

Afro-pessimism and Christian hope

Reading Saidiya Hartman alongside Vincent Lloyd has helped me get through the night.

by [Lynn Tang Lee](#) in the [August 2026](#) issue

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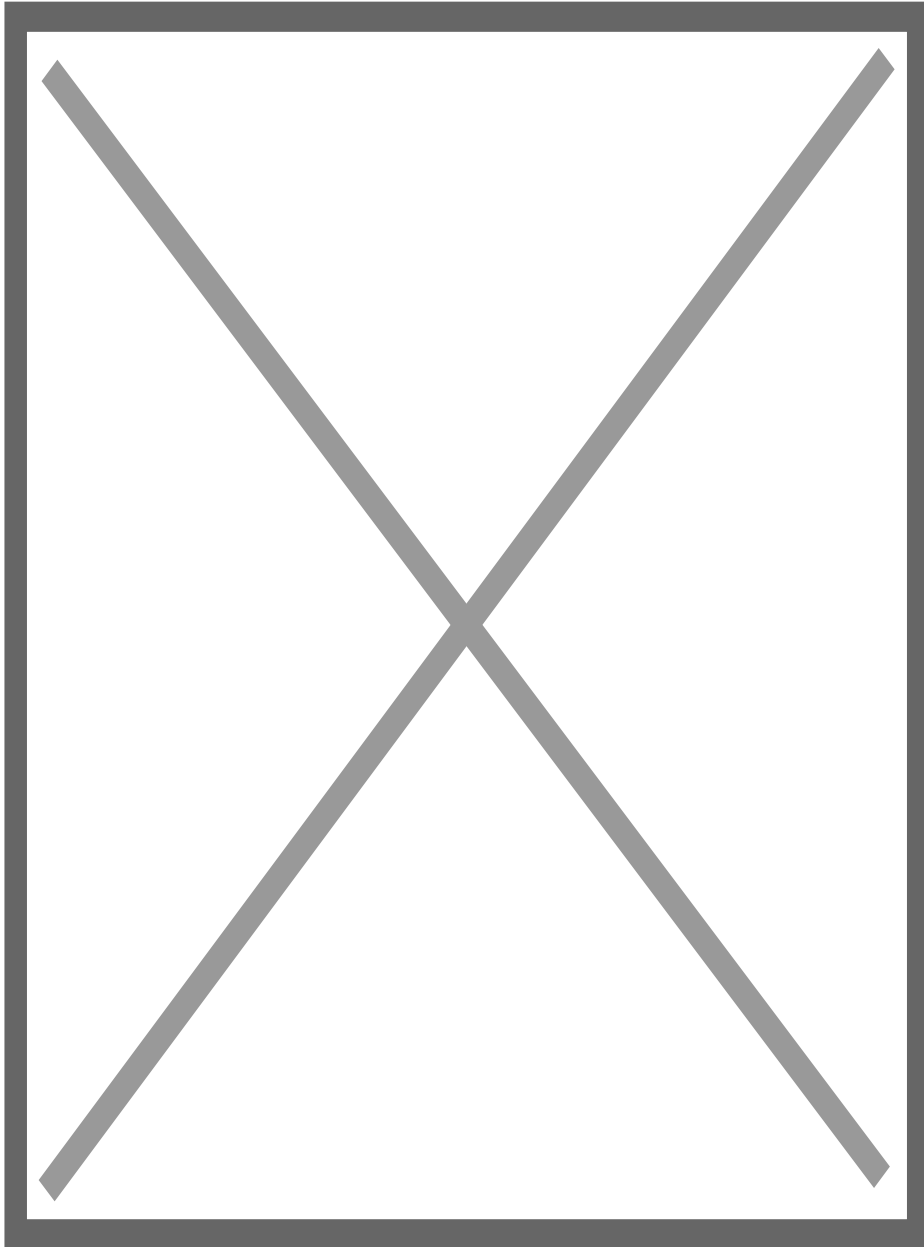


Illustration by Diana Ejaita

My anxieties usually emerge in the middle of the night. I wake with wide-open eyes and a fast-beating heart, and the house is eerily silent except for the slow, deep breaths of my husband's sleeping form beside me. My mind

begins to churn, spinning dire thoughts about our finances or, even worse, the next day's tasks.

Lately, however, the night wakings find my thoughts spiraling about Jenny, our former nanny. My children are years past needing a nanny, but you can never forget a person who loved your children well.

In the middle of the night, I wonder whether Jenny is working, how she's faring, whether her daughter completed her college studies. I last connected with Jenny when I provided a reference for her a few months ago. But in the deep of the small hours, I think paranoid, disjointed thoughts: What if someone traces my texts to her and they somehow find her? Jenny is an undocumented immigrant.

For those who live in the United States, it is an unsettling and uncertain time: productive immigrants contributing to this country suddenly deported, international student visas revoked with no explanation, mass layoffs in the federal workforce, government agencies abruptly dismantled, polarizations deepening.

However you may feel about undocumented immigrants working in the United States, the economic and political climate is distressing for many and becomes more so with each passing day. As a child of Chinese immigrants and a Catholic who thinks about how to exercise gospel values, I find myself wondering what it means for Christians to practice hope in the United States right now.

For that matter, what does hope even mean? Is it a feeling of optimism? Is it political action for the sake of a more just and merciful present and future? Is it trusting that the "moral arc of the universe is long but it bends toward justice," as Martin Luther King Jr. reminded us in 1965? Christian hope may include all of that, but it must be more—a need that is most evident in times of despair.

For such a time, retrieving theological hope requires thinking expansively. I turn to thinkers on Afro-pessimism and Christian hope, as exemplified, respectively, by Saidiya Hartman and Vincent W. Lloyd. While these conversation partners might seem odd at first, that's only because we have lost sight of Christian hope. In fact, the insights of Afro-pessimism may well reveal the very starting point of true Christian hope.

Afro-pessimism requires some explanation. But first it might be helpful to articulate a nourished and full sense of hope. Lloyd, a religious scholar who works in Black theology, reminds us what Christian hope is supposed to be:

Christians are to be committed to a vision of the future in which goodness prevails, a time when violence and suffering end. This vision produces an uncannily bright disposition, a disposition discordant with the violence and suffering that surrounds. Christians are called to do more than endure or persevere in a world of wretchedness. They are called to thrive, to have a radiance guaranteed by the eternal happiness they know is to come—to have a radiance that itself participates in that happiness.

Let's be clear about the implications: Adversity is what allows for Christian hope to be made visible. "In comfortable circumstances, Christian hope and worldly hope are difficult to distinguish," Lloyd says. "But in the face of adversity, sustained adversity, worldly hope retreats." He equates worldly hope with optimism, "a precarious individual disposition," which is enabled and sustained by comfortable circumstances.

Christian hope, on the other hand, is formed and strengthened only when we allow ourselves to dwell in the crucible with those who face suffering and violence—and then to actively participate in the goodness that brings about the end of suffering and violence. And yet, dwelling in this wretchedness also produces a radiance that itself participates in happiness. How can this be?

It's worth analyzing Lloyd's definition further. If we take his use of the word *disposition* seriously, we may first need to understand that Christian hope surpasses feeling, affect, or desire. This type of hope does not pay attention to whether it is realistic, achievable, or practical to pursue an end to violence and suffering. This type of hope chooses to pursue goodness even if the effort is likely to fail. This "uncannily bright disposition" is a stance—a commitment—toward goodness.

A lived commitment of this kind produces a radiance that is part of happiness. In other words, Christian hope is paradoxical. Dwelling in the crucible with those who face violence and then participating in ending the violence unaccountably leads to happiness. This is a clue that Christian hope is found where we may not normally look.

Lately, I have found Christian hope practiced in Hartman's writing. She's a scholar of African American literature and history, and her work is often classified in the vein of Afro-pessimism, which posits that Blackness is not like other differences, including racial or ethnic differences and differences of gender, sexuality, or disability. That's because Blackness does not assimilate or fade away. Instead, it is an ontological condition in which the very possibility of being is foreclosed.

Blackness is woven into the fabric of Western metaphysics—so much so that Hartman's Afro-pessimist contemporaries would say that working to end violence against Blackness necessarily entails ending a future in the modern world as we know it. This is the logical conclusion of Afro-pessimism. So it is from the ground of Afro-pessimism that I wonder, Must I resign myself to despair? This leads me back to my original question: How do I find Christian hope—at least of a type—within Hartman's writings?

In *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*, Hartman visits Ghana in pursuit of the questions that drive her: What is the afterlife of slavery, and when might it be eradicated? What is the future for descendants of slaves? In her search, Hartman repeatedly returns to sites such as the Elmina Castle, one of the historic gateways for the transatlantic slave trade, and plumbs the colonial archives of slave ships. Ultimately, for Hartman, slavery never ends: "I, too, live in the time of slavery, by which I mean I am living in the future created by it."

In her chapter titled "The Dead Book," Hartman constructs a piece of narrative in a mode she calls "critical fabulation." In this writing practice, Hartman reads a slave ship's colonial archive and then laces together a story of the lost, the nameless, and the dispossessed. She focuses on an enslaved girl who died during transportation aboard the ship, which was called the *Recovery*. In an influential essay written as a reflection on this chapter, Hartman explains her thinking: "The intention here isn't anything as miraculous as recovering the lives of the enslaved or redeeming the dead, but rather laboring to paint as full a picture of the lives of the captives as possible." This double gesture can be described as straining against the limits of the archive to write a cultural history of the captive and, at the same time, enacting the impossibility of representing the lives of the captives precisely through the process of narration.

In other words, Hartman creates a narrative out of traces and fragments, out of practically nothing. After all, there is no textual evidence from the enslaved girl herself. All references to the nameless girl exist from the points of view of a captain, a surgeon, and an abolitionist—all of whom disagree about what happened on the ship. Hartman only knows about the girl at all because "exceptional circumstances prevented [her] from simply vanishing into the heap of obscure lives scattered along the ocean's floor: a captain was tried for her murder."

Hartman came up with the enslaved girl's story after discovering a few lines of evidence from the trial transcript. The Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade had been brought to the attention of the public, and in 1792 William Wilberforce used the girl's death as the occasion for a speech about the abolitionist cause. It was only by chance, says Hartman, that "one girl comes into view" out of the 21 slaves who died aboard the *Recovery* and the millions more tossed from slave ships into the Atlantic.

In fabulating the girl's thoughts and imagination as she lay dying on the deck of the ship, Hartman imagines how the girl might have experienced her last, tenuous connections to the earthly. Writing in third-person close point of view, Hartman describes the girl's perceptions by way of sound alone: the grumbling of sailors on deck, the scuttling of rats, the whipping of canvas in the air, and finally the echoes of "cities of the dead laughing and crying out," because the girl has entered their realm.

Hartman asks herself a question about what drives this critical fabulation: Is it possible to exceed or negotiate the constitutive limits of the archive? She answers her own question by telling us that she intends to tell an impossible story and to amplify the impossibility of its telling. In doing so, she attempts to "jeopardize the status of the event, to displace the received or authorized account, and to imagine what might have happened or might have been said or might have been done." In this attempt, Hartman describes herself as "flout[ing] the realist illusion customary in the writing of history, and produc[ing] a counter-history at the intersection of the fictive and the historical." She acknowledges that Black counter-historical projects will *always* be read as insurgent, disruptive narratives rather than as any kind of history. And yet, Hartman goes ahead anyway.

In contrast to a performance of optimism or pessimism, Hartman evinces a type of hope out of her creative labor of fabulation. This hope is conjoined with defeat, Hartman says, and the outcome of this labor is open. That is, she embarks on this creative labor knowing that finding the voices of her ancestors is not realistic, achievable, or practical. Hartman herself calls this act an "impossible story." She has no aspirations to redeem the dead. What, then, is this creative labor out of the chaos of chattel slavery worth?

Worldly hope might read this effort as useless, but Christian hope, I would suggest, begins exactly here: at the location of adversity and impossibility. The outcome of Hartman's labor is open, but it dwells in the territory where Christian hope traverses—a creative travelling for a kind of goodness, even when the full result is yet to be determined. Though Hartman has no designs to articulate a theological hope, she uncannily echoes the province of Christian hope.

In a time such as this, Hartman's creative labor enfleshes Lloyd's concept of Christian hope. Instead of viewing my nighttime wakings about Jenny as only disruptive, macabre warnings, Hartman's writing prompts me to ask of myself: What creative labor of hope might my Christian faith be asking me to begin and sustain amid the current chaos in our country?