

The Anarchy of Colored Girls Assembled in a Riotous Manner

Saidiya Hartman

September 1, 2018

Esther Brown did not write a political tract
on the refusal to be governed,
or draft a plan for mutual aid
or outline a memoir of her sexual adventures,
“A Manifesto of The Wayward”;
“Own nothing —
refuse the given,
live on what you need and no more —
get ready to be free,” was not found among the items contained in her case file

She didn’t pen any song lines:
“My momma says I’m wreckless
My daddy says I’m wild
I ain’t good looking
But im somebody’s angel child,”

She didn’t commit to paper her ruminations on freedom,
with human nature caged in a narrow space
wooped daily into submission —
how can we speak of potentialities?

The cardboard placards for the tumult
and upheaval
she incited might have said:
“Don’t mess with me
I am not afraid to smash things up,”

But hers was a struggle without formal declarations,
policies,
slogans,
or credos.
It required no party platform

or 10 point program.

Walking through the streets of New York City,
she and Emma Goldman crossed paths
but failed to recognize one another.

When Houghward * Harrison encountered her
in the lobby of the Renaissance Casino
after he delivered his lecture
on Marriage vs. Free Love
at the socialist club,
he noticed only that she had a pretty face
and a big ass.

Esther never pulled a soap box
onto the corner of 135th Street
on Lennox 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 the desire to move as she wanted
was nothing short of treason.

She knew first hand that
the offense that was 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.

Had anyone ever found the rough notes through reconstruction
jotted in the margin area of her grocery lists,
or correlated the numbers circled most often
in her dog-eared dream book,
with routes of escape not to be found in McNally's Atlas
or seen the love letters written to her girlfriend
about how they would live at the end of the world
the master philosophers, and the card-holding radicals
in all likelihood
would've said that her analysis was insufficient,
dismissed her for failing to understand those Key Passages
in the Grundrisse
about the ex-slaves refusal to work,
and emphasized the limits

of Black feminist politics

“They have ceased to be slaves,
but not in order to be wage laborers!”

She had Amen’d an enthusiastic agreement
at all wrong places —
content with producing only what is strictly necessary
for their own consumption
and she embraced wholeheartedly
indolence,
indulgence,
and idleness
as the real luxury good.

What did the untested militants,
and smug ideologues,
know of Truth
and Tubman?

Unlike Unruly Colored Women,
they failed to recognize that experience
was capable of opening up new ways,
yielding a thousand new forms
and improvisations.

Could they ever understand
the dreams of another world
that didn’t trouble the distinction between
State, Law, Settler, and Master?
Or account the struggle against servitude,
captivity,
property, and
enclosure
that began in the Barracoon
and continued on the ship
where some fought, some jumped,
some refused to eat,
others at the plantation and the fields
on fire
poison the Master?

They had never listened to Lucy Parsons...
They had never read Ida B. Wells,
or envisioned the riot as a rally cry:
a refusal — a fungible life...
Only a misreading of the key text of anarchism
could ever imagine a place for Wayward Colored Girls.
No, Kropotkin never described Black women’s

mutual aid societies
 or the chorus in mutual aid —
 although he imagined animals sociality
 in its rich varieties
 in the forms of cooperation and mutuality
 found among ants, monkeys, and ruminants
 and possible recalcitrant domestics
 weren't yet, in his view,
 or anyone else's.
 It would be a decade and a half
 before Marvel Cooke and Ella Baker wrote their essay:
 "The Bronx Slave Market"
 and two decades before Claudia Jones'
 "An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman"
 Their revolt against the personal degradation of their work,
 and unjust labor conditions expressed itself in militant refusals,
 soldierings, sullenness,
 petty pilfering,
 unreliability,
 and fast and fruitless change of Masters.
 Yet it had no chronicler —
 none responded to the call to write The Great Servant Girl Novel
 It is not surprising that a negress would be guilty
 of conflating idleness with resistance
 or exalt the struggle for mere survival,
 or confuse petty acts for insurrection,
 or imagine a minor figure might be capable
 of some significant shit,
 or mistake laziness and insufficiency
 for a general strike,
 or recast theft
 as a kind of cheap socialism
 for two fast girls and questionable women,
 or steam wild ideas as radical thought.
 At best
 the case of Esther Brown
 provides another example
 of the tendency to exaggeration
 and excesser friends
 raised hell on 132nd Street,
 or turned out Edmond's cellar,
 or made such a beautiful noise during the riot
 that their screams,
 and shouts

were improvised music
so that even the tone deaf
from the New York Times
described the Black noise of disorderly women
as a jazz chorus.
that is common to The Race.

Nobody remembers the evening she and her friends
raised hell on 132nd Street,
or turned out Edmond's cellar,
or made such a beautiful noise during the riot
that their screams,
and shouts
were improvised music
so that even the tone deaf
from the New York Times
described the Black noise of disorderly women
as a jazz chorus.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Saidiya Hartman
The Anarchy of Colored Girls Assembled in a Riotous Manner
September 1, 2018

Retrieved on 2020-06-10 from medium.com

theanarchistlibrary.org