

## Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects by Christina Sharpe (Book Review)

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### **Abstract:**

A review of the book *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects* by Christina Sharpe.

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### **Article:**

Christina Sharpe. *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2011.

*Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects* begins with a repetition of the scene of Aunt Hester's beating, made famous in Frederick Douglass's *Narrative*. Sharpe's attention to the scene is essential in the introduction to her book as it not only elucidates the ways in which Black "subjectification equals objectification" but, more profoundly and cruelly, the way that Black people's entrance into subjectivity (as subjection) is never not free from the intimate entanglements of racial and sexual violation (6). Many, including Sharpe, identify Douglass's witnessing his aunt's beating as a primal scene, and with that, concede that this act of violence is never not erotically horrific, horrifically erotic in his formation of self and identity, being "made and unmade in the same moment" (7). For the young Douglass, the (primal) scene of monstrosity, a vicious enactment of objectification and unfreedom, was instrumental in his journey from "bondage to freedom." Here, Sharpe powerfully inquires into the haunting character of Aunt Hester's beating in Douglass's freedom story and the ways in which she "hides" (and embodies) his subjection while reminding antebellum and postbellum readers that she is essential in his subjectification (9–10).

Sharpe's text moves insightfully from this scene to engage with the work of Afro-diasporic authors and artists Gayl Jones, Bessie Head, Isaac Julien, and Kara Walker. It is through these engagements that we see this primary (primal) scene of Aunt Hester's beating return and repeat in other forms, revealing how the monstrously intimate relation between violence and sexuality (at the heart of chattel slavery) continues to ripple through a re-fashioning of post-slavery Black subjectivity. Deeper still, Sharpe brilliantly elucidates how slavery's erotic and violent

entanglements are occupied by these artists as a way to illuminate the quotidian fact of postbellum Black subjection, “the routiniz[ation] of everyday violence in the name of new (national) narratives. In addition, they suggest the complicated ways that post-slavery subjectivity involves reciting ‘original traumas and their subsequent repetitions’ [as they] are interpellated by the enslaved, remembered, and passed on to generations as their own” (24).

In Chapter One, “Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* and Reading the ‘Days that Were Pages of Hysteria’” Sharpe grapples with slavery's erotic and violent entanglements through what she calls the monstrously seductive “Corregidora Complex” (29). Sharpe's unthreading of the Corregidora Complex is achieved through a delicate reading of author Gayl Jones's neo-slave narrative, *Corregidora*. A story about a family of Black women, linked by (post-)slavery kinship and the spectre of the man that owned them (both in the real and symbolic sense), *Corregidora* is a complex narrative about the possibility of Black women's “nonhysterical sexual awakening” (48). According to Sharpe, Jones's *Corregidora* unveils (albeit partially) the spaces of enslavement that persist past emancipation, the occasions where the victims of racialized, sexualized violence inhabit and enact, through repetition, the “law of the (slave) master” (32). As Sharpe demonstrates, this hysterical repetition is achieved through the injunction to reproduce and “make generations,” ensuring that those women who have survived *Corregidora* never cease to forget and pass on his evil (30).

What becomes dangerous, however, is that, in the injunction to repeat/retell, the originary narrative of Black female sexuality (as captive) is reinstated as law. And in the case of the main character, Ursa, the law is broken through her inability to “make generations” (ibid.). As Sharpe contends, Ursa's inability to reproduce a narrative of slavery in the post-slavery moment (the mid 1940s to late 1960s) is joined by Jones's innovations in a narrative structure riddled and enhanced by its silences and elisions. Moments later, however, Sharpe asserts that what remains hidden still “must be read” (60). While I understand the ways in which the urgency of reading (the diagnosis of a symptom as indictment of history) ultimately works in the interest of justice and healing, it seems that the sanction to read contradicts the text's own premise; that is, that desire and violation are entangled, ambivalently figured, rehearsed, and disturbed, working in excess of meaning.

Again, while I understand the move to “read” as a desire for justice—in the interest of a different story—the use of psychoanalysis in this chapter (as a reading strategy vexed and im/possible itself in ways Sharpe recognizes) enlists its own troublesome imperatives (in ways Sharpe does not recognize). Namely, the belief in and presumption of acts as symptoms produces a narrative structure to which, Sharpe otherwise brilliantly argues, Jones actively resists. Sharpe knows this, but insists on reading nonetheless; however, this impulse is soon after brought into relief. Chapter Two: “Bessie Head, Saartje Baartman, and *Maru*” offers a wonderfully ethical (non)engagement with the “signifying excess” of author Bessie Head, one of her characters Margaret Cadmore, Jr., and the “historical” figure cum icon Saartje Baartman (71).

For Sharpe, Bessie Head was doubly positioned (77). Writing in the 1960s, during an era of South African apartheid, anti-colonial movements, and African ethno-nationalisms, Head was “coloured” and an exile living in Botswana. According to apartheid's racial taxonomy, this meant that she did not enjoy the privileges of “whites,” but had “relative freedoms” with respect to black South Africans (77). As Sharpe observes, once in Botswana, being “coloured” meant an association with the racially abject figure of the “Bushman” (78). Sharpe deftly engages with Head's novel, *Maru*, and thinks through the complicated process of racial identification and refusal. Positioned on the border between Masarwa identity and whiteness, Margaret Cadmore Jr. is afforded the relative freedom of social and economic mobility, all the while resignifying upon her Masarwa self. In doing so, she refuses “imposed hierarchies and relative freedoms” (87). Sharpe continues to argue that this refusal of presumed allegiance (whiteness) is consistent with Head's own ambivalent relationship with “familial and national narratives” (87). Here, Sharpe nicely establishes a connection between Head's bodily and psychic undecidability with the figure of Sara Baartman whose own ontological, bodily, and economic “unreadability” rendered her easy fodder for political and racial redemption. Because both women's autobiographies were either elusive (in Head's case) or non-existent (in Baartman's), critics have subjected them to a kind of renarrativization and appropriation. For Sharpe, this is another expression of the post-slavery tautology, “subjectification equals objectification” (6). Sharpe's writing on the problem of Baartman's endless resignification as South Africa's lost daughter is brilliant and necessary. The ethical stakes of Sharpe's project are clearest here when she asks “Is redemption possible?” (73).

What is impressive about *Monstrous Intimacies* is Sharpe's ability to raise im/possible questions about slavery and post-slavery and to do so in a way that attends carefully to the dimensions of unknowability and irreducibility essential to the asking and engagement. Chapter 3, “Isaac Julien's *The Attendant* and the Sadomasochism of Everyday Black Life,” asks about “pleasure in slavery” (114). Sharpe asks this question in relation to Julien's *The Attendant*, a film that deploys a purportedly abolitionist museum-space, England's *Wilberforce House*, to inquire into the repressed fact of desire in the institutionalization, remembrance, and enactment of (anti) slavery. The film, which contains scenes of same-sex interracial s/m, is at once framed by portraits depicting chattel slavery (scenes which are then restaged by “live” bodies). As Sharpe powerfully argues, the tendency to read interracial s/m as an “unchanging” reenactment of slavery is reductive, to say the least (120). This particular argument is extraordinarily necessary in response to what Sharpe calls “straight” anxieties around queerness, sadomasochism, race, sexuality, and desire (123).

With Julian, Sharpe brilliantly engages with that complexity, careful to not collapse sadomasochistic practices and subjectivities into each other but also to examine how the scene of s/m in a museum that memorialized slavery invites a whole other set of questions concerning not just (inter)racial desire and history but how “playing the slave a little bit” continues to be constitutive of subjectivity for all those African and European people whom I am calling “post-

slavery subjects” (121). While Black bodies have historically been the stage for the often violent enactments of White (imperial) desire, Sharpe is careful not to read the scenes of master and slave “play” as opposed to desire, but rather as opening up other possibly unreadable (and with that, liberatory) domains of signification.

Sharpe continues her argument about these other possibilities of racial and sexual desire, ambivalently constituted in monstrous conditions and forms, in the last chapter, Chapter Four: “Kara Walker's *Monstrous Intimacies*.” In response to critics of Walker who misread her work as complicit in the reduction of Black people to stereotype and caricature, Sharpe powerfully acknowledges that something else (something always missed) in Walker's re-depictions of scenes from plantation slavery is going on. Something that can't be read, that won't be read. Not only does Sharpe brilliantly indict the critical refusal to recognize the whiteness constitutive and constituted by these scenes of horror and pleasure (that which is refused a “reading”) but elucidates the profundity of what also remains hidden in Walker. That is, Walker's scenes contain images of Black people that may be named but cannot be read. “[T]he figures engage in actions that one can describe and not name [...] and that sometimes one can barely describe seems to be a step away from the readily assignable roles [...] and a step toward throwing into relief against what they conceal” (175).

Like Walker, Sharpe's *Monstrous Intimacies* succeeds in illuminating the complex entanglements of desire and horror at the heart of Black and White subjectification “after” slavery. More profoundly, this text powerfully balances the fact of history's monstrous persistence and the desire for what she identifies, after Dionne Brand, as a modality of Black life unhinged to historical narrative (129).