History Otherwise:

(Un)Archiving Eighteenth-Century Lives and Afterlives of the Enslaved Gender-Variant West Africans

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'What is at stake in revisiting the devastation and death contained in the documents of slavery?'—ask Brian Connolly and Marisa Fuentes in a recent special issue of *History of the Present* dedicated to the archives of slavery. [quote] 'And is such a revisiting even possible? […] [A]ll archives are incomplete—such historical accounts written primarily by the most powerful have overwhelmingly informed our understanding of the past. But what is it about the archives of slavery, the more than 400-year span of forced labor and death of Africans that requires that we pause to consider their particular silences?' [end quote]

These are the core questions I have begun and continue to struggle with in my current book project, which, over the past three or so years, has felt quite like working on a second PhD and involved much puzzling over the sea of new primary literature, new languages and new archival sites across three continents. My current work confronts silences of eighteenth-century archives of slavery, and concerns two relatively small regions in the Atlantic world: Senegambia in West Africa and what was first French and then Spanish colonial Louisiana—between which existed, for the most part of the eighteenth century, a more or less direct exchange. In fact, the directness of it often puzzles historians, as a rather unique phenomenon. Still, the nature of eighteenth-century Atlantic exchange in general and the slave trade and patterns of imperial archiving in particular command that I pay attention to many other nodal points of the eighteenth-century world, of which these are some [show on the map; explain Greater Senegambia]. As we shall see later, two additional ports in Africa—Ouidah in Benin and Cabinda in Angola—are of particular interest.

What is it, then, that one can see, once some of these dots are connected? My argument, in short, is that paying attention to *one particular aspect* of being in and surviving these worlds can disrupt not only certain formations of silence in the archive but also the ways those ostensibly tongue-tied archives are continuously used to legitimise and loudly proclaim as 'historical' only *certain* kinds of subjectivity and life of the enslaved Africans. That aspect is gender, or more specifically, gender variance of the enslaved.

There is a great deal of evidence to suggest that, across the societies and historical periods that are of broader relevance here, a gender-variant person would be, in many ways, a living interruption to the imperial orders of human personhood, an interruption whose presence revealed certain less-obvious inconsistencies in those orders. In my previous work [show book], for example, I examined the practice of castration of ostensibly male children, purportedly outside the purview of a Muslim state or family, who were then sold to Muslim polities to serve at the ruler's courts and in their military service. Their presence inspired awe and suggested to many who were gendered differently to them an almost otherworldliness, while it also terrified jurists and others working tirelessly on imperial concepts of maleness and femaleness. These individuals, coming most often from various parts of Africa, especially

Abyssinia but also West Africa, traversed the Muslim world and ended up as far away as in the Mughal court of the Indian subcontinent, where their life-stories still reverberate and form part of originatory narratives of contemporary gender-variant communities [and, here's one *habshi* or Abyssinian minister to the Mughal court in early to mid-seventeenth century].

If one takes seriously not only the possibility of *transitioning*, not just from one bodily and social appearance to another—and, to be sure, neither of which should necessarily be understood as 'male' or 'female'—but also in as much as it involves *journeying* by road and sea and also in language, kinship, religion and other senses of the self, one is struck by the immensity of the whole affair. This immensity, I would argue, is archaeological in a Foucauldian sense in that it jolts us out of our accustomed ways of thinking, not just about the past but about us, here, *doing* things, doing work. What's been uprooted by Empire sails into the wind and gets dispersed, recast and temporally and ontologically distant. But does it, or can it, get lost?

Louisiana [show image] became a French colony a year before the beginning of the eighteenth century and remained so until it was granted to Spain in 1762. Although this grant was ratified a year later, the Spanish rule did not begin in earnest until 1769. In 1800, in another secret treaty, Louisiana was retroceded to France, only to be sold by Napoleon to the United States in 1803. What makes this story rather unique in the Atlantic history is that almost all of the enslaved Africans brought to French Louisiana came directly from West Africa between 1719 and 1731. To be exact, there were also a few others who came via the Caribbean since 1709 and yet the others who arrived on a privately financed ship from Senegal in 1743. But the great majority of the enslaved West Africans—or estimated 5,951 of them—arrived within those twelve years, between 1719 and 1731, and soon made up over half of the total population of the colony's largest settlement and capital, New Orleans [show the list]. Moreover, Senegambian ports accounted for some 3,909 Africans brought to Louisiana in that period, while Ouidah in present-day Benin accounted for 1,748 individuals and Cabinda in present-day Angola 294. Therefore, when discussing Senegambia [show the map], which remains central to the history of slavery in eighteenth-century Louisiana—including during the brief but significant Spanish period when new enslaved Africans were brought in—one must also pay attention to Ouidah and Cabinda.

Senegambia [show on the map] comprises the basins of the Senegal and Gambia rivers. Its population, for centuries, has been remarkably diverse, for it 'has been the confluence of all the area's migratory streams'. During the seventeenth century, the Senegambian coast was divided into French, Dutch, Portuguese and English spheres of influence. The violence of the Atlantic slave trade led to an era of great social and political instability, in which Wolof, Serer and Fulɓe slave warriors, called *ceddo*, formed phalanges [show an illustration] that could make or break almost any regional polity. As one account states, they 'were known for their colourful clothes, their long hair, and their hard-drinking, hedonistic lifestyle'. Against the *ceddo* but in the formations in many ways resembling them, there arose a number of Muslim slave armies, which occasionally, as in many other Muslim societies, included individuals who were castrated in their youth.

For the purposes of our story, it matters that, as a consequence of these conflicts, the region was beset by largely an intra-Mande religious divide for the most part of the eighteenth

century—the Mande being a large family of linguistic and ethnic groups in West Africa. The divide was between the Mandinka, who were Muslims, and the Bambara (or Bamana), who were not. These terms-of-art should, however, be taken with a grain of salt, as both 'Mandinka' and 'Bambara' in this period were rather common collective terms of reference, in Senegambia and elsewhere, that may not have reflected more specific local differences. Still, both 'Mandinka' and 'Bambara' are mentioned in numerous colonial sources, including those concerning Louisiana. The often repeated narratives were that, due to the constant Mandinka-Bamana conflicts, they would regularly sell each other's captured enemies into the Atlantic slavery.

The French, who, through the Company of the Indies, facilitated the slave trade to Louisiana, mostly from their ports at Île de Gorée and Saint-Louis [show the illustration], had every reason to play into the Mandinka-Bamana divide. The archival evidence I have uncovered strongly suggests that the French, and later also the English, actively spurred on the warring sides to maintain religious differences in what was otherwise an astonishingly syncretic region. We also know that both the Muslim Mandinka and the Bamana carried into captivity and the New World a strong sense of their spiritual practices, and resisted Christianisation as long as it was possible. This was particularly true in Louisiana.

The Bamana cosmology revolved around the gender-variant water-spirit, called Faro [show an image]. Faro brought order out of the original chaos; created the seven heavens; killed Teliko, the spirit of the hot winds of the desert; and produced the first human beings by impregnating themself and bearing twins. Faro also gave the first humans the power of speech. Amongst the Mande, the spiritual knowledge seems to have been primarily transmitted orally, without codification, by a sage or a bard, known as *jeli* or griot [show image]. As I hope to demonstrate in the book in some detail, the gender of the *jeli* could have been illusive—and still remains so in places—not least because in the Mandé languages all nouns and pronouns, with the exception of the words for woman, man, mother, father, brother and sister, are gender-neutral. Thus, the word *jeli* had no gender, either formal or semantic. It referred to a social status and occupation that could be filled by people of any gender.

The Mandinka, for their part, were Muslims, whose spiritual practices often involved *taṣawwuf*, or Islamic mysticism, as well as belonging to different *ṭuruq*, or Ṣufi orders, such as the Qādiriyya and the Tijāniyya. It is through such practices and living, for the most part, in a secluded mono-gendered community that a marabout (from Arabic: *marbūṭ* or *murābiṭ*) [show an image] would arise, and lead a Mandinka community or a Mandinka military formation, including those with numerous castrated individuals. A marabout could, however, also be a wandering sage, not unlike a *jeli*, and tell fortune, make amulets and transmit oral histories. And, as we shall see, it is in this latter *jeli*-like guise that one often finds the Mandinka marabout surviving in the New World.

For both the Bamana and the Mandinka, gender roles and gender categories, if and where existent, were closely related to their cosmologies and their social, linguistic and kinship ties. They were transgressive in that they could change in one's both personal and communal sense of the self, whether from nominally 'male' to nominally 'female', and *vice versa*, or something altogether different.

Let me now briefly move to Ouidah and Cabinda [show on a map] which, as you may recall, are the only two major ports outside of Senegambia from which the enslaved Africans were shipped to French Louisiana. In both cases, there is clear evidence of an enormous gender diversity. Here are just a couple of examples.

In 1727, Ouidah (Whydah) was conquered by Agaja, the ruler of the powerful Kingdom of Dahomey. This kingdom was perhaps most well-known for its *N'Nonmiton*, meaning 'our mothers' in Fon [show an image], an all-female military regiment whom, for obvious reasons, European observers and historians called the Dahomey Amazons. The *N'Nonmiton*, who were active since at least the mid-seventeenth until the end of the nineteenth century, were primarily recruited from among the *ahosi*, or 'king's wives', of which there were often hundreds. They trained with intense physical exercise, wore distinct uniforms and were equipped with Danish guns. By the mid-nineteenth century, they numbered between 1,000 and 6,000 warriors [show another image]. The well-documented complexity of their gender identity was further compound by the fact that the regiment had a semi-sacred status, relative to the Fon belief in Vodun. That the social status of the *N'Nonmiton* presumed a particular kind of gender performativity is evident, for example, in this speech, given by one of *N'Nonmiton* commanders: 'As the blacksmith takes an iron bar and by fire changes its fashion, so we have changed our nature. We are no longer women. We are men'.

Agaja, the conqueror of Ouidah, was succeeded in 1740 by his son, King Tegbessou. Tegbessou installed for a *Tegan*, or Dahomian Viceroy of Whydah, a male-born castrated individual. Robert Norris [show the title page], a slave trader who lived in the kingdom in that period, documents in great detail this *Tegan*'s affairs and mentions numerous other castrated individuals, whom he calls 'eunuchs', as was—and still is—the European custom. He mentions, for instance [show the page], that the *Tegan*, 'though [a] eunuch [enlarge the passage] […] had a seraglio of some hundreds' of wives.

Meanwhile, in Cabinda [show an image], in present-day Angola, European missionaries and explorers reported the presence of gender-variant individuals—whom they called *chibados*, *chibande* and *quimbandas*—since at least the beginning of the seventeenth century. In languages across this part of Africa, the stem '-mbándá' still denotes 'healer' or 'spirit medium', which may suggest that their gender identity had a particular spiritual dimension. For example, a Jesuit report from Angola from 1606 noted the presence of 'chibados' [and I quote], 'extremely great fetishers […] [who] went around dressed as women and they […] by great offence called themselves men; they had husbands like the other women, and in the sin of sodomy they are just like devils'.

Deeply disturbed by the *quimbandas*' sexual and gender-variant practices was also the Italian Capuchin missionary, Giovanni Antonio Cavazzi da Montecuccolo, who wrote about them in his influential *Istorica descrizione de' tre' regni: Congo, Matamba et Angola* [show the cover], published in 1687. Consider [show the page in print], for example, this remarkable description [enlarge to show quote]: 'Amongst the numbers of these Ganga-ya, there is one who'd be unworthy of remembrance, were it not for the instruction of the missionaries. He is called Ganga-ya Chibanda, that is (his name means), the superintendent to others in matters of sacrifice. A man—all opposed to the true Priests of the true God, obese, filthy, impudent,

brazen, bestial, who amongst the inhabitants of Pentapolis [he means Sodom and Gomorrah] would perhaps be [considered] a first-class [citizen]—he—as a marker of a talent that his diabolical ministry requires—dresses, looks and behaves like a woman, and ordinarily calls himself the *Grandmother*'. And, of course, in the same book, Cavazzi also famously wrote about Queen Njinga [show image], of the Angolan kingdoms Ndongo and Matamba, who resisted any fixed categories of gender, and dressed their male concubines as women and referred to themself as king.

In sum, all three of the principal territories from which the enslaved Africans were brought to French Louisiana harboured exceptionally diverse expressions of gender, which were deeply ingrained in the local populations' social, political and spiritual life. It should, however, come as no surprise that, when these same people were captured, enslaved and sent through the Middle Passage [show the ships] to their destinations in the New World, they were forcibly stripped off many fundamental aspects of their personhood, including those relating to gender. Or so, at least, thought the French slavers.

For reasons of slave economy—which centred on procreation, hard labour and rudimentary physique of the enslaved—the slavers sought to develop as simple a system of record keeping and sale as possible. The enslaved were categorised as men, women and children, who were then placed into separate compartments of the ship [show the interior of a slave ship]. The ships' records, crude as they were, are still revealing in several aspects. Firstly, I've discovered that, on a number of inventories, the presumed 'sex' of an enslaved individual is not recorded, even though this information is not missing for the others up and down the list. Further, resistance aboard the slave ships to Louisiana is well documented. Some conspiracies, such as one aboard *Le Courrier de Bourbon* in 1723, would often involve an individual that the captain would describe as *le sorcier*, or 'the sorcerer'—thereby very possibly providing the first trace of a Senegambian *jeli* or marabout en route to Louisiana.

And, French Louisiana—to which these ships were bringing its forced future residents—was quite a unique place in its own right [show a map]. This vast colony, which included the entire Mississippi Valley, was thinly populated by Canadian illegal fur traders and 'the rejects of French society', who were sent to Louisiana as a form of punishment. The enslaved West Africans arrived to a place teeming with diverse and often clashing ideas about morality, class and social order. Against this background, the colonial state—however at times feeble its presence—invested a great deal of energy and financial resources in, quite literally, *making space* for itself [show Plate 4]. This space was carved out both violently, in outright shows of force, and through a complex web of negotiations, involving, in particular, numerous Indigenous peoples [show image] in the region—most notably the Choctaw—generally, the allies of the French, the Chickasaw—usually, the allies of the English, and the Natchez—whose revolt, in 1729, nearly put an end to the colony.

All three of these Indigenous peoples were reported to have gender-variant members—which were, in the French literature of the period, commonly termed *bardache*. In this literature, the author was usually quite incapable to comprehend such diversity—especially its social and spiritual dimensions. For instance, in his *Mémoires historiques sur la Louisiane* [show cover], published in 1753, colonial officer and farmer Dumont de Montigny lamented the fact [show page] that [enlarge to show quote] '[a]lmost all the authors who have spoken of

Louisiana, have pretended that this country was full of hermaphrodites'. He, however, has found none [show page]. Instead, he wrote, people must have mistakenly taken for 'veritable hermaphrodites' [enlarge to show quote] 'a certain [type of] man amongst the Natchez and possibly also amongst other savage [that is, native American] nations who is called the Chief of Women. What is certain is that, although he is really a man, he has the same adornments and the same occupations as women: he has long hair and braids, he wears something like a petticoat or a little skirt (*alconand*) instead of men's shorts (*brayet*); like women, he works on the cultivation of fields, and does all other chores that women do'.

The Indigenous peoples [show an illustration] were also the first enslaved population in the colony. When the enslaved West Africans arrived, they often found themselves sharing the same fate with the Indigenous. Out of their shared experience, numerous public acts of defiance emerged, including the large-scale insurgencies such as the Natchez revolt. The alliances that were created involved sexual affairs, too—and the children born out of some of them were categorised as *grif* by the colonial state.

The state also endeavoured to race all of its Louisianan subjects. Thus, for example, the gender-binary designations of *négre*, *négresse*, *négritte*, *négrillon*, and so on, were used to describe the arrived West Africans. Categories to describe the presumed degrees of the so-called *sang-mêlé*, or 'mixed blood', were also devised, including *mulâtre* and *quarteron*. The enslaved were also often forcefully grouped into and encouraged to form 'nuclear families'—an activity driven by the slavers' obvious economic interests. A free population of African descent, *les gens de couleur libres* [show a picture], also emerged relatively early in New Orleans—the earliest remaining record dating from 1722. But whether describing the enslaved or the free, the state's categories of racial difference often made little sense and were self-contradictory. Police, medical and death records about a single person could, for example, describe such an individual as a *nègre libre*, a *grif* or a *mulâtre*, respectively.

But, while racial categories abound in Louisiana's colonial archive, the same cannot be said for the categories of gender. Instead, what little remains are fragments—modest insurrectionary details—that challenge the logics of pure binarism in intra- and inter-personal, cultural, legal, religious and linguistic formations of gender. For instance, Louisiana Creole and Louisiana Voodoo contain numerous Senegambian terms-of-art associated with both Bamana and Mandinka Muslim cosmologies, including especially those that relate to charm-making, the prerogative of a *jeli* or marabout. We know that the Louisiana Mande in general maintained an organised language community; it could well be that this community continued their religious practices in some form, too, which in turn may have preserved some aspects of both human and divine gender-variance (the latter is certainly true in many other Afro-Creole Vodou practices in the Caribbean). At a minimum, it is curious how consistently Muslim names and West African honorifics feature in Louisiana slave inventories and other records.

Remarkably, gender variance reappears at its most uncanny in the Bouki and Lapin tales, the Louisiana equivalent of the Br'er Rabbit stories, which are amongst 'the most widely collected folktales in French Louisiana'. In these tales [show a picture], Bouki the hyena acts as the dupe to Lapin the rabbit's tricks and schemes. Although these tales were collected in French, *bouki* is, in fact, a Wolof term for 'hyena'. In West African lore, *bouki* is commonly associated with

sex-change, because [and I quote] the 'unusual genitalia of the female hyena cause it, until puberty, to look and act like a male. Because of this, hyenas have been surrounded with folk beliefs, and surely this is significant in the African tales and in the Louisiana Bouki and Lapin tales'. [end quote]

That so little remains of such a rich tradition of gender variance should be treated as suspect. And so should, I propose, the stubborn silence of the archives [show an image]. Archiving, as a practice, as an art of preserving for the posterity a curated assemblage of the present, certainly wasn't immune to the prevailing logics of that present. And, the prevailing logics of the French and Spanish colonial archives, and, indeed, those that would come after them, was a gender-binary logic. And, not only was gender variance beyond the grasp—that is, evacuated from the imagination—of the colonial archivist; it remained so for the generations of historians, too. For example, not a single database on colonial Louisiana exists that uses anything other than gender-binary logics.

Working with the absences [final image] produced by such logics requires, in a way, working from the negative: not to invent, mind you, or even critically fabulate, as Saidiya Hartman has suggested, but to account for what's missing, to invert and interrupt the ontological paradigm from which conventional histories are worked out and written. In such a setting, gender variance figures not as another identity placeholder, but a praxis that attends to complexities of both individual and collective subjectivity-making.