



**Comparing Critical Theory – Saidiya Hartman, ‘Venus in Two Acts’, and Catherine
Gallagher & Stephen Greenblatt, ‘Introduction’ to *Practicing New Historicism***

Zanthe Livingstone

August 2025

‘How does one revisit the scene of subjection without replicating the grammar of violence?’

(Hartman 4)

Saidiya Hartman's 2008 essay 'Venus in Two Acts' examines the exemplary figure of Venus in the archive of Atlantic slavery, and grapples with the impossibility of recovering the lives of black female slaves with all of their complexity and psychological depths, without re-presenting the violence which defined them in the first place. Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt's 'Introduction' to their 2000 seminal book *Practicing New Historicism* outlines the foundational principles of new historicism as a critical approach to literature and culture, declaring their intentions to configure an overarching theory that would integrate both historical and literary interpretation to generate new compelling readings. Whilst both critical texts are concerned with investigating the archive, Hartman's article offers a more cautious reading of the complexities of representing Venus in the archive of slavery, whereas Gallagher and Greenblatt's introduction offers a wider framework of new historicist principles, exploring the interplay between literature and historical context. This essay will consider each text's use of 'counter-history'¹, utilising gaps and silences to reconstruct hitherto suppressed voices. It will then explore how Hartman's analysis of Venus as a symbol within the libidinal economy of slavery demonstrates Gallagher and Greenblatt's understanding of how literature contributes to and reflects broader social structures and power dynamics. Finally, Hartman's concern with the recapitulation of violence in counter-historical literature offers a crucial dimension not considered by Gallagher and Greenblatt, perhaps exposing a limitation of their theoretical framework.

Gallagher and Greenblatt argue that they 'mine what are sometimes called counterhistories that make apparent the slippages, cracks, fault lines, and surprising absences in the monumental structures that dominated a more traditional historicism.' (17). They aim to identify the gaps and silences within a text, extracting a counter-history that will illuminate the unsaid implications. As they are concerned with how historical narratives are constructed,

¹ Spelling of 'counter-history' will differ between authors, as Gallagher and Greenblatt conjoin the words, whereas Hartman hyphenates them. When discussing each author, I will use their respective spelling.

they place emphasis on interrogating these gaps, discussing the ‘core hermeneutical presumption that one can occupy a position from which one can discover meanings that those who left traces of themselves could not have articulated’ (8). Their desire to construct a counterhistory which articulates the unsaid differs slightly from Hartman, who specifically investigates cases where people were never given the opportunity to leave traces of themselves and are instead defined by the ‘world of her captors and masters’ (Hartman 2). While both discuss the importance of archival material in discovering lost meanings, there is a crucial difference: Gallagher and Greenblatt argue one can occupy a historical position and discover traces of individual experiences, whereas Hartman sees violence in this attempt and prefers to honour those individuals by leaving them be.

Hartman provides an account of analysing historical records, recounting an example of a slave girl upon a ship, the *Recovery*, who died at the hands of Captain John Kimber after being beaten and tortured for days (7). During his indictment, it transpired that another slave girl died at the hands of the captain: Venus. Kimber was acquitted for both murders, and so their deaths remain unavenged, their stories lost. She contemplates the ‘friendship that could have blossomed between two frightened and lonely girls. Shipmates.’, as she could have created ‘the glimpse of beauty, the instant of possibility.’ (8). Hartman’s personal tone serves to convey the emotional intimacy with which she holds this account, confessing her fear of misrepresenting the unrepresented. However, she writes that ‘[t]he loss of stories sharpens the hunger for them. So it is tempting to fill in the gaps and provide closure where there is none.’ (8). She recognises that the desire to fill in the gaps serves only to fulfil the reader’s insatiable need to delve further, rather than dignify the lives lost to the archive – hence Hartman’s conclusion that recovering these lives is impossible. Later, using Gallagher and Greenblatt’s understanding of a ‘counter-history’ as opposing dominant narratives and established modes of historical thought, Hartman argues that ‘in retelling the story of what

happened on board the *Recovery*, I have [...] produced a counter-history at the intersection of the fictive and the historical' (12-13). Yet, she argues that the 'history of black counter-historical projects is one of failure because these accounts have never been able to install themselves as history, but rather are insurgent, disruptive narratives that are marginalized and derailed before they ever gain a footing' (13). As their application has failed historically, the power of counter-histories as a theory therefore appears unreliable. Hartman's counter-historical approach to the story of Venus is ultimately an impossible project due to the 'inevitability of the reproduction of such scenes of violence' (7). Gallagher and Greenblatt, on the other hand, do not acknowledge this potential for violence, instead focusing on the theoretical construction of counter-histories and their benefits. Their optimism about the investigative potential of the archive contrasts Hartman's analysis, which leads her to a resigned pessimism about the impossibility of her aim; therefore, both texts use counter-histories to explain the gaps in historical narratives, with differing perspectives on the success rate of such techniques.

Additionally, Hartman's analysis of Venus as a symbol within the libidinal economy of slavery embodies Gallagher and Greenblatt's claim that literature reflects broader social structures and power dynamics. Hartman's abstract at the beginning of her essay clarifies '[a]s an emblematic figure of the enslaved woman in the Atlantic world, Venus makes plain the convergence of terror and pleasure in the libidinal economy of slavery' (1). From the outset, the reader is made aware that Hartman's essay analyses the interplay of sexual desire and violence within the structure of slavery. She describes how '[t]he libidinal investment in violence is everywhere apparent in the documents, statements and institutions that decide our knowledge of the past' (5). The borderline-erotic engagement with violence is evident in the archive, and the vast majority of stories that exist about varying figures of 'Venus' do not

hold her in a good light: these stories ‘transformed them into commodities and corpses, and identified them with names tossed-off as insults and crass jokes’ (2).

These narratives then permeate wider culture in the terms Gallagher and Greenblatt describe, reflecting the power relations of racism; if we accept ‘[t]he notion of culture as text’, then these texts must reflect the broader social structures and power dynamics which constitute the culture (9). Gallagher and Greenblatt view this optimistically; however, in neglecting the context of what is being read, they risk being tone deaf. Investigating the archive is an enlightening endeavour; yet, failing to consider the gravity of these texts could unwittingly recapitulate the violence to which murdered slaves were subjected. Ultimately, Hartman’s specific examination of Venus cautiously illustrates Gallagher and Greenblatt’s understanding of literature’s contribution to and reflection of broader societal power dynamics, while also introducing the added consideration of the violence such representations might replicate.

Finally, Hartman’s concern with the mimicry of violence in counter-historical literature is not mentioned in Gallagher and Greenblatt’s text, implicitly critiquing their theoretical framework. Throughout her essay, Hartman makes it clear that she wants to come as close as possible to a ‘biography of the captive and the enslaved’, but she wants to do so ‘without committing further violence in my own act of narration’ (2-3). ‘How does one revisit the scene of subjection without replicating the grammar of violence?’, asks Hartman, subsequently evaluating the potential of a recombinant narrative (4, 11). She discusses ‘critical fabulation’: a method which plays with and rearranges the ‘basic elements of the story by re-presenting the sequence of events in divergent stories and from contested points of view’ (11). This produces a narrative whose elements are recombined, bringing together the strands of incomplete accounts to combine all temporalities which retell Venus’s story and relate it to our present (12). However, Hartman clarifies that ‘[n]arrative restraint, the refusal

to fill in the gaps and provide closure is a requirement of this method', as we must respect the pain of black slaves without omitting it for our own comfort (12). Her refusal to fill in archival gaps serves to maintain respect for the reality of enslaved lives, neither reviving nor omitting violence, which leads her to conclude that '[t]he conjunction of hope and defeat define this labour and leave open its outcome' (14). We hope to uncover the true lives of Venus - yet, defeated by the limited records of her, we must respect what cannot be.

Gallagher and Greenblatt, on the other hand, do not concern themselves with the implications of filling in the gaps. They write that 'new historicism invokes the vastness of the textual archive, and with that vastness an aesthetic appreciation of the individual instance'(16). By classifying their appreciation as 'aesthetic', it reveals their endeavour as optimistically surface level, rather than being interested in semantic importance and liberating possibilities. This is repudiated by Hartman, whose consideration of her work's implications is important: critical theory does not exist within a vacuum – literature has external consequences. As Gallagher and Greenblatt's preoccupation is with the relationship between literature and its context, they neglect to consider potential detriments (in the introduction at least). Hartman's preoccupation, however, concerns the violence within the archive of black Atlantic slavery, advocating for dignity and humanity within literature and discussing how any attempt to represent hitherto unknown voices will fail. Failing to mention such implications, Gallagher and Greenblatt's optimistic, aesthetic appreciation of the archive, unlike Hartman's, appears limited.

In conclusion, when read together, the texts offer a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of exploring the archive. Hartman exposes the possibility that re-presenting the archive only *replicates* the violence done towards enslaved women in the Atlantic world, whereas Greenblatt and Gallagher outline the aesthetic, investigative capabilities of the archive. Neither text concludes with a definitive or repeatable methodology for how to

approach historical literature, consequently underscoring the uncertainties that the archive's exploration invokes.

Works Cited

Gallagher, Catherine, and Stephen Greenblatt. 'Introduction.' *Practicing New Historicism*,

University of Chicago Press, 2000, pp. 1-19.

Hartman, Saidiya. 'Venus in Two Acts.' *Small Axe: A Journal of Criticism*, vol 12, no. 2,

2008, pp. 1-14.