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Intergenerational Trauma and *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*

In her book, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments,* Saidiya Hartman builds a new method for conveying the past. The book is broken up into segments exploring the lives of individual Black women and queer folks during the turn of the twentieth century. As Hartman notes in her introduction, she seeks to illustrate how these individuals strove "to create autonomous and beautiful lives, to escape the new forms of servitude awaiting them, and to live as if they were free" (Hartman xiii). Hartman does not focus directly on any largescale, cultural phenomena that were affecting these individuals, like the Great Migration and its backlash, or segregation laws. Instead of searching for a broader context or takeaway—or working to prove why readers should care about these individuals' lives—she unapologetically seeks out and expounds upon the intimate, particular details of these individuals' lives.

Hartman draws her exploration from what archival photos and documents are left of these individuals in the historical banks. Crucially, however, Hartman acknowledges the limitations of the archival source material, stating, "Every historian of the multitude, the dispossessed, the subaltern, and the enslaved is forced to grapple with the power and authority of the archive and the limits it sets on what can be known, whose perspective matters, and who is endowed with the gravity and authority of historical actor" (xiii). Hartman recognizes the inherently oppressive bent of the historical record of these oppressed individuals. Thereby, she recognizes the same

oppressive bent of contemporary historical writing which solely relies on such documentation. Hartman attempts to undo this bent with her new method.

Maria Wendt Höjer considers the paradox Hartman faces in voicing these archivally oppressed perspectives, drawing on works such as "Can the Subatlern Speak?" (1988) by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Höjer writes, "If […] Spivak […] [is] working towards a negative answer, Hartman departs directly from the impossibility: dead girls cannot speak" (Höjer 39). Here, Höjer posits Hartman pushes against the paradoxical impossibility of voicing the archivally oppressed. But Hartman does not deny this archival oppression, she engages with it in *Wayward Lives.* Höjer frames Hartman's pursuit as "The struggle to write about histories of violence without again closing the doors of what lost lives could/might have contained" (39). In this passage, Höjer outlines how Hartman conveys the past with a focus not on what is in the historical record, but what lies outside it. Hartman, still rooted in archives, uses a mixture of speculative, hypothetical, and subjunctive language to build out from the record. She also draws from a myriad of writers and scholars, embedding their words into the body of her writing. Höjer calls this process "critical fabulation" (38): an approach to historical documentation that is critical of historical documentation. I argue it is Hartman's particular focus on individuals and their experiences that allows her to stay rooted and connected to the present from a historical perspective in her move beyond the limits of the archive.

Her focus on the edges of the oppressive, historical limits allows her to create a new approach for expressing "intergenerational trauma" and configuring the fabric of social, cultural, and intergenerational memory in her work. While the term "intergenerational trauma" and terms like it have a long history, their popularity in literature studies coincides with medical findings of intergenerational trauma's genetic existence in the nineties (Dekel 2008). These ideas come

mostly out of Holocaust studies. At the most minute level, the term intergenerational trauma describes the effects of a group's trauma on their children (the second generation), what Marianne Hirsch calls "The Generation of Postmemory" (Hirsch, *Generation* 103). Focused on the art and literature of Holocaust survivors' children, Hirsch bases her understanding of intergenerational trauma upon direct familial ties. This basis is illustrated in the line: "At stake is precisely the 'guardianship' of a traumatic personal and generational past with which some of us have a 'living connection' and that past's passing into history" (104). This passage shows that Hirsch's conception of the term is centered upon the familial connection with the Holocaust. Notably, she frames this connection against a historical connection.

Her ideas have gone on to be applied to a wide variety of cultural settings, events, and survivor groups as she recognizes in a 2014 speech (Hirsch, *Connective* 335). The term has also slowly been broadened to apply to a much larger sense of transmissive scope. This broadening begins with the conception of a third generation (Zeitlin 6). But it grows to describe examples of many generations-worth of intergenerational trauma. Laura Murphy argues the intergenerational trauma following the trans-Atlantic slave trade, given its centuries-long span as opposed to the Holocaust's time frame (Murphy 53), has and will continue to be processed by the generations following in the wake of slavery. She writes:

> I do not want to dispense with the word "trauma" altogether in describing the experience of people who live hundreds of years after an originating traumatic event; the analytical framework of trauma provides us with useful tools with which to read some experiences of the postcolonial era that might otherwise be overlooked or discounted. (54)

In this passage, Murphy outlines her belief that the language of intergenerational trauma should equally apply to people many generations after survivors, at least in the example of the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

Murphy's definition of intergenerational trauma conflicts with Hirsch's definition. And many scholars have taken up this debate about the scope of intergenerational trauma. Michelle Balaev, for example, criticizes overly broad definitions of intergenerational trauma. Balaev, countering uses like Murphy's, concerns herself with an erosion of "distinctions between personal loss actually experienced by an individual and a historical absence found in one's ancestral lineage" (Balaev 153). In other words, Balaev sees broader ideas of intergenerational trauma in literature and literary study (like Murphy's) as equating intergenerational inheritors' trauma with the experience of those who underwent the original traumatic event. For Balaev, the concern with an overly broad definition is the possible loss of weight to the term trauma. She defines another term, in her argument: "historical absence." For this essay, I will refer to this term "historical absence" as "cultural absence" or simply "absence" to differentiate it from the practice of history which propagates past oppression. This absence, as Balaev uses it, describes a missing connection with the past. This connection is severed by the violence inflicted upon an original generation. Largescale violent events against a group uproot culture and intergenerational memory, leaving a generation's worth or more of silenced and trauma-bearing survivors. To the descendants of these oppressed generations living within the cultural medium of the audible oppressors, an absence is left in their intergenerational, cultural inheritance. Balaev's binary sets up a useful lens through which to characterize the present and past of longer timescale intergenerational trauma than Hirsch. But her insistence on a division of absence from original trauma upholds the oppressive bent of history. Her division leaves people experiencing

cultural absence without any framework to alleviate their lack of connection to the past. I believe Muprhy's view better supports the larger scale with which intergenerational trauma, its roots, and its oppressive propagation and contemporary existence should be seen.

Hartman, through her mode of critical fabulation, explores this debated relationship between personal trauma and cultural absence. Hartman uses perspective to reconnect the gap. She embodies the individual perspective of those following the trans-Atlantic slave trade and experiencing their own oppressive traumas whose silence echoes intergenerationally: the "young black women in open rebellion" (Hartman xiii). Through her fabulations of these individuals, Hartman connects past individual experience to present mourning. Hartman does not engage with the concept of intergenerational trauma directly. For example, she does not use the word trauma in the body of her book. She does not see it as important to her ends. But through her approach to conveying the past, Hartman breaks with archival and literary conventions to address the origins of an original trauma still felt today. Hartman connects the experience of these past figures to the present by giving them voice in this moment. In this way, Hartman engages with intergenerational trauma by conveying the past to keep the doors of cultural absence open and to engage people today with reflections on the experience of past individuals. In her method, breaking from the approach of contemporary historical study, Hartman provides an outlet for the present effects of cultural absence.

By breaking with historical and literary forms, she shows how cultural absence cannot be mourned or processed without understanding the individual experience of absent figures and the failures of history to address these absent perspectives. In this habilitated mourning she goes beyond the abilities of history and trauma literature and theory.

Such a focus on individuals might seem to lend itself to the individualistic approach of the practise of history, embodied by the "Great Man." Historical individualism in a patriarchal, colonial sense is founded on a history that centers the active roles of individual white men and erases the oppressed: women and queer folks of colour. Hartman shows she is clearly aware of this sense of "the individual" in her introduction where she questions who counts as "historical actor" (Hartman xiii). Höjer also considers the role of individualism in history, writing, "Theorists have pointed out how the idea of the singular, revolutionary Act tends to reinforce masculinist and colonialist imaginaries" (Höjer 38). For Höjer, reconfiguring the past through a feminist lens means deconstructing the understanding of action as individually male. Thinker Hortense Spillers explores the inherent, linguistic conceptualization of the Black female body as captive in her article, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe." She writes:

> The captive body, then, brings into focus a gathering of social realities as well as a metaphor for *value* so thoroughly interwoven in their literal and figurative emphases that distinctions between them are virtually useless. Even though the captive flesh/body has been "liberated," and no one need pretend that even the quotation marks do not *matter*, dominant symbolic activity, the ruling episteme that releases the dynamics of naming and valuation, remains grounded in the originating metaphors of captivity and mutilation so that it is as if neither time nor history, nor historiography and its topics, shows movement, as the human subject is "murdered" over and over again by the passions of a bloodless and anonymous archaism, showing itself in endless disguise. (Spillers 68)

Here, Spillers notes history's implicit, linguistic subjection of Black women as non-actors, or captives. For Spillers, the practise of history can never "liberate" Black women from history's captivity because history's dominant language is inherently and infinitely constrictive. While

times change, the language of history does not, and thereby, oppression is propagated continually. Instead of upholding the historical idea of the individual in her focus on singular figures in *Wayward Lives*, Hartman adopts history's convention of individualism to attack history's patriarchism and colonialism. Hartman reshapes the use of the individual in the historical tradition to imbue historically labelled non-actors with the "weight and authority of historical actors" (xiii). Appropriating the historical individualism in her examination Black women's lives, Hartman combats history's inherent prejudice and oppression.

Hartman's attention to individual experience is built on spacial and interpersonal structures of memory. Hartman depicts these in her fabulation of place in *Wayward Lives.* A large part of her resources for colouring in these individuals' lives are based on records of place and sociological studies on marriage and familial status. Her argument, that these Black women who were migrating to northern cities like New York and Philadelphia from the South sought to "create autonomous and beautiful lives" (Hartman xiii), is made based on the space they built and the people they connected with.

Her focus on the individual is intersected by reflections on how these individuals informed and were informed by their space and interpersonal connections. These reflections are embodied by metaphors like the chorus and chorines or the riot and rioters. For example, she concentrates on a woman who joins a chorus line, Mabel Hampton, and how she shapes and is shaped by the chorus. But she also uses the term chorus in reference to Harlem itself (Hartman 301) and to the many voices she pulls from in the body of her fabulation (xiv). As well, she examines the lives of inmates at the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility for Women—Eleanor Fagan, Esther Brown, Eva Perkins, and others—and how they inform and are informed by "Assembl[age] in a Riotous Manner" (229). Hartman also uses riotous language to describe these

Black women's fight to forge their own free lives, as she writes, "The endeavor is to recover the insurgent ground of these lives; to exhume open rebellion from the case file, […] to illuminate the radical imagination and everyday anarchy of ordinary, colored girls" (xiv). In this passage, she uses the same language of the riot—"insurgent", "rebellion", "radical", "anarchy" (xiv)—to build the perspective of these archivally oppressed women. By using the words that describe the figures she depicts on those figures' spaces and her own project with the other figures, Hartman builds a sense of space and collective within the book itself.

This framework is further constructed using contrast between perspectives of inside and outside the collective or space. For Hartman, the project to create an account of the past, utilizing, but in opposition to the practise of history, is built on a framework of inside and outside. From a historical lens, the figures Hartman seeks to illuminate are outside the boundaries of the record. This separation is the dominant ideology that propagates the cultural absence rooted in the centuries of trauma and erasure. But Hartman frames her pursuit, writing, "This story is told from inside the circle" (xiv). By framing her book as inside, Hartman subverts the built-in perspective of history—that history is the central plot. From inside the metaphorical circle of absence, Hartman forces us to reposition our taught, oppressive perspectives and embody erased perspectives. This shift forces us to question present, oppressive conclusions about "whose perspective matters" (xiii).

Hartman's embodiment of absence as inside a collective or space is well supported by theories of collective memory. For Hartman, the experience of individuals and her expression of an inside and outside perspective hinge on the relationship between individual and collective memory. This relationship between individual and collective in *Wayward Lives*, mirrors the relationship of past trauma and present cultural absence.

In the chapter "Cultural trauma and collective memory" from his book *Cultural Trauma* (2001), Ron Eyerman outlines collective memory and trauma and their uses in literature and art. He distinguishes "collective memory" from history, defining collective memory

> as the outcome of interaction, a […] dialogic process […] of negotiation for both individuals and the collective itself. […] From this perspective, the past is a collectively shaped, if not collectively experienced, temporal reference point which forms an individual, more than it is re-shaped to fit generational or individual needs. (Eyerman 7)

Here, Eyerman defines "collective memory" as molded by, as well as molding, the collective and its individuals. He contrasts collective memory with the practise of history, criticizing history as "always written from some point of view" (8) and saying, "as an academic discipline, even within the constraints of nationally based institutions, [history's] aims and, especially, its rules of evidence, are of a different sort from the collective memory of a group. At the very least, professional historical accounts can be criticized for their ethnocentrism" (8). Here, Eyerman does not oppose the conventional practise of history as forwardly as I believe Hartman does with her approach to conveying the past in the face of history's conventions and failures. Eyerman, however, builds his theory of collective memory in opposition to history, like Hartman's method does.

For Eyerman, this collective memory is both the basis of individuals' self-understanding and the medium of memory as we experience it. He writes, "collective memory provides both individual and society with a temporal map, unifying nation through time as well as space. Collective memory specifies the temporal parameters of past and future, where we came from and where we are going, and also why we are here now" (6). His understanding of collective

memory defines a fabric of negotiated memory, tethering individuals to collectives through time and space.

Eyerman's interest in defining a temporal and spacial map through memory applies to Hartman's approach in *Wayward Lives.* While Hartman uses critical fabulation where Eyerman uses theory, both create a new framework of space and temporality in their work. Hartman's approach while less transparent, illuminates cultural absence through her lens of individual experience within the collective absence. Hartman's own interplay between the individual and the collective, as in the riot and the chorus in *Wayward Lives,* reflects the bridge she forms between original trauma and cultural absence.

The figures Hartman chooses, while undergoing their own personal experiences and struggles, exist in the direct shadow of the trans-Atlantic slave trade few generations before them. She highlights this shadow, for example, with her unnamed "minor figure" from the chapter "Minor Figure." Hartman writes, "So much time accumulates on her small figure, the girl might well be centuries old, bearing the weight of slavery and empire" (27). In this passage, she notes the traumatic past of slavery borne by her figures. Instead of focusing on said traumatic past and framing her figures as unwilful victims of a larger event, Hartman frames them as hopeful (10) revolutionaries (217) and exercising their will (241) to seek out a new way, "believ[ing] another world was possible" (347). Hartman focuses on their personal experience and trauma from the viewpoint of their absence from our contemporary, cultural past. In this way, Hartman breaks with history and with narrow concepts of intergenerational trauma theory, like Hirsch's, that are tethered to the events of trauma in the past and their familial memory. Her struggle against the oppressive, controlling narrative of history is informed by the individuals she chooses to depict. As opposed to using theory to conceptualize a new approach to

intergenerational trauma, Hartman uses these past figures, from behind the margins of their minimal documentation and historical archivism, to enact a new approach to intergenerational trauma. Her enactment is impossible without said figures and their personal experience. In a way, Hartman negotiates with them, the same way collective memory is negotiated within a group (Eyerman 7), but she negotiates intergenerationally and with absent and obscure figures.

The connection she draws between the individual/collective and past trauma/present absence is evident in her depiction of the reformatory riots of the chapter "Riot and Refrain." In this chapter, Hartman explores the riotous women forced unjustly into abusive imprisonment, focusing on their struggle to be heard. Through her exploration Hartman speaks to the power of collective voice, as well as the difficulty with collapsing individuals' personal experience into such a collective voice. In her conclusion to the chapter, she writes:

> All those listening outside could discern were "gales of catcalls, cyclones of rage, tornadoes of squeals." The sounds yielded to "one hair-raising, ear-testing Devil's chorus." Those inside the circle listened for the love and disappointment, the longing and the outrage that fueled this collective utterance. They channeled the fears and hopes of the ones who loved them, the bad dreams and the nightmares about children stolen away by white men in the back of wagons or lost as sea. The refrains were redolent with all the lovely plans about what they would do once they were free. (Hartman 286)

Here, Hartman draws a distinct contrast between the outside historical accounts of reports about the riots and the personal experience of those inside the riots. This attention to both perspectives, outside and inside "the circle" (285) foremost shows her recognition of history's practical prejudice. Hartman contrasts her approach with history's by framing her quotations from past articles as the outside voice. Where those voices represent the audible majority in history's

outlook, Hartman shows their limitedness and treats them as outside her frame of exploration. Her recognition of these articles and their prejudice restates, as well, her position filling in absence. Through her fabulation she reconfigures these outside perspectives as deaf to a truer reality (the reality of the rioter's lives and trauma) now shrouded in absence. For Hartman, the noise is meaningless to those without the individual perspective. With it, the noise is a "language" (283): a negotiated reality, memory, trauma. To be within the circle or to speak the language, one must have the perspective of the individual within this collective as Hartman makes clear in the conclusion to "Riot and Refrain." Each have their own "love," "disappointment," "longing," "outrage," "fears," "hopes," "ones who [love] them," "bad dreams," "refrains" (286). Hartman's focus on the individual characteristics of the rioters shows her centralization of individual perspective. To see and hear through the absence, Hartman must look to individual perspective. The power of the rioters comes in its collective volume, but its message is easily twisted and repurposed in prejudice with the generalization and compression of the individuals. So too does the cultural absence continue to loom over the present without an individual perspective within it with which to orient oneself.

A second example of her framework is the theme laced throughout the book of "the chorus" and the "chorines," or the individual cabaret performers in the chorus. Hartman continually relies on the imagery of the chorus in her illustration of the individual and the collective. She ends the book off with two chapters focused directly on the chorus and an individual chorine, Mabel Hampton. In the first of these two chapters, "The Beauty of the Chorus," Hartman depicts the power of the collective, as well as the dichotomy between the inside and outside of the collective, much like with the rioters, writing:

> Dancing in the cabaret was different from dancing on the stage. In the music hall, when the lights illuminated the stage, you became someone other than yourself, and this person guided how you moved, directed your gestures. The chorus was transformed from a line of separate dancers into a shared body finding a common rhythm. And this body moved as one, erasing the borders of the bounded self, feeling and moving in concert, and communicating with the audience through the cadence of voices, gestures, variations of movement, and the rhythm of clap and step. (303)

This passage shows the impact of the chorus upon both those inside and outside of the collective "shared body" (303). By becoming a part of the chorus, the individual chorines can become "someone other" (303). This metamorphosis can be read in two ways. It can be read as a limitation to personhood, as may be evident in the wording guidance and direction (303), both seemingly controlling or inhibiting verbs. It can also, however, be read as a growth of personhood, as shedding the weight of their individuality, as "erasing the borders of the bounded self" (303) seems to suggest. By opening their individuality up to a collective being, the chorines can remove the limitations of individuality.

This imagery mirrors Eyerman's idea of collective memory: the chorines become a negotiated idea (Eyerman 7) through their commitment to each "finding a common rhythm" (Hartman 303). The former reading lends itself to the omnipresent, outside experience in Hartman's depiction of the chorus—the audience. Hartman makes the dichotomy of inside and outside the collective essential to the collective's existence in this passage's imagery by first cementing that only "when the lights [illuminate] the stage" (303) are the chorines transformed.

The audience could be viewed as the controlling force behind the guiding and directing (303) of the chorus. This view is also supported by Hartman's description of "the beauty of

becoming one with seven other girls […] unfold[ing] in public under the pressure and encouragement of the gaze of strangers" (302). This description continues the double reading with both "pressure" and "encouragement" (302), seemingly negative and positive contexts, Hartman uses here. Yet she does not draw a clear conclusion. This ambiguity is evident in her reference to the relationship between the chorus and audience as "communicating with" (303) one another. This wording gives the chorus far more autonomy in relation to the outsiders than as previously with the rioters. In both passages, Hartman seems to suggest the collective is shaped both by the relationship between the individual members, as well as, essentially, the distinction between inside and outside of the collective.

Her reference to the outsiders as the audience, viewing the performance of a combined collective of "someone other" (303) is indicative of the misjudgment of the outsiders. Their "gaze" (302) comes with "pressure" or "encouragement" (302), neither are terms of understanding or flexibility. While the chorus is in "communication with" (303) the audience, the opposite is less clear. The imagery of performance and audience denotes a pretense of reality versus fantasy. Where the performers are in "communication with" (303) the audience, the performers are also in a conceptual subspace to the audience. For the audience the chorus is their pressured or encouraged (303) collective performance. In the terms of collective memory, the space between inside and outside the collective, critical to defining the collective, inherently lends to said collective being easily twisted or repurposed by those outside it. This inherent obscurity to those outside the collective is portrayed as the sub-reality of stage performance in the imagery of the chorus.

Once again, however, Hartman centers herself, within the collective. Hartman makes clear that this performance is viewed as a sub-reality from outside, while, at the same time,

framing said sub-reality as the central reality in *Wayward Lives.* This framing is evident when she says, "Walking down Seventh Avenue, Mabel delighted in getting lost in the crowd, in being carried away by the rush of black, brown, and tan bodies, in being one among the chorus" (301). This quotation illustrates how Hartman uses the imagery of the chorus metaphorically. Here she applies the imagery of the chorus to a broader idea: in this case denoting Harlem city life. This Black and queer city life is the subject of Hartman's efforts to undo contemporary, historical obfuscation. It is the area of absence she mends in *Wayward Lives* through her fabulation of the individual, in this case Mabel, the chorine. As Hartman shows through her focus on Mabel and her individual path, the chorus, like the riotous noise, can only be understood from an inside, individual perspective. This notion is evident further into her description of the chorus as she says, "The dancers also moved independently, orbiting one another like small planets, one body pulling away from the others, yet still connected by force, gravity, and propulsion, then rejoining the line, engulfed once again in the collective composition and the collaborative movement" (303). In this passage, Hartman shows how, viewed from within the chorus, the chorus is clearly made up of separate individuals, individuals bound in common interpersonal action or purpose (as Hartman imagines here as a "gravity" (303) upon the chorines), but individuals all the same. Her use of the terms "collective composition" and "collaborative movement" (303) once again brings forth the understanding of "collective memory" from Eyerman. Just as within the chorus, the individual chorines collectively compose and collaboratively move (303), so too the individuals of a collective negotiate collective memory (Eyerman 7). This metaphorical resonance is also evident given Hartman's broader use of the term in depicting Harlem (301). Through this imagery of the chorus, Hartman illustrates her framework of individual and collective memory or trauma. As Hartman delves into the absence she seeks to illuminate, she

tethers herself to the individuals, the chorines. Her unique approach of fabulating individual lives allows her to shed light on a past obscurity, still felt culturally, socially, and individually today, in a way that the contemporary, conventional practise of history and the attempts of narrowly defined intergenerational trauma literature and literary theory do not and cannot.

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