Enslavement as Regime of Western Modernity: Re-reading Gender Studies Epistemology Through Black Feminist Critique

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Abstract:
What emerges from Saidiya Hartman's, and Hortense Spillers's work about slavery which I am reading as a rather elaborate argument taking off where Toni Morrison left it with *Beloved*, is a picture of foundational violence which helped put the modern Euroamerican world's white subjectivity in its place. One of the ways this happened was the structural obliteration of access to gender, that is, gendered subjectivity for black human beings, male or female, while at the same time making black human beings, and particularly females, the target of white transgressively abusive desires of all shades and forms. I will draw out the implications of contemporary meditations on the slave trade for Gender Studies' epistemological horizon. I will follow Hartman's and Spiller's evolving arguments by way of a close reading which challenges (white) gender studies borders erected around the sanctity of gender as the founding difference of western societies.

1 One of the claims in the call for papers for this issue of *Gender Forum* was to document the blurring of distinctions between writers, in the sense of a strictly literary production, and theorists, philosophers, critics engaged in epistemological production (and vice versa) - a diffusion which has become something like a hallmark of black women's cultural production ever since Angela Davis', Alice Walker's, Toni Cade Bambara's, Audre Lorde's, June Jordan's or Sylvia Wynter's earliest interventions, as well as Hooks', Morrison's, Williams' or others in later years. Black Womanism, in Alice Walker's term, brought forth writer/critics who have created a web of creative and critical theoretical contributions to contemporary theory within cultural studies in the widest sense. All of these authors have been taking black women's cultural production beyond the field of literature in a narrow sense, and thus their wok should have been received beyond the academic discipline of literary criticism much more stringently, as Barbara Christian so trenchantly argued in her "The Race for Theory". (1987)

2 The still palpable legacy of the transatlantic slave trade, and New World Slavery became one of the crucial concerns the more those black women writers stepped up their critical inquiry of the entanglement of racism and sexism, and argued for the overdue critical examination of this nexus in two directions, both with the black liberation and the white feminist movements of the 1970s, and subsequently with their academic successors in the 1980 and 1990s. In this context, the publication of *Beloved* (1987) the Nobel Prize award and the novel's subsequent mainstream success must be marked as a watershed moment in that it put slavery, as well as the black woman's plight resulting from it, on the public agenda to a

hitherto un-witnessed extent. The novel's impact on US literary history, as well as on cultural studies' discourses (within and beyond academia) in terms of a reckoning with slavery as one of the haunting United States traumata, of a discussion of cultural memory, and of an acknowledgement of the long term effects of enslavement on the public psyche has been extensively documented in what amounts to a veritable school of *Beloved* - scholarship, now active for 20 years (see for example Broeck 2006).

3 When Toni Morrison published *Beloved* in 1987, she created not only the most widely publicized, translated, received and criticized literary representation of slavery and its aftermath - next to Harriett Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to which the novel entertains obvious revisionist intertextual relations - she also rather purposefully created a want. In her *Nobel Prize* winning novel, the Middle Passage itself, the voyage the enslaved Africans were forced to undergo as movable property, as things, by the terroristic rules and conditions of the slave trading economic and cultural machine, becomes the literary space of a telling narrative void. Those passages in *Beloved* which directly engage the trauma of the slave trade, remain urgent language fragments, arranged more like a dazed and always already collapsing chant than the swift and artful narrative stridency characteristic for the novel. At the point where the reader awaits a narrative recollection of the Middle Passage, any syntax has collapsed; any clear indication of a narrative perspective has disappeared into a litany of stumbling passages the origins of which remain lost to the reader; the verbal register has become reduced to desperate repetition. As if in an echo of Adorno's dictum, *Beloved* seems to forbid itself any narrative after, and of the Middle Passage; instead, the text dares the reader with the ambiguous morality of textually accommodating the devastating loss of human lives by way of *Beloved*'s lapse in, and loss of a novelistic storytelling capacity. (Broeck 1999) In *Beloved*, it is the very void of story which gestures towards an ethically, and linguistically impossible representation.

4 This void is articulated as well in the publication, in the very same year, of Hortense Spillers' "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe,: An American Grammar Book" (I will be using the essay here as reprinted in (2003) in which she lays out the skeleton of a theoretical framework to reconsider the dubious role of gender as a modern western paradigm from the enslaved Africans' points of view. Spillers' groundbreaking essay corresponds to Morrison's novel in intricate ways: both are concerned with the particular position of Black women in the orbit of slavery, and its aftermath, and both focus on the violence and abuse directed against Black human "flesh"'- Spillers' direct use of the word here appears quite in tune with Morrison's images of her protagonists' scarred back, branding marks, violated mouths and genitalia, and

stolen milk; as well as with Baby Suggs mournful celebration of "black flesh" - to raise the question if 'gender' (and the adherent notions of self definition) might have the epistemological function to further add to black people's abjected position in the modern world, since they cannot access gendered subjectivity. The limitation of access to a system of human binarisation functioned so as to arrest African-origin humans in the flesh, as well as to endow white Euro-American human beings with the property of engendered selves:

> To that extent, the captive female body locates precisely a moment of converging political and social vectors that mark the flesh as a prime commodity of exchange. While this proposition is open to further exploration, suffice it to say now that this open exchange of female bodies in the raw offers a kind of Ur-text to the dynamics of signification and representation that the gendered female would unravel. (220)

My intervention here means to follow Spillers' provocative insight in juxtaposing it with the feminist credo of "we shall not be slaves" which originated with early modern feminists like Mary Wollstonecraft, enabling white women until today to discuss gender as a privilege of the subject whose pretense to universality has by now been thoroughly critiqued by postcolonial studies. Spillers put this point on the agenda in 1987, clearly pointing towards the implications of her argument for white gender studies:

> Indeed, we would go so far as to entertain the very real possibility that sexuality, as a term of implied relatedness, is dubiously appropriate, manageable or accurate to any of the familial arrangements under a system of enslavement, from the master's family to the captive enclave. Under these circumstances, the customary aspects of sexuality, including "reproduction," "motherhood," "pleasure," and "desire" are all thrown in crisis. (221)

5 In a series of novelistic and essayistic texts writers have since then engaged to fill that void with feats of the imagination, to counter the oppressive silences of the historical record. Cultural critics like Spillers herself, but most recently, and prominently Hartman have pushed the issue of returning slavery to the postmodern moment of critical theory, over and against either sheer forgetfulness, or relegation to a sub-discipline of history. This return serves to raise critical awareness of modern western societies' genealogies in the transatlantic system of *thingification* that is, the most extreme commodification, from a black feminist perspective. In this venture, Hartman's second book, *Lose Your Mother* (2008), mobilizes the rather effective device of creating a narrative first person of essayistic inquiry as a veritable time traveler who is able to transcend the distinction between Hartman's autobiographical present and the historical archives' past. At the same time, her persona in the text becomes a listening membrane for black memory in whatever fragmented form it might be sought out, or encountered. Autobiography, historical documentation, poetic narrative, philosophical

meditation, pamphlet, travel journal, oral history - all these subgenres thus aggregate and form a distinct kind of textual reflection.

6 Hartman herself locates the text's raison d'etre in autobiography: she wants to engage the African-American community, and a wider black diasporic readership in a deconstruction of political mythologies of "Africa" while at the same time keeping slavery's time, creating a proactive counter-memory against the repeated and still repeatable loss of human lives in the Middle Passage. As she states very pointedly, she wants to counter mythical notions of the Africa as black haven with a painstaking recording of her encounters with the remnants of slave trading in Africa, including an unflinching look at African tribal elites' responsibility for this barter in human beings, for forsaking the "lost tribes." (235) Her authorial persona undertakes, as it were, a Middle Passage to Ghana in reverse, an imaginary reconstruction of centuries of slave trading of African-origin human beings from the previously non-existent, annihilated position of the human thing, the "commoner" as she terms it.

7 While Hartman's and Spillers' text crucially address what Spillers has called intramural conflicts, and while they have created vanguard theory for critiquing patriarchal and sexist hegemonies within black diasporic communities (a feature that they share with the radical purposes of dozens of African and black diasporic female writers in the last few decades who I cannot even begin to list here) that imminently 'homebound' term of address does not concern me here. I will offer a rather particular reading of Hartman's work. One her most compelling points in her first book *Scenes of Subjection* (1997), had been the exposure of white US American society's libidinal, emotional, cultural and legal investments in the enslavement and later, racist oppression of black people:

> Although assertions of free will, singularity, autonomy and consent necessarily obscure relations of power and domination, the genealogy of freedom, to the contrary, discloses the intimacy of liberty, domination, and subjection. This intimacy is discerned in the inequality enshrined in property rights, the conquest and captivity that established 'we the people,' and the identity of race as property, whether evidenced in the corporeal inscriptions of slavery and its badges or in the bounded bodily integrity of whiteness secured by the abjection of others. (123)

Indirectly, Hartman extends this argument in her recent work, focusing on the triangularized inhumanity of 300 hundred years of trading in enslaved Africans executed by Africans and Arabs, by many European nations, and by Americans to the point of saturating the entire modern transatlantic world with its regime.

8 Black women writers have made it their prominent purpose to go behind the veiling screen (white) abolitionist memory left in the archives, and in white western public memory - which has been recently rejuvenated militantly in ubiquitous bicentennial celebrations. They

have persistently raised the question: if slavery did create a modern "behavioral vortex of money, property, consumption and the flesh" (Bhana Young 4), what does that mean for critical thinking today, exactly? Tracing the slave trade in ways as visceral as it has been elusive in history's archives, Hartman's symptomatic reading of the "dead book", as she calls the vast archive of slavery, follows a particular textual strategy by which the trace of enslavement - a notorious deconstructive term in the arsenal of différance - becomes charged with referential value clearly in excess of its metaphorical workings. By way of a particularly striking example, I quote her description of her visit of the slave holding dungeons in Ghana's slave fort, Elmira, now a major tourist attraction:

> Human waste covered the floor of the dungeon. To the naked eye it looked like soot. After the last group of captives had been deported, the holding cells were closed but never cleaned out. For a century and a half after the abolition of the slave trade, the waste remained. To control the stench and the pestilence, the floor had been covered with sand and lime. In 1972, a team of archeologists excavated the dungeon and cleaned away 18 inches of dirt and waste. They identified the topmost layer of the floor of the compressed remains of captives - feces, blood, and exfoliated skin. (115)

This strategy of *re- referentializing* becomes the crucial political lever for Hartman's text to turn the tables on slavery. Paradigmatically, *Lose Your Mother* calls for a shift of attention towards a protocol of white western investments in the effective system of enslavement. The very mass of details the text assembles to document, against the grain, the catalogued but previously neutralized transgressions of the trading machine, forces a white reader to reconsider the investment in, as well as the short - and long term benefits of the discourses and practices of enslavement for modern white European societies. Beyond its autobiographical context, and beyond its intramural address, *Lose Your Mother* needs to be read as a major contribution to theorizing transatlantic modernity as driven by the technological machinery, the economy, and epistemology of enslavement. As a sort of coterminous address, the texts contains a rather trenchant critique of - white - modernity:

> Impossible to fathom was that all this death (*the millions dying in the Middle Passage*, my italics) had been incidental to the acquisition of profit and to the rise of capitalism. Today we might describe it as collateral damage. The unavoidable losses created in the pursuit of the greater objective. Death wasn't a goal of its own but just a by-product of commerce, which has had the lasting effect of making negligible all the millions of lives lost. Incidental death occurs when life has no normative value, when no humans are involved, when the population is, in effect, seen as already dead. Unlike the concentration camp, the gulag, and the killing field, which had as their intended end the extermination of a population, the African trade created millions of corpses, but as a corollary to the making of commodities. To my eyes this lack of intention didn't diminish the crime of slavery but from the vantage of judges, juries, and insurers exonerated the culpable agents. In effect, it made it easier for a trader to countenance yet another dead black body or for a captain to dump a shipload of captives into the

> sea in order to collect the insurance, since it wasn't possible to kill cargo or to murder a thing already denied life. Death was simply a part of the workings of the trade. (31)

9 As with Spillers' "Mama's Baby," I see this critique as a challenge to gender studies that reaches beyond both, the "add-on race approach" that dominated so-called multicultural gender studies in the nineties (see Wiegman), and in the early years of the 21 century; it also provides a rather skeptical angle on the more recently en-vogue discourse of intersectionality which has recently arrived in Germany, at least, with roughly a decade of time-lagging. (see Walgenbach et.al.) It seems to have fallen to a black female epistemological location to articulate the most radical cultural memory of transatlantic modernity, and to unearth a historical baggage of systematic dehumanization at the core of western contemporary societies that gender studies needs to address, because it is to those configurations of violence that gender as we know it, has to be traced. I am writing this against the long deplored but ongoing phenomenon in white feminist and gender studies theory to instrumentalize black women as ethnographical witnesses on their own plight, in direct and not so direct ways, and to constantly ignore or negate black women's theoretical, and critical input as relevant to gender studies as such.

10 After this exposition, let me now move to my close reading proper. How does a reading of the slave trade impact on theory for gender studies? The focus of Hartman's attention in her chapter "The Dead Book", and its accompanying article piece, "Venus in Two Acts" (2008) is on the black female doubly violated: first made into a mere thing, abject in her opaque human subjectivity which the machine of enslavement refuses to constitute in its own terms, and which thus does not exist. That absented claim to human subjectivity, secondly, also entails the dispensation of any access to human differentiation, according to categories like age, region, tribal origins, language, or what passed at the time for gender distinctions - except, crucially, for instructions about slave ship packing, and, of course, except for the suffering of so called sexual transgression and abuse enacted on what amounted to nothing more than a female anatomy. As Hartman writes, following her descent into the archives of enslavement - documents kept by slave ship captains, insurance companies, abolitionist pamphlets, doctors and legal institutions:

> There are hundreds of thousands of other girls who share her circumstances and these circumstances have generated few stories. And the stories that exist are not about them, but rather about the violence, excess, mendacity and reason that seized hold of their lives, transformed them into commodities and corpses, and identified them with names tossed off as insults and crass jokes. The archive is, in this case, a death sentence, a tomb, the display of the violated body, and inventory of property, a medical treatise on gonorrhea, a few lines about a whore's life, an asterisk in the grand narrative history. (2008, 2)

11 Two crucial related questions pertaining to content and form result from this; the first is: "How does one rewrite the chronicle of a death foretold and anticipated, as a collective biography of dead subjects, as a counter-history of the human, as the practice of freedom?" (Venus 3), and the second, paramount for Hartman, as well as many other black writers, male and female:

> What are the kinds of stories to be told by those and about those who live in such an intimate relationship with death? Romances? Tragedies? Shrieks that find their way into speech and song? What are the protocols and limits that shape the narratives as counter-history, and aspiration that isn't a prophylactic against the risks posed by reiterating violent speech and depicting the grammar of violence? […] Do the possibilities outweigh the dangers of looking (again)? (2008, 4)

The dangers of looking and of thus creating a panoptikum of what Hortense Spillers early on called a "pornotroping" (206) of the enslaveds' history weigh in on Hartman's text heavily; the only strategy available to deal with that ambiguous challenge is a constant level of self-reflection, puncturing Hartman's text almost to excess because:

> Scandal and excess inundate the archive: the raw numbers of the mortality account, the strategic evasion and indirection of the captain's log, the florid and sentimental letters dispatched from slave ports by homesick merchants, the incantatory stories of *shocking (ibid.)* violence penned by abolitionists, the fascinated eyewitness reports of mercenary soldiers eager to divulge 'what decency forbids (them) to disclose,' and the rituals of torture, the beatings, hangings and amputations enshrined as law. The libidinal investment in violence is everywhere apparent in the documents, statements and institutions that decide our knowledge of the past. What has been said and what can be said about Venus *take for granted* the traffic between fact, fantasy, desire and violence. (2008, 5)

12 With its excessive, repetitive questioning gestures towards images of the dead, Hartman' text performs a wake for the nameless millions lost in the middle Passage; with Foucault, *Mother* speaks of the "precarious domicile of words that allowed the enslaved to be murdered" (2007/8, 250) against which another artifice of words is left as the only however fragile and intangible re-compensation. Working with the archival material which slave trade historiography has of late unearthed in great quantities, she reconstructs the scenes of torture, abuse and annihilation filling the ledgers of slave trading, as well as abolitionist records, as mere numbers, as ciphers of obstinacy, loss or safe cargo. Aggressively, her text strains against the process of historiography's familiarization which has rendered the corpses for a second killing. Her purpose is - to the contrary - to de-familiarize enslavement in its detail for her readership; thus she critically reworks the phrasing by other scholars whose very words, in her eyes, recapitulate - despite all best intentions - the litany of regular normalcy: "Outrages of that nature were so common on board the slave ships that they were looked upon

with as much indifference as any trifling occurrence; their frequency had rendered them familiar" (2007/8, 143). Hers becomes a meticulous effort to make readers understand the extent to which the annals available to historiography amount to a comprehensive book of the dead, to a pornography of suffering which "flummoxed the London public" (145) during the heydays of the abolitionist campaigns, became sanitized in slave trade historiography, and regain their ability to haunt contemporary readers only if connected to an ethically self-reflective, and deconstructive reassembly of detail. Past the contemporary international debates for monetary reparation (167-169) Hartman goes straight for a white audience which has deluded itself for the longest time about the pertinence of slavery to white Euro-America, claiming, as James Baldwin and others have also noted with rage, that they, as the "authors of devastation" could be "innocent" (169). Her text's pertinence lies in an awareness of how early, and in how constitutive ways, the modern world we inhabit was grounded in the purposeful creation of human thingness, of human property outside the realm of human subjectivity.

13 Vis-a-vis the "dead book," as Hartman reiterates, there is not one single autobiographical narrative of a female captive who survived the Middle Passage. (3) Accordingly, the challenge to represent the absented human clamor which haunted Morrison's *Beloved* implicitly, Hartman makes explicit. In one self reflective turn after another, she agonizes about the impossibility of narrative which the counter-history she aims for requires being written, but which actually can never have a solid foundation in a human voice, may only be - as I argued in *White Amnesia - Black Memory* (Broeck) delivered in the paradoxical mode of invented testimony. In *Lose Your Mother*, she describes her discourse - something akin to the gesturing towards story, but overlaid by a persistent arresting self-questioning of that very narrative - as "critical fabulation" (2008; 9, 10, 11). Her witnessing, as she sees it, has always already failed by necessity, so that, in a strange and perturbing way, she knowingly reproduces excess, in order to keep herself to and produce in her readers, the "acuity of regard" (Scarry, in Hartman 2008, 4). She keeps re-articulating her project in impressive ways which will need readerly patience to be digested in full:

> The archive of slavery rests upon a founding violence. This violence determines, regulates and organizes the kinds of statements that can be made about slavery and as well it creates subjects and objects of power. The archive yields no exhaustive account of the girl's life, but catalogues the statements that licensed her death. All the rest is a kind of fiction: sprightly maiden, sulky bitch, Venus, girl. The economy of theft and the power over life, which defined the slave trade, fabricated commodities and corpses. But cargo, inert masses, and things don't lend themselves to representation, at least not easily? […] Is it possible to exceed or negotiate the constitutive limits of the archive? By advancing a series of speculative arguments and exploiting the capacities

> of the subjunctive (a grammatical mood that expresses doubts, wishes and possibilities), in fashioning a narrative, which is based upon archival research, and by that I mean a critical reading of the archive that mimes the figurative dimensions of history, I intended both to tell an impossible story and to amplify the impossibility of its telling. The conditional temporality of "what could have been," according to Lisa Lowe, "symbolizes aptly the space of a different kind of thinking, a space of productive attention to the scene of loss, a thinking with twofold attention that seeks to encompass at once the positive objects and methods of history and social science and the matters absent, entangled and unavailable by its methods." (2008, 11)

Her terms of address thus oscillate from mourning to meditation, to reflection, and to radical revision: "The dream is to liberate them from the obscene depictions that first introduced them to us, It is too easy to hate a man like Thistlewood; what is more difficult is to acknowledge as our inheritance the brutal Latin phrases spilling onto the pages of his journals" (2008, 6).

14 Thistlewood, the British slaveholder who wrote an extensive and self-indulgent account of his practice as an early modern owner of human beings on his plantation in Jamaica, here stands in for the masterful regime of New World slavery in its inseparable connection to early modern investments in white western civilization, to wit, Hartman's oxymoronic conjunction of obscenity and Latin, via the tie-in of "brutal". As a cautionary tale, Thistlewood's recollection - though easily despicable - amounts to quite a challenge for a white community of readers. Because Thistlewood, if read epistemologically, not ethnographically, or 'historically," calls white readers into a profound dis-identification with humanities' trajectories rooted in modern Enlightenment's premises. Thistlewood's freedom to transgress against human beings turns out to be quite commensurate with modern notions of the sovereign subject - even though abolitionism duly used his writing as the kind of propagandistic pornography Hartman also dissects. As Hartman argues, the slave barracoon must be looked at not just as a holding cell, but more importantly, as a modern episteme which controlled as well the practices of history, and collective white memory, creating a "second order of violence" which reached far into abolition. (2007/8, 5) Faced with the regime of this episteme, Hartman's, Spillers' and Morrison's work, among others, urges Gender Studies to move away from benevolently thinking about race, as in "add race" to postmodern thinking about the modern self, for the formation of which the gendering of subjects - male and female- was essential. Instead, we need to discuss the modern gendered subject as situated in a nexus of property versus sovereignlessness, to take Hartman and Best's term, (as the sine qua non of black human beings), of *blackness as abjection* outside all the defining categories of modernity. Thus, Hartman's question becomes: How does the recognition of the creation of sovereignlessness "better enable us to chart the relation between

pasts and presents, to think about the relation between capitalism and slavery and the dilemmas of the present" (2006, 12)? That is to say, for me the founding *difference* of early modern Euro-American societies was subject versus abject, of sovereign self versus sovereignlessness, of *thinged* property versus the subject; gender as modern category, comes to figure *within* that economy, that epistemology, as precisely a category to negotiate, for white European and US women, towards a status of sovereignty, subjectivity and property rights.

15 The point I want to make is not that African societies did not organize themselves around different cultural social and economic interpellations for men and women, neither that in new world slavery, and colonial societies female beings were not subjected to particular politics and practices - most importantly - rape, and the theft of motherhood. However, as Spillers has argued, and as Hartman's texts illuminate, enslaved African-origin female beings never qualified as women (because of their non-humanness, it followed logically) in the Euro-American modern world, and therefore were not interpellated to partake in the ongoing social construction and contestation of gender. The point I do want to make is that *gender* - a category that would have enabled a black female claim on social negotiations did not apply to 'things', to what was constructed as and treated as human flesh. Moreover, that very category gender emerged in western transatlantic rhetoric precisely in the context of creating a space for white women, who refused to be treated like slaves, like things. Modern gender, with early modern feminism, constituted itself discursively precisely in the shift from 18th century female abolitionist Christian empathy with the enslaved to the paradigmatic separation of women from slaves, a process that repeated itself in the late 19th century American negotiations of, and between, abolitionism and suffrage. The fact that black women have - in their long history in the western transatlantic world - consistently fought for an access to the category gender to be able to occupy a space of articulation at all, most famously, of course, in 19th century Sojourner Truth's angrily subversive exclamation "Am I not a woman and a sister?", does not alter the structural complicity of gender as a category with the formation of the sovereign modern white self. That is to say to have, or to be of female gender which could claim and deserved certain kinds of rights, and treatment, staked the claim of white 18th century women to full human subjectivity, as opposed to thingness. The infamous and very persistent use of the analogy of women and slaves (Broeck) provided a springboard for white women to begin theorizing a catalogue of their own demands for an acknowledgement of modern, free subjectivity as antagonistic to enslavement; as a discursive construct, then, modern gender served the differentiation of human from property. White Feminism *and*

gender theory have thus played active roles in the constitution of modern societies as we know them that need far more reflection in shaping and negotiating the expectations of how to do gender properly, even in its critical modes - roles that were claimed rather rarely in conjunction with, or based on an acknowledgment of black people's agency. To me, the corruption inherent in this history demands a bracketing of the category gender, a coupling of it to that history to lose its innocence. Making this kind of connection will also support Gender Studies to go beyond the epistemologically restrictive gender-race analogy which fired white female abolitionism - an ideological position that is untenable for gender studies in a de-colonial moment.

16 (White) Gender Studies may decide to reflect self-critically on its own embeddedness in the Enlightenment proposal of human freedom which strategically split a certain group of humans, namely enslaved African-origin people, from the constitutive freedom to possess themselves and as such, from any access to subjectivity, which entailed, as Hortense Spillers above all has argued, a splitting of African-origin women from gender. If, thus, the knowledge of the slave trade and slavery will become the site of a re-reading of Enlightenment, modernity and postmodernity, a revised theoretical, and material approach to an epistemology of emancipation like Gender Studies will be possible. Gender Studies, too, lives "in the time of slavery," in the "future created by it" (Hartman 2007, 133). It is the economic, cultural and epistemic regime of human commodification, that transgressive nexus of violence, desire and property which first formed the horizon of the Euro-American modernity that US and European intellectuals, including Gender Studies, have known and claimed. The Enlightenment's proposal of human subjectivity and rights which was in fact inscribed into the world the slave trade and slavery had made (Blackburn), created a vertical structure of access claims to self-representation and social participation from which African-origin people, as hereditary commodities, were a priori abjected. It is on the basis of that abjection, that the category of woman, of gender as a framework to negotiate the social, cultural and economic position of white European women was created. To accept that the very constitution of gender as a term in European early modernity was tied to a social, cultural and political system which constitutively pre-figured "wasted lives," and an extreme precariousness of what constitutes human existence, throws contemporary notions of gendered subjectivity into stark relief. Hartman's work, therefore, may be read as just as axiomatic as Bauman's, Butler's or Agamben's in measuring postmodern global challenges to critical theory. Elaine Scary's, Susan Sontag's interventions on pain and voyeurism, and Spillers' or Wood's considerations, more specifically, on the sexualized campaigns of Anglo-

American abolition, have compounded the challenge for an epistemology of slavery as a modern episteme not to recycle abolitionist titillation - the risk to become part of a second order abolitionist discourse must, however, be run. To play an active role in the project of decolonizing (post)modern critical theory, gender studies need to acknowledge and reckon with black de-colonial feminist interventions beyond add-on approaches. Those interventions will enable an epistemic turn away from the solipsistic quasi universal presentism of much of contemporary theory, and make it answerable to its own indebtedness to the history of early modern Europe, and the New World. Hartman's and Spiller's texts, as well as Morrison's writing become something like deconstructive guides: we are being asked to look, and listen with black women's perspectives - but at the same time the texts fold back on themselves, and thus on our reading; they disrupt a smooth appropriation of suffering, they derail us from a swift hate for the Thistlewoods (Mother, 61). Those texts under scrutiny here do enact a kind of self-conscious parasitism, forcing readers into complicity - but they refuse to do it innocently, disrupting a renewed take on slavery by way of abolitionist benevolence. They teach readers that the boundaries of the archive cannot be trespassed at will, and without consequence; and they also teach us to respect what Hartman calls, with Fred Moten, "black noise" (2008, 12).

17 "I, too, live in the time of slavery" - is a statement not yet widely enough echoed; gender theory needs to expose itself to the demands of modern history. At a time of rampant takeover by globalized forces of neo-liberalism, for (white) gender studies theory the challenge is to achieve agony instead of complicity with the corporate projects and, particularly in Europe, with the recent onset of a rampant eulogizing of Europe as the mythical ground of universal freedom. This urgency of the modern past as postmodern present may be shored up against all too flippant deployments of Agamben's, Bauman's or Butler's respective terms of "precarious lives" - terms which need to be reloaded with their entire modern history. (White) critical gender theory, as much as it has been a modern critical agent in the negotiation of patriarchal power, has also partaken in the violence of discursive formations that produced the disposable lives of "black flesh". Black women writers like Hartman, Spillers or Morrison argue for creating or maintaining - in the face of much postmodern indifference or abandon - a particular "relationship to loss". Their work, as formulated most clearly by Hartman, calls for a "redress project" which challenges white reading communities - in the present case, a reading public trained in gender studies, that is - to go beyond the confines of gender. To re-arrive in the time of slavery calls for a political orientation in support of "fugitive justice," in Best and Hartman's words,

> to interrogate rigorously the kinds of political claims that can be mobilized on behalf of the slave (the stateless, the socially dead, and the disposable) in the political present. [...] [W]e are concerned neither with 'what happened then' nor with 'what is owed because of what happened then,' but rather with the contemporary predicament of freedom, with the melancholy recognition of foreseeable futures still tethered to the past. [...] [W]hat is the story about the slave we ought to tell out of the present we ourselves inhabit -- a present in which torture isn't really torture, a present in which persons have been stripped of rights heretofore deemed inalienable? (Best and Hartman, 3, 4)

Hartman (and her co-author, Stephen Best) have outlined a series of questions for the Redress Project, the most important in my context being the following:

> What is the violence particular to slavery? [...] What is the essential feature of slavery: (1) property in human beings, (2) physical compulsion and corporal correction of the laborer, (3) involuntary servitude, (4) restrictions on mobility or opportunity or personal liberty, (5) restrictions of liberty of contract, (6) the expropriation of material fruits of the slave's labor, (7) absence of collective self-governance or non-citizenship, (8) dishonor and social death, (9) racism? We understand the particular character of slavery's violence to be ongoing and constitutive of the unfinished project of freedom.
> What is the slave -- property, commodity, or disposable life?
> What is the time of slavery? Is it the time of the present, as Hortense Spillers suggests, a death sentence reenacted and transmitted across generations? (Best and Hartman, 5)

18 For the still largely white gender studies academic community in Europe to adopt itself to the redress project means a re-location into the time of slavery, into a genealogical continuum which reaches from the early modern period into postmodernity. This kind of "bracketing" gender might result in an expansion of urgently needed sites of cross-racial alliance, for gender studies to find a position from which to share not only postcolonial melancholia but also transcultural conviviality, as Paul Gilroy has recently phrased it. This conviviality requires white critical communities to read black women writers/critics work not as ethnography, but as lessons in decolonization itself. Working through Fred Moten's *In The Break*, Hartman postulates:

> By throwing into crisis "what happened when" and by exploiting the "transparency of sources" as fictions of history, I wanted to make visible the production of disposable lives (in the Atlantic slave trade and, as well, in the discipline of history), to describe "the resistance of the object," if only by first imagining it, and to listen for the mutters and oaths and cries of the commodity, trying to narrate "the time of slavery as our present," to "imagine a future in which the afterlife of slavery has ended," and finally, to move beyond "the ongoing state of emergency on which black life remains in peril. (2008, 11, 12)

Euro-American modern societies created the paradox of dehumanized but at the same time racialized and hyper-sexualized group of about 12 million people at the locomotive disposal of white ownership. As black writers have insisted for generations, and Hartman's work

confirms yet again, this transatlantic moment of early modernity amply qualifies as the first instance of "the lager." Beyond an innocence of 'gender' as a category rooted in a narrative of universal freedom, the political point that Gender Studies needs to adjust itself to is to trace its own story as much to a story of the realization of subjectivity as to a story of abjection, and foundational commodification of black human beings.

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