

Saidiya Hartman
**Extended Notes
on the Riot**

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Simone Leigh is a friend, a collaborator, a co-conspirator, and a sister. A shared set of concerns animates our respective practices, which can be described as an effort to articulate the conceptual rigors of black women's everyday life and ordinary use. A being made into a tool for others, equipment for living, an incubator of possibility, a refuge, a clearing, a dwelling, a loophole of retreat – these are some of the ways that Leigh has articulated the black female condition, the tension between the facts of blackness and the lived experience. Her work, like my own, is preoccupied with the question of scale: how to undo assumptions about the provincialism and narrowness of black women's life and work, so that the dimensions of their existence in the world, their contribution, their way of making and doing might be recalibrated. In Leigh's attention to the black feminine, not simply its myriad duties and functions or the long durée of abuse, violation, exploitation, precarity, and fungibility, but the black feminine as an architecture of possibility, as a grammar of (not) being in the world, I have found a critical language able to convey the epic reach of the black ordinary and the monumentality of the everyday. The solidity and mass of the work illuminates the paradox, expresses the antagonism: her capacity is yoked in service of others, exploited and devalued. She is load-bearing and breakable. The stark outline of the predicament is that the one who makes a home for others in the world finds herself outside the parameters of the human, not seen and never regarded, excluded and negated.

I have tried to describe something similar in my work on existence in a minor key, on what the chorus has made possible, on the radical thought that fuels the lives of ordinary black women, on the anarchy and beauty of colored girls: *Now it is impossible to turn your back, to carry on like the world is the same. Don't waste a breath asking why she has to hold everything the rest can't bear, like you don't know, like you supposed things were some other way, like there was some gift other than what she offered in her outstretched hands, or shelter outside her embrace.*

How does one convey the beauty of the gathering and how she brings us together? How she does what she does and what unfolds inside the circle? What has she been called to bear for all of us? Refuge is to be found in a skirt of raffia, in a rampart of clay. Simone Leigh's hands have created a world, have disrupted and evaded the dominant economy of the gaze, not by opposition or protest, not by explaining anything, but by looking otherwise, by retreating within, by a radical withholding that makes visible and palpable all that is held in reserve – all that

power, love, brilliance, labor, and care. All that beauty. The “Loophole of Retreat” exhibition articulates this world, this dwelling, this possibility. *It is impossible to turn your back, to carry on like the world is the same.*

The ultimate *nègre*, the exemplary slave, is the black female; she is the *everything* and the *nothing* that constitutes our modernity. She is the belly of the world, the factory, the crop, the implement of future increase, and the captive maternal that nurtures the world. Unacknowledged, disavowed, unloved, unseen – yes, but her existence is more than this inventory of violence. There is care and beauty too. Leigh’s body of work transforms how we look and instructs us to listen at a lower frequency, to inhabit this architecture of possibility.

The idea to produce a black feminist broadside for “Loophole of Retreat” emerged in collaboration with Leigh and Nontsikelelo Mutiti. In thinking about the kind of document we wanted to produce for the show, we revisited the pamphlet, “A Call to Negro Women,” produced by the Sojourners for Truth and Justice, an organization of radical black women.* We echoed the call of the manifesto to black women everywhere to stand up, give air to our grievances, fight, and demand the impossible – redress. Like them, we would make the call in our name and on our behalf; it was a call to assembly – *Dry your tears, and in the spirit of Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth, ARISE.* A few months later, hundreds of black women would gather at the Guggenheim. Nontsi Mutiti designed the broadside. Leigh’s work and Jacobs’s words inspired it, and I assembled and composed the elements. The broadside blends literary and visual elements in an extensive sampling of black radicalism. *The Anarchy of Colored Girls Assembled in a Riotous Manner* appears on the outer side and *Notes for the Riot, an Outline Drafted in the Midst of Open Rebellion, a Runaway Plot* is folded away inside. The broadside serves as a study guide and liner notes to the riotous music and noise strike of the sonic installation. *Notes for the Riot* is an assemblage of two centuries of black feminist utterance and radical thought. It is a reading guide and a plan for study inside the enclosure. The broadside offers an inventory of keywords and concepts essential to insurgent practice and to the world of beautiful objects Leigh has given us as incitements to thought, as provocations about value and existence, as a ready path and a line of flight away from the enclosure, as a directive: study this, the black femme as a figure and vessel of contemplation.

Inside the loophole, you can hear the slave

girl’s runaway tongue, after Harryette Mullen’s track on resistant orality; Nina Simone’s lyric about a bird flying high; Assata’s poem about contraband love in hell and her grandmother’s dream-prophecy about the escape from the cell; the subterfuge of noise that Debbie Africa and her cellmates made as they ushered the child into the world; Frederick Douglass recounting, a decade after the *Narrative* and having abandoned the burden of being a representative man, how he was not a solitary hero, but rather that they were all in open rebellion that morning; Harriet Jacobs instructing other slave girls to be cautious and cunning at an early age; Hortense Spillers explicating the gift and impossibility of the black maternal, with Joy James extending Spillers’s line in the captive maternal and Christine Sharpe in the womb as factory; Nahum Chandler’s lesson on anacrusis, the expectant music of the before, and his step-by-step guide to paraontology in Cecil’s music and Du Bois’s compositions; Tina Campt humming the frequency of black life; Fred Moten amplifying the more-than-pain of Aunt Hester’s scream; Orlando Patterson and Claude Meillassoux expounding on the structural design of “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child”; Sethe’s refrain, mother make your mark on me; Élisée Reclus encouraging us to let our lives be beautiful, foreshadowing Amiri Baraka, if we could see ourselves, we would dig ourselves; Harriet Jacobs musing aloud in a cramped cell about the feel of the earth under her feet; Hazel Carby spinning a genealogy of black women’s reconstruction and Thavolia Glymph providing the account of the war against the women, the war-within-the-war; Du Bois’s call: How does it feel to be a problem? and Chandler’s response: How does it feel to be a problem of thought?; Zora Neale Hurston chuckling, let’s bring this talk down to earth and make plain that we speak with our sister’s tongue in our mouth; NourbeSe Philip trying her tongue in the discourse on our hidden anguish; Gloria Wekker and Omise’ke Tinsley whispering *mati*, just friends, the embrace of a lover, life in the hold; *still life, still life*, Sharpe utters and augments; Frank Wilderson’s full stop: there is nothing analogous to this!; Jared Sexton murmuring about social life and social death to the tune of “(What Did I Do to Be So) Black and Blue”; Riley Snorton introduces Mary Jones to the chorus, wedding the fungible and the trans; Dionne Brand cautioning us, do not for a moment forget the casual homicide of the dress, do not forget that nowhere has the assault come to an end; Zakiyyah Jackson speaks on it – the blackness of blackness or sublimity and the void; Rizvana Bradley chiming in about the lyric surplus that always exceeds and escapes; Sharifa Rhodes-

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Pitts takes it to the bridge: the shape depends on what it is designed to bear and who bears it; Ella Baker and Angela Davis affirming, yes, you have grasped the world at its roots, so you know the struggle is eternal; the chalk screeches against the blackboard as Denise Ferreira da Silva draws a diagram and writes the equation about blackness as matter signaling infinity, building with Gayatri Spivak's speculations on value, Cedric Robinson's *Das Black Capital*, and Sylvia Wynter's *Black Metamorphosis*; after the exercises on frequency and tonality, the chorus enters again, Glissant's refrains about free and forced poetics aerated by Ashon Crawley's black breath; Paul Gilroy, channeling Ralph Ellison and Seyla Benhabib, stresses the unsayable and the music of transfiguration; Wynter's laughter precedes the most beautiful cover of Aimé Césaire's "Poetry and Cognition" that you have ever heard – poesis as black capacity; Stuart Hall explicates the concept of "articulation" so we might understand the way the world works and how the structure holds together; Rosa Luxemburg decries the dangers of a policeman-like historical materialism and anarchists improvising in the air; Joshua Clover, finding his way to black music like the white boys from Liverpool, says the riot seeks to preserve nothing; Guy Debord mutters shyly about a theoretical account of practical action, because he knows philosophy is nothing compared with what they do in the streets of Watts, not interpret the world, but change it; Katherine McKittrick and Alex Weheliye introduce the deep beats and bass of the Roland TR-808 drum machine, crooning lyrics about black heartbreak, Fred Moten about what we owe one another and the generosity of the debtor, the secondary rhythms of the subprime, and Moor Mother making dissident music of all of this.

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*Beah Richards and Louise Thompson Patterson issued the call in 1951. Two weeks later, 132 women gathered in Washington, DC. A young Lorraine Hansberry read the manifesto in front of the home of Frederick Douglass. Mariame Kaba reissued the manifesto as a pamphlet in 2019.

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