Transcript (Clean Copy)

Edited for accuracy and readability by limiting repeated and filler words

“A Conversation with Saidiya Hartman”

May 12, 2022 | Microsoft Teams

00:00:03 Tangela Serls

I am delighted that you all were able to be here for our final public event for "Re-imagining Blackness: Storytelling the End of the Racialized World." I'm Dr. Tangela Serls, assistant professor, or newly promoted associate professor of instruction in the Department of Women's and Gender Studies and member of the inaugural Humanities Institute faculty fellow cohort and member of the inaugural Humanities Institute faculty fellow cohort.

I'd like to take a moment to thank the USF Humanities Institute for sponsoring today's event. My fellow cohort members and co-hosts for today are Dr. David Ponton, assistant professor in the School of Interdisciplinary Global Studies with core appointment in Africana Studies and Associate Professor MacArthur Freeman II from the School of Art and Art History.

We're joined today by Professor Saidiya Hartman. Dr. Ponton will introduce her in a second and afterwards Professor Freeman will give Dr. Hartman and the audience a little background on the cohorts work and fellowship. Dr. Ponton.

00:01:07 David Ponton

Thank you Dr. Serls. I have the pleasure of introducing the illustrious Dr. Saidiya Hartman, who is the author of Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments, Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route and Scenes of Subjection. A MacArthur genius fellow, she has been a Guggenheim Fellow, a Coleman fellow and Fulbright Scholar. She's published articles in journals such as South Atlantic Quarterly, Brick, Small Axe, Callaloo, The New Yorker, and the Paris Review, and is a professor at Columbia University and lives in New York.

00:01:41 McArthur

Right as the first cohort of Faculty fellowship Fellows of the Humanities Institute, we were brought together by shared interests and the possibilities of storytelling to reimagine blackness. In many ways, Dr. Hartman’s work embodies the dilemmas of storytelling and reimagining. There's a pessimism related to trying to reimagine blackness because how and what we imagined seems always constrained by the anti-black structures that characterize the modern world. This is reflected in Dr. Hartman’s development of critical fabulation, which functions in part to narrate the impossibility of narration given the constraints of the anti-black archive. At the same time, critical fabulation is itself an invention in the abyss of the archive. It is a fugitive practice, an ongoing process of imagining what might be possible true or meaningful. Better still, it is a practice of redefining what it means for a person of people and their practice to be possible true and meaningful. It is in this way optimistic, or at least critical fabulation is evidence that the abyss can be a space for creativity, invention, sincerity, empathy and collective care.

In short, it helps us to imagine blackness as a resource for life and life giving. Our conversation with Dr. Hartman today concerns this dilemma. How to reimagine blackness and the possibilities of such re-imagining.

00:03:13 Tangela

Today's conversation will be limited to the fellows and eight invited participants who have read Professor Hartman's articles, "Seduction and the Ruses of Power," and "Intimate History, Radical Narrative." Each participant will introduce themselves and then present their question to Dr. Hartman. We invite audience members to engage with each other. In the chat, however, we will not be able to entertain specific questions from the audience. Today's conversation will be recorded and will be available via the Humanities Institute website for two weeks following the event. Thanks again for being here with us today and I'll turn it over to Dr. Patterson.

00:04:01 Tangela

You're muted.

00:04:40 David

If you can't find the mic button, try pressing control shift M on your keyboard. It might unmute you.

There you go. Try it one more time. You turned your- you turned it back off.

00:05:01 Cynthia Patterson

Not yet?

00:05:05 Tangela

We can hear you now.

00:05:06 Cynthia

OK, well I was waiting. It did say that someone had muted me and I thought someone had to unmute me I apologize, so I'm Cynthia Patterson. I'm an associate professor in the English department working on a new book on the contributions of AME Church women to the AME Church Review 1884 1924 which is under contract with the University Press of Mississippi, so I write about the church ladies. I'm really curious about your decision to publish your latest book with the popular press. I've read both that book and scenes of subjection which was published with Oxford University Press. And so I'm just wondering what drove that decision? In particular, you talk about the notes and how difficult it was to try to put them together, and then there really aren't footnotes but there are bolded words and the notes at the end of the book, so I was hoping you could talk a little bit about the process that led to that decision.

00:06:07 Saidiya

Yes, and are you- okay great. I think that one of the things that I've enjoyed about having a book published with FSG and with Norton is actually having a real and rigorous editorial experience amd process. And that's one thing that you know, was not the case at Oxford and I think that I really- and I've had the same editor for two books, and that's been actually very nice because I have an editor who, his name is John Glusman, when I gave him the first draft of a chapter for Wayward Lives, he just said

casually, oh, you're trying to invent a new mode of historiography, I get it. And so having someone who understands what you're trying to do and trust that is very important.

Actually, Norton will reissue Scenes of Subjection this year. And with Oxford, there were a number of mistakes that have been introduced in the book and its production and for me as the author, even if they're small, there's no such thing as a small mistake to an author of a book. So just having that chance to correct that and also just you know in terms of pricing, I mean Norton isn't a big trade press. In fact it's worker owned and it's considered like a crossover press. They do a lot of serious academic work, Eric Foner, I'm forgetting the name that- the author of the Hemings book, what's such historian's name, she's not coming to my mind. She's at Harvard, she wrote a great book about Sally…

I mean, all of these are like Norton authors, so they are serious scholars, there's novelists. And for me it's both about a commitment to getting books reviewed and a commitment to having them distributed. And right now my Oxford paperback, it's almost $40. The Norton paperback will be $20. With Scenes to save time and space it feels like a really tense experience because there's almost like 100- there's almost 1 1/2 pages of text on each page, so for me there's just more attention to the book and its production.

I mean, there was never an ebook of Scenes, right? Those kinds of things matter in terms of the distribution of books, and so much of what we do as teachers and professors is a way of keeping books alive. I think that anything we can do as writers to just have more people have access to a book at a lower cost, that's a value for me. After writing Scenes, which was a book from my heart, just as everything is, but there were people I met because I had my Fulbright year after writing Scenes, and there were people I met in Ghana who were reading the book or trying to read it and they said there's so much important stuff in here I can tell, but it is so difficult, it's so difficult. And I thought, wow, these are people I really respect. These are people I'm engaged with. I want them to be able to enter the work. So I feel with Lose You Mother and Wayward Lives, the same theoretical apparatus is at work, but the reader doesn't need that apparatus to enter the text. If you have it, good, there will be things that are like present for you, there will be ques, there will be references, but to actually have a full reading experience of the book that isn't required.

And it's important to me to have more black readers, more readers who are not traditional intellectuals. The porter of my building in New York has read my book. My electrician and his mother and his sister, they've read my book and I love that. That means everything to me. So that's one of the differences between kind of like my evolution as a writer. I mean, I'm writing about black life and I want black readers of all sorts to be able to engage the work.

00:10:53 Cynthia

Yes, thank you. I told my publisher I want my mother to be able to read my book, you know, so I can appreciate that. Thank you.

00:11:10 Elizabeth Hordge-Freeman

So I'll go ahead and ask my next question if that's okay with the group and actually hearing your response to that has provoked a number of other questions that I won't ask, I'll stay focused on the task at hand. I'm Elizabeth Hordge-Freeman. I'm an associate professor of sociology here, and I have a number of administrative roles as well. I recently published a book, Second-Class Daughters, which is about the coexistence of these cruel and caring intimacies between black women in Brazil and the

wealthier families that “adopt” them, so many of the ideas that you bring up in terms of the duality of intimacy and domination and things of that sort are so relevant, but we'll get to that later on.

My question to you is I want to start with the shorter piece that you have, Intimate History, Radical Narrative.” And essentially you take us on a journey inside of your studio and I really enjoy this piece, you describe it as a fugitive text of the wayward, but I wanted you to give us more detail about how we make sense of it from a methodological standpoint. Is it fiction? Is it nonfiction? Is it a mix of it all? You describe it as intimate history, radical narrative, critical fabulation, tell us what these labels mean, how they're different and distinctive?

00:12:26 Saidiya

Right, as the footnotes- the notes of Wayward Lives would indicate, I mean, I still have a rigorous archival practice, right? I think that there are a couple of things, in a chapter when I am actually trying to create, maybe the difference is I feel like I'm actually trying to narrate historical and social experience the way a novelist does, and for me, that means embodied. That means that we just don't have a description that's at arm’s-length of the reformatory, it’s brutality. But what does it feel like then when you are in that room, right? Because the person who's actually confined there, that's when we really, deeply understand the dimensions of that confinement and the cruelty of that institution.

So in order to recreate that experience, I read every prison report from like the New York State prison authority from the first one I think, which was like in 1912 or 1914, to like 1930. I'm reading those things for looking at information that enables me to build character and scene right? So I'm culling the archive as I'm trying to produce a story that still has minimal attention in these histories of the reformatory, et cetera. So what I do when I'm describing everything in terms of the chapter, like Riot and Refrain, all the facts of those chapters, all the experience, the letters, all of that, from Eva Perkins, all of those are archival documents. That's the archive. I think the dimension that's hardest to describe is the translation into like story, right? So what is it that enables you to tell a story?

On my retreat now, I'm here with all of these novelists and the way we are talking about our writing isn't actually that different. I don't know that most historians think about their ethical contract with their subjects or the kind of intimacy you need to have to describe a life in its fullness.

I was talking about being stuck around a certain thing that I'm working on now and I realized like, oh, how I was framing this character, historical figure, archives, evidence, again, it's all based in- but my orientation towards the figure enables narrative or prevents it, right? That's the kind of inchoate, creative dimension of an engagement.

In the chapter about Mattie Jackson in intimate history of slavery and freedom, the first time I read that case, Mattie touched me so deeply I just knew immediately oh, I have to… I'm going to write about this person. I'm going to write about her family. And again, that's subjective. It's intimate. It's the stories that appeal to you. I had an archive of 75 cases, I think really I wrote about maybe 10 at most of all of those cases that were in the archive I referenced other details from them, and so I don't, “make up” anything when I imagine so, for example, like in Intimate History the Mattie Jackson chapter, I want to recount her journey on that steamship from Norfolk to New York City. Well then I read all the descriptions of the shipping company about the steamship. I look at diagrams of it. I read like a black police officer in New

York who took the same journey. So that's the way- even as I'm imagining, I'm imagining based upon archival evidence.

00:17:15 Elizabeth

Thank you for that. I have another 3 minutes so if I can just type- put in another question here. What I love about what you just said is its resonance with the way that I approach my own writing, which is that emotions are both a substantive question to be explored and also a methodological issue that we have to consider, especially as ethical researchers, so I love the way that you navigate that. I guess that's less a question and more of a comment unless you have something more to add about that.

00:17:43 Saidiya

No, I mean, I think that that's actually really important, and it's interesting that for anthropologists or sociologists, you have to assign these like human subject agreements right to make sure your conduct is ethical. But as you know, people writing about “the past” as people are involved in historical labor, the notion of that ethical contract is as important.

00:18:11 Elizabeth

Thank you for that.

00:18:12 Saidiya

Yeah, no, thank you.

00:18:16 Brittany Powell

I have the next question and I'm fangirling a little bit right now. [laughing] My name is Brittany Powell. I'm a graduate student in Africana studies. So yes, I'm just a little bit of a fangirl, like when you mentioned Sarah Haley in your piece I was like, “Oh my gosh! I’m using her too!” I'm going to read my question because I'm a little nervous, again, like I said, fangirling over here, but I have loved everything that you have written up, so I really, really enjoyed both the pieces.

So specifically in Seduction and the Ruses of Power, I kept coming back to that humanity and slave law. So I kept thinking about in policing how they used the term, NIH, no human involved and in that piece, I kept thinking about that there's a lack of pretty much naming the enslaved as humans as if there was a commitment to seeing the enslaved as human then there would have been an adjustment to the laws. So even in cases where the whites were punished for death or injury of black of a black person, it was because the damage that they did was considered damage to property and not a human. So if that's the case, what do you mean when you use the phrase humanity in slave law?

00:19:50 Saidiya

Right and I think that what I'm trying to do- that's a great question. It's a great question, and it's about putting pressure on this discourse of the human and the conception of Western humanity that can actually enable these brutalities to exist in something like a recognition of the human…When I was writing Scenes I had read a few articles by Sylvia Wynter. Now, at this point in time I can say that certainly that questioning of this particular discourse of the human and its violence was really what I was trying to underscore in Scenes. So it's not that oh, the enslaved are only considered objects, even in the

way that there's a recognition of humanity, that recognition imposes another kind of violence. And for me, that was the theoretical intervention at the macro level, right? So that, then, is this discourse ultimately one that it's going to enable us? I mean other 18th century historians have spoken about the relationship between the emergence of humanitarian discourse and capitalism and commerce and the slave trade, so that there's an entanglement, which means that there is an underside, and I think that that's what we see, because I think, traditionally, oh the violence of slavery is being objectified, you know, there's a theorist, Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, and she has this term thinking about black existence as plasticity. So it's not simply that we are negated as human, we're both recognized as humans and negated as humans, but that articulation of what the human is, is so restrictive, is itself a mode of violence.

I mean you opened up making an aside to Sarah Haley and I wanna bring her back in because I think that we also had this vision of writing as this solitary enterprise, and I really feel like I've never written a single author anything. When I am on the page, there's so many people who are always with me on that page. I say in the piece, when Sarah helped me- my mother had just died. I don't know that I actually had the energy or the focus to do that work of doing all the notes. So that was just such a great gift and I think that that's also a part of this, ideally, this collective project that we're involved in, that there's a community that has enabled us to do the work, and a community will continue to enable us to do that collectively.

And I think about that experience versus someone like Sylvia Wynter who wrote a brilliant tone, Black Metamorphosis, that has been unpublished for like 30 or 40 years because the footnotes weren't completed and are now just being completed so it can be published. So that gift meant a great deal to me.

00:23:23 Brittany

Thank you so much. I love what you said about not writing alone, like that was… [laughing].

00:23:33 Elizabeth

I think I have the next question. So in the tradition of critical race theory- and I'm going to use that term even though we are in Florida- [laughing] you persuasively expose some of the nefarious ways that racist lawmakers anticipated and really deliberately constructed a legal system based on white supremacist and patriarchal ideas right, involving cultivated stereotypes, custom sentiments, and in many ways that connects to a number of themes that I write about in my own work that I connect to what I call this affective architecture of domination.

So what's interesting about your work is that you leverage court cases in ways that show that rape, for example, was really a property crime when it was a crime at all. And black women really had no recourse. You mentioned 75 cases I believe. Are there conditions in cases where a different outcome actually happened as it relates to the readings of black women's bodies? So like I guess what I'm asking is how many cases are in the historiography where claims of rapes were made and actually prosecuted with a guilty verdict. Did that ever happen? Did anything close to that happen? And this is me wanting to see perhaps some of the gray area that existed, if any, just to hear more about the texture of these cases.

00:24:58 Saidiya

Yes, and you know what? When I was referring to the 75 cases, I was thinking of actually, Wayward Lives in terms of the cases from the reformatory and the prison. But in Donnan's volume of slave cases and also Adrienne Davis, do you know her work? She's a legal theorist. She's at WashU who also does work on issues of slavery, sexuality and the family- because it had no standing in law, like how do you actually- it has no standing, so there can't be a case for something that's nonexistent, and I think that that's what was interesting about the strategy around Silia, right? Like trying to introduce rape as the cause for then her own act of self defense and it's like but no what are you talking about? It's as if making excess profit under capitalism were a crime. It's not. So even as we understand the violation it is, even as we understand how it makes human life unlivable, that's not a crime. But in terms of gray areas, I think I can talk about that in relation to Wayward Lives, in that I wrote a book about wayward lives. I didn't write a book about the lives of young black women in the reformatory, because there were a range of young black women in the reformatory, right? And not all of the young black women in the reformatory were wayward. There were virginal young women who were engaged to be married who had sex with their fiance who got pregnant who were abandoned. For me that didn't qualify for being actually wayward. There were people who weren't wayward.

So it's not like my project was to kind of paint every case I've read with that brush, but to respect that difference because I think a question that- Annette Gordon Reed was the historian I was thinking of- I think a question is am I imposing a kind of a contemporary set of values on those I'm writing about in the past. And the answer is no, and that's why this is the set of lives that I described. Does that describe the lives of all young black women? No. Does it even describe the lives of the majority of black women? No right? Because there's always cases that can challenge- I mean, I think if I was doing a history of the reformatory or prison it would be different. But I was writing about these kind of dangerous experiments and freedoms. These attempts at sexual transgression and freedom. So a particular set of people were central to that.

00:28:29 Elizabeth

Thank you for that and I think that Dr. Lemons is up next.

00:28:37 Gary Lemons

Dr. Hartman, I am so very inspired by your work. My name is Gary Lemons and I'm a full professor in the English department at the University of South Florida and my pedagogical focus is black feminist and womanist literary studies.

Just had a book that came out called Liberation for the Oppressed: Community Healing Through Activist Transformation, which really relates so much to the course and the progression and the radicalism and revolutionary aspects of your writing. Now I, like Brittany, wrote down my question because it has a context and it follows with Dr. Elizabeth's point about critical race theory, particularly in the state of Florida. So I'll read the context and the question is in this.

In the state of Florida, the current governor has promoted and insisted upon passing legislation banning the teaching of critical race theory in schools. Considering the critical importance of your legal research focused on the history for African enslavement as the legal foundation of this nation's constitutional property rights of whites, particularly hetero white men and the black body, how would you defend the

necessity of teaching critical race theory in schools, not as a form of attack against white people, but as a liberating strategy of anti-racist alliance and racial healing?

00:30:20 Saidiya

So first I'm going to give you a very pessimistic answer. Okay, and you know one has to want to have the eradication of racism as a goal and one has to want to be healed, and I think at this moment in our national context, many people are devoted and are successfully committed to a racist order.They are actively committed to disenfranchising black voters. They have an agenda, so it's not that, oh, we can win those people over through an anti racist pedagogy. I mean, they're committed to something and what they're committed to is a white dominant social order and a white supremacist project. In a way it's paradoxical that you know, and just under 45, you know the return of all the kind of the Confederate flags, the regalia, fascist regalia, as a source of empowered white identity, why is it actually so threatening than to just deal with the formation of our national context, and that undeniably being based on racial slavery and settler colonialism? And so that's not about reaping disharmony, because it's just like the fact of the programs that the institutions of exploitation and the extraction and accumulation that were foundational to the emergence of the nation. So for me, it's about this authoritarianism and an incipient fascism in the US, because authoritarianism wants to repress discourse. And it's not like you or I made up the fact of European settlement in the Americas. I mean, there is a Trail of Tears, there is treaties, there's the whole apparatus of law that emerges in the 17th century to make this a slaveholding republic and to create the category of a white citizen. So partly it's an attempt to enable a supremacist project by denying people and particularly young people and students of the kind of knowledge that would enable them to have critical perspective on the US. And might be radically disenchanting, right? Might be radically disenchanting when we think about the systemic ways that black wealth has been extracted, right? So then, oh, if you would just understand that from the freedman's bank forward every- we're just talking about like black people's efforts to accumulate capital and when they do that successfully, even that comes under attack. I mean, we're in a capitalist nation, so what's so threatening about the specter of black capital? I think then these kind of myths of US democracy, upward mobility, the meritocracy, anyone can get ahead, that is thrown into crisis when we think about the structures that have actually made that impossible.

And I think that for white people thinking about the structural advantages that have enabled them to move ahead and to accumulate wealth and value and property, and this is not- and even if you're like, well, I wasn't here, I didn't own slaves- I mean, in the course of the pandemic there was a series of exposes about evaluations of property. What do you call it? The people who go to people homes and they evaluate the worth of their house. So homes that were in white neighborhoods but owned by black people, if the black owner was present, the value of the house would be devalued 2 and 3 hundred thousand dollars so the black owners would have their white neighbors stand in when the banking officials and others came to evaluate the value of their homes so its proper value could be ascribed to the home. So that's about the way in which- whether that's conscious or not- but the way racism is so built into these structures evaluation and without an understanding of the long history of exploitation, extraction, the destruction of black business zones, the collapse of black financial institutions with no intervention by the federal government, the predatory crisis of the 2008 subprime workers, all of these are like capitalist strategies that are totally entangled with racism. So if you can't talk about this history then you can never understand those things, and so then it's easier to say like, "Oh well, you know black people are responsible for their own condition. They don't work hard and save like other people. They

don't do this. They don't do that. They don't do this." And I think that knowledge is power. And to give young people a tool for critical thinking, that's potentially a tool for a radical social transformation. That's the reason why they're doing this. I mean, 45 and the far right, they're not afraid of racial antagonism. In fact, they're cultivating it. What they're afraid of, is the cultivation of critical thinking that threatens to undo this project.

00:36:52 Gary

Dr. Hartman you remind me so much of Angela Davis. Continue be the radical sister that you are. Thank you so much.

00:36:59 Saidiya

Thank you, thank you very much and I hope everyone sends me their books after this is over 'cause people keep on mentioning things that they've written. So please please do send them to me.

00:37:14 Cynthia

OK, I guess my question is next. Can you hear me? I want to go back and pull through a thread from earlier and then kind of build on it. You were talking about sitting down, you're never writing alone, you're living with Cilya, you're living with the women that you wrote about and I think that's what brought me to my current project. I'm a minister's wife, not a Christian. I always tell people we're not Christian. Unitarian far left go farther left that you can go in white denominations. And so I've been really feeling connected to these women I'm trying to write about 'cause they were ministers wives and bishops wives, and they're trying to carve out some space for cultural authority in a very patriarchal denomination, African Methodist Episcopal. And I also been leading racial justice at my church for a long time, and it's frustrating. I'm frustrated with white people right now, but I wanted to ask about the church women that you write about, because you write about women who are also churchgoing and you talk about the Bibles in their rooms and were you surprised that there was this kind of waywardness balancing out their religious faith? Or did that not come as a surprise to you?

00:38:40 Saidiya

You know what? I think it didn't come as a surprise to me and I think I wanted to not present a certain picture of like the "church lady" right? And there's a great collection of short stories called the secret lives of like church women or something like which is great. It's like you know what? People go to church are as complex as people who don't go to church and I think that for me, what was really important was the fact of their faith in a way underscored their non conventionality and radicalism. Because what does it mean to be like a churchgoing woman who's a total respectable member of your congregation, but you do not believe in marriage, and you are not going to get married again, like do you know what I'm saying? Like in a way that's a really interesting position to maintain. If you issue the church OK, you can do what you want and I think that thinking about that nuanced web of values was important to display because I think that for the state authorities- some of the women I [inaudible] oh this person is like, you know, amoral because they're living out of wedlock with the man and I'm like no, this is like the matron of the church who's doing all this good work, who owns her own business, I mean, this is someone who's actually a respectable upstanding figure in our community and is also involved in the lifestyle that's like a variant on what is considered the heteronormative Victorian paradigm. So I think that that was, you know, important.

A friend of mine who is a filmmaker, Arthur Jafa, has this thing because he made this great film on black religious experience. And people were like, well do you believe in God? And he said, “I believe in black belief” and I want to say just like the power of black belief and how critical that power is to struggles for freedom, whether you're like in the church or not, what is it, I think that particularly for 18th and 19th century enslaved Africans that was so important in imagining a justice that was so much greater than the power of white men or Europeans. Like no no, your justice is small in compared to this and you may not give me justice, but you know what? There is divine retribution, so I think belief and faith are really complex matters. So I feel like I just like touched upon that I think that. You know there's historians like Ula Taylor who wrote this book on Women and the Nation of Islam, which is really kind of a similar project because it's like how is it that women exist within these really patriarchal structures, but still, they're exercising leadership. Most people don't know, they think of Elijah Muhammad, founder of the Nation of Islam, his wife Clara converted to Islam before him. She brought him to Islam, right? So I think that especially in those places that seem really shut down and patriarchal, to think about the work that women inside those institutions do to push against the frame and to exercise their leadership.

00:42:31 Cynthia

Thank you, thank you, I appreciate it. I think Marlon Wilson is next.

00:42:39 Marlon

Yes, thank you and thank you guys all for inviting me to participate in this conversation. My name is Marlon Tobias I'm an artist and an educator, and a recent graduate from USF with an MFA in studio art. My thesis work explored the historical relationship between African Americans and land ownership. So from reading intimate history and radical narrative, I actually related to using archival documents and materials to rebuild and reimagine history but through a more intimate lens.

My question though is in relation to Seduction and the Ruses of Power. Reading that essay on the backdrop of the Supreme Court leak of the Roe V. Wade overturned draft, I thought about the history of government impediment on the women's body in the United States and how race has played a role in the distribution of those rights. So for example, in 1839 the Married Women's Property Act passed and expanded rights of married women to act as independent agents in legal context, however, black women were still enslaved, restricting them from access to those rights. The 19th amendment granted women the right to vote in 1920. However, this right was not granted to black women, so history has shown that government has restricted black women from having full agency over their being despite laws granting rights to all women.

With that said, black women have always practiced wayward experiments to make choices about reproduction, but their use of their own agency in this regard had been historically treated as criminal, and appears it will again soon. So my question is, is there hope in imagining a world outside of the oppressive systems we currently live in, where black women have what we might call agency?

00:44:49 Saidiya

Yeah, yeah, I mean that's a great question. There's a kind of tension between abortion rights and something like reproductive justice. And I think that often black women have functioned and advanced a reproductive justice initiative, and that's actually including but more encompassing than the right to choose. And I think because we know with black women, women in the global South, issues of forced

sterilization has been such a huge issue. And also Miriam Makeba actually framed as a reproductive justice issue, the murder of our children, right? That's also in the frame, like being able to kind of sustain and preserve the life of our children. And that framing of reproductive justice has the potential to undo these structures because it's not only about individual rights to choose, but it's about reproductive justice projects that are fundamentally at odds with the order that makes certain lives disposable, vulnerable to more violence, without access to healthcare. Again, black maternal mortality is also a reproductive justice issue. I'm thinking of Dorothy Roberts, you know, killing the black body. I mean, I feel like the way black feminists have taken up reproductive justice is been thinking about all of these state institutions and practices which make life for us impossible.

So I think you're right to point out that disparity. What's also really interesting about married women's property rights is a number of historians, white women historians, black women historians, have also demonstrated that in terms of white women slaveholders were as committed to the institution and were capable and distributing as much violence as white men, that gender quote unquote provided no relation of equality. And in fact, that slave even came to structure white intimacy, because a woman entering a marriage could always quote unquote hold onto her slaves. So just even that the terms of white marital contracts were so impacted by this like property in slaves so that disparity between the lives of black women and white women has a long history. It has a long history.

00:48:09 Marlon

Thank you so much and I will pass it to Jordan.

00:48:14 Saidiya

Yeah, but at some other point I would like to hear more about the land piece of your project. Maybe when we have the discussion.

00:48:22 Marlon

Oh, of course, of course.

00:48:24 Jordan D.

Alright, awesome, so yeah, my name is Jordan Daley. I am a recent graduate from USF in philosophy with a minor in Africana Studies. And I had mentioned before our conversation, I was lucky enough to receive the opportunity to go to Columbia in the Fall for the MFA program in Creative Writing and poetry. So I'm very excited to continue this project of working with you.

My question being a philosopher is a little theoretically complex, and so it's been brought down. But I'm here to open it back up a little. But the question is basically, are we without a prayer? Like have we managed to fool ourselves with the critical edge of our intelligence and our very ability to think about our situation?

And there are two things that I've been thinking quite a lot about. It's something that you said to bring up Arthur Jafa again, and in his film Dreams are Colder than Death where he said one of the things that you know is that at any moment your life could be ended in an act of gratuitous violence, right? And I think living in Florida something that we've all sort of felt after the death of Trayvon Martin is this feeling that that was a serious thing that was upon all of us, and our deaths were imminent.

00:49:40 Saidiya

Right

00:49:40 Jordan D.

I'm also thinking about some of the ways that the institution participates in the very things that we are trying to abolish, right? And that part of our work is caught up in the very systems that we intend to abolish. So what I really mean when I say we're without a prayer is I'm really curious about your perspective on this double bind of what I think is black studies of this double binding condition of black studies. Is that the work that you have achieved is theoretical genius and I don't think anyone could take that away from you. I think it is a work that will exist forever. For as long as there are people who can read, your work will exist forever. But the problem is that the very condition of that work is the precariousness of our situation is how awful things are, and I think what our discussion is made very legible is the ways in which all these historical conditions are still our same conditions, their structures that changed, but their functions are exactly the same.

So my question is, do we have hope? Have we lost? Did we lose already? And if we've lost, what does that mean for our project?

00:50:46 Saidiya

Yeah for me a couple of things come to mind. There's a certain way, there's this polarity of like Afro pessimism, black optimism and for me, they're like are porous membrane they're not poles, they're total porous membrane. Du Bois said something about, you know it is most necessary to have hope in a situation, it is most necessary to be hopeful in a situation that seems utterly hopeless. So I think hope is different from optimism, right? And I don't think that we have already lost. I don't feel that even as I could say our defeat is ongoing, so I could say our defeat is ongoing and we haven't already lost, right?

We mentioned Arthur Jafa. He has this great kind of like black anthropocene film called AGHDRA and it's great because it's about like the apocalypse has happened. But still kind of like blackness in this totally different form is still there in present, and I feel like that's a great articulation of my sensibility.

I mean, without a doubt human existence on the planet is a question. I mean, maybe we have 200 more years, right? But it's not sustainable. That's just a fact. So one of the things I think that inspires me and I would hope also in my work and I think it's the way I just appreciate and marvel and almost get like spiritually corrected and aligned is that, even when life is impossible, we have lived as if we can live. And for me, that's the nuance that's required. There was nothing for the hundreds of years that Africans were enslaved here. People had a knowledge that they were going to be free. There was nothing to encourage that- That was kind of like reckless and foolish, right? So the kind of radical capacities of the imagination of the otherwise and how we inhabit this antagonism of existing in an order that is totally death driven, that can accept the loss of millions of lives around the globe without a blink and the markets are stronger, more money is made, more billionaires emerge as like death and war unfold. So I'm not at all optimistic about that order and I don't think that there's a way to reform it. But it's not my only vision of the possible. One of the things that I appreciate about the anthropologists, David Graeber, who said that the way we live is just one possibility, but humans across time have lived in a variety of ways. So I feel that we need a much more kind of capacious imagination of what is possible. And we need to commit to those ways, because even as we're here talking this lovely talk, we are required to

make good this talk by trying to produce other sets of arrangements, other forms of association, other ways to live. I don't in any way take for granted a future, but I don't feel hopeless or that we have already lost.

00:55:03 Jordan D.

I have one quick question to sneak in. One last thing, do you still believe in Baraka's note on poetry?

00:55:11 Saidiya

Oh, say, more. Like what do you mean?

00:55:13 Jordan D.

It was an interview you did a few years ago, where apparently you had interviewed him and what he said, you asked him if the poetry could make social change and he said you needed a gun [laughter].

00:55:22 Saidiya

Oh, oh. And you know what? And I think that Baraka is someone like Frank Wilderson, they say provocative things to inspire thought to like, ah. But, I think Baraka, as his practice would indicate was like absolutely committed to poetry and poetics, and one of the things that's so important for me about poetics it's about making new modalities of thought possible. I mean, I don't really think that differently about the distinction between poetry and theory.

I was certainly shocked, but I don't think that Baraka believed that 100%...

00:56:13 Jordan D.

Alright, that makes sense. Thank you so very much, thank you.

00:56:18 David

We are doing very well on time, so we have additional questions. So Jordan Battle we'll ask you to go ahead and pose your questions Dr. Hartman and then Brittany, I think we might also have time for that second question from you, but let's just keep our eyes on the time.

00:56:41 Jordan B.

Hello, I'm gonna try to make this- can you hear me? OK, I'll try to make this very quick. It's a little bit of a long-winded question. I was definitely over thinking. Also a big fan like Brittany so. Yes, so I wanted to focus on your Intimate History Radical Narrative paper. So the blueprint that you put forth in that article I wanted to utilize in a ethnography project I did this semester. I honestly just got added to this panel and sent the article not so long ago, so I would wish I had more time to sit with it, 'cause I think I fell into some traps that I wanted to discuss in this project right now with you.

So the particular cemetery I focused on for this project is called the Zion Cemetery here in Tampa. It was a rediscovered cemetery, and it's ironically, or perhaps unironically located underneath the predominantly black public housing project named Robles Village. So, within my project, I attempted to emulate your work and that I sought to link the past to the present and to expose the experience of those who endure the long durée of dispossession and the seemingly interminable unalleviated

condition of fungibility as you say. I feel my efforts to highlight the disparate living conditions for residents within the Robles public housing village and their ability to, despite these circumstances, form commune, resilient practice, maintain exuberance in spirit was successful, but in hindsight I think my project had a couple of faults, the first being that I concluded Robles Village is Zion, which is actually the title of my paper. So not only a cemetery but a place of spiritual importance that we should regard as such. I feel like I fell into the trap of pleading for recognition rather than planning for abolition.

So I think this conclusion stemmed from my interviews that I did with some of the residents and I wanted to help alleviate their suffering like immediately and ended up falling into this trap. And then the second part of my question was, I don't think I sat long enough or lingered in this space of the more, as you say.

There's 382 death certificates of African Americans entered at Zion Cemetery, and outside of their names, date of birth, death, their marital status, and their home address, there's little known about the lives of the deceased there. There was eleven people, African Americans that actually had little pieces articles in the local archives and it was mostly like they had strange or gruesome deaths that occurred that justified newspapers, I guess, covering them. There was one actually prominent minister who was also covered, but that was the only person that was considered of importance buried there in that time.

So I believe imagining some of the strange and missing details within these 11 deaths may have allowed for more compelling discourse on agency within social death that African Americans within Tampa Bay experienced in the 20th century, and then linking that to the social positionality of African American residents in the Robles Housing Project Village today.

So yeah that was kind of not really direct questions, but I wondered if you had some input or how I might be able to rethink this and elaborate on these projects in the future.

01:00:16 Saidiya

Yeah, I mean one, there's a colleague of mine at Columbia, an architect Mable Wilson, who also curated the show Black Architects at MoMA in New York who did that kind of like architectural histories about thinking of the city as a plantation. And I think that thinking about the spatial dynamics is a really, really good way to articulate that long durée. I think that there's something about wanting- I understand that impulse like wanting to rush in and do better. And I think that sometimes what we're called on to do is actually to just sit with people's experience, to just sit with it as opposed to- So that's it.

The other thing I would say is, when I listen to Angela Davis or Ruthie Wilson Gilmore, they're like, "do everything possible." So short term reform and recognition with abolition as the goal is also fine because we're also trying to survive in the meantime and so the resources of the state should be available for black people. With that kind of structural arrangement that you are talking about is this project that's built upon- it's like another form of settler colonialism because it's about like the desecration of an ancestral site. What does it mean to build a housing project on a cemetery? I don't know if you do, just in terms of your interviews, having the people you work with shape more how you're telling the story, right?

So there's this classic old book, I don't know if you know, it's called like Lessons from the Damned. And it was about a group of radical organizers who did this work in public housing. But the book itself is a compilation of those people's stories, and that's a way that you get to make something happen that

creates an archive of struggle that, their voices are not framed by your own, and is also like a kind of a text of struggle for the future.

01:02:59 Jordan B.

Thank you so much. Yeah, so during the project I wanted to go into it just elaborating the Robles residents' experiences and then once I started to interview them, that's when I was really like, "Oh my gosh, I need to implement some kind of radical way to change their position." I was attempting to allow them to dictate how the project went on, but even just definitely sitting with what they were saying and it would allow me to not fall into that trap that I fell into.

01:03:32 Saidiya

So yeah, yeah. I think it's like that impulse to want to alleviate someone suffering- I don't think that that's something you should be like- Like that's a good thing! Even if, you know, there's a limit- that's a good thing!

01:03:50 Jordan B.

Thank you so much.

01:03:54 Brittany

My question kind of piggybacks off of Jordans- well, actually both of the Jordans- I just realized that there were two of you. Again, it's that piece an Intimate History Radical Narrative. I lost my mom also and I've been trying to figure out how to write about her. And the thing that's been really sitting with me is the fact that we had to choose either between the segregated cemetery or the not segregated cemetery that's behind the plantation. I'm third generation Floridian, so like those were our choices. And how do I tell that story with encompassing that that's her final choice? That kind of gave me this like ah-ha moment when I was reading Intimate Histories. Specifically when you say black feminist poetics is not a plea for recognition, but for abolition. So it made me question, what are we doing with this? What is the plan? Are we just discussing and critiquing and dissecting? Or are we really putting some kind of plan into action? And you kind of answered that a little bit when you were talking about making your books more accessible to the public. But again, are we elevating the struggle? Or how are we doing this to really actually have a plan for some type of action? If that makes any sense, I'm sorry.

01:05:34 Saidiya

Yeah, no no no no no. So I'm going to say a couple of things. One, I think the space for thinking and writing and producing work, like that's a plan of action. Toni Morrison said she did her work as an editor because she was watching this struggle go on, and she had children, she couldn't be out in the street, she wasn't doing that, so her contribution was through editing these books and giving black writers a space inside the press. So I think that all forms of action don't look the same, and I don't think the only form of political action is you know that, so I think it's really important to value what we do as thinkers and writers, is as imagining the many dimensions of black life, particularly that aren't represented in dominant media and all that. So that's one thing.

I feel like I see people doing a lot of things. I have two younger cousins. My mother's family is from Montgomery, Alabama. My great grandfather had a country store. My cousin who's in theater who

teaches at Spellman decided make a community organic farm at the site of my great grandfather's store and is now feeding that community right? She's gotten these funds from a black land trust to expand that project. That's something that's very, it is just like so important. For me, it's so funny, about her doing that actually changes my relationship to Montgomery. For the first time, I think like, oh maybe I have to spend part of my time in Montgomery- like my cousin is doing this really tremendous thing there. And that's created an opening for me to be grounded in community in a way that I'm not because I grew up in New York with my dad's family who's Caribbean. So that's one cousin and I have another cousin in Cambridge, she was a teacher and educator trying to be a progressive inside the public school system and finding it impossible [laughter]. And so she started like a black freedom school and is working with all these other black homeschoolers, having these projects. So when I look, particularly people who are younger than me, I feel like, wow, you all are taking up- you're asking this question and you're building other kinds of institutions, so I feel like whether it's [inaudible], black farming projects, held collectives, I feel like those are the kinds of structures that we need to build that simply not like about a protest politics, a politics of recognition about getting into the street. But how do we create things that are going to help make our lives more sustainable and fuller right now where we are?

01:08:50 Brittany

I actually really, really appreciate your answer. I'm an educator, I'm going back to teach middle school y'all pray for me.

01:09:00 Saidiya

Yeah no, no no and it was funny because with these young cousins, I mean my daughter went to like this, quote unquote, new progressive arts charter school and when I showed them the statement, they're both educators- I was so optimistic- they were like mm-mm [shakes head no], as long as it's trying to be school, there's so much stuff that comes with that. So I think also just like you young educators who are trying to do it differently, who both have a theoretical analysis of the limits of the structure, so you come in with so much knowledge, and you're also not going to tolerate things as usual.

And that gives me a lot of hope.

01:09:38 Brittany

Yeah, yeah, I definitely said that in an interview that this is what I will and will not tolerate [laughter].

01:09:44 Saidiya

Yeah, and my cousins they were clear too, its like okay…

01:09:51 David

Alright, we have about 19 minutes before we need to let Dr. Hartman go so she doesn't miss her ride [laughter]. I know you expressed interest in chatting with Marlon a bit more about his work on land.

So Jade if you could highlight or spotlight Marlon again so they can discuss that would be great.

01:10:17 Marlon

Oh yeah, so you just- like to go into my work pretty much?

So my work, like I said, I'm an artist, a visual artist. I just received my MFA this year. My work focused on the historical relationship between African Americans and land ownership through the lens of my family. My family has owned, more or less, a big plot of land in this small, small town right outside of Jacksonville, Florida. And they've owned it for generations, so I wanted to really uncover all of the nuances that it took for black people to get land and also to keep land. So in my research I went through a lot of documentation, legal documentation in regards to my family and passing down the land and owning the land and even losing the land. I interviewed a lot of older family members. I went through a lot of family archival documents, photos, as well as actual found materials. I did some installation work as well, which allowed me to actually build scenes, and I built some conceptual pieces that really at the heart of it, just told the story of this black family in the South during Jim Crow and what it took for them to survive and keep this little piece of America for future generations.

01:12:23 Saidiya

Yeah, no, that that's powerful. That's powerful.

01:12:35 David

Dr. Serls or Professor Freeman? Did either of you want to jump in for this final set of minutes with a question?

01:12:48 McArthur

Well, we do have our cohort question here. Be good for that. OK, so one of the questions that I wanted-

This has been great. I feel like I'm full and there's still a lot of food on the table.

So can you talk about the importance of re-imagining blackness through storytelling? It's a pretty open question, but really relevant to how we've been framing this semester, or this year.

01:13:15 Saidiya

Yeah, I think for me, that’s a really important ethical and political labor, that re-framing and even what the telling of stories means, 'cause I say this in one of my books, my great grandfather, Moses Thomas, I would come to the South to see my grandmother and my great grandfather would take me on a ride through the countryside like every summer and he would point out land actually and he would say, that land used to be owned by black folks, that land used to be owned by black folks. And he would tell me these stories about slavery. I was 11 and 12 years old. When I think that I'm doing this labor, like the kind of intellectual labor I'm involved in, was precisely about that conveyance of stories in my own family. But I think so much the shift of even a minor, just even a minor 10-degree shift in the perspective of a story can radically open things up. I have a former student who's a brilliant historian, her name is Marisa Fuentes, she wrote a book called Dispossessed Lives. It's about black women in the archive of slavery. And she was reading these descriptions of the beating and punishment of enslaved people. And it was like just a matter of fact description. And just by saying something like, “THE” body was beaten versus “HER” body was beaten. That “HER” locates all of that pain in a particular human figure, and so that's a small thing just what the insertion of “her” did in retelling that story.

For me, I think of stories- I have this thing about like it's my secular mode of ancestor worship. So it's about attending to the lives of those who have been here and just really wanting to attend to their lives

with a kind of acute regard and deep and profound understanding of all the tools I have, everything I have is because of what they've done, even when they don't talk about it. Even when they don't talk about it. This same great grandfather, I saw a picture of him In Eyes on the Prize when, like the Klan was surrounding a church in which Dr. King and others had gathered. And after they gathered, black men had gathered and I was like looking through it, I was like what? Is that Papa? I did a freeze frame and I took a photo and I sent it to them and they were like Oh my God Papa was there. That's a story- he never told us that, right? For me, those moments are everything. That's a spark for a story of an average working class, but middle class aspiring black man pullman porter, would never consider himself a radical or even like he never said, “oh I participated in the struggle in Montgomery” but yet he was there outside that church when people needed help. And so those are the moments that I like to attend to and all the people whose names we don't know, who made where we sit possible. So that just feels like really tremendously important to me and I want to spend the rest of my life doing that.

01:17:46 McArthur

Awesome, thank you.

01:17:53 David

Dr. Serls?

01:18:00 Tangela

I actually saw someone in the chat had their hand raised but then they lowered it and so since we're going to have our own time with Dr. Hartman, I thought I could let that person ask, but I don't see their hand raised anymore.

01:18:20 Saidiya

Oh, there I think I see a hand on the screen. I see like what is it…Yeah yeah yeah.

01:18:29 Tangela

So really quickly, if you want to ask your questions since I mean we have a little bit of time.

01:18:35 Sohail

No, I appreciate that. And thank you. I was, regrettably, a little bit later to this. I was like rushing in the car to like get in front of my laptop. I was super excited to be able to hear from you Dr. Hartman. I'm trying not to totally fanboy out a little bit, but you said something earlier and I really do apologize if you mentioned this maybe earlier in the teams meeting, but, it was interesting to hear you kind of, you know, describe Frank Wilderson as maybe overstating certain things to challenge people’s conceptions of thought. And hearing you towards the tail end discuss the black sort of perspective when it comes to reproductive rights, as that's become timely again, I'm curious about- And I don't know if I have a question, I guess, I'm more asking you to pontificate on maybe your assertions about the Afro pessimists ungendering of black folk in particular, and how maybe you do agree or what tangents maybe you do disagree with when it comes to the unique perspective of black women in comparison to how afro-pessimists oftentimes say, it's not just that blackness is foundational predating gender, but that gender for blackness is in anomaly, that that's reserved for humanist subjects, not for black people.

I'm curious what you're interested in telling us with the backdrop of Roe V. Wade being challenged and unique concerns that black women have and how that may- I know you mentioned that Afro pessimism is oftentimes like a permeable wall that goes in and out of you know nihilism and optimism. So I guess again, I don't know if I have a real question, but I really want to hear your thoughts, if that makes sense.

01:20:28 Saidiya

Yes, and I'm trying to…I think that certainly the piece on unendering comes from Hortense Spillers, Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe. And I think that that article is so foundational to now like 3 generations of Black thought and so I think that there are various arguments that build from Spillers. I mean other people have challenged a dimorphic gendered framework as like an imposition of coloniality that's inapplicable to many places in the world, but certainly in terms of understanding black people, and particularly enslaved, that issues of fungibility, plasticity, figurative capacity, maybe more robust descriptive terms than any notion of black life unfolding in accordance with these gendered norms. So I think that even when people, and I would say myself included, deviate from Spillers, it's not like in opposition to Spillers.

One of the things I say in seduction, even as there's a recognition of certain limited forms of violence that may constitute the enslaved as human, it is very interesting that sexual violence isn't one of those forms of violence that has that status. So to me, that's a way- that's a form of gender differentiation. Someone named Jennifer Morgan in a brilliant article called Partus sequitur ventrem and in another book called Reckoning with Slavery- it's a very brilliant book- and in that, Jennifer Morgan actually is articulating racial capitalism and the emergence of a black radical tradition and the black radical imagination. And what she says, building from Spillers but with a difference, she talks about the centrality of the enslaved female as central because of her reproductive capacity and how that reproductive capacity was folded into the notion of like wealth futures for white people, that part of the whole transmission of property and wills was not only about this body with the capacity of this body to reproduce other bodies in the future. And that was central to the emergence of racial capitalism and accumulation, and for her, that too is a site of gender differentiation, but that's not the same as saying, oh, that gender differentiation makes black female gender differentiation the same as or equivalent or anything resembling white female gender, right? I think that the larger point that Afro pessimists make about when one's relationship to the status, to the category of the human is precarious, then all of these things that are refinements of that human don't make sense. I mean, I once heard Sylvia Wynter when asked whether she was a feminist or not, she said no, because feminism is a part of the discourse of man. So I think that there is a community of discourse, and in that community there are lots of convergences. It's the political project and the aspirations are shared, even as there are those differentiations and variations of analysis.

01:24:47 Tangela

That was excellent. As my fellow cohort members said, I'm full too. I cannot wait to go back and watch this video. I hope all of you will too, it's going to be up for two weeks, so make sure that you take a look at it, it's going to be on the humanities institute website. And for our published authors who just recently released books, don't forget to send them to Dr. Hartman. She will be looking out for them. I'd just like to take a moment to thank everybody and can everybody just join me in either a physical or virtual round of applause? Because this has been fantastic, like…

01:25:28 Saidiya

It's been a pleasure and I'll look forward to seeing the cohort next week.

01:25:30 Tangela

Yes, we'll be in touch and thank you all so much for supporting us these last several months for the 21-22 inaugural cohort of Humanities Institute Faculty Fellows, and we look forward to seeing you all in the Fall.

01:25:44 Saidiya

Thank you, thank you bye.