

The Otherwise of History. Saidiya Hartman's New Radical Aesthetic of Historical Representation

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In *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* the Black American historian Saidiya Hartman writes that “the very effort to represent the situation of the subaltern reveals the provisionality of the archive as well as the interests that shape it and thereby determine the emplotment of history.” (Hartman 2022) This essay examines the recovery by Black feminist writing of the stories of the subaltern that have never been entirely told, proposing a new critical methodology that registers the gaps in the colonial archive and reconstructs a history of violence, injustice and domination without replicating the grammar of it (Hartman 2008). Thanks to her wayward method, Saidiya Hartman recreates the voices, the radical imagination, and the everyday practices of rebellion carried out by young Black women who tried to live as if they were free. Through a combination of different genres and styles, writing at the limit of the unspeakable and the unknown, Hartman's critical fabulation challenges the unidirectional linear representation of marginalized stories and characters. Rooted in archival facts and yet at once “imagined”, her work of reconstruction and fabulation highlights the relationships between power and voice and the constraints that determine not only what can be said but also who can speak.

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This article investigates contemporary radical thought and practices that seek to disrupt the presumption of the universality of history, in order to recognize its intrinsic plurality and the relevance of historical particularity. Central to this inquiry is the question of how to intervene in the archive – through re-readings, revisions, and experimental poetics – as a means of forging a new, ethically grounded historical practice. Such perspectives imply the interdisciplinary approaches of Cultural Studies so as to focus on the relationship between discourse, power, and otherness.

In this sense, the contemporary critical-literary experimentations that try to recover the histories that have never been entirely told in the historical archive offer an extraordinary example of po-ethics (Rich 2007), which is central in this engagement with the responsibility and the burden of history and representation. Through the analysis of the “critical fabulation” – the speculative method proposed by the historian Saidiya Hartman – I intend to examine the possibilities of reconstructing, without replicating its grammar, the history of quotidian violence, injustice, and domination experienced by the Black community during the transatlantic slave trade and later in the “afterlife of slavery” (Hartman 2008). But, most importantly, I try to highlight how Hartman crafts a counter-narrative that offers an intimate chronicle of Black radicalism, liberated from judgment, classification, and prejudice, which describes Black people as promiscuous, reckless, wild, and wayward.

Reading the Archive “Against the Grain”

As a scholar of African American literature and cultural history, Saidiya Hartman undertakes a deep archival work, reading the official documents, reading the official historical documents “against the grain to write a different account of the past” (Hartman 2022, 12). Critically engaging with the work of Michel Foucault, and other theorists, Hartman denounces the distortions of national history, and highlights the relationship between power and voice. By intertwining storytelling, visuality, and speculation, she challenges dominant historical narratives. Her focus is on the constraints and silences that determine what can be said and whose perspective matters, noting that “The archive of slavery rests upon a founding violence. This violence determines, regulates and organizes the kinds of statements that can be made about slavery and as well it creates subjects and objects of power” (Hartman 2008, 10).

Indeed, the archive has long been central in critical debates surrounding knowledge, power, and memory. Michel Foucault’s analysis in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972) – which positions the archive as a system that regulates what is knowable and sayable – alongside Jacques Derrida’s reflections on the archive’s dual function of preservation and exclusion (Derrida 1996), offer crucial insights into how the past is structured and how histories are both constructed and silenced. Yet, in this framework, archives often reflect dominant narratives that systematically marginalize – or entirely efface – the voices of women, colonized peoples, and other subaltern groups. While these thinkers unveil the power dynamics embedded in historical discourse, Hartman goes a step further by writing from within and against the archive to construct what can be described as an *otherwise of history* – a speculative, affective, and polyphonic approach that refuses to restore historical coherence and instead embraces rupture, absence, and the impossibility of total recovery. Whose voice is heard and whose is silenced? According to Hartman, “the very effort to represent the situation of the subaltern reveals the provisionality of the archive as well as the interests that shape it and determine the emplotment of history” (Hartman 2022, 12).

Writing at the edge of the unspeakable and the unknown, Hartman challenges the one-way representation of marginalized stories. Her speculative narrative mode – later termed *critical fabulation* – aligns with feminist epistemologies and counter-hegemonic memory practices. At the same time, she remains acutely aware of the tensions inherent in her method: she acknowledges the perceived illegitimacy of her speculative approach to historical writing and the paradoxical risk of reaffirming the authority of archival sources, even as she mobilizes them for opposing purposes and subversive ends.

In his essay, “La Historia como ficción, la ficción como historia”, José Saramago – winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1998 – similarly questions the objectivity of history, noting that, though it is often classified as an objective science, history is, in fact, not the past itself (Saramago 1989). Rather, it is a form of narration. In their accounts of the past, historians arrange events into a coherent order – an order shaped by ideological, social, and cultural choices. By selecting, choosing, including or excluding, their narrative creations also claim the sovereignty of what Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has termed “a single story” in her 2009 TED Talk (Adichie 2009). This means that, as Hayden White famously pointed out, historians “emplot” history by elaborating “facts” and ideologies through narrative structures – strategies that are similarly employed by literature (White 1973). Actually, as Saramago argues, history is not fundamentally different from fiction; they both share what he describes as “a rarefaction of the referral” (Saramago 1989), collapsing the boundary between fact and narrative form.

Such concerns about the ethics of historical representation are shared by many Black scholars and critical thinkers, whose voices interrogate what happens when literature wants to recover the lives of the unnamed and the forgotten in order to shape a counter-history of the human, and how imagination, fabulation and speculation can play a central role by marking the gaps of the colonial archive. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak argues in *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*, the act of imagining a different world is, first and foremost, an imaginative task. The reconfiguration of history, she suggests, can only be achieved through new forms of imagination and creative experiments. (Spivak 2012) Drawing on personal, cultural and archival memory, as well as creativity, Black Atlantic radical writers and thinkers offer a re-reading of history to acknowledge the existence of other stories, other voices, other sounds. In their efforts to “queer” the historical archive and articulate challenging responses to the question of why it is important to disrupt hegemonic historical paradigms and deconstruct official historiographies, such writers and artists transform a painful legacy into works of extraordinary beauty, giving birth to a new “Black aesthetic” – a dynamic, relational mode of artistic and historical reimagining rooted in Black experience and resistance. This aesthetic embraces opacity, intimacy, and speculation as tools of historical re-vision and aesthetic insurgency.

These radical re-readings of history also resonate with Édouard Glissant’s concept of a *poetics of relation*, which resists the linearity and closure of traditional (Western) historiography in favor of an open, plural, and interconnected vision of memory, identity, and space. (Glissant 1997) For Glissant, opacity – the refusal to be fully known – is a political right and a form of resistance to colonial epistemologies, and Hartman’s method of critical fabulation enacts this right, occupying the archival silence with narrative invention that does not seek mastery, but embraces relationality, fragmentation, and ambiguity, to produce a new ethical framework for historical narration.

How, then, can these experimentations trouble the line between history and imagination? How can we understand the value of the past and its enduring impact on

the present? If, in the past, the term “fabulation,” deriving from the Latin word *fabula*, indicated the act of fabricating false stories, today, it is placed at the heart of a radical ethics of historical representation. As Robert Scholes argued, fabulation should not be dismissed as mere falsehood, but rather recognized as a narrative mode that challenges conventional realism by embracing invention, play, and metafictional awareness. (Scholes 1979) In 2008, Saidiya Hartman proposed her historical method of critical fabulation in the essay “Venus in Two Acts” – though some instances of her new methodology can be traced in her previous books: *Scenes of Subjection* (2002) and *Lose Your Mother* (2007). The essay marks a pivotal moment in Hartman’s intellectual trajectory, providing a more explicit theorization of her innovative mode of writing – a synthesis of historical and archival research, critical theory, and fictional narrative. “Venus in Two Acts” serves as both a theoretical and aesthetic manifesto, prefiguring the experimental form and intimate focus of *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* (2019).

Like G.C. Spivak, Hartman is acutely aware of the risk of reinscribing domination through the very act of speaking for the silenced. Yet she diverges by proposing a form of narrative intervention that does not claim to fully recover or ventriloquize subaltern agency but instead gestures toward it through fragments, subjunctive possibilities, and polyphonic storytelling.¹ Hartman claims: “I think of my work as bridging theory and narrative” (Siemsen 2021, n.p.). Specifically, Hartman’s scholarly practice wants to make a productive sense of the gaps and silences in the archive of trans-Atlantic slavery that negate and silence the voices of so many enslaved people, notably women. She writes: “I intended both to tell an impossible story and to amplify the impossibility of its telling”. (Hartman 2008, 11)

Therefore, critical fabulation allows a connection to the past, and offers a way of engaging with history (Hamer 2020). Hartman’s exploration of the time of slavery cannot but highlight the relation between the past and the present, the coexistence of then and now in an irreparable injury. This is why her work, though anchored in the past, is fundamentally about the present. She writes:

My effort to reconstruct the past is, as well, an attempt to describe obliquely the forms of violence licensed in the present. [...] Narrative is central to this effort because of the relation it poses, explicit or implied, between past, presents and future. (Hartman 2008, 13)

As Hartman explains in “Venus in Two Acts”, the very “wayward” work is the political and ethical relevance of the past:

For me, narrating counter-histories of slavery has always been inseparable from writing a history of present, by which I mean the incomplete project of freedom, and the precarious life of the ex-slave, a condition defined by the vulnerability to premature death and to gratuitous acts of violence. (Hartman 2008, 4)

The questions guiding her work are: why tell these stories? Why go back to this violence and these horrible times? Did slavery really end? “Racial subjection, incarceration, impoverishment and second-class citizenship: this is the legacy of slavery that still haunts us [...] the living presence of slavery”. (Hartman 2002, 766) Echoing

¹ Hartman’s use of the subjunctive mood – the “might have been” and “could have happened” – is especially significant. It displaces the authority of the historian’s voice and invites readers to dwell in ambiguity, acknowledging both the violence of historical erasure and the imaginative labor required to envision lives that history has deemed unworthy of record.

Toni Morrison's words – "Modern life begins with slavery" (Gilroy 1993, 221) – Hartman suggests that by returning to these painful histories, and trying to examine these instances, Black people might find a key to their identity, agency, and futures. (Hartman 2002)

Strategies of Power and Tactics of Resistance

In *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-making in Nineteenth-Century America*, Hartman poses a central and unsettling question: "How does one tell the story of an elusive emancipation and a travestied freedom?" (Hartman 2022, 11). Published for the first time in 1997, *Scenes of Subjection* is a powerful exploration of slavery, freedom, and the long-lasting race relations in the United States. A masterpiece that pays attention to what carried on after the abolition of slavery – the ongoing forms of subjugation endured by ordinary Black people and the regime of exclusions and coercion that had been at the heart of the liberal American state. In *Scenes*, slavery is shown to be fundamental to the American project of democracy and to its notions of liberty. What is experienced in everyday life is that slavery still affects the present and determines the fungibility and the precarity of Black life. Racism is not mere ideology but a determining factor of the social formation; we all live in a present determined by slavery and coloniality.

A powerful echo of Hartman's reflections can be traced in Christina Sharpe's metaphor of the *wake*. For Sharpe, to live in the wake is to inhabit what Hartman calls "the afterlife of slavery", a temporal and spatial zone where the violences of the past remain active in structuring Black existence. (Sharpe 2016, 2-4) The *wake* is both the lingering trace of the slave ship's path and the ongoing mourning of Black death, a condition in which Black people are socially positioned as already dead or perpetually dying. Both Hartman's and Sharpe's work, insist that we do not live in a "post-slavery" world, but in one where coloniality and racial capitalism continue to govern the distribution of life and death, visibility and disposability. Thus, the *wake* becomes the grammar of the present – the means by which the enduring structures of anti-Blackness are both experienced and resisted.

This grammar also includes what Hartman terms the "economy of enjoyment," a central feature of slavery in which white pleasure was intimately tied to Black suffering. Within this structure, organized around the dichotomy of White enjoyment and Black subjection, Black performance for white audiences did not simply entertain but enacted a different kind of brutality and extreme domination – what Foucault defined as "biopower" – that aestheticized violence. According to Hartman, these performances often transformed the spectacle of Black pain into a site of white pleasure, where violence elicited forms of white empathy that served to obscure, rather than confront, Black suffering. Moreover, the body of the slave, dancing and on display, seemingly revealed a comfort with bondage and a natural disposition for servitude. (Hartman 2022, 56) In this sense, "Negro enjoyment" was a form of domination and an instrument for contented subjugation.

Yet *Scenes* does not only reveal the mechanisms of domination – it also tries to illuminate the countless, subtle, and often invisible ways in which the enslaved challenged, refused, defied, and resisted the condition of enslavement and its ordering and negation of life. By refashioning Black performance, the enslaved enacted a counterinvestment in the body as a site of possibility and a practice of resistance, aiming at the refusal of the anatomopolitics that identified the black body as aberrant. This

reclamation can be read through the lens of Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, wherein the socially marginalized body – cast out as impure or threatening – becomes a locus of both exclusion and subversive potential (Kristeva 1982). Rather than remaining a passive object of control, the Black body emerges as an active site of political and affective rearticulation. In this regard, Hartman's hope is "to illuminate the practice of everyday life – specifically, tactics of resistance, modes of self-fashioning, and figurations of freedom – and to investigate the construction of the subject" (Hartman 2022, 13).

Drawing on Hartman's notion of the body as a site of critical fabulation, Black performance reclaims corporeality not merely as expression but as counter-archive, where gesture, posture, and movement become acts of historical re-vision. In the wake of Fred Moten's aesthetics of the break, Black performance foregrounds the sonic and the haptic – where the Black body vibrates across space as both resistance and survival. This vibration is not merely physical but deeply affective: it carries the weight of diasporic memory, ancestral trauma, and social rupture. It marks the body as a site of resonance, where history reverberates beyond language. To vibrate is also to resist stasis – to remain fugitive in the sense proposed by Moten: to move *otherwise*, to dwell in the break between recognition and erasure (Moten 2003).² The Black body resists containment, enacting gestures of refusal, intimacy, and historical rupture. Thus, within this performative landscape, corporeality becomes a radical mode of historical reimagining and embodied critique.

This interplay of domination and resistance not only animates Hartman's reading of the Black body but also resonates with broader postcolonial critiques of voice and representation. In particular, it brings her work into meaningful dialogue with the *Subaltern Studies* tradition, notably with Gayatri Spivak's seminal question: "Can the subaltern speak?" In her essay, Spivak addresses the problem of representation within the context of postcolonial theory, and critiques Western intellectuals and theorists for appropriating the voices of the subaltern – those who exist outside the dominant power structures – arguing that their voices cannot be heard within the existing frameworks of knowledge. As Spivak remarks, "The 'subaltern' cannot appear without the thought of the *élite*". (Spivak 1988, 11-12) The challenge, then, is not only to ask whether the subaltern can speak, but to recognize the structures that prevent them from speaking, and to create new forms of listening, representation, and knowledge production.³

Following Spivak's wake, as a scholar of African American history, Hartman points out that the history of the oppressed is rarely autobiographical but always written by the oppressor himself. The stories that exist are never about them but rather about the violence and brutal excess that transformed them into commodities, numbers, ciphers, units of value, corpses, and property. "The libidinal investment in violence is everywhere apparent in the documents, statements and institutions that decide our knowledge of the past." (Hartman 2008, 5)

² Fred Moten theorizes fugitivity not as a flight from power but as an alternative mode of being, one that refuses capture, visibility, and containment, and instead inhabits the "break" as a generative space of resistance and survival (Moten 2003).

³ G.C. Spivak critiques the tendency of Western scholars to 'speak *for*' the subaltern, thereby enacting a form of epistemic violence. In the context of the archive, her work highlights the difficulty of accessing subaltern histories and how the archive, shaped by colonial and imperial legacies, actively silences these voices. Her intervention is crucial for feminist theory, as it emphasizes the limits of traditional forms of representation and the need for spaces where marginalized voices can speak on their own terms, arguing that dominant discourses often render subaltern subjects unheard.

In *Scenes of Subjection*, Hartman writes:

The documents, fragments, and accounts considered here, although claimed for purposes contrary to those for which they were gathered, nonetheless remain entangled with the politics of domination. In this regard, the effort to reconstruct the history of the dominated is not discontinuous with dominant accounts or official history but, rather it is a struggle within and against the constraints and silences imposed by the nature of the archive—the system that governs the appearance of statements and generates social meaning. (Hartman 2022, 13)

And then she wonders:

How does one use these sources? At best with the awareness that a totalizing history cannot be reconstructed from these interested, selective, and fragmentary accounts and with an acknowledgment of the interventionist role of the interpreter, the equally interested labor of historical revision, and the impossibility of reconstituting the past free from the disfigurements of present concerns. With all these provisions issued, these narratives nonetheless remain an important source for understanding the everyday experience of slavery and its aftermath. [...] I read these documents with the hope of gaining a glimpse of black life during slavery and the postbellum period while remaining aware of the impossibility of fully reconstituting the experience of the enslaved. (Hartman 2022, 13)

The Political and Ethical Relevance of Critical Fabulation

As a response to the lack of representation of the lives of the subaltern, the dispossessed, and the enslaved in historical texts, Hartman chooses to imagine what cannot be fully verified but might have happened to the thousands of people, specifically women, exposed to historical silencing. As she states, it is “an impossible writing which attempts to say that which resists being said” (Hartman 2008, 12), “by advancing a series of speculative arguments and exploiting the capacities of the subjunctive (a grammatical mood that expresses doubts, wishes, and possibilities), in fashioning a narrative, which is based upon [...] a critical reading of the archive” (Hartman 2008, 11). In this sense, she uses and develops the technique of critical fabulation, actively studying archives and a wide range of historical documents to “fabulate” stories based on the ones who have been forgotten or “deemed unfit for history and destined to be minor figures” (Hartman 2019, xv). Her practice of critical fabulation combines different genres and styles – documentary, historical, sociological ones – in order to create stories that are as close as possible to the truth of the lives of Black individuals, whose experiences of life have been lost and ignored throughout history.

Hartman’s *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments. Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women and Queer Radicals*, published in 2019 and winner – among other prizes – of the National Book Critics Circle Award 2019, continues her reflection on the original process of critical fabulation by telling the “semi-fictional” but strongly historically informed, post-slavery stories of Black women, their rebellious acts against segregation and patriarchy, the unfolding of their “revolution in a minor key” (Hartman 2019, 217). She offers a visual prose of what life was really like for poor Black women during the early days of the last century. Rather than focusing on traditional political activities, such as those of the Abolition Movement, Hartman turns to the detailed telling of ordinary girls’ everyday practices and small acts of resistance. In doing so, she creates a rendering of “wayward” and “beautiful” lives –honoring both the anonymity of

some historical figures and the lived experiences of more visible protagonists such as Gladys Bentley, Billie Holiday, and Ma Rainey – while affirming the ethical necessity of rewriting history.

Wayward Lives offers a new and profound approach to writing. With her method of close narration, Hartman brings to life the intimate worlds of these young women, applying her speculative approach to history, to restore their lived complexity. For instance, she describes how these women navigate daily life not only as subjects of marginalization but also as complex individuals who experience desires, fears, and joys – engaging in relationships that defy normative expectations, such as same-sex romances or unconventional partnerships, thereby revealing their full humanity beyond victimhood. Their everyday practices – whether subtle acts of asserting bodily autonomy, occupying public spaces, or creating informal networks of care – become crucial forms of resistance and survival, challenging dominant structures that seek to confine and erase them.

Hartman gives voice to their thoughts and desires, fears and wishes, and stages the “symphony of anger” of Black women (Lorde 1984), their daily struggle for survival (Lorde 2000) – echoing bell hooks’ view of the margin as a “space of radical openness,” where marginality is not solely deprivation but also a “site of resistance” and possibility (hooks 1989, 21). Much like hooks, Hartman resists dominant narratives of victimhood or pathology and instead renders the margin a generative space, a site of radical experimentation with freedom, intimacy, and social life. Her wayward protagonists inhabit a space that allows for the invention of new subjectivities and modes of relation outside normative frameworks of race, gender, and respectability. These women reject the rigid norms of respectability politics, crafting new forms of identity and community based on affection, solidarity, and shared struggle – creating alternative social networks that resist isolation and assert their autonomy:

Esther Brown hated to work, the conditions of work as much as the very idea of work. Her reasons for quitting said as much. Housework: Wages too small. Laundry work: Too hard, ran away. General housework: Tired of work. Sewing buttons on shirts: Tired of work. Dishwasher: Tired of work. Housework: Man too cross. Live-in service: I might as well be a slave.

At age fifteen, when Esther left school, she experienced the violence endemic to domestic work and tired quickly of the demand to care for others who didn’t care for you. She ran the streets because nowhere else in the world was there anything for her. She stayed in the streets to escape the suffocation of her mother’s small apartment, which was packed with lodgers, men who took up too much space and who were too easy with their hands, men who might molest a girl, then propose to marry her. She had been going around and mixing it up for a few years, but only because she liked doing it. She never went with men only for money. She was no prostitute. After the disappointment of a short-lived marriage to a man who wasn’t her baby’s father (he had offered to marry her, but she rejected his proposal), she went to live with her sister and grandmother, and they helped raise her son. She had several lovers to whom she was bound by need and want, not by the law. (Hartman 2019, 232-3)

As Hartman states, “It is a story told from inside the circle. [...] a moving picture of the wayward, [...] a love letter to all those who had been harmed.” (Hartman 2019, xiv; 30-1) Through this intimate and nuanced portrayal, *Wayward Lives* not only recuperates marginalized histories but also challenges and expands the boundaries of

historical knowledge itself, offering a vital framework for understanding resistance and freedom in the margins.

Hartman's experimental and brilliant writing exceeds the expected and usual, and transforms facts and data into a three-dimensional living history. These women transcend the page; they seem to come alive and speak to us. Her prose is soaked in orality and polyphony and seems to replicate the characteristics of Black music – improvisation and polyrhythms. It is imbued with visuality (photos, letters, and newspaper clippings), quotations (italics), and historical, ideological-cultural, political, and legal knowledge. With her descriptions, Hartman makes us *see* the urban landscape from which the stories unfold; *hear* the incessant sounds that characterize the slum; *smell* the scents wafting through the air; *feel* the touch of a hand brushing against you.

Weary of the endless pictures propelled by moralistic narratives of sexual promiscuity, improper guardianship, and the dangers of saloons, boarding houses, and dance halls – the visual clichés of damnation and salvation – Hartman looked for photographs unequivocal in their representation of what it meant to live free for the second and third generations born after the official end of slavery. In *Wayward Lives*, she creates a sort of alternative archive of history, which defies the common representations of Black life – images that never grasped the beautiful struggle to survive but only documented ugliness – by retrieving pictures that represented the experiments in freedom that unfolded within slavery's shadow; images that would provide a necessary antidote to the bodies stripped and branded, or rendered grotesque for white enjoyment. (Hartman 2019, 17) Looking for the errant, the unruly, the fugitive, *Wayward Lives* rescues the lives of young Black women from the margins of history.

Narrative is central to the effort of re-arranging and re-presenting historical events from contested points of view. These counter-historical projects have not yet been able to install themselves as history; they are still deemed insurgent, disruptive, and, therefore, marginalized. For this reason, it is important to continue the engagement in finding an aesthetic mode suitable or adequate for rendering the lives of these people. After reading, researching, and attempting to understand the oppression of historical and current individuals, it can be said, without fear of being contradicted, that the dispossession of Black lives never stops and that the hold of racism continues to shape their existence. In the face of this evidence, what is required is to keep rethinking the meaning of history and the meaning of narrative, rethinking the ethics of translation, and, last but not least, rethinking the meaning of freedom. In this sense, Hartman's work is a *beautiful experiment*, one that not only rewrites marginalized histories, but also invites us to imagine freedom not as a destination, but as a continuous, collective, unfinished practice. Her work inhabits what can be called *the otherwise of history*: a space of historical imagining that displaces linearity, coherence, and objectivity in favor of relation, ambiguity, and resistance.

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