



# Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America

*Saidiya V. Hartman*

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In this provocative and original exploration of racial subjugation during slavery and its aftermath, Saidiya Hartman illuminates the forms of terror and resistance that shaped black identity. *Scenes of Subjection* examines the forms of domination that usually go undetected; in particular, the encroachments of power that take place through notions of humanity, enjoyment, protection, rights, and consent. By looking at slave narratives, plantation diaries, popular theater, slave performance, freedmen's primers, and legal cases, Hartman investigates a wide variety of "scenes" ranging from the auction block and minstrel show to the staging of the self-possessed and rights-bearing individual of freedom. While attentive to the performance of power--the terrible spectacles of slaveholders' dominion and the innocent amusements designed to abase and pacify the enslaved--and the entanglements of pleasure and terror in these displays of mastery, Hartman also examines the possibilities for resistance, redress and transformation embodied in black performance and everyday practice. This important study contends that despite the legal abolition of slavery, emergent notions of individual will and responsibility revealed the tragic continuities between slavery and freedom. Bold and persuasively argued, *Scenes of Subjection* will engage readers in a broad range of historical, literary, and cultural studies.

## Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America Details

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**franciszka says**

heavy on the academese, which made this a difficult and sometimes esoteric read for me. but it was important reading - so i plowed through

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**molly says**

This book has challenged me in ways that I was not aware I could be challenged before i read it. It is possibly single-handedly THE book i reference/ am mindful of practically in each space I enter...

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**ralowe says**

my god what a staggering achievement this book is. it took me what felt like forever to get to the end because when she got to the part about the aftermath of our alleged emancipation i underwent a profound spat of indignation with living in san francisco. suddenly everytime someone glared at me on the street i wanted to stab them dead on the sidewalk. you know, it's really fucked what they did to us. the emotion reading this brought up was a sensation of what could be finally named as a debt. within people's inexplicable random glares i thought i could see a denial of debt compensated by hostility. a hostility projecting an expectation of debt back at me. that debt is what black people owe this country for "giving us our freedom." in one chapter saidiya hartman closely examines the apparent origins of this sensation of debt through her close readings of tracts given to freed slaves that outline suggested conduct. whichever i figured out how to deal with the chapters previous to that which talked about the ways that the law assumed mutuality and reciprocity in the disciplinary violence during master-slave relations, and the peculiar place of agency in this midst of utter terror for female slaves, this chapter completely bowled me over. in horror i saw the unfolding of black investment in propriety. hartman's writing is really incredible, she writes each sentence like a work of art.

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**Miguel says**

*Scenes of Subjection* is an encyclopedic text (though Hartman makes no such claim) detailing the means of domination and terror of black men and women in the era of North American chattel slavery and Reconstruction alongside means of resistance and insurgence. Hartman begins with Frederick Douglass (making one of her most memorable and reproduced points — a point precisely about not reproducing sensationalized images of black suffering) and ends with a virtuoso reading of *Plessy v. Ferguson*.

Her book is split between the period of chattel slavery and the post-emancipating periods. Hartman identifies the quotidian violence punitively heaped upon the enslaved and the involvement of the state. She explores the state's disavowal of its role in white supremacy, the means by which notions of white supremacy are propagated, and the features of language (both legal and social) that are culpable in these formations.

Hartman is at her best making incisive readings of legal precedent and social convention that produce serious theoretical points. Hartman also includes important strategic conclusions (such as: "challenges to the inequalities sanctioned in [the private sphere] and the demand for remedies cannot simply seek solutions in state intervention .... Instead remedy depends upon the deconstruction of the private, exposing its overdetermination by the state and making legible the ascription of the state's duties.") Hartman references robust historical detail ranging from pamphlets and public debates to literature and legal transcripts.

Hartman's text is essential both for its content and its method. *Scenes* is a model of hybrid historical-theoretical work that does not privilege the so-called disinterested historical archive but rather exposes the blindspots by thorough interrogation of that archive and of common sense understandings of history. Hartman is able to not only reveal much of what history effaces, but reveal precisely how that effacement took place.

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## **Mars says**

the discourse on terror and enjoyment between master/slave relationships is insightful, deep, and oft' times, frighteningly relevant to my own experiences as a performer and as a black man negotiating (enjoying and cautious of) the fruits of my culture.

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## **M. says**

This is quite possibly the most important book ever written. The analysis is brilliant, the research is thorough and comprehensive, the writing is lyrical, and the implications will challenge everything you thought you knew (about everything), if you engage it honestly and seriously. Read this book!

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## **Essex says**

whoa...

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## **Ayanna Dozier says**

Saidiya Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection* reveals with great detail how Slavery has shaped and continues to influence the construction of subjectivity amongst Black individuals today. While the entirety of this book is incredible there are three key concepts that I would like to recount here. The first being the construction of Black suffering or images and accounts of Black suffering as used for entertainment for a white majoritarian environment. Hartman analysis of the Black suffering body reminds us that spectacles such as whipping, lynching, rape, flogging, etc. were created as mode of entertainment be that for humorous purposes or for sympathetic ones. The Black body politic was one created for white individuals to "feel" something and psycho-affective responses factor into this; Hartman clarifies this by analyzing how many white abolitionists used images of Black suffering to give an account about how Black suffering affected them, as oppose to hearing how it affects those who wear enslaved. Secondly, Hartman tackles the "bonds of affection" that existed with slave masters and their slaves, arguing that the law afforded slave masters (and by extension

white individuals because let us not forget that structure of Slavery subjected all Black individuals to the will of white individuals in the States, slave owner or not) the ability to be "overcome" with emotion and negatively re/act against a Black individual. It should come as no surprise that rape was a lawlikely bond of affection committed against a Black woman. Moreover, by detailing this relationship with the law, Hartman points out that questions of agency or power that Black women may have had under such circumstances are ill place because what's at stake in this power dynamic is their well being and lives. Thus, claims of seduction, or affairs with actually cater to the myth of "happy slave," "gentle master," or those who "accepted their status." Hartman asserts that this narrative plays into the spectacle of pacifying the atrocities of Slavery. Lastly, Hartman's analysis on the "burden of freedom" that was placed upon the freed Black man's body is crucial to examining the ways in which respectability politics shaped, and still shapes, encounters with Black individual's lives. By examining mid 19th century text on "how to be free," Hartman is able to show how Black bodies were expected to disarm white individual's anger against them by "proving" that their freedom was "not for nothing" through their attire and attitude. This structure is still in place as Black individuals bear the burden of having to prove that they belong in certain environments, specifically institutional ones where the structures and conditions actively work against them.

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## **Harriet Showman says**

If you think slavery was a benign system. Read this book. Saidiya Hartman's scholarship cannot be denied.

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## **Maggie says**

I'll admit this was a tough read for me, especially the first part. The academic writing style was difficult, which is on me: I don't have the educational background that would probably have made it more accessible. I regret that, because I'd be better able to summarize, share, and discuss the vitally important topics Hartman analyzes.

I found Part 2: The Subject of Freedom to be astonishing and compelling. The concept of emancipation and the plain language of the Thirteenth Amendment was just the beginning of a truly American wave of backlash, retaliation, and enormous effort on the part of white America to maintain and exploit black subjugation, only with the pesky legalistic definition of "chattel slavery" having been legally discarded. Hartman's study of the efforts to fit the newly freed people into a system that comfortably (for whites) replicated antebellum norms is amazing. "The lessons of conduct imparted in freedmen's primers refigured the deference and servility of the social relations of slavery...Clearly, these lessons instilled patterns of behavior that minimized white discomfort with black freedom. The regulation of conduct lessened the discussions of the war by restoring black subordination on the level of everyday life..." (148)

The failure of Reconstruction, the acquiescence of the federal government to the creation and passage of state Black Laws, the concept that legal freedom need not intrude on local definitions of acceptable behaviors (at the expense of achieving social equality for black people), the rise of Jim Crow, the decision of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, and the fact that all of this was enforced by legal and extra-legal terror and violence, all of it reminds me that my early education about slavery and Emancipation pretty much ended with just that: Abraham Lincoln freed the slaves, blah blah blah, then *Brown v. Board of Education*...American exceptionalism.

No, no and no. I totally recommend this book. If, like me, you find it challenging at first, keep going. I may not have been able to process or understand everything I read, but I value what I learned. This is one of those books that changes everything.

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**Alex Robertson says**

4.5

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