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The National Archives

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¹**Yale**

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Featured image: Windrush Stories exhibition at the British Library, 2018. Photo courtesy of Leon van Kemenade.

I dressed conservatively; I did not appear to be a disruptive or unruly researcher. I was indistinguishable from the others who arrived at the National Archives early in the morning and who stood, patiently, waiting for the doors to open while swans, graceful in their every movement, nuzzled the weeds underwater. As they raised their long necks and droplets of water rolled on the surface of feather, I became aware of my own poor posture and straightened my spine. We who left late in the evening passed through doors that rapidly closed behind us, and did not notice swans. We marched together to and from the Kew Gardens Tube station everyday carrying computers and clutching umbrellas, too intent on our work to acknowledge each other with more than

a brief incline of the head and half-smile. After leaving the locker room and climbing the stairs, all similarity with my fellow travelers ceased: they seem to parse the same historical manuscripts day after day, while I sought to undermine the edifice of knowledge to which I was granted generous access.

I was exposed but felt completely in the dark. Florescent light was diffused across the room from large gray rectangles embedded in the ceiling. Behind me was a wall of glass through which, if I wanted to turn, I could have seen the sky, swans, geese, ducks swimming on a pond, and the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew. The wings of jumbo jets landing at Heathrow Airport skimmed the roofs of the neighborhood but, inside the room, the roar of their Rolls Royce engines was muted. Like everyone else at work in the National Archives of the UK, I was hermetically sealed away from bird song, from the smell of wet soil, from the fragrance of shrubs and flowers, from the drone of London traffic, from the sounds and rhythms of everyday life.

The building precludes distraction, natural and artificial light illuminate inconspicuous interiors. This room is designed to promise transparency in all transactions: a promise that nothing will be withheld or concealed, that everything can be known. In this vacuum of light, no shadows would dare fall to obscure, disguise or blunt the edges of documented truths bound in files and books and papers tied together with ribbon. Uniform exposure to the light offers assurance that what is past can be recovered, made easily accessible and available to all who have the time to sit and stare.¹ Revelation, however, does not ensure accountability.

That morning, in early summer, I sat at a computer workstation searching the catalogue, *Discovery*. What eventually surfaced on the screen sent a jolt through my spine, the sudden movement caused the four wheels on my chair to roll across the surface of the industrial strength floor covering. A nondescript weave of rectangles in multiple shades of soft grays, the carpet duplicated the shapes on the ceiling. There was nothing in either pattern to catch the eye and distract attention from the serious business of research.

A room full of people thinking is quiet but it is not silent. There was a low frequency hum of constant activity, pages were turned, documents were scanned and delivered but all motion was circumspect, coughs, sneezes, and clearing of throats were stifled. My urge to exclaim was strangled in my throat and, when I glanced over my shoulder, I was relieved to see that the abrupt movement of my chair had not attracted attention or disrupted the gentle flow of hush that washed across the room. I had found what I set out to discover but I was staring at the carpet instead of the catalogue

entries. I was reluctant to submit the call numbers that would trigger the delivery of materials to 14B, the number of my bright orange cubby and dull green desk.

My search was for financial matters, for “property.” Methodically I had found, “Records created or inherited by Her Majesty’s Treasury,” and within them, the “Records of Commissions and Committees [which] reflect core Treasury functions such as financial and establishment matters.” I felt compromised by the language of the system of classification, the language of dissimulation I was forced to follow. I refuse the terms and conditions that shaped the world in which these records were created. I need different language, a different map, different truths.²

I temporarily avoided the object of my search, what I had at some point to confront, by thinking instead about the structure of the classification system that determined my path. The catalogue consisted of a hierarchy of terms which organized knowledge. The intention is to provide a gradual progression, a descent into the “matters” for which any researcher seeks. However, when I found the “matter” I was looking for I was not sure that I wanted to see it. Persistence, being determined to find out, to know, to interrogate, kept me in my chair, but I was also cautious, hesitant, weighing and calculating the costs of finding out.

I considered the source of my hesitation, my fractured sense of being, my loss of a singular “I” who knew what she wanted. I probed my conflicting motivations as a researcher, as a daughter, as a black woman descended from those I was about to find; I weighed opposing outcomes and fought the indecision and immobility rooted in the tension between intentions and desires. I wanted to seize my ambivalence as an opportunity, a moment of historical consciousness, an important recognition of the fictional nature of a unified self. There is no simple “I” marking my subjectivity here. Having fallen down the equivalent of Charles L. Dodgson’s rabbit hole, I needed to take stock, to reassemble my multiple selves and motives, to pull myself together and catch my breath. The organization of knowledge in the classification system appeared, on its surface, perfectly logical, in accord with established pathways to enlightenment but I landed not in the light of knowledge but beneath its surface, in the soil where it began to take shape, in the blackness where the roots of enlightenment become entangled with the rhizomes of unreason.

The architecture and pathways of the chamber of knowing in which I found myself are the product of a history I have spent a career contesting and challenging. In “Commissions and Committees,” I tunneled through “various bodies dealing with compensation and other issues relating to slavery, land and war,” until I encountered

the records of the “Office of Registry of Colonial Slaves and Slave Compensation Commission,” which took the form of a Cheshire Cat curled up in the darkest corner of its burrow, in wait for me. Its grin widened, its maw opened and its body dissolved leaving the words “Slave Compensation Commission,” behind, hovering in the atmosphere of foetid breath.

Elucidating the dimensions of property as a social relation principally entails attending to the restoration of slavery effected through the regulation of conduct, the fashioning of individuality, and the naturalization of race.

—Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*³

I was unsure of my footing, balanced precariously on the terrain of treachery as well as dissimulation. In an alternative world, a world that was just and equitable, the title “slave compensation” would mean that the brief of this commission was to compensate the enslaved for the theft of their selves, of their labor, of their offspring, and of their future: compensation for the wealth wrung from their agony; wealth generated from lives of unremitting toil; wealth welling up from an inundation of tears, of pain, of frustration and of fury, flooding the hold of slave ships, watering the unforgiving soil of plantations, nurturing the seeds of rebellion. Immense wealth, produced by the labor of generations of enslaved human beings, enriched and was consumed within the colonial heart of empire; generations of laborers were rewarded with immiseration and ineffable physical and psychological violence.

The language of the archives is specious, duplicity burdens research with a terrible weight. I forced myself to pause, I closed my eyes and indulged in the comfort of fantasy. It seemed important to dwell, just for a moment, on the possibility that compensation might actually have been granted *to* the enslaved instead of enriching those who, on paper, and in the eyes of Her Majesty’s Treasury, were designated owners of their bodies. I held my breath.

There should be space for alternative realities, alternative ways of knowing, in the archive. There should be room for imagining a world in which justice not injustice triumphed, a world where wealth had been returned to those who had produced it, but I knew that I was wasting time, that no one should look to the colonial archives for social justice. In order to complete the task at hand I forced breath back into my lungs, opened my eyes, lifted my chin, clenched my jaw, and continued to search. Committees and commissions are not the only bodies buried here in boxes and files and tied with ribbon and string; truths, by any measure or definition, are difficult, if not impossible, to excavate, to expose to the light. Over the course of ten years I followed the White

Rabbit, confronting and interrogating colonial archives in London and in Kingston, Jamaica, in search of records.

In 1816, the British government instituted a process to register all of the enslaved in every territory of its empire. Human beings who lived and breathed were confined within the straightjackets of columns and bound within ledgers: “REGISTRATION”; “SLAVE REGISTERS.” By 1817, the first year of registration was complete and henceforth, until emancipation, records of “increase” and “decrease” were updated every three years. “Increase,” covered birth and purchase, “decrease” covered sale, escape, being sent to the workhouse, and death, but did not distinguish between death from torture, punishment, disease or a broken heart. The language of these documents confirms that the only interest in keeping these registers of bodies was as accounts of profit and/or loss.

What life raft of reason is within reach of descendants of those listed in these account books of enslavement, of Empire? Is there hope, comfort or escape to be found in remembering only those who survived? I grieved for lives maimed, destroyed, cut short. If someone I found disappeared without explanation from a subsequent record, I hoped they ran, ran fast and far and re-named themselves so as to be forever hidden from capture by former owners—and the archives. Records of those condemned, viciously punished, and murdered, stilled me.

As each person in the register was recorded, they were categorized not as a human being but as property by HMS Treasury. This practice of dehumanization is preserved and reproduced, without end, in the language and structure of classification: the headings, subheadings and definitions. No one should imagine that entering this archive is journeying back in time to a history that is past, that is over. Traveling through the archive imposes an experience of time that is not linear, but circuitous. A passage through the living language of humans as property is an ever-present entrapment in, and assertion of the *right to own*, it is a continual imposition of subjection and endless possession. To enter this archive is to become conscripted into an ongoing process of trading in flesh.

In Portland, Jamaica, in 1817,

John Carby / Negro / 6 years old / Creole

is listed as:

*son of Nancy / 30 years old / African.*⁴

I followed broken threads of information written into ledgers by the hands of clerks who cared about tallying numbers, detailing property and establishing ownership, but had no care for the accuracy of the names of this “property,” for they did not regard “it” as human. I found precious but inconsistent traces of more than one Rose Munro: in Hanover, an enslaved Rose Munro, African, “said” to be 26 years old in 1817,⁵ was “registered” as 38 years in 1829;⁶ in Kingston in 1820, a Rose Munro, free black, 8 months old, was baptized (a daughter I wondered?);⁷ in 1822, the manumission of a Rose Munro for 10/- is recorded.⁸

I have utilized the tension between my working self as scholar from being a descendant, a daughter, a granddaughter and a great granddaughter. I created connections between disparate threads of ancestry, followed the name Rose as it passed through generations until bestowed, as if a gift, upon my grandmother, Millicent Rose Munro who, known simply as Rose, gave birth to my father in Kingston, Jamaica in 1921. I knew that I would be able to assemble only fragments of histories and traces of ancestors, that I could not recreate the lives of all of those from plantations even though I found this conclusion unacceptable. As a daughter and granddaughter, I was left bereft, dissatisfied and unsettled that lives silenced in and by the archives and by enslavement are irretrievable.

In the large document room, I walked to and from the reserve desk carrying large grey boxes. They were bulky and heavy. Inside each box was a single volume of Triennial Returns for the parishes of Portland and St Georges, Jamaica beginning in 1817, and continuing through 1820, 1823, 1829, and 1832. I clutched each box tightly to my chest using my body as a brace, afraid that one would slip from my arms, fall and burst apart, spilling its contents over the floor. As I reached a table, I lowered each box, gently, and removed a white cotton ribbon.

The passage of time was marked not by the measure of seconds, minutes and hours but by the repetitious nature of my movements which assumed the character of ritual. I stood with bent back, lifted a lid, set it aside, and stared down at the contents of a box while the first of many clouds of particles I disturbed rose and settled. Squeezing my fingers between the interior edges of each box and a register I gripped each tome and lifted. When these ledgers were created, copied, bound, transported across the Atlantic and stored, did officials of the British Treasury imagine that, like their Empire, these records would last forever?

Tropical environments, humidity, insects, ocean journeys, human neglect, defeated the aims of clerks to preserve records in the form they intended: book boards, with marbled covers separated from their spine and signatures, bindings have partially disintegrated, rag paper pages have been attacked by mold, but most of the stitching has held. As I searched through the registers and turned page after page, it was as if the particles of hemp, linen, cotton and board that constituted these ledgers of the long dead had a consciousness, were seeking to attach themselves to me, refused to be neglected or left behind: reddish orange, brown and cream fragments drifted around me, covered my clothes and worked their way inside, stuck to my skin, settled in my hair.

I was unable to leave the dead who cleaved to me. As I walked from the archive to the tube station, I left a trail of fragments in my wake; on the train I stood in a pall of residue. In the shower I watched as particles flushed down the drain; when I awoke they were on my pillow. I left remains in the house of my closest friends. As I passed through Customs and Border Protection on the other side of the Atlantic, I hesitated, wondering if I should declare that I bore this residue on my person.

Footnotes

1. "A poor life this if, full of care / We have no time to stand and stare." My mother was fond of quoting these lines from a Welsh poet, W.H. Davies, "Leisure," in *Songs of Joy and Others* (London: A.C. Fifield, 1911), 15.

See <https://englishverse.com/poems/leisure>. [↵](#)

2. See Kei Miller, *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion* (Manchester: Carcanet Press Limited, 2014), 18-19. [↵](#)

3. Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 148. [↵](#)

4. Detail, Jamaica Portland, 1817, Slave Registers, Registration, Office of Registry of Colonial Slaves and Slave Compensation Commission, The National Archives T71/151/37. [↵](#)

5. Jamaica, Hanover, 1817, Slave Registers, Registration, Office of Registry of Colonial Slaves and Slave Compensation Commission, The National Archives T71/190/. [↵](#)

6. Jamaica, Hanover. I-O, 1829, Slave Registers, Registration, Office of Registry of Colonial Slaves and Slave Compensation Commission, The National Archives T171/196. [↗](#)
7. Baptisms in Kingston, May 14, 1820, page 356, Jamaica, "Church of England Parish Register Transcripts, 1664-1880," Kingston, Jamaica, Registrar General's Department, Spanish Town; FHL microfilm 1,291,763. [↗](#)
8. Colonial Office and predecessors: Jamaica, Original Correspondence, Transmits a return of all manumissions granted in Jamaica between January 1, 1817 and December 31, 1830, The National Archives CO/137/183/38. [↗](#)