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Gendering the General Strike:

W. E. B. Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction* and
Black Feminism's "Propaganda of History"

This investigation into the gendered afterlife of slavery begins with the perhaps contentious observation that there are two main periods in the history of racial capitalism during which women's reproductive labor power and reproductive products have been engineered for profit: first, during the four hundred years of chattel slavery in the Americas; and, second, in the current conjuncture—a period stretching back to the birth of biocapitalism in the late 1970s and forward into the twenty-first century. My contention is not that women's reproductive labor, broadly construed as the reproduction of workers and the relations of production, has not been exploited at other times and in other places, but rather that over the last four decades the human reproductive body, in a robust material sense, has been increasingly exploited in a manner that has precedent in chattel slavery and its culture of enslaved reproduction. Today, women's gestational capacities and the raw materials that women reproduce—which include but are not restricted to human beings, eggs, and embryonic stem cells—are commodified resources available for direct exploitation, investment, and speculative development. Taken together, reproductive exploitation and the

The South Atlantic Quarterly 112:3, Summer 2013

DOI 10.1215/00382876-2146395 © 2013 Duke University Press

necessarily correlated commodification of reproductive labor and products thus suggest the urgency of examining the relationship of the contemporary reproductive scene to that of chattel slavery, the principal economic system predicated on women's productive *and* reproductive labor, on women's work in the fields and household *and* on their reproduction of human, biological commodities.

Although a range of thinkers has attended to the intersection of racism, sexism, and capitalism in the context of globalization,¹ here I propose that black feminism produced in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s—including theory, history, and literary fiction (especially so-called neoslave narratives)—constitutes the principal *philosophy of history* that is adequate to the task of both comprehending the gendered afterlife of slavery as it manifests as an uncanny feature of racial capitalism's global expansion and imagining resistance to it. In limning cycles of historical repetition black feminism not only makes visible the material, ideological, and cultural continuities that haunt as they actively enable the exploitation of human reproductive labor and its products. Black feminism also imagines an alternative future. Indeed, through an examination of the scale and scope, material and psychic, of women's reproductive exploitation, black feminism animates the struggles for freedom from reproductive bondage that slave women fought—and, in the process, suggests how such struggles might yet inform a response to present conditions. In this sense, black feminist productions, expressed in multiple idioms, can be thought of as what Robin Kelley has called “freedom dreams,” utopian aspirations that transform conventional understandings of human “agency” and “resistance,” and the connections of both to Marxist materialist mainstays such as “work,” “the worker,” and “class consciousness.” As Kelley explains, to conceive of freedom dreams is to “recover ideas—visions fashioned mainly by those marginalized black activists who proposed a different way out of our contradictions” (Kelley 2002: xii). However, he cautions, the point in so doing is not to “wholly embrace their ideas or strategies as the foundation for new movements” (xii). Rather, the point is to allow recovered ideas to “tap the well of our own collective imaginations” (xii)—that is to “dream” (again) of forms of “freedom” that are unbound from free enterprise.

In insisting on the singular importance of black feminist “freedom dreams” to both the analysis of and the response to racial capitalism and biocapitalism's present imbrication, it is important to note that other scholars have considered black feminism in somewhat different terms. Some have placed it in the context of the long civil rights movement, the rise of

Black Power, and the ascendance of racially dominant forms of feminism (see Springer 2005; White 1999; Giddings 1984), and cast it as a negotiation of the sexism and masculinism (and sometimes heterosexism) of black nationalism, on the one hand, and as a response to the racism and classism of second wave feminism, on the other. Others have demonstrated through historical work on reproductive rights how, beginning in the 1970s, black feminists (along with other race radical feminists) shifted from a narrow focus on access to abortion to examination of an entire range of reproductive freedoms, including the economic freedom to bear, raise, and care for children and, not least, freedom from sterilization abuse and related forms of racist, sexist, and ultimately eugenic coercion (see Nelson 2003; and Siliman et al. 2004).

While these interpretations must necessarily be considered, here I also situate black feminist production as part of a long black radical tradition invested in full-scale critique of racial capitalism, starting with slavery. Building on the work of theorists such as Roderick Ferguson and Grace Hong who have read black feminism as a response to late capitalism² and on that of literary critics such as Hazel Carby, Ann duCille, Deborah McDowell, and Valerie Smith (to name only a few) who have treated motherhood in black women's fiction, I offer a proleptic reading of black feminism as a response to the long history of racialized reproductive exploitation that has its roots in chattel slavery. In doing so, I key black feminism to its moment of production, a moment indelibly marked by the rise of human biological commodification and thus by an economic formation that recent scholars have dubbed the "tissue economy," the "bioeconomy," or most powerfully, "biocapitalism."³

Although biocapitalism has not been recognized as a formative context or interpretative lens by other scholars of black feminism, here I argue it is imperative to recognize that black feminism emerged, coalesced, and expanded as the global economy increasingly gravitated toward investment in biotechnological processes and products and grew giant pharmaceutical and biotech companies (that, in turn, created variegated markets for biological, human commodities).⁴ And, too, it is imperative to understand that the flourishing of black feminism across three decades thus necessarily reflects and refracts the emergence of racialized forms of biocapitalism, and, more particularly, an emergent economy in which women's reproductive labor power and products are (once again) being commodified with intensifying speed. When we shift from conceptualizing black feminism as a reaction to the flawed political movements by which it was surrounded and to which it

contributed, it comes into view as a profound meditation on the long history of reproduction in bondage and the gendered afterlife of slavery, and also as a profound response to questions first posed in 1935 by W. E. B. Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction*. As we shall see, in this watershed text Du Bois boldly posited slaves as black workers and the Civil War as a world historical protest against the conditions of slave work, including slave women's work as sex slaves and breeders.

Gendering the General Strike

Although it may at first seem counterintuitive to situate *Black Reconstruction* as pivotal to the proposed project of recontextualizing and recalibrating the contributions of black feminism in and for biocapitalism, in creating a dialogue between *Black Reconstruction* and black feminism, it becomes possible to identify not only shared Marxist resonance and revisionism but also *Black Reconstruction's* albeit unintentional summoning of black feminist freedom dreams. Black feminism not only persistently engages the most important concepts that animate *Black Reconstruction's* story of the implosion of slavery, the outbreak of the Civil War, and the foreclosed horizons that are its aftermath, but it also takes up and further develops the Du Boisian idea of the "general strike" of slaves against slavery as the motor of modern history, recalibrating, as it does so, the Du Boisian methodology that transforms historical narration into counter-propaganda capable of offering forward new "truths" about the past that might alter futures yet to come.

In reading *Black Reconstruction* in order to raise what I will shorthand as the question of the *gender of the general strike* and, in turn, in reading black feminism as a meditation on the general strike, I highlight how and why women's removal of reproductive labor and products from circulation was at one time, and might yet still remain, a revolutionary act that has not been but ought to be understood as part of the strike of black workers against slavery. For even though Du Bois only fleetingly casts female slaves as workers who elected to take their labor power out of circulation, in placing *Black Reconstruction* and black feminism into dialogue we can begin to recognize that slave women's protest against the exploitation of their sexual and reproductive labor—against rape and the work of breeding—was as central to the struggle against slavery in the nineteenth century as it might yet be to the struggle against contemporary biocapitalism.

If black feminists provide the standpoint that allows us to recognize breeding as work and to protest against it as a privileged model for biocapital-

ist times, the question arises: is Du Bois really necessary to the dialogue? After all, according to many, Du Bois ought not be considered a profeminist or even a profeminist thinker. As biographers and critics concur, he was a “retrograde rake” who played the role of “priapic adulterer” throughout several decades in an unhappy first marriage (Elam and Taylor 2008: 209; Lewis 2000: 267). He had a notoriously poor track record of publically crediting the women antilynching crusaders, civil rights activists, and literary muses and editors who surrounded him and collaborated with him. And when he did write on gender and sexuality (as he does in *Black Reconstruction*), his contributions are often unself-conscious, unsustainable, contradictory, or a combination thereof (see James 2008 and Carby 2008). In short, while it is not credible to read *Black Reconstruction* as feminist, here I argue that it is nonetheless invaluable in that it performs an explosive, if fleeting, opening up of the question of the gender and sexual politics of slavery and the revolt against it. This opening up is most apparent when Du Bois’s historical narrative (which is also a historiographical corrective) is parsed not for evidence of sustained treatment of gender and sexuality, but rather for the manner in which it calls forth feminist questions about the historical processes that it describes and the methodology that it models.⁵ For in this way, *Black Reconstruction* excavates the conceptual site where black feminist analyses of slave women’s participation in the war against slavery will eventually coalesce—that is, around the question of the gender of the general strike.

Given the compendious nature of the story of the transition from slavery to war and from war to the failures of Reconstruction that *Black Reconstruction* offers, it is instructive that Du Bois’s analysis of sex and reproduction is restricted to the opening chapters that lead into discussion of the general strike and, thus, to chapters focused on the conflicts that erupted, under the pressure of slavery’s internal contradictions, into the full-blown historical crisis that found expression in civil war. As Cedric Robinson notes, Du Bois’s recasting of the slave as the “black worker” caught up in an eruptive moment is a decisively Marxist move and also a major innovation on Marxism.⁶ In insisting on the slave as “worker,” Du Bois retooled the idea of the paid laborer as the model proletarian and rendered the unpaid, hyperexploited slave the centerpiece of a black revolution (see Robinson 1977; 1983: 185–240). In this way, Du Bois positioned slavery as a subsystem of world capitalism, and the Civil War and the crushing of the revolutionary impulses that animated it as two world historical events that set the stage for the development of a violent modernity grounded in human slavery and the racialized, global division of labor that we today inherit.

And yet, while Robinson beautifully captures the enormity of Du Bois's conceptual shift away from traditional Marxist conceptions of history and historical agency, he is not alert to the manner in which *Black Reconstruction* poses questions about the black worker's gender and about reproductive and sexualized aspects of slave work, especially at the outset of the book. Indeed, the black worker whom Robinson describes is presumptively without gender or, perhaps more aptly, reifies the already implicit masculinity of the Marxist category. And thus, while I build on Robinson's insights, I also find it necessary to bring into view that which Robinson neglects in his reading of *Black Reconstruction*, namely, Du Bois's groundbreaking, if ultimately unsustainable and inconsistent, account of the reproductive and sexual nature of slave women's work and of their resistance to it.

In Du Bois's opening sally in his book's first chapter, "The Black Worker," he acknowledges the centrality of the self-production of "real estate" to the system of slavery and thus the manner in which forced sex and "breeding" subtend the reproduction of the relations of production within slavery. As he explains, "Human slavery in the South pointed and led in two singularly contradictory and paradoxical directions—toward the deliberate commercial breeding and sale of human labor for profit and toward the intermingling of black and white blood. The slaveholders shrank from acknowledging either set of facts but they were clear and undeniable" (Du Bois 1992: 11). When Du Bois goes on to discuss rape in the "deliberate commercial breeding" of slaves, he emphasizes the instrumental role of sexual violence in the perpetuation of the slave economy. And, finally, when he discusses runaways, he posits them as historical agents protesting the conditions of their labor (and thus as figures that allow him to anticipate his argument about revolutionary agency as developed in his subsequent chapter, "The General Strike"), two of the three runaways he mentions are women. This singling out of female fugitives is noteworthy; the historical consensus was (and remains) that men were more able and likely to run. Women, uniquely constrained by duties to family and ties to children, necessarily considered their actions in the context of their motherhood—electing whom to leave behind or take along—and thus frequently negotiating maternity as the condition and context of action. Apparently Du Bois regarded slave women, even when operating under conditions of constricted mobility, as active agents in rebellion against the system.

Following "The Black Worker" is "The Planter." Together these chapters set up the opposition of forces that animate the rest of the book. In "The Planter," consideration of the gendered and sexualized social dynamics of

slavery intensifies. In a passage on the slave home, for instance, Du Bois examines the impact on the structure of slave families of women's labor in the fields, imagining the destabilization of family bonds and the insecurity and vulnerability of children that this situation produced (1992: 40). So, too, he considers the emotional toll on women of the "raising of slaves . . . for systematic sale on the commercialized cotton plantations" (41), where he believes reproductive exploitation to have been most extensively practiced and the forced separation of families most pervasive.

While in each of these instances Du Bois attends to the gender-specific conditions of work and the impact of women's work on slaves' intimate, familial, and psychic lives, it is when he imagines the toll taken by planter violence *on planter men* that he most powerfully conceptualizes the gendered and sexualized violence to which slave women were subjected as catalyzing the crisis that brought down the entire system of slavery. When planters sought to increase surplus through increased exploitation of workers, Du Bois observes, they routinely employed reproductive *and* productive forms of exploitation. They increased crops and profits by acquiring more land and took up the lash to force all workers to increase productivity. They also increased it by engineering enslaved women's rate of reproduction of human commodities through explicit orchestration of both sexual and reproductive violence. As Du Bois makes plain, the planters' "only effective economic movement . . . could take place against the slave. He was forced, unless willing to take lower profits, continually to beat down the cost of slave labor. . . . One method called for more land and the other for more slaves" (1992: 41). While planters "surrounded it with certain secrecy, and it was exceedingly bad taste for any . . . planter to have it indicated that he was deliberately raising slaves for sale . . . that was a fact. . . . A laboring stock was deliberately bred for legal sale" (42–43). As Du Bois concludes, these "plain facts" were nonetheless "persistently denied" by planters. Indeed, because planters, "could not face the fact of Negro women as brood mares and of black children as puppies"—because the system they had created "so affronted the moral sense of the planters themselves that they tried to hide from it" (43)—they shamefacedly responded to their own involvement and investment in slave breeding with forms of disavowal that found expression in the violence that they directed toward enslaved women and the children these women bore for, and often to, planters.

Du Bois's ensuing discussion of the "sexual chaos that arose from [the] economic motives" (44), which, he laments, characterized plantation life, exhibits both his understanding of slave women's particular exploitation and

an all-too-familiar sexist and bourgeois concern with, what he calls here and elsewhere, the lack of a “bar to illegitimacy” (44), which was slave breeding’s necessary correlate.⁷ As Du Bois’s moral ire surfaces, in other words, it undercuts the feminist potential of the analysis that precedes it. And yet, undercutting duly noted, what comes before—Du Bois’s account of sexual and reproductive exploitation as foundational to the interstate slave trade—remains of utmost importance. The fact remains: Du Bois’s main argument in his book’s central chapter on planter-slave relations is built out of an account of the sexual and reproductive exploitation that enslaved women were forced to endure at the hands of planters. The upshot: through its implicit teleological movement Du Bois’s narrative emphasizes, even as it forecloses, the centrality of sexual and reproductive exploitation to the profitability of slavery. It underscores, even as it undercuts, the fact that the antagonism between planters and enslaved women was part and parcel of the antagonism between black workers and planters that led to the eruption of the internal contradictions of slavery and, in turn, to the Civil War. And although Du Bois never expresses it thus, his narrative suggests that when the slave systems’ internal contradictions reached their breaking point, the crisis precipitated ought to be understood, at least in part, as a result of enslaved women’s revolt against planters’ gendered and sexualized violence against them—as a strike against the world that the planters created with and through their female slaves, through exploitation of their sexuality and reproductive labor power and commodification of the children born into slavery.

In the recursive historical rhythm of Du Bois’s book as a whole (he moves from antagonism, to revolt, to crisis, to re-entrenchment, and then again to antagonism), the gendered and sexualized reproductive contradictions that are constitutive to the narrative at the outset go missing from the story of war and Reconstruction that eventually unfolds. The unfortunate result is that the chapter, “The General Strike” (which immediately follows “The Planter”), is evacuated of the account of reproductive and sexual work and the account of gendered and sexualized conflict that was initially offered. Here, slaves emerge as black workers, but as workers they are no longer gender differentiated. Likewise, the slaves who are variously described throughout this chapter as “swelling,” “flooding,” and “swarming” Union troops (1992: 64–65), as withdrawing their labor from plantations, as sabotaging the production of surplus through labor stoppages, and as staunching the supply of food to plantations and Union troops are virtually all characterized as male.⁸ Consequently, when Du Bois arrives at the apex of his argument and suggests that the black worker (now fully transformed into an insurgent

member of the black proletariat) was not “merely . . . [expressing] the desire to stop work,” but rather “[the Civil War] was a strike on a wide basis against the conditions of work” (1992: 67), these conditions are unself-consciously stripped of the gender-differentiated labor processes and of the reproductive and sexualized exploitation that Du Bois had, up until this point, observed throughout his narrative.

For readers immersed in the story of the black worker and the planter and the gendered and sexualized antagonism between the two, Du Bois’s discussion of the general strike signals an abrupt narrative break. It also marks the presence of a profound conceptual aporia. Suddenly slave work emerges solely as the production of agricultural commodities. But, what about the production of those other, more fleshy raw materials that Du Bois had posited as essential to the existence and reproduction of the slave economy? What of the black female workers whom he had, until this crucial point in his narrative, recognized as the workers responsible for the reproduction of human commodities for sale on the interstate market? In short, how do we account for the disappearance of reproductive workers, reproductive work, and reproductive work’s products, human chattel? In performing the foreclosure of these questions, Du Bois’s account of the general strike inaugurates an exquisite experience of simultaneous narrative opening and deferral: the question of slave women’s reproductive and sexual labor infuses the story that precedes that on the strike—that is, the chapters that are devoted to the crisis that produces the general strike. And yet, when Du Bois treats the strike itself, the female worker as a singular figure and the sexual and reproductive labor that is part of the general work performed by the collectivity of black workers are no longer anywhere in evidence. Where a gender-differentiated black mass once momentarily stood, a masculinized labor force takes its place; where sexual and reproductive labor was acknowledged, it has been subsumed within the category of productive work.

The textual aporia that remains is the result of unexamined textual juxtapositions and interrupted narrative momentum, and it begs a series of essential but too often unasked questions about the gendered historiography of slavery and about historical epistemology more generally: How might our understanding of the history of slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction be transformed if we considered enslaved women as participants in a general strike against slavery? How might we imagine slave women’s protest against the conditions of their reproductive and sexual work and the forms that such protest might have taken? What alternative genres and narrative idioms lend themselves to exploration of slave women’s membership in the mass of black

workers who took labor out of circulation in the process of waging war? What alternative narrative approaches would enable the imagination of slave women's withdrawal of sexual and reproductive labor, and thus of their contributions to what Du Bois called "a strike on a wide basis against the conditions of work" (1992: 67)? And, finally, how should concepts such as "work," "worker," and "class consciousness" be reconceived so that they become responsive to the question of the gender of the general strike?

Clearly, the general strike is an invaluable heuristic tool that can be used to study enslaved reproduction and also the impact of slave women's protest against sexual and reproductive exploitation. However, in the present moment, a historical corrective is not the only, or even principal, stake. Rather, the question of the gender of the general strike must be asked because it connects the past to the present and presses us to *imagine* historical continuities, links between women's protest against the conditions of work in the past and struggles against biocapitalism in the present. Put differently, the challenge posed by the question of the general strike is not solely about creation of a gendered supplement to dominant historiography. In the spirit of *Black Reconstruction*, the challenge also lies in the reconceptualization of the stakes of historical inquiry in the present and for the future. While new "facts" are welcome, incorporation of new, unverifiable truths recalibrates received understandings of the relationship between past and present and, too, of the relationship of the past to a future that lies in the balance.⁹ It may be impossible to know with empirical certainty what a general strike inclusive of women's protest against reproductive and sexual exploitation looked like in 1861, and yet we might grasp the political urgency of being able to imagine such a strike and, too, of imagining what a strike against reproductive exploitation might yet look like in a future moment—in a yet-to-arrive crisis characterized by the revolt of reproductive bodies against "the conditions of work" and by the removal of reproductive labor and products from circulation.¹⁰

"The Propaganda of History" and the Rise of Black Feminism

"The propaganda of history" is the only idea explored in *Black Reconstruction* that is as often debated as that of "the general strike." In the chapter so named, often reproduced as a stand-alone treatise on historiography, Du Bois offers a searing two-pronged critique of how "the facts of American history have in the last half century been falsified because the nation was ashamed" (1992: 711) and of how such falsified "facts" have contributed to

the perpetuation of not only a national but also the global racial formation. In producing this critique, Du Bois crystalizes his book's twinned agendas: (1) refutation of the long history of the "scandalous white historiography" of the Civil War and its aftermath, and (2) demonstration, through analysis of the promise and failures of Reconstruction, of historiography's role in the legitimation of Jim Crow, a global culture of imperial and colonial domination, and a corresponding racial division of labor predicated on exploitation of those whom Du Bois had, for several decades, taken to describing as "the darker peoples of the world."¹¹

In not only casting white historiography as propaganda but also suggesting that all historians are implicated in a contest over historical "truth" in and for the present, Du Bois situated historical narratives, his own included, as necessarily presentist.¹² As he suggests, history ought not be geared solely toward correction of the record; it should also ring changes on the meaning of "propaganda" through the production of "truths" that might ideally catalyze a more liberated future. To this end, *Black Reconstruction* exemplifies the methodology it proposes, demonstrating what its title announces: it is a *black (re)construction* of white supremacist propaganda, a form of counterpropaganda that produces the "truth" of the counternarrative that it elaborates, even as it mobilizes this narrative for the present moment of writing. As already discussed, one of the central "truths" *Black Reconstruction* proffers is that of the slave as "the black worker" and of slaves, en masse, as agents of human emancipation. But what of the other "truths" that press for a hearing when the question of the gender of the general strike is raised? It is here that black feminism enters, constituting a response to the gendered aporia *Black Reconstruction* opens up—a unique, future-oriented response that grasps this aporia not only as an absence but also as an imaginative possibility. For when read in and through its exchange with *Black Reconstruction*, black feminism emerges as nothing less than a new "propaganda of history"—a counternarrative insistent on accounting for enslaved women and, too, for the continued relevance of the story of enslaved women's protest against their reproductive and sexual exploitation in the moment of black feminist elaboration.

Though numerous texts might be drawn on in order to limn the cultural, political, and activist horizon that I have throughout short-handed "black feminism," I turn first to those written in the 1970s that explicitly treat slave women's protest against sexual and reproductive exploitation and imagine the importance of these protests for the present. These early, historiographical interventions set the stage for the outpouring of black feminist

fiction that, I argue, constitutes the apogee of black feminist response to the question of the gender of the general strike and to the rise of biocapitalism. “Reflections on the Black Woman’s Role in the Community of Slaves” is, to my knowledge, the first article to expressly argue for the centrality of women’s day-to-day resistance to slavery. In it, Angela Davis posits domestic life in the slave quarters as the primary site of sustained protest against slavery. Originally written while Davis was in prison, as part of an unfinished exchange with fellow Black Panther George Jackson, Davis’s (1971) article takes aim at the neglected history of slave women and at the figure of the so-called black matriarch, which, at the time of her writing, formed the basis for public perception and policy on the black family, especially in the wake of Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s infamous report.

Building on *Black Reconstruction*’s revisionist project, Davis corrects the historical record somewhat unconventionally. Making clear to readers that her concern is excavation of the past in the interest of the illumination of the present, she observes: “The matriarchal black woman has repeatedly been invoked as one of the fatal by-products of slavery. . . . An accurate portrait of the African woman in bondage must debunk the myth of the matriarchate. Such a portrait must simultaneously attempt to illuminate the historical matrix of her oppression and must evoke her varied, often heroic response to the slaveholder’s domination” (1971: 4). In refuting the myth “at its presumed historical inception” (3), Davis first moves to defamiliarize the dominant historical account of slave rebellion and resistance. On the one hand, she unsettles the notion (which, she observes, is too often held by male scholars, black and white alike) that black women “actively assented” (4) to slavery and related to “the slave holding class as collaborators.”¹³ On the other hand, she submits the unprecedented thesis that it was, “by virtue of the brutal force of circumstances . . . [that] the black woman,” as opposed to the black man, “was assigned the mission of promoting the consciousness and practice of [slave] resistance” (5).

Davis offers two interrelated arguments for the black woman’s exceptional centrality to slave resistance. Domestic space was the site of resistance because it was at the greatest distance from slaveholders’ reach: “of necessity . . . [the slave] community would revolve around the realm which was furthestmost removed from the immediate arena of domination. It could only be located in and around the living quarters, the area where the basic needs of physical life were met” (6). In ministering to the needs of men and children, she continues, slave women performed “the *only* labor of the slave community which could not be directly and immediately claimed by the

oppressor,” and it was thus “only in domestic life . . . away from the eyes and whip of the overseer . . . [that] slaves could . . . assert . . . freedom” (6). Whereas previous accounts had focused on documented rebellions and revolts, Davis (following in the footsteps of social historians such as Herbert Gutman) highlights the quotidian: “If,” she hypothesizes, “domestic labor was the only meaningful labor for the slave community as a whole” (7), then slave women’s labor not only “increased the total incidence of anti-slavery assaults,” but should be viewed as the “barometer indicating the overall potential for [slave] resistance” (15). Contra Du Bois, who lamented slave women’s inability to do the care work involved in social and cultural reproduction, Davis regards “domestic work” as a source of not only individual but also community sustenance and resistance.

Although Davis’s arguments have been challenged (some have queried her ideas about “domestic space” and her emphasis on women’s role within it; others have taken issue with a perhaps misplaced attribution of “agency”), in creating a dialogue between *Black Reconstruction* and black feminism that integrates both into the long history of black radical critique of racial capitalism, it is ultimately unnecessary to adjudicate whether Davis got it “right” or “wrong.” Rather, in keeping with the spirit of Davis’s project, we should historicize it, effectively reading Davis’s contribution as a context-specific response to the question of the gender of the general strike—as a response that *imagines* the importance of this strike for Davis’s present and the future.¹⁴ Davis pushes readers toward recognition of her *imaginative* project by acknowledging her scholarly shortcomings, engaging potential objections to her argument, and delineating the political gains that are to be had by nonetheless forging ahead. As she notes, “no extensive and systematic study of the role of black women in resisting slavery has come to my attention,” and yet there is great “urgency to undertake a thorough study of the black woman as anti-slavery rebel” (1971: 9). In prison, without access to archives and sources, Davis knows she can offer neither a complete nor an in-depth study; instead, she provides “a portrait of the *potential and possibilities* inherent in the situation to which slave women were anchored” (14, emphasis added). In prying a story of the gender of the general strike from available sources, in other words, in working with and against the few historiographical texts at her disposal, Davis seeks not to prove but rather to *imagine* slave women’s resistance as central to the downfall of slavery and to forecast how knowledge of this resistance might yet impact black women’s liberation and the black liberation movement’s engagement with black women’s history and future more generally.

Given Davis's strategy, it is perhaps unsurprising when she rapidly exhausts discussion of women's participation in slave revolts as documented in existing scholarship (her discussion of organized revolts is almost entirely gleaned from an against the grain reading of Herbert Aptheker's 1943 classic, *American Negro Slave Revolts*) and concedes that in order to show that black women's insurgent response to "counter-insurgency [is] not as extravagant as it might seem" (Davis 1971: 8), it is necessary to build the argument from a new starting place.¹⁵ Indeed, in order to recognize "the black woman as anti-slavery rebel" (Davis 1971: 9), she not only mines available historiographical accounts, but also, and more importantly, imagines the female "insurgency" that evoked the principal form of "counterinsurgency" to which slave women were routinely subjected by planters: rape.

Davis's argument that rape is *counterinsurgency* and that women's resistance to rape is thus a major form of *insurgency* transforms her essay into counterpropaganda and paves the way for future black feminist responses to the question of the gender of the general strike. Turning attention away from "open battles," from organized acts of rebellion, Davis focuses instead on individual, intimate acts of resistance that might not be evident in available archives (and the scholarship based on them). Such quotidian acts, she *imagines*, constituted the resistant reality of the majority of slave women. As she explains, "The oppression of slave women had to assume dimensions of open counter-insurgency" (1971: 12). In rape and forced reproduction, the slave woman also must have "felt the edge of this counter-insurgency [the master's] as a fact of her daily existence" (12). Routine acts of sexual aggression ought to be recognized as "terrorist methods designed to dissuade other black women from following the examples of their [insurgent] sisters" (12). Making recourse to the conditional tense—and, thus, calling attention to the politically imperative (as opposed to factually grounded) nature of her conclusions—Davis specifies, "the act of copulation, reduced by the white man to an animal-like act *would* be symbolic of the effort to conquer the resistance the black woman *could* unloose. In confronting the black woman as adversary in a sexual contest, the master *would* be subjecting her to the most elemental form of terrorism distinctively suited for the female" (13, emphasis added). Having introduced the idea of women's insurgency as a self-evident historical "truth" (as opposed to "fact")—that is, having introduced the idea of insurgency on the basis of the then-controversial idea that planters routinely raped slaves—Davis brilliantly concludes that slave women routinely *provoked* and *countered* counterinsurgency.

The power of Davis's argument resides in its ability to fold the reader's knowledge of the "truth" in on itself and then to actively convert this knowledge into felt (as opposed to documented) evidence of women's resistance to slavery. From one perspective, Davis argues, women's and men's productive labor was exploited; from another perspective (one that prefigures subsequent work on the paradoxical un-gendering of slave women [see, among others, Spillers 1987]), Davis argues that women's resistance to exploitation must be understood as a response to sexual and reproductive exploitation. By "reestablish[ing] her femaleness by reducing her to the level of her *biological* being," she writes, the master directly "attack[ed] . . . the black female as a potential insurgent" whose resistance to domination ought thus to be simultaneously understood as specifically female and as integral to the larger strike against slavery (Davis 1971: 13). As Davis concludes: "Countless black women did not passively submit to these abuses, as the slaves in general refused to passively accept their bondage. The struggles of the slave woman . . . were a continuation of the resistance interlaced in the slaves' daily existence" (14).

Whereas Du Bois had positioned *Black Reconstruction* as a critique of white supremacist historiography, as counterpropaganda possessing the power to restore agency to black workers and to their descendants, Davis positions her work as a critique of the prevailing masculinist historiography of slavery possessing the power to restore agency to female slaves and their descendants. Davis's slave woman is not the emasculating matriarch of Moynihan's report; rather, she is a sexually and reproductively oppressed worker whose gendering by the master class is meted out as sexualized violence against her (re)productive body. Neither victim nor aggressor in any simple sense, she is an active member of a striking collectivity whose contribution to the larger struggle against slavery is expressed through individual, often intimate protests that specifically target the sexualized and reproductive conditions of production—the conditions responsible for the maintenance of the entire system of slavery, especially after the end of the transatlantic trade in 1807. After dispensing with the Moynihan report ("a dastardly ideological weapon designed to impair our capacity for resistance by foisting upon us the ideal of male supremacy" [14]), Davis offers a final appeal to readers (especially "us" black women) to whom she has demonstrated, as had Du Bois before her, that the history of slavery matters in the present and for the future.

While historians rarely cite Davis's article, presumably regarding it as too undisciplined and politicized, most feminist historians of slavery have

nonetheless entered into the groundbreaking conversation that Davis initiated. In 1979, for instance, Darlene Clark Hine questioned the dominant focus of slavery studies, implicitly following Davis in calling for study of the sexual economy of slavery.¹⁶ In “Female Slave Resistance: The Economics of Sex,” Hine focuses on “black female resistance to slavery” by not only positing enslaved women as insurgent (as had Davis), but also by *imagining* the specific “means through which female slaves expressed their political and economic opposition to the slave system” (1979: 123). Delineating three “intimately related forms of resistance”—sexual abstinence, abortion, and infanticide—Hine argues that women’s resistance to sexual and reproductive exploitation contributed to the overthrow of the slave system. When “they resisted sexual exploitation, . . . [when they] reject[ed] their vital economic function as breeders,” Hine observes, female slaves rejected their “role in the economic advancement of the slave system,” undermining the “master’s effort to profit from [female slaves] . . . by exploiting [them] sexually.” Such resistance to sexual and reproductive exploitation, she concludes, though private and individualized, nonetheless had “major political and economic implications” (126).

Although it is beyond the scope of this article to treat the numerous contributions made by black feminist historians in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, suffice it to say that Davis’s and Hine’s essays are representative of a multivoiced black feminist response to the question of the gender of the general strike that was expressed by Deborah Gray White, Nell Irvin Painter, Paula Giddings, Kathleen Thompson, and a subsequent generation of scholars that includes Mia Bay, Stephanie Camp, Sharla Fett, Thavolia Glymph, and Jennifer Morgan, among many others. What brings this black feminist work into dialogue with *Black Reconstruction* is the manner in which it expands on one of Du Bois’s most profound ideas. As Cedric Robinson has eloquently expressed it, in *Black Reconstruction* Du Bois shows us that slaves needed to be neither consciously nor collectively organized in the traditional Marxist sense in order to make history.¹⁷ As black feminists writing about women in slavery concur, slave women’s strikes against sexual and reproductive bondage, though not necessarily consciously or collectively organized, nonetheless possessed profound revolutionary force. In resisting sexual assault, committing infanticide, or aborting unwanted pregnancies, women refused their work as sex slaves and as breeders—and thus refused to participate in the reproduction of the slave system and in the reproduction of the human commodities that sustained it. Indeed, from the vantage point opened up by black feminist historians, we comprehend that the “work” per-

formed by “the black worker” of whom Du Bois wrote necessarily involved sexual and reproductive labor as well as productive (agricultural and domestic) labor. And while there may be no way to empirically verify the extent to which slave women were conscious that their individual, intimate acts of resistance contributed to the overthrow of slavery, the existence and persistence of planter counterinsurgency must itself be recognized as an excellent index of the impact that slave women’s sexual and reproductive insurgency must have continuously exerted.¹⁸

The Reproduction of “Freedom”

Both alongside of and then in the wake of the production of the nonfiction discussed thus far, black women writers pushed at the limits of the conventions of historical narrative, not only working to write counterhistory, but also to differently—and more popularly—explore the relevance of historical imagination for black feminist production. Creating what some subsequently came to call “neoslave narratives,” these writers imagined the experience of bondage from the vantage point of slave women, utilizing the creative latitude offered by fiction to enter into the battle over historical “truth” while at the same time sidestepping some of the thorny questions that historians have raised about archive and interpretation. While male authors also participated (and in some accounts of the genre, invented it), black women’s contributions comprise the genre’s dominant and most distinct formation.¹⁹ On the one hand, black women writers contested the masculinism of the stories told about slavery by centralizing enslaved women and their children. On the other hand, as they produced fiction that exposed the sexism of the historiography of both slavery and an emerging black male literary canon, they materialized the power of works of creative imagination to inaugurate a new propaganda of history. Improvising on earlier feminist historiographical work, black women writers offered alternative methodological and epistemological responses to the question of the gender of the general strike, entering into dialogue with *Black Reconstruction* in yet another black feminist idiom.

Short stories and especially novels focused on women in slavery—including those by Octavia Butler, Lorene Cary, Michelle Cliff, J. California Cooper, Nalo Hopkinson, Gayl Jones, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Sherley Anne Williams, to name some of the most well known—thematize, *without exception*, the experience of motherhood in bondage and hone in on reproductive and sexual exploitation and the protest against it. Daring to

imagine (again, *without exception*) what existing historical archives cannot fully reveal, these writers describe how individual women took sexual and reproductive labor and products out of circulation, and they explore how women and children felt about and understood their actions. As importantly, insofar as these writers tell stories of women who recode, as they appropriate, sexual and reproductive labor and its products, bestowing on them new meaning, they collectively guide readers toward comprehension of the relationship between the present moment of writing and the slave past—toward comprehension of the relationship between the forms of exploitation that characterize the biocapitalist world out of which black women writers emerged, in which they wrote, and to which they respond.

Although space does not allow for close readings of the fictional texts treated in the book project from which this article is drawn, I conclude by offering a provisional sketch of the literary terrain that highlights how it moves backward to slavery and forward into the present moment of production, effectively bridging the two most significant periods in biocapitalist expansion.²⁰ In the 1970s Gayle Jones and Octavia Butler presented fictional portraits of black women who struggle to interrupt the intergenerational cycles of slavery's reproduction by questioning their own participation in them and, in so doing, altering the hold of the past on the supposedly emancipated present. In Jones's *Corregidora*, a novel published in the wake of the Supreme Court's passage of *Roe v. Wade* and the emergence of a women of color reproductive rights movement, the protagonist, Ursa, wrests control of her reproductive life from the men who attempt to possess her sexuality and reproduction and, in the process, overdetermine her relationship to her family's slave past. Specifically, Ursa's repossession of her body and bodily processes involves recoding violently imposed infertility—her transformation of "barrenness" into an embodied revision of three generations of rape, incest, and forced fecundity, as experienced by her female forebears. As Jones details, Ursa's refusal to "make generations" and her repetition, with a difference, of a passed-on story of sexual and reproductive exploitation strengthens as it simultaneously reworks Ursa's connection to her grandmother and great-grandmother, each of whom, unlike Ursa, had reproduced a girl-child impregnated by its father/master. Straddling the past of slavery and her present through song, Ursa emerges as a phonic time traveler whose art form replaces childbirth with vocalization. In short, *Corregidora* responds to the question of the gender of the general strike in the form of a manifesto for freedom from reproductive and sexual exploitation that is articulated by Jones and her protagonist alike in the idiom of the blues.

In Butler's watershed novel, *Kindred*, the narrative is driven by yet another time-traveling protagonist, Dana, who moves between 1970s California and a plantation in the Deep South where her ancestors reside. Dana appears to be pulled across time by a compulsion to save her white, slave-owning ancestor and, at once, to ensure that he fathers her enslaved female foremother. In a story focused on the complexity of obtaining "freedom" in either 1976 (the ironically symbolic year in which the novel opens) or during the midnineteenth century (when the novel is set), it is imperative to underscore that securing existence (literally her birth) requires Dana to manipulate the reproductive life of an enslaved woman, her great-great grandmother, Alice. In this sense, Dana's present "freedom" is predicated on the denial of that same "freedom" to an enslaved woman—and more particularly still on her reproductive (ab)use of this woman.

While available scholarship on *Kindred* has focused almost exclusively on Dana, it ought to grant her progenitor, Alice, as much if not more attention. When we read the novel as a response to the question of the gender of the general strike, it is on Alice's repeated, desperate protests against enslaved sex and reproduction that we ought to focus if we hope to understand the space of resistance to slavery that exists within the claustrophobic confines of the novel. As Butler details, Alice battles to choose her lover (and then, too, against his violent murder by her master); she protests her sexual enslavement by her master; she fights against loss of control over her children; and finally, she protests against their removal by taking her body out of sexual and reproductive use, once and for all, by committing suicide. While it would be a mistake to sanguinely redeem this suicide as an unmitigated "success," Alice's act should be recognized as a resistant one that exists along a continuum comprised of multiple forms of withdrawal of sexual and reproductive labor from circulation. Indeed, all of Alice's protests are insurgent acts against the reproductive and sexual conditions of work on the plantation on which she resides that ought to be understood as gendered contributions to the larger general strike against slavery.²¹

Significantly, in the year prior to *Kindred's* publication the successful and healthy birth of the first so-called test-tube baby, Louise Brown, by in vitro fertilization (IVF) was widely reported in the international press. As Butler completed her novel the ethics of biotechnological engineering of human reproduction burst into public consciousness through intensive media coverage of the event—"Baby of the Century"—and more focused academic scrutiny. As was clear from the outset, the advent of IVF revolutionized reproductive medicine and opened up new markets. The fertilization of

eggs outside the body allowed women to be impregnated with genetic materials to which they were unrelated and for women to sell their reproductive labor—to work as human incubators. In the wake of Louise Brown's birth, moreover, the market in surrogate labor took off, as did the market in an array of assisted reproductive technologies that would soon enable gestational surrogates (today the primary type of surrogate laborers) to gestate unrelated genetic materials and to (re)produce children *belonging* to other, unrelated people. As the celebrated doctors of reproductive medicine, Robert Edwards and Patrick Steptoe, raced to develop the technique that would result in Louise Brown's birth, in other words, Butler, together with other black feminists, catalyzed the outpouring of black feminist fiction about sex and reproduction in bondage that would continue unabated for nearly three decades—the same three decades that would witness the rise of the newly (re)formed biocapitalist economy.

By the 1980s, when black women's production of neoslave narratives reached its apex, public and scholarly outcry over various forms of reproductive exploitation and the emergence of ever-expanding forms of commodification of the human reproductive process, body, and bodily products was loud and insistent. In 1986, when US surrogate mother Mary Beth Whitehead publically breached her contract and refused to turn her baby over to the couple that had purchased her reproductive labor, Whitehead became a household name and the so-called Baby M case an object of academic study. As feminist activists and scholars sought to understand the emergence of a surrogate industry powered by new reproductive technologies, they launched a series of sustained arguments against baby selling, against the commodification of human reproduction and children, and against the emergence of a racialized class of hyperexploited, impoverished breeders whom, they presciently forecast, would increasingly be used to reproduce designer children for those able to pay the price.²²

For some, surrogacy revealed reproductive labor as profoundly similar to other forms of productive labor for sale on the market.²³ For others, it was connected to both wage slavery and the long history of chattel slavery. As Davis observed in the wake of the Baby M case, the historical parallels between motherhood in late capitalism and slavery run in two temporal directions: "The reproductive role imposed upon African slave women bore no relationship to the subjective project of motherhood. . . . Slave women were *birth mothers* or *genetic mothers*—to employ terms rendered possible by the new reproductive technologies—but they possessed no legal rights as mothers, of any kind. Considering the commodification of their children—

indeed, of their own persons—their status was similar to that of the contemporary surrogate mother” (1998: 212). According to Davis, surrogacy and the conceptual terminology that it has produced alter our understanding of the slave past and vice versa: “The term surrogate mother might be invoked as a retroactive description of . . . [slave women’s] status because the economic appropriation of their reproductive capacity reflected the inability of the slave economy to produce and reproduce its own laborers” (212). Conversely, Davis concludes, “While the new technological developments have rendered the fragmentation of maternity more obvious [than it was in the past], the economic system of slavery fundamentally relied upon alienated and fragmented maternities, as women were forced to bear children, whom masters claimed as potentially profitable machines” (213).

Davis’s final point is salutary and can be expanded further still: surrogacy and the rise of the reproductive economy that it signaled are directly connected to slavery not because contemporary surrogacy is solely performed by black women who are the descendants of slaves, or even because it is primarily performed by women or women of color in the global South (although this is increasingly the case).²⁴ Rather, surrogacy must be linked to slavery and thus recognized as a racialized capitalist formation because it is in and through slavery that surrogacy becomes intelligible. Put differently, surrogacy and slavery must be linked because surrogacy has an irrepressibly racialized historical precedent. Indeed, surrogacy ought to be understood as a racialized biocapitalist formation enabled and invigorated by biocapitalism’s long history, including chattel slavery. And, reciprocally, chattel slavery ought to be understood as a biocapitalist formation from the retrospective vantage point of the emergence of a global market in surrogate labor and reproductive products.

Alongside the growth of the surrogate and reproductive technology industries throughout the 1980s and 1990s, so many black feminist fictions about reproduction in bondage were published that it is possible only to engage the most obvious one here. Crucially, though it is too often forgotten in criticism on Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, the fictionalized story of Margaret Garner’s escape with her children from slavery and her subsequent murder of her daughter in an effort to “free” her from recapture by the master and his sons is lifted out of the context of slavery and moved by Morrison into the blurred historical horizon of the novel, which, tellingly, encompasses the Civil War and Reconstruction, as well as the present moment of Morrison’s writing. As Morrison explains in her 2004 forward, her invention of her protagonist, Sethe, as a reincarnation of Garner allowed her to plumb the story

for what “was historically true in essence, but not strictly factual in order to relate her history to contemporary issues about freedom, responsibility and women’s ‘place’” (Morrison 2004: xvii). In other words, Garner’s story allowed Morrison to meditate on women’s “freedom” in the 1980s and, at least implicitly, on the question of reproductive freedom. At that time reproductive freedom was being hotly debated by black feminists who were mobilized against sterilization abuse and the war on poor black mothers (especially “crack moms”) and, too, were involved in the larger feminist outcry against surrogacy. In short, although *Beloved* has principally been read as an account of one woman’s struggle to free her children from slavery, it should also be read as an exploration of women’s participation in the general strike against sexual and reproductive bondage and as a meditation on women’s withdrawal of sexual and reproductive labor and products from circulation. The struggle for motherhood free from commodification was a central freedom dream of slave women in the historical past in which *Beloved* is set and a central political preoccupation in the present from which Morrison wrote about this past. Underscoring this linkage, Davis invokes *Beloved* as a relevant historical precedent in her discussion of surrogacy (1998: 212), because *Beloved* tells a story of historical continuity, a story that has remained relevant across the long history of both racial capitalism and biocapitalism. Although separated by race and time, we can infer, Garner and Whitehead are connected by imbricated (albeit specific) experiences of the enslaving logic of reproductive commodification.

In this article, I have suggested that it is imperative to situate black feminism in its biocapitalist context of production, publication, and reception and to both recontextualize and recalibrate black feminist productions as together constituting a philosophy of history that is profoundly responsive to the slave past, our recent past, our present, and the future. In so doing I have placed black feminism within a long black radical tradition, and, in particular, as a response to the Du Boisian question of the gender of the general strike. I have argued that black feminism animates the freedom dreams that might yet allow us to track the gendered afterlife of slavery and to imagine how it might yet be resisted.

I conclude by pointing out that the sheer outpouring of black feminist productions that meditate on what it has meant and what it yet might mean for women to reproduce substantive freedom (as opposed to what Stephanie Smallwood [2004] has called “commodified freedom”) suggests a collective sense of urgency that those committed to substantive freedom ought to

embrace. Although each individual black feminist text differently explores the pitfalls and possibilities that inhere in the idea of “freedom,” hinged and unhinged from racialized, sexualized, and commodified reproduction, each also contributes to a larger cultural and political formation, the existence of which clears new epistemological ground and points the way to new idioms of political expression. In short, in reading black feminism as a propaganda of history, I am also suggesting that we might yet grasp it as an imaginative resource that has the power to reveal the significance of stories of reproduction in bondage set in the slave past, in our present, and for a future in which women might yet reproduce “freedom” rather than commodities.

Notes

- 1 For instance, world systems theorists have explored the global expansion of capitalism and attended to the racial divisions of labor in the global North and South. They have situated slavery and colonialism as twinned foundations of the modern world system and demonstrated the instrumentalization of race and racism in the division (and rationalization of the division) of the world’s labor force. In turn, feminists have examined the gendered division of labor in transnationalism and have attended to the hyperexploitation of women and the increasing feminization of the world’s labor force.
- 2 Though neither Hong (2006) nor Ferguson (2004) keys their analysis of women of color feminism to biocapitalism’s rise, my thinking builds on the materialist impulses that animate theirs.
- 3 On biocapitalism see Sunder Rajan 2006; Cooper 2008; and Waldby and Mitchell 2006. Notably, this work focuses neither on the centrality of reproductive exploitation to biocapitalist expansion nor on the relationship between biocapitalism and slavery, save for one exception: see Waldby and Cooper 2008.
- 4 Moving from microscopic to multicellular products, there today exist markets in human blood, tissues, organs, gametes, embryos, and high-tech babies. The development of reproductive technologies in the late 1970s and 1980s that allow for the extraction of human eggs and their fertilization outside the female body led to the rapid growth in markets for human eggs and surrogate labor power. In the book project from which this article is drawn, I explore the dependence of biocapitalist expansion on the exploitation of the reproductive body as a source of raw materials and labor power.
- 5 *Black Reconstruction* exhibits a textual form I have elsewhere described as Du Bois’s “politics of juxtaposition.” In placing unremarked discussions of gender and sexual oppression and violence, in Du Bois’s own words, “right next to” discussion of racist and imperialist violence, Du Bois demonstrates the need for (but does not offer) an intersectional analysis of racism, sexism, and capitalism. In deferring such analysis, he defers participation in a political formation that he nonetheless marks as imperative. See Gillman and Weinbaum 2008b; and Weinbaum 2008.
- 6 Robinson (1983: 199–203) regards this as one of black Marxism’s foundational moments.

- 7 Du Bois writes, “Child-bearing was a profitable occupation that received every possible encouragement, and there was not only no bar to illegitimacy, but an actual premium put upon it. Indeed, the word was impossible of meaning under the slave system” (1992: 44).
- 8 When Du Bois does mention women in the war, he further undercuts their role by noting that they “*accompanied*” husbands. I thank Thavolia Glymph for clarifying that from the beginning of the conflict black women fled to Union lines without men and often with children. Additionally, the enlistment of black men as soldiers in the Union Army left women especially vulnerable, leading to “swelling” numbers of black women among those “swarming.” The violence these women faced led to a growing number of orphaned children.
- 9 On the distinction between “fact” and “truth” see Morrison 1990. Robinson (1983: 44) also discusses historical “truth” in related ways
- 10 On creation of “counter-history” that “can not be verified” and history that “tells an impossible story,” see Hartman 2008: 12.
- 11 This is the black internationalist language used throughout both *Darkwater* and *Dark Princess*—a language that is constitutively gendered and sexualized. See Weinbaum 2004: 187–226.
- 12 In his introduction to *Black Reconstruction*, David Levering Lewis designates it “propaganda for the people” (1992: xii), observing that it instantiates slaves and former slaves as agents of their own destiny. In the process, he argues, Du Bois transforms our understanding of the future that might evolve out of the past. Also see Lemert 2000.
- 13 Davis singles out E. Franklin Frazier for his support of these ideas in *The Negro Family in the United States* (1939); this appears to be one of the texts Davis had on hand in prison. Notably, Moynihan built his infamous argument out of his reading of Frazier’s.
- 14 Quotations from Du Bois in Davis’s article are from both *Darkwater* and *Black Reconstruction*.
- 15 Within Aptheker’s book Davis locates an account of black women’s role in fugitive and maroon communities, as insurgents within plantation households, and as participants in organized rebellions. As she implicitly laments, if reigning (male) historians would only interpret their findings correctly, they would discover that women were not only “the most daring and committed combatants” but also “the custodian[s] of a house of resistance” (1971: 8, 9).
- 16 Hine (1979) cites scholarship by field shapers such as Aptheker, Eugene Genovese, and Winthrop Jordan. Though she does not cite Davis, the solidarity of their projects remains salient.
- 17 Here I follow Robinson’s observation that “the general strike had not been planned or centrally organized. Instead, Du Bois termed as a general strike the total impact on the secessionist South of a series of actions circumstantially related to each other. . . . These events were a consequence of contradictions within Southern society rather than a revolutionary vanguard that knit these phenomena into a historical force” (Robinson 1977: 48). He continues, “with respect to class consciousness, Du Bois perceived that official Marxism had reduced this complex phenomenon to a thin political shell consisting of formulae for the dominance of state and/or part of workers’ movements. In order to resist this tendency, Du Bois sought to reintroduce the dialectic in its Hegelian form as the cunning of reason. No party could substitute itself for the

- revolutionary instrument of history: a people moved to action by the social and material conditions of its existence” (50).
- 18 Hine suggests that some acts of resistance, including abortion, may have been collaborative, if not collectively organized in the conventional Marxist sense (1979: 125).
- 19 Novels by Alex Haley, Ishmael Reed, and Charles Johnson are often cast as precedent-setting texts within the genre against which a black feminist critique is launched. See Rushdy 1999. Though discussion of the genre is beyond this article’s scope, feminist critics have noted that inclusion within the genre can be disabling. See, for example, Mitchell 2002; and Sharpe 2003.
- 20 For insightful discussions of the literary texts discussed in this article and in the book project (*The Afterlife of Slavery: Human Reproduction in Biocapitalism*) from which it is drawn I wish to thank Elizabeth Brown, Maia Chance, Gianna Craig, Claire Lee, Christopher Patterson, Alice Pedersen, Sue Shon, Balbir Singh, and Maya Smorodinsky—members of the first graduate seminar I taught in conjunction with my research on this project.
- 21 For an extended reading of Alice’s role in *Kindred*, see Weinbaum 2013.
- 22 Most famously Gena Corea and members of the activist group FINNRAGE called for a moratorium on the use of all reproductive technologies and all forms of baby selling, surrogacy included. See Corea 1985; and Arditti, Klein, and Minden 1984.
- 23 On surrogacy as (re)productive labor, as wage labor with a difference that is felt in the laborer’s body as life is extracted from it, see Weinbaum 1994.
- 24 In the 1980s surrogates received roughly \$10,000 for raw materials (eggs), labor power (gestation and birth), and the contracted release of progeny. Prices (if not wages) have gone up substantially, and surplus distribution has shifted. Today, many surrogates, located in the global South, (re)produce for export to the global North. See Vora 2009.

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