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Women, Slavery, and the Archive: Innovations in Slavery Studies and Contemporary Connections

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Abstract

"Women, Slavery, and the Archive: Innovations in Slavery Studies and Contemporary Connections"

Early scholarship on slavery, abolition, and the British empire largely ignored the contribution of women of any race to the African Institution. British women who participated in boycotts, produced literary texts against African enslavement, and did the legwork of circulating petitions were relegated to footnotes until well into the twentieth century when women scholars began to create space in the canon for the unrecognized or under-recognized women writers. These new avenues of research evolved through decades to become more inclusive, more critical, and more ground-breaking in bringing the past into the present. I identify four important shifts in our understanding of British enslavement and abolition over the long eighteenth century: 1. recognition of (white) women's work in the abolitionist campaigns; 2. recognition of the labor of enslaved women and their contributions to resistance; 3. recognition of women's involvement in supporting as well as resisting slavery; 4. recognition of the erasure of people, and the violence of the archive that only validates recorded experiences. Recovering these various kinds of erasures has opened possibilities for new methods of analysis. The legacy of this work not only opened slavery studies to new methodologies of gender and intersectional analyses, but it also opened the archive to productive critique. The new avenues for slavery studies recovers the voices of silenced women and empowers scholar who wish to challenge established narratives. By reviewing the scholarly legacy of transatlantic slavery studies, we can also better appreciate the influence on the immediate present. Contemporary work on Black Lives Matter (abolition), 1619 Project, and the attempts to ban critical race theory address the importance of the transitions in scholarship and how their legacies can reshape the future.

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Cover Page Footnote

The quality and rigor of this article are possible because of Marilyn Francus's excellent editorial skills.

This scholarship is available in ABO: Interactive Journal for Women in the Arts, 1640-1830: https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/abo/vol13/iss1/3
While examining advertisements for runaways in the Anglo-Caribbean newspaper archives, I came across an extraordinary entry about an enslaved woman who purportedly lived to be 110! Under the title of “the Remarkable Influence of Longevity,” this short testimonial stood out for its unusual content:

Died, a few days ago, in St. Elizabeth’s an old negro woman, named Cooba, at the very advanced age of 110. —She belonged to the Hon. Thomas Chambers, Esq. Custos of that parish. From her master, and a numerous family of descendents [sic], down to the fourth generation, she had every comfort and convenience of life; besides which, having been entirely at liberty to do as she pleased for twenty or thirty years past, she used regularly to visit a circle of acquaintances for many miles round, and not only was well received both by whites and blacks, but made herself useful to them, as she possessed her recollection to the last, and had her senses so perfectly, that to instance only her sight, which generally fails the first, she could to thread a small needle, and was still so active, that a few months before her death she was seen to dance with as much apparent ease as a girl of fifteen. On being questioned, whether she considered her having been brought from Guinea (for she was by birth a Coromantee) as a misfortune? She gave a decided preference to the lot which had befallen her, being sensible that she enjoyed much greater happiness by coming to this country, and that the thought this last was a lucky circumstance for all the Africans, even those whom, in her long experience, she had known treated the worst.¹

“Cooba,” a member of the Coromantee people, was sold to Jamaican plantation and managed to create a life for herself under conditions of enslavement. This obituary was clearly a proslavery testimonial that led the reader to the following conclusion: enslavement in the Anglo-Caribbean was preferable to freedom in the African kingdom from which she was taken. While the impetus of the testimonial is obvious, interpreting the text through varied contemporary scholarly lenses produces a more robust analysis.

The field of slavery studies encompasses perhaps the broadest geography and widest array of disciplinary approaches. The multiple forms of human enslavement operating around the globe at any given time share common threads, one of which is the treatment of humans as chattel. In the “New World,” as designated by Western European explorers to describe North and South America as well as the Caribbean, chattel slavery took on a racialized context. Each European empire—British, French, Spanish, Portuguese, and Dutch—carefully documented their version of racialized chattel slavery,
leaving rich archives for scholars from disciplines like literature, history, rhetoric, sociology, and philosophy to study. A comprehensive analysis of all these geographic and disciplinary perspectives is beyond the scope of one article. However, this article will attempt a review of the scholarship focused on the British circum-Atlantic world from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. More specifically, I focus on how scholarship by women academics about women bound up in the racialized chattel slavery of the circum-Atlantic world has shifted and opened more fruitful and innovative understandings of the earlier period and our contemporary time.

Returning to Cooba’s obituary, the context was most likely a response to the very popular movement to abolish the slave trade taking place in Great Britain in 1791 when it was published. The representation of Cooba’s opinion on enslavement, whether truth or fiction, was intended to contradict the damning reports of slave mortality, slaveholder cruelty, and the overall sadism of the racialized chattel slavery in the Anglo-Atlantic world. Cooba’s gender is also noteworthy since obituaries of the enslaved were rare and obituaries of enslaved women were rarer still. Enslaved women were doubly imperiled by the intense labor of plantation work and the dangers posed by pregnancy and childbirth. Cooba’s fertility, longevity, and success in the plantation culture served two purposes: to show the ability of enslaved people to flourish in Jamaica, and that over time they would appreciate their good fortune of being brought under British rule. The richness of this text can be parsed in many scholarly directions: what more could be learned about Cooba’s existence? Do any records remain of her descendants? What might her daily life have looked like on the plantation? We can also read the silences around the details of Cooba’s labor, the paternity of her offspring, and the manner of her death, to critique the propagandistic tone of the testimonial. However, Cooba’s story also lives beyond the text. The resilience needed to withstand the conditions of the Jamaican climate, let alone enslavement, is the subtext of this obituary. In examining both written and unwritten details, Cooba’s story can be told in a richer context.

The trends in scholarship around the intersection of gender, race, and enslavement in Anglophone plantation societies have revolutionized the field of slavery studies and encouraged a necessary critique of the archive. In tracing these trends, I do not mean to set out a linear progression from one to the other. Many of the foundational texts overlap in time frame and may spin off into other scholarly directions. However, each “move” creates a new space for research on the form of racialized chattel slavery distinct to the British—and by extension, American—empires. Until the 1990s, most of the published research on slavery and abolition in the Anglophone Atlantic focused on men—as perpetrators, as victims, and as liberators. Starting with Thomas Clarkson’s The History of the rise, progress, and accomplishment of the abolition of the slave-trade, by the British Parliament (1808), the work of
white women in promoting abolition, the voices of black women contesting slavery, and the representation of women in general had been largely ignored by slavery scholars—most of whom were men. The field expanded exponentially with the analysis of gender as category and the role of women in systems of enslavement.

My aim in this essay is to trace the legacy of contemporary scholars (primarily women scholars) who examine how gender influences our understanding of slavery and abolition in the Anglophone Atlantic in order to emphasize how they have reshaped the field. The four subsections correspond to four important shifts in our understanding of racialized chattel slavery and abolition in the Anglophone Atlantic (encompassing the American colonies, the United States, and the Caribbean) over the long eighteenth century: 1. recognition of (white) women’s work in the abolitionist campaigns; 2. recognition of the labor of enslaved women and their contributions to resistance; 3. recognition of women’s involvement in supporting as well as resisting slavery; 4. recognition of the erasure of people, and the violence of the archive that only validates recorded experiences. In each section, I highlight significant contributions made by the scholars whose methodologies and analyses encouraged research and gave voice to the un(der)represented. The legacy of this work has opened slavery studies to new methodologies of gender analyses, intersectional analyses, and productive critique of the archive as well as shaped the contemporary cultural discourse of race.

**(White) Women and the abolitionist campaigns**

Analyses of the rise, progress, and abolition of the African slave trade and then chattel slavery in the British Empire emerged most fully from the discipline of history. Scholars examined the slave trade and colonial reliance on slave labor as arising from political and economic factors that shaped the nation and empire over the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The mobilization of public opinion managed to apply pressure to the government and override the interests of the powerful West India lobby. The waning economic value of sugar allowed for abolitionist sentiment to sway government interests. According to these early studies, spanning the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the extraordinary aspects of abolition stemmed from the size and scale of its mobilization. More focused on the “why” rather than the “whom,” early analyses were not as attentive to the many different constituencies recruited both for and against abolition. The campaigns to abolish the African slave trade and then African enslavement from all British territories encompassed every aspect of culture; however, the cultural influencers were assumed to be primarily (white) men. Part of the impetus for this scholarly assumption was the ready adoption of Habermas’ theory of separate spheres. This separation by gender of public and private rendered the work of women in abolition as largely invisible.
The study of the abolitionist movement began with a primary source document that was published almost immediately after the legislation to abolish the slave trade in the British empire passed. The treatise represented a combination of a pat on the back and a way to write this accomplishment into the historical record. Thomas Clarkson published his history in 1808 and identified the “Saints” responsible for abolishing the slave trade. Unsurprisingly, the “Saints” were all mostly British men. Clarkson barely mentioned women’s support of the movement, and even when mentioned it was ancillary to their husbands’ active participation. Most of the primary source material from the first campaign constructed slavery, the slave trade, and abolition as wholly masculine enterprises. On the proslavery side, the literature produced by planters, traders, and members of the West India lobby was authored primarily by men. Similarly, abolitionist literature was predominantly male-authored (with the exception of the poetry) and even the slaves depicted in verse or prose were primarily male. The second campaign for abolition of slavery was more inclusive of female voices, but they were rarely the focus of scholarship. Women provided the labor of the movement by campaigning person to person, but their efforts were relegated to the background as support staff rather than agents in their own right.

Clare Midgley’s Women Against Slavery (1992) brought a feminist, gender-focused lens to both campaigns as a challenge to masculinist readings of the historical record. Her study pointed to the “separation of spheres” discourse as de-valuing the contribution of women during both the campaigns. For example, male abolitionist campaigners relied on large-scale public rallies to educate the public about the horrors of the slave trade and slavery. Analyses of these “public sphere” speeches privileged masculine discourse and virtually erased the work of women. Midgley pointed out that while public rallies served a function, they mostly preached to the converted. Women actively campaigned on a more personal level since public engagement in terms of speech-making or even publishing tracts would have been perceived as immodest. Women campaigners went door to door to promote the cause; they organized petitions and boycotts to apply pressure on Parliament.7 As a result, they captured a breadth of support that may not have been swayed by speeches and polemic. Midgley writes, “The aim of this study is thus not to incorporate women into pre-existing accounts of the anti-slavery movement. It is not to add to traditional anti-slavery hagiography a clutch of minor female ‘Saints’… Rather, my aim is a disruptive as well as an informative one: to expose the need to rewrite general histories of anti-slavery, and to reconstruct the frameworks upon which they rest” (4).8 This disruption brought to the fore the labor of women and the power of the domestic, private sphere in effecting political change.9
Another significant contribution of the nineties was Moira Ferguson’s *Subject to Others* (1992), which focused on women’s literary contribution to antislavery literature. Ferguson’s work introduced literary analysis more actively into the field of slavery studies by examining women’s antislavery literature. Since sentimental literature was increasingly the province of women, antislavery became a frequent trope that many (white) women writers incorporated into their poetry and prose. While most of these women had no direct contact with enslaved people or the plantation culture of the New World, Ferguson argues that white women recognized a common bondage—constraints on the liberty of the enslaved had corollaries with the restrictions placed on white, middle-class women in Britain. White women’s writing also pointed out another dimension of suffering of enslaved women who were subject to the predatory appetites of the slaveholder and trader. In fact, antislavery poetry brought together British women across broad socioeconomic and political spectrums who shared sympathy with the enslaved person’s plight. Thus, the organizing of the abolitionist campaigns precipitated and contributed to the later mobilization of women on their own behalf.

Both Midgley and Ferguson shift the conversation about abolition to embrace the critical role that (white) women played in the movement. However, they also problematize this engagement as it intersected with race and class. Midgley points to the class politics inherent to the participants in the movement by noting that middle-class white women often placed poor Britons in similar categories of subjection. Similarly, Ferguson notes the appropriation of the African woman’s body as a site of sympathy in the writings of white women. While the agitation for ending enslavement was genuine, many white women saw themselves as the saviors of black femininity. In this way, they were able to preserve their racial supremacy as if they were the only ones who could bring an end to slavery. White women writers utilized the imagined experience of black enslaved women to sentimentalize enslavement and draw connections to their own subject positions within British society even as they empowered themselves. As Charlotte Sussman states, “[s]eeing the allegiances of female antislavery activists as bisected by the bonds of class and sex helps explicate the contradiction between their identification with West Indian slave women, and their denial of alternative forms of agency or subjectivity to such women” (6). White women politicized the domestic sphere and claimed agency at the expense of and on the body of black enslaved women.

**Claiming enslaved women’s agency**

Literary studies has rich traditions to mine for understanding and interpreting representations of chattel slavery over the long eighteenth century. In antislavery poetry, for example, images of African women were relegated to the sidelines—either left behind to mourn the captured men or as objects of
regret because they shared in enslavement. In 1795, Hannah More published *The Sorrows of Yamba* in her *Cheap Repository Tracts*.13 As a conservative voice for middle-class British women, More had garnered such respect from antislavery advocates that she was contracted to write *Slavery: A Poem* in 1788, which was her first foray into the cause. *The Sorrows of Yamba*, published while the anti-slave-trade movement was regrouping after a Parliamentary defeat, was one of the only abolitionist poems in the first campaign to feature a female protagonist. While both abolitionists and slavery advocates pointed to effects of enslavement on the body of the slave, the slave was usually male.14 More’s poem offered a seemingly fresh perspective by focusing on women’s loss, not only of personal freedom but also freedom for their offspring. The poem depicts Yamba’s capture by slave traders on the West African coast. She is stolen from her homeland with an infant at her breast. The baby dies while on board the slave ship and Yamba contemplates suicide. After arriving in the Caribbean, she is sold to a plantation owner and on the plantation she is converted to Christianity. That conversion prevents her from committing suicide and provides meaning to her enslavement. “All my former thoughts abhor’d, / Teach me how to pray and praise / … / Cease, Ye British Sons of murder! / Cease from forging Afric’s chain.”15 More speaks through this character to chastise British slavers while offering one “benefit” of enslavement for the African.

Hannah More represented the complex relationship between white women, abolition, and the black female body at the turn of the century. Her poem directly incorporated the many shocking details of mistreatment that came out of Parliamentary testimony about behavior on slave ships. However, More also lauds the efforts of converting the enslaved and preserving body and soul. This idealization of conversion represents one way in which More appropriated the voice of the enslaved. In speaking for the enslaved, many of the poems presented only a caricature of suffering to appeal to sentiment because most authors had no direct contact with anyone who had personal experience of the Middle Passage or plantation life. The body of the enslaved became a palimpsest on which reformers sought to rewrite the story of British morality and Christianity. Unfortunately, in giving voice to these enslaved women, white reformers cast themselves as saviors and stripped black women of any form of agency. As Ferguson and Midgley show in their analyses, white women in Britain took up the antislavery cause as much to serve personal ends as to right social wrongs.

By the second abolitionist campaign, depictions of the suffering of enslaved women increased and broadened to include sexual as well as physical exploitation. Even the most genteel female campaigners could not ignore the testimonials about predatory slave masters and their mixed-race children. The clearest recounting of these conditions came from *The History of Mary Prince* (1831), the first Caribbean slave narrative published by and about a woman. In
the first abolitionist campaign, first-hand accounts of enslavement were almost entirely the province of men. Black women’s experiences were filtered through the narratives of others, and even Prince’s narrative was mediated through a white woman who served as amanuensis and a white man who edited her narrative. Prince (or her proxies) made use of all the sentimental tropes popularized in earlier antislavery publication. Her language, however, moved between idealized sentiment and brutal reality. She recounted the cruelty of her white masters and mistresses; the continuous threat of sexual exploitation and abuse of enslaved women’s bodies; and her own agency in claiming freedom in England. As Charlotte Sussman states, “Prince reveals the disjunction between idealized images of the domestic sphere, where tearful reading is the only means of producing saltwater, and the realities of labor conditions for women in the Caribbean, where saltwater had other sources, and other uses” (155).

During the abolitionist campaigns, white women (and men) rendered black women’s bodies as spectacles for sympathy and these depictions were analyzed in literary scholarship as part of the sentimental canon. However, scholars working on the Caribbean (and who are also of Caribbean descent) in the late 1980s and 1990s reclaimed the black woman’s body as a site of resistance. In the parallel field of Anglophone Caribbean studies, scholars contested the imperialist narrative that abolition occurred through the beneficence of white campaigners. Instead, they pointed to the active threat of slave insurrections, the complexity of Caribbean social stratification, and other forms of enslaved people’s resistance occurring in tandem with the abolitionist campaigns. Initially, these scholars also ignored black women’s contributions to and participation in these struggles. Barbara Bush’s Slave Women and Caribbean Society precipitated a significant reconsideration of the agency of enslaved women. Based on the pioneering work of Lucille Mathurin Mair, Bush sought to present a “fresh analysis” of the integral role played by slave women in the plantation economy and in resistance movements: “History for the most part has been written by men, for men, and thus records largely what men want to see. In the case of black women this ‘invisibility’ was complicated by the ethnocentric nature of contemporary writings by both planter and critic of slavery alike. If the former’s rare comments on slave women were bluntly racialist, the latter’s were tinged with paternalistic sentimentality. Both were inaccurate” (xi).

In spite of the paucity of records, scholars have managed to reconstruct and reimagine the lives of enslaved women on the Caribbean plantation. Bush’s analysis set out several criteria that continue to inform scholarship on Caribbean society. She argued strongly against the stereotype of enslaved women as “a compound of the scarlet woman, the domineering matriarch and the passive work horse” (5). Rather, she underscored that enslaved women were subject to the same physical conditions of labor as men. In addition, they
had to contend with sexual exploitation and creating families within the instability of enslavement, subject to both white and black patriarchal restrictions. Most importantly, Bush created space for claiming black women’s role in slave resistance and as integral participants in all aspects of society.

Her work invited reconsideration of gender dynamics in plantation societies and demonstrated the complexity of analysis required to understand black women’s roles in those societies. Hilary Beckles in his long essay, *Afro-Caribbean Women and Resistance to Slavery in Barbados*, acknowledges that his own work largely ignored the contribution of black women to resistance movements in the Caribbean. This gap was especially troubling given that Barbados was the only British colony to maintain an almost equal number of enslaved men and women. Following the criteria set out by Bush, Beckles re-examined evidence of black women’s participation in family life, plantation work, and resistance in Barbados. He concludes: “Women were concerned with autonomous participation in their economic environment, improving their social and material welfare within the slavery system, obtaining full legal freedom, attaining the semi-freedom which marronage afforded, building families and other social institutions, all of which required opposition to the rules and ideologies of the slaveowners’ administration” (75).

More so than the work on abolitionists, the study of black enslaved women opened scholarship and the feminist lens to the full range of plantation societies in the western hemisphere. Caribbean scholars acknowledged their debt to African-American feminist scholars in considering how to reclaim images of black womanhood across the forced diaspora created by enslavement. Two important collections illustrate the widespread importance of this work. *Engendering History* (1995) takes a broad historical and geographic perspective by examining black women’s involvement in enslavement, emancipation, and protest from the eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries. The collection helps to broaden images of black womanhood beyond stereotypical victimhood. The collection also claims a place for Caribbean scholars in the vast field of slavery studies. In *More than Chattel* (1996), the editors assemble essays examining the plantation labor and resistance across many societies in the United States, the Caribbean, and Brazil. This collection brings together analyses that racialized chattel slavery as a system operating across many different parts of the Americas. While earlier studies focus on the colonizer in the settlement of these colonies, this collection reclaims the labor and resistance of Black women as an organizing lens for understanding the Americas. The legacy of women’s scholarship in Caribbean slavery studies and the surfacing of black women’s role in all aspects of plantation societies has made visible the significance of the enslaved woman’s contribution.
**Women and shades of difference**

As scholars in the nineties successfully established the role of women in abolition and resistance, the next wave of research could focus on the differences among the women. Social historians delved more deeply into the complex social stratification in plantation culture. In literary studies, scholars began to surface texts that had been previously dismissed as outside the canon. The richness of these texts written by women and about women was that they were attentive to a broader range of social issues that were prominent at the time. As such, scholars were able to take a more nuanced perspective on the varied subject positions occupied by women in the Anglophone world. For example, in analyses of *The Woman of Colour* (1808), scholars opened the conversation of novelistic traditions to the position of mixed-race offspring of planters and enslaved women as well as their position in British society. The epistolary novel centers on Olivia Fairfield, the child of a white plantation owner and a black woman, who is sent to England by her father to marry her cousin. Olivia’s financial well-being is tied to this marriage as well as her ability to negotiate English society. She is accompanied by a black enslaved woman, Dido, who is “proud” to serve Olivia. Unfortunately, Augustus Merton has issues with Olivia’s mixed race, even though her character is exemplary. He recounts to a friend that when he first saw her, he “beheld a skin approaching to the hue of a negro’s … I that had been used to contemplate a countenance, and a transparent skin of ivory” (12). As the title implies, much of the novel is taken up with skin color and the meaning of skin color to English society. More importantly, the novel also brings to light the different social strata and subject positions occupied by people in Caribbean society. The position of white women in Caribbean society, and their complicity in supporting racialized chattel slavery, came under greater scrutiny as well. Caribbean-born white Britons, the “West Indians,” faced similar conflicts as Olivia Fairfield in terms of fitting into British society, making whiteness itself a contested category. Other novelists of the time were also attentive to these distinctions—Maria Edgeworth’s *Belinda* (1801) features a West Indian character, and the central character of Helena Wells’s *Constantia Neville: or, The West Indian* (1800) is a white “Creole” woman.

Having reframed the historical documents and literary works around slavery to include the agency of women, scholars were now free to parse women’s participation in the slave system more finely. The intersection of race, class, and gender is central to understanding the multiplicity of women’s involvement with slavery. Historians also began to focus more on the variety of archival evidence for the white, black, and mixed-race women who participated in the slave system. Christine Walker’s book is the most recent and dynamic study of women slaveholders in the Caribbean. In *Jamaica’s Ladies* (2020), Walker reveals that slaveholding included women of multiple racial categories and involved different forms of labor. Her study contests
most clearly the stereotype of the male, Caribbean planter who employed enslaved people as agricultural labor as representative of all Caribbean enslavement. She expands the simplified categorization of women in the Caribbean by parsing the English mistress, from the “mulatto” concubine, or the enslaved African—paying attention to social as well as racial stratification. The agency demonstrated by women—white, black, and mixed—through chattel slavery to leverage their social position or freedom for a better life is pivotal to grasping the full complexity of women’s participation.

A second important trend in historical scholarship is the role of the body and reproduction in the perpetuation of enslavement. English common law acknowledged native forms of enslavement, but those forms did not resemble the racialized chattel slavery of the empire. One of the most important distinctions was that chattel enslavement passed through the mother and was contingent upon her status within society. As a consequence, black women’s bodies took on additional responsibilities and burdens in the plantation system. Jennifer L. Morgan’s *Laboring Women* (2004) examines the Anglophone Caribbean and the American South to evaluate “the impact of slavery on women’s lives and the impact of women on the development of slavery” (4). She makes the radical claim that enslaved women’s labor, both in the sense of the physical and the reproductive work of the plantation, fundamentally shaped Caribbean and American slave societies. However, the archive does not support this reading on its face. She notes that “[w]e define the communities we study and find them bounded not so much by their own uniformity as by our own still-inadequate notion of boundaries” (197). Morgan’s work leads to the final significant trend and a lasting legacy of women’s scholarly contribution to the field of slavery studies: challenging the archive.

**Reading silences in the archive**

One could argue that the archive is the most masculine and patriarchal form of knowledge currently limiting the academy. One need only see the opposition to Nikole Hannah-Jones’s *1619 Project* (2019) to understand how the archive has become synonymous with “fact” in a way that equates lack of evidence with erasure. In the field of slavery studies, the volume of the record has masked significant lacunae in recording the experiences of all involved. Scholarship of the first decade of the new millennium challenges not only the paucity of the archival record but our strict reliance on the archive. In 2013, I attended an NEH seminar on slave resistance and a participant actually voiced the opinion, “if it wasn’t written down then it didn’t happen.” That arcane manner of thought has been challenged consistently and successfully by feminist scholars. Women’s history is found in objects, encoded in oral histories, or discovered through subtext. As Jennifer Morgan puts it, “The
archive yields very little without a struggle, and the effort to wrench meaning itself creates meaning all its own” (198). The archive is another site of violence and erasure because the lives of many women who were enslaved, freed, transported, or otherwise embedded in the system of slavery do not appear. Therefore, to understand the daily life of the enslaved and the enslavers alike, we must read around and beyond the archive.

Three texts recognize the violence of the archive and actively work to disentangle the unwritten truths of transportation and enslavement in the New World from the biased record. In Saltwater Slavery (2008), Stephanie Smallwood examines the ledgers of countless slave ships to understand the Middle Passage. She uses this archival material to read back and (re)create the “linear narrative” from capture to enslavement. Random notes made by ship’s captains become the basis for understanding the behavior and resistance demonstrated on board the slave ship; information from legal and newspaper sources in the Caribbean broaden the portrait. Smallwood’s final chapter, “Life and Death in Diaspora” concludes with ’Sibell’s narrative, an enslaved woman in Barbados whose story was recorded by a white male traveler from England. Though a mediated re-telling of her story, Smallwood points to the ways in which ’Sibell’s story challenges the linearity of experience that she maps out in her earlier chapters.

’Sibell supplies a narrative that is less about enduring the crisis of the slave ship than about surviving it. Indeed, what is most striking about ’Sibell’s story is its unambiguous message that the trauma of the slave ship survivor lay in the effort to integration—the challenge to integrate pieces of a narrative that do not fit neatly together, to suture the jagged edges and bleeding boundaries of lives fragmented by captive migration. […] [T]he fractured shape of ’Sibell’s account reflects the nonlinear temporality of a nonwestern subject and the familiar rhythms of oral, as distinct from written, narrative expression. (205)

In Lose Your Mother (2007), Saidiya Hartman interweaves personal narrative, literary analysis, and historical contextualization to imagine the path on the Atlantic slave route. She moves beyond the archive—personalizes the archive—to create a story that emerges rather than is told. Marisa J. Fuentes approaches the archive more directly in Dispossessed Lives (2016): “My work resists the authority of the traditional archive that legitimates structures built on racial and gendered subjugation and spectacles of terror. This violence of slavery concealed enslaved bodies and voices from others in their own time and we lose them in the archive due to those systems of power and violence” (7).
With these powerful changes in archival methodology, we can return to Cooba’s story to extract fresh knowledge through evolving legacies of scholarship on slavery and gender. Cooba was of the Coromantee people whose reputation among the enslavers and the enslaved was of fierceness and pride. In other archives, enslavers show a grudging respect for and wariness of the warrior-like nature of the Coromantee, especially on the island of Jamaica where the Coromantee were integral to the formation of Maroon communities. Cooba managed to survive the difficult work of the plantation and bear children whose paternity may have been mixed in some way, either with African (e.g., “Eboe,” “Nago,” “Congo”) or British (e.g., Scottish, Welsh, English) ancestry. Cooba survived seeing her children sold away from her care to neighboring parishes, some of which were “miles away.” She complied with demands on her labor in order to maintain contact with her family, who were increasingly scattered and sold. She earned some degree of personal liberty by surviving these demands, and she managed to create a life for herself in spite of her situation. While we cannot truly know what her final words may have been, she demonstrated her political savvy in gaining trust and making the master believe that he had succeeded in curbing her freedom. Cooba found a different sort of freedom in survival as the obituary also reveals the increasing amount of geographic liberty she was granted. She was an extraordinary woman who made survival her most enduring legacy.

With Cooba’s story, we can add nuance to the ambitious 1619 Project by locating sites of resistance in seemingly complicit behavior. The violence of the archive is increasingly acknowledged and excavated for its erasures. The interrogation of the traditional archive as the site of white supremacy will be one of the most lasting legacies of slavery studies. As slavery scholarship continues to broaden and incorporate greater understanding of the institutions of the past, the next move in scholarship needs to make a better bridge between past and present. Work like Nicole Aljoe’s and Elizabeth Maddox Dillon’s “Early Caribbean Digital Archive” and Kerry Sinanan’s “Woman of Colour” Facebook group has begun the task of using contemporary tools to understand the weight of the legacies of racism and sexism, which are often intertwined. Bringing an understanding of the past into the contemporary world should not just be a scholarly exercise and academics could better support work like the 1619 Project and its broader appeal. If anything, the backlash against the 1619 Project has been so swift and so absolute—leading to attacks on critical race theory, book banning, and fascistic legislation designed to censor voices in the classroom that challenge white supremacy in the United States—that it proves we are still seeing evidence of proslavery rhetorical maneuvers in popular discourse. So, scholars must do a better job of taking apart, acknowledging, and analyzing the proslavery argument because its influence has never truly waned. The legacies of these scholarly shifts are only useful if they lay the groundwork for real and substantive change.
Notes

This essay is part of a special issue: “Shaping the Legacy of 18th-Century Women,” guest edited by Marilyn Francus, Aphra Behn Online 13, no. 1 (Summer 2023). To read the essays in the cluster, follow this link: https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/abo/vol13/iss1/.

1 The Cornwall Chronicle, and Jamaica General Advertiser. Supplement, Saturday, 13 August 1791, pp. 3.

2 The field of slavery studies is vast and covers multiple European empires. This essay cannot hope to provide a summary of the entirety of changes. I focus primarily on the British Empire because it was the largest purveyor of enslaved peoples during the eighteenth century. I also note that American scholars were more mindful of the intersection between slavery and gender, so analyses of slavery in the United States were more sophisticated on the issue by the 1980s.

3 See David Brion Davis and Robin Blackburn.

4 See Eric Williams and Seymour Drescher.

5 Jurgen Habermas, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere.

6 This separation and its subsequent denigration of women’s work was criticized effectively in the mid-nineties. See Joanne Meehan for more.

7 See J. R. Oldfield. He does mention British women as an important audience for abolitionist rhetoric and attributes this awareness to Midgley’s work.

8 Midgley’s work provides a healthy critique of the discipline of history that places political and economic change solely in the “public sphere” of men while relegating women’s labor to social history. In economic terms, especially, women’s control of domestic consumption afforded a great deal of power, and the door-to-door engagement is still the most potent form of campaigning.

9 A natural legacy of these analyses can be seen in Charlotte Sussman, Markman Ellis, and Jennifer DeVere Brody.

10 In 1788, for example, three of the most popular antislavery poems were written by Hannah More, Ann Yearsley, and Helen Maria Williams. More and Williams were at opposite ends of the political spectrum and Yearsley was in a lower socioeconomic bracket.

11 Midgley does caution against drawing too direct a line between women’s engagement with abolition and the feminist movement. Conservative women had no trouble advocating for the enslaved but found women’s liberation far more troubling.

12 Other studies enabled by this work: Lyndon J. Dominique’s Imoinda’s Shade, Heather Nathans, and Srividhya Swaminathan.

13 More is not the sole author of this poem; rather, she expands upon and changes an earlier version by Eaglesfield Smith. For a full consideration of this dual-authored text, see Alan Richardson. With the exception of Phyllis Wheatley, all abolitionist poetry in the first campaign was authored by white Britons.
The most popular poems during the first abolitionist campaign were Thomas Day and John Bicknell’s *The Dying Negro* (1773) and William Cowper’s “The Negro’s Complaint” (1788). They both focus on male speakers with female characters as peripheral.


The three most famous narratives were *Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho* (1782), Ottobah Cugoano’s *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evils of Slavery* (1787), and *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* (1789). The noteworthy female contribution came from Phillis Wheatley; however, her poetry was not solely focused on her history of enslavement.

See Jessica L. Allen.

Scholars disagree on the extent to which Prince’s voice comes through despite the editing. In “Caribbean Slave Narratives,” Nicole Aljoe provides a compelling argument that white Britons’ unfamiliarity with Creole made the editing process fraught.

For a good overview of the many ways that antislavery made use of sentimental tropes, see Stephen Ahern. For a focused study of sentiment and Mary Prince in particular, see Christine Levecq.

The long essay is in response to earlier work by Barbara Bush and Lucille Mathurin Mair. After Bush’s full study was published, Beckles continued his re-assessment.

Other studies enabled by this work are Elizabeth Bohls and Katherine Paugh.

*The Woman of Colour* has received a great deal of scholarly attention and continues to be a rich source for scholars. See Sara Salih, Jennifer Reed, Kristina Huang, and the most recent special issue of *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, “New Essays on *The Woman of Colour,*” edited by Nicole N. Aljoe, Kerry Sinanan, Mariam Wasif.

Brooke S. Newman mines the historical archive of Jamaica to show how fluid the ideas of whiteness were in the Caribbean when questions of inheritance arose.

See Christine Walker. A more focused study of black women’s agency is Jessica Marie Johnson.

See Barbara Bush, “White Ladies.”

The legacy of Morgan’s work can be found in Sasha Turner and Paugh.

Five historians protested the problems with “verifiable” fact from the Project, claiming it was driven by ideology not scholarship. However, they also claimed to operate from an ideological purity that no historian has ever possessed. See the interaction with New York Times’ editor-in-chief, Jake Silverstein: https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/20/magazine/we-respond-to-the-historians-who-critiqued-the-1619-project.html. *The Atlantic* offers a useful analysis of the argument in “The Fight Over the 1619 Project is Not About the Facts” by Adam Serwer, https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/12/historians-clash-1619-project/604093/.

Hartman’s text is more appropriately categorized as public intellectual work, as she successfully produces scholarship that appeals to a broader audience.
The idea for the archive began at a symposium of the Early Caribbean Society in 2011. According to the website, “The ECDA has two primary related, overarching goals: the first is to uncover and make accessible a literary history of the Caribbean written or related by black, enslaved, Creole, indigenous, and/or colonized people. […] we aim to enable users—both scholars of the Caribbean as well as students—to understand the colonial nature of the archive and to use the digital archive as a site of revision and remix for exploring ways to decolonize the archive.”

In 2019, Dr. Kerry Sinanan created a private Facebook group called “Woman of Colour” in order to “support and share resources for those of us teaching and researching race, colonialism, empire, slavery, and Indigenous histories in 18th-century studies.” The group provided resources, engaged publicly with racist and white supremacist structures in higher education and the classroom, and created systems of support for those working in more challenging educational environments. Unfortunately, in February 2023, the group was permanently paused because “one cannot do both the work of dismantling oppressive systems while also bolstering them.” The group will reopen in new spaces that more actively challenge hegemonic structures.

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