Property: White Gender and Slavery

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Abstract:
The article will focus on the problematic workings of white women's function as allegorical embodiment of white dominance and their subjective agency, their involvements in the violence and desire of the racial divide of slavery. Of course, this requires a theoretical grounding which the space of this article permits to sketch out only in roughest form. The first part of the article therefore means to frame what is actually an extensive project of study as a kind of opening, a suggestive plea for debate, discussion and cooperative results. Its second part engages a cross reading of Judith Butler and Hortense Spillers by way of clearing mental space for a re-reading of the complexly charged scene of race/gender and gender/race as conditioned by slavery. In its third part, I will engage a literary text by a contemporary white female writer which tries to come to terms with the legacy of an inextricable connection of white femininity to slavery.

> [M]odern life begins with slavery […]. Slavery broke the world in half, it broke it in every way. […] It made them into something else, it made them slave masters, it made them crazy. You can't do that for hundreds of years and it not take a toll. They had to dehumanize, not just the slaves but themselves. (Morrison, in Gilroy 221)

1 The images the Deep South will evoke are likely to be titillating; even though the contemporary public has learned to distance itself from all too naive and stereotypical mind frames. Nevertheless, the sensationalist imagery of abolitionism has had a long and persistent life in a mixture of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *The Awakening*, *Gone With the Wind* and *Roots*: hysterical wasp waists and piles of white, pure, feminine muslin, porches filled with rustling Mammy-underskirts, mint juleps, strained female idleness and male self-importance, alongside scenes of nameless terror: back breaking labor in cotton fields, auction block, whippings, a baby child's mother sold down the river. It is only outside the reign of the grippingly affective, that Deep South historiography may offer facets of the social and cultural practices of slavery pointing beyond clichés which are distinguished mostly by their value of political correctness, but which otherwise leave even a white critical readership, like academic gender studies, unimplicated.

2 The chronotope of the Deep South keeps recreating itself in conflicting representations, which seem to exist simultaneously in strangely unconnected and non-scrutinized ways. The aim of this article is to take up such scrutiny. The impulse to this kind of questioning reaches back to earlier contributions in Black feminist scholarship, such Angela Davis' groundbreaking *Women, Race and Class* from 1981, but also to the nineteenth century legacy of black women's address of issues of gender trouble in their slave narratives, and other writings (Painter, Mullen). The questions I want to raise are meant to address

particular limitations of US-gender research/theory and to possibly reach beyond, by emphasizing the importance of dialogical approaches "across race" and asking for a theory that does not argue in the abstract beyond historical contingency. "Question" here has to be taken quite literally; the article may function rather as a construction site of inquiry than as an ultimately satisfying set of research results. The following considerations are the beginnings of some sort of path finding into a research project based on the assumption that white Southern ladies had reasons to value the system of slavery — despite their own ambivalences. From this perspective the focus is on the problematic workings of white women's function as allegorical embodiment of white dominance on the one hand as well as their subjective agency, their involvements in the violence and desire of the racial divide of slavery, on the other. Of course, this requires a theoretical grounding which the space of this article permits to sketch out only in roughest form. The first part of the article therefore means to frame what is actually an extensive project of study as a kind of opening, a suggestive plea for debate, discussion and cooperative results. Its second part engages a cross reading of Judith Butler and Hortense Spillers by way of clearing mental space for a re-reading of the complexly charged scene of race/gender and gender/race as conditioned by slavery, it will suppose the need for contemporary gender studies to address this charged scene. In its third part, I will engage a literary text by a contemporary white female writer which tries to come to terms with the legacy of an inextricable connection of white femininity to slavery.

Slavery and Gender

3 The assumption of freedom, i.e. the generative semiosis of an individual human subject as the owner of a right to freedom, was the self-authorizing gesture of modernity par excellence, just as it has provided the philosophical and epistemological foundations for emancipation movements such as feminism. Yet this assumption required a massive break within cultural memory. It required a self-inscription of western modern subjects as not-enslaved and, at the same time, as opponents to slavery at a historical point at which modernism fostered the slave trade most profitably, and was at the same time fostered by the latter in surprisingly effective ways. In their basic denial of transatlantic slavery critical philosophies of modernity were marked by split consciousness; the Enlightenment in particular, with its impetus for individual self-ownership, self-responsibility, subjective and objective right to freedom and productive self-realization, learned to operate within a system of a large-scale parasitism. Social critique used the slave trade and slavery in a very creative, but also mostly metaphorical way. Slavery in the abstract provided the modern symbolic with

an intricate apparatus for the formulation and critique of mechanisms of social inclusiveness, exclusiveness, and liminality (Broeck, *Slavery and Early Modernity*; Gilroy, Patterson, Davis, *Problem of Slavery*) .

4 The social and cultural practices of trade and slavery changed the history of sexuality in the transatlantic realm, in which a voyeuristic drama for the submission of people unfolded. This encouraged the development of a large-scale white pornographic perspective and allowed for a permissivity of white male rape, by which whole generations were corrupted (Painter, Spillers). It is also necessary to speak about the almost absurd degree of fusion of economic motives and human greed, which turned female human beings into breeding machines in order to maximize profit and social control — which has had a profound effect on the representations and self-representations of black women until the present day. Most crucially in my context, slavery must be seen as a culture of ownership, — or, where white women, adolescents and children are concerned, co-ownership of people, a culture of an aggressively defended right of access to de-subjectified beings, to so-called chattel, their labor, and their reproduction. The elements of white dominance over black add up to a picture of an extreme precariousness of social and individual relations, as Orlando Patterson and other scholars (Patterson, Mullen) have so amply configured. What interests me about these relations is the process of idealization and splitting of gender.

5 The status of white women within the plantation complex is difficult to assess. It was aggressively marked by an almost schizoid antagonism between not having civil rights on the one hand and being extremely privileged, socially and culturally, on the other. After decades of neglect, Deep South historiography has, over the last thirty years, become gendered: anthologies and monographs have been published on a variety of aspects of white female life and gender relations in the antebellum South, ranging from studies of white women in Southern politics, to domesticity, to motherhood, to male-female power relations, class distinctions among white women, women's cultural, particularly literary contributions and more (see e.g. Scott, Clinton, Faust, Juncker). Many of these studies by white researchers, with the notable exception of Elisabeth Fox-Genovese's work, are characterized by what I would call the unacknowledged desire to counter-write the abolitionist myth of the lazy, hysterical Southern Belle with representations of white women fully integrated into social functions, responsibilities, and ethical obligations; their lives bound into structures of production and reproduction in which they played a crucial and distinct role vis-à-vis white men to whom they still remained legally and culturally subjugated. Black women, if they appear at all in those publications, appear marked as such, marginalized from those

reconstructions of the centrality of gender divisions and relations for plantation society, often pluralistically and rather naively subsumed under politically correct multicultural approaches to gender studies issues like mothering. Strikingly absent are specific studies which might confront the parasitical configuration of dominance and oppression which enabled white women's position in the plantation system vis-à-vis Black women, and black men, for that matter. An inquiry is necessary as to how white women pursued their own privileged status, how they defined their own mistress — (or co-master-) — position within the slave system, how they judged the investment of their femininity for the physical and cultural representation of white dominance, and how they reacted to the splitting off of black female slaves from their gender. The discourse of domesticity will have to be re-examined with an eye to the role of white women's structurally legitimate and largely exploitative access to black women's labor, their emotional resources, and sexual availability played in the production of both the iconographic constitution of white lady-hood and white women's subjective readings of their situation. Historian Nell Painter's investigations have prepared a road map: her essays should be read as signposts for further necessary archival scholarship on letters, diaries and correspondence; one might also suggest tracing those complex contradictions in a web of literary representations — even if that might entail a reading for what Toni Morrison would call ornate absences; a further object of interest could be the small number of contemporary counter fictions, such as *The Wind Done Gone* (Randall) and *Property* (Martin) which have imaginatively tried to fill in those representational lacunae, the latter of which I will take up in this article.

6 US-American gender theory has basically developed within a framework of — as I want to call it — racially innocent modernity and its emphatic philosophical foundations of the subject and subjectivity (Broeck, *Amnesia*). In US-American society, modernity has constituted itself in a particular logic of the subject (Broeck, *Slavery and Early Modernity*), and it has done so by reverting to a philosophically justified freedom of white subjectivity that presupposes the desubjectification of others by way of ownership of those others. US-American gender theory has avoided searching for the traces of its own historical rootedness within this philosophical and political regime of freedom as ownership; it has entered a dialogue almost exclusively with the theories of European modernity and postmodernism, rather than with philosophical approaches generated by Black diasporic theory that has given center stage to the meaning of slavery for modern ideas of subjectivity. Neither psychoanalysis, nor Foucauldian theory, nor gender studies — for that matter — have sufficiently dealt with the history of subjectivities created within extreme human conditions

characterized by divisions as well as convergences between and across gender and race constellations in a historical situation marked by the conditions of ownership of human beings. The aim of my project is to come to understand the intricate and individually invested psychic mechanics of this culture of ownership, as well as the subjective mental figurations of this relation. How did owning, having to work and control other human beings in a chronotope such as slavery and enjoying unlimited access to those beings one way or another, affect white women's sense of their capacities, their limitations, the reach of their desires? How did white female subjects learn to become owners of beings and to desubjectify those that appeared day in day out before their very own eyes as human beings, how did they learn to un-think another human being's access to human subjectivity? What acts of aggression (directed at self or other) were employed in order to compensate for the social and psychological compulsion to embody white domination? To what extent could a desire for closeness, intimacy and satisfaction of their own needs be gratified within the social divide of slavery, and which role did their privilege and ownership play in this? How did white women deal with the right to sanctioned white violence which afforded a perpetual invitation to excess?

7 Female domesticity of plantation ladies was inevitably contingent on female slaves' labor capacity (Weiner). For a white lady, domesticity meant a kind of compulsive but luxurious construction of the white female body, which required extreme efforts at staging this body. Part of this was, for example, the creation of an ethereal aesthetics, bearing no correspondence to the reality of the climate, or to bodily functions, or a repertoire of white feminine body language, such as calculated faints. Fictions of the South, as well as autobiographical material speak volumes to these camouflage acts. However: which role was attributed to black women in order for these acts to be successful? And how did white women perceive themselves, knowing that their success was dependent on black women's work? Domesticity meant being trained to expect and to accept black labor for one's own sustenance as a matter of course; it entailed a dependent relation to that labor: even though white ladies had the power of representing their oftentimes absent husbands in matters concerning the "big house." According to black female slave narratives white women relied on their female slaves for the actual execution of almost all household tasks (taking care of the children and the sick, cooking, household logistics, sewing, washing, keeping store, feeding slaves and animals, gardening, but also of such intimate tasks as emptying chamber pots) (Mullen, Davis, *Women, Race and Class*). Moreover, domesticity for the Southern Belle included a very ambivalent position concerning her role as mother and her offspring: white children were to the largest

extent raised by black nannies. This parasitical state of affairs did create a subjective feeling of being at the mercy of the household's slaves, which in turn means that a paranoid preemptive despotism must have been the order of the day. White women were routinely surrounded by black people, who, in their imagination figured as loyal chattel, and must have caused great wonder and aggressive disappointment if they chose not to function properly.

How To Get Beyond the Analogy of Race and Gender?

8 Even though a historical reappraisal of plantation slavery has been available for years it has hardly made an entrance into white gender theory; by the following exemplary engagement with Judith Butler's early argument in *Gender Trouble* I turn to this lack directly, trying to tease out the possibly productive implications of a necessary address of slavery's scenarios for gender studies. I will look at two paradigmatic passages from Judith Butler, which reflect — though in a rather condensed fashion — the state-of-the-art knowledge gained by Euro-American gender theory which, in my view, still rests with the far-reaching insights Butler provided into the performativity of gender. Some gender theorists, like Butler herself, have recently transferred that approach to a selective discussion of race — which, however, has remained connected mostly to an examination of issues concerning "raced" people, as in African-Americans (Butler, *Bodies* and Salih); what has been missing is a general address of gender theory's genealogy which has been so profoundly implicated in slavery's division of women into gendered subjects, and ungendered body things. To quote black feminist critic Hortense Spillers first for contrast and clarification:

> Under these conditions [of slavery], we lose at least gender difference in the outcome, and the female body and the male body become a territory of cultural and political maneuver, not at all gender-related, gender specific. But this body, at least from the point of view of the captive community, focuses a private and particular space, at which point biological, sexual, cultural, linguistic, ritualistic, and psychological fortunes converge. This profound intimacy of interlocking detail is disrupted, however, by externally imposed meanings and uses: (1) the captive body as the source of an irresistible, destructive sensuality; (2) at the same time — in stunning contradiction — it is reduced to a thing, to *being* for the captor; (3) as a category of "otherness," the captive body translates into a potential for pornotroping and embodies sheer physical powerlessness that slides into a more general "powerlessness" […]. (206)

9 In contrast to that argument, Butler's *Gender Trouble* marks a crucial void in white gender studies in the very theoretical universality, and the abstraction in which it appears. I quote two passages which condense what has become a widely uncontested paradigma for gender theory. First: "If sexuality is culturally constructed within existing power relations, then the postulation of a normative sexuality that is 'before', 'outside', or 'beyond' power is a

cultural impossibility" (30), and, the second one:

> As a shifting and contextual phenomenon, gender does not denote a substantive being, but a relative point of convergence among culturally and historically specific sets of relations […]. Gender ought not to be constructed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts. The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of abiding gendered self. This formulation moves the conception of gender of the ground of a substantial model of identity to one that requires a conception of gender as a constituted social temporality. Significantly, if gender is instituted through acts which are internally discontinuous, then the appearance of substance is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief. (10, 140 - 141)

This paradigm could be, in principle, very useful for a discussion of gender relations in the Deep South, which reveal the precariousness of the category gender. Why then, has white US gender theory so rarely looked at slavery and the role of white women within it? The question of the racial constitutedness of/in gender — which has, after all, become one of the most crucial questions for gender studies — could be much more productively theorized if the discourse included an address of US history. One explanation might be that the lack of such a historicizing approach in gender studies is the result of a re-universalizing tendency within theory as genre, in which the obsession with the abstract leads to an a priori, always already, white subject. Theory — in this logic — knows only the universal kind of performativity of gender (which is by white by default); authors and readers as agents of a mutually shared symbolic can in the end only imagine post-enlightenment white subjects. European theories of modernism (and postmodernism) in their exclusively abstract contemplation of the master-slave dialectic, which has consistently functioned as the key-metaphor for oppressive relations, could only imagine human beings who were not enslaved as subjects. In reverse, and one could say, rather perverse logic, it decided not to see the enslaved as subjects. Gender theory's affective and epistemological liaison with post-enlightenment theory resulted in an avoidance of American history to which the paradigm of the master-slave dialectic could never be applied only as a metaphor, but for which, instead, the issue of the enslaved's access to subjectivity (and thus to gender) was the most crucial, and visceral, question, and one which has had repercussions until today.

10 These are, of course, polemical suggestions. I want to go on in the same spirit and share some observations which could be useful for a reconsideration of gender in and through slavery, and race. These observations have been inspired mostly by Hortense Spillers, who, in

her already quoted "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," (a 1987 article which has gone largely unnoticed by white theorists, reprinted in Spillers), has already pointed to fundamental problems for a grammar of gender grammar, that is, for gender theory:

> […] in the historic outline of dominance, the respective subject positions of "female" and "male" adhere to no symbolic integrity. At a time when current critical discourses seem to compel us more and more decidedly toward gender 'undecidability', it would appear reactionary, if not dumb, to insist on the integrity of female/male gender. But undressing these conflations in meaning, as they appear under the rule of dominance [i.e. slavery], would restore, as figurative possibility […] the potential for gender differentiation as it might express itself along a range of stress points […]. (206)

Spillers refers here to the division of female beings in "women" equal white-female and "slaves" equal ungendered, which made it impossible for black female slaves to access the cultural capital available to gender. Spillers also scandalously suggests that this reduction of black women and men to tortured and torturable flesh (206, 207) established manipulative rights to sexual, mental and psychological infringement on slaves for both white men and women. This made any interpellation of female slaves into gendered subject positions impossible. This structural impossibility then marks a kind of ground zero for theoretical notions of gender differentiation of heteronormative sexuality in the United States, in which the availability of gender neutral flesh significantly undermined the naturalness of binary gender constellations and of socially stabilizing gender differentiation along the straight axis of male versus female subjectivity.

11 Spillers' article also suggests that motherhood was an impossibility for black female slaves, whose children did not belong to them or their men, but became white owners' chattel. This deliberate bastardization, or orphanization of black children had dire consequences: triangularization and oedipal identity formation within the family triad mother-father-child became outlawed for generations of African-Americans. White intervention required a psychological, mental and social act of compensation from the black community, beyond the gendered task of individual legitimate mothering in order to counter this imposition of white patriarchal interest of reproduction onto their own kinship structures, and the destruction of a black male subject position as father. Insight into these conditions of slavery thus necessitates a reconceptualization of theoretical statements about gender differentiation: a re-assessment of the assumption that only those allegedly universal gender relations may be constitutive for social and individual reproduction, and thus, nothing outside a binary white gender purview requires theory's interventions. Spillers concerns herself mostly with the effects of slavery's constellations on the black community in US-American history, and especially on the position of black women, as perceived by themselves and by others. Robyn Wiegman, the only white

gender scholar who clearly refers to Spiller's thesis of the "ungendering" of the black community, in her book *American Anatomies. Theorizing Race and Gender*, also focuses on the long term effects of this psychological and social de-subjectification of the black community and the resulting American difficulty to imagine sovereign race relations. The agency of white women in slavery's *quadrangulations*, as it were, thus still awaits theoretical address. What I will suggest in the following then are some preliminary speculative questions which gesture in that direction.

12 White femininity which, in the antebellum South, works as an aesthetic representation of gender at the cost of almost total disembodiment of white women, functions as a central defining moment of white dominance, as visceral allegory of an unassailable white gentility. This in turn is made possible by ascribing to black female slaves a status of pure flesh, so to speak (in the sense of sexual and reproductive accessibility and functionality). The Deep South needed female whiteness in order to *allegorize* racial difference, but its livelihood depended on making this allegory materially visible and physically effective. It thus granted white women an agency of being white that was based on an authoritative privilege of gender which could only, by necessity — since equity within patriarchy was out of the question — have slaves as its defining object. The possession of a white gender subjectivity was bound to owning black objects — materially or symbolically, female gender could only exist, and thus support the white power structure, only because and if female slaves were split off from it.

13 The construction of gendered subjectivity depends largely on the successful management and controlled pursuit of a human being's libidinous desire. But what does this easily acceptable sentence mean within the orbit of slavery? How has a definition of white desire within the bounds of race and its complete and terrorist restriction to the white race succeeded in the face of stunning day-to-day intimacy of black-white relations and of white violence? A human relation which was characterized simultaneously by a high degree of intimacy and an extremely rigid hierarchical divide and disavowal must have carried within itself the latent possibility of transgression of which we have as yet no protocol, as Spillers would phrase it. Can a post-Lacanian analysis of the law of the symbolic and its regulations of human desire into and within gendered constellations be transported universally into a historical scenario that has juxtaposed raced and gendered beings in a way that explodes and multiplies beyond the binary difference of gender that European theory assumes? The sexual nexus of slavery functioned in a way that excluded the black non-subjects from the symbolically legitimate circulation of desire; it did, as Althusser would say, not interpellate black human beings as gendered subjects, but worked so as to de-subjectify them. What was

white women's function in that game? How did white women function in a scenario with four actors, in which both, "possessing the phallus" and "being the phallus" was seriously thrown into question by the presence of a second binary gender constellation, to which the white couple had a relation of ownership — so that it was viscerally present at the same time that it had to be aggressively disavowed? Psychoanalytically speaking, what do we make of the fact that the white woman was situated in a gender quadrangle in which the black man could not have the phallus, and the black woman could certainly not be phallic — or both of these only to the point of a hysterical breakdown of the system of white control? Post-Lacanian theory has as yet not ventured to self-reflexively address psychosexual scenarios that were not inscripted in/as binary differences and which might have effected the emergent white subjects' situatedness within the symbolic, as well as the black human non-subjects' barred access to it, and the psychosexual, and cultural conflicts resulting thereof, to a considerable extent.

14 Furthermore, what do we make of the complicated games with their own sexuality which white women must have been playing: in which way did white ladies use their black female slaves for their own strategies against repeated unwanted pregnancies? In which way did white women access black bodies for their own pleasure — or are we to remain theoretically fixed within Victorian strictures of make-belief that framed interracial desire of any kind as impossible, and therefore, non-existent? Or, to step up the complication of questions: Black slaves were not allowed to mother their children in many cases, but raised their white owners' babies for whom they became a proverbial fountain of motherly care and nurturance. How then does a theory, for which oedipal disavowal and the loss of the maternal object have been most crucial in the formation of gendered, individual subjectivity, apply? The maternal object was not only to be, as it were, passively lost, or forsaken; it had to be actively disowned so that the human being (who had performed as maternal object) could be owned prospectively, could mature and become realized as a legal and material object, as it were. What becomes of the taboo restriction for the child to grow beyond symbiosis if it has to work not only in order to enter the child in his/her own sexual subjectivity apart from the parents, but also to rid the child of an improper racial attachment? How did the culturally enforced and sanctioned exchange of the maternal function affect white women's psychic constitution? What did it mean for white girls in the first place, as well as for them as prospective white mothers with black mammies for their children? My article means to appear as an inquisitive accumulation of stress points, to paraphrase Spillers again, which need to be disseminated, worked through, and possibly answered; this question in this part thus work as a list, not as a presentation of an organic picture.

On Being the Subject of Property Relations: Valerie Martin's Exploration of Possession and Domination

15 In the last part of my article I want to read two crucial passages from Valerie Martin's 2003 novel *Property* — thus referring readers to a contemporary text which addresses the conundrum of gender in slavery by way of a daring fictional re-imagination of the master/mistress/slave entanglement. Martin works with the steamy props of antebellum romance (an almost gothic plantation setting, cruel and greedy white male characters, an assortment of narcissistic Southern Belles, wicked creoles, and self-indulgent splendor on display) but employs those to shore them up, as it were, against the very genre conventions they conjure up. In her text, slaves organize for a successful uprising, the white master of the Louisiana sugar plantation, male protagonist of the novel, is murdered in the revolt; the light-skinned female house slave, who has been abused as rape object by the master, manages to run away in the fracas and escape to Boston. The slave woman is abetted by her lover/partner, a free New Orleans Black man, only to be apprehended by a slave catcher at the novel's end, not because of his detectival intelligence but because — by a deus-ex-machina narrative twist — the slave's mistress, daughter and inheritor of the dead master's slaves and estate, has a fit of female intuition, driven by the desire to re-obtain her property.

16 With her, as Toni Morrison called it, "prised and clean-limbed" prose (in a back cover blurb on the *Abacus* edition of the novel) Martin's novel may serve to fill an imaginative void in theoretical conceptualizations of gender, and gender splitting. Looking at plantation slavery as the constitutive US-American microcosm for gender articulation, her text squarely places property that is the existence of human beings as possessions for other human beings at the center of analysis. To critically represent a white female perspective of possession from within, as it were, becomes as much a daring act — given the overall negligence which characterizes white gender studies' attitudes towards the problematics of white women and slavery — as it remains an urgent desideratum. Of necessity, this perspective needs to reconstructed in the realm of imagination; it may only be accessed by a careful re-consideration of the in-between-the-lines of white women's diaries, letters, and memoirs, as well as African-American slave narratives; first, the silences kept by Victorian standards of decency, and later, a profound lack of political interest in re-examining white women's position have not exatly facilitated an entry of this perspective into the cultural memory of white gender studies.

17 Of course my reading in this context does not claim to do the novel justice in terms of

literary analysis proper; on the contrary, I am looking only at a rather select aspect of it, namely its representation of the social, cultural and psychic implications the material fact of property has for the positioning of the white mistress, and her black slave on an axis of gender; and what it could mean for white gender studies to pay attention to those implications. Which is also to say that I will not in any detail trace the novel in its intertextual connectedness to both, African-American writing, theoretical and literary, about slavery, as well as to antebellum white literature. What interests me is the problematics of the *splitting* of gender, into white female human beings who have gendered subjectivity, and black slaves who do not; and the trans-aggressivity this splitting endows white women with, by way of enabling unchecked access to their slaves' physical existence as possession. In this scenario, the black slave woman figures as a monstrous crossing between a dis-subjectified, de-gendered sexual beast, and a movable, serviceable body-thing. By way of constructing her tale as a first-person narrative of the white mistress, which does not allow for any changes of perspective beyond the protagonist Manon Gaudet's narcissistic reflections, Martin — consciously running the risk of misreading — forces readers into an instructive, but uncomfortable identification with that position of white gendered subjectivity. The art of reading Gaudet's tale, she seems to insist, lies in the empathy a reader will need to picture the point-of-view of the slave by way of willfully positioning herself as possession of a white woman, and by — from that position — mentally responding to the questions a strategically ignorant Manon Gaudet keeps asking throughout her tale: "My husband is dead… why would she run now, when she was safe from him? It did not make sense" (137). And, getting the very last sentence of the novel, wondering at what good a free life in the North might have possibly meant to the now re-possessed Sarah, she muses: "What on earth did they think they were doing"? (209)

18 The two scenes I want to look at specifically are positioned at crucial points of the narrative's plotting. The first one is the novel's opening sequence; it establishes Manon Gaudet's position within the plantation orbit as a white possessor, and at the same time, as a subject at her master husband's mercy. It also creates a voyeuristic white female gaze on white male violence, and sexual exploitation of black slaves which, by way of being voiced by the narrative's protagonist, envelops the reader in Gaudet's precarious oscillation between envious desire, repugnance and a rather aloof disdain for male spousal misbehavior. This opening sequence is of strategic importance to the text because it already positions its heroine as a willing — though passive — participant/observer, literally a spy through the looking-glass, in what she calls her husband's "games" which will in the course of the novel, slide into

her active usurpation of the right to a deliberate masterful trans-aggression in her own sexual "game" with her slave servant.

19 I will need to quote the pertinent passages from the novel at some length, in order to visualize the problematics for those readers who are not familiar with Martin's text. This is the first scenario: Gaudet repeatedly watches her husband — unbeknownst to him — at one of his favorite pastimes with his property. On the plantation's lake, he forces young black boys to perform water gymnastics for him which entail their unconsensual sexual arousal, and his brutal corporeal punishment of them as a consequence; the master, in turn, experiences orgiastic pleasure caused by both, an enjoyment of the boys' forced sexualisation and by the unchecked reign of his own violence which does not even have a need to be framed as illicit sadism, because its object are things in his possession. Not only the boys themselves, but also their slave mothers, regularly have to bear the brunt of his desires, because they will be punished for their offspring's forced performance. Manon Gaudet's very phrasing of that ritual reveals her own position as profoundly complicit with the masterful pleasure — what separates her interest from his is not any kind of empathy for the boys subjected to the ritual, or for the boys' families, but rather an angle of scandalized, envious fascination with the master's freedom which throws her own rights and claims as a presumably loved wife into sharp relief, and subjugates her to under his moods and whims:

> They have to keep doing this, their lithe young bodies displayed to him in various positions. […] The boys rub against he other, they can't help it […]. It isn't long before one comes out of the water with his member raised. That's what the game is for. This boy tries to stay in the water, he hangs his head as he comes out, thining every thought he can to make the tumescence subside. (4)

Her next words give away Manon's conjugal implication in the master's pastime; even though she clearly recognizes the violence employed against the boys' integrity, it does not occur to her to question the enlightened racist prerogative on which it is premised: "This is what proves they are brutes, he says, and have not the power of reason. A white man, knowing he would be beaten for it, would not be able to raise his member." (4) She may call her own stance "incredulous" in the face of her husband's self-centered and willfully misdirected desire, in effect, however, Manon shares a gleeful satisfaction with him upon the execution of his fancies:

> He has his stick there by the tree […]. Sometimes the offending boy cries out or tries to run away, but he's no match for this grown man with his stick. The servant's tumescence subsides as quickly as the master's rises, and the latter will last until he gets to the quarter. If he can find the boy's mother, and she's pretty, she will pay dearly for rearing an unnatural child. This is only one of his games. When he comes back to the house he will be in a fine humor for the rest of the day. (4)

20 The second scene under scrutiny here, as provocative as it is productive, needs an attentive reader to deal with her shocked, and always already implicated awareness of white female titillation. The white master and husband having died, Manon Gaudet is enabled to follow her very own designs on and with her black property, and the novel follows her exploitative, and vengeful dealings with Sarah and Walter (the half-wit, deaf master's bastard son with Sarah) in some detail. Time and again the text deconstructs its own premises, as it were, because behind Manon's narcissistic but shrewd readings of Sarah's righteous anger at her abuse at the master's hands, it does allow readers to obtain glimpses of a possible line of joint gendered interests against the white patriarch. The text makes it very clear — drawing on a wealth of documentary material that Southern historians like Nell Painter have of late unearthed — that the ubiquity of white male liaisons with African-American slaves within the white plantation household was the crucial and unforgivable vexation for white women to drive them into opposition to the white male prerogative of freedom at their own expense (Painter). This deeply entrenched mad white female hatred of white male power to do what pleased the patriarch *might* have enabled a reconfiguration of gender so as to include African-American female slaves within its claims, but — as the text makes equally clear — it did not because it was thwarted by white women's own possessive investments in their slaves, and the need to maintain the position of white ownership and control over and against a — however germinal — potential of gender based alliance.

21 By way of a neat narrative ploy, Martin amply exposes that white priority of interest. By having the master be killed in the slave uprising, and leaving Manon Gaudet as a propertied widow with the proverbial room of her own (based on the sale of the plantation, and the inheritance of her mother, conveniently deceased in a cholera epidemic in New Orleans), Gaudet finds herself in the privileged and exceptional position of being able to master her own affairs. And master them she will. She will go to considerable, and financially unwarranted, lengths in recapturing the runaway Sarah to exert her ownership over the woman. Her ostentatious reason to have wanted Sarah back is the woman's competence as a servant on the protagonist's white body, captured, tellingly, by Manon's statement: "No one could dress my hair so well as Sarah…" (206). However, the scenario I am going to discuss here reveals that Gaudet's investments in her property go far beyond the usefulness of being served and extend to a masterful enjoyment of trans-aggressive sexual freedom which, at the beginning of the novel, she could but follow as a powerless voyeur.

22 After her mother has died, Manon is sitting awake in her house, being watched by the slave Sarah who is sucking her baby, wondering why her husband let Sarah keep her child,

instead of selling it immediately. Watching Sarah's milk leak from her breast, it comes to Manon like a revelation: "It was for his own pleasure, I thought" (89). In a fantasy of wishing her husband dead before the fact, she takes on his position, assaulting Sarah by kneading her breasts, and sucking her nipples for milk. Having turned the tables on her husband she gleefully imagines that he, this time, is looking on "with an uncomfortable position that something was not adding up" (82). She thus successfully accomplishes the act of her own, gendered, liberation, by the trans-aggression of confirming, and acting out the slave woman's splitting off of gender. The slave literally, in this scene, becomes an un-gendered breast to fulfill the white woman's dreams both of power, and of the physical comfort of body nurturance — which seems to be an ingenious textual signification on the hundreds of scenes of black mammies feeding white babies in American cultural memory, nursing them into masterhood, as it were, as well as on Toni Morrison's scene of the white men taking Sethe's milk in *Beloved*.

23 Gaudet's sentences contracts white freedom into a microcosm of pleasure, willfulness, possession and power: "I closed my eyes, swallowing greedily […]. How wonderful I felt, how entirely free. My headache disappeared, my chest seemed to expand, there was a complimentary tingling in my own breasts" (82). One needs to be keenly aware of the fact that this is neither a scene of utopian women-bonding, nor of lesbian cross-racial desire, but entirely one of domination, and potential violence:

> I opened my eyes and looked at Sarah's profile. She had lifted her chin as far away from me as she could, her mouth was set in a thin hard line, and her eyes were focused intently on the arm of the settee. She's afraid to look at me, I thought. And she's right to be. If she looked at me, I would slap her. (82)

The gendered subjectification of the white woman — her freedom as an agent of her own desire — is literally sucked from the black woman's body, contingent on the de-subjectification, and thus the de-gendering of the enslaved human being who has become her serviceable flesh, as it were. It appears as if Valerie Martin, with this compromising scene, has cast Hortense Spillers' observations in literary terms, thus filling a blank in white gender studies' perceptions of the gender/race nexus in American history. Martin does not list Spillers' text in her acknowledgement of material she consulted upon writing her novel; however, her reading of the nexus of sexuality and gender under slavery corresponds to Spillers' argument with striking clarity. Spillers observed that slavery, under which gender, and " the customary aspects of sexuality […] are all thrown in crisis […]" provides a realm of sexuality

> that is neuterbound, because it represents an open vulnerability to a gigantic

> sexualized repertoire that may be alternately expressed as male and/or female. Since the gendered female exists for the male, we might say that the ungendered female — in an mazing stroke of pansexual potential — might be invaded/raided by another woman or man. (222)

24 Of course, this argument does not mean to read the novel as a text of documentary value about the life of Southern white women to any representative degree. Rather, it is meant to probe suggestively into configurations of gendering, and ungendering under slavery which white gender studies need to include in their theoretical horizon. As my reading of *Property* has tried to demonstrate, a largely unexamined nexus of impulses and effects of violence and desire constituted white women's emotional and psychic investments within the affective orbit of slavery (to paraphrase Fox-Genovese's term), and by the very fact of having been left unexamined, paradoxically has carried over into post-slavery racialized constructions of gender. Gender studies, despite politically correct affectations of the race and gender mantra, have widely avoided to read a growing corpus of black gender theory as *theory* and to apply it to a cultural analysis of white women. Going back to the history of slavery and its implications — paying the referential debt to history, as Shoshana Felman once called it — could, however, improve (white) gender theory far beyond any explicit, or implicit facile appeals to universalism, or a helpless, and misleading reliance on the analogous pairing of gender, and race.

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