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Loving Through Loss: Reading Saidiya Hartman's History of Black Hurt

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Love has nothing to do with it; love has everything to do with it.

Saidiya Hartman

An abiding dualism courses through the diasporic sensibility. On one hand, a feel for inconsolable loss is intrinsic to the life of these communities. Diasporas bear histories of a deep and enduring sense of alienation: from place, from personhood and, in the most severe cases, from human purpose. On the other hand, diasporic peoples are armed with a bottomless belief in the possibility of redemption. Told from this perspective, historical accounts of diaspora tend toward epics of the human will to survive and, incredibly at times, of the surreal search for a full life. This Janus-faced notion of diasporic communities is not novel; in practice, however, it has yet to establish a firm grip on the historiography of Africans and their dispersed descendants. Rather than attending to both profiles of this past, historians have tended to contemplate one side of this story, the inspiring aspect. Taking black people's pain and suffering as a predicate (taking it for granted, some might say), we largely nominate as our main subject their determination to overcome a wretched racial inheritance, their will to make a way out of the darkness of melancholia and perhaps even into the light of the marvelous.

Recently, however, this syntax has come under question. A developing historiographical tendency has begun to bring balance to the portrait of blacks across the globe. Demanding that despair, defeat and death be given its just share, this loose affiliation of scholars insists that the time has come for black people to look back, too, in grief.¹

One of the most provocative recent contributions to this growing corpus of what I like to think of as "wake work" is Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Transatlantic Slave Route*. Learned, eloquent and unflinching, the book offers a meditation on the haunting contemporary presence of the past commerce in human lives between Africa and the Americas. It is an ambitious work, nimbly braiding autobiography, literary criticism, historiography and travelogue; and its author is splendidly up to the task. Without cue or hiccup, the narrative glides from childhood recollections to critical theory to blunt reflections about the fate of postcolonial Ghana. Topical wanderlust, notwithstanding, the study's underlying point is clear and consistent: the modern trade in Africans festers as a virtually incurable wound in the constitution of modern black personhood and politics. A commerce that crushed millions of lives on both sides of the Atlantic, it cannibalized the continent then demoralized survivors and their offspring—people who would wind up bearing the brand of blackness. For Hartman, the many miseries that plague the diaspora of which she is a part—from high HIV infection rates, to high poverty rates, to high incarceration rates—began centuries ago with the brutal, deadly business of making things out of persons stolen from Africa.

Determined to plumb this passed on racial plight, Hartman set off across the Atlantic from her American domicile to slave trading forts, paths, markets and raiding sites in Ghana. The general “will to forget” the ghastly experience of slaves, she is convinced, is a big part of black people’s problem. She thus offers this book as an act of remembrance. Retracing the coerced steps of the enslaved from African hinterland to European slavers to American workplaces, *Lose Your Mother* pays a belated tribute to the “tribe of the middle passage,” those people undone during captivity and reborn as slaves. Its narrative is heavy with bereavement, circling corpses as well as facing the impoverishment of the lives of those left behind. It is a brave effort to reckon with a mortifying past, a book bent on providing a fitting mourning for family the author knows of but could never truly know.

As with the best of travel writing, this work journeys not merely to a place (Ghana) but more profoundly into the author’s own sensibility, her particular way of feeling in the world. One of the brightest young stars on the academic scene, Hartman, it turns out, moves under a gray cloud. She seems fixed in a forlorn isolation, a kinless soul soaked by the world’s unkindness. She is emancipated but terribly estranged. Hartman beholds the world through the punished, weary eyes of an after-slave, and in *Lose Your Mother* she has composed what might be labeled a post-slave narrative. A testament to the incompleteness of the struggle for freedom as well as to the fugitive longings of black folks, this essay gives serious pause to all those heartening stories of progressive and inevitable black liberation.

The text’s literal point of departure is Hartman’s dispiriting feeling of orphanage in, and resulting need to run away from, her country of birth. Held back by a mix of indifference, cowardice and hostility, the United States, she believes, has been unwilling to address the wreckage left by racial slavery. In a nation famously branded as the land of the free, this progeny of branded captives lives in limbo. A home grown outsider, Hartman might carry a US passport, but she identifies herself as stateless. She is a citizen of nowhere, a woman with no country. Yet Hartman is not completely sold to cynicism and travels to West Africa with a small purse of hope for some acknowledgement of and attention to the historical wounds inflicted by slavery. The author, it is important to note, does not leave the US hankering after something akin to home and its promise of terminal ease; this is no errand of sentiment. In going to Ghana, the author seeks above all a sense of solidarity and its challenge of ceaseless collective struggle.

This former British colony carries a past that made it a most promising locale for Hartman’s purpose. Paths and roads reluctantly taken by raided people for over three hundred years scar the landscape. During the postwar tide of decolonization, moreover, the territory christened the Gold Coast by British rulers became an historic hotbed of global black power; and once it gained independence in 1957, the newly named Ghana garnered even greater fame for its rich hospitality to the diaspora.² More recently, too, the government has been actively touting the nation’s monumental memory of the slave trade as a tourist destination.³ Ghana seemed as good a place as any to confront the transatlantic commerce in people.

Such thinking proved misguided. As much as the postcolonial Ghanaian state was eager to welcome black new world returnees hoping for heartening *Roots*-like reunion, the society practiced a purposeful reticence with regard to its own role in enslavement. It did not help, furthermore, that in taking this expedition Hartman was certainly no Haley. She was not in Ghana to celebrate the rediscovery of once severed familial links; she arrived there, rather, to find a community in which—and with which—to grieve the losses borne from slavery. And in what is perhaps the narrative's ultimate irony, the author of *Lose Your Mother* ended up in a place where people generally eschewed talk about their stakes in the buying and selling of others. Covered by an explicit imperative for silence, slavery went largely unspoken in Ghana. It was a source of shame, and, as a preemptive act of politeness, locals refrained from tracing people's origins. This was a taboo, as Hartman notes, which could work in West Africa but not the Americas, where domestic slavery was religiously racialized. In the absence of clear, uniform badges of servitude (skin color, hair, nose etc) Ghana's slaves and their descendants could pass for beloved kin rather than violated strangers.

Still, slavery's bar of silence was scalable. Convenience could lift Ghanaians to acknowledge their entanglement in the history of human captivity. Slavery crept into public discourse, for example, under the cover of "hustles"—political and economic. This was the case with a group of young boys Hartman met posted outside the Elmina Castle. Recognizing a potential American benefactor, they presented the author with well-worn letters expressing love for their robbed sibling: "Because of the slave trade you lose your mother," one of these mercenary missives explained, confirming Hartman's gut feeling as well as providing her narrative a title. Beyond these entrepreneurial zones of tourist contact, however, Ghanaians avoided the subject of the transatlantic slave trade.

With the author's mission to disinter the memory of departed slaves repeatedly doomed, *Lose Your Mother* unfolds as a document of misunderstanding, disappointment and estrangement. By the time Hartman finishes the tour in the former slave raiding center of Gwolu, she is no less alienated than when she arrived. During her stay in Ghana, she is hailed as "Obruni" (the same word locals use to identify a white foreigner) as well as quizzed by an old man as to whether "negro" or "nigra" is the proper term of address for her. Whether visiting slave dungeons and slave markets or sharing a tour bus with other scholars, Hartman finds communion and shared sensitivity elusive. At the Elmina slavehold-turned-tourist site, her sincere séance-like effort to conjure up the world of chained, drained and demeaned African ancestors is frustrated by a young Ghanaian girl's flippant talk about American popular fashion and music. Then on the trip north with academic colleagues, their comic riffs on slavery quickly stale on her, sending Hartman to the window to ponder grimly those places from which people once had to flee to avoid capture. Not even long-resident African-Americans provide a respite of sympathy. Drawn to the beacon of postcolonial black hopes in the decades after 1957, these "revolutionary returnees" had long since earned a jadedness that left them largely impatient with the author's seemingly naïve, professorial enterprise.

In Ghana, few situations fail to arouse discomfort, disorientation or dejection for the author. The heat, the stench, the unknown tongues: all declare Hartman a stranger, reminding her that, despite all the vibrancy of the surrounding life, she did not belong and, in fact, existed at a distance not too far “social death.” Not long after arriving in Accra, her alarmist mistaking of rumbling trucks in the street for a political coup tickles her local housemates. Later on, walking about the city with little sense of direction, she embarrassingly stumbles upon men defecating in public. Likewise, Hartman dismisses a newspaper headline warning of impending power outages only to pay for her disbelief with shock when the power did disappear for weeks. Ironically, it was only during these “dark days” that she, prowling the city with a battery-powered torchlight, effectively registered Ghana’s glaring Third-Worldliness. Such power failures, indeed, symbolized for her the larger failure of postcolonial black power. Once upon a time, after all, Ghana’s “founding father,” Kwame Nkrumah, had heralded abundant electricity as the new nation’s sure step toward enlightened development.

However estranged from her present, Hartman is eerily at ease in the past, especially the past depicted in scholarship. In making the case for the far-reaching force of the slave trade, she draws on and masterfully re-scripts writing on the subject. Her record of reversed travel along the slave path is spliced with unassuming yet powerful and sophisticated mini-essays, insightful, sensitive vignettes of ill-fated captives, misguided rebels and self-serving traders. Telling these stories with the tone and texture of an implicated witness, there is little wonder that Hartman believes herself an exile from the past itself. Her intimacy with times gone and kinship with departed people emerges most poignantly perhaps in a stunningly crafted account of a girl murdered during the middle passage. A late 18th century death that would have gone undocumented were it not useful for abolitionists, the disputed passing aboard the *Recovery* is recalled in detail both gruesome and loving. The girl, Hartman relates, met her end for refusing to go on living. Ignoring the captain’s commands to eat and exercise, she had been hung naked by her feet, brutally beaten and left for dead. Her fate came to the attention of prominent abolitionist William Wilberforce, who seized the story for a scandal that led to the captain’s trial for murder. The case ended with an acquittal, but it granted the dead girl a moment of publicity (though much in newspaper caricature) and hence a brief appearance in the official archives. It is from these “few lines from a musty trial transcript” that Hartman imaginatively resuscitates the last moments of the young woman’s life. Facing the terror of the middle passage, the girl, recounts *Lose Your Mother*, grimly calculated that a tortured death was less unbearable than a life in captivity. In this fragment, Hartman seems to have found more than an archival muse; she had caught a fleeting glance of one of many lost Old World mothers.

Alive in the narrative is the author’s biological mother, whose sparse appearances belie the density of her impression on the text. Born black, poor and outside of wedlock, this great granddaughter of southern slaves resolves to redeem respectability through her daughter. Her strivings, however, backfire; instead of spurring the author, they register as the pathetic product of shame. This undercurrent of filial disaffection goes by untapped in *Lose Your Mother*, but

nonetheless acquires a quiet force in light of the author's wariness toward kin-based ideas of community. As a girl then named Valarie, she liked playing by her self and even sometimes pined to be part of a different household. Once she reached young adulthood, moreover, Valarie busily set about losing her mother's ideal of a daughter. Choices in boyfriend, residence and field of study all trampled on the older woman's bastard-bred, bourgeois dreams. Hartman, indeed, went as far as to dispose of "Valarie" along the way and adopt "Saidiya." It is a name that means 'helper' in Swahilli and, maybe more important, a name meant to mock the mother's pretensions.

Saidiya, moreover, appears not to have been the only family member with a flair for the reinvention of self. In a disclosure intended to underscore how wholly and pathologically slavery has tangled black genealogies, *Lose Your Mother* reports the author's own brush with the "confusions of consanguinity" (Spillers 73). In the course of researching the paternal side of the family tree, Hartman is unable to turn up any authentic evidence of a "Hartman." Presumably belonging to a disavowing paternal Dutch ancestor and one-time family owner, the Hartman name was more likely an appellation her grandfather had made up or picked up. As with so many New World black people, Saidiya's progenitor could not secure a seat on the white branches of his family tree.

Enslaved mothers with lost names and slaveholding fathers who denied children of color's claims: this, *Lose Your Mother* concludes, is the unhappy lot of people dispersed from the African continent. They are homeless and orphaned. Yet their hope, she insists, does not lie in the romance of return—neither to a geographically fixed territory nor to a sanguinary finite family. It rests, rather, in the restless search for spaces to make and defend freedom and, in that task, in a fearless openness to naming themselves anew.

Lose Your Mother is not to be trifled with. Its accomplishment as scholarship, as literature and as critique is beyond dispute. This work, in fact, helps to confirm the arrival of a generation of black diaspora scholars, virtually all feminist-inspired, manifestly ready to refine and redefine the field. What might be overlooked, however, is just how serious—or better—grave a book this is. There is a sense, both gripping and awesome, that something more than intellectual rigor and rectitude is at stake in this work (which is not to say that Hartman is sloppy or wrongheaded; this is not the case). At issue here is her contemplation about how the past, and which past, forms, informs and deforms what we have become. Hartman has written one of those rare books where accord or discord might be incidental. The real and pressing responsibility is to accept the provocation to ponder society and self.

Lose Your Mother is a work of discreet yet daring politics. With little fanfare, the author resists a long influential strain of thinking about the imagined endpoint of political struggle. Well founded in its reasoning and bold in its implications, Hartman's recommendations about politics are too ramifying to bypass. At the base of her thinking is faithlessness in the government's capacity to further the cause of meaningful freedom and human dignity. She is persuaded instead by what might be termed fugitive strategies. Within this framework effective politics consists in

the pursuit of autonomy not in the campaign for control of the state; statelessness not citizenship is the grand prize. This precept, in fact, underpins Hartman's somewhat renegade wariness toward recent agitation for reparations in the US. The act of pleading before an unsympathetic government, she worries, drains black people of their dignity. Specifically, she fears that demands for reparation might very well reprise the historic belittling of black people enacted by abolitionists during the turn of the 19th century. In her anxious assessment, pro-reparation appeals to the state stands to reproduce a scene sadly reminiscent of the famous image of a kneeling slave beseeching white for recognition as man and brother. Hartman might claim to be officially "agnostic" about the movement, but her discomfort is patent. However just the ends of reparations activism, it could, she believes, wind up dishonoring enslaved Africans, men and women who never asked for their rights but simply burned, rebelled and ran away for them.

While there are tragically just reasons to recognize the limits of government as an instrument of emancipation, championing statelessness (as Hartman does) is not without great peril. Nation-states, as blacks all over can attest, continue to be shamefully unscrupulous guarantors of rights and privileges. Still, to exist outside of that global system can be fatally precarious. To be stateless at present is to be naked before government agencies possessed of a cold faith in documents and to be defenseless before armies empowered to detain and torture with immunity. Perhaps, Hartman meant to be metaphoric in employing the term "stateless," for, although she includes herself in that category, the ironic truth is that the genuinely stateless tend to find themselves stuck. For non-citizens, the mobility Hartman boasts is nearly impossible or dearly dangerous. However weary of America, the author of *Lose Your Mother*, as a US citizen, could apply for a passport and with relative ease secure entry into scores of countries around the world. For the vast majority of the world, such trips belong to the realm of the wishful imagination. The very movement endorsed in *Lose Your Mother*, in other words, rests upon the author's access to the sanctions of a powerful state.⁴ Might Hartman in the end be too quick to dismiss the state as a fruitful arena of freedom-centered politics? And might that be because her own biography allows her to take its protective and enabling aspects for granted?

The author's doubts about the cost of citizenship are not unthinking; in fact, they are deeply considered and are of a part with a mood putatively endemic to a generation. This cohort, goes the conventional wisdom, has been paralyzed by pessimism with regard to the potential for collectively transforming society. Having come of age too late for the idealism of civil rights and decolonization movements and having witnessed their reversals, corruptions and demises, they sit resigned, like belated guests to the party that promise to make the world anew.⁵ This generational paradigm should not go unquestioned. Its acceptance facilitates a fudging that allows individual thinkers to avoid dealing with the ambiguities and nuances of the political present and making tough contingent choices about appropriate courses of action. *Lose Your Mother*, insofar as it is framed as an offspring of a postcolonial melancholia or post civil rights despair, resurrects my wariness about this brand of soft demographic determinism.

Hartman, of course, is too thoughtful to attribute her political disposition to some simple generational inheritance. Indeed, she explicitly acknowledges the possibility of adopting politics in a radically different key through her running engagement with another book, Robin Kelley's *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*. A kind of foil for *Lose Your Mother*, this series of essays by a scholar roughly of Hartman's generation mines a rich past of lesser-known black liberation struggles toward inspiring present-day radicals. And although Hartman confesses to harboring a secret wish to share Kelley's optimism, her writing stops far short of the kind of hope that invigorates *Freedom's Dreams*. This invocation of Kelley is pertinent; it is an admission that there is no necessary link between a post-sixties maturation and a political temperament resistant to hope. Indeed, one can only wonder how she regards another intellectual peer who has also written thoughtfully about self-making, politics and the black diaspora and whose rhetoric of hopes and dreams just might land him in the White House. The phenomenal ascendance of Barack Obama ought to serve as a cautionary tale for those who feel comfortable framing the present. Ours might not quite be the romantic age of black radicalism, but neither does it quite look like one of tragic defeat.

If recent epochal political changes cannot explain straightforwardly the grimness that haunts *Lose Your Mother*, what does? Aware of this lurking question, Hartman responds by owning up to the book's personal investments. The text's discouraging darkness, she accepts, is deeply indicative of her stalking despair. Early, in fact, Hartman discloses that her interest in slavery is partially motivated by a belief that it has shaped the person she has become. The sad fates of those millions stolen, bought, sold, and killed, she is convinced, somehow find expression in her soul. Their death sentences compose her life's story. As she concedes at one point, a grave in Africa marks the proper beginning for her autobiography.

Yet this take on the connection between the author's affective life and her writing on slavery is not the only valid one, perhaps not even the immediately obvious one. The logic might just as easily be reversed; in other words, it is no less credible to view the history Hartman has chosen to write as the product of the person she has become. Both forms of reasoning are legitimate and ultimately inseparable, belonging to a circle of causation. Still, each implies a different emphasis. The second approach, importantly, suspends the presumption about the appropriate point of entry for Hartman's autobiography. It does not make slavery the self-evident start, leaving open the possibility of a story with a different timeline. This perspective could endorse training attention on Hartman's lived experiences rather than on "history." To what extent, for example, might her Brooklyn upbringing—and not the plight of fugitive slaves—better account for the melancholy that pervades her worldview. *Lose Your Mother*, however, does not entertain this kind of query. As autobiography, it tends to tease, remaining mostly guarded about the signal turns, eddies, erosions and falls that shaped the course of the author's life. Saidiya, the text lets on, is a loner and can be argumentative, short-tempered and stubborn. We are at a loss, however, as to how she became that way.

In this autobiographical regard, some of the most pregnant moments of *Lose Your Mother* are those that invoke the underlying rift between the author and her mother. The portrait of this pair, however sketchy, conveys a compelling alienation. Perhaps, it has something to do with the fact that I'm writing this review in Trinidad, where my own mother still lives (rather than in my Brooklyn apartment), and where I'm thus forced to recalibrate our bond. But, whatever the reason, I could not escape speculating about whether the title of the work unwittingly alludes to Hartman's uneasy relationship with her mother. The author reveals a coming-of-age experience filled with withdrawal and rebelliousness forcefully directed at her mother. Just as telling, there is no recollection of occasions of accord or solidarity between them (save the existence of a color line), no record of lightness or warmth. Mother-daughter dealings can be notoriously difficult, and this relationship bears classic symptoms of a filial ailment. If true, then might it be that the author's aggrieved sense of self betrays a breach with her own twentieth century made-in-America black biological mother rather than with unknowable ancestral African mothers? Fascinated by Hartman's utter refusal of her mother's designs, I longed to learn more about the fate of their tension-filled tie as the daughter reached adulthood. How, for example, did the mother respond to Valarie's rechristening? Did she ever adopt "Saidiya?" These questions point to a more fundamental and, in the end, awkwardly and perhaps impolitely intimate one: do Saidiya and her mother lose each other?

Although *Lose Your Mother* is a paean to the loss of kin, it evokes nonetheless the power of the love for them. The people we call kin mold our lives in countless and often insalutary ways; far too frequently, in fact, they are the causes of stubborn scars and unyielding injuries. Still, family I like to think of as a kind of trade-school of care. The lessons learnt and cultivated there are inseparable from apprehensions of the significance of human sociability (from marriage to politics to labor). If it is by now a truism that the personal is political, the familial just might be philosophical. Seen this way, the love worked on among blood relations is the seed and the struggle to free all people the fruit.

This labor in love does not get easier as we age. Indeed, properly playing the part of an adult child can be a frustratingly difficult and delicate act. Intrinsically contradictory, it tears us in two opposite directions. It demands that we simultaneously resume old ill-fitted roles of deferral and assume the new responsibility of seeing mothers and fathers as people with full rich lives beyond the familiar bounds of parental guidance. Love at this stage, unhinged from dependency, is an imposing challenge. For many of us academics who have "done good" (or, at least, done "better" than our parents), it is especially tough. Loving our mothers and fathers often requires a sacrificial stretching of self as we seek to come to terms with what we regretfully regard as their unworldly ways. It calls for a daily practice of reaching out, of reasoning and sometimes of simply resigning to views and tales that would otherwise offend. Far from sappy and sentimental, this has to be more often than not bone-like love, hard and dry. It is love dedicated to enduring, and hence a love endlessly labile, pitched to argue through tears and freed to laugh out in the middle of an argument. Yes, Hartman is right. Love does indeed have

everything to do with it. For, in its absence, what she calls mother loss is not just a discrete fatality but a daily dripping despair.⁶

This essay is dedicated to my mother, who practices more love than I could ever conceive, and to Clarissa, who opens my eyes.

Notes

¹See, for example, recent works by Vincent Brown, *The Reaper's Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery*, and David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment*. Conferences and citations suggest a thick trafficking of knowledge among these scholars, the author and others. Pioneering and even paradigmatic statements on this themes can be found in the work of Hortense Spillers, see especially "Mama's Baby Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book."

²For more on this subject, see James Campbell, *Middle Passages: African-American Journeys to Africa 1787-2005* and Kevin Gaines, *American Africans in Ghana: Black Expatriates and the Civil Rights Era*.

³See, for example, Bayo Holsey, *Routes of Remembrance: Refashioning The Slave Trade in Ghana*.

⁴For further discussion of the history of "statelessness," see Linda Kerber, "Toward A History of Statelessness in America."

⁵One of the clearest statements of this view can be found in David Scott's *Refashioning Futures: Criticism After Postcoloniality*, especially chapter 1.

⁶I am grateful to Donette Francis, Patricia Saunders and Sandra Paquet for generously sharing their comments and suggestions.

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