

**“...why does it take artists that pride themselves on criticality and vanguardism so long to confront its direct complicity in gainful conditions that have been evident for decades?”**

in “not taking things too seriously, in order to take them seriously.” Can you talk a little more about that?

Satire, I suppose, is my way of shining an unwelcomed light on our continued complicity... why does it take artists that pride themselves on criticality and vanguardism so long to confront its direct complicity in gainful conditions that have been evident for decades? We’re always arriving five or ten minutes late to the realisation that we ourselves abet the exclusivity mechanisms so off-handedly, it could hardly be less spectacular. So for me ‘not taking things too seriously’ is a vehicle for creating humorous iterations that compel us to ask ourselves, very seriously, who benefits from this alter-ego. My jokes can fall flat. My epitaph: très hit-or-miss.

**Did your desire to write this book come from your own, personal weariness with leftist arts and political circles? How much of the character of Elke is based on yourself?**

I find it fascinating that in all my reviews and interviews people cast me in auto-theory, which is brilliant company, mind you. But I suppose for me I think of myself more as a ficto-critic. This is not to say there aren’t elements of me in the character of Elke, there are several commonalities, especially the very blue-collar upbringing... what did I say in the book, something like “popping morning-after pills like lollies”? Something like that. But what people do with my work is, quite frankly, none of my business...most of the time. I guess it’s better to be misunderstood than understood too well.

# SAIDIYA HARTMAN



**IN CONVERSATION WITH RHEA DILLON**

INTERVIEW BY RHEA DILLON  
PHOTOS COURTESY OF SAIDIYA HARTMAN

*A CONVERSATION BETWEEN VISUAL ARTIST, WRITER AND POET  
RHEA DILLON AND AUTHOR SAIDIYA HARTMAN.*

Saidiya Hartman is the author of three books: *Scenes of Subjection*, *Lose Your Mother* and *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*. Her practice as a writer sits between archival research and her concept of ‘critical fabulation’ that combines fiction making with critical theory to interrogate and uncover the histories of black lives that the archive so often negates. Her work seeks to push back against the violence of the archive, its rigid limitations and gaping silences that uphold inherently racist colonial versions of history. *Lose Your Mother* traces the journey that enslaved Africans, brutally captured and removed from their native countries, were forced to make. Along the way Hartman unpacks what she terms ‘the afterlife of slavery’: the endurance of racialised violence and its continued impact on contemporary society. In *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, a series of archival photographs become gateways into fictional narratives, giving voice to the black women and queer people they depict; re-ascribing to them lives full with “ambulatory possibility, interminable migration, rush and flight,” the agency and complexity that singular, white-supremacist understandings of history deny them.

Hartman’s practice is always self-reflexive and pays close attention to the ethics of this kind of work. She takes seriously the imperative to not create more harm in a space where depictions of violence are unavoidable, as well as her intimate obligations to the lives and stories of those she is attending to. Artist, writer and poet Rhea Dillon talks to Saidiya about critical fabulation and the process and limitations of working with the archive.

**What is ‘critical fabulation’ and why ‘critical fabulation’?**

I came to ‘critical fabulation’ belatedly. ‘Critical fabulation’ was a way to describe what I’d done in *Lose Your Mother*, and I think specifically about the chapter, ‘The Dead Book’, which is where the pressure and limit of the archive was so intense that it made narration nearly impossible. By that I mean, ‘The Dead Book’ is about the murder of a young black woman aboard a slave ship, and there are seven words about her in the legal trial: “said negro girl” and “the bitch is sulky.” From that, what could

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I possibly say or do in terms of trying to attend to the life of this young woman murdered aboard a slave ship? How could I describe the context of both her experience and her refusal? She refused to eat and refusing to eat was a way to refuse being conscripted as slave and as commodity – but I had nothing. I didn’t even have her name. So the methods I utilised were to try to tell a story without filling in all of the gaps and how do I respect what I couldn’t know, whilst still trying to tell the story? I







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attempted to narrate and withhold at the same time - to really do it. Afterwards, reflecting on my practice, I thought, “Oh, yes, what I’m doing entails these practices of archival transposition, the elaboration and augmentation of statements, the intensification of silence, the embrace of opacity.” I’m not simply creating a fiction but rearranging the elements and the building blocks of narrative in order to dramatize have this void and to speak through the context of the fragments of narrative and the trial transcripts. How do I attend to the girl given this limited window onto her life and to the violation of her death?

Critical fabulation enabled me to understand what I had tried to do across *Lose Your Mother*, whether it was thinking about enslaved African people like Ottobah Cugoano, or the generation of eighteenth century Africans who first articulated a pan-Africanism and a black consciousness in the wake of the experience of having been made captives and slaves. I really wanted to attend to these aspects of Cugoano’s life, which he was reluctant to tell. So, how do I tell a story about these empty spaces of death that resist a kind of historical narration? How do I try to reconstruct and create a knowledge of the past? Critical fabulation was the way to describe a practice of narration and archival orientation that enabled me to do that.

**Who do you think was working in a ‘critically fabulative’ way, perhaps before you founded the turn of phrase?**

I feel like there were a number of people who were working in these ways. One of my favourite novels is *Coming Through Slaughter* by Michael Ondaatje. It’s a novel about the musician, Buddy Bolden, who is considered one of the originators of jazz. Bolden had this incredible sound, but he was never recorded, so there is a way that Ondaatje had a task. Ondaatje was working with archival

material, but he was also involved in this kind of fiction-making practice.

I think of someone like Caryl Phillips, too, especially in *Cambridge* and *Crossing the River*. Phillips was working with historical and documentary materials, but really trying to build them out.

And, obviously, in relation to a critical philosophy of history, the work of Jamaica Kincaid and Toni Morrison was absolutely foundational. Morrison’s work opened a conceptual door. It is critically important to me. In all of Kincaid’s work she’s thinking about the colonial episteme, and how that colonial episteme makes a certain kind of writing of the self impossible. Kincaid’s wonderful short essay, ‘In History’ was also important.

The German writer, W. G. Sebald’s work was important, because I don’t have a fidelity to genre. It’s a matter of, how is one able to engage a certain set of critical questions fully? How is one best able to amplify, describe or articulate a life? I think sometimes one set of strategies lends itself to doing that, but a different set of strategies might be required in another context. So sometimes it’s a story, sometimes it’s a political screed, sometimes it’s a fabulation. It’s about thinking about that integral relationship between a critical question and the form that best articulates it.

**That makes a lot of sense. It’s really interesting to hear some of the people who inspire you.**

Certainly, with *Lose Your Mother*, there are writers like Yambo Ouologuem, Ayi Kwei Armah, and Ben Okri: who dealt with these kinds of broad issues of slavery, precarity, death and coloniality and the making of a continent in the wake of a certain kind of colonial framing of Africa. They really shaped my critical perspective. I think that so much of the work of decolonizing the imagination, particularly for the black world, has occurred in the context of novels and poetry.

## MOTHER YOUR LOSS

(after S Hartman)

sounds trapped in the dome of my mouth,  
 rippling across the surface of my studied speech,  
 expiring from lack of air  
 branded  
 me  
 strangers impelled towards the sea  
 the scar between native and citizen.  
 I thought the past was a country  
 to which I could return  
 yet  
 it's just how you adjust to that loneliness that matters.  
 It was to my eyes a terrible beauty,  
 he was the antidote to recollection  
 the steel bit in a woman's mouth  
 a wretched dark woman: W1CS25 or T99  
 kosanba—the spirit child—who dies only to return  
 again  
 and again  
 in a succession of rebirths.  
 Mannish.  
 How like a Barbarian should I look  
 to the natives  
 being an utter stranger to the language.  
 The sea has nothing to give  
 but a well excavated grave  
 offered, her body as a vessel.  
 It is not permissible that the authors of devastation should also be innocent,  
 it is the innocence which constitutes the crime.  
 It was the kind of velvety black that was rare ever to see in cities,  
 because artificial light robbed the sky of this jetty density.  
 Lost spirits who would never become anyone's ancestors.  
 As if a trickster god alternately cast the world  
 into light and shadow  
 I stared back until the bus sped past  
 making a blue of the tan, brown and black faces

the eroded holes sunk into the ground  
 and now it makes you expendable.  
 For those who can read the landscape  
 crypts for dead issue  
 Ceylon, it's all dead money now.  
 All the moorings fell away.  
 These islands of baobab, shea butter, locust bean, and fig trees  
 preserved the history of the stateless;  
 they were the archive of the defeated rust,  
 ocher  
 and cocoa-coloured grasses  
 to come together,  
 to become together,  
 to weave together.  
 As circumstances changed, so too did the ways we imagined ourselves.  
 Go, come back, I love you.

**“There’s been so much violence that has already been committed so I must not do any additional harm and try to treat these lives with a certain care and regard. This is of critical importance”**

Yeah, totally. I had wondered, do you speak to duppies/ghosts?

I feel like there’s an ancestral call that I’ve been responding to. In *Lose your Mother*, I wrote this phrase, “History is how the secular world attends to the dead”, and it’s not that I’m thoroughly secular, but there’s this sense of inhabiting the world with those about whom I write. It’s not that I imagined that I’m in one time and they’re in another. I do think that there are ethical and affective requirements that are part of that engagement with these lives. With what I’ve been working on recently I’ve been having great difficulty. Then I had this epiphany, I thought, “I didn’t actually approach this person correctly”, and that’s why something was blocked. I was approaching unwittingly with a certain kind of baggage that didn’t then enable me to have a kind of intimacy with this character that’s required for the writing or working with a maxim like, “I don’t want to do any harm to the lives I encounter”. There’s been so much violence that has already been committed so I must not do any additional harm and try to treat

these lives with a certain care and regard. This is of critical importance. When I was finishing *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, I guess I was two thirds into the book when my mother died. She was living with me during the last months of her life. After she died, I felt like the characters in *Wayward Lives* sustained me. When I went to the page, I was in their company. So I guess I do speak to these spectral presences, and I do feel their energy. I am aware of the certain set of ethical or intimate obligations that accompany attending to the lives of others.

**“I am aware of the certain set of ethical or intimate obligations that accompany attending to the lives of others.”**

Yeah... The multitudes of soul work, is how I think of it.  
 Say more!

For me as an artist, I look to ‘souls’ a lot in my practice. I just closed a solo show the other week, *The Sombre Majesty (or, on being the pronounced dead)*, and it was really the word that was ruminating most potently in the space and work. I think a lot about how to give space to souls, releasing souls, and being sup-

ported by souls where in that sense it engages with both the living and those who have passed away. Books, often fiction most directly, can really be that room, or furthering that, womb of support. I think about that when I read Morrison, because I’m willing to entertain and exist within how her language absorbs me. But at the same time, I sense the care in people’s language building that space of absorption, which I felt when reading *Lose Your Mother*.

Thinking about the archive as a framework in your work - and I use ‘framework’ in the sense of a baseline, starting point, or birthright - I think that some people look to the archive to give a framework to their identity, and so I wanted to know if you arriving at the archive came from a desire to see yourself in a mirror?

For me, I feel like the archive is not seeing myself in the mirror. What the archive affords me is a kind of time travel: I’m transported, I get to meet all of these really

interesting people, and I get to live with them. I think that’s really what it’s about. I love this short essay John Berger wrote *Twelve Theses on the Economy of the Dead*.

It’s about how, basically until modernity, most of the people on the planet understood that the world of the dead was larger than that of the living, and that one day we too would join that larger world of the dead. For me, the archive is the space for encountering the presences and energies of people who may no longer be here, at least in a literal and restricted sense, who in secular terms



are considered gone or confined to the past. I get to commune with them, I get to travel with them. I guess there's a certain kind of call that I imagined myself answering, and rather than a mirror, I'd like to think of myself more as a kind of medium, or a member of the chorus. Particularly in terms of doing something like creative non-fiction, which is so wedded to the memoir's form, but I'm really concerned about writing from the space of immersion in the multitude, the chorus, and the ensemble. I feel like maybe my best 'I' is the one that disappears and dissolves in that multitude, so it's not so much that I'm trying to find my 'I' as much as, in the archive, I encounter all of these other lives that have shaped me. There's a way that this pushes against the tidiness of some singular authorial 'I'. I mentioned in passing that in the new project I realised that my comportment toward this person I was writing about was not correct, and I came to that through reading about someone else's life! So again the other life/lives I encountered were teaching me a lesson that enabled me to change my practice with the subject. It's time travel. It's a way of really trying to break down the self or escape a certain kind of enclosure of the self, to produce or encounter an opening. I guess it's that I'm looking for something

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**fill the void, or speak to the void, in essence.**

I think that Wilderson is building a certain kind of structural analytic, and I'd say that it is akin to Orlando Patterson in *Slavery and Social Death*, where Patterson gives us a structural analysis of slavery and its idioms of power. Patterson also says “there's no group of enslaved people who ever fully internalised these idioms of power.” So, even as they are socially dead, he asks what it means to not fully internalise them. In my work I explore the ontic, or the everyday, so I think there can be both absence and loss. We see among African peoples and enslaved peoples throughout the Americas these very developed practices of mourning, attending to the afterlife, and communing with the spirits. I think that's about the question: can the object grieve? You might say, “We don't have a subject who mourns because we have objects and

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like the ‘clearing’ or ‘circle’ that Morrison writes about so movingly in *Beloved*. Archival encounters help me to build that out.

That reminds me of when Frank Wilderson III said, “Black people are not subjects of loss, we are objects of absence.” When you were talking about the ‘clearing’, looking to the archive and essentially not seeing yourself, Wilderson's idea of absence came to me. As well as, the desire to

absence,” and what I'd like to say is that objects also grieve and experience loss. I've always thought of my work as being in this tradition of keening, or wailing, which is about all of these kinds of work - the work of mourning, the work of caring, the work of commemorating - and these labours also tend to be typically gendered female. So I would just add an ‘and’ to the Wilderson statement: “loss and absence.”

You said so many things that I speak about in my practice. I love how you mentioned the ontic and the everyday. I really respect and create a lot of space for it in that I work sculpturally, most primarily, in talking about the object, mourning with or through the object, and how objects are imbued by our presence. That's what can be interesting to explain to people.

Yeah, because, in a way, it kind of pushes against and collapses that binary.

**Totally. I think there's a hold that is often desired to be relinquished with objects. That's what I found when I first came to *Scenes of Subjection*, thinking about objecthood and subjection really was a formative moment for me through the language that you so eloquently parse, especially in the first few chapters.**

**If the enslaved are our contemporaries, which I remember you wrote in *Lose Your Mother*, then when does history become history? ... And therefore, when you're going about your research, when do you know when to stop?**

That's a very interesting question, because in some sense a Western secular modality of history would not presume being coeval at all. There's the belief in a kind of discreteness of the past. I think that now what I recognise is the temporal framework in which I work is more like temporal entanglement. One in which pasts, presents and futures are synchronic. It has nothing to do with a notion of a developmental line or discrete periods. It may be more like a historical materialist poetics than a history per se.

Say more about the second part of your question so I know how to address it.

I guess this part of the question comes down to your process, so perhaps it's better to pull back a bit and allow you to describe it. There are billions of books, billions of narratives, and billions of means of going about research, approaching an archive, or dancing with an archive. I think that what I've noticed in my own practice, but also through teaching, is the attempt to figure out how many books one needs to go through, how many experiences one needs to have, to then decide, “Now I'm going to respond to this, now I'm going to punctuate time.” Personally, I don't believe in the full stop. I think a period ends the conversation in a way that I wouldn't want to. A comma is pause. How

**do you create punctuation in your work and process?**

I think I've been grappling with this series of questions across the body of my work. So we might think of the books as being serial rather than discrete, in that way. There were certain questions about memory, practice, and the status of Africanity in *Scenes of Subjection* that are taken up in a different way in *Lose your Mother*. Then in *Wayward Lives* there are these questions about a practice of freedom, which isn't about being a subject in the ways that are imposed by the ruling episteme or the dominant classes.

The last line of *Scenes* speaks of this anomalous social formation, “no longer enslaved, but not yet free.” That feels like a pause, with a breath. The last line of *Wayward Lives* is “Hold on.” The last line of *Lose Your Mother* is “I closed my eyes, and I listened.” I'd hope the reader can discern the space of the moment after the last word, even on the page, so that they feel, not “Oh, my God, it's complete,” but a breath, a pause, a space of response.