

Pinder puts the discussions of neoliberalism, globalization, and the existence of poor black women in the welfare state in conversation. This work is a valuable way of understanding how poor black women fit into the United States political economy. The “workfare” system requires that recipients work to receive welfare benefits, and in this globalized political economy the type of job available to recipients is the low-skilled service work that comes without benefits and protections, like healthcare and sick leave. Altogether, recipients have enough to get by, but not enough to have a quality life. Pinder makes it clear that the welfare system as it stands not only stigmatizes black women but also results in what she calls “death in life.”

Jamil Scott is Assistant Professor of Government at Georgetown University:
jamil.scott@georgetown.edu

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***Gender and the Abjection of Blackness*. By Sabine Broeck. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2018. 238 pp. \$22.95 (paperback), \$90.00 (hardcover).**

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Erica Townsend-Bell
 Oklahoma State University

Sabine Broeck’s *Gender and the Abjection of Blackness* is an ambitious undertaking. Using a “hermeneutics of absence,” a method of reading against the text, Broeck contends that Western modernity has ignored, and continues to ignore, the black¹ experience (46). She suggests that taking the history of slavery seriously challenges the binaries that inform most theories of human intersubjectivity within the theoretical canon of Western modernity. These include the master/slave and subject/object

1. Broeck is explicit in her capitalization of Black, and lower-case presentation of white. However, per *Politics & Gender* journal style, black and white are both uncapitalized in this review.

binaries. As such, gender studies, which proceed from the basic Hegelian master/slave binary, are also structured in whiteness and, as with Hegel, this structuring is generally unrecognized and unaccounted for. That is, historically gender theory proceeded from a perspective of universal (white) women, and in the current moment it proceeds primarily from an identity-based view of race in which only certain kinds of women register as raced, thus neglecting the constitutive nature of racialization and its relationship to all women, including white women. Why? Because white gender studies takes insufficient account of black theoretical contributions.

Broeck refers to this disregard as “theoretical agnotology” or “studied epistemic ignorance,” using terms from Robert N. Proctor and Londa Schiebinger, and Charles Mills, respectively (11). Several additional concepts serve to frame her argument. *Abjection* refers to (Western linked) black bodies in the liminal space between unowned and thing, reflecting their history as the property of whites. *Abjection* denotes “anti-Blackness as a practice... the continuous *doing* of anti-Black agency” (30), reflecting ongoing practices of “unhumanization of Black being[s]” (45). Finally, the term *enslavism* refers to “the durable nexus between Euro-American transatlantic enslavement practices and (post)modern discourses” (45). The word is meant to introduce an active and presentist conception of slavery as an ongoing practice.

The author engages these concepts to argue that gender theory, at its core, is organized around practices of enslavism. First Hegel, and then Wollstonecraft, de Beauvoir, Benjamin, Butler, and Braidotti, authors of the canonical texts that form the basis of Broeck’s analysis and argument, presume that the master–slave binary is inclusive of all people. Moreover, the authors presume that all peoples can be interpellated into this contrast, but the dichotomy relies on a foundational assumption of human intersubjectivity. Yet blacks, in the modern Atlantic tradition, were not human, but things, so this dualism both excludes them by default, and is, in fact, not a binary, but rather a set of relations that rely on the invisible third pole of blackness for sensibility. The problem is constitutive of gender theory: “When white women . . . began using the term ‘slave’ as critical boundary of their own inscribed, textualized subjectivity, they fixed a practice of distinction — the founding gesture of gender struggle requires woman not to be slave — in Western post-Enlightenment cultures and societies” (56). Broeck contends that this fundamental inconsistency, this abjection of blackness, has never been addressed, thus making it a problem for both historic and contemporary gender theory.

Who fixes this problem? White women. Broeck conceives of this work as a white-on-white project, in which white women cease abjectorship. The book is cogently argued and thick with description, to a degree that makes it both compelling and somewhat opaque. The argument is layered, tracing the metamorphosis of anti-black abjection from history to the modern day. Yet the richness of detail sometimes leads to a sense of overimmersion. The book requires a level of close reading that can be exhausting. The text is dense and some chapters quite long: chapter 4 clocks in at 78 pages. The in-chapter organization does not really function as a clear organizational road map for the reader so much as descriptive topic headings for each section's particular content. Hence, it can be easy to miss important details of the argument. Only upon a second reading did I understand her position that the large variety of other marginalized peoples could be excluded from theorizing, precisely because Broeck perceives them all as subjects who figure as human, notwithstanding the question of how tenuous recognition of their subjectivity may be.

I was similarly unclear about her critique of intersectionality. Broeck notes, approvingly, the black feminist genesis of intersectionality and its treatment of black women as lacking basic subjectivity. Given this, it was difficult to square her review of intersectional thought with a dismissal of its theoretical utility, until I reread and gleaned that her critique is with a whitening of intersectionality that reduces the concept to an "et cetera." This is just one example among others in which the language slips away from the specific to an overly encompassing universal. Here, particular takes on intersectionality stand in for the entirety of the concept; elsewhere gender theory becomes an exclusively white property, with no reference to time and place in a way that signifies the modern/post-modern, Atlantic character of the analysis.

Broeck's central goal is for white women to cease abjectorship and take up "an interventionist anti-racist struggle alongside Black resistances" (209). The argument is difficult in many ways. It challenges the progressivism of multiple well-respected gender theorists. It puts white readers on notice, at least some of whom will be either unfamiliar with the suggestion that racism is really a white problem in need of a white solution, or who, while familiar with this line of argument, have presumed themselves to be on the good side of this problem. It is too much to expect that she write a self-help manual alongside the theoretical work of the book, but, given the heady subject matter, the lack of scaffolding for working through the contemporary implications of her argument is notable. The book is likely to elicit defensiveness (and possibly incompleteness) by some of the very

readers she wants to reach, yet there are no suggestions for helping the reader grapple with what she's asking.

It seems likely that readers will walk away from this book unsure what, outside of perhaps more gender theory critique, they are supposed to *do*. I interpret her to suggest that one strategy scholars can adopt is to look at their assumptions with a critical lens, to assess whether they are casting whiteness on their work. Instead scholars can and should assume a lens of racialized gender as a part of crucial work toward justice, and more accurately, nonagnotological scholarship.

Erica Townsend-Bell is Associate Professor of Political Science at Oklahoma State University: etowns@okstate.edu