A review of *Sites of Slavery* (2012)

Salamishah Tillet’s *Sites of Slavery* examines the ways in which post-Civil Rights African American writers and artists return “to the site of slavery” (Tillet 2) in order to grapple with the ongoing exclusion of African Americans from full citizenship and to pose racial futures. Tillet analyzes diverse texts, ranging from legal documents to plays and films. All share what she calls a “democratic aesthetic,” the strategic use of postmodernist approaches and metafiction in particular to narrate or visualize the paradox of African American citizenship. Further, Tillet argues that as part of a democratic aesthetic these writers and artists deploy what she terms “critical patriotism,” an orientation toward American citizenship born of “dissent, criticality, and inclusion” (12). Ultimately, this posture enables them to move black women from the outskirts to the center of American citizenship.

Sites of slavery are physical and rhetorical spaces that “provide tangible links between present-day Americans and American chattel slavery” (5). In her interdisciplinary study, Tilletexamines four such sites, grouping them thematically. In the first two chapters, she examines sites that serve as metaphors for post-civil rights racial melancholia. Chapter one focuses on the decades-long relationship between Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson. The second chapter attends to Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. In the last two chapters, Tillet turns to the ways in which African American writers and artists engage collective memory. The third chapter chronicles African Americans’ “Back to Africa” travel and tourism. Finally, the fourth chapter engages reparations movements from the early twentieth century to the present. Tillet anchors each chapter in its site and examines them through textual reinterpretations of the historical moment.

In her first chapter, “Freedom in a Bondsmaid’s Arms,” Tillet examines plays, historical monographs, and novels that imagine the life of Sally Hemings and her long-term sexual relationship and children with Thomas Jefferson. Here, Tillet argues that these texts revisit early American history in order to cast Sally Hemings as the mother of American democracy, someone “more faithful to the democratic ideals of the nation than one of its most esteemed founders” (20). Additionally, they explore interracial intimacy, which establishes American democracy as the birthright of African Americans and undermines “national racial order” (26).

Nonetheless, these texts risk fashioning an alternative narrative of American citizenship “harnessed to the yoke of daddy-mommy” (Deleuze 54). They elevate Hemings to founding mother, relying on her reproductive labor and biological descendants. The focus on the nation-state as family, through Jefferson and Hemings, neglects the political links between the United States and the rest of the hemisphere at this moment. As Edward Brathwaite wrote, the American Revolution “raised a question” about freedom and democracy that the movements for slave emancipation in the Caribbean later began to answer (Brathwaite xiv). The Hemings-Jefferson relationship is a synecdoche for African Americans’ claims to American democracy, but democracy in the Americas is often much more queer and far-flung.

The second chapter, “The Milder and More Amusing Phases of Slavery,” focuses on works that satirize *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. In her novel, Harriet Beecher Stowe uses sentimentality to advance abolitionism. However, in the mid-nineteenth century, performers used blackface as they portrayed Uncle Tom and Topsy in Great Britain and the United States, a practice that would help “promote anti-black discourse and legislation throughout much of the Jim Crow era” (52). Tillet argues that Ishmael Reed, Robert Alexander, Bill T. Jones, and Kara Walker turn to satire as a postmodern strategy in order to displace sentimentality and authorship in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Broadly, as they revise Topsy and Uncle Tom, these writers and artists also strike against the myths of black inferiority to which these characters were tied.

The third chapter, “A Race of Angels,” examines the work of African American photographers Chester Higgins and Carrie Mae Weems amidst the rise of commercial heritage tourism to slave forts in the 1970s. Both Higgins and Weems turn their lens to the House of Slaves at Gorée Island, Senegal as an emblem of the slave trade: “Today, returning to Africa primarily means visiting what Edouard Glissant calls the “point of entanglement [intrication],” those sites at which their ancestors began the torturous journey to the New World” (98). According to Tillet, their works challenge national boundaries in order to establish solidarity between African Americans and the African continent. Higgins and Weems present a contrast to Haile Gerima’s film *Sankofa* (1993), which ossifies Cape Coast Castle without recognizing the desires of the Ghanaian government and citizenry to re-purpose this site. As Tillet notes, slave forts mark an origin point for African American identity. Still, the question of contemporary West African engagement with these spaces illuminates yet another kind of entanglement—of African American history with a dynamic, living African continent.

The fourth and final chapter, “What Have We Done to Weigh So Little on Their Scale?” emphasizes what Tillet calls “mnemonic restitution,” or attempts to “revis[e] the historical record” of slavery in reparations debates from the early twentieth century to the present (136-137). It chronicles reparations lawsuits, including *Cato vs. United States of America* (1995) and the African-American Slave Descendants Litigation lawsuit in 2004. Tillet closes the final chapter by restating the argument of the final section and the book: “the recognition of slavery in the civic sphere will expand the parameters of African American citizenship” (166). In other words, these legal forms of remembrance make possible a vision of a democratic future.

*Sites of Slavery* charts conversations between the antebellum United States and post-Civil Rights works, constructing an overlapping rather than linear timeline. Through deft analysis of art and legal forms, Tillet illuminates the fragmentation of the historical record of slavery and of African American citizenship. In this way, Tillet animates a black feminist criticism—extending David Scott’s notion of criticism as “a practice of situated remembering (or remembering-and-forgetting)” (Scott 177) to place race and gender at the heart of enduring political and intellectual questions. Appropriately, then, *Sites of Slavery* occasions an examination of our current moment, which has been punctuated by the extrajudicial killings of African Americans. Activists, artists, and public figures have used physical demonstrations as well as new media technologies to respond to the deaths of Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, and Michael Brown—with comparatively less attention to black women. Following Tillet’s study, I will now turn my attention to the aesthetics of one such response.

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On December 8, 2014, the Cleveland Cavaliers faced the Brooklyn Nets at the Barclays Center in downtown Brooklyn, New York. The area was dense with foot and vehicular traffic, as it often is on game nights—and in general since the gentrification of the borough and this neighborhood in particular over the last decade.

But the landscape saw more changes that night. Outside the front entrance, a group of demonstrators gathered. They held signs and recited chants—“Hands up, don’t shoot!”—while NYPD officers looked on. Inside, Prince William and Kate Middleton sat courtside. The game was one stop on their royal visit to the United States. LeBron James and Kyrie Irving of the Cavaliers warmed up in black shirts that read “I CAN’T BREATHE” in white upper case Comic Sans lettering. As the Cavaliers and the Nets prepared for the game, Irving and James returned again and again to the scene and sounds of Eric Garner’s death.

On July 17, 2014, police officers had approached Garner in Staten Island to arrest him for allegedly selling “loosies,” or single, untaxed cigarettes. According to a video from the scene, Garner accused the police officers of harassing him and in response one of the officer used a chokehold on Garner. As the officer brought Garner to the ground and maintained the chokehold, “I can’t breathe” eleven times before dying. The medical examiner ruled that the chokehold was the primary cause of death; the NYPD has long banned the use of chokeholds.

After a grand jury in Staten Island failed to indict the police officer for Eric Garner’s death on December 3, #ICantBreathe became an explosive trending topic (Izadi). To that end, Ben Zimmer sheds some light on the linguistics of “I can’t breathe,” examining its potency as a Twitter hashtag and a slogan. As people repeat Eric Garner’s last words, he argues, the first-person pronoun “I” expresses solidarity but may also risk creating an “easy assertion of identification with the oppressed” (Zimmer).

However, following Salamishah Tillet’s examination of postmodern strategies in post-civil rights arts and letters, I argue that LeBron James and Kyrie Irving called up the site of Eric Garner’s death through repetition. The clash of color, white font against a black background, mirrored the vexed relationship between African Americans and liberal American democracy on which *Sites of Slavery* focuses.In upper-case lettering, “I CAN’T BREATHE” amplified Eric Garner’s labored last words, words that circled the arena as the two players jumped rope and took shots. But their performance did not only conjure Eric Garner in the city where he lived and died but also displaced the tenor of the royal visit. Prince William and Kate Middleton seemed incidentally party to James and Irving’s demonstration. But that evening also implicated Great Britain in a history of transatlantic slavery, colonialism, and anti-black violence—a history resounding with that of the United States through the transnational “afterlives of slavery” (Hartman 6).

Finally, black women were an absent presence on December 8, 2014. By comparison, the archive of contemporary state and interpersonal violence against black women is thin. As of February 10, 2015, six of the seven murdered trans women in the United States in 2015 were women of color, Ty Underwood and Penny Proud among them (Kellaway). And, many black girls and women including Aiyana Stanley-Jones, Yvette Smith, and Miriam Carey have died at the hands of police officers. However, there are few videos or words from which to draw slogans; their names and likenesses do not echo with the same frequency. So, we will imagine and fill the gaps.

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