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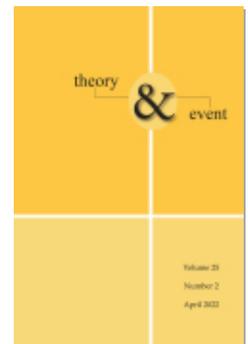
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# Attempting Redress: Fungibility, Ethics, and Redressive Practice in the Work of Saidiya Hartman

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**Abstract** This paper explores Saidiya Hartman's undertheorized account of 'redress' in conversation with the extensive uptake of her work on Black fungibility, subjection, and critiques of emancipation. Although Hartman uses the term in nearly all of her writing, little work has been done to clarify how Hartman conceptualizes redress as a response to the constitution of Black lives as abstract, exchangeable, and disposable. This paper offers an account of how Hartman theorizes redress, showing how it both resists, and acts as a mechanism for, the constitution of Blackness as fungible. Consequently, I argue that Hartman's readers fundamentally skew her thinking in divorcing redress from her other key concepts.

## Introduction

In a footnote to his essay, 'The Social Life of Social Death,' Jared Sexton writes that "it strikes me that the arrangement of afro-pessimism and Black optimism ... is a variation on a theme of Moten's discussion of Hartman in the opening pages of his *In the Break*."<sup>1</sup> Beyond merely noting Saidiya Hartman's work as a common resource for the Black optimism of Fred Moten and the Afro-pessimism for which he and Frank Wilderson III have become famous, Sexton here suggests that it is differing readings of Hartman's writing on fungibility, emancipation, and Black subjection that both inspire and divide these two veins of Black thought. Like Sexton, I also see Hartman's work as central to these ongoing debates in Black studies. Consequently, I find it particularly surprising that—despite their differences—both sides of these debates have remained unified in their refusal to engage seriously with a central aspect of Hartman's corpus, one that is intimately and inextricably a part of much, if not all, of her thinking: Hartman's concept of redress.

Those readers who have drawn on her work to develop Afro-pessimist and Black nihilist thinking<sup>2</sup> have remained completely silent on Hartman's discussions of redress. These readers have largely emphasized how Hartman develops an account of Blackness

as fungible and how that fungibility extends itself through the political and social reforms meant to remedy it, isolating fungibility from Hartman's other methodological and conceptual concerns. At the same time, Moten's Black optimism—in its 'appositional' relation to Afro-pessimism<sup>3</sup>—has acknowledged, but then actively criticized, Hartman's writing on redress. Though Moten takes note of Hartman's use of the term and cites passages of her work on it, he dismisses the idea that redress is a useful concept for Black thinking *tout court* without exploring the specifics of Hartman's theorizations of it. Moten dismisses redress, presenting it as a straightforward attempt to remedy the harms of slavery and its afterlives, and ascribing this reading to Hartman even as he acknowledges that her thinking ought to undermine such too-easy narratives.<sup>4</sup>

And yet, despite these silences and slights, redress is everywhere in Hartman's work. In *Lose Your Mother*, Hartman describes practices of spirit possession by slave traders meant to appease the spirits of taken slaves as an attempt at redress.<sup>5</sup> Redress is present in the everyday practices of enslaved peoples stealing away, engaging in minor acts of resistance, singing juba songs, and calling up memories of the Middle Passage and what was lost there as they upend a kitchen pot in *Scenes of Subjection*.<sup>6</sup> A Harlem dance scene is an attempt at redress in *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*.<sup>7</sup> Hartman's own work in and on archival sources in 'Venus in Two Acts' is described as an attempt at redress, even as she claims that that work mimes — necessarily — the violence to which her redress is addressed<sup>8</sup>. In these and still further moments, redress surfaces — insistently, doggedly — throughout Hartman's corpus.

Both the consistency of her return to redress and, as I will argue, its centrality to Hartman's thought call into question her readers' attempts to disentangle redress from her other insights. In response, this paper intervenes to articulate an account of what redress is and does in Hartman's work in order to show what is lost in its occlusion. In particular, I argue that Hartman's redress both responds to, and delineates the challenge posed by, Blackness's constitution as fungible insofar as fungibility elides both the sentience and the particularity of Black lives marked as disposable. Situated in the space of what Nijah Cunningham calls "the non-arrival of Black freedom"<sup>9</sup>, Hartman's redress contests her subjects' fungibility, attempting to craft spaces of relief and possibility even as it is a part of the very mechanism through which that fungibility is reconstituted.

In the first part of this essay, I unpack Hartman's account of fungibility as that to which her concept of redress is addressed. I attend to how the particular form of harm imposed by fungibility constitutes a challenge that turns to archival fidelity, emancipatory legal victories, and the implementation of universalist ethical principles all fail to meet. In the second part, I give an account of redress itself as it appears

both in Hartman's subjects and in her own methodology. There, I focus on two key elements of redress in Hartman's work: her emphasis on the importance of *re-membering* and the articulation of pain, alongside her focus on a counter-investment in the fungible body by creating spaces to articulate desire in practices of *self-making*. In my reading of each of these elements of redress, I show how it remains inextricably tied to Hartman's thinking on the nature of slavery's harms, the methods through which Blackness is theorized, and the possibilities, limitations, and dangers involved in resistance.

### Part One: Fungibility

Black fungibility has arguably been the key concept taken up by Hartman's readers. Wilderson draws on Hartman directly in his landmark *Red, White, & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*, claiming that Blackness as a structural position is characterized by fungibility and accumulation<sup>10</sup>. Calvin Warren's *Ontological Terror* draws on Hartman's account of fungibility in offering a reading of how Black people are taken as not having any sense of *being*—no recognizable or stable essence—of their own.<sup>11</sup> C. Riley Snorton centers a rethinking of fungibility in its relationship to the mutability of gender for Black peoples in his *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity*.<sup>12</sup> Much like Tiffany Lethabo King in *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies*,<sup>13</sup> Snorton emphasizes the relationship between Hartman's account of fungibility and visions of Black fugitivity drawn from Moten. Indeed, Sarah Jane Cervenak and J. Kameron Carter go so far as to argue that the first half of Hartman's *Scenes*, specifically in its development of an account of fungibility, is "Black performance studies' founding text".<sup>14</sup> That said, while fungibility becomes a central concept for these readers, few elaborate on how Hartman theorizes this fungibility not just as a key feature of Blackness as it is shaped through slavery and its afterlives, but as a problem and challenge which—I argue—redress both responds to and participates in.

Snorton has traced the etymology of 'fungibility' in English to its 1818 use in describing property that was "alike liquidate and exigible"<sup>15</sup> and indeed fungibility has its roots in such Latin phrases as *fungi vice*, 'to take the place of' and the root verb *fungi*, 'to perform,' with still older senses in which it means 'to enjoy.' Hartman's use of the term draws on all of these senses in describing how enslaved Black people were constituted as exchangeable, able to take the place of one another and to have their places taken by whites insofar as they were valued only relative to what they were able to do; what physical, emotional, or symbolic tasks or roles they performed for the enjoyment of white masters.<sup>16</sup>

Hartman argues that "...the fungibility of the commodity makes the captive body an abstract and empty vessel vulnerable to the projection of others' feelings, ideas, desires, and values; and, as property, the dispossessed body of the slave is the surrogate for the master's body since it guarantees his disembodied universality and acts as the sign of his power and dominion".<sup>17</sup> Exposed through the interdictions on both Black testimony and self-defense against whites, a fungible body is, in Hartman's account, disposable insofar as it has no particular value separate from its use. This is a body that can be disposed of in favor of anyone or anything who could perform the same functions, anyone or anything that could do the same work. In King's words, fungibility "represents the unfettered use of Black bodies for the self-actualization of the human and for the attendant humanist project of the production and expansion of space".<sup>18</sup> As fungible articles under slavery, Black people were 'fundamentally' vehicles for the enjoyment of others, capable of being inhabited and put to use, as Hartman will say, "... in any capacity that pleased the master or whomever".<sup>19</sup>

To be put to use in *any* capacity by *any* white person, constituted as fungible in the sense of being exchangeable, disposable, and reducible to their potential use, enslaved Black people also had to be conceptualized and treated as anonymous, unspecific, *empty* of any kind of particularity. Black people as fungible, Hartman writes, are marked by a specific kind of "...abstractness and immateriality...".<sup>20</sup> If the enslaved were definite, particular beings, if they had acknowledged sentience, personality, or bodies with their own pleasures, limitations, or needs that called for acknowledgment or respect, it would curtail how those people could be put to work or enjoyed. Simply put, if an enslaved Black person were *any* particular or definite thing, they could not be enjoyed in *every* way that might suit white needs, and could not then serve as vehicles for the universal enjoyment and extension of whites.

While fungibility characterized the nature of race relations and the constitution of Blackness during slavery, Hartman also uses the concept as she describes the production of a skewed archive of Black lives both during slavery and in its wake. The archival records with which Hartman works are marked and marred as they ignore, silence, or distort the sentience and singularity of the Black people inscribed therein. Fungibility is at work in how enslaved captives were recorded simply as cargo aboard slave ships, left nameless in records or given names that suited their masters. It is at work also in how the enslaved were given scant or no resources to record accounts of their own thoughts and desires, actions or feelings. In both antebellum and post-bellum America, this fungibility is at work in the records that retain Black people only under the signs of criminality, waywardness, and madness. In 'Venus in Two Acts,' Hartman argues that "the silence in the archive in combination with the robustness of the fort or barracoon,

not as holding cell or space of confinement but as an episteme, has for the most part focused the historiography of the slave trade on quantitative matters and on issues of markets and trade relations".<sup>21</sup> Growing out of slavery's reduction of the enslaved only to *quantitative* matters, to questions of trade and tradability, the archive reproduces the fungibility that constituted Blackness on slavery's terms in continuing to deny the *qualitative* dimensions of particularity, sentience, and feeling. Black people are reduced to one among many exchangeable and disposable quantities, commodities, or tools. This fungibility prevents the possibility of any immediate or untainted access to these people through the archive, even as that archive remains at times the only avenue through which they might be approached.

Fungibility lives on past slavery's formal end not only in how it colors the archive, but also in and through the very terms of emancipation. No *tabula rasa*, emancipation's transformation of the enslaved into ostensibly free citizens re-enforced Black fungibility in the very terms through which it ascribed them an "im/proper freedom."<sup>22</sup> As Hartman writes, "the antagonistic production of abstract equality and Black subjugation rested upon contending and incompatible predications of the freed—as sovereign indivisible, and self-possessed and as fungible and individuated subjects whose capacities could be quantified, measured, exchanged, and alienated."<sup>23</sup> The abstraction and universality of the rights and freedoms ascribed to the formerly enslaved served as vehicles for the continued flourishing of the abstraction and universality at work in fungibility through parallels in their terms and concepts.

On this account, Black people's continued reduction to their exchangeable, quantitative value is masked and extended under the language of equality and the equal capacity to sell one's labor under racialized conditions of exploitation. Black people's continued indebtedness to whites was sheltered in the extension of universal rights and their concomitant language of obligation. And the naturalization of universal rights and freedoms, alongside the pretense that Black people would be treated as indistinguishable from any and all other human beings, sovereign subjects, or rational agents, disavowed how Black people remained burdened with a past whose intrusions then appeared as failings or flaws in need of perpetual management. The conditions of emancipation thus preserved Black people's vulnerability to white intrusions into their homes and lives under the guise of moral correction.<sup>24</sup> Rather than dispelling the fungibility that had been part of Black people's constitution as enslaved property, "postbellum, liberalist freedom, when enacted by the former slave or the post-slavery subject, [could] only register as property acting improperly."<sup>25</sup>

As part of this critique of emancipation and its supposedly universalizing work, Hartman argues that "It is worth examining whether

universalism merely dissimulates the stigmatic injuries constitutive of Blackness with abstract assertions of equality, sovereignty, and individuality." "Indeed," she asks, "if this is the case, can the dominated be liberated by universalist assertions?"<sup>26</sup> Her analysis of the abstract universalism of what she calls a 'travestied emancipation' outlines the challenge involved in both past and present reformist attempts to ascribe or apply universal rights and responsibilities—political or ethical—in response to slavery's harms. The ways that fungibility reduces the body to use, empties it of sentience and feeling, and elides its particularity are harbored in the extension or application of abstract and universal conceptions of freedom, equality, rights, and sovereignty to Black people, even—and perhaps especially—when these are presented as attempts to heal or correct for those very harms.

Forms of deontological, utilitarian, and contractarian liberal moral and political theories have attempted to address the conditions of slavery and finesse their formulations of universal rules, principles, or entitlements to repair either the exclusion of Black people from the realm of moral subjects or the particular ways that they have been wronged. And yet, Hartman and others have detailed both these systems' historical failings to contend with slavery and its afterlives and the parasitism of their conceptions of freedom, sovereignty, and equality on the fungibility of the very Black people to whom they are offered as correctives.<sup>27</sup> These accounts skirt the key questions that Hartman's work on fungibility asks: How is it that the harm involved in fungibility can be *addressed* without thinking that that fungibility—constitutive as it is of Blackness—can be dispelled, ignored, or engaged without reinforcing or extending it in the very terms we use for repair? How can Blackness, as constituted through its fraught history, be engaged without attempting to erase or reject it as occurs in the turn toward universal rights and principles? Hartman confronts this challenge and the necessity of working *with* fungibility even as one tries to "recuperate lives entangled with and impossible to differentiate from the terrible utterances that condemned them to death,"<sup>28</sup> developing and practicing her particular conception of redress.

## Part Two: Redress

The second chapter of *Scenes*, 'Redressing the Pained Body,' investigates, "...the struggle waged in everyday practices, from the appropriation of space in local and pedestrian acts, holding a praise meeting in the woods, meeting a lover in the canebrake, or throwing a surreptitious dance in the quarters to the contestation of one's status as transactable object or the vehicle of another's rights..."<sup>29</sup> alongside accounts of song and dance, practices involving the protection of meeting spaces, and articulations of pain, hunger, and desire. All of

these Hartman describes as the work of, or as attempts at, redress. Elsewhere, redress will involve Hartman's own work in and on archival sources, her engagement with the fragments of discourse and memory that preserve Black lives, even as they skew and risk re-stigmatizing them. Redress characterizes the practices operating outside of or below the level of institutional political struggle through which Black people contest their conditions.<sup>30</sup> Redress is the way that fungibility is responded to, not in being *undone*, *healed*, or *accommodated*, but insofar as its terms are *challenged*, *relieved*, or *re-elaborated*. Hartman will describe a host of different practices as forms of redress. What unifies these practices is the presence of three elements that structure their response to fungibility: re-membering, articulation, and self-making or 'counter-investment.'

In the next sections, I divide Hartman's conception of redress into a re-membering and articulation of pain that returns to and elaborates fungibility as a harm, and a counter-investment in the body made fungible through practices of self-making and the articulation of desire. Noting the tendency in contemporary Black studies to emphasize *either* accounts of death and loss or accounts of pleasure and joy, James Bliss writes that "One doesn't escape the question of death by insisting on the power of life, and one doesn't escape the question of social death by engaging erotic life. Each term descends into the other".<sup>31</sup> As I hope will become evident, each of these elements of Hartman's account of redress engages the other, descends into the other, as re-membering harm offers a sense that things might still become otherwise—acknowledging the ongoing and active *constitution* of Blackness as fungible—and as counter-investment in the body takes place through a return to that fungible condition, to the harm that has been done and that remains unfinished.

### *Re-membering and the Articulation of Pain*

"First," Hartman writes, "redress is a re-membering of the social body that occurs precisely in the recognition and articulation of devastation, captivity, and enslavement. The re-membering of the violated body must be considered in relation to the dis-membered body of the slave—that is, the segmentation and organization of the captive body for the purposes of work, reproduction, and punishment".<sup>32</sup> The first aspect of redress, as Hartman describes it, is attending to the harmed person as harmed through an engagement with the past. Hartman consistently claims that a key element of redress is the need to re-invoke or "mime" the harms done to Black people through the Middle Passage, the violence of slavery, travestied forms of emancipation, and the distortions of the archive.<sup>33</sup> To redress the fungibility instituted through these practices means acknowledging and accounting for

them in the harm that they have done and that they continue to do; in what Hartman calls their 'dis-memberment.'<sup>34</sup>

In attempts at redress, the felt sense of harm is put into a historical, narrative, or other expressive frame that allows the pain of the past to not just be felt, but to be heard, seen, and engaged. It thus transforms pain from a naturalized condition into an explicit problem. More precisely, it transforms that pain into a question. In the first chapter of *Wayward*, Hartman writes about a woman—one she finds and leaves nameless—recently arrived in the North, torn between extensions of past harm and specters of alternative futures. She is haunted by the question "Can I live?", uncertain if this is a question "to which she could ever give a certain answer or only repeat in anticipation of something better than this, bear the pain of it and the hope of it, the beauty and the promise".<sup>35</sup> Though it is a practice that re-invokes and perhaps re-inflicts the pain woven into the past through its insistent repetition, re-remembering puts into explicit question the terms of Blackness' historical and ongoing constitution as fungible.

This language of remembering, miming, and articulating harm as part of Hartman's descriptions of redress clearly mirrors the account of 'redressive action' in the work of Victor Turner from whom Hartman draws her use of both the terms 'redress' and 'breach.' For Turner in *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*, redress "...furnishes a distanced replication and critique of the events leading up to and composing the 'crisis.'"<sup>36</sup> On Turner's account, in response to a breach in community norms, 'redress reenacts the breach and the conflict involved therein and does so in a way that frames the breach critically. Redress articulates that something is wrong with a scene in the form of its reenactment. Redressive 'replication' of these events re-present the breach as a problem and, in that replication or reiteration, makes room to reimagine how the problem could play out otherwise, and to make it a site for new forms of attachment and relation.

Hartman describes this critical re-remembering work in an imagined dance number in a Harlem club in *Wayward Lives* that she explicitly names a scene of redress: "What it envisions: life reconstructed along radically different lines. The chorus elaborates and reconstructs the passage, conjures the death in the fields and the death on city pavements, and reanimates life; it enables the felled bodies to rise, plays out in multiple times, and invites all to enter the circle, to join the line, to rejoice, and to *celebrate with great solemnity*".<sup>37</sup> This scene reiterates the issue, conjures the crisis, and in repeating it, re-opens the space for it to be lived out differently. The intensity of death on the ship, in the field, or on the pavement plays out its devastation in the intensity of the dance. But in its reiteration, that devastation is not the end. The dead rise up, they are re-integrated in a continuity—the circle, the line—with the world of the living. All can celebrate with a solemnity that does not efface, but works to face up to, the ongoing harms of the past.

As Hartman puts it, “the recognition of loss is a crucial element in redressing the breach introduced by slavery. This recognition entails a remembering of the pained body, not by way of a simulated wholeness but precisely through the recognition of the amputated body in its amputatedness, in the insistent recognition of the violated body as human flesh, in the cognition of its needs and in the anticipation of its liberty”.<sup>38</sup> Here, Hartman rejects the idea that redress is about a restoration to a prior imagined ‘whole’ condition as she rejects a reading of enslaved peoples’ practices, like patting juba or overturning kitchen pots, as simply remnants of an Africanity that can be traced back to particular peoples and places on the continent.<sup>39</sup> Redress is not about trying to return to the past so as to re-establish a continuity with what Black bodies might have experienced in a real or imagined Africa prior to being enslaved, a past which could offer a model of how things ought to be. Instead, redress mimes or repeats the violence that founds the breach of transatlantic slavery and the making-fungible of Black bodies so as to draw attention to the breach as breach, to the *imposition* of pain and the *constitution* of Blackness as fungible. This miming thus works to challenge the naturalization of Blackness as fungible without positing an ideal condition prior to that constitution.

For Hartman, to say that the goal of redress is to engage with the breach as breach, the harm done to Black people as harm, is to say that redress can act as a limited corrective in its aspect as re-remembering not through healing wounds, but through creating the space—contrary to the constitution of fungible bodies as inured to harm—in which pain can be recognized and articulated and new potential opened up in response. For her, “Pain is a normative condition that encompasses the legal subjectivity of the enslaved that is constructed along the lines of injury and punishment, the violation and suffering inextricably enmeshed with the pleasures of minstrelsy and melodrama, the operation of power on Black bodies, and the life of property in which the full enjoyment of the slave as thing supersedes the admittedly tentative recognition of slave humanity and permits the intemperate uses of chattel”.<sup>40</sup> Pain is here a normative condition insofar as the failure to acknowledge enslaved people’s capacity to feel pain marks their being ontologized as fungible commodities. That pain is effaced to make it seem that there is a natural and uncoerced unity between the Black body, its work as vehicle of white enjoyment, and its need for occasional correctives through punishments that redirect the labor of mostly insensate flesh. Insofar as the disavowal of pain is the through-line connecting and naturalizing the practices of Black fungibility, the articulation of pain acts as a practice of re-remembrance in offering the sense that this pain is present, a problem, and laden with a history. To articulate this pain is to invoke a past that remains active and unsettled, one that cannot be confined to discrete events or eras but, rather, lives on in the fungible body.

The emphasis in Hartman's work on redress as ultimately about re-remembering and the articulation of pain, and *not* about healing or the closing of the breach, contests Moten's critique of Hartman's use of the term in the introduction to his *Black and Blur*. In an explicit response to Hartman's discussions of redress, Moten argues that "there's no remembering, no healing. There is, rather, a perpetual cutting, a constancy of expansive and enfolding rupture and wound, a rewind that tends to exhaust the metaphysics upon which the idea of redress is grounded".<sup>41</sup> Moten's argument is rooted in the claim that Blackness is not simply a kind of wound or pathology instituted at a certain moment in time through the event of slavery, and capable of being healed through a faithful remembrance of and compensation for that harm. Indeed, he is emphatic in his claim that a model of redress as healing is impossible precisely because, "The event of captivity and enslavement is not an event. *Event* isn't even close to being the right word for this unremitting non-remittance, as Hartman's own writing shows and proves".<sup>42</sup>

That slavery is not an event — not a singular, locatable moment in which Blackness is constituted as fungible and to which one might return in order to undo that constitution or which one might ever be able to remember in straightforward or objective ways — is a lesson that Moten claims is clear in Hartman's writing but occluded by her misguided turn to the language of redress. Yet, as I have shown already in this section, redress in Hartman's work is inextricable from what Moten calls a 'perpetual cutting.' Hartman's conception of redress rejects the idea of slavery as singular event at the same time as it rejects the possibility of a final healing of its wounds. Redress, on Hartman's terms, re-members and creates spaces for the articulation of pain but, in so doing, it lingers on the difficulty of locating that pain in particular moments or events in the past, or of relegating it exclusively to the past. In this vein, Moten's removal of the dash that separates re-remembering in his discussion of Hartman is telling. Hartman's work is not remembering in the sense of a return to a finished past. It is a re-enacting of harm in the very attempt to alleviate it, a re-invocation by the body of the terms of its constitution as fungible that resists presenting that harm as something that can be firmly situated, closed, and healed. Re-remembering not only does not heal slavery's wounds: it cuts again. Re-remembering returns to and re-enacts an unfinished and unsettled scene, an ongoing constitution, that disturbs the dead and strains the living. It does so in the hope that — in repeating the cut, *but with a difference* — something else might break out not instead of, but alongside, pain.<sup>43</sup>

Hartman does not shy away from how her own redressive return to archival sources involves re-remembering as a miming and repeating of the violence involved in Black fungibility, and addresses the distinction between faithful remembering and redressive re-remembering. She

does so in her acknowledgment that her sources are indeed skewed, distorted images of the Black subjects they describe, reinforcing the forms of power and domination that constituted them as fungible under slavery and re-inscribing that fungibility after emancipation. That said, miming the figurative dimensions of history allows Hartman “both to tell an impossible story and to amplify the impossibility of its telling”.<sup>44</sup> In her own reiteration of the harm that effaces Black particularity and engages the nameless, the distorted, the caricatured, Hartman articulates and grapples with the impossibility of recapturing an unmediated, painless contact with the lives to which and for which her work reaches.<sup>45</sup>

Perhaps one of her most beautiful and difficult attempts at this re-membering work as it repeats and recasts the harm that redress addresses is Hartman’s engagement with the odalisque picture of a young Black girl in *Wayward Lives*. Starting from a photograph taken by Thomas Eakins that obviously sexualizes a naked prepubescent girl, Hartman asks about her life, wonders how she responded to this man’s advances, how her family did or did not reply, how the experience marked her even as it serves as the only archival mark of her that remains. Left without a name or other identifying trace on the photograph, Hartman wonders who she became or might have become, what it might mean to extend her life beyond the circumscribed, pornographic, and violating scene framed in the photograph. Yet, in doing so, Hartman must make use of the very fungible anonymity of that Black girl that her work aims to redress. She writes that, “after a year spent looking at a colored girl, posed in the nude, on an old horsehair sofa, I decided to retrace her steps through the city and imagine her many lives. Following her footsteps and in those of other young Black women in the city, I made my way through the Black Belts of Philadelphia and New York... In the end, it became not the story of one girl but a serial biography of a generation, a portrait of the chorus, a moving picture of the wayward.”<sup>46</sup> Hartman reaches for this girl, assaulted and exposed, made fungible, anonymous, and opened to further assault through that fungibility. Hartman reaches for *her*, but since the traces of who she was as particular individual are effaced, Hartman ends up finding still other Black faces to fill her place, faces that are exchanged for hers.<sup>47</sup> There is not one girl but many lives, not a particular Black person but a generation, a chorus, a repeatable image of all the wayward. The fungibility of the Black girl in the photo is reiterated in Hartman’s very attempts to imagine her otherwise and to let her stand in for and echo in other Black people, other Black girls, other times and places. That said, Hartman’s work is a practice of redress in that her echoing asks, in each face exchanged, *where the particular girl went*. Hartman might repeat that fungibility, but she preserves the

degree to which it is not simply a fact about Black life, but part of its unfinished constitution, and thus subject to ongoing questioning. In other words, she re-members and repeats Blackness's constitution as fungible, but she refuses to ontologize it.

This refusal to ontologize fungibility marks one place where Hartman's emphasis on redress shows how her work, while serving as the ground for Afro-pessimist and Black nihilist thinkers like Wilderson and Warren, clearly diverges from them. Wilderson argues that Hartman shows how "slavery is and connotes an *ontological* status for Blackness".<sup>48</sup> Warren echoes Wilderson's claim that this ontology requires a "paradigmatic analysis,"<sup>49</sup> arguing that "Hartman's analysis in the postbellum period and my analysis of the antebellum period provide a *paradigmatic* perspective on emancipation".<sup>50</sup> Such readings, in their attempts to isolate Hartman's senses of Blackness, fungibility, and emancipation are belied when put in conversation with Hartman's focus on a redress that questions the totalism of these formulations and their desire to say what Blackness is—or is not—distinct from how it is made and remade. Rather than focusing on ontological *descriptions* of Blackness as fungible, Hartman clarifies that her "reading attempts to elucidate the means by which the wanton use of and the violence directed toward the Black body come to be identified as *its* pleasures and dangers—that is, the expectations of slave property are *ontologized* as the innate capacities and inner feelings of the enslaved, and moreover, the ascription of excess and enjoyment to the African effaces the violence perpetrated against the enslaved".<sup>51</sup>

Using precisely the terms on which Moten had aimed to critique her, Hartman acknowledges that Black fungibility is not founded in a given, original, event. There is no moment that established and defined Blackness once and for all and, as such, it cannot be read as a static ontological or paradigmatic condition. Blackness constitution is ongoing, a continual and fraught cutting that undermines the capacity to make stable or final ontological or paradigmatic claims about what an uncontested and uncontesting Blackness simply *is* in its being or non-being. Instead of exploring fungibility as the ontological or paradigmatic condition of Blackness writ large, Hartman's accounts of redress show the ache of fungibility's constitution and re-constitution that weaves through her explorations of Black lives, repeating the question of particular erasures in the exchanges and movements they enable. That ache is a re-remembering, but it also allows for the utopian power of a re-investment in the Black body in ways not taken up by her pessimist or nihilist readers. It allows Hartman to "discern the glimmer of possibility, feel the ache of what might be".<sup>52</sup>

*Counter-Investing, Articulating Desire, Self-Making*

In one of her imaginations of the lost girl in the odalisque's future life, Hartman asks if what happened to her in the studio made, "...her yearn for a tender touch capable of assuaging and redressing the long history of violence captured in a pose".<sup>53</sup> While the re-remembering of redress addresses the histories of slavery and fungibility that mark Blackness, drawing out and articulating the particularity of bodies that have been and continue to be constituted as fungible and pained, Hartman's conception of redress encompasses more than simply the articulation of that pain, past or present. The second element of redress as she describes it – the other side of the ache – is a 're-investment' or a 'counter-investment' in the Black body, not only as either fungible or pained but as open to the possibility of pleasure, connection, and joy. In giving an account of Black dance styles, at times describing dances using the same language in *Scenes'* pre-bellum moments as she will later in the post-bellum sphere of *Wayward Lives*, Hartman describes a "...counter-investment in the body and the identification of a particular locus of pleasure, as in dances like the snake hips, the buzzard lope, and the funky butt. This counterinvestment in all likelihood entails a protest or rejection of the anatomo-politics that produces the Black body as aberrant. More important, it is a way of redressing the pained constitution and corporeal malediction that is Blackness".<sup>54</sup> Re-remembrance rejects the naturalization of the pained and fungible condition of the body through a reinvocation of the past. In contrast, here the body's constitution as pained and fungible, through either anatomo-political intervention or through discipline and punishment, is contested not only by articulating the pain that presents it as a problem, but through different ways of moving and feeling. This contestation takes place by engaging with the body as a site of pleasure and of both un-disciplined and creative movement in the dance.

The fungible body is not just a body used by others, but one that is meant to have no desires, pleasures, or joys outside of the use and enjoyment for which it is an empty vehicle. The slave, "...is thus the object that must be de-animated in order to be exchanged and that which, by contrast, defines the meaning of free labor".<sup>55</sup> As I noted in the first section, the fungible body is meant to be *empty*, devoid of any particular feelings or desires of its own so as to be able to be put to *any* white use. Consequently, redressing the pained constitution and 'corporeal malediction' that is Blackness formulated as fungible takes place in the attempt to re-invest in bodies through their *own* experiences of pleasure or desire. In *Wayward Lives*, Hartman explores how young women in Philadelphia and New York engaged in forms of sexuality, dance, and sensualism, not – as claimed by those who recorded, institutionalized, and attacked them – because of a lack of good moral

upbringing, patriarchal supervision, or sense of decency that Black families were deprived of by the indignities of slavery. Instead, these women were re-investing in their bodies as attempts to redress their fungibility.

In describing Mattie Jackson's experiments in sexual freedom, but also her engagement with beautiful things, Hartman writes

*If she could feel deeply, she could be free.* She knew that beauty was not a luxury, but like food and water, a requirement for living. She loved cashmere sweaters, not because they were expensive, but because the fabric felt so exquisite against her skin, like a thousand fingers caressing her arms, and the cool slip of silk undergarments against her flesh, smooth and releasing all that heat and fire... Beauty and longing provided the essential structure of her existence. Her genius was exhausted in trying to live.<sup>56</sup>

In this passage, Mattie is deeply invested in beauty and physical enjoyment in ways that seem to those around her wayward, opposed to good sense, thrift, and modesty. But, in Hartman's engagement with Mattie, this excessive love of beauty and pleasure—in all its waywardness—is a means of challenging the conditions that would restrict her life to endless hours of drudgery, forms of wage-slavery, and subjugation of her own desires to those of the men and of the white world around her. In other words, investing in her own feeling is a push towards freedom. It is a direct response to, and a rejection of, her constitution as fungible.

This resistance to fungibility through the cultivation of pleasure and the articulation of desire is especially clear in Hartman's line about Mattie's cashmere sweater. What matters to Mattie about the sweater is not that it is expensive. Its appeal is not in its quantitative exchange value or its power as symbol of wealth. What makes it precious to her is how the touch of the fabric awakens sensation; how it brings about a qualitative reinvestment in Mattie herself insofar as the feel of it reaffirms her body as qualitative and not simply quantitative, not an object of exchange but a subject of pleasure and a site for desire and connection. The way the material of the sweater makes her feel translates her ache into a longing, one that tells a different story about what her body could and should be.

Mattie's redressive re-investment in her body and its pleasures are key to redressing how it and she have been reduced to their use for others. That said, this re-investment in her own experiences of pleasure is not about isolating her from others. On Hartman's account, redress attempts to re-invest in the body but not only to ease its pain. In developing the body's sense of itself and its possibilities for pleasure, redress also reaches outward to constitute a social world and new

possibilities for relation. Hartman points to how forms of redress work to alleviate what she describes elsewhere as the ways that Black people are made “world-less” by the violence through which their Blackness is made.<sup>57</sup>

In being no particular thing, an empty vehicle for others’ use, the fungible body has no proper place of its own in the world of social relations outside of where and how it is used. It has, as such, no location within a network of social relationships that would situate it or support it, or offer it forms of continuity. Practices like ‘stealing away’ redress this condition of worldlessness or social death by constituting and re-constituting kinship and developing ties to loved ones. These ties and forms of kinship neither simply reach back to a model of family or love from a time *before* slavery, nor do they mirror white visions of the family or home. Instead, much like the post-slavery forms of sexual experimentation Hartman describes with Mattie and other women in *Wayward Lives*, these experiments in kinship are attempts to open up new kinds of relationships to others and different possibilities for care and affinity in response to present needs. This might involve the kinship of families held together by multiple generations of women not headed by any patriarchal power. It might also be the ephemeral connections found in “gatherings that were too loud or too unruly or too queer... forms of free association and open assembly [that] threatened the public good by transgressing the color line and eschewing the dominant mores”.<sup>58</sup> In either case, these relationships and contacts challenged slavery’s natal alienation and relational disjunctions, and the displacement stemming from Black people’s exposure to violence, job insecurity, and the demolition or prohibitive pricing of homes in areas where communities gather in slavery’s aftermath.<sup>59</sup>

Hartman writes that “what unites these varied tactics is the effort to redress the condition of the enslaved, restore the disrupted affiliations of the socially dead, challenge the authority and dominion of the slaveholder, and alleviate the pained state of the captive body. However, these practices of redress are undertaken with the acknowledgment that conditions will most likely remain the same. This acknowledgment implies neither resignation nor fatalism but a recognition of the enormity of the breach instituted by slavery and the magnitude of domination”.<sup>60</sup> The goal of these practices is to re-invest both in the body and in its social bonds. That said, this re-investment does not mean that fungibility is overcome, or that people engaging in these practices see them as the foundation of a radically other or lasting alternative to the present order of things. Indeed, the very language of ‘re-investment’ attests to the continued reinvoication of models of exchange and quantifiability even in the turn towards qualitative aspects of experience. Hartman attends to this tension, noting that when she talks about redressive practices, “practice is, to use Michel de Certeau’s phrase, ‘a

way of operating' defined by the 'non-autonomy of its field of action,' internal manipulations of the established order, and ephemeral victories".<sup>61</sup> The field of action's 'non-autonomy' shows the degree to which redressive practices remain indebted to the conditions they resist, working to constitute a kind of relief that is not an erasure of history — or the Blackness bound thereto — but, rather, a delimited amelioration and an only fleeting sense of alternatives.

Instead of enduring change, redress offers what Hartman calls "utopian expressions of freedom that are not and perhaps cannot be actualized elsewhere".<sup>62</sup> Instead of a plan for a world to come, a program for revolution, or a movement that might found new institutions, redressive action cares for the pained body in the same sense in which Christina Sharpe argues for the importance of an 'ordinary note of care' which she "...name[s] an ordinary note because it takes as weather the contemporary conditions of Black life and death".<sup>63</sup> The care at work in redress offers something more than or in addition to death and pain even as these remain its basic conditions, its 'weather.' This care operates in both the knowledge that a sense of something more can ease suffering, and that easing suffering is not the same as ending it. Nonetheless, here easing suffering works to keep alive the sense that fungible bodies are not *only* fungible.

If the fungible commodity is judged relative to its quantitative value, its potential use, and its exchangeability with other fungible commodities, engaging in practices that have no sustained use, no quantitative or calculable likelihood of success, and no need to be taken up in world-historical changes re-inscribes the person addressed through redress in excess of the bounds of the fungible. Just as there is a kind of excess in Mattie's love of pleasure, or a riskiness in stealing away in the high likelihood of getting caught, neither of which seem easily reducible to a logic of good self-possession or self-management, Hartman's accounts of redressive practices conjure an often inchoate sense of Black people's value that does not replace, but exceeds the calculative terms of fungibility. Here, to go forward with the knowledge of possible, even likely, failure is to constitute the sense that Black people are more than their value as fungible commodities, even if that excess is illegible in the terms offered to them. At the same time, to engage in redress as re-investment that can never simply 'fix' a fungible condition is to fashion selves, connections, and communities that continue to produce that excess, even if its freedoms, pleasures, and forms of relief are always partial, ephemeral, and — importantly — compromised, carrying their own dangers.

Redress as re-investment in the body takes place both in the everyday practices of the Black people Hartman describes, but also through Hartman's own work reimagining how pleasure, desire, and resistance operated in spaces where their traces are or have been

effaced. Hartman does this work of re-investment in trying to imagine what experiences other than exposure or violation might have been part of the life of the girl in the photograph, in describing Mattie's engagements with her lover and her possessions, and in imagining the potential friendship and care between the two girls aboard *The Recovery* in 'Venus in Two Acts.' She writes,

If I could have conjured up more than a name in an indictment, if I could have imagined Venus speaking in her own voice, if I could have detailed the small memories banished from the ledger, then it might have been possible for me to represent the friendship that could have blossomed between two frightened and lonely girls. Shipmates. Then Venus could have beheld her dying friend, whispered comfort in her ear, rocked her with promises, soothed her with "soon, soon" and wished for her a good return. Picture them: The relics of two girls, one cradling the other, plundered innocents; a sailor caught sight of them and later said they were friends. Two world-less girls found a country in each other's arms. Beside the defeat and the terror, there would be this too: the glimpse of beauty, the instant of possibility.<sup>64</sup>

In her engagement with the archival records that serve as the basis for her 'critical fabulation' of the lives of these and other Black peoples made fungible in their treatment during their lives and in their traces, Hartman attempts redress, trying to do in writing what they tried to do in practices of pleasure, desire, and care: she re-invests in these girls as more than fungible commodities. She works to create room for thinking of them not just as harmed bodies—exchangeable and disposable—but as sentient beings who feel, engage with each other, and offer each other physical and emotional solace. Redress in Hartman is not and cannot be a remedy to what happened to these girls or to the other Black people with whom she engages. The passage above is marked by Hartman's desire to do what she cannot, balanced by her attempt to avoid the danger of making these girls into props in her own pursuit of closure. Her attempt at redress does not escape the terms through which she observes these girls' lives through the archive; terms that re-inscribe the fungibility to which they were subject in life. Nonetheless, to re-invest in the body in this way allows Hartman to offer a degree of relief. Redressive re-investment allows her to challenge the domination and exclusivity of the formulation of the dead as fungible, and to engage in a practice of self-making that resists how her own Blackness might be formulated as she tries to imagine the girls doing the same.<sup>65</sup> She puts her own genius to work in the art of trying to imagine how else they might have lived and, by extension, how she might live with what they leave behind.

For Hartman, attempts at redress that work at the re-fashioning of the self, the reinvestment in of senses of possibility, the creative appropriation of present conditions in the imagination, or the articulation of other futures are described as forms of 'self-making,' a term that serves as part of the subtitle of *Scenes* and that resurfaces throughout her corpus. Hartman draws the language of self-making and life as art from her many engagements with the work of Michel Foucault and his conception ethics as the work of the self on the self.<sup>66</sup> Famously, in an account of this later work, Foucault articulates that, "What strikes me is the fact that in our society, art has become something which is related only to objects and not to individuals, or to life. That art is something which is specialized or which is done by experts who are artists. But couldn't everyone's life become a work of art? Why should the lamp or the house be an art object, but not our life?"<sup>67</sup> This conception of a life as a work of art is part of Foucault's wider investigation into practices of ascetic self-fashioning or 'the care of the self' whereby individuals engage in forms of self-discipline, experimentation, and creativity that re-shape their sense of themselves and their capacities, through which the care of the self becomes, in a phrase that Hartman also cites, "a practice of freedom".<sup>68</sup>

To understand redress as operating here as a kind of ethics on the terms through which Foucault asks, "...for what is ethics, if not the practice of freedom, the conscious [*réfléchie*] practice of freedom?"<sup>69</sup>, is to understand that freedom is a *way* of being in response to one's conditions. Drawing on Judith Butler, Hartman describes waywardness as just such a form of self-making, writing that practices of freedom are "...an improvisation within the terms of social existence, when the terms have already been dictated, when there is little room to breathe, when you have been sentenced to a life of servitude, when the house of bondage looms in whatever direction you move. It is the untiring practice of trying to live when you were never meant to survive"<sup>70</sup>. At work is a way of trying to imaginatively repurpose the given to create, if not a wholly new world or a wholly new self, some part of the world or some iteration of the self with more possibilities for motion and feeling; one with more room to breathe.

Foucauldian ethics has drawn criticism relative to Foucault's claim that this work is normatively neutral, interested more in the creation of values than in any particular value, even while potentially carrying tacit normative commitments that it disavows.<sup>71</sup> By contrast, Hartman's commitments are clear. The self-fashioning at work in re-investment and the articulation of desire respond actively to fungibility as both challenge and condition. This orientation against fungibility motivates continued engagements in practices of redress in the face of their inevitable insufficiency. It bears saying once again that the people Hartman describes often attempt redress while knowing that

their conditions will, in all likelihood, stay the same. The scope of the harm inflicted by the slave trade and the formulation of Blackness as fungible constitutes a massive breach, and it would be too much to expect that it can be undone or healed through everyday acts of pleasure, through song, or through dance. What takes place then, is a re-organization and re-situation of the self—a refashioning—in the context of those conditions.

Framed more troublingly, Hartman takes from Foucault the awareness that forms of self-fashioning—even and especially those that are most invested in the felt need to create something different, to resist fungibility—draw on fungibility’s given resources and respond to the terms it lays out. As such, they not only re-invoke, but also reinscribe that fungibility in the very attempt to redress it. In Foucault’s late work, self-fashioning does not involve the radical erasure or overcoming of existing—and potentially oppressive—conditions; rather it attempts to reshape the given, to ask what ambiguities, fissures, or spaces of resistance exist within extant power-relations. In Timothy O’Leary’s words, “For Foucault, to bring about change in our political and ethical subjectivity is not to attempt a total reconfiguration of the cognitive, the practical and the aesthetic spheres”.<sup>72</sup> Instead, practices of self-fashioning take advantage of what is already made available in these spheres so that subjects might re-shape themselves in ways that run contrary to extant power-relations’ tendency toward domination. Caring for and cultivating the self, making life into art, is a practice of freedom precisely to the degree that it does not simply ‘express’ freedom, but *produces it* in alternative sets of possibilities built by rearranging existing, circumscribed options. Redress, in this sense, is not simply fungibility’s other or opposite, but both draws on how Black people’s conditions constitute them as fungible and, in its own way, carries forward and internalizes those conditions and that fungibility in the self fashioned to resist and reshape them. Redress is here both fungibility’s afterlife and the attempt to build another life within it.

### **Conclusion: A Quicksand-Ethics – Redress and Fungibility**

Hartman’s sense that redressive practices fashion a self resistant to fungible iterations only through the same materials that constitute the self as fungible is crucial to understanding why and how Hartman’s readers skew her conception of fungibility in divorcing it from her work on redress. In the third chapter of *Scenes*, acknowledging once again that the practices meant to redress fungibility do not manage to overcome it once and for all, Hartman writes that “If deliberate calculation is unable to effect an ‘event,’ a reversal of forces in relations of domination, it is clearly double-edged, for the bid for freedom culminates in another ‘tie’ or ‘link’ to bondage. The same act both holds out

the possibility of freedom and intensifies the burdens and constrains of enslavement".<sup>73</sup> The account Hartman offers here attests to how Black people's redressive practices both alleviate fungibility and are *part of the very mechanism through which Blackness as fungible is constituted and reconstituted*. Here fungibility is a part of the condition of Blackness and its constitution, but not simply as a status ascribed to Black people or a position they are forced to inhabit. Instead fungibility is a condition constituted in the push and pull between that ascription and the formation of subjects through their negotiation with it in attempts at redress.

This conception of fungibility as inextricably tied to redress challenges both redress's occlusion from the literature drawing on Hartman and many conceptions of fungibility that claim her as their source. Figures like Wilderson and Warren fundamentally reframe what Hartman means in her discussions of fungibility insofar as, instead of attending to its relationship to redressive action, they draw on Hortense Spiller's language of 'grammar' to think about how Blackness is defined as fungible and applied by whites in ways irreconcilable with operative conceptions of the human, turning toward ontology.<sup>74</sup> In contrast, when paired with Hartman's account of redress particularly in the context of her discussions of seduction and the complex space of nonconsent and consent, participation and resistance, it becomes clear that fungibility is not simply a definition imposed on Black people from the outside or accepted by them either as fact or in resignation.

Hartman already declines Wilderson's invitation to speak about fungibility in the register of ontology or distinct from attempts at redress in her 2003 interview with him, where he attempts to summarize her reading of Harriet Jacobs' writing by articulating how "...the female slave is a possessed, accumulated, and fungible object, which is to say that she is *ontologically* different than a white woman..."<sup>75</sup>. Instead of taking up the task of defining the ontological status or the conditions of the slave or of Blackness within a given American 'grammar,' Hartman turns to how those conditions are articulated in and through their tension with the redressive practices of the enslaved. She redirects the conversation, claiming that what she is interested in is "...that impossibility or tension between Jacobs as an agent versus the objective conditions in which she finds herself".<sup>76</sup> Here, as elsewhere, it is not enough simply to describe an imposed fungible condition or articulate its role in given paradigm. Fungibility *is* a part of Blackness's constitution, and acts as a form of subjection, only in its pairing with those forms of agency that both resist and fail to escape it. Put simply, fungibility is not just about what is said of the enslaved *as* Black people, but what the enslaved do with what is said of them in their *becoming* Black.

Hartman's account of redress, while oriented against fungibility as challenge, is not then just its opposite or its foil. Redress is not a simple ethical corrective to harm, an optimism or utopianism opposed to fungibility's pessimism and violence. As Sexton notes in his critique of Achille Mbembe's emphasis only on the resistant "stylization" at work in the practices of the enslaved, the desire to imagine those practices and spaces conjured by attempts at redress as unambiguously positive alternatives and resistances to Black subjection fails to take Hartman's intervention seriously. He writes that, "Uncritical, and ultimately romantic, ethnographic claims, like those Mbembe draws upon, about the slave's capacity and capability for "stylization" are theoretically untenable since the publication of *Scenes of Subjection* over a decade ago. I am talking broadly here about the sort of claims about slavery that rely on phrases like "in spite of the terror" and "...nevertheless..."<sup>77</sup> Sexton's critique indicts not only Mbembe, but also Moten—insofar as he too presented Hartman's work on redress as ultimately an uncritical desire for an impossible healing—and both Wilderson and Warren, insofar as their occlusions of attempts at redress also tacitly frame redressive practices as futile gestures of optimism and not as key mechanisms of an always-intertwined resistance and subjection. Redress is not about what can be salvaged 'nevertheless.' It is about how the forging of alternative possibilities remains both necessary as ameliorative for the subjected, and indispensable to their subjection.

Redress describes both the self-making that challenge the emptying of the particularity of the body and the ambivalent relationship between "...the slave's self-betrayal and survival".<sup>78</sup> To work towards one's survival, to re-member and to fashion the self in response to one's fungibility, is unquestionably to contest that fungibility even if that contestation, in its failure to fully dispel it, involves fungibility's continued re-invocation in re-membrance and its continued incorporation in self-making. In that light, if there is an ethical dimension in Hartman's account of redress it might best be described as a kind of 'quicksand-ethics.' Acts of redress articulate the creativity and power of Black people's struggles against the ascription of fungibility—the real attempt to survive in deadly conditions, to stay above water in the hope of more chances to live—even as that redress makes them participants in the very forces against which they struggle. Hartman's accounts of redress mark the place of this ambivalence and outline the tensions that weld together Black joy and pain. Redress is a push to survive, to escape, to be free, to draw breath, that also and inseparably threatens to draw one—ever faster—back under the sand, back toward subjection, back into yet another hold.<sup>79</sup>

## Notes

1. Sexton, Jared. "The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism." *InTensions Journal* No. 5 (2011), 40n xi.
2. Wilderson, Frank B. III. *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (London and Durham: Duke University Press, 2010). Calvin Warren. *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation* (London and Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).
3. Moten, Fred. "Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)." *The South Atlantic quarterly* 112, no. 4 (2013): 737–780.
4. Moten, Fred. *Black and Blur* (London and Durham: Duke University Press, 2017) ix.
5. Hartman, Saidiya. *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007) 161.
6. Hartman Saidiya. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) 66, 76, 73 respectively.
7. Hartman, Saidiya. *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2019) 197.
8. Hartman, Saidiya. "Venus in Two Acts." *Small Axe* Vol. 12, No. 2, (2008), 3.
9. Cunningham Nijah. "The nonarrival of black freedom (c. 12.6.84)", *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory*, Vol 27: No. 1 (2017) 117.
10. Wilderson, *Red, White, & Black*.
11. Warren, *Ontological Terror*.
12. Snorton, C. Riley. *Black on Both Sides: a Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018).
13. King, Tiffany Lethabo. *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies* (London and Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).
14. Cervenak, S.J. and J. Kameron Carter. "Untitled and Outdoors: Thinking with Saidiya Hartman" *Women and Performance: a journal of feminist theory* Vol. 27, No 1. (2017) 46.
15. Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*, 55.
16. It is common among many readers of Hartman to emphasize not a Black/white binary but a Black/non-Black binary as in, for example, Wilderson's emphasis, read though Fanon, on the claim that "Being can...be thought of, in the first ontological instance, as non-niggerness, and slavery then as niggerness" (Wilderson, *Red, White, & Black*, 37). For Wilderson, a White or Human structural position is defined only privately as the position of those not constituted as fungible, where fungibility defines the structural position he calls that of the Black or the Slave. More directly, Sexton has argued that Hartman's claim that the enslaved are subject to all whites is imprecise. He argues that, "The latter group is better termed *all nonBlacks* (or, less economically, the unequally arrayed category of nonBlackness), because it is racial Blackness as a necessary condition for enslavement that matters most, rather than whiteness as a sufficient condition for freedom.

The structural position of the Indian slaveholder — or, for that matter, the smattering of free Black slaveholders in the United States or the slaveholding mulatto elite in the Caribbean — is a case in point. Freedom from the rule of slave law requires only that one be considered nonBlack, whether that nonBlack racial designation be “white” or “Indian” or, in the rare case, “Oriental” — this despite the fact that each of these groups has at one point or another labored in conditions similar to or contiguous with enslaved African-derived groups. In other words, it is not *labor* relations, but *property* relations that are constitutive of slavery” (Sexton, Jared. “People of Color Blindness: Notes on the Afterlife of Slavery” *Social Text* 103, Vol. 28, No. 2, 2010, 36). Nonetheless, I continue here to emphasize fungibility’s specific relationship to white people and whiteness. I do so in part in adherence to Hartman’s own genealogical accounts that specify whiteness. My goal in a re-reading of Hartman on both fungibility and redress is to attend to what Hartman says, prior to, and distinct from, how readings of her work have reformulated or differently emphasized some of its key terms and claims. In *Scenes of Subjection* when Hartman writes that Black fungibility is about an openness to the master or “whom-ever” she grounds this fungibility in “the interdiction against self-defense and the inability of the slave to testify against whites...” (Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 25 my emphasis) Since this specific association with white actions and violence characterizes the language that Hartman uses, I find it important to deploy here in an attempt to carefully trace Hartman’s thinking on fungibility and redress. For still further examples of Hartman’s continued focus on the language of whiteness see her recent essay “The End of White Supremacy: an American Romance” (Hartman, Saidiya. “The End of White Supremacy: an American Romance” *Bomb Magazine* 152, June 5 2020, <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/the-end-of-white-supremacy-an-american-romance/>).

17. Hartman *Scenes of Subjection*, 21.
18. King, *The Black Shoals*, 24.
19. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 25.
20. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 26.
21. Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts”, 3.
22. Cervenak, S.J. and J. Kameron Carter, “Untitled and Outdoors”, 46.
23. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 117.
24. Hartman’s critique of emancipation as incapable of undermining the fungible condition of Black people relative to whites here shares similarities with Frantz Fanon’s critique of accounts of emancipation offered in *Black Skin, White Masks*. In chapter seven, Fanon argues that “the upheaval [of emancipation] reached the Negroes from without. The Black man was acted upon... the white man, in the capacity of master, said to the Negro, ‘from now on you are free.’” (Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Trans. Charles Lam Markmann. New York: Grove Press, 1967, 220) Drawing on a Hegelian master/bondsman relationship, Fanon argues that to be *set* free is never to be recognized *as* free since the freedom of the former slave is simply an extension of the free prerogative of the master to

- do with the slave as he pleases. While Fanon argues that only a resistant violent uprising against masters accomplishes what emancipation cannot, Hartman's account of redress articulates alternative senses of freedom that do not rely on a search for mutual recognition with whites.
25. Cervenack and Carter, "Untitled and Outdoors", 47.
  26. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 23.
  27. See for example, Zack, Naomi. *The Ethics and Mores of Race: Equality After the History of Philosophy* (Lanham and Plymouth: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2011) and Mills, Charles. *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1997) for their explorations of the historical implication of common Western philosophical approaches to ethics with slavery and racism. While I emphasize in this paper the importance of thinking redress as inseparable from the conditions it works to address, involving forms of repetition that re-invoke the harm they work to ease, I see these writers as showing that there is too close a repetition here, one that does not open up new possibilities and that does not repeat with an adequate difference that would keep a critical light on the ways liberalism shapes and is shaped by slavery.
  28. Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts", 3.
  29. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 69.
  30. Though Hartman titles a section of her chapter 'Redressing the Pained Body' in *Scenes*, 'Politics without a Proper Locus,' and discussions of politics and resistance are common in her work, she writes there that, "I am reluctant to simply describe these [redressive] practices as a 'kind of politics,' not because I question whether the practice considered here are small-scale forms of struggle or dismiss them as cathartic and contained. Rather, it is the concern about the possibilities of practice as they are related to the particular object constitution and subject formation of the enslaved outside the 'political proper' that leads me both to question the appropriateness of the political to this realm of practice and to reimagine the political in this context" (Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 64). Though she acknowledges that the political can perhaps be 'reimagined' in this context, she is herself wary of asking whether these practices are simply a form of politics.
  31. Bliss, James. "Arranging Flowers." *Palimpsest: A Journal on Women, Gender, and the Black International*, Vol. 8, No. 2, (2019) 4.
  32. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 76.
  33. Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts", 1.
  34. There are ableist reason to take issue with Hartman's use of the language of amputation, re-membling, and dis-membling here and elsewhere – used to encompass both the literal physical harms done to Black bodies but also the sometimes metaphorical 'amputations' of the enslaved – but there are also conceptual ones. First and foremost is that her language of amputation undermines her own focus on how re-membling the breach of slavery is not done in the context of an 'imagined whole' or in the light of a thoroughgoing conceptualization of what the pained body was like before the harm that has been done to it. While it is true the slavery and

racism did and do involve actual forms of bodily harm, actual amputations and scars, the movement between the metaphorical and literal use of this language is questionable.

35. Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, 10 original emphasis.
36. Turner, Victor. *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press) 1975, 41.
37. Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, 197 original emphasis.
38. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 74.
39. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 72.
40. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 51.
41. Moten, *Black and Blur*, ix.
42. Moten, *Black and Blur*, xii original emphasis.
43. Drawing on similar resources to Hartman, Jeffrey Nealon has argued that, "From the slave narrative to the postmodernism of Toni Morrison and Clarence Major; from The Souls of Black Folk to The Signifying Monkey; from what Amiri Baraka calls the 'willfully harsh, anti-assimilationist sound of bebop' (1963, 181-82) to rap; from Prince Hall to Malcom X, African-American traditions have deployed "repetition with a difference" as a key concept in maintaining a vibrant culture on the margins of the American mainstream. Certainly there is a kind of repetition of standard Western forms in, for example, Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* or in the scholarly anthropological prose of W.E.B. DuBois, but it is precisely the difference - the displacement, the question posed from within - that renders a singularity or irreducibility to African-American tradition" (Nealon Jeffrey T. (Jeffrey Thomas). "Refraining, Becoming-Black: Repetition and Difference in Amiri Baraka's *Blues People*." *sympløke* 6, no. 1, 1998, 83).
44. Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts", 11.
45. This difficulty is at the center of Hartman's work in 'Venus' and reflects her engagement with Foucault's essay "The Lives of Infamous Men." Thinking through his access to figures through police and medical archives he writes that "What snatched them from the darkness in which they could, perhaps should, have remained was the encounter with power; without this collision, it's very unlikely that any word would be there to recall their fleeting trajectory ...So that it is doubtless impossible to ever grasp them again in themselves, as they might have been 'in a free state'; they can no longer be separated out from the declamations, the tactical biases, the obligatory lies that power games and power relations presuppose" (Foucault, Michel. —"The Lives of Infamous Men" *Power — The Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1964-1984 Volume 3* Ed. James D. Faubion. New York: The New Press, 2000, 161).
46. Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, 31.
47. Hartman uses extremely similar language to describe the nature of her work in "Venus" where she frames her project in light of the question, "how does one rewrite the chronicle of a death foretold and anticipated, as a collective biography of dead subjects, as a counter-history of the human,

as the practice of freedom" (Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts", 3). Note here that the key element of her method is the rewriting of a particular death, 'foretold and anticipated,' as a *collective* biography of dead subjects. The fungibility that marks the particular death is not dispelled but reiterated and dispersed in the attempt to bring to light the collective conditions that enable it.

48. Wilderson, *Red, White & Black*, 14, my emphasis.
49. Wilderson, *Red, White & Black*, 3.
50. Warren, *Ontological Terror*, 91 my emphasis.
51. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 26 my emphasis.
52. Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, 30.
53. Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, 29.
54. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 59.
55. Hartman, Saidiya V. and Frank Wilderson III. "The Position of the Unthought: An Interview with Saidiya V. Hartman Conducted by Frank Wilderson III." *Qui Parle*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (2003), 199n2.
56. Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, 60 original emphasis.
57. Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts", 8.
58. Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, 248.
59. For more on the question of gender, sexuality and the Black family see, for example, Feder, Ellen K. *Family Bonds Genealogies of Race and Gender* (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2007). Young, Thelathia Nikki. *Black Queer Ethics, Family, and Philosophical Imagination* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016) and Russell, Camisha A. *The Assisted Reproduction of Race* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2018).
60. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 51.
61. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 50.
62. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 13.
63. Sharpe, Christina. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (London and Durham: Duke University Press, 2016) 132.
64. Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts", 8.
65. Famously, Hartman is critical of the role of the imagination insofar as it is meant to serve simply as a tool for an empathic identification with Black people. If imagination or empathy allows one to step into or take the place of a particular Black person, it can work in the service of the very fungibility with which one hoped to empathize, casting that person as inherently inhabitable (Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 19). That said, her goal in what she will elsewhere call critical fabulation is to put imagination to work not in the attempt to inhabit the Black body and replace it with oneself, but to illustrate the failures, distances, and opacities in the archive. Such work does not completely succeed in circumventing the imaginative use of the body in question, but Hartman's work recognizes that fungibility is not something we can circumvent or dispel, but that we can re-deploy in order to keep its functioning in sight.

66. Denise Feirera da Silva has chosen to think Hartman's work as part of what she reads as a Black Feminist practices of *poethics* where a less formal, poetically inflected engagement with Black people's redressive practices would aim to "emancipate the Category of Blackness from the scientific and historical ways of knowing that produced it in the first place which is also the Black Feminist Critic worksite." (Da Silva, Denise Ferreira. "Toward a Black Feminist Poethics: The Quest(ion) of Blackness Toward the End of the World." *The Black Scholar*, 81) While I appreciate the turn to the poethic to distinguish the sense of Hartman's work and that of other Black authors from prescriptive and rule-governed classical conceptions of the ethical in Western philosophy, I remain intrigued by Hartman's own description of the "situational ethics of the enslaved" (Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 107). I think that is important to recognize that Hartman is drawing many elements of her work that da Silva's describes as poethical from Foucault's articulation of the connection between ethics, askesis, and aesthetics to show that what Hartman is doing is not simply other-than the normative Western ethical tradition. If there is something ethical about redress it is ethical in the sense that it represents both a critical engagement with that tradition in its relation to slavery and a retrieval of everyday uses of the term as they reflect felt senses of right and wrong, hope and possibility.
67. Foucault, Michel. "On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of a Work in Progress" *The Foucault Reader* Edited by Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books 1984), 350.
68. Foucault, Michel. "The Ethics of the Concern for the Self as a Practice of Freedom" *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth – The Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954-1984 Volume 1*. Edited by Paul Rabinow (New York: The New Press, 1997), 282; Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 233; Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts", 3.
69. Foucault, "The Ethics of the Concern for the Self as a Practice of Freedom", 284.
70. Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, 228.
71. Bernstein, Richard. "Foucault: Critique as a Philosophical Ethos," *Critique and Power: Recasting the Foucault/Habermas Debate*. Edited by Michael Kelly (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1994) and Habermas, Jürgen. *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*. Translated by Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1990).
72. O'Leary, Timothy. *Foucault and the Art of Ethics* (London and New York: Continuum 2002) 130.
73. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 109.
74. In *Scenes*' third chapter, Hartman sets up a kind of deep division between herself and readers like Wilderson and Warren insofar as she offers there a critique of the kind of reliance on accounts of racial 'grammar' in Spillers that underlie many of Wilderson and Warren's claims. Just as Wilderson and Warren will ultimately both argue for the impropriety and irreconcilability of 'Black' with "human" as these have been defined in the wake of the Middle Passage, so too did Spillers famously question the

appropriateness of using the language of gender to describe the enslaved, questioning the grammatical feasibility of joining enslaved 'Black' with 'woman.' (Spillers, Hortense. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." *Diacritics* 17, no. 2, 1987) In *Scenes*, Hartman critiques the fixity of the categories presumed by these positions and the implicit sense that these categories are simply applied to the bodies of the enslaved. In contrast with the claim that "gender is relevant only to the degree that generalizable and universal criteria define a common identity" Hartman argues that "at issue here is the construction of 'woman' not as foundational category with given characteristics, attributes, or circumstances but within a particular racial economy of property that intensified its control over the object of property through a deployment of sexuality." (Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 101) This is a deployment that involves not just what is ascribed to the body of the enslaved, but how they act in and against that ascription.

75. Hartman and Wilderson, "The Position of the Unthought", 17 my emphasis.
76. Hartman and Wilderson, "The Position of the Unthought", 18.
77. Sexton, "People of Color Blindness", 35.
78. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 37.
79. My thanks to Romy Opperman for her invaluable engagements with this piece throughout its development.