The Psychic Hold of Slavery

Legacies in American Expressive Culture
Staging Social Death
Alienation and Embodiment in Aishah Rahman’s Unfinished Women

GERSHUN AVILEZ

In recent critical discourse, the concept of social death has emerged as an important lens through which to describe and assess black lived reality. It has developed as a way to communicate how histories of racialized subjection inform the quotidian experience of African American existence. In his influential monograph, Slavery and Social Death (1982), Orlando Patterson uses the term to theorize slavery’s institutional negation of the enslaved’s capacity for self-determination. More recently, Jared Sexton has refashioned the term as a tool for thinking through the phenomenon of contemporary communal and civic estrangement, particularly for racial minorities. “Black life,” he insists, “is lived in social death.” His maxim consolidates the view of an emergent field of thought that has come to be known as Afro-pessimism in the context of U.S. critical theory.

Afro-pessimism asks if the relationships between blacks and the state (and blacks and whites) are to some extent a series of irreconcilable encounters and considers how our understanding of the social world shifts if radical change or resolution is not imagined on the horizon. More pejorative readings of this framework see it as mere hopelessness. Black citizens never seem to have agency and are unable to define themselves or have access to the social world—hence Afro-pessimism. Yet such assessments focus too heavily on the seeming incapacity (the death) of the black subject, missing the evaluation of the historically persistent restrictive nature of the civic realm (the social). In fact, a restricted yet existing black sociality has often been Afro-pessimism’s chief concern. Sexton helps us to recognize that social death is more about recognizing seemingly unchanging social conditions and political structures and less about identifying a torpid black interiority that can appear will-less.

My approach to social death pivots on the idea that a distinct theorization of the body lies at the heart of this critical construct. In his comparative...
analysis of enslavement as a social system, Patterson explains that the slave was defined as a socially dead person. From the viewpoint of the majority of society, the enslaved person is deemed a "nonperson." Patterson's larger point is that enslavement relies upon a particular institutionalization that deprives a specific group of rights and access to the body politic while still incorporating them into the social world precisely through that deprivation. That is, they become culturally legible through their abject status. For the enslaved, there is no social existence outside the realm of the master. In effect, Patterson specifies a kind of civic death that results in a general social nonexistence or illegibility. The fact that there is no state of being beyond the affective circuit with the master figure means that social death has more to do with the experience of sociality than with subjectivity or the space of identity. In my reading, his point is not to evacuate the subject of interiority but to draw attention to how it is enmeshed in a set of networks that attempt to confine or obscure interiority. This constricting network creates the reality of social death.

Some readers conclude that social death necessarily implies an undesirable constricting of black interiority. However, the concept is also about the prohibitive boundaries of relationality. Social nonbeing becomes aligned closely with a specific racialization in the context of enslavement in the Americas. Racial embodiment becomes the basis and context for the marginalizing relationship. Accordingly, even after the official ending of enslavement, the circulating meanings already attached to blackness perpetuate the link between black corporeality and social death. The projection of negative values onto the subject means that the experience of black embodiment can still be understood through this lens. In addition, the emphasis on experience clarifies that social death, from Patterson's work forward, constitutes a phenomenological assessment of black embodiment.

Social death is not only an important critical construct but also relevant to the world of artistic production; and drama, which is constitutively attuned to enactment and embodiment, is a particularly effective means for exploring how it anticipates the form and content of black expressive culture. In this chapter, I consider Aishah Rahman's play *Unfinished Women Cry in No Man's Land While a Bird Dies in a Gilded Cage* (1977), which uses the gendered dynamics that characterized U.S. enslavement as the dominant framework for articulating the possibilities of owning the self. Rahman uses reproductive imagery and jazz musical references as figures for exploring her characters' limited social agency. The plot features five fictional pregnant women and a fictionalized Charlie Parker Jr. (based on the well-known jazz musician), all of whom struggle to gain self-control and agency while being held captive by the state (the women) and by a rich patron (the musician).

The conceptual tension between individual freedom and imprisonment becomes the basis for Rahman's formal practices. She creates a dramatic form that exhibits structural collapse—specifically, the disintegration of the boundaries between scenes and different points in time—in order to enact her characters' striving attempts to challenge boundaries or limits. This performed collapsing becomes a means for recognizing the historical impress of enslavement and for refuting enslavement's totalizing influence through undermining the psychic and material spaces this institution has created. More importantly, the play represents a creative response to the conditions that underpin the notion of social death, and it stands as an unparalleled feminist intervention in Afro-pessimism.

Rahman presents what she calls a polydrama by having two sets with separate storylines on stage at once: the "Hide-a-Wee Home for Unwed Mothers" and the secluded boudoir of a French woman named Pasha. Wilma, Paulette, Consuelo, Mattie, and Midge—a group of young, pregnant women of different ethnic and class backgrounds—occupy the Hide-a-Wee Home. By the end of the day, all must decide if they are going to give their children up for adoption. The action depicted on the other set focuses on the saxophone player Charlie Parker Jr. and his white patron, Pasha. Through these juxtaposed sets, Rahman uses the trope of reproduction to investigate how one's agency is delimited by social conceptions of her body. More importantly, the two sets together represent the paradox at the heart of social death. On each stage, reproductive imagery represents both gendered embodied agency and the mechanisms that link characters to limited social mobility. Juxtaposing freedom and restriction in her characters' gendered pursuits of self-determination, Rahman offers a performative exploration of the notion of social death.

A conflict between body and mind highlights the characters' collective vulnerability and informs the events in the play. The character Nurse Jacobs is central to the world of the Hide-a-Wee Home, and her presence helps to solidify the idea that the body makes one vulnerable to manipulation. Jacobs is in charge of the women's physical well-being during their stay at the home, but she also takes charge of their moral development. Her guidance develops from her belief that there is an internal competition going on within the women's bodies:

NURSE JACOBs: (Examining Mattie) Just what I expected! You're gaining too much weight. Too much salt. Lord, today ... You're swollen and probably toxic.

PAULETTE: I told you not to eat that whole jar of pickles.

MATTIE: I like 'em. (All of the girls laugh)

NURSE JACOBs: You think it's funny, don't you. You think it's funny if she gorges herself with salt and swells up like a balloon. All right. Everybody off salt.

ALL THE GIRLS: What!
NURSE JACOBS: No more salt on the table. No salt in the crackers. No salt in the ocean and no salt in your tears. No more salt, I say! Don’t you know it’s a mortal sin to harm your babies... I think you are purposefully trying to cross God by harming your babies. No salt for anyone I say. Now! You see the shame and burden loose ways bring upon a girl... It don’t pay to be worthless.19

Jacobs’s insistence that these young women remove salt from their diets leads her to a confusing yet suggestive hyperbole. In effect, to cry tears without salt is not to cry at all. Her dietary request denies not only of food but also the body itself. Her unfeasible demand (that they will no longer be allowed to have salt in their tears or even in the ocean) also reflects her general tendency to ask the impossible of these women: that they differentiate their desires from their expectant bodies.20 In arguing that physical pleasure is secondary to the health of the fetus, Jacobs is asking the women to no longer fully inhabit and enjoy their bodies for fear of fetal contamination. By having Jacobs place the needs or rights of a fetus over those of the woman carrying it, Raham consciously invokes abortion discourses.21 Moreover, pitting the body against the self adds to the antithetical effect of the polydrama.

Dorothy Roberts and Robert J. Patterson have both made the case that black women in the United States have been historically manipulated and made vulnerable through reproduction, and the events of the play reflect a similar understanding.22 The nurse insists that the women are only their bodies and places herself in charge of them. Given that a place such as the Hide-a-Wee Home would almost certainly be a state-run, publicly funded facility, she may be read as an avatar of the state. The women’s pregnancies have made them subject to state influence. The thinking behind the nurse’s directions also taps into commonly held beliefs that working-class women and women of color in particular need instruction on motherhood and require governmental intervention.23 However, rather than making Jacobs a simplistic, controlling apparatus of the state, Raham has created a heavy-hearted character who is herself alienated from her corporeal existence. The nurse is asking the young women to do what she did long ago: deny her body and her right to its issue. In a monologue in scene 4, Jacobs explains that, when she was a young woman living in the Caribbean, she fell in love with a Calypso singer. She got pregnant, but he left her, moving “from island to island” to perform. After giving birth, she moved away, calling her daughter a niece in an attempt to avoid dishonor and disgrace in her Caribbean community. By claiming this tangential relationship, Nurse Jacobs demonstrates that she feels she has no right to this child because of the circumstances of her conception and birth. This feeling is linked to why she believes that the women at the home have no choice but to sign their children over to heterosexual couples with the wherewithal to raise them. From Jacobs’s perspective, these couples have more right to the issue of the women’s bodies than do the women themselves. Accordingly, there are conditions on and limitations to the extent to which one can claim a right to her body. The nurse’s shame about her own past has led her to become an agent of the state’s circumscribing power.

This moralizing fracture of personhood and body leads the character Mattie to insist, “I don’t know nothing except this baby is in my belly and gonna come out my pussy with blood and piss and shit. I’m scared.”24 Her assertion reveals self-concern and demonstrates that this home for unwed mothers does little to prepare the women for the actual act of giving birth. Yet it also locates her understanding of herself, the world around her, and the future in terms of her corporeal being. Another character, Midge, jokingly (and knowingly) responds to Mattie’s statement: “We’re just wonderful vessels of creation for the Lord!” Her sarcasm reveals the complexity of how the women are viewed and how they view themselves. If, as the nurse implies in her global moratorium on salt, they are simply vessels, pain should not and cannot be an issue. Nonetheless, the women and the audience know that this idea is false. Furthermore, the women are all aware that they are not deemed to be “wonderful vessels” otherwise, they would likely not have to decide if they should hand their children over to strangers. The assertion, then, demonstrates the women’s consciousness of the fact that they are seen not as people but as unworthy vessels. The statement acknowledges an understanding of their bodies that erases their sentence and value. It suggests that these characters occupy a space of nonbeing because of the public perceptions of their pregnant bodies; their access to both agency and self-definition has been co-opted. The body can make a person vulnerable because it situates her within the social gaze and exposes her to restrictive social meanings.

The disappearance of a woman’s individuality beneath a pregnant body is a recognizable concept within feminist theoretical discourse. In “Stabat Mater,” Julia Kristeva argues that no signifier is able to encompass the maternal body, which is overburdened with socially imposed values and ideas to the point of being hidden or obscured:

The weight of the “non-said” (non-dit) no doubt affects the mother’s body first of all: no signifier can cover [the maternal body] completely, for the signifier is always meaning (sens), communication or structure, whereas a mother-woman is rather a strange “fold” (pli) which turns nature into culture, and the speaking subject (le parlement) into biology. Although it affects each woman’s body, this heterogeneity, which cannot be subsumed by the signifier, literally explodes with pregnancy... These peculiarities of the maternal body make a woman a creature of folds.25

The theoretical model of the *non-dit*—the “non-said” or “not speakable”—does not indicate that the maternal body is beyond meaning or description.26
Instead, it intimates that this body has been drowned or submerged beneath layers of significations, which occasions a loss of personhood as the pregnant woman is transformed from a subject to a biological object: a belly. Hortense Spillers explicitly responds to and builds upon this understanding in her own thinking on black female identity, emphasizing the historical contexts that help constitute these ideas. The "folds" describe the occluding layers of meaning that surround and ultimately stand in for the body in question. As Kristeva's work reveals, feminist theorizing is relevant to conceptions of black identity; the pregnant body functions as a productive site to connect feminism and black cultural theory. Specifically, in considering the extent to which it is possible to gain control of or have agency over a body that is overdetermined with projected meaning, Kristeva reveals how social readings of the body persistently threaten to overwhelm the self-determining potential of individual interiority.

Acknowledging the emphasis on public perceptions of the women's bodies allows Rahman's readers to recognize how even the spatial locations of the play comment on the erasure of individual identity. The tangible space that the "unfinished women" inhabit, the Hide-a-Wee Home, symbolizes the place they occupy in public opinion. As the name of the home indicates, these women must be hidden from public view. When the character Consuelo's family decides to put her in the home and then lie that she is in Puerto Rico visiting relatives, they offer double evidence of the refusal to submit her body to community purview and judgment. They create a narrative of her life and impose it on her because the conditions that surround the pregnancy threaten to shame her and them. Pregnancy has the potential to do social damage and must be kept from public view.

The coextensive space of the private boudoir enhances the seclusion fundamental to the Hide-a-Wee Home. Rahman has the two sets occupy the same space and time on stage. Their proximity has nothing to do with geographical closeness; instead, it reveals that they have similar metaphorical values: the hidden and the private (both symbolically feminine domains). Whether literal (the pregnant characters) or figurative (Pasha's control of Parker), conversations about procreation take place in private because the pregnant body (or even the procreative body) is always on the cusp of becoming an unethical and offending body. Rahman makes the moral and ethical state of the body dependent upon its spatial location.

Rahman's dramatic work recognizes a link between this specific way of thinking about the pregnant body that Kristeva describes and the racialization of the black body/minority bodies in the social imaginary. Her play effectively links the concepts of the non-dit and social death. The disappearance of the subject beneath folds of projected meaning identifies precisely the cultural work done by racial and gender stereotypes. The racialized minority body, like the pregnant body, oversignifies and obscures individual subjectivity. This point is the one that Spillers makes in opening "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe":

I am a marked woman, but not everybody knows my name. "Peaches" and "Brown Sugar," "Sapphire" and "Earth Mother," "Aunty," "Granny," God's "Holy Fool," a "Miss Ebony First," or "Black Woman at the Podium": I describe a locus of confused identities, a meeting ground of investment and privations in the national treasury of rhetorical wealth. Embedded in bizarre exiologic ground, they demonstrate a sort of telegraphic coding; they are markers so loaded with mythical possession that there is no easy way for the agents buried beneath them to come clean. In that regard, the names by which I am called in the public place render an example of signifying property plus.

The multiplicity of signifiers—here limiting stereotypes about black female identity—signals that, like the Kristevan mother, no signifier can cover the body of Spillers' "marked woman." Black female subjectivity lies hidden under these denominative folds. The subject remains effectively unspoken or unexpressed through the controlling and violent acts of misnaming. There are important theoretical ties between Spillers' assessment of the black female subject and the social world and the evolving theorization of social death. In both, meanings are projected onto a subject in ways that attempt to interrupt or bury identity. Both appear to describe a veritable loss of identity but actually illuminate the mechanisms by which identity is manipulated socially. By taking up these ideas and using them to construct her female and male characters, Rahman points to these exact mechanisms that are rooted in structures of power.

Social death has to do with corporeal vulnerability, not simply of the physical body but of the vulnerability to social scripts that the body expresses. The possibility of a troubled relationship to one's body also undergirds the second component of the polydrama, Pasha's boudoir. It may seem strange to juxtapose a group of expecting women with a dying musician and his mistress; however, Pasha's desire to be with Parker is itself a desire to conceive and to control through conception. When Parker arrives at the boudoir, she is tattling lace. Rahman purposefully makes use of this craft imagery because the act of creation relies on locking the lace into place; hence, Pasha creates by fixing and tying down. After complaining about his absence and her inability to contact him, she tells Parker that she will "tat" them a child. Her language links reproduction to confinement, and her comments throughout the play exhibit how this desire to procreate expresses her general desire to control him. As Pasha asserts that he should impregnate her because her patronage obligates him to do so, she explains that he is not only in her debt but also dependent upon her for personal development: "I am the farmer. You are the seed. I am the farmer
that nurtures the seed. You are the genius but I am the power.”22 Her money gives her complete access to and governance of his body and future. Extending procreative understandings to the male body, she makes his body the site of (re)production in making him the seed but limits his creative output by making him dependent upon her will. She imagines him as will-less though necessary for the act of creation.23 The procreative imagery, then, manifests her designs of controlling Parker and expanding her possession of him. He is figured as a vessel of creation that is effectively unworthy and incapable without her. Parker depends on Pasha for meaning and has little sense of value outside of their exploitative relationship.

The importance of procreation is enhanced by Parker’s request for a womb:

“Tat me a womb, Pasha . . . not attached to anybody . . . just some unattached place for me to lay my head. You can do it. You can do anything.” To make sense of this request, the reader must consider the “Playwright’s Notes” that precede the text of the play. Here, Rahman emphasizes the importance of the “metaphor of birth and art” to the content and structure of her work.24 If birth is connected to or equated with art throughout the play, then the womb that Parker requests represents artistic potentiality or a creative matrix. The character feels artistically stifled and at a standstill: “Music is my only motive . . . My only alibi . . . for living. Clubs are named after me. Musicians make it . . . imitate me. And I can’t even give it away. I stand around begging people to let me play. I . . . am . . . Charles . . . Parker, Jr . . . and I beg people to let me play.”25 His frustration about not being able to create music is transmogrified into a request for a conduit for creation—a womb—for his horn, a phallic symbol, has failed him. More importantly, the desire for a womb that is “not attached to anybody” is a desire for its symbolic power minus the weaknesses connected to flesh. As his drug addiction confirms, Parker is a character who is especially vulnerable to such weaknesses: “Sometimes I wish I could be a thought, a sound / Anything, but flesh . . . . Or to be free. Not to a giant, not a god, not a man!”26

This rejection of flesh is a tacit acknowledgment of the vulnerability of the body, but it also points to a critical reading of racialized embodiment as fragmented. In “Mama’s Baby,” Spillers provides insight on the concept of flesh in the context of black cultural history. She makes a distinction between “body” and “flesh” in constructing captive and liberated subject positions:

Before the “body” there is the “flesh,” that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse or the reflexes of iconography. Even though the European hegemonies stole bodies—some of them female—out of West African communities in concert with the African “middleman,” we regard this human and social irreparability as high crimes against the flesh, as the person of African females and males registered the wounding. If we think of the “flesh” as

a primary narrative, then we mean its seared, divided, ripped-apartness, riveted to the ship’s hole, fallen, or “escaped” overboard.27

In this view, the flesh precedes the body, which names one’s placement within the discursive realm. The flesh thus represents the prediscursive realm, which exists before and outside of scripted meanings. The body has been mapped with designations and misrepresentations that can obscure histories as well as the scars of conflict. Spillers’s goal is to illuminate the physical acts of destruction as well as to expose and remove the layers of pejorative meaning that are forcefully projected onto black corporeal being; these meanings give shape to the body as a social unit. She acknowledges the existence of the being who is outside of destructive designations. This understanding of the body lies at the root of and enables the conception of social death. The reference to flesh in the play therefore does not operate to signal a prediscursive positonality. Because flesh equals vulnerability, it is presented as a problem. More importantly, the desire to get away from the flesh can be read as an indication that there is no outside to the discursive realm. While Spillers’s distinction clarifies that the body is a construct, my point is that Parker and the characters in Unfinished Women recognize how they are caught in a net of meanings because of the embodiment. The women know that their pregnancies have made them vulnerable, as Parker does with his addiction. Parker’s desire to be a thought or a sound is a request for an escape from physical being and its social trappings. This yearning for escape gets coded or translated into a death drive.

It is important to recognize that Parker’s desire to free himself from his flesh signals his impending death and the symbolic weight of death in the drama’s general configuration. The space of the boudoir is itself a kind of burial plot; in it, Parker admits that his career is over, and he dies there under Pasha’s watchful eye. His feelings of inadequacy and artistic impotence coupled with his approaching death suggest that his request for a womb reflects a longing for virility. In this way, Rahman alludes to recognizable formulations of masculinity that imagine reproduction as a tool primarily for manhood, as Robert Carr explains in the context of black nationalism.28 Parker’s necrotic presence in the drama also inserts death into the considerations of life that occur in the other space of the polydrama: the Hide-A-Wooe Home. Ultimately, juxtaposing this dying figure with the fecund bodies of the young women shows how death provides the terms for depicting the contested nature of black and minority reproduction in Rahman’s mind.

This representation of Parker’s character also illustrates how he functions as a figuration of what Abdul JanMohammed calls “the death-bound subject.” One might go so far as to say that the play as a whole offers a collection of death-bound subjects. For JanMohammed this subject “is formed, from infancy on, by the imminent and ubiquitous threat of death; he is one who inhabits a
social environment in which the threat of death is constant yet unpredictable. As such, the death-bound subject occupies a deeply aporetic structure to the extent that he is "bound," and hence produced as a subject, by the process of "unbinding." JanMohammed develops the idea to describe the conditions of twentieth-century African American existence. In his view, the legal end to enslavement does not cease willful aggressions against black bodies, aslynchings and other acts of gratuitous violence throughout the twentieth century have shown. For him, such social realities mean that black subjectivity, as a social formation, continues to be defined in the context of the threat of death, which encloses and envelops the black subject and permeates the experience of the social realm. The emphasis on the threat means that the construction is not only about the cessation of the life function but also about undermining agency and willfulness.

JanMohammed's contention builds upon Patterson's earlier treatise, yet his work is also distinct from Patterson's and Sexton's. Patterson's construction of social death is rooted in ideas about civic death. Similarly, Sexton explores the terrain of compromised civic status in his thinking on social death. JanMohammed is more interested in shining light on how the consistent and ongoing social threat of death—as opposed to civic marginalization and alienation—constitutes death-bound subjectivity. His discussion attempts to describe a position that this subject is forced to occupy because of historically ingrained conceptions about the social implications of black physical vulnerability caused by the ubiquitous threat of death. The constant context of death means that one is on the verge of losing personal identity and that agency is thwarted.

In chapter 1 of this book, Robert J. Patterson contends, "Both racism and slavery are discursive and material sites wherein black bodies constantly straddle the tenous positions between life and death," and this understanding undergirds both the death-bound and social death concepts. This idea also describes succinctly the imagined world of Unfinished Women. Parker is actually dying and Pasha denies him any personal will outside of herself; he is figured as powerless outside of his relationship with this rich and influential white woman. The state's threatening denial of the young women's agency makes them appear similarly dependent, but it also attempts to present them as objects without autonomous subjectivity. In other words, Rahman's play deploys the cast of characters through the framework of being literally and figuratively death-bound to articulate the social restrictions that delimited certain racial and gendered agency well into the twentieth century. Part of the significance of the play is that it extends the death-bound subject formulation not only to the black female body but also to the female body in general by exploring the suffocating notions that are projected onto the pregnant body.

The curious figure of Charlie Chan enhances the contemplation of death that informs the presentation of the rest of the characters. In the "Playwright's Notes," Rahman describes Chan as "a black man in blackface, a minstrel who acts as master of ceremony, connecting between scenes, always remaining outside of the drama. He is a magic mimetic man." In addition, he is dressed exactly like Parker—a conspicuous visual cue that he can be seen as Parker's double. On one hand, having the character in blackface allows Rahman to conjure up the idea of racial performance and embodiment as a historical phenomenon. Chan introduces the concept of minstrelsy, which, even with its problematic history, can function as an artistic tool for claiming ownership of historical means of representation and a gesture toward repair, as Soyica Digg's Colbert intimates in her discussion in chapter 7. Rahman's play seeks to highlight how certain recognizable notions about racial and gendered embodiment undergird the events on stage. It is Chan, as the figuration of these ideas, who links the disparate sets. On the other hand, the presence of a double for Parker in blackface that exists outside of the primary action also can be interpreted as a figure of death. It is not death in general but Parker's own death that threatens to emerge in the boudoir and that is announced and haunts the events at the Hide-a-Wee Home.

Besides his death-figure function, Chan's character also helps to illuminate how a different understanding of temporality emerges in Unfinished Women. One of the most important actions that this deathly doppelgänger performs is adjusting the hands of a broken clock on the stage, which he does at various moments throughout the play. The clock keeps stopping, and Chan tries to make it show the right time. His actions, which only the audience notices, draw attention to the fact that time has stopped in the world of the play. The structural mechanisms of the drama gesture toward the possibility of halted time, suggesting the end of time, history, or life—arguably, the realm of death. The point is not simply that life is at a standstill but that the events of the play take place outside the normal circuit of the passage of time. For this reason the two sets of the polydrama can be juxtaposed. The events in the Hide-a-Wee Home happen on the day that Parker dies: March 12, 1955. The women hear about his death on the radio near the end of scene 1, yet Parker dies in the boudoir at the end of the play in the final moments of the last scene. The end of the play beckons back to and is connected to the beginning. Although the audience experiences these events as a linear progression, the disruptive manipulation of time and temporal location is integral to the drama.

Chan offers the audience a lens for making sense of time in Unfinished Women. As the play opens, he explains, "Think of time as a circle going round and round, beginning at this place or any other place where we think we began. Where is the past? Up? Down?" These comments enable a conception of time as cyclical and allow for an out-of-sync dramatization in which the temporal present of the Hide-a-Wee set is not the present of the boudoir set. Rahman's audience experiences a sensation of halted time; as Chan's comments indicate, this cyclical experience conflates and compresses different temporal moments.
In transgressing the boundary between the two sets of the polydrama, Rahman unravels the dichotomy itself. She stages an enfolded gender collapse conceptually in the characters' requests and performatively by breaking the boundaries between the two sets of her polydrama. This technique helps to reveal the feminist strategies at work in the play. The primary goal is not to articulate womanhood but to reconsider the overall frameworks of gender expression; manipulating the structure of the play becomes a means by which Rahman can deconstruct the common understandings of black gender identity and express desires for their reformulation.

This notion of enfolded collapse also recalls Sexton's theorization of black life as social death: his insistence that "our grand involvement across the color line is structured like the figure of an envelope, folds folded within folds: a black letter law whose message is obscured, enveloped, turned about, reversed. Here a structure of violence is inscribed problematically in narrative, an inscription that can only struggle and fail to be something other than a writing-off, or a writing-over." For Sexton, existence within the social world makes one aware of how power dynamics become imbricated with intimacy so that the experience of the social is only legible as a tortuous navigation through the conflicted layers of private and public meanings. He theorizes social life as a constant negotiation of imposed meanings, particularly those that pertain to racial and gender embodiment. Each fold of the metaphorical envelope that is social existence represents our entanglements in competing subjective significations. The idea that the "message is obscured" suggests that the blocked meaning must be unraveled and unbound to become legible or to be redefined. Sexton's discussion opens up space for strategies that seek to disentangle and unfasten the knotted significations that shape social life. Rahman's play takes up that challenge formally.

Laying bare the intrinsic connection between Rahman's jazz aesthetic and the drama's concerns with death, Wilma's monologue in the center of the play describes her first sexual experience. As she is lying beneath her boyfriend, she "crouches" inside of her self and listens to the "silence" of their activity. In the midst of this sexual silence, she feels, "very faint at first ... the sound of Bird's horn ... tugging at me, taking me back to a memory I was born with. Following the music's heartbeat I took a journey I could no longer avoid and along the way I helped a woman toss her newborn baby overboard a slave ship. I joined hands with my mother as she took her mother's hand and I took my place in the circle of black women singing old blues." The sound of Parker's horn connects Wilma to a past of vexed reproduction and death. As a form shaped by the African American experience, jazz is arguably reflective of a complex history that entails manipulated, controlled, and forced reproduction. Accordingly, the first note Wilma imagines transports her to the Middle Passage and an African mother who would rather see her child drown than complete the journey.
The monologue implies a continuum between Wilma and her forbears, between the living and the dead.

In Raising the Dead, Sharon Holland argues that references to the ancestors in African American texts function as strategic refusals of the clear distinction between life and death, the present and the past. Amid such temporal and ontological confusions, black life occupies a liminal position. The blurring of the line between the living and the dead is like being caught in a net of conflicting significations. This liminality—being neither here nor there but both—defines the socially precarious state of black life, which functions as the foundation for constructions of social death, as Colbert reminds us in chapter 7. In Rahman’s play, then, the sexual encounter evokes sacrifice and destructive histories. The character’s vision does suggest unity and generative potential, but one routed through sorrowful songs from past violations.

The reference to the maternal chorus of ancestors sets the stage for the collective singing that constitutes scene 12, and this singing becomes an explicit and sustained strategic mechanism for crossing the boundaries between the two sets. In addition, it recalls and elaborates on Colbert’s analysis of Manray’s final performance in Spike Lee’s film Bamboozled (see chapter 7). There, Manray’s “dance of death” entails a performative negotiation of prescribed meaning: it “challenges the economics of legibility that render his movements commodifiable.” Each step, skip, and slide embodies his precarious movement between his own claims of agency and the institutional forces that seek to deny that agency and claim him as their own. Likewise, in the boundary-breaking singing that closes Unfinished Women, the condition of compromised agency links the women to the musician. The collaborative vocalizing, singing, and chattering attempt to clarify this situation and repudiate the empowered individuals who seek to define and delimit the characters’ sense of selfhood and their actions. According to Rahman, “the structure of this scene is nearest to a spontaneous jazz piece. Free-form saxophone music dominates and is played steadily throughout . . . The entire drama bursts into music. The characters repeat the . . . dialogue over and over, weaving in and out of, on top and below, each other, accelerating in pace, volume and intensity.”

The chaos of the scene and the fast-paced alternations among characters undermine each individual set’s structural integrity and coherence. Having the drama “burst” into music infuses the jazz aesthetic into the fabric of the play but also destabilizes notions of structure, control, and order—the concepts associated with Nurse Jacobs’s and Fasha’s endeavors. The jazz-inflected structure offers the characters, both female and male, a momentary sense of agency in the context of manipulation. The fact that it is spontaneous and perhaps short-lived indicates the singing’s and the characters’ precariousness but does not erase the significance of the collective performance. The choral singing clarifies the characters’ liminality, just as Manray’s dancing does in Lee’s film.

Thus, for every textual move that appears to lock the women into their bodies and into particular scripts, Rahman offers other artistic strategies that disturb such “tatting.” The reader must always keep in mind that she characterizes Wilma, Paullette, Conuelo, Mattei, and Midi as “unfinished women”—a concept validated by the fact that all but Paullette have yet to give birth. At the same time, she aligns the women’s embodiment with the seemingly unscripted or improvisational character of Parker’s music. Unwilling to rest at any one level of meaning, Rahman pushes the reader to other understandings of “unfinished.” The awkward expression functions as a response to the idea that these young women are “finished”: no longer of value or written off by society. This state counters a description applied to the women before they ever appear on stage, and it operates in the text as a rejoinder to an interpellation. The rights that the women characters claim to their bodies at the play’s close are not sung in a vacuum. Rather, they engage with a social discourse that finds fault with them because of their choices and exposes public perceptions about each woman’s body and character.

Wilma’s perception of herself as connected to her ancestors extends Rahman’s attempts to free her characters from understandings that confine or bind them. As Holland explains, “it is the dead, present as ancestors, who make the complete social death of the slave, and therefore the categories of freed and enslaved, unstable at best.” That the dead can be invoked and resurrected through embodied and imagined connection means that the condition of social death does not necessarily produce social isolates or characters without agency. Holland explains that such invocations function as devices that render social categories unstable and permeable, precisely because of the refusal of the division between past and present. Rahman chooses to have Wilma’s sexual encounter become a meditation on her relationship to her ancestors. Conflating physical pleasure with historical pain, the dream vision confirms how death has saturated every encounter that Wilma has, but it also introduces the possibility of breaching boundaries that would stifle or limit her sense of self.

My exploration here of social death is not intended to assert the helplessness of the characters. Instead, it is a reckoning with how death informs minoritarian subjectivity. I follow Sexton, who argues that black social death as a critical concept does not concede death and acquiesce to the loss of agency: “A living death is as much a death as it is a living. Nothing in Afro-pessimism suggests that there is no black (social life), only that black life is not social life in the universe formed by the codes of state and civil society . . . Black life is not lived in the world that the world lives in, but it is lived underground, in outer space.” Black social death describes an environment in which a subject is expressly alienated from the rest of society—the metaphorical condition of being underground and or in outer space. In other words, it is more nuanced and nontransparent than its harshest critics have allowed.
In *Unfinished Women*, Rahman may have set out to delineate the ubiquity of social death, but she does not then imagine characters without agency and the right to define themselves. Perhaps it is only by recognizing the penetrating yet non-annihilating character of social death that black life can be redefined.

*Unfinished Women* unveils a conceptual connection between black reproduction and death because of the social history that haunts black embodiment. This association grounds the drama and situates reproduction as a crucial conduit for the concept of social death. Rahman's emphasis on reproduction uniquely clarifies the contention that social death is about life, not about the act of dying or the absence of will or personal agency. The playwright works at the intersection of contemporary discourses on race and gender, and her play is a significant feminist appraisal of social death and an artistic contribution to critical discourse. In addition, her investment in feminist frameworks allows us to reimagine the coordinates of gender identity in the context of social death.

Rahman's play also uses the concept of social death to illuminate the boundaries of masculinity and femininity and the means for transgressing them. The fact that she chooses to explore death and black identity in these ways on stage or through embodied enactment illuminates the idea that social death concerns itself with lived experience and embodiment. The genre itself helps to root the concept within the realm of the performative, staging the body's experience of discursive confinement. Ultimately, *Unfinished Women* helps to explain the attraction of social death as a critical construct, one that elucidates the coordinates of the legacy of enslavement as an experiential reality. To speak of social death is to acknowledge how we must all continue to negotiate the past's presence in our expressions of self. The question of wellness that frames the chapters in this book can also be understood as a question about freedom. Cultural explorations of social death, like Rahman's play, propose that we turn our attention to the social conditions and structural forces that might impede the routes to desired freedom and wellness.

NOTES


3. The concept of Afro-pessimism, which gained traction in the 1980s and 1990s, initially was an attempt to describe how sub-Saharan African nations might be so plagued with social and political dilemmas that any effective change or progress would be difficult to realize. David Rieff argues for the value of the framework in "In Defense of Afro-Pessimism," *World Policy Journal* 15, no. 4 (1998–1999): 10–22. For work that details the historical and political contexts that fed this understanding, see George B. N. Ayittey, *Africa Betrayed* (New York: St. Martin's, 1992); and his *Africa in Chaos* (New York: St. Martin's, 1998). Also see Robert Jackson and Carl Rosberg, *Personal Rule in Black Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).


6. This relationship between abjection and cultural legibility resonates with Giorgio Agamben's argument that a subject can be included in the community through his or her exclusion. This included exclusion is crucial to the formation of communal or national identity. See *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1998).

7. Rahman's title invokes Harold Pinter's play *No Man's Land* (1974) and Maya Angelou's autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969). Her play thus revises both the canonical play and black feminist theorizing.


10. By having Jacobs attempt to exert power over their development, Rahman is linking desire to agency and subject formation.


18. The idea that the pregnant body connects feminism and black cultural theory lies at the heart of Roberts's *Killing the Black Body*. 
19. It is important to note that the women are “hidden” in a public institution and become publicly marked by that fact.


22. See Patterson, Slavery and Social Death. The willlessness apparent here is a white-imposed conception; Pasha’s construction of Parker results in an eviscerated agency.


25. Ibid., 28.

26. Ibid., 29.


30. Chan’s name also alludes to Chan Parker, Charlie Parker’s common-law wife, and Charlie Chan, the fictional Asian American detective. These connections enhance the connotations of racial performance.


32. Ibid., 33, 34.

33. Ibid., 7.


35. On this understanding of the jazz aesthetic, see Alicia Kae Koger, “Jazz Form and Jazz Function: An Analysis of Unfinished Women Cry in No Man’s Land While a Bird Dies in a Gilded Cage,” MELUS 16, no. 3 (1989–1990): 99–111. The concept of improvisation is integral to the characterization of Parker’s musical style.


37. Ibid., 29.


40. The fact that Wilma is transported by means of Parker’s phallic horn suggests that black heterosex is immersed in a complex history of subordination but is also a tool for escaping from that history.


42. Rahman, Unfinished Women, 34.


44. Holland, Raising the Dead, 14.


Dancing with Death

Spike Lee’s Bamboozled

SOYICA DIGGS COLBERT

The texture of freedom is laden with the vestiges of slavery, and abstract equality is utterly enmeshed in the narrative of black subjection.¹

—Saidiya Hartman

As time goes on, the direct impact of slavery on American social life seems to become less and less clear. As the new millennium opened, the United States turned a page in race relations, with many deciding that we no longer need the protections of key parts of the 1965 Voting Rights Act or the use of racial criteria in college admissions decisions. As the saying goes, everything has a season, and the short season of racial repair enacted through juridical means seems to have run its course. The notion of the natural and progressive propulsion of time underpins the logic that historical distance has diminished the effect of slavery on the lives of twenty-first-century Americans.

Set at the critical juncture of the new millennium, Spike Lee’s film Bamboozled (2000) questions how far U.S. audiences have come, since the nineteenth century, in their perceptions of blackness as well as how far removed we are from slavery’s legacy. The film situates abject blackness as central to the formation, maintenance, and proliferation of American society and culture, presenting blackness in “a dialogical rather than a strictly oppositional way.”² The dialogic relationship between the constitution of blackness and nationalism also calls attention to time as a progressive and contrapuntal force with the ability to mark the progress toward fulfilling the promise of the democratic and the counterpoint of transatlantic slavery. Much like Hortense Spillers, who famously claimed that “my country needs me and if I were not here I would have to be invented,” Bamboozled dramatizes the ongoing tension between the national necessity of blackness and the particular ways in which twenty-first-century culture makers remake it.³