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RECALCITRANT DOMESTICS ON THE RADICAL RADAR

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Saidiya Hartman's article, "The Anarchy of Colored Girls Assembled in a Riotous Manner" (2018), offers a "speculative history" (1) of Esther Brown, a black woman living in New York in the early decades of the twentieth century. Hartman seeks to understand Esther Brown's "wild and wayward" (469) life, how and why the state incarcerated her, and the significance of the collective noise strikes in which she participated in prison. These 'sonic revolts' (481) rejected the gratuitous violence to which the white women matrons subjected inmates. Newspapers reported the strikes in dismissive terms. The *New York Times* wrote: "The noise was deafening. Almost every window [...] was crowded with Negro women who were shouting, angry and laughing hysterically" (481).



Hartman's research draws on Inmate Case Files of the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility in the New York State Archives. The facility kept extensive notes on inmates, including "personal interviews, family histories, interviews with neighbours, employers, and teachers, psychological tests, physical examinations, intelligence tests, social investigators' reports, as well as the reports of probation officers, school report cards, letters from former employers, and other state records (from training schools and orphanages)" (486). Each case file collected the facility's intelligence as part of an attempt to "produce deep knowledge of the individual" detainee (486). The logic of the indeterminate sentencing many women received was that facilities should determine punishment on an individual basis. This meant that young women were often confined and surveilled for years, in gross disproportion to the "crimes" they were deemed to have committed. ("Staying out all night at a dance with her friends or stealing \$2.00 to buy a new dress so she could perform on stage was sufficient cause", Hartman writes of one woman (482). They contain "personal correspondence, discussions of sexual history, life experiences, family background, hobbies, as well as poems and plays written by the prisoners" (486). These extremely detailed case files, Hartman suggests, "combined sociological investigation with literary fiction" (486).

Many scholars have emphasised the problems with using the archives of state surveillance to understand the lives of its subjects. Such sources are highly problematic, as to reconstruct any story through their gaze means in some senses accepting their optic (2). In this context, one of the many merits of Hartman's intervention is methodological. As form, the case file was a product of the "therapeutic state" (486), which combined a "hermeneutics of suspicion" (assumed guilt) with a "horizon of reform" (486). Hartman, meanwhile, reads the case file as a point of access to unrealized visions of other worlds "*that would guarantee to every human being free access to earth and full enjoyment of the necessities of life, according to individual desires, tastes, and inclinations*" (471, original emphasis). In that sense, the article builds on Hartman's earlier work that asks – and often demonstrates – how it is possible to draw on colonial and neo-colonial archives to move past their confines and their silences.

Hartman is not a historian; she is a critic and writer whose "speculative" (470) history rejects a purely empirical historiography. Anyway, an empirical history would be unable to tell the story of Esther Brown's appearance in the Women's Court 'since the magistrate court had no jury, produced no written record of the events, required no evidence but the police officer's word, failed to consider the intentions of the accused, or even to require the commitment of a criminal act' (472). The incarceration of women



such as Esther Brown was based on police prophecy of the “*likelihood of future criminality*” (472, original emphasis) rather than evidence. There is little to go on, too, regarding the later noise strikes. Only one black woman was quoted in the newspaper reports. The statements of prison matrons – Hartman describes one as “a thug in a skirt” (482) – omitted a great deal: they strung up inmates and suspended them from the ceilings of their cells, beat them and administered “water treatment” (479) Hartman’s speculative, dramatized method puts onto centre stage the histories of (mainly black) women’s oppression and creative resistance that official archives leave only partially visible. Her work underlines, as Édouard Glissant puts it, that “l’histoire en tant que vécu [...] [n’est] pas l’affaire des seuls historiens” (3).

Hartman’s approach draws out the possibilities of inadequate archives, but her point is also interpretative. That is, it is not just that Esther Brown is forgotten, not just that “nobody remembers the evening she and her friends raised hell on 132nd Street” (467). It is also that the lives, history and potential of these “recalcitrant domestics” (466) have been understood as (bad) behaviour, not praxis. Their lives “remained unthought because no one could imagine young black women as social visionaries, radical thinkers, and innovators in the world in which these acts took place” (470-1). Central here is Hartman’s expansive understanding of the forms in which social, political and aesthetic thinking manifest themselves. Esther Brown did not articulate her work in the form of Political Theory or of “poem or song or painting” (469). Esther Brown was “hungry for beauty” (469), but her pursuit of the aesthetic was inseparable from the “challenges of survival” (469). That is, “the aim was to make an art of subsistence [...] What she created was Esther Brown” (469).

In her earlier “Venus in Two Acts”, Hartmann argued for the need to describe “as fully as possible the conditions that determine the appearance” of women in the empirical archive, and the conditions that “dictate [their] silence” (4). “The Anarchy of Colored Girls Assembled in a Riotous Manner” returns to the question of voice and silence to read the noise strikes of 1917-9 in New York State prisons as an expression of a “philosophy of freedom” (469). In Hartman’s interpretation, those “sonic revolts” (481) are not just noise, not just “gales of catcalls, hurricanes of screams, cyclones of rage, tornadoes of squalls” (486). They are a collective utterance that carries hopes and fears; love and disappointment; longing and outrage. Hartman’s work “is an effort to narrate the open rebellion and beautiful experiment produced by young women in the emergent ghetto” (470).

Hartman helps us understand ongoing police prophecies (5) and racial enclosures in North America: how the “plantation was not abolished, but transformed” (476). Though her analysis cannot straightforwardly be transposed to other times and places, rooted as it is in 1910s New York, its insights resonate far beyond that context. Hartman offers new methodological pistes for literary critics working in archives and shows how literary studies can learn from the wayward lives of women like Esther Brown to expand its understandings of creative practices. Reading Hartman reminds us of the political imperative to interrogate spaces and structures of oppression, confinement and conformism from the perspective – speculative if necessary – of those who resist them.

(1) Saidiya Hartman, “The Anarchy of Colored Girls Assembled in a Riotous Manner”, *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 117:3, July 2018, pp.465-90, p.470. Hartman’s piece, published last year, reappears as a chapter in her book *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019). Page numbers for citations from this article will be noted in brackets the body of the text.

(2) In the Portuguese context, for example, Paulo Lara discusses the problems of using PIDE records in Paulo Lara, “O ‘Bando de Neto’ visto pela PIDE/DGS & Carlos Pacheco. A propósito de uma inquirição ao nacionalismo angolano”, *Novo Jornal* 442 (29 July 2016), 14-7.

(3) “History as lived experience [...] [is] not the business of historians alone”. Édouard Glissant, *Le Discours antillais* (Paris: Éd. du Seuil, 1981), p.133.

(4) Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts”, p.1. Hartmann’s essay addresses the figure of Venus in the archive of Atlantic slavery and strategies for addressing the violence of that archive.

(5) Hartman mentions the “Manner of walking’ offences the United States police used in Ferguson on p.472.



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