

Rewriting History: The Neo-Slave Narrative in the New Millennium

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To Professor Hans Bak, who did not give up on me.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction.

In December of 1865 the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution of the United States was ratified, making slavery illegal in thirty out of the thirty-five states. Canada, which did not have nearly as many slaves as the United States, had already abolished slavery in 1834 and the remaining five US states followed suit in 1866. Slavery has thus been outlawed in North America for almost 150 years. Nevertheless, slavery is still a controversial topic in contemporary North American society and particularly in popular culture.

One area of contemporary interest in slavery is the film industry, which experienced an upsurge of films about antebellum slavery in North America in the past few years. *Django Unchained* (2012), *Lincoln* (2012), and *Twelve Years a Slave* (2013) can be listed among the box office hits, although they are certainly not the only films on the subject. The adaptation of Lawrence Hill's novel *The Book of Negroes* (2007) for television, starring famous actors such as Cuba Gooding, Jr. and Louis Gossett, Jr. has also been favourably reviewed. In addition, famous musicians have taken a renewed interest in slavery, with African-American rappers such as Jay-Z-, Lecrae, and Lupe Fiasco as well as country music singers such as Brad Paisley composing songs about their country's slavery past.

Antebellum slavery has been a consistent topic in literature for hundreds of years, most often in the form of slave narratives or, more recently, neo-slave narratives. The original genre of the slave narrative featured the (auto-) biographical account of the life of a former slave. Abolitionists often used these accounts to further their cause. The neo-slave narrative also centres on the lives of former slaves in antebellum North America, but it is usually fictional. The authors of neo-slave narratives were often closely linked to the Civil Rights Movement. However, the genre persisted even after the Civil Rights Act of the United States (1964) and the Human Rights Act of Canada (1977) were passed. In fact, as is the case with the film and music industry, the neo-slave narrative has again become increasingly popular in the new millennium. This is particularly striking given that there is no cause as immediate as the Abolitionist Movement or the Civil Rights Movement, which are tied to the creation of slave and neo-slave narratives, respectively.

This leads me to my research question:

**How, and to what extent, have the authors of the post-millennium neo-slave narrative genre in North America continued and/or expanded on the revisionist purposes of the neo-slave narrative genre of the Civil Rights Period?**

In one of the courses that I took as part of the master program Literary Studies, we discussed both the slave narrative genre and the neo-slave narrative genre. The uniformity and continuity of the two genres intrigued me to the point of prompting a more in-depth research on the subject. As of this moment, plenty of research has been done on the original slave narratives. The neo-slave narratives, however, which are seen by scholars as belonging to an independent genre, have not been discussed as often as the antebellum slave narrative. Furthermore, scholarly sources on neo-slave narratives focus mostly on the novels that were written during, or just after, the time of the Civil Rights Movement, at a time when the genre flourished. Scholars regard several novels from that period as the key examples of the neo-slave narrative genre, but they do not seem to have looked far beyond those works. Comparatively little research has been done about more recent, i.e. postmillennial, North-American neo-slave narratives, even though the genre has once again become quite popular. When analyzed, most contemporary neo-slave narratives are discussed individually, often in reviews, and are frequently described as recent versions of neo-slave narratives from the earlier wave. It occurred to me, then, that it would be interesting to look at recent neo-slave narratives as a separate group within the genre. Their revisionist purposes make them stand out from the neo-slave narratives that were written during the Civil Rights Movement. To this effect, I will subsequently refer to those works as revisionist neo-slave narratives or contemporary neo-slave narratives in order to maintain a clear division.

To find out how, and to what extent, these revisionist neo-slave narratives differ from their predecessors within the neo-slave narrative genre, I will analyse five fictional revisionist neo-slave narratives that have been written since the start of the new millennium. They are:

- The Known World* (2003) by Edward P. Jones
- Slave Moth* (2004) by Thylia Moss
- Copper Sun* (2006) by Sharon Draper
- The Book of Negroes* (2007) by Lawrence Hill
- A Mercy* (2008) by Toni Morrison

Each of these novels has slavery as its subject, largely follows the format of the slave narrative genre, and contains characteristics of the neo-slave narrative genre and revisionist neo-slave narrative genre. There are other novels that also answer to these requirements, but I specifically chose these five novels because they each have something that is unique. *The Known World* touches upon the sensitive and daring subject of black slave holders and tells its story through a complicated web of different perspectives. The novel won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2004. However, it also received criticism from readers who were angry at Jones

for bringing up the topic of black slaves holders, because they deemed it part of a history that had best be forgotten. *Slave Moth* is unique for its narrative style: it is written entirely in verse. It also touches upon the topic of a slave's love for her master. It thereby provides its audience with an unusual reading experience of a revisionist neo-slave narrative, both in terms of style and content. *Copper Sun* is a novel that was written for an audience of young adults and it includes materials for students who wish to use the novel in class. The story is written from two seemingly opposite perspectives: that of an African-American slave-girl and that of a white indentured servant-girl. Its author, Sharon Draper, also explains that her own biography plays into the story, since her own grandmother had been a slave. *The Book of Negroes* is a novel written by Lawrence Hill, an author from Canada, which is also where part of the story takes place. It won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize in 2008 and has been adapted into a mini-series. Finally, *A Mercy* was written by arguably the most famous contemporary African-American author, Toni Morrison. It is one of the few novels that explores the institution of slavery in the period of the early settlements in America in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Together, these five novels offer a representative sample of the revisionist neo-slave narrative genre and they provide a broad and solid base for my research.

In order to answer my research question, I will assess the formal and thematic properties of the original slave narrative genre and the neo-slave narrative genre. I will then study to what extent the authors of these novels have followed or deviated from the conventions of the original slave narrative genre and to what purpose. I will also evidence the characteristics of the neo-slave narrative genre that are present in my primary texts. Subsequently, I will determine how the authors' artistic choices revise the neo-slave narrative genre. By comparing the results of my analyses, I will attempt to find the revisionist purpose behind the novels in order to understand why these contemporary authors decided it was necessary to revise the neo-slave narrative genre and how they managed to do so.

Before I start with my comparative research, I will provide a clear definition as well as a short history of the genres of the slave narrative and the neo-slave narrative, which I will do in Chapter 2. The first section of this chapter will be dedicated to a history of the slave narrative. During my classes on the slave narrative genre and the neo-slave narrative genre we used Olney's outline. He stated that the "conventions for slave narratives were so early and so firmly established that one can imagine a sort of master outline drawn from the great narratives and guiding the lesser ones" (152)<sup>1</sup>. I will use this outline as my main source to

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<sup>1</sup> A copy of the full description of Olney's outline can be found in Appendix I.

explain what the characteristics of the slave narrative genre are. In the next sections of the second chapter, I will explain how the neo-slave narrative genre was formed and how it can be defined. The most common characteristics of neo-slave narratives are discussed in the third section of Chapter 2.

The main sources for Chapter 2 can be summed up as follows: I have consulted Olney's article on the outline of the slave narrative, (literary) reference books, such as encyclopaedias and anthologies, notes on the lectures I attended, and scholarly articles on the two genres. Of the latter, the most important source is Ashraf H.A. Rushdy, who appears to be the leading scholar on the neo-slave narrative genre. Another important source is KaaVonnia Hinton, who is, as far as I know, the only scholar who has written an article on the topic of neo-slave narratives that are specifically aimed at a young adult audience.

Chapters 3 to Chapter 7 discuss the individual novels mentioned above. Each chapter will start with a brief summary of the novel in order to ensure that the reader knows the plot and the background, which is crucial to understand my analysis. Next, I will analyse the text to determine to what extent it meets the characteristics of the slave narrative that Olney has described in his outline. I will do this in quite some detail, because it shows how extensive the similarities between the slave narrative genre and the neo-slave genre are and what has linked the genres over time. I will also interpret the manner in which the authors have used the elements of Olney's outline in their contemporary novels and to what purpose. In the third part of each individual analysis, I will examine what characteristics of the neo-slave narrative genre can be found in the novels. Subsequently, I will try to determine what each author's revisionist purpose was for adapting or conforming to specific characteristics of the neo-slave narrative genre.

Aside from individually analysing my chosen works, I have consulted articles, reviews, and interviews with the authors. The purpose of this research was twofold. First, these secondary sources enabled me to grasp the authors' intentions and motives behind writing a revisionist neo-slave narrative. Second, the sources evidence how the scholars and critics received the revisionist purposes of each novel.

In the final chapter I will combine the results of my research and analyse the five revisionist neo-slave narratives as a group. Finally, I will determine what characteristics they have in common and how contemporary authors have revised the neo-slave narrative genre.



## Chapter 2: The history of slave narratives and neo-slave narratives

### 2.1 The slave narrative's evolution

In the 1820s by far the biggest part of cultural depictions of African Americans in Northern America were confined to either the minstrel shows or the fugitive slave narratives. The minstrel shows had known white people in blackface for decades, but it was not till the 1820s that acts specialized in blackface came to the stages (Toll 1456). The African-Americans were usually played by white people in blackface, which is stereotypical makeup giving white actors a black face and big red lips. The minstrel actors made a comical and mocking show of the African-American slave culture and of the slaves' attempts to imitate their white owners (Rushdy, "Slavery Represented" 423). Although the minstrel show was meant to be "escapist entertainment, [...] its racial caricatures and stereotypes allowed its huge northern white audiences to believe that African Americans were inferior people" (Toll 1457). Thus influencing the public's attitude towards the issues of race and slavery, the minstrel shows also influenced the impending threats of civil war in America (Toll 1456).

Established in 1760 (Andrews 668), the slave narrative genre, also called liberatory narratives (Patton 878) or deliverance narratives (Elder 101) or fugitive slave narratives, did not have an offensive goal like the minstrel shows did. Such narratives were written to make the white audience feel sympathy for the slaves (Rushdy, "Slavery Represented" 423). The Abolitionist Movement, which tried to abolish slavery through the motto "Am I not a man and a brother?" (Rushdy, "Slavery Represented" 423), operated on the idea that if the white people in the North of the United States would hear about the ordeals of the African Americans in the South, they would be emotionally touched and spurred into political action. The testimonies of former slaves became very popular tools for the "abolitionists proclaiming the antislavery gospel during the antebellum era" (Andrews 667). The narratives did not only show how inhuman the slave system was, but also presented evidence that the African-Americans were just as human as any other person (Andrews 667). About 500 slave narratives were published before the Civil War (Sekora 483); some of them were even translated and published on the European market.

The first slave narrative that became very famous and influential was Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* (1789) (Paul 849). His text is seen as the basic narrative upon which all subsequent slave narratives were modelled. Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* from 1861 was the first slave narrative written by a woman (Andrews 669). But the most famous slave narrative was that of

Frederick Douglass, published in 1845, of which over thirty thousand copies were sold within the first fifteen years (Andrews 668).

In total, there are roughly 6000 known slave narratives (Polsky 166), most of which were published in anthologies and followed a very specific outline. First of all, it should be noted again that the narratives were aimed at a white audience and were also often written by white abolitionists who penned down the former slaves' histories (Andrews 668). Although literacy was usually a key element to his route to freedom and, thus, the slave could write his own story, the abolitionists, feeling that they best knew the intended audience, would often edit the texts. Furthermore, the narrators' 'intellectual worth' was measured by the quality of their use of the English language (even though they would often have had ghost writers) and how 'well' they had taken on Christianity (Yorke). If the story was written eloquently, the reader would feel more sympathetic towards the slave and be more inclined to support the Abolitionist Movement.

As mentioned, almost all slave narratives followed a specific outline. All slave narratives give an account of how the individual slave moved from bondage to freedom. This change is typically depicted in the ex-slave's movement from the South to the North, from a rural to an urban environment, from legal powerlessness to a state of citizenship, and from a lack of self-awareness to a "felt self" (Elder 101).

Olney addresses the front and back matter of the slave narrative genre in his outline<sup>2</sup>. The narratives start with an engraved portrait, a title page that assures the reader that the work was narrated by the slave himself, testimonials, and a poetic epigraph. The actual narrative starts with the sentence "I was born...", followed by a place and a vague familial history. Then the ex-slave writes about his life in slavery, talking about his cruel master, the whippings, the amounts of food and clothing he was given, and how he managed to learn how to read and write despite many obstacles. Other elements mentioned in Olney's outline are the description of an exceptionally strong and hardworking slave, the story of a 'Christian' slaveholder who is cruel, and the description of a slave auction. This is followed by an account of how the slave escaped, how he had to evade patrols, and how he was welcomed in the North. The free man or woman takes a new last name and shares his thoughts on slavery with the reader. The slave narrative is concluded by an appendix filled with documents that prove the truth of his story (Olney 152-153). The slave narrative can use a tone that resembles that of an adventure story, sometimes addressing the reader directly (Olney 152). Apart from

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<sup>2</sup> A copy of the full description of Olney's outline can be found in Appendix I.

the personal details, the slave narratives followed the format so closely that, especially in the early days of the genre (Yorke), they almost seem interchangeable (Olney 148).

According to Elder, all narratives taken collectively “form a coherent historical and artistic grounding for the general black experience in America” (101). The fact that the narratives can be seen as a collective body of works is due to the fact that the plot was more important than the character. After all, the narratives were supposed to portray the “protagonist’s journey of transformation from object to subject” (Bell, “*Beloved*” 10) and remind the reader of how evil slavery was (Andrews 668). It is for the same reason that the objectivity of the narrative was also very important (Bell, “*Beloved*” 10). Physical pain played an important role in the slave narratives, but could not be emphasized too much, since that could suppress other elements of the story. It could also make the white reader look upon the protagonist merely as a subject in pain, rather than a fellow human being who experienced other emotions aside from pain (Vint 244). Emotional pain was usually an element in a slave narrative, such as in the recounting of a period of complete isolation after slaves were removed from their community (Yorke).

The Civil War, which took place from 1861 to 1865 between the Northern and Southern states in America, was fought over, amongst other things, the issue of slavery. While the North wanted to abolish the institute, the South wanted to retain it (Glatthaar and Randall, 208). The North won and in 1865 the Thirteenth Amendment, which abolished slavery in thirty states (the remaining five states followed in 1866), was ratified (Fitzgerald 2192). After the Reconstruction, many slave narratives were still written down. Their continued popularity was due to, amongst others, the idea that the narratives would show the white people that slavery had prepared the former slaves for a new life in which they were free and able to participate in the newly structured society. Furthermore, the slave narratives could show that the African Americans wanted progress for both the white and black population and reminded the people of how the existence of slavery had threatened the nation (Andrews 669).

## 2.2 The neo-slave narrative

The slave narrative genre had a hopeful tone right after the Civil War, but became less optimistic during the Long Depression of the years from 1873 to 1896, a period of global economic recession (Rosenberg 59). Nevertheless, the slave narrative genre remained the most important literary form within African-American literature. Most black writers used elements of the slave narrative when publishing their first works (Andrews 668). During the

Great Depression of the 1930s roughly 2,300 testimonies of former slaves were orally recorded by the Federal Writers Project for the Slave Narrative Collection (Nash 243).

Still, slave narratives had started to subside in volume, although there were still plenty of writers who published works concerning the legacy of slavery and its social consequences. Two well-known examples are Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* from 1937 and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* from 1952. These novels were part of a new form of the slave narrative genre called the neo-slave narrative. Rushdy makes a clear distinction within this genre by dividing it in the periods before and after 1966. In that year, Margaret Walker published *Jubilee*, a novel that is seen as the embodiment of the "transition between the modern and contemporary history of neo-slave narrative" (Rushdy, "Neo-slave Narrative" 534).

It is no surprise that this change occurred during the days of the Civil Rights Movement. At this time the New Left was a powerful movement that focused on, among others, racial equality, the Vietnam War, and redesigning the structure of social and educational institutions (Winkler 229, 230, Rushdy 4). Amongst other things, this meant that African-American history scholars, for example John Hope Franklin, were able to do more and different research. They, and other scholars such as Jesse Lemisch, claimed that history should be written from the bottom up. Barton J. Bernstein's *Towards a new past*, published in 1968, is a well known example of this new method of writing history (Kraditor 529). Whilst giving more attention to the people outside of the educational system, they saw how history was not only recorded by the elite, whose descriptions Lemisch regarded as atypical, but also by the people of lower classes who had experienced it too (Kraditor 530). More and more scholars realized how important the old antebellum slave culture still was, and renewed their interest in the original slave narratives, the folklore, and the old slave community. It became apparent how vital the slaves' culture had been in the psychological as well as physical resistance of the slaves to their masters. Nichols noted as early as 1959 that authors such as John Hope Franklin regarded the "'narratives' [as] an important source for the study of slavery in America" (qtd. in Nichols 162). Thus the method of writing history from the bottom up became part of the development "of [the] contemporary discourse on slavery" (Rushdy, *Neo-slave Narratives* 5-6) and the scholars' new methods and views concerning slavery and history created a new chapter in African-American culture that revived the slave narrative genre. A well known example in that new chapter is white author William Styron's *Confessions of Nat Turner*, which was written from the slave's perspective and is regarded by Rushdy as "the sixties' most representative novel", though perhaps mostly because it had

slavery as its topic (Rushdy, *Neo-slave Narratives* 4, 6). Another key work is *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* by Ernest J. Gaines, which “exemplifies the links between slavery and the sixties by having its protagonist live out both epochs” (Rushdy, *Neo-slave Narratives* 6). Both novels give fictionalized, personal accounts of slavery history and have links to the political and cultural ideologies of the sixties (Rushdy, *Neo-slave narratives* 6).

Another movement that influenced the neo-slave narrative genre was the Black Power Movement. It gave the African Americans “the sense of subjective empowerment” that helped them to invent new ways to portray slavery (Rushdy, “Neo-slave Narrative” 534). The neo-slave narrative genre supported the Black Power Movement and the Civil Rights Movement in its effort to help portray the situation of African Americans in the sixties, which was still far from equal.

That portrayal in its turn provided the basis of the neo-slave narratives of the seventies and eighties. The writers, who themselves were culturally formed during the sixties, commented via the neo-slave narrative genre on the mistakes of the New Left and Black Power Movement and those movements’ hopes for the future (Rushdy, *Neo-slave Narratives* 5). One of the points of discussion was the fact that during the sixties white people were writing neo-slave narratives too, such as William Styron’s *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. The writers of the seventies and eighties were now, decades later, able to give subtle comments on that discourse (Rushdy, *Neo-slave Narratives* 6). The fact that it was not until the sixties that the historical slave narratives were considered proper historical evidence was also a critical point that was addressed by the later writers (Rushdy, *Neo-slave Narratives* 6), especially since the romantic view of slavery, which portrayed happy and contented slaves (Smith 51), persisted long after the Civil War.

Since 2000 there has been an increase in the emergence of studies on the neo-slave narrative genre, as can be seen in the works of, amongst others, Christine Levecq and Timothy A. Spaulding. They address questions such as why the genre is still so popular and what its deeper meaning might be and thus contribute to the improved understanding of the genre (Rushdy, *Revisiting Slave Narratives* 504). Ashraf H.A. Rushdy, one of the most prominent scholars on neo-slave narratives, has analysed the genre from the perspective of Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of the “field of cultural production” in his book *Neo-slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form* (8). As Levecq summarizes in her review of that book:

Bourdieu situates his analysis of cultural production over against various forms of formalism, which view literary works as autonomous from the social conditions of their production, circulation, and consumption, and the mimetic model, according to which literature directly reflects these conditions. To counteract a purely internal or a purely external form of analysis, Bourdieu proposes the notion of field. Because it is relatively autonomous, the field of cultural production, itself characterized by power relationships among its different constituents (such as writers, publishers, critics, institutions), does not reflect but refracts factors external to it, which belong to the larger field of power. (Levecq 161)

Rushdy uses this concept of ‘field’ to explain how the politics of society can influence the production of literature. In the case of neo-slave narratives, the concept of those ‘fields’ can be found in the process of how the Civil Rights Movement and Black Power Movement cleared the way for the historians of the New Left, who in their turn influenced the newfound popularity of the slave narrative genre (Levecq 161). The genre is, however, also indebted to other literary genres such as the antebellum slave narratives, postbellum slave narratives and abolitionist fiction (Rushdy, *Neo-slave Narratives* 8).

The concept of fields that influence each other can also be found in the artistic aims of Toni Morrison. The author of the acclaimed neo-slave narrative *Beloved* (1987) wishes, amongst other things, to fill certain gaps in our understanding of history by writing novels about slavery. There are aspects of slave life that the historical antebellum slave narratives could almost never address, such as romance between African Americans (Robinson 54). Morrison said that as a novelist, her duty was to write about “proceedings too terrible to relate” (qtd. in Moody 640). According to Vint, this is something that Octavia Butler, author of *Kindred* (1979), also does. Butler and Morrison change the form of the antebellum slave narrative to suit the contemporary readers, who are aware of the fact that the abolition of slavery was not yet enough to make the African Americans ‘full persons’ (Vint 245). Writers of neo-slave narratives have more or less renovated the genre to serve their contemporary goals and connect with their contemporary readers (Rushdy, *Revisiting Slave Narratives* 506). Many of these writers feel that although the neo-slave narratives closely resemble the antebellum slave narratives (Moody 633), their function within the genre is more like that of the post-bellum slave narratives’ narrator, since they too aim to keep the discussion about slavery alive (Moody 640). Moody even states that the readers of the neo-slave narratives are

invited to celebrate the African Americans who battle against slavery, but that, by reading the texts, they are also encouraged to protect these African Americans and to help in making sure that similar things ever happen again (645-646). As Vint states, there are still a number of Americans, both black and white, who are dealing with the legacy of slavery, often in their own families (242). For example, it might give contemporary readers who feel that their ancestors should have fought harder against their owners an insight into how “disciplinary power produces slave mentality” (Vint 249). Reading neo-slave narratives might show these people a view of slavery that can help them come to terms with their familial pasts (Vint 245).

### 2.3 Characteristics of neo-slave narratives

According to Rushdy, “Neo-slave narratives are modern or contemporary fictional works substantially concerned with depicting the experience or the effect of new world slavery” (“Neo-slave Narrative” 533). A fictional slave is used in the novel as narrator or subject, or the narrator might have ancestors who were slaves. There are two kinds of neo-slave narratives: the historical novels that are set in the antebellum South and the social realist or magical realist novels that are set in the post-reconstruction era or in 20<sup>th</sup>/21<sup>st</sup> century America. They have in common that slavery is an aspect of history of which the effects are still felt today. Rushdy distinguishes three kinds within the contemporary revisionist neo-slave narrative genre of the post-Civil Rights era (“The neo-slave narrative” 90). The first is the historical novel about slavery. It follows the antebellum traditions of the slave narrative genre, as described by Olney, or sometimes varies with the perspective of the narrator, which used to be the first-person but is sometimes the third-person perspective in the neo-slave narrative. The second subgenre is formed by the novels that deal with the aftermaths of slavery as experienced by contemporary Americans, which Rushdy calls the pseudo-autobiographical slave narrative. The third kind of neo-slave narrative is a “relatively original form [...] of writing about slavery” (“Neo-slave Narrative” 533-535) and was formed just after the Civil Rights era. They are the genealogical narrative or a novel of remembered generations, which tells the story of a family’s experiences with slavery (“The neo-slave narrative” 90).

In general, the neo-slave narrative genre reclaim the old slave culture, because it was vital for the survival of the African-American slaves and it was a significant element in the slave narrative genre. The slave culture kept the slaves from becoming enslaved in their minds, even though physically they were (Rushdy, “Neo-slave Narrative” 533). They often used speech music and religious texts in the narratives, giving the slave culture an additional

didactic function. This is why the writers of neo-slave narratives often use the vernacular, songs, and humour in their novels (Bell, *Contemporary* 195).

Furthermore, contemporary authors of slave narratives sometimes combine the old traditional methods of storytelling with elements of black folklore. That movement away from realism is specific for neo-slave narratives, because they are not restrained by the necessity to write 'the truth' and provide the reader with proof (Vint 243-244). In fact, as Spaulding states, all the claims of authenticity and objectivity only complicate the view on the past and therefore contest the idea that realism is the best style to use when writing historical fiction (5). Shockley has also noted that trend, but in a different area of literature. She observes an "explosion of historical poems by African-Americans [that] has brought with it a noticeable increase in poems treating the era, the institution, the condition of slavery" (792). These poems are written in a variety of styles, but have in common that they try to deal with a painful aspect of African-American history through imagination (Shockley 792).

Robinson affirms the idea that neo-slave narratives do not necessarily have to follow the traditional methods of writing slave narratives, for example when addressing romance. She states that during the antebellum period, romance was not a part of the slave narratives. This was firstly because the slave owners did not allow the slaves to have romances, since that would suggest that the slaves actually had human feelings and thus were human (41, 44). Even in marriage, the slave owners would not allow emotion, but rather looked upon the institution of marriage as a way to control their slaves (Robinson 44). They would also use the slaves for breeding, in which case any matrimonial status of the slave was usually disregarded by the slave owners (Robinson 52), which meant that slaves sometimes had to have intercourse with someone else than their spouse, in order to produce offspring. The second reason was that the element of romance did not fit in well with the goal of the historical slave narrative genre. The abolitionists wanted the readers to see how the (ex-) slaves were denied their humanity, but a romance would show the reader how the slave "could be human despite slavery" (Robinson 40). Romance was occasionally discussed, but only if it served the abolitionists' cause (Robinson 42). By ignoring the romance subject, the abolitionists tried to make it appear as if loving relationships were impossible for the pitiful slaves. Obviously this does not mean that the slaves did not have romantic relations; it just meant that they hid them in their narratives. Zora Neale Hurston warned that white people would never think of the African-American people as humans without the element of romance in their (fictional) lives (Robinson 44). This is probably also why Hurston gave her protagonist Janie such a full love-life in the modern slave narrative *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Robinson 52). During the



1960s the African-American writers were able to speak about black romance and thus affirm their human emotions even more (Robinson 44).

Another new topic that could be discussed during the 1960s was that of sexuality amongst slaves. As said above, the slaves were seen as livestock that could be used for breeding. Beaulieu observes that enslaved women were “under a double bondage”, because they had to work in the fields and as sexual objects (qtd. in Campbell 244). In the past few decades rape has been reinterpreted as a method of exerting power rather than a method to satisfy sexual lust. Furthermore, laws have been changed to acknowledge the crimes of rape in war (Sagawa & Robbins 3). It is a shrill contrast to the antebellum period, when the female, African-American authors of slave narratives were usually not allowed to write about rape, because it was considered an unfit subject for literature that might be read by women. In fact, when these authors did manage to incorporate rape into their slave narratives, the subject would be regarded as proof of the author’s lack of morale, such as in the case of Thomas Pringle’s *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* where he left out certain accusations towards her “sexual depravity” (Sagawa & Robbins 4). The African-American female was often accused of being nymphomaniacal and seductive, which legitimated white men’s sexual abuse of their slaves (Sagawa & Robbins 4). The neo-slave narratives can show readers that sex between African Americans was not animalistic, but could come from human emotions (Robinson 46). In addition, the contemporary neo-slave narratives can freely talk about a subject such as abortion (Robinson 51). The issue of sexual agency is not only important as an argument against slavery, but also for “women as an oppressed group” (Vint 244). According to Canadian statistics, only 10% of sexual assaults are reported, a percentage that might be changed by discussing the subject of rape and sexual agency in literature (Sagawa & Robbins 5).

The notion of gender plays an important role in the neo-slave narratives and even more in those written by women. In the original slave narrative genre, the transition to freedom was different for women than for men. For the male slaves the three stages were literacy-identity-freedom. For the female slaves the stages were family-identity-freedom. The neo-slave narratives have broken with that tradition, starting with Walker’s *Jubilee*, which thus reinvigorated the slave narrative genre (qtd. in Levecq “Black Women Writers” 136). Walker shed a light on everyday aspects of female slaves’ life which had long been disregarded (qtd. in Levecq “Black Women Writers” 136). By showing the female slaves as full, motherly women, instead of genderless objects, the neo-slave narrative genre celebrates “the heroic

status of the enslaved mother” and thereby can inspire all contemporary black women (qtd. in Levecq “Black Women Writers” 138).

The neo-slave narratives can take liberties with the conventions of the original slave narratives, mixing different genres in one work of literature. But more importantly, the new shape of the genre also provides new ways to help on a social level, thus enabling literature to do important ‘cultural work’. Sagawa and Robbins have noticed a trend in literature by and about enslaved women and proposed that “the time seems ripe for reevaluation” of that genre (2). Neo-slave narratives can offer a chance to redeem the wrongs towards African-American women, romance, and sexuality, since the genre can provide readers with accounts of aspects of slavery that the antebellum slave narratives could not (Robinson 40). Aside from that, fiction “will not give us the whole story about social justice, but it can be a bridge both to a vision of justice and to the social enactment of that vision” (Nussbaum 12). Telling the slave stories in neo-form provides a method to resist the injustice of maintaining errors in history, or forgetting history altogether (Sagawa & Robbins 1).

### Chapter 3: *The Known World*, Edward P. Jones

#### 3.1 Summary of *The Known World*.

Edward P. Jones' *The Known World*, published in 2003, tells the story of Henry Townsend, the son of Augustus and Mildred Townsend. He is a freed slave, a successful farmer, the husband of Caldonia Townsend, a renowned bootmaker, and a slaveholder. Although the narrative starts on the day Henry dies, it relates his entire life by weaving together the past, the present, and the future. Henry's life starts on the plantation of William Robbins, where he works as his master's groom. When he is 17 years old, his father manages to buy him, but he remains Robbins' protégé. After a few years Henry can purchase his own land and his first slave, Moses, which ensures the estrangement from his parents. Henry manages to make his plantation successful. He marries Caldonia, a girl he meets when Robbins sends him to Fern Elston. Fern is also a black slave holder (although she could easily pass for a white woman) and she teaches free black children on her plantation. Unfortunately, Henry and Caldonia never have any children because he dies of an unknown disease at a young age. Caldonia thus becomes the mistress of the plantation, but she cannot control affairs as well as her husband could. In an effort to keep a closer watch on the slaves and their daily business she asks Moses, the overseer, to give her an account of the day in the evenings. After a while, those reports evolve into a sexual relationship. Moses begins to hope that Caldonia will set him free and marry him. For that to happen he feels that he has to send away his family and he convinces them to escape with fellow slave Alice. But Caldonia never intended to let their relationship evolve beyond the physical. When Moses realises that he runs away as well. He is captured not much later, but Moses' family does make it to the North with the help of Alice. She is considered a crazy woman, but at the end of the novel it turns out that she is not nearly as mad as she appeared as she becomes a successful artist and entrepreneur. Caldonia ends up marrying Robbins' extramarital son Louis and the Townsend plantation survives.

The omniscient narrator also tells the story of some other characters that are all in some way linked to Henry. Therefore, some of them have to be introduced here. As mentioned above, Robbins is the former owner of the Townsends. He is the richest and most powerful man in the county, but he suffers heavily from headaches. He has a daughter with his wife, and two children, Dora and Louis, with Philomena, the former slave whom he genuinely loves, but does not always treat well. Robbins makes John Skiffington, a pious and law abiding man, the sheriff of Manchester County. When he marries Winifred, his cousin, Counsel Skiffington, gives him the slave girl Minerva as a wedding gift. They treat her as

their daughter, but never free her. Furthermore, John starts to have inappropriate feelings for the girl and becomes troubled. A few years after the wedding Counsel encounters a heap of misfortune and John offers him a job as deputy-sheriff, a task that he does not perform very well. At the end of the novel the two visit Mildred to tell her that her husband has been sold back into slavery and that he has died. Counsel unexpectedly ends up shooting John and Mildred, because he (rightly) believes that the Townsends have a lot of riches hidden away. He only finds a small portion of it, but during his search Counsel does encounter Moses, whom he returns to the Townsend plantation. He receives help with that task from Harvey Travis, one of the patrollers of Manchester County. Travis is a mean, dishonest, and selfish man, but because he is feared by the slaves he is able to do his job well. The last white person that should be mentioned is Clara, a cousin of Winifred Skiffington. She has an old slave named Ralph, who has cared for her for many years, but whom she suddenly does not trust anymore.

There are also some African-American characters that should be introduced. Elias is one of Henry's slaves. He is always inclined to run away, until he falls in love with her. Another slave from the Townsend plantation is Stamford. He is a notorious womanizer, but after he has a surreal encounter with lightning when he is picking blueberries, he becomes a changed man. He finds love with an older woman and, so the narrator tells us, will one day raise an important orphanage. Another slave that plays a significant role in the novel is Jebediah. He is a literate man and the only person who nearly humbles Fern Elston. She sets him free after a series of unfortunate events, but is shown to think about him a lot for many years after she last sees him. The last African American that should be introduced is Calvin Newman, Caldonia's brother. Although he is also born free and has wealth to his name, he is burdened by shame. Firstly because he feels that African-American slaveholding is wrong and secondly because he has homosexual feelings, mostly for Louis Robbins.

There are many other characters in *The Known World*, but these are the characters that are important with regard to reviewing the novel as a neo-slave narrative.

### 3.2 Olney's outline of antebellum slave narratives in *The Known World*.

*The Known World* has many characteristics of the original slave narrative that are described by Olney, but also contains deviations from that format, which is inherent to the neo-slave narrative genre, which is confirmed by Patton who classifies *The Known World* as a neo-slave narrative (878). One of the more obvious deviations is that the narrative not only relates the story of Henry, as would be the case in the antebellum slave narratives, but that of many other

people as well. Some of them are more prominent, such as Augustus, Moses, and Fern, whereas others only make a brief appearance.

Another deviation is the fact that the protagonist's move to freedom does not play as prominent a role as it does in the traditional slave narratives. This contrasts with what the epigraph, which (in itself) is a typical characteristic of the slave narrative, suggests: "*My soul's often wondered how I got over...*". The most obvious reason for the absence of this theme is that the protagonist is already a free man at the start of the novel. Even though Henry is not freed until he is around the age of 17, he lives a relatively good life on the Robbins plantation. It is therefore understandable that when he is freed, he does not seem to feel any different:

About halfway the trip home, the man realized that these had been his son's first days of freedom. He and Mildred had planned a week of celebration, culminating with neighbors coming by the next Sunday.

Augustus said, "You feelin any different?"

"Bout what?" Henry said. He was holding the reins to the mules.

"Bout bein free? Bout not bein nobody's slave?"

"No, sir, I don't reckon I do." He wanted to know if he was supposed to, but he did not know how to ask that. He wondered who was waiting now for Robbins to come riding up on Sir Guildenham.

"Not that you need to feel any different. You can just feel whatever you want to feel."

Augustus [...] wondered if all would have been different if he had bought the boy's freedom first, before Mildred's. "You don't have to ask anybody how to feel. You can just go on and do whatever it is you want to feel. Feel sad, go on and feel sad. Feel happy, you go on and feel happy."

"I reckon," Henry said.

"Oh, yes," Augustus said. "I know so. I've had a little experience with this freedom situation. It's big and little, yes and no, up and down, all at the same time."

"I reckon," Henry said again.

(Jones 49-50)

This fragment shows that Henry does not seem to realise what it means to be free. His thoughts contrast with those of Augustus, who is very much aware of what freedom is. His father wishes for Henry to have the freedom to feel whatever he wants, even though it is different from his own emotions. It is not surprising that Henry has some problems

appreciating his newly received freedom. As said, Robbins' treatment of him has given him no reason to long for a life outside of slavery. Furthermore, Henry has had nothing to do with obtaining his freedom and it cost him no effort; his father has worked to raise the money to buy him free (Bassard 415-516). The end of the novel, however, does suggest a sense of posthumous true freedom for Henry. For when Calvin sees Alice's piece of art, the tapestry of the Townsend plantation, he notices that Henry is also included in it. That shows the inevitable link between master and slave, or in other words, how Henry depended on his slaves. Acknowledging that interrelation is, according to Donaldson, what brings African Americans salvation (281).

Measuring by Olney's scheme for slave narratives, we find that most features are present in *The Known World*. The difference is, though, that they do not just apply to Henry, in fact, he is often not linked to some of them at all. For example, the phrase "I was born", followed by a place, is literally present in the novel, but never refers to Henry, thus echoing the convention rather than literally reproduce it. The young slave Luke tells Elias: "I was born on Marse Colfax place.... You know that?" (Jones 82). The narrator uses almost the exact same phrase (replacing "I" with "she") to describe the birth of Philomena Cartwright on the same plantation (Jones 114).

The vague familial history, part of every traditional slave narrative, is also present in the novel, but in a different way. Stamford is a good example of how *The Known World* adapts this feature in a neo-slave narrative. He stayed with his parents until he was around the age of five, after which they were sold (Jones 191-192). One night he lies in bed and realizes that he cannot remember their names. He imagines them on the plantation where they used to live thirty-five years ago, but it still takes him an entire night to remember that their names are June and Colter (Jones 192). This event shows the natal alienation that many slaves felt (Mutter 131); a concept that was portrayed in the antebellum slave narratives by providing vague family histories. Most characters in the novel, however, know who their parents were and when they do not, the narrator simply does not mention them. Although it is uncharacteristic for the antebellum slave narrative to give readers much information about the people's background, it befits the narrator of *The Known World*, since his narrative style is rather elaborate. Still, as is common in a slave's story, that background usually only contains information about the parents and excludes any other extended family. This applies to Henry too, for his parents are well-known to him and the reader, but Henry and Mildred's history is completely unknown. Fern is sort of a special case, since it is said that she has a family that

“had managed to produce people who could easily pass for white”. The narrator even comments on Fern’s relationship with her mother and siblings (Jones 74).

Olney’s slave narrative elements that concern the cruel masters are also distributed over different persons in *The Known World*. Harvey Travis, one of the patrollers, has a cruel nature and a strong hatred towards Augustus. Near the end of the story Augustus runs into him on the road, and after he has shown him his freepapers, Travis eats them, destroying Augustus’ proof that he is not a slave (Jones 211). Perhaps the cruellest example of a slave owner in *The Known World* is Darcy, the slave dealer that buys Augustus from Harvey, despite the fact that he knows Augustus to be a free man (Jones 275). Darcy is not just unfeeling towards his property, but also has a disregard for the law, the only thing that might provide African Americans with some security. The novel does not feature an especially cruel, Christian slaveholder. Robbins does not care much for religion, saying that “God is in his heaven and he don’t care most of the time. The trick of life is to know when God does care and do all you need to do behind his back” (Jones 140). It seems that, throughout the novel, most white slaveholders or other white people in power feel roughly the same about slaves. And although some act disgracefully towards slaves, none are especially religious and cruel at the same time. Jones may have wanted to show the readers here that cruelties against slaves are morally reprehensible, whether or not someone professes a belief (and reason for it) in a higher power.

The exceptionally cruel characters do not belong to the main characters. It is possible that Jones did not want his main characters to have a cruel nature, because it would divert the reader’s attention from minor, but meaningful, aspects of their behaviour. Physical punishment, for example, is a common method used by all slave owners in the novel, even the African-American ones. Henry Townsend is emphatic that he intends not to whip his slaves. But occasionally he has to deal out punishments, for example when his slave Elias runs away. One of the most common measures consists of the cutting off of an earlobe, for which slave owners can hire the Cherokee patroller Oden Peoples (Jones 95). In those days, this would have been regarded as justice, not cruelty; a difference that would not have been clear had Henry been a completely reprehensible character. Another example is Fern, who is one of the few masters in the novel who actually orders one of her slaves to be flogged for making a sexual remark. She does not like to do it, though, since it diminishes a slave’s value (Jones 259). White slave owner Robbins, on the other hand, never deals out any physical punishments to his slaves in the novel. It therefore appears that Jones has tried to make the

fact that African Americans own slaves in his novel more confrontational by letting them deal out the harshest physical punishments.

There is always at least one slave, usually male, in a slave narrative that cannot be punished due to his strength. In *The Known World* it is the female slave Alice. She was hit in the head once by a mule and has been considered crazy ever since. Her nightly wanderings and strange talk are nevertheless accepted, because she is a good worker in the field. Near the end of the novel it is revealed that she is not half as crazy as she appears to be and can act very sanely. The fact that Jones has given the role of strong slave to a seemingly crazy woman, whose strength is her cunningness, is a modern, perhaps even feminist, element that makes *The Known World* fit even better in the neo-slave narrative genre.

Another element of the antebellum slave narrative is the description of a slave auction. There are many other descriptions of the sales of slaves in the novel which are much like the heartbreaking scenes of auctions that the antebellum slave narratives contained. For example, Moses has found a woman slave, Bessie, whom he thinks of as family, because she is the only person in the world he feels close to. Unfortunately when he is sold to Henry, the woman is not and he never sees her again. Henry is present at the slave auctions as a buyer. Because he is black, it is sometimes difficult for him to buy slaves. That is why Robbins often purchases them for him, whilst Henry hangs out in the back of the market. By converting the familiar and heartbreaking scenes of the original slave narratives into a scene of a thwarted buyer, Jones shows that even though Henry was well-to-do, owned slaves, and was respected by some important white people, he would never be fully accepted by the white community.

In Olney's outline he states that the original slave narratives described the food and clothing the slaves were given by their master, which is also done in *The Known World*. The reader is informed that Henry always tries to give his slaves a sufficient amount of rations (Jones 180, 262). The clothes that the field slaves wear are usually not much more than rags, whereas the house slaves have more appropriate attire. Henry is given a new outfit by Robbins when he becomes his groom, but he has to return those when he is freed. Moses also decides he needs a new shirt when he has to visit Caldonia more often at the house, so he is given one by one of the house slaves (Jones 264). Although this element is not addressed as pointedly as was common in the antebellum slave narratives, it is adequate in fulfilling its objectives, which is to describe how well or badly a master treats his slaves and give the reader a better sense of what life was like in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

As Olney argues, literacy is an important part of the slave narrative genre, and it is important in *The Known World* as well. Literacy puts slaves in special positions, which is



probably why it is forbidden to teach slaves to read and write (Jones 253). During the time Henry is enslaved he is also illiterate. When he becomes a slaveholder, Robbins feels it is necessary for his protégé to learn how to read and write (Jones 127). He arranges for Henry to be taught by Fern, who claims that he was her brightest, and darkest, student (Jones 134). Jebediah is also literate and able to write his own freepapers, real and fake (Jones 260). The majority of the slaves cannot read, but some find solutions for that. Augustus, for example, has someone read his free papers to him out loud until he knows the text by heart (Jones 211). Many of the white people cannot read either, which makes for odd situations when Fern, the teacher, encounters patrollers who pretend to read her free papers (Jones 131). Jones has made most of his successful and likeable (ex-)slaves literate, which again shows the importance of literacy. For literacy provides a chance of a better life and that is what the readers hope these characters will obtain.

One of the key themes in the slave narrative is escape, which is invariably linked to the patrols that look for runaway slaves and the welcome runaway slaves are given once they reach the North. The patrols play an especially important role in *The Known World*, because there are a lot of them and the patrollers influence the lives of many characters. The implementation of a team of twelve nightly patrollers in Manchester County is Robbins' idea, because he fears his own vulnerability when he has one of his headaches (Jones 26). The patrollers are actually paid from the taxes that all slaveholders have to pay. Thus, when Fern has to show her free papers yet again and is treated rudely by Harvis Travis, she does not accept his behaviour. She visits Robbins the next day and tells him she has had "a disagreeable episode with one of the patrollers" (Jones 133). Robbins promises to take care of it and after that Fern is always treated well. Here, Jones has given an African-American character the power over one of the most feared aspects of slavery, thus subverting the conventions of the antebellum slave narrative, but most of all giving back a certain sense of control to African Americans.

However, the patrollers are not nearly as kind to the slaves. Oden, as said before, cuts off earlobes and Travis is a cruel and dishonest man to basically everyone who is below him on the 'foodchain'. Alice, one of the slaves from the Townsend plantation, has a habit of wandering off at night, which means she often runs into a patrol. At first they are scared of her erratic behaviour. It takes a few weeks for them to get used to it and they never stop verbally abusing her. Ironically, despite the fear they inspire, there are plenty of slaves whom patrollers never manage to catch, like only one of Caldonia's six escaped slaves. The first slaves to leave the Townsend plantation are Moses' wife Priscilla, their son Jamie, and Alice.

Moses sends them away because he hopes to find a better life at his mistress' side. Their escape is well planned: they leave on a Saturday night, just after the patrollers get their pay and tend to get drunk. Furthermore, Sheriff Skiffington in general does not encourage the patrollers to work on Sundays, ensuring that they can get a good head start. The next slave to escape is Moses himself. He decides to leave after he realises that Caldonia will neither marry nor free him. Although he manages to hide at Mildred's house for a while, eventually he is captured by deputy Counsel Skiffington, albeit accidentally. The morning after Moses escapes, Clement and Gloria, two other slaves of the Townsend plantation, also manage to sneak away in the midst of the commotion. The only thing the narrator has to say about them is that they are never seen or heard from again. Again, by showing the incompetence of the slave patrollers, Jones has taken away a part of the anxiety they would traditionally cause.

The first slave in the novel to escape is Robbins' slave Rita, Henry's surrogate mother, just after Augustus buys Henry's freedom. She finds temporary shelter with the Townsends, who figure out an ingenious way to smuggle her to the North in a crate. She ends up in New York, where it is suggested that the people who find her are not all that shocked by her sudden appearance and that they are also kind enough to not send her back (Jones 48). Another slave who manages to reach freedom is Minerva. She is owned by Sheriff Skiffington and his wife Winifred, who actually regard her as their daughter. After John's death they move to Philadelphia, where they live together as they have done for many years. But Minerva has never forgotten that she is officially a slave and when she sees an African-American man whom she believes might aid her, she grabs her chance. The man takes her to his family's home and helps her. Thus Minerva leaves Winifred without saying goodbye and, according to the narrator, does "not see Winifred Skiffington again for a very long time" (Jones 381). A few other characters who find freedom in the North are Jebediah, Ralph, and Calvin. Jebediah is set free by Fern after he loses his foot.

He met a lot of kindness on his way north because he had only that one foot, but no matter how many warm beds and full plates black and white people gave him and no matter how well they treated his horse, he never stopped thinking that he was moving through a demon state. He came to Washington, D.C., and settled for it, though it was Baltimore that he had had his heart set on.

(Jones 260).

Clara, who is family to the Skiffingtons, has a slave named Ralph, who intends to go to North after the ending of the Civil War, but Clara is devastated by his plans and manages to change his mind. After her death he finally leaves, and finds that “Washington was good to the old man’s bones” (Jones 164). Calvin has of course always been a free African American, but he does not feel free until he finally finds some relief in Washington D.C. from his shame of once having owned slaves and of having homosexual desires (Jones 383). All these characters, even the ones that are set free by their owners, end up in the North, thus reinforcing the idea of the North as being a safe haven for slaves. Furthermore, the high number of freed and escaped slaves, especially in contrast to the slaves who are recaptured, is atypical for the antebellum slave narrative. It might be that Jones tried to soften the confrontational element of an African-American slaveholder, and the mood of the novel in itself, by giving many other characters a happy ending.

Finally, with regard to the elements of Olney’s scheme that involve the front and back matter of slave narratives, we have already mentioned one above; the epigraph. Another feature is the illustrations. There are no actual illustrations in the novel, but they do play an important role in the novel. There is a photograph of a family with a dog that means a lot to Calvin and is one of the things that inspire him to try to move to New York City (Jones 189). The title *The Known World* is derived from an illustration. In the novel, *The Known World* refers to a map of the world, underneath which those three words are written. The map belongs to Sheriff Skiffington and is one of his prize possessions, even though it is hopelessly outdated (Jones 174). The map is a contrasting symbol to the aim of the novel. The map is incomplete, but its owner does not mind. The aim of the novel, however, is to provide a more complete account of the actual history of African-American slaves and slaveholders. It is as if Jones mockingly tries to show that the known world is not good enough (anymore). The novel does not contain any of the other front or back matter elements listed by Olney.

### 3.3 *The Known World* as a neo-slave narrative

The general perception amongst critics is that *The Known World* is a neo-slave narrative. It is, however, hard to pin down what kind of neo-slave narrative this novel is, when looking at Rushdy’s scheme. It is certainly a “contemporary fictional work [...] substantially concerned with depicting the effect of new world slavery” (“Neo-slave Narrative” 533). But it is hard to categorize the novel in one of the three possibilities that Rushdy gives, due to the fact that it contains elements of all of them. It is a historical novel, set in the antebellum South, which

follows the antebellum slave narrative outline, and deals with slavery, which would make it belong into the first category of the historical novel about slavery. Given that it discusses an entire family and different generations during and after slavery, although not chronologically, it would make a good fit for the genealogical narrative genre too. Perhaps a case could even be made for the second genre that deals with the aftermaths of slavery, because the narrator tells us a lot about how the choices the characters make will affect their future. The fact that this many labels could apply to the novel does suggest that it, in multiple ways, belongs in the neo-slave narrative genre.

Another reason why *The Known World* is a neo-slave narrative is its depiction of love amongst slaves, something that could not be spoken of in the antebellum slave narratives, but is often heavily featured in neo-slave narratives. In *The Known World*, the subject of love is definitely not ignored. The narrator speaks of romantic encounters between slaves several times, such as when Elias woos Celeste (Jones 100). Even Calvin's homosexual feelings of love and sexual desire are addressed (Jones 66). The feeling of love is one of the few things the slaves have that cannot be controlled by the masters (Mutter 128). Mutter states that in *The Known World*, the word "love" "becomes the "conduit of identification," one which is presented as a universal force, one which works to draw the noun "slave" closer to the noun "person" — and farther from the noun "thing" (128). In other words, love makes the slaves seem more human. That love can, however, be used by a master to his advantage. In the case of Elias and Celeste, love is the thing that tames the rebellious Elias. Henry soon realises that allowing Elias to have a family will be a more effective method of keeping him from causing trouble than any punishment could ever be. Not all masters think similarly though, for Robbins finds the notion of love and bonds between pieces of property preposterous (Mutter 131). And even when slaves, like Elias and Celeste, are allowed to be together in the neo-slave narratives, it should also not be forgotten that that does not give them any security (Mutter 131).

Similar to the notion of love, the neo-slave narratives also have more freedom to introduce female perspectives to the genre. Although the subject of gender in neo-slave narratives is usually written about by female authors, Edward P. Jones also includes a few women who are, each in their own way, strong and independent. Two examples are Caldonia and Fern, two freeborn African-American women who both own slaves. They are independent, capable of making decisions, and not afraid to stand up against men. But they do not go through the typical phases of the females of the antebellum slave narrative – family - identity-freedom –, because they are already free. Caldonia and Fern are two characters who

revise the traditional notion of the white, male slaveholder, because they are the exact opposite and are still successful. Mildred Townsend, on the other hand, is a good example of a slave woman who does go through the three phases of family – identity – freedom. She finds her family and identity with her son Henry and her husband Augustus, who manages to buy her freedom. She is not only a caring mother, but also a strong and independent woman, which she shows after her husband goes missing. Mildred speaks with Sheriff Skiffington as an equal and is even brave (and smart) enough to hide Moses for a while. Another woman in the novel that should be mentioned for her extraordinary independency is Alice. Although she is thought to be crazy due to an unfortunate accident, her behaviour seems normal and rational after she escapes to New York and becomes a successful artist there. It remains unclear whether she has been fooling everyone with her strange behaviour for all those years on the plantation or whether her mind was healed after she managed to become a free person. Either way, she is a strong character who not only manages to free herself, but two other slaves as well.

Another element that could not be incorporated in the antebellum slave narratives is magical realism, something which features heavily in *The Known World*. It can be seen, amongst others, in Stamford's life changing encounter with lightning, with the two children who are connected via their dreams (Jones 67), and in Augustus' visit/vision to Mildred after he has died (Jones 346). And at the beginning of the novel the narrator tells us what Henry experiences after he has passed away.

Henry walked up the steps and into the tiniest of houses, knowing with each step that he did not own it, that he was only renting. He was ever so disappointed [...]

Whoever was renting the house to him had promised a thousand rooms, but as he travelled through the house he found less than four rooms, and all the rooms were identical and his head touched their ceilings. "This will not do," Henry kept saying to himself.

(Jones 10-11)

This fragment shows the reader that Henry was apparently rather disappointed with his life, which his ghost also feels and is symbolized in his tiny house in the afterlife (Donaldson 272). For a novel that is predominantly written in a very realistic way, these different episodes involving unexplained magical realism would seem out of place. Nunes suggests, however, that these "two worlds should exist together". It is another, new method of telling the slave's

story (136). This method honours the folklore that the actual antebellum slaves used to rely upon, because it gave them a way of creating their own sense of culture. Thus they created a mental freedom, even though they were physically enslaved. The antebellum slave narrative could not include these themes, because it would make the narrative seem less truthful.

The use of magical realism is only one part of the narrative style that is typical for the neo-slave narrative genre. Other parts are the change of perspective and the use of poetry within the narrative. The authors of the original slave narratives would sometimes include poems in their appendices, but Jones has scattered poetry throughout his novel. The most prominent one is Alice's rhyme, which is repeated three times in the novel.

*I met a dead man layin in Massa lane  
Ask that dead man what his name  
He raised he bony head and took off his hat  
He told me this, he told me that.*  
(Jones 14, 76, 267)

Alice sings it after the death of Henry, although nobody can figure out what she means by it exactly. The author can place these poems within his narrative, because unlike in the antebellum slave narratives, realism and truthfulness are now of less importance. This deviation from realism can also be seen in the change of perspective. The traditional slave narrative was always told by a first person narrator, but in *The Known World* there is an omniscient narrator. As mentioned, he has a realistic way of telling the story. He is very thorough, and no story line is left unfinished, which makes for a lot of extra, although not necessarily superfluous, information about minor characters. The omniscient narrator speaks about the distant future, even referring to a fictional event in 1994 at some point (Jones 106). The flashbacks and flashforwards and the additional information that the narrator provides are sometimes very intrusive so that the reader cannot help but notice him, even though he never gives his personal opinion about matters. It is the complete opposite of the modest first person narrator of the antebellum slave narrative, but that could be chosen by the author because it allows him to include more and different storylines than the original slave narrative. Furthermore, this innovation of perspectives might go better with the contemporary audience.

### 3.4 *The Known World* as a revisionist neo-slave narrative

Edward P. Jones has incorporated certain elements in his novel that continue to change the audience's view on history like the neo-slave narratives did. Similar to the altering notion of love in the neo-slave narratives, revisionist neo-slave narratives have even more freedom to introduce female perspectives to the genre. Although the subject of gender in neo-slave narratives is usually written about by female authors, Jones also includes many women who are, each in their own way, strong and independent. Mildred Townsend is a good example of a slave woman who does go through the three phases of family – identity – freedom. She finds her family and identity with her son Henry and her husband Augustus, who manages to buy her freedom. Nevertheless, she is not only a caring mother, but also a strong and independent woman, which she shows after her husband goes missing. Mildred speaks with Sheriff Skiffington as an equal and is even brave (and smart) enough to hide Moses for a while. Another woman in the novel that should be mentioned for her extraordinary independency is Alice. Although she is thought to be crazy due to an unfortunate accident, her behaviour seems normal and rational after she escapes to New York and becomes a successful artist there. It remains unclear whether she has been fooling everyone with her strange behaviour for all those years on the plantation or whether her mind was healed after she managed to become a free person. Either way, she is a strong character who not only manages to free herself, but two other slaves as well. Jones has even expanded the extent of the female's power in his novel. For Caldonia and Fern, two freeborn African-American women, both own slaves. They are independent, capable of making decisions, and not afraid to stand up against men. But they do not go through the typical phases of the females of the antebellum slave narrative – family -identity-freedom –, because they are already free. Caldonia and Fern are two characters who revise the traditional notion of the white, male slaveholder, because they are the exact opposite and are still successful. It is not the fact that Jones' used strong and successful females in the novel that makes it a method to revise history. He changes the idea that women are the inferior sex with the fact that he created so many of them, that it seems that women are, over all, more successful than men in *The Known World*.

The previous chapter stated that Jones deviated from realism. This can also be seen in the change of perspective. The traditional slave narrative was always told by a first person narrator, but in *The Known World* there is an omniscient narrator. As mentioned, he has a realistic way of telling the story. He is very thorough, and no story line is left unfinished, which makes for a lot of extra, although not necessarily superfluous, information about minor characters. The omniscient narrator speaks about the distant future, even referring to a

fictional event in 1994 at some point (Jones 106). The flashbacks and flashforwards and the additional information that the narrator provides are sometimes very intrusive so that the reader cannot help but notice him, even though he never gives his personal opinion about matters. It is the complete opposite of the modest first person narrator of the antebellum slave narrative, but that could be chosen by the author because it allows him to include more and different storylines than the original slave narrative. Furthermore, this innovation of perspectives might go better with the contemporary audience.

This might be especially important for a novel that speaks about African-American slaveholders, which to many will seem an exotic and surreal idea. But the phenomenon of black slave owners was definitely a historical reality. Some of them held slaves for economic reasons, like Henry Townsend. Others held slaves because it was a covert way of setting people free, usually family members (Bassard 410), just like Augustus does with Mildred and Henry. Although the majority of African-American slaveholders were ‘benevolent’, commercially held slaves accounted for a far more substantial percentage of all slaves owned by African Americans (Lightner and Ragan 555). These proportions are roughly the same in *The Known World* as well, since Augustus owns two slaves and Henry has 33 (Jones 4). Jones has integrated some of the actual historical legislations of antebellum Virginia in his novel too. One of those legislations decreed that after a slave was freed, he or she had to leave the state within a certain amount of time, because the state government was afraid that the growing population of freed slaves would start to become a dangerous influence on slaves (Schwarz 322). These rules were even stricter in other Southern states. This explains why the ‘benevolent’ slave owners often did not free their loved ones. It should also be noted that, as is also the case in the novel, it was not only the African-American males that held slaves. Women, mostly in urban areas, often received slaves from their former owners when they were freed (Bassard 413) or inherited them from their husbands like Caldonia does. With his novel, Jones has tried to uncover a part of American history of which many people are still unaware. It makes sense that Jones has stuck to actual history while telling his story, given the sensitive nature of the subject and the fact that, to many, this is an unfamiliar part of history.

Taking all that into account, the fact that Henry owns slaves is not as strange as it may appear. Still, Augustus and Mildred are highly disappointed in their son’s actions: “Don’t go back to Egypt after God done took you outa there” (Jones 137). But Mildred admits that they never clearly stated that it would be wrong to own slaves; they simply assumed Henry would learn that from their example. What they did not realise is that, after all those years as Robbins’ groom, Henry has started to see him as more of a father figure than Augustus, and



therefore emulates his former master (Bassard 416). There are plenty of characters in the novel, aside from Henry's parents, who do not approve of African-American slaveholders and are not accustomed to the idea. When Moses becomes Henry's slave the narrator states that "It took Moses more than two weeks to come to understand that someone wasn't fiddling with him and that indeed a black man, two shades darker than himself, owned him and any shadow he made" (Jones 8-9). As in the historical antebellum Virginia, there are also white people in the novel who dislike the idea of African-American slaveholders. Some people will not sell their slaves to Henry and not even to Robbins, who often conducts business in his place. The patrollers, after meeting Alice again at night and returning her to the Townsend plantation, say that "[this] is what happens [...] when you give niggers the same rights as a white man" (Jones 13). The journalist who visits Fern also questions the custom, but mostly because he feels "it would be like owning my own family", with which Fern heartily disagrees (Jones 108). But perhaps the most important thing is that, although he claims ignorance, Henry does not go to his parents' house for months after he has purchased Moses, showing that somewhere deep down he realises that his parents would not approve of his purchase and perhaps even that he knows it is a wrong thing to do.

Jones has not simply introduced the fact that African-Americans owned slaves, but he has put it in a context that makes it easier for readers to understand what actually happened. By showing the difference between African-American slave holding for economical and 'benevolent' reasons, he has already taken down part of the negative stigma the subject has. And when he does show African Americans holding slaves for economical reasons, he tries to explain that for someone who has lived their whole life in an environment that contains slavery, becoming a slave holder might seem the logical choice. Thus, Jones has introduced the sensitive subject of African-American slave holding under mitigating circumstances that not only make the novel more enjoyable for his readers, but also make his audience more understanding towards what has happened in actual history.

By choosing African-American slaveholding as the subject for his novel, Jones certainly put slavery in a new and different light. The author does this in several ways. He "interrogat[es] mastery itself", by opposing the romantic views of the antebellum South and its slavery that can be seen in, for example, *Gone with the Wind* (Donaldson 268). As mentioned before, Alice's tapestry shows how the masters depended on their slaves and how their worlds were interrelated, which is a new perspective on America's slavery past (Donaldson 281). Furthermore, by writing about African-American slaveholders, this novel discusses the African-American people who crossed a social line. They were not on the same

social level as slaves or freed men, but neither were they equal to white people (even though they often were a lot richer). Thus they had a very unclear social status (Bassard 408). A similar thing also goes for the Native Americans in the novel, who were also slaves and slave owners, like Oden Peoples, who owns (black) slaves (Jones 122). In *The Known World*, slaves are often not human beings but commodities. Minerva, for example, is a wedding present for the Skiffingtons. She is “festooned with a blue ribbon” as if she is boxed gift (Mutter 127). The remarkable thing in *The Known World*, however, is that the slaves also treat each other as things. As Mutter points out, when Moses sends his family away, “He reinforces his own thingness by refusing any connections that might help him transcend it” (132). These (relatively) new perspectives on the slavery past are exactly what the neo-slave narrative genre tries to bring forward.

Aside from a revisionist neo-slave narrative, *The Known World* is at the same time a historical novel. As said, Jones has used actual historical facts in his novel. However, he partly undermines the value of those facts when he writes that “The census of 1860 said there were 2,670 slaves in Manchester County, but the census taker, a U.S. marshal who feared God, had argued with his wife the day he sent his report to Washington D.C., and all his arithmetic was wrong because he had failed to carry a one” (Jones 7) (Bassard 408). Jones tries to show his readers that although the history of slavery is important, there should not be too much focus on its authentication. Jones wishes his contemporary readers to pay more attention to people’s relationship to history (Bassard 410). For by merely looking at the facts people will not be able to grasp the personal tragedies that took place due to slavery, but keep regarding it as an abstract thing, even if morally wrong.

## Chapter 4: *Slave Moth: A Narrative in Verse*, Thylia Moss

### 4.1 Summary of *Slave Moth: A Narrative in Verse*

Thylia Moss' *Slave Moth: A Narrative in Verse* (2006) is one of the more peculiar neo-slave narratives that have been published in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, because it is completely written in verse. It is the narrative of a fourteen-year old slave girl, Varl Perry. She lives with her mother, Mamalee, on the Perrysburg plantation, which is owned by their master, Peter Perry. Varl writes that Perry has a preference for rare and deformed things.

My master is a collector.  
Rare things delight him.  
Deformity piques in him an unwholesome joy  
(Moss 3)

Varl, named after his deceased racehorse, is his most prized object. She has been given that position because she is literate and because she does not seem to be afraid of her master.

Mamalee was taught to read and write by her previous owner, Esmenda Jenkins Dube. Esmenda allowed Mamalee to attend college and Mamalee, in turn, secretly taught other slaves from the area to read and write. Esmenda would even pay the owners of these slaves to have them work in her fields, while they were really going to school. But their secret was discovered by the other slave owners and one of them came and threatened the two women. After that, Esmenda disappeared and left a will stating that all slaves were to be freed and that Mamalee was to inherit the plantation. However, the county judge stated that Mamalee had forged the will, that she had no claim on anything, and that she was still a slave. That is when Peter Perry was found as a very distant relation to Esmenda and he became the new owner of the plantation. Mamalee continued to live there with her husband, Captain, her twin boys and Varl. Before the start of the narrative, Captain has disappeared and her sons have died.

Mamalee, like Varl, has a special place in the Perry household. She has long conversations with Peter Perry and gives him her opinion without reserve. The slave owner's cranky wife, Ralls Janet, who is only a few years older than Varl, feels threatened by Varl and Mamalee, because she is illiterate and realises that she is below them in the plantation's chain of hierarchy. Even though she seems to have it all (a fair husband, a healthy daughter, wealth), she is extremely lonely and jealous.

Varl has a few friends on and around the plantation. Dob is the boy she claims she loves and who is to be hers. She enjoys his company and feels safer around him. Dob also

belongs to Perry and is a valued worker, but he is dissatisfied and secretly speaks of rebellion. Jessper is a girl from a nearby plantation. Her master, Theodore Staley, is a sadistic man who often sexually abuses her in the most horrendous ways. Jessper often visits the Perrysburg, because she feels safer there. Varl finds it hard to watch her friend suffer and repeatedly tells her to run away, but Jessper is too afraid to do so. One night Varl hears about Clarie, a slave who underwent the same kind of treatment as Jessper does. Clarie found the power to fight back and did not only kill her master, but also defended in court that the murder was self defence, even though she knew that she would lose.

Peter Perry's fascination with Varl has grown now that she is older and starts to have a mind of her own. She is well aware of her high status and the fact that her master secretly loves her. She uses her position to taunt Ralls Janet and enjoys the attention she gets. Still, Varl often thinks about how complicated her relationship with Peter Perry is, both for him and for her. She wonders whether by loving him back, she becomes more his slave than before. She also wonders whether her love for Dob is real, or just a safer choice.

Perry leaves books lying around, to see how she will react to them. One day, the inquisitive Varl learns about the 'luna moth' in one of these books. Inspired by the process of metamorphosis she starts to embroider her story on fabrics, which she wears underneath her clothes. Just like the moth, she wishes to emerge from the cocoon transformed. As her cocoon and narrative grow, so does her desire to break free, which she plans to do sometime. But then her secret is discovered by Peter Perry and he becomes even more physically attracted to the girl. Mamalee can only just prevent him from acting on his feelings, but it is clear that she cannot hold him off for long. Thus, Varl's plans to escape are pushed forward and she has to start thinking seriously about an escape.

Just after these events Varl is working with Ralls Janet, who confesses that she sometimes thinks about leaving and regrets not trying to befriend her. But it is too late for that now; too much animosity has grown between them. So Ralls Janet asks Varl to run away instead, so that she can fix her marriage. Varl is shocked and annoyed that Ralls Janet has taken away the satisfaction of escaping. For if she does run, now she will be following Ralls Janet's orders, giving her a power she never had before. Varl walks away, not sure what to do.

After that the events quickly unfold. It starts when Peter Perry decides to change the name Perrysburg into Varlton. He claims to name it after his old horse, but everyone knows that he actually means his slave girl Varl. It puts her in a difficult position, because she is touched by the gesture, but she also realises that she will not be safe much longer. Ralls Janet is furious and finally figures out a way to get her husband interested in her: she thwarts Varl.

The slave girl has difficulty figuring out what she should do next, but she is helped by Dob, who reveals that the slaves will soon start a rebellion. Just before it starts the narrative ends, but Varl has already chosen to be with Dob, which has already given her mental freedom.

#### 4.2 Olney's outline of antebellum slave narratives in *Slave Moth: A Narrative in Verse*.

Although a long poem would probably not be the first thing that comes to mind when one thinks of slave narratives, the novel in verse form *Slave Moth* certainly belongs to that genre. The plot holds the most basic element of a slave narrative: a slave's journey to freedom. *Slave Moth* also contains many elements of Olney's outline of the original slave narrative.

One of the elements that Olney describes, literacy, features heavily in the narrative. It is crucial to the slave narrative genre, because it leads to a sense of identity, and, subsequently, freedom. Most slave narratives relate the difficulties of becoming literate, since slave owners, who saw it as a threat, naturally opposed it. Mamalee is fortunate, because her previous owner, Esmenda, cannot stand stupidity around her. She teaches all her slaves to read and write and the first word they learn is "manumission" (Moss 20). Together the women even found a school for other slaves in the area, much to the dislike of other slave owners, who call it "nigra trickery" (Moss 24). Varl, in her turn, is taught to read and write by Mamalee. Because their current owner, Peter Perry, enjoys odd things, he quite likes to own a literate slave girl. His approval gives Varl an "insatiable appetite for self-expression and self-ownership" (Hinton 58). She starts to sow her life's story onto the fabrics hidden under her dress, which Moss called "a slow and deliberate form of making text" in an interview (Pereira 144). Varl is aware of the fact that writing down her thoughts helps her deal with the events that transform her life. Literacy is an essential part of her survival, because it helps her to shape her identity and mentally prepare Varl for freedom. But even though it appears that becoming literate seems to be helpful for some, not all slaves pursue it. Jessper, for example, does not want to learn to read and write, because she is afraid to get caught by her cruel master. By contrasting Varl's literary means to express herself with Jessper's anxiety towards literacy, Moss shows the audience that becoming literate could be highly beneficial for slaves, but that it at the same time was neither easy nor free of risk.

Embroidering the fabrics with her narrative is part of Varl's everyday routine, as is taking care of the Perry household, looking after her master's daughter, and working in the fields, depending on what season it is. The slaves on the Perry plantation have to work hard at their various jobs, but they are sufficiently fed and clothed and overall treated reasonably well. These descriptions of daily life fit in with Olney's scheme for the traditional slave

narratives and show what life was like for slaves who had a kind master and who were given enough spare time to do other things.

Another element of his scheme is the description of an extraordinarily strong slave that cannot be whipped. In *Slave Moth* this is Dwarf Sully, one of the slaves on the Perry plantation, who works hard and is a friend of Varl and Mamalee. Varl writes about his life with his previous master:

[...] Sully catching  
a whip in his teeth, and with his teeth, cracking the whip  
and sending that master to the ground. Couldn't beat Sully.  
(Moss 85)

Peter Perry believes that the powers Dwarf Sully possesses come from the fact that he is a dwarf. It should be noted that all the slaves Peter Perry owns are in one way or another extraordinary and that it is said that he is unlikely to hurt them, because it would diminish their value, thus giving them some kind of protection. Still, the slaves remain aware of the fact that they are not free and that Perry could just as easily decide that they are not interesting anymore. Moss shows that not all slave owners were the same and that some could be regarded as kind, but that the institution of slavery is invariably hurtful.

Almost all traditional slave narratives feature a cruel master. In *Slave Moth*, there are a number of slave owners that can be considered cruel, but the most important slave owner in the narrative, Peter Perry, is not one of them. He does not whip or beat his slaves and takes care of their basic needs. Theodore Staley, however, a slave owner who lives nearby, is quite the opposite. He sexually abuses and tortures Varl's friend Jessper, for example by using his whip to lash words in her skin. His paralyzed wife, whom Jessper takes care of, starts to hate the slave girl. She is jealous of the attention Jessper is given by Mr. Staley and hurt because her husband will not give up his nasty needs for her. When Jessper makes an error while folding the laundry Mrs. Staley makes the girl burn her own neck and face with a hot iron. In slave narratives, cruelty in the form of whippings and rape were often means to control the slaves. But in the case of Jessper, her masters' reasons for cruelty are individual pleasure and a reaction to feeling powerless, which gives more depth to the characters. Especially in the case of Mrs. Staley the story becomes less black and white, because all readers can relate to the feeling of powerlessness. Still, in the end it does have the same effect on Jessper, since she has become too afraid to attempt to go against her owners and improve her situation.

Although Varl never witnesses the actual cruelties committed against Jessper, she does see the wounds on her friend's body and the sadness the girl feels. She often proposes plans to improve Jessper's situation, such as running away or killing her masters, but as said above, Jessper is too afraid to do any of those things.

Escaping to freedom is another element of Olney's outline. Varl has made plans to run away. She has heard stories of slaves who successfully escaped to freedom, like her father did, and hopes to find him in the North. Her boyfriend Dob has roughly the same idea, but he also wants to start a rebellion against the slave owners in the area. He has been able to acquire a number of guns, which he will hand out to his fellow slaves. After they have disposed of their masters they will head north to freedom. All though it sounds like a good plan, it should be noted that these escapes were very dangerous and Varl and Dob might not be successful. She is well aware of the fear and hardships involved in running away, since her mother has helped quite a few runaway slaves who passed their home.

Moss never relates how the actual rebellion took place, but by choosing to be with Dob and loving him, Varl has already gained mental freedom from her master Peter Perry. Therefore it makes sense that a few of the elements in Olney's scheme are already addressed in the narrative before Varl is officially free. She has, for example, already thought about the new name she will take after she will no longer be a slave, something all slaves did after they became free. Her mother had named her Free after her birth, but Peter Perry wanted to call the baby Varl. It is not easy for Varl to give up the name she is used to, since she realises it is the name that shaped her into the person she is now and it has certain powers, especially now that Peter Perry has named his property Varlton. The name Free is not just a symbol for her status. Giving up the name Varl and changing it to Free is a symbol for breaking her link with Peter Perry, which is the most important element of finding her freedom. Unlike in the original slave narratives it is not the meaning of the new name, but the actual acceptance of it that has power.

Varl has also given extensive thought to the institution of slavery, which was often the final note upon which a slave narrative would end. Many of her ideas centre around the notion of who is responsible for slavery. She believes that slave owners must know that the slaves are human beings and that they simply choose to ignore that fact. She does not believe that slavery is God's will, for just as easily "the Lord's will could be for somebody to take action" (Moss 82). And she realises that being free in the North is not the answer to everything either, because there everybody is also free not to care about her. To Varl, being manumitted is not her ultimate goal; being free in her mind is what freedom is to her. Thus, *Slave Moth*

discusses a new type of mental freedom, a change that is completely in line with the neo-slave narrative genre.

Most of the elements of the original slave narrative are present in *Slave Moth*, but there are also a few that are missing. There is no description of a slave auction where families are separated. With regards to the personal data of Varl it can be said that her parentage, in contrast to what Olney's scheme states, is quite clear; she knows her parents well, but nothing is said about any other ancestors. The sentence "I was born..." is also missing, although the early years of her life are described in the narrative. With regards to the front and back matter elements that Olney discusses only one is present to a certain level in *Slave Moth*: On the back of the book a few favourable quotes from reviews and a picture and short biography of the author have been printed. Thylia Moss, an African-American professor of poetry and creative writing, does gain some extra authority on the subject, so it could be argued that they are testimonials. It is more likely, however, that these were included for commercial purposes. There is also no engraved portrait, no title page that claims the narrative was written by the ex-slave, and no further documentation in *Slave Moth*. But the most important missing element of Olney's outline is that there is no actual physical escape in the narrative, although it is often discussed and there are plenty of hints that an attempt to run away will be made soon. Instead, Moss introduces her readers to the concept of mental freedom, which, at least to Varl, is more important and satisfying than being physically free.

#### 4.3 *Slave Moth: A Narrative in Verse* as a neo-slave narrative

The most obvious link to the neo-slave narrative genre is probably the fact that she gave the work the subtitle "A Narrative in Verse", instead of, for example, 'A Novel in Verse'. Poetry was present in most antebellum slave narratives and an important part of the African-American slave culture, which makes the form in which the narrative is written all the more fitting. Although the style makes it hard to place it in one of Rushdy's categories of the neo-slave narrative genre, the historical novel that has slavery as its subject is probably the closest fit.

Another characteristic of the neo-slave narrative genre is the fact that in the original narratives the women would usually be portrayed as weak and vulnerable beings. *Slave Moth*, however, tells the story of a different, stronger type of women. The character of Mamalee is a good example of this. She should rightfully be the owner of the plantation, but was denied her claim by the court. The fact that her previous owner educated her and the fact that she has never really given up her claim put her in a position to make deals regarding Varl with Peter



Perry. Brutalities are still committed against other female slaves, such as the continuous rape of Clarie Lukton, a slave-girl from Missouri whose story is shared among the slaves, and the vicious behaviour of the Staley couple, the owners of Varl's friend Jessper. But what is typical for the neo-slave narrative genre is the way Varl responds to these deeds towards her fellow slaves. For Varl does not just document these events, she analyses and draws conclusions from them. When she hears the story of Clarie, who eventually kills her master, she accepts that women (should) have sexual agency. Varl also realises that there is a point where a person cannot take or accept any more, even though the same awful things have happened many times before. Furthermore, she wonders whether she could do the same thing, and how such an act might affect the other people involved. And when Jessper seeks her comfort, Varl learns that there are things she is not brave enough to prevent from happening. Although these events on their own are typical for the original slave narrative, in that it describes the treatment of cruel masters, the fact that Varl, as a fourteen-year-old girl, learns from them and thus is allowed to grow stronger makes *Slave Moth* a neo-slave narrative.

Several characters in the novel have romances, which are an important characteristic of the neo-slave narrative, because the authors of the traditional slave narratives believed romances would have a negative impact on the abolitionists' goal and did not include them. The first romance is that of Mamalee and Peter Perry, who share a vague, but intimate oral relationship. It should not be forgotten, however, that Mamalee has a clear and true romance with Captain, Varl's father, to whom she has stayed as loyal as possible, even though he has escaped years ago and has not been heard of since. Varl herself realises that she is loved by her master and seems to love him back, although she does not like to admit it:

and I have let him in by writing about him so much,  
making him the centre of my thoughts.

As if I love him  
*but I do not.*  
(Moss 88)

Varl also writes that she loves Dob, but that is an equally complicated relationship. The girl wonders whether there can be love within slavery, or whether a master would always be in the way. And if she does choose to completely and openly love Dob, that might have an effect on her relationship with Peter Perry, for he could become jealous. At the same time, her mother wonders whether their master's jealousy is Varl's only reason for loving Dob, because the girl knows that it makes her even more interesting to Peter Perry. In *Slave Moth*, Moss has

incorporated the different kinds of relationships a person can have. Young as she is, Varl can distinguish the difference between her mother's love for her father and their master. Furthermore, by portraying all of Varl's ideas on the subject of her relationships with both Dob and Peter Perry, the author has not only created a recognisable illustration of the confused mind of a teenage girl, but she has also incorporated questions that were vital to every slave. Although this makes the narrative more complicated, it might make it more recognisable for the reader at the same time, so that they can come to an even fuller comprehension of a slave's difficult position, especially when it comes to love.

#### 4.4 *Slave Moth* as a revisionist neo-slave narrative

One of the factors that make *Slave Moth* a revisionist neo-slave narrative is the way it was written. As Hinton observes, it might just be the first slave narrative that is completely written in verse (57). That, plus the nonlinear plot, allows the reader to really experience the protagonist's echoing thoughts (Campion 137), which makes Welch draw a comparison between *Slave Moth* and James Joyce's *Ulysses* (106). The style is demanding and the reader has to commit to the story in order to be able to follow what goes on in Varl's mind, but this also means that the reader becomes more involved with the character. Furthermore, the beautiful phrases that were used make it hard for any audience not to have a positive attitude towards the protagonist.

Furthermore, Varl is never manumitted in the narrative; she does not even leave the plantation, but she does find freedom in her mind. In the course of the story, she starts to realise that she loves her master, Peter Perry, even if mostly for the attention he gives her. But while writing her cocoon, she also comes to understand that not even those private words written on fabric are hers; they belong to Peter Perry too. She dislikes this idea, because these words are so important to her. It is not until the end of the narrative that she learns that it is not the actual written words that matter, but the fact that she thought them. She realises that she was the one who came up with her ideas and that they will remain hers, whether or not they are written down. She also finds that thinking about all these different ideas of slavery has brought her to understand that in order to be truly free, she needs to sever herself from her relationship with Peter Perry. When she finally manages to do this, she feels that mentally, she is free from her master. By letting the narrative end like this, Moss has stuck with the traditional function of literacy in the slave narrative, but she has given an entirely new meaning to the concept of freedom.

It should also be noted that Varl goes through both the typical female phases (family-identity-freedom) and male phases (literacy-identity-freedom) to freedom. First she becomes literate and starts to create her cocoon of written fabric, which allows her to transform into a person that can be free. But at the same time, she also finds and chooses her family, which does not include Peter Perry, but Dob. These two gender-related phases towards freedom are combined in Varl, giving her female character a degree of (masculine) strength which the women in traditional slave narratives did not have.

The narrative also explores different kinds of slavery that were usually not discussed in the previous kinds of slave narratives. Varl mentions Native Americans and fellow African Americans who own slaves. But she also realises that Ralls Janet, Peter Perry's wife, is not very fortunate in life, even though she is not owned by anyone and she is free from physical harm. Her inability to read and write and her lack of confidence makes her uninteresting to her husband, which causes him to ignore her most of the time and make her feel extremely lonely. She suffers even more because she feels that her husband shares an intimate relationship with Mamalee through their deep conversations and she cannot do anything to stop them. Varl even states that she "can bear being a slave better than [she] can bear / the nasty details of [Ralls Janet's] life" (Moss 58). By including these groups in her narrative, Moss lets her audience know that there were other historical groups that were also affected by slavery.

But *Slave Moth* goes even further, because it affirms that awful deeds against people do not always have to be physical. Varl is never physically hurt, but she suffers mental pain because she has lost her brothers, because she sees her friend get seriously hurt, and because she has little to no power to prevent these things. As Moss mentions in her conversation with Pereira, and as is exemplary of how contemporary writers can try to change people's perspective on history, it is not important whether or not brutalities are committed; it is harmful enough that people are owned (Pereira 143).

Finally, Moss has given her own reasons for writing *Slave Moth* that should be mentioned. In an interview, Moss relates how she went to a parental meeting of her sons' private school, where a project in which students had to research their family's lineage was almost banned, because one African-American mother was afraid it would shame her son. Moss did not agree with that idea, first of all because denying that part of history to be shown only enforces the notion that the black slaves were weak and subservient. Instead, she wanted to make people see that it was the slave owner who should be ashamed. For even though they might have been benevolent to their slaves, they still thought that fellow humans were fit to be

kept as property (Pereira 143). Another reason why Moss did not agree was that she already realised that many African Americans are descendants of slaves who survived, which makes her feel proud (Pereira 140). Moss sees it as a task of the revisionist neo-slave narrative genre to create “an alternative [...] model of slavery” which shows the “richness in the slave experience that is finally being imagined” (Pereira 145). And in that richness there must have been people who were able to survive by instinctively knowing their individuality, their boundaries, and the power of mental freedom. People such as Varl (Pereira 145-146).

## Chapter 5: *Copper Sun*, Sharon Draper

### 5.1 Summary of *Copper Sun*

Sharon Draper's *Copper Sun* (2006) is a novel for young adult readers. The story, which is set in the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, is presented through the perspectives of Amari and Polly, two girls of approximately fifteen years old. Amari's perspective is used the most. The book is divided into eleven parts, which are subdivided into a total of 42 chapters. In each part the narrator alternates between the perspectives of the two main characters.

Amari is taken from her village in Africa by the slave-traders who murdered her entire family. She has to walk in a slave-coffle for days and is treated badly by her capturers. When she arrives at the West Coast she is brought to a fortress where she meets Afi, an older slave woman who is kind enough to comfort her. During the crossing to America the seamen keep the female slaves on the deck of the ship so they can watch them dance during the day and rape them at night. Occasionally, Amari is taken to the cabin of a devout seaman who is not interested in raping her. Unfortunately he cannot save her from being raped every night, but when he can he gives her food and teaches her a little English.

After docking in the Carolinas Amari and the other slaves are to be sold at an auction. When the bidding on Amari is about to begin the perspective changes to the viewpoint of Polly, an indentured white girl who has to pay off the contracts of her deceased parents on the plantation of Percival Derby. While watching the auction she feels that the Africans should be grateful for not having to live like savages anymore. She watches how Amari is sold to the highest bidder and is forcefully separated from Afi. Although Polly sees Amari cry, she is uncertain whether negroes' emotions are similar to those of humans or those of animals.

It turns out that Polly's new boss, Mr. Derby, has bought Amari as a present for his son Clay's sixteenth birthday. After arriving at the plantation, Amari, who is renamed Myna, and Polly are put to work as assistants of Teenie, the cook. She and her son Tidbit welcome them and explain that Polly will teach Amari English and the ways of the plantation. That first night Amari is sent for by Clay, who wants to be entertained by his birthday present. She panics and begs to be left alone, but soon realises she has no choice but to do as he wishes.

Three months later the lives of Polly and Amari have settled into a daily routine. They help Teenie and Tidbit, whilst Polly teaches Amari English. At least twice a week Amari is raped by Clay. The loss of her family, the foreign environment, and the continuous rapes have made her lose the will to live. Most people around her feel for her, even Mrs. Derby, who is pregnant but still seems unhappy. But nobody can help her and Amari knows that once Clay

loses interest, she will be sent off to work in the rice fields. Polly, who seems to have warmed up a bit to the slaves and has formed something of a friendship with Amari, still feels that the slave girl should accept the fact that she is called to her master's bedroom.

Then their hard, but relatively calm life is turned upside down. It starts when Amari and Polly have to help as serving maids in 'the big house'. Mr. Derby lets Amari trip and she drops a pie, after which he punishes her with numerous lashes from his wired whip. Conflicted, Polly is furious at her inability to help the slave girl and also angry at herself for being selfishly disappointed, for now her own chances of working in 'the big house' are ruined. Soon after Amari's recovery, Clay and his friends take Tidbit with them on an alligator hunt, where they use the little boy as bait, which he barely survives.

Two weeks later Mrs. Derby goes into labour. As Mr. Derby, Clay, and Noah, Mrs. Derby's personal slave, are out to find the doctor, Amari and Polly help Mrs. Derby give birth. But to their consternation the baby is black. It turns out that Noah is not just Mrs. Derby's personal slave, but also the man she truly loves. The girls and Teenie hide the baby and try to convince Mr. Derby that the baby is stillborn and deformed. When Mr. Derby discovers the truth he shoots Noah and the baby before Mrs. Derby's eyes. As punishment for helping Mrs. Derby Amari, Polly, and Tidbit are to be sold the next day; Teenie will remain on the plantation. The cook tells the girls to take her son and flee. Cato, the oldest slave on the plantation, tells them to run south to Fort Mose, a Spanish free place for slaves. When the three young people are en route to the slave market with the doctor, he surprisingly turns out to be an abolitionist and lets them go, promising to buy them as much time as possible.

They head south, since that is where no one will expect them to go. After weeks of running at night and lying low during the day, Clay catches up with them. He never believed they went north. A struggle ensues, in which Clay is shot and left to die. The three runaways head further south, meeting friendly people along the way who are willing to help them.

After months they reach Fort Mose, where all slaves can be free as long as they become Catholics, swear loyalty to the Spanish crown, and help the community. Polly is literate, so she will become the town's first teacher. Tidbit will go to school and help the carpenter. Amari, however, gets one final shock: she is pregnant. Although it is Clay's baby, she knows that she loves the child and she is determined to make it a symbol of her freedom.

## 5.2 Olney's outline of the antebellum slave narratives in *Copper Sun*.

When looking at the front and back matter of *Copper Sun* it is clear that many of the original features that are listed by Olney are also present in this novel. After the title page there is an author's note which starts with these words:

I am the granddaughter of a slave.

My grandfather – not my great-great-grandfather or some long-distant relative – was born a slave in the year 1860 on a farm in North Carolina. He did not become free until the end of the Civil War, when he was five years old.

This author's note resembles how former slaves used to authenticate their narratives in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Her note can be interpreted as a justification and motivation for Sharon Draper to write the novel; she has a claim to the subject, because her direct family experienced slavery. Further down in the author's note Draper dedicates the novel to her grandparents and all other people who were enslaved.

On the next page Draper has placed an excerpt of a famous poem by Countee Cullen, an African-American writer and poet who lived during the time of the Harlem Renaissance. In the poem he questions what Africa is to him, since his family has lived in the United States for centuries. The characters in *Copper Sun* are faced with that same question: what is Africa to me when my entire life is in America? Draper's choice to include a poetic epigraph is therefore not only a reference to the tradition of the original slave narratives, but also hints to one of the themes of the novel (Hinton 61).

In the back of the novel Draper has included an afterword that shortly discusses the historical elements of the book. This is followed by a number of pages that contain documentary material with sources and discussion questions for the readers. Draper concludes the book with a personal afterword about her motivation to write Amari's story. She tells her readers that she went to a slave castle in Ghana, which is when she knew she would have "to tell the story of just one of those who had passed that way" (313). Finally, she answers eight questions that she is often asked about *Copper Sun*. Her extensive explanation and documentation are much like the documentation that the original slave narratives used to contain in order to increase the credibility of their narrative. In part, that is also what Sharon Draper intends to do; mentioning her sources and motivation gives her authority and credibility as the writer of a neo-slave narrative. It should not be forgotten, however, that her

intended audience is the young adult reader and that it is not uncommon for writers (and publishers) to include these materials to make the books more attractive and educational.

Not all the elements of the front and back matter of the antebellum slave narratives are as clearly represented as those mentioned above. There are no testimonials that testify to the good intentions and behaviour of the author. There are a few indirect testimonials, however. For example, the cover contains the logo of the Coretta Scott King Award, which *Copper Sun* won in 2007. The inside of the cover page contains a few quotes from positive reviews. These testimonials, however, should probably be seen as marketing strategies rather than testimonials of the author's personality.

Another missing element of the original slave narrative is the first sentence, which is not "I was born..." or an equivalent of it. Instead the novel starts in media res. The novel also does not contain a sketchy account of the protagonists' parentage. Amari has lived with her family until the age of approximately fifteen, which means she knows them well. The same goes for Polly, who also grew up with her parents. Even Teenie's background is given in *Copper Sun* when she speaks about her mother, who came from Africa like Amari.

In the antebellum slave narrative there was most always an account of a slave coffle and -auction. In *Copper Sun* Amari has to walk in a coffle when she is taken to the West Coast of Africa, where she sees many slaves perish. When she arrives in America she is sold at an auction. This event in the novel appears to have been important for Draper. Firstly because she has Amari build up a relationship with Afi. Afi helps her on their journey, but it seems that Draper introduced the character mainly to have her taken away at the auction, making it an even more emotional event. Secondly because the entire scene is described through the eyes of Polly. Her feelings about the auction as a white person are in strong contrast to the emotions the reader is feeling after Amari is separated from Afi. Thirdly because the part that describes Amari's experience of that slave auction is repeated just after the title page, where a onepage excerpt is printed. By highlighting the slave auction, Draper has tried to ensure that the reader would experience and remember the dehumanization of slaves.

Olney also states that the original slave narratives used to give an account of the slaves' daily life. Polly and Amari's lives are described with quite some detail. Especially when the girls first arrive on the plantation, Draper often speaks about their duties and the conditions they live in. Although their clothes are shabby, they have their own hut (where Polly sleeps in the single bed and Amari voluntarily sleeps on the familiar ground). They have to work hard in the kitchen, but it also means they are given enough food. Their lives have



settled into a routine, but for Amari there is also the routine of being raped by Clay a few times a week. Draper shows that even though a slave's life may seem no very different than that of a regular servant, their lack of control over their bodies, such as when a slave woman is raped, is what matters the most in the end.

The girls get to know some of the field slaves. One of them, Cato, is the oldest slave on the plantation. He is a good example of a slave who is strong, hardworking, and refuses to be whipped, and, as Olney states, who can be found in the typical antebellum slave narrative. Although Cato does not work in the fields anymore, he has done so for eighteen years; a record. He is also seen as the leader of the community and is left alone by his masters. He says that "they ain't got much choice but to let me do pretty much what I wants to nowadays, since they done 'bout worked me dry" (Draper 132). Another slave who is mostly left unpunished is Noah, Mrs. Derby's bodyguard. He is usually by her side and it seems Mr. Derby has made a deal with his wife to leave him alone. That is, until he figures out that Noah is actually the father of Mrs. Derby's child and he kills the slave.

There are more cruelties like this one throughout the book. The ones that are most common in the slave narratives are the whippings. Amari witnesses those en route to the African coast and on board of the ship. She herself receives a whipping from Mr. Derby after the dinner at 'the big house' from which it takes her weeks to recuperate. The first whipping Polly sees, or at least cares about, is that of Amari, which leaves her feeling furious and helpless. It bothers her that even though she is white, due to her low social status there is nothing she can do to stop Mr. Derby when he treats his slaves badly. He is aware of the miserable and lethal conditions in which his slaves are working in the fields (they usually do not live longer than five years while working there) and he knows that without them his rice plantation would soon fail. But instead of improving their situation he simply keeps buying new African slaves to replace them. It shows that he dehumanizes the slaves; he sees them as goods or cattle. This also becomes apparent when he gives Amari to Clay for his birthday. He has no regard for her feelings; in fact, he thinks that she has little to few emotions to begin with. His cruellest acts, however, take place after he finds out that the baby he thought was his is in fact Noah's baby. He tells Mrs. Derby that he will not kill her: 'Instead, I shall refuse to let you die.' (Draper 183). Then he kills Noah and their child by shooting them before her eyes. Amari, Polly and Teenie are also punished for trying to help Mrs. Derby and Noah. Amari is to be sold at the slave market, Polly's indenture contract is to be sold to a whorehouse in New Orleans, and although he lets Teenie stay at the plantation, he gives orders for her son, Tidbit, to be separated from her and to be sold at the slave market as well.

Clay Derby is another character who is continuously cruel towards the slaves. He frequently summons Amari to his bedroom to be raped and shares his father's beliefs about slaves lacking emotions. When he is visited by some friends, he takes Tidbit with them on their hunt for alligators. They let the boy swim in the water and use him as bait, while they shoot the animals that are going after him. Tidbit only barely survives. When Amari, Polly, and Tidbit are on the run, Clay is the one who follows them to the South and finds them. Before they manage to fight him off, he tells them he will "enjoy punishing you [Amari]".

According to Olney, most original slave narratives also had a cruel, Christian master who is much worse than a master who does not profess any religion. In *Copper Sun*, that is Mr. Derby: he considers himself to be a good Christian, because he saves the Africans from living like savages in the jungle. However, for the contemporary reader it will mostly be the sadistic nature of Mr. Derby and his son that makes them despicable, not the fact that they are not acting like proper Christians.

An important part of the antebellum slave narrative was the difficult way in which the slave would become literate. In this novel, however, Amari does not learn how to read and write, but to speak English. She is taught some words on the ship by the friendly sailor and learns more from Polly at the plantation. Amari often receives compliments for quickly picking up the language. Polly already knows how to read and write, since her mother taught her as a young girl. She is ordered by Clay to hide her literacy, because he feels women have no business reading. Nevertheless, when the girls reach Fort Mose, her literacy-skills are appreciated and she is quickly set to become the first teacher of the community of ex-slaves. This implies that Amari, Tidbit, and many others will become literate after all.

Before the trio reaches Fort Mose, however, they first need to escape. Cato has given them the advice to go south instead of north, because he once heard of Fort Mose and because everyone will expect them to go north. Teenie has asked Amari and Polly to take her son with them while they escape, but when they leave the plantation they have no actual plan. Luckily, they get some unexpected help from the doctor who is sent to sell them. The trio travel at night and rest by day, afraid someone might notice them. Their journey is full of dangers. Once, they accidentally eat poisoned berries and all get ill. Then they meet Clay, who has followed them south. After they shake him off they meet more people, some of whom help them and some from whom they have to hide in the swamp. Draper describes their escape in great detail and strictly follows the conventions of genre, which is probably because she intended to teach her audience of young adults something about the slave narratives.

After a long journey Amari, Polly, and Tidbit make it to Fort Mose where they are welcomed by the residents, most of whom are also ex-slaves. In many slave narratives the runaways change their names after they have arrived in safe country, as a symbol of their newfound freedom. Amari has already changed her name though. At the plantation she was called Myna, but as soon as they ran from the doctor's wagon she told the other two that from now on her name was Amari again, symbolising how she regains control over her life. At Fort Mose, Polly keeps her name, but Tidbit reveals that the real name his mother gave him was Timothy, which is what he would like to be called now in remembrance of Teenie. When Amari finds out she is pregnant with Clay's child, she already knows what she will name it.

*If this child is a boy, Amari thought, I shall name him Freeman. He will stand tall and proud and be forever free. I shall teach him my native language and tell him of the beauties of my homeland. If it is a girl, I shall name her Afi, after the one who loved me and helped me find my destiny. I will tell this child of her ancestors and her grandparents and tell her the stories my father told me. My child shall never be enslaved, Amari vowed fiercely.*

(Draper 302)

This fragment shows how important names were for slaves, as their symbolism would give them continuous hope and strength. The fact that Amari thinks about these things fits right in with the slave narrative tradition, since they would often reflect upon slavery at the end of the story. In this case, Amari realises that love will always triumph over slavery, since Clay's "evil spirit could never touch the love she was already beginning to feel for the child within her" (Draper 301).

### 5.3 *Copper Sun* as a neo-slave narrative

As in many neo-slave narratives, *Copper Sun* contains African songs and uses the vernacular. All the slaves that Draper created on the plantation speak in the vernacular. Their language is in stark contrast to that of Polly, whose mother taught her to speak like a proper lady. There is also quite some singing in the book, although the actual lyrics of a song are only written down once. It is the song the people of Amari's village sing when they welcome their white and Ashanti 'guests'. It is also the last happy memory Amari has of her village, since immediately afterwards the strangers attack them. It seems songs are not Draper's preferred tool to remember the past and culture of her protagonists; she prefers the oral

tradition, like many other neo-slave narratives (Hinton 53). Teenie, whose mother came from Africa too, tells Amari that even though they live in America now, “long as you remember, chile, it ain’t never gone” (Draper 109). She is speaking of the memories, skills, recipes, and stories their parents have given them. Those will keep the deceased alive and keep their spirits up while they try to create a new life. This way, Teenie is able to teach Tidbit about his African heritage. A task which, at the end of the novel, Amari has set herself for Tidbit and her own child as well.

When Polly and Amari find freedom they do so in a way that is typical for female characters in neo-slave narratives. They go through the three phases of family – identity – freedom. In this case, the family consists of the three runaways: Amari, Polly, and Tidbit. They start to build a life in Fort Mose, where Amari becomes a new mother for Tidbit. Amari, Afi, and Teenie are also typical female characters of the neo-slave narrative genre because they are motherly figures while they are enslaved. Even though the conditions are harsh, these women find the strength to take care of other people. In the antebellum slave narrative there was no place for characters like these, because they had to write about the difficulties female slaves endured. But in the neo-slave narrative genre these women are celebrated for their love and strength, which also positively changes the view contemporary readers may have had about slave women.

Another aspect of the neo-slave narrative is that even without freedom, the characters are shown to have romances and relationships. In *Copper Sun* there are a few as well. Polly meets a boy, Nathan, who helps them when the three young people are on the run. They flirt and she realises that when she becomes free, she can try to imagine a future with someone like him. When they arrive in Fort Mose, they hear that a boy matching Nathan’s description has been asking around about her and has promised to come back. But the real romance in the book is that of Isabelle Derby and Noah. Their love is kept a secret, although the unusual circumstances of Noah’s contract do raise some questions amongst the other slaves. Their relationship is extraordinary because of their respective social status and because of their race. When the truth comes out it ends badly for the couple and their child; an outcome that all characters expected, which implies how unacceptable their relation was at the time. It should also be noted that the interracial friendship between Amari and Polly is not very common either. It shows the need to see beyond shallow limitations in a coalition (Hinton 61). The book itself is a symbol for such a coalition, since it is a collaboration of the narratives of both the enslaved Amari and the indentured Polly. The theme of collaboration beyond races is

obviously something that is still relevant in the present day and which may make it easier for the readers to imagine themselves in the position of Amari or Polly.

Along with the presence of romance in neo-slave narratives the genre can also speak about (women's) sexuality. In the antebellum slave narrative sex was completely different: it was always rape, either for the rapist's pleasure, to establish domination, or as an involuntary means that forced slaves to produce more slaves. Nowadays, writers have the possibility to show that slaves did have consensual intercourse. In *Copper Sun*, this is visible in the relations between Mrs. Derby and Noah. Many neo-slave narratives also show that when slave women are raped, they find a way to get rid of the foetus, giving women back control over part of their sexuality. In this novel, however, that does not happen. Amari is raped continuously, but she never finds a way to get an abortion. Instead, she unknowingly becomes pregnant with the child of her rapist, Clay Derby. Perhaps in this case the controlling element is not in whether to have or not have the baby, but in Amari's choice to love the baby and make it a symbol of freedom.

#### 5.4 *Copper Sun* as a revisionist neo-slave narrative

*Copper Sun* touches upon some subjects that the original slave narratives could not discuss, because it would distract from the ultimate goal: abolitionism. A clear example is the fact that the group that captures Amari and the villagers are not only white men, but also men from the nearby Ashanti tribe. Amari does not understand how their old friends could betray them like this. After the Ashanti have led their captives to the West Coast, they are also enslaved by the slave traders. Draper has also deviated from the original slave narrative by letting Amari and her friends run south instead of north. Fort Mose, a historical place in Florida, was not a place that would be mentioned in the antebellum slave narratives, because it was on Spanish territory and the Spanish were the enemy of the British. Giving them credit for helping runaway slaves would not have been appropriate.

Another subject is the indentured servant. Indentured servitude was introduced in Virginia (it was already well established in England) in 1620. It was an effective method to transport a European workforce to America, but the demand for European labourers dwindled as more African-American slaves were imported. It nevertheless existed till at least the 1840s (Galenson 1-2). Because the abolitionists focused on abolishing slavery, the stories of indentured servants were given less attention. These elements of history were neglected in the original slave narratives, because they would not be helpful to the abolitionist cause.

Contemporary authors of revisionist neo-slave narratives, however, are able to include such tales in their novels, thus attempting to re-educate their readers.

Draper uses the perspective of an indentured white girl alongside the perspective of a black slave girl. Similar to Amari, Polly recalls her past throughout her narrative. She had a happy childhood with her family, even though they were poor. Her parents wanted the best for her and were loving towards her and each other. Although the African cultural heritage is discussed the most in the novel, Draper has, through Polly's narrative, ensured that the stories of the white, indentured servants are also given attention. It is interesting that Draper initially shows us how negative Polly feels about the slaves she sees. She does not even regard them as human beings. Nevertheless, she is a likeable character and her attitude towards the slaves gradually changes. Draper shows her readers that white people might simply have been brought up with certain ideas about slavery and African Americans, but that these people should be given a chance to adjust their views, because in time their morals might improve.

Polly's perspective also shows that white women were sometimes not much better off than slaves. Although Polly is theoretically free, her indenture means that Mr. Derby can sell her to a whorehouse as a punishment, just like he would with a slave. The only advantage Polly has over the slaves is that her indenture is temporary, but since hers lasts fourteen years that actually does not make too much of a difference, since she will have to live the best years of her life as an indentured servant with little control over what happens to her. Furthermore, she herself was not indentured; she has inherited the contracts of her parents, just like the baby of a slave woman would automatically become a slave. And even without being indentured white women often had little freedom. Mrs. Derby, for example, has no say in any part of her life, everything is controlled by her husband. Even some of the slaves feel sorry for her when they discuss her pregnancy:

“It’s a girl for shure. Miz Isabelle deserve a purty little girl to keep her company in that big ol’ house. I feels sorry for her.”

“How you feel sorry for a rich white woman?” Lena asked harshly.

“Money ain’t everything, chile. And ain’t none of his money belong to her – she got ‘bout as much chance to use his money as you do.”

“Yeah, but she ain’t no slave,” Lena insisted.

“Pretty close to it,” Teenie said. “He decide where she go, who she talk to, what she wear – everything. She just sleep in a better bed than you do!”

(Draper 123)

Isabelle Derby's father has married her off to Percy Derby for financial reasons. Her true love turns out to be Noah, but she can never be with him. By telling the story of Mrs. Derby, Draper shows her readers that even without being a slave or an indentured servant, there were many people who did not have control over their own lives. Freedom is not just a legal term; it is a state of being that more people than just slaves had to live without.

*Copper Sun* is seen as a neo-slave narrative, because it addresses neo-slave narrative topics such as romance, sexuality, and the importance of memories. It also fits perfectly into Rushdy's category of the historical novel about slavery. However, what also makes it a revisionist neo-slave narrative is the fact that Draper has included the stories of other people without freedom. In fact, she experiments with the entire notion of freedom. By incorporating the white, indentured girls' perspective and that of the white wife of a slaveholder she has given modern day readers a relatively unknown view on other forms of slavery, which is completely in line with the revisionist neo-slave narrative genre.

## Chapter 6: *The Book of Negroes*, Lawrence Hill

### 6.1 Summary of *The Book of Negroes*

According to Canadian author Lawrence Hill, *The Book of Negroes* (2007) is a novel about slavery, “liberation, [...] and a woman’s journey through life in the eighteenth century” (Sagawa). The narrative is written as a first person account of Aminata Diallo’s life, which she puts on paper so that the abolitionists in London can use it to further their cause, completely in line with the purpose of the original slave narratives. The novel is divided into four books. The first chapters of the first three books are set in early 19<sup>th</sup> century London (Aminata’s present), where the narrator tells about her life in long flashbacks.

In the first chapter the narrator introduces herself to the reader as “Aminata Diallo, daughter of Mamadu Diallo and Sira Kulibali, born in the village of Bayo” (Hill 16). She has a happy childhood. Although her father is not supposed to, he teaches Aminata to read and write, using the Koran. Sira, who is a midwife, lets Aminata come along when she has to “catch babies” and soon she becomes her reliable assistant. But her deepest wish is to become a ‘djeli’, a storyteller. Aminata is friends with Fomba, the village chief’s ‘woloso’, a “captive of the second generation” (Hill 30). He is mentally challenged, but he is very strong and considered the best hunter in the village.

One night, when Aminata returns home with her mother and Fomba from delivering a baby, they are captured by slave traders, who kill Sira and Mamadu. Aminata is forced to walk in a coffle with Fanta, the chief’s wife, Fomba, and other captives. One of the slave traders’ helpers is a young boy named Chekura, who is from a village not far from Bayo. At first Aminata does not understand why he helps the traders, but then learns that he is also a slave. Chekura takes a liking towards Aminata and occasionally helps her.

When the coffle reaches the coast the captives and Chekura are taken to a fortress called Bance Island, where they are branded with a hot iron and carried onto a ship. Aminata, who speaks two languages, becomes an interpreter for the doctor on board and helps him deliver babies. After a couple of months a slave revolt is organized, but it is violently struck down. During the revolt Fanta kills the doctor and her own newborn baby to prevent it from having to live in slavery. Not long after the revolt they reach America, where the slaves are auctioned off. Due to an illness, Aminata is weak and an unpopular ‘item’ at the auction. Along with Fomba, who has lost the ability of speech on the crossing, she is among the last and cheapest slaves to be bought. Aminata is then around twelve years old.



Their buyer is Robinson Appleby, the owner of an indigo plantation in South Carolina. Aminata is taken in by Georgia, another slave, who cares for her like a mother. Georgia is a healer and she teaches Aminata her herbal skills. She also teaches her English and the slaves' dialect, Gullah. Mamed, the overseer, soon decides to teach Aminata to speak, read, and write 'proper' English. After a couple of years Aminata finds Chekura again and he visits her, despite the risks. Although they become closer, Aminata is not ready to become intimate yet. Unfortunately Appleby finds out about the visits and rapes her as a punishment. Georgia makes sure that Aminata does not become pregnant, after which Appleby seems to lose interest in her.

Solomon Lindo, a Jewish indigo inspector, finds out about her literacy and tries, but fails, to buy her from Appleby. Two years later, Aminata is pregnant and marries Chekura. Enraged, Appleby shaves her head and burns her possessions. When their child is not even a year old Appleby takes him from her and sells him. Broken by grief for her son and husband, who has suddenly stopped visiting, Aminata refuses to work or eat, even though she is beaten. Finally, Appleby gives up and sells her to Lindo.

Lindo, who lives in Charles Town (now Charleston), teaches Aminata how to become his bookkeeper. He and his wife treat her well and let her earn some extra money by delivering babies and selling herbal remedies. She lives in relative prosperity for over a decade, but then an economic crisis and the plague sweep over the area, killing Lindo's wife. Times are hard for everyone, but she does suddenly get a visit from Chekura. He tells her that their son died a year after she was sold and that it was Lindo who had brokered the deal, making her feel immensely betrayed. In a final attempt to save his business, Lindo travels to New York City and takes Aminata with him.

Because the British occupation of New York is threatened, many white people hurry to get away. Aminata uses those circumstances to flee, knowing that Lindo will not be able to go after her. She works in the tavern of her friend Sam, delivers babies, and teaches other African Americans to read and write. She becomes well-respected in her community and among the British, while the problems between the British and the rebels worsen. When the British finally decide to retreat, Aminata is chosen to help make a list, of all free black people whom the British will bring to Nova Scotia, Canada, to start a new life there. The list is called The Book of Negroes. A decade after their last meeting Chekura finds her again and for a few months they live together. The day they are supposed to leave for Canada, the British clerk on the ship says that Aminata has been claimed as property. She has to disembark, whilst Chekura leaves with the ship. At her hearing she finds out that it was Appleby who put a

claim on her, but Lindo shows up just in time to truly free her. She boards another ship headed to Birchtown, Nova Scotia, a city of free African Americans. Soon after she arrives, she gives birth to a daughter, May. They live together in Birchtown for a few years, but when the white people start to riot against the African Americans, a white couple abducts May. Not long after, Aminata meets John Clarkson. He is a spokesman for the Sierra Leone Company that wishes to give free black people a chance to return to Africa. Aminata does not decide to join the group until she hears that Chekura's ship perished on the journey to Nova Scotia and she has nothing left to stay for in Canada.

In Sierra Leone Aminata manages once again to form a caring community around herself, but she wishes to return to Bayo. After roughly another decade she meets an African slave trader who agrees to take her there, but en route she finds out that he has plans to sell her as a slave. She escapes and is welcomed in a small African village. For a month she serves as their djeli in return for their care. When she returns to Freetown she sails to London with John Clarkson, where she helps the abolitionists with their cause. She writes an account of her life, testifies in parliament, and even meets the king and queen. Thus, although she is almost sixty years old and her health starts to fail her, she becomes a public figure. Her fame gives May a chance to track her down and they are reunited. Thus, Aminata finally finds some peace and finally has someone of her own kin to nurture her in her old age.

6.2 Olney's outline of antebellum slave narratives in *The Book of Negroes*.

*The Book of Negroes* is seen as a neo-slave narrative (Sagawa and Robbins). Thus it is to be expected that it holds elements of Olney's outline. The narrative does not start with an engraved portrait, a title page that claims the narrative was "written by himself", or testimonials from respected citizens (aside from the quotes from positive reviews for marketing purposes). It does, however, contain two poetic epigraphs: one verse from the bible book Deuteronomy, and one from Jonathan Swift, which is repeated in the novel a number of times.

*So geographers, in Afric-maps,  
With savage-pictures fill their gaps;  
And o'er unhabitable downs  
Place elephants for want of towns*  
-Jonathan Swift

This epigraph shows the ignorance (and wild imagination) that colonizers have when it comes to Africa. Aminata does not like to be called an African and stresses that she is from the village of Bayo. At the end of the book Lawrence Hill provides some documentary material, which was common in the antebellum slave narrative genre. He talks about the factual history he implemented in his work, suggests sources for further reading, and also adds a chapter with acknowledgements. The final pages of the novel show two pages from the historical *Book of Negroes*.

The first sentence of the narrative is quite the opposite of the usual “I was born” phrase, since it starts with “I seem to have trouble dying” (Hill 13). Aminata does provide all the personal details that the antebellum slave narratives used to provide as the chapter progresses. And although she is not sure about the actual date of her birth, she can give a quite detailed account of it (Hill 16). Therefore the sketchy account of parentage does not apply to her. Aminata Diallo knows exactly who her parents – and even some of her extended family – are and she can relate the story of how her parents met and got married (Hill 26). Hill might have done this so that the reader gets a deeper sense of what Aminata lost when she was abducted and why she longs for a family throughout the rest of her life.

Looking at Aminata during her journey to America and her life on the Appleby plantation, many of the elements in Olney’s scheme can be seen. Cruel masters are present in the characters of the slave traders, the sailors on the ship, and Appleby himself. Aminata and her fellow captives are painfully branded on Bance Island. The sailors on the ship mock the slaves and use them as entertainment. The ship is also the place where Aminata witnesses her first whipping. In America, Chekura is frequently whipped and abused as well and he also loses three fingers as punishment. The way in which Appleby treats Aminata is especially cruel, since he beats her, rapes her, and refuses her any chance of having a family. Yorke states that antebellum slave narrative authors would often “fetishize the black body, depicting cruelty in [...] luscious detail”. But despite the fact that similar horrific acts are present in *The Book of Negroes*, “Hill is careful to avoid the sensational, often homoerotic, violence depicted in many slave narratives. [...] Aminata’s sufferings, and those of her friends, are judged rather than merely depicted” (Yorke). For example, when Chekura loses three fingers, Aminata describes the remains of his fingers as “his punishment”, thus making the moral aspect of the more important than the physical aspect (Hill 221). And when Aminata sees a slave-coffle in Sierra Leone, she describes how she hates herself for not helping them, instead of providing her audience with a detailed rapport of what she sees (Yorke, Hill 433). This is how Hill turns violent episodes into events that humanize the characters.

Christian slaveholders that are worse than the ones professing no religion are also present in *The Book of Negroes*. The doctor on the ship is a very religious man, but still tries to abuse Aminata. When she manages to scare him off, he turns to singing hymns, but still rapes numerous other slaves instead. The Witherspoons are a seemingly devout family, but when they get the chance they abduct May. Alassane, a Muslim African, makes a deal to help Aminata, but turns out to be a liar. Solomon Lindo, a Jew, appears to be very kind, but turns out to be the one who betrayed her worst. The narrative does not literally say that non-religious slaveholders are better, but it clearly shows that professions of religion, regardless which one, are no guarantee for a fair treatment.

Olney states that descriptions of a slave's daily life were typical in the original slave narrative. For Aminata, the treatment she receives is different in every place she lives. While walking in the slave coffle, she is allowed to walk 'freely' in the beginning, but she still has to abandon all clothing and is only given limited rations.

I lived in terror that the captors would beat us, boil us and eat us, but they began with humiliation: they tore the clothes off our backs. We had no head scarves or wraps for our body, or anything to cover our private parts. We had not even sandals on our feet. We had no more clothing than goats, and nakedness marked us as captives wherever we went.  
(Hill 43)

On board of the ship Aminata is occasionally given some clothes and food by the doctor, which makes the journey a little bit more bearable. On the Appleby plantation she has to work as hard at producing indigo as the rest of the slaves, but she has Georgia and Mamud to take special care of her. Due to their healing skills Georgia and Aminata are capable of buying some luxury items such as scarves. During her stay in Charlestown she is, at first, treated as a highly appreciated servant. Lindo and his wife revel in her intellect and eagerness to learn. She is fed and clothed and given the chance to earn some extra money with her healing skills. But when times grow hard, Lindo abandons her and she has to struggle to obtain food. When she writes about her daily routine and that of other slaves, it seems as though Aminata is spared the worst. This is probably due to her skills as a midwife and, later on, her age, which perhaps make her seem harmless and respected, or perhaps she is simply lucky in some way. She says it herself: "I seem to have trouble dying." (Hill 13). By showing all the different ways Aminata is treated, the reader does not only get a good sense of the different kind of

lives a slave could lead, but also experiences the displacement and instability a slave would feel.

The overall manner in which the slaves are treated is heartbreaking, but, as Olney states, the antebellum slave narratives always hold an account of one extraordinarily strong, hardworking slave who could not be punished. In *The Book of Negroes* that is Fomba, who might have some mental problems, but is undeniably the best hunter in his village in Africa. Even though the other slaves on the Appleby plantation are annoyed by his inability to do plantation work, they start to value him more highly when he manages to bring them game from the surrounding forests.

Value is also important at the slave auctions that were a conventional part of the slave narrative genre. Aminata's value is actually quite low when she arrives in America, because she has just been seriously ill. She is part of the group that is left over and can be claimed by slave holders in a bizarre scene.

The toubabu [white people] raced forward, ropes in hand, pushing and shoving as they tried to grab captives and sling ropes around them. A man grabbed me. He tried to tie me up. Another man knocked him back, and tied his own rope around my waist. He pulled me closer to his stinking chest and tightened the rope, which bit into my skin. [...] Now that a rope was fastened around my waist, I was left standing alone. (Hill 127).

At the same market she witnesses how Fanta rebels against the auctioneers before she disappears out of her life forever. Years later, when Aminata moves to Charlestown with Lindo, she passes by another slave market. She sees people who have just come off the ships from Africa and feels distraught, because there is nothing she can do for them. And in Africa Aminata visits the place where she stayed before she was loaded onto the ship. Hill gives the readers different views of the slave auctions through the eyes of Aminata. Each time she is in a different stage of her life, the first two times she is a slave, the third time she is free. But every time she is overwhelmed by the feeling of powerlessness.

One of the most important elements of the slave narrative genre is literacy. But for Aminata the barriers against literacy are not as high as could be expected. This starts with her father, who, although it is forbidden, teaches her some Arabic when he sees her trying on her own. She speaks two languages, Bamanankan, her father's language, and Fulfulde, her mother's language. While she marches in the coffle and is a translator on the ship, she also

learns a few dialects of those languages. She learns some English words on board of the ship, but Georgia is the one who really teaches her to speak English, with a very clear distinction between the English that the slaves speak when they talk to white people and the vernacular version called Gullah. This language distinction was an ordeal for African slaves, because they suddenly had to learn two new languages that were nothing like their mother tongues (Yorke). Mamud, the overseer on the plantation, secretly teaches Aminata 'proper' English, as well as how to read and write. This is a key moment, since her skills make Lindo interested in buying her and teaching her how to keep his books. The final time Aminata has to learn a new language is when she returns to Sierra Leone and wants to speak the African language Temne. Even though she is much older at this point, learning a new language comes easy to her. The fact that Aminata learns these languages voluntarily defies the stereotypical idea of the lazy African American some of Hills' white characters have (Yorke). But Aminata's ultimate act of resistance is not the fact that she learns all this, but teaches it too (Sagawa and Robbins 14). By making other African Americans literate, she empowers them. She does not encounter many problems in this profession either, although that could be expected given the adversity against slave-literacy. She is welcomed in communities as a teacher and people are grateful for her lessons, which white people never try to obstruct. Literacy alone is not what empowers Aminata, it is the way in which she uses her skills, by teaching other African Americans and writing for the abolitionists, that make her stronger.

The primary element of slave narratives is the search for freedom. Before that goal is achieved, it is preceded by accounts of failed and successful escapes. In *The Book of Negroes*, Aminata starts to think about escaping while she lives on the Appleby plantation. It is her motivation to follow the lessons Mamud gives her, since she realizes that in order to survive she will have to learn as much as possible about her adversary. However, the actual escape does not take place until over a decade later, when she visits New York City with Lindo. She flees to the Burial Grounds, the woodland on Northern Manhattan where they will not look for her. After hiding there for a couple of days she sneaks back into the city and is effectively freed. Many years later she expects to receive official freedom from the British, but is thwarted by Appleby who has put a false claim on her. Fortunately, Lindo arrives just in time to state that she is his slave and, furthermore, that he wishes to set her free. Thus, Aminata gets her official freepapers and goes to Nova Scotia to live with other freed African Americans. The process of finding freedom runs fairly smoothly for Aminata, but her husband Chekura encounters more obstacles in his search for freedom. He has undertaken a few failed

attempts to escape, paying for it with three of his fingers, but when he reaches New York he professes to be a free man.

It remains a question how much value freedom holds though, since the black communities in Nova Scotia and Freetown still struggle to make a decent living. For Aminata, gaining freedom is not the end of her story. She still longs for her daughter and her village Bayo. Yorke claims that even though she is reunited with her daughter and the narrative seems to have a happy ending, Aminata's hard and difficult life has only gained her a peaceful death. On the other hand, Aminata has certainly changed her situation in regards to her status as a slave. When she is confronted with some slaves at an auction in Charlestown and she feels helpless because she cannot aid them, she comes up with her personal definition of slavery.

I was fed, and they were not. I had clothes, and they had none. I could do nothing to change their prospects or even my own. That, I decided, was what it meant to be a slave: your past didn't matter; in the present you were invisible and you had no claim on the future.

(Hill 207).

At the end of her life, Aminata has a future in the grandchild that she will soon have and in the fact that she has changed the prospects of many Africans by helping the abolitionists. Nevertheless, it could still be seen as ironic that her final haven is in London, the heart of the empire that so brutally disrupted her young life by stimulating the slave trade.

In many slave narratives the narrator will take a new name after he or she has found freedom. This does not apply to Aminata, which is a testimony of her strength as a female character in a neo-slave narrative. She was named Aminata Diallo at birth. She is called Mary by the doctor on the ship. In America she is called Meena Dee, because the Americans have trouble pronouncing her name. But in contrast to the name Mary, this is one that she has chosen herself and that resembles her real name. Significantly, the few people in her life who call her by her real name are also the people closest to her. But names are still very important for the slaves and freed African Americans. Claybourne Mitchell, whom Aminata befriends in New York, does change his name after he has become a free man. His description of that process is typical for the slave narrative.

“Claybourne the only name they done give me,” he said. “Mitchell is a name I done took. Heard a man called that once, and liked it so much I decided when I got here I was gonna be a new man. Free man. With two names, both for myself.”

(Hill 274)

The importance of names in the slave narrative genre can also be seen in the American edition of the novel. Because publishers in the United States could not accept the title *The Book of Negroes* another title had to be created. It is no coincidence that it became *Someone Knows My Name*. They are Chekura’s words on board of the ship, after he asks Aminata to say his name (Hill 81). Hearing it assures him of his existence. When the Africans are forced to entertain the sailors on deck, Aminata sings out the names of the other captives as they dance. She soon knows all their names and they are grateful someone knows them. Names also have an important symbolical meaning when Aminata writes down the names of the African Americans that are allowed to go to Nova Scotia with the British. Although she is supposed to document only short descriptions of all the people in the Book of Negroes, she tries to make each entry as personal as possible. The freed people are very curious about what she writes and are happy that somewhere they exist on paper. To them, a written name is an even bigger affirmation of their existence as a human being.

### 6.3 *The Book of Negroes* as a neo-slave narrative

Looking at Rushdy’s definitions of the neo-slave narrative genre *The Book of Negroes* mostly resembles the historical novel that follows the format of the original slave narratives. It is written in the first person perspective of a slave in the South, which is typical for the slave narrative genre, and contains many of the common subjects. Furthermore, the author has tried to make his fictional account as historically accurate as possible.

Part of the neo-slave narrative genre is the implementation of elements from the antebellum slave culture, such as (religious) songs and the vernacular. As mentioned before, Aminata soon learns Gullah, but only speaks the vernacular with other African Americans. Hill has mentioned that he wanted to implement the vernacular so that the readers would be reminded of how linguistically flexible and creative the slaves had to be in order to survive and thrive (Hauglund 37). Furthermore, showing the different languages also underlines the gap between the slaves and the white people on a social, cultural, and racial level, as well as that it “creates associations to the collective socio-cultural identity of the African American community and the strong sense of togetherness against a common enemy” (Hauglund 37).



The only songs that are mentioned in *The Book of Negroes* are those of the white people, usually hymns or other religious texts. Since Aminata is not a Christian, she does not have much interest in biblical texts or songs. As Hill has stated, he had to make the Diallo family Muslims, because that was the only way he could convincingly provide Aminata with a basic literacy. But soon after she is captured by the slave traders she realizes that there is no place for Islam in her life anymore and she continues to live the rest of her life without any religion. In fact, and unlike most neo-slave narratives, which usually incorporate elements of magical realism, the only departure from 'reality' that Hill allows Aminata to take is the imaginary contact she has with her parents. Even though they have long been killed by the slave traders, she can still hear them while they give her advice and help her to make decisions.

Storytelling, another important part of the antebellum slave culture, is visible in Aminata's wish to become a djeli, or a storyteller. In fact, that is in part what keeps her going. Although she witnesses horrific events, she forces herself to watch so that at a later stage she can tell other people what she has seen (Krampe 70). And she does, when she writes the narrative of her life. Passing on memories is incredibly important to her, because she refuses to let the history of the slaves be forgotten (Krampe 69) and it helps her to deal with her traumas of slavery. Lawrence Hill does the same with *The Book of Negroes*: he gives readers a fictional, though rather realistic, account of the life of a slave woman. By telling that story, he provides his readers with a way to deal with their trauma and he makes sure that people do not forget the history of slaves and slavery.

Romance, sexuality, and gender are three other very important aspects of the neo-slave narrative genre that feature heavily in *The Book of Negroes*. The romantic element is clearly visible in the relationship between Aminata and Chekura. They meet during trying circumstances and there are many who disapprove of their bond and even try to ruin it. And even though they sometimes spend decades without a single word of communication, they still remain loving and loyal to one another. The love of Aminata and Chekura completely refutes the idea that African Americans were incapable of building emotional relationships. In fact, they are each other's family, community, and the only constant factor in their lives. The way in which their marriage is portrayed is very typical for the neo-slave narrative. The contemporary slave narrative does not have to hide the fact that romances were possible between slaves. *The Book of Negroes* gives an extreme example of how marriages could be formed between African-American slaves.

Part of that relationship consists of sexual feelings, and the characters are not denied these either. The neo-slave narrative genre wishes to refute the notion that African Americans

were animalistic, lustful creatures. It is no surprise then that Aminata and Chekura have sex in a passionate, but loving way. The way they make love is, to them, a way to honour and cherish each other. It seems only logical, then, that the narrative suggests that the two are monogamous. It should, however, be noted that Chekura is not the man who takes Aminata's virginity, since Appleby rapes her before she starts her relations with Chekura. To Appleby, she is the typical lustful slave, which is revealed when he calls her an "african whore" after he has forced himself upon her (Sagawa and Robbins 13). By raping her, Appleby tries to produce offspring for economical gain and punish her for seeing Chekura. But perhaps his most important motivation is, as Aminata puts it: "He owned my labour, but now he was bursting to own all of me" (Hill 178). In the past few decades rape has been acknowledged as a common method to dominate and submit. The neo-slave narratives often give examples of how that might actually happen and what the possible effects of that abuse of power are (Sagawa and Robbins 13). In this case, Hill shows how Aminata worries about how Chekura will react to her rape, but Georgia advises her to tell him nothing. She also gives the girl a potion that secures an immediate abortion of whatever Appleby's seed might have produced, for which Aminata is grateful. The abortion shows how the female slaves could have the ability to control their own bodies. In the antebellum slave narrative speaking about the cruel act of rape itself was helpful to the abolitionists' cause, but the emotional and physical results were not and therefore were not often discussed. Rape and its traumatic aftermaths are a frequent topic among neo-slave narratives, however, because nowadays authors such as Hill have the possibility to show readers what the effects of these cruelties are and how slaves would deal with them, thus showing the women's sexual agency.

Aminata's road to freedom does not follow the typical female family-identity-freedom pattern. From her early childhood she is very much aware of her own identity. The fact that she is captured or becomes a mother does not change that. She is, however, portrayed as the typical neo-slave narrative woman who is a rounded character, instead of the genderless objects female slaves were in the antebellum slave narratives. Even her owners acknowledge her intellect, although they call her 'sensible', which means she possesses "an intelligence that is useful, but not threatening" (Yorke). She might not be as motherly as other female characters in neo-slaves narratives, but that is through no fault of her own. After all, her first baby is taken from her when he is not even a year old and with her second child she is too busy with their survival to be completely devoted to her child. It is interesting that as a mother, she does not just mourn the loss of her children but also the loss of her parents and her village, even as an elderly woman (Krampe 68).

Other strong, female characters in the novel also fit in with the neo-slave narrative tradition and are often role models for Aminata. Fanta is a rebellious, strong woman, who, although at times it seems as if she has gone mad, never stops fighting (Sagawa and Robbins 13). Georgia is a strong and intelligent woman who becomes Aminata's surrogate mother and finishes her upbringing in a manner that is probably similar to the way her own mother would have done. They and the other women whom Aminata gets close to show that she clearly has a need for a female community throughout her entire life; she misses her mother and always keeps looking for someone to replace her.

#### 6.4 *The Book of Negroes* as a revisionist neo-slave narrative

Throughout her entire life, Aminata mourns and misses her parents and her own family. That sense of displacement is an important element of the revisionist neo-slave narrative that contemporary authors address. When Aminata lives in Sierra Leone as a free woman, she tries to return to her birthplace Bayo, but she cannot make it there. Her inability to go back to the place she came from is a trauma that most slaves in North-America and their descendants faced. Hill has tried to help these descendants by portraying this collective trauma in the story of one woman who finds a way to come to terms with her losses and her issues of displacement, by telling her others about her life, which is an important aspect and goal of the revisionist neo-slave narrative genre.

Another part of the revisionist neo-slave narratives genre's strength is that it deals with topics that were too painful to address in earlier times. In *The Book of Negroes* that is the fact that Africans were no strangers of the institute of slavery. Fomba is the village's chief's woloso, a second generation slave. Furthermore, the novel does not deny the fact that white people usually did not travel to the inlands of Africa and that, basically, the Africans were captured and enslaved by their own people. These are painful subjects, because they were used as arguments by the pro-slavery lobby before the abolition of slavery. Nevertheless, the narrative implements these issues and thus strengthens its own story by not avoiding them, but explaining and accepting them as an inevitable part of history.

At least equally painful a topic is the notion of Canada as a promised land for the African-American slaves and, following from that, the Canadians' sense of superiority towards the United States in this respect (Krampe 66). However, that notion is not entirely correct, since cruelties against African Americans did occur in Canada too. Racist treatment of black people in Canada was frequent, such as in the allotment of land. Up to this day, many people are unaware that Canada had a large number of slaves and indentured people. And if

they were truly free, they were often confronted with racism and unequal opportunities. Canada was not the safe haven many freed slaves hoped for, although admittedly, neither was Sierra Leone, their other choice (Krampe 74). Furthermore, there were plenty of American slaveholders who would have their escaped slaves captured in Canada and returned to them (Krampe 72, 76).

The revisionist neo-slave narratives aimed to tell the slave stories in neo-form, in order to provide a method to resist the injustice of maintaining errors in history, or forgetting history altogether (Sagawa & Robbins 1). These errors in history are part of a cultural trauma. Those traumas have been ‘whitewashed’ out of the Canadian collective memory, which now sees Canada as if it was the ‘Promised Land’ for (former) slaves, something that is particularly painful for those whose ancestors had to live in or with slavery. Black Canadian writers, like Lawrence Hill, now try to insert those traumas in their literature, so that that part of history, shameful and painful as it may be, may be known again. Hill has stated that it is hard for people to come to terms with a traumatic past if everyone denies it. This is one of the main goals that the revisionist neo-slave narrative has: to be, as Sagawa and Robbins call it, an “antidote to cultural amnesia” (14).

## Chapter 7: *A Mercy*, Toni Morrison

### 7.1 Summary of *A Mercy*

Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* was published in 2008 and is seen by some critics as a prequel to *Beloved*, the neo-slave narrative that Morrison published in 1987 (McHenry 16). In *Beloved*, which is set in the late 1850s, a mother kills her daughter to save her from slavery, feeling that death is preferable to the hardships the girl would have to endure as a slave. A similar act of motherly despair occurs in *A Mercy*, but the setting of this novel is much earlier and the narrative framework is different.

*A Mercy* is told through seven perspectives. The main narrator is Florens, who tells her story in the I-perspective. A third-person narrator provides the views of five other characters in separate chapters, which alternate with Florens' narrative. They are Jacob Vaark, "a ratty orphan" who became a trader and farmer in the state of New York; Rebekka Vaark, his English wife; Lina, a Native American slave who lost all her kin to smallpox; Sorrow, a mentally unstable slave; and Willard and Scully, two indentured servants working at the farm. Florens' mother, Minha Mãe, writes her narrative in the final chapter. The chapters are not in chronological order, but this section will combine them all into one chronological summary.

Set in the America of the 1690s, the novel takes place during the creation of the American states. The characters live in a small community where Jacob Vaark is the master who works together with Lina, his slave, until Jacob decides that he needs a wife. He sends word to England that he needs a spouse and Rebekka's father is only too happy to oblige. Rebekka knows that her options are limited, so she welcomes the chance to find a better life in an adventurous new place.

After their marriage, Jacob starts to travel for his business. On one of his trips a sawyer family asks Jacob to take with him a girl called Sorrow. She was given the name after she was found as the sole survivor of a shipwreck. She has long conversations with her imaginary friend Twin. Lina thinks that Sorrow is the source of all the evil that befalls upon the farm. For the Vaark family is not blessed with children. Rebekka gives birth five times, but the only child that survives past her infant years dies at the age of five after an accident.

Some time later Jacob visits the plantation of Senhor D'Ortega, who is unable to pay off his debt. Jacob proposes to take his cook as payment, but D'Ortega refuses. The slave woman begs Jacob to take her eight-year-old daughter, Florens, instead and he accepts. Florens is deeply distraught by her mother's dismissal. She thinks her mother chose to abandon her over her little brother. In Jacob's account of the event, her mother only says

“Please Senhor. Not me. Take her. Take my daughter.” (Morrison 26), not mentioning the boy at all.

Florens is taken to the Vaark farm by a kind priest who has secretly taught Florens and her mother and brother to read and write. At the farm Lina welcomes the girl, feeling that Florens might give her some happiness. The two become close, but the girl is still so traumatised by her mother’s dismissal and so hungry for motherly love that the Native American woman’s love is not enough to make her happy.

Jacob becomes very rich, but his childless marriage burdens him. He plans to build a mansion like the one he saw on the D’Ortega plantation, so that when he dies he will have left behind some sort of legacy. One of the workmen who helps is a young, free African-American blacksmith, whom Florens, now sixteen years old, falls in love with. They begin a passionate and careless affair, because Florens finally has someone she can belong to after her mother abandoned her. Early in that winter, the happy environment that came with the construction of the mansion suddenly disappears when Jacob gets smallpox and dies. It soon turns out that Rebekka is ill too. Florens is sent to get the blacksmith, since he has healed Sorrow of the same disease once before.

Florens is supposed to travel by carriage, but she misses her connection. She continues on foot in the night, hiding in the forest without food or warm clothes, soon feeling miserable and afraid. The next day she meets some Native American boys, who mock her at first, but then take pity on her and help her. A while later Florens asks for food and shelter at a farm, which is run by religious Widow Ealing and her daughter, Jane. Because Jane has a ‘lazy eye’ she is accused of witchcraft by the Puritan community. Every night, the widow gives her lashes to ‘save’ her (Babb 157). When the Puritans visit the farm to inspect Jane, they are surprised to see a person with such dark skin. Florens undergoes an intrusive examination, but before they can do further harm, Jane helps Florens escape.

She soon finds her way to the blacksmith. Elated to see him, her glee soon diminishes when he tells her she cannot return with him. He has a protégé, a little boy named Malaik, and he needs her to take care of him. Florens is immediately scared and wary that Malaik threatens the love the blacksmith has for her, like her little brother did with their mother. Things escalate when Malaik does not stop crying after she has hidden his doll. She pulls his arm so hard it dislocates. At that moment, the blacksmith returns. He sends Florens away, after which she also attacks him in a frenzy. She leaves him on the floor with a bloodied head, not knowing how badly he is injured. Florens walks back to the farm barefoot.

At the farm things have changed. The blacksmith has healed Rebekka, but her character has altered. She has become religious and strict. Willard and Scully still help out on the farm, but Rebekka now pays them, giving them a new sense of self-worth and hope of freedom. Sorrow has had a baby and develops strong motherly feelings. She is a more stable person than before; her imaginary friend Twin is gone. She decides to run away, asking Florens to come with her. But Florens has an unfinished task. She is writing her story into the walls and floor of the abandoned mansion. She addresses the blacksmith, still needing his love and approval. She also says that sometimes she feels her mother tries to tell her something, but she can never hear what that is.

The novel ends with the short narrative of Florens' mother, describing how she was taken from her African village and became a slave on the D'Ortega plantation. There, a slave tasked with 'breaking her in' raped her. Minha Mãe was scared for Florens, because even at the age of eight the girl was already getting unwanted attention. When Jacob visited, her mother saw a man who did not view them as property. In a desperate attempt to save her daughter from all the hardships of the plantation she begged Jacob to take Florens, knowing that she would be safer with him. That is the message she wants to give her daughter, but the girl will never know that her dismissal was endowed by the motherly love she so badly wants to feel.

## 7.2 Olney's outline of the antebellum slave narratives in *A Mercy*

Of all the novels that have been studied in this thesis *A Mercy* is the one that, at first glance, appears to be the least like the original slave narrative that Olney describes. This section and the next will provide arguments as to why *A Mercy* can be categorized as a (neo-)slave narrative.

A number of points on Olney's list of slave narrative characteristics can be found in *A Mercy*. One of the most prominent characteristics is the road to slave literacy. In Florens' case this is addressed early on. She, her mother and little brother are taught to read and write by the priest who visits the D'Ortega plantation. They have to study in secret, because it is forbidden for slaves to learn how to read and write. The reverend could be severely punished, imprisoned or even killed if they were caught, but he believes that they will love God more if they can read. They have only two religious books and one slate and they write their words in the sand or on rocks (Morrison 6). When Florens speaks about the past she always uses the present tense, such as when she writes about how she became literate:

Once every seven days we learn to read and write. We are forbidden to leave the place so the four of us hide near the marsh. My mother, me, her little boy and Reverend Father. He is forbidden to do this but he teaches us anyway watching out for wicked Virginians and Protestants who want to catch him. If they do he will be in prison or pay money or both. He has two books and a slate. We have sticks to draw through sand, pebbles to shape words on smooth flat rock. When the letters are memory we make whole words. I am faster than my mother and her baby boy is no good at all. Very quickly I can write from memory the Nicene Creed including all of the commas. (Morrison 6)

The progress Florens makes as she studies shows that she has a bright mind, but the constant use of the present tense seems to imply that there are aspects of life she does not fully understand. She also does not ‘learn the alphabet’, but “the letters are memory” and although she claims to have knowledge of commas, she sparsely uses them in her own narrative. Florens also tells that she cannot just read and write words, but that she is also capable of reading the signs nature provides: “If a pea hen refuses to brood I read it quickly” (Morrison 3). Florens sees these signs as a warning that something bad is about to happen. So she seems to be able to read more than just one complicated language, but she fails to grasp the meaning of words spoken to her or the underlying meaning of messages.

According to Olney, another element of the slave narrative is the description of the slaves’ daily life and the food and clothes they are given. In *A Mercy*, it differs per character how much information is provided. The accounts that stand out are those of Florens, Lina and Willard and Scully. Lina, for example, has to work closely with her mistress, Rebekka, and the novel describes how meticulously she does her daily chores. Lina also likes to sleep outside with Florens during summer nights, whilst during the colder nights they sleep in the barn. Finally, she has a habit of bathing on a daily basis. In the case of Willard and Scully the narrator describes what they are paid for their labour and how long they would have to save to finally obtain their freedom. Florens’ shoes are often discussed in the novel. As a child, she refuses to walk barefoot and is given an old pair of Senhora’s fancy shoes, of which her mother, and later Lina, disapprove. Lina says that her delicate feet are now useless for the life she is to lead.

Every slave narrative contains descriptions of cruelties committed against the slaves. As Olney states, many of the victims of cruelties are women and in this novel that mostly means Lina, Sorrow and Minha Mãe. Lina is rescued by the army when her entire Native



American village dies as a result of smallpox. She is taken in by a community of Presbyterians, but they whip her for the small mistakes she makes as their servant. Sorrow is abused by members of the sawyer's family who take her in after she has been orphaned. The sons of the sawyer rape her repeatedly, after which their mother wants to get rid of the girl. On occasion, when she messes things up again, Sorrow is also beaten by Rebekka Vaark. Florens is quite shocked when this happens, for it is the first time she sees a beating. A description of someone witnessing a beating for the first time is a frequent topic in the slave narrative genre. *Minha Mãe* is taken from the inlands of Africa by a rival tribe and shipped to the Americas. There, she has to work hard under miserable conditions. When she first arrives on the D'Ortega plantation her fellow male slaves are ordered to rape her, in order to 'break her in', which is another cruelty.

Sometimes the people who have witnessed or endured cruelties end up committing them themselves at a later time. Lina is particularly cruel to Sorrow, because she believes the girl is bad luck and has brought misfortune to the Vaark farm. When Sorrow is pregnant of her first child, Lina delivers the baby. The Native American woman tells her that the baby is stillborn and gets rid of it by throwing it in the river, but Sorrow claims to have seen the baby open its eyes. This suggests that Lina has killed the child, which she probably did because she thought it was the best thing to do to protect the farm (Morrison 123). Florens, who has seen servants being hit and whipped, is cruel to the little boy Malaik. She fears the blacksmith will like him more than her, which brings back the feelings she had when she experienced the sibling rivalry with her baby brother when her mother chose to abandon her (Jimenez 4). She does not realise that being kind to him will not only win his love, but also that of the blacksmith. Instead, she hides his toys and handles him roughly, which becomes the reason for the blacksmith to send her away. With these two characters Morrison shows what kind of traumatic effect witnessing or enduring cruel acts can have. She has chosen two of her most sympathetic characters in the novel and given them understandable reasons to be cruel, in order to make it even more confrontational for her readers.

Olny makes a distinction between wrongdoers who are 'regular' slaveholders and Christian slaveholders, who are often described as worse than the ones who are not religious. In *A Mercy* there are numerous accounts of cruelties committed by masters who profess no religion as well as masters who claim to act from Christian ideals. The Presbyterians who took in Lina do not just whip her for no good reason, but their leader frequently sexually abuses Sorrow and is most likely the father of at least one of her children. There is also an Anabaptist community nearby, whose members refuse to help the people on the farm when

they are hit by smallpox, even though their Christian faith tells them to help those in need. The religious community that Florens confronts at Widow Ealing's place reacts very superstitiously to Jane's odd eyes. Their beliefs have nothing to do with love, but with fearing what is different, such as strange eyes or a different skin colour. But their religious accusation might have been more than just that, since some scholars have theorised that women of independent means were often accused of witchcraft to separate them from their wealth (Babb 157). When the visitors at the Widow's home discover Florens they subject her to all their superstition and denigrating ideas too. Given that in the 17<sup>th</sup> century religion was often the most important aspect of people's life, it is quite shocking to read about Christians who act so unkindly. This is even more the case when it is not to survive, but for individual game.

Morrison also shows how people can change for the worse. Vaark starts out as a farmer, but at the end of his life he has built a mansion which was paid for by the proceedings of his rum and sugar cane business. Both businesses depend on slavery, but Jacob Vaark tells himself that as long as he is not directly involved in the slave trade there is no harm done (Grewal 191). He may treat the servants in his own home quite well, but he is willing to let go of his morals for the sake of profit when he is not immediately confronted by the consequences of his actions. His wife, Rebekka, also changes at the end of the novel. After Jacob's death and her own illness, she suddenly becomes very devout. She attends church and expects the servants on her farm to abide by the same religious rules as she does. Lina, for example, is not allowed to sleep under the stars anymore or regularly wash herself in the river like she is used to. Her punishments of Sorrow also become more severe and she plans to sell Florens, thus becoming an official slave trader.

One other example of the cruelties that are committed against slaves are the auctions and subsequent separations. Florens' mother Minha Mãe was sold at an auction, where she is bought by Senhor D'Ortega. Lina is also bought and sold as a slave, but not at an auction. Jacob Vaark finds her through an advertisement, the same way he later searches for his wife. Rebekka, in her turn, puts up posters to advertise her sale of Florens. Even though the advertisements may seem less traumatising, the slaves still have no say in their fates whatsoever and the text of the advertisements speak of the slaves as if they are cattle, which makes the process dehumanising too.

In *A Mercy* there are several elements of a slave's escape that Olney describes in his scheme. The most typical example is the escape of the indentured servants whom Florens meets when she travels by wagon to the blacksmith. The servants say they are sure their years of debt are over, but their masters have sent them north for more years of service. Florens

does not understand why they are complaining, since she feels everybody has to work anyway. The servants call her young and daft. The girl also does not comprehend that the man who is “scratching his ankle for a long time” is in fact trying to break free from the rope that chains all the servants to the wagon. When the driver stops for the night at a tavern the servants quietly slip away into the forest. A few days later Lina encounters them by the stream near the Vaark farm. She offers to get them some supplies, but all they ask is for her to forget she ever saw them. Thus, Lina becomes one of the people who help runaways that Olney describes.

Florens also leaves the wagon and has to make a choice: go north with the runaways or go west to the blacksmith on her own. Even though freedom is now a real option for the girl and the journey west is dangerous on her own in the freezing conditions, she decides to go to the blacksmith, because he is what she really desires. Florens’ journey resembles that of runaway slaves, but her path leads to the opposite: complete submission to slavery. She is frightened by the unknown environment and the lack of food. Still, along the road there are people who help her, just as many of the slaves were helped when they ran away to find freedom. First, she meets a group of Native American boys, who first laugh at her, but then give her some food out of pity. When she stays at Widow Ealing’s home she is not safe, but she is helped again, this time by the widow’s daughter, Jane. She manages to find the home of the blacksmith, but she does not find the warm welcome she expected there. She hoped to find a new life, but she returns to a life as a slave on the Vaark farm. Note that, again, she chooses to return to the Vaark farm and not to run away.

Sorrow’s journey does seem to lead to freedom. At the end of the narrative, Sorrow asks Florens to run away with her and the baby, since she knows that there is little future for the two slave girls at the farm, but Florens does not yet know what to do. In a way, Sorrow has already found a kind of freedom in the stability of motherhood. She has even changed her name from Sorrow to Complete, as did many slaves after finding freedom.

Olney also states that not every attempt to escape is successful. In *A Mercy*, Willard is said to have run away several times, but each time he is captured not all that far away in a state of drunkenness. It does seem, however, that Willard and Scully will one day become free, since Rebekka Vaark is now paying them for their service and they can save up the money to pay off their debts.

Although Florens reflects on slavery a couple of times in her narrative, she certainly does not do this in the same way that Olney describes in his scheme. He refers to the critique on slavery the authors of slave narratives had and the joys of freedom. The unusual opinion

Florens has about slavery will be discussed in the next section. There are other points from Olney's scheme that are not present either in *A Mercy*. Looking at the front and back matter of the novel, all points that Olney touches upon are missing. There is no portrait, no title page with a claim stating that the writer wrote the narrative by himself, no testimonials, no poetic epigraph, and no documentary material, although the title page does show an old map of America. In Florens' narrative the first sentence, which is usually "I was born ... place ... date of birth", is different from Olney's scheme. Neither does she give an account of her parentage. In fact, she hardly speaks about her life at the D'Ortega plantation at all and never seems to wonder about her origins, aside from the fact that her mother gave her up. There is also no account of an extraordinary slave who refuses to be whipped, although the blacksmith does hold a unique position in the early-American society which will also be discussed in the next section.

### 7.3 *A Mercy* as a neo-slave narrative.

Looking at the categories and characteristics of neo-slave narratives that Rushdy has outlined in his articles, it can be said that *A Mercy* is a neo-slave narrative. It is a historical novel which concerns itself with slavery in the New World and resembles the original slave narratives. Furthermore, it contains many elements that are often part of the neo-slave narrative genre.

One of the most common topics for neo-slave narratives is the element of romance and sexuality in the (female) slaves' lives, which could not be included in the original slave narratives, since it would undermine the idea of the loveless lives slaves were forced to lead. *A Mercy* does not hold a lot of romance, but loving connections are sought after by all the characters. There are two couples who, to some degree, find this loving connection. The first couple are Jacob and Rebecca Vaark, even though Rebecca arrives as little more than a servant with very little control over her own life. Their love, against all odds, grows so big that they retreat from the nearby community and live a secluded life at the farm. They are happy, or at least until the burden of having no offspring becomes too heavy for Jacob. When they are struck by the smallpox their seclusion turns out to have been a risk, since they now have no community to fall back upon (Downie 57).

The aspect of sexuality was not part of the traditional slave narrative genre. Florens' feelings for the blacksmith would definitely not have been included in the antebellum period. In the beginning their relationship is one of lust and they have numerous sexual encounters that they cannot keep hidden from the rest of the workers of the farm. Florens is soon

completely smitten by the young man and her narrative shows that she appears to lose herself in her love for him. This could not have been part of the antebellum slave narrative, because pro-slavery propaganda portrayed African Americans as lustful animals instead of human beings. Therefore the hormone driven feelings the teenager has would not have helped the abolitionists' cause.

Although the topic of sexuality in neo-slave narratives usually presents itself in women who take ownership of their sexuality, this is not always the case for the women in *A Mercy*. Minha Mãe is raped by her fellow slaves because they are charged with the task of breaking her in. The men apologise afterwards and Minha Mãe even claims to be okay with what happened because it gave her her children. But the threat of what the, apparently, perverted D'Ortega couple wish to do with Florens is enough to make the mother send her daughter away. Both Lina and Sorrow are sexually abused on a number of occasions, sometimes even by members and leaders of the religious community. By subtly describing the horror of sexual abuse Morrison not only portrays what happens but also condemns it (Babb 157). Furthermore, she gives more depth to (the consequences of) sexual abuse. In *A Mercy*, rape is used as a method to dominate women (Sagawa and Robbins 13), young girls can become victims of perverted (though never clarified) plans of owners, and even religious leaders are not exempt from forcing themselves upon defenceless women (Babb 157). Thus, she takes on a slightly different approach to rape than the original slave narratives.

As is common in many neo-slave narratives, some of the traumatized characters find comfort in stories and in elements of magical realism that they implement in their lives. Sorrow has created an imaginary friend, Twin, who often seems more real to her than the other people on the farm. Florens believes in a form of superstition when she reads signs she encounters in daily life as forebodings of future events. She often likes to listen to stories that Lina tells her, especially the one about the little eagles who are abandoned by their mother, because it gives her hope (Morrison 62). Lina has remembered these stories from when she used to listen to them as a child. She has also retained a strong belief in nature from her life among the Native Americans. This becomes most obvious during the bad times on the Vaark farm (Downie 57). When she looks back on Jacob's death after he had built his mansion she says that "killing trees in that number without asking their permission, of course his efforts would stir up malfortune" (Morrison 44). She also places pebbles under pillows for protection and sometimes speaks with birds. These natural rituals she performs have merged with European rites over time (Morrison 48). This assimilation of different religious rituals and traditions by Lina and the other characters is portrayed as a natural evolution of religion. It is

a development that resembles the evolution of culture, as different aspects of early American society were also merged. Although at a later stage this process was seen as threatening by white American society, Morrison shows that these different cultures and traditions are the basis of that same society (Babb 158), or can at least peacefully co-exist.

#### 7.4 *A Mercy* as a revisionist neo-slave narrative

As mentioned above, sexuality is a subject that the neo-slave narrative has changed. The revisionist neo-slave narrative has expanded that alteration. Aside from the couples that have been discussed in the previous chapter there is one more couple: Willard and Scully, the two indentured servants. Lina mentions that Scully “did not object to lying with Willard when sleep was not the point” (Morrison 58) and later in the narrative it is suggested that they would like to stay together after their indenture is paid off. Their homosexual relationship is an element of the novel which could certainly not have been part of the original slave narrative and, probably, the neo-slave narrative, but that can far more easily be included in the present day.

As said earlier, the characters in *A Mercy* are looking to find loving connections. According to Jimenez, all characters in *A Mercy* suffer from “motherlessness”, which is “a yearning for the lost kinship bonds of family” (2). Especially Florens, who feels abandoned by her mother, searches for someone by whom she can be loved and to whom she can devote her love. She thinks she has found that person in the blacksmith, but she is unable to keep his affection. Jacob yearns to have a family of his own, after he was disowned by his own relatives. When he realises he will not have any children with Rebekka, he becomes more focused on building a material legacy, of which the opulent mansion he builds is the best example (Jimenez 6). Lina looks for the safety she had when she was living among the Native Americans as a child. She feels she has someone to love again when Florens comes to the Vaark farm, but it soon turns out that Florens is not trusting enough to accept her as a surrogate mother. Rebekka would like to replace her English family with a new American family, but all her children pass away and she seems unable to build relationships with her servants that go beyond that of the master and the servant. Sorrow, finally, is desperate for a friend, but does not find one in reality so she creates an imaginary friend. The common pursuit of love of the people on the farm should bring them together, but instead they all try so hard that they push each other away.

It is clear that the characters’ search for love comes from traumas they have experienced in the past. Morrison especially focuses on the psychological damage that is

caused when people are separated by slavery (Wyatt 129), which is portrayed through the narrative of Florens. She misunderstands her mother's intentions when she is given to Jacob Vaark, which makes her feel unloved and unwanted. These emotions, combined with the lack of her mother's guidance, influence her capability to read other people's intentions as well as the underlying meaning of words (Wyatt 128-129). Florens' difficulty with words can also be seen in the language she uses to write her narrative: she has trouble conjugating verb tenses and her syntax is disjointed. According to Wyatt, this "would seem to reflect disturbances of her signifying capacities" (130). In other words, the trauma she has experienced has influenced her linguistic abilities. Aside from that, she sometimes sees visions of her mother who is trying to tell her something, but she can never understand what she is saying. It is very unlikely that she will ever meet her mother again, therefore she will never know what her mother is trying to tell her; which is that she abandoned her to protect her. Morrison has put *Minha Mãe's* narrative at the far end of the novel, where it is also physically removed from Florens' narrative and they cannot touch each other through their stories (Wyatt 128, 131). Morrison has portrayed the collective trauma of the African-American slaves and their descendants through the displacement Florens feels and the effects this has on her.

When she grows older, Florens replaces the love from her mother with the love she receives from the blacksmith, because "she associates him with the safety and refuge of the family and home that she lost when her mother abandoned her. Indeed, she sees his black skin [...] as proof of the authenticity of their connection" (Jimenez 3). The fact that she feels similar about her mother and the blacksmith is also the reason why she is so hostile towards Malaik. To her the boy is a rival, just like her little brother was when her mother sent her away (Jimenez 4). This sibling rivalry makes her attack Malaik "with violence that can be explained only through the temporarily displaced logic of trauma" (Wyatt 129). The same goes for her attack on the blacksmith. Every time Florens gets closer to the love she searches for, her traumatic past gets in the way and ruins it for her.

Morrison addresses a few other controversial and modern aspects of the early American slave trade in *A Mercy*. The elements of history that were previously left untold that are brought forward by authors of neo-slave narratives are sometimes facts that were used in favour of slavery before it was abolished. Similar to Lawrence Hill, Sharon Draper, and other authors of neo-slave narratives she shows that the African people were slave traders themselves. In the case of *Minha Mãe*, members of a rival tribe force her into slavery (Jennings 649). The pro-slavery lobby often pointed out that slavery was fairly common on the African continent. It has been proven by (more recent) studies that not only Christians and

Muslims, but also indigenous tribes took part in slavery (Alexander 44). Furthermore, many of the Africans that were captured and sold into slavery by Europeans were initially betrayed by their fellow Africans, either because they aided the white people who travelled inland or because they captured the to-be-slaves themselves. Although it is a part of history that many deem unfit to bring up again, speaking about them through media such as literature is necessary to overcome a cultural trauma and revise history.

Including African slave trade is not the only revisionist aspect that Morrison uses. There are more examples of actual historic facts that are now largely unknown. She makes up her novel of the perspectives of people who were often traditionally ignored: Lina, who is Native American; Rebekka, who is from the white lower-class of England; Willard and Scully, who are both white indentured servants; and Sorrow, whose ethnic origins and precise history are unknown altogether (Babb 149). By using these different and unknown perspectives she seems to try to draw attention to the part of American history that has been forgotten in its origins story (Babb 150), but that have been the subject of studies in recent years (Gustafson and Hutner 247). Morrison also seems to suggest “the need to acknowledge the existence and validity of stories in the margins” (Babb 159), by letting Florens, a traumatised slave girl, be the main character who writes her own narrative as a cure to her sorrow.

Another result of using these different perspectives is that Morrison is able to portray different kinds and sides of slavery. The sale of Florens to Jacob Vaark shows the different sides of slavery. The conventional side is the threat it poses, in this case for Florens who is in danger of being raped by D’Ortega. Two other sides of slavery that are not often mentioned in (neo-)slave narratives are that in this case it is also the solution – Minha Mãe sends her away to be a slave with a kinder man where she will be safer – and a barrier – the mother can never undo or rectify what she has done (Wyatt 132). There are also reasons for slave trade other than economic gain: Sorrow is sold because she is a burden and Florens is bought by Vaark out of kindness. This undermines the conventional image of slave trading (Cantiello 171)

The indentured servants also show a different kind of slavery. They were shipped from Europe to America, along with transported convicts, to work in the New World (Gustafson and Hutner 246-247). Indentured servants were not seen as slaves, but in reality were often just that. Willard and Scully, as well as the indentured servants who run away in the novel, are forced to work for periods that are far longer than the original contracts. The smallest mistakes result in added years that have to be paid off. Willard even experiences the heredity of slavery, since he has to serve out his mother’s contract.



Florens also shows that there is also a voluntary kind of slavery. To her work is an inherent aspect of life and she seems to be unappreciative or afraid of freedom.

To my left is a hill. High, very high. Climbing over it all, up up, are scarlet flowers I never see before. Everywhere choking on their own leaves. The scent is sweet. I put my hand in to gather a few blossoms. I hear something behind me and turn to see a stag moving up the rock side. He is great. And grand. Standing there between the beckoning wall of perfume and the stag I wonder what else the world may show me. It is as though I am loose to do what I choose, the stag, the wall of flowers. I am a little scared of this looseness. Is that how free feels? I don't like it. I don't want to be free of you because I am live only with you. (Morrison 69-70)

Throughout the novel she has several chances to gain freedom, but every time she chooses to remain a slave. It seems as if Florens is afraid of freedom. Perhaps it is because she feels safer when someone else takes care of her and in slavery she feels closest to the security that her mother once provided for her. Or perhaps she just loves the blacksmith more than her freedom. The blacksmith resents her for her voluntary enslavement to him and rejects her. After that she walks back to the Vaark farm barefoot, symbolising her acceptance of her slave state (Cantiello 171).

Rebekka is officially neither slave nor indentured servant, but is still shipped off by her father when he gets an offer that will take her off his hands. Her mother objects to the sale, not because she thinks it is wrong to practically sell your own daughter, but because her future son in law might be a heathen (Morrison 72). Rebekka knows this is her best option for a chance of a better life and thus it appears that she has little choice but to board the ship. Her passage to America is also very similar to that of *Minha Mãe*, an official slave. She has to stay in the damp and filthy belly of the ship with a group of other women, most of whom are prostitutes, for the entire journey. She is lucky to find a husband waiting who is kind to her, but she realises that it might well have been a far more unpleasant man. Even though she is not officially a slave, for at least a part of her life, she has no control over it.

The different kinds of slavery that Morrison writes about also show that American society in its early stages was a time when slavery as an institution was not yet fully formed. On the Vaark farm, both master and servants/slaves work side by side, because all their survival depends on it (Wyatt 129, Jennings 645). Slavery also did not yet have much to do with race. Florens describes the indentured boy on the wagon as having a "yellow pigtail"

instead of being “white”, thus pointing at his physical attributes instead of his racial status (Babb 151, Morrison 68). Sorrow is a slave in the novel, but her background and race are never even really defined by Morrison (Cantiello 169). Furthermore, there were already free African-American people, since the blacksmith is a free man. In fact, it seems that he has more ancestry than any other person in the novel and that his forefathers were also never enslaved (Morrison 68).

Other places, however, had already implemented the racial aspect into slavery at that time. Barbados, where *Minha Mãe* first arrives in the Americas, was one of the first places where this happened (Cantiello 172). It is where she learns that her heritage does not mean anything to the traders and that she is only “negrita” (Morrison 165). Cantiello describes how Barbados exerted one of the strongest influences on the way slavery developed in North America (173). The process of legalising slavery was gradual, starting in 1640, when perpetual enslavement was handed down as a punishment for an African-American person, which set a precedent for other cases (Jennings 648). Morrison mentions Bacon’s Rebellion in *A Mercy*, a historic rebellion from 1676: “Half a dozen years ago an army of blacks, natives, whites, mulattoes – freedmen, slaves, and indentured – had waged war against local gentry.” (10). This event resulted in laws that gave white people, even if they were poor, power over poor black people, thus marking the beginning of “the institutionalization of racial hierarchy” (Cantiello 169). This gradual process is a corruption of a culture that is based on economic values and “undermines the human value of all races, classes, genders, and sexualities” (Babb 148). By implementing that corruption in her novel on different levels, for example through the story of *Minha Mãe*, Jacob Vaark, and the indentured servants, Morrison shows that early America was not yet a place where race determined your status.

*A Mercy* was published in 2008, when Barack Obama was still running for President of the United States. Given that it dealt with the pre-racial era of 17<sup>th</sup> century America and had multiracial characters, the novel was often compared to the possible post-racial era of the present day. Reviewers certainly seemed to assume that there was no other way to read *A Mercy* but by linking it to the present (Cantiello 166 – 167). Nevertheless, most of those reviewers still felt the need to administer a racial clarification, for example when they were talking about Willard and Scully as ‘white’ slaves, which suggests that people still automatically assume a slave to be black (Cantiello 171). The reviews of *A Mercy* therefore seem to show that the present day is still a time where race is an important signifier, at least for readers and reviewers (Cantiello 176).

## Chapter 8: Conclusion

The present thesis analyzed five revisionist neo-slave narratives. The thesis started by considering the extent to which the authors have followed and/or deviated from the conventions of the original slave narrative genre and to what purpose. An outline of the characteristics of the neo-slave narrative genre present in the novels followed. Finally, the writers' diversions from that genre were researched in order to determine what their revisionist purpose was for the genre. These analyses can now be compared and combined to provide an answer to the research question: How, and to what extent, have the authors of the post-millennium neo-slave narrative genre in North America continued and/or expanded on the revisionist purposes of the neo-slave narrative genre of the Civil Rights Period?

Considering the comparison with the original slave narrative genre, it becomes apparent that all five contain the characteristics of Olney's outline. However, some elements were largely discarded. This is notably the case for the elaborate extra material, such as testimonials or illustrations, which the authors of the antebellum slave narratives incorporated. This exclusion is likely due to the circumstance that it is no longer necessary to persuade the reader of the author's credibility, education, and honesty. Nonetheless, the majority of the conventions that Olney mentions are present in most of the five novels and the most prominent ones will be briefly recapitulated here.

One convention is the adoption of a new name after a slave gained freedom. The postmillennial authors seem keen to use this element, not only to describe to the contemporary audience how important a name is for people who had to struggle to find their own identity, but also because it is still an effective symbol for a fresh start.

Other elements of Olney's outline have been expanded, such as the description of a slave auction where families were torn apart. In the revisionist neo-slave narratives, the authors still attempt to impress on the readers the impact that being separated from loved ones has, though this is not always placed against the background of a slave auction. Some writers return to the African villages from where the slaves were abducted while others simply describe the sale of African-American people between slave owners. Furthermore, the effects of these separations are more strongly highlighted than in the original accounts and contemporary authors have tried to let the reader experience more deeply what it must have been like for the slaves to lose their family and homes. Aminata in *The Book of Negroes*, for example, still longs for her African village, even when she is old and has grown used to Western life. And Florens in *A Mercy* is unable to properly use language or adequately

function on a social level, because she is traumatised after her mother has abandoned her. Their experience is closely connected to the element of the vague familial history in Olney's outline, such as Lina in *A Mercy* and Stamford in *The Known World*, who wonder about who their family members were, since they have few memories left of them. Connecting these characters is their suffering from what Jimenez has called "motherlessness," or the "yearning for the lost kinship bonds of family" (2), which has caused feelings of natal and national displacement amongst slaves and their descendants. By depicting this trauma of displacement in the revisionist neo-slave narratives the contemporary authors try to acknowledge and explain the far-reaching effects that separation, loneliness and lack of kin in slavery had and might still have, aside from the physical pains they had to endure.

As with the feeling of displacement, the authors of revisionist neo-slave narratives have also changed the portrayal of cruel masters and their horrible treatment of slaves. It appears that the revisionist neo-slave narrative authors no longer restrict themselves to the depiction of cruel acts of whippings and rape. Instead, they have come up with new ways to showcase the inhumane acts of barbarity a master (or another person in a position of power) inflicted on slaves. Examples are eating a man's freepapers (*The Known World*); using a child as bait in an alligator hunt (*Copper Sun*); and letting a slave burn herself when the master is physically incapable of administering the punishment (*Slave Moth*). The authors may have had to invent new types of cruelty, because the contemporary reader has grown accustomed to stories of slaves who are whipped and raped in a culture that has grown accustomed to violence. The invention of new cruelties has a greater potential of shocking readers and reminding them of the slaves' powerlessness. Taking that into account, the contemporary authors, nevertheless, seem to pay less attention to the physical details of the heinous acts that are committed, but focus more on the emotional effect on slaves in order to condemn these atrocities. By exceeding the physical aspects, the authors amplify the slaves' humanity, making the acts even more despicable to the audience (Yorke). Occasionally, authors forego violence altogether, but still stress that just owning a human being is harmful (Pereira 143).

Olney singles out literacy as another important element of the original slave narrative, because it gave slaves access to texts about abolition, through which they formed a new identity and found the means to become free. On the one hand this process of learning to read and write is less prominent in the (revisionist) neo-slave narrative genre; often the struggle to become literate is not as difficult as it was in the original slave narratives and some slaves who find freedom never become literate at all (*The Known World*). Sometimes learning to read and write has simply been replaced by learning a new language (*Copper Sun*, *The Book*

of *Negroes*). In the contemporary neo-slave narratives, reading seems less important in the creation of a slave's new identity: only one of the five novels that have been discussed in this thesis includes a slave who is aided by literature (*Slave Moth*), and she does not even have to read secretly. This does not mean that literacy is not important in the revisionist neo-slave narrative; it has just been given another form. It appears that it is no longer reading about other (ex-)slaves that forms a new identity, but writing down one's own life story and teaching other slaves to read and write. Writing is a tool through which slaves become conscious of their situation. Consequently, slaves are able to create an identity that gives them the desire and means to find freedom. This may have been done because the difficult process of becoming literate seems outlandish to contemporary readers, since most people have easy access to education. Being aware of a person's situation and trying to improve the conditions someone lives in, however, is something that is still familiar to people today. Thus the authors of the revisionist neo-slave narratives focus on the transformation from slave to free person.

The novels that have been analysed all contain the major elements that belong to the neo-slave narrative genre. The first of these characteristics is the I-perspective, which is also used in the original slave narratives. Of the five narratives that were analysed in this thesis, three applied that perspective (*Slave Moth*, *The Book of Negroes*, *A Mercy*). It should be noted that the authors that diverted from the first person perspective have both chosen a narrative that highlighted multiple characters and included the perspective of a third-person, who is often omniscient. *A Mercy* is a unique narrative in the sense that it includes two narratives that are told in the I-perspective (Florens's and her mother's) and an omniscient narrator who unfolds the stories of the other characters.

The contemporary authors may have had different reasons for choosing a specific perspective. The I-perspective gives the narrative a genuine feel, since it resembles the original format of the slave narrative genre. Furthermore, it enhances the reader's connection to the/identification with the protagonist, because theirs is the only perspective through which the story is told. On the other hand, authors may have used multiple characters and the third-person (omniscient) narrator because it is a convenient method to convey more ideas and opinions to the reader. In *Copper Sun* and *A Mercy*, the use of multiple perspectives gives the author a chance to show the reader different kinds of servitude and slavery, for example by including the stories of indentured servants. Similarly, the third-person narrator in *The Known World* leads to a more complex understanding of an issue that has sparked controversy, namely the presence of an African-American slaveholder as one of the main characters. Telling Henry's story from his perspective as well as from the perspective of other characters,

such as his parent, complicates our assessment of slaveholders. Another reason for contemporary authors to use a third-person omniscient narrator is its association with a reliable narrative. Ultimately, it appears that the authors' choice of perspective was directed at making the readers more susceptible to revising their perceptions about history.

Other stylistic aspects of the five neo-slave narratives have also contributed to the revisionism of the neo-slave narrative. *Slave Moth* is written completely in verse, almost in a stream-of-consciousness voice, making it more challenging to read, but at the same time making it impossible for the reader not to commit to the story and get involved with the character. Other authors use poetry to this purpose, but only in the form of short poems or quotes that highlight a theme in the novel. The use of the vernacular in all five novels can be seen as a method to give the neo-slave narrative a more genuine touch (Bell, *Contemporary* 195). Incorporating vernacular is a way for authors to distinguish the slaves from the white people, since each group had their own language. Furthermore, if a slave was capable of speaking 'proper English' like the white Americans, it was a sign of his or her educational and social advancement. In many ways, that is still the case in modern society, which makes the narrative more recognisable and perhaps even more relevant.

Many authors of (revisionist) neo-slave narratives use stories that were told amongst the slaves. Lina tells stories she remembers from her years among her Native American tribe in *A Mercy*, Amari tells the stories her parents had once taught her in *Copper Sun*, and Aminata's dream for her future in *The Book of Negroes* is to become a djeli, a storyteller, in order to let people know what befell her when she was captured and taken from her homeland. These stories are a way to pass on the legacies of the characters' family and therefore are an integral part of slaves' traditions. Furthermore, they lift the spirits of the characters and give them hope. For the contemporary authors, they are also a way to convey aspects of the slave cultures that existed in the antebellum period. While these stories usually did not obtain a place in the original slave narratives to reflect an authentic element in African-American slave culture, because they had no added value for the abolitionists' goals, they can be used in the (revisionist) neo-slave narratives.

The same holds true for the magical realism that features in *The Known World*, *Slave Moth*, and *A Mercy*. These elements were not present in the original slave narratives, but are often given a place in the (revisionist) neo-slave narrative genre. The spiritual part of slave culture was mostly a combination of traditions from different cultures. It was often heavily influenced by the white, Christian traditions, because those were dominant and provided a link between different cultures. White, Christian traditions were also used to cover up

elements of ethnic traditions in order to keep their practice alive. Lina's Native-American habits in *A Mercy* are a strong example of this and show that slaves tried, and often succeeded, to keep certain parts of culture by making concessions (Nunes 136). Thus, the spiritual part not only shows the strength of slave-cultures, but also their resourcefulness.

Implementing elements from slave culture such as vernacular, poetry, songs, spiritual traditions, and stories in the novels also reminds the reader of the fact that the slave community had its own culture. It may have been influenced by the white culture of their masters, but slaves were able to create a separate cultural identity despite the hardships they had to endure. In fact, they were partly able to endure these hardships thanks to their separate cultural resources that contributed to their resilience. By using these cultural elements in the neo-slave narratives, the authors cannot only preserve a part of that culture, but also honour it and finally give it the recognition it deserves.

Gender is something that seems to play a minor role now in comparison to the neo-slave narratives that were written during the Civil Rights Movement. In the original slave narratives, the protagonist was usually male, but most of the neo-slave narratives that were used in this thesis are written from a female perspective. *The Known World* is the only novel that has a male protagonist, but it should be noted that, at the same time, it contains many strong, female characters. It does not seem to matter what the gender the contemporary neo-slave narrative author is, for both male and female writers use the perspectives of the other sex through their characters.

The women that feature in the neo-slave narratives are strong characters, who manage to find freedom (Walker, Alice. Qtd. in Levecq "Black Women Writers" 138). Some, such as Amari in *Copper Sun* and Sorrow in *A Mercy*, do this via the traditional female phases to freedom: family – identity – freedom. Other female characters, such as Aminata in *The Book of Negroes* and Varl in *Slave Moth*, find their freedom through the three phases that are traditionally male: literacy – identity – freedom. It seems that with the increase of strong female characters in the revisionist neo-slave narrative genre, the borders between the male and female phases to freedom are starting to fade. Surely, this is linked to the fact that the distinction between men and women has become less pronounced when it comes to education in the Western world in the modern time.

On the other hand, it could be argued that gender plays indeed a significant role, since the women who feature in the revisionist neo-slave narratives serve as role models for the readers of the genre. Their strength in trying times can be an inspiration for a contemporary audience, especially those who descended from slaves. Caldonia Townsend and Fern Elston

in *The Known World*, for example, manage to defy the stereotype of the white, male slave owner, by becoming successful African-American slave owners and running a plantation. By changing people's view of the female stereotypes that are linked to slavery, the contemporary neo-slave narrative authors try to change people's gender-related view of history and remind them of women's worth and strength.

Another gender-related topic which these authors use to rewrite history is the implementation of romance. Writers of the original slave narratives could not include this issue, because it would have devalued their message that slavery kept human beings from forming emotional bonds (Robinson 54). This is, of course, historically incorrect. It could indeed be very difficult to maintain relationships through the boundaries of slavery, since there was always the possibility that someone would be sold off or that an emotional bond would be used against you, but the slaves proved to be resilient and were able to find love (and friendship) despite their circumstances. This is clearly shown in each (revisionist) neo-slave narrative: all novels contain multiple examples of slaves or indentured servants who form loving connections. By having characters experience love and romance, the authors of revisionist neo-slave narratives can, as it were, 'correct' the historical literary conventions of the original slave-narrative and fill a historical oversight.

The revisionist neo-slave narrative genre is also able to expand these relationships beyond traditional love. The novels include, for example, examples of teenage love: Aminata and Chekura in *The Book of Negroes* meet when they are very young, but they remain loyal to each other even though slavery repeatedly separates them for more than a decade without a single word from one another. Other teenagers who experience love are Varl (*Slave Moth*) and Florens (*A Mercy*). Varl's teenage love affair with Dob is innocent, whereas Florens' affair with the blacksmith is passionate and sexual. These different relations showing teenage stories and love affairs are now generally accepted within the revisionist neo-slave narrative genre, whereas it was not common in the neo-slave narratives that were written at the time of the Civil Rights Movement.

Homosexual love, for example between Willard and Scully (*A Mercy*), is also addressed and accepted in the revisionist neo-slave narrative genre, which is most likely possible because homosexuality has become more accepted in the Western world in the past decades. This shows that the revisionist neo-slave narrative genre is now capable of not just reflecting on the original slave narrative genre, but perhaps also of implementing generally accepted issues of modern society and thereby expanding the genre. They are thereby



rectifying / filling in another historical oversight while at the same time infusing the novels with a contemporary sensitivity.

Finally, non-traditional love relationships extend to the transcendence of social boundaries, as in the case of relationships between slaves and their masters as well as in interracial couples. In the traditional slave narrative, masters would have relations with their slaves, but not very often in the form of genuine romances. This is still the case for Caldonia Townsend (*The Known World*), whose relationship with a slave she owns is purely based on lust, although the bond is unconventional insofar as it features a sexual relationship between a slave and an African-American slave-holder. Genuine romances include Varl (*A Mercy*), who confesses to be in love with her master, Peter Perry, and both Mrs. Derby (*Copper Sun*) and William Robbins (*The Known World*) have their most important romance with slaves they own. It should be noted that gender plays a role in these relationships: both Varl and Mrs. Derby are restricted from fully exploring their feelings, whilst Robbins is able to free his true love and build some kind of family life.

The revision of the original slave narrative through the inclusion of romances makes the stories more appealing to the modern day reader. It also has the effect of providing a kinder and more hopeful tone throughout the stories. Chiefly, however, these relationships, in all shapes and sizes, help to rewrite history. They contribute to slowly erasing the historical image of both the lonely and the lustful slave in addition to humanizing the slaves in the books. The authors highlight the slaves' resilience and ability to find love across the boundaries imposed by slavery and other cultural obstacles, instead of highlighting their victimization.

The inclusion of romances is closely linked to the final topic in neo-slave narratives that is related to gender: sexuality. In the antebellum slave narratives sex was only mentioned in connection to rape. In the (revisionist) neo-slave narratives the authors have the chance to let their characters have voluntary sex for love or even lust. Especially the latter reason could not be mentioned in the original slave narratives, because African Americans were already portrayed by anti-abolitionists as lustful creatures with animalistic desires. However, in the neo-slave narratives discussed in this thesis, there are many examples of sexual relations that are enjoyed by all who are involved. As was mentioned above, the genre is even open to homosexual (*A Mercy*) and interracial sexual experiences (*Copper Sun*, *The Known World*). In this day and age, when sexuality has become rather mainstream and where unconventional sexual experiences are also becoming more and more accepted, it is to be expected that the authors of the revisionist neo-slave narrative genre decided it was time to address this topic in

their novels. In addition to different standards of openness in the discourse of sexuality, it would have been a risk to address sexuality during the Civil Rights period due to the danger of diverting attention from the issue of civil rights. Part of the motivation for authors to include romances might just be that it makes the story more interesting, thus, again, implementing elements of modern day culture and further humanizing the slaves. Furthermore, it reminds the reader to have an open mind, not just about this, but about other issues as well.

With regards to the topic of sex, it is not just the act in itself, but also the issue of sexual agency that is important. There are several women in the revisionist neo-slave narrative novel who are very much in control of their sexuality (Vint 244). Not always just by choosing the men they wish to sleep with, like Florens (*A Mercy*) and Caldonia Townsend (*The Known World*), but also by deciding for themselves whether or not they want to have the child of the men who raped them, like Aminata (*The Book of Negroes*) and Amari (*Copper Sun*). By making these decisions these women are clearly in power. Their characters not only revise the image of the antebellum female slave who had nothing to say about her own sexuality, but also serve as an example for contemporary readers. In the cases of rape portrayals, it should be noted that the writers acknowledge that sexual abuse was a means of domination over another human being. Minha Mãe's experience in *A Mercy* when she is 'broken in' provides such an example of domination. Once more, this can be seen as a modern day view, only being accepted in the past couple of decades, that authors of the revisionist neo-slave narrative genre are implementing in the historic novels.

Another characteristic of the revisionist neo-slave narrative is that it addresses unpopular topics. One of these topics is the fact that there were other forms of slavery aside from the traditional form. The indentured servant, for example, was not given much attention before the year 2000, because both for the abolitionist and the activists of the Civil Rights Movement discussing the fate of the indentured servant did not further their cause or might have even harmed their cause by diverting attention. Their existence has been pushed to the background, even though, as can be seen in *Copper Sun* and *A Mercy*, their lives were not much better than those of the slaves. Likewise, the wives of slave holders did not always lead an easy, insouciant life. They could be 'bought' (*A Mercy*), tossed aside (*The Known World*, *Slave Moth*), and treated with extreme cruelty (*Copper Sun*) just as easily as slaves might have been. So even though it may appear that their lives were idyllic, their lack of control would have been traumatising for them as well. By writing about these groups, the authors

show that suffering can take many different forms and that people need to look more closely to uncover a possible trauma.

Another forgotten issue that revisionist writers, and particularly Lawrence Hill, have tried to bring forth is that the Northern States and Canada were not always the safe havens that people long thought they had been (Krampe). Once a slave had escaped, his or her owner could decide to have people try to hunt them down. These hunters would not shy away from following the slaves well into abolitionist areas, even as far as Canada. In fact, Canada also harboured slaves and slaveholders, as well as thousands of indentured servants. Even the areas where slaves were allowed to build communities, such as Birchtown in *The Book of Negroes*, were often dangerous places for African Americans. By writing about this subject, painful as it may be for Canadians, Hill has shown that it is easy to be misled by history as he puts one a historical blind spot back in the spotlight. It is an important goal for the writers of revisionist neo-slave narratives to make people aware of forgotten parts of history, so that the story of these unfortunate people will not repeat themselves. It is still important to speak about the truth, because without it there can be no hope of coming to terms with a traumatic past.

That also applies to the topic of African-American slaveholders (Bassard). It is a part of the past that many have tried to forget and that is regarded as extremely painful. Still, in the present day, neo-slave narrative genre writers feel that it is now time to come to terms with this part of history as well, either by speaking of Africans who participated in the slave trade (*The Book of Negroes*, *Copper Sun*, *A Mercy*) or by mentioning free African Americans who owned slaves (*The Known World*, *Slave Moth*). Thus, it seems as if there is a collective idea that it is impossible to overcome traumas unless people learn to accept the entire story of their pasts. Especially the fact that there was slavery in Africa is a view that can be found in present day discussions on the topic of slavery. Even though it may complicate a current discussion, these facts bring shades of grey to an earlier apparently black-and-white discussion on slavery. Slaveholders were not always white monsters and slaves were not always powerless African American victims. Aside from stirring up a discussion on the subject, showing these forgotten elements of history may make readers realise that they should be careful in placing the blame. Accepting the past as it is might help people overcome any traumas from the past.

All the above-mentioned issues that revisionist neo-slave narratives have expanded on force the audience to broaden their mind. There is one more element of the revisionist neo-slave narrative that contributes to the same effect. Traditional slave narratives would typically end with the slave finding freedom. The revisionist neo-slave narratives that have been discussed have that same outcome in the end, but the authors each have their characters find

different forms of freedom. Varl (*Slave Moth*), for example, finds mental freedom by deciding to love Dob instead of her master, Mr. Perry. Amari (*Copper Sun*) does not find true freedom until she accepts the baby that she conceived through rape. Aminata (*The Book of Negroes*) finds physical freedom by helping others, but only manages to find peace when she lets go of her dream of finding her old home. Henry (*The Known World*) seems unperturbed by the notion of freedom altogether and Florens (*A Mercy*) even fears it. The authors have tried to remind the reader that freedom is a concept that is different for every individual, but that it is a vital element for everyone in their quest for happiness.

After looking at these five neo-slave narratives, it seems that there is one aspect of the genre that still makes it particularly relevant and important: it gives people the chance to come to terms with the traumatic past of slavery, which has not yet been sufficiently dealt with. Whether the genre addresses the elements of antebellum slave narratives that can now, finally, be altered to more closely resemble actual history, or whether it keeps confronting us with painful parts of the past that many would rather forget; there are things that need to be spoken of before they can be put to rest. During the Civil Rights Movement, the neo-slave narrative genre was used to further a specific cause. The contemporary revisionist neo-slave narrative does the same thing, but now the cause is helping people accept the past by revising history and providing more accurate accounts. Sometimes the authors of neo-slave narratives even implement contemporary cultural notions in their narratives to help that cause. But until the task of revising history has been completed, the genre will most likely remain popular amongst North American authors.

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## Appendix I.

Olney's "Master Plan for Slave Narratives".

Taken from:

Olney, James. "'I Was Born': Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature." *The Slave's Narrative*. Eds. Charles T. Davis, Henry Louis Gates Jr. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1985. 114-156. Print.

"The conventions for slave narratives were so early and so firmly established that one can imagine a sort of master outline drawn from the great narratives and guiding the lesser ones. Such an outline would look something like this:

- A. An engraved portrait, signed by the narrator.
- B. A title page that includes the claim, as an integral part of the title, "Written by Himself" (or some close variant: "Written from a statement of Facts Made by Himself"; or "Written by a Friend, as Related to Him by Brother Jones"; etc.).
- C. A handful of testimonials and/or one or more prefaces or introductions written either by a white abolitionist friend of the narrator (William Lloyd Garrison, Wendell Phillips) or by a white amanuensis/editor/author actually responsible for the text (John Greenleaf Whittier, David Wilson, Louis Alexis Chamerovzow), in the course of which preface the reader is told that the narrative is a "plain, unvarnished tale" and that naught "has been set down in malice, nothing exaggerated, nothing drawn from the imagination" – indeed, the tale, it is claimed, understates the horrors of slavery.
- D. A poetic epigraph, by preference from William Cowper.
- E.
  1. a first sentence beginning, "I was born ...," then specifying a place but not a date of birth;
  2. a sketchy account of parentage, often involving a white father;
  3. description of a cruel master, mistress, or overseer, details of first observed whipping and numerous subsequent whippings, with women very frequently the victims;
  4. an account of one extraordinarily strong, hardworking slave – often "pure African" – who, because there is no reason for it, refuses to be whipped;
  5. record of the barriers raised against slave literacy and the overwhelming difficulties encountered in learning to read and write;

6. description of a “Christian” slaveholder (often of one such dying in terror) and the accompanying claim that “Christian” slaveholders are invariably worse than those professing no religion;
  7. description of the amounts and kinds of food and clothing given to slaves, the work required of them, the pattern of a day, a week, a year;
  8. account of a slave auction, of families being separated and destroyed, of distraught mothers clinging to their children as they are torn from them, of slave coffles being driven South;
  9. description of patrols, of failed attempt(s) to escape, of pursuit by men and dogs;
  10. description of successful attempt(s) to escape, lying by during the day, travelling by night guided by the North Star, reception in a free state by Quakers who offer a lavish breakfast and much genial thee/thou conversation;
  11. taking of a new last name (frequently one suggested by a white abolitionist) to accord with new social identity as a free man, but retention of first name as a mark of continuity of individual identity;
  12. reflections on slavery.
- F. An appendix or appendices composed of documentary material – bills of sale, details of purchase from slavery, newspaper items –, further reflections on slavery, sermons, anti-slavery speeches, poems, appeals to the reader for funds and moral support in the battle against slavery.”

## Abstract

During the period of the Abolitionist Movement the original slave narratives were highly similar, because they all followed a specific outline. During the Civil Rights Movement, authors of the neo-slave narratives had the chance to let go of that outline and incorporate issues that the earlier writers could not, such as romance amongst slaves. Although the issues of those times (Abolitionism, Civil Rights) have now become less demanding, the genre is still popular amongst contemporary writers. How, and to what extent, have the authors of the post-millennium neo-slave narrative genre in North America continued and/or expanded on the revisionist purposes of the neo-slave narrative genre of the Civil Rights Period?

The post-millennium neo-slave narratives breach topics that have been neglected, such as African (-American) slaveholders, indentured servants, and Canada as a country that was not as much of a safe haven as people think it was. Even though it is painful for some, these issues need to be addressed, so that oversights in history can be mended and people might get a chance to come to terms with the traumatic past of slavery.