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Abstract: In "The Lie at the Center of Everything," Christina Sharpe reads Valerie Martin's 2003 Orange Prize winning novel *Property* for the ways that it positions readers, across race, to enter into the narrative through the consciousness of the white slave-owning woman Manon Gaudet. Sharpe traces the ways that such positioning locates many readers in the inability to see (or hear) black suffering, locates them as unable to see or account for the matter of race; specifically the 'lived experience of the black.'

Keywords: Slavery, sexual violence, lived experience of the black: racial sexual gender, white 'historical fiction' on slavery

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The Lie at the Center of Everything

Christina Sharpe

“The door signifies the historical moment which colours all moments in the Diaspora. It accounts for the ways we observe and are observed as people, whether it’s through the lens of social injustice or the lens of human accomplishments. The door exists as an absence. A thing in fact which we do not know about, a place we do not know. Yet it exists as the ground we walk. Every gesture our body makes somehow gestures toward this door. What interests me primarily is probing the Door of No Return as consciousness. The door casts a haunting spell on personal and collective consciousness in the Diaspora. Black experience in any modern city or town in the Americas is a haunting. One enters a room and history follows; one enters a room and history precedes. History is already seated in the chair in the empty room when one arrives. Where one stands in a society seems always related to this historical experience. Where one can be observed is relative to that history. All human effort seems to emanate from this door. How do I know this? Only by self-observation, only by looking. Only by feeling. Only by being a part, sitting in the room with history.”
– Dionne Brand¹

“It was the lie at the center of everything, the great lie we all supported, tended, and worshiped as if our lives depended upon it, as if, should one person ever speak honestly, the world would crack open and send us all tumbling into a flaming pit.” – Valerie Martin²

“The white woman writing about race is necessarily a double agent, both acting as ‘mistress’ in controlling her characters and her plot, and identifying with them.” – Diane Roberts³

Introduction

The above three epigraphs help situate my reading of Valerie Martin’s 2003 Orange Prize winning novel *Property* as a text that positions readers, across race, to enter into the narrative through the consciousness of the

white slave owning woman Manon Gaudet and to account or not for the matter of race; specifically the 'lived experience of the black' and the slave. *Property* is set in 1828 in Louisiana on both a sugar plantation and in New Orleans in the midst of cholera, yellow fever outbreaks, and slave revolts and it is narrated in the voice of the unhappily married, white slave owning woman, Manon Gaudet.

The first epigraph comes from Dionne Brand's *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging* and in it she locates the door of no return, reality and myth, as an optic and a haunting that constructs and positions black people in the 'new world.' For Brand that un/known door is the frame that produces black bodies as signifiers and bearers of enslavement and its (unseeable) excesses. It is the ground that positions them to bear the burden of that signification and that positions some black people to know it.

The second epigraph comes from the novel *Property* and supplies the title of this paper and marks a moment in the text where the protagonist Manon Gaudet comes to understand not for the first time the forms of sexual license that subtend slavery and freedom. In this scene Manon entertains Joel Borden as he talks about his upcoming marriage. And as she listens to him it is with the newly gained knowledge that this man whom she formerly idealized, has attended and will continue to attend the Blue Ribbon Balls and that he will most likely acquire "a house in the Ramparts" and a "trussed-up yellow girl" (Martin 178).⁴ These thoughts lead Manon to the conclusion that the "meaningful look" (179) Joel has given her at the outset of their conversation is but a show for "a poor crippled widow" (179) and not an acknowledgement of a set of shared though unspoken truths about their ill-fated because un-moneyed mutual desire and his soon-to-be marriage of convenience to the rich and "rather plain" Alice McKenzie (179).⁵

The third quotation comes from Diane Roberts's *The Myth of Aunt Jemima: Representations of Race and Region* and it positions the white woman novelist and critic as witness to and participant in a structural bind, implicated in both revealing and concealing narrative and other desires; positions her, in fact, as working through an optic opposite to Brand's.

Together in their focus on representation and ways of seeing and not seeing, these quotations frame my reading of Martin's text and the difficulty that seems continually to arise for some readers of *Property* in holding on to and accounting for the very real differences produced by racial chattel slavery and its long shadow and material transformations. Real differences that are elided, for example, in the writings of the slave owner Mary Boykin Chesnut who records in her diaries that: "There is no slave, after all, like a wife" (May 1861; Chesnut 59), and "All married women, all

children, and girls who live in their father's houses are slaves" (February 1865; 729).

In what follows I briefly think about the novel again in relation to Brand, Jacobs, and Douglass, and then in relation to the tensions between what Martin has written and said about her novel and the text's enthusiastic reception which often seems to rely on and then reproduce a set of blindnesses around and erasures of the materiality of raced/sexed power relations and affiliations then and now. Each quotation sets out an optic for reading Martin's white-authored 'historical novel' of slavery and then for thinking through the impediments (then and now) to seeing the (former) slave and the society in which s/he is situated. "Rather than merely a willful refusal," this impediment to seeing is what Frank Wilderson (in conversation with Saidiya Hartman) has identified as a "structural prohibition [...] against whites being the allies of blacks due to this [...] 'species' division between what it means to be a subject and what it means to be an object: a structural antagonism" (Hartman and Wilderson 189–190). As Hartman makes clear, the sympathetic ally is no more able to see the slave than the one claiming and using her as property. I also think the novel in relation to the larger issues of what's at stake in Martin's and in the reader's (a reader I position across race/sex/gender/class difference and differentiation) imaging that "we" who are of African descent, will, in an anti-black world, through proximity to whiteness and the forbearance of those structures and people who mean us harm, be okay. (A reference that will become clearer in what comes next.)

I Think He's Going To Be Okay

At the center of *A Map to the Door of No Return*, Dionne Brand's meditation on the black body and questions of belonging, is a desire to account for the place, power, and the materiality of the body raced as black. Her text begins with "A Circumstantial Account of a State of Things" that is an attempt to reckon with a series of silences, historical and personal, that stand in the place of a record of how she has come to live in the place she is. She begins in Guayaguayare, Trinidad at the age of thirteen trying to wish/think/will her grandfather into remembering what he cannot remember and what he refuses to lie about—the name of the "people they came from." Instead of a name that would stand in for an account, the adolescent Brand encounters an absence, and what is unnamed and unremembered signifies "a tear in the world," and "a rupture in history, a rupture in the quality of being" (5) that is nevertheless productive of new modes of (not) being and (not) seeing. For Brand, "the door of no return is

on [her] retina" (2). It is an optic that guides her way of seeing, understanding, and accounting for her non/place in the world (89).

When Frederick Douglass begins his 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* with his aural and eyewitness account of Captain Anthony's whipping and presumed rape of Aunt Hester it is because this door of no return (first as the blood stained gate and later as shadow) is on his retina. And with his transcription of it he wished to position his white readers to see that they have maintained innocence of such brutality despite being, like him, though in ways *different* than him, witness to and participant in brutal scenes of production, conception, and transformation (Sharpe 6-8).

When Harriet Jacobs publishes *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* in 1861 she begins almost immediately to illustrate for her readers that "perilous passage in [a] slave girl's life" (45) when 'looks' become "whisper[s]" (26) and whispers both enact and prefigure sexual violation. Jacobs declares in her introduction that she speaks these terrible truths because she means to reveal something of slavery's effects on all black women and because she "earnestly desire[s] to arouse the [white] women of the North to a realizing sense of the condition of two millions of women at the South, still in bondage" (5). Published in the same year that Boykin Chesnut begins her diaries, Jacobs's text centers her recognition that she has lived the differences between "slave" and "wife" (59), and between "all married women, all children, and girls who live in their father's houses" (729). Centers her recognitions that while she has in some measure been protected each new 'protection' offered and/or taken, imposed/refused/or produced opens her up to the possibility of more abuse, positions her to experience further degradation. Despite her best calculations there is no position that she can occupy that will halt the coming violation and the most that she can do is to choose Mr. Sands to be the author of it (Sharpe 10). In her authenticating introduction to the text Lydia Maria Child writes that, "those who know [Jacobs] will not be disposed to doubt her veracity, *though some incidents in her story are more romantic than fiction,*" and that, accusations of "indecorum" aside, here are the "monstrous features," of slavery that "the public ought to be made acquainted with" and which she "willingly take[s] the responsibility of presenting [...] with the veil withdrawn" (6, emphasis mine).⁶

With *Property* (original title *Hatred*⁷), Valerie Martin announces that she too seeks to draw back a veil, to present the monstrous features of slavery, to provide a counter narrative to what she identifies as her prior lapse into romance. And with its publication in 2003 the novel becomes what Tim Ryan, in *Calls and Responses: The American Novel of Slavery Since Gone with the Wind*, calls the first "novel of substance about slavery by a white writer [since William Styron published *The Confessions of Nat Turner*]" (150).⁸ (One can though, think of white writers outside of the U.S. — Barry Un-

sworth's historical novel *Sacred Hunger* [1992], and Manu Herbstein's *Ama: A Story of the Atlantic Slave Trade* [2000], for example.) This is a lacuna noted by others but nonetheless astonishing given that during the same time period there was a proliferation of novels by black authors who take slavery as their subject. There have also been significant numbers of scholars and critics across race whose work has broken new ground on how we understand and think questions of slavery and post-emancipation.⁹ Is it possible that in that 36-year period between 1967 and 2003 the majority of white fiction writers simply have nothing to say about slavery, slaveholding, and its long afterlife in the U.S.? Is it that the setting of slavery is such infertile ground, *or* is it too dangerous, too fertile imaginative ground, *or* is the risk of black censure so debilitating? To think the latter is, I think, to grant the black critic a regulating power in herself that she simply does not have. Here's Tim Ryan: "*The Confessions of Nat Turner*—*or, more specifically, the critical reaction to it—essentially shut down all opportunities for a fruitful discourse between black and white writers of slavery fiction,*" though African American writers "were justified, of course, in condemning William Styron's unqualified acceptance of the questionable conclusions of Stanley Elkins" (150, emphasis mine). For Ryan it is black writers and critics responses to Styron's work and the literary world's embrace of it that brings an end to "all opportunities for a fruitful discourse between black and white writers of slavery fiction" and *not* the long past and present of white writing that romanticizes slavery.

Other white-authored texts published prior to 2003 that come to mind are Newt Gingrich's 'alternate history' novels, John Jakes's *North and South* trilogy (1980s), and Stephen Wright's *Amalgamation Polka* (2006), but these could be called civil war novels, by which I mean novels set immediately before or during the Civil War and not principally concerned with slavery.¹⁰ But with some few exceptions, why such a long silence by white fiction writers and then why is that silence broken in the turn into the twenty-first century? A clue might lie in Ashraf Rushdy's reading of Styron's *Confessions* and John Henrick Clarke's *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond* as together "form[ing] a site of historical and cultural contestation at a crucial moment in the post-civil rights era" (54). There are non-fiction works and documentary and fiction films by white filmmakers and writers that explore slavery and the slave trade. Films that run the gamut from *Roots* and *Amistad* to *Goodbye Uncle Tom*, and *Mandingo* and documentary film and historical memoirs like Katrina Brown's *Traces of the Trade* and Edward Ball's *Slaves in the Family*. But, what I am calling a turn, however tentative, by contemporary white fiction writers to writing fiction set during U.S. slavery and post emancipation comes at another moment of historical and cultural contestation. That is, the increased proliferation and instrumentalization of discourses of

post-race in the midst of the continued dismantling of hard-fought-for legal rights and the increased criminalization of blackness and black mobility. And rather than works of excavation that get at the interiority of the slaveholder, 'historical novels' like Martin's seem to be engaged in *constructing a useable past out of which a post racial present and future might be understood to have been always already coming into existence – even under the most brutal of systems.*¹¹

On the online site *Big Think*, Martin provides an account of why she wrote *Property* that would seem to support Ryan's reading of the novel as wanting to grapple substantively with slavery and the awful power it confers upon the slaveholder. I quote Martin at length:

I think from very early on, although I didn't realize it myself, I was really preoccupied with race relations and with slavery. And I didn't consciously pursue that as a subject matter, but I was very interested in equality and injustice, which is built into that system; and power relationships.

So I think that those old stories, which in many ways are dashing and romantic, are also full of horrific violence and just plain cruelty. I think that had a big influence on my writing, which is sometimes pretty gothic I guess, although I never can see it as much as other people seem to. It's certainly writing that's preoccupied with relationships of power.¹²

Well some years ago, many years ago I wrote a book called *The Great Divorce*, and it had three stories in it. And one of the stories is [...] about a woman who murders her husband. And it takes place in antebellum times on a plantation, and she turns into a leopard; very mysterious, and magical, and horrific. In that story I wrote a little bit about one of her slaves and some things that happened to the slaves, and I described the plantation life a bit. I guess maybe 20 years later in reading about slavery; I thought perhaps I romanticized that a little bit. [...] and in looking back over my own writing the thought I have romanticized something as important as slavery, I was very upset. So I set about to repair that and de-romanticize it, and that was really how *Property* came about" (Martin, *Big Think* n. pag.).¹³

In line with what she sees as "[o]ne of [her] great missions as a writer ... [which is] to de-romanticize the world, because [...] Americans still receive a romantic education, and that ill-fits them for life" (Martin, *Big Think* n. pag), Martin positions *Property* to perform a kind of reparative work for her past transgression as well as for the culture and for literary history. But when the reader opens the paperback edition of the novel, before getting to the body of the text or even to the epigraph one encounters what I can only read as the text's own authenticating document (or perhaps counter or complementary optic) written by Egyptian novelist Ahdaf Soueif, head of the 2003 Orange Prize Jury.¹⁴ Given what Martin understands to be Americans' romantic education (Which Americans? Which education?), perhaps the placement of this text is an attempt to cir-

cumvent readings that would re-romanticize the world the slaveholders made and erase the violence they used to ensure its continuation. Or, in light of ten black critics and writers' responses to *Confessions*, perhaps it is there to authorize the white writer who in the present would write about historical legal slavery (as opposed to contemporary and illegal human trafficking). Whatever the reason, the paperback edition of the novel published post-Orange Prize is introduced in this way:

"Exuberance in a novel is a wonderful quality. *Property* is the opposite of exuberant—but the great quality of this novel is fairness. It takes a very specific, dated subject and makes it universal. It looks at relationships of power and ownership among people living in a system which is manifestly evil. Yet they are ordinary, often good people. They are being damaged by their system, you can see it damaging them, and yet they never question it. The story is told through an unsympathetic narrator; yet the book is utterly where its moral heart is. This is a terribly difficult thing for a writer to do. The gaps in the book, what is left unsaid, are very important." (Martin, *Property* n. pag.)

That is, the function of this introduction is not like Child's introduction to Jacobs's text that is there to authenticate Jacobs's unromantic story, to substantiate that what her text reveals is 'true' and unembellished, and to tell readers that the veil is being rent, that these things are being spoken, to "acquaint readers with [slavery's] most monstrous features [...] for the sake of [her] sisters in bondage that are suffering wrongs so foul that our ears are too delicate to listen to them" (Jacobs 6).

Following this is an epigraph that belies that lack of questioning and that positions readers to understand that this system is of the slaveholders making and that they are legally and socially invested in maintaining it at all cost. We read: "This one thing we wish to be understood and remembered—that the Constitution of this State, has made Tom, Dick, and Harry, property—it has made Polly, Nancy, and Molly, property; and be that property an evil, a curse, or what not, we intend to hold it" (qtd. in Martin, *Property* n. pag.).¹⁵ (We can recognize in this epigraph echoes of *Gregson v Gilbert*'s coming before the courts as an insurance case in 1783. In that case Solicitor General John Lee's argument in favor of the owners said: "it has been decided, whether wisely or unwisely is not now the question, that a portion of our fellow-creatures may be the subject of property. This, therefore, was a throwing overboard of goods, and of part to save the residue" [Brown 172].) *Property*'s epigraph and Soueif's front matter are doing quite different work. Soueif's constellation of terms, fairness, dated subject, and universal, are curious for what is marketed as a historical novel set during slavery and narrated from the point of view

of a purportedly unsympathetic white slave owning woman. What part of the subject is dated?: Is it slavery?; Race?; White subjectification through black suffering? And what about those people imagined as the subjects in the text who are not questioning the system? Certainly not those enslaved black people who are rising up, those who resist in more quotidian ways, nor Sarah who also takes her freedom. If one supposes that a novel or even just this novel should be fair what would that mean and then what form would fairness take in a text that, to quote Toni Morrison's blurb, "looks at what slave owning does to (and for) one's interior life" and that aims to expose the everyday brutalities central to slavery, constitutive of its excesses, and of the maintenance of the slaveowner's pleasure? And if we understand the personal, formal, and strategic reasons for the myriad and differentially motivated silences in nineteenth-century texts authored by enslaved women and by white slave-owning women, this reader is left wondering how we are to understand the gaps in this white-authored twenty-first century account of the slaveholder? Has Martin pulled aside the veil on the interiority of the slaveowner, or is whether one sees the veil rent or put more firmly in place dependent on the point of view of the reader; where the reader is positioned vis-à-vis history? Does it depend on whether it is the door or the spyglass and account book that is on one's retina?

In "The Double Life and Its Dangers," her 2009 review of Martin's most recent novel *The Confessions of Edward Day*, Margaret Atwood produces a common reading of *Property* that erases the particular conjunctions of race, gender, and power under slavery in Louisiana in 1828. She writes,

[it] is an astonishing take on the gruesome and emotionally incestuous lives led during the antebellum years of the American South, not only by the plantation slaves but by the white wives of the plantation owners, who were also considered "property" – albeit of a slightly higher order since they couldn't be sold. Most of Martin's novels have at least one character in them who is likeable or charming or admirable in some way, but Martin does not flinch: slavery deforms everyone involved in it. *Property* is *Gone With the Wind* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* rolled into one and turned upside down. Nobody comes out of it well, although of the two female leads – one black, one white – it can be said of them that they are brave and resourceful, and also long-suffering; they put up with a colossal amount of sadistic abuse and hypocrisy, not that they have a choice." (Atwood n. pag.)

Atwood is right in naming *Property* a mix of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Gone With the Wind* but wrong, and hardly alone, in a reading that erases relations of power and property by collapsing Sarah's suffering and Manon's by refusing to account for Manon's ownership of Sarah and that much of the quotidian violence in words and deeds detailed in the novel is un-

leashed by Manon on Sarah (and on others under her control). This despite the fact that, “the antebellum South was a world whose history renders it virtually incapable of sustaining many romantic ideals about relations between black slave women and white slaveholding women” (Rushdy 2). But they are sustained in the present as those modes of reading persist “even though a historical reappraisal of plantation slavery has been available for years [though] it has hardly made an entrance into white gender theory” (Broeck par.8). In order to disrupt them and to shift that “racially innocent modernity” (par. 6), Sabine Broeck argues that, “[t]he discourse of domesticity will have to be re-examined with an eye to the role of white women's structurally legitimate and largely exploitative access to black women's labor, their emotional resources, and sexual availability played in the production of both the iconographic constitution of white lady-hood and white women's subjective readings of their situation” (par. 5). And Broeck offers a series of important questions that have not yet been adequately addressed in the work of white feminists. Among them:

How did white female subjects learn to become owners of beings and to desubjectify those that appeared day in day out before their very own eyes as human beings, how did they learn to un-think another human being's access to human subjectivity? How did white women deal with the right to sanctioned white violence which afforded a perpetual invitation to excess? (n. pag.).

To Broeck's questions I add, in what sort of account and under what conditions of forgetting does one in the present understand slaveowner and slave to have had the same absence of choice? As historical record bears out and as Martin repeatedly says in interviews there is no comparison between Sarah's life and Manon's, between the life of the slave and the life of the mistress. Manon of course can make a legal choice to leave her husband – divorce is possible if not socially or economically profitable. To return to the title of this article, the lie, or at least one lie, that remains at the center of the U.S. and that keeps on being told might be located in a current politics of unspeakability, a refusal in the present to account for the persistence, necessity, and instrumentalization of black suffering. A current politics, where, “race has always appeared as disappearing” (Eng 1480) and, as Vijay Prashad points out, “The Problem of the Twenty-First Century is the Problem of the Color-Blind” (qtd. in Spickard 355). For many readers the difference that legal blackness makes, at the very least the ability to be enslaved, the ability literally to be property, disappears even as it seems to be most apparent in the setting, in the subject, and in the fears and realities within the world of the narrative of whites holding

onto people, power, and privilege in the midst of violent slave rebellion.¹⁶ Its disappearance is what will allow Martin, as you will see, to imagine a future for Walter, the violently conceived, incorrigible, deaf and mute son of the enslaved woman Sarah and Mr. Gaudet, in which he is no longer property himself but the inheritor of property. No longer “possessed, accumulated, and fungible object” but inheritor of, legal heir, to the slave owner’s estate (Hartman and Wilderson 186).

In 2003, *Black Issues* Book Reviewer Susan McHenry had a conversation with Valerie Martin and black novelist Bebe Moore Campbell. McHenry begins:

In *Property*, there's a fascinating character, Walter, the son Sarah has had with her master who is Manon's husband. Walter's also deaf, mute and a kind of wild creature. Tell me where he comes from, Valerie.

VM: I get accused of being a Gothic writer a lot, and I think, in a way, that Walter contains that Gothic quality of being that uncontrollable force. I also think of Walter as a real little boy.

BMC: *His situation though is horrible.*

VM: *I actually think Walter is going to be O.K.* Manon likes Walter. *He's the only one who likes to touch her.* And she tolerates him.

BMC: *He's like a pet, though.*

VM: *Yes, because his behavior is so unpredictable, they put him on a leash when they walk through the streets of New Orleans with him.* But he's learning to speak a little bit. I think Walter is going to inherit the house.¹⁷

BMC: *Really? I saw Walter in the future as a black man who will inherit the mantle of slavery. He will remain wild, uncontrollable and fill the jails in the 21st century* (McHenry, n. pag.; emphasis mine).¹⁸

Bebe Moore Campbell counters Martin’s ahistorical assertions with what she knows to be the reality of Walter’s and many other black men’s material conditions: from the plantation to the penitentiary. That Martin imagines that Walter will be okay, that she imagines he will inherit the house, is evidence of the “structural antagonism” at the root of her misreading (Wilderson 189), of her refusing the ways that Walter will be put to work, and of her reinscribing the romance that she purportedly writes the text in order to undo. It is her refusal of the very forms of violence that she writes out, that she encountered in the research that she references in the novel’s back matter, and that were she positioned to see black subjections as violence, she would surely witness in myriad forms in the present carceral state. Martin’s positioning of Walter, her declaration that she thinks he’s going to be okay, appear as powerful instances of an inability or refusal to really see black suffering as suffering, an inability or refusal to see the violence of everyday black subjection in both the past and the present. In this

inability to see suffering one can clearly see that “violence [...] precedes and exceeds Blacks” (Wilderson 76).

In a *New York Review of Books* review titled “Desire and Dread,” Joyce Carol Oates writes, Manon is the “‘property’ of her husband, nearly as powerless as the slaves who serve her” (Oates n. pag.). And, “*Property* might be described as a novel of ideas in the guise of a darkly erotic romance. It isn't race or Negroes with whom Manon is obsessed, and her obsession is never theoretical like her father's: she is unwittingly in love with her servant Sarah, and most of her actions, even when she lashes out bitterly against Sarah, are guided by this thwarted passion. Significantly, there is only one erotic scene in *Property*, following Manon's mother's death, when Manon approaches Sarah as she nurses her baby, falls to her knees before her, and without a word begins to nurse at Sarah's breast” (Oates n. pag.; emphasis mine). Oates' review, like Atwood's, and like Child's introduction to *Incidents*, firmly places romance in the picture. But, as Annette Gordon-Reed cautions those who would read Thomas Jefferson's unchecked power, his legal ownership and licensed ill use of Sally Hemings as somehow mitigated by love: “The romance is not saying that they may have loved one another. The romance is in thinking that it makes any difference if they did” (365).

Optical and Other Illusions

In a conversation between Kurt Andersen, host of Public Radio International's *Studio 360*, and Monticello senior curator Susan Stein, Andersen asks Stein about Thomas Jefferson's building and rebuilding of Monticello and his installation of six oculi in the dome. Stein responds that she “is certain” that Jefferson's decision to install them is “just aesthetic,” an “architectural conceit” (Andersen). But after reading interviews with black people who were both enslaved and employed by Jefferson, Monticello senior research historian Cinder Stanton reaches a different conclusion about their purpose and links the oculi and their placement to the telescope that was one of Jefferson's prize possessions.

Stanton: I often think of Monticello as a Panopticon with Jefferson the all-seeing-eye at the top. He could see everything that was going on.

Andersen: Jefferson had a copy of Jeremy Bentham's 18th Century book “Panopticon” in his collection.

Stanton: At least two former slaves talk about Jefferson with his telescope, watching enslaved people at work. So this whole concept of surveillance from his central place on the apex of the mountain came through the oral tradition. He could see out but nobody could see in.” (Andersen)¹⁹

The telescope links Mr. Gaudet to Thomas Jefferson and Monticello and then again links the plantation to the penitentiary.²⁰ And the exchange between Martin and Campbell, Atwood's and Oates's reviews, and the comments of Susan Stein and Cinder Stanton return me to the beginning of *Property* and the scene in which Manon both watches through a spyglass and rehearses from memory her husband's routinized sexually violent abuse of several slave boys. The text begins:

It never ends. I watched him through the spyglass to see what the game would be. There were five of them. He gets them all gathered at the river's edge and they are nervous. If they haven't done this before, they've heard about it. First he reads to them from the Bible. I don't have to hear it to know what passage it is. Then they have to strip, which takes no time as they are wearing only linen pantaloons. One by one they must grasp the rope, swing over the water, and drop in. It's brutally hot; the cool water is a relief, so they make the best of it. He encourages them to shout and slap at one another once they are in the water. Then they have to come out and do it again, only this time they hang on the rope two at a time, which means one has to hold on to the other. They had gotten this far when I looked. (Martin, *Property* 4)

Mr. Gaudet makes the naked black boys hang onto the rope in twos, threes, and fours until the contact, heat, and then the cold water succeed in arousing them. And "[w]hen he gets them up to three or four he begins to watch closely."

Their limbs become entwined, they struggle to hang on, and it isn't long before one comes out of the water with his member raised. That's what the game is for. [...] He has his stick there by the tree [...]. Sometimes the offending boy cries out or tries to run away, but he's no match for this grown man with his stick. The servant's tumescence subsides as quickly as the master's rises, and the latter will last until he gets to the quarter. If he can find the boy's mother, and she's pretty, she will pay dearly for rearing an unnatural child. This is only one of his games. When he comes back to the house he will be in a fine humor for the rest of the day. (Martin, *Property* 4)

This is the scene that Manon watches and that I read as repeating an encounter that takes place immediately following the death of Manon's father's when she is a girl. In that scene Manon is alone on the dock, mourning her father's death, when she encounters two slave boys who are around her age (which is around the age of the boys who are made to perform in Mr. Gaudet's sadistic games) and who tell her what she refuses to believe—that her father set the fire that destroyed the barn and then shot himself.²¹ An outraged Manon thinks, "It was a lie of course. [...] It was an outrage that they should seek me out to tell me this lie which they had made up just to hurt me [...] I wanted to kill the boys" (47–48). When we

reencounter this scene later in the novel, it is after Manon has read her father's journal and noted her absence from it—noted that in some fundamental way as far as her father was concerned she and her mother did not count. (Their absence from the journal, their not counting in that text, is actually another measure of their distance from being property—the journal is, to all effects, an account book. Brand's "circumstantial account of a state of things" with which the previous section began is the inclusion in the account book—the journal of property and not of kin.) This time around, the scene is represented through that recognition, the lens of Mr. Gaudet's spyglass, and also the accumulated knowledge of the various 'infidelities' of her father, her husband, her uncle, and Joel. In its presence here it functions as a way of seeing that provides a bookend to the novel's opening pages in which we find Manon with the spyglass and her interpretation of the events. In this second iteration Manon recalls: "I turned to find those boys—did I really see them?—who appeared from nowhere to tell me what no one in my world ever would, the plain unvarnished truth" (Martin, *Property* 182). In Manon's remembering and then wondering if she had really seen and heard the boys, we recognize blackness as simultaneously optic, and auditory and optical illusion. Recognize too, the optic of the door (as consciousness) and what, were readers/listeners positioned to be able to see and hear them, could be made visible and audible by the boys who are not of her world.

If "it never ends," and I would argue that it doesn't—with it being the time of slavery²²—by the time we reach the end of this text that has been haunted by those opening words we can imagine Manon fully occupying her husband's position. In the wake of her mother's death, Manon interrupts Sarah's nursing, tells her to set her daughter aside, takes hold of Sarah's breast, "guides the nipple to [her] lips and sucked gently. Nothing happened. I took it more deeply into my mouth and sucked from my cheeks. This is what he does, I thought" (Martin, *Property* 76). And, as Manon claims his place and his pleasures, she imagines her husband looking up from *his* accounts with the feeling that "something important isn't adding up" (76).

We continue reading:

At once a sharp, warm jet hit my throat and I swallowed to keep from choking. How thin it was, how sweet! A sensation of utter strangeness came over me, and I struggled not to swoon [...]. I closed my eyes, swallowing greedily. I was aware of a sound, a sigh, but I was not sure if it came from me or from Sarah. How wonderful I felt, how entirely free. My headache disappeared, my chest seemed to expand, there was a complementary tingling in my own breasts. I opened my eyes and looked at Sarah's profile [...]. Her eyes were focused intently on the arm of the settee. She's afraid to

look at me, I thought. And she's right to be. If she looked at me, I would slap her (76–77).²³

Manon's sexual subjection of Sarah is cut short by the ring of the doorbell and the entrance of her Aunt Leila, the aunt who has "destroyed her happiness" (Martin, *Property* 77) through removing Sarah from the reach of her own husband by making her a wedding gift to Manon. "My poor darling," Aunt Leila says, "What a frightful time you must have had. Look, you are as white as a sheet" (77). Manon's remarkable whiteness has been produced by the shock of her mother's (black oozing) death from cholera, by the effects of inheriting her property, and by the theft and ingestion of Sarah's milk and through it the expansion of her freedoms.²⁴

This is most obviously an intertextual moment with schoolteacher's nephews' theft of Sethe's milk in *Beloved*. And also and more tellingly, given the desire across race on the part of contemporary readers to imagine retroactively and for the present moment some sort of sisterhood between enslaved women and their white female owners, there is thick resonance with the scene in which Amy Denver coming upon Sethe lying in the grass asks her, "you got anything on you, gal, pass for food?"²⁵ To which Sethe replies, "No." (Morrison 24). But we know from Sethe's descriptions that this is not true: "milk, sticky, and sour on her dress, attracted every small flying thing from gnats to grasshoppers," and, "Anybody could smell me long before he saw me. And when he saw me he'd see the drops of it on the front of my dress" (24; emphasis mine). That is, "food" (for her "crawling already?" daughter) is precisely what's on Sethe and her experience with two white boys with mossy teeth is what sets her on edge. What becomes clearer through the optic of Martin's text is that in this scene in *Beloved* Amy Denver could have violated Sethe in this way and does not; could have taken and does not take the milk Sethe is running to get to her still nursing daughter. (In that could is both the connection and disconnection, for Sethe cannot, with impunity, violate Amy. In that "could" is the license to wound given even to a running-away-throw-away-white-girl. In that could is one of the facts of blackness.) And, unlike Steinbeck's *Rose of Sharon* in *The Grapes of Wrath*, Morrison does not have Sethe offer her milk to Amy who is also in flight to the North and who repeatedly speaks of her hunger. Instead Morrison's Sethe remembers her own milk-hunger because the slave woman Nan who nursed her and other slave children had to nurse the white children first and so never had enough for them. She thinks: "Nobody will ever get my milk no more except my own children. I never had to give it to nobody else—and the one time I did it was took from me—they held me down and took it. Milk that belonged to my baby" (Morrison 231).²⁶

With that scene of Manon's theft of Sarah's milk in mind and with it her appropriation of her husband's sexual pleasures for her own, we can imagine Manon again moving from telescope to touch, (from optic to haptic) extending the reach of her license to an imminent sexual(ized) violation of Sarah's son Walter who by novel's end is approaching the age of the boys Manon has watched her husband abuse. We can also imagine this soon-to-be-new-violation as a postponed and redirected revenge-of-sorts on the memory of the boys who tell her the unvarnished and initially rejected truth of her father's death. "Your pappy started that fire hisself," they say. "He shot hisself" (Martin, *Property* 182). We have only to return to Manon's descriptions of fetishized, aestheticized, dehumanized, and injured black maleness that appear on the first two pages of the novel as she narrates that scene of subjection and subjectification partially from memory (for "they had gotten this far when [she] looked") and partially from the position of active voyeur, as witness and participant. Although she tells us that she couldn't look any more, her continued narration of the events alerts us that there are times when her husband plays this "game" that she has watched through to the end and it might indicate that such scenes have been committed to memory, perhaps for some other, later erotic use.

We read that the slave boys chosen by the master for that day's sadistic game have "lithe young bodies [that are] displayed to him in various positions," "bodies [that] glisten and steam like a horse's flanks after a long run," and that "crash into the water like wounded black geese" (Martin, *Property* 3-4). If at the beginning Mr. Gaudet hardly watches the descriptions indicate that Manon does and that as she watches the boys she both aestheticizes and analogizes them. Since a slave's worth is determined by labor's manual and sexual and by future sexual value in the market place ("[u]gly, dark little girls aren't easy to sell" [Martin, *Property* 7])—might that not be at least part of the reason why Manon decides that Walter ("a beautiful and vicious little wildcat [5]") is worth keeping around even absent of Sarah? Why, given the sexual economies of the novel, Manon comes to allow Walter's proximity and to "tolerate" and seek out in some small way his affection and his touch? Walter is worth more to Manon than either she or the novel can admit and that desire is hidden in plain sight in the narrative and hidden (in and) from the character (and the author), camouflaged in the language of discipline and duty. Inherited "principle[s]" that Manon says she must by example show Sarah (who when she escapes takes her daughter Nell with her and leaves Walter behind) since slaves "have no moral sense" and an absence of responsibility is "the gift" whites "give" their slaves (Martin, *Property* 191).

At the beginning of the text Manon stands at a window looking through the spyglass at Mr. Gaudet's sadistic sexual games, and hears in

her head the “incredulous refrain: This is my husband, this is my husband” (4). Complicit constitutive violent sexual ab/use is, therefore, the optic through which we must read the text. Described as an excellent reader and reconciler of accounts, Manon, is not at all outraged at the brutalizing system of slavery but at her marriage to a man who, because he cares so little for the appearance of things, is the particular agent of her degradation. In another instance of substitution of the experiences of the enslaved for her own, Manon remembers seeing Mr. Gaudet’s lips move with a threat to Sarah as he walks across the yard carrying a collar on his way to punish another enslaved woman for a sexual transgression not necessarily of her ‘choice.’ Manon imagines that she hears him say, “[y]ou’re next” (Martin, *Property* 179). She thinks,

I heard his voice clearly as I sat there in the darkened room clutching my head. He’s dead, I told myself. He’s not coming back. But it was as if he were there, leaning over me, turning the screw of the hot iron collar tighter and tighter until my skull must crack from the pressure. (179).

The narrator consistently imagines herself into the same position as Sarah (the boys, an unnamed enslaved woman) and here replaces the threat to Sarah (itself already a displacement) with a threat to herself of something that never happened. Readers should ask what work such displacement is doing both inside and outside the world of the text. We may understand why Martin positioned Manon positioning herself in this way; why, that is, within the text Manon looks at and engages in the violent subjection of enslaved people and turns their subjection into a rumination on her own subjugated position. We should ask, though, why contemporary readers sustain this collapse in the face of history, the dis/continuous past, and our knowledge that Manon is, “an extremely unreliable narrator. [...] A self-indulgent, delusional diary-keeper, a vainglorious and self-justifying memory machine” (Carvalho and van Vuuren 41). But many of Martin’s interviewers and readers insist on this collapse. They insist not only that Manon and Sarah are both property but that they are property in the same ways.²⁷

Not only does Martin not shift the romance that she introduces in writing “about” slavery in *The Great Divorce*, *Property* goes farther into the terrain of romance. Despite her desire not to analogize Sarah and Manon, the novel and its persistent doublings return us both to Boykin Chesnut’s sentiments and to Diane Roberts’ assertion with which I began, that the “white woman writing about race is necessarily a double agent, both acting as ‘mistress’ in controlling her characters and her plot, and identifying with them” (16). Interviewed in *The Guardian* after winning the Orange

Prize Martin spoke of her "obligation as a writer not to tell lies" and her exploration of difficult truths. "It seemed to me," she says,

"that the scariest place in the deep south, or in any society in which you have an imbalance of power, is the inside of the head of the slave owner, or the tyrant. [...] I wanted that middle ground—a person who is embedded in that society but not consciously a perpetrator, and who has something at stake. That often is a woman." (Ezard n. pag.)

To correct Martin, that actor in and out of her text often is a white woman who may be conscious of and to her power but who may also be allowed to hide that consciousness. In imagining that Manon is not a perpetrator, Martin refuses to enter the "scariest" place, and in doing so she refuses to know on a conscious level what is at stake. The lies and omissions that structure her existence (and then again the novel) Manon concludes are taken in with "their mother's milk" (Martin, *Property* 180). Milk that we are immediately reminded, "wasn't [in fact] their [her] mother's milk. [...] Perhaps that was how the poison entered us all. [...] I recalled watching Celeste nursing my brother at one breast, her own dark child at the other, while my mother looked on approvingly. Never, I thought. Not me" (180). But protestations aside Manon has done more than watch; she has taken for and taken into herself the pleasures of milk (sustenance and sexual ab/use). Though Manon too would have been nursed by an enslaved woman, until she steals Sarah's milk she is positioned and positions herself solely as witness to sexually violating 'intimacy' through the distance of sex/gender, memory, imagination, or through the apparatus of the telescope. By the end of the novel Manon has moved from positioning herself as just spectator to a brother's and a husband's license, to claiming for herself, as a measure of her independence as a widowed property-owning white woman, the rights to and pleasures of and in the violated black body.

Recall Harriet Jacobs's words in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*,

The white daughters [...] know that the women slaves are subject to their father's authority in all things; and in some cases they exercise the same authority over the men slaves. I have myself seen the master of such a household whose head was bowed down in shame; for it was known in the neighborhood that his daughter had selected one of the meanest slaves on his plantation to be the father of his first grandchild. She did not make her advances to her equals, nor even to her father's more intelligent servants. She selected the most brutalized, over whom her authority could be exercised with less fear of exposure. (44-45)

With Jacobs's text in mind and with the context of this novel's interest in power relations, in "the way that power obtains in and as relation,"²⁸ it takes little imagination to replace the enslaved woman Rose, who walks around town with Walter on a halter and leash, with Manon with Walter leashed/lashed to her and her desires like Luke in *Incidents* leashed and lashed to his master and subject to what Jacobs calls "the strangest freaks of despotism" (149).

Returning to the violence of Martin thinking that Walter "is going to be okay," all of this seems to be adding up to the text's (and then, again, Manon's) investment in and production of past and present white subjectivity through an erotics of pain and of black male and female suffering. When Douglass's text foregrounded his position as witness and participant to his Aunt Hester's brutal beating and rape, he named the ways that he *and* she were being made and unmade. Within *this* text scenes of spectacular black subjection are foregrounded through Manon's perspective, a perspective that then undoes their status as world making for her and world destroying and re-making for the enslaved.

I want to end with a return to violence. A return to the violence in the present in the material, rhetorical, state, discursive, intimate, violences to which black bodies and psyches are subjected. Very recently, when I gave a talk about *Property* at Willamette University an undergraduate asked me to make sense of the way that in his experience readers of *Property* don't register the ritualized sexual violence against black boys (and the forestalled violence against black women and I add, all of the questions this opens up about 'western gender') with which the text begins. In what follows I'll briefly attend to that question by way of a return to Brand who tells us that she recognizes that the "door exists as the ground we walk. [...] Only by self-observation, only by looking. *Only by feeling. Only by being a part, sitting in the room with history*" (Brand 25; emphasis mine).

It Gets Better

In the U.S. that phrase ("it gets better") gained traction in the aftermath of a rash of reporting-on suicides by lgbtq young people who had been harassed. Meant as an intervention and a lifeline the "It Gets Better Campaign Project" "was created to show young LGBT people the levels of happiness, potential, and positivity their lives will reach if they can just get through their teen years" (*It Get's Better Project*). But what if "it" doesn't get better? Or it doesn't get better in the ways that Dan Savage and the well-meaning and committed others behind the "It Gets Better" campaign imagine "it" getting better? It doesn't get better *only* through

the inspirational, aspirational (love in the future), and the power of the iterative (if I say it gets better – it will get better).

I want to position the logic of “It Gets Better” alongside the logic of Martin’s “I think he’s going to be okay,” and place both in conversation with, in particular, a liberal and progressive circumvention of the complex realities of racism, sexism, heterosexism, structural inequality, diminished life chances, harassment etc. in favor of a liberal iteration of a politics of hope and a ‘universal humanity’ that can transcend a ‘universal’ even if particularized suffering.

Because under what conditions *does it* get better? And for whom? And to return to the text of *Property*, under what conditions does it get better for Walter, under what conditions is Walter going to be okay? Walter could very well end up inheriting the plantation but not in the way that Martin seems to imagine. That is, he could end up in the notorious prison farm Angola, former Louisiana plantation turned maximum security penitentiary where, for example, 2 of the 3 members of the so-called Angola 3 (Herman Wallace and Albert Woodfox) have, in contravention of the 8th amendment, spent the last 40 years in solitary confinement, confined to a 6 foot by 9 foot cell for 23 hours a day.²⁹

To say, then, that Walter is going to be okay (particularly in relation to work that aims to correct a romantic education), to insist that “it gets better” without specifying how and for whom, is to position those who are most vulnerable on the edge of an abyss. To speak, to embody, to be black genderqueer in certain spaces may not make it get better but *may* put you in real danger, to wear a hoodie in solidarity or otherwise depending on who you are or are perceived to be and where you are and where you are perceived to belong, *may* put you in danger. We are *not* all Rashawn Brazzell, Trayvon Martin, Troy Davis, or Rekia Boyd and to insist that “we” are is to further endanger those on whom life-threatening violence is already most grievously enacted; it is to endanger all of us who live in the shadow of the door in black bodies. How do I know this? By sitting in the room with history.

The lie, noun and idiom (as in lie of the land), at the center of everything *is in the silence*, then and now, about power, about the structuring presence of anti-blackness, and the ways and what it positions one to see and hear, positions those would claim the freedom to walk, drive, and “stand their ground,” as participant in unseeing and unspeaking this foundational anti-blackness even as it emerges as most apparent in spaces and places, in where and how we live, how we are consigned to living deaths, how we die, and the forms that our struggles to live and change must take.

Notes

- 1 Brand 24–25.
- 2 Martin, *Property* 179.
- 3 Roberts 16.
- 4 Manon refers to *plaçage*, the system by which a young free black woman (often a mulatto or a quadroon) would be ‘placed’ by her mother in a relationship with a white man of good economic and/or social standing. The man accepting the *plaçage* would provide a home for the young woman and their ‘unofficial’ children, this in addition to a ‘legal’ white family that he might have elsewhere in the city.
- 5 This scene is joined with a memory: as Manon ponders Joel with “one of those light-skinned courtesans” (Martin, *Property* 160), she thinks about Joel using his future wife’s property to support this woman and her children and she concludes, “It wasn’t possible. Joel never looked at the servants; he hardly noticed they were there” (161). And then, “I had seen one of these women once Manon and her mother are visiting a neighbor [...]. Her features were fine, though her lips were too thick, and her posture erect. She was dressed to perfection in the latest fashion: a morning dress of pale lavender silk with deep purple velvet edging at the sleeves and throat, and a satin bonnet of the same dark hue edged in black. [...] What struck me most about the horrible creature was her excellent French. That perfect accent coming out of that yellow face, those dark eyes flashing with rage, made her seem some grotesque doll, created as some sort of poor joke, which I suppose is exactly what she was, what they all are” (161–162). Sound and sight converge; what truly horrifies is that “almost perfect” French coming out of that blackened face.

The deliberate use of velvet in the description of the quadroon woman’s dress seems to me another intertextual reference to *Beloved*. Specifically to Amy Denver who bets that Sethe doesn’t know what velvet is: “Ever seen any?” Amy Denver says. “I bet you never even seen any” (Morrison 33).
- 6 One should note here that it is Child whose short story “The Quadroons” is called the first narrative to introduce what will be the trope of the tragic mulatta, she who inserts romance into Jacobs’s distinctly unromantic narrative.
- 7 As Susan V. Donaldson writes, “Tellingly, the original title of *Property* was *Hatred*, apparently changed at the suggestion of the publisher to avoid a too close resemblance to Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved*” (274).
- 8 In full Ryan writes, “*Property* is additionally significant for being the first novel of substance about slavery published by a white writer in more than thirty years. *The Confessions of Nat Turner*—or, more specifically, the critical reaction to it—essentially shut down all opportunities for a fruitful discourse between black and white writers of slavery fiction. African American critics, exemplified by the Ten Black Writers, were justified, of course, in condemning William Styron’s unqualified acceptance of the questionable conclusions of

- Stanley Elkins in his fictionalization of the Turner insurrection" (150, emphasis mine).
- 9 See, for example, Gordon, Hartman, as well as the scholarship of Ashraf Rushdy and Hortense Spillers.
 - 10 Thanks to those people on twitter who so generously responded to my query about white authors writing fiction about slavery from 1967–2003.
 - 11 We might glimpse its alleged coming into being almost immediately after the passage and ratification of the Emancipation Proclamation when in 1870 Frederick Douglass is appalled that the U.S. is "already beginning to succumb to nostalgia for Dixie and its plantation life." He says, "The South has a past not to be contemplated with pleasure, but with a shudder," and, "She has been selling agony, trading in blood and in the souls of men. If her past has any lesson, it is one of repentance and thorough reformation" (qtd. in Bromell n. pag.). In 1970, five years after the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and in the midst of uprisings and continued terror we witness the first use of the term post racial and the suggestion that the South is entering into a period of post race at a policy conference held at Duke University. "Southern Growth Policies Board [...] designed to deal with rapid change in 'post-racial' south by 70 politicians and profs who believe [the] South has entered era in which race relations are soon to be replaced as major concern by growth and other problems" ("New 'Confederacy'" n. pag.).
 - 12 Of course the ability to find those "old stories" either dashing or romantic depends on one's optic, depends on where one stands or where one wants to stand in relation to slavery's lives and afterlives
 - 13 Having read *The Great Divorce*, it seems to me that *Property* is the more egregious text as far as its handling of slavery. The violence meted out to the slave woman Bessie in *The Great Divorce* and the disfiguration that results from her beating and subsequent maltreatment are rewritten in *Property* and it is Manon (the Elisabeth Boyer character) who is disfigured in the way Bessie is, it is Manon who is rendered worthless (in the marriage marketplace). While Bessie despite her disfiguration retains reproductive 'value' and value as a child's caretaker and wetnurse – her womb and hence her ability to produce value for the slaveowner is not damaged.
 - 14 Attestations from the Orange Prize Jury are not common in prize-winning texts.
 - 15 In "Property No Property" Jane Baron reads Louisiana Civil codes. She cites the following: "See LA. CIV. CODE art. 492 (1825) [...] ('The children of slaves and the young of animals belong to the proprietor of the mother of them, by right of accession.')" (9).
 - 16 The novel draws on events surrounding the German Coast Uprising that took place outside of New Orleans in 1811.
 - 17 This idea of inheritance is certainly problematized in Marlene Van Niekerk's *Agaat* (2004) set in South Africa after the end of legal apartheid. In that novel at great cost Agaat will inherit the property of Grootmoedersdrift from Milla de Wet.

- ¹⁸ Fred Wilson has taken white family portraits that feature black children in positions of servitude or on the outskirts of the scene and highlighted them – blocking out the white subjects of the painting. See Corrin.
- ¹⁹ Likewise Lucia (Cinder) Stanton writes, “[i]n the 1880s, a black man who had not been a Monticello slave but who worked on the construction of the University of Virginia recalled Jefferson standing in the Monticello yard watching ‘we all at work through his spyglass’” (147). Terrence W. Epperson writes that, “Benjamin Henry Latrobe (with some input from Thomas Jefferson) was the first American architect to use the panopticon model, in his Virginia Penitentiary in Richmond, completed in 1800” (Johnston et al. 108).
- ²⁰ Many thanks to Arlene Keizer for pointing out the Jefferson connection with Mr. Gaudet and his telescope. (The red hair of Mr. Gaudet is another clue to this Jefferson connection). And like Gaudet, Jefferson was supposed to be, “unscrupulous in his demands upon colored women” (Stanton 145). See, for example *Eastern State Penitentiary: Crucible of Good Intentions*, whose authors write, “Benjamin Henry Latrobe (with some input from Thomas Jefferson) was the first American architect to use the panopticon model, in his Virginia Penitentiary in Richmond, completed in 1800” (Johnston, Finkel, and Cohen 108).
- ²¹ We should bear in mind here what slave children looked like, how they were dressed how often they would be in a state of near nakedness year round. As Douglass tells us, “Children from seven to ten years old, of both sexes, almost naked, might be seen at all seasons of the year” (15).
- ²² I am following here the work of Saidiya Hartman who writes that the time of slavery is “the relation between the past and the present, the horizon of loss, the extant legacy of slavery, the antinomies of redemption (a salvational principle that will help us overcome the injury of slavery and the long history of defeat) and irreparability” (“The Time of Slavery” 759). Also, the “‘time of slavery’ negates the common-sense intuition of time as continuity or progression, then and now coexist; we are coeval with the dead” (759).
- ²³ This scene also connects with the scene from which the title is drawn. Manon has named the milk of enslaved women as the source of the lie. Though Manon wonders if it is Sarah or her who emits the sigh, the sigh and the slap function in different registers. The sigh signals collapse, the slap recognizes difference.
- ²⁴ For more on milk, excess, and license see Yaeger. Yaeger’s reading makes clear that *The Wind Done Gone* is another text that Martin is in conversation with.
- ²⁵ A desire to be seen in recent and divergent receptions of *The Help*.
- ²⁶ Another intertextual moment with *Beloved* is that Walter, like Denver, is deaf and mute although Denver’s muteness and deafness is temporary.
- ²⁷ Diane Rehm begins with the understanding that past and present are linked when she speaks about the “voice of a slaveholding woman [that] provides a glimpse into the heart of moral darkness that continues to haunt race relations in the U.S.” (“Valerie Martin” n. pag). A liberal proposition but one that, in the end, cannot be sustained by Rehm who after Martin’s confused definition of

- property remarks that “wives were considered chattel” (“Valerie Martin” n. pag).
- ²⁸ Jared Sexton, unpublished remarks, March 11, 2011.
- ²⁹ After 41 years in solitary confinement, Herman Wallace was finally released from the Louisiana State Penitentiary in Angola on October 2, 2013. After 41 years of torture Wallace was released to die of cancer in hospice with friends and family by his side on October 4, 2013.

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