Epilogue: The Past of Slavery and "the Incomplete Project of Freedom"

In his novella *Every Day Is for the Thief* (2014), which was first published in a different version in Nigeria in 2007, Teju Cole tells the story of a young Nigerian American psychiatrist who leaves New York City to visit his country of birth—for the first time after more than a decade. In a way similar as in his novel *Open City,* Cole adopts the perspective of an urban *flâneur,* a black intellectual who walks through the streets of Lagos. Focusing on the omnipresence of corruption, poverty and violence in present-day Nigeria as well as on the nation's role in the transatlantic slave trade, Cole's unnamed narrator explores the painful connection between the history of Lagos and that of New Orleans:

> The thought is of the chain of corpses stretching across the Atlantic Ocean to connect Lagos with New Orleans. New Orleans was the largest market for human chattel in the New World. There were twenty-five different slave markets in the city in 1850. This is a secret only because no one wants to know about it. […] The human cargo that ended up in New Orleans originated from many ports, most of them along the West African shore. And here was another secret: none of those ports was busier than Lagos.[1]

In addition to highlighting the historical transnational links between these two cities as sites of the slave trade, Cole's narrator draws attention to disturbing similarities between contemporary Nigerian and (white) American public discourses of remembrance: On both sides of the Atlantic, the history of the slave trade and slavery has been deliberately suppressed or erased from mainstream public memory. Avoiding questions of historical responsibility and guilt, many Nigerians and white Americans try to present a sanitized version of the past, to ignore or downplay the significance of slavery in the history of their countries. Significantly, both *Open City* and *Every Day Is for the Thief* not only explore the meaning of collective acts of "forgetting;" they also reflect on the enduring ef-

1 | Teju Cole, *Every Day Is for the Thief* (2014; London: Faber & Faber, 2015) 112.

fects of the slave trade and slavery on contemporary black life. As Cole's narrator in *Every Day Is for the Thief* remarks, quoting William Faulkner: "'The past is never dead. It's not even past.'"[2]

This complex view of the past as unfinished is reflected in the works of Toni Morrison, Saidiya Hartman, Yvette Christiansë and Marlon James: Rather than constructing their texts as narratives of reconciliation and healing, these authors focus on the enduring impact of slavery, examining the ways in which this past still haunts the present. According to a 2010 article in the *Chicago Tribune*, before the publication of *A Mercy*, Morrison had been asked by her editor to change the ending of her novel, i.e., to construct a reconciliatory narrative that closes with the description of Florens's reunion with her mother. "I thought about it," Morrison said, "But then I decided against it because slavery cuts through families. That is what it does, and it is unapologetic and there are no answers for those it affects."[3] Instead of satisfying a reader's desire for a "happy ending" and narrative closure, Morrison vigorously challenges the idea of narration as healing in *A Mercy*. A radical black feminist reflection on the origins of systemic anti-black racism in the United States, her novel self-reflexively elaborates on the impossibility of transforming Florens's story of uprootedness and despair into a narrative of overcoming. Engaging in an Afro-pessimistic re-writing of black history, Morrison presents, as Diedrich puts it, "a discourse on enslavement so fiercely embracing its momentum of negativity that any attempt of escaping into redemption kitsch reception goes up in flames with Florence's writing on the walls."[4] Drawing attention to the persistent and destructive effects of chattel slavery as "thingification," Morrison refuses to conceptualize and celebrate her slave protagonist's creative work in Jacob's house as a triumphant act that could help her cope with her separation from her mother. Focusing on Florens's painful and enduring experiences of loss and fragmentation, *A Mercy* "does not attempt any consoling, recuperative gesture,"[5] to use Christiansë's words.

In *Lose Your Mother* and her insightful essay "Venus in Two Acts," Hartman explicitly reflects on the significance of the past for (understanding) the present, drawing attention to "the link between our age and a previous one in which freedom too was yet to be realized" (LYM 133). In a way similar to Morrison,

---

2 | Ibid. 114. This famous quotation is taken from William Faulkner, *Requiem For a Nun* (1951; London: Vintage, 2015) 85.

3 | Courtney Crowder, "Toni Morrison Discusses Racism and 'A Mercy' during Keynote Speech," *Chicago Tribune* 20 Oct. 2010, 21 Sept. 2015 http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2010-10-20/entertainment/chi-books-morrison-keynote_1_toni-morrison-racism-speech.

4 | Diedrich, "'The Burden of Our Theories' Genealogies'" 269.

5 | Christiansë, *Toni Morrison* 198.

she offers a sophisticated meditation on the ethics of writing and theorizing slavery, arguing against "kitsch" conceptions of fiction based on healing and redemption: "For me," Hartman explains, "narrating counter-histories of slavery has always been inseparable from writing a history of present, by which I mean the incomplete project of freedom, and the precarious life of the ex-slave, a condition defined by the vulnerability to premature death and to gratuitous acts of violence."[6] In her critical (re-)appropriation and radical re-writing of the archive of slavery in "The Dead Book," she resists the temptation to "fill in the gaps and to provide closure where there is none."[7] Her multi-perspective and fragmentary account of the Middle Passage self-reflexively comments on the ultimate impossibility of recovering the voice of the female captive who was murdered on board the *Recovery*. Reading slavery as "thingification" and exploring the destructive nature of anti-black racism in the past and in the present, Hartman refuses to construct the slave woman's story as a triumphant narrative, to provide the reader with a consoling vision of the past.

Christiansë's 2006 novel about Cape slavery cannot be read without taking into account its complex engagement with Morrison's literary and theoretical work. In terms of content and form, *Unconfessed* participates in an intertextual discussion with *Beloved*. Even more significantly, like Morrison's *A Mercy* and Hartman's *Lose Your Mother*, it offers a radical response to reductive reconciliatory interpretations of Morrison's 1987 masterpiece as it deconstructs the naïve idea of the healing power of neo-slave narratives. While Christiansë successfully challenges the racist representation of Sila van den Kaap in the historical record, she employs a fragmentary style and non-chronological structure to reflect on the ethical dangers of depicting the slave woman's experiences of sexual violence and on the ultimate impossibility of recovering her story. "In Sila's case," Christiansë contends, "there can only be the incomplete disappearance that being consigned to the archive ensures. What is dis-appearing then? [...] A boy, dead. A woman consigned to death. A history of living death. The archive is haunted by them all."[8] Drawing attention to South Africa's long history of racial violence, Christiansë presents a powerful black feminist/Afro-pessimist discourse on the hardships of slave motherhood, the crushing power of slavery as "thingification" and the enduring effects of loss.

Unlike Morrison, Hartman and Christiansë, Hill constructs his neo-slave narrative as an ultimately redemptive narrative about the healing power of familial love and a slave mother's triumph over slavery. Whereas Morrison foregrounds the enduring traumatic effects of the destruction of slave families, Hill strategically incorporates melodramatic plot episodes and "fairy-tale" el-

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

7 | Ibid. 8.

8 | Christiansë, "'Heartsore': The Melancholy Archive of Cape Colony Slavery" 12.

ements into *The Book of Negroes* (most notably, May's hart-warming reunion with Aminata in London) to celebrate black agency and resistance. One of his primary narrative goals is to present a story that not only bears witness to the incredible cruelty of slavery but also, and paradoxically, offers a consoling view of this history. Taking "recourse to the language of romance,"[9] to employ Hartman's phrase from "Venus in Two Acts," Hill trivializes the painful reality of slave women's experiences in the eighteenth-century transatlantic world. Moreover, he fails to express the true meaning of chattel slavery as a brutalizing system of "thingification." Unlike *A Mercy*, *The Book of Negroes* emphasizes the liberating effects of the slave protagonist's act of writing, without critically engaging with questions about the ethics of narration and about the appropriation of a black female voice. Problematically, Aminata's first-person account suggests that it is possible to work through the past in order to find closure to the trauma of slavery.

In *The Book of Night Women*, James employs the trope of the circle to highlight the utterly dehumanizing and brutal nature of white rule in late eighteenth-century Jamaica, focusing on forms of never-ending violence and the constitutive role of loss in the lives of enslaved women and men. Like Morrison's *A Mercy*, Hartman's *Lose Your Mother* and Christiansë's *Unconfessed*, James's second-generation neo-slave narrative refuses to offer a reconciliatory interpretation of the past. Rather, it enters into an intertextual dialogue with Afro-pessimism about slavery's lasting effects on later generations of blacks. In a way similar to Wright in *Native Son* and Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth*, James explores the meaning of (counter-)violence for the oppressed, ultimately stressing the destructiveness of his female slave protagonist's acts of violent resistance and revenge in order to draw attention to the captives' hopeless situation. In a self-legitimizing move, James strategically employs a black female protagonist to justify his explicit rendering of scenes of violence against black human "flesh." However, unlike Morrison, Hartman and Christiansë, he fails to take into account the insights of black feminist theory concerning the ethics of representation, thus exposing the enslaved to a second act of victimization[10]—and, like Hill, he never reflects on his use of the female voice/perspective.

Taken together, *A Mercy*, *Lose Your Mother*, *Unconfessed*, *The Book of Negroes* and *The Book of Night Women* engage in a transnational literary re-negotiation of slavery from twenty-first-century perspectives, highlighting the intricate relationship between local and global structures of racial oppression and anti-blackness. Morrison, Hartman, Christiansë and James—unlike Hill—strongly argue against a teleological conception of history as progress

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

10 | See ibid. 5.

and powerfully challenge "kitsch" interpretations of slavery. Focusing on loss, dispossession and grief as defining features of the African diaspora in the past and in the present, they not only counter the erasure of slavery from mainstream public memory (in countries such as Ghana, the United States, Canada, Jamaica and South Africa) but also, and essentially, reflect on the enduring effects of slavery on later black generations and "the as-yet-incomplete project of freedom,"[11] as Hartman puts it.

11 | Ibid. 14.