

Response

The Dead Book Revisited

Saidiya Hartman

The question returns again: how do we attend to black death? How do we find life where only the traces of destruction remain? What is required to witness the murder of two girls on board a slave ship as it crossed the Atlantic in 1792? How is the obligation to witness their deaths any different than what is required to encounter death today? The lives of two girls are recorded in the official annals of British law and parliamentary debate in the moment they met their death. The meager biography here assumes the form of an obituary. The fragments and scraps of the archive do little more than index the violence that extinguished their lives and cast them out of the world. What of their existence can be exhumed from the archive: the ship's manifest, the legal case, the newspaper profile, the death table, the actuarial chart, the autopsy report, the tally of police killings? How is the chronicle of death foretold, expectant and always looming on a slave ship, dissimilar to the threat of death that hangs over the head of a population that remains the target of the state's militarized violence?

The point here is not to conflate these two moments—what happened then and our now—but to think about the constellation formed by them. The intimacy with death that was first experienced in the hold continues to determine black existence. The matrix of our dispossession encompasses the fungible and disposable life of the captive/slave; the uneven distribution of death and harm that produces a caesura in human populations and yields a huge pile of corpses; the accumulation, expropriated capacity, and extracted surplus constitutive of racial capitalism and modernity; and the premature death, social precarity, and incarceration that characterize the present.¹ Our dispossession is ongoing. The hold continues to shape how we live.

In *Lose Your Mother*, I attempted to reconstruct the murder of a “said Negro girl,” “a sulky bitch” aboard the *Recovery*. In “Venus in Two Acts,” I turned my attention to another girl murdered by the captain, who the ship's crew called Venus. I tried to imagine two dead girls as shipmates, to envision the company

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and the solace they might have found in the arms of one another, to consider whether one girl might have attended to the other as she passed. Did their suffering become shared or did the mutual terror of the unknown cultivate a common knowledge that developed into relation—*the anomalous intimacy of cargo*?² In this experiment with narrative and movement toward another mode of writing, I realized that it mattered little whether the murders of these girls were spectacular or routine, whether there was a legal trial or not, or even the outcome. What mattered was that centuries later the reverberations of what happened in the hold would touch us; we too would experience its intensities.

Why acknowledge the non-event of black death? (And by this non-event, I mean the inevitable and wanton violence that routinely produces corpses and denies these deaths any standing as murder. Rather, such deaths constitute the meaning of law and order.) How might the effort to reach two girls first condemned to the hold and then cast into the sea pose questions critical to the archive and to the history of the present? How might I pronounce their deaths without ever being able to say their names?³ In “Venus in Two Acts,” I endeavored to witness the transit of life and death shared by two girls, to reckon with the violence that the law deemed appropriate and not a crime at all, and to describe the experience of the hold. Yet, in this effort, I neglected to take into account the ways the other captives might have attended to these girls and responded to their deaths. This omission was a consequence of my inability or unwillingness to think about the possibilities of mourning in the context of immanent death and extreme violence.

What space for grieving could exist in the context of the slave hold? How could one mourn the death expected, anticipated, imposed and inescapable? Mourning necessarily would be insufficient, fleeting, and nearly impossible in such a context. The space for mourning would instead need to be stolen, furtive, like the moments of clasping hands, appealing for mercy, welcoming death, cursing the men without skin, plotting and planning, unleashing song, sounding their complaint—all of which occurred below decks. In the endeavor to witness what others had refused, and to find ordinary words capable of reaching two girls, I tried to read and listen for more than the generic descriptions of the legal file: to enact a poetics of the document—a way of transposing, augmenting and remaking the scraps and fragments of the archive—to produce a different order of statements. By so doing, I hoped to recall the wild thoughts and the longing unloosened in the hold, *the wanting to live and the wanting to die* conveyed in a scream, the appeal to one another expressed in the

form of groans and cries.⁴ How had it been possible for these girls to endure the nowhere of the passage? How was I to avoid becoming trapped at the level of words—utterances that confirmed the girls' existence as commodities and allowed their lives to be taken without a murder having occurred?

I navigated the limits of evidence by invoking a series of speculative arguments that exploited the capacities of the subjunctive—the what might have been—and by inhabiting a figural or affective relation to the past rather than a causal or linear one. The tense of writing presented the greatest challenge: the future anterior or the past conditional? How best to convey the lived experience of the multiple *durées* of unfreedom?⁵ The temporal entanglement of my life with theirs was essential to my understanding of what was required to write a history of the present. The afterlife of slavery was defined by the enduring and seemingly interminable clutch of the hold on our present and by the ongoing processes of dispossession, accumulation, and extermination. It was not a melancholy relation to the past but a structural one. In my eyes, the world in all ways meaningful was governed by the racial distinction between captive and free, between slave and Man, between human and object. One hundred and fifty years after emancipation, I knew on which side of the divide I resided, the eternal alien still wasn't a citizen and perhaps no longer even desired to be.⁶ So I needed to conjure another mode of writing, a blueprint for disorder, a disruptive poetics, an unthinkable narrative from the confines of the hold.⁷

Why does the murder of two girls on board a slave ship continue to be important? What claims do their deaths exercise on the present? Why revisit the centuries-old crime that reduced life to nothing when death is expected and not at all unusual? Because premature death persists as one of the definitive markers of blackness, and as a consequence our very lives are a "condition of mourning."⁸ We still bear the mark of the commodity: the lockdown of the hold, the chokehold, arms in the air, walk backwards, makes it impossible to breathe. The state transforms us into nobody, no human involved, disposable life through the exercise of violence, by enclosure and abandonment, and by measuring "safety in chains and corpses."⁹ Anti-black violence and stolen life define the very foundation of the settler state.¹⁰ Captivity, whether understood as slavery or debt peonage or the enclosure of the ghetto or incarceration, continues to be the prevailing schema.¹¹

In "Venus in Two Acts," I hoped my words were a path that would allow me to reach two girls in the hold, a response to the call that still echoed across the Atlantic passage. To glimpse fleeting pictures of life from the traces of abstract

violence, “to tell the history that is accountable to the enslaved,” to utilize non-fiction narrative “to extend our visions of what might yet be possible,” and to elaborate the ways in which the captives refused slavery and imagined a free state—all of these conveyed my intentions.¹² I strived to recover the flesh in numbers that reduced captives and slaves to increments of measure, itemized goods, and quantified masses and I endeavored to expand the limits of the archive through attentive reading amplified by speculative narrative.

The challenges presented by the archive of slavery concern the forms of power and violence produced as historical fact; the silences, prolixities, and slippages both reveal and obscure the state and condition of slavery. The fragments of “memoir” and testimony found in the archive yield a stark outline of the captive’s condition:

*The white people received, and stripped us of all our beads, and shells, and while the naked children were permitted to walk about the ship, the men and women were chained and kept in darkness below. Our food was sparing, and ever bad. Our punishment was frequent and severe, and our death became so frequent an occurrence, that at last it passed on, without fear on the dying, or grief on those left behind, as we believed that those who died were restored to their people and Country.*¹³

The pathway to their thoughts was not one I could trace, but one I was required to imagine.

No less difficult to apprehend was the relation between the extraordinary violence of captivity and what we might think of as the black ordinary in extreme circumstances. Of the twelve or fifteen or twenty million or more who endured the Middle Passage, the few who went on to write about it emphasized the terror of the unknown that characterized life in the hold, the grief and despair, the regular course of sexual violation and brutality, the disease and abjection created by living in waste, and the daily routine of death. This state of emergency, this state of mortification, was their collective condition. The slave ship was a floating prison, factory, war machine, tomb, and the Atlantic crossing a way of death.¹⁴ Yet, in this context, a new social formation emerged; the inception of blackness was bound to this terror. In my attempt to explicate “the controlled depletion” of the hold, that is, “the limits to which it is possible to discipline the body without extinguishing the life within,” I did not mention the collective wealth of the enslaved, that is, the capacity and knowledge and tradition that crossed the water with them.¹⁵ Nor did I allude to the “abject sublime,” the way in which the radical constriction of the hold, the boxing of the body, shaped and created our tales,

our songs, our music, our expressive flight, our creative *marronage*.¹⁶ The beauty of this *black thing* borne of terror. Such were the resources with which they were endowed and which would enable them to persist and endure.

I did not speak of the ways other captives might have experienced the loss of these two girls or the other twenty-one who died aboard the *Recovery* and in the Middle Passage. In their collective utterance of loss, in the moans and cries and songs that provided a shared language for those without one, a particular note might have been sounded for the girl tortured and strung up by the captain. No doubt, the terror and humiliation that accompanied her death made sharper the fear and the uncertainty regarding what awaited them. (This reconsideration is prompted not by any new evidence in the archive or a better practice of reading, but by inhabiting the entanglement of that time with our own, by thinking inside the circle of slavery, which can only ever be narrated from the outside.¹⁷)

In the wake of the recent onslaught of black death at the hands of the police, the murders of black men, women and children have been recorded, documented, widely circulated and witnessed by millions. Yet this ever-growing archive of black death has produced an outcome no different than the decision made in the case of the two girls: no one would ever be convicted or held responsible for these murders either. These circumstances have led me to revisit again what happened on the *Recovery* and what was possible more generally (care, grief, regard) on board a slave ship. As our present makes all too apparent, there is no space outside the threat of death in which black mourning can or could take place.

So we make a place, we take space, make the outside while we are still being held captive on the inside; we hold these deaths in our bodies and in our songs, create a way to celebrate the lives and memorialize the deaths of those we loved and those we never knew, the deaths of strangers we claim as kin. These practices did not and do not occur outside the zones of anticipated and premature death. They do not happen in safe spaces, but in the here and now, where we are, in a time and a place where all refuge is temporary. We are murdered where we pray; sleeping in bed with our grandmothers; chilling on the front steps with our friends; playing at the park; in the company of our children; and with the whole block watching. Our mourning will not wait and cannot be deferred. By not expounding earlier on this capacity to mourn for one another, or to create sociality through grief or find companions among

the shipped, I did not intend to minimize or deny such possibility. Rather, I sought to underscore the structures of violence and dispossession that made death not-much noticed, effaced murder in columns of debits and loss, and conscripted our future for the master's wealth and security.

There is a great paradox at play here: how is it possible to entertain ideas of care, love and regard in the confines of the extreme and normative violence of slavery? This question required me to recalibrate the terms and imagine differently the collectivity that emerged from the hold, and to follow a line of thought that made it possible to discern the potentialities and capacities residing among the shipped: the contours of struggle and the shape of thought under extreme domination; the poetics of a free state engendered by the slave quarters; and the forms of life that emerge under the sentence of death.¹⁸ How does one conceive the possibility, chance and contingency of life as it is structured by death? What is the imagination and practice of freedom in the belly of the ship or on the plantation? What are the dimensions of refusal that arise in captivity—no matter how many are murdered, beaten, raped and tortured? The first girl who died refused to eat, intent on ending the terror by embracing death. It is unclear if Venus also refused to eat, or if she pursued another line of flight. Others vowed never to become habituated to this violence, never to believe that they were the property of white men, always insisting that they were human flesh. How does one account for the state of extreme domination and the possibilities seized in practice? How does time unfold in the confines of expected death? And does this negate or destabilize the very idea of the everyday or the ordinary? At the very least, would this suggest that time is lived in multiple and simultaneous registers that trouble discrete notions of the beginning and end of captivity, the before and after of slavery?¹⁹ How does one comprehend the routine struggle to endure together with the state of emergency? Is it possible to hold the disaster and the everyday in the same frame of reference? Is this what is entailed in living in the wake?²⁰

This task (of fathoming existence in the hold) is made even more difficult given the character of slavery's archive, which provides such a meager picture of the life and thought of the enslaved. How do we apprehend the philosophy of those inside the circle of slavery, as Frederick Douglass would say, from the outside? Or is the very notion of being outside the hold a kind of fiction, a myth of progress, the price of admission to the welcome table? If the matrix of death and dispossession constitute the black ordinary, even if not solely or exclusively, then how are we to think about practice in the

hold? I believe it requires us to rethink the meaning of abolition, not only as the not-yet, not simply as the event for which we are waiting, but as the daily practice of refusal and waywardness and care in the space of captivity, enclosure, and incarceration. How does the song inside the circle go? *We are the ones we have been waiting for*. What is impossible to bear is that the hold is the black ordinary and, at the same, it is what we seek to escape.

How can we live? There is no question more enduring and uncertain than this one. The life of the enslaved, and, more generally, black social life, has never been a matter of facts or crude plots of when, where and how. What could be of greater critical and philosophical import than the matter of black life in a context of anticipated death, brutal violence, and enduring dispossession? *If they take you in the morning, they will come for us at night. When they come for you, I will shield your name.*²¹ We grieve and make life with one another.

The space for our love, our care, and our dreams will have to be taken like everything else.

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Notes

1. Aime Cesaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (2000). Edouard Glissant, *The Poetics of Relation* (1997). Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection* (1997). Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended* (2003), 235.

2. See Edouard Glissant, “The Open Boat,” in *The Poetics of Relation* and Stephanie Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery* (2007).

3. See Karla Holloway’s brilliant lecture, “Pronouncing Death: I Can’t Breathe,” *Policing the Crisis*, Barnard College and SUNY Stonybrook, September 26, 2015.

4. See Marisa Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence and the Archive* (2016), 142–143.

5. See Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (2001). Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacy of Four Continents* (2015), 40–41, 175; and “History Hesitant,” *Social Text* (Spring 2016): 86, 92, 98. As Lowe writes, The “past conditional temporality” enables us to “conceive

the past, not as fixed or settled, not as inaugurating the temporality into which our present falls, but as a configuration of multiple contingent possibilities, all present, yet none inevitable." She goes on to write that it "enables us to consider alternatives that may have been unthought in those times," but which permits us to "imagine different futures for what lies ahead" (175).

On a related but distinct track, Alexander Weheliye writes: "the future anterior transmutes the simple (parenthetical) present of the dysselected into the nowtime of humanity during which the fleshy hieroglyphics of the oppressed will have actualized the honeyed prophecy of another kind of freedom (which can be imagined but not yet described) in the revolutionary apocatastasis of human genres." See *Habeas Viscus* (2015), 138.

6. Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism* (1983). Fred Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black* (2010)

7. See Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus* for a critique of liberal humanism and the radical potentiality of the flesh for introducing a rupture capable of creating a new social order. On disruptive poetics see Jennifer Morgan in this issue.

8. Claudia Rankine, "Black Life Is A Condition of Mourning," *New York Times*, June 22, 2015.

9. James Baldwin, "An Open Letter to My Sister, Angela Davis," *The New York Review of Books*, January 7, 1971.

10. Denise Ferreira da Silva, "No-Bodies: Law, Raciality and Violence," *Griffin Law Review*, 18.2 (2009): 212–236.

11. See Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake* (forthcoming). Dionne Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return* (2002).

12. Stephanie Smallwood, this issue, 125, Seth Moglen, this issue, 179.

13. "Florence Hall's 'Memoirs': Finding African Women in the Transatlantic Slave Trade," *Slavery And Abolition* 37:1 (2016). Thanks to Marisa Fuentes for bring this to my attention.

14. Marcus Rediker, *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (2007) and Joseph C. Miller, *Way of Death* (1988).

15. Stephanie Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery* (2007), 35–6.

16. On "controlled depletion," see *Saltwater Slavery*. On "boxing the body" and the prison slave ship, see Dennis Childs, *Slaves of the State* (2015). The term "abject sublime" is borrowed from Arthur Jafa. Personal conversation with Arthur Jafa & Greg Tate, Hammer Museum, June 14, 2016.

17. This reconsideration has been informed by the work of Vincent Brown, Fred Moten, Christina Sharpe, Omiseke Natasha Tinsley and Alexander Weheliye. Their work has deepened my understanding of the sociality of the hold.

18. See Jared Sexton, "The Social Life of Social Death," *InTensions* (Winter 2011).

19. Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* 14, 18. Denise Ferreira da Silva, "Towards a Black Feminist Poetics," *Black Scholar* 44:2 (Summer 2014).

20. Sharpe, *In the Wake*.

21. James Baldwin, "An Open Letter to My Sister, Angela Davis."

historical thought and methods of research.”³⁹ However, the *history* of black counter-historical projects is one of failure, precisely because these accounts have never been able to install themselves as history, but rather are insurgent, disruptive narratives that are marginalized and derailed before they ever gain a footing.

If this *story of Venus* has any value at all it is in illuminating the way in which our age is tethered to hers. A relation which others might describe as a kind of melancholia, but which I prefer to describe in terms of the afterlife of property, by which I mean the detritus of lives with which we have yet to attend, a past that has yet to be done, and the ongoing state of emergency in which black life remains in peril.

For these reasons, I have chosen to engage a set of dilemmas about representation, violence, and social death, not by using the form of a metahistorical discourse, but by performing the limits of writing history through the act of narration. I have done so primarily because (1) my own narrative does not operate outside the economy of statements that it subjects to critique; and (2) those existences relegated to the nonhistorical or deemed waste exercise a claim on the present and demand us to imagine a future in which the afterlife of slavery has ended. The necessity of trying to represent what we cannot, rather than leading to pessimism or despair must be embraced as the impossibility that conditions our knowledge of the past and animates our desire for a liberated future.

My effort to reconstruct the past is, as well, an attempt to describe obliquely the forms of violence licensed in the present, that is, the forms of death unleashed in the name of freedom, security, civilization, and God/the good. Narrative is central to this effort because of “the relation it poses, explicit or implied, between past, presents and futures.”⁴⁰ Wrestling with the girl’s claim on the present is a way of naming our time, thinking our present, and envisioning the past which has created it.

Unfortunately I have not discovered a way of deranging the archive so that it might recall the content of a girl’s life or reveal a truer picture, nor have I succeeded in prying open the dead book, which sealed her status as commodity. The random collection of details of which I have made use are the same descriptions, verbatim quotes, and trial transcripts that consigned her to death and made murder “not much noticed,” at least, according to the surgeon.⁴¹ The promiscuity of the archive begets a wide array of reading, but none that are capable of resuscitating the girl.

39. Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, “Counter-History and the Anecdote,” in *Practicing New Historicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2001), 52.

40. David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 7.

41. *Trial of Captain John Kimber, for the Murder of a Negro Girl*, 14; *Trial of Captain John Kimber for the Supposed Murder of an African Girl*, 20. The surgeon testified that brutal floggings on board the slave ships were customary.

My account replicates the very order of violence that it writes against by placing yet another demand upon the girl, by requiring that her life be made useful or instructive, by finding in it a lesson for our future or a hope for history. We all know better. It is much too late for the accounts of death to prevent other deaths; and it is much too early for such scenes of death to halt other crimes. But in the meantime, in the space of the interval, between too late and too early, between the no longer and the not yet, our lives are coeval with the girl's in the as-yet-incomplete project of freedom. In the meantime, it is clear that her life and ours hang in the balance.

So what does one do in the meantime? What are the stories one tells in dark times? How can a narrative of defeat enable a place for the living or envision an alternative future? Michel de Certeau notes that there are at least two ways the historiographical operation can make a place for the living: one is attending to and recruiting the past for the sake of the living, establishing who we are in relation to who we have been; and the second entails interrogating the production of our knowledge about the past.⁴² Along the lines sketched by de Certeau, Octavia Butler's *Kindred* offers a model for a practice.⁴³ When Dana, the protagonist of Butler's speculative fiction, travels from the twentieth century to the 1820s to encounter her enslaved foremother, Dana finds to her surprise that she is not able to rescue her kin or escape the entangled relations of violence and domination, but instead comes to accept that they have made her own existence possible. With this in mind, we must bear what cannot be borne: the image of Venus in chains.

We begin the story again, as always, in the wake of her disappearance and with the wild hope that our efforts can return her to the world. The conjunction of hope and defeat define this labor and leave open its outcome. The task of writing the impossible, (not the fanciful or the utopian but "histories rendered unreal and fantastic"⁴⁴), has as its prerequisites the embrace of likely failure and the readiness to accept the ongoing, unfinished and provisional character of this effort, particularly when the arrangements of power occlude the very object that we desire to rescue.⁴⁵ Like Dana, we too emerge from the encounter with a sense of incompleteness and with the recognition that some part of the self is missing as a consequence of this engagement.

42. Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).

43. Octavia Butler, *Kindred* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002).

44. Palmié, *Wizards and Scientists*, 97.

45. Slavoj Žižek has described this as a practice of enthusiastic resignation: "Enthusiasm as indicating the experience of the object through the very failure of its adequate representation. Enthusiasm and resignation are not then two opposed moments: it is the 'resignation' itself, that is, the experience of a certain impossibility, which incites enthusiasm." "Beyond Discourse-Analysis," in Ernesto Laclau, ed., *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (New York: Verso, 1990), 259–60.