

In the Trail of the Ship

Narrating the Archives of Illegal Slavery

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The Middle Passage is a stench.

The Brazilian crew of the brig-of-war *Olinda* had been alerted that a certain illegal slave ship from Ambriz, a port city in northern Angola, had made its transatlantic journey and was looking for a place to anchor along the coast. Summer heat began to ease in the January twilight when an unknown vessel came into view.

A few Africans aboard caught the attention of the *Olinda*'s lookout. The commander maneuvered his ship toward the other vessel until he could make out the name on the stern: *Mary E. Smith*. Of this name they had been told. The definitive evidence of the ship's identity, however, was olfactory: the *Olinda*'s second lieutenant smelled the stench—*catinga*—specific to slave ships.¹

Like the scent of mule dung wafting off cobblestone streets, *catinga* was a familiar smell to any seaman of the nineteenth-century Atlantic. Ten years earlier, when the slave ship *Tres Amigos* arrived from the Yoruba kingdom of Onim (Lagos) to Bahia, its master and officer recounted that it emitted a “smell at night . . . so offensive, that to obtain rest, they were obliged to hang their hammocks outside the ship, either under the bowsprit or on the quarter.”² The word *catinga* was Kikongo in origin, signifying bad- or foul-smelling sweat, a sign of illness that contrasted with the good sweat of health. Its incorporation into the Portuguese language was deeply enmeshed with the slave trade.³

“To read the archive is to enter a mortuary,” noted Saidiya Hartman, poignantly evoking how the fragmentary records reflect the transformation of a person into a commodity.⁴ But the list of those rescued from the *Mary E. Smith* is not a figurative mortuary: many outlived their rescue from the

illegal trade for only a few weeks, or even days. So it vexes us to consider that the ship's captives appear in the archive not because they were commodities but persons "rescued" and later "liberated" from illegal slavery. By the time a scribe recorded them, most were long dead. Their deaths, whose dates the scribe noted with terrifying monotony and precision, are recorded in a list that documents their liberation. How do we read an archive that is both a memorial of freedom and a literal death record?

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"It's beautiful." A colleague startled me with these words upon seeing a photograph of a stack of manuscript folios I had taken in the Rio de Janeiro branch of the National Archive of Brazil, the principal repository of Brazilian government documents. (See image that precedes this article.) In the hushed, cavernous reading area, islands of fluorescence-lit desks emerge from the dark, an incongruous world just a few steps removed from the chaos of traffic and hawkers and the bucolic park right outside where cats, peacocks, and *capivara*-like rodents roam. I was examining records from Rio's House of Correction, a state prison that also held Africans who had been recently rescued from illegal slave ships. Each folio was nearly identical, the difference being the registration number of the African "rescued" and the cause of his or her death. I had taken the photo because I wanted to capture the excess of death and the resounding anonymity of the deceased. But when I looked at the image again, I realized my colleague was right: each manuscript was immaculately penned by a scribe who had recorded, painstakingly, with an uncanny precision, the nameless African, his or her registration number, and the horrific cause of death. The manuscripts were beautiful.

To what end are these records of horrific deaths created, with such beauty? Why did the scribe record each anonymous death with such care? What is, as Arlette Farge put it, the "organized topography" of these sources, the "different representations of reality" the archives of illegal slavery craft so carefully?⁵

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Tarps covered the ship's hatch. When the lieutenant lifted them, he had a clear view, through the iron bars, of the Africans trapped below.

"I never heard or saw a more distressing case of slave-trading than the one the *Mary E. Smith* has offered," observed a British consul.⁶ His US counterpart noted that the "mortality among the slaves on board has been dreadful, and the survivors, are represented, as little more than moving skeletons."⁷ To survive was to be devoid of flesh, barely holding on to life.

The suppression of the transatlantic slave trade to Brazil went hand

in hand with the flourishing of the illegal trade. Between 1830 and 1856, when the *Mary E. Smith* was captured, the nation received nearly eight hundred thousand illegally enslaved Africans. The trade's definitive abolition in 1850 encouraged traffickers to adopt increasingly draconian measures. This ship was a prime example: in late 1855, over 450 people, twice as many as considered "minimally humane" during the legal trade, were crammed into a treacherously small vessel at Ambriz.⁸ As the Bahian police chief noted a few years prior, "In proportion to the increase of repression, the horrors of the Slave Trade also increase; the care heretofore taken by the slavedealers of the convenience and health of the passengers has disappeared. . . . Hundreds of Africans come huddled together in a small vessel, in want of provisions and water, lying upon the casks, without a platform or second deck, as was customary."⁹ Notwithstanding the fantasy of describing the slaves as "passengers" and their traffickers as attending benevolently to their "convenience," the comment reveals the heightened brutality under the illegal trade. When the *Mary E. Smith* was captured off the Brazilian coast, there were, alternately, 320, 350, 384, or 387 on board, the fluctuating numbers reflecting officials' inability to keep up with the mounting deaths. At least 133 had already been lost by the time of the ship's capture on January 20, 1856, their bodies tossed overboard into the Atlantic.¹⁰

Scurvy. Starvation. Cholera. Macula or flux, known as a "sickness from Africa." These were listed as the "cause of such great mortality" of the captives in the overcrowded vessel, many of whom had soon "expired from exhaustion consequent on starvation and disease, their bodies being eaten into by vermin."¹¹ Disease similarly ravaged other Africans who had been rescued from illegal slave ships in the same period: Gastrohepatitis. Internal abscess of the liver. Acute pneumonia. Gangrenous ulcers. Pleurisy. Dysentery. Typhoid fever. Doctors at the House of Correction warned that the rescued Africans were "dispirited and overcome by fear because of the deaths they witness everyday."¹²

But mortality did not end with the seizure of the ship; death claimed the lives of those moved from sea to land, from land to the holding cell. The *Mary E. Smith* was rushed to Salvador, the capital of Bahia, "in order to avoid the great mortality assailing the Africans." Still 71 more perished, the ship becoming a floating morgue. Among the 313 who had managed to leave the ship and land on Brazilian soil, 76 were buried and 109 more were hospitalized, suffering from diseases contracted on board. By September 3, seven and a half months after the *Mary E. Smith* was captured, only 145 of those "rescued," and barely one-third of those embarked in Ambriz, were still alive.¹³ Death, however, was not the final chapter of their lives but the preface to their entering the record of liberation. It is

in the archive as mortuary that the captives ontologically transform from commodity to liberated person, delivering us a jarringly disjointed narrative of freedom.

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On February 21, 1856, a month after the *Mary E. Smith*'s capture, the marine auditor and police chief of Bahia province, Francisco Liberato de Mattos, judged the ship to be a "good prize" and its Africans to be "liberated."¹⁴ These legal proceedings were rooted in Brazil's difficult suppression of the transatlantic slave trade. Under British pressure, Portugal signed a treaty to ban the trade north of the equator in 1815 (whose terms were refined in 1817 and 1818). The ban was extended after Brazilian independence (1822), this time for all of the Atlantic, in an 1826 Anglo-Brazilian treaty that took effect in 1830. The following year Brazil issued a law prohibiting slave imports and punished those involved in illegal activity, declaring all those slaves brought from outside to be free.¹⁵ This infamous *lei pra inglês ver*, or law for English eyes, was brazenly ignored with the deep complicity of law enforcement and slave traffickers. This was, after all, the Atlantic world in the aftermath of the Haitian Revolution, when Brazil, Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the US South saw their slave-based economies boom in an Atlantic world fueled by the ravenous appetites of British industrialization. The illegal trade spawned new global trafficking networks that defied imperial, national, and linguistic boundaries with a vengeance. In Brazil, slavery remained a lucrative business, and the logic of wealth muffled most voices denouncing the trade and its threat to transform the nation into a "Kingdom of Kongo." Only in 1850 did it really make a concerted commitment to ban the transatlantic slave trade with the Eusebio de Queirós Law, which enforced the 1831 law. Illegal slavers continued to arrive in Brazil for several more years, however. The *Mary E. Smith* was one of the last recorded attempts before slave traffickers focused their attentions on the less patrolled Cuban trade, thus marking Brazil's fuller embrace of antislavery.¹⁶

Judging illegal slavers was the Anglo-Brazilian Mixed Commission and, after it was disbanded in 1845, Brazilian Admiralty courts, judges, and provincial authorities. Captured slavers were brought to the Marine Auditory to be adjudicated at the main court in Rio de Janeiro and associated courts in major port cities, including Salvador.¹⁷ According to the law, any ship captured after 1831 and judged guilty of involvement in the illegal trade would have its enslaved captives liberated. This was a misleading nomenclature, however, as *Africanos livres*, although translatable as "free" or "liberated Africans," became wards of the state, akin to children who were incapable of managing their own affairs. The Judge of Orphans who oversaw their administration turned them over to individuals and, later,

organizations, which the Africans would serve for a period of fourteen years, after which they were eligible for actual emancipation. Often these limits were ignored.

Brazil's attitude toward Africans informed this status. Although the postcolonial elite embraced a very inclusive national identity based on the mixture of the "three races" of African, Indian, and Portuguese and extended citizenship to Brazilian-born freedpeople and "civilized" Indians, Africans were never welcomed but disdained as a stain that was best removed.¹⁸ The liberated African status was premised on their being temporary residents who would be "reexported" back to Africa.¹⁹

Recent works have illuminated the liberated Africans' lived experience. Forced into hard labor on public works projects and trafficked great distances during and beyond their mandatory service period, their everyday experience was often barely distinguishable from that of slaves. Nonetheless, liberated Africans had special legal recognition and a pathway to full liberty from wardship. These options were not available to the enslaved, including the hundreds of thousands who were held illegally. They would have to await manumission, which too often depended on the masters' vagaries, the freedom it promised precarious.²⁰

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There are at least two copies of the handwritten registry titled *Report on the Africans apprehended on the schooner 'Mary E. Smith' by the brig-of-war Olinda on January 20 of the current year with a declaration of their numbers, names, ages, and other circumstances . . .*²¹

When I first came upon a copy of the list in the National Archive, my pulse quickened. I had already gathered a considerable paper trail of the ship's journey, especially of its captain and its financiers. But the possibility that I would know the names, the ages, or something, anything, of those forced into this journey excited my hope for personal stories, however fragmentary—or, dare I say it, for the possibility of writing their biographies.

A closer look proved far more troubling (fig. 1). The columns were uneven, some filled with writing, others completely blank. On the right-hand page, a lone column consisted of quasi-repeating dates:

3 of February
4 " "
4 " "
4 " "
5 " "
5 " "

Nº	Nome	Idade	Quando morreu	Nº de dentes	De qual doença	Observações
418	Levi	20				
419	Antonio	18				
420	Francisco	18				
421	Isabel					
422	Isabel					
423	Isabel					
424	Isabel					
425	Isabel					
426	Isabel					
427	Isabel					
428	Isabel					
429	Isabel					
430	Isabel					
431	Isabel					
432	Isabel					
433	Isabel					
434	Isabel					
435	Isabel					
436	Isabel					
437	Isabel					
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459	Isabel					
460	Isabel					
461	Isabel					
462	Isabel					
463	Isabel					
464	Isabel					
465	Isabel					
466	Isabel					
467	Isabel					
468	Isabel					
469	Isabel					
470	Isabel					
471	Isabel					
472	Isabel					

Figure 1. The first pages of the *Mary E. Smith* report (copy 2). On the right side, the lone column with annotations records “When they died.” The ship was captured on January 20, 1856; all of the Africans recorded here died in early February. Arquivo Nacional, Rio de Janeiro, IJ6 472. Photograph by the author.

There was no clear chronology. Sometimes a February date was followed by March or April, then another February, mostly February. The top of the column read: “When they died”; 172 in the list were already deceased.

In this regard, this list is indeed a mortuary. To see rows of the already dead seems a resounding final word on the illegal slave trade and the violence inflicted on women, men, and children whose stories we will never know. This sensation is particularly heightened by their ages: eleven, thirteen, seventeen. They are the casualties of the illegal trade, whose thirst for labor drove its participants to prey on the increasingly young.²²

My uncertainty about how to make sense of this report took an unexpected turn when the historian Daryle Williams kindly shared another version he had found. It was also in the National Archive, from a different bundle within the same series: Ministry of Justice, Police of Rio de Janeiro, slave trade suppression (IJ6). I will refer to Williams’s copy as copy 1, and the one I found as copy 2.²³ Apparent facsimiles of each other, they share the same visual structure, categories, and information. But the differences and omissions that emerge upon comparison reveal the ways in which the Brazilian state conceptualized those whom it liberated from illegal slavery. Copy 1 was very likely created first, for it contained information that was noticeably absent from copy 2. Both have the same title

page and are written on neatly lined sheets of paper. Eight columns drawn on a two-page spread create a starkly reductive portrait of a liberated African's experience. The leftmost column is the person's registration number, followed by columns for "Name," "Age," "Sex," then "Signs" in copy 1, replaced by an undecipherable symbol in copy 2. This column is followed by a category unique to liberated Africans: "To whom they were distributed"; then, "When they died," with an awkward postscript in the rightmost column, "Observations." The rest of the pages are filled with row after row of entries rendered in delicate script, concluding on the final page, in both copies, with a tally:

Total apprehended on 20 January as stated in the terms n. 223 to 225 of the apprehension act	384
Deceased during the voyage [from 20] until 31 January when they were removed to land as stated in said papers	71
Deceased subsequently on dates that were declared in the general report	168
Existing until today in the power of different parties as stated in said report	145
	384

Mysterious discrepancies conclude the lists: the different document dates (September 3, 1856, on one hand, September 3, 1853, a puzzlingly flagrant error, on the other) and the scribe's signature, the same name—the (marine) auditory scribe Ladislau Pereira Pinto—rendered in two distinct handwritings, the flair of curlicues on copy 1 diminished in copy 2, the S's unmatching.

There is also an erasure. Copy 1 is eight pages longer than copy 2, owing to the decision—by the scribe of copy 2, or perhaps following a superior's instructions—to exclude the writing of the "Signs" column, the only information, however fleeting, describing the unique markers of each person aboard the *Mary E. Smith* (fig. 2). In copy 1 the scribe drew the branding that slave traders had seared into each African's flesh prior to the Middle Passage, often specifying the body part—left arm, right chest, and so forth. Also haphazardly included was information on their teeth (perfect, filed, missing) that could indicate specific ethnic practices, and the shape of their head, ears, or nose. Sometimes such documents also included descriptions of ethnic scarification. These dismembered portraits of burned flesh markings, body parts, and scarification constitute what we can know about a ship's captives—an archive of signs.²⁴

Copy 2's omission of this information was evidently improvised. The scribe had specifically created the "Signs" column and left extra rows open on the first page with the intention of reproducing its content from copy 1, but never got around to it, or decided that descriptions of lost bod-

N ^o	Nome	Idade	Sexo	Sinaes
468	Amiranda	14	af. masc.	☐ no braço d ^{ta} , dentes por- fectos.
469	Ped	15	"	sem marcas, labios regula- res, dentes perfectos.
470	Paschoal	20	"	C no peito esp ^{to} , rosto largo, labios grossos, dentes levemente
471	Sulqueria	14	femin.	CM no braço esp ^{to} , dentes por- fectos
472	Pais	14	af. masc.	☐ no braço d ^{ta} , rosto largo, labios grossos.
473	Ramiro	16	"	4 no braço d ^{ta} , dentes le- vemente sem marca
474	Rafael	16	"	☐ no peito d ^{ta} , rosto comprido, labios grossos, dentes separados
475	Amiranda	19	"	B no peito d ^{ta} , rosto largo, labios grossos, dentes perfectos
476	Armando	14	"	4 no braço d ^{ta} , dentes perfectos
477	Rogério	15	"	4 no peito d ^{ta} , dentes levemente
478	Henrique	15	"	△ no peito d ^{ta} , dentes perfectos.
479	Alvaro	19	"	B no peito d ^{ta} , dentes por dentes
480	Rangel	14	"	5 no peito d ^{ta} , dentes por dentes.
481	Rogério	10	"	B no peito d ^{ta} , dentes levemente.
482	Horacio	20	"	☐ no braço d ^{ta} , rosto largo, l ^{ta}

Figure 2. Detail of the “Signs” column from copy 1 of the *Mary E. Smith* report. For example, no. 473, Ramiro, age sixteen, male, has a “4” seared into his right arm and filed upper teeth. This information was entirely omitted from copy 2. Arquivo Nacional, Rio de Janeiro, IJ6 525. Photograph courtesy of Daryle Williams.

ies were unnecessary. By the second page, he abandoned the intent. For thirteen pages, then, the “Signs” column is empty. Unlike in the House of Correction records discussed earlier, absent too are the causes of death.²⁵ Also missing entirely are the seventy-one who never left the ship and died by the time the *Mary E. Smith* was brought to Salvador; the liberation of souls was in the realm of sacramental law. The act of documentary creation and copying becomes a form of narration that omits what is deemed expendable. In the archives of illegal slavery, traces of past lives inscribed on each person’s body are rendered superfluous to a record of liberation. But the catanga remains.

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The archives of slavery in Brazil and the wider Atlantic world are multiple. “It has become common to speak of ‘the archive’ as though it were singular and hermetic,” noted Brent Hayes Edwards. “But there is never only one archive.” David Kazanjian similarly proposed that we “pluralize the archive of slavery.”²⁶ Both were responding, the latter more directly, to Hartman’s haunting “Venus in Two Acts” in which she expresses her struggle to write “a collective biography of dead subjects . . . as the practice of freedom.” Kazanjian critiques Hartman’s conflation of a deeply specific, Anglo-American literary genre—the autobiography, virtually nonexistent in the rest of the African diaspora—with *the* archive of slavery.²⁷ Indeed, “the archive” of slavery is a chimera. As historians we know slavery’s archives to be multiple, whether they are court testimonies, bills of sale, certificates of emancipation, police reports, newspaper ads, ledgers, ship logs, or memories and lore, among many other types of sources. If the archives document, and partake in, the reduction of people into property, we also find love, anger, desire; motherhood, rebellion, freedom dreams—the incredibly rich, complex world that enslaved and freed-people wrought amid astonishing violence. These lives are undoubtedly fragmentary. But no archive offers an exhaustive record of anyone’s life; fragmentation is not unique to the archives of slavery. *The gaps remain.*²⁸

Rather than seeking to fill the gaps, as it were, the report can be our point of departure to consider the archival grain of illegal slavery. How do the archives of illegal slavery come into being, and what particular kinds of knowledge do they produce?²⁹ What is an archive of clandestinity? How do we engage with these dissonant archives in which women, men, and children are reduced to merchandise but also reemerge from the slave hold into liberated personhood, already deceased or alive in a precarious freedom? This endeavor poses specific challenges: suppression was a national or imperial project, but its perpetrators were dizzyingly peripatetic, multinational, and multilingual (a diverse group dominated by Portuguese, Spanish, and US traffickers), demanding the same from us as we work across the archives.

The *Mary E. Smith* report was the result of a July 1856 order from Brazil’s Ministry of Justice to the Bahian provincial president, in observance of the 1850 law.³⁰ Article 6 states: “If the ship was captured with slaves aboard, whose importation is prohibited by the Law of 7 November 1831, the Marine Auditor, after verifying their number and seeing whether it coincides with the captor’s declaration, will record their [registration] number, followed by their names, if they have them, and all the signs distinguishing them. Experts will examine them to verify whether they are prohibited (illegally enslaved).” Once this was done, the auditor would place the Africans under his responsibility. The Bahian president added more categories following, in all likelihood, what was now a com-

monplace practice: “Those who died” and the “Destiny of those who exist,” rendered in the report as “To whom they were attributed.”

For the Brazilian state, creating these lists, and the related death records, had both a practical and a performative value. These records became an official archive of the Africans the Brazilian state rescued and liberated from illegal slavery while accounting for the traffickers’ crimes. At the same time, they were a public declaration of the state’s commitment to antislavery. Through the act of recording the Africans, including their destinies and deaths, the state presented itself as responsible for their care. Archiving the rescued Africans signaled the power of Brazilian law to recognize them as persons with names, ages, and distinguishing marks, thereby liberating them from the condition of commodities who could be sold and disappeared. If Brazil was keenly aware of its pariah status as an independent nation still steeped in slavery both legal and illegal, the documents became a public record of the state’s authority over illegality and its commitment to international laws suppressing the slave trade.³¹ Such records required a meticulous beauty.

Equally essential to these efforts was the archiving of illegality. Article 2 of the 1850 law required that the person who captured the ship “inventory and keep all papers under seal,” to be examined subsequently by the marine auditor, who would utilize the records to investigate the ship and crew.³² But more important, archiving struck at the heart of a practice that relied on forgery, secrecy, and denial. When the *Olinda* captured the *Mary E. Smith*, for instance, the crew was initially unable to locate the letters pertaining to the shipment of the captives. A sailor recounted that “as soon as the *Olinda* approached the *Mary E. Smith*, the passenger João José Vianna (the agent of one of the ship’s Angola-based owners) threw the papers overboard.” Nor did the *Olinda* find the “ledger and other papers regarding the ship’s administration, nor the navigation diary, and only four small notebooks, written in pencil, with notes on the nautical route.”³³ Often traffickers, having thrown their ships’ own archives into the Atlantic waters, went further, setting fire to their ships. Archival destruction freed them from accountability.

On the other hand, illegal slavery produced its own paper trail. The archives of the illegal trade can be nominally divided into three types: those produced by the state and its representatives (police, diplomats) tasked with its suppression, those produced by slave traders to circulate clandestinely within their own global network, and those produced by Africans who survived the trade. For a long time, however, traffickers and state agents actually worked in tandem, with diplomats signing off on illegal slavers with fake manifests and police officers pocketing bribes to allow a ship loaded with Africans to slip into port at night. The British

believed, for instance, that the documents of the *Esperança's* purported journey to Portugal “serve to show the facility with which papers and certificates may be obtained at the Portuguese Consulate at Bahia, for vessels concerned in the African Trade.”³⁴ Traffickers and owners also baptized their undocumented slaves, the baptismal certificates becoming coveted, legal proofs of ownership.³⁵ The result was a maddening archival slippage between the clandestine and the official, of records destroyed, forged, and intermixed. This bewildering array of ersatz documentation would facilitate keeping eight hundred thousand Africans in illegal bondage. If archives are a technology of state power, then the archives of illegal slavery also expose the state’s complicity and fickleness.³⁶ To work among them, we must learn their lexicon of subterfuge.

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Brazilian authorities accused the ship’s captain, who claimed he was en route to Cuba, likely to circumvent the jurisdiction of Brazilian law, of “tell[ing] an improbable story that is nothing but fiction.” He was in good company. The archives of illegal slavery reveal how those tasked with its suppression crafted and narrated particular stories about freedom. Paying attention to these stories in turn allows us to discern the archives’ “reluctant counterhistories” that trouble these narratives.³⁷

In the report, the names, genders, ages, and signs of the *Mary E. Smith's* liberated Africans console us with the hope that we may at least know that much about them, if nothing more: eighteen-year-old Silvano, branding on his right arm, with a “regular” face and lips and perfect teeth, was sent to, and works for, the Santa Casa da Misericórdia following a March 4 order. Seventeen-year-old Eugenia, a heart seared into her right leg and two filed front teeth, died on August 22. All have Western, not African, names (Valerio, Narcizo, Balthazar, etc.), with some appearing in peculiar ways. In sections of the report, clusters of names appear beginning with the same letter, for example, no. 501 Francisco, no. 502 Firmino, no. 503 Fernando, no. 504 Febrônio, no. 505 Feliciano, no. 506 Fausto, no. 507 Francisconi, no. 508 Fabião, no. 509 Facundo. How was this information recorded? The numbered entries intimate that the apprehended captives, many of them children, lined up and gave the Brazilian official their names and ages, and a group of them had names beginning with the same letter. Here was the Brazilian state’s archiving in action, each African captive rescued and entered into the record as a person under its protection.

However, the orderliness conveyed by the carefully crafted list is incongruous with the unmitigated horror of the ship’s capture. In this incongruity between the numbered and alphabetized report and the “dreadful . . . mortality among the slaves on board” whose survivors were

“little more than moving skeletons,” we can begin to see the artifice of the archives.³⁸

The official entrusted with creating these reports of rescue followed certain procedures. Boarding a vessel full of dying and sick captives, he assessed their condition, body markings, and other traits. What followed was largely his prerogative. He annotated what he perceived to be their age and, rather than asking for their African names, arbitrarily assigned them Western names, probably moving down the alphabet. This explains the cluster of “F” names in the report.³⁹ Scholars of illegal slavery have found scant evidence of any interaction between the officials and the captives, most of whom did not speak Portuguese and would have been too weakened to communicate.⁴⁰ To know that the names and ages of each African were fictions spun by Brazilian officials to create a record of their rescue leaves us with the bleak realization that the only things in the report that may have exceeded the realm of archival invention were their fragmented “signs”—erased from copy 2—and their date of death. Their names are unknowable. If they survived, they would henceforth appear only with these new names.

But in the eyes of the state, it was a cause for celebration. The Bahian police chief began his report of the *Mary E. Smith* capture by alluding to his “duty to give Your Excellency the detailed information of this *happy occurrence*.”⁴¹ Foreign minister José Paranhos later thanked Her Britannic Majesty’s congratulating the Brazilian imperial government for an event that “evidently demonstrates the zeal with which Brazilian authorities take to heart the repression of the African trade.”⁴² This was the Brazilian state’s narration of the *Mary E. Smith* capture: a sovereign nation whose zealous commitment to the suppression of the transatlantic trade deserved British accolades. In this story, a memorial of liberation that was also a death record harbored no contradiction.

Yet there is something unsettling, even grotesque, about these correspondences. Certainly they are exercises in formalities. Nonetheless, this expression of joy—“*feliz acontecimento*”—seems jarringly out of place when followed by the “deplorable state of the unhappy Africans.” Another phrase from the British legation two weeks after the *Mary E. Smith* capture has a similar effect: that the news of the ship with “387 slaves on board, 67 of which are reported to have died after her capture, unfortunately, from want and disease, has *caused the greatest pleasure to Her Majesty’s legation at this Court*.”⁴³ In British eyes, the *Mary E. Smith*’s capture was above all an occasion to project its own moralizing antislavery ambitions onto the Americas’ largest slave society. In these acts of narration, African names, and lives lost, mattered little.

Brazil’s success in capturing the *Mary E. Smith* “makes good satisfying sense” as an official antislavery narrative.⁴⁴ But for us to tell the same

story is to reproduce the narrative of state archives. The counterhistories reveal joy and pleasure jostling with body counts, invented names, and incalculable human suffering, leaving us with a conundrum: a story of human commodification existing in unresolvable tension with another story about freedom. Can the archives of illegal slavery yield only this single story of freedom, produced by a state that obliterated people's pasts and rejoiced in the "liberation" of the weakened and already deceased? Or is it still possible for the archives of illegal slavery to narrate other stories?

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There may be other counternarratives. Just twelve women appear in the entire report, which was typical of the illegal trade that skewed male and very young. There is something curious about the way the women appear in the list, however. Some are almost imperceptible among rows of men and boys, such as no. 471 Pulqueria and no. 486 Izabel, both of whom died before their liberation. But others appear adjacently, or very nearly so: no. 638 Maria and no. 639 Francisca, both sent to the Convent of Santo Amaro; no. 668 Carolina, hospitalized, and no. 670 Eugenia, who died August 22; or strikingly, five women: no. 689 Ignacia, no. 690 Urania, no. 691 Anastacia, no. 694 Benedicta, and no. 696 Senhorinha, some alive, some dead. If we cannot know their real names, their ages, and only the "branding on left breast, perfect teeth," is it possible to imagine something else about them? Perhaps, when the *Mary E. Smith* was captured and the official came aboard, these young women were in one another's company (women and children were often unshackled), and that is why they appear so close to one another in the report. Starved and exhausted as they were, perhaps they had found some solace as they shared the horror of the transatlantic journey and mourned for what was lost; perhaps they came together for the bewildering rescue and to confront the unknown that awaited.

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The archives of illegal slavery challenge our own desire for satisfying stories. Centering the experiences, however fragmentary, of the captives themselves yields counternarratives to histories of national formation, universal citizenship, and Atlantic world freedom. Postcolonial Brazil was deeply complicit in slavery's preservation. Legal and illegal slavery was rampant, and indigenous and African-descended people's freedom and citizenship tenuous. Only in midcentury did the dynamic begin to tip as Brazil's claims for modernity became increasingly irreconcilable with its deep reliance on slavery. Antislavery, however, did not inaugurate a pathway to freedom. Burgeoning throughout the Atlantic world and beyond in this age of abolition were new forms of labor coercion. The report itself, a record of liberation, was also a surveillance mechanism through which the state tracked its new servile labor force. The few who survived the *Mary E.*

Smith's horrific transatlantic journey realized that rescue was merely the beginning of an uncertain life in their new identity as liberated Africans.⁴⁵ Their deaths and afterlives trouble the narratives that have been formative to our own understandings of the past: slavery's rise and fall, the Age of Emancipation, the triumph of liberal freedom.

Scattered around the Atlantic world, many in locations with limited access (Cuba, Brazil, Sierra Leone, Angola), these archives have also confounded many scholars, who hesitated before their opacity. Their elaborate deceptions seemed to abrogate any possibility of recovery of black life. Today, however, many scholars are pouring energy into this work. To read across these multiple archives and attend to their narratives and counternarratives is to understand how the violence of illegal slavery resonates with the precariousness of black life in the present. Our work on the practice and pervasiveness of illegal slavery in the age of antislavery, spanning multiple languages and geographic regions, is also a necessary, urgent critique to revisionist histories celebrating the civilizatory effects of European imperialism.

What we have is an invitation to tell different stories. The archival traces of the *Mary E. Smith* captives reveal the violence of the illegal trade and of those who liberated them. We need to accept that we may never know their real names, that the gaps will always remain. But while the loss is unfathomable, the report is not the conclusion. Illegal slavery's multiple archives are an opportunity to pluralize histories of freedom, in which the official state version becomes but one narrative, and ruptured families and disappeared lives are the stories, not consequences. We can imagine stories about freedom that attend to the suffering and mortality of the illegally enslaved. Pluralizing histories of freedom also requires us to explore the archives of those who survived. Rarely do these exceed institutional archives. However, in petitions for release from wardship, in marriage records, and in testimonies of Africans speaking about their illegal captivity, we see how they formed kinships on Brazilian soil, fought for emancipation, and imagined different possibilities.⁴⁶ Refusing to engage these archives is to accept a single story.

• • •

The sight that welcomes the visitor upon entering the reception area of the National Archive's reading room is a row of chairs all facing a screen. Numbers appear on it notifying the next person to be attended. These seats are swiftly filled and remain so for most of the day. The women and men filling these seats comprise the majority of the National Archive's visitors: neither professional historians nor scholars, they are Brazilians who want to leave their country. With every new indication of the country's precarious hold on the present and an even more uncertain future,

these visitors multiply. I had seen them for many years before, but as the Brazilian economy and politics hit crisis levels, they fill the waiting room, patiently, holding old identity cards, letters, and other mementos in their hands that may help their queries. They come to the National Archive in hopes not of satisfying some genealogical curiosity but of finding their ticket out: an entry in a ship's passenger list, a naturalization document, something that will show their connection to a European immigrant ancestor who had come to Brazil. Today the legacy they bequeath to their Brazilian-born descendants is a possible future EU citizenship, a way out.

I mentioned this to my friend, a prominent Afro-Brazilian intellectual and activist. With a bemused look she remarked, "Such papers will never be available to me."

...

Joaquim Monteiro, a traveler in colonial Angola, felt the urge to explain that the "Portuguese and Brazilians call the smell that exhales from the bodies of the blacks 'Catinga.'"⁴⁷

Racism is an olfactory memory. Monteiro encountered catinga because Europeans in Angola did not walk, instead relying on hammocks that were hoisted onto the shoulders of natives who carried them around. When traversing a field of tall grass, the stifling heat caused the "perspiration to run in drops off the wet, shining, varnished skins of the almost naked blacks." Some of Monteiro's attendants would go before him "to open aside and widen [the grass] sufficiently to allow the traveler in his hammock to be carried and pushed through the dense high mass." Wet with their sweat, the grass "constantly slapp[ed] one's face and hands, to say nothing of the horrible stink from their steaming bodies. It is a powerful odour, and the quiet hot air becomes so impregnated with it as to be nearly overpowering." The memory of smell invited him to expound on racial taxonomies of the animal and human, black and white. "It is difficult to compare it with any other disagreeable animal smell," Monteiro remarked. "It is different from that of the white race, and the nearest comparison I can give is a mixture of putrid onions and rancid butter well rubbed on an old billy-goat."

In colonial Angola, the smell of ill health became the stench of racism and servile labor. In the illegal slave trade, it was the smell of filth and death. In the wake of the *Mary E. Smith*, catinga lingers in the archives across the Atlantic, leaving traces of lives lived and lost.

...

There is another list. Created on April 3, 1861, five years after the two copies of the report were created, it includes information on 729 Africans apprehended from three ships, the last one being the *Mary E. Smith*.⁴⁸

The “Observations” column notes that a handful were sent to the Amazon and others continued their compulsory labor. Dominating the column, however, are deaths, mostly from 1856. Then one entry catches my eye: no. 661, Seneca, Angola, age twenty-one.

A fugitive. *Está fugido*. One that got away.

Notes

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1. Arquivo Nacional, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (hereafter ANRJ), IJ1 472, Secretaria da Polícia da Bahia to Thomaz Nabuco d’Araújo, February 14, 1856.

2. British Parliamentary Papers (hereafter BPP), class A (January 1–December 31, 1846), enclosure (encl.) 1 in no. 12, Montgomery to Inglefield, Bahia, April 9, 1846, p. 44.

3. Ras Michael Brown, pers. comm., May 22, 2018. Today the term means “bad body odor” in both Brazil and Angola.

4. Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 16–17.

5. Farge, *Allure of the Archives*, 30.

6. BPP, class B (April 1, 1855–March 31, 1856), no. 163, Consul Morgan to Earl of Clarendon, Bahia, February 13, 1856, p. 219.

7. Yale University Sterling Library, microform, US Department of State, dispatches from US consuls in Bahia, John Gilmer to William Marcy, Secretary of State, February 1, 1856.

8. At nearly 3.7 slaves per ton (the ship was 122 tons), the *Mary E. Smith* transported nearly twice the ratio set for the legal slave trade by Emperor Pedro I in an 1824 decree. Tinnie, “Slaving Brig *Henriqueta*,” 520–21.

9. BPP, class B (April 1, 1851–March 31, 1852), encl. 2 in no. 201, João Mauricio Wanderley to the President of Bahia, Bahia, November 18, 1851, p. 338. See also Verger, *Trade Relations between the Bight of Benin and Bahia*, 361–63.

10. Morgan to Clarendon.

11. Morgan to Clarendon. I thank Manuel Barcia for the information on macula (pers. comm., June 19, 2018).

12. ANRJ, IJ7 11; quote from ANRJ, IJ7 17, Antonio Galea, House of Correction (RJ), to Thomas Nabuco d’Araújo, October 7, 1855.

13. Morgan to Clarendon; ANRJ, IJ6 525, *Mary E. Smith* report, September 3, 1856; Daryle Williams, pers. comm., December 7, 2017.

14. BPP, class B (April 1, 1856–March 31, 1857), encl. in no. 147, Report of the Council of the State (Marques de Abrantes, Visconde de Maranguape, and Eusebio de Queiros Couto), April 17, 1856, pp. 127–28.

15. Mamigonian, *Africanos livres*, chaps. 1 and 2.
16. Harris, "Circuits of Wealth," 426–27.
17. Decree 708, October 14, 1850.
18. Miki, *Frontiers of Citizenship*, chap. 3.
19. Cunha, *Negros, estrangeiros*; Mamigonian, *Africanos livres*, 50–57.
20. Chalhoub, "Precariousness of Freedom."
21. ANRJ, IJ6 472, "Relação dos Africanos apreendidos na Escuna 'Mary E. Smith' pelo Brigue de Guerra *Olinda* em 20 de Janeiro do anno corrente com declaração de seus números, nomes, idades, e mais circunstancias, começando do no. 417 immediato ao em que findou a numeração das prezas anteriores, e que é assim o lo da presente relação," September 3, 1853 (1856).
22. According to David Eltis, "Children likely made up a greater share of nineteenth-century cargoes than those of earlier periods; in addition, the child ratio steadily increased after 1810. After 1850 children made up 40 percent of cargoes and adult women a further 15 percent." (*Economic Growth*, 131–32).
23. Copy 1: ANRJ, IJ6 525; copy 2: ANRJ, IJ6 472.
24. A reproduction of scarifications is available in the list for the ship *Ganges* in Figueiredo, *Marcas de escravos*.
25. If flesh injuries, as Marisa Fuentes observed, "identified a person to other enslaved people . . . by their dishonored condition that branded them as commodities," becoming the "remains with which we must construct their history," in this latter copy they are erased (*Dispossessed Lives*, 16); on enslaved people's scarifications, see also Mamigonian, *Africanos livres*, 44–47.
26. Edwards, "Taste of the Archive," 961; Kazanjian, "Freedom's Surprise," 138.
27. Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 3; Kazanjian, "Freedom's Surprise," 136.
28. Thanks to Brent Hayes Edwards and Ansley Erikson for this point. See Edwards, "Taste of the Archive," 961; see also Brown, "Social Death and Political Life in the Study of Slavery," 1239.
29. Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain*, 47; Smallwood, "Politics of the Archive," 124.
30. Decree 708.
31. Williams, pers. comm.; Mamigonian, *Africanos livres*, 48.
32. Articles 2 and 4 specify the papers to be seized and kept, such as the ship's registry and passenger list.
33. ANRJ, IJ6 472, Secretaria da Polícia da Bahia to Thomaz Nabuco d'Araújo, February 14, 1856.
34. BPP, class A (1845), no. 36, M. L. Melville and James Hook to the Earl of Aberdeen, Sierra Leone, April 15, 1845, pp. 230–31.
35. Lisa Earl Castillo, pers. comm., April 19, 2018. On the various subterfuges traffickers employed, including document forgery, see Verger, *Trade Relations between the Bight of Benin and Bahia*, chap. 11; Silva, "Memórias do tráfico ilegal," 39–41; and multiple examples in Mamigonian, *Africanos livres*.
36. Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain*, 20.
37. Smallwood, "Politics of the Archive," 125.
38. Smallwood, "Politics of the Archive," 125.
39. Williams, pers. comm.; Mamigonian, *Africanos livres*, 45.
40. Williams, pers. comm.; BPP, class B (April 1, 1855–March 31, 1856), encl. no. 145, Consul Morgan to Mr. Jerningham, Bahia, February 4, 1856, p. 203.
41. ANRJ, IJ1 472, Secretaria da Polícia da Bahia to Thomaz Nabuco d'Araujo, February 14, 1856.
42. José Maria da Silva Paranhos to W. Stafford Jerningham, British legation,

May 7, 1856, in Paranhos, *Relatório da repartição dos negócios estrangeiros, Anexo B: Trafico de escravos*, no. 19, p. 29.

43. BPP, class B (April 1, 1855–March 31, 1856), encl. 2 in no. 142, Jerningham to Paranhos, Rio de Janeiro, February 4, 1856, p. 193.

44. Smallwood, “Politics of the Archive,” 118.

45. Ferreira, *Costs of Suppression*; Lowe, *Intimacies of Four Continents*; Mamigonian, *Africanos livres*.

46. There is a growing scholarship tracing their lives, the most complete being Mamigonian, *Africanos livres*.

47. This and the following quotes are from Monteiro, *Angola and the River Congo*, 34–38.

48. Courtesy of Daryle Williams. The other two ships are the *Ultimação* and *Relâmpago*, both from 1851: ANRJ, IJ6 525.

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