

INTERVIEWS

SAIDIYA HARTMAN

July 14, 2020 • Saidiya Hartman on insurgent histories and the abolitionist imaginary



Underwood & Underwood, *Photograph of Silent Protest Parade, July 28, 1917*. Photo: Wikimedia Commons.

Five centuries of white supremacist terror: not just a past to which we are ineluctably fastened,

*but a present which produces us, albeit in differing orders of magnitude and vulnerability. The United States has long maintained the fiction that this country had molted its foundational violence, and yet, just as your skin sheds daily only to live dispersed atop your furniture and knick-knacks, so too does the grime of history make up the loam in which a person is destined to flourish, struggle, or wither. The work of Saidiya Hartman has charted a path in and through the social arrangements produced by the sedimented forces of accumulation and dispossession. Her writing, in numerous essays, and in such books as *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (1997), *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (2007), and *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* (2019) has not only reshaped the contours of scholarly inquiry, but has given form to what she has called “the as-yet-incomplete project of freedom.” Below, Hartman speaks about the continuity of the Black radical tradition, the insurrectionary qualities of Black life, and the “wild exercise of imagination” required to challenge the reigning order.*

WHAT CONSTITUTES RADICAL THOUGHT? How do we bring into view *the constancy* of Black radical practice—a practice that has overwhelmingly fallen from view—and a certain lexicon of what constitutes the political, or the radical political, or an anarchist tradition, or a history of anti-fascism? In looking at the lives of young women, gender nonconforming and queer folk in *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* (2019), one thing was absolutely clear: the practices of refusal—shirking, idleness, and strike—a critique of the state and what it could afford; and an understanding that the state is present primarily as a punishing force, a force for the brutal containment and violation and regulation and eradication of Black life. In *Wayward Lives*, I discuss the “jump warrant,” which enabled police to enter apartments at will. We know that Breonna Taylor was murdered in the contemporary equivalent of that jump warrant, which is the “no knock” warrant. The police just enter a place and do as they will.

Because the “wayward” are largely acting in and conceiving of the world in a way that exceeds the boundaries of the norm—the legitimate, the respectable—traditional political actors and thinkers have failed to understand their actions as animated and inflected by the spirit of radical refusal. But to me, that was utterly clear. I would like to think of waywardness as prefigurative of today’s protests and insurgency and also as *a sustained practice*. In Frederick Douglass’s *My Bondage, My Freedom*, he describes the plantation as a nation within the nation, as a space of exception outside the embrace of democracy, as an enclosure. Black

people have been abandoned by the law, positioned outside the nation, and excluded from the terms of the social contract—and this recognition is in fact hundreds of years old. *Wayward Lives* gives young Black women credit for understanding this, for their acute understanding of relations of power, and the book attends to the ways they tried to live and sustain themselves, never forgetting the structure of enclosure that surrounded them, and the forces intent on conscripting them to servitude.

My work tries to think about the question, the open question—the almost impossible question—of Black life in this context, and the ways to best convey the rich texture of existence in these circumstances: to render visible the brutal and abstract relations of power that make violent domination and premature death defining characteristics of Black life. How does one push against particular plots or impositions of the subject? Defy the script of managed and regulated life? Persist under the threat of death? One of the things that I love about W.E.B Du Bois—and my work is in dialogue with and indebted to his—is his imaginative capacity and commitment to experimentation. To understand the epistemic revolution that takes place in *Black Reconstruction* (1935) is to understand the abolition of slavery and Reconstruction as *the making* of American democracy, and to conceive the radical and insurgent political practice of enslaved actors. Even C.L.R. James marvels at Du Bois's ability to conjure that revolutionary consciousness and reflects on his own shortcomings, in comparison, in *Lectures on The Black Jacobins* (1971).

There is always an open question of form: How does one bring a minor revolution into view? Most often we want to maintain a fiction that desire exists on one hand and violence and coercion on the other, and that these are radically distinct and opposed. We might instead think of sexual violence as a normative condition, not the exception. Under heteropatriarchy, violence and rape are the terms of order, the norm; they are to be expected. So how does one lust after or relate to or want or love another? How does one claim the capacity to touch when touch is, in so many instances, the modality of violence? As I say repeatedly, *Wayward Lives* is not a text of sexual liberation. But I really wanted to think about sensory experience and inhabiting the body in a way that is not exhausted by the condition of vulnerability and abuse. What does it mean—for those persons whose bodies are most often subjected to the will, desire, and violence of others—to imagine embodiment in a way that's not yoked to servitude or to violence? For me, this was essential to thinking about radical politics: What does it mean

to love that body? To love the flesh in a world where it is not loved or regarded? To love Black female flesh. *Breonna Taylor's murderers have still not been charged.*

The possessive investment in whiteness can't be rectified by learning "how to be more antiracist." It requires a radical divestment in the project of whiteness and a redistribution of wealth and resources. It requires abolition, the abolition of the carceral world, the abolition of capitalism.

Incredible vulnerability to violence and to abuse is so definitive of the lives of Black femmes. And so, what does it mean to want to imagine and to experience something else? It can't *but* be political—simply to want to free one's body from its conscription to servitude, to no longer be made a servant in the reproductive project of the world—all of this is part of an abolitionist imaginary. We have been assigned a place in the racial capitalist order which is the bottom rung; the bottom rung is the place of the "essential" worker, the place where all the onerous reproductive labor occurs. Not just reproductive labor in the terms of maintaining and aiding white families so that they might survive and thrive, but the reproductive work that nurtures and supports the psychic life of whiteness: that shores up the inviolability, security, happiness and sovereignty of that master subject, of man. In large measure, this world is maintained by the disposability and the fungibility of Black and brown female lives. Intimacy is a critical feature of this coerced labor and of care. Black intimacy has been shaped by the anomalous social formation produced by slavery, by involuntary servitude, by capitalist extraction, and by antiblackness and yet exceeds these conditions. The intimate realm is an extension of the social world—it is inseparable from the social world—so to create other networks of love and affiliation, to nurture a promiscuous sociality vast enough to embrace strangers, is to be involved in the work of challenging and remaking the terms of sociality.

What we see now is a translation of Black suffering into white pedagogy. In this extreme moment, the casual violence that can result in a loss of life—a police officer literally killing a Black man with the weight of his knees on the other's neck—becomes a flash point for a certain kind of white liberal conscience, like: "Oh my god! We're living in a racist order! How

can I find out more about this?” That question is a symptom of the structure that produces Floyd’s death. Then there’s the other set of demands: “Educate me about the order in which we live.” And it’s like: “Oh, but you’ve been living in this order. Your security, your wealth, your good life, has depended on it.” So, it’s crazy-making. The largest loss of Black property since the Great Depression was a consequence of the subprime mortgage crisis, and proliferating acts of racist state violence occurred under a Black president. The largest incarcerated population in the world; the election of 2016 and the publicly avowed embrace of white supremacy by 45—all of these things we know, right? We know the racially exclusive character of white neighborhoods; how in urban centers upper-class people monopolize public resources to ensure their futures and their children’s futures over and against other children. I’m a New Yorker—the city has the most racially segregated school system in the country. The Obama and Clinton voters are invested in a school system that disadvantages Black and brown children and they resist even the smallest efforts to make it more equitable. The possessive investment in whiteness can’t be rectified by learning “how to be more antiracist.” It requires a radical divestment in the project of whiteness and a redistribution of wealth and resources. It requires abolition, the abolition of the carceral world, the abolition of capitalism. What is required is a remaking of the social order, and nothing short of that is going to make a difference.

Everyone has issued a statement—every elite racist university and cultural institution, every predatory banking and investment company—has issued a statement about being down with Black Lives Matter. It’s beyond hypocrisy. It’s utter cynicism. These institutions feel required to take part in this kind of performance and this kind of speech *only* because of the radically capacious demands of those in the street, those who are demanding abolition, and who have said: “We are not a part of the social contract, we will riot, we will loot.” These are legitimate political acts. These are ways of addressing the violence of that order at the level of the order—the police precinct, the bank, the retailer, the corporate headquarters.

There’s a great disparity between what’s being articulated by this radical feminist queer trans Black movement and the language of party politics, and the electoral choices, which are so incredibly impoverished they’re not choices at all. The demand to defund the police was taken up because there’s been a movement unfolding for decades, an analysis *that has been* in place—building on the work of Angela Davis, Assata Shakur, The Combahee River Collective, Marsha P. Johnson, Audre Lorde, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Mariame Kaba, Patrisse Cullors, Opal

Tometi and Alicia Garza, Michelle Alexander, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor. It's not a surprise that so many of the people in the street are young. They're in the streets with these powerful critical and conceptual tools, and they're not satisfied with reform. They understand reform to be a modality of reproducing the machine, reproducing the order—sustaining it. I do feel that there is a clarity of vision that won't be lost. That's what has been so inspiring about these protests and uprisings—the clarity and the capaciousness of the vision.

— *As told to Catherine Damman*

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