

Love, Anarchy, and Drama

The Classical Anarchists' Adventures and Misadventures in Polyamory

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Like many contemporary anarchists, many anarchists of the 19th and 20th centuries maintained relationships with multiple romantic partners, or were involved with partners who did. Just as it does today, this often precipitated gossip, heartache, jealousy, and interminable emotional processing. A complete history of anarchist polyamory drama would be nearly as ambitious as a comprehensive history of the anarchist movement itself. Here, we've limited ourselves to a few poignant anecdotes from the lives of a handful of classical anarchists. There is a great deal more to be told—for example, the love triangle involving Emma Goldman, Alexander Berkman, and Johann Most, or Voltairine de Cleyre's writing about ownership and possessiveness in relationships.

Why revisit all this, you ask? Certainly not *just* for the salacious thrill of letting the skeletons out of the closet to dance a little on holidays. No, we return to these stories because our antecedents were just like us, flawed and fallible yet capable of greatness. They were responsible for both heroic acts and gross stupidities (let's not forget Bakunin's anti-Semitism). In studying their lives, we might recognize some ways to improve ourselves.

“We want freedom; we want men and women to love and unite freely for no other reason than love, without any legal, economic, or physical violence. But freedom, even though it is the only solution that we can and must offer, does not radically solve the problem, since love, to be satisfied, requires two freedoms that agree, and often they do not agree in any way; and also, the freedom to do what one wants is a phrase devoid of meaning when one does not know how to want something.”

—Errico Malatesta, “Love and Anarchy”

Mikhail and Antonia Bakunin and Carlo Gambuzzi

One of the most influential anarchists of the 19th century, Mikhail Bakunin famously asserted “I am truly free only when all human beings, **men and women**, are equally free.” In his *Revolutionary Catechism*,¹ he devoted a section to the abolition of compulsory relationships, marital or otherwise:

Religious and civil marriage to be replaced by *free* marriage. Adult men and women have the right to unite and separate as they please, nor has society the right to hinder their union or to force them to maintain it. With the abolition of the right of inheritance and the education of children assured by society, all the legal reasons for the irrevocability of marriage will disappear. The union of a man and a woman must be free, for a free choice is the indispensable condition for moral sincerity. In marriage, man and woman must enjoy absolute liberty. Neither violence nor passion nor rights surrendered in the past can justify an invasion by one of the liberty of another, and every such invasion shall be considered a crime.

There was a 24-year age difference between Mikhail's father and mother; they had become engaged when his mother was 18 and his father was nearly 42. This was not particularly unusual

¹ Bakunin's *Revolutionary Catechism* is distinct from Sergey Nechayev's *Catechism of a Revolutionary*, which is often mistakenly attributed to Bakunin. In fact, there were serious differences between the politics of the two Russian revolutionists, as Bakunin set forth in this letter to Nechayev. ☒

in Russia at the time. Mikhail grew up surrounded by four sisters, from whom he learned a variety of intellectual pursuits and, above all, the importance of women's autonomy and self-determination. He came of age fighting alongside them against pressure from their parents to get married to men who did not share their philosophical or artistic interests.

When Mikhail was living in exile in Siberia after being sentenced to death in three countries for participating in the revolutions of 1848 and 1849, he met Antonia Kwiatkowska, the daughter of an exiled Polish teacher. When they married, she was 18 and he was 44.

A few years later, Mikhail pulled off a daring escape from Siberia, circumnavigating the globe to arrive in Western Europe, where there was not yet a price on his head. Antonia joined him, and the two lived together in Sweden, Italy, and Switzerland.

At this point, Antonia was in her twenties, while Bakunin was in his fifties, prematurely aged by years chained up in solitary confinement. Antonia began a tempestuous relationship with one of Bakunin's young Italian comrades. In the following letter to his Russian friend Nikolaj Ogarev, Bakunin describes the considerable challenges that ensued. His complicated feelings will be familiar to anyone who has struggled to set boundaries regarding a partner's volatile relationship or struggled to balance the demands of two very different relationships.

December 16, 1869

Locarno, Switzerland

Antosja arrived. I went to meet her in Arona, the first Italian city at the end of Lake Maggiore, and I spent two and a half days in great anxiety, expecting her at any moment. Contrary to date on the telegram I had received from Naples, she arrived two whole days late, as a result of the storm in the Mediterranean. She traveled by sea, on account of the low price. The poor woman was quite shaken. Imagine yourself in this situation: alone at sea with an eighteen-month-old child, eight months pregnant and of an ideal disposition for seasickness. She spent days without moving on the boat until Gaeto, despite terrible sea turbulence. She arrived to me exhausted and sick. The child is also sick. I took them to Arona with great difficulty. Antosja took a little rest, the little one as well. But in four, three, or perhaps two weeks, she will deliver. You understand that in these conditions, my head is spinning.

Dear friend, I want once and for all to explain to you my relationship with Antosja and her veritable husband. I did a terribly stupid thing, even more than that, I committed a crime by marrying a young girl almost two and a half times younger than me. I could, to justify myself, invoke many extenuating circumstances, tell you that I pulled her out of a vulgar provincial dump, that if she had not married me, she would have become the wife of a monster, of a Siberian police chief. But a fact is a fact, a mistake a mistake and a crime a crime. Antosja is a kind person and a beautiful soul, I love her as much as a father can love his daughter. I managed to wrest her away from the world of trivial ideas, to help her human development and save her from many vulgar temptations and loves. But when she met true love, I did not believe myself to have the right to enter into a struggle with her, that is to say, against this love. She loved a man who is completely worthy of her, my friend and my son in social-revolutionary doctrine, Carlo Gambuzzi. Two and a half years ago, Antosja came to tell me that she loved him and I gave her my blessing, begging her to see me as a friend and remember that she had no better nor more sure friend than I.

A few months later, at the Congress of Geneva, after a long struggle not only on her part, but also on the part of Gambuzzi, a struggle in which furthermore I did not interfere in any way, that I deliberately ignored, Antosja found herself pregnant. Due to lack of confidence, she hid her pregnancy from me, she endured terrible torments, deceived everyone and, under the pretext of going on a trip, went to give birth in a village near Vevey, exposing herself, as well as the child, to great danger. Informed of this without my knowledge, Gambuzzi arrived and took the child with him to Naples. Antosja recovered; as for me, I still suspected nothing.

One year ago, in October 1868, an incident revealed everything to me. The fact that I did not learn this earlier is not the fault of Antosja but of Gambuzzi. From the beginning, she wanted to tell me everything, but he demanded of her and pleaded with her not to talk to me about anything. In this respect, as in many others, he showed himself to be below her. Raised in the bourgeois world of Italy, he still can't free himself from the cult of propriety and from the point of honor, and often prefers small winding paths to the long straight road. I will say in his defense that the thought of aggrieving and offending me actually terrified him. He has a filial attachment for me and an undeniably warm friendship.

Anyway, having learned the essence of things, I repeated to Antosja she was entirely free and asked her to decide her own fate, without any consideration of me, in the manner that she believed best: to stay with me as a wife—a wife of course only insofar as the public is concerned—or to separate from me and live in Naples openly as the wife of Gambuzzi. She decided on the first option for the following reasons: above all, she is accustomed to me, and the idea of living apart seemed unbearable to her; second, she feared being a burden for Gambuzzi, feared to put him in a situation that he would not know how to extract himself from with honor, given his social prejudices.

So all three of us decided that everything would remain the same as before. The child would spend the winter in Naples (this decision was made in October 1868) and, in autumn, Antosja would travel to Italy, supposedly with a sick Polish friend who would “die” in the summer and entrust her son to Antosja. This fall, Antosja traveled to Naples with the child, and what happened was what was to be expected and what I had predicted: once again, she became pregnant.

She was in despair. So Gambuzzi proposed that she come to give birth in Naples and leave the new child entirely to his guardianship; renouncing him completely, she would return with me after the birth, with the son, our adopted child of the deceased Polish friend (of course a myth). Antosja rebelled against this proposal and stated categorically that for nothing in the world nor for any consideration whatsoever would she abandon her child. A fight began between her and Gambuzzi. They appealed to me as judge. I took the side of Antosja, of course, and wrote to Gambuzzi that his plan was monstrous, that a mother capable of abandoning her child simply for social considerations would be a monster in my eyes.

So Antosja addressed this entreaty to me: leave Geneva, come to Italy and recognize the two children as my own. I did not reflect on it for long and agreed. I felt obliged

to accept, because I could see no other way to save Antosja; and having committed a crime against her, it was my duty to assist her. That took place in July or August of this year, precisely at the moment when I announced to you that I had to leave Geneva.

After the Congress of Basel, Antosja pressured me. I hastened to leave and, as agreed, I went down to Locarno, began looking for a home, a nursemaid, and telegraphed Antosja that she could come, that I was waiting for her. For over two weeks, I received no word of reply to my telegram, nor to letters sent after it. I realized that the struggle was continuing between them; I wrote them a synodic letter in which, while describing our mutual situation to them in its true light, I indicated two options for them and demanded that they choose one or the other, namely: either Antosja, renouncing once and for all the love of Gambuzzi and contenting herself merely with his friendship, return immediately to me with my son and my future child, or else she should remain in Naples as the wife, known to all the world, of Gambuzzi, with the two children of their relationship also recognized by him. I offered my stamp of approval for either decision, but I demanded they choose one or the other without delay and stated that I would only agree again to do the first provided that it come into effect immediately.

Antosja arrived. Gambuzzi offered to stay, but she declined the offer.

Friendly relations on my part, as well as on the part of Antosja, continue with Gambuzzi. Their romantic relationship is over. I adopted the children of Gambuzzi, without denying his incontestable right to take charge of and lead their education alongside Antosja. Life here is inexpensive. He will pay 150 francs per month into the common fund and I will do the same. We will stay together, Antosja and I, as long as the revolution hasn't called me. Then I will belong only to the revolution and myself.

In fact, after this letter was sent, Antonia maintained a romantic relationship with Carlo Gambuzzi and gave birth to a third child with him. Mikhail and Antonia continued to live together, and Mikhail participated in raising all three children as if they were his own. Antonia stood by Mikhail even when political conflicts and financial mismanagement alienated him from many of his other comrades and created considerable difficulties for their household. After his death, she finally moved in with Gambuzzi, and the two had one more daughter together.

Errico Malatesta, Emilia Tronzio-Zanardelli, and Giovanni Defendi

While still a teenager, Errico Malatesta met Mikhail Bakunin and joined him in helping to organize the First International and other early anarchist efforts, including armed uprisings in 1874 and 1877. Targeted by the Italian police forever afterwards, he was compelled to spend a great part of his life in hiding or in exile, especially in London.

Around the same time that he met Bakunin, Malatesta had begun a romantic relationship with the anarchist Emilia Tronzio-Zanardelli. Little is known about their relationship, but they likely

began seeing each other as early as 1871,² as Malatesta was involved alongside her brother in the Mazzinist student movement and then the Neapolitan section of the First International. Emilia followed her brother to London in 1879 and began working as a seamstress.

A comrade of theirs, Giovanni Defendi, had gone to France in 1871 to participate in the defense of the Paris Commune, for which he was imprisoned for eight years. After his release, in 1880, he moved to London. That year, he and Emilia announced that they were entering into a *union libre*:

The undersigned make it a point to announce to you that, on May 8, 1880, they will enter into a free union, in the presence of some socialist friends invited and gathered simply to receive communication.

The reasons that determined them to dispense with legal marriage, as well as religious marriage, are that they view them as bourgeois institutions created for the sole purpose of settling questions of property and inheritance, not offering any serious guarantee to proletarians of either sex, consecrating the subjugation of women, committing wills and consciences for the future, without taking into account the characters involved, and opposing the dissolubility which is the basis of any contract.

The question of children will be settled later in the manner most in accordance with justice and according to the situation that bourgeois society imposes upon them.

Fraternal greetings.

-Giovanni Defendi, Emilia Tronzio-Zanardelli

Malatesta had already been living with Emilia before this; he joined the couple at their residence in London in 1881. He lived with the Defendis for much of the next four decades. The British police, scandalized, reported that there were rumors that Malatesta was sleeping with Emilia despite her relationship with Giovanni.

The house and the business of the Defendi couple, where Malatesta lived, 112 High Street in Islington, was a convergence point for everyone that arrived in London. How many stormy and brotherly discussions were had in the little kitchen through the grocery store of the good Defendi family, which served as an Athenaeum!

-Luigi Fabbri's Life of Malatesta

Emilia had six children, some of whom she may have conceived with Malatesta—including her son Enrico, born in 1883, who accompanied Malatesta when he went to Italy in 1897, and her daughter Adele, born in 1892. When Emilia fell ill in the aftermath of the First World War, Malatesta stayed by her bedside for months, nursing her until she passed away.

In contrast to the dramatic difficulties that beset Mikhail and Antonia Bakunin and Carlo Gambuzzi, the relationships of Errico Malatesta, Emilia Tronzio-Zanardelli, and Giovanni Defendi appear to have been healthy and stable, providing a solid foundation for their decades of political activity. Knowing that Mikhail Bakunin mentored the young Malatesta, we can't help wondering

² See *Errico Malatesta da Mazzini a Bakunin, la sua formazione giovanile nell'ambiente napoletano (1868–1873)* by Misato Toda. ☒

if the two ever discussed affairs of the heart. Could Malatesta's graceful conduct in relation to his partner's marriage have been informed by advice or anecdotes from Bakunin? We know they discussed the political and martial aspects of liberation, but we know less about their discussions regarding its personal aspects, which are just as fundamental to the anarchist project.

Likewise, though Emilia Tronzio-Zanardelli was an important participant in the Italian anarchist movement in diaspora across several decades, we have little documentation with which to understand the substance of her contributions. On the basis of what we do know about her role in organizing, though, we know they were considerable.

"Let's eliminate the exploitation of man by man, let's fight the brutal pretention of the male who thinks he owns the female, let's fight religious, social, and sexual prejudice. In any case, [in the anarchist future] the ones with bad luck in love will procure themselves other pleasures, since it will not be as it is today, when love and alcohol are the only consolations for the majority of humanity."

-Errico Malatesta, "Love and Anarchy"

América Scarfó, Severino di Giovanni, and Émile Armand

If we don't know as much as we might wish to about the perspectives of Antonia Bakunin and Emilia Tronzio-Zanardelli, we have a full record of the thoughts of América Scarfó, an Argentine anarchist who began a romantic relationship with a married man while she was still a teenager.

Born in a middle-class immigrant family, América already shared anarchist ideas with her brothers Paulino and Alejandro by the end of her adolescence. Their family rented out a room to an Italian anarchist who had fled with his wife and three children to Argentina on account of the rise of Mussolini. He and América began a vibrant intellectual exchange that blossomed into romance. But then a police raid forced him to go into hiding along with Paulino and Alejandro.

Frustrated by the interference of the state, her parents' opposition and, worst of all, the criticism of other anarchists, América wrote the following letter across the Atlantic Ocean to Émile Armand, an internationally known anarchist proponent of "revolutionary sexualism" and *camaraderie amoureuse*. Armand had revived Zo d'Axa's individualist anarchist publication *L'En-Dehors*, largely as a vehicle to promote what today we might call relationship anarchy.

In sending this letter, América was publicly declaring the legitimacy of a relationship not sanctioned by the church, the state, or her parents, just as Giovanni Defendi and Emilia Tronzio-Zanardelli had done before her. But more than that, she was taking revolutionary measures on the terrain that was available to her as a young woman in Buenos Aires: challenging the norms around intimacy, gender, and affective relations in society at large, in her birth family, and in the social circles of her fellow anarchists.

Revolution is not something that the party implements in the parliament or the workers carry out in the factories—it is a project that concerns every single aspect of life, and therefore, every single person, wherever she is situated.

Buenos Aires, December 3, 1928

To comrade E. Armand

Dear Comrade,

The purpose of this letter is, first of all, to ask your advice. We have to act, in all moments of our lives, in accord with our own manner of seeing and thinking, in such a way that the reproaches and criticisms of other people find our individuality protected by the healthiest concepts of responsibility and liberty, which form a solid wall weakening their attacks. For this reason, we should act consistently with our ideas.

My case, comrade, is of the amorous order. I am a young student who believes in the new life. I believe that, thanks to our free actions, individual or collective, we can arrive at a future of love, fraternity, and equality. I desire for all just what I desire for myself: the freedom to act, to love, to think. That is, I desire anarchy for all humanity. I believe that in order to achieve this, we should make a social revolution. But I am also of the opinion that in order to arrive at this revolution, it is necessary to free ourselves from all kinds of prejudices, conventionalisms, false moralities, and absurd codes. And, while we wait for this great revolution to break out, we have to carry out this work in all the actions of our existence. And indeed, in order to make this revolution come about, we can't just content ourselves with waiting, but need to take action in our daily lives. Wherever possible, we should act from the point of view of an anarchist, that is, of a human being.

In love, for example, we will not wait for the revolution, we will unite ourselves freely, paying no regard to the prejudices, barriers, and innumerable lies that oppose us as obstacles. I have come to know a man, a comrade of ideas. According to the laws of the bourgeoisie, he is married. He united himself with a woman as a consequence of a childish circumstance, without love. At that time, he didn't know our ideas. However, he lived with this woman for a number of years, and they had children. He didn't experience the satisfaction that he should have felt with a loved one. Life became tedious, the only thing that united these two beings were the children. Still an adolescent, this man came to know our ideas, and a new consciousness was born in him. He turned into a brave militant. He devoted himself to propaganda with ardor and intelligence. All the love that he hadn't directed to a person, he offered instead to an ideal. In the home, meanwhile, life continued with its monotony relieved only by the happiness of their small children. It happened that circumstances brought us together, at first as companions of ideas. We talked, we sympathized with each other, and we learned to know each other. Thus our love was born. We believed, in the beginning, that it would be impossible. He, who had loved only in dreams, and I, making my entrance into life. Each one of us continued living between doubt and love. Destiny—or, better, love—did the rest. We opened our hearts and our love and our happiness began to intone its song, even in the middle of the struggle, the ideal, which in fact gave us an even greater impulse. And our eyes, our lips, our hearts expressed themselves in the magic conjuring of a first kiss. We idealized love, but we were carrying it into reality. Free love, that knows no barriers, nor obstacles. The creative force that transports two beings through a flowery field, carpeted with roses—and sometimes thorns—but where we find happiness always.

Is it not the case that the whole universe is converted into an Eden when two beings love each other?

His wife also—despite her relative knowledge—sympathizes with our ideas. When it came to it, she gave proofs of her contempt for the hired killers of the bourgeois order as the police began to pursue my friend. That was how the wife of my comrade and I have become friends. She is fully aware of what the man who lived at her side represents to me. The feeling of fraternal affection that existed between them permitted him to confide in her. And he gave her freedom to act as she desired, in the manner of any conscientious anarchist. Until this moment, to tell the truth, we have lived really like in a novel. Our love became every day more intense. We cannot live altogether in common, given the political situation of my friend, and the fact that I have still not finished my studies. We meet, when we can, in different places. Isn't that perhaps the best way to sublimate love, distancing it from the preoccupations of domestic life? Although I am sure that when it is true love, the most beautiful thing is to live together.

This is what I wanted to explain. Some people here have turned into judges. And these are not to be found so much among common people but in fact among comrades of ideas who see themselves as free of prejudices but who, at bottom, are intolerant. One of these says that our love is a madness; another indicates that the wife of my friend is playing the role of "martyr," despite the fact that she is aware of everything that concerns us, is the ruler of her own person, and enjoys her freedom. A third raises the ridiculous economic obstacle. I am independent, just as is my friend. In all probability, I will create a personal economic situation for myself that will free me from all worries in this sense.

Also, the question of the children. What do the children have to do with the feelings of our hearts? Why can't a man who has children love? It is as if to say that the father of a family cannot work for the idea, do propaganda, etc. What makes them believe that those little beings will be forgotten because their father loves me? If the father were to forget his children, he would deserve my contempt and there would exist no more love between us.

Here, in Buenos Aires, certain comrades have a truly meager idea of free love. They imagine that it consists only in cohabiting without being legally married and, meanwhile, in their own homes they carry on practicing all the stupidities and prejudices of ignorant people. This type of union that ignores the civil registrar and the priest also exists in bourgeois society. Is that free love?

Finally, they criticize our difference in age. Just because I am 16 and my friend is 26. Some accuse me of running a commercial operation; others describe me as unwitting. Ah, these pontiffs of anarchism! Making the question of age interfere with love! As if the fact that a brain reasons is not enough for a person to be responsible for their actions! On the other hand, it is my own problem, and if the difference in age means nothing to me, why should it matter to anyone else? That which I cherish and love is youth of the spirit, which is eternal.

There are also those who treat us as degenerates or sick people and other labels of this kind. To all these I say: why? Because we live life in its true sense, because we recognize a free cult of love? Because, just like the birds that bring joy to walkways

and gardens, we love without paying any attention to codes or false morals? Because we are faithful to our ideas? I disdain all those who cannot understand what it is to know how to love.

True love is pure. It is the sun whose rays stretch to those who cannot climb to the heights. Life is something we have to live freely. We accord to beauty, to the pleasures of the spirit, to love, the veneration that they deserve.

This is all, comrade. I would like to have your opinion on my case. I know very well what I am doing and I don't need to be approved or applauded. Just that, having read many of your articles and agreeing with various points of view, it would make me content to know your opinion.

Her letter was printed in *L'en dehors* on January 20, 1929 under the title "An Experience." Émile Armand printed his answer alongside it:

"Comrade: My opinion matters little in this matter you send me about what you are doing. Are you or are you not intimately in accord with your personal conception of the anarchist life? If you are, then ignore the comments and insults of others and carry on following your own path. No one has the right to judge your way of conducting yourself, even if it were the case that your friend's wife be hostile to these relations. Every person united to an anarchist (or vice versa), knows very well that she should not exercise on him, or accept from him, domination of any kind."

The lover that the 16-year-old América Scarfó refers to in this letter was, of course, the anarchist Severino di Giovanni, Argentina's most wanted criminal. When she sent this letter, he was living underground, accused of carrying out a string of bombings targeting the Italian Consulate, the US embassy, the Ford Motor Company, and a monument to George Washington, among other targets. By the time he was captured in January 1931—along with América and her brother Paulino—he was also accused of the most dramatic robbery in contemporary Argentine history and the shootings of various police officers.

At that point, a military coup had taken place in Argentina, Hitler was headed for power in Germany, and the whole world seemed to be sliding rapidly towards fascism. In such a context, we can understand Severino's actions as a rational attempt to carry out much-needed revolutionary measures on the terrain that was available to him, just as he and América were doing in their romantic relationship.

When the police captured Severino, they rushed him to a doctor to treat his wounds, so as to be sure he would die at precisely the hour they decreed, after the proper show trial. The police reportedly tortured Severino, but none of the arrestees cooperated with the state by informing against their fellows. After the trial, Severino's lawyer was arrested, dismissed from his post in the armed forces, imprisoned, and deported.

The novelist Roberto Arlt witnessed the scene of Severino's execution:

He looks stiffly at his executors. He emanates will. Whether he suffers or not, it is a secret. But he remains like this, static, proud.

Only after the execution did they call over a blacksmith to unfasten his fetters—and another doctor, this time to make sure he was dead. Then they executed Paulino Scarfó, too, for good measure.

They had released América, deeming her unfit to stand trial on account of her age.

On July 28, 1999, after 68 years, the Argentine government finally returned Severino di Giovanni's letters to América Scarfó. América passed away on August 26, 2006 at the age of 93. Her ashes were buried in the garden beside the headquarters of the Argentine Libertarian Federation in Buenos Aires.

There are many different risks to loving fiercely and outside the prescribed lines. Perhaps the only thing worse than these terrifying risks is the deadly certainty that comes of not daring to love.

“For us, love is a passion that engenders tragedies for itself.”

-Errico Malatesta, “Love and Anarchy”

Further Reading and Viewing

- Anarchist Individualism and Amorous Comradeship, Émile Armand
- *The Knights Errant of Anarchy: London and the Italian Anarchist Diaspora (1880–1917)*, Pietro di Paola
- *Anarchism and Violence: Severino di Giovanni in Argentina, 1923–1931*, Osvaldo Bayer

Daiana Rosenfeld and Anibal Garisto have produced a documentary about América Scarfó's relationship with Severino di Giovanni entitled *Los ojos de América* (“The Eyes of América”).

“Women almost everywhere are slaves, and we ourselves are the slaves of their bondage; without their liberation, without their complete, unlimited freedom, our freedom is impossible.”

—Mikhail Bakunin, writing in 1845, decades before he became an anarchist or there was anything like an anarchist movement.³

³ In utilizing the slavery metaphor, Bakunin was speaking from the perspective of a Russian who grew up in a country that was still thoroughly based in serfdom. For him, speaking of women's condition as slavery wasn't a metaphor comparing race with gender, but rather a matter of equating different forms of bondage. ☒

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