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Conclusion

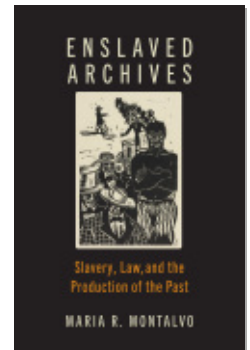
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Conclusion

I TELL MY STUDENTS that everything a historian writes is their argument for how history should be written. This book is mine, and this conclusion is for them.

I've struggled with how to end this. Should I tell one more story? Make one more point and walk away? Finally, thankfully, I have arrived at the conclusion that all I want to talk about, the only person I really want to talk about, is John.

I still don't know where he was born. I can't tell you where he died. I don't know where his people were, what he dreamed about, or where he most wanted to be. Still, I believe each chapter of this book contributes something to our understanding of what was possible in the world John lived in. In the circumstances of Isaac Wright's enslavement, we see a business in which repetition, deception, and constructing the past were essential, dreadful parts. In working to reconstruct the last year of Jack Smith's life, we learn that enslaved people were most always at the center of the past that enslavers worked to construct—perhaps not always powerful or autonomous, but always present and important. In Betsey's enslavement, we find a possible history of every enslaved person who appears and disappears in a contract. And in Sarah Ann Connor's efforts

to make and keep herself free, we find the uncodified limits of the world that shaped John's life and constrained his choices.

In some ways, we are where we began: a name, an age, a sex, and a price. The limits of John's history are real and unyielding, but its possibilities are ours to identify and give shape. For historians, there is always a space between the story we want to tell and the story we get to tell. I have used questions about historical production and knowledge to try to make sense of enslaved people's experiences at the center of a narrative they did not choose. In doing so, I have put them at the center of another narrative that they never could have chosen. I have sifted through written records that were central to their exploitation and commodification, and I, too, have made demands of their pasts. To what end have I told these stories? It is my sincere hope that in telling them, I have in some way contributed to the ever-growing evidence that intellectual histories of enslaved people are possible and valuable to our understanding not only of the business of slavery but also of American history. It is my hope that historians of enslaved people continue to do the important work of looking for the enslaved in well-trodden records where we have been told these individuals are silent. And it is my hope that we continue to work to learn from the past in the interest of building a better, more equitable present.

This book not only demonstrates that enslavers cared about what was written down but also shows us that enslaved people's histories were always a site of their commodification. I believe that in acknowledging that enslaved people are at the center of the record of antebellum slavery, we must also recognize that there is most always a way to center the enslaved in our scholarship. And it is important that we do so, because in working to historicize the human beings who were the focus of enslavers' archival constructions, we also do the difficult, important work of resisting enslavers' control, not of the lives of the enslaved, but of the stories we get to tell about slavery. And it matters that we resist enslavers' efforts to control the narrative because enslaved people's histories are worth fighting for. Although history cannot remedy the irreparable violence of the slavers' archive, it can create a physical analog to the written record, generating a new way of encountering individuals such as

John—one that acknowledges what we cannot know while also working to learn what we can. We pick up the pieces to wrest control of the historical narrative from the hands of enslavers—as a means of using stories to ends that enslavers tried to refuse and deny.

Finally, it is a cliché that knowledge is power, but it is also true. In defining thousands of people by a first name, an age, a sex, and a price, enslavers did the careful, deliberate work of historical production and erasure, controlling access to much of the information available to historians for the purposes of making or saving a few bucks. While we do not have to tell the stories they wanted told, we are nevertheless bound by their decisions. This means that the choices we make today—“about who lives and who doesn’t,” about whose stories are told and privileged—matter now and will matter in the future. We may not have infinite power over the data and information that fill our world, but we do have the ability to choose the lessons we wish to learn and unlearn. Is there anything lovelier and more filled with possibility than asking a question and working to answer it?¹

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