

5 Coda

5.1 Refusing Private Property or, On Telling Impossible Stories

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. I explain. [...] Stranger things happen all the time everywhere. You know. I know you know. One question is who is responsible? Another is can you read?

— *A Mercy*

Slavery broke the world in half, it broke it in every way. It broke Europe. It made them into something else, it made them slave masters, it made them crazy. You can't do that for hundreds of years and not take a toll. They had to dehumanize, not just the slaves but themselves.

— Toni Morrison in Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*

And how does one tell impossible stories?

— Saidiya V. Hartman, “Venus”

I began this study with the observation that Toni Morrison's novel *A Mercy* fundamentally confronts its readers with a specific kind of negation advanced through what one critic has somewhat disparagingly alluded to as “insubstantial characters and this wisp of a narrative” (Mantel). I asserted that this negation needs to be theorized as a refusal – expressed and negotiated through the text's strategies of allegorical characterization – to reproduce liberal ideas of what it means to be a Human subject within *A Mercy*'s seventeenth-century plotting. Those ideas are inextricably bound by notions of ownership, (self-)possession, and private property. Within *A Mercy*'s diegesis, refusal in the form of allegorical characterization emerges as critical practice; it becomes a strategy to take up, to allegorize, and to confront a grammar, which structures being and self-making through private property. The novel's form itself thus ultimately becomes a means to interrogate and to (re-)configure the relation between literary narrative and a theoretical critique of early modern liberal self-making.

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 Atlantic slavery's “afterlife” in the present moment (Hartman, *Scenes* 115; *Lose* 6). Throughout this study, I have argued that *A Mercy* urges us as readers to critically revisit our liberal Western legacies of colonialism and slavery – social, political, cultural, epistemic – by way of returning us to key historical moments of its emergence on the aesthetic level of literary representa-

tion. That is to say, the novel takes its readers back to the late seventeenth century when liberal ideas of individual rights, representational government, and Human emancipation from feudal rule, as well as claims to individual liberty and property, among others, were first articulated by early Enlightenment thinkers over and against the systems and practices of New World chattel slavery. In this context, I drew attention to an event that would come to define North American, and later U.S. beginnings and futures like no other: the arrival of the first enslaved Africans in colonial Virginia in 1619 (see Hannah-Jones). This event would come to mark one crucial site on which the interconnected concepts of freedom and individuality emerged and constituted themselves in parasitic relation to Atlantic slavery. I also suggested that in returning us to American beginnings in the colonial Chesapeake, Morrison's novel transports us back to a moment in time that historians have often read as a moment of pure possibility, a moment in which racial lines appear to have not been as rigid and rife as they would come to be in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, respectively. From the perspective of enslaved Black women, however, those lines were far from fluid, as Black feminist historians have taught us in their examination of the intricate connections between slavery, property, reproduction, and heritability in seventeenth-century Virginia. Entering into conversation with such Black feminist counter-historical projects, I have endeavored to illustrate how *A Mercy* pushes an interrogation of the ways in which a grammar of private property is already at work at a time commonly understood to be shaped by the (near) absence of inflexible racial lines. I have insisted throughout that *A Mercy's* representation of late-seventeenth-century colonial Virginia returns us to a past in which chattel slavery and its regimes of violence and grammar of private property produce a subject, whose claims to freedom are both fueled by and grounded in the abjection of the enslaved, and I proposed to conceptualize this as the liberal *property paradigm*. The complex entanglements between individual liberty, slavery, and private property converge in a subject, which can be recognized in paradigmatic textual articulations and flourishing epistemic configurations from across the seventeenth-century English Atlantic, where it materializes in the early Enlightenment political philosophy of John Locke and in the Northern Quakers' concerns for their reputation, respectively. In different, while fundamentally related, ways, slavery and possession here emerge as a sounding board for the development and as a marker of white capacity and identity deliberations. The absence of captivity and bondage, freedom from social death and "violence's gratuitousness," as well as ownership of enslaved human beings become a metaphor for white liberty and being (Wilderson, *Red* 31).

A Mercy's experimental setup returns to the seventeenth-century slave past not to lay this past to rest, as some critics have suggested prominently (e.g., Best,

None, “On Failing”; Christiansë), but to draw attention to the ways the grammar of property planted on the North American mainland with the founding of the Virginia colony would structure social formations for centuries and its afterlives would continue to shape the present moment. *A Mercy*’s very first lines – “Don’t be afraid. My telling can’t hurt you in spite of what I have done” – are spoken by the slave girl [Florens], who introduces us in an anti-introductory fashion to *A Mercy*’s thought experiment that exposes us to slavery’s multiple pasts at the New World colonial scene (*AM* 1; see also first epigraph). Through the text’s creating of the different [characters] and the historical and mythical narratives that they evoke, we are by way of allegory confronted with the desire for freedom from feudal rule and religious doctrine that drove European settlers to embark on one of the countless oceangoing vessels. We are, in other words, exposed to those settlers’ transatlantic passage to an environment, in which the fashioning of this new, liberal, and self-made self would come to be intricately connected to practices of enslavement. That white English women, too, would both struggle for and claim access to this new status of liberal subjectivity comes to the fore through the novel’s gesturing towards the legal system of coverture as one site at which white married (or divorced) women in the seventeenth through the nineteenth century were legally dispossessed of their property. With the [character] of [Rebekka Vaark], the novel points the reader to the notion that white women would in fact “find ways to circumvent the constraints that coverture imposed” on them and that they would ultimately be able to claim mastery precisely of their (human) property (Jones-Rogers 27). Such claims to mastery, as we have seen with [Rebekka] as the novel’s representation of late seventeenth-century formations of white womanhood, translate into claiming mastery of themselves as well as their slaves. *A Mercy* also exposes us to the histories of genocide and fundamental eradication of Indigenous life by European settlers and it does so by gesturing towards, for example, mythically rendered narratives of the distribution of smallpox infected blankets to Indigenous tribes or towards nineteenth-century futures of forced assimilation. I have suggested throughout that *A Mercy* constantly plays with the possibility of creating a version of the past that is not structured by the property paradigm at the same time that it confronts the reader with the histories and legacies of the Middle Passage and the archives of Atlantic slavery. In so doing, *A Mercy* draws attention not only to the conceptual conflation of enslavement, property, and reproductive capacity within the realm of colonial law but also to the continued disruption and denial of vertical and recognized kinship formations for the enslaved on the New World plantation. In this context, the examples of the [characters] of [Florens] and the [*minha mãe*] also expose the reader to a different realm of the past, namely that of literary history and ancestry, as it were. In its vision of a historical future yet to

come, the text crucially enters into dialogue with its literary predecessors from the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries such as the African American slave narrative tradition and Morrison's prize-winning neo-slave narrative *Beloved*.

In the preceding chapters, *A Mercy's* experimental setup and plotting animate an analytic aesthetic invested in "unimagining" the full scale "irreparable violence of the Atlantic slave trade" (Hartman, "Venus" 12), while facing the impasse that it is precisely this violence that is deeply woven into the social, political, and epistemic fabric of the present. From chattel slavery, Reconstruction, and Jim Crow over "police brutality, mass incarceration, segregated and substandard schools and housing, astronomical rates of HIV infection, and the threat of being turned away en masse at the polls," this violence "still constitute[s] the lived experience of Black life" today (Wilderson, *Red* 10). Thus revisiting the aesthetic territory of the New World colonial scene and straddling the line between unimagined pasts and devastating present-day futures, *A Mercy* shows us what could have been but what did not happen and what it is that we as readers should be grieving for. *A Mercy* imagines a history that could have taken a fundamentally different turn, creating a lost future in which conceptions of the (universal) self would not be intricately connected to proprietorial notions of being. By anticipating a historical future yet to come, that is, this experiment on the literary level of representation becomes a return to seventeenth-century American beginnings fueled by the dreadful knowledge that the workings of the liberal property paradigm are ubiquitous, past and present. This literary endeavor, I suggested, makes legible the positioning power and the violence of property in close dialogue with post-slavery Black Studies theoretical trajectories, which provide us with a set of analytical terms – *violence*, *dispossession*, *fungibility*, *abjection*, *reproduction*, *kinship*, *anticipatory wake* – as they ask us to scrutinize, intervene into, and deconstruct formations of private property. Put another way, the analyses of *A Mercy's* [characters] have illustrated the manifold ways in which the property paradigm configures existence at the New World colonial scene in fundamentally different and often antagonistic ways. Throughout the study, I asserted that the novel attempts to account for the structural as well as structuring violence of slavery as that which places *A Mercy's* [characters] in relation to one another. What this analytical focus on violence specifically brings to the fore is how the absence of relationality, that is social death, situates the slave woman [characters] outside of the realm of liberal self-making that the other [characters] are able to claim for themselves. This is also to say that I have rejected the critical discourse on *A Mercy* and its assumptions of "innocent" transformations fueled by the desire for property of quintessential Lockean subjectivity into morally corrupted and greedy versions of the liberal self, as is the case with

[Jacob Vaark]. I also have rejected this discourse's conceptualizations of cross-cultural, cross-racial, and cross-religious solidarity amongst *A Mercy's* women [characters]; its embrace of concepts like dispossession as that which positions those [characters] in similar ways; as well as critics' politically salient, inclusionary gestures of universal female agency, identity deliberation, or self-emancipation from patriarchal formations of power.

All analyses of the novel's [characters] demonstrate, albeit to different degrees, that *A Mercy* establishes and reconfigures the relation between narrative form and theoretical critique. This relationship is often configured as distinct from the slave past in Black Studies' works that, like Stephen Best's, are committed to unearthing "a new set of relations between contemporary criticism and the black past on the basis of aesthetic values and sensibilities" (*None* 22). Here, rather than to theorize from the positioning power of gratuitous violence and the attendant structural ramifications for civil society as well as narrative, scholars like Best push towards disintegrating precisely this past and towards adopting a practice that will account for Black aesthetic and political articulation in abandonment of the slave past (Best, *None* 23). Rather than reproduce the "abandonment aesthetic" promoted by such disintegrative critical approaches to engaging with narrative and other works of art, I have argued that *A Mercy* both heightens and insistently questions narrative's embeddedness within the fold of the Human and points us to literary narrative's inability to account for Black social death. *A Mercy* thus opens up a path for us to think about the ways literary narrative and narrative form may allow for a new kind of "potentiality" (Sharpe, *Wake*) that devises new means for interrogating Atlantic chattel slavery's epistemic formations on the literary level of representation. This kind of "formal agency" (Best, *Fugitive*) is fundamentally different from widespread theorizations of agency, which frequently come into view as enunciations of capacity—to be gained or to be held by the liberal subject or by literary character as this subject's representation within narrative, respectively. Instead, it needs to be conceptualized as the insistent questioning of the relationship between the violence of social death, literary narrative, and form. This is what I have conceptualized throughout as allegorical anti-narration.

As strategy, allegorical anti-narration is not only wedded to Black Studies' critical inquiry of "speaking from the standpoint of the slave in a slave society" (to echo Jared Sexton). It also is fundamentally committed to notions of ambiguity, non-resolution, and contradiction. As an ongoing epistemic critique of modernity's calculus of property, allegorical anti-narration challenges (the structure of) narrative, which is to say that it challenges narrative's striving for resolution and its restorative desires (Wilderson, "Aporia"; Spillers, "Mama's Baby"). In *A Mercy*, we can recognize this confrontation in, for example, [Florens'] reconfigu-

ration of narrative as “telling” or in [Sorrow]’s fugitively generative (racial) ambiguity, which opens up an utopian moment for the possibility of making Black generations beyond the property paradigm. *A Mercy*’s lingering with ambiguity, then, becomes a way to address the absence of narrative, which is to say social death, within a narrative text.

In the face of the ongoing abjection of Black life, antiblackness, and the longue durée of Atlantic slavery, Christina Sharpe – citing Hartman and Wilderson – conceptualizes the project of Black Studies as the “continued imagining of the unimaginable: [the] continued theorizing from the ‘position of the unthought’” (“Black Studies” 59). As an antidote to literary narratives (and, by extension, the critical discourses accompanying those narratives) that neglect to account for and to reckon with Atlantic slavery’s structuring violence, *A Mercy* heeds Sharpe’s conceptualization. That is, the novel both portrays and theorizes the unimaginable at the same time that it attends to “the ongoing state of emergency in which black life remains in peril” (Hartman, “Venus” 13). In this way, *A Mercy* crucially becomes a sanctuary for Black critical thinking and fabulation.¹⁶⁵ *A Mercy* is history: Its representation of late seventeenth-century Virginia’s colonial historical landscapes makes visible the fundamental differences between what it means to be dispossessed and what it means to be fungible property. *A Mercy* is theory: In and through its insistent questioning, we can recognize that the gratuitous violence of social death is “prelogical to narrative construction” (Wilderson, private conversation) and that the absence of narrative is social death (Wilderson, “Aporia”). *A Mercy* is anti-narrative: Not only does its representation of North American beginnings in colonial Virginia expose us to a version of the past that confronts us with and makes us work through a set of questions such as, *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?* This representation also fundamentally exposes us as readers to the im-

¹⁶⁵ I use the term “fabulation” here with reference to Tavia Nyong’o’s theory of *Afro-Fabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life*. In his eponymous study, Nyong’o conceptualizes afro-fabulation as “black feminist and posthumanist acts of speculation [that] are never simply a matter of inventing all tales from whole cloth. More nearly, they are the tactical fictionalizing of a world that is, from the point of view of black social life, already false. It is an insurgent movement – in the face of an intransigent and ever-mutating anti-blackness – toward something else, something other, something more. While moments of afro-fabulation are indeed often ephemeral and fleeting [...] they may also be monumental and enduring” (6). The connections and incongruences between Hartman’s and Wilderson’s concerns about the emplot-ability of social death and the practice and “insurgent movement” of afro-fabulation need to be examined more closely in a different project.

portance of language, of narrative construction and fabulation, as well as the necessity to recount the impossible to paraphrase Hartman from the third epigraph of this section (“Venus” 10).

A Mercy’s groundbreaking refusal, which lingers and sprouts in the combination of theoretical intervention with literary/narrative form, raises important questions that take us beyond the novel’s immediate diegetic frame. In other words, the larger implications of this project as the first book-length in-depth study of Morrison’s novel beyond the realm of close analysis and literary criticism can be delineated along the following lines: First, novels like *A Mercy* alert us to the notion that language and words matter and are crucial to any engagement of Western modernity’s genealogies grounded in Atlantic chattel slavery. And while language and words matter and often are the only vehicles available for any such engagement, *A Mercy* also confronts us with the limits as to what we can know, understand, and address through them. It points us to the limitations of what words can actually tell. That is to say, we (as literary scholars, critics, and readers of literary narratives) need a new vocabulary, new words, new terms that bring us closer to being able to describe and to account for the structures, patterns, mechanisms, and systems of white liberal self-making over and against private property, fungibility, and the abjection of Blackness. Black feminist thinkers like Christina Sharpe have recently introduced us to notions such as the “Black anagrammatical” or “Black annotation and redaction,” which delineate Blackness and its repertoires of aesthetic, epistemic, and representational articulation as “exist[ing] as an index of violability and also potentiality” (*Wake* 75; see also Moten, *Break*).¹⁶⁶ Like [Florens] in *A Mercy*, who exposes us to her “telling,” we as readers and critics need words and concepts that are

166 The struggle to find the “right” and adequate vocabulary has always been an essential part of the groundbreaking work of Black feminist thinkers. As Hortense Spillers reminds us, her pioneering work endeavored to “find a vocabulary that would make it possible, and not all by myself, to make a contribution to a larger project. I was looking for my generation of black women who were so active in other ways, to open a conversation with feminists. Because my idea about where we found ourselves in the late 1970s and the mid-1980s, was that we were really out of the conversation that we had, in some ways, historically initiated. In other words, the women’s movement and the black movement have always been in tandem, but what I saw happening was black people being treated as a kind of raw material. That the history of black people was something you could use as a note of inspiration but it was never anything that had anything to do with you—you could never use it to explain something in theoretical terms. There was no discourse that it generated, in terms of the mainstream academy that gave it a kind of recognition. And so my idea was to try to generate a discourse, or a vocabulary that would not just make it desirable, but would necessitate that black women be in the conversation” (Spillers et al. 300).

able to account for the ambiguity, the contradictions, and the absence of resolution that literary texts like *A Mercy* confront us with—texts that unsettle and de-center white knowledge formations in fundamental ways. Put somewhat differently, literary critics need a new language in narrative theory to speak about the limits of narrative with respect to social death.

Within the realm of the (narratological) study of literary character, and second, there also is a need for a re-examination of the concepts that we use to address fictional entities within literary narrative. This re-examination needs to follow in the steps of post-slavery interventions, like Afropessimism, which profoundly question the assumptive logics of critical theory's "ensembles of questions dedicated to the status of the subject as a relational being" (Douglass and Wilderson 117). Throughout the study, I have opted to use square brackets as a way of connoting the various demands or claims to New World subject-making and property, or the structurally induced absence thereof, that *A Mercy*'s fictional entities make in their respective textual fragments. While bracketing subject-making and the concept of fictional character in this way has helped me grapple with the aporia of not having adequate terms to account for the notion that not all "beings are on the same side of social life," both in narrative and beyond (Wilderson, "Aporia" 141), this orthographical shortcut demands further scrutiny and elaboration, as do other narratological terms, concepts, and methods, such as "close reading." Most often and to recall Bal's suggestions for cultural analysis and use of "travelling" concepts (see Chapters 1 and 4), existing narratological methodologies are bound by a premise of "intersubjective" exchange or conversation (e.g., Bal, *Traveling* 11). At the heart of this premise seems to be an assumption of a universal subject and relational being. If we follow post-slavery theoretical thinker's pressing interventions, as this study has done throughout, such an assumption needs to be thoroughly scrutinized, challenged, and dismantled.

Third, novels like *A Mercy* force us not to impose, consciously or unconsciously, a white hermeneutic reading and inflection on such Black-authored texts, the "ventriloquism or unbidden translation" of which will only reproduce and maintain the violence of white knowledge formations and assumptions of universalism (Broeck, *Gender* 11; see also Mills, "White Ignorance"). The push here must be to destabilize such white reading practices and to distort white coherence. Recall how [Jacob Vaark] as a paradigmatic example of the New World liberal subject is so forcefully disnarrated from the novel and how *A Mercy* refuses to reinscribe white subjective coherence within its diegesis in this way. By referring the reader, scholar, student, and critic back to questions concerning ethics and methodology, in other words, *A Mercy* opens up avenues towards a radical pedagogy committed to lingering with ambiguity and non-resolution.

This, and fourth, becomes highly relevant with respect to reading and studying *A Mercy* in the context of American Studies in Germany. As a discipline that continues to wrestle not only with what I have called the “challenge of remove” in the introduction to this study but also with the notion that it is a predominantly white(-authored) field, following a pedagogy and a practice of lingering with ambiguity or with what Frank Wilderson calls “pyrotechnics” (*Red* 337) seems more than urgent. Put somewhat differently, *A Mercy*’s call for critical vigilance holds true for those of us who, like myself, belong to the “social formation of contemporaries who do not magnetize bullets” (Wilderson, “Prison Slave” 20).

Finally, there is a fundamental difference between a grammar and its critique, on the one hand, and literary representation *as the critique of* this grammar, on the other. *A Mercy* embodies the task and challenge of becoming the means by which to provide the critique of the New World grammar of private property and Atlantic slavery. As such, it offers a response to Hartman’s question and imperative not only to tell that which is impossible to tell but to also remain alert to “the incommensurability between the experience of the enslaved and the fictions of history, by which I mean the requirements of narrative, the stuff of subjects and plots and ends” (“Venus” 10). Within the realm of literary representation, *A Mercy* insists on and allows for these contradictions to coexist and to disseminate. It is in the imperious space of Toni Morrison’s writing (to paraphrase Namwali Serpell), in other words, that theoretical critique, historical writing, and narrative form converge and thrive. It is here that the reader is cautioned/reassured “not to be afraid” of the enormous challenge they will meet on the pages that follow. It is here that *A Mercy*’s form becomes both the refusal and the argument.