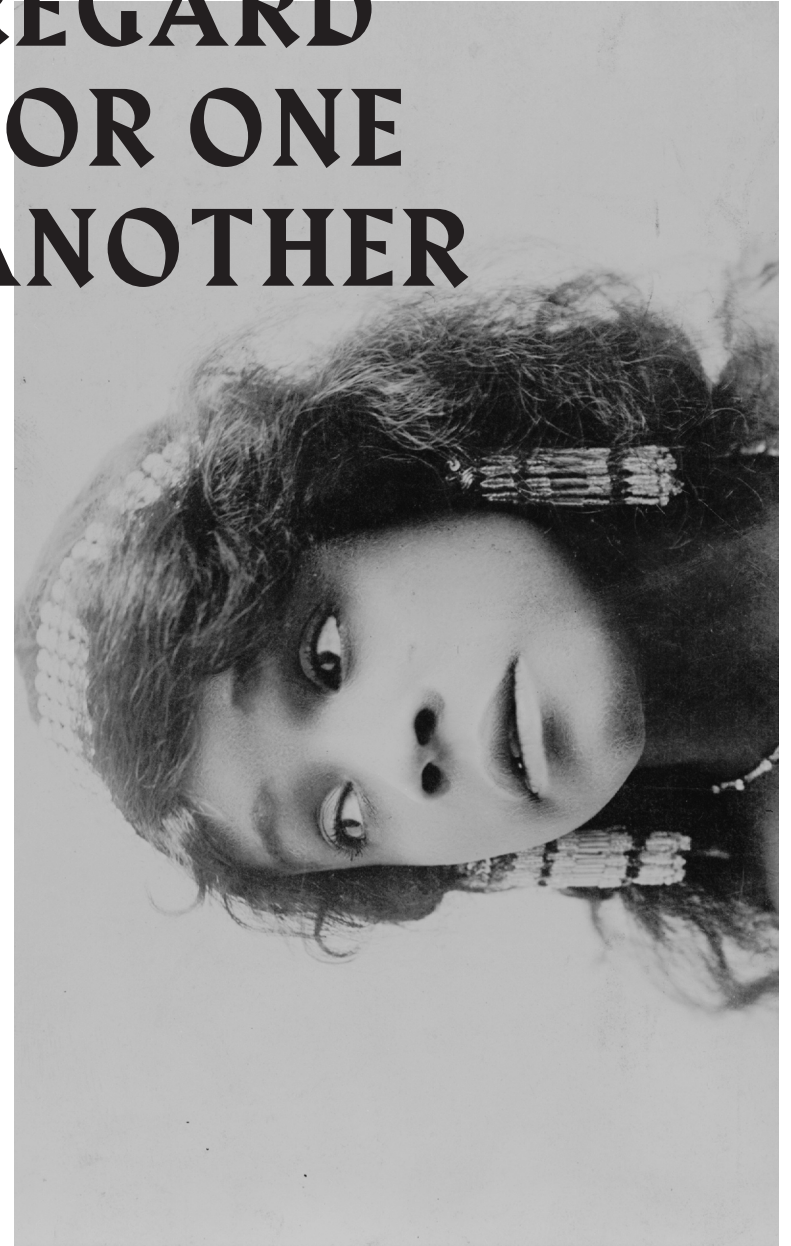


REGARD FOR ONE ANOTHER

In the context of such enormous structural violence, how was it possible to imagine that a beautiful life is possible? Even more unthinkable was the idea that one might create it, not in the future, but now.



A Conversation Between Rizvana Bradley
and Saidiya Hartman

Rizvana Bradley is assistant professor of the History of Art and African-American Studies at Yale.

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SH: Jennifer Morgan has observed that the historical complex of slavery has produced a very polarized approach to the maternal: either the maternal as “absence, dearth, negation,” and neglect, or the plentitude of the maternal, the idealization of maternal love and care. We deny the very real experience of maternal ambivalence. That’s what we have to bring to the table as well, but it’s scary to face that.

In her new book, Jacqueline Rose talks about the demands an inhumane culture places on the mother figure. That’s magnified a thousandfold for the Black maternal.

RB: Yes, and actually all this leads me back to our recent conversation with Hazel Carby over lunch, when she commented: “You love these women. You really love them.” I’m interested in hearing you say something about the relationships you cultivated with these women as you were writing, the intimacies that developed and changed through the very process of writing with and about them.

SH: Yes, I do love them. There’s affective investment in the lives that I write about. I try to attend to them with care. I have regard for them. That’s what love is. It is palpable in the book, and I am proud of this. It is what readers respond to. Love for Black women always feels unexpected and surprising, especially within the covers of a book. I do think it is at the heart of Black feminism especially, and Black radicalism generally. This practice of regard for one another is so important, so critical because Black women are treated with such little regard, such little regard in the world.

We—the surplus life, the nobody, the thing who falls out of the scheme of representation, the void, the tool—expect to be rough-handled. What we think and imagine has been dismissed and ignored. What we want has been belittled and mocked. So when our lives aren’t handled brutally or indifferently, but treated with care, you feel the force of that. I think that’s what Carby felt when she said I love them. Her words made me feel that I had achieved something.

REGARD FOR ONE ANOTHER

Saidiya Hartman’s Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval is an elegant study in the arts of refusal cultivated by young Black women at the turn of the 20th century. The singular discursive aims of the text center on Hartman’s commitment to highlighting the creativity, beauty, and possibility of Black women, whose sexuality, aesthetic ambitions, and imaginations consistently made them a target of restrictive Progressive Era reforms directed at the urban poor. At the same time, the concealed and hidden histories of eccentric, queer, and gender nonconforming figures hover at the edges of the photographs, letters, archival documents, and other ephemera that Hartman has included, revealing the centrality of these minor figures, not simply to the stories we ought to tell about Black historical subjectivity, but about American modernity.

Wayward Lives is divided into books, each of which serves as a unique compendium, or minor anthology, that demonstrates how Black women's labor, artistic experiments, and performative practices, constituted strategies of survival that clashed with the violent policing of Black lives, state-sanctioned segregation, city-wide austerity measures, and the systematic discrimination and inequality that led to the impoverishment of Black urban populations. Experimenting within and across literature, sociology, and art criticism, Hartman stretches the intelligible boundaries of social history to encompass the conceptual expansion of the plantation as a zone of racial enclosure to the city center, while illuminating the city's more obscure settings—the cabarets, speakeasies, and theaters, where extravagant and exorbitant female performers mingled with a Black female working class.

The social entanglements of these surplus women inaugurated a sexual renaissance that defied the ongoing criminalization of Black desire. And Hartman's dedication to these women, as well as the improvisational narratives their intimate lives generated, illustrates that their struggle for sexual autonomy was bound up with nothing less than an anarchic call to resist the socioeconomic ordering of a world that would readily disavow and violently exclude forms of Black feminist kinship from its political purview and allegedly democratic aims. Reworking ground from her essay "Venus in Two Acts" (2008), Hartman writes a history of the wayward that doubles down on the split critical imperatives to simultaneously "tell an impossible story and to amplify the impossibility of its telling."

It's the sign that something has gone awry in the developmental scheme from girl to woman and from wife to mother. It's meant to suggest a deviation or mutation of the terms of order. How can one be a girl and a mother? Motherhood happens too early—like precocious sexuality—and it also signals arrested adulthood, or a failure to achieve a normative adulthood. The term is fraught with judgment and condemnation, even as Du Bois wants to champion Black women. The girl mother is the central figure in the sociological discourse about Black life as a problem.

I think you're right to gesture to Spillers because she has so brilliantly named Black maternity as being at the center of this crisis of Black social life—and also as defining the potential of Black social life.

RB: Teaching your child about racism and the anti-Blackness of the white world is a burden or responsibility that the mother explicitly bears. There's something about having to always bear the affective burdens of maternity in precisely the way that you're describing. Having to transfer knowledge to your child about the anti-Black structures of the world is an ethical charge which is as impossible as it is enduring. I'm trying to say that there are weird, strange affective strategies that Black mothers have probably developed in order to grapple with the weight of having to carry and convey this knowledge. Perhaps it's the hardest thing to do—to instruct your child in the ways of a world that wasn't meant for them.

SH: Absolutely. What does it mean to undertake reproductive labor in a context where death and captivity are the prevailing schemes? If, in fact, that condemnation or threat of death is normative, then what does it mean to be assigned the task of making and preserving life as one's duty in this condition?

RB: I agree with you. I think we have to be able to think about how the mother's injunction in *Body and Soul* is injurious. But I also think that Black women's resistance to having to care in the face of violence is a way of showing genuine maternal love. And we have to be able to recognize their mutual reinforcement as a real structural thing in Black women's lives.

film is devoted to the impossibility of such romance. The scary nightmare comprises the largest portion of the film; it is a film about what can't happen, at least until the last scene. Which is so brilliant, right? *Body and Soul*, like *The Philadelphia Negro*, contends with the factors that doom love and make marriage impossible.

RB: That Micheaux chapter is also about the imperiled future that is already announced by the girl's mother. The mother's exclamation—"what that n—h got to marry on?" you write, functions as the "question on which Black marriage founders." Statements such as the one offered by the mother in Micheaux's film glimpse the affective lifeworlds of Black maternity. I'm always interested in mining the presumably protective, seemingly pathological drives that animate the statements of Black mothers.

SH: The use of the expletive—the "N word"—in that question is really the crux of the mother's question. What future can the Negro have? If the Negro is a category that is defined by negation, then the answer is "no future." And that's why the precise and "vulgar" language of the mother is so important. The question isn't, "What does Sylvester have to marry on?" But what does "a niggah" have to marry on? Absolutely nothing. Of course the proper answer would be property: property is what we marry on, because the whole arrangement is about property's transmission and protection and reproduction. So it is the question on which Black marriage founders, but it's not the question on which Black love founders.

RB: I also want to ask about something related here that I've written about, taking up Hortense Spillers's work on Black girlhood as unthinkable within the normative economy of sexual difference. In this book, you write about Black mothers, or, as you often refer to them, "girl mothers." Could you say a bit about these Black maternal figures who exist at the thresholds of childhood, adolescence, and adulthood?

SH: The term "girl mothers" is a term that Du Bois uses in that essay "The Damnation of Women." Are they girls because they are not "proper wives"?

RIZVANA BRADLEY: The historical figures you discuss [in *Wayward Lives*] negotiate between the practiced inhabitation of beauty and the politics of confinement. The book re-marks the historical specificity of their sexual ambitions, drives, and desires in relation to the structures of racial enclosure that contour Black life in the present. How is this central aspect of *Wayward Lives* tied to your previous thinking in *Scenes of Subjection* and *Lose Your Mother*, and how does this book mark something of a break from those projects?

SAIDIYA HARTMAN: In *Scenes of Subjection*, the goal was to think about slavery as a structural relation, to articulate the idioms of power that characterize the institution, to illuminate the foundational imprint of slavery on the social order, and to challenge the limited notions of slavery posited by legal philosophy and liberal politics. One of the challenges was to think about the transformative character of the everyday practices of the enslaved and the necessary limits or failures of such practice in the context of social death and racial terror. These performance practices were antagonistic to the structure [of slavery], and, at the same time, the slave-owning class, in particular, and whites, more generally, utilized and appropriated these practices for producing and reproducing subjection. The point was not to celebrate slave agency, but to note the critical valences of performance and other quotidian practices; and, as well, to acknowledge the insufficiency of any practice, short of abolition and ending the world structured by chattel slavery and racial capitalism, in redressing the conditions of the enslaved.

Similarly, *Wayward Lives* examines everyday practices in the context of the emergent racialized enclosure that is the ghetto. One racialized enclosure gives way to another—the extension and transformation of the plantation in the city. Again, there is the defining tension between the Black city-within-the-city and the ghetto. What are the structures that are shaping, forming, disfiguring, and making Black life? The book focuses on what Du Bois described as the third revolution of Black intimate life, the next major transformation of Black social life after the ship and the plantation. Forms of practice are being fashioned, yielded, invented, and elaborated to elude and refuse this new enclosure and to imagine how life might

be possible.

In *Wayward Lives*, I address the perception of the enclosure, the tactics utilized, and the forms of refusal that were fashioned to escape the enclosure, or, at the very least, the refusal to volunteer for servitude. There is a continuity or affinity between the structures of racialized enclosure, even as they are transformed and repackaged. The question is what kind of practices are created so that one might live in ways that are antagonistic and recalcitrant to these new modes of subjection and servitude. Involuntary servitude endures across this official divide between slavery and freedom.

RB: Theorizing about the formation of enclosure, you begin with an exploration of the ghetto as “not yet a zone of racial enclosure.” Collective Black life in the ghetto of this pre-Harlem Renaissance moment is distinctive because of its teeming intellectuality and sensuality. The ghetto is shaped by patterns of historical flight that you narrate through the anonymous women and sartorial flâneurs who open the text. You write of the historical formation of the ghetto:

“It was not yet a reserve for the dispossessed and those relegated as fungible, disposable, surplus, and not quite human. The ghetto was not yet a foregone conclusion. In two decades, this would no longer be true.”

In Book Three, you assert that Harlem was then “a Mecca, not a ghetto” a place whose “sense of the possible was stoked by the visions of all the other strivers running the streets, dancing in the cabarets, listening to street-corner lectures about the revolution and the new day...”

SH: The term “Harlem Renaissance” appears once in the book and only to emphasize that the wayward fall outside and exceed that framing. But your larger point is about the double character of the Black city as ghetto or open-air prison and as mecca or refuge. This tension defines the character of the Black Belt as the space of the enclosure produced by segregation, and the Black Belt as where we huddle together.

order and recognize it as essential—both to survival and the making of beauty—in this most terrible of places.

RB: I love the phrase generative disorder because it marks a sustained practice. Disorder is not chaos everywhere but signals the practiced dissent from order.

SH: Exactly. Fanon underscores this in *The Wretched of the Earth* when he observes that in a colonized situation, nonparticipation and refusal are foundational. Because what can the colonized do but refuse? These acts of noncompliance are significant, that’s obvious, but the real point is how this extended noncompliance, nonparticipation, and refusal by Black female actors has been under-attended.

RB: Perhaps we can shift to talk about love. A history of impossible loves surfaces in the artful rebellion of the wayward. You show us Black women whose commitment to love as a practice emerges from the imposed socio-economic restrictions and laws against errancy and vagrancy, in the Tenement House Act of 1901, for example. But there’s also something daring in the anarchic shiftiness of women who understand love as an ongoing experiment in the breaking and making of new social and political bonds.

SH: I think you’re right that these notions like “love” or “beauty” or “communal luxury” are made meaningful in the context of wayward practices. Because love that is not tied to upheaval or anarchy—or love not fashioned in a critical relation to the prevailing terms of order—leads us back to bourgeois romance and the marriage plot.

RB: Exactly.

SH: The short chapter, “In a Moment of Tenderness the Future Seems Possible,” was really important in that regard. In *Body and Soul*, Oscar Micheaux strives to craft a normative Black heterosexual romance. But even as he desires to do it—even as it is the trajectory of the film—most of the

the general strike become irreducibly bound up with the aesthetic.

SH: Great observation. It brings to mind your essay on *The Fits* [“Black Cinematic Gesture and the Aesthetic of Contagion”] as a way to understand riotous formations that are radically different articulations of the political and that fall outside of the prevailing frameworks.

I elaborate the concept of the strike as it is entangled with other terms: tumult, upheaval, riot, idleness, nonparticipation, refusal. There isn’t a hierarchy of struggle for me. The entanglement that you’re thinking about, in terms of the Black female social formations and the riotous, which is the articulation and transformation of a movement aesthetics. Vijay Iyer has this great phrase, “resistance as music,” and what I like about the phrase is that it tethers the embodiment of aesthetic and expressive production to social practice and social existence. So one way that a practice might articulate itself—a practice against the given—might be in something that we think of as music or noise, or in sabotage, or the gestural formation that you examine.

RB: That’s where I see a strong parallel between what you just said—not thinking in hierarchal terms about the difference between “strike” and “riot”—and what I was writing about. I was thinking about the deep sociality of the riot, in relation to Black social dance forms. I enjoy theorizing the relationship between noise and music, improvisation and riotous form, and the way performative practices anticipate riotous sociality. Riffing with Fred Moten, one might say that the riot is something that is anarranged—black dance circles that move in formation and just as soon shift into counterformation, that itinerant practice of anarranging the line, for me, is itself the riot.

SH: I like that. In focusing on riotous sound, I wanted to emphasize the creative making that is at the heart of tumult and upheaval, at the heart of Black noise. I wanted to engage the radical art of undoing, to regard it as a practice of improvisation, but one not tethered to the cult of male genius. So how do we think of the space of collective practice and generative dis-

RB: So we could say this wayward cultural history is part of the ongoing project of what you’ve referred to as writing a history of the present, of present dispossession, with and against the architectures of social death?

SH: As someone who has been thinking about the issue of social death for decades, the question I wanted to ask in this book is, what are the forms of life that unfold under the threat of death? *Wayward Lives* is neither a celebration of the Black city as paradise, nor a dire portrait of poverty and brutality. I hope it is a nuanced and rigorous account of Black social life in a context in which life cannot be taken for granted, since the most basic requirements for its reproduction are unable to be met or sustained. In the context of such enormous structural violence, how was it possible to imagine that a beautiful life is possible? Even more unthinkable was the idea that one might create it, not in the future, but now.

RB: Yes, and I want to shift to your nuanced exploration of the subjective ambivalence at the heart of W. E. B. Du Bois’s legacy. It seems his 1899 text *The Philadelphia Negro* provided an opening for the trajectories of sociological study you follow in *Wayward Lives*. The social history that unfolds in Book One pivots in many ways on Du Bois’s discovery that the slum is not a sociological fact of Black existence, but a “symptom” of slavery’s afterlife and the problems engineered by the institution of the color line. Du Bois, you say, was “living alongside those he had come to study.”

SH: Du Bois is such a complex figure in the book. In significant ways, his work provides the conceptual scaffolding and architecture of the book, even as I argue with and contest many of his descriptions of Black social life. Only after the book was completed did I realize that I had tried to compose the kind of book he assembled in *Souls of Black Folks* and *Darkwater*.

The Philadelphia Negro made so much possible for my own understanding, and, at the same time, Du Bois is the patriarch who must be toppled. [Laughs.] What I love is his large, structural framing of the Negro problem. In an essay, “The Development of a People,” he addresses yet again the crisis of the Black home, he describes a one-room shack in

Georgia as a failing and immoral household, but he notes that this failure is a result of a papal bull issued in the 15th century! [*Laughs.*] That's what I love. It's about the scale and placement of Black life within an account of the making of the modern world and the genesis of racial capitalism. I think that is what distinguishes Du Bois from all of his peers. He notes that the Negro slum is not a matter of deteriorated housing or overcrowding or crime; it is part and parcel of the structural afterlife of slavery, and entrenched racism.

Yet, his descriptions of Black social life are rife with the language of pathology, cultural backwardness, sexual immorality, and arrested development, especially as regards the failure to produce a patriarchal, Victorian, heteronormative household. Du Bois is very concerned about the small, yet significant, difference between Black and white rates of marriage, family forms, widowhood, and household arrangements. He is prescient in anticipating that what is not yet a significant difference, if unchecked, will become significant. And this divergence between Black and white households, which emerges in the city, will become significant and, by 1940, definitive.

What Du Bois can only lament as a divergence from white gendered and family norms, I accept not as lesser or deviant forms of intimacy and relation, but as the gender nonconforming and sexual variant character of Black intimacy. What Du Bois describes as failure, I describe as wayward forms of intimacy, family, and affiliation. They are a queer resource of Black survival, marked by the anomalous social formation of Black life that unfolded in the hold of the ship.

RB: I want to ask how you understand the relationship between urban space and the interiority of the subject. It seems there is constant movement between exterior Black life worlds, and the shaping of subjective interiority.

SH: That's an interesting question, and you may be surprised by my answer. I don't feel that I am describing "subjective interiority," even though I know what you mean. My concern is that subjective interiority inscribes a conception of both the subject and the kind of surface, or the plain, in

could be regarded as the primary leitmotif of the book as a whole. By this I mean: history problematically understands the genealogy of the general strike as part of a legacy of the communist left, tied to the revolts initiated by the masculine white worker. But in your book, you understand the general strike as part of the protracted history of resistance to racial slavery's afterlife. Following your essay "The Belly of the World: A Note on Black Women's Labors" (2016), you center the imagination of the general strike around Black women's resistance to a general economy of gendered sexual violence that the lawful mandate of *partus sequitur ventrem*, the transference of dispossession from mother to child, historically insisted upon and extended.

SH: Yes, I find the general strike to be an interesting, expansive concept that needs to be mistranslated, augmented, and extended in ways it's not meant to be. Basically, you're right, a classic understanding of the general strike is the proletariat in the context of a strike against industrial capitalism, although anarchists also have a more expansive notion of the general strike as toppling an order that isn't as restricted. We know Du Bois extended this concept to think about the enslaved, who are never imagined within that frame.

I think that one of the things that happens both in Du Bois and in C. L. R. James is that at one moment they are addressing the slave, the ex-slave, the fugitive—then suddenly this figure has been translated into the narrative of the worker. And in the worker's narrative, the very figure that I'm concerned with, the Black female, the fungible life, the minor figure, totally falls out of the frame of what constitutes the political notion of struggle. The "everyday resistance of enslaved women" in the context of a slave economy, for example the refusal to reproduce life, has never been considered as a component of the general strike. Yet, they too were involved in a fundamental refusal of the conditions of work and intent on destroying an economy of production in which their wombs and their reproductive capacity were conscripted along with their labor.

RB: But also for you, the feminist refusals that serve as the conditions for

fact, the cropped image of the girl in the Eakins's photo and that Bedford photo are reproduced in very similar ways. I hope this way of working with compelled images is productive. That it is capable of releasing them from the white gaze and surveillance. But I'm not one hundred percent sure. That is why I am still interested in the question. If I were totally sure, then I would have a method that I could apply to every object. But one must contend with the particularity of the objects and documents and the ongoing set of questions that emerge in the context of that encounter. So I need to consider that question again.

RB: In reposing and reapproaching the question, you hold the object in abeyance. It's really important that you say you're not sure if overlaying the photograph with your own text, as an act of defacement, is an adequate form of redress.

SH: Right. Is it sufficient? It may not be.

RB: As someone who works on images, that's a really exciting thing to propose: representation as redress is perhaps an irresolvable ethical dilemma, but something to which we ought to nevertheless critically attend.

SH: That's exactly right.

RB: Your reading of the female inmates at Bedford instructs us to attune to the riotous music behind images of confinement. It seems you are interested in listening beyond the bounds of the archived image, to partially echo Tina Campt's formulation.

The section that recounts the 1919 rebellion at Lowell Cottage—the revolt against the legal segregation of cottage reformatories following scandals of interracial sex and lesbian love—describes the “wailing and shrieking chorus” that emerges as a disruptive revolt against the state's legal disciplining and sentencing practices. Your description encompasses the improvisatory and organized “noise strike,” the sonic revolt, or the “din of an infernal chorus.” The sonic rebellion that emerges in this chapter

which life unfolds. For me, both the narrative experiment of the book and the focus on the minor figure are ways to think about collective life outside of the subject-object distinction by attending to the deep, shared embodiment of promiscuous sociality, to be situated in the urban sensorium in a way that exceeds and undoes the very notion of subjective interiority. And that's why the imagined moment of Mattie's pleasure in the flesh is described as an escape or release from the enclosure of the subject, too. I think that's why intimacy is more important as a term than sexuality. How do we think about the varied forms of connected, interlinked, interfaced, transversing existences?

RB: The “urban sensorium” you describe helps me think about forms of intimacy that are more visceral manifestations of Black sociality, intimacies that complicate any clear dialectic between the individual subject and world.

SH: That is exactly it, to think about these forms of intimacy and sociality, as opposed to the experience of an individual in the world with sexuality being privileged point for the exploration of the otherwise bounded subject.

RB: That completely makes sense, and troubles the phenomenological orientation of my original question. Your book is trying to revise the interior, self-sufficient constitution of the subject.

The book is striking in its visual layout, too. You've chosen not to have credits appear alongside the many images, which include film stills, archival photographs, et cetera. Can you talk about your process of selecting the images and the book's design? I'm especially interested in the two-page layout of the Thomas Eakins photograph that appears early in Book One. The girl Eakins photographed in his studio serves as a kind of zero ground for envisioning the minor figure. (I'm thinking about the resonance with M. NourBese Philip's *Zong!*, a text that designates the diminutive status of the enslaved girl as the meager figure who is afforded no proper name in the ship's ledger.)

SH: Yes, the photograph of the girl inaugurated the project. The image sent me back to *The Philadelphia Negro*.

And then things shifted, and I started to write a very different project, one that wanted to explain the transition from slavery to freedom with this image at its center. For years I didn't actually know how I was going to handle the image. It was an image that was really pivotal for the development of this project about wayward lives, and the ways that the Black female is conscripted to live the afterlife of slavery, especially the intimacy of the commodity, the prostitute, the slave. So what do I do with this image? What is the kind of story that I can tell about this figure? How would she have ever arrived there? The image set the terms of the project because it offered an account of the forms of racialized and sexualized violence which continued to shape, make, and disfigure Black female life.

RB: It's important to note that your reading of the photograph is prompted by the magnification of an image that was originally a small, "inexpensive, albumen print." The text appears over the Eakins photograph, so the reader is forced into a palimpsestic encounter, and prompted to negotiate the relationship between image and text differently than she would with an image that would appear more conventionally cropped and illustrative of the text. The inclusion of photographs in this project strains against their inherently evidentiary, indexical, and iconic function. I know you mentioned to me that there were issues you had to navigate in terms of copyright with the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. Can you say something about why this particular layout for this particular image, and what the book's design animates critically and conceptually for its core concerns?

SH: It is a very, very small image. I didn't even know until a year ago that I would reproduce that image anywhere in the text, but a friend who is a visual artist said, "If you don't, people are just going to Google it and find it, and then they're going to see it in whatever way they want. So what do you want to do to the image? Do you want to deface it? Do you want to destroy it?" I immediately printed it and started writing words on top of it. I thought of this both as a defacement of the image and a shield or scrim for

the girl. The textual saturation of the image introduced radically different kinds of value. I submitted that image with the manuscript, and the book designer transformed it. The transformation was brilliant because although the albumen print is very small, the girl is so psychologically large. She is bleeding off the page. This seemed appropriate because the minor figure defines the world for me. Someone asked me, "Did you have to crop the image because it was child pornography?" No, I had to get permission to crop the image, because a work of art is autonomous, and to reproduce the image saturated with text. That permission was required to engage it and place it in the ways that I did. I hope it is a critical reframing of the image, that it is both a defacement and a remaking. The saturated text also raises the question: is annotation possible?

RB: I am so compelled by your claim that the bodily violation she endures in being photographed "fabricates her consent to be seen." This image confounds disciplinary classification. Much like the image of this minor figure, your book as a social history, formally breaks away from conventional historiography, while making room for a different set of formal priorities. I'm thinking in particular about another photograph of a young female inmate at Bedford that appears in the chapter, "Riot and Refrain." Reading that photograph, you write: "Even a century later, reading through the materials assembled in the case file and poring over her letters, I am prohibited from calling her name, less to protect her than to guarantee her disappearance." Can you talk about brushing up against the impossibility of telling certain histories, and your continued insistence upon the methodological implications of telling them while exercising restraint?

SH: I don't know if I can answer that question, because that is the question I am always thinking about. It is one of the questions that is at the heart of what I do so I keep revisiting it. I am going to try to answer it yet again in the next little book. So a big yes to your question. In "Venus in Two Acts," I elaborated a method, critical fabulation, that could attend to both of those impulses. I would describe *Wayward Lives* as an historical poetics.

You are right to connect these two photos; they are twins. And, in