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“IF YOU GO THERE – YOU WHO WAS NEVER THERE:” ON CONTEMPORARY USES OF THE MEMORY OF SLAVERY

“Don't you know that slavery was outlawed?”

“No,” the guard said, “you're wrong. Slavery was outlawed with the exception of prisons. Slavery is legal in prisons.” I looked it up and sure enough, she was right.

Assata Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography* (1987)

It seemed that (...) one was always trying to remember a gigantic shock that had left a haunting impression upon one's body which one could not forget or shake off, but which had been forgotten by the conscious mind, creating in one's life a state of eternal anxiety.

Richard Wright, “The Man Who Lived Underground” (1942)

In November 2006, the UN General Assembly designated 25 March 2007 as the International Day for the Commemoration of the Two-Hundredth Anniversary of the Abolition of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Member States acknowledged that slavery was at the heart of “profound social and economic inequality, hatred, bigotry, racism and prejudice, which continue to affect people of African descent today” (“Protection of Human Rights” 829). Here are a few passages from the resolution which put the past in conversation with the present:

The General Assembly, (...)

Acknowledging that the slave trade and the legacy of slavery are at the heart of situations of profound social and economic inequality, hatred, bigotry, racism and prejudice, which continue to affect people of African descent today, (...) Recognizing the knowledge gap that exists with regard to the consequences created by the slave trade and slavery, and on the interactions, past and present, generated among the peoples of Europe, Africa, Asia and the Americas, including the Caribbean, (...) Urges Member States that have not already done so to develop educational programmes, including through school curricula, designed to educate and inculcate in future generations an understanding of the lessons, history and consequences of slavery and the slave trade (...)

The turn of the twenty-first century has witnessed an emerging willingness on the part of former slave societies – at the level of public institutions as well as in popular culture – to confront their past and acknowledge the role played by enslaved Africans and their descendants in the making of their national histories. Institutions in the Americas, Europe and Africa seem to be increasingly aware that slavery and the slave trade are the core of our modernities and need to be memorialized in the public space so as to bridge the gap between the private mnemonic archive of Afrodescendants and national memory. Initiatives such as the rehabilitation of sites of slavery, the proclamation of memorial days and the construction of monuments and museums, aiming at turning the slave past into a pedagogical tool able to provide solutions for racial conflicts, are being funded also by countries whose role in the slave trade was completely erased from public memory. The United States as a nation has been slow in joining this transnational memorializing trend, in spite of a politically and culturally active black minority that has always struggled to make the legacy of

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slavery visible to the white mainstream. While the historiography of slavery has changed dramatically since the 1950s, and has established the centrality of slavery to the history of the United States, to its notions of democratic citizenship and American freedom, and to the persistent racism of the American society, the lack of a consistent memorializing politics makes it difficult for most white U.S. citizens to see “black problems” (unemployment, poverty, higher incarceration rate and mortality rate, lower education, drug addiction etc.) as related to the continuing legacy of slavery. African Americans were enslaved and segregated much longer than they have been free and their citizenship rights date back only to the 1960s. Contrary to the American myth of equal opportunities, race continues to predict with a high degree of accuracy their prospects in life. As historian Eric Foner noted in *Who Owns History?* (2003), history and memory, the study of the past and how communities remember it, are separated by a large gap in regard to slavery: “In an essay on historical consciousness, Friedrich Nietzsche spoke of ‘creative forgetfulness’ – how the memory of some aspects of the past is predicated on amnesia about others. Slavery is a case in point. Nowhere is the gap between scholarly inquiry and public perceptions of history more stark” (xiii). This gap is probably one of the reasons why, in spite of having the largest number of museums in the world, the United States still lacks a national museum devoted to slavery and has only recently added a museum celebrating black America to the list. The Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, where slavery is included in the narrative but does not constitute the main focus, opened in Washington, DC, last September, on the last available slot on the National Mall.¹ The project for a national slavery museum in Fredericksburg, VA, launched in 2001 by former Virginia governor Douglas Wilder, a descendant of slaves, has come to a halt, filing for bankruptcy. Nevertheless, as Ira Berlin has remarked, “[t]here is a general, if inchoate, understanding that any attempt to address the question of race in the present must also address slavery in the past. Slavery is ground zero of race relations” (3), and a number of institutions are taking actions to engage their history of slavery.

Often following public pressure, some universities, such as Brown, Emory, the University of North Carolina, Columbia, Harvard and the University of Virginia, have begun to study the role of slavery in their history, finding that, as Craig Steven Wilder has shown, the unpaid labor of slaves funded colleges, built campuses, and paid the wages of professors. It is recent news that Georgetown University’s permanent Working Group on Slavery, Memory and Reconciliation, has acknowledged the institution’s profiting from slavery and taken measures to redress its debts towards the African American population, granting preferred admissions status to the descendants of slaves who provided uncompensated labor at the university. Though some scholars have denied that this is a form of reparation, as it does not require payment of money and avoids to address the slavery-related obstacles that a black student has to navigate before he/she can be admitted at university, yet it is a step forward in the process of reconciliation as it admits to more than a merely moral obligation.²

The current escalation in the number of acts of public memorialization of past wrongs towards African Americans – namely, slavery and segregation – is frequently related to the Obama presidency, as a positive side effect of the first black presidency in the United States. Indeed Barack Obama’s so called “race speech,” or “A More Perfect Union,” which he delivered in 2008, during the presidential campaign as a response to the attacks he received for his friendship with Reverend Jeremiah Wright, was an unprecedented attempt to find historical reasons for black anger and feelings of betrayal and for the racial conflicts of the present.³ A few

¹ The museum, with its bronze-colored, three-layered building inspired by Yoruba culture, was designed by David Adjaye so as to look remarkably different from the other museums on the National Mall, most of them neo-classic, white-marble constructions. It was built on the mall’s last available plot of land and opened thirteen years after it was funded by Congress. Its mission, as stated by Lonnie G. Bunch, its director, is to highlight the central role played by African American history and culture in a national context: “This Museum will tell the American story through the lens of African American history and culture. This is America’s story and this museum is for all Americans” (<https://nmaahc.si.edu/about/museum>).

² Ta-nehisi Coates, author of a long article defending the case for reparations, a hotly debated issue in the U.S., initially tweeted that Georgetown’s act was reparation, but after sociologist Tressie McMillan Cottom published an article in *Vox* arguing that Georgetown’s plan lacked two important components of reparation, in addition to acknowledgement, that is to say restitution and closure, he admitted to being wrong. See Coates, Cottom.

³ Jeremiah Wright, the pastor at Obama’s church, had been criticized for his speeches condemning America for its racism and for murdering innocent people in its war against terror.



years before George W. Bush had made an official statement on U.S. slavery but to remarkably different ends. On July 8, 2003, during a trip to the *Maison des Esclaves* on Gorée Island, Senegal, he stated that slavery was “one of the greatest crimes of history (...) And many of the issues that still trouble America have roots in the bitter experience of other times.” But he concluded: “our destiny is set: liberty and justice for all” (quoted in H. Res. 194, House of Representatives June 29, 2008). His remarks, thus, were fully inscribed within an empty rhetoric of “mere regret that fell conspicuously short of a formal apology for past U.S. support of slavery” (Vivian 8). Obama’s speech, on the contrary, was an important symbolic turning point on the discourse on race in the U.S. It was a public acknowledgement of the links connecting the racial problems of the present with the past of slavery and Jim Crow segregation, even though these links were embedded in the traditional form of the jeremiad, a rhetoric that, as Sacvan Bercovitch has shown, is a typically American ritual of consensus where radical potential is transformed into social integration. As Bridget Byrne has underlined, in “A More Perfect Union” “[t]he story of the United States becomes one which is untellable without a retelling of the crimes of slavery thereby making black people and their experience central to the narration of nation” (10).

Especially during the early months of Obama’s first term, his election was celebrated as a sign that the U.S. had finally overcome its racial problems becoming a postracial country, or to say the least as a promise that, though not yet realized, reverend Martin Luther King’s dream was within reach. The message was, in other words, that the U.S. was finally confronting and coming to terms with its past of anti-black violence, which meant that national healing had finally begun. The advent of colorblind America, however, was soon questioned by the racist virulence of attacks on President Obama, and especially by the numbers of African American lives lost on the urban streets by the hands of policemen and vigilantes. As postracial America appears to be more distant a dream than it was a few decades ago, the recent memorializing turn of the U.S. is being criticized as a hollow, hypocritical acknowledgement of past wrongs that does not involve any change in current social, cultural, juridical and economic politics. Most attempts at building a public memory of slavery have been under attack for offering an edulcorated, progressive narrative of the past that does not really challenge the exceptionalist mythology of the United States. Since memory is an ever-changing representation of the past that does not aim at establishing the truth, but rather at highlighting what parts of the past are important for the present, it is inevitably a source of controversies and a site where competing versions of the past clash: who decides what stories to select and what to discard as marginal?

In 2007, the bicentenary of the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade in Britain sparked a hot debate on how to memorialize the past, as celebrations and museum exhibits focused on British abolitionists and mostly ignored the agency of Caribbean freedom fighters, presenting the end of the trade as an achievement of the nation’s love for freedom.⁴ Similar controversies arose also in the U.S., where the apology for slavery and segregation passed by Senate in 2009, after it had been passed by several states and by the House of Representatives,⁵ was criticized for its non-binding wording, that is to say, for a text careful to avoid the

⁴ Eric Williams, in his *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944), had already argued that emerging economic reasons were behind the abolition of the slave trade, a thesis that by the end of the last century had become dominant in historiography but did not find space in the bicentennial celebrations. See Wallace, Hamilton, and Wood, “Significant Silence.” For a global survey of the public memory of slavery, see Araujo 2014. For a transnational analysis of the politics of memory in museums, see the essays in the second part of Araujo 2012.

⁵ In 2007, on the occasion of the celebration of the founding of Jamestown, 1607, the General Assembly of Virginia passed a resolution expressing “profound regret” for the exploitation of Native Americans and the involuntary servitude of Africans. Virginia has become the first state in the U.S. to respond to the demands for reparation that African Americans have been making for a long time and many states have passed similar resolutions. Only a few years earlier a resolution to acknowledge the injustice of slavery and the responsibility of the U.S. was presented in Congress but was not even voted since, as many representatives maintained, slavery was not an issue for contemporary U.S. because all the people involved had long been dead. The Virginia resolution is not much in practical terms, yet it has symbolic relevance, given the state’s importance in the national mythology. In July 2008 the House of Representatives passed a resolution stating that “African-Americans continue to suffer from the consequences of slavery and Jim Crow – long after both systems were formally abolished – through enormous damage and loss, both tangible and intangible, including the loss of human dignity and liberty, the frustration of careers and professional lives, and the long-term loss of income and opportunity.”



possibility of opening the resolution up to claims for reparations. Thanks to the boom in heritage tourism many plantations have been opened to the public, but almost none devotes more than a marginal space to slavery and most, to the outrage of black visitors, instruct guides not to mention it at all so as not to trouble white tourists lured by the glamour of life in the big mansion. Only in December 2014 the first plantation in the U.S. South with a focus on slavery, the Whitney Plantation, near Wallace, Louisiana, opened its doors to the public. Monticello, Thomas Jefferson's plantation, included slaves in the picture only a few years ago, in spite of the well-known liaison between the president and Sally Hemings, his wife's slave, and probably half-sister, with whom, according to the Thomas Jefferson Foundation, he fathered six children. Like in other accounts of the slave past, the fact that the plantation was run thanks to the labor of hundreds of slaves is an aside that does not significantly change the overall picture, and as a consequence it does not question, as it should, what "men" Jefferson had in mind when he wrote the text of the Declaration of Independence.⁶

In light of the quotidian evidence of the vulnerability of black bodies in the United States, which has led to the creation of grassroots movements such as Black Lives Matter and to a new political visibility of the black community in the urban space, the memorializing turn calling for the official recognition of the nation's guilt towards African Americans appears as a strategy to divert attention from the all-too-present reality of racism in contemporary America. Indeed, the main tendency in the memorialization of slavery, in the United States as well as in many other post-slavery nations, is to frame it in a self-absolving narrative of healing and progress that, according to many observers, obscures the economic and social marginalization that Afrodescendants continue to suffer and denies the myriad ways race still functions as a tool of exclusion in our societies. As Michel-Rolph Trouillot warned in his *Silencing the Past* (1995), "the focus on THE PAST often diverts us from the present injustices for which previous generations only set the foundations (...) no amount of guilt about Germany's past can serve as a substitute for marching in the streets against German skinheads today" (150).

The more pressing question to ask, then, is why an interest in the slave past is emerging now, after centuries of silence. The turn to the past that has characterized also Black Cultural Studies for some decades was criticized, by Walter Benn Michaels and Adolph Reed among others, as a naive entrapment of academics into a neoliberalist agenda, which uses the horrors of the past as a way to divert attention from the problems of the present and does not address slavery as a form of labor. Have acts of remembrance become "tools to pacify the masses by appearing to bring communities to work towards one unifying goal," in an age of economic crisis and growing social conflicts, as Olivette Otele has recently asked? Are all the Black Diaspora artists and writers taking up slavery as a theme inadvertently working at the service of neoliberal capitalism? Does the current flourishing of popular culture products dealing with the slave past, which was heralded by the TV miniseries *Roots* adapted from Alex Haley's novel, erase modern day slavery with period dramas that highlight by contrast the progress made by American blacks? Are *Amistad* (1997), *Beloved* (1998), *Amazing Grace* (2006), *Lincoln* (2012), *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter* (2012), *Django Unchained* (2012), *Belle* (2013), *12 Years a Slave* (2013) and the soon to be released *Birth of a Nation* (2016), not to speak of small screen productions such as *The Book of Negroes/Nobody Knows My Name* (2015), the remake of *Roots* (2016), and *Underground* (2016), to be rubricated under the same heading, "Weapons of Mass Distraction"?⁷ Many recent Hollywood movies can be easily inscribed in the traditional white savior narrative erasing the agency of the slave and in the typical rhetoric of American exceptionalism, where the villain enslavers are not authentic Americans. The same applies to most public memories of the slave past. Yet dismissing all acts of rememory, to use Toni Morrison's well-known coinage, as neoliberal opium of the masses risks erasing the agency of all the black artists and intellectuals who engage the slave past as a conceptual, political and aesthetic tool that can ultimately change the racial state. Criticism of the memorializing turn of our times has

⁶ On public memory of slavery as a controversial site, see the essays in Horton and Horton; Wood, "Refurbishing;" Ebron.

⁷ An article in *The Daily Beast* by writer Allison Samuels, titled "How 2013 Became the Year of the Slavery Film" and listing seven slavery-themed movies coming out on the silver screen the year after the release of *Django Unchained*, reported skeptical comments by filmmakers and critics on the politics of this sudden interest in slavery on the part of the movie industry. Ava DuVernay, for one, underlined the imbalance between contemporary and historical cinematic representation of black people and the utter absence of blacks in science fiction films. Money, she said, goes to projects dealing with the distant past, not to films about today's black America.



certainly a point, but we should not forget that memories are multiple and conflictual and that not all of them can be dismissed as serving a neoliberal agenda.

As Marianne Hirsch's work on postmemory and Alison Landsberg's notion of prosthetic memory have highlighted, memory is not necessarily connected to the first-hand experience of a traumatic event, nor does it need to be based on ethnic or racial belonging. According to Hirsch, the "generation after" bears the trauma of those who came before and their connection to the past "is thus actually mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation" (107). Alison Landsberg's work on the transformation of American remembrance in the age of mass culture argues that the technologies of mass culture make it possible for anyone, regardless of race, ethnicity, or gender, to assimilate the memory of historical events that do not belong to their personal or group experience. Mass cultural forms such as cinema and television can thus become instrumental for a progressive politics based on empathy. They can create a "prosthetic" memory able to transcend the essentialism and ethnic particularism of contemporary identity politics.

When last year a black American musician spoke of past wrongs suffered by his people before a predominantly white Hollywood audience, his speech was anything but congratulatory for America's final achievement of racial justice. I am referring to John Legend's acceptance speech of the Academy Award for the best original song, *Glory*, from the soundtrack of Ava DuVernay's film *Selma*. John Legend's speech came immediately after a less antagonistic address delivered by rapper Common, who had inserted references to the U.S. present in the rap verse he authored for the song ("*That's why we walk through Ferguson with our hands up*"), but chose a global context instead of the domestic stage one might have expected for his indictment of racial violence in his acceptance speech. In Legend's words no progressive narrative of the United States was offered, though the heroic efforts of blacks in the struggle for freedom were celebrated. Slavery, the Civil Rights movement, the continuing vulnerability of African American lives, and their hope and will to act for change, all came together in words that in that context, Hollywood's Dolby Theatre, were remarkable for their antagonism and were met by the silence of most of the audience before the final cathartic applause. Legend refused to sugarcoat the continuing legacy of violence against black bodies in the United States, simply because actors and directors have a reputation for being antiracist and he had received an important award. To an audience used to movies that, when they tackle the issue of U.S. racial past at all, they usually do so within a narrative frame that emphasizes the sacrifice of heroic white men for the freedom of blacks, his words did not allow for the feel-good response these films are meant to trigger.

Here is the most potent passage from his speech:

Nina Simone said it's an artist's duty to reflect the times in which we live. We wrote this song for a film that was based on events that were 50 years ago, but we say *Selma* is now, because the struggle for justice is right now. We know that the Voting Rights Act that they fought for 50 years ago is being compromised right now in this country today. We know that right now, the struggle for freedom and justice is real. We live in the most incarcerated country in the world. There are more black men under correctional control today than were under slavery in 1850.⁸

Legend's words echoed the arguments advanced by legal scholar Michelle Alexander in her widely popular book *The New Jim Crow* (2010).⁹ He quoted almost verbatim her claim that, like slavery in the nineteenth century, today's prison system is a form of racial control, since the war on drugs targets blacks, young black males in particular, who are a large majority of the incarcerated American population. Alexander's thesis that the U.S. racial system has been simply redesigned, not erased, is amply confirmed by available statistics (figures 1, 2, 3).¹⁰

⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U4n4Fy6iyjo>. Last visited October 15, 2016.

⁹ *The New Jim Crow*, which was for months on the *New York Times* bestseller list for nonfiction, has been loudly praised but also strongly criticized for failing to support its otherwise correct thesis with references to radical black thinkers, such as Malcolm X, George Jackson, and Angela Davis, among others, and through a broader analysis of the role played by colonialism and capitalism in the making of the racial state. See Osel and Thomas.

¹⁰ Race and class critiques of the prison as the new plantation, such as Colin (Joan) Dayan's *The Story of Cruel and Unusual* (2007) and Angela Davis's *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (2003), have thoroughly investigated

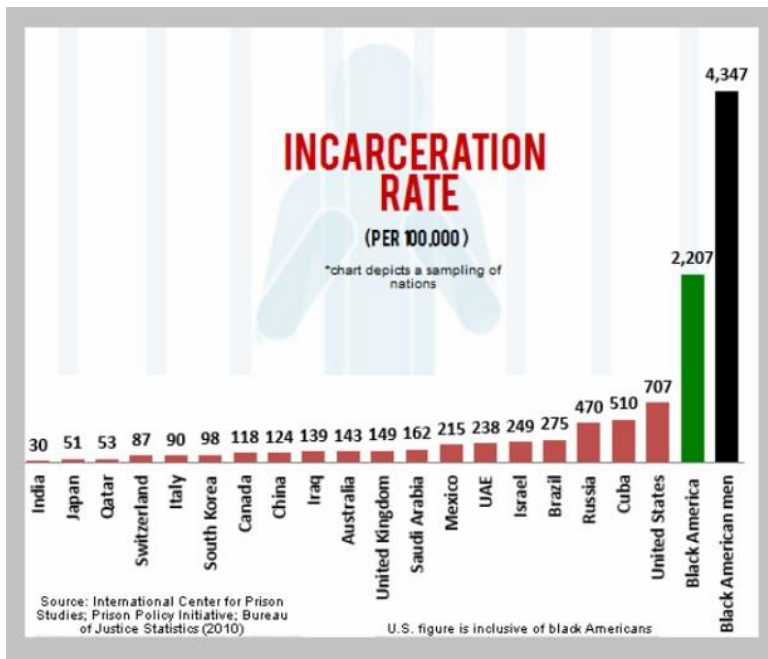
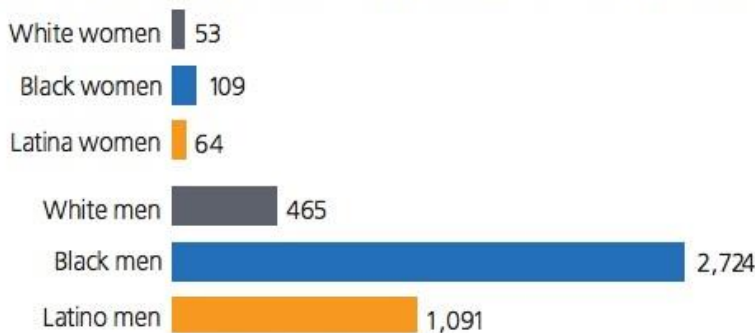


Figure 1

Rate of Incarceration per 100,000, by Gender, Race, and Ethnicity, 2014



Source: Carson, E.A. (2015). *Prisoners in 2014*. Washington, D.C.: Bureau of Justice Statistics.

Figure 2

the close connection of the U.S. prison industrial complex and the institution of slavery. The connection between the prison and the plantation has also been explored by musicians, such as Kendrick Lamar, whose stunning performance of his song “The Blacker the Berry” at the 2016 Grammy Awards presented the rapper and the dancers as members of a chain gang, with the rest of the band playing inside jail cells (the video of the performance is accessible at <https://vimeo.com/156180581>), and visual artists who translate abstract reasonings about the exploitation of inmates’ labor into an adversarial visual culture. An example of images highlighting how closely labor in prison plantation recalls labor under slavery – not only in the skin color of the prisoners, but also in the hierarchical relation between the (white) overseer and the (black) laboring multitude – can be found in the photographs of the prison farm of Angola, by photographers Chandra McCormick and Keith Calhoun. Angola is the country’s largest maximum-security prison in a state where the rate of incarcerated people per capita is the highest in the United States. See Beller.



Trends in U.S. Corrections

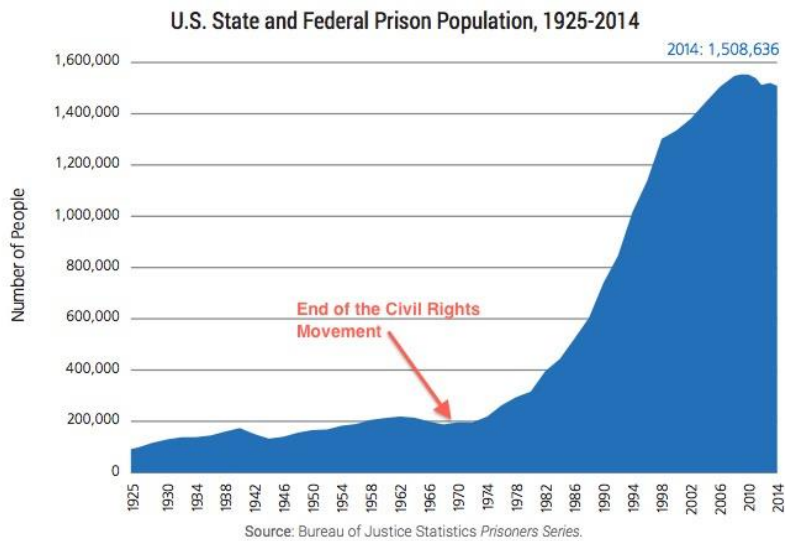


Figure 3

As Stephan Palmié has written in an enlightening essay that questions the opposition between (true) history and (fabricated) memory on which many historians rely,

Increasingly foregrounded as a past pragmatically significant in regard to contemporary social issues and political struggles or meaningful in respect to competing visions of collective futures, slavery gradually (became...) a screen for the projection of diverse and fundamentally contested claims on larger histories. (368)

Revising historical narratives is as much a goal for black activists, intellectuals and artists in the U.S. and other post-slavery nations as addressing the failures of the present. Black diasporans use the memory of the slave past in order to question not only the national master narratives that have made them invisible except as passive recipients of the gift of freedom, but also the current neoliberal narrative which frames them as backward subjects lacking entrepreneurial spirit and clinging to the old notion of the welfare state. Ta-Nehisi Coates, author of the highly praised memoir *Between the World and Me*, which won the 2015 National Book Award, wrote a long essay for *The Atlantic*, "The Case for Reparations" (2014), opposing the idea that blacks are responsible for their poverty with detailed accounts of how African Americans have been plundered of their labor and bodies for centuries: "To celebrate freedom and democracy while forgetting America's origins in a slavery economy is patriotism *à la carte*. Perhaps no statistic better illustrates the enduring legacy of our country's shameful history of treating black people as sub-citizens, sub-Americans, and sub-humans than the wealth gap." Saidiya Hartman, the author of an important autobiographical work analyzing the ways the legacy of slavery affects the everyday life and psyche of African Americans, *Lose Your Mother*, calls this legacy "the afterlife of slavery:"

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 and devalued 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. (6)

Building on the work of W.E.B. Du Bois, Frantz Fanon, Orlando Patterson, Hortense Spillers and Achille Mbembe, the political philosophers and cultural critics known under the name of Afro-Pessimists have



engaged Giorgio Agamben's theory of modern sovereignty and politics, questioning his avoidance of racialization and putting slavery at the center of their reflection on modernity as a radical epistemological move able to dismantle the racial state.¹¹ As Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe wrote in his landmark essay "Necropolitics," slavery was the cradle of modern terror, turning the enslaved African into a paradigmatical *homo sacer*:

Any historical account of the rise of modern terror needs to address slavery, which could be considered one of the first instances of biopolitical experimentation. In many respects, the very structure of the plantation system and its aftermath manifests the emblematic and paradoxical figure of the state of exception. This figure is paradoxical here for two reasons. First, in the context of the plantation, the humanity of the slave appears as the perfect figure of a shadow. Indeed, the slave condition results from a triple loss: loss of a "home," loss of rights over his or her body, and loss of political status. This triple loss is identical with absolute domination, natal alienation, and social death (expulsion from humanity altogether). (21)

Afro-Pessimists argue that slavery, colonialism, lynching, and the U.S. prison industrial complex, a modern day slave plantation relying on the unpaid labor of inmates, constitute integral components of modern terror and politics.¹² In their view the slave *is the homo sacer*, the human being that is deprived of political agency to exist in bare life and is set outside the delimited boundaries of humanity, which is white by definition. They contend that the structural condition of black life is marked by the residual traces of the *slave relation, which can be best summed up as a condition of social death predicated on the fungibility and vulnerability of black bodies*.

Their radical focus on the afterlife of slavery is regarded as controversial and potentially damaging by other scholars in the field of Black Studies, who believe that this kind of epistemological negativity inhibits political action. As Achille Mbembe himself underlined in "Necropolitics," though slaves lived in a condition of social death, this never resulted in the complete erasure of their spiritual life and they continued a parallel cultural existence in a community of their own:

In spite of the terror and the symbolic sealing off of the slave, he or she maintains alternative perspectives toward time, work, and self. This is the second paradoxical element of the plantation world as a manifestation of the state of exception. Treated as if he or she no longer existed except as a mere tool and instrument of production, the slave nevertheless is able to draw almost any object, instrument, language, or gesture into a performance and then stylize it. Breaking with uprootedness and the pure world of things of which he or she is but a fragment, the slave is able to demonstrate the protean capabilities of the human bond through music and the very body that was supposedly possessed by another. (21)

Others, such as Vincent Brown and Fred Moten, although they share with Afro-Pessimists the notion that slavery has shaped the ontology of blackness, as blackness did not exist before the slave trade, yet underline that the agency of the oppressed exists before and is not erased by oppression. They foreground the social life of the slave in spite of imposed social death and highlight resistance to the reduction to bare

¹¹ Afro-Pessimism, a coinage of Frank B. Wilderson, III in *Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (2010), is a recent and controversial theoretical development in black studies building upon Orlando Patterson's notion of social death – i.e. total powerlessness, natal alienation, and the dishonor that derives from these – as characterizing the condition of the slave, and contending that the afterlife of slavery continues to dominate black life. Afro-pessimists, among them in particular Wilderson, Jared Sexton, Saidiya Hartman, and Christina Sharpe, are harshly criticized for "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" (Sexton 2016), as well as for their totalizing views denying the possibility of political action and change. Afro-pessimists, however, deny that the refusal of hope and the "consolation of transcendence" (Wagner 2) equates with the refusal of political action. On this see Sexton 2011.

¹² On the meaning of the phrase prison industrial complex to refer to the criminal justice system, see Herzing.



life in the crevices of enslavement, stressing slaves' cultural and political ability to survive the damaging effects of slavery.

Both sides of this discussion on the afterlife of slavery have merits and liabilities, in my opinion. As Stephen Best has asked, "if we take slavery's dispossessions to live on into the twenty-first century, divesting history of movement and change, then what form can effective political agency take?" In his view, "a sense of racial belonging rooted in the historical dispossession of slavery seems unstable ground on which to base a politics" (454). In spite of Afro-Pessimists' reminders that their claim that slavery is now is a description of the world, and not a choice about the future, their description of anti-black violence as structural of modernity seems indeed to make it an inescapable condition. Pessimism is, in their view, a radical challenge to dominant epistemologies that can bring about change, yet the very same thing can be argued for optimism and the utopian impulse, as Ernst Bloch's work on the emancipatory potential of the principle of hope demonstrates. *Realpolitik*, on the other side, can underestimate the political power of the figurative uses of the slave that is being made in literature and the arts.

The quote in my title comes from Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987). This is the way the protagonist, Sethe, describes the concept of rememory, her idea that the slave past is "never going away" – for "the picture is still there and what's more, if you go there – you who never was there – if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you" (34). "If you go there – you who never was there:" these words sum up one of the most important aims of the rememory of slavery in the arts, that is, creating memories of slavery for those who have no direct experience or connection with it, not only because they are several generations removed from slavery as historical fact, but also because they believe that it is not part of their past.

According to a recent essay by Stephen Best, "On Failing to Make the Past Present" (2012), Toni Morrison's *Beloved* has been crucial in the turn to slavery in African American Studies:

As for when slavery emerged as the constituent object and metaphor in African American studies, I would nominate 1988 as an important turning point. In the advent of that year, significant works had appeared that placed the slave's narrative and habitus at the center of the symbolic order that Hortense J. Spillers would name the "American grammar book" (...) The paragon literary text of this moment was of course Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, which won the Pulitzer Prize in that year – about when the Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers also began to appear. Soon after, Paul Gilroy's *Black Atlantic* (1993) promoted slavery to a unified field theory, which anchored the black experience of modernity in "a continued proximity to the unspeakable terrors of the slave experience." Gilroy's compelling claim for the connection between "living memory and the slave sublime" (187) served many of the same critical ambitions as the Morrisonian proposal that "all of it is now, it is always now." (...) For a distinctive if not singular moment in the history of the interpretive disciplines, a novel set the terms of the political and historiographical agenda. The rise of *Beloved* moved the entire field of literary studies to a central place in African American studies, (...) With Morrisonian poetics as a guide, the black Atlantic provided a way of making history for those who had lost it and as such secured the recent rehabilitation of melancholy in cultural criticism. (456-459)

For Best two dangers lie hidden in this turn to the past: on the one side, the present makes good for the past, that is a narrative of redemption is produced; on the other, paradoxically, there is no healing and a narrative of racial melancholia is produced, which replays over and over the moment of an original disaster (trauma). Best cautions against the current rememorying of slavery, or better the assumed continuity between the enslaved past and the present, which according to him engenders either recovery or melancholy (not to be understood as an equivalent of mourning, which refers instead to the successful acceptance of loss). The contemporary tendency to read the past as trauma and foundation of black diasporic identity, argues Best, is hardly inevitable, indeed it is a fairly recent turn in Black Studies. Via a reading of Morrison's *A Mercy* as an undoing of *Beloved*, in which he finds a sense that "the logic of racial slavery does not fully describe or capture racial injustice in the present" (474), he invites to a different conceptualization of black politics, one more effective in the fight against current forms of "racisms without race" that lie within neoliberalism.



Kenneth Warren makes a similar case for the need for an approach to black literary studies that is aware of its historical development and does not take its current concerns as foreordained in his controversial *What Was African American Literature?* (2011). He argues that while African American literature was once “prospective,” contemporary black writing is “retrospective” and its obsessive preoccupation with the past is the result of nostalgia for the supposedly unified and cohesive black community of Jim Crow times and unwillingness to accept the disappearance of racial particularity after the end of legally sanctioned racial segregation.

While some of Best’s and Warren’s points are well taken, in my opinion neither nostalgia for a unified past nor a melancholic, paralyzing replaying of the trauma of slavery are predominantly behind the current rememory of slavery in literature, the arts and popular culture of the Black Diaspora, but rather what I would call, paraphrasing Paul Gilroy, a poetics of transfiguration focusing on hope and utopianism. Going there, for those who were never there, conjuring an imagined past that expands the finite possibilities of the historical archive by way of literature, films, the arts, or performance, is the only way to change the future. “I know I can’t change the future but I can change the past. It is the past, not the future, which is infinite,” replied Toni Morrison to a question about the genesis of *Beloved* (quoted in Taylor-Guthrie xiii). By changing the past, however, she aims at changing the future. Sherley Anne Williams made two historical characters who had never met become friends in *Dessa Rose* (1986), because she wanted to forge a past she could inhabit, a past that would not be a bleak place of desolation, as she stated in the author’s note to the novel. Toni Morrison takes up the historical events in the life of Margaret Gardner, the fugitive slave woman who killed her children before they were recaptured so as to free them from slavery, and turns it into a narrative that, while conscious of the volitional power of the slave’s choice of death over slavery, follows a different path. Morrison imagines Margaret/Sethe’s final rejection of her former negative liberation through death and describes her choice of rebellion. While Best reads *Beloved* as a meditation on the inescapability of the racial identity produced by slavery, which more than a wound is a ghost haunting the black psyche forever, I prefer to read it as informed by a poetics – and politics – of transfiguration that turns the social death of enslavement into a utopian rebirth. The scene ending with the disappearance of Beloved – where Sethe mistakes Mr Bodwin for the slave hunter coming to recapture her daughter and herself but this time she does not kill Beloved but attacks the man with an ice pick – shows that the past is, as Morrison said, infinite and contains many potential outcomes. Neo-slave narratives are works that rewrite the past not to set the historical records straight, but rather to imagine and bring about a more ethical future by this act of imagination.

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