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Haunting as Method: Mapping Imaginaries & Investigating Slavery's Archive

This paper argues that the felt condition of haunting projects lost histories of formerly enslaved Afro-Texan peoples. Nevertheless, enslaved peoples respond to this archival neglect using what this paper describes as a strategy of enslaved imaginaries. These imaginaries take up this very condition of haunting to refuse, and actively create against, the white imaginary that makes up the archives in question. For this reason, I excavate oral narratives for stories on haunting, such as tales around fugitives from slavery who had a “devilment” spirits in the head and restless spirits of folks killed by white enslavers. Archival analysis of the Texas Born in Slavery volumes of the Federal Writers’ Project (FWP) question not only their limited material utility but further make room to play with finding enslaved imaginaries’ moments of re-navigating these archives and possibly Texas history. Therefore, this work demonstrates that enslaved imaginaries are a way of knowing, feeling, and watching whiteness outside the limits of historical material. Rather, enslaved imaginaries point to haunting as an immaterial alternative to crafting a history whiteness can never touch, it can only be haunted by.

As archives grant a partial recollection of history, the historical sociologist must imagine alongside these partial histories to delve into stories of the past. Nevertheless, research based solely on archives help solidify their material as correct representations of the historical past thereby further instituting an imaginary of the past (see Mbembe 2002). These archival imaginaries mold and capture bodies of the past in the documents, photographs, and maps for present and future interest in histories like enslavement. Thus, as the slave narrative is a sociological document, both now and for abolitionist of the time (see also Gordon 2008, Browne 2015), the “slave writer’s purpose,” or the archivist’s purpose, was to create and explore a

connection that would and could shed greater light on a previous social division white audience had not seen nor understood. It was the job of the archivist, therefore, to bring lay peoples into their imagining of that era. In this way, what we denote as an archive and its materials, particularly archives on the enslavement era, institutionalize practices of imagining the formerly enslaved Black body as a palpable material to be read and accessed by and for the white consumption. It is for these reasons this paper challenges archive material as the sole entrance into Black histories. Rather, I argue that, using examples from the Federal Writers' Project Slave Narratives of Texas, enslaved imaginaries offer an epistemologically liminal site of subversion and reconfiguration of enslaved life. These imaginaries, that I engage as an immaterial archive, utilize haunting as a language to demand attention to an alternative telling of history that purposely thrusts archival material into illegitimacy.

If imaginaries – a collective set of desires that define the making, engagement and telling of certain bodies to be recorded – make up the power and status granted to an archive to rewrite human life into material and spatial text, then to approach archives on the enslaved era are no longer reliable for telling Black stories. Haiven and Khasnabish (2011) offer a radical imagination, one I argue in which the immaterial archive of non-white imagination can be traced. This “reweaving of the social world” speaks to an ability to imagine something else and imagine it collectively (Haiven and Khasnabish 2011:3). This imaginative possibility engages what Mbembe (2002) describes as the debris of archives, or archival immaterial, the lingering traces of history not imagined within archival power or status to tell history – which are therefore left out of the official archives. Archival immaterial contains a radical imagining of the past “work[ing] with and through what exists in order to call forth something presently absent” (Keeling 2019:34). In other words, the immaterial, as it defies a white, national imagination, holds a

“reweaving” of the past that lies outside of the material, space and time of an archive. Using archival immaterial, this paper emphasizes Black enslaved imagination’s ability to uproot the very foundations of what we consider to be a shared reality of the past.

If alternative imaginaries, such as enslaved imaginaries, only exist as spectral debris over our archives (see Gordon 2008, Mbembe 2002), haunting captures our attention, covering white imagination and revealing the opacity of the past. I ground enslaved imaginaries in growing cultural sociology’s study of imagination as a tool for making futures. I expand on this by arguing that enslaved imaginaries represent a particular “genre” of imagination that traverses temporalities providing a particular “foresight” into the past (Mische 2009:697, 701). Likewise, in seeking a theoretical foundation to reflect the specific racialized and embodied experiences that inform this “genre,” I additionally take up bell hooks’ (1997) theory on imagination. hooks details that Black imagination becomes forged in parallel with lost, hidden and repressed histories. Therefore, Black folks collectively acquire new vernacular for engaging their histories—a language that demands attention to a present mode of living that tries to remain concealed; Avery Gordon (2008) describes this as haunting. I build the work of enslaved imaginaries around hooks and Gordon to theoretically answer what and how are enslaved imaginaries demanding attention “open[ing] up the historical and theoretical conditions, laying the ground for questions confronting the black and brown diaspora” (Charania 2019).

Haunting intimately elucidates vernacular moves that counter the FWP interviewer’s pathological imagining of formerly enslaved life. White interviewers, and archive directors, were more interested in spotlighting plantation violence as spectacular yet captivating while playing into overtly racialized beliefs about the formerly enslaved, such as their natural relations to the superstitious and supernatural (see Hutchinson 1861, Pitman 1926). My findings suggest that

within Black Texan immaterial archiving, formerly enslaved Afro-Texan peoples use haunting to demand attention to two distinct enslaved experiences: 1) *conjuring death* – the naming of untimely deaths of fellow enslaved family, friends, community members and acquaintances and 2) *fugitive ‘devilment’* – use of ‘spirits’ as a description of enslaved peoples with an urge to run (escape, flee, take flight). Both themes offer unique sight on how formerly enslaved folks relations to the spiritual world was one path to maintaining debris as the only possible means to travel into Black pasts.

This paper stages a Black Feminist sociological intervention into the archive. Archives of enslavement have previously been studied as spaces where Black bodies are silent and therefore, recorded as dismembered souls whose stories will always remain incomplete. Imagination rewrites Black stories in Texas. To rewrite these stories also means that the authority archival material holds is thrown out of balance. I take on Black enslaved imaginaries as a challenge to forgotten histories stating that, whether their narratives tell fact or fiction, taking these folks at their words is enough to bring out, specifically the Federal Writers’ Project, archive’s ghostly matters. Here, archival debris becomes the way forward to reading subversive imaginings of what haunts the past so as to focus our attention to how enslaved Black Texans respond to the developing loss of enslaved histories of Texas.

Although this paper is not a one in search of completing an entire history on Texas enslavement, I do take seriously the haunting over official archival materials. It is in how enslaved folks speak on haunting that paint paths where archival immaterial emerge on Texas land. Similar to archives, these narratives mark their time in Texas enslaved as immaterial. This means that in the face of FWP archivist understanding haunting as an expression of laughter and

happiness under enslavement, formerly enslaved Texans imagine a nuanced meaning to haunting that did not fit in the government's *Born in Slavery* collection.

References

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