4 "Hertseer:" Re-Imagining Cape Slavery in Yvette Christiansë's *Unconfessed* (2006)

Introduction

Over the last years, in the vast and diverse realm of South African literature, numerous black and white authors (such as Zakes Mda, Zoë Wicomb, Rachel Zadok, Marlene van Niekerk, Troy Blacklaws and Michiel Heyns) have chosen to turn their attention to the past, addressing the injustice, violence and cruelty of apartheid and the struggle against racial segregation and discrimination in South Africa. These novelists enter into a dialogue with internationally recognized white writers like Nadine Gordimer and André Brink, who, since the 1950s, have been at the forefront of exploring and highlighting the racist nature of the apartheid system; and who have been "authorized" by white publishers and publishing houses to write about this period and to "speak for"[1] the oppressed.

While South Africa's relatively recent past is a key theme of many contemporary black novels, there are also a growing number of literary texts by non-white authors (e.g. Rayda Jacob's 1998 *The Slave Book* and Therese Benadé's 2004 *Kites of Good Fortune*) that deal with the institution of chattel slavery from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries (1652-1834).[2] In this study, I focus

1 | For a theoretical discussion of "the problem of speaking for others" (Linda Alcoff), see chapter 5, "Transnational Diasporic Journeys in Lawrence Hill's *The Book of Negroes* (2007)," in this study.

2 | See Crystal Warren, "South Africa: Introduction," *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 41.4 (2006): 181; Ena Jansen, "Slavery and Its Literary Afterlife in South Africa and on Curaçao," *Shifting the Compass: Pluricontinental Connections in Dutch Colonial and Postcolonial Literature,* eds. Jeroen Dewulf, Olf Praamstra and Michiel van Kempen (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013) 171; Margaret Stead, "A Better Connection," *Guardian* 29 Oct. 2005, 28 Aug. 2014 http://www.theguardian.com/books/2005/oct/29/featuresreviews.guardianreview27; Marita Wenzel, "Cross-

on Yvette Christiansë's *Unconfessed* (2006)—a critically acclaimed novel about the hardships of black motherhood in the Cape Colony in the early nineteenth century—for the following reason: *Unconfessed* engages in an intertextual discussion with both twentieth-century neo-slave narratives like *Beloved* and twenty-first-century literary representations of slavery like *A Mercy* and *Lose Your Mother*, while simultaneously contributing to a critical rewriting of South African history from a black feminist perspective.

In an interview published as an appendix to her novel, Christiansë, who was born in South Africa in 1954, refers to the significance of racial slavery in South African history and culture, highlighting its enduring legacy and impact on (twentieth-century) black life:

> Slavery in the Cape Colony, and in almost all places where Europeans had instituted slavery, was racially determined. As someone who grew up under apartheid, I am acutely aware of this history and its relationship to the founding of what would become the Republic of South Africa.[3]

Faced with racial discrimination, as a young adult, Christiansë (and her family) left the country to escape from apartheid, moving to Swaziland and later to Australia, where she earned her PhD in English at the University of Sydney. An expert on postcolonial and African American literature and theory, she has held numerous distinguished positions at universities in the United States and South Africa and is currently professor at Barnard College.[4] Like Hartman and Morrison and other contemporary authors of neo-slave narratives, Christiansë thus has achieved considerable acclaim as a writer and scholar; and she has been "appropriated" by U.S.-American academia.

In her sophisticated study *Toni Morrison: An Ethical Poetics* (2013), she focuses particularly on the discourses of witnessing, testimony and trauma and the representation of slavery in texts like *Beloved* and *A Mercy*. While Morrison seeks to challenge dominant white versions of American history and to tell stories that have been neglected, suppressed or marginalized, her novels are not written with the primary intention of closing the gaps of the historical record, Christiansë contends. In fact, "the narrators of Morrison's fictions often refuse such easy consolations and do not offer themselves in the mode of the wit-

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ing Spatial and Temporal Boundaries: Three Women in Search of a Future," *Literator* 21.3 (2000): 23-25.

3 | Yvette Christiansë, "A Conversation with Yvette Christiansë," *Unconfessed: A Novel* (New York: Other Press, 2006) 351-53.

4 | Liesl Jobson, "Yvette Christiansë," *Poetry International Rotterdam* 1 Dec. 2009, 28 Aug. 2014 http://www.poetryinternationalweb.net/pi/site/poet/item/15564/10/yvette-christianse. See also https://barnard.edu/profiles/yvette-christianse.

ness whose storytelling will stand in where official history failed."[5] According to Christiansë, Morrison's literary texts (characterized by fragmented narrative structures, opacities, silences and highly self-reflexive passages) thematize the ultimate impossibility of bearing witness to slavery and of healing the wounds of the past with the help of fiction.[6] In this regard, there are crucial similarities between Christiansë's interpretation of Morrison's work in *An Ethical Poetics* and my reading of *A Mercy* in chapter 2 of this study.

Unlike many other Morrison scholars, Christiansë refuses to offer what Sabine Broeck would call a "kitsch"[7] interpretation of texts like *Beloved* and *A Mercy*. Arguably, Christiansë's reading of Morrison's work strongly influences her own literary projects: In a way similar to Morrison's *A Mercy* and Hartman's *Lose Your Mother*, *Unconfessed* not only self-reflexively highlights the intricacies and inherent dangers of articulating the experiences of the enslaved and dispossessed; it also accentuates the impossibility of working through and overcoming the trauma of slavery.

In *Unconfessed*, Christiansë unfolds the story of Sila, a nineteenth-century black woman kidnapped from Mozambique as a child and shipped to the Cape Colony, where she and her children are repeatedly mistreated and (sexually) exploited by different masters. In response to an extremely brutal attack by the slave owner Jacobus van der Wat, Sila takes the life of her nine-year-old child Baro, desperately wishing to protect him from further violence. Written on the basis of fragmented archival material composed by the colonial authorities, *Unconfessed* seeks to deconstruct the received and racist representation of Sila as a murderer and piece of property. In Christiansë's fictional (re-)appropriation of the archive of slavery, the enslaved woman is re-imagined as a complex person plagued by ambivalent feelings. At the same time, marked by a sophisticated narrative structure, the novel directs our attention to the limits and ethical dangers of giving an account of Sila's life and the impossibility of recovering her voice from the existing documents.

Published first in the United States (by Other Press in New York City in 2006) and then in South Africa (by Kwela Books in Cape Town in 2007),[8] *Unconfessed* has to be read as a border-crossing novel: One the one hand, as a novel about chattel slavery in the Cape Colony, it makes a crucial contribution to contemporary cultural and political discourse in South Africa, seeking to explore a history that was repressed, ignored and marginalized in the apartheid era. By

5 | Christiansë, *Toni Morrison* 35.

6 | See ibid. 28-75.

7 | Broeck, "Trauma, Agency, Kitsch and the Excesses of the Real" 247.

8 | Christiansë's decision to publish her novel first in New York was certainly based on commercial considerations, i.e., the desire to attract a large readership in the United States.

critically engaging with the colonial archive and trying to present the forgotten story of a female captive who is treated as an object and subjected to extreme cruelty, Christiansë draws not only attention to the brutality and violence of slavery at the Cape and, in particular, the slave woman's plight in a racist and sexist society but also reflects on the new violation contained in this telling. Drawing on fragments of information about Sila's life, *Unconfessed* is firmly "rooted" in a specific region and historical context, i.e. the Cape Colony in the 1820s, several years after the second British occupation.

On the other hand, as a scholar who is strongly influenced by the work of (African) American literary/cultural theorists and writers, Christiansë deliberately writes herself into the vibrant and commercially successful African American literary tradition of neo-slave narratives. Given its non-linear structure, fragmented character and lyrical tone,[9] its refusal to fill in the gaps and silences of the historical record and, last but not least, its thematic focus on infanticide committed by a female slave, Christiansë's text stands in an intertextual relationship to *Beloved*. As in Morrison's highly acclaimed novel, there is the determination to revisit the past from a black feminist perspective as well as the insight that certain experiences cannot be reconstructed and should not be put into words. Like *Beloved*, *Unconfessed* focuses on the interior life of a slave mother who is willing to do everything to protect her children from violence and, in a state of utmost despair, decides to commit infanticide. Rather than describing the actual violent act, Christiansë's text highlights the circumstances and events in Sila's life that lead to the killing, including the slave woman's unsuccessful attempt to convince the local authorities and her different masters of her legal status as a manumitted slave. Directing the reader's attention to Sila's feelings and thoughts, Christiansë finds a way to avoid repeating the racist descriptions that can be found in the archive.

The significance of Christiansë's work, I argue, lies not only in its critical re-writing of the historical record and exploration of the history of slavery in South Africa from a black feminist perspective but also in its complex reflection on the aesthetics and ethics of writing slavery. I read Christiansë's intertextual engagement with *Beloved* not simply as a commercial strategy to enter into the best-selling tradition of female-authored neo-slave narratives. For Christiansë, one of the most prominent Morrison scholars, it is primarily an act of respect towards and a gesture of appreciation of Morrison's theoretical and literary work. At the same time, *Unconfessed* offers a counter-discourse to "kitsch" interpretations of *Beloved* by resisting the temptation to transform Sila's story into a narrative of overcoming, to construct an "optimistic ending."

9 | In this context, it is worth noting that Christiansë has received wide critical acclaim as a poet. She has written two books of poems: *Castaway* (1999) and *Imprendehora* (2009).

In this chapter, first of all, I will give a brief historical account of slavery in the Cape Colony, focusing on specific characteristics (e.g. the slave's legal status as chattel and the oppression of slave women) and developments (e.g. the British takeover of the Cape and the period of "amelioration" in the 1820s and 1830s). Drawing on the writings of revisionist historians like Nigel Worden, I will challenge the widespread notion—and legitimizing myth created by white South African historiography—that Cape slaves were treated with dignity and kindness. In a next step, the chapter will examine Christiansë's critical exploration and (re-)appropriation of the archive of slavery, highlighting the ways she reflects upon the challenges and limits inherent in her ambitious project to reconstruct Sila's life. I will demonstrate that Christiansë employs specific narrative and aesthetic devices to refer to the fragmented character of the archive, to depict the protagonist's experiences of despair and loss and to emphasize the impossibility of healing the wounds of the past. Finally, drawing on diaspora studies, this chapter will shed light on Christiansë's representation of the complex interconnections between race, class and gender at the Cape and the meaning Christiansë attributes to acts of humiliations and violence within the slave community.

Historical Context: Race-Based Chattel Slavery in the Cape Colony

For a long time, research within the fields of slavery and African diaspora studies was primarily concerned with the history of the transatlantic slave trade and the experience of racial slavery in the "New World," in particular in mainland North America and the Caribbean. This focus on the Atlantic world reflects the avant-garde role as well as the enormous influence and dominance of African American and black British texts and theories in contemporary academic discussions about black diasporic life and slavery.[10] More recently, however, a number of scholars have begun to move beyond the framework of the Atlantic. Determined to explore the global nature of the African diaspora, they have started to analyze the complex history of the slave trade and slavery in the Mediterranean and in the Indian Ocean, within Africa and in other parts of the world.[11] In particular, one topic that has received increasing attention over the last decades is slavery in South Africa under Dutch and British rule.

10 | See also my introduction to *Transnational Black Dialogues*.

11 | Gwyn Campbell, "Slavery and Other Forms of Unfree Labour in the Indian Ocean World," *The Structure of Slavery in Indian Ocean Africa and Asia*, ed. Campbell (London: Frank Cass, 2004) vii-ix; Zeleza 35-68; Isabel Hofmeyr, "The Black Atlantic Meets the Indian Ocean: Forging New Paradigms of Transnationalism for the Global South – Liter-

As the historians Kerry Ward and Nigel Worden point out in their 1998 essay "Commemorating, Suppressing, and Invoking Cape Slavery," in South Africa, this history was systematically ignored, suppressed or misrepresented during the apartheid era. For instance, in public museums, such as the South African Cultural History Museum in Cape Town, the nation's past was constructed as exclusively white.[12] In South Africa's school curriculum, the issue of slavery was largely suppressed, aiming to "present a favourable view of white Cape colonists as brave pioneers and bringers of civilization, rather than exploiters of slave labour."[13] In those few school texts in which Cape slavery was discussed, it was depicted as a paternal and benign institution not comparable to the large-scale and brutal plantation systems of the Americas.[14] "A sub-text here," Ward and Worden contend, "was the oft-repeated statement of apartheid apologists that racial discrimination and genocide had been considerably worse in countries then critical of South Africa, such as the United States."[15]

Likewise, at least until the 1980s, most historians ignored the centrality of slavery to the economic, cultural, social and political development of South Africa, concentrating instead on the history of the Cape frontier in the eighteenth century or the industrial revolution in the late nineteenth century. Moreover, in academic works, a widespread assumption was "that in the fair Cape, with its production of the more genteel crops of wheat and wine, slavery was somehow 'mild.'"[16] According to this myth, under Dutch and British rule, enslaved individuals in South Africa were treated with respect and kindness and, unlike in places such as Jamaica or Brazil, did not participate in slave revolts; in the 1830s, slavery at the Cape ended without much protest and without a violent war.[17] These attempts to downplay or deny the brutality and cruelty of South African slavery remind us of similar pro-slavery and self-legitimizing discourses in the United States, where (early) twentieth-century historians like Ulrich Phillips

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ary and Cultural Perspectives," *Social Dynamics* 33.2 (2007): 3-32. See also chapter 1, "The Concept of the African Diaspora and the Notion of Difference," in this study.

12 | Kerry Ward and Nigel Worden, "Commemorating, Suppressing, and Invoking Cape Slavery," *Negotiating the Past*: *The Making of Memory in South Africa,* eds. Sarah Nuttall and Carli Coetzee, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999) 202.

13 | Ibid. 201-02.

14 | Ibid.

15 | Ibid. 202.

16 | Nigel Worden and Clifton Crais, "Introduction," *Breaking the Chains: Slavery and Its Legacy in the Nineteenth-Century Cape Colony*, eds. Worden and Crais (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand UP, 1994) 2.

17 | Ibid. 1-2.

interpreted, defined and justified racial slavery as a paternalistic and civilizing system that offered support and protection for African women and men.[18]

In South Africa, since the 1980s, scholars such as Nigel Worden have contributed to a radical transformation of the historiography of Cape slavery. Unlike their predecessors, they have begun to highlight the violence of Dutch and British rule, the Cape slave's legal status as chattel, the slave woman's (sexual) victimization, as well as forms of black resistance against colonial control. In the following, based on the work of these revisionist historians, I will offer a short overview of specific historical developments and characteristics of slavery at the Cape that help contextualize Christiansë's novel *Unconfessed*.

In 1652, the occupation of the Cape by the Dutch East India Company (VOC) marked the beginning of race-based chattel slavery in South Africa. Soon after arriving in the colony, the Dutch commander Jan van Riebeeck criticized "the inability of the small garrison to produce sufficient fruit, vegetables and grain to feed itself as well as to supply passing ships."[19] As a solution, he proposed the importation and use of slaves to work on the recently established settler farms and in the Company's Lodge in Cape Town. The VOC fully supported van Riebeeck's plan to introduce slavery as the dominant labor system: In the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, thousands of women and men were violently taken from a great variety of places in Africa and the Indian Ocean world, in particular from Madagascar, Mozambique, India and Indonesia, and brought to the Cape on Dutch, French, Portuguese and British ships. Over the decades, the Dutch enclave changed from a small settlement and refreshment station for VOC ships traveling between Europe and Asia into an influential trading center, a profitable agriculturally oriented colony and a brutal slave society based on the subjugation and racial discrimination of enslaved individuals and indigenous communities.[20]

Contrary to what seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European colonists and white visitors to the Cape Colony claimed and most twentieth-century historians continued to argue, slavery in Dutch South Africa was not at all benign and benevolent. Under VOC rule (1652-1795), enslaved women and men were legally defined and treated as chattel, as objects that could be bought, loaned and sold like an animal or a piece of furniture. They were not allowed "to marry, had no rights of *potestas* over their children, and were unable to make legal

18 | Huggins xxi.

19 | Nigel Worden, *Slavery in Dutch South Africa* (1985; Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010) 6.

20 | Robert C.-H. Shell, *Children of Bondage: A Social History of the Slave Society at the Cape of Good Hope, 1652-1838* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan UP, 1994) xxx; Worden, *Slavery in Dutch South Africa* 3-9, 41-46; Wayne Dooling, *Slavery, Emancipation and Colonial Rule in South Africa* (Scottsville: U of KwaZulu-Natal P, 2007) 3-4.

contracts, acquire property or leave wills."[21] As in other slave societies, such as those in the Americas, violence was used as a means to maintain and control the labor force, to demonstrate the master's authority and power and to prevent slave uprisings and escapes. In urban and rural areas alike, house and field slaves were regularly exposed to extreme forms of exploitation, discrimination and punishment. For instance, they were severely whipped and beaten for working too slowly or trying to run away.[22] As Worden points out, female captives at the Cape were particularly vulnerable to abuse. In many cases, they "were obliged to submit to their owner's sexual appetites if so ordered, and risked beatings if they refused."[23]

In theory, the colony's law (known as Roman-Dutch law) provided Cape slaves with the right to approach the Company's authorities to complain about mistreatment and assaults committed by their masters. Moreover, they were allowed to testify in court against whites, including their owners. In that respect, Cape slavery differed—at least on the surface, in theory—from slavery in the United States. Among farmers and government officials, this resulted in the self-legitimizing view that enslaved women and men in Dutch South Africa were better off than those in other parts of the world.[24] In practice, however, the law clearly supported and protected the interests of slave owners to ensure "that control over slaves was effectively maintained and that sufficient produce was extracted from their labour to keep the colony self-sufficient and to provide the necessary surplus for Company and burgher requirements."[25] In court, the slave's testimony was treated with utmost suspicion or completely dismissed as unreliable. In general, slaves were extremely afraid to accuse their owners of abuse because they knew they had to return to them after the trials.[26]

Like their counterparts in the Atlantic world, enslaved women and men at the Cape did not passively accept their fate. While there were no collective slave uprisings in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Cape slaves engaged in various forms of individual resistance to challenge the masters' authority and break the chains of bondage. As archival court records indicate, many slaves tried to escape to the colony's hinterland or the mountains near Cape Town, where some of them joined maroon communities. In many cases, however, fugitive slaves were not able to hide and stay free forever because "there was no permanent point of refuge in the western Cape after the expansion of the sett-

21 | Worden, *Slavery in Dutch South Africa* 115; italics in the original.

22 | Ibid. 101-18; see also Dooling, *Slavery, Emancipation and Colonial Rule* 40-41.

23 | Worden, *Slavery in Dutch South Africa* 105.

24 | Ibid. 110-16; see also Dooling, *Slavery, Emancipation and Colonial Rule* 41-42.

25 | Worden, *Slavery in Dutch South Africa* 110.

26 | Ibid. 111-16; see also Dooling, *Slavery, Emancipation and Colonial Rule* 42.

ler farming region."[27] In addition to escape attempts, slaves offered resistance by slowing their work pace, attacking their owners or overseers, setting fire to the masters' houses or poisoning their food, participating in underground networks and, tragically, by committing suicide and infanticide.[28]

As the historian Wayne Dooling points out, the beginning of the nineteenth century (the time in which Christiansë's novel *Unconfessed* is set) was a period of transformations and "considerable flux in the colony, primarily stemming from the replacement of the moribund VOC at the end of the eighteenth century by a British colonial government."[29] One of the primary goals of the new administration was to create and ensure political, social and economic stability in South Africa. Shortly after the first British occupation of the Cape in 1795, some of the new local authorities recognized the need to address and improve the situation of the enslaved population in order to reduce the risk of unrest and rebellion.[30] Certainly, this debate was influenced by recent slave revolts in British colonies such as Jamaica and, most notably, by the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804)—which, as Iyunolu Folayan Osagie puts it, "symbolized the vigor of slave resistance in the New World."[31] Ultimately, however, the British reform plans at the Cape were not put into practice, primarily because Cape slaveholders and settlers strongly defended their rights and privileges.[32]

In the 1820s, more than a decade after the second conquest of the Cape in 1806 and the legal abolition of the transoceanic slave trade in 1808, the British colonial authorities started to pursue "an official policy of 'amelioration'"[33] in South Africa, intended to improve the slave's legal position. As a result of this new initiative insistently demanded by abolitionists in Great Britain, during the 1820s and 1830s, enslaved individuals were given the right to marry, the slave's working hours were reduced and "[t]he sale in separate lots of husbands,

27 | Worden, *Slavery in Dutch South Africa* 125.

28 | Ibid. 119-37.

29 | Wayne Dooling, "'The Good Opinions of Others': Law, Slavery & Community in the Cape Colony, c.1760-1830," *Breaking the Chains: Slavery and Its Legacy in the Nineteenth-Century Cape Colony*, eds. Nigel Worden and Clifton Crais (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand UP, 1994) 25.

30 | Dooling, *Slavery, Emancipation and Colonial Rule* 72-73.

31 | Iyunolu F. Osagie, *The Amistad Revolt: Memory, Slavery and the Politics of Identity in the United States and Sierra Leone* (Athens, GA: U of Georgia P, 2000) 29. For more information on slave revolts in eighteenth-century Jamaica as well as on the Haitian Revolution, see chapter 6, "A Vicious Circle of Violence: Revisiting Jamaican Slavery in Marlon James's *The Book of Night Women* (2009)," in this study.

32 | Dooling, *Slavery, Emancipation and Colonial Rule* 72-73.

33 | Ibid. 84.

wives, and children under the age of ten was prohibited."[34] In case of maltreatment, slaves could turn to local authorities (so-called "Assistant Guardians"), who were required to carry out investigations and provide legal assistance and representation in court. Moreover, the Dutch masters and farmers were obliged "to keep record books of punishments inflicted and these were to be submitted to the Slave Protectors biannually."[35]

In practice, however, these measures did not change the slave's status as chattel or ameliorate her living and working conditions. In several rural districts, slave owners strongly, and at times violently, protested against the new policy. Not willing to cooperate with the office of the "Protector of Slaves," they refused to fill out the required documents and continued to subject their slaves to sexual assaults and mistreatment. In the 1820s and 1830s, a large number of slaves actually went to the courts to complain about their owners, hoping to escape from further violence. Yet, in many cases, they were forced to realize that their charges were not taken into account and their masters were not punished.[36] "Colonial policy was deliberately aimed at arriving at 'amicable' settlements in conflicts between masters and slaves," Dooling explains. "For the most part, this consisted of the withdrawal of slave complaints."[37]

(Re-)Appropriating the Archive of Slavery: Goals, Challenges and Limits

> The *landdrost* said, is it true that on the twenty-fourth of December last … *Hai*. What could I say that would be answer enough for us all? […] *Speak, Sila van den Kaap. You have committed a heinous crime.* […] I told him, *hertseer.* It is like wind blowing against a closed door.[38]

In this key passage taken from Christiansë's *Unconfessed*, the novel's protagonist Sila, an enslaved woman in early nineteenth-century South Africa, recalls the day she was brought to court and condemned to death for infanticide: Her trial takes place in 1823, seventeen years after the second British occupation of the Cape. Despite the ameliorative measures introduced by the new colonial go-

34 | Ibid. 85.

35 | Dooling, "'The Good Opinions of Others'" 31; see also Dooling, *Slavery, Emancipation and Colonial Rule* 84-86.

36 | Dooling, *Slavery, Emancipation and Colonial Rule* 86-89.

37 | Ibid. 89.

38 | Yvette Christiansë, *Unconfessed: A Novel* (New York: Other Press, 2006) 231-34; italics and first ellipsis in the original. All further references to this novel (U) will be cited in the text and will refer to this edition.

vernment to reform the colony's slave law, the situation of the enslaved in South Africa has not significantly improved. In most legal proceedings, the slave's testimony is either ignored or dismissed as unreliable and untrustworthy.[39] In *Unconfessed*, Sila is aware of the fact that her tragic story will not be heard by the colonial authorities. Thus, when asked by the local magistrate, Van der Riet, to confess the killing of her nine-year-old son Baro, "in response to the law's demand for corroboration of what it already claims to know,"[40] Sila refuses to give a detailed account of the crime and her motives. Knowing that her master will probably not be punished, she does not explain that she and her children were routinely exposed to mistreatment and (sexual) abuse by Van der Wat. Instead of answering the magistrate's question in a direct way and confessing the infanticide (the novel's title alludes to this fact), she only says: *hertseer*.[41] For the reader of *Unconfessed*, this utterance provides (partial) insight into Sila's complex emotional state as a slave mother who, driven by extreme sorrow and utmost despair, decides to take the life of her child in order to protect him from further pain and harm.

Outside the fictional realm of the novel, the term *hertseer* refers to Christiansë's exploration and critical (re-)appropriation of the colonial archive. As she explains in her author's note and a detailed accompanying essay called "'Heartsore': The Melancholy Archive of Cape Colony Slavery" (2009), *Unconfessed* is based on historical documents found at the Cape Town Archive and other institutions that, from the colonizer's perspective, reveal the case of Sila van de Kaap, a female slave accused of slitting the throat of her child. Her name occurs in various forms like Siela, Silia or Drusilla in a number of white-authored sources, including the will of her first mistress Hendrina Jansen, court and prison records and a decree by King George IV, composed in 1827. In these texts, Sila is defined as chattel and reduced to a criminal without history. Based on these documents, it is impossible to gain insight into her feelings and thoughts or to discover the circumstances surrounding her son's death.[42] As Christiansë puts it, "Of her life, we know almost nothing. […] To the extent that she remains visible to us now, it is as a shadow figure […]."[43]

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39 | See, for instance, Dooling, *Slavery, Emancipation and Colonial Rule* 89.

40 | Yvette Christiansë, "'Heartsore': The Melancholy Archive of Cape Colony Slavery," *S&F Online* 7.2 (2009): 10.

41 | In the novel's glossary, this Dutch term is translated as "[a]nguish; sore of heart (heartsore); distress." Yvette Christiansë, "Glossary," *Unconfessed*: *A Novel* (New York: Other Press, 2006) 344.

42 | Christiansë, "'Heartsore'" 2.

43 | Ibid. 1.

What can be reconstructed from the archival material is the following account of events, which forms the basis of the plot in *Unconfessed*:[44] In the Cape Colony, Sila was apparently first owned by a widow called Hendrina Jansen, who died in 1806. In her testament, Jansen directed that Sila and her other slaves be manumitted after her death. In order to earn money to compensate Jansen's son Theron, the slaves should be hired out to other masters. Contrary to what her mistress had stated in her will, however, Sila did not obtain her freedom. Rather, four years later, she was sold to Carl Hancke in Cape Town, where she gave birth to Carolina, Camies and Baro. In 1817, after a heated legal dispute between Theron and Hancke over the ownership of the slave woman, Sila and her children were transported to a farm in Plettenberg Bay.

At this place, Sila and Baro were repeatedly whipped and flogged by their new owners, Jacobus van der Wat and his wife; Carolina and Camies were sold to another farmer. In December 1822, after a terrible beating that left Baro with serious injuries, Sila killed her son with a knife. Then, she escaped from the farm to turn to her neighbor, a militia officer named Witte Drift, where she confessed the crime. Complaining about her master's cruelty and brutality, she was examined by the district's surgeon, who discovered a number of bruises on Sila's body and confirmed her story of mistreatment. A couple of months later, in March 1823, the slave woman was brought to trial for *kindermoord*. In court, her fellow slave Jephta was asked by Sila's lawyer to testify against Van der Wat. Instead of corroborating Sila's version of events, Jephta called her a drunkard and described his master as a kind and good-natured man. "The fact that he was obliged to return to Van der Wat's farm after his testimony—and that this might have had some bearing upon his claims—went unchallenged,"[45] Christiansë observes.

As the official (court) records show, Sila was found guilty of killing her child and, despite the surgeon's notes, of falsely accusing her owners of mistreatment of their slaves. As a result, she was sentenced to death and taken to the prison in Cape Town. However, since Sila was with child and the law forbade the execution of pregnant women, the punishment was not carried out. In 1826, a number of years after the trial, the new superintendent of police, de Laurentz, became aware of the fact that Sila was still imprisoned and exploited as a prostitute. After obtaining a royal pardon from the king of England, her death sentence was changed to a fourteen-year imprisonment on Robben Island,[46] where she was forced to work in a quarry. As one of the few women

44 | The following paragraphs focusing on the archival account of Sila's life are based on Christiansë, "'Heartsore'" 2-6.

45 | Ibid. 5.

46 | As Harriet Deacon explains: "Robben Island has been used for many different purposes and held various contrasting meanings for South Africans during the course of

living on the island, she was again repeatedly subjected to sexual abuse. What is striking is that her name does not appear in any records after 1830; it might be that Sila was transported back to the prison in Cape Town a year after the official ending of slavery in 1834. But it is impossible to say if "she survived or not."[47]

In her author's note, Christiansë reflects on her motivation for exploring Sila's life and telling her story, after discovering the slave's name in several historical documents in South Africa and England:

> My own questions were straightforward: Who was she? What did it take for someone, a slave, a woman, to survive a death sentence, and for three years? Trying to answer these questions took years of summers and any other times I could get in the Cape Town archives, the British Library, and the Public Records Office in Kew. What pulled me? It was that trace, the word that all of the official documents seemed unable to resist—that single Dutch word, *hertseer*, which the English translated directly into "heartsore." Not "grieving" or "griefstruck," but this forceful, corporeal, "heartsore." I believed it to be one real world she uttered when the prosecutor outlined and demanded that she confirm her act.[48]

Inspired by this archival source, in *Unconfessed*, Christiansë seeks to write against the one-sided representation of Sila as a criminal within the colonial record, presenting her as a complex woman and loving mother with fears, hopes and dreams as well as a strong desire to protect her children. Focusing on everyday practices, experiences and relations of domination and subordination, Christiansë's primary goal is "to recover, to the extent possible, some sense of the life and conditions Sila lived in and from which she attempted to speak."[49] Like Hartman in "The Dead Book," she is faced with the ethical and aesthetic challenge of finding an appropriate way to engage with the archive and deal with its silences and gaps, racist depictions and "pornotroping" characteristics. To repeat an important point raised in my chapter on *Lose Your Mother*: Dependent on the information contained in white-authored sources, Christian-

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its history. [...] During the eighteenth century the island became a place of detention for those defined as the worst criminals and most dangerous opponents of the Dutch East India Company." Harriet Deacon, "Remembering Tragedy, Constructing Modernity: Robben Island as a National Monument," *Negotiating the Past*: *The Making of Memory in South Africa,* eds. Sarah Nuttall and Carli Coetzee, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999) 162.

47 | Christiansë, "'Heartsore'" 6.

48 | Yvette Christiansë, "Author's Note," *Unconfessed: A Novel* (New York: Other Press, 2006) 350; italics in the original.

49 | Christiansë, "'Heartsore'" 2.

së's difficult task is to write about scenes of oppression, rape and humiliation without "reinforcing the authority of these documents even as [she tries] to use them for contrary purposes"[50] and without subjecting the female captive to a further act of violation.

Like Hartman and Morrison, Christiansë is fully aware of the limits of her project to explore and articulate the experiences of enslaved women: While she attempts to challenge the dominant white account of the past, she points out that it is impossible to reconstruct Sila's life or to recover her voice from the material available. Legally defined as chattel, in court, Sila was only allowed to answer to questions asked by members of the colonizing group. Without support and protection, she could not give an account of the cruelty of the slave system and her traumatic experiences as a slave mother.[51] Drawing on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's work and her landmark essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), Christiansë argues that, in the archive, "Sila is structurally muted in that, although we have words from her, the state never granted her full subjectivity, and her utterances remained, for them, utterly illegible."[52] Although she had the opportunity to speak, she knew that her voice would not be heard by the colonial authorities.

For Christiansë (and any other contemporary author dealing with this subject), the attempt to explore the history of slavery in South Africa from the slave's point of view is complicated by "the absence of generic forms for slave self-articulation in the Cape Colony."[53] In contrast to the United States and other countries in the Americas, there are virtually no autobiographical texts written by (former) Cape slaves. As Christiansë explains, the primary reason for this dearth of first-person accounts of slavery in South Africa was the lack of abolitionist groups supporting the writing and publication of slave narratives. While British abolitionists like William Wilberforce also drew attention to the terrible conditions for Cape slaves and the high rate of infanticide among slave mothers in South Africa, "little effective abolitionist activity occurred in the Cape itself."[54] As a result, for enslaved individuals like Sila, there was no public space for self-representation. Today, confronted with silences, gaps and fragments of information, the novelist's task is

50 | Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection* 10-11.

51 | Christiansë, "'Heartsore'" 10-11.

52 | Ibid. 1. See also Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1988) 271-313.

53 | Christiansë, "'Heartsore'" 9.

54 | Ibid.

to listen to echoes of subjects for whom one might not have an adequate language; one must also learn how to discern what they might have been trying to say within the statements attributed to them (but that could very well represent the redactions of colonial officials—notaries, court reporters).[55]

Most crucially, as a contemporary author who intends to bring to light the intricacies involved in recovering the forgotten story of a slave woman like Sila, Christiansë, like Hartman and Morrison, has to acknowledge and respect the fact that the archive's fragments cannot be pieced together to create a coherent picture of the past.[56]

Fragmentation, Non-Linearity and Textual Blanks: Aesthetic Strategies in *Unconfessed*

In *Toni Morrison: An Ethical Poetics*, Christiansë vigorously disagrees with and powerfully challenges "kitsch" interpretations of *Beloved* that conceptualize this novel as an ultimately triumphant narrative of overcoming and redemption.[57] On an intertextual level, I argue, Christiansë's neo-slave narrative *Unconfessed* presents an oppositional response to such reductive reconciliatory readings: By using an extremely complex, fragmented and non-linear narrative style that refers to Sila's painful experiences of loss and violence and that reflects the archive's omissions, contradictions and gaps, in a way similar to Morrison and Hartman, Christiansë discards the notion of slavery fiction as a form of therapy, healing and reconciliation.

As Christiansë argues, an aesthetic strategy of fragmentation is "the only form that would resist any narrative longing for a complete, consoling recuperation of the colonial record on [the novelist's] part and, perhaps, a reader's."[58] By drawing attention to the interiority of the slave experience and exploring Sila's state of mind—her contradictions, inner conflicts and struggles—Christiansë seeks to re-imagine the enslaved woman's tragic story in all its depth, complexity and ambiguity, avoiding "sentimentality and nostalgia that would want to make this life heroic or even representative, as a bearer of truth we might want to universalize."[59]

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55 | Ibid. 2.

56 | See also Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts" 4.

57 | See Christiansë, *Toni Morrison* 34, 35, 46, 75.

58 | Christiansë, "Author's Note" 350.

59 | Yvette Christiansë, "A Freedom Stolen," *Dialogues Across Diasporas: Women Writers, Scholars, and Activists of Africana and Latina Descent in Conversation*, eds. Marion Rohrleitner and Sarah E. Ryan (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013) 104.

As a loving and caring slave mother, who is treated as chattel and (sexually) exploited by different masters, reduced to her reproductive capacities and separated from some of her daughters and sons, Sila is faced with the same dilemma as Sethe in *Beloved* and Florens's mother in *A Mercy*: How to protect her offspring and herself in this violent society that denies her the right to decide over her own body and the lives of her children? How to carry out her role and tasks as a mother in a world in which she and her children are registered as the property of white women and men? Focusing on the destructive psychological effects of slavery and colonial discourse on the female captive, *Unconfessed* offers no redemptive vision or easy solutions to Sila's predicament; ultimately, the novel's protagonist sees no other option but to commit infanticide to save her boy Baro from being beaten and mistreated by van der Wat. While Sila's deed could be interpreted as a strong act of black resistance against the colonizer, "the fact that Baro bears the full burden of this violence puts the brakes on any runaway 'triumphalism' of late twentieth-century readerly practice,"[60] Christiansë contends. In *Unconfessed*, as in *A Mercy* and *Lose Your Mother*, the main focus is on loss, grief and pain rather than on the celebration of resistance. Given Baro's death, for Christiansë, it is impossible to transform Sila's story into a narrative of overcoming and liberation.[61]

Like Hartman's attempt to reconstruct the slave's experience aboard the *Recovery* in "The Dead Book," Christiansë's text is based on the archive of slavery but also written against it.[62] In a third-person point of view, *Unconfessed* begins with a description of the new superintendent's visit to the prison in Cape Town in 1826, where he encounters Sila, a female slave "moved from master to master, farm to farm, from the district's prison, to the big town's prison" (U 12). In the following pages, in a non-chronological order and fragmentary manner, the reader is introduced to the tragic events of Sila's life, circling around her separation from her family and home in Mozambique and her terrible experiences in South Africa. After this introductory sequence, the narrative perspective shifts to the protagonist's point of view, which gives the reader insight into Sila's thoughts and feelings and highlights her "desire for speech resulting from the inability to be heard fully from within slavery's discourse."[63] Her decisive remark "*Out of my way*!" (U 34; italics in the original) is the prelude to a complex act of black self-representation and to a deep and extremely intense confrontation with her past. The rest of the novel "has the deep inner logic of the oral storyteller who relates to past events and characters in a different way than a chronicler, or even third person narrator," Christiansë contends. "Key

60 | Christiansë, "'Heartsore'" 12.

61 | Ibid.

62 | See Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts" 12.

63 | Christiansë, "'Heartsore'" 1.

moments taken from the archive provide the temporal ordering but they are set in an approaching claim to how Sila might have seen and heard."[64]

As in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, it is the "unhomely"—"a paradigmatic colonial"[65] situation, to use Homi K. Bhabha's words—that causes the female protagonist to wrestle with memories that have been repressed or forgotten. On Robben Island, Sila encounters the spirit of her dead son Baro whose presence makes her feel stronger and forces her to re-experience traumatic events and feelings: "Now that you are back, my thoughts are like bees in a bottle. Days long ago are back, fresh and with them a pain that is sharp" (U 66). Unlike some of her fellow prisoners, Sila believes in the necessity to remember and, in a poetic and fragmented narrative that switches between times and places, she begins to dig into her past. However, what characterizes her internal speech—a sophisticated fusion of dreams, memories, flashbacks and visions—is a high level of self-reflexivity concerning the limits and dangers of her attempt to talk about her experiences. Put differently, in *Unconfessed*, there is an underlying voice emphasizing that certain aspects of Sila's life cannot (and should not) be articulated or represented. To use Sila's words: "Some things just cannot be told" (U 150).

As an enslaved black woman, Sila is categorically excluded "from the full and putatively universal subjecthood of 'free white male.'"[66] For the European colonizers, she is "that 'otherness' which is at once an object of desire and derision."[67] As mentioned before, on van der Vat's farm as well as in the Cape Town prison and on Robben Island, Sila becomes a rape victim. In her speech, she is torn between the wish to address her mistreatment and the refusal to recount it. In these passages, the novel enters into a discussion with contemporary theoretical explorations within the fields of African American and African diaspora studies that focus on the risks of representing slavery's violence. It is in this context that I will, once again, look at the work of Saidiya Hartman.

In *Scenes of Subjection*, Hartman justifies her decision not to incorporate Frederick Douglass's famous description of the violent act against Aunt Hester by arguing that she seeks to highlight "the ease with which such scenes are usually reiterated, the casualness with which they are circulated, and the consequences of this routine display of the slave's ravaged body."[68] As Hartman goes on to explain, in most cases, such accounts of violence do not evoke the reader's indignation but rather "reinforce the spectacular character of black suffering."[69]

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64 | Christiansë, "A Freedom Stolen" 104-05.

65 | Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994) 13.

66 | Christiansë, "'Heartsore'" 2.

67 | Bhabha 96.

68 | Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection* 3.

69 | Ibid.

According to Hartman, writers dealing with the issue of slavery are faced with the challenge of bearing witness to the atrocities "without exacerbating the indifference to suffering that is the consequence of the benumbing spectacle."[70]

In *Unconfessed*, instead of satisfying a contemporary reader's thirst for violent entertainment and offering an account rich in detail,[71] Christiansë carefully employs specific narrative strategies to describe these scenes of humiliation and violence against the black female body. Sila's "Let us talk about the things these guards do. Let us not" (U 154), for instance, allows the protagonist to refer to her experience of being raped by the prison guards without having to narrate it. Here, Sila gives us a short glimpse into her tragic situation as one of the few female prisoners on Robben Island but, by refusing to talk about it, prevents us from becoming "voyeurs fascinated with and repelled by exhibitions of terror and sufferance."[72] When she recalls the events leading up to Baro's death, a single, onomatopoetic word depicts the beating of Sila by her master: "Van der Wat caught me when I came in. *Klap*!" (U 266; italics in the original). In this utterance, the brutal act is indicated but not explicitly told; it is up to the reader to imagine it or not. As Christiansë explains in an essay called "A Freedom Stolen" (2013), in *Unconfessed*, her goal "was to *not* show the violence in any descriptive detail. This was made easier by the fact that the novel becomes a first person narration. One does not 'write' a description of violence while experiencing it. Rather, a listener might hear a sound that tells everything."[73]

Built in a circular way around repetitions with a difference, the text slowly moves towards the novel's climax: the protagonist's act of infanticide. Again and again, Sila's reconstruction of the event is interrupted by textual blanks. At one point, signifying on Sethe's combination of mono-syllables in Morrison's *Beloved*,[74] Sila's train of thought suddenly stops in the middle of a sentence—after a clear, repeated "no" that expresses her refusal to confront her past: "That

70 | Ibid. 4.

71 | See also Maria Geusteyn, "The Art of Looking Sideways: Articulating Silence in Yvette Christiansë's *Unconfessed*," *Postamble: A Multidisciplinary Journal of African Studies* 7.1 (2011): 5.

72 | Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection* 3.

73 | Christiansë, "A Freedom Stolen" 110; italics in the original.

74 | Here, I am referring to Sethe's response to Schoolteacher's arrival at 124, "Simple: she [Sethe] was squatting in the garden and when she saw them coming and recognized schoolteacher's hat, she heard wings. Little hummingbirds stuck their needle beaks right through her headcloth into her hair and beat their wings. And if she thought anything, it was. No. No. Nono. Nonono. Simple." Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (1987; London: Vintage, 2007) 192. In her insightful reading of this scene, Sabine Broeck argues that "*Beloved* enacts the answerlessness, which I take to mean the impossibility to respond to a traumatic event with words, in the ultimate collapse of signification into the

day. Oh. No, nono. I do not want to go to that day. I should have [...]" (U 257). In this passage, Christiansë's text performs the difficulty and pain involved in the process of remembering the infanticide and talking/writing about it. Throughout *Unconfessed*, Sila uses euphemisms[75] to describe the *kindermoord* ("I sent him away from this world;" U 294) and, as illustrated in the quotation above, only refers to "that day." In a similar way as Morrison's *Beloved*, Christiansë's text seeks to shift the attention away from the actual act of infanticide (the crime that is centralized in the archive) to the circumstances that lead to the event, to the motives that lie behind the killing, to Sila's life with the killing.

Power Relations in a Racist and Sexist Society

In *Unconfessed*, Christiansë depicts a society profoundly marked by power inequalities and hierarchical structures based on race, class, gender and sexuality. To draw, once again, on the work of Avtar Brah, the Cape Colony can be described as a "diaspora space," in which various power struggles take place between diasporic and non-diasporic individuals. Written from a black woman's perspective, Christiansë's novel not only explores the intricate web of relationships that exist between the white male colonizers/slaveholders, the white women living in the Cape Colony and the enslaved community. Like Morrison's *A Mercy* and James's *The Book of Night Women*, it also sheds light on what Tina M. Campt and Deborah A. Thomas would describe as "intra-diasporic"[76] tensions, that is, on acts of oppression, betrayal and jealously within the black diasporic group. What emerges is a complex portrait of a violent and male-dominated world, in which black women like Sila are subject to both racism and sexism: They suffer not only from the same experiences of violence as male slaves; they are also exposed to forms of humiliation and abuse by black men, i.e. male fellow slaves.

A key theme that runs through the novel is Sila's desperate (and ultimately unsuccessful) attempt to gain manumission. As the historian Robert Shell points out in his 1994 study *Children of Bondage: A Social History of the Slave Society at the Cape of Good Hope, 1652-1838*, manumission was "a juridical act in which the property rights in the slave were surrendered by the owner and the slave assumed a new—but at the Cape, unfortunately not full—legal and civic

mono-syllable 'no,' strengthening its effect of denial by repetition, 'nonono.'" Broeck, *White Amnesia - Black Memory?* 37.

75 | See also Jessica Murray, "Gender and Violence in Cape Slave Narratives and Post-Narratives," *South African Historical Journey* 62.3 (2010): 458.

76 | Campt and Thomas, "Gendering Diaspora: Transnational Feminism, Diaspora and Its Hegemonies" 3.

status and responsibility as a 'free black.'"[77] In private households (in contrast to the Company's lodge), a large number of enslaved women and men "were manumitted by testamentary disposition after their owners died."[78] However, it was not uncommon that the slave owner's heirs went to court to contest their fathers' or mothers' will. Noteworthy, under Roman Dutch law, the children of manumitted slave mothers were also treated as free individuals. Therefore, for members of the ruling class, the manumission of an enslaved woman was a significant economic loss.[79] Not coincidentally, in the years following the abolition of the oceanic slave trade in 1808, the number of manumitted female captives rapidly declined because enslaved "women then became the main source of supply for all future slaves in the colony."[80]

As the archival material reveals, when the widow and Cape slave owner Hendrina Jansen died in 1806, her son Theron ignored his mother's instructions to offer manumission to her slaves, including Sila van de Kaap. For Theron, Sila was especially valuable because she was of childbearing age and already had several children, who could be rented out or sold to other farmers. Presumably, Jansen's son (and other masters) repeatedly changed Sila's name to conceal that she was, in fact, a free person. Their efforts were successful: While Sila believed that she "was working off the price of her freedom, as stipulated in Hendrina Jansen's will,"[81] she was actually transferred from master to master as chattel and never gained her freedom. Instead of intervening in this matter, the relevant colonial authorities did not question Theron's act.[82] Deprived of her freedom, Sila was forced to accept "that any children born to her would also be slaves, and therefore, property."[83] For the slave mother, this was certainly the most painful aspect of Theron's fraud.

In *Unconfessed*, Christiansë focuses our attention to Sila's (failed) efforts to enforce the will of her deceased mistress. Throughout the novel, the slave woman struggles to make her voice heard and assert her legal status as a manumitted slave. Exposed to abuse and sexual exploitation, her primary goal is to protect and liberate her children:[84] "When *Oumiesies* put me in her will, she meant for my children to be free too. That is how the law is. I know that. The children of a free woman are free. And when *Oumiesies* died I became free. Eighteen and oh-six" (U 65; italics in the original). However, Sila's predicament

77 | Shell 371-72.

78 | Ibid. 390.

79 | Ibid. 384, 390.

80 | Ibid. 384.

81 | Christiansë, "'Heartsore'" 3.

82 | Ibid. 3-4.

83 | Ibid. 3.

84 | See also Christiansë, "A Freedom Stolen" 109.

is that the colony's law provides no help or protection for free black women and men held as slaves. Living in a society in which her subjectivity is completely denied, Sila's cries for justice are systematically ignored. Except for friends like Lys, a fellow prisoner on Robben Island, nobody listens to her complaints or stands up for her rights. At the Cape, the master not only has the power to humiliate, beat and torture his slaves on a daily basis without being punished for it; he is also in a position to defy the law. Although the British authorities claim to be willing to improve the conditions of the enslaved, before the law and in court, Cape slaves are "never treated as the responsible authors of meaningful statements,"[85] to quote Christiansë.

In *Unconfessed*, Christiansë shows that the slaveholder's power over his slaves is nearly unlimited, which regularly leads to cruel and degrading treatment of those in bondage: At a certain point in the novel, van der Wat's daughter Susanna asks Sila to follow her into her father's office. A few hours after the painful separation from her children Carolina and Camies, Susanna attempts to humiliate Sila by reading from a book compiled by van der Wat; an inventory of his possessions that puts Sila and her daughters and sons on the same level as his animals: "She made my name come out of that book like a crazy thing lost in a big wind when everything is thrown up in the air and spins around. There we all were, the cows and you and me and Carolina and Camies and Pieter" (U 246).

This passage, which reminds us of a similar scene in Morrison's *Beloved*, where Schoolteacher evokes Sethe's supposed "animal" characteristics,[86] refers to the concept and colonial process of "thingification:"[87] the slaveholder's attempt and power to transform African captives into mere objects, destroying the slave's possibility of subjecthood. As shown before, this is also a central theme of Morrison's *A Mercy* and Hartman's *Lose Your Mother*. In *Unconfessed*, throughout her life, Sila is forced to work for masters who treat and (as van der Wat's book illustrates) represent her and her children as "things bought and sold" (U 299). Within the existing power structure of the colony, the slave holder's children have internalized their fathers' racist beliefs that white men and women are superior to black individuals. In this regard, van der Wat's daughter Susanna is representative.

In addition to exploring the relationship between white and black, *Unconfessed* offers striking examples of the complex power structure and conflicts between male and female slaves at the Cape. In her speech to her dead son, Sila recounts a series of incidents in October 1823, two months before the killing

85 | Christiansë, "'Heartsore'" 9.

86 | Morrison, *Beloved* 228.

87 | See also chapter 2, "From Human Bondage to Racial Slavery: Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* (2008)," in this study.

of Baro: Having lost his master's cattle, Jeptha, one of Sila's fellow slaves, finds himself in a precarious situation. His only chance to avoid being severely punished by van der Wat is to leave the farm and run away. As indicated before, flight was a widespread form of slave resistance in South Africa.[88] However, while many enslaved women and men in North America gained their freedom by traveling to regions and states where slavery was not allowed or practiced, "there was no 'outside' for slaves of the Cape Colony, no northern, nonslaving state to which a slave might escape."[89] Thus, given the colony's geographical location, in most cases, the attempt to escape was doomed to failure. And, quite often, recaptured Cape slaves were beaten or even whipped to death.[90] Despite these enormous risks, Sila expresses her strong wish to join Jeptha, together with her children, hoping to leave behind the violence she encounters on van der Wat's farm: "We can do it. I told him. My blood was coming back. My blood was running away. *My children* [...] But he said, that is not possible. They will slow us down" (U 251; italics in the original). While Sila believes in the power of black solidarity and responsibility in the face of slavery's horror, Jeptha is depicted as a cold and emotionless man who is only concerned about his own future and unable or unwilling to empathize with a black mother and fellow slave struggling to protect and care for her children.

In its depiction of Jeptha's cruel behavior towards Sila, this passage illustrates the fact that, as Christiansë puts it, "slave men, too, regarded women as beneath them."[91] In her insightful essay "'Strength of the Lion ... Arms Like Polished Iron': Embodying Black Masculinity in an Age of Slavery and Propertied Manhood" (2011), the historian Kathleen M. Brown argues that male slaves tried and managed to express their manhood in various ways: for instance, by running away from the master, starting fights with fellow slaves and whites, engaging in sexual relationships, participating in cultural activities or seeking to control and oppress black women.[92] "Subjected to a labor system and a legal context that attempted to strip them of their humanity," Brown contends, "enslaved men struggled to find space to be men."[93]

For Jeptha, the refusal to allow Sila to take her children with her provides him with the opportunity to dominate and exert power over a slave woman; it offers the chance to assert his manhood, restore some sense of self-esteem and

88 | Warden, *Slavery in Dutch South Africa* 123.

89 | Christiansë, "Author's Note" 351.

90 | Warden, *Slavery in Dutch South Africa* 125-27.

91 | Christiansë, "A Freedom Stolen" 109.

92 | Kathleen M. Brown, "'Strength of the Lion ... Arms Like Polished Iron': Embodying Black Masculinity in an Age of Slavery and Propertied Manhood," *New Men: Manliness in Early America*, ed. Thomas A. Foster (New York: New York UP, 2011) 172-80.

93 | Ibid. 174.

gain respect within the slave community—at the expense of Sila and the lives of her children. Focusing on intra-black violence in the Cape Colony, this scene parallels Morrison's representation of the Blacksmith's rejection of Florens in *A Mercy*: Both Morrison and Christiansë challenge static conceptualizations of black groups as homogeneous communities of victims and rebels and, therefore, move beyond a strict dichotomy between black victimhood/resistance and white guilt culture. Adopting a black feminist standpoint, they highlight the brutalizing impact of slavery on the dispossessed and explore the ways in which black men like Jeptha and the Blacksmith seek to gain or regain some form of power by oppressing black women and other fellow captives.

Instead of celebrating acts of kindness and cooperation within the black diasporic community, *Unconfessed* thus draws our attention to "the collusion between a slave owner and his male slave"[94] at the Cape. "At some point in their relation to women," Christiansë contends, "these men are in concert, even while they remain in their hierarchical relation to each other."[95] In fact, subordinated to van der Wat's will, Jeptha acts like his master when he tries to rape Sila, reducing her to a (sexual) object and destroying any sense of solidarity between enslaved women and men. As Jessica Murray shows in her essay "Gender and Violence in Cape Slave Narratives and Post-Narratives" (2010), *Unconfessed* sheds light on the black man's feelings of powerlessness, inferiority and bitterness, given the fact that he is unable to protect members of the black female community from being exposed to (sexual) abuse by white men. According to Murray, Christiansë's text shows "how this rage is projected onto the female victim of rape rather than being solely directed at the perpetrator/owner."[96]

On one of her first days on van der Wat's farm, Sila is terrible beaten although she is pregnant. While she hopes to get help from her fellow slaves, Jeptha offers no words of consolation but laughs and spits at Sila: "And she knew the men were jealous and ashamed, and that was why their eyes went dull with hatred when they looked at her. She knew there would be no Sunday afternoon dancing or singing with these people" (U 21).[97] Participating in a dialogue with Afro-pessimism about the utterly destructive nature of anti-blackness, *Unconfessed*, like *A Mercy*, examines the devastating effects of slavery as "thingification" on relationships within the black community, foregrounding violence, loss and despair as defining features of the female captive's life.

94 | Christiansë, "A Freedom Stolen" 109.

95 | Ibid.

96 | Murray 459.

97 | See also ibid.

Conclusion

In her essay "'This is Our Speech': Voice, Body and Poetic Form in Recent South African Writing" (2011), the South African poet and literary scholar Gabeba Baderoon analyzes the sophisticated use of lyrical language and poetic devices, such as repetitions and ellipses, in *Unconfessed*. According to Baderoon, Christiansë strategically employs these narrative and aesthetic strategies to address the cruelty of Cape slavery and acts of sexual violence against enslaved women without running the risk of "reproducing an intrusive gaze on their suffering."[98] The protagonist's highly poetic interior monologue, Baderoon contends, offers a powerful alternative to Sila's life as a prisoner and slave on Robben Island: In her private speech, the slave mother is able to communicate with her sons and daughters who are dead or have been sold, to recount her childhood in Mozambique, to swear at her cruel masters and to dream about freedom.[99] While Sila's story of abuse and violence is ignored or dismissed by members of the ruling class, her thoughts and utterances directed at Baro and friends like Johannes, "constitute the anguished but ultimately triumphant words of the novel,"[100] Baderoon concludes. Drawing our attention to Sila's private memories of her past as a free woman, her desires and hopes and her attempts to offer resistance against her masters, "the text emphatically conveys her powerful resilience and creation of intimacy and wholeness."[101]

Highlighting the novel's careful representation of (sexual) violence, Baderoon identifies and analyzes a crucial aspect of Christiansë's neo-slave narrative that is also addressed in this chapter. However, by reading Sila's private "confession" to her children and friends as an empowering narrative that allows the protagonist to find a new sense of wholeness, Baderoon's interpretation fails to take into account that Christiansë explicitly refuses to offer a triumphant reconstruction of the slave woman's life. As I have shown, *Unconfessed* is marked by contradictory tendencies: By focusing on the interiority of the slave's experience, Christiansë indeed writes against the one-sided and racist depiction of Sila within the archive of slavery. At the same time, however, the novel self-reflexively elaborates on the ultimate impossibility of reconstructing Sila's experiences; it refuses to fill in the silences of the historical record as it abstains from transforming the slave mother's story into a narrative of overcoming. Fiction, for Christiansë, cannot heal the wounds of slavery: "Confronted by such a figure as Sila," Christiansë explains, "a researcher must skirt a lon-

98 | Gabeba Baderoon, "'This is Our Speech:' Voice, Body and Poetic Form in Recent South African Writing," *Social Dynamics* 37.2 (2011): 214.

99 | Ibid. 219.

100 | Ibid. 220.

101 | Ibid.

ging for evidence of agency or escape."[102] The same is true for a writer trying to piece together the fragments of the past and to represent the tragic life of a slave woman exposed to extreme cruelty and violence.

Christiansë's refusal to engage in a therapeutic project and to provide narrative closure is particularly apparent at the end of the novel.[103] As mentioned before, the archival documents do not reveal any information about Sila's fate after 1830. We cannot know with certainty if Sila, like her fellow prisoners, had to leave Robben Island in 1835 and was taken to the town prison.[104] In *Unconfessed*, on the last page of the novel, in a third-person point of view, the narrator directly addresses the reader and refers to the impossibility to give an accurate account of the events in Sila's life after the end of slavery in the Cape Colony in 1834: "*You want to know. What happened to her? Well, some say she left the island, but there is no agreement on how*" (U 341; italics in the original). Written in a highly poetic style, the narrator offers five different versions of Sila's departure from the island. Among these stories is one narrative that deals with the slave woman's death. Thus, struggling with the unknown, Christiansë resists the temptation to construct an optimistic ending that would present a consoling and reconciliatory view of the past, in general, and Sila's life as a slave, in particular. While it is impossible to recover the voice of an enslaved woman like Sila, Christiansë's goal is to provide us with a "sense of the world that reduced such a person to traces."[105]

102 | Christiansë, "'Heartsore'" 11.

103 | See also Meg Samuelson, "'Lose Your Mother: Kill Your Child': The Passage of Slavery and Its Afterlife in Narratives by Yvette Christiansë and Saidiya Hartman," *English Studies in Africa* 51.2 (2008): 39.

104 | Christiansë, "'Heartsore'" 6.

105 | Christiansë, "A Conversation with Yvette Christiansë" 353.