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## The Slave Episteme in Biocapitalism

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### Abstract

This article explores the connection between the extraction and dispossession of human reproductive labor power and its products in the contexts of Atlantic slavery and contemporary biocapitalism. It argues that the conceptualization and practice of slave reproduction that sustained slave racial capitalism is forwarded into the biocapitalist present through “the slave episteme.” This becomes evident when reproduction in biocapitalism is viewed through the lens of the long history of slave “breeding” in the Atlantic world. While the supposed “blackness” that enslavers attributed to enslaved mothers and their progeny objectified and dehumanized both and rationalized their treatment as fungible and alienable commodities, in contempory biocapitalism the racial formation that subtends reproductive extraction and dispossession has been complexly recalibrated to do related ideological and material work. The article concludes with a discussion of the sublation of “blackness” in contemporary market exchanges in which reproductive labor and its products are bought and sold.

### Keywords

### Reproduction, slavery, surrogacy, ARTs, racial capitalism, biocapitalism, Black feminism

### Introduction

Over the last two decades, scholars of human reproduction have examined the development and consumption of biotechnological know-how and assisted reproductive technologies (ARTs), especially *in vitro* fertilization (IVF) and embryo freezing, and have honed in on expanding markets in oocyte vending and gestational surrogacy. In attending to human reproduction’s commodification around the globe, they highlight the extractive character of the seemingly quotidian economic exchanges by which we are today surrounded and in which increasing numbers of people participate as either sellers or consumers of human biological commodities including cells, tissue, eggs, wombs, and babies. Taken together existing scholarship documents interconnected markets that make possible what some call “transnational reproduction” and what others evocatively describe as the “global fertility chains” that link a range of reproductive transactions across geographically and geopolitically disparate spaces (Vertommen, Pavone, and Nahman 2021). Such “chains” simultaneously connect and bind. They transform poor women in the Global South who sell reproductive labor and products into workers who fulfill the affective and material desires of intending parents seeking to purchase high-tech babies (or the necessary labor, biological parts, and biotechnological processes). Notably, consumers oftentimes elect transnational reproduction so that they can short-circuit prohibitions on economic transactions in their home countries. In this way, their reproductive choices facilitate further expansion of global fertility chains.

In limning the commodification of human reproduction that characterizes contemporary global exchange, scholars reveal the scope and inner workings of a version of late capitalism that is most aptly labeled “biocapitalist.”1 This moniker, though by no means adopted by all who treat transnational reproduction and the global fertility chains that secure it, is mobilized here as descriptive shorthand. In my preferred reading, biocapitalism is both a linguistic and a conceptual term. The prefacing “bio” draws attention to the commodification of *in vivo* processes (ovulation, conception, gestation, and parturition), the commodification of human biological products (cells, tissue, eggs, and babies), and the accumulation of surplus value by those who possess the means to invest in (as opposed to those who labor at) what I will hereafter refer to as *(re)production*.2 I place parentheses around “re” to create a term that describes how women’s *in vivo* processes and biological products move through capitalist circuits of exchange alongside of conventional commodities, thereby constituting a specifically (re)productive form of productive labor. As with the exchange of conventional commodities, (re)productive commodities are rendered alienable and fungible in and through market exchange.

In the past decade, scholars of biocapitalism have sought to treat the colonial histories and imaginaries that subtend the (re)production of surplus value. Attentiveness to such legacies is treated in rich ethnographies on the processes and products offered for sale in parts of the Global South formerly subject to colonialism, especially India (Pande 2014; Rudrappa 2015; Hochschild 2012; Vora 2015; Deomampo 2016). Notably, the colonial legacies of ARTs are also amplified in several articles collected in this special issue. Settler colonialism is examined in emergent research on ARTs in scholarship focused on contexts subject to ongoing occupation, especially Palestine (Nahman 2013; Vertommen 2017). Focus on both colonialism and settler colonialism is evident in recent scholarship that takes a meta view and tracks the spread of (re)productive markets in cryopreserved eggs and gestational labor to new locations in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and Eastern Europe in the wake of the closure of the Indian surrogate market to foreigner consumers in 2015 (see Parry 2022; Parry and Ghoshal 2018). And yet, despite the attention to colonial and settler colonial legacies, existing scholarship on (re)production in biocapitalism can be characterized by a concerning, although largely unremarked silence on the related issue of the impress of the legacies of Atlantic slavery on ARTs and the global market in (re)productive labor and products more generally. As I discuss later in this article, this silence has been created by separation of the history of colonialism from that of Atlantic slavery, and by tacit assumption that the history of slavery is only truly germane in relation to analysis of surrogacy in the United States. The upshot: in most feminist work on biocapitalism long-standing relationships of historical reciprocity between colonialism and Atlantic slavery––the relationships that subtended globalizing capitalism from the outset (Robinson 1983; Lowe 2015; Melamed, 2015; Smallwood 2019)––are ignored and the impact on the present conceptualization and practice of (re)production of four hundred years of what enslavers called slave “breeding” all but entirely neglected.

In *The Afterlife of Reproductive Slavery: Biocapitalism and Black Feminism’s Philosophy of History*, I call attention to the silence and neglect of the legacies of slavery and seek to redress it. Following in the footsteps of Black Feminists who first wrote on surrogacy in the 1990s (Roberts 1997; Allen 1990, 1991; Rutherford 1992; Cherry 2001), I explore the impress of the practice of slave “breeding” on contemporary (re)production and thus account for how (re)production in biocapitalism is conceptualized and materialized in and through ideas about human reproductive labor and products that were brewed up in the context of Atlantic slavery. I suggest the urgency of bringing feminist histories of slavery in the Americas and the Caribbean to bear not only on surrogacy in the US but also on (re)production in global biocapitalism.3 Along the way I argue, that more than any other group of scholars and activists, Black Feminists, writing across idioms (history, theory, law, and fiction, among others) have demonstrated that slavery shaped and continues to contour the cultures and politics of human reproduction and mothering in the modern world.4 And I thus urge scholars of (re)production in biocapitalism to follow the lead of Black Feminists, especially those writing about surrogacy and slavery. For when Black Feminist insights are set to work in relation to transnational reproduction and the global fertility chains that secure it, it becomes possible to apprehend what I have called “the afterlife of reproductive slavery,”and thus to discern the myriad itineraries and iterations of anti-blackness in a neoliberal, supposedly post-racial present.5 In sum, in the *Afterlife of Reproductive Slavery* I argue for recognition of biocapitalism as a form of racial capitalism (more on the latter concept shortly) that is predicated on the forwarding into the present of ideas about racialized (re)production that were set in place long ago.

In the present article, I reprise key arguments of my bookin view of the animating concern of this special issue: “the colonial present of ARTs.” By digging into the thorny question of the relationship of the extraction and dispossession of (re)productive labor and products in biocapitalism to the extraction and dispossession of (re)productive labor and products in Atlantic slavery, I seek to contribute to the discussion about the colonial present an understanding of the importance of engaging with the long history of Atlantic slavery. When placed alongside the history of colonialism, the history of slavery not only allows for comprehension of the complex material foundation for contemporary biocapitalism it also allows for identification of a constitutive epistemic antecedent for the complex processes of racialization that characterize and power the forms of (re)productive extraction and dispossession by which we are today surrounded and in which many participate.

Above all, the impress of the history of slavery on biocapitalism becomes visible when we attend to what I elsewhere describe as *the slave episteme* (2019)––the thought system, brewed up and distilled over the course of four centuries, that initially enabled and continues to subtend the racialization of (re)production. When tracking the slave episteme, it is useful to underscore an instructive if seldom acknowledged fact: There are only two periods in modern world history during which *in vivo* (re)productive labor and products have been expressly engineered for profit. The first of these is the extended period of racial slavery in the Atlantic world, a period during which enslaved women’s wombs became the source of human commodities and were themselves treated as commodities. The second is the comparatively brief period that commences with the rise of biocapitalism and the market for surrogate labor in the 1970s, a period that extends over several decades into the present.

And yet, having made this point, I should clarify that my intent in tracking the forwarding of the slave episteme into the present is not to demonstrate a simple form of historical repetition. I neither aim to document resurgence of human (re)productive enslavement, nor to equate contemporary (re)productive laborers and women enslaved in the context of Atlantic slavery. Instead, the present argument is principally philosophical and speculative. It seeks to shift conceptualization of the relationship of human reproduction to capitalism by highlighting not only the role of non-commodified reproductive labor in social reproduction (as Marxist feminists and a subsequent cohort of Social Reproduction Theorists have so eloquently done [Mies 1986; Federici 2012; Bhattacharya 2017) but also by highlighting the centrality of expressly (re)productive labor. In short, I seek to offer an argument about the persistence of an old conceptual edifice—the slave episteme—by exploring how it time-travels and in so doing constellates contemporary (re)productive extraction and dispossession with its historical antecedent.

As it constellates past and present, the slave episteme does something remarkable and remarkably disturbing: it renders contemporary (re)productive extraction and dispossession *conceivable* in both senses of that biologically laden term. This becomes evident when contemporary (re)production is viewed through the lens of the long history of slave “breeding.” For when we begin from an understanding of Atlantic slavery as an economic system that came over time to be based on (re)productive extraction and dispossession, it becomes possible to see that contemporary (re)productive extraction and dispossession would be unthinkable––and thus unmaterializable––were it not for the creation and persistent recalibration of racialized ideas about wombs as founts of fungible and alienable commodities.

### Biocapitalism as Racial Capitalism

In advancing an argument about the afterlife of reproductive slavery, I’ve found it necessary to bring the concept of biocapitalism into conversation with that of racial capitalism. The latter was first developed by the political scientist Cedric Robinson in his groundbreaking study, *Black Marxism* (1983). According to Robinson contemporary capitalism has constitutively racial origins and is powered by ongoing racial dynamics. Drawing on a range of thinkers whom he dubs “Black Marxist,” Robinson demonstrates that there is a Black radical tradition that has continuously elaborated on ideas first proffered by Marx and Engels but never fully adumbrated by them. These include ideas about the role that processes of racialization play in the creation of the antagonisms that turn the wheels of capitalism and thus modern history. As Robinson explains through recourse to W.E B. Du Bois and C.L.R. James among others, complex processes of racial differentiation not only initially enabled dispossession, enclosure, colonization, genocide, settlement, and enslavement (in short, the combined processes that Marx and Engels include within their account of the birth of capitalism during what they incorrectly regard as a finite period of “so-called primitive accumulation”), complex processes of racialization continue to power *ongoing* capitalist expansion. As Robinson famously observes, “the development, organization, and expansion of capitalist society pursued essentially racial directions, [and] so too did social ideology. As a material force…it could be expected that racialism would inevitably permeate the social structures emergent from capitalism” (1983, 2). Capitalism, Robinson concludes, is always already racial capitalism.

Robinson’s insights have transformed numerous academic fields including slavery studies. This is unsurprising given that the history of Atlantic slavery so clearly manifests the dynamics of racial capitalism. Within recent historical scholarship, plantation economies in the Americas and the Caribbean are now regarded as key players in early racial capitalist expansion which finds its apotheosis in contemporary globalization. Relatedly, the concept of “blackness” is now treated as the principal ideological creation responsible for rationalizing and thus materializing the forms of dehumanization that subtend enslavement (Baptist 2014; Johnson 1999, 2013; Smallwood 2007), and subtend the capitalist world system (Wallerstein 2004). In some work, Atlantic slavery has simply been recast as “slave racial capitalism” (Johnson 2013). This coinage represents more than a semantic innovation. It signals wholescale reconceptualization of Atlantic slavery as one instantiation of racial capitalism among others, one that sits alongside colonialism, settler colonialism, and, I argue, biocapitalism. Put otherwise, the concept of slave racial capitalism invites awareness of racial capitalism’s continuous recalibration of complex processes of racial differentiation, and of slavery as an instantiation of racial capitalism that both precedes and shapes biocapitalism.6 And yet, to fully compass the relationship of historical reciprocity between slavery and biocapitalism it is necessary to go beyond Robinson by focusing in on the history of (re)productive in slavery afforded by expressly feminist historians. Together with other Black Feminist scholars of racial capitalism, feminist historians of slavery foreground sex and reproduction (and thus attune us to the intersection of gender and sexuality with race and class), effectively demonstrating that slavery was powered by both the productive and (re)productive labor of the enslaved.7

Three generations of feminist historians ground my thinking on Atlantic slavery as the world’s first modern (re)productive enterprise (Davis 1971; Hine 1979; White 1985; Beckles 1989; Bush 1990; Camp 2004; Morgan 2004; Fuentes 2016; Berry 2017; Turner 2017).Hilary McD. Beckles’s now classic history of enslaved women in Barbados is especially instructive for present purposes. As Beckles explains, earlier (non-feminist) scholars of the oldest and most lucrative of the sugar economies were unable to explain why it was that importation of African women outnumbered the import of men beginning in the late seventeenth century because they simply could not recognize female slaves as the main source of capital accumulation within the plantation economy (1989, 2). The situation on Barbadian plantations was not exceptional, Beckles insists, but ought to be regarded as indexical of “the overall history of plantation America” (5) in that it attests to a long-neglected truth: *All* enslaved women experienced slavery as producers and *reproducers*, as all enslaved women were valued in both capacities throughout the Atlantic world. The task of writing the history of women in slavery is not, therefore, the “absurd” one of “adding women to history.” It is the challenging one of restoring history to those who constituted “the pivot”––as opposed to the tangent––around which the entire slave enterprise turned (Beckles 1989, 5).

Like most studies of Caribbean slavery, Beckles divides his into three distinct periods. During the first (1627–1730), planters preferred to import African men. However, once land was cleared, women were increasingly imported to perform agricultural work. In the second period (1730–1790), planters came to regard African women as more manageable and efficient than men because West and Central Africa women were already acculturated to heavy agricultural labor. Consequently, in the second period, import of African women dramatically increased. By the start of the third period (1790–1838) a new gender dynamic was set in place. Planters worked enslaved women in field gangs and invested in their (re)productive labor. Significantly, because this last period encompassed the imposition of the 1807 Slave Trade Act that banned further importation of captive Africans to the New World, it is the period of greatest interest to me here. Bracketed by the Slave Trade Act and British abolition of slavery, this last period was characterized by intensified "creolization” of the slave population (Beckles’s euphemism), by increase in the valuation of enslaved women, and, most importantly, by systematic “stimulation” of fertility (again, Beckles’s term). Specifically, enslaved women were offered “concessions” that were expressly targeted at amelioration of the harsh, often deadly conditions on Barbadian plantations that militated against conception, gestation, and care for pregnancies and offspring. Although Beckles finds little empirical evidence of what he calls “selective breeding” (by which he presumably means the application of the principals of animal husbandry to human beings), his analysis of management manuals detailing plantation organization and administration support his conclusion that slave (re)production was deliberately “orchestrated” (Beckles 1989, 92).

Planters were motivated to orchestrate (re)production by their growing awareness that successful “increase” was fast becoming not only a useful means by which labor power could be replenished, but after 1807 the only means by which slave racial capitalism could be maintained. Due to implementation of highly successful managerial strategies and use of incentives in the late eighteenth century, by the start of the nineteenth century, slavery in Barbados was no longer dependent on the importation of captive Africans. Whereas in the 1730s and 1740s at least half the children born in Barbados died within their first week of life, by the 1790s, improved diet, lessened workload during pregnancy, fieldwork schedules more amenable to nursing, and monetary incentives for live births together facilitated increased (re)production and a sharp decline in infant mortality.8 Nothing evinces intensified planter investment in slave women’s reproductive lives more poignantly than changes in planter bookkeeping practices. Alongside increase in cattle, horses, and other valuable nonhuman livestock, beginning in the late eighteenth century they began to routinely record the birth of slaves as capital gains (Beckles 1989, 102).

Subsequent scholarship expands on Beckles’s signal contribution by accounting not only for the material conditions of enslaved (re)production but also for the importance of the ideological dimensions of (re)productive enslavement to a globalizing Euro-American empire. As Jennifer Morgan (2004) elaborates in her watershed study of the early English colonies in the West Indies and on the North American mainland, enslavers required both women’s physical labor and their “symbolic value” as “black,” fecund, animal beings. To this end, those invested in the slave trade created and disseminated ideas about the distinct “blackness” of African women through discourses that tethered African women’s reproductive bodies and capacities, actual and imagined, to their enslavability. These discourses, initiated by European travelers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, can be gleaned from both visual and discursive archives that together adumbrate the ideological construction of African women as (re)productive assets, living and breathing tools available for use. In etchings from the seventeenth century that portray African women at work in the fields, for instance, they are depicted nursing infants, affixed to their backs, with milk provided by elongated breasts that are slung over their shoulders (Morgan 2004, 12–49). In written accounts, African women are depicted as capable of “pain-free” and “disinterested” delivery; parturition is for them just another form of work. Indeed, for African women reproductive and productive toil were represented as entirely compatible activities. As travel diaries attest, African women were a breed apart, less-than-human beings descended from a bestial point of origin that was imagined to be “black” and therefore distinct from that of the Christian Eve and her white European descendants (Morgan 2004, 40–47).9

In creating representations of African women’s specifically “black” reproduction, Europeans fueled an ideology in which “blackness” constituted a visible mark of the biological and social distance separating African and European women. In circulating representations of African women as “black”, Europeans naturalized the two forms of productive labor impressed upon female slaves: agricultural work and (re)production of human commodities. Over time, such representations rationalized treatment of enslaved conception, gestation, parturition, and the products of “black” women’s wombs as fungible and alienable.

In so far as (re)production was deemed fungible, (re)productive labor and products were regarded as substitutable––one commodity (including labor power) could stand in for another so that a purely formal economic exchange could take place.10 As *in vivo* labor took place within enslaved wombs, the children being gestated within were abstracted into the metrics of capital. Upon birth, all qualitative characteristics were erased or instrumentalized so that children could be viewed as commodities that could justifiably circulate in quantifiable form. In so far as (re)productive labor was deemed alienable the “lively products” to which women gave birth were regarded as rightfully separable from those who (re)produced them, transferrable away from the (re)productive body through market exchange. Like their enslaved mothers, children born to enslaved women were regarded as chattel. Because they existed as commodities within an exchange relationship, enslaved women who gave birth were forced to (re)produce the foreclosure of their own motherhood, the “natal alienation” of their children (Patterson 1982), their own and their children's status as dehumanized slaves, and their mutual loss of belonging to each other as kin. As Hortense Spillers observes, in slavery the gendered maternal function was severed from (re)production effectively rendering ideas such as Senator Moynihan’s “black matriarch” a violent misnaming of “the captive African female”—she whose gender was in fact negated in and through the abstracting calculations involved in filling the hold of the slave ship with its “human-as-cargo” bound for the New World (1987, 72).

Taken together, the fungibility and alienability of (re)productive labor and its products distinguish commodified (re)production from non-commodified reproduction (for instance unremunerated domestic work, child bearing, child rearing, care for the elderly, sick, and dying, etc.), as non-commodified reproduction only indirectly enters into circuits of market exchange. Put otherwise, although non-commodified reproduction is integral to the reproduction of capitalism, as Marxist feminists, Social Reproduction theorists, and historians of care work and intimate labor demonstrate (Mies 1986; Federici 2012; Bhattacharya 2017; Boris and Parreñas 2010), non-commodified reproduction is not expressly transacted in order to create surplus value in the ways that the (re)productive labor of enslaved women was once transacted in the context of Atlantic slavery, or the ways that it is today transacted in the global marketplace for (re)productive labor and products.11

The fungibility and alienability of enslaved (re)production is nowhere more visible than in the implementation, beginning in the second half of the seventeenth century, of the New World interpretation of the Ancient Roman doctrine of *partus sequitur ventrem* (Berry 2017; Morgan 2004, 2018). This Latin phrase, roughly translated as “that which comes forth follows the womb,” was enshrined in English and Spanish slave codes to ensure that children born to enslaved women were enslaved. Significantly, *partus* made a child born to an enslaved woman enslaveable regardless of the race or status of the father. As a consequence, free white men’s rape of enslaved women functioned to augment their own (or other free white men’s) property. By the late antebellum era, advertisements and bills of sale frequently classified enslaved women as “breeders” or “breeding wenches,” indicating precisely how (re)productive labor and products were valued.12 Especially robust enslaved men were selected and taken on a “breeding circuit” and appraised for rent or sale as “studs” (Roberts 1997, 28; Berry 2017, 19, 78–79). Although limited space requires me to omit a discussion of the sexual labor performed by male and female slaves, it is crucial to note that while the concept of (re)production does not encompass all forms of sexual labor, it includes, by necessity, procreative sex. In fact, the term “(re)production” instructively illustrates (precisely because it replicates) enslavers’ enfolding of procreative sex, often in the form of rape, into (re)productive labor. My intention in using (re)production as a portmanteau is certainly not to minimize sexual violence in slavery, but rather to specify the manner in which (re)productive extraction and dispossession included extraction and dispossession of procreative sex.13 Put otherwise, from the vantage point of enslavers and thus from that of (re)production as an engine of surplus value, enslaved sex, conception, gestation, and parturition were inextricable. By contrast, from the vantage point of enslaved individuals and communities, conception, gestation, and parturition were experienced as sites of resistance, refusal, joy, hope, sadness, violation, and violence, as scholarship on intimacy in slavery attests (Berry and Harris 2018). Importantly, in biocapitalism (re)production rarely requires sexual violence in the form of rape or forced “breeding”— which is not to suggest that contemporary (re)productive laborers do not suffer a host of psychological and bodily violations that are both intimate and sexualized in nature.

Over time, the circular ideological construction of African and African-descended women’s reproduction as “black” was called upon to justify the treatment of their wombs as engines of “future increase” and thus of surplus value.14 Histories that account for the racialization of enslaved (re)production and treat the role of “blackness” in the maintenance of slave racial capitalism resonate forcefully with the present argument. As in slave racial capitalism, in biocapitalism racialized (re)production makes the system go. As in slavery, in biocapitalism (re)productive labor and products are rendered fungible and alienable through a complex process of racialization. The feminist histories of slavery that I have briefly limned above historically ground an argument about contemporary (re)productive extraction and dispossession. As, I will now argue, they also constitute the foundation upon which unique insights into the continuous recalibration of racial capitalism may built. They allow us to see that (re)productive extraction and dispossession in slavery both temporally precedes (re)productive extraction and dispossession in biocapitalism, and, therefore, they intimately link biocapitalism to the evolution of racial capitalism.

And yet, even though slave racial capitalism and biocapitalism can be constellated, it should not be assumed that (re)production in biocapitalism is racialized in the same way as it was in the slave past. In the next and final section, I offer some preliminary ideas about how to think about the complex recalibrationof racialized (re)production over time. While anti-blackness clearly characterizes a present moment violently saturated by myriad forms of racism, the attribution of “blackness” to (re)productive labor and its products is no longer the only modality through which (re)productive extraction and dispossession operate today. Rather, in contemporary biocapitalism “blackness” is being *sublated*, by which, I mean it is being simultaneously *negated and preserved* in order to make biocapitalism go.

### The Sublation of “Blackness” in Biocapitalism

Although, as already observed at the outset, it could reasonably be assumed that feminist scholarship on (re)production in biocapitalism would center the history of slavery, substantive discussion of slavery and its legacies is missing from most scholarship on ARTs, biocapitalism, and the neoliberal post-racial ideologies that sustain transnational reproduction.15 There appear to be several reasons for this. Scholarship on the global fertility chains that secure transnational reproduction is primarily concerned with the largest (re)productive markets, those in oocytes and surrogate labor.In most instances, oocyte vendors and surrogates are neither majority Black nor do they predominantly reside in locales that were at one time directly implicated in the Atlantic slave trade. When historical antecedents are considered, as already noted, European colonialism is therefore deemed most germane, and is too often hived off from Atlantic slavery as if the two were not historically coincident and economically imbricated. Separation of these histories lends itself to spurious distinctions between slavery and remunerated or waged labor, distinctions that tend to be reified rather than interrogated. And yet, as I elsewhere argue (2019), in both past and present, the distinction between slavery and waged labor is messy; and, at least when it is construed rigidly, this distinction constitutes one of capitalism’s major ideological supports.

Rather than begin from the assumption that (re)productive laborers "choose" to labor for a wage (for instance, when they participate in transnational markets as surrogates), I suggest beginning from an insight that is neatly if perhaps too implicitly encapsulated in Marx’s quip that contract labor is a form of “wage slavery.” In creating a seeming oxymoron, Marx challenged us to consider nineteenth-century wage labor as existent on a continuum. By extension, here I challenge us to critically re-examine the character of the so-called choices that are made by contemporary (re)productive laborers, women who, in some instances, enter the market without even the supposed protection afforded by labor contracts or other legal protections (Rudrappa 2015). From a vantage point that apprehends the predication of liberal notions of freedom on the exemption of slaves, the colonized, and Indigenous Peoples from such freedom (Lowe 2015; Smallwood 2004), it is apparent that on the underside of the supposed freedom to alienate labor power lie interlocked forms of gendered, sexualized, and racialized governance that divide laboring populations into categories of human and less-than-human. Those deemed human are more likely to be remunerated for their labor and to be perceived (and perhaps to feel themselves) as having “chosen” to labor for a wage. Those deemed less-than-human are more likely to be treated as disposable and to understand the ruse that the ideology of “choice” conceals.16 In sum, the neglect of the impress of the slave episteme by scholarship on biocapitalism has troubling consequences in that it obscures the conditions and contexts in which laborers “choose” to labor, and creates an artificially narrow understanding of the connections between (re)production in slavery and biocapitalism.

To demonstrate the importance of accounting for the work of the slave episteme when seeking to understand (re)production in biocapitalism––even in those instances and in those locales in which slavery does not immediately appear to be relevant––I have found it necessary to craft a reoriented approach to (re)production that treats it as a racializing process that is being continuously recalibrated over capitalism’s *longue durée*. This reorientation begins with an observation, indebted to feminist historians of slavery, that enslaved women’s participation in (re)productive labor was regarded as racializing of the labor performed (it rendered it less-than-human, “black”, and therefore fungible and alienable), and of the products of this labor. In other words, rather than begin by assuming the *a priori* racial identity of (re)productive laborers, as existing studies of surrogates and other participants in the (re)productive economy have (Twine 2011; Hochschild 2012; Pande 2014; Rudrappa 2015; Vora 2015; Deomampo 2016; Harrison 2016), I instead suggest that scholars of (re)production in biocapitalism follow the example set by feminist historians of slavery. This requires focus on (re)production as a racializing process––a process that racializes the laborer and renders her labor and products fungible and alienable.

The proposed shift in focus is intended to be expansive. It clears a path to a historically inclusive account of the (re)productive character of ongoing forms of “so-called primitive accumulation” in biocapitalism. It is also intended to nuance discussions of processes of racialization in a neoliberal moment saturated by post-racial ideologies that insist on treating the slave past as irrelevant to the present. Indeed, the shift to a focus on processes of racialization is intended to open our eyes to the pervasive disavowal of the afterlife of slavery, the work of the slave episteme in biocapitalism, and thus to the sublation—again, by this I mean the simultaneous *negation* and the *preservation*––of “blackness” in rationalizing processes of (re)productive extraction and dispossession.

For the most part, analyses of race and racism emergent from critical race studies, critical ethnic studies, Black studies, and postcolonial studies have treated race as a social construct that is affixed to individual bodies and populations as power is arrayed hierarchically and white racial hegemony secured. In such analyses, race is not regarded as biological, genetic, empirical, or, for that matter, as analytically stable.17 Rather, race is examined for *how* it is equated with phenotype and thus naturalized, for *how* it functions as a biosocial mark, and for *how* it exerts social, political, and economic power as it transforms over time. In short, race is variously recognized as a process (as opposed to an identity) and as a motor of globalizing capitalism, regimes of racial nationalism (white racial nationalism and other forms of ethnic nationalism), colonialism, settler colonialism, empire, or some combination of these. In situating (re)production as a racializing process, as I do here, I suggest that the race ascribed to individuals and populations prior to their recruitment into and participation in (re)production ought not be construed as the only racial calculation that enables and rationalizes (re)productive extraction and dispossession today.

The proposed treatment of (re)production as racializing process makes sense for several reasons. Around the globe, the (re)productive labor force is robustly multiracial, multiethnic, and multinational. Available information about the individuals who currently perform (re)productive labor reveals that they are more frequently connected to each other by their shared economic precarity than by any single racial, ethnic, caste, religious, or national identity. Indeed, it is never solely the *a priori* racial identity of the (re)productive laborer that renders her (re)productive labor and products alienable and fungible. It is always also the exchange relationship into which she enters when she sells her (re)productive labor that precipitates a racializing process that devalues labor and renders labor and products alienable and fungible.

Notably, my treatment of (re)productive labor as a racializing process resonates deeply with the dominant approach to the creation of racialized divisions of labor as these are elaborated by labor historians. For those who study the changing racial formation of the labor force over time, the labor that individuals and populations engage in or are forced to perform both creates racial identity and shapes the racial character of labor. By virtue of her place in the division of labor, the laborer is transformed into a racialized individual (be this individual previously identified as “white,” “black,” or “Asian”) and, by extension, incorporated as a member of a racialized group thought to be comprised of “slaves,” “coolies,” or “niggers” (Roediger 1991; Allen 1994; Jung 2006; Day 2016). As labor historians attest, static ideas of race are too rigid to account for the ideological and material processes that create the complex racial formations that were consolidated during prior periods in the history of racial capitalist expansion (slavery, colonialism, settler colonialism, and industrialization). Here I follow in their footsteps and suggest that static (*a priori*) ideas of race are likewise too rigid to account for the ideological and material processes that create the complex racial formations that make biocapitalism go and facilitate its expansion.

Primary emphasis on the race of (re)productive laborers cannot fully account for the totality or complexity of the racializing processes that subtend transnational reproduction and the global fertility chains that secure it. On the one hand, treatment of race (or, for that matter, ethnicity, caste, or national identity) as *a priori* has the tendency to foreclose attention to (re)production as a process that shapes observable divisions of labor. On the other hand, focus on the race ascribed to laborers obscures the connectivity (or, to invoke Lowe's capacious formulation “the intimacy”) that has in the past existed among those individuals and populations caught up in the violence of Atlantic slavery, colonialism, settler colonialism, and empire, and thus in the intertwined economic systems that first enabled and that continue to subtend globalizing capitalism (Robinson 1983; Lowe 2015; Smallwood 2019). In sum, failure to treat (re)production as a racializing process runs of the risk of obscuring the impress of the slave episteme (which is never the possession of a single nation or national economy), and the circuitous routes that it travels, crisscrossing historical epochs and national boundaries as it renders (re)productive extraction and dispossession conceivable and thus materializable.

And yet, an irrepressible question remains: What happens in the present moment to the specific form of “blackness” that functioned as product and rational for (re)productive extraction and dispossession in slavery? I believe that a preliminary answer to this question lies in realization that “blackness” is one but never the only modality through which the slave episteme is forwarded into the present. Today “blackness” is no longer the only mark of alienability and fungibility; rather, it has been both expanded and abstracted, recalibrated and erased. This is because biocapitalism has a hegemonic neoliberal cast that sometimes successfully, and at other times unsuccessfully, obscures from view the historically sedimented processes of racialization that have subtended (re)productive extraction and dispossession over time.18 As noted earlier, these include (but cannot be reduced to) processes of racialization that powered *partus sequitur ventrem,* the doctrine that was encoded in Slave Law to ensure that in slavery the enslaved woman was transformed into a “black” womb (re)producing alienable and fungible commodities rather than children.

In the current historical conjuncture, practices of (re)productive extraction and dispossession that are predicated on the forwarding of the slave episteme can be further illuminated by drilling down on the verb *to sublate*. As a philosophical concept, sublation has been most fully elaborated by Hegel, subsequent Hegelian philosophers, and Marxist theorists. In their usage (as opposed to the colloquial one) sublation is neither synonymous with disappearance nor repression. Rather, it is an active verb that describes the paradoxical movement through which ways of being in the world (Hegel’s idea of dialectics) and systems of power such as feudalism or capitalism (Marx’s idea of history) are simultaneously negated and preserved by opposing forces that transform the status quo by altering it over time. In certain strands of Marxist theory, sublation is used to describe the historical processes that continuously reshape the hegemony, not by toppling it in one fell swoop but rather by taking up new positions within an ongoing struggle for dominance. The national bourgeois revolutions that led to the birth of industrial capitalism are perhaps the most well-known example of the dialectical process of sublation. The proletarian revolution that Marx and subsequent generations of Marxists believe will eventuate in the destruction of the system of bourgeois private property is the most anticipated. The *Oxford English Dictionary* captures the duality of the verb *to sublate* in a definitional quotation: “It is the actualization of the system that makes it rational, and sublates past history into a rationally-necessary moment of the whole.”

In returning to the irrepressible question about the role that “blackness” plays in biocapitalism, I venture the following formulation: *biocapitalism sublates slavery and the ongoing work of the slave episteme by negating, or actively obscuring from view the centrality of a preserved if at once altered process of (re)productive racialization that was once, but is no longer exclusively predicated on the creation of “blackness” as the rationale for rendering (re)productive labor and its products alienable and fungible.*19

The dual action of negation and preservation that characterizes sublation is amplified in biocapitalism because the interlinked neoliberal ideologies of colorblindness and post-racialism with which biocapitalism is conjoined require that the forms of racial capitalism that were historically pervasive (slavery and colonialism) be regarded as antiquated, regimes of the past that are no longer today relevant. However, as already argued, it is precisely the processes of (re)productive racialization that were brewed up in slavery that are currently being recalibrated, and thus that persist in and through the contemporary exchange of (re)productive labor and products. Borrowing and at once tweaking the definitional quotation taken from the *Oxford English Dictionary*, I conclude by observing that “blackness” as the mark of (re)production’s racialization has come over time to constitute a “rationally-necessary moment of the whole.” This “moment” is now being sublated (rather than transcended or eclipsed) by pervasive, persistent, and patently ahistorical neoliberal ideologies such as post-racialism. In sum, today the slave episteme subtends processes of (re)productive racialization even though the “blackness” of (re)productive labor and products is no longer always visible as the primary expression of such processes.

In the preceding pages, I have argued that the history of (re)production in Atlantic slavery ought to be accounted for alongside the history of reproduction in colonialism in scholarship on transnational reproduction and the global fertility chains that secure it, and in work on contemporary forms of racial capitalism including biocapitalism. In advancing this argument, I have suggested that the slave episteme, brewed up in slavery, is currently being forwarded into the biocapitalist present. In arguing thus, I do not mean to imply that the slave episteme determines the totality of contemporary social and economic relations as these pertain to contemporary (re)productive extraction and dispossession. There are clearly multiple and overlapping processes at work in each specific reproductive market; together, these processes enable (re)productive extraction and dispossession globally. Relatedly, there will always be many racial marks (each of which is likewise historically moored) that are today sublated alongside “blackness”. As others in this special issue demonstrate, it is imperative to account for colonial legacies and settler colonial practices when examining (re)productive extraction and dispossession in former colonies and in contexts of ongoing settler occupation. And yet, even as we track what I would suggest we shorthand “the colonial episteme” and “the settler colonial episteme,” scholarship on (re)production in biocapitalism can only be fully responsive to the history of (re)productive racialization that has enabled biocapitalist expansion when it attends to the slave episteme, and thus to the continuous recalibration of (re)production as a racializing process that is rooted in four hundred years of racial slavery.

Sustained consideration of the forwarding of the slave episteme in biocapitalism has the capacity to thicken existing theorization of the “racial reproductive imaginaries” (Deomampo 2016) that together inform how and why consumers select both surrogates and eggs. Reciprocally, sustained consideration of the forwarding of the slave episteme has the ability to nuance analysis of (re)productive laborers’ experiences of the racialized roles that they play in the lives of those who consume (re)productive labor and products. Beyond the instructive examples of surrogacy and oocyte vending, consideration of the forwarding of the slave episteme in biocapitalism has the capacity to make us aware of the anti-blackness that powers racial capitalism *tout court*. Clearly processes of (re)productive racialization will continue to shift and change in myriad ways. Sustained consideration of the work of the slave episteme might yet transform our collective consciousness of these shifts and changes, and enable greater attunement to the ways in which (re)productive extraction and dispossession simultaneously preserve and negate “blackness” and, in the process, create the complex and historically sedimented racial formations that are mobilized by biocapitalism in the service of its ongoing expansion.

### Notes

1 In 2003 Sarah Franklin and Margaret Lock observed that “shifts in the definition of biology-as-capital involve a prioritization of reproduction,” thus announcing human reproduction’s emergence as a “primary generator of wealth, agency, and value” in biosciences dependent on human research participants for what are often euphemistically referred to as “donations” or “gifts” of reproductively derived raw materials (Franklin and Locke 2003, 7). Subsequent scholarship fills out the portrait of a rapidly changing landscape. Contributions that inform the present argument demonstrate the centrality of human (re)production to the emergence of biocapitalism. Waldby and Mitchell (2006) develop the concept of “tissue economies” through analysis of embryonic stem cell and umbilical cord blood banking; Franklin (2007, 2013) tracks marketization of cloning back to innovations in animal husbandry and forward to IVF's transformation of human kinship; Spar (2006) examines the “commerce of conception”; Dickenson (2008) treats “global markets in baby making”; Cooper (2008) explores financialization of “life itself” through production of “life as surplus”; Vora (2015) joins Hochschild (2012) in analysis of outsourcing of emotional labor and intimate life in the Indian surrogate market; Cooper and Waldby (2014) develop the concept of “clinical labor" to describe commodification of *in vivo* processes, including surrogacy.

2 Here I extend earlier meditations on the use of the labor theory of value (LTV) to theorize surrogacy as a form of (re)productivelabor (Weinbaum 1994). With the parentheses surrounding (re) I differentiate an approach rooted in the LTV from Marxist feminist “dual systems” approaches focused on unremunerated or non-commodified reproductive labor and autonomist feminist arguments focused on recognition of the productive value of unremunerated reproductive labor in the home.

3 *The Afterlife of Reproductive Slavery* (Weinbaum 2019) focuses on surrogacy (as opposed to other ARTs) because I regard surrogacy as a unique heuristic device that provides insight into how *all* forms or (re)productive extraction and dispossession function in biocapitalism. Put otherwise, analysis of surrogacy opens the way to comprehension of racialized (re)productive extraction and dispossession in biocapitalism generally.

4 In addition to centering contributions by feminist historians of slavery (as I discuss shortly), *The Afterlife of Reproductive Slavery* treats Black Feminist literary scholars (Carby 1987; Christian 1985; Hartman 1997, 2007), Black Feminist legal scholars (Williams 1991; Roberts 1997; Allen 1990, 1991; Rutherford 1992; Cherry 2001), Black Feminist theorists (Spillers 1987; Davis 1971, 1998), Black Feminist reproductive justice activists (Ross and Solinger 2017), and novelists such as Toni Morrison and Octavia Butler.

5 The concept of “the afterlife of reproductive slavery” is indebted to Saidiya Hartman’s (2007) signal contribution on the “afterlife of slavery.” See also Hartman (1997).

6 The idea of “slave racial capitalism” also invites consideration of slavery as an early form of biocapitalism, albeit one to which the relatively new conceptual term can only be applied retroactively. Though it is beyond the scope of the present essay to treat this relationship as I do elsewhere (2019), it is worth noting that contrary to Birch and Tyfield (2012), who argue that the “bio” prefacing capitalism obscures economic realities, I regard the “bio” as revelatory in that it points to what is old (the slave episteme) about a supposedly new economic formation—namely, the commodification of (re)productive labor and products.

7 Numerous Black Feminists theorize intersections of race, gender, and class and thus contribute to a specifically Black Feminist understanding of racial capitalism. Though this rich scholarship cannot be adequately represented in a single note, contributions that inform my thinking here include Angela Y. Davis (1971, 1981, 1998), the Combahee River Collective (1982), Carole Boyce Davies (2008), Sarah Haley (2016), and Shauna Sweeney (2021).

8 Beckles observes, “the ameliorations of the late eighteenth century can be defined as a system of thought and practice by which money that would have been otherwise spent on…buying unseasoned Africans was used to improve the lot of existing slaves in order to induce them to breed their replacements” (1989, 97).

9 Ideas about European descendants of Eve as cursed with pain in childbirth paved the way for ideas about European sensate difference as a sign of racial superiority, and later as a basis for the theory of polygenesis (Morgan 2004, 40–47).

10 Hortense Spillers (1987) first theorized the abstracting logic of enslavement as an erasure of the gender specificity of “the captive African female” who is reduced to a quantity of commodified “flesh” that fills a designated space within the hold of the slave ship. Elsewhere I argue that when Spillers extends her insight about the ungendering of “the captive African female” to the question of enslaved (re)production, she effectively illuminates the manner in which slave (re)production depended upon the world historic application of the logic of fungibility to *in vivo* bodily processes and human biological products. (In so doing, Spillers compels questions about the gender of contemporary (re)production. See next note). Hartman (1997) extends Spillers’ ideas about “black” fungibility through examination of the ontological and epistemological violence to which women were subject during and after slavery. Afropessimists such as Frank Wilderson and Jared Sexton drill down on ontological violence through examination of the persistence of anti-blackness and the foreclosure of “black” subjectivity in the wake of slavery (Winnubst 2020, 105). Other recent scholarship on fungibility moves in more liberatory directions. C. Riley Snorton (2017) influentially argues that the ungendering of blackness that first transpires in Middle Passage can and should be linked to transness, and, conversely, transness to blackness. Tiffany Lethabo King (2019) powerfully attests that blackness is irreducible to the commodity form precisely because it is fungible. For Snorton and King, fungibility is defiant, a resource for insurgent, life-affirming identity formation. In the present essay, I build on Spillers to argue that a specifically (re)productive form of enslaved fungibility continues to violently subtend racial capitalist expansion. Elsewhere, I examine how attention to the ungendering of enslaved deepens our understanding of racial capitalism, opens up new questions about enslaved (re)production’s gender dynamics, and, potentially, allows for more expansive conceptualization of Reproductive Justice (Weinbaum, forthcoming 2022; Weinbaum forthcoming; Ross and Solinger 2017).

11 Though it is impossible in the limited space of the present essay to treat the implications of the ungendering of the enslaved that Spillers’ (1987) essay opens up, suffice it to note that this ungendering ought to ideally inform theorization of (re)production. Whereas non-commodified reproductive labor is today feminized and thus denigrated, devalued, underpaid, and hyper-exploited, commodified (re)production (i.e., surrogacy, egg vending, etc.) is shaped *both* by the feminization of non-commodified reproduction *and* by the ungendering of the enslaved in ways that scholars of biocapitalism have yet to adumbrate.

12 Berry argues that the terms “breeder” or “breeding wench” were largely descriptive as opposed to pejorative in the early antebellum period. It was only after the closure of the transatlantic trade that these terms were used to indicate the market value attributed to enslaved women (2017, 20–21). Throughout I have enclosed the terms “breeding” and “breeder” in quotations marks to indicate both their violence and pliability.

13 Berry (2017) introduces the term “third party rape” to describe how enslaved women *and* men were used against their will by enslavers. Davis (1971), Hartman (1997), and Berry and Harris (2018) examine enslavers’ use of myriad forms of sexual violence as racial terror.

14 Morgan demonstrates that planters’ wills reveal their understanding of the importance of the transfer of reproductive assets to future generations and their investment in reproductive speculation (2004, 92). Berry argues that speculation on “future increase” was commonplace and that enslavers placed value on “preconception” (2017, Chapter 1).

15 Here I distinguish between dominant trends in scholarship on transnational reproduction and Black Feminist treatments of surrogacy in the US in the 1990s (Allen 1990, 1991; Cherry 2001; Rutherford 1992; Davis 1998; Williams 1991; Roberts 1997) that link surrogacy to slavery. Important recent contributions by the Race and Reproductivities Working Group showcased in a double issue of *Medical Anthropology* (Valdez and Deomampo 2019) also examine racialization in ways the depart from dominant trends in scholarship through focus on how “race materializes through biogenetic, phenotypic, and cultural imaginaries” (554) that shape reproductive markets.

16 Several scholars of surrogacy in India (Pande; Rudrappa) argue that surrogates ought to be regarded as “free” agents who “choose” to surrogate. Notably, enslaved women exercised profound forms of agency when they sought to shape or refuse their (re)productive enslavement, and yet no scholar of slavery argues they had free choice (Davis 1971; Hine 1979; Morgan 2004; Turner 2017; Weinbaum 2019).

17 This is especially important in a context in which biological ideas of race resurface in genetic guise despite scientific consensus that race is not located in our genes (Reardon 2005; Weinbaum 2007; Roberts 2011; TallBear 2013).

18 Two of neoliberalism’s most salient features are the burdening of individuals with excessive responsibility, and the hyper-exploitation of people of color. Both are buttressed by ascendance of ideologies of color-blindness and post-racialism (Harvey 2005; Brown 2003, 2006; Melamed 2011).

19 In arguing that “blackness” is sublated in biocapitalism, I dialogue with scholars of biopower who regard racialization as a context bound and ever shifting form of dehumanization (Weheliye 2014; Mbembe 2003). In exposing the Eurocentrism of foundational theories (Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben), Weheliye and Mbembe demonstrate that “blackness” is never the only racial cut or “caesura” (to use Foucault’s original term) that generates the distinctions upon which biopower (and, here I add, biocapitalism) depends––distinctions between living beings entitled to full humanity and those denied it; and those between living beings who (in Foucault's formulation) are “made to live,” and those who (in Agamben's formulation) may “be killed with impunity.”

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