Ashley Miller

Professor Buchholz

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Article Review

           I would like to introduce Sara Clarke Kaplan’s article, “Love and Violence/Maternity and Death: Black Feminism and the Politics of Reading (Un)representability”. This article explores and examines how Toni Morrison’s novel, *Beloved*, through its elements of violence in the aftermath of trauma, alongside defining elements of African chattel slavery, situates the enslaved black female as the subject, coined by Orlando Patterson, of “social death” (94). It’s been fascinating to have come across this article, not only for its content concerning *Beloved*, but also the extent to which the author, Sara Clarke Kaplan, is deeply ingrained in ethnic studies and critical gender studies. Since the publication of this article, back in 2007, Kaplan has made incredible contributions to critical race, gender, and cultural studies as the author of *The Black Reproductive*, a text I had previously encountered in a critical race theory course. She was also recently named the new executive director of American University’s Antiracist Research and Policy Center and has been published in several journals, including *American Quarterly*, *American Literary History*, *Callaloo*, and the *Journal of Black Women, Gender, and Families*. The information provided by the date published makes me assume that this particular article might be a little dated in comparison to her other publications in the realm of critical race studies. However, with the topic being specific to Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, I believe Kaplan will have no issue providing a compelling history and argument.

The thesis of Kaplan’s article is, “by depicting the enslaved black female not only as an object of bodily violence, but as an agential body of violence, *Beloved* offers an explicitly feminist reconceptualization of black radical politics that leverages productive contradictions and destabilizes constraining binaries, exposing the outlines of a black feminist liberatory politic that expands and enriches traditional conceptions of both black radicalism and black feminism” (94). It appears at the end of the abstract and is reiterated at the conclusion of the first paragraph of the article. To an extent, I see that rhetorical signal that highlights the thesis as the parallel the author draws between the subject of the enslaved black female and the subject of social death. However, most significantly prevalent is the use of pathos in steering her appeal to the audience. Kaplan outlines her argument clearly by the processes which “the enslaved black woman as a social category has been given meaning,” but also pleads with emotion, illuminating that in deeming the enslaved black female as an agent of violence the realities to which they are mystified or erased (95).

To provide background and further situate her argument, Kaplan introduces the following authors and their concepts: Saidiya Hartman’s “call for a literary practice of resignification”; Hortense Spiller’s “ramifications of the paradoxical play of race and gender in the context of African chattel slavery”; and, Allen Feldman’s conception of violence (95-96). Bringing these authors and these critical points of their own literary investigations into the conversation allows Kaplan to dive deep into raced and gendered workings among scholars, historically and theoretically, as it correlates to the narrative of *Beloved* and its commentary on the horrors of slavery and its unending impact on those enslaved and their descendants. Specifically, I would like to identify three main points in which Kaplan seeks to establish her case and make a connection to the events of *Beloved*. First, by re-reading Beloved, Kaplan seeks to “illustrate the theoretical and political potential in reconceptualizing the historical function of categories of race and gender under African chattel slavery” (96). Next, she examines how the enslaved black maternal body functioned as a “material-discursive” nexus (96). Last, but not least, Kaplan examines how an imbricated nexus of love and violence, exemplified through the characters in *Beloved*, “enslaved domesticity is produced, negotiated, and transformed in the social spaces of the antebellum plantation and the black female body, enables a “resignification” of race and gendered womanhood as a category encompassing both bodily objectification and agential bodily violence” (96).

The evidence Kaplan utilizes to support these main points starts with the re-presentation of *Beloved* as a theory of history. By considering Kaplan’s previously mentioned main point of the historical function of raced and gendered subjection through this lens, the novel operating on fictional grounds can approach and acknowledge realities of the “unspeakable, the foreclosed, and the must-be-forgotten” (97). A specific example that is highlighted in connection with the literary text is when Sethe sets upon killing her children as the schoolteacher has come to bring her and them back to a life of slavery. This particular instance is one among the multiple examples used to support Kaplan’s main points. It initiates the conversation of the “embodied form of radical resistance” in *Beloved*. Furthermore, Kaplan expounds on these actions, “whether by committing suicide, fighting back against brutal masters, or planning and enacting large-scale rebellions,” fatal violence is a crucial means of opposition within African chattel slavery (99).

Overall, Kaplan concludes that by showing the enslaved black female body as it operates through the characters and the events in *Beloved*, the novel functions historically as a “spatialized nexus of power and discourse, embodying and resolving the sometimes-contradictory demands of white supremacy, capitalism, and patriarchy” (115). The most significant source the author uses I believe would help aid in my comprehension of the essay and the entirety of Kaplan’s argument is Allen Feldman’s *Formations of Violence: The Narrative of the Body and Political Terror in Northern Ireland*. Kaplan consistently references Feldman’s conceptions of violence, as well as how these instances perpetrated historically and individually to the human body, as points to navigate literature on political violence. In addition to this source, Claudia Tate’s *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire: The Black Heroine’s Text at the Turn of the Century* I think would be a crucial selection to assist in diving deeper into the analysis of of the enslaved black female. Kaplan briefly focuses on Tate’s intervention of the “role of feminist revisionist historiography and literary history in replicating the original foreclosure of the violent enslaved female,” and elaborates how “post-Reconstruction African American women’s domestic novels deployed domestic allegories to encode political desire through narratives of fulfilled aspirations effectively counters the ubiquitous representation of black political opposition as exclusively masculine” (105). Both of these sources, especially when considering the text of *Beloved*, I believe would provide thorough and essential evidence in navigating Kaplan’s argument. In reviewing these elements of her argument, alongside the other literary works and the evidence presented, I believe this article should be considered crucial to the reading of *Beloved* and understanding the extensive and historical trauma of slavery, especially as it pertains to the black female body, and how this racialized and gendered brutality continues to be reproduced through generations and exploit these individuals.

Works Cited

Sara Clarke Kaplan. “Love and Violence/Maternity and Death: Black Feminism and the Politics of Reading (Un)Representability.” *Black Women, Gender + Families*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2007, pp. 94–124, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/blacwomegendfami.1.1.0094. Accessed 5 Apr. 2022.