



**Comparing Saidiya Hartman's 'Venus in Two Acts' and Catherine Gallagher's
*Practicing New Historicism***

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*"People will wherever possible invent its drama according to its own history, spirit of
the times, customs, opinions, language, national biases, traditions and inclinations"*

(Gallagher 7)

Saidiya Hartman's journal article 'Venus in Two Acts' and Catherine Gallagher's introductory chapter to the book *Practicing New Historicism* in collaboration with Stephen Greenblatt can be set in relation to each other as both argue that literature simultaneously reflects and contributes to the broader socio-political landscape it is created and read in. 'Venus in Two Acts' discusses the absence of black female representation in the archives of the Atlantic Slave Trade. *Practicing New Historicism*, as an opening to a book of literary criticism, explains the origins of New Historicist thought and gives a brief description of what it entails. Though differing in form, style and most importantly, intention, both texts argue persuasively that there is an inseparable relationship between history and literature - that how we understand the past is influenced by what texts we are presented with, and that how we look at literature is also influenced by the culture surrounding its creation. As a result of this concept of "the mutual embeddedness of art and history" (Gallagher 7), both Gallagher and Hartman go on to argue that literature favours certain voices and by extension marginalises others. Recognising literature as a cultural artefact acknowledges that power dynamics prevalent in society will most probably be reflected in texts (and the texts may, in turn, perpetuate this marginalisation in society). While Gallagher appreciates this concept, Hartman takes it one step further by discussing in pragmatic terms how it might be possible to give voice to those whose lives have been previously diminished. The core difference between the two texts is that, while they both identify similar concepts, 'Venus in Two Acts' applies them to the specific example of the Atlantic Slave Trade and attempts to provide a solution.

Both 'Venus in Two Acts' and *Practicing New Historicism* argue that literature is connected to its historical, cultural and societal context. Gallagher speaks of the "notion of culture as text" (9), recognising that literature and history constantly feed into one

another, perpetuating a society's values. The chapter cites Johann Gottfried von Herder to further confirm this idea, explaining that "people will wherever possible invent its drama according to its own history, spirit of the times, customs, opinions, language, national biases, traditions and inclinations" (Gallagher 7); what this claims is that whether conscious or subconscious, cultures will create texts that reflect their own values and belief systems. Furthermore, what New Historicism suggests as a result of this concept is that the same can be said for contemporary critics or readers. While "the inner resources of a people in a particular place and time" (Gallagher 7) influences the composition of a text, it also affects how it is interpreted. Gallagher argues that we as receptors of the text are also tainted by our own biases and internalised cultural beliefs, and must be aware of these when reading (we all have "historically conditioned longings, fears, doubts, and dreams, along with our accumulated knowledge of the world", 17). The argument that is presented as a result is that we should have a "characteristically double vision of the art of the past - at once immersed in its time and place and yet somehow pulling away" (Gallagher 17). Considering the reciprocal nature of history and art, the established cultural biases this relationship holds, and the differing interpretations of "culture as text" (Gallagher, 9) depending on which period of history the receptor is from, it makes sense that "the relative positions of text and context" will constantly "shift" (Gallagher 16). Gallagher argues that text is never static.

Saidiya Hartman echoes a similar idea, discussing the reciprocal nature of culture and text, and its inherent openness to reinterpretation. Though Hartman presents a differing theoretical framework to Gallagher - she presents her ideas through a Critical Race

Theory lens whereas New Historicism is more specific to literary criticism - her work also subscribes to the belief that text engages with its historical context in a reciprocal manner; she even quotes Michael de Certeau who writes that we must “[interrogate] the production of knowledge about the past” (14). Hartman makes references to multiple nonfictional documents from the archive, but the article is written in light of previous works which fuse history and fiction - she claims that “I longed to write a new story” (9). The article talks of how “documents, statements and institutions ... decide our knowledge of the past” (5), and how better to summarise the mutual influence shared between history and text; what we know of the past is defined by what access to records and texts we are given. What is included - or excluded - in records of the past form and mould our understanding of history. For example, Hartman writes that the content of the archives “has for the most part focused the historiography of the slave trade on quantitative matters and on issues of markets and trade relations” (2-3), rather than focusing on the lives of the people most involved. What this leaves, according to both Gallagher and Hartman, is a skewed and biased perception of the past, where the lives of those in power are prioritised.

Both texts establish that literature silences or marginalises certain groups as a result of the normalised dominant cultural beliefs of its society, though Hartman elaborates on this in more detail than Gallagher through applying the idea to the Atlantic Slave Trade. Hartman discusses “Black Venus” (2), a symbol of all black female slaves who are only represented in history through their “encounter(s) with power” (Foucault 2); she writes that “there are hundreds of thousands of other girls who share her circumstances ... and the stories that exist are not about

them, but rather about the violence ... that seized hold of their lives” (2). Here, the article presents the reader with a primary example of those minority groups that have been left out of history. *Practicing New Historicism*, to a lesser extent and somewhat less convincingly, also recognises this - Gallagher argues that groups are often “marginalized, half hidden, or even entirely excluded from the professional study of literature” (11). The solution, both texts agree, is writing about “counter histories”, which aim to “make apparent the slippages, cracks, fault lines, and surprising absences in the monumental structures that dominated a more traditional historicism” (Gallagher 17). Hartman references Gallagher in her writing, citing that counter history “opposes itself not only to dominant narratives, but also to prevailing modes of historical thought and methods of research” (Gallagher 12-13). Therefore, there is a distinct call from both authors to understand the necessity in recognising the previously marginalised in history and to elucidate “counter histories” for them going forward - to “represent what we cannot” (Hartman 13).

Whilst New Historicism states the importance of counter histories but provides limited attempts to establish any specifically, Hartman faces counter history head on through the process of “critical fabulation” (11). Critical Fabulation explores what ‘might have been’ amidst the gaps in the tales of the marginalised, building off of what limited information is granted by the archives. Hartman recognises these retellings as “a form of compensation, or even as reparations”, aiming to “represent the lives of the nameless and the forgotten” whilst also “[respecting] the limits of what cannot be known” (4) through “narrative restraint” (12). Hartman writes with intention - she is politically motivated in her desire to “topple the hierarchy of discourse” (12) - and this is what distinguishes her from Gallagher most dramatically. *Practicing New Historicism* allows us an insight into the development of thought

surrounding “culture as text” but what it does not do is apply it as wholly or effectively as Hartman does. Moreover, whilst ‘Venus in Two Texts’ provides guidance in the creation of counter histories, ultimately leading to a “recombinant narrative” which weaves “present, past and future” (12), Hartman is not blind to the limitations of this method. She recognises that her work is “dictated by the archive ... upon the legal records, surgeons’ journals, ledgers” etc. (12) and is also fully aware that whilst there are many ways of reading and interpreting the archives, ultimately none “are capable of resuscitating the girl” (13). Hartman’s work is aware of its hindrances - that it can provide a voice for the silenced, but it cannot change the outcomes of their lives.

Conclusively, there are moments where ‘Venus in Two Acts’ and *Practicing New Historicism*’s arguments overlap, particularly in their agreement that there is a reciprocal relationship between literature and culture, and as a result there are certain groups that are excluded from history. Both call for the inclusion of “counter histories” (Gallagher 17) that encourage “listening for the unsaid, translating misconstrued words, and refashioning disfigured lives” (Hartman 2-3). However, they are also very different texts. ‘Venus in Two Acts’ is born out of Critical Race Theory with an intention to give voice to a particular group of people, whereas *Practicing New Historicism* serves as a form of literary criticism that notes the influence of culture, anthropology and history. Moreover, Hartman’s work takes the agreed concepts between the two texts a step further in her pragmatic application of the ideas through “critical fabulation” (11) which aims to provide a “recombinant narrative” (12). By focusing on one particular minority group, Hartman illustrates how it is possible to apply these ideas in actuality, rather than leaving it as a form of academic discourse, like Gallagher does. Ultimately,

both texts are successful in fulfilling their respective *raison d'être*, but, in my opinion, Saidiya Hartman's study of the silenced voices of black female slaves resonates on a much deeper level.

Works Cited

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