

Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route

Saidiya V. Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*
(NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007). 288 pp.

reviewed
by

Kwame Essien
History Department
The University of Texas at Austin

Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route is Saidiya V. Hartman's autobiography. As a descendant of enslaved Africans, she embarks on a journey to search for strangers "who left behind no traces" (15) and to find answers to her unknown ancestral connections in Africa. Hartman's book does more than unearth the experiences of an individual whose story and life intersect with others cemented in the archaeological remains along the coast of Elmina and Cape Coast in Ghana and other locations on the continent. *Lose Your Mother* reveals Hartman's imagination, curiosity and anguish about an aspect of her ancestral roots and identity that she grapples with as an African American living in America.

In many thought-provoking ways, Hartman's book epitomizes the dream and experiences of Diaspora Blacks who congregate at sites of slave memories in Ghana to inquire, express and articulate personal and collective yearnings to unknown ancestral spirits in earthly and heavenly realms. Hartman "was not trying to dodge the ghosts of slavery but to confront them" (42). This well-written twelve-chapter book is engaging, poetic, historical and sometimes humorous. Chapter eight not only underscores Hartman's motivation for the journey, but draws striking comparisons between the humiliating treatments the enslaved endured in Africa and North America. Hartman blends her skills in poetry and prose with her limited knowledge about her heritage to make sense of the Middle Passage. Hartman's major argument underscores challenges that confront returnees as they refashion their identity in ways that allow them to embrace their dual identity as people of African descent born in the Americas.

Chasing invisible voices, exhuming hidden spirits, uprooting concealed echoes, unearthing shadowy ancestral images entrenched in the dungeons for centuries can indeed be overwhelming. This daunting task not only requires an attempt to bring to light the spirits of one's forebears in unfamiliar territories along the coastline of Ghana. Indeed, this exploration demands a rigorous search as Hartman as walks in vicinities where the enslaved were paraded the last time before they entered through the "Doors of No Return" into waiting ships; and as she navigates through human remains at various sites of memory tracing a history without transparent evidence of enslavement and ancestral linkages.

At the same time, Hartman describes the somber experiences of Diasporan Blacks and the apathy of Ghanaians at sites of slavery: “We were encouraged to mourn because it generated revenue, but our grief struck no common chord of memory, no bedrock of shared sentiment” (171).

According to Hartman, her “grand-parents erected a wall of half-truths and silence between themselves and the past” (12-15). Hartman does not hide her frustrations, loneliness and disappointment as she provides detailed narratives about her encounters with people in Ghana. Hartman interrogates them about the presence or absence of her forebears as she faces the reality of rejection in negotiating her pathway. Through these historical spaces in Ghana Hartman firmly plants the lives of slaves-strangers and at the same time situates her own family history of slavery in southern plantations in the United States. As Hartman confesses, “In Ghana, one has to go and come, go and come, before you can get a damned thing done...last summer it seemed like paradise. But living here it feels like hell” (27). Hartman’s curiosity, imagination and mysteries about her family’s past, as well as her reconstruction of her grandparents’ plantation experience could not immunize her.

Like authors of her ilk, Hartman’s goes to Ghana with nostalgic fantasies and high expectations for Ghanaians. In her attempts to reconstruct sites of slavery to fit her imagination, Hartman goes back and forth fusing Ghanaian history and cultural practices to explain what, why, when and how the spirits of her ancestors should have been showcased in local rituals. Here, Hartman compellingly expresses the disappointment of returnees in poetic language: “The failure to properly mourn the dead was considered a transgression...But there were no corpse that I could tend in Elmina...No one placed burial gifts alongside the corpse or whispered messages that were to be delivered to dead relatives in the land of ghost” (70).

If Hartman’s intent was to show aspects of “fractured” Diasporan identities created out of the Middle Passage experience, she was remarkably successful in this personal endeavor. However, there are minor concerns about Hartman’s book. She criticizes Ghanaians and foreign institutions for taking advantage of returnees and the historical monuments for profit making just as Bayo Holsey’s does in *Routes of Remembrance: Refashioning the Slave Trade in Ghana* (2008). In Hartman’s words, “Every town or village had an atrocity to promote—a mass grave, an auction block, a slave river...equivalent to a fried chicken franchise...for petty traders, it was an expanded market for their goods (163). Hartman continues, “So the descendants of slaves were welcomed with the red carpet treatment. They mourned their ancestors in great public ceremonies where chiefs assembled to atone for the past and to collect alms” (164). Part of her expressions seem patronizing but elucidate her frustration.

Obviously, Hartman set out to fill a historical void about slavery in Ghana, but in some ways she provides a single-focus lens that ignores ways returnees also profit from sites of slavery, especially entrepreneurs that appropriate the Middle Passage to amass wealth through tourism, in some of the hotels and motels where Hartman stayed during her visit.

Lose Your Mother is essentially about a disconnection about the present and the past; a cut off between home and exile; a separation between one's identity and kinship and the consequences of detaching a child from the mother's womb before "natural birth." Indeed, Hartman illuminates her lack of understanding about her present and her ancestral past. The book will be useful for students aspiring to learn how a segment of the African American population reconstruct their identity, those interested in tourism in Ghana as well as the ties between returnees and Ghanaians. *Lose Your Mother* is one of the best books evoking the genuine experiences of Diasporan Blacks who desire to reconnect to their roots. It should be read alongside Godfrey Mwakikagile's *Relations Between Africans and African Americans: Misconceptions, Myths and Realities* (2007) for other insight.