

INTO THE STACKS

In Search of the Black Women’s History Archive

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Questions of evidence have sat at the center of black women’s history since the field entered the academy over thirty years ago. Historians of black women’s lives and labors have filled bookshelves by “mining the forgotten” to render them visible.¹ Scholarship pioneered in the 1980s and 1990s established black women as prominent and indispensable historical actors, and key to understanding such eras as slavery, the Civil War, and the Civil Rights movement.² Subsequent works built upon the bedrock that these initial studies provided, incorporating nuanced gender analyses into the history of black women’s thought, experiences, and political action. The past ten years have seen a proliferation of publications that have extended the reach of the field to include such genres and approaches as girlhood studies, intellectual history, and black internationalism.³ This groundswell of research has foregrounded a persistent methodological quandary for scholars of black women’s history: how should they address the paradox of simultaneously finding copious archival records on some black women, while also accounting for the deafening archival silence on others?⁴

Newer histories resolve this tension by questioning whether this “paradox” should be regarded as a problem at all. Less invested in “rescu[ing] black women from their submergence and invisibility,” researchers have turned their attention to acknowledging and interrogating issues of empowerment and erasure embedded in the archive itself.⁵ Recent histories are raising methodological questions and concerns: How should historians conceptualize the archive? What can be discerned from traditional and nontraditional sources? How do scholars interpret and account for the power dynamics that the archive reproduces? And, how should this dynamic inform historical inquiry and methodology?

These questions are at the core of Marisa Fuentes’s *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (2016), a study of bonded and free women of color as they “came into archival view” in eighteenth-century Bridgetown, Barbados—but one with important methodological implications for modern American historians.⁶ Exploring the lives of runaway slaves, slaves-turned-slave-owners, and black domestics, Fuentes compels the reader to take into account the “power in the production of history” as it has been embedded in the archival

¹Deborah Gray White, “Mining the Forgotten: Manuscript Sources for Black Women’s History,” *Journal of American History* 74, no.1 (June 1987): 237–42.

²Examples include, but are not limited to, Deborah Gray White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York, 1999); Darlene Clark Hine and David Barry Gaspar, *More Than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas* (Bloomington, IN, 1996); Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (New York, 1985); Jo Ann Robinson, *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It* (Knoxville, TN, 1987).

³Examples include, but are not limited to, LaKeisha Michelle Simmons, *Crescent City Girls: The Lives of Black Women in Segregated New Orleans* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2015); Brittney Cooper, *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women* (Urbana, IL, 2017); Ashley Farmer, *Remaking Black Power: How Black Women Transformed an Era* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2017); Keisha N. Blain, *Set the World on Fire: Black Nationalist Women and the Global Struggle for Freedom* (Philadelphia, 2018).

⁴Ula Taylor, “Women in the Documents: Thoughts on Uncovering the Personal, Political, and Professional,” *Journal of Women’s History* 20, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 187–96, here 189.

⁵White, “Mining the Forgotten,” 237.

⁶Marisa Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia, 2016), 3.

record.⁷ This approach, she argues, reveals the often-overlooked, gender-specific cruelties of urban slavery and calls into question previous historians' emphasis on enslaved women's social and cultural agency.

Fuentes undergirds these claims by challenging the common presumption that the absence of documentation renders enslaved women's experiences and agency, or lack thereof, unrecoverable. She investigates the lives of women like Jane, who only "materializes briefly" in a runaway slave ad in which a slaveholder emphasizes her scars. Fuentes shows how even with this "scant accounting" of Jane's life, historians can ascertain the language she spoke, her probable ethnic origins, and her past experience with violence. Using maps and a range of other firsthand sources, she shifts the "epistemological weight" of the slave ad in order to construct a "topography" of Jane's enslavement and escape.⁸ In other instances, such as in her examination of a court case against an adulterous slaveholders' wife, Agatha Moore, Fuentes renders black women visible even when they are not the subject of the historical record. The court deposition indicates that, after learning about the affair, Moore's husband sent an armed enslaved boy dressed in women's clothing to her lover's home. Fuentes argues that the boy's movements around the city disguised as a black woman are evidence of relative mobility in urban landscapes—that black women's presence was common enough not to seem out of place. She also notes that their presence within the public sphere indicated the vulnerability and assumed availability that black women were forced to navigate. Adopting a more nuanced approach to archival recovery, Fuentes accounts for the hyper-visibility of enslaved women in some records and their "spectral influence" in others.⁹ She also calls into question a perennial assumption among historians—that to do more, new sources must be found. Rather than looking for new evidence, Fuentes encourages scholars of black women's history to "eke out" the "extinguished and invisible" aspects of their lives by revisiting the known archive and reflecting more deeply on the power imbalances within it.

While Fuentes interrogates black women's mobility and agency within urban bondage, Talitha LeFlouria reveals how "gendered nuances" complicate historians' framing of the post-Civil War convict leasing system as a new form of slavery. In *Chained in Silence: Black Women and Convict Labor in the New South* (2015), she documents women who labored and languished in Georgia's penitentiary system in the postbellum era. Moving beyond traditional studies of black women as domestic servants or field hands, LeFlouria illustrates how black female convicts became "modernizing instruments" in the New South's industrializing economy. More than simply "slavery by another name," she argues, convict leasing, a system in which Southern states provided prisoners as labor for companies and plantation owners, became the lynchpin of industrialized imprisonment and helped foster mass incarceration as we know it today.¹⁰ Thoroughly researched and vividly written, *Chained in Silence* reveals how a holistic understanding of Jim Crow, modernization, and the carceral state requires an adequate analysis of black women prisoners and their resistance to systemized punishment.

Like Fuentes, LeFlouria faced challenges in resurrecting the lives and perspectives of those who entered the historical record primarily as property or victims. Although official documents like convict camp registers, Prison Commission reports, and newspaper accounts offered an overview of the systems in which black female convicts worked, their inner thoughts remained elusive. LeFlouria finds their voices in unexpected places—including their clemency applications and "whipping reports," the monthly accounts of corporal punishment that labor camp officials produced. Where others find rudimentary records and merciless violence,

⁷Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives*, 5.

⁸Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives*, 14–15, 29.

⁹Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives*, 94, 78.

¹⁰Talitha LeFlouria, *Chained in Silence: Black Women and Convict Labor in the New South* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2015), 8–9.

LeFlouria sees resistance. She argues that by reading these reports to glean the types of offenses for which black women were punished, rather than focusing solely on the act of punishment itself, historians can see women and girls' "habits of dissent."¹¹ The silence, we learn, stems not from the absence of black women convicts' perspectives in the archive; rather it derives from how historians interpret the records on their punishment and resistance.

Kali Nicole Gross adopts a similar approach by exploring how existing archival methods "largely mute the experiences" of "everyday black women."¹² In *Hannah Mary Tabbs and the Disembodied Torso: A Tale of Race, Sex, and Violence in America* (2016), she focuses on a young, poor black woman accused of murdering and dismembering a man in Philadelphia in 1887. Living, working, loving, and potentially killing in the age of Jim Crow, Tabbs was an "antihero," who refused to acquiesce to the many mores of her time. Gross uncovers Tabbs's family and upbringing, her romantic life, potential motives for murder, and trial, paying special attention to the ways in which she played on widespread ideas about race, gender, and criminality to garner sympathy for her case.¹³

Gross mirrors how Tabbs "navigated the difficulties of moving between black and white communities" by shifting between black- and white-authored sources.¹⁴ She examines newspaper accounts, court records, images of Tabbs and the victim, Silas Gaines, and reprints of Tabbs's confession. Despite her inventive use of evidence, by the end of the book, readers remain uncertain about Tabbs's innocence or guilt. Lingering doubts, Gross argues, are after all core dilemmas posed by archival recovery and methodology in black women's history. Documents about poor and working-class black women are often generated only when their lives "collided in some way with white people."¹⁵ Moreover, when scholars do find evidence about women like Tabbs, they either "pathologize" or "animate" them, turning them into sympathetic victims or making them exemplars of respectability. Gross challenges both conventions, imaginatively reconstructing Tabbs's life through her own words and resisting the urge to redeem her. By deciphering existing sources to discern the richness and diversity of black women's lives, and by embracing rather than papering over the "disrespectable" elements of Tabbs's story, Gross offers a nuanced and multi-layered approach to black women's biography.

Some black women, like Tabbs, wanted their stories told. Others studiously avoided being recorded. It is these women that LaShawn Harris examines in *Sex Workers, Psychics, and Number Runners: Black Women in New York City's Underground Economy* (2016). Although the lack of extensive archival records about black women workers in illegal and informal economies can be "attributed to their own efforts" to remain undiscovered, Harris unearths their quests for economic stability in Harlem in the 1920 and 1930s.¹⁶ She documents women like "numbers laborers Madame Stephanie St. Clair, supernatural consultant Dorothy 'Madame Fu Futtam' Matthews Hamid, and number runner turned 1930s jazz musician Ella Fitzgerald," in order to demonstrate how black women who entered into informal labor markets out of necessity and genuine interest survived.¹⁷ By recounting how black women laborers navigated marginalized forms of work, Harris upends conventional ideas about black womanhood, labor, respectability, intimacy, and women's work.

¹¹LeFlouria, *Chained in Silence*, 16.

¹²Kali Nicole Gross, *Hannah Mary Tabbs and the Disembodied Torso: A Tale of Race, Sex, and Violence in America* (New York, 2016), 4.

¹³Gross, *Hannah Mary Tabbs*, 5.

¹⁴Gross, *Hannah Mary Tabbs*, 3.

¹⁵Gross, *Hannah Mary Tabbs*, 4.

¹⁶LaShawn Harris, *Sex Workers, Psychics, and Number Runners: Black Women in New York City's Underground Economy* (Urbana, IL, 2016), 11.

¹⁷Harris, *Sex Workers, Psychics, and Number Runners*, 5.

Where others identified bias or a paucity of sources, Harris sees an “opportunity for historians to interrogate black women’s multilayered experiences as laborers and urban citizens.”¹⁸ She employs this strategy in her exploration of black sex workers. Harris notes that scholars usually rely on the records of anti-vice organizations like the Committee of Fourteen (COF). She confirms that these records, biased in their creation and documentation, reveal more about the city’s police anti-vice agents than they do about sex workers. Yet when read *alongside* black women’s personal accounts in newspapers and autobiographies, as Harris does, they can reveal these laborers’ “aspirations, value systems, [and] disappointments.” Using this method, Harris widens her historical gaze to include lesser-known women such as a college-educated migrant-turned-sex worker named Carol Smith and celebrities like Billie Holiday within histories of illicit economies and to document their “complex outlooks on sex work and intimacy.”¹⁹ Her approach also indicates that recovering the lives of underground workers is not a matter of archival abundance or absence; it is a question of how historians account for where and how these women wanted to be seen in the archive.

These and other scholars have captured the ingenuity and resiliency of the women they study, in the process developing histories that redefine the possibilities of the archive and the nature of evidence for the field. Ranging across different times and places, this scholarship shows a commitment to acknowledging the diversity of black women’s experiences, as well as a shared devotion to reading against the biases, power imbalances, and violence of the archive. Many new histories employ these approaches, eschewing glossy representations in favor of documenting black women’s lives as they lived them, as heroes and anti-heroes, mothers and murderesses, principals and prostitutes, and domestics and domineering gambling ring leaders. This is no small feat, given that popular and academic perceptions of black women remain largely invested in, as Gross argues, “one-dimensional portraits,” that often emphasize redemption and respectability over reality.²⁰

These approaches in black women’s history also invite innovative conversations and new scholarship across multiple fields of modern American history. First and foremost, they show that lack of source material is no longer an adequate justification to marginalize black women—or race and gender analyses—in historical accounts. Recent scholarship indicates that there is ample evidence of their lives and work; historians need only to adjust their methodology in order to better account for the power imbalances embedded in document collection. This reorientation to research is also generative for identifying new sites of historical inquiry. To be sure, scholars of recent periods do not face the same challenges of source availability as students of earlier epochs. Nevertheless, there is still a tendency to privilege conventional sources and relegate topics that lack adequate documentation to the periphery. Heeding black women’s historians’ calls to return to familiar archives in search of the silences can breathe new life into well-worn historical debates. For example, mining World War II sources for the “spectral influence” of mental health issues, race relations, or sexual politics has the potential to reorient ideas about the transformative nature of the conflict. Foregrounding and interrogating conspicuous archival absences about immigrant communities can help us develop biographies and collective studies that move us closer to “fully legible” histories of the twentieth century. The methods of those who examine black women can also be productive for challenging existing epistemological methods to the study of the American nation-state. What new approaches to the history of government institutions or U.S. foreign policy might develop if historians were to, for example, employ LeFlouria’s approach to reading CIA torture records or pair FBI records with autobiographical accounts of 1960s activists as Harris does? Finally, employing these strategies can be generative for the intersection of modern

¹⁸Harris, *Sex Workers, Psychics, and Number Runners*, 10.

¹⁹Harris, *Sex Workers, Psychics, and Number Runners*, 134.

²⁰Gross, *Hannah Mary Tabbs*, 5.

American history and the digital humanities. The lack of source material on marginalized communities is often the product of bias in institutional collection and commemoration. By centering and interrogating these discriminatory practices, as historians of black women's history do, scholars can inform and transform conversations about collection, documentation, and dissemination. This re-orientation to archival collection is especially important given the increasing interest in digitization and open access of recent archives.

To generate these new histories, scholars must mirror black women's historians' investment in questioning what Fuentes calls the "logic of historical methodology," or the perception that there must be enough of the "right" kind of sources in order to make a historical project feasible.²¹ Instead of searching for more evidence, or writing only about black women who left ample records, these scholars are now returning to favored archives, convinced that there is as much knowledge embedded in the lack of evidence as there is in existing documents about black women's lives. In doing so, they are challenging the singularity of "the" archive, highlighting the ways in which erasures in historical documents are not absences but presences that can be examined. Black women's voices are there to be found in the casual omissions, the deliberate silences, their traces left in images, court records, bodily scars, and jail cell confessions. Imagine what new histories could emerge from a commitment to doing more with less.

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²¹Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives*, 146.