

## Epistemology of Survival: A Working Paper

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‘They just want to rescue us, but they’ll leave us to die after.’

- C. Adeyemi<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

The motives underpinning the current anti-slavery movement are crumbling without viable replacements. This paper proposes a new foundation for the anti-slavery movement that encourages us to go beyond rescuing victims of slavery, and to create possibilities for a ‘*full freedom*’ (Douglass, 1872). In this new intellectual and philosophical foundation, the knowledge, histories, and expertise of survivors of slavery will bolster the movement rather than serve as emotive window dressing. Despite the work of some scholars to elevate the insights of historical and contemporary survivors of slavery (E.g. Bales & Trodd, 2008; Murray, H.R., 2018; Murphy, 2014), the knowledge and expertise of survivors remain consistently under-recognized.

In this paper, I assert that survivors *know and understand* slavery and freedom differently from non-survivors. I present a new theory of knowledge called the *epistemology of survival*, and suggest that adopting such an approach will improve the incorporation of survivor knowledge in academic literature, radically altering the wider field of anti-slavery knowledge and practice to focus on freedom after slavery.

When we fail to focus on the lives of survivors after exiting slavery, we find ourselves facing a state of ‘botched emancipation’. Bales (2007) describes the ‘botched emancipation’ of people who were enslaved in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, when societies legally abolished slavery but failed to transform the institutional structures of society to ensure full integration of formerly enslaved

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<sup>1</sup> Name changed to ensure confidentiality.

people into freedom. As a result, in many societies, descendants of the formerly enslaved continue to be denied equal access to rights and opportunities (e.g. Alexander, 2011; Araujo, 2017; Blackmon, 2012). In the abolitionist movement of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, we seek to avoid yet another ‘botched emancipation’ by understanding the *lived experience* of survivors of slavery in both slavery and in freedom. In this focus on freedom, the knowledge, histories, and expertise of survivors of slavery will serve as the core of anti-slavery efforts rather than continue to tokenize or marginalize survivor voices (Dang, 2018).

The current antislavery movement lacks meaningful and widespread engagement with survivor knowledge. Because virtually all anti-slavery researchers (as well as funders, front line staff, and policy makers) are non-survivors, our literature, interventions, and policies are limited to the perspectives of people who have not been through slavery. Though it may seem paradoxical, the social position of continuous freedom imposes limitations when attending to and understanding survivors’ experiences and needs in freedom. Understanding how survivors *know*, their epistemologies, is therefore crucial to understanding *what* they know and *how* they represent that knowledge. A key reason for this absence of survivor engagement is the difficulty non-survivors face in truly understanding the information and knowledge offered by survivors. More specifically, I assert that survivors *know* differently from non-survivors. To illuminate this assertion, I propose the *epistemology of survival*, and demonstrate its fundamental difference from the epistemologies of non-survivors. If the difference in epistemologies is true, then we must accept that anti-slavery efforts driven by non-survivors’ will lack critical insights that only those with a lived experience of slavery, survivors, can provide.

As both a researcher studying slavery and a survivor of modern slavery, I enter the anti-slavery field and the academic world as a *survivor-scholar*. But, of course, I am more than

simply that. I also enter this project as an experienced front-line practitioner, and a qualitative researcher who consciously sustains a practice of reflexivity. My reflexivity within qualitative research has led me to observe and articulate assumptions to which non-survivor researchers are blind. In explaining my research epistemology to others, non-survivors of slavery, I faced frustration and misunderstanding. I found that there was a gap between my underlying assumptions about knowledge production and the assumptions of my non-survivor colleagues. I recognized that my colleagues will need to understand how the epistemology of a survivor is different from other research epistemologies. This paper is the articulation of that difference.

### **Epistemology of Survival: Core Assumption No. 1**

Even the most reflexive researchers can find it difficult to uncover the theoretical assumptions that form the basis of their thinking. These assumptions arise from our ontological position and live in our subconscious. Normally they are only questioned if they are summoned to our consciousness or challenged by another person. As a survivor of slavery, I enter anti-slavery research from a unique position that allows me to question the assumptions of non-survivor researchers. Similarly, non-survivors are able to question my theoretical assumptions in ways that can be challenging for me. Since non-survivors are the primary producers of anti-slavery research, the challenges to my theoretical assumptions are easy to find. Other scholars, however, have not directly presented those challenges; rather, I confronted them merely by engaging in anti-slavery research. The lack of survivor researchers<sup>2</sup> means that anti-slavery literature currently fails to include the perspective and analyses of survivors. This gap in the literature, an absence of literature that matches my theoretical assumptions and approach,

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<sup>2</sup> The few published survivor-researchers include Karen Countryman-Roswrum, PhD (2015) and Katariina Rosenblatt, PhD (2014).

became an important gap to interrogate. What is that gap, and why does it exist? This gap in the knowledge is the lack of the *epistemology of survival*. This gap exists because there are few contemporary survivor scholars writing about slavery or critiquing existing social and political theory about slavery.

A core assumption of the *epistemology of survival* is **that human beings know through our lived experiences**. How we know what we know, our epistemology, is through our lived experiences as biopsychosocial beings. We are embodied mammals (bio) with internal psychological lives (psycho) and exist only in relationship to other humans (social). We experience *knowing* through the complex integration of our physical senses, our cognitive and emotional processing, and our social relationships. As such, even the most sensitive slavery scholars who try to describe slavery from the perspective of survivors of slavery must bring their own lived experiences and the theoretical assumptions from their lived experiences of freedom. Stated another way, free people bring the assumptions and worldviews of a free person, to their attempts to understand the assumptions and worldviews of enslaved or formerly enslaved people. Research undertaken from the intellectual context of a life lived in continuous freedom may not need to be concerned with the implications of this worldview on research about the experiences of other people in freedom. However, research undertaken about slavery from the perspective of a life lived in continuous freedom should at least be concerned with how the researcher's assumptions of freedom might have an impact on data collection and interpretation.

Most research epistemologies assume that knowledge is developed in an existential state of freedom, by people who have never been enslaved. Researchers who have always existed in the state of freedom, who then study slavery, are researching a phenomenon that is not known to them via lived experience. Their research must then be a process aimed at understanding, from

without, the experience of slavery. Often this understanding is undertaken to define and interrogate the sociological, psychological, and economic elements of slavery. Such research is an activity to learn *to know* slavery, and this assumes that a researcher *can know* slavery without living through slavery. The *epistemology of survival*, however, assumes that a non-survivor of slavery *cannot know* the experience of slavery, though they can describe their interpretation of the experiences of slavery. Non-survivors *can know* slavery in ways that don't include the experience of being enslaved, because knowledge about slavery includes the understanding of the economics or the social relations of slavery, and much more. That said, non-survivors' knowledge is limited and they *cannot know* the entirety of slavery. And while non-survivor academics might not profess to know the entirety of slavery, and sufficiently acknowledge their research limitations, they often fail to see the limitations of academic research on slavery that does not prioritize a key authoritative source of knowledge on slavery. Any authoritative source of knowledge on slavery is incomplete if it excludes survivors who know about slavery from lived experience - if survivors are excluded from decisions on what data to collect, how to analyze it, and what research questions are important.

### **Ontological Assumption**

It is also true that survivors of slavery *cannot know* the entirety of slavery, but what they can know will be different from what non-survivors can know. Central to my assertion that survivors of slavery know through an epistemology of survival is a key ontological assumption. Understanding this assumption helps to explain the argument that survivors *know differently*. The key ontological assumption is that human beings experience the world indirectly. Unmediated access to the world is impossible because the world is not outside of us (Benton & Craib, 2011). We are of the world, shaping, naming, constructing, and reconstructing it with the other human

beings around us. In the philosophy of social science research, this ontological position appears to fit neatly within interpretivism and in opposition to positivism. However, the assumptions of my research demonstrate that my ontological position sits at the nexus of positivism and interpretivism. My research examines survivors' 'subjective' (i.e. mediated) experience of the world, with an 'objective' (i.e. observable and socially agreed upon) reality of slavery.

My research does not question the reality of slavery in our global society; however, it does acknowledge that slavery is a contested global concept. Others have demonstrated how the reality of slavery has been socially constructed and that there are ongoing and existing challenges to that social construction (e.g. Allain & Bales, 2012; Quirk, 2006). For my research, I accept the definition of modern slavery that is operationalized in the 2016 Global Slavery Index and I assume this as objective fact in my studies. My ontological position also suggests that the world is knowable, but we know the world through our social relationships. We can only know the world through concepts that are socially constructed and accepted (Winch, 1958), but we know these in our subjective and interpreted ways. We have the capacity to create our realities in our own minds and then construct these realities outside of our minds. For example, race is a social construction which we have created in our minds, but we have constructed race (and racism) in the world outside of our minds through individual and social practices. Thus, race and racism are both real *and* socially constructed. Because the 'real-ities' we create are from socially constructed concepts, we are co-creating realities and collaboratively validating or discrediting these realities through our conversations with one another.

One method for these conversations to either validate or discredit realities is research. Academic institutions, as the primary engine for research, not only validate or discredit realities, they are central in creating realities and influencing what society deems as real or true. Academic

institutions have created this binary between real/objective and not-real/subjective. This binary has been created by the (socially constructed) division between positivism and interpretivism. Positivism indicates that we know the world through observation and that these observations are neutral. Repeated observations and measurements of these observations allow us to create facts through induction (Chalmers, 1982). Traditional inductivists assume that facts are independent of theory (Chalmers, 1982). The key criticism of inductivists is that every scientist brings theoretical assumptions to their work and we cannot assume that what one researcher measures and observes is equivalent to what other person measures and observes (Chalmers, 1982). Although post-positivists accept that facts are theory-dependent and historically placed (Chalmers, 1982) they still operate with an underlying assumption that it is possible to know the world objectively and to measure and report these facts as truths. Traditional interpretivists take the opposite extreme from positivists. Where positivists argue for universal truths, interpretivists argue for subjective truths, leading to a perspective of universal relativism, where knowledge is not generalizable but specific to context and setting and how the actors in that setting subjectively interpret their actions (Schutz, 1953).

My ontological position suggests that a researcher does not have to fall into a mutually exclusive position of either positivism or interpretivism. My ontology frames the world as knowable, and equally, we know the world through our social relationships and through socially constructed realities. What is knowable about the world is not the world in its purest form. We cannot know if we know the world in its purest forms. What we *can* know is the socially constructed world. Thus, we may *not* know if our socially constructed experience of reality is a capital O, Objective reality. But we can know whether our experience of reality (our interpretations of reality), are similar to what other people experience (and interpret) as reality. In

a socially constructed world, if a majority of people experience a particular reality, then that reality is likely to become seen as an Objective reality, or capital T Truth. These Truths are then taken as Objective Fact.

These socially constructed Objective Facts and Truths are actually lower-case objective facts and truths, because we can never experience the world fully. At the same time, because we live in a socially constructed world together as human beings, whether or not objective facts are Objective Facts is often beside the point. What is to the point is that we *believe* and *behave* as if they are Objective Facts that are undeniable. Taking again the example of race, it is not true that humans were biologically or anthropologically divided into racial categories, but it is true that we have created racial categories and treat each other based on these divisions. We know it is true through the lived experiences of people who have experienced these divisions. If we treat racism as merely subjective truths, we deny our collective responsibility to address its harmful effects. Although we can never know if race is True, and thus it is a truth, race might as well be treated as Truth because we have constructed a world in which we live as if race is True. If we do not treat the discrimination based on race as Truth, then we are denying the lived experiences of millions of people who are subjected to racism.

No one, whether a survivor of slavery or someone who has lived in continuous freedom, can know the full truth about slavery. A core assumption of the *epistemology of survival* is that human beings know through our lived experiences of the world (Epistemological Assumption No. 1) and these experiences are mediated by shared social constructions (Ontological Assumption). The epistemology of survival is an epistemology in which knowledge may neither be an objective truth about the outside world, nor a subjective experience that is only relevant to a single, subjective individual. Any person who lived through slavery could possess the same



knowledge as other people who lived through slavery, because by definition, living through slavery means that a person has lived through the same general social conditions that someone else has lived through, and that have been socially constructed as slavery.

If we deny that the lived experiences of survivors of slavery are true or relevant, then we as scholars disallow survivors' knowledge from altering our shared social constructions about the reality of slavery. In addition, if we treat any concept presented to us by survivors of slavery as solely a subjective experience, we deny our participation in constructing those very concepts, and we deny that these concepts are infused with our own theoretical assumptions about knowledge, experience, and the nature of the world. In the next section, I will illuminate that survivors' knowledge is developed from a *different* theoretical assumption about knowledge.

### **Epistemology of Survival: Core Assumption No. 2**

The second core assumption of the epistemology of survival is that during the period of enslavement, the purpose of knowledge must be in the service of survival, rather than in the service of truth. An external reality of the threat of death requires survivors of slavery to reject, or at minimum obfuscate, reality and to hold and invest in knowledge that most people would agree is untrue. The threat of death is experienced as a biological and psychological experience, some of which must be subconscious to the individual. Because most experiences of enslavement last more than one day, people with lived experiences of slavery have lived through consistent threat of death. Scholars have demonstrated that the human body responds to this level of danger with both physiological and psychological adaptations (e.g. Besnard & Sahay, 2016; McDonnell, Robjant, & Katona, 2013; Ganzell & Morris, 2011). These adaptations and survivors' embodied experiences of them, must be considered when studying and analyzing survivors' knowledge.

An uninterrogated assumption of both qualitative and quantitative research is the assumption that all knowledge is created for the purpose of representing truth/Truth, whether a subjective reality or an objective reality. Quantitative social science researchers seek knowledge for the sake of explaining what is real, or to positivists, what is True – a universal True nature of reality. Qualitative social science attempts to understand truths, how humans as social beings experience the nature of reality through their subjective meaning-making and subjective interpretations of the world. For survivors of slavery, the condition of slavery requires that the purpose of knowledge is to deny truth and Truth. Survivors must deny reality and construct a fantasy world, one in which they can survive. For example, a survivor's subjective experience of the knowledge 'I am worthless' is not objectively true. Yet, it is not merely subjective truth because it is knowledge acquired from and required by the objective social condition external to the individual. It is knowledge gained through the specific experience of slavery, rather than knowledge gained through cognitive and rational assessment of reality. Though I am not the first to assert this, I may be the first to suggest that *within the context of enslavement* knowledge can be a constructed fantasy of a world where fictional beliefs are experienced as reality. Such constructed fantasies are often regarded as an indication of mental illness, but refraining from creating such a reality from fantasy would, within the lived experience of slavery, potentially lead to extreme suffering if not death. The lived experience of slavery creates the condition where knowledge is not in the service of what is real and true. In slavery, knowledge, whether learned, experienced, or constructed, is in the service of survival.

Without this understanding of the epistemology of survival, research by non-survivors who seek to understand survivors' realities may be prone to ask, 'Why are survivors not seeing the truth that they are free and don't have to go back?' The problem with this question is that it

presumes that ‘seeing the truth’ is a possibility for survivors of slavery, and that survivors’ avoidance of the truth is inexplicable or inaccurate. As a survivor of slavery, I do not presume that ‘seeing the truth’ is always possible. I know from lived experience, and my theoretical assumptions tell me, that avoidance of truth, within the context of slavery, can be functional and necessary. Additionally, I know from lived experience that continued avoidance of some truths remain necessary after exiting slavery, even when most non-survivors assume that there is no longer a need to maintain false beliefs for the sake of survival. Survivors themselves might cognitively and rationally understand some new truths, but grasping these truths and integrating them into behavioral change is another matter. Survivors’ ability to question the veracity of their truths, is determined by how they perceive the threat of death, even if an objective external threat of death, by anyone’s measure, is removed.

When survivors exit slavery, their external reality changes. Specifically, the threat of death and violence is, for the most part, removed. Academic research about a survivors’ experience after slavery, especially that focusing on rehabilitation and reintegration, typically focuses on the effects that the threat of death, violence, and exploitation had on them physically, economically, socially, and psychologically. The psychological focus emphasizes psychological harm and adverse effects. PTSD, depression, and anxiety are stated as the key mental illness diagnoses of survivors (e.g. Oram, et. al., 2012). These diagnoses and academic research tend to focus on psychological disorders and would lead us to think that survivors’ lived experiences post-slavery, and thus their knowledge, is shaped by mental illness. Instead, I argue that survivors’ post-slavery lived experiences are not shaped by mental illness, but rather shaped by a process of adjusting to a life that is no longer dependent on a focus on survival. Put another way, what if the removal of the threat of death, means that survivors’ entire knowledge base is now

fundamentally mismatched to their reality? Those emerging from enslavement *know* how to survive. But since that crucial knowledge no longer serves the goal of survival, what is that knowledge for? What causes, enables, or drives the shift in survivors' knowledge from knowledge acquired in slavery to new knowledge acquired in freedom? If we can illuminate the factors that cause this shift and listen to how survivors of slavery acquire and articulate their new knowledge, we will likely achieve more accurate interpretations of the information they report to us, and we will likely reveal crucial elements of the trauma recovery process.

### **Integrating and Challenging Standpoint Epistemology**

It can be seen that my epistemology parallels some assumptions of standpoint epistemology. A researcher's social position (i.e. standpoint) will determine how and what they see, what questions they ask, what data they collect, their interpretations of data, and what they do with their data. Standpoint epistemology became well known in the 1960s, established by feminist researchers addressing the male domination of academic research. The feminist critique was not merely an argument for self-determination, where women would research 'women's issues'. Rather, standpoint feminism argued that 'the activities of those at the bottom of such social hierarchies can provide starting points for thought – for everyone's research and scholarship – from which humans' relations with each other and the natural world can become visible' (Harding, 1993, 54). Women, and other marginalized communities, bring different assumptions and perspectives into their inquiry than men bring. These feminist standpoints provide input that enhances *all knowledge*. Though not all feminist scholars agree on this point, some standpoint feminists sought to move beyond knowledge that is validated merely by positionality. What they wanted people to understand is that *all knowledge* is socially situated by

the positionality of the researcher, that recognition of these social positions is essential to recognizing the strengths and limitations of the knowledge claims made by any researcher.

Most knowledge about slavery has come from the position of the free person. As a consequence, knowledge about slavery is lacking key information and remains further away from the Truth than researchers may think. By adding additional truths about slavery from the perspective of survivors, the socially constructed Truth about slavery will likely shift. It is important for me to clarify that the epistemology of survival does not argue that survivors of slavery possess epistemic privilege. Epistemic privilege claims that ‘subjects located at the social margins have an epistemic advantage over those located in the social center’ (Bar On, 1993, 85). Although survivors of slavery are a marginalized group, I am not arguing that survivors of slavery can know slavery *better* than non-survivors.

Both survivors of slavery and non-survivors have a limit to how much they can know the experience of slavery. My ontology remains interpretivist - survivors of slavery cannot experience the world unmediated or directly, any more than non-survivors can. However, for non-survivors, their knowledge is also limited through the lived experience of studying slavery from the outside looking in. For survivors of slavery, their knowledge is limited by the experience of being on the inside, looking out. After survivors exit slavery, they can look back at their own experiences of enslavement. Self-reflection while in freedom allows survivors to develop new knowledge about their experiences. And yet, survivors’ experiences of looking back at slavery will always be informed by having experienced slavery. The mediated experience of survivors of slavery must be different from non-survivors’ mediated experience. Stating the obvious, every person experiences the same phenomena differently. Social science research can study whether individuals in a group with one or more shared characteristics (survivors of

slavery), have similar experiences to each other, and different experiences from a group of individuals who do not have the same shared characteristic (non-survivors).

While survivors do not have an advantage in access to all knowledge about slavery, they do have advantage in accessing particular knowledge about slavery – knowledge that can only be gained by living through slavery. Evidenced by the lack of survivor scholars, survivors of slavery have a disadvantaged position of access to the social and political institutions that produce knowledge, as well as the policies that might derive from that knowledge. Standpoint epistemology is not about possessing or lacking epistemic privilege; rather, it is about possessing or lacking the privilege of directing and participating in the means of knowledge production.

## **Conclusion**

Most readers of this paper will not need any introduction to the deleterious effects of slavery on a person who is enslaved. There are many harmful effects and even a cursory literature search will demonstrate how much of that literature focuses on those effects. However, one of the most harmful consequences documented in research and narratives is the effect of isolation and alienation (Caruth, 1995; Herman, 1992). Survivors of slavery who suffer from isolation and alienation lack access and opportunity to share their wisdom and knowledge about slavery with others, should they desire to. Survivors of slavery, or other forms of extreme trauma, struggle to articulate their experiences even to themselves (Caruth, 1995), and their insights and experiences often go with them to their grave. Even well-established survivor leaders have made clear the difficulties in articulating their experiences in ways that non-survivors understand (U. Hang, personal communication, September 11, 2017).

Learning to articulate one's experiences so that others may understand requires on-going and continuous engagement, reflection, and analysis of memories of atrocities and abuse. This process is tremendously upsetting and may cause additional harm, exacerbating difficult psychological symptoms and impeding daily functioning. Survivors of slavery face a double bind – on the one hand, they feel a need to share their experiences (knowledge), and on the other, sharing their experiences causes distress, and so they often live in isolation with their stories (Caruth, 1995). This isolation is not only harmful for the individual soul and experience of the formerly enslaved, it leads to an unfortunate absence of survivors' lived experience in the wider knowledge base about slavery.

Survivor scholarship is essential for accessing and re-presenting survivors' experiences in ways that are currently absent from anti-slavery literature. If and when survivors do articulate their insights, the epistemology of survival will be important for our ability to understand and receive those insights. Although historians, academics, NGOs, and civil society attempt to illuminate the knowledge of survivors of slavery through a number of methods, their ability to do so without bias is limited by their own experiences of not ever being enslaved. To do right by our intentions to end global slavery and to support lives for survivors beyond exiting slavery, my aim is that this paper will invigorate new survivor scholars and their trusted allies and foster the growth of survivor scholarship. In the meantime, I urge non-survivor scholars to consider: how has your data collection and analysis been informed by your assumptions and lived experiences of freedom? How might you reconstruct your research to place survivor voices at the center? And lastly, how might the epistemology of survival challenge or transform your own ways of knowing?

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