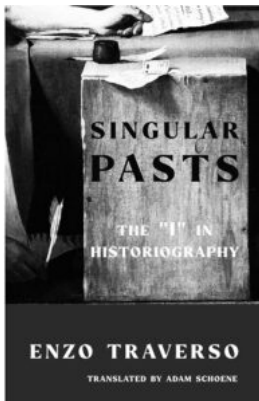
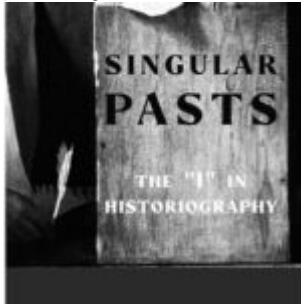


# Presentism: African American Epilogue

January 30, 2023



With a few exceptions, the historical and literary sources of these chapters come from continental Europe (they are mostly French, with several German, Italian, and Spanish incursions). I had already finished the original version when I discovered the powerful work of Saidiya Hartman. At first glance, *Lose Your Mother* (2007) perfectly conforms to the tropes of subjectivist history: she writes in first person; her book is based on extensive historical documentation without inventing or fictionalizing anything; she describes the steps of her investigation, giving her work a significant autobiographical dimension; she does not hide the emotions related to her discoveries and thoughts; she puts forward the subjective part of her inquiry, admitting how much it is fueled by an identity quest, well expressed by genealogical references and family recollections; finally, her book is built on a twofold historical temporality that merges the reconstitution of the past with an account from the perspective of the present. The history of slavery and the slave trade intermingles with the description of a one-year investigation conducted in Ghana, and this continuous switch between past and present is supported by a remarkable narrative rhythm. Readers do not face a grandiose historical fresco à la Braudel, but rather a literary, historical, and political work in the style of Susan Sontag, even if Hartman combines many skills of both. Undoubtedly, all these elements give Hartman a distinguished place in the constellation of subjectivist authors analyzed in this book, beside someone like Jablonka. Nonetheless, there is something in her writing that overcomes the limits—or avoids the traps—of most subjectivist history.

The main difference is as simple as it is essential. Differently from those of many European historians analyzed in these pages, Hartman's investigation is not confined to a subjective sphere: it transcends the author's self and results in a collective view of the past (as well as inspiring a collective agency in the present). Her latest book—*Wayward Lives* (2019), a reconstitution of the trajectory of rebellious black women in Philadelphia and New York at the beginning of the twentieth century—persuasively explains this posture. She does not fill the blanks of history with her imagination or literary artifacts; nothing is invented, since all characters and events described in her book truly existed. They are gathered from a multitude of sources that usually encumber the historian's workshop and fuel archival investigation: "journals of rent collectors; surveys and

monographs of sociologists; trial transcripts, slum photographs; reports of vice investigators, social workers, and parole officers; interviews with psychiatrists and psychologists; and prison case files.”<sup>1</sup> Her voice intermingles with those of historical actors by creating a polyphony that, although nonfictional, possesses a powerful lyrical strength. As she elucidates in the “note on method” that opens *Wayward Lives*,

I recreate the voices and use the words of these young women when possible and inhabit the intimate dimensions of their lives. The aim is to convey the sensory experience of the city and to capture the rich landscape of black social life. To this end, I employ a mode of close narration, a style which places the voice of narrator and character in inseparable relation, so that the vision, language, and rhythms of the wayward shape and arrange the text. The italicized phrases and lines are utterances from the chorus. The story is told from inside the circle.<sup>2</sup>

A similar hermeneutic “I” is at work in *Lose Your Mother*. Retracing the Atlantic slave route, she tries to capture some life fragments of the enslaved people deported to the New World by exploring the realms of their departure. Saidiya—she chose this Swahili first name in her sophomore year of college—claims her African American identity, but in Accra she quickly realizes the precariousness and elusiveness of the concept of “roots” itself. In Ghana, she was an *Obruni* (a stranger) and a “slave baby.” Any dream of finding “roots” and feeling “at home” had to be abandoned as romantic illusion. Slavery was an experience of complete dispossession; there is no “homeland” to recover. Frederick Douglass was right to emphasize that “genealogical trees don’t flourish among slaves,”<sup>3</sup> and Saidiya’s experience proves this assessment. The African roots of African Americans are fabricated and exhibited by cultural industry. More than a legacy of the past, they are an “invented tradition” forged by the Ghanaian Ministry of Tourism with museums, U.S. universities, and some multinational companies like McDonald’s (which organizes “McRoots” tours). Slave memory is finally illustrated by brochures in which Ghana’s black kids appear disguised as slaves: “Every town or village had an atrocity to promote.”<sup>4</sup> There is nothing to be done: in Accra, Saidiya is a stranger even among her university colleagues. For them, she observes, “my self-proclaimed African identity, albeit hyphenated, was fanciful and my Swahili name an amusement. They could hardly manage to say it without snickering.”<sup>5</sup>

In fact, the slaves’ past is a mystery. Through genealogical research, Saidiya finds traces of her family at the archives of Willemstad, the capital of Curaçao, thus discovering that her known ancestors were all named Virgilio. However, she does not know the origins of her family name, Hartman. “Return” is an illusion. “The sense of not belonging and of being an extraneous element,” she concludes, “is at the heart of slavery.”<sup>6</sup> Yet she persists in defining herself as African American. This identity is grounded on a memory of suffering, not on ungraspable “roots” or a mythical imaginary home. It is an identity made of a memory of struggles. African Americans did not inherit a past of rootedness or the promise of a recovered homeland. They receive a legacy of struggle and rebellion, and this is their link with the past. Far from being a retreat into the self, this link is a living continuity of collective agency. Saidiya does not try to imagine her ancestors basking in the beautiful glow of an African landscape at sunset, the evening of a ritual celebration. Her visit to the dungeon of Elmina Castle, the Gold Coast fortification that provided the headquarters of the Royal Africa Company, which the British transformed into one of the main slave “warehouses” on the continent at the end of the seventeenth century, and from which five hundred thousand of slaves were deported, is a meaningful experience. Saidiya does not pretend to know what exactly happened there; she is more interested in understanding “what lived on from this history.”<sup>7</sup> Dispossession and oppression are not over. As she writes, the inequalities that affect Blacks in terms of lifespan, poverty, and homicide rate rival those of a third-world country. Her purpose, therefore, is not searching for an idealized past, but rather for the “roots” of a still living despair. In some passages

worthy of Fanon, she emphasizes that freedom is not a gift—it has to be taken—and that liberation is usually conquered by violence. Without any embellishment, she quotes the “inaugural gesture of revolt” as transcribed by a French planter:

That unhappy day was the 23rd of November 1733, at three in the morning. Mr Soetman’s Negroes, assisted by others, broke down their master’s door, while he was sleeping, ordered him to get up, and, after having stripped him naked, forced him to sing and dance. Then, after having run a sword through his body, they cut his head off, cut open his body, and washed themselves in his blood. To this execution, they added that of his daughter Hissing, thirteen years old, by slaughtering her on top of her stepfather’s body.<sup>8</sup>

Violence is horrible and ugly, and nonetheless, Fanon stressed, it can both “humanize” and “detoxify.”<sup>9</sup> Of course, a romanticized family saga would avoid these kinds of unpleasant descriptions. Javier Cercas, for example, does not depict the atrocities perpetrated by the Falangists during the Spanish Civil War when he sketches the portrait of his great-uncle as an authentic Homeric hero. Saidiya Hartman’s book certainly cannot be read as an apology for violence, but it is at the same time far from the current standards of memory catechism and human rights’ rhetorical prescriptions. She proves that it is possible to write in the first person avoiding solipsism and connecting one’s manifold “I” with the “we” that makes history.

#### Notes

1. Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals* (New York: Norton, 2019), xiv.
2. Hartman, xiii-iv.
3. Quoted by Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 90-91.
4. Hartman, 163.
5. Hartman, 218.
6. Hartman, 88.
7. Hartman, 130.
8. Hartman, 91-92.
9. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove, 2004), 44.

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