Laboring Women* was one of the first historical monographs devoted to examining enslaved women's sexuality and reproductive lives and the centrality of reproduction to the social and legal machinery of colonial slavery.
2. W. E. B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America 1860–1880* (1935; reprint, New York: The Free Press, 1992), 13, 44, 39, 67.
3. Angela Davis, "Reflections on Black Women's Role in the Community of Slaves," *The Black Scholar* 13 no. 4 (1971): 2–15; Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West," *Signs* 14 no. 4 (1989): 912–20; Darlene Clark Hine, "Female Slave Resistance: The Economics of Sex," *The Western Journal of Black Studies* 3 no. 2 (1979): 123–27.
4. Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," in her *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 203–29; Morgan, *Laboring Women*; Alys Weinbaum, *Wayward Reproductions* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004); Alys Weinbaum, "Gendering the General Strike: W. E. B. Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction* and Black Feminism's 'Propaganda of History,'" *South Atlantic Quarterly* 112 no. 3 (2013): 437–63; Neferti Tadiar, *Things Fall Away* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008); Neferti Tadiar, "Life-Times of Disposability within Global Neoliberalism," *Social Text* 31 no. 2 (2013): 19–48.
5. Stephanie Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007); Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 215. Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley describes this anomalous intimacy in terms of a queer Atlantic in "Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic," *GLQ* 14 nos. 2–3 (191–215): 191–215. Stefano Harney and Fred Moten describe the experience of the shipped as "hapticality in the hold" in *The Undercommons* (New York: Autonomedia, 2013).
6. Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*.
7. Jennifer Morgan, "Partus Sequitur Ventrem: Slave Law and the History of Women in Slavery," A Workshop with Jennifer Morgan (Irvine: University of California, Irvine, 2014); Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 75.
8. Christina Sharpe, "In the Wake," *The Black Scholar* 44 no. 2 (2014): 59–69.
9. Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 73. Katherine McKittrick, "Plantation Futures," *Small Axe* 17 no. 3 (2013): 1–15.
10. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899; reprint, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995); W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folks* (1903; reprint, New York: Penguin, 1989).
11. Tera Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).
12. Fred Moten, "Uplift and Criminality," in *Next to the Color Line: Gender, Sexuality and W. E. B. Du Bois*, ed. Alys Weinbaum and Susan Gilman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 317–49.
13. Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York: Vintage, 1998); Dorothy Roberts, *Shattered Bonds: The Color of Welfare* (New York: Basic Civitas Book, 2003); Wahneema Lubiano, "Black Ladies, Welfare Queens, and State Minstrels: Ideological War by Narrative Means," in *Race-ing Justice, Engendering Power*, ed. Toni Morrison and Leon Higginbotham (New York: Pantheon, 1992), 323–63; Fred Moten, "The Subprime and the Beautiful," *African Identities*, 11 no. 2 (2013): 237–45.
14. Christina Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 4, 15.

15. This is a restatement with a difference of Fred Moten: “All that we have (and are) is what we hold in our outstretched hands.”
16. Tadiar, *Things Fall Away*, 136.

About the Author

Saidiya Hartman is the author of *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2007) and *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (Oxford, 1997). She has published several articles on slavery, including “Venus in Two Acts” and “The Time of Slavery.” She is completing a book, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, which examines the sexual upheaval and radical transformation of everyday life that took place in the slums in the early decades of the 20th century.