3 Interrogating Private Property: Black Studies and the Liberal Imagination

[Routing the Argument] The chapter reads 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 of liberal subjectivities, the chapter engages with Black Studies' post-slavery interrogations of the liberal property paradigm. It thus continues the study's examination of the complex entanglements between individual liberty, slavery, and private property that I began in the previous chapter in my reading of late seventeenth-century liberal narratives of individual freedom. The aim of the chapter is to think with Black Studies' post-slavery trajectories, whose theoretical interventions make it possible for me to address and examine the intricate connections between property and self-making in the narrative orbit of *A Mercy* in the next part of the study. As for its structure, the chapter is organized around a set of interconnected terms that I have isolated from these post-slavery trajectories, and which shall serve as points of entry for my analyses of *A Mercy*. These are: *violence*; *dispossession* and *fungibility; abjection* and *abjectorship*; *reproduction* and *kinship*; and, finally, *anticipatory wake*.

> Black studies will have to disinvest our axiological commitments from humanism and invest *elsewhere*. Continuing to keep hope that freedom will occur, that one day the world will apologize for its antiblack brutality and accept us with open arms, is a devastating fantasy.
> — Calvin L. Warren, *Ontological Terror*

> A focus on violence should be at the center of this project because violence not only makes thought possible, but it makes black metaphysical being and black relationality impossible, while simultaneously giving rise to the philosophical contemplation of meta-physics and the thick description of human relations. Without violence, critical theory and pure philosophy would be impossible.
> — Patrice D. Douglass and Frank B. Wilderson, "The Violence of Presence"

3.1 Introduction

The chapter reads Black Studies' post-slavery theoretical interventions into the discursive promises of universal liberty as interrogation of proprietorial conceptions of liberal selfhood. As we have seen in the previous chapter, private property emerges as an extremely flexible and mutable vehicle for the negotiation of

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social and cultural meaning as well as for the formation of power and of value systems from at least the middle of the seventeenth century (see e. g., Bhandar, "Critical Legal Studies"; Davies). As a paradigm, that is, private property functions to keep power and knowledge systems in place and it provides fertile political, social, cultural, and philosophical ground for the ideal of the white liberal subject to emerge (cf. Quijano; Wynter, "Unsettling"). Again, the precepts and the promises of liberal individualism, including its anti-feudal impetus and its commitment to the granting of equal rights to "all" individuals, have from their very inception been intricately connected to the practices and economies of slavery and (settler) colonialism. And they continue to structure post-Enlightenment critical thinking and its concomitant literary, cultural, philosophical narratives of political and individual emancipation (Broeck, *Gender*; Dussel and Mendieta; Lowe; Mills, *Black Rights*). That is, slavery and freedom have been complicit from the very beginning, and it is their "vexed genealogy" that continues to structure both the liberal imagination of personhood and enslavement's "afterlife" in the present moment (Hartman, *Scenes* 115; *Lose* 6; see also Bennett; Walcott, *On Property*).

Working through an ensemble of questions on slavery, subjectivity/subjection, Blackness, liberty, whiteness, and private property, a number of scholars have greatly increased our understanding of the intricate entanglements of individual liberty and private property (e. g., Broeck, "Abolish"; Harris, "Whiteness," "Finding," "Markets"; Hartman, *Scenes*, "Belly"; J. Morgan, "*Partus*," "Archives"; Nyong'o, "Barack"; Lowe; Sharpe, *Wake*, *Monstrous*; Spillers, "Mama's Baby"; P. Williams). While I generally draw on Orlando Patterson's seminal definition of slavery as social death, my argument fundamentally builds on the work of Black feminist historians, thinkers, and scholars whose research has focused on the institution of slavery's reproductive calculus and "afterlife of property" (Sharpe, *Wake* 15).[41] Critically supplementing and expanding on Patterson's pivotal text *Slavery and Social Death* in this way, Black feminist historians and thinkers have strongly influenced how we think and write about, for instance, Black women's reproductive capacities under slavery. They have 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 the master's private property and economic increase was tethered to inherit-

41 To recall, according to Patterson, the constituent elements of slavery-as-social-death are natal alienation (i. e. the absence of kinship structures), general dishonor, and gratuitous (as opposed to contingent) violence (Patterson; see also Wilderson, *Red*).

able slave status as enshrined in colonial legislation. As Christina Sharpe reminds us with respect to the longue durée of these intricate connections:

> Reading together the Middle Passage, the coffle, and, I add to the argument, the birth canal, we can see how each has functioned separately and collectively over time to dis/figure Black maternity, to turn the womb into a factory producing blackness as abjection much like the slave ship's hold and the prison and turning the birth canal into another domestic Middle Passage with Black mothers, after the end of legal hypodescent, still ushering their children into their condition; their non/status, their non/being-ness. (*Wake* 749)

Following in these scholars' vein, I seek to investigate private property as a means to white (self-)possession and liberty, which fundamentally includes the active and willful unmaking of human subjects into socially dead Black "sentient beings" (Hartman, *Scenes* 93; Wilderson, *Red* 55, 57) under slavery. In this context, the following questions arise: Which concepts or terms may describe the status of the enslaved as both socially dead and somebody else's legal and inheritable property? Which terms may address the idea that human freedom entails the notion of a right to property? Relatedly, who can be considered as being dispossessed and why? In wrestling with these questions, I aim to do two things: First, by engaging with these questions and by drawing on Black Studies' post-slavery theoretical trajectories that focus on the complicity of notions of subjectivity, freedom, and property with the histories, practices, and legacies of chattel slavery, I seek to complicate the liberal narratives of individual freedom that I examined in the previous chapter. Second, in thinking in relation to post-slavery theoretical trajectories such as Afropessimism and Black Feminist theorizing, I hope to address the various representations of the intricate connections between property and subjectivity that *A Mercy* navigates. That is also to say that without those theoretical interventions, it would not be possible for me, as someone who is positioned within the white/Human fold (Wilderson, *Red*), to unpack what I consider *A Mercy*'s fundamental critique of "the sanctity of property and proprietorial notions of the self" as fundamental building blocks of modern conceptions of freedom and subjectivity in the next part of the study (Hartman, *Scenes* 115).

3.2 Interrogating the Property Paradigm

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; see also Weheliye, *Habeas*). It is not in the scope of the chapter to provide a detailed account of the develop-

ment of the various critical trajectories of Black Studies in the United States ever since its inception as a twentieth-century academic field that developed out of 1960s Black social activism and political organizing during the Civil Rights and Black Liberation movements as well as the Black Arts and Aesthetic Movements.[42] Even before becoming an "institutional and disciplinary formation" (Weheliye, *Habeas* 3), Black Studies has always been the locus of intense and dynamic debate—debate about its intellectual, political as well as methodological stakes (Gates and Burton LII; Gordon and Gordon xxi; K. Wright). There is an extensive historiography on (the development of) Black Studies' various genealogies (see e. g., Bobo, Hudley, and Michel; Gates and Burton; Gordon and Gordon; Marable; Norment; Rojas). Recently, debates within Black Studies have continued to thrive under the guidance of media outlets such as #BlackTwitter, blogs, and other "hashtag politics," specifically in relation to social activism and political organizing in the era of BlackLivesMatter (Neal; Wadud).

I use the term "Black Studies" not only fully aware of these manifold transformations and controversies internal to the field but also aware of the fact that "Black Studies" focuses on different sets of questions depending on who asks these questions as well as on where this inquiry is located.[43] If the term "African American Studies" appears in this study, I use it interchangeably with "Black Studies" throughout. In doing so, I generally follow Jared Sexton, who discusses African American Studies as a twenty-first-century academic field stratified along "two general poles of inquiry and organization regarding the status" of nation and the United States ("African American" 211), with "neonationalist ideological tendencies under the heading of Afrocentrism, Afrocology, or Africology

42 Weheliye stresses that Black Studies 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 U.S. mainstream academy in the latter half of the twentieth century (*Habeas* 3). In describing Black Studies as "a most difficult terrain" in the introduction to their *Companion to African-American Studies* (2008), Gordon and Gordon likewise remind us of the various transformations that Black Studies as a disciplinary transformation has undergone.

43 In Germany, for example, Black German feminist activist-scholar Peggy Piesche has recently called for the implementation of "Black (German) Studies," thereby designating the global dimension of Black and PoC European knowledge productions both within and outside of the academy. Black (German) Studies, according to Piesche, need to be understood as "an attempt to open an intellectual space for an interdisciplinary and international scholarly and artistic engagement with 'Black German Studies' that brings to the field insights beyond those demanded within the nationally inflected, colonial model of area studies" (Piesche). For a general overview of the development of African American studies as an academic discipline in West Germany see Boesenberg.

(and some variants of Africana and African Diaspora thought)," on the one hand, and "a postnational ideological tendency under the heading of [...] 'critical Black Studies,'" on the other (211, 212). Pointing out that the many debates happening in this context do so across this "general interpolation" and that they follow numerous methods and develop different approaches, Sexton argues that twenty-first century African American or Black Studies is at a crossroads at which questions concerning antiblackness and a sustained critique of Black suffering should take center stage ("African American" 213 ff.). In thus charting the political, theoretical, aesthetic, and philosophical stakes of Black Studies in the first decade of the twenty-first century, Sexton writes:

> The problem of speaking from the standpoint of the slave in a slave society, or, *pace* Gordon, as a black in an anti-black world, has structured black critical discourse from its earliest moments of articulation—primarily in aesthetic production (from music and dance to visual arts and literature), but also in political rhetoric and philosophical and theoretical writing as well [...] This is also to say that African American Studies, an academic project catalyzed in the political ferment and crisis of the mid-century social movements, inherits this problem; *it is the hard kernel around which it continues to grow*. ("African American" 211; emphasis mine)

Sexton's words here delineate Black Studies as a radical intellectual project equipped with an analytic lens that attempts to account for Blackness in an antiblack world, both in terms of structure and performativity. On the one hand, Sexton here discusses Black Studies as an "intramural" project in Hortense Spillers' sense, that is, as a project "interested in articulating the complex networks – historical, cultural, literary networks – that have shaped, and continue to shape, the contours of" Black life (Woubshet 925; see also Spillers, *Black*, "Idea"). On the other hand, and this is particularly important for my study, his words also show that Black Studies represents an important intervention into white knowledge productions that helped create the modern Western world. Black Studies' interventions as exemplified by Sexton's above words remind us that to reckon with the making of the white Human subject is to fundamentally engage with modernity's calculus of property and practices of "propertization" (Broeck, "Abolish" 212).[44] As Wilderson puts it, "The race of Humanism [...] could not

44 I borrow the term "propertization" from Broeck, who uses it to describe the "scandal of reducing a human being to property" ("Abolish" 212). It is part of a repertoire of terms and concepts that Broeck has coined in her work on (early) European modernity, transatlantic slavery, and structural antiblackness (*Gender*), and which draws on Black post-slavery thinking's interrogations of white Western modernity. As part of this effort, I understand the term "propertization" to denote the white economic, political, philosophical, and epistemic effort to not only "re-

have produced itself without the simultaneous production of that walking destruction which became known as the Black" (*Red* 20).

In order to understand how a novel like *A Mercy* interrogates the complicity of slavery and freedom in/as the liberal imagination, it is important to remind ourselves of the groundbreaking work Black feminists have done in addressing the ways in which concepts of kinship, reproduction, and family have historically and epistemically been enmeshed with enslavement, the market, and racial capitalism in the United States. Intensely focusing on "questions of race and maternity" (J. Morgan, "*Partus*" 2), Black feminist thinkers have shown how a conceptual bind between property, slavery, and reproduction was and continues to be central to conventional understandings of Human subjectivity. Ever since Angela Davis' work on resistance, family, and women in slave communities put slavery on the agenda of Black feminist theorizing at the beginning of the 1970s ("Reflections"), that is, Black feminist thinkers in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have examined and continue to interrogate what Adrienne Davis has described as the "sexual economy" of slavery[45] (see "Don't," "Slavery," "Private"; see also the work of, for example, Hazel V. Carby; Marisa J. Fuentes; Sharon Harley and Rosalyn Terborg-Penn; Cheryl I. Harris ("Finding," "Markets"), Darlene Clark Hine ("Female," "Rape"); Jennifer L. Morgan ("*Partus*, "Archive," *Laboring*), Deborah Gray White; Hortense J. Spillers (*Black*, "Mama's Baby"), and Patricia J. Williams, respectively). By this route, Black feminist thinking critically supplements this study's arguments on the socio-cultural, epistemic, and structural connections between private property and subjectivity in that it establishes at least three interlocking sites of critical inquiry: First, the connections between property and/as reproduction, the master's willful, violent, and targeted use of Black enslaved women's reproductive capacity to guarantee his economic increase. Hartman has recently described this as the "theft, regulation and destruction of black women's sexual and reproductive capacities [...] In North America, the future of slavery depended upon black women's reproductive capacity as it did on the slave market. The reproduction of human property and the social relations of racial slavery were predicated upon the belly" ("Belly" 166, 168). Second, the impossibility of *recognized* kinship formations for the enslaved because kinship "*can be invaded at any given and arbitrary moment by the property relations*" structuring racial slavery (Spillers, "Mama's Baby" 74). Third,

duce a human being to property" but also to establish and maintain whiteness's trajectories of individual liberty and self-possession.

45 In ""Don't Let Nobody Bother Yo' Principle": The Sexual Economy of American Slavery," Adrienne Davis describes the "interplay of sex and markets" and the law on the New World plantation as a "sexual political economy" (105).

the regulation of maternal descent through colonial law, which made racial slavery hereditary (J. Morgan, "*Partus*," "Archives"). In this context, scholars like Patrice D. Douglass ("Claim"), Saidiya V. Hartman ("Belly," *Lose*, *Scenes*), and Christina E. Sharpe ("Lose," *Monstrous*), among others, have also pointed to the ways in which the sexualized and racialized landscapes of the institution of slavery continue to animate hegemonic discourses on Black family formations in the present. As Hartman writes, for example, African and African-descended enslaved women's reproductive labor "not only guaranteed slavery as an institutional process and secured the status of the enslaved, but it inaugurated a regime of racialized sexuality that continues to place black bodies at risk for sexual exploitations and abuse, gratuitous violence, incarceration, property, premature death, and state-sanctioned murder" ("Belly" 169). Put another way, reading and studying Black feminist historians and theorists' work has taught me that "slavery and freedom presuppose one another, not only as modes of production and discipline or through contiguous forms of subjection but as founding narratives of the liberal subject" (Hartman, *Scenes* 116); and that engaging with the position of Black enslaved women on the New World plantation is key not only to further understanding and complicating this white, self-possessing liberal subject as the current hegemonic formation or "genre" (Sylvia Wynter) of the Human but also for the kind of reading of Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* that this study pursues.

In the first chapter of *Scenes of Subjection*, Hartman discusses the relationship between white narration, empathy, and enslavement in turning to the antislavery writing of white abolitionist John Rankin. Rankin – intent on documenting the injustices of slavery and on bringing those closer to his readers in order to win them over for the abolitionist cause – literally imagined himself and his family in the position of the enslaved in an "epistle to his brother" (17). Hartman points to the "difficulty and slipperiness of empathy" in the context of a narrative practice, exemplified by Rankin's writing, that bases its rhetorical gist on reiterating as well as identifying with black suffering (18). Because "empathy is a projection of oneself into another in order to better understand the other," white narrative emphatic identification here becomes an instance of obliterating the enslaved from discourse, even though it is designed to create such things as visibility, solidarity, or human common ground (19). Hartman writes:

> [B]y exploiting the vulnerability of the captive body as a vessel for the uses, thoughts, and feelings of others, the humanity extended to the slave inadvertently confirms the expectations and desires definitive of the relations of chattel slavery. In other words, the ease of Rankin's empathic identification is as much due to his good intentions and heartfelt opposition to slavery as to the fungibility of the captive body. (*Scenes* 19)

Hartman's concerns about the (im)possibility of white emphatic narration/identification with Black suffering strongly resonate with Frank Wilderson's questioning of narrative and whether narrative can "account for the violence that wounds and positions Black people" ("Aporia" 134). Wilderson raises these questions in the context of and as key proponent of the expanding theoretical trajectory of Afropessimism, which, as I will discuss in more detail below, "elaborates a paradigmatic critique of the Human that reckons [sic] civil society's perverse and parasitic relation to the hydraulics of anti-Black violence" (134).[46] As "both an epistemological and an ethical project" (Sexton, "Afro-Pessimism" par. 15), that is, Afropessimism thinks Blackness as coterminous with and inextricably bound by Slaveness (Wilderson, personal conversation. 9 December 2018) in its analysis of "how anti-black fantasies attain objective value in the political and economic life of society and in the psychic life of culture as well" (Sexton, "Afro-Pessimism" par. 7). In "Social Death and Narrative Aporia in *12 Years a Slave*," Wilderson argues that "narrative strategies that try to account for the violence of Black life," regardless of their purpose, will inevitably fail to achieve what they set out to do because they lack the "requisite explanatory power to make sense of violent context and performances that are prelogical and, as such, beyond the grasp of narration" ("Aporia" 134). That is, the violence that slavery gratuitously inflicts on the enslaved (and by which slaves are ontologically positioned as socially dead) cancels out any "narrative moment prior to slavery" on a structural level (*Red* 29). Following Wilderson, narrative is always imbued with both a temporal and a spatial dimension—dimensions to which the slave does not have access:

> Social death bars the slave from access to narrative, at the level of temporality; but it also does so at the level of spatiality. [...] just as there is no time for the slave, there is also no *place* of the slave. The slave's reference to his or her quarters as home does not change the fact that it is a spatial extension of the master's dominion. ("Aporia" 136)

Any attempt of emplotting the slave within narrative, then, ultimately results in their eradication, "regardless of whether it [is] a leftist narrative of political agency [...] or whether it was about being able to unveil the slave's humanity by actually finding oneself in that position," as in Rankin's case (Hartman and Wilderson 184). Wilderson explains that the slave's social death "when storied, should

46 Wilderson has since published his philosophical and lyrical memoir/theory book *Afropessimism* (Liveright 2020), in which he continues to elaborate on Afropessimism's core ideas and arguments. I follow his spelling whenever I refer to or draw on Afropessimist thought in this study.

not be seen as producing a logical impasse or contradiction within narrative but, rather, social death is the very meta-aporia that interrogates narrative as a form" ("Aporia" 135). In other words, rather than being a means or a structure that can account for the slave, narrative needs to be understood as being within the purview of the Human. As Rankin's emphatic narrative imagining so aptly illustrates, narrative needs to be understood as being part of the liberal Human subject's repertoire of being/becoming (as examined in the previous chapter).

If narrative plays such a fundamental role in the making of Human subjectivities, as Hartman and Wilderson suggest, then what does this mean for a project that intends to dismantle white conceptualizations of subjectivity and liberal self-making bound by various conceptions of ownership at the same time that it is heavily indebted to Black knowledge productions? Hartman's and Wilderson's fundamental questioning of narrative situate not only their own work but also, more generally, Black Studies' inquiry of "speaking from the standpoint of the slave in a slave society" (Sexton, "African American") as critical projects of anti-narration—if by narrative we mean a spatiotemporal structure, which is part of the Human fold and for which the social death of the slave presents a fundamental impasse. In this respect, I need to explicitly frame my reading of *A Mercy* as a project with its own theoretical interest. That is, reading *A Mercy* as a literary intervention into the discursive promises of universal liberty as/and white knowledge production produces a theoretical argument that both contrasts with the existing discourse on this novel and gets into conversation with the current debates about the legacies of slavery within post-slavery critical thinking. Hartman's questioning of white narrative's potential to tell stories that do not reproduce the "violence of identification" (*Scenes* 20) pushes me to conceptualize this project as a critical reckoning with whiteness and its imaginations and narratives of liberal selfhood. Hartman's and Wilderson's respective works help me raise the following core questions for this study: (How) Does a novel like *A Mercy*, which is set in the seventeenth-century North American colonial mainland, and which offers representations of slavery, take up Hartman's and Wilderson's respective concerns about narrative as a form and structure? How does a novel like *A Mercy* navigate its own incapacity (*qua* its narrative form) to account for the slave while at the same time mounting a fundamental critique of early modern liberal subjectivities on the aesthetic level of representation? With which narrative strategies does the novel attempt to rupture self-possessed subjectivities while simultaneously exposing its own inability to fully contain fictional beings that are enslaved? How does *A Mercy* "disnarrate" (G. Prince) self-possessed liberal subjectivities by creating Black fictional beings that resist and refuse modernity's grammar of property?

With these questions in mind, the task of the following pages is to delineate and to think about a specific set of interconnected terms stemming from recent Black Studies' post-slavery trajectories that tackle the complex political, philosophical, social, and cultural connections between transatlantic enslavement, liberal individualism, and the making of modern western subjectivities. These terms will help me structure the study's coming chapters and shall serve as points of entry for my analyses of *A Mercy*. They are: *violence*; *dispossession* and *fungibility*; *abjection* and *abjectorship*; *reproduction* and *kinship*. While related, the final term discussed in the chapter – *anticipatory wake* – somewhat differs from the former ones in that I construct it from my reading of Black feminist theorizing. The task here is to discern and to work through the ways in which these terms confront the conceptual conflation of individual liberty and/as self-possession put forth on the seventeenth-century New World colonial scene in political philosophical discourse á la John Locke and which continue to be produced and reproduced in(to) the present. It is important to note at this point that these terms do not neatly fall into chronology. Rather than examining them separately, I have grouped them into thematic clusters. As I elaborate on these terms as theoretical sites of inquiry (following Bal, *Travelling* 44, "Cultural Studies" 35 – 36) there will be some conceptual overlap. I will go through them in the order that they are listed above. Throughout, I will refer to and give examples stemming from *A Mercy* to make visible the connections between the novel and the epistemic, political formations that the terms under scrutiny here describe.

3.3 The Structure of Violence

Let me turn, then, to the first term to be examined: *violence*.[47] Within the first few lines of Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* we as readers encounter the slave girl Florens and her "telling" about what the reader will later come to learn has been a vio-

47 Calvin Warren has expanded on this by introducing the concept of "ontological terror" in his eponymous study *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation* situated at the intersections of African American Studies and Philosophy. Warren uses this term in the context of what he has coined as the philosophical trajectory of Black Nihilism to think about "the ontological crisis blackness presents to an antiblack world" (ix). Against this backdrop, he meditates on the "(non)relation between blackness and Being by arguing that black ~~being~~ incarnates metaphysical nothing, the terror of metaphysics, in an antiblack world. Blacks, then, have function but not Being—the function of black(ness) is to give form to a terrifying formlessness (nothing). Being claims function as its property (all functions rely on Being, according to this logic, for philosophical presentation), but the aim of black nihilism is to expose the unbridgeable rift between Being and function for blackness" (5 – 6).

lent fight between her and the blacksmith. We read: "Don't be afraid. My telling can't hurt you in spite of what I have done and I promise to lie quietly in the dark – weeping perhaps or occasionally seeing the blood once more – but I will never again unfold my limbs to rise up and bare teeth" (*AM* 1). These two sentences are saturated with words like 'blood,' 'weeping,' 'hurt,' and 'teeth' and they evoke notions of pain, fear, and violence. Not only do they proleptically set the novel's plotting for 'the fight-to-come' between Florens and the blacksmith but they also establish violence as one of *A Mercy*'s core concerns. Indeed, there are various representations of violence in the novel, ranging from social "disorder" and mayhem fueled by religious conflict in England (73)[48] and the forceful and unwarranted extension of indenture (146–147) and peonage (52)[49]; over the brutal uprooting violence of settler colonialism and the annihilation of Native American tribes in the New World (42, 44–45, 47)[50]; sexual violence and subjection (91–92, 117–118)[51] as well as the entanglements between sexuality, slavery, and the market as in the "breeding"/"increase" of slave property through sex (163–164)[52]; the violence of racialization (108–113)[53]; and the brutality and

48 "Rebekka was ashamed of her early fears and pretended she'd never had them. Now, lying in bed, her hands wrapped and bound against self-mutilation, her lips drawn back from her teeth, she turned her fate over to others and became prey to scenes of past disorder. The first hangings she saw in the square amid a happy crowd attending. She was probably two years old, and the death faces would have frightened her if the crowd had not mocked and enjoyed them so. [...] She did not know what a Fifth Monarchist was, then or now, but it was clear in her household that execution was a festivity as exciting a king's parade" (*AM* 73).

49 "Sold for seven years to a Virginia planter, young Willard Bond expected to be freed at age twenty-one. But three years were added onto his term for infractions – theft and assault – and he was re-leased to a wheat farmer up north" (*AM* 146).

50 "Once, long ago, had Lina been older or tutored in healing, she might have eased the pain of her family and all the others dying around her: on mats of rush, lapping at the lake's shore, curled in paths within the village and in the forest beyond, but most tearing at blankets they could neither abide nor abandon. Infants fell silent first, and even as their mothers heaped earth over their bones, they too were pouring sweat and limp as maize hair" (*AM* 44).

51 "The housewife told her it was monthly blood; that all females suffered it and Sorrow believed her until the next month and the next and the next when it did not return. [...] [W]hether it was instead the result of the goings that took place behind the stack of clapboard, both brothers attending, instead of what the housewife said. Because the pain was outside between her legs, not inside where the housewife said was natural" (*AM* 118–119).

52 "But the first mating, the taking of me [*minha mãe*, enslaved mother of Florens] and Bess and one other to the curing shed. Afterwards, the men who were told to break we in apologized. Later an overseer gave each of us an orange" (*AM* 163–164).

53 "Eyes that do not recognize me [the slave girl] Florens, eyes that examine me for a tail, an extra teat, a man's whip between my legs. Wondering eyes that stare and decide if my navel is in the right place if my knees bend backward like the forelegs of a dogs. They want to see if my

loss at play when being orphaned (30)[54] to the unspeakable act of child murder (121).[55] [56] Rather than to think about this list simply as a panorama of various representations of violence addressed in the novel, however, I suggest that it is indicative of how violence operates on a different level in the text—namely, how violence defines and positions *A Mercy*'s characters both within and towards one another in the text.

In order to understand how *A Mercy* navigates this, it is important to keep in mind how Black post-slavery thinking has made a focus on the "forms and functions of violence" its central analytical objective (Sexton, "Afro-Pessimism" par. 33). For example, Hartman in *Scenes* examines forms of domination and violence that manifest themselves in seemingly "innocent" scenes of the everyday in the aftermath of the American Civil War and the legal abolition of slavery. Explicitly, her work needs to be understood as "a mediation on metaphysical violence that asks first under what conditions of existence can injury become legible" (Douglass and Wilderson 119). In a similar vein, Afropessimism has made violence and its positioning power on the level of structure one of its core interests. As pushed in the respective works by Frank B. Wilderson, III., and Jared Sexton, Afropessimism examines

> the hidden structure of violence that underwrites so many violent acts, whether spectacular or mundane. [...] [I]n its formulation of power, and particularly of the nature and role of violence, Afro-Pessimism does not only describe the operations of systems, structures and institutions, but also, and perhaps more importantly, the fantasies of murderous hatred and unlimited destruction, of sexual consumption and social availability that animate the realization of such violence. (Sexton, "Afro-Pessimism" par. 6, par. 7)

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tongue is split like a snake's or if my teeth are filing to points to chew them up. To know if I can spring out of the darkness and bite. Inside I am shrinking" (*AM* 112–113).

54 "From his own childhood he [Jacob Vaark, the master] knew there was no good place in the world for waifs and whelps other than the generosity of strangers. Even if bartered, given away, apprenticed, sold, swapped, seduced, tricked for food, labored for shelter or stolen, they were less doomed under adult control. Even if they mattered less than a milch cow to a parent or master, without an adult they were more likely to freeze to death on stone steps, float facedown in canals, or wash up on banks and shoals" (*AM* 30).

55 "Sorrow's birthing came too soon, Lina told her, for the infant to survive, but Mistress delivered a fat boy who cheered everybody up—for six months anyway. [...] Although Sorrow thought she saw her own newborn yawn, Lina wrapped it in a piece of sacking and set it a-sail in the widest part of the steam and far beyond the beaver's dam. [...] [I]t took years for Sorrow's steady thoughts of her baby breathing water under Lina's palm to recede" (*AM* 121).

56 This is, of course, a recurrent theme in Morrison's oeuvre, for example in *Beloved* when "Sethe commits the horrible act of killing her child in order to save her from a certain emotional and possibly physical death at the hands of slave-holders" (Raynor and Butler 181) or when Eva, in *Sula*, pours kerosene over the sleeping, dilapidated, heroin-addicted grandson-veteran Plum.

Afropessimism brings to the scene of critical inquiry a set of questions, which opens analytical ground for a radical re-focusing on violence as that which structures U.S. civil society, as that which has positioning power on the level of ontology. In *Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*, Wilderson pushes for a structural analysis of civil society in the United States that goes beyond the emancipatory narratives that Leftist scholarship in the form of, e. g., Marxism, white feminism, or postcolonial studies has crafted in the wake of the liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s in that it argues for a radical return "to think the vagaries of power through the generic positions within a *structure of power relations*" (Wilderson, *Red* x, 6; emphasis mine). [57] Wilderson argues that there are "the three structuring positions of the United States (Whites, Indians, Blacks)," all of which are situated in the world by different "grammars of ontological suffering," and that these three grammars are "predicated on fundamental, though fundamentally different, relationships to violence" (*Red* 29). Global in scale (2–3), this analysis calls for a paradigmatic framework which can elaborate on how violence structurally determines who is part of civil society and who is not. Following Wilderson, the Black positionality is cast *outside* the realm of civil society whereas the white and Red positionalities are fundamentally part of it. Always-already positioned as Slave (7), the Black positionality is constituted historically and ontologically by the excessive violence incited by the transatlantic slave trade and chattel slavery, which turned human bodies into (tradable) "flesh" (11; Wilderson borrows this term from Spillers, "Mama's Baby"). This grammar of suffering makes the Black position incommensurable not only with the white positionality but also with the structural po-

57 Afropessimism largely builds on the work of such critics and intellectuals as Frantz Fanon ("Black Skin," "Wretched"), David Marriott, Saidiya Hartman (*Scenes*), Hortense Spillers ("Mama's Baby"), and Orlando Patterson. As a "contemporary phenomenon, some may even scoff that it is trendy, [Afropessimism's] political and intellectual evolution is considerably longer and its ethical bearings much broader than one might expect, and there is work yet to be done regarding a genealogy of its orientation and sensibility" (Sexton, "Afro-Pessimism" par. 1). This work is ongoing, as, for instance, in a 2016 issue entitled "Black Holes: Afro-Pessimism, Blackness, and the Discourses of Modernity" of the journal *rhizomes* featuring essays and interviews by, for example, Jared Sexton, Selamawit Terrefe and Christina Sharpe, Jaye Austin Williams and Frank B. Wilderson, Sabine Broeck, and Parisa Vaziri; or in a 2018 special issue of the journal *Theory & Event* edited by Tiffany Willoughby-Herard and M. Shadee Malaklou. Weier ("Consider") provides an excellent overview of Afropessimism's core concerns and arguments, especially of Wilderson's work. He suggests that Afropessimism's radical interventions into post-racial discursive formations in the United States and beyond also critically supplement previous critiques of post-racialist discourse and white supremacist thinking offered by scholars working in the field of American Studies in Germany (e. g., Berg; Knopf).

sitions of marginalized groups such as white women or "colored immigrants," whom Wilderson controversially calls the "junior partners" of civil society (*Red* 38). In this framework, the Black/Slave's position is one of gratuitous violence and incoherence, a state of being that renders the Black/Slave an "anti-Human, a position against which Humanity establishes, maintains, and renews its coherence" (11). Put differently, the relation between the structural positionalities of the white/Human, the Red/"Savage," and the Black/Slave is based on an ontological split or antagonism induced by the violence that the modern Western histories of enslavement and its economies of subjection brought about: "[T]his violence is peculiar in that, whereas some groups of people might be the recipients of violence, after they have been constituted as people, violence is a structural necessity to the constitution of blacks" (Douglass and Wilderson 117).

From an Afropessimist perspective, there is a difference not only between how positionality determines one's relationship to violence but also between two different forms of violence. Violence needs to be understood as being either *contingent* or *gratuitous*. While violence is *contingent* when it "happens because people transgress the unethical rules of civil society," *gratuitous* violence, by contrast, is that which "produces the 'inside-outside' of civil society" (Wilderson, Spatzek, and von Gleich 14, 15). *Gratuitous* violence is one of the three constituent elements of slavery; it is that which allows for the other two elements of social death, namely natal alienation and general dishonor (16). *Gratuitous* violence

> turns a body into flesh, ripped apart literally and imaginatively, destroys the possibility of ontology because it positions the Black in an infinite and indeterminately horrifying and open vulnerability, an object made available (which is to say fungible) for any subject. (Wilderson, *Red* 38)

It is this violence, in other words, which determines the status of the Black as a sentient nonbeing or as "existential negation" (Jackson, "Waking" 358). Wilderson goes on to tell us that *gratuitous* violence, as that which the slave receives, is "a kind of violence that is necessary not to produce a certain kind of behavior, but to give the other people who are not receiving this gratuitous violence a sense of stability in their own lives" (Wilderson, Spatzek, and von Gleich 14). Thus, while the Black is always "open gratuitous violence" and thus marked by it ontologically, the white positionality precisely is elaborated by "the freedom from violence's gratuitousness" (Wilderson, *Red* 31, 25, 20). Thirdly, the Red positionality is elaborated by its liminal status in civil society's political economy as being in between the white and the Black positions in that it "shut-

tles between the incapacity of a genocided object and the capacity of a sovereign subject[.] [...] [T]he Indian comes into being and is positioned by an a priori violence of genocide" (*Red* 49).[58] However, even though the violence of genocide separates Redness from the fold of whiteness, it does not fully isolate Redness from civil society on a structural level; the Red position can still submit claims to sovereignty (49–51). Working through the ways in which these different forms of violence (*gratuitous* v. *contingent*) position Blackness as well as Redness and whiteness against as well as alongside one another in political economy, violence's function(s) become apparent. That is, the relation between these positions – the Black v. the Red and the white positionalities – "demarcates antagonisms and not conflicts because [...] they are the embodiments of opposing and irreconcilable principles or forces that hold out no hope for dialectical synthesis" (29).

This chasm – a non-relation of antagonism versus a relation of conflict in Afropessimist terms – also plays itself out in the relationships between the characters in *A Mercy*, as I argue. Even though most characters in the novel's representation of the New World appear to be dispossessed, oppressed, or subjugated in similar ways, an analytical focus on violence, as Douglass and Wilderson have it in the third epigraph to the chapter, makes visible the ways in which this is in fact not the case. Consider, for example, Rebekka Vaark, the mail-order-bride of the settler and trader Jacob Vaark, as well as the Indigenous woman Lina and the enslaved girl Florens. The plot appears to suggest that all of these female figures suffer from early modern hetero-patriarchal power relations at the scene of Jacob Vaark's New World farm in very similar ways. However, a fundamentally different impression conveys itself if we examine their existence in the text with a focus on the hidden metaphysical and material structures, strategies, and systems produced by the violence of European economic and colonial expansion (as represented by Vaark). While Rebekka escapes her old life in England, which holds out few prospects to her other than "servant, prostitute, [or] wife," to begin a new life as Vaark's wife, Lina needs to build herself anew as the Vaarks' humble servant after having experienced the genocide of her tribe (*AM* 75–76, 43–47). A close relationship develops between Rebekka and Lina through their shared experience of trying to survive and run the Vaark farm in the wilderness of colonial Virginia (71–73). Florens, in turn, enters the household as the currency of one of Vaark's business transactions. While Vaark initial-

58 Wilderson has since elaborated on this when he writes that "[i]n some ways, American Indians are a liminal category, and in other ways they are more profoundly on the side of 'junior partners' and antagonistic to Blacks" (Wilderson, Spatzek, and von Gleich 14).

ly considers her to be some sort of a replacement for one of their deceased children (24); and while Lina "adopts" her as something like her surrogate daughter/sister/friend who "assuaged the tiny yet eternal yearning for the home Lina once knew where everyone had anything and no one had everything" (58), the text clearly delineates Florens' place within the household as that of a slave. When the household collapses in the wake of Jacob Vaark's sudden death, Rebekka becomes the sole mistress of the other women on the Vaark farm, and the friendship between her and Lina dissolves. While Lina stays on to nurse her sickened mistress back to health, Rebekka sends Florens on an errand to fetch the blacksmith for help, equipping her with a letter in which she makes her claims of rightful ownership of Florens clear. Upon her recovery, Rebekka is free—free to marry again, for example. Her behavior towards Lina fundamentally changes: "She requires her company on the way to church but sits her by the road in all weather because she cannot enter. Lina can no longer bathe in the river and must cultivate alone" (158). She also makes plans to sell Florens (157). Far from being subjugated or dispossessed in similar ways, then, an analytical focus on violence will show how the relationships between these women are in fact structured by this violence even though they initially believe themselves to be, in Lina's words, a "tight-knit family" (56). As theorized in post-slavery discourses, then, violence can be deployed as an analytical tool that speaks to Atlantic slavery's fundamental, world-creating and world-destructing (to paraphrase Hartman, "Belly") powers. It introduces a relation of capitalism to African slaves, perpetuated inheritable property, white self-making, and conceptions of freedom and emancipation that encompass some but not others. What is at stake, in other words, is a reckoning with these structures, strategies, and systems of terror, violence, and death, on the one hand, and self-making, emancipation, and universal freedom, on the other. As will be discussed in the next part of the study, such an analytical focus also raises questions as to what this violence does to a literary text's strategies of characterization.

3.4 Dispossession and Fungibility

Dispossession and *fungibility* are terms relevant to my analyses of *A Mercy* because they delineate fundamentally different states of being and existence in the world. As I hope to show, it is their fundamentally different "assumptive logics" (Wilderson, *Red*) that will help me unpack and conceptualize the novel's strategies of characterization and, thus, its critique of the property paradigm. In its conventional definition, *dispossession* refers to the "action of dispossessing or fact of being dispossessed; deprivation of or ejection from a possession." This

definition also includes meanings of (dis-)inheritance, birthright, and damage to reputation or personal injury caused by dispossession ("dispossession, n."). *Dispossession* is also defined as "the condition of those who have lost land, citizenship, property, and a broader belonging to the world" (see back blurb of Butler and Athanasiou's book). Within current academic, post-1960s social justice movements and political left-leaning discourses equipped with anti-capitalist and emancipatory rhetoric, the term *dispossession* largely functions as a theoretical trope. As such, it refers to a subject that is exposed to various forms of injustice and that is subjected to vulnerability in the context of neoliberal capitalism's global market economies (Butler and Athanasiou 2; cf. Bhandar and Bhandar). For example, in their book-length conversation on *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political* (2013), Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou discuss *dispossession* as a useful tool with which to think about how "human bodies become materialized and dematerialized through histories of slavery, colonization, apartheid, capitalist alienation, immigration and asylum politics, postcolonial liberal multiculturalism, gender and sexual normativity, securitarian governmentality, and humanitarian reason" (10). For Butler and Athanasiou, *dispossession* signals "the contemporary production of social discourses, modes of power, and subjects [and it] works as an authoritative and often paternalistic apparatus of controlling and appropriating the spatiality, mobility, affectivity, potentiality, and relationality of (neo-)colonized subjects" (6, 11).

What these meanings share is the assumption of a *subject* that "has been deprived of something that rightfully belongs to them" (Butler and Athanasiou 6). That is, the above leftist political discourse on dispossession is structured around a set of questions concerned with Human subjects and "their capacities: powers subjects have or lack" (Wilderson, *Red* 8). As Black post-slavery thinkers, philosophers, and scholars have shown, however, the subject of dispossession is cast in a fundamentally different light, if examined against the backdrop of the histories and afterlives of transatlantic slavery and antiblackness in its longue durée (e. g., Sexton, "Social Life"; Walcott). *Dispossession* (as a term and as a theoretical trope) cannot account for the ways in which social death determines and structures the lives of the slaves as well as of their descendants, past and present (Sexton, "Afro-Pessimism"; Wilderson, *Red*). In drawing on this body of scholarship, Broeck in *Gender and the Abjection of Blackness* (2018) reads Butler and Athanasiou's use of *dispossession* in the context of their "post-Marxist, post-feminist meditation on the possibilities and exigencies of struggle against late neoliberalism's global production of permanent crisis for human life" (202) against the theoretical and literary interventions of Black feminism in general and, in particular, against Black feminist critique of gender (e. g., Douglass, "Black Feminist"; Hartman, *Scenes*; Spillers, "Mama's Baby"). Such interventions have aptly

shown that to be a slave is to be absented from the purview of the Human and thus from "the possibility of subjectivity altogether" (Broeck, *Gender* 204).[59] Broeck writes:

> Being property cancels out dispossession; thus, if one speaks of dispossession as a general condition, one cannot speak of the (post-)slave. Where there has been no possession of self, let alone of property, of land, or other things, structurally speaking, but instead, propertied thingness of being, there can be no dispossession [...] the prefix tellingly assumes, at the very least, a metaphysical disposition to see the human [...] in possession, of his life, of herself, of a cartography of humanness, however embattled, if not altogether in possession of other property. (*Gender* 204, 207)

In light of this, *dispossession* as used by Butler and Athanasiou and, by extension, other intellectual projects similarly invested in accounting for "embattled humanness" needs to be understood as a term that can *only* account for the status of *subjects*. *Dispossession* cannot account for those who are positioned outside of the realm of the law and rights discourse and their epistemologies or, more generally, outside of civil society; it cannot account for the grammar of suffering of the enslaved. If a term like *dispossession* cannot do so, which term or terms can?

The Dispossessed Body, or the Fungibility of the Commodity

Let me turn to the Black feminist work of Saidiya Hartman and specifically to her seminal 1997 monograph *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. *Scenes* is Hartman's "provocative [...] exploration of racial subjugation during slavery and its aftermath" in the Reconstruction era, in which she focuses on the entanglements of slavery, subject-making, pleasure, and terror in the mundane scenes of the everyday (back blurb of *Scenes*). As part of her analyses, Hartman introduces a new term with the help of which she attempts to adequately talk about the enslaved's position of social death, racial subjugation, domination, and commodification, both on an analytic and semantic level. Hartman writes:

> The relation between pleasure and the possession of slave property, in both the figurative and the literal senses, can be explained in part by *the fungibility of the slave* – that is, *the joy made possible by virtue of the replaceability and interchangeability endemic to the commod-*

59 This is part of the critical reckoning with and the anti-racist critique of the field of white gender studies that her book pushes towards.

> *ity* – and by the extensive capacities of property—that is, the augmentation of the master subject through his embodiment in external objects and persons. [...] [T]he *fungibility of the commodity* makes the captive body an abstract and empty vessel vulnerable to the projection of others' feelings, ideas, desires, and values; and, as property, the *dispossessed body* of the enslaved is the surrogate for the master's body since it guaranteed his disembodied universality and acts as the sign of his power and dominion. Thus, while the beaten and mutilated body presumably establishes the brute materiality of existence, the materiality of suffering regularly eludes (re)cognition by virtue of the body's being replaced by other signs of value, as well as other bodies. (*Scenes* 21; emphasis mine)

Fungibility delineates the slave's status as the exchangeable possession of their master, the uses and enjoyments of which are "essential aspects of property" (Harris, "Whiteness" 1734). As the usable commodity of the master, the enslaved may be replaced or substituted at any given moment and it is this fungible status, which caters to the master's needs (economic, personal) and brings them "joy" (Hartman, *Scenes* 21). The fungibility of the slave commodity thus serves the purpose of establishing and maintaining, as well as expanding the master's subjective coherence, for it is "through chattel slavery [that] the world gave birth and coherence to both its joys of domesticity and to its struggles of political discontent" (Wilderson, *Red* 20). Hartman here offers a powerful counterpoint to the above uses of *dispossession* by inserting *fungibility* to our critical lexicons. *Fungibility* draws analytical attention on the *function* of Blackness within the white liberal imagination because it emphasizes the exchangeability and usability of the slave commodity for the master. As Hartman explains, "the value of blackness resided in its metaphorical aptitude, whether literally understood as the fungibility of the commodity or understood as the imaginative surface upon which the master and the nation came to understand themselves" (*Scenes* 7).

However, in the above quoted paragraph there also seems to be a tension at work between, on the one hand, the term *fungibility* and, on the other, the words *dispossessed body*, both of which Hartman uses when referring to the bodies of the enslaved as an extension of or proxy for the master's body. If *fungibility* connotes the enslaved's status as commodity and as an 'abstract and empty vessel vulnerable to the projection of others' feelings, ideas, desires, and values'; if *fungibility*, in other words, connotes the absence of subjectivity for the slave, then the words *dispossessed body* evoke a different theoretical register, namely a Human(ist) analytical lens. So why use these differently theoretically accentuated and dissonant terms in the same semantic environment? What I want to suggest is that, rather than simply being a dissonance in her argument, Hartman pushes terms and tropes like *dispossession* to a point where what she talks about is *not* the subject's deprivation of something but the violent absenting

of subjectivity subtended by chattel slavery. Hartman does not use *dispossession* in the above sense of a Human subject which is subjugated, dominated, and deprived of selfhood but, rather, the words *dispossessed body* signify the human "flesh" that the master owns (Spillers). They therefore do *not* delineate a dispossessed subject but a "sentient being" (Hartman, *Scenes* 93). [60] On a slightly different note, this tension also addresses and is testimony to the fact that language will only ever be an approximation of, only ever be a substitute for that which it seeks to signify. Hartman elsewhere not only questions the possibility of unearthing something from the archive of slavery that has not been fashioned from the viewpoint of the masters, captors, and traders but she also explains that "writing is unable to exceed the limits of the sayable dictated by the archive" ("Venus" 12). And archive here not only refers to the archive of the history of slavery but also to the epistemologies that slavery brought about. The question Hartman brings up in this context – "[H]ow does one tell impossible stories?" ("Venus" 10) – thus feeds directly back into the tension at work between her uses of terms like *fungibility* and *dispossessed body*, which, as I have suggested, speak to different epistemic as well as analytical registers. Ultimately, I understand *fungibility* to emerge as an analytical tool for thinking about *who* can actually be dispossessed. It shows that the register of *dispossession* cannot account for the enslaved on the level of theory. *Fungibility* introduces and locates the slave's "brute materiality of existence"; by bringing slavery's calculus of property to the scene of theoretical inquiry, this term critically subverts most left-leaning critical discourse's implicit assumptions of subjectivity.

Accumulation and Fungibility

Afropessimism, as a theoretical trajectory that offers an analysis of the violence produced and subtended by transatlantic regimes and practices of slavery as

60 Hartman continues to criticize and to play with Human(ist) analytical registers throughout her work. In her more recently published article "The Belly of the World," a meditation on the histories of Black women's (reproductive) labors, Hartman continues to use both terms in her discussion of the connections between reproduction, kinship, and economic concerns both on the New World plantation and within the domestic realm in slavery's aftermath. Hartman writes, for instance, "To be a slave is to be 'excluded from the prerogatives of birth.' The mother's only claim—to transfer her *dispossession* to the child. [...] For the enslaved, reproduction does not ensure any future other than that of *dispossession* nor guarantee anything other than the replication of racialized and disposable persons or 'human increase' (expanded property-holdings) for the master" (166, 168; emphasis mine).

that which structurally "underwrites the modern world's capacity to think, act, and exist spatially and temporally" (Wilderson, *Red* 2), both takes up and adds to Hartman's respective uses of the terms *fungibility* and *dispossessed body*. Again, Afropessimism's unflinching analysis of antiblackness as U.S. civil society's fundamental structuring "arithmetic" (Hartman, *Lose* 6) proposes "a critique of (post-)modernity's theorization of the subject whose claims within civil society are based on a supposed possession of the self and right thereto" (Weier, "Consider 421).[61] Those claims, Weier reminds us, are "constitutionally opposed to the literal possession of the slave or prison inmate as commodity and chattel and the structural *de facto* (if not always *de jure*) exclusion of blacks from that same civil society" ("Consider" 421). Afropessimism argues that Western modernity's theorization of the subject falls short in the face of the "Black; a subject who is always already positioned as Slave" and "whose structure of dispossession (the constituent elements of his or her [sic] loss and suffering" cannot be accounted for through a discourse organized around claims of or rights to self-possession (Wilderson, *Red* 7). That is, Afropessimism contends that a Black subject does not exist, if by subject we mean critical theory's subject and its status "as a relational being" (Douglass and Wilderson 117).[62] This conceptualization of Blackness as Slaveness fundamentally draws on Hartman's term *fungibility*. Following Wilderson, slavery "is and connotes an ontological status for Blackness" (*Red* 14). In his endeavor to provide a paradigmatic *structural* analysis that explains the Black/Slave's position in the modern world, that is, Wilderson goes on to theorize the "constituent elements of slavery [as] [...] *accumulation and fungibility* [...] the condition of being owned and traded" (*Red* 14, emphasis mine).

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61 Again, in arguing for a shift from "a politics of culture(s)" towards "a culture of politics," Wilderson offers a paradigmatic analysis of civil society along a "triangulation of antagonisms" between the Red/Indigenous, the white/Human, and the Black/Slave positionalities (*Red* 26, 53). In thus shifting the analytical focus away from the level of performativity and experience, these structural positions constitute "the embodiments of opposing and irreconcilable principles or forces" inside and outside of civil society (*Red* 29; Wilderson, "Prison Slave" 20; Wilderson, Spatzek, and von Gleich).

62 In the introduction to Oxford University Press's *A Dictionary of Critical Theory*, Ian Buchanan loosely describes critical theory as follows: "I suspect critical theory has leakier borders than most disciplines, not least because at its origins it is a hybrid of history, philosophy, psychoanalysis, and sociology" (vii). With Afropessimism's interventions in mind, I use critical theory here to delineate Marxist/materialist thought and the (post)structuralist currents that came to dominate most of cultural and literary studies after the 1970s, including white feminist and postcolonial thinking. Here, critical theory assumes its subject to live, stand, act, or suffer in relation to other subjects (Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, *Red*).

These thinkers thus make similar points when it comes to thinking about the status of Blackness, "the world-making and world-breaking capacities of racial slavery" (Hartman, "Belly" 166), and how this can be accounted for on the level of theory. They show that the explanatory power of theoretical tropes/terms like *dispossession* falters in the face of Blackness; it falters because such tropes/terms assume a subject/relational being that has been deprived of such things as civil rights, propriety, livelihood, or sovereignty. This also means that such terms assume a "before," a moment *prior to* the moment in which one becomes dispossessed. It assumes a moment in time during which there existed possession (of self and rights), as brief as that moment may have been. It also suggests that there is the possibility of a future in which possession – of self, of rights, of coherence – may be restored.[63] Interventions such as those by Hartman and Wilderson show, however, that there will never be such a restorative moment for Blackness (as Slaveness) because "there was never a prior meta-moment of plenitude, never Equilibrium: never a moment of social life" (Wilderson, "Aporia" 139). As analytical categories and terms, *dispossession* and *fungibility* offer me a way to think about how *A Mercy*'s characters are positioned towards one another and how the structure of their positionality actually undermines any sense of "[companionship] they had carved [...] out of isolation" at the colonial scene of the novel's setting in seventeenth-century Virginia (*AM* 154). Of course, this connects back to my earlier point that even though most of the novel's characters appear to be dispossessed or subjugated in similar ways – because they are someone else's servant or because they are subjugated by hetero-patriarchal power formations, for instance – they are in fact structurally positioned by different regimes of violence.

3.5 Abjection and Abjectorship

In order to speak about the slave not as a dispossessed subject but as fungible being, post-slavery thinkers have introduced terms like "flesh" (Spillers, "Mama's Baby"), "object of property" (P. Williams), "sentient being" (Wilderson, *Red*; Hartman, *Scenes*), or "equipment in human form" and "merchandise" (C. Warren). In the context of discussing post-slavery thinkers' interventions into the discursive promises of universal liberty within American Studies in Germany,

63 I thank Taija Mars McDougall (UC Irvine) for drawing my attention to this. See also generally, for example, her piece "'The Water is Waiting': Water, Tidalectics, and Materiality."

Broeck has done work on the terms *abjection* and *abjectorship* (*Gender*).[64] I discuss these terms here because they help me further unpack how *A Mercy* stages different states of being and existence in the world in relation to slavery's positioning power. These terms address the white subject that creates itself over and against the enslaved. They delineate a "system of *black abjection* and of *white abjectorship*" as being central to the making of white Western modernity ("Abolish" 214). Alienating the term "abjection" from its psychoanalytic and white feminist deployments as "a category descriptive of individual subjectivity and its contours," as for instance in the work of Julia Kristeva, Broeck thus uses the term *abject* as a "theoretical concept to discuss the underside of [white] Western modernity's terms of human *sociability*" ("Abolish" 215). Broeck claims:

> I am not, however, interested in a quasi-ethnographical description of Blackness as abject; quite to the contrary, I mobilize the term abjection here – pace Kristeva, and encouraged by Hartman's historicizing of the term – to speak of abjection as a white practice of subjectivity, as that which renders Black being abject in order to be. Thus, my interest is in the work of abjecting, which remakes white supremacy, and anti-Blackness on a daily basis, individually and collectively. I argue that the splitting off of the enslaved Black and of enslavism itself from the symbolic order was an act of successful externalization of allowing the white Western subject to engage with internal objects-to-be-subjects (as in gender struggle) but literally leaving the abjected *outside itself* and its parameters of subjectivation. (*Gender* 84)

Broeck's conceptualization of *abjection* and *abjectorship* as white practice of self-making helps me address what Hartman demarcates as the "cleavage or sundering as object of property, pained flesh, and unlawful agent situat[ing] the enslaved in an indefinite and paradoxical relation to the normative category person" (*Scenes* 56). This is especially pertinent to my readings of Jacob Vaark and Rebekka in *A Mercy*, in which I suggest that both these white characters make their respective claims to freedom vis-à-vis their slave property. For them, regimes of ownership become part of 'abjection as a white practice of subjectivity, as that which renders Black being abject in order to be.' For Jacob Vaark, this means that his freedom to opt for and invest in the West Indian sugar economies comes as a necessary step in the creation of his liberal self. With Rebekka becoming the sole owner and mistress of the slave and servant women on the Vaark farm after her husband's untimely death, this means that her struggle for subjectivity and, ultimately, her claim to white female co-mastery at the New World colonial scene are likewise bound by property. Put another

64 For a discussion and theorization of the relation between *abjection* and Blackness in African American literature which foregrounds often neglected depictions of the sexual exploitation and humiliation of men, see D. Scott.

way, (co-)ownership of land, servants, and slaves, as well as ownership of herself open up an avenue towards the fold of the liberal Human and, as I will elaborate in my reading of her character, establish for this woman capacity for choice —the choice to opt for a certain way of existence in the first place (see Chapter 4.3).

3.6 Reproduction, Kinship

> Slaveowners in the early English colonies depended upon and exploited African women. They required women's physical labors in order to reap the profits of the colonies and they required women's symbolic value in order to make sense of racial slavery. Women were enslaved in large numbers, they performed critical hard labor, and they served an essential ideological function. Slaveowners appropriated their reproductive lives by claiming children as property, by rewriting centuries-old European laws of descent, and by defining a biologically driven perpetual racial slavery through the real and imaginary reproductive potential of women whose 'blackness' was produced by and produced their enslavability.
> — Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women*

> *The slave ship is a womb/abyss*. The plantation is the belly of the world. *Partus sequitur ventrem*—the child follows the belly. The master dreams of future increase. The modern world follows the belly. Gestational language has been key to describing the world-making and world-breaking capacities of racial slavery.
> — Saidiya V. Hartman, "The Belly of the World"

In *A Mercy*, the white Anglo-Dutch settler, farmer, and moneylender Jacob Vaark considers expanding his business activities and consequently resolves to invest in rum. This decision is provoked by his encounter with one of his clients, a Portuguese slave trader called Senhor D'Ortega. Vaark marvels at this man's economic buoyancy as well as at the opulence of his estate. On his return from their meeting, Vaark enters into conversation with the rum investor Peter Downes, who "[b]urly, pock-faced [...] had the aura of a man who had been in exotic places and the eyes of someone unaccustomed to looking at things close to this face" (*AM* 27). While Downes entertains his company with "mesmerizing tales ending with a hilarious description of the size of the women's breasts in Barbados," Vaark slowly arrives at his decision to invest in "kill-devil"/rum (28, 27). When Vaark responds to Downes's tales by questioning the sustainability of the sugar business in the Caribbean, the latter responds, "They ship in more. Like firewood, what burns to ash is refueled. And don't forget, there are births. [...] As long as the fuel is replenished, vats simmer and money heaps. Kill-devil, sugar—there will never be enough. A trade for lifetimes to come" (28–29). Morrison's text here explicitly references slavery's "sexual economies"

(Adrienne Davis, "Don't"). On the one hand, phrases like 'as long as the fuel is replenished' and 'what burns to ash is refueled' evoke Barbados's thriving seventeenth-century sugar industries driven by constantly replaced slave labor forces (Beckles; E. Williams). On the other, they strongly resonate with the hyper-sexualized imagery of African and African-descended women produced by European colonial discourses (Hulme, "Spontaneous," *Colonial Encounters*; J. Morgan, *Laboring* 12–49; Mackenthun)—imagery that *A Mercy* evokes by way of the rum investor's tales about the size of Black women's breasts. Together with Downes's insistent reminder that 'there are births,' these phrases speak to the importance of reproduction for the emerging capitalist marketplace in the New World, both in the Caribbean and on the North American mainland (see also Fuentes). As Jennifer L. Morgan reminds us in this context: "Women's lives under slavery in the Americas *always included* the possibilities of their wombs. Whether laboring among sugar cane, coffee bushes, or rice swamps, the cost-benefit calculations of colonial slaveowners included the speculative value of a reproducing labor force" (*Laboring* 3, emphasis mine).

In this section, I turn to *reproduction* and *kinship* as the next set of terms relevant for my analyses of Morrison's novel. In my thinking about these terms, I generally follow Alys E. Weinbaum's conceptualization of the race/reproduction bind.[65] With this conceptual frame, Weinbaum delineates an ideological constellation emerging from "transatlantic modernity's central intellectual and political formations," in which "competing understandings of reproduction as a biological, sexual, and racialized processes became central to the organization of knowledge about nations, modern subjects, and the flow of capital, bodies, babies, and ideas within and across national borders" (Weinbaum, *Wayward* 6, 2; see also Weinbaum, *The Afterlife*). As previously suggested, Black feminist thinkers and scholars of slavery continue to research the connections between the capitalist market, property, race, and sexuality. In what follows, I draw on their invaluable work on slavery's sexual economies and the "uncertainty of descent, the negation of paternity, the interdiction regarding the master-father's name, and the ambiguous legacy of inheritance" and abjection that these economies engendered (Hartman, *Scenes* 76).

65 I follow J. Morgan in this respect ("*Partus*"; "Considering").

Partus Sequitur Ventrem: Reproduction, Slavery, Property

> Whereas some doubts have arisen whether children got by any Englishman upon a negro woman shall be slave or free, Be it therefore enacted and declared by this present grand assembly, that all children borne in this country shall be held bond or free only according to the condition of the mother—*Partus Sequitur Ventrem.* And that if any Christian shall commit fornication with a negro man or woman, hee or shee doe offending shall pay double the fines imposed by the former act.
> — Laws of Virginia, 1662 ACT XII

The above epigraph constitutes the first act with which the colony of Virginia legally codified and enshrined the complex intersections between slavery, reproduction, and property on the North American colonial mainland (qtd. in J. Morgan, "*Partus*" 1). Passed in 1662, the *Partus Sequitur Ventrem* act would tether notions of reproduction to questions of race, status, heredity, and descent. As such, the "American 'innovation'" of *Partus* would change genealogies of recognized family and kinship structures in North America in the *longue durée*, putting forth still hegemonic normative conceptions of white kinship and family formations vis-á-vis the so-called "pathology of the black family, rather than the necropolitics of slave life" (Nyong'o, "Barack").[66] Following J. Morgan's work on the histories of racial capitalism, gender, and reproduction in colonial slavery ("*Partus*," "Archives," "Considering," *Laboring*), the *Partus* ruling needs to be understood as a paradigmatic articulation of the ways in which the institution of slavery both depended on and maintained itself through a "reproductive calculus" bound by "a notion of heritability" (Hartman, "Belly" 169; J. Morgan, "*Partus*" 1).[67] Atlantic slavery, Morgan explains,

> relied on a reproductive logic that was inseparable from the explanatory power of race. [...] Building a system of racial slavery on the notion of heritability [...] did require a clear un-

66 I am here of course referring to the notorious Moynihan Report, which tried to "explain racial subjugation in America by means of the supposedly inverted gender hierarchy in African American culture produced by chattel slavery" (Nyong'o, "Barack"). See also Spillers's seminal critique of this report and the symbolic order/American grammar it purports in "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book."

67 On a more general note, it is important to recall the constraints many historians and scholars of slavery face when working with hegemonic archives. Morgan, like others before and after her, talks about her "relationship with the archive [as] always one of struggle and frustration" given those constraints (J. Morgan, "Archives" 154). For Morgan, the problem she faces in her work is "not to weed through an overabundance of sources but to endure the absences, erasures, and mischaracterizations of racialized subjects" ("Archives" 155). I will return to this and similar notions when I discuss *anticipatory wake* as my final term of this chapter.

> derstanding that enslaved women gave birth to enslaved children. Resituating heritability was key in the practice of an enslavement that systematically alienated the enslaved from their kin and their lineage. ("*Partus*" 1)

Partus sequitur ventrem is "the first explicit English articulation of hereditary slavery" ("Archives" 158). At stake here are the ways in which the law inaugurated a new symbolic order of gender and race that would regulate descent, heritability, and status through *maternal* instead of paternal lineage ("*Partus*"; see also e. g. Spillers, "Mama's Baby"; Nyong'o, "Barack"). In general, "[l]aws concerning slavery in the English Atlantic were not transposed from England but were an amalgam of legal borrowing and commonly held assumptions about who would be enslaveable and from whence the legal right to property in persons originated" (J. Morgan, "*Partus*" 2). In case of the *Partus* ruling, colonial and slaveowning legislators and stakeholders went to great lengths to establish a legal connection between reproduction and property – and thus between Black women's reproductive capacity and the emerging capitalist marketplace – as they turned away from "bastardy laws" and instead drew on property law in order to regulate descent on the New World plantation. "Bastardy laws would have clarified the status of a child born of a nonmarried couple; but by echoing the language of property, the legislators weighed in on something larger than sexual mores" ("*Partus*" 5). In other words, rather than being situated within a legal framework of familial (read: male) lineage, the "*partus* ruling derived from concerns around animal husbandry and conflicts over impregnated cattle and cultivated land" ("Archives" 159). Morgan reminds us that the "issue on the table was not simply the matter of heritable kinship but rather the matter of heritable property" ("*Partus*" 5). In linking race and status as "heritable qualities" to be passed on through the *maternal* line (14), slaveowners as well as

> slaveowning legislators enacted the legal and material substitution of a thing for a child: no white man's *child* could be enslaved, while all black women's *issue* could. This happens as though it were common sense, when, in fact, it was a profound reversal of European notions of heredity in the service of a relatively new notion of difference and bondage. ("*Partus*" 5)

With the 1662 act and the ways it bound Black women's interiority to the market, *reproduction* thus becomes a means to delineate freedom and bondage along racial lines. As Morgan argues, the law not only "locked enslaved women into a productive relationship whereby everything that a body could do was harnessed to the capital accumulation of another"; it also detailed that "some women's children became indelibly marked with the inevitability of enslavement, [while] other women's children became inevitably free" ("*Partus*" 17, 12–13). En-

slaved women's reproductive capacities, then, become an important pathway to power for the English settlers, traders, and planters, both male and female, as well as to Black abjection. Morgan writes: "As enslaved women were situated as the antithesis to the rights-bearing citizen-subject emerging in this period, they became placed outside of historical processes, except as indexes of suffering" (16).

In close conversation with Morgan's work, Saidiya Hartman writes that "[r]eproduction is tethered to the making of human commodities and in service of the marketplace. [...] Slavery conscripted the womb, deciding the fate of the unborn and reproducing slave property by making the mark of the mother a death sentence for her child" ("Belly" 168, 169). As my analyses will show, *A Mercy* both addresses and negotiates the interplay between reproduction, slavery, and the market throughout. Most explicitly, it does so in the textual fragment of the *minha mãe* (Florens' enslaved mother). Situated at the end of the novel as a kind of coda to the novel's other fragments, the *minha mãe* tells the reader as well as her daughter about how she was first shipped to Barbados and then sold to her new master in the colonial Chesapeake. All of this happens, the text suggests, as part of her master's efforts to increase his profit—a profit calculated according to the proliferation of slave property both bought at the auction block and reproduced on the plantation. We read:

> Barbados, I heard them say. [...] One by one we were made to jump high, to bend over, to open our mouths. [...] It was there that I learned how I was not a person from my country, nor from my families. [...] So it was as a black that I was purchased by Senhor, taken out of the cane and shipped north to his tobacco plants. A hope, then. But the first mating, the taking of me and Bess and one other in the curing shed. Afterwards, the men who were told to break we in apologized. Later an overseer gave each of us an orange. [...] [T]he results were you and your brother. (*AM* 163–164)

With the *minha mãe* and her experiences of transport from one colony to another as well as of sexual subjection, the novel situates its setting in the colonial Chesapeake, where chattel slavery is nascent then; within a broader frame of a fully implemented economic regime of chattel slavery, property, reproduction, and sexual violence in the colonial English Atlantic. That is also to say that the *minha mãe*'s experience of "being taken in the curing shed" here represents what Hartman elsewhere describes as "the instrumental deployment of sexuality [...] The particular investment in and exploitation of the captive body dissolved all networks of alliance and affiliation not defined by property ownership" (*Scenes* 100). Of course, the irony of a gift of an orange does not ameliorate the sexual brutality inflicted against the *minha mãe* and the other women but instead emphasizes the institution's reproductive calculus by making visible

their master's "investment" in them. Furthermore, the fact that the *minha mãe* does not hesitate to ask Jacob Vaark to take her daughter instead of herself when Senhor D'Ortega suggests human flesh/property as partial payment of his debt to Vaark (*AM* 20 – 25) speaks to her fear when she notices both her master's and her mistress's intentions of making sexual use of the *minha mãe*'s daughter: "Neither one will want your brother. I know their tastes. Breasts provide the pleasure more than simpler things. [...] It was as though you were hurrying up your breasts and hurrying also the lips of an old married couple" (160). Offering her daughter to Jacob Vaark under these circumstances – in an attempt to protect her from her master and mistress and without knowing that Vaark (and his wife) will spare her daughter – represents the *minha mãe*'s impossible "choice" between two masters/mistresses against the backdrop of slavery's reproductive calculus.

On a slightly different note, Morgan's arguments about the "intersections between intimacy and property" ("*Partus*" 9) critically supplement a widespread argument made by many historians of slavery: namely, that racial lines in colonial Virginia were more fluid than in other English colonies in North America and the Caribbean (e. g., Fields, E. Morgan). Indeed, in seventeenth-century Virginia "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). These facts have lead many historians interested in the "origins of racial thinking" to employ notions of fluidity and indeterminacy to chart colonial Virginia as a place where events might have taken a turn for the better, a place where "an egalitarian future could have been foretold" ("*Partus*" 3; "Archives" 158). In such "arsenal[s] for dislodging racist inevitability," as Morgan has it, the *Partus* law often appears to be "simultaneously anomalous and exemplary" ("*Partus*" 3). While historians distinguish Virginia "from colonies such as Barbados, where slavery was in full force by the middle of the seventeenth century" in this way, Morgan stresses the fact that, with the *Partus* ruling, lawmakers actually "put into code the assumptions about racial inheritance that prevailed throughout the Atlantic, even as those elsewhere simply acted on those assumptions" ("*Partus*" 3, 2 – 3). Put another way, rather than being "a simple and necessary corollary to racial slavery and the logical outgrowth of a labor system rooted in slavery in an increasingly inflexible and racialized understanding of heritability," the *Partus* law both enshrined and made explicit assumptions about as well as practices concerning the reproductive capacity of enslaved women that slaveholders had pursued in service of their capitalist ventures across the English Atlantic long before Virginia legislators passed the act (3, 2). In this light, the act complicates and perhaps even unhinges many scholars' emphasis on Virginia's racial fluidity and indeterminacy. That is

also to say that the "ability to render this colony as the locus of possibility is itself a kind of testimony, a set of interpretative practices that could be made from a very particular location—but not a location in which the lives of pregnant African-descended women are the starting point" ("Archives" 158 – 159).

My close readings of *A Mercy* will follow Jennifer Morgan's arguments. I suggest that Morrison's novel both tests and contradicts the possibility that the property paradigm will *not* take hold in colonial Virginia throughout. What I hope to show is that *A Mercy* brings the sexual economies of New World slavery to its plotting and that it engages in a productive exchange with Black feminist historians' archival work on Atlantic slavery's histories of the experiences of enslaved women, whose "maternal" possibilities on the New World plantation were overwritten by chattel slavery's regimes of property. As I will elaborate below, it is this focus on *reproduction*, property, and slavery that critics and readers most often have neglected in their analyses of *A Mercy*. Placing the novel in conversation with Black feminist scholarship on *reproduction* and racial slavery, my analyses will take this nexus as its point of departure. The novel's thematic focus on and plotting of *reproduction*, then, becomes part of an effort of aesthetically representing a historical past in which African and African-descended women and their reproductive capacities take center stage. This is especially the case with characters like Sorrow and the *minha mãe*, but it also echoes in the other characters' textual fragments. My readings, then, will open up a counternarrative in Jennifer Morgan's sense and position *A Mercy* as being "home to the counternarrative, or at least to its possibility [...] [offering] a new way of thinking about slavery, gender, and reproduction" ("Archives" 154, 158).

The Property/Kinless Constellation

> It seems clear, however, that 'Family,' as we practice and understand it 'in the West' – the vertical transfer of a bloodline, of a patronymic, of titles and entitlements, of real estate and the prerogatives of 'cold cash,' from *fathers* to *sons* and in the supposedly free exchange of affectional ties between a male and a female of *his* choice – becomes the mythically revered privilege of a free and freed community.
> — Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby"

> The theft, regulation and destruction of black women's sexual and reproductive capacities would also define the afterlife of slavery.
> — Saidiya V. Hartman, "The Belly of the World"

The inextricable connections between race, reproduction, and property, as Black feminist thinkers have shown, are nowhere as clear as in the histories of New World chattel slavery. These connections were elaborated by the law, which map-

ped new meanings of status and made explicit assumptions about the connections between birth and race (J. Morgan, "*Partus*," "Archives"). That is, "Euro-American legislators amalgamated property with a reproducible kinlessness" (J. Morgan, "*Partus*" 14). In what follows, I chart *kinship* as the second term of this section. The Middle Passage resituated Black women's reproductive capacity within the marketplace. It "interrupted hundreds of years of black African culture" and made it impossible for the enslaved "to refer to one site of origin" (Spillers, "Mama's Baby" 68; Hartman, *Scenes* 76). The captors' and slaveholders' disregard of relations, familial or otherwise, enforced this "impossibility of origin" (Hartman, *Scenes* 76). As Spillers has it, "[w]hen the field of captives [...] is divided among the spoilers, no heed is paid to relations, as fathers are separated from sons, husbands from wives, brothers from sisters and brothers, mothers from children—male and female" ("Mama's Baby" 70). With *kinship* as the second term under scrutiny here, I seek to deal with questions that Morrison's text raises with regard to the possibility of recognized kinship or family formations, or the absence thereof, for the characters in the novel. Spillers's 1987 seminal work on questions of gender and family relations under slavery is particularly instructive in this respect. Published at a time when gender studies would come to be part of the Western academy and began to "compel us more and more decidedly toward gender 'undecidability'" (66), her essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" focused critical attention on how such a notion lacks analytical rigor when it comes to interrogating the lives and positionalities of Black women, children, and men during and after slavery, and it introduced a new vocabulary with which to address these issues (Spillers et al. 302).

Following Spillers, the conditions of the Middle Passage and of New World slavery uniquely position the captives in the world, situating them as "neither female, nor male, as both subjects are taken into 'account' as *quantities*" ("Mama's Baby" 72). Spillers claims that the capturing of human beings and the making of them into property that could be shipped across the Atlantic constitute an epistemic, cultural, political, and philosophical moment in which a distinction between "captive and liberated subject-positions" becomes the core organizing principle of the modern world (68). Spillers writes:

> the socio-political order of the New World [...] with its human sequence written in blood, represents for its African and indigenous peoples a scene of *actual* mutilation, dismemberment, and exile. First of all, their New-World, diasporic plight marked a *theft* of the body—a willful and violent (and unimaginable from this distance) severing of the captive body from its motive will, its active desire. Under these conditions, we lose at least *gender* difference *in the outcome*, and the female body and the male body become a territory of cultural and political maneuver, not at all gender-related, gender-specific. ("Mama's Baby" 67)

Under these conditions of the cultural "unmaking" of millions of men, women, and children (72), the captives are being forced to enter into a status of "*being* for the captor" (67). Their bodies become the "'flesh,' that zero degree of social conceptualization," that traders and slave owners will both regard and use as tradable, fungible, and collectible possessions (67). In the context of nascent racial capitalism in the New World, the status of the enslaved as their master's usable "flesh" has important implications with respect to notions of family formation and *kinship*. First, the offspring of the enslaved become "the man/woman on the boundary, whose human and familial status, by the very nature of the case, *had yet to be defined*" (74; emphasis mine). And second, Spillers explains that

> 'motherhood' is not perceived in the prevailing social climate as a legitimate procedure of cultural inheritance. [...] In effect, under conditions of captivity, the offspring of the female does not 'belong' to the Mother, nor is s/he 'related' to the 'owner,' though the latter 'possesses' it, and in the African-American instance, often fathered it, *and*, as often, without whatever benefit of patrimony. ("Mama's Baby" 80, 74)

For the enslaved, *kinship* "loses meaning, *since it can be invaded at any given and arbitrary moment by the property relations*" (74). Slavery's grammar of property, then, not merely rewrites reproduction along economic terms but it also codifies *kinship* and family as being within the purview of those deemed to be free (see also epigraph to this subchapter). With this conception of "the property/kinless constellation" in mind (74), which also is the overall title to section of the chapter, I argue that *A Mercy* deconstructs Western ideas of kinship and family, revealing the ways in which these conceptions are deeply dependent upon the intricately connected notions of property and human reproduction under Atlantic slavery. I will address this, for instance, in my close reading of Sorrow's textual fragment in *A Mercy* (see Chapter 4.4). I will also think about this in relation to nascent formations and identity deliberations of whiteness as staged in the novel.

Property, Kinship, Whiteness

Five months after white terrorist Dylann Roof murdered nine African Americans during a prayer service and Bible study group meeting at the Emanuel African

Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina,[68] as well as eight days after the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States on November 8th, 2016, Christina Sharpe published a short piece in the online journal *The New Inquiry* entitled "Lose Your Kin." In it, Sharpe lends her perspective on slavery's longue durée in relation to the entanglements between property and *kinship*. Sharpe writes that "transatlantic chattel slavery's constitution of domestic relations made kin in one direction, and in the other, property that could be passed between and among those kin" ("Lose"). Tracing these formations of white kinship over and against the making of slave property through the examples of two U.S. Senators, both of whom had "fathered" Black children, whom they would not claim as kin, Sharpe writes:

> The laws of U.S. chattel slavery and Jim Crow made white kinship (legally, familially, and politically). These modes of recognizing white kinship and refusing to recognize Black personhood endure into the present; they make and unmake persons and families, and assign human beings value in and of themselves, or not. ("Lose")

Of course, this configuration of kinship as it relates to property and racial formations in many ways is in conversation with Cheryl Harris's arguments about "whiteness as property," as put forward in her eponymous 1993 article. As Bhandar has noted recently, Harris's piece "remains unsurpassed in the novelty of the theoretical framework she developed for understanding how whiteness has come to have value as a property in itself, a value encoded in property law and social relations" (*Colonial Lives* 7). As previously discussed, Harris interrogates how in conjunction with the formation of chattel slavery and practices of settler colonialism in the seventeenth-century century "the concept of race interacted with conceptions of property, to 'establish and maintain racial and economic subordination'" (Bhandar, *Colonial Lives* 7). According to Harris, whiteness became

> a shield from slavery, a highly volatile and unstable form of property. [...] Because whites could not be enslaved or held as slaves, the racial line between white and Black was extremely critical; it became a line of protection and demarcation from the potential threat of commodification, and it determined the allocation of benefits and burdens of this form of property. White identity and whiteness were sources of privilege and protection; their absence meant being the object of property. ("Whiteness" 1720–1721)

68 See, for example, the news coverage by *The Guardian* ("Staff and Agencies") or the *Washington Post* (Bever).

Addressing these connections between property and whiteness and linking them to notions of kin and family formations, Sharpe suggests that *kinship*, like whiteness, becomes and remains "a way of sorting oneself and others into categories of those who must be protected and those who are, or soon will be, expendable" ("Lose"). Furthermore, both whiteness and *kinship* need to be conceptualized as being tied to notions of purity and pure blood: White legal identity also manifested in the assumed "purity" of white blood.[69] In a similar vein, notions of reproduction, lineage, and heritability under slavery, too, refer us back to such things as blood and blood lines (see also J. Morgan, *Partus*; Nyong'o, "Barack"). What is elaborated through the conceptual nucleus of *kinship*, in short, is a set of practices, belief systems, or a grammar, which organizes and structures civil society the in(to) the present: To be kin "means all of those *recognized* by the self – in some fundamental, indelible way – as being like the self" (Sharpe, "Lose").

We can recognize these entanglements in *A Mercy* as well. For example, we encounter them in the textual fragment of Jacob Vaark. As the text suggests, the decision to accept Florens as partial payment in his business transaction with the slave trader D'Ortega is also influenced by the fact that all of his children have passed. The loss of their children, in turn, weighs heavily on his wife Rebekka: "Three dead infants in a row followed by the accidental death of Patrician, their five-year-old, had unleavened her. A kind of invisible ash had settled over her which vigils at the small graves in the meadow did nothing to wipe away" (*AM* 19). In contrast to his wife, however, Vaark is "confident she would bear more children and at least one, a boy, would live to thrive" (19). What the text indexes here, as I hope to show in over the coming pages, is not only the prospect but also the project of *white male lineage* on the North American colonial mainland and, by extension, in the English Atlantic.

69 Harris writes, "In adjudicating who was 'white,' courts sometimes noted that, by physical characteristics, the individual whose racial identity was at issue appeared to be white and, in fact, had been regarded as white in the community. Yet if an individual's blood was tainted, she could not claim to be 'white' as the law understood, regardless of the fact that phenotypically she may have been completely indistinguishable from a white person, may have lived as a white person, and have descended from a family that has lived as whites. Although socially accepted as white, she could not *legally* be white. Blood as 'objective fact' dominated over appearance and social acceptance, which were socially fluid and subjective measures" ("Whiteness" 1739 – 40).

3.7 Anticipatory Wake

> I am become wilderness but I am also Florens. In full. Unforgiven. Unforgiving. No ruth, my love. None. Hear me? Slave. Free. I last. I will keep one sadness. That all this time I cannot know what my mother is telling me. Nor can she know what I am wanting to tell her. Mãe, you can have pleasure now because the soles of my feet are hard as cypress.
>
> — *A Mercy*

> I'm interested in ways of seeing and imagining responses to terror in the varied and various ways that our Black lives are lived under occupation; ways that attest to the modalities of Black life lived in, as, under, and despite Black death. And I want to think about what this imagining calls forth, to think through what it calls on 'us' to do, think, feel in the wake of slavery—which is to say in an ongoing present of subjection and resistance; which is to say wake work, wake theory.
>
> — Christina E. Sharpe, *In the Wake*

While the study of the aftereffects of chattel slavery in the United States is anything but new, Black Studies post-slavery theorizing has recently pushed analytical emphasis towards slavery's ongoing structural, ontological, and metaphysical positioning power for Blackness in a continuum from the plantation to the penitentiary. As suggested earlier in the chapter, theoretical trajectories such as Afropessimism (e.g., P. Douglass, Hartman, Sexton, Terrefe, Wilderson), as well as others following in their vein, have inserted into our critical lexicons a focus on analytical terms such as *fungibility, gratuitous violence*, and *abjection*. Such terms, I have argued, matter to critical thinking not merely because they offer new ways of accounting for Blackness in the modern Western world on a structural level—as well as, for that matter, for how whiteness's imaginary is "parasitic on the Middle Passage" (Wilderson, *Red* 11); but they also allow for an unflinching examination of the "vexed genealogy" of property and white liberal self-making as subtended by chattel slavery (Hartman, *Scenes* 115).

The last term that I introduce and discuss in the chapter is *anticipatory wake*. I combine this from my reading of Saidiya Hartman's ("Belly," "Venus," *Lose*) and Christina Sharpe's (*Wake*, "Black Studies") Black feminist theorizations of Atlantic slavery and its ongoing aftereffects. In their own ways, Hartman and Sharpe take up a set of questions that the trajectory of Afropessimism does not seem interested in pursuing.[70] That is also to say that Afropessimism's ensemble of questions generally has sparked some controversy among critics,

70 Here, it is important to remember that Hartman's book *Scenes of Subjection* is often regarded as a "founding document" for Afropessimist thinking (Weier, "Consider" 425). To my knowledge at this point, Hartman herself has never referred to her work as Afropessimist. However, like Sharpe's, her scholarship appears to be in conversation with Afropessimism.

with arguments against this strand of Black critical thinking often being based on the observation that it does not offer any "way out" of the abyss of white supremacist antiblack modernity.[71] Afropessimism does indeed not offer a prescriptive "roadmap to freedom so extensive it would free us from the epistemic air we breathe" (Wilderson, *Red* 338). Several scholars have responded to this "impasse" and have in a more or less explicit manner set out to think about what Jared Sexton elsewhere calls "the social life of social death." Prominent among them, for instance, are the interventions into (some) Afropessimist precepts by Fred Moten ("Nothingness," "Case"; cf. also Moten and Harney), who, rather than dwell on the ontological impossibility of Black being, seeks to "think (not so much about, but rather) in social life, which is to say black social life, which is to say the social life of the alternative in a different way" (Moten and Harney 12–13).[72] While the politics of Moten's work are invested in thinking about "the possibility and the law of outlawed, impossible things" rather than

71 Jared Sexton offers a somewhat comprehensive overview of the numerous arguments against Afropessimism's analytical lens when he writes: "Afro-Pessimism [...] is thought to be, in no particular order: a negative appraisal of the capabilities of black peoples, associating blackness with lack rather than tracing the machinations through which the association is drawn and enforced, even in the black psyche, across the *longue durée*; a myopic denial of overlapping and ongoing histories of struggle and a fatal misunderstanding of the operational dynamics of power, its general economy or micro-physics, reifying what should be historicized en route to analysis; a retrograde and isolationist nationalism, a masculinist and heteronormative enterprise, a destructive and sectarian ultra-leftism, and a chauvinist American exceptionalism; a reductive and morbid fixation on the depredations of slavery that superimposes the figure of the slave as an anachronism onto ostensibly post-slavery societies, and so on. The last assertion, which actually links together all of the others, evades the nagging burden of proof of abolition and, moreover, fails to acknowledge that one can account for historically varying instances of antiblackness while maintaining the claim that slavery is here and now. Most telling though is the leitmotif of *offense*, and the felt need among critics to defend themselves, their work, their principles and their politics against the perceived threat. In place of thoughtful commentary, we have distancing and disavowal. The grand pronouncement is offered, generally, without the impediment of sustained reading or attempted dialogue, let alone careful study of the relevant literature. The entire undertaking, the *movement* of thought it pursues, is apprehended instead as its lowest common denominator, indicted by proxy, and tried *in absentia* as caricature" ("Afro-Pessimism" par. 4–5).

72 Here, I am of course referring to an intra-mural debate – often stylized as unfolding along the two contesting poles of Afropessimism and what has come to be called "Black Optimism" – that both stresses the importance and the necessity of Black studies now more than ever and grapples with the orientation/locus of Black (studies) critique. This debate can be traced through the following works, among others: Moten, "Case," "Nothingness," "Black Op"; Moten and Harney; Sexton, "African American," "People-of-Color-Blindness," "Unbearable Blackness," "Ante-Anti-Blackness," "Social Life"; Sharpe, "Response."

pursuing a Black theoretical project that thinks Blackness as social death (Moten, "Case" 178; "Nothingness" 738),[73] others have made Afropessimism's conceptualization of antiblackness and Black social death the locus of their thinking through "the vitality of the impossibility" (Jaye Austin Williams, private conversation).[74] For example, in "Response to Jared Sexton's 'Ante-Anti-Blackness: Afterthoughts,'" Sharpe writes that Afropessimism's explanatory power

> makes clear the existence of black social life in all of its modalities does not alter the fact of black social death. That black life is not recognized as life (or life lived) on the order of other lives [...] [Its trajectory enables Black Studies] to build a language that, despite the rewards and enticements to do otherwise, refuses to refuse blackness, that embraces 'without pathos' that which is constructed and defined as pathology. ("Ante-Anti")

This section charts conceptualizations of 'black social life in all of its modalities' in the face of social death in the work of Hartman and Sharpe, who theorize programmatically slavery's technologies of self-(un)-making as that which is being produced and reproduced into the present. In grappling with questions about the (im)possibility of redressing the positioning brutality of slavery, issues concerning the representation of lives lost and obliterated, and ways of dealing with or mourning the "interminable event" of slavery, both Hartman and Sharpe's respective thinking oscillates between "disaster and possibility" (Sharpe, *Wake* 19, 134). As such, their work also comments on the stakes of Black study as a "continued reckoning the longue durée of Atlantic chattel slavery, with black fungibility, antiblackness, and the gratuitous violence that structures black being, of accounting for the narrative, historical, structural, and other positions black

73 Moten writes: "More to the point, if Afro-pessimism is the study of this impossibility, the thinking that I have to offer (and I think I'm as reticent about the term *black optimism* as Wilderson and Sexton are about *Afro-pessimism*, in spite of the fact that we make recourse to them) moves not in that impossibility's transcendence but rather in its exhaustion. Moreover, I want to consider exhaustion as a mode or form or way of life, which is to say sociality thereby marking a relation whose implications constitute, in my view, a fundamental theoretical reason not to believe, as it were, in social death. Like Curtis Mayfield, however, I do plan to stay a believer. This is to say, again like Mayfield, that I plan to stay a black motherfucker" ("Nothingness" 738).
74 At a workshop on the connections between antiblackness, subjectivity/subjection, and (practices of) performance that I co-organized as a member of the doctoral students' network "Perspectives in Cultural Analysis: Black Diaspora, Decoloniality, Transnationality" at the University of Bremen, artist, scholar, teacher, writer, actor, and director Jaye Austin Williams described U.S.-Black radical studies' multiple critical inquiries of transatlantic slavery as regime of Western modernity as the study of the 'vitality of the impossibility.' The workshop took place in August 2016. For more information on the University of Bremen's doctoral students' networks see the University of Bremen's website ("Doc Netzwerke").

people are forced to occupy" and of Black Studies as the "continued imagining of the unimaginable: its continued theorizing from the 'position of the unthought'" (Sharpe, "Black Studies" 59). I reconstruct their respective works here in regard to the ways they pay attention to notions of grief, loss, the (im)possibility of Black narration/narrative, and the "afterlife of property" (Sharpe, *Wake*), and I do so as I work towards my own term, *anticipatory wake*. With this term I seek to account for the ways in which *A Mercy* again and again walks a tightrope between, on the one hand, taking its readers to colonial Virginia and Maryland at a time when chattel slavery was not yet fully implemented on the North American mainland and, on the other, doing so with the full knowledge that slavery will become full-scale only a few decades later, unfolding across the eighteenth and maintaining itself as a regime of violence well into the nineteenth century and with its legacies ongoing.

Living (in) Slavery's Afterlife

> She had discovered a way off the ship. It worried her that the ancestors might shun her, or the gods might be angry and punish her by bringing her back as a goat or a dog, or she would roam the earth directionless and never find her way beyond the sea, but she risked it anyway, it was the only path open. When the two boys plummeted into the sea, they had made leaving so easy [...] If the story ended there, I could feel a small measure of comfort. I could hold on to this instant of possibility. I could find a salutary lesson in the girl's suffering and pretend a story was enough to save her from oblivion.
>
> — Saidiya V. Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*

The above epigraph comes from Hartman's book *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*. Part autobiography, part fiction, part travelogue, part history book, and part theory (Newman et al. 1), this book offers Hartman's personal, theoretical meditation on her attempt at grappling with a historical past that is ongoing. Hartman begins *Lose Your Mother* by narrating how she travels to Ghana in search of a way to belong in the world, wanting "to engage the past, knowing that its peril and dangers still threatened and that even now lives hung in the balance" (6). For Hartman, the lasting effects of slavery which continue to structure and define Black existence need to be understood as slavery's "afterlife." I echo her by now seminal formulation here:

> Slavery had established a measure of man and a ranking of life and worth that has yet to be undone. If slavery persists as an issue in the political life of black America, it is not because of an antiquarian obsession with bygone days or the burden of a too-long memory, but because black lives are still imperiled by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were

> entrenched centuries ago. This is the afterlife of slavery—skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment. I, too, am the afterlife of slavery. (*Lose* 6)

Notions of longing and of loss are at the center of Hartman's epistemological project of interrogating slavery's afterlife and these notions are tied to questions of narrative and the writing of the past, present, and future of slavery's positioning power ("Venus," *Lose*, *Scenes*). From the very beginning, that is, *Lose Your Mother* wrestles with the loss of lives during and after the Middle Passage and Hartman questions how these lost lives can be mourned: "As both a professor conducting research on slavery and a descendant of the enslaved, I was desperate to reclaim the dead, that is, to reckon with the lives undone and obliterated in the making of human commodities" (6).

The above epigraph comes from the very end of a chapter in the book entitled "The Dead Book" and it is an example of how Hartman, on the one hand, tries to navigate the fact that the archive of slavery does not contain the stories of those whose lives have been erased during and after the Middle Passage. On the other hand, it is an example of how she negotiates the longing to "represent the lives of the nameless and the forgotten, to reckon with loss, and to respect the limits of what cannot be known" ("Venus" 4). In the chapter, Hartman goes to great length to tell the story of the murder of an enslaved girl aboard the slave ship *Recovery* and to represent the ensuing court case, in which The Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade sued the captain of the *Recovery*, John Kimber, for the murder of this girl and another slave girl. Variously focalized through, for example, the captain, the third mate, the enslaved girl, and the abolitionist William Wilberforce, Hartman's chapter is a multi-perspective narrative that tries to bring to the fore the slave girl's perspective in the face of obliteration, archival and other. Hartman writes: "On April 2, 1792, William Wilberforce immortalized the girl in a speech delivered before the House of Commons and the world lent its attention, at least for a few days. When the trial ended, so did any interest in the girl. No one has thought of her for at least two centuries, but her life still casts a shadow" (*Lose* 138). Thus writing (in) the shadow of the girl, the chapter becomes "an instance of possibility" (see epigraph).

In "Venus in Two Acts," an essay published in *small axe* as a companion piece to the book, Hartman returns to her writing this particular chapter as she discusses the connections between the archive of slavery, the writing of history, and the "impossibility of discovering anything about [the dead] that hasn't already been stated" (1). At the center of this piece is the second enslaved girl who died on the *Recovery*, who merely

> appears in the archive of slavery as a *dead girl* named in a legal indictment against a slave ship captain tried for the murder of two Negro girls. [...] We stumble upon her in exorbitant circumstances that yield no picture of the everyday life, no pathway to her thoughts, no glimpse of the vulnerability of her face or of what looking at such a face might demand. We only know what can be extrapolated from an analysis of the ledger or borrowed from the world of her captors and masters and applied to her. ("Venus" 1, 2)

What Hartman addresses in this essay is the difficulty of creating a narrative that will embody the dead girl and that, at the same time, does not pretend to "provide closure where there is none" ("Venus" 3, 8). While writing stories about the dead here can become a "form of compensation or even [reparation], perhaps the only kind we will ever receive," these stories remain confined to the archive and the longing to ameliorate the pain and to seek redress for something that cannot be remedied weighs heavily on those who attempt to write such stories (4).

Together, "The Dead Book" and "Venus in Two Acts" raise questions about narrative's ability to account for Blackness's material and social death during and after the Middle Passage. What they reissue is a Black critique of narrative strategies (including but not limited to white/Human narrative articulations of empathy for the slave) that strive "to account for the violence of Black life" (Wilderson, "Aporia," *Red*). For Hartman, a way to deal with this conundrum – the grief and the pain about lives lost, the longing to tell their stories so as to rescue them from oblivion, and the impossibility of narrative to actually account for the (living) dead – is a new Black writing practice that both "tell[s] an impossible story and [amplifies] the impossibility of its telling" ("Venus" 11). Hartman calls this new aesthetic mode/method, which attempts to account for Blackness's "narratively condemned status" (Wynter, "No Humans" 70), "critical fabulation." Employing this mode/method means to be "playing with and rearranging the basic elements of the story, by re-presenting the sequence of events in divergent stories and from contested points of view [so as to] jeopardize the status of the event, to displace the received or authorized account, and to imagine what might have happened or might have been said or might have been done" ("Venus" 11). The goal of this writing practice is to write a "history of the present" with which to "imagine a *free state*, not at the time before captivity or slavery, but rather as the anticipated future of this writing" (4). Ultimately, Hartman seeks to create a counternarrative with these texts, doing so in spite of the fact that everything that can actually be said or told "*take*[*s*] *for granted* the traffic between fact, fantasy, desire, and violence" (5). Violating the boundaries of the archive of slavery would turn that which is being told into ridicule instead of honoring the dead (10). And yet, this kind of writing also wants "to escape the slave hold with a vision of something other than the bodies of two girls settling on the floor of the Atlantic" (9) even though it is aware that this project is doomed to fail:

"It's hard to explain what propels a quixotic mission, or why you miss people you don't even know, or why skepticism doesn't lessen longing. The simplest answer is that I wanted to bring the past closer" (*Lose* 17). For Hartman, this notion of 'bringing the past closer' is what living or being *in* and *as* the afterlife of slavery means. We continue reading:

> I am the relic of an experience most preferred not to remember, as if the sheer will to forget could settle or decide the matter of history. I am a reminder that twelve million crossed the Atlantic Ocean and the past is not yet over. I am the progeny of the captives. I am the vestige of the dead. (*Lose* 17–18)

"Wake Work"

In Christina Sharpe's highly acclaimed *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016), Hartman's project of writing an "anticipated future" and a "history of the present" becomes Sharpe's critical interest in "plotting, mapping, and collecting the archives of the everyday of Black immanent and imminent death, and in tracking the ways we resist, rupture, and disrupt that immanence and imminence aesthetically and materially" (*Wake* 13). The book is divided into four chapters entitled "The Wake," "The Ship," "The Hold," and "The Weather," respectively. Sharpe deals with questions of Blackness and being in the afterlife of slavery as she interrogates multiple visual, literary, cinematic, and other aesthetic responses to the ongoing abjection and commodification of Blackness in slavery's afterlives, both in the United States and globally. However, rather than "seek to explain or resolve the question of [Black] exclusion in terms of assimilation, inclusion, or civil or human rights," Sharpe interrogates notions of survival and persistence in the face of Black social death, past and present (14).

To this end, Sharpe introduces the metaphor of the wake to "depict aesthetically the impossibility of such resolutions by representing the paradoxes of blackness within and after the legacies of slavery's denial of black humanity" (*Wake* 14). The metaphor of the wake delineates the paradox of "surviv[al in] this insistent Black exclusion, this ontological negation" (14). As she extracts and discusses the multiple layers of meaning of this metaphor – including the track left in the water behind a ship, keeping watch with the dead, commemorating the dead (1–13) – Sharpe argues that for Blackness to be "*in* the wake is to occupy and to be occupied by the continuous and changing present of slavery's as yet unresolved unfolding" (13–14). Explicitly, Sharpe here enters into conversation with Hartman (and, by extension, Black feminist historians like Jennifer Morgan, given her conceptual focus on property and reproduction) when she writes that

> Living in/the wake of slavery is living 'the afterlife of property' and living 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. (*Wake* 15)

With the metaphor of the wake, Sharpe thus seeks to examine "how we imagine ways of knowing that past [i.e. slavery], in excess of the fictions of the archive, but not only that. I am interested, too, in the ways we recognize the many manifestations of that fiction and that excess, that past not yet past, in the present" (13). And in thinking with Hartman, Sharpe's metaphor of the wake and her theorization of how antiblackness continues to shape Black life in the United States and beyond put analytical attention to notions of mourning and of memorialization (19 – 20). However, rather than to think about these notions in relation to redress, the questions that ultimately drive Sharpe's theorizations target the ways in which the "interminable event" of slavery (19) can be mourned, commemorated, remembered, respectively: "What, then, are the ongoing coordinates and effects of the wake, and what does it mean to *inhabit* that Fanonian 'zone of non-Being' within and after slavery's denial of Black humanity?" (20). The metaphor of the wake ultimately needs to be understood not as something that is employed in order to seek "resolution of blackness's ongoing and irresolvable abjection" but as way to describe and represent a "form of *consciousness*" (14). Following Sharpe, inhabiting such a

> blackened consciousness [would mean to] rupture the structural silences produced and facilitated by, and that produce and facilitate, Black social and physical death. For, if we are lucky, we live in the knowledge that the wake has positioned us as no-citizen. If we are lucky, the knowledge of this positioning avails us particular ways of re/seeing, re/inhabiting, and re/imagining the world. (*Wake* 22)

In dialogue with Hartman's critical fabulation, Sharpe thus positions "wake work" (17 – 22) as a "*mode* of inhabiting *and* rupturing this episteme with our known lived and un/imaginable lives," as a mode for Black thinkers and scholars, a way of "encountering a past that is not past" (*Wake* 18, 13; emphasis mine). As mode and as consciousness, the wake is "a theory and a praxis of Black being in diaspora" (19). The work that this theory and this praxis do is to find and create a language that is able to account for the manifold inhabitations of the wake and of Black being in the afterlife of slavery's sexual economies of property; following Sharpe, it is to chart "responses to the terror visited on Black life" and to possibly "imagine otherwise from what we know *now* in the wake of slavery"

(116, 18). This study positions Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* as an articulation *in* and *of* the wake.

Anticipatory Wake, or Anticipating the Afterlife of Property in *A Mercy*

"To anticipate" something means to expect or to foresee something, to forestall someone else's moves, or to await something ("anticipate"). The *Oxford English Dictionary* also defines "to anticipate" as "to take into consideration before the appropriate or due time" ("anticipate, v."). With these definitions in mind, I join the notion of anticipation to Sharpe's concept of *the wake* to create the last analytical term for my readings of *A Mercy: anticipatory wake*. My term *anticipatory wake* both situates and delineates *A Mercy*'s narrative as a space in which grief about the "interminable event" of slavery is navigated on the literary level of representation (Sharpe, *Wake* 19). It fundamentally speaks to the novel's complicated workings of time that are best delineated as the text's anticipation of a historical future yet to come. That is, Morrison's novel in the present moment – in the twenty-first century as well as in each reader's present/presence – tries in imaginary hindsight to represent and to show us what did not happen. It attempts to imagine and to represent a moment in the past, in which chattel slavery and, with it, the property paradigm would not be implemented full-scale on the North American mainland—and it does so with the full knowledge and anticipation that this will in fact happen. In other words, at the same time that *A Mercy*'s diegetic orbit asks, *What else could have happened? What could have been had history not taken us down the devastating path of the epistemic, philosophical, social, political, and cultural entanglements of slavery and freedom fueling the liberal imagination of self?*, it asks these questions while charting what Sharpe calls "slavery's yet unresolved unfolding" (*Wake* 14). As such, *A Mercy* becomes a writing praxis – Morrison's writing praxis – "of Black being in diaspora" (Sharpe, *Wake* 19).

On the level of diegesis, moreover, *A Mercy* becomes a history of the present in Hartman's sense, a history that "imagine[s] a *free state*, not at the time before captivity or slavery, but rather as the anticipated future of this writing" ("Venus" 4). However, the anticipated future that *A Mercy* presents its readers with does not strive towards resolution and/or redress. As I will suggest in the next part of this study, *A Mercy*'s form in fact fundamentally defies such notions. This is best illustrated with the slave girl Florens' "telling" (*AM* 1), which is broken up into six textual fragments that take turns with the other character's texts. The last of Florens' fragments ultimately connects back to the first, which is also the beginning of the novel, so that her "telling" will start all over again.

As I will argue in more detail below, her text thus takes a circular form, which points to the fact that her telling will never end. She will continue to tell her story without ever getting to a point of resolution. In the first epigraph to this section, we read that the narrating I is both "wilderness and Florens," both "slave and free," and that Florens will "keep one sadness." These lines constitute the very last words of Florens' textual fragments and they are situated towards the end of *A Mercy*. Like Hartman's grieving meditation on the connections between slavery and narrative, Florens' words are filled with sadness about the fact that she will never be able to talk to her mother, from whom she was separated when her Portuguese master decides to sell her in order to settle his debt with Vaark. Florens will never "know what my mother is telling me. Nor can she know what I am wanting to tell her." Her words "will talk to themselves" (*AM* 159). Florens here also defies categories of "freedom" and "slavery," which, incidentally, are categories along the lines of which the other characters (as well as critics of the novel) have read her. Instead, I suggest, Florens claims for herself a space in which she is both slave and free, in which she is "wilderness." Like Sharpe's "wake work," then, *A Mercy* aesthetically ruptures and disrupts the "immanence and imminence" of social death with Florens's character. Lasting as wilderness, she claims and occupies modernity's grammar of slavery and property, using it to "imagine existence otherwise" (Sharpe, *Wake* 18) and outside of the New World's grammar of property and its positioning power. As I will elaborate below, Sorrow's fragment offers another example of this notion of claiming one's ambiguous status as a "survivor of insistent Black exclusion [and] ontological negation" (Sharpe, *Wake* 14). Not only will she become a mother at the end of her text, she will also rename herself "Complete" (*AM* 114 – 132). Sorrow refuses the "non/status" that slavery's reproductive calculus forces on enslaved women by claiming her child in spite of *partus sequitur ventrem* (Sharpe, *Wake* 15).

With the term *anticipatory wake*, finally, I want to make visible that *A Mercy* needs to be understood as an aesthetic investment in an imagining elsewhere. As a post-slavery historical novel published in the twenty-first century United States, *A Mercy* performs wake work in Sharpe's sense. The novel makes the absence of resolution its primary concern. And with this refusal to offer narrative resolution, *A Mercy* brings to the fore "the paradox of survival" (Sharpe, *Wake*) *in spite of* the abjection of Blackness within and after the Middle Passage and its regimes of private property.

[Coda]

This chapter has isolated the following terms from recent post-slavery Black interventions into the discursive promises of universal liberty: *violence*; *dispossession* and *fungibility; abjection* and *abjectorship*; *reproduction* and *kinship*; as well as *anticipatory wake*. These terms offer me multiple avenues to interrogating the nexus between private property and subjectivity in the remainder of my study. These terms help me chart what I have previously described as *A Mercy*'s refusal to restage and to partake in hegemonic discourses about North American beginnings and its liberal, possessing subjectivities. This also is a refusal to (re-)produce resolution where there is none. As I hope to show in the chapters to come, this refusal lingers and sprouts in the novel's combination of theoretical intervention with narrative form. I will trace this refusal by way of closely examining how *A Mercy* interrogates the intricate connections between subjectivity, slavery, and private property with its allegorical figures. In thus examining the property paradigm within the realm of literary representation, I will also raise questions with respect to the wide array of conceptualizations of fictional character within the field of narrative theory and their ability to account for social death.