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Narrativism, critical fabulation, and the ethics of history writing

Maud Rijks

Introduction

Until the winter of 2023, visitors to the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) could peruse a collection gallery titled ‘Critical Fabulations’, an exhibit which displayed ‘artifacts, archives, and testimonies...in works that respond to the legacy of colonialism and its hold in the present.’¹ The visitor could encounter early twentieth-century photography, contemporary art, and video footage with the aim of responding to the ‘afterlife’ of slavery and colonialism in the present day. The gallery’s title was borrowed from cultural historian Saidiya Hartman’s groundbreaking essay ‘Venus in Two Acts.’ *Critical fabulation*, she argues, is a method by which the historian engages in the speculative, reckons with injustices inherited from the past, and essentially subverts hierarchies embedded in narrative structures and discourse more broadly. In so doing, telling ‘an impossible story,’ that of enslaved peoples, is made possible.²

I argue that Hartman’s method can be situated among the works of foundational historical theorists of narrativism, deepening and expanding the notion that narrative imposes meaning through the outlined method of critical fabulation.³ Since Hartman’s introduction of it, the method’s use has been effectively demonstrated in Tiya Miles’ *All That She Carried: A Journey of Ashley’s Sack* (2021). Miles skillfully reconstructs the story of three generations of Black women whose voices have been erased through the oppressive forces of history-writing, enslavement, and colonial structures. Besides situating Hartman amongst the corpus of important works on narrativism, and scrutinizing the use of critical fabulation in practice, a familiar ethical discussion on representation in coping with archival inequalities will form the concluding section of this essay. Historical

¹MoMA, ‘214: Critical Fabulations’. <https://www.moma.org/calendar/galleries/5378>, accessed December 5, 2023.

² S. Hartman, ‘Venus in Two Acts’, *Small Axe* 26 (2008) 1-14: 10.

³ A. C. Danto, *Narration and Knowledge. With a new Introduction by Lydia Geobr and a new conclusion by Frank Ankersmit*. (New York, NY 2007); L. Goldstein, *Historical Knowing* (Austin, TX 1976); L. O. Mink, *Historical Knowledge* (Ithaca, NY and London 1987).

theorists of the Holocaust have grappled with the difficulty of representing a historical event that is 'by definition' unrepresentable.⁴ I argue that Hartman's theory, put in dialogue with these theorists, answers some of the challenges (while also raising new questions) coming out of this ethical discussion. Ultimately, power involved in the shaping of history-writing, and the moral duty of the historian to re-imagine history by engaging with the present, will be reflected on.

Narrativism in historical theory

The early works of narrative constructivism in history introduced narrative as a cognitive instrument, arguing that historians, and humans in general, tell stories in order to comprehend the world around us.⁵ Situated within the analytic philosophy of history, Louis Mink rejects positivist accounts of history that consider the historical account to be, or at least strive towards, a detached and falsifiable portrayal of the past. He argues that historical accounts are constructed narratives or stories, and that ultimately history teaches us how stories answer questions.⁶ According to Mink, the mode of comprehension used to understand historical knowledge is a configurational one, meaning humans see 'elements in a single and concrete complex of relationships.'⁷ The structuralist basis of this theory is clear; humans make sense of the world and comprehend history through structures, in this case narratives. Rather than narrative simply being a method of communication, constructing and following a narrative is directly related to how humans perceive events. The novelty of viewing the essence of history-writing as telling stories reverberates today; Mink's contemporary Hayden White is still central to this discussion on narrative.

⁴ A. Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory* (Cambridge and London 2002); S. Friedländer ed., *Probing the Limits of Representation* (Cambridge and London 1992); M. L. Morgan and B. Pollock, eds., *The Philosopher as Witness: Fackenheim and Responses to the Holocaust* (Albany, NY 2008).

⁵ L. O. Mink, 'History and Fiction as Modes of Comprehension', *New Literary History* 1.3 (1970) 541-588: 549.

⁶ Ibidem, 558.

⁷ Ibidem, 551.

White sees narrative as ‘a metacode, a human universal’, underlying how humans connect with each other, both within and across cultures.⁸ This extends to the realm of history; White argues that historical texts are fundamentally pieces of written prose, all constructed to conform to particular *types*. Histories are constructed along ‘modes of interpretation’: emplotment, explanation, ideological, and tropological.⁹ These conventions, stemming from the institutionalization of the historical discipline in the nineteenth century, result in familiar patterns of historical narratives. Such typologies, disruptive as they were to the state of the discipline, are still engaged with today. David Scott, for example, draws upon White’s modes of emplotment to suggest that anticolonial histories have largely been constructed within the form of Romance, subsequently calling for Tragedy as a more useful narrative frame.¹⁰

The innovation of this theory led to the groundbreaking yet difficult conclusion, especially for proponents of positivism, that there is no ‘neutral’ way to write history. Historians, whether consciously or not, always construct their histories within these modes. The theory also implies that there is no objective judgement on which constellation of rhetorical forms is more effective or true. White’s theory of interpretation leaves us with an assertion, that narrative imposes meaning, and a question: can we reach historical truth?

White’s underlying thesis, that historians always engage in the imaginative and poetic in how they construe relationships between people, places, and things, remains worthwhile. He grapples with historiographical problem of finding a ‘true story’ out of the chaos of ‘historical records.’¹¹ The ethical implications of this question of ‘truth’ will be returned to. First, it is necessary to linger on the process of narrativizing ‘facts’ into ‘history’, and the power dynamics at play in this process. The prefigured nature of White’s typologies may also leave the historian with a sense of restriction and the perhaps rebellious question: can these conventions of historical narrative be stretched and disrupted in favor of the scholar writing histories

⁸ H. White, ‘The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality’, *Critical Inquiry* 7.1 (1980) 5-27: 6.

⁹ H. White, ‘Interpretation in History’, *New Literary History* 4.2 (1973) 281-314: 309.

¹⁰ D. Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham, NC 2004) 7.

¹¹ White, ‘The Value of Narrativity’, 8.

of the marginalized? The work of Saidiya Hartman can help to answer these questions.

Critical Fabulation

Saidiya Hartman, a writer, activist, and pioneer of African American history and the afterlife of slavery, sees her work 'as bridging theory and narrative.'¹² Placing her work within the context of narrativist historical theory, therefore, may seem redundant. However, her concept of critical fabulation pushes the boundaries of how intertwined history and fiction can be. In 'Venus in Two Acts,' she simultaneously embraces and laments the historian of slavery's struggle of writing a history of those who have been violently silenced by the archive. She copes with this by calling for a convergence of 'the intimacy of history with the scandal and excess of literature.'¹³ Using unusual, disruptive literary forms, Hartman explores a new approach to history. It is an approach that ultimately seeks to subvert the hierarchies embedded in conventional history-writing.

Dealing with silences in the archive is nothing new. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's famous question, 'can the subaltern speak?' and the resultant firm answer of 'no' triggered a wave of historiographical discussions confronting the difficulty of unearthing stories of historical actors not found in the archive.¹⁴ Hartman directly draws from subaltern studies, grappling with the notion that the aim of the subaltern historian, excavating an archive for stories of oppressed peoples, is ultimately doomed. Her blunt statement that 'dead girls are unable to speak' echoes Spivak in this way.¹⁵ Power and violence are inherent to the archive. State documentation, official ledgers, preserved journals of powerful men: these are what historians must sift through when looking for the 'other'. The

¹² T. Siemsen, 'On working with archives', *The Creative Independent*, <https://thecreativeindependent.com/people/saidiya-hartman-on-working-with-archives/>, geraadpleegd December 5, 2023.

¹³ Hartman, 'Venus', 1.

¹⁴ S. Shetty and E. J. Bellamy, 'Postcolonialism's Archive Fever', review of *Archive Fever* by J. Derrida; *Of Grammatology* by J. Derrida and G. Chakravorty Spivak; *Can the Subaltern Speak?* by G. C. Spivak, C. Nelson and L. Grossberg, *Diacritics* 30.1 (Spring 2000) 25-48.

¹⁵ Hartman, 'Venus', 13.

archive is finite, no matter how many times a crumbling page is re-read. Hartman offers critical fabulation as a way to make it infinite.

Critical fabulation is a method composed of two parts. The first involves ‘invoking a series of speculative arguments that exploited the capacities of the subjunctive – the what might have been.’¹⁶ Speculation in history seems, of course, risky. Hartman convincingly argues, however, that the method is a necessary part of engaging with the worst injustices done to those silenced by the archives. What, after all, is the alternative? Ignoring their existence? Hartman refuses this recourse, vying for a narrative that explores ‘what might have been’ in order to take power away from the realities of the present. Through literary subversion, the process of narration gains an extra dimension, contributing to a goal of ‘toppl[ing] the hierarchy of discourse.’¹⁷ This hierarchy refers to the structures of narrative applied to history that perpetuate the oppression of some and the privileging of others. By disassembling these structures and re-thinking the building blocks of narrative, historians must challenge ‘the production of disposable lives’ that has been engrained in the historical discipline.¹⁸ Hartman exposes the power held by the historian and their narrative choices. Historians must take responsibility in their duty to historical actors, especially those that have been marginalized, and thus silenced by the discipline.

The second aspect of Hartman’s method is the historian’s ‘figural or affective relation to the past,’ one that reaches with emotion and empathy through history, forming a bridge between past and present that is non-linear and non-causal.¹⁹ This disregard for linearity or causality contests history’s traditional approaches to narrative. Not only does this free the historian from previously prescribed structures, it writes the scholar into the history they compose. An ‘affective relation’ means it is no longer a unidirectional relationship; the historian is implicated, charged with a burden. Again, the implied power, and consequent moral duty, of the historian is centralized.

Central, too, is the notion of narrative restraint, another aspect of critical fabulation that defies the instinct of historians to ‘fill in the gaps and

¹⁶ S. Hartman, ‘The Dead Book Revisited’, *History of the Present* 6.2 (Fall 2016) 208-215: 210.

¹⁷ Hartman, ‘Venus’, 12.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, 11.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, 210.

provide closure.²⁰ Closure, in this sense, is different to the employment of the imaginative described above, although finding balance within the delicate tension between the two remains a daunting task for the historian. Closure is an impossible task and an ill-advised goal. Just as the historian of the subaltern should not aim to make the subaltern ‘speak,’ neither should the historian of slavery aim to ‘make the dead girl speak.’ The historian should ‘reckon with loss’ and ‘respect the limits of what cannot be known,’ else risking exploitation or a repetition of the violence already committed to the marginalized.²¹

Crucial to Hartman’s theory is the necessary acknowledgment that we have inherited the violent past of our predecessors. Engaging with history from this perspective stems from postcolonial theory; systems of oppression are rooted in the past, and it is the responsibility of the historian to engage with the resultant present injustices. To rephrase Michel-Rolph Trouillot, the past is not history until it is connected to the present.²² Trouillot, himself a pioneer on the issue of representing slavery and drawn upon by Hartman, writes that ‘slavery...is a ghost, both the past and a living presence; and the problem of historical representation is how to represent that ghost, something that is and yet is not.’²³ Hartman confronts this issue of representation directly; its attempt will result in ‘inevitable failure.’²⁴ Yet this does not absolve the historian; in the meantime they must ‘[recruit] the past for the sake of the living.’²⁵ This is what Trouillot refers to as the *authenticity* of the present; ‘only in that present can we be true or false to the past we choose to acknowledge.’²⁶

Critical fabulation builds upon the work of narrativism by seeing historical narrative as more than a pre-existing structure used by the historian to order events in a certain way and tell a specific type of story. Rather, Hartman’s vision of narrative liberates the historian, allowing one to cast around through the scarce, almost impossible to find scraps of evidence left of people forgotten by the archives. Where Mink saw history

²⁰ Hartman, ‘Venus’, 12.

²¹ Ibidem, 4.

²² M. Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, MA 2015) 143.

²³ Ibidem, 147.

²⁴ Hartman, ‘Venus’, 12.

²⁵ Ibidem, 14.

²⁶ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 151.

as teaching us how stories answer questions, Hartman's more complex vision involves historical narrative *asking* questions that we may never have a certain answer to. It also establishes a necessary line from the past to the present, centering the fact that the historian's narrative is grounded in the realities of today. It invites the historian, writing in the context of an unfinished history of dispossession, to narrate the (impossible) story of dispossessed lives.

Practicing fabulation

Having argued that critical fabulation should be considered as both a method and theoretical innovation to enrichen our understanding of narrativism, Tiya Miles' *All That She Carried: The Journey of Ashley's Sack*, exemplifies the effectivity of it in practice. Miles 'critically fabulates' in order to write an innovative, inspired historical narrative. Writing a little more than a decade after Hartman, Miles builds on histories of slavery, materiality, and Black feminism to unearth the history of several generations of Black women in the United States. Starting with just an embroidered sack and the enslaved woman, Rose, who was the sack's first owner, Miles constructs a narrative that explores the history of Rose and her probable descendants (Ashley and Ruth), honoring their love and resourcefulness in a time of trauma and extreme subjugation.²⁷ In her telling of these stories, she is both persuasive and mindful of the limitations inherent to oral history, memory, and circumstantial evidence.

Miles applies the methods prescribed by Hartman; she embraces the subjunctive as a literary form, takes on an 'affective relation with the past,' and employs 'narrative restraint.' On a broader level of historiographical purpose, Miles' aims connect with those of Hartman; through the material object of the sack, she 'weaves' together past, present, and future in order to deconstruct and re-imagine what we know and assume about Black lives. Throughout, she connects the story of these women and the world they lived in to the present, following Hartman's insistence on intimacy with the past due to its legacy in the present. She celebrates the women of her story by honoring their struggle and the lessons they can teach to present-day challenges. In essence, it is a masterpiece of critical fabulation.

²⁷ T. Miles, *All That She Carried: The Journey of Ashley's Sack* (New York 2021) 13.

Miles' necessary use of the subjunctive, or 'speculative,' is admitted up front. Her history will be one that cannot be corroborated against evidence in any traditional sense. Rather, she considers it to be more 'evocation...than argumentation and is rather more meditation than monograph.'²⁸ Miles employs the imaginative, both freely and with caution. The effect of this is a rich history, spun together not in the traditional sense of 'building' a history from an immense pile of documentation, but by employing the extremities of 'what could have been,' to iterate Hartman. This is not to say that *All That She Carried* is not grounded in any further empirical evidence than the sack which begins the story. On the contrary, Miles' excavation of archives, landscapes, and other carriers of evidence is a thorough case of meticulous historical research. Where the archive leaves silences, as it inevitably does in the history of the marginalized, she constructs a narrative that explores these silences while respecting their existence.

The most striking example of this can be found in the chapter 'Searching For Rose,' which, as its title would suggest, is a painstaking search for the sack's first owner in this story, a 'mission of historical rescue.'²⁹ Beginning with the sack, found at a flea market in the early 2000s, the basic facts that one can extract of Rose can be drawn from the stitching on the material:

My great grandmother Rose/ mother of Ashley gave her this sack
when/ she was sold at age 9 in South Carolina/ it held a tattered
dress 3 handfulls of/ pecans a braid of Roses hair. Told her/ It be
filled with my Love always/ she never saw her again/ Ashley is my
grandmother/ Ruth Middleton 1921.³⁰

These words are the only material evidence of the existence of Ruth's ancestors, and form the basis for Miles' historical investigation. Combing through South Carolina plantation records, Miles identifies many Roses, lingering with them and the scraps of evidence revealed of them. Throughout her search, she builds the world in which Rose lived, detailing the political economy of colonial South Carolina, the socio-economic structures of plantation houses, and the daily realities of the lives of the

²⁸ Miles, *All That She Carried*, 21.

²⁹ Ibidem, 59.

³⁰ Ibidem, 2.

enslaved. Delicately, painstakingly, she builds a potential narrative for Rose within and beyond this history, one infused with repetitions of ‘probably,’ ‘maybe,’ and ‘perhaps.’ Yet by the end of the chapter, we feel as if we know Rose, or at least a core element of her existence that we can understand, despite the thin historical thread connecting us to her: By employing the speculative to tell the story of Rose, Miles powerfully refuses to resign her to historical anonymity.

Miles’ care and empathy towards her historical agents is exhibited throughout the book, demonstrating to the fullest extent what Hartman prescribes as a ‘figural or affective relation’ between historian and historical actor. First and foremost, Miles brings ‘love’ to the center of her history: the love that her characters have for each other, the love that runs through Black feminist history, and, importantly, the love that Miles herself feels and responds to. Miles does not shy from the emotional. It empowers her history. Her vulnerability towards the harrowing, traumatic events endured by her historical actors, and her willingness to expose both herself and the reader to the deeply emotional, work to strengthen her already highly sophisticated narrative form. Without this, it would not be possible to write such a history, let alone grasp the ‘figural’ relation between present and past asked for by Hartman.

Miles grounds this affective relation in the materiality of the embroidered sack, a tangible item that has been created by and passed on between endless sets of hands. From the unknown maker of the sack to its current resting place at the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC), she stresses the importance of ‘things’ as a ‘threaded loop’ bringing together the past, present, and future in her historical narrative.³¹ Miles introduces her own material history in the first pages of her history, telling a story of a quilt sewn by her grandmother’s aunt, passed along generations in her family and now owned by her. She additionally explores the many identities retained by the sack given by Rose to her daughter: that of a gift, a means of survival, a canvas to be sewed upon, and finally an archive of all these meanings carefully collected. She then connects these two tangible things, the quilt and the sack, to the broader history of textile and cloth, something that ‘has traditionally been the craft of women across cultures.’³² By emphasizing a circular relationship between herself, the women of her story, and the

³¹ Miles, *All That She Carried*, 19.

³² Ibidem, 233.

materials they all interact with, Miles successfully employs and plays with narrative in order to do justice to the legacy left behind by Rose, Ashley, and Ruth, placing them at the center of a long history of survival and womanhood.

Where Hartman instructs not to ‘fill the gaps’, Miles refuses to ‘close the stitches’, rather inviting the receptor of her narrative ‘to embrace the spaces between the stitches.’³³ She does not aim to recount a history with a firm resolution or familiar mode of emplotment. Rather, Miles asks as many questions as she suggests speculative answers. This exercise of restraint, a necessary counterweight to the speculative, is applied throughout *All That She Carried* but is most concentrated in her chapter titled ‘The Bright Unspooling,’ which lingers on a lost generation in the lineage of Rose, Ashley, and Ruth. Namely, Ruth’s mother. In roughly the period between the 1850s and 1920s, Miles loses the trail she has so painstakingly followed, and admits defeat in the sense that she accepts the futility of ever bringing to light the history of this missing character.³⁴ Silences like these are felt, accepted, and mourned. They are an integral part of telling the impossible story.³⁵

By employing the stipulated conditions of critical fabulation, Miles subverts the hierarchies of history presented by the traditional archive, making space for alternative, counter-histories. She centers the resourcefulness of Black women and girls, their ability to persevere and claim existence in the direst of circumstances.³⁶ By re-imagining their history in a way that does not commit repeated violence to them, she stretches the limits of narrative to honor Hartman’s call of understanding history as our present, relating to issues including ‘the federal mistreatment of migrant children, the cultural neglect of African American heirlooms, the political betrayal of democratic principles, the economic cleavage of rich from poor, and the global shadow of an existential threat.’³⁷ Miles’ monograph acts as a compelling example of the method of critical fabulation in practice. It commits itself, in Trouillot’s language, to authenticity. It skillfully employs imagination, and it addresses present injustices by re-writing pasts.

³³ Miles, *All That She Carried*, 24.

³⁴ Ibidem, 228.

³⁵ Hartman, ‘Venus,’ 11.

³⁶ Miles, *All That She Carried*, 13.

³⁷ Ibidem, 18.

On the ethics of fabulation

To what extent can critical fabulation provide an answer to the elusiveness of historical ‘truth’? Historical theorists of the Holocaust have experience dealing with issues of representation, memory, and handling absences. The theoretical discussion that has emerged on narrativism within this field, having already engaged White, invites us to probe the ethical dimensions and implications of Hartman’s theory. Critics of Hartman and White may oppose the potential risk of presenting history as fiction, rather than using fiction to enrichen history. These fears, of course, are well-grounded; they seek to defend the worth and moral task of the discipline of history in general. Yet the sophistication and caution inherent to critical fabulation, when exercised correctly, should quell these fears. Historians writing ‘impossible histories’ will surely be presented with challenges, but also a plethora of opportunities.

Grappling with the impossibility, if not extreme difficulty, of engaging with the chapters of history burdened with the worst cases of mass violence and death, Avishai Margalit’s work on testimony reminds one of Hartman’s plight. Margalit’s text on testimony and the moral witness highlight the delicacy of engaging with and representing difficult historical events.³⁸ It explores the idea that there is more to historical experiences than just ‘the facts’, thus coinciding with Hartman. Of course, the fundamental differences between these areas of history cannot be reconciled; ethical discussions on memory, in the field of the Holocaust, simply cannot be paralleled with a history of slavery where no living witnesses tell their stories today. Yet historiographical discussions on the Holocaust and its interaction with memory have, like Hartman’s work, centralized the question of the responsibility of the historian to ‘do justice’ to historical subjects.³⁹

Saul Friedländer argues that it would only be unacceptable to engage in a theoretical discussion on the extermination of European Jews ‘if these abstract issues were not directly related to the way contemporary culture reshapes the images of the past.’ The necessity of discussing the theoretical issues at stake do not detract from ‘the horror behind the words.’⁴⁰ Rather, they are necessary to engage with, the political present being what it is: inextricable from the horrors of the past. Immediately, Hartman’s relevance

³⁸ Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory*, 147-182.

³⁹ D. LaCapra, *History and Memory After Auschwitz* (Ithaca, NY and London 1998) 2.

⁴⁰ Friedländer ed., *Probing the Limits of Representation*, 1.

is evident. Her insistence that history is written not just in, but about the present, connects on a theoretical level to the above considerations of the event of Holocaust. On slavery and its legacy, she writes that ‘our dispossession is ongoing;’ the afterlife of centuries of oppression and injustice linger today, and humanity has not come so far as to rid itself of these handed-down hierarchies.⁴¹ It is both the legacy of history’s marginalized figures and the future of how society deals with its injustices that are at stake.

The notion of memory has not yet been considered in this essay, yet it should be touched upon here. The idea of ‘collective memory’ in the field of Holocaust studies signifies a moral discussion on how we relate to the worst chapters of the past. Friedländer writes that ‘the main aspect of the interaction between the memory of the Holocaust and its historiography belongs to the moral dimension of the events, that is to the demand for justice and to Nazism as a metaphor of evil.’⁴² To Friedländer, history and memory share these moral categories, yet differ in one important aspect: ‘the apparent dichotomy between a necessarily ‘detached’ history of National Socialism and the no less unavoidable presence of a moral dimension in dealing with this epoch *may find its resolution only in the sensitivity and creative intuition of the historian*’ (my emphasis).⁴³ While Friedländer fears the ‘dilution’ that may come from narrativity, he ultimately instructs historians to ‘dare to challenge the complacency and routine already existing in their domain.’⁴⁴ The historian’s task is to seek ‘new concepts that would express, however inadequately, the breakdown of all norms and the dimensions of suffering that traditional historiography cannot easily deal with.’⁴⁵ Friedländer’s reflections on the case of memory and history point towards the same dilemmas that Hartman grapples with as a historian of slavery. Can the violent silencing of the collective and the individual be honored while simultaneously finding a way to shed light on human suffering and survival in the present?

We return to White here, as he enters Friedländer’s discussions on memory and historians’ responsibilities in ‘Probing the Limits of

⁴¹ Hartman, ‘The Dead Book’, 208.

⁴² S. Friedländer, ‘History, Memory, and the Historian: Dilemmas and Responsibilities’, *New German Critique* 80 (Spring-Summer 2000) 3-15: 11.

⁴³ Ibidem, 12.

⁴⁴ Ibidem, 13.

⁴⁵ Ibidem, 15.

Representation.’ White observes that it has become increasingly common to encounter representations of Hitler’s Germany in academia and popular media. Previously, this would have been deemed unacceptable, the consensus being that one could not represent the worst of humanity’s crimes. He determines the change to stem from the ‘type’ of narrative conveying the Holocaust, and that there has been an evolution in the types that have been accepted by the discipline and broader public. White’s argument that narrative form imposes meaning leads to the (for White’s critics) troubling conclusion that *any* narrative risks inauthentically representing the Holocaust. Some critics therefore maintain that it must only be spoken of literally, and not figuratively.⁴⁶ White opposes this, defending that every historical event is and can be represented through discourse, composed of ‘linguistic entities.’⁴⁷ Hence, the ‘literal’ does not exist. His critics subsequently respond with an exasperated ‘how could we make a difference between fiction and history?’⁴⁸ Hartman would dispose of this dichotomy entirely, seeing it not as a case of difference but of opportunity and liberation.

Today, as the number of Holocaust survivors lessens, its historians stray further from an ability to excavate new eyewitness accounts, and the ability to recount its events ‘literally’ (if this was ever possible) becomes ever more problematic. Hartman’s method of speculation, restraint, imagination, and importantly, writing about the present reveals new paths. As Miles so effectively demonstrates, perhaps the only way to do justice to history’s silenced is to produce a historical narrative that leaves space for questions as well as answers. The precarity of language, the tool by which we communicate narrative, lends itself to this.

Finally, the above discussion warrants a reflection on the responsibility and moral duty of the historian of slavery and Black history, and their consequent involvement as an agent of history. There are concerns that arise from the persona of the historian becoming involved in the discussion, namely that their positionality inevitably does, too. Hartman, positioning herself as connecting with her ancestors, is a direct inheritor of the injustices of slavery. Through critical fabulation she puts herself partially in the shoes of historical actors, imagining their experiences aboard a ship on the Middle Passage, feeling and exploring their emotions as they were

⁴⁶ H. White, *Figural Realism: Studies in the Mimesis Effect* (Baltimore, MD 2020) 44.

⁴⁷ Ibidem, 37.

⁴⁸ Friedländer, ‘Introduction’, 8.

silenced by history. Not every historian can write this kind of story. Although all historians have inherited the hierarchies embedded in the discipline, and should seek to question these, those with a more direct connection to the historically oppressed inevitably write from a different perspective to those descending from historic oppressors. Indeed, the method of critical fabulation is firmly rooted in Hartman's own experiences as both an academic and inheritor of this oppression. There is certainly a level of introspection, self-criticism, and scrutiny that should be involved in writing the history of non-white people as a white person, for example. Similar reflections are crucial to make in areas like queer history. One could argue that those who do not inherit these histories in a direct sense should not be writing these histories at all. Perhaps it only serves to contribute to oppressive structures if non-marginalized voices involve themselves in a discussion, speaking for the marginalized and trying to represent experiences which they may never truly understand. Does this mean that only certain historians should write certain histories? Would that be such a bad thing? Following the line of argument that historians are agents, too, scholars engaging with histories of oppression must consider these questions, difficult though they may be.

Conclusion

Revisiting the MoMa gallery, its title's full meaning and potential is now available to us. Our eyes are drawn to colorful, large portraits depicting people from the Black population of Brazil. Despite more than half of the country's population being made up of Black people, the only early photographic material available of them largely objectifies them and their bodies. The artist of these portraits, Dalton Paula, refuses to let these communities be marginalized by history. He seeks to create a new history, a counter-narrative, that acknowledges their existence; based on photographs of current Black communities in Brazil, he envisions their ancestors by depicting them as African royalty, flaking their faces with gold leaf.⁴⁹ By connecting past, present, and future, Paula conveys a narrative that is simultaneously hopeful, lamenting, and politically grounded. Taking a step back to perceive the gallery as a whole, we are presented with a new look on

⁴⁹ MoMa, 'Dalton Paula: *Liberata*, 2020'.
<https://www.moma.org/calendar/galleries/5378>, accessed December 5, 2023.

history that visually portrays the project of Miles, Hartman, and ultimately White, too; historians must be aware that the structures of writing history are deeply rooted in traditions as old as the discipline itself. Only by engaging with these structures and subverting hierarchies can we work to write histories that do justice to those that have been traditionally marginalized by the discipline.

Coping with our inherited structures of injustice (like slavery, colonialism, and capitalist hierarchies) as well as global threats of the future (like continued political upheaval, genocide, and the climate crisis) requires a re-thinking of the way we tell history. Rather than reducing the method of critical fabulation to a 'one size fits all' approach, I have demonstrated the necessary interdisciplinarity, constant reassessment, and self-reflection needed to do justice to the requirements of history now and in the future. Its theoretical innovation, however, seems too promising not to develop and diffuse further. The afterlife of slavery and colonialism is entangled with other histories: those of environmental destruction, capitalist exploitation, and Western imperialism.⁵⁰ This essay has started the discussion between narrativism, critical fabulation, and ethical considerations of history-writing, and it invites historians to reflect on their role as agents along the lines of Hartman, Miles, and White. Additions to this discussion from related fields of history would only work to enrichen it, giving the innovations made by Hartman the attention they deserve. The future of historical theory must engage with its present; it is only then that we can answer the complex questions raised by the future.

⁵⁰ T. Bruno, 'Ecological Memory in the Biophysical Afterlife of Slavery', *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 113.7 (2023): 1543-1553.