
Book Review

Domestic Contradictions: Race and Gendered Citizenship from Reconstruction to Welfare Reform

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Priya Kandaswamy's book *Domestic Contradictions* makes an important contribution to both intersectional thought and feminist analyses of the American welfare system. By juxtaposing the current welfare system to the work of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands in the first six years after the Civil War, the author compellingly argues that today's welfare system reforms aim at producing a class of lower wage workers whose identities mirror the racial discriminatory ideological presuppositions that have persisted since the Reconstruction Era. These enduring presuppositions themselves contribute to motivating those welfare reforms. According to Kandaswamy, in the aftermath of the Civil War the Freedman's Bureau was nominally instituted to assist freedpeople in becoming citizens by helping the transition from slavery to freedom, from being considered property to having citizenship, but reading the documents of the Bureau's archive in a different light allows one to account for the persistence of poverty and the failure of freedpeople to fully embody idealised heteropatriarchal roles.¹ The author's extensive archival research supports her hypothesis that the Freedman Bureau's officers were rather concerned with assuaging the anxieties that emancipation occasioned in the dominant, predominantly white part of society. Kandaswamy shows that the way in which citizenship and personhood were extended through labour and marriage contracts represents a direct response to such anxieties and constitutes an attempt to suppress alternative forms of embodying freedom.

While the archival work and the historical depth of Kandaswamy's text bring to light important aspects of the Reconstruction Era—from the process of naming and recording the identities of black people to the idiosyncratic ideas about freedom the Bureau's officials tried to impose on freedmen and freedwomen—*Domestic Contradiction* is neither comprised of a historical investigation nor of a linear chronological narration from the Reconstruction Era to today's welfare reforms. On the contrary, building on the idea of 'palimpsest' as articulated by M. Jacqui Alexander in her recent book *Pedagogies of Crossing*, Kandaswamy frees her work from the idea of historical progression and instead shows the persistence of past ideas, fears, and anxieties in recent welfare reforms. The metaphor that the concept of palimpsest offers—that of a text that has been only imperfectly erased and which confuses the words of the present—allows us to see in the narration of the past confusing, indistinct, and

¹ Kandaswamy cites the work of Anjali Arondekar, who suggests the relevance of real-life effects in order to orient the reading of archival sources.

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disorganising forces still at work in the present rather than chronologically distinct events which may be identified as explanatory causes for present problems. It allows us to see, in the conflation of heteronormative ideals with the injunction to work to become a deserving citizen, the determination to maintain and secure a labour force that can be exploited as much as needed in the interests of those that perceive themselves as deserving citizens.

Accordingly, Kandaswamy shows that the persistence of systemic racism and inequality is easily ignored as the origin of black people's social and economic difficulties because the work of the Freedmen's Bureau projected such difficulties onto black bodies themselves; in fact, by pathologising their genders, sexual behaviours, and kinship relationships and by connecting these behaviours to socio-economical struggles, social reformers have kept black people in a state of perpetual scrutiny. Such scrutiny has invariably confirmed its own assumptions, and several reformers, scholars, and policy makers have ascribed the responsibility for black people's poverty and social difficulties to their family and kinship systems, to their 'failure' to live a settled life or to form heteronormative nuclear families, and in general, to their 'failure' to conform to sexual and gender norms.² While this supposed failure has been alternatively read either as a sign of black people's unworthiness to become citizens and members of society or as a residual effect of slavery's degradation, the responsibility for social and economic hardship is typically perceived as still lying with black people themselves. As a result, old and new reforms of public assistance programs all respond to hardship with an injunction to norm the bodies and lives of black people—black women in particular—instead of finding solutions for social and economic inequality.

Kandaswamy notices that present discourses about public assistance programs construe such reforms as innovative despite the recurrence of the same prejudices and stereotypes and the unvarying nature of these reforms' solutions. She suggests that this is possible precisely because the anxieties these reforms attempt to respond to remain unclear and are not explicitly linked, in the public and political sphere, to those that circulated in the aftermath of slavery. It is therefore a great contribution of Kandaswamy's book to link discourses about public assistance to the social inequality they actively contribute to maintain and the hierarchies of gender and race they attempt to naturalise. By uncovering these unspoken presuppositions and by compellingly arguing that they shape the current system, it becomes possible to read, in what appears as inclusion and assistance, new forms of subjugation.

These forms of subjugations rest on the stratifications of race, gender, and class that justified past structures of violence and past phenomena of oppression. The idea of 'seething presence' formulated by sociologist Avery Gordon in *Ghostly Matters* suggests that the social sphere is continuously haunted both by what these structures bring about and by what they try to erase or contain. By taking seriously the suggestion to pay attention to what surreptitiously invades our present, yet remains generally unrecognised, Kandaswamy identifies not only the actual aims of different welfare reforms, but also the alternative ideas of freedom that could have been and still can be embodied. While the obsession with work, financial autonomy, and the heteronormative family in welfare reform discourse reveals the shadow of the anxieties around restitution and integration that accompanied emancipation, the forms of life that these policies tried to reform can still lead the way towards alternative understandings of personhood, family, and freedom. Stigmatised figures such as the vagrant, the prostitute, or the welfare queen exemplify ideas of kinship that both threaten the domestic ideals of the nation and illuminate a different way of thinking and embodying freedom and citizenship. It is one of the great accomplishments of *Domestic Contradictions* to pay attention to these figures that appeared through archival research and to allow their voices to be heard, not as figures of resistance but as invitations to explore alternative ways of being. Because these alternatives directly defy the United States' ideal of heteropatriarchal family organisation, Kandaswamy suggest considering them as queer figures.³

Kandaswamy's original archival research occupies the central three chapters of her book, while the first and last chapter of *Domestic Contradictions* establish and analyse the connection between the welfare reforms of the 90s and the work of the Freedmen's Bureau. The first chapter, 'Welfare Reform and the Afterlife of Slavery', establishes the point of departure for the author's research: the discourses and presentations of the welfare reforms during the Clinton and Bush administrations. These reforms, as well as the way they were presented, emphasised the importance of autonomy and of hard work. At the signing of the law in 1996, Lillie Harden, the woman chosen to represent a successful example of welfare-to-work programmes, declared herself grateful for the opportunity to work that had been given to her by the programme because she had been able to become the model of a hard-working person for her children. Kandaswamy teases out the ideological presupposition of these discourses around welfare reform and argues that the roles of mother and service worker are intertwined when it comes to black women, who are consistently pushed to become low-wage labourers.

² Among other works and reports, Kandaswamy also cites the 1965 Moynihan Report. Kandaswamy's approach greatly resonates with and complements the analysis of the report by Hortense Spillers in her critical and fundamental text 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe'.

³ Kandaswamy's suggestion to consider these figures as queer rests on Cathy Cohen's reflection. Cf. Cathy J. Cohen, 'Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens; the Radical Potential of Queer Politics?'

Kandaswamy's second chapter, 'Making State, Making Family,' shows that the gendered dichotomy of the public and private spheres does not allow us to understand the experience of black Americans since emancipation—in contrast to feminist analysis that have interpreted the welfare system as confining women to domesticity. In fact, while white women's role inside the house was protected, black women had to work outside of their homes in order to show their suitability to become free citizens. Indeed, when freedwomen tried to care for their families by choosing to stay at home they were accused of 'playing the lady'. Thus, white families could embody the gendered ideal of the family, while black people were in a permanent state of failure regarding the liberal notions of personhood, marriage, and the general heteropatriarchal organisation of society. Of course, black people had established and maintained complex family relations and kinship systems despite the violence of slavery and the forced separations they endured, but these alternative systems have been completely disregarded. Moreover, the attempt to search for family members that had been sold and moved to other parts of the country was considered with suspicion and perceived as a threat. As a result, black people that did not immediately conform to the dominant culture were punished for vagrancy. The Freedmen's Bureau encouraged both marriage and a sedentary life and the identities of freedpeople were often recorded upon the fulfilment of these two conditions.

While marriage was presented as a way to enter society and be acknowledged as a citizen, Kandaswamy shows in the following chapter, 'Marriage and the Making of Gendered Citizenship,' that it did not grant the privacy and independence to black people that it granted to white families. In fact, the Freedmen's Bureau's evaluations of requests for public assistance as well as the assessments of later welfare reforms appeared to justify a constant scrutiny of black people's most intimate lives and kinship organisation. Black people had to show their deservingness to be included in the social fabric of the nation by conforming to the dominant liberal culture's norms of heteropatriarchy and economic autonomy. However, as the material conditions of those that had been enslaved were extremely difficult, embodying liberal ideals of economic autonomy was practically impossible. In this context, Kandaswamy remarks that figures such as the vagrant or the prostitute appeared to threaten the social structure of the nation. As Kandaswamy shows, the vagrant needs to be considered as a queer figure because the persistence of such individuals challenged the natural necessity of masculine ideals of economic self-sufficiency and household mastery, as well as of feminine dependency. Kandaswamy argues that the vagrant was not simply presented as someone that was not settling, but as someone that refused his or her role in society in a way that specifically threatened gender models: vagrants were, for instance, sometimes imagined as men who, in shirking work, also took on ambiguously feminine attributes.

On the one hand, Kandaswamy is interested in tracing the trajectory of these figures to think about different ways to organise kinship and alternative ways to gain independence. On the other hand, it is important to trace the connection between these figures and the anxieties that produced them as well as the use of these images in society. Indeed, Kandaswamy remarks that the moral stigmatisation of vagrancy inhibited alternative modes of freedom, but it also became a legal pretext for recreating work relationships reminiscent of slavery: whomever was considered a vagrant would be fair game for forced labour, and whomever was not supervised by a white employer was a vagrant.⁴ These labour relationships were structured through a perverse conflation of free contractual engagement and compulsory racial domination, in which subordination to white employers 'as before' emancipation was now given a pretext of voluntary engagement.

In chapter 4, titled 'Domestic Labor and the Politics of Reform' Kandaswamy assesses the fragilising impact on freedwomen of the double injunction to enter into marriage and labour contracts. On the one hand, black women were, unlike white women, discouraged from working solely for their families. As a result, black women could never enjoy the protection that working within their homes and communities would have granted them. On the other hand, because of the stereotypical gender roles of marriage contracts, black married women did not gain any independence by becoming wage workers. For instance, black women's labour contracts could be signed by their husbands, who were therefore able to relegate their wives to conditions that were similar to those of slavery. Although the gendered images of dependency and domesticity that black women were now supposed to embody were incompatible with wage work, domestic work in white households resolved this contradiction. As a consequence, white employers of domestic workers came to see themselves as supervising black women's morally uplifting path into gender normativity, citizenship, and social uprightness. Kandaswamy shows that the opening of schools that trained black women to become domestic workers attests to such conflation of education with gender norms and exploitation. It is noteworthy that while these roles as domestic workers were conceived as edifying and presented as direct alternatives to debasing life choices, such as vagrancy or prostitution, the relationship with white employers inside white, autonomous, and unregulated households exposed black women to rapes and sexual abuses that had been a considerable part of slavery.

In the last chapter of the book, 'The Chains of Welfare', Kandaswamy compares the work of the Freedmen's Bureau to welfare reforms of the twentieth century like the 1996 law. She shows that neither system responds to

⁴ Kandaswamy's analysis of the Reconstruction Era and of the new forms of subjugation that were invented to recreate conditions similar to those of slavery also rests on W. E. B. Du Bois' work in *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935).

the difficult material conditions of black families and black women. Both in the Reconstruction Era as much as at the end of the twentieth century it appears that public assistance responds to anxieties about undisciplined black bodies and operates in a social environment that considers that black women need to work in a subservient position in order to learn proper feminine virtues. Work outside of their own homes, far from their children, and in no connection to their communities is then presented as the only way to ensure the moral uprightness of black women and their suitability as mothers and citizens. In other words, Kandaswamy argues that the anxiety around black bodies continues to this day to reform society in such a way that instead of materially helping black women in need it only disciplines them.

Kandaswamy's book greatly contributes to feminist intersectional thought and her research is critical in helping understand instances of social oppression that continue to appear in our present. In fact, the conflation between gender norms, moral values, and exploitation is at work whenever a specific group appears as a threat to the social order. Kandaswamy's book challenges the idea of deservingness that justifies the constant scrutiny of such groups as migrants, refugees, lower class workers, racial minorities, women, and queer people. Moreover, the author shows that dominant social values can be particularly dangerous when their historical dimension is concealed and when they are perceived as neutral or natural. In fact, this perception is the condition of their dominance and of their power to obscure alternative ways of embodying freedom.

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