Surrogate selves: notes on anti-trafficking and anti-blackness

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This essay explores the discursive production of black captivity across the African diaspora in the afterlife of slavery. I take as my objects of analysis the contemporary anti-trafficking and anti-slavery movements, features of the increasing hegemony of human rights discourse for formulating problems of social justice and their remedies. I argue that configuring black captivity – in this case, the experiences of Nigerian women migrants to Western Europe – through these hegemonic discourses extend, rather than ameliorate, the global structural antagonism of anti-blackness.

Keywords: slavery; anti-blackness; anti-trafficking; modern-day slavery; Nigeria; globalization; racial/sexual violence; black migration

The slave population, it could be and was assumed, offered itself up as surrogate selves for meditation on problems of human freedom, its lure and its elusiveness. (Toni Morrison, 1993)

The objective of this essay is to show how anti-blackness underwrites the present movement to challenge human trafficking and what has come to be called 'modern-day slavery.' I assess anti-trafficking discourse and the specter of slavery that both haunts it and on which it parasitically feeds. The notion of 'modern-day slavery,' or the 'new slavery,' has gained considerable currency within the human rights movement to describe some of the coercive working and living conditions under which many migrants toil around the globe – often, but not exclusively or even primarily, for purposes of commercial sex. When we actually bring contemporary abolitionism face-to-face with the historical structure installed by racial slavery and the transatlantic trade in African bodies on which it was based, however, we see that the discourse on contemporary forms of slavery fails to make a critical political and analytical distinction between the respective and differing positionalities of black people as compared with non-black post-colonial subjects within the global onto-epistemic structure of the modern world. In short, I argue that the contemporary anti-slavery movement deploys the specter of African slaves as 'surrogate selves' through which to meditate on the ongoing problems of human freedom global capitalism still presents, and it does so in highly eroticized ways that in fact erase both the erotic struggle for black liberation and the sexual violence intrinsic to empire generally, and to anti-blackness in particular.

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The specific concern guiding this analysis is the problem of black women's captivity globally, and in particular with the increasingly visible criminalization of Nigerian women in Western Europe. These migrant women are incarcerated for offenses associated with drugs or commercial sex, and are often portrayed as victims of the international human trafficking industry. Trafficking affects hundreds of thousands of young women and men, girls and boys, mostly from the global South, who migrate for economic purposes, or are transported for such reasons, within conditions often marked by varying levels of coercion, deceit, extortion, physical violence, rape, and detention. In one weekend in March 2003, 84 'suspected prostitutes' were deported to Nigeria from Italy, joining the several thousand of other Nigerian women who have been deported from European countries such as Italy, Germany, Britain, and Belgium since the late 1990s (Kempadoo, 2005, pp. 35–36).

Since any ethical interrogation of criminalization begins with an accounting of the social, rather than the individual, increasing imprisonment of Nigerian migrant women in Europe indicts the context of neoliberal globalization. As a number of researchers have documented, the globalization of neoliberal market systems of production and governance articulate with colonial legacies to transform Nigeria (compare Falola & Ihonvbere, 1987; Onimode, 1992; Oronta & Douglas, 2001). At independence from Britain in 1960, Nigeria was virtually self-sufficient in food production; today it is dependent upon food imports and foreign aid, and is structurally incapable of meeting the most basic needs of its people. The rise of modern terror in postcolonial Africa – its despotism, mass killings, material crises, epidemics of premature death, wanton natural resource exploitation – constitutes the grounds for Achille Mbembe's formulation of 'necropolitics.' In noting the way that 'the political economy of statehood [in Africa] has dramatically changed over the last quarter of the twentieth century' in connection with 'the wars of the globalization era,' Mbembe expands on Michel Foucault's notion of biopower (Mbembe, 2003, pp. 30–32). Whereas biopower marks how governance calculates the techniques for population control in the name of promoting a 'way of life,' 'necropower' is the subjugation of life to the power of death. It is the management of populations through the practice of killing.

For Mbembe, postcolonial Africa emerges as a zone where the state operates as if it were in a constant state of war. The postcolony is where 'the fiction of a distinction between "the ends of war" and the "means of war" collapses; so does the fiction that war functions as a rule-governed contest, as opposed to pure slaughter without risk or instrumental justification' (Mbembe, 2003, p. 25). These material processes are the conditions of possibility for economic migration and any adequate accounting of criminalization in the African diaspora must attend to this political and economic context. Denise Ferreira da Silva refers to this situation as the 'criminalization of dispossession,' noting as well the concomitant escalation of deadly police actions in the economically dispossessed regions where racial subalterns reside (Ferreira da Silva, 2001).

A political economic analysis, however, merely situates but cannot exhaust our consideration of Nigerian women incarcerated in Western prisons, nor is it adequate for conceptualizing the essential contours of black punishment more generally. Criminalization is first and foremost a political-symbolic tool, and as such, our inquiry must attend to the onto-epistemic frameworks operating on black women in

their movements from the postcolony to the West. To put it differently, I view the problem of criminalization in terms of Frank Wilderson's concept of 'political ontology.' In this instance, the political ontology of race dissects the supposedly juridical procedure of criminalization, exposing it as the outcome of a politics and available to challenge through popular mobilization. At the same time, Wilderson's concept underscores how it is not simply a description of a political status either, because criminalization functions *as if* it were a metaphysical property across the pre-modern, modern, and now post-modern eras (Sexton, 2010a; Wilderson, 2010).

The specific problem I engage in this essay, then, is the political ontology of race in which black women's bodies 'always-already signify violence' (Ferreira da Silva, 2009, p. 213). I engage with scholarship on the structure of racial slavery and what Saidiya Hartman has named its *afterlife*, its articulation with what Greg Thomas terms the 'sexual demon of colonial power,' and, more specifically, with the legal and political status of the captive black female that is paradigmatic for (1) the extremity of power that enslavement itself signifies, and (2) the reproduction of racial and sexual difference long after the operation of slave or colonial law has been reconfigured in the post-emancipation and post-colonial world into the humane and the tolerable (Hartman, 1997, pp. 85–86; Sexton, 2010a, pp. 33, 37; Thomas, 2007). With this context in focus, what is most troubling for me about the Nigerian woman languishing in a British or Italian prison is not her supposed 'criminality,' or the prejudicial operation of 'justice,' or even the political economy of globalization that conditioned her migration from her homeland, although certainly the latter two issues are matters against which to mobilize. Rather, what concerns me is 'the epistemological violence of the existing map' on which her subjectivity appears under erasure, as always and already captured flesh – a cartography that makes her twenty-first century migration into the Western prison a Middle Passage *redux* (Rodriguez, 2006; Wilderson, 2010, p. 123).

As I will demonstrate, the anti-trafficking movement is mired in an ahistoricism symptomatic of our anti-black world. In this case, slavery is evoked to cloak the movement with political saliency and emotional urgency, while obscuring the ongoing calculus of racial slavery's afterlife, the sexual terror of enslavement and coloniality, and the conspicuous absence of both from the discourse on human trafficking. I want to be clear that I consider much of the interventions of the anti-trafficking movement important to political struggles against the violence and injustice of the ruling global political economic order, and do not generally contest the realities of women's exploitation and oppression that these terrible facts document (Tadiar, 2009, p. 3). Indeed, I am less interested with documenting so-called 'deviant acts' nor with an empirical study of the migration or trafficked experience. I recognize the importance of hearing the voices of the women whose bodies are scrutinized in the discourses I critique, and moreover, of not reinscribing their invisibility by *not* centering their lived experiences.[1] To borrow from Neferti Tadiar's probing assessment of sexual economies, my concern is with the conditions and limits of the epistemic frameworks deployed to construct black women and legitimate their captivity, and in particular the political contradictions conveyed in the norms such knowledge institutes (Tadiar, 2009, p. 3). The suffering of the trafficked young Nigerian woman becomes metaphorical in the hands of the anti-trafficking movement. I suggest that the discourses on human trafficking and modern-day slavery extend, rather than amend, the violent anti-black cartography

underwriting the modern world since at least the mid-sixteenth-century Dutch Golden Age. In this way, black women continue to serve as 'surrogate selves,' to employ Toni Morrison's words, 'for reflection on human freedom in terms other than the abstractions of human potential and the rights of man' animating the human rights corpus and its allegiance to Enlightenment notions of sovereignty grounded in anti-blackness (Morrison, 1993, p. 38).

Human trafficking and the specter of racial-sexual terror

In its recent report, the US Department of State finds that over 12 million people worldwide are victims of 'trafficking in persons': trapped in forced labor, bonded labor, or prostitution (US Department of State, 2010). Other reports put the figure upwards of 27 million persons trapped in 'modern-day slavery' (Verité, 2010). In her review of the extant literature on human trafficking, Jennifer Musto states that methodological challenges lead to most researchers studying the most visible and accessible trafficked persons: namely women who have been trafficked for the purposes of sexual exploitation. Musto reports that, as a result of the prominence of sex, the vast majority of officially identified trafficking cases in the US center on forced prostitution and sexual slavery, despite the fact that 'trafficking' in its various guises is a feature of migrant labor markets across almost every industry (Musto, 2009, p. 282). This slant towards commercial sex is also the result of governance: the United Nations protocol against trafficking privileges a link between prostitution and trafficking; and US policies towards undocumented populations are most sympathetic to women trafficked for sexual purposes (Musto, 2009, pp. 282–283). The official incidence rates of trafficked persons are therefore less than reliable and are productive of the governmental relationship to poor working women in general.

The contemporary discourse on 'trafficked persons' and 'modern-day slavery' severely contorts the historical context of racial slavery, as well as the contradictory history of abolitionism that actually sought to contain the immiserated body by extending the apparatus of control, surveillance, and punishment over the formerly enslaved. News articles describing 'Nigeria's "respectable" slave trade' reveal a projection of Western nationhood's racial make-up and erotic paranoia by securing the discursive connections between Nigerian women selling sex in Europe and the 'new slavery' (Little, 2004). In these articles, published on the BBC website between 2000 and 2010, reporting on thousands of Nigerian young women 'forced to work as prostitutes in Mali "slave camps,"' on the rescue of 'about 200 "child slaves" from forests in the southwest,' or the 'hundreds of girls from Nigeria sold into sexual slavery in Europe each year [and] trafficked through England,' modern-day slavery is constructed as a mundane feature of contemporary Africa (BBC, 2010; Olukoya, 2003; Pannell, 2001). In this narrative, African agents foist slavery upon an unwilling West and Africa is construed, again, as the locus of criminality and barbarism. For example, the articles assert, 'human trafficking is not something that happens on the criminal fringes of Nigerian society. It is woven into the fabric of national life' (Little, 2004, p. 2). The articles portray the parents as willing participants in the victimization of their children. One of the articles quotes the president of UNICEF UK, David Puttnam, who states that what 'frustrates him here, in Nigeria, more than the poverty that is its root cause, is the attitude that accompanies it.' As Puttnam puts it, '*develop some determination* [a]nd this exploitation of children could be

tackled and Nigeria could be a really successful nation' (emphasis added) (Little, 2004, p. 3).

According to this narrative, modern day slavery is a product of African culture. Because this thesis is basic to the very cultural milieu in which it is articulated, Western white supremacist society, articles such as those cited above can routinely point to the dire poverty in Nigeria as a reason for children and young women migrating or being trafficked abroad without affecting the basic premise of cultural difference as the root cause for why black female sexuality is available for exploitation or accumulation. The articles repeatedly note 'almost all [Nigerians working in commercial sex in Italy] come from Edo state in southern Nigeria . . . [and yet,] no research has been done into why so many come from this one state . . .' (De Blank, 2005, p. 1). It hardly requires much investigation or journalistic integrity to consider the connection between the conditions of possibility for international human trafficking and the evisceration of the Niger River Delta region, in which Edo state is situated, by the multinational energy industry (Oronta & Douglas, 2001). Yet nowhere have I seen reports that suggest a relationship between these two processes. Absent a political economic contextualization that would necessitate identifying the continuities between colonization and the present, the gesture to poverty as a cause of trafficking is in fact a component of the cultural racism thesis: African cultural deficiencies produce predatory economic processes that cannot support civilized democracies. Or, as the UNICEF UK head Puttnam put it, 'Half of you feels sympathy [for the poverty and the victims of trafficking, b]ut the other half wants just to shake the people here and say look – this is a large, wealthy, powerful country. Put the structures in place. Develop some determination . . .' (Little, 2004, p. 3).

The argument that 'modern day slavery' emanates from African cultural backwardness raises a raw moment of historical reckoning and lays bare the essential anti-blackness subtending the journalistic outrage and strident advocacy against human trafficking. The anti-trafficking movement is historically and politically connected to the long-standing, and recently reinvigorated, position that Africans were as culpable for the transatlantic slave trade (and, consequently, for its aftermath as well) as were Europeans and Americans (compare Gates, 2010). This position aims to diffuse the reparations movement and conjoins the colorblind logic of the post-civil rights era: like simultaneous penalties against both sides in a sporting match, the fouls off-set one another, and therefore the only recourse is rhetorical reconciliation and the resumption of business as usual. The deadly effects of the structures of control and accumulation under the regime of colorblindness, or in the case of post-colonial Africa, the re-colonization of the continent by neoliberal global capital, are thereby disavowed (Bonilla-Silva, 2003).

The expenditure of 'prostitute' or 'trafficked person' across the post-Enlightenment, post-Emancipation, and post-colonial eras is historically embedded within both the material economic transactions of the neoliberal global economy and the ongoing currency of slavery's and colonialism's libidinal economies (Lyotard, 1993). Considering Western society's basis in the riotous carnal historical context of slavery and colonialism, it is unsurprising that today's discourse on human trafficking is inordinately preoccupied with women engaged in commercial sex. Given this historical context, inquiries into black migration and the criminalization of such mobility under neoliberal globalization must attend to the renewed manner in which 'the captive is made responsible for her undoing and the black body is made the

originary locus of its violation,' as was the case with slavery's preoccupation with the supposed sexual power of blacks, and in so doing, how contemporary discourses displace the organized violence mandated for captivity (Hartman, 1997, pp. 226–227, fn 6; Sexton, 2008, p. 113).

The organizing violence of Western civilization has entailed a graphically sexualized dichotomy between rational and sensory nature, between white and non-white persons and, in particular, the conceptualization of black people as an undisciplined mass of sexual savages. Frantz Fanon wrote in *Black Skin, White Masks*, 'In the case of the Jew, one thinks of money and its cognates. In that of the Negro, one thinks of sex' (Fanon, 1952, p. 160). Fanon went on to name the sexual neurosis of white supremacy as 'negrophobia,' instructing us to read the terror of racism as sexual revulsion, as a disavowed desire for 'immoral and shameful things' – black bodies, the lusted-after objects of colonial desire, imagined by the colonizer and slave master alike as hyper-sexual and bestial (Fanon, 1952, pp. 154–156). Thomas thus observes that the production of 'race' through violent carnality is simultaneously the normative process by which 'sex' or 'sexuality' is conferred (Thomas, 2003, p. 239). Pointedly, the reproduction of slavery and colonial power – of white supremacy and anti-blackness – is grounded in sexual violence and expresses 'itself along a range of stress points, including where human biology' would otherwise intersect with the project of culture, and where the terrain of desire and sexuality meant nothing less than the intimate combat of trench warfare (Spillers, 2003, p. 204). For Hortense Spillers, this socio-sexual politics 'represents for its African and indigenous peoples a scene of *actual* mutilation, dismemberment, and exile' that both explodes the prevailing assumptive logic of gender categorization itself as the necessary corollary of the slavocracy and underscores the essential bodily disintegration attendant to the captive black body (Spillers, 2003, p. 206).

The fact that slavery structures black bodies in antithetical opposition to Western categories of sex and gender bears massive consequences for our present study of the black incarcerated body, criminalized globally for commercial sex or for *being* contraband in the global war on drugs. Thomas observes that in the historiography of slavery there has been a tendency (even among black feminist authors) to reduce the violence of slavery, and the violations of sex therein, to a social conflict – or as Hazel Carby famously put it, the black female is said to embody 'a locus of contradictions' (1987, p. 15). The Nigerian migrant woman incarcerated in Western prisons, however, represents a locus of *antagonisms*, not a social conflict or a set of material contradictions, that cannot be resolved by 'reconstructing [her] woman-hood' (in Carby's terms), as in a social scientific or juridical demonstration of the consensual dimensions to her commercial activity – sexual, illicit, or otherwise – or by pointing to the fact that her victimization, as the case may be, is facilitated by other blacks (traffickers, parents, pimps, the African state, etc.). The deployment of sexual crimes to reproduce the relations of slavery (motherless and fatherless breeding) points to how, in Sylvia Wynter's terms, blackness is the symbolic negation of womanhood and manhood, as much as it is of whiteness – thereby, underscoring the fundamental antagonism of blackness (Thomas, 2005, pp. 79–80). This is not the stuff of a social conflict, resolvable through an end to exploitation or a transfer in political power (to wit, the era of formal legal equality and multiculturalism in North America, or national independence in formerly colonized Africa).

The discourse on anti-trafficking repackages the time-worn theme of colonialism's so-called civilizing mission. Fanon explained in *Wretched of the Earth* how colonialism teaches the colonized that decolonization would result in '"barbarism," degradation, and bestiality' (1961, p. 211). The anti-trafficking discourse simultaneously projects this savagery onto contemporary post-independence Africa and denounces the continent's sexual regression after the end of formal colonial rule, having constructed it as such after the image of the West's own negrophobia. If we can understand the slavocracy and the colony in terms of the measure of sexual license it reserved for the privileged, we should read the era of globalization and its 'helping' discourses (anti-trafficking) and institutions (human rights doctrine) in similar terms.

Anti-blackness and the 'new slavery'

The anti-trafficking and human rights movement's assertion of 'modern-day slavery' reproduces a disabling historical amnesia about the precise manner in which neoliberal globalization imbricates with the slave trade and stands as decolonization's failure (as yet). Rather than lending it moral authority and political urgency, the specter of slavery ought to be a scandal to current anti-trafficking discourse and human rights doctrine because the movement to reduce women's sexual exploitation does not account for the ontological suffering intrinsic to the anti-black world. A number of points demand exposition towards this end: first, the features of the anti-black world; second, the constituent elements of slavery that structure anti-blackness; third, the points at which slavery and colonial subjection diverge; and fourth, the distinction that then emerges between enslavement – that which happens to non-human objects – and exploitation, the process of oppressing human subjects by alienating them from their labor power or political sovereignty and territory.

Lewis Gordon formulates 'anti-blackness' as an onto-epistemic condition of negation, since the human race is normatively white, racialized human beings – in other words, a subspecies of humanity are non-white. According to the Manichæan terms of the modern world, the opposite of white (human being) is its negation, black (human nothingness). Following Gordon, who builds upon the path laid by Fanon, we must treat blackness as a realm of negativity, not as a set of physical attributes, encompassing of bodies (black people), social spaces (black neighborhoods), and geo-political regions (Africa and the diaspora).

The anti-black world is a historically specific context, spanning at least since the Age of Discovery through to the present and beyond, in which the slave is paradigmatically black (Gordon, 1997, pp. 73–85). As Jared Sexton writes, there is an ontological difference, therefore, between the oppression and dehumanization of the masses of people across the globe suffering and toiling in societies structured in dominance – including the colonization of their land and resources, the exploitation of their labor, the subordination of their cultures, and even their extermination in whole or in part – 'and the singular commodification of human being pursued under racial slavery, that structure of gratuitous violence in which bodies are rendered as flesh to be accumulated and exchanged' (Sexton, 2010a, p. 17). The attributes of this difference are laid out by Orlando Patterson in his 1982 study *Slavery and Social Death,* where he teaches us that the essential elements of slavery have to do with matters of kinship and belonging, with the plight of 'social death' in which all honor

and 'human recognition' (in Fanon's words) is deprived by force of law. 'Natal alienation . . . the loss of ties of birth in both ascending and descending generations,' means that the slave is the 'ultimate human tool,' isolated from human relations and obtaining only to the universe of objects (Patterson, 1982, p. 7–8). According to Patterson, then, fungibility and accumulation are the constituent elements of slavery; or, to state it differently, the slave's primary reason for being is to exist as a thing for the whims of the captor, while her exploited labor, although a commonality of slavery, in fact, is of secondary importance.

Wilderson's conception of the political ontology of race, outlined at the outset of this essay, helps us recognize the durable conflation of racial blackness as 'categorical eligibility for enslavement,' whether or not the institution of slavery has technically, legally, receded into the past (Sexton, 2010b, p. 37). As Wilderson's concept explains, then, the racialized status of enslavement acts as if it were a metaphysical condition, despite constant contestation. A sampling of research across a variety of disciplines and contexts underscores the fact that this connection is by now a well-established verity, affirming that blackness is first and foremost a category of negation and fungibility, despite variations across time and place (compare Baucom, 2005; Davis, 2003; Eltis, 2000; Wacquant, 2002; Washington, 2008). In a famous passage, Fanon put it thus: 'Ontology – once it is finally admitted as leaving existence by the wayside – does not permit us to understand the being of the black man . . . The black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man' (1952, p. 110). Fanon is sketching the paradigm of the anti-black world, which is grounded in the *antirelation* of blackness: that is, irrespective of formal political empowerment in the post-Civil Rights and post-independence period – *leaving existence by the wayside* – blackness signifies 'the impossible subjectivity of a sentient being who can have no recognition in the eyes of the Other' (Wilderson, 2008, p. 103). Spillers enjoins this paradigm, writing that the socio-political order of the New World instantiates a political ontology in which the black body as a 'captive body' is branded as such from one generation to the next, 'even though the captive flesh/body has been 'liberated,' and no one need pretend that even the quotation marks do not matter' (Spillers, 2003, p. 208).

The cultural production of desire for black bodies is thus also the political production of culture in Western society. For our present consideration of the discourse on 'modern-day slavery,' at issue is the political production of anti-blackness. The analysis of anti-blackness is too infrequently employed in the study of postcolonial Africa and its (renewed) diaspora. On this score, we can simply return to Mbembe's take on the postcolony, cited earlier. As Sexton explains in his critique of what he terms 'people-of-color-blindness,' Mbembe locates necropolitics in the administration of colonial and postcolonial sovereignty, and not as a result of the structures of terror already instantiated prior to colonization by the institutions of racial slavery and the Middle Passage (Sexton, 2010b). Although Mbembe writes in 'Necropolitics' of racial slavery as 'one of the first instances of biopolitical experimentation,' his meditation glosses over slavery in order to locate 'the peculiar terror formation' in the emergence of colonial rule (2003, p. 21). Mbembe's overview of the historical trajectory from slavery to postcolony evinces the occlusion of racial slavery in the formation of the present – especially when we contrast Mbembe's reading with that of the very same historical period by Walter Rodney in his classic study *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1982).

With the shift from 'an economy based on the slave trade' to a nascent colonial economy, according to Mbembe, the African continent engages in a process of 'turning inward on itself in a very serious way' (2001, pp. 68–69). African societies thus embarked upon an internecine transition that prepared the ground for subsequent colonial conquest. In Mbembe's history: 'A tradition of predatory states living by raiding, capturing, and selling captives' fostered a 'territorial fragmentation and structural stagnation'; societies and nascent states 'devoid of civil responsibility' and hell-bent on dominance used 'war as a resource' to exact authoritarian and tributive relations, succeeding 'in criminalizing not only economic activity but the very act of governing,' and ultimately, with a shift to an economy 'based on so-called legitimate trade, . . . [t]he race for ivory and rubber,' completing the dislocations internal to African societies (2001, pp. 69–72). Mbembe continues to sever, or at least qualify, the relationship between slavery and the present: 'After the bloodletting of the slave trade, Africa bounced back into the international economic system, in a way that involved the extraction of its resources in raw form . . . Under the protection of the colonial bureaucratic apparatus, the market began to function in gangster mode' (2001, p. 72).

Mbembe's focus on the colony and the postcolony, at the analytical exclusion of slavery and its afterlife, is readily apparent when contrasted with Rodney's contribution to radical-critical thought on the same terrain. Rodney's intervention begins with his insistence that under/development is a *relation*, and therefore, we can comprehend the processes of underdevelopment that Mbembe describes as internal to African societies – 'turning inward on itself' – only when we investigate them as part of a *comparative* analysis of European development. *How Europe Under-developed Africa* counters Mbembe's terms by locating the changeover in African societies to a general economy of warlike activities and kidnapping in the relation-ship between European and African societies, namely a relation of exploitation and domination. It was precisely through slavery that Africa became incorporated into the modern international system; similarly, this incorporation, European slave raiding itself, marks the originary 'gangster mode' on the continent and the dawning of a systematic centuries-long extraction of resources of the rawest form (human bodies). While Mbembe asserts that 'between 1850 and 1925 . . . everything was redrawn,' Rodney exhaustively documents the proliferating and exponentially destructive effects throughout African society, the comprehensive 'social violence' as he puts it, of the 425-year European raid for black bodies and the making of slaves. In short, Rodney shows that 'everything was redrawn' in Africa between 1445 and 1870, prior to the period of colonialism that is Mbembe's focus (Mbembe, 2001, p. 72; Rodney, 1982, p. 95).

Mbembe's misrecognition of racial slavery's singular theoretical significance to modern social formation and politics indicates the manner in which the problematic of anti-blackness as a *global* structure comes to be submerged in the contemporary political imaginary, to be replaced by the act and context of *displacement* – or what is essentially an analytic of colonialism and postcolonialism. Hence, Mbeme's focus on theorizing 'the African subject emerging, focusing on him/herself, withdrawing, in the act and context of *displacement* and *entanglement*' (2001, p. 15). In the process, the insights, intellectual labors, and radical tradition of black studies is eclipsed. The anti-trafficking and contemporary anti-slavery movements are themselves enabled by this disavowal, premised as they are on an understanding of slavery and commercial

sex as part of a continuum of violence measured by exploitation and alienation. The tendency of the 'new slavery' discourse is to notice how the structural adjustment policies of neoliberal globalization produce commonalities in suffering between working and dispossessed peoples around the world, and to apply 'slavery' for the most extreme cases of exploitation.

Wilderson shows that the black subject manifests an ontological disarticulation of Marxian categories – work, progress, production, exploitation, hegemony. In his terms, the result is a radical incoherence for the assumptive logic of left critiques of human trafficking and other features of twenty-first century global capitalism: the black subject 'implies a scandal' (Wilderson, 2003, p. 225). The fungibility and social death of blackness, essential to the structure of the modern world, distinguishes the fundamental deracination of the enslaved even from the displacement and oppression of the colonized, 'whose status obtains in a network of persecuted human relations rather than in a collection or dispersal of a class of things' (Sexton, 2010a, p. 14). We need to consider the contemporary anti-trafficking and anti-slavery campaigns (and more broadly, even, globalization itself) through the analytic lens of black existence and beyond the assumptive logic of exploitation via the intensification of work and the extraction of surplus value.

The anti-trafficking discourse appropriates the emotional weight of 'slavery' bereft of its constituent elements, as the leading figure of the contemporary anti-slavery movement, Kevin Bales, demonstrates. In his 1999 book *Disposable People: New Slavery in the Global Economy,* Bales attempts to define the 'new slavery' by contrasting it with the 'old slavery' that has supposedly been laid to rest. Although he struggles to define the 'old slavery' as anything more than 'one person legally owning another person,' he asserts that 'I think everyone would agree that what I am talking about [in reference to today] is slavery: the total control of one person by another for the purpose of economic exploitation' (Bales, 1999, p. 6; 2005). He claims that, by this definition, there 'are more slaves alive today than all the people stolen from Africa in the time of the transatlantic slave trade' (Bales, 1999, p. 9).

Bales' description of how he became aware of 'real slavery' is revealing. He begins by sharing that he first encountered the 'vestiges of the old slavery' as a child in the US going to dinner with his family in the Jim Crow South. As he proceeded forward in the cafeteria line with his own family, little Kevin noticed a black family waiting behind a chain as others moved through the line. Young Kevin unhooked the chain and said, 'You were here first, you should go ahead.' A moment of silent tension passed until the black father said, 'That's ok, we're waiting on someone; go ahead' (Bales, 1999, p. 6). Bales goes on to note that '[a]s I grew up I was glad to see such blatant segregation coming to an end. The idea that there might still be *actual* slavery – quite apart from segregation – never crossed my mind. Everyone knew that in the United States slavery had ended in 1865' (emphasis added) (Bales, 1999, p. 7). Bales then states that it was only after he moved to England in the 1980s and encountered a leaflet from Anti-Slavery International that he 'became aware of real slavery' (Bales, 1999, p. 7). It is also noteworthy that for Bales, in the 'new' or 'real' slavery, 'race means very little': 'The criteria of enslavement today . . . do not concern color, tribe, or religion; they focus on weakness, gullibility, and deprivation' (Bales, 1999, p. 11).

Bales summarizes the mainstream perspective of white civil society, that slavery ended in 1865, that the vestiges of the 'peculiar institution' were finally eradicated in 1964 with the passage of the Civil Rights Act, and that the remaining racial

inequities in our current system of formal legal equality and colorblind integration-ism are due either to the innate inadequacies of those left behind – in other words, as due to something other than racism, such as culture, conduct, or values – or to an irrational few bigots with holdover ideologies from the bygone era of segregationist white supremacy (Harris & Carbado, 2007). The abundance of empirical evidence to the contrary – revealing that twenty-first century American society is as hierarchical as it has ever been, that whites are the single most segregated racial group, that wealth, health, education, and employment disparities have been increasing rather than diminishing in the post-civil rights era (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; California News-reel, 2008; Kozol, 2005; Oliver & Shapiro, 1995; Roberts, 2003) – is unpersuasive in the face of white desire to be human, or in today's parlance, to 'transcend race' and be 'post-racial.' But to the slave and her descendants, the demarcation between the slavocracy and what has come afterwards is untenable: in North America, the distinctions between the slave patrols, Jim Crow lynch mobs, and post-civil rights law enforcement are incidental to black life; in Central and South America, different historical specifics lead to similar circumstances of black premature death; and ample evidence from the African continent documents the decline of living standards after political independence from colonial and apartheid rule (Chabedi, 2003; Ferreira da Silva, 2001; Samara, 2003; Sexton, 2010a, pp. 15–16; Vargas, 2008). Indeed, there is a critical tradition in African diasporic thought which argues 'genocide' is the proper register for understanding the black experience in the modern world (James, 2009; Vargas, 2008).

The left-liberal desire to not see how the relations of slavery live on is enabled by confusing the empirical for the structural. The empirical facts of exploitation, which oppressed groups around the world have at one point or another shared in common with African-derived groups, are not up to the task of describing the structure of the antagonism represented by racial slavery. In Wilderson's analysis, to be dispossessed of citizenship status and access to civil society, or to be alienated from one's labor power, are representative of political conflicts, but 'neither formulation rises to the temperature of the black's grammar of suffering,' to the level of a structural anta-gonism (Wilderson, 2008, p. 99). Bales and the 'new slavery' movement demonstrate this fundamental confusion. In the absence of an accurate structural analysis of anti-blackness, Bales illustrates the tendency in contemporary political and intellectual culture to metaphorically appropriate black suffering as the model for non-black grievances, for injustices understood in expressly non-racial terms (Sexton, 2010a, p. 15). The contemporary anti-slavery movement, in fact, represents the case *par excellence* of the utility of abstract black suffering for non-black, non-racial political demands. Bales and other proponents of anti-trafficking and contemporary abolitionism do not draw upon the moral authority of the black struggle out of solidarity with actually existing black communities. Rather, their invocation of late capitalism's ills as 'slavery' demands a comprehensive disavowal of the facts of the ongoing relations of racial slavery, all the while parasitically consuming its supposed carcass to sustain the anti-trafficking movement. As with Bales, much of the anti-slavery literature today either defines 'slavery' in strictly Marxian terms, or declines to even proffer a definition, permitting the appropriated and redirected (and unnamed) specter of black enslavement to perform its ideological labor (compare Hughes, 2000).

Black mobility-as-captivity

What happens to the Nigerian migrant woman when she leaves Africa and is constructed as an erotic criminal threat in the midst of Western Europe indicates what is essential about the structural antagonism suturing global space. Again, from the study of slavery we learn that black humanity was only recognized in order to ascribe criminal culpability; that the criminalization of slave agency was a necessary corollary to the requirement that black submission to all whites be total; as well as the obligation that black women be vulnerable in the absolute, unprotected against the aggressions of both white and black men (Hartman, 1997, pp. 90–98). In short, as Steve Martinot has written (with Sexton), slavery teaches us that the ethos of white supremacy permits no legitimate black self-defense or self-possession against the structural violence of anti-blackness – be it the bodily assault of the overseer, the police officer, or the boss in the workplace; or the bodily disintegration of poverty and environmental degradation under neoliberal structural adjustment (Martinot & Sexton, 2003).

For post-Emancipation black women, then, social life entails various degrees of injury unrecognizable as violence and shows that the problem represented in the criminalization of Nigerian migrant women is not the conditions under which they migrate, the varying degrees of coercion, violence, and deprivation. Nor is it the extremities of exploitation under which they toil in commercial sex industries or the numerous other spaces of the informal economy. Rather, the problem emanates from the fact that they migrate *at all* (Carby, 1992). The construction of black women migrants solely in terms of their sexuality, at the expense of the numerous other dimensions of their personhood, and which is figured in socially dangerous terms, is a function of the fungibility of the always already captive body (Agustin, 2005). Nigerian women, therefore, are a problem because they have left their space – *not* because in so doing, in migrating, they have encountered conditions that violate Western standards of human decency or 'human rights.' The black migrant is seen as threatening the degeneration of Western civilization, and is criminalized not so much for what she has or has not done, but rather for who she is *not* – a human subject in the anti-black world – *and* for what she has done as a result: act *as if* she were one. At issue with the case of Nigerian women migrants is the construction of 'female' and 'woman' within a particular racial economy of property that sought to exert its dominion over the object of property in one context (postcolonial Africa) by means of structural alterations to that context (neoliberal globalization) that are ultimately designed to implement bodily control (reproduction, poverty, premature death), and in another context (Milan streets, London airports, and other global locations) through an intensification of its control through the deployment of a debased and dangerous sexuality ('prostitute,' 'drug mule,' *social violence*).

The situation of the Nigerian woman incarcerated in a Western prison cannot be approached through the existing discourses deployed to ascribe her either as victim or perpetrator: prostitution, human trafficking, international drug trade, or even feminist analyses of the larger historical context of globalization, informal economies, the gendered division of labor, or the feminization of poverty. Instead, I argue that the shift to what is essential in the study of black existence requires a reorientation of each of these dynamics relative to the category of blackness and beyond the usual discourses. Once this theoretical shift is secured, all future treatments of African diasporic subjects in terms of globalization or 'trafficking,'

for instance, must deal with the politics of black migration-*as*-immobilization, of black movement-*as*-captivity.

Note

1. For an important accounting of this process that does utilize women's voices, see Asale Angel-Ajani's (2010) recent ethnography of two African women's experiences in the global drug trade.

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