Book Review

Addressing the Afterlife of Slavery

Rozena Maart

ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3829-1523>

Gender and the Abjection of Blackness

By Sabine Broeck

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In *Gender and the Abjection of Blackness*, Sabine Broeck, recently appointed Emeritus professor at the University of Bremen in Germany, argues that the contributions by Black feminist thinkers have not adequately been taken into consideration by White women scholars in their attempt at constructing Women's Studies, Gender Studies and African American Studies, among others, and as such lacks a full understanding of Black women's history in the United States and the African diaspora. Broeck spent more than thirty years teaching American Studies, Gender Studies and Transatlantic Black diaspora Studies in Germany and visiting locations across the globe. Among her many contributions to this field of study, Sabine Broeck is a founding member and until 2015 was the director of the Institute of Postcolonial and Transcultural Studies (INPUTS) at the University of Bremen. I have been familiar with Broeck's work for more than two decades and was not the least bit surprised to see *Gender and the Abjection of Blackness* in print. The 238-page book was published by SUNY Press in 2018 and contains, six thought provoking chapters, mouth-gaping revelations, with sound arguments and a string of insightful, well-sourced theoretical underpinnings, which leaves one breathless at times whilst questioning why any category of gender should be used at all.

In many ways, what Broeck demonstrates in the book is what many have debated but few have managed to put together as succinctly as she has, in six riveting chapters. Broeck's main focus in the book is with the ways in which, 'White knowledge formation', has come about, and the conditions under which Black history and Black thought has been side-lined, yet used in order to construct a foundation for gender identity and gender politics.

In Chapter One, 'Against Gender: Enslavism and the Subject of Feminism', Broeck makes her point of departure clear. Right at the start of Chapter One, on page 1, Broeck makes a concerted effort to situate herself politically, and in doing so asks questions she knows many who do not know her politics or her work will ask: 'how can one – in my case a senior white feminist German scholar who has struggled with and through decades of transnational, (post-)multicultural, intersectional, queered, intergenerational feminism – be against gender. Why – and how can one, or even need one— read the category of gender as constitutively anti-Black, not just in cases of racist practice but as a theoretical formation?' Through careful consideration of her words, Broeck takes us through a series of what she calls, 'white post-Enlightenment' claims to show, what she believes is the gist of the book: 'to put gender as a heuristic concept in more intimate but quite agonistic relation to enslavism, as the historical and ongoing practice of structural anti-Blackness, with the result of seeing the persistent intergenerational blockage on the part of white gender studies against black epistemological interventions not just as an individual white supremacist practice but as a structural problem of theory'. In an attempt not to summarise or clumsily paraphrase Broeck's position, I have taken to quotes so as to ensure that the reader gets the full meaning that Broeck intends. Perhaps one of the key concepts in *Gender and the Abjection of Blackness* is Broeck's concept of enslavism, which Broeck proposes as a 'necessary term to situate current anti-Black practices in the future that slavery has made ... and thus to critique them as the ongoing afterlife of enslavement instead of addressing slavery as an event of bygone history (page 6)'. In chapter Two, 'Abolish Property: Black Feminist Struggles Against Anti-Blackness', Broeck engages with Black feminism's history in the United States as articulated by key scholars such as Michelle Wallace, Cherrie Moraga, Alice Walker, Toni Cade Bambara, June Jordan, Sylvia Wynter, Saidiya Hartman, Beryl Gilroy, Hortense Spillers, Patricia Williams, and several others, as a means to offer what their work has taught her about knowledge formation. To this she offers an interesting hesitation: 'Talking

about the challenge of Black feminism entails, of course, a problematic for a white gender studies descendant like myself, and a German at that, who needs to steer clear of ventriloquism or unbidden translation'. I can see several students with whom I am engaged raising their eyebrows and wondering why White South African women researchers who make the news for undermining and appropriating Black peoples' experiences don't seem to suffer from this dilemma of developing a consciousness of their Whiteness after 1994, where they possibly did not get the memo that says: 'You do not own Black experience just because your White beneficiary status grew from it'. In Chapter Three, 'Gender and the Grammar of Enslavism', Broeck address the language of gender, and how it has been used in opposition to slavery. One need only think of the patriotic song, 'Rule Britannia', strongly associated with the British Navy and the British Army, written by Scottish poet and playwright, James Thomson and put to music by Thomas Arne in 1740. The main chorus is as follows: 'Rule Britannia! Britannia rules the waves, Britons never, never, never, will be slaves'. The chorus was particularly popular when White women sought the vote in the United Kingdom, a subject I discussed with Broeck when she visited UKZN in 2017 and spoke to students of her arguments in this very book, now in print.

On page 44, Broeck notes:

Gender as an analytic for women's liberation, or, better, for generating knowledge necessary to work towards overcoming patriarchal power structures and social, political, cultural and economic formations, is at the same time a reiteration of enslavism.

I leave readers to engage with her many examples. The main strand of her argument continues in Chapter Four, 'Abjective Returns: The Slave's Fungibility in White Gender Studies'. Here Broeck takes on Simone de Beauvoir, and the early history of so-called second-wave feminism, whose work students read as a required text almost globally since the model of undergraduate gender studies and women's studies, forged by White women as a result of the politics of race and empire across the globe, which has historically put them in positions of false authority within the university setting because of their beneficiary status as recipients of histories of enslavement and empire building. Broeck asserts on page 97, 'What does it mean, in this context, that Simone de Beauvoir, in what has become almost universally recognized

as one of the founding texts of second-wave feminism, grounds her inquiry into the situation of “woman” in Hegelian allegory? The premise of her analysis rests on the seductive analogy of woman and slave that, in the long history of Western White feminism, dates back to early foundational texts like Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication*. Mary Wollstonecraft’s title, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women: With Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* (1792), is considered one of the earliest works of feminist philosophy even though Wollstonecraft spoke for and on behalf of White English women in Britain, asserting that it is the lack of education for woman, a right she suggests should be bestowed to match their social standing in society ... that if these particular women can demonstrate the ability to reason, which of course is due to their class privilege where dinner-time conversations include the reverence of colonisation and empire building, they should be afforded the same rights as the men of their social standing. Britain was not only reeking of the blood of those they enslaved at the time but the benefit it brought to the middle and upper middle classes was no secret at the time that Wollstonecraft wrote her text. It is interesting of course to see reason be established alongside the unspoken but fully benefactor status of ignorance, denial, disavowal, and the neglect of a consciousness of the colonised and usurped as being human. Wollstonecraft’s book is set against enslavement, and she asks for White women not to be treated as slaves because White women have the capacity to reason. In Broeck’s Chapter Five, ‘Post Gender, Post Human: Braidotti’s Nietzschean Echoes of Anti-Blackness’, Broeck reads Braidotti’s Posthuman through Gilles Deleuze, and asks very early on in the chapter: ‘From where can Black articulation take place, if thinking is structurally, in white philosophy, the name of the human?’ (page 177). She continues, ‘The “slave” is not a human in a cage. The “slave” is a shippable, fungible thing outside that orbit where freedom/conatus struggles with conditional encagement so that human philosophy can exist. The “slave” is the outside of the cage, that horror which looms beyond the human, that which gives the human the strength to resist the cage, to think. To be human is to be raised to know in oneself that one’s conatus will not bear the cage becoming perennial’ (page 177). Broeck has been engaging with Braidotti’s work for several years and as such takes on her text *The Posthuman* (2013), and examines the premise of it. Braidotti’s work is well quoted and well regarded among White feminists in the United States, Australia and Europe, at the exclusion of her very problematic anti-Black analysis. Braidotti’s work speaks to White feminist scholars that wilfully

exclude the enslavement of Black people of their poststructuralist and uppity postmodernist critiques, that lack the very substance they claim for themselves – reason and the ability to be human. Broeck is direct and diligent throughout the chapter of her critique of Braidotti, noting: ‘I see Braidotti’s ruminations partake in the ongoing trajectory of post-Enlightenment conceptualization of self-empowering white voluntarism as liberated (post-)subjectivity’, Broeck notes, on page 191. I leave the many arguments and critiques Broeck puts forward in this chapter of anti-Blackness by scholars who posit post gender and post human arguments to the reader. In the closing chapter, ‘On Dispossession as a False Analogy’, considerably shorter than the five that precedes it, Broeck sums up the goal of her project as follows: ‘The goal of this book has been to make visible the white practice of anti-Blackness within and as part of Western Eurocentric modernity while avoiding voyeuristic repetition of Black abjection’. *Gender and the Abjection of Blackness* is a must read for students and scholars engaged in debates on histories of enslavement, decolonisation, gender studies and critical race theory.

Rozena Maart
Associate Professor
Gender Studies, Social Sciences
University of KwaZulu-Natal
Durban, South Africa
International Research Ambassador
University of Bremen
Germany
rozmaart@gmail.com