

## Book Review

# The Afterlife of Reproductive Slavery: Biocapitalism and Black Feminism's Philosophy of History

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Family planning purveyors in the global North hail surrogacy and egg donation as treasured opportunities to build families for those unable to have biological children of their own. Offering a range of resources that bring together donors, surrogates, and families, surrogacy agencies frame their services as acts of love and compassion, treasured experiences, and creators of legacies that make 'the impossible possible.' Evidence of surrogacy's roots in capitalism and racial politics, is exemplified by such practices as using rating sites for industry agencies (i.e., 'the Trip Advisor of Surrogacy'<sup>1</sup>), web-based cost-benefit analyses of using surrogates from different countries, together with the prevalence of using reproductive labour from women in the global South for the benefit of families in the global North. Surrogacy agencies use marketing tactics that portray surrogacy as 'acts of trust', 'loving care', and 'facilitating relationships' mute the exploitation of surrogates' reproductive labour.

How have such forms of gendered and racialised reproductive biocapitalism and its cultural production entered into our collective imaginaries and become possible? In her book, *The Afterlife of Reproductive Slavery: Biocapitalism and black feminism's philosophy of history*, Dr. Alys Eve Weinbaum examines how four hundred years of Atlantic slavery has materially, and most crucially, epistemically influenced this global reproductive capitalist market. Analysing the literary and scholarly works of Black feminists such as Angela Davis, Toni Morrison, and Octavia Butler, Weinbaum argues that Atlantic slavery, especially slave breeding, provided society with an intellectual template to conceive of the commodification and extraction of women's reproductive labour and their 'biological fruits'.

Weinbaum engages with Marxism and critical race theories to extend our understanding of how conceptions of race endure within this slave episteme. Here, she suggests that the endurance of the slave episteme is not about physical attributes or the visibility of blackness of the worker; instead, she configures how reproductive labour and products continue to be racialised. Racialisation as a process operates in ways that renders women's labour power external and interchangeable, which strips away such women's rights to be recognised as mothers and full citizens with complete legal protection. Weinbaum calls this 'the flickering on and off of blackness' (p. 10). In other words, the racial power that rendered a population of people as biological commodities within the Atlantic slave trade still operates, even though such racial power and 'distinctions' are currently disavowed.

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<sup>1</sup> Growing Families, Surrogacy Service Provider Rating (Crow's Nest, Australia, accessed on April 25, 2021)  
<https://www.growingfamilies.org/agency-ratings/>.

Weinbaum carefully develops her arguments using a critical, speculative reading of an array of Black feminist literary works. In the first chapter, 'The Surrogacy/Slavery Nexus,' she examines how slave breeding dovetails with current-day biocapitalism and surrogacy, thus creating the racialising process of legitimising women's reproductive labour as extractable, and alien to themselves. Weinbaum draws out the connection between slave breeding and contemporary reproduction exploitation through her treatment of Black feminist historical scholarship on reproduction in the time of the Atlantic slave trade, to demonstrate how surrogacy 'binds reproductive labourers together by racializing their labour and dehumanizing those who perform it' (p. 52). Chapters two and three demonstrate the importance of what she calls *the Black feminist philosophy of history* to analyse neo-slave narratives *vis-à-vis* an array of contemporary black feminist texts. Here, Weinbaum highlights how Black feminist writings in the late twentieth century gender deployed the DuBoisian concept of the general strike against slavery, as the notion centres 'sexual and reproductive insurgency as central to slavery's overthrow' (p. 26). Weinbaum illustrates this further in her close reading of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), which follows the story of Margaret Garner, an enslaved woman on the run who would rather commit infanticide than see her children endure a life of slavery. Weinbaum posits that the protagonist's socio-political sexual and reproductive agency encapsulates the radical idea that insurgent violence interrupts the hegemony that undergirds reproduction extraction, both past and present. As chapter four unfolds, Weinbaum expounds on the subtleties of women's political agency within the contemporary reproductive extraction nexus, using the literary genre of Black feminist science fiction works. The final and most engaging chapter takes on the topic of cloning via the films, *The Island* (2005) and *Never Let Me Go* (2010). Weinbaum demonstrates how the racialising process of reproductive extraction also affects non-Black women. White characters are racialised as chattel for reproduction and organ harvesting. Despite their humanity and personal agency, their status as 'clones' normalises the extraction of the biological labour. This 'flickering on and off of blackness' extends the process beyond Black women and perpetuates the slave episteme in today's neoliberal biocapitalism.

The contributions of this book intersect with Black Marxism, Intellectual History, and critical race theory. Weinbaum challenges the genealogy of black Marxism as distinctly masculine through her treatment of selected black feminist works of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. These works address reproductive extraction and slavery using a Black Marxist tradition of radical insurgency. Consequently, she calls for the recognition of these thinkers as contributors to Black Marxism. This three-decade period of black feminists, who published works on rising neoliberalism and biocapitalism, constitutes what Weinbaum calls a Black feminist philosophy of history that needs further examination. As for critical race studies, Weinbaum contributes to a new dimension of how race operates. Instead of situating race as a mobilising social construct attached to individual bodies and populations that lends to the hierarchical power of nation-states, capitalism, and racial domination (p. 48), she treats race as a *process*. Weinbaum notes that this is a point of departure from theories of racialisation since it renders racial ascription to populations of little use in understanding how the slave episteme operates in today's neoliberal biocapitalism. In this way, racialisation as a process accounts for why society can conceive of the dehumanisation and alienation of those whose reproductive labour is extracted - in the absence of black bodies.

Despite the sometimes rather weighty, dense writing of this tome, feminist scholars will find this book an engaging and exciting read. Weinbaum is a careful scholar who meticulously lays out and traces the evolution of her argument. She eloquently demonstrates how current-day neoliberal biocapitalism is reproduced through racialised and gendered processes that continue to exploit, dehumanise, and devalue women's reproductive labour. The foci on Black feminist scholars - who Weinbaum argues should be included in the Black Marxist tradition - emphasises the history of women's insurgency against exploitation, instead of the emphasis on exploitation itself. These insights lend to strategies that can be used to epistemically and empirically dismantle reproductive exploitation. However, I did find it curious that Carole Boyce Davies' work is absent, primarily as she addresses some of the key criticisms of Black Marxism that Weinbaum lays out in her book. As a scholar who uses critical race theories in my own work, I held a high level of scepticism at the concept of the 'flickering on and off of blackness.' However, Weinbaum thoroughly engages the literature to present the reader with a sound and convincing argument. Her exegesis of Black feminist scholarship makes visible the slave episteme that does not necessarily manifest itself in tangible ways.

Ultimately, *The Afterlife of Reproductive Slavery: Biocapitalism and black feminism's philosophy of history* does not disappoint. It does the job of demonstrating the complex connections between the gendered and racialised reproductive exploitation and extraction during the historical Atlantic slave trade period and today exceedingly well.

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