

One

Against Gender

Enslavism and the Subjects of Feminism

How can one—in my case a senior white feminist German scholar who has struggled with and through decades of transnational, (post-)multicultural, intersectional, queered, intergenerational feminism—be against gender? Why—and how can one, or even need one—read the category of gender as constitutively anti-Black, not just in cases of racist practice but as a theoretical formation? This book is about a (self-)critical recuperation of white feminist interventions, which have paradigmatically shaped my generation's trajectory of gender studies. It could not have been written without Black feminism. Writing it has been about coming to terms with where I come from: the white habitus of gender and my own being implicated in the *longue durée* of enslavism. It responds to Elisabeth Spelman's pioneering attempt, as a white feminist philosopher, to question the essentialization and universalization of white women's feminist approaches to gender, and takes up her questions, still unanswered. For me, this reckoning with the history of my own formation as a white feminist recapitulates an epistemic challenge: white gender studies' evasion of the authority of Black theoretical interventions.

The book is neither a historiography of white feminism and gender studies, nor a painstaking discussion of lively and massive intramural debates in gender studies, including those over trans-difference, postcolonial and decolonial intersectionality, and queerness, which have shaped gender studies over the last half-century. It is a theoretical intervention focused on a, for me, paradigmatic set of intellectuals—Simone de Beauvoir, Jessica Benjamin, Judith Butler, and Rosi Braidotti—with an American and transnationally

effective white feminist trajectory, engaging it with my readings of what have been key Black texts of my generational formation, by Hortense Spillers, Sylvia Wynter, and Saidiya Hartman. It does look past the (de)constructionist, poststructuralist approaches of difference, performativity, and the nonidentity of gender, and at the ongoing racist agnology of gender studies and the fungible status of Blackness within gender as a paradigm. Gender, as white feminism has known it, will be discussed here as an anti-Black concept in its inception and in a series of generative reiterations.

Accordingly, my interest lies in a critique of late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century white knowledge formations, and not in transmitting, ventriloquizing, or explaining contemporary Black feminist activism and scholarship. This activism and scholarship has created a resurgence that has been lighting up the pressure on white institutions, formations, and agents outside and inside academia—as anybody connected to social media will or might have realized over the last years. The following is not at all an inclusive list of activists, scholars, cultural producers, but names only a few: Christina Sharpe, Kimberly Brown, Tiffany Lethabo King, Patrice Douglass, Lisa C. Moore, Nadia Alahmed, Samiya Bashir, Korina Jocson, Mecca Jamilah Sullivan, Aneeka Henderson, Aishah Shahidah Simmons, Kai M. Green, Evie Shockley, Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Keisha Blain, and Jessica Marie Johnson. As this is a collective movement, it has also become manifest in the brilliant work of the e-journal *Feminist Wire*, in the special issues of *The Black Scholar* published on Black feminisms (*On the Future*), and a series of recent Black feminist symposia: for example, The Flesh of the Matter: A Hortense Spillers Symposium, on March 18, 2016, at Cornell University; Feminist Poetics: Legacies of June Jordan Symposium, on March 25, 2016, at University of Massachusetts, Amherst; and the Black Feminist Futures Symposium, in April 2016, at Northwestern University.

While much attention has been given to white supremacy, and white privilege, this attention has been largely directed at the social, political, or cultural racist white positionalities, agents, and practices, from which anti-racist white feminists have learned to distance ourselves. By contrast, I do not read for a dissection of white privilege or for instances of obvious racism in gender studies' theoretical pronouncements by way of finding imperfection and a “not enough” of feminist anti-racism, but for the anti-Blackness I see settled in the premises of gender theory's genealogy, in its rearticulation of post-Enlightenment discourses of white freedom, that is, in the very fiber of its programmatic intent. Black feminism has been pushing for this epistemic break in most explicit, but insistently unnoticed, terms—a white feminist theoretical reckoning with a Black feminist genealogy remains an urgency.

“Feminist leaders rooted in the second wave such as Gloria Anzaldúa, bell hooks, Kerry Ann Kane, Cherríe Moraga, Audre Lorde, Maxine Hong Kingston, Reena Walker and other feminists of color, sought to negotiate a space within feminist thought for consideration of race.” This is from the *Wikipedia* article “Third-Wave Feminism.” If *Wikipedia* may be seen as the reservoir of collective e-memory for the current and coming producers of knowledge in its most immediately accessible form, its acts of naming, framing, and formatting become crucial, signifying not just a particular information but a certain politics of knowledge and interpellation of knowers. The sentence quoted here situates Black and women-of-color feminist work squarely in the paradigm of “racial difference,” which still pertains to much international gender scholarship. In this view, “women of color” are responsible for race. By implication—and this is so engrained in collective white majority habitus that the writers of this entry apparently write this fluently, without hesitation, as a standard phrase—any subjects related to race are of course Black or people-of-color. White gender studies moving into the third wave, the entry tells us, accept the difference “among women,” and have responded to critical Black interventions by granting “space” to Black voices. This space, however, has but materialized in white feminism’s ethnographic gains, in an attention to Black knowledge produced about Blackness. In the very same move, the very phrasing of this passage tellingly abjects Black being because apparently Black knowledge cannot be about gender or feminist issues in any generalized way, it is rendered unable to enter into a relation with gendered knowledge for and of women. That move leaves the space of race to Black knowledge and knowledge “of color” and keeps authority over “universal” gender issues as a white default. Thus, the white gender theoretical production of what Orlando Patterson has called a “genealogical” isolation (5) from Black knowledge amounts to a practice of anti-Black abjection, which has generated academic generations of agnotology.

In a first move, thus, my critique requires sharing a reading of those Black feminist theorists who have taught me to think about what Hartman calls the “afterlife” of enslavement, the “future slavery has made,” in which white and Black people in the Euro-American West live, but about which white and Black people have told antagonistic stories. Black feminist theorists—and I will look at Wynter, Spillers, and Hartman paradigmatically—enabled me to think of a term, *enslavism*, for this continuity reaching into the future, in which anti-Blackness as violence, commodification, and repression is contained as a kind of ongoing legacy of New World enslavement. Chapter 2, “Abolish Property: Black Feminist Struggles against

Anti-Blackness,” thus reads the theoretical advances of Black feminism’s history in the United States as epistemic rupture of contemporary white gender theory. It is decidedly not an exhaustive and inclusive report of recent Black feminist activism and scholarship, particularly of the younger, post-Obama, Internet-based textual and activist production in its manifold academic and nonacademic articulations. This restriction is owed to the particular nature of my enterprise here: to produce a reckoning within white gender studies scholarship of my generation and its evasion of foundational Black feminist theory, and not to repeat gestures of white-on-Black ethnography. At the moment of writing this, in the wake of an escalation of state and fascist killings of Black people in recent years, the movement Black Lives Matter, organized by Black feminists, with a strong queer and transgender constituency, has garnered nationwide and international Black support and coactivism, based on its instant and constant dissemination on social media like Black Twitter. The work of these activists is more than amply visible, if one is interested; in its presence to the historical moment, it does not at all need or bear, and even interdicts, white mediation or translation.

In chapter 3, “Gender and the Grammar of Enslavism,” I will elaborate on the term, its justification, and the mutually constitutive relation I see between gender, as a modern and postmodern conceptual advance, and enslavism. Chapter 4, “Abjective Returns: The Slave’s Fungibility in White Gender Studies,” performs exemplary readings of crucial moments in the post-Enlightenment career and ever growing sophistication of gender as a concept, which hinge on the concept’s anti-Blackness in and by the very move that the selected texts work as anti-patriarchal critique. This chapter focuses on Simone de Beauvoir, Jessica Benjamin, and Judith Butler. In a coda, I look at the contemporary moment of theorizing the posthuman moment in the work of Rosi Braidotti, who, as a theorist of gender, suggests vitalism as a solution to the impasses of humanism’s legacies, including gender theory’s—a turn that, however, repeats anti-Blackness in its very disavowal of post-Enlightenment narratives.

I am not claiming that these texts are per se canonical, or that they are the universally most important representative texts of all Western/transnational gender studies. The selection is due (a) to a personal generational trajectory of feminist education spanning almost five decades, for which all the selected texts have been constitutive, and (b) to my theoretical premise that those particular texts—if from rather different angles, given their historical context and specific respectively different ideological, theoretical, and philosophical loyalties—share certain white premises of (post)humanist worldviews for which Black being, as well as Black knowledge (in many intellectual circles

an oxymoron to this day), does not exist but as fungible flesh, spectacle, or otherwise commodified entity. So, my interest was not to create or reinstate a canon but to make visible certain structures, terms, articulations of anti-Blackness that have permeated existing theoretical repertoires, which until now have exacted considerable influence in gender and cultural studies departments, social sciences, and philosophy. The overall gist of the book is to put gender as a heuristic concept in more intimate but quite agonistic relation to enslavement, as the historical and ongoing practice of structural anti-Blackness, with the result of seeing the persistent intergenerational blockage on the part of white gender studies against Black epistemological interventions not just as an individual white supremacist practice but as a structural problem of theory. The concept of gender, as we know it, has been a means of intrahuman differentiation, serving to analyze and make claims on white post-Enlightenment patriarchal societies. As a term then, gender has cast Blackness as the signification of human absence, captured in Black flesh, which has served largely symbolic purposes for representations of oppression, violence, and discrimination. This very signification, of the slave or the “n---,” provided the metaphorical horizon of what woman, if she was to achieve fully human status, was not to be. The maintenance of this metaphorical fungibility has been serving generations of white feminist articulations of gender.

My discussion demonstrates a diachronic continuity between the selected texts beyond otherwise crucial distinctions of humanism and posthumanism. It also, putting the selected texts in synchronous connection, shows how the various strands of thinking taken from the post-World War II feminist metaphoric apparatus of *woman as slave* are contiguous with early twenty-first-century metaphorical employments that capitalize on Black critical notions of social death, that evade an engagement with Black critiques of humanism, or that rejoice in a kind of revindication of certain white philosophies' satisfaction about the collapse of humanism without even addressing the problem that the visions of the posthuman responding to that collapse share in very old practices of anti-Blackness: textual dismembering, silencing, overwriting, and desubjectification of Black being. The point to me is that there is no break between humanism and posthumanism, when it comes to intellectual enslavement as a shared ground of thought. Current deliberations of posthumanism, as I will argue in the chapter on Braidotti, cannot be seen as epistemic and ethical ruptures. They, too depend on referential absence paired with rhetorical fungibility of Black abjection in order to draw their allegedly raceless, not-species-bound human lines of flight from what they see as the oppressive shackles of humanism.

I propose enslavism as a term necessary to situate current anti-Black practices in the future that slavery has made (see Hartman, *Lose*), and thus to critique them as the ongoing afterlife of enslavement, instead of addressing slavery as an event in bygone history. To produce those critical protocols means to reread the *longue durée* of humanism in a way that abolishes the human's reign of being and knowledge, based as it has been on Black nonexistence for the human. Rather than taking recourse, thus, to the established paradigm of multiple and trans/differentiation—which, again, has been enabled by Black corporeality marking the “difference”—I suggest reading the epistemology of gender as a function of enslavism, as a function of a changing same: the continuity between the regimes of Euro-American and Caribbean enslavement and its anti-Black afterlife. The term points to a present tense of anti-Blackness engrained in modern and postmodern epistemic trajectories which have, for the most part, not acknowledged their rootedness in the wake (Sharpe, *In the Wake*) of transatlantic enslavement. The employment of the term abjection for white enslavist practices of anti-Blackness provides the overarching frame for the selection of texts discussed here. Arguably, while the selected texts have operated in different theoretical fields and periods, and were bound into different feminist loyalties and epistemic allegiances, they share a claim to posit and mobilize the concept of the binary human gender antagonism over and against Black being. The political effects of this binary division, ultimately bolstering the claims of Western white cisgender women at the expense of all Black being and some people-of-color, as well as of Black and some white LGBTQ communities' struggles, have been critiqued severely from within those communities. My contribution to this debate seeks to provide a genealogical foray into the theoretical premises of those politics, which have remained untouched by white critical self-inspection.

As the reader might have guessed from the employment of the personal pronoun and other markers, my selection of the texts under discussion and my rather involved criticism of those texts is a specific individual response to Black critique, based in my years of scholarship at the crossroads of gender studies, African American studies, and Black feminist theory, and, as such, it might be regarded as a project of intellectual autobiography. Thus, the book shares an agonistic return to my own scholarly and intellectual trajectory, and, indeed, it partakes in the genre of the polemic essay, rather than in the genre of an academic research piece with its appeal of uninvested oversight, neutrality of tone, and multiperspectivity. It does not develop its train of argument in linear, chronological fashion through a series of points evolving in progressive sequence. Rather, it consists of a series of essays that encircle

the intimacy between enslavism and white feminist gender studies, and that tries to find a—certainly nonexhaustive—mode to address this intimacy.

A note on this book's citation politics: readers will be asked for their patience with digesting a number of extensive quotations from primary sources. Crucially, it is in formal terms of textual address, that is, in the overwhelming amounts of ornate repetition, in excessive but vacuous employment of rhetorics that anti-Black abjection becomes visible beyond the mere content of respective pronouncements. Finally, I ask readers to employ necessary caution with respect to my highly problematic employment of the terms "slave" and "slave/Black." Theorizing enslavism results in a methodological as well as ethical conundrum. While one must inevitably use those words in order to critique the ongoing violence of enslavism, they need to be read with an alert awareness of the very term slave's racist naturalization as a signifier for Black enslaved being, as an anti-Black signification of Black life forced to figure as a nonhuman species in those ongoing white discourses and practices of abjection in urgent need of being destructed.