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AN UNNAMED GIRL, A SPECULATIVE HISTORY

What a photograph reveals about the lives of young black women at the turn of the century.

By Saidiya Hartman February 9, 2019

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 Philadelphia, condemn and pity the child whore. Everyone has a different story to share. Fragments of her life can be gleaned from the stories of girls resembling her and girls who are nothing like her, stories held together by longing, betrayal, lies, and disappointment. A newspaper article confuses one girl with another, gets her name wrong. Photographs of the tenement where she lives appear in a police brief and a charity report, but you can barely see her, peering out of the third-floor window. The captions make 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. Instead, I have pressed at the limits of case files and documents, speculated about what might have been, imagined the things whispered in dark bedrooms, and amplified moments of withholding, escape and possibility, moments when the vision and dreams of the wayward seemed possible.

No one knew how the girl arrived at the studio of Thomas Eakins that afternoon. Eakins, a realist painter, striving to create a "visual lexicon" of the human body, produced a series of photographs of the nude, including académies (traditional poses of naked figures) and anatomical and motion studies. But the photograph of this girl was not like the images taken of young white women or of other children. She was the only one forced to assume the pose of courtesan and concubine.

The rule of the house: no one was allowed to interfere with Eakins in his studio, or question what happened there, not even his father. Did the Irish cook think she was the niece of the black servant? Perhaps the servant, no kin to the girl, believed that Mr. Eakins had lured her to the attic with the promise of a few coins, but she never said what she feared. A social worker assigned to the girl's case would never have seen the photograph, filling in the questions on the personal-history form without listening for any other answer, leaving it blank where it asked for the age of first sexual offense.

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 at the turn 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. The minor figure yields to the chorus. All their hurt and promise are hers to bear.

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 in slavery's shadow, the practice of everyday life stoked by the liberties of the city, beautiful experiments that flourished until they proved unsustainable—thwarted or criminalized before they could take root.

This archive of images, I hoped, would provide a necessary antidote to the scourged backs, the glassy, tear-filled eyes, the bodies stripped and branded or rendered grotesque for white enjoyment. I refused the mug shots and the family albums of black élites 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. Young women with serial lovers, husbands in the plural, and female lovers, too. Young women who outfitted themselves like Ada Overton Walker and Florence Mills, young women who preferred to dress like men. I looked at vernacular images, collections of photographs in municipal archives, photography

anthologies, documentary surveys of the slum. I browsed thousands of photographs taken by social reformers and charity organizations, hoping to find these young women, but they failed to appear.

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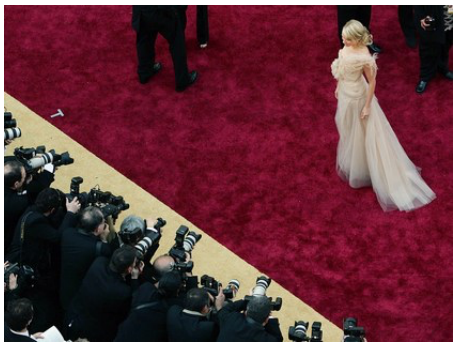

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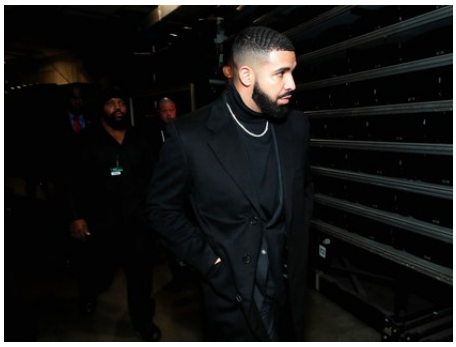

It's Too Late for the Grammys to Redeem Themselves

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The Gramm
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I grew weary of the endless pictures of white sheets draped on the clothesline, leaking faucets, filthy water closets, and crowded bedrooms. 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; the model tenement occupied by a monochromatic family of the same race. The surveys and the sociological pictures left me cold. These photographs never glimpsed the alternative modes of life or illuminated the mutual aid and

communal wealth of the slum.

Such pictures made segregation seem like natural selection based on affinity and Jim Crow appear as inevitable. 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, who were often arrested or confined. Progressive reformers and settlement workers were the architects and planners of racial segregation in northern cities.

Some things didn't appear in the photographs. The reformers and the journalists didn't know that the foyer, the fire escape, and the rooftop were stretches of urban beach. 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*.

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 walkup, know first-hand 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, teen-agers 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 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 a little under one and a half inches in height and two and a half inches in width. It is not the kind of photograph that she would have wanted and it was not taken

at her request.

The image of the odalisque evokes two kinds of human commodification: the slave and the prostitute. The rigidness of the girl's body betrays this salacious posture, and her flat, steely-eyed glare is hardly an invitation to look. Her direct gaze says everything about the kind of female property she is—one not in the class of those deserving protection. The graphic picture 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.

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, 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 might have occurred in the studio, and, had such a law existed, a poor black girl would have fallen outside its reach. When a rape or assault was reported to the police or to the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, the girl, seduced or raped, might be sentenced to the training school or reformatory, to protect her or to punish her for being too fast, too mature, or too knowing.

Innocence—that is, virginity—was the issue, not at what age a girl was old enough for the taking. Previous immorality meant a man could do whatever he

wanted, and negated a girl's claims to protection by the law. Colored girls were always presumed to be immoral. (One of the arguments against the statutory-rape legislation passed at the end of the nineteenth century, 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. Under the prevailing set of social arrangements, she was formally free; in reality, she was 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.

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: 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, of care and exploitation, continues to define the meaning of being black and female.

The more I looked at this girl without a name the more I wanted to move beyond the photograph and find another path to her. I decided to retrace her steps and imagine her many lives. Following her paths, and the paths 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, the stories I gathered exceeded the life of this individual, unnamed girl. She was not one girl but many. I spotted her everywhere: on the corner, in the cabaret, on the boardwalk at Coney Island. It became a serial biography of a generation, a portrait of the chorus, a moving picture of the wayward.

Progressive reformers and settlement workers were the architects of segregation in northern cities. But they didn't know that the foyer, fire escape, and rooftop were stretches of urban beach.

Photograph Courtesy Lesbian Herstory Archives, Mabel Hampton Collection

For decades I had been obsessed with anonymous figures, and much of my intellectual labor was devoted to reconstructing the experience of the unknown and retrieving minor lives from oblivion through archival research and imagination. 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.

The official documents I found in my search produced someone else entirely. In them, I found delinquents, whores, average Negroes in actuarial tables, incorrigible children, and disorderly women. 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 saw her differently. She was a girl situated on the threshold of a new era, one defined by extremes—the nadir of democracy and the onset of 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 anti-black legislation 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 from their necessary outcomes: poverty and unemployment and social violence. Political activists and black radicals battled against the resurgence of racism that engulfed the nation. Club women focussed their attention on the plight of black girls and women, determined to protect, defend, and uplift them and eradicate their immoral habits, which were the legacy of slavery.

I envisioned her not as tragic or as ruined but as an ordinary black girl. For her,

the state of emergency was the norm, not the exception. The only difference between this girl and all the others who crossed her path or 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 that was not deemed a crime at all.

It is hard to explain what's beautiful about a rather ordinary colored girl, 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 that is reluctantly ceded: the beauty of the black ordinary, the beauty that resides in and animates the determination to live free. Beauty is not a luxury; it is a way of creating possibility in the space of enclosure, a radical art of subsistence, a transfiguration of the given. Only the wayward appreciated this girl's riotous conduct and wild habits—her longing to create a life from nothing. Only they could discern the beautiful plot against the plantation that she waged each and every day.

This essay was drawn from "Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval," which is out this February from W. W. Norton.

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