

2012

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Recommended Citation

Olausen, Maria, Africa's Indian Ocean in Yvette Christiansë's "Unconfessed", *Kunapipi*, 34(1), 2012.
Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol34/iss1/11>

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Abstract

Yvette Christianë's novel *Unconfessed* approaches the history of slavery at the Cape through the story of Sila, a slave woman incarcerated on Robben Island for the murder of her son Baro. The author's note at the end of the novel places the narrative within a context of the colonial archive in the form of court records which contain the information that Sila was sentenced to death in 1823 but discovered in a Cape Town gaol by the Superintendent of Police for the Cape Colony in 1825. She was subsequently moved to Robben Island and, through the intervention of the Superintendent, granted a full pardon.

MARIA OLAUSSEN

Africa's Indian Ocean in Yvette Christiansë's *Unconfessed*

Yvette Christianë's novel *Unconfessed* approaches the history of slavery at the Cape through the story of Sila, a slave woman incarcerated on Robben Island for the murder of her son Baro. The author's note at the end of the novel places the narrative within a context of the colonial archive in the form of court records which contain the information that Sila was sentenced to death in 1823 but discovered in a Cape Town gaol by the Superintendent of Police for the Cape Colony in 1825. She was subsequently moved to Robben Island and, through the intervention of the Superintendent, granted a full pardon.

Christiansë describes her encounter with Sila's story as an 'accidental and uncanny encounter,' as being 'haunted by a powerful trace of this woman's "voice"' but she goes on to add: 'Or, perhaps as is really the case — that the living long for the dead — I came to haunt her' (*Unconfessed*, A Reader's Guide¹). What Christiansë here refers to as a trace of a 'voice,' the utterance which pulled her to the story, consists of one single word in the public record which is believed to have been uttered by the accused, the Dutch word *hertseer*.

What pulled me? It was that trace, the word that all the official documents seemed unable to resist — that single Dutch word, *hertseer*, which the English translated directly into 'heartsore.' Not 'grieving' or 'griefstruck,' but this forceful, corporeal, 'heartsore.' I believe it to be the one real word she uttered when the prosecutor outlined and demanded that she confirm her act. She uttered one phrase, 'Yes, because I was heartsore.' Frustrated, he asks again, 'Is it true, that on the night of...' The record shows just that one word as her response. (*Unconfessed*, A Reader's Guide n.p.)

The significance of this utterance, framed as an author's discovery, lies in its potential to disclose an alternative history of the settlement of the Cape. In contrast to the dominant narrative of European conquest, this history gestures towards Africa's Indian Ocean connections and it contains traces of a different kind of transnational movement than the one determined by a Europe-Africa dichotomy.

Unconfessed tells the story of a woman, born in Mozambique, who is enslaved and brought to the Cape as a young girl. There she passed into the hands of different slave-owners and later was sold specifically for her child-bearing capacity. She struggles to gain freedom for herself and her children but she ends up in an increasingly violent and oppressive situation where she kills one of her sons, Baro. She is sentenced to death but remains in prison where she is forced to perform sexual services, until she is discovered by the superintendent of police and

moved to Robben Island to serve a prison sentence instead of the death sentence. Here she is approached by a minister's wife who urges her to confess the crime of *kindermoord* [infanticide] and convert to Christianity. Sila refuses to confess and it is this act of refusal which determines the title and the narrative structure of the novel.

While *Unconfessed* opens in the prison in Cape Town with the efforts by the prison authorities to explain Sila's situation to the newly appointed Superintendent of Police, the novel consists mainly of Sila's memories, which often take the form of an address to her dead son Baro, whom she imagines approaching her during weekly visits to Robben Island. These memories are represented in circling movements which draw closer and closer toward the death of Baro. As Meg Samuelson shows in her reading of the novel, 'Christiansë undertakes a double conjuring act in her novel, *Unconfessed*: she both salvages the slave woman Sila from her sentencing in the colonial archive, and then allows her to summon back the son that she had killed' (Samuelson 2008 41).

In this reading of *Unconfessed* I want to focus on instances where Sila articulates the possibilities for a life of freedom for herself and her children and I argue that these instances are inspired by the forms of assimilation and settlement that took place in communities across the Indian Ocean rim. The narrative is, however, determined by a different historical context, one in which slavery at the Cape was only a starting point for colonialism and racial segregation. *Unconfessed* tells the story of how Indian Ocean transnational movement developed into a history of global settlement based on the racial dichotomy of the Atlantic Ocean.

Slavery at the Cape was an integral part of the first settler societies, when employees of the Dutch East India Company brought slaves to the Cape as part of their households. As historians of Indian Ocean slavery have pointed out, European traders were latecomers to the networks of trade across the Indian Ocean and they adopted both the navigational expertise and the social structures of the societies that they encountered. Slavery as it later came to be practised at the Cape between 1652 and 1838² evolved out of the highly complex and historically varied forms of human bondage developed over thousands of years across the societies of the Indian Ocean rim.³ Slaves were brought to the Cape from 1652 to 1808. In the early years slaves came primarily from the Eastern possessions of the Dutch East India Company but with the first British occupation of the Cape in 1795 until the banning of the slave trade in 1808, most slaves were brought from Mozambique and other parts of the east coast of Africa (Shell 1994; Machado 2004).

In comments on slavery by European travellers to the Cape in the 1790s, during the first British occupation, there is a particular interest in the lack of a clear distinction in physical appearance between the Dutch settlers and their slaves (Barnard, Barrow, Sparrmann) within their descriptions of Dutch settler society as backward, inefficient, patriarchal and cruel. The ideals of progress and enlightenment through individual freedom and law and order are here clearly directed at a competing system of power and authority represented by the Dutch,

not as another European power, but as a manifestation of an Indian Ocean heritage about to be displaced. The movement from the position of slave or other dependant to that of a slave-owning settler and vice versa, which characterised Indian Ocean societies and which was practised at the Cape through a variety of complex systems ranging from marriage to concubinage and sexual abuse of female slaves, gained an entirely new meaning through the introduction of racial taxonomies and the idea of miscegenation. The geographical, social and reproductive movement of people for thousands of years was suddenly described in terms of shame and degeneration with clear cut distinctions between the movements of the Europeans as settlers and the Africans as slaves. This process of racial determination was articulated alongside ideas of individual human freedom and both were seen to represent superior European ideals from which the Dutch settlers, interestingly enough, were excluded.

A re-orientation of the historical perspective on slavery at the Cape towards the Indian Ocean World would take into consideration the fact that the slave routes across the Indian Ocean 'along with those across the Sahara, were of far greater antiquity than those across the Atlantic, and the total number of African slaves transported across the Indian Ocean and Sahara probably exceeded that carried across the Atlantic' (Allen 36–37). This shift of focus would also, as Gwyn Campbell argues, change our view of the historical and global role of Africa and challenge 'conventional views of who constitutes an "African" [away from] "essentialist"' and 'ahistorical concepts of ethnic, linguistic and cultural "purity"' (Campbell 2010 174).

In its articulation of these shifting paradigms from the Atlantic world to the world of the Indian Ocean,⁴ *Unconfessed* calls into question the reliability of the colonial authorities' documentation and creates a protagonist whose only strategy is a refusal to play the role assigned to her in the construction of the written records surrounding the case: she refuses to be reduced to a slave and criminal. A significant aspect of this refusal concerns Sila's opposition to the tropes and figures of death and resurrection, legitimacy and heritage, informed by a Eurocentric tradition of Christianity which determines the position of her and her children as outsiders. The story evolves instead through the trope of haunting, creating a disconnection to the colonial archive but also, through the presence of the dead son, Baro, a different trajectory into the future. It is within the story that Sila offers to Baro that the traces of Africa's Indian Ocean connections can be found.

Through its literary exploration of archival material on slavery, Christiansen's novel shows similarities with Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* (1987). The story of infanticide, present as historical events only through court records, is in both novels evoked through the experiences of the slave woman having to come to terms with the past. In both novels the dead children are present in the narratives, although the character *Beloved* takes on a much more tangible presence than the dead son Baro in *Unconfessed*, and both authors thereby disregard perceived

ideas of truth in realist fiction in favour of the version of events experienced by the mothers. Both narratives are formed through the relation between mother and child and, in different ways, as stories of failed confessions. In *Beloved*, Sethe tries to explain her actions to her daughter, who becomes increasingly demanding and violent, refusing to understand or forgive her mother's action, while in *Unconfessed*, as the title suggests, the protagonist refuses to participate in both legal and religious acts of confession but instead explains her actions to her dead son and in this way changes the context and the terms of the act of confession and absolution. Another point of similarity between *Beloved* and *Unconfessed* is their setting in a time leading up to the abolition of slavery and the function of abolitionist discourse in the novels.

What the evocation of *Beloved* suggests, however, is that present day expressions of the Indian Ocean history of slavery find themselves in a complex relationship with the dominant Atlantic paradigm through which issues of slavery and freedom in transnational encounters have been most often represented. *Unconfessed* is not so much concerned with the colonial archive as a source of information about the slave as it is a narrative of the processes of enslavement. In this respect Sila's story points to a different historical and geographical context than that of *Beloved*, and, to the difficulties of representing the history of slavery and freedom, it also points to the problems inherent in finding expressions for Africa's Indian Ocean connections. *Unconfessed* focuses on the future rather than the past and it is through a concern for her children and her despondency when it comes to securing their rights as children of a free woman that Sila's narrative engages with a racialised order to come. The possibility of a life of freedom is only approached in retrospect as a failed dream, a dream not of taking the place of the slave owners but of joining the community of Muslims of the Bo Kaap. The title *Unconfessed* gestures towards a double inscription where Sila's narrative comes to constitute both a refusal to confess and a confession directed beyond the authorities that demand it. In this refusal, Sila also establishes her relation to her dead son and what she sees as his agency as equally valid and powerful as the written records by the authorities which constitute the present day archives on slavery at the Cape.

ARCHIVES, MEMORY, WRITING

In Robert Ross' study, *Cape of Torments* (1983), the question of how to represent slavery at the Cape as a historian is approached through a focus on the limitations of the colonial archive. As other historians and scholars of Cape slavery have pointed out, not only are there no slave narratives that draw on ideas of authenticity and autobiographical testimony as in the Atlantic tradition drawing on ideas of authenticity and autobiographical testimony, but the archival material concerning slavery and slave resistance consists of legal documents where the voice of the slave is often represented in terms of the confession to a crime.⁵ What Ross terms 'the material deposit' of slave life at this period consists of the records of the

Court of Justice in Cape Town covering the period of Dutch East India Company rule, now deposited at the Algemeen Rijksarchief in The Hague. Ross describes the procedures through which the words of the slave — obtained through interrogation and normally translated from Malay or Portuguese into official Dutch of the courtroom — was presented to the Court of Justice only in writing. These statements as well as those later obtained during the British dispensation and deposited in the Cape Archives Repository contain the few material remnants of statements derived from slaves at the Cape; and, as Ross points out, even in these records the words of the slaves are present only indirectly.

Christiansē's novel explores this silence in the archival records as part of a set of practices that resist the dominant context of confession-absolution, rather than producing a story that would take up the position of the missing slave narrative. As Meg Samuelson argues, 'Christiansē shifts attention from Sila to the law that produces her first as a slave and then as criminal subject' (Castaways and Generations 14). In her reading of the novel in connection with Christiansē's poetry collection, *Castaway*, Samuelson identifies 'a methodology of salvage and haunting — or, more accurately, salvage as haunting — as that which is rescued from the wreckage of history is recycled as troubling recurrence in our present' (2). In this reading of what Samuelson identifies as multidirectional haunting across generations — 'a mother is in communion with her dead son in *Unconfessed*, while in *Castaway* the authorial persona is visited by her dead grandmother' (3) — the emphasis is placed on Sila's struggle against her inscription into the colonial archive.

We are asked not to join the minister's wife in probing 'How could [she] do it?' this is not the question the novel seeks to answer. Instead, in the absence of confession, we are asked to consider how *kindermoord* as archival trace and literary trope functions in this text. In what ways does this unspeakable, unconfessed act speak, and what might it articulate? (Castaways and Generations 14)

It is thus in opposition to what Robert Ross has described as the 'exceedingly voluminous (and, exceedingly verbose) mass of source material' (7) in the colonial archive that Christiansē writes a story that does not seek to represent the voice of the slave. Sila's scepticism towards record keeping is expressed directly in statements such as: 'I have had enough of that speech that travels on paper' (211) as well as in her focus on the power structures that she finds herself in:

I have been trying to understand what it means for someone like me around people like these — and I mean the guards, the warden, the ministers and their wives, the judges, the field cornets, governors who come and go, the wives, the doctors, the king. I mean this great weight of masters and madams is like a wave that comes and comes. When such a wave breaks it is on backs like mine. I am tired of them and fear that wherever I go they will follow and make me believe they have always been there. I fear that no matter how far I travel into that land, my children, will end up like me. (334)

What this passage also illuminates is the connection that Christiansë establishes between Sila's story and the fate of future generations. The foreboding about the future in this passage also contains Sila's observations about the intersection of language and power structures where she has a clear and pessimistic view of her own place. As Bhekizizwe Peterson argues: 'Underlying the archive is the aim of ordering the past as inheritance (Peterson 29). In this sense, the slave woman's relation to the archive will always be determined through an act of exclusion extended onto future generations through the slave matronymic, according to which children born to slave women, regardless of the status of the fathers, were always enslaved.

The narrative structure of *Unconfessed* moves in circles towards the incident where Sila, already legally a free woman, is sold to the farmer Van der Wat, together with her children, among them her son Baro. Although Sila is regularly raped by Van der Wat and also bears his children the incident which leads to Sila's killing of her son Baro is set off by a scene where Baro, in front of important guests, imitates Van der Wat's youngest son calling his father 'pappa' (257). The punishment inflicted on him by Van der Wat is so terrible that Sila decides to 'protect' her son in the only way she is capable of, that is by killing him. Baro's enunciation of the forbidden patronymic is, in Sila's narrative, only expressed indirectly through a reference to the expression used by Van der Wat's son. It is as if Sila, in moving slowly towards this incident, sees this word when expressed by Baro as invested with such a destructive force that she cannot bring herself to include it in her narrative.

This incident, articulated partly as an absence, stands at the centre of Sila's story. It structures the narrative by offering an explanation of her state of imprisonment and her refusal to confess, and it forms the turning point in a story about motherhood in a time when the meaning of freedom and bondage is rapidly shifting. The novel traces a trajectory of changing household forms, from a situation with several layers of bondage and dependence where women and children would all find themselves in a position of subservience to a male head of household, towards households which were allegedly based on ideas of individual freedom. As Robert Ross points out: 'The master also had the right, as head of the household, to inflict corporal punishment on his slaves, just as he could on his wife and children. Only when the norms of domestic correction were exceeded did this turn into a criminal offence, and in practice the boundary of what was permissible was drawn at the survival of the victim' (33). Baro's imitation of the slave-owner's son can only constitute a crime worthy of severe punishment in a situation where the officially acknowledged son and heir has a different relation to the father as head of household than the son of a slave woman. In situations where all dependents are encouraged to refer to their ruler as father and see him as a benefactor, the difference between the sons would not be expressed as an interdiction in relation to the patronymic.⁶

Baro is thus doubly excluded from the colonial archive. Through Sila's refusal to confess, there is no story about the killing of the son and through the slave matronymic he has no claim to the inheritance of the slave owners. It is in this space that the haunting takes place. The paradigmatic shift between the Indian Ocean World and one determined by the Black Atlantic also involves a shift in ideas of ancestry and heritage as well as of the techniques and the significance of archival records. In Derrida's *Archive Fever*, the creation of history, tradition and culture is placed within a context of a public/private divide where the archival material is linked to the creation of the domestic sphere which also, at the same time, represents a publicly recognised authority: 'It is thus, in this domiciliation, in this house arrest, that archives take place' (2). Derrida's discussion moves around what he terms a 'Freudian impression' and involves the reiteration of patriarchal structures of traditional Judaism with the elements of psychoanalytical concepts derived from family forms based on a public/private divide. Linked to the production of memory, these impressions concern the physical act of writing, the figures of suppression and repression and their link to the future, as well as the question of legitimate heirs. In Derrida's text, the spectre is present through intergenerational haunting as a figure which commands authority but also as a symptom of absence of memory and archive.⁷ This function of haunting is used in *Unconfessed* when Baro himself and the act that Sila has committed both remain within the sphere of that which cannot be archived. Sila's concern for the future of her children also attests to what she sees as the function of the archival records as delimitations of the possibilities of freedom.

In Sila's gestures towards future archives she includes the very tangible results of the work slaves perform in breaking stones on Robben Island: 'The stones we break loose from the island are bits of the future we give to that growing town across the water' (48). This information is part of the story she tells about her life to her dead son Baro and here she connects her own present location to the future stones and walls of Cape Town as well as to written records kept by the prison authorities:

And when you walk away from the edge, if you keep the water at your back and walk a straight line from this point where you found me, you will go by the place where I break stones for Cape Town's streets and walls. Yes, even women break stones here.

The warden must count each stone and write the number in a book and in that book he must also tell the superintendent of police how it is with all of us who live here. We are in the same book as the stones. Rounders. Oblongs. Squares. Pounders. (45)

By including the buildings and streets of Cape Town in the archives of slave labour⁸ and connecting them to the written records by the prison authorities which in themselves constitute and inscribe the subject as prisoner, Christiansē suggests that the written archive is part of the prison that Sila needs to escape rather than a point of origin and possibilities. The novel illustrates the trajectory of the archival material discussed by Achille Mbembe as 'fragments of lives and pieces of time' moving towards their role as part of public institutions (19). Mbembe further

identifies the documents in the public archive as characterised by their material status as well as an imaginary function: 'Through archived documents, we are presented with pieces of time to be assembled, fragments of life to be placed in order, one after the other, in an attempt to formulate a story that acquires its coherence through the ability to craft links between the beginning and the end' (21). Christiansë's novel challenges this function of the archive, identified by Samuelson as a 'teleological temporality' (Castaways and Generations 3), by making Sila resist all attempts by the authorities to explain her deed or to participate in an act of confession. The novel is thus not concerned with versions of voices or alternative stories but with interrogating the very foundations of such projected purposes of the material deposits of the past.

This resistance is particularly evident in the novel's treatment of death. In Mbembe's theory of the archive, death is a prerequisite for what he terms co-ownership: 'the feeling that we should all be heirs to a time over which we might exercise the rights of collective ownership' (21). For this right to be established, Mbembe argues, the author of the document is dead and can only be 'woken from sleep and returned to life' at a point in time when the archival material can be consulted. In *Unconfessed*, the 'salvage as haunting' that Samuelson has identified in the novel, stands in direct opposition to the theme of death and resurrection/confession and absolution that underlies the process through which archival material makes stories possible. These figures also underline the link between this coding of the past and the tradition of Christianity which came to be predominant at the Cape and which is also thematically foregrounded through the character of the Minister's wife in the novel.

Christianity is thus present as a disturbing reality from the very beginning of the novel. The fact that Christian mission stations acted as places of refuge for slaves is acknowledged by Sila in her narrative but the historical context is enlarged to include her premonitions of a future where the interests of landowning farmers predominate.

Mina says there are good ministers who are collecting the purchase price for children and old men and women, and they set these people free.

Where do they go then?

She says they go to a farm inland, near the winegrowers of Stellenbosch. Am I stupid? Do you think those farmers will let good hands sit idle? I am not so stupid that I cannot tell a thorn in my foot when I feel it. (69)

Sila's story is made possible through contradictory processes of a refusal to confess to the living and to the future and by turning to the dead in the form of the son she has saved from that future. The theme of haunting allows for a process of simultaneity where Sila's story exists in spite of the efforts of the authorities to extract their version from her. The haunting in *Unconfessed* gestures towards the future where Sila's descendants, as she predicts, are unable to escape the oppression and degradation of which slavery was only a starting point. But the novel

also contains fragments and traces of an Indian Ocean version of global movement and change, one that has been silenced by the strategies of European expansion.

VISIONS OF FREEDOM AND HOPE

Although Sila tells her story from a position of deep despair and a prophetic vision of the racialised oppression of future generations, the novel ends with the possibility of hope. In a postscript, a third person narrator addresses the reader directly: 'You want to know. What happened to her?' (341) and goes on to offer different scenarios about the ending of Sila's story of which the last is a happy ending. 'There are wishes: a child of a child came, a guard swallowed astonishment and lost his heart and she hers — hah! — a quiet freedom in the shadow of Signal Hill. Perhaps she would say, wishes are sometimes just stories that have nowhere to go' (341).

These are the very last words of the novel and they suggest more than the reader's presumed wish for closure, knowledge and a happy ending. These words encourage the reader to revisit the very few but significant moments in Sila's narrative where she stresses her status as a free woman and plans where she and her children would spend their days in freedom. These moments are significant because they place the narrative within the context of Indian Ocean slavery of which the slave trade and slavery at the Cape was a part, and they gesture towards an alternative but disappearing history of slavery and assimilation that would open up a possibility of a free movement between the position of settler and slave, at least across generations.

The question of origin is addressed from the very beginning in *Unconfessed*. The novel opens with the superintendent entering Sila's cell in the prison yard and asking her to confirm that she is the 'Sila van den Kaap, slave to the burgher Jacobus Stephanus Van der Wat' (2). Sila's objection to this way of describing herself is based on the fact that she was fraudulently kept in slavery after having been manumitted in the will of her late owner and in her answer, 'I am Sila who was taken from Cape Town to Van der Wat' (3), she also refuses to use the slave name 'van den Kaap' as a designation of her place of origin. Only later in the novel is she described as a 'Mozbieker slave girl' (10) and traces of her efforts at reconstructing memories of her childhood in Mozambique become intermixed with the dream world she conjures up on Robben Island.

Perhaps, if we had been able to run from Van der Wat's farm... perhaps if we had found and followed the land's edge we too might have come back to the place from which I had been taken as a girl. If there had been someone to tell me these things... (45)

This identification of the slave as African and not of the Cape marks the beginning of a different idea of slavery and freedom than that which was predominant in the Indian Ocean World. It denies Sila the possibility of finding a home at the Cape in a process of movement between ethnicities and degrees of dependence and bondage and fixes her as African in opposition to the European settlers and

slave owner and thereby marks the end of the Cape as part of the Indian Ocean World. The story that Sila recounts to Baro is therefore already determined by this outcome of racial dichotomies where she and her offspring are doomed to a life of subservience. The story can therefore only contain traces of different possibilities and a different outcome as embedded in the structures of Indian Ocean slavery.

One of the most important aspects of these structures as depicted in the novel concerns the fact that the relation between slave and slave owner was played out within a hierarchical extended family consisting of the male head of household and his dependents.⁹ The very real possibilities of freedom that Sila keeps returning to in her narrative are to be secured through the goodwill of her owners as long as they remain capable of keeping their promises. The first owners she is brought to as a young girl, the Neethlings, have to sell their slaves due to economic difficulties. It is significant that the destitution that she and her fellow slaves experience due to Minister Neethling's drinking is part of a disintegration of the entire household, starting with the selling of the grown slave woman 'that all the children had to call Ma' (9). In this incident it is not only the slaves who are helpless:

Standing at the end of the road to the farmhouse, Sila tried to see Ma go, but the sun was in her eyes. She heard Ma calling out of the ball of light that seemed to dance around the cart, but what was called was lost because of Missus Neethling's terrible wailing back in the house and Minister Neethling's loud praying. (10)

Sila's enslavement then follows a trajectory characterised by the cruelty and greediness of slave owners set against the ineptitude or helplessness of those who feel responsible for the well-being of slaves in their household. Her next owner, Hendrina Jansen, a widow called *Oumiesies*, turns out to be as helpless as the Neethlings. She draws up a will ensuring freedom for all her slaves after her death and fights her son, Theron, who tries to lay claim to the slaves during her lifetime. In spite of Jansen's will, all the slaves, except a literate slave woman, Spaasie, end up enslaved to Theron after *Oumiesies*' death in 1806. In recounting her story to Baro, Sila dwells on the possibilities of a life at the Neethlings or at *Oumiesies*:

Sila tried to think of a life that might have been if only Missus Neethling had kept her promise and resisted her drunken husband. They would all have stayed together.

(31–32)

If *Oumiesies* had lived, *Oumiesies* for whom the world was her god's test, Sila knew they would all have been happier. She would have taken good care of *Oumiesies*. (32)

What these fantasies suggest is that Sila sees slavery within the context of these households as radically different from what she later comes to experience when the economic value that she and her slave children represent determine their future. In these visions of the future, Sila, her children and her fellow slaves are not commodities to be bought and sold but members of a household with clear hierarchies and power structures where women and children find themselves subservient to male heads of the household. As Joseph Miller points out,

Women's gendered exclusion from the modern public realm of highly commercialized and legally framed forms of slaving that developed in the eighteenth century in the New World, centered on plantations and mines, developed in parallel with, and eventually replaced, the millennia-long, continent-spanning, positioning of women, children, and others in private households centered on patriarchal extended families.

(Miller 2007 xv)

Sila's wish to remain within the slave-owning household must therefore be understood within the context of the Indian Ocean World prior to the imposition of a public/private divide where all human relations were organised within complex domestic arrangements 'in which dominant men surrounded themselves with women of many origins outside the group, including some acquired through capture or purchase, that is, as slaves' (Miller xv–xvi). As Miller points out, this reality stands in opposition to 'the stereotypical modern image of slaves [as] male, men imagined as toiling from sunup to sundown in fields and canebrakes, subject to sale at any time for the financial advantage of their owners' (Miller xv–xvi). What Christiansē's novel describes are the changing ideals of domestic households as well as the commodification of slaves within a system of commercialisation. The last 'patriarchal' household that Sila experiences is headed by a woman, *Oumiesie*, and it is through her death and the treachery of her son, Theron, that Sila's status as chattel slave is determined. It is also within this context that the status of slave differs markedly from that of other female dependants.

In Theron's household Sila is sexually abused by Theron, bears several children and holds the position of Mother also to Spaasie's children whom Theron refuses to set free. This household also disintegrates when Sila is sent to work for Hancke, and from there is sold to Van der Wat together with her children, of whom the eldest are then sold away from her despite her desperate fight to keep them. Throughout her narrative Sila returns to the fact that neither she nor any of her children could legally be enslaved after being manumitted in *Oumiesies'* will: 'My children are the free children of a free woman' (300). In legal terms the slave matronymic regulates the slave status of children born to slave women, disregarding the fact that many of them were the offspring of free men, often the slave owners themselves. In Sila's case, the opposite should also apply and all children included in *Oumiesies'* will as well as those born to her after her manumission were legally free.

Sila's story contains subdued elements of the possibilities of reconstructing an Indian Ocean experience of transnational movement where the position of slave and settler would not be fixed or determined for future generations. Her dreams of inclusion in a large household of benevolent slave owners should be understood in this context. In these dreams of returning or remaining on the farms of the Neethlings or *Oumiesies*, Sila's main concern is for her children and the children of other slave women that she sees as her responsibility. Freedom is, in Sila's narrative, always expressed in relation to her children, 'the children of a free woman', but this should not be taken as an indication of a domestic ideal

but rather as an insistence that the law be applied. In this respect, as Samuelson argues, Sila's story contains premonitions about future structures of bondage which replaced those that were removed through the abolition of slavery. As Ross Worden shows, the slave matronymic was not respected in cases where this would have ensured freedom for children of slave women:

Children born to slave mothers after 1834, who by law should have been free, were indentured until the age of 25. No preparation for freedom was forthcoming: in contrast to the other slave colonies, the Cape apprenticeship system made no provision for education (However rudimentary), granted no overtime pay and imposed more severe restrictions on movement and rights of complaint than had existed in the final years of slavery. (Worden 2005 42)

It is against the background of these and subsequent legal restrictions on the freedom of former slaves, as well as the introduction of further racialised limitations to the possibilities of full citizenship, that Sila's hesitations about the promises of abolition and her resistance to the act of confession within existing power structures should be understood.

Despite her misgivings, she nevertheless thinks about how and where she and her children would live if granted their freedom and these thoughts concern two very specific places; the Bo Kaap or a Mission Station. Both places come with their own separate histories and Sila is determined not to be tricked into further dependence under the guise of freedom. In Sila's narrative the possibility of settling in the Bo Kaap is connected to the efforts made by Spaasie, who managed to assert her right to freedom stipulated in *Oumiesies'* will.

The superintendent will come and Pedder will have to say sorry and I will set off from this place. I will say Lys must come too. It is the price I ask for all those years that the Orphan chamber did nothing for me and mine. And I will go and find Camies and tell him, you see, your mother never forgot you. Perhaps I will get a small house up there in the Bo Kaap, on Signal Hill where the gun goes off each day to tell us it is noon. (93)

There is no mention of Islam as a religion here but Sila refers to a Muslim diviner in another context where she is intent on finding answers to her dreams about the future. In the novel, the Bo Kaap functions as a brief and fleeting indication of the Indian Ocean origins of the persons who were brought to the Cape as slaves and of the existence of Muslim religious communities. Ross points to the fact that Muslims were brought from Indonesia from the very beginning of European settlement of the Cape:

Throughout the period of VOC rule, the Cape was used as a penal colony, in which undesirables, frequently the enemies of the Dutch in the East, were kept from endangering the profits of the East India Company in the Indonesian archipelago. The political exiles at the Cape were generally aristocrats and often learned Islamic teachers. In time they came to furnish the first Imams of the Cape Muslim community as this developed among the slaves and their descendants from the 1780s on. (20)

It is through this history of movement across the Indian Ocean where the previously powerful and privileged find themselves in positions of deprivation and dependence that the traditional image of the slave is given a new meaning. Whereas slave narratives in the Atlantic tradition build on the idea that learning and freedom are granted to the slaves through the intervention of Europeans, while at the same time using autobiographical conventions and authenticating frame narratives to show that these stories are told by the slave, this Indian Ocean heritage of learned and powerful convicts has found its way into the colonial archive only through court records.¹⁰ According to Gabeba Baderoon, ‘Christiansē drew on two decades of research into the archives of the Cape Colony. Journals kept by slave ships recount the raiding and slave-buying expeditions to Mozambique and only emphasize that the views of slaves are almost irretrievably absent in the historical record’ (2009 95). The presence of Islam in Cape Town therefore functions beyond the archival conventions of the European powers as well as the mechanisms of subject constitution determined by abolitionist ideals of conversion, confession and individual freedom. As Baderoon further points out, ‘Under the statutes of India through which the Dutch governed the Cape Colony, the public practice of Islam was punishable by death, so Islam survived through hidden practices of subversion by slaves, shaping communal relations, language and food rituals that survive among descendants of slaves even today’ (2009 92). In South African official history, the presence of descendants of slaves in the Bo Kaap was constructed through an essentialising idea of the Cape Malay as picturesque which served to gloss over the complex history of settlement and slavery and the existence of communities other than those of the European settlers.¹¹ In contrast to Rayda Jacob’s novel *The Slave Book*, where the communal practices and the presence of Islam are central, Sila is not part of the global community of the *Ummah*. Her knowledge of the Bo Kaap is, however, severely restricted by her life as prisoner on Robben Island and the predominance of Christianity in that context and never remains more than a fleeting reference to a possibility of what might have been.

As the chronology of the story leads up to the emancipation of the Lodge slaves in 1828, the emancipation of all slaves in 1834 and the end of the apprenticeship period in 1848, Sila’s narrative becomes increasingly involved with the past as well as with visits from those who have passed away. Sila sees her power and her possibilities in this spiritual world, where she comforts those who have escaped slavery through death and takes revenge on the slave owners.

I *am* a small boat bobbing just there off Cape Town, there at Roggerberg. I have come to pick up Hester and her babies. She walked into the water with her children so that they would escape this country. But cruelty of cruelties, she and one child were pulled free of the water. They punished her, as they wanted to punish me.

For women it is different. Two men get hold of a piece of rope. They call it strangulation. For men it is hanging. (76)

I will call up bad things and send them there and they will crawl into Van der Wat's ear and scream at him until he runs into a wall, head first, until he breaks his head open the way he broke our lives. (40)

Sila's visions also include dancing and flying away from Robben Island and in these visions of the future she reaches out to her son Baro. Most importantly, however, these visions are interspersed with her preoccupation with the past, a concern with how the past is represented and what effect this will have on future generations.

Christiansë's novel articulates an important turning point in the history of global settlement. It shows how complex and changing structures of slavery and freedom came to be inscribed into a racialised narrative of ethnic essentialism with a clear divide between a settler as European and the African as slave. It marks the end of centuries of human reproductive, geographical and social movement, and a beginning of an era where these movements and the communities they produced were marked as shameful, inferior and illegitimate. Sila's refusal to confess operates as a central device which charts the submerged Indian Ocean history throughout the novel while ultimately also testifying to its loss.

NOTES

- ¹ A Readers Guide is an unpaginated appendix to the novel.
- ² The slave trade was banned in 1808. Slavery was abolished in 1834 but prolonged by a period of apprenticeship until 1838.
- ³ Gwyn Campbell (2005, 2006, 2008, 2010) and Nigel Worden (1985, 2005, 2007) discuss these aspects of Cape slavery as part of the slave trade across the Indian Ocean.
- ⁴ See Hofmeyr for a discussion of the characteristics of these paradigms. See also: Alpers 2000; Bose 2006; Kearney 2004; McPherson 1993; and Pearson 1998, 2000.
- ⁵ See Ross and Wentzel on lack of slave narratives in the Cape. Novels depicting Cape slavery, such as Rayda Jacob's *The Slave Book* (1998) and Therese Benadé's *Kites of Good Fortune* (2004) are based on historical and archival sources where the authors position themselves as descendants of slaves. Other novels depicting slavery at the Cape are Wilma Stockenström's *The Expedition to the Baobab Tree* (1983) and André Brink's *The Rights of Desire* (2000).
- ⁶ See Shell 2001 for an analysis of Cape slavery as part of the changing structure of the family institution. See also Ahjum for a discussion of the relevance of the slave matronymic for the subject position of slave women.
- ⁷ For a discussion of Derrida's *Archive Fever* in a South African context, see Derrida (2002), van Zyl and Harris.
- ⁸ The Memorial to the Slave in Cape Town's Church Square by artists Wilma Cruise and Gavin Younge takes the form of a grid of granite blocks to express, in abstract form, the history of slavery at the Cape.
- ⁹ Ross points out that 'Cape Town, of course, was not just a city of masters and slaves. The visiting sailors and the local soldiers lived lives that were probably as oppressed as those of the slaves, and certainly the social distance between the slaves and this group of whites was very considerably less than that between a sailor and his captain' (Ross

21). See also his discussion of *knegten* as ‘men who had climbed their way up from the lowest levels of North European society’ (Ross 30).

- ¹⁰ Rayda Jacob’s novel *The Slave Book* (1998) depicts slavery and the process of inverse assimilation of the son of a slave owner into a Muslim community at the Cape. For a discussion of the significance of Islam in this novel see Baderoon 2009, Gqola 2010, Olausson 2011 and Samuelson 2010.

- ¹¹ See Baderoon 2005, Bradlow and Cairns 1978, Ward and Worden 1998.

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