

MARKUS NEHL, *Transnational Black Dialogues: Re-Imagining Slavery in the Twenty-First Century* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2016), 212 pp.

'Postslavery Studies' might be a more appropriate denominator for this relevant study that appeared in *Transcript's* Postcolonial Studies series and focusses on the ways in which "second generation neo-slave narratives" (32) address the histories of the transatlantic slave trade and chattel slavery in seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and nineteenth-century North America, the Caribbean, Europe, and Africa from distinctly "twenty-first-century perspectives" (19).¹ As the title suggests, in five of its six chapters Markus Nehl's compelling monograph—originally submitted as a dissertation to Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität Münster, Germany, in 2015—analyzes five well-chosen anglophone neo-slave narratives published during the first decade of the new century, discussing the novels' contributions to ongoing transnational dialogues about the African diaspora, the history of slavery, and the role of (anti-Black) violence afflicted on and resisted by enslaved women. Published in close succession between 2006 and 2009, Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*, Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother*, Yvette Christiansë's *Unconfessed*, Lawrence Hill's *The Book of Negroes*, and Marlon James's *The Book of Night Women* not only deal with the historically "white-authored [...] archive of slavery" through fictional writing (16). All of the narratives also speak to what Saidiya Hartman has called "the afterlife of slavery" in the United States (and beyond) today (quoted in Nehl 12).

Consequentially, Nehl begins his well-structured study by briefly embedding its literary corpus into the current social, cultural, and political climate of the United States at the beginning of the new century when the election of the first Black U.S. president in 2008 was followed by the formation of the Black Lives Matter movement (BLM)—under the leadership of the queer Black women Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi

and as a reaction to numerous cases of fatal police violence against young unarmed African Americans, such as Trayvon Martin in 2012 and Michael Brown in 2014 (13-14). Nehl clearly understands the novels he analyzes as important critical interventions into the pressing debate about racism and anti-Blackness in the United States today, a debate that his monograph also inevitably partakes in.

Before delving into the five case studies, the introduction of *Transnational Dialogues* also gives a comprehensive overview over the study of the genre of neo-slave narratives (23-30) and proposes the notion of "a second generation of neo-slave narratives" (23) as a useful concept to describe the corpus at hand and distinguish it from earlier contributions to the genre from the 1960s to the 1990s (30-32). Discussing this new generation of neo-slave narratives that exceeds national boundaries and boundaries between genres, fiction, and non-fiction as well as disciplines, *Transnational Dialogues* contributes to the transnationalization of the study of "contemporary literary negotiations of slavery and the African diaspora" (14). The first chapter establishes the theoretical and methodological framework of *Transnational Dialogues* by following such influential scholars as Stuart Hall, Avtar Brah, Brent Hayes Edwards, and Tina M. Campt. It discusses their diaspora theories in order to develop a "concept of the African diaspora as a conceptual framework and analytical tool" (54) that congenially links the five case studies through a focus on slavery, the African diaspora, and what Campt fittingly calls "the dynamics of difference" (quoted in Nehl 51).

In order to adequately account for "the productive tensions between local specifics and global structures" and "the diversity and complexity of the African diaspora" (17), the case studies are introduced by undergirding contextualizations of the specific historical background that each narrative draws from, be it chattel slavery in the Cape colony in nineteenth-century South Africa for a close reading of *Unconfessed* (113-18) or the "historical developments in North America in the second half of the eighteenth century relevant for Hill's *The Book of Negroes*" (140-44). The case studies then center on close readings, examining the ways in which the narratives recast discourses about the African diaspora and slavery thematically and stylistically. Nehl identifies various intertextual discussions "with African diaspora theory, slave narra-

¹ Here, I understand Postcolonial Studies as critical work on the history of colonialism and its legacies and analogize it with critical work on chattel slavery and its legacies. For a more nuanced conceptualization of the term 'postslavery,' see Christina Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2010).

tives, earlier neo-slave narratives and African American literature more generally” (27-28) that contribute to the novels’ eponymous transnational dialogue. In Hartman’s *Lose Your Mother*, for instance, Nehl observes a “powerful re-negotiation of Paul Gilroy’s concept of the black Atlantic and the discourse of roots tourism in Ghana” (81) and discusses Black America’s debates about its varied relations to post-independence Ghana by contrasting Hartman’s narrative with Alex Haley’s *The Roots: The Saga of an American Family* (1976) and Maya Angelou’s *All God’s Children Need Travelling Shoes* (1986) (82-84).

The transnational dialogue that Nehl discerns in his corpus, thus, concentrates “on the meaning of home, on the complex interplay between ‘routes’ and ‘roots,’ on (power) differences and hierarchies within and between black diasporic groups as well as on the enduring legacy of slavery” (54). Most importantly, however, this dialogue very quickly conveys a fault line based on which Nehl builds a bold argument about the “aesthetic and ethical challenge of how to re-imagine slavery from twenty-first-century perspectives” that involves “the (ultimate) impossibility of recovering the (female) slave’s voice and filling the gaps in the historical records” through writing (19). Based on differences in the writers’ approaches to the difficult task of narrating chattel slavery and the experiences of enslaved women, Nehl identifies a divide between the work of Black feminist writers Morrison, Hartman, and Christiansë on the one hand, and the works of the Black Canadian author Hill and the Jamaican writer James on the other. Nehl does not pretend to disinterestedly observe this divide from a neutral perspective. By drawing on Hartman’s research in *Scenes of Subjection* (1997) and “Venus in Two Acts” (2008), he clearly subscribes to what he calls “the ethics of narration” (16)—ethics which, Nehl contends, the narratives *A Mercy*, *Lose Your Mother*, and *Unconfessed* have aesthetically addressed with great success, not least through their intertextual involvement with the influential first-generation neo-slave narrative *Beloved* (1987).

Based on Sabine Broeck’s pointed re-reading of the critical reception of Morrison’s *Beloved* as “kitsch” readings, *Transnational Dialogues* convincingly proposes to read Morrison’s later novel *A Mercy* as well as Hartman’s and Christiansë’s narratives as writing against “interpretations of *Beloved* that are

based on notions of overcoming, healing and redemption” (20-21). Nehl argues that, “[i]nstead of naively and uncritically celebrating the reconciliatory power of twenty-first-century fiction, they shed light on the devastating nature of slavery to reflect on ‘what lived on from this history,’ to use Hartman’s words” (21). As the first three case studies successfully show, Hartman, Morrison, and Christiansë “warn against an easy appropriation of black history and draw attention to the impossibility of working through the past in order to heal the wounds of slavery” (21). They do so by adopting narrative strategies such as non-linearity, multi-perspectivity, and narrative fragmentation as well as by resisting “the temptation to fill in the gaps and silences of the archive” (36). Like *Beloved* before them, these more recent female-authored neo-slave narratives fundamentally question the ‘narratibility’ of the traumas of slavery and the possibility of its overcoming as well as the recuperation of lost voices.

Hill and James, however, Nehl openly criticizes for “writ[ing] themselves into the commercially successful tradition of female-authored neo-slave narratives” while neglecting “the aesthetic and ethical challenge” involved in writing a literary archive of enslaved women’s suffering and resistance as well as “the theoretical intricacies involved in ‘the practice of speaking for others’ (Linda Alcoff)” (23). In his attempt to recover voices and complex experiences of enslaved women in North America and to highlight “the liberating power of the act of writing,” Hill, for example, not only employs a linear, “melodramatic” and “fairy-tale” like plot (23) with a strong autodiegetic narrator who works towards narrative coherence and closure where, as Morrison, Hartman, and Christiansë would have it, there is none. Hill also, Nehl contends, “offers an unconvincing teleological conception of history and a reductive reconciliatory interpretation of eighteenth-century black life” (22) while rightfully questioning the possibility of returning to an ancestral home and the notion of Canada as a safe haven for fugitives (136, 144). James’s narrative exhibits yet another problem, Nehl maintains with Hartman and Hortense Spillers, by explicitly “representing scenes of subjection and torture [afflicted on the enslaved woman’s body] in a pornographic way” that “subjects the enslaved to a second act of victimization and abuse, reducing his (female) characters to objects of

voyeuristic desire” (22-23). Nehl identifies, for instance, the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845) as well as Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940) as central intertexts for James’s neo-slave narrative and its take on different forms of violence during slavery (175-76; 185-87).

By foregrounding “black experiences of loss, dispossession and grief without losing sight of forms of black agency and resistance” (21), Nehl further makes the case that *Lose Your Mother, A Mercy, and Unconfessed* not only write from “black feminist perspective[s]” (68, 110) that James and Hill fail to regard. Morrison, Hartman, and Christiansë also “engage in a dynamic dialogue” with Afro-Pessimism about the “thingification (Aimé Césaire)” of Black being (21). This argument that Nehl incidentally also extends to his close reading of *The Book of Night Women* is an important and comprehensible one to make since Hartman’s aforementioned research in *Scenes of Subjection* and “Venus in Two Acts”—that Nehl also references—have been very influential for the development of Afro-Pessimism.² While the discussion of diaspora studies and the concept of neo-slave narratives is comprehensively elaborated and then successfully harnessed for its close readings, however, *Transnational Dialogues*’s involvement with this radical trajectory of contemporary Black Studies remains too limited to give further direction to its otherwise theoretically well-underpinned and convincing interpretations.

Especially in its discussion of violence in *A Mercy, Unconfessed, and The Book of Night Women*, a more detailed engagement with Afro-Pessimism’s concept of anti-Blackness would have enabled a deeper understanding of the ways in which anti-Black violence is addressed in the novels under scrutiny. It would also have reduced the risk of blurring the line between anti-Blackness and other forms of violence. Afro-Pessimists such as Frank Wilderson argue that the anti-Black violence of enslavement and criminalization has been unleashed gratuitously against Black bodies,

² See, e.g., Patrice Douglass and Frank B. Wilderson, III, “The Violence of Presence: Metaphysics in a Blackened World.” *The Black Scholar: Journal of Black Studies* 43.4 (2015): 117-23, esp. 119; Frank B. Wilderson, III, *Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2010).

i. e. without the necessity of prior acts of transgression of legal or moral rules, and produced and continues to reproduce Black being as socially dead.³ Anti-Black violence is therefore fundamentally different from other forms of violence, such as resistance against, flight from, and refusal of anti-Black violence that Nehl calls “counter-violence” in chapter six as well as the violent consequences anti-Blackness has had within Black communities during slavery and its afterlives that Nehl describes with the controversial term “intra-black violence” in chapters two, three, and five.⁴ Yet, with its totalizing claims, an Afro-Pessimist perspective also leads to rigorous interrogations of many more fundamental concepts that hold the study under review together, such as the concepts of Africa and of diaspora.⁵ Thus, Afro-Pessimism proves unsuitable as a supplementary approach as it puts forward in Wilderson’s words “a different conceptual framework, predicated not on the subject-effect of cultural performance but on the structure of political ontology” that helps to theorize “the unbridgeable gap between Black being and Human life.”⁶

In its current form, Afro-Pessimism emerged at the same historical moment of Barack Obama’s presidency, BLM, and the publication of the second-generation of neo-slave narratives under scrutiny in this study.⁷

³ For an Afro-Pessimist take on anti-Black violence, see, e.g., Douglass and Wilderson 117, 119, 122; and Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black* 11, 75.

⁴ On the concept of the “intramural” as an alternative to “intra-black,” see, e.g., Frank B. Wilderson, III and Jaye Austin Williams, “Staging (Within) Violence: A Conversation with Frank Wilderson and Jaye Austin Williams.” *Rhizomes* 29 (2016): n. pag, par. 59, endnote 14. On Black diasporic resistance as fugitivity and refusal, see, e.g., Tina M. Campt, *Image Matters: Archive, Photography, and the African Diaspora in Europe* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2012) 80, 112; and Tina M. Campt, *Listening to Images* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2017) 10, 32.

⁵ See Frank B. Wilderson, III. “Grammar and Ghosts: The Performative Limits of African Freedom.” *Theatre Survey* 50.1 (2009): 119-25, esp. 119-20, 124.

⁶ Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black* 57.

⁷ The most influential work of Afro-Pessimism so far, Wilderson’s *Red, White and Black*, was published in 2010.

In 2016, when Obama left the White House and Donald Trump, who heavily relies on support from openly racist and white supremacist groups, was elected as 45th U.S. president, the genre of neo-slave narratives has registered further growth with innovative novels such as Colson Whitehead's *Underground Railroad* and Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing*. Clearly, *Transnational Dialogues* is an important contribution to the study of this new generation of neo-slave narratives that continues to develop with no end in sight as it engages the history and afterlife of chattel slavery on a transnational

level, recasting the African Atlantic at the beginning of a still young century from nuanced 'postslavery' perspectives. *Transnational Dialogues* successfully shows both with its thorough contextualizations and its in-depth analyses how these narratives speak of and to this world in which we live today by writing about the transatlantic world in the time of slavery—work that seems more pressing than ever, or rather, as Hartman, Morrison, and Christiansë would have it, as urgent as ever.

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