

*“Memory Trouble: Continuity and Discontinuity” is part of The Humanities Institute’s 2021 [Memory Series](#). This series features contributions from a range of faculty and emeriti in the Humanities community at UC Santa Cruz – each of whom highlight connections between memory and their work or meditate on memory’s relevance in our current moment.*

## **Memory Trouble: Continuity and Discontinuity**

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When the UC Santa Cruz Humanities Institute chose “Memory” as its theme this year I thought that my research on the politics of indigenous culture and heritage could have something to contribute. But as I’ve tried to understand these collective, social processes of loss and renewal as kinds of remembering, I’m not so sure. Memory, a metaphor derived from individual experience, suggests a retrospective connection of past and present life, a process that creates continuity across time. A good deal of cultural tradition corresponds to this way of gathering and transmitting a prior legacy. But the simultaneous work of “forgetting,” of partial transmission or translation, of creative borrowing from others, is less apparent.

The Institute’s Spring program directs us to the work of Saidiya Hartman, this year’s Hayden White Distinguished Lecturer. I’ve been reading her brilliant memoir/travel story/history, *Lose Your Mother* (2007), a book I’ll return to later in this essay. Hartman’s ability to retrieve the past without covering over its constitutive gaps, her willingness to work with, not suppress, historical discontinuity, reminds me of a time, more than forty years ago, when I first confronted serious questions about cultural “memory” and historical “loss,” questions I’m still asking.

Just before coming to Santa Cruz, in Fall 1977, I attended a trial in Boston Federal Court where the Indians from Mashpee, a town on Cape Cod, were required to prove they were a “tribe.” If the community was to have standing to sue for land and recognition, the court required that it needed to demonstrate continuous tribal existence over several centuries. There was evidently an organized tribe in 1977, but how was that group connected with the seventeenth-century refugees and converts, “praying Indians,” who had gathered on the land that is now called Mashpee? I won’t go into the details of the conflicting arguments in court, the dueling definitions of “tribe,” and especially a relentless tendency of the written records of “history” to override the oral transmissions of “culture.” A fuller account appears in my 1988 book, *The Predicament of Culture*.

A lot of historical evidence was presented to a Boston jury over more than six weeks. It showed that the Indian residents of Mashpee had gone through many changes and had suffered grievous losses in the wake of conquest, disease, evangelization, and structural oppression. They had stopped speaking their native vernacular; they intermarried with other minority groups (Portuguese sailors, freed African American slaves); they became Baptist Christians; they worked and traveled widely in the surrounding capitalist society. Over and over, their opponents

argued, the Mashpee community had “lost” its Indian identity. There were long gaps in the written record that suggested an extinction of cultural life. And yet, there had been several public revivals of Indian culture, with recognizable symbols such as Siouxan feathered war bonnets. Kinship relations remained strong. Many witnesses argued that Indian tribal life, invisible to the dominant society, had been sustained informally. Collective decisions were made around kitchen tables, not in formal meetings.

Weighing contradictory testimony from community members, anthropologists, and historians, the jury found that the Mashpee community had not been continuously a tribe. Tribal institutions existed in the present and for periods in the past. But at other times, evidence was lacking. The tribe seemed to disappear and return. Given these discontinuities, the jury found that the current Mashpee were not the same Mashpee as those who had been dispossessed many years before. The contemporary tribe was a new creation and, as such, lacked status to sue for lost lands.

My own conclusion, having heard the evidence, was that the court’s requirement of continuity as an essential feature of tribal life, was prejudicial and ahistorical. Social and cultural continuity—not just for tribal people—is often uneven, made and remade from shreds and patches, reinvented in changing circumstances. Of course, this is especially true of communities grappling with the destructive effects of conquest and racist marginalization.

In 1970s Mashpee, a revival was clearly underway, a process that continues. Oral tradition, religious practices (combined with Christianity), and even the Wampanoag vernacular, are being actively restored.

Is this cultural and political reconnection with the past, the latest in a series of renewals, analogous to individual memory? When remembering is conceived as recovering lost or forgotten experience, continuity over time is reestablished and the person made whole. But can you “remember” an experience you never had, or recall something you never knew, something borrowed from someone else? “Invented memory,” in the life of individuals, is looked at with suspicion, as self-deception, even a kind of lying. Yet, collectivities are constantly inventing and reinventing. They patch up ruptures, rewrite broken traditions, enjoy “renaissances,” improvise new connections, and route their ongoing identifications through external detours and borrowings.

Historical documents (and especially their absence) convinced the jury that Indians in Mashpee had been “losing” their heritage and tribal institutions for centuries. What was it that kept disappearing, over and over? Sometimes Native life in Mashpee seemed to me like the Cheshire Cat from *Alice in Wonderland*, present in parts, but seldom, if ever, a whole body. I came away from the trial with a new set of questions about cultural integrity over time. How could we think of continuity and discontinuity, remembering and forgetting, not as opposites but together? Culture and identity would need to be understood as dynamic, always unfinished, processes.

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The Mashpee trial and the questions it raised provided the material for my job talk here at UC Santa Cruz, in the winter of 1978. My theoretical touchstone then was Michel

Foucault's *Archaeology of Knowledge*, an epistemological challenge to historical holism, especially assumptions of linear development and organic form. Social memories (Foucault's "genealogies") could enact multiple, contradictory histories. Cultures, I was beginning to see, are unlike living organisms. They come apart and reconnect, die and come back to life. Later, I acquired tools that would have helped me give a better job talk, especially the concept of "articulation." This analytic approach recognizes that social, cultural and economic forms are sustained by connecting, disconnecting, and reconnecting separate elements in specific conjunctures, unequal relations of power. Alertness to these historically real, non-necessary political processes helped me begin to grasp the constant reshaping of social, racial, and ethnic identifications.

The concept of articulation came to me via Stuart Hall, who was a visitor to UC Santa Cruz and an inspiration during the early years of our Center for Cultural Studies. A second guide was the Welsh Marxist Raymond Williams whose writings often referred to "the selective tradition." I learned from him that the cultural legacy preserved by a group from its past is always partial, constructed and political.

I've been asking whether social processes such as this are adequately represented by "memory," a model based on individual experience. I think not, if we adopt the common-sense notion of memory as a kind of archive, a storage place from which information can be retrieved unchanged, more or less efficiently. Understood this way, the work of memory guarantees personal continuity, the wholeness and stability of a self. But continuity, wholeness, and stability were what the Court unfairly required from the Mashpee, an essential identity sustained over three centuries.

Another, less-familiar conception of memory might have offered a better analogy for the dis-articulating and re-articulating historical processes actually at work. Recent psychological research has shown that, in practice, recollection is malleable and creative. What is retrieved, narrated, grasped as real, may depend on current desires and influences. This memory is productive, its truth not guaranteed. Areas of the past expand and contract: remembering and forgetting are active, adaptive processes.

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Questions like these have shaped my reading of *Lose Your Mother*, a partial, strong interpretation. Saidiya Hartman's book, an unflinching, beautifully-written project of historical and personal retrospection, is subtitled "a journey along the Atlantic slave route." It avoids from the outset a search for wholeness: remembering a lost Africa, reconnecting "roots" in the manner of Alex Haley. Her task is to explore, not eliminate, the violent losses, the gaps of recorded history. Hartman's destination is Ghana, where other African Americans have emigrated, hoping to escape the vicious legacies of slavery in the United States. She distinguishes her quest from theirs: "They went to be healed. I went to excavate a wound." (p. 40)

Neither these emigres nor the Ghanaians she encounters show much interest in the history of slavery. Active forgetting and silence are the price of moving on. For Hartman, however, there is no evading the wound of slavery, especially not for an African American who must constantly

contend with its legacy, the ongoing structures of racism. Only uncompromising confrontation with slavery's history and lucid acceptance of its formative influence can inhibit nostalgic escape and sustain a place from which to create something new and perhaps better.

*Lose Your Mother* records many illuminating, sometimes frustrating, conversations with people in Ghana. And Hartman probes her reactions to historical sites, the coastal forts where slaves were confined and the Northern towns where Africans were captured and sold by other Africans in an economy re-aligned by the trans-Atlantic trade. Her encounters with people and places are recounted with self-irony and without sanctimoniousness or self-pity. They leave the traveler, forever a "stranger," with no home, no place to rest and begin again. The horrific passage from Africa to the Americas is what remains.

The loss of mother Africa is irreparable, and generative. Homelessness leaves "no choice but to avow the loss that inaugurates one's existence. It is to be bound to other promises. It is to lose your mother, always." (p. 100) Loss is thus not an ending, but a source of "other promises." At the Mashpee trial, a literalist history decreed that gaps in the surviving record were evidence of a collective death. A historical sensibility such as Hartman's points toward another way of understanding discontinuity.

In her work, gaps in the historical record, the lack of slave voices, are not an absence, but a kind of insistent, inescapable, presence. She repairs the lack with a grounded practice of imagination, stories that can render at least something of the experiences of enslaved Africans. The repair is partial and contingent. We see the gaps and jagged edges of her inventions. Smoothing these over in the name of wholeness would be a work of fantasy, not the realism which, I think, guides her project.

Hartman's fictions, avowed as such, are reminders of what is simultaneously missing and real. She has spent many hours in the archives, searching for scraps of evidence that can break the enormous silence of the slaves, both in Africa and in the Middle Passage. There is almost nothing to be found. But where a name or a record survives, drawing on available scholarship and relevant context, she is able to imagine credible narratives.

Two extended examples are prominent in *Lose Your Mother*: the experience of a boy, Kwabena (pp. 123-5) and of a nameless young woman who, brutally tortured by the captain of a slave ship, refuses food, choosing death over bondage (Chapter 7). Both stories draw on textual records. The first elaborates on a brief passage evoking the slave hold in Ottobah Cugoano's *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery* (1787). The second begins from records of a 1792 *cause célèbre*, the trial and acquittal of the murderous captain and a famous speech in parliament by the anti-slavery crusader William Wilberforce. Hartman writes as a novelist, entering the thoughts and feelings of the nameless victim, of Wilberforce, of the captain, and of the third mate and the ship's surgeon who testified in court. The details of what happened on the ship, the "facts" revealed at the trial, differ sharply from person to person. Hartman accepts that the historical record is no guarantee of a coherent truth. Yet everything she narrates is believable. Something like this must have happened.

I won't try to illustrate, here, the imaginative power of Hartman's writing, its ability to shock, to convince and to move us. I'll just reiterate my claim for its realism. She is writing history in the epistemological space theorized by Hayden White. Her work of counter-history supplements the surviving records, reads the archive against the grain, and displaces the self-justifying stories of the victors. And more than just a corrective, Hartman's "excavation" of history's "wounds" explicitly rejects narrative strategies that could make a torn history feel whole.

For me, this lack of closure is a sign of the work's realism. And it suggests why the retrospective language of memory is misleading when used to describe historical change. When remembering means retrieving what was once known and has been suppressed, it evokes a process of restoration. Should a historical "realism" worthy of the name be conceived as working toward a kind of completion, filling gaps and finding continuities? Or could it accept that the past will never be made whole, that history is nothing but ruptures and repairs, dis- and re-articulations, gaps and openings, places of possibility?

That's the history I was looking for, and found, in *Lose Your Mother*. And it's what I saw and heard in a Boston courtroom forty years ago: the fractured, creative experience of Indian survival in Mashpee.