1 Introduction

1.1 Forming Refusal, or Refusal as Form

> Freeing yourself was one thing, claiming ownership of that freed self was another.
> — Toni Morrison, *Beloved*

> The entanglements of bondage and liberty shaped the liberal imagination of freedom, fueled the emergence and expansion of capitalism, and spawned proprietorial conceptions of the self. [...] The longstanding and intimate affiliation of liberty and bondage made it impossible to envision freedom independent of constraint or personhood and autonomy separate from the sanctity of property and proprietorial notions of the self.
> — Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*

Within the first few pages of Toni Morrison's historical novel *A Mercy*, the Anglo-Dutch farmer, trader, and moneylender Jacob Vaark appears unannounced out of a thick and inscrutable mist on his way to his business partner, a Portuguese slave and tobacco trader. At this point, we as readers neither know his identity nor his business as we encounter him only as "[t]he man." As he happens on the novel's setting in seventeenth-century colonial North America,[1] he slowly moves "through the surf, stepping carefully over pebbles and sand to shore" until he arrives at "the ramshackle village that sleeps between two huge riverside plantations," where he buys a horse (Morrison, *A Mercy* 7, 8).[2] When "the man" signs a note as a means to finalize the act of sale, we finally learn his name: "Jacob Vaark" (*AM* 8). At this very moment of the purchase, Vaark not only signs himself into being, but *he signs himself into being as an owner.* Is it a coincidence that the coming-into-being of this character correlates with the sale of property? What is the relation between the sale of property, a signature, and the naming of this character? How can we examine this nexus, what does it mean? And what does it tell us about the making of liberal subjects?

The scene exposes the connections between the rise of liberal modernity and its subject and the questions it raises point to the importance of private property in this context. In this study of the positioning and formative powers of modern

1 Most critics and readers seem to agree that the novel is set in colonial Virginia and Maryland even though some have suggested that it is set in the Northern colonies. In *Unruly Narrative*, I also consider the colonial Chesapeake and especially Virginia to be the novel's immediate setting while also suggesting more broadly that *A Mercy* allegorizes North American colonial beginnings as a whole.

2 From here on, I will use *AM* whenever I quote from *A Mercy.*

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110780574-002

liberal ideas of private property, I offer an intervention into hegemonic notions of the liberal Human. *Unruly Narrative: Property, Self-Making, and Toni Morrison's A Mercy* observes the importance of narrative for the liberal subject, which emerged through the formations of European liberalism, Atlantic slavery, and settler colonial expansion in the so-called New World. In questioning these connections, I turn to Morrison's *A Mercy* as a key literary text that generates a fundamental philosophical and political critique of the connections between self-making and private property as it interrogates liberal ideas of what it means to be a Human subject at its seventeenth-century New World scene.[3]

Unruly Narrative examines the complex social, cultural, political, and philosophical entanglements between power, race, and subjectivity that are so fundamental to U.S. society. The study scrutinizes this nexus, or grammar (Spillers, "Mama's Baby"), by way of examining the entanglements between self-making and private property within the realm of literary representation and in relation to what Saidiya Hartman has called "the liberal imagination of freedom[, the texture of which] is laden with [...] slavery" (*Scenes* 115 – 116). To this end, my study follows scholars of the racialized emergence of Western modernity, whose works show that, historically, liberal claims to individual freedom are intimately bound by the systems and practices of European settler colonialism and enslavement of African and African-descended human beings and the transatlantic trade in human flesh. Over the coming pages, I will use the terms Atlantic slavery, New World chattel slavery, chattel slavery, and slavery interchangeably in my discussion of colonial Virginia and its fictional representation in *A Mercy*. I do so in order to denote the global dimensions of transatlantic slavery as well as its local configuration in seventeenth-century Virginia. As Caribbean intellectual and feminist thinker Sylvia Wynter notes when she reminds us of the conjunction between the systems of Atlantic slavery and liberal claims to individual freedom:

> Western Europe's epochal shift was a product of the intellectual revolution of humanism [the effects of which were] the horrors that were inflicted by [...] the settlers upon the indig-

3 In this study, I will use terms like subjectivity, subject, personhood as well as self and self-making interchangeably. Following Wilderson, I will use Human and Humanist with a capital H "to connote a paradigmatic entity that exists ontologically as a position of life in relation of the Black of Slave position, one of death" (*Red* 23). It is important to state clearly that my work does not position Black people as objects of analysis; I capitalize "Black" to denote a historical, socio-discursive construct and category of analysis, and a political position. I use "white" in small letters to show that "whiteness" also is a racialized (and not a universal) category and (analytical) position "that has been historically produced and that has real consequences" (Adusei-Poku 44).

> enous peoples of the Caribbean and the Americas, as well as upon the African-descended Middle Passages and substitute slave labor force. ("1492" 13)

Today, dominant contemporary conceptions of the liberal subject as inherently free, white, and propertied relate back to these early moments of liberal subject formation described by Wynter.[4] It is this "white subject's universalist reign [which] keeps resurfacing [...] in much of the recent feuilleton and academic discourse of the legacy of Enlightenment as a haven of freedom, entitled subjectivity, and human rights" (Broeck, *Gender* 49). This white Human subject (of at least male and female if not all genders) and the discourse accompanying it have "endured not only in the face of hundreds of years of enslavism and colonialism, but also in our presence of white neoliberal capitalist expansion" (49).[5] *Unruly Narrative* interrogates the emergence and status of this subject and its claims to freedom on the literary level of representation and thinks through questions of self-making, personhood, and the meaning and positioning power of private property in relation to those who are barred from making such liberal claims at *A Mercy*'s early colonial scene.

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4 A distinguished body of scholarship on the relation between *Race and the Enlightenment* (Eze; see also Buck-Morss; Hulme, "Spontaneous"; Ward and Lott) has shown that the Enlightenment's self-descriptive narrative of scientific and Human emancipation needs to be understood as "altogether bypass[ing] the historical experience of lively and angry early modern controversies around the slave trade, slavery, and issues of mastery, ownership, and oppression of human beings" (Broeck, "Never" 236). Historians, sociologists, and philosophers have also written extensively about the closely intertwined gendered and racialized histories of European economic expansion, (settler-) colonialism in the 'New World,' the transatlantic slave trade, and modern liberalism (e. g., Bhandar, *Colonial Lives*; Blackburn; Lowe; Grosfoguel; Dussel and Mendieta; Greene; Hartman, *Scenes*; McClintock; Mustakeem).

5 Sabine Broeck introduces the term "enslavism" to try and create a vocabulary for white people to address the "historical and ongoing practice of structural anti-Blackness" (*Gender* 5; see also "Legacies," "Lessons, "Abolish") and to "generate metacritical, epistemic potential" (*Gender* 47) to talk about these – white – practices. As such, it becomes a means to "critique the durable nexus between Euro-American transatlantic enslavement practices and (post-)modern discourses" as well as a means to think about "this continuity reaching into the future, in which anti-Blackness as violence, commodification and repression is contained as a kind of ongoing legacy in New World enslavement" (*Gender* 47, 3). With this term, then, Broeck seeks to take account of the "telling fact that humanist education, including recent so-called avant-garde theory, has so utterly abjected modern transatlantic enslavement from its purview" (*Gender* 47). Broeck seeks to create a vocabulary that helps white people to unlearn and "to dismantle [antiblackness's] conceptual, theoretical and epistemic hold and ubiquity, to move beyond prescriptive appeals to good behavior in ally-ship" (qtd. in Sirvent).

As a concept, private property has been subjected to much intellectual scrutiny at least since the seventeenth century and particularly within scholarly fields such as legal studies, political philosophy, and cultural studies. Historians and philosophers have thoroughly demonstrated that ideals of private property are central to the making of Western modernity and that private property has become "the basis for making claims of natural rights and political liberties" (Graeber 35). The multi-faceted concept of private property thus not only "references the things that are owned, as in common usage, but also a social system in which the right and ability to own are protected by the state" (Hong 180). Critical race and critical legal scholars have shown that private property also goes "beyond legal doctrine, extending to ideologies of the self, social interactions with others, concepts of law, and social concepts of gender roles and race relations" (Davies 2). Thus deeply woven into the social, political, and philosophical fabric of Western modernity, Whiteness has in this context gained "value as a property in itself, a value encoded in property law and social relations" (Bhandar, *Colonial Lives* 7; see also Bell; Harris, "Whiteness," "Afterlife"; Lipsitz). Black feminist thinkers' deep engagement with the entanglements between private property, racial capitalism, and gender has shown how the institution of slavery maintained and renewed itself through the calculated acquisition and reproduction of human property. As a post-slavery theoretical trajectory intervening into the discursive promises of universal liberty, Black feminist theorizing demonstrates that to reckon with the making of the white Human subject means to fundamentally engage with Western modernity's racialized "calculus" of private property (Hartman, *Lose*). I follow these insights in conceptualizing private property as a racialized cultural metaphor and abstract value determining various scales of existence. My study examines the complex entanglements of the regimes of private property and violence induced by Atlantic slavery with processes of liberal self-making and demonstrates how *A Mercy* becomes a critical lens with which we are able to interrogate ideas of the quintessential modern Human subject that characters like Jacob Vaark represent. Throughout, I conceptualize the connections between freedom, private property, and bondage as the *property paradigm*. I suggest that narrative form – specifically the text's strategies of characterization – becomes the means by which *A Mercy* allegorizes, criticizes, and ultimately rejects the property paradigm.

Published in 2008, *A Mercy* takes its readers back to late seventeenth-century North America and thus to a time when liberal ideas of individual rights, representational government, and political emancipation from feudal rule, as well as claims to individual liberty were first articulated through "metaphors of property" (Graeber 36). As David Graeber has it, "Where an earlier, hierarchical view assumed that people's identities (their properties, if you will) were defined by

their place in society, the assumption was now that who one was was based on what one had, rather than the other way round" (36). Locating the action of the novel in colonial Virginia and Maryland around 1690, *A Mercy* begins *in medias res* and tells the story of the Black enslaved girl Florens. She is the legal property of Jacob Vaark (also called Sir) and lives on his farm with a group of women: Vaark's wife Rebekka (also called Mistress); an Indigenous woman servant called Lina; and a shipwrecked girl called Sorrow/Twin. Two white indentured servants, Willard Bond and Scully, whose services Vaark regularly makes use of, are also part of the farm life even though they belong to the household of neighbor. In addition, a blacksmith, whom one of the other characters describes as a "free African man" (*AM* 43), appears on the Vaark farm in the novel. Finally, the reader also encounters Florens' mother, the *minha mãe*. Florens' first-person text gives an account of her journey to the blacksmith, whom she is ordered to fetch to help cure Rebekka of the pox in the wake of Vaark's untimely death (37). Following Florens' six textual fragments are the respective sections of Jacob Vaark, Lina, Rebekka Vaark, Sorrow, and Willard Bond and Scully. Her fragmented auto-diegetic text thus takes turns with a third-person narrator who "provides the back-stories for Florens [...] and the other characters who live or work on [Jacob Vaark's] burgeoning Virginia estate" (Jennings 646). The novel ends with the textual fragment of the *minha mãe*.

A Mercy urges its readers to critically revisit their Western liberal heritage as being shaped by slavery and settler colonialism. In doing so, the novel creates what I call a complex "character-scape." Critics have often read the novel's character-scape as representing seventeenth-century colonial Virginia's intricate social strata at a moment in the long history of Atlantic slavery "when the conflation of race and slavery was in its infancy" (Jennings 645). Take, for example, the section of Willard Bond and Scully, which is framed by Florens' texts and situated in the second half of the novel. In it, we learn that Willard and Scully have been subjected to different terms of indentured service. As a somewhat retrospective account of the novel's plot and action, this section of the novel exposes the reader to these characters' respective views of both the other characters and the events happening in the wake of Jacob Vaark's death. Focalized through Willard and Scully, the section paradigmatically speaks to colonial Virginia's said relative racial fluidity. In the novel's rendering, these two indentured servants are placed in a competitive relationship with the free African blacksmith, who is paid for the work that he performs on the Vaark farm. "The clink of silver was as unmistakable as its gleam. [Willard] knew Vaark was getting rich from rum investments, but learning the blacksmith was being paid for his work [...] roiled Willard" (148). The fact that the blacksmith is not only able to "own things [and] sell his own labor" but that Vaark pays him for his work appears to suggest

that his economic status at the New World colonial scene is elevated over that of white indentured servants like Willard and Scully (43). As we continue reading, however, we firstly learn that the blacksmith will be violently forced out of the novel's plot after Florens injures him in a fight; and, secondly, we learn that these two white men will in the wake of Vaark's death eventually also get paid for their help on the Vaark farm: "The shillings [Rebekka Vaark] offered was the first money they had ever been paid, raising their work from duty to dedication, from pity to profit. [...] Perhaps their wages were not as much as the blacksmith's, but for Scully and Mr. Bond it was enough to imagine a future" (142, 153). The text does not offer any clue as to what kind of future this will be. It seems to me, however, that the removal of the blacksmith from the narrative proper alludes to the notion that future social, political, and economic configurations of Virginia will no longer allow for the possibility of a free African man to conduct business with a white settler and, by extension, for racial lines to permit such cross-racial interaction in the first place.

What *A Mercy*'s motley cast of characters has in common, in other words, is that they attempt to negotiate and navigate their individual freedom, their servitude, and their enslavement, respectively, in the potentially dangerous environment of the New World colonial scene.[6] What separates and antagonizes these characters, as my study observes, are the ways formations of private property fundamentally position them in non/relation to one another. The idea that certain groups of human beings are positioned towards one another in some sort of structural relation and that others are positioned by the absence of such a relation stems from the trajectory of Afropessimism, which I discuss in more detail as part of Black Studies' post-slavery theoretical articulations in the third chapter of this study.[7] For now, suffice it to say that Afropessimism's claims about the non/relationality of subjects inform my study's core argument that *A Mercy* presents its readers with a critique of the liberal property paradigm by way of its strategies of characterization. I work with the premise that instead of relying on fully rounded and easily accessible fictional characters, the novel constructs its characters in the form of *allegorical figures* through which it interrogates the

6 I use the terms "negotiate" and "negotiation" in the sense of Mary Louise Pratt's *contact zones*. Pratt describes these as referring to "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today" (34).
7 As I will show, Afropessimism has introduced a complex ensemble of concepts and terms in this context, which is geared towards accounting for the violence of Atlantic slavery as that which continues to position and structure Black life in(to) the present. Throughout, my study draws on Afropessimist vocabulary.

liberal property paradigm precisely. Indeed, reviewers have repeatedly hinted at the unease they felt when encountering *A Mercy*'s characters, stylizing the novel as a "wisp of a narrative [peopled with] *insubstantial* characters" (Mantel; emphasis mine). I take such notions of discomfort and lack with respect to *A Mercy*'s strategies of characterization as the study's point of entry to trace and unpack *A Mercy*'s fundamental philosophical and political critique of the property paradigm.

Throughout, I discuss *A Mercy*'s allegorical figures as a "refusal of narrativization." Under this rubric, I hope to account for a literary maneuver that needs to be understood as a refusal to restage and thus to partake in hegemonic, dominant discourses about North American beginnings and its liberal, possessing subjectivities. The *OED* defines the word "refusal" as the "action or an act of refusing; a denial or rejection of something requested, demanded, or offered"; and the "repudiation or renunciation of a contract, allegiance, obligation, etc." among many others. I think about and use the word "refusal" in all of these ways, but I am particularly interested in the notion of refusal as an action or an act, as I will demonstrate over the coming chapters. The challenge of *A Mercy*'s refusal/critique, in other words, lies in what Stephen Best calls the "agency of form[:] what form produces, what form generates" (*Fugitive* 21, 25). It lies in how form produces, enforces, and challenges connections – discursive and conceptual – between private property and self-making. This study draws extensively on recent deliberations on narrative stemming from post-slavery Black Studies, which have questioned narrative's ability to account for and emplot the violence that "wounds and positions" the enslaved (Wilderson, "Aporia" 134). My study follows this line of questioning and brings it to the study of fictional character (see Chapter 4). Following Wilderson, who writes that "for Blackness, there is no narrative moment prior to slavery" (*Red* 27), the enslaved are not part of the community of the Human. By extension, I suggest that Black Studies' questions about the "emplot-ability" of social death also concern the realm of fictional character. I claim that as long as cultural and literary critics cannot explain "how the Slave is of the world" (*Red* 11) and thus of (the structure of) narrative, any assumption or conceptualization of fictional character needs to be understood as being fraught with similar explanatory lacunae. In other words, I suggest that *A Mercy* draws an analogy between the making of liberal subjects (within the realm of the world) and the creation of fictional character (within the realm of literary narrative). If, following post-slavery interrogations of white Western modernity, to be the subject of property is to be a Human subject, then *A Mercy* suggests there can only be fictional characters if there is *subject form*. In dialoguing with Afropessimism's suggestion that social death "ruptures the assumptive logic of narrative writ large" (Wilderson, "Aporia" 135), I offer

that *A Mercy* resorts to allegory in creating its characters as way to represent social death's explosion of narrative form. Put another way, *A Mercy*'s fundamental critique of liberal self-making is situated precisely in its form, in its strategies of allegorical figuration. *Unruly Narrative* ultimately will conceptualize *A Mercy* as unruly Black "anti-narration": as the practice and the site of an epistemic critique of modernity's calculus of private property that is ongoing—a critique that is both located in and constantly revisited, revised, and recalibrated with each of the text's allegorical figures.

With its analyses of *A Mercy*'s allegorical figures, this study will wrestle with a set of core questions that address the relationship between narrative form and/as epistemic critique. These are: How does narrative form problematize liberal conceptions of private property? How do *A Mercy*'s unruly strategies of characterization become the critical lever with which the novel advances its epistemic critique of the formative and positioning powers of private property? How do *A Mercy*'s strategies of characterization become a tool for interrogating and confronting, and perhaps also for redefining, the relation between property and personhood? How does one address, in a study that is concerned with literary narrative and/as epistemic critique, the notion that narrative itself is conscripted by the episteme in which it is produced? What is the relation between allegorical narration and the (un-)making of liberal, possessive subjectivities? How does one address the absence of narrative (social death) in what is, after all, a narrative text?

1.2 Historical Contexts

In order to understand how *A Mercy* stages its refusal of the liberal property paradigm, it is important to recall the historical context that the novel both critically revisits and allegorizes. I reconstruct this context here with an eye on what historians of slavery and of North American beginnings have often read as a moment of possibility in the long history of chattel slavery and of racial subjection on the North American mainland. In other words, historians have often deemed racial lines in colonial Virginia to be relatively permeable still at this point, which would, for instance, allow for enslaved and free African(-descended) people to coexist, trade with, or marry white settlers from all walks of life (Fields; E. Morgan; P. Morgan). Most often, this assessment of seventeenth-century Virginia is based on the fact that "the transition to slavery was slow, and free black men and women gained some autonomy and maneuverability over the course of the

first fifty years of colonial settlement" (J. Morgan, "*Partus*" 3). Historians accordingly have traced a panorama of variously evolving subject and "non/subject"[8] positions, such as English settlers, colonizers, and gentry, white indentured servants, indigenous populations, both free and enslaved Africans and African-descended people, all of whom appear to navigate early Virginia's colonial space relatively peacefully as well as on relatively "equal" racial terms. This kind of emphasis on racial fluidity continues to serve "to distinguish Virginia from colonies such as Barbados, where slavery was in full force by the middle of the seventeenth century" (J. Morgan, "*Partus*" 3). As part of her research on reproduction, gender, and slavery in seventeenth-century Virginia, Black feminist historian Jennifer L. Morgan has recently both pushed back against and critically supplemented the historical narrative of Virginia's racially indeterminate and fluid social strata. Let me briefly trace this narrative for a moment here, before turning to her arguments in more detail.

In August 1619, a ship landed at the shores of what was then called Point Comfort (today's Hampton) in colonial Virginia, bearing a cargo of twenty to thirty enslaved Africans, who were sold to the Jamestown colonists. Bought from English pirates, who, in turn, "had stolen them from a Portuguese slave ship that had forcibly taken them from what is now the country of Angola" (Hannah-Jones, "Our Founding" 16), those enslaved Africans would mark the beginning of Atlantic slavery on the North American mainland. Although this was "not the first time Africans could be found in an English Atlantic colony" (Guasco), this event represents one crucial moment in which the interconnected concepts of freedom and individuality emerged and constituted themselves in parasitic relation to Atlantic slavery. Virginia was England's first successful, that is to say permanent, American colony on the North American mainland. The English first attempted to establish permanent settlements in the Chesapeake area in 1585, when the landed gentleman, adventurer, and writer Sir Walter Raleigh sponsored the colonial endeavor to settle at Roanoke. Famously, the colony was "lost" (Kelleter; Maier; L. Miller). Ultimately, what contributed to the permanent and economically successful settlement of Virginia was the growing of tobacco, which lead to a downright "tobacco boom" in the 1620s (E. Morgan 108 – 30). From their experiences at Roanoke, the English settlers and colonizers

8 In *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016), Christina Sharpe uses the concepts of "non/being" and "non/status": "Living in/the wake of slavery is living 'the afterlife of property' and living in the afterlife of *partus sequitur ventrem* (that which is brought forth follows the womb), in which the Black child inherits the non/status, the non/being of the mother. That inheritance of a non/status is everywhere apparent *now* in the ongoing criminalization of Black women and children" (15).

knew that the Indigenous peoples "grew and smoked a kind of tobacco; and tobacco grown in the Spanish West Indies was already being imported to England," where it garnered high profits for the planters and traders (E. Morgan 90). As a "profit-seeking venture," Virginia's economic success was fueled by this boom, and it initially largely "rested on the backs of English indentured servants" (Fields 122). Only in the second half of the seventeenth century – at the end of which *A Mercy* is set – would this labor force come to be replaced by enslaved African and African-descended people large scale, whom the Virginia traders would initially buy from Barbados and other West Indian islands and, later, directly from the African continent (E. Morgan 295 – 315).

In general, then, economic success in colonial Virginia and, by extension, Virginia's emerging social makeup were fundamentally shaped by different forms of servitude that had already been partially in place before the tobacco boom but were significantly institutionalized by it. Apart from the more well off (socially as well as economically) English entrepreneurs and planters, the bulk of the white settlers who came to Virginia were subjected to various forms of indentured servitude (E. Morgan 115 – 116). White indentured servants "served longer terms in Virginia than their English counterparts and enjoyed less dignity and less protection in law and custom. They could be bought and sold like livestock, kidnapped, stolen, put up as stakes in card games, and awarded – even before their arrival in America – to the victors in lawsuits" (Fields 122). White English women, who were few in number throughout the seventeenth century and usually would come to the colony as 'mail-order-brides' (Zug), generally had greater economic advantages in Virginia than they would in England, and they would continue to enjoy these even as they were back on the marriage market after their husband's death (E. Morgan 165). Furthermore, the English initially envisioned 'their' land and future society along the lines of peaceful coexistence between the Indigenous as well as the English populations (E. Morgan 44). With recurring Indigenous resistance to white settlement and colonization, however, this one-sided utopian worldview would not materialize. While the white English population seems to have been in two minds about the issue of enslaving the Indigenous populations in the colony, Native Americans did in fact become increasingly subjected to slavery in the latter half of the seventeenth century (E. Morgan 316 – 337).

Historians have also observed how African and African-descended enslaved people "during the years between 1619 and 1661 enjoyed rights that, in the nineteenth century, not even free black people could claim" (Fields 126). In the wake of the tobacco boom, when white English settlers in colonial Virginia would slowly come to conceive of their environment in more permanent terms and the settler population would finally begin to grow, many of the previously inden-

tured servants would become free and decide to try and make a living in the colony (E. Morgan 136). With the indentured servants gaining the status of free settlers, the labor force on the tobacco fields would slowly but steadily be replaced with African(-descended) slaves and the few rights that they enjoyed would be eradicated gradually (but nonetheless forcefully)—a development that was also fueled by the economical fact that prices for African and African-descended slaves dropped significantly in the latter years of the seventeenth century (Fields 126). Furthermore, free Black people continued to be part of the colony's social strata and they (together with free Indigenous people) went on to live in the colony even after "it was made plain to them and to the white population that their color rendered freedom inappropriate for them" through new sets of laws issued by the Virginia assembly from the 1660s. These laws were geared towards systematically racializing, subjugating, and abjecting enslaved African(-descended) people (E. Morgan 337). That is, colonial legislation came to regulate the spheres in which the enslaved and free populations would live, interact, marry, have children, or conduct business with one another while at the same time continuously inscribing and systematizing racist taxonomies, thus determining who would be considered free or someone else's property within Virginia's colonial fold. What such conventional historical assessments of seventeenth-century Virginia tell us, then, is that the colony and its emerging society need to be understood in terms of highly complicated, constantly changing social arrangements between Indigenous populations, white English settlers/colonizers, as well as African and African(-descended) people.

Jennifer Morgan's work has intervened in this historiographic narrative of colonial Virginia's racial fluidity and indeterminacy. In her discussion of the *Partus Sequitur Ventrem* law, which was passed in 1662 and which would be the first slave code of the English Atlantic to regulate slave status through maternal descent, J. Morgan argues that from the perspective of enslaved Black women, racial lines in colonial Virginia need to be understood as far from fluid in fact. Enslaved Black women's "maternal possibilities became a crucial vehicle by which racial meaning was concretized—and it did so long before legislators indexed such possibilities into law" ("*Partus*" 2). Throughout the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Atlantic, slave owners "presumed that enslaved women's reproductive labor accompanied their manual labor in tobacco and sugar fields. Mobilizing the language of increase [...] was part and parcel of how nascent slaveowners shaped their newly racialized present and future" ("*Partus*" 2). If we follow J. Morgan, as I do throughout the study, colonial legislation made the connections between already existing assumptions about slavery, race, and heredity explicit rather than for those connections to suddenly materialize ("*Partus*" 2, 3). Put another way, only a few decades after the first arrival of enslaved

Africans in Jamestown, "white settlers demanded a new world defined by racial caste" (Stevenson 81). We already encountered this in the expectations of the indentured servants in *A Mercy*, who did not mind as much not to be paid while Vaark made money off them but felt uncomfortable knowing that the blacksmith was paid for his labor. The New World white settlers demanded was a world in which their claims to freedom would be made possible only through the enslavement of others. As Toni Morrison elsewhere reminds us, "The concept of freedom did not emerge in a vacuum. Nothing highlighted freedom – if it did not in fact create it – like slavery" (Morrison, *Playing* 38). At the same time that most of the white English settlers – be they part of the gentry and merchants classes or servants – were claiming their status as self-possessed New World liberal subjects, enslaved African and African-descended men, women, and children would already be positioned in antagonistic ways to this emergent Human subjectivity even though the laws cementing this antagonism would be introduced decades later.

1.3 Critical Contexts

For the majority of its critics and readers, *A Mercy*'s seventeenth-century setting and plot seems to neatly represent the various social positions outlined in the established historiographic narrative of racial indeterminacy in early colonial Virginia. La Vinia Delois Jennings' review of *A Mercy* in the journal *Callaloo*, for instance, explains how *A Mercy* invites

> twenty-first century readers to consider a sectarian America as its racial divide unfolded. It challenges us to historicize the racialized political momentum that ushered in perpetual servitude based on non-whiteness and to meditate on the analogous forms of early colonial servitude, formal and informal, that might have united rather than divided persons of disparate religions and nationalities, especially those of underclass status. (645)

As such, the novel's representation of American colonial beginnings in Virginia has functioned as a research catalyzer with most studies of the novel making this their analytical point of departure. Over the course of my study, I will return to and take up this line of inquiry periodically in each of my analytical chapters. These chapters will reconstruct the critical discourse's specific take on the character in question, thus providing a more detailed discussion of existing trends and strands within the research on the novel.

Of course, to write about Toni Morrison's fiction at this point in time is to sift through an enormous body of continuously growing scholarship. It is not in the

scope of this study to comprehensively delineate this here.[9] In general, publications on *A Mercy* range from a huge number of reviews and interviews to a relatively small but steadily growing number of academic publications.[10] Scholarly articles on the novel have been published in major academic journals[11] and chapters on *A Mercy* have been published in monographs and edited collections.[12] The only book-length publication on *A Mercy* has been issued by Stave and Tally, whose collection offers readings of the novel from various disciplinary angles, such as the study of history, literary studies, sociology, and psychology. Thus published in various ways and forms, most of these readings usually start from the obvious: the novel's seventeenth-century plot, its motley cast of characters, as well as the strange and startling environment of the New World in which it is set. What astounds me is that this rich pool of literature often decen-

9 Roynon, *Cambridge Introduction*, and Raynor and Butler offer critical surveys of Morrison's work and its reception since the mid-1970s. Many of these early, often white-authored responses would assume "a white Euro-American subject position [...] to which Morrison's concerns are always cast as relative" while Black-authored criticism already placed Morrison's writing as both emerging from and thriving within "a broader African-American tradition that was being documented and given scholarly validation at exactly this time" (Roynon, *Cambridge Introduction* 114, 115). With the rise, manifestation, and proliferation of the Black feminist and women's movements in the 1970s and 1980s, both within and outside the academy, critics would pay more attention to Morrison's equally growing literary output. At the time, that is, Black feminist scholars recognized Morrison as a Black female author alongside other Black women writers such as Toni Cade Bambara, Gwendolyn Brooks, Rita Mae Brown, Nikki Giovanni, Gayl Jones, Paule Marshall, Sonia Sanchez, and Alice Walker (DuCille). In this way, these scholars firmly established what is now understood, read, studied, and taught as a rich tradition of Black female/feminist literary writing that "defied known forms, invented new grammars, upset, inverted, and subverted traditional structures and narrative strategies[, creating and reconfiguring] the novel, unbound, blackened, feminized, repopulated, and unpunctuated" (DuCille 381; see also Hull, Scott, and Smith).

10 Reviews include, for example, Adams; Barbara Carey; Charles; Freeman; Gates; Grewal; Heltzel; Jennings; Mantel; C. Miller; C. Moore; Myers; Teele; Todaro; Updike. Most prominent examples of interviews are Morrison and Neary, and Norris and Siegel.

11 Articles on *A Mercy* have been published *Callaloo* (Jennings; Roye), *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U.S* (Babb; Cantiello; Morgenstern; Nicol and Terry; Sandy), *Early American Literature* (Bross; Curtis; Cillerai; Logan), *American Literary History* (Gustafson and Hutner), *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* (Strehle), *Black Women, Gender + Families* (Putnam), and *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* (Karavanta; Wyatt). For publications in graduate and postgraduate as well as online and open access journals, see, e. g. *Berkeley Undergraduate Journal* (Jimenez), *Teaching American Literature: A Journal of Theory and Practice* (Bartley), and *Black Studies Papers* (Andrès; Michlin; Müller, "Standing"; Raynaud; Spatzek).

12 For monographs, see, for example, Schreiber, "Echoes"; contributions in edited collections include Anolik; Carlacio; Conner, "Language and Landscapes," "Modernity"; Fultz; Mayberry; Montgomery, "Contested"; Waegner.

ters race in its reading of a novel that centers on the *very making of race* in North America. That is, the critical reception of *A Mercy* has shown a tendency to read the novel as a text in which *race* is not part of its narrative politics. Instead, it tends to argue that in writing *A Mercy*, Morrison created a novel that addresses our contemporary moment despite or, rather, *because of* its seventeenth-century plotting and cast of characters that allows Morrison "to present an expansive version of the prenational world, one that reveals the heterogeneity that characterized settlements then and the nation today" (Babb 149).

In other words, a significant portion of the novel's rich pool of critical readings situates itself within an environment of twenty-first century post-racial political discourses, in which Barack Obama's ascent to the White House is commonly read as a redemptive watershed in America's racial politics, and thus serves as proof that US-civil society has finally overcome its histories and its legacies of chattel slavery, on the one hand, and genocide of the Indigenous populations, on the other.[13] This kind of post-racial imperative figures prominently in the critical reception of *A Mercy*, not least since the novel was published one week after Obama was elected in 2008. This has led to these two events being coupled, making Obama and then-current politics "ubiquitous presences" in the discourse on the novel (Cantiello 165). If nothing else, this was a clever marketing stunt by Morrison's publisher, of course. With its analytical interest in the workings and powers of the property paradigm, my study critically revisits such post-racial readings of *A Mercy*, which typically follow the above established historical narratives stressing colonial Virginia's relative racial fluidity and indeterminacy. As previously suggested, Black feminist scholarship has complicated such widespread historical evaluations; it has fundamentally changed the ways in which we understand how Black women's interiority was violently bound to the market, as well as how the accumulation and proliferation of

13 Here, I follow legal scholar Sumi Cho's theorization of "post-racialism" as an ideological formation in which "[r]ace-based affirmative action, race-based admissions or districting in school desegregation plans, and minority voting districts, as a few prominent examples, all come under scrutiny" (1594). In a post-racial world, Cho explains, "white normativity [is insulated] from criticism and opens the floodgates of white resentment when confronted with previously accepted and unquestioned civil rights inequities, [the effect of which is] the ultimate redemption of whiteness: a sociocultural process by which whiteness is restored to its full pre-civil-rights value" (1596). Within African American literary studies, we can observe a similar tendency to view our contemporary aesthetic moment along 'post-racial' lines. Conceptualizing African American literature as existing as specifically African American only in the historical period from the Jim Crow era until the 1960s Civil Rights Movement, Kenneth Warren has famously declared the end of African American letters (K. Warren; Touré; for a rebuttal of this, see e. g. Baker and Simmons).

the master's private property and economic increase was tethered to inheritable slave status as enshrined in colonial legislation. *Unruly Narrative* brings these insights to its study of *A Mercy*'s questioning and refusal of the liberal property paradigm.[14]

Another predominant trend in the academic study of *A Mercy* reads the novel as counterweight or counter-history to longstanding master narratives of North American beginnings, such as the myth of the promised land, the myth of discovery, and the myth of transatlantic love.[15] As critics variously speak of *A Mercy* as "rewriting" (Babb), "unwriting" (Strehle), "retelling" (Omry), or "counterwriting" (Karavanta) of American colonial beginnings, readers and critics variously read the novel's complicated narrative structure and "multi-voiced litany" as a smooth narrative of alternative American origins (Waegner 91; see also Montgomery, "Traveling Shoes") or as an alternative to civil religious representations of US-American origins (Strehle). While both these interpretive trends also reflect an interest in the novel's narrative structure and form, they do not make this their central concern. By contrast, Stephen Best's deep interest in the aesthetics, poetics, and politics of narrative form in this context becomes highly relevant to my own arguments. Both his essay "On Failing to Make the Past Present" (2012) and his monograph *None Like Us* (2018) are representative of recent scholarship that deals with the entanglements between ethics and aesthetics in Morrison's work (see also Baillie; Christiansë; Palladino; Morgenstern; V. Smith, *Writing*). In both these texts, to which I will return in detail in the fourth chapter of *Unruly Narrative*, Best positions *A Mercy* as a historical novel that reads as the paradigm of a "new" critical moment in which an ethical relation to the histories and the legacies of transatlantic slavery – as that which continues to structure the present moment and its modes of critical thinking and reading practices – should no longer fuel African American and African-diasporic theorizing ("Failing" 456 – 465). Best claims that *A Mercy*'s form abandons the reader "to a more baffled, cut-off, foreclosed position with regard to the slave past" (472), thereby creating a new relationship between the slave past (as historical event) and the ways in which Black Studies discourses "[apprehend] the black political present" (*None* 63). For Best, *A Mercy*'s form undoes the eth-

14 In an interview with NPR's Michel Martin, Morrison herself has rejected this kind of post-racial rhetoric which "misreads the complexity of the racial relationships" examined in *A Mercy* (Cantiello 165) when she states: "I certainly don't like that word [post-racial] [...] [I]t seems to indicate something that I don't think is quite true, which is that we have erased racism" (Morrison and Martin).

15 In T*he Myths that Made America: An Introduction to American Studies* (2014), Paul offers a comprehensive overview and analysis of these myths.

ical imperative that *Beloved*'s poetics offered to generations of scholars—a poetics, in which the slave past and its afterlives in the present political and aesthetic moment continue to uniquely shape Black identities. If we follow Best, this also is a poetics, in which slavery's afterlives become common ground in most theoretical thinking about and attempts at creating Black (critical) community. By refuting such theoretical underpinnings for Black Studies and Black study (to paraphrase Christina Sharpe), Best argues that *A Mercy* fundamentally changes the ways in which we as readers should think about ethics and aesthetics in African American literature in the twenty-first century.[16]

1.4 Private Property as Cultural Metaphor and Literary Form

In different, while related, ways this study is also concerned with how *A Mercy* navigates the connections between ethics and aesthetics, thus joining the above Morrison scholarship showing an (renewed) interest in the relation between the two. Unlike Best (and others), however, I suggest that *A Mercy* not only deliberately returns its readers to the slave past, making this its very explicit narrative concern. I also argue that it does so in order to engage with how form both sheds light and becomes the means by which to investigate and to criticize the liberal property paradigm. In general, I understand property as an extremely flexible and mutable vehicle for the negotiation of social and cultural meaning as well as for the formation of power and of value systems (Bhandar, "Critical Legal Studies", "Disassembling"; Banner; Davies; Rose). In its Western liberal understanding, as legal scholar Margaret Davies notes, property is a

> multi-faceted, sometimes self-contradictory and internally irreconcilable notion which is variously manifested in plural (though inseparable) cultural discourses—economic, ethical,

16 Much like Best, Yvette Christiansë in *Toni Morrison: An Ethical Poetics* (2013) turns to Morrison oeuvre as an African American writer whose work is situated in the "space of modern literature" (2). It is in this space and from "her own scholarship about and reading of modernism," Christiansë suggests, that "Morrison's fiction emerges from and depends upon" (2). At the center of her inquiry into Morrison's oeuvre is a set of questions on the relation between (the politics of) language, (African American) historical consciousness, racialization, and testimonial practices, among others (27). As amalgamation of close reading and critical theory, Christiansë's book establishes *A Mercy* as Morrison's single novel that is not concerned with "the enormity of America's slave past"—the legacies of which are otherwise "everywhere in her fiction and nonfiction" (21). Instead, Christiansë stylizes *A Mercy* as Morrison's attempt "to narrate a moment prior to that in which slavery had become codified and solidified by law, and naturalized through custom" (21).

> legal, popular, religious. [...] [I]ts reach is not only material and political, but also cultural and symbolic. (3, 7)

In light of the varied meanings of property, I should point out that my understanding of property strongly resonates with Davies's observation that "property is also a powerful metaphor for *existence* in a liberal social framework" (7; emphasis mine; see also Radin). Discussing the property concept in the context of European settlement, colonization, and the implementation of slavery in North America, moreover, Critical Race theorists have shown how the conceptual conflation of property and personhood was racialized from the start. As mentioned already, whiteness became "the characteristic, the attribute, the property of free human beings" (Harris, "Whiteness" 1721). Thus marking whiteness and with it the promise of individual liberty as the most valuable property to be owned on the early American scene, such racially contingent forms of property remain protected in American law until today (1709; see also P. Williams).

My thinking about private property – as cultural metaphor and as abstract value determining and governing scales of existence – is also informed by scholarship on ownership and property in American and African American literature (Best, *Fugitive*; Clymer; Homestead; King, *Race, Theft*; Luck; Schneck) as well as by interventions from the scholarly field of law and literature (Coombe; Dolin). Flowering as a movement systematically investigating the correlation between the law and literature since the 1980s (Dolin 1), thinkers working in this context have since pointed to the "narrativity" of the law and its textual articulations (Brooks and Gerwitz; Rose) and have discussed this in relation to issues such as literary property rights, intellectual property rights, copyright, and constitutional rights (Buinicki; Ely; Hesse; Irr). Commenting on the importance of the politics of form for the domain of property and its various configurations in American law, Best in *The Fugitive's Properties: Law and the Poetics of Possession* suggests that the interplay between slave law and intellectual property law "help[s] redefine the very essence of property in nineteenth-century America" (16). Following Best, the conceptual correlations between property and personhood established under slavery continue to live "within the text of the law" and they do so within the specific frame of the emergence of intellectual property law towards the end of the nineteenth century (14). We read:

> The issues of personhood and property that slavery elaborates and the issues from the emerging law on intellectual property are part of a fundamental historical continuity in the life of the United States in which the idea of personhood is increasingly subject to the domain of property. Slavery is not simply an antebellum institution that the United States has surpassed but a particular historical *form* of an ongoing crisis involving the subjection of personhood to property. (*Fugitive* 16)

Best's analytical focus on slavery jurisprudence and intellectual property law configures a new ensemble of questions concerning "the social specificity of the person-property relation as the law tries to come to terms with new configurations of that relation and, in turn, generates new forms for that relation" (16). As mentioned earlier, it points to what Best has called the "agency of form." What follows is an attempt at taking up Best's concerns regarding form in my analyses of the relation between property and personhood and the critique of this relation as presented in *A Mercy*.

1.5 Situating the Study

Unruly Narrative is located at the interdisciplinary intersections of the scholarly fields of Early American Studies, African American Studies, U.S.-American Black (Diaspora) Studies, Black Feminist Criticism and Theorizing, as well as Critical Race Theory. It is a study that draws extensively on post-slavery theoretical trajectories (including recent US Black feminist articulations and Afropessimism)[17] invested in criticizing and dismantling white Western modernity's structural and epistemological histories and legacies of slavery and racial subjection. The study approaches Black Studies as an intellectual project equipped with an analytic lens that attempts to account for Blackness in an antiblack world, both in terms of structure and performativity (Sexton, "African American" 10). As such, Black Studies operates as a fundamental corrective and as an insurgent project of counter-epistemology to European and Western Enlightenment's narrative of universal subjectivity.[18] While Black Studies certainly can be understood as Black intramural critical conversation about the status and stakes of Black existence, articulation, and critique (Spillers, "Idea," *Black*), it also represents an important intervention into white knowledge productions and long-standing

17 Christina Sharpe defines the term 'post-slavery' as follows: "[W]hile all modern subjects are post-slavery subjects fully constituted by the discursive codes of slavery and post-slavery, post-slavery subjectivity is largely borne by and readable on the (New World) black subject" (Monstrous 3). I borrow the term here to delineate these articulations specifically (see also Chapter 3).

18 In general, Black Studies have labored to push a critical "transformation of the human into a heuristic model [over and against the idea of the human as] an ontological fait accompli" (Weheliye, "After Man" 322). Weheliye reminds us that Black Studies in North America has "existed since the eighteenth century as a set of intellectual traditions and liberation struggles that have borne witness to the production and maintenance of hierarchical distinctions between groups of humans" before becoming part of the US mainstream academy in the latter half of the twentieth-century (*Habeas Viscus* 3).

"historical racist sedimentation" (Yancy 233).[19] For someone who, like me, is positioned within as well as by the fold of the white Human – with the Human here "connot[ing] a paradigmatic entity that exists ontologically as a position of life in relation to the Black or Slave position, one of death" (Wilderson, *Red* 23) – engaging with and drawing from Black Studies necessarily comes with a persistent kind of tension or set of contradictions. That is, while I think about this study explicitly as a project of anti-racist critique and of dismantling white conceptualizations of the fashioning of a universal Human subject, Black thinkers and scholars of color, like Sara Ahmed, continue to remind me that "any project that aims to dismantle or challenge the categories that are made invisible through privilege is bound to participate in the object of its critique" ("Phenomenology" 150). That is also to say that while I hope to think, write, and speak from a position of being aware of the notion that "*whiteness* is a real category, that has been historically produced and that has real consequences" (Aduse-Poku 44) – a position confronted and challenged by Black (feminist) thinkers, novelists, and philosophers of color – this project inevitably runs the risk of being "ambushed" by white power formations (Yancy). It runs the risk of thus becoming a "[project] of critique [...] complicit with what [it] attempts to disrupt," including (but of course not limited to) the reproduction of epistemic violence (Applebaum 3).

With this comes the attendant problem and challenge of remove: Writing from a geographical location and disciplinary situatedness within the field of American Studies in Germany, this project aims to consciously reflect on the place from which it follows *A Mercy*'s critique. This place is that of the mostly white German university landscapes with which come the very substantial risk of imposing ventriloquist readings and offering "unbidden translation" of Black-authored novels like *A Mercy* (Broeck, *Gender* 11). This is another way of saying that my project of tracing and analyzing the interconnections between notions of private property, personhood, and (historical and contemporary) mechanisms of racialization and subjection within the literary realm of representation is heavily indebted to the intellectual labor of generations of (mainly US-American but also European and German) Black (feminist) thinkers. It is their intellectual work which has opened up critical epistemologies of white Western modernity and which continues to confront the modern white liberal subject. To say with Hartman's words quoted in the second epigraph to this chapter that *A Mercy*

19 In describing Black Studies as "a most difficult terrain" in the introduction to their *Companion to African-American Studies*, Gordon and Gordon also remind us of the various transformations that Black Studies as a discipline has undergone as locus of intense and dynamic debate.

challenges "the liberal imagination of freedom [and its attendant] proprietorial conceptions of the self" (*Scenes* 115), then, is to listen to and enter into an exchange with Black Studies post-slavery trajectories. This effort crucially needs to be informed by and committed to "critical vigilance" (Applebaum 3; Yancy).

In this vein, *Unruly Narrative* aims to contribute to the large body of scholarship on Toni Morrison's literary and critical oeuvre by offering the first in-depth single study of Morrison's ninth novel. Critics and readers have largely overlooked *A Mercy*'s profound engagement with and interrogations of the concept of private property as an integral part of the novel's re-telling and representation of American seventeenth-century beginnings in colonial Virginia. With its focus on private property as that which establishes, determines, and maintains scales of existence, the study seeks to critically supplement the existing critical discourse on the novel. By way of entering into an exchange with post-slavery interrogations of Atlantic slavery as the underside of white Western modernity's fashioning of freedom as self-authorizing teleological narrative of self-making, I furthermore hope to add to the existing discourse on post-slavery scholarship within American Studies in Germany and beyond. Engaging specifically with post-slavery thinking's questioning of the possibility of narrative emplotment of social death, this study pushes a set of questions on the discipline's "methodology and morals" as part of "the deconstruction of the anti-blackness [sic] structuring white western civil societies as well as large parts of their knowledge production" (Weier, "Consider" 430; cf. Essi et al.). As already suggested, my study also enters into conversation with existing concerns and conceptions on the making of fictional character as I bring Black Studies' questions about the "emplot-ability" of social death to narrative theory's vast archive of the study of fictional character.

1.6 Reading Methods

How does one read a historical novel published in the first decade of the twenty-first century against texts that come from this novel's historical setting and time frame of the seventeenth-century English Atlantic? And how does one read these in conjunction with twentieth and twenty-first century theoretical texts by Black theorists? To paraphrase Saidiya Harman, how does one tell impossible stories? Throughout the study, I employ the concepts of property, freedom, and subjectivity and I place them in relation to each other within the historical frame of white Western liberalism and modernity. As already suggested, my analytical focus will be on the concept of property and on the ways in which the concepts of freedom and liberal self-making connect to notions of ownership and posses-

sion. In the interconnected readings that *Unruly Narrative* pursues, I draw on the interdisciplinary methodology of *cultural analysis* as suggested by Dutch narratologist Mieke Bal.[20] Cultural analysis, which poses that concepts may "offer miniature theories" (*Travelling* 22), helps me embrace, combine, and connect the three analytical arenas of this project.[21] Following Bal, concepts are "intellectual tools, which determine how members of the academic community conceive of themes, approach objects and define relevant questions to be addressed" (Neumann and Nünning 3). For Bal, concepts are small theories in themselves —theories that are "flexible: each is part of a framework, a systematic set of distinctions, not oppositions, that can sometimes be bracketed or even ignored but never transgressed or contradicted without serious damage to the analysis at hand" ("Cultural Studies" 35–36). Thus contained, condensed, packed, and explicit, concepts will to a certain extent also always be normative, programmatic, as well as dated (39, 42). As mobile units of knowledge, concepts constantly commute through time and "through a nonlinear history" (*Travelling* 44, 40). As such, concepts are "not fixed [...] between [...] historical periods, and [...] disciplines, their meaning, reach, and operational value differ" (24). In other words, the mobility of concepts always is "bound up with social and political

20 Bal is not the first cultural critic who resorts to the idea of 'travelling concepts' (see also Said; Clifford). For an overview of how Bal's work relates to other approaches that make use of the metaphor of travel see Bachmann-Medick; Neumann and Nünning; Teller. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that Bal does not refer to the respective works by Said and Clifford, as a look at her bibliography shows.

21 Bal's suggestions for cultural analysis and for 'travelling concepts' have been subjected to a good amount of critique (e. g., Nünning, "Kulturwissenschaft(en)"; Teller). German literary scholar Doris Bachmann-Medick, for instance, has observed that from a transnational, decolonial perspective, "the concept of 'travelling concepts' itself remains imprisoned in the tradition of a European history of travel, discovery, and expansion. This tradition has long been associated with concepts of mobility, flexibility, conquest, and expansionist ambition, which are not only eurocentric [sic] but also construed as middle-class and male dominated" (Bachmann-Medick 120, 121). Against this kind of "free-floating" of conceptual mobility (120), Bachmann-Medick calls for "more historical grounding and contextualization" of concepts (133). Her suggestion is to conceive of concepts as "concepts in translation," which would "allow for a more detailed exploration of exactly which social practices and social relations lie behind the specific concepts at issue, which intermediaries are active, and what obstacles and local resistances arise" (133). I seek to enrich my use of concepts and their mobility with Bachmann-Medick's suggestions for the incorporation and the recuperation of historical contexts in dealing with concepts (128–133). This study pursues this aim in that it – by following *A Mercy*'s allegories – identifies the conceptual nexus of private property and self-making in the historical frame of late seventeenth-century Western liberalism and European colonial expansion and then turns to recent critiques of this nexus articulated by post-slavery Black thinkers. In this two-pronged endeavor, I hope not to "[leave] universalizing assumptions unreflected" (Bachmann-Medick 129).

concerns" (Neumann and Nünning 8). Bal argues that concepts "can become a third partner in the otherwise totally unverifiable and symbiotic interaction between critic and object" (*Travelling* 23). This they can do only on the condition that "they are kept under scrutiny through a confrontation with, not application to, the cultural objects being examined" (24). Concepts thus need to be understood as "important arenas of debate" (27).[22] If concepts are not only "dynamic in themselves" but also "travel between ordinary words and condensed theories" (11, 29), it follows that property is by no means reducible to a single strand of meaning. That is to say, even though I for the purposes of this study conceptualize private property in relation to liberal self-making and against the backdrop of Atlantic slavery, other meanings of private property will also always resonate with this conceptualization. For while being present "in a given moment and a specific epistemological context, concepts also link that moment and that context to earlier moments, to earlier epistemological contexts" (Neumann and Nünning 4). Put another way, Bal's suggestions for cultural analysis help me account for the fact that the mutable concept of private property from its inception in the late seventeenth-century English Atlantic until today has traveled not only across centuries but also through the different analytical frames that this study puts in relation to one another. I also follow Bal in her suggestion to privilege the "close and detailed engagement with the object" of analysis that cultural analysis advocates in the form of close reading ("Cultural Studies" 38). I enrich the methodologies of cultural analysis and close reading with an additional reading device specifically developed for this project. Situated at the beginning of every individual chapter (excluding the introduction to and conclusion of the study) are single paragraphs marked with the subtitle "[Routing the Argument]." These single paragraphs not only succinctly summarize the arguments made in the respective chapter and trace how I develop, weave, and sharpen my overall argument with each step that I take. These paragraphs also index the movement of the property

22 One needs to approach the project of cultural analysis, too, with "critical vigilance" (Applebaum 3). That is, one needs to be aware of the underlying assumptions of established methodologies within disciplines like American Studies or Cultural and Literary Studies more generally. To quote Bal again, concepts constitute "the backbone of the interdisciplinary study of culture primarily because of their potential *intersubjectivity*. Not because they mean the same thing for everyone, but because they don't" ("Cultural Studies" 35). To use a notion such as 'intersubjectivity' means to assume that all beings can be subjects or strive towards subject status. Post-slavery Black Studies trajectories have taught us, however, that this is not the case if by subject we mean critical theory's subject and its status "as a relational being" (Douglass and Wilderson 117). I draw on cultural analysis as a methodological framework for this project fully aware of such limitations while it is not in the scope of this study to examine the implications of these insights on cultural analysis.

concept as well as the critique of the property paradigm through the study's different analytical frames and from one discursive arena to the next. As such, the [Routing the Argument]-paragraphs function as a reading manual for the study.

1.7 The Chapters

This brings me to the study's overall structure. As should have become clear by now, *A Mercy* is this study's pivotal point, it is at the center of *Unruly Narrative*'s project of interrogating the property paradigm. In the second and next chapter of the study entitled "Claims to Freedom: Private Property and the New World Liberal Subject," I turn to a paradigmatic selection of texts from the late seventeenth-century English Atlantic to place my analysis of *A Mercy* on an historical footing. I examine these texts for the ways they stage, discuss, and navigate liberal ideas of what it means to be a Human subject with regard to private property. My focus will be on John Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* (1689), which, ever since its publication, has inspired dynamic intellectual debate on questions of government, sovereignty, political power, civil society, as well as the form and function(s) of private property (Laslett 1988). That is also to say that Locke's ideas on ownership and possession as put forth in the *Two Treatises* remain an important point of reference for many conceptualizations of (exclusive) private property as well as for critical discourses on such ideas until this day. In tandem with the *Two Treatises*, the chapter also discusses Locke's *The Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina* (1669) and "The Germantown Friends' Protest Against Slavery" (1688). As I work my way through these paradigmatic texts and the twentieth and twenty-first critical discourses on them, I argue that they constitute the New World's liberal Human subject through notions of ownership, metaphors of property, as well as "possessive investments" (Lipsitz) in white identity deliberations. My goal in engaging this paradigmatic selection of texts is to make visible an emerging conceptual nexus in seventeenth-century North America that connects notions of possession and ownership to questions of race and racialization.

In the third chapter – "Interrogating Property: Black Studies and the Liberal Imagination" – my study turns to Black Studies' post-slavery theoretical interventions into the discursive promises of universal liberty as interrogation of proprietorial conceptions of liberal selfhood. Bearing in mind the overall study's core questions on the relation between literary narrative and a fundamental theoretical critique of early modern liberal subjectivities, the chapter engages with Black Studies' interrogations of the liberal property paradigm, continuing my examination of the complex entanglements between self-making, slavery, and pri-

vate property that I began in the previous chapter. From these post-slavery interventions, I extract a set of interrelated terms – *violence*; *dispossession* and *fungibility*; *abjection* and *abjectorship*; *reproduction* and *kinship*; and *anticipatory wake* – which not only provides the internal structure for the chapter itself but which, as analytical vocabulary, helps me address the ways Morrison's novel wrestles with the property paradigm within the representational realm of the literary. In other words, the aim of the chapter is to think with these Black Studies' post-slavery trajectories, whose interventions make it possible for me to address and examine the intricate connections between private property and self-making in *A Mercy*.

This, then, brings me to the fourth chapter of the study and to my analyses of *A Mercy*'s characters: "Practicing Refusal: Interrogating the Property Paradigm in *A Mercy*." This part consists of an introduction as well as six individual analytical subchapters, in which I examine the characters of Jacob Vaark, Lina, Rebekka Vaark, Sorrow, Florens, and the *minha mãe* separately. In the first introductory chapter of this part of the study, I turn to the vast field of narrative theory and to its various conceptualizations of literary character as I follow post-slavery Black theoretical trajectories' questioning of (white) narrative's ability to account for and emplot the slave/social death (Hartman, *Scenes*; Wilderson, "Aporia"). As I move towards examining the property paradigm within the realm of the literary in this way, I identify a fundamental tension at work in the ways in which *A Mercy* resorts to allegorical figuration when presenting its critique of the liberal property paradigm. On the one hand, this tension is caused by what I identify as *A Mercy*'s allegorical anti-narration. On the other hand, it relates to the fact that the vocabulary available to talk about form and narrative, such as the term "character," cannot account for social death. Throughout my close readings, I use square brackets as a way of connoting this tension, making it visible not only on an orthographical level but also to show how this tension is fundamental to my analyses of *A Mercy*. That is, I use "[character]" whenever I generally talk about *A Mercy*'s allegorical figurations and "[name of a character]," for example [Sorrow], whenever I talk about a specific [character] in *A Mercy*. Each of the [character] studies deals with how the [characters] under scrutiny tackle liberal conceptions of private property, ownership, and possession in relation to the making and unmaking of subjectivities at the New World colonial scene. Each of the [character] studies, too, establishes *A Mercy* as an epistemic critique that is ongoing. In refusing narrative

and in creating Black anti-narrative, *A Mercy*'s critique is "always now" (Morrison, *Beloved* 248).[23]

23 While I have briefly discussed the [characters] of [Willard] and [Scully] at the beginning of this introduction, these two [characters] are the only ones that I do not discuss in a separate chapter. I have chosen to do so because, in my reading of *A Mercy*, all the other [characters] play a much more central role for the novel's plot.