On Campus

Saidiya Hartman Named University Professor

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Saidiya Hartman (Courtesy of the MacArthur Foundation)

Saidiya Hartman, a prominent author and scholar of African-American literature and history, has been named a University Professor, which is the highest rank that Columbia bestows on its faculty.

A Columbia professor of English and comparative literature since 2007, Hartman writes genre-bending books that combine elements of historical scholarship, biography, and fiction to vividly portray the experiences of African-American enslaved people and their descendants. In works like *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* and *Lose Your Mother: A*

Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route, Hartman uses historical data about real individuals — often culled from slave owners' diaries, captains' logs, bills of sale, and other commercial records — as a jumping-off point to create rich, semi-fictional narratives that immerse readers in slaves' emotional lives. Her methodology, which she calls "critical fabulation," has proven to be highly influential in academia, prompting other scholars of African-American studies to reconsider the value of traditional historical scholarship that relies primarily on materials produced by slavery-era whites to understand past Black lives.

"Hartman is a sleuth of the archive; she draws extensively from plantation documents, missionary tracts, whatever traces she can find — but she is vocal about the challenge of using such troubling documents, the risk one runs of reinscribing their authority," wrote the *New York Times* in a review of Hartman's most recent book, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals*, in 2019. "Similarly, she is keen to identify moments of defiance and joy in the lives of her subjects."

Raised in Brooklyn, Hartman received her PhD from Yale and taught at the University of California, Berkeley, for more than a decade before coming to Columbia. She is a former director of the University's Institute for Research on Women, Gender, and Sexuality and remains part of its core faculty. In 2019, she won a MacArthur "genius" grant.

"She is also a person of expansive warmth and caring," said President Lee C. Bollinger in announcing Hartman's new appointment, "and, not surprisingly, she is beloved by her undergraduate and graduate students and revered as a committed, incisive, and encouraging teacher and mentor."



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