

**The Rewritten Narrative of the History of Black Women on a path towards Sexual
Liberation and Individual Freedom**

Final Paper

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Throughout this course, we have focused on gaining a deeper understanding of Black feminism and sexuality, particularly the experiences of Black women in the United States since Emancipation. Saidya Hartman's *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals* narrates the stories of riotous young Black women creating a new life in the North's Black Belt despite the systematic racism and hindering societal structures. Hartman chronicles the Black women's journey from being subjected to societal scrutiny for assumed sexual promiscuity to ultimately attaining liberation in the face of oppression. Intersecting Hartman's writing is Hortense Spiller's work *Interstices*. In this piece, Spillers describes the simultaneous over-sexualization of the Black female body with the simultaneous stripping of Black women's sexuality. Spillers argues for restoring Black female sexuality and absolute bodily autonomy. Ultimately, Hartman and Spillers rewrite the conventional narrative of Black women's history, where Black women reclaim their agency on a path toward sexual liberation and individual freedom.

I hypothesize that there exists a narrative of acceptance and rebellion to gain sexual liberty and freedom in the United States. This narrative can be broken down into three interrelated narratives. A lack of sexual identity marks the first narrative as Black women were subjected to non-consensual sexualization and sexual abuse, accompanied by a lack of legal protection. The second narrative is reclaiming womanhood, where Black women restore their feminine identity despite not following traditional gender roles. Finally, the third narrative centers on sexuality and sensuality as a way to freedom and empowerment. I will explore the history and complexities of each narrative, providing a comprehensive overview of the journey toward liberation for Black women in the United States.

Hartman's *Wayward Lives: Beautiful Experiments* examines the intimate life of Black women in the early 20th century. During this time, Black women moved to the North's Black Belt, primarily in Philadelphia and New York City, to escape the South. In the post-Emancipation era, the South remained dangerous for African-Americans with few career opportunities, white race prejudice, and rural poverty. Quickly after arriving at the place of refuge with a dream for the future, Black women realize their damaged reputation as colored women "did not release them from the sexual stigma of slavery."¹ Racist assumptions of sexual promiscuity were fueled by the history of slavery, where Black women's bodies became a commodity, sexual objects, that the white enslaver could use.² Assumptions of sexual promiscuity led to the accepted presence of coercion of innocent young Black women to surrender their bodies through prostitution to survive in a society that may not employ them due to the color of their skin. The presence of prostitution further amplified the stigma of sexual promiscuity among Black women.

"Previous immortality meant a man could do whatever he wanted. Colored girls were always presumed to be immoral."³ Presumed immortality led to removing all legal protection if a Black woman experienced sexual assault, sexual abuse, or rape. Not only did Black women lack any legal protection, but also they were vulnerable to being seized and arrested at random. A Wayward minor, as defined by the code of criminal procedure, is a person between the ages of sixteen and twenty-one at risk of becoming morally depraved or in danger of being morally depraved. Primarily young Black women were convicted under the Wayward Minor laws due to the belief that they were always morally depraved and at risk of becoming prostitutes.⁴ The

¹ Saidiya V. Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Ritous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2020), 54.

² Hortense Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2003), 155.

³ Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Ritous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals*, 28.

⁴ Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Ritous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals*, 222.

Tenement House Law, established in New York, allowed police to survey and arrest young Black women as prostitutes with no evidence except for a police officer's suspicion. With the institution of the Tenement House Law and Wayward Minor laws, young Black women were at risk of being arrested at any time – including at their homes, flirting at dance halls, walking home from work, enjoying intimate acts with a lover, or just being at the wrong place at the wrong time. Black women could be arrested for suspicion of prostitution or in danger of committing prostitution. Then, they could be persecuted based on “*the likelihood of future criminality*, rather than any violation of the law, determined their sentence.”⁵

Black women have not only experienced sexual abuse and legal persecution due to their hyper-sexualization but also have been stripped of their status as sentient beings. Spillers, in her work *Interstices*, examines the status of Black women within the United States. She argues their portrayal as sexual objects in society has resulted in a status of non-being, which is reinforced by denying them recognition and social status. Rather than being viewed as sexual beings with desires and sexual freedom, Black women were often depicted as whores in literature and Anglo-American society. Often others portrayed their experiences rather than their experiences represented by them, leaving them in a state of non-being, without a voice. Spillers writes in *Interstices*, “Black women are the beached whales of the sexual universe, unvoiced, misseen, no doing, awaiting their verb.”⁶ The supersexed Black female body with simultaneous unsexed Black female results in sexualization with no sexual liberty or humanity. With a realization of their status, Black women must declare womanhood, status as a woman, and status as a human being.

⁵ Hartmann, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Ritous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals*, 240.

⁶ Hortense Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color*, 153.

Black women cannot comply with the traditional female gender norms. They are the breadwinners, the providers, and the mothers. Often, they could not live within the traditional nuclear family structure throughout the early-mid twentieth century. The lack of privilege and resources required to uphold the nuclear family structure prevented Black families from becoming the nuclear family that white society valued. Additionally, Black families favored extended family and communal parenting, which was not performed nor valued in white households. Black women could not become submissive homemakers while their husbands worked and a domestic worker mothered their children. That lifestyle was prescribed to only white women.

“The failure to comply with gender norms would define black life; this ‘engendering’ inevitably marked black women (and men) as less than human.”⁷ Therefore, black women must reclaim, declare, and redefine womanhood. Spiller uses African-American blues singer Bessie Smith as an example of reclaiming womanhood. Through her music, Smith is her own invention. Smith is empowered through the physical expression of her music and takes sheer pleasure in her performance. In this way, Smith takes control of her womanhood, sexuality, and bodily autonomy.⁸

Furthermore, Spillers concludes at the end of *Interstices*, “Black women do not live out their destiny on the borders of femaleness but in the heart of it.”⁹ Black women experience all elements of womanhood in extremes. Black women love their brothers, sons, and fathers, yet they must watch them be mutilated in war and work. Black women love their daughters but know they are raising them in a world where they may be subjected to sexual abuse. Black

⁷ Hortense Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color*, 163.

⁸ Hortense Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color*, 166.

⁹ Hortense Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color*, 173.

mothers do what they must to care for themselves, their children, and their families. They sacrifice for their families, including being deprived of their families to work. Although Black women do not ascribe to the traditional role of homemaker, they are the matriarchs of their families. They work to provide food, care for their brothers and sisters, and they mother their children to the best of their abilities. Black women uplift their race. This is feminine Black womanhood.

The final narrative discussed is the narrative toward sexual liberation and personal freedom. In *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* Hartman tells the story of a girl named Mattie. Mattie, a young girl who emigrated from Florida to New York City, was intoxicated with dreams of freedom. Shortly after her arrival, she learned what she had hoped to be abundant opportunities were only domestic work jobs offered to women of color. However, Mattie soon found sexual pleasure as a way to freedom; “this freedom was sensual and palpable – like the taste of Herman Hawkins in her mouth.”¹⁰ Although Mattie never anticipated finding sexual freedom as a way of liberation within the life of the oppressed, she found sexual power. Sexual power, which can be taken behind closed doors and hidden, creates freedom when prescribed freedom is only for some within society. Individuals like Mattie were the underground revolutionist of their time, as Hartman writes:

If it is possible to imagine Mattie and other young black women as innovators and radical thinkers, then the transformations of sexuality, intimacy, affiliation, and kinship taking

¹⁰ Hartmann, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Ritous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals*, 62.

place in the black quarter of northern cities might be labeled *the revolution before Gatsby*.¹¹

In the final section of *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, Hartman describes the lives of Black women who attempt to earn and experience freedom even when freedom is not available. Hartman describes the life of Mabel, a young Black woman who fled domestic service to join a chorus line and dance in cabarets. Through dancing, Mabel “announced the struggle against and imposed life, that sensual embrace unmarked by stigma and undisciplined by servitude... In its broadest sense, choreography – this practice of bodies in motion – was a call to freedom.”¹² For Mabel, dancing was a way to freedom even when physical and social freedom was not obtainable within the oppressive, racist society. At the end of Mabel’s story, Hartman tragically states that Mabel could never escape the fate of domestic work. Although Mabel could find freedom within the chorus, her freedom was temporary, as the crash of 1929 stripped it away. In the last chapter of *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, Hartman writes:

The chorus bears all of it for us. The Greek etymology of the word *chorus* refers to *dance within an enclosure*. What better articulates the long history of struggle, the ceaseless practice of black radicalism and refusal, the tumult and upheaval of open rebellion than the acts of collaboration and improvisation that unfold within the space of enclosure?¹³

There is freedom within the enclosure, where none is genuinely free. Dancing within an enclosure is an attempt at freedom that is waged or enacted. Hartman’s *Wayward Lives, Beautiful*

¹¹ Hartmann, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Ritous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals*, 61.

¹² Hartmann, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Ritous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals*, 306.

¹³ Hartmann, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Ritous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals*, 347.

Experiments, and Spiller's *Interstices* develop the idea of freedom and rebellion within the enclosure through their theories and narratives. Black women had to contend with systemic racism and hindering societal structures that sought to control their bodies, subjecting them to non-consensual sexualization and lack of legal protection. Despite this, they could reclaim their status as women because they live at the heart of womanhood regardless of not following traditional gender roles. Finally, Black women found freedom within the enclosure of society by embracing sexuality and sensuality. Upon reflection, it is evident that the enclosure imposed upon Black women's lives through systemic racism and societal structures did not fully restrict their agency or limit their ability to assert their identity as women, as seen through their acts of rebellion, reclamation of womanhood, and embracing of sexuality and sensuality.

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