

# INTERSECTIONAL DISCOURSE IN DOLEN PERKINS-VALDEZ'S *WENCH*

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## Résumé

*Les récits néo-esclavagistes, depuis leur résurgence dans les années 1960 jusqu'aux évolutions post-MeToo, contestent les histoires officielles de l'esclavage, mais les oppressions sexuelles et sexistes combinées subies par les femmes noires esclaves restent sous-explorées (Nash 2020 ; Rushdy 1999). *Wench* (2010) de Dolen Perkins-Valdez comble cette lacune en fictionnalisant l'histoire de la Tawawa House dans l'Ohio, où les hommes blancs du Sud passaient leurs vacances avec des concubines noires, comme un microcosme satirique des oppressions raciales, sexuelles, de classe et de genre qui se croisent dans la mixité raciale. À travers une lecture attentive des protagonistes Lizzie, Reenie, Sweet et Mawu (pp. 7-215), croisée avec les codes esclavagistes (Stroud 1827) et les cadres féministes noirs (Crenshaw 1989 ; Collins 2020), cet article révèle comment les « modèles familiaux » patriarcaux caricaturent les victimisations : séparations raciales, vulnérabilités au viol liées au genre, concubinage coercitif, « amour » sur fond de mixité raciale, hypocrisie opulente de Tawawa House et complots d'évasion provocateurs. *Wench* restaure des histoires occultées, validant le pouvoir « supérieur à la somme » de l'intersectionnalité (Crenshaw 140) dans le discours antipatriarcal du XXIe siècle.*

**Mots-clés :** *récit néo-esclavagiste, intersectionnalité, patriarcat, mixité raciale, Tawawa House*

## Abstract

*Neo-slave narratives, from their 1960s resurgence to post-MeToo evolutions, contest official slavery histories, yet enslaved Black women's compounded sexual-gendered oppressions remain underexplored (Nash 2020; Rushdy 1999). Dolen Perkins-Valdez's *Wench* (2010) fills this gap, fictionalizing Ohio's historical Tawawa House, where white Southern men vacationed with Black concubines, as a satirical microcosm of miscegenation's intersecting race, gender, class, and sexuality oppressions. Through close reading of protagonists Lizzie, Reenie, Sweet, and Mawu, cross-referenced with slave codes (Stroud 1827) and updated Black feminist frameworks (Crenshaw 1989; Collins 2020), this paper reveals how patriarchal « family models » caricature victimizations: racial chattel separations, gendered rape vulnerabilities, coercive concubinage, miscegenated « love, » Tawawa's opulent hypocrisy, and defiant escape plots. *Wench* restores obscured histories, validating intersectionality's « greater-than-sum » power (Crenshaw 140) in 21st-century antipatriarchal discourse.*

**Keywords:** *neo-slave narrative, intersectionality, patriarchy, miscegenation, Tawawa House*

## Introduction

The transatlantic slave trade and chattel slavery remain pivotal traumas in African American literature, evolving from antebellum slave narratives to their resurgence as neo-slave narratives in the 1960s amid civil rights struggles. While scholars like Ashraf Rushdy (1999) have mapped this genre's contestation of official histories, recent post-MeToo and Black Lives Matter discourses highlight a critical gap: the under-exploration of enslaved Black women's intersecting sexual and gendered oppressions, as noted by Jennifer Nash (2020) in her reimagining of Black feminism beyond singular axes of race or sex. Dolen Perkins-Valdez's *Wench* (2010) addresses this gap, drawing on the historical Tawawa House resort, a real pre-Civil War site in Ohio where white Southern men vacationed with Black concubines, to unveil miscegenation as a nexus of race, gender, class, and sexuality.

Set in antebellum America, *Wench* chronicles four enslaved women: Lizzie, Reenie, Sweet, and Mawu, who accompany their white masters to Tawawa House each summer. Lizzie, groomed by Nathan Drayle from age thirteen and mother to his children by sixteen, embodies conflicted internalization of patriarchal bonds, ultimately betraying her peers' escape plan to safeguard her sons' potential freedom. Their stories expose economic exploitation, domestic servitude, racial dehumanization, and sexual objectification, aligning with Christine Delphy's (1998) view of patriarchal production as compounding capitalist modes. This narrative innovation builds on neo-slave precedents like Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred* (1979), yet uniquely satirizes planter leisure as a microcosm of intersecting oppressions, per Rushdy's definition of the genre as novels assuming « the form, conventions, and first-person voice of the antebellum slave narrative » (3).

Contemporary theorists like Patricia Hill Collins (2020) extend Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) foundational intersectional metaphor: discriminations converging like traffic at a crossroads, to include transgenerational trauma and neo-slavery sexual politics, framing *Wench* as a vital intervention. Recent scholarship, including Jennifer Nash (2020) and Brittney Cooper (2018), critiques earlier waves for marginalizing Black women's sexual agency under slavery, urging analyses that capture « the greater-than-sum » of oppressions (Crenshaw 140). *Wench* responds by restoring hidden histories distorted by patriarchal historiography, as

Crenshaw (2019) insists: « the story isn't complete unless we're talking about the way slavery impacted Black women. »

This paper examines how Perkins-Valdez deploys intersectionality and Black feminist criticism to revisit enslaved women's victimization in *Wench*, revealing patriarchy's concealed mechanisms through miscegenation. Through close reading of key episodes like Tawawa House dynamics, informed by slave codes (Stroud 1827) and Collins's matrix of domination (2020), it argues that the novel's satirical caricature of planter-mistress « family models » validates antipatriarchal discourse in 21st-century neo-slave narratives.

This study employs intersectional textual analysis, blending Crenshaw's (1989) framework with Collins's (2020) updated matrix. The corpus centers on *Wench*'s Tawawa arcs, cross-referenced with primary slave laws and comparative neo-slave texts (Rushdy 1999 ; Butler 1979).

The analysis unfolds in three chapters: the first elucidates feminist theories of patriarchy and intersectionality, incorporating recent evolutions (Nash 2020; Cooper 2018); the second dissects the wench's racial, gendered, and classed victimizations; the third unveils Tawawa House as a patriarchal caricature, from miscegenated « love » to defiant escape.

## **1. Feminist Perceptions of Patriarchy and Intersectionality**

This chapter establishes the theoretical foundation for analyzing *Wench* through Black feminist lenses, integrating foundational concepts with recent scholarship. It defines patriarchy as systemic male domination intertwined with capitalism and class, then traces intersectionality's evolution from Crenshaw's (1989) seminal framework to contemporary expansions by Collins (2020) and Nash (2020), who emphasize transgenerational sexual trauma in neo-slave contexts. These tools illuminate how white male enslavers in *Wench* embodied intersecting oppressions, distorting enslaved Black women's histories.

### ***1.1 Feminist Approaches to Patriarchy***

Patriarchy, conventionally the male-headed family structure, is reframed by feminists as institutionalized male supremacy, the primary barrier to gender equity and the core enemy in antipatriarchal struggle. Lois Tyson (2006) synthesizes this: « Women are oppressed by patriarchy

economically, politically, socially, and psychologically; patriarchal ideology is the primary means by which they are kept so... In every domain where patriarchy reigns, woman is 'other', she is objectified and marginalized » (Tyson, 2006: 91). From a Marxist-feminist perspective, patriarchy sustains elite male power as ideology, embedding sexism and capitalist exploitation across labor spheres.

Heidi Hartmann (1981) refines this as « a set of social relations between men which have a material base, and which, though hierarchical, establish... interdependence and solidarity among men that enable them to dominate women » (Hartmann, 1981 :14). Recent theorists like Sylvia Walby (2023) underscore its intersections with neoliberal capitalism, where gendered domestic labor, evident in *Wench's* wenches performing unpaid chores, compounds wage exploitation. In slavery's context, white male planters like Nathan Drayle epitomize patriarchs, relegating white wives, for instance, Fran Drayle to passivity akin to enslaved mistresses. Fran endures Nathan's dominance much as Lizzie does, highlighting patriarchy's universal reach. Walby (1989 and 2022) notes the « symbiotic » class-patriarchy bond, where enslavers' economic control via chattel codes fueled racialized gender prejudices. Thus, patriarchy in *Wench* emerges not as isolated family tyranny but as a matrix priming Black women for intersectional erasure, paving the way for Crenshaw's framework.

### ***1.2 Black Feminist Conceptions of Intersectionality***

Black feminists posit that Black women endure oppressions not additively but simultaneously, a insight Barbara Smith (2000) deems Black feminism's « most significant ideological contribution », « The concept of the simultaneity of oppression is still the crux of a Black feminist understanding of political reality » (Smith, 2000: 6-7). This exceeds racism and sexism binaries, encompassing class, sexuality, and more, positioning Black women at oppressive « intersections. »

Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) traffic analogy crystallizes this: Discrimination flows « like traffic through an intersection... If a Black woman is harmed... her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination... [or] occurred simultaneously » (Crenshaw, 1989 :143). Far from novel, it echoes slavery-era lexicon, « interlocking oppressions, » « double/triple jeopardy » (S. Smith 2021), but Crenshaw insists its « greater-than-sum » nature demands holistic analysis: « Any

analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated » (Crenshaw, 1989 : 140).

Contemporary evolutions enrich this for neo-slave studies. Patricia Hill Collins (2020) updates her matrix of domination to include « transgenerational domains, » where slavery's sexual traumas reverberate in fiction like *Wench*, framing Lizzie's grooming as inherited violation. Jennifer Nash (2020) critiques intersectionality's « afterlife », urging focus on Black women's sexual agency under duress, as Mawu's defiance exemplifies. Brittney Cooper (2018) extends to « erotic subjectivity », analyzing miscegenation not as victimhood alone but contested power. In *Wench*, these lenses dissect the wench's Tawawa House entrapment: racial property status, gendered sexual access, classed disability converge, rendering singular oppressions inadequate.

### ***1.3 Intersectionality and Patriarchy in the Slavery Era***

Feminists conceptualize patriarchy as male supremacy operationalized through intersecting oppressions, race, gender, sexuality, class, where men dominate and women are subjugated. In U.S. slavery, white male enslavers wielded absolute control, codified in slave laws that dehumanized all Blacks as chattel: « The slave, being himself a property, can own no property. He may labor fifteen hours a day, but he acquires nothing from his labor » (Jay, 1835: 131). Marriage was invalidated : « No slave can commit bigamy, because the law knows no more of the marriage of slaves than... of brutes » (Jay, 1835 : 132), facilitating sales that shattered families, with women suffering disproportionately as bearers and nurturers of children sold away. Female slaves faced acute disposability: « The slave... is at all times liable to be sold absolutely... at the will of his master » (Stroud, 1827 : 33), absent protections against parental separation except in Louisiana.

Recent scholarship contextualizes this for neo-slave narratives. Collins (2020) maps slavery's « matrix » onto transgenerational codes, where *partus sequitur ventrem* (children inherit mother's slave status) perpetuated racial-gendered control, evident in *Wench*'s light-skinned offspring. Nash (2020) highlights sexual codification as « racial terror » amplifying Crenshaw's (1989) rape analysis: Black women's bodies were unprotected sites of domination, judicially invisible. In *Wench*, this nexus manifests vividly. Lizzie, Drayle's favored concubine, begs manumission

for sons Nate and Rabbit, her « privilege » illusory amid property threats: Drayle asserts: « He is still my son, and so my rightful property » (Valdez-Perkins, 2010: 284). Sweet's cholera-separated children « his own flesh and blood [...] like most property they could be replaced » (185), expose kinship's commodification. Reenie endures incest with her white half-brother; Mawu, brutalized by Tip, witnesses her children's puppy-like sale. Even Drayle's wife Fran mirrors this hierarchy, subordinated like the wench.

Walby (2022 ) and Cooper (2018) frame these as « patriarchal public patriarchates, » where slave resorts like Tawawa extended plantation control into leisure, blending economic and sexual exploitation (Delphy 1998). Thus, *Wench* restores obscured realities: Black women as triply oppressed : Black, female, enslaved via codes that naturalized white male supremacy, priming analysis of the wench's specific victimizations.

## **2. Intersectional Victimization of Enslaved Black Wench**

This chapter applies theoretical matrix: patriarchy as male supremacy (Tyson 2006; Hartmann 1981; Walby 2022) intersecting with Crenshaw's (1989) framework, updated by Collins (2020) and Nash (2020) to *Wench*'s protagonists. Through close reading of Tawawa House episodes cross-referenced with slave codes (Stroud 1827; Jay 1835), it dissects racial bondage, gendered vulnerabilities, and concubinage as converging oppressions. These exceed additive harms, embodying the « greater-than-sum » dynamic (Crenshaw 1989: 140) that neo-slave narratives like *Wench* restore from patriarchal erasure.

### ***2.1 Bondage on a Racial Basis***

Perkins-Valdez prefaces *Wench* with the term's historical valence : « wench » as « a black or colored female servant—a negress or mulatress » (United States, 1812-1832), enshrining Black women in pre-1865 codes of hereditary enslavement: « All negroes... shall serve durante vita and all children born of any negro... shall be slaves as their fathers were » (Stroud 1827, 1). As racialized chattel, they were vendible property, their Blackness scripting perpetual disposability for profit. This dehumanization erupts in Tip's rage at Mawu's defiance: « Goddamnit, that's my property! » (Perkins-Valdez, 2010: 53). Drayle echoes to Lizzie: « You are just a woman and, on top of that, nothing but

a black slave woman » (Perkins-Valdez, 2010: 215), claiming their sons Nate and Rabbit as « my son, and so my rightful property » (284). The cholera crisis lays bare the economic calculus: Sweet beseeches her master for their children, yet « for white men there was no such thing as separating the two. They were his children, yes. But they were also his property. And like most property they could be replaced » (185). Familial rupture was routine, mothers disproportionately ravaged.

Collins (2020) conceptualizes this as « racial matrixing », where color encoded vulnerability across generations via *partus sequitur ventrem*, priming Black women for gendered intensifications at Tawawa House. Racial bondage thus forms the foundational oppression, rendering the wenches legally invisible and economically expendable.

## ***2.2 Gendered Vulnerability as Female Slaves***

Slave codes imposed universal chattel status, but Black women endured compounded sexist oppressions, as Crenshaw (1989) analyzes: « When Black women were raped by white males, they were being raped not as women generally, but as Black women specifically. Their femaleness made them sexually vulnerable to racist domination, while their Blackness effectively denied them any protection » (Crenshaw, 1989 : 158). Judicial systems rendered white-on-Black rape « virtually unthinkable », blending sexist chastity ideals with racist promiscuity tropes, erasing Black women's recourse.

In *Wench*, this intersectional terror devastates: Sweet's cholera-induced child separation, her pleas ignored spirals into grief-fueled madness and death, her motherhood weaponized against her. Reenie carries intergenerational incest trauma: « Sirs daddy took my own mammy before she got her first blood... the missus had my ma whipped... No longer after, my ma disappeared » (Perkins-Valdez, 2010: 57), her plantation kin fragmented by punitive sales. Mawu withstands Tip's relentless brutality, her light-skinned children's sale like « puppies », fueling unyielding defiance. Lizzie, groomed from age thirteen into « love », internalizes violation, her freedom pleas for sons Nate and Rabbit rebuffed by Drayle's property claims.

Nash (2020) terms these « erotic afterlives of slavery », where femaleness escalated racial bondage into transgenerational wounds, sidelined by mainstream feminism or anti-racism. Collins's (2020) updated matrix

reveals how gendered vulnerability amplified racial disposability, forming an inescapable net at Tawawa House.

### ***2.3 Concubinage and the Status of Black Mistresses***

Concubinage represents the matrix's zenith, merging racial ownership, gendered sexual terror, and classed subjugation into a veneer of « mistress » privilege that Perkins-Valdez skewers. At Tawawa House, the wenches serve as sexualized vacation companions, their bodies commodified leisure. Lizzie's bond with Drayle, initiated at thirteen, yielding children by sixteen, offers illusory status; her manumission begging underscores entrapment: affection masks absolute property rights.

Reenie's incest with her white half-brother profanes kinship, light skin no bulwark; Sweet's serial pregnancies prioritize master's reproduction over her maternity; Mawu's rejection provokes escalated violence, her rebellion exposing coercion's core. Slave codes enabled this asymmetry, voiding Black marriages while granting white men impunity (Jay, 1835 : 132).

Cooper (2018) frames concubinage as « erotic coercion » blending victimhood with glimmers of agency in reference to Mawu's plots for instance, while Collins (2020) traces its transgenerational echoes in *partus sequitur ventrem*. Crenshaw's (1989) « greater-than-sum » logic unveils concubinage as uniquely devastating (140), neither mere rape nor ownership alone, but slavery's hidden reproductive engine. *Wench* thus restores Black mistresses from patriarchal myth-making, and satirical unmasking of Tawawa's « family » parody.

### **3. Derogatory Caricature of the Patriarchal Environment in *Wench***

This chapter culminates the analysis by unveiling Perkins-Valdez's satirical caricature of patriarchy in *Wench*, portraying miscegenation as a grotesque « family model » between white masters and enslaved mistresses. Building on (Crenshaw 1989; Collins 2020; Nash 2020), it dissects Drayle-Lizzie's perverse « love » Tawawa House as opulent hypocrisy, and Mawu's escape as insurgent agency. This satire validates antipatriarchal discourse, echoing radical (Firestone 1970), Black (hooks 1989), and lesbian (Rich 1980) critiques of heteronormative domination,

while affirming neo-slave narratives' historiographical power (Rushdy 1999).

### ***3.1 Love in Miscegenation: The Drayle-Lizzie Dynamic***

Perkins-Valdez skewers miscegenation's romantic myth, caricaturing Drayle and Lizzie's bond as coercive paternalism masquerading as affection, a prototype of the family model radical feminists decry. Groomed from age thirteen, Lizzie bears Nate and Rabbit by sixteen, internalizing abuse as devotion: « had loved him since she was a girl » (Perkins-Valdez, 2010: 215). Yet Drayle's retort shatters the illusion: « He is still my son, and so my rightful property » (284), fusing kinship with chattel via *partus sequitur ventrem*.

Patricia Hill Collins (2020) deems such dynamics « controlling images » hypersexualizing Black women, perpetuating transgenerational violation. bell hooks (1989) critiques, interracial « love » as evading white supremacist accountability, mirroring Drayle's gifts (silks, privileges) that bind Lizzie through dependency. Shulamith Firestone (1970) exposes this as « biological tyranny », where master's paternity enforces servitude, akin to marriage norms. Lizzie's betrayal of Mawu's escape, prioritizing Drayle's « family » over solidarity, crystallizes intersectionality's trap: racial enslavement, gendered grooming, classed complicity (Crenshaw 1989: 140).

Nash (2020) highlights Lizzie's conflicted agency, her pleas humanizing the caricature without absolving patriarchy. Thus, this miscegenated « love » satirizes the wenches' victimizations, restoring obscured emotional architectures of slavery through biting irony.

### ***3.2 Tawawa House as Symbol of Southern Bondwomen's Oppression***

Tawawa House stands as *Wench's* satirical centerpiece, a resort symbolizing patriarchy's obscene leisure built on Black women's suffering, a historical inversion of Ohio's Tawawa Springs, where white Southern men paraded Black concubines pre-Civil War. Perkins-Valdez transforms it into a microcosm of planter society : masters lounge, gamble, and fornicate while wenches toil invisibly in domestic and sexual labor. « The house was full of white men and their colored women » (Perkins-Valdez, 2010: 7), Reenie notes wryly, exposing the facade of benevolent vacation.

This caricature intensifies intersecting oppressions : race as servitude, gender as spectacle, class as disposability. Sweet's breakdown amid festivities « wondering if he cared that these were his children, too » (185) contrasts revelry with maternal agony, embodying Delphy's (1998) patriarchal domestic production layered atop capitalism. Adrienne Rich's (1980) « compulsory heterosexuality » illuminates enforced bonds, casting masters as patriarchal husbands and wenches as docile wives in radical feminists' denounced family prototype (Firestone 1970). Tawawa banalizes slavery's evil, its opulence mocking bondwomen's traumas. Mawu's subversive songs and plots disrupt this, embodying Collins's (2020) « outsider-within » resistance. Nash (2020) reads such spaces as « erotic afterlives », where leisure veils racial terror. Thus, Tawawa caricatures patriarchy's public face, validating neo-slave satire as historiographical corrective (Rushdy 1999).

### ***3.3 Escape as symbolic emancipation from patriarchy***

Mawu's audacious escape plot climaxes *Wench's* satire, caricaturing patriarchal control as brittle against Black women's agency. Rallying Reenie, Sweet, and initially Lizzie with subversive chants, Mawu, brutalized by Tip, her light-skinned children sold like « puppies », embodies insurgent refusal. Betrayed by Lizzie's fealty to Drayle, her flight nonetheless symbolizes emancipation, parodying the master-mistress « family » as possessive marriage.

bell hooks (1989) frames this as « talking back » to white supremacist patriarchy; Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979) parallels via time-travel insurgency. Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents* (1861) prefigures Mawu's defiance, hiding years for freedom. Firestone (1970) and Rich (1980) decry this model as biological/heteronormative tyranny; Mawu's rebellion exposes its fragility.

Crenshaw's (1989) intersectionality reveals multidimensional stakes, race demands flight from chattel, gender from rape, class from servitude (140). Though thwarted, it restores obscured resistance, echoing Collins's (2020) transgenerational matrix. *Wench* thus affirms antipatriarchal discourse, priming the conclusion's broader implications.

## Conclusion

Dolen Perkins-Valdez's *Wench* (2010) exemplifies neo-slave narratives' power to reclaim enslaved Black women's histories through intersectional and antipatriarchal discourse, addressing the historiographical gaps Rushdy (1999) identified while engaging post-MeToo evolutions (Nash 2020). Chapter 1 established patriarchy as systemic male domination (Tyson 2006; Hartmann 1981; Walby 2022) intersecting with Crenshaw's (1989) framework, enriched by Collins (2020) and Cooper (2018) for transgenerational sexual politics. Chapter 2 dissected the wench's victimizations, racial chattel enabling separations (Stroud, 1827), gendered rape vulnerabilities (Crenshaw, 1989), and concubinage's coercive « privilege » (Nash 2020) as converging oppressions exceeding singular analyses.

Chapter 3's satire crescendo unmasked patriarchy's absurdities: Drayle-Lizzie's miscegenated « love » as biological tyranny (Firestone 1970), Tawawa House's opulent hypocrisy enforcing compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1980), and Mawu's thwarted escape as « talking back » agency (hooks 1989). These restore what slave codes and historiography obscured: Black bondwomen as complex agents amid race-gender-class erasure (Collins 2020).

Beyond revisionism, *Wench* weaponizes caricature : « still my son... my rightful property » (Perkins-Valdez, 2010: 284); children « replaced like most property » (185), bridging Antebellum traumas to contemporary reckonings like #MeToo and BLM. Perkins-Valdez thus, ignites feminist fire against persistent oppressions, validating the genre's 21st-century urgency.

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