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Frank B. Wilderson III

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Reciprocity and rape: Blackness and the paradox of sexual violence

Frank B. Wilderson, III*

Departments of African American Studies and Drama, University of California, Irvine, CA, U.S.A.

This essay expands Saidiya Hartman's unflinching paradigmatic analysis in *Scenes of Subjection* of the modes of historical continuity in which Black women are barred from reciprocity, recognition, and incorporation ab initio (Hartman, Saidiya V. 1997. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. New York: Oxford University Press.). By engaging the works of key Marxist feminist theorist Leopoldina Fortunati, I will demystify the ways in which these three homologues which non-Black women depend upon for the coherence of their complaint are parasitic on the flesh of Black women and men.

Keywords: Marxist feminism; consent; reciprocity; recognition; coercion

In the 1980s, I was teaching creative writing at the Loft in Minneapolis. The novelist Toni Cade Bambara came to give a weekend workshop for teachers and advanced fiction writers. She graciously agreed to have dinner with me, so that we could talk, Black-writer-to-Black-writer, instead of just writer-to-writer. At one point in the evening she began to lament the breakup of a coalition to fight rape in Philadelphia between Black women and White women. At one of the meetings, the White women had put forth a motion that they launch a campaign to educate the police about rape and how it affects their lives. The Black women were completely against this. The White women made comments about how they must try to weed out good cops from bad cops, and the Black women scoffed at the very idea. The White women argued that the Black women were too hasty in their rejection and had not put forth reasons that were good enough or offered an alternative plan. The meeting disintegrated and, as Toni Cade Bambara lamented, so did the coalition.

Bambara's coalition between White women and Black women broke down not due some ineffable, murky misunderstanding, but because the affect in the room betrayed a structural antagonism between the living and the dead, and this revelation was too much to bear. Because even though White women are *positioned* as victims of violence in relation to White men, they are *simultaneously* positioned as *perpetrators* of violence in relation to Black women *and* Black men. On this, Jared Sexton writes:

[It] seems counterintuitive ... [but] because of her historical implication in the structures of white supremacy (marked by her limited *capacity to marshal* state violence or state sanctioned

*Email: fwilders@uci.edu

paramilitary violence), the white woman can have the black man (or black woman) brutalized for transgressions real or imagined. However, and because of this relation of power, *she can also rape him*, thereby reversing the polarity of a rape fantasy pervasive in the anti-black world; regardless of his size and strength, his prowess and his pride, he is *structurally vulnerable* to her. (Contrary to many standard legal definitions, she is able to rape him without his necessarily being physically penetrated against his will. In this sense, the fear of rape and the fear of penetration must be *carefully distinguished*.) Perhaps rape is better understood not as an isolated act, but as part of a *spectrum of sexual coercion generated within a broader set of social, political, and economic relations* regulated (but not simply controlled) by the racial state and enabling permutations of enactment. (2003, 36)

White women may be on the *policed* side of violence against non-Black women, but they are on the *policing* side of anti-Black violence.¹

Saidiya Hartman's 1997 monograph *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* provides an unflinching paradigmatic analysis of the modes of historical continuity that help to clarify Bambara's broken coalition. In Bambara's coalition, the White women assumed that the universal experience of rape was somehow indicative of a universal structure of subjugation vis-à-vis (sexual) violence. Most White feminists operate out of an assumptive logic that imagines sexual violence as an effect of competing notions as to how the symbolic order is structured: by capital, according Marxist feminists, or by patriarchy according to feminists who deploy psychoanalysis.² The content of these frameworks cannot be reconciled, but the actual structure of how feminine (and masculine) dispossession is imagined is the same. They are the same in that the homologies that I have identified as *reciprocity*, *recognition*, and *incorporation* are constituent elements of both modes of analysis, and by extension are logical prerequisites for the maintenance of civil society writ large. As Hartman makes evident, and as I will elaborate upon in this essay, Black women are barred from *reciprocity*, *recognition*, and *incorporation* ab initio.³ By engaging the works of key Marxist feminist theorist Leopoldina Fortunati, I will demystify the ways in which these three homologies which non-Black women depend upon for the coherence of their complaint are parasitic on the flesh of Black women and men.

If we read Hartman's monograph as an "allegory of the present," (Hartman and Wilderson 2003, 190) more so than a historical account of past practices, we can get an overview of her meta-critique of the Marxist feminist project, especially Italian Marxist feminism which, I have argued, is the most unflinching of revolutionary feminist theory (Wilderson 2010). But not unflinching enough for its grammar of suffering to include Black women in particular and Black people in general (135).⁴

Gramscian hegemony is comprised of three constituent elements: influence (of ideas and values, such as meritocracy and universal suffrage), leadership (of what Gramsci calls a "social group," his coded moniker for class), and consent (the spontaneous assent subalterns give to the leadership of ruling-class influence) (Hartman 1997, 65).⁵ Consent can be seen as the immaterial *inheritance* of both classes, much in the way labor power is a possession elaborated *by* the body of the worker but *not* isomorphic with that body. One's consent is as "natural" an inheritance as one's labor is within the Marxist paradigm.

For Marxist feminists the truth of the paradigm is capital: an antagonism between capitalists and workers. Sexual violence happens when women withdraw consent or are in "need" of preemptive disciplinary measure to discourage them from withdrawing

consent from an imposition of a “crippling sense of inadequacy” (Silverman 1983, 143)⁶ that both the symbolic order and wage system mandates for woman (as a universal category). Rape, therefore, is a disciplinary form of violence which is contingent upon a “real,” imagined, or projected transgression. For Leopoldina Fortunati, rape is a coercive measure aimed at aligning women with the hegemony of the wage relation, Capital.

In her groundbreaking book, *The Arcane of Reproduction: Housework, Prostitution, Labor and Capital*, Leopoldina Fortunati (1995) alerts her readers to the blind spots, or better, the patriarchal disavowal of feminine labor found in Marx’s writing. But she is at pains to argue that one cannot and should not look outside of Marxism for an avenue to redress this disavowal – that the equity she seeks is *within* Marxist theory:

[W]ithin reproduction, the exchange of labor power takes place on three levels. It, too, is an exchange of non-equivalents between unequals, but it does not appear even formally as an exchange that is organized in the capitalist way. Rather, it is an exchange that *appears* to take place between male workers and women [who, in the realm of reproduction, *appear* as non-workers] but in reality takes place between capital and women with male workers acting as the intermediaries. (Fortunati 1995, 8)

If we look closely at the verbs and nouns of this passage – exchange, appears, workers, acting, intermediaries – we see that the language situates us in a world where what is at stake is *not* the structural coherence nor the epistemological integrity of elements – *reciprocity, recognition, and incorporation* – that make civil society possible. In fact, the verbs and nouns assume and *instantiate* Fortunati’s workers whose civic inheritance is vouchsafed by *reciprocity, recognition, and incorporation*.

The space and time of labor power is reduced, in this redaction, from a relation to the experience and cartography of men at work. The analysis of Marx and his Italian heirs *analyzed* the wage relation as a *relation* when the drama of value was played out in the homosocial realm; but they *imagined* the space and time of housework and prostitution as being extra-diegetic to the drama of value, which is to say, women were divorced from relational logic. We might call this a projection, or fantasy, of absence.

The dual inscription of lack that Italian feminists took pains to reveal in an effort *not* to discredit Marxism, but to restore (or point to) the place of women within Marxist relational logic. For Italian feminists, the world is unethical because the symbolic order is saturated and arranged by the logic of capital where *reciprocity, recognition, and incorporation* exist as essential homologies – from which Black women (and men) are excluded. All three homologies are subtended by what goes unacknowledged in their work and that which stands at the center of Saidiya Hartman’s analysis: their privileged relationship to structural violence. Put more to the point, in Fortunati’s account, women exist within a contingent, as opposed to a gratuitous, relationship to structural violence.

Hartman illustrates a double bind Black slave women faced when appealing to courts for redress in the event of rape:

If the definition of the crime of rape relies upon the capacity to give consent or exercise will, then how does one make legible the sexual violation of the enslaved when that which would constitute evidence of intentionality, and thus evidence of the crime – the state of consent or willingness of the assailed – opens up a Pandora’s box in which the subject formation and

object constitution of the enslaved female are no less ponderous than the crime itself or when the legal definition of the enslaved negates the very idea of “reasonable resistance”? (1997, 80)

This “Pandora’s box” is precisely what the White women in Toni Cade Bambara’s coalition were anxious about. For what kinds of political strategies of redress can be deployed by a sentient being who is always already outside of the political and, most importantly, whose exile White women depend upon for their own categorical coherence – even that of sexual violations against them?

It is not just that the injury of rape does not translate for Black women in the same way it does for White women; it is that *injury* itself is the categorical inheritance of non-Black women: injury has no representational supports within Blackness. We are, once again, confronted by two irreconcilable regimes of violence. This is the spanner in the feminist coalition. The noun “alignment” and its corresponding verb “aligning” are indicative of a Marxist feminist homology: reciprocity. The modality of consent is a manifestation of reciprocity: woman is aligned with “inadequacy” thereby consenting to the hegemony (that is, influence and leadership of patriarchal or capitalist values) and violence stands a better chance of remaining in reserve. Reciprocity is vested in the violence that acts upon a stimulus: a transgression. For Hartman, there is no reciprocal modality in slavery and its afterlives. It would be, however, imprecise to say that the paradigm usurps Black women’s consent. She argues that it would be more precise to say that consent is not constitutive of Black subjugation; ergo, the sexual violence against Black women cannot even be theorized as a violation. What happens, then, when Black women (and men) are raped if Blackness and consent cannot be conjoined?

Through Hartman, we see how the putative antagonism between capitalist and worker is demoted to a *conflict* because absencing the slave from civil society means that the slave is not an interlocutor within struggles for hegemony (Wilderson 2003). Therefore, the *real* antagonism is not, as the Marxist would have it, between the haves and have-nots, but between Blacks and Humans. The regime of violence that structures and saturates Black “life” makes it fungible *possessions* of exchange, rather than coerced and exploited agents, subjugated by unethical and asymmetrical matrices of the exchange of consent or labor power.⁷

Hartman’s work helps us to see why it is difficult to comprehend how the regime of violence that subjugates the subject of redress in Marxist feminism cannot be reconciled with the regime of violence that subjugates the female and male slave. Whereas Hartman approaches the problem of structural violence directly, Marxist feminists approach it indirectly, assuming its universal nature, which results in describing its effects and performances rather than constituent elements. Therefore, we must work through the symptoms of those points of attention which *do* animate Marxist feminism, in order to come full circle to the contradictions between their work and Hartman’s, and why the room fell apart in Philly.

Earlier, I indicated that it was important to take note of the verbs and nouns that animated Fortunati’s intervention: exchange, workers, acting, and intermediaries. These verbs and nouns are symptomatic of a logic that assumes all women to be *in* the world of signifiers: that all women have the discursive capacity to narrate and not simply be narrated by others. No such set of assumptions underwrite Hartman’s analysis of the structural location of Black women. Hartman’s work offers a more sustained and comprehensive

critique: that injury predicated on narrative exile or marginalization is not a mode of analysis with sufficient explanatory power to account for the suffering of Black women. Black women do not suffer the slings and arrows of hegemonic enclosure; or, better, hegemony cannot account for the nature of their common injury. The verbs and nouns so essential to Fortunati's lens of interpretation are symptomatic of a regime of violence that Black women have no opportunity – as ironic as that word might seem when juxtaposed with violence – to be subjugated by. Put another way, Black women have no ontological capacity to be considered as subjugated in a world that necessitates their nonbeing. The dual inscription of lack is a burden White women bear in relation to White men, and a privilege they inherit *by virtue of the fact that they are not* Black women.

Whereas Fortunati would link misogynist violence to the narrative redaction of woman. Until she *appears* in the narrative of labor-power alienation, she will be vulnerable to the kinds of scapegoating that men of both classes partake in. But should she be recognized by male workers as a worker, then the potential for solidarity across gender lines increases and the proclivity of intra-worker misogyny decreases.

Hartman, on the other hand, problematizes the assumption that Black women have been redacted as women, or that they could *appear* as subjects of either violation *or* redress. Her writing on rape is instructive here. “Not only was rape simply unimaginable because of purported black lasciviousness, but also its repression was essential to the displacement of white culpability that is characterized by the recognition of black humanity in slave law and the designation of the black subject as the originary locus of transgression and offenses” (Hartman 1997, 77). Recognition, in Hartman's work, is a homology not to be assumed but to be held to the light and interrogated. Recognition, for the Black woman, is extant only to the extent that it connotes what Orlando Patterson describes as “general dishonor.”⁸ Similarly, Hartman is suggesting that the Black woman is recognized in the slave codes – which is an oxymoron; that is to say, she is recognized only as a material and psychic possession of others. And psychic possession is a mode of subjugation beyond the scope of Fortunati's woman's dual redaction. The Black woman is a material and psychic possession of the master class. The White woman's labor power *remains* her material and psychic possession *even as she is coerced into exchanging it for half a wage and the redaction of that process*. Hartman drives home the difference:

[T]he fungibility of the commodity makes the captive body an abstract and empty vessel vulnerable to the projection of others' feelings, ideas, desires, and values; and, as property, the dispossessed body of the enslaved is the surrogate for the master's body since it guarantees his disembodied universality and acts as the sign of his power and dominion. (Hartman 1997, 21)

This is not the condition of the White/non-Black female subject (subjectivity being the essence of *recognition*) whose labor-power, be it material (the making of widgets) or psychic (the making of love), is exchanged (*reciprocity*) in an asymmetrical relation (the symbolic order of capital). Recognition and reciprocity maintain their ontological integrity in the drama of value even when she is raped, because the discursive capacity to narrate injury still exists. But recognition for the Black woman where rape is concerned is a cruel joke because, to the extent it can be narrated, general dishonor prescribes that she

is always already the “originary locus of transgression and offense.” By this, Hartman means something more than she will be scapegoated as having brought the rape upon herself.

Such a twist of logic is the “privilege” of Fortunati’s White woman worker. For the Black woman to inherit this sophistry she would have to be considered an agent of narrative. But in her case, Hartman argues, the crime itself is not legible. This is why Fortunati is concerned with how women wield discursive capacity; how stories are told about them by men like Marx and Lacan; and how they can tell new or amended stories. Hartman, on the other hand, interrogates the void, the absence (something more comprehensive than the loss) of discursive capacity; the “story” of social death.

For Fortunati, the dual inscription of lack can be resisted by the withdrawal of consent – in praxis (the refusal of housework and/or sex) and in meta-criticism (the interrogation of redactions within Marxist theory). But the withdrawal of consent is never an option for Black women, because hegemony is not constitutive of Black people’s subjection. Consent is also a modality of reciprocity and recognition and incorporation. Hartman illustrates this absence in her analysis of what happens when slave women presume themselves to be subjects of consent and appeal to the courts for redress in the case of rape. “As *Missouri v. Celia* demonstrated,” Hartman writes:

The enslaved could neither give nor refuse consent, *nor offer reasonable resistance*, yet they were criminally responsible and liable. The slave was recognized as a reasoning subject who possessed intent and rationality solely in the context of criminal liability; ironically, the slave’s will was acknowledged only as it was prohibited and punished. (1997, 82)

Here we see further evidence that homologies which form the rebar of White feminist thought – reciprocity, recognition, and incorporation – are absented from the condition of Black femininity. It is not that the slave experiences the wrath of structural violence when she withdraws consent, but that consent is the possession of another species, the Human.

If consent is the possession of another species, then the regime of violence that subjugates the worker bears no resemblance to the regime of violence that subjugates the slave. The quote above makes this point implicitly, but powerfully nonetheless. Black women cannot “offer reasonable resistance” yet they are “criminally responsible and liable.” The drama of jurisprudential value, like the drama of value in political, social, and libidinal economies cannot be played out, cannot be narrated. There is no “opportunity” for redaction; no chance to rise even to the level of an objection. Redemption is foreclosed because the “slave’s will is acknowledged only as it prohibited and punished” (Hartman 1997, 82). Hartman continues to make explicit what she has argued implicitly. “In positing the black as criminal, the state obfuscated its instrumental role in terror by projecting culpability and wrong doing onto the enslaved” (82). One needn’t the transcripts of nineteenth-century courts to see this imaginative labor at work; it has been generalized in television procedurals, the nightly news, and the veiled and not-so-veiled speeches of politicians both Democrat and Republican.⁹

The criminality imputed to blacks disavowed white violence as a necessary response to the threatening agency of blackness. I employ the terms “white culpability” and “white offense” because the *absolute submission* mandated by law was not simply that of the slave to her owner but the submission of the enslaved to all whites. (1997, 82)

Here Hartman drives the last nails in the coffin of reciprocity, recognition, and incorporation. Hartman’s (1997, 82) notion of “absolute submission mandated by law” is paradigmatically incompatible with Fortunati’s (1995, 8) notion of “an exchange of non-equivalents between unequals.” Furthermore, the reciprocal nature of “an exchange of non-equivalents between unequals,” despite its degrading lack of ethics, has, nonetheless, temporal and spatial limits. The worker must exchange her labor-power with individuals within the capitalist class, because they possess capital. She does not, however, suffer an “absolute submission,” the usurpation of her corporeal and psychic *being* to the unregulated caprice of the entire world, regardless of whether or not the members of that world have anything to offer her in exchange. As unethical as capital is – and it is *that* – without *reciprocity* the paradigm would not have coherence.

Note on contributor

Frank B. Wilderson III is a professor in the Departments of African American Studies and Drama. He is also the Director of the Culture & Theory PhD Program. Professor Wilderson spent five and a half years in South Africa where he was one of two Americans to have held elected office in the African National Congress during the apartheid era. He also worked as a psychological warfare, secret propaganda, and covert operations cadre for the ANC’s armed wing Umkhonto We Sizwe. His books include *Incognegro: A Memoir of Exile and Apartheid* and *Red, White, & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*. In addition to being an activist and scholar, Dr. Wilderson is also a creative writer. Through his creative writing he has received a National Endowment for the Arts Literature Fellowship; The Maya Angelou Award for Best Fiction Portraying the Black Experience in America; the Zora Neale Hurston/Richard Wright Legacy Award; The Eisner Prize for Creative Achievement of the Highest Order; The Judith Stronach Award for Poetry; and The American Book Award.

Notes

1. Saidiya Hartman’s diachronic explanation of the paradigm of anti-Black sexual violation concurs with Sexton’s synchronic explanation of the paradigm: “[E]nslaved men were no less vulnerable to the wanton abuses of their owners, although the extent of their sexual exploitation will probably never be known, and because of the elusiveness or instability of gender in relation to the slave as property and the erotics of terror in the racist imaginary.”
2. While I do not have enough space to explore the limitations of psychoanalytic feminism’s assumptive logics in this article, I am interested specifically in how their own Oedipal logics play out the same assumptions and narrative dynamics as those of Marxist feminism.
3. This is best evidenced by Saidiya Hartman’s insistence that “[t]he slave is the object or the ground that makes possible the existence of the bourgeois subject and, by negation or contradistinction, defines liberty, citizenship, and the enclosures of the social body.”
4. Consider, for example, how “Leopoldina Fortunati and the Marxist feminists of Italy’s Autonomia Movement, however, are perhaps the most provocative, iconoclastic and dedicated White female intellectuals and street fighters alive today.”
5. Hartman unpacks the tenuous relationship between Gramscian hegemony and the captive subject when she notes: “[T]he slave is neither civic man nor free worker but excluded from the narrative

of ‘we the people’ that effects the linkage of the modern individual and the state. The enslaved were neither envisioned nor afforded the privilege of envisioning themselves as part of the ‘imaginary sovereignty of the state’ or as ‘infused with unreal universality.’ Even the Gramscian model, with its reformulation of the relation of state and civil society in the concept of the historical bloc and its expanded definition of the political, maintains a notion of the political inseparable from the effort and the ability of a class to effect hegemony ...”

6. While this citation comes from Kaja Silverman, not Fortunati, the phrase is constitutive of both Marxist *and* psychoanalytic feminists’ modes of analysis.
7. Both Hartman and Orlando Patterson call this “life” “social death.”
8. See, for instance, Orlando Patterson’s elaboration on the denigration of the slave in relation to “honor”: “The slave could have no honor because of the origin of his status, the indignity and all-pervasiveness of his indebtedness, his absence of any independent social existence, but most of all because he was without power except through another” (Patterson 1982).
9. In a 1996 speech in New Hampshire in support of the 1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act, Hillary Clinton called Black youth offenders “superpredators” and said they should “be brought to heel.”

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