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Fugitive Dreams of Diaspora: Conversations with Saidiya Hartman

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What, then, are these three things of the thing?

First of all mourning. We will be speaking of nothing else. It consists always in attempting to ontologize remains, to make them present, in the first place by *identifying* the bodily remains and by *localizing* the dead (all ontologization, all semanticization—philosophical, hermeneutical, or psychoanalytical—finds itself caught up in this work of mourning but, as such, it does not yet think it; we are posing here the question of the specter, to the specter, whether it be Hamlet’s or Marx’s, on this near side of such thinking). One has to know. *One has to know it. One has to have knowledge....* Now, to know is to know *who* and *where*, to know whose body it really is and what place it occupies—for it must stay in its place. In a safe place... Nothing could be worse, for the work of mourning, than confusion or doubt: *one has to know* who is buried where—and it is *necessary* (to know—to make certain) that in what remains of him, *he remains there*. Let him stay there and move no more!

Jacques Derrida, “Injunctions of Marx,” in *Specters of Marx* 9

The “Archaeologies of Black Memory” symposium and seminar hosted by *Small Axe* and the Caribbean Literary Studies Program at the University of Miami (June 2007) provided an occasion for a number of scholars to reflect on some of the critical concerns raised by Derrida in this opening epigraph, though not primarily (or even simply) in regards to the specters of Marx. I am appropriating Derrida’s engagement with the ghosts of Marx because it has particular relevance for the central focus of this two day symposium, the work of memory in producing knowledge, in this case knowledge about black people who have been disappeared, nowhere to be identified or localized, except (of course) in the archives of history. The questions though, that haunt us are; what role does the archive, or should the archive, play in constructing knowledge about black subjectivity? Put differently, to what extent can the archive represent the “place” that these missing black bodies, denied the “safe space” of the marked burial space, have come to (un)rest? Another set of questions that emerge from this line of inquiry about ghosts, the work mourning, the archive and knowledge production highlights the problematic relationship between scholars and their disciplinary conventions. There is an increasingly uneasy dialogue taking place between scholars and the “ghosts of history” that inhabit the texts we depend on so heavily to represent the lives and worlds they once inhabited. Derrida warns us about the problematic relationship of the scholar or spectator and the specter, noting, “a traditional scholar does not believe in ghosts” (12). To be sure, this statement has little to do with faith or beliefs but more so the school of thought and conventions that inform epistemological boundaries of the learned intellectual. There has long been a tradition in the theatre for imagining the voice of the

specter, and subsequently, through the novel and poetry, writers could address themselves to the ghost. But to reconstruct scholarly traditions in this regard involves nothing short of what Derrida refers to as a “hauntology” or a “staging for the end of history” (10).

There are signs that suggest this “hauntological” project is underway in the poetic engagements of writers such as Zora Neale Hurston, Kamau Brathwaite, Fred D’Aguiar, Erna Brodber, and Marlene NourbeSe Philip. However, there is also a critical discourse emerging in a number of disciplines centered on a similar dialogue, not only with the specter of the black subject, but also with that of its alleged “final” resting place, or place of last known occupancy: the archive. The “Archaeologies of Black Memory” symposium broadened the space for these dialogues by bringing literary scholars, historians, anthropologists, poets and art historians together to engage one another’s work and the shared interests in considering how we endeavor to make the dead bodies we encounter in the archive “mean” for our Selves in this present moment. Saidiya Hartman’s book, *Scenes of Subjection*, asks us to consider the history and processes of subjection that critically inform how and even where we encounter (and read) black subjects in the archives of history. If, in *Specters of Marx*, Derrida insists that “one has to know it,” and that “one has to have knowledge” of the who and the where, then Hartman’s *Scenes of Subjection* and, more recently, *Lose Your Mother* highlights the troubling complexity of attaining knowledge of a body, a subject, a Being whose existence and life is tied to the pleasure, power and profit of white plantation owners. Moreover, her work suggests that the very desire to know “it”—the black subject—is a means of further effacing the suffering and pain of the slave whose body (though missing) is being called upon to provide the evidence that we (the readers) need in order to “understand” slavery.

My conversations with Saidiya Hartman, like those with NourbeSe Philip, are shaped both by their individual efforts to consider what it means to try to “understand” slavery in our present moment. Can we understand it by returning, yet again, to the archive, in the absence of bones, of tombstones, to try to identify and localize the remains of the enslaved? More importantly, have we begun to think critically about what it meant, for example, to throw one hundred and fifty human beings overboard a ship in order to collect insurance monies, as was the case with the slave ship, the *Zong*? There were/are no bodies (of evidence) other than the two page legal document that remains in the archive, and that document alone is what allows us, in Derrida’s words, to know it; or in this case to know of it, the horrifying event, but certainly not the lived experience of what transpired aboard the *Zong*. But in the end, what NourbeSe and Hartman ask us (the readers and the spectators) is this: what do we know, really? What can we know, finally? But more importantly, how do we begin to articulate these stories, their stories, this (un)knowing? These conversations take very seriously the question of the absence, or some would even say, the impediments, in the work of mourning the millions of dead in the aftermath of slavery. How do you tell a story that must be told and yet cannot be told? A number of scholars, including Saidiya Hartman, suggest that we begin by “not telling.”

The Interview: New York, October 2007

As theoreticians or witnesses, spectators, observers, and intellectuals, scholars believe that looking is sufficient. Therefore, they are not always in the most competent position to do what is necessary: speak to the specter.

(Jacques Derrida, “Injunctions of Marx,” in *Specters of Marx*)

Yet how does one recuperate lives entangled with and impossible to differentiate from the terrible utterances that condemned them to death, the account books that identified them as units of value, the invoices that claimed them as property, and the banal chronicles that stripped them of human features?

How can narrative embody life in words and at the same time respect what we cannot know? How does one listen for the groans and cries, the undecipherable songs, the crackle of fire in the cane fields, the laments for the dead, and the shouts of victory, and then assign words to all of it?

(Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts” 3)

Patricia Saunders: Saidiya, thanks for taking the time to continue the dialogue we began in Miami. I want to open the conversation by making some provocative connections between your work, NourbeSe’s and the critical observation expressed by Derrida in this opening epigraph. During my interview with NourbeSe we had an opportunity to discuss what I saw as a critically provocative dialogue between your work and hers despite the differences in form. In particular, I am struck by the attention you both pay to honoring the dead or what Derrida refers to as *the work of mourning* (9). However, it seems to me that you are both concerned with the “unknowable” the “unspeakable,” rather than the desire to possess or *have knowledge* of (in this case) the enslaved subject imprisoned, so to speak, in the archive.

Saidiya Hartman: During the symposium, we were beginning to have a conversation about this. NourbeSe’s work is very much about tending to the dead, and in her interview she discusses the responsibility for undertaking this task. That’s something that we don’t really talk about.

PS: And when you say responsibility, do you mean how we as scholars work in the archive, or that this responsibility should be a part of, or reflected in, the scholarship we produce?

SH: Well, I would have to say yes to both. There is a moment in the interview with NourbeSe where she talks about the kind of incredible responsibility involved in telling these stories and how she didn’t know if she could have told these stories earlier because of the pain and the challenge and the difficulty involved in telling the stories. When we talk about history and the

archive, I feel like there's a natural correspondence with Nourbese's work which has a great deal to do with a concrete on-the-ground poetics, which is concerned with what it means to narrate history differently. We have talked a bit about my work and its formal dimensions in terms of the memoir/travelogue presentation part of it—but in the form there is the question of what it means to narrate the past differently.

PS: One of the questions raised during the symposium concerned the degree to which poetry or fiction allows for a more unapologetic and even critical reflection and engagement with the archive that doesn't fetishize it, but also a consideration that encourages scholarly responsibility to the lives and the people we encounter there. I would have to say, borrowing from the title of the *Small Axe* interview with NourbeSe, that this relationship with the archive is very much concerned, not just with "defending the dead" but also with being accountable to the dead. I see this most readily in NourbeSe's poetry, but I wonder working in prose—whether there's room in academic discourse for participating in this not telling. I guess what I am asking is whether you feel that poetry or fiction allows the writer/critic more—I don't want to say accessibility—a space that makes the "not telling" less contradictory? But to take it a step further, is this why you ended up working with the memoir/travelogue in *Lose Your Mother*.

SH: I really understood the project to be a critical prose monograph. I never thought that I would write anything that anyone could attach the label memoir to. I didn't want to write that book. That's not me, and we know all the critiques of confessional discourse. We're all good Foucauldians, so we know to stay away from that stuff. So I had to inhabit a rhetorical position that was discredited on numerous fronts. To write *Lose Your Mother* I had to imperil myself and make myself vulnerable to critiques from poststructuralists, Africanists, and historians. The nature of the archive, and/or the absence of captive Africans as subjects in the discourse of slavery, and the absence that haunts the physical spaces of confinement made writing the book seem impossible. How does one write about a history that is this encounter with nothing; or write about a past that has been obliterated so that even traces aren't left. That entails more than a critique of the archive. This absence or loss was a window onto the enormity of violence that characterized the process of captivity and enslavements. Life worlds disappeared and destroyed; the names of places that would never be remembered and all the names of persons that would never be uttered again.

PS: When I listen to you talk about the absence that haunts the physical spaces, Erna Brodber's novel, Louisiana comes immediately to mind. Not only is this narrative concerned with the same absence, but also she seems to be grappling with the same critical questioning of the archive that both you and NourbeSe are concerned with. Here is a writer/critic/social scientist who is not only grappling with the contested and, at times, contradictory conventions of these disciplinary discourses, but doing all of this in the name of challenging the methodology and processes of recording history in the face of this absence; this is a daunting task, to say the least. In *Lose Your Mother*, you describe the landscape itself as a witness, or a manifestation of the absences. There is a moment where you point out that whenever you see the baobab tree, you are reminded that a

village once stood there. So, even the landscape itself is a reminder of absence, not because of what is there, but what isn't there, what can't be summoned, recalled, or remembered. It must be difficult to write into that space, how do you write into that?

SH: How do you write into that? Yes, that is the problem. It might also speak to the gendered character of scholarship. Brodber, Zora Neale Hurston and Katherine Dunham come to mind. Women often attempt to embody an archive or to be it. They are willing to make the body a vehicle; courage and recklessness are required to be a host of history. In the conference in Miami this question came up in regard to the archive and the repertoire. I think that part of *Scenes of Subjection* was also about looking at the repertoire, looking at the forms of everyday life and cultural practice from which I could galvanize certain narratives, or which offered counter-histories of slavery. So there's an archive of song, and of the dance form, but what are the social texts and the historical texts that articulate those longings and aspirations, that take forms commensurate or productively incommensurate to the experience described? Again, largely we don't have them, with notable exceptions like DuBois. Regarding the memoir, for me, DuBois's *Souls of Black Folk* and *Dusk of Dawn* are critical models. DuBois is always using what Spivak and Chandler would describe as the autobiographical example, which is not a personal story that folds onto itself; it's not about navel gazing, it's really about trying to look at historical and social process and one's own formation as a window onto social and historical processes, as an example of them. In *Lose your Mother*, I wanted to tell a story capable of engaging and countering the violence of abstraction. For me, that had to be embodied in physical story, and I was the one who had to hazard the journey.

PS: So, in essence you become the conduit through which this narrative emerges.

SH: Right. And, in a way, it is very much like Brodber's *Louisiana*. It's the willingness to make yourself a vehicle for these other stories. So I think that those were all the choices that dictated it, and I think that theorists have made the point, whether it's Hortense Spillers or Achille Mbembe, about forms of power and sovereignty, about the character of black or native life, and the way those forms of life or those forms of living death have been shaped by slavery and colonialism. And so how could I make that argument, but in a narrative form? And why was I interested in making it in a narrative form? I think that I was interested in writing a book that was narrative because I feel that many of the people who care most about this issue are not inside the university. It's like Hurston's work on voodoo, where she goes through the initiation and it's not only about the discipline of anthropology. Like Hurston, I think Brodber is asking us to think about what it means for someone who is trained as a social scientist to reckon with the limit of her discipline, then to want to be able to tell a story at another level—and that's that zone that is so hard to name. Fiction writers and poets have the privilege of not having to name that as method.

PS: In reviews of *Lose Your Mother*, the question of how to classify this text inevitably emerges. Readers naturally want to situate your critical approach, narrative style or disciplinary

investment in relation to a set of conventions. Given this, I'm curious about the broader dialogues taking place in a number of disciplines at this historical moment. It seems to me, based on the scholarship presented at the conference, that a number of scholars are grappling with whether the conventions themselves are the limitations—not just in terms of the scholarship that can be produced or the kinds of questions that can be asked—but also limitations of the archive. And I'm wondering whether that limitation extends to the critical tools that we have for engaging the archive.

SH: That's a good question. For me it's about the relationship between the project of critique, a relationship between critique and the relationship of that to a poetics. I mean in terms of the relationship of critique to a revolutionary imagination that wants to discover, institute, initiate a new way of telling, and there's a way that in Nourbese's *Zong!* poems she does both. There's a way that she's working with that legal template and in working with it she's utterly eviscerating it and deconstructing it. In making all of its assumptions known, she's undoing those assumptions by exacerbating them.

PS: Laying them bare?

SH: Right, but then she's also doing something more. She's finding a way, as she's working with silence, to give voice to the unutterable. And I would say that's the relationship between critique and poetics.

PS: So, would you define that as a kind of fundamental shift in the discourse of thinking about archives of memory and archives of history and experience of slavery?

SH: I think, yes, it's a shift, although I don't know if it's a shift that we can only trace temporally, if it's a shift of our moment, or if it's the shift that any insurgent practice tries to achieve in order to realize its goals. When one of those foundational texts, like *The Souls of Black Folk*—this is a text assembled from a collection of essays which is this incredible critique post emancipation, post Reconstruction—that form is a reflection of the need to assemble a variety of forms in order to fully tell that story, to represent the breadth of experience. There's an economic discourse, a historical discourse, an elegiac discourse, and there's a performative discourse. And I think that there's something of that in the drama of James' *Black Jacobins*, again in terms of the silence and withholding, and for me there's the critique of James not actually being able to fully articulate and illuminate the consciousness of the Haitian masses. It's as if in their consciousness as revolutionary actors who make the revolution succeed in a way that Toussaint cannot, there is something about their consciousness that remains opaque. But part of that opacity is there because it actually exceeds and goes beyond, rests outside the terms of an Enlightenment discourse that made Toussaint legible, but also over-determined his failure. So, I think that it's the presence of that thing that can't be announced within the framework that's already there and legible, that there's a hint of possibility. It's a possibility that for someone like James remains encrypted in the voodoo songs. I think that it's a project for people like DuBois,

James, NourbeSe, Kamau Brathwaite, Hurston and Brodber—it's a common and crucially important project. And I think it's why so many important black radical intellectuals have also been playwrights, poets and novelists working across a variety of forms.

PS: How does your recent essay, "Venus in Two Acts," take you in the direction of what you are describing above? Or would you consider this a departure from that trajectory all together?

SH: In a way it's the beginning of a new project. I try to make a statement about the cost of not imagining, and I ask: can critique just be another way of remaining faithful to the limits of the archive. And how do critics like myself continue to do what I do—I'm not going to go on to be a fiction writer, I'm someone who will continue to be involved in the work of nonfiction. But there's a cost even in that. A former student, who is a historian, remarked that reading my work is always so hard for her because on the one hand she looks at what's possible given the limits of history as a discipline, and given the history that's produced its facts; but on the other hand that there is a kind of optimism and possibility announced in "Venus in Two Acts" as well. I think it's a question I address in the essay itself: it's the romance of resistance that I fail to narrate and the events of love that I refuse to describe that raise important questions regarding the thing historically; matters that are still contested in the present, that life eradicated by the protocols of intellectual discipline.

PS: The project sounds a great deal like an archaeological dig where there's a kind of anticipation of unearthing, but at the same time there's also a sense of having a context for interpreting whatever is uncovered. That's a difficult process. It is also clearly a project concerned with caring for and about the dead—but it's not the kind of honoring and recuperating that memorializes people in stone as described in Verene Shepherd's presentation on monuments in Jamaica. In an interesting way it's the anti-monument: it can't be fixed in that site, it can't be set in that location, and yet it does a similar kind of work on the memory, the words attempt to do this. But at the same time, it seems as though you are suggesting that language falls short, necessarily so.¹

SH: Yes, but I also think that the memory can't be fixed. In the temporality of my work and NourbeSe's there's something that remains open, that's why this is not simply the labor of remembering. It's different because of the openness in the question of post-colonial: the sense that the outcome is open and that intellectual labor is a part of that openendedness, is key to the kind of work that I want to do.

The Location of Memory in *Scenes of Subjection* and *Lose Your Mother*

PS: Would it be fair to say that *Lose Your Mother* is a continuation of that same kind of critical project of engaging the archive begun in *Scenes of Subjection*? It's clear that contextually it's a different project, but it seems to me that traveling to these "archival sites" of memory and

displacement in Ghana is a different way of thinking about the archive vis-à-vis the physical connection with the location, with the evidence (or lack thereof) and imagined memories of what transpired in these spaces. On the one hand you say you're going to Ghana to try and connect, but it seems to me that *Scenes of Subjection* is about problematizing the reader's expectations of what they will find there, or, for that matter, in the archive. So was the move out (physically and formally) in *Lose Your Mother* an effort to rethink the authority and powerful presence of the archive by situating yourself in the physical space of the archive?

SH: That's a great question and there are many answers. I think that you're right, in *Scenes of Subjection*, there's that suspicion of the archive but the thing is that when you have a plentiful archive, of the Freedmen's Bureau papers, the WPA narratives, and the hundreds of slave narratives produced in the U.S., then you have an archive that you can read symptomatically and against the grain. But in order to do a symptomatic reading, it presumes a kind of canon, and there was no canon or vast archive available regarding the experience of the captives in the Atlantic slave trade. After my Fulbright year in Ghana, I came home thinking about what was I going to do. How could I write a book with no texts, with no evidence, with no traces? In so many traditional historiographies of the slave trade, the paucity of the archive was what permitted historians not to represent the experience of those who were enslaved. So what was I to do with this limitation? And the archive of the trade in some ways proved to be a distraction—I mean, it wasn't a trade for us. It was war and death, and kidnapping, but there was, again, the volumes of trade documents. Now we see younger historians like Stephanie Smallwood, Vincent Brown and Jennifer Morgan who are reading those documents against the grain, largely as a way to understand the European logic, the kind of capital logic that translated humans into commodities. All of which is to say that a critical reading of the archive is possible. You're right to point out the deep connection between *Scenes* and *Lose Your Mother*. Both books struggle to understand the experience of slavery, to reckon with its violence, to attend to what remains. So I'm always writing about the present. *Scenes* closes in on the liminal status of the freed subject, the ambiguity of that status, the impossibility of that status, and the crisis of citizenship, which is about the immediate aftermath—.

PS: *Lose Your Mother* is also bound up with contemporary expectations about our inherited relationships, memories, recollections and encounters with slavery. In your case these encounters and memories are revealed or even withheld in the archive and also in the landscape of Ghana, the slave ports/towns where Africans were taken and sold into slavery. Throughout the narrative there is a provocative gap between what I would have to call a psychic recollection of a past that is present, and a distant history that we cannot connect with at a fundamental level.

SH: You raise an important point that is connected to what I think is a crucial question: what does it mean to have this psychic inheritance of an experience for which one has no memory, where people are still living in the temporal space of being an ex-slave? We don't possess memories of slavery ourselves and that coupled with the incredible absence of witnesses of the experience, particularly in terms of the slave trade, is part of the whole displacement from

Africa. So for me the book is a meditation on memory, on memory and history, written in the form of a travelogue. But the journey through time and space is a device, a vehicle, a formal means to exist in the physical landscape of slavery and to embody that history and to carry it. And that explains the significant difference between what I do and what a “guild historian” does, to borrow Michel Rolph-Truillot’s phrase. I’m writing about an experience that I psychically inhabit. Most history isn’t written from that perspective.

PS: It seems to me that one of the things that you were doing in *Lose Your Mother* and in the paper delivered at the conference (“Venus in Two Acts,”) was trying to think through the contemporary condition of the slave past.

SH: Yes, I am engaging the slave past in order to understand the future that we inhabit. There are great texts like W. E. B. DuBois’s *Black Reconstruction*, James’s *Black Jacobins*, and Walter Rodney’s *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, that undertake this labor. However, for the most part it has been poets and writers who have enabled me to think critically about history and to figure out a way of talking about the immediacy of an experience that most others consider remote.

PS: Yes, *Lose Your Mother* and “Venus in Two Acts” both end with a gesture towards thinking about slavery in relation to a very contemporary condition—

SH: Yes, it’s the contemporary condition and, you know, some readers get that, some don’t. As you know I’ve never been trained as an Africanist—I’m not an Africanist, but I wanted to think comparatively about the memory of slavery. The first summer I traveled to Ghana my head was going in circles because there was a Pan-Africanist vocabulary about slavery and colonialism that I took for granted. I mean we, those of us in the diaspora, were always made aware of the oppressive and destructive impacts of slavery—we all understood that from reading Walter Rodney—after all wasn’t that everyone’s Bible? So it hadn’t even occurred to me, I mean literally the thought never crossed my mind, that there could be benefits of the slave trade? But the text I encountered in the Cape Coast Castle Museum suggested exactly that. There were just certain kind of things that I took for granted in terms of the critique of modernity and its cost, right, that’s pretty standard in the black, radical, postcolonial tradition of criticism. So I was surprised, no, shocked, to discover that the imperial history of the slave trade was alive and well in the public memory of slavery in Ghana, which was my naiveté. The struggle over the meaning of the past is still being waged. Every book written in the ‘wasn’t Britain wonderful for having abolished the slave trade’ mode ends on a celebratory note that establishes the distance and remoteness of that history from our present. One British scholar goes so far as to celebrate the fact that Ghanaian youngsters feel that the history embodied in the castles have no relevance to the present. British philanthropy and African forgetfulness are cause for rejoicing at Westminster Abbey. Not being an African historian, I had to think about comparative memories and the way memories are mobilized, which required me to engage the question of African slavery. Alongside all of the historical questions, there was the issue of the form. What form was

adequate to this project? I'm an incredibly private person—I never wanted to write a personal book. I never wanted to write anything someone could refer to as a memoir. But I had to be there to be the bridge between the present and the past, since I too was part of the remains.

PS: Well it's also interesting that you raise that because the form certainly strays into personal territory and yet it seems actively involved in denying the reader access to all of the conventions that could solidly identify the content of the text as a memoir. There is a very personal aspect of the book, one that draws the reader into a conversation in a seductive way, as if to take the reader into your confidence as you begin to discuss the personal, but it is a personal that isn't simply about you—it is also the formation of an intellectual, the formation of a radical politics and—

SH: The formation of a diasporic subject—

PS: There is a very personal element that is seductive because it promises to expose the pathways to the formation of this intellectual, this diasporic subject. I think that every intellectual is engaged in that very personal kind of work regardless of their explanations for why they write the books they write. There are always deeply personal questions we are trying to work through and understand. But the reality of the situation in *Lose Your Mother* is that yours was an experience of failed expectations, from day one. Given the desire to answer these personal questions, how did you adjust to the failed expectations? Or even the resounding silences that occurred when you met people and encountered locations that were not responsive and did not measure up to your sense of their relationship to history.

SH: Ah the disappointment. It made me think and value the critical labor of eighteenth-century writers like Ottobah Cugoano and his *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species*. Cugoano refuses to describe the experience of the captive because he says that it would be needless to describe it. The nature of black suffering is all too familiar. And that's the way in which our present also creates an impasse, because to what end does one represent such scenes when black suffering is all too ubiquitous? Recently, in the Sunday edition of the *New York Times*, there was a photo of Congolese women who had been raped in the war and who were attempting to elude the gaze of the camera, accompanied by a casual, gratuitous description of their brutalization. What is the point of such descriptions? Did the Sunday readers, put down their lattes and stop nibbling on their croissants? The chronicle of black pain doesn't mobilize a response, it doesn't arrest the reader, and it doesn't incite a crisis. Perhaps for us, for black people, but even that is not certain. So we see the violated women, we read the text and we turn the page. In my work, I endeavored to make palpable that kind of silence, the silence of Cugoano's refusal and withholding, and to use it critically in my own narrative. The strategic use of silence was a way to ask: what does it mean to live in this present? Someone like Sylvia Wynter would say, when we look at this whole language of the human with 1492 being a moment when we have the invention of the human and blacks are positioned on the other side of that, that we continue to remain on the other side. So in some sense, again, looking at the slave trade is about looking at this moment in the emergence and development of

capitalism, the development of this whole language of the human, the rights-bearing subject, the man and the citizen.

PS: Are you optimistic about the possibilities of Pan-Africanism in the present?

SH: I think that some people have said that they think that in my book I'm saying we need to leave Africa behind. I'm not saying that at all. For me it's about the kind of possibility of political connections that are vital, that are real, and not about some fanciful notion of who we once were (for a \$50 ritual you can regain your Asante heritage). But it's really about trying to find points of crossing that are related to a future that might be different from the present on both sides of the Atlantic. And I think that that's why I revere the Pan-Africanist generation and that moment when they held sway on the world stage; it was a moment in which it seemed like a radical Black global politics was destined to be triumphant.

PS: So do you think it's impossible now, or is it simply a different way of thinking about what politics means to this generation? The Africa of our parents' generation was about a kind of anti-colonial resistance, an identity that wasn't simply about finding a past that could connect us to a larger whole. But it was really this sense of being part of a common struggle that may have been different in Trinidad and Jamaica, and yet a sense that their fortunes were our fortunes guided their participation. But today the way Africa lives in the contemporary imagination of black Americans is so distinctly different than it was even forty years ago.

SH: I think what's ironic is the Pan-Africanist of the present, the kind of African Americans who are largely living in Africa happily, the corporate Pan-Africanists. The young black Vice Presidents of large companies like Coca-Cola and Shell Oil, or cultural attaches of mining companies, are working for these multi-national corporations and living the African dream in exclusive enclaves.

PS: So it's a multinational corporate brand of pan-Africanism, not necessarily a socially or cultural based political model of pan-Africanism?

SH: Right, it's not about the political.

PS: It's about commerce?

SH: It's about commerce and trade. But when I think of those people I know who are in the forties set and younger, many of those people are corporate people who are in South Africa, Nigeria or Ghana. What's interesting, though, is that many of the corporate upper-middle class African American ex-patriots want the full benefits of their class privilege, but in the U.S. racism always tempers that. And that's actually a difference between an African American and a Caribbean experience because you can just be your full bourgeois self at home. The corporate expats are interesting. I heard a radio interview with an investment banker who had lived in Nigeria for four years and returned to Florida for a vacation. She was staying at a four star hotel

resort, and her son was in the swimming pool and a little white girl in the pool asked her son if he was a nigger. And she said it was at that moment that she decided that she wanted to return to Africa because she didn't want her son to have the kind of experiences that awaited him in the U.S. Her return to Africa was less like that earlier moment of people going to Tanzania or Nigeria or Ghana because there was some political dream that was being articulated by those progressive nation states then that those from the diaspora wanted to realize. I know a number of African Americans who are in the professional, diplomatic, NGO, and USAID sector. They live much better in African countries than they could in the U.S. They're living pretty well and the inconveniences of life in the "Third World" are worth it when compared with "Look a Negro" or forty-one bullets. The irony is that they are less vulnerable because they are safely situated within the enclosure of empire and foreign capital, which is the very same force making the lives of Africans vulnerable and disposable. Also, I think that there's something for people who understand home as a place to which they belong. I mean, you're here, but where is home for you?

PS: I've been living here for thirty years of my life, but Trinidad and Tobago is still, and has always been, the place I call home. But that is as much about how I inhabit my own social and cultural realities of having parts of my life lived and experienced in other places for extended periods of time. Most of my adult life has been spent moving between these two homes. So, to an extent, I don't think choosing is an option.

SH: And that's a great psychological armor.

PS: Yes, I guess that is true. I think near the end of the book you say that being in a place doesn't necessarily make it home. And as you suggest, at the conscious level, there is the psychic impact of that knowledge. It's not something you live in a present day-to-day way, but there are certain instances in which you know, to borrow NourbeSe's idea, that belonging isn't just about being accepted in a particular space, but it is about the notion of being long in (and longing for) a space. So that there is a longing for some kind of connection that is precisely about the day to day, about being able to subscribe to a certain set of values that, not only are you invested in, but you've helped to create. I think that that's what drives some of the people to go to go to Ghana and Nigeria and other parts of Africa. It is an alternative to the reality that, three or four generations later, there is still this sense of non-belonging that is based largely on race in America.

SH: I also think that there is something about the virulence of racism in the present, there's something about the possibility of being subject to random acts of violence just because of the color of your skin. And I don't know if it's also, meaning again this is the personal history—New York is home for me, but I don't actually have deep roots here. My mother's family is from the South. My father's family is from the Caribbean. So what it means to be really grounded in a place, I don't know. I was once talking with someone, a Southerner who did work on SNCC, and

he was just talking about the connection and experiences he had there so that the South felt for him like an ancestral land.

PS: While Trinidad may be home for me it's also the constant movement between these two spaces that makes me know that I'm living and a part of both places/spaces. Because there's life for me in both of these places and I am a part of communities here and there. When I go back home and I see relatives aging, that pulls you back home because there's an immediacy of life and living there that, while you are a part of it psychologically and emotionally, you haven't been there to witness and participate in the day-to-day physical activities of life.

SH: I think that part of the journey of *Lose Your Mother* is not about home as inheritance, but home as making. I am writing about the journey in terms of thinking about what the poetics of making (again) involves. That's what revolutionary movements do, and I think that's what diasporic identities are, and that's often what freedom communities, whether they be maroon communities, or social movements,—the possibility of dwelling or inhabiting a place. It's not about inheritance but it's about creating conditions that make dwelling possible.

PS: When I first finished reading *Lose Your Mother* there was this kind of immediate dissatisfaction, not so much with the book itself, but with the process.

SH: So what was the disappointment about, say more.

PS: Because it is such a personal journey, it is as much about the individual subject of history as it is about a collective experience. And yet by the end of the book it's clear that the "collective" you encountered in Ghana is not a oneness based on skin color. It is so very clear that "*we who become together*" is a collective that is yet to even begin to take shape on the other side of the Atlantic (Hartman *Lose* 231). So I suppose the disappointment may well be that there has not been enough of an avenue between Africans on the continent and Africans in the Americas to begin to engage in this project of "becoming together." Yes, as I think about it more now, I think that is the source of my disappointment. It is tied, I think to what you mentioned earlier, what you described as the poetics of making anew, with one another, a narrative that is of our making and our time.

SH: It's almost as if there are two endings really in the last chapter, and one is on this note of becoming a whole again, and the fugitive dream that exceeds this part of the world. And for me, this is about a kind of radical black internationalism. I think that's what Pan-Africanism was. The fate of Ghana was connected with Vietnam. So I think that there's that echo, and then there's something ironic, there's something sweet, there's something sentimental about the last song.

PS: What's empowering about the fugitive dream is that it leaves open this possibility for us to imagine and refashion out of what isn't there. So we have the power and the authority to create what we want to be in that space, which is both the empowering part of it and a really terrifying

part of it as well. Because what does that mean, especially in the contemporary context, where Africa is at once so distant from us and yet, particularly in the here and now, so very, very present in terms of how black subjectivity is read, experienced, and lived on a daily basis, especially here in the U.S.

SH: But in terms of the dissatisfaction, I'd like you to say some more about it because for me the question is: What do you make of this absence? On the one hand, it's a promise and on the other hand it's a parody because it's saying, okay, here's your song.

PS: I keep re-reading the end of the book because there's a part of me that's very much invested in that creative moment, the possibility of what this remaking might mean. It suggests that we have the wherewithal to write the tune and to write the lyrics. And yet there's a part of me that believes that this is also a very privileged space.

SH: *Lose Your Mother* has one of those endings that is about listening for that song that is our song, that song that actually travels across the diaspora, that song that might engender a new form of radical black politics and it's about waiting for that song. I can't fill that song in. Maybe that song would have been Marley's song at a certain period in time but in our moment it feels like we're waiting to hear that song. So in that sense it wasn't only that I was trying to underwrite closure but also the politics that's animating this meditation on the path we are on in this moment of waiting, of anticipation, of not knowing.

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Notes

¹See Kamau Brathwaite's *The Zebra Mexican Diary, 7 Sept 1926 - 7 Sept 1986*.

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