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*Sites of Slavery: Citizenship and Racial Democracy in the
Post-Civil Rights Imagination* by Salamishah Tillet (review)

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cal studies while moving beyond the limits of each. Though the author avoids a heavy theoretical discussion of the subject, his approach invites the reader to consider what a productive relationship between literature and history might look like—an urgent question for the inevitably interdisciplinary field of Caribbean Studies. As a literary scholar, I admire and appreciate Ocasio’s deft management of archival sources, though I am curious as to what he thinks about the relationship between the *costumbrista* articles he analyzes and the antislavery *costumbrista* fiction that scholars agree occupied a central place in the nineteenth-century Cuban lettered sphere. For example, what light do little-known texts such as Suárez y Romero’s *Colección de artículos* or Villaverde’s *costumbrista* article shed on those authors’ canonical antislavery novels *Francisco* (1880) and *Cecilia Valdés* (1882)—both of which feature *costumbrista* types such as the black coachman and the tragic *mulata* that Ocasio discusses in his book?

This comment does not, however, detract from the value of Ocasio’s multidisciplinary project, which elucidates a world in which reluctant creole and mixed-race writers struggle with both the shadow of their own prejudices and the iron fist of the colonial censor in order to set the bases of what would become Cuba’s hybrid national culture. To his credit, Ocasio refuses to judge the *costumbristas*, instead allowing their works to speak for themselves. Such a subtly nuanced study at times strains the reader’s ability to follow, but the book is well worth the effort.

—Thomas Genova

Tillet, Salamishah. *Sites of Slavery: Citizenship and Racial Democracy in the Post-Civil Rights Imagination*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2012.

In *Sites of Slavery: Citizenship and Racial Democracy in the Post-Civil Rights Imagination*, Salamishah Tillet explores the way in which post-civil rights African Americans return to “sites of slavery”—“the objects, texts, figures, places and narratives from the American past that provide tangible links between present-day Americans and American chattel slavery”—in order to produce a “democratic aesthetic” which responds to the “civic estrangement” of contemporary African American citizenship in the United States (5). Tillet defines “civic estrangement” as “the paradox post-civil rights African Americans experience as simultaneous citizens and ‘non-citizens’” (3). Her notion of a “democratic aesthetic” both emerges and departs from Michael Bennett’s *Democratic Discourses* in drawing on the Du Boisian “twoness” of “the pessimism of civic estrangement and the privilege of American legal citizenship” (4). Ultimately, Tillet’s argument is that “the recognition of slavery in the civic sphere [achieved by returning, as the figures in Tillet’s book do, to sites of slavery,] will expand the parameters of African American citizenship” (166).

Tillet weaves through a rich archive of cultural productions from literary fiction and legal cases to photography and film. As such, the book’s interdisciplinary approach draws on scholarship in literary and cultural studies, performance studies, history, and law, and will appeal to readers from a variety of disciplines.

Following a teachable introduction, chapter 1, “Freedom in a Bondswoman’s Arms,” combs the historical canon’s account of the sexual relationship between Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings. Tillet begins with Barbara Chase-Riboud’s 1979 novel *Sally Hemings*, which imagines a romantic relationship that “does not entertain the possibility that Jefferson sexually exploited Hemings” (29). While it isn’t fully clear how the novel considers what Saidiya Hartman describes as slavery’s “condition of unredressed injury” (101)—despite Tillet’s gloss of the “ambiguity” of the relationship—it is clear that it repositions black female subjectivity as central to American founding narratives. Chapter 1 then moves to historian and law professor Annette Gordon-Reed’s books *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy* (1997) and *The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family* (2008) as well as playwright Robbie McCauley’s 1992 drama *Sally’s Rape*. Tillet reads Gordon-Reed’s books both as illustrating African American civic estrangement’s roots in American slavery and as “democratizing the historical record” (38). In contrast to Chase-Riboud and Gordon-Reed, who both imagine a romantic relationship between Hemings and Jefferson, McCauley’s play directly confronts the violence of interracial sexual relationships during slavery and posits them as “the historical foundation for racial inequalities, such as civic estrangement, in the present” (42). Also unlike the previous two authors, McCauley highlights a multiplicity of African American women’s voices as opposed to privileging one particular subject. Such a multiplicity “reconstructs a lineage of critical patriotism that centers black women’s dissent” (50).

The author’s second chapter, “The Milder and More Amusing Phases of Slavery,” looks at how post-civil rights African American writers and artists return to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* not to reject its most problematic characters, Uncle Tom and Topsy, but to reclaim them “as post-civil rights symbols of racial resistance or reconciliation” (52). Tillet pairs Ishmael Reed’s novel *Flight to Canada* (1976) and Robert Alexander’s play *I Ain’t Your Uncle: The New Jack Revisionist “Uncle Tom’s Cabin”* (1991) to examine the promise and limits of satire as they each displace Harriet Beecher Stowe’s narrative authority and “recast Tom as a figure who embodies the racial self-awareness and political pessimism of the post-civil rights era” (60). Her reading of *Flight to Canada* demonstrates the multi-directional reach of satire, as Reed critiques not only Stowe’s racism but also the Black Power Movement, while her reading of *I Ain’t Your Uncle* highlights the importance of returning to sites of slavery because this reveals an account that “originates modern-day police brutality in American racial slavery” (71).

The chapter then moves to the utopian vision of Bill T. Jones’s dance *Last Supper at Uncle Tom’s Cabin/The Promised Land* (1990) before closing with an analysis of Kara Walker’s silhouette *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven* (1995). Jones’s dance begins by satirizing Stowe through gross exaggeration, but differs from Reed and Alexander in not satirizing Tom. Instead, he “stages a *coup de theatre*” in which the beating of Tom is reversed (76). Jones’s dance, Tillet argues, returns to a site of slavery to resurrect Tom in order to reinstate the histories of dead enslaved African Americans into national memory. This allows for the culmination of the play with scores of naked dancers performing a democratic aesthetic which “underscores the brutality of slavery while simultaneously positing democracy as beyond representation but nonetheless desirable” (78). The chapter closes by shifting focus from Tom to Topsy in Walker’s silhouette, which opens up space for thinking about reparations in conjunction with revenge and

re-foregrounds black female corporeality as central to African American counter-memory and critical patriotism.

Chapter 3, “A Race of Angels,” turns to African American “heritage tourism” to slave forts on the west coast of Africa—most specifically The House of Slaves at Gorée Island, Senegal, and Cape Coast Castle at Cape Coast, Ghana. Tillet pushes to consider the contradictions she sees in heritage tourism: the clash of desires of African Americans to imagine a transnational diasporic identity and also to see these slave forts as sites of an *American* past which thus offer ways of entering into US national belonging. As a result, “heritage tourism to the slave forts often produces a visual rhetoric that results in a displacement of contemporary Ghana and Senegal” (128). She reaches this conclusion through examining the “visual rhetoric” of two photographers’ portrayals of the slave forts—Chester Higgins’s *The Door of No Return in the House of the Slaves* (1972) and Carrie Mae Weems’s *Elmina Cape Coast Ile de Goree* (1993)—and one filmmaker’s use of a slave fort as a narrative catalyst—Haile Gerima’s film *Sankofa* (1993).

The final chapter, “What Have We Done to Weigh So Little on Their Scale?” adds significantly to legal and historical scholarship of the “long history” of reparations in the United States by emphasizing “the pivotal role that aesthetics have always played within debates about reparations for slavery and racial equality” (136). Tillet offers generous readings of the lawsuits *Cato V. United States* (1995) and *re African-American Slave Descendants Litigation* (2004), Randall Robinson’s *The Debt: What America Owes to Blacks* (2000), and Mary Frances Berry’s *My Face is Black is True* (2005) in synthesizing her arguments that contemporary reparations movements are situated “within the broader post-civil rights movement to reclaim sites of slavery and reimagine democracy” and that “symbolic changes must be accompanied by a structural transformation of the American economy” (136, 165). *Sites of Slavery* then brings the reader back to the connection between slavery and the presidency with an epilogue on the President’s House in Philadelphia.

While Tillet’s book is already remarkably interdisciplinary, I was left wondering what might happen if the combination of history, literary studies, and performance theory had been pushed just a bit further. For example, in chapter 3 she cites Joseph Roach’s concept of “surrogation,” but merely to describe the phenomena of present-day bodies standing in for past bodies. What might come from thinking not only about present bodies within sites of slavery, but also thinking about the sites themselves through the performance studies concepts of “ephemerality”—since in visiting a slave fort in 2014 one is not, in fact, visiting a “slave fort” as it was in the eighteenth century—and “remains”—since in visiting a slave fort in 2014, one may indeed feel overwhelmed by the connection to a history one never personally lived?¹ How might sites of slavery both accomplish and forestall the task of crossing temporal boundaries as the living speak with the dead?

This is to take nothing away from the richness of Tillet’s book. *Sites of Slavery* offers fresh vocabulary for thinking through the very old problem of African American civic estrangement, contributes to the growing bodies of scholarship resituating black women as central to long histories of art and activism, and adds aesthetic dimensions to arguments about what responsibilities remain in a modern economic world full of spaces still visibly haunted by the specters of the massive enslavement that made it possible.

—Jesse A. Goldberg

NOTE

1. For example, see Phelan on “ephemerality” and Schneider on “remains.”

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Johnson, Sarah E. *The Fear of French Negroes: Transcolonial Collaboration in the Revolutionary Americas*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2012.

The title of the book, *The Fear of French Negroes*, is an oft-mentioned expression in contemporary accounts of the Haitian Revolution; the phrase draws attention both to the fears felt by blacks themselves and the implied anxiety of their oppressors (xx). With an emphasis of what the author has termed “transcolonial exchange,” the book uses various case studies to examine “the migration of people, ideas, and practices across colonial boundaries from 1790s to the 1840s” (xx). On one hand, Sarah Johnson stresses the importance of seeing the “French Negroes” of revolutionary Haiti “as subjects rather than objects and as the agents of radical change in hemispheric economic and social relations” (xxi). On the other hand, she argues that the transcolonial collaborations and relations between hemispheric blacks to contest the racialized violence endemic to European imperialism and creole-nation building projects were disparate and “not intrinsically emancipatory or progressive . . . their struggle to connect was where a hopeful politics existed, sometimes even thrived” (5). The term “transcoloniality” (or “transcolonial”) denotes both “a set of strategic practices in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and a methodological approach in the present to reconstruct how people understood and experienced their worlds” (124).

Chapter 1 is an analysis of the proslavery dimensions of transcolonial encounters. It provides the context to understand the master/slave dividing binary, a vital phenomenon that explains conflicting inter-Americanist visions. The author analyzes the colonial experience between inter-island blacks by linking seminal events in colonial Cuba, Jamaica, and territorial Florida with revolutionary events in Saint-Domingue. She observes that transcolonial and inter-American relations and alliances were used decisively for vicious and repressive objectives. The reader should remember that the slave system in the Americas was a “veritable state of war,” as the author highlights, between opposing factions: masters, and men and women who were forced to work as slaves. It is from this perspective that Johnson demonstrates how colonial powers (uniting across frontiers)—French, British, Spanish, and North-American slave-holding societies—collaborated and used warfare techniques such as canine torture (i.e. “bred dogs” trained by *chasseurs*) in the circum-Caribbean to terrorize African slaves, feed upon black flesh, and subdue non-white