

Saidiya Hartman, Columbia University

The Anarchy of Colored Girls Assembled in a Riotous Manner

This speculative history of the wayward is an effort to narrate the open rebellion and beautiful experiment produced by young Black women in the emergent ghetto, a form of racial enclosure that succeeded the plantation. The narrative utilizes the reports and case files of the reformatory, private investigators, psychologists and social workers to challenge the primary tenets of these accounts, the most basic of these assumptions being that the lives represented required intervention and rehabilitation and that the question—who are you?—is indistinguishable from one's status as a social problem. The method is critical fabulation. State violence, surveillance and detention produce the archival traces and institutional records that inform the reconstruction of these lives; but desire and the want of something better decide the contours of the telling. The narrative emulates the errant path of the wayward and strives to convey the aspiration and longing of riotous colored girls.