

“Autobiographical Absences: Kinship and Mourning in the Memoirs of Jesmyn Ward and Saidiya Hartman”

I. Introduction

In her 2006 book, *Lose Your Mother*, Saidiya Hartman writes, “Loss remakes you” (100). This statement could just as well have appeared in Jesmyn Ward’s *Men We Reaped*, a memoir written less than a decade after Hartman’s. Both memoirs reflect—directly or indirectly—on experiences of loss in the wake of slavery. In *Lose Your Mother*, a book that blends memoir and travelogue with history, Hartman describes a trip to Ghana she undertakes to confront the gaps slavery has left in her family lineage—and in the lineages of all descendants of slaves. Ward’s *Men We Reaped* offers a more *indirect* account of slavery’s enduring effects on her life and community: her portrait of young adulthood is framed around the premature deaths of five close male friends and family members as result of systemic racism and related public health crises that make Black life in America precarious. Centered around these genealogical gaps and premature deaths, these two memoirs represent *absence* as, paradoxically, constitutive of the authors’ sense of identity.¹

While our field—life narrative studies—emphasizes *life* in its very name, my paper today asks how auto/biographical writing is transformed when it focuses instead on *death*, on lives prematurely ended and subsequently forgotten, and on the lives that persist in the wake of such loss. Hartman encapsulates this idea in referring to her book as “an autobiography” begun “in a graveyard” (130)—a site we’d likely not think of as a typical starting place for *life* writing.

¹ Hartman herself uses the phrase “identity produced by negation” to describe that with slavery, “[t]he only sure inheritance passed from one generation to the next was ... loss” (103).

I argue that by intertwining their life stories with those of the prematurely dead and historically erased—the specters of slavery and persisting structural inequities—Hartman and Ward offer an approach to narrating the entanglement of personal and historical trauma that reimagines a number of basic (though, of course, not universal) life narrative conventions: they focus on absence over presence, kin over self, and enduring conflict over resolution.

At the end of my talk, I'll engage with Jasbir Puar's theory of debility to make a case for extending our field's conversations about auto/somatography, or life narratives about illness and disability, to account for race- and class-based forms of injury that tend to be less visible and, consequently, underrepresented.

Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother* reflects on the ways that the Transatlantic slave trade and its aftermath have shaped her sense of personal identity and family heritage, *on the one hand*, and global political relations and economic structures, *on the other*. As she blends these narratives—the micro and the macro, the personal and the historical—Hartman remains preoccupied with *absences*: from the relatives that have been forgotten and the biographical details of her great-grandmothers' and great-great-grandmothers' lives, to [specific] artifacts “missing” from the Cape Coast Castle's museum that would have shed light on the lives, beliefs, and social practices of the people sold into slavery (116). Hartman variously describes her objective in the book as being “to *reclaim* the dead, to *reckon* with the lives undone and obliterated in the making of human commodities” (6), “to *resurrect* the dead,” and “to *redeem* the enslaved” (54).

Distinguishing Hartman's memoir from much of the writing about the African diaspora that preceded it, Temple University history professor Harvey Neptune refers to *Lose Your*

Mother as an example of what he calls “wake work,” which he describes as a relatively recent effort to balance the emphasis on the [optimism and] resiliency of African diasporic populations with space to look back ... in grief” and to give “despair, defeat and death” its “just share” (1).

In *Lose Your Mother*, Hartman shows how slavery’s disruption of her own family narrative has created a sense of incompleteness in her *personal* story. She observes, “There were no survivors of my lineage or far-flung relatives of whom I had come in search, no places and people before slavery that I could trace. My family trail disappeared in the second decade of the nineteenth century” (7). Early in the book, Hartman shares what she *does* know of her family heritage, a narrative cobbled together mostly from stories her grandfather told her as a child and information shared by an aunt. These accounts were limited, though, and piecemeal; genealogical work always is, of course, but genealogies disrupted by slavery are limited to a far greater extent than those of other families. Hartman observes that her aunt “never shared any anecdotes about the ones who crossed the Atlantic from Africa” because “[t]here were no anecdotes” (76). These effects extended to the relatives she did know of, as well: she notes that her grandfather “could fill in only the bare lines of [his mother’s and grandmothers’] lives,” and that these “gaps and silences ... were not unusual” (13-14) because slavery “stripped your history to bare facts and precious details” (11).

A historian studying her own life through the lens of a much larger, much older narrative, Hartman investigates these “gaps and silences” which she regards as “the *substance* of [her] history” (16, emphasis mine). This characterization is striking because gaps and silences are generally understood as the antithesis of substance—they are intangible, they signify *absence* rather than *presence*. And yet, *Lose Your Mother* shines a light on these gaps and silences, insisting that we see and hear them—and treat them as substantial in their own right. Hartman

reflects on the inadequacies of her training as a historian to address these problems in telling her family narrative: “My graduate training hadn’t prepared me to tell the stories of those who had left no record of their lives [and whose biography consisted of the terrible things said about them or done to them]. I was determined to fill in the blank spaces of the historical record and to represent the lives of those deemed unworthy of remembering, but how does one write a story about an encounter with nothing?” (16). This question speaks to the ways Hartman’s work confronts the limits of narrative as we generally understand it—we expect narratives to include names and details about events that took place, but Hartman’s narrative foregrounds instead the *absence* of such details as a result of violent acts of erasure. Yet even as Hartman grapples with this question, her work itself constitutes an answer to it: *Lose Your Mother* makes substantial Hartman’s encounters with “nothing” not by filling in the stories that have been lost—for that is *impossible* (135)—but by making us *sit with* this loss, to *acknowledge* and *mourn* it. Hartman comes to realize that, in her words, the book “could only *express* the loss, not repair it” (135, emphasis mine).

It is not only Hartman’s personal and familial losses that she mourns, but the much greater losses resulting from slavery across centuries. Hartman explains that she returns to Ghana seeking “the expendable and the defeated,” “the commoners, the unwilling and coerced migrants who created a new culture in the hostile world of the Americas and who fashioned themselves again, making possibility out of dispossession” (7). Hartman tells what stories she can of the slaves she encounters in historical records, frequently highlighting the absences that are *a key part* of the story she tells. Of a girl murdered aboard the ship the *Recovery*, for instance, Hartman acknowledges that even as she tries to “save the girl ... from oblivion” (137), “her life is impossible to reconstruct” because “not even her name survived,” and “[w]ith a name she might

have been more difficult to forget” (137). Whereas historically, much auto/biographical writing has focused on remarkable lives, it is noteworthy that Hartman instead explicitly seeks to tell the stories of the nameless and the forgotten.

In *Lose Your Mother*, Hartman repeatedly draws connections to the ongoing social, political, and economic aftermath of centuries of slavery in the Americas. She asserts that “slavery persists as an issue in the political life of black America ... because black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago. This is the afterlife of slavery—skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment” (6). Jesmyn Ward’s *Men We Reaped* likewise examines “the confluence of history, of racism, of poverty, and economic power” that shape “what it means to be Black and poor in the [U.S. South]” (237, 236). As in Hartman’s book, Ward’s personal story is entangled with those of her family members and her community. In her prologue, Ward explains that *Men We Reaped* is “[her] story just as it is the story of those lost young men” and “[her] family’s story just as it is her community’s story,” and that “[t]o tell it, [she] must tell the story of [her] town, and the history of [her] community” (8).

The chapters of Ward’s memoir alternately narrate her young life and the premature deaths of five young African American men—Ward’s younger brother, cousin, and friends. This structure illustrates the extent to which Ward’s conception of her own life is entangled with the prevalence of death within her family and community. While the chapters about Ward’s childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood are organized chronologically, the chapters that focus on the lives and deaths of the five young men are organized in reverse chronological order by the date of each death: “Roger Eric Daniels III, Born: March 5, 1981, Died: June 3, 2004”; “Demond Cook, Born: May 15, 1972, Died: February 26, 2004”; “Charles Joseph Martin, Born:

May 5, 1983, Died: January 5, 2004”; “Ronald Wayne Lizana, Born: September 20, 1983, Died: December 16, 2002”; and finally, Ward’s brother, “Joshua Adam Dedeaux, Born: October 27, 1980, Died: October 2, 2000.” The titles of these chapters resemble inscriptions on headstones, naming the person and marking the span of his life—23 years, 31, 20, 19, 19. This structural choice creates the sense, once again, of a life narrative set in a graveyard. In naming them, examining their lives, and grieving their deaths, these chapters also testify to the inherent value of these young men. Ward writes, echoing the rhetoric of the Black Lives Matter movement, that “this grief, for all its awful weight, insists that [Josh] matters. What we carry of Roger and Demond and C. J. and Ronald says that they matter” (243). Ward’s account thus succeeds where Hartman’s is constantly thwarted, for naming makes possible the act of memorializing the dead as *individuals*, rather than as only a generalized and anonymous population.

Like Hartman’s *Lose Your Mother*, *Men We Reaped* is a life narrative haunted by death and suffused with mourning. Ward refers to southern Mississippi as the “place that birthed [her] and kills [her] at once” and states that she “carr[ies] the weight of grief even as [she] struggle[s] to live” (240). She opens *Men We Reaped* with a meditation on childhood ghost stories and refers to the young men she memorializes in the book as “ghosts,” who, she wills herself to not forget, “were once people” (7). As with Hartman’s memoir, which characterizes autobiographical and historical absences as *substantial*, the ghosts of *Men We Reaped* can also be understood as absence made manifest—a presence that marks an absence, a loss made visible yet intangible. Like Hartman, Ward foregrounds and responds to silences that follow from the deaths she documents; yet whereas Hartman ultimately finds any attempts to fill the historical silences in *Lose Your Mother* to be *impossible*, Ward’s proximity and personal connection to the losses she narrates enables her to tell the young men’s stories. She begins the memoir by

acknowledging this deliberate undertaking: “I wonder why silence is the sound of our subsumed rage, our accumulated grief. I decide this is not right, that I must give voice to this story” (7-8).

Ward’s two narratives—the autobiographical and the biographical—intersect at her final chapter about death, which focuses on the first and most significant loss for Ward: her younger brother Joshua, who died in a car accident after being hit by a drunk driver. She opens this penultimate chapter, towards which the entire memoir has been building, by commenting on the convergence of her two narratives: “This is where the past and the future meet... This is before Ronald, before C. J. This is before Demond, before Rog.... This is the last summer that I will spend with my brother. This is the heart” (213). Joshua’s death forms a hole at the center of Ward’s life narrative. He is central to her childhood memories, and Ward writes that after his death, an “ordinary memory gains heft, representative of all the ordinary days [they] shared, all the ordinary days [they] lost” (224). She notes that these memories “[make] [her] fingers ache like a phantom limb as [she imagines her] brother alive and close enough to touch” (224). Notably, this description of grief characterizes loss in simultaneously substantial and spectral terms; intangible memories take on the weight of reality, even as these memories are an inadequate substitute for Joshua himself.

Ward situates these five deaths within discussions about racial and economic precarity *more broadly*. For instance, Ward’s chapter about Roger Eric Daniels III—a family friend and the first of the young men featured in *Men We Reaped*—calls attention to substance abuse issues in her community. While Roger died of a heart attack, having inherited his father’s “bad heart” (36), he also “medicated with drugs and alcohol” (32), and his use of cocaine and painkillers was a contributing factor in his death (36). In retrospect, Ward connects the prevalence of substance abuse to the debilitating conditions of her community, which she describes as “a place where

hope and a sense of possibility were as ephemeral as morning fog”; in writing the book, Ward comes to “see the despair at the heart of our drug use” (34).

Other chapters illustrate the roles that various public health issues—like gun violence and inadequate mental health care—play in the “epidemic” of death in Ward’s family and community. In her chapter about Ronald Wayne Lizana, Ward writes that years after Ronald died by suicide, she found that “Racism poverty, and violence are the primary factors that encourage depression in Black men” and that most of these men “will not get care for their mental disorders,” making them “more vulnerable to incarceration, homelessness, substance abuse, homicide, and suicide” (176). Ward notes that she and members of her community “felt like death was stalking [them], driving [them] from one another, the community falling apart” (31). And the statistics with which she concludes her memoir back this fear up: she observes that “[a]bout 35 percent of Black Mississippians live below the poverty level, compared with 11 percent of Whites,” and she cites one study from “Columbia University’s Mailman School of Public Health [that] found poverty, lack of education, and poor social support contribute to as many deaths as heart attack, stroke, and lung cancer in the United States” (236-37).

Building on these statistics, I want to conclude by drawing connections to Jasbir Puar’s theorization of debility to contextualize what I see as these memoirs’ significance within conversations about life writing depicting vulnerable and precarious forms of embodiment. According to Puar, debilitation refers to “the slow wearing down of populations” (xiv) by capitalist and imperialist powers that operate by making “certain bodies and populations” “[available] for maiming” (xvii). She further describes debilitation as “a normal consequence of laboring, as an ‘expected impairment’” (xvi). Differentiating debility from disability, Puar

explains that “Debility addresses injury and bodily exclusion that are *endemic* rather than *epidemic* or *exceptional*” and it “elucidates what is left out of disability imaginaries and rights politics” (xvii, emphasis mine). Seeking to complicate the claim often made by disability rights advocates that “we will all be disabled if we live long enough,” Puar observes that “depending on where we live, what resources we have, what traumas we have endured, what color our skin is, what access we have to clean water, air, and decent food, what type of health care we have, what kind of work we do ... we will not all be disabled. *Some of us will simply not live long enough*” (xiv). In this quotation, Puar refers to the constellation of factors that may debilitate certain populations, factors that play a prominent role in shaping the life—and death—narratives conveyed in *Lose Your Mother* and *Men We Reaped*.

In mourning the dead who populate their memoirs, Hartman and Ward call attention to and denounce the practices of debilitation. For example, Hartman says of the twelve to sixty million Africans who are estimated to have died as a result of the slave trade, that “today we might describe [these deaths] as collateral damage... Death ... [was] just a by-product of commerce, which has had the lasting effect of making negligible all the millions of lives lost. Incidental death occurs when life has no normative value, when no humans are involved, when the population is, in effect, seen as already dead” (31). Such remarks speak directly to the callous imperialist and capitalist logics that Puar associates with debilitation in observing that “The work machine ... need[s] bodies that are preordained for injury and maiming, often *targeted* maiming” (65).

Both Hartman and Ward recognize the ways that these practices of targeted injury continue to shape the lives—and deaths—of Black Americans today. As Hartman notes, “we still [live] in a world in which racism sorts the haves and the have-nots and decides who lives and

who dies” (129). Likewise, Ward writes poignantly of young men’s awareness of the forces of debilitation in their lives and communities. For instance, Ward notes that her cousin CJ “spoke of dying young” and that “even after dropping out, he never got a legitimate job, perhaps dissuaded by the experiences of the young men in the neighborhood.... Maybe he looked at those who still lived and those who’d died, and didn’t see much difference between the two, pinioned beneath poverty and history and racism, we were all dying inside” (121). These statements characterize death as a fundamental aspect of Black life narratives, and in doing so call attention to forms of racialized precarity and debilitation.

There’s been considerable engagement in our field with memoirs about experiences of illness and disability, but debilitation has less often been the focus of memoirs and life narrative scholarship in part because debility, as Puar notes, is “a form of massification,” rather than an identity category. In recasting people as commodities, debilitation makes individual lives illegible. For *this* reason, auto/biography constitutes an interesting and apt response to practices of debilitation. Bearing witness to the effects of debilitating structures on individual lives across generations, across continents, and within particular communities, Harman and Ward reject the politics of debilitation at the same time that they reveal the individual life as having inherent value and as both shaping and shaped by their wider community and deeper histories.