

Book Review: *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence and the Archive* by Marisa Fuentes

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In *Dispossessed Lives*, Marisa Fuentes probes the construction of enslaved women in the archival records using what she frames *reading along the bias grain*. According to Fuentes, this method *subverts and illuminates biases in the colonial archive in order to map a range of life conditions that challenge assumptions about the slave experience in the Caribbean (5)*. Like *cutting fabric on the bias to create more elasticity, reading along the bias grain expands the legibility of these archival documents to accentuate the figures of enslaved women present in the society who are a spectral influence on the lives of white and black men and women (78)*. In one of her footnotes (footnote 32 on p. 156), Fuentes explains the “stretching” that happens with this method allows us to accentuate the presence of the enslaved who may actually be missing from the actual document under study. Further, it makes visible the relations of power that frames not just enslaved women’s exclusion from texts but fosters a broader understanding of the behaviors and practices of the colonial authority. For Fuentes, there is a tendency even within Black feminist scholarship to know *bodies are healed (199)* from the disfiguring and violation they suffer even in the archive (16) and that has meant turning to other colonial sources that elide the impact of the ongoing violation of the state. Reading along the bias grain acknowledges the unknowability of this violation from a silent and silenced archive; it holds the horrors of that past and carries them into the present moment to explain, for example, mass incarceration and

state-sanctioned and extralegal killings of black people. This goes beyond what other Black feminists have framed as reading along the grain or reading against the grain in how it does not resolve the inhumanity of racial slavery through over scripting narratives of resistance and agency.

One of Fuentes' central argument is that slavery was no less violent in urban Barbados than on rural plantations even though it took on a different form. In what can be read not just as critical historiography but also critical geography, Fuentes reconstructs/recovers and reimagine the life of the enslaved by examining spatial arrangements of Bridgetown Barbados which was itself a weapon of white colonial power. For Fuentes, the architecture and symbols of terror including cages, cranes, and gallows, were a means of inflicting psychic harm and discouraged the enslaved who contemplated flight. The sounds, smells and physical proximity to this architecture is how the state produced and reproduced the dehumanization and terror. An interesting move that Fuentes makes is to allow the physical body of the enslaved to constitute part of this geography of terror where scars and wounds on the enslaved person also serve to reinforce dispossession and powerlessness while accentuating white supremacy. Using the figure of Jane, Fuentes marks how location did not matter, that is, whether the enslaved was on the plantation or an urban space, the terror inscribed on the bodies of the enslaved even in movement ensured that all enslaved people would constantly be in view of imminent 'punishment'. Through her examination of the body in flight, fragmented in the archive along with an assessment of the physical space Fuentes imagines the thoughts, actions, movements, feelings, fears, and alliances of the women rendered invisible in the body of the archive.

Another significant intervention Fuentes makes which is not dissimilar from Hartman in *Wayward Lives* is cautioning against the reproduction of violence in our acts of narration. While Fuentes does not say that there is a way to avoid this reproduction, she argues for an ethical way of treating with those we encounter in the colonial archive. Essentially, Fuentes asks how do we not further commodify and brutalize those we encounter in the archive? To do so, we must commit to a simultaneous telling of how power has worked to produce the enslaved in this way, to have an organized skepticism of the work produced by the state. This commitment is the utilization of methods that as Hartman says *presses against the limits of the case file* and allows us to speculate about what might have been. These methods have become the mainstay of interdisciplinary work and in fields such as Black Feminist thought, queer theory, critical geography, and cultural studies.

The most compelling example of *spectral influence [of the enslaved] on the lives of white and black men and women* (78) is Fuentes' treatment of the slave boy dressed as a woman in the case of involving adultery. In this case, the enslaved woman was physically not present however the construction of Black women sexuality and servitude was the framework through which a slave boy could move dressed as a woman and not raise suspicion and also how we come to see white femininity as granted purity and agency in ways black and free women of color were not. This analysis also revealed how gender and race are constitutive and underscore the importance of intersectional analyses- White (and free women of color to a different degree) slaveholding women were equally implicated in systems of patriarchy and anti-black violence.