3 Rethinking the African Diaspora: Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother* (2007)

Introduction

A cultural historian and expert on slavery at Columbia University, Saidiya Hartman is one of the most distinguished scholars in the field of African American studies. Her widely recognized monograph *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (1997) focuses on everyday acts of anti-black violence and forms of black resistance during and after the time of racial slavery in the United States, seeking "to illuminate the terror of the mundane and quotidian rather than exploit the shocking spectacle."[1] Drawing on a wide variety of archival sources, including slave testimony, newspaper articles, government documents and other white-authored texts, Hartman is particularly concerned with the risks and limits of reconstructing and articulating the slave's experience[2]—a topic that also defines her later work.

Like Hortense J. Spillers, Jared Sexton, Frank B. Wilderson and a number of other (contemporary) black scholars, Hartman has been called an Afro-pessimist. These intellectuals share theoretical, philosophical and political assumptions about the meaning of (anti-)blackness in the United States and in other parts of the world.[3] Focusing on structural forms of white supremacy and the precariousness of black life in the twenty-first century, they draw attention to the enduring and destructive effects of slavery and black abjection—what Hartman describes as "the afterlife of slavery."[4] Deconstructing the idea of a post-racial America, they agree that, as Wilderson puts it, "the election of a

1 | Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection* 4.

2 | Ibid. 10-14.

3 | Wilderson 1-32, 58. See also my introduction to *Transnational Black Dialogues*. For a critical discussion of Afro-pessimism, see Weier 419-33.

4 | Hartman, *Lose Your Mother* 6. All further references to Hartman's *Lose Your Mother* (LYM) will be cited in the text.

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Black president aside, police brutality, mass incarceration, segregated and substandard schools and housing, astronomical rates of HIV infection, and the threat of being turned away en masse at the polls still constitute the lived experience of Black life."[5]

In her second-generation neo-slave narrative *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route* (2007), Hartman explores the complex relation between the past of slavery and the present, crossing the boundaries of genres: Her text is an innovative mélange of fictional elements, essayistic reflections on the history of the slave trade and autobiographical passages about her experiences as a Fulbright scholar in Ghana in 1997. Focusing on Hartman's attempt to trace the stories of African captives, *Lose Your Mother* sheds light on a number of burning topics that resonate in contemporary public discourse and academic contexts: the lasting and disturbing legacy of racial slavery; the black diasporic subject's quest for home and belonging; the discourse of roots tourism in Ghana; links and differences between African Americans and Africans and the limits and dangers of representing slavery in the twenty-first century. "All of these concerns about time, eventfulness, the life world of the human commodity," Hartman explains in a conversation, "required a hybrid form, a personal narrative, a historical meditation, and a metadiscourse on history."[6]

Combining autobiographical writing with theoretical considerations on the relationship between Africa and the African diaspora, Hartman's travelogue describes a literal journey through Ghana as well as a metaphorical one: Beginning with a depiction of her feelings of estrangement, *Lose Your Mother* reveals how Hartman's encounters with local residents on the coast and in the Ghanaian hinterland influence her interpretation of the transatlantic slave trade and slavery, her understanding of transnational relations between black communities and her identity as an *African* American. At the end of her journey, she privileges a view of the black world as a complex formation marked by essential differences and hierarchies but also by similarities.

In terms of structure, this chapter begins with an exploration of Ghana's status as a symbol of hope and place of residence for African Americans in the late 1950s and 1960s. Moreover, I will examine the impact of Alex Haley's famous neo-slave narrative *Roots* (1976) on diasporic constructions of Africa and public discussions about the history of racial slavery in the late twentieth century. In addition, I will focus on Ghana's popularity among black American visitors and emigrants in the 1990s as well as on contemporary forms of roots

5 | Wilderson 10.

6 | Saidiya Hartman, Eva Hoffman and Daniel Mendelsohn, "Memoirs of Return: Saidiya Hartman, Eva Hoffman, and Daniel Mendelsohn in Conversation with Nancy K. Miller," *Rites of Return: Diaspora Poetics and the Politics of Memory*, eds. Marianne Hirsch and Nancy K. Miller (New York: Columbia UP, 2011) 111.

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tourism encouraged by popular TV documentaries and modern DNA technology. After this contextualization, the chapter shows that *Lose Your Mother* calls for a paradigm shift in our understanding of relations between Africa and its diaspora. Engaging in an Afro-pessimistic rewriting of Haley's novel, Hartman's text discards the concept of a return to an ancestral village and the idea of a family reunion in Africa. Discussing the active participation of Africans in the slave trade and drawing attention to Hartman's experiences of loss and estrangement in Ghana, *Lose Your Mother* challenges the myth of "mother Africa" as a welcoming home for black diasporic returnees and deconstructs a static understanding of the African diaspora grounded on authenticity, continuity and roots.

Most crucially, Hartman's text moves beyond a view of the black world as a transnational community linked by common historical experiences of dispossession. Focusing on Hartman's emphasis on difference, I will examine the ways in which *Lose Your Mother* contributes to a powerful re-negotiation of Paul Gilroy's concept of the black Atlantic and the discourse of roots tourism in Ghana. Moreover, I will demonstrate that Hartman ends her travelogue by developing a new perspective on the African diaspora and transnational black relations. The last part of this chapter sheds light on Hartman's critical (re-) appropriation of the archive of slavery, analyzing her attempt to explore the experiences of a young African woman who was murdered during the Middle Passage.

Freedom Dreamers and Root Seekers: Black Americans in Post-Independence Ghana

Ghana's political independence from Great Britain in 1957 marked a crucial moment in the history of Africa and the African diaspora. All over the world, black individuals welcomed and celebrated the establishment of the new country, the first sub-Saharan nation to break away from colonial rule. For many people of African descent, the events in Ghana were a source of hope and opportunity, inspiring and energizing them to resist racial oppression and colonial domination in their countries of origin.[7] As the historian Kevin K. Gaines explains, in the late 1950s and 1960s, Ghana not only emerged as a symbol of black freedom, "a beacon for the black world's liberatory aspirations."[8] It also became a place of residence and refuge for black expatriates, who were drawn

7 | Kevin K. Gaines, *American Africans in Ghana: Black Expatriates and the Civil Rights Era* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2006) 1-26; Bayo Holsey, *Routes of Remembrance: Refashioning the Slave Trade in Ghana* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2008) 128.
8 | Gaines 26.

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by the vision of a free black community and the idea of a pan-African identity articulated by Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana's first president.[9]

In his public speeches and writings, Nkrumah stressed the importance of solidarity between different black groups in political and economic affairs. In the years following independence, he actively recruited African Americans and other members of the African diaspora to live and work in Ghana and to assist in the process of nation-building. Many black Americans, in particular professionals, writers, activists and political refugees, readily accepted his invitation to relocate to West Africa. Among those who visited the country or even migrated to Ghana were well-known African American intellectuals, such as Richard Wright, Maya Angelou and W.E.B. Du Bois. In the midst of a period of social and political unrest in the U.S., at a time when the Civil Rights movement was at its height, many black Americans dreamed of a country without anti-black violence. Sympathizing with the anticolonial movements in Africa, they were inclined to take part in the global struggle against racial oppression. For these expatriates, crossing the Atlantic Ocean to settle in Ghana not only provided a way to escape from the laws of Jim Crow and to create a free black state:[10] Moving to Africa also "satisfied an idealized desire for a return to their homeland,"[11] as Bayo Holsey puts it.

In her memoir *All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes* (1986), a reflection on her time in Ghana in the early 1960s, the African American poet and writer Maya Angelou expresses such a longing for home. Although she also refers to experiences of disappointment and conflicts with local residents, she embraces the static idea of return:

> The prodigal child, having strayed, been stolen or sold from the land of her fathers, having squandered her mother's gifts and having laid down in cruel gutters, had at last arisen and directed herself back to the welcoming arms of the family where she would be bathed, clothed with fine raiment and seated at the welcoming table.[12]

In this passage, Angelou presents a highly idealized and mythical image of Africa as a haven for African American returnees. While the slave's deportation across the Atlantic and life in America is depicted as a descent into hell, Angelou draws on images associated with familial love, care and support to describe the warm welcome she receives in Africa. Highlighting her status as a resilient, proud and victorious slave descendant, she strategically reconstructs

9 | Ibid. 6.

10 | Holsey 153-54; Gaines 1-26, 44.

11 | Holsey 154.

12 | Maya Angelou, *All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes* (1986; London: Virago, 2012) 21.

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her African experience as a triumphant success story. Written for an (African) American reader, her text suggests that it is possible to put an end to the history of dispossession and grief and to reconnect with Africa.

Crucially, there are significant absences and silences in *All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes*. Unwilling to relinquish her dream of diasporic homecoming and rebirth in Africa, Angelou deliberately avoids addressing questions of historical guilt: Throughout her autobiographical text, she refuses to discuss the active participation of Africans in the transatlantic slave trade because this history stands in stark contrast to her vision of Africa as a promised land for black diasporic women and men. Desperate and determined to find a sense of belonging in Ghana, she ignores the fact that many of her ancestors were kidnapped and sold into transatlantic slavery by other Africans. Strategically constructed as a narrative of liberation and healing, Angelou's text prioritizes solidarity and unity between people of African descent, failing to reflect on past experiences of betrayal and acts of complicity between European slave traders and Africans. Angelou can maintain her narrative of African return, belonging and healing only because she firmly bases it on narrative strategies of avoidance and silencing.

As victims of racism and segregation in the U.S., many African Americans like Angelou dreamed of a new and better life in Ghana in the 1950s and 1960s. In their attempt to reinvent and refashion themselves on the African continent, they struggled to shake off the ghosts of slavery and colonialism. Turning away from narratives of despair and defeat, they sought to recover and revitalize the history of ancient Africa as an era of glory and splendor. Notably, on the political level in Ghana, a similar tendency to focus on Africa's noble past could be observed: Determined to challenge Western myths of African cultural inferiority, backwardness and savagery, Nkrumah called for stories of black self-determination, self-reliance and freedom. Under his leadership, "Ghana" was chosen as the nation's new official name, evoking the history of the old and well-known West African kingdom rather than that of the transatlantic slave trade (see LYM 40).[13]

For many expatriates in Ghana, the dream of creating a new society and starting a new life in Africa was destroyed in 1966, when Nkrumah's government was overthrown in a military and police coup. After the president's ouster, most of the black exiles left the country and decided to go back to the U.S. to participate in the struggle for civil rights and social justice there and to retain and celebrate their connections to Africa (see LYM 37).[14] "Nkrumah's Ghana,"

13 | See also Holsey 60.

14 | See also Gaines 244-46.

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Gaines contends, "had changed the lives of these men and women and had endowed them with a unique perspective on the politics of the African diaspora."[15]

A decade later, in the late 1970s, a wide public debate about the link between Africa and its diaspora emerged in the United States. This discussion was caused by the publication of Alex Haley's *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* (1976), one of the most famous and commercially successful first-generation neo-slave narratives. In *Roots*, Haley delves into his (slave) ancestors' past, beginning with an exploration of the life of Kunta Kinte in eighteenth-century West Africa. At the heart of the novel is Haley's description of a journey to Juffure, a small town in Gambia and Kinte's supposed birthplace. By highlighting the possibility to identify his African roots and to return to his ancestral village, Haley constructs a static view of Africa and the African diaspora grounded on continuity, authenticity and tradition. Notably, focusing on seven generations of African Americans, *Roots* not only sheds light on oppression and dispossession in Africa and in the "New World" but also on experiences of survival and fights for black freedom. In particular, it deals with the history of African royals and elites, emphasizing the connection between African Americans and ancient African kingdoms.[16]

Shortly after the novel's publication, *Roots* was transformed into an incredibly popular television miniseries, attracting more than 130 million viewers from all over the world.[17] Given its popularity and commercial success, Haley's text had an enormous influence on (African American) conceptions of Africa and interpretations of the slave trade. Representing slaves as noble characters and strong survivors rather than as passive victims, it encouraged black diasporic subjects to explore the past of racial slavery and, most crucially, to embrace their African origins. In the wake of *Roots*, Americans, in general, and African Americans, in particular, developed an enormous interest in family genealogies. Like Haley, many black Americans embarked on a journey to African countries like Ghana to trace their roots and discover their ethnic and cultural heritage.[18]

Many scholars agree that *Roots* offers an empowering vision of black American history, challenging interpretations of slavery that rely exclusively on nar-

15 | Ibid. 245.

16 | Kamari Maxine Clarke, "Mapping Transnationality: Roots Tourism and the Institutionalization of Ethnic Heritage," *Globalization and Race: Transformations in the Cultural Production of Blackness*, eds. Kamari Maxine Clarke and Deborah A. Thomas (Durham: Duke UP, 2006) 140-41; Marianne Hirsch and Nancy K. Miller, "Introduction," *Rites of Return: Diaspora Poetics and the Politics of Memory*, eds. Hirsch and Miller (New York: Columbia UP, 2011) 1-2.

17 | Clarke 140. See also my introduction to *Transnational Black Dialogues*.

18 | Holsey 155; Clarke 141.

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ratives of victimization and passivity. At the same time, the novel has been criticized for its teleological construction of history:[19] According to Holsey, *Roots* is "a triumphant tale that does not attend to continuing forms of oppression."[20] Celebrating the triumph over slavery, it differs fundamentally from texts like Toni Morrison's *Beloved* "in which the terror of slavery is always a haunting presence."[21]

In the 1990s, when Hartman spent a year in Ghana as a Fulbright Scholar, the West African nation continued to attract thousands of African Americans, in particular (class-privileged) tourists, entrepreneurs, retirees and celebrities. More than a decade after the airing of *Roots*, several factors contributed to the country's continuing popularity among black visitors and emigrants from the United States: While Ghana struggled with economic problems and high rates of poverty and unemployment, it was known for its stable democratic system and hospitality towards foreign visitors. Wishing to delve into the history of the transatlantic slave trade, many black Americans were drawn by Ghana's wide array of historic sites and monuments, such as former slave dungeons and castles. The Ghanaian government finally recognized the enormous economic potential of diaspora tourism and explicitly invited African Americans and other individuals of African descent to travel or relocate to Ghana and invest in the country. Financially supported by U.S.-American organizations, institutions and agencies like USAID, in the early 1990s, Ghana started to renovate and restore the castles in Elmina and Cape Coast, which, as a result, emerged as immensely popular and highly frequented tourist attractions. In order to increase the number of tourists, the administration even intended to create a special visa program for black diasporic individuals in 2005.[22]

In the new millennium, still, many African Americans are driven by the longing to trace their ancestral origins. This desire is fueled by contemporary TV series about root seekers and modern DNA technology: Most recently and prominently, the cultural critic and Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr. presented a twenty-first-century version of Haley's *Roots*, encouraging black Americans to explore their family histories and connections to Africa. In his PBS documentary *African American Lives* (2006), Gates sets out to identify the ancestral African roots of a number of African American celebrities like talk show icon Oprah Winfrey, singer Tina Turner and actor Morgan Freeman.

19 | Holsey 155; Clarke 141.

20 | Holsey 155-56.

21 | Ibid. 156.

22 | Gaines 282-83; Lydia Polgreen, "Ghana's Uneasy Embrace of Slavery's Diaspora," *New York Times* 27 Dec. 2005: A1+; Holsey 156-62; Edward M. Bruner, "Tourism in Ghana: The Representation of Slavery and the Return of the Black Diaspora," *American Anthropologist* 98.2 (1996): 290-91.

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Working together with leading scientists, he not only draws on genealogical documents, archival sources and online databases but also uses DNA testing to construct narratives of recovery and healing.[23] "For the first time since the seventeenth century," Gates argues, "we are able, symbolically at least, to reverse the Middle Passage. Our ancestors brought something with them that not even the slave trade could take away: their own distinctive strands of DNA."[24] Like Haley in the 1970s, Gates offers a static interpretation of the African diaspora focusing on roots, authenticity and the possibility of return and healing.

While *African American Lives* was extremely successful in commercial terms and followed by a number of other genealogical series like *Faces of America* (2010),[25] Gates's documentaries provoked sharp criticism from scholars working in the fields of critical race theory, African American and African diaspora studies. For instance, in a 2006 essay in *The Nation*, the legal scholar and Columbia professor Patricia J. Williams urges "us to be less romantic about what all this DNA swabbing reveals."[26] Focusing on the social construction of (black) diasporic identity, she emphasizes that the longing to return to an African homeland "is in our heads, not in our mitochondria."[27] Critically reflecting on Gates's decision to use DNA testing, Williams argues that "if we biologize our history, we will forever be less than we could be."[28]

23 | Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *In Search of Our Roots: How 19 Extraordinary African Americans Reclaimed Their Past* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2010) 1-14; Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Exactly How 'Black' Is Black America? 100 Amazing Facts About the Negro: Find out the Percentage of African Ancestry in Black Americans," *The Root.com* 11 Feb. 2013, 11 Apr. 2014 http://www.theroot.com/articles/history/2013/02/how_mixed_are_african_americans.html; see also Hirsch, "Introduction" 2.

24 | Gates, *In Search of Our Roots* 10.

25 | See Meg Greene, *Henry Louis Gates, Jr.: A Biography* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2012) 160.

26 | Patricia J. Williams, "Emotional Truth," *The Nation* 16 Feb. 2006, 23 Sept. 2014 http://www.thenation.com/article/emotional-truth.

27 | Ibid.

28 | Ibid.

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Kinless and Uprooted: A Stranger in Africa

In newspaper reviews and scholarly articles, Hartman's *Lose Your Mother* has been described as "an anti-*Roots*" story, an alternative narrative to Haley's popular novel.[29] Indeed, there are significant differences between both texts: Whereas, in *Roots*, Haley crosses the Atlantic to explore and strengthen his ties to Africa and to find his ancestral village, Hartman had abandoned the concept of black diasporic return long before her Fulbright year. In contrast to Haley, she does not intend to celebrate Africa's noble past and discover the history of royal families and ancient kingdoms. Rather, as a scholar of slavery and "a descendant of the enslaved" (LYM 6), she struggles to trace the paths of those Africans captured by slave raiders and predatory groups, forcibly transported to the coast of West Africa and shipped to foreign lands on the other side of the Atlantic.

Instead of embracing her African roots and searching for information about distant ancestors, she seeks to reconstruct the experiences of strangers, the story of "the commoners, the unwilling and coerced migrants who created a new culture in the hostile world of the Americas" (LYM 7). In Ghana, she visits formers slave castles and dungeons, slave markets and fortified towns, determined to confront and excavate the history of African captives and "the transatlantic system of *thingification*,"[30] to use Sabine Broeck's words. By deconstructing a static view of black diasporic identity based on roots and authenticity, Hartman engages in an Afro-pessimistic rewriting of Haley's text and a critical re-negotiation of the concept of the African diaspora; she sets herself apart from thousands of other black Americans who—encouraged by new DNA technology—hope to reconnect to an African mother country and spend money on genetic tests "to construct a family tree."[31]

While Hartman shows no interest in searching for her origins and tracing family genealogies, she attests to her emotional connection to Africa, having "dreamed of living in Ghana" (LYM 56) since her time in college in the 1980s.

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29 | See G. Pascal Zachary, "Valiant Battle to Reconstruct Ties to Africa," *San Francisco Chronicle Book Review* 28 Jan. 2007: M1+; Marcus Wood, "Round Table: Review of Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route*," *Journal of American Studies* 44.1 (2010): 9-11; Hartman, "Memoirs of Return" 112-13.

30 | Broeck, "Enslavement as Regime of Western Modernity" 37; italics in the original.

31 | Amy Harmon, "Blacks Pin Hope on DNA to Fill in Slavery's Gaps in Family Trees," *New York Times* 25 July 2005: A1+. In *Lose Your Mother*, Hartman discusses this "article in *The New York Times* about African Americans attempting to fill in the blank spaces of their history with DNA tests." Hartman strongly opposes the use of DNA technology to trace ancestral roots and refers to "the ambiguous and inconclusive results" of such DNA tests (LYM 90).

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Like so many other black diasporic subjects, she longs for a place to call home, a country without anti-black racism and humiliation, a nation in which she does not "feel like a problem" (LYM 57). Instead of looking for a specific geographical place in West Africa, she strives for a more general sense of belonging in the world. However, as a woman of African descent, she also hopes to be welcomed as a friend by the Ghanaians. Focusing on her encounters with local residents, her travelogue is marked by ambiguity. As Hartman explains in a conversation with Nancy K. Miller, Eva Hoffman and Daniel Mendelsohn, "Like every oppositional narrative, *Lose Your Mother* is haunted by the thing it writes against—the desire for home—and, at the same time, I was acutely aware that I would always be outside home."[32]

As Hartman illustrates, Ghana does not at all feel like a welcoming place. From the beginning of her journey, right from the moment she steps off the bus in Elmina, she is treated as a stranger, "a wandering seed bereft of the possibility of taking root" (LYM 4). Instead of embracing her as a long-missing sister, the Ghanaians, in a distancing move, call her *obruni*, a term used for privileged and wealthy foreigners and visitors from other countries.[33] In Ghana, she suffers from a sense of alienation and loss similar to her experiences of exclusion in the United States. Realizing that her skin color does not necessarily make her a beloved family member, in the course of her stay in Ghana, she learns to accept her status as an outsider: "After all, I was a stranger from across the sea" (LYM 4).

In *Strangers to Ourselves* (1991 [1988]), the philosopher Julia Kristeva describes the condition of being a foreigner, alien or outsider as follows: "Not belonging to any place, any time, any love. A lost origin, the impossibility to take root, a rummaging memory, the present in abeyance."[34] This conception of the stranger as an uprooted, displaced and unloved person neither belonging

32 | Hartman, "Memoirs of Return" 113.

33 | In *Routes of Remembrance: Refashioning the Slave Trade in Ghana*, Holsey offers an explanation of the term *obruni* or *oburoni*: "*Oburoni* (or *buronyi* in Fante) is an Akan word that has become a bone of contention between Ghanaians and blacks in the diaspora, who, having been told that *oburoni* means 'white man,' find themselves to their dismay called by this term. In actuality *oburoni* means 'those who come from over the horizon.' This is not a racial label then but rather a demonstration of the ways in which Ghanaians often identify people by the places from which they come, in quite literal terms. Indeed, the Americanness of African Americans is quite significant from the point of view of Ghanaians. For them, African American and white tourists sometimes occupy the same mental space; they are all privileged foreigners." Holsey 220; italics in the original.

34 | Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (1988; New York: Columbia UP, 1991) 7.

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to a specific place nor—and this is a crucial point—to any specific historical moment captures Hartman's experience as a member of the African diaspora. "Being a stranger," Hartman argues, "concerns not only matters of familiarity, belonging, and exclusion but as well involves a particular relation to the past" (LYM 17).

In *Lose Your Mother*, Hartman sheds light on the complex interrelation between the past and the present, exploring "the historical links between Ghana and the African diaspora."[35] On her journey, many Ghanaians immediately and correctly identify her as a slave descendant, a woman whose ancestors were kidnapped and taken to the Americas. As a black American visitor, a stranger in Africa, she is a living reminder of the horror of the Middle Passage, "the vestige of the dead" (LYM 18). Whereas Angelou and Haley focus on black agency and heroic survival, Hartman employs death metaphors to express the horrors of slavery and the enduring effects of this history on African American identity, to reflect on "the incomplete project of freedom."[36] An enslaved person, Hartman argues, is a foreigner and outsider separated from home and loved ones. Based on this characterization, she interprets the term *obruni* as a reference to her forebears' status as non-kin: In the era of the slave trade, Africans did not give away and sell their friends and family members, she contends, but individuals they perceived, often conveniently so, as social outcasts, criminals and strangers from other parts of the country (LYM 5). For Hartman, *obruni* evokes this history of relations between different African individuals and groups. By drawing our attention to regional, ethnic, religious and class cleavages within West African societies, she counters the notion of a single African culture, a view that emerged in the period of the transatlantic slave trade and European colonialism.[37] "Africa was never one identity," Hartman contends, "but plural and contested ones" (LYM 231).

In a way similar to Morrison's *A Mercy* and Christiansë's *Unconfessed*, *Lose Your Mother* refuses to offer a consoling interpretation of slavery: What results from Hartman's engagement with the past is a deep sense of loss that cannot be redeemed or healed, and the death metaphors she insists on using express just that. As its title suggests, *Lose Your Mother* urges African American readers and other members of the African diaspora to discard mythical and romanticizing conceptions of "mother Africa" as a paradise and home for black dias-

35 | Holsey 220.

36 | Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts" 4.

37 | See Maria I. Diedrich, "'As if Freedom Were a City Waiting for Them in the Distance:' The American Revolution and the Black Hessian Subject," *Transnational American Studies*, ed. Udo J. Hebel (Heidelberg: Winter, 2012) 102.

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poric returnees.[38] Having witnessed the failures of the twentieth-century black liberation movements, Hartman is unable to conceive of Africa as a place that promises renewal and rebirth. Unlike black expatriates in the late 1950s and 1960s, who traveled to Ghana hoping to recover their African roots and build a free back nation, she belongs to a new generation of African Americans who are skeptical about the realization of political, economic and social justice for black women and men: "My arrival in Ghana was not auspicious. Mine was an age not of dreaming but of disenchantment" (LYM 38). As Hartman points out, even in Nkrumah's Ghana in the 1960s, many black Americans like Maya Angelou could embrace "mother Africa" only by consciously ignoring a past that spelt African complicity in the slave trade and slavery. In *All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes*, Angelou thus intentionally avoids a confrontation with the history of the transatlantic slave trade and the experiences of her enslaved ancestors by initially staying away from the former slave castle in Cape Coast. What she longs for in Ghana is to be "accepted as an African,"[39] and she can achieve that only by closing her eyes to African guilt. This is a crucial difference between Angelou's memoir and *Lose Your Mother*: For Hartman, exploring the history of racial slavery has a larger significance than the desire to blend into Ghanaian society (LYM 41-42).

In her travelogue, Hartman offers a self-reflexive comment on the meaning of the past for the present and the relevance of her project to explore the stories of the enslaved: Tracing the route of African captives, visiting the slave castles in Ghana and, most crucially, writing about slavery cannot simply be equated with "an antiquarian obsession with bygone days" (LYM 6). Rather, it is a highly political endeavor that highlights the painful connection between our time and the period of the slave trade,[40] the enduring effects of slavery on contemporary black life. Like Wilderson and other Afro-pessimists, Hartman argues that the legacy of racial slavery manifests itself in a shorter life expectancy, a higher risk of poverty and fewer educational opportunities for blacks (LYM 6). By turning to the past of loss and despair in order to reflect on the present, *Lose Your Mother*

38 | Broeck, "Enslavement as Regime of Western Modernity" 37; Judie Newman, "Round Table: Review of Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route*," *Journal of American Studies* 44.1 (2010): 1; Wood 9.

39 | Angelou 43. For months, Angelou refuses to visit Cape Coast. However, when she goes on a journey to the Ghanaian hinterland, she stops in this city to tank up. Thinking of her enslaved ancestors, she is overwhelmed by feelings of sorrow and pain. In her autobiographical narrative, this scene is constructed as a short and accidental interruption of her journey, not as an event that encourages her to rethink her view of Africa as a haven for black diasporic returnees. See Angelou 108-09.

40 | See also Tina M. Campt and Saidiya Hartman, "A Future Beyond Empire: An Introduction," *Small Axe* 13.1 (2009): 20.

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emerges as a protest narrative that centralizes the unfulfilled dream of black emancipation and liberation:[41] "I was loitering in a slave dungeon less because I hoped to discover what really happened here than because of what lived on from this history. Why else begin an autobiography in a graveyard?" (LYM 130).

Re-negotiating the Black Atlantic: *Lose Your Mother* and the Notion of Difference

By exploring the intricate relationship between black Americans and Africans—between black individuals in the diaspora and in the "homeland"—*Lose Your Mother* deals with a topic that has received relatively little attention in African diaspora studies.[42] Initially, Hartman privileged a view of the black world based on commonality and solidarity, assuming that different black communities are linked by "a thread of connection or a common chord of memory" (LYM 73). Like Gilroy in *The Black Atlantic*, she argued that the experience of suffering and oppression binds together black individuals and groups: "Dispossession was our history. [...] The solidarity I felt with other black people depended largely on this history" (LYM 74). For Hartman, the event of slavery and its afterlife are the defining moments of black life.

As *Lose Your Mother* shows, in Ghana, however, Hartman is forced to rethink her understanding of the black world as an intercultural and transnational formation united by common historical experiences. Hoping "to find a community in which—and with which—to grieve the losses borne from slavery,"[43] to quote Harvey Neptune, Hartman discovers that the majority of her interlocutors try to avoid any discussions about the history of the slave trade. Especially those whose ancestors collaborated with European and African slave raiders and traders are reluctant to acknowledge this fact or take recourse to legitimization strategies; but even for the Ghanaian descendants of enslaved Africans, these slave origins are too shameful to reveal. Also, confronted with poverty and unemployment, most Ghanaians have too many everyday problems to dig into the past (LYM 71-73). Given this strong reluctance or outright refusal to talk about slavery, Hartman's journey through Ghana proves to be, as Patricia J. Saunders puts it, "an experience of failed expectations, from day one."[44]

41 | Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts" 4. See also Holsey 156.

42 | Mayer 110-11; Zeleza 37. See also chapter 1, "The Concept of the African Diaspora and the Notion of Difference," in this study.

43 | Harvey Neptune, "Loving Through Loss: Reading Saidiya Hartman's History of Black Hurt," *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal* 6.1 (2008): 3.

44 | Patricia J. Saunders, "Fugitive Dreams of Diaspora: Conversations with Saidiya Hartman," *Anthurium* 6.1 (2008): 10.

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Her conversation with Kofi, a Ghanaian assistant curator at the Elmina Castle Museum, represents one of those defining moments in which Hartman realizes that there can be no unitary black identity based on a common history. For Hartman, the system of slavery is closely connected with disturbing scenes of horror. When reflecting on what her great-grandfather Moses calls "*the dark days*" (LYM 10; italics in the original), she thinks of burning villages, inhuman slave auctions and violent masters. These images show that, to use an expression taken from Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection*, "to be a slave is to be under the brutal power and authority of another."[45] For Kofi, however, slavery cannot be solely interpreted as a horrible crime. As the grandson of a former slave owner, he is equipped with a completely different attitude towards the past than the slave descendent Hartman. Emphasizing that enslaved Africans were treated with respect and dignity within his family, he relegates the violence of slavery exclusively to the American continent (LYM 72). In other words, Kofi refuses to accept any historical responsibility for the crimes of the past. Drawing on legitimization strategies, he seeks to whitewash his country's history, to portray slavery in Africa as a benign institution and to absolve the African slave trader and master from guilt.

Lose Your Mother represents this confrontation with a sanitized version of slavery as an extremely disturbing and shocking experience for Hartman. Talking to local black residents like Kofi, she is forced to discover a painful familiarity, i.e., crucial similarities between Ghanaian and white American discourses on slavery and racial subjugation: In the United States, slaveholders and masters sought to offer moral and religious justifications of slavery, depicting it as a benign system, civilizing force and paternalistic institution in which enslaved women and men were happy and satisfied. As the historian Nathan I. Huggins explains, an influential pro-slavery statement was that slaves were better off than their white owners "because they were unfettered by responsibilities for subsistence or family."[46] For centuries, white Americans avoided to acknowledge the fact that the nation's ideals of democracy, equality, progress and liberty existed side by side with slavery and racial oppression. In public contexts and most academic works, until the 1960s, slavery was regarded as a historical aberration and disorder rather than as an integral component of American history and culture.[47] To this day, many stereotypical views about slavery and plantation life in North America continue to influence discussions about and attitudes towards the past. "Generally," the historian James Oliver Horton contends,

45 | Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection* 3.

46 | Huggins xlix.

47 | Ibid. xi-xxiii.

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"Americans believe that slavery was a southern phenomenon, date it from the antebellum period, and do not think of it as central to the American story."[48]

What comes as a shock to Hartman is the insight that similar self-legitimizing discourses proliferate in contemporary Ghanaian society: On both sides of the Atlantic, there are attempts to present and justify slavery as a benevolent institution, to avoid questions of guilt and responsibility, to ignore the past altogether or to deny the enduring effects of slavery on contemporary black life. During the transatlantic slave trade, the African slave trader/owner felt connected to the white trader/master, not to the black victim. In other words, the dividing line here is not between black and white but between those who claimed the right to own human property and those who were reduced to objects; between the master's narrative (and the memory constructions of his descendants) and the slave's story (and the perspective of her descendants). This legacy, Hartman comes to understand, continues to shape contemporary interactions between African Americans and Ghanaians, destroying any hope for black solidarity across national and cultural borders.

Hartman's depiction of her encounter with Phyllis confirms this point: As a student at a prestigious private school, the Ghanaian teenager belongs to a higher social class in Ghana. Unlike many African Americans who are eager to connect to their roots in Africa, she is representative of those (educated) local residents intent upon "finding routes outside of their country,"[49] to use Holsey's words. When visiting Cape Coast Castle, Phyllis reveals her dream of studying in the United States but avoids any serious confrontation with the castle's dreadful history. For Phyllis, roots tourism offers a chance to socialize with Americans, to talk about American culture and to earn some money as a tour guide; however, she refuses to explore her country's past and its effects on contemporary Ghanaian society and black life, and nothing in her culture encourages her to do otherwise.

Influenced by contemporary popular representations of African Americans as successful and affluent individuals, many Ghanaians like Phyllis grow up with myths of the United States as a country of unlimited possibilities and opportunities, even for black people.[50] Struggling with inequality, poverty and oppression in Africa, some tend to emphasize the "positive" aspects of the history of the transatlantic slave trade and American racial slavery, assuming, as Holsey contends, "that slaves were simply low-status individuals in the New World, [...] and that their descendants ultimately benefited from their ability to be absorbed into a first world nation."[51] In other words, they are not familiar

48 | Horton 21. See also my introduction to *Transnational Black Dialogues*.

49 | Holsey 215.

50 | Ibid. 218.

51 | Ibid.

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with or seek to trivialize the devastating effects of American chattel slavery as a dehumanizing "system of *thingification*."[52] Instead of acknowledging the brutality of "New World" slavery, they draw on the past only to highlight contemporary social inequalities and hierarchical structures between Ghanaian and African American communities based on different political, social and economic developments in the U.S. and Africa.

By putting her African experience at the center of *Lose Your Mother* and focusing on the perspectives of individuals in the "homeland," Hartman contributes to a rethinking of Gilroy's concept of the black Atlantic that is primarily concerned with African American society, history and culture.[53] What emerges from Hartman's encounters with Ghanaians like Kofi and Phyllis is the insight that there are essential differences in the experiences, memory constructions and attitudes of blacks in the diaspora and Africans at "home." African Americans and Ghanaians are not linked by a common history of oppression/dispossession and view of slavery. The granddaughters and grandsons of slave owners like Kofi invent completely different readings and discourses of the past than slave descendants like Hartman. Directing our attention to the heterogeneity and diversity of black life and inequalities and hierarchies within the black world, *Lose Your Mother* moves beyond conceptions of similarity that, Campt reminds us in *Other Germans*, "often anchor dominant modes of theorizing the diaspora and *its relations*."[54] Difference, Hartman comes to understand, is the defining feature of interactions and relations between blacks in Africa and in the United States.

While Ghanaians and diasporic subjects cannot possibly share the same notion of home and view of the past, the concept of diaspora, Holsey argues, "can be mobilized in quite conscious ways in order to form a transnational relationship that might have certain kinds of benefits."[55] In fact, since the early 1990s, on the part of the Ghanaian government, there have been attempts to forge links between local residents and diasporic tourists, to build a bridge between Africa and its diaspora. Driven by economic interests and, in particular, the fear of losing the enormously profitable roots tourists, since 1991, the Ministry of Tourism has initiated several (cultural) projects centered on the history of the transatlantic slave trade to continue to attract African Ameri-

52 | Broeck, "Enslavement as Regime of Western Modernity" 37; italics in the original.

53 | See chapter 1, "The Concept of the African Diaspora and the Notion of Difference," in this study.

54 | Campt, *Other Germans* 23; emphasis added.

55 | Tina M. Campt and Deborah A. Thomas, "Diasporic Hegemonies: Slavery, Memory, and Genealogies of Diaspora: Dialogue Participants: Jacqueline Nassy Brown and Bayo Holsey," *Transforming Anthropology* 14.2 (2006): 165.

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can visitors.[56] By privileging diasporic narratives of loss, grief and mourning rather than return, reunion and recovery, Hartman contests this discourse of diaspora tourism in Ghana.

Loss, Grief and Mourning: Challenging the Discourse of Roots Tourism in Ghana

Evoking the loss of family members and (African) origins, the title of Hartman's travelogue has a double meaning: Not only does it deconstruct myths of Africa as a welcoming home for black diasporic subjects;[57] it also refers to the fact that, during the era of the transatlantic slave trade, African, American and European slave owners and masters tried to erase the African past of the enslaved, to destroy the captive's memories of her life before bondage: "A slave without a past had no life to avenge. No time was wasted yearning for home, no recollections of a distant country slowed her down as she tilled the soil, no image of her mother came to mind when she looked into the face of her child" (LYM 155). Today, within the framework of diaspora or roots tourism in Ghana, slave descendants around the world are urged to do the opposite and to remember their African ancestors; they are encouraged not to forget their "mothers" (LYM 162)—as if that were possible through an act of will.

Every year, Ghanaian guides take thousands of black Americans and other members of the African diaspora to and through former slave dungeons and the castles in Elmina and Cape Coast, suggesting that it is possible to experience the pain and sorrow of their enslaved forebears. Moreover, there are regular festivals, such as "Panafest," intended to revitalize the bonds between Africa and its diaspora. In other words, whereas in everyday life, many Ghanaians hesitate or refuse to discuss this past defined by slavery, the history of the slave trade and slavery, however devoid of the African guilt issue, now is made to play a prominent part within the (public) performance sphere of tourism.[58] Drawing on Gilroy's discussion of the exchange of concepts and practices between different black groups, Holsey reads the emergence of roots tourism in Ghana as the result of a "black Atlantic conversation,"[59] as the product of a transnational discussion between Africans and African Americans "in which various notions of connection are regularly mobilized."[60] Exploiting and perverting myths of unity and solidarity, diaspora tourism is reconceptualized to

56 | Holsey 156-64.

57 | See also Broeck, "Enslavement as Regime of Western Modernity" 37.

58 | Holsey 1-14.

59 | Ibid. 152.

60 | Ibid.

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create the illusion that the differences and gaps between Ghanaians and black diasporic subjects can be overcome.

Hartman, however, documents that Ghana's political decision to remember, stage and memorialize the transatlantic slave trade is primarily motivated by financial interests: "Every town or village had an atrocity to promote—a mass grave, an auction block, a slave river, a massacre. It was Ghana's equivalent to a fried chicken franchise" (LYM 163). *Lose Your Mother* shows that it is a shocking and painful experience for Hartman to discover that there are cruel similarities between the commemoration of slavery in Ghana and North America: In the U.S., historic plantation sites and living history museums have become popular tourist destinations. Created to engage, educate and, most crucially, to entertain the public, these places are notorious for offering sensationalized stories or presenting a sanitized view of slavery. In Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia, a highly commercialized tourist attraction and one of the most famous living history museums in the country, large numbers of visitors are drawn by highly problematic reenactments, guided tours about slavery and reconstructed slave quarters. Since the late 1970s, there have been bitter controversies about the way slavery is represented by historians and costumed interpreters. In 1994, for instance, a mock slave auction depicting the separation of a black family attracted an enormous amount of criticism.[61] Many black Americans, in particular members of the NAACP, were outraged at "the trivialization and degradation of African American history,"[62] as Dan Eggen explains in a 1991 article in the *Washington Post*.

In addition to denouncing this commercialization of the past, Hartman criticizes that, in Ghana, the history of slavery is exclusively constructed as an African American narrative. While the return of black Americans to Africa is celebrated with festivals, ceremonies and rituals, there is no public debate about the participation of African royals, elites, merchants and common folk in the slave trade or about the experiences of those Africans who managed to escape captivity and enslavement. For many Ghanaians, diaspora tourism offers a chance to improve their living conditions, by giving them jobs and attracting affluent visitors from all over the world. But most local residents refuse to explore their connections to the African diaspora, examine their country's history of slavery or reflect on internal tensions and differences based on class, ethnic-

61 | See Dan Eggen, "In Williamsburg, the Painful Reality of Slavery," *Washington Post* 7 July 1991: A1; Horton 30-31; Eric Gable, Richard Handler and Anna Lawson, "On the Uses of Relativism: Fact, Conjecture, and Black and White Histories at Colonial Williamsburg," *American Ethnologist* 19.4 (1992): 791-805; Michael Janofsky, "Mock Auction of Slaves: Education or Outrage?" *New York Times* 8 Oct. 1994, 17 Apr. 2014 http://www.nytimes.com/1994/10/08/us/mock-auction-of-slaves-education-or-outrage.html.

62 | Eggen A1.

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ity, gender and region (LYM 162-65). Although thousands of African American root seekers continue to travel to Ghana to discover their African ancestry, the discourse of diaspora tourism cannot serve to unite the black world, Hartman argues: "What each community made of slavery and how they understood it provided little ground for solidarity" (LYM 164).

A couple of years ago, the Ghanaian government initiated an advertising campaign asking local residents to avoid using the term *obruni* and to embrace black Americans as beloved family members (LYM 164).[63] In *Lose Your Mother* and in her 2002 essay "The Time of Slavery," Hartman offers a critical reflection on the impossibility of reunion between tourists and Ghanaians: In front of Elmina Castle, she encounters a group of teenagers, who welcome her return to Africa, address her as "sister" and urge her to stay in touch as pen pals. Emphasizing their common ancestry as people of African descent, the boys give her three, rather stilted, letters focused on the notion of familial bonds between black women and men in the diaspora and in Africa. While Hartman is drawn "by the lure of filial devotion extended by these budding amorists,"[64] she stresses the impossibility of recovering the loss caused by the horror and brutality of slavery. In her view, the boys' letters serve as "a pretend cure for an irreparable injury"[65] rather than as a bridge between Africans and black diasporic subjects.

By directing our attention to the crucial role of grief, loss and mourning in black diasporic life, Hartman's *Lose Your Mother* challenges dominant narratives of roots tourism in Ghana that center on the success of black liberation and the end of slavery.[66] In her conversation with Khalid, an Atlanta-based filmmaker, she discards the idea of return and spiritual renewal. Khalid, by contrast, constructs his journey to Ghana as powerfully redemptive: "'All the folks taken across the waters are returning home through me,' he said with absolute earnestness" (LYM 108). In "The Time of Slavery," Hartman explicitly argues against such interpretations that depict African American tourists as victorious survivors and "vessels" for their dead ancestors' return to Africa. In her view, the yawning gap caused by the Middle Passage cannot be closed by the captives' descendants.[67] Instead of celebrating the slave's redemption, in her discussion with Khalid, she reveals her feelings of loneliness in Ghana and begins to cry. Within the travelogue, this expression of grief directs our attention to a moment of utter disillusionment and despair in Hartman's life in Ghana. For her, roots tourism cannot serve to transform the violence of slavery into a story of recovery, to translate the past of defeat and dispossession into "a history

63 | See also Polgreen, "Ghana's Uneasy Embrace of Slavery's Diaspora" A1+.

64 | Hartman, "The Time of Slavery" 761.

65 | Ibid. 762.

66 | Ibid. 758; see also Holsey 233.

67 | Hartman, "The Time of Slavery" 768.

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of progress."[68] Like Morrison in *A Mercy* and Christiansë in *Unconfessed*, Hartman explores the destructive nature of slavery as "thingification" to reflect on the enduring effects of this history on black life, "to illuminate the intimacy of our experience with the lives of the dead."[69]

Bridging the Gap: "The Fugitive's Dream" and the African Diaspora

Contrary to what many (twentieth-century) studies suggest, during the time of the transatlantic slave trade, African individuals and groups whose lives were impacted or threatened by the trade did not passively and silently submit to enslavement, subjugation and forced migration. Rather, they developed a wide variety of violent and non-violent strategies to resist enslavement and to stay free. While some African communities managed to protect and defend themselves against slave-raiding by migrating to distant and unknown places and building walls around their villages and towns, other groups actively participated in slave rebellions or attacks on slave depots. Despite this long and vibrant history of black struggles against enslavement in Africa, for long, scholars in the field of slave trade studies have primarily shed light on the crushing power of the slave system or forms of (commercial) cooperation between African and European slave traders. In many academic works, the historian Sylviane A. Diouf observes, Africans are only seen as passive commodities or treacherous collaborators but not as active agents in the fight against the slave trade.[70]

By exploring the history of refugees and warriors in the Ghanaian village of Gwolu, Hartman's *Lose Your Mother* deconstructs notions of black passivity towards enslavement in Africa. In the heyday of the slave trade, Gwolu was a place of refuge for those Africans fleeing from freebooters, soldiers and slave raiders, a remote village in the northwestern hinterland where fugitives and runaways came together, hoping to avoid kidnapping and deportation. Having migrated from different regions, these refugees, who became known as "the Sisala," had neither a common language, ancestry, ethnicity nor history. What united them, however, was "the danger that had driven them" (LYM 225) to leave their familiar homes and cross the savanna—as well as a determination to stay free.

While they were filled with feelings of loss, they were ready to start a new life, to forge bonds of love, friendship and solidarity with other villagers and to share their traditions, customs and religious values. In short, they started to

68 | Ibid.

69 | Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts" 4.

70 | Sylviane A. Diouf, "Introduction," *Fighting the Slave Trade: West African Strategies* (Athens: Ohio UP, 2003) ix-xxvii.

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reinvent themselves, creating a new home and community not based on kin and ethnic affiliations but on the hope for freedom: "'We' was the collectivity they built from the ground up, not one they had inherited, not one that others had imposed" (LYM 225). In Gwolu, strangers were welcomed as allies as long as they helped to defend the town and accepted that "there would be no masters" (LYM 225). Threatened by foreign troops and warriors, the villagers knew that they were still in danger of being attacked, captured and sold as property. Like other African groups of runaways in other places, they decided to build a barricade around their settlement, a high defense wall whose remains are still there.[71]

In *Lose Your Mother*, Hartman's trip to Gwolu marks the end of her journey through Ghana; it is her last chance to encounter and reconstruct stories about the defeated and dispossessed, "to discover the signpost that pointed the way to those on the opposite shore of the Atlantic" (LYM 231). Contrary to her expectations, however, in the northwestern area of Ghana, "in the heartland of slavery" (LYM 232), nobody talks about slaves. Unlike Hartman and other African Americans, the local residents of Gwolu do not define themselves through narratives of captivity, loss and enslavement. For the descendants of "the Sisala," the past of racial slavery is not a matter of suffering, sorrow and pain "but rather a source of pride" (LYM 233), a story of triumph over powerful hostile communities, aggressive states and predatory troops.

What follows from Hartman's reflections on the history of Gwolu is, again, an emphasis on difference as a constitutive element of the black world: In the Ghanaian hinterland, she comes to the insight that the complex history of the transatlantic slave trade cannot be restricted to the experiences of those African women and men kidnapped in villages and towns, violently taken to the West African coast, shipped across the Atlantic Ocean and forced to work in the Americas.[72] Listening to the residents of Gwolu, she realizes that the past of slavery cannot be read solely through the lens of African America. It is not only about captives, orphans and coerced laborers but also about fugitives, runaways

71 | This section on the history of Gwolu is based on Hartman's account in *Lose Your Mother*; see LYM 219-35.

72 | In *Routes of Remembrance: Refashioning the Slave Trade in Ghana*, the cultural anthropologist Bayo Holsey reaches a similar conclusion, arguing that the transatlantic "slave trade has never been solely the history of those who were captured from their homes, placed in chains, carried across the sea, and forced to toil on plantations. It is also the history of those in the bondage of the global system of oppression that emerged at the moment of this forced migration. This interpretation provides then a different vision of black Atlantic community that might be a stronger basis for connection than those based on overcoming the divide between those who were enslaved and those who remained." Holsey 237.

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and fighters—about African individuals and communities who managed to escape enslavement.

"The fugitive's dream" (LYM 233), the story of those Africans who left behind their old lives and came together to protect themselves and fight against the slave trade, has an inspiring, empowering and transformational effect on Hartman. Reconstructing the experiences of "the Sisala," she discovers a past that is not only about loss, dispossession and grief but also, and essentially, about reinvention, resistance, cooperation and solidarity. In particular, she embraces the runaway's idea of "home as making"[73] rather than as heritage, the refugees' concept of community not grounded on common ancestral ties but on shared goals. Emphasizing the interrelation between local contexts and global structures and between the past and the present, she draws a connection between the history of Gwolu and the current formation of the African diaspora, the narrative of fugitives and rebels in Ghana during the period of the slave trade and the dream of contemporary black people in Africa and elsewhere.[74]

For Hartman, the struggle against racial oppression, the fight against "slavery in all of its myriad forms" (LYM 234), serves as a transnational link between black communities and individuals marked by different ethnic origins, languages, traditions, cultural values, experiences and histories: "The bridge between the people of Gwolu and me wasn't what we had suffered or what we had endured but the aspirations that fueled flight and the yearning for freedom" (LYM 234). Gwolu, *Lose Your Mother* insists, is connected to any other place around the world where black people come together to resist white supremacy and anti-black racism.

Reflecting on the relation between towns like Gwolu and the African diaspora, Hartman engages in and contributes to a re-negotiation of diaspora theory. In an interview with Patricia J. Saunders, she points out that there are essential similarities between freedom communities, such as the group of fugitives in Gwolu, and diasporic formations: They are shaped by experiences of dislocation as well as by processes of arrival and settlement.[75] Living far away from their ancestors' places of origins, these groups try to produce "conditions that make dwelling possible,"[76] to quote Hartman. This view echoes Campt's understanding of diaspora as a concept that is "quite fundamentally about dwelling and staying put."[77]

73 | Saunders, "Fugitive Dreams of Diaspora: Conversations with Saidiya Hartman" 13.

74 | See also Diedrich, "'As if Freedom Were a City Waiting for Them in the Distance'" 98.

75 | Saunders, "Fugitive Dreams of Diaspora: Conversations with Saidiya Hartman" 13.

76 | Ibid.

77 | Campt, *Image Matters* 25.

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While Hartman emphasizes the significance of local contexts for black diasporic identity formation, she also focuses on the dialogic nature of the African diaspora: the possibility and necessity to enter into a conversation with other black groups, to exchange and compare different experiences and to position yourself in relation to other black people. Highlighting the construction and ongoing negotiation of black diasporic identity, this is a dynamic view of diaspora privileged by scholars like Campt, who has recently argued:

> I can't understand diaspora through only African-Americans—there's no way I can do that. I can only understand diaspora by understanding my own location in relationship to other communities, how they struggle with, and actually thrive, under circumstances of racial oppression. So to me [...] diaspora is what happens when you're in one place and still have to connect to and utilise the resources of other black communities to make sense of your own.[78]

In *Lose Your Mother,* Hartman tries to make sense of diaspora by exploring the connection between black Americans and the inhabitants of Gwolu. While they do not share the same experiences of suffering, both communities are linked by common political goals to end oppression. Listening to the story of fugitives and freedom fighters, Hartman embraces her identity as an *African* American: "Africa wasn't dead to me, nor was it just a grave. My future was entangled with it, just as it was entangled with every other place on the globe where people were struggling to live and hoping to thrive" (LYM 233).

"Critical Fabulation:" Writing with and against the *Dead Book*

In *Lose Your Mother,* Hartman directs the reader's attention to a photo included in a Ghanaian tourist brochure. The picture shows a group of Ghanaian schoolchildren engaged in an attempt to re-enact the past. Crowded together in the dungeon of Cape Coast Castle, the boys and girls are costumed as enslaved Africans; some of them are in chains. This scene parallels the cruel (and highly profitable) spectacle of historical reenactments in the United States in places like Colonial Williamsburg, where costumed slave interpreters attract thousands of visitors by offering a sanitized version of slavery. Assuming that a bridge between the past and the present can be built, the photograph in the tourist brochure claims that the painful experiences of African captives can be reconstructed and captured, that the slaves can be rescued from oblivion (LYM 133-35). In her analysis of the picture, Hartman emphasizes the moral and

78 | Campt, "Imagining Ourselves."

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ethical risks of this visual representation of slavery: "By providing the anonymous with faces, the image succeeded only in killing the dead a second time by replacing them with stand-ins. The loss that the photo struggled to articulate was at cross-purposes with the gaggle of children huddled in the dungeon" (LYM 134-35).

Without doubt, these reflections on the dangers inherent in re-imagining the history of the slave trade and slavery are not specific to the medium of photography; they are as well relevant to the field of literature. In writing about slavery from twenty-first-century perspectives, contemporary authors of neo-slave narratives are faced with the challenge of finding an appropriate form to represent the past. In a chapter called "The Dead Book," Hartman reflects on the hazards and ultimate impossibility of recovering and telling the story of an eighteenth-century enslaved African woman who was murdered during the Middle Passage, on a British slave vessel known as the *Recovery*. As the ship's surgeon Thomas Dowling later testified, the young woman was tied up, severely beaten, whipped, mutilated and eventually killed by Captain John Kimber. In 1792, the abolitionist William Wilberforce gave a speech before the House of Commons to campaign for the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade. In his talk, he referred to the incidents on board the *Recovery*, highlighting the woman's suffering, degradation and sexual abuse as well as the captain's cruelty. When the case came to trial in Britain, Kimber was accused of murder but a jury absolved him of the charge (LYM 136-49).[79] What the anonymous black woman has in common with other female captives is the fact that there is hardly any information on her experiences in Africa and aboard the slave ship. This paucity of sources especially about black women, Hortense J. Spillers contends, characterizes much of the historiography of the transatlantic slave trade: "At any rate, we get very little notion in the written record of the life of women, children, and infants in 'Middle Passage.'"[80]

In fact, the only text about the female captive on board the *Recovery* is a trial transcript, a musty document in the archive of slavery reducing her to the acts of (sexual) violence committed against her.[81] It consists only of the statements of white men, including the ship's surgeon, the third mate and Captain Kimber. In the transcript, the woman's voice is absent. The scandalous and shocking depictions of her body's violation, "are the only defense of her existence," Hartman observes, "the only barrier against her disappearance; and these words killed her a second time and consigned her to the bottom of the Atlantic" (LYM 138).

79 | See also Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts" 7-8.

80 | Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" 73.

81 | See also Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts" 2.

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While the trial against Captain Kimber attracted considerable public attention in the eighteenth century, the woman's terrible story on board the *Recovery* is largely forgotten today (LYM 138). In *Lose Your Mother*, Hartman seeks to rescue the female slave from oblivion and to deconstruct the horrible stories told about her. Based on the conviction that narratives can be seen "as a form of compensation,"[82] Hartman's goal is to create a black counter-history of the slave trade that does not depict the enslaved as a number, a value unit, a human commodity or an object of voyeuristic desire. In her 2008 essay "Venus in Two Acts," she directs our attention to the ethical risks of her project: Since it is only possible to explore the woman's life through the eyes of white masters and captors, there is the danger of repeating and re-articulating the humiliations, atrocities and obscene phrases of the archive and to expose the enslaved to a second act of victimization and violence.[83]

As Sabine Broeck has shown in "Enslavement as Regime of Western Modernity: Re-Reading Gender Studies Epistemology through Black Feminist Critique" (2008), Hartman is highly influenced by the literary and theoretical writings of Toni Morrison and Hortense J. Spillers. Like Morrison's *Beloved*, *Lose Your Mother* is not only marked by a strong determination to revisit the past of the slave trade and slavery but also by a painful reflection on the limits of this endeavor. "In *Beloved*," Broeck contends, "it is the very void of story which gestures towards an ethically, and linguistically impossible representation"[84] of the Middle Passage. In *Lose Your Mother*, Hartman explicitly and repeatedly refers to the impossibility of reconstructing and articulating the slave's experience onboard the *Recovery*.[85] Focusing on acts of (sexual) violence directed against the black female body, Hartman knows that her attempt to represent the past necessarily "translates into a potential for pornotroping."[86] In her landmark essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" (1987), Spillers introduces the term "pornotroping" to describe processes in which enslaved black women were violently mutilated and sexually mistreated, reduced to flesh

82 | Ibid. 4.

83 | Ibid. 2-5.

84 | Broeck, "Enslavement as Regime of Western Modernity" 35.

85 | Ibid. 34-51.

86 | Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" 67. In an interview, Hartman explicitly refers to the influence of Spillers's writings on her own work: "Indebtedness is the word that comes to mind that I would use to describe my relation to Hortense's work. That's how I would summarize it. I mean I am still struggling with the problematic terms that 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe' has generated." See Hortense Spillers, Saidiya Hartman, Farah Jasmine Griffin, Shelly Eversley and Jennifer L. Morgan, "'Watcha Gonna Do?'—Revisiting 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book,'" *Women's Studies Quarterly* 35.1/2 (2007): 300.

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and then, in abolitionist discourse, exposed to a (white) audience.[87] As Michael A. Chaney puts it in his reading of Spillers's concept, "pornotroping" is an act that is about "satisfying voyeuristic desire by reinforcing the viewer's self-perception of bodily integrity."[88] It refers to the widespread and highly problematic circulation of shocking images and sensationalized narratives of black suffering by white abolitionists who sought to illustrate and prove the cruelty of the transatlantic slave trade.

Determined to minimize the risk of "pornotroping," Hartman uses a narrative and aesthetic strategy "best described as critical fabulation."[89] This practice of writing is based on the conviction that, as Hayden White's work has shown, the traditional differentiation between history and fiction, in which history is regarded "as the representation of the actual" and literature "as the representation of the imaginable,"[90] is untenable. On the one hand, "critical fabulation" is grounded on a careful analysis and critical incorporation of archival documents, which represent "the building blocks of the narrative."[91] On the other hand, a writer drawing on this narrative strategy is required to confront the silences and omissions in the archive. The goal is to discuss and portray the complexity of the slave's life, while acknowledging and commenting on the fact that there are certain aspects of history that cannot and must not be recovered and articulated. In other words, it requires a self-reflexive and critical examination of the value and the limits of digging into the past and representing the captive's experiences of (sexual) violation.[92] Marked by ambiguity and uncertainty and a refusal to offer narrative closure, it is a strategy that involves writing "with and against the archive,"[93] as Hartman puts it.

An analysis of "The Dead Book" illustrates Hartman's complex project: Blurring the line between what has been conventionally perceived as fact and fiction, she incorporates "authentic" voices into this chapter. Taken from eighteenth-century documents, these are the statements of white men, such

87 | Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" 67-68. See also Alexander G. Weheliye, "Pornotropes," *Journal of Visual Culture* 7.1 (2008): 71-72; Michael A. Chaney, *Fugitive Vision: Slave Image and Black Identity in Antebellum Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2008) 63.

88 | Chaney 63.

89 | Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts" 11.

90 | Hayden White, "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact," *The Northern Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch (1978; New York: Norton, 2001) 1727.

91 | As Hartman explains, the term "fabula" refers to "the basic elements of story, the building blocks of the narrative." Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts" 11.

92 | Ibid. 11-12. See also Broeck, "Enslavement as Regime of Western Modernity" 34-51.

93 | Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts" 12.

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as the judge of the Admiralty Court, who chaired the trial against Kimber in 1792, the ship's surgeon Dowling or the insurance expert John Weskett. In their utterances, they construct the enslaved as a non-human being or justify the captain's violent actions on board the *Recovery* as a means to prevent slave rebellions. In addition to these original phrases from the archive of slavery, Hartman presents sentences that might have been uttered and acts that might have been performed, telling the story from the points of view of the captain, the surgeon and the third mate. While all of them claim the authority to tell the truth, each character offers a different version of the incident on the slave vessel. By reconstructing the same narrative—the captain's brutal flogging of the woman and the slave's death—from contradictory perspectives, Hartman manages to deprive the white men of their authority and to deconstruct the "received or authorized account."[94] For the reader, it is a challenging task to piece together the episodes and to identify and distinguish between the different speakers and the narrator of the story.[95] As Hartman explains, by dividing the plot into different parts, she seeks "to illuminate the contested character of history, narrative, event and fact."[96]

While the trial transcript only gives voice to white captors, Hartman's reconstruction of the past ends with a sequence presented from the perspective of the female victim. This passage not only highlights the black woman's traumatic experiences on board the *Recovery* but also sheds light on her strong determination to resist the captain's control over her. Without losing sight of the horror of the Middle Passage, in Hartman's narrative, the woman's spirit returns home to her family and friends in Africa. What follows, however, is a short self-reflexive part, in which Hartman addresses the limits of her project to salvage the female captive. Like Morrison in *A Mercy* and Christiansë in *Unconfessed*, Hartman challenges the naïve idea of the liberating and reconciliatory power of slavery fiction: She resists the temptation to provide narrative closure and to transform the slave woman's story of (sexual) violence and despair into a triumphant account of redemption:

> If the story ended there, I could feel a small measure of comfort. I could hold on to this instant of possibility. I could find a salutary lesson in the girl's suffering and pretend a story was enough to save her from oblivion. I could sigh with relief and say, "It all happened so long ago." Then I could wade into the Atlantic and not think of the *dead book*. (LYM 153; italics in the original)

94 | Ibid. 11.

95 | Ibid. 11-12.

96 | Ibid. 12.

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The black woman's fate still has relevance today, *Lose Your Mother* insists, drawing attention to the enduring and destructive effects of the Middle Passage and slavery on twenty-first-century black life—to what Campt and Hartman describe as "[t]he tragic entanglement of our era with that of the Atlantic slave trade, the weight of dead generations upon the present."[97] For Hartman, it is impossible to reconstruct, recreate and rescue the life of the eighteenth-century slave woman who was murdered on board the *Recovery* but not too late to imagine a different future for black individuals around the world.[98]

In recent years, Hartman and other Afro-pessimists have been criticized for concentrating exclusively on the crushing power of chattel slavery; for reading slavery and blackness as a condition of "social death" (Orlando Patterson);[99] for ignoring the agency of the enslaved; for interpreting dispossession, alienation and despair as defining elements of black life in the past and in the present. In his 2009 essay "Social Death and Political Life in the Study of Slavery," the historian Vincent Brown argues that Hartman "remains so focused on her own commemorations that her text makes little space for a consideration of how the enslaved struggled with alienation and the fragility of belonging, or of the mourning rites they used to confront their condition."[100] According to Brown, Hartman's view of slavery as a form of social death "precludes her from describing the ways that violence, dislocation, and death actually generate culture, politics, and consequential action by the enslaved."[101]

This failure, Brown contends, is especially noticeable in Hartman's representation of the Middle Passage in "The Dead Book:"

> Hartman discerns a convincing subject position for all of the participants in the events surrounding the death of the girl, except for the other slaves who watched the woman die and carried the memory with them to the Americas, presumably to tell others [...], who must have drawn from such stories a basic perspective on the history of the Atlantic world.[102]

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97 | Campt and Hartman, "A Future Beyond Empire" 20.

98 | Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts" 13-14.

99 | In his 1982 work *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*, Orlando Patterson defines slavery as "*the permanent, violent domination of natally alienated and generally dishonored persons*." Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1982) 13; italics in the original.

100 | Vincent Brown, "Social Death and Political Life in the Study of Slavery," *American Historical Review* 114.5 (2009): 1239.

101 | Ibid.

102 | Ibid. 1240.

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Significantly, Brown does not take into account that Hartman strategically decides not to adopt the perspective of Venus, another female captive on board the *Recovery*, who possibly witnessed the slave woman's death: "Initially I thought I wanted to represent the affiliations severed and remade in the hollow of the slave ship by imagining the two girls as friends, by giving them one another. But in the end I was forced to admit that I wanted to console myself,"[103] Hartman explains in "Venus in Two Acts." *Lose Your Mother*, I argue, never denies the possibility and existence of black agency under slavery, yet refrains from evoking the social power of friendship and mourning rites in slave women's lives: "In a free state," as Hartman points out, "it would have been possible for the girls to attend to the death of a friend and shed tears for the loss, but a slave ship made no allowance for grief and when detected the instruments of torture were employed to eradicate it."[104]

Conclusion

Crossing the borders of different genres such as travelogue, autobiography and historical writing, Hartman's second-generation neo-slave narrative *Lose Your Mother* contributes to a critical re-negotiation of the concept of the African diaspora. Focusing on experiences of loss and estrangement, Hartman stresses the impossibility not only of going back to an "authentic" ancestral village; she powerfully challenges the myth of "mother Africa" as a welcoming home for black diasporic subjects.[105] Hartman reconstructs her time in Ghana as a process of disenchantment: She comes to understand that black communities and individuals around the world are not necessarily linked by common historical experiences of suffering and interpretations of the transatlantic slave trade and racial slavery. Drawing on her encounters with local black residents during her Fulbright year in Ghana, she highlights differences, gaps and hierarchical structures between African Americans and Africans and among Africans, thus countering dominant narratives of black relations based on similarity.

Hartman depicts her time in Gwolu as a turning point of her journey through Ghana: In this village in the northwestern hinterland, she realizes that the experience of the slave trade cannot be read solely through the eyes of captives transported to the Americas. Inspired by the stories of fugitives and rebels, she engages in a rethinking of her identity as an *African* American woman and the global formation of the black world. For Hartman, the fight against racial oppression serves as a transnational link between black commu-

103 | Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts" 9.

104 | Ibid. 8.

105 | See also Broeck, "Enslavement as Regime of Western Modernity" 37.

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nities around the world: "The legacy that I chose to claim was articulated in the ongoing struggle to escape, stand down, and defeat slavery in all of its myriad forms. It was the fugitive's legacy" (LYM 234). Hartman's view, however, excludes large segments of the Ghanaian population descended from African slave owners and slave traders from this inheritance.

Published exactly twenty years after *Beloved*, *Lose Your Mother* cannot be read without considering its complex intertextual relationship to Morrison's 1987 masterpiece. In "The Dead Book," Hartman struggles to give an account of the Middle Passage from a black female perspective "without committing further violence in [her] own act of narration."[106] Like Morrison, Hartman employs a sophisticated narrative strategy marked by self-reflexivity and ambiguity: Based on archival material and white voices, she seeks to reconstruct the young woman's life on board the *Recovery* by drawing on a variety of (contradictory) perspectives, while simultaneously emphasizing the obligation and urge to bear witness to the past and the impossibility of writing slavery and recovering the captive's voice.

In a way similar to Morrison's *A Mercy* and Christiansë's *Unconfessed*, Hartman offers an intertextual counter-discourse to "kitsch" interpretations of *Beloved*. Deconstructing the idea of history as progress, *Lose Your Mother* explicitly directs the reader's attention to the persistent legacy of slavery and black abjection, or what Hartman describes as the "future created by" slavery (LYM 133). For her, representing the experiences of the forgotten and dispossessed is not at all an attempt to close the wounds of the past but to excavate them to examine "what lived on from this history" (LYM 130).

106 | Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts" 2.

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