Book Review

CHRISTINE L. MONTGOMERY


Sites of Slavery explores diverse spaces of slavery, from Jefferson’s Monticello plantation home to the slave forts in Senegal and Ghana. Beginning with two epigraphs by Charles Johnson and Toni Morrison, respectively, Sites highlights the debate about what it means when writers return to that terrain. While not taking up Johnson’s idea that slavery as story has the potential to become “ideology, even kitsch” (1), the book aligns itself with the Morrisonian philosophy of slavery as an inexhaustible subject as Tillet’s ambitious interdisciplinary study covers multiple genres, from satiric narratives, experimental dance, visual arts, and reparations discourse, to heritage tourism. Building upon Michael Bennett’s notion that antebellum abolitionist literature and slave narratives produced “a democratic aesthetic that created an emancipatory space for African-Americans” (3), Tillet seeks out these spaces in political, aesthetic, legal, and cultural projects that offer comparative visions of slavery, freedom, and citizenship. She also attempts to create a more inclusive “democratic aesthetic” for the future.

In her first chapter, Tillet examines the relationship between Thomas Jefferson and his slave mistress Sally Hemings as reconstructed in recent historical and imagined accounts, namely Barbara Chase-Riboud’s novel Sally Hemings (1979), Robbie McCauley’s play Sally’s Rape (1994), the historical account Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy (1997), and The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family (2008) by Annette Gordon-Reed. The half sister of Jefferson’s white wife, Martha Wayles Jefferson, Hemings has been repeatedly erased from America’s past by Jeffersonian scholars. Tillet references works that have sought to implicitly conjure Hemings, from William Wells Brown’s Clotel: or, the President’s Daughter (1852) to the Ebony magazine article “Thomas Jefferson’s Negro Grandchildren” (1954) to show how Hemings and her descendants, when included in America’s national framework, paint Jefferson as the “more accurate symbol for America’s racial paradox and who thereby compromised democracy” (22). Conversely, Tillet’s chosen counter-narratives serve to decenter Jefferson by reframing Hemings’s life and subjectivity not as “an empty signifier of the slave past, a historical womb that both mourns and mirrors black disenfranchisement” (22) but rather as a founding mother who symbolizes the interracial beginnings of America. Tillet thus elaborates how these revisions of Hemings follow Saidiya Hartman’s

Christine L. Montgomery received her PhD from the University of California, Santa Cruz and is a postdoctoral fellow in the Department of English at Santa Clara University.
and Hortense Spiller's call to unearth new narratives by black enslaved women.

One of the strengths of the chapter is Tillet's examination of oral histories and contemporary audience participation in McCauley's play. Incorporating the playwright's personal history and that of her grandmother, also named Sally, Tillet argues that the playwright creates an “intergenerational narrative that attributes the contemporary violence inflicted against black women to Jefferson's founding interracial violence” (44). This connection is further enhanced by audience participation. In a scene where McCauley “strips naked on stage and stands on a bench that serves as an auction block” (45), the slave auctioneer invites the audience to take part in the bidding. Contributing to the multiple voices of the play that travel from the slave past, to the 1960s civil rights movement, to the present moment, the audience also engages in “the unacknowledged and unheroic American history of black subjugation and white supremacy” (45).

Chapter 2 situates Ishmael Reed’s Flight to Canada (1976), Bill T. Jones’s choreographed dance Last Supper at Uncle Tom’s Cabin/The Promised Land (1990), Robert Alexander’s play I Ain’t Yo’ Uncle: The New Jack Revisionist of “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” (1991), and Kara Walker’s large-scale silhouettes The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven (1995) as representations of black satire that work against Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1852). Tillet argues how the aesthetic and ideological freedoms inherent within postmodern satire allow these artists to reclaim Stowe’s most racially problematic characters, Uncle Tom and Topsy. Here they are recovered as symbols of resistance and reconciliation. Comparing the implementation of postmodern techniques in these diverse works, such as the use of anachronisms, pop-culture referentiality, and hyperbole, allows Tillet to show the diverse ways in which these artists revise dominant historical narratives and also subvert and “upset the hegemony of Stowe’s sentimentality and its attendant racial and racist iconography” (58). As highly informative as this chapter is, the problematic representations of gender, especially in Reed’s Flight to Canada, are strikingly absent. Given that Tillet focuses on satire as strategic subversion, bringing the troublesome figure of Reed’s Mammy Barracuda into the discussion might have been productive.

Haile Gerima’s 1993 film Sankofa, Chester Higgins’s photograph “Dakar, Senegal, 1972. The Door of No Return in the House of Slaves” (1994), and Carrie Mae Weems’s “Elmina Cape Coast Ile de Gorée” (1993), compose chapter three as Tillet turns to visual culture and provides a transnational perspective on slavery. Drawing on black-and-white photography scholarship, and scholars of the African diaspora, from Édouard Glissant to Bayo Holsey, Tillet argues that while the photographs and film stand for an imaginary unity between Africa and America, the legacy of slave forts serves as a reminder of lost histories and the “missing voices of those enslaved, dead, and forgotten throughout the entire diaspora” (108). Tillet’s significant accomplishment lies in her reading of Weems’s photographs as a representation of melancholia that reveals a more nuanced vision of difference in the visual representations of slave forts. Accord-
ing to Tillet, Weems’s “manipulation of the architecture . . . re-create[s] the melancholic affects caused by the confinement, dismemberment, and displacement of the slave trade itself” (110). Notably, Tillet also shows how Sankofa and the photographs represent a form of African-American exceptionalism as the slave forts become, for the African-American tourist, a utopic reclamation of an imagined preslavery Africa that elides the contemporary politics and cultures of Ghana and Senegal.

The final sections of the book bring together legal reparation court cases with historical narratives of reparations, Randall Robinson’s The Debt (2001), and Mary Frances Berry’s My Face Is Black Is True (2005). Demanding both material and mnemonic restitution by reclaiming sites of slavery, Robinson and Berry hope to fill in aporias in the African-American historical archive. Moreover, they reveal how civic estrangement—Tillet’s overarching term for the alienation felt by African Americans because of their exclusion from American civic myths—has impacted the poetics, politics, and economics of the post-civil rights African-American community at large. While black civic estrangement is visible in slavery and Jim Crow segregation, as she correctly shows through her discussions of Dred Scott v. Sanford (1857) and W. E. B. Du Bois’s magisterial Black Reconstruction in America (1935), greater detail of post-civil rights civic estrangement and additional references would have enhanced the study.

Pairing the court cases with the historical narratives, Tillet hopes to clarify what she calls “mnemonic restitution” and how the term challenges both the national amnesia around slavery and institutionalized racism that sustains African-American civic estrangement. Situating the court cases in psychoanalytic discourse, specifically racial melancholia, Tillet argues that the calls for mnemonic restitution have the potential to reconcile the past by insisting that the nation apologize for the trauma due to slavery. Thus, mnemonic restitution “requires a collective working through of the difficult affects of slavery” and “imagines that new racially inclusive collectiveness can thrive in the wake of such remembrances” (140). While Tillet recognizes that contemporary reparations discourse seeks to come to terms with the past and imagine a utopian future where American monuments honor instead of elide slave history, her contextualization of mnemonic restitution also relies heavily on a utopian democratic and interracial future.

George Washington’s presidential mansion is the closing site where Tillet also points out the limits of mnemonic restitution. Excavated and restored in 2002 by the Liberty Bell Center, “The President’s House” is the first “federal site designated to acknowledge the founding contradiction of American freedom and slavery” (173). Tillet analyzes how this exhibition, by pairing slave history with the national symbol of freedom, makes visible a “twin narrative” (174) of slavery and emancipation that materializes as the American narrative. However, Tillet recognizes the constraints of mnemonic restitution as she reminds us that restoring such sites complements but does not atone “for the paucity of resources that African-Americans inherited from slavery” that still “limit[s] their economic citizenship in the present”
(177). Though these sites of slavery do not solve racial inequality or provide complete democracy for all, Tillet’s work is valuable to scholars because of its careful illumination of diverse conceptions of slavery, freedom, and citizenship. Sites of Slavery is a useful book that contributes to our understanding of the challenges of contemporary neo-slave “narratives” across several genres.