In the discourse surrounding the historical examination of slums and tenements within the United States, the main narrative often centers on "How the Other Half Lives" by Jacob Riis, a photographic seminal work published in 1890(Riis). This photographic exploration provides a firsthand experience of daily life within the slums. It offers vivid depictions that conjure mental images of the living conditions and sensations of these marginalized urban areas. Riis's visual documentation, characterized by poignant photographs, has become the main element of historical examinations, because of its effectiveness in eliciting reformative responses from its intended audience, primarily the white middle-class of the time. After the publication of this work, a surge in resources, dedicated committees, and legislative efforts emerged, aiming to uplift and improve conditions within these communities(Britannica).

However, the essay "The Terrible Beauty of the Slums" by Saidiya Hartman introduces a contrasting perspective, challenging the usefulness of these visual representations. Noteworthy is the essay's critique of reformers who sought to encapsulate the essence of the slums through photography. The assertion is made that reformers, in their attempts to encapsulate the slum experience, often lost sight behind the camera and failed to truly grasp the lived realities, capturing predominantly images of everyday items – "the buildings, the kitchenettes, the clotheslines, and the outhouses," as well as streets "when hardly no one is there"

(Hartman. 40). These reform driven images constrict a holistic understanding of the complex and nuanced dimensions of life in the slums during this time period. Perceiving the slum solely through the lens of a reformers' photographs creates a reductionist interpretation of what precisely life was like in these communities.

On further examination of Hartman's essay, the observer can see Hartman scrutinizes the elements omitted from the photographs yet still employs them as a foundation for comprehension, skillfully unveiling a more authentic depiction of life within the slums. Utilizing her own research and contextual evidence, she delves into the gaps and omissions within the historical source, a methodology she frequently employs and termed "crucial fabulation." In this essay, Hartman's critical fabulation takes on a unique significance, as it skillfully repositions the observer's lens through which the reformers' images are viewed. This approach enables these images to transcend their reductionist interpretation, offering profound insights into the realities of life within the slums.

Saidiya Hartman initiates the exploration by honing in on the absence of representation in photographic reform, particularly focusing on a young black girl. Hartman strategically begins her narrative with, "You can find her in the group of beautiful thugs and too-fast girls"(39). This deliberate choice exemplifies Hartman's critical fabulation. By drawing attention to the girl's life which was conspicuously absent from the photographs, Hartman embarks on a journey of

creative reconstruction, weaving her own perspective into the visual compositions to alter the reformers' bias on the photograph. In doing so, she not only critiques the limitations of reformers' depictions but also amplifies the voices and experiences that were historically marginalized, enriching the depth and complexity of the original photographs.

In the course of Hartman's scholarly inquiry into the life of the black girl, a notable focal point emerges around the arrest of the black girl. A defining incident encapsulated by the essay's statement: "When she arrives in the Tenderloin, the riot erupts"(45). This storyline connects to a specific historical event in 1900 when May Enoch, a black woman, faced an arrest. The repercussions of this arrest reverberated as the catalyst for the New York City race riot of 1900, documented in a New-York Tribune article. The newspaper account narrates the ensuing disorder, injuries, and clashes, but curiously sidesteps the details of the riot's genesis. The photograph accompanying the article, captioned "A part of the negro quarters on the west side," initially appears as a visual encapsulation of the tension of the scene before the riot(New-York Tribune. 3).

However, Hartman's astute interpretation in her essay transforms this perception. By weaving in the quote "Black bitch, come out now!" spoken by a policeman, Hartman transcends the visual constraints of the image, articulating the racial tension and hostility embedded within the photograph(45). This auditory layer enriches the photograph's narrative, reshaping the viewer's understanding of the circumstances that triggered the unrest. Upon closer examination of the aforementioned photo, distinct patterns emerge, the poised postures of individuals reveal signs of intensifying tension. Hartman's insightful exploration underscores her proficiency in extracting intricate historical narratives from visual records, illuminating the complexities ingrained in the photographic artifacts of that era.

In her scholarly endeavor, she not only critiques photographic reformers extensively but also seamlessly incorporates an entire photograph into her

narrative. Hartman pairs this photograph with an intricately detailed two paragraphs: one, a traditional analysis and the other, a departure from the conventional analyses employed by many historians. This enables the reader to discern the stark contrast between their initial perception of the photograph and the perspective gleaned after engaging with Hartman's critical fabulation. The first paragraph presents a precise inventory of the visual elements within the picture, adhering to the typical analytical framework, “father’s wares: rags, papers, cast-offs, piecework, and discarded objects salvaged for future use”(Hartman. 42). However, it is in the subsequent paragraph that Hartman's narrative transcends traditional boundaries. Here, she masterfully articulates the genuine sensations one would encounter if present in that captured moment – "The guttural tones of Yiddish" and "The eruption of laughter, the volley of curses, the shouts that make walls vibrate and jar the floor"(Hartman. 42-43). By seamlessly intertwining visual analysis with a vivid evocation of sensory experiences, Hartman invites her readers to not only see but also feel the pulsating life within the images she dissects, offering a holistic understanding that extends to the visual photograph.

While critiquing these images is valid and reveals the reformers' intentions, focusing on the nuanced aspects that are not present creates an unintended and new message conveyed by these visual artifacts.Throughout her essay, Hartman's technique provides a compelling case study for reevaluating how we approach

historical photographs of reformers. This approach enables the observer to view the photographs from the perspective of individuals inhabiting the slum, rather than through the lens of the photographer. While it may be impossible to entirely eliminate biases inherent in the photos, they can serve as a framework for visually constructing narratives based on what is audibly and contextually absent from the image.

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