

Leaving Home: Slavery and the Politics of Reproduction

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| In fact, from one point of view, we cannot unravel one female's narrative from the other's, cannot decipher one without tripping over the other - Hortense Spillers ¹

We had driven straight through from Brisbane to Sydney, a nine-hour drive with your foot flat to the floor. We were on our way to a radical student conference, it was the very late 1990s and the WTO protests in Seattle had just hit the national papers. It was a time when some of us had started to get confident in naming the problem, saying it out loud: capitalism. We arrived sweaty, tired and sort of tumbled out of the car and into the front garden of a huge run-down student house in inner Sydney. A woman I had not met before, Natasha was at the front door. Noting my then boyfriend, she spat,

“So, you’re a breeder then.”

Standing there in the harsh morning sunshine, the word breeder did the job it was intended to do: producing a connection between my nineteen year old body, its assumed capacity for biological reproduction, patriarchy and normative heterosexual sex. A little taken back, I mumbled something while looking at my feet and spent the rest of the week thinking about what breeder sex would be like.



Conversation Piece, before a house in Monument Lane, Edgbaston (William Williams, 1780)

This essay offers a critical reflection on the history of reproduction at the intersection of slavery and capitalism in the Anglo-American context. ² In sketching this history I explore the relationship between capitalism, gender and slavery and how the invention of the two separate spheres of production and social reproduction was produced and maintained. What emerges is the highly contradictory nature of the home and family under slavery and that in some instances the household served as an important site of resistance for slave women. Exploring the complexities of the household and family structures under slavery challenges tendencies within feminist theory that assume a universal or “shared” experience of home, motherhood and the domestic sphere.

The problem of where to begin in unraveling the stories of slavery, feminism and reproduction is an interesting one. Particularly if one is not seeking to locate origins or founding moments, but is instead interested in asking how reproduction has come to be the problem that it is today. In the first instance, it is necessary to ask what is at stake in the history of reproduction, in part because the definitions and meaning of reproduction not only vary but also are often experienced in contradictory ways. The inequalities and disparities in how different racialized and gendered subjects experience the labor of making and remaking people under capitalism cannot be ignored and these gaps, silences and spaces of difference have long and complex histories. Considering the overwhelming location of reproduction is in the realm of the

natural, the biological and that murky, under-theorized location of home, it is necessary to not only gesture towards what is at stake politically but to do so with the aim of “weaponizing reproduction.” The task is certainly a feminist project, one that takes seriously what it means to denaturalize reproduction, with the desire to grab hold of the problem and transform it.

From the outset it is clear that the story of feminism and reproduction is a complex and at times contradictory one. Of the many valid and necessary critiques of second-wave feminism that have and continue to be made, the notion that the women’s movement in the 1960s and 1970s was anti-mother is certainly a persistent line of attack. It is also a criticism that has been consistently challenged by those who were active in the movement, many of who were young mothers at the time. The idea that feminists were anti-child and anti-mother can in some ways be traced to how uncomfortable the original demand in Britain for “free 24-hour nurseries” made people feel. Critics claimed that the demand signaled women’s desire for “baby dumping.” People were horrified by the supposed unnaturalness of young children being looked after by people other than their mothers at irregular times. That a demand for accessible and affordable childcare could cause such panic tells us something about the organization of gender in post-war industrial economies.

Whilst the charge that second-wave feminist were anti-mother unravels under scrutiny, the family and the post-war family in particular was certainly the object of much feminist criticism and analysis. Shelia Rowbotham writes that the women’s movement erupted “in a literature of complaint which focused on the experiences of the family – both in the sense of life in the household and with kin.”³ It was less mothers and more motherhood that feminist saw as the problem. In a pamphlet entitled *Women and the Family*, written by three women, each with two kids, the authors write, “our window on the world is looked through with our hands in the sink and we’ve begun to hate the sink and all it implies.”⁴ Rowbotham continues that it was not that “every woman suddenly became unhappy, but that significant numbers of women felt entitled to a destiny which was not simply domestic.”⁵ Considering that in the late 1960s, nearly 55 percent women in Britain did not work outside of the home, it is unsurprising that for significant numbers of women the family and women’s domestic destiny came to be seen as one of the central sites of female oppression. For many in the movement, women’s liberation meant an escape from the home – “in the home the woman is in the family, and the two are disturbingly synonymous.”⁶

Of course not all women dreamed of escape and experienced the family in the same way. For others, predominately working class women active in trade unions, women’s struggle was in the fight for equal pay and opportunities in the workplace. Whilst there were clear divisions and difference in perspectives and politics, there was also significant overlap between those in the women’s liberation movement and women active in trade unions. The story of feminism and reproduction is however far more complicated than simply being either about the family or about waged work. The argument developed in this essay is that it is necessary to develop an orientation

towards the home, motherhood and the domestic sphere that can accommodate multiple positions - specifically that in some instances home and motherhood operates as a site of resistance and in other locations they intersect with processes and practices of oppression and exploitation. By insisting that the home is neither essentially repressive nor liberatory, we are able to question why some homes can be sites of significant resistance, while others remain places of domination and exploitation. By returning to the organization of reproduction under slavery the specific operation of certain relations such as patriarchy and access to the means of reproduction outside of the wage are also able to be grasped.

In *Caliban and the Witch*, Silvia Federici explores the historical processes that reconfigured the female body “into an instrument for the reproduction of labor and the expansion of the work-force, treated as a natural breeding-machine, functioning according to rhythms outside of women’s control.”⁷ This reconfiguration of women into breeders is a story that, as Hortense Spillers reminds us, cannot be deciphered without tripping over other female narratives. It is a story that asks us to consider how the reproduction of labor-power is valued, what it costs and who pays the bill. It is not by accident that the story here begins with the profoundly racist and sexist concept of breeding as a departure point in which to unravel some of the interconnections between slavery, gender, and reproduction. It is an attempt to make visible the technologies of reproduction and the construction and organization of gender, race and class relations inside and outside of the wage.

In beginning with breeding, I want to explore how “in a situation where labor was plentiful, it was considered more profitable to work slaves to death than to provide the basic human requirements which would have prolonged our working lives.”⁸ Which is to investigate how it was more profitable to buy humans than it was for them, to use the language of the slave owners, to breed. Connected to the enslavement and exploitation of African slaves in the colonies, is the history of how the making and remaking of labor-power in Britain was reconfigured to be a white woman’s “natural” role, stripped of value and confined to the domestic sphere. Framed another way is to think through how the construction and meaning of motherhood and women’s naturalized domestic role relied on the exclusion and disciplining of certain bodies, specifically women of color and working mothers.

An investigation into these technologies of reproduction makes it painfully clear that it is necessary for a feminist politics of reproduction to pay attention to the constructions and experiences of race and class alongside that of gender. In doing so, such a politics demands that we abandon the universal presentation of motherhood and the domestic sphere as an always already degraded terrain of oppression. The desires of some women, overwhelmingly white middle-class educated women to escape the home and strive for equality in the world of employment has certainly dominated the story of reproduction in the last forty years. However, this desire of escape from domesticity and for a certain notion of freedom has obscured other narratives of the domestic

sphere and motherhood, as well as concealing on both a local and global scale the layers of dependency that are involved in the making and remaking of people under capitalism.

To be able to challenge notions of womanhood and manhood as inherent “natural” qualities it is useful to develop a definition of motherhood and the processes of mothering as a historically variable relationship in which an individual nurtures and cares for another. At the same time it is useful to disrupt the binary of the good / bad mother and include the processes of discipline, repression and harm that operate inside the matrix of care. The battles that have been fought in the name of motherhood, for abortion rights and against forced sterilization to access to reproductive technologies, childcare and maternity leave or the requirement that single mothers participate in workfare programs reveals motherhood to be a highly contested terrain. Furthermore, as Evelyn Nakano Glenn argues mothering occurs within specific social contexts that vary in terms of material and cultural resources and constraints.⁹ However, how mothering is conceived, organized and performed is not determined solely by these conditions, mothering is also produced through women’s and men’s actions within specific historical circumstances. Importantly, “agency is central to an understanding of mothering as a social, rather than biological, construct.”¹⁰

Dependencies

When we articulate reproduction as a problem, a political question connected to the histories of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, colonialism and the development of industrial capitalism in Europe and particularly Britain, we are able to grasp how certain activities and bodies became sexually and racially differentiated. In the case of reproductive activities, not only differentiated but also devalued and in many instances made invisible through an evocation of the natural. These structures of difference, of violent separation, can usefully be located alongside the processes of the enclosure of the commons and mechanisms of primitive accumulation that connects the emergence of industrial capitalism in Britain with the colonial project that relied on the enslavement of African workers. The framing of history in such a way reveals how essential and central slavery has been for capitalism. Massimo De Angelis argues that tracing such connections reveals characteristics and dynamics quite different from the stereotypical representation portraying the passage from “feudalism” to “capitalism” in Europe and posits that an analysis of “primitive accumulation is consistent with an understanding of the capitalist economy as *a world economy*.”¹¹

The vast concentrations of wealth, resources and capital that flowed into Europe and specifically England in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries has led many to conclude that the plantation production system and trade in African labor played a fundamental role, in the emergence of capitalism, industrial production and the expansion of colonialism and settlement. Taking this argument further in *Black Marxism*, Cedric Robinson presents the histories of race and racialism as existing prior to the emergence of capitalism and demonstrates the necessarily racist character of

capitalism as an expression of European civilization. ¹² He cautions against a narration of the history of capitalism that defines slavery and slave labor as processes of primitive accumulation relegated to a historical stage somewhere between feudalism and capitalism. He stresses that “slave labor, the slave trade and their associated phenomena ... profoundly altered the economies of those states directly or indirectly involved in colonization and production by slave labor.” ¹³

Insofar as terminologies like separation and differentiation are effective as analytical categories to better understand the dynamics and relations of capitalist society, they do not necessarily encapsulate the violence, brutality or the struggles, co-optation and resistance embedded in the processes that separated producers from the social means of subsistence and of production. In *Capital, Volume One*, Marx reminds us “this history, the history of their expropriation, is written in the annals of mankind in letters of blood and fire.” ¹⁴ Just in case one was to miss it the first time, he repeats the imagery fifty pages later, stating that capital comes into the world, is born so to speak “dripping from head to toe, from every pore, with blood and dirt.” ¹⁵ Federici makes the point that the term transitions “suggests a gradual, linear historical development, whereas the period it names was among the bloodiest and most discontinuous in world history – one that saw apocalyptic transformations.” ¹⁶

Not only is the extreme violence and brutality often washed away in the tales of capitalism’s birth, but the scale and level of connection between the geographies of Empire is rarely acknowledged; to do so would give voice to uncomfortable questions of how some people came to possess the wealth that they have and why others remain dispossessed and trapped in so-called cycles of poverty and underdevelopment. Eric Williams explains that the specific role that England played in the “triangular trade” between Europe, the New World and Africa as one in which “by 1750 there was hardly a trading or a manufacturing town in England which was not in some way connected with the triangular or direct colonial trade. The profits obtained provided one of the main streams of that accumulation of capital in England which financed the Industrial Revolution.” ¹⁷

The centrality of slavery to the emergence of capitalism was one that transformed not only the landscape of the colonies but also Britain. The immense accumulation of labor and capital that was made possible through the enslavement, forced labor and death of millions of African workers on the slave ships, plantations and colonies produced some of the economic and social conditions that enabled the separation of production from reproduction in the transition from feudalism to capitalism in Britain. In this instance to speak of the separation of production from reproduction is to articulate the processes that ensured workers’ dependence on the wage and their inability to reproduce themselves independently of capitalism. The significant reduction in the costs associated in reproducing workers in Britain that was made possible through the production of cheap commodities using slave labor in the colonies, prefigured capitalism’s contemporary use of “cheap” migrant labor and production of consumer commodities in the so-called Third World. ¹⁸

The production of commodities such as sugar, rum, tea, tobacco and cotton – the most important commodities (apart from bread) in the making and remaking of workers in Europe did not reach large-scale production in the colonies until slavery has been institutionalized after the 1650s. Before production was transformed with African slave labor, the “luxury” items stolen, looted or traded from the colonies were consumed by the privileged European elite who could afford them.¹⁹ However, once production was expanded through the use of slave labor, one direct consequence was the reduction in the costs of commodity basket necessary to reproduce labor-power on a daily and intergenerational basis during the emergence of industrial capitalism in Britain. As Federici argues, the expansion of colonial commodity production and the use of slave labor restructured the reproduction of industrial workers and conversely the costs associated with reproducing labor-power on an international scale and “the metropolitan wage became the vehicle by which the goods produced by enslaved workers went to market, and the value of the products of enslaved-labor were realized.”

The emergence of industrial capitalism was an uneven, contested and violent series of interlocking events, and at the same time that the wage relation produces a relation of dependency that disciplines and transforms those who receive a wage, it also organizes and disciplines those who do not directly receive wages.²¹ The accumulation of labor and capital that slavery made possible assisted in forging the “free” laborers of Britain – workers who were and often remain free to starve without the wage. The “freedom” of capital’s industrial workers was, following Marx’s analysis, a double freedom. A freedom that enabled specific class and gender relations, that whilst being uneven and continually contested, separated men and women into distinct spheres of work and influence, specifically (male) waged productive work in the factory/public sphere and (female) unwaged reproductive work in the home/domestic realm.

Separations

The centrality of slavery to the development of capitalism in Britain cannot however be posed as only existing within the realm of the economic. In addition to the immense monetary wealth that slavery produced for Britain it is also useful to add the techniques of discipline, policing and control of labor exported from the colonies back to England and into the factory system.²² Equally, power does not flow in only one direction, and there were significant lessons and experiences that the colonialists and slaveholders learnt from the sustained slave revolts and resistance against conditions of captivity.²³ In relation to the argument being explored here concerning the connections between slavery and reproduction, it is useful to consider the centrality of slavery to constructions of gender relations. bell hooks contends that “the shift away from the image of white women as sinful and sexual to that of white women as virtuous lady occurred at the same time as mass sexual exploitation of enslaved black women.”²⁴

The Transatlantic Slave Trade and slave economy was one in which slaves were defined as chattel and this definition of people as “profitable labor-units” or as property to be bought and sold applied to women as much as it did to men and as Angela Y. Davis

argues slaves “might as well have been genderless as far as the slaveholders were concerned.”²⁵ Hortense Spillers makes the point that “under these conditions, we lose at least *gender difference in the outcome*, and the female body and male body become a territory of cultural and political maneuver, not at all gender-related, gender specific.”²⁶ This loss of gender difference is evident in the conditions of labor of fieldworkers that (the majority of) slaves experienced, in that girls and women were “assigned to work the soil, pick the cotton, cut the cane, harvest the tobacco... [and] ...that judged by the evolving nineteenth-century ideology of femininity, which emphasized women’s roles as nurturing mothers and gentle companions and housekeepers for their husbands, Black women were practically anomalies.”²⁷

Despite the equality of exploitation that slave women experienced in the conditions of their work, they also suffered in different ways in so far as they were victims of sexual abuse and other violence that is preserved for and inflicted upon women. Furthermore, by analyzing the labor conditions of (female) slaves involved in production and the differentiated ways that (white) women in Britain came to be seen as inhabitants of a sphere separated from the realm of productive work and synonymous with “mother” and “housewife,” it is important to note that “among Black slaves, this vocabulary was nowhere to be found.”²⁸ Davis argues that the gendered role assigned to female slaves was one in which they were conceived of “as ‘breeders’ – animals, whose monetary value could be precisely calculated in terms of their ability to multiply their numbers ..[and] since slave women were classified as “breeders” as opposed to “mothers,” their infant children could be sold.”²⁹

In sharp contrast to the emerging Victorian ideology that attempted to naturalize, feminize and crucially privatize the processes of reproduction of “industrial” workers in Britain, the explicit understanding of the costs and work of reproducing the slave population is revealed by the calculations that the slave traders and planters undertook. The cost of reproduction was so considerable that a slave born on the plantation cost substantially more, confirming that during the operation of the international slave trade it was “cheaper” to purchase than to breed.³⁰ Consideration of the time during and after pregnancy, the need for better and more food and importantly the loss of work hours which would have been necessary so as to be able to care for the child all informed plantation owners calculations. The considerable differences in how reproduction was constructed and valued are stark. In the colonies with regard to slaves there was visible and measurable monetary value associated with the activities of reproduction, in comparison to the naturalized processes of reproduction that were emerging in industrial Britain.

Drawing together the twin processes of the emergence of the trade in slaves and the subjugation of women, Federici argues “starting in the mid-16th century, while Portuguese ships were returning from Africa with their first human cargoes, all the European governments began to impose the severest penalties against contraception, abortion and infanticide.”³¹ In her analysis of the historical dynamics and processes that led to the devaluation of women’s reproductive labor, Federici stresses the

importance of the witch trials, the criminalization of women's control over procreation and the degrading of maternity to a relative and literal position of forced labor. However, like many other feminist scholars she also characterizes the dynamic that was gaining momentum in eighteenth-century as one that assigned men and women to separate spheres of influence and work and one that particularly designated women to the domestic sphere and privatized family structure. Federici argues that the historic changes in the social location and power of women "that peaked in the 19th century with the creation of the full-time housewife – redefined women's position in society and in relation to men." ³²

It was within the bourgeois class that the family and the household were first defined as separate from the sphere of production. Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall argue that the construction of women's naturalized domestic role within the family was key to the bourgeois assertion of cultural authority and political power, enabling the middling classes to relocate the idea of virtue, honor and morality away from the inherited form of aristocratic *noblesse oblige*, into the domestic sphere. ³³ As guardians of morality, middle-class women were also the bearers of bourgeois cultural hegemony and Davidoff and Hall demonstrate that middle-class women themselves played an active role in the production of domestic ideology, just as their domestic labor made a vital contribution to middle-class economic production. Not only did middle-class women, along with the enormous amounts of work of their female servants, perform the reproductive labor upon which all the now differentiated "productive" labor of men depended, but as consumers of an ever-increasing range of household commodities – soft furnishings, ornaments, cleaning products – they were also central in shaping new forms of commodity capitalism and colonial economies, while actively creating a new middle-class identity. ³⁴

The domesticated family structure that came to dominate middle-class homes mediated between the public and private spheres and importantly connected the emerging market with the domestic sphere. Davidoff and Hall's analysis of middle-class men and women highlights the class and gender formations that both constructed and were constructed by the creation of the domestic sphere. In particular, their work draws our attention to the role of the middle-class home; a space that can be said to have been built on the expropriation of working-class men and women's labor, whether in the public world of the workplace (factories) or the private workplace of the home, which employed the majority of the female workforce as servants; expropriation that was also made possible by the immense amount of wealth produced by slave labor on the plantations.

Here the triangular trade connects the creation of the Victorian domestic sphere as home to millions of working-class servants, middle-class wives and consumption of household commodities, the industrial factories in which value was produced and labor-power consumed, and the slave plantations that produced the materials that provided cheapened materials to reproduce workers in both the public and private spheres. This interconnected and complex picture of the boundaries that demarcated private from public emphasizes the fact that the public was not really public, nor the private really

private. Furthermore, despite the powerful imagery and discourse of the separate spheres of work and home, both the private and public are ideological constructs with specific meanings that are the product of a particular historical time, constantly being contested and under revision.³⁵

The idea of men and women occupying different spheres of work and influence was both a response to, and a contributing factor in, the reorganization of reproduction that occurred with the emergence of capitalism. Separate spheres reflected, justified and made sense of the reorganization of society brought about by the development of industrial capitalism. Within middle-class discourses of work, gender and the family, the potent combination and intersection of the constructs of labors of leisure (the housewife) and labors of invisibility (servants) served to further conceal and deny the economic value of women's domestic work.³⁶ The dehumanization of slaves and measurable cost of reproduction under slavery effectively excluded female slaves not only from constructions of motherhood but also more generally from being imagined as women.

Labor

However in the British Empire, the relative “cheapness” of slave labor declined when the trade in slaves was abolished in 1807, prompting planters to adopt a “slave breeding” policy. Although the trade in slaves was illegalized in 1807, it took another 26 years for *The British Slavery Abolition Act (1833)* to come into force, which formally abolished slavery throughout most of the British Empire. Writing specifically about the histories of slavery in the US, Davis argues that when the abolition of the international slave trade began to threaten the expansion of the young cotton-industry, “the slaveholding class was forced to rely on natural reproduction...[and that]...during the decades preceding the Civil War, black women came to be increasingly appraised for their fertility (or for the lack of it).”³⁷

The “turn” to a reliance on biological reproduction as compared to the trade and purchase of labor–power for colonial economies has been debated and analyzed by numerous scholars and “much has been made of the slaveholders’ definition of the black family as a matrilineal structure.”³⁸ In *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom*, Herbert Gutman presents evidence of developed and complex family structures that existed during slavery which were not the infamous matriarchal family but rather families involving wife, husband, children and frequently other relatives, as well as adoptive kin.³⁹ Gutman confirms that undeniably slave families were separated and disrupted, however he also argues that slaves adhered to strict norms regulating their familial arrangements. Patricia Hill Collins develops Gutman’s argument around slave families further and posits that “enslaved Africans were property, and one way that many resisted the dehumanizing effects of slavery was by re-creating African notions of family as extended kin units.”⁴⁰ Connected to acts of resistance against dehumanization was the relative security that often accompanied motherhood for slave

women, in that “childbearing was a way for enslaved black women to anchor themselves in a place for an extended period and maintain enduring relationships with husbands, family, and friends.”⁴¹

Collins outlines the various mechanisms involved in not only calculating the costs of reproduction but also encouraging it “as assigning pregnant women lighter workloads, giving pregnant women more attention and rations, and rewarding prolific women with bonuses were all used to increase Black women’s reproduction.”⁴² Herbert Gutman also notes that especially after the abolition of the overseas slave trade a high premium was placed on females who began early to bear children.⁴³ Of course, slaves and owners measured the birth of a child differently, “the owner viewed the birth of a slave child primarily as an economic fact but the slave viewed the same event primarily as a social and familial fact.”⁴⁴

It is within a complex conceptualization of equality in exploitation and enslavement and the valorization of a limited yet present domestic life, that Davis adds another dimension to the story of slavery and gender, in that Black women “also asserted their equality aggressively in challenging the inhuman institution of slavery.”⁴⁵ Davis sketches the various practices and acts of resistance that female slaves engaged in and writes that slave women “poisoned their masters, committed other acts of sabotage and like their men, joined maroon communities.”⁴⁶ However, she also notes that resistance was also often more subtle and involved, such as in the example of the clandestine acquisition of reading and writing skills and the imparting of this knowledge to others.

An analysis of slave families, their social and domestic lives and support structures helps to foreground a crucial and antagonistic space within slavery, a space where slaves performed, according to Davis “the only labor of the slave community which could not be directly and immediately claimed by the oppressor... Domestic labor was the only meaningful labor for the slave community as a whole.”⁴⁷ She argues that the domestic life of slaves took on an over-determined importance as it provided them with the only space “where they could truly experience themselves as human beings” and “Black women, for this reason – and also because they were workers just like men – were not debased by their domestic functions in the way that white women came to be.”⁴⁸

Home

Counter to much of second-wave (white) feminism that expressed the family is the source of women’s oppression, Hazel Carby argues that “we need to recognize that during slavery, period of colonialism and under the present authoritarian state, the black family has been a site of political and cultural resistance to racism.”⁴⁹ This is to argue that for some women, (and also men and children) the home was historically and continues to be an important site of resistance to institutional and structural racism and white supremacy. To be sure, the question of home, as well as that of family and reproduction have remained contested concepts and values within various tendencies of feminist thought and certainly disagreement exists among Black and post-colonial

feminists as to how we can and should orientate towards home. Iris Marion Young posits that “house and home are deeply ambivalent values”⁵⁰ and draws attention to the various feminist ambivalences concerning the values accorded to notions of home and the domestic. In her work she re-centers preservation within an analysis of home, arguing that “preservation makes and remakes home as support for personal identity without accumulation, certainty or fixity.”⁵¹ Furthermore, she posits the values of homemaking that underlie the affirmation of personal and cultural identity as counter to the various post-colonial feminist interventions by Bidy Martin and Chandra Mohanty,⁵² Teresa de Lauretis,⁵³ and Bonnie Honig⁵⁴ that reject home as inappropriately totalizing and imperialist.

Whilst agreeing with much of the critique of home as depoliticizing, essentialist and exploitative and the suggestion that we should fear the nostalgic seductions of home as a fantasy of wholeness and certainty, Young draws on the positive reading given by bell hooks of “home” as a critical value for feminism. Drawing similar conclusions as Carby, hooks highlights the historical experiences of African American women and argues that “homeplace”⁵⁵ is a site of resistance to the dominating and exploitative social structures and “the ability to resist dominant social structures requires a space beyond the full reach of those structures, where different, more humane social relations can be lived and imagined.”⁵⁶ The positing of the home and domestic sphere as offering a potential space for resistance and renewal is not, however, about drawing a neat line from “the past,” in this case slavery and to the present. On the contrary the intention is to recognize that the conflicts and contested experiences of home reveal it to be a location in which the realities of race and class intersect with gender. As a location of intersection it resists simplification and destabilizes claims to universal experiences of womanhood and motherhood.

In so far as it is useful to assert that there are many different experiences and contradictory meanings of home, it is also crucial to not be seduced by notions of the home as a space that is inherently good, stable or natural. In locating and making visible home as a potential and lived place of resistance, it is also necessary to remain open to a reading of the home as a place of exploitative waged and unwaged work and sensitive to the experiences of many people, many of them women for whom the home is a space marked by violence, isolation and unhappiness. The challenge in confronting the home and reproduction as political problems is to make sense of the various structures, histories and processes that have produced the traditional nuclear family as the normative family structure, while at the same time remaining attentive to the actually existing multiple forms of kinship and household structures. The positing of a multiplicity of experiences and meaning of family and reproduction is not to gloss over what normative structures do, in effect what they reproduce. The feminist task is to make sense of the dependencies, separations and labors of multiple and at times conflicting histories: of working class women who were often both workers and mothers, with that of middle class women many of whom were historically “just housewives” but are now overwhelmingly workers and mothers and the stories of women of color who have been excluded from discourses of motherhood and have

traditionally always worked, overwhelmingly in badly paid and low status job. The ongoing challenge then is to bring home and reproduction to the center of politics in such a way that plays close attention to different female narratives of reproduction.

My nineteen year-old-self never dreamt of having children. I had discovered feminism and it enabled me to dream of being a woman that did not include breeding. I swapped babies for a wage of ones own. At the time, I wanted to be sterilized. It wasn't that I didn't want to have children; it was so I could be set free from the potential, that very gendered assumption that one-day I would of course want to have kids. I even went to see a doctor about it. He suggested I see a shrink. I laughed in his face and carried on working hard and earning nothing.

But it turns out that Natasha was right, I was a breeder. Around a year and half after my first child was born, I had what can only be described as a crisis of motherhood. I was not suffering from post-natal depression nor was I exclusively at home with the baby. I was one of the so-called "lucky" mothers whose partner did more than just "help"; he washed, cared, cleaned, cooked and worried with me about that high temperature or strange looking vomit. The problem wasn't the baby, or breastfeeding, or not getting enough sleeping. As I lay sobbing, panic ripping through my body, it was motherhood, my newly acquired identity that came spilling out as the problem. Good mother, bad mother, good-enough mother, working mother, stay at home mother, all and none of them made me want to scream. It wasn't that I couldn't find a category of motherhood to fit my lifestyle or a bundle of commodities to consume to affirm my status. It was more profound than that, it was an unnerving realization of having birthed capital: all that blood and dirt. And that the work of wiping the snotty noses, cleaning up the shit and teaching them to be on time, it all still pretty much fell to women, and yet more women, no matter how you rolled the dice. Added to that enormity was the fact that whilst my nice radical reconfiguration of family was a much needed little refuge within the horror show, it was not a way out.