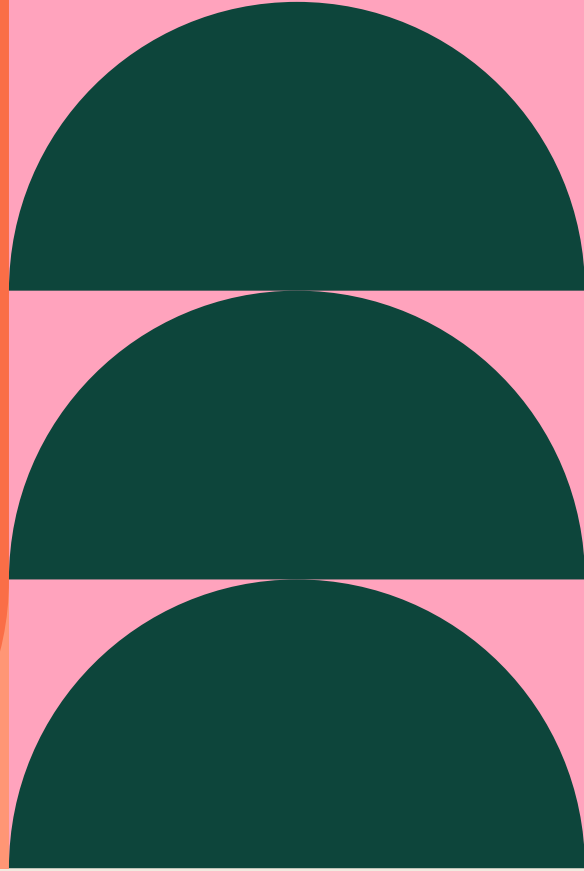


FEMINIST
ART COALITION



NOTES ON FEMINISMS

2

SAIDIYA
HARTMAN

SAIDIYA HARTMAN

The Plot of Her Undoing

The plot of her undoing begins with his dominion. It begins in the fifteenth century with a papal bull, with a philosopher at his desk, pen in hand, as he sorts the world into categories of genus and species. It begins with a bill of sale, with a story in the newspaper that enumerates her crimes, with a note appended to the file: she answers questions easily, but appears stupid; it begins with a wanted poster that reduces the history of her life to a single word—condemned. The plot of her undoing begins with a man in his study writing a tome about the Americas, the species, the fauna, the races, it is a compendium illustrated with botanical drawings, architectural plans, sketches of farm buildings, and a microscopic view of her scarfskin. The plot of her undoing begins with the violence of reason. It begins with an entry in the ledger that itemizes her as number 71, a meager girl, and forever erases her name. It begins with her rape by the ship's crew. It begins with the stillbirth, with the abortifacients, with the children lost at sea, with the babies unloved, with the calculations of maternal mortality, with negative formulas of value, with falling property rates, with alarming BMI profiles, with the epidemics, with criminal statistics, with the addictions, with the Great Removal, with the Trail of Tears, with the Middle Passage, with the Decades of Disappointment, with the Nakba, with the Ghost Dance, with the Cattle Killing. It begins with Cassandra's discounted words, with Philomela's silence, with Nongqawuse prophecies, with Rebecca Jackson's spirit drawings, with the letters scrawled in the crawlspace. The plot of her undoing begins with the enclosure. She falls quickly into the list: his settled land, his property, his real estate, his plantation, his acres, his frontier, his fence, his family, his wife, his cattle, his brood mare, his slave, his wet nurse, his bitch, his world.

The plot of her undoing begins with the man, the sovereign, the subject, the self-possessed, the able-bodied, the reasonable, the gendered, the neurotypical, it begins with the vertical hierarchy of life, with the uneven distribution of death, with the announcement "I think" and "I am" and "I own" and "I will," with the possessive my and mine, with therefore and hereafter, with future increase, with the sanctity of property, with the map of the territory, with the deed that says get the hell out and affirms that there is no place for her anywhere, with the court

order that declares her a squatter and a trespasser, with the mortgage for mud people, with the eviction, with no human involved.

The plot of her undoing begins with she, her, his, him, mine; with the rape in the provision ground, with the legal fact that she belongs to him, with the promise that he will do right by her, with the things whispered in the night, with her name and those of her children registered in the farm book (along with the plow and spades, whips and harnesses), with the chart that lists her animal characteristics on one side and her human on the other.

The plot of her undoing begins when he sleeps with her best friend, when he molests her daughter, when he refuses to wear the condom, when he forces her in the freshman dorm. The plot of her undoing begins with the proposal and the ring, with the beautiful wedding, with the black eye and the bruised lips, with the promises never to do it again, with the loneliness that breaks her, with the boredom and the shame, with the inventory of betrayals. The plot of her undoing begins with his claim to the fetus, with the womb made into a factory, with her body as the implement for his future, for his gain. It begins with his efforts to destroy her. It begins when he calls her his bitch, when he says she is nasty, when he swears to turn back the clock, when he grabs her pussy, when he hurts her down there. When he bellows: mine, mine, mine.

The plot of her undoing begins with inviolable rights, with liberty and happiness, with the sanctity of property. It begins when she learns to pronounce the words master and mistress. It begins with the sale of the horses and the oxen and her brothers. It begins with yellow bone and red bone. It begins when she learns to nod in agreement without uttering a word. When she answers dutifully to all the names tossed off indifferently, carelessly. When she cowers as if there is something else to lose.

The plot of her undoing begins with the transition from foraging to cultivation. It begins with the household and the plantation and the factory. It begins with imperial concepts like “populousness” and “terra nullius” and “the New Jerusalem.” It begins with the East India trade and the Africa trade. It begins with the disease of royalty. It begins with the bit in her mouth and the lashes on her back. It begins with animal husbandry and economies of scale. It begins with black cargo, native slaves, and white indenture, with primitive accumulation. It begins with manifest destiny and a plan to exterminate all the brutes. It begins with the genocide of her people, with the lie of her disappearance.

The plot of her undoing begins with prayers for relief and a program for amelioration and a society for the protection of *negros*, natives, aborigines, children, and dogs. It begins with the reform party and the coalition government. It begins with the idea to save her from herself, with the scheme to train her for a better life, with the program for self-improvement, with the reformatory, with the internment camp. It begins when the social worker takes the infant, when the doctor sterilizes her, when the detention center provides the training for citizenship,

it begins when education becomes compulsory for native children. It begins with the white schoolteachers. The plot of her undoing begins with an edict, with an asiento, with a sovereign decision, with a short account of the destruction of the Indies, with an executive order, with a removal act, with her manumission papers, with a declaration that seals her dispossession, with a treaty ceasing all hostilities, with a plan for resettlement.

The plot of her undoing begins with the fences and the corralling of the animals, with the law of the father, with the patronymic that identifies the true heirs, with the disinheritance of the bastards. It begins with her existence as an object of property. The plot of her undoing begins with the signs posted on the perimeter of the enclosed land: "No Trespassing," "Violators Will Be Prosecuted," "Danger," "Proceed at Your Own Peril."

The plot of her undoing begins with the constitution that endows her with rights that no white man is bound to respect, that designates her an eternal alien, outsider, foreigner, and enemy combatant. The plot of her undoing begins with the ground removed from under her feet. It begins with proclamations, with nonevents, with servitude in-all-but-name, with the afterlife. The plot of her undoing begins with the social contract, with the marriage vow, with the dream of the state, with the novel of love, with the longing to be sovereign, with coveting a piece of the pie. The plot of her undoing begins with the measure of man, with financial transactions and exchanges, with the calculation of her worth necessary to secure her freedom papers, with the documents that transform her from nobody to someone, with the great assumption, with the American dream, with the settler romance, with future prospects, with being slow to anger.

The plot of her undoing begins with her consignment to the hold, with her place fixed at the bottom, with the interminable state of her defeat, with her capacity to endure the worst yet. The plot begins with the blackening of the world. With being brutalized, scorned, dishonored, and violated. With being cast out. It begins with the wall, with the electrified fence, with the surgical bomb, with the embargo, with the police helicopters and the military drones looking for all those out of place and on the run. It begins with a blunt instrument to the back of the head, with being unable to breathe, with refusing to put out her cigarette.

The plot of her undoing begins with chastity, fidelity, virtue, and submission. It begins with the exchange between the husband and the father, with true womanhood, with her property, with the daughters of the confederacy, with the daughters of the revolution, with the double down on white supremacy, with neoliberal feminism and structural adjustment, with a bid for governance.

The plot of her undoing begins with dispossession and the rule of law. It begins with the great chain of being, it begins with her relegation to the lowest rung, it begins with the restricted sentence of animals and brutes, it begins with commodities that speak. It begins with the rights of man and citizen. It begins with the pledge of allegiance, with the stars and stripes, with the iron cross, with the dream of belonging, with the division of us and them, with profit margins

and returns, with the love of God and country, with a pearl-handled pistol, with the want of safety, with the necessary war, with a white picket fence, with the NRA and IRAs, with the investment portfolio, with Balenciaga, with the renovation of the brownstones in the hood, with the ordinances about loud music, block parties, barbecues in the front yard, and hanging out on the stoop after night falls.

The plot of her undoing begins when they expel her from the city, when they make black radical Brooklyn an exhibit in the Museum of Natural History, when all the members of the funk band are white boys, when the faux soul food kitchen in Bushwick serves sriracha and shakshuka, when someone spray-paints *tattarattat* on a wall in South Jamaica. When they clear the renewed city of all signs of her and the people she loves, it begins.

The plot of her undoing begins with the advent of the insurance company, with anticipated loss and securitized risk, with the pillage of shithole countries. It begins with a hedge fund, a red line, a portfolio, with the real property transmitted across generations, with a monopoly on public resources, with the flows of global capital. The plot of her undoing begins with the assertion, but I am a decent person, but it is not my fault, but I worked hard for what I have, but I am not responsible, but we could not find a qualified candidate, but there are good people on both sides, but the free speech of fascists must also be protected.

The plot of her undoing begins with the word consent, with faking an orgasm, with finishing herself off in secret, with coming quietly, with wanting more, with wanting it longer and harder, with not wanting it at all, with wanting it too much, with not wanting it enough, with wanting at all.

The plot of her undoing begins with contracts and white polar bears. It begins with her nephew watching from the closet, with her screams in the boy's mouth. It begins with the men splitting her open. It begins with corrective rape. It begins with a shortcut through the alley, with a package at the post office, with an offer of chocolate, with a knock at the front door. It begins in the house of a friend. It begins in her own bed. It begins with the promise not to tell anyone.

The plot of her undoing begins with official Negroes and gatekeepers and state representatives and nongovernmental organizations and the Bureau of Native Affairs and the TRC and the War Crimes Tribunal. It begins with her hands raised for the pledge, held in the salute, with her humiliation in the barracks, with donning the uniform, with mouthing the anthem, with signing the loyalty oath. The plot of her undoing begins with the vow, I do, with the promise, until death do us part, with the checking of the appropriate boxes, with holding her tongue, with biding her time, with causing no trouble at all, with contracting her limbs and lowering her eyes, with not saying a fucking word. The plot of her undoing begins with a fetal pose, with her hands in the air, with the words please, please.

The plot of her undoing begins with a man who looks presidential, who says all the right words and utters them so they sound sweet, so they sound possible and within reach, not at all like a lie—hope and change. The plot of her undoing begins with a man who looks presidential, who speaks like a fool, who grabs pussy and beats down niggers and spics. The plot of her undoing begins with the foreclosure, the water crisis, the state executions, with derivatives and deregulation, with data mining. It begins with the oil and the pipeline, it begins with silver and gold and diamonds, with fossil fuels and fracking, it begins when the hurricane lands, when the troops arrive at the border, it begins with the wall, with the prison, with the refugee camp.

The plot of her undoing begins with the knowledge that she can't protect her children, or shield her baby when the police break open the front door, or defend her home when the sights of the Glock 22 fall on her chest, or record the death she anticipates. The plot of her undoing begins as a state of unredressed injury.

*

The undoing of the plot proceeds by stealth. It is almost never recognized as anything at all and certainly never as significant. The undoing of the plot is blamed on foreign agents and outside agitators and troublemakers and communists. The undoing of the plot does not substitute the woman for the man, or topple the hierarchy to become the hierarchy. It does not replace the bad state with the good state or supplant the villain with the man of the people. It does not craft a story of leaders and followers in which she might assume a starring role. The undoing is not for your entertainment, even if it is for your benefit.

It unfolds when she is not much noticed, it advances at a snail's pace, it is stoked by quiet persistence, it is nurtured in the hollow of trees and in the dismal swamp, it is secreted by leaving no traces of human habitation.

The undoing of the plot begins because she won't do shit. She won't be no bird in a cage, no black woman at the lectern, no model Negro, no cog in the machine.

The undoing of the plot begins when everything has been taken. When life approaches extinction, when no one will be spared, when nothing is all that is left, when she is all that is left. The undoing begins with a potion poured into a silver soup tureen before she delivers it to the table, with acts of sabotage and destruction, with idleness and destitution. The undoing of the plot begins with her drifting from the course, with an errant path, with getting lost to the world. The undoing begins with an escape to the woods, with perilous freedom, with *petit maroonage*, with wading in the water. It does not begin with proclamations or constitutions or decrees or appeals or a seat at the table or a stake in the game. The undoing of the plot does not start on bended knee, it does not begin with ballots or bullets, or with an address to the court, or with a petition, or with the demand for redress, or with the slogan: no justice, no peace. It begins with the earth under her feet. It begins with all of them gathered at the river

and ready to strike, with all of them assembled in the squatter city, with all of them getting ready to be free in the clearing. They don't say what they know: all things will be changed. The undoing of the plot begins with her runaway tongue, with her outstretched hands, with songs shared across the unfree territory and the occupied lands, with the pledges of love that propel struggle, with the vision that *this bitter earth may not be what it seems*.

Commissioned by the Feminist Art Coalition (FAC)



Feminist Art Coalition (FAC) is a platform for art projects informed by feminisms. FAC fosters collaborations between arts institutions that aim to make public their commitment to social justice and structural change. It seeks to generate cultural awareness of feminist thought, experience, and action.

FEMINISTARTCOALITION.ORG