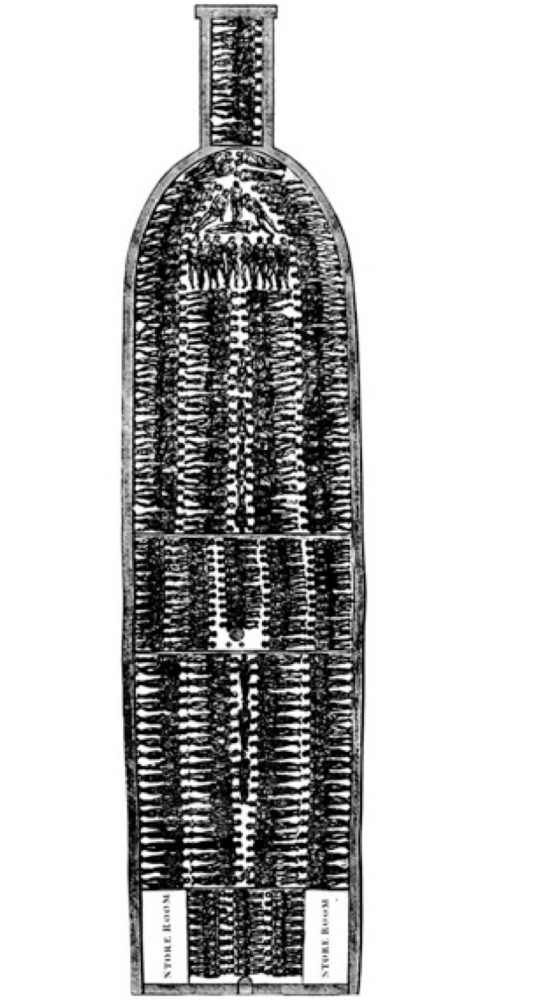


Hank Willis Thomas, 2003

The neo-slave narrative

Rememorying Slavery in Literature and Culture

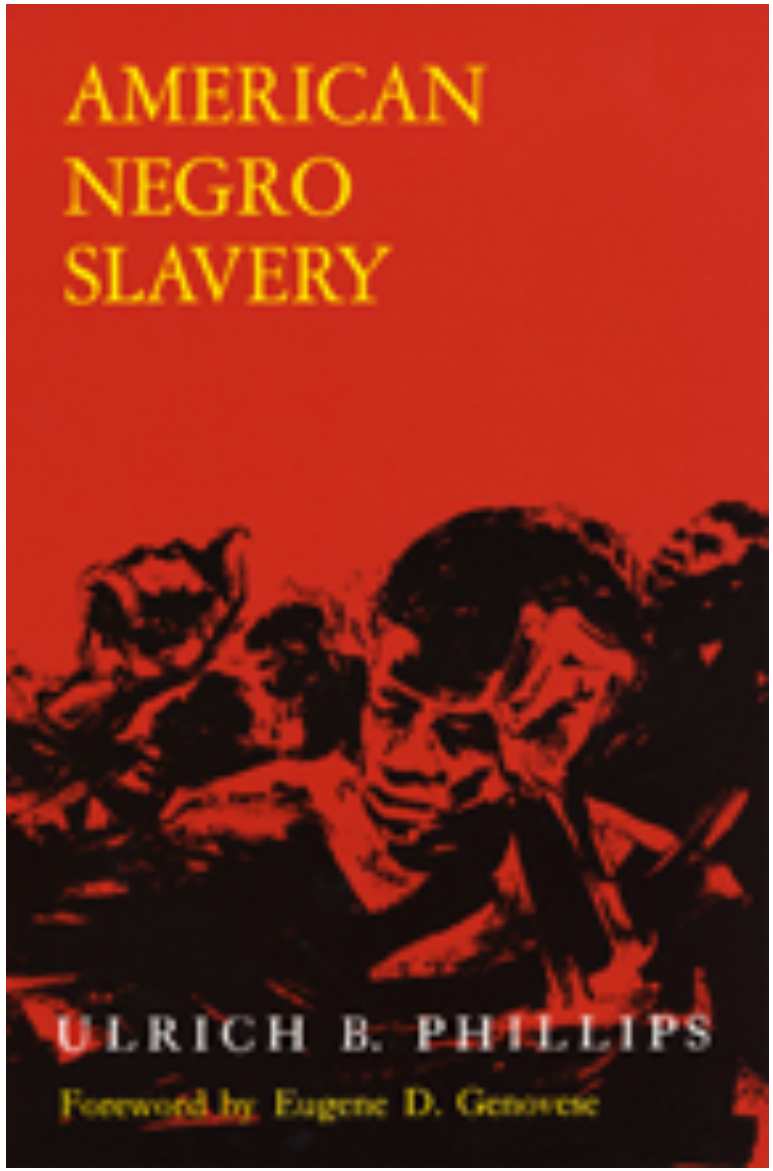
Historiography of Slavery Before the Civil Rights Era

Three dominant studies:

Ulrich B. Phillips, *American Negro Slavery: A Survey of the Supply and Employment of Negro Labor as Determined by the Plantation Regime,* 1918.

Kenneth Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-bellum South*, 1956.

Stanley Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life*, 1959.



Early Historiography of Slavery: A Civilizing Institution

From the late nineteenth century through the 1950s the historical literature on slavery was dominated by the analysis of Ulrich B. Phillips, who was the first major historian of the South and the "peculiar institution." Southern-born and trained in Southern universities, Phillips wrote the first systematic analysis of slavery but his interpretation reflected the slave owner's view and portrayed slavery as a mainly benevolent patriarchal institution which had given civilization to savage Africans. The pre-1960s historiography of slavery mainly focused on a single research question: What did slavery do for the slave? The answer was that slavery had lifted the slaves out of the barbarism of Africa, Christianized them, protected them, and generally benefited them. While *American Negro Slavery* was attacked soon after its publication by black scholars, it was only in the 1950s and 1960s that a new generation of white scholars took Phillips' depiction of slavery to task.

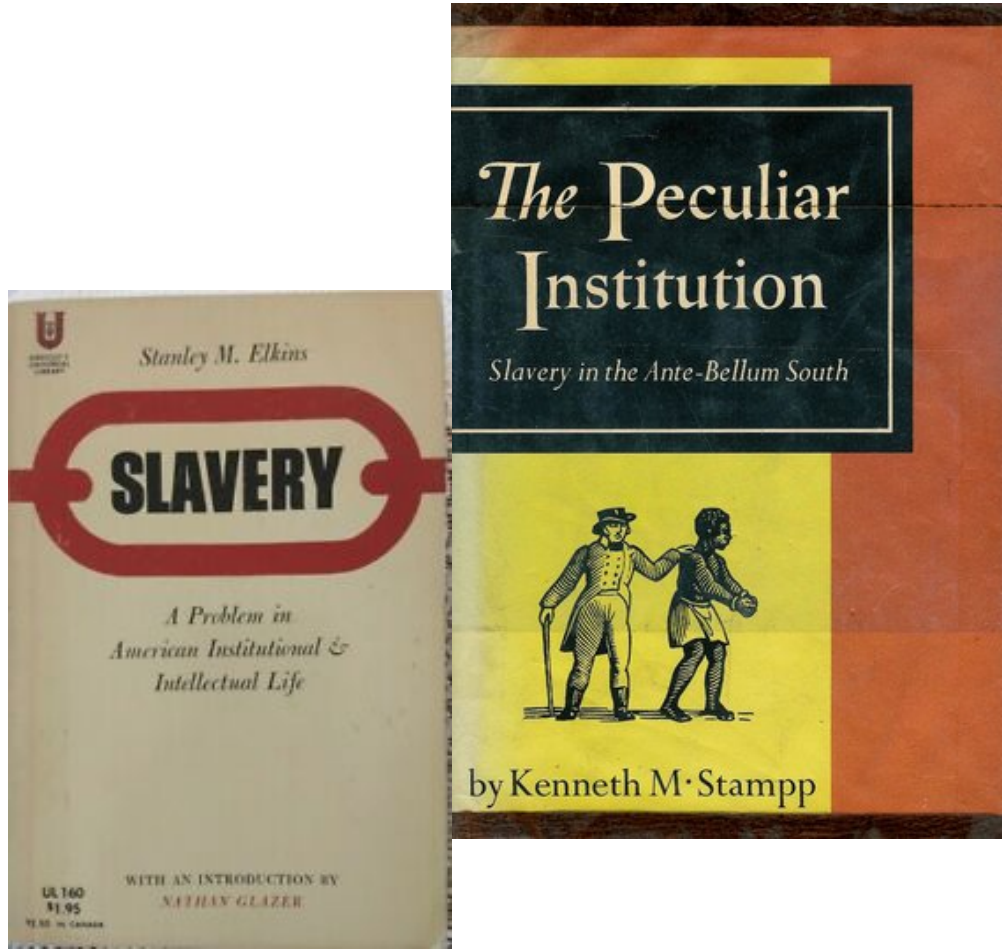
People With Neither Culture nor History

> It is a striking fact of the intellectual history of the American negroes that they have preserved no vestige of tradition regarding the concrete ancestral life in Africa, and likewise the children of the slaves...[have] retained very slight knowledge of their parents. ...Typical negroes are creatures of the moment, with hazy pasts and reckless futures.

Phillips shared the dominant idea that enslaved Africans had not retained their original cultures in the Americas – but in the twenties and thirties anthropologists such as Melville Herskovitz started to look for evidence of the existence of continuity between African cultures and the slaves' traditions and the idea of cultural retentions triggered important research on African American folklore

Historiography of Slavery Starts to Change: A Dehumanizing, Oppressive Institution

The Phillips school of slavery historiography was not limited to the South. Samuel Eliot Morison and Henry Steele Commager, of Harvard and Columbia Universities respectively, also spread the traditional interpretation in a leading college textbook of the era. At mid-century, however, historians began to view slavery more critically, because of the increasing visibility of the existence of a race problem in the US. Amid the Supreme Court's decision in Brown v. Board of Education, the Montgomery bus boycott, and other stirrings of civil rights activism, the view of slavery as a benign, civilizing institution for an inferior race began to crumble. A new question was asked: What did slavery do to the slaves? As the research of Kenneth Stampp and others answered, slavery was above all a harsh and profitable system -- so harsh and all-encompassing, according to Stanley Elkins, that it destroyed slaves' African culture and left them passive and dependent on their masters for their culture and identity.



Kenneth Stampp

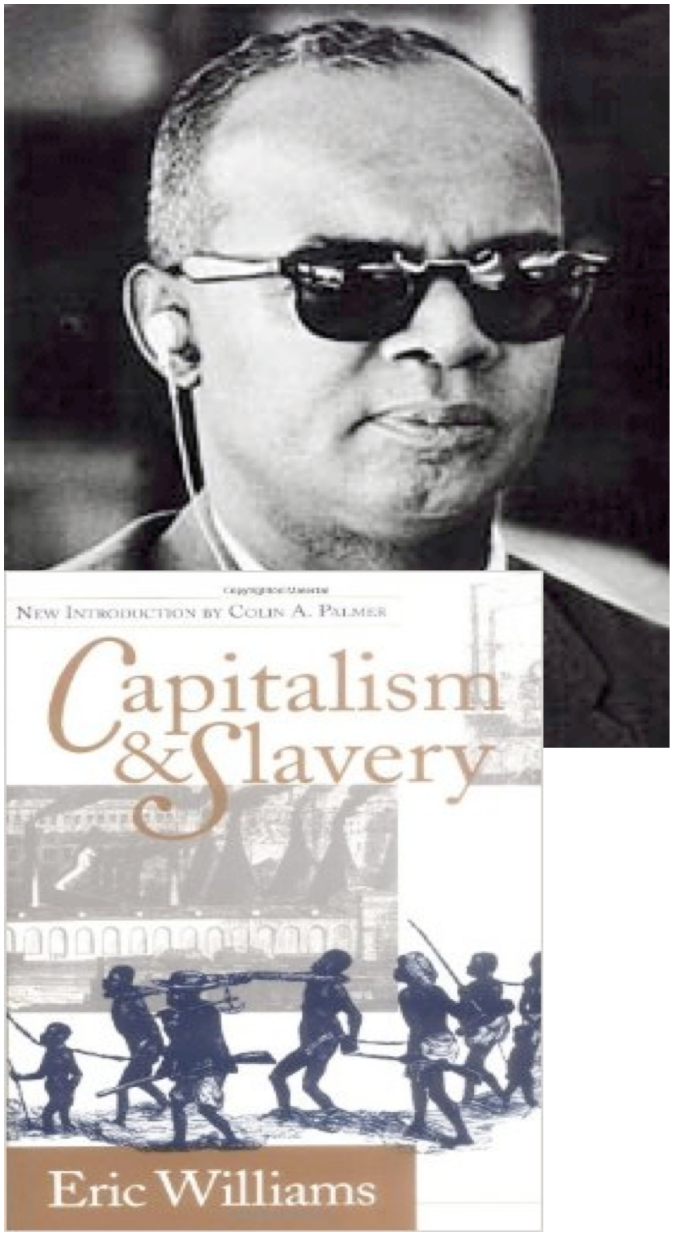
Stampp's 1956 book challenged most aspects of Phillips's view. He uncovered and emphasized many harsh aspects of slavery. Writing as the civil rights movement was winning legal victories, he rejected Phillips's ideas of Blacks' racial inferiority and underlined their struggles to achieve freedom. In this his study started to challenge the myth of a docile, childish, contented, happy-go-lucky slave

Stanley Elkins

Writing a few years after Stampp, Elkins revived the "Sambo" image of the slave presented by Phillips, but while Phillips had said blacks were Sambos by nature so slavery was good for them as they were in the care of white people, Elkins said slavery turned blacks into Sambos. The effect of slavery was to create the Sambo type. Slaves were cut off from African culture and language and were prevented from forming family ties. Men were deprived of authority over their children. Elkins compared the condition of slaves to concentration camp prisoners.

Early Historiography of slavery

- 1908: U.B. Phillips, *American Negro Slavery*: slavery was unprofitable and archaic but acted as a civilizing force on African Americans
- 1956: Kenneth Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution*: slavery was not paternalistic (for the slaves own good), but a practical, violent system of controlling and exploiting labor
- 1959: Stanley Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life*: the first historian to look at the psychological impact of slavery rather than economics; erasure of native cultures, comparison with concentration camps, infantilization of black subjects through violence



Modern scholarship on the relationship between British capitalism and Caribbean slavery has been profoundly influenced by Eric Williams's 1944 classic, *Capitalism and Slavery*. Eric Williams was born in Trinidad and graduated in history from Oxford. His doctoral dissertation was the first academic work to question the idea that the British abolition of the slave trade and slavery was a victory of the humanitarian ideals of the West. He became a political leader, led his native country to independence and became the first prime minister of Trinidad and Tobago.

Post-1960s Historiography of slavery

- “Sambo” as a model slave personality, a docile being whose psychological oppression had emasculated and infantilized him and left him without culture or community. Objecting to such a characterization, a generation of historians set about to discoverevidence of black culture, community, family, creativity, and identity thriving within slavery. From John Blassingame, Eugene Genovese, Herbert Gutman to Deborah Gray White, Ira Berlin, and David Brion Davis, scholars shifted the focus from patterns of domination to the “slave community” and its cultural resistance
- 1976: Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*
- African retentions / interaction with white masters’ cultures >hybrid forms > diasporic cultures
- peculiarity of black culture as influenced by the slavery context and West African cultural heritages: language and the arts (signifyin’, double codes), family (othermothers, matrilinearity), orality, church etc.

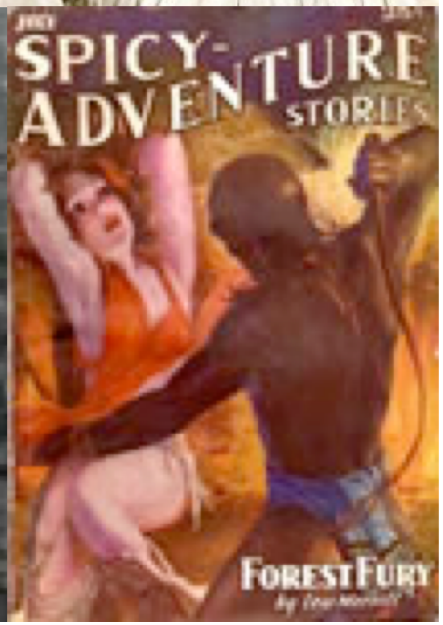
Contemporary Historiography of Slavery

- recognition of the centrality of slavery and race in the American experience: not just in the South, but in the North too
- New sources: slave narratives, demographics, quantitative analysis, comparative history
- Slavery as varied and complex experience, that changed over time and was influenced by gender, class and locale; differences in master/slave relationships depending on many factors: plantation size, crops, field vs house slaves, city vs rural areas
- From black and US South history to national and world history; from archaic retention, anachronism and paradox to foundational for American democracy and capitalism
- Slavery and the making of modernity: at the very heart of modernity, for both economic (sugar, cotton, tobacco) and cultural (displacement, double consciousness, Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*) reasons
- Slavery produced racism in order to legitimize itself

Historiography vs popular culture

- minstrel show: Sambo, Jim Crow, Mammy, Uncle Tom, Jezebel
- The black rapist
- Yes, it was a national sin but the US atoned for it by means of a bloodshed and gave blacks their freedom
- All those involved have long been dead
- It has nothing to do with the present situation of black Americans. They always play the slavery and race card to excuse their failures.
- 1997 and 2000: Congress rejects Tony Hall's proposal of an apology for the enslavement of African Americans

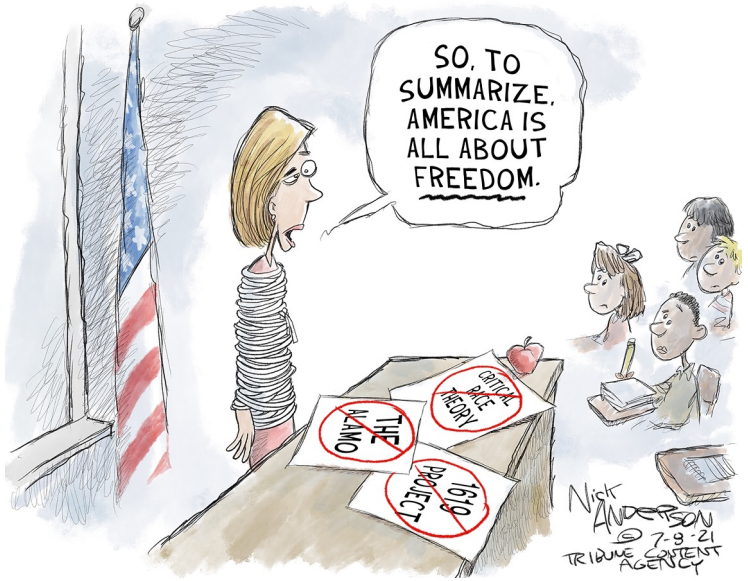

[Aunt Jemima in 1921]

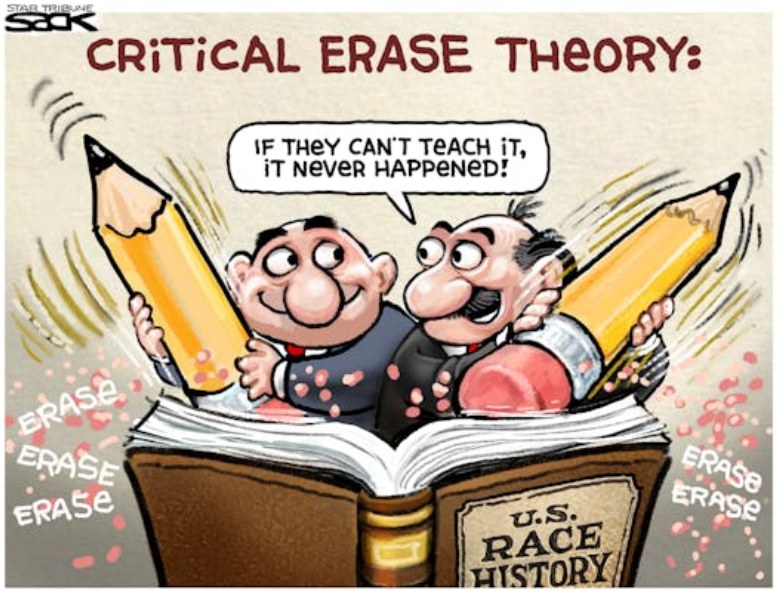


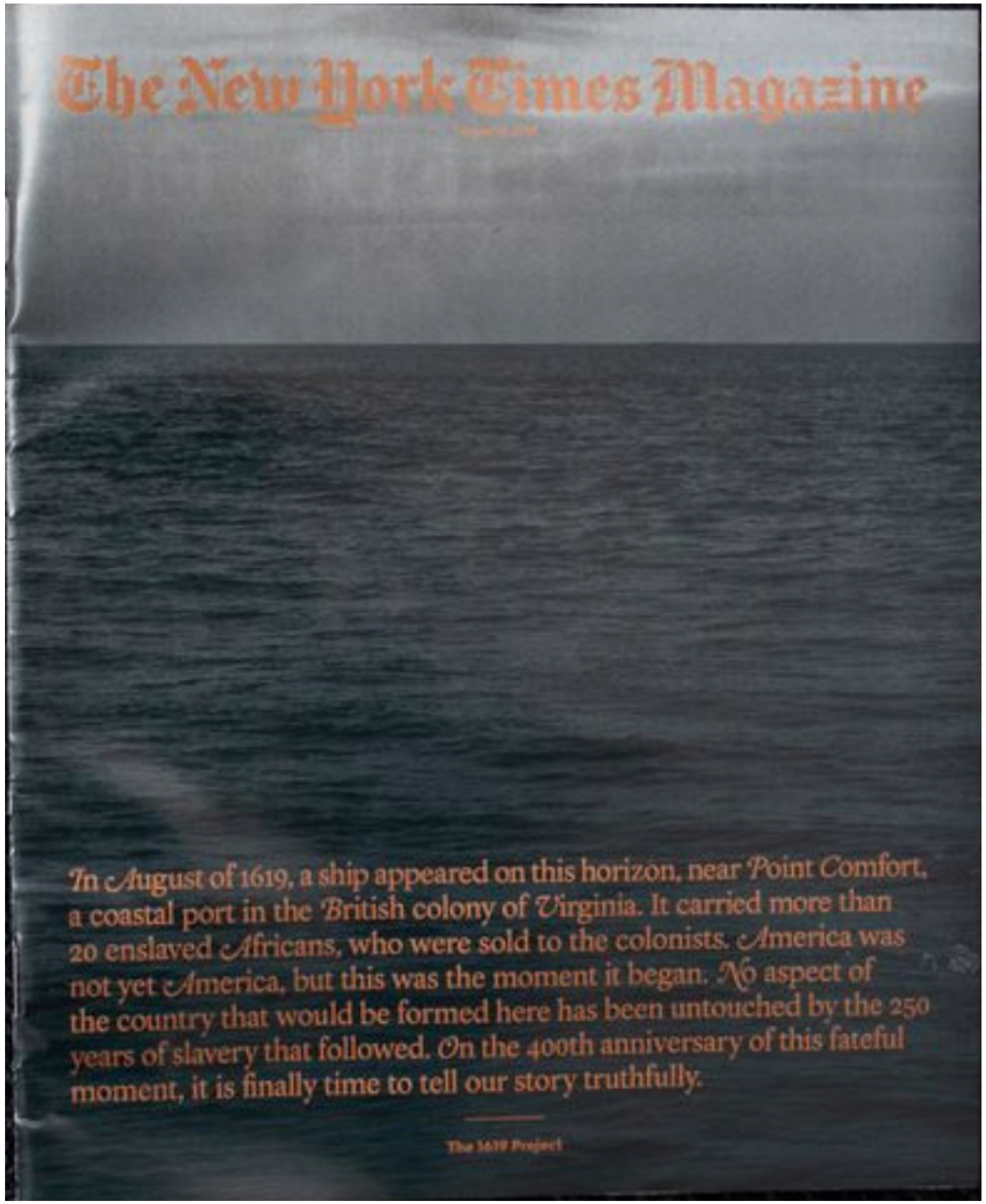
Rememorying Slavery

American public culture is characterized by a large void for what concerns slavery. While the historiography of slavery has changed dramatically since the 1950s, showing it as a national, not local, problem that is the root cause of the conditions of African Americans today and of the persistent racism of the American society, for many white US citizens "black" problems (unemployment, poverty, higher crime rate and mortality rate, lower education, drug addiction etc.) depend on the "anomaly" of blacks, who are unfit for democratic citizenship, and racism was a Southern problem solved by the Civil Rights Movement.

Because racism is not regarded by the mainstream as systemic and produced by the centuries of enslavement and segregation, many white Americans object to reparations and affirmative action. In the last years, Trump and Republican politicians have attacked Critical Race Theory as "divisive and unpatriotic."






The New York Times Magazine
In August of 1619, a ship appeared on this horizon, near Point Comfort, a coastal port in the British colony of Virginia. It carried more than 20 enslaved Africans, who were sold to the colonists. America was not yet America, but this was the moment it began. No aspect of the country that would be formed here has been untouched by the 250 years of slavery that followed. On the 400th anniversary of this fateful moment, it is finally time to tell our story truthfully.
The 1619 Project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It is not a year that most Americans know as a notable date in our country's history. Those who do are at most a tiny fraction of those who can tell you that 1776 is the year of our nation's birth. What if, however, we were to tell you that this fact, which is taught in our schools and unanimously celebrated every Fourth of July, is wrong, and that the country's true birth date, the moment that its defining contradictions first came into the world, was in late August of 1619? Though the exact date has been lost to history (it has come to be observed on Aug. 20), that was when a ship arrived at Point Comfort in the British colony of Virginia, bearing a cargo of 20 to 30 enslaved Africans. Their arrival inaugurated a barbaric system of chattel slavery that would last for the next 250 years. This is sometimes referred to as the country's original sin, but it is more than that: It is the country's very origin.

Out of slavery — and the anti-black racism it required — grew nearly everything that has truly made America exceptional: its economic might, its industrial power, its electoral system, diet and popular music, the inequities of its public health and education, its astonishing penchant for violence, its income inequality, the example it sets for the world as a land of freedom and equality, its slang, its legal system and the endemic racial fears and hatreds that continue to plague it to this day. The seeds of all that were planted long before our official birth date, in 1776, when the men known as our founders formally declared independence from Britain.

The goal of The 1619 Project, a major initiative from The New York Times that this issue of the magazine inaugurates, is to reframe American history by considering what it would mean to

regard 1619 as our nation's birth year. Doing so requires us to place the consequences of slavery and the contributions of black Americans at the very center of the story we tell ourselves about who we are as a country.

Perhaps you need some persuading. The issue contains essays on different aspects of contemporary American life, from mass incarceration to rush-hour traffic, that have their roots in slavery and its aftermath. Each essay takes up a modern phenomenon, familiar to all, and reveals its history. The first, by the staff writer Nikole Hannah-Jones (from whose mind this project sprang), provides the intellectual framework for the project and can be read as an introduction.

Alongside the essays, you will find 17 literary works that bring to life key moments in African-American history. These works are all original compositions by contemporary black writers who were asked to choose events on a timeline of the past 400 years. The poetry and fiction they created is arranged chronologically throughout the issue, and each work is introduced by the history to which the author is responding.

A word of warning: There is gruesome material in these pages, material that readers will find disturbing. That is, unfortunately, as it must be. American history cannot be told truthfully without a clear vision of how inhuman and immoral the treatment of black Americans has been. By acknowledging this shameful history, by trying hard to understand its powerful influence on the present, perhaps we can prepare ourselves for a more just future.

That is the hope of this project.

Our founding ideals of liberty and equality were false when they were written. Black Americans fought to make them true.

Without this struggle, America would have no democracy at all.

By Nikole Hannah-Jones

Artwork by Adam Pendleton

This erasure of slavery from memory is not unique to the US, but it is common to the whole Western world. Other countries of the Americas, however, have been more willing to celebrate black freedom fighters and acknowledge the contribution of black citizens in the public space. In the last few decades, however, something has begun to change, first in the realm of culture, literature, film, visual arts, and later increasingly at the level of institutions. The idea that the refusal to acknowledge the role played by slavery in the making of the West is one of the reasons why racial relationships are even more difficult than they used to be, is gradually gaining ground in the public opinion. The need to build a public memory of slavery, in order to change misperceptions of Afrodescendants and to accept the notion of a common responsibility for slavery and racial segregation, has become more visible thanks to the cultural productions of the Black diaspora.

Do-Ho Suh, “Unsung Founders Memorial,” University of North Carolina

Bussa Statue, Bridgetown, Barbados

Institutions in the US and elsewhere have been making statements in which they publicly express regret, apologize and, above all, acknowledge the connections between past and present.
On 28 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.** Recognizing the ever lasting effect of slavery in the modern world, 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.”

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. In July 2008 the House of Representative 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.” A similar **non-binding resolution** was passed by the Senate in June 2009. Non-binding means that it offers no reparations and it is craftily worded so as to offer no ground for legal suits.

The Slave Route

Since its launch in 1994, the UNESCO Slave Route Project has contributed to the production of innovative knowledge, the development of high-level scientific networks and the support of memory initiatives on the theme of slavery, its abolition and the resistance it generated.

At the international level, the project has thus played a major role in "breaking" the silence surrounding the history of slavery and placing this tragedy that has shaped the modern world in the universal memory.

Today, among its major objectives, the project contributes to "de-racialising" our vision and "decolonising" our imaginations of the world by

- deconstructing the discourses based on the concept of race that justified these systems of exploitation,
- promoting the contributions of people of African descent to the general progress of humanity, and
- questioning the social, cultural and economic inequalities inherited from this traged

Monument to Slaves, Zanzibar

Emancipation Park, Kingston, Jamaica

2012 proclaimed “Year of African-American Heritage Tourism”

“Cultural and Heritage tourism is one of the fastest growing segments of the hospitality/tourism industry. Coupled with the growing African-American travel market, a heritage trail highlighting the achievements of African Americans will have a positive impact on our state’s economy…”

Document planning the Louisiana African American Heritage Trail (2007), qtd in Jonathan Scott Holloway, *Jim Crow Wisdom* (2013)

Heritage travel for African Americans includes a variety of United States destinations. Every major city across the United States and every rural town in the south and other regions have rediscovered their African American roots and compete with each other for the tourist dollar. Whereas Europe, the Caribbean, Latin America, and Canada have also constructed African American tourist destinations, arguably the most moving destination is to journey back to the continent of origin—heritage travel to Africa. African nations such as Senegal and Ghana have responded to this interest of the African diaspora in returning to its roots.

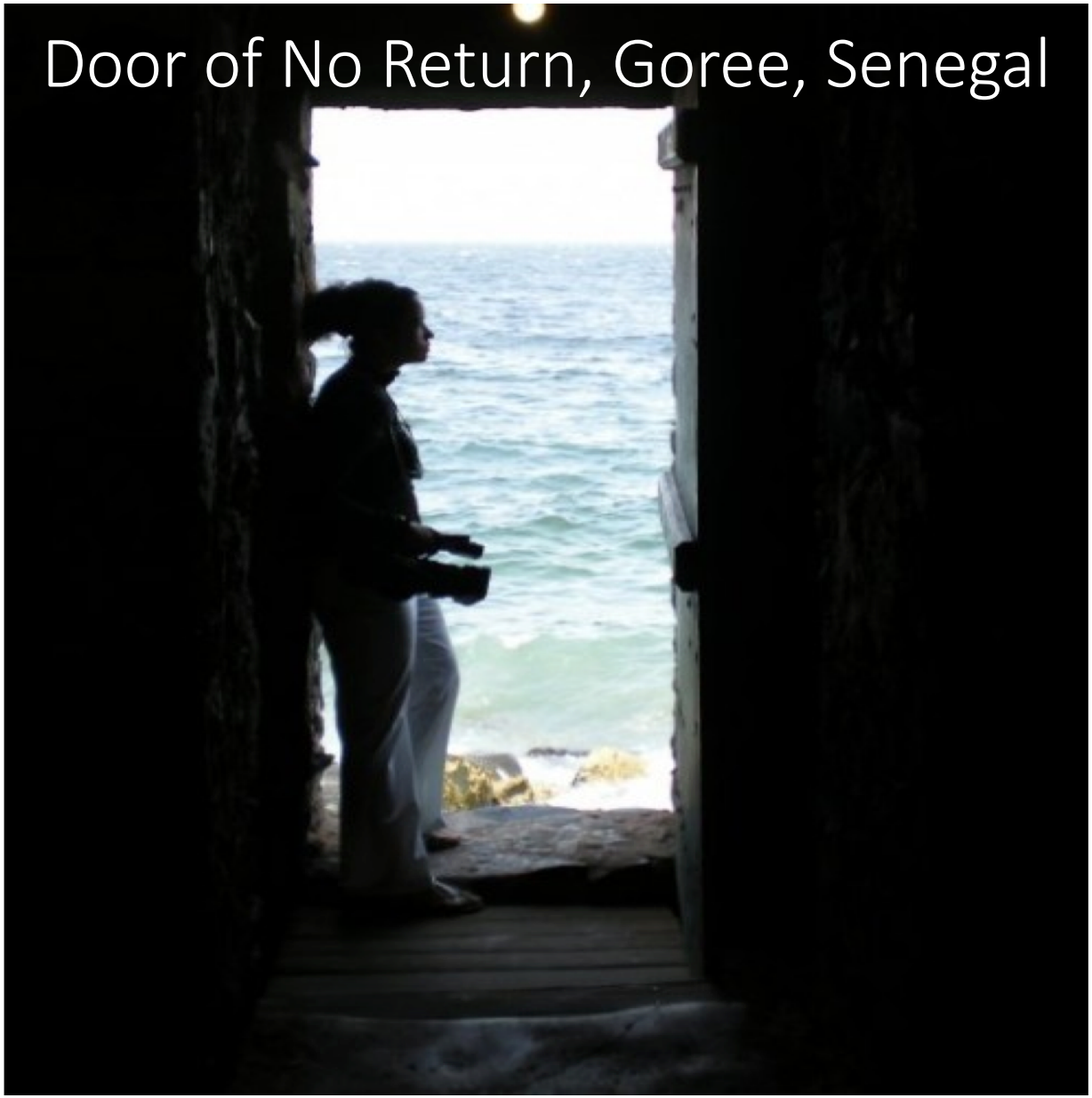
Encyclopedia of Race and Racism, ed. John Hartwell Moore, vol. 3, 2008

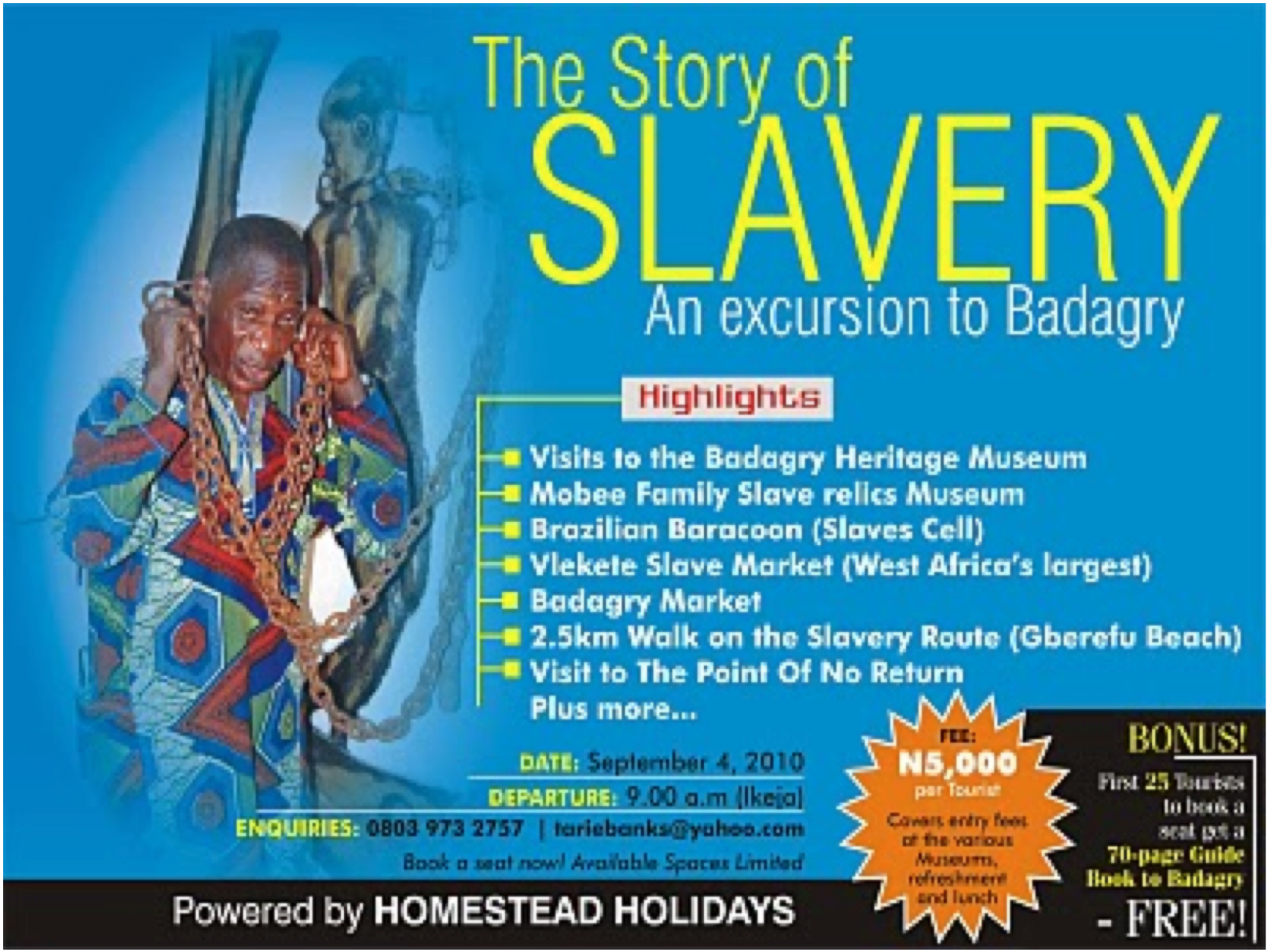
Thanatourism:
tourism involving locations associated with death and suffering

- 1. Travel to watch death (public hangings or executions)
- 2. Travel to sites after death has occurred (Auschwitz)
- 3. Travel to internment sites and memorials (graves and monuments)
- 4. Travel to reenactments
- 5. Travel to synthetic sites at which evidence of the dead has been assembled (museums)

Slavery, Contested Heritage and Thanatourism, eds. Graham M. S. Dann and A. V. Seaton, 2001

Cape Coast castle, Ghana


Door of No Return, Goree, Senegal


The Story of
SLAVERY
An excursion to Badagry
Highlights
Visits to the Badagry Heritage Museum
Mobee Family Slave relics Museum
Brazilian Baracoon (Slaves Cell)
Vlekete Slave Market (West Africa's largest)
Badagry Market
2.5km Walk on the Slavery Route (Gberefu Beach)
Visit to The Point Of No Return
Plus more...
DATE: September 4, 2010
DEPARTURE: 9.00 a.m (Ikeja)
ENQUIRIES: 0803 973 2757 | tariebanks@yahoo.com
Book a seat now! Available Spaces Limited
FEE:
N5,000
per Tourist
Covers entry fees at the various Museums, refreshment and lunch
BONUS!
First 25 Tourists to book a seat get a 70-page Guide Book to Badagry
- FREE!
Powered by HOMESTEAD HOLIDAYS

Rememorying in the Arts

In the last few decades a large number of Black Atlantic artists in many different creative media (from fiction to poetry, from film to the performing arts) have taken up slavery as an "aesthetic" subject, that is to say as a theme to be explored not only with the tools of historiography and similar disciplines belonging to the realm of the rational and aiming, at least in theory, at objective truth, but rather with the tools that belong to the realm of emotions and "the possible". The meaning of this act of "rememorying" – a neologism created by Toni Morrison – is more complex than what is implied in the sheer appreciation of history, since it highlights the "gaps in the archive", which have to be filled through memory and imagination. In this it questions the very idea of history in Western culture as a discourse based on facts; it is also crucial to African Americans and the nation at large because of its value as therapy; that is to say, the need to go back to the slave past is not only a means to know more about the blacks' own history, rewrite the national narrative and correct the misrepresentations of slavery which still influence the present; retelling the past works as a healing therapy from the trauma of a past which still haunts African American people and projects a more equitable future.

Betye Saar, I'll Bend, But I Will Not Break (1998)

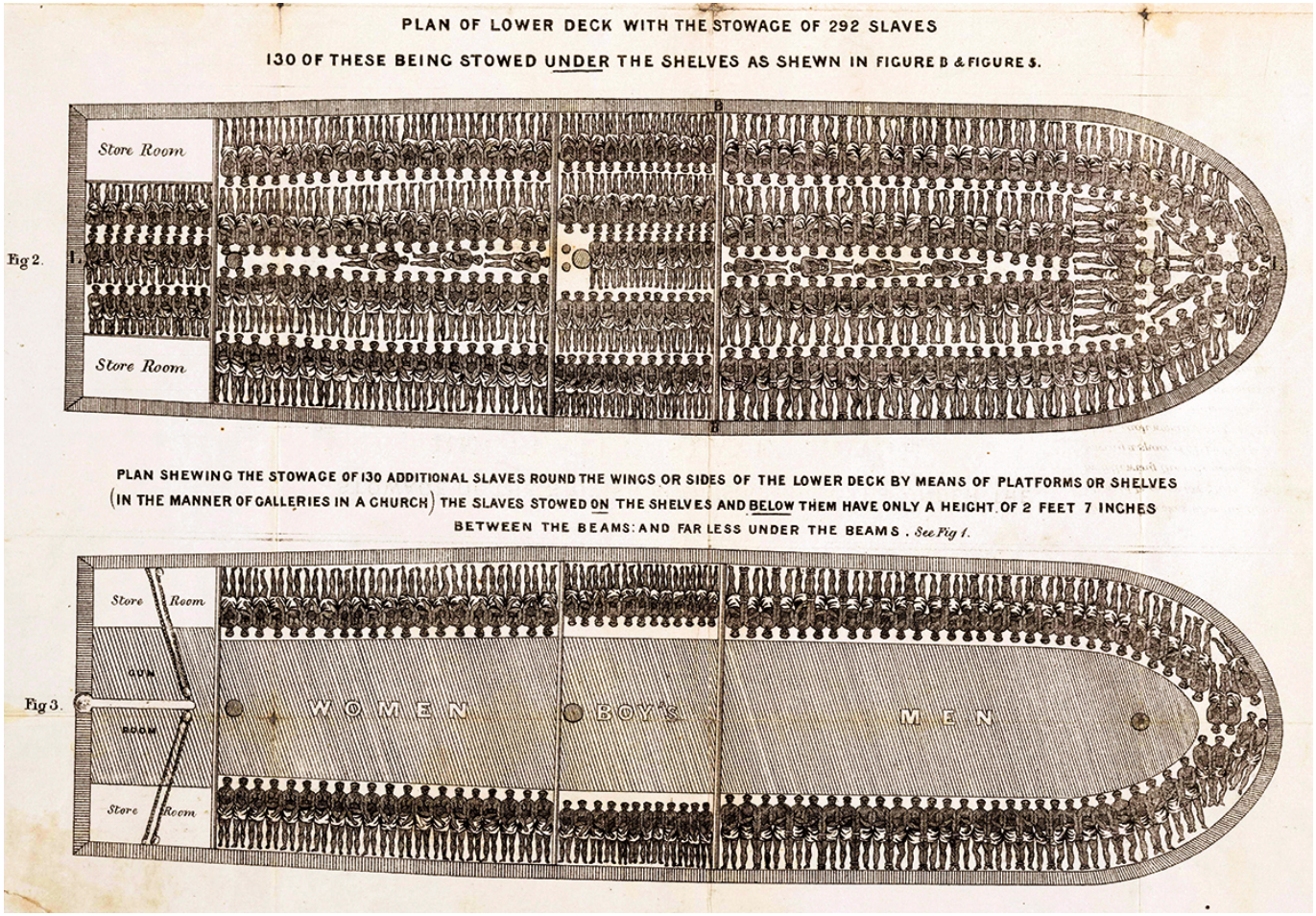
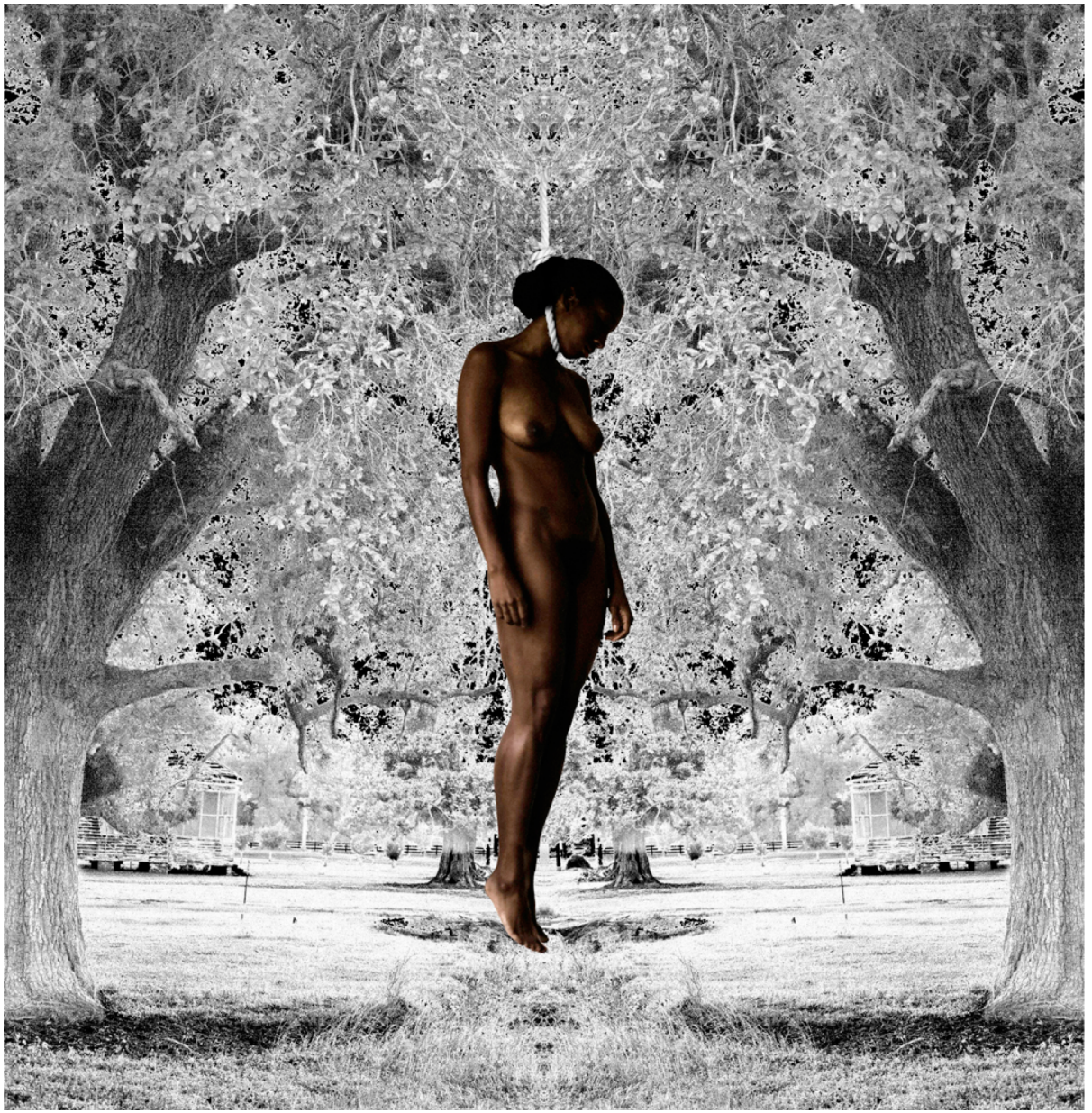


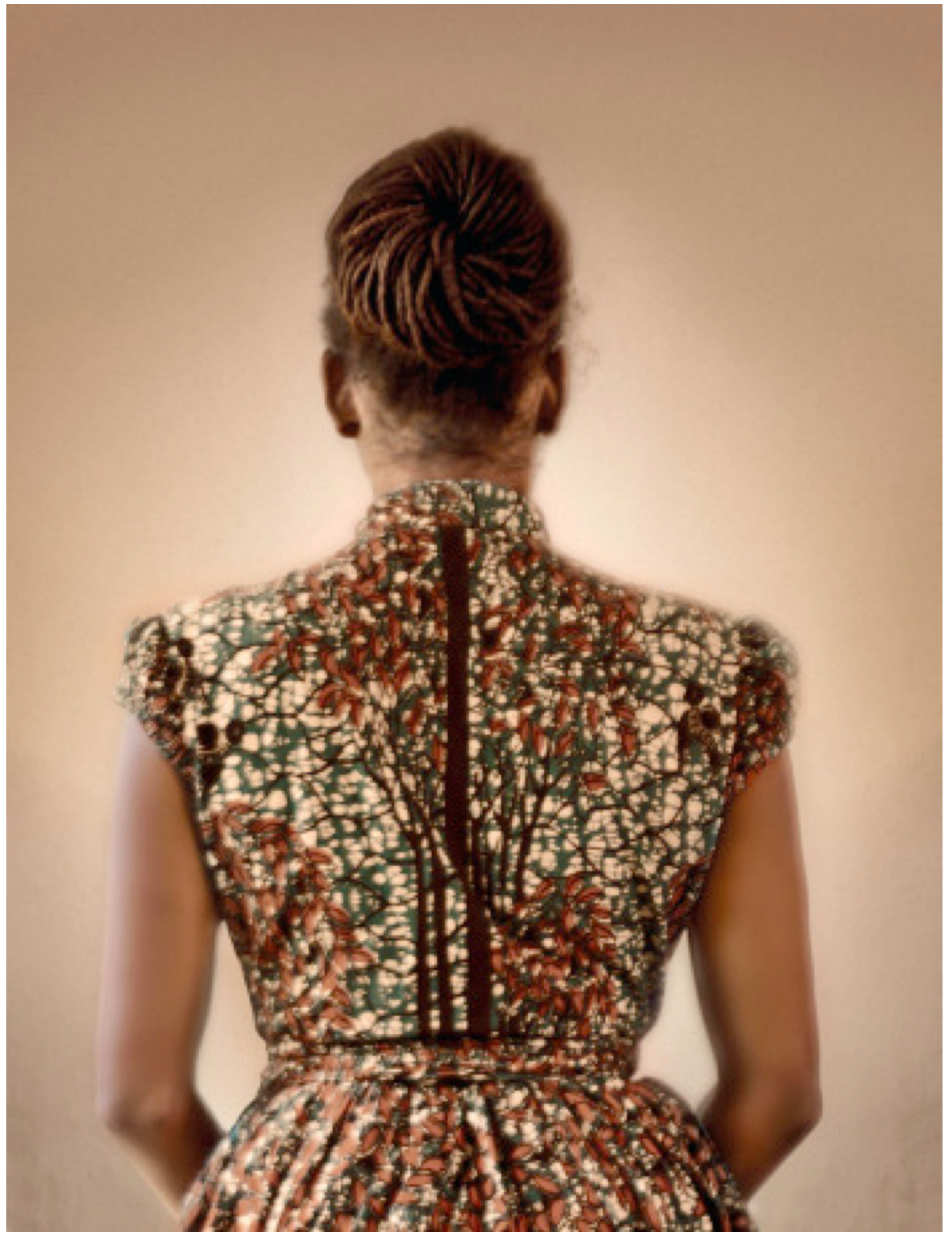
Diagram of the Brookes, 18th century

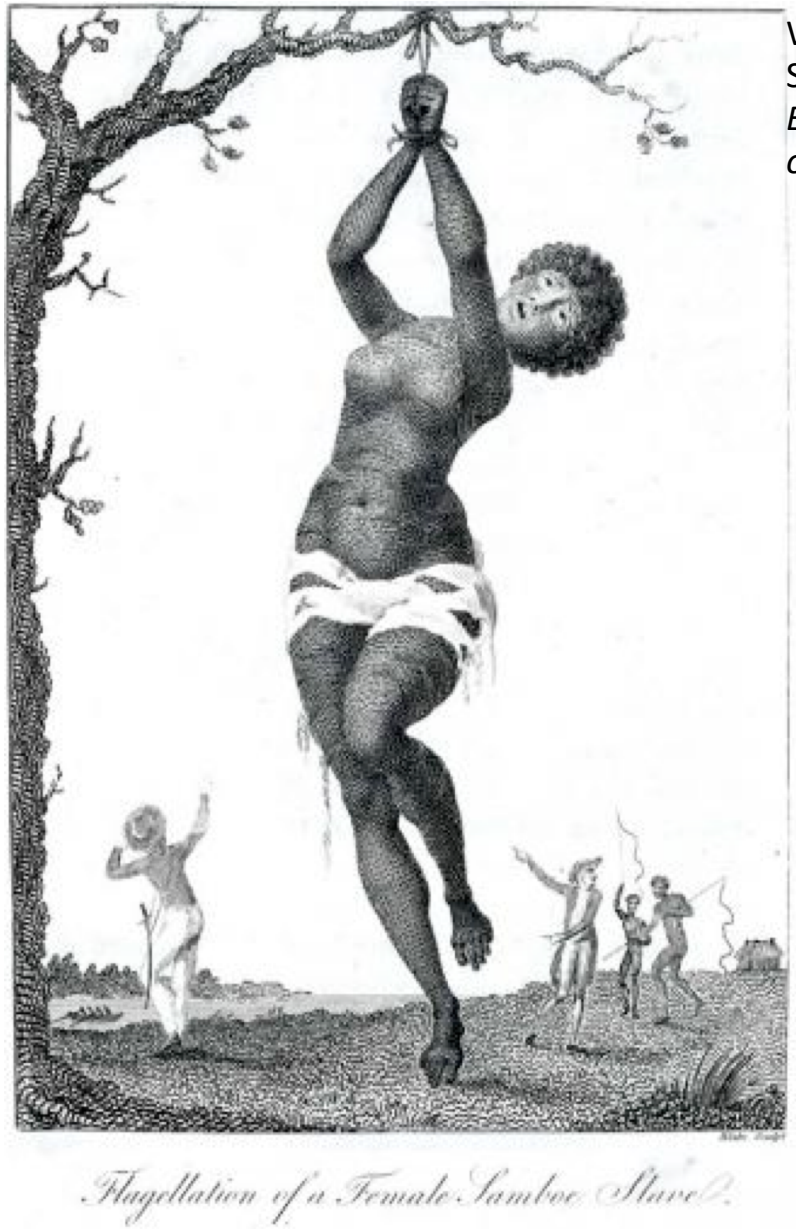
Lamine Barro, “Goree on the Slave Route: from memory to forgiveness”. The exhibition consists of miniature figurines which recount the history of the slave trade and slavery with a perspective of forgiveness without forgetting.

Ayana V. Jackson *Death*, 2013



Ayana V. Jackson, *Case 33 VI*, 2013

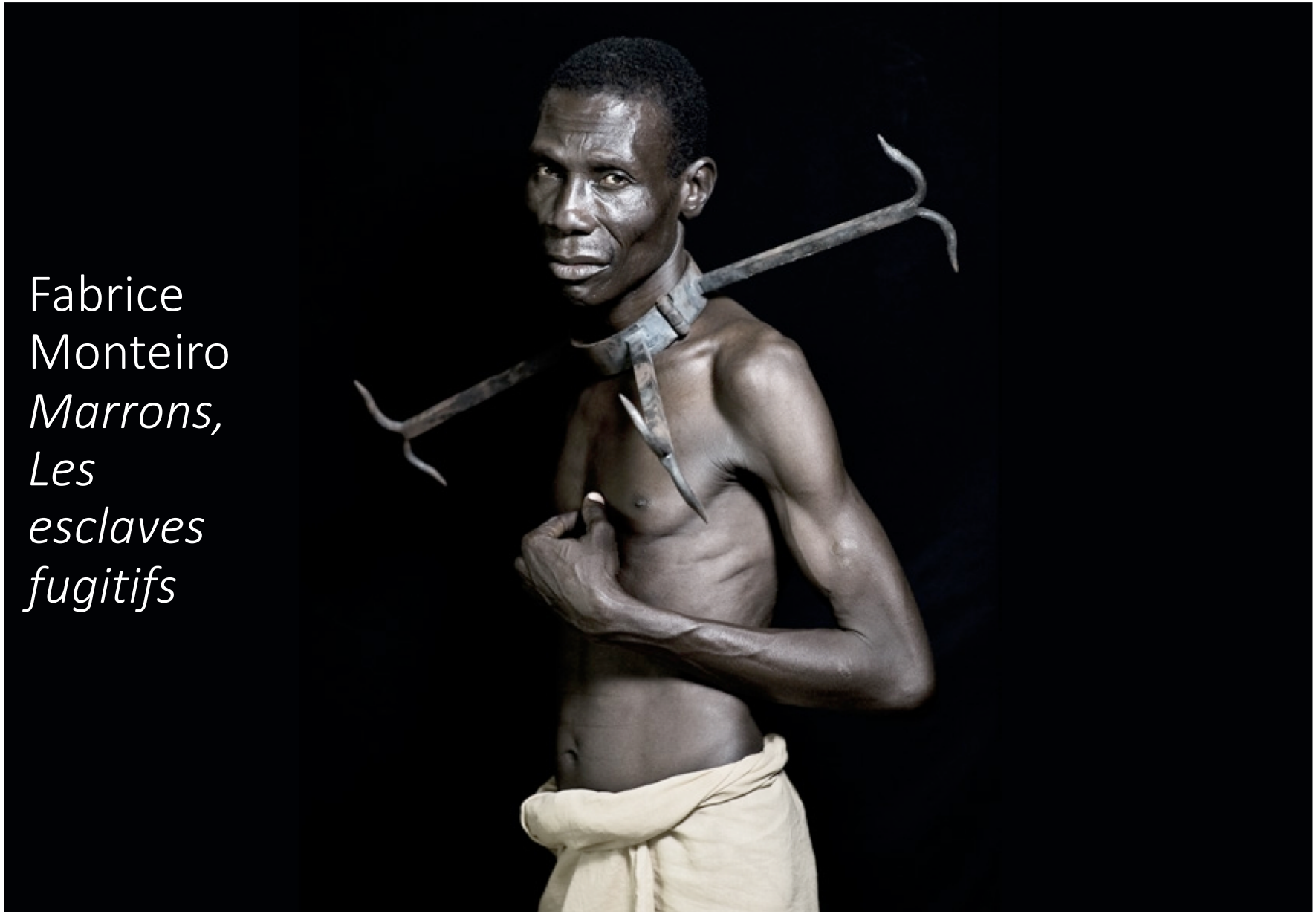


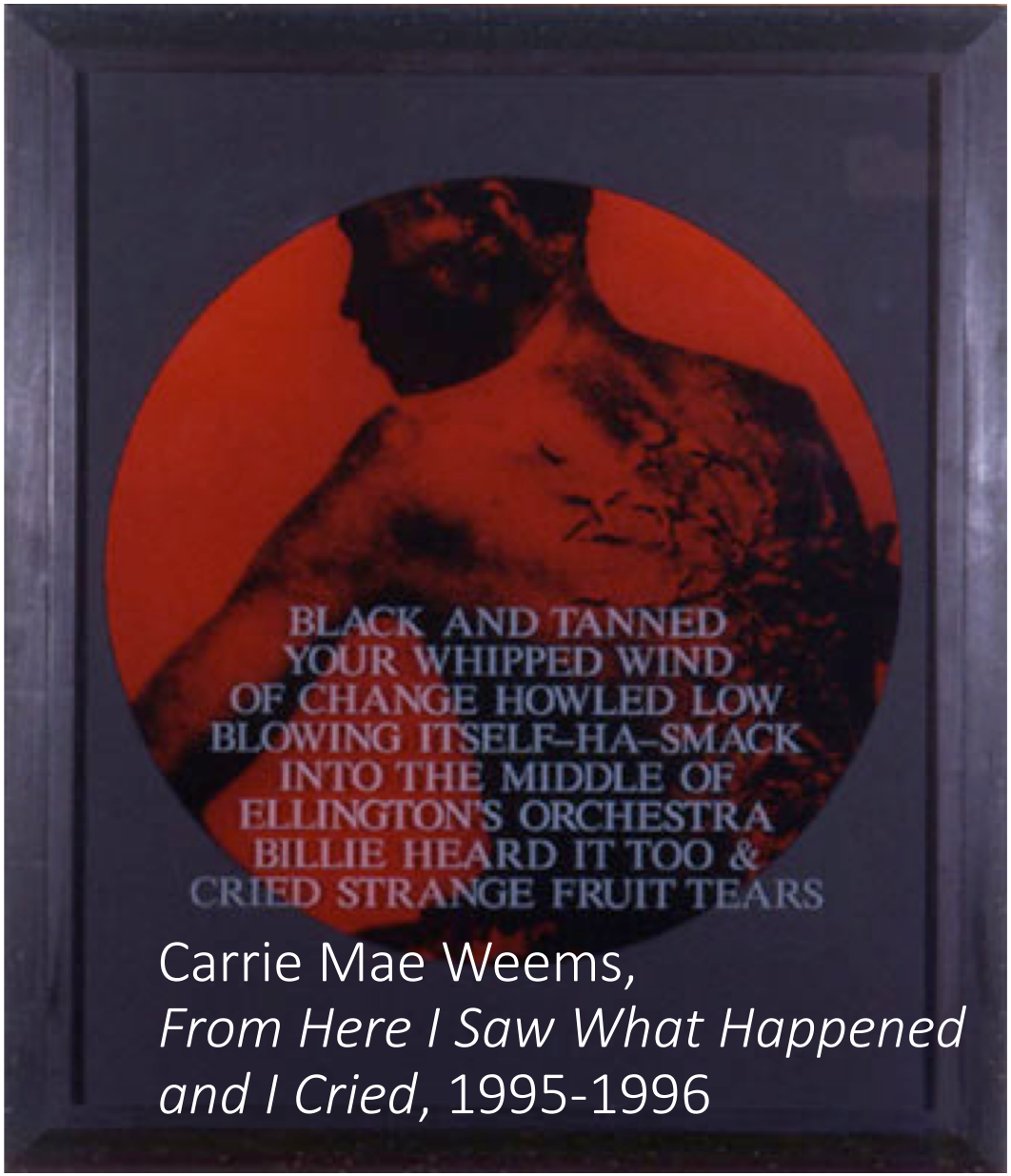


William Blake's engraving for John Gabriel Stedman's *Narrative, of a Five Years' Expedition, against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam* (1796)

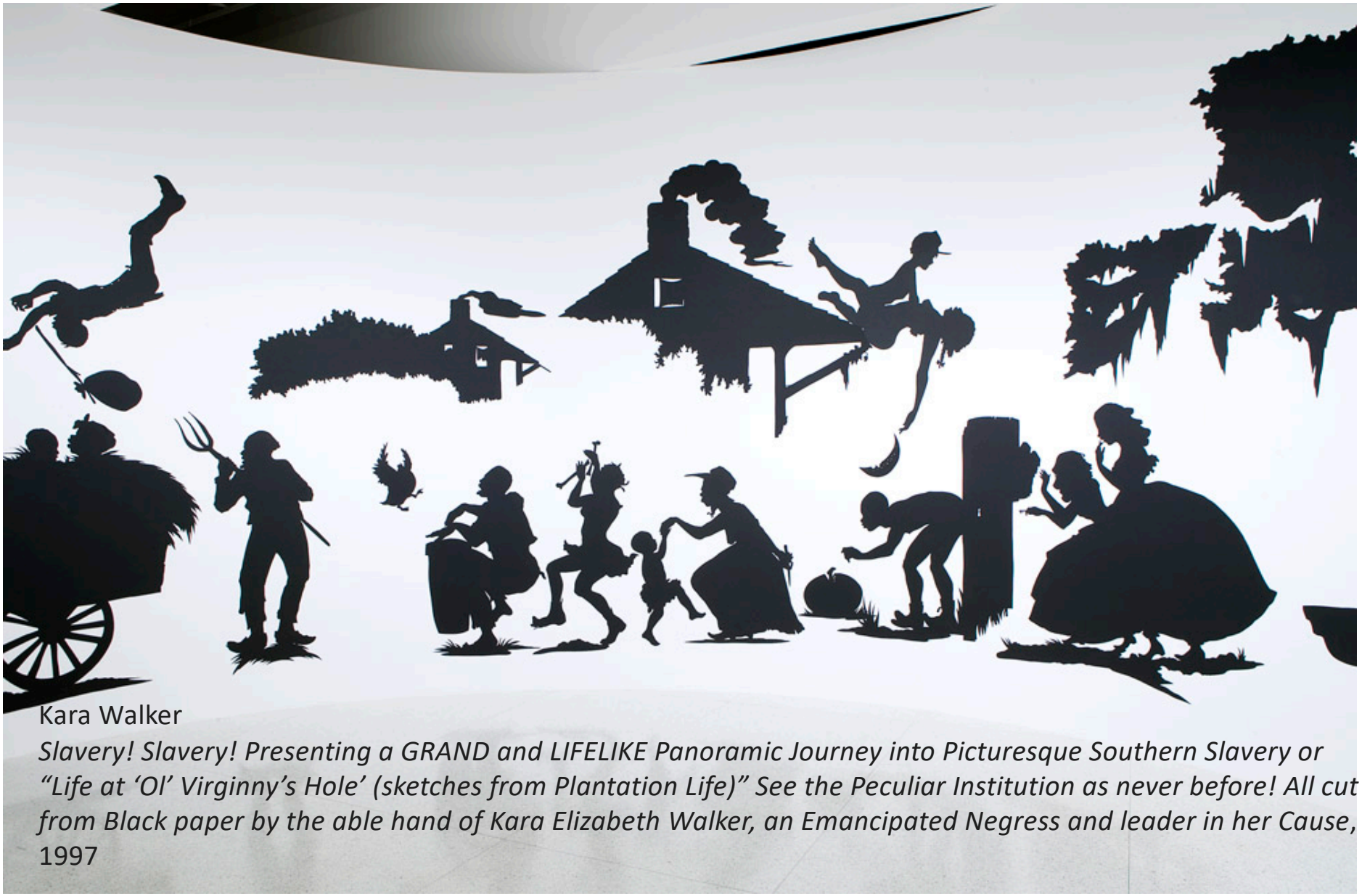
The Scourged Back, April 1863
carte-de-visite portrait of Gordon, a runaway slave who joined the Union army

Fabrice Monteiro *Marrons, Les esclaves fugitifs*





Carrie Mae Weems,
From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried, 1995-1996



Kara Walker
Slavery! Slavery! Presenting a GRAND and LIFELIKE Panoramic Journey into Picturesque Southern Slavery or "Life at 'Ol' Virginny's Hole' (sketches from Plantation Life)" See the Peculiar Institution as never before! All cut from Black paper by the able hand of Kara Elizabeth Walker, an Emancipated Negress and leader in her Cause, 1997

At the behest of Creative Time Kara E. Walker has confected:

A Subtlety

or the *Marvelous Sugar Baby*
an Homage to the unpaid and overworked Artisans who have refined
our Sweet tastes from the cane fields to the Kitchens of the New World
on the Occasion of the demolition of the Domino Sugar Refining Plant

Hank Willis Thomas said, in relation to “Absolut Power” (an inkjet print on canvas and paper, 2003) that “Racism is the most successful advertising campaign of all time. Africans have hundreds if not thousands of years of culture. Having all of these people packed into ships and then told they’re all the same, reducing them to a single identity—that’s absolute power.” The juxtaposition of the centuries-old feel of the slave ship engraving with the bracing modernity of the ad forces a connection between past and present, as well as relating racist propaganda to the modern advertising industry the way the artist describes….

“Afro-American Express” relies on a similar dynamic as “Absolut Power”; it takes an easily recognized symbol of modern consumerism, here an American Express card, and tweaks the details to recall slavery. The edge of the card, as opposed to the typical engraving flourish, is an engraving of packed black bodies similar to the image in “Absolut Power,” clearly taken from or mimicking an old drawing of a slave ship. The background of the card, rather than a repetition of an engraving of the company name, is the iconic image used by the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, an engraving of a shackled slave on bended knee with his clasped hands outstretched above the (seemingly rhetorical) caption, “Am I Not a Friend and a Brother?” … Each detail is crucial– where the typical card would say “Member Since [the cardholder has been a customer of American Express],” the card here says “Member Since 1619”

https://sites.duke.edu/blackatlantic/sample-page/depictions-of-the-middle-passage-and-the-slave-trade-in-visual-art/absolut-power-afro-american-express-middle-passages-5-middle-passage-middle-passages-ii-curatorial-statement/hank-willis-thomas-absolut-power/

sankofa 

(n.) (phr.)"go back and fetch it"; we must look back to the past so that we may understand how we became what we are, and move forward to a better future

AKAN
OTHER-WORDLY.TUMBLR.COM

Haile Gerima, *Sankofa* (1993)

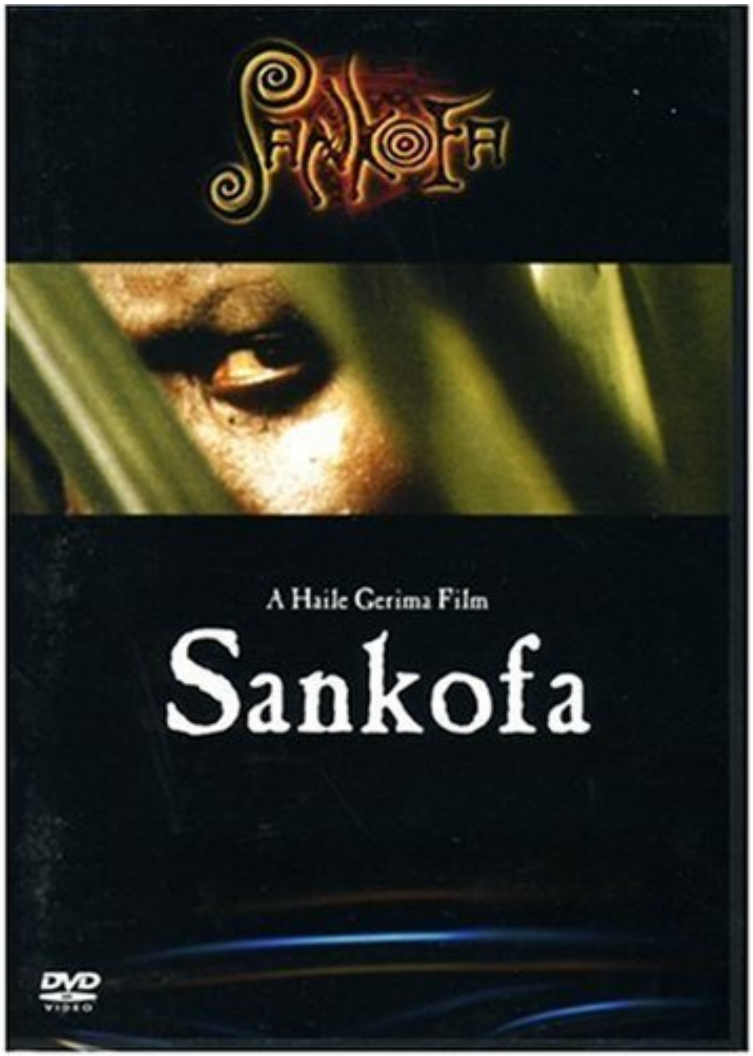
Sankofa is a masterpiece of cinema that has had a transformative impact on audiences since its release in 1993. This empowering film tells a story of slavery and of the African Diaspora from the perspective of the enslaved, challenging the romanticizing of slavery prevalent in American culture.

Sankofa was developed from 20 years of research into the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the experiences of African slaves in the New World. The film represents complex characters and empowering moments of resilience that assert humanity in the face of subjugation. Unlike Hollywood's depiction of slavery, Gerima presents the often suppressed history of slave resistance and rebellion and represents the enslaved as agents of their own liberation.

… The film's narrative structure follows the concept of "Sankofa," an Akan word that signifies the recuperation of one's past in order to comprehend the present and find one's future.

—Allyson Nadia Field

https://www.cinema.ucla.edu/la-rebellion/films/sankofa



https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NOGWSL2Pkoc

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z-h8FOtN7Uo

Essentialist and Anti-essentialist theories of diaspora
From the nostalgia for the origin and the desire to return to the creativity of diasporic entanglements

Contemporary uses of the concept of diaspora in cultural studies are based on the understanding of cultural identity as shifting, flexible, and invariably anti-essentialist. Earlier definitions of diaspora instead emphasized notions of origin, purity, authenticity and the possibility of return (Marcus Garvey's Back to Africa movement). This is also the way diaspora is being used in contemporary Afrocentric theories. Molefi Kete Asante, considered the main philosopher of Afrocentricity, defines Afrocentricity as a manner of thought and action in which the centrality of African interests, values, and perspectives predominate. He describes himself as an African, descendant of seven generations of Africans who have lived in the US.

While these conceptions of diaspora posit an organic link to Africa, and imagine both symbolic and actual returns to the homeland, the new one focuses on displacement itself and on the anti-essentialist identities created by the lack of national or ethnic/racial belonging. To Paul Gilroy the "essentially symbolic" value of the term *diaspora* lies in its emphasis on "the fact that there can be no pure, uncontaminated or essential blackness anchored in an unsullied originary moment". At the heart of the Black Atlantic, is the "desire to transcend both the structures of the nation state and constraints of ethnicity and national particularity" (*Black Atlantic* 19) in favor of a "creolisation, métissage, mestizaje, and hybridity" (2).

Molefi Kete Asante

An Afrocentric Manifesto

Toward an African Renaissance

MOLEFI KETE ASANTE

I am a child of seven generations of Africans who have lived in America. My entire life, including career, struggle against oppression, search for ways to overturn hegemony, political outlook, fortunes and misfortunes, friends and detractors, has been impacted by my Africanness. It is an essential reality of an African living in America. Sometimes one has to learn what it is to be and this learning is how something seemingly essential can be translated into culture.

Afrocentricity is a paradigmatic intellectual perspective that privileges African agency within the context of African history and culture transcontinentally and trans-generationally. This means that the quality

Why is the concept of diaspora important?
The utility of employing diaspora as conceptual rubric lies in the fact that diaspora troubles the stability of concepts such as nation-state, citizenship, and empire. According to historian Robin Kelley, "(diaspora) served as both a **political term** with which to emphasize unifying experiences of African peoples dispersed by the slave trade and an **analytical term** that enabled scholars to talk about black communities across national boundaries." Diaspora is both a process and a condition. As a process it is constantly being remade through movement, migration, and travel, as well as imagined through thought, cultural production, and political struggle. Yet, as a condition, it is directly tied to the process by which it is being made and remade. Scholars started to apply the term in reference to the dispersal of Africans around the 1960s, but the idea was there much earlier. The notion of an African homeland was widespread among US blacks in the nineteenth century. Slaves often referred to Ethiopia as a mythic homeland to return to to end their sufferings and many free blacks got involved in the African colonization project; many turn-of-the-century African American political movements relied on African origins as a source of pride and identity. In the 1990s the concept of diaspora became a dominant paradigm in Black studies, mainly because it moves the focus **from hegemonic agents** (slavery, imperialism, colonialism) to the **black experience itself**, from the nation of relocation (which emphasized diversity) to the condition of displacement and forced relocation, which stresses similarities and enables to capture black experience through a comparative perspective.

Why is the use of the term diaspora important?

Because as an analytical framework it implies

1) a common historical origin among all blacks in the Americas in their abduction from their homeland;
2) a common historical experience in slavery and racism;
3) a common identity based on both their genealogy and their experience under slavery and afterwards
4) a particular relationship with Africa, their homeland.

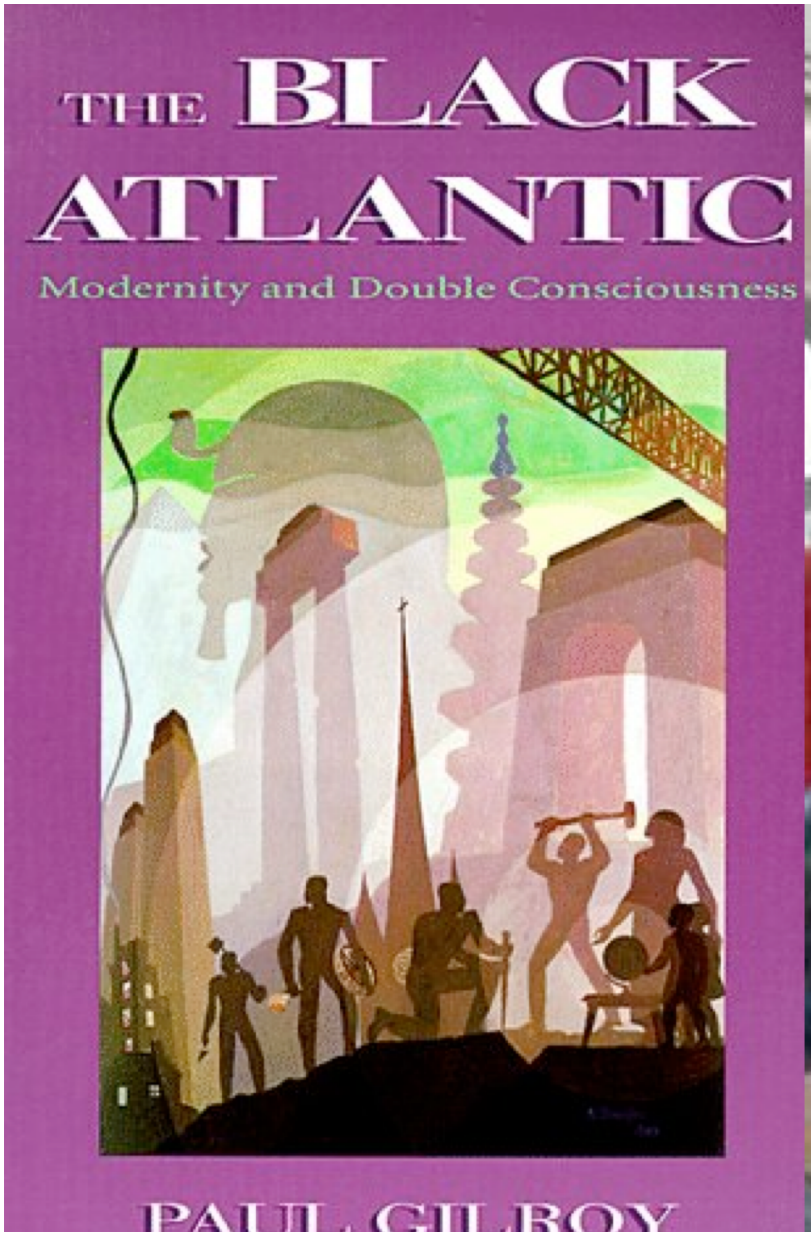
It posits, in other words, that people from diverse national genealogies, who were forced to settle in very different countries and interacted in many different ways with their new environment, yet share a common identity, they are linked by unique cultural bonds. It allows to think of black diasporic people as a whole.

Now, **what is it exactly that links blacks in the diaspora**?
Much depends on how we reply to this questions.
In the past such common "African" identity has often been understood primarily in racial terms, that is to say as founded on biology, on blood and skin color. But more recently scholars have denounced the essentialism of this notion of identity (the idea that there is an unchanging biological essence that all blacks have in common, whatever their personal history, so that they are first of all "African") and the limits of a diasporic identity based on blood ties with Africa, which for most blacks in the diaspora is more an imaginary and fictional homeland than a real country. The notion of racial "authenticity", in addition, is highly problematic since most diasporic people are biologically and culturally hybrid, biracial or multiracial and an heterogeneous compound claiming diverse cultural traditions. The unifying elements among diasporic black peoples, according to many scholars, are to be seen instead in 1) their common history of slavery and discrimination; 2) their common struggles for civil rights.

1925

"Heritage"
By Countee Cullen
(For Harold Jackman)

What is Africa to me:
Copper sun or scarlet sea,
Jungle star or jungle track,
Strong bronzed men, or regal black
Women from whose loins I sprang
When the birds of Eden sang?
One three centuries removed
From the scenes his fathers loved,
Spicy grove, cinnamon tree,
What is Africa to me?


THE BLACK ATLANTIC
Modernity and Double Consciousness
PAUL GILROY

What do we mean by “Black Atlantic”? The notion of the Atlantic as a transnational space of cultural contact that needed to be studied on its own terms was not invented by Gilroy; it was already being used by historians in the late 1980s, in works which studied the Atlantic as a cultural and historical unit with unique features, independent from, to a certain extent, the nation states around its basin. But Gilroy’s book (1993) was seminal in that **it reconceptualized the notion of a black diaspora by building on the Atlantic as a site of cross-cultural exchange**.

Gilroy focuses on the Black Atlantic, that is to say the crisscrossing of the ocean by slaves and later intellectuals, musicians, migrants etc, as a **contact zone** (Mary Louise Pratt’s term for the space of colonial encounters), or in other words as a “system of cultural exchanges” not defined by national constituencies and racial authenticity but rather by cultural hybridity, a site of transnational affiliation and dialogue transcending “the structures of the nation state and the constraints of ethnicity and national particularity”.

Roots vs Routes

The subtitle of the book is *Modernity and Double Consciousness* and Gilroy defines the Black Atlantic as a counterculture of modernity. The Black Atlantic as a space of "counterculture to modernity" illustrates how black people played an integral role in the economic and cultural development of the West. Paul Gilroy describes black identity in Europe and the New World as an ongoing process of travel and exchange across the Atlantic that tried to come to terms with Western modernity, and in the while profoundly changed it. Gilroy rejects the idea of Black cultures from around the Atlantic basin as being marginal to or derived from dominant national cultures, and so resulting in specific subcultures like African-American or Anglo-African that have a closer relation to American or British culture at large than to each other.

Trauma and slavery

In the last decades the concept of trauma has been used to analyze the black diasporic identity and to press claims of reparation to the descendants of slaves, that have usually been rejected with the argument that slavery is a thing of the past, that both victims and perpetrators are long dead, and so on. The discourse framing slavery as a traumatic experience that has affected and still affects people of African descent all over the diaspora gained resonance through a connection with the contemporary discourse on the Holocaust, which offered a language (words, metaphors, figures) to speak of the violence of the past and its lingering effects. "The articulation of Holocaust memory categories and vocabularies … opened up possibilities for people or groups, particularly black Americans and other minority groups who were not typically granted an interiorized humanity or a recognizable way to speak about their suffering" (Paulla Ebron, "Slavery and Transnational Memory: The Making of New Publics")

Trauma: a disordered psychic or behavioral state resulting from severe mental or emotional stress or physical injury. We usually understand trauma as being directly linked to the victim, that is to say as being the result of an experience that happened to somebody in a more or less recent past. According to psychoanalytic theories of trauma, however, trauma is produced not by the experience itself but by the remembrance of it, which usually comes after a period of latency or forgetting.

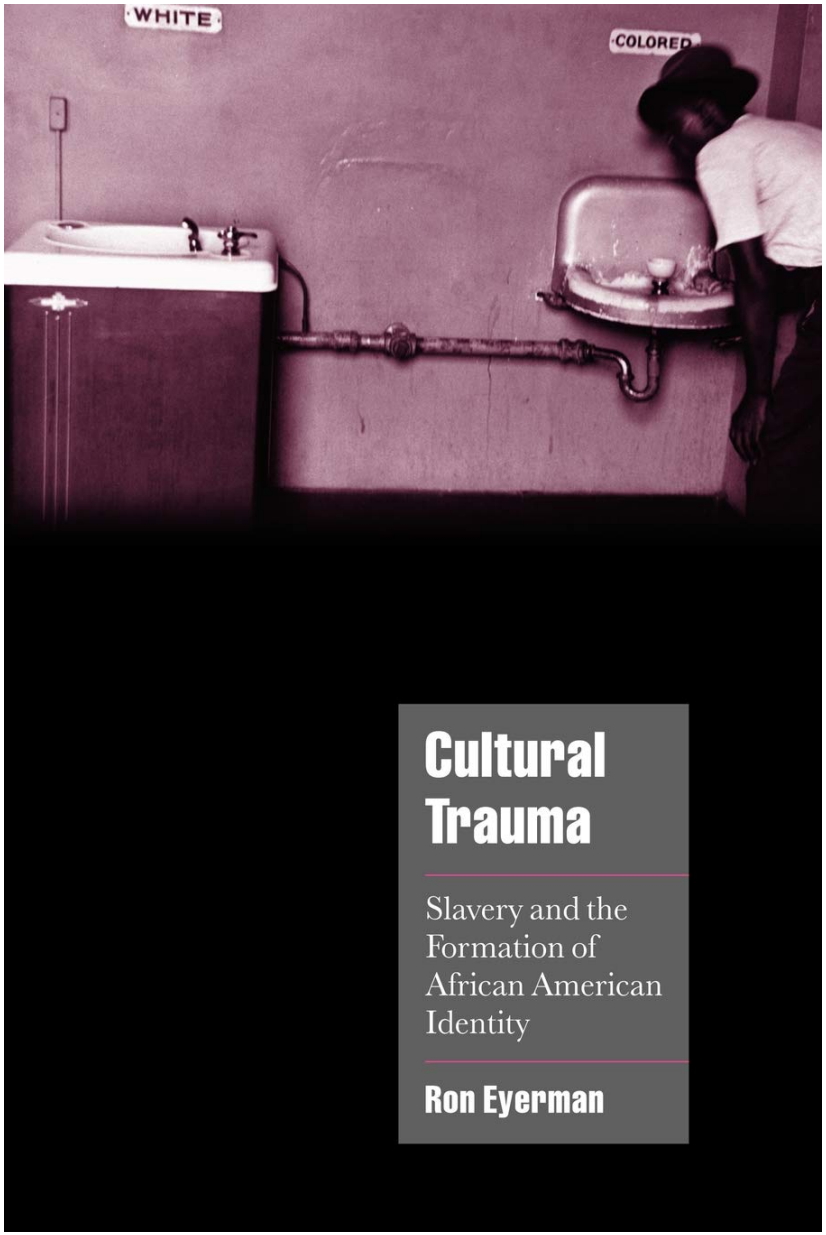
“In its most general definition, trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena.”

Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*

Slavery as Cultural Trauma

"Cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways" (Jeffrey Alexander "Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma," 2004, 1).

According to Ron Eyerman the memory of slavery, not the institution itself, is what functions as "a form of remembrance that grounded the identity-formation of a people" (2004)



Ron Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity*, 2001

people. There is a difference between trauma as it affects individuals and as a cultural process. As cultural process, trauma is mediated through various forms of representation and linked to the reformation of collective identity and the reworking of collective memory. The notion of a unique African American identity emerged in the post-Civil War period, after slavery had been abolished.[1] The trauma of forced servitude and of nearly complete subordination to the will and whims of another was thus not necessarily something directly experienced by many of the subjects of this study, but came to be central to their attempts to forge a collective identity out of its remembrance. In this sense, slavery was traumatic in retrospect, and formed a "primal scene" which could, potentially, unite all "African Americans" in the United States, whether or not they had themselves been slaves or had any knowledge of or feeling for Africa. Slavery

POSTMEMORY

is distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection. Postmemory is a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated, not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation. Postmemory characterises the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated.

Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames*

“Postmemory” describes the relationship that the “generation after” bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before-to experiences they “remember” only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right. Postmemory´s connection to the past is thus actually mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation. **To grow up with overwhelming inherited memories, to be dominated by narratives that preceded one´s birth or one´s consciousness, is to risk having one´s own life stories displaced, even evacuated, by our ancestors. It is to be shaped, however indirectly, by traumatic fragments of events that still defy narrative reconstruction and exceed comprehension.** These events happened in the past, but their effects continue into the present.

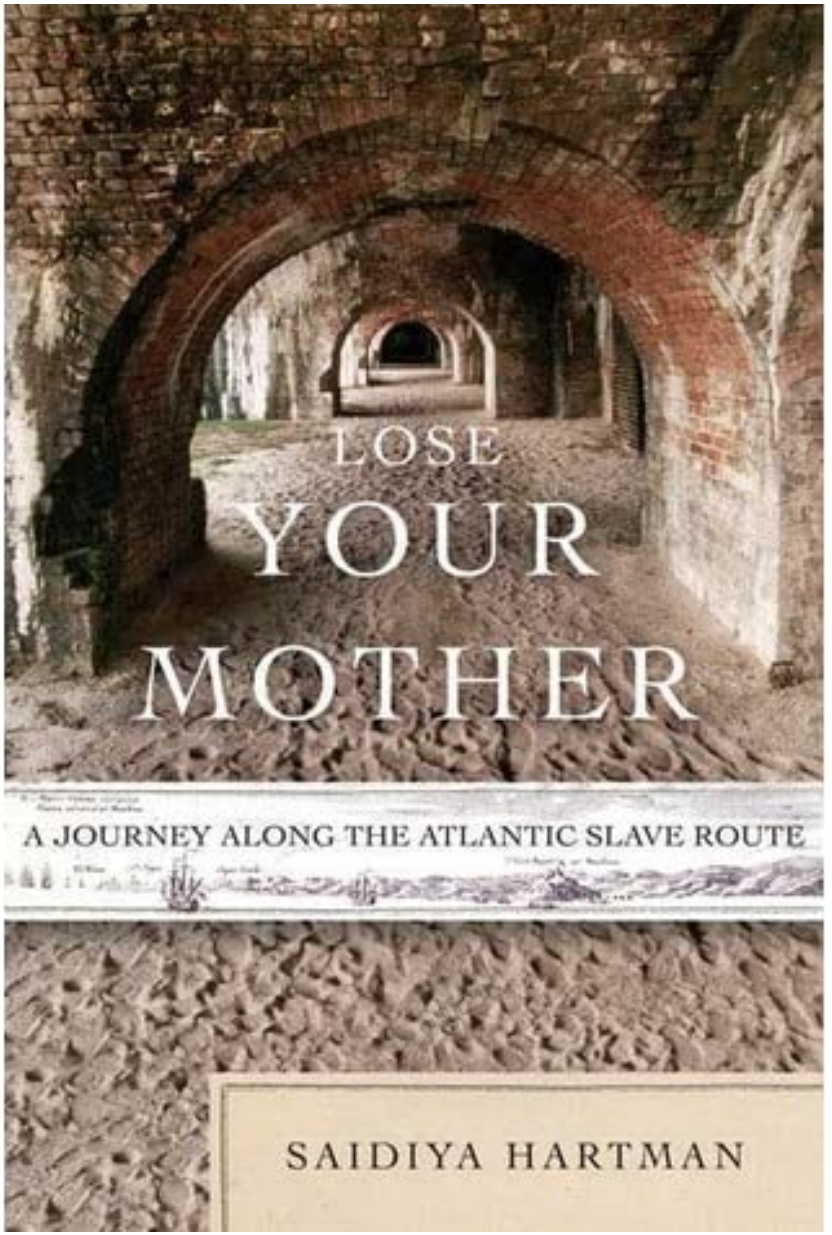
Marianne Hirsch, http://www.postmemory.net/

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. (Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 6)

Saidiya Hartman is a member of a school of thought referred to as Afropessimism which, basing on Orlando Patterson’s notion of slavery as social death and on Hartman’s own notion of the constitutive role of anti-blackness in US society, argue that in the Western world black equals slave.

"The slave, Hartman observes, is a stranger—torn from family, home, and country. To lose your mother is to be severed from your kin, to forget your past, and to inhabit the world as an outsider. There are no known survivors of Hartman's lineage, no relatives in Ghana whom she came hoping to find." (Robin D. G. Kelley, author of *Freedom Dreams*).



A central component of UNESCO and World Tourist Organization's Cultural Tourism Programme on the Slave Routes is the development of "roots tourism," that is, tourist products and excursions geared for North Americans in search of their roots. Of concern here are the kinds of identification facilitated and the degree to which they are determined by the national location and political imaginary of African-American tourists, the development strategy of African states, and the staging of these tourist excursions as the return of the exiled and the displaced. While it is neither implausible nor far-fetched to describe those in the diaspora as exiled or estranged children, I question the sufficiency or adequacy of "return" as a way of describing this transatlantic journey, which some have gone so far as to dub a "reverse Middle Passage" and the nature of this encounter with the past. To what degree can the journey of the "native stranger" be termed a return?[4] How can one go back to a place that one has never been or never seen? Is return, then, a figure that stands in for a more adequate language of longing and estrangement and one that gainsays undeniable and definite difference as it attempts to mend the irreparable?

Saidiya Hartman

The Time of Slavery

Yet, what does it bode for our relationship to the past when atrocity becomes a commodity for transnational consumption, and this history of defeat comes to be narrated as a story of progress and triumph? If restaging scenes of captivity and enslavement elide the distinction between sensationalism and witnessing, risk sobriety for spectacle, and occlude the violence they set out to represent; they also create a memory of what one has not witnessed. The reenactment of the event of captivity contrives an enduring, visceral, and personal memory of the unimaginable. These fabricated and belated encounters with slavery enable a revisiting of the past only fleetingly visible in the unabashed contemporaneity of Africa, recovering origins in the context of commercial transactions and exchanges, and experiencing the wonder and welcome made possible by the narratives of return. In the context of this encounter with death much comes into view: the continuing crisis of black life in the post–civil rights era, the social foreclosure of grief, and bereavement as a response to the limits and failures of political transformation. Essentially, these belated encounters bring to light the broken promises of freedom.

Steel Pulse, The Door of No Return, 2004 (from the Album African Holocaust)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UsO4aYNFc9U

Chorus:
I've returned through the door of no return
On Goree Island
I've returned through the door of no return
On Goree Island

Oh I remember I once dressed as a king
Decked in fine robes and everything
The blood that's in my veins is pure royalty
I ruled many kingdoms and ruled many dynasties
Then all of a sudden I was in a state of shock
Caught and thrown on the auction block
Just like Jesus I was flogged and mocked
Now human cargo yes they said I wasn't coming back

The enslaved (female) subject as the first truly modern person

... modern life begins with slavery ... From a women's point of view, in terms of confronting the problems of where the world is now, black women had to deal with postmodern problems in the nineteenth century and earlier. These things had to be addressed by black people a long time ago: certain kinds of dissolution, the loss of and the need to reconstruct certain kinds of stability. Certain kinds of madness, deliberately going mad in order, as one of the characters says in the book, 'in order not to lose your mind.' These strategies for survival made the truly modern person. They're a response to predatory western phenomena. You can call it an ideology and an economy, what it is is a pathology. 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 it not take a toll. They had to dehumanize, not just the slaves but themselves. They have had to reconstruct everything in order to make that system appear true. It made everything in world war two possible. It made world war one necessary. Racism is the word that we use to encompass all this.[11]

The Neo-Slave Narrative

The term “neo-slave narratives” was coined by Bernard W. Bell in his 1987 study *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition*. Bell described “neo-slave narratives” as “residually oral, modern narratives of escape from bondage to freedom.” Over time that definition has expanded to include a variety of texts – literary, visual or cinematic - that tackle slavery from a contemporary standpoint. Ashraf Rushdy, in *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form* (1999), defines neo-slave narratives as “contemporary novels that assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on the first-person voice of the antebellum slave narrative.” Many texts that are considered neo-slave narratives, however, do not follow the slave narrative format but relate to the past in more complex ways.

I will be focusing here on one particular form of the contemporary narrativity of slavery, what I call "Neo-slave narratives," that is, contemporary novels that assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on the first-person voice of the the antebellum slave narrative.[1] By studying together Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada* (1976), Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose* (1986), and Charles Johnson's *Oxherding Tale* (1982) and *Middle Passage* (1990), I am able to explore in some detail the social logic of the literary form of the Neo-slave narrative: its origins in the social, intellectual, and racial formations of the sixties, its cultural politics as these texts intervene in debates over the significance of race, and its literary politics as these texts make statements on engagements between texts and between mainstream and minority traditions. After delineating the social conditions within which the specific literary form of the Neo-slave narrative emerged by analyzing the political and academic debates of the late sixties regarding the cultural politics, I will define how those original debates have been sustained through a specific kind of intertextuality in the Neo-slave narratives produced during the seventies and eighties.

Ashraf Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form* (1999)

1) Black Power Movement
2) New Left historiography
3) The problem of representation and voice (Styron, Confessions of Nat Turner)

VALERIE SMITH

Neo-slave narratives

The critical context

The institution of slavery in the United States was a site of unimaginable physical, emotional, and spiritual cruelty, justified by greed and racism, and sanctioned by religion, philosophy, and the law. Written into the nation's founding documents, its very existence betrayed the contradictions at the heart of national identity and consciousness. It is thus little wonder that it has compelled a rich, challenging, and demanding body of cultural products, from sorrow songs and work songs, to the antebellum narratives written by individuals who had emerged from a system that denied them literacy, to an extraordinary genre of retrospective literature about slavery that exploded in the last decades of the twentieth century and shows no signs of abating.

According to conventional wisdom, the term "neo-slave narratives" originated with Bernard W. Bell's 1987 study *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition*. Bell described "neo-slave narratives" as "residually oral, modern narratives of escape from bondage to freedom,"[1] although over time that definition has expanded to include a more diverse set of texts than Bell's initial description could have anticipated. This genre, which includes some of the most compelling fiction produced in the last fifty years, has evolved to include texts set during the period of slavery as well as those set afterwards, at any time from the era of Reconstruction until the present. They approach

Neo-Slave Narratives

Madhu Dubey

On July 26, 2008, in Sullivan's Island, South Carolina, the Toni Morrison Society inaugurated its "Bench on the Road" project of commemorating key sites of African American history. Morrison, along with some 300 people, participated in a memorial ceremony honoring the captured Africans who disembarked at Sullivan's Island, a major gateway of the transatlantic slave trade. This public gesture of remembrance initiated by a literary society attests to the vital significance of the past in contemporary African American literature. Since the 1970s, African American writers have insistently revisited earlier historical periods, in particular the era of slavery. This literary return to the past marks a break from the present-oriented impetus of African American literature from its origins up to the late 1960s. With very few exceptions (notably Arna Bontemps's *Black Thunder*, published in 1936), African American novelists steered clear of the topic of slavery through much of the twentieth century. The publication of Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* in 1966 initiated an outpouring of novels about slavery that continues unabated into the twenty-first century. These novels comprise an array of genres, including realist historical fiction, historiographic metafiction, ghost stories, fantasy, speculative and science fiction, and even vampire tales, and are generating a growing body of scholarship.

Regardless of how they label the genre, scholars agree that its emergence in the 1970s marks a crucial juncture of historical reckoning that followed the racial upheaval of the previous two decades. Although it seems logical to assume that the genre of the neo-slave narrative emerged in response to historical amnesia about slavery, in fact it was preceded by a heightened public attention to slavery during the late 1960s. In the immediate aftermath of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, slavery erupted onto the national scene as a matter of intense public interest and debate. Conflicts over how slavery should be represented in the realms of historiography, literature, and popular visual culture were clearly inflected by the militant black politics of the 1960s. The most important point of contention in the national discourse about slavery in this period was the issue of slave agency. By the end of the 1960s, historians had begun to challenge Stanley Elkins's influential account of the American slave as a "Sambo"-like figure whose personality was wholly shaped by the crushing victimage imposed by slavery. Notable historical studies of slavery that were published during the early 1970s, such as John Blassingame's *The Slave Community* or Eugene Genovese's *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, emphasized the resilience of the slave community as well as the sparks of rebellious agency that gave the lie to Elkins's Sambo thesis. Perhaps the most lasting contribution of what is now known as the revisionist historiography of slavery was its reassessment of prevailing standards of historical evidence. In an effort to incorporate the perspectives of slaves on their own experience, historians began to turn to folklore, oral tradition, antebellum fugitive slave narratives, and Works Progress Administration interviews with former slaves, and for the first time in the academic study of slavery the first-person testimony of slaves was accepted as legitimate historical evidence. The official archive of slavery was radically expanded by the beginning of the 1970s, with the reissue of numerous antebellum fugitive slave narratives.

public. In the literary sphere, the publication of a fictionalized slave narrative by a white writer, William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967), provoked the most acrimonious debates about authentic representations of slavery. In *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond* (1968), historians, intellectuals, and public figures associated with the Black Power movement took issue not only with Styron's caricature of Turner as a hypersexual fanatic, but also with his assumption of the first-person voice of the slave. As Ashraf Rushdy points out in his carefully researched account of the controversy sparked by Styron's novel, concerns about white appropriation of the slave's voice were crucially entwined with issues of historical accuracy (*Neo-Slave Narratives* 54–95).

Emerging out of this broader cultural context, the earliest novels of slavery took on the task of recovering the authentic perspectives of slaves on their own experiences. In keeping with the aims and methods of the 1960s revisionist historiography of slavery, novelists such as Margaret Walker and Ernest Gaines turned to oral testimony as the most effective means of correcting and supplementing the historical record. In *Jubilee* (1966), Walker adapted her great-grandmother's oral stories of slavery, and further reinforced the importance of oral tradition as a conduit of slave culture by using excerpts from spirituals as chapter epigraphs. The narrator of Gaines's *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971) is a history teacher who ostensibly tape-records, edits, and transcribes the oral testimony of Miss Jane Pittman, who was born a slave. When asked about his motives ("What's wrong with them books you already got?"), he replies simply, "Miss Jane is not in them" (vi). The main impetus of realist

Defining the genre

Neoslave narratives
Liberatory narratives
Contemporary narratives of slavery

Intertextuality: filling the gaps of the slave narrative, rewriting the slavery text

Narrative modes and techniques:
from realism to magic realism to the fantastic and science fiction
from elegy to humor to irony to parody and anachronism

Toni Morrison, «The Site of Memory»

Whatever the style and circumstances of these narratives, they were written to say principally two things. One: "This is my historical life — my singular, special example that is personal, but that also represents the race." Two: "I write this text to persuade other people — you, the reader, who is probably not black — that we are human beings worthy of God's grace and the immediate abandonment of slavery." With these two missions in mind, the narratives were clearly pointed.

of extensive freedom." With typically eighteenth-century reticence he records his singular and representative life for one purpose: to change things. In fact, he and his coauthors *did* change things. Their works gave fuel to the fires that abolitionists were setting everywhere.

More difficult was getting the fair appraisal of literary critics. The writings of church martyrs and confessors are and were read for the eloquence of their message as well as their experience of redemption, but the American slaves' autobiographical narratives were frequently scorned as "biased," "inflammatory" and "improbable." These attacks are

In addition to using their own lives to expose the horrors of slavery, they had a companion motive for their efforts. The prohibition against teaching a slave to read and write (which in many Southern states carried severe punishment) and against a slave's learning to read and write had to be scuttled at all costs. These writers knew that literacy was power. Voting, after all, was inextricably connected to the ability to read; literacy was a way of assuming and proving the "humanity" that the Constitution denied them. That is why the narratives carry the subtitle "written by himself," or "herself," and include introductions and prefaces by white sympathizers to authenticate them. Other narratives, "edited by" such well-known anti-slavery figures as Lydia Maria Child and John Greenleaf Whittier, contain prefaces to assure the reader how little editing was needed. A literate slave was supposed to be a contradiction in terms.

proceedings too terrible to relate." In shaping the experience to make it palatable to those who were in a position to alleviate it, they were silent about many things, and they "forgot" many other things. There was a careful selection of the instances that they would record and a careful rendering of those that they chose to describe. Lydia Maria Child identified the problem in her introduction to "Linda Brent's" tale of sexual abuse: "I am well aware that many will accuse me of indecorum for presenting these pages to the public; for the experiences of this intelligent and much-injured woman belong to a class which some call delicate subjects, and others indelicate. This peculiar phase of Slavery has generally been kept veiled; but the public ought to be made acquainted with its monstrous features, and I am willing to take the responsibility of presenting them with the veil drawn [aside]."

But most importantly — at least for me — there was no mention of their interior life.

For me — a writer in the last quarter of the twentieth century, not much more than a hundred years after Emancipation, a writer who is black and a woman — the exercise is very different. My job becomes how to rip that veil drawn over "proceedings too terrible to relate." The exercise is also critical for any person who is black, or who belongs to any marginalized category, for, historically, we were seldom invited to participate in the discourse even when we were its topic.

Moving that veil aside requires, therefore, certain things. First of all, I must trust my own recollections. I must also depend on the recollections of others. Thus memory weighs heavily in what I write, in how I begin and in what I find to be significant. Zora Neale Hurston said, "Like the dead-seeming cold rocks, I have memories within that came out of the material that went to make me." These "memories within" are the subsoil of my work. But memories and recollections won't give me total access to the unwritten interior life of these people. Only the act of the imagination can help me.

Main aims of the neo-slave narrative

- Revising dominant mythologies of slavery and plantation life, popularized by novels and movies such as *Gone with the Wind*
- Questioning the master narrative
- Questioning the truth of historiography
- Reclaiming black voices and perspectives
- Filling the gaps in the historical archives
- Rewriting national histories in ways that include African Americans
- Highlighting the lasting effects of slavery in the present
- Deconstructing the narrative of racial progress – showing how the project of freedom is still incomplete
- Building a truly post-racial society

I have tried to imagine without success a last poem, a last play, a last novel, a last song, about slavery: final acts of creativity in this given area that would somehow disqualify any future need to return to it in these forms. The will to write such a thing is itself a call for slavery to be confined to the past once and for all; for slavery's relevance to present anxieties about race to come to an end; to kill slavery off.

Perhaps I am suffering from slavery-fatigue – a condition brought about by slavery's direct bearing on how the races fail to get along today – to such a degree that I wish it were not so. After many years of reading and listening to slavery's songs, stories and arguments, I want it to have had such an impact on this racially over-determined present that the present becomes cured of a need for it and it can finally be laid to rest.

Fred D'Aguiar

The Last Essay About Slavery

But the present, not slavery, refuses to allow slavery to go away. This present insists that however many stories and arguments about slavery it consumes from writers and singers it still hungers for more. Conditions in the present are not ameliorated by the accumulation of a library of slave-novels, poems, plays, films and albums (cds) about slavery. On the contrary, each generation of blacks demands more of the past. Not because they are suffering short-term memory loss or some such syndrome (after all, didn't the generation before have lots to say about slavery) but because they need their own versions of the past, to see the past in their own images, words. To have slavery nuanced their way.

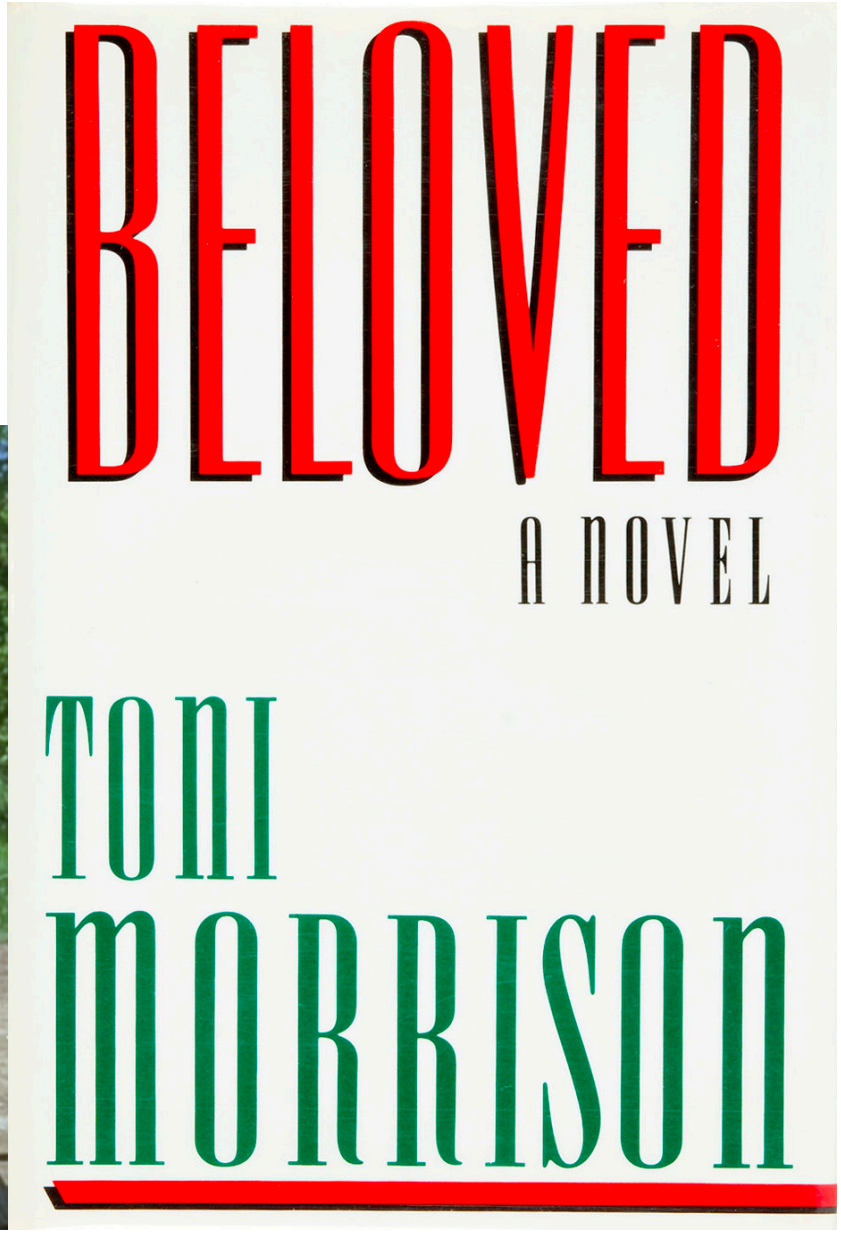
For black readers, history is recovered in fiction. A history of unwritten lives that was previously lost to them is suddenly revealed. This contemporary fictional history is different in tone and register from the slave narratives, many of them ghost-written, of the day. The indignities of slavery are re-created by these fictions as though they were actual narratives but with fiction's added ability to ironise, to ennoble and dignify the demeaned life, the dehumanised slave, by recovering their humanity, but with an ironic detachment afforded by the privilege of retrospective wisdom and of art. Whereas in the slave narrative the life of the slave is the subject of the story that the reader is privileged to overhear, in the slave novel that life is rendered in such a way that the reader becomes the subject, no longer able to sit outside it as witness but put in its place. The reader becomes both the 'thing' doing the talking and the 'thing' talked about in slave novels: not a single entity but splintered; not in one fixed location or vantage-point but shifting.

When writers ransack the history of slavery for its emblems, for the art of the hurt, they are, in essence, engaged in a search for stories, for character, and for events. The act of looking back not only acknowledges the present in the past, it admits, too, the future in the past. The descendants of slaves are hurting because the present isn't working for them. They are shackled to a past by the failure of the present (the recent present) to examine that past in a way that makes sense as rhetoric, as emblem, as art. It is not enough to direct someone to the large body of research on slavery as a means to assuage that hurt. A vocabulary is needed to furnish the custom-made emblems that cope with pain. Each generation demands something different from those stories, some shift in emphasis or focus, some alteration in tone and nuance, that has a direct bearing on the ease of their own inherited hurt.

Beloved as *the* text that most contributed to popularizing the language of trauma to address the past of slavery (the ghost haunting the national home, the scar, the story not to pass on, rememory) and trouble Western notions of modernity.

Not all African American intellectuals appreciated it, however.

Critic Stanley Crouch denounced it as “a blackface Holocaust novel … written in order to enter American slavery into the big-time martyr ratings contest” (*The New Republic 1987*; cit. in Gilroy 1993, 217)



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.
Stephen Best, "On Failing to Make the Past Present," 2012, 456-459)

Madhu Dubey, «Neo-slave Narratives» (2010)s

Although realist historical novels of slavery continue to appear sporadically even into the twenty-first century, much more common are novels that depart from narrative realism to varying degrees, with the ultimate aim of challenging narratives of African American history as a process of racial advancement. In counterpoint to the linear historical vision of realist fictions of slavery, formally experimental novels such as Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* (1975) and Leon Forrest's *Two Wings to Veil My Face* (1983) fracture narrative time in order to reveal the lingering grip of slavery on the present. Like virtually all fiction about slavery published since the 1970s, these novels take as their point of departure the gaps in the official historical archive that generate the need for stories, whether oral or literary. Because written records of slavery have long since been burned by the masters in *Corregidora*, the foremothers of Ursa, the protagonist, compulsively repeat their stories about the past, in order to ensure that their historical version of slavery is transmitted to future generations. Likewise, in Forrest's novel, Sweetie Reed commands Nathaniel, her adopted grandson, to write down her stories about her enslaved ancestors because "too much has been erased in time" (7). Oral storytelling sustains a specific kind of historical memory in these novels, testifying to a systematic element of slavery – the rape of women by their masters – not likely to appear in official documents of the institution.

The familial narratives of slavery that are at the forefront of Forrest's and Jones's novels carry disquieting implications for the post-Civil Rights and Black Power generation, as becomes immediately clear by comparing these novels to the most popular story of slavery to emerge during the 1970s, Alex Haley's genealogical saga, *Roots* (1976). The spectacular cross-racial success of the TV mini-series based on Haley's book was partly due to its smooth reconciliation of the demands of black cultural

nationalism and US patriotism. While affirming African ancestral origins as the foundation of contemporary black identity, Haley's "up from slavery" narrative also confirms the promise of the American dream. Leon Forrest and Gayl Jones do not offer either kind of reassurance. With rape and miscegenation at the center of their "family genesis" stories (Forrest 90), *Corregidora* and *Two Wings* obviously cannot deliver a secure or racially pure conception of black identity. Oral traditions in these novels, whether familial lore or blues music, only confound notions of racial or cultural authenticity, for they are revealed to be shot through with contradictions, complicit as much as oppositional in their relation to the "master's text." In *Corregidora*, it is not just the history of rape but also the ancestral imperative to keep reproducing this history that proves to be stifling to Ursa, as her story about her own sexuality is repeatedly interrupted by the stories of her enslaved ancestors. Both novels follow a