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"Capacity Theft" in Esther Brown's Life

Saidiya Hartman recounts the history of a colored lady called Esther Brown who lived in the twentieth century in "the Anarchy of Colored Girls Assembled in a Riotous Manner." Hartman delves into her wild and ferocious personality and the ramifications of her rebellious stance against society. However, in the middle of the tale, Hartman leads readers on a historical detour under the heading 'the Future of Involuntary Servitude,' which left me wondering whose story I was reading. Even after returning to the tale of Esther Brown, she narrows her attention to the punishments and events in the Bedford reformatory facility, which involved a large number of other women and young girls. By the conclusion of Hartman's article, I was left wondering if I was reading about Esther Brown or a much larger tale. If the latter is accurate, the reader's intended background for Esther Brown's narrative would be substantially altered.

Hartman immediately immerses the reader in the world of Esther Brown by explaining the environment in which she lived and her attitude toward it. We learn about Esther's work habits, how she spends her free time, and how she yearned for more than what was available. Hartman describes her as "wild and wayward." She yearned for a different way of life in the world. She

yearned for enough, for something more, for something greater. a song about being young, impoverished, talented, and black.

Nonetheless, she did not attempt to compose a poem, song, or art. Esther Brown was what she created" (469). As with any normal biography, I developed an attachment to the central individual I was reading about. This led me to think that the remainder of the narrative would focus on her life and the events that transpired. Hartman had so far laid the groundwork for telling the tale of Esther "and her companions" (470), which had "gone unnoticed because no one could envision young black women as social visionaries, radical thinkers, and innovators in the environment in which these actions occurred." (471–471) This remark alone suggests that she will begin to explain why Esther and her companions should not be forgotten. Esther gets arrested with her buddy as the narrative progresses. "Because Esther lacked evidence of work, she was charged with vagrancy under the Tenement House Law" (473). Thus far, we have learned all there is to know about Esther as a woman of color within her time period, that we should place a greater emphasis on her and her friends than on others, and that she has been arrested.

As a result, wouldn't it make sense to believe her tale would continue? Nonetheless, Hartman takes a historical detour from the road we were on to discuss 'the Future of Involuntary Servitude.' We read of Esther's imprisonment in one paragraph and then go hundreds of years back to 1349 in the next. Initially, I assumed Hartman was just contextualizing the "first vagrancy law" that "was passed in England" (474). Nonetheless, this whole section is devoted to paragraph

after paragraph on the history of vagrancy laws and racial prejudice, with no mention of Esther until near the conclusion. Given the section's surprising and out-of-proportion length, I questioned as a reader what the section's real aim was. I'm inclined to think that understanding Esther Brown's tale requires much more than the background. "Involuntary servitude was not a single state – chattel slavery — nor was it a set time and location; rather, it was an ever-changing form of exploitation, control, accumulation (the severance of will, the robbery of ability, the appropriation of existence), and confinement," Hartman says. Antiblack racism had a profound influence on the formation of 'status criminality.' As a result, status crime was inextricably linked to blackness" (475). The reader is prompted to consider the racial discrimination in general, not only in terms of slavery in the past but also in terms of the issue's evolution through time as involuntary servitude in future situations.

Following the historical diversion, Hartman returns to Esther's narrative and subsequently to the Bedford 'reformatory institution,' where she has been transferred. Yet, once again, our attention is not on Esther alone but on all the women and young girls who are subjected to cruel punishment there. "There were 265 prisoners and twenty-one infants. The young ladies were between the ages of fourteen and thirty..." (479). Hartman takes the time and cares to broaden the reader's perspective, rather than focusing only on Esther and her companion. We read about Loretta Michie (479) or "Mickey" (482), and how her psychologist, Dr. Spaulding, characterized her as "simple-minded and a liar, she thought too highly of herself,' she had been with a good many guys,'" and how she was "attempting to seem youthful and innocent, but obviously wasn't"

(482). Why was Hartman devoting attention to these other secondary characters now? What role did they play in the tale of Esther? The psychologist's remarks here emphasize the prevalent mindset of the period, which held that all black people were guilty regardless of whether they committed a crime. We learn of "Other ladies [who] have claimed being stripped nude and chained to their beds" (480). Throughout the Bedford facility's upheaval, "They... shared a constant beat in the aim of toppling the cottage, collapsing the walls, smashing the beds, and destroying the reformatory so that it would never be capable of keeping another innocent girl in the jailhouse'... The chorus spoke in unison. They all shouted and wept at the injustice of being sentenced to Bedford, caught in a frame-up, and having three years of their lives stolen. Were they insignificant or non-existent?" (481).

The Bedford institution's inmates are referred to as 'one voice,' and they shared a rhythm of want to demolish the facility in order to avoid future unjust treatment of innocent colored people, compelling the reader to consider this problem not only in terms of the past but also of the future. And in the current day. Although the word 'jailhouse' is used in this context as a technical phrase, it may also be used metaphorically to refer to the stealing of ability regardless of the physical location—oppression will always make you feel imprisoned. I started to see a link between the part on 'the Future of Involuntary Servitude' and the Bedford facility at this point. The lives of these ladies were taken 'unfairly' and via discriminatory methods. As Hartman previously said in the section on 'the Future of Involuntary Servitude,' "it was a dynamic method of exploitation, control, accumulation (the severance of volition, the robbery of ability, the appropriation of

existence), and imprisonment" (475). Bedford itself was an example of involuntary slavery because of the women's harsh treatment and exploitative circumstances.

Although the poem begins by emphasizing Esther, the whole final paragraph is devoted to the other residents of the Bedford institution. Beginning with the assumption that "the Anarchy of Colored Girls Assembled in a Riotous Manner" would be about Esther Brown, I often became confused while reading the parts on "the Future of Involuntary Servitude" the Bedford facility, which concentrated on history and other people. Through rereading and more research, I determined that Hartman was not writing only about Esther but was navigating through the real and much larger tale of Involuntary Servitude that has continued throughout time. By focusing on Esther, we can follow her to the Bedford facility, where the 'steal of capacity' is on show hundreds of years after England's first vagrancy legislation was enacted. By recognizing that it did not end with slavery, but rather with the continuation of "exploitation, domination, accumulation (the severing of will, the theft of capacity, the appropriation of life), and confinement" (475), we as readers can see that the slavery mindset did not end during Esther's lifetime. We are left with the provocation to choose whether it continues in its current form.

It seems obvious that it does, given problems such as jail labor and uneven enforcement in minority communities. Esther's story, as well as that of all the other victims at the Bedford facility, continues to send a message today. This, I think, is what Saidiya Hartman intended for us to ponder as we navigate Esther's story. By drawing the reader's attention to previously

unconsidered women, we are forced to confront a past that never faded and examine the magnificent resistance that existed inside them.

Work Cited

Hartman, Saidiya. “The Anarchy of Colored Girls Assembled in a Riotous Manner.” The South Atlantic Quarterly, 117, 3, 2018, 465-490.