Introduction: Slavery—An "Unmentionable" Past?

In his critically acclaimed debut novel *Open City* (2011), mainly set in New York City a few years after the terrorist attacks of 2001, Teju Cole unfolds the story of Julius, a Nigerian American psychiatric fellow at Columbia Presbyterian who spends his leisure time wandering aimlessly through the streets of Manhattan. Deconstructing prevailing notions of white American moral superiority and righteousness that especially flourished in the aftermath of 9/11, Cole employs the figure of the black intellectual urban *flâneur* to explore New York's history and legacy of slavery, colonialism and racism, focusing particularly on the mass murder of Native Americans in the seventeenth century and the systematic oppression and exploitation of blacks during and after the period of the transatlantic slave trade. Drawing attention to the devastating impact of historical racial injustices and violence on the present, Cole's novel offers an intricate view of the city as a palimpsest, a place haunted by the hidden traces of past atrocities and collective traumatic experiences.

In a key scene near the novel's end, Cole describes how Julius accidentally discovers the African Burial Ground National Monument near City Hall. Via this episode, he foregrounds the centrality of slavery to New York's economic, cultural and social development and, equally important, highlights the ways in which this history has been erased from white American public memory: The African Burial Ground, where thousands of enslaved and free people of African descent, many of them children, were laid to rest in the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, is a significant archeological site in today's lower Manhattan. As the historian Leslie M. Harris explains, the cemetery was no longer used after 1790 and, then, "covered over by roads and buildings throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries."[1] It was largely forgotten until 1991, when, during construction of a new 34-story office building at

1 | Leslie M. Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626-1863* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2003) 1.

Broadway and Duane Street, workers uncovered several graves and the remains of human bodies. Archeological excavations at the site offered valuable insights into black life and burial customs in colonial New York, drawing attention to the ways in which blacks creatively combined African and European cultural traditions. Most crucially, the (re-)discovery of the African Burial Ground showed that, between 1626 and 1827, New York's economy relied heavily on large numbers of black slaves, who were exposed to utterly dehumanizing treatment and forced to carry out various tasks, such as field work, blacksmithing, carpentry and cooking.[2]

Cole's *Open City* contributes to reconstructing the forgotten story of New York City's early black community, particularly highlighting the cruelty and violence of slavery in the North: "At the Negro Burial Ground, as it was then known, and others like it on the eastern seaboard, excavated bodies bore traces of suffering: blunt trauma, grievous bodily harm. Many of the skeletons had broken bones, evidence of the suffering they'd endured in life."[3] Cole's novel powerfully challenges myths, stereotypical assumptions and self-legitimizing interpretations of the nation's past, in general, and New York's history, in particular: To this day, many whites deny or downplay the importance of slavery to the development of the country, justify the so-called "peculiar institution" as a benevolent system or ignore the history of black enslavement altogether. Others view slavery as an exclusively southern phenomenon, trying to absolve the North from any responsibility or guilt.[4] "The fact that slavery was practiced all over the early United States," Brent Staples points out in a 2005 editorial comment in the *New York Times*, "often comes as a shock to people in places like

2 | Ibid.; see also E.R. Shipp, "Black Cemetery Yields Wealth of History," *New York Times* 9 Aug. 1992, 7 July 2015 http://www.nytimes.com/1992/08/09/nyregion/black-cemetery-yields-wealth-of-history.html; David W. Dunlap, "Dig Unearths Early Black Burial Ground," *New York Times* 9 Oct. 1991, 7 July 2015 http://www.nytimes.com/1991/10/09/nyregion/dig-unearths-early-black-burial-ground.html. For more information about the history of slavery in New York City, see Harris 1-71. For a discussion of the controversy surrounding the excavation of the site and the African Burial Ground project, see Cheryl J. La Roche and Michael L. Blakey, "Seizing Intellectual Power: The Dialogue at the New York African Burial Ground," *Historical Archaeology* 31.3 (1997): 84-106.

3 | Teju Cole, *Open City* (London: Faber & Faber, 2011) 221.

4 | James Oliver Horton, "Presenting Slavery: The Perils of Telling America's Racial Story," *The Public Historian* 21.4 (1999): 21; Duncan Faherty, "'It's Happened Here': Slavery on the Hudson," *American Quarterly* 58.2 (2006): 456; Brent Staples, "A Convenient Amnesia About Slavery," *New York Times* 15 Dec. 2005, 7 July 2015 http://www.nytimes.com/2005/12/15/opinion/a-convenient-amnesia-about-slavery.html.

New York, where the myth of the free North has been surprisingly durable."[5] In *Open City*, Cole not only addresses what Staples describes as New York's "cultural amnesia"[6] about its past but also emphasizes the significance of slavery as a fundamental structural element of American history, society and culture.

While "American slavery is one of the last great unmentionables in public discourse,"[7] as the historian Lonnie Bunch has recently put it, over the last decades, numerous black novelists, essayists, non-fiction writers, poets, artists, and film-makers from all over the world have begun to counter this erasure of slavery from collective (white) memory and to explore the history and nature of black enslavement inside and outside the United States in a variety of genres: Among these cultural products are critically praised, commercially successful and prizewinning novels like Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) and *A Mercy* (2008), books of poetry like M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!* (2008), graphic novels like Kyle Baker's *Nat Turner* (2008), artistic works like Kara Walker's silhouette images, plays like August Wilson's *Gem of the Ocean* (2003), television miniseries like Lawrence Hill's and Clement Virgo's *The Book of Negroes* (2015) and movies like Steve McQueen's *12 Years a Slave* (2013). According to Bunch, a film like *12 Years a Slave*, which received three Academy Awards and has attracted millions of viewers, "might help America overcome its inability to understand the centrality of slavery and its continuing impact on our society."[8]

In recent academic discourse, scholars such as Saidiya Hartman, Frank B. Wilderson III, Jared Sexton and Michelle Alexander have offered complex theoretical, philosophical, historical and political explorations of the link between the history of slavery and contemporary forms of systematic racial oppression and discrimination in the United States and elsewhere. These black intellectuals, who have been described as Afro-pessimists, "do not form anything as ostentatious as a school of thought,"[9] as Wilderson emphasizes in his 2010 study *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*. And yet, influenced by the works of Frantz Fanon and Orlando Patterson, they share important assumptions about the meaning of blackness and the devastating logic of anti-blackness in our contemporary societies: Powerfully countering

5 | Staples, "A Convenient Amnesia About Slavery."

6 | Ibid.

7 | Lonnie Bunch, "The Director of the African-American History and Culture Museum on What Makes '12 Years a Slave' a Powerful Film," *The Smithsonian.com* 5 Nov. 2013, 26 July 2015 http://www.smithsonianmag.com/ist/?next=/smithsonian-institution/the-director-of-the-african-american-history-and-culture-museum-on-what-makes-12-years-a-slave-a-powerful-film-180947568/.

8 | Ibid.

9 | Frank B. Wilderson III, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham: Duke UP, 2010) 58.

the (white) notion of a post-racial America, they shed light on the precariousness of black life in the past and present and examine the debilitating effects of systemic white supremacy.[10]

In her path-breaking 2007 protest narrative *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route*, which will be closely analyzed in chapter 3 of this study, Saidiya Hartman uses the phrase "the afterlife of slavery"[11] to reflect on the lasting impact of the transatlantic slave trade and slavery on twenty-first-century black life, to deconstruct the naïve idea of history as progress and to focus on loss, dispossession and grief as defining features of the African diaspora:[12]

> If slavery persists as an issue in the political life of black America, it is not because of an antiquarian obsession with bygone days or the burden of a too-long memory, but because black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago. This is the afterlife of slavery—skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment.[13]

In a way similar to Hartman, legal scholar Michelle Alexander radically challenges the prevailing (white) "narrative that emphasizes the death of slavery and Jim Crow and celebrates the nation's 'triumph over race' with the election of Barack Obama."[14] In *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2010), Alexander focuses on the systematic discrimination of blacks within the U.S. criminal justice system. In particular, she draws attention to the high incarceration rate of black (male) Americans and, closely connected,

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10 | See, for instance, Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997); Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007); Wilderson, *Red, White & Black*; Saidiya V. Hartman and Frank B. Wilderson III, "The Position of the Unthought," *Qui Parle* 13.2 (2003): 183-201; Jared Sexton, "'The Curtain of the Sky': An Introduction," *Critical Sociology* 36.1 (2010): 11-24; Jared Sexton, "The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism," *InTensions* 5 (2011): 1-47; Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, rev. ed. (2010; New York: The New Press, 2012). For a critical discussion of Afro-pessimism, see Sebastian Weier, "Forum: Consider Afro-Pessimism," *Amerikastudien/American Studies* 59.3 (2014): 419-33.

11 | Hartman, *Lose Your Mother* 6.

12 | See also Saidiya Hartman, "The Time of Slavery," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 4 (2002): 758.

13 | Hartman, *Lose Your Mother* 6.

14 | Alexander 11.

the hypervisibility and stereotypical perception of black men as criminals in public and legal discourses. "Like Jim Crow," Alexander contends, "mass incarceration marginalizes large segments of the African American community, segregates them physically (in prisons, jails, and ghettos), and then authorizes discrimination against them in voting, employment, housing, education, public benefits, and jury service."[15]

Over the last years, numerous incidents of anti-black violence have brought to the public's attention the persistent legacy of black enslavement and abjection in the United States: In August 2014, for instance, Michael Brown, an eighteen-year-old unarmed black man was shot and killed by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri. This not only led to street protests and violent responses by heavily militarized police forces but also provoked public discussions about structural anti-black racism and white police brutality. The police officer was not indicted for Brown's death, which resulted in further violent demonstrations.[16] According to the philosopher Charles Mills, recent events like the shooting of Michael Brown show that "in the second decade of the 21st century, nearly 150 years after the end of the Civil War and with a black president in office—black citizens are still differentially vulnerable to police violence, thereby illustrating their (our) second-class citizenship."[17] Aiming to

15 | Ibid. 17.

16 | In recent years, there have been numerous other incidents of racial violence: In February 2012, for instance, seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin was shot and killed by a white neighborhood watch coordinator, who was later acquitted of second-degree murder by a jury in Florida. In November 2014, Tamir Rice, a twelve-year-old African American teenager was shot and killed by a white police officer in Cleveland, Ohio. In June 2015, nine black Americans were murdered by a white supremacist in a church in South Carolina, Charleston. See Monica Davey and Julie Bosmannov, "Protests Flare After Ferguson Police Officer Is Not Indicted," *New York Times* 24 Nov. 2014, 26 July 2015 http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/25/us/ferguson-darren-wilson-shooting-michael-brown-grand-jury.html; Wesley Lowery, "Trayvon Martin Was Shot and Killed Three Years Ago Today," *Washington Post* 26 Feb. 2015, 26 July 2015 http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2015/02/26/trayvon-martin-was-shot-and-killed-three-years-ago-today/; Emma G. Fitzsimmons, "Video Shows Cleveland Officer Shot Boy in 2 Seconds," *New York Times* 26 Nov. 2015, 26 July 2015 http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/27/us/video-shows-cleveland-officer-shot-tamir-rice-2-seconds-after-pulling-up-next-to-him.html; David Remnick, "Charleston and the Age of Obama," *New Yorker* 19 June 2015, 26 July 2015 http://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/charleston-and-the-age-of-obama.

17 | George Yancy, "Lost in Rawlsland: Interview with Charles Mills," *New York Times* 16 Nov. 2014, 26 July 2015 http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/11/16/lost-in-rawlsland/.

draw attention to the long history of black oppression and the systematic devaluation of black life in the twenty-first century, in 2012, three black female activists created the movement *#BlackLivesMatter*, which, as the Jamaican poet and playwright Claudia Rankine contends, "can be read as an attempt to keep mourning an open dynamic in our culture because black lives exist in a state of precariousness."[18] "If the ghost of slavery still haunts our present," Saidiya Hartman writes in *Lose Your Mother*, "it is because we are still looking for an exit from the prison."[19]

Contemporary Literary Negotiations of Slavery and the African Diaspora

Situated in the fields and intersections of African American, black feminist, diaspora and postcolonial studies, this work focuses on a vibrant and heterogeneous group of black authors who approach the subject of slavery from twenty-first-century perspectives. Among them are African Americans, Africans, African Canadians and African Caribbeans; former journalists, emerging scholars and distinguished professors; promising young writers and international literary celebrities. Drawing particular attention to the specific experiences of enslaved women, one of their common goals is to explore aspects of black diasporic history that have been forgotten, deliberately suppressed, neglected or marginalized in mainstream popular discussions, in earlier literary texts, in historical studies as well as in theoretical approaches. Significantly, these twenty-first-century black writers are not only concerned with U.S.-American history but also with the past of the slave trade and slavery in places such as Ghana, South Africa, Canada and Jamaica. Taken together, their texts highlight the transnational dimension of the history of slavery and the African diaspora, while at the same time paying scrupulous attention to the specificity of local historical developments and contexts.

In the following part of this chapter, after introducing the texts that I have selected for this study, I argue for a vibrant conceptualization of the African diaspora that provides a useful framework for a critical analysis of twenty-first-century literary negotiations of slavery. Moreover, this chapter gives a short overview of the emergence of neo-slave narratives in the United States in the aftermath of the Civil Rights, Black Arts and Black Power movements,

18 | Claudia Rankine, "The Condition of Black Life Is One of Mourning," *New York Times Magazine* 22 June 2015, 26 July 2015 http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/22/magazine/the-condition-of-black-life-is-one-of-mourning.html.

19 | Hartman, *Lose Your Mother* 133.

focuses on recent developments within this genre and argues that the selected texts belong to a second generation of neo-slave narratives.

Set in late seventeenth-century North America, *A Mercy* (2008) is Toni Morrison's first novel after her 1987 literary masterpiece *Beloved* that explicitly returns to the theme of slavery and the Middle Passage. Focusing on the fate of Florens, a sixteen-year-old enslaved woman, *A Mercy* examines the paradigm shift from human bondage to racial slavery that occurred in the early colonial period and particularly explores the disastrous psychological effects of anti-black racism on the oppressed. Without ignoring the possibility of black resistance, Morrison's multi-perspective novel strongly emphasizes the destructive nature of chattel slavery by exploring the complexity and pain of being a slave mother, addressing the subject of intra-black violence and depicting the ultimate breakdown of a heterogeneous group of uprooted women. In *A Mercy*, Morrison draws attention to loss and grief as defining features of black life in early colonial America, employing various postmodern narrative strategies to highlight Florens's experiences of fragmentation and hopelessness.

In her innovative travelogue *Lose Your Mother* (2007), Saidiya Hartman combines fictional elements, essayistic explorations of the history of the slave trade and autobiographical passages about African American roots tourism in present-day Ghana to reflect on the disturbing legacy of slavery. Hartman, a distinguished expert on slavery, African American literature and history and a professor at Columbia University, presents a vibrant interpretation of the African diaspora and black relations: *Lose Your Mother* deconstructs the static idea of a return to an "authentic" African village and the myth of Africa as a welcoming home for black diasporic returnees, directing the reader's attention to the complicity of Africans in the slave trade and giving voice to Hartman's feelings of loss and disenchantment in Ghana. What emerges from *Lose Your Mother* is an intricate view of the black world as a complex social formation that is not only characterized by essential differences and hierarchies but also united by the common objective of fighting against anti-black racism. At the core of *Lose Your Mother* is a multi-voiced chapter called "The Dead Book," in which Hartman critically engages with the archive of slavery to highlight the ultimate impossibility of recovering the voice and story of an eighteenth-century female captive who was murdered during the Middle Passage.

Having grown up in apartheid South Africa, Yvette Christiansë is currently professor of English and Africana Studies at Barnard College specializing in postcolonial and African American literature and theory. Set in the early nineteenth century, her critically acclaimed novel *Unconfessed* (2006) unfolds the story of Sila, a female slave kidnapped from Mozambique as a child and transported to South Africa's Cape Colony. Suffering from white brutality and sexual abuse, Sila takes the life of her son Baro, desperately hoping to protect him from further pain. Christiansë's novel is based on white-authored historical

documents found in the archive of slavery that reduce Sila to a piece of property and a criminal. In *Unconfessed*, Christiansë uses various sophisticated narrative strategies to write against this racist and one-sided depiction. In terms of form and content, Christiansë's novel enters into a powerful intertextual relationship with Morrison's *Beloved*: Exploring the theme of infanticide, both novels focus on the interiority of the female captive's experience and highlight the destructive psychological impact of slavery. Moreover, in a way similar to Morrison's masterpiece, *Unconfessed* self-reflexively draws attention to the limits and ethical dangers of revisiting the past of slavery.

Published in 2007, Lawrence Hill's *The Book of Negroes* is a prizewinning and best-selling novel about the life of an eighteenth-century African-born woman who is kidnapped from her native village as a child, transported across the Atlantic and sold into American slavery. Hill, an African Canadian writer and former journalist, engages in a dynamic dialogue with current discourses on the African diaspora, addressing questions of home, belonging and loss and reflecting on the impossibility of diasporic return. Focusing on the story of fugitive slaves who joined the British during the American Revolutionary War and relocated to Nova Scotia in 1783, *The Book of Negroes* particularly explores Canada's history of slavery, racial violence and segregation, deconstructing mythical conceptions of the country as a "paradise" for blacks during the time of the slave trade and slavery. Using unconvincing melodramatic plot devices, offering narrative closure and naively celebrating the healing power of literature, Hill, I argue, presents an ultimately triumphant account of an enslaved woman's life and, thus, trivializes the horrors of slavery.

Marlon James is a Caribbean-born writer and currently a professor of English and Creative Writing at Macalester College in Minnesota. His novel *The Book of Night Women* (2009), winner of the 2010 Dayton Literary Peace Prize for Fiction, highlights the destructive power of Jamaican slavery and revolves around the themes of oppression and black female resistance. Set in the late eighteenth century, James's novel focuses on the life of Lilith, the daughter of a slave woman and a white overseer, who grows up on a large sugar plantation. *The Book of Night Women* examines the intricate power relationships between slave owners, overseers, slaves and maroons, directing the reader's attention to the female slave's plight in a racist and sexist world. Moreover, tracing Lilith's transformation into a murderer, James's novel explores the role and the legitimacy of violence in the struggle for freedom. What renders *The Book of Night Women* problematic is James's decision to represent acts of anti-black violence, torture and rape in an unsparing, even pornographic, way that remains unreflected in the text. Unlike Morrison, Hartman and Christiansë, he fails to acknowledge and include the epistemological insights of black feminist scholars, such as Hortense J. Spillers, concerning the ethics of narration.

Characterized by a high level of heterogeneity, the texts I have selected for this study are set in different geographical regions and historical periods, i.e., in late seventeenth-century colonial North America (Morrison); in late eighteenth-century Jamaica (James); in eighteenth-century/early nineteenth-century West Africa, South Carolina, New York, Nova Scotia and Great Britain (Hill); in the nineteenth-century Cape Colony (Christiansë) and in twentieth-century Ghana (Hartman). In their attempt to unearth forgotten or neglected histories of slavery, they focus on spaces with specific social power structures; spaces in which meanings of race, class, gender and sexuality as well as concepts of home, belonging and exclusion are negotiated in concrete historical, social, political and cultural contexts. In analyzing these twenty-first-century literary texts, my work offers a transnational approach to the topic of writing slavery that accentuates the productive tension between local specifics and global structures:[20] It highlights the diversity and complexity of the African diaspora, while simultaneously drawing attention to dimensions that connect black diasporic subjects and communities around the world, such as traumatic experiences and memories of dislocation, violence and loss as well as dynamic forms of home-making, black agency and resistance against oppression and exploitation.

In order to acknowledge and reflect on this intricate relationship between the local and the transnational, *Transnational Black Dialogues: Re-Imagining Slavery in the Twenty-First Century* draws on a dynamic conceptual framework within the field of African diaspora studies that emphasizes the idea of "'difference within unity.'"[21] Following scholars such as Stuart Hall, Avtar Brah, Brent Hayes Edwards and Tina M. Campt,[22] this study contends that the African diaspora is a complex social and cultural, transnational network of groups marked by fundamental similarities, essential differences and internal and external hierarchies. Focusing on transnational literary and theoretical negotiations of slavery, my work is based on the conviction that it is important to contextualize

20 | For a similar approach in the context of black Canadian literature, see Winfried Siemerling, *The Black Atlantic Reconsidered: Black Canadian Writing, Cultural History, and the Presence of the Past* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 2015).

21 | Brent Hayes Edwards, "The Uses of Diaspora," *Social Text* 19.1 (2001): 59.

22 | Stuart Hall, "Race, Articulation, and Societies Structured in Dominance," *Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader*, eds. Houston A. Baker, Jr., Manthia Diawara and Ruth H. Lindeborg (1980; Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1996) 16-60; Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference,* ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990) 222-37; Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (London: Routledge, 1996); Edwards 45-73; Tina M. Campt, *Other Germans*: *Black Germans and the Politics of Race, Gender, and Memory in the Third Reich* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2004); Tina M. Campt, *Image Matters: Archive, Photography, and the African Diaspora in Europe* (Durham: Duke UP, 2012).

the specific history of a particular black group (such as African Canadians or African Caribbeans) and to take into account the interplay between local characteristics and the larger framework of the African diaspora.

Within the field of African diaspora studies, there is a strong focus on the history and experiences of blacks in the Atlantic world, particularly in the United States,[23] as well as a "dominance of African-American and Black British paradigms for understanding Black identity and Black cultural formations"[24] across the globe. This development, Campt contends, raises questions about the hegemony of black America in academic and public discourses on the African diaspora.[25] Furthermore, it draws attention to the (self-proclaimed) avant-garde role of African American intellectuals, scholars and writers, who have been at the forefront of articulating the complexity and richness of black life in a wide range of literary, philosophical, political and theoretical texts. Moving beyond victimization approaches, African Americans have created powerful concepts and paradigms for theorizing black diasporic identity and analyzing forms of black agency and resistance. Equally significant, they have inspired and empowered other black intellectuals, researchers and authors around the world to examine various aspects of black history both inside and outside the United States.

While twenty-first-century black writers like Christiansë, James and Hill turn their attention to exploring the past of slavery in countries like South Africa, Jamaica and Canada, they enter into a dynamic intertextual dialogue with African American literary texts about slavery—which reflects the dominance as well as the avant-garde role of black America within African diaspora discourse. Crucially, Christiansë and James, although originally from South Africa and Jamaica, respectively, are now members of the U.S. academic community. As experts in disciplines such as African American, postcolonial and gender studies, they actively participate in and contribute to the negotiation of critical theory and history, which, in turn, has an enormous influence on their literary projects: Profoundly shaped by the work of African American literary and cultural theorists and writers, Christiansë not only published a theoret-

23 | Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, "Rewriting the African Diaspora: Beyond the Black Atlantic," *African Affairs* 104.414 (2005): 35-68.

24 | Campt, *Other Germans* 23.

25 | For critical discussions of the dominance of African America within the field of African diaspora studies, see Tina M. Campt and Deborah A. Thomas,"Gendering Diaspora: Transnational Feminism, Diaspora and Its Hegemonies,"*Feminist Review* 90 (2008): 1-8; Campt, *Other Germans* 1-23, 168-210; Tina M.Campt, "Imagining Ourselves: What Does It Mean to Be Part of the African Diaspora?" Interview by Jean-Philippe Dedieu, *Think Africa Press* 21 Nov. 2013, 29 Jan. 2014 http://thinkafricapress.com/society/imagining-ourselves-interview-tina-campt-diaspora-photograph.

ically sophisticated monograph on the work of Toni Morrison.[26] In terms of content, aesthetics and ethics, she also participates in an intertextual dialogue with *Beloved* in her novel *Unconfessed*.[27]

Writing and Theorizing Slavery in the Twenty-First Century

While they shed light on different local contexts, historical events and developments, power structures and black cultural traditions, contemporary writers like Morrison, Hartman, Christiansë, Hill and James face the same aesthetic and ethical challenge of how to re-imagine slavery from twenty-first-century perspectives. Reflecting on what Hartman calls "the ethics of historical representation,"[28] this study is particularly attentive not only to the dangers inherent in writing about acts of anti-black violence, exploitation, torture and sexual abuse but also to the risks of revisiting and (re-)appropriating the archive of slavery both inside and outside the United States. Drawing on the work of black feminists such as Spillers and Deborah E. McDowell, my work contends that there are fundamental similarities and differences between Morrison's, Hartman's, Christiansë's, James's and Hill's aesthetic choices, ethical approaches and theoretical conceptions of (writing) slavery.

What makes texts like Morrison's *A Mercy*, Hartman's *Lose Your Mother* and Christiansë's *Unconfessed* so complex and powerful in both ethical and aesthetic terms, I argue, is that they creatively combine, and self-reflexively draw attention to, different narrative goals: They not only seek to reconstruct largely forgotten or suppressed memories of slavery, to counter white misrepresentations of black life, to engage with the disturbing silences and omissions in the archive, to expose the horrific violence of slavery and to address the specific vulnerability of enslaved women to (sexual) abuse. Even more significantly, writers like Morrison, Hartman and Christiansë also critically reflect on the (ultimate) impossibility of recovering the (female) slave's voice and filling the gaps in the historical records. Highly influenced by the epistemological interventions of black feminists like Spillers, they employ innovative narrative techniques, such as non-linearity, fragmentation, multi-perspectivity and self-reflexivity, to acknowledge and highlight the intricacies and risks inherent in representing scenes of exploitation and suffering and, especially, in writing about violence

26 | Yvette Christiansë, *Toni Morrison: An Ethical Poetics* (New York: Fordham UP, 2013).

27 | See chapter 4, "'Hertseer:' Re-Imagining Cape Slavery in Yvette Christiansë's *Unconfessed* (2006)," in this study.

28 | Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12.2 (2008): 5.

against the black female body. Ultimately, texts like *A Mercy*, *Lose Your Mother* and *Unconfessed* culminate in the insightful claim that there are specific aspects and experiences of slavery that cannot, and should not, be put into words.

This study argues that contemporary black feminist literary negotiations of slavery like *A Mercy*, *Lose Your Mother* and *Unconfessed* cannot be read without taking into account their dynamic intertextual relationships to Toni Morrison's 1987 *Beloved* and, more specifically, to a particular and disturbing tendency in the reception of this masterpiece: In contemporary (African) American literature, *Beloved* stands out as one of the most influential, critically acclaimed and commercially successful literary meditations on slavery, the Middle Passage and the enduring effects of this history. The novel was translated into numerous languages and adapted into a 1998 movie starring Danny Glover and Oprah Winfrey. More importantly, it earned Morrison the Nobel Prize of Literature in 1993, which transformed her into "a global cultural figure,"[29] as Farah Jasmine Griffin has put it. Given the text's enormous international success and profound influence on academic and popular discourses, the publication of Morrison's *magnum opus* as well as its critical reception, Sabine Broeck contends, "must be marked as a watershed moment in that it put slavery, as well as the black woman's plight resulting from it, on the public agenda to a hitherto un-witnessed extent."[30]

In her insightful essay "Trauma, Agency, Kitsch and the Excesses of the Real: *Beloved* within the Field of Critical Response" (2006), Broeck offers a critical discussion of a prevailing trend in the secondary literature about *Beloved*, a novel which has been widely praised for giving voice to the formerly excluded, silenced and marginalized: Among cultural critics, (literary) scholars and other readers, Broeck argues, there is a strong tendency to offer a "kitsch"[31] interpretation of *Beloved* and to regard the novel solely as a powerful narrative of overcoming, liberation, redemption and recovery; as a triumphant tale suggesting that it is possible to work through the past, bear witness to the atrocities

29 | Farah Jasmine Griffin, "A 'Middle Aged Gray Haired Colored Lady' Appears on the Cover of *Newsweek*: Toni Morrison," *A New Literary History of America*, eds. Greil Marcus and Werner Sollors (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2009) 997.

30 | Sabine Broeck, "Enslavement as Regime of Western Modernity: Re-reading Gender Studies Epistemology Through Black Feminist Critique," 2008, *Sabine Broeck: Plotting Against Modernity; Critical Interventions in Race and Gender*, eds. Karin Esders, Insa Härtel and Carsten Junker (Sulzbach: Helmer, 2014) 35.

31 | Sabine Broeck, "Trauma, Agency, Kitsch and the Excesses of the Real: *Beloved* within the Field of Critical Response," 2006, *Sabine Broeck: Plotting Against Modernity; Critical Interventions in Race and Gender*, eds. Karin Esders, Insa Härtel and Carsten Junker (Sulzbach: Helmer, 2014) 247.

suffered by enslaved individuals and heal the trauma of slavery though the act of narration.

In order to support that claim, many critics have primarily focused on the novel's plot and its rather "optimistic" ending (Paul D's return to Sethe, Beloved's departure, Denver's integration into the (local) black community and her chance to go to college), without paying attention to the text's ambiguities, its complex aesthetic structure and ethical implications. According to Broeck, what is often ignored is the fact that Morrison strategically employs a variety of sophisticated narrative techniques and strategies (including fragmentation, non-realist elements, textual blanks and ruptures), reflecting on the ultimate impossibility to articulate the experiences of the dispossessed, to present a coherent story of a black woman's life in bondage and to heal the trauma of "New World" racial slavery. Marked by ambiguities, *Beloved* seeks to confront the reader with the brutal nature and persistent legacy of slavery, while commenting on the impossibility to write about this (collective) traumatic experience.[32] *Beloved*, Yvette Christiansë argues in her study *Toni Morrison: An Ethical Poetics* (2013), "does not merely fill in or supplant the previously vacant spaces of historical knowledge. It retains asymmetries and opacities, which produce a haunted text and a haunted reader."[33]

In this study, I read black feminist texts like *A Mercy, Lose Your Mother* and *Unconfessed* as radical intertextual responses to interpretations of *Beloved* that are based on notions of overcoming, healing and redemption: Concerned with questions of representability and ethics, Morrison, Hartman and Christiansë warn against an easy appropriation of black history and draw attention to the impossibility of working through the past in order to heal the wounds of slavery. Instead of naively and uncritically celebrating the reconciliatory power of twenty-first-century fiction, they shed light on the devastating nature of slavery to reflect on "what lived on from this history,"[34] to use Hartman's words. Thus, they engage in a dynamic dialogue with Afro-pessimist discourse. Foregrounding black experiences of loss, dispossession and grief without losing sight of forms of black agency and resistance, their texts offer a conceptualization of slavery as an utterly dehumanizing process of "thingification"[35] (Aimé Césaire), exploring the ways in which enslaved black subjects were transformed into mere commodities and objects of (sexual) exploitation.

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32 | Ibid. 239-57; see also Broeck, "Enslavement as Regime of Western Modernity" 35; Sabine Broeck, *White Amnesia – Black Memory? American Women's Writing and History* (Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang, 1999) 36-40.

33 | Christiansë, *Toni Morrison* 34.

34 | Hartman, *Lose Your Mother* 130.

35 | Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham (1955; New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000) 42.

Analyzing crucial aesthetic, ethical and conceptual differences and similarities between texts like *A Mercy*, *Lose Your Mother* and *Unconfessed*, on the one hand, and *The Book of Negroes* and *The Book of Night Women*, on the other, one of the main concerns of this study is to draw attention to the risks and dangers of re-imagining slavery in the twenty-first century: What Hill shares with female writers like Morrison, Hartman and Christiansë is the desire to bring to light largely forgotten stories of slavery and to examine the specific experience of enslaved women. However, while *A Mercy*, *Lose Your Mother* and *Unconfessed* strongly focus on loss as a definer of black life and refuse to offer a consoling view of slavery in order to accentuate the impossibility of healing and overcoming, *The Book of Negroes* is constructed as an empowering narrative about a slave woman's triumph over slavery, suggesting that it is possible to work through and close the wounds of the past. In stark contrast to writers like Morrison, Hartman and Christiansë, Hill offers no critical reflections on the limits and ethical implications of writing about anti-black violence and slavery as "thingification" but instead highlights the liberating power of the act of narration. Using a vivid style, he presents an affirmative approach to writing and theorizing slavery, focusing especially on dynamic forms of black self-invention, home-making and renewal. Analyzing the novel's melodramatic plot structure, this study argues that *The Book of Negroes* runs the risk of playing down and trivializing the true implications and the horrors of American chattel slavery; it fails to acknowledge and express the intricate meaning of slavery as "thingification."

In *The Book of Night Women*, James, too, pays particular attention to the female slave's experience of sexual violence and oppression in a racist and male-dominated society, unfolding the story of a young black woman in late eighteenth-century Jamaica. Yet, in stark contrast to Morrison, Hartman and Christiansë, he shows the brutality of slavery in a detailed, unsparing and ultimately pornographic way, without engaging in a self-reflexive examination of the ethical dangers inherent in this narrative choice. Unlike Hill's *The Book of Negroes*, which offers an unconvincing teleological conception of history and a reductive reconciliatory interpretation of eighteenth-century black life, *The Book of Night Women* foregrounds the utterly destructive nature of slavery, underlining the impossibility for the slaves to escape the vicious circle of violence and racial oppression. By presenting the captive's experience of "thingification" in a pornographically explicit manner, however, James fails to take into account the complex (epistemological) insights of black feminist theory concerning "the ethics of historical representation,"[36] to use Hartman's phrase. Drawing on Spillers's, McDowell's, Hartman's and Angela Davis's theoretical contribu-

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

tions,[37] this study contends that James subjects the enslaved to a second act of victimization and abuse, reducing his (female) characters to objects of voyeuristic desire.

I argue that both Hill and James strategically employ black female protagonists to explore the history of slavery: Not only do they seek to write themselves into the commercially successful tradition of female-authored neo-slave narratives that concentrate on the lives of enslaved women. In a self-legitimizing move, they also intend to justify their decision to depict slave women's experiences of (sexual) violence. However, both *The Book of Negroes* and *The Book of Night Women* never critically elaborate on the ethics of narration and the theoretical intricacies involved in "the practice of speaking for others"[38] (Linda Alcoff). Whereas Hill fails to articulate the true meaning of slave womanhood and motherhood by incorporating melodramatic, "fairy-tale" elements into his text, James refuses to engage in a self-reflexive examination of the dangers of representing scenes of subjection and torture in a pornographic way.

Neo-Slave Narratives: Current State of Research

Exploring the history of slavery in a variety of geographical areas and historical periods, contemporary black writers like Morrison, Hartman, Christiansë, Hill and James do not write in a vacuum but enter into an energetic and fruitful dialogue with both classic slave narratives and twentieth-century neo-slave narratives. This study argues that texts like *A Mercy*, *Lose Your Mother*, *Unconfessed*, *The Book of Negroes* and *The Book of Night Women* are representative of a second generation of neo-slave narratives. The following short overview focuses on the emergence of neo-slave narratives in the United States in the late 1960s, explores recent developments in this genre, reflects on the complex relationship between slave and neo-slave narratives and, most importantly, argues that it is essential to distinguish between a first and a second generation of neo-slave narratives.

Since the late 1960s, numerous African American writers have written literary texts about the transatlantic slave trade and slavery. Among these works

37 | See Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*; Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts" 1-14; Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17.2 (1987): 64-81; Deborah E. McDowell, ed., *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, by Frederick Douglass (1845; Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999) vii-xxvii; Angela Davis, ed., *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, by Frederick Douglass (1845; San Francisco: City Lights, 2010) 21-37.

38 | Linda Alcoff, "The Problem of Speaking for Others," *Cultural Critique* 20 (1991-1992): 9.

are critically praised as well as commercially successful novels like Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* (1966), Ishmael Reed's *Flight To Canada* (1976), Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose* (1986), Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) and Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage* (1990). In light of the scarcity of black literary representations of slavery in the first half of the twentieth century, this orientation towards the past marked a new development in the context of African American fiction: As scholars like Ashraf H. A. Rushdy, Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu, Maria I. Diedrich and Madhu Dubey point out, it was a dynamic response to transformations in intellectual discourses and in the political, social and institutional realms of the United States; a response to transformations initiated by the Civil Rights, Black Arts and Black Power movements.[39]

One of the important changes that took place during this period was a radical reconceptualization of the historiography of slavery. In his introduction to the 1990 edition of *Black Odyssey: The African-American Ordeal in Slavery*, the historian Nathan I. Huggins presents an intriguing overview of the way U.S. historians have treated slavery over the course of time: Like the Founding Fathers of the U.S., who refused to regard racial slavery as a structural element of American history and instead constructed a racially exclusive concept of the nation, up until the transformational 1960s, U.S. historians generally created a white master narrative of American history. According to Huggins, they produced a story of constant progress that considered "racial slavery and oppression as curious abnormalities—aberrations—historical accidents to be corrected in the progressive upward reach of the nation's destiny."[40] In this dominant conceptualization of the past, there was no room for African Americans, no interest in the stories of and texts written by enslaved black men and women. In general, Huggins argues, historians "seemed to assume that a slave's testimony was self-interested special pleading and, therefore, uncreditable."[41]

The 1960s, however, marked a turning point when several historians, especially those associated with the New Left, started to adopt a bottom-up approach

39 | See Ashraf H. A. Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form* (New York: Oxford UP, 1999) 1-22; Ashraf H. A. Rushdy, "The Neo-Slave Narrative," *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel*, ed. Maryemma Graham (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004) 87; Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu, *Black Women Writers and the American Neo-Slave Narrative: Femininity Unfettered* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999) xiii-27; Maria I. Diedrich, "Afro-amerikanische Literatur," *Amerikanische Literaturgeschichte*, ed. Hubert Zapf, 3rd ed. (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2010) 439-40; Madhu Dubey, "Neo-Slave Narratives," *A Companion to African American Literature*, ed. Gene Andrew Jarrett (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010) 332-33.

40 | Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Black Odyssey: The African-American Ordeal in Slavery* (1977; New York: Vintage, 1990) xii.

41 | Ibid. xxiv.

to history. Employing new methodologies, they began to look at the past focusing on the perspectives of African Americans and other formerly marginalized groups, such as Native Americans, Asian Americans or women. In their studies of racial slavery, they no longer ignored the testimony of slaves but began to draw on, even to concentrate exclusively on, oral histories and slave narratives.[42] As Huggins explains, scholars like John Blassingame started to examine the vital role of the black family and community, to emphasize the importance of slave religion, to shed light on the dynamic culture of the enslaved population and to reconstruct the history of organized slave rebellions and different forms of daily resistance. As a result of this important scholarly activity, (black) historians "were no longer content to understand slavery simply as an institution in which blacks labored under white dominion, mere victims subjugated to the rule and will of whites."[43] Rather, they were determined to demonstrate that enslaved black women and men were active agents in the formation of a distinctive African American culture.[44]

This new academic approach to slavery had an empowering influence on contemporary African American writers but was not the only driving force behind the emergence of neo-slave narratives. As Ashraf Rushdy argues, it is also essential to focus on important institutional developments that occurred at that time: In the late 1960s, when the Black Power movement flourished, the first Black Studies programs were established at historically white universities and colleges in the U.S., which, among other things, caused an increasing demand for black-authored texts that could be read and taught in class. With its emphasis on black self-determination, the Black Power movement, in turn, encouraged African American writers to approach the history of slavery from a black perspective.

At around the same time, the publication of *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967) by white Southern author William Styron evoked strong indignation among black intellectuals and Black Power advocates: They criticized the novel for its racist depiction of rebellion leader Nat Turner, its uncritical adoption of the hegemonic discourse on slavery and, as Rushdy puts it, "its presumption of assuming the voice of a slave, its uninformed appropriation of African American culture."[45] Determined to give a more accurate account of the past, African American authors like Sherley Anne Williams started to create counter-stories to Styron's controversial novel. Together, Rushdy contends, these social, polit-

42 | Ibid. xvi-xx. See also Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives* 4; Dubey 333.

43 | Huggins xxxii.

44 | Ibid. xvi-xxxi.

45 | Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives* 4.

ical, historiographical and institutional developments laid the ground for the rise of the genre of neo-slave narratives.[46]

The term "neoslave narrative" first appears in Bernard W. Bell's 1987 work *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition*: In a chapter on black modernism and postmodernism, Bell offers a reading of Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* (1966), which he describes as the "first major neoslave narrative: residually oral, modern narratives of escape from bondage."[47] In more recent years, Bell's neologism, which acknowledges the influence of slave narratives on postmodern black reconstructions of slavery, has been taken up by scholars like Ashraf H.A. Rushdy and Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu.

Rushdy's *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form* (1999), the first extensive work on neo-slave narratives, has become a key text within the field. In comparison with Bell, Rushdy presents a more exclusive definition that characterizes neo-slave narratives as "contemporary novels that assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on the first-person voice of the antebellum slave narrative."[48] Rushdy offers an excellent overview of the historical contexts out of which the genre of neo-slave narrative emerged. In his analysis of *Flight to Canada* (1976) by Ishmael Reed, *Dessa Rose* (1986) by Sherley Anne Williams, *Oxherding Tale* (1982) and *Middle Passage* (1990) by Charles Johnson, he draws on an extended meaning of intertextuality, which refers to the relationships that exist between literary texts as well as to "the ways texts mediate the social conditions of their formal production."[49] Rushdy shows that the three selected authors of neo-slave narratives from the 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s actively participate in discourses of the 1960s: They comment on the heated controversy surrounding Styron's text, contribute to historiographical discussions about slavery and, equally significant, critically reflect on the legacies of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. By employing the form of the classic slave narrative, a genre in which black American subjectivity was first articulated, they demonstrate the rise of a new black political consciousness.[50] Primarily "concerned with tracing how a specific literary form emerged and evolved in response to developments in the public sphere,"[51] Rushdy's study, I argue, fails to explore the influence of black feminist criticism on neo-slave narrative authors and to provide a systematic reflection on the ethical implications and dangers of re-imagining chattel slavery from a twentieth-cen-

46 | Ibid. 1-22, 90; see also Rushdy, "The Neo-Slave Narrative" 87-98.

47 | Bernard W. Bell, *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition* (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1987) 289.

48 | Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives* 3.

49 | Ibid. 14.

50 | Ibid. 1-22.

51 | Ibid. 5.

tury perspective. Furthermore, Rushdy does not acknowledge and examine the transnational dimension of the genre of neo-slave narratives, ignoring the fact that "Caribbean and Black British writers have also turned back toward slavery,"[52] as Arlene R. Keizer contends.

Beaulieu is one of the first scholars to approach the genre of neo-slave narratives from the vantage point of black feminism: In her seminal study *Black Women Writers and the American Neo-Slave Narrative: Femininity Unfettered* (1999), Beaulieu argues that twentieth-century female writers like Sherley Anne Williams, Toni Morrison and J. California Cooper "choose to author neo-slave narratives to reinscribe history from the point of view of the black woman, most specifically the nineteenth-century enslaved mother."[53] As Beaulieu points out, highly influenced by the revisionist scholarship of black feminists such as Angela Davis and Deborah Gray White, these black women writers are determined

> to rectify the historic invisibility of the enslaved woman by exploding the oversimplified stereotype of black women as genderless work animals capable only of matching a man's work production in the field and of breeding, and by producing viable alternative models of enslaved women, models that continue to inspire black women today.[54]

According to Beaulieu, writers like Morrison, Williams and Cooper depict female slaves as strong and complex characters, "as mothers capable of loving and caring for their children in spite of the obstacles placed in their way by slavery and slave masters."[55] By exploring the intricate meaning of motherhood under slavery, they engage in a powerful rewriting of male-authored slave narratives that primarily focus on themes like black manhood and literacy.[56] While her study offers a complex meditation on intertextual relations between slave and neo-slave narratives, Beaulieu fails to examine differences and similarities between contemporary black female and male writers in terms of aesthetic choices and theoretical conceptions of (writing) slavery.[57] Moreover, like Rushdy, she does not systematically reflect on questions concerning the ethics of narration, i.e., the dangers inherent in representing acts of exploitation and violence against the black (female) body. Crucially, she also ignores the transnational nature of the genre of neo-slave narratives.

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52 | Arlene R. Keizer, *Black Subjects: Identity Formation in the Contemporary Narrative of Slavery* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2004) 4.

53 | Beaulieu xv.

54 | Ibid. 25.

55 | Ibid. 14.

56 | Ibid. 13-14.

57 | For a similar critique of Beaulieu's study, see also Keizer 4.

In a way similar to Beaulieu, Angelyn Mitchell offers a compelling analysis of twentieth-century representations of slavery by black female writers. In her study *The Freedom to Remember: Narrative, Slavery, and Gender in Contemporary Black Women's Fiction* (2002), she concentrates on literary works such as Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979), Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose* (1986), Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), J. California Cooper's *Family* (1992) and Lorene Carey's *The Price of a Child* (1995). According to Mitchell, these selected postmodern novels do not primarily deal with the condition of enslavement but rather explore "the nature of freedom—of affranchisement—for those who were formerly enslaved."[58] Therefore, Mitchell does not use the term neo-slave narratives to characterize these female-authored texts but instead introduces the category of "liberatory narratives."

Mitchell shows that the "liberatory narratives" are deeply embedded in a black women's literary tradition. In particular, they stand in a dialogic relationship with Harriet Jacob's classic slave narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) and, from a twentieth-century perspective, shed light on issues like black motherhood and community. Inspired by contemporary black feminist discourse, they write about formerly ignored aspects of slavery and delve into the inner life of female slaves. According to Mitchell, by challenging the white master narrative of slavery that reduces black women to disempowered objects, the "liberatory narrative" has a healing effect on contemporary (black) audiences: It is intended "to liberate its readers from the shackles of the past by asking them to look at the whole of slavery, especially as it involved Black women."[59] The novels under consideration, Mitchell argues, "are liberatory not only in content and form, but in their projected and ideal reception as well."[60]

Mitchell's study fails to take into account that, as Keizer puts it, many (female-authored) neo-slave narratives do "not qualify as liberatory, either for their characters or their readers."[61] In *Transnational Black Dialogues*, I argue that writers like Morrison, Hartman and Christiansë not only self-reflexively elaborate on the impossibility of working through the past in order to heal the trauma of slavery but also highlight the enduring effects of slavery on later black generations. Refusing to give a consoling view of black slave life, they reflect on what Hartman calls "the future created by"[62] slavery. Focusing on loss, grief and dispossession as defining features of the African diaspora, their texts cannot be described as "liberatory narratives."

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58 | Angelyn Mitchell, *The Freedom to Remember: Narrative, Slavery, and Gender in Contemporary Black Women's Fiction* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2002) 4.

59 | Ibid. 146.

60 | Ibid. 21.

61 | Keizer 4.

62 | Hartman, *Lose Your Mother* 133.

In recent years, scholars like Keizer have started to explore the transnational dimension of the genre of neo-slave narratives, moving beyond an exclusive focus on literary negotiations of U.S.-American slavery. In her monograph *Black Subjects: Identity Formation in the Contemporary Narrative of Slavery* (2004), Keizer shows that both Caribbean and African American writers participate in discourses on African diasporic identity and challenge established Western concepts of subjectivity, such as psychoanalysis and performance theory. What unites authors like Derek Walcott and Morrison, despite their exploration of different geographical regions, is their attempt to deconstruct static and essentialized understandings of black identity, "while maintaining a sense of the integrity of creolized black cultures in the Americas and showing how black subjectivities are produced and contested within these cultures."[63] The authors do not return to the period of slavery primarily to call attention to the history of black subjugation and contemporary forms of racial oppression but rather, Keizer contends, "to explore the process of self-creation under extremely oppressive conditions."[64] In particular, they theorize about the complex nature of black diasporic resistance. In a way similar to Rushdy, Keizer reads these twentieth-century neo-slave narratives as responses to the social, cultural and political movements of the 1960s.[65] While Keizer acknowledges that novels about slavery "have emerged from every site in the diaspora where people of African descent are present in significant numbers,"[66] she focuses exclusively on African American and Caribbean authors. Moreover, primarily concerned with examining the authors' concepts of subjectivity, she does not critically reflect on questions of representability and ethics.

Transnational Black Dialogues offers an innovative transnational approach to recent developments in the genre of neo-slave narratives: Rushdy, Beaulieu and Mitchell are exclusively concerned with late twentieth-century African American writers whose neo-slave narratives primarily reconstruct the history of slavery in the United States in the nineteenth century and critically reflect on discourses associated with the Civil Rights, Black Arts and Black Power Movements; in other words, their studies are striking examples of the dominance of African America within African diaspora discourse. By contrast, I also include twenty-first-century black writers with different cultural backgrounds (e.g. African Canadian, South African, African American and African Caribbean) who examine the link between the history of slavery and twenty-first-century black life; who enter into an intertextual discussion with African diaspora theory, slave narratives, earlier neo-slave narratives and African American literature

63 | Keizer 11.

64 | Ibid.

65 | Ibid. 1-20.

66 | Ibid. 4.

more generally; who shed light on a variety of places and periods, such as late eighteenth-century Jamaica and early nineteenth-century South Africa.[67]

Unlike Keizer, whose primary goal is to highlight the relationship between black Caribbean/American authors' concepts of subjectivity and Western theories of identity, I offer a systematic investigation of continuities and discontinuities between twentieth-century and recent neo-slave narratives. In contrast to Keizer's *Black Subjects*, my work draws on diaspora theory to analyze the complex tension between local black histories and the global framework of the African diaspora, while paying particular attention to the ethical and aesthetic implications of writing chattel slavery from today's point of view.

Second-Generation Neo-Slave Narratives

Significantly, in current academic discourse, the term neo-slave narrative is not uncontested: A major point of criticism is that the prevailing definitions of this genre are too restrictive to cover the heterogeneity and diversity of contemporary representations of slavery. In *Black Subjects*, for instance, Keizer argues that Bell's definition in *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition* "limits the scope of these works because of its focus on the movement from enslavement to freedom, the trajectory of the traditional slave narrative."[68] Keizer also criticizes Rushdy for concentrating "even more narrowly on the influence of the antebellum slave narrative, analyzing only those contemporary novels that clearly and explicitly reference nineteenth-century, first-person, literate slave testimony."[69] Many literary texts that deal with slavery, Keizer contends, are not first-person accounts and therefore depart from the tradition of slave narratives. Thus, in order to consider a larger group of texts, she introduces "the category of contemporary narratives of slavery."[70] In a similar way, in *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery* (2008), Glenda R. Carpio employs the broad term "fictions of slavery" to refer to a heterogeneous mixture of genres,

67 | While I acknowledge that Francophone authors, such as Maryse Condé and Patrick Chamoiseau, and many other non-Anglophone writers have turned their attention to exploring the history of slavery and the slave trade, I focus exclusively on texts written in English to limit the scope of my study. For a discussion of Francophone Caribbean authors of slavery, see Judith Misrahi-Barak, ed., *Revisiting Slave Narratives/ Les avatars contemporains des récits d'esclaves* (Montpellier: Université Montpellier III, 2005).

68 | Keizer 3.

69 | Ibid.

70 | Ibid. 4.

including plays, short stories, novels and visual art, from the Civil Rights era to the present.[71]

While I agree that Bell's and Rushdy's definitions are narrow, the term neo-slave narrative captures the complex intertextual relationship between slave narratives and contemporary literary representations of slavery. No one has better described this dynamic interaction than Toni Morrison: In her seminal 1987 essay "The Site of Memory," she offers an insightful reflection on key characteristics of the slave narrative and her role as a contemporary black female writer. As Morrison explains, slave narrative authors like Olaudah Equiano, Frederick Douglass and Harriet Ann Jacobs primarily addressed—or rather: had to address—a white audience: "In shaping the experience to make it palatable to those who were in a position to alleviate it, they were silent about many things, and they 'forgot' many other things," Morrison argues. "There was a careful selection of the instances that they would record and a careful rendering of those that they chose to describe."[72] In Morrison's view, her task as a postmodern novelist is to shed light on previously suppressed topics such as the female captive's experience of sexual violence, to explore the interior life of the enslaved and to find ways "how to rip that veil drawn over 'proceedings too terrible to relate.'"[73]

In their attempt to appropriate the past of slavery, in their struggle for black self-representation, black writers like Morrison refused to submit to the expectations of a white audience; they envisioned a reader from their own cultural matrix instead of a white audience:[74] "I write what I have recently begun to call village literature, fiction that is really for the village, for the tribe,"[75] Morrison says in a 1981 interview with Thomas LeClair. In other words, in texts like *Beloved*, she has a reader in mind who is familiar with African American oral traditions, myths, tales and folklore; a reader who is ready and culturally competent to take part "in the act of creating the story."[76] As Diedrich explains, Morrison's concept of "village literature" must be interpreted as a "construction

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71 | Glenda R. Carpio, *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery* (New York: Oxford UP, 2008).

72 | Toni Morrison, "The Site of Memory," *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, eds. Russell Baker and William Zinsser, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1995) 91.

73 | Ibid.

74 | Diedrich, "Afro-amerikanische Literatur" 439-43.

75 | Thomas LeClair, "The Language Must Not Sweat: A Conversation with Toni Morrison," *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, ed. Danille Taylor-Guthrie (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1994) 120.

76 | Maria I. Diedrich, "'Things Fall Apart?' The Black Critical Controversy Over Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," *Amerikastudien/American Studies* 34.2. (1989): 176.

of her ideal target group; it is a model which bears little resemblance to her actual audience,"[77] yet is both self-empowering and liberating.

In this study, I argue that twenty-first-century black writers continue to write about formerly ignored or marginalized aspects of slavery and, in doing so, enter into a dialogue with both the antebellum slave narrative and twentieth-century neo-slave narratives. Crucially, writers like Morrison, Hartman and Christiansë not only try to fill in the gaps of the historical record but also self-reflexively comment on the dangers and limits inherent in their attempt to reconstruct the history of slavery from today's perspective. In *Transnational Black Dialogues*, I use the term neo-slave narrative in a broad sense to refer to different genres, such as novels and travelogues, and texts written from different perspectives, not only first-person accounts.

As far as the category of second-generation neo-slave narratives is concerned, the notion of succeeding generations is not without its pitfalls. As Mark Stein points out in a study on black British fiction, the idea of different generations suggests that it is possible to draw clear lines of demarcation between one group of authors/texts and another.[78] Moreover, Stein maintains, it implies "an organic connection between the literature of different writers who may or may not stand in a *relationship of entailment*."[79] While it is true that the linearity the term conveys is problematic,[80] I use the concept of the generation to draw attention to fundamental continuities and important discontinuities between neo-slave narrative authors of the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s and twenty-first-century writers with regard to form, content, theoretical conceptions of slavery, social and political contexts and publishing opportunities. Crucially, this study is based on the conviction that the lines between the first and the second generation are not strict. Toni Morrison, for instance, is a pioneer as well as the most famous and commercially successful representative of the first generation. With *A Mercy*, however, she has written a text that contributes to a significant broadening of the genre of neo-slave narratives, most notably by focusing on the paradigm shift from human bondage to racial slavery in early North America and by entering into a powerful intertextual dialogue with *Beloved* and the critical reception of her *magnum opus*. I argue that *A Mercy* is a second-generation neo-slave narrative.

In terms of publishing opportunities, second-generation neo-slave narrative writers like Hartman, Christiansë, Hill and James benefit from the struggles, accomplishments and the huge commercial success of the first generation: In

77 | Ibid. 175.

78 | Mark Stein, *Black British Literature: Novels of Transformation* (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2004) 5-7.

79 | Ibid. 6; italics in the original.

80 | Ibid. 7.

the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, black authors like Sherley Anne Williams faced considerable difficulties in finding a publisher for their short stories and novels, suffering from racial discrimination and harassment in a white-dominated publishing world: "From her attempted entry into the fiction marketplace, Williams learned that the field of cultural production contained the same inequities as the social terrain of the United States,"[81] Rushdy contends. While some white editors categorically refused to publish the work of black Americans altogether, others forced black writers to revise their manuscripts significantly to appeal to a white audience.[82] In the 1980s, Williams eventually found a publisher for her novel *Dessa Rose* (1986). Significantly, she was urged by her white editor at HarperCollins to include an author's note at the beginning of her neo-slave narrative, informing her readers that *Dessa Rose* is a work of fiction. As Rushdy puts it, Williams's novel "was being treated like an antebellum slave narrative, her authority questioned the same way fugitive slaves' had been."[83]

However difficult it was for twentieth-century black writers to enter the white literary marketplace, many of their novels became international best-sellers: Most impressively, Alex Haley's neo-slave narrative *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* (1976) was translated into more than twenty languages, received the Pulitzer Prize, sold almost nine million copies and was adapted into an eight-part, ABC television miniseries that attracted more than 130 million viewers from all over the world.[84] Today, decades after the first publication of *Roots*, there is a large and growing market for black literary texts about slavery: Given the commercial success story of African American writers like Haley and Nobel Prize winner Morrison, publishers within and outside the United States are highly interested in printing and promoting the work of neo-slave narrative authors. In recent years, texts such as Hartman's *Lose Your Mother*, Hill's *The Book of Negroes* and James's *The Book of Night Women* have been published by major houses, i.e., by Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Norton and Riverhead Books, respectively.

Over the last decades, there has also been a change in terms of the intended readership of neo-slave narratives; a shift away from an exclusive orientation towards a "village" audience: Honored by notable literary awards, neo-slave narratives have been and continue to be read by a large group of both black and

81 | Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives* 141.

82 | Paul C. Rosenblatt, "Reading Novels as a Social Science Researcher," *The Impact of Racism on African American Families: Literature as Social Science* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2014) 22-23.

83 | Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives* 141.

84 | Eric Bennett, "Alexander Palmer (Alex) Haley, 1921-1992," *Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience*, vol. 3, eds. Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005) 131.

white readers from across the world. Hill's *The Book of Negroes*, for instance, has been translated into many different languages, such as French, German and Dutch, and has sold hundreds of thousands of copies. Like Haley's *Roots*, the novel was turned into an incredibly popular miniseries: Directed by Clement Virgo, it premiered on CBC Television in early 2015 and was watched by more than 1.6 million viewers in Canada.[85] Today, neo-slave narratives authors like Hill see black and white readers as their intended audience; their texts are rather written for the "global village." Against this background, this study is particularly attentive to the risks inherent in specific narrative strategies employed by contemporary writers to appeal to a large readership, such as the explicit rendering of acts of violence, torture and sexual abuse, as in James's *The Book of Night Women*.

Most twentieth-century neo-slave narrative authors were not only professors at American universities and colleges but also supporters of the social, cultural and political movements of the 1960s: As Rushdy emphasizes, Ishmael Reed, Sherley Anne Williams and Charles Johnson, for example, "began writing in the sixties when each first became enamored of and then disenchanted with the politics of Black Power."[86] In their neo-slave narratives, they focus on "particular Black Power issues—especially the politics of property, identity, and violence—as a way of commenting on the failures of the New Left and articulating their hopes for whatever comes next."[87] For many second-generation neo-slave narrative authors, the Civil Rights, Black Arts and Black Power movements mark a turning point in the history of blacks in the United States and elsewhere. Yet, in their literary texts, I argue, they do not necessarily (and explicitly) reflect on the discourse of the 1960s but rather examine the connection between the period of slavery and forms of systemic racism in the twenty-first century. While they are profoundly influenced by the avant-garde work of African American writers, they contribute to an enormous broadening of the genre of neo-slave narratives by exploring the transnational dimension of the history of slavery, by creatively combining different narrative forms and strate-

85 | Ted Bishop, "Introduction," *Dear Sir, I Intend to Burn Your Book: An Anatomy of a Book Burning*, by Lawrence Hill (Edmonton: U of Alberta P, 2013) xiv; Jane Taber, "How *The Book of Negroes*, a Profound Yet Unknown Canadian Story, Became a Miniseries," *Globe and Mail* 2 Jan. 2015, 21 Jan. 2015 http://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/television/an-unknown-canadian-story-brings-book-of-negros-to-tv/article22275312/; Lawrence Hill, "Adaptation: Rewriting *The Book of Negroes* For the Small Screen," *The Walrus* Jan./ Feb. 2015, 21 Jan. 2015 http://thewalrus.ca/adaptation/; Katie Bailey, "The Book of Negroes Debuts to 1.7M Viewers," *Playback* 8 Jan. 2015, 23 July 2015 http://playbackonline.ca/2015/01/08/book-of-negroes-debuts-to-1-7m-viewers/.

86 | Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives* 5.

87 | Ibid.

gies and by entering into a powerful dialogue with contemporary discourses on the African diaspora and on the ethics of narration.

Structure

Chapter 1, "The Concept of the African Diaspora and the Notion of Difference," lays the theoretical foundations for my analysis of second-generation neo-slave narratives. I focus especially on recent critical interventions in the field of (black) diaspora studies that seek to explore the complexity and diversity of black diasporic experiences by adopting a transnational perspective. Drawing on and engaging with the works of scholars like Stuart Hall, Brent Hayes Edwards, Avtar Brah and Tina M. Campt, I argue for a conceptualization of the African diaspora that is grounded on the idea of difference: Such an interpretation acknowledges and highlights the specificity of local black contexts and histories, while at the same time reflecting on the larger framework and the dialogic nature of the African diaspora. In particular, it draws attention to power differences and hierarchical structures within and between black diasporic groups. I contend that this vibrant view of diaspora is both an intricate framework and a powerful analytical tool for the examination of second-generation neo-slave narratives.

The following chapters (2-6) on Morrison's, Hartman's, Christiansë's, Hill's and James's neo-slave narratives are not arranged chronologically according to their date of publication. Rather, I begin my analysis with a discussion of Morrison's *A Mercy* to illustrate the complex intertextual relationship between first- and second-generation neo-slave narratives. This part is followed by chapters on *Lose Your Mother* and *Unconfessed* because these texts participate in a fruitful dialogue with *A Mercy* about the ethical challenges, implications and dangers of writing and theorizing slavery. Before closing with an epilogue, I focus on *The Book of Negroes* and *The Book of Night Women*, examining and highlighting fundamental differences between the female- and male-authored texts in my study.

Chapter 2, "From Human Bondage to Racial Slavery: Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* (2008)," reads Morrison's ninth novel *A Mercy* as an intertextual intervention against reductive reconciliatory interpretations of *Beloved* in both scholarly and public discussions: Focusing on Morrison's intricate depiction of the plight and vulnerability of enslaved women in late seventeenth-century North America, I demonstrate that *A Mercy* sheds light on the permanent and debilitating psychological effects of sexual exploitation, oppression and humiliation in order to accentuate the impossibility of working through, and closing the wounds of, slavery. Drawing attention to the novel's emphasis on loss and exploration of intra-black conflicts, the chapter illustrates that *A Mercy* engages in

an intertextual dialogue with both Afro-pessimist discourse and black diaspora (feminist) theory. Moreover, I show that Morrison employs complex narrative techniques (for instance, non-linearity and self-reflexivity) to capture her black female protagonist's experiences of uprootedness and dissolution and to reflect on the limits of black self-invention. Chapter 2 also examines Morrison's representation of the paradigm shift from human bondage to racial slavery that took place in the early colonial period, arguing that *A Mercy* foregrounds the socio-psychological conditions under which anti-black racism developed and flourished in North America.

In Chapter 3, "Rethinking the African Diaspora: Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother* (2007)," I explore how Hartman's innovative travelogue contributes to a critical re-negotiation of the concept of the African diaspora and Paul Gilroy's paradigm of the black Atlantic: *Lose Your Mother*, I contend, challenges static interpretations of black diasporic identity grounded on authenticity, continuity and tradition, engaging in an Afro-pessimistic rewriting of Alex Haley's famous neo-slave narrative *Roots* (1976) and focusing on loss, dispossession, grief and mourning as central features of black life. Equally significant, Hartman's text deconstructs dominant narratives of black relations based on similarity and unanimity, drawing attention to differences, gaps, social inequalities and hierarchies between (and among) African Americans and Africans.

Furthermore, drawing on Spillers's and Morrison's works, chapter 3 analyzes Hartman's ambitious project to explore the experiences of an eighteenth-century slave woman during the Middle Passage: I demonstrate that Hartman offers a highly self-reflexive and multi-perspective account to engage with the silences in the archive, to comment on the ethical dangers inherent in her attempt to address the female captive's (sexual) abuse and to underscore the (ultimate) impossibility of recovering the slave's voice and healing the wounds of slavery.

Chapter 4, "'Hertseer:' Re-Imagining Cape Slavery in Yvette Christiansë's *Unconfessed* (2006)," focuses on Christiansë's critical encounter with and fictional (re-)appropriation of the colonial archive, examining the complex ways in which *Unconfessed* deconstructs the received and racist representation of Sila van de Kaap, an early nineteenth-century Cape slave, as a piece of property and murderer. Drawing attention to intertextual links between *Beloved* and *Unconfessed*, I show that Christiansë's text not only highlights the cruelty of Cape slavery and the female slaves' devastating experiences of (sexual) violence but also self-reflexively elaborates on the ultimate impossibility of reconstructing Sila's life. In a way similar to Hartman and Morrison, Christiansë refuses to engage in a therapeutic literary project as she resists the temptation to fill in the gaps and silences of the archive and to transform the slave woman's story of loss into a narrative of overcoming.

Chapter 5, "Transnational Diasporic Journeys in Lawrence Hill's *The Book of Negroes* (2007)," illustrates that Hill's best-selling neo-slave narrative presents a distinct transnational perspective on slavery and black life in the eighteenth-century world: Exploring the meaning of home for black women and men kidnapped from their ancestral lands and sold into American slavery, *The Book of Negroes*, I contend, focuses on the impossibility of going back to any "authentic" place of origin in Africa; at the same time, it sheds light on complex forms of black self-invention and home-making and struggles for freedom and racial equality in North America, West Africa and Europe. Thus, Hill's novel actively participates in contemporary discussions about the African diaspora, deconstructing static and essentialist understandings of black culture and re-writing important historical events, such as the experiences of African Americans during and after the American Revolutionary War, from a black perspective. In particular, I show that *The Book of Negroes* challenges mythical conceptions of Canada as a "paradise" for blacks during the period of the transatlantic slave trade and slavery by depicting the black protagonist's experiences of racial violence and utter disillusionment in Nova Scotia.

Moreover, chapter 5 critically examines the novel's aesthetic devices and its theoretical conception of slavery: Drawing attention especially to the novel's melodramatic plot devices and "fairy-tale" ending, I argue that Hill, unlike Morrison, Hartman and Christiansë, fails to acknowledge and explore the full meaning of racial slavery as a dehumanizing system of "thingification." Unlike *A Mercy*, *Lose Your Mother* and *Unconfessed*, *The Book of Negroes* ultimately highlights the triumph over slavery, conveying the disturbing message that it is possible to overcome the traumatic experiences of slavery.

Chapter 6, "A Vicious Circle of Violence: Revisiting Jamaican Slavery in Marlon James's *The Book of Night Women* (2009)," analyzes James's prizewinning novel about slavery in late eighteenth-century Jamaica. Drawing on the works of Hartman, Spillers, McDowell and Davis and highlighting crucial differences between *A Mercy*, *Unconfessed* and *Lose Your Mother*, on the one hand, and *The Book of Night Women*, on the other, I delineate how James exposes the enslaved to a second act of victimization and violence by representing the horrors of slavery and, in particular, the slave women's sexual abuse and oppression in a pornographic way, without reflecting on the ethical dangers of depicting scenes of torture and subjection.

Examining James's intertextual engagement with Afro-pessimist discourse, I show that one of the novel's primary goals is to draw attention to the utterly dehumanizing nature of Caribbean slavery, focusing on the captives' experience of being caught in a vicious circle of repression, counter-violence and retaliation: While *The Book of Night Women* foregrounds the (female) slaves' determination and willingness to offer (violent) resistance, it ultimately stresses the impossibility to escape racial oppression. Examining James's depiction

of his female protagonist's transformation into a murderer, I illustrate that *The Book of Night Women* enters into a dynamic dialogue with Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940): Both novels not only reflect on the (potentially) liberating power of violent action for subjugated individuals but also emphasize the ultimate destructive nature of violence.