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Tisha Brooks
tibrook@siue.edu

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Searching for "Free Territory" in Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother*

Tisha M. Brooks

[W]hen we reject the single story, when we realize that there is never a single story about any place, we regain a kind of paradise.
—Chimamanda Adichie

Introduction

In her 2007 book *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route*, Saidiya Hartman describes her reason for spending a year in Ghana thus:

> I wanted to engage the past, knowing that its perils and dangers still threatened and that even now lives hung in the balance. Slavery had established a measure of man and a ranking of life and worth that has yet to be undone. If slavery persists as an issue in the political life of black America, it is . . . because black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago. This is the afterlife of slavery. (6)

Defining the afterlife of slavery as "skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment" (6), Hartman claims that "[s]lavery is a dimension of the present that we're still living" ("Memoirs of Return" 111). Hartman identifies the silences, the erasures, and the active practices of forgetting that generate singular narratives about slavery.[1] Seeking to bridge the past and the present, Hartman constructs a more expansive understanding of slavery and its enduring consequences for African Americans at home and abroad.

Lose Your Mother is a travel narrative that describes Hartman's personal travel to and throughout Ghana as a Fulbright scholar and

the Ghanaian people she encounters on her journey, interwoven with experiences of African Americans who emigrated to Ghana in the 1950s and '60s in search of "a free territory" (39). Hartman also includes her own imaginative retellings of historical events from the Middle Passage. Hence, *Lose Your Mother* is more than an autobiography and more than a personal travel account: it is a work of recovery aimed at retrieving those voices lost or silenced by the official historical record. Hartman's text challenges our narrow conception of black female mobility in the past and in the present.[2] Moreover, it locates Hartman's travel and writing in relation to a longer and multifaceted legacy of black travel that includes the coerced movement of black people across the Atlantic during the slave trade, the migratory travel of black diasporic peoples from the Caribbean to America and from America to Africa, and the travel of black tourists seeking to recover their roots in Africa. Hence, in this essay, I argue that Hartman's text challenges us to build bridges across the boundaries we often construct between these various types of movement (involuntary, voluntary, coerced, migratory, leisure, tourist, professional, etc.). Significantly, this bridging enables us to see the tenuous ways in which these various kinds of movement and mobility intersect.

Central to Hartman's text is the search for home and a place of belonging. Although much of African American literature reflects what Toni Morrison refers to as "the anxiety of belonging,"[3] travel writing is a genre well suited for exploring African Americans' conflicted relationship to and tenuous status within the nation space. Specifically, through Hartman's travel to Ghana and through her exploration of the transatlantic slave trade's impact on both sides of the Atlantic, Hartman seeks to build a bridge across these two tenuous parts of her identity: African *and* American. Throughout *Lose Your Mother*, Hartman foregrounds her status as stranger, at home and abroad, that extends from the divide between these two aspects of her identity. However, Hartman employs a critical gaze that is at once externally and internally directed as she writes about the various spaces that she visits in Ghana. I argue that this enables her to bridge the gap between Africa *and* America and to construct a vision of home and of belonging that extends beyond national boundaries—what Hartman refers to as "a free territory" in which "the stateless might, at last, thrive" (234). Ultimately, Hartman's bridge-building work challenges us to move beyond a singular and limited understanding of travel, of slavery, and of identity to a

more expansive vision of free territory that confronts, rather than erases, the complexity of black people's journeys and that critically engages with the varied perspectives and experiences of African Americans and Ghanaian people in the past and in the present.

Hartman employs historical recovery to challenge the singular narrative of slavery with all its accompanying silences and erasures. She chooses Ghana to engage in this work of historical recovery because of the central role of Ghana in the slave trade and "because it possessed more dungeons, prisons, and slave pens than any other country in West Africa" (7). But Hartman also chooses Ghana because of the long legacy of Western travel to the country that shapes and informs her own contemporary journey, including the journeys of African American tourists and émigrés seeking to bridge the divide between their African and American selves, as well as the colonial journeys of European travelers. Despite the intersection between Hartman's journey to Ghana and those of preceding travelers, she challenges the blindness of Western travelers and the subsequent historical and literary erasures that their writing about Africa reproduces. In contrast to this legacy, Hartman develops and employs a critically self-aware and more expansive gaze in her encounters with Ghanaian people, which enables her to resist singular narratives about slavery and limiting representations of Africa and of African people that persist into the present. Moreover, *Lose Your Mother* challenges the erasures that singular methodologies used in the study of travel writing perpetuate, a dynamic I will address next. As I will demonstrate, Hartman's text specifically and black travel writing more generally require a more expansive approach.

Historical and Literary Erasures

Though Hartman's journeys to Ghana, first as a tourist and second as a Fulbright scholar, reflect her class and national privilege, her decision to place slavery at the core of her text and to name slavery as the impetus for her journey disrupts traditional definitions of travel, revealing the often-overlooked complexity of black travel writing within the larger fields of American travel writing and African American literary studies. Despite scholarly claims to the multiplicity of travel writing and to the significance of mobility in African American literature, critical definitions of travel, as well as the literary approaches and frameworks employed in the study of travel writing, draw narrow boundaries around the category of travel that

exclude and erase the complex journeys of black people.[4] One editor's description of why the collection of women's travel writing she edited excludes women of color illustrates this erasure:

> The early women travelers were women of the upper classes . . . invariably white and privileged. This trend has not shifted greatly in the past two hundred years. . . . Travel literature by both men and women awaits its full range of multicultural voices and perspectives. . . . We have tried to assemble a diverse body of work that charts . . . women and their journeys. . . . For various reasons, we decided not to include involuntary travel. It would have seemed casual—disrespectful, even—to juxtapose slave narratives . . . and . . . stories of flight and displacement with accounts of deserts crossed, swamps forded, and mountains climbed by choice. . . . We regret the absence of more multicultural voices. It is our hope that in the future both the gender and racial gaps will be bridged, but for now the voices we present are those we found. (Morris xxi–xxii)

Although the introduction attributes the lack of "multicultural voices" to their nonexistence—most evident in the claim, "the voices we present are those we found"— this justification fails to consider the impact of a narrow definition of travel on the search process. This definition of travel produces several singular claims, including that travel is marked by privilege and choice and that only fully free subjects can practice it. This definition creates sharp borders around travel, separating it from slavery and from journeys of flight and displacement. It helps explain the continued marginalization of black travel writing and the subsequent mythology that "black folk don't travel."[5]

The problem with the single story of black people and travel, to borrow Chimamanda Adichie's assertion, is that single stories are "incomplete."[6] Not only can we attribute this incomplete picture of black travel writing to narrow definitions of travel that privilege voluntary journeys, but, as Tim Youngs argues, scholars of African American literary studies have tended to ignore depictions of the travels of privileged African Americans, foregrounding instead "the forced journey into slavery, signified by the

middle passage; and the willed flight to freedom" (72). Hence, the binary at work within studies of American travel writing also informs African American literary studies—leading once again to erasure. Additionally, such singular frameworks focused solely on a single type of journey lead to incomplete readings of texts, like Hartman's *Lose Your Mother*, that foreground more fluid and multiple journeys—forced journeys of slavery, journeys of flight and displacement, as well as voluntary journeys of privilege. While current scholarship[7] on *Lose Your Mother* offers a cogent analysis of memory and loss in Hartman's text, it does not consider the text in light of the continuities across these various kinds of journeys and the intersections between them. This study seeks to expand scholarship on *Lose Your Mother* by tending to the fluid and multiple geographies and itineraries at the center of her travel text.

In particular, my approach to Hartman's text, one that embraces multiplicity rather than singularity, draws on a longer legacy of scholars and critics of African American literature who have challenged us to rethink our methodologies and approaches, claiming that a more expansive approach is necessary if we are to construct a fuller, more complex, story of African American literature. Houston Baker, for instance, attests that "[a]ny single model . . . will offer only a selective account of experience—a partial reading, as it were, of the world. While the single account temporarily reduces chaos to ordered plan, all such accounts are eternally troubled by 'remainders'" or elements that do not fit within the critic's carefully drawn borders (9–10). Hence, although the boundaries that we draw around the genre of travel writing certainly create order, they also lead to the creation and assertion of limited, singular models and selective frameworks that silence and exclude the multiplicity of perspectives offered within African American literature. Moreover, Barbara Christian asserts that more expansive approaches are necessary for the study of African American literature because "there are different interpretations of history and different narratives, depending on where one is positioned, in terms of power relations as well as distinctive cultures" that singular models and frameworks fail to consider (365). The complexity of Hartman's text—for instance, her refusal to embrace singular narratives about travel, about slavery, about black people in America or in Africa—demands an expansive approach by scholars that recognizes its fluidity and multiplicity. As Alasdair Pettinger and Angela Shaw-Thornburg note, this type of reading requires new and alternative approaches.[8]

Hence, this essay, offering a more expansive rather than a *partial reading*, seeks to uncover the complexities of black people's journeys in the past and present, which are evident through Hartman's travel narrative.

Beyond a Single Story: Hartman's Critical Vision

African American travel to Africa has a long legacy, spanning over 220 years, and reflects the centrality of Africa for black people in America. As James Campbell asserts, "Africa has served historically as one of the chief terrains on which African Americans have negotiated their relationship to American society" (xxii). Given their tenuous and fraught relationship to America, a relationship marked by alienation, many African American travelers to Africa, including Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Maya Angelou, embark on their journeys with an imagined view of the continent as "an idyllic homeland" (Campbell xxi).

Although Hartman's experience of alienation in America similarly informs her journey, she claims that unlike so many African American travelers before her "neither blood nor belonging accounted for my presence in Ghana" (7). Rather than open her narrative with "romantic presuppositions about Africa" often found in travel books (Gruesser 19), Hartman instead opens her travel text by immediately illustrating her positioning in Ghana as *obruni*, the word for stranger that Ghanaian children greet her with. Describing this as her *welcome* to the country, Hartman explains, "*Obruni* forced me to acknowledge that I didn't belong anyplace. . . . I was born in another country, where I also felt like an alien and which in part determined why I had come to Ghana. . . . Secretly I wanted to belong somewhere or, at least, I wanted a convenient explanation of why I felt like a stranger" (4). While Hartman's words certainly reflect a yearning and desire to belong, her self-positioning as a stranger enables her to navigate and resist the long legacy of Africanist discourse[9] that has produced singular and limited representations of Africa as either dream or nightmare—representations that erase the complexities of the continent and its varied peoples.

In stark contrast to the continued and persistent erasures and silences expressed in travel writing about Africa, Hartman's own narrative offers a more expansive vision of Ghana and of the African people she encounters even as she remains critically aware of the limitations of her own perspective. This tension between blindness and sight echoes throughout Hartman's narrative as John and Mary Ellen, black émigrés in Ghana, continually remind her to "open your eyes" and to "get out and see" (173, 176). Stella, the housekeeper at the Marcus Garvey Guest House, tells Hartman that she cannot see Ghana clearly because "[n]o matter how big a stranger's eyes, they cannot see" (19). Acknowledging this, Hartman claims that "I doubted whether my way of seeing things had any footing in reality" (22). Foregrounding her own blindness from the very beginning of her text, Hartman's narrative highlights her limited perspective and failure as a witness, in order to destabilize the traditional status of travelers as authoritative and objective witnesses. Moreover, Hartman works to develop a practice of vision rooted in liberation, rather than domination.

Mary Louise Pratt's *Imperial Eyes* echoes the link between Western vision and domination that Hartman describes. She challenges the common self-positioning of European travelers to Africa as innocent by linking colonial practices of seeing and observation with violence and domination. She claims, "The ideology that construes seeing as inherently passive and curiosity as innocent cannot be sustained" (65). Hartman, in contrast, eschews claims to innocence as she draws attention instead to her failures, blindness, and guilt even as she tries to resist an active participation in the violence of erasure—the consequence of her limited vision and shortsightedness.

This critical preoccupation with blindness and travel persists in the ninth chapter "The Dark Days," which foregrounds tropes of blindness and sight in order to challenge traditional Western conceptions of vision, as well as conceptions of light and dark. After ignoring repeated commands by John and Mary Ellen to explore her surroundings and see that "the zone of privilege doesn't extend very far," Hartman finally does "get out and see" but only after a power outage in Osu (176). This power outage erases, if only temporarily, one of the major class divisions in Osu—access to electricity. Hartman notes, "I didn't worry about living in darkness, because I was convinced the headlines had to be mistaken. . . . I hadn't stopped to think that at least 60 percent of Ghanaians regularly lived without electricity. So I was unprepared when the middle classes were also plunged into darkness" (173). Hartman initially uses this darkness as an opportunity for meditation and reflection on the physical darkness around her—an opportunity to expand beyond typical literary representations of darkness. She notes,

> Once you left Osu Road, the neighborhood was immersed in shadow and the streets were pitch-black. It was

> the kind of velvety black that was rare ever to see in cities, because artificial light robbed the sky of this jetty density.
>
> Walking the streets after eight p.m., I navigated with a flashlight. I wasn't afraid that I would be robbed or assaulted, as I would have been in New York or Oakland. (174)

Notably, Hartman's descriptors, *velvety* and *jetty density*, represent the darkness as soft, smooth, and as a protective cover that envelops her. As she walks through Osu, shifting further beyond typical representations of darkness as terrifying, Hartman notes the absence of the fear that she would experience in a US city. Location matters. Darkness is not inherently fearful or terrifying. Rather, darkness in Ghana opens up possibilities and discoveries for Hartman. She observes, "[O]ver the course of weeks, I began to experience a kind of relief when the lights went out, as if the world were meeting me on my own terms or pardoning me for my flawed perception. The darkness provided a welcome retreat from my failure and, to my surprise, the threshold to a world I had failed to notice" (175). Here Hartman shifts from desiring to escape darkness to welcoming it, suggesting once more that this darkness protects her emotionally from her own failure.

Darkness, however, also opens Hartman's eyes to her own blindness. Positioning herself once more as a failed witness, Hartman explains, "In the deep hole of night lived all the people whom I passed by during the day but failed to see. They . . . lived within arm's reach of me but at the periphery of my world and beyond my notice. The beggars, . . . the slum dwellers, . . . the toilers who tidied and swept the world for those who owned it . . . — all resided in this nocturnal world" (176). Notably, Hartman focuses here on her own personal failures, her limited vision and shortsightedness. However, in this chapter, she also seeks to locate her journey as a Western traveler to Ghana within the broader legacy of colonial travel to Africa. For Hartman, the tension between blindness and sight and between darkness and light reflects a key intersection between her own travel and colonial journeys. Linking her movement through the darkness of Osu with that of colonial travelers before her, Hartman exclaims, "I was self-conscious about my flashlight and feared it was the equivalent of the pith helmet worn by colonial administrators. Illuminating the world seemed like an act of violence" (174). Here Hartman notes the way in which metaphors of darkness and light inform colonial journeys to Africa, within which colonizers positioned themselves as bearers of light over and against the darkness of Africa and of African people.[10] While Hartman recognizes her flashlight as a similar reflection of her discomfort with darkness and her potentially colonial desire to illuminate the world, she significantly defines such a desire and practice as "an act of violence." This critical shift introduces a new perspective, a new way of seeing her own journey and the Ghanaian people she encounters—a perspective that is crucial to her practice of bridge building between African Americans and Africans.

In her analysis of "nineteenth-century hegemonic viewing practices," Charmaine Nelson notes, "[t]here is no one gaze, no singular universal way of seeing." Rather she argues that viewing "is classed, raced, and sexed"; our "identification and location" produce our ways of seeing. Viewers, she explains, "do not merely see what *is*. Rather, vision must be addressed not as a process of objective reading but as a process through which identifications are imagined and assigned" (xiv). Nelson's theorizing of vision illuminates Hartman's own critical "viewing practices," which similarly reject the notion of vision as singular or objective. Throughout her narrative, Hartman engages in a decolonizing viewing practice that embraces a multiplicity of gazes and multiple ways of seeing the spaces she moves through and the people she encounters in the present, as well as multiple ways of seeing the past. In addition to Nelson's view, M. Jacqui Alexander's view of colonization as a "process of fragmentation . . . linked in minute ways to dualistic and hierarchical thinking: divisions among mind, body, spirit" and as committed to the creation of "singular thinking" shapes my reading of Hartman's viewing practice as decolonized (281). Given this definition of colonization, I consider Hartman's own practice as decolonized because her bridge building work reflects a process of interconnection and interdependence—a practice that embraces multiplicity, complexity, and even contradiction over the ease of simplistic binaries at the heart of singular narratives.

Juxtaposing her own decolonized viewing practice against a colonized vision, Hartman challenges the Africanist discourse employed by Western travelers who envision Africa as "the heart of darkness, the dark continent, the blighted territory" (175). Rather, Hartman states,

> I lived in darkness, not the darkness of African inscrutability or the gloomy cast of a benighted landscape but

> rather in a blind alley of my own making, in the deep hole of my ignorance. . . .
>
> But I knew better. My flashlight was a defense not against dark, dark Africa but against my own compromised sight, my own thickheadedness. I had been in Ghana nearly half a year and I barely understood the world around me. (174–75)

Here Hartman links her inability to see, her failure as witness, to a long legacy of Western blindness in Africa. Yet she also asserts a critical distance and difference, acknowledging, "I knew better." More specifically, what Hartman knows is how not to project her own blindness onto Africa or onto the African people she encounters. Instead, she owns her blindness and employs a critical practice that enables her to explore its roots and consequences. Reversing her gaze, Hartman employs a critical viewing practice that turns inward to expose her own interior failings, flaws, and limitations rather than projecting the fear of such failure and limitation onto the bodies of "others" deemed strange and alien. Ultimately, Hartman's self-positioning as stranger and as foreign enables her to resist the violence of colonial vision that seeks instead to project that strangeness and foreignness onto African people.

Offering a more expansive vision and understanding of travel to Africa, Hartman situates her own journey not only in relation to Western colonial travel but also locates her travel tenuously within a legacy of African American émigrés who travel to Ghana with the hopes of realizing the dream of freedom abroad, beyond the confines of Jim Crow and de facto segregation, as well as anti-black violence in America. According to Hartman, "[t]he émigrés had wanted to belong to a country of the future" (39). This belonging, however, required a firm break from the past:

> The revolutionaries had come to Ghana believing they could be . . . reborn as the African men and women they would have been had their ancestors not been stolen four hundred years ago. . . . They left the states hoping to leave slavery behind too. . . . They had faith that the breach of the Middle Passage could be mended. . . . (39)

Slavery and the Middle Passage propel both Hartman and the revolutionaries,[11] across the Atlantic to Ghana. Moreover, Hartman's question "What orphan had not yearned for a mother country or a free territory?" reflects a similar yearning to belong (39).

Despite this shared desire for a place of belonging and the yearning for a country "in which your skin wasn't a prison," Hartman is also quite critical of the revolutionaries' journeys. She asserts unequivocally, "The dreams that defined their horizon no longer defined mine. The narrative of liberation had ceased to be a blueprint for the future. The decisive break the revolutionaries had hoped to institute between the past and the present failed" (39). Here we get a clearer sense of how Hartman distinguishes herself from the revolutionaries, whom she calls Afros. They share a similar longing and desire but have starkly different visions of the past and of the future. For instance, Hartman claims, "While the Afros were far too intelligent to believe the past could be forgotten, they definitely wanted their distance from slavery and colonialism. They valued history to the extent that it aided the task of liberation. So it was more common for them to disparage the slave mentality than to claim the slave" (40). Rather than claim enslaved ancestors and the reality of slavery as a tenuous inheritance, the Afros constructed "a grand narrative" of a glorious African past in order to "reverse the course of history, eradicate the degradation of slavery and colonialism, and vindicate the race" (40). In stark contrast to the interdependence and interconnection that might satisfy the revolutionaries' yearning to belong, they engaged in practices that separate and divide. As Hartman's passage illustrates, the revolutionaries' desire for distance from the past, from slavery, and from colonialism, as well as their refusal to claim the slave, reinforces the break the Middle Passage caused and reinforces colonial divisions.

Although their vision for the future expressed through Pan-Africanism[12] reflects a desire for belonging and connection, Hartman's critique reveals the limitations of this political vision that constructs a single view of Africa—a utopian vision of glory and redemption that can wash away the shame and pain of the past. This vision of a glorious return rests on multiple erasures. As Hartman notes,

> Utopias always have entailed disappointments and failures. They cast a harsh light on the limits of our imagination, underscore our shortsightedness, and replicate

the disasters of the world we seek to escape. Utopia never turns out to be the perfect society. Look hard enough and you'll . . . see the African elites . . . fashioning themselves after Europe's kings and the captives trailing behind them in tow. You'll discern the disease of royalty beneath the visage of eternal glory. You'll witness the dream of freedom crash and burn. (46)

This passage clearly marks the instability of and contradictions within utopias as Hartman's description links "the visage of eternal glory" to disease and posits "the dream of freedom" as a destructive vision. Moreover, utopia blinds us precisely because it rests on an erasure of the past and on a single narrow vision for the future. This utopian vision of a "perfect society" produces a singular vision of Ghana as the dream of freedom—dependent on the silencing and erasure of slavery and colonization.

Disconnected from history and from the lived experience of African people in the present, the émigrés' romanticized vision of Africa, and of Ghana more explicitly, erases the deep divisions between Africans and African Americans, including the complicity of African people in slavery, differing experiences of racism, and class hierarchies. As Kevin Gaines notes, Ghanaians considered African Americans to be privileged—the beneficiaries of their enslaved ancestors' suffering—and had little sensitivity to white racism (157, 283). Similar to Hartman's initial blindness in "The Dark Days" (ch. 9), the émigrés fail to see the economic and political struggles of Ghanaian people. Ironically, this blindness to the differing experiences and perspectives of Ghanaians only exacerbates their sense of alienation and further divides them from the very people with whom they wish to belong.

Seeking to expand beyond the limited imagination and shortsightedness of the revolutionaries, Hartman works hard to distance her own journey to Ghana from the legacy of African Americans who traveled to the country before her. Noting Maya Angelou's curious avoidance of the slave forts in her 1962 journey to Ghana and Sylvia Boone's description of the country as "a dream come true" in her 1974 travel guide,[13] Hartman reveals the ways in which these travelers fuel a tradition of black tourism shaped by yearnings for belonging, as she challenges the singular narrative of return that African American travelers reproduce in their writing (Hartman 42, 37). In stark contrast to this legacy of black émigrés and tourists, Hartman notes,

My generation was the first that came here with the dungeon as our prime destination, unlike the scores of black tourists who, motivated by Alex Haley's *Roots*, had traveled to Ghana and other parts of West Africa to reclaim their African patrimony. For me, the rupture was the story. Whatever bridges I might build were as much the reminder of my separation as my connection. (41–42)

The intersection and divergence of Hartman's journey from preceding travelers becomes apparent in the tension between connection and separation. Through her recovery efforts, Hartman seeks a connection between the past and the present and a way across the breach in her identity as African American—the break that the Middle Passage caused. In opposition to the desire for kinship and return, stemming from "the sickness of nostalgia" (105–106), she embraces bridge building as a critically engaged practice that requires wrestling with the complex and varied histories and geographies of African-descended people in the past, as well as confronting the multiplicity of their experiences in the present. Moreover, her words illustrate that the bridge she seeks to build is tenuous and is shaped as much by separation and loss as it is by connection.

The tension between separation and loss saves Hartman's recovery project—and her imagining of the past—from nostalgia. Locating nostalgia at the heart of her critique of Pan-Africanism in her article "The Time of Slavery," Hartman explains, "Pan-Africanism has been animated by the desire for . . . a return to ancestral land, an abiding nostalgia, and unmet and perhaps unrealizable longings for solidarity throughout the black world" (759). Nostalgia, with its desire for an idyllic return, inevitably erases the separation and rupture between Africa and the diaspora. Therefore, by tethering her project of bridge building to this separation and loss, Hartman enables her own vision of the present (and future) to push beyond the limitations and shortsightedness of a utopian vision that foregrounds the experiences of African Americans over that of Africans from the continent. For Hartman, nostalgia also reflects an active rejection of history. As Svetlana Boym explains, nostalgia is "a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy. Nostalgic love can only survive in a long-distance relationship" (151). The romance and fantasy at the heart of

nostalgia conflict with Hartman's own practice of freedom, which is rooted in recovery work and a more expansive vision of the past and the present. Conversely, nostalgia "desires to obliterate history and turn it into private or collective mythology"—a fantasy "determined by the needs of the present" (Boym 152). This obliteration or erasure of history leads to the singular, shortsighted, and limited utopian vision that Hartman resists throughout her narrative. In the case of the émigrés or revolutionaries, their desire for a glorious past that can redeem their slave inheritance inevitably requires the obliteration of the slave—an act of violence that Hartman bears witness to again and again throughout her narrative.

Even in the slave forts, where Hartman initiates her work of recovery, she finds the obliteration of history and the erasure of the slave. Chronicling her multiple visits to the slave fort, Elmina Castle, Hartman connects her ongoing claim about the shortsightedness and limitations of Pan-Africanism with her critique of roots or heritage tourism[14]—an industry that seeks to profit from the insatiable desire for return, belonging, and home. Ultimately, through her critical gaze and analysis of the slave forts, Hartman reveals the ways in which the narratives of redemption, progress, and nostalgic return, constructed for tourists in these spaces, disrupt the work of remembering and recovery, in which such sites claim to engage.

In chronicling her visits to the slave forts, Elmina Castle in particular, Hartman considers the ways in which the tourist industry in Ghana participates in the construction of a single narrative about Africa and about slavery that intersects in key ways with the singular and limited narrative black émigrés have embraced. Upon reaching the slave fort, Hartman notes, "The sign posted on the hurricane fence warned: 'No one is allowed inside this area except tourists'" (84). The slave fort, then, is a closed space, exclusive, and designed only for tourists—in particular African American travelers, who yearn for belonging, connection, and who yearn to repair the break caused by the Middle Passage. Moreover, at the entrance, two young Ghanaian boys hand Hartman letters they have written her that further reflect the narrative designed exclusively for black tourists. One letter begins, "Beloved Sister, please write me. We are one Africa which means we are the same people . . . and Africa is both of us motherland so you are welcome back home." The other boy's letter concludes, "Because of the slave trade you lose your mother, if you know your history, you know where you come from" (84–85). These letters clearly reproduce the utopian vision of a united Africa, Africa as the motherland and home to black people throughout the diaspora. Here in the letters are the welcome and homecoming that so many black travelers before Hartman sought. However, Hartman's own experience of strangeness and alienation in Ghana disrupts this singular vision. Although her tenuous welcome as *obruni*, stranger, rather than as sister, mars the fantasy of kinship, her acceptance of her status as alien and strange enables Hartman to develop a new way of seeing—a critical gaze and perspective leading to a more expansive vision that resists the blindness of previous travelers to Ghana.

Critical of superficial claims to kinship and homecoming at the heart of roots and heritage tourism, Hartman asks,

> But how could these scruffy adolescents love me or anyone else like me? You could never love the foreigner whose wealth required you to inveigle a handful of coins. It was not the kind of relationship that cultivated tender feeling. I had fled to their world and the boys yearned to escape to mine. They wanted to break out of this dusty four-cornered town and never see the castle again or the sign barring their entrance; they wanted never to plead for small change from an *obruni* or repeat the words "slave trade" and "one Africa." . . . Looking at me, the boys imagined the wealth and riches they would possess if they lived in the States. . . . Looking at me, the boys wished their ancestors had been slaves. If so, they would be big men. (89)

Hartman's attempt to enter into the boys' perspective reveals the difficult work of bridge building. This work of connection requires not an erasure of difference but a confrontation with that difference—their varied ways of seeing the world. This division between Hartman and the Ghanaian boys marks the slave forts as "contested spaces" (MacGonagle 250) or, as Sandra Richards notes, as sites "produced for outsiders" and yet requiring Ghanaian support to authenticate the performance (626). The end result of this construction of "one collective memory," which Elizabeth MacGonagle defines as "a fiction" (252, 257), and the concomitant failure to integrate varied and often tenuous histories and perspectives within the slave forts is the reproduction of *forgetting* in spite of the central mission and invocation of

heritage tourism to *remember*. Such practices of forgetting, which Hartman locates at the heart of heritage tourism and of the revolutionaries' idyllic vision of return, undermine the decolonizing work necessary for building free territory.

Though Hartman challenges heritage tourism practices, she does come with her own yearnings, needs, and desires that often disrupt and oppose the yearnings and desires of the Ghanaian people she encounters. For instance, Hartman's critique attributes the boys' letters not to their belief in "one Africa," nor to their desire to restore what the slave trade had destroyed—ties of kinship, home, belonging. Rather, the boys possess their own dream, their own utopian vision, which differs from that of African Americans who visit the slave forts. While for black émigrés and tourists to Ghana, Africa is the locus of free territory, for Ghanaians, America is the dream. Hartman's critical response to the boys' letters further illustrates this deep divide:

> [E]ven if African Americans were seduced by tourism's promise of an African home and . . . solidarity with their newfound kin . . . , most Ghanaians weren't fooled by the mirage, even when their survival necessitated that they indulge the delusion. The story of slavery fabricated for African Americans had nothing to do with the present struggles of most Ghanaians. What each community made of slavery and how they understood it provided little ground for solidarity. . . . African Americans entertained fantasies of return and Ghanaians of departure. From where we each were standing, we did not see the same past, nor did we share a common vision of the Promised Land. (165)

Once again, Hartman demonstrates that vision and sight are not singular or fixed but rather multiple and fluid—dependent on our location in the world. Where we stand impacts what we see. At the slave forts, Hartman illustrates blindness and shortsighted vision as persistent threats to the work of bridge building. Notably, she attributes this blindness to differing perspectives as the consequence of a single story of slavery, which she refers to as a *mirage*, a *delusion*, and as a *fabrication*, in part because it silences the lived experiences of Ghanaians in the past and present. This disconnection

at the heart of the Pan-Africanist vision espoused in the boys' letters—the erasure of their own experiences as Ghanaians—inevitably destroys, rather than creates, possibilities for solidarity and connection. Hence, Hartman's text reveals that only in rejecting the single story of slavery can we adopt a more expansive vision of the present and of the future.

Building Free Territory

Though Hartman critiques heritage tourism and the émigrés' idyllic vision of diasporic return and solidarity as exacerbating the disconnect between African Americans and African people, her journey along the interior slave route in Ghana reveals both the persistence and depth of this divide *and* her own participation within it. Initially, she feels overwhelmed by the chasm between her own perspective and that of her fellow travelers to Gwolu—the last stop on her journey along the slave route: "The deeper into the heartland of slavery we entered, the greater the isolation I experienced. Most of my colleagues didn't experience slavery as a wound" (215). While her experience of alienation intensifies on this leg of her journey, Hartman reverses her critical gaze away from her African colleagues and their limited perspectives on the past and the present to foreground as well the limitations of her own journey, her search for free territory, and her work of recovery. Though Hartman admits to wanting "to build a bridge across our differences," she concedes that the

> thicket of misunderstanding grew denser and more impassable as our journey continued. . . . Whatever remained of Pan-Africanism, which had espoused solidarity among all African people . . . and encouraged each and every one of us in the diaspora to dream of the continent as our home, no longer included the likes of me. . . .
>
> I couldn't surmount the barricade that separated me from the others. . . . And I was reluctant to admit that I was as much at fault as the others. (217–18).

Here Hartman tethers her critique of the utopian vision of Pan-Africanism to a self-reflexive admission of her own fault—her own singular perspective as African American.

Although she asserts her inability to "surmount the barricade that

separated" them on the journey, her arrival in Gwolu marks another key shift in her perception—an opening and possible way across the divide. In Gwolu, Hartman discovers that "those who stayed behind told different stories than the children of the captives dragged across the sea. . . . [T]hey had fashioned a narrative of liberation in which the glory of the past was the entry to a redeemed future" (232). This narrative conflicts with Hartman's own "history of defeat." Admitting that "in listening for my story I had almost missed theirs," Hartman attests to the limitations of her search for the lost stories of the enslaved (233). In her attempt to recover the silenced and forgotten stories of those who had been captured, Hartman nearly misses another key experience of slavery, one central to Ghanaian people: the story of fugitives—those who escaped and stood down slavery. This story of the fugitives reveals a stark contrast between "the history of slavery" in Gwolu—a history of resistance and overcoming, a history of fugitives and warriors, a history of triumph and pride—and her own story, which is one of death and sorrow, of masters and slaves: "an irredeemable past" that makes it "hard to envision a future in which this past had ended" (233).

While Hartman does not find what she is initially looking for in Gwolu, her time there enables her to see beyond her singular perspective as a descendant of enslaved people in order to embrace a more expansive vision of slavery that includes the descendants of fugitives. Ultimately, this work of recovery provides not only a more complex portrait of slavery but also a new way of seeing identity, community, and belonging. Illustrating the impact of slavery on the fugitive community, Hartman notes, the ever-growing reach of the slave trade in Ghana turned everyone into "a captive on reprieve" (222). In order to escape participation in the trade—either as a slave raider or trader—and to escape captivity, refugees and fugitives (men, women, and children) fled in search of freedom. Though initially free territory for those in flight was the "unknown territory to which they were heading, as if freedom were a city waiting for them in the distance" (223), eventually that free space becomes, in Hartman's reimagining, a place that the fugitives build together. Building free territory required them to embrace

> becoming something other than who they had been and naming themselves again[;] . . . genealogy didn't matter . . ., building a community did. . . . So they put down their roots in foreign soil and adopted strangers as their kin . . . and blended their histories. "We" was the collectivity they built from the ground up, not one they had inherited, not one that others had imposed. (225)

Hartman's vision, her imagining of what she calls "the fugitive's dream" (233) rejects the stability and safety of inherited and imposed identities as well as the vision of free territory tied to a single place. Rather, Hartman foregrounds the difficult work of *building* and *becoming* over imposed identities and inherited visions. In stark contrast to the initial vision of freedom as "a city waiting for them in the distance," Hartman defines freedom as a practice that requires the fugitives and refugees to leave all that they knew behind to begin anew and, in particular, to reject inherited and imposed identities in favor of building a community and a collective with strangers. In this new place, everyone is a stranger in a strange land; the condition of stranger is shared rather than projected onto a single group. The fugitive's dream challenges the divisive and hierarchical nature of colonizing discourse, which projects the condition of stranger onto the other or the *not-me*, in favor of a decolonized vision of free territory that calls us to embrace the condition of stranger as a shared one. This recognition of the condition of the stranger as a shared human reality, defining the stranger as *me* rather than *not-me*, enables us to construct spaces that invite rather than exclude.[15] Hence, the work of building community requires adopting strangers as kin, blending histories, and building a new collectivity "from the ground up."

In order to engage in this work of becoming, Alexander explains, "we would need to become fluent in each others' histories, to resist and unlearn an impulse to claim first oppression, most-devastating oppression, one-of-a-kind oppression, defying-comparison oppression. We would have to unlearn an impulse that allows mythologies about each other to replace *knowing* about one another" (269). Here, Alexander concretizes the practice of freedom that Hartman employs throughout her travel narrative. Fully committed to this creative work of becoming, Hartman's recovery work is fundamentally an attempt to become fluent in multiple histories (her own and others') even though this means confronting the differences between them. Her journey also reveals a commitment to resisting the desire to position her own experience of suffering, oppression, and injustice above those of the Ghanaian people she encounters. And finally, she is thoroughly com-

mitted to moving beyond the singular identities and narratives of African Americans and of African people that we have inherited and that have been imposed upon us.

The ending of Hartman's text illustrates her ability to "make peace with contradiction and paradox," her willingness to embrace a "dialectics of struggle" that is absolutely necessary for building a collective informed by multiple perspectives, as well as by often conflicting and tenuous journeys, histories, and geographies (Alexander 266). Offering the clearest vision of her approach for bridging the divide between America and Africa, in the final pages of her book Hartman states, "The bridge between the people of Gwolu and me wasn't what we had suffered or what we had endured but the aspirations that fueled flight and the yearning for freedom. . . . If an African identity was to be meaningful at all, at least to me, then what it meant or was to mean could be elaborated only in the fight against slavery" (234). Challenging the Pan-Africanist claim that a common history links African Americans and Africans, Hartman's narrative foregrounds the complex and multiple histories and experiences of African-descended people. These divergences and tenuous differences threaten to disrupt any singular historical narrative. Yet Hartman asserts that a bridge is still possible.

In full awareness of the challenges, Hartman's ending suggests a possible way forward—a bridge based on shared longings and desires for freedom expressed through struggle. This shared longing, however, is not enough. Work must be done to construct a shared vision of free territory. Drawing from her encounters in Gwolu, Hartman embraces the fugitive's dream as a possible shared vision, arguing that her identity as African American "had its source in the commons created by fugitives and rebels . . . [and] was articulated in the ongoing struggle to escape, stand down, and defeat slavery in all of its myriad forms. It was the fugitive's legacy. . . . It wasn't the dream of a White House . . . but of a free territory. It was a dream of autonomy rather than nationhood" (234). Significantly, Hartman extricates the dream of free territory from race and from nationhood. Rather, for Hartman, we build free territory by continuing the legacy of fugitives and rebels—a legacy that includes all those who struggle against slavery "in all of its myriad forms."

Unlike her colleagues in Ghana who limit their Pan-Africanist vision to the borders of the continent, Hartman adopts a more expansive definition of belonging, a dream that "exceeded the borders of the continent[,] . . . a dream of the world house" (233). Hartman's vision echoes Alexander's assertion that

> [t]his yearning to belong is not to be confined only to membership or citizenship in community, political movement, nation, group, or belonging to a family. . . . The source of that yearning is the deep knowing that we are in fact interdependent—neither separate nor autonomous. . . . There is great danger, then, in living lives of segregation" (281–82).

Expanding beyond inherited and imposed racialized and nationalist identities that segregate, separate, and compartmentalize human beings, Hartman argues that free territory is not about nationhood or returning to "the great courts and to the regalia of kings and queens," as many of the émigrés believed (234). For Hartman, nationalist and racialized visions of "a White House" or a glorious return to Africa reinforce separation and division rather than engaging in the difficult work of bridge building that Hartman commits to throughout her journey. Moreover, her text challenges us as readers and scholars to ensure that our own lived experiences, our movements through the world, and our critical reading practices reflect a commitment not to singular narratives and journeys but to the ongoing work of decolonization and the unfinished project of freedom.

Notes

1. I use the term "singular" throughout this essay to mean "single" or "only one." Moreover, in my critique of singularity as a methodological approach and framework, I draw from M. Jacqui Alexander, who defines "singular thinking" or thinking that focuses on "only one" as divisive, hierarchical and as a practice of negation that undermines the work of decolonization, which seeks wholeness and freedom (281).

2. This essay is part of a more expansive book-length study that explores the mobility and international travel of black women in the nineteenth-century through the twenty-first-century.

3. See Morrison's essay "Home" for her reflections on the intersection of race, belonging, and home in African American literary studies, p5, 10.

4. See Alfred Bendixen and Judith Hamera's introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to African American Travel Writing*, in which they highlight the "complex, fluid, multiple-layered nature of travel writing" (3). See also Farah J. Griffin and Cheryl J. Fish's introduction to *A stranger in the village: two centuries of African-American travel writing* and Tim Youngs' "Pushing Against the Black/White Limits of Maps: African American Writings of Travel." Both texts similarly define travel writing as a fluid genre, while foregrounding the "hybridity" and "fluidity" of African American travel writing in particular (Griffin and Fish xiv; Youngs 78). Additionally, Angela Shaw-Thornburg notes the "hybridity" of African American travel writing as one explanation for its marginalization (47).

5. Here I refer to "Travel," an episode of the web series *Black Folk Don't*, which explores and challenges the myth that black people don't travel. The video disrupts the common association of travel, especially international travel, with whiteness. Moreover, it illustrates a significant link between narrow constructions of race and mobility in both the academy and in the larger society that reproduce this common stereotype.

6. In naming this single story of black people and travel as "incomplete," I draw from Chimamanda Adichie's 2009 TED Talk, "The Danger of a Single Story," in which she asserts that "[t]he single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story."

7. Current scholarship on Hartman's *Lose Your Mother*, including Harvey Neptune's "Loving through Loss," Meg Samuelson's "Lose Your Mother, Kill Your Child," and Pramod Nayar's "Mobility, Migrant Mnemonics and Memory Citizenship," foregrounds the themes of memory and loss in Hartman's text. This paper seeks to broaden the conversation about Hartman's book by locating her work within a larger tradition of travel writing and within a legacy of black travelers to Africa, more specifically, in order to explore the intersections and divergences between these disparate journeys.

8. Specifically, Shaw-Thornburg explains that "[i]f African-American literature of travel is to become more visible, critical readers must ultimately

examine their reading practices" (53). Illustrating the potential impact of such alternative reading practices, Pettinger claims that "the conventional definition [of travel writing] is too closely tied to the image of a particular kind of travel: it neglects others, or at least forgets that other kinds of travel also find their way into print" (ix). Hence for Pettinger, a critical reading practice that includes stretching the boundaries of genre and grouping texts in unconventional ways "makes it possible to identify certain continuities that might otherwise go unremarked" (ix).

9. John Gruesser defines Africanist discourse as "texts written about Africa by Western authors" (5). Gruesser's analysis reveals the ways in which African American travel writers actively participate in constructing singular narratives about Africa and African people. Claiming that their deployment of Africanist discourse "has frequently stymied the attempts of Afro-Americans to produce more accurate depictions of the continent than those of their white counterparts," Gruesser foregrounds the common tendency to reproduce binary oppositions in their texts that position Africa as "either a dream or a nightmare" (5, 7). Hartman, however, as this essay will demonstrate, rejects this dichotomy in her refusal to position Africa as "an idyllic homeland" or as "a grave" (233).

10. In Hartman's recovery of darkness, she challenges the myth of the Dark Continent that, according to Patrick Brantlinger, "developed during the transition from the British campaign against the slave trade . . . in 1833, to the imperialist partitioning of Africa, which dominated the final quarter of the nineteenth century" (185). This myth of Africa as a land of darkness, savagery, and "social and moral regression" in Western literature about Africa reflects "the processes of projection and displacement of guilt for the slave trade, guilt for empire, guilt for one's own savage and shadowy impulses" onto the African continent and its people (215).

11. Afros, short for Afro-Americans, is the Ghanaian people's term for black expatriates to Ghana, including W. E. B. Du Bois, Julian Mayfield, Sylvia Boone, and Maya Angelou (Hartman 36–37). See Kevin K. Gaines's *American Africans in Ghana* for a deeper analysis of the African American expatriate community in Ghana, especially pages 142–44.

12. Though Pan-Africanism is an ideology and a social and political movement based on the assertion of a unified Africa, its definition is complex and

varied—often manifesting differently on the continent than throughout the diaspora, which explains one source of conflict between African Americans and Ghanaian people that Hartman attests to in her book. See also Gaines for a deeper analysis of the complexity and multiplicity of Pan-Africanist visions in Ghana (157).

13. See Angelou's *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes*; also see *Boone's West African Travels* (236).

14. For additional scholarship on heritage tourism in Ghana, see especially Jemima Pierre's "Beyond Heritage Tourism," Sandra L. Richards's "What Is to Be Remembered?" and Jennifer Hasty's "Rites of Passage, Routes of Redemption."

15. Here I borrow the term "not-me" from Toni Morrison's book *Playing in the Dark*, in which she asserts, "Nothing highlighted freedom—if it did not in fact create it—like slavery. . . . For in that construction of blackness *and* enslavement could be found not only the not-free but also, with the dramatic polarity created by skin color, the projection of the not-me" (38). Drawing on Morrison's language, I seek to highlight the contrast between a colonizing vision of freedom that rests on dualities and hierarchies and Hartman's decolonized vision of free territory that rejects the "not-me" in favor of interdependence and interconnection.

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