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FUENTES, Marisa J. 2016. *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. Pp. 232. ISBN 9780812248227, Hardback \$55.00. ISBN 9780812224184, Paper \$24.95.

*Dispossessed Lives* is an impassioned and meticulously researched call to rethink how history, as a discipline, can approach the absence of archival evidence concerning enslaved women’s lives in the Americas. Fuentes goes beyond theorizing “silence” and uses geographic, demographic, literary, and legal methods to flesh out a historiography of women’s lives in eighteenth-century Barbados. She does not attempt to recover the wholeness of these lives in the archive but instead points to the violence the archive does to enslaved women by enforcing their historical silence, leaving virtually no trace of enslaved voices and emphasizing either their status as commodified objects through the chattel slave trade or their status as criminalized and then brutalized bodies through logs of their punishments. “Violence”, Fuentes argues, “is the historical material that animates this book in its subtle and excessive modes — on the body of the archive, the body in the archive and the material body” (7). In *Dispossessed Lives*, then, she makes a compelling argument about the practice of history as a discipline itself, in addition to mapping new archival territory.

In addition to challenging the mythic status of silence and recovery in black feminist archival methods, Fuentes also debunks historical conventional wisdom on urban enslavement as compared to plantation systems of slavery. Even as she documents the seeming mobility of enslaved women in the heavily populated port of Bridgetown, she uncovers the very public means by which the urban enslaved were placed in check. Such methods included laws regarding the marketplaces where they did business and also public spaces of torture and punishment, including “The Cage”, a carceral apparatus that was part of the architecture both of the town itself (in the center square) and of intentional terror in its publicness. In this way, Fuentes argues, “[t]he control wielded by slave owners, overseers, and

drivers on plantations was shared with constables, magistrates, jumpers, and executioners in urban areas” (37). She explores how the colonial state stepped in to enact violence on enslaved women found culpable of numerous “offenses” that included running away or poisoning a white resident, while it maintained laws that prohibited enslaved persons in court itself — offering them no ability to testify, and no compensation for harm besides the sum paid to their owners for lost property.

Joining scholars such as Saidiya Hartman, Jenny Sharpe, Emily Owens, and Walter Johnson, among others, Fuentes documents the undocumentability of black women’s experiences under slavery in Barbados. *Dispossessed Lives* claims the impossibility of agency under the conditions of enslavement — and, in fact, argues that the very terms of agency and resistance are misplaced in their application to scholarship on slavery. In addition to calling out the hunt for resistance in the archive as the remnant of a masculinist methodology, Fuentes is most concerned with a trend she sees in feminist scholarship to valorize the sexual agency of some enslaved women. By reading the archives to show the deep vulnerability of urban enslaved women hired out by their owners for sexual labor, Fuentes complicates readings of redress through sexuality that she sees in emerging historical work on black women in the Caribbean of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (though, of course, many of the articulations of agency through sexuality in enslaved women’s history are not purely celebratory or uncomplicated themselves).

Fuentes works heavily from the paradigm shifting scholarship of Hartman — and, more occasionally, Hortense Spillers, though I think following her claim of “ungendering” does not serve the book’s powerful and particular re-mapping of black women’s enslaved bodies and sexualities onto urban eighteenth-century space as well as Hartman’s *Scenes of Subjection* (1997). Fuentes’ work is indeed a challenge to historians of the Caribbean, and of slavery. Here, she joins her fellow historians Jennifer Morgan, Daina Berry, Deborah Gray White, Stephanie Camp, and others, as well as a host of cultural studies scholars like Hartman and Sharpe, in their deep and dark dives into the historical record to question claims of agency or resistance as the desired endpoint of scholarship on enslaved women. But, like Fuentes’ own paradigm shift away from the plantation and toward urban space, some of the historical work on black women being done, even under the banner of “agency”, is not usually seen or known as common history, and that documentation is also significant to broadening the base of representational (and methodological) possibilities for black women in the early Americas. And there are points where Fuentes’ own push against

agency as an analytical imperative breaks down — especially in the chapter on Agatha, a white woman caught in an adulterous affair, whom Fuentes uses agentic terms to describe and compare her relative protection and freedom against those of the enslaved (76–7). It is not that the claims are false or incorrect — white women surely had more mobility and leniency in Bridgetown and faced only a fraction of the vulnerability and violence that black women did; it is that Fuentes cannot completely rid the work of a comparative scale of agency. It is difficult to work on enslavement, race, and the archive and not occasionally fall back on these polarities, but the powerful meta-question Fuentes is asking, and pushing toward in her methodology, is: can we find a new language, a new conceptual terrain, to lay out these extremely important “along the bias grain” readings of the archive? This methodology is one Fuentes returns to throughout and is an archival practice that merges the “mutilated historicity” she assigns to enslaved women’s bodies in the archive and her attempt not to restore but to reckon with such historical lacunae.

Fuentes’ point that we should not let these historical recoveries linger in the discourse of resistance is well and truly taken as a necessary if difficult shift for the field of feminist histories of enslavement. In fact, the methodology she lays out here — following Walter Johnson, one that shifts “resistance” and “agency” onto historians themselves, asking that they approach the archive differently, and without these categories as their ultimate search terms and hence interpretive bias — is one that could and already has enriched a range of feminist and historical scholarship. What if the liberal humanist paradigm of the agentic, willful subject was not our base for discerning the “success” of a given text or figure, especially those who serve as the photo-negative of those very concepts — the unfree against whom one can define individual freedom and rights? *Dispossessed Lives* gives us a rich counter-reading of the archive to map just such an endeavor, a methodological move toward “reckoning”, rather than resistance.

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