



Radical Acts: Enslaved Practices of Care and Slavery Archives in 19th Century Brazil and the United States

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ABSTRACT

In the face of the violence of slavery, enslaved people found ways of addressing and alleviating the suffering they and others faced by performing acts of care. This same regime of violence was often perpetuated via the erasure of enslaved people's voices in formal archives of enslaved people and their descendants' experiences.¹ Saidiya Hartman developed the device of critical fabulation which uses fiction writing practices, imagination, and counterfactual speculations to challenge the absence of enslaved voices in historical archives.² This article seeks to extend Hartman's work by offering a new methodological device that I call "critical combination." Critical combination employs the comparison of archival production and crossing of fragmentary archival evidence to expand Hartman's method. In doing so, I demonstrate that enslaved practices of care created and maintained connections threatened by the structural violence of slavery, were conditioned by their geographies, and founded in a critical consciousness of oppression without which performing care would not be possible. By examining archives of slavery in the US and Brazil, I use critical combination to address the multifactual—what also happened—and uncover the multiple voices of enslaved people and their descendants to counter the erasures of enslaved perspectives. By using critical combination, this paper finds that archives silenced enslaved people's experiences due to political and editorial decisions that determined which accounts were deemed "factual" representations of slavery.

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On August 15, 1987, Benedita, a sixty-six-years-old descendent of enslaved people, gave an interview about her Brazilian family's history of enslavement.³ Benedita said that her great-grandparents—whose names she did not know—were from Mozambique and were brought to Brazil because slave traders set their village on fire and kidnapped them.⁴ After arriving in Brazil, her grandparents were purchased by Jose Alves Lima to work on his plantation in Sao Paulo. Benedita's father used to tell her about those great-grandparents. One of the parents' memories he shared with her was about how his parents used to talk in their native language, but when their enslaver or overseer caught them, they would yell to make them stop.⁵ Benedita explained that they were not allowed to speak in their own language, but they kept speaking in secret, switching to Portuguese if they saw their enslavers coming. Their descendants learned a few words of the African language but not how to speak it. As Benedita asserted: "It was forbidden to speak [in the African language] with the children, so they would not learn. Those who came from [Africa] were not allowed to teach their children. They even made the language die."⁶ Nonetheless, Benedita's great-grandparents found alternative ways to maintain connections with Africa. During winter nights, they used to gather the family around the fire and share stories about Africa.⁷ For instance, they used to tell their grandchildren that, "in Africa, there was an animal called elephant, and it was the size of the house that white people live."⁸

In the United States, during the 1850s, a young North Carolina enslaved girl named Laura Clark was sold alongside ten other children to a slaveowner in Livingston, Alabama.⁹ All of the other children were unknown to Laura, and none of her relatives joined her.¹⁰ Laura was separated from her mother, an enslaved woman named Rachel, and at the moment of their separation, Rachel fell on the floor, crying.¹¹ Laura, however, did not understand the reason for Rachel's suffering because her enslaver gave her candies in order to, as she said, "keep us quiet."¹² In adulthood, Laura remembered this moment: "I didn't have sense enough to know what ailed Mammy, but I know now, and I have never seen her again in this life."¹³ Before the new enslaver removed Laura from her family, Rose, Laura's grandmother, said to her: "pray, Laura, and be a good girl," and "everybody will miss you and if you never see me again, pray to meet me in heaven." Finally, Rose recommended again, "pray to meet me in heaven."¹⁴ Much like sharing stories of Africa with family, Rose's words, reaffirming the missing and calling Laura to pray for a reunion even in the afterlife, evidence enslaved people's desire to maintain the connections

1 Marisa Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives*.

2 Saidiya Hartman, *Venus in Two Acts*.

3 This interview was part of the oral history project *Memórias do Cativo*, in which historians interviewed the descendants of the last generation of enslaved people in the Southeast of Brazil.

4 On the process of capture during Portuguese occupation in Africa, see Mariana Candido, *An African Slaving Port and the Atlantic World*.

5 While the interview did not mention which languages they used to speak, it is reasonable to speculate that they were probably part of the Bantu linguistic group.

6 Hebe Mattos and Ana Lugao Rios. *Memórias do Cativo: Trabalho e cidadania no Pós-Abolição*. (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 2005).

7 On the oral traditions in Mozambique, see Alberto da Costa e Silva, *Um Rio Chamado Atlântico: A África no Brasil e o Brasil na África*.

8 Hebe Mattos and Ana Lugao Rios. *Memórias do Cativo: Trabalho e cidadania no Pós- Abolição*. (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 2005). pp. 67–68.

9 Laura Clark, "CHILLUN IN EV'Y GRABEYARD", interviewed by Ruby Tartt. Accessible in <<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/36020/36020-h/36020-h.html#laura-clark>>.

10 On the domestic slave trade to the US South, see: Damian Pargas, *Slavery and Forced Migration in the Antebellum South*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Joshua Rothman, *The Ledgers and the Chains*. (New York: Basic Books, 2021); Steven Deyle, *Carry Me Back: The Domestic Slave Trade in American Life*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Walter Johnson, ed., *The Chattel Principle: Internal Slave Trades in the Americas*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004) Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999); Michael Tadman, *Speculators and Slaves: Masters, Traders, and Slaves in the Old South*. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989).

11 On the emotional impact of the suppression of kinship: Heather Williams, *Help me to Find My People*.

12 Wilma King, *Stolen Childhood*.

13 Laura Clark, *ibid*.

14 *Ibid*.

they had lost.¹⁵ Benedita's great-grandparents and Laura's grandmother did not intend to directly subvert the power of their enslavers in their conversations, but even still, their behavior constituted a kind of quiet and everyday radicalism.¹⁶ They addressed their own and loved one's suffering and offered them a work of care.¹⁷ Christina Sharpe defines care as the work that allows black people, even when experiencing and recognizing subjection, to not simply live in subjection, but also alleviate their suffering.¹⁸ Care, in this sense, should not be confused with forms of coercion and continued violence which causes the effect of hiding suffering, as in the case of Laura's enslaver giving her a candy to silence her cry.¹⁹ Rather, care demands a recognition and awareness of the suffering and violence that is causing it.²⁰ The practices of care performed by enslaved people were possible not only because they suffered violence, but because they actively recognized and comprehended that violence.²¹

The ways practices of care circulated among enslaved people are not always visible in the archives of slavery, which often silence enslaved voices and perspectives about their own lived experiences.²² Achille Mbembe, for instance, pointed out how the archive "results in the granting of a privileged status to certain written documents, and the refusal of that same status to others, thereby judged 'unarchivable.'"²³ In response to this, some scholars have challenged the disciplinary boundaries of history by creating methods and counter-hegemonic archival practices that expand the traditional understanding of what constitutes an "archive," such as activist and community-based archives.²⁴ This article aims to advance an additional methodological device, which I call "critical combination," that uses comparison as a tool to engage with archival erasures. I recognize, agreeing with Mbembe, that the archiving process entails the burying of remains of the past, so that "the dead should be formally prohibited from

15 Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*.

16 Tiya Miles, *All That She Carried*; Tina Campt, *Black Visibility and the Practice of Refusal*.

17 My conceptualization of care is deeply indebted to Christina Sharpe. See Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), p. 4. See also Joy James, *The Captive Maternal and Abolitionism*. *TOPIA: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies* 43 (2021): 9–23. Stephanie M. H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004). And, for a critical discussion on the "paradox of caring" in which care is seen as both being an antidote to violence and form of perpetuating it, see Jared Sexton, *Antidoting*. *The Black Scholar*, 51:3, (2021) 5–24.

18 Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake*.

19 Saidiya Hartman, *Belly of the World*.

20 In fact, enslaved people, and particularly enslaved women, had to perform a work that, beyond the productive sphere, was oriented to attend to the needs and comfort of their enslavers. They performed work such as housekeeping, caretaking, and wet nursing within the household, and, as a result, they were particularly vulnerable to violence and sexual coercion. Also, when enslavers forced enslaved women to execute this labor, they had, as Angela Davis pointed out, "to surrender her childbearing to alien and predatory economic interest." These labors are the opposite of care. They are rather actions that addressed the desires, comfort, and security of enslavers and, at the same time, exploited, abused, and traumatized enslaved people. See Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the Household of Bondage*. Angela Davis, *Reflections on The Black Women's Role*, p. 84. Saidiya Hartman, *The Belly of the World*.

21 On enslaved people comprehension on the violence perpetrated against them, see See Stephan Palmie, *Wizard and Scientists*. Jennifer Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery*. Jennifer Morgan, *Partus Sequitur Ventrem*. Neil Roberts, *Freedom as Maroonage*.

22 In the vast scholarship about power, violence, and erasure in the archives, scholars such as Michel Trouillot, Saidiya Hartman, Stephanie Smallwood, and Marisa Fuentes have theorized the ways the archives of slavery embody colonial violence and argue that scholars should examine not just their contents, but also their structures. See Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995). Saidiya Hartman, *Venus in Two Acts*. *Small Axe* 1 June 2008; 12 (2): 1–14. Stephanie E. Smallwood, "The Politics of the Archive and History's Accountability to the Enslaved." *History of the Present* 6, no. 2 (2016): 117–32. Marisa Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016). See also Tiya Miles, *All That She Carried: The Journey of Ashley's Sack, a Black Family Keepsake*. (New York: Random House, 2021). Jennifer L. Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery: Gender, Kinship, and Capitalism in the Early Black Atlantic*. (Duke University Press, 2021). Sasha Turner (2017) *The nameless and the forgotten: maternal grief, sacred protection, and the archive of slavery*, *Slavery & Abolition*, 38:2, 232–250.

23 Achille Mbembe, *The Power of Archive and its Limits*, p. 20.

24 On critical fabulation, see Saidiya Hartman, *Venus in Two Acts*. Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007). On an interesting discussion on pluralizing archives and expanding the source base available for historians considering the geographical diversity of black lives, see David Kazanjian, *Freedom's Surprise: Two Paths Through Slavery's Archives*. *History of the Present*. 1 October 2016; 6 (2): 133–145. The consideration of sources of slavery beyond the English Atlantic was object of reflection of other scholars. For instance, Herman Bennett also reflected on the ways that nationalist hegemony prefigured discussions on black past, see Herman L. Bennett, "Writing into a Void: Representing Slavery and Freedom in the Narrative of Colonial Spanish America," *Social Text* 93, 25.4 (Winter 2007): 82. Hilary Green, *The Georgetown Slavery Archive*. *The American Historical Review*, Volume 125, Issue 2, April 2020, Pages 587–589. Vincent Brown, *Mapping a Slave Revolt: Visualizing Spatial History through the Archives of Slavery*. *Social Text* 1 December 2015; 33 (4 (125)): 134–141.

stirring up disorder in the present.”²⁵ However, I suggest that, as those archival acts of burial are a product of historical contexts that customize them, such variability creates the breaches through which it is possible to question the archives by evidencing and diffusing their power.

Critical combination attempts, by considering the different production of absences in the slavery archives in the United States and Brazil, to illuminate the fragmentary experience they articulate, brushing one archive against the other.²⁶ Expanding Saidiya Hartman’s practice of “critical fabulation,” “critical combination” is not a traditional comparative history, but rather, it is an instrument of counter-history with four main aspects.²⁷ First, while “critical combination” relies on comparative elements, this approach does not boil down merely to the comparison.²⁸ Comparison does not have the function of filling marginal gaps in the archives; instead, it advances arguments on enslaved people’s practices of care.²⁹ Second, critical combination reflects on the relation of power present in the production of slavery archives and assumes that different archives are the result of specific power dynamics which produce silence in distinct ways.³⁰ Third, I track comparatively the production of sources in each archive and, by contrasting them, I try to elaborate on their erasures.³¹ Finally, I craft a narrative that is a patchwork of multiple voices – rather than engaging with the counterfactual (what could have happened) as Hartman’s critical fabulation does, I address the multifactual (what also happened) in the face of the silencing of enslaved perspectives.³²

The combination of slavery archives leads me to rethink the concept of survival in the context of racial slavery and reestablish it within the framework of “care.”³³ While the same regimes that caused enslaved suffering made it elusive in the records, this article claims that it is possible to examine the organization of enslaved people’s work of care by critically combining the fragments of experiences present in different slavery archives. In applying my device of critical combination, I argue that enslaved people’s deep understanding of the violence inflicted upon them made possible their engagement in acts of care. These acts of care addressed structural aspects of life under slavery in at least three main dimensions: (i) connection, as loss and grief were constitutive parts of the enslaved lived experience; (ii) spatiality because performing care demanded escaping their enslavers’ control at least temporarily; (iii) critical awareness, once they perceived that an accurate perspective of the power relation they were kidnapped into could sometimes prevent further victimization.

There is a relative divorce among the literature of politics of archives, enslaved resistance, and comparative history. Saidiya Hartman’s critical fabulation is a method that intends “to paint as full a picture of the lives of the captives as possible.”³⁴ Critical fabulation also engages with writing practices of the fabula which consists in a series of logical and chronological set of events.³⁵ Since the articulation of Hartman’s method, critical fabulation has been employed both by many historians of slavery and its afterlife, and artist interested in doing creative

25 Achille Mbembe, *The Power of Archive and its Limits*, p. 22.

26 Michael Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, Ann Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain*. Arlette Farge, *The Allure of the Archive*.

27 For Saidiya Hartman counter- history is a form of opposing to dominant modes of historical writing. Hartman writes: “the history of black counter-historical projects is one of failure, precisely because these accounts have never been able to install themselves as history, but rather are insurgent, disruptive narratives that are marginalized and derailed before they ever gain a footing.” Hartman, *Venus in Two Acts*, p. 13.

28 Saidiya Hartman, *Ibid*, p.14.

29 Hartman on the impossibility of filling the gaps: Saidiya Hartman, *Venus in Two Acts*, p.12

30 On the power dynamic in the archives, see also Smallwood, *The Politics of the Archive*.

31 Marisa Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives*.

32 On the idea of pluralizing archives, see: David Kazanjian. “Freedom’s Surprise: Two Paths Through Slavery’s Archives.” *History of the Present*. 6, no. 2 (2016): 133–45.

33 Scholarship of slavery has been mainly employing categories such as resistance, flight, or survival to describe forms of enslaved agency. Dusi Berre William. 2009. *Strategies for Survival: Recollections of Bondage in Antebellum Virginia*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press. Stephanie Camp, *Closer to the Freedom*. Tamika Nunley, *At the Threshold of Freedom*.

34 Saidiya Hartman, *Venus in Two Acts*. p.11.

35 Saidiya Hartman, *Venus in Two Acts*. p.13.

work about Black life.³⁶ Critical combination, like Hartman's critical fabulation, takes a critical perspective of the production of archives, but differs in the engagement with counter-factual and fiction writing practices. Critical combination engages with sources and stories in which performing care was not possible as a way of evidencing the conditions that informed and enabled the practices of care. Those acts were ultimately a response to violence and also exceeded it, allowing enslaved people to not simply live in subjection.³⁷ In the time of slavery, for instance, practices of care corresponded to attempts to preserve the cultural and linguistic traditions that nurtured communities, teach young children work skills and avoid punishments, and maintain connections in moments of family separation.³⁸ More recently, scholars have discussed politics of care as one of the key elements of contemporary Black feminist thought and healing and restorative justice.³⁹

In this paper, I engage with two archives: the Works Progress Administration Slave Narrative Collection and the *Memórias do Cativo* Project, as they were the most comprehensive initiatives of recording oral histories of slavery in the United States and Brazil, respectively.⁴⁰ The WPA slave narratives was a collection of 2,300 interviews with formerly enslaved people. These narratives were collected in the Federal Writer's Project, a branch of the Works Progress Administration. The *Memórias do Cativo* Project included 50 interviews with descendants of the last generation of enslaved people in southeast Brazil. Though these records were produced to capture the memories of slavery from formerly enslaved people, they also distorted and silenced parts of these memories because of their methods of production.⁴¹

THE PRODUCTION OF THE WPA SLAVE NARRATIVES

The production of the WPA archive – the Slave Narrative Collection – has two main historical precedents: the African American autobiographical and oral traditions, as well as earlier attempts during the Great Depression to collect and preserve slave narratives.⁴² The African American oral tradition preserved the memory of slavery and established narrative procedures that were later incorporated into written forms of black literature.⁴³ The Black tradition of autobiographical writing allowed for not only the expansion of the audience to a larger number

36 For an account of the influence of Hartman's critical fabulation, see: Connolly, Brian and Fuentes, Marisa. "Introduction: From Archives of Slavery to Liberated Futures?" *History of the Present* 6, no. 2 (2016): 105–16.

37 Christina Sharpe, *And to Survive*.

38 On the concept of "time of slavery" as a continuous relation between the past and the present, and slavery and its aftermath, see Saidiya Hartman, "The Time of Slavery." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 100, no. 4 (fall 2002): 757–77; Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents*.

39 Deva Woody, *Reckoning*.

40 The Works Progress Administration developed programs in arts, writing, music, theater, and historical records. The Federal Writer's Project was the Federal Project Number One and established project and produced on oral history, ethnography (folklore), state and local histories, and slave narratives. The Slave Narrative Collection, from the Works Progress Administration's (WPA) Federal Writers Project, compiled more than 2000 narratives between 1936 and 1938 with mostly formerly enslaved people. While they represented an extensive material to the study of American Slavery and have been deeply impacting slavery scholarship since at least the 1970s, historians also recognize many limitations with those interviews. On the critical assessments of this project, see: Paul Escott, *Slavery Remembered*. John W. Blassingme, ed., *Slave Testimony*. C. Vann Woodward, *The Slave's Narrative*. George Rawick, *From Sundown to Sunup*. Eugene D. Genovese, "Getting to Know the Slaves," *New York Review of Books*, 19, 21 Sept. 1972, pp. 16–19 David Thomas Bailey, "A Divided Prism: Two Sources on Black Testimony on Slavery," *Journal of Southern History* 46 (1980). Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*. The *Memórias do Cativo* Project was an oral history project established under the leadership of the historians Hebe Mattos and Ana Lugao Rios, which interviewed descendants of the last generation of enslaved people in Southeast Brazil during the 1990s. On the project see, Hebe Mattos and Ana Lugao Rios. *Memórias do Cativo: Trabalho e cidadania no Pós- Abolição*. (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 2005). Hebe Mattos, *Os Combates da Memória: escravidão e liberdade nos arquivos orais de descendentes de escravos brasileiros*. *Tempo*, v.3, n.6, Niterói, pp. 119–138, 1998. Hebe Mattos and Angela Castro Gomes, *Sobre apropriações e circularidades: Memória do cativo e política cultural na Era Vargas*. *História Oral*. São Paulo; v.1, n.1S, p. 121–144, 1998.

41 Extending Trouillot's insight on the four stages of historical silencing. Michael Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*.

42 Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*.

43 Zora Neale Hurston, Characteristics of Negro expression. *African American literary theory: A reader*, (1934): 31–44.

of white people but also disputed pro-slavery apologetics who portrayed slavery as either benign or necessary.⁴⁴

Black people had been orally transmitting and recording written narratives of their stories since the time of slavery. In 1929, their narratives became the object of comprehensive scholarly engagement, and two independent projects launched by the Fisk and Southern University collected interviews with formerly enslaved people in the South. At Fisk University, Charles S. Johnson, the founder of its Social Science Institute, and Ophelia Settle, a research staff at the Institute, interviewed formerly enslaved people in Tennessee, Kentucky, and Macon County, Alabama. An example of the interviews was reproduced by the institute's "Unwritten History of Slavery."⁴⁵

John B. Cade, a history professor at the Southern University, instructed his US History students to interview formerly enslaved people to get their perspective of the 'peculiar institution.'⁴⁶ Students asked respondents about issues such as the material conditions of life, family, education, and labor under slavery. John Cade published an analysis of the material they collected in an article entitled "Out of their Mouth."⁴⁷ In this article, Cade established his methodological position regarding the use of slave narratives: "the bitterness against the institution of slavery might be arguments against the historical accuracy of everything which follows."⁴⁸ He continued with a caveat: "we notice, however, that other authors dealing with American Negro Slavery quote from ex-slaves. If it is a fault, then we feel that we are in good company."⁴⁹ The Southern University professor concluded his analysis by stating that most of the interviews did not discuss whether slavery was good or bad for them, but among those who did, the positions were divided. Some said that the times of bondage were good compared to the Great Depression, while others pointed out that slavery was cruel both to them and the people they knew.⁵⁰

Despite his methodological skepticism regarding the veracity of the reports collected, the project led by Cade inaugurated an ethnographic approach to life under slavery and concern with the feelings of formerly enslaved people that would later impact the Works Progress Administration project.⁵¹ In 1934, A professor at Kentucky State University, Lawrence Reddick, proposed that the Federal Emergency Relief Agency (FERA), in cooperation to The Association for the Study of the Negro Life and History develop an oral history project.⁵² He ambioned to employ five hundred college-educated black workers who would systematically interview formerly enslaved people. The project would only interview 250 people before it was succeeded by the Works Progress Administration, however, in May of 1935. Among the programs WPA created was the Federal Writer's Project (FWP). One task of the Federal Writer's Project was the American Guides, a panoramic portrait of the history, geography and social aspects of cities and states, and African American's lives under slavery.⁵³ This endeavor included efforts to investigate folk life in American society, which was particularly represented by the work of

44 The extensive historical scholarship about pro-slavery propaganda in the US encompasses discussions on evangelism, parliamentary debates, confederacy and lost cause, and, more recently, pro-slavery thought in Southern Universities. See: Alfred L. Brophy, *University, Court, and Slavery*. James Oakes, *The Debates over Slavery*. Sean Wilentz, *No Property in Man*. Sven Beckert and Katherine Stevens, *Harvard and Slavery: Seeking a Forgotten*. Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *The Shaping of Southern Culture*. David Blight, "Perceptions of Southern Intransigence and the Rise of Radical Antislavery Thought, 1816-1830." *Journal of the Early Republic* 3.2 (1983): 139-163. Drew Gilpin Faust, *A Sacred Circle*; and Drew Gilpin Faust, *Ideology of Slavery*. Peter Kolchin, "In Defense of Servitude: American Proslavery and Russian Proserfdom Arguments, 1760-1860," *American Historical Review*, 85 (Oct. 1980), 809-827. Fox-Genovese, *Slavery in White and Black*.

45 Unwritten History of Slavery: Autobiographical Accounts of Negro Ex-Slaves.

46 Term employed to refer to slavery.

47 John B Cade, "Out of the mouths of ex-slaves." *The Journal of Negro History* 20, no. 3 (1935): 294-337.

48 Ibid, p.295.

49 Ibid, p.295.

50 For reconciliationist views of slavery, see: David Blight, *Race and Reunion*.

51 Sharon Ann Musher, "Contesting 'The Way the Almighty Wants It': Crafting Memories of Ex-Slaves in the Slave Narrative Collection." *American Quarterly* 53, no. 1 (2001): 1-31.

52 On the racialized dimensions of the social citizenship created by the New Deal, see: N. D. B. Connolly, *Shaped by the State*. Destin Jenkins, *The Bonds of Inequality*. And Amy Zanon, "Remembering Welfare as We Knew It: Understanding Neoliberalism through History of welfare," *Journal of Policy History* 35.1 (2023): 118-158.

53 Norman R. Yetman, *The Background of the Slave Narrative Collection*. *American Quarterly*, Autumn, 1967, Vol. 19, No. 3 (Autumn, 1967), pp. 534-55.

John A. Lomax, then a renowned folklorist and curator of the folk music archives at the Library of Congress.⁵⁴

In Alabama, the WPA employed mostly white interviewers to meet with formerly enslaved people in the late 1930s, asking them questions about their memories of slavery and the civil war. They produced a transcript of the interview and submitted the document to editors who could approve or reject the interview for publication.⁵⁵ According to WPA's methodology, each fieldworker received a questionnaire intended to guide their interview process. This interview guide stated that the purpose of the interview questions was to make the respondents "think and talk about slavery." The fieldworkers were not required to ask persons every question, which allowed both variability in the slave narratives and the recording of unexpected memories.⁵⁶ Fieldworkers were required to perform verbatim transcription and make a second visit to the respondents to review essential information and take their picture.

Fieldworkers could ask interviewees personal information, such as interviewees' place and date of birth and the names of their family members.⁵⁷ The questionnaire recommended asking several questions about the conditions of life during slavery, including the work interviewees performed, their eating habits, the size of the plantation, their childhoods, their clothes and medicine, and their relationship with their enslavers. Another category of questions inquired about respondent's reading and church attendance. The document recommended that the interviewer ask about memories of sales of enslaved people, about the existence of jails in the plantations, and about enslaved individuals who ran away. Additionally, fieldworkers could—and frequently did—ask about the way those formerly enslaved people witnessed the events of the Civil War and their experience during the Reconstruction.⁵⁸

The interventionist role the WPA played in the narratives was not restricted to the direction of the interviews but also impacted the process of transcription, evaluation, and editorialization.⁵⁹ The interviewers did not reproduce the totality of what formerly enslaved people said in their interviews. In fact, their manual of procedures recommended they check the accuracy of the information they gathered against archival records and avoid "overemphasis or overstatement in description upon local material."⁶⁰ Instead of uplifting black voices in their full integrity, the transcriptions mostly paraphrased what the interviewees said. Indeed, even when the narratives included directed quotations, these quotations did not indicate which questions respondents answered.⁶¹ For both fieldworkers and FWP's directors, the transcription of black respondents' speech became a problem solved with a pseudo-phonetic approach. This phonetic transcription of Black speech ended up producing a caricatural and degrading effect even when black people were directly quoted in the narratives. In a correspondence addressed to the FWP's state director, the associate director George Cronyn praised fieldworkers for their fidelity to the "truth to the idiom" and stated that the writers had recorded the so-called "negro dialect" with "sensitivity." Following the suggestions of John Lomax, the director of the Slave Narrative Project, Cronyn recommended interviewers avoid exaggerations, suggesting that the narratives should be "more readable to those uninitiated in the broadest Negro Speech."⁶²

The acknowledgment of the disfigurements those recording the interviews produced in the black voices leads to the conclusion that what emerges in the WPA's narratives is a representation of

54 Catherine Stewart, *Long Past Slavery*.

55 Herman Lantz, and M. Mizan Miah. "Appraisal Sheets of WPA. Interviews of Ex-Slaves a New Source of Data." *International Review of Modern Sociology* 14, no. 2 (1984): 245–53.

56 *Ibid.*

57 *Ibid.*

58 Lomax, A. Questionnaire: Stories from Ex-Slaves. Box A1081.WPA Collection. Manuscript Room. Library of Congress, Washington DC.

59 Saidiya Hartman also analyzes the interventionist role of WPA. See Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*.

60 Manual of Procedures.Box A7. WPA Collection. Manuscript Room. Library of Congress, Washington DC.

61 One good example is the interview with Tom Baker that Susie R. O'Brien transcribed. It has five quotations and nothing else. Access: <<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/36020/36020-h/36020-h.html#tom-baker>>.

62 Correspondence between George Cronyn and state directors. The correspondence continues providing a parameter to transcription of words when pronounced by black people. See George Cronyn. Questionnaire: Stories from Ex-Slaves. Box A1081. Manuscript Room. Library of Congress, Washington DC.

enslaved experience mediated by a project of national memory and its agents.⁶³ Specifically, the WPA employers mediated the formerly enslaved narratives by choosing what questions to ask or not ask and offering less than faithful transcription of respondent's answers. The context in which the WPA Slave Narratives were collected indicates the power dynamic that shaped these records. As the historian Peter Scott noted, the fact that most of the interviewers were white discouraged the respondent's critical statements about slavery and slaveowners.⁶⁴ In fact, there were cases in which the interviewer was a direct descendant of the respondent's enslaver. Scott's quantitative analysis of the WPA's narratives revealed that interviews with white workers tended to register more positive views of slavery and slaveowners when compared to when the interviewer was Black.⁶⁵ If the imbalance of power between white interviewers and formerly enslaved people is one undeniable factor that structured the slave narratives, the 'ideology of paternalism' provides a framework to think about the categories of race relations available to white southern interviewers.⁶⁶ Since the antebellum period, paternalism was an ideological construction oriented to morally justify slavery. Antebellum paternalism imagined slaveowners as responsible, fatherly protectors of enslaved people who, in turn, repaid enslavers for their protection with loyalty.⁶⁷ This depiction of slaveowners as protectors of the enslaved not only erases the violence and subjugation inherent to hereditary racial slavery, but it also obscures the necessary work that enslaved women and men had to perform to protect and care for themselves in face of the violence of their enslavers.

The drafts of the WPA interviews had to pass through editors, who recommended or rejected them for publication. These editors were in the state where the interview was conducted. In this process, the reliability and the value of the information the testimonies presented were the main criteria of approbation.⁶⁸ Additional criteria included the writing style of the transcriptions, their readability, and presentation of the "negro dialect." For instance, the interview that Nelson Birdsong gave to fieldworker Ila B. Prine was rejected because, according to the editor, it did not contain "enough slavery data to have any value." Birdsong, despite the expectations of his interviewer, spent most of his time talking about his life after slavery.⁶⁹

In addition to rejecting interviews when respondents did not discuss their life in slavery, appraisers in Alabama rejected narratives based on what they considered unrealistic. In an interview with Martha Bradley, fieldworker Mabel Farrior recorded how Martha reacted to her overseer's physical violence. Martha Bradley said her overseer whipped her for not working in the rain, and she responded by hitting, biting, and kicking him. The appraiser rejected the testimony, claiming that it consisted of a "disjointed series of exaggerations" because Martha did not explain which punishments followed. The appraiser concluded that the narrative did not "have the ring of truth necessary to be termed reliable," since he expected the overseer to punish enslaved resistance.⁷⁰ Rather than being untruthful, perhaps the reason for Martha's omission of the aftermath of her resistance is due to the pain and shame associated with the memories of violent experiences which, even if fully disclosed to the interviewer, could nonetheless be

63 Here I am indebted to Gayatri Spivak's discussion of representation as replacement. See Gayatri Spivak, *Can the subaltern speak?*.

64 Peter Scott, *Remembering Slavery*.

65 *Ibid.*

66 One of the first and main contributors to the scholarship on slaveowner's paternalism was Eugene Genovese. In his book "Roll Jordan Roll," he argues that paternalism established a fictive – and, by the way, never actualized – absorption of the enslaved into their enslaver's kinship ties. Although Genovese had an important role in the historiography when he introduced Gramscian concepts such as consensus and cultural hegemony to explain the power dynamic between enslaved and slaveowners, the recent scholarship tends to underline the coercive dimension of slavery. See Adam Rothman, *Slave Country*. Other historians such as Steve Hahn employed James Scott's theoretical framework on how subordinated groups resist to domination and argue that religion in enslaved communities was at times more an example of underground forms of resistance than production of consensus. See Steve Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet* and James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*. Finally, Stephanie Camp demonstrated how enslaved women everyday resistance created rival geographies in the plantations. See Stephanie Camp, *Closer to Freedom*.

67 Eugene Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll*.

68 Mostly understood value as a detailed narration of lived experiences in slavery and civil war times.

69 Appraisal Sheet, Box A1081. Manuscript Room. Library of Congress, Washington DC. Nelson Birdsong, "NELSON BIRDSONG REMEMBERS HIS MASTER".

70 Appraisal Sheet, Box A1081. Manuscript Room. Library of Congress, Washington DC.

deemed as untruthful.⁷¹ It further suggests a connection between the gendered and racialized violence of slavery and the silences in the archives, since one plausible explanation for Martha's silence regarding the events following her reaction was sexual violence, which was often part of the punishments perpetrated against enslaved women.⁷²

MEMÓRIAS DO CATIVEIRO IN BRAZIL

The WPA slave narrative project recorded individual memories in a process that, despite the fieldworkers' genuine interest in gathering information on slavery, disfigured the voices of formerly enslaved people and silenced the structural violence of slavery and the forms of refusal utilized by enslaved people. The decades following abolition in Brazil between 1890 and 1930, were marked by a 'whitening' ideology.⁷³ In this context, Brazilian elites, under the influence of the European scientific racism, tried to eliminate blackness and indigeneity from Brazilian racial composition.⁷⁴ The primary method of 'whitening' employed by Brazilian elites was stimulating the immigration of Europeans, which they saw as a "superior" race. As this ideology conceived progress in Brazil as directly related to the disappearance of the non-white population, the matter of memory or reparation of slavery was barely considered by white elites that were committed with the 'whitening' ideals.⁷⁵

From the 1930s, the reactions against the 'whitening' ideology consolidated themselves in a shift of racial paradigm both in Brazilian state and society, emerging an ideology of racial harmony, termed "racial democracy" by its critics.⁷⁶ Rather than explicitly trying to strengthen the whiteness of Brazilian society, intellectuals committed to racial democracy celebrated the miscegenation of people of European, Indigenous, and African ancestry as the essence of Brazilian culture.⁷⁷ As the historian Paulina Alberto argued, by adopting terms of inclusion, racial democracy symbolically positioned African and African-descended people as contributors who helped shape a new Brazilianess marked by cultural hybridism, despite the fact that the incorporation of non-white cultural heritage happened through a process of violence.⁷⁸

To Denise Ferreira da Silva, the emergence of this new ideology defined a shift from a racial project characterized by a "strategy of containment"—which produced silence by placing black bodies outside of national subjecthood—to a "strategy of engulfment," in which the silencing relied on ideas that situated blackness in a locus to produce a Brazilian historical subjectivity characterized by its globality.⁷⁹ In other words, it is not precise enough to say that there was a gap between the ideals of racial harmony and the lived experience of racism in Brazilian

71 The interviewer, Mabel Farrior, was a white woman. On the structures that render black female trauma invisible, inconsequential, and self-inflicted, see Joy James, *Afrealism and the Black Matrix: Maroon Philosophy at Democracy's Border*.

72 Jennifer Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery*, p. 211.

73 Whitening ideologies or *Teoria do Branqueamento* was a Brazilian-made form of eugenics. Unlike European doctrines of scientific racism, whitening ideology asserted that miscegenation was not a degeneration of races but rather a solution for Brazil. Although by the late nineteenth-century Brazil had the largest population of African-descent in the Americas, this ideology previews the possibility of making Brazil a white nation in three generation by stimulation European immigration and interracial marriages. See Lilia Schwarcz, *O Espetáculo das Raças*. On the impact the whitening ideology had on black communities in Brazil, Petronio Domingues argued that some Afro-Brazilians ended up, as a result of this ideological domination, assimilationist politics. See P. J. Domingues, (2002). *Negros de almas brancas? A ideologia do branqueamento no interior da comunidade negra em São Paulo, 1915–1930. Estudos Afro-asiáticos*, 24(3), 563–600.

74 On the reception of Scientific Racism in Brazil, see also: Thomas Skidmore, *Neither Black Nor White*.

75 On the post-abolition period in Brazil, see: Florestan Fernandes, *A integração do negro na sociedade de classes*. Célia Azevedo, *Onda negra, medo branco: o negro no imaginário das elites*. George Reid Andrews, *Blacks and whites in São Paulo, Brazil – 1888–1988*. Hebe Mattos, *Das cores do silêncio*. S. Kim Butler, *Freedoms Given, Freedoms Won*.

76 Florestan Fernandes, *A integração do negro na sociedade de classes*.

77 In other words, the racial democracy echoed and reworked the nineteenth-century myth of the three races. In 1841, the Historical Institute and Geográfico Brasileiro held a competition entitled "how to write the history of Brazil", which would reward the German naturalist Karl von Martius. Using a metaphor of a river, he defended that Brazil was a result of three heritages: a powerful one that was European, and two small confluents that were Indigenous and African. See Lilia Moritz Schwarcz, "Do preto, do branco e do amarelo: sobre o mito nacional de um Brasil (bem) mestiçado." *Ciência e cultura* 64.1 (2012): 48–55.

78 Paulina Alberto, *Terms of Inclusion*.

79 Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Towards a Global Idea of Race*.

society.⁸⁰ Instead, the ideological production of “racial democracy” was itself a rationality of racial subjection which operates in Brazilian society not as much via containment and exclusion as through engulfment, obliteration, and erasure of its scenes of subjection.⁸¹

These erasures are evident in Brazilian academic production throughout the 20th century, as Sueli Carneiro indicated. Despite a relative interest in the African roots of Brazilianess, Afro-Brazilians, during this period, were often reduced to the role of informants in an extractivist mode of production of racial knowledge. Carneiro still asserted that the dynamic of racial subjection, which positioned Black people as economic machines during slavery, reproduced itself in academic spaces by positioning Blacks as mere scientific objects. Furthermore, the study of Black life in Brazilian universities constituted a space that was primarily about power-knowledge disputes between whites, leading to the discard of people of African descent from the position of the subjects of knowledge. For instance, in 1988, during the centennial of the abolition of slavery in Brazil, a national committee of scholars specialized in race relations in Brazil was created, which could not have the presence of a single Black person. The committee’s coordinator explained this choice with the allegation that they could not find any Afro-Brazilian holding a PhD in History. This exclusion of Black bodies in academic spaces resulted in a (racial) antagonism between academic and activist discourses, in which the claims about memory and history made by black activists were often delegitimized – rendered as solely political or, at best, sources of insights; but not as authorities of knowledge.⁸²

In 1990, the family memories transmitted in the *Memórias do Cativo* often did not include the rich details of personal experiences, association with major historical events, or periodization that the individual memories in the WPA narratives contain.⁸³ However, the *Memórias do Cativo* recorded the collective memory of slavery from the descendants of the last generation of enslaved people in southeastern Brazil. As Maurice Halbwachs asserted, collective memory is remembered by individuals who belong to groups and collectives. In fact, these groups and collectives provide the context in which they will recover from the past.⁸⁴

While the descendants of enslaved people who share stories of slavery are not remembering events that occurred directly to them, they nonetheless offer ways of reading and listening to the actions of their ancestors. In this case, for Halbwachs, “the past is stored and interpreted by social institutions.”⁸⁵ Therefore, the investigation of family memories can make sense of the meaning that this collective attributed to the individual memories transmitted to them. Additionally, as the *Memórias do Cativo* Project stored the full oral records of the interviews, it is possible to access part of the interchangeable gaze between the descendants and the interviewer, which is only partially visible in WPA narratives. Finally, because these Brazilian scholars recorded the interviews as an oral history archive, it is possible to use elements of speech, such as repetition, speed, and tone of voice, as an analytical resource that may evidence the emotion of those memories. Hence, I hope to engage with them in a way that, rather than prolonging the obliteration and hyperbolizing the denial of violence and its refusal, will illuminate the sometimes too familiar and undertheorized perceptions of the suffering of the enslaved, and the radical work they performed to address that suffering.⁸⁶ The contrast between these two archives can illuminate aspects of the circulation of survival knowledge and practices of care in enslaved and Black communities. Particularly, the employment of the device of critical combination shows the speaker’s attempts to maintain a connection with Africa in the Brazilian oral histories and with lost family members in the American narratives.

80 As Barbara Weinstein has argued. See Barbara Weinstein, *The Color of Modernity*.

81 One example of how the rhetoric of racial democracy erasure of the dynamics of racial subjection in Brazil is the fact that in early twentieth century Afro-Brazilians still faced extra-legal barriers to access public education, see Sidney Chalhou, *Visões de Liberdade*. In the mid-20th century, Black Brazilians also faced intense forms of housing and employment inequalities as Carolina Maria de Jesus noted in her memories *Child of the Dark*.

82 Sueli Carneiro, *Dispositivo de Racialidade*.

83 Hebe Mattos, *Memórias do Cativo*.

84 Maurice Halbwachs, *On the Collective Memory*.

85 Maurice Halbwachs, *On the Collective Memory*, p. 24.

86 Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*.

Benedita's testimony, which opens this piece, preserves her enslaved ancestors' efforts to continue to talk in their African language and to transmit the memories of their lives before the Middle Passage. As the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade in Brazil happened in 1850, the contingent of African-born enslaved people in the late 19th century was significantly higher than in other countries of the Americas. Therefore, the matter of the survival of African culture in the Atlantic, and in Brazil, is a matter of contentious debate among historians of the African diaspora. The extensive scholarship on creolization is not the object of this paper, but the meaning of this cultural survival (or the fight for it) in the face of the suffering of the enslaved is part of my reflection. Engaging with African subjectivity without first-hand testimonies of their experience is not an easy task. However, the family memory Benedita recounted provides us with keys to interpreting the importance of African ties to her family.

As Benedita remembered, her great-grandparents' enslavers reproached when enslaved people tried to speak in African languages. Many slaveowners feared that conversations in African languages could allow enslaved people to plan revolts.⁸⁷ Such speech could certainly challenge enslavers' intrusion in social interactions between the enslaved. For African people in Brazil, as well as for their descendants, the survival of African languages was an aspect of their own survival. As Stephanie Smallwood pointed out on the relationship between language and suffering, "the only means to survive in this realm was to divine a means to explain it, to define and delimit it. And the only means to achieve that was to speak of it."⁸⁸ Indeed, African captives, even those learning Portuguese, could better find meaning and expression for their suffering in their native languages. Although enslaved people brought to Brazil spoke a diversity of languages, it did not mean they were unable to communicate across linguistic divides. Given the similarities among languages and dialects from the same linguistic group, as well as the ability of some African captives to speak more than one language, some scholars argue that the engagements of African language contributed to the formation of the social and political landscape in the Americas.⁸⁹ However, linguistic similarities among the enslaved did not result in cultural cohesion among them, particularly considering that in late nineteenth century Brazil, African-born enslaved people lived together with enslaved people born in Brazil.

Moreover, language was a vehicle through which African epistemologies could be accessed and African systems of knowledge, shattered in the middle passage, could be re-interpreted, and thus provide meaning to the experience of captivity in the Atlantic world.⁹⁰ Even though Benedita's account did not reveal the content of any conversations in African languages, it still expressed her family's insistence on speaking in their native tongue. Since language relates to knowledge, conversing in and teaching those languages might have created an opportunity to preserve and engage with African forms of knowledge, such as healing practices, fertility, agriculture, and religion. The preservation of language was also a form of maintaining a connection in the face of the atomizing dimension of enslavement. Hartman writes about the enslaved (and their descendants) as the holders of the missing. People of African descent are often missing their genealogical trees.⁹¹ Also, as Hartman wrote, "the slave is always the one missing from home."⁹² Enslaved people missed the continent they left, and they missed the loved ones who were gone due to death or commodification. Even as they grieved those losses, they also attempted to keep the connection. Speaking in their native language and sharing stories of life in Africa, as Benedita's stories reveal, might have been ways of staying connected. Acknowledging the missing and praying for a re-encounter might have been another, as in Laura's testimony. In sum, African captives and their descendants were not just establishing

87 Robert Slenes, *Malungo Nhoma Vem*.

88 Stephanie Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery*, p.125.

89 Robert Slenes, *Ibid*.

90 For example, the African cosmologies and religions.

91 Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*.

92 Saidiya Hartman, *Ibid*, p.87.

slave communities but guarding the resources that would help them to express their suffering, stay connected, cope with grieving, and revisit African forms of knowing in the Atlantic context.⁹³

When Benedita said that her ancestors used to speak African languages in secrecy while watching to make sure the overseer would not catch them, she also attested that enslaved people sought to create situations in which they could, even temporarily, escape their enslaver's gaze. The act of maintaining African languages and the habit of sharing stories about African life challenged their slaveowner's authority to the point that they had to be hidden practices. It shows that the work to perform care demanded spaces of "escaping" for enslaved people.⁹⁴ Relatedly, Jennifer Morgan asserts that the inability to protect private life—which was an emergent terrain of affectability in early modern bourgeoisie society—was also a hallmark of enslavement and enslavability. For her, "when enslaved women and men claimed the prerogatives of private life, those claims were necessarily rendered as sites of conflict and were therefore deeply political."⁹⁵ Enslaved people had no right to private spaces and in the places where enslaved bodies circulated, they were mostly, as Katherine McKittrick wrote, territorialized as property, and unprotected against the enslaver's control in even the most ordinary behaviors, desires, and affections.⁹⁶ Therefore, the creation of opportunities for care was also a production of fugitive histories and geographies happening either inside or outside the plantation. Otherwise, the radical acts of caring, understood as work performed to alleviate enslaved suffering, would⁹⁷

The memory of the enslaved ancestors of Claudina Souza illuminates the opposite aspect of the spatiality of care – when care could not be provided. Claudina's grandmother was Tibúcia, an enslaved woman who lived in Rio de Janeiro state in Brazil. She had sixteen children.⁹⁸ Some of her children were fathered by slave traders, her enslaver, and his sons.⁹⁹ When the *Memórias do Cativo* Project's interviewer asked about Tibúcia's relationship with her children, Claudina said that her grandmother was alienated from them. Claudina explained: "when she finally had time to breastfeed her kids, she had to feed all the mistress' children. She stopped feeding hers to do it- because she was obliged, she was obliged!" Claudina continued emphasizing the trauma of her grandmother: "She had her children, they cried with hunger, and she had to feed other children while leaving her own hungry. That alone was already a punishment." Claudina concluded, with a theoretical affirmation about what slavery meant to her grandmother and others: "they did not own themselves."¹⁰⁰

Claudina discussed her grandmother's experience with maternal alienation in a 90-minute-long tape. In the tape, Claudina paused at length before engaging with this topic. When she affirmed the fact that her grandmother could not feed her hungry children was already a punishment, the rhythm of her vocal pattern shifted, her volume increased, and her speech accelerated. While there are no universal rules for interpreting speech patterns, the pause anticipating a tough topic might indicate difficulty in bringing it into the conversation. Similarly, the shift in the

93 Additionally, as Lélia Gonzalez noted, the preservation of African languages had an impact on the Africanization of the Portuguese language in what is called "Pretuguês." It was spoken in the quilombos (Afro-Brazilian maroon communities) and marked the Portuguese language by, for example, replacing the sound of "L" for the "R", since "L" does not exist in many African languages. See Lélia Gonzalez, *Por Um Feminismo Afro-Latino-Americano*.

94 This also relates to Beatriz Nascimento's writing of *quilombos* (afro-brazilian maroon communities) as paradigms, exceeding their meaning as only physical spaces. For nascimento, quilombos were practices of resistance that belonged to a long black radical tradition. See Beatriz Nascimento, *Uma História Feita Por Mãos Negras*.

95 Jennifer Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery*, p. 211.

96 Katherine McKittrick. *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place*.

97 By fugitive histories and geographies, I mean the refusal and subversion of the cartographies of white supremacy, in which either temporary or definitive escaping of enslaver's control was possible.

98 On the exploitation of the reproductive capacities of enslaved women, see: Sasha Turner, *Contested Bodies*. Alys Eve Weinbaum, *Wayward Reproductions: Genealogies of Race and Nation in Transatlantic Modern Thought* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004). Jennifer Morgan, *Laboring Women: Gender and Reproduction in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

99 On the coercive nature of the sex between enslaved women and their enslavers, see: Sharon Block, *Rape and Sexual Power in Early America*. Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*; Merril Smith, *Sex without Consent*. Tiya Miles, *Ties that Bind*.

100 Claudina de Souza, "Memórias do Cativo e Identidades Etnicas" (1880–1940). Interviewed by Ana Lugao Rios, 10/19/1994. Available in <<http://www.labhoi.uff.br/arquivo-sonoro/item/2984>>.

rhythm may be an indication of a change in Claudina's emotional state. Increasing her volume suggests she wished to emphasize what she was saying. The acceleration of her speech could mean she wanted to glide past certain painful memories. However, as the previous pause and the increase in the volume, it is plausible to assume instead that, since Claudina had probably heard and repeated this story many times, she could easily articulate her words without spending much time in this emotional state.

Like Claudina's accounts, Laura's narrative exposes aspects of the displacement of family spaces of care enslaved people experienced. Through Claudina's account, it is possible to envision the everyday alienation of an enslaved woman from the experience of motherhood and the enslavers' role in undermining the possibilities of nurturing kinship ties and caring for loved ones. In Laura's story, what is recorded is the individual memory of circumstances that tore a family apart forever, and her grandmother's refusal manifested in a work of care towards her. Tibúcia's memory of maternal alienation is transmitted through two generations, and Claudina indicates the impact this violence had on her.

Because the WPA project valued the details of the accounts and a sense of the chain of the events narrated, the narrative of Laura's sale exposes she lacked a full understanding of the event when it happened, as well records fragments of the experience of her grandmother with the family separation. However, as recording the grief and trauma of enslaved people was not among the objectives of the WPA project, most of the emotional context and, the meaning of those events is inaccessible to readers.¹⁰¹ In contrast, the recording of orality in the *Memórias do Cativo* project uncovers the emotional density of the transmitted memory of maternal alienation, and the impact it had on the descendants of enslaved people. Those emotions could be understood solely as a result of Claudina's empathic rejection of the violence of hereditary racial slavery and, possibly, as a symptom of intergenerational trauma it caused. But also, it is important to consider that, alongside the memories of captivity transmitted to Claudina, a consciousness of the oppression Tibúcia and her children suffered was preserved. Such "practical awareness", as Angela Davis wrote, sharpened itself in everyday painful experiences, and hence, enacted the foundation of many forms of refusal, including the acts of care.¹⁰²

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

If the *Memórias do Cativo* Project reveals enslaved people's practical and critical awareness in the collective memory of slavery, the WPA narratives – because they purposely tried to record details of daily life – illuminate how slavery operated in enslaved lives to forbid practices of care. When Laura was sold, the dimension of the awareness of violence defined the moments in which she was cared for and those in which she was not. Laura's enslaver also addressed her crying and the expression of her suffering by offering candy, but, regardless of the intentionality, she did not offer Laura a work of care. This practice was not unusual among slaveowners who did not want to witness enslaved children's expressions of pain. For instance, Oliver Bell, a formerly enslaved man from Livingston (Alabama), told to the WPA interviewer Ruby Tartt that his earliest memory in slavery was seeing her mother being whipped. He said: "one day my mammy had done a soup and the master made her dress down around her waist and made her lay down across the door." Witnessing that, Oliver started to cry, so "mistress Beckie said, 'Go, get that boy a biscuit'."¹⁰³ Bell's enslavers also witnessed his suffering, but not with a critical awareness of what was happening. As their acts were devoid of a consciousness that is (re)shaped in subjection, Laura's and Oliver's enslavers' engagement with their suffering was, regardless of their will, a perpetuation of violence. While assuring that children's cries would not interrupt the sale or the whippings of human beings, the slaveowner's acts obstructed enslaved children's assessments of the violence that caused their suffering and the suffering they witnessed. But it is precisely this critical understanding that could allow a response to that violence either in the form of practices of care or direct resistance.

101 One of its memoranda even asked interviewers to avoid overemphasis. Statement and Memoranda. Works Progress Administration Collection. Box A1. Manuscript Room. Library of Congress, Washington DC.

102 Angela Davis, *Black Women's Role*.

103 Oliver Bell, "DE BES' FRIEND A NIGGER EVER HAD". Interviewed by Ruby Tartt. Available in <<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/36020/36020-h/36020-h.html#oliver-bell>>.

In suggesting the inseparability between critical awareness and practices of care, it is possible to challenge dominant narratives of enslaved resistance which obliterate some responses to slavery's regimes of violence.¹⁰⁴ Neil Roberts argued that through centering our attention on the “theorists who were slaves,” we encounter an understanding of freedom that, unlike the western political theories, is marked by instability and the importance of the acts of flight.¹⁰⁵ Similarly, perhaps modern western conceptualizations of resistance and radicalism obscure some dimensions of survival due to their insufficient attention to the acts of care.¹⁰⁶ As I claimed in this work, those practices of care were founded in a critical consciousness of oppression, conditioned by its geographies, and creators and maintainers of connection. Finally, in addition to tracking different archival production of silence and the historical contexts that customized them, my engagement with “critical combination” experimented with the multifactual to evidence and diffuse archival power. Therefore, the combination of archives I employed aimed to grasp (and put together) in the fragmentary archival evidence the elements of a praxis that, as I implicitly assumed, is diasporic.

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¹⁰⁴ On gendered and racialized accounts of enslaved resistance, see: Jennifer Morgan, *Partus Sequitur Ventrem* and Jennifer Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery*.

¹⁰⁵ Neil Roberts, *Freedom as Marronage*. p. 15.

¹⁰⁶ Saidiya Hartman, *Venus in two acts*.

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