

# The Question of Recovery

## An Introduction

---

**Laura Helton, Justin Leroy, Max A. Mishler,  
Samantha Seeley, and Shauna Sweeney**

In 1843 Amos Beman, a black reverend from Connecticut, penned a letter to the eponymous dictionary compiler Noah Webster seeking information on the history of Africa and its people. In reply Webster wrote, “Of the woolly-haired Africans . . . there is no history and can be none.”<sup>1</sup> Looking back on this exchange from the vantage point of the present, it is easy to dismiss Webster’s response as a mixture of racial arrogance and racial ignorance. Of course “the woolly-haired Africans” have a history; it has been recounted in innumerable volumes over more than two hundred years. As early as the eighteenth century, black activists and intellectuals believed that recounting examples of black achievement in both antiquity and modernity would form a bulwark of counterevidence against deeply entrenched ideas about black inferiority.<sup>2</sup> By the twentieth century, this motley assortment of historical documentation coalesced into a desire among many black collectors and historians to recover black subjects from archives structured by violence and colonial dispossession.<sup>3</sup> Yet what if we suspended this initial impulse and took seriously Webster’s claim that there can be no black history?

This issue of *Social Text* takes as its starting point the generative tension between recovery as an imperative that is fundamental to historical writing and research—an imperative infused with political urgency by generations of scholar-activists—and the impossibility of recovery when engaged with archives whose very assembly and organization occlude certain historical subjects. In recent years, the field of Atlantic slavery and freedom has explicitly and forcefully grappled with this tension, as the limits of recovery have reshaped the parameters of scholarly

debate. Recovering the histories of Africans in the Americas originally emerged as an abolitionist tool in the nineteenth century and would remain inextricable from black freedom struggles well into the twentieth century. Now, however, the traditional relationship between historical recovery and freedom seems less self-evident. A new and influential line of argument posits that the violence of Atlantic slavery was so great, and the limits of its archive so absolute, that no amount of historical recovery could properly describe it, let alone begin to undo its damage. This premise has challenged the ideals that motivated not only early black historians but also subsequent generations of scholars who—like so many who study subaltern peoples—had carefully devised modes of counterreading the archive to recover black voices and agency from the ledgers, diaries, and other documents that recorded the subordination of enslaved people.

In 2012 we hosted a conference at New York University, “Against Recovery? Slavery, Freedom, and the Archive,” to consider this growing body of scholarship. We reimagined Webster’s claim of black ahistoricity as a provocation rather than a disavowal, and we asked what rubrics other than recovery we might employ for harnessing the potential of the archive, particularly in relationship to its dispossessed. “The Question of Recovery” emanates from that provocation and marks an interdisciplinary intellectual conversation that has become central to the study of slavery and freedom. The articles in this issue argue that we cannot resolve the tension between recovering archival traces of black life as a means of contesting legacies of racism and exclusion, on the one hand, and reading the archive as a site of irrevocable silence that reproduces the racial hierarchies intrinsic to its construction, on the other. Rather than assembling work that attempts to overcome the limits of the archive, we have brought together scholarship that inhabits those limitations and uses them to innovate new historical methods.

• • •

As the exchange between Beman and Webster suggests, early black writers believed that one of the most pernicious manifestations of racism was the exclusion of Africans from narratives of historical progress. Webster’s insistence on the impossibility of black history was best expressed in a more famous text from the same period. In his 1831 *Philosophy of History*, G. W. F. Hegel wrote, “The Negro . . . exhibits the natural man in his completely wild and untamed state,” and Africa “is no historical part of the World; it has no movement or development to exhibit.”<sup>4</sup> Faced with such an inauspicious beginning, it is perhaps no surprise that the field of black studies has been committed to the enterprise of demonstrating that Africans and their descendants live within the fold of history. This

endeavor sought to prove that black people deserved social and political equality; it tethered intellectual investigations into the black past to political struggles for black futures. In 1925 Afro-Puerto Rican bibliophile Arturo Schomburg captured this sentiment when he declared, “The American Negro must remake his past in order to make his future”—a statement that indexed a growing tradition of black memory work invested in archive building as a foundation of liberation.<sup>5</sup> The publication of Olaudah Equiano’s *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* (1789), abolitionist William Cooper Nell’s *The Colored Patriots of the American Revolution* (1855), Schomburg’s own extensive collecting projects of the early twentieth century, and the vast materials unearthed since the formal inauguration of African American studies as an academic discipline represent some of the tremendously successful efforts to recover black history. Whether as slaves, sailors, soldiers, dissidents, or revolutionaries, black people have been recorded ubiquitously in the history of the Americas and wider Atlantic world.

The consolidation of a global color line made historical recovery and analysis urgent matters for scholars of African descent invested in social change and revolution. In the wake of efforts to forge black internationalism in the 1920s and 1930s, C. L. R. James, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Eric Williams emphasized the world-historical significance of slave revolts, black politics under slavery and freedom, and the centrality of black labor to the development of capitalism.<sup>6</sup> By the 1960s, on the eve of decolonization in Africa and the Caribbean, intellectuals such as Aimé Césaire, Walter Rodney, George Padmore, Amy Jacques Garvey, and Frantz Fanon had inaugurated a critical historiographical tradition that both mirrored and served broader anticolonial and social-democratic movements. The specific political contexts in which these scholars researched and wrote varied considerably across boundaries of empire, nation, and language. Yet they sought to preserve and narrate pasts that could be used to contest global inequality, forging international bonds that exemplify Paul Gilroy’s conceptualization of the black Atlantic.<sup>7</sup>

This political-scholarly imperative became a hallmark of twentieth-century slavery studies across the diaspora. Gilberto Freyre and Fernando Ortiz highlighted the culture and politics of enslaved Africans as a tool to mitigate the marginalization of black peoples in Brazil and Cuba.<sup>8</sup> In the United States, Carter G. Woodson, Du Bois, John Hope Franklin, and others contested mainstream historical accounts of slavery as a benign or civilizing institution and challenged cynical depictions of Reconstruction and black citizenship as abysmal failures.<sup>9</sup> They also contested Jim Crow restrictions on black scholars’ access to archival materials at a moment when the records on slavery were often found in southern repositories and the majority of slave narratives remained out of print. The early impulse

toward archival recovery, then, was intimately bound up with battles against legalized forms of black exclusion from public life. In the civil rights and Black Power eras in the United States, the new social historians extended this political imperative, even as some critiqued what they viewed as the liberal integrationist tendencies of their forebears in the Negro history movement.<sup>10</sup> With increased access to archival material held in the South, from the 1960s to the 1980s scholars mined the records of slaveholders for narratives of cultural agency and everyday forms of slave resistance.<sup>11</sup> In the ensuing decades, an enormously rich body of contemporary literature has grown from this long-standing, evolving commitment to recovering black lives from archives.<sup>12</sup> The lack of evidence about enslaved and free black lives has presented an overwhelming challenge to scholars while simultaneously rendering slavery studies an exceptionally dynamic field.

• • •

Increased attention to the archive itself has challenged and reoriented this historiography. Archives have long served as the preserve of historians. More recently scholars in fields across the humanities and social sciences have turned to “the archive” as a subject and not just a source.<sup>13</sup> Crucially, this body of work has been deeply rooted in studies of colonialism, imperialism, and their attendant forms of racial categorization and subjugation. Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s 1995 *Silencing the Past*, a meditation on the assembly and retrieval of Haitian history, provided what has continued to serve as one of the most influential outlines of archival power and the mode of counterreading it necessitates: “To make the silences speak for themselves.”<sup>14</sup> Building on subaltern studies’ long-standing attention to the logics of historicism,<sup>15</sup> recent postcolonial scholarship interrogates archives as themselves artifacts of colonial bureaucracy and imagination.<sup>16</sup> And in South Africa, archivists and theorists have written about state archives that both recorded and, through purposeful destruction of records, secreted the classification and surveillance regimes through which apartheid operated.<sup>17</sup> In each instance, from the age of revolutions to the postapartheid era, scholars have approached archives as a mechanism of racialized discourse and governance rather than simply a storage medium.

This approach has had particular purchase for scholars of the black Atlantic. Simon Gikandi has argued that the history of Africans in the Americas is fundamentally rooted in two opposing, if linked, archives. One, embodied in the slave narratives, provided a sheltering ground for African American identity; but the other, forged between West African slave dungeons and the American coast, represented a place of “pure negativity.”<sup>18</sup> Scholars of slavery and freedom have recently proposed a range

of strategies for writing through, about, and against this bifurcation. In 2008 Patricia Saunders noted a “convergence of critical dialogue” about the archive among scholars of the African diaspora.<sup>19</sup>

Acknowledging that the archival form itself often precludes recovery, some scholars have transformed archival lack into a methodological tool, which exposes the transformation of human beings into property that set black subjects outside the realm of history. Indeed, the archive often records blackness only as an absence of human subjecthood, as when the enslaved enter the historical record as a number, a mark, or a notice of death. And yet, scholars such as Jennifer L. Morgan and Stephanie Smallwood, for example, argue that “the impossibility of recovery is inextricable from the moral imperative to attempt it.”<sup>20</sup> These attempts have often entailed forms of critical speculation that challenge what types of evidence count when it comes to making claims about the lives of the archive’s dispossessed.

Other scholars have called into question both the possibility and political purpose of recovering the lives of the enslaved, reanimating Orlando Patterson’s concept of social death—one of the defining frameworks for the study of slavery. Patterson described social death as the sociolegal process by which slaves were denied personhood in a variety of societies.<sup>21</sup> Scholars have turned to this concept to grapple with the discrepancy between a present marked by racialized forms of social negation eerily similar to those of slavery, and conventional frameworks for understanding the black past that revolve around the progress from slavery to freedom. They suggest that the continuity of racial logics of exploitation provides a more useful lens through which to view black history in the Americas than whiggish accounts of gradual improvement over time. In a key formulation, Saidiya Hartman has argued that recovery is impossible because the social death of slavery renders dispossession the defining feature of black history.<sup>22</sup> Even those committed to telling stories, as she is, must recognize that our attempts to narrate this history will inevitably fail. In a related move, Stephen Best has advocated for a black politics predicated on “forms of unbelonging, negative sociability, abandonment, and other disruptions that thwart historical recovery.”<sup>23</sup> Their work suggests that the failure of liberal freedom for descendants of the enslaved should, at the very least, invite a reconsideration of the historian’s task.<sup>24</sup>

Where some scholars see limits and impossibilities, others, such as Vincent Brown, have envisioned beginnings. Brown worries that the lens of social death precludes the discovery of political life. He is concerned instead with what the archive can reveal about how the enslaved themselves grappled with the social alienation of slavery: how they mourned, resisted, acted. These small acts of courage and humanity have been, no less than dispossession, a defining feature of black history over the past

five centuries.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, Ada Ferrer has urged scholars to render the archive in terms other than silence, calling for work that locates “traces of the conflicts between competing histories and their would-be tellers.”<sup>26</sup>

These questions about the structure and possibilities of the archive illustrate a problem that also troubles scholars in a variety of other fields: comparative genealogies on the politics of archival recovery could be constructed with indigenous genocide and expropriation, or with colonial subjugation, at their center. Yet the need for comparative work should not lead us to collapse all forms of historical dispossession into one story. This special issue, focusing as it does on archives of black Atlantic slavery and freedom, is broadly relevant to the politics of methodology in other fields and, at the same time, responds specifically to urgent questions raised now by burgeoning social and political movements in the United States and the Caribbean. The transatlantic slave trade was, for over four hundred years, a touchstone for the development of modern Western economic, political, and legal systems, and its legacies still structure the particularities of our present. We hear the echoes of slavery’s logic in statistics about racial health, wealth, and employment disparities, in corporate insurance practices, and in debt regimes that capture students, consumers, and post-colonial nations alike.

• • •

When we first conceived of a project that would reflect on new scholarship on slavery and the archive, we posed the question of recovery in an antagonistic frame. Should we move past the recuperative politics that bolstered much of the twentieth-century work on African-descended people in the Americas? Did recent scholarship on the black Atlantic that was wary of recovery as an intellectual project signal a new direction for research of slavery and freedom? While we did not wish to dismiss the radical effects of nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholarship, we did intend to mark an intellectual moment in which the aims of scholarly inquiry had shifted to center the unknowable and the limits of the archive itself.

Yet Khalil Gibran Muhammad has reminded us that the same neo-liberal present that has supposedly diminished the value of vindicationist histories of black subjects has also redoubled the political necessity of African American history beyond the academy. For Muhammad, it is hard to justify moving beyond recovery when the purging of slavery, emancipation, and civil rights from high school and college curricula, in conjunction with the erosion of public education itself, has produced an education crisis in black communities already segregated in subpar schools.<sup>27</sup> The havoc wrought on black communities by massive disinvestment in social welfare programs and brutally racist policing demands accessible black histories that inform a broader public in the service of contemporary cam-

paigns for social justice. The detailed recovery work that historians do might be the best armor against the technocrats and statisticians that systematically devalue black life in contemporary America. In this framing, recovery can serve as a powerful antidote to the erasure of black history from public discourse.

Indeed, Caribbean historians Hilary Beckles and Verene A. Shepherd are currently at the helm of an effort by fourteen Caribbean nations bringing a reparations suit against the former slave-trading empires of Europe at the United Nations' International Court of Justice. Beckles and Shepherd are engaging publics and mobilizing governments around the history of slavery.<sup>28</sup> For them, slavery and freedom are not just archival relics but a living history with ethical dimensions that require action.<sup>29</sup> These scholars conceive of the struggle for reparations in terms of an archeology of illegal expropriation—centuries of unpaid labor, compensation paid to former slaveholders instead of former slaves, and colonialism. This approach exemplifies a powerful, capacious understanding of history's field of action.<sup>30</sup>

While the reparations movement is a poignant example of history's mobilization, as both a practice of scholarly recovery and social justice action, the question remains whether even this project—either through direct payment, investment in development, or debt cancellation—could ever fully restore that which Africa and its diaspora lost to slavery. Accounting for slavery may not unsettle the deep power imbalances that continue to permeate our world. Similarly, historical recovery may never adequately restore the ontological totality of African-descended people silenced within the archive of slavery and freedom. Taking seriously Muhammad's critique, however, we might argue that incomplete history remains a worthy pursuit.

• • •

This issue of *Social Text* asks what our relationship to the archive is now. Generations of thinkers have placed their faith in historical recuperation as a foundation for black liberation: nineteenth- and early twentieth-century writers and collectors who countered claims that the “wooly-haired African” had “no history” by making evident black inclusion in modern temporalities of progress; scholar-activists of the long civil rights era who reclaimed and reprinted histories of black resistance as harbingers of revolution to come; and most recently, Caribbean historians who draw upon the archive to make redistributive claims on the West. As our own generation of scholars has come to question the very possibility of recovery—even, at times, seeing black Atlantic archives as a place where all that “enslaved Africans could hope for was an occasional stammer in the cracks of European speech”—what happens to this long tradition of black

archival politics?<sup>31</sup> Recognizing both the radical and the reductive legacy that recovery projects have bequeathed to contemporary scholarship, the work in this issue does not ask whether or not the black past can be recovered but, rather, what kinds of recovery are possible—or desirable—and to what ends might they be used.

“The Question of Recovery” grapples with the achievements and disappointments of a redemptive historical enterprise that was not—and perhaps could not have been—apparent to earlier scholars. It probes the limits of our contemporary archival skepticism without presuming that recovery should be the end point of all historical inquiry. It approaches the archive’s silences and secrets not simply as antagonistic to our desire to recover but also as a beginning. Rather than rejecting the promise of recovery out of hand, then, the articles in this issue argue that we must develop new approaches to archival recuperation that could illuminate forms of black politics beyond narratives of radical redemption or liberal inclusion.

Bringing together scholars of history and literature who study African, Asian, and Native diasporas in the Americas, “The Question of Recovery” foregrounds methodological experimentation at the boundary of archival impossibility. Articles by Britt Rusert, Greg L. Childs, and Lisa Lowe offer motifs of archival recovery that rework what Hartman has called “the impossibility that conditions our knowledge of the past.”<sup>32</sup> *Disappointment, secrecy, hesitancy*: these terms serve not simply as adverse descriptors of archival encounters but also as tools the authors deliberately deploy as they dwell within the limits of the archives of slavery and freedom in the Atlantic world.

In the piece that opens this issue, Britt Rusert reflects on her encounter with North American black women’s nineteenth-century friendship albums—objects that, in their polite renderings of sentimental refinement, disappoint her expectations of locating resistance, subversion, or agency. Rather than bypass such disappointment and focus her search elsewhere, Rusert pauses to appraise not only her own disenchantment but also that of the albums’ creators. Could these artifacts index the album makers’ vexed relationship to a bourgeois politics of nineteenth-century black womanhood? Taken seriously as objects of ambivalence, the albums reveal heterogeneous aspirations that challenge a “sinking sense of the vacuity of bourgeois models of freedom.” Rusert repositions these archival objects in relation to recent work on Afro-pessimism, probing the tensions between expectation and cynicism within the gendered contours of black antebellum intellectual practice in the United States.

If disappointment is one threshold of what the archive cannot grant us, secrecy is another. As scholars well know, the boundaries of what enters the archive are usually determined by those in power, and the

power to record is also the power to leave unsaid, to classify, or to keep secrets.<sup>33</sup> In his article on the 1798 Tailors' Conspiracy in Bahia, Brazil, Greg L. Childs encounters a thicket of such secrets. Colonial officials sought to repress enslaved and free black conspirators' public acts of sedition by destroying information and, ultimately, their bodies. But Childs asks whether archival secrets might reveal, rather than occlude, black politics and the limits of colonial rule. Childs reads archival silence as the "conscious attempts on the part of black and nonwhite subjects to avoid what Derrida refers to as the 'violence of the archive.'"

Lisa Lowe offers the notion of hesitancy to plumb the limits and possibilities of archival skepticism. She borrows the term from W. E. B. Du Bois, who used it to call for a "philosophy of history with modest and mundane ends, rather than eternal, teleological purpose."<sup>34</sup> Lowe urges scholars to pause before attempting to fill in gaps in the archive, so as to invite the past to exceed what is "visible Within current epistemological orthodoxy." Such hesitation offers a space to ask what histories we are yet unable to imagine, and what pasts have been "forcibly assimilated, or forgotten," because they escape the frames of reference we find most familiar. For Lowe any recovery project must entail a radical interrogation of narratives that reify a progression from slavery to freedom. She thus works across asymmetrical archives of settler colonialism, transatlantic slavery, European liberalism, and East Indian trade to reveal the abiding power of colonial projects of racialization that underpin liberalism's archive as well as our own neoliberal present.

The conjunctures that Lowe identifies illustrate the ways in which slavery was an ideological, economic, and cultural system that underwrote histories not usually classified as black or African, or even necessarily as Atlantic. Like Lowe, Edlie L. Wong moves the frame of this issue beyond the specificities of "black racialization . . . as a process of historical erasure," emphasizing instead the intertwined histories of bonded and enslaved labor. But how do we write such capacious histories? Wong argues that our task should be to think "across *kinships*" in archives of the New World slave and coolie. She looks to complex forms of storytelling to trace hidden intimacies between archives of bondage too often considered in isolation, examining bilingual Spanish-Chinese labor contracts, plantation logbooks, and imbricated African American and Asian American literatures. In traversing these archives, she does not seek to fill the gaps in one with information from another; recovery, she argues, is not her aim in comparative work. Rather, their resonances encode the "deep figurative associations between coolieism and chattel slavery." And storytelling, she contends, remains an urgent enterprise in grappling with documents that, in their recording, collection, and assembly, render enslaved and bonded subjects only in terms of their commodification.

The critical possibilities and limits of storytelling are also the preoccupation of two roundtables in this issue that foreground particular issues of methodology. The first, “Archives and Methods in the Study of Slavery and Freedom,” puts into conversation three scholars of nineteenth-century North American literature and history who work on texts produced at moments of new or nominal freedom for the formerly enslaved. It features a trio of short reflections by Thulani Davis, Martha Hodes, and David Kazanjian. Each invested in the politics and poetics of writing, they grapple with acts of reading and interpretation at the margins of archives. These scholars consider the indeterminacy of the archive, and they make careful speculation central to the act of writing. Of particular interest to all three is how archival quotidian and marginalia might record black political visions that go otherwise unremarked because of their seemingly apolitical content.

The work in this roundtable tests how much historical weight archival quotidian can bear. The second roundtable examines digital methodologies that are quickly shifting our expectations of what archives can reveal.<sup>35</sup> Vincent Brown enters into conversation about digital design with Elizabeth Maddock Dillon and Claudio Saunt. At the center of their exchange is Brown’s animated mapping project, *Slave Revolt in Jamaica, 1760–1761: A Cartographic Narrative* (revolt.axismaps.com), which visualizes the spatial and temporal maneuvers of fifteen hundred enslaved rebels who waged a revolt over the course of eighteen months in colonial Jamaica between 1760 and 1761. Brown’s map illuminates how enslaved rebels made strategic use of the landscape in ways that are difficult to capture in written words. However, as Saunt and Dillon each note, colonial-era Europeans and their descendants also used maps to control space and populations by naturalizing the “legal fictions” of colonial boundary lines. Can such fictions represent the knowledge and aspirations of enslaved and colonized people? Brown engages such questions through what Dillon calls a “visual rhetoric” that notes ambiguity and incompleteness in the colonial archive while granting to the insurgents’ movements a visual autonomy that exceeds the confines of colonial expectations.

• • •

Despite all reservations, we are led inexorably back to the archive. As Jennifer L. Morgan notes in her afterword to this issue, “Those who work on the subaltern, on people and places that are understood as outside of or marginal to the archival project of nation building, have long grappled with a scholarly induced malady, a relationship to research that positions us always on the brink of breakthrough and breakdown.” Such a relationship is underlined by the contemporary political imperative that leads scholars of the subaltern to the archive in search of ways to undo or

explain its logics of racial exclusion. Morgan concludes that despite the impossibility of such a task, we must still continue to attempt it.

Indeed, this issue takes up modes of accessing Atlantic subjects that do not abandon all hope of recovery in the face of archival lack, but complicate the notion of what historical recovery is. Recovery must have a political purpose beyond documenting black presence, or it is merely a plea for inclusion within the foundational promises of liberal modernity—a critique of its boundaries but not of its essence.

Scholarly battles to chart black presence in the archive have always worked alongside political struggles for basic human rights. In both arenas, these struggles bore enormous fruit. The triumph of the modern civil rights movement in the United States and decolonization throughout Africa and the Caribbean have transformed the political landscape. In the United States, African American studies and African diaspora studies have a major, if sometimes marginalized, presence in American universities. The scholarship on slavery and freedom produced since the civil rights era is one of the crowning achievements of historical studies. One of the most difficult lessons of these struggles, however, has been that political inclusion, whether in the United States, South Africa, or Brazil, is not coterminous with justice and cannot, on its own, bring about substantive equality.

In some ways, even as we celebrate a black president and other forms of black achievement, we are still grappling with the same question as Amos Beman, although now in a neoliberal context of renewed state-sanctioned violence against black people, persistent poverty, and mass incarceration. Schomburg's declaration that "the American Negro must remake his past in order to make his future" continues to inspire those scholars who, ninety years later, rely on the archival tradition, and even the very archive, that he founded.<sup>36</sup> But Schomburg's confidence in this ability to make the future seems less sure today. Unlike in the eras of slavery and Jim Crow, the liberatory potential of restoring the black presence to historical narratives in which it was absent seems now distant and less possible. It is in this context that recovery remains the most important site of contestation for scholars of slavery and freedom. At stake in our debates about recovery is what forms of historical inquiry are best suited to addressing the contradictions of the political present. Like the historical work of earlier generations, contemporary scholarship is marked by a sense of urgency about the continued onslaught against black life and the integral role of stories about the past for fashioning just futures.

## Notes

We would like to thank Jennifer Morgan and members of New York University's 2009–11 Working Group on Slavery and Freedom, as well as participants in the 2012 conference "Against Recovery? Slavery, Freedom, and the Archive," where this project first began. We would also like to thank David Sartorius, Herman Bennett, David Kazanjian, and Tavia Nyong'o, who advised on the project, as well as the *Social Text* readers for their feedback and intellectual generosity.

1. Letter from Noah Webster to Amos G. Beman, 27 April 1843, in Sterling, *Speak Out in Thunder Tones*, 291.

2. For selected overviews, see Moses, *Afrotopia*; Ernest, *Liberation Historiography*; and Hall, *Faithful Account of the Race*.

3. See Hill, "On Collectors"; Kelley, "'But a Local Phase of a World Problem'"; and Franklin, "Power to Define."

4. Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, 99.

5. Schomburg, "The Negro Digs Up His Past," 231. Black memory work is, of course, broader than archival preoccupations, but Schomburg's project marked a moment of frenzied archive building among black bibliophiles, collectors, and intellectuals in the first half of the twentieth century, especially in the United States. The gendered construction of Schomburg's declaration ("to remake *his* past") underscores the acts of exclusion—in this case, the presumptive equation of "Negro" with "his"—inherent in the construction of even insurgent national histories. On this long-standing tension, see Higginbotham, "African-American Women's History," and Mitchell, "Silences Broken, Silences Kept."

6. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*; James, *Black Jacobins*; Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*.

7. Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*.

8. Freyre, *Masters and the Slaves*; Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint*.

9. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*; Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom*; Woodson, *The Mis-education of the Negro*. See also Aptheker, "American Negro Slave Revolts"; Quarles, *The Negro in the Civil War*. At the same time, sociologist Edward Franklin Frazier and anthropologist Melville J. Herskovits entered into a debate about black culture and American racism that was premised on competing views of the historical legacy of slavery. See Frazier, *The Negro Family in the United States*, and Herskovits, *Myth of the Negro Past*. For a comparative perspective between the United States and Brazil, see Tannenbaum, *Slave and Citizen*.

10. See, e.g., Harding, "Beyond Chaos."

11. Following Stamp's *Peculiar Institution*, key social historical and cultural anthropological works include Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*; Gutman, *Black Family in Slavery and Freedom*; Mintz and Price, *Birth of African American Culture*; Raboteau, *Slave Religion*; Blassingame, *Slave Community*; Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long*; and White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?* Parallel works in Caribbean history include Goevia, "West Indian Slave Laws of the Eighteenth Century"; Brathwaite, *Development of Creole Society in Jamaica*; Patterson, *Sociology of Slavery*; Craton, *Testing the Chains*; and Rodney, *History of the Guyanese Working People*.

12. See, e.g., Hahn, *Nation under Our Feet*; and Camp, *Closer to Freedom*. One important iteration of contemporary discussions about recovery is the debate over agency. Walter Johnson has critiqued historians' preoccupation with *agency* as a catchall term invoked to signify the humanity of enslaved people, while Saidiya Hartman has articulated a need to temper the "romance of resistance" and to understand

the constraints of enslaved peoples' practices. See Johnson, "On Agency"; Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*; Painter, "Soul Murder and Slavery."

13. This body of work is too large to enumerate here, but early works include Richards, *Imperial Archive*; Voss and Werner, "Toward a Poetics of the Archive"; Steedman, *Dust*; Dirks, "Annals of the Archive"; Taylor, *Archive and the Repertoire*; Cvetkovich, *Archive of Feelings*; Appadurai, "Archive and Aspiration"; Burton, *Archive Stories*; and Blouin and Rosenberg, *Archives, Documentation, and Institutions of Social Memory*.

14. Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 27. Trouillot draws upon Michel Foucault's 1972 *Archaeology of Knowledge*. See also Sibylle Fischer's engagement with Trouillot in *Modernity Disavowed*.

15. Spivak, "Rani of Sirmur," represents an early instance of an archival focus within subaltern studies. See also Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*.

16. Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain*. See also Burton, *Dwelling in the Archive*; Arondekar, *For the Record*; and Thomas, "Caribbean Studies, Archive Building, and the Problem of Violence."

17. See Hamilton et al., *Refiguring the Archive*.

18. Gikandi, "Rethinking the Archive of Enslavement," 84–86.

19. Saunders, "Defending the Dead, Confronting the Archive." For critical entries in this convergence, see Holton, "Decolonizing History"; Scott, "On the Archaeologies of Black Memory"; Camp, *Image Matters*; Edwards, "Taste of the Archive"; Walters, *Archives of the Black Atlantic*; and Thomas, "Caribbean Studies, Archive Building, and the Problem of Violence."

20. Morgan, *Laboring Women*, 199. See also Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery*.

21. Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*.

22. Hartman, *Lose Your Mother* and "Venus in Two Acts," 12.

23. Best, "On Failing to Make the Past Present," 455.

24. Such arguments have led to important debates in black cultural studies more broadly. See Sexton, "People-of-Color-Blindness," and Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black*; for a critical engagement, see Moten, "Blackness and Nothingness."

25. Brown, "Social Death and Political Life in the Study of Slavery."

26. Ferrer, "Talk about Haiti," 36.

27. Muhammad, "Closing Remarks."

28. Castle, "Caribbean Nations Seek Reparations"; Pilkington, "Caribbean Nations Prepare Demand for Slavery Reparations."

29. The most definitive scholarly treatment of the contemporary grounds for reparations is Beckles, *Britain's Black Debt*. For other debates about the concept of reparations and its validity, see Salzberger and Turck, *Reparations for Slavery*; Brennan and Packer, *Colonialism, Slavery, Reparations, and Trade*; Martin and Yaquinto, *Redress for Historical Injustices in the United States*; Tillet, *Sites of Slavery*; Henry, *Long Overdue*; Boonin, *Should Race Matter?*; Bittker, *Case for Black Reparations*; Araujo, *Living History*; and Harvey, *Whiteness and Morality*.

30. Rojas, "Will the Caribbean Reparations Initiative Inspire a Revitalization of the US Movement?"; "International Reparations Conference"; Stangler, "Francois Hollande Evokes France's 'Debt' to Haiti."

31. Gikandi, "Rethinking the Archive of Enslavement," 86.

32. Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 13.

33. See, e.g., Galison, "Removing Knowledge," and Harris, "Archival Sliver."

34. Du Bois, "Sociology Hesitant," 39–40.

35. The starkest example is the 1999 publication of *The Transatlantic Slave*

*Trade: A Database on CD-ROM*, which opened countless subjects for renewed study by collating data from nearly thirty-five thousand slave voyages spanning four centuries. While the database provides a tremendous amount of empirical information about the slave trade, some scholars have used that information as the basis to dismiss other methodologies and types of evidence. Unsurprisingly, these debates have often centered on the role of Africans and enslaved people in shaping the Atlantic world. See, e.g., Carney, *Black Rice*, and the ensuing critique in Eltis, Morgan, and Richardson, “Agency and Diaspora in Atlantic History.” Eltis and Morgan played key roles in inaugurating the database.

36. Schomburg, “The Negro Digs Up His Past,” 231. Schomburg’s library formed the nucleus of what is now the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, a research branch of the New York Public Library and the preeminent center in the United States for popular and scholarly research on the history of the African diaspora.

## References

- Appadurai, Arjun. 2003. “Archive and Aspiration.” In *Information Is Alive: Art and Theory on Archiving and Retrieving Data*, edited by Joke Brouwer and Arjen Mulder, 14–25. Rotterdam: V2/NAi.
- Aptheker, Herbert. 1945. *American Negro Slave Revolts*. New York: International Publishers.
- Araujo, Ana Lucia. 2009. *Living History: Encountering the Memory and the History of the Heirs of Slavery*. Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars.
- Arondekar, Anjali. 2009. *For the Record: On Sexuality and the Colonial Archive*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Beckles, Hilary. 2013. *Britain’s Black Debt: Reparations for Slavery and Native Genocide*. Mona, Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press.
- Best, Stephen. 2012. “On Failing to Make the Past Present.” *Modern Language Quarterly* 73: 453–74.
- Bittker, Boris I. 2003. *The Case for Black Reparations*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Blassingame, John W. 1979. *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Blouin, Francis X., and William Rosenberg, eds. 2008. *Archives, Documentation, and Institutions of Social Memory*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Boonin, David. 2011. *Should Race Matter? Unusual Answers to the Usual Questions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Brathwaite, Edward. 1971. *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica, 1770–1820*. Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press.
- Brennan, Fernne, and John Packer. 2012. *Colonialism, Slavery, Reparations, and Trade: Remediating the Past?* New York: Routledge.
- Brown, Vincent. 2009. “Social Death and Political Life in the Study of Slavery.” *American Historical Review* 114: 1231–49.
- Burton, Antoinette. 2003. *Dwelling in the Archive: Women Writing House, Home and History in Late Colonial India*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Burton, Antoinette, ed. 2005. *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Camp, Stephanie M. H. 2004. *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

- Campt, Tina. 2012. *Image Matters: Archive, Photography, and the African Diaspora in Europe*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Carney, Judith A. 2002. *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Castle, Stephen. 2013. "Caribbean Nations Seek Reparations, Putting Price on Damage of Slavery." *New York Times*, 20 October. [www.nytimes.com/2013/10/21/world/americas/caribbean-nations-to-see-reparations-putting-price-on-damage-of-slavery.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/21/world/americas/caribbean-nations-to-see-reparations-putting-price-on-damage-of-slavery.html).
- Chakrabarty, Dipesh. 2000. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Craton, Michael. 1982. *Testing the Chains: Resistance to Slavery in the British West Indies*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Cvetkovich, Ann. 2003. *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Culture*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Dirks, Nicholas. 2002. "Annals of the Archive: Ethnographic Notes on the Sources of History." In *From the Margins: Historical Anthropology and Its Future*, edited by Brian Axel, 47–65. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. 1935. *Black Reconstruction, 1860–1865*. New York: Russell and Russell.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. 2000. "Sociology Hesitant." *boundary 2* 27, no. 3: 37–44.
- Edwards, Brent Hayes. 2012. "The Taste of the Archive." *Callaloo* 35: 944–72.
- Eltis, David, Philip Morgan, and David Richardson. 2007. "Agency and Diaspora in Atlantic History: Reassessing the African Contribution to Rice Cultivation in the Americas." *American Historical Review* 112, no. 5: 1329–58.
- Ernest, John. 2004. *Liberation Historiography: African American Writers and the Challenge of History, 1794–1861*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Ferrer, Ada. 2008. "Talk about Haiti: The Archive and the Atlantic's Haitian Revolution." In *Tree of Liberty: Cultural Legacies of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World*, edited by Doris L. Garraway, 21–40. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.
- Fischer, Sibylle. 2004. *Modernity Disavowed: Haiti and the Cultures of Slavery in the Age of Revolution*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Franklin, John Hope. 1947. *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans*. New York: Knopf.
- Franklin, V. P. 2015. "The Power to Define: African American Scholars, Activism, and Social Change, 1916–2015." *Journal of African American History* 100, no. 1: 1–25.
- Frazier, Edward Franklin. 1939. *The Negro Family in the United States*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Freyre, Gilberto. (1956) 1987. *The Masters and the Slaves: A Study in the Development of Brazilian Civilization*. New York: Knopf.
- Galison, Peter. 2004. "Removing Knowledge." *Critical Inquiry* 31, no. 1: 229–43.
- Genovese, Eugene. 1974. *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Gikandi, Simon. 2015. "Rethinking the Archive of Enslavement." *Early American Literature* 50, no. 1: 81–102.
- Gilroy, Paul. 1993. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Goevia, Elsa. 1960. "West Indian Slave Laws of the Eighteenth Century." *Revista de Ciencias Sociales*, no. 4: 75–105.

- Gutman, Herbert G. 1976. *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750–1925*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Hahn, Steven. 2003. *A Nation under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South, from Slavery to the Great Migration*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.
- Hall, Stephen G. 2009. *A Faithful Account of the Race: African American Historical Writing in Nineteenth-Century America*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Hamilton, Carolyn, Verne Harris, Michèle Pickover, Graeme Reid, Razia Saleh, and Jane Taylor, eds. 2002. *Refiguring the Archive*. Dordrecht: Kluwer.
- Harding, Vincent. 1970. “Beyond Chaos: Black History and the Search for the New Land.” In *Amistad I*, edited by John A. Williams and Charles F. Harris, 262–92. New York: Vintage.
- Harris, Verne. 2002. “The Archival Sliver: Power, Memory, and Archives in South Africa.” *Archival Science* 2: 63–86.
- Hartman, Saidiya. 1997. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hartman, Saidiya. 2007. *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Hartman, Saidiya. 2008. “Venus in Two Acts.” *Small Axe* 12, no. 2: 1–14.
- Harvey, Jennifer. 2007. *Whiteness and Morality: Pursuing Racial Justice through Reparations and Sovereignty*. Gordonsville, VA: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hegel, G. W. F. (1831) 1956. *The Philosophy of History*. New York: Dover.
- Henry, Charles P. 2007. *Long Overdue: The Politics of Racial Reparations*. New York: New York University Press.
- Herskovits, Melville J. (1941) 1958. *The Myth of the Negro Past*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Higginbotham, Evelyn Brooks. 1992. “African-American Women’s History and the Metalanguage of Race.” *Signs* 17: 251–74.
- Hill, Robert. 1990. “On Collectors, Their Contributions to the Documentation of the Black Past.” In *Black Bibliophiles and Collectors: Preservers of Black History*, edited by Elinor DesVerney Sinnette, W. Paul Coates, and Thomas C. Battle, 47–56. Washington, DC: Howard University Press.
- Holton, Adalaine. 2007. “Decolonizing History: Arthur Schomburg’s Afrodiasporic Archive.” *Journal of African American History* 92: 218–38.
- “International Reparations Conference Ends on a High Note.” 2015. *Jamaica Observer*, 15 April. [www.jamaicaobserver.com/news/Int-l-reparations-conference-ends-on-high-note\\_18754992](http://www.jamaicaobserver.com/news/Int-l-reparations-conference-ends-on-high-note_18754992).
- James, C. L. R. (1938) 1963. *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*. New York: Vintage.
- Johnson, Walter. 2003. “On Agency.” *Journal of Social History* 37: 113–24.
- Kelley, Robin D. G. 1999. “‘But a Local Phase of a World Problem’: Black History’s Global Vision, 1883–1950.” *Journal of American History* 86, no. 3: 1045–77.
- Litwack, Leon F. 1980. *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery*. New York: Vintage.
- Martin, Michael T., and Marilyn Yaquinto. 2007. *Redress for Historical Injustices in the United States: On Reparations for Slavery, Jim Crow, and Other Legacies*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Mintz, Sidney, and Richard Price. (1976) 1992. *The Birth of African American Culture: An Anthropological Perspective*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Mitchell, Michele. 1999. “Silences Broken, Silences Kept: Gender and Sexuality in African-American History.” *Gender and History* 11: 433–44.

- Morgan, Jennifer L. 2004. *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Moses, Wilson Jeremiah. 2004. *Afrotopia: Roots of African-American Popular History*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Moten, Fred. Fall 2013. "Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 112, no. 4: 737–80.
- Muhammad, Khalil Gibran. 2012. "Closing Remarks." Paper presented at "Against Recovery? Slavery, Freedom, and the Archive" (conference). New York University, New York, December 1.
- Ortiz, Fernando. (1940) 1995. *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Painter, Nell Irvin. 1995. "Soul Murder and Slavery: Toward a Fully Loaded Cost Accounting." In *U.S. History as Women's History*, edited by Linda Kerber, Alice Kessler-Harris, and Kathryn Kish Sklar, 125–46. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Patterson, Orlando. 1967. *The Sociology of Slavery: An Analysis of the Origins, Development, and Structure of Negro Slave Society in Jamaica*. Madison, WI: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press.
- Patterson, Orlando. 1982. *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Pilkington, Ed. 2014. "Caribbean Nations Prepare Demand for Slavery Reparations." *Guardian*, 9 March. [www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/09/caribbean-nations-demand-slavery-reparations](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/09/caribbean-nations-demand-slavery-reparations).
- Quarles, Benjamin. 1953. *The Negro in the Civil War*. New York: Russell and Russell.
- Raboteau, Albert J. 1978. *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Richards, Thomas. 1996. *The Imperial Archive: Knowledge and the Fantasy of Empire*. London: Verso.
- Rodney, Walter. 1981. *A History of the Guyanese Working People, 1881–1905*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Rojas, Don. 2014. "Will the Caribbean Reparations Initiative Inspire a Revitalization of the US Movement?" *Nation*, 23 May. [www.thenation.com/article/179990/will-caribbean-reparations-initiative-inspire-revitalization-us-movement](http://www.thenation.com/article/179990/will-caribbean-reparations-initiative-inspire-revitalization-us-movement).
- Salzberger, Ronald P., and Mary Turck, eds. 2004. *Reparations for Slavery: A Reader*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Saunders, Patricia. 2008. "Defending the Dead, Confronting the Archive: A Conversation with M. NourbeSe Philip." *Small Axe* 12, no. 2: 63–79.
- Schomburg, Arthur A. (1925) 1968. "The Negro Digs Up His Past." In *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, edited by Alain Locke, 231–37. New York: Arno Press.
- Scott, David. 2008. "On the Archaeologies of Black Memory." *Small Axe* 12, no. 2: v–xvi.
- Sexton, Jared. 2010. "People-of-Color-Blindness: Notes on the Afterlife of Slavery." *Social Text* 28, no. 2: 31–56.
- Smallwood, Stephanie E. 2007. *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Spivak, Gayatri. 1985. "The Rani of Sirmur: An Essay in Reading the Archives." *History and Theory* 24: 247–72.
- Stampp, Kenneth. 1956. *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South*. New York: Knopf.
- Stangler, Cole. 2015. "Francois Hollande Evokes France's 'Debt' to Haiti, but Stops

- Short of Reparations.” *International Business Times*, 10 May. [www.ibtimes.com/francois-hollande-evokes-frances-debt-haiti-stops-short-reparations-1915791](http://www.ibtimes.com/francois-hollande-evokes-frances-debt-haiti-stops-short-reparations-1915791).
- Steedman, Carolyn. 2002. *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Sterling, Dorothy, ed. 1998. *Speak Out in Thunder Tones: Letters and Other Writings by Black Northerners*. New York: Da Capo Press.
- Stoler, Ann Laura. 2009. *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Tannenbaum, Frank. 1947. *Slave and Citizen*. New York: Knopf.
- Taylor, Diana. 2003. *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Thomas, Deborah A. 2013. “Caribbean Studies, Archive Building, and the Problem of Violence.” *Small Axe* 17, no. 2: 27–42.
- Tillet, Salamishah. 2012. *Sites of Slavery: Citizenship and Racial Democracy in the Post-Civil Rights Imagination*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. 1995. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Voss, Paul J., and Werner, Marta L. 1999. “Toward a Poetics of the Archive: Introduction.” *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 32, no. 1: i–viii.
- Walters, Wendy W. 2013. *Archives of the Black Atlantic: Reading between Literature and History*. New York: Routledge.
- White, Deborah. 1985. *Ar’n’t I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South*. New York: Norton.
- Wilderson, Frank. 2010. *Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Williams, Eric. 1944. *Capitalism and Slavery*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Woodson, Carter G. 1933 (1977). *The Mis-education of the Negro*. New York: AMS Press.