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Unconfessed

BY YVETTE CHRISTIANSË

“Sila’s absorbing, lyrical narrative is circular: she alternates between exhausted lament, seething rage and scripture-tinged poetic soliloquy... In the final pages, she movingly addresses “the daughters and sons of my generations”—those now living with slavery’s legacy.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“A gorgeous, devastating song of freedom that will inevitably be compared to Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. But it deserves to stand on its own.”

—*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)

Several years ago, Yvette Christiansë returned to her native country of South Africa in search of slave narratives of the kind she had found so readily in the United States. When she discovered that there were none, she began researching 19th century court records, and it was among the old court transcripts that she discovered Sila van den Kaap—a slave woman on trial for murdering her child. Born from those records is Christiansë’s first novel: **UNCONFESED**.

Sila—the name given by her Dutch masters—was abducted from Mozambique as a small child; her real name has been lost to her. As the novel begins, we meet Sila in prison, awaiting execution for the crime of murder. It is 1823 and change is coming to South Africa. An English inspector arrives at the prison and, appalled by what he sees, and seeing mitigating circumstances, arranges to have Sila’s sentence commuted to a lengthy term on a notorious prison island. Robben Island is the chief setting of the book, but the action—

decades of it—spins out from Sila’s memory. Through the rich flow of Sila’s voice the reader is introduced to the precise details of a slave woman’s life in the South African outback of the early 1800s—and to the historical tensions between the Dutch settlers and the encroaching English that impact her life both directly and from afar. Sila’s interior world—her emotions, her consciousness—all are rendered with a fluency and nuance that make her voice as powerful as her story.

Yvette Christiansë, an associate professor at Fordham University and a scholar in African American literature and postcolonial studies, was raised in South Africa under apartheid and emigrated to Australia via Switzerland when she was eighteen. Through her academic articles on the present-day repercussions of apartheid, she remains an active observer and commentator upon South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation project.

“[*Unconfessed*] unfolds in fits and starts and reads like a confession to a soulmate. This stream-of-consciousness style gives readers an intimate if disturbing peek into the mind of a fierce 19th-century slave woman.”

—*Library Journal* (starred review)

UNCONFESED by Yvette Christiansë