

Community Reading Group Annotations

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Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval

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I find definitions of community in relation to politics confusing. I find rigid ideologies suspect, and any adherence to them is a scratch worth itching—maybe enough to draw blood. I can't stand monumentalizing an individual but am deferential to respecting subjectivity and extolling the value of lived experience. I care to know the dimensions of what community can mean, often in terms of trust, empathy, interpersonal dynamics related to power, and self-organization by shared beliefs.

In my time in CRG the reading has been leaned toward an abstract/theoretical tone in discussions of community—a bit super-structure oriented. So, I've suggested books focusing on the experience of subjective identities as an anchor in the service of CRG's exploration of community. I'm curious to see how this will tip the balance of our conversations, especially considering the frameworks of knowledge that group members have benefited from reading thus far.

—Simone Montemurno

1. Her head was full of dreams. It was 1913 and anything seemed possible. She had done “the one thing which seemed to offer hope,” she had left home. She was one of thousands of young black folks rushing to New York from Virginia and elsewhere. Only later would these acts of flight be recognized as a *general strike* against slavery in its new guises, as a fugitive movement from life lived under the heel of white men. When Mattie Nelson landed at Pier 26, she was dreamy with thoughts of what the future would hold. In the crush of folks on the pier, she breathed comfortably inside her own skin, enjoying the self-forgetfulness that she had imagined was possible in a free territory. **(Book: 48, PDF: 68)**

2. When Victoria Matthews first arrived in New York City, she entered the city empty-handed, and, like every other black woman, with no past to which she could appeal for anything. Slavery, she believed, had destroyed everything decent; the institution had made honor and virtue impossible. All a Negro woman could count on was the future. So she worked hard to define herself and to fend off all that had been put upon her. Like every other southern girl taking her chance in the city, she was treated as if a prostitute (or in her words, a woman of “the depraved class commonly met with on the streets”). She labored as a domestic during the day and studied at night, determined to be *more than nothing*. It mattered little that she eschewed things sensual and disreputable, that she never acted her color, and that she struggled mightily to fortify the degrees of rank and caste that separated the good and decent Negroes from the wayward and the *not uncriminal*. Two-and-a-half centuries of being used, taken, broken, and loved by white folks in whatever manner they decided and by whatever means that suited their fancy, with blows or lashes, with gifts of the mistress’s cast-offs or promises of manumission, with curses and sweet talk, with threats and whispers of love in the night—this intimate history of slavery—had indelibly marked black women, and it had marked her too.

While she was determined to turn this shame inside out and to make of it pride; pride and dignity of this sort had at its core something rotten, something spoiled. A life devoted to repairing the damaged reputation of the colored woman did not release Matthews from the sexual stigma of slavery, but merely transformed her from someone tainted by a shameful past into someone who had succeeded in improving and overcoming this past, yet was still bound to it. The taint proved indelible regardless how faint. Stigma isn’t an attribute, it’s a relationship; one is normal against another person who is not. White women were respectable over and against the degradation of black women. Victoria Matthews and Mattie Nelson were the excluded ones who defined the norms of gender and the meaning of womanhood. The shadow of slavery, wounded kinship, rape, and concubinage had created her and decided the character of her struggle to achieve virtue and decency. But promoting these new ideals, new if only because impossible to achieve or maintain in the context of chattel slavery, produced its own kind of shame and deviance. Her decency also required someone to be respectable against. **(Book: 52-3, PDF: 73-4)**

3. It is possible that Mattie experienced this opening of her desire as a refusal of all that kept her fixed in place, stuck at the laundry, chained to an ironing board, suffocating and without any possibility of change. An unremarkable act of coitus, a deed of no import, except to those involved, a routine practice not in any way to be confused with matters of significance, just an everyday act of fucking, a quasievent, would not have been noticed had it not been part of a greater social upheaval. Intimate acts shared in rented rooms in boarding houses and tenements throughout the city fueled the social panic about wandering, dissolute young women and the great numbers of young black people rushing to New York. Mattie’s restiveness and longing and the free love practiced in a private bedroom rented by the week were part of a larger ensemble of intimate acts that were transforming social life and inaugurating the modern, which was characterized by the entrenchment and transformation of racism, emergent forms of dispossession, and the design of new enclosures, and by a fierce and expanded sense of what might be possible. Girls on the cusp of womanhood, young colored women like Mattie, were at the center of this revolution in a minor key. Despite the efforts of the state to contain it as pathology and as crime, it proved impossible to stave the tide of desires not bound by law, coupling and procreation outside the embrace of marriage, and the ardent longing to live as one wanted. **(Book: 59, PDF: 82-3)**

4. After the slave ship and the plantation, the third revolution of black intimate life unfolded in the city. The hallway, bedroom, stoop, rooftop, airshaft, and kitchenette provided the space of experiment. The tenement and the rooming house furnished the social laboratory of the black working class and the poor. The bedroom was a domain of thought in deed and a site for enacting, exceeding, undoing, and remaking relations of power. **(Book: 61, PDF: 84)**

5. To yield, to be undone and dispossessed by the force of her desire, and for no other reason than that she *wanted to*, made Mattie feel vital, untethered. And this freedom was sensual and palpable—like the taste of Herman Hawkins in her mouth, a force so arresting it could stop her in her tracks, make her ache in anticipation of what could happen. When he was inside her, when she was inside him, when he kissed her so hard that his teeth were bruising her lips, she left that other Mattie behind, the plain dark-skinned girl whom no one had ever described as pretty. The sweetness of bodies was stoked by self-forgetting. In that room she tried to slip away, elude the hold of the plantation and the police, and pry open time into an endless stretch of possibility.

At other moments, it was harder to discern the difference between something painful and something beautiful. *Take all of me. Don't lie to me. Use me. Hit it. Don't hurt me.* There was a thin line between loss and expenditure, between yielding and breakdown. The violence of it when he forced her to do things she didn't want to do. How he might punish her. How he misused her. *How he loved her.* Trained her to want what she didn't, as if every black woman's life was destined to a blues, an autobiographical chronicle of love and disaster, or a secret history of pain and joy. *How he loved her.* A rough hand caught in Mattie's hair, which unfurled and then drew up in tight curls in sweaty palms, and the light playing on dark bodies at dusk said what the world withheld—beauty. It was a practice of care and an offering of the self for the use of the other in the confines of enormous brutality. The beauty of things taken and things given by those living in defeat. Mattie wanted so much from the world and had been allowed so little—the force of all that *want* drove her to the small rented room. She was moved by lust, which was not an exercise of her will, but *the mere force of existing*, a kind of submission that was insistent, an act that confused the doer and the deed. In the enfolding of flesh, in this most base and exalted act of entries and exits, Mattie threatened to disappear, the force of it exceeding her and erasing the boundaries of the discrete body, making her something less than she was and something more. To be undone, against her will and with her consent. A state that was neither autonomy nor capture. It broke her down, it made her nothing at all, it laid her low, it transformed her into anything else she longed to be: like a bird flying high or a thing vast and boundless, oceanic—not a person at all. In the reek and warmth of a rented room she was all flesh and sensation; she was hovering at the end of the world. And she welcomed it. **(Book: 62-63, PDF: 87)**

MANUAL FOR GENERAL HOUSEWORK (whole chapter, highlighted rather than excerpt).

Manual: of or pertaining to the hand or hands, done or performed with the hands. Now especially of (physical) labor, an occupation, etc., as opposed to mental, theoretical. Manual as distinguished from the mind and the intellectual. Manual: as of a weapon, tool, implement, etc.; that is used or worked with the hand or hands. Actually in one's hands, not merely prospective. (Manual: short for manual exercises, i.e., physical labor, and not the exercise of reason or imagination.) A tool or an object, within one's grasp, not speculative, not a proposal for black female genius. The use of the body as tool or instrument. Of occupation or possession. Able to have in one's own hands, as in possession is three-fifths of the law, as in possession makes you three-fifths of a human, as in property handled by another. Also to be possessed. To be handled as if owned, annexed, branded, invaded, ingested, not autonomous. Manual: to be wielded by another, to be wielded on a whim; to be wielded as an exercise of another's will, to be severed from one's own will or motives or desires. Manual: as opposed to mental, as in not an exercise of rational faculties. As opposed to the formation of critical reflections; as opposed to contemplation of the

self or the world. A method of operating or working. A function. Short for manual exercise. Short for manual tool.

Manual: as opposed to automatic, as opposed to starting or functioning by itself and for itself, as opposed to deliberation and judgment, as in the need for direction, as in the imposition of a mistress or master.

Manual: As of pertaining to the hand or hands. The hands to be outmoded or made obsolete by the machine. Of or pertaining to the mule more than the machine. Worked with the hands, finished with the hands. No more than a pair of hands. Hands cracked and swollen from harsh soap and ammonia. Hands burnt taking the pies out of the oven. Hands stiff and disfigured from wringing cold sheets and towels outside in the winter before hanging to dry on the line. Hands, no longer yours, contracted, owned, and directed by another, like a tool or object. The hands that handle you. The hands up the dress, the hands on your ass, the hands that pull down your undergarments, the hands that pin you to the floor. The hands that pay you two dollars for the day or thirteen dollars for the week. Manual: as of subject to use, made a tool, handled, grasped, palmed, slapped, fondled, hugged, harassed, caressed; as of pertaining to the hand.

Manual: as opposed to contemplation, or theory. As opposed to the use of the intellect. As opposed to looking, viewing, contemplating. As opposed to thinking, reflecting, scheming, plotting, planning, weighing, brooding. The use of the hands as opposed to a conception or mental scheme or paradigm. Manual: the concrete, the physical, the embodied as opposed to abstract knowledge and the formulation of it. As opposed to reason. Manual: as pertaining to ignorance, obtuseness, stupidity, and as opposed to erudition.

As related to handle, as to be handled, as to be handled with no regard, as to be handled as a tool or instrument; as to be handled like a slave, like a wench, like a bitch, like a whore, like a nigger. Handled as pertaining to that part of the thing which is to be grasped by the hand in using it or moving it. To be grasped by the hand or sometimes by the neck, the ass, the throat. Colloquial: to fly off the handle; to go into a rage; to fuck shit up. Figurative: that by which something is or may be taken hold of; one of two or more ways in which a thing may be taken or apprehended. To manipulate, manage; to subject to the action of hands, to touch or feel with hands. As opposed to: Don't touch me. As pertaining to: Hands up, don't shoot. To manage, conduct, direct, control. To be handled by men, to be manhandled, to be seized by men, to be used by men, to be used up by men. Handled, as related to use of the thing, to do something with the tool, as opposed to directed by will and desire; as opposed to consent, as opposed to leave me the fuck alone. To deal with, to treat as you wish, to serve, to use, to accumulate, to expend, to deplete.

Manual: as related to a book, etc.—of the nature of a manual intended to be kept at hand for reference. A concise treatise, an abridgment, a handbook.

Block after block of the ugly and unsightly was as sweet as freedom got. Three decades after Emancipation and black folks had nothing. No matter. The flood of migrants did not cease, and the scramble to live did not squelch dreams of the north, the city, and the good life. All they heard back home, in dusty southern towns, were the lies and the assurances—things were easier up there and the white folks ain't as evil. It took only a week to discover that neither was true. Still, it was better than Virginia or North Carolina. To the newcomers entering the city, the only lasting evidence of what the Civil War had won for them was their ability to catch a steamer north and roam the streets in search of opportunities that eluded them.

The Seventh Ward was marvel and blight, the heart of a ragtag black metropolis, the seed of the emergent ghetto. Philadelphia housed the largest black population in the northeast, until 1900, when New York's Black Belt surpassed it and Chicago replaced it as the second-largest city in the nation. But in 1896 it was still impressive. Since 1780, Philadelphia had been a laboratory for the nation's experiment in racial democracy and the premier stage on which the future after slavery was enacted. The city boasted a gilded history of triumph and accomplishment. The first act for the Gradual Emancipation of Slavery was passed in 1780. The Free African Society was established in 1787, and the doors of Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church opened in 1794. The American Anti-Slavery Society was founded in 1833. Before the Civil War, the city was home to the largest free black community in the country, and it boasted a small prosperous black elite. Then there was the underside: An outbreak of yellow fever in 1793 divided the city along racial lines. The black residents were blamed for the spread of the epidemic, conscripted to nurse the sick and cart the dead, and then excoriated for acts of theft and extortion rumored to have happened during the crisis. The Eastern State Penitentiary opened in 1829 and inaugurated the practice of solitary confinement. The first prisoner was Charles Williams, a Negro. In 1838, Negroes were disenfranchised after the state legislature decided that black and white citizens were not equal in the eyes of the law and changed the qualifications for suffrage in the state constitution from every freeman to every white freeman twenty-one and over who had paid taxes. Race riots in 1839, 1842, 1849, and 1871 rocked the city and tested the meaning of slavery and freedom, citizen and alien, on northern soil. **(111–112)**

Falling-down tenements and alley dwellings sprouted in the shadows of Philadelphia's best homes. Ignorant Negroes and drunken Irish willing to exchange a vote for a few dollars or a chicken dinner had decided the last mayoral election and defeated the reform candidate. The elites complained that political clubs merely provided cover for gambling and prostitution. Barbarians from the south had changed the face of the city and threatened to do more harm if the tide wasn't turned. The daily papers belittled the newly arrived migrants: they were unlettered country folk unsuited for modern life and intoxicated with dreams of freedom.

Concerned citizens, alarmed by the political corruption and crime in their city, held the growing population of black migrants responsible, so they hired him—a Harvard PhD and a Negro—to conduct a survey of the Seventh Ward, where they believed the cancer resided. Susan Wharton, the head of the College Settlement Association, and Dr. Charles Harrison, Provost of the University of Pennsylvania, invited the young social scientist to Philadelphia to write a comprehensive study of the Negro problem. The motives behind the invitation did not escape him. There was a widespread feeling that something was wrong with a race responsible for so much crime. It was clear that they wanted him to confirm what they already knew: The city was going to the dogs and the Negroes were to blame. (114–115)

He learned far more about the Negro problem from them than he had imagined possible. Being born of a race didn't endow him with a storehouse of knowledge. He had come late to the experience of being a Negro. He started the survey with no research methods, just visiting and talking with people. In interview after interview, black folks made it clear they wanted more and deserved better than they had received. While most doubted the survey would make any difference, they shared the details of their lives with him. No one had ever asked them how they managed to scrape together a living, or what they wanted for their children, or what were their experiences with the white world or the difficulties they faced in trying to find a place to live or why so many lived in so few rooms. He listened to their stories about low wages, about being shut out of the professions that used to be theirs—butlers, chauffeurs, barbers, and headwaiters—and being barred from the new jobs at the steel plant. Despite the absence of signs clearly stating, “Colored need not apply,” no one wanted to hire them. The men couldn't find work and the women were trapped in domestic service. Unskilled labor and low wages were the only opportunities awaiting them in the city. A third of the Negroes in the city were servants. Nine out of ten women were domestics. Many, almost 20 percent, lived in the homes of white folks, where they were lonely and isolated. No, they never felt like one of the family. Those who didn't live-in spent virtually all of their wages on rent. Some weeks their children ate only what they could take home from white women's kitchens. The white folks thought of it as stealing. But how was it wrong to take home leftovers from meals they had prepared? Were their labor and care to be denied their own family? Were the hours that went into making biscuits and pot roasts not to benefit their own homes? How could it be a crime to feed their children?

Every day was a test of the assertion, I am not a slave. Things seemed like they were getting worse. Kind of employment? He didn't really need to ask. (130–131)

To witness such intellect thwarted and ambition derailed affected him deeply. It changed the way he looked at black folks and in time it would transform radically his understanding of the problems they faced. When he first arrived, he thought of them as raw recruits and barbarians and blamed them for the crime and squalor of the ward. The inconsiderate rush of backward

Negroes to the city had stoked the antipathy of whites and precipitated the decline of the best Negro neighborhoods. Dense pockets of poverty and vice were concentrated in the ward. He understood that the newcomers were propelled by the universal desire to rise in the world and escape the choking narrowness of the plantation and the lawless repression of the south. Yet, unless their movement into the city was checked or real opportunities created, how would they avoid becoming paupers, loafers, whores, and criminals? The lowest ranks struggled for sheer physical existence. How would they not impair and threaten the tenuous foothold of the better class of Negroes? **(135)**

Those lonely years at Harvard had taught him how avidly the liberal north policed the race lines. His fellow students sped across Harvard Yard and averted their gaze on Brattle Street rather than utter hello or good day to a Negro. Harriet Beecher Stowe captured it in Miss Ophelia's benevolent antipathy and sentimental aversion to Topsy. Lofty ideals and racist aversion went hand in hand. His classmates were enlightened enough to be seated in the same lecture hall with him, but that defined the extent of their hospitality and engagement. When circumstance or proximity made conversation unavoidable, it followed a predictable course. He wanted to say, no to shout: One is not compelled to discuss the Negro question with every Negro one meets or tell him of a father who was connected with the Underground Railroad; one is not compelled to stare at the solitary black face in the audience as though it were not human; it is not necessary to sneer, or be unkind or boorish, if the Negroes in the room or on the street are not all the best behaved or have not the most elegant manners; it is hardly necessary to strike from the dwindling list of one's boyhood and girlhood acquaintances or school-day friends all those who happen to have Negro blood, simply because one has not the courage to greet them on the street. **(139–140)**

Who else but the prostitutes of Middle Alley or Ratcliffe Street dared utter such words? Their history was apparent in the open expression of desire. He knew exactly what kind of man they imagined in those shoes. Idlers and libertines accustomed to living on the wages of prostitutes. Of this he was certain, if only because he was unable to imagine what else could account for such desire in a woman. Looking at the girls' reflections in the glass, he questioned, Who are they? He couldn't really see their faces, only everything that he feared. They returned his gaze with a penetrating look that asked, "What are you staring at?" Before he could venture a reply, the young women locked arms, turned away and continued their stroll. **(151)**

‘A Chronicle of Need and Want’

Old Clayton and Mary Riley were never able to meet the rent; they were always in debt. They swept the hallways and scrubbed the water closets and cleaned vacant rooms and passively received Helen’s abuse. They pawned their clothes and household items and they found piecemeal work—shucking oysters, washing clothes and linens, and repairing garments. On occasion, Helen extended loans, despite her belief that it would encourage laziness and a sense of entitlement. These calculated acts of kindness were not enough to bridge the gulf between poverty and the minimal requirements necessary to live. None of these stopgap measures afforded a way around the truth: more than sixty percent of the Negroes in the city lived in a state of poverty. (162)

Helen failed to reach the women. Each sharp word and cut of the eye was the reminder. The women were as likely to send her to hell as to utter good day. Watching them gather in the courtyard, she looked on jealously, believing their intimacy to be a rejection of her. They were backlit by the late afternoon sun, the flat black shapes like silhouettes against the flank of sheets hanging behind them. Every indifferent glance and back turned toward her was a barricade keeping her outside the circle. When they withheld their recognition and made plain that they had no clear need of her, when she was unable to find her better self reflected in their eyes, when their hostility was so piercing it threatened to crush and destroy her, then the cluster of women assembled in the yard on a late August afternoon involved in the mundane tasks of hanging clothes, cracking pecans, and tying off buttons collapsed into a faceless *them*, a threatening crowd, a race without distinct features or characteristics. At such moments, Helen could see only treason *en masse*, the lines of battle were drawn; she thought, *All are against me*. She doubted if she would ever be able to reach them. Who would have guessed that the battle to be waged was against them as well as the slum? (164–165)

The first generation after slavery had been so in love with being free that few noticed or minded that they had been released to nothing at all. They didn’t yet know that the price of the war was to be exacted from their flesh. People were too busy dreaming of who they wanted to be and how they wanted to live and the acres they would farm, and searching for the mother they would never find, wondering what happened to their uncle, was their sister dead, and was it true that someone had seen two of their brothers as far north as Philadelphia? Freedom was the promise of a life that most would never have and that few had ever lived. But who could bear this? So colored folks were still looking, picking up and moving on, again and again. (177)

Intimate arrangements on Saint Mary Street, as Helen learned, were never what they appeared. Was a husband a husband or a wife a wife after all? The terms of intimacy were so elastic for Negroes it was uncertain exactly what they meant—the wife of his youth or the woman he was living with now? Was the head of the household the father of the children or the man who supported them? One could never be sure if a young couple had been separated by work as they claimed, or if theirs was a free union not bound by the law. It was hard to decide whether the Negro family was really a family at all. A child arrived with one mother, only to be claimed months later as someone else’s child. Men were fathers, but separated from their children; or a husband might have two families. Women on the loose were unable or unwilling to make a home

for anyone, or they lived in with white families while their own children were untended. Helen knew all of this, yet she was not prepared for Mamie. Not even her name was right. Mamie Sharp. She had been married when she was fifteen years old, and her husband abused and ill-treated her. Mamie left him about two years ago. Since then he had “married” again and she had “married” James Shepherd. (178–179)

This was the trouble with Negroes—the law did not determine what was right and wrong in their eyes, as if they could live outside or oppose it. She had heard others besides the Fishers insist that no paper can decide if a thing is right or wrong, no paper can settle the matter of truth. Owning nothing and subsisting on so little, they let the heart decide everything. Love was their only anchor. It was clear to Helen that the sole thing that mattered to James Shepherd was: Do I want Mamie? Does she want me? Damn the law and Miss Parrish.

“Mamie wants you to leave. She told me she is willing to give up her room and her ‘friend’ and find a new place. She wants you to leave. She is willing to do as I wished.”

James didn’t call Miss Parrish a liar, but he was unwilling to believe what she said was true.

“Mamie?” James waited for her to reply, waited for her to deny it, but she didn’t answer. “Mamie, did you tell Miss Parrish you were willing to give me up?”

The air was thick with all the things they refused to say in front of Helen Parrish. I have forgiven you everything, James might have said. You know what kind of woman I am, Mamie might have ventured in reply. None of this was uttered, but it hung in the air between them. (181–182)

Helen understood the cruelty unleashed by want. She and James had sparred for Mamie. She intended to rescue the girl, to train and manage her, to mold Mamie’s life in accordance with her designs. The best thing would be to send her to the country. The city promised only trouble for her. Helen wasn’t ashamed to admit that she cared deeply for the girl. The success of the work depended upon this mutual affection. When James Shepherd stepped into his front room, he had not been prepared to fight for his life; he never suspected that Mamie would be the weapon used against him. It was a rout—Helen had broken him as his beloved Mamie watched passively from the sidelines. He would leave the city in a matter of days. She would find a safe place for Mamie in the country where the girl would be far from temptation and in her hands.

If James truly loved Mamie, he could do more for her by leaving. Helen would make sure that Mamie was shielded and protected, something her consort could not do. Never before had Helen been so confident about what love required or how a woman should be loved. *Miss Parrish, have you ever been married?* Helen had skirted his question. Her heart was not the issue at hand. She wondered what Hannah would make of this—a black man trying to teach her about love and devotion. (185)

‘In a Moment of Tenderness the Future Seems Possible’

The right couple exists in a state of peril. The future promised by the marriage plot will be derailed when the mother asks, “What that niggah got to marry on?” It is the question on which black marriage founders. The numbers doom love. The death table, the rate of unemployment, the skewed gender ratios, the murderous abstractions. The numbers secure the law and determine the dire outcome. What kind of anchor is love against all that? The happily ever after will elude them. The beautiful life that might have been is captured in a moment of tenderness that in no way betrays what is to come—the mother cloaking her daughter in a burial garment. All the maternal toil and sacrifice fail to assure any better prospects for her daughter or provide an escape from the unspeakable. For this too the black mother will shoulder the blame. She has given all she has, all that matters, but to no avail. A vague disquieting feeling hangs in the air. It will cost her and the daughter everything. **(192–193)**

1900. The Tenderloin. 241 West 41st Street

They arrested her for prostitution and then took her to the Tombs. When the following day the newspapers reported that a Negro, Arthur Harris, had murdered a police officer in the Tenderloin, they identified her by name, followed by indictments and qualifiers like “would-be wife,” “girlfriend,” “common-law-wife,” “negress,” and “wench.” Her guilt was established with the words “loitering” and “soliciting.” Description condemned her: dissolute, criminal, and promiscuous.

May Enoch passes as a wife, but they didn’t say what she was, like she was nothing at all. It was in the New-York Tribune for everyone to see. Passing for a wife or acting like one was not the same as being one. Love not bound by the law and sanctioned by the city clerk’s seal had no standing. The district attorney never failed to describe her as a prostitute and Arthur Harris as a rapist. It didn’t matter that there was no evidence for either charge. The white world had made the rules about how to be a man, how to be a woman, how to live intimately, and May and Kid lived outside those rules. Everyone kept asking the same questions: Why was she out after midnight by herself? Why had she waited on the corner after she had spoken with her husband? What exactly did the officer say to her and what was her reply? Why didn’t she do anything to stop her consort, to stop Arthur Harris, once Thorpe was sprawled in the street?

It became apparent that she was guilty too. Her crime was moving through the city and taking up public space; his was the belief that he had a right to defend them from a white man’s violence. Other black folks agreed.

201-202 PDF / 165-166 Print

It was asserted on every side that [Negroes] had been entirely too bold, and had assumed improper sway in Sixth, Seventh and Eighth Avenues and that the white must assert themselves.” White men beat Negroes in the street, pulled them from streetcars, and broke into their homes, determined to quash and extinguish this improper sway, this black swagger betraying the sense that they were at least as good as any white man. Maybe Kid did want to be “the coolest monster on the corner.”

204 PDF / 167-168 Print

When the Reverend Brooks and the Citizens’ Protective League assembled the pamphlet *Story of the Riot*, May Enoch’s story was nowhere to be found. She was mentioned in passing as the wife of Arthur Harris and otherwise merited little attention. Kid was the only one who cared about her. The League feared dissolute types like May and Kid. Too loud women loitering on street corners and black men with too much swagger would confuse the matter, defuse the righteous anger about what had been done to decent black folks, innocent, lawabiding, and respectable people. She and Kid were on the other side of that line.

It was as if what had happened to May was in a different class than the terrible things the police had done to all those other Negroes, as if good and decent folks had suffered because of them, because of her. Was it Arthur Harris who incited the mob? Was she responsible in the end because he tried to protect her? Was the blood of every Negro battered and brutalized by the

police and the white mob to be blamed on her? She was as bad as Kid, and everyone concurred what he had done was terrible. He had tried to defend his wife; he had refused to be beaten like a dog. May had been standing on the corner waiting for him to have a drink and finish a cigar. Was that a crime? Was the knife in her hand, too?

205 PDF / 168 Print

Less than three weeks after the brutality in New Orleans and a year after Sam Hose was lynched in Georgia, burned and mutilated before a crowd of over two thousand, white men gathered in the streets of New York, determined to instruct Negroes about the limits of liberty and intent on quashing the arrogance and swagger that evidenced a misguided belief in equality. Mob rule in the Tenderloin was as vicious and indiscriminate. North and south were just directions on a map, not placeholders that ensured freedom or safety from the police and the white mob.

210 PDF / 173 Print

Between 1890 and 1900, New York City's black population doubled, and the white folks living in closest proximity greatly resented their presence. The more than forty thousand Negroes made up less than 2 percent of the population, but the threat represented by their presence was magnified a thousandfold. The effects of the riot in the Tenderloin were far-reaching and accelerated the racial segregation that more and more defined the city. The violence was a major catalyst in the making of Harlem. After being attacked by their white neighbors, black New Yorkers sought protection by huddling with their own. [...] By 1915 at least eighty percent of black New Yorkers lived in Harlem. [...] What the riot made clear was that the color line was hardening and that segregation and antiblack racism were not only augmented by way of state and federal policy, but also stoked by the antipathy and the psychic investment of even the poorest whites in black subordination and servility. Their ancestors had never owned slaves, yet they regarded Negroes as "slaves of society." What stake had survivors of famine and immiseration in recreating the plantation in the city, in gratuitous violence directed at any and every black face, in defending the color line as if their very lives depended on it, as if their sense of self was anchored in this capacity to injure others? [...] As four days in August made plain, the enclosure of the Black Belt was to be as sharply defined in northern cities as it had been in the south; poverty, state violence, extralegal terror, and antiblack racism were essential to maintaining the new racial order

211-212 PDF / 173-174 Print

“909. 601 West 61st Street. A New Colony of Colored People, or Malindy in Little Africa”

Half a man—it sounded less harsh than the third sex or queer or invert and had the advantage of endorsing the aspiration to be a full and true man. As critical was the related question shadowing this as-yet unrealized ambition: When would the colored female achieve her full status as a woman? (p. 177)

Intimate lives were on view in the streets and corridors. The airshaft made public the things that happened behind closed doors. (p. 177)

In 1910, John Rockefeller Jr. commissioned a door-to-door survey of prostitutes in the worst dens of the city. Irish, French, German, and Italian women selling hand jobs and French style lived in close proximity to black working girls. Had they uttered good day, had they been willing to cross the color line, had they imagined Negroes as neighbors, they might have sounded a whore’s *Internationale*. This was the very thing that Rockefeller and other Progressive reformers feared—the promiscuity sociality of the lower ranks, love and friendship across color lines. Law and order depended on the color line to segregate vice and quarantine it within the black ghetto. The white working class fell into line and shored up the project. (p. 182)

It was obvious that gender as a category was not elastic enough to encompass the radical differences in the lived experiences of black and white women. In slavery, stolen labor, violated flesh, and negated maternity (black women were legally denied a mother’s access to her child or choice about reproduction had defined this difference. In the twentieth century, wage labor, servitude, improper guardianship, failed maternity, chance coupling, serial marriages, and widowhood marked the difference. *Half a woman* announced the black female’s failure to realize the aspirations of womanhood or meet the benchmark of humanity. Great dangers awaited those who lived in the lexical gap between black female and woman. This category crisis defined the afterlife of slavery. “The Negro comes north and finds himself half a man. Does the woman, too, come to be but half a woman? What is her status in the city to which she turns for opportunity and larger freedom? (p. 184, 185)

The black woman was a breadwinner—this was the most glaring problem. In short, she threatened to assume and eclipse the role of the husband. As early as 1643, black women’s labor had been classified as the same as men’s. The Virginia General Assembly placed a tax on African women’s labor. Tithes or taxes were usually imposed on men in agricultural labor and the heads of household. No tax was imposed on the labor of white wives and daughters laboring in the household of their husbands and fathers. Unlike white women’s labor, black women’s labor was treated as if they were men, inaugurating a centuries-long crisis about the status of black women’s work and their deviation from gender norms. The tax introduced this gender variance, which would be made absolute two decades later when their reproductive capacity and maternity was also targeted and deemed the property of slave-owners; the womb was made into a factory and children transformed into commodities for the market. The failure to comply with or achieve gender norms would define black life; and this “ungendering” inevitably marked black women (and men) as less than human. (p. 185, 186)

In the film, the telltale gestures, tics, and queer traits would give Bentley away: his tendency to swagger; the too-big body, the too-loud voice, the mountain of flesh, the vocal intonation, the distribution of hair, the masculine distribution of weight, his brazen flouting of law and custom and civilization, the preening defiance and naked display of pleasure. Seated at the best table in the club, he would be surrounded by a bevy of beauties. The camera lingers on the five bottles of champagne accumulated at the table, so the audience doesn't miss the clue and the condemnation: he has been plying the young chorines with alcohol and all of them are intoxicated, and the many bottles make plain that the rogue has money to burn. The eyes brim with lust. The sideways smile and the inviting mouth are certain to be the cause of a young chorine's downfall.

194, 235

Cut to the dance number on the club floor, which is pivotal, obligatory, and never inessential in a Micheaux film. Everything terrible about the club—the alcohol, the debauchery, the infidelity encouraged by the environment, the loose, jaded women—would be balanced by this scene, which would condemn the cabaret and at the same time exalt it. In the cabaret scene, black virtuosity is on display. Then comes the chorus, and the dancing bodies are arranged in beautiful lines that shift and change as the flourish and excess of the dancers unfold into riotous possibility and translate the tumult and upheaval of the Black Belt into art. The extended musical numbers might first seem like digressions, except that they establish the horizon in which everything else transpires and foreground the lovely actuality of blackness. The dance scene is crucial, the movement of bodies, the chorus as well as the ordinary folks crowding the floor, reveal the other lineages of black cinema, understood broadly as a rendering of black life in motion in contrast to the arrested and fixed images that produce and document black life as a problem.

196, 236

The chorus conjures the promise that this night might never end, that there is no world but this one, that everything is possible, that the reservoir of life is limitless. The hyperextended bottom, the contracted figure, the rotating pelvis, the arms akimbo and then raised to the sky and bringing down the house, the motion of bodies—they collapse the distance between the plantation and the city, the quarters and the tenements, producing the “annihilation of time and space” characteristic of modernity and definitive of the cinema. The Shimmy, the Turkey Trot, the Funky Butt, the Black Bottom, the synchronized rhythm of the chorus all attest to the flow and frequency of black locomotion, to the propulsion and arrest of history. Bentley's life refracted through Micheaux's cinema is the wild, deregulated movement that refuses the color line and flees the enclosure of the ghetto. The bodies in motion, bodies intimate and proximate, recklessly assert what might be, how black folks might could live.

197, 237

Bentley's queer masculinity ran roughshod over the righteous propagation that resided at the heart of every racial melodrama. Bentley trashed the gender norms and family ideals central to the project of racial uplift—self-regulation, monogamy, fidelity, wedlock, and

reproduction—and scoffed at the moralism of the latter-day Victorians, the aristocrats of uplift. Alas, the villain cannot escape the end that awaits him. By the time *The End* rolls onto the screen, virtue's antagonist is long gone. A car crash, a bullet to the head or the heart, or the penitentiary has resolved the drama. (For our protagonist, the political climate would propel the story toward a tragic end.

200,241

An act of self-immolation motivated by state repression and declared in a coerced confession forces the beautiful husband to assume the role of wife, signaling his defeat. It is a crushing last act of self-renunciation. The lines from the deathbed: I inhabited that half-shadow no man's land which exists between the boundaries of the two sexes. Throughout the world there are thousands of us furtive humans who have created for ourselves a fantasy as old as civilization itself; a fantasy which enables us, if only temporarily, to turn our back on the hard realm of life. Our number is legion and our heartbreak inconceivable. The hard-hearted no-count man, sharper, sheik, sweet man, queer fellow, seducer must be handled or dispatched so that the right couple can emerge—the true husband and wife. So that the girl ruined by the promise of a part in the show, the girl willing to meet the gambler, pimp, or shady producer later at the after-hours spot, the girl willing to do anything to get the part can be rescued, so that no one else will savor the words or hum the tune: Women ain't gonna need no men. They got a head like a sweet angel and walk just like a natural man.

201-202, 242...

bloom to early...snakes in her belly

205-206, 247

On stage, she had purpose. She was no longer a disappointed wife; she was alive, resplendent. It didn't matter that this feeling was transient and ephemeral. The freedom of being less like Edna and more like others was exhilarating. To be lost to the world of marriage and duty and disappointment and tedium as she entered the space of the ensemble and the intensity of creating and inhabiting a world with others, a domain of collective bodies, kinesthetic experience and gestural language. All other roles had to be relinquished. The stage enabled her to escape her paltry individual life and slip into someone else's existence—prostitute, queen, toiling laborer, flawed heroine—and to shed every petty concern. When she stepped into a character and lent her body to the gesture, she was nobody and everyone at the same time, no longer bound to her personal history and yet able to express deeply all the pain and failure and want, sharing it with the world but not shamed by it.

210-211, 252-3

PDF 273–274 / Book 229–230

Esther never pulled a soapbox onto the corner of 135th Street and Lenox Avenue to make a speech about autonomy, the global reach of the color line, involuntary servitude, free motherhood, or the promise of a future world, but she well understood that the desire to move as she wanted was nothing short of treason. She knew first-hand that the offense most punished by the state was trying to live free. To wander through the streets of Harlem, to want better than what she had, and to be propelled by her whims and desires was to be ungovernable. Her way of living was nothing short of anarchy.

PDF 280–281 / Book 235–236

Esther Brown longed for another world. She was hungry for more, for otherwise, for better. She was hungry for beauty. In her case, the aesthetic wasn't a realm separate and distinct from the daily challenges of survival; rather, the aim was to make an art of subsistence. She did not try to create a poem or song or painting. What she created was Esther Brown. That was the offering, the bit of art, that could not come from any other. She would polish and hone that. She would celebrate that every day something had tried to kill her and failed. She would make a beautiful life. What is beauty, if not "the intense sensation of being pulled toward the animating force of life?" Or the yearning "to bring things into relation . . . with a kind of urgency as though one's life depended upon it." Or the love of the black ordinary? Or the capacity to make what we do and how we do it into sustenance and shield? What Negro doesn't know that a few verses of song might be capable of stoking the hunger to live, might be the knowledge of freedom that leads you out of the enclosure? Brings you back from the dead or kills you a second time? Who could fail to understand seeking a way out, inhabiting a loophole of retreat, and escaping the imposed life as anything else, anything but beautiful?

PDF 287–288 / Book 241–242

With no proof of employment, Esther was indicted for vagrancy under the Tenement House Law. Vagrancy was an expansive and virtually all-encompassing category; like the manner of walking in Ferguson, it was a ubiquitous charge that made it easy for the police to arrest and prosecute young women with no evidence of crime or act of lawbreaking. In the 1910s and 1920s, vagrancy statutes were used primarily to target young women for prostitution. To be charged was to be sentenced because nearly 80 percent of those who appeared before the magistrate judge were sentenced to serve time; some years the rate of conviction was as high as 89 percent. It didn't matter if it was your first encounter with the law. Vagrancy statutes and the Tenement House Law made young black women vulnerable to arrest. What mattered was not what you had done, but the prophetic power of the police to predict the future, and anticipate the mug shot in the bright eyes and intelligent face of Esther Brown.

PDF 295–296 / Book 248–249

Wealthy private citizens endowed with the authority of the state and directing the police, ruled the Committee of Fourteen (the vice commission comprised of rich New Yorkers and reformers) and ran the State Board of Charities and State Prison Commission. One of their central goals, beyond dominating the propertyless, was to impose racial segregation in the absence of legislative decree at the state or city level.

Segregation was seen as a way to maintain the health and morality of the social body and police power was critical to achieving this goal. In the most general terms, police power endows the state with the capacity to regulate behavior and enforce order in the service of the public good. Policing blackness was deemed essential to ensuring the health of the social body and minimizing danger. In the eyes of the city's ruling elite, racial segregation was synonymous with the public good, and the imposition of the color line a means of controlling crime by funneling prostitution, gambling, drugs, and other vice into black neighborhoods and containing it there.

“The Arrested Life of Eva Perkins”

And what of Shine’s woman—his mate, his friend, his sister, his comrade? Shine, not unlike Caliban, was cast into the fight without a female companion. The most significant absence of all in the dramaturgy of struggle, in the cosmic shattered history of black life, in the unfolding plot of the wretched, was that of his woman. Was the native son ever to be accompanied by a native daughter? Or was there no one at his side as he faced the world? As it faced him? Am I not an ally and a sister? Am I not here? Am I an absent presence? If the text of the human was written over and against him, she fell out of the order of representation all together. Neither subject nor object, but a mute, silenced thing, like an impossible metaphor or a beached whale or a form yet to be named. Her coming of age has been endlessly deferred. What place was there for Eva in the stuff of myth and imagination? Could the *Coming of Eva Perkins* or its tragic eclipse ever stand as allegory of the race, as the representative tale of blackness? In the drama between the world and him, she disappears, she falls into the black hole; she is the black hole, a person of no account. Unnamed, she waits in the wings, but without her own part to play, the catalyst of nothing. What has she to do with matters of life and death writ large? What about her desire and defiance? Or was she “reduced to having no will or desire except that prescribed” by master and mistress or coaxed by a lover?

What was the text of her insurgency? Did she also possess knowledge of freedom—the miraculous, unfathomable ways of escaping from under the heels of white folks? How did she strike back and lash out? She too had survived a thousand deaths, so why were there no folk ballads about her or exaggerated accounts of her endurance? Was her fate to remain trapped within the impoverished realm of realism, or worse, confined in the sociological imagination that could only ever recognize her as a problem? (308–309)

Eva hated the police detectives who had forced their way into her home and arrested her simply because they could, because Shine eluded them and she could be seized as his surrogate. Next time, she would give them a reason. Silently, she harbored the protest and the complaint. No talking back, no expletives—not even a whisper. She vowed to tell them nothing. (311)

Wayward Lives: Part 3

The hopes of revolutionary change ignited by 1917 reached deep into the heart of the Black Belt. The New Negro has no fear—was the declaration that echoed through the crowd. The spirit of Bolshevism was palpable in the streets of Harlem. Would a better world unfold in its wake? In editorials in the New York Age, the Amsterdam News, the Chicago Defender, and the Afro-American, everyone was asking when, if ever, the Negro would be free. But no one had Harriet Powell in mind or the war waged against her. Walking with the “conscious sway of invitation,” gathering and assembling at the cabaret, and engaging in the very ordinary everyday practice of defiance were incommensurate with the political idiom of adjustment, betterment, and reward, the holy grail of self-appointed race leaders and friends of the Negro, and, as well, beneath the scrutiny of black socialists and street-corner radicals. Harriet’s beautiful lack of restraint, her spectacular refusal to aspire to a better job or a decent life, and her radiant lust solicited only the attention of the police and the sociologist. (261)

It was one’s status that determined whether an intimate act, an evening spent with a stranger, or a proclivity to run the streets was a punishable offense. A status offense was a form of behavior deemed illegal only for a particular group of persons. These offenses fell within the jurisdiction of magistrate courts, and judges had great latitude in deciding a young woman’s fate. Subjective evaluations of “behavior and conduct” produced dire outcomes. The Women’s Court was created to address matters of sexual delinquency and it had the highest rate of conviction of all New York City courts. Not surprisingly, black women made up a significant percentage of those convicted.

Only young women were adjudged wayward under these statutes (between the years 1882–1925). The intent of the legislation was to police and regulate sexual offenses without the “stigma of the conviction of crime.” Young women’s sexual activity, it was believed, led “directly to the entrance of the minor upon a career of prostitution.” Yet such “protective measures” served only to criminalize young black women and make them even more vulnerable to state violence.

The wayward were guilty of a manner of living and existing deemed dangerous, and were a risk to the public good. Formally, they were not juvenile delinquents because “delinquency includes the commission of an act which if committed by an adult would be adjudged a crime and punished as such.” In contrast, the provisions of the Wayward Minors Act held that “the definition of a wayward minor includes *only non-criminal acts but which indicate the imminence of future criminality.*”

Wayward minor laws brought conduct such as drinking, dancing, dating (especially interracial liaisons), having sex, going to parties and cabarets, inviting men to your room, and roaming the street under the control of the police and the courts. These counter-conducts (different ways of conducting the self directed at challenging the hierarchy of life produced by the color line and enforced by the state) or errant ways of living were seized by the state in its calculation of social risks and dangers. Risk was the metric for tabulating future crimes and this foreshadowing

determined the outcomes of young black women already targeted and vulnerable to myriad forms of state violence. The actuarial logic at work predicted the kind of persons and the kind of acts that were likely to lead to crime and social disorder. State racism exacerbated the reach of wayward minor laws, marking blackness as disorderly and criminal. (265–269)

Harriet Powell has been credited with nothing: she remains a surplus woman of no significance, a nobody deemed unfit for history and destined to be a minor figure. What errant thoughts and wild ideas encouraged her to flout social norms and live outside and athwart the law in pursuit of pleasure and the quest for beauty? Or to never settle and keep running the streets? Was it to experience something akin to freedom or to enjoy the short-lived transport of autonomy? Was it the sweetness of phrases like *I want you, I go where I please, Nobody owns me* rolling around in her mouth? (259–270)

Wayward, related to the family of words: errant, fugitive, recalcitrant, anarchic, willful, reckless, troublesome, riotous, tumultuous, rebellious and wild. To inhabit the world in ways inimical to those deemed proper and respectable, to be deeply aware of the gulf between where you stayed and how you might live. Waywardness: the avid longing for a world not ruled by master, man or the police. The errant path taken by the leaderless swarm in search of a place better than here. The social poesis that sustains the dispossessed. Wayward: the unregulated movement of drifting and wandering; sojourns without a fixed destination, ambulatory possibility, interminable migrations, rush and flight, black locomotion; the everyday struggle to live free. The attempt to elude capture by never settling. Not the master's tools, but the ex-slave's fugitive gestures, her traveling shoes. Waywardness articulates the paradox of cramped creation, the entanglement of escape and confinement, flight and captivity. Wayward: to wander, to be unmoored, adrift, rambling, roving, cruising, strolling, and seeking. To claim the right to opacity. To strike, to riot, to refuse. To love what is not loved. To be lost to the world. It is the practice of the social otherwise, the insurgent ground that enables new possibilities and new vocabularies; it is the lived experience of enclosure and segregation, assembling and huddling together. It is the directionless search for a free territory; it is a practice of making and relation that enfolds within the policed boundaries of the dark ghetto; it is the mutual aid offered in the open-air prison. It is a queer resource of black survival. It is a beautiful experiment in how-to-live.

Waywardness is a practice of possibility at a time when all roads, except the ones created by smashing out, are foreclosed. It obeys no rules and abides no authorities. It is unrepentant. It traffics in occult visions of other worlds and dreams of a different kind of life. Waywardness is an ongoing exploration of what might be; it is an improvisation with the terms of social existence, when the terms have already been dictated, when there is little room to breathe, when you have been sentenced to a life of servitude, when the house of bondage looms in whatever direction you move. It is the untiring practice of trying to live when you were never meant to survive. (271–272)

Aaron and Eva wanted nice things like everyone else, but like most black folks they didn't adore property, believe in it as a principle like freedom or love or Jesus, or idolize and worship it like white folks did. What Aaron and Eva esteemed was autonomy, what they sought was an escape from servility. Owning things, land, and people had never secured their place in the world. They didn't need others beneath their feet to establish their value. For white folks— settlers and masters and owners and bosses—property and possession were the tenets of their faith. To be white was to own the earth forever and ever. It defined who they were and what they valued; it shaped their vision of the future. But black folks had been owned, and being an object of property, they were radically disenchanted with the idea of property. If their past taught them anything, it was that the attempt to own life destroyed it, brutalized the earth, and ran roughshod over everything on God's creation for a dollar. As items of cargo, they had experienced first-hand the ugliness and violence of the world as seen through the ledger and double-entry bookkeeping. They had endured the life of the commodity. They had been propagated and harvested like any other crop, treated no differently from the tools and the animals owned by massa. They knew a corporation was not a person, not flesh and blood, and that a piece of paper secured nothing that a white man was bound to respect; they knew starvation wages weren't freedom, but another kind of slavery. The things they valued most had no price on them.

270-72 / 320-21

Eva and Aaron were bold in daring to risk love at all. Why even try to hold on to each other when the law could seize you on a whim? Why heed any of it? Was the failure to live like white folks only injurious? Or was there a gift too that resided in the "detour around the proper"? Certainly, the Negress occupied a different rung of existence than the mistress and the lady of the house, the very term signaled a break or caesura in species life, a variant in the human, an antagonism or dimorphism more fundamental than man and woman. Yet, was there an opportunity that resided in the infidelity to supposed to be? In the refusal to emulate and mimic the standards of who and what you were directed and commanded to be (but never would be)? It was difficult to put this visceral and abiding sense of existing otherwise, at odds with the given, into words. Hadn't they spent the last centuries asking: Am I human flesh? Am I not a man and a brother? Ain't I a woman?

Such queries and appeals had been imposed, desperate assertions that circumstance and necessity forced them to mouth and inhabit. The humiliation of having to prove and assert over and over again, they were human flesh. To what end? What opportunity might be found in never uttering such questions again? What possibility for living a radically different scheme of being? Such wild notions proved nearly impossible to articulate or to embrace consciously and unreservedly, even as they suffered the truth of it, even as they paid the cost.

274-5 / 326

...sonic revolt, noise strike, vocal outbreak...described the soundscape of rebellion and refusal.

The chorus spoke with one voice.

279 / 331

The aesthetic inheritance of “jargon and nonsense” was nothing if not a philosophy of freedom that reached back to slave songs and circle dances—the sonic gifts of struggle and flight, death and refusal, became music or moanin’ or joyful noise or discordant sound.

285 / 339

No slave time now. Abolition now. In the surreal, utopian nonsense of it all, and at the heart of riot, was the anarchy of colored girls: treason en masse, tumult, gathering together, the mutual collaboration required to confront the prison authorities and the police, the willingness to lose oneself and become something greater— a chorus, swarm, ensemble, mutual aid society. In lieu of an explanation or an appeal, they shouted and screamed. How else were they to express the longing to be free? How else were they to make plain their refusal to be governed? It was the soundtrack to a history that hurt.

285 / 339

The noise conveyed the defeat and aspiration, the beauty and wretchedness, which was otherwise inaudible to the ears of the world; it revealed a sensibility at odds with the institution’s brutal realism. What accounts for the utopian impulse that enabled them to believe that anyone cared about what they had to say? What convinced them that the force of their collective utterance was capable of turning anything around? What urged them to create a reservoir of living within the prison’s mandated death? What made them tireless?

286 / 340

Would he have been as blind as other socialists and tried to save the girls from the street by making them respectable women? Would he have seen their gestures of refusal as “responding to the call of battle against the white man’s ‘Color Line’ ”? Would he have been guilty of mistaking an experiment in living for a chronicle of transgressions, or capable of recognizing their yearning and passion? Might he have understood that they also were embarked on a radical project?

290 / 344

Coney Island provided her exit from servitude, and the stage was the free territory.

Dancing and singing fueled the radical hope of living otherwise, and in this way, choreography was just another kind of movement for freedom, another opportunity to escape service, another elaboration of the general strike. Joining the chorus encompassed much more than the sequence of steps or the arrangement of dances on the stage of a music hall or the floor of a cabaret. Like the flight from the plantation, the escape from slavery, the migration from the south, the rush into the city, or the stroll down Lenox Avenue, choreography was an art, a practice of moving even when there was nowhere else to go, no place left to run. It was an arrangement of the body to elude capture, an effort to make the uninhabitable livable, to escape the confinement of a four-cornered world, a tight, airless room. Tumult, upheaval, flight—it was the articulation of living free, or at the very least trying to, it was the way to insist *I am unavailable for servitude. I refuse it.* (355)

Muses, drudges, washerwomen, whores, house workers, factory girls, waitresses, and aspiring but never-to-be stars make up this company, gather in the circle and fall into the line where all particularity and distinction fade away. One girl can stand in for any of them, can serve as the placeholder for the story, recount the history from the beginning, convey the knowledge of freedom disguised as jargon and nonsense. Few understand them, study them like they are worth something, realize their inherent value. If you listen closely, you can hear the whole world in a bent note, a throwaway lyric, a singular thread of the collective utterance. Everything from the first ship to the young woman found hanging in her cell. Marvel at their capacity to inhabit every woman's grief as their own. All the stories ever told rush from her opened mouth. A tome of philosophy in a moan. In the deepest darkest recess of an opaque song, it is clear that life is at stake.

She is an average chorine, just one of the girls, nobody special, part of the assembly, engulfed in the crowd, lost in the company of minor figures. The songs like her are an enigma, obscure and full of meaning, vital and *so old and raw*, like those voices echoing through the airshaft of the building or the stories of loss and betrayal bellowed from a second-story window, or the pleas whispered in a back alley: *Baby, let me come back home*. In unison, the voices give form to the tragedy:

*Sometimes I feel like a motherless child,
A long way from home, a long way from home.*

*I saw my husband lying dead,
They took me over the sea*

*Love is like a faucet that turns off and on.
The very time you think you got it
It's turned off and gone.*

*Blues, please tell me do I have to die a slave?
Blues, please tell me do I have to die a slave?
Do you hear me pleading, you going to take me to my
grave.*

The song lines, the riotous refrains, the street-corner compositions are hard to explain or reduce to one thing, like a maternal song that makes you and marks you, yet is untranslatable. *Do bana cobe, gene, gene me!* The story exceeds the words, the verses. All the things secreted, harbored deep inside are felt and exclaimed. It is all so terrible and so beautiful. The weight of all that has happened is palpable, the immensity of hurt and betrayal, articulated in the rhythm of the line, conveyed in the length of breath. Living is not to be taken for granted. If you are able to bear the burden of what they have to bring, then there is a place for you inside the circle and what you have suffered is part of this inventory. The war, theft, rout, rape, and plunder are lodged in every line.

If you dare to listen and watch, or shout, "Speak—Tell it now," or clap your hands, you're in it and there's no escape. Now it is impossible to turn your back, to carry on like the world is the same. Don't waste a breath asking why she has to hold everything the rest can't bear, like you don't know, like you supposed things were some other way, like there was some gift other than what she offered in her outstretched hands; don't dare ask, you're in no position nor is anyone else except the ones with the crumpled paper bags stuffed with work clothes, or the kitchen

conscripts, or the Middle Alley whores, or the fast girls acting like fools in the club and moving like angels on the stage, or girls trapped in an attic or raped in a coal bin, or women, bent over tubs, scrubbing and washing for the whole city, or sleeping in the room off the kitchen so they can raise the children and tend to the husbands and ensure the *future increase* of the world set against them. The chorus makes a plan, they draft a blueprint: move, escape, rush to the city, quit the job and run away from everything hell-bent on sucking all the life out of them. A moment of reprieve. Then trapped somewhere else, in a different city, a new place, a stranger's house, the boss's bedroom. No one else imagines anything better. So it is left to them to envision things otherwise; as exhausted as they are, they don't relent, they try to make a way out of no way, to not be defeated by defeat.

Who else would dare believe another world was possible, spend the good days readying for it, and the bad days shedding tears that it has not yet arrived? Who else would be reckless enough to dream a colored girl's or a black woman's future? Devote even an afternoon musing about the history of the universe seen from nowhere? Or be convinced that nothing could be said about the Negro problem, modernity, global capitalism, police brutality, state killings, and the Anthropocene if it did not take her into account? Did not reckon with the disavowed geography of the world: the barracoon, the hold, the plantation, the camp, the reservation, the garret, the colony, the attic studio, the bedroom, the urban archipelagoes, the ghetto, and the prison?

The chorus bears all of it for us. The Greek etymology of the word *chorus* refers to *dance within an enclosure*. What better articulates the long history of struggle, the ceaseless practice of black radicalism and refusal, the tumult and upheaval of open rebellion than the acts of collaboration and improvisation that unfold within the space of enclosure? The chorus is the vehicle for another kind of story, not of the great man or the tragic hero, but one in which all modalities play a part, where the headless group incites change, where mutual aid provides the resource for collective action, not leader and mass, where the untranslatable songs and seeming nonsense make good the promise of revolution. The chorus propels transformation. It is an incubator of possibility, an assembly sustaining dreams of the otherwise. *Somewhere down the line the numbers increase, the tribe increases*. The chorus increases. So *how do you keep on?* She can't help it. ... *The struggle is eternal. Somebody else carries on*.

All of the details of the nothing special and the extraordinary brutality cohere to produce a picture of the world in all its beauty and death. In the whimsical girlish tones, in the loud laughter and the back-and-forth exchange of the hallway, in the girls dancing in the stairwell is a will to unsettle, destroy, and remake that is so forceful it takes the breath away, so palpable it makes you reel with pain. To fall in step with the chorus is to do more than shake your ass and hum the melody, or repeat the few lines of the bit part handed over like a gift from the historian, as if to say, See, the girl can speak, or to be grateful that the sociologist has taken a second look and recognizes the working out of "revolutionary ideals" in an ordinary black woman's life. Guessing at the world and seizing at chance, she eludes the law and transforms the terms of the possible.

The bodies are in motion. The gestures disclose what is at stake—the matter of life returns as an open question. The collective movement points toward what awaits us, what has yet to come into view, what they anticipate—the time and place better than here; a glimpse of the earth not owned by anyone. So everything depends on them and not the hero occupying center stage, preening and sovereign. Inside the circle it is clear that every song is really the same song, but crooned in infinite variety, every story altered and unchanging: *How can I live? I want to be free. Hold on.* (408–412)