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Radical Imagination – in the Making of the World: A Glimpse into the Works of

Hannah Arendt
& Saidiya V. Hartman

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How can we rethink critical thought and archival research? This text, which represents part of Mariam Popal's ongoing work and 2024 research stay in New York, USA, discusses historical and discursive marginalization, representation – and literary imagination as counter-narrative in the work of Hannah Arendt and Saidiya V. Hartman.

World-making is a major research field in literary theory. The conjunction of literary works – or, more generally of the arts – and world-making seems apparent. But how do we experience and make the world on all our possible roads and dwellings on the earth? True, in the 'real' world we experience the timing and the plot of our continuing life stories, our losses, in their undelayed immediacy on our very own skin, in the regulations and irregularities of our bodies in physical and mental ways, in the injuries and defeated hopes of our expectations and possibilities. Yet we are also experiencing the world, in its glocal dimensions, mostly as narrated. The German-Jewish literary critic Erich Auerbach, who later became a refugee, titled one of his major works *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (*Mimesis: Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der abendländischen Literatur*, 1946). The university, as an institution that manages 'knowledge' via structures of learning and teaching, and thus the transfer of different narratives, is also a major manufactory of world-making. This not only equips us with the power to contribute to the building of 'worlds'

through knowledge-systems that inevitably will influence the world in the making and the making of worlds. It also implicitly endows us with the task, with a responsibility, and the question of what kind of worlds we are about to shape, to whom we are speaking while creating them, and who may remain unheard or silenced in the process, often without us being aware. Although our works themselves may appear to be mere raindrops, according to a Darian proverb in Afghanistan, it is raindrops that drop by drop create a sea (*qatra, qatra daryā gardad*). So, it may not be irrelevant how we proceed in our works and with which questions in mind we develop them.

Hannah Arendt and Saidiya V. Hartman are two scholars who create worlds in their works by considering literature and literary writing while reading our canons and archives. They do so by employing what I would call a *radical imagination* as an reading lens against the backdrop of often hidden and overlooked atrocities and sufferings. Their works not only begin at the ruins of painful historical events – the long history of antisemitism, beginning in antiquity and much later, the Shoah, as well as the old history and institution of enslavement and later The Middle Passage – but in their search for new beginnings, for opportunities to shift our perceptions and widen the scope of our world's underpinnings, both scholars reconfigure 'knowledge' and its meanings with the dimensions of aesthetics. One of Arendt's impressive phrases was also taken as the title for a posthumously compiled volume of her seminal essays

Thinking without a Banister: Essays in Understanding, 1953-1975 (*Denken ohne Geländer* 2005; 2015) and describes the necessity and risk of this radical approach: It is a movement within uncertainties that have arisen from the ruins of a former knowledge, a knowledge that turned out to be part of destructive political dynamics, or at least, could not prevent them. In *Thinking without a Banister*, Arendt speaks of the 'thinking self' as a 'homeless' entity and refers to this homelessness as a space of 'nowhere' (*Nirgendes*). According to this view, we do not have a place in the process of thinking – we become homeless. She describes this homelessness as a void (*Leere*). However, for Arendt, this void is not something 'bad'. Rather the void – the experience of homelessness – is an essential, natural (*natürlich*) part for thought to emerge; it is the place of all philosophy. Homelessness, Arendt muses, is like a country, a prerequisite world for thinking. Arendt's considerations are based on the history of Judaism as an experience of persecution *par excellence* due to one's thoughts and beliefs, especially in the European context.

Regardless of enlightenment and secularism, racist thinking against Jews culminated in the Shoah genocide within European modernity. Against the backdrop of this history, Arendt developed a complex critical approach towards mainstream traditionalism, knowledge, and philosophy. In her rather neglected work that because of its actuality, brilliance, and depth is now receiving renewed attention across the world, Arendt rereads ancient philosophical texts but also a

number of progressive literary works to find new entry points for thought. One of the concepts she speaks of, and which is also the title of one of her essay volumes, is *The Hidden Tradition* (*Die verborgene Tradition*) (1976). This insightful expression refers to the marginalisation and disregard of the work of Jewish European writers and authors – work and approaches that Arendt unearthed and makes room for.

A similar movement is also inherent in the works of African American literary scholar Saidiya V. Hartman. In her more recent works, Hartman develops a methodological and epistemological reading lens of archival material that is also a form of aesthetically inspired literary writing. This is an approach that she employs in her book *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (2019). In an earlier work, Hartman calls her technique 'critical fabulation'. Using archival and historical records, as well as critical theories, Hartman fills in the gaps in the lives and lived experiences of African Americans, particularly women, that she finds in the archives, while remaining attentive to the injustices they experienced. Hartman also bases her approach on her difficult, and mentally and emotionally exhausting work on *The Middle Passage* and the history of transatlantic enslavement that, because of the unspeakable crimes against humanity that were committed daily and which inform the archives, does not leave space for the experience of beauty. So, in her more recent approach, Hartman attempts to create an aesthetic dimension in her research and give epistemological depth to missing and inadequate archival material through writing. This is an approach that she introduces, for example, in her research on 'Venus' as a recurrent figure of a traumatised girl or woman that haunts the Atlantic slavery archive. The 'nowhere' and the 'void' that Hartman tries to capture and to fill thus represent the lives and voices that the unbearable injustices and atrocities of the *The Middle Passage* have created and left behind – with the urgent, almost impossible attempt to avoid reproducing them. She

understands her approach as a 'counter-history of the human', as a 'practice of freedom', and a form of 'reparation' (*Venus in Two Acts*, 2008). A major component of her thought and work is the question of ethical responsibility regarding the work of representation involved in storytelling. What Hartman seeks to complicate and challenge in her work are the 'pledges of history' "to be faithful to the limits of fact, evidence, and archive, even as those dead certainties are produced by terror." Hartmann's approach, in contrast to the usual research of a disin-

terested style and against the silences that accompany this economy, is "not to give voice to the slave, but rather to imagine what cannot be verified." Like Arendt, Hartman also relates her approach to the present and to the crimes committed in the name of 'security', 'civilisation', 'God', and 'the good' worldwide. Our work may then also mean the attempt to capture the impossible in the face of the other and to carve out space for them while we are engaged in the making of our worlds and the production and distribution of knowledge.



Drawing "repair" by D.M.P., 2025