

# **The Anarchy of Colored Girls Assembled in a Riotous Manner**



**Saidiya Hartman**



Esther Brown did not write a political tract  
on the refusal to be governed,  
or draft a plan for mutual aid  
or outline a memoire 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 carboard plackards 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 135<sup>th</sup> 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 i 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 132<sup>nd</sup> 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 132<sup>nd</sup> Street,  
or turned out Edmond's cellar,  
or made such a beautiful noise during the riot  
that their screams,  
and shouts  
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