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Violent Intimacies: Women and White Supremacy in *Imperial Intimacies* and *The Woman of Colour*

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Abstract
Reading *The Woman of Colour* (1808) and Hazel Carby's *Imperial Intimacies*: *A Tale of Two Islands* (2019) together, this essay examines how both texts reveal the chasm between Black mothers and women and white mothers and women within racial capitalism. Abolitionist sentiment and white feminism posit a universal feminism that Carby and *The Woman of Colour* reveal to be exclusionary to women of colour. *Imperial Intimacies* and *The Woman of Colour* explicitly expose the domestic as a site of violent intimacy that is perpetrated on Black and Brown women by their white women relatives: far from the supposed thrust of feminist abolition, white women's sympathies in both texts end at the hearth and home, and the violence of the racist state is repeated by them in the domestic sphere.

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> But what of this woman who produces children of two worlds—Europe and Africa? Two cultures. Through her the strains cross and criss cross: red skins, light eyes; dark skins, dark eyes, dark skins light eyes—the permutations appear infinite. You see it within the same family. An account of descent... by enumeration... a genealogy

of resistance—.

—M. NourbeSe Philip,

A Genalogy of Resistance

Where did you get these two chocolate drops from?

—An Irish Catholic Priest to my mother, 1980s Ireland

1. *The Woman of Colour* (1808) begins with Marcia, an enslaved mother and a figure whose presence in the Romantic period is mediated in fragments, silences, and extreme violence through the archives of slavery: a "dispossessed" life, in the words of Marisa Fuentes. Despite her erasure and fragmented existence in the archive, the enslaved mother is frequently to be found in anti-slavery poetry, which often appealed to white mothers, using motherhood as a supposedly shared experience that could be leveraged on behalf of the abolition cause: white mothers should sympathize with Black mothers whose children were routinely being stolen from them. Tobias Menley notes that Helen Maria Williams's "Poem on the Bill Lately Passing for Regulating the Slave Trade" (1788) and Hannah More and Eaglesfield Smith's "The Sorrows of Yamba" (1797) create the speaking enslaved mother whose infants are part of the story of their captivity (56).[1] Added to these, William Wordsworth's "The Mad Mother" (1798), Roxanne Wheeler tells us, "is close to the telling abolitionist stereotype of the destructive and despairing mother-infant dyad, a stereotype that functioned as the most powerful sentimental campaigning tool in abolitionist literature" (200). Abolitionist sentiment sought to bridge with white sympathy the chasm that racial capitalism had made between Black and white mothers, each with radically

different roles in imperial accumulation, and with the latter irredeemably positioned to benefit from the former's subjection.

2. The very presence of the Black mother in abolitionism, though, is ambivalent, for while she is to be found in later eighteenth-century texts, as Lyndon Dominque argues in his introduction to *The Woman of Colour*, it was "the *fertile black African* woman who [had to] vanish" (13). In rewritings of Aphra Behn's *Oronooko*, Imoinda becomes whitened, Dominique tells us, in order to mobilize sympathy, and so Black women become a "spectral presence" (15), both needed and erased at the same time in abolitionism's raced discourse. This shifting of maternal sympathy from being located within slavery's violences—the moment of capture and the birthing regimes of the plantation—to being located in white women's bodies and affect, can be explained, as Zakiyyah Jackson argues, by understanding that slavery "as an experimental mode, sought to redefine and explore the possibilities and limits of sex, gender, and reproduction" while at the same time enabling "hegemonic notions of sex/gender and reproductions such as 'woman,' 'mother,' and 'female body'" (11). The cultural work (in addition to the labour extracted from her in racial capitalism) that the enslaved mother was made to perform for abolitionist culture, and particularly for white proto-feminism, is necessarily occluded.

3. Hazel Carby's *Imperial Intimacies: A Tale of Two Islands* (2019) and *The Woman of Colour* (1808), when read together, make it clear that this racialized gap between white women and their "sisters" simply cannot be bridged, even with the abolition of slavery, given the former's ongoing investment in white, capitalist, heteropatriarchy. This dynamic

is one of ongoing white replacement of Black woman and motherhood, which is replicated on the political stage: as bell hooks argues, dominant feminism actively "overlooks and excludes the efforts of black women in the discussion of the American women's rights movement" (160). If we read *The Woman of Colour* as an abolitionist novel, then it is calling for the abolition of not just slavery but also white supremacy. And, as Carby says in her opening, this "is a story of imperial intimacies, of geographies of pain, of the continuing aftermath of enslavement" (4): a story of what was not abolished in 1808.

4. Reading *The Woman of Colour* alongside Carby's critical memoir makes it clear that we must not elide the experiences of Black or "mixed-race" women with those of white women: their pasts and futures are radically different, as are their positions within imperial racial capitalism. Stephanie E. Jones-Rogers has made clear in *They Were Her Property* that historians have largely ignored the very substantial role that women enslavers, full owners of those reduced to chattel, have played in racial capitalism.

> Historians rarely differentiate between married women who owned enslaved people in their own right and married women who merely lived in households in which they engaged with, managed, and benefited from the labour of the enslaved people that others owned. . . . Historians have neglected these women because their behaviors toward, and relationships with, their slaves do not conform to prevailing ideas about white women and slave mastery. (xii)

So powerful are the myths of white feminism that they have occluded "women's economic investments in slavery" (xiii). In fact, as Jones-Rogers shows, white women played a significant role in racial capitalism's mechanics and in its ideological race- and gender-making work. Mary Prince tells us in her *History* (1831) that it is her mistress who sells her and parts her from her own mother. We know that Phillis Wheatley was bought for Susannah Wheatley. This historical actuality upsets Wollstonecraftian metaphorizations of slavery as suffered by all women in patriarchy, an ideological sleight of hand that has dictated white feminism's refusal of its power over Black and Brown women. Carby considers how Iris, her mother, became white, through her relationship to Carby's father and to her: "[D]id the bloody, brown emergence of an infant reconfigure that whiteness in relation to motherhood?" (81). It is the intimacy of birth that produces the violence of rejection. Iris refused to see her daughter as "coloured," or Black, and Carby's existence in Britain upset both the domestic and the colonial imaginary:

> When the British confronted a black presence at home it challenged their previous idea of themselves as rulers of colonies who resided at a geographical distance from those they colonized. The encounter within the borders of this island nation—an encounter between parochial metropolitan population and an international constituency consisting of black Americans and black volunteers from the Caribbean—led to the creation of new formulations of being and becoming a national subject relating to the ways in which people became racialized (65).

This national positionality is an extension of the intimate domestic identity that "the girl" has made for her by her mother. *Imperial Intimacies* and *The Woman of Colour* explicitly expose the domestic as a site of violent intimacy that is perpetrated on Black and Brown women by their white women relatives: far from the supposed thrust of feminist abolition, white women's sympathies in both texts end at the hearth and home, and the violence of the racist state is repeated by them in the domestic sphere.

5. In each text, it is the "mixed race" daughter who unsettles the lines of supposed sympathy that "all" mothers are supposed to have in abolitionist sentiment, exposing that this sympathy cannot surmount race. The "mixed" daughter questions the human status of woman, incurring, as she does, the desired hegemonies of white supremacy. As Jackson argues, "[B]lack female flesh persistently functions as the limit case of 'the human' and is its matrix-figure" (4). Anti-Blackness delimits white sympathy, reminding us of the fiction of "mixedness," which it ultimately brings under its operations.[2] The child of imperial intimacies in both texts is not a site for interest convergence but rather a site of white female violence. Derrick A. Bell explains that whiteness always prioritizes its own needs, structurally: "The interest of blacks in achieving racial equality will be accommodated only when it converges with the interests of whites" (523). In both *The Woman of Colour* and *Imperial Intimacies*, we read the divergence, rather than convergence, of Black and white women's interests during slavery and its afterlives.

6. In the opening of *The Woman of Colour*, Olivia crosses from Jamaica to the British metropole as an orphan who must marry her cousin, Augustus, and transmit her planter

father's wealth back into the white slave-owning patriarchy. Here she is subjected to the rancour of Mrs. Merton, formerly Miss Manby, whose profound envy of Augustus produces a devastating hostility that overturns Olivia's marriage and threatens her safety and livelihood. In *Imperial Intimacies*, Carby herself triggers interest divergence. Carby tells us of her Black Jamaican father and white Welsh mother, a union that mystifies Carby given the intimate hostilities she witnessed in their marriage. Arguably, Carby's book details an intimacy of empire more obscured than that of the Black mother: the white mother of a "mixed race" child, a positionality that is not a trope in Romantic-period literature despite the fact that there were many mothers of free Black children of formerly enslaved people throughout Britain. Susannah Cullen, for example, married Olaudah Equiano and they had two daughters, Ann and Joanna Vassa, who were then raised by the Cullens after Susannah died in their infancy. The supposed maternal feelings of white mothers of Black and Brown daughters are not harnessed in the period because this remains taboo: the imagined, sympathizing woman who might give up sugar in her tea as an anti-slavery protest is the mother of white children. Abolitionism only imagines sympathy going so far, after all.

7. In these ways, the structures that deliver white women's control over "freedom," while erasing women of colour, are made. As Rafia Zakaria writes, these structures are dominant today: "[B]y and large, the women who are paid to write about feminism, lead feminist organizations, and make feminist policy in the Western world are white and upper-middle-class" (12). This structure is directly linked to sympathy's limits: "The cult of relatability fosters the exclusion of certain kinds of lived experience from the hierarchies of feminist

power, with pervasive consequences for feminist thought and praxis" (12). Carby writes with an explicit sense of her existence as transgressive in British society and finds herself being regarded as a "monstrosity, a 'half-caste': the issue of a black father and a white mother" (13). Her own being is denied by Iris, her mother: "'You are not coloured!' she emphatically declared when the girl came home with stories about racist bullying" (81). "Relatability" includes relations. Writing over two hundred years after the novel and almost two hundred years after emancipation, Carby delineates the devastating persistence of imperial power within the intimate spaces of immediate families, all held together by "the tensile strength of a spider's web spun across the Atlantic" (3). This web is both fixed and flexible, absolute and "plastic" in its mobility, invisible and visible, tensile in its thereness, weaving connections that one might and might not see, between worlds, peoples, and places.[3] Both texts read together make visible the webs of relation between Black daughters and their Black and white mothers, woven into the Black Atlantic's formations, yet often occluded, and they propose reading intimacies as a methodology for seeing the multiple points of contact among the threads of empire.

8. In *The Woman of Colour*, Marcia's union with Fairfield is presented ambivalently: we are told there is love for the sake of the romance plot, but the narrative deliberately intertwines this asserted love with the realities of chattel slavery. Mr. Fairfield "purchased the youthful Marcia" is the opening to the sequence that retells their "romance" and so it is overwritten with the power of mastery. Marica upbraids Fairfield for leading her into sin once she learns about Christianity and makes it clear that her consent for sexual relations was not properly sought. She is filled "with horror at the crime of which she had innocently been

guilty" (54). Olivia does not hide the incursion on Marcia's consent that produces her; it is an act that is part of "a litany of rape" in Carby's words (304). Olivia also explicitly relates Marcia's sense of continued chattel status in her doublespeak that, like Phillis Wheatley's poetry, casts only death (not romantic love) as a space "where the captive is made free" (*Woman* 55). Marica remained Fairfield's property: this is Olivia's genealogy. As M. NourbeSe Philip writes when tracing her own genealogy in Tobago through lines of enslavement and coloniality:

> There is a story, a tale. And I am the one who speaks it: a white man—a European man, a Scottish man with the name Cruickshank—was he owner or overseer? On a plantation in Tobago. Had children with an African woman who had been enslaved. Did he rape her—the classic "cane piece rape"? Did he court her? Did he touch that oh-so-fine black skin, tell her how beautiful she was? What drew him to her? The slant of her eyes? His power? Her lack of it? But this is an account of descent. The story is that she had children with him. (13)

The violences that animate the intimate spaces between enslaved Black women and white men, between Black men and white women, and between Black, "mixed" women and their mothers, quicken both texts, creating an unknowable excess over the information that can be accounted for in the archive. These desires, loves, hates, and disgusts animate the unions, as NourbeSe Philip knows. As Carby writes, "I gradually became aware [of] the absolute nature of our outcast status" (81).

9. Olivia, too, is under the sign of the outcast although invited into the white centre. The legal terms of Olivia's freedom are not made clear as, under *partus sequitur ventrem*, she would legally be her father's chattel unless formally emancipated. It appears as though Fairfield simply raised her as a daughter rather than used her as his enslaved property. Olivia's arrival in England, along with the inheritance that will make her a wife of white Augustus, deeply upsets all the carefully established, legally underwritten boundaries between Black, "mixed," and white mothers of empire. Upon marrying Augustus, Olivia soon finds out that his first wife, whom Mrs. Merton had proclaimed dead years ago, is in fact alive, as is his son: Mrs. Merton had fabricated their deaths out of envy of their union. Olivia is only fleetingly allowed to be a *potential* mother of Augustus's children—she is a free woman of colour *and* the daughter of an enslaved woman—in opposition to Angelina, the ideal white heroine of British romance fiction and mother of "a beautiful boy of two years of age" (*Woman* 145). This potential is swiftly dissolved as Olivia's marriage with Augustus is annulled. Even this radical plot will not deliver a "mixed-race" child with an enslaved grandmother into the metropole, accepted fully into the upper strata of primogeniture. As Carby's memoir tells us, even in the 1950s, a "'half-caste' daughter was an offence against nature and society because she was a public statement of closeted colonial desire" (76). Olivia relinquishes her claims on Augustus and on her wealth once Augustus's elder brother asserts that she has no legal right to her erstwhile dowry once the marriage is ended. Money and children must be controlled by white patriarchy. The novel does find a way, of course, to deliver Olivia's money back to her, and she returns as a single, free woman of colour to Jamaica with Dido, her companion, to agitate for emancipation. Olivia refuses wifehood and motherhood when she rejects another offer of marriage and vows never to

marry again. The child of imperial intimacies refuses them in the domestic centre and moves away to create new ones: "We will revisit Jamaica. I shall come back to the scenes of my infantine happiness—of my youthful tranquility" (188).[4] Such peace is possible for Olivia because in Jamaica her dark skin does not mark her as anathema, and she is now free.

10. In her memoir, Carby creates "the girl," an "errant" figure whose young life she tells us about, insisting on a distance from and between several selves that she creates as she writes (127).[5] This narrative complexity is one we see, too, in Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative* (1789), in which an adult narrative self is in dialogue with a child narrator in the opening chapters, and the narrative voice flits between multiple assumed identities, resisting singularity. And "the girl" is not at home in her mother's domestic world: "Her mother's words were a weight, in her presence the girl became inarticulate, which makes it impossible for me to recover the kitchen as source of creative friction" (Carby 121). Working with her mother in the kitchen silenced and suffocated "the girl," Carby tells us. "Girl" recalls the short story of this name by Jamaica Kincaid that details the disciplinary regime surrounding her Antiguan girlhood: "[T]his is how you sweep a whole house; this is how you sweep a yard; this is how you smile to someone you don't like too much. . . ." Carby cites Kincaid explicitly in her preface to harness the "outcast" energy she offers: "Jamaica Kincaid is wise: I, too, will attempt to disconcert, to challenge and to confront the assumptions that any reader may bring to these pages" (3). Resistance and errancy are part of "the girl's" dynamic as taboo presence, the product of others' desires and powers. Olivia similarly refuses a coherent female identity within eighteenth-century romance

discourse, offering an epistolary narrative that, while deploying all the language of sentiment and virtue promoted by abolitionist feminism, also uses it to severely criticize the roles offered her by British sentiment and gendered domesticity. Olivia, too, disconcerts and confronts. Her final refusal of marriage with Honeywood is a refusal to be a British wife and a form of both generic and gendered disobedience.

11. The question posed by Romantic abolition, speaking for enslaved women via the legend, "Am I not a Woman and a Sister?" remains core. It was repeated again by Sojourner Truth in 1851 when "the racism of white woman's rights advocates surfaced" (hooks 3). Truth revealed that in fact the silent answer to that question from white women abolitionists had been "no." Zakaria also states that "[m]ost British suffragettes made no bones about tying their right to vote to their racial identity as Anglo-Saxons" (29). And it is a question that that today is refused by enfranchised white women, fifty-five percent of whom voted for Donald Trump in 2020, an increase from 2016 and a clear vote against the rights of non-white women. In the UK, in 2016, minoritized women overwhelmingly voted to remain in the European Union but were forced into leaving by a white majority voting based on ethno-nationalist sympathies and anti-immigration, mainly in England. At the time of writing this, the Tory party leadership candidates (including those who are themselves not white) are garnering votes by promising to continue to separate Black mothers from their children born in the UK and to deport them to Rwanda: this is a popular promise with the UK electorate based on state-sanctioned misogynoir.[6] This is not a historical glitch: the supposed "universalist" tendencies of white woman feminism thus require, structurally, the exclusion of Black women, posited as "abject human animality" (Jackson 4). As Jackson

argues, the task of an "intersectional" feminism "would be to take seriously the particularization of gender and sexuality in black(ened) people in the context of a humanism that in its desire to universalize, ritualistically posits black(female)ness as opacity, inversion, and limit" (10). The voting white women of the US and the UK have carried on the racism of their abolitionist foresisters and remain as "disgusted" with Black and Brown women as the character Mrs. Merton in *The Woman of Colour* declares herself to be when she plans her revenge against Olivia, whom she reduces to the racist epithets "this native" (95) and "Blacky" (101). And, as Carby writes, her mother's connection with her own domestic family unit was made unsafe by her marriage: "The presence of Iris's black husband would have—in fact already had—unleashed outrage upon her head, bitter condemnations which always threatened violence. . . . The coming into the world of her brown child meant mother and child were both to be ostracized" (80). This structural refusal of meaningful sisterhood by white women is detailed by hooks in her powerful *Ain't I a Woman?* (1981). As hooks notes, a typical response by white women to the structural realities faced by Black women is to "romanticize the black female experience rather than discuss the negative impact of that experience" (6). White woman feminism, hooks tells us, produces "the stereotypical image of the 'strong' black woman" that ignores their struggles in coping with the multiple oppressions often caused and upheld by their white sisters (6). This image, too, is as Jackson, tells us, part of the endlessly mutable, plastic repertoire Blackness is made to perform: "the discursive-material plasticity of black(ened) flesh" (19).

12. In both *The Woman of Colour* and *Imperial Intimacies*, white women police black(ened) flesh. Detailing a traumatic interview conducted by a white woman British Home Office bureaucrat with her and her father, a Jamaican born, British RAF pilot, Carby notes that the woman accused them of forging and stealing legitimate government-issued papers proving his citizenship. She swept the papers to the floor "in a wild gesture of incredulity" calculated to intimidate. It was, Carby says, "an exercise in humiliation": Black people, Jamaican people, remain "not welcome" in the country that colonized them and told them they were "British Subject(s) by birth" (17), formalized in the British Nationality Act of 1948. Both Carby and *The Woman of Colour* expose how this boundary, a colour line imposed by the colonial centre on its plantations and at home, is maintained by white women, Karens of empire, from the eighteenth century to today, working in concert with the patriarchal imperial nation state. While it is a relatively recently coined term to denote the deliberate exploitation by white women of their femininity under white supremacist, capitalist, heteropatriarchy to police, dominate and even kill Black and Brown people, the term *Karen* helps us to read the historic, systemically organized roles of white women going back to slavery. *Karen* cannot be sexist because it names the way in which white women are misogynistic to both themselves and people of colour by deploying their very objectification under white patriarchy to harm those with less power than they. As Diane Negra and Julia Leyda write, "The 'Karen' trope crystallizes a particular constellation of entitled white supremacy and class privilege into a scathing dismissal of white female anger that deserves attention, particularly to distinguish the 'Karen' from other targets of public opprobrium" (350). In both texts, these systemic roles connect Jamaica and Britain: Carby's mother, Iris, and Mrs. Merton, respectively, bring the imperial home, creating

domestic spaces that mimic the oppression and dispossession of the racist nation state. In this sense, the mother-daughter dynamic in Carby is a hierarchy that brings colonial relations into the family, a dynamic of power over intimacy. And family dynamics in *The Woman of Colour* underwrite Mrs. Merton's structural power as she had hoped herself to be Augustus's wife. In a letter to her friend, Mrs. Merton vents her full spleen regarding Olivia: "[D]addy Merton is all upon the complimentary order with her, and has made sixty thousand bows for her sixty thousand pounds! . . . [B]y showing how much I am disgusted with Miss *Blacky*, I draw out *sensitive* Augustus. . . . [W]hat will I not do?" (101) She devises a deep revenge, and the plot makes it very clear that Olivia's intrusion into her world is an intrusion of black(ened) being not accounted for by gendered, colonial dynamics. Mrs. Merton cannot abide that Olivia has any power, personal or social. Carby also details the many racial slurs she had to endure even as a light-skinned Black woman in the UK growing up, slurs that her mother refused to acknowledge while also disciplining "the girl" in multiple ways.

13. The function of the domestic is to produce white humanity, and Blackness threatens this: "Universal humanity, a specific 'genre of the human,' is produced by the constitutive abjection of black humanity" (Jackson 23). Drawing on Sylvia Wynter, Jackson makes clear that the outcasting of those black(ened) is structurally necessary to maintain the fiction of white humanity as universal. Iris has broken this structure, Carl is a direct threat to it, and Olivia is a more empowered interloper who, if absorbed into white primogeniture, risks unsettling the entire edifice that works via insisting on Blackness that is "an inclusion that masks itself as an exclusion" (Jackson 23). As Carby writes, finding a domestic home

at all is threatened by her "mixed-race" unit: "Iris and Carl were unable to find anyone willing to rent accommodation to a black and white couple with a brown child" (81). At a ball in Clifton, Olivia is keenly aware that she is not classified along with white women by men, and she feels her hypervisibility which she relates in a letter to Miss Milbanke, her white companion in Jamaica: "[T]hey walked up in pairs . . . and, with a stare of effrontery, eyed your Olivia, as if they had been admitted purposely to see the *untamed savage* at a shilling a piece!" (*Woman* 85). NourbeSe Philip, too, understands the taboo of desire and disgust of the white supremacist from the slave ship's hold to the upper-class ballroom: "her beauty and . . . their love. The word rises unbidden to his thoughts, he feels himself flush . . . with shame? embarrassment? He loves a savage! And he loathes the idea!" (37) The taxonomic economies at work in this moment of libidinal desire and rejection are entirely felt and seen by Olivia as she is rejected from "the human" to maintain domestic white femininity. At the same time, she "belongs" herself to Miss Milbanke, outside of domestic empire, reconfiguring transracial, communal feminism as resistance in a reclamation of her own humanity.

14. In a recent article, Kathleen Lubey sees "the woman of colour" as originating a universal "feminist consciousness" (113). But it is precisely such a universalizing fiction—the masquerading of whiteness as a global "feminist" standard—that *The Woman of Colour* and *Imperial Intimacies* do not allow: in the words of Dido, a Black woman in Olivia's service, the texts reveal Black women's rejection because their "skin is not quite so white" (*Woman* 100). We should not read Olivia as generating a freedom and vision that will be in service of Western, domestic feminism: rather, she shows the double standards and

material inequities in play from her positionality as a woman of colour. For Lubey, "the colonial woman of colour uniquely possesses a capacity to resist the narrowness of idealized British wifehood" (113) and a "racial consciousness" that protects her from white domination because she is excluded from "white conjugality" (117). Such an argument risks repeating the very dynamic that hooks names through which white feminism romanticizes Black women, while simultaneously handing them the work of dismantling racist patriarchy. Notably, it is Mrs. Merton who tries most to regurgitate Olivia from the Merton domestic configuration. Augustus and Mr. Honeywood are effusive about Olivia's feminine virtues and consider her a paragon of all that their period expected of "women." Ultimately, it is Olivia *herself* who rejects marriage with Augustus and also with Mr. Honeywood. She could have inserted herself into English domesticity but chooses not to, instead rejecting the violent intimacies of whiteness in the metropole. Olivia's actions are in service of extrinsic Black and Brown radical hybrid consciousnesses rather than the hetero-gendered, mono-white empire. White women and their domesticity are left far behind by Olivia and Dido as they return to Jamaica, inviting Miss Milbanke into the kind of transracial Blackness forged by the Haitian constitution of 1805, which made Black freedom synonymous with a relinquishment of property. In her refusal of white domesticity, Olivia rejects both white womanhood and her "job" as a mixed-race transmitter of property, the index, above all, of white supremacy (Harris).

15. As much as *The Woman of Colour* participates in the lure to romanticize offered by the romance plot itself, we can see that it ultimately refuses this and sends both Olivia and Dido back to Jamaica and out of the clutches of domestic fiction and of the fictions of white

supremacy as guarded by white women. These fictions, Carby makes clear, are often violently imposed in intimate spaces: Carby tells us that her mother Iris's stories, retailed to Carby as a child in the intensive workspace of their kitchen, "were a weight" (121), and so Carby "found her way to the library, from the spoken to the written word, from absorbing stories to writing about them, but her route was an escape: she was a fugitive" (121). This fugitivity from the forces of white women within patriarchy connects both books: as Olivia declares after she realizes Angelina is alive, she wants the "the obscurest nook, the most retired cot" and notes that this self-exclusion is about freedom: "But yet, in privacy, I pant for independence" (*Woman* 144). And her letters themselves are a space for this freedom to see, speak and judge, and where she has the power to declare Mrs. Merton's inhumanity in her estimation: "[D]o you think that creature deserves the name of woman?" (145). I read this as a judgment on white Karenism, from the position of alternative womanism that Black and Brown women committed to emancipation create. Both Oliva and Carby are Trojan horses, brought into the geographic heart of empire, able to speak the language of the West, knowing it from the inside out, and yet using their words to dismantle its assumptions.

16. If Olivia gestures to making hybrid womanhood outside of the domestic spaces controlled by white women, then Carby details the violent intimacy by which Iris, her mother, bit by bit, erases her father Carl's West Indian identity and culture and thereby Carby's own Jamaican heritage:

> My father enjoyed cooking. When the girl was young enough to be lifted up to perch on a stool, he took pleasure in preparing Jamaican dishes and sharing them with his daughter. This food they ate together in the kitchen, not in the dining room where meals were usually served. Iris disapproved of Carl's cooking and wouldn't eat Jamaican food herself, but the girl devoured her father's curries. . . . Eventually the kitchen became a domain ruled by Iris. She created a "home" in which Carl was an unwelcome presence. . . . Jamaican food disappeared from our lives. (118)

In this domestic unit, Blackness, Jamaicanness, foreignness, come from Carby's father, and if Iris became white once Carby was born, then she does everything to ensure that her home is white and that her daughter is "white," which she achieves by wielding her female designation within imperial Britain to organize her domestic "domain" and to purge it from foreign influences. "The girl" and Carl become like servants eating "downstairs," enjoying their culture in secret. The suggestion of enslaved people growing and eating their own foods on their plots is also clear: food is a cultural pathway to forge community outside of white power. Carby's language makes it clear that the dynamics of empire and colonization are being enacted within the violent intimacies of their home, particularly in their small kitchen, and this extends to arduous laundry sessions with her mother that are deeply oppressive. Food politics are also at work in a now-famous scene in *The Woman of Colour* when Mrs. Merton deliberately orders a plate of rice to be brought to the dining table for Olivia: "I understood that people of your—I thought that you almost *lived* upon rice . . . — for my own part I never tasted it in my life, I believe!" (77), she declares. The intentional blank in the sentence is of course "colour," and so Mrs. Merton racializes the rice as for

Black people only. Olivia reads this moment accurately as a violent racist act, "blending *her* with the poor n----- slaves of the West Indies!" (77). Olivia rejects the rice as a mere subsistence offered by greedy planters and reaches for a soft piece of bread instead. The food in both texts is wielded by the domestic white woman to cordon off their own relatives as "black(ened) humanity" (Jackson 3). The incursion of Black food into the domestic space is purged as well as those whose cultural identity is linked to cooking and eating it.

17. We can read these moments of domestic power in both texts as tying into the less acknowledged history of white women as mistresses, that is to say, as owners of enslaved people and full participators in racial capitalism's property ownerships. Jones-Rogers offers a particular definition of the kinds of mistress-ship that Mrs. Merton is practising above as we bear in mind that her husband owns enslaved people. This definition emerges from slavery's legal framework that enshrined the rights of white women over Black people. A mistress owned "capital,"

> [a] mistress also exercised "dominion, rule, or power." The term mistress did not signify a married woman's subservient legal position or a woman's subordinate status to that of a master. By definition and in fact, the mistress was the master's equivalent." (xv)

Mrs. Merton is certainly practising her mistress power in her interactions with Olivia. Lubey argues that the domestic legal framework of "coverture" forges "dependency" in white women and that Olivia's extrinsicness creates a "lack of context for the forms of

action that Olivia takes" (120). But we see, in fact, that racial capitalism empowers the domestic white woman to exert "not *mastery* but *mistress-ship*" as Jones-Rogers puts it (xv). Their dependency under coverture does not prevent white women from being oppressors, too.

18. When rejecting the rice, Olivia makes the point that it is consumed by those whose labour produces the very wealth that gives Mrs. Merton her bread and her power: black(ened) humanity makes white domesticity. Taking opportunities to name racial capitalism explicitly, Olivia emphasizes that "black slaves are, by some cruel masters, obliged to work like horses" (80). While Olivia is free, she makes a point of saying that the enslaved people owned by Mr. Fairfield are "*my brothers and* sisters," naming a kinship that Mrs. Merton reads as a stigma. This disruption by Olivia, in refusing the rice but owning her community while rejecting white property interests, goes to the heart of the legal frameworks that made whiteness in the colonies and that she is now upsetting in the domestic centre. Her resistances make it clear that white women are core to these frameworks.

19. In another essay on the novel, I discuss how the legal codes of colonial Jamaica, defined whiteness (Sinanan). As Brooke Newman tells us, in 1733, an act defining voting rights stated that one had to be several degrees of descent away from a Black mother in order to be allowed to vote. We can read, therefore, the whitening of blood via legal acts that policed "mixed race" people in Jamaica. This very same law policing mixedness is noted by Carby as having an impact on her own family's history in eighteenth-century Jamaica.

> The term "mulatto" had become so complex in Jamaica by 1733 that a law was passed determining that a free person four generations removed from African ancestry could be legally white. At the time the law was instituted, no one was more than three generations away from their African roots. . . . By 1774, there were said to be approximately 23,000 people designated "mulattoes" in Jamaica, 4,000 of them free. (292)

The word *m*------ occurs in both texts several times and, as Carby notes, is a "threat to the maintenance of white supremacy" in the colonies and in Britain itself: Olivia's very physical being and presence is deeply undermining to white colonial power. In the chapter, "Contagion," Carby notes the "provocation" of her parents' "proscribed" union and on the same page quotes William Cobbett, who in 1804 railed against "mixed-race" relationships, particularly against Black men and white women who would "breed English mulattoes!" (76). Across three hundred years, Olivia and "the girl" are "filthy" because they signify the transgressing of the making of whiteness by white people themselves (76). Extending her narrative along the spiderweb of cross-Atlantic connections, Carby traces her Jamaican family all the way back to Lilly Carby, a former foot soldier, and son of a Lincolnshire carpenter, who, once established in Jamaica, had powers, much like the lowly but more famous overseer, Thomas Thistlewood: he "raped, punished and tormented" (279). Lilly Carby also became a planter and owner of enslaved people: his whiteness delivers him status and property in the colony. Lilly then married Mary Ivey Mann, who was a free woman of colour, and they had two children. These "mixed-race" Carby children became owners of his other offspring: this true story parallels the complex kinship that Olivia

claims with her enslaved "brothers and sisters" who, even if not the actual offspring of Fairfield, are still her relatives. Mary Ivey Mann's freedom was precarious, as Carby notes, in terms of her financial security in a colony that treated a "mulatto mistress" with "disdain" and legally prohibited her from inheriting more than two thousand pounds. What Lilly willed her she relied on white executors to dispense. But as a free person of colour, she was able to lobby with others to secure more rights of inheritance in 1813. In *The Woman of Colour*, Olivia has circumvented this control over "mulatto" inheritance by being given her fortune in Britain itself and so the threat she poses to this precarious edifice of white supremacy is considerable. However, even Mary Ivey Mann's slim foothold on rights was not available to the enslaved woman listed as Matthew Carby's mother, who is only named in the ledger as "Big Fanny." "Matthew Carby did not inherit. He was owned and enslaved by his half-brother and sister, William Ivy Carby and Bridget Ivy Carby," and is referred to a "Mulatto Matty." His eldest child was Carby's "great, great grandfather" (Carby 306). Carby traces her imperial intimacies all the way back to the violent union of Lilly and "Big Fanny," whose son was Matthew, enslaved by his siblings, and was her ancestor.

20. Carby invites us, I think, to connect these imperial violences in the imperial and domestic spaces of eighteenth-century Jamaica with the ones she tells us about in the household with Carl and Iris, where she is unprotected from the intimate violence of their marriage: "The mother held the girls at arm's length, using her, as usual, as body armour to protect herself" (115). Violent intimacies are part of the spiderweb across time and space, and Carby is not safe in her family, just as Matty (and so many others) was not in his. Iris and Carl's lack of protection of "the girl" in a household of toxic refusals puts her at the worst kind of risk:

"Sacrifice was Iris's shield and her most effective weapon" (119). This mirrors, structurally, the use that white woman feminism makes of Black and Brown women in the political arena while denying the dangers they face. As Zakaria notes, "On the other side are women of color, working-class women, immigrants, minorities, Indigenous women, trans women, shelter-dwellers—many of whom live feminist lives but rarely get to speak or write about them" (11). While Iris is indeed in a violent relationship, she abandons her role as mother. In the chapter "Lost," Carby's narrator conveys to us the rape that "the girl" endures because she is alone, unprotected, and unaware of the violences on offer to her small body. This traumatic violation loses Carby from herself: "In the late 1950s, in Mitcham, a girl was lost. I do not mean that she was incapable of finding her way, but that I had to let her go" (56). "The girl" becomes one of the many lost Venuses of the transatlantic slave trade to whom Saidiya Hartman pays tribute in "Venus in Two Acts": "There are hundreds of thousands of other girls who share her circumstances and these circumstances have generated few stories" (2). In placing "the girl" within this litany of Venuses, I extend Hartman's invitation to read beyond archives and across temporal boundaries. The past not yet past. Such violences are absences in the archive, and while Carby's telling is as much about what cannot be said as what can, she puts into our knowledge what happened to "the girl." The chapter "Lost" is therefore a response to the erasures of Karenism in the domestic heart of empire, responding to Hartman's injunction to "say more" (2) and presencing the tragedy and trauma of a white supremacist world that seizes to extract.

21. Against the monumental trauma of Black women, in both *The Woman of Colour* and *Imperial Intimacies*, white-woman victimhood is a driver for intimate and imperial violence. This is also a dynamic of Karenism, as is clear in the Amy Cooper story of 2020, in which Cooper falsely accused a Black man, Christian Cooper, of "threatening her life" after he politely asked her to put her dog on a leash in an on-the leash zone in Central Park ("Central Park"). Carby makes it clear that Iris had a hard life of hard domestic labour in South Wales, missing out on her own childhood because she had to "minister to a dying mother and run . . . a household" (126). Out of this suffering, however, Iris carves a selfish space that excludes "the girl," using her as a witness to her own suffering rather than forging kinship that could alleviate suffering: "Iris's real purpose in telling these stories [was] to talk about herself"; they were "self-serving" (126–27). White women in the texts weave their own oppressive force from their neglect and victimhood. Mrs. Merton feels wronged by Augustus's rejection and punishes both him and Angelina, and then Olivia for her "revenge." While the novel stresses the moral goodness of both Angelina and Olivia, one interesting feature is that Angelina is portrayed as physically weak and this is linked explicitly to her whiteness: "[H]er dove-like eyes, her transparent complexion, the delicacy of her fragile form," Olivia tells us, "all rendered her a most interesting object. She seems peculiarly to require the assistance and support of the lordly creature man, and to be ill calculated for braving the difficulties of life alone" (*Woman* 155). Olivia clearly ironizes Angelina's compliance with coverture's power. Angelina's exceeding white "transparency" is emphasized too by Augustus as the sign of her virtue and therefore the source of his love. Lubey argues that Angelina is so "fetishized" by patriarchy that she cannot resist its oppressions. But this argument erases the degree to which Olivia is also

fetishized as "Blacky," as "savage," as exotic in ways that demean rather than praise her: it ignores the fetishization of Marcia and thousands of Venuses in the time of slavery. Lubey's desire for Olivia to heal the breach that white supremacy has made between Black and white women merely replicates the dynamics of race: absolving white women and giving Black women more work.

22. The portrayal of white mothers as sympathetic but weak, as natural victims, is also a visual trope of abolitionism that we can see clearly in two prints that were made by John Raphael Smith after George Morland in 1790 when they deliberately collaborated to make a powerful abolitionist statement.

Fig.1. John Rafael Smith after George Morland, *African Hospitality*, 1791, Paul Mellon Collection, Yale Center for British Art. Mezzotint, printed in color, published state on medium, slightly textured, cream laid paper, 22.25 x 29.25 inches. Public domain.

These prints participate in the large range of visual representations of slavery across centuries, indeed connecting to the Amy Cooper video in which she threatens a muscular Christian Cooper. As Kimberly Juanita Brown discusses, the "reverberations" of "slavery's heightened visual register" "tell us how to see the beneath and beyond of the system of slavery, the 'visions and revisions' fueling poetry, fiction, and visual art practices" (15). Brown's work invites us to read *The Woman of Colour* and *Imperial Intimacies* as also visual works, re-imaging the Black, white, and Brown of slavery's taxonomies. In this first print, *African Hospitality* (fig. 1), there is a clear satire at work as African people are depicted rescuing a shipwrecked English family. The white mother is portrayed as much weaker than the Black mother, almost infantile, and extremely white, just like Angelina, unable to stand, and morally and physically less strong than the mother tending to her. This print is the "before" of the slave trade, imagining how African people might behave toward English shipwreck victims. And the satire is clear: these Africans are people before becoming chattel, and they show rather than elicit sympathy. The Black mother is strong and standing above the white mother while also carrying an infant on her back. This infant is curious and looks around with intelligence and alertness. Another baby is crawling toward her, and she is supporting the white mother who is dressed in white and fainting. A white child clasps around her neck, looking as if he is both expressing concern for his mother as well as looking for attention, but he is not being acknowledged. In fact, the white mother is portrayed as almost a child herself—Smith very clearly depicts weakness and even a certain fecklessness. The Black mother, in contrast, can clearly nurture and look after her two children but the white mother seems less able to do so: she is weak and ineffective and her hand limply held by her husband. The point to note here is that, while

Smith and Morland appear to be praising a strong Black mother figure, they are mobilizing the noble savage trope and also constructing a false sense of the structural realities via which racialized and gendered power is enacted in the transatlantic eighteenth century. In fact, it is the Black mother who will be separated from her children, who will be violated, whose exoticized "strength" will create a trope that denies the actual violations and dispossessions that she will incur. The weak white mother, often depicted, as here, as a physically weak person, then, is a tool of abolition, used to suggest that her fate under patriarchy is somehow worse than that of Black women.

23. The second print, *The Slave Trade* (fig. 2), which shows an African family being separated and a breastfeeding mother being taken with her toddler to a different boat than her husband, cannot help but reveal the true fate of the "strong" Black mother under white supremacy. She is portrayed as a strong and "natural" mother, a portrayal that draws on the racism of the "noble savage." Her presence should elicit the sympathy of white mothers and draws on Christian notions of "the family" to forge abolitionist action. Instead, the children of white mothers are part of the slaveocracy. The print suggests that the common enemy of Black and white mothers is rapacious patriarchy and we see the younger white boy in the foreground being moulded to become the angelic-looking enslaver to the right, a clear satire that draws on depictions of Lucifer/Satan as beautiful but evil. The fact is, however, that the fates of white and Black women under enslaving patriarchy are in no way comparable, despite Wollstonecraftian assertions. The violences of chattel slavery are far beyond the realities of domestic violences in which white women, while they may suffer, structurally reap the rewards of systemic anti-Blackness.

Fig. 2. John Rafael Smith after George Morland, *The Slave Trade*, 1791, Paul Mellon Collection, Yale Center for British Art. Mezzotint, printed in color, published state on medium, slightly textured, cream laid paper, 22 × 29.5 inches. Public domain.

24. These moments show us what Carby and *The Woman of Colour* make so explicit in their different ways: the making of race and the weaving of it into intimate spaces that cannot remain intimate. The kitchen, the laundry room, the dining room, as well as the ineffable spaces of raced relation are interwoven into the web of empire's devastating forces. Black and white motherhood, far from being spaces for empathy and abolition, are positioned in radically different ways within racial capitalism, creating enduring systems of intersectional violences that white women must fully reckon with.

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Notes

[1] According to Tobias Menley, "All three of the 1788 poems [by Williams, 'A Poem on the Inhumanity of the Slave Trade' by Ann Yearsley and 'Slavery, A Poem,' by Hannah More] highlight the moment of dislocation when the free African is forced into bondage. . . . This staging of geographical displacement and domestic disruption reflects the gradualist aims of abolitionists, who sought the prohibition of the slave trade before turning to slavery itself . . . ." The poems expose a moment "whereby the African person is *brought into* the system of slavery, inducted into the circumatlantic triangular trade and made subject to its logics of speculation and commodification" (56).

[2] Throughout this essay, I put "mixed-race" in quotation marks to remember the biological fallacy of race while also acknowledging that this is how white supremacy organizes people. *Black* is capitalized by me and by some writers. Where Black writers themselves do not capitalize, I follow their choice. *Brown* is used by Hazel Carby too to describe herself; her skin colour and the word also connects with Olivia's name. I also use *Brown* to denote other "mixed-race" identities such as my own.

[3] As Jackson elaborates, "Plasticity is a praxis that seeks to define the essence of a black(ened) thing as infinitely mutable, in antiblack, often paradoxical, sexuating terms as a means of hierarchically delineating sex/gender, reproduction, and states of being more generally" (11).

[4] For such readings of the novel that regard the ending as radical, see Fielder; Jarvis.

[5] Thank you to Ereck Jarvis for helping to clarify this point about what he noted in a conversation as Carby's "refusal of a unified self" in her writing.

[6] See, for example, Allegretti.