6 A Vicious Circle of Violence: Revisiting Jamaican Slavery in Marlon James's *The Book of Night Women* (2009)

INTRODUCTION

"I am more interested in darker subjects than brighter ones," the Jamaican author Marlon James contends in a 2006 interview, "because somewhere in that shadow is a story."[1] Highlighting the extreme brutality of slavery and British colonial rule in late eighteenth-century Jamaica, his prize-winning novel *The Book of Night Women* (2009) explores one of the darkest and most painful chapters of Caribbean and modern transatlantic history. Set between 1784 and 1801, James's text focuses on the fate of Lilith, the daughter of a slave woman—who dies giving birth to her child—and a tyrannical and sadistic white overseer, Jack Wilkins.

Growing up on Montpelier Estate, a large sugar plantation in eastern Jamaica, Lilith is constantly faced with cruel and gratuitous acts of violence committed not only by her white owners but also by fellow male slaves: As a fourteen-year-old girl, she is attacked and humiliated by a black overseer who tries to rape her; in an act of self-defense, she kills the man. This incident attracts the attention of the night women, a group of female slaves who secretly meet at night to prepare an uprising against their brutal oppressors. Homer, the rebel's leader, invites Lilith to take part in their conspiracy. However, the young black woman is sent to another estate, where she is again confronted with scenes of incredible horror. After witnessing her friend's murder, Lilith kills her master and his family, sets the house on fire and returns to Montpelier, where the night women start a massive but unsuccessful slave revolt. As becomes appar-

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1 | Felicia Pride, "What Does It Take? An Interview with Marlon James (2006)," *To Create: Black Writers, Filmmakers, Storytellers, Artists, and Media-Makers Riff on Art, Careers, Life, and the Beautiful Mess in Between* (Chicago: Agathe Publishing, 2012) E-book. n. pag.

ent in a short metafictional passage at the end of the novel, the story is told from the perspective of Lilith's daughter.

The Book of Night Women deals with a variety of themes: the slaves' experience of being trapped in a vicious circle of oppression, counter-violence and retaliation; the brutalizing effects of slavery; intra-black violence and the slave woman's misery; the (potentially) transformative, yet also destructive power of black (counter-)violence.

Like Hill's *The Book of Negroes*, James's neo-slave narrative has received widespread critical acclaim as well as several prestigious awards, including, most notably, the 2010 Dayton Literary Peace Prize for Fiction. In reviews, *The Book of Night Women* has been enthusiastically hailed for its exploration of the complex history of slavery and white colonial rule in Jamaica, its attempt to capture the horrific violence of eighteenth-century plantation life, its vivid depiction of a strong black female protagonist as well as its artistic use of Jamaican patois.[2] However, there are also critical discussions of James's narrative approach: For instance, in a 2009 review for the *Los Angeles Times*, Susan Straight points out that "the novel can be unrelentingly violent, and the litany of terror, torture and revenge is long and horrifically detailed."[3]

Drawing on the work of black feminist critics such as Deborah E. McDowell, Angela Davis and Hartman, I will argue in this chapter that James's novel exposes the enslaved to a further act of violence[4] by presenting the (female) slave's experience of humiliation and sexual exploitation in an explicit, even pornographic, way. Unlike neo-slave narratives like Morrison's *A Mercy*, Hartman's *Lose Your Mother* and Christiansë's *Unconfessed, The Book of Night Women* offers no reflection whatsoever on the risks inherent in writing about slavery's violence. Rather, James's detailed renderings of acts of torture and execution "reinforce the spectacular character of black suffering,"[5] to use Hart-

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2 | See Kaiama L. Glover, "Womanchild in the Oppressive Land," *New York Times Book Review* 26 Feb. 2009, 20 Feb. 2015 http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/01/books/review/Glover-t.html; Suzanne Marie Hopcroft, "A Heartbreaking History," *Small Axe Salon* 27 Oct. 2010, 20 Feb. 2015 http://smallaxe.net/wordpress3/reviews/category/contributor/suzanne-hopcroft/; Michiko Kakutani, "Jamaica via a Sea of Voices: Marlon James's 'A Brief History of Seven Killings,'" *New York Times* 21 Sept. 2014, 20 Feb. 2015 http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/22/books/marlon-jamess-a-brief-history-of-seven-killings.html?_r=0.

3 | Susan Straight, "'The Book of Night Women' by Marlon James," *Los Angeles Times* 8 Mar. 2009, 20 Feb. 2015 http://articles.latimes.com/2009/mar/08/entertainment/ca-marlon-james8.

4 | See Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts" 5.

5 | Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection* 3.

man's phrase from her 1997 study *Scenes of Subjection*, and, thus, potentially satisfy a reader's desire for violent entertainment.

This chapter opens with a short historical overview of slavery in (late) eighteenth-century Jamaica, focusing particularly on the (female) slaves' various forms of resistance to European rule; a theme that plays a crucial role in *The Book of Night Women*. In a next step, I will argue that one of the novel's main goals is to explore the intricate relations between masters, overseers, slaves and maroons in the "diaspora space" of eighteenth-century Jamaica and to highlight the slave woman's vulnerability to (sexual) abuse by both black and white men. As this chapter will demonstrate, *The Book of Night Women* examines different forms of black agency and resistance, yet ultimately directs our attention to the impossibility to break free from the chains of bondage and to escape racial violence. Focusing on James's conceptualization of counter-violence, I will show that *The Book of Night Women* enters into a dynamic intertextual relationship with Frantz Fanon's work as well as with African American male literary texts, in particular with Richard Wright's famous novel *Native Son* (1940). In a way similar to Wright, James explores both the liberating effect of violence on oppressed subjects and the disruptive nature of violent action. Throughout this chapter, I will offer a critical examination of James's narrative and aesthetic strategies and his theoretical reflections on slavery.

MASTERS, SLAVES AND BLACK RESISTANCE IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY JAMAICA

In his 1999 essay "Slavery and Emancipation in Caribbean History," the historian Francisco A. Scarano draws our attention to the centrality of slavery to Caribbean historiography, arguing that the enormous scholarly and popular interest in this topic "clearly mirrors the institution's overall historical significance and weight:"[6]

For nearly four centuries after the European conquest, the vast majority of the Caribbean's residents were slaves. Even now […] possibly more than half of the region's inhabitants are descended from these enslaved people. Moreover, the *quality* of the human experiences involved amply justifies slavery's centrality in historical writings about the region. The chattel slaves of the Caribbean and elsewhere endured an extreme victimization. By contemporary standards of civil and human rights, the bondage to which so

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6 | Francisco A. Scarano, "Slavery and Emancipation in Caribbean History," *General History of the Caribbean: Methodology and Historiography of the Caribbean*, ed. B. W. Higman, vol. VI (London: Unesco Publishing, 1999) 233.

many people were subject was bizarre, as were the societies that were built upon the institution.[7]

Over the last decades, especially since the 1970s, numerous scholars have turned their attention to exploring the past of slavery and its enduring legacy in the Caribbean, in general, and Jamaica, in particular. Recent scholarship by historians such as Vincent Brown, Trevor Burnard, Barbara Bush, Demetrius L. Eudell, Herbert S. Klein and Ben Vinson III focuses on a variety of topics, including economic and social dimensions as well as comparative aspects of slavery; the complexity of black family life under Caribbean slavery; the specific experiences of slave women; slave resistance and rebellions; the history of maroons; European immigration into the Caribbean; and the emancipation process in the Caribbean and other parts of the Americas.[8] In the following, I will particularly shed light on the subject of black resistance in eighteenth-century Jamaica.

As scholars like Brown and Burnard point out, during the second half of the eighteenth century, when the sugar boom was at its height, Jamaica became Britain's most valuable and profitable colony, attracting thousands of white European immigrants and sojourners. Most of these newcomers to the West Indies were free young Englishmen, especially from urban areas, driven by the desire to gain influence and power, to make a fortune as soon as possible and then to return home to Europe as absentee planters. In Jamaica, Europeans worked as merchants, (sugar) planters, traders, bookkeepers, attorneys or slave overseers, creating an extremely violent and materialistic society whose wealth was based on the systematic exploitation of African slaves.[9]

According to Burnard, eighteenth-century Jamaica was a place of economic and social opportunities for white Europeans from all social classes: "Any man with a modicum of ambition and a measure of talent was in a very strong position to acquire a fortune superior to that possible anywhere else in Britain

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7 | Ibid.; italics in the original.

8 | See, for instance, Vincent Brown, *The Reaper's Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2008); Trevor Burnard, "European Migration to Jamaica: 1655-1780," *William and Mary Quarterly* 53.4 (1996): 769-96; Barbara Bush, *Slave Women in Caribbean Society: 1650-1838* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990); Demetrius L. Eudell, *The Political Languages of Emancipation in the British Caribbean and the U.S. South* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2002); Herbert S. Klein and Ben Vinson III, *African Slavery in Latin America and the Caribbean,* 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford UP, 2007).

9 | Burnard, "European Migration to Jamaica" 789-96; Brown, *The Reaper's Garden* 13-24; Trevor Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire: Thomas Thistlewood and His Slaves in the Anglo-Jamaican World* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2004) 13-67.

and its empire (save perhaps British India)."[10] As in other European colonies in the tropics, however, the white mortality rate was incredibly high; many whites died of diseases such as malaria and yellow fever: "Through the middle decades of the eighteenth century, immigrants could not expect to survive more than thirteen years," Vincent Brown explains. "Those native-born whites (Creoles) who survived childhood were likely to die before they reached the age of forty."[11]

Nevertheless, throughout the eighteenth century, large waves of white Europeans continued to flock to Jamaica, determined to take advantage of the island's enormous economic growth. Unlike in the plantation colonies of eighteenth-century British North America, in Jamaica, native-born whites were heavily outnumbered by immigrants.[12] Significantly, numerous Jamaican plantation owners and slave masters were absentees, living in Great Britain and "visiting their West Indian estates only once or twice in their lives."[13] This had devastating effects on black and white Jamaicans alike: Absenteeism, Richard B. Sheridan contends, "tended to promote a careless, cruel, and extravagant management of plantations; it established conditions that led to slave insurrections; it drained away wealth and income that might otherwise have gone into public and private improvements."[14]

Jamaica's booming economy depended on the forced labor of large numbers of enslaved blacks: From the beginning of British rule in Jamaica in 1655 until the early nineteenth century, hundreds of thousands of black captives were violently taken from Africa, in particular from the Bight of Biafra and the Gold Coast, shipped across the Atlantic and brought to Jamaica as slaves.[15] "The result," Burnard contends, "was a slave population that grew dramatically, despite the fact that deaths constantly outnumbered births and despite exceptionally low female fertility."[16] In the middle of the eighteenth century, blacks constituted the overwhelming majority of Jamaica's population: In 1752, about 10,000 whites and more than 110,000 slaves lived in the colony. Approximately 75 percent of the slaves worked on sugar plantations, where conditions were incredibly harsh and inhumane. Suffering from malnutrition, disease and great brutality, the African captives were forced to perform arduous (and often dan-

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10 | Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire* 42; see also Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire* 38-41.

11 | Brown, *The Reaper's Garden* 17.

12 | Ibid.; see also Burnard, "European Migration to Jamaica" 791.

13 | Michael Craton, *Testing the Chains: Resistance to Slavery in the British West Indies* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1982) 36.

14 | Richard B. Sheridan, *Sugar and Slavery: An Economic History of the British West Indies* (1974; Kingston: Canoe Press, 2010) 386.

15 | Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire* 15-16; Brown, *The Reaper's Garden* 25-27.

16 | Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire* 15.

gerous) tasks, such as digging holes, cutting the cane and transporting it to the mill, cutting firewood as well as crushing and boiling the sugarcane.[17]

Living in a society in which whites were heavily outnumbered by blacks, eighteenth-century Jamaican slave masters, plantation owners and overseers were in a state of constant alert: Faced with the threat of slave rebellions, they resorted to extreme physical and psychological violence to control and intimidate their labor force. Determined to demonstrate the extent of their power, they whipped, branded, humiliated, tortured or killed their slaves in horrific ways. Female captives were especially vulnerable since, in addition to being exposed to the same dehumanizing conditions as male slaves, they became victims of sexual abuse by both white and black men, as Bush has amply documented.[18] In terms of the legal status of enslaved women and men in the British West Indies, there were crucial similarities to slavery in (eighteenth-century) mainland North America: Denied the status of human beings, "once acquired by their masters, slaves became their owner's private property, as was his horse or cow," Bush contends. "As chattel slaves, they could be sold for debts if other moveable assets were exhausted, and disposed of in accordance with the laws of inheritance of real estate."[19]

Written from a slave owner's perspective, Thomas Thistlewood's diaries give a meticulous, and highly shocking, description of slavery's violence in eighteenth-century Jamaica: In 1750, at age twenty-nine, Thistlewood left England to move to Jamaica, where he became a pen keeper, a landowner, a horticulturalist and, above all, an extremely ruthless and sadistic slave overseer and master. As Burnard explains, Thistlewood's diary entries reveal that he repeatedly raped black women and children and punished his slaves dreadfully:[20] "Thistlewood whipped slaves; rubbed salt, lemon juice, and urine into their wounds; made a slave defecate into the mouth of another slave and then gagged the unfortunate recipient of this gift; and chained slaves overnight in 'bilboes' or stocks."[21] Thistlewood's horrific crimes, Saidiya Hartman argues in "Venus in Two Acts," "offer a graphic account of the pleasures exacted from the destruc-

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17 | Klein and Vinson 56; Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire* 16-17, 181-83; Brown, *The Reaper's Garden* 52; Bush, *Slave Women in Caribbean Society* 27.

18 | Bush, *Slave Women in Caribbean Society* 8, 23-27; see also Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire* 138-271.

19 | Bush, *Slave Women in Caribbean Society* 27.

20 | Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire* 1-35; see also Brown, *The Reaper's Garden* 23; Barbara Bush, "African Caribbean Slave Mothers and Children: Traumas of Dislocation and Enslavement across the Atlantic World," *Caribbean Quarterly* 56.1/2 (2010): 80-81; Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts" 6.

21 | Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire* 150.

tion and degradation of life and, at the same time, illuminate the difficulty of recovering enslaved lives from the annihilating force of such description."[22]

Subjected to abominable conditions but unwilling to accept their fate passively, West Indian slaves employed a variety of means to challenge the white racist power structure. As in other slave societies in the Americas, forms of black resistance ranged from individual acts of sabotage, disobedience or non-cooperation to organized violent uprisings.[23] Crucially, Bush contends, female captives "had as deep a commitment to 'putting down massa' and the continuing struggle for human dignity and freedom, as any of their male counterparts."[24] Even though they knew they risked serious punishment, enslaved women attempted to run away from their plantations, tried to poison their masters, mutilated themselves or feigned illness to avoid working. They also actively participated in slave rebellions.[25] Furthermore, to their masters' dismay, many Jamaican slaves engaged in West African spiritual and religious practices such as obeah: "Practitioners of this art, of whom a significant proportion were women, were believed by the whites to wield a great influence over their fellow slaves and were hence accused of many subversive activities including incitement to revolt,"[26] Bush argues.

In Jamaica (and in other Caribbean countries), the history of black resistance against white colonial rule is closely connected with the complex story of maroons, a term used to refer to groups of escaped slaves and black freedom fighters who created semi-autonomous, defensible communities, mostly in isolated mountainous regions. Most maroon societies developed complex networks of communication; they combined African, European and indigenous (military) traditions and operated as guerrilla bands, raiding farms and plantations and generating fear and anxiety among white local residents. Throughout the early decades of the eighteenth century, Jamaican maroon communities and white settlers were engaged in constant power struggles and violent battles, resulting in staggering losses on both sides.[27]

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22 | Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts" 6.

23 | Craton 33; Bush, *Slave Women in Caribbean Society* 51-82.

24 | Bush, *Slave Women in Caribbean Society* 81-82.

25 | Ibid. 51-82.

26 | Ibid. 74. For more information about "obeah," see James D. Rice, "Obeah," *The Historical Encyclopedia of World Slavery*, ed. Junius P. Rodriguez, vol. 2 (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 1997) 477.

27 | Craton 61-87; Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire* 22-23; Isaac Curtis, "Masterless People: Maroons, Pirates, and Commoners," *The Caribbean: A History of the Region and Its Peoples*, eds. Stephan Palmié and Francisco A. Scarano (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2011) 150-52; Nicholas J. Saunders, *The Peoples of the Caribbean: An Encyclopedia*

In 1739, British colonial officials and the maroon leader Cudjoe signed a peace treaty officially ending the so-called First Maroon War (1729-1739): "By this treaty," Burnard explains, "Cudjoe and his band were granted a large free-hold property in the northwestern interior where they were to have almost sovereign rights and from which whites were excluded. They were also given rights to trade with whites."[28] In exchange, the maroons were required to assist the white authorities in suppressing slave revolts, "to help defend Jamaica against foreign invasion and return any future runaway slaves to their owners."[29] As Isaac Curtis contends, the 1739 peace treaty had devastating consequences for the enslaved population: "By employing maroons in enforcing the boundaries of the plantation, Jamaican planters eliminated the logical base of future maroon support while establishing more complete control over their own work force."[30]

In the following decades, most Jamaican maroons cooperated with the white ruling class, putting down slave revolts and catching runaway slaves. Yet, in July 1795, a violent conflict broke out between the Trelawny Town maroons, the largest Jamaican maroon group, and British troops. Known as the Second Maroon War, it lasted until March 1796, when the maroons, who were heavily outnumbered by the British, were forced to surrender. Seeking to prevent further maroon revolts, Lord Balcarres, then Governor of Jamaica, decided to banish more than five hundreds Trelawny maroons from the island: They were transported to the British colony of Nova Scotia in June 1796.[31] As James D. Lockett explains, this decision "was based on the fact that in 1783, some 1,200 former American slaves who gained their freedom by fighting on the British side during the American Revolution were taken to Nova Scotia."[32] Suffering from hunger and harsh living conditions, many of the Trelawny maroons were desperate to leave Nova Scotia. Like those black Nova Scotians who, in 1792,

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of Caribbean Archeology and Traditional Culture (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2005) 174-75.

28 | Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire* 23.

29 | Saunders, *The Peoples of the Caribbean* 175. See also Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire* 23; Curtis 158.

30 | Curtis 158.

31 | Ibid. 160; see also Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire* 145; Winks 78-80. For more information about the Second Maroon War, see Craton 211-23.

32 | James D. Lockett, "The Deportation of the Maroons of Trelawny Town to Nova Scotia, then Back to Africa," *Journal of Black Studies* 30.1 (1999): 11. See also chapter 5, "Transnational Diasporic Journeys in Lawrence Hill's *The Book of Negroes* (2007)," in this study.

had accepted the offer by the Sierra Leone Company to relocate to West Africa, hundreds of them eventually migrated to Freetown in 1800.[33]

"Jamaica was a brutal and volatile slave society, contentious and unstable in the best of times," Vincent Brown emphasizes. "Slave rebellions and conspiracies of varying magnitudes occurred almost once each decade between 1740 and 1834."[34] One of the most significant slave uprisings in eighteenth-century Jamaica was Tacky's revolt: In early April 1760, on Easter Sunday, more than fifty Coromantee slaves (Akan-speaking captives from Africa's Gold Coast) started an insurgency in St. Mary's parish, where the number of white residents was especially small. Led by a slave named Tacky, they seized weapons and gunpowder, killed several whites, set fire to the sugar canes and collected new recruits. Their goal was to put an end to British colonial rule, to drive all whites from the island and to build an independent black society. Soon, thousands of male and female slaves joined the insurgents, causing considerable panic among slaveholders and plantation owners in all parts of the island. Although Tacky was shot and decapitated shortly after the outbreak of the uprising, the slaves continued to wage a guerrilla war in western Jamaica; the rebellion was not completely suppressed until October 1761. In the course of Tacky's Revolt, approximately 500 blacks were executed, killed in fighting or committed suicide, hundreds of rebels were shipped to the Bay of Honduras and about 60 whites lost their lives.[35] As Brown explains, Jamaican planters and colonial authorities were extremely shocked and frightened, responding to the events "by tightening social control, updating their slave codes, and urging more vigilant enforcement of existing regulations."[36]

In the last decade of the eighteenth century, the Haitian Revolution shattered the world of white slave masters in the Americas in general and Jamaican slave owners in particular: In 1791, in the neighboring French colony of Saint-Domingue, where whites and free people of African descent were vastly outnumbered by (African-born) slaves, black rebels "gained control of the plain and the mountains around Le Cap, turning plantations into military camps,

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33 | See Winks 80-95; Lockett 5-14; Curtis 222; Junius P. Rodriguez, "Trelawney Town Maroons," *Encyclopedia of Slave Resistance and Rebellion*, ed. Rodgriguez. vol. 2 (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2007) 517-18.

34 | Brown, *The Reaper's Garden* 3.

35 | Craton 125-39; Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire* 170-71; Diana Paton, "Tacky's Rebellion (1760-1761)," *The Historical Encyclopedia of World Slavery*, ed. Junius P. Rodriguez, vol. 2 (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 1997) 625; Junius P. Rodriguez, "Tacky's Rebellion (1760-1761)," *Encyclopedia of Slave Resistance and Rebellion*, ed. Rodgriguez, vol. 2 (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2007) 497-98; Brown, *The Reaper's Garden* 148.

36 | Brown, *The Reaper's Garden* 148.

recruiting new followers, finding weapons, and consolidating their territorial control."[37] Led by former slaves such as Toussaint Louverture and Jean-Jacques Dessalines, the slave insurrection finally resulted in the abolition of slavery in Saint-Domingue in 1793 and the founding of Haiti, the first independent black nation in the so-called "New World," in 1804. A watershed event in modern (Western) history, the Haitian Revolution had enormous effects on black (enslaved) communities as well as on white groups in the Atlantic world and elsewhere:[38] As Iyunolu F. Osagie has argued, it "produced two narrative paradigms—that of terror among the slaveholders and of liberation among the slaves."[39]

In late December 1831, twenty-three years after the legal abolition of the transatlantic slave trade in 1808, tens of thousands of Jamaican slaves rose against their white masters, setting fire to sugar plantations and estates. The so-called "Christmas Uprising," which also became known as the "Baptist War" because many white Jamaicans believed that Baptist missionaries had been involved in the conspiracy, was one of the largest slave revolts in the history of the British West Indies.[40] Although the rebellion was violently suppressed in early January 1832, it played a significant role in the Caribbean slaves' struggle against enslavement as it "helped hasten the British Parliament to decide the monumental question of whether or not slavery should be maintained in the British colonial possessions."[41] Chattel slavery was formally abolished

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37 | Laurent Dubois, "The Haitian Revolution," *The Caribbean: A History of the Region and Its Peoples*, eds. Stephan Palmié and Francisco A. Scarano (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2011) 279.

38 | Dubois, "The Haitian Revolution" 273-87. For more information about the Haitian Revolution, see also Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2004); C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, rev. ed. (1963; New York: Vintage, 1989).

39 | Osagie 29.

40 | See Jean Besson, "Missionaries, Planters, and Slaves in the Age of Abolition," *The Caribbean: A History of the Region and Its Peoples*, eds. Stephan Palmié and Francisco A. Scarano (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2011) 321-24; Colleen A. Vasconcellos, "Abolition in Jamaica," *Encyclopedia of Emancipation and Abolition in the Transatlantic World*, ed. Junius P. Rodriguez, vol. 2 (2007; New York: Routledge, 2015) 310-12; Colleen A. Vasconcellos, "Emancipation in Jamaica," *Encyclopedia of Emancipation and Abolition in the Transatlantic World*, ed. Junius P. Rodriguez, vol. 2 (2007; New York: Routledge, 2015) 312-14; Junius P. Rodriguez, "Jamaica Rebellion (1831-1832)," *Encyclopedia of Emancipation and Abolition in the Transatlantic World*, ed. Rodriguez, vol. 2 (2007; New York: Routledge, 2015) 314-15.

41 | Rodriguez, "Jamaica Rebellion" 314.

throughout the British Empire in 1833, yet Jamaica's ex-slaves "were forced into a life of apprenticeship until their full emancipation in 1838."[42] In the years (and decades) after the passing of the Slavery Abolition Act in 1833, Jamaica's black population continued to suffer from racial oppression and discrimination as "the ex-slaveholders attempted to replicate the structure of social, cultural, and labor relations that had existed under slavery,"[43] to quote Eudell.

POWER RELATIONS AND INTRA-BLACK VIOLENCE IN *THE BOOK OF NIGHT WOMEN*

Diaspora, to paraphrase Avtar Brah and Tina M. Campt, is not only closely linked with terms and concepts like forced migration, displacement and mobility. Even more fundamentally, it also refers to experiences of arrival, settlement and dwelling as well as to intricate power struggles in specific local environments outside the original homelands.[44] As I have shown in chapter 5, Lawrence Hill's *The Book of Negroes* provides a transnational perspective on a wide variety of diasporic themes: the loss of home and family in West Africa, the forced deportation to the Americas, the impossibility of recuperating the past and going back to an ancestral village and, equally important, the practices of home-making in the diaspora.

Unlike Hill's novel, James's *The Book of Night Women* is not concerned with exploring what Marianne Hirsch and Nancy K. Miller describe as "the intensities and contradictory impulses of diasporic return."[45] Rather, James's main goal is to shed light on the complex web of relationships between masters, overseers, slaves and maroons and to examine the constitutive role of violence in the "diaspora space" of eighteenth-century Jamaica. In particular, *The Book of Night Women* focuses on what Campt and Thomas would call "the vexing tensions of difference and inequity that characterize the internal relations of diaspora."[46]

Reflecting on the heterogeneity and complexity of black life under slavery, James depicts a slave community that is marked by constant power struggles and clear hierarchical divisions between creole and African-born slaves, be-

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42 | Vasconcellos, "Abolition in Jamaica" 312.

43 | Eudell 16.

44 | Campt, *Other Germans* 7; Campt, *Image Matters* 25, 54; Brah 178-210; see also chapter 1, "The Concept of the African Diaspora and the Notion of Difference," in this study.

45 | Hirsch and Miller 4.

46 | Campt and Thomas, "Gendering Diaspora: Transnational Feminism, Diaspora and Its Hegemonies" 1.

tween black women and men as well as between house slaves, artisans, drivers, field slaves and overseers. Crucially, James particularly highlights the specific vulnerability of female slaves within this social structure: In *The Book of Night Women*, black women like Lilith are subjected to the same forms of exploitation, oppression and violence as male slaves; in addition, they become victims of sexual abuse and harassment by both white and black men. Exploring the intricate theme of intra-black violence, James participates in a powerful intertextual dialogue with slave narratives: As Diedrich has shown, many African American authors in the antebellum period deliberately and strategically avoided writing about conflicts, tensions, violence and acts of betrayal within the black community. In their attempt to fight for the end of slavery and racial oppression, one of their common objectives was to stress the slaves' moral incorruptibility, integrity and superiority over their white oppressors. Therefore, most antebellum slave narrative authors prioritize black solidarity, unity and loyalty rather than intra-black violence and black disloyalty. Their texts create a strict division between black victims, on the one hand, and white perpetrators, on the other.[47]

In his neo-slave narrative, James powerfully deconstructs what the historian Jeff Forret describes as "overtly romantic interpretations of a harmonious and idyllic slave community virtually devoid of conflict."[48] In other words, *The Book of Night Women* not only demonstrates how the slaves on Montpelier Estate form bonds of friendship and love, how they cooperate in their struggle against their white oppressors and support each other in moments of danger and desperation. In order to draw attention to slavery's corrupting and brutalizing effect on blacks, James's novel also explicitly shows that the slaves fight against, exert control over and sometimes even kill each other. In particular, it explores the complex power relationship between black enslaved women and men.

As the historian Kathleen M. Brown argues, male slaves often "created a culture of male performance that offered some protections from violence, and opportunities to dominate fellow slaves, particularly women, in certain circumscribed contexts."[49] Unable to lead an independent life and to protect their children and wives, many male slaves resorted to violence to assert their manhood, to "channel the anger and frustration they repressed when around the master and liberate themselves temporarily from their powerlessness."[50] By exploring how the institution of chattel slavery perverts the slaves' moral values and how

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47 | See Diedrich, *Ausbruch aus der Knechtschaft* 78-83.

48 | Jeff Forret, "Conflict and the 'Slave Community:' Violence among Slaves in Upcountry South Carolina," *Journal of Southern History* 74.3 (2008): 553.

49 | Brown, "'Strength of the Lion ... Arms Like Polished Iron'" 174.

50 | Forret 569.

male slaves turn into perpetrators due to slavery's dehumanizing impact, *The Book of Night Women* challenges static conceptualizations of slave communities as homogenous groups of passive and innocent victims, without justifying acts of intra-black violence and without absolving the black victimizer from guilt and moral responsibility.

In one of the first chapters, James describes how Paris,[51] a black overseer, tries to rape Lilith. Like many other male slaves on Montpelier Estate, Paris is depicted as a ruthless and cruel man, using physical and psychological means to control and humiliate others whenever he can: "He was one of them man who didn't even have to beat and thump and slap, him voice was enough."[52] Subjected to his master's will, in a way similar to Jeptha in *Unconfessed*, Paris attempts to demonstrate and assert his manhood by oppressing and exerting control over black women.[53] He feels free to sexually abuse Lilith because he knows that the white plantation owners and the colonial authorities will not punish him for this crime. Through Paris's hostile treatment of black women, James sheds light on forms of male bonding (across race, class and status) at the expense of black women; he draws attention to what Yvette Christiansë would describe as "the collusion between a slave owner and his male slave:"[54]

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51 | In James's *The Book of Night Women*, many slaves are named after characters from Greek mythology, such as Circe, Andromeda and Paris. Of course, Paris was the prince of Troy; he triggered the Trojan War by kidnapping Helen from Sparta. In the British West Indies, Barbara Bush explains, many enslaved women and men were "given ludicrous and demeaning classical names—Hercules, Phibia—which stripped them of their African identity." As Ira Berlin argues, similar practices were common in mainland North America: Slaves' "names reflected the contempt in which their owners held them. Most answered to some European diminutive—Jack and Sukey in the English colonies, Pedro and Francisca in places under Spanish rule, and Jean and Marie in the French dominions. As if to emphasize their inferiority, some were tagged with names usually assigned to barnyard animals. Others were designated with the name of some ancient deity or great personage like Hercules or Cato as a kind of cosmic jest: the most insignificant with the greatest of name." Bush, *Slave Women in Caribbean Society* 52; Berlin, *Generations of Captivity* 54; see also Luke Roman and Monica Roman, *Encyclopedia of Greek and Roman Mythology* (New York: Facts on File, 2010) 386.

52 | Marlon James, *The Book of Night Women* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2009) 16. All further references to this novel (BoN) will be cited in the text and will refer to this edition.

53 | For a detailed discussion of black masculinity during slavery, see Brown, "'Strength of the Lion … Arms Like Polished Iron'" 172-80; see also chapter 4, "'Hertseer:' Re-Imagining Cape Slavery in Yvette Christiansë's *Unconfessed* (2006)," in this study.

54 | Christiansë, "A Freedom Stolen" 109.

Both treat female slaves as inferior beings, mistreating them and reducing them to objects of sexual gratification.

In this scene, and throughout *The Book of Night Women*, however, James refuses to represent his black female characters as passive and submissive. Instead, he highlights the slave women's strong inner determination to offer violent resistance. In an act of self-defense, Lilith seriously injures Paris: "She grab the pot of cerasee tea and don't care that it burnin' her finger. —What de——the man say but before him could even shift, she turn over the pot of tea on him face" (BoN 16). In this phase of the novel, at least for a short moment, James centralizes a Fanonian counter-violence and the liberating effect it has on Lilith: It frees her from her "despair and inaction,"[55] to quote Fanon, and makes her realize that she has the power to resist male dominance on the plantation and beyond: "That was the first time she feel the darkness. True darkness and true womanness that make man scream" (BoN 17). Empowered by her new sense of self, Lilith has the strength to fight against her attacker. In this chapter, ultimately, she manages to escape sexual abuse by killing the would-be rapist Paris with a cutlass. This scene plays a significant role in the novel's plot because it foreshadows the night women's and Lilith's (further) acts of violence against white masters and fellow slaves in the course of the narrative.

In addition to focusing on tensions, conflicts and violence within the slave community, *The Book of Night Women* draws attention to the complex and violent relationship between enslaved subjects and maroon communities in eighteenth-century Jamaica: "What every nigger done know," James's narrator says, "was that after the treaty, the Maroon, the slave sworn friend, become him sworn enemy. The backra pay two pounds for every captured nigger but most time Maroon done hunt and send back niggers even for free" (BoN 78). Signifying on the 1739 peace treaty between the maroon leader Cudjoe and the British, James challenges a clear-cut dichotomy between black victimhood and white suppression, without relativizing the guilt of white colonial authorities, plantation owners and slaveholders. Instead of offering a naïve celebration of black cooperation and solidarity, *The Book of Night Women* explores the brutalizing effect of slavery and white colonial rule on black maroon communities, centralizing the maroons' decision and willingness to turn against and betray other blacks to maintain their own status as free individuals.

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55 | Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (1961; New York: Grove Press, 1968) 94.

THE SLAVE'S CIRCLE AND THE ETHICS
OF REPRESENTING VIOLENCE

"Every negro walk in a circle. Take that and make of it what you will" (BoN 33, 120, 223, 313, 421). Repeated five times throughout James's text to introduce several chapters, these two sentences point to the novel's nihilistic tendency to focus on the captive's desperate and hopeless situation: To be a slave in eighteenth-century Jamaica, *The Book of Night Women* insists, is to be trapped in a vicious circle of oppression, counter-violence and retaliation. While the novel explores different forms of black agency and various acts of defiance against slavery, it ultimately highlights the impossibility to triumph over the white plantation owners and masters and to escape subjugation and exploitation; it demonstrates that the slaves' effort to break out of the vicious circle of violence is doomed to failure: "Every negro walk in a circle. [...] He can't walk like freeman and no matter where he walk, the road take he right back to the chain, the branding iron, the cat-o'-nine or the noose that be the blessing that no nigger-woman can curse" (BoN 120). As the following example illustrates, *The Book of Night Women* particularly dramatizes the white colonizer's immediate and violent response to any attempt to challenge the existing white racist structure. In December 1784, several months before Lilith's birth, the white overseer Jack Wilkins manages to catch a runaway slave called Bacchus; the two men engage in a violent fight in which Bacchus is killed (BoN 260-66). A key scene in *The Book of Night Women*, it evokes the slave's strong yearning for freedom, his desire to overthrow the master's rule and, most importantly, his willingness to risk death rather than endure enslavement. This topic also plays a crucial role in male slave narratives, most notably in the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845), in which the fight with the white overseer and slave-breaker Edward Covey is represented as a powerful turning point in Douglass's struggle to regain his manhood and to liberate himself from bondage. As Paul Gilroy has argued, Douglass's *Narrative* shows how "the slave actively prefers the possibility of death to the continuing condition of inhumanity on which plantation slavery depends."[56]

In his neo-slave narrative, James engages in an intertextual dialogue with Douglass's *Narrative* and other male slave narratives by exploring the relationship between counter-violence, black masculinity, freedom, self-worth and self-assertion. In recent years, black feminist scholars such as McDowell and Davis have highlighted "the patriarchal assumptions"[57] in Douglass's 1845 slave

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56 | Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic* 63; see also Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, 1845, *The Classic Slave Narratives*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Signet Classics, 2002) 323-436.

57 | Davis, *Narrative* 24.

narrative: According to McDowell, "Douglass's refusal to be whipped represents, not only an assertion of manhood, but the transcendence of slavery, an option his *Narrative* denies to women."[58] Crucially, unlike Douglass, James is not only concerned with the theme of black male resistance but also, and essentially, investigates the meaning of black female counter-violence in eighteenth-century Jamaica, emphasizing that, as Bush puts it, the slave woman "reacted to slavery with the same intensity and commitment as her menfolk."[59]

Unlike in Douglass's *Narrative,* in *The Book of Night Women*, James's account of the fight between slave (Bacchus) and overseer (Wilkins) ends with the slave's death. Via this episode, James sheds light on the repressive and utterly dehumanizing nature of white rule in eighteenth-century Jamaica; a place that historians like Burnard describe as "a mature and brutal slave society."[60] On Montpelier Estate, like on all the other plantations on the island, whites are heavily outnumbered by blacks; slave revolts are common and feared by white plantation owners and overseers: "White man know that there never be a safe day in the colony," James's narrator remarks. "So they whip we. One hundred, two hundred, three hundred lash and whatever number come after that" (BoN 261).

Like so many other white Jamaicans, Wilkins is a torturer and rapist, firmly determined to preserve white rule, to intimidate slaves on a daily basis and to punish them harshly in order to stifle black resistance and rebellion. After killing Bacchus, Wilkins goes on to commit further acts of horrific violence designed to demoralize the slave community:

Later that night he shove Bacchus' head on a stick and plant the stick right in front of the slave quarters, where Bacchus stay until he rot off. Knowing who Bacchus' sister be, a house slave who not yet fourteen, he drag her from great house to the stable, where he rape her and leave him seed in her. [...] Wilkins say they must teach the negroes a lesson. That Saturday, the negroes get the learning. In the morning when the womens washing before they go to the field, Wilkins ride up and grab Leto, a girl who not be sixteen yet. Leto scream. One hour or so later he summon all the slave to one of the empty fields. —This is what happen to you when you cross with your master! Jack Wilkins say. In the middle of the field was bundles of stick and bush. In the middle of the bundle was a tree trunk. Tied to the tree trunk was Leto who screaming, pleading and crying. (BoN 265-66)

As this excerpt reveals, for Wilkins, violence is a means of control, punishment, domination and oppression as well as a tool to demonstrate the (almost

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58 | McDowell, *Narrative* xx.

59 | Bush, *Slave Women in Caribbean Society* 164.

60 | Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire* 244.

unlimited) extent of his mastery over blacks. During slavery, Saidiya Hartman explains, "the exercise of power was inseparable from its display because domination depended upon demonstrations of the slaveholder's dominion and the captive's abasement."[61] Seeking to assert and strengthen his position as overseer and to set an example for other blacks, Wilkins forces his slaves to witness Leto's gruesome torture and execution. Knowing that his actions are supported by the state's legal system,[62] he fears no social or legal consequences. As *The Book of Night Women* illustrates, the black women under Wilkins's control are especially vulnerable to abuse since they suffer from both racist and sexist oppression.

For Wilkins, the rape of Bacchus's sister is more than a means of sexual arousal and an act of revenge for Bacchus's insubordination; it is a tool to intimidate the whole slave community: "Rape was a weapon of domination," Angela Davis explains in her influential study *Women, Race and Class* (1981), "a weapon of repression, whose covert goal was to extinguish slave women's will to resist, and in the process, to demoralize their men."[63] As Davis goes on to argue:

> If Black women had achieved a sense of their own strength and a strong urge to resist, then violent sexual assaults—so the slaveholders might have reasoned—would remind the women of their essential and inalterable femaleness. In the male supremacist vision of the period, this meant passivity, acquiescence and weakness.[64]

Enslaved men who were forced to witness the rape of black women were painfully reminded of the impossibility of protecting their wives and daughters from abuse. Driven by despair and suffering from powerlessness, many male slaves used violence against black women to regain a sense of self-worth and to reassert their manhood.[65] Detailing Wilkins's divide-and-rule strategy, James shows how the white overseer's use of rape as a weapon eventually results in violent conflicts within the slave community, i.e., in acts of oppression against black women committed by black men. Significantly, in James's novel, the rape

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61 | Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection* 7.

62 | As Trevor Burnard points out: "White Jamaicans developed a legal system and a social structure in which any brutality exercised by whites towards blacks could be excused by the fundamental necessity of keeping blacks subdued. Only in this way could white fears be assuaged. Such assumptions, of course, were a license for sadism and tyranny among all whites, not just those inclined to psychopathic behavior. Whites knew that they had the full support of the state and white public opinion for whatever they did toward slaves." Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire* 33.

63 | Angela Davis, *Women, Race, and Class* (New York: Random House, 1981) 23-24.

64 | Ibid. 24.

65 | See Forret 568-69.

scene is presented as a flashback, highlighting the constitutive nature of violence in the black protagonist's life: Born as a slave in 1785, Lilith is the daughter of Bacchus's sister and Jack Wilkins; her green eyes are, as Suzanne Marie Hopcroft puts it, "the legacy of her mother's rape by her white overseer father."[66]

Like other contemporary authors who revisit the past of slavery from twenty-first-century perspectives, exploring the nature of white power and rendering "the lives of the nameless and the forgotten,"[67] James must answer the crucial question of how to write about acts of anti-black violence, sexual abuse, annihilation and torture, and to what ends. Depicting Wilkins's atrocities against Bacchus, Bacchus's sister and Leto, the passage quoted above is representative of James's decision to include explicit, and extremely shocking, scenes of violence in *The Book of Night Women*; it illustrates the novel's narrative choice to present the horrors of slavery and, in particular, the black woman's experience of (sexual) abuse in an unsparing, even pornographic, manner.

In cultural studies discourse, the term "pornography" generally refers to "a form of representation that graphically depicts sexuality in order to stimulate its consumer."[68] As Brenda Cossman points out, the last five decades have witnessed heated academic debates about the misogynistic nature and damaging effects of pornography: "Dominance or radical feminism has argued that pornography harms and subordinates women," Cossmann explains. "Beginning in the 1970s, this feminist theory shifted the harm associated with pornography from sexual explicitness to sexism. Some feminists began to identify pornography as a cause of exploitive male sexual practices, and women's subordination."[69] For instance, in her ground-breaking study *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law* (1987), Catharine A. MacKinnon, one of the most prominent anti-pornography feminists, "define[s] pornography as the graphic sexually explicit subordination of women through pictures or words that also includes women dehumanized as sexual objects, things, or commodities."[70]

Since the 1980s, feminists such as Carole Vance have started to challenge this anti-pornography discourse, contending "that pornography has a subversive quality, in representing and advocating sexual pleasure and agency for women."[71] Today, "pornography" remains one of the most controversial topics

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66 | Hopcroft, "A Heartbreaking History."

67 | Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts" 4.

68 | Brian Longhurst et al., *Introducing Cultural Studies*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge 2013) 221.

69 | Brenda Cossmann, "Pornography," *Encyclopedia of Feminist Theories*, ed. Lorraine Code (London: Routledge, 2000) 393; emphases deleted.

70 | Catharine A. MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1987) 176.

71 | Cossmann 393.

in cultural and feminist studies as scholars "differ on whether all sexually-explicit material is defamatory to women, or whether pornographic forms can be used to formulate a discourse of female desire."[72]

In a 2014 interview with Kaitlyn Greenidge, James offers the following explanation for his aesthetic choice to depict violence in a pornographic way:

I have a problem with understated violence. I have a problem with violence that is tasteful. [...] It's nasty, it's bloody, it's painful. There's nothing touching about it. It was very important to me that when I write brutality, it be brutal. And when you say to me, "Well, we can't stomach it, we can't read it," I'm like, "Well, consider the person who had to experience it." [...] The concern a lot of people have with explicit violence, explicit sex, explicit anything, is that it turns into a kind of pornography. And I'm like, "So what?" Risk pornography. [73]

In order to evaluate James's narrative strategy, I will, once again, refer to the theoretical interventions of black feminist critics such as McDowell, Davis and Hartman: In her 1999 introduction to the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, McDowell criticizes Douglass's explicit rendering of violence against the black female body—most notably his detailed description of the beating of Aunt Hester at the beginning of his autobiographical account. "The *Narrative* is literally populated with the whipped bodies of slave women, and in each of these scenes Douglass looks on voyeuristically in a fashion tinged with eroticism,"[74] McDowell contends. "As the *Narrative* progresses, the beatings proliferate, and the women, no longer identified by name, become absolutized as a bloody mass of naked backs."[75] Drawing on McDowell's work, Davis argues that Douglass and other contemporary abolitionist writers do not "apprehend how literary representations of black women's bodies as targets of slavery's most horrific forms of violence might also tend to objectify slave women and discursively deprive them of the capacity to strike out for their own freedom."[76] In *Scenes of Subjection*, Hartman contributes to this discussion about the ethics of narration as she chooses not to incorporate Douglass's Aunt Hester scene into

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72 | Sarah Gamble, ed., *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism* (London: Routledge, 2006) 276.

73 | Marlon James, "Violently Wrought: Kaitlyn Greenidge Interviews Marlon James," *Guernica* 3 Nov. 2014, 4 June 2015 https://www.guernicamag.com/interviews/violently-wrought/.

74 | McDowell, *Narrative* xxi.

75 | Ibid. xxii.

76 | Davis, *Narrative* 26.

her study in order to draw attention to "the precariousness of empathy and the uncertain line between witness and spectator."[77]

Crucially, James's novel fails to take into account the epistemological insights of black feminist scholars such as McDowell, Davis and Hartman—to reflect on the danger of constructing "women's bodies as objects of slavery's appalling violence:"[78] Whereas Hartman, Morrison and Christiansë are torn between the desire to highlight the female slave's experience of "thingification" and the refusal to narrate it and creatively address that conflict (on a meta-level), *The Book of Night Women* shows no critical awareness of the ethical risks involved in putting the atrocities against slave women into words: James's novel is full of shocking images, gruesome passages and pornographic scenes that "subject the dead to new dangers and to a second order of violence,"[79] to use Hartman's words from "Venus in Two Acts."

In a way similar to Hill in *The Book of Negroes*, James strategically adopts a black female perspective: In doing so, he intends to enter into the commercially successful tradition of female-authored neo-slave narratives that center around black female protagonists. Furthermore, in a self-legitimizing way, he tries to justify his narrative strategy of representing black women's experiences of sexual abuse. Like Hill, James never reflects on the theoretical and ethical implications of "the practice of speaking for others,"[80] on the challenges and difficulties inherent in appropriating the slave woman's voice. While Hill's melodramatic novel fails to acknowledge the true implications of chattel slavery as a dehumanizing system of "thingification," James offers an unsparing account of the utterly destructive and brutalizing nature of slavery, yet refuses to engage in a critical examination of the dangers of writing about scenes of black female subjection and torture. "I didn't want my reader to be at a further degree of remove from the characters," James explains in his interview with Kaitlyn Greenidge. "That was one thing that was very important to me. That you don't get to have a wider view than they do. You don't get to have a bigger sense of perspective than they do."[81] Ultimately, I argue, James's pornographic representations of the (female) slaves' experiences of humiliation satisfy the

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77 | Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection* 4. See also chapter 4, "'Hertseer:' Re-Imagining Cape Slavery in Yvette Christiansë's *Unconfessed* (2006)," in this study.

78 | Davis, *Narrative* 26.

79 | Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts" 5.

80 | Alcoff 8.

81 | James, "Violently Wrought." In the interview with Kaitlyn Greenidge, James not only refers to *The Book of Night Women* but also to his other two novels *John Crow's Devil* (2005) and *A History of Seven Killings* (2014).

reader's potential voyeuristic desires in that they "reinforce the spectacular character of black suffering."[82]

BLURRING THE LINES BETWEEN VICTIM AND PERPETRATOR: LILITH AS (ANTI-)HEROINE

One of James's central objectives in *The Book of Night Women* is to foreground the utter destructiveness of Caribbean slavery by showing how slavery perverts the slaves' moral values and how Lilith turns into a victimizer. In the course of the novel, James's black protagonist emerges as an incredibly complex character, overwhelmed by conflicting feelings of hate and love, revenge and guilt, fear and decisiveness. Depicted as a rebellious, impetuous and headstrong woman, she struggles to find a way to gain a measure of control over her life, to escape her miserable existence and to set herself apart from the other female slaves on Montpelier Estate.

On an intertextual level, her name refers to a famous character in Jewish mythology and tradition that appears in different incarnations: as a demon and child murderer, as a seducer of men, as Adam's first wife and as a queen of demons.[83] As Geoffrey W. Dennis explains in *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Myth, Magic and Mysticism* (2007), in recent debates, "Lilith has become a rallying point among feminists in critiquing the overwhelmingly male-oriented perspective of traditional Judaism, and she has been adopted as a symbol of feminist resistance to male spiritual hegemony."[84] In *The Book of Night Women*, Lilith is a personification of female vulnerability and resistance: She is both a victim of white brutality and a defiant slave; an oppressed woman and a victimizer who not only resorts to violence to defend herself and to challenge the master's power but who also kills white children and ultimately even attacks fellow female captives to gain influence and power within the slave community.

As the following scene illustrates, James directs our attention to Lilith's willingness to turn against other slaves in order to accentuate the brutalizing effect of slavery on the enslaved: To Lilith's great annoyance, Andromeda and several other female captives are chosen to serve at the Montpelier Estate New Year's Eve ball. Wishing to take over Andromeda's task, Lilith asks the obeah woman Gorgon for help. On the next morning, Andromeda coughs up blood and dies (BoN 98-105). In this passage, *The Book of Night Women* highlights the crucial significance of West African spiritual and religious practices in (eight-

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82 | Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection* 3.

83 | Geoffrey W. Dennis, *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Myth, Magic and Mysticism* (Woodbury, MN: Llewellyn Publications, 2007) 153-54.

84 | Ibid. 154.

eenth-century) Jamaican culture, focusing particularly on the slaves' strong belief in the magic and subversive power of obeah. As James's novel suggests, obeah practitioners like Gorgon exert enormous (psychological) influence over black women and men; they use obeah to cure illnesses, to prophesy the future, to provoke slave rebellions and, of utmost importance, to intimidate their fellow slaves. In fact, Andromeda's death causes great panic among those who recognize the existence of supernatural forces: "In the kitchen all hell about to break loose. Nobody did like Andromeda, but word spread 'bout how she dead and one woman already run outside the house screaming that Obeah deh'pon di Montpelier Estate" (BoN 110). In other words, in James's novel, obeah is closely connected with "divination, medicine, and protection from malevolent forces,"[85] and it is exploited by some practitioners as an instrument of manipulation and domination within the black community.

In addition to exploring the intricate nature of African (diasporic) spiritualty, the obeah scene serves to characterize Lilith as a multifaceted (anti-)heroine, willing to commit morally unacceptable acts but also capable of expressing empathy with others. In fact, after Andromeda's death, she is plagued by unsettling nightmares:

She hear Andromeda daughter screaming and turn around, lookin' to see where she be. Nothing but darkness. Lilith go over to her mat on the floor and stoop down, her head heavy and not together. Slave death is nothing new and a strong nigger learn to walk past it but Lilith look down on her own hands and keep seeing blood. (BoN 123)

Lilith's owners and her white father Jack Wilkins ruthlessly whip, humiliate, torture and kill blacks on any given day and without any reason; they do not feel any sense of culpability or wrongdoing. In contrast, Lilith is haunted by guilt and shame after acknowledging her responsibility for Andromeda's death and the slave woman's daughter's suffering. In this scene, James shows that Lilith, unlike her white masters, is willing and able to critically reflect on her violent actions and to recognize her moral failures. And yet, in the course of the narrative, as she is confronted with further acts of (sexual) abuse and exploitation, Lilith continues to use violence against both whites and blacks. Like Morrison, Hartman and Christiansë, James participates in a discussion with Afro-pessimism about the crushing power of slavery: Delineating Lilith's transformation into a murderer, *The Book of Night Women* examines how slavery destroys the moral values of the oppressed and dispossessed.

For Lilith, it is Mistress Roget's barbaric killing of Dulcimena at Coulibre that marks a traumatic turning point in her life. Again, James presents the female slave's experience of subjection in an explicit and pornographic way,

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85 | Rice 477.

without reflecting on what Hartman describes as "the risks posed by reiterating violent speech and depicting again rituals of torture:"[86]

Dulcimena begging for the massa to save her but Massa Roget ride right past her to go to Kingston. The mistress wield the cart whip herself. Lilith always hear she do such a thing but never see for herself before. She flog Dulcimena as hard as she could flog, swinging the whip wide and lashing Dulcimena back till the skin tear into flesh and the flesh tear into blood. [...] Dulcimena get one hundred sixty-six lash that day and the mistress say she would have derby-dose her too if any of the negroes was setting to pass shit. (BoN 203-04)

Highlighting the slave mistress's sadistic practices, James engages in an intertextual dialogue with African American slave narratives, such as Douglass's *Narrative* and Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), and with white abolitionist novels, such as Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852):[87] One of the primary goals of anti-slavery writers like Jacobs, Douglass and Stowe was to direct the white American reader's attention to the ways in which, as the historian Dickson D. Bruce, Jr. puts it, "slavery corrupted slaves and slaveholders alike."[88] In order to illustrate the demoralizing effects of the so-called "peculiar institution," they showed how white Southern women, who were represented as innocent, noble, pious, sympathetic and graceful in most nineteenth-century literary texts, were perverted into cruel oppressors, taking pleasure in humiliating and killing black people and in witnessing scenes of torture and abuse[89]—as were their children, yet another paragon of innocence. One reason for describing the destruction of "white innocence" was the inability or unwillingness of contemporary dominant white discourses to attribute qualities like innocence to chattel slaves.

   In his *Narrative*, Douglass demonstrates how slavery perverts the mind of Sophia Auld, his mistress in Baltimore: "When I went there, she was a pious, warm, and tender-hearted woman. [...] Slavery soon proved its ability to divest her of these heavenly qualities. Under its influence, the tender heart became

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86 | Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts" 4.

87 | Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 1861, *The Classic Slave Narratives*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Signet Classics, 2002) 437-667; Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* 323-436; Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 1852, ed. Elizabeth Ammons, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 2010).

88 | Dickson D. Bruce, Jr., "Politics in the Slave Narrative," *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Slave Narrative*, ed. Audrey A. Fisch (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007) 31.

89 | See Diedrich, *Ausbruch aus der Knechtschaft* 71-74.

stone, and the lamblike disposition gave way to one of tiger-like fierceness."[90] While Douglass initially offers a highly idealized view of his mistress to foreground her inherent virtues of integrity, faith and charity, he uses animal comparisons to describe Auld's development into a ruthless and pitiless slaveholder and to draw attention to the moral decay of white America; for if the country's "true woman" loses her innocence and cleansing power, the entire (white) nation is without a future. Douglass's slave narrative emphasizes the destructive impact of the institution of enslavement on blacks and whites alike and urgently calls for the immediate abolition of slavery in the United States.

In *The Book of Night Women*, James, too, employs the trope of the sadistic and brutal female mistress to shed light on the damaging effects of slavery on black and white society. Moreover, in the passage quoted above (the flogging of Lilith's friend Dulcimena), he explores the meaning of slavery as "thingification" by explicitly describing atrocious acts of violence against black human "flesh,"[91] to use Spillers's term. On the plot level, the torture scene at Coulibre offers a contextualization for Lilith's development into a ruthless victimizer: Her crimes in the second part of the narrative are primarily a result of the dehumanization and degradation she has experienced throughout her life as a slave. After witnessing Dulcimena's execution, Lilith thinks about taking revenge:

Lilith start to imagine what white flesh look like after a whipping. What white neck look like after a hanging and what kinda scar leave on a white body after black punishment. She think of the little Roget boy, Master Henri, of tying and hanging the boy up by him little balls and chopping him head off. She make the thoughts of white blood work into a fever. (BoN 204)

Subjected to intolerable physical pain and psychological torture, Lilith has internalized the white (wo)man's conception of violence as a legitimate tool of punishment and sadistic suppression. Her hatred is directed against all white people, including children like Roget's son; and she hopes that her white oppressors will suffer the same fate as Dulcimena and other brutalized slaves.

The following acts of violence carried out by Lilith could be interpreted as a form of self-liberation, an attempt to express her freedom as a human being: In fact, after killing her master Roget, the novel's protagonist re-experiences a sense of empowerment: "Lilith feel a new thing under skin, something that tingle as her heart jump up and down. It never beat so fast and so loud. True darkness and true womanness that make men scream" (BoN 228). As in the scene of Paris's killing at the novel's beginning, Lilith articulates her willing-

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90 | Douglass 367.

91 | Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" 67.

ness to fight against the (white) patriarchal system. For Lilith, the notion of "true womanhood" is not at all linked with submissiveness and passivity but with resistance and disobedience.[92]

Focusing both on the transformative power of violence for oppressed subjects and the destructive nature of violent acts, James's neo-slave narrative stands in a dynamic intertextual relation to Richard Wright's 1940 *Native Son*, one of the most famous and controversially discussed African American novels of the twentieth century: Concentrating on the pervasiveness of racial oppression and the hardships of black ghetto life in early twenty-century America, Wright unfolds the story of twenty-year-old Bigger Thomas, a black man working as a chauffeur for an affluent white entrepreneur. In a moment of extreme fear and panic, Bigger accidentally suffocates his employer's daughter Mary. Later, while on the run from the police, Bigger rapes his black girlfriend Bessie. Afraid that she will hand him over to the police, he kills Bessie in cold blood. The novel ends with Wright's description of Bigger's time in prison, where the black anti-hero waits to be brought to the electric chair.

The Book of Night Women and *Native Son* are set in different historical periods and explore different cultural, political and social contexts (slavery in Jamaica at the end of the eighteenth century vs. racial segregation in Chicago in the 1930s during the Great Depression). Yet, both novels examine the role and legitimacy of (counter-)violence in the fight for freedom, recognition and self-determination. In *Native Son*, Wright shows how the killing of Mary gives meaning to Bigger's life, at least for a short moment. At this point of the novel, Bigger admits his responsibility for Mary's death and re-conceptualizes his

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92 | Lilith's concept of "true womanness" could be read as an intertextual reference to and rewriting of the discourse of "true womanhood." In the United States, Hazel V. Carby contends, the prevailing "ideology to define the boundaries of acceptable female behavior from the 1820s until the Civil War was the 'cult of true womanhood.'" As the historian Barbara Welter explains in her famous 1966 "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," an essay to which Carby also refers: "Woman, in the Cult of True Womanhood presented by the women's magazines, gifts annuals and religious literature of the nineteenth century, was the hostage in the home. [...] The attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors and society could be divided into four cardinal virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity. Put them all together and they spelled mother, daughter, sister, wife—woman." Hazel V. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford UP, 1987) 23; Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," *Locating American Studies: The Evolution of a Discipline*, ed. Lucy Maddox (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1999) 43-44.

crime as a powerful act of defiance against the white oppressive system:[93] "He had murdered and had created a new life for himself. It was something that was all his own, and it was the first time in his life he had had anything that others could not take from him."[94] Even though it ultimately leads to his death sentence, the killing of Mary is constructed as an essential element of Bigger's attempt to (re)gain a sense of self-worth and self-control in a white racist environment. Likewise, in *The Book of Night Women*, Lilith's killing of her slave master Roget is presented as another turning point in the slave woman's life: For Lilith, at least in this part of the novel, "violence is a cleansing force,"[95] to use Fanon's words, a tool to overcome fear and to re-establish her self-esteem.

However, both Wright and James also foreground the utterly disruptive nature of their black protagonists' violent actions: In *Native Son*, Wright emphasizes that, after the killing of Mary, the novel's anti-hero is still overwhelmed and controlled by exclusively negative feelings such as fear and hate. While Bigger's crime against his white employer's daughter has offered him a sense of inner freedom, he is unable to act as a morally responsible being and to recognize and acknowledge the link between individual freedom, on the one hand, and social responsibility and human solidarity, on the other.[96] Addressing the complex subject of intra-black violence, the scene in which Wright's protagonist brutally murders Bessie[97] sheds light on the specific vulnerability of black females in early twenty-century America and Bigger's dehumanizing treatment of women. Equally important, it demonstrates that, as Robert Butler puts it, "Bigger's killing of Mary was not a conversion experience [...] but simply brought to a culmination the pathological tendencies of Bigger's old life."[98] Instead of uncritically glorifying the black man's violent rebellion, *Native Son* ultimately stresses the destructiveness of Bigger's acts in order to focus the

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93 | See also Markus Nehl, "Richard Wright, *Native Son* (1940)," *The American Novel of the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries*, ed. Timo Müller (Berlin: De Gruyter, forthcoming).

94 | Richard Wright, *Native Son*, The Restored Text Established by the Library of America (1940; New York: Harper Perennial, 2005) 105.

95 | Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* 94.

96 | Maria I. Diedrich, *Kommunismus im afroamerikanischen Roman: Das Verhältnis afroamerikanischer Schriftsteller zur Kommunistischen Partei der USA zwischen den Weltkriegen* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1979) 238.

97 | For a critical discussion of Wright's representation of Bessie and the voyeuristic depiction of Bessie's rape, see, for instance, Alan W. France, "Misogyny and Appropriation in Wright's *Native Son*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 34.3 (1988): 413-23; Nehl, "Richard Wright, *Native Son* (1940)."

98 | Robert Butler, *Native Son: The Emergence of a New Black Hero* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991) 46.

reader's attention to violence, deprivation, hopelessness and fear as defining features of black American life in the 1930s.[99]

Entering into a dynamic intertextual discussion with *Native Son*, *The Book of Night Women* powerfully highlights the destructive power of Lilith's vengeful struggle: Like her (in)famous namesake in Jewish mythology, Lilith becomes a child murderer. Equipped with a strong will to survive, she fights against and eventually kills her mistress and, then, decides to set fire to the house with the sleeping children in it. When some of her fellow slaves are accused of the crime, put into prison and stoned by a furious white mob, Lilith does not intervene, primarily because she wants to save her life.

Slavery, *The Book of Night Women* insists, creates abominable conditions of anti-blackness that can lead to morally unacceptable actions on the part of the dispossessed and exploited, blurring, at least on the surface, the allegedly clear-cut distinction between black victim and white perpetrator. However, the novel never allows the reader to forget the one source of these perversions, i.e., chattel slavery and anti-blackness. In a way similar to Wright, James traces his protagonist's development into a murderer, seeking to foreground the centrality of violence to black life and to explore the reasons for violence, tensions and conflicts within the black community: James's novel stresses that many slaves "adapt to the overwhelming cruelty and humiliation of their circumstances in order to survive, often by engaging in behavior that may be deemed reprehensible by outsiders,"[100] to use Caille Millner's words.

Like other contemporary authors of neo-slave narratives,[101] James offers a reflection on the inherent contradictions of violent resistance, emphasizing the impossibility to eradicate violence by using more violence. He invents a protagonist who is haunted by traumatic memories after killing her master, her mistress and their children; a crucial difference, the novel insinuates, to Jamai-

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99 | See also Butler 46; Diedrich, "Afro-Amerikanische Literatur" 436; Diedrich, *Kommunismus* 222; Nehl, "Richard Wright, *Native Son* (1940)."

100 | Caille Millner, "A Twenty-Year-Old Slave Named Frederick Bailey Slips Away From His Master in Maryland and Makes His Way to the Free State of New York: The Slave Narrative," *A New Literary History of America*, eds. Greil Marcus and Werner Sollors (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2009) 251.

101 | As Arlene R. Keizer argues in her 2004 study *Black Subjects: Identity Formation in the Contemporary Narrative of Slavery*, "the contemporary narrative of slavery demonstrates how fraught with difficulty resistance is and has been. In fact, one of the signal characteristics of these works is their problematization of resistance. These texts never question the need to struggle against a system that has consistently subjugated people of African descent, but the means through which such resistance can be carried out are closely examined and the contradictions inherent in certain modes of resistance are evaluated." Keizer 9.

ca's white slaveholders who humiliate and murder their slaves without being left with a sense of guilt. In a heated discussion with the slave leader Homer, Lilith vehemently criticizes the night women's plan to start a slave rebellion: "Me get my blood and see me here," Lilith says. "Nothing different. Nothing better. Revenge don't leave me nothing but them burning skin smell that me can't blow out of me nose nor wash out" (BoN 349). Again, in this phase of the novel, Lilith is depicted as a complex, self-critical but also self-confident (anti-) heroine, refusing to fulfil the night women's expectations of unquestioning black female cooperation.

Significantly, while *Native Son* and *The Book of Night Women* focus on different historical locations, they participate in a transnational, cross-generational discussion about the meaning of black (counter-)violence in an anti-black world and, eventually, move beyond an uncritical celebration of the liberating impact of violence for the oppressed. In this regard, on a meta-level, James's novel also challenges reductive interpretations of *The Wretched of the Earth* that exclusively center on Fanon's conceptualization of violence as "a cleansing force:"[102] Noteworthy, as Elizabeth Frazer and Kimberly Hutchings point out in their 2008 essay "On Politics and Violence: Arendt contra Fanon," Fanon's work not only explores "the productive use of violence as a political instrument, providing the momentum motivating the colonized to do what is necessary to overthrow the oppressor, and thereby cleanse both themselves and their world of violence."[103] In the last chapter of *The Wretched of the Earth*, "which deals with mental disorders on both sides of the Algerian war, the idea that using violence may be a way to escape being in violence is countered by case after case in which people remain trapped in the violence they have inflicted and suffered."[104]

Crucially, Lilith's decision not to participate in the slave uprising is strongly influenced by her highly ambivalent experience of having a sexual affair with Robert Quinn, a white immigrant from Ireland. Given Quinn's position as a slave overseer, their relationship cannot be described as consensual. And yet, as Sam Vásquez puts it, James shows how Lilith intentionally "uses her sexual prison to secure a measure of mental and physical freedom, enjoying the material luxuries of the overseer's home—creating a fantasy, albeit a disturbing facsimile of domestic bliss, and protecting herself from other men's sexual assaults."[105] Focusing on the complexity of inter-racial relationships during slav-

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102 | Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* 94.

103 | Elizabeth Frazer and Kimberly Hutchings, "On Politics and Violence: Arendt contra Fanon," *Contemporary Political Theory* 7 (2008): 98.

104 | Ibid.

105 | Sam Vásquez, "Violent Liaisons: Historical Crossings and the Negotiation of Sex, Sexuality, and Race in *The Book of Night Women* and *The True History of Paradise*," *small axe* 16.2 (2012): 51.

ery, James refuses to offer a romantic and idealized view of Lilith's and Quinn's relationship: Even though they begin to forge an emotional bond, ultimately, the novel's female protagonist and the Irish immigrant remain trapped in their roles of slave and overseer. In fact, Lilith's scars are a constant reminder of the white man's cruelties she has been exposed to: "She lie on top of him and let Quinn wrap him arm round her back. But then him skin touch her scars and they both realise what they touching" (BoN 275-76). According to Vásquez, this passage draws attention to "the vicious cycle that sex and violence represent in Lilith's life."[106] As Vásquez goes on to argue, "the physical evidence of the overseer's violence toward her mitigates against any permanent intimacy between these symbolic figures and resituates them as 'slave and master.'"[107]

Unlike Lawrence Hill's *The Book of Negroes*, whose last chapter focuses on Aminata's triumph over slavery and her happy reunion with her daughter May, *The Book of Night Women* charts the failure of black rebellions to challenge existing racist power structures: The night women's revolt is not successful but ends in a bloody massacre, in serious losses on both sides. Lilith's act of charity—she saves her father, the white overseer Jack Wilkins, from being killed by the night women—does not serve to overcome the nihilistic tendencies inherent in James's novel.

The circle of violence, hate and hopeless misery, *The Book of Night Women* insists, cannot be broken; it is passed down from one generation to the next: "But sometimes when a negro die and another negro take him place, even if that negro not be blood, they still fall in step with the same circle. The same circle of living that no nigger can choose and dying that come at any time" (BoN 421). Significantly, this scene highlights one of the novel's central concerns, drawing our attention to the tragic connection between the past of slavery in Jamaica and contemporary forms of anti-blackness, "the link between our age and a previous one in which freedom too was yet to be realized" (LYM 133), to use Hartman's words from *Lose Your Mother*. In this respect, *The Book of Night Women* enters into a fruitful dialogue with Morrison's, Hartman's and Christiansë's neo-slave narratives and Afro-pessimist discourse.

CONCLUSION

In *The Book of Night Women*, James offers an unsparing account of the slaves' experience of being trapped in a vicious circle of violence, highlighting the utterly destructive nature of slavery as "thingification" as well as the institution's lasting impact on further black generations. Reflecting on the legitimacy and

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106 | Ibid.

107 | Ibid.

transformative power of violence in the struggle for recognition and freedom, *The Book of Night Women* stands in an intertextual relation to black male literary and theoretical texts, such as Douglass's *Narrative,* Wright's *Native Son* and Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth.* Emphasizing the impossibility to eradicate violence by using more violence, James's goal is not to justify his slave characters' acts of revenge but to explore the miserable conditions of anti-blackness that trigger their brutal actions. In a way similar to *Native Son* and *The Wretched of the Earth, The Book of Night Women* ultimately moves beyond a reductive celebration of the liberating power of counter-violence and highlights the destructive nature of violent acts.

In several newspaper articles and critical discussions, James's work has been compared to that of Toni Morrison. In his 2009 review for *Time Out Magazine,* Anderson Tepper, for instance, argues that "James has given us an epic novel of late-18th-century West Indian slavery, complete with all its carnage and brutishness, but one that, like a Toni Morrison novel, whispers rather than shouts its horrors."[108] Obviously, Tepper ignores the fact that *The Book of Night Women* presents the horrific violence of slavery in a highly detailed, unsparing and ultimately pornographic manner; he fails to take into account the fundamental differences in Morrison's and James's aesthetic and ethical choices.

Arguably, James's approach to writing slavery is characterized by inconsistencies and contradictions: While James strategically adopts a female perspective and appropriates a black woman's voice, his conceptualization and representation of (female) counter-violence is profoundly influenced by, if not exclusively based on, black male writing traditions. By inventing a female protagonist, James tries to capitalize on the commercial success of female-authored neo-slave narratives and, equally important, to legitimize his narrative strategy of focusing on acts of sexual abuse against women. However, and this is a crucial point, James fails to acknowledge and include the epistemological insights of (black) feminist scholars such as McDowell, Davis, Hartman, Spillers and Alcoff, who have offered thoughtful reflections on "the ethics of historical representation,"[109] the concept of "pornotroping" and the dangers of speaking for, and about, the (gendered) "other." By depicting abominable acts of violence against black human "flesh" in an explicit way, without self-reflexively commenting on the risks of rendering scenes of black female degradation, torture and sexual abuse, *The Book of Night Women* ultimately exposes the enslaved to what Hartman would describe as "a second order of violence."[110]

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108 | Anderson Tepper, "The Book of Night Women," *Time Out* 25 Feb. 2009, 4 June 2015 http://www.timeout.com/newyork/books/the-book-of-night-women.

109 | Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts" 5.

110 | Ibid.