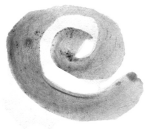
On working with archives



Writer Saidiya Hartman details the importance that deep research and archival materials have on her writing practice.

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As told to Thora Siemsen, 2816 words.

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What is your outlining process like when starting a book?

Outlining may be too formal a description. I work intuitively and will follow a trail of documents or my instincts until the project emerges. I have an impression of the kind of thing I might want to do, and that's very clear, as opposed to having a full outline of the book. I think partly it's because of the way I engage archival materials. I have a deep encounter with them. Sometimes that means there are things that I think I'm going to write about that I actually can't write about once I encounter the particular material, or sometimes it just takes me in a direction that I wasn't expecting to go in at all.

I think of my work as bridging theory and narrative. I am very committed to a storied articulation of ideas, but working with concepts as building blocks enables me to think about situation and character as well as my own key terms. When writing I will ask what are some of the key terms that I'm thinking with, or that I'm writing against.

How soon after your first book, *Scenes of Subjection* (1997), did you begin researching and writing your next, *Lose Your Mother* (2007)?

A week after *Scenes* came out, I was on a plane to Ghana. I had a Fulbright and wanted to write about memory and slavery in a comparative frame. I think I was probably trying to run away from the possible reception or failure of *Scenes*, so I started research on a new project. I didn't realize how difficult or challenging that project would prove to be until I had been in Ghana for a year.

Have you had conversations with readers of *Lose Your Mother* about their own travels to Ghana?

Yes. I think that it's certainly Ghana specific, but the larger frame is about these issues of memory, the afterlife of slavery, and what are the forms of narrative that are commensurate to trying to tell an impossible history. I mean, it's a 500 year swath of history, and I'm trying to inhabit that swath. An anthropologist of Africa said, "I read that book. I read it so many times, and the first two times I read it, I hated it." I thought, "Wow. I'm actually delighted that she had such an impassioned reaction to it." I'm glad people read it and they feel that there's something important at stake.

When you're writing from a place that isn't home, do you welcome the interruptions to your rhythm or do you seek it back?

A place that isn't home… I think that so much of writing is about a way of trying to make home, and I often think of this in terms of national identity. I don't really feel like an American. I feel like a New Yorker. A New Yorker is as close as I get to having a national identity. I think part of writing is about that negotiation with

homelessness and placelessness.

I have this short essay, "Venus in Two Acts." It's a reflection on *Lose Your Mother*, and in that, I observe that narrative may be the only available form of redress for the monumental crime that was the transatlantic slave trade and the terror of enslavement and racism. That's a long way of saying that the stories we tell or the songs we sing or the wealth of immaterial resources are all that we can count on.

But there is also something that's really difficult and exciting about being in a place that you don't know, because you're absolutely disoriented. Sometimes that disorientation challenges the way you look at things, because often you don't really know what you're looking at. You're trying to figure out the clues. You're trying to build up a certain literacy in regard to the environment, and writing is the way I build home, even here. Maybe everyone feels this way. Recently I've had so many deaths in my family. There has been so much pain and loss and chaos, but the routine of writing is how I sort it out, how I withstand it.

Last year, Mariame Kaba shared your quote "care is the antidote to violence" as a "potentially powerful feminist frame for abolition." She was talking about examples of care, like letter writing, prison visits, and financial support. How often is it the goal of your rhetoric to become a frame for action?

All the time. That's great. Obviously not in some instrumental way, but yeah. The writing and the thought that propels it is the desire for a radically different order than the one in which we're living. It pleases me that people can engage the work and yet take it into whatever practice they're involved in. I have friends who are dancers who've worked with my texts in building dance pieces.

Often the way people think of care is as an incredibly privatized thing. I mean, caring for ourselves, partly, is the way we destroy this world and we make another. We help each other inhabit what is an otherwise uninhabitable and brutal social context.

At Columbia this semester, you're teaching "Du Bois at 150," a course that examines "the philosophical, literary, historical and sociological work of W.E.B. Du Bois…some 150 years after his birth and 55 years after his death." How is teaching this course in 2018 impacting the way you're thinking about posterity?

I'm not thinking about my own posterity, but I definitely love Du Bois. Du Bois is both foundational in black radical thought, and Du Bois is also the privileged site of masculine intellectual self-fashioning. I always think that my own take on Du Bois is wayward. It's wonderful to engage the breadth of his work, because Du Bois was involved in so many formal experiments of his own, so just looking at a book like *The Souls of Black Folk*, which contains historical essays, economic analysis, fiction, with each chapter opening with these musical epigraphs… It's so innovative on the level of form that it's really an inspiration for me. So many of his ideas have shaped the project I'm working on now, both in terms of thinking with him, and thinking in a critical relation to him.

I certainly would be delighted to have people reading my work a hundred years from now. That isn't my expectation. I work a lot with scraps of the archive. I work a lot with unknown persons, nameless figures, ensembles, collectives, multitudes, the chorus. That's where my imagination of practice resides. That's where my heart resides. I think that there's a certain notion of the intellectual capital "I." It's not that I'm not an intellectual, and I certainly want to produce work that people find valuable and of use, but I guess I already feel so fortunate and so rich to be in the company of thinkers and artists that I'm a part of. That just feels like an incredible gift.

"The afterlife of slavery is not only a political and social problem but an aesthetic one as well," you wrote for The Whitney Museum of American Art's book, *Glenn Ligon: America*. Are there ways you see certain artworks successful in surpassing the constraints of this aesthetic problem?

I think that there are many ways we can take up this notion of the afterlife of slavery. Certain representational structures continue to produce black death, or death as the only horizon for black life. There's another way in which the afterlife of slavery produces a certain set of aesthetic and intellectual, conceptual challenges, and I think one of those for me is around temporality, and how do we narrate time?

One of the things I think is true, which is a way of thinking about the afterlife of slavery in regard to how we inhabit historical time, is the sense of temporal entanglement, where the past, the present and the future, are not discrete and cut off from one another, but rather that we live the simultaneity of that entanglement. This is almost common sense for black folk. How does one narrate that?

Given that the afterlife of slavery means that black death is the normative condition of civil society, what is the character of the aesthetic in the context of terror? Does death find its antidote in beauty? Do we find a way of regarding death and reckoning with it in beauty or impossible beauty or monstrous beauty? These are things that I think about when I think about the aesthetic and the way that a variety of artists and writers are taking it up.

I think of *Love Is The Message, The Message Is Death,* the Arthur Jafa short film. It articulates the intensity of the brutal disposability and precarity of black life, and then the making and creation and aesthetic genius that also unfolds in that context, too. That's the pressure. Ultimately, part of that remaking is about anticipating a world in which slavery has ended. To most North Americans, that might seem bizarre, the tense of that sentence might not make sense, to imagine a future world in which slavery has ended, but that's part of the project. What would it mean to not have a social political order that's founded on settler colonialism and slavery, racism and anti-blackness, in particular?

How do you understand the link between the art world and the academic world, and do you see yourself doing the same kind of work in each?

While I think that each space can be a context for the production and dissemination of ideas, what's different about the university, at least for me, is that I think of my classroom as a laboratory in thought. In the classroom, I try not to have an audience, even as I might, in the case of a lecture, sometimes lead and direct the engagement with ideas. I really enjoy being a part of this collective exploration of thought, one that feels open-ended and exciting.

Not that museum spaces can't do that. I was a part of this day of study in London, a day of events for the anniversary of *Scenes*. It was a day of study organized by Rizvana Bradley and in relation to Arthur Jafa's show at Serpentine gallery. It too had this sense of open-endedness, and an exchange of ideas. I think that's what I really enjoy, the sense that there's something at stake, and we're all a part of that, as opposed to I'm speaking and there's an audience observing. I really enjoy the collaborative process. At its best, the classroom can be that.

You're at work on a forthcoming book, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, which "examines the sexual upheavals and radical transformations of daily life that took place in the slums of Philadelphia and New York in the years between 1890 and 1930." How long has the research process taken so far?

Yikes. It's hard to remember when I started working on this work because, of course, it seems like I've been working on this book all my life. I think probably seven years. I started out trying to write a book on photography and ethics, but an encounter with one photograph set me on to a different track. After writing two books about slavery, I wanted to consider material that was psychically easier to engage, or so I thought.

The book opens with a mediation on a photograph taken of a young black girl in 1882, and the image lead me to question and to imagine the kind of life this girl and, more generally, the lives of girls and young black women in cities in the North, in urban contexts, who were just a generation, or a few generations removed from slavery? How were they thinking about practices of freedom? What were their hopes? Sometimes despite wanting to get some distance from the matter of slavery, I found myself right back there again thinking about the afterlife of slavery because of the emergence of a new racial order in the northern city, and the fact that young black women's lives were so policed and constrained and their options so very limited. Trying to live a life not defined by servitude, trying to live as if you were free—this was this radical experiment in thought and imagination enacted in everyday practice.

What drew you to the years 1890-1930 specifically?

The photograph was taken in 1882. In 1896, W.E.B. DuBois arrives in Philadelphia. For a year and a half he lives in the heart of the black slum and then produces a monograph, which is *The Philadelphia Negro*. It is the first study of the black slum, or what we will later call the ghetto. So much of the discourse on black pathology, on the forms of black intimacy, sexuality, kinship and affiliation that deviate from bourgeois heterosexual norms start with that monograph. It's a way of thinking about black life as a particular kind of problem, and a problem of its deviation from bourgeois family norms and hetero-patriarchy. As if the restoration of the black patriarchy can remedy the ravages of slavery, dispossession, capitalism and white supremacy.

It is this moment of transition to a new century. Rather than deviance and pathology, what I saw was the way in which the particular formation of black social life yielded radically different forms of intimacy and kinship and association, and I thought, "Wow. There's so much to be valued there. There's so much there." Partly it's about thinking about subsistence as a radical process of collective survival and thinking about the wayward and queer resources of black survival.

For me, at issue in this book was also thinking about young black women as radical thinkers, which no one ever does, because they imagine that thought is only the capacity of the educated, or the endowment of elites. What is it like to imagine a radically different world, or to try to make a beautiful life in a situation of brutal constraint?

In the 1880's and 1890's black people are thinking very intensely about the meaning of freedom as is Du Bois. It's after the demise of Reconstruction and a new racial order is emerging, one also founded on violence, servitude and the disposability of black lives. The plantation is extending its reach into the northern city, so the paradox is that black migrants to places like New York and Philadelphia often have less opportunity than they had in the south, in terms of their professions. *Wayward Lives* examines this remaking of the racial order, and the way in which we're still living that formation. Those are some of the factors that made me interested in this period and that are addressed in the work.

Where do you see the new book fit into the trajectory of your life's work?

I think I remain obsessed with the same themes. Each time, I think I am writing a different book, but I am wrestling with the same core set of issues. *Wayward Lives* is a different kind of formal experiment than *Lose Your Mother*, but it too is concerned with the form adequate to conveying the story of these unknown and anonymous radicals. Like *Scenes of Subjection*, it too considers the ways that forums of violence and dispossession yield other kinds of social formations, and the other set of possibilities that might and do reside in these formations, when we're not all trying to be a subject, or a Mrs. I think that there's a critical continuity in terms of the issues that concern me, and I think an ongoing set of formal questions.

Many of my friends are poets, and so they have what I would describe as a very degraded view of narrative. They think of it as being about closure, about teleology, nothing exciting can happen in narrative. It's so often that narrative is the vehicle for the reproduction of a certain way of looking at the world, a conceptual prisonhouse. For me, I'm working with this degraded material, this degraded form that is narrative, and seeing what I can do with it.

Saidiya Hartman recommends:

Abbie Lincoln

Nina Simone

Thelonious Monk

Gwendolyn Brooks, *Maud Martha*

Michael Ondaatje, *Coming Through Slaughter*

Elizabeth Hardwick, *Sleepless Nights*

John Keene, *Counternarratives*

NourbeSe Philip, *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks*

James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*

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Vocation
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