

Review of Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route: Tracing the Unfinished Journey to Finding Identity*

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Beginning with the Portuguese greed for gold in the fifteenth century, African chattel slavery thrived for generations, acting as fuel for Western capitalism. For many black Americans, bloated bodies of existential questions surface when they cannot identify their specific ethnic origins. As a result, droves have retraced the Middle Passage seeking closure for the still-gaping wound of transatlantic chattel slavery. In *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (2008), Saidiya Hartman details her year of research as a Fulbright Scholar in Accra, Ghana, where she learned that these African American longings cannot be satisfied by a return to a place that is only debatably their own. This memoir of sorts takes a fresh angle on the relationship between the diaspora and the Mother Continent, and addresses African conceptions of African Americans, shame, and commodification. Using these themes, Hartman weaves a story of loss and discovery that invites readers to search for hope in unconventional places and reconsider their own understandings of their individual and collective pasts.

Initially, Hartman displays an unusual resolve not to answer questions about her own lineage, but instead amplifies unspoken histories abandoned on the path from the hinterland to the West African coast. *Lose Your Mother* begins by excavating the origins of a word that often stung the author's ears during her travels: *obruni*—stranger, an Akan term that can describe enslaved persons and descendant pilgrims to Ghana. Hartman problematizes African Americans' imaginative construction of an "Afrotopia," a hope for salvation in the homeland that the author experiences as little more than an easily contested figment of a communal imagination (Hartman 2006, 19). Thus, rather than denying the historical truth of her *obruni* identity, Hartman explains that the dehumanizing nature of capitalism invited Europeans to muddy the kinship relationships of entire groups, including her own family.

Subsequently, *Lose Your Mother* navigates a tour of Elmina Castle, a fifteenth-century fortress that acted as a main depot for enslaved persons, to discuss the strained relationship between African Americans and Africans. Elmina constitutes just one of many aspects of Hartman's visceral walk through some of the worst terrors of life and death on the slave route. As the author describes a complicated trip through this infamous fort, she allows the reader a glimpse of the native poverty entrenched in the surrounding area. Hartman compares this to her privileged accommodations in the expatriate district of Osu, as she considers the enduring separation between those whose ancestors were and those whose ancestors were not transported across the Middle Passage.

The journey continues on to explore memory and slavery's residual impacts on locales along the Atlantic slave route. In its discussion of modernity, *Lose Your Mother* illuminates the author's experience of living through Ghana's "Dark Days" in the winter of 1997, during which the government rationed electricity in reaction to a water shortage at the dammed Volta Lake successor (136). Although slavery's divisive legacy causes these outages to burden rural areas most frequently, some of the most acutely harrowing effects of slavery specifically ravaged the region along "The Famished Road" to Salaga, a once-affluent slave trading stop (178). There, in

the wake of the wealth of cowrie shells, warriors, and captives, an impoverished area remains. Here and throughout the narrative, Hartman describes close encounters with native Africans who recognize her difference and considers the seemingly unbridgeable Atlantic gap. She then releases readers from her journey to ponder the difficulties of losing one's heritage and straining to identify the thief who stole it.

As Hartman interprets her own struggles during her stay in Ghana, she comments on the experiences of African Americans under the African gaze. The author focuses on those who have traveled to West Africa in search of soil to fill the holes in their pasts. An expatriate African American couple, Mary Ellen and John Ray, inform much of Hartman's understanding of this transatlantic relationship. Over their decades-long stay in Ghana, the couple had endured feelings of continual shunning by Ghanaian nationals, which caused Mary Ellen to exchange the "African" in her hyphenated ethnic identity for "black" (29). Similarly, while walking the streets of Accra, Hartman bore the weight of being viewed as "a privileged American" whose material assets belied the collective social and economic statuses of the children of the enslaved in comparison to the children of African slavers (56). Thus, in highlighting the fallacies in the Ghana of the black-American imagination, *Lose Your Mother* posits the futility of African Americans' voyages to the Motherland in search of a cultural embrace that remains as illusory in Africa as in the United States.

Furthermore, *Lose Your Mother* considers the African view of African Americans by projecting a shared desire to understand and commune with one another. Hartman juxtaposes Afro-descended people's fantastical ideations against actual lived experiences in order to characterize both African Americans' and Africans' inaccurate perceptions of the other Atlantic shore. Though many academics portray an image of solidarity and progress between these two disparate communities, *Lose Your Mother* truthfully reveals the reality of the otherization of skinfolk that manifests not only in Hartman's suffering through too-casual invocations of slavery by Ghanaians, but also in the prejudiced jokes imbibed in African American homes (217).

By way of its historical work, this narrative uncovers the shame that dims the self-images of Africans and African Americans alike. In a compelling chapter titled "The Dead Book," *Lose Your Mother* describes how in the midst of the ignominy of being counted expendable enough for trade, captured individuals strove for their dignity (145). To some extent, however, the loss of dignity is unavoidable when humans are reduced to values counted in shells. This same "insignia of shame," which compels African Americans to return to Africa in search of redemption, often leads Ghanaians—those faced daily with artifacts of slavery—to limit discussions of slavery to avoid admitting their historical participation in its evils (72–73). As a result, Hartman struggled to find people willing to engage in serious conversations about overcoming the dark history of all those affected by the transatlantic slave trade (203). As such, this book reveals that a full and meaningful healing cannot be attained until all Afro-descended individuals release generational regret, and instead focus on caring for those who differently experienced this trauma.

Much of the shame embedded in this narrative springs from the common practice of commodifying humanity. Scholarship on the history of the Americas has revealed that chattel slavery thrived for centuries because it fueled Western capitalist endeavors. Concurrently, the slave trade became a means of attaining political and social power so coveted that black debtors, nephews, and warriors lived and fled in fear of enemies and neighbors turning them into mere market wares (181). Hartman restores some of the victims' humanity by carving out images of their stories and struggles, rather than simply outlining their monetary value.

Still, this attempt at restoration leaves the lingering effects of commodification unresolved. The practice of manipulating human capital to satisfy desires introduced or amplified through interactions with Europeans has expanded beyond the physical body to exploit the emotional trauma of African Americans. *Lose Your Mother* details how Ghana caters to the descendants of those enslaved because these returnees possess dollars needed by a nation marred by neocolonialism. In particular, the Ministry of Tourism intentionally fills its market of remembrance with public mourning events and castle tours meant to procure donations from diasporic visitors (164). This modern piece of the story complicates understandings of the impacts of capitalism on Afro-descended peoples the world over. Further, it exemplifies how every black person yet lives “in the time of slavery” by experiencing and participating “in the future created by it” (133).

Lose Your Mother deserves acclaim for stylistic choices that accentuate the merits of its content. Hartman successfully excavates neglected discussions about West Africa and its diaspora by narrating her personal experience in Ghana, while limiting discussion of her own lineage. By the end of Hartman's account, the reader understands that although Hartman began her journey to Ghana for strictly academic purposes, she shares widely held experiences of shame, abandonment, and confusion. Additionally, Hartman's artful employment of poetic prose throughout the work entices even the least patient of audiences to read thoughtfully. For example, the reader feels the slave trade's flesh-eating nature through the author's depiction of Elmina Castle as a gluttonous monster hungry for human prey. In this and other examples, the author's masterful handling of language creates an entire world in which anyone who engages with this text can look beyond preconceived understandings of the meaning of black identity.

Although *Lose Your Mother* requires significant emotional expenditure, it is an essential addition to the canon of scholarship on Africa and its diaspora. The themes of the African view of African Americans, shame, and commodification touch on a range of issues that plague the wandering black psyche on both sides of the Atlantic. Embedded within the pages is a recognition that no place or heritage on this earth will ever heal the centuries-long trauma of slavery. Thus, *Lose Your Mother* invites its audience to embark on the unfinished journey to understanding the self. If nothing else, a reader will finish this book having recognized that individual identity is often more complicated and intricately related to broader societal concerns than it appears. Because the author's own exploration of the physical and cultural landscape of Ghana manifested differently than the typical narrative of return, readers leave *Lose Your Mother* with permission to mourn, celebrate, and dig into their own pasts more freely.

Reference

Hartman, Saidiya. 2008. *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*. New York: Macmillan.