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## **monstrous intimacies: making post-slavery subjects**

Christina Sharpe, Duke University Press, Durham, NC and London, 2010, 272pp., ISBN: 978-0-8223-4609-8, \$22.95 (Pbk), ISBN: 978-0-8223-4591-6, \$79.95 (Hbk)

In *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects*, Christina Sharpe explores the way in which the power relations of freedom and enslavement intrinsic to Atlantic slavery have informed human subjectivity in the present.

Sharpe defines monstrous intimacies as 'a set of known and unknown performances and inhabited horrors, desires and positions produced, reproduced, circulated and transmitted, that are breathed in the air and often unacknowledged to be monstrous' (p.3). Sharpe's concept is a valuable counter-discourse to recent critical conversations, particularly those relating to the 'post-racial' society in the United States, in which racial inequalities and conflicts are considered to be resolved as a result of the election of a black president, Barack Obama, in 2008. Sharpe demonstrates to the reader that, post-slavery, 'new forms of subjectivity are created not only for people of African descent in the diaspora, but also for Africans, Europeans and others' (p.4).

To begin, Sharpe provides a reading of a scene from the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1995 [1845]), in which Douglass witnesses and interprets the beating of his Aunt Hester as her symbolic initiation into enslavement through the metaphor of 'the blood stained gate' (p.4). Sharpe juxtaposes this reading with an analysis of Essie Mae Washington's declaration of 'freedom' with the publication of her memoir *Dear Senator*, (Washington-Williams and Stadiem, 2005) which concerns her life as the previously unacknowledged daughter of segregationist Governor Strom Thurmond. In subsequent chapters, Gayl Jones' neo-slave novel *Corregidora* is read alongside the diaries of South Carolina politician and slave owner James Henry Hammond; the life of Bessie Head and her novel *Maru* is linked with that of Saartje Baartman; Isaac Julien's film *The Attendant* is analysed in the context of the commemoration of the abolition of slavery in Britain; and the visual artist Kara Walker's work is considered in relation to its critical reception. The readings are connected by Sharpe's overarching objective: to demonstrate the ways in which post-slavery subjectivities are constructed and articulated.

In Chapter 1, Sharpe reads Gayl Jones' novel *Corregidora* (1987[1975]). The narrative focuses on a Brazilian slave owner, Corregidora, his ownership of the protagonist Ursa's great-grandmother, and the repercussions of this relationship over four generations of women, compelled to pass on the original trauma of

chattel slavery. Unable to have children, Ursa cannot 'reproduce' the memory of Corregidora. Sharpe indicates in her summing up of *Corregidora* that the text concerns a specifically American view of slavery, in which subjectivities and familial relations are formed by the reproductions of intergenerational trauma and memory.

The focus of Chapter 2 is an analysis of author Bessie Head, the novel *Maru* (1995 [1971]), and the life and posthumous representation of Saartje Baartman, also known as the Hottentot Venus. Sharpe draws parallels between the lives of Head, born in apartheid South Africa, categorised as coloured and resident in Botswana, and Baartman, a Khoisan woman displayed as a human exhibit in nineteenth century Europe. The protagonist of *Maru*, Margaret Cadmore Jr., is an orphaned Masawa woman adopted by a white English missionary. Sharpe contends that Head's fictional character, Saartje Baartman, and Head herself are subject to a 'condition of relative freedom within unfreedom', their status and subjectivities determined by 'larger colonial and national histories' (pp.83–84) that designate their racial differences as 'monstrous' (p.68).

In Chapter 3, Sharpe engages more closely with the relations of dominance and desire in order to examine the formation of post-slavery subjectivity. Isaac Julien's film *The Attendant* (1993) is set in the Wilberforce House Museum, Hull, an institution dedicated to the history of England's anti-slavery campaign. In *The Attendant*, fantasy scenes of sado-masochism are enacted between the eponymous attendant and a young white male visitor, after opening hours in the museum spaces. Sharpe's reading of the film affords critical space to the potential formations of complex, embodied, sexualised subjectivities in the post-slavery present.

The work of artist Kara Walker is discussed in Chapter 4. According to Sharpe, Walker responds to the nostalgia evoked by the 'plantation romance' (p.157) by depicting scenes of plantation life and often-sexualised violence through the arrangement of black and white silhouettes on white backgrounds. Sharpe argues that Walker 'insists on linking the past with the present' (p.158) in her work as an expression of post-slavery subjectivity.

Christina Sharpe's achievement in *Monstrous Intimacies* is to reconfigure the theorising of subjectivities by contending that slavery across the African diaspora informs subjectivities in ways that remain largely unacknowledged. An exploration of differences in the ways that individuals are implicated in monstrous intimacies depending on gender, sexuality and race would have been especially effective. Nevertheless, *Monstrous Intimacies* is an impressive study that offers valuable strategies for rethinking subjectivity in relation to slavery.

## references

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Sonia Hope  
Goldsmiths, University of London

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