

Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America. By Saidiya V. Hartman. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997. x, 281 pp. Cloth, \$45.00, ISBN 0-19-508983-9. Paper, \$19.95, ISBN 0-19-508984-7.)

Saidiya V. Hartman teaches in an English department, but American historians, especially historians of the South, will learn much from *Scenes of Subjection*. We historians have too quickly averted our gaze from the human side of slavery, preferring to count heads, acreage, and profits or to enumerate the ways in which "the slave community" transcended oppression. We rarely discuss southern history in an international framework or heed scholars not focused on American race, slavery, or freedom. Hartman is comfortable with Frederick Jameson, Michel Foucault, Albert Raboteau, Patricia Williams, Amy Dru Stanley, Peter Kolchin, Edmund Morgan, and Mark Tushnet, among platoons of experts from varied fields. Former slaves analyze slavery in counterpoint with complaining masters and preachy white Friends of the Negro. Cultural studies accommodates the ma-

teriality of legal history and the epistemological bedrock of political philosophy.

Hartman divides her work between slavery and freedom. She opens with Frederick Douglass's "terrible spectacle" of the beating of his Aunt Hester and ends in 1896. Dwelling on the auction block and the slave coffle, Hartman asks what "enjoyment" meant for the unfree and for white observers: for slaves, enforced smiles; for whites, evidence that slaves, who could sing in shackles, were not really human. Slaves who desired, danced, or exerted their will merely gave owners pretexts for further subjugation. Hartman says the violence of slavery exceeded beating, shackling, raping, and degradation. Even supposed pleasures such as singing and dancing became scenes of subjugation. Humanity and individuality, rather than defying slavery, were enacted through the display of tortured bodies.

With slave humanity having been cramped by the domination inherent in the institution of slavery, freedom was bound to prove similarly restricted, Reconstruction fated to fail. Examining the role of rights in the American polity through the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case (1896), Hartman concludes that submission so permeated the concept of black people, enslaved or emancipated, that "travestied liberation, castigated agency, and blameworthiness of the free individual" characterized their freedom.

Historians may wonder what is so new in the discovery that the disabilities of slavery followed black people into freedom, which we have known for a very long time. Hartman's method—explained as though she were the first to employ it—also reinvents our wheel. Translated into historianese, Hartman's means and ends sound familiar, but wait. *Not* translating is in our interest. What is fresh in *Scenes of Subjection* is a new way of seeing the southern past, through careful investigation of texts together with critical race theory's insights about rights.

Not surprisingly, this book's discursive strengths relate directly to its weakness, for language can substitute for events: historians' bread and butter. Hartman's experts intervene so often they threaten to become the book's real subject. I am all for using the work of thinkers such as Michel de Certeau and Hortense Spil-

lers, but the clutter of their names and words
really gets on my nerves.

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