

↪ Interview 01 ↩

Rozena Maart in Conversation with Sabine Broeck

ROZENA MAART: In Chapter one of your book, *Against Gender: Enslavism and the Subjects of Feminism* you introduce your point of departure for the book, on page 1, as follows: ‘This book is about a (self-)critical recuperation of White feminist interventions, which have paradigmatically shaped my generation’s trajectory of gender studies. It could not have been written without Black feminism’. Can you elaborate on this a little?

SABINE BROECK: The two most important mental turning points I went through in my decades [of] long study of Black feminism were, one, that it has entirely reshaped my idea of White feminism’s philosophical premises and second, that therefore I needed to study and destruct the epistemic regime of post-Enlightenment White power (including the paradigm of gender) instead of continuing the well-established, practice of White-on-Black ethnography (which is a standing practice in theory and/or lit crit, too!) that has been the overall gist of much White research and teaching of Black diasporic cultures and literatures, including my own for a long phase of my professional life. Apart from having been impacted upon by personal interaction with Black scholars and activists which have massively amplified and furthered those insights, I have been invited and pushed into these reconsiderations by a series of crucial Black feminist texts which have become signposts for this trajectory I am still learning within.

In 1969, Fran Beale published ‘Black Women’s Manifesto: Double Jeopardy: To be Black and Female’.

<http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/45a/196.html>

One of the pioneering intersectionalists avant la lettre, she described the nature of African-American women’s unique oppression within sexist and

racist orders. *The Black Woman: An Anthology* edited by Toni Cade Bambara in 1970, which assembles an array of key texts for the emerging new wave of Black feminism, all of which insist on the importance of recognizing the fact that woman is not one homogenous entity, and criticizing White feminism for its middle class solipsism, elitism and racism. 1977 sees the publication of the foundational Combahee River Collective Statement by a group of Black lesbian feminists ‘actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking’.

<https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/combahee-river-collective-statement-1977/>

Reading this, I realized, again that White feminism had no epistemic, political or ethical right to represent all women as if they inhabited the category of universal female. Similarly, Angela Davis in ‘Reflections on the Black Woman’s Role in the Community of Slaves’, from 1971, taught me to make the history of enslavement and the history of Black women central to my reading of, and takes on, American Studies, and feminism. I came, so to speak, to Poe and to Gertrude Stein, for that matter, after Toni Cade Bambara, to Foucault later on, after the Combahee River manifesto, and to Derrida after Angela Davis since I studied all of these texts (and a whole other plethora of texts culled from their respective bibliographies for my master’s exam thesis in the mid- to late 1970s, before I even entered my professional life as an Americanist. The breakthrough text: *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave* (Black Women’s Studies), edited by Akasha Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell-Scott, and Barbara Smith, was one of the first texts initiating my dissertation, in translation of the publication’s German title: *The Decolonized Body, A Study of the Black Female Narrative Tradition from the 1950s to 1980s* which, again, made me understand the particularity of White feminist claims when seen from a Black feminist perspective. The text, however, for my turn to a kind of meta-reflection of White epistemologies, beginning with a study of White American women’s literature of the 20th century (*White Amnesia, Black Memory*) and taken to a critique of theory in *Gender and the Abjection of Blackness* was Hortense Spillers ‘Mamas Baby, Papa’s Maybe’ from 1987.

[https://people.ucsc.edu/~nmitchel/hortense_spillers -
_mamas_baby_papas_maybe.pdf](https://people.ucsc.edu/~nmitchel/hortense_spillers_-_mamas_baby_papas_maybe.pdf)

This is an essay that turned my world upside down. As much as that essay has been one of the most brilliant contributions to Black feminist intra-mural interventions into Black intellectual and activist debates, I read it as a kind of massive epistemic attack on White gender theory, in its deliberations of the post-enslavement categorical distinction between the free human gendered body and Black enslaved ungendered flesh – which meant to me that gender theory itself as I had immersed myself in it, was deeply flawed in its conception since it has refused to theorize enslavement. I realized that Black feminist intellectual intervention had to be understood as the most advanced vantage point from which to read all the world in its post Enlightenment formation, including the paradigm of the gender episteme, and women’s literature canons. For the second book which came out in 1997, I also intensively studied Wynter’s *The Ceremony Must Be Found: After Humanism* from 1984, and knew then, for sure, that I had to keep up with Black feminist philosophical critique of the solipsism, racism, and agnotology of White Humanities in their various disciplinary forms, and of White gender studies, and feminism in particular.

These were the teaching moments in a very important process of realization for me: that as a White feminist and scholar, I needed to find a way of becoming a ‘spoken-to’ by Black feminist knowledge, in order to turn the lens on White philosophy which has also taken me to prioritize both Christina Sharpe’s and Saidiya Hartman’s work as orientation marker for my more recent work. So the book is literally a reckoning with that history, which means I have immersed myself into a trajectory of the modern West’s epistemologies – as manifest in post-Enlightenment philosophies and sciences of the human – as a White regime of thought, which needs to be aggressively unlearned. From Black feminism, I learned not to read in identification with White gender theory, but in the antagonism created by a perspective that acknowledges our present tense as the afterlife of slavery.

ROZENA MAART: At the start of your book, *Gender and Abjection of Blackness*, you make it very clear that you are arguing against gender. Whilst I have written a review of your book, I was wondering whether you could comment on this, as per the title of chapter one, and perhaps give some indication of how scholars have reacted to your argument.

SABINE BROECK: The book came out in 2018, the year I had my first severe ankle injury, so I could not do a book tour. In 2019 I had another injury and was bound to stay at home as well. Then in 2020, we have the pandemic. So I haven't had much chance to gauge possible responses to the book, because I haven't been out and around discussing it with colleagues and students. I see people are reading the intro chapter on academia.edu, but I can't say, of course, what they think about it. There is a review by political science professor Erica Townsend-Bell in *Politics & Gender* (2020), and a short interview here:

<https://blackgendareport.com/bar-book-forum-julia-jordan-zacheryshadow-bodiesand-sabine-broecks-gender-and-abjection-blackness> .

The title of the introductory chapter of course wants to be a provocation. I do invite readers to rethink their relation to gender as a formation, a discourse, a habitus, and as an epistemology because of the intimate relation it entertains to *enslavism*. So, my aim was not to add something (as much White gender studies that have learned to occasionally include a rather generalized hint a black woman's work for diversity purposes, or add a Black contribution to their argument), and I also did not want to go with the recently fashionable spread of intersectionality in gender studies, because in too many cases in White interventions, intersectionality does not go beyond using it as a lens to talk in more sophisticated ways about Black women, and to read Black critics and knowledge producers as crown witnesses, as ethnographers, of their own particular situation. Those contributions mostly fail to see Black knowledge, specifically Black feminism, as an intervention that calls our entire artifice of post-Enlightenment humanism, including the paradigm of gender, into question. When Wollstonecraft creates the premise: 'We are not your slaves', which served as the crucial lever to mobilize a notion of a society split by gender, but with both sides being read and valued as human, and therefore having to be granted equity in entitlements and rights and civil status, she sets in motion a trajectory of Black being's (the enslaved and as a continuation of that thingified existence of sentient being, the n... 's) fungibility for White emancipation by way of that analogy which permutates way into our present moment. So that a violent anti-Blackness has become anchored within gender theories' various sophisticated incarnations, by way of ignoring Black existence in its life-producing capacity, and its epistemic agency, but using it in so many ways for its rhetorical value. Yes, so then, one needs to be against

gender as we know it ... and I do assume this as a provocation to White readers.

ROZENA MAART: On page 6, you note: ‘I propose enslavism as a term necessary 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 in bygone history’. How might students and emerging scholars think through this time in view of the most recent global anti-racist protests?

SABINE BROECK: When I first thought of that term – *enslavism* – it came out of a response to a disjoint. On the one hand, there were Black struggles, Black intellectual interventions, and Black knowledges throughout the US, the wider diaspora, on the African continent, and of course in South Africa, against what Saidiya Hartman has called the afterlife of slavery, the future slavery has made. On so many different levels: political, cultural, social, economic western societies have upheld an abjection of Black life on the levels of individual practices, structures, civil procedures, apparatuses like education and the police, and others. In the book, I talk about why I say abjection: I read the violence against Black life in an entirely anti-Hegelian mode: the subject-object binary has from Hegel onwards been cast as something potentially reversible, and it characterizes an intra-human relationship, a kinship that can be, and has been, struggled over, but that is ontologically a given. Following Wilderson’s and Sexton’s reading of Patterson’s notion of social death, I do not see a human relation between the (White) human on the one hand, and Black life, on the other. In the human (structurally cast as White) gaze there is no acknowledged relation between the human and the things in their possession, in their use, in their fancy, in their desires; and Black being has been made the heir of the enslaved throughout Western history. Black women have been condemned by human society, to giving birth to unfreedom (as both Sharpe, and Hartman have recently argued respectively – see the last chapter in my book). So we are faced with this ongoing gratuitous violence against Black life, this fungibility and this accumulation of Black life for the human (Hartman’s terms, see my book chapter on her work). And then, on the other hand, and in total epistemic disregard, in blatant agnotology, we have White academic systems that have banished enslavement to ‘transatlantic slavery’ which is a bygone event in history. It’s over, abolition cancelled it. We have libraries full of detailed research on almost all small and big facts of

enslavement in the transatlantic (and even the pacific) realm at this point. However, without very few exceptions, outside slavery historians no academic discipline in their White authored incarnations (not philosophy, not political studies, not social sciences, not natural sciences, not even and strikingly so many academics in postcolonial studies) have taken it as their task to ask their own epistemologies and their disciplines the simple question of what does it mean, that the human could become a free subject, because the Black could not (paraphrasing Fanon here). What does that mean for anti-Black violence ongoing – which then appears not at all like a number of aberrations of the system, or a series of voluntarily committed evil deeds by ultra-racist actors, or a lack of anti-racist training, or a not-yet-diverse-enough institutional staff? Instead it looks like an on-going human practice that needs to be theorisable as such, on the same footing as, e.g. sexism, or fascism, or colonialism. So we need to name, critique, subvert and destruct it as a set of political, cultural, social practices on repeat, not just an isolated and past historical phenomenon. We need a rupture, to go beyond historiography (which is of course the indelible basis for all this thinking!) into theory about enslavement and the future it has made for us. Like after decolonial thinkers like Dussel and Mignolo coined the term ‘coloniality’, we could talk about the metropolis and the West as colonial, never mind the presence or absence of actual colonies, we could critique a zoo as colonialist, a museum, pop songs, chocolate advertisement. So, to bring it to the present moment of militant activism against anti-Black violence which has shaken the globe recently: I am hoping the term might help to understand racial profiling in Germany as enslavist, to understand it as connected to learned White practices that make of Black being transactionable lives that the human can do all possible things with and violence to without redress, and without it being a transgression of rights. If we have a term, it might help to connect the dots between those enslavist practices across vastly different terrains which are all connected by way of sharing an acquired human modus and habitus of entitlement to and use of anti-Black violence and of a learned right to abject Black life on all possible levels.

ROZENA MAART: In your chapter, ‘Gender and the Grammar of Enslavism’, page 45, you note: ‘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’. Can you offer us

some insight into how you reached this position and what the implications are for those who teach in Gender Studies, and argue that gender has to be placed within the central focus of the decolonial lens?

SABINE BROECK: What I have shown in my book is the intimacy, as I call it, between the idea of human life as organized by the binary paradigm of gender (even if, as Judith Butler's pioneering oeuvre has argued, gender must be seen as a performative, as a social construction that is not in any way innate to so-called human nature) and the abjection of Black life by human society. The paradigm has worked as a tool for White women's antipatriarchal liberation by the very creation of an antagonism of the intra-human struggle over who has the right to count as human (as in patriarchy against women) versus the abjection of Black life as a fungible commodity split entirely from human value. So, while White women could and have joined a (post)-Hegelian struggle in the terms of the supposed object's resistance against the dominant subject, in order to partake in full human subjectivity, Black (post)enslaved lives and their existential struggles have been, as 'thingified' beings (seen from the human's perspective), a priori excluded from these trajectories of contention over humanness. The book thus calls for a turn in gender studies to see gender theory as an instrument of abjection, in that it has only worked so successfully for White women because it created the necessary frame for them to have their humanity recognized because they were not Black, because they were not connected to slaveness - so that slaveness could be used freely as analogy. And this strand of gender as a White antagonistic differentiation from Blackness runs through the entire canon of White gender theory.

Decolonial feminists based in Indigenous communities have also demanded an overhaul of feminist theory, critiquing the rampant White universalization of Western modernity's philosophical repertoires of masculinity and femininity that is contained even in feminism, as local construction, as it were. I think there is overlap between decolonial and Black critical philosophies in that both struggle against the 'overrepresentation' of MAN (including White women) as the universal human, in Wynter's phrase.

But analytically speaking they do not harmoniously cohere because of the different structural positions between colonized subjects turned into objects on the one hand, and the enslavist abjection of Black being as fungible thing without claims to land or nativist teleologies. I think that many people who do not want to make categorical distinctions between *enslavism* and colonialism

(or even between all the many old and new form of legal and factual forms of violent servitude across the globe) miss the crucial importance of the Middle Passage, which means they ignore the fact that Black being in the wake of New World anti-Black enslavement were by force made ‘shippable’, that is being forced into a sentient life without – in the perspective of the human abjector/enslaver - any claims to human sociality based on land, kinship, civil traditions, epistemic communities, languages, religions, and being forced by this thingified dis- and relocation into a state of self-reproducing unfreedom across generations. If you remember the legal codes of *partus sequitur ventrem*, enslaved mothers gave birth to always already enslaved children. So Black social death was ‘inheritable’ on the side of the (post) enslaved Black person, and property and fungibility of Black life was ‘bequeathable’ across generations among humans, without the enslaved being able to make any civil claims with respect to his own nativity as an Indigenous subject of land and kinship. However, both Black and decolonial feminists have again and again insisted, from Sojourner Truth to theories of intersectionality, and recent interventions in support of trans-lives that a struggle against misogyny, male violence and sexualized transgression must be urgent and vital to the struggles against racial capitalism in all its localized shapes and forms – for me, those kinds of violence are part and parcel of *enslavism*.

ROZENA MAART: Further along in chapter three, in a subsection titled ‘Enslavism and Abjection’, you assert: ‘... by contrast, modern *enslavism* needs to be analysed as the major propeller of modern capitalist mental and constituencies. If commodification and propertisation, the learning, grasping, materializing of the world as ownable, have been generally acknowledged, as the characteristics of (post)modern capitalist society, then the White abjection of Blackness, the violent making of thing beings, of packable, shippable, transportable and possessable, and as such, usable, itemizable, and fungible bodily entities, was its constitutive practice’. Can you offer some further insight here? I am thinking of the decolonisation movement in South Africa, and the manner in which previously enslaved communities are working towards recovering their forgotten, neglected and hidden histories.

SABINE BROECK: So you are asking: given that *enslavism* is the anti-Black environment which is being enacted by ‘carceral capitalist’ human society on a daily basis (from racial profiling to the prison industrial complex to the street

killings to the systematic letting-die of Black life in Katrina's New Orleans, in the Mediterranean and elsewhere, as well as in the abandonment of Black life to the pandemic) but also becomes manifest in White society's profiteering from the massive and indomitable Black creativity, knowledge, as well as from Black social, political, cultural and economic capability (what Wilderson would call 'performing freedom') how is Black life being lived, how is Black life being held tight, how is Black life being saved and is being cared for, against that perpetual onslaught? I don't think it is my position to answer that question as a White person, it seems presumptuous to pronounce on the histories of recovery and resistance, other than learning their lessons respectfully. One thing I do would like to say is that for me, there is no redemptive horizon within the world as we know it, no reconciliation or recognition to expect from the human as we know them. If the human is because the Black is not - again Fanon - for Black life to be free will entail the end of the human world as we White humans have established and dominated it. So there is a Black freedom struggle and life within and against social death - as has so massively become visible in the last years in the #BlackLivesMatter campaigns all over the world. I see it not in redemptive accommodation policies, not in harmonious diversity campaigns, nor in so-called electoral victories like Kamala Harris' vice-presidency. I think Black activists, intellectuals, artists and scientists throughout the entire diaspora have amassed incredibly persistent trajectories of counter-memory, and counter-knowledge in all areas of life over the centuries. These days in particular, one witnesses a massive global proliferation in and because of social media communication channels being so much more international, being shared in real time, and being extremely well networked. The question is much rather: how will that epistemic, cultural and political wealth, establish Black power against enslavement? The end the world as we know it means #RhodesMustFall. That entails as much a material practice of militant struggles already taking place in South Africa, and elsewhere, as it may be seen as a surging inspiring metaphor for culture, politics, social life and the economy. Land must be distributed, the police must be abolished, the state and its White power institutions must be destructed, capitalism has to be vanquished. The problem with those demands is obvious: they come without immediately transparent facile and swiftly ownable 'methodologies' to arrive at results, without immediate solutions. The challenge to us academics who have been trained to think these days that there is a quick fix positivistic research project for everything, is that these struggles

are not contained in discourse, but will demand material change, and will call for massive social, political, and cultural losses for White human possessions and entitlements. I doubt that White academia is anywhere near ready for this, given how minimal even the epistemic inroads into Higher Education still are. But the fact that there is no majority will, nor any general consensus of the ‘how to go about to reach these goals’ does not invalidate the perspective, in my opinion. I go with Frank Wilderson’s reminder: the power to pose the question is the greatest power of all. I would also caution – which, having served my tenure at this point is probably rather much easier for me to say than for younger scholars – to not put too much emphasis, let alone hope on academia, and on us as academics. I am not saying we are useless, I think we have a lot of destructive homework to do in terms of shattering epistemologies of the human. But the world does not pivot on academic institutions. I guess it is going to be much more the issue of, as we used to ask each other in my activist days as a student: which side will you be on?

Acknowledgement: Sabine Broeck wishes to acknowledge, through the ‘Critical Times, Critical Race’ research group, which was a recipient of a research grant through the National Research Foundation of South Africa [NRF], for their support in making travel and symposiums available that furthered discussion and research with students.