Recoveries and Reconsiderations

Recoveries and Reconsiderations: The Archive We Inherited

Rachael McIntosh

Abstract: The Slavery Documents Collection at the Eberly Family Special Collections Library serves as a case study to explore the impact of collection organization and the interplay between digital components of archives, such as finding aids, and the physical items within the repository. I will recount my experience encountering the collection to consider how the organizational logics of the archive and reparative description efforts undertaken by an archivist inform how the documents are interpreted and understood. I offer this analysis to consider how sustained critical attention to archival rhetorics might contribute to the development and refinement of archival practices and research strategies to contend with violence and silences in the archive.

Keywords: Archival Rhetorics, Black Feminism, Slavery, Archives, Reparative Description

Doi: https://doi.org/10.37514/PEI-J.2024.27.1.15

In "Venus in Two Acts," Saidiya Hartman narrates her attempt to reckon with the violence enacted by the archive of slavery. She weighs her desire to tell the stories of women who are only represented through their interactions with mechanisms of power that sought to erase their subjectivities with her desire not to reenact that violence in the telling. Hartman asks, "[y]et how does one recuperate lives entangled with and impossible to differentiate from the terrible utterances that condemned them to death, the account books that identified them as units of value, the invoices that claimed them as property, and the banal chronicles that stripped them of human features?" (3). In this question, Hartman highlights the extent to which documents in the archive dehumanize by stripping people of their "human features," claiming them as property, and recording them only in relation to violence and death. The very systems that dutifully recorded and condemned enslaved people as objects of trade ensured that these records would survive and that the lives, perspectives, and histories of enslaved Africans and their descendants would be written out of the grand historical narrative. This is the archive we have inherited; what do we do with it?

Scholars of African American history and culture like Hartman have skillfully articulated the challenges researchers face when looking for Black life in the archives, especially the archive of the transatlantic

Rachael McIntosh is a PhD Candidate in the English Department at Northeastern University studying archival rhetorics. Her research investigates how archival structures and logics craft meaning around and influence interpretations of the materials they house and thus participate in generating historical knowledge. The goal of her dissertation project is to assess what strategies are being or can be implemented to recuperate suppressed epistemologies and to gather, preserve, and code knowledge in ways that humanize rather than dehumanize the racialized subjects represented within archival records and the people engaging with those records.

slave trade[1].

Jacqueline Jones Royster paved the way for Black feminist rhetoricians who take seriously the rhetorical prowess of Black women. Royster and others[2]have crafted methods informed by the experiences of Black women to draw attention to Black women rhetoricians who have not always had access to spaces to which scholars of rhetoric have traditionally turned, and who do not always employ strategies that are legible when relying only upon traditional methods and frameworks.

Feminist historiographers have undertaken work to recover the rhetorics of historically marginalized people, including, but not limited to women, and have shifted existing and developed new archival research methods (Royster; Enoch; Glenn). Archival rhetorics scholarship has helped draw attention to the archive itself as a rhetorical actor (Cushman, Morris, Rawson). The structures, organizational logics, and textual elements of archives participate in the process of knowledge creation; they create meaning around and through the materials they house. Additionally, over the past decade or so, archivists have been working to address some of the ways that systemic power imbalances have influenced what kinds of records are most often preserved and how marginalized and underrepresented people are depicted within their repositories, largely through digitization and reparative description efforts (A4BLiP; Berry; Hughes-Watkins).

Less attention has been devoted to the impact of collection organization and how it often reinscribes power imbalances and notions of who is worthy of subjecthood that are rooted in a racialized and gendered colonial order. A critical understanding of the rhetorical power of organizational logics is especially important when considering the history of the transatlantic slave trade. Current interventions typically aim to assert the humanity of enslaved people by rewriting descriptions and editing metadata. Some of these strategies include updating terminology, naming enslaved people whenever possible, and providing thoughtful historical context for collections in finding aids. Digital exhibits provide opportunities for archivists to reorganize and reframe materials to center the experiences of enslaved people and make records related to those experiences easier to find. The physical holdings are often left as they were, which raises complex questions about the effect of interventions that occur in digital spaces and the interplay between physical holdings and digital components of the same repository. I will share my experience encountering the Slavery Documents Collection at the Eberly Family Special Collections Library at Pennsylvania State University to consider the rhetorical impact of collection organization and the interplay between digital resources, in this case a finding aid, and the physical materials.

I had the opportunity to explore Penn State's Special Collections as part of a five-day seminar on archival methodologies, which included time in the archive to try out the methodologies we studied in the classroom. Without a specific project in mind, I sought out materials that would allow me to explore my general interest in the construction of hierarchies of racial difference through the discourse surrounding

1 See also the work of Jennifer Morgan, Marisa Fuentes, Tiya Miles, Stephanie Smallwood

2 For example, Tamika Carey, Brittany Cooper, Patricia Davis, Ersula Ore, and Gwendolyn Pough

slavery and an emerging interest in archival rhetorics. After running a couple searches in the catalog, I came across the "Slavery Documents Collection." According to the finding aid, this collection contains 24 bills of sale, two certificates of indenture, and a few additional documents of a similar nature related to the transfer of property in the form of both land and people ("Slavery Documents"). Though this collection aligned with my interests, I hesitated to submit a request. I had read about these documents that recorded enslaved people as units of property, documenting their market value but no real sense of who they were; however, I had yet to encounter them directly. I knew confronting the reality of this history would be emotionally taxing, but I went ahead with the request.

I entered the reading room with a feeling of curiosity tinged with dread. I braced myself for what I anticipated would be cold, depersonalized, legalistic language acting upon the bodies of enslaved people and reaffirming their status as objects to be traded. I sat down at my table in the middle of the brightly lit room in which other seminar participants were dispersed reviewing their own materials, took a deep breath, and flipped open the manila-colored file box. I carefully slid the first folder out and placed it on the table. I opened the folder, and, to my surprise, the first document was titled "How to De-Control Your Union of Communists." Startled and confused, I checked the request slip. Sure enough, it read, "Title: Slavery documents collection," so why was I looking at a document about communism? I sifted through a few more items within the folder, but none seemed to relate to slavery. The archivist explained that the collection was part of a shared box, which was indicated in the catalog by the box number, "Collection — Box: Share 16." Being fairly new to archival research and to the Penn State catalog, I did not notice this detail, nor did it occur to me that there might be such a thing as a shared box.

The archivist explained that the shared box was a result of storage logistics. If they have a small collection that is housed in one folder, they cannot simply put that folder on a shelf. It would get lost. For the sake of space, they cannot put one folder in its own box. So, smaller collections are housed in shared boxes. This made perfect sense to me, but I was struck by how such straightforward, logistical decision-making could potentially affect the way in which I was interacting with these documents. It troubled me that documents that can appear deceptively banal at first glance, especially if someone does not know exactly what they are looking at, could end up in a box with such a random, disjointed array of other materials. With a better understanding of and some new questions about the organizational system, I returned to my table and located the folder containing the collection I sought.

The line of inquiry that led me to the collection of bills of sale for enslaved people has to do with how the construct of private property played a significant role in dehumanizing enslaved Africans and reducing them to property. Property law did not end at securing an enslavers' "right" to claim ownership over an enslaved person, it stripped enslaved people of their personhood and linked wealth and property to whiteness. The bills of sale housed in the Slavery Documents Collection enact this work of separating the lives of enslaved people from their bodies by reducing them to items to be traded and listing only the features that are relevant to the sale (e.g., sex, age, ability). I could not help but wonder how the archive in which these docu-

ments were housed might still be participating in this process of objectification.

The bills of sale in the collection mostly come from the same county in Tennessee. In many ways they seem quite ordinary, hardly any different from a letter or any other kind of document. A few include a witness statement from the county court attesting to the legitimacy of the agreement. Signatures from the relevant parties appear at the end of each statement and sometimes spill onto the back. In one document that outlines an agreement to divide all of the enslaved people within a particular estate among two parties, a few words are even crossed out, which comes across as a mark of informality, at least at first glance. In one line about halfway down the page where it is outlined which enslaved people will be transferred to whom, the phrase "and child" was inserted with a caret symbol and then crossed out ("Bill for seven"). What happened to the child? One might be left to assume that the child was either sold elsewhere, rather than divided between the two parties, or, perhaps, that it did not survive. It seemed to me that the matter of dividing a significant portion of an estate is important enough that it might warrant a clear, unmarred statement of the particulars. Once the matter of the child was clarified and other errors made, would it not be worth rewriting the agreement? It is possible that this was a draft or one of multiple copies that existed. Either way, the overall form of the document is rather informal and to the point. They contain no special headers or seals, just a statement of the exchange and the necessary signatures.

Each bill of sale begins with a statement of the date and the basic facts of the agreement. The agreed upon amount of the purchase and the fact that the money was at that moment "in hand" precede the brief description of the person/s being sold, indicating that the financial aspect of the transaction is the most important component. The details of the "goods" being purchased are secondary. Many contain language that ensures that the seller and their heirs can make no future claim to ownership against the purchaser or their heirs. For example, the closing statement of one reads, "I further warrant and defend my title of said girl to the said adary his heirs and [illegible] against the lawful claims of all other persons whatsoever this 11th day of November 1852" (Fletcher). The heirs are not named, which could account for the possibility of additional children. A primary occupation at this time was to secure wealth within the family and to pass it down. The mechanisms through which this was achieved are deeply intertwined with racialization. For this reason, one of the other places where property law and racial differentiation intersect most explicitly is in the laws that were written not just to protect inheritance, but to ensure that wealth remained linked to whiteness.

The legal doctrine *Partus Sequitur Ventrem* ensured that wealth would not be passed to the mixed-race children of white enslavers by assigning them the "status" of their mother. This doctrine ensured that any children born to enslaved people were also enslaved by default. Through this system, wealth in the form of material goods, social capital, and family legacy was firmly linked to whiteness.[3] The crossed-out addition of "and child" in the document described above stood out to me as a symbol of the fact that kinship links among enslaved people were deliberately destroyed. The child is written into the margin of the historical

3 For more about the legal linkage between whiteness and property, see Harris, Cheryl L. "Whiteness as Property." *Harvard Law Review*, vol. 106, no. 8, 1993, pp.1708-1791.

record, a secondary consideration. The parent is sold away, and the child is scratched out, its fate unknown. By contrast, the document attests that "all the heirs at a law in testimony whereof use have hereunto set our hands this 6th day of 1840" ("Bill for seven"). Even if it survived, the crossed-out child is likely no one's legal heir. Only the legal heirs, the white, property-owning heirs, can witness and testify to the facts of the sale.

The clauses that protect the ownership rights of heirs ensure that the ownership of the person sold remains in the hands of the purchaser and his descendants and reaffirm the relationship between the enslaved person and the descendants of the enslaver. The language explicitly dictates that the seller and their heirs cannot contest the rights of the purchaser's heirs to the "property," and it also more subtly underscores that the enslaved person cannot contest their ownership either. The term of each person's enslavement is explicitly stated in each bill of sale, often through the phrase "to have and to hold a slave for life." Generally, this assertion follows the description of the person's attributes, such as their sex, age, and a statement that the person is of "sound body and mind." The repetition of this standardized language within the documents illustrates the frequency and ordinariness of these transactions. The repetition of the transactional language in documents that, aside from a few basic characteristics, hardly differentiate a human being from a cow or a plot of land, has a compounding, soul crushing effect. It emphasizes the quotidian nature of both the physical and ontological violence of the institution of slavery that these records continue to enact.

The finding aid for the Slavery Documents Collection provides useful context that demonstrates a significant effort on the part of the archivists to mitigate the violence inherent in these documents. A processing note explains that archivist Lexy deGraffenreid "re-described" the collection and then later "further revised it," and one strategy she employed was to add the names of the enslaved people and the enslavers referenced in item level descriptions whenever possible ("Slavery Documents"). Presumably, the choice to name individuals in both groups functions to restore some degree of personhood to enslaved people and to ensure that enslavers are named in the historical record as such. The stated purpose of deGraffenreid's revisions is "to elevate the names and experiences of the enslaved persons present within this collection" ("Slavery Documents"). Entering the names of enslaved people into the metadata is meant to work toward this goal given that enslaved people are often unnamed in records, and sometimes are only represented by tallies.

Allocating the time and resources to re-process these items and informing researchers of those efforts is a significant step. The note itself prompts researchers to consider the limitations as well as the contents of the documents, and to center the enslaved persons as subjects even when the documents do not. The finding aid is less successful in elevating the experiences of enslaved people, given that the aid does not provide any specific information to explain what those experiences may have been or where to find that information beyond what appears in the documents. The documents contain very little information other than small details that may lead a researcher to locate more materials related to a particular enslaver, plantation, or town. It is very possible that more information about the enslaved people referenced does not exist.

Finding aids are important resources, especially when deciding what items to request in advance of a

research visit. Online access to finding aids often provides insight into collections that allows researchers to develop a sense of what materials might be relevant to their inquiry, which is an important step in the initial stages of research. They can also help to frame a collection and orient a researcher to the materials. de-Graffenreid's revision of the finding aid draws researchers' attention to the enslaved subjects of the records and the description of her efforts prompts researchers to consider how they are approaching the documents. However, finding aids are not always front of mind during the process of reviewing materials.

As part of the online catalog, finding aids often factor into a researcher's initial searches, but the online format creates some degree of distance between the finding aid or catalog record and the physical materials, as researchers may not consult them after they locate the materials they want to review. Though it is possible that a researcher may view a finding aid while in the reading room, factors such as box contents and folder organization will likely have a more immediate, if subtle impact on the framing of materials as they are being reviewed. In "The Rhetorical Power of Archival Description," K.J. Rawson claims that "archival boxes can enlist both bureaucratic and epistemological functions" (339). In the case of the Slavery Documents Collection, the arrangement of the box serves a bureaucratic function in that materials are housed in a shared box as a result of the limitations on space in the archive. Small collections need to be stored in a safe and efficient manner, which can result in unrelated materials being held together in the same box. Some researchers may have noticed the indication in the catalog that it is a shared box, and so may not have been so surprised to encounter pamphlets discussing communism upon opening it. However, the dissimilarity among the items sharing the box is still jarring even if it is not surprising. Housing the bills of sale in a box that is filled with completely unrelated items decontextualizes them. It leaves the transactional, seemingly straightforward language of the records to speak for themselves.

The title of the collection, The Slavery Documents Collection, which appears on the outside of the folder, suggests that these are the only documents related to slavery that are in the archive's holdings. A review of their catalog determined that collections related to slavery in their holdings mostly focus on individuals who were abolitionists or other, mostly white people who wrote about slavery. Other items, such as "Unidentified Paper (pertains to slavery)" and "Slavery Notes" are single files that are minimally processed, so no description is available online. I can only assume that they were acquired at different times and so are not stored together due to the logistical constraints that make reorganizing boxes and re-cataloging items when new, related items are acquired unmanageable. The existence of this folder in this shared box is a result of the lack of related materials at the time of acquisition within this archive's holdings.

Encountering the materials in this way diminishes their significance as records that speak directly to the role of slavery in the development of capitalism and the United States' economy. Two collections stored within the shared box are the Charles Owen Rice correspondence and Arthur St. Clair family papers. The proximity of these collections draws attention to the fact that the slavery documents record part of the family and estate histories of the enslavers, primarily in one area of Tennessee. The gaps left in the historical record by the dearth of information related to the enslaved subjects of the documents are primarily filled by

the personal papers of men of Scottish and Irish descent in the folders that surround the collection. Situating the documents among personal collections emphasizes their function as records of the white enslavers' family and personal histories and positions the enslavers as the primary subjects of the records. The inclusion of a property agreement related to a marriage underscores the emphasis on personal history and contributes to the dehumanization of the enslaved people referenced by creating the opportunity for comparison between the sale of people as property and the transfer of the rights to a house and a few cows through marriage. The enslaver's legacy is effectively secured through their history of property ownership and the subjecthood of the enslaved people is significantly diminished.

Yet how might one organize and present this collection differently within this archive? In "Archival encounters: rethinking access and care in digital colonial archives," Daniela Agostinho describes "the productive tension between the desire to recover those documented subjects from archives structured by violence and dispossession, and the impossibility of recovery when one is dealing with archives whose organization is envisioned and managed so as to obliterate the colonized" that has been central to discussions of colonial archives and transatlantic slavery (154). The Slavery Documents Collection is a prime example of that tension.

The description of deGraffenreid's efforts to re-describe the collection indicates that she engaged in recovery work; however, including the names of the enslaved people in the item descriptions may not counterbalance the dehumanizing effects of the documents, the lack of supplementary materials about the enslaved people referenced, or the effects of the repetition of banal, transactional language, all of which are beyond the archivist's control. Naming can be powerful, but reproducing names that appear in the documents as a means to restore subjecthood is fraught considering that the names by which enslaved people were recorded may have been given to them by their enslaver, a tactic that deliberately distanced captured Africans and their descendants from their cultures, languages, and communities. In these documents, their names only serve the purpose of identifying them as items to be sold, so names in themselves do not always restore full personhood, though they are the best option we have to refer to enslaved people with some dignity. I do not say this to criticize deGraffenreid or to suggest that her efforts are not worthwhile, but rather to draw attention to the tension that Agostinho names and to identify some of the specific challenges that it creates. In order to develop strategies to counter the ways in which the archive often dehumanizes racialized subjects, careful attention must be paid to the contexts from which the materials emerged and that continue to inform their meaning.

I sit here looking at my notes in which I transcribed the records from the Slavery Documents Collection. I see photos of browned pieces of paper with watermarks, deep creases, and small tears carefully protected in plastic sleeves. In them, a woman and her child are sold for $520. A "negro girl by the name of Jemirna age seventeen years" (Fletcher), the same age as my sister. The crossed-out child. I wonder who these people were and how we will ever learn to live with the fact that these documents, a piece of paper through which a parent is sold, and their child is blotted out, may be the only records left to us of their lives. What else could possibly go in that box that could provide the appropriate context and attempt to restore some

sense of life to the subjects of these documents? I cannot claim to have any answers to that question, but sustained, critical attention to the ways in which the archive participates in generating historical knowledge and shaping understandings of the materials it houses will lead to the continued development and refinement of archival practices and research strategies that contend with violence and silences in the archive and enable the writing of more dynamic histories.

Works Cited

Agostinho, Daniela. "Archival encounters: rethinking access and care in digital colonial archives." *Archive Science*, vol. 19, 2019, pp. 141–165. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-019-09312-0

Antracoli, Alexis A., Annalise Berdini, Kelly Bolding, Faith Charlton, Amanda Ferrara, Valencia Johnson, and Katy Rawdon. A*rchive for Black Lives in Philadelphia: Anti-Racist Description Resources.* September 2020. https://www2.archivists.org/standards/archives-for-black-lives-in-philadelphia-a4blip-anti-racist-description-resources#:~:text=Anti%2DRacist%20Description%20Resources%20(PDF)

Berry, Dorothy. "Take Me into the Library and Show Me Myself: Toward Authentic Accessibility in Digital Libraries." *American Philosophical Society*, vol. 110, no. 3, 2022. https://www.jstor.org/stable/45420503

"Bill of sale for seven enslaved persons." 6 January 1840. MS. Slavery Documents Collection. Box 01, folder 38. Eberly Family Special Collections Library, Pennsylvania State University, State College.

Cushman, Ellen. "Wampum, Sequoyan, and Story: Decolonizing the Digital Archive." *College English*, vol. 76, no. 2, 2013, pp. 115–35.

Enoch, Jessica. "Releasing Hold: Feminist Historiography without the Tradition." *Theorizing Histories of Rhetoric*, edited by Michelle Ballif. E-book. Southern Illinois University Press, 2013. pp. 58-73.

Fletcher, John. "Bill of sale for a girl named [Jemirna]." 16 November 1852. MS. Slavery Documents Collection. Box 01, folder 38. Eberly Family Special Collections Library, Pennsylvania State University, State College.

Glenn, Cheryl. "Truth, Lies, and Method: Revisiting Feminist Historiography." *College English,* vol. 62, no. 3, 2000, pp. 387-389. https://www.jstor.org/stable/378937

Glenn, Cheryl and Jessica Enoch. "Invigorating Historiographic Practices in Rhetoric and Composition Studies." *Working in the Archives*, eds. Mastrangelo, Lisa, Barbara L'Eplattenier, Wendy B Sharer, and Alexis E. Ramsey. Southern Illinois University Press, 2009. pp. 11-27.

Hartman, Saidiya. "Venus in Two Acts." *Small Axe*, vol. 12, no. 2, June 2008, pp. 1-14 DOI: 10.1353/smx.0.0006

Hughes-Watkins, Lae' l. "Moving Toward a Reparative Archive: A Roadmap for a Holistic Approach to Disrupting Homogenous Histories in Academic Repositories and Creating Inclusive Spaces for Marginalized Voices." *Journal of Contemporary Archival Studies*, vol. 5, no. 6, 2018. https://elischolar.library.yale.edu/jcas/vol5/iss1/6

Morris III, Charles E. "The Archival Turn in Rhetorical Studies; Or, The Archive's Rhetorical (Re)turn." *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2006. pp. 113-115. https://doi.org/10.1353/rap.2006.0027

Rawson, K.J. "The Rhetorical Power of Archival Description: Classifying Images of Gender Transgression," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, vol. 48, no, 4, 2018. pp. 327-351, DOI: 10.1080/02773945.2017.1347951

Royster, Jacqueline Jones. *Traces of a Stream: Literacy and Social Change among African American Women*. University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/northeastern-ebooks/detail.action?docID=2038895

"Slavery Documents Collection." Eberly Family Special Collections Library. https://archives.libraries.psu.edu/repositories/3/resources/8455. Accessed 29 August 2024.