

De-Romanticizing the History of Slavery in the United States

The Tragic Mode in Saidiya Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection*

Desromantizando a História da Escravidão nos Estados Unidos

O modo trágico em *Scenes of Subjection* de Saidiya Hartman

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ABSTRACT This article starts with *Scenes of Subjection*, the first book published by African-American historian Saidiya Hartman, to reflect on the forms of narrating the past of slavery. First, I briefly overview slavery historiography in the United States and describe her place in this scenario. Then, I present some of the problematizations elaborated by historian Hayden White about the forms of past entanglement in the writing of history, something that is essential to understanding the work developed by Hartman and which relates to the next subtopic, in which I discuss the narrative possibilities of tragedy and the tragic. Finally, I discuss how, by applying these demands, *Scenes of Subjection* provokes us to think, theoretically and methodologically, about other forms of writing slavery history.

KEYWORDS history writing, narrative, slavery.

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RESUMO O presente artigo parte de *Scenes of Subjection*, primeiro livro publicado pela historiadora afro-americana Saidiya Hartman, para refletir sobre as formas de narrar o passado da escravidão. Em um primeiro momento, faço um breve apanhado sobre a historiografia da escravidão nos Estados Unidos e situo o lugar ocupado por ela nesse cenário. Na etapa seguinte, apresento algumas das problematizações elaboradas pelo historiador Hayden White sobre as formas de enredamento do passado na escrita da história, algo essencial para entender o trabalho desenvolvido por Hartman e que dialoga com o próximo subtópico, em que discuto as possibilidades narrativas da tragédia e do trágico. Por fim, discorro como, ao aplicar essas demandas, *Scenes of Subjection* convoca-nos a pensar, teórica e metodologicamente, outras formas de se escrever a história da escravidão.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE escrita da história, narrativa, escravidão.

The conviction that I was living in a world created by slavery propelled the writing of this book. I could feel the force and disfigurement of slavery in the present. The life of the captive and the commodity certainly wasn't my past, but rather the threshold of my entry into the world. Its grasp and claim couldn't be cordoned off as what happened then. For me, the relation between slavery and the present was open, unfinished. (Hartman, 2022, p. xxix).

In the United States, from the end of the 19th until at least the middle of the 20th century, the historiography of slavery was dominated by the point of view of enslavers. In a pastoral view, the institution was seen as having offered captives an alternative to the barbarism of Africa and paternalistic protection from the enslavers, Christian salvation, and self-building through hard work. These models of interpretation would be questioned by the activism that unfolded in the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. In the wake of Black Power in the 1970s, there was a significant emphasis on black resilience in the face of oppression.

Researchers marked captives' courageous resistance and astute agency by reinterpreting old sources and adding insightful studies of new materials, such as interviews with formerly enslaved people conducted in the 1930s by the Works Progress Administration. Various studies on the enslaved people's family and religion sought, in dialogue with demands for recognition and reparations in the present, to exalt examples of dignity and emancipation in the somber past. In short, the narratives were different, as were their aspirations.

However, at the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s, the concept of resistance would be significantly problematized in the humanities because, in addition to the remarkable theoretical sophistication of various anthropological and historiographical studies on everyday ways of resisting, there was a disturbing disposition, as Palestinian-American anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod (1990, p. 42) argued, towards romantic projections of resistance. In other words, there was too much focus on understanding these processes' "signs of the ineffectiveness of systems of power and the resilience and creativity of the human spirit in its refusal to be dominated". What was lacking, she explained, was a greater focus on readings that understood that resistance "is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power" (Foucault, 1978, p. 95).¹ For political scientist and anthropologist James C. Scott (1985, p. 29), the situation reflected a growing focus in the humanities on unheard-of, tiny, or local forms of resistance, motivated above all by disillusionment with the post-1968 socialist revolutions. A distinct academic language was increasingly being used: terms such as "subversions," "dissidence," and "counter-discourses" pointed to the transformation of the debate.

In 1997, as a result of her doctoral thesis defended in the American Studies program at Yale University, under the supervision of Alan Trachtenberg, Saidiya Hartman published the first edition of *Scenes of*

1 In North America, Johnson's work (2003) is a classic reflection on this topic. Discussing in depth the prominence of this debate in Brazilian historiography is beyond the scope of our intervention. For more, see Machado (1988), Mello e Souza (1989) and Gomes (2004).

Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America, which was truly inspired by the warnings issued by a group of interlocutors of the French philosopher Michel Foucault.² *Scenes of Subjection*, therefore, stems from the author's concern to develop an intricate diagnosis of power, capable of presenting her present with a robust panorama of the brutality of slavery and its afterlives. The tragic form of Hartman's project reveals the unease she felt with sectors of black thought at the time, which she considered highly susceptible to separating themselves "consciously or unconsciously peel away from the strength and the terror of their evidence"³ (Hartman; Wilderson III, 2003, p. 183). In a conversation about the book, she would even complain:

That project is something I consider obscene: the attempt to make the narrative of defeat into an opportunity for celebration, the desire to look at the ravages and the brutality of the last few centuries, but to still find a way to feel good about ourselves. That's not my project at all, though I think it's the project of several people. Unfortunately, the kind of social revisionist history undertaken by many leftists in the 1970s, who were trying to locate the agency of dominated groups, resulted in celebratory narratives of the oppressed. (Hartman; Wilderson III, 2003, p. 185-186).

To what extent could a romanticized celebration of the capacity of "those from below" to overcome be used to associate black resistance with a larger nationalist project of exalting American exceptionality and its supposedly democratic values? Hartman (2003, p. 185) saw risks and recalled that, in the United States, "the metanarrative thrust is always

2 The first edition of the book was published in 1997 by Oxford University Press. Here I use the revised version published in 2022 by W. W. Norton & Company.

3 Sirma Bilge (2020, p. 2300) shows how — despite an apparently greater institutional receptivity — that was a context where black researchers feared that the inclusion of their knowledge and racialized workforce in university spaces in the global North would be used to prove the overcoming of the "race problem".

towards an integration into the national project, and particularly when that project is in crisis, black people are called upon to affirm it.” The curious thing about this rebuke is that it was not limited to pastoral/conservative readings of slavery, which, as we have seen, had prevailed until the mid-twentieth century. In dialogue with Lila Abu-Lughod, she was also suspicious of some authors linked to the Social History of the 1960s–70s who, thirsting to “give voice to the oppressed,” ended up underestimating the capacities of anti-black power in Slavery. The *form* how she narrated that past so full of contradictions — which she stressed still haunted her present — was therefore decisive. Proof of this was the fact that, not infrequently, the author recalled the theoretical importance of the historian Hayden White in her reflections on the entanglement of the history of black slavery in the United States “in the tragic mode” (Hartman; Nelson, 2022b).

HAYDEN WHITE: THE HISTORICAL TEXT AS LITERARY ARTIFACT AND THE HISTORIAN’S INTERVENTION IN THE PRESENT

By focusing on the narrative character of the historical text, its ideological implications, and the performative dimension that writing about the past can have in the public debates of the present, Hayden White provoked a veritable hecatomb in the historiography of the second half of the 20th century. As was to be expected, in a discipline that he defined as “conservative par excellence,” many detractors accused him of being “relativist,” “anti-realist,” “radical,” “utopian” etc.⁴

White saw a profound crisis in disciplinary history, resulting from a widespread attitude among its professionals, who were clinging to “an epistemologically neutral middle ground” that they supposed existed between art and science. The “burden of history” was that, despite claiming the privileges of both, historians, in the process of increasing

4 Two texts full of rhetorical scarecrows about Hayden White, postmodernism and historical realism were written by Cardoso (1998) and Ginzburg (2006).

specialization and professionalization, resisted submitting to the new critical models emerging about art or science. In a classic text published in 1966, he complained that:

Many historians continue to treat their “facts” as though they were “given” and refuse to recognize, unlike most scientists, that they are not so much “found” as “constructed” by the kinds of questions which the investigator asks of the phenomena before him. It is the same notion of objectivity that binds historians to an uncritical use of the chronological framework for their narratives (White, 1966, p. 127).

“One means among many” of portraying a particular past event, the writing of history should no longer be stuck with the burden of totalizing and naive realism that threw the discipline into a deep crisis. There are no “right angles” and “true perspectives” on particular portions of the past, but rather “*many* correct views, each requiring its own style of representation” (White, 1966, p. 131). For White, the concern should be shifted to the field of style, to the content of the form of the historical text, and to the more or less conscious decisions that historians make in making sense of the past.

In another text, the American historian reflects on how historical narratives are “verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much *invented* as found” (White, 1974, p. 278). In other words, they are a kind of literary artifact. In his terms:

The historian shares with his audience *general notions* of the *forms* that significant human situations *must* take by virtue of his participation in the specific processes of sense-making which identify him as a member of one cultural endowment rather than another. In the process of studying a given complex of events, he begins to perceive the *possible* story form that such events *may* figure. In his narrative account of how this set of events took on the shape which he perceives

to inhere within it, he emplots his account as a story of a particular kind. The reader, in the process of following the historian's account of those events, gradually comes to realize that the story he is reading is of one kind rather than another: romance, tragedy, comedy, satire, epic, or what have you. And when he has perceived the class or type to which the story that he is reading belongs, he experiences the effect of having the events in the story explained to him. He has at this point not only successfully *followed* the story; he has grasped the point of it, *understood* it, as well. The original strangeness, mystery, or exoticism of the events is dispelled, and they take on a familiar aspect, not in their details, but in their functions as elements of a familiar kind of configuration (White, 1974, 283)

Historical narrative comes to be thought of as something that manipulates our thinking about events, as a device that activates different “emotional valences” in readers about the past. By imagining the stories we write as symbolic structures, that is, as “extended metaphors, that ‘liken’ the events reported in them some form with which we have already become familiar”, Hayden White (1974, p. 291) urged the discipline to pay attention to its origins in the literary imagination.

In *Metahistory* (1973), he would detail, with practical examples in the intellectual tradition of the 19th century, that if a historian, while narrating his story, offered him the plot structure of a tragedy, he would be “explaining” this set of temporally connected events in a way that, as a rule, would be significantly different from a novelistic, satirical or comedic form. Concerning the historiographical choices made by Saidiya Hartman, it is interesting to remember that Hayden White (1973, p. 8-9) marks the romance structure as “a drama of self-identification symbolized by the hero's transcendence of the world of experience, his victory over it, and his final liberation from it...a drama of the triumph of good over evil, of virtue over vice, of light over darkness”. In short, stories entangled this way tend to make us interpret the past as a drama of

redemption. As *Scenes of Subjection* exemplifies, this implies an ideological issue significantly different from tragedy. In White's words, in the tragic mode of writing history:

There are no festive occasions, except false or illusory ones; rather, there are intimations of states of division among men more terrible than that which incited the tragic *agon* at the beginning of the drama. Still, the fall of the protagonist and the shaking of the world he inhabits which occur at the end of the Tragic play are not regarded as threatening to those who survive the agonistic test. There has been a gain in consciousness for the spectators of the contest. And this gain is thought to consist of the epiphany of the law governing human existence which the protagonist's exertions against the world have brought to pass (1973, p. 9).

The tragic form accounts for a world full of ambivalence and reversals of rights supposedly won in an apothecic way. *Scenes of Subjection* is born in a context in which the tragic mode of narrating the history of slavery intervenes against the post-racial discourse of the transcendence of race and the "end of history," reverberated by American neoliberalism which, in the wake of the "meritocratic" inclusion of a rising black bourgeoisie, has meant that the complaints of radical and "identity" activists have been "reduced to historical dead weight" (Crenshaw, 2017). With this influence of Hayden White on Hartman's thinking in mind, we need to briefly digress into some elements of tragedy and the tragedy before exploring how the plot is woven into the tragic mode in *Scenes of Subjection*.

SOME NOTES ON TRAGEDY AND THE TRAGIC

For the Hellenist Page duBois (2004), the spread of tragedy, in the context of the Dionysian celebrations in 5th century BC Athens, provided an exciting space for political education in the *polis*. As Jean-Pierre

Vernant (1999, p. 162) has rightly explained, this great theatrical innovation offered Athenian culture a new imaginary, fictional geography. According to Marcel Detienne (2013), this led to a significant displacement of the sensible since, in archaic Greece, the truth was generally accessed through a system of religious representations and was the prerogative of the poet, the soothsayer, and the king of justice.

Tragedy, then, would be the representative art of the rise of democracy in Athens. In line with Hayden White's reading and the paths taken by Saidiya Hartman in *Scenes of Subjection*, it should be emphasized that its character was less flattering and much more problematic for society in Ancient Greece. As Alberto Toscano (2019) explains, it thematized conflicts between different citizens and between them and others (metics, barbarians, women, enslaved people) and, above all, between the city and its past. As Nicole Loraux (2007) points out, Athenian tragedy activated even anti-political elements when it promoted concerns that challenged the *polis*' assumptions of unity and pacifism.

For example, the women's pain in the tragic plots performed an obstinate mourning that went against the amnesiac imperatives of the city. For this reason, Page duBois (2004, p. 77) suggests that our readings of ancient tragedy "must include more than Oedipus and his family if they are to illuminate our present and our future" because, by confining it to the *pathos* of the great man, his tragic flaw and his fall, Aristotle and many modern interpreters have contributed to tragedy becoming an empty signifier in popular culture and contemporary literary theory.

Jamaican anthropologist David Scott insightfully elaborated on one possible alternative in his *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (2004). Anticolonial stories about the past, present, and future followed a form for him. They had narrative potential that seemed increasingly out of place in a postcolonial context: the novel. Tending towards a character of overcoming or vindication, with rhythm and direction based, more often than not, on an apothotic final conquest, the romantic writings of history seemed to lose critical relevance in the face of a multifaceted set of historical and political changes taking place in the 1980s–1990s. I quote him (p. 2): "I think we

live in tragic times (...) The old languages of moral-political vision and hope are no longer in sync with the world they were meant to describe and normatively criticize.”

The remarkable dialog with Hayden White here was revealed in the attempt to establish as a political-epistemic goal a temporal reorientation through the narrative redefinition of the writings of history that purport to be emancipationist. About this initiative in particular, he argued that the change in this (utopian) horizon had already been perceived by the Trinidadian-Tobag historian C. L. R. James in a 1963 reprint of his emblematic *The Black Jacobins*, a book originally published in 1938.⁵ Scott (2004, p. 7), somewhat annoyed, questioned:

Does the moral point of anticolonialism depend on constructing colonialism as a particular obstacle to overcome? Does the purchase or salience of anticolonialism depend on a certain narrative form, a certain rhythm, and a certain conception of temporality? Does the anticolonial demand for a certain kind of postcolonial future oblige its histories to produce certain types of pasts?

C. L. R. James wrote his history of the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804) between the wars in London when he was experiencing active Trotskyist and anticolonial engagement. The work was an incisive claim against anti-black colonial historiography, which insisted on denying African peoples and their descendants in the diaspora the capacity for heroic leadership and self-government. Close to revolutionary socialism and the different traditions of black romanticism, James did not just see the event as a fundamental episode in the revolutionary struggle for the self-emancipation of enslaved Black people relegated to the past. In profound “historiographical self-consciousness,” that is, in the intense perception of the critical present in which he was writing, his “revolutionary epic” reconstructed and unfolded the historical past “in the

5 The Brazilian edition, published in 2000, already includes these paragraphs from 1963.

service of imagining the direction in which an alternative future might be sought” (Scott, 2004, p. 10). In *Scenes of Subjection*, Hartman starts from a similar historiographical self-consciousness, as he seeks to activate “emotional valences” (to use White’s term) that dialogue, above all, with an African-American audience of the late 1990s.

David Scott, I stress, did not fail to recognize the value of the romantic narrative model, nor did he throw his propositions into the same ideological pool as those who advocated the end of history and racism.⁶ He doubted the usefulness or applicability of a theoretical and narrative framework that only read and represented upheavals based on the modern concept of revolution. In the present, skeptical about the teleologies of nationalist and socialist liberation, he saw the need to search for other forms of narrative and rhythms of historiographical writing.

According to the author, it is mainly in the unpublished seven paragraphs of the opening of the last chapter of this revised version that we see C. L. R. James breaking with a “consoling vision” of colonialism, civilization, modernity, and the Enlightenment. Consequently, this would offer us a historiographical performance capable of, at the same time, refiguring *The Black Jacobins* as a “tragedy of colonial enlightenment” and offering “the elements of a critical history of our postcolonial times” (Scott, 2004, p. 14).

In close dialogue with the article *Conscripts of Western Civilization*, by the Saudi anthropologist Talal Asad (1992), Scott argues that those who deal with the black past through history should, from then on, focus less on the volitional subjectivity of the subjects [that is, on the *agency* of the subalterns, as thought of by a given Social History of Slavery] and focus on the conditions of possibility for the subjectivities of these subjects to exist and act. Reading *The Black Jacobins* in this way, Scott argued that, for the postcolonial present, it is more worthwhile to understand Toussaint Louverture — the black revolutionary chosen by C. L. R. James as the main character in the grand plot. James as the main

6 On the conceptions of an “end of racism” in North American culture, see Rasberry (2012) and Bonilla-Silva (2020).

character in the grand plot of the Haitian Revolution — not so much as “a revolutionary agent who made history” but as a subject “constrained [or *conscripted*, *recruited* as the title of Scott’s book and Asad’s article say] to imagine and make the revolution he imagined and made within the conceptual and institutional terrain of modernity” (Scott, 2004, p. 129).

Tragedy, in this case, would have the fundamental function of questioning “the view of human history as moving teleologically and transparently toward a determinate end, or as governed by a sovereign and omnisciently rational agent” (Scott, 2004, p. 12). James’s tragic Toussaint acted in a historical scene full of instability about the future of the revolution in which he was taking part, in an instant of profound ambiguity about the effectiveness of the conquests that the Haitian rebels were achieving. From then on, every revolutionary success was read with the suspicion that failure is uncompromising in these processes.

In the seven new paragraphs that open the final chapter of the revised edition, Haitian freedom was far from being portrayed as an apothotic Jubilee. After all, its content was much more of a warning for the postcolonial present. The tragic, David Scott (2004, p. 209) concluded at one point: “a sense of the inability of man in society to overcome the evil which seems inseparable from the social and political organization.” Whoever performs their historiographical narrative this way must ask how subjects can fight against an ever-lurking subjection. With these moves, Talal Asad, James Scott, and C. L. R. James were not appealing to a mere fatalism about the present or even less about black emancipation in the modern world. The present is not doomed; we are not, after all, mere puppets in the face of colonial/imperial tyranny. Change, albeit limited, is possible.

And we will see that Saidiya Hartman walked a similar road and diagnosed her present as being asleep in a false dream of black emancipation, which was so reminiscent of the broken promises of Jubilee in the 19th century. The tragic mode in *Scenes of Subjection* sought to put slavery studies in the United States and so-called black studies on alert. From her, we learn, after all, a writing to awaken.⁷

7 For Christina Sharpe (2023), the “work of awakening” acts as a form of consciousness, where

PLOTTING SLAVERY IN THE TRAGIC MODE

Scenes of Subjection is divided into two sections: *Formations of Terror and Enjoyment* is set in the context of slavery, while *The Subject of Freedom* reflects on the broken promises and incursions of anti-black subjection after formal emancipation, which in the USA, the scope of the work, took place in 1865. The book begins by analyzing how the white abolitionist John Rankin, writing letters to his slave-owning brother in the Old South, could only measure the flogging of the enslaved by imagining that that suffering body could be his own or that of his family. Such a grotesque re-enactment appealed to the good feelings of the sender/spectator through the shock and disturbance that only a detailed account of the torture could offer. The tragedy of Rankin's "noble intention," observes Hartman, is that by "making his own" the suffering of the enslaved, he "begins to feel for himself rather than for those whom this exercise in imagination presumably is designed to reach" (Hartman, 2022, p. 24).

Hartman seemed to write these first moments as a playwright haunted by the extensive television reproduction of the video of the Rodney King case, a 25-year-old black man beaten by four Los Angeles police officers in March 1991. How was she supposed to write a book about slavery without replicating the status of the violated black body available for public consumption? Why is the violence of slavery, as in the Rodney King video, often recognized/debated almost exclusively through the spectacular exploitation of images of enslaved people/blacks being punished? Why are such scenes constantly taken as necessary to confirm the exemplary victim status of such subjects? Such questions seem to be the starting points of *Scenes of Subjection*.

By making an accurate adjustment to the historiographical sensibility, his entanglement desacralizes the notion of the tragic, in most cases associated with the stage/representation/enactment of a tragedy,

black researchers understand that "to be awake" is to occupy and be occupied by the continuous and changing present of the unresolved unfolding of slavery.

and chooses to foreground other forms of anti-black subjection, such as the disparate theatricalities involving enslaved people in the playful performances of minstrels⁸ and the cruel *coffle*.⁹ In the first case, read as “innocent amusements,” the acts of transgression allowed by *black-face* masks ended up policing blackness “through derision, ridicule, and violence” (Hartman, 2022, p. 42). Going in the opposite direction, the “shameless display” of the slave trade in the *coffle* curiously achieved similar results, Hartman points out. To “make themselves sellable,” the captives chained by the neck were forced to sing *Old Virginia Never Tire* [a song that originated, curiously, on the minstrel stage] in an “indecent” and “disgusting” scene whose essential function, the author demonstrates, was to make the subjugated appear content and comfortable (2022, p. 49).

In this sense, where many saw a romantic pastoral between enslavers and enslaved people, Hartman noted the tragic reinsertion of anti-black power. For her, this set of dissimulations, when demanded in coerced displays at plantation house, forces us to rethink some parameters. As a talented playwright, she suggests that:

Rather than glance at the most striking spectacle with revulsion or through tear-filled eyes, we do better to cast our glance at the more mundane displays of power and the border where it is difficult to discern domination from recreation. Bold instances of cruelty are too readily acknowledged and forgotten, and cries quieted to an endurable hum. By disassembling the “benign” scene, we confront the everyday practice of domination, the daily routine of terror, the non-event, as it were. Is the scene of enslaved people dancing

8 Minstrel shows were a type of theatrical performance that was very popular in the post-Civil War USA (1861–1865). Filled with music and dance, their comic scenes were performed by white actors who painted their faces black in the characterization of stereotypical black characters.

9 A kind of platoon organized by owners to transport a group of enslaved people chained by the neck to a place where they would be sold/exchanged.

and fiddling for their masters any less inhumane than that of enslaved people sobbing and dancing on the auction block? If so, why? Is the effect of power any less prohibitive? Or coercive? Or does pleasure mitigate coercion? Is the boundary between terror and pleasure clearer in the market than in the quarters or the “big house”? Are the most enduring forms of cruelty those seemingly benign? Is the perfect picture of the crime the one in which the crime goes undetected? (Hartman, 2022, p. 66).

The Saturday games at plantation house acted as a productive force that regulated the forms of expression allowed to the dominated. The harmonious and idyllic “time off” was supposed to theatricalize power and reinscribe the status of each character. Referencing Hayden White’s *Metahistory* and *Tropics of Discourse*, the author recalls how the comic entanglements of “romantic racist” interpretations tended towards organicist conclusions with conservative ideological implications. In pastoral discourse, the “good society” would be benevolent, paternalistic, and humanized towards the poor helpless creatures who, treated as foolish “children,” responded to the pleasures of the masters with exuberant joy, natural musical talent and an unwavering will to serve (Hartman, 2022, p. 397). The tragedy in Hartman understands that these speeches, above all, acted to silence an indigestible past that displeased the glorious national projects of an exceptional democracy provided by the USA. This was, therefore, an integrative conversation that, the author was keen to point out, seemed to be intensely revived in the decades leading up to the production of *Scenes of Subjection*.

Hartman courageously tries to imagine if there is a different way of interpreting the actions of the enslaved in these spaces of coerced entertainment, false consent, and feigned enjoyment. Is it possible to think of movements of resistance or spaces of escape in a place of such sophisticated violence? Many authors linked to the *Social History of Slavery* have tried this. But what theoretical and methodological limits did they face? In short, the question was:

How might we reconsider the performative to illuminate the social relations of slavery and the daily practices of resistance that traverse these relations or represent the critical labor of these practices without reproducing the contented subject of the pastoral or the heroic actor of the romance of resistance? (Hartman, 2022, p. 90).

Even with good intentions, many historians — predominantly white men with a strong base in Marxism — began to overinterpret everyday acts involving music and dance, for example, as episodes that would confirm the self-directed capacity of the enslaved to react to the condition of subjection. The risk, however, is that many of these readings ended up “neutralizing the dilemma of the object status and the pained subject constitution of the enslaved, obscuring the violence of slavery” (Hartman, 2022, p. 88). As Hartman incisively elaborates, it would make no sense to look at that context of extreme subjugation and see the figure of the enslaved as an autonomous subject endowed with free will since their relationship with the normative category “person” was much more undefined and paradoxical. In his terms:

I think the book is about the problem of crafting a narrative for the enslaved person as subject, and in terms of positionality, asking, ‘Who does that narrative enable?’ That’s where the whole issue of empathic identification is central for me. It just seems that every attempt to employ the enslaved person in a narrative ultimately resulted in their obliteration, regardless of whether it was a leftist narrative of political agency — the enslaved person stepping into someone else’s shoes and then becoming a political agent — or whether it was about being able to unveil the enslaved person’s humanity by actually finding oneself in that position. In many ways, what I was trying to do as a cultural historian was to narrate a certain impossibility, to illuminate those practices that speak to the limits of most available narratives to explain the position of

the enslaved. On one hand, the slave is the foundation of the national order, and on the other, the slave occupies the position of the unthought. (Hartman; Wilderson III, 2003, pp.184–185).

Less than a “novel of resistance,” its theoretical impulse draws our attention to the countless and intricate ways enslaved people could perform fleeting spaces of freedom in practically impossible contexts, marked by surveillance and constant threat. Precisely, his tragic mode of entanglement will see, in those “pedestrian challenges” to slavery, confirmation of the extent to which black captives challenged the dominant episteme, even if it infantilized them and considered them to be devoid of obstinacy or intelligence. In short, diagnosing (in this theatrical vein, we could also talk about “showing its backstage, its *making off*”) power would also mean noticing how much that power was in crisis and, for this very reason, theatricalizing its vitality.

Scenes of Subjection is, therefore, far from immobilizing or even pessimistic, as Anitta Patterson (1999, p. 683) defined it in one of the first reviews of the work.¹⁰ On the contrary, its tragic form of entanglement complexifies the scenario in which resistance/agency is possible. The enslaved are not arrogated the illusory privileges of the bourgeois subject or the individual who owns himself.¹¹ “Endowing” the enslaved with volition could be part of the good intentions of many historians who are understandably concerned with achieving social justice through academics. However, the possibilities for the subjects of the past were always more restricted:

10 In an interview with Max Nelson (2022), Hartman even complains about the way in which many people have received her work as a simple denunciation of cruelty against black bodies. For the author, many readers have forgotten or diminished the weight that the invention of everyday life has in *Scenes of Subjection*.

11 Curiously, the work that has won the most credit in this discussion, the aforementioned “On Agency” by historian Walter Johnson (2003), does not cite Hartman’s book published shortly before.

The constraints of agency are significant in this situation, and it is difficult to imagine how the interpellation of the enslaved person as subject enables forms of agency that do not reinscribe the terms of subjection. Although it has become commonplace in Foucauldian approaches to power relations to conceptualize agency as an enabling constraint or an enabling violation, the problem with this approach is that it assumes that all forms of power are normatively equivalent without distinguishing between violence, domination, force, legitimation, hegemony et cetera. (Hartman, 2022, p. 91).

The tremendous theoretical merit of this tragic reading of history, I repeat, is that it does not reduce countless forms of everyday practices to conditions of extreme domination, nor does it romanticize the frictions that took place in these spaces as if they were equivalent to rare forms of open resistance or conquests that could come to shake up a larger power structure. This does not mean diminishing the value of those acts; it is quite the contrary. This perception implies considering that, after all, no heroes and villains were competing with equivalent forces in the context of slavery. Far from mere fatalism, what was at stake was an interventionist way of imagining which paths (radical) black politics could take in the post-racial present of the 1990s.

Scenes of Subjection performed a language marked by a generative distrust and a renewed cry for an *awakening*. As Hartman protested, the debate on race often descended into an ill-considered “celebration of the oppressed” when several of the historians of slavery described their research as if they could discover and access first-hand testimonies, that is, as if academic work, as long as it was rigorous, was capable of “rescuing the voice” of the silenced subaltern poor. To think about these issues, *Scenes of Subjection* articulated African-American authors, such as James D. Anderson (1976) and Clarence E. Walker (1991), to current readings by Renato Rosaldo (2016 [1986]) and Gayatri Spivak (2010 [1988]). In a move that precedes his much-cited 2008 article *Venus in Two Acts*, Hartman explains how the imperative to construct a usable

and palatable national past determined the image of slavery in the archives of testimonies collected by the Works Progress Administration.

More than that, the records demonstrated how hierarchical relations developed between the primarily white interviewers and the black interviewees. Hartman (2022, pp. 14-15) emphasized the risks to any historian dealing with this type of historical source: even if he used this documentation “for the opposite purpose,” his project was not a full recovery of the experience of captives and emancipated people that might be “hidden” in the testimonies. His method, described here as a “work of reconstruction” and [for the first time in his career] “fabulation,” was “raiding for fragments upon which other narratives can be spun and transposing and deforming the testimony through selective quotation and amplification.”¹²

Awakening us to this idea of “giving voice to the oppressed,” Hartman decides to alert us to another assumption idealized by many libertarian interpretations of the American slave past: the political and historiographical concept of the “black community.” In the process, she takes up part of the discussion established by Walker (1991). Still, she discusses it with the philosopher Drucilla Cornell (1992, pp. 39–61), noting that the interactions established by the enslaved generated moments of cooperation and solidarity and various conflicts, betrayals, mistrust, conflicting beliefs, and different values. What Cornell preferred to call “communality” was a type of formation “constituted in practice” and which depended less on a supposed uniformity between peers than on the collective desire to change that world, in other words, to abolish servitude (Hartman, 2022, p. 99).

The tragic entanglement of the slave past sees that process of union as something much less stable. This way of perceiving dissension and intramural differences as constituent elements of black commonality also allows us to understand the vision elaborated by Saidiya Hartman about how the memory of a “dismembered past” defined

12 The author would theorize the question of “critical fabulation” in a more expansive way in her “Venus in Two Acts” (2021 [2008]), p. 105-129.

the reparative possibilities employed by the enslaved (Hartman, 2022, p. 122). A past was elaborated through devotional dances, the ghostly presence of ancestral spirits, and even nostalgia for an Africa rich in possibilities of freedom that, curiously, many had never even witnessed or experienced.

This reparation, therefore, testified to a *loss* much more than an exact survival of the past. Dialoguing with another text by David Scott (2018), Hartman (2022, p. 127) sought to criticize the essentialist views of the transmission of African culture and past to the experience of the enslaved in the New World. By demystifying and displacing these concepts about Africa, she pointed to the centrality of the violent discontinuity produced by the *Middle Passage*. The *juba* dance, for example, is taken by her as a “channel of subterranean and repressed histories” rather than “a reminder of distant but recoverable origins.” There would be no way for the enslaved to repair or compensate, through those cultural expressions, for the tragic event that threw them into that condition. But “the effort to put things right,” Hartman (2022, p. 129) risks saying, was what gradually promoted “a revolution of the social order, an entirely new set of arrangements.”

This is very interesting, and the book is full of examples of these clandestine, hidden, “stolen,” exorbitant assemblies that were courageously made possible and ended up breaking down the boundaries between religion, politics, culture, and bodily pleasure. The fleetingness with which the encounters were engendered attests that the enslaved people’s ways of living could “not be reduced to domination nor explained outside it” (Hartman, 2022, p. 102). This is a synthesis of what it means to think of the past of black slavery in the tragic mode: a dance hidden in a fenced space; an elusive freedom being experienced in the most intense way possible in the least likely place available. That’s why these stories matter so much to us today. Those people were, in a way, transmitting something to the future. That is, to the present, we live in an indomitable form of black freedom, another way of shouting for abolition (Hartman, 2020).

THE TRAGIC AND THE AFTERLIFE OF SLAVERY

However, the question remains about what language to define these movements. How do we account for these practices, given that our discipline, as Hayden White rightly pointed out, has such well-policed borders? Is it possible to draw a parallel between tragic entanglement and an undisciplined way of writing history? *Scenes of Subjection* reminds me a lot of what David Scott proposed when talking about the narrative potential of the tragedy. After all, there is another kind of narrative about the past being proposed in the work to meet, or rather, to intervene in new demands of the present.

Let's take the third chapter as an example of what I'm getting at. Entitled *Seduction and the Ruses of Power*, one of its most valuable insights highlights how the values revered and thought of as universal in our modern democracies — freedom, equality, self-mastery, and the inviolable rights of personality — were acquired in a direct relationship with black enslavement. Since slave volition was only intelligible as a crime, how could the newly freed take possession of these attributes? How could they affirm their humanity and have their demands as subjects of the modern state recognized when this personality proved to be loaded with a series of perpetual responsibilities that generally served to reaffirm and intensify the coercive mechanisms of anti-black power? The tragic problematizations raised by Hartman call us to reflect on the nefarious continuity of these reversals of subjection in a present where black lives continue to be violated.¹³

However, what was at stake for the author was not a peremptory denial of the successes made possible by the formalization of equality

13 In footnote 44 of chapter 2, "*Redressing the Pained Body*," Hartman states: "Neither liberal nor Marxist notions of the political subject are adequate to the particular situation of the enslaved. The Marxist model is concerned with a different model of oppression-exploitation and with the free worker and does not offer an analysis of racial oppression. Ironically, the 'Marxist' interpretations of slavery were quite conservative in their analysis of slavery and focused on paternalism rather than domination or terror, and on total relations rather than racial subordination", p. 403.

but rather a tension in understanding the limits of the Emancipation of 1865. *Scenes of Subjection* sought to do this without following the usual path of merely denouncing the non-application of fundamental rights, privileges, and benefits for the former enslaved. The movement was significantly different, as the work sought to question how the inclusion of the former enslaved in this imagined set of rights served, in many cases, to truly mutate and transform anti-black power (Hartman, 2022, p. 210).

The book's second part makes a bold diagnosis of the entanglement¹⁴ between the constituent principles of slavery and the responsibilities imbued in the discourse of the guilty conscience of formal freedom. The question for the US national project at that time was whether that contingent "unaccustomed to white freedom" could become an orderly, productive, responsible, and hygienic working class. Trying to act in the face of an extensive set of pessimistic prognoses, manuals such as *Advice to Freeman*, *Friendly Counsels for Freedmen*, *John Freeman and His Family*, and *Plain Counsels for Freedman* were devised as a way of linking education and religious instruction to tutelage for the newly emancipated in this transition. Published by the American Tract Society, an evangelical organization established in 1825, the booklets sought to guide adults and children to be "respectful of their former masters, good Christians and dutiful citizens" (Hartman, 2022, p. 228).

Only in this way would it be possible to "overcome the degradation of slavery and meet the challenges of freedom" (Hartman, 2022, p. 227). The tragic thing, Hartman explains, is to read these manuals and know that the post-abolition fate was far from easy for blacks, even those who tried (or were coerced into) following primers like these: "debt peonage, a reign of terror, nearly one hundred years of remaining separate and resolutely unequal, second-class citizenship, and an as-yet-unrealized freedom" (Hartman, 2022, p. 229). As the author would supplement in the penultimate chapter of the new edition of *Scenes of Subjection*, cynicism was crucial in consolidating the United States as a

14 Although little noticed, "entanglement" is a term as present as "afterlife of slavery" in the works of Saidiya Hartman.

superpower in the second half of the 19th century. After all, the reunion and reconciliation of the capitalists of the North with the plantocrats of the South took place through the detraction and debasement of blacks (Hartman, 2022, p. 253).

This second part has an ironic accent markedly inspired by the interpretation developed by W. E. B. Du Bois in *Black Reconstruction in America 1860–1880* (1935), where the African-American sociologist complained about the prevalence of a tragic vision of Reconstruction produced by white historians of the South. As part of a true white supremacist counter-revolution and with the representative help of writers, filmmakers, and painters, figures such as Claude G. Bowers, John W. Burgess, and William A. Dunning replicated a shamed and racist version of the events of the Civil War (1861–1865) and post-Emancipation in the USA. In short, they considered that the republicanism of blacks and their white allies had caused harmful damage to democracy.

Daring to challenge this historiography, Du Bois argued that the real “unending tragedy of Reconstruction” lay in the “utter inability of the American mind to grasp its real significance.” That’s why he was interested in recovering the story of the black man’s part in Reconstruction, a tragic narrative too, but in a different way, because the “splendid failure” of the black worker’s revolutionary struggle in Reconstruction would have offered the future a series of lessons about the obstinate organizational capacity of blacks (Du Bois, 1935, p. 708). *Scenes of Subjection*, as Hayden White and James Scott point out about tragic entanglement, highlights this gain in consciousness in its conclusion. Suppose the ironic reversal of democratic promises and the auspices of liberalism that projected the USA as the land of prosperity in the 19th century made the lives of black people in the post-Emancipation period a real tragedy. In that case, the tragic can only be summoned in the present if it serves as a collective experience of entanglement in the past, which echoes the dissonant chorus of those silenced by monumental history. *Scenes of Subjection* is, after all, an open-ended construction of historical meaning, which invites the reading public to think together about a past that still haunts us.

Hartman, therefore, teaches us that tragedy can offer an exciting grammar of intervention, even though we are well aware, with uncomfortable frequency, that this is the kind of entanglement of the past that is deemed inappropriate for the stories of subaltern redemption that fill the eyes of a publishing market that is still very white. This market is paradoxically thirsty for black authors, as long as they are palatable and capable of “empowering” their readers in a move that also manages to reassure whiteness with not very radical anti-racist conduct manuals. An imperative for happiness and overcoming finds strong traction even among black thinkers. This impulse always invites us to “move forward,” take a break from pessimism, “keep our eyes on the prize,” and look to the past with an interest in seeing the good despite everything. On the other hand, *Scenes of Subjection* thinks of slavery as a returning ghost. It remains to be seen whether we are open to the possibilities of this way of relating to slavery’s past.

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Received: 21 Dec. 2023 / Reviewed by the author: 3 Apr. 2024 / Accepted: 6 May 2024

Responsible Editor: Nathália Sanglard de Almeida Nogueira