

A Radical, Subaltern Chorus: Saidiya Hartman's Album of Rebellious Young Black Women

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Saidiya Hartman, [Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval](#) (2019).

Saidiya Hartman opens her powerful and lyrical *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* with an epigraph from Harlem Renaissance author Nella Larsen's [Quicksand](#): "She was, she knew, in a queer indefinite way, a disturbing factor." As I read Hartman's brilliant narrative recreation of the voices, words, and intimate lives of "young black women," at the turn of the twentieth century, as they sought "to create autonomous and beautiful lives, to escape the new forms of servitude awaiting them, and to live as if they were free" (P. xiii), another Harlem Renaissance novel came to mind: Jessie Redmon Fauset's [Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral](#) (1929). The desire to live free also preoccupies Angela Murray, the young Black woman whose own intimate history and experiments in living are at the center of *Plum Bun*. While Murray has more economic and family resources and class privilege than the young Black women whose lives Hartman makes palpably and poignantly real to readers, this fictional heroine and these women alike perceive the bar that "the color line" poses—at every turn—to living "as if" free. "Freedom!" is the most frequent "note" in the "melody of living" of which Angela dreams, and she perceives that "[c]olour or rather the lack of it seemed . . . the one absolute prerequisite" to that dream life and to the "difference between freedom and fetters." (Fauset 13, 137.)

The "fetters" created by the color line's racial caste system constrain yet fuel the subjects of Hartman's narrative: young Black women on a quest to rebel and "live free" in the decades between 1890 and 1935, in New York City and Philadelphia. To construct her dazzling portraits of those "wayward" lives, Hartman uses a method of "close narration" by attempting to "inhabit the intimate dimensions" of those lives and place "the voice of narrator and character in inseparable relation." (Hartman, P. xiii) She draws on "a vast range of archival materials" to "convey the sensory experience of the city and to capture the rich landscape of black social life." Such archival sources treat these young women as "a problem," and include "the journals of rent collectors; surveys and monographs of sociologists; trial transcripts; slum photographs; reports of vice investigators, social workers, and parole officers; interviews with psychiatrists and psychologists; and prison case files." (P. xiv.) Countering that diagnosis, Hartman insists on the beauty of these experiments in trying to live free, arguing that these "young black women in open rebellion" show "utopian longings" and provide "an intimate chronicle of black radicalism;" such radicalism included "free" motherhood, intimate partnerships outside of marriage, and "queer and outlaw passions." (P. xv.) As the archives reveal, the regulatory apparatus of governmental and quasi-governmental officials labelled and punished these young Black women for their supposed deviance from marital, gender, and sexual norms.

The expansive use of the police power to protect public morals is particularly sobering. For example, under the Tenement House Law, young Black women were surveilled and arrested "as vagrants and prostitutes" simply on a police officer's testimony. (P. 249.) A prostitution charge could follow a young woman inviting a man into her home for a drink. Given the police invasion of Black homes in 2020, it is chillingly resonant to read of the disrespect a century ago for Black homes as private spaces: in a "jump raid," plainclothes officers, "having identified a suspicious person and place, knocked at the door of a private residence, and when it opened, they forced their way across the threshold or they followed behind a woman as she entered to her apartment." (P. 252.) Hartman recounts that Elinora Harris (the future Billie Holiday) and her mother were arrested in a neighborhood sweep. (P. 252.) "Walking while black" had its counterpart in the 1920s, when, as Holiday recalled, women like her mother, employed as maids or office cleaners, "were picked up on the street on their way home from work and charged with prostitution." (P. 254.)

Hartman compellingly describes the “incredible ferocity” of this “state surveillance and police power” as “the afterlife of slavery.” (P. 256.) The young women targeted by this regulatory power perceived that such law was “designed to keep them in place,” even as they “*refused to live in its clauses and parentheses.*” (P. 256.) The consequences of this regulatory power fell most harshly on Black female minors: an adult woman convicted of prostitution might be sentenced to 60 days at the workhouse, but, under the Wayward Minors Act, “a girl convicted as a wayward minor might receive an indeterminate sentence of three years” at a reformatory. (P. 223.)

Racism and sexism intertwined in the application of such status offense laws: between 1882-1925, “*only* young women were adjudged wayward under” wayward minor laws, and Black girls were “more likely to be punished and . . . punished more harshly” than white girls. Thus, “state racism exacerbated the reach” of such laws, “marking blackness as disorderly and criminal.” (P. 225.) Hartman’s empathetic reconstruction of the desires and interrupted lives of these “wayward” girls — subject to the “civil death” of confinement in racially segregated and brutal reformatories (P. 264)— offers a valuable counterpoint to portrayals of Progressive-era efforts around juvenile justice, with the (unrealized) ideal of a prototypical wayward (white) boy in need of the counsel of a kindly judge.

As a family law scholar, I found sobering how Progressive-era social reformers in Northern cities viewed maintaining segregation and preventing “interracial intimacy or even proximity” as necessary for public health and morals: “the Girl problem and the Negro problem reared their heads” together, finding “a common target in the sexual freedom of young women.” (P. 20.) Further, vice commissions diagnosed interracial association as “disorderly” even when the purpose was “to undo the color line.” (P. 249.)

The book is a tour de force in its richly and vividly imagined narratives, which allow these young Black women hitherto “credited with nothing” and “deemed unfit for history” to emerge with agency and vision—as “radical thinkers who tirelessly imagined other ways to live and never failed to consider how the world might be otherwise.” (P. xv.) Part of that quest, Hartman persuasively shows, is the desire for aesthetic beauty and pleasure. As Professor Eddie Bruce-Jones [observes](#), in showing “why beauty is a vital component of the narrative,” Hartman has also “created a beautiful experiment of her own.”

“The beauty of the chorus” is a phrase Hartman uses skillfully to portray the goals of women like Mabel Hampton, who left domestic service – the expected employment for young Black women – to pursue romance and adventure through joining a chorus line and dancing in cabarets, where she could shake off (however briefly) the “assault of racism.” (P. 307.) Mabel’s intimate experiments in loving other women also dared to cross the color line. Hartman places Mabel amidst a “glamorous world” of other Black women, such as Gladys Bentley, Jackie Mabley, and Ethel Waters, whose artistic lives defied gender and sexuality conventions. Mabel’s chorus line did not lead to the concert career she sought; instead, in middle age, Mabel faced the fate she evaded as a teen: entering the “Bronx slave market” for day laborers, “settled on a crate among the group of domestics as they waited for housewives from Yonkers and Westchester.” (P. 343.)

Hartman closes by envisioning a chorus of the many young women whose voices need to be heard, whose stories are terrible and beautiful, and who “transform[] the terms of the possible.” (P. 349.) The Greek etymology of “chorus,” Hartman observes, is to “dance within an enclosure.” This image of “acts of collaboration and improvisation that unfold within the space of enclosure” well conveys “the long history of struggle, the ceaseless practice of black radicalism and refusal,” and “the tumult and upheaval of open rebellion.” The chorus, with its many songs asking how to live free, “propels transformation” and is “an incubator of possibility.” This chorus so vividly presented by Hartman offers a rich resource for legal scholars seeking to expand the canon to include missing and marginalized voices in a way attentive to the intersection of race and gender discrimination. At a time when legal scholars and teachers are seeking to make antiracism and reckoning with systemic racism more central to their pedagogy and writing, Hartman’s intricate reconstruction of this unrelenting apparatus and its harsh and unjust toll on the lives of young Black women is a powerful and sobering text.

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