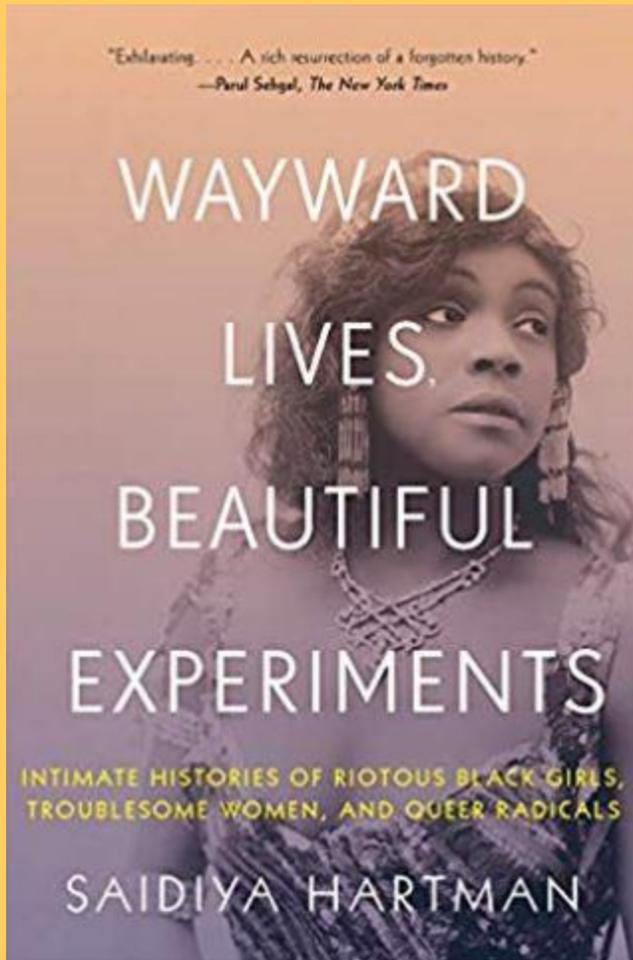


**S**aidiya Hartman’s exhilarating social history, begins at the cusp of the 20th century, with young black women “in open rebellion.”

A revolution in intimate life seethed in the dance halls, rented rooms and reformatories of New York and Philadelphia, in the women’s



prison in Bedford Falls, N.Y., and the Jim Crow railway cars on the Atlantic line. Young women, two or three generations removed from slavery, discovered the city — its promise of sensation and adventure — and tossed out the narrow scripts they had been given. They claimed sexual freedom, serial partners, single motherhood — or opted out of motherhood entirely. They quit their demeaning jobs and went out dancing instead. They fell in love with each other.

Long before the Harlem Renaissance, Hartman writes, “before white folks journeyed uptown to get a taste of the other, before F. Scott Fitzgerald

and Radclyffe Hall and Henry Miller,” these women were reconceiving the possibilities for private life.

Their efforts often brought only censure and arrest, the attentions of the missionary or the social reformer. Hartman discovered many of her proudly “errant” subjects in police blotters. Vagrancy laws tightly restricted free movement, and black women were routinely harassed or confined on suspicions of future criminality, on charges like “failed adjustment” or “potential prostitute.” “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,” Hartman writes. “They have been credited with nothing: they remain surplus women of no significance.”

And how they leap off the page. The cast of characters includes A’lelia Walker, whose mother, Madame C.J. Walker, was one of the first American women to become a self-made millionaire. Tall, imposing, terrifically rich and fond of carrying a riding crop at all times, A’lelia was notorious for soigné sex parties. There is Edna Thomas, a stage and screen actress who, at one such sex party, met Lady Olivia Wyndham, a distant cousin of Oscar Wilde, and memorable in her own right — she once cut her forehead on the head and then flung herself down a flight of stairs in order to be looked after by a particularly adored nurse. (How reasonable I suddenly appear to myself.) Thomas and Wyndham lived together in Harlem, famously content for decades; newspaper articles praised their “firm friendship.”

We meet communists and chorines, anonymous women gazing into shop windows. There are the female inmates at Bedford, abused to the point of torture, who initiated a strike with the only tools they had: their voices. They sang and screamed for months in 1919, and again the following year. We see the anti-lynching activist Ida B. Wells as a young woman refusing to give up her seat in a first-class train car, and a 14-year-old picked up for prostitution who called herself Eleanora Fagan (after her grandmother) and who would later be known as Billie Holiday.

“Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments” is a rich resurrection of a forgotten history, which is Hartman’s specialty. Her work has always examined the great erasures and silences — the lost and suppressed stories of the Middle Passage, of slavery and its long reverberations.

Her rigor and restraint give her writing its distinctive electricity and tension. Hartman is a sleuth of the archive; she draws extensively from plantation documents, missionary tracts, whatever traces she can find — but she is vocal about the challenge of using such troubling documents, the risk one runs of reinscribing their

authority. Similarly, she is keen to identify moments of defiance and joy in the lives of her subjects, but is wary of the “obscene” project to revise history, to insist upon autonomy where there may have been only survival, “to make the narrative of defeat into an opportunity for celebration.”

Hartman is most original in her approach to gaps in a story, which she shades in with speculation and sometimes fictional imagining — a technique she has used in all her work but never quite so fully as in this new book.

One bravura sequence opens with the photograph of a young woman walking in what appears to be an alley. We enter the world of the image — it comes to life — and we follow the woman through the neighborhood, looking over her shoulder at the slant of the sun in a stairwell, the Sunday hats and dresses, other women passing by holding packages tied with string. Hartman lets us see the world and then hear it: “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.” From sound she turns to smell, the “musky scent” of bodies dancing close together in a saloon, and, finally, to touch. She describes a stranger’s hand grazing the reader’s own, as we pass each other in a courtyard.

This kind of beautiful, immersive narration exists for its own sake but it also counteracts the most common depictions of black urban life from this time — the frozen, coerced images, Hartman calls them, most commonly of mothers and children in cramped kitchens and bedrooms. The women were forced to pose for these photographs to receive financial assistance, and the photographs, in turn, were “marshaled as evidence in the case made against them by the social workers and the sociologists.”

Against these images, Hartman is able to lay her own — of dashing women in top hats, laughing cabaret dancers on a rooftop on a clear day. She pushes past the social workers, the psychologists, the

policemen and the scandalized moralists standing in our way to reveal the women for the first time, individual and daring. “Look in awe,” Hartman enjoins us, pointing out a woman — and how can we not? There she is, leaning “halfway out of a tenement window, taking in the drama of the block and defying gravity’s downward pull.”