



The Edinburgh Student Literary Journal

Fatalism and Fabulation: Hartman's Critical Fabulation as an Impossible Intervention Against Althusserian Interpellation

Max Bondatti

S/S 2026

*"What we know of Venus in her many guises amounts to little more than a register of her
encounter with power" (Hartman 2)*

Saidiya Hartman's *Venus in Two Acts* (2008) and Louis Althusser's *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* (2002) both confront coercive structures through which subjects are produced and constrained within dominant systems of control. Althusser, through the lens of structural Marxism, abstracts the societal mechanisms by which all individuals are 'interpellated' and subjugated into hegemonic ideology. Hartman, meanwhile, posits the literary archive as a microcosmic reconfiguration of this dominant ideology, within which she foregrounds the repressed figure of Venus and proposes 'critical fabulation' as a tentative process of counter-history through which her narrative presence may be reimagined. This essay will briefly define these key terms before proceeding with a close comparative analysis of the texts' content and style. Consequently, it will attest that the pairing of Althusser and Hartman is generative in its illumination of diverse theoretical responses to the impossibility of resisting dominant ideology.

Althusser defines interpellation as the process by which individuals are constituted as subjects through their (often unconscious) submission to dominant ideology. The allegory which he employs to illustrate this concept is a police officer calling 'Hey, you!' and an individual consequently turning and acknowledging the hail. Althusser argues that "by this mere one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion, [the individual] becomes a subject" (30), because they recognise the imposed authority of the ideology that hailed them and respond accordingly. Conversely, Hartman proposes critical fabulation as a speculative narrative method that gestures towards the life erased by the archive: the life of 'Venus', serving as an imagined and anonymous emblem of all enslaved black women. Critical fabulation – an imaginative exercise of "what might have been or could have been" (12) – is thus devised as a means to narrate this lost and impossible history of Venus without simply perpetuating the violence which defines her existence within the archive. Having clarified these terms, this essay will firstly posit that Althusser's abstractions of ideological tyranny

(and the violence through which it is maintained) are equally apparent within Hartman's depiction of the archive. Secondly, it will propose that through societal perpetuation of archival silence, we as readers are inadvertently interpellated into this dominant literary ideology by allowing Venus to be continually defined solely through a system of commerce and violence. Finally, it will submit that Hartman's critical fabulation is therefore an ethical intervention to this interpellation, constituting tentative refusal of the hail – yet is an impossible attempt at disrupting Althusser's ideological inevitability.

The first point of apparent commonality between Althusser and Hartman's theoretical texts is in their mutual consideration of ideology as entirely inexorable from violence. In his abstraction of capitalist society, Althusser proposes the concept of Ideological State Apparatuses¹ as “distinct and specialized institutions” (11) which exist to propagate “the ideology of the ruling class” (13), ensuring total subjugation of a population. He scrupulously specifies, however, that the existence of these institutions equally necessitates the existence of Repressive State Apparatuses, which function “by violence” (12) in producing subjects compliant with ruling ideology. Althusser belabours the interdependence of these two concepts as he states, “(there is no such thing as a purely repressive apparatus)... (there is no such thing as a purely ideological apparatus)” (12). The repetition of the negating structure “there is no such thing as” performs rhetorically what he theorises politically: the syntactic parallel between these assertions disavows the potential for autonomy in either apparatus, thus cementing linguistically that ideology and repression are inexorably bound. Althusser's imagining of “the cultural ISA (Literature, the Arts, etc.)” (11) is exemplified within Hartman's depiction of the literary archive of slavery, which she asserts “rests upon a founding violence. This violence determines, regulates, and organizes the kinds of statements that can be made about slavery and as well it creates subjects and objects of power” (10).

¹ Ideological State Apparatuses will henceforth be referred to as ISAs, whilst Repressive State Apparatuses will be referred to as RSAs. This is consistent with Althusser's own initialism of his terms.

Bearing a dual semantic significance, violence denotes both the corporeal brutality inflicted upon enslaved women and their subsequent epistemic repression within the literary archive as “objects of power”. Hartman’s diction reflects this very violence as she lists degrading terms historically applied to Venus in a tricolon of cumulative degeneration: “a sulky bitch. A dead negress. A syphilitic whore” (6). The repeated indefinite article “a” anonymises Venus through the grammar of typology rather than individuality, reflecting the erasure of her identity within the archive to “little more than her encounter with power” (2). The misogynistic assaults “bitch... whore” and the racial epithet “negress” reproduce this exact encounter with power linguistically, articulated here as sexual domination and colonial racialisation. Consequently, Hartman’s construction of the literary archive as structurally dependent upon violence parallels Althusser’s depiction of ISAs as inextricable from RSAs. Both theoretical texts depict institutional formations that persist through repression, concurring upon the premise that violence is not ancillary to ideology but in fact constitutive of it.

The second point of convergence between Althusser and Hartman’s theoretical texts is their shared proposal that interpellation into dominant ideology is seemingly inevitable. Althusser attests that “an individual is *always-already* a subject, even before he is born” (31), a claim which he substantiates through a transposition of textual focus from society in its entirety to a singular familial unit. In the case of a family expecting a child, he claims, “it is certain in advance that it will bear its Father’s Name... appointed as a subject in and by the specific familial ideological configuration” (32) within which it is born. Hinging upon the temporal paradox within “already-always”, Althusser’s concept erases the ontological gap between existence and subjection, framing interpellation as a prerequisite to one’s very existence. By staging this interpellation in domestic microcosm, Althusser exposes ideology as operative precisely where it may appear least coercive. He thus illuminates the perhaps

unsettling possibility that subjecthood is imposed not necessarily by institutions visibly associated with repression (prisons, schools, etc) but within sites that may appear entirely inconspicuous to us. If Althusser attests that this interpellation into ideology is inevitable, and we have already established that ideology is structurally coextensive with violence, then applying this argument to Hartman's theory delivers it to its next logical conclusion: our readerly interpellation into archival violence is inevitable. The moment at which a reader approaches the archive, they inadvertently confront Venus only through forms sanctioned by archival repression, through "violence... everywhere apparent in the documents, statements, and institutions that decide our knowledge of the past" (5). The possessive "our" actively implicates the reader within the repression of Venus, as Hartman argues that to read this repression is to "subject the dead to... a second order of violence" (5). Universalising this violence as "everywhere apparent", the fact that it is capable of "decid[ing] our knowledge" emphasises archival adjudication and rearticulates Althusser's inevitability of subjection. Thus, in comparing the case of the unborn child appointed within familial ideology and the reader unwittingly implicated in archival violence, interpellation into dominant ideology is revealed as not simply inevitable but a *fait accompli*.

A point of significant contention between Hartman and Althusser is illuminated through their contrasting styles, which consequently reflect their divergence upon theoretical stakes. Althusser's acknowledgement of omnipresent subjugation culminates in the metatextual (perhaps dismal) recognition that even "the writing that I am currently executing and the reading you are currently performing are also in this respect rituals of ideological recognition, including the 'obviousness' with which the 'truth' or 'error' of my reflections may impose itself on you" (29-30). The style of this assertion operates as a vigorously deductive lecture, in which he considers interpellation to be omnipresent to such a degree that even disagreeing with his logic merely affirms it. His impersonal and syllogistic prose enacts

precisely what it asserts, producing a discursive fatalistic tone in which acknowledgement of ideological ensnarement remains purely diagnostic and affords the reader no liberty for rebellion. Conversely, Hartman's style is ethically fraught and rhetorically ornate as she reflects that "narrative restraint, the refusal to fill in the gaps and provide closure, is a requirement of [critical fabulation], as is the imperative to respect black noise – the shrieks, the moans, the nonsense, and the opacity" (12) which defined the slave trade. Hartman practices precisely this narrative restraint in her own text as she questions "...to what end does one tell such stories? How and why does one write a history of violence? Why revisit the event or the nonevent of a girl's death?" (10), in which repeated rhetorical interrogatives destabilise narrative authority and foreground uncertainty as constitutive of ethical method. Hartman's syntax is sparse and suspended, as each question trails into silence rather than resolution, formally enacting the very limitations of knowledge upon which her critical fabulation operates. Unlike Althusser's declarative logic, which represents interpellation as a dismal ideological inevitability, Hartman's style foregrounds indeterminacy and her interrogative mode urges the reader into emotional and ethical intervention. The stylistic contrast of Hartman and Althusser is thus reflective of the divergence of their theoretical stakes as response to interpellation – one fatalist, the other interventionist. Hartman challenges Althusserian theory in her proposition that ideological ensnarement need not foreclose an ethical attempt – however ambitious, tentative, or seemingly impossible – to imagine a voice which resists interpellation and trespasses the boundaries of archival violence.

A comparative analysis of Althusser and Hartman ultimately reveals that the recognition of ideological violence is not simply diagnostic but creatively and ethically generative. Both texts concur upon the premise that ideology and violence are coextensive, and emphasise a seemingly omnipresent societal subjugation into an economy of power and

control which implicates even their own readers. Thus, critical fabulation fails in abolishing interpellation. However, therein lies the critical payoff of their dialogue: for Althusser, interpellation culminates in inevitable resignation, whereas for Hartman it necessitates an ethical attempt to retaliate – however impossible that attempt may be.

Works Cited

- Althusser, Louis, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes towards an Investigation,' *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, Monthly Review Press, 2002, pp. 1–38.
- Hartman, Saidiya. 'Venus in Two Acts', *Small Axe: A Journal of Criticism*, no. 2, 2008, pp. 1–14.