

A NOTE ON METHOD

At the turn of the twentieth century, young black women were in open rebellion. They struggled to create autonomous and beautiful lives, to escape the new forms of servitude awaiting them, and to live as if they were free. This book recreates the radical imagination and wayward practices of these young women by describing the world through their eyes. It is a narrative written from nowhere, from the nowhere of the ghetto and the nowhere of utopia.

Every historian of the multitude, the dispossessed, the subaltern, and the enslaved is forced to grapple with the power and authority of the archive and the limits it sets on what can be known, whose perspective matters, and who is endowed with the gravity and authority of historical actor. In writing this account of the wayward, I have made use of a vast range of archival materials to represent the everyday experience and restless character of life in the city. I recreate the voices and use the words of these young women when possible and inhabit the intimate dimensions of their lives. The aim is to convey the sensory experience of the city and to capture the rich landscape of black social life. To this end, I employ a mode of close narration, a style which places the voice of narrator and character in inseparable relation, so that the vision, language, and rhythms of the way-

ward shape and arrange the text. The italicized phrases and lines are utterances from the chorus. This story is told from inside the circle.

All the characters and events found in this book are real; none are invented. What I know about the lives of these young women has been culled from the journals of rent collectors; surveys and monographs of sociologists; trial transcripts; slum photographs; reports of vice investigators, social workers, and parole officers; interviews with psychiatrists and psychologists; and prison case files, all of which represent them as a problem. (Some of the names have been changed to protect confidentiality and as required by the use of state archives.) I have crafted a counter-narrative liberated from the judgment and classification that subjected young black women to surveillance, arrest, punishment, and confinement, and offer an account that attends to beautiful experiments—to make living an art—undertaken by those often described as promiscuous, reckless, wild, and wayward. The endeavor is to recover the insurgent ground of these lives; to exhume open rebellion from the case file, to untether waywardness, refusal, mutual aid, and free love from their identification as deviance, criminality, and pathology; to affirm free motherhood (reproductive choice), intimacy outside the institution of marriage, and queer and outlaw passions; and to illuminate the radical imagination and everyday anarchy of ordinary colored girls, which has not only been overlooked, but is nearly unimaginable.

Wayward Lives elaborates, augments, transposes, and breaks open archival documents so they might yield a richer picture of the social upheaval that transformed black social life in the twentieth century. The goal is to understand and experience the world as these young women did, to learn from what they know. I prefer to think of this book as the fugitive text of the wayward, and it is marked by the errantry that it describes. In this spirit, I have pressed at the limits of the case file and the document, speculated about what might have been, imagined the things whispered in dark bedrooms, and ampli-

fied moments of withholding, escape and possibility, moments when the vision and dreams of the wayward seemed possible.

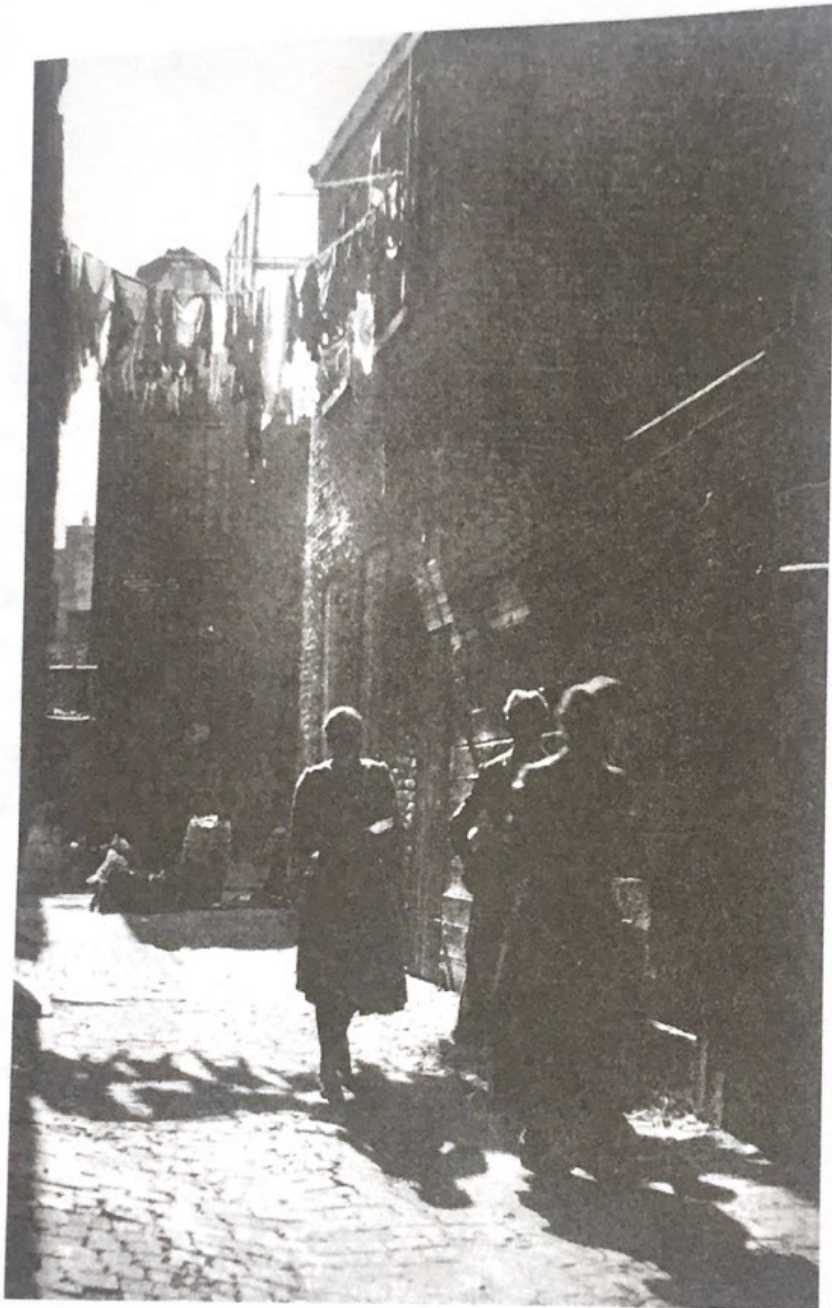
Few, then or now, recognized young black women as sexual modernists, free lovers, radicals, and anarchists, or realized that the flapper was a pale imitation of the ghetto girl. They have been credited with nothing: they remain surplus women of no significance, girls deemed unfit for history and destined to be minor figures. This book is informed by a different set of values and recognizes the revolutionary ideals that animated ordinary lives. It explores the utopian longings and the promise of a future world that resided in waywardness and the refusal to be governed.

The album assembled here is an archive of the exorbitant, a dream book for existing otherwise. By attending to these lives, a very unexpected story of the twentieth century emerges, one that offers an intimate chronicle of black radicalism, an aesthetical and riotous history of colored girls and their experiments with freedom—a revolution before Gatsby. For the most part, the history and the potentiality of their life-world has remained unthought because no one could conceive of young black women as social visionaries and innovators in the world in which these acts took place. The decades between 1890 and 1935 were decisive in determining the course of black futures. A revolution in a minor key unfolded in the city and young black women were the vehicle. This upheaval or transformation of black intimate life was the consequence of economic exclusion, material deprivation, racial enclosure, and social dispossession; yet it, too, was fueled by the vision of a future world and what might be.

The wild idea that animates this book is that young black women were radical thinkers who tirelessly imagined other ways to live and never failed to consider how the world might be otherwise.

Book One

SHE MAKES AN ERRANT
PATH THROUGH THE CITY



The Terrible Beauty of the Slum

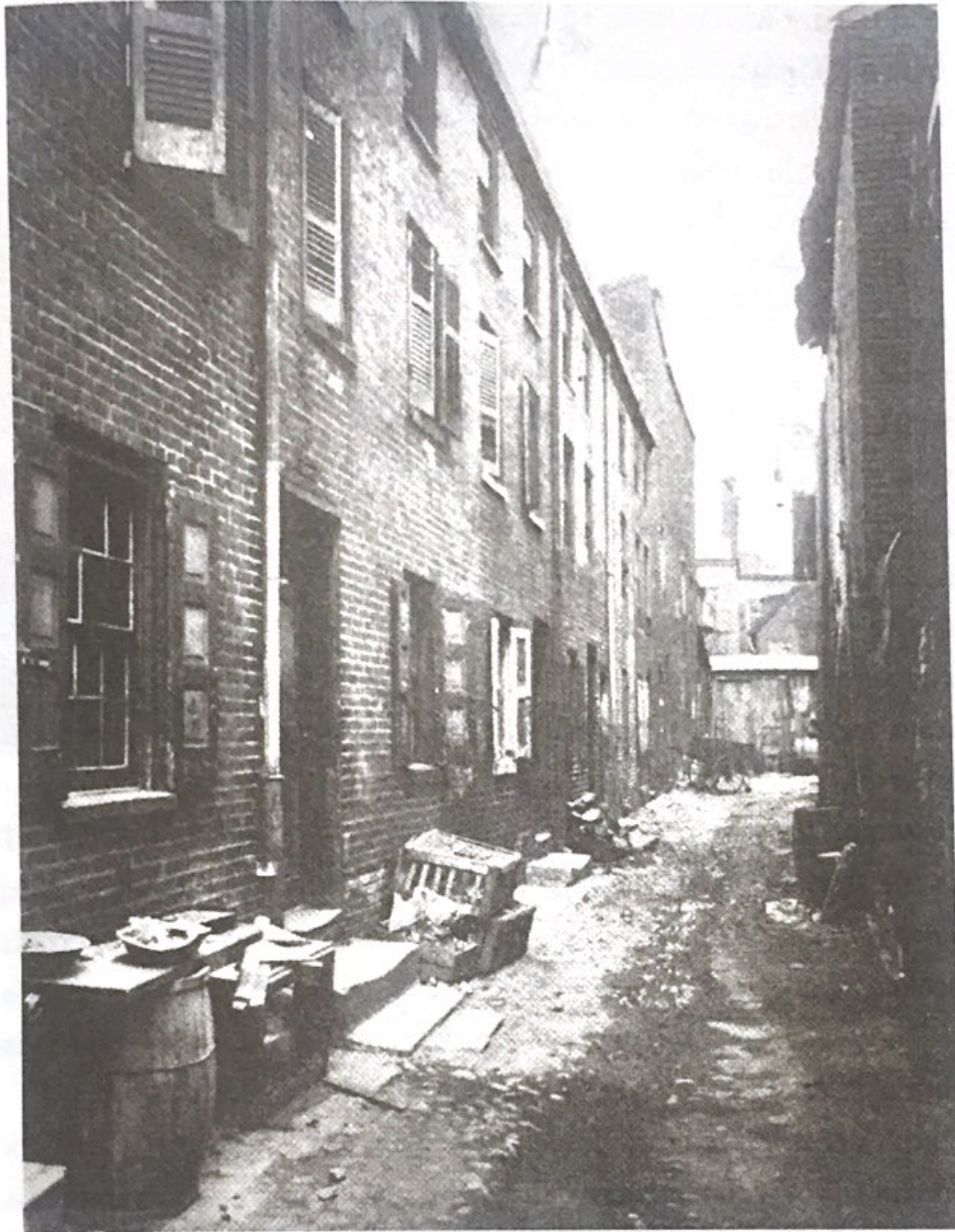
You can find her in the group of beautiful thugs and *too fast* girls congregating on the corner and humming the latest rag, or lingering in front of Wanamaker's and gazing lustfully at a pair of fine shoes displayed like jewels behind the plate-glass window. Watch her in the alley passing a pitcher of beer back and forth with her friends, brash and lovely in a cut-rate dress and silk ribbons; look in awe as she hangs halfway out of a tenement window, taking in the drama of the block and defying gravity's downward pull. Step onto any of the paths that cross the sprawling city and you'll encounter her as she roams. Outsiders call the streets and alleys that comprise her world the slum. For her, it is just the place where she stays. You'd never happen onto her block unless you lived there too, or had lost your way, or were out on an evening lark seeking the pleasures yielded by the other half. The voyeurs on their slumming expeditions feed on the lifeblood of the ghetto, long for it and loathe it. The social scientists and the reformers are no better with their cameras and their surveys, staring intently at all the strange specimens.

Her ward of the city is a labyrinth of foul alleys and gloomy courts. It is Africa town, the Negro quarter, the native zone. The Italians and Jews, engulfed by proximity, disappear. It is a world

concealed behind the façade of the ordered metropolis. The not-yet-dilapidated buildings and decent homes that face the street hide the alley tenement where she lives. Entering the narrow passageway into the alley, one crosses the threshold into a raucous disorderly world, a place defined by tumult, vulgar collectivism, and anarchy. It is a human sewer populated by the worst elements. It is a realm of excess and fabulousness. It is a wretched environment. It is the plantation extended into the city. It is a social laboratory. The ghetto is a space of encounter. The sons and daughters of the rich come in search of meaning, vitality, and pleasure. The reformers and sociologists come in search of the truly disadvantaged failing to see her and her friends as thinkers or planners, or to notice the beautiful experiments crafted by poor black girls.

The ward, the Bottom, the ghetto—is an urban commons where the poor assemble, improvise the forms of life, experiment with freedom, and refuse the menial existence scripted for them. It is a zone of extreme deprivation and scandalous waste. In the rows of tenements, the decent reside peacefully with the dissolute and the immoral. The Negro quarter is a place bereft of beauty and extravagant in its display of it. Moving in and moving on establish the rhythms of everyday life. Each wave of newcomers changes the place—how the slum looks and sounds and smells. No one ever settles here, only stays, waits for better, and passes through; at least, that is the hope. It is not yet the *dark ghetto*, but soon only the black folks will remain.

In the slum, everything is in short supply except sensation. The experience is *too much*. The terrible beauty is more than one could ever hope to assimilate, order, and explain. The reformers snap their pictures of the buildings, the kitchenettes, the clotheslines, and the outhouses. She escapes notice as she watches them from the third-floor window of the alley house where she stays, laughing at their stupidity. They take a picture of Lombard Street when *hardly no one is there*. She wonders what fascinates them about clotheslines and outhouses. They always take pictures of the same stuff. Are the



undergarments of the rich so much better? Is cotton so different than silk and not as pretty draped like a banner across the streets?

The outsiders and the uplifters fail to capture it, to get it right. All they see is a typical Negro alley, blind to the relay of looks and the pangs of desire that unsettle their captions and hint at the possibility of a life bigger than poverty, at the tumult and upheaval that can't be arrested by the camera. They fail to discern the beauty and they see

only the disorder, missing all the ways black folks create life and make bare need into an arena of elaboration. A half-dressed woman, wearing a housecoat over a delicate nightgown, leans against the doorway, hidden by the shadows of the foyer, as she gossips with her girlfriend standing at the threshold. Intimate life unfolds in the streets.

The journalists from *Harper's Weekly* gush in print: "Above the Jews, in the same [tenement] houses, amid scenes of indescribable squalor and tawdry finery, dwell the negroes leading their light-hearted lives of pleasure, confusion, music, noise and fierce fights that make them a terror to white neighbors and landlords alike." Aroused at the sight of elegantly clad domestics, janitors and stevedores, elevator boys in rakish hats preening on the corner, and *aesthetical* Negroes content to waste money on extravagance, ornament, and shine, the sociologist urges them to learn the value of a dollar from their Jewish and Italian neighbors. Negroes must abandon the lax moral habits, sensual indulgence, and careless excess that are the custom of slavery. The present-past of involuntary servitude unfolds in the street, and the home, which was *broken up completely by the slave ship and the promiscuous herding of the . . . plantation*, is now broken again, broken open in its embrace of strangers.

The senses are solicited and overwhelmed. Look over here. Let your eyes take it all in: the handsome thugs lining the courtyard like sentinels; the immoderate display of three lovely flowerpots arranged on the sill of a tenement window, the bed-sheets, monogrammed handkerchiefs, embroidered silk hose, and whore's undergarments suspended on a line across the alley, broadcasting clandestine arrangements, wayward lives, carnal matters. Women, with packages tied in paper and string, flit by like shadows. The harsh light at their backs transforms them into silhouettes; abstracted dark forms take the place of who they really are.

The rag seller's daughters idle on the steps that descend to their cellar flat. The eldest is resplendent, sitting amid the debris in her Sunday hat and soiled frock. The youngest remains mystery and blur.



The sun pours down the stairwell, pressing against the girls and illuminating the entrance to the small dank room, which is filled with the father's wares: rags, papers, cast-offs, piecework, and discarded objects salvaged for future use. He turns his back to the camera and eludes capture.

What you can hear if you listen: The guttural tones of Yiddish making English into a foreign tongue. The round open-mouthed sounds of North Carolina and Virginia bleeding into the hard-edged language of the city and transformed by the rhythm and cadence of northern streets. The eruption of laughter, the volley of curses, the shouts that make tenement walls vibrate and jar the floor. *Yes, oooh, baby that's so good!*—the sweet music of an extended moan that hushes the ones listening, eavesdroppers wanting more, despite knowing they shouldn't. The rush of impressions: the musky scent of tightly pressed bodies dancing in a basement saloon; the inadvertent brush of a stranger's hand against yours as she moves across the courtyard; a glimpse of young lovers huddled in the deep shadows of

a tenement hallway; the violent embrace of two men brawling; the acrid odor of bacon and hoe-cake frying on an open fire; the honeysuckle of a domestic's toilet water; the maple smoke rising from an old man's corncob pipe. A whole world is jammed into one short block crowded with black folks shut out from almost every opportunity the city affords, but still *intoxicated with freedom*. The air is alive with the possibilities of assembling, gathering, congregating. At any moment, the promise of insurrection, the miracle of upheaval: small groups, people *by themselves*, and strangers threaten to become an ensemble, to incite *treason en masse*.

There are no visible signs on shop doors barring her entrance, just the brutal rebuff of "we don't serve niggers." If she feels brave, she will shout an insult or curse as she retreats from the shop under the hateful gaze of clerk and customers. She can sit anywhere she wants on streetcars and in theaters, even if people inch away as if she were contagious when she chooses the seat next to them, and she can go to the vaudeville show or the nickelodeon on the same day as the white folks, although it is more fun and she breathes easier when it is just colored and she knows she will not be insulted. Despite the liberties of the city, there is no better life here than in Virginia, no brighter future to grow into, no opportunities for colored girls besides the broom and the mop, or spread-eagle in really hard times. Everything essential—where she goes to school, the kind of job she can get, where she can live—is dictated by the color line, which places her on the bottom and everybody else on top. Being young, she tries to dream another life into existence, one in which her horizon isn't limited to the maid's uniform and a white woman's dirty house. In this other life, she would not be required to take all the shit that no one else would accept and pretend to be grateful.

In this city of brotherly love, she has been confined to a squalid zone that no one else but the Jews would suffer. It isn't the cradle of

liberty or the free territory or even a temporary refuge, but a place where an Irish mob nearly beat her uncle to death for some other Negro's alleged crime; where the police dragged her to jail for being riotous and disorderly when she told them *go to hell*, after they had grabbed her from the steps of her building and told her to move on. At Second and Bainbridge, she heard a white man shout, "Lynch him! Lynch him!" after a colored man, accused of stealing a loaf of bread from the corner grocer, ran past.

When she arrives in the Tenderloin, the riot erupts. At Forty-First and Eighth Avenue, the policeman said, "Black bitch, come out now!" Then dragged a woman from the hallway, pummeled her with his club, and arrested her for being riotous and disorderly.

Paul Laurence Dunbar caught sight of her on Seventh Avenue, and he feared for American civilization. Looking at the girl amidst the crowd of idle shiftless Negroes who thronged the avenue, he wondered, "What is to be done with them, what is to be done for them, if they are to be prevented from inoculating our civilization with the poison of their lives?" They are not anarchists; and yet in these seemingly careless, guffawing crowds resides a terrible menace to our institutions. Though she had not read *God and the State* or *What Is Property?* or *The Conquest of Bread*, the dangers she and others like her posed was as great as those damned Jews Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman. Everything in her environment tended to the blotting of the moral sense, every act engendered crime and encouraged open rebellion. Dunbar lamented: If only they could be prevented from flocking to the city, "if the metropolis could vomit them back again to the South, the whole matter would adjust." Better for them and for us, the restrictions of the south, than a "seeming liberty which blossoms noxiously into license." Better the fields and the shotgun houses and the dusty towns and the interminable cycle of credit and debt, better this than black anarchy.

Most days, the assault of the city eclipses its promise: When the water in the building has stopped running, when even in her best dress she cannot help but wonder if she smells like the outhouse or if it is obvious that her bloomers are tattered, when she is so hungry that the aroma of bean soup wafting from the settlement kitchen makes her mouth water, she takes to the streets, as if in search of the real city and not this poor imitation. The old black ladies perched in their windows shouted, "Girl, where you headed?" Each new deprivation raises doubts about when freedom is going to come; if the question pounding inside her head—*Can I live?*—is one to which she could ever give a certain answer, or only repeat in anticipation of something better than this, bear the pain of it and the hope of it, the beauty and the promise.