

"Exhilarating. . . . A rich resurrection of a forgotten history."

—Parul Sehgal, *The New York Times*

# WAYWARD



# LIVES,

# BEAUTIFUL

# EXPERIMENTS

INTIMATE HISTORIES OF RIOTOUS BLACK GIRLS,  
TROUBLESOME WOMEN, AND QUEER RADICALS

# SAIDIYA HARTMAN

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SAIDIYA HARTMAN



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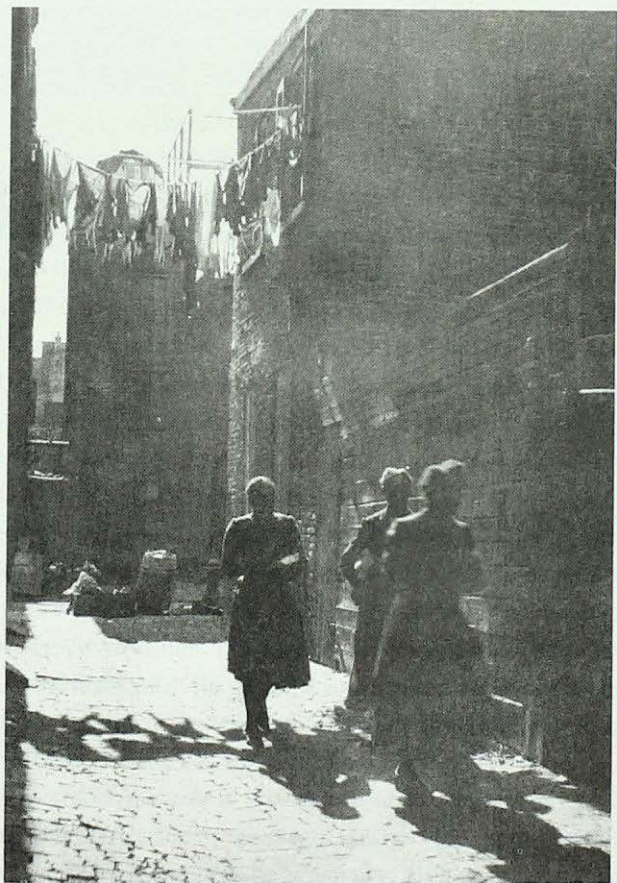
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Book One

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SHE MAKES AN ERRANT  
PATH THROUGH THE CITY



## The Terrible Beauty of the Slum

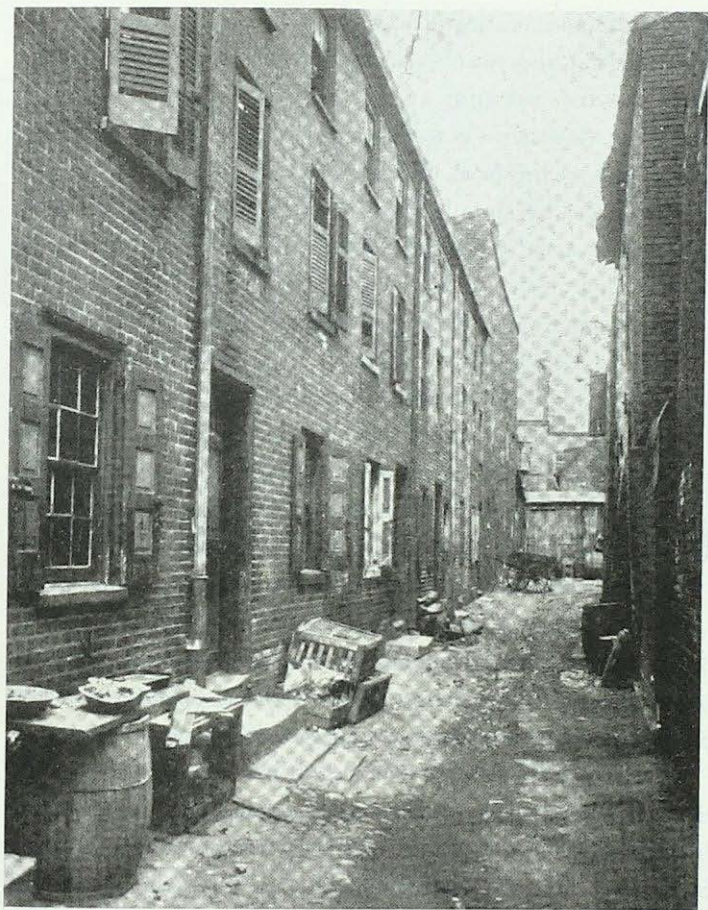
You can find her in the group of beautiful thugs and *too fast* girls congregating on the corner and humming the latest rag, or lingering in front of Wanamaker's and gazing lustfully at a pair of fine shoes displayed like jewels behind the plate-glass window. Watch her in the alley passing a pitcher of beer back and forth with her friends, brash and lovely in a cut-rate dress and silk ribbons; look in awe as she hangs halfway out of a tenement window, taking in the drama of the block and defying gravity's downward pull. Step onto any of the paths that cross the sprawling city and you'll encounter her as she roams. Outsiders call the streets and alleys that comprise her world the slum. For her, it is just the place where she stays. You'd never happen onto her block unless you lived there too, or had lost your way, or were out on an evening lark seeking the pleasures yielded by the other half. The voyeurs on their slumming expeditions feed on the lifeblood of the ghetto, long for it and loathe it. The social scientists and the reformers are no better with their cameras and their surveys, staring intently at all the strange specimens.

Her ward of the city is a labyrinth of foul alleys and gloomy courts. It is Africa town, the Negro quarter, the native zone. The Italians and Jews, engulfed by proximity, disappear. It is a world

concealed behind the façade of the ordered metropolis. The not-yet-dilapidated buildings and decent homes that face the street hide the alley tenement where she lives. Entering the narrow passageway into the alley, one crosses the threshold into a raucous disorderly world, a place defined by tumult, vulgar collectivism, and anarchy. It is a human sewer populated by the worst elements. It is a realm of excess and fabulousness. It is a wretched environment. It is the plantation extended into the city. It is a social laboratory. The ghetto is a space of encounter. The sons and daughters of the rich come in search of meaning, vitality, and pleasure. The reformers and sociologists come in search of the truly disadvantaged failing to see her and her friends as thinkers or planners, or to notice the beautiful experiments crafted by poor black girls.

The ward, the Bottom, the ghetto—is an urban commons where the poor assemble, improvise the forms of life, experiment with freedom, and refuse the menial existence scripted for them. It is a zone of extreme deprivation and scandalous waste. In the rows of tenements, the decent reside peacefully with the dissolute and the immoral. The Negro quarter is a place bereft of beauty and extravagant in its display of it. Moving in and moving on establish the rhythms of everyday life. Each wave of newcomers changes the place—how the slum looks and sounds and smells. No one ever settles here, only stays, waits for better, and passes through; at least, that is the hope. It is not yet the *dark ghetto*, but soon only the black folks will remain.

In the slum, everything is in short supply except sensation. The experience is *too much*. The terrible beauty is more than one could ever hope to assimilate, order, and explain. The reformers snap their pictures of the buildings, the kitchenettes, the clotheslines, and the outhouses. She escapes notice as she watches them from the third-floor window of the alley house where she stays, laughing at their stupidity. They take a picture of Lombard Street when *hardly no one is there*. She wonders what fascinates them about clotheslines and outhouses. They always take pictures of the same stuff. Are the



undergarments of the rich so much better? Is cotton so different than silk and not as pretty draped like a banner across the streets?

The outsiders and the uplifters fail to capture it, to get it right. All they see is a typical Negro alley, blind to the relay of looks and the pangs of desire that unsettle their captions and hint at the possibility of a life bigger than poverty, at the tumult and upheaval that can't be arrested by the camera. They fail to discern the beauty and they see

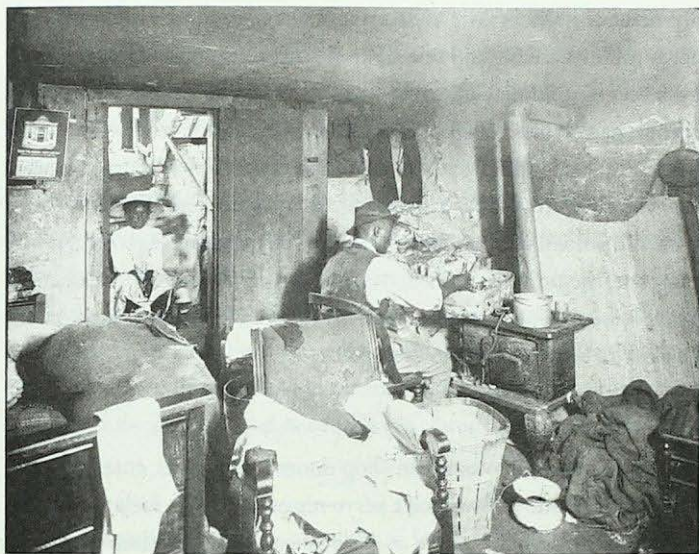
only the disorder, missing all the ways black folks create life and make bare need into an arena of elaboration. A half-dressed woman, wearing a housecoat over a delicate nightgown, leans against the doorway, hidden by the shadows of the foyer, as she gossips with her girlfriend standing at the threshold. Intimate life unfolds in the streets.

The journalists from *Harper's Weekly* gush in print: "Above the Jews, in the same [tenement] houses, amid scenes of indescribable squalor and tawdry finery, dwell the negroes leading their light-hearted lives of pleasure, confusion, music, noise and fierce fights that make them a terror to white neighbors and landlords alike." Aroused at the sight of elegantly clad domestics, janitors and stevedores, elevator boys in rakish hats preening on the corner, and *aesthetical* Negroes content to waste money on extravagance, ornament, and shine, the sociologist urges them to learn the value of a dollar from their Jewish and Italian neighbors. Negroes must abandon the lax moral habits, sensual indulgence, and careless excess that are the custom of slavery. The present-past of involuntary servitude unfolds in the street, and the home, which was *broken up completely by the slave ship and the promiscuous herding of the . . . plantation*, is now broken again, broken open in its embrace of strangers.

The senses are solicited and overwhelmed. Look over here. Let your eyes take it all in: the handsome thugs lining the courtyard like sentinels; the immoderate display of three lovely flowerpots arranged on the sill of a tenement window, the bed-sheets, monogrammed handkerchiefs, embroidered silk hose, and whore's undergarments suspended on a line across the alley, broadcasting clandestine arrangements, wayward lives, carnal matters. Women, with packages tied in paper and string, flit by like shadows. The harsh light at their backs transforms them into silhouettes; abstracted dark forms take the place of who they really are.

The rag seller's daughters idle on the steps that descend to their cellar flat. The eldest is resplendent, sitting amid the debris in her Sunday hat and soiled frock. The youngest remains mystery and blur.





The sun pours down the stairwell, pressing against the girls and illuminating the entrance to the small dank room, which is filled with the father's wares: rags, papers, cast-offs, piecework, and discarded objects salvaged for future use. He turns his back to the camera and eludes capture.

What you can hear if you listen: The guttural tones of Yiddish making English into a foreign tongue. The round open-mouthed sounds of North Carolina and Virginia bleeding into the hard-edged language of the city and transformed by the rhythm and cadence of northern streets. The eruption of laughter, the volley of curses, the shouts that make tenement walls vibrate and jar the floor. *Yes, ooh, baby that's so good!*—the sweet music of an extended moan that hushes the ones listening, eavesdroppers wanting more, despite knowing they shouldn't. The rush of impressions: the musky scent of tightly pressed bodies dancing in a basement saloon; the inadvertent brush of a stranger's hand against yours as she moves across the courtyard; a glimpse of young lovers huddled in the deep shadows of

a tenement hallway; the violent embrace of two men brawling; the acrid odor of bacon and hoe-cake frying on an open fire; the honysuckle of a domestic's toilet water; the maple smoke rising from an old man's corncob pipe. A whole world is jammed into one short block crowded with black folks shut out from almost every opportunity the city affords, but still *intoxicated with freedom*. The air is alive with the possibilities of assembling, gathering, congregating. At any moment, the promise of insurrection, the miracle of upheaval: small groups, people *by themselves*, and strangers threaten to become an ensemble, to incite *treason en masse*.

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There are no visible signs on shop doors barring her entrance, just the brutal rebuff of "we don't serve niggers." If she feels brave, she will shout an insult or curse as she retreats from the shop under the hateful gaze of clerk and customers. She can sit anywhere she wants on streetcars and in theaters, even if people inch away as if she were contagious when she chooses the seat next to them, and she can go to the vaudeville show or the nickelodeon on the same day as the white folks, although it is more fun and she breathes easier when it is just colored and she knows she will not be insulted. Despite the liberties of the city, there is no better life here than in Virginia, no brighter future to grow into, no opportunities for colored girls besides the broom and the mop, or spread-eagle in really hard times. Everything essential—where she goes to school, the kind of job she can get, where she can live—is dictated by the color line, which places her on the bottom and everybody else on top. Being young, she tries to dream another life into existence, one in which her horizon isn't limited to the maid's uniform and a white woman's dirty house. In this other life, she would not be required to take all the shit that no one else would accept and pretend to be grateful.

In this city of brotherly love, she has been confined to a squalid zone that no one else but the Jews would suffer. It isn't the cradle of

liberty or the free territory or even a temporary refuge, but a place where an Irish mob nearly beat her uncle to death for some other Negro's alleged crime; where the police dragged her to jail for being riotous and disorderly when she told them *go to hell*, after they had grabbed her from the steps of her building and told her to move on. At Second and Bainbridge, she heard a white man shout, "Lynch him! Lynch him!" after a colored man, accused of stealing a loaf of bread from the corner grocer, ran past.

When she arrives in the Tenderloin, the riot erupts. At Forty-First and Eighth Avenue, the policeman said, "Black bitch, come out now!" Then dragged a woman from the hallway, pummeled her with his club, and arrested her for being riotous and disorderly.

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Paul Laurence Dunbar caught sight of her on Seventh Avenue, and he feared for American civilization. Looking at the girl amidst the crowd of idle shiftless Negroes who thronged the avenue, he wondered, "What is to be done with them, what is to be done for them, if they are to be prevented from inoculating our civilization with the poison of their lives?" They are not anarchists; and yet in these seemingly careless, guffawing crowds resides a terrible menace to our institutions. Though she had not read *God and the State* or *What Is Property?* or *The Conquest of Bread*, the dangers she and others like her posed was as great as those damned Jews Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman. Everything in her environment tended to the blotting of the moral sense, every act engendered crime and encouraged open rebellion. Dunbar lamented: If only they could be prevented from flocking to the city, "if the metropolis could vomit them back again to the South, the whole matter would adjust." Better for them and for us, the restrictions of the south, than a "seeming liberty which blossoms noxiously into license." Better the fields and the shotgun houses and the dusty towns and the interminable cycle of credit and debt, better this than black anarchy.

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Most days, the assault of the city eclipses its promise: When the water in the building has stopped running, when even in her best dress she cannot help but wonder if she smells like the outhouse or if it is obvious that her bloomers are tattered, when she is so hungry that the aroma of bean soup wafting from the settlement kitchen makes her mouth water, she takes to the streets, as if in search of the real city and not this poor imitation. The old black ladies perched in their windows shouted, "Girl, where you headed?" Each new deprivation raises doubts about when freedom is going to come; if the question pounding inside her head—*Can I live?*—is one to which she could ever give a certain answer, or only repeat in anticipation of something better than this, bear the pain of it and the hope of it, the beauty and the promise.

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## A Minor Figure

The small naked figure reclines on the arabesque sofa. Looking at the photograph, it is easy to mistake her for some other *Negress*, lump her with all the delinquent girls working Lombard Street and Middle Alley, lose sight of her among the surplus colored women in the city, condemn and pity the child whore. Everyone has a different story to share. Fragments of her life are woven with the stories of girls resembling her and girls nothing like her, stories held together by longing, betrayal, lies, and disappointment. The newspaper article confuses her with another girl, gets her name wrong. Photographs of the tenement where she lives regularly appear in the police briefs and the charity reports, but you can barely see her, peering out of the third-floor window. The caption makes no mention of her, noting only the moral hazard of the one-room kitchenette, the foul condition of the toilets, and the noise of the airshaft. The photograph taken of her in the attic studio is the one that is most familiar; it is how the world still remembers her. Had her name been scribbled on the back of the albumen print, there would be at least one fact I could convey with a measure of certainty, one detail that I would not have to guess,

one less obstacle in retracing the girl's path through the streets of the city. Had the photographer or one of the young men assisting him in the studio recorded her name, I might have been able to find her in the 1900 census, or discover if she ever resided at the Shelter for Colored Orphans, or danced on the stage of the Lafayette Theatre, or if she ended up at the Magdalene House when there was nowhere else to go.

Her friends refused to tell the authorities anything; but even they didn't know how she arrived at the house on the outskirts of the Seventh Ward, or what happened in the studio that afternoon. The Irish housekeeper thought she was the black cook, Old Margaret's, niece, and, neglecting her work *as they were wont to do* had wandered from the kitchen to the studio. Old Margaret, no kin to the girl, believed that Mr. Eakins had lured her to the attic with the promise of a few coins, but never said what she feared. The social worker later assigned to the girl's case never saw the photograph. She blamed the girl's mother and the slum for all the terrible things that happened and filled in the blanks on the personal history form, never listening for any other answer. Age of first sexual offense was the only question without certain reply.

From these bits and pieces, it has been difficult to know where to begin or even what to call her. The fiction of a proper name would evade the dilemma, not resolve it. It would only postpone the question: Who is she? I suppose I could call her Mattie or Kit or Ethel or Mabel. Any of these names would do and would be the kind of name common to a young colored woman at the beginning of the twentieth century. There are other names reserved for the dark: Sugar Plum, Peaches, Pretty Baby, and Little Bit—names imposed on girls like her that hint at the pleasures afforded by intimate acts performed in rented rooms and dimly lit hallways. And there are the aliases too, the identities slipped on and discarded—a Mrs. quickly affixed to a lover's name, or one borrowed from a favorite actress to



invent a new life, or the protective cover offered by the surname of a maternal grandmother's dead cousin—all to elude the law, keep your name out of the police register, hold the past at a safe distance, forget what grown men did to girls behind closed doors. The names and the stories rush together. The singular life of this particular girl becomes interwoven with those of other young women who crossed her path, shared her circumstances, danced with her in the chorus, stayed in the room next door in a Harlem tenement, spent sixty days together at the workhouse, and made an errant path through the city.

Without a name, there is the risk that she might never escape the oblivion that is the fate of minor lives and be condemned to the pose for the rest of her existence, remaining a meager figure appended to the story of a great man and relegated to item number 308, African American girl, in the survey of his life and work. If I knew her name I might be able to locate her, discover if she had any siblings, if her mother was dead, if her grandmother was "living in" with a white family, if her father was a rag seller or day laborer, or if he had disappeared. A name is a luxury that she isn't afforded—other sitters are unnamed, but they can be identified; she is the only one who is anonymous.

In a compelled photograph, a girl's name is of no greater consequence than her desire for a different kind of likeness. (The only thing I knew for sure was that she did have a name and a life that exceeded the frame in which she was captured.) When the scandal erupted and the white girls who lived in large stately homes with powerful fathers disclosed the things the artist had forced them to do, no one mentioned her or any other black girl. Years later when another anatomist, another man of science, was found with a cache of nude pictures of colored schoolgirls, no one remembered her. Without a name, it was unlikely that I would ever find this particular girl. What mattered was that she was a placeholder for all the



possibilities and the dangers awaiting young black women in the first decades of the twentieth century. In being denied a name or, perhaps, in refusing to give one, she represents all the other girls who follow in her path. Anonymity enables her to stand in for all the

others. The minor figure yields to the chorus. All the hurt and the promise of the wayward are hers to bear.

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It was not the kind of image I was looking for when I set out to tell the story of the social revolution and transformation of intimate life that unfolded in the black city-within-the-city. I had been searching for photographs unequivocal in their representation of what it meant to live free for the second and third generations born after the official end of slavery. I was hungry for images that represented the experiments in freedom that unfolded within slavery's shadow, the practice of everyday life and *escape subsistence* stoked by the liberties of the city. Beautiful experiments in living free, urban plots against the plantation flourished, yet were unsustainable or thwarted or criminalized before they could take root. I searched for photographs exemplary of the beauty and possibility cultivated in the lives of ordinary black girls and young women and that stoked dreams of what might be possible if you could escape the house of bondage. This archive of images, found and imagined, would provide a necessary antidote to the scourged backs, glassy tear-filled eyes, bodies stripped and branded, or rendered grotesque for white enjoyment. I refused the mug shots and the family albums of black elites who fashioned their lives in accordance with Victorian norms, those best described by W. E. B. Du Bois as strivers, as the talented tenth, as whites of Negro blood.

I looked at Thomas Askew's lovely portraits of the black aristocracy but didn't find the young women whose lives unfolded in streets, cabarets, and tenement hallways, rather than in grand homes with parlors furnished with pianos and wingtip chairs adorned with lace antimacassars. Young women with serial lovers, husbands in the plural, and women lovers too. Young women who outfitted themselves like Aida Overton Walker and Florence Mills, young women who preferred to dress like men. I looked at vernacular images, collections of photographs in municipal archives, anthologies of black



photographs, documentary surveys of the slum, black portraits and group pictures displayed in Negro buildings and institutes of social economy at international expositions and world fairs. I browsed thousands of photographs taken by social reformers and charity organizations, hoping to find them, but they failed to appear. They averted their gaze or they rushed past the photographer; they clustered at the edge of the photos, they looked out of windows, peered out of doorways, and turned their back to the camera. They refused the terms of visibility imposed on them. They eluded the frame and remained fugitives—lovely silhouettes and dark shadows impossible to force into the grid of naturalist description or the taxonomy of slum pictures.

The young mothers were the ones pictured most often; they were required to sit with their children in crowded bedrooms and kitchenettes in order to receive the assistance which they had been promised: some milk for the children, or a visit from the nurse because the youngest was ailing, or the loan of a pair of shoes to go out and find

work. The mothers had to appear in the reform pictures, and these images were marshaled as evidence in the case made against them by the social workers and the sociologists.

Young women not in desperate need, not saddled with children, and old enough to say *Hell no* and *Get out of my face* evaded capture. The few images of young women between the ages of sixteen and twenty-three are group pictures taken with their families or with their neighbors. They never looked *wild and wayward* or *too fast* in these pictures. Despite their fugitive gestures of refusal—slumped shoulders and side-eyes and radiant anger—they are made into clients and types and examples; they are transformed into social documents and statistical persons, reduced to the human excrescence of social law and slum ecology, pitied as betrayed girl mothers, labeled chance creatures of questionable heredity. The ash barrels lining the street and the ramshackle buildings and the friendly visitors to the poor dominate and infantilize them.

I grew weary of the endless pictures of white sheets draped on the clothesline, leaking faucets, filthy water closets, and crowded bedrooms. I recoiled at the lantern slide show and its oscillating pictures of cause and effect, before and after, the movement of images propelled by moralistic narratives of sexual promiscuity, improper guardianship, and the dangers of the saloon, boarding house, and dance hall. The visual clichés of damnation and salvation: the black-and-tan dive, the sociality of neighbors across the color line, hanging out on the stoop, marrying outside the race, or the model tenement occupied by a monochromatic family of the same race. The outcomes were stark: on one hand, the morgue, prison and the workhouse; on the other, the privatized household and the sovereignty of the husband and father.

The surveys and the sociological pictures left me cold. These photographs never grasped the beautiful struggle to survive, glimpsed the alternative modes of life, or illuminated the mutual aid and com-

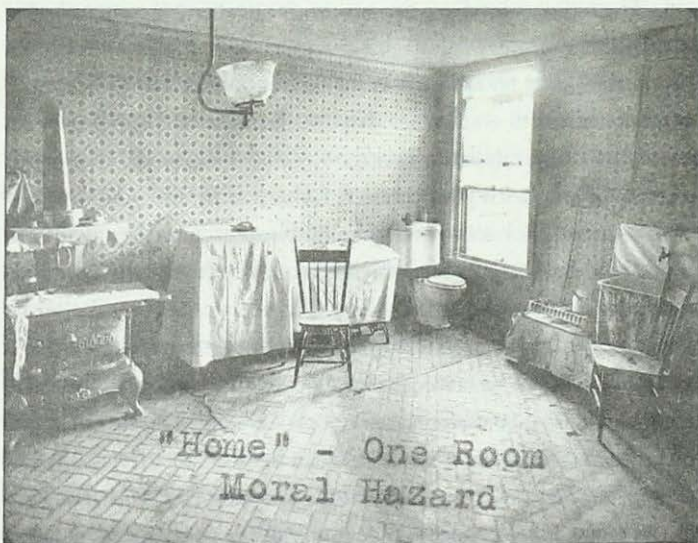
munal wealth of the slum. The reform pictures and the sociological surveys documented only ugliness. Everything good and decent stood on the ruins of proscribed modes of affiliation and ways of living: the love unrecognized by the law, households open to strangers, the public intimacy of the streets, and the aesthetic predilections and willful excesses of young black folks. The social worlds represented in these pictures were targeted for destruction and elimination. The reformers used words like "improvement" and "social betterment" and "protection," but no one was fooled. The interracial slum was razed and mapped into homogeneous zones of absolute difference. The black ghetto was born.

The captions transform the photographs into moral pictures, amplify the poverty, arrange and classify disorder. *Negro quarter*. The caption seems to replicate the image, to detail what resides within its frame, but instead the caption produces what appears. It subsumes the image to the text. The words attached to the image—unsightly, broken, typical—seem almost to be part of the picture, like the crumpled bed-sheets or the boards covering the broken windows of the shack. The captions index the life of the poor. The words police and divide: *Negro quarter*. Announce the vertical order of life: *Damaged Goods*. Make domestic space available for scrutiny and punishment: *One-room moral hazard*. Declaim the crime of promiscuous social arrangements: *Eight Persons Occupy One Bedroom*. Manage and segregate the mixed crowd and represent the world in fidelity to the color line: *View of Italian girls, Boys with Cap, and Two Negroes in Doorway of Dilapidated Building*.

Such pictures made it impossible to imagine that segregation was not natural selection based on affinity and that Jim Crow had not always prevailed. Social reformers targeted interracial intimacy or even proximity; the Girl problem and the Negro problem reared their heads at the same time and found a common target in the sexual freedom of young women. The attendant fears of promiscuity, degeneration, and

interracial sexual intimacy resulted in their arrest and confinement. Improving the slum and targeting urban vice extended the color line in absence of a legal apparatus or statutory law to mandate and enforce it. Progressive reformers and settlement workers were the architects and planners of racial segregation in northern cities.

The photographs coerced the black poor into visibility as a condition of policing and charity, making those *bound to appear* suffer the burden of representation. In these iconic images of the black urban poor, individual persons were forced to stand in for sweeping historical narratives about the progress or failure of the Negro, serve as representatives of a race or class, embody and inhabit social problems, and evidence failure or improvement. These photographs extended an optic of visibility and surveillance that had its origins in slavery and the administered logic of the plantation. (To be visible was to be targeted for uplift or punishment, confinement or violence.)



Some things didn't appear in the photographs, like the three flowerpots lined up on the windowsill, the crazy quilts covering the tick mattresses, the Bibles wrapped in lace and calico, the illustrations from the mail-order catalogue affixed to the walls. The reformers and the journalists were fixated on the kitchenette. They didn't know that the foyer, the fire escape, and the rooftop were a stretch of urban beach, not until the rich adopted the practice and sleeping on rooftops became fashionable. They didn't know that the hallway and the stairwell were places of assembly, a clearing inside the tenement, or that *you love in doorways*. There is no photograph of the hallway, barely illuminated by a flickering gaslight that hides everything that is unlovely. Even in the daytime, the shadows are too dark and too deep to capture it. The hallway provides the refuge for the first tongue kiss, the place for hanging out with your friends, the conduit for gossip and intrigue. Here you first learn about the world and the role to which you have been consigned, so you scribble *fuck* or *wretched* on the wall in the stairwell. The hallway is where the authorities post the tenement-house laws and the project rules, and the guidelines might as well say, *Negro, don't even try to live*. It is inside but public. The police enter without warrants and arrest whoever has the bad fortune to be found and caught. It is the passageway that leads to the two rooms where you stay with your mother, father, aunt, and your two sisters. Your mother tries to make the drab rooms home by setting out your grandmother's tea set, which is too fancy for the small kitchen table; the set belonged to the white folks she worked for. She said it was a gift, but once let it slip that it was owed to her, she earned it and much more. A Masonic Lodge calendar and lithograph of Frederick Douglass hide the crack on the plaster wall. The sheer curtain hanging in the window filters the weak light of late afternoon. The ivory table mat covering the battered stovetop confirms that even in the worst places one finds beauty. All that effort makes it less



terrible. No one forgets that they are here because excluded from everywhere else, so you make do and try to thrive in what's nearly unlivable. It is the Black Belt: You are confined here. You huddle here and make a life together.

In the hallway, you wonder will the world always be as narrow as this, two walls threatening to squeeze and crush you into nothingness. So you imagine other worlds, sometimes not even better, but at least different from this. You and your friends hatch plots of escape and dereliction. This black interior is a space for thought and action, for study and vandalism, for love and trouble. The hallway is the parlor for those who manage to live in cramped dark rooms with not enough air and who see the sunlight only when they step out onto the front stoop.

It is ugly and brutalizing and it is where you stay. It doesn't matter if you don't love the place; you love the people residing there. It is as close to a home as you'll get, it is a transient resting place, an impossible refuge, for those forced out, pushed on, displaced always. They stay but never settle. The hallway is a space uneasy with expectation and tense with the force of unmet desire. It is the liminal zone between the inside and the outside for the one who stays in the ghetto; the reformer documenting the habitat of the poor passes through without noticing it, failing to see what can be created in cramped space, *if not an overture, a desecration*, or to regard our *beautiful flaws and terrible ornaments*. This hallway never appears in the lantern slide show. Only the ones who reside in the tenement know it.

It won't be photographed from the inside until decades later. Not until 1953 will a photograph convey the experience of dwelling within these walls, offer a glimpse of the life worlds made there, capture the breathlessness of a fourth-floor walk-up, know firsthand that how we live and where we stay is not a social problem. It is our relation to the white world that is the problem. Even in the

kitchenette one can find the joy of couples dancing under a clothesline suspended from the ceiling, teenagers playing cards and laughing with their friends, a man sitting at a kitchen table drinking tea, the steaming cup pressed tight against his cheek. He delights in the sensation of the heat against his face, the feel of the porcelain on his skin.

The how-to-live and *the fierce urgency of the now* can be perceived in these other photographs, the images lost and found, imagined and anticipated, like stills edited from an unfinished movie. The tintypes taken at a church picnic. The Kodaks on the beach at Coney Island. Images of *too fast* black girls trying to make a way out of no way, a serial picture of young black women rushing to the city to escape the plantation and intent on creating a free life in the context of a new enclosure. They are as desperate to find an escape route from servitude, as they are hungry for new forms of life. Watching people stroll the avenue or play cards on the step or drink wine on the roof, they are convinced that Negroes are the most beautiful people. The communal luxury of the black metropolis, the wealth of *just us*, the black city-within-the-city, transforms the imagination of what you might want and who you might be, encouraging you to dream. Shit, it don't even matter if you're black and poor, because you are here and you are alive and all these folks surrounding you encourage you and persuade you to believe that you are beautiful too. This collective endeavor to *live free* unfolds in the confines of the carceral landscape. They can see the wall being erected around the dark ghetto, but they still want to be ready for the good life, still want to get ready for freedom.

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The photograph is small enough to be cradled in the palm of your hand. It is not a lush silver print, but an inexpensive albumen print that measures  $1\frac{7}{16} \times 2\frac{7}{16}$  inches; its tiny size announces its minor status. It is a compelled image, an image taken without the permis-

sion of the sitter; it is an image intended to classify, isolate, and differentiate. It is not the kind of photograph that she would have wanted and it was not taken at her request.

The odalisque, an image of a reclining nude, conjoins two distinct categories of the commodity: the slave and the prostitute. The rigidity of the body betrays the salacious reclining posture, and the girl's flat steely-eyed glare is hardly an invitation to look. She retreats as far away from the camera as possible into the corner of the sofa, as if seeking a place in which to hide. Her direct gaze at the camera is not a solicitation of the viewer, an appeal for recognition, or a look predicated on mutuality. The look assumes nothing shared between the one compelled to appear and those looking. The private wish is that the harm inflicted won't be too great and that there will be an exit from this room and others like it.

What knowledge of anatomy did Eakins or his students uncover that afternoon in the studio? They had encountered black bodies before, mostly the corpses at the Jefferson Medical College. The bodies of poor Negroes not claimed by kin, or whose families had no money for a proper burial, or bodies stolen from the colored cemetery. There had been several scandals. She was a living body, not a corpse, but the image of her was not like the other photos of children taken to corroborate or question theories of skeletal development or to determine the movement of the musculature on the frame. I hope he didn't attach electrodes to her to observe the movement of muscle mass. It was unlikely that there was a chaperone attending to this girl. What knowledge of the world did she gain that afternoon? Was Susan Eakins present? Did she take the photograph? Did *she whisper foul things in her ear?* Or encourage her to stay still and not move? Had she done the same with the nieces too? Did she assist him or turn a blind eye to his work? It is hard to look at the photograph and not think about the images that preceded it and the images that would follow in its wake. Afterimages of slavery intended to remind the viewer of the power they exercised over such a body and the threat hanging over

the subject captured within its frame of the kinds of terrible things that could be done to a black girl without a crime having occurred.

Was it possible to annotate the image? To make my words into a shield that might protect her, a barricade to deflect the gaze and cloak what had been exposed?

Anticipating the pressure of his hands, did she tremble? Did the painter hover above the sofa and arrange her limbs? Were his hands big and moist? Did they leave a viscous residue on the surface of her skin? Could she smell the odor of sweat, linseed oil, formaldehyde, and clothes worn for too many days? Did she notice the slippers, tattered shirt, and grubby pants, and then become frightened? Had the other models left their imprint in the lumpy surface, the oily patina of the upholstery, and the rank musky odor?

The girl who entered 1729 Mount Vernon Street was not the same one who departed. Rumors about the other girls surfaced: they were white, they were the daughters of the elite, so there was public outrage and the painter disgraced. They had been spared this: the odalisque, the pose of the whore and the slave. They had not been required to look directly at the camera and acknowledge his gaze and pretend to invite it. The other girls might have mentioned her if she hadn't been black and poor.

She left the studio exactly the way she came: down the four flights of stairs into the rectangular garden with the row of elephant ears, past the water hydrant, the four cats, and the setter, exiting through the wooden fence back onto Eighteenth Street, and then made her way back home. Was she able to settle back into her life or did this latest violence leave a mark, a record as indelible as the photograph?

The look says everything about the kind of female property she is—a female not in the class of those deserving protection, and unlike the daughter of the bourgeoisie, whose sexuality is the private property of the father and then the husband, she is one intended for public use. The pleasure yielded by the disavowed assault, by the

graphic picture of violated black embodiment provides an inkling, an anticipation, that her body, her labor and her care, will continue to be taken and exploited; the intimate labor of the domestic will define her subjection. It is a stark and brutal image, despite its purported power to arouse. Is the pleasure of looking predicated on the disavowal of violence, the insistence on the girl's agency, the invitation to look signaled by her direct gaze at the camera? Is the precondition of this pleasure indifference, which is the habituated response to black pain? Or is the pleasure achieved through the cultivation of suffering and the infliction of harm?

The odalisque is a forensic image that details the violence to which the black female body can be subjected. It is a durational image of intimate violence. So much time accumulates on her small figure, the girl might well be centuries old, bearing the weight of slavery and empire, embodying the transit of the commodity, suturing the identity of the slave and the prostitute. All of which makes it impossible for her to be a child. The photograph fabricates her consent to be seen. How does she consent to coercion? How does the pleasure taken in the image of sexual assault issue from the girl's invitation? It is a picture redolent with the auction block, the plantation, and the brothel.

It is a picture that confounds our efforts to classify it. Art? Science? Pornography? It is a cold image that makes apparent what can be taken and what can be done under the guise of science and observation. The violence achieved and practiced justifies itself as the study of the Negro, as an anatomy lesson. How does one describe the life that oscillates among the categories of domestic, whore, slave, and corpse? Is it apparent that her life is disposable? Or that she is subject to a regime of brutality so normalized that its violence is barely discernible? How does one make this violence visible when it secures the enjoyment, sovereignty, and bodily integrity of man and master?

Her body is exposed, but she withholds everything. "The body shows itself," complying with the demand, yet "it does not give itself,

there is no generosity in it." Is it possible to give what has already been taken?

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What can a photograph of a girl posed on a horsehair sofa tell us about black life at the turn of the century or about the lives of young black women *rushing to the city* and desperate to enter a new era? How might it anticipate the obstacles awaiting them? How might this photograph illuminate the entanglement of slavery and freedom and offer a glimpse of the futures that will unfold?

Looking at her immobilized on the old horsehair sofa, pinioned like a rare specimen against the scrolling pattern, her small arms tucked tight against her torso like clipped wings, I think about the kinds of touch that cannot be refused. In 1883, the age of consent was ten. There was no statutory rape law to penalize what occurred in the studio, and had such law existed, a poor black girl would have fallen outside its reach. When a rape or assault was reported to the police or the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty



to Children, the girl, seduced or raped, might be sentenced to the training school or the reformatory to protect her or punish her for being too fast, too mature, or too knowing. The precocious sexuality of girls *ripened too soon* made them vulnerable to confinement and arrest. Previous immorality negated any claims to protection by the law. Innocence (that is, virginity) was the issue, not what age a girl was old enough for the taking. Previous immorality meant a man could do whatever he wanted. Colored girls were always presumed to be immoral. (One of the arguments against the statutory rape legislation passed in the 1890s, raising the age of consent in most

states to sixteen or eighteen, was that lascivious Negro girls would use the law to blackmail white men. Black girls came before the law, but were not protected by it.)

As the photograph makes plain, her body was already marked by a history of sexual defilement, already branded as a commodity. Its availability to be used, to be hurt, was foundational to the prevailing set of social arrangements, in which she was formally free and vulnerable to the triple jeopardy of economic, racial, and sexual violence. This necessary and routine violence defined the afterlife of slavery and documented the reach of the plantation into the ghetto.

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Looking at the photograph, one wonders if she had ever been a child. By age ten, had she learned everything about sex she would ever need to know? By twelve, had she no interest in it? Did she know the women working the street, the ladies in sporting houses, the sweet men, the badgers and thieves who lived on her block? Had she become prematurely knowing because of what had already been done to her or by observing the world around her? Was the violence experienced in an attic studio or at a neighbor's house irreparable? If so, how did it determine her course? Did it eclipse the possibility of sexual autonomy or stamp it indelibly? Did it make her vow never to love a man or seek his protection? Did it make her yearn for a tender touch capable of assuaging and redressing the long history of violence captured in a pose? Did it make her love fiercely and wildly? Did it make her decide that she didn't want to be a woman, but not a man either?

Looking at the photograph, one can discern the *symphony of anger* residing in the arrested figure. It is an image that I can neither claim nor refuse. Admittedly, it is a hard place to begin, with the avowal that violence is not an exception but rather that it defines the horizon of her existence. It is to acknowledge that *we were never meant to*

*survive*, and yet we are still here. The entanglement of violence and sexuality, care and exploitation continues to define the meaning of being black and female. At the same time, I had to move beyond the photograph and find another path to her. How might this still life yield a latent image capable of articulating another kind of existence, a runaway image that conveys the riot inside? What would a moving picture of a young black woman's life inside the Black Belt encompass? The tenement. The washtub. The dance hall. The house of dreams. Where would it begin? In Farmville, Virginia? In the hold of the ship that conveyed her great-grandmother from Bermuda to Norfolk? In the steamer that delivered her to New York City? And how would it end? With her dancing in Edmond's Cellar or singing at the Clam House or cleaning rooms at the Hollywood Hotel, or waiting for a job in the Bronx slave market or counting the days until her sentence ended and she would receive the gift of her free papers? Would the serial picture of her life be terrible or lovely or heartbreaking?

In the pictures taken with her friends at a church picnic on the Jersey shore or hugging her girlfriend under the boardwalk at Coney Island, we catch a glimpse of this other life, listen for the secondary rhythms, which defy social law and elude the master, the state, and the police, if only for an evening, a few months, her nineteenth year. In the pictures anticipated, but not yet located, we are able to glimpse the terrible beauty of wayward lives. In such pictures, it is easy to imagine the potential history of a black girl that might proceed along other tracks. Discern the glimmer of possibility, feel the ache of what might be. It is this picture I have tried to hold on to.

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After a year spent looking at a colored girl, posed in the nude, on an old horsehair sofa, I decided to retrace her steps through the city and imagine her many lives. Following in her footsteps and in those of other young black women in the city, I made my way through the



Black Belts of Philadelphia and New York, the neighborhoods and black quarters named after their inhabitants, Little Africa and Nigger Heaven, or their aspirations, the Mecca and the City of Refuge. I traced the errant paths and the lines of flight that in the decades from 1890 to 1935 would enclose the boundaries of the black ghetto. In the end, it became not the story of one girl, but a serial biography of a generation, a portrait of the chorus, a moving picture of the wayward.

For decades I had been obsessed with anonymous figures, and much of my intellectual labor devoted to reconstructing the experience of the unknown and retrieving minor lives from oblivion. It was my way of redressing the violence of history, crafting a love letter to all those who had been harmed, and, without my being fully aware of it, reckoning with the inevitable disappearance that awaited me. The upheaval I experienced looking at her image convinced me that I had to go forward, even if I doubted that I would ever find her. I saw her differently from the others. She was a girl situated on the threshold of a new era, one defined by extremes—the nadir of democracy and the Progressive Era. The age was characterized by imperial wars, an epidemic of rape and lynching, the emergence of the legal and social apparatus of racial segregation, and antiblack racial laws that inspired the Nazis' Nuremberg Laws. Race riots swept across the country. At the same time, legal and social reforms attempted to buffer the vulnerable from the predations of capitalism and free markets, and their necessary outcomes: poverty and unemployment and social violence. Political activists and black radicals battled against the resurgence of racism that engulfed the nation and contested the impaired citizenship and the rightlessness that defined the Negro condition. Club women focused their attention on the plight of black girls and women, determined to protect, defend, and uplift them and eradicate the immoral habits, which were the legacy of slavery.

I envisioned her not as tragic or as ruined, but as an ordinary black girl, and as such her life was shaped by sexual violence or the



threat of it; the challenge was to figure out how to survive it, how to live in the context of enormous brutality, and thrive in deprivation and poverty. The state of emergency was the norm not the exception. The only difference between this girl and all the others who crossed her path and followed in her wake was that there was a photograph

that hinted that something had happened, that enabled everyday violence to acquire the status of an event, a forensic picture of an act of sexual violence not deemed a crime at all.

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I followed her from Philadelphia to New York, the largest black cities in the north, stumbling through the streets of the Seventh Ward and then onto the Tenderloin and after that Harlem. I spotted her everywhere—on the corner, in the cabaret, on the boardwalk at Coney Island, in the chorus; sometimes I failed to notice her. At other times, the headliners and celebrities overshadowed her when she was allowed among their company. She bore faint resemblance to the girl I first encountered, and had I not known about the attic or that she had been forced to sleep in a coal bin or that she was raped by her uncle or assaulted by a neighbor or brutalized by her employer, I would have never guessed from looking at her. It was an age when Negroes were the most beautiful people, and this was no less true of her. Even her detractors reluctantly admitted as much. It's hard to explain what's beautiful about a rather ordinary colored girl of no exceptional talents, a face difficult to discern in the crowd, an average chorine not destined to be a star, or even the heroine of a feminist plot. In some regard, it is to recognize the obvious, but that which is reluctantly ceded: the beauty of black ordinary, the beauty that resides in and animates the determination to live free, the beauty that propels the experiments in living otherwise. It encompasses the extraordinary and the mundane, art and everyday use. Beauty is not a luxury; rather it is a way of creating possibility in the space of enclosure, a radical art of subsistence, an embrace of our terribleness, a transfiguration of the given. It is a will to adorn, a proclivity for the baroque, and the love of *too much*.

In my search for her, I soon encountered all the others hovering about her—the sociologist, housing reformer, probation officer, club woman, social worker, vice investigator, journalist, and

psychiatrist—all of them insisting their view of her was the truth. One of them was always there, standing in my way, blocking my path, whenever I encountered her. None of them believed she would blossom. Their notebooks, monographs, case files, and photographs created the trails I followed, but I read these documents against the grain, disturbing and breaking open the stories they told in order to narrate my own. It required me to speculate, listen intently, read between the lines, attend to the disorder and mess of the archive, and to honor silence. The official documents made her into someone else entirely: delinquent, whore, average Negro in a mortuary table, incorrigible child, and disorderly woman. In the statistical chart, the social survey, and the slum photograph, she seemed so small, so insignificant. Everything else loomed large—the condition of the tenements, the perils of the ghetto, the moral dangers of the kitchenette, the risks presented by too many bodies forced into the cramped rooms of the lodging house. It was easier for the professionals to imagine her dead or ruined than to entertain the idea that she might thrive, that chance or accident might permit her to flourish. I had to be mindful not to do damage of my own. Only the chorines, bull-daggers, aesthetical Negroes, lady lovers, pansies, and anarchists supported her experiments in living free. She was their avenging angel. Only the wayward appreciated her riotous conduct and wild habits and longing to create a life from nothing; only they could discern the beautiful plot against the plantation she waged each and every day.

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The moving men found the albumen prints among the rubbish of the abandoned house. They might have been aroused by the photograph of a naked colored girl reclining on an arabesque sofa and not at all concerned about whether she was yet of legal age. A flat-chested, narrow hipped, thick-thighed, prepubescent child arrested in the classic pose of the whore and the concubine was as good an incitement as any other dirty picture. When pleasure yielded to indiffer-

ence, the photograph was discarded and thrown into a pile with the other debris from the studio.

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It was not the kind of picture that the girl would have wanted. It didn't even look nothing like her. The eyes are flat and withholding; hard like the eyes of the girls working Middle Alley. They are *eyes in advance of time and experience*. To keep the photographer from coming any closer, she tried to make mean stay away from me eyes, I dare you eyes, eyes of flint, not whore eyes that solicited—*Hey Mister*—and refused—*I don't do that*—in the same glance. When she crossed Du Bois's path over a decade later, the longing in those eyes would betray her.



## An Unloved Woman

When the conductor asked her again to give up her seat in the ladies' car, she refused. He didn't say that the other passengers objected to her company, but simply ordered her to surrender her seat and move on to the segregated car. Until he attempted to remove her forcibly, the ladies had assumed she was a servant traveling with her mistress, so were comfortable with the place she occupied in the first-class car. Only after the dispute erupted and the brown-skinned woman insisted that her first-class ticket entitled her to a seat did the white ladies recoil and begin shouting and ordering her to "get away" because they were "not in the habit of sitting on the seat with Negroes." Then their nerves were shocked by her presence and the imposition of such intimate contact. The distress aroused by her proximity was not lessened by the petite stature of the colored schoolteacher—she was a few inches short of five feet—or her discernible refinement. The attractive twenty-one-year-old was attired in a stylish linen duster. The rancor of the women and the threats of the conductor hovering above her did not weaken her determination to continue on her journey from Memphis to Woodstock, Tennessee, or lead her to doubt her right to assume the seat for which she had paid. The conductor's eyes, the harsh tone

of his voice, and then the rough hands were not enough to dislodge her. No, she would not budge. The conductor attempted to yank her out of the comfortable upholstered chair, but when he grabbed her arm, she fastened her teeth onto the clenched hand assaulting her and bit down with all the force she could muster.

She took pride in the fact that two additional men were required to assist the conductor in ousting her. She fought like a tiger. They clutched her hands and feet, dragging her through the aisle, tearing her traveling coat. She held on to the seats, scratched and kicked, but there were too many of them and only one of her. The white passengers stood on their seats and clapped when she was ejected. She was not a lady. She was not a woman. She was a Negro. The Jim Crow car had no gender designation. Ida Wells chose to exit the train rather than suffer the humiliation of the segregated coach, which also served as a smoking and drinking car for white men. The conduct prohibited in the first-class car was licensed in the colored coach. White men smoked in the foul car, spat on the floor, drank liquor, cursed, read lewd magazines, ogled and molested colored women. As one young woman recalled, "You were at the mercy of the conductor and any man who entered." Ida was familiar with "all the awful tragedies which had overtaken colored girls who had been obliged to travel alone on these cars." This had been the rationale for the ladies' coach.

Luckily there were no bruises, or black eyes, or battered ribs. For Miss Jane Brown, another colored woman who had earlier been removed from a first-class coach, the action was justified after the fact by the charge that "she was not a respectable person" but "a notorious public courtesan, addicted to the use of profane language and offensive conduct in public places." The damage done to Ida Wells was justified not by a bad reputation, but by her status as "not-quite human." A darky damsel and a black cow were strangely equivalent and indicative of the category crisis she embodied. What kind of woman was she, if a woman at all? The question was no less



prescient or urgent than it had ever been. A century later, it would achieve mythic proportions: *Ain't I a woman?* The hold of the uncertainty was so inescapable that it mattered little that Sojourner Truth had never uttered such words. As Ida Wells experienced directly, a colored woman could be labeled a prostitute, cursed as a "slandorous and dirty-minded mulatress," and threatened with castration.

On her way back home, she decided to hire a lawyer and fight the railway company in court. An obedient disposition did not come naturally to her. By her own description, she was tempestuous, hard-headed, and willful which meant she was prepared to confront and stand against white men and the law, and the whole world if need be. She would not stay in her place or kowtow to the ruling race. When she shared the story with her attorney, her voice did not break with the mortification the violent incident sought to produce; rather, it unleashed her innate fearlessness and a quality of courage so fierce and steadfast that it enabled her to do what "reasonable" Negroes declined—to confront, battle, boycott, and oppose white supremacy on all fronts. Only her skin betrayed her as she recounted what had happened; it prickled as she recalled the hands of white men on her arms and legs and tugging at her waist. The bitter taste of the words stuck in her throat might have caused a weaker woman to cry or to retch, but she held it all in check.

The conductor and the baggage handler might have done far worse, and the law would have permitted it. She knew first-hand the terrible things that happened to Negro women. That very day, she had read a story in the *Appeal* about a colored woman who had been lynched in Richmond, Virginia. Terrible things had happened in her family too. She remembered distinctly an exchange between her grandmother Peggy and her father, James Wells, about the old master and his wife. Her father was the offspring of the slave owner, property not son. Her grandmother mentioned that Miss Polly, the old mistress, wanted to see James and his children. The vehemence of her father's response surprised the young Ida: "I never want to see

that old woman as long as I live. I will never forget how she had you stripped and whipped the day after the old man died, and I am never going to see her." Her father's hard words raised questions that she dared not ask her grandmother, but which soon found their answer in the sexual violence that engulfed the south. In *The Free Speech*, Ida Wells would write stories about the schoolgirls and domestics and teachers raped and beaten and hanged. *The women of the race have not escaped the fury of the mob*. She would tally the atrocities. She would make a timetable of the deaths. She would denounce mob rule, lynching, sexual violence, and the white man's law until the death threats forced her to flee Memphis and seek exile in the north.

In the parlor of well-appointed homes in Philadelphia and New York, she exchanged stories with other black women about the insults, the obscene propositions, the hateful glances, the lustful eyes, the threats of grievous bodily harm. There was no asylum to be found in the north either. The very words "colored girl" or "Negro woman" were almost a term of reproach. *She was not in vogue. Any homage at the shrine of womanhood drew a line of color, which placed her forever outside its mystic circle*. Together they recounted these stories in a world-weary tone, but without shame—they were treated less kindly than a stray dog, handled less gently than a mule, they were brutalized and abandoned by the law. Then there were the stories that made the room go silent: that woman in New Orleans murdered for living with a white man as her husband; the housekeeper lynched for stealing a Bible; the mother hanged alongside her son for the usual charge; the postmaster's wife, Mrs. Baker, who lost her husband and infant daughter to the mob, enraged that a Negro had taken a white man's job; the thirteen-year-old girl, Mildrey Brown, lynched in Columbia; the eight-year-old Maggie Reese raped in Nashville; Lou Stevens hanged from a railway bridge for the murder of the white paramour who had abused her; and it went on. The Red Record never ceased. More than a thousand Negroes had been murdered in six years. All



the terrible things she and the other survivors would never forget no matter how hard they tried.

As the women drank tea and ate shortbread, they planned ways to prevent such things from ever happening, collectively dreamed of a country in which they might be citizens, weighed the pros and cons of African emigration, lamented the dead. Ida Wells described the virtues of the Winchester and concluded self-defense was the sole protec-

tion afforded black women. *One had better die fighting against injustice than to die like a dog or a rat in a trap.* The sentence she penned about the outlaw hero, the attic-philosopher Robert Charles, could well be applied to her. She had already determined *to sell her life as dearly as possible* if attacked.

The delicate clatter of a porcelain teacup placed gently in a saucer, the ring of a silver spoon laid carefully on the Wedgwood pattern seemed to announce—*Still here*. It was the murmur, the music that animated their speech. Still here. They didn't allow their voices to crack or their eyes to glisten at the cold facts, at the brutal calculus of life and death. Only *us* and *we* and *still here* allowed them to utter one atrocity after another without breaking.