BOOK FORUM

Intimate History, Radical Narrative

Saidiya Hartman

Archival documents are scattered and stacked across multiple rooms, assembled by theme and chapter, a palimpsest of notes defaces some of the files and others are minimally annotated. With this pointed observation about the sprawl of news clippings, case files, state reports and pamphlets and my centrifugal manner of working, Sarah Haley skirts the unkind judgment—what a mess—and delves into the heart of my practice, which can be described as critical fabulation, speculative history, close narration, and documentary poetics. All are methods for engaging and remaking the document, for assembling and composing alternative narratives of Black existence. If scholars and writers sitting at their desk, scrawling copious notes, endlessly revising drafts, and rifling through documents might be described as a studio practice, then Sarah was one of the few people I have permitted to enter the studio with me.

In October 2017, my mother died. I had finished writing *Wayward Lives,* but the footnotes were incomplete. In this grief-filled state, it was hard to imagine completing this gargantuan task by the beginning of March, as I had promised my editor. I mentioned this to Sarah as we chatted casually about other matters and she volunteered to assist in this vital last stage of the project. I trusted her

Saidiya Hartman is professor of English and comparative literature at Columbia University (USA).

The Journal of African American History (Winter 2021) ©2021 ASALH. 1548-1867/2021/10601-0011$10.00 All rights reserved. DOI: 10.1086/712019

deeply as a scholar. Her book, *No Mercy Here,* alongside LaShawn Harris's *Sex Workers, Psychics and Number Runners*, and Cheryl Hicks, *Talk with You Like A Woman*, was critical for *Wayward Lives*.[1] These texts brilliantly attended to the everyday radicalism of Black girls and women, and their refusal to be tethered to norms of respectability. Sarah's imagination as a radical scholar resonated with my own, especially her attention to the practices of making and sabotage, which comprise a Black feminist politics of refusal. Nonetheless, I was still nervous about granting anyone entry to the intimate disorder of my practice and allowing her to read my unedited manuscript.

Inside my apartment, Sarah confronted the plastic file boxes filled with reformatory cases, the multiple stacks of newspaper articles paper-clipped in manila folders, twenty years of state prison reports, three copies of *The Philadelphia Negro,* bloated with colored post-its and scribbled notes so that the books were nearly unreadable, the yearly surveys produced by the Atlanta University Laboratory in Sociology, the collection of letters from mothers and husbands and lovers, the four legal pads filled with handwritten transcripts of interviews with Mabel Hampton, barely legible copies of the observations of private dicks and investigators about too fast girls, sex workers, queers, Harlem cabarets, tenement hallways, and black-and-tan dives. Then there were the orphan notes scribbled with details about a sentence or paragraph I wanted to add to a chapter, or a question for Emily Hainze, my research assistant, about whether Loretta Michie's note had been written on toilet paper with pencil, a reminder to look at the migrants' letters again or to include the exact number of cubic feet of air in a Philadelphia tenement as compared with one in Harlem. I had lived with this material for seven years. More importantly, I had lived in the raucous company of Mattie and Esther and Mabel and Gladys and Loretta and Edna, listening to them and speaking with them daily. I had lived with these folks for a very long time and after my mother's death, they sustained me. As important were those I was unable to name. The daily ritual of returning to the page was how I communicated with them. In Gladys and Mabel and Mattie and Edna, I saw all of those I loved. In the fierceness of their want and the collective desire to break every structure that confined them to the bottom, I saw a blueprint for another set of arrangements.

I believe that living with them for so long enabled me to hear *something else* in the compelled biographies and meager stories of the case file and the state archives, and to create what Sarah Haley names the "long form historiographic

1. Sarah Haley, *No Mercy Here: Gender, Punishment, and The Making of Jim Crow Modernity* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2016); LaShawn Harris, *Sex Workers, Psychics, and Numbers Runners: Black Women in New York City's Underground Economy* (Urbana, IL, 2016); Cheryl D. Hicks, *Talk With You Like a Woman: African American Women, Justice, and Reform in New York, 1890–1935* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2010); Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals* (New York, 2020).

song" of *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*. In the "Note on Method" that opens the book, I write that "I prefer to think of the book as a fugitive text of the wayward, and it is marked by the errantry that it describes." It is text filled with the ambient sound and minor music of Black life, a composition of shared utterance. *Wayward Lives*, as Haley observes, is composed of intimate history in at least two senses. Intimate history describes the effort to convey the revolution of Black intimate life in the twentieth century and it names the style of close narration that is utilized in the book. It reckons with the violence of history by "crafting a love letter to all those who had been harmed." Close narration, the entanglement of narrator and character, made palpable what was shared, the dreams and aspirations that bridged a century of wayward practice, the long history of gender trouble and sexual variance, aesthetical Negroes inventing possibility and trying to make art of life. It also was an attempt to collapse the subject-object divide, topple the hierarchy of reason, and enact other ways of knowing and doing. I strived for the language of *just us*, the brilliance of the circle. So I wrote with Mabel laughing at dicty Negroes determined to keep experiment and non-conformity on the down-low, raged with Esther at the gate keepers unable to see the brilliance and talent of poor Black girls, battled against the patriarchs and predators, the bosses and the police always on their trail, scheming always about how to elude them, joined the defiant girls spewing curses out of the window of a Harlem shelter and summoning the force of their fierce intelligence to utter a resounding "No" to the world.

I am not an archival sleuth, so my counter-narratives have not been composed as a consequence of discovering new documents, but rather by engaging with extant archival materials critically and creatively. My aim has been to compose and to reconstruct, to improvise and augment. I have embraced the document, and by this I don't mean to suggest any fidelity to the truth or authority of the document, but simply that I have tried to figure out what I might do with official documents, given the limits, the lies, the omissions, the fabrications. What could I make of this "stuff"? How might I break open the condemnation of description and exploit the contradictions of the archive? Was it possible to annotate, deface, transpose, remake, augment and recompose extant materials? I learned to work with the constitutive mess of the archive, to *creatively disorder* the institutional fictions and the violent abstractions authorized as fact and truth. Poets like NourbeSe Phillip and Tyehimba Jess and Robin Coste Lewis demonstrated how the limits and constraints of the archive could be exceeded by improvisation and radical composition. Then there was the rich tradition of Black letters and the critical thought distilled in the writing of Nella Larsen, Lucille Clifton, Audre Lorde, Gwendolyn Brooks, James Baldwin, Amiri Baraka, Edouard Glissant, Maryse Condé, Jamaica Kincaid, and Toni Morrison. There was the model of the possible offered in the work of Marguerite Duras, Virginia Woolf, Michael Ondaatje,

W. G. Sebald, Ryzard Kapucinski, and Sven Lindqvist. How might I decompose the official narrative or recombine its elements or produce a different assembly or economy of statements? If Mattie or Esther *did* say the things that were reported, how would they have expressed it and what would they have meant by it? How could I convey the force and intensity or the edge of withholding? What were the idioms of Black girls in New York City in the early twentieth century? I reread Lynne Nottage's *Intimate Apparel* and listened to recordings at the Library of Congress. What sounds did Virginia and Jamaica, North Carolina and Guyana make when they collided in a Harlem row house, and how was this different than the rhythm and the tenor of those who could boast of having been in the city for generations? How could I tell the story of Eva Perkins and convey the bluesy tone of her speech, or her partner's aspiration and intensity, a style of elocution belabored and with an unmistakable funky beauty, speech song always adorned in its Sunday best? Double description and African baroque, four centuries of the retentive *be*. I got to know Eva's man, Aaron, through his careful and labored handwriting, a cursive style that shouted, "I am a man." "I am an intelligent Negro." All of which is simply a way of saying that in order to write with these archival materials, I had to live with them.

"Venus in Two Acts" raised a set of questions about writing, genre, fabulation, and historiography (no longer faithful to the rules of the guild) that I set out to explore, not to answer or resolve, in *Wayward Lives*.[2] In the essay, I described the venture toward another mode of writing and its aspiration as "performing abolition on the page." Yet, the response to these questions in *Wayward Lives* produced an unanticipated departure and experiment with method. "Critical fabulation and close narration both strain and press at the limits of the archive," but as Haley observes, *Wayward Lives* assumes the risk involved in exceeding the limits of the archive, because we need "histories that no history book can tell," lessons of poets at the kitchen table, chronicles of song and stories, all that is possible, according to Michel-Rolph Truillot, "when we close the books with their verifiable facts."[3] What variety of forms would history assume if we responded to Truillot's call and opened the field to recognize the many actors involved in the production of historical knowledge. Making new narratives entails a creative practice untethered or indifferent to the rules of the historical guild, and directed by the assembly, the ensemble, the multitude, the chorus. What might be possible if I chose not to leave these lives as I found them in state archives and newspaper articles, but instead imagined another kind of existence? Haley writes: "If the founding violence of the archive is obliteration, the founding truth of speculative and close narrative forms is that there is more, we might call it life, interiority,

2. Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 26 (2008): 1–14.

3. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Power and The Production of History* (New York, 1995).

vision, imagination, desire that exceeds archival documentation *and* that this *more* is a legitimate subject of history and scholarly writing." *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* lingers in the space of this *more* and attends to what exceeds the frame, *the something else* and *the what-might-be*.[4]

The experiment in prose and the construction of a serial, recursive narrative enabled me to tell stories that exceeded, even as they did not the escape, the ditto, ditto of archival violence. I endeavored to regard Black life from inside the circle and to recapture the wild thought and the beautiful recklessness capable of imagining the *with* and the *us* and the *we*, to see and be seen in this relay of looks, seeking love and trouble in the darkness of a tenement hallway and dreaming *something better than this* in the company of folks crowded into a kitchenette. The serial biographies, chronicles, prose poems, and long form songs woven across *Wayward Lives* undertake this work of imagining otherwise. As LaShawn Harris notes, the Black feminist labor of the book is inextricable from the exercise of imagination. "Ordinary women boldly "snatching liberty," by her assessment form the heart of the book. This debt to the brilliance and beauty of ordinary folk is one we share and what we understand has been deepened and sharpened by their ideas and analysis, by their relentlessness in the face of "law and order," by their refusal to disavow what they know—the extraordinary violence of a world organized against them. Harris offers her own moving picture of the wayward with photos depicting the secondary rhythms of Harlem streets. Window shoppers, domestics, sex workers, and working-class women strive to "live by a different set of rules, refusing to be governed by individuals who cared little about their dreams, desires, and ideas about freedom." So why not portray Black women and girls as "fully visible, fully legible, fully human," as well as deeply "vulnerable, damaged, and flaws."[5] The need to be "representative women" and "respectable ladies" was a moral strategy directed at challenging the hostile reason of the white world and persuading "decent" men and women that Black people were human too. By the 1920s, it was conceded that this strategy had failed to defeat white supremacy or lessen its violence; but it had succeeded in producing a class of Black Victorians as reluctant, if not as hostile, to represent the lives of ordinary Black folks and the radical trajectories of the wayward, the queer, the lawbreaker, and the riotous, at least as anything other than a sociological problem. (Nella Larsen's plea for color, Claude McKay's bawdy romances of the toiling classes, Bruce Nugent's queer erotica, and Langston Hughes's blues suites were notable departures.) Wayward practices were targeted

4. Trouillot, *Power and the Production of History*, 72; Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC, 2016).

5. Kali Gross, *Hannah Mary Tabbs and the Disembodied Torso: A Tale of Race, Sex, and Violence in America* (New York, 2018), 5.

for eradication and punished by the state, and also stigmatized and pathologized, when not silenced, by historical and sociological scholarship intent on proving Black value and asserting the equality of the race as measured by the fidelity to the proper and the norm. *Wayward Lives* was devoted to elaborating the everyday practices and long-standing tactics of creative maladjustment. A fugitive text, a wayward method, a Black feminist poetics is not a plea for recognition, but a plan for abolition.

In considering the rich variance of Black radical imaginaries and their milieu, Ahmad Greene raises a question about the significance of the church for wayward lives, since the church was also a space of wayward and errant practice. Many of those in *Wayward Lives* expressed a belief in God, but the cabaret or the private party provided the milieu of their ecstatic experience rather than the church. As a child, Mabel Hampton experienced the hypocrisy and violence of the hetero-patriarchal church led by an uncle who sexually abused her. As an adult, she joined a spiritualist church with a woman minister. No doubt, Mabel was attracted to this church because of her own belief in apparitions and occult and supernatural forces. As she repeated frequently, a guardian angel had accompanied her throughout her life. At times she described this presence as the spirit of her dead mother. Others like Mattie Nelson and her mother Caroline attended church, but their Christian faith was shaped to the contours of their lives and not by the prohibitions of the church regarding extramarital sexual intimacy and motherhood. The church as an institution was one in which they found community and succor, but which did not dictate the blueprint for their life. Mattie's Nelson's mother attended church regularly, was a God-fearing and respectable women *and* cohabitated with a man who was not her legal husband. In fact, she vowed never to marry again. In this regard, she was no different than many upstanding church-going women. Serial marriages without legal standing were not at odds with being a good Christian. The point is that everyday practice troubled stark distinctions between secular and sacred beliefs and obligations. At the very least, the wayward inhabited the structure of their contradictions without shame. One could attend a traditional church and believe deeply in the Lord, yet still choose to live and love in a variant manner. I certainly agree with Greene-Hayes's observation that waywardness flourishes under cover in Black churches, however great the need to denounce or disavow those practices. The explicit condemnation of the wayward, queer and gender-nonconforming and the heteropatriachal organization of the Black church explain the scant attention the church received in the book. Ashon Crawley's *Blackpentecostal Breath* offers a wonderful example of the ways in which spiritual practice can exceed and upend doctrine, enabling queer modalities and wayward dispositions.[6] More

6. Ashon T. Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility* (New York, 2016).

work along this line would transform and enrich our understanding of the range of practices harbored in the church, even if by stealth and dissimulation or proliferating under the cover of marriage.

"What would [Black women] be doing or thinking if there was no gaze or hand to stop you?" Toni Morrison ruminates about what might be possible without the obstacles imposed to thwart and obstruct Black women's talents and capacities. Harris considers Morrison's question and finds its echo and response in the book's effort to decenter the "iconic visual stills of urban poor women and Black interior spaces, venturing beyond reformers and intellectuals' one-dimensional frames and captions." Ekphrasis, the description or translation of a work of visual art in prose, provided a formal means of inhabiting the space of the tenement with those captured in the frame.[7] This enabled me to see and look at the world from the perch of a third floor window and not as organized by strategies of surveillance or the white gaze. Kwame Holmes also invokes Toni Morrison when thinking about Black women's struggle to survive, to find shelter and the means to live; as significant is his observation that Morrison's work provides the model for the time travel or temporal entanglement enacted in *Wayward Lives*, because works like *Beloved* and *A Mercy* exceed the imposed boundaries of historical periodization or the discrete, homogenous and regimented time of capitalist modernity. The matters of time and history are especially vexed for those whose existence challenges the prevailing periodization, who are deemed unfit for history or castaway as "outside of history," or those who are not guaranteed any right to live. Those who live intimately with the dead experience the porosity of then and now, and do not perceive and apprehend the world through the taxonomies and categories of anti-Blackness or colonial reason. Holmes asks how might we elaborate the contours of Black life given the intransigent structures that continue to extract value from Black life and make it impossible at the same time? If history is a chronicle of change over time, then how does one tell a historical story for those who endure the *longue durée* of dispossession and the seemingly interminable and unalleviated condition of fungibility? The imposition of this uniform experience of time is unsuited to the complex texture of Black life. Nor can it grasp the significance

7. The work of Ariella Azoulay provided a guide for breaking the photographic frame and entering the photographic encounter, watching from inside as if its time were still open and anything might could happen. Fred Moten offered an example of what might be possible when our engagement with photography was not restricted to unalloyed looking, but augmented by other senses. Christina Sharpe's concept of annotation as a form of wake work and a process of imagining what escaped the frame supplemented the work of fabulation and speculation. Annotation remade those iconic still photographs into moving pictures. As important were Tina Campt's critical propositions about affective labor and haptic engagement in transforming compelled images and/or creating alternative modalities for understanding them.

of affect in shaping history as well as apprehending it. Holmes underscores the structural arrest of Black life, the historicity of affect, and the role of love as a force that could compel a riot and incite freedom dreams.

Narrative is radical, creating us at the very moment it is being created. These are Morrison's words, but Quashie reiterates them to consider narrative as aesthetic resource, as knowledge production and theory making. Specifically, Quashie examines the role of anecdote and fragment, and narrative strategies (of the subjunctive, fabulation and "romance,") as a way of refusing the enclosure of disciplinarity and the hierarchy of high theory and everyday life, the ways of doing and knowing that constitute a Black feminist poetics. What forms best convey the embodied knowledge and conceptual apparatus of Black feminist poetics? If we are a "race for theory," as Barbara Christian asserts, then Quashie, like Ferreira da Silva, is interested in how poetics might shift the terms of discourse and intellectual practice.[8] How are we to elude the trap of disciplinary protocols and the violence of reason, and prove unwilling to reproduce the violence of the master's tools? *Wayward Lives* attempts to do so by experiment and fabulation, by composing theory in a minor key, where the intimate and the erotic, the errant and the visionary feed and sustain a poetics of the ordinary, or in his terms, ways "to conceptualize everyday living in its sublime worldliness."

Quashie's reading of *Wayward Lives* focuses on the interface of history and literature, analysis and speculation, theory and poetry. The anecdotes and fragments are assembled as a part of the larger narrative "suspend[ed] between the real and the literary." Quashie poses a series of questions about the formal constituents of a wayward poetics, and the role of intimacy and affect in creating and transforming one's critical position? How is it, he wonders, that I am able to look at the girl at the center of "A Minor Figure" and dare reproduce this compelled image? Isn't the mere appearance of this photograph at odds with the injunction that opens *Scenes of Subjection* regarding the reproduction and circulation of scenes of the violated body and the dangers entailed—reinforcing the spectacular character of Black suffering.[9] There I ask, "What does the exposure of the violated body yield? Proof of Black sentience or the inhumanity of the peculiar institution'"? Implicit is the question: for whom does one expose the body and as explicit is its rejection of a politics of recognition. There is the clear refusal to offer Black suffering as the raw material of white pedagogy.

In *Wayward Lives*, the body and look are situated in radically different circumstances. The photograph of the nude girl on the arabesque sofa pivots on

8. Barbara Christian, "The Race for Theory," in "The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse," special issue of *Cultural Critique*, no. 6 (Spring 1987): 51–63.

9. Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Hartman: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, 1997).

the matter of how *we* look, and the hope and the risk is that a look might be a way of tending to or caring for one another. Surely, there is how we look, untethered to the gaze or the white spectator, not pleading before the court, not trying to convince the world of anything. Rather, the intent is to deflect and avert the gaze through the scrim of words. We are inside the photographic encounter and the aim of the reading is not to convince anyone *not with the girl* or bearing the burden of the gaze of anything at all. Rather the only concern is whether it is possible to annotate and transform the image and to liberate her and us from its frame. Keenly aware of this, Quashie writes, "Is it that the world of the book could sustain this and other tender moments, that the whole of it is a cushion of regard so that the visual and narrative apparatuses would not only lean toward the pornotropic?" To which I would respond, yes that it is the intention. The hope is to look at the girl, to see her, yet not reproduce the violence of the compelled image, but instead cloak her in the collective utterance, take on the labor of care, form a circle around her. Might a look be capable of the laying on of hands, holding her, capable of gathering us, of tending to and caring for each other, destroying the compelled image?

To follow Quashie to Audre Lorde, there is "the erotic practice of bearing story's intimacy," and poetry as "the revelation or distillation of experience," a reservoir for "hopes and dreams toward survival and change," a detour around the impasse of the unthought, a method for giving "name to the nameless."[10] Intimate history, speculative thought, radical narrative, and critical fabulation are ways to create other kinds of story, and to refuse a view of Black life as only "a problem to be solved." So I have labored to create the kind of narrative able to excavate the beauty of a wrong turn and regard the forms of social life opened by refusal. I have tried to think as hard as Mattie Nelson or Esther Browne did about the kind of life that can be lived when *unfreedom* is the normative condition.

10. Audre Lorde, "Poetry Is Not a Luxury" in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, CA, 1984), 36.