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Slavery's Afterlife in Text and Image

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Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-slavery Subjects by Christina Sharpe. Perverse Modernities, edited by Jack Halberstam and Lisa Lowe. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010. Pp. 272, 21 illustrations. \$79.95 cloth, \$22.95 paper.

In Christina Sharpe's book *Monstrous Intimacies*, there is the palpable sense of the total encompassing of black subjectivity, part and parcel of slavery's brutality, its horrendous intensity, and its transnational legacy. Explicitly linking visual and literary texts across slave nations and imperial registers, Sharpe is invested in exploring "how freedom and slavery are performed" and adhere to a set of intimate relations (familial, sexual, national) informing social and political arrangements (5). "Thinking about monstrous intimacies," Sharpe writes in her introduction, "means examining those subjectivities constituted from transatlantic slavery onward and connected then as now, by the everyday mundane horrors that aren't acknowledged to be horrors" (3). The lack of visibility of the "mundane horrors" is what links her project with Saidiya Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (1997), as both books highlight the *terror*, *making*, and *self-making* that necessarily produce and extend racial trauma.

While Sharpe pairs texts that do not immediately adhere to the structures of slavery's recognizable imprint (Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* [1975], Isaac Julian's *The Attendant* [1993 film], Bessie Head's *Maru* [1971]), upon deeper examination it is precisely these imprints, according to Sharpe, that allow the

measure of postslavery memory to propel itself in specific (rhetorically, imagistically) manifestations. Visuality is central in *Monstrous Intimacies* (as it is for Hartman in *Scenes*) to the ways in which bodies are read and inscribed, subjected, and delineated.

In the introduction, Sharpe carefully lays out the stakes of freedom's cloaking mechanism: "that is, freedoms for those people constituted as white . . . produced through an other's body" and thus creating slaves out of slaves and molding freedom through unfreedom (15). She uses two case studies to tether these paradigms to a larger discourse of gender and restraint: Frederick Douglass's writings concerning the beating of his aunt Hester, and Essie Mae Washington-Williams's memoir of racial lineage as the "outside" daughter of the Southern segregationist Strom Thurmond. From the middle of the nineteenth century through the earliest part of the twenty-first century, spatial and familial lineage breeds violence and engenders human indifference. Like the Charles Chesnutt short story "The Dumb Witness" (1897), slavery's legacy is both literally and figuratively that of multiple inculcations of violated bodies. The servant in Chesnutt's story "seemed a bit younger than the man" (her owner, her brother?), but "her face was enough like his, in a feminine way, to suggest that they might

be related in some degree, unless this inference was negated by the woman's complexion, which disclosed a strong infusion of darker blood."¹ Since in the story she speaks the unspeakable—the violations against her body by this man, her brother—to his beloved future wife (the wedding is called off), she is silenced. At first she cannot speak, then she refuses to. But much like any slave on any plantation, she knows where the bodies are buried, as well as the treasure. Such proximity and violated intimacy, Sharpe's books seems to say, is the space of profound articulations of irony and imagery, and the perfect place to parse out racialized subjectivities often rendered invisible.

The first chapter extends out from the introduction to deepen the exploration of the import of slavery-as-incest narrative. Examining the quintessential representation of this narrative, Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*, Sharpe asserts, "Jones writes out something like a *Corregidora* complex; an Oedipus complex for the New World" (29). Indeed, it makes sense to begin *Monstrous Intimacies* with Jones's novel, for it is within this text that the horrendous layering of incest, racial hegemony, enslavement, and eventual "self-making" takes place.

Using *Corregidora* and the diaries of former US Senator John Hammond, Sharpe writes, "The formerly enslaved faced a present

in which most other possible lives for them were rigorously foreclosed at all levels of society; in which their freedom was only nominal" (37). This thread of "nominal freedom," woven throughout *Monstrous Intimacies*, provides the text with its overarching concern: an articulation of what Sharpe calls "the materialized affective relations of slavery within freedom" (38). These "relations" or proximities allow for Sharpe to mark out disparate yet interlocking geographies of black subjectivity, all converging on the fertilized underbrush of violence.

This attention to the racialized visibility of the traumatic event of slavery and its afterlife is how Sharpe's work tethers itself to the careful scholarly trajectory cemented by Hazel Carby, Hortense Spillers, Jennifer Morgan, and Saidiya Hartman. That visibility is part of the directive of a black Atlantic trajectory that highlights the impact of the racialized body as text, as read and reread but also watched and heard.

Her second chapter links Besie Head's novel *Maru* with the visual and corporeal marginalization rendered through fragmented subjectivities (Saartjie Baartman's, for instance), blending an elegant meditation on racialized hegemonies that cross national borders and produce contingent forces of unbelonging.

Each of the next two chapters extends the centrality of "nominal

freedom" attending cultural productions that are connected to Sharpe's resonant contingent concerns. In Isaac Julian's presentation of what she calls "calcified modes of seeing and understanding," Sharpe reads *The Attendant* through the lens of archive, empire, and slavery's sadomasochistic queering of black masculinity (113). Building on the disturbances of race, gender, and sexuality that become more visceral in their layering, more violent in their repetitive articulations, the third chapter explores Julian's film for what it reveals of the "repressed, of the disavowed, and the emergence of the uncanny" (117). Placed within the temporal scene of slavery's afterimagined brutality and performativity, Julian's film is imagined alongside the famous 1833 painting by Françoise-Auguste Biard (*Slaves on the West Coast of Africa* [1840]) situating museum archives as violent encounters of culling and collecting that extend the difficult reconciliation of slavery's profundity within the contained space of rigid compartmentalization.

Sharpe's final chapter is perhaps the most vivid visual articulation of her concerns, using the art of Kara Walker and her infamous silhouettes to interrogate the all-encompassing burden of slavery on all of its participants, white and black, free and enslaved. Early in the final chapter (provocatively titled "Kara Walker's Monstrous

Intimacies”), Sharpe reveals a disturbing tendency: “The majority of critics, readers, and reviewers,” she argues “regardless of their diegetic reading of the work, locate its signifying effect almost exclusively on black people,” leading to continual misreadings and misrecognitions around the postslavery subject and the postslavery articulation of trauma (154). “I read Walker’s cut-outs as representing a violent past that is not yet past,” says Sharpe, “in such seductive forms that black and white viewers alike find themselves, as if against their will, looking and looking again” (156). Thus, *Monstrous Intimacies* uses Walker’s art to invoke the stark white/black contrasts in this final chapter that do not allow for the interstices of carving (slaves out of slaves) and

making (freedom through unfreedom), as a visualization of the rubrics of slavery’s cultural, historical, and residual productive deployments.

Kimberly Juanita Brown is a visiting scholar in gender and sexuality studies at the Pembroke Center, Brown University. Her upcoming book, The Repeating Body: Slavery’s Visual Resonance in the Contemporary (Duke University Press, in press), examines the gendered manifestations of slavery’s memory. She is an interdisciplinary scholar working at the intersection of feminist theory, literatures of the black diaspora, and visual culture studies (particularly photography).

NOTE

1. Charles W. Chesnutt, *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales*, ed. Richard H. Brodhead (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 159–60.