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The Metamorphosis of Gender: The Caribbean as a Sex/Gender Laboratory

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This essay proposes a novel approach to gender and the formation of sex/gender subjectivities of the Black enslaved population in the context of Caribbean plantations, specifically French and British, between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries.[1] For this purpose, I will introduce the concepts of *the metamorphosis of gender* and *the plantation as a laboratory of gender experimentation.* Following Sylvia Wynter's 1982 manuscript *Black Metamorphosis*, I argue that the slave trade—that is, the abduction, transshipment as commodity, and public sale—not only constituted the African subject as "Black" but also, through subsequent violence and experimentation, produced new metamorphoses, among them the metamorphosis of gender. Within French and British Caribbean plantation islands, control was absolute and planters operated as omnipotent beings with unrestricted power over the enslaved mass. This type of domination is what enables us to conceptualize the plantation as a laboratory of experimentation in which different disciplinary practices and techniques for economic exploitation—among them gender practices—were rehearsed on Black people.

To develop these arguments, in the first section I will provide an overview of the ways some texts of Caribbean historiography approach the production of gender on the plantation. In

[1] Translator's note: All the translations of texts originally in Spanish are my own. I want to thank Celenis Rodríguez Moreno and Rocío Zambrana for their exceptional support in the process of translation.

the second section, I will develop a philosophical reflection around the idea of the metamorphosis of gender in dialogue with Hortense Spillers's concepts of "flesh" and "pornotrope," which leads me to posit the impossibility of configuring a gendered body.[2] However, in the third section, I will show how experiments with gender practices that took place in the plantation coalesce in a process of sedimentation of these practices that gives rise to a specific sex/gender subjectivation that María Lugones calls "versions" of woman and man.[3] With these arguments, I will situate some reflections of Latin American decolonial feminism—which have hitherto been centered in the Andean Indigenous world—in the context of the Caribbean, the plantation, and the experience of enslavement undergone by Black people.[4] To do so, I have placed Latin American decolonial feminism, Black critical theory, and Caribbean critical thought in dialogue.

The Plantation

The plantation complex that organized the economic, social, and political life of the Spanish, British, French, and Dutch colonies in the Caribbean—based on the dispossession of Indigenous territories, the subjection of Indigenous peoples to a forced labor power and to genocide, as well as the trade and enslavement of millions of African people—had its point of departure at the beginning of the sixteenth century.[5] The immense extensions of appropriated

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[2] See Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 65–81.
[3] See María Lugones, "The Coloniality of Gender," *Worlds and Knowledges Otherwise* 2 (2008): 1–17; and Lugones, "Subjetividad esclava, colonialidad de género, marginalidad y opresiones múltiples," in Patricia Montes Ruíz, ed., *Pensando los feminismos en Bolivia* (Conexión, 2012), 129.
[4] For a discussion of this issue, see Selamawit Terrefe, "The Pornotrope of Decolonial Feminism," *Critical Philosophy of Race* 8, nos. 1–2 (2020): 134–64.
[5] I consider the plantation as a colonial structure that regulates social, political, and economic life, and whose logics of exploitation of racialized peoples persist beyond the processes of independence. The material and ideological order of the plantation is still present in contemporary Caribbean societies; see Katherine McKittrick, "Plantation Futures," *Small Axe*, no. 42 (November 2013): 1–15. I am in dialogue with Kris Manjapra, who also adopts a *longue durée* view of the plantation in his work (see Manjapra, "Plantation Dispossession: The Global Travel of Agricultural Racial Capitalism," in Sven Beckert and Christine Dessan, eds., *American Capitalism: New Histories* (Columbia University

lands were dedicated to monoculture for exportation of, according to market demands, coffee, cotton, indigo or tobacco but was mainly sugarcane. Sugar cane cultivation was so lucrative in the British colonies in the Caribbean that it was also adopted in the southern colonies of what is currently the United States.

According to Richard Turits and Laurent Dubois, the first plantation in the Americas and the Caribbean was erected in Santo Domingo in the sixteenth century; however, its rise was as abrupt as its fall.[6] This was not the case for the plantations located in the French and British colonies, which throughout their dominance between the middle of the seventeenth century and the last decades of the nineteenth century became veritable jewels for their respective metropoles. These plantations replaced free workers, who were initially hired, with slave labor, becoming the main cause of the substantial increase in the slave trade of African people.[7]

Lloyd Best describes the plantation as a total economic institution that was highly regulated.[8] Each plantation functioned with its own rules and institutions that subordinated all aspects of life to production. Within the plantation it was impossible to detach social life from economic life; in fact, enslaved people were denied the possibility of developing social, cultural, and communal bonds, were condemned to "social death,"[9] to an isolated individuality, without the possibility of generating any bond freely or to make decisions over their desires or their

Press, 2018).

[6] See Laurent Dubois and Richard Turits, *Freedom Roots: Histories from the Caribbean* (University of North Carolina Press, 2019).

[7] According to Pablo Mariñez, "England, France, and the Netherlands were the true creators of the conditions of production in the Caribbean that led to an unprecedented intensification of the African slave trade, an increase in the number of slave shipping companies, and the arrival of millions of enslaved people to the New World in the span of three and a half centuries. The slave distribution in the Caribbean was deeply unequal according to each of the subregions dominated by the British (17%), the French (17%), the Dutch (6%), and the Spanish"; Mariñez, "Esclavitud y economía de plantación en el Caribe," *Sotavento* 1, no. 2 (1997): 87.

[8] See Lloyd Best and Kari Polanyi, *The Theory of Plantation Economy: A Historical Approach to Caribbean Economic Development* (University of West Indies Press, 2009).

[9] See Orlando Patterson, "The Constituent Elements of Slavery," in Verene Shepherd and Hilary Beckles, eds., *Caribbean Slavery in the Atlantic World* (Ian Randle, 2000).

destiny.

The space/time of the plantation operated through an unwavering racial hierarchy in which the planters, mostly White men, regulated all aspects and activities that were developed. Their economic, political, and ideological power was absolute. For example, in the case of the British colonies, it was planters who legally defined the enslaved Black population as a special commodity. Planters also had exclusive political power to make decisions deemed most convenient for the use and trade of the enslaved.[10] Such power was accompanied by high levels of terror, violence, and torture.

The racist structure of the Caribbean plantation was crucial for the consolidation of an idea of race and of racism as core elements of capitalist exploitation, being a veritable machine for the fabrication and multiplication of racial discourses.[11] Moreover, the immense wealth produced on the Caribbean plantation islands, whose population was made up between 85 and 90 percent of African people reduced to enslaved labor, promoted the reproduction of its model and its discourses at a global scale.

Gender and the Plantation

With regards to gender—understood as a norm that operates in the administration of the lives of people subjected to enslaved labor, whether in the division of labor within the plantation, the distribution of spaces, the circulation of representations, or the election of the forms of subjection and the methods of torture—we find different views among Caribbean historians such as Hilary Beckles, Bernard Moitt, Lucille Mair, and Elsa Goveia. Their analyses move

[10] See Elsa Goveia, "The West Indian Slave Laws of the Eighteenth Century," in Shepherd and Beckles, *Caribbean Slavery in the Atlantic World*.
[11]See Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

away from the classic division between field labor and domestic labor and are closer to the position developed by Angela Davis in *Women, Race, and Class*, where she examines archives that present enslaved women beyond gender stereotypes and as active participants in intensive fieldwork.[12] Nonetheless, in contrast to Davis, who questions the existence of an order of gender regulating the life of the enslaved, these historians maintain that there are indeed gender differences but that they operate in the distribution of skilled and unskilled labor. This supposes a hierarchy between enslaved men and enslaved women, which would be reflected in access to better material living conditions and their value in the market. The latter is the case for Jamaica, according to Mair, and for the French colonies, according to Moitt.[13]

However, in other parts of their work, both Mair and Moitt recognize that the planter's pragmatic view and the needs of the plantation were above any other order or discipline within the plantation, which made this space incompatible with gender. In fact, Moitt goes as far as to say that the reality of the plantation "made a joke" of gender-based labor assignments, that is, something that would be established but not necessarily enforced.[14]

In *Centering Woman*, Beckles adds further analytical elements that are centered not in a sexual division of enslaved labor but in the way the plantation produced representations of enslaved people's subjectivities that rehearsed ideas about the capacity of bodies to resist intensive labor and with gender stereotypes from the White world. Planters continuously produced contradictory, unstable, and discontinuous representations that shifted according to the economic needs of the plantation.

One example is the case of enslaved Black women, around whom there was a kind of

[12] See Angela Davis, *Women, Race, and Class* (Vintage, 1983).
[13] See Lucille Mair, "Women Field Workers in Jamaica During Slavery," in Shepherd and Beckles, *Caribbean Slavery in the Atlantic World*; and Bernard Moitt, "Work and Resistance in the French Caribbean during Slavery, 1700–1848," in Shepherd and Beckles, *Caribbean Slavery in the Atlantic World*.
[14] Bernard Moitt, *Women and Slavery in the French Antilles, 1635–1848* (Indiana University Press, 2001), 38.

ideological vagueness for nearly a century.[15] Throughout the seventeenth century, the most disseminated idea surrounding enslaved Black women was that they were true Amazons who were able to endure strenuous labor in sugar or cotton fields, who could give birth and come back to work in a couple of days, and who could physically endure any climate. In other words, they were the opposite of White women.[16] In the eighteenth century, the discourse changed and the enslaved Black woman began to be considered as part of the weaker sex and as a mother, all of which was related to the internal need to reproduce the enslaved labor force in light of the imminent prohibition of slavery. Following Beckles, the enslaved were not women because they were considered to lack any of the capacities and faculties of the female sex, yet once ideas of their femininity were introduced, these operated as an apparatus to secure the continuity of the plantation. In the words of Beckles, "Womanhood, as a gendered formulation, was therefore legally constituted as a reproduction device that offered the slave system continuity and functionality."[17]

Mair, Goveia, Moitt, and Beckles's work offers enough information to question both the operation of a sex/gender system as a regulator of the lives of the enslaved and the idea that the enslaved were being gendered. They all agree that the plantation was indifferent to gender, that is to say, that the division of labor was not necessarily based on an idea of gender, that there was no spatial separation between enslaved men and women, and that they were not organized in family units that would allow for the operation of ideas of domesticity or childcare.

[15] See Hilary Beckles, *Centering Woman: Gender Discourses in Caribbean Slave Society* (Ian Randle, 1998).
[16] An interesting point in Beckles's work that merits discussion is the idea of a defeminization of Black women; see *Centering Woman*, 10. This assertion presupposes that the plantation transformed Black women's ancestral femininity as they were introduced into a form of labor and life that did not correspond to the gender order of their own people. The latter has been problematized by thinkers such as María Lugones and Yuderkys Espinosa-Miñoso, who, following Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí, argue that it is difficult to infer how a sex/gender system functions with regard to different African peoples; see Lugones, "The Coloniality of Gender"; and Espinosa-Miñoso, "De por qué es necesario un feminismo descolonial: Diferenciación, dominación co-constitutiva de la modernidad occidental y el fin de la política de identidad," *Solar* 12 (2016): 141–71. In that sense, pace Beckles, it is not possible to think of a defeminization.
[17] Beckles, *Centering Woman*, 8.

However, this work reaffirms gender and its universality, assuming that the ideological configurations of bodies are the same for all people, in every context, and in all historical periods. In this regard, it is important to point out that the categories of “man” and “woman” entail the condensation of a series of gender practices that are more or less stable and continuous, something that was not the case for the enslaved population.

The Metamorphosis of Gender

The information provided by Caribbean historians in their research on the situation of enslaved Black women allows us to recognize the transformation of the meanings and ideas that the planters used to describe them and treat them according to the material needs of the plantation, in addition to their own desires and whims.[18] This long process, which took place from the sixteenth century until the early nineteenth century, can be described, paraphrasing the title of Wynter’s manuscript, as a metamorphosis of gender, a *longue durée* process through which enslaved Africans were subjected to violent transformations that ranged from the material and ideological condition of being genderless, being commodities, chattel, animal stock, or property to the different forms of experimentation with gender practices.[19] The latter were used in interrupted, circumstantial, and even altered or inverted ways, which allows us to think about the Caribbean plantation as an authentic gender laboratory.

The first moment of not-gendering could be explained through the work of Afro-Caribbean thinkers Sylvia Wynter and Yuderkys Espinosa-Miñoso. Based on two different conceptions of the human, they argue that gender is not a sufficient category to account for

[18] For a more detailed analysis of the complexities entailed by this metamorphosis, see Demetrius L. Eudell, “From Mode of Production to Mode of Auto-Institution: Sylvia Wynter's Black Metamorphosis of the Labor Question,” *Small Axe*, no. 49 (March 2016): 47–61.
[19] See Goveia, “The West Indian Slave Laws of the Eighteenth Century.”

dealings between enslaved people and their White owners, or for relations among the enslaved. For Espinosa-Miñoso, who builds on Lugones's idea of the colonial and modern gender system, gender was an attribute of the human (i.e., Whiteness) that thus only regulated the White world.[20] In this context, gender defined how productive and reproductive labor was distributed, dividing socialization between the public and the private, and producing ideas and representations about White women's fragility and White men's rationality. This was not the case for Black or Indigenous people subjected to enslaved labor or servitude, since they were considered neither human nor rational but instead as natural beings and thus not subject to gender.[21]

In her essay "Beyond Miranda's Meaning: Un/Silencing the Demonic Ground of Caliban's 'Woman,'" Wynter reflects on the secondary relevance of gender in the relations between colonizers and natives through a reading of William Shakespeare's *The Tempest.* By focusing on the relation between Miranda, the White daughter of the colonizer, and Caliban, the monster who is the original inhabitant of the island (colony), Wynter suggests that the latter must be interpreted not through a patriarchal hierarchy between men and women but through the process of racialization to which Caliban is subjected. This process will define Caliban as an irrational being, a savage, another category of the human, with no masculine traits, while recognizing Miranda as part of the community of rational beings. She will embody the only true femininity and will be the sole progenitor of humanity. This explains the ontological absence of Caliban's "woman," that is, the impossibility of a non-White female's embodying femininity.[22]

Delving into this complex process of metamorphosis and constitution of Black

[20] See Lugones, "The Coloniality of Gender."
[21] See Espinosa-Miñoso, "De por qué es necesario," 153.
[22] Sylvia Wynter, "Beyond Miranda's Meaning: Un/Silencing the Demonic Ground of Caliban's 'Woman,'" in Carole Boyce Davis and Elaine Savory Fido, eds., *Out of the Kumbla: Caribbean Women and Literature* (Africa World, 1990), 360.

subjectivity, Hortense Spillers, in her essay “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” explains what happens to the abducted body in the Middle Passage as it is thrown into a slave ship and sold in an auction market. During this journey, the formerly African subjects will become “Black” as they lose the cultural and material codes, the coordinates of their world, the ciphers that make them intelligible to themselves and that define their relations with other beings around them. Édouard Glissant has also addressed the process of world and subject destruction that took place in the Middle Passage and that would leave the transshipped suspended in a senseless void, a nonworld.[23] In “The Open Boat” chapter of *Poetics of Relation*, Glissant describes the process as follows: “The first dark shadow was cast by being wrenched from their everyday, familiar land, away from protecting gods and a tutelary community.”[24] In the womb of the boat, the abducted subject begins to dissolve in the nontime, nonplace, nonworld that is the boat, and life enters a kind of suspension.

> What is terrifying partakes of the abyss, three times linked to the unknown. First, the time you fell into the belly of the boat. For, in your poetic vision, a boat has no belly; a boat does not swallow up, does not devour; a boat is steered by open skies. Yet, the belly of this boat dissolves you, precipitates you into a nonworld from which you cry out. . . . This boat is your womb, a matrix, and yet it expels you. This boat: pregnant with as many dead as living under sentence of death.[25]

[23] What interests me here is the idea of an excision of the African subject subjected to the trade. The issue of gender in the boat is not part of my discussion, since it would require a different argumentative structure and a survey of the literature on Glissant that is beyond the scope of this essay. It would also involve assuming that childbirth is a function that necessarily refers to the feminine or to a specific location within the sex/gender order, which I consider to be cisheterosexist and biologically determinist. Therefore, by quoting Glissant, what I am primarily interested in understanding the “boat” as a matrix of a nonworld.
[24] Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (University of Michigan Press, 1997), 5.
[25] Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 6.

For Spillers, once on that boat, the body of the African subject becomes flesh, a kind of "zero degree" of ideas and representations. All the meanings that had configured the African subject until then are dissolved.[26] This zero degree, this excision of the subject, is the result of the abduction, the loss of spatiotemporal referents, the whip, the rape, the hunger, and the overall articulation of different kinds and levels of violence.[27] This excision, this condition as flesh, is what will allow the colonizers and planters to experiment with different meanings on the enslaved, as if they were a tabula rasa, whether as commodity, measuring unit, livestock, labor force, or sexual object. This is what Spillers calls the "pornotrope," which is explained by Alexander Weheliye as follows:

> Pornotroping, then, names the becoming-flesh of the (black) body and forms a primary component in the processes by which human beings are converted into bare life. In the words of Saidiya Hartman, it marks "the means by which the wanton use of and the violence directed towards the black body come to be identified as its pleasure and dangers—that is, the expectations of slave property are ontologized as the innate capacities and inner feelings of the enslaved, and moreover, the ascription of excess and enjoyment to the African effaces the violence perpetrated against the enslaved."[28]

Although this pornotroping exercise, marked by the violence, excess, and omnipotence of the planter, entails the dissolution of a subject, of a body, it does not necessarily involve the installation of stable or continuous meanings within the flesh, which would amount to the transmutation of

[26] See Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe."
[27] See Alexander Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Duke University Press, 2014).
[28] Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 91.

flesh into a new body. The enslaved remains flesh. In *Centering Woman* and in other texts, as we will see, Beckles shows that the "engineering" or "reengineering" of narratives, representations, and ideas that were inscribed on enslaved people was a constant and necessary element for the optimal functioning of the plantation.[29]

Following this line of argumentation, it is difficult to conceive of a process of gendering enslaved people insofar as it would entail the flesh becoming a sexed body, that is, an assemblage of relatively stable and temporally continuous meanings and practices regulated by an ideal of being female or masculine that organizes work, space, time, sexuality, and desire. The notion of the pornotrope is incompatible with the way a regulatory ideal such as gender operates, which requires the reiteration of certain practices to materialize.[30] The pornotrope indicates that for the enslaved there is no stable regulation, no recognizable norm, but a cluster of dispersed practices that correspond to the projections, ideas, fantasies, or ever-changing needs of the planter. This impacts the understanding that people have of themselves and that is crucial for the operation of the gender norm.[31] Spillers writes,

> But this body, at least from the point of view of the captive community, focuses a private and particular space, at which point of convergence biological, sexual, social, cultural, linguistic, ritualistic, and psychological fortunes join. This profound intimacy of interlocking detail is disrupted, however, by externally imposed meanings and uses: 1) the captive body becomes the source of an irresistible, destructive sensuality; 2) at the same time—in stunning contradiction—the captive body reduces to a thing, becoming being for the captor; 3) in this absence from a subject position, the captured sexualities provide a physical and

[29] See Beckles, *Centering Woman*, 18.
[30] See Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (Routledge, 1993), 1–2.
[31] See Beckles, *Centering Woman*, 160.

biological expression of “otherness”; 4) as a category of “otherness,” the captive body translates into a potential for pornotroping and embodies sheer physical powerlessness that slides into a more general “powerlessness,” resonating through various centers of human and social meaning.[32]

On the one hand, the pornotrope makes it impossible to conceive of the regulation of the gender norm, but, on the other, it allows the enslaved to be exposed to situations and scenarios in which they behave, act, and speak according to the standards of gender practices, visible in dialogues, performances, tasks, and so on. Therefore, although they are not subjects of gender, it cannot be asserted that the enslaved were foreign to certain gender practices or ideas. That their contact with them though was incidental and obeyed the planter’s concrete goals, it did not entail a coherent or systematic operation. Indeed, in *Scenes of Subjection*, Saidiya Hartman argues that the enslaved were not gendered subjects but that they were affected or impacted by the gender norm that regulated the White world.[33] This impact commonly took place through scenes of experimentation, whether these involved testing strategies to increase the plantation’s profits or participating in the fantasies or desires of the master within the confines of a bedroom.

The Plantation as a Sex/Gender Laboratory

The plantation was able to operate as a laboratory of experimentation given its character as a total economic and social institution that exercised absolute control over the people who lived

[32] Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” 67.
[33] See Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford University Press, 1997).

within its confines. The planter had enough material and symbolic resources to release and withdraw from circulation representations of himself and of the behavior of enslaved people, discipline with severe punishment, impose rules, transform their spaces, and manage their time and feelings.[34] In sum, the planter generated the material, epistemic, and symbolic conditions that configured the experiences of the people subjected to slavery.

As I have argued, gender practices, as one of the elements with which planters experimented, were introduced in the economic, social, and intimate life dynamics of the plantation. However, this integration did not follow the logic of the gender norm but was in line with the circumstantial necessities of the plantation and the will of the planter. This entailed constant changes with regards to the division of labor; the production of representations about sexuality, femininity, masculinity, the desire, and the violence of enslaved Black people; assigned spaces; maternity and care; and hierarchy in relation to tasks and the time allotted to complete them.[35] For this reason, as soon as enslaved women were the majority in the crews that intensely labored in the sugar or tobacco fields, the ideas that circulated referred to their antifemininity, their physical strength, their lack of maternal instincts, and their incapacity to reproduce.[36]

The reproduction of the enslaved labor force is potentially the most paradigmatic case of experimentation. Until the mid-eighteenth century, planters had, for economic reasons,

[34] See Patricia Northover and Michaeline Crichlow, *Globalization and the Creole Imagination: Notes on Fleeing the Plantation* (Duke University Press, 2009).
[35] While enslaved Black women were represented as antifeminine, as possessing an immense brute force, and as lacking delicacy, enslaved Black men were represented as effeminate and infantile, as passive and obedient beings. Enslaved men had no possibility of developing family bonds or access to a patriarchal status because the master owned their children and partner. For more on this issue, see Hilary Beckles, “Black Masculinity in Caribbean Slavery,” in Rhoda Reddock, ed., *Interrogating Caribbean Masculinities Theoretical and Empirical Analyses* (West Indies University Press, 2004). On hierarchy with respect to tasks, see Beckles, *Centering Woman*.
[36] It is important to note the way the planter Edward Long referred to enslaved Black women as the perfect beast upon which the future of the plantation was erected. Furthermore, he also highlighted “low fertility,” an essentially “antifeminine” feature, as a virtue. See Beckles, *Centering Woman*, 10.

preferred not to own pregnant enslaved women or children. They justified this by appealing to Black women's antifemininity and their incapacity for motherhood and care. Once the slave trade became illegal and the acquisition of young enslaved men was disrupted, the view that buying instead of reproducing enslaved Africans was more profitable was replaced.[37] The problem was that the birth rate was low among enslaved women from the seventeenth century to the end of the eighteenth, which planters attributed to secret birth control practices and infanticide.[38]

Nonetheless, following Spillers, it is possible to argue that maternity and kinship had lost their meaning as they had been invaded by the arbitrariness of property relations.[39] In fact, the planters intervened, looking to install what they conceived to be maternal and paternal feelings. For this purpose, they generated artificial spaces and emotional atmospheres, and they developed a series of measures that, in the midst of the plantation, would allow for the simulation of a European-style nuclear family. Some examples included the celebration of marriages among enslaved people, the allocation of a plot of land and a house, the allowance of more rest time for enslaved women who had just given birth so that they could take care of their children, and the granting of awards for each child who was born alive.[40] These material measures were accompanied by an ideological shift in the way enslaved Black women were represented with regards to their features and behavior. From this point, the focus on their brute force diminished and instead their endowments as caretakers, dedicated mothers, and nannies were praised.[41]

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[37] See Marietta Morrisey, "Women's Work, Family Formation, and Reproduction Among Caribbean Slaves," in Shepherd and Beckles, *Caribbean Slavery in the Atlantic World*; and Elsa Goveia, *Slave Society in the British Leeward Islands at the End of the Eighteenth Century* (Yale University Press, 1965).
[38] See Hilary Beckles, *Natural Rebels: A Social History of Enslaved Women in Barbados* (Rutgers University Press, 1989).
[39] See Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 74.
[40] See Beckles, *Natural Rebels*.
[41] See Beckles, *Centering Woman*.

What the planters attempted to do was create a material and symbolic scenario, that is, the family, which could provide coherence to the realization of some gender practices: the home as a private sphere, the enslaved Black woman as a fragile and caretaking mother, the enslaved man as a father and husband who dedicates more time to productive labor, and the marital ritual that would seal the relational bond.[42] Nonetheless, the marriage did not disrupt the planter's power over the enslaved couple's children. Notwithstanding matrimony's implicit expectation of monogamy, enslaved women were still available as a sexual object for the planter, and enslaved men were never able to fully form a bond with their wives and children because they could be sold at any time. Participation in these experiments with gender practices was not optional, since whoever resisted was forced under the threat of the whip to behave according to the gender simulacrum.[43]

The ever more sophisticated experiments with enslaved people and their violent insertion in the dynamics of the sentimental and sexual lives of the planter and his family would end up producing what Lugones calls "versions" or similes of woman and man.[44] These versions, produced through the "sedimentation" of gender practices applied randomly and violently over Black people, would enact, in a more consistent and coherent fashion, some of the gender practices of planters and their families, especially those related to the new division

[42] See Goveia, *Slave Society in the British Leeward Islands*, 196.
[43] See Beckles, *Natural Rebels*.
[44] In "The Coloniality of Gender," Lugones argues that, in accordance with the needs of global capitalism, racialized females who were first considered to be beasts became versions of women. This emphasizes a complex transformational process of the production of sexed/gendered subjectivities that is entangled with the racial order of the colonial world. In "Sylvia Wynter's Theory of the Human and the Crisis School of Caribbean Heteromasculinity Studies," *Small Axe*, no. 49 (March 2016): 92–112, Tonya Haynes argues that, for Wynter, "Man"—as a system of meaning—is maintained because those historically excluded from the Eurocentric project of humanity produce "sub-versions" or "lesser versions" of Man instead of deconconstructing it. For a broader account of the idea of versions, see Celenis Rodríguez Moreno, "The Woman and Her Obscure Versions," trans. Alejandro Montelongo González, *Hypatia* 37, no. 3 (2022): 566–81.

of labor required within the plantation.[45] In this case, the emphasis lay on the obligations of enslaved women as mothers and caretakers of the enslaved labor force rather than as members of the weaker sex. This is the case because, following Moitt, enslaved women continued to perform intensive fieldwork until the declaration of the abolition of slavery.[46] In other words, enslaved women would come to share the obligations imposed on White women by the gender norm but, as Lugones argues, without any of its entitlements.[47] These versions would not be the only ones, since others would be produced in light of the needs of the plantation and global capitalism. It is noteworthy that this idea of the continuous production of versions implies that the Black bodies which had become flesh would continue to be inscribed with meanings and that new experiments would continue to be imposed on them (pornotrope).

The Secret of Sex/Gender Is in the Plantation

The process of experimenting with sex/gender practices that took place in the plantation was fundamental in the long metamorphosis of enslaved Black people's gender, but it was equally crucial for the stabilization of the White Western gender norm.[48] According to Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, the definitive form of the sex and gender system and the formations of sex/gender subjectivities—man and woman—would not have been possible without the existence of other

[45] "Consider that a sedimentation of gender norms produces the peculiar phenomenon of a 'natural sex' or a 'real woman' or any number of prevalent and compelling social fictions"; Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge, 1999), 178.
[46] See Moitt, *Women and Slavery in the French Antilles*.
[47] See Lugones, "Subjetividad esclava."
[48] The system that regulated the relations between men and women in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Europe was not a sex/gender system as it was not based on sexual dimorphism. The explanation of gender, that is, the assignment of tasks, the social status, the juridical categories, the hierarchies, and the cultural traditions that established the role of men and women, was not based on the biology of the two bodies. The sex/gender system based on sexual dimorphism emerges as part of eighteenth-century Enlightenment. The latter entailed the production of specific knowledges surrounding the man's body and the woman's body, the production of a scientific language that signaled the differences between them, and the allocation of functional characteristics to sexual organs, which became the defining mark of gender. See Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Harvard University Press, 1990).

bodies, turned flesh, on which modalities of labor, meanings, desires, sexual practices, and different forms and degrees of violence were tested.[49]

Following Jackson, I argue that the experimentation on enslaved people with regards to gender practices impacted the gaze White people crafted to understand themselves, their ideals of masculinity and femininity, as well as the latter's possibilities and limits. Indeed, decisions made within the plantation redefined the place of White women and the tasks that they could take on, which homogenized among them the idea of "woman" beyond social class but established a clear limit in terms of racial difference. This makes evident the racial basis of the idea of "woman." As the idea of the Black enslaved woman as antifeminine, inept, sexually active, and infertile was crafted, the poor White woman was expelled from fieldwork and was represented as delicate, morally superior, and pure.[50]

The planter thus used Black people to rehearse his own gender practices, that is to say, he tested his own gender practices in an altered, "inverted," or dislocated manner. Through these experiments, planters subrogated their desires, explored the borders of sexuality, and, due to their unrestricted access to enslaved people, were able to learn the anatomy of sexual and reproductive organs in detail. Two centuries of violent experimentation with the lives of racialized people were fundamental to the sketching of racial theories that would provide an allegedly biological justification for slavery. These same biological assumptions would be used to produce the category of sex and to uphold the different status between White men and White women. As Kyla Schuller argues, the scientific category of sex is a variation of the scientific discourse on race and is an effect of racial biopower.[51]

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[49] See Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World* (New York University Press, 2020).
[50] See Beckles, *Centering Woman*.
[51] See Kyla Schuller, *The Biopolitics of Feeling: Race, Sex, and Science in the Nineteenth Century* (Duke University Press, 2018).

All of this would introduce changes in the Western gender system that, during the eighteenth century, would become a sex/gender system in which the anatomy of bodies would be fundamental to explain the differences between the White man and the White woman.[52] However, it would not operate this way for Black people because, according to biological discourse, in their case the differences between the sexes were not as stark. In fact, Thomas Laqueur shares an interesting quote by Charles Darwin, who, quoting Karl Vogt, maintained that the difference between the sexes lies in the size of the skull, a fact that was evident among White people but not among Black men and women.[53] The category of sex that was produced by the Enlightenment naturalized gender relations between White women and men, the sexual division of labor, the delimitation of public and private spheres, and the reproduction of the human. But above all it would be, on the one hand, the definitive argument that showed sex and gender to be a natural attribute of Whiteness, of the human, and, on the other, it would scientifically justify the indetermination of and the tortuous experimentation with gender practices to which Black people were subjected.

An Incessant Metamorphosis

The long process of the metamorphosis of gender that I have presented in this essay addresses the transformation of enslaved Black people from “commodities” to versions of woman and man. This transformation was not an intentional process, given that the slave system and the plantation were not interested in making enslaved people into women or men. What was an explicit goal was extracting as much profit from them as possible, whether economically, socially, or sexually. It was this quest for maximum profit that gave way to

[52] See Lugones, “Subjetividad esclava.”
[53] Laqueur, *Making Sex*, 208.

experimentation with gender practices which regulated the world of White colonizers and were introduced in the relations between planters and the enslaved, as well as among the enslaved, in order to solve the specific needs of the plantation and the planter.

For over two centuries enslaved Black people were exposed to the rehearsing of representations, tasks, spaces, and temporalities that obeyed the dynamics of the gender norm, which would allow the latter's sedimentation. It is worth noting that the sedimented gender practices were those selected by the planters for their ongoing experimentation. Because they were linked to certain forms of exploitation of Black lives and high levels of violence, their meanings were altered, manipulated, and/or partial in relation to the gender norm. These constitute the features of what Lugones calls versions of man and woman.

Experiments with aspects such as the reproduction of the enslaved labor force took place in the context of an "amelioration" of the life conditions of the enslaved that was catalyzed by the European abolitionist movement, which, during the nineteenth century, denounced the horrible conditions in which enslaved women lived. This gave way to new legislation that declared Black women to be members of the weaker sex. This type of declaration, which circulated other representations of enslaved women, could be read, following Hartman, as the introduction of new forms of control and subjection.[54] Enslaved people would shift from the master's direct control and subjection to the administration of life by the state (itself an expression of the coloniality of power), which would introduce more or less stable norms and institutions to the regulation of their lives.

The epistemic and material conditions under which the enslaved would be included in a society of the free and the new postcolonial or independent state structure were outlined before

[54] See Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 6.

the declaration of the prohibition and abolition of slavery in the Caribbean. The sex/gender norm that materialized through the new state, and which supposedly equated "*mujeresnegras* [Blackwomen]" with White women, had consolidated over racist conceptions.[55] This norm would therefore continue to produce *mujeresnegras* as exploitable caretakers or as sexual objects, a version of woman built on racial and gender prejudices, one that would impede access to other kinds of economic activity or to a different social status.

Despite the fact that the nineteenth century put an end to the trade, abolished slavery, and saw anticolonial revolutions, giving birth to new republics and/or to novel juridico-administrative relations between the metropole and the colonies, the *longue durée* of the order of the plantation made it possible to sustain racial hierarchies and allowed the continuation of all kinds of experimentation, medical and social engineering experiments, on Black people. The results of such experiments were useful to continue actualizing the racial and gender order for the needs of capital. Experiments that range from the design of birth control pills to development politics with its new representations of the subject woman make possible new racial grammars and actualize the gender norm.[56]

[55] I use the notion of *mujernegra*, "Blackwoman," following Betty Ruth Lozano, who writes, "I utilize 'Blackwoman' as a single word due to the impossibility of compartmentalizing the experience of being a woman and being Black." See Betty Ruth Lozano, "Pedagogías para la vida, la alegría y la re-existencia: Pedagogías de mujeresnegras que curan y vinculan," in Catherine Walsh, ed., *Pedagogías decoloniales: Prácticas insurgentes de resistir, (re)existir y (re)vivir*, vol. 2 (Abya Yala, 2017), 12.

[56] I want to thank Rocío Zambrana for exchanging ideas with me about the relation between the pornotrope, the norm, and plasticity.

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