Round Table

Journal of American Studies, **44** (2010), e1. doi:10.1017/S0021875810000071

Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007, $25.00 cloth, $14.00 paper). Pp. xi + 270. ISBN 978 0 374 27082 7, 0 374 27082 1.

INTRODUCTION

Saidiya Hartman's previous monograph, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford University Press, 1997) emphasized that the exercise of power is inseparable from its display, with the violence of slavery embodied in performance practices in antebellum America, turning terror into theatre, from minstrelsy to melodrama, slave narrative, the sentimental novel, ethnography and the slave auction. Steeped in the literature of race and class, Hartman pondered how the historian could find the black subject in the white-controlled archive. In her second book, race almost disappears in favour of class and economics, in a blend of autobiography, fiction, history and travelogue, the result of a year in Ghana exploring the slave routes. Far from pursuing elusive documentary evidence, Hartman follows in the footsteps of Pierre Macherey and Michel-Rolph Trouillot in emphasizing the gaps and silences in the story. "Lose Your Mother" becomes an imperative phrase, commanding the reader to abandon the notion of return to an African motherland, to give up on artificially constructed memories and invented rituals of recovery, in favour of recognizing that the economies of theft and predation which produced internal African slavery, and then the transatlantic slave trade, continue to operate globally today. Unlike Toni Morrison's practice of "re-memory," where the past erupts into the present in Gothic fashion, here the present (often in the character of an obdurate or insouciant Ghanaian) breaks into the narrator's ruminations on the past. As if to repudiate the practice of the guild historian, the method is intensely digressive. Where most historians aim for a tightly controlled narrative, impersonal and without irrelevance, Hartman deliberately interrupts herself. The description of the slave forts, for example, is interrupted not only by a pop-music-fixated Ghanaian adolescent but also by a whole chapter on the Dutch slave trade and Hartman's ancestry, returning to the fort to discuss the history of the Portuguese Saint George, to be interrupted again by a Ghanaian schoolboy proffering a begging letter, and thence moving on to the Revolt of Saint John in 1733, led by enslaved black aristocrats who themselves were slaveholders. Digression protects in some ways against emotion, maintaining a degree of distance

from a traumatic site, but it also makes a point about the writing of history. In the course of the narrative Hartman provides a wealth of historical analysis (footnoted and illustrated) and a succession of finely crafted stories, complete in themselves, describing the experiences of Ottobah Cugoano and Philip Quaque, modern Ghanaian political history, the interdependence of kola and slaves as traded commodities, pan-Africanism and Afrotopia, northern Ghanaian resistance to slave raiders, and a tour de force narration (in the voices of each participant in the ensuing murder trial, plus the victim) of the murder of a slave girl by Captain Kimber on the slave ship *Recovery* in 1792. Yet the finely crafted and detailed stories are undercut by the digressive context in which they are situated. In their tightly shaped form they question the ease with which this sort of historical narrative can be written. It is rather as if the reader turned away from the priceless treasures dug up by the archaeologist in favour of the rather dull-looking context in which they are embedded. That context also includes Hartman, who is a decidedly anti-heroic narrator. At the start she tells two anecdotes which establish her own abjection (professional and personal). Working in the Yale Library she discovers her great-great-grandmother in a volume of slave testimony. But she loses the reference – when she goes back she is never able to find it again. If this is a brave admission for an archival scholar, worse is to follow. On arrival in Accra in a power cut she spots soldiers, jeeps and tanks, assumes a coup is in progress, and immediately wets herself. (The troops are merely on manoeuvres.) In the course of her stay, she realizes that she renamed herself from Valarie to Saidiya without enough knowledge of Swahili as a trade language. (Her name is usually the beggar's call for alms.) In Ghana people find her dull or irritating. She characterizes herself as a monster in a cage with a sign – "Danger. Snarling Negro. Keep Away" – and when she joins a group of researchers to visit Salaga, promptly falls out with them all. Hers is no sentimental "McRoots" enterprise. But her method is her message. The Ghanaian public memory of slavery (economically motivated in part by the benefits of heritage tourism) is focussed on the African American story so that "remembering slavery" becomes a way of silencing the past in the guise of preserving it, avoiding discussion of the internal trade as the product of African elitism and dictatorship, and as a stimulus to capitalism. What is sold back to tourists is the memory of their ancestors. Memory is itself a commodity, bought and sold in the markets of global tourism, and the link between Africa and African Americans is not the achievements of the great African states which sold those ancestors, but a relationship of economic exchange. For Hartman, therefore, the transatlantic story is not the master narrative, and its characters are not the heroes but are playing bit parts in the story of global capitalism. African history consists of anecdotes, tales, recollections, odd bits and pieces and fragments of narrative which cohere into an assemblage of overlapping disparate histories, in which there is never one African identity but many plural and contested ones. Arguably, by shifting between genres, pushing at the limits of the discipline of history, drawing on autobiography, fiction and travelogue, *Lose Your Mother* gets closer to the truth about slavery itself and its afterlife in the present. While it is beautifully written popular history, its crossover appeal is also intellectually well founded on an innovative method.

University of Nottingham JUDIE NEWMAN

Part autobiography, part confession and part history lesson, Saidiya Hartman's experimental and intellectually groundbreaking work *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route* signifies upon at the same time as it challenges white racist parameters of the nineteenth-century slave narrative genre. More particularly, she signals her rejection of the problematic desires of white abolitionists which required that the fugitive slave recount a litany of horrors and offer up their scarified backs, not only to qualify for their own freedom but also to effect white moral redemption. According to this schema, exploited and suffering bodies of evidence functioned as the only legitimate heirs of slavery's untold and unseen atrocities. By contrast, Hartman's experimental work dramatizes the powerful reality that, while she tried initially to articulate some form of missionary zeal – "I wanted to redeem the enslaved" – she was ultimately forced to acknowledge a haunting truth: "In my heart I knew my losses were irreparable" (54). No trajectory of cathartic uplift mapping an oversimplified journey from slavery to freedom, this twenty-first century testimony bears witness not to acts of self-making and rebirth but to those of self-dissolution and fragmentation. Hers are not customary moments of "epiphany" but dramatic tableaux testifying to a dual heritage of remembering and forgetting in histories characterized as much by concealment as by revelation. Ancestry – both real and imagined – lacerates and haunts Hartman's multiple journeys – intellectual, psychological, physical – in this daring work. Above all else, her painful and powerful testimony bears witness to a historical and political amnesia resulting in physical and psychological alienation.

"*WTCS25* or *T99* – no one wants to identify her kin by the cipher of slave-trading companies, or by the brand, which supplanted identity and left only a scar in its place" (80). By creating a work of stark self-examination, Hartman ultimately dramatizes the frustrations and failures of re-creating and reimagining the hidden legacies of enslaved Africans living and dying for centuries in the fetid slaveship holds of the Middle Passage or upon gruelling plantations of the American South. For Hartman, acts of memorialization legitimize cultural amnesia by replicating the dynamics of power similarly embedded in racist practices responsible for violations historically visited upon enslaved bodies. Horrific rituals such as branding which exchanged identities for scars, public auctions which traded in human chattels, and punitive rituals which performed acts of inhumane violation, all resulted in cultural erasure via unspecified "journeys of no return." These historical realities remain no less traumatizing for Hartman than any straightforward pretensions to "know" or commemorate a monolithic slave experience. Frederick Douglass's hope for the suffering bodies of slaves to be redeemed as "living parchments" or as pages upon which they could "write" their stories finds no resonance in Hartman's discovery of individuals designated solely as "*WTCS25* or *T99*." Voiceless, bodiless and nameless, no amount of excavation can recover these lost legacies in a post-slavery era. Burdened by histories whose realities remain unfathomable and by ancestors anonymized by racist archives, her only salvation or prospect for redemption resides in personal embodiment. As she writes, "I, too, am the afterlife of slavery" (6).

Hartman's war upon the rhetoric and iconography of the white United States abolitionist movement speaks to the traumatic struggles of the survivor via a confessional poetics characterized by both visibility and invisibility. Simultaneously inhabiting a post-emancipation era and living with the emotional legacies of slavery,

hers is a post-heroic age in which martyrdom and victimhood have lost their currency only to be replaced by anti-epic, mundane rituals of oppression. As she argues, "I was blind to everything but the insignificance of the past and the unremarkable routine of the present" (69). Dispossessed and rootless, she both inhabits and is excluded from a kaleidoscopic array of diasporic identities, none of which seem real or capable of healing "scars" both unknown and unidentified. As an *obroni* or "stranger" in Ghana, Hartman's only source of hope in this text is to explore the psychological landscape of the imagination: an interior, atemporal terrain as yet unscarred and unfettered by forces of colonization and enslavement. The defining features of the seemingly global slave narrative that Hartman creates or conjures up in collaboration with an elusive past are ellipsis and obfuscation. Literary strategies of telling and untelling dominate this book as she sifts the "bare bones" (11) for "unknown and unspeakable" (14) histories which remain just beyond her reach in "search of people who left behind no traces" (15). A historian with no archive, hers is the quest of the archaeologist whose excavation unearths no human remains. Such an approach leads to scholarly lacunae, emotional bereavement and even intellectual mirage as she imagines stories that are not there or have ceased to exist. "Had my need for an entrance into history played tricks on me," she speculates, "mocked by scholarly diligence, and exposed me as a girl blinded by mother loss?" (16). Her inability to see speaks to the troubled politics and poetics of representation within mainstream representations of slavery and histories of the enslaved that have existed for centuries. As she admits, "To read the archive is to enter a mortuary" (17). The act of "reading" fails to liberate by testifying to the annals of the dead rather than reimagining the histories of the living. Herein lies a crucial paradox: to interpret an enslaved legacy is often to destroy it. As Hartman writes, "I am the progeny of the captives. I am the vestige of the dead" (18). As such, her body functions as a slippery but palpable site of unofficial memorialization.

A mourner with no site at which to grieve, Hartman does not shy away from confronting the "historical debris of my present" (39). While other "émigrés" to Africa "went to be healed," she explains, "I went to excavate a wound" (40). And it is her preoccupation with scarring no less than wounding which constitutes Hartman's radical protest against the conventions of scholarly research and the burdens of official commemoration. For Hartman, the only way to reimagine and recover the realities of slave suffering and obtain any hope of healing is by dramatizing the failures presented by unidentifiable, "unspeakable" languages which defy translation. Far from a linear process, such a poignant search is characterized by repetition and reimagining. "For me," she writes, "the rupture was the story" (42). In this context, Hartman's text offers a liberating way out of an abolitionist politics of representation and storytelling as characterized by a penchant for determinist narratives which traded in psychological appropriation and emotional ownership. In clear-cut defiance, hers is a narrative not of answers but of questions: questions which critique the ideological, racist and nationalist biases of "unspeakable" histories. Hartman's introspection and self-reflexivity trouble the unseen waters of the twenty-first century: "What was the afterlife of slavery and when might it be eradicated? What was the future of the ex-slave?" (45).

And yet Hartman struggles with her own demons in this book. She remains afflicted by a sense of defeat and nihilistic despair that twenty-first-century members

of the community in Ghana are not crippled by their history in ways that she imagines they should be. Disappointed with the hustle and bustle of everyday life surrounding Elmina Castle, she admits, "I would have preferred mourners with disheartened faces and bowed heads and the pallor of sadness coloring the town. Or at least something Gothic: bloodstained ruins, human skulls scattered like cobblestones in the street, the castle draped in black crepe" (50). This excerpt bears witness to a frustrated Hartman briefly resorting to a grisly hunt for "bloodstained ruins" and "human skulls" in an attempt to recover not the poetically elusive, but the historically verifiable, "facts" of slavery. Such a search risks reviving the reductive and dehumanizing tendencies of white abolitionists who believed that it was possible to remember and retell the entirety of slavery's horrors simply by exhibiting naked bodies, artefacts of torture, and/or recovering seemingly uncensored testimonies of enslaved women and men replete in all their ghoulish horrors. As such, Hartman's rejection of the "prosaic conduct of everyday life" (50) as unfitting and disrespectful in the shadow of the slave fort has the potential similarly to deny a historical reality within which it was not only bodies which were bought and sold but also the means to their archival recovery and memorialization. Thus, while she maintains throughout that "I don't want to paint too simple a picture of things" (73), it is at this moment she runs the risk of doing just that in her disappointment that she is unable to find any "bloodstained ruins."

Ultimately, however, it is this internal conflict which gives rise to one of the most powerful moments in the text as Hartman recognizes the problematic futility of any such approach by rejecting the seeming emotional power or validity of physical markers and/or visceral realities of human remains. She engages powerfully and self-consciously with the difficulties of memorializing slavery via an imaginative evocation of the past. In the face of discoveries by archaeologists who had "identified the topmost layer of the floor" of the slave holds "as the compressed remains of captives – faeces, blood, and exfoliated skin" (115), she articulates militant resistance: "I refused this knowledge. I blocked it out and proceeded across the dungeon as if the floor was just that and not the remnants of slaves pressed further into oblivion by the soles of my shoes" (115). Hartman's rejection of the realities of this "base matter" returns the text to her resistance to the white abolitionist "trade" in bodies of evidence. She also differentiates her approach from the experimental canvases and body prints of contemporary artists such as David Hammons and Howardena Pindell, both of whom work with dirt, faeces and blood to create uncensored and liberated visual languages through which to dramatize the horrors of slavery. By comparison, Hartman rejects any emphasis upon physical signs or markers to return to her preoccupation with "rupture" and "wound" as the only legitimate means to memorialize the hidden histories of slavery. As she writes, "In the dungeon, there were remains but no stories that could resurrect the dead except the stories I invented" (116). "Even in the museum, the slaves were missing," she adds (116). Nothingness and erasure – "missing" bodies and "invented" narratives – traumatize Hartman and yet they provide her with the means to reach beyond histories of black commodification and appropriation.

The power of Hartman's lyrical and confrontational narrative arises in her self-reflexivity, which articulates an experimental aesthetic vis-à-vis the relationships between monuments, audiences and histories. Her search for realities – "My hands

glided over the walls, as though the rough surfaces were a script that I could read through my dull fingers" (119) – initially returns us to abolitionist displays of naked bodies as "scripts" upon which to write narratives of white emancipation complicit in effacing black suffering. And yet there is a key difference. Hartman comes to the brave realization that, "I, TOO, was a failed witness" (129). "I am as guilty as the rest," she admits regarding her relationship to one enslaved woman's story, "I too am trying to save the girl, not from death or sickness or a tyrant but from oblivion" (137). The fundamental success of Hartman's narrative lies in her realization that, in the context of exhibition and spectacular consumption, black bodies resting in "oblivion" are those with their dignity, history and agency intact. Such a recognition cuts to the enduring difficulties of memorialization which violates in the act of excavation. Hartman notes powerfully, "'Remembering slavery' became a potent means of silencing the past" (164).

Staking a claim to empowerment in a declaration of independence, Hartman declares, "I didn't want to display my scars" (168). Thus while she writes, "The demands of the slave on the present have everything to do with making good the promise of abolition," her experimental narrative has gone far beyond the circumscribed parameters of such "an unfinished struggle" (170). As she acknowledges, "I had nothing to show for the time endured. I had collected no artifacts. I had found no stories" (175). As a failed latter-day abolitionist with no curios to exhibit, Hartman emerges from *Lose Your Mother* as a powerful memorialist fully respectful of "the slipperiness and elusiveness of slavery's archive" (17). Against a backdrop of scholarly research, popular memorialization and abolitionist history within slavery studies, Saidiya Hartman reimagines resurfacing traumas to map the *tabula rasa* of the Atlantic slave trade, unspoken and unseen because still unknown.

University of Nottingham CELESTE-MARIE BERNIER

Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother* is among the most painfully honest documents recently produced to confront the agony of displacement felt by a hybridized ex-slave female consciousness when turned back towards Africa. Hartman's book sets out a bleak meditative landscape, yet by studying the forms of this new violent imaginative terrain it is possible to readdress central questions relating to African, African American, European and even Afro-Brazilian encoding of the memory of slavery in the black Atlantic. It is difficult to settle upon what form this multivalent, destructive and self-destructive book takes, and in this sense it may embody the miasmal presence of Africa within the African American consciousness. Its elaborations and transformations of historical texts from the slavery archive into neo-biography destabilize fact and fiction with an unremitting suspicion, and a furious nervous energy.

Lose Your Mother is a difficult text to place in formal terms. It is not history, although it is in dialogue with many historiographies. Despite the fact that it includes a large number of images these remain dumb unsupported exhibits, a silent untitled collage. Only two of the twenty-seven reproduced pictures are explicitly discussed in the text in any sort of detail, and so the book makes no serious attempt to become

art history. Hartman leaves her open signs to speak for themselves, and they consequently emerge as an uncontrolled text within a text, an exhibition without a catalogue, a parentless family. This book is not fiction, although it attempts occasional forays into historical reconstruction, and it obstinately refuses to become cultural anthropology. It is not conventional autobiography, yet it certainly incorporates confessional elements in passages which can be both atavistic and harshly honest. The pure brutality with which Hartman takes herself and her preconceptions apart is at points almost unbearable. No one could be harder on Saidiya Hartman than she is on herself, and this gives her work an emotional authority that is riveting and constantly shocking. This is an angry, sad, bitter, self-lacerating text which refuses, utterly, the option that African Americans can effortlessly tap into a set of African "roots" which will nurture them, and heal over the traumatic inheritance of slavery. Indeed the book is a significant cultural marker, in that it constitutes a new kind of African American testimony, one fixed in an unrelieved anxiety over rootlessness. The book is saturated with dread and uncertainty over what the African American relation to Africa might mean, and in a conviction that the final inheritance of slavery is locked within a sense of cultural, national and racial displacement. The book also looks harshly at the realities of African, and specifically Ghanaian, attitudes to African Americans, and is prepared to critique the burgeoning and troubling phenomenon of what has become labelled "trauma tourism" on the west coast of Africa. The book displays a pessimistic and unforgiving attitude to Africa, its role in the slave trade, and the ambiguous reconstruction of this aspect of its history.

Lose Your Mother might then be seen as a form of diasporic *Bildungsroman*; a coming-of-age drama in which the female protagonist loses all faith in "Mother Africa" as a potential source of spiritual nourishment for the ex-slave populations. Hartman's teleology, moving from a childish desire to be loved by, and to love, Africa, into a position of hopeless isolation from, and contempt for, the continent, marks something more than an individual's journey. She may have created a paradigm shift, because she is located at the opposite extreme from a recent swathe of Afrocentric scholarship. Several recent scholars working in a variety of fields have attempted to resurrect specific connections between creole communities across the Atlantic diaspora, and the specific African ethnicities out of which these communities evolved.[1]

Gwendelyn Midlo Hall's *Slavery and African Ethnicities in the Americas: Restoring the Links* (University of North Carolina Press, 2005), with its self-explanatory title, is the most accessible distillation of recent work which attempts to reclaim Africa for the diaspora. This book insists that it is possible for research to recover links between African communities and surviving cultural elements within the ex-slave populations. Hall's work consequently might be seen to constitute a new form of

[1] Much of the most significant work has been done by African scholars. Key books to appear in the new millennium are Toyin Falola and Matt D. Childs, eds., *The Yoruba Diaspora in the Atlantic World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004); Toyin Falola and Niyi Afolabi, eds., *African Minorities in the New World* (New York and London: Routledge, 2008); Akinwumi Ogundiran and Toyin Falola, eds., *Archaeology of Atlantic Africa and the African Diaspora* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007).

pan-Africanism. Unlike the idealistic but frequently counterfactual pan-Africanism of the 1960s, Hall's work grows out of meticulous research, and particularly the new emphasis on African languages and art forms which has suggested that explicit connections between Africa and the Americas can be resurrected. Because this work is synthetic and looks right across the Atlantic diaspora, including the whole of Latin America, it seeks to place North American slavery within a larger pattern where strong links with Africa are a cultural reality. In contrast, Hartman's work, based in a personal quest to recover the memory of slavery within Africa, eschews an inclusive paradigm for the study of North American slavery. She sees African Americans today as irredeemably cut off from their African roots. The significant reintegration of African Americans into the cultures of Africa is rejected as a dangerous fantasy which Africans are only too willing to exploit for their financial gain.

From the opening words, Hartman constructs herself as a stranger in Africa; she sees Africans who can only see her as *obroni*, the foreigner.[2] She experiences hostility, resentment, distrust, feelings which emerge as all the more intense because she is not tuned into ways in which African humour, sarcasm and irony operate both as bonding rituals and as survival mechanisms. This lack puts her both at an advantage and at a severe disadvantage. As a foreigner of any sort in Africa you have to spend a lot of time not only being laughed at but laughing at yourself, given what is bound to befall you.

In my experience Ghanaians are only serious about serious matters; for the most part they are "gayful" ironic people with a satiric streak running through their marrow. They have developed a wealth of idioms which demonstrate this quality. In Ghanaian English "PhD" stands for "pull him down" or "pull her down," and all politics is "politricks." Ghanaians take to the mocking of Americans with some alacrity and it doesn't matter if they are black or white Americans, if they haven't "got a side." They will mock any "huhudinous kakalikas," or any "posturists," "suffermen" or "sufferwomen" indulging in "mouth-mouth lie-lie tongues-speaking." There are many idioms in their English directed against "fanfaronading," "face-squeezing" and other aspects of self-involved demonstrative emotionalism, none of which leave Ghanaians exactly "flabberwhelmed" with American slavery tourists; after all, "this is Ghana." Ghanaians who leave Africa and do well are described as "eating with both hands in America now." To eat with your left hand in Ghana is of course an obscene gesture. Hartman won't laugh with them, or at them, or at herself, but meets them head on with unremitting seriousness, and the result is a tragic but useful collision. African humour exists in part in order to create places to hide; Hartman will have none of it and so there is nowhere to hide – not for her, not for the Africans she meets, and not for her readers.

[2] In fact, if the Ghanaians did call Hartman *obroni* to her face it would have been even more insulting than she thought. In pure terms as an African American who is not pure black she would be termed "broni Pete" half-caste. She would also more probably have been referred to as "cocola faced" or "fanta-faced" – terms for blacks who bleach themselves and are American, or look towards America for their life standards. *Obroni* is a term usually reserved for white, particularly European, foreigners, and in applying this term to a black female American there is a particularly cruel jibe in that she is stripped of her black identity because of her perceived white wealth and behaviour.

If one pulls back to a larger historical perspective then Hartman's book is both a proof of, and a lament over, the death of the pan-Africanist fantasies elaborated by African Americans of what might be termed "the Roots generation." Hartman's entire project evolves as a reaction against everything Alex Haley had set out to do, and presents a vision of sub-Saharan West Africa not as a vast maternal presence and cradle of civilization, but as the space of horror which generated the Atlantic slave trade.[3] Hartman's modernity, and distance from the pan-Africanism of the 1960s, is evident in the way she enters her book as a self-proclaimed trauma tourist, and maintains this position throughout. Her separation from Africa, her refusal to look for a shared cultural inheritance within Africa, her conviction that Africans were massively and knowingly complicit in the development of the slave trade, and her determination to show that they are now in various states of denial over this issue, are set out with clarity at the start, and are positions which do not shift:

> My generation was the first that came here with the dungeon as our prime destination, unlike the scores of black tourists who, motivated by Alex Haley's *Roots*, had travelled to Ghana and other parts of West Africa to reclaim their African patrimony. For me the rupture was the story. Whatever bridges I might build were as much the reminder of my separation as my connection. The holding cell had supplanted the African village. The slave trade loomed larger for me than any memory of a glorious African past or any sense of belonging in the present. (42)

This passage essentializes the manner in which Hartman glories in and celebrates the distorted nature of her vision. She is going to saturate herself in one side, the dark side of the story, because as far as she is concerned that is all that Africa offers the returning diasporic child of slaves. So at one level the book reads like an act of revenge, slapping down Haley's rapturous and redemptive mythologization of Africa at every turn, and presenting a counterthesis to recent defences of African slavery as benign. Indeed, there are several passages where Hartman sets out her intention as if it is a declaration of war:

> Unlike Alex Haley who embraced the lost clans of Juffure as his own, grafted his family into the community's genealogy, and was feted as the lost son returned, I travelled to Ghana in search of the expendable and the defeated. I had not come to marvel at the wonders of African civilization, or to be made proud by the royal court of Asante, or to admire the great states that harvested captives and sold them as slaves. I was not wistful for aristocratic origins. Instead I would seek the commoners, the unwilling and coerced migrants who created a new culture in the hostile world of the Americas. (7)

Hartman is setting herself up as the new voice of testimony for Africa's forgotten victims, a mouthpiece for Africa's homegrown subaltern yet silenced slave voices. She has come to see and to imagine the things which Africans will not see and

[3] Although her primary targets are the "Afrotopians" of the 1960s, Hartman's work also runs powerfully counter to increasingly benevolist constructions of mainland African slavery. For a summary of recent work in this area see Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Slavery and African Ethnicities in the Americas* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), 7–21. See also John K. Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

imagine for themselves; she will redeem them by seeing clearly the things which they want to hide, and to hide from. It is, of course, inevitable that with such clarity of purpose, such conscious and undeviating Manicheanism, such a commitment to revisionism, that not only Hartman, but Africa, is going to pay a certain representational price. Consequently the book is open to the charge that as far as West African societies are concerned Hartman has thrown the baby out with the bathwater, in that she ruthlessly excludes any sense of wonder at, or interest in, the art or cultural richness of any of the places she visits. She refuses to be seduced by, to wonder at, to exoticize, to celebrate, Africa; but that does not mean that according to her own dark imaginative prescriptions she will not fantasize it.

Alex Haley had an unshakeable confidence that finally he, and the seven generations preceding him, were profoundly and recognizably African. He is not oblivious to his own separateness from continental Africans. In the celebrated climax of *Roots* (Penguin, 1983), when he first arrives at his ancestral village the first thing he notices is that "everyone was jet black" and looking down at his "own hands' brown complexion … I felt myself some sort of hybrid" (677). Yet this does not prevent his experience among these people from rapidly transforming into something familial and celebratory. As soon as his ancient blood relation to this village is explained to the griot, and then to the villagers, the women approach him with their children, and he holds each in turn. He was, we are told,

> participating in one of the oldest ceremonies of humankind, called "The laying of on hands", and this contact establishes a seemless connection between the African villagers and the African American author which is compressed into the impromptu doggerel rhyme: "Through this flesh, which is us, we are you and you are us". (681)

It is quite precisely the terms of this formulation which Hartman's book is set on shattering. *Roots* celebrates the conviction that Haley's essential being, and that of all African Americans, grew organically out of African culture and specifically out of oral history. When Haley came to write the acknowledgements to what was, and what remains, the most influential book ever written about the relation of African culture to the self-identity of African Americans, he ended with the following paean:

> Finally I acknowledge a great debt to the griots of Africa – where today it is rightly said that if a griot dies it is as if a library has burned to the ground. The griots symbolize how all human ancestry goes back to some place and some time where there was no writing. Then the memories and the mouths of ancient elders was the only way that early histories of mankind got passed along … for all of us today to know who we are.

Haley possessed an absolute faith that Africa would constitute an imaginative and historic archive which would tell him who he was. His book was a triumphant demonstration that "my maternal family's treasured oral history [could] be documented back to Africa where all black Americans began." His book presents a vision of Africa, or more precisely an African inheritance, that overflows with dignity, creativity, love, morality, beauty, strength and respect for tradition. This is the patriarchal Muslim world of mid-seventeenth-century inland Senegambia, the depiction of which takes up the novel's first third. This is the version of "mother Africa" which he, and a whole generation of African Americans, sought to embrace

in the 1960s and 1970s.[4] The title of Hartman' book is *Lose Your Mother*, and the mother she finally loses is Haley's version of mother Africa. Hartman's book consequently presents a traumatized and traumatic antithesis to Haley's, and the final darkness of this text comes out of its anti-Hegelianism, in that it refuses to suggest that out of her collision with Haley there might be any possibility of the evolution of a third way, a synthesis. She knowingly walks, and walks her reader, into a dead end; there is no way forward.

Hartman's quest to discover what Africa might mean to her hybridized African American consciousness gives her almost nothing but pain, and the excruciating certainty that there is no possibility of naively claiming a vibrant, organic and sustaining set of cultural roots. She develops relationships with very few Africans during the few months she stays in Ghana, and all that seems to come out of these interactions is pragmatic disdain, disguised and open forms of ridicule, constant suspicion, envy, resentment, and above all blanket rejection of any claim on her part to be an African. Hartman shines a harsh and undeviating light on African moral corruption and historical evasion, past and present, over the slave trade. Yet what finally makes this text really important (and her critique of contemporary Africa permissible) is that she is then prepared to push things further, and to shine an even brighter and less forgiving light on the painful responses which her own attitudes create. She mercilessly searches, and anatomizes, the responses of the Africans who feel attacked or insulted by her, but she also testifies to her own responses to these responses, no matter how unflattering, hypocritical, solipsistic or ignorant they might be. Consequently this book contains some of the most undisguised self-criticism I have ever seen; it uncovers the author's psychopathology. It is the constant element of unremitting self-flagellation, the unpitying examination of her own processes of self-pity, sadness, incomprehension and self-delusion, which make this book one of the most heartfelt acts of literary confession within Atlantic studies.

University of Sussex MARCUS WOOD

I am a creative writer. I tread on scholarly territory to comment on Professor Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route*, with great trepidation. I have been told it is an exemplar of a new historiography, which, in the words of Professor Alessandro Portelli, "changes the writing of history much as the modern novel changed the writing of literary fiction" because "the narrator is now one of the characters." However, I read an excerpt from *Lose Your Mother* in the online magazine *Narrative*, where my own work has appeared, and *Lose Your Mother* has been praised, by reviewers both scholarly and secular, on aesthetic grounds.

Professor Henry Louis Gates of Harvard said Hartman combined "the depth and breadth of a scholar … with the imagination of linguistic facility of a novelist."

[4] It is now too easily forgotten that the black radicalism of Malcolm X's Nation of Islam looked to a paternalistic fiction of Muslim Africa. Haley significantly was the editor/co-author of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, which he moulded out of interviews with Malcolm X. He finished the manuscript two weeks after the great radical's assassination.

Anne C. Bailey, associate professor at SUNY-Binghamton, called *Lose Your Mother* a "beautiful and insightful narrative." Assistant professor Harvey Neptune of Temple University said, "Retracing the coerced steps of the enslaved from African hinterland to … American workplaces … Its narrative is heavy with bereavement." Blurbed novelist Randall Kenan: "Wider and deeper than Alex Haley's landmark *Roots* … makes the Middle Passage more personal than heretofore imaginable." Gushed the *Publisher's Weekly* reviewer, "In this rousing narrative Hartman traces first-hand the progress of her ancestors." Burbled poetry editor Elizabeth Schmidt, in the *New York Times*, "a welcome illustration of the powers of innovative scholarship … driven by this writer's prodigious narrative gifts."

But on first looking into Hartman's odyssey, I thought of Mark Twain, who took issue with professors who lauded James Fenimore Cooper. "It was far from right," wrote Twain, "to deliver opinions on Cooper's literature without having read some of it."[5]

Some scholars, I understand, are uncomfortable with authorial intention. But writers (excepting poets) tend to agree with Twain; the writer should "say what he is proposing to say, not merely come near it," and, by corollary, commentators should take what is proposed into account. By writers' lights, then, it is far from right to say that Hartman traces her ancestors. "Neither blood nor belonging accounted for my presence in Ghana," she writes. "There were no survivors of my lineage or far-flung relatives of whom I had come in search, no places and people before slavery that I could trace" (7).

It also far from right to mention *Roots*. For Hartman most definitely says she is unlike "Alex Haley, who claimed the sprawling clans of Juffure as his own, grafted his family into the community's genealogy, and was feted as the lost son returned" (237), and even "unlike the scores of black tourists who, motivated by Alex Haley's *Roots*, had traveled to Ghana … to reclaim their African patrimony" (41).

Possibly Hartman distances herself because (unlike most Americans) she is aware of the ethical *annosus* afflicting *Roots*. But her intent, indeed, is unlike Haley's, and stated too explicitly to be fairly ignored: "In following the trail of captives from the hinterland to the Atlantic Coast, I intended to retrace the process by which lives were destroyed and slaves born" (6).

It is close to right, however, to praise Hartman's linguistic facility, for in contrast to her previous work, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, she here eschews Derridian complexities, theoretical prolixities and artless terms of art in favor of lyricism.

[5] Alessandro Portelli, "The Peculiarities of Oral History," *History Workshop Journal*, 12 (1981), 96–107. Henry Louis Gates, Randall Kenan, and *Publisher's Weekly* reviews available at http://www.amazon.com/Lose-Your-Mother-Atlantic/dp/product-description/0374270821. Anne C. Bailey, "Dungeons and Diaspora," *Ms* magazine, 28 Jan. 2007. Harvey Neptune, "Loving through Loss: Reading Saidiya Hartman's History of Black Hurt," Anthurium, 6, 1 (Spring 2008), available at http://anthurium.miami.edu/volume 6/issue 1/neptune.loving.html. Elizabeth Schmidt, "Erasing Slavery," *New York Times*, 11 Feb. 2007. Mark Twain, "Fenimore Cooper's Literary Offenses," available at http://etext.virginia.edu/railton/projects/rissetto/offense.html.

She delights with naturalistic metonyms ("Nothing had endured except blood, shit, and dirt" (119)), assonance, alliteration and antistrophe ("tight dark cells buried underground, barred cavernous cells, narrow cylindrical cells, dank cells, makeshift cells" (7)). She instructs on slave trade currencies in an elegant elegiac chapter, "Blood Cowries," and in "The Dark Days" transforms the unelectrified African night into a vehicle for her fear that her "quixotic mission … in search of people who left behind no traces" (17) will fail.

That fear emerges as a motif, as does Hartman's sense of alienation. "I wanted to belong somewhere" (4), she confesses, and is distracted to the point of paranoia when natives call her *obroni*, which she translates as "stranger" and says "forced me to acknowledge that I didn't belong anyplace." To these she adds a motif of rage at contemporary Africans who have again turned slavery into an industry: "Every town or village had an atrocity to promote … It was Ghana's equivalent to a fried chicken franchise" (163). As if guided by Burton's *Anatomy*, she merges fear, alienation and rage with costiveness and bad air ("The smell hung in a black cloud over Accra" (47)) to give *Lose Your Mother* a Keatsian melancholy, "a wakeful anguish of the soul."

But – as Twain would put it – Hartman's art has some defects. Some lines are less musical than muddleheaded: "This sense of not belonging and of being an extraneous element is at the heart of slavery. Love has nothing to do with it; love has everything to do with it" (88). A surplusage of metaphorical manifestations makes alienation seem whiny. Ignoring intermarriage, religious conversion, even race, she extends her master metaphor into self-serving simplism:

> The most universal definition of the slave is a stranger … She is the perpetual outcast, the coerced migrant, the shamefaced child … Contrary to popular belief, Africans did not sell their brothers and sisters into slavery. They sold strangers: those outside the web of kin and clan relationships, nonmembers of the polity, foreigners and barbarians at the outskirts of their country, and lawbreakers expelled from society. (5)

Still, it is also close to right to laud Hartman's narrative gifts. She follows most of Twain's "rules governing literary art," and finds Eliot's objective correlative in the castle – as slave-trading forts were called – at Cape Coast and, using a technique from historical fiction, she extrapolates from sketchy records to summon spirits long dead.

Nine lines in *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Commerce of the Human Species* (1787) by Quobna Ottobah Cugoano, a Fanti who was kidnapped at thirteen and transported to Grenada, inspires a fantasy of "Kwabena" who vomits at the filth on the floor of the Cape Coast dungeon but realizes, as he boards a slave ship, "why the men had clenched the muck … as though it were the soil of their country" (125).

The grave of Philip Quaque, another Fanti transported at thirteen, prompts her to speculation. Quaque was sent to England under the auspices of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, educated at Oxford, ordained an Anglican priest, and sent back as evangelist to the natives and chaplain to British slavers at Cape Coast Castle. Hartman imagines, "if the priest caught sight of the boy as he was being shipped from the fort" (126) and "If they encountered one another in the courtyard."

But, again, her art has some defects. These fantasies are impossible – Cugoano was not held in the castle, but aboard ship. And both men's realities are more compelling than fantasy. Cugoano conspired to "burn and blow up the ship, and to perish all together in the flames." Although that plot failed, Quaque, who "resided in the castle for twenty years before he dared mention slavery in a letter," broke his silence with nine lines reporting revolt aboard a Dutch slaver.

And Hartman seems less sympathetic to the quick than to the dead, for she fails to dramatize the dilemma of John and Mary Ellen Ray, black Americans less expatriated than stranded in Ghana when the law granting all blacks citizenship failed to pass. John's challenge: "Do you know what it feels like to be living in a place for nearly twenty years … and still being treated like a foreigner?" (44) goes unanswered; instead, Hartman appropriates his "stateless" status and dismisses him as cynical and inebriated. That Mary Ellen rejects the label African American gives Hartman only brief pause – until Hartman applies it to herself.

It is nowhere near right to call *Lose Your Mother* a narrative – it is not supposed to be. Hartman's intent predicts a travelogue – a first-person, time-ordered record of experiences, observations, meditations, and realizations inspired by a journey. Granted, travelogue can be as boring as a tour operator's brochure. But travel can generate conflict, suspense, every type of irony; and a writer attuned to connotations can make "journey" and "destination" moving metaphors.

Hartman is so attuned. "The slave route," she writes, is "both an existent territory with objective coordinates and the figurative realm of an imagined past" (9). But, to again invoke Twain, who knew a bit about the travelogue form, *Lose Your Mother* "has no order, system, sequence." The Prologue opens with Hartman arriving in Elmina, site of another castle. Chapter 1 opens at a guesthouse in Accra, on her first night – ends with her arrival at the airport. In chapter 2 she again arrives in Elmina, which might be seen as postmodern variation if Hartman did not continue to digress – to St. George, Sir Thomas More's, the slave revolt on St. John and, despite disavowal, her family history – and does it so often the Elmina visit figures in four chapters.

Her visit to Cape Coast is more unified, but still ruptures continuity. When she stumbled on Quaque's grave she "had never heard of the black priest" (126). She injects information that was discovered "only later … at the Bodleian Library at Oxford" and obviously had had no affect on current experience.

Hartman's intention requires her to follow at least one of Ghana's slave routes. She follows none. For months she lingers in Accra, where "it was hard to picture the slave routes" (22). Then she visits coastal castles. Though the phrase "as I traveled through Ghana" suggests continuation, she mentions no destinations; it seems she returns to Accra. When she at last lights out for the hinterland, she mentions only two destinations, both in the Baedeker: Salaga, in central Ghana, once a bustling slave market, and Gwolu, near the northern border.

The problem is, she makes two trips. Each has its own origin and terminus; thus there can be no sense of progress towards the destination, which is to say, no Unity of Action – in travelogue, the only Unity there is.

"A tale shall accomplish something and arrive somewhere," said Twain. *Lose Your Mother* seems poised to do so in Gwolu – "my last stop in the slave route," Hartman writes. It's also her last chance. But it is primed emotionally by a second visit to

Salaga, where a Kenyan woman, dressed "like an American" – "Nike baseball cap, auburn hair weave" (217) – dons allegedly authentic shackles and hobbles about, enraging Hartman. Gwolu itself would seem a site conducive to epiphany, for it was the origin of many captives, a refuge for thousands fleeing capture and a redoubt where residents built a wall to repel raiders. But "In Gowlu," writes Hartman, "it finally dawned on me that those who stayed behind told different stories than the children of the captives dragged across the sea" (232), and she follows "well, duh" with not a bang but a We-Are-the-World whimper:

> I didn't find what I had hoped to in Gwolu … At the end of the journey … Africa wasn't dead to me … My future was entangled with it just as it was entangled with every other place on the globe where people are struggling to live and hoping to thrive … (233)

Writers will be unsurprised that, as Twain said of *The Deerslayer*, *Lose Your Mother* accomplishes nothing and arrives in the air, for writers will have noticed that all along, Hartman has been going in some wrong direction – from coastal castle to coastal castle, or from the coast inland, never "from the hinterland," as her intention mandates. Scholars may not see why this matters unless they understand that, to a writer, intention can function as a research protocol.

Writers, nonetheless, will sympathize with Hartman's failure; we've all been there. There just *had* to be a story, and we promised to tell that story, but discovered there was no story, at least not one that we could tell. Black Americans who have been to Africa will empathize; trying to connect the dots between the theoretical African past and the visible African present is dizzying. Fear of failure and cultural vertigo encouraged Alex Haley's ethical errors. Before that, they had him standing on the fantail of a freighter thinking, "all I had to do was step through the rail and drop in the sea."

But as a black American writer I wonder if Hartman's failure did not spring from self-absorption. "Professor," John Ray tells her, "people are still being bought and sold in Ghana" (27). Hartman is irritated by his tone, but his words might have led her to *trokosi*, a still extant practice in which a family atones for transgression by giving a girl-child to a fetish priest as "a slave of the gods." This would have contradicted her "slave-as-stranger" paradigm; but in travelogue, drama happens when the theories of morning collide with the evidence of afternoon.

I have to wonder also if Hartman might have succeeded if she had been the one to don the shackles, or if, instead of taking wrong-way day-trips to metaphorical fried-chicken franchises, she had gotten out of the van to trek a mile or two.

Say what you will, before Alex Haley went over to the Dark Side, he boarded a freighter outbound from the Slave Coast and lay for two nights in the hold, trying to imagine the Middle Passage. Haley, like Hartman, failed. But Hartman, unlike Haley, did not attempt such immersion. This makes for art with defects. Whether it makes for innovative scholarship is not for me to say.

DAVID BRADLEY