

To cite this article: Broeck, Sabine. "Commentary (In Response to Michel Feith)." *Black Studies Papers* 1.1 (2014): 25–28. Web.

To link to this article: <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:gbv:46-00103773-15>

Abstract: Broeck's commentary focuses mainly on the ethical challenge to read the Enlightenment's freedom narratives not in a paradoxical relation to Euro-American modernity's coloniality and enslavement regimes but as a complex vision of white free enlightened conviviality—the free brotherhood of Man—purposefully premised on black social death. From this perspective, it becomes crucial to criticize the tendency in much of *Beloved's* critical reception to slide into neo-abolitionist "kitsch."

Keywords: enslavement, coloniality, Enlightenment, *Beloved*, kitsch aesthetic

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Commentary

(In Response to Michel Feith)

Sabine Broeck

I am grateful to Michel Feith for writing an elegant, acutely perspectivized and knowledgeable introduction to this collection of essays; thus at the same time both rendering to a wider audience the spirit of inquiry that guided the conference at Nantes and laying out suggestions for further research and collaborative questions in the field of interdisciplinary “post-slavery” studies.

My comments are meant, thus, as a supportive addendum to the array of issues his introduction tackles. I would like to raise the following points by way of conversation with his argument:

–I would like to respond to his phrasing that Enlightenment ideals were “unwittingly conflated with a racial shadow” (Feith 5).

–As Feith mentions, I had quite an agonistic response to the Nantes museum’s handling of the transatlantic slavery trade and Black enslavement—a response that might relate to the last point:

–One of the elements of debate about “writing slavery after *Beloved*” that I would stress rather poignantly is the slippage in much of both critical and literary post-*Beloved* writing towards a veritable kitsch of slave suffering, which renders the Black/slave a fungible entity for consumption of audiences as eager to demonstrate their redemptive goodwill as abolitionist publics of the 18th and 19th century.¹

As for the Enlightenment’s “shadows.” As I have argued elsewhere,² the ethical challenge to me is to read the Enlightenment’s freedom narratives, the philosophical “hobby of freedom” (129), as Jamaica Kincaid has once trenchantly called it, not in a paradoxical relation to Euro-American modernity’s coloniality and enslavement regimes—as the phrasing of “unwittingly” would insinuate—but as a complex vision of white free enlightened conviviality—the free brotherhood of Man—purposefully premised on black social death. I am raising this point based on Sylvia Wynter’s, Saidiya Hartman’s, Jared Sexton’s and Frank Wilderson’s work.

To me, *Beloved's* clairvoyant contribution to a radical critique of enslavement does not ask for a recuperation of slavery into postmodern discourses as a contingent, and finite historical event—however evil—which serves contemporary audiences' desire for a guilty sense of righteousness because it stands in contradiction to the Enlightenment they are the rightful heirs of. Rather, it delivers a view of enslavement as a *longue-durée* practice, a complex regime of modernity, that has made the political, social and cultural future of past centuries, the afterlife of slavery in which we live.³

In this context, my response to the slavery exposition in the museum at Nantes was precisely that it does put some of the atrocities of slavery on display, and it does give its visitors introductory information as to how French major port cities like Nantes profited massively from the trade and from the larger New World plantation economy, but it shows anti-black enslavement not as a practice constitutive of, integral to, and embedded in European enlightened freedom but as an odd, contradictory, and somehow schizophrenic phenomenon in paradoxical relation to it. By way of this ideological decision-making, the viewer's perspective is also bound to the shock effect of the extreme violence of the exhibition's pieces, like shackles, whips and the ubiquitous pictures of black bodies as victimized cargo. What goes missing, however, is any kind of information about black resistance: black enslavement was never an uncontested practice, as black studies' historiography has amply documented. This silence about black struggles against "thingification" (Césaire 21) renders black being lost to enslavement for a second killing.

This in turn leads me to my last point: the easy identification of post-modern, contemporary white European and American novel readers, museum visitors and media consumers with the violated but mute black body of slavery has produced a kitsch aesthetic in need of critique. That white students in American Studies respond to Sethe's ripped apart back with empathic understanding echoes the 19th-century's abolitionist tears which Marcus Wood has already analyzed as a specific kind of pornography, following Hortense Spillers's lead, who already spoke of "pornotroping" years ago (206). Such empathy fails them to understand, however, passages in *Beloved* that might disturb an ample emotional alignment with the enslaved's suffering but calls for a reckoning with white power, and positionality, as in: "There is no bad luck in the world but whitefolks." (89). To me, a critical engagement, particularly after the quite narcissistic 2007 jubilees to the abolition of slavery, with white European/American practices of enslavement, seems to be the order of the day. So, writing slavery after *Beloved* calls for more projects like Catherine Hall's recently available research on British wealth made in and by the recompensation to slave owners after so-called Emancipation in Jamaica,⁴

for the atlas of enslavement involvement which Dienne Hondius and her colleagues are producing about Amsterdam's post-slavery bourgeoisie,⁵ for a project, as in Switzerland, that trails the profits made by urban merchants in this region which could—on the face of it—not be farther removed from the Atlantic colonialist space, achieved in the enslavement driven production and trade with cocoa and sugar to feed the famous Swiss chocolate industry;⁶ for the participation of a next generation of students in projects, like *Tracing the Fabric of Slavery* in Bremen, which foreground white European involvement in and profiteering of transatlantic slavery in the least expected contexts of early modern global expansion of Europe and—as it gets to be euphemistically called in colonialist speech—overseas trading.⁷ The critical gaze needs to be averted from the serving to the served, to paraphrase it with Toni Morrison once again—not from *Beloved*, but from *Playing in the Dark*.⁸

Notes

- 1 Cf. Broeck "Trauma."
- 2 Cf. Broeck "Never."
- 3 Cf. Hartman.
- 4 Cf. *Legacies*
- 5 Cf. "Slave owners."
- 6 Cf. Purtschert et al.
- 7 Cf. Broeck "Lessons."
- 8 See Morrison *Playing* 90.

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