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## Review

# Wayward lives, beautiful experiments: Intimate histories of social upheaval

Saidiya Hartman

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What kinds of lives emerge in the afterlife of slavery? What is a free life? In *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, Saidiya Hartman narrates a story of social transformation, exploring the ways young black women in the early twentieth century refused the second-class existence assigned to them. She examines alternative forms of intimacy and kinship that rejected the socially imposed standards of respectability. Hartman's work offers a powerful counter-narrative in which freedom materializes through the enactment of longing and desire in the intimate lives of these women. The protagonists move through New York City and Philadelphia, their blackness usually understood as pathological, criminal, and often subject to surveillance. Hartman, by contrast, contemplates the radical possibilities they embody. New modes of freedom find space in the wayward lives and beautiful experiments of these young black women.

Hartman's book uncovers revolutionary potential in the everyday practices that animated the lives of these women. They consistently found new ways to live, new ways to be alive, in the face of economic exclusion, material deprivation, racial enclosure, and social dispossession thrust upon black intimate life. These conditions constituted a pervasive climate of anti-blackness. And yet, in finding new ways to live against, under, and despite these modes of control, Hartman's young black female visionaries enacted their freedom as a rejoinder to anti-blackness. Some of these women lack names – Girl #1 'wanders through the streets of Philadelphia's Seventh Ward and New York's Tenderloin', and 'the Chorus' refers to 'all the unnamed women of the city trying to find a way to live and in search of beauty' (p. xvii). Other characters have names – such as Ida B. Wells, Gladys Bentley, and Jackie Mabley – and even occupy space in the official historical accounts of the period. By weaving together this cast of characters, Hartman is able to produce a narrative of rebellious practices that took shape in ghetto streets, rented rooms, and dance halls.



The twenty chapters that comprise *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* are divided into three books. Book One, ‘She Makes an Errant Path through the City’, inaugurates the radical possibility of the ghetto, found in forms of experimentation in which young black women engaged with one another, with intimate arrangements, and with the limits of the law. The chapters in this section construct a powerful juxtaposition to W.E.B. DuBois’s sociological study of ‘the Negro Problem’ in the seventh ward of Philadelphia. While DuBois documents deviance in black social life, Hartman celebrates the radically different forms of kinship and intimacy in the ghetto (DuBois, 2007). In Book Two, ‘The Sexual Geography of the Black Belt’, Hartman picks up the threads of various characters to follow the map of their desires. The result is a layered account of the choreography of black existence, where alternative intimate arrangements are constantly sidestepping and dipping out of view of the law. Book Three, ‘Beautiful Experiments’, begins with a discussion of wayward minor laws, legislation that aimed to curb social disorder and that ultimately marked blackness as disorderly and criminal (p. 225). This section explores the strategies that young black women undertook to cultivate and embody different kinds of freedom in the very spaces they were barred from entering as a result of such laws. Their refusal to submit to the countless forms of control imposed upon them opened new possibilities and alternative ways to live.

Hartman’s text takes shape as she performs her own form of experimentation – with method, with content, and with the very rhythms and movements found in the lives of her subjects. The book begins with a note on method, which sets the tone for the work as a whole. ‘The wild idea that animates this book’, Hartman writes, ‘is that young black women were radical thinkers who tirelessly imagined other ways to live and never failed to consider how the world might be otherwise’ (p. xv). To capture the world through the eyes of her protagonists, Hartman makes use of a range of archival materials with which she engages in a mode of close narration. Reading the archival traces they have left against the grain of dominant narratives, Hartman uses the women’s own voices as a window into their most intimate, quotidian, and restless moments. Because the archive is an extension of the power relations that dominate the existence of her protagonists, Hartman’s method demands creative and fugitive reading practices to help recreate the lived experiences of these women. By attending to the performance of power within the archive, Hartman crafts alternative narratives and enables her readers to hear missing voices – an approach that has tremendous promise for political theorists.

Political theory is no stranger to creative reading practices that seek to unearth new modes of understanding, but these practices stop short of Hartman’s approach. More than just a close reading of archival material, Hartman’s narration allows the past to blossom from the pieces of her protagonists’ lives recorded in the archive. From these hints – accidental pictures, mug shots, critical comments – Hartman builds a view otherwise unseen. What the dominant lens renders criminal instead emerges as a practice of freedom. Hartman’s critical perspective on the archive’s



records as well as its gaps and silences is able to not only recreate the practices that lay hidden for so long but also transport the reader into the sensory experience of that world. This approach dares to think differently about archives and dares scholars to think differently about what it means to theorize and how to do so in creative ways. Hartman's approach grows out of attention to what is missing from the archive. In theorizing from this space, she articulates presence in empty spaces. Hartman's work engages omissions, traces patterns, and considers the structures that engender absences. Her innovative methods of narration and fabulation expand the toolbox of approaches to political thought. For political theorists, this is an invitation and, simultaneously, a challenge, to alter how one thinks and knows.

Beyond its innovative method and its challenging invitation, Hartman's book is also a rich resource through which to theorize the contours of black life in the early twentieth century. One such mode of theorizing is *refusal*. '[H]ungry for images that represented the experiments in freedom that unfolded within slavery's shadow', Hartman searches for photographs of beauty and possibility in the ordinary lives of black girls (p. 17). Hartman herself refuses other prominent representations of black life, such as family albums of black elites. These refusals propel Hartman to photographs taken by social reformers, municipal archives, and documentary surveys of the slum. Missing from all these records are the young black women at the center of her narrative. But Hartman interprets their failure to appear not as absence, but as a 'refusal of the terms of visibility imposed on them' (p. 18). Such a refusal of external standards constitutes what Fred Moten names 'fugitivity', which, for him, is central to understanding blackness (Moten, 2018). Indeed, when contemplating pictures of her protagonists, Hartman reads their slumped shoulders and radiant anger as 'fugitive gestures of refusal' (p. 19). These multiple forms of refusal facilitate Hartman's considerations of alternative ways of living and simultaneously demonstrate the way refusal captures blackness in its aesthetic, experiential, and material dimensions.

*Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* offers a wealth of resources for theorizing, from its method to its content and its creative modes of thinking. Hartman challenges her readers to keep up and to think beyond the text, as she herself does throughout the work. The final chapter, 'The Chorus Opens the Way', returns to the 'Chorus' of all the wayward girls whose lives are chronicled in the book in an effort to highlight the ordinary character of the women Hartman has followed and assembled. It is easy for them to get lost in the crowd, enveloped by the other voices around them. Hartman's remarkable feat is to have found these women, to have made them visible, and to have narrated the significance of their practices of freedom and refusal. In Greek tragedy, the chorus mediates and directs the audience's reaction to the events on stage. Hartman's chorus does not mediate action, but facilitates it. This book dares to experiment, taking risks alongside its audacious subjects. And in doing so, Hartman invites her readers to experiment



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themselves, to think creatively and imaginatively about freedom, blackness, and refusal.

## References

- DuBois, W.E.B. (2007) *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.  
Moten, F. (2018) *Stolen Life (consent not to be a single being)*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

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