# 

## Book Review | *The Afterlife of Reproductive Slavery: Biocapitalism and Black Feminism’s Philosophy of History*, by Alys Eve Weinbaum (Duke University Press, 2019)

Daisy Deomampo

Fordham University

ddeomampo@fordham.edu

Over the four past decades, reproductive technologies have been subject to numerous social scientific, historical, legal, and bioethical examinations. In *The Afterlife of Reproductive Slavery: Biocapitalism and Black Feminism’s Philosophy of History*, Alys Eve Weinbaum brings a literary studies perspective to this scholarship, making critical contributions by centering Black feminist perspectives and building on the intertwined histories of slavery and capitalism. Building on Saidiya Hartman’s conceptualization of the afterlife of slavery, Weinbaum aims to illustrate the ways in which slavery “has a specifically reproductive afterlife” (1). Building on a feminist interest in reproductive justice issues and antiracism, Weinbaum develops a complex argument that outlines how human reproduction—and specifically the forms of devaluation and extraction that accompany it—become conceivable.

A cultural theorist and professor of English, Weinbaum uses a range of cultural texts, mainly creative works such as novels and films, which she treats as works of philosophy in order to develop a Black feminist philosophy of history. Weinbaum conducts what she calls a “critical speculative engagement” with the afterlife of reproductive slavery in each of these sources, arguing that such an engagement is both “methodologically useful and politically necessary” (15). In so doing, Weinbaum develops her argument that human biological commodities are required to maintain biocapitalism; in other words, analyses of commodification processes (in particular, where human biological life is concerned) must be anchored in the history of slave breeding in the Americas and the Caribbean.

Through her “critical speculation” of literary and creative works, Weinbaum argues that it is the “slave episteme” that makes biocapitalism possible: the slave episteme is central to biocapitalist processes and is what makes biocapitalism work. Weinbaum tracks the apparatus of the slave episteme, a “thought system” through which slavery endures, formed by what Hartman calls “a racial calculus and a political arithmetic” (1). Put differently, the slave episteme renders reproductive slavery thinkable; it is the thought system that endures from the antebellum period to the present moment. Importantly, it moves alongside capitalism and illustrates how wombs come to be viewed as commodity sources. Chattel slavery, for instance, relied on Black women’s wombs as a source of commodities; in the contemporary moment, this thought system renders conceivable the use of women’s wombs in the context of surrogacy and assisted reproductive technologies. As Weinbaum argues, these are the two main periods in modern history during which reproductive labor power has been used for profit, and the slave episteme enables the ongoing gendered and racialized exploitation of human reproductive labor.

The book’s argument unfolds in two parts. In the first part (Chapters 1, 2, and 3), Weinbaum “tracks the slave episteme in black feminist texts that highlight the reproductive dimensions of slavery” (15). Through examinations of historical and feminist scholarship on surrogacy and critical readings of Black women’s neo-slave narratives—the most famous of which is Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*—Weinbaum argues that these neo-slave narratives, when read alongside Black feminist nonfiction, shed light on questions of reproductive extraction and reproductive insurgency in slavery.

The second half of the book (Chapters 4, 5, and the Epilogue) offer a thorough reading of speculative fiction that reveals the relationship between reproduction of the current moment and slavery. Weinbaum analyzes texts and films as diverse as Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*, works such as *Kindred*, *Wild Seed*,and othersby Octavia Butler, and filmmaker Alfonso Cuarón’s *The Children of Men*. Importantly, in assembling these works that might not otherwise be taken together, Weinbaum illustrates the workings of the slave episteme, unfolding how the texts in question—which do not explicitly treat racial slavery—demonstrate the relationship between the slave-breeding past and the contemporary moment.

In centering cultural texts and literary works in her analysis of slavery and its reproductive afterlife (what Weinbaum calls *critical speculative engagement*), Weinbaum emphasizes that her focus on *imagination* is worth considering because it influences, transforms, and shapes understandings of reproductive politics and cultures, as well as the reproductive practices in which we take part. In doing so, Weinbaum offers a compelling account of how we arrived at the point at which a person’s in vivo reproductive labor can be extracted and sold for profit. A meditation on the past as much as it is on the present, the book illuminates how both slavery and contemporary reproductive technologies are both racializing processes that produce commodities. Perhaps a key contribution of the book is its emphasis on Black feminist approaches to these questions in order to connect the slave past to the contemporary moment.

Weinbaum acknowledges the contributions of empirical researchers at the outset of her book, noting that the work of social scientists has been crucial the development of her argument. For Weinbaum, however, empirical approaches are less able to follow the work of the slave episteme than works of creative imagination. Ethnographers may take issue with such stances, not because of a deference to that which is empirically verifiable, but because empirical and ethnographic studies shed light on the sometimes messy specificity of people’s everyday lives—cultural, social, and political economic contexts that inevitably influence and are influenced by thought systems and ideologies. Weinbaum does acknowledge that it is beyond the scope of her book to conduct a comparative study of US surrogacy and Indian surrogacy, for example, and that the slave episteme is certainly “not the only episteme that is set to work when surrogacy is outsourced” (59). Nonetheless, as Weinbaum seems to want to extrapolate the slave episteme to any context in which surrogacy is practiced, readers may be left wanting for some analysis of how diverse thought systems may coalesce in wide geographical and historical contexts to create particular understandings of commodified reproductive labor.

Stylistically, the book may be unsatisfying for readers seeking greater clarity and accessibility, due to its dense and often obfuscating prose. Nonetheless, the book offers much-needed critical perspectives on the racializing processes at the center of reproductive labor and commodification. It also corrects a long-standing need to center Black feminist scholarship in studies of the Black radical tradition. Ultimately, Weinbaum’s analysis shows the importance of thinking historically and offers insights into the ways in which gendered, racialized, and sexualized forms of oppression that have roots in slavery continue to motivate biocapitalism today.

### Author Bio

**Daisy Deomampo** is Associate Professor of Anthropology at Fordham University. She is the author of *Transnational Reproduction: Race, Kinship, and Commercial Surrogacy in India* (NYU Press, 2016).