

KIM HALL & JENNIFER MORGAN, 9/18/2014: *Slavery and the Sweet Taste of Empire*  
A blog by Pamela Kierejczyk Thielman, PhD Student, Theatre, Graduate Center



A full and lively crowd of over 50 turned out on Thursday, September 18, 2014 for the conversation between Kim Hall, Lucyle Hook Professor of English and Professor of Africana Studies at Barnard College, and Jennifer Morgan, Professor of Social and Cultural Analysis and History at NYU. Both scholars presented from their works in progress which, broadly speaking, deal with the role of women in the slave economy of the English colonies. The evening was decidedly less formal than the usual presentation of papers, a result of the unconventional genesis of the event. To orient the attendees each scholar read short (approximately 10-minute) excerpts of her work.

Kim Hall began her talk, formally titled “Agricultural Ideals, Sugar and Slavery in the Anglo-Caribbean,” with a very contemporary reference: She discussed visual artist Kara Walker’s recent installation piece at the Domino Sugar factory in Long Island City, Queens. The piece, *A Subtlety; or the Marvelous Sugar Baby* was a massive sphinx fabricated from about thirty tons of sugar (over a Styrofoam core) with racially and sexually provocative features, surrounded by smaller statues made with molasses representing black children cheerfully performing manual labor. The title points to a somewhat archaic usage of the term “subtlety” as a decorative culinary item, typically one made of sugar.

Though the work could easily have been a whole evening’s conversation unto itself, Hall’s point in bringing it up was to highlight the invisible labor behind culinary decadence (a connection made more explicit in Walker’s extensive subtitle: *an Homage to the unpaid and overworked Artisans who have refined our Sweet tastes from the cane fields to the Kitchens of the New World on the Occasion of the demolition of the Domino Sugar Refining Plant*). Hall said that her current work focuses on the connection between sugar, slavery, and English women. She argued that as sugar became more widely available in the 17<sup>th</sup> century it was given various cultural frames that cut out any allusion to the harsh realities of sugar cultivation. One strategy was the application of classical pastoral imagery to illustrations of slaves in the Caribbean, another was association of sugar with the “twin benefits of health and pleasure” which brought it into the sphere of English domestic femininity. Hall finished her brief presentation by asserting that though slaves are largely absent of from the artistic discourse of the period, visual and textual, non-fiction accounts of Caribbean plantation life from the early seventeenth century draw heavily on tropes and topoi from canonical literary works and should thus be examined from a literary studies perspective for insight into the socio-cultural context around Anglo-Caribbean sugar slavery.

Jennifer Morgan’s talk also centered on the radical absence of black people from the archive, particularly black women. More than omission or obfuscation, she raised the question of whether this absence was willful erasure of women from writing on the black Atlantic. Like Hall, Morgan began with a fairly contemporary touchstone, Carolyn Steedman’s *Dust: The Archive and*

*Cultural History*, a book that revisits Derrida's notion of archive fever with more concrete concerns like anthrax from the old leather bindings. She described her struggles as a graduate student in the archive, becoming almost delirious with the effort of finding any traces of the black subjects she was looking for in Early Modern records. Her labors eventually led her to travel narratives, which would form the foundation of her first book.

Morgan's current work continues her interest in women and reproduction in the English slave economy, centering on the 1662 Virginia law that established *partus sequitur ventrem*, the doctrine by which the race of the child followed that of the mother. The law's object was to, as Morgan put it pithily, codify "what to do with progeny conceived with property," and many scholars have taken this to mean that—before the law was enacted—children born of white men to black women existed in a state of possibility. Morgan made a case for turning attention away from the children to the mothers, who must have been cognizant of the complicated position in which their reproductive abilities put them. As a fascinating and troubling illustration of this, Morgan related a story drawn from the voyages of Sir Francis Drake about a captured slave, Maria, who, when it became apparent that her use as a sexual object had resulted in a pregnancy, was left on a deserted island—ostensibly to found a colonial settlement—with two male slaves. What, Morgan wondered, must Maria have been thinking as she watched Drake and his men sail away?

The larger conversation that flowed out of the two presentations touched on topics from the division of labor on Caribbean sugar plantations, to Donne's poetic use of the word "subtle," to the deleterious effect of a sugar-heavy diet on female reproduction. Hall and Morgan were visibly pleased to be sharing their ideas with each other and a group of attendees that included students and faculty from a variety of institutions as well as members of the general public. Though both scholars highlighted the fact that the Early Modern archive often excludes women and people of color, the response from the audience suggested that there is an engaged community interested in their projects to recover those lost perspectives and restore them to contemporary discourses of literature and history.

For further information see Kim Hall's foundational book on blackness in Early Modern literature, *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England* (1995) and Jennifer Morgan's *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (2004). Details about Kara Walker's *A Subtlety* can be found at <http://creativetime.org/projects/karawalker/>.

*This talk by Professors Kim Hall and Jennifer Morgan was co-sponsored by the Society for the Study of Women in the Renaissance and the Center for the Study of Women & Society.*

*Please join us for the upcoming events we are co-sponsoring:*

*"Greek Tragic Heroines in Shakespeare's Comedies," a talk with Tanya Pollard on Thursday, October 16<sup>th</sup> from 6:00-7:30 in room 9206; a presentation of Eugenia Paulicelli's book, Writing Fashion in Early Modern Italy with the author on Tuesday, October 28<sup>th</sup> from 6:00-8:00 in the Segal Theatre; and "Libertinism and Misogyny in Early Modern Venice," a discussion with Paolo Fasoli and Andrea Fedi on Thursday, November 13<sup>th</sup> from 6:00-7:30 in room C201. All events are free and open to the public and are held at the Graduate Center, 365 Fifth Ave., New York, NY.*