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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version  
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

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#### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Santos, F. (2023). Mind the Archival Gap: Critical Fabulation as Decolonial Method. *Historical Social Research*, 48(4), 330-353. <https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.48.2023.50>

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## Mind the Archival Gap: Critical Fabulation as Decolonial Method

*Fabio Santos\**

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**Abstract:** »Beachten Sie die Lücke im Archiv: Kritisches Fabulieren als dekoloniale Methode«. This article tackles a question long deemed impossible and unthinkable: how can sociology come to grips with the colonial past and present, situating the uprooting and re-composition of families and biographies in the *longue durée* of enslavement and its aftermaths? As centuries-long and continent-spanning processes of violence, subjugation, exploitation, extermination, and alienation, enslavement and the trade in enslaved people have dramatically transformed social structures, including kinship ties, across the Atlantic and beyond. Seeking to reconcile sociology and slavery studies, I retrieve forgotten pieces of the sociological and abolitionist archive to engage with historical and artistic counter-narratives challenging not only white-washed European self-understandings, but also the standard methodologies and epistemologies upholding them. Unapologetically undisciplined, this article hence follows two interrelated decolonial strategies: besides conceiving of uncovering and closely reading long-forgotten foundational sociological works as a decolonial device challenging knowledge canonized by hegemonic positions in the North, I also introduce Saidiya Hartman's literary-historical method of critical fabulation as a decolonial method. I do so via a sociological reading of La Vaughn Belle's contemporary audiovisual artwork *In the Place of Shadows*. Mobilizing her childhood memories of racism and objectification on the US mainland, the Crucian artist traces and imagines the forced displacement of Victor and Alberta, two half-siblings from the Caribbean island of Saint Croix who were caged and exhibited as part of the 1905 colonial exhibition in Copenhagen.

**Keywords:** Global Sociology, decoloniality, critical fabulation, family, kinship, biography, enslavement, trade in enslaved people.

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## 1. Introduction

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*I was not permitted to see my mother or father, or poor sisters, to say good bye, though going away to a strange land, and might never see them again. Oh the Buckra [White] people who keep slaves think that black people are like cattle, without natural affection. But my heart tells me it is far otherwise.*

Mary Prince ([1831] 2000, 18)

*The American brand of slavery strove toward a rigidified disorganization of family life, just as it had to proscribe all potential social structures within which black people might forge a collective and conscious existence. Mothers and fathers were brutally separated; children, when they became of age, were branded and frequently severed from their mothers. That the mother was “the only legitimate parent of the child” did not therefore mean that she was even permitted to guide it to maturity.*

Angela Davis (1972, 82-3)

The conditions and (im)possibilities of forming a family, staying with one's family, and tracing one's family history have varied across time and space. As highlighted by abolitionists Mary Prince and Angela Davis at different points in time, enslavement and the trade in enslaved people across the Atlantic have characterized the uprooting of Black families over several generations. While Prince wrote from the perspective of a Black woman who had been enslaved for most of her life in the Caribbean before gaining legal freedom and chronicling her autobiography in Britain, Davis's reflections are rooted in Black feminist thought, pointing out the enduring legacy of the violence of enslavement. How can sociology – a discipline historically complicit in silencing histories incompatible with its incomplete and self-congratulatory theories on modernity – come to grips with the colonial past and present, situating the uprooting and re-composition of families and biographies in the *longue durée* of enslavement and its aftermaths? A seemingly impossible and unthinkable question to ask, it is one I address nonetheless.

Combing through forgotten pieces of the sociological and abolitionist archive (Cooper 1925; Du Bois [1896] 2007, [1899] 2007, 1908; Equiano 1789; Hurston [1927] 2018; Loick and Thompson 2022; Prince [1831] 2000; Wells 1892, 1901) and engaging with new historical counter-narratives (Belle 2019a; Belle et al. 2021; Fuentes 2016; Hartman 2007, 2008, 2019; Otele 2020), in this article I argue that the Global Sociology of biographical becoming proposed in this HSR Special Issue requires a radical re-thinking of sociological and archival theory, methodology, and epistemology against prevailing Eurocentric assumptions and the active production of absences through the silencing of inconvenient histories, with silence being “the nickname of distortion” (Spillers 1987, 73). Global Sociology is thus understood here as historical sociology revealing social, cultural, epistemic, political, and economic power relations through a long-term perspective (Bhambra 2014; Boatcă 2015; Bueno, Teixeira, and Strecker 2023; Connell 2018; Costa 2005, 2014; Go 2016;

Gutiérrez Rodríguez, Boatcă, and Costa 2010; Randeria 1999; Santos and Boatcă 2022; Santos and Ruvituso 2023 [forthcoming]). Two interrelated decolonial strategies guide this article: Besides conceiving of uncovering and closely reading long-forgotten foundational sociological works as a decolonial device challenging knowledge canonized in the North, I also introduce critical fabulation and related approaches to challenge the authority of archival records as decolonial methods. A sociological reading of La Vaughn Belle's contemporary artwork *In the Place of Shadows* underpins my unapologetically undisciplined approach towards an expanded sociological imagination (Kalayji 2018; Mills 1959).

As centuries-long and continent-spanning processes of violence, subjugation, exploitation, extermination, and alienation, enslavement and the traffic in enslaved women, men, and children have dramatically transformed social structures, including kinship ties, across the Atlantic and beyond. Throughout, I posit an interdependence between kinship and slave ship, two notions structuring this article: The latter encapsulates the broader system of violence that enslavement and the trade in enslaved people have come to represent, “pregnant with as many dead as living under sentence of death” (Glissant [1990] 1997, 6). At the same time, I rely on the productive conceptualization of slave ships “as cultural and political units rather than abstract embodiments of the triangular trade” (Gilroy 1993, 17). This article thus rests on understandings of kinship and slave ship as institutions made and unmade with the commodification and deportation of people torn from kinships, while attempting to retain and form new kinships under life-threatening, if not deadly, conditions: If kinship is an institution that is fundamental to structuring interpersonal relations, while at the same time requiring group stability, then its meaning and the concrete social practices related to it were extensively altered on and through the slave ship (Rediker 2007; Mintz and Price 1992).

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## 2. Conditions of Captivity: Living and Dying in Modernity's Hold

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While different forms of enslavement have characterized societies across the globe at different times (Patterson 1982), the focus of this article lies on the Atlantic, European-dominated trade in enslaved people and the large-scale economic, social, and cultural transformations it set in motion, laying the foundations for capitalism and modernity (Mintz 1978, 1985). Notions of the slave ship as “modernity's hold,” a “modern machine,” a “mobile prison,” and a “floating factory” have therefore become apt denominations highlighting the centerpiece it was for racialized capitalism and the concomitant

inequalities that have been unfolding to this day (Ferdinand 2022, 12; Gilroy 1993, 13; Rediker 2007, 44-5).

The starting point for the Atlantic trade in enslaved people can be dated back to the year 1444, when Portuguese traders brought 235 enslaved Africans to Lisbon – a forced displacement that became systematic half a century later, when 300 to 2,000 enslaved Africans were annually brought to the Portuguese city (Otele 2020, 61; Saunders 2010, 23). This systematic deportation was echoed in the earliest Atlantic colonies of the Portuguese: Upon colonizing the formerly uninhabited eastern Atlantic islands of Madeira (1419) and Cape Verde (1456), they transported enslaved Africans to the sugar plantations set up in their new colonies (Adhikari 2017, 8; Thornton 2012, 15-25), yielding clear economic results: “By 1450, the most important sector of Portuguese trade in Africa was black slaves” (Berquist Soule 2018, 25). These enslaved people included the indigenous population of the Canary Islands, in whose devastation and exploitation the Spanish Crown and the Catholic Church were actively involved (Berquist Soule 2018). The genocide of the archipelago’s indigenous people, as well as the social destruction caused by their enslavement and displacement, were blueprints of the Atlantic history of violence. They acquired new dimensions in 1492, when Christopher Columbus accidentally “discovered” the Caribbean islands of Guanahani, renamed San Salvador and today part of the Bahamas, as well as Cuba and Saint-Domingue, named Hispaniola by Columbus and consisting of today’s Haiti and the Dominican Republic. In the process, Columbus, his companions, and his successors ravaged the indigenous populations, who died from enslavement, massacre, or disease – a sweeping loss of lives characteristic of all inhabited territories in the Americas subsequently claimed by Europeans. The first enslaved Africans arrived on Hispaniola in 1503 (Cooper 1925, 8). While indigenous enslaved people provided slave labor to early colonists in the Americas, their brutal decimation down to ten percent of their original demographic size, or their complete erasure on Caribbean islands like the Bahamas, prompted Europeans to import enslaved Africans and exploit their labor instead (Eltis and Richardson 2010, 301-2). Over the course of almost three centuries, an estimated 12.5 million African captives were shipped to the Americas, with the highest number of people being deported to Brazil and the Caribbean.

Of these 12.5 million captives, only 10.7 million survived the oceanic voyage, also called the Middle Passage. This was partly due to murder, as evidenced by the mass killing of 132 enslaved Africans on board the *Zong* in 1781 (Philip 2008; see also Fig. 1), and partly to homicide on the part of the traders who allowed cramped and filthy conditions that facilitated the spread of death and disease on board.

**Figure 1** “The Slave Ship”



Painting by Joseph Mallord William Turner from 1840, most likely based on the true story of the Zong. Henry Lillie Pierce Fund, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, public domain.

The terrible conditions on board were impressively documented by Olaudah Equiano and Anna Julia Cooper. Writer and abolitionist Olaudah Equiano offers a first-hand account: Captured and enslaved during his childhood in the Eboe region of the Kingdom of Benin in the mid-18th century, he was transported with 244 other enslaved individuals to Barbados, and from there sent on for sale to Virginia. After purchasing his freedom in 1765, Equiano settled in Britain, became a fierce abolitionist, and wrote his autobiography describing in detail the conditions on board a slave ship:

The stench of the hold while we were on the coast was so intolerably loathsome that it was dangerous to remain there for any time, and some of us had been permitted to stay on the deck for the fresh air; but now that the whole ship's cargo were confined together, it became absolutely pestilential. The closeness of the place and the heat of the climate, added to the number in the ship, which was so crowded that each had scarcely room to turn himself, almost suffocated us. This produced copious perspirations, so that the air soon became unfit for respiration from a variety of loathsome smells, and brought on a sickness among the slaves, of which many died, thus falling victims to the improvident avarice, as I may call it, of their purchasers. This wretched situation was again aggravated by the galling of the chains, now become insupportable, and the filth of the necessary tubs, into which the children often fell and were almost suffocated. The shrieks of the

women and the groans of the dying rendered the whole a scene of horror almost inconceivable. (Equiano 1789, 52-3)

Though the size of the ships and their human cargo varied, an average of 300 enslaved Africans were incarcerated on the lower deck beneath the main deck for the crossing, which lasted eight to twelve weeks.

Anna Julia Cooper, in turn, born into slavery in the US South in 1858, demonstrates an astonishing, yet largely forgotten historical sociological thinking in her dissertation *L'attitude de la France à l'égard de l'esclavage pendant la révolution*, with which she graduated from the Sorbonne in 1925 at the age of 67 – the fourth Black US American woman to earn a PhD. In analyzing the interrelations between 18th-century revolutionaries in Paris and representatives of France's most profitable colony, Saint-Domingue (Haiti), she argues that, though enslavement and the trade in enslaved people were central during the French Revolution, the White revolutionaries had not taken these issues seriously enough to address equality and liberty in global terms. Cooper explains that at the time of the French Revolution, an estimated 74,000 enslaved Africans arrived in the Americas each year. "This constant and terrible replenishment," she writes, "was necessary because of the excessive mortality of the slaves – almost three times their birth-rate [...]; and for one imported, four had already died, succumbing to the perils of the passage – during which the poor souls had been chained and penned like cattle – succumbing especially during these awful manhunts organized on the African continent to be able to supply the demands of the slave traders" (Cooper 1925, 9).

After the enslavement regime was powerfully eradicated in the most prosperous French colony by the Haitian Revolution in 1794 (Trouillot 1995; Cooper 1925; Dubois 2004; Du Bois [1896] 2007, 50-1), it was gradually abolished in the rest of the Americas in the 19th century, with Brazil being the last country to proclaim abolition in 1888. The exploitation of people's labor thus outlived the trade in enslaved Africans, officially abolished by the British Slave Trade Act in 1807, the US Act Prohibiting Importation of Slaves in the same year, and formally condemned in the Vienna Declaration of 1815, in which all the colonial powers expressed "the wish of putting an end to a scourge, which has so long desolated Africa, degraded Europe, and afflicted humanity." However, as Du Bois ([1896] 2007, 76) notes in his dissertation, referring to the United States, "the Act of 1807 came very near being a dead letter," with illegal trade continuing thereafter. Here, Zora Neale Hurston's biographical account of Oluale Kossola, also known as Cudjo Lewis, the last survivor of the trade into the United States, is revealing: Kossola arrived with the *Clotilda*, the last known slave ship to land in the United States, in 1860 (Hurston [1927] 2018).

Du Bois's poignantly observed contradiction between legal measures and social practice in the US case has been proved for all parties involved in the

Atlantic trade in enslaved people. Today, it is well-documented that the transportation of enslaved Africans remained an illegal activity well into the second half of the 19th century: the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database dates the last known Atlantic crossing to the year 1866 (<https://www.slavevoyages.org/voyage/database> [Accessed August 16, 2023]). Moreover, the 19th century saw new patterns of bonded and forced labor, with China, the Pacific Ocean, and the Indian Ocean being linked to the Atlantic world through the deportation of so-called “coolies” from these regions to plantations in the Americas that had been formerly worked by enslaved Africans – a world-economic expansion conceptualized as “Second Slavery” (Laviña and Zeuske 2014; Tomich 1988; Tomich and Zeuske 2008).

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### 3. Transplanted Belongings: Gendered and Racialized Divisions of Labor

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Gendered and racialized divisions of labor, as well as family uprooting, were instrumental to the global transformations described above: before, during, and after the Middle Passage. In one of the first empirical sociological studies – *The Negro American Family* (1908) – W.E.B. Du Bois traced the inequalities suffered and violence experienced by Black people in the United States back to the family destruction entailed by the Atlantic trade in enslaved people, whose “effectiveness [...] meant the practically complete crushing out of the African clan and family life” (Du Bois 1908, 21). The continuities of this “crushing out” are described at length in his book: Black family life was precarious, with the lifespan of Blacks structurally shortened through torture, lynching, morbid housing, working conditions, and the lack of medical assistance (see also, before Du Bois, Wells 1892, 1901).

The beginnings of these long-term uprootings and inequalities are well-captured by Saidiya Hartman: Taking as a starting point the crossroads position held by the Ghanaian city of Salaga in linking different economic circuits, including the commerce in enslaved humans, she grippingly traces how

men, women, and children stolen from their homes became commodities destined for the market. Men were bound with ropes and chains. Little children two years old and upward, and women, young and old, trailed along beside them. Most were prisoners of war or victims of raiding. Reeling along this gutted pathway, they began to anticipate what awaited them. The sinking feeling that they had seen their home for the last time and the fear that at the next town they would lose their son or sister made them drag their feet, search out an escape route through the grasslands, and with their eyes ask one another what they might do. What they knew was that one life had ended and the one they could foresee was terrifying. The first steps propelling them away from home had cut loose the familiar. Once inside the



market at Salaga, it was clear: the old life was a pile of ruins. (Hartman 2007, 181)

It was on these ruins – lives separated, transplanted, and prematurely terminated – that Europeans built their wealth, and in some cases their African European families, while many Africans lost theirs. Their bodies, writes historian Olivette Otele in her monograph *African Europeans*, “had been deemed relevant only as wealth-building tools” (Otele 2020, 7).

These inequalities were cemented at the disproportionate expense of female bodies. Any reflections about the centrality of gender in enslavement and capitalism needs to consider the childbearing capacity of most women, aptly captured by the ambiguous word-pair “laboring women,” the title of Jennifer Morgan’s monograph (Morgan 2004): Not only did women labor on plantations and in households, but their assumed reproductive labor was at least as important to profit-seeking slaveholders aimed at expanding their slaveholdings by claiming the children born to enslaved women as their property. Visual evidence of this strategic (ab)use of Black women’s reproductive potential is available in the form of historical images of slave ships, often including pregnant women, women giving birth, and women breastfeeding their babies.<sup>1</sup>

Equally revealing of this gendered component in the Atlantic history of violence are analyses of original depictions of some of the earliest plantations set up in the Caribbean: In the case of Barbados in the 1650s, Morgan demonstrates that “slaveowners understood quite early the value of the reproductive lives of laboring women in their evolving conception of themselves as owners of human property” (Morgan 2004, 82). In the case of colonial Bridgetown, Barbados, this resulted in the unusual demographic over-representation of women, both Black and White (Fuentes 2016, 1). However, low fertility and high mortality rates, including infant mortality, prompted the strategy of replacing those enslaved people who had been worked to death with newly purchased and imported African laborers until the abolition of the trade in enslaved people. Building on the work of Jamaican sociologist Orlando Patterson (1967), Trinidadian sociologist Rhoda Reddock offers an in-depth analysis of these changing reproductive politics in the Caribbean, linking them to the economic interests of the planter class. While a first phase up until the early 18th century was characterized by small estates with relatively few enslaved people and the encouragement of their “natural” reproduction, the rise of the large-scale monocrop production of sugar in the 18th century was dependent on numbers of enslaved labor that were impossible to

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<sup>1</sup> See the diagram of the *Marie Séraphique*, capturing “the most accurate contemporary depiction of shipboard conditions in the transatlantic slave trade during the late eighteenth century” (Radburn and Eltis 2019, 542): Straddling a fine line between representing and reproducing the violence this article seeks to reveal and counter, the diagram has not been included here, but can be accessed online via <https://bit.ly/3OEChUk> [Accessed August 16, 2023]).

reproduce “naturally”: hence the import of enslaved women, men, and children, “the general opinion being that it was cheaper to buy new slaves than to rear children” (Reddock 1985, 67). The same observation of gendered demographic and reproductive control was highlighted in Manuela Boatcă’s retrieval of the contributions to global inequality research made by the feminist scholarship of the Bielefeld school of development sociology, to which Reddock (1983) was affiliated: “Because of the labour power ‘lost’ during an enslaved woman’s pregnancy and breast-feeding, it thus became cheaper for slave owners to purchase further captives as slaves than to allow children to be born to enslaved mothers. ‘Local breeding’ only started being encouraged after the abolition of the slave trade” (Boatcă 2015, 76). These economic reasonings were also imbued with the imposition of moral(izing) concepts of family patterns, gender relations, and sexuality in the colonies (Boatcă 2015, 101; Boatcă and Roth 2016, 195-6).

The hypocrisy of this “civilizing mission” becomes blatantly apparent once we take into account widespread practices of the rape and sexual assault of enslaved people, especially women, by their White, male owners and those facilitating their commodification: planters, traders, and sailors. The most notorious example is that of Thomas Thistlewood, an English planter in 18th century Jamaica, whose diaries chronicle 3,852 acts of rape with 138 Black women, besides the daily record of punishments. For Nobel laureate in Literature Toni Morrison, Thistlewood’s diaries and the acts recorded represent the normalization of violence, especially sexual violence, within the enslavement system:

He did not wonder about slavery’s morality or his place in its scheme. He merely existed in the world as he found it and recorded it. It is this, his divorce from moral judgment, not at all atypical, that sheds light on slavery’s acceptance. (Morrison 2017, 8)

As shown by Hortense Spillers (1987), this divorce from moral judgment went hand in hand with a divorce from legal judgment, as children in the English colonies in the Americas would inherit the legal status of their enslaved mothers rather than that of their fathers, an inversion of traditional legal gender roles not implying any rights typically associated with motherhood and having family uprooting as its guiding principle: “Under conditions of captivity,” Spiller (1987, 74) writes, “the offspring of the female does not ‘belong’ to the Mother, nor is s/he ‘related’ to the ‘owner,’ though the latter ‘possesses’ it, and in the African-American instance, often fathered it, and, as often, without whatever benefit of patrimony.”

Besides the plantations to which they were transplanted, Black women and girls were equally vulnerable to rape upon capture in Africa and on slave ships, and right after departing on the latter for sale in the Americas. Again, Equiano’s biography is insightful regarding the systematic order of sexual harassment experienced by Black women and girls. He reports the following

from his time exploited as a slave, when he had witnessed or heard of all sorts of sexual abuse:

While I was thus employed by my master I was often a witness to cruelties of every kind, which were exercised on my unhappy fellow slaves. I used frequently to have different cargoes of new negroes in my care for sale; and it was almost a constant practice with our clerks, and other whites, to commit violent depredations on the chastity of the female slaves; and these I was, though with reluctance, obliged to submit to at all times, being unable to help them. When we have had some of these slaves on board my master's vessels to carry them to other islands, or to America, I have known our mates to commit these acts most shamefully, to the disgrace, not of Christians only, but of men. I have even known them gratify their brutal passion with females not ten years old; and these abominations some of them practised to such scandalous excess, that one of our captains discharged the mate and others on that account. And yet in Montserrat I have seen a negro man staked to the ground, and cut most shockingly, and then his ears cut off bit by bit, because he had been connected with a white woman who was a common prostitute: as if it were no crime in the whites to rob an innocent African girl of her virtue; but most heinous in a black man only to gratify a passion of nature, where the temptation was offered by one of a different colour, though the most abandoned woman of her species. (Equiano 1789, 133-4)

What Equiano makes intelligible here are the double standards in condemning a supposed or proven sexual crime according to the race of both the perpetrator and the victim, with Black women being at the bottom rung of a hierarchy of sexual self-determination, and thus subject to severe consequences in terms of their physical and mental health as well as family (de)formation.

Equally revealing are the findings of historians Jennifer Morgan and Markus Rediker. Reflecting on the *Prinses*, a Dutch slave ship transporting a human cargo of 152 captives, 98 percent female, from Luanda (Angola) to Pernambuco (Brazil) in 1642, Morgan grapples with the difficulty “to comprehend how saturated that ship must have been with rape and sexualized violence. The women must have concluded that they were to be delivered as sexual objects to be consumed at their ultimate destination, wherever that was, and perhaps they were correct” (Morgan 2021, 50). In other cases, rape is evidenced by archival material that often remains silent on such matters, a silence that is not to be conflated with the non-existence of such assaults, but rather indicates a repetition of violence, this time epistemological. Drawing on the diaries of slave-trader John Newton, Rediker reports the case of William Cooney, a seaman on the slave ship *African* from Sierra Leone and the Windward Coast to St. Kitts in the Caribbean in 1753: “On the afternoon of January 31, William Cooney [...] ‘seduced a slave down into the room and lay with her brutelike in view of the whole quarter deck.’ The woman who was raped, known only as Number 83, was pregnant. Newton put Cooney in irons,

noting in his journal, ‘I hope this has been the first affair of the kind on board and I am determined to keep them quiet if possible’” (Rediker 2007, 179). Like Morgan’s confrontation with archival absences concerning the women on the *Prinses*, Rediker writes that

it is not clear what he meant by “keep them quiet.” Did he mean that he wanted to keep these kinds of events quiet? Did he mean that he wanted to keep predatory seamen like Cooney quiet? Or did he mean that he anticipated loud protest from the enslaved once they learned what had happened? Newton’s concluding conversation suggested his concern for property: “If anything happens to the woman I shall impute it to him, for she was big with child.” (Rediker 2007, 179)

The question marks raised in Rediker’s quote and Morgan’s attempt at imagining the violation, objectification, and commodification of enslaved women and girls in the absence of archival sources from *their* perspective call for a radical rethinking of both archival knowledge and historical research methods. This is discussed in more detail in the following pages.

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#### 4. Ghosts from the Past: Critical Fabulation as Decolonial Method

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The question of historical representation – put differently, What counts as qualified knowledge? – has occupied historians, philosophers, anthropologists, and sociologists for several decades. The first extensive and to date most influential lesson in epistemology was offered in the work of Michel Foucault: As “the law of what can be said,” the archive is not an institution accumulating statement-events, but it defines “the system of [their] enunciability” (Foucault [1969] 1972, 132). As outlined in *Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault’s archival theory rests on an understanding of discursive formations as systems of dispersion – “series full of gaps, intertwined with one another, interplays of differences, distances, substitutions, transformations” (Foucault [1969] 1972, 40). This Foucauldian conception anticipated later critiques and interventions, including deconstructive engagements with subaltern voices escaping the archive and requiring “the task of measuring silences” (Spivak 1988, 286), psychoanalytical works on archival authority, and the recovery of “archival documentation where the ‘ordinary historian’ identifies none” (Derrida 1996, 64), as well as anthropological research on the power imbalances at work in the creation of archival sources and of historical narratives based on these sources (Trouillot 1995). Slavery, Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995, 147) points out, “is a ghost, both the past and the living presence; and the problem of historical representation is how to represent the ghost, something that is and yet is not.” While Trouillot excavates how certain historical processes and events such as the Haitian Revolution were “unthinkable” from the

established European categories of (un)freedom and (in)equality at the time, as well as from the ensuing historical truth-making, Priya Satia (2020) emphasizes how historical scholarship has made empire “thinkable,” reproducing notions of progress and temporal linearity.

The common ground shared by all these critical approaches is that generalized historical knowledge has come to be (widely) accepted only by creating absences, that is, suppressing other knowledges, both materially and discursively. Yet, how can we address, connect, and fill in for the structural silence of the archive, especially in the context of enslavement? While historical anthropologist Ann Laura Stoler (2002, 100; see also 2008) makes a case for reading *along* the archival grain, that is, reading “for its regularities, for its logic of recall, for its densities and distributions, for its consistencies of misinformation, omission and mistake,” Black feminist historian Marisa Fuentes (2016, 16) argues that such a reading does not fully counter the “mutilated historicity,” a term referring to “the violent condition in which enslaved women appear in the archive disfigured and violated.” In analogy to the tailoring practice wherein the fabric is made more elastic, she proposes an archival reading *along the bias grain*, “stretching the archive to accentuate the presence of enslaved women when not explicitly mentioned in certain documents” (2016, 153, 156). Linking the critique of archival power with Black feminist epistemologies allows her to connect and expand on sources that shed light on people who left few such sources: enslaved women in 18th-century Barbados. In the case of ethnographic works confronted with fragmentary archival trails in seemingly secluded, interstitial spaces shaped by the agency of fugitive enslaved people, a case has been made for the cultivation of a “historical sociological imagination” (Santos 2022, 51) to reinscribe their stories into a multifaceted and polyphonic historiography – an approach informed by local counter-memories.

In challenging the violent silence of the archive, Saidiya Hartman adopts an approach that is somewhat similar to Fuentes’s reading “along the bias grain,” though more radical: If documents about the marginalized are exceptions proving the rule and the rulers, then reading *against* the grain remains a vital resource for critical scholars (Hartman 2018). The magnitude of fugitive information – knowledge escaping the archive, or only elusively available within it – forms the basis for Hartman’s oeuvre. Largely unnoticed by the Global Sociology to which this article and the entire Special Issue speak, she developed the method of “critical fabulation” in her seminal article, “Venus in Two Acts” (Hartman 2008), building on the chapter “The Dead Book” from her monograph, *Lose Your Mother* (Hartman 2007). In the latter, she writes of a teenage Black girl who, in 1791, was tortured to death on the British slave ship *Recovery* by its captain, John Kimber, most likely because she had refused to dance naked for him. The ship sailed from New Calabar in West Africa to Grenada in the Caribbean. The case of the flogged girl whose name we

do not know grew to prominence, as abolitionist William Wilberforce gave a speech on her murder half a year later to the British parliament. Key to the debate on the abolition of the trade in enslaved people, this incident nonetheless remains isolated, silencing the death of 19 enslaved men who had died prior to the girl on the *Recovery*, as well as “another girl on board the *Recovery* [...] whom they named Venus, and she too had the pox” (Hartman 2008, 26, citing *The Trial of Captain John Kimber for the Murder of Two Female Negro Slaves, on Board the Recovery, African Slave Ship, 1792*). Hartman criticizes herself for not having given Venus more space in her book, and thus being complicit in silencing her due to academic conventions: “I chose not to tell a story about Venus because to do so would have trespassed the boundaries of the archive. History pledges to be faithful to the limits of fact, evidence, and archive, even as those dead certainties are produced by terror” (Hartman 2008, 9). To overcome the violence of the archive – the erasure or minimization of entire lives – Hartman develops critical fabulation as a method of crafting

stories predicated upon impossibility – listening for the unsaid, translating misconstrued words, and refashioning disfigured lives – and intent on achieving an impossible goal: redressing the violence that produced numbers, ciphers, and fragments of discourse, which is as close as we come to a biography of the captive and the enslaved. (Hartman 2008, 2-3)

In this imaginative process of reading the archive critically, Hartman invents a single detail on the *Recovery*, that of a sailor testifying that the two girls seemed like friends:

Picture them: the relics of two girls, one cradling the other, plundered innocents; a sailor caught sight of them and later said they were friends. Two world-less girls found a country in each other’s arms. Beside the defeat and the terror, there would be this too: the glimpse of beauty, the instant of possibility. (Hartman 2008, 8)

According to this counter-narrative, in which humanity is given back to people to whom it had been denied, Hartman imagines two teenage girls becoming friends on board, only to point out her own hesitancy and the limits of the reflexive counter-history she engages with:

If I could have conjured up more than a name in an indictment, if I could have imagined Venus speaking in her own voice, if I could have detailed the small memories banished from the ledger, then it might have been possible for me to represent the friendship that could have blossomed between two frightened and lonely girls. Shipmates. Then Venus could have beheld her dying friend, whispered comfort in her ear, rocked her with promises, soothed her with “soon, soon” and wished for her a good return. (Hartman 2008, 8)

Despite pointing out the impossibility of representing these lives, Hartman still regards critical fabulation as an important method challenging archival authority and the structural absences thus created: Though we have the valuable account of Equiano quoted earlier in this article, there is no similar

autobiographical narrative of a female captive who survived the Middle Passage (Hartman 2008, 5).

Imagining a friendship resembling sisterhood on board the *Recovery* is not at all far-fetched: In their book-length analysis *The Birth of African-American Culture*, anthropologists Sidney Mintz and Richard Price show that

some of the earliest social bonds to develop in the coffles, in the factories and, especially, during the long Middle Passage were of a dyadic (two-person) nature. Partly, perhaps, because of the general policy of keeping men and women separate, they were usually between members of the same sex. The bond between shipmates, those who shared passage on the same slaver, is the most striking example. In widely scattered parts of Afro-America, the “shipmate” relationship became a major principle of social organization and continued for decades or even centuries to shape ongoing social relations. (Mintz and Price [1976] 1992, 43)

The “shipmate” relationship thus substituted biological kinship ties, as evidenced by the synonymy of the term with “brother”/“bro” or “sister”/“sis” for Black generations to come – a synonymy so strong that intercourse among shipmates was considered to be incestuous (Mintz and Price [1976] 1992, 43; Patterson 1967, 150). The vocabulary and conventions related to kinship have come to characterize the social relations – and their vernacular – between people violently wrested away from their biological kin.

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## 5. Embodied Archives: History Nonetheless

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Critical of standard research practice often masqueraded as neutral and unwilling to acknowledge positionality and partiality, Hartman’s work could easily and wrongfully be mistaken for fictional art. Though Hartman’s method of critical fabulation and mode of close narration come to full bloom in her acclaimed book *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* (2019) and blur the boundaries of conventional history, her extended readings against archival violence do not stretch their limits to the fictional. Her historical poetics hence differs from the literary arts in its treatment of themes of family disconnection in the context of enslavement, such as Octavia E. Butler’s *Kindred* (1979), Yaa Gyasi’s *Homegoing* (2016), and even Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987). Though inspired by the true story of Margaret Garner, who killed her daughter and tried to kill her three other children to spare them from a return to enslavement in pre-Civil War America, the latter is a widely acclaimed work of historically contextualized literary art.

Besides literature, the intervention of the visual and performing arts in public spaces has been blossoming, with works problematizing absences in the family archives of enslavement and its aftermaths. Recent examples in Europe include Grada Kilomba’s *O Barco*, an art installation consisting of a 32-

meter-long outline of the lower “hold” a slave ship composed of 140 wooden blocks within Lisbon’s colonial cityscape (Augusto 2023). Then there is also Jeanette Ehlers’ creolized dance interventions, such as *Whip it Good* (Kabir 2021), as well as her collaboration with La Vaughn Belle, *I Am Queen Mary*. This is a monumental public art project memorializing the leader of a labor revolt on Saint Croix, a former Danish colony, and located on the harbor front in Copenhagen (Belle 2019b; Cramer 2018). All these works employ the body as a transgenerational Black archive, yielding knowledge otherwise obliterated (see also Johnson 2021; Lockward 2013).

In what follows, I analyze one such work exemplary of the counter-archival engagement with a diverse set of materials: La Vaughn Belle’s *In the Place of Shadows* (2021). In this audiovisual, poetic essay, the Crucian (i.e., from the former Danish colony and current US colony of Saint Croix, part of the Virgin Islands Archipelago) artist traces and imagines the forced displacement of Victor Cornelins and Alberta Roberts, two half-siblings from the island who had been caged and exhibited at the 1905 colonial exhibition in the Tivoli gardens in Copenhagen. The pinnacle of dehumanizing the exoticized Other, such exhibitions across Europe displayed human beings, animals, and plants from the colonies. In the case of Denmark, this colonial space stretched from as far north as Greenland, Iceland, and the Faroe Islands to as far south as the Danish West Indies (now the US Virgin Islands, including Saint Croix). At the time of the exhibition, Victor was seven and Alberta was four years old (see Fig. 2). In the so-called West Indian pavilion, they were exhibited alongside William Smith, a man from the Caribbean island of St. Thomas, black pigs, and mules (Loftsdóttir 2019, 39). Their parents had allegedly agreed to the Atlantic voyage and the subsequent two-month-long exhibition of Victor and Alberta in exchange for education, though “agreements” under conditions of colonialism are never made on equal terms. Alberta never returned home, dying of tuberculosis aged fifteen. She was buried on the same day the Danish West Indies were formally “transferred” to the US, on 31 March 1917 (Loftsdóttir 2019, 42). Victor returned briefly to Saint Croix later in life, in 1970, having dedicated his life in Denmark to teaching and music. He passed away in 1985.



**Figure 2** Detail of a Photo of Victor and Alberta in Tivoli in 1905



The National Museum of Denmark, public domain.

An instance of critical fabulation, *In the Place of Shadows* pays tribute to Victor and Alberta. Belle blends visuals – archival material and recent images of the island, partly including the shadowy silhouette of the artist – with her warm voice from the off, speaking directly to Victor and Alberta. As in much of Black Atlantic and Oceanic history and art, the ocean serves as a method for thinking about histories of violence and resistance through the maritime domain, signaling an “aquatic turn” (Menon et al. 2022; Morse 2022; Mukherjee 2014): “The ocean,” we hear Belle speaking from the off, “holds stories that you will not find in history books but it’s history nonetheless” (see Fig. 3).

**Figure 3** Still from *In the Place of Shadows*, La Vaughn Belle, 2021.



Courtesy of the artist.

Belle explains to Victor and Alberta, and by extension to the wider audience, that the fleeting fragments in the colonial archive did not bring her any closer to the half-siblings' lived experience. Unable to unearth anything new in the available archival material, she admits: "I stopped searching for you because in the traces left in Denmark, there were only shadows. What I didn't know yet is that I could make my own." Belle hence maps herself visually and verbally onto the artwork. Mobilizing her own childhood memories of racism and objectification on the US mainland, she places herself in the *longue durée* of enslavement and its aftermaths: She details how, upon moving to Wisconsin for a year with her family during her childhood, being stared at not in a colonial exhibition but in all sorts of daily situations in a majority-White surrounding is a familiar experience of racist alienation to her. She recounts her memories in the classroom, saying that "instead of paying attention to the teacher, they [the White classmates, FS] would just stare at me as if I was the lesson." This excavation of memories is made with reference to a photo found of Alberta, with all the eyes of the other schoolchildren on her. Disrupting temporalities and archival power by inserting herself into connected, fabulated histories, Belle wonders "if I can put my body in the places your bodies have been / And the place of your shadows / Maybe I can find your story in me / Maybe it's always been there / Maybe I am both your stories and mine."

**Figure 4** Still from *In the Place of Shadows*, La Vaughn Belle, 2021



Courtesy of the artist.

What are archival materials evidence of, and how can we repair and fill in for archival absences, for people and stories that have been made absent? How do we narrate from a place of silence, from a paucity of sources, and what is considered valid historical practice? Scholars and artists such as Saidiya Hartman and La Vaughn Belle offer valuable exercises in rethinking these questions and disrupting established understandings of temporality: The present moment was the future at some point, and we are currently living the consequences of, or in the shadows cast by, the past. As Hartman writes, “I, too, live in the time of slavery, by which I mean I am living in the future created by it” (Hartman 2007, 133).

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## 6. Towards a Global Sociological Archive

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It is revealing that many forgotten founding figures of the discipline employed a sociological style borrowing from, or applied to, the fields of literature and journalism: Wells – born into slavery like Cooper – wrote abolitionist pamphlets and articles for her co-owned newspaper *Memphis Free Speech and Headlight*; Cooper published essays in addition to two dissertations; Hurston wrote poems, novels, short stories, and ethnographic studies; and Du Bois wrote short stories, novels, and magazine articles for *The Crisis*, of which he was the founding editor, besides his numerous book-length studies effectively founding sociology in the United States. All of them thereby created an archive that has remained largely untapped by mainstream sociology, with the hesitant and belated exception of Du Bois (Blume Oeur 2022; Burawoy

2021; Bhambra and Holmwood 2021, 177-206; Itzigsohn and Brown 2020; Kelly 2016; McAuley 2019; Morris 2015; Wright 2017).

The Global Sociology I have proposed in this article and elsewhere (Santos and Ruvituso 2024 [forthcoming]) argues for a critical archaeology of the discipline: Finding out what forgotten founding figures had to say about global entanglements, rather than reinventing the wheel and thereby reinforcing the absences created in the hegemonic sociological archive once again. In writing Black US American scholars, partly enslaved by birth, back into the history of the discipline, I have aimed to demonstrate their relevance to discussions around biographical becoming, family uprooting, and gendered and racialized labor in the context of global transformations literally spurred by the slave ship. Hurston's biographical work reconstructing the life trajectory of the last survivor of the trade in enslaved people in the United States, Wells's statistical data on lynching, and Du Bois's statistics on Black communities are but glimpses into the global sociological archive to be further explored, alongside the abolitionist sources foregrounded in this article.

At the same time, they all offer blueprints for reflexive positionality in the social sciences (Boatcă 2021). In positioning themselves within historical and current entanglements, global sociologists *avant la lettre* made the presences and absences created in their work legible, and their overall research practice more comprehensible. By way of illustration, we can once again delve into the global sociological archive on families and kinship, this time from Du Bois's reflections on "The Damnation of Women" from his autobiography *Darkwater*:

I remember four women of my boyhood: my mother, cousin Inez, Emma, and Ide Fuller. They represented the problem of the widow, the wife, the maiden, and the outcast. They were, in color, brown and light-brown, yellow with brown freckles, and white. They existed not for themselves, but for men; they were named after the men to whom they were related and not after the fashion of their own souls. (Du Bois 1920, 163)

Combining reflections on his own upbringing among differently positioned women with sociological analyses prompts him to call for social change:

The future woman must have a life work and economic independence. She must have knowledge. She must have the right of motherhood at her own discretion. The present mincing horror at free womanhood must pass if we are ever to be rid of the bestiality of free manhood; not by guarding the weak in weakness do we gain strength, but by making weakness free and strong. (Du Bois 1920, 164-5)

Reading along the global sociological grain and against the canonical and exclusionary archival grain, I have situated family separation as part of the general prevention of forging social relations among enslaved people – a strategic means to seek more profit and impede collective action in the form of protests and revolts. "To lose your mother," Hartman (2007, 85) writes, "was

to be denied your kin, country, and identity. To lose your mother was to forget your past.” Her method of critical fabulation, introduced here to discussions held within (global) sociology, aids in reversing oblivion and giving nuance to lives of which we have few detailed archival records. Examples are the absences of Victor Cornelins and Alberta Roberts, transported without their families from Saint Croix to Copenhagen, where they were caged and under constant observation of the White gaze at the colonial exhibition in 1905. Powerfully countered in Belle’s artwork *In the Place of Shadows*, I have argued for closer sociological attention to the creative methods against the archival grain employed in the arts which, in turn, produce knowledge and materials to be recognized as relevant sources in their own right. Given this strong epistemic potential, I understand critical fabulation as a powerful decolonial method that turns discredited histories into possible alternatives debunking the truth claimed by hegemonic memory practices.

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## Doing Global Sociology: Qualitative Methods and Biographical Becoming after the Postcolonial Critique

### Introduction

Johannes Becker & Marian Burchardt

Doing Global Sociology: Qualitative Methods and Biographical Becoming after the Postcolonial Critique  
- An Introduction.

doi: [10.12759/hsr.48.2023.37](https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.48.2023.37)

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