



ANALYTICAL CONTRIBUTIONS FROM INDIGENOUS CAPTIVITY TO THE UNDERSTANDING OF BLACK SLAVERY IN THE AMERICAS: THE CASE OF HELENA VALERO

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Abstract

This essay contributes to the comparative study of slavery by challenging the tendency to treat characteristics of Atlantic racial slavery as universal features of slavery itself. It uses the testimonial observations of an early twentieth-century captive among the hunter-gatherer, Amazonian Yanomami people as a methodological lens through which to reconsider popular beliefs about Black slavery in the Americas. The goal is to differentiate commonalities across slave systems from practices that are contextually contingent, especially those that emerged in association with eighteenth and nineteenth-century European racial capitalism. Based on Helena Valero's captivity story, this current paper describes differences in a particular form of Indigenous slavery against general Atlantic world patterns, in terms of slavery's purpose, methods of control, forms of interaction with local free people, and means of accessing freedom. The comparison argues that while slavery has existed in many forms across human history, several characteristics commonly associated with Atlantic slavery—including hereditary status, legal codification, and racialization—were historically contingent rather than intrinsic features of enslavement itself.

Keywords

Comparative Slavery, Indigenous Slavery, Atlantic Slavery, Yanomami, Helena Valero, Kinship, *Partus Sequitur Ventrem*

The comparative study of slavery has long sought to distinguish those characteristics common to systems of human bondage from those produced by particular historical circumstances. Yet modern scholarship remains heavily influenced by the Atlantic experience, especially the plantation economies of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Americas. Categories developed from those societies—including racial ideology, hereditary status, market exchange, capitalist production, and formal legal regulation—often become implicit measures against which other forms of enslavement are evaluated. Such comparisons risk treating historically specific features of Atlantic slavery as if they were universal characteristics of slavery itself. A broader comparative perspective instead asks which dimensions of slavery remain consistent across societies and which emerge from the distinct economic, political, and cultural conditions in which particular slave systems developed.

This essay approaches that question through an unusual source: the twentieth-century testimony of Helena Valero, a Brazilian mestiza captured as a child and held for twenty-four years among Yanomami communities of the Amazon. Although her captivity occurred in the modern era, the society into which she was absorbed retained many characteristics associated with non-state, hunter-gatherer societies that predated agriculture, written law, and market economies. Read alongside the historiography of antebellum slavery in the United States, Valero's narrative illuminates both enduring and historically contingent dimensions of enslavement. Rather than asking which system was more oppressive, the essay examines how different social worlds constructed slavery through varying understandings of enslavability, labor, kinship, reproduction, methods of control, resistance, and pathways to freedom. In doing so, it argues that Indigenous captivity provides an important comparative framework for understanding not only what slavery was, but also what made Atlantic racial slavery historically distinctive.

Helena's story

Within historical writing, accounts of enslavement from the perspective of the captive are extremely rare, representing a negligible fraction of those ever held in bondage. In one mid-twentieth-century story, renowned within Indigenous studies from Latin America, Helena Valero tells of her capture by the rainforest, hunter-gatherer Yanomami (Biocca, 1970; Cocco, 1972; Valero 1984).¹ These are a people who make their home along the Brazil-Venezuela border, at the Orinoco-Rio Negro headwaters of the Amazon. From 1932, Valero was forced to live among them for twenty-four years. She had been unable to escape, despite several efforts. Helena was first captured as a young mestiza girl of only twelve. Her family's background and lifestyle were typical of many of the region's peasants, who were variably described as acculturated Indians, mixed race, and occasionally white. Most, like Valero's family spoke some variation of the regional lingua franca, a creolization of coastal indigenous Tucano, Portuguese, and Spanish. Only an elite few spoke pure European languages. The rural poor, like Helena's family, lived and worked in sparsely populated areas along the rivers, farming their banks and fishing their waters. Canoes were their primary form of transportation. Helena enjoyed the time spent with her parents, especially as they made frequent canoe trips into the backwoods to develop a small, riverside farm.

It was in one trip to the farm that the terror began. While canoeing, Valero's father saw smoke in an unexpected place. He positioned the family canoe on the riverbank and went ashore to investigate. A short time later, Helena first heard his screams and then saw him run from the rainforest, with fear in his eyes, and an arrow in his back. Such a sight was previously unimaginable to her. Typically, her father would have carried a shotgun with him. That normally would have been enough to make potential attackers think twice. But not today. He had left it at home. The family was defenseless.

The forest dwellers advanced relentlessly. Their arrows arrived before they did. Helena, her mother, and her two young brothers, one age six and the other less than two, were caught off guard, still in the canoe. An arrow struck Helena, going partially through the skin of her abdomen and into her leg. Suspecting that the arrow was poisoned, Helena's mother was desperate to remove it. She pulled the tail from Helena's abdomen, leaving a significant wound. Unfortunately, the head remained in Helena's leg. Her mother bit it with her teeth to yank it out. All of this happened in the blink of an eye. The attackers were still approaching, and the family needed to run. Valero's father arrived to see his wife juggling the two young boys and unable to manage Helena too. He grabbed his daughter and pulled her onto land. She shrieked in pain. He tried to carry her into the forest, but with both of them injured, he did not have the strength to save both their lives. The family escaped. Helena was left behind, lying unconscious from her wounds.

When she awoke, Valero did not know how long she had been asleep. Was it a few hours or several days? She had no idea. She realized she was in a new place. She could hear people around her talking. Their language was neither of the three she understood. She saw that she was a short distance from a fire, and people she couldn't recognize surrounded it. Their loincloths, body paint, and bare-breasted women gave Helena an idea of who they were. She had long heard stories of these "primitive savages," and now she was utterly at their mercy. It would take a long time for Helena's body to heal, and in the meantime, these people carried her deeper into the jungle. When she was stronger, she could tell the people wanted something from her. Yet, she didn't understand what it was. It would take her some time to finally discern their goal. And Helena remained a captive of various Yanomami bands for the next 24 years, traded between them on several occasions, while facing abuse, the loss of family and freedom, yet also maintaining a sense of her own humanity.

While this singular story from the Indigenous and peasant communities of northwestern Brazil and southwest Venezuela might not immediately seem relevant to Western slavery's eventual concentration on Black bodies, it allows us to explore the basic features of slavery and situate them in global context. Let's turn to a truism that frames slavery. **No one is born a slave.** It is not some innate, natural condition. Historians now acknowledge this reality by speaking of the "enslaved," instead of the easily accepted and natural-sounding term "slave." To enslave, human beings must designate someone as a slave, establish methods of forcing people into that category, and create specific behaviors and outputs expected of it. Societies build varying systems of enslavement by bringing their own priorities to how such characteristics combine (Patterson 1982).

Slavery as the right to possess and control another human being has existed from the time human society was formed. The concept itself is stable, but its justifications and practices varied over time and place. The processes through which anti-black, racial slavery came to dominate the Western world by the early 1700s, or beginning of the eighteenth century were also not natural and inevitable. These processes developed out of specific human choices conditioned by both the immediate concerns of the European empires in which they emerged and the social legacy of much earlier conceptualizations of slavery. Valero's story allows us to consider elements of an almost stone-age slavery against our understanding of slavery as it existed in the nineteenth-century, antebellum

¹ The narrative details that follow are composed from a combination of sources: Biocca (1970), Cocco (1972), and Valero (1984). These sources have slight variations. Those differences are only noted when they are significant for this essay's analysis. Any quotes used from the latter two sources have been translated by the author of the current essay.

U.S. South, noting the commonalities and differences. Valero's capture, despite its occurrence at the beginning of the twentieth century, was done at the hands of a people living almost in stone-age conditions. They maintained a lifestyle that had existed for most of human history, tens of thousands of years of social interaction before farming, written laws, capitalism, and industrialization.

Looking at preliterate slaving practices forces us to reconsider some of the many false assumptions held about slavery's history. For example, it is a common myth of human social evolution to believe that slavery only emerged with farming and formalized, landed property. Nor was it only first practiced by literate societies. It is also true that slavery has not always existed in racialized forms, in which European enslavement of Africans represented the height of the system. And no straight line can be drawn from ancient Roman law to the slavery operating in the pre-Civil War United States. Comparison with a non-state, hunter-gatherer slave system allows us to separate characteristics that belong to slavery as an institution from characteristics produced by capitalism, racial ideology, formal law, market exchange, or state formation. We can begin to reveal variation in some key elements of slavery, especially those specific to place and time, from the domination by a "master" (or enslaver);² methods of control; characteristics of enslavability, the purposes of enslavement; social relations amongst enslaved people; social relations between enslaved and free people; and the possible modes of exiting slavery. This knowledge can aid in distinguishing the features of American slavery that were shared with other societies from those that developed in a unique national context that impacted enslaved people in unprecedented ways. We can address questions of what is slavery, especially when we consider its existence outside of the plantations of the Western Hemisphere, and how much did the patterns familiar to us, those found in the modern, English-speaking world of the 18th and 19th centuries, differ from slavery practiced elsewhere.

Variations within slavery

We begin with a question that is not as straightforward as it may first appear. Was Helena a slave or simply a captive? What criteria should apply to the distinction? Until recently, most anthropologists who have considered this question in general terms for the Yanomami describe them as a society without slavery. For example, Murdock (1967) and Kirby, et al (2016) rely almost exclusively on a 1966 dissertation by Napoleon Chagnon to promote this categorization. These, mostly male, outsider, 20th-century social scientists asserted this claim despite their own evidence that the Yanomami would frequently capture women and children when warring against both intra-ethnic and foreign enemies. Enemy men were usually killed. The surviving captives were expected to work, mostly in domestic and small horticultural tasks. Women were also expected to be sexually available to capturing men. In both cases, those who refused were often brutalized or even killed. Captives could also be exchanged and ransomed amongst Yanomami communities for material resources. So, why wasn't this considered slavery earlier?

In distinguishing slaves as a subset of captives, Cameron (2016) suggests that it may have been that previous generations of anthropologists did not consider these, mostly female, victims as slaves because many were allowed to "marry" into their captor communities. Additionally, earlier assessors of Amazon captivity dismissed the possibility of slavery because there was no obvious "racial difference" between captor and captive. The Yanomami captured women from both other Yanomami communities and from other Amazonia native groups. These were people with no phenotypic group differences amongst them. While phenotypic and racial difference has been seen as a prime rationale for the Western world's enslavement of Africans, for most of human history this was not the case. Capture and enslavement were done to not-so-distant neighbors. People could choose to enslave those who looked like them as easily as those who didn't. In holding captives for indefinite periods, extracting value from their labor, or trading them like commodities, the Yanomami clearly practiced slavery (Santos-Granero 2005 and 2009). However, our larger point here is that not all slavery is the same. Through human history, there have been many localized forms of slavery, with their particular characteristics that do not resemble the nineteenth-century Western practices that are most familiar to us.

The purpose or value that motivated Helena's initial enslavement was somewhat unique. Her gender, and possible sexual access to her, were not the most significant factors in her capture. Yanomami seizure of non-Indigenous people was very rare. Once she understood their language, her captors explained that they originally attacked her family not to kidnap any of them. Their objective was to take the Western goods they valued. These were typically items of metal (Valero, 1984 p. 12). They would have killed to obtain them. The family had little of value and had fled, injured in their escape. However, the young girl had been injured and left behind. She was then seen as a type of gift. But perhaps more importantly, her captors convinced themselves that Helena would be able to teach them how to make metals, since she came from an outside world where it was found in abundance. This belief circulated through other Yanomami bands in the area, who even attacked or attempted to trade for her. Once the Yanomami realized that Helena had no knowledge of making metals, she still had value. She existed as a symbol of control over something or someone from the outside world.

² In English-language historiography on slavery, the use of "master" has fallen out of favor. This paper returns to it as an alternative to "owner," which is limited in this essay to societies with market economies.

That enslaved people were valued for their knowledge, or skills, should remind us that they were thinking people, endowed with the full complexity of humanity. They did not just contribute their physical labor or commodity trade value to the communities that held them. They brought new ideas with them. They were enslaved empty-handed, but not empty-headed. So, while many theorists of slavery have defined it as a system or set of societal processes through which the powerful make other human beings into their economic tools, its lived experience was never only that, for either enslavers or the enslaved. To take examples from Black slavery in the Americas, we readily acknowledge the contributions Africans and their descendants made in cultural areas, such as cuisine and music. When we allow ourselves to explore the knowledge enslaved people brought with them, we can also see material technologies (such as metal smithing), agricultural expertise, military capabilities, forms of social organization, and so on that transformed their receiving communities (Cameron, 2016; Bradley, 1994; Westernman, 1955). Therefore, slave knowledge should be added to other diffusive processes (such as trade or religious conversion) by which information and expertise move from one community to the next. In Helena's case, although she was a young girl at the time of her capture, she brought with her Christian beliefs and the values of her Brazilian creole community (Valero, 1984 pp. 174-75).

We now know through archaeological and anthropological research that when it came to the bodily characteristics that were the basis of enslavement in hunter-gatherer societies, what mattered most were gender, age, and health. While not all such societies sought captives, for those that did, there was a much greater preference for women over men (Patterson, 1982; Brooks, 2002; Santos-Graneros 2009, Harrod & Martin, 2014). Before intensive agriculture or large, ever-present militaries, there was little utility in male enslavement. And they had great potential for physical danger to the receiving community and were costly to control. Weighing the costs and benefits, men often were simply not worth the trouble.

For many communities at this societal stage, captured men were held for a relatively short time, from days to months, with the goal of either ransoming them for the return of those captured from the community, murdering them for political displays of terror, or for eventually sacrificing them to the local gods (Otterbein, 2000; Schwartz, 2017). Among the Tupinamba, another Amazonian group not unlike the Yanomami, enemy men were occasionally captured and allowed to assume the role of husband to one or more women. However, such captive husbands could not claim children with these wives. If they had done so, according to patrilineal descent rules of most Amazonian peoples, the children would have been classified as enemies and subject to execution. Captured men's time with the Tupinamba was typically short as adult initiation rights for young Tupinamba men required the murder of a male stranger. A limited supply of male captives was kept on hand for this purpose.

By contrast, among Amazonian groups, captive women were valued for several reasons. They were desired primarily for domestic labor, done in the most basic of homes that were temporary, grass-roofed shacks with little more than hammocks inside and done in the small rainforest horticultural plots that supplemented a wilder food supply. Some women also became multi-lingual with long-term captivity, making them useful as negotiators between communities. While this was Helena's experience only after regaining her freedom, the most famous such case was that of the captive Malinztin/La Malinche/Doña Marina's assistance to Hernán Cortez's early engagement with the Aztec empire. For these reasons, captive women were valued as objects of trade.

Female captives among Amazonian people also contributed to their captors' households as either dependents or kin. Healthy female captives were sought for sexual access and their reproductive potential, bearing children to be incorporated into the male captors' family lineages. Many were accepted as low-ranking, later wives in polygamous unions (Chagnon, 1968; Rivière, 1969; Gregor, 1985). These relationships were established through some combination of force and the women's acquiescence to the survival benefits of aligning with a strong, male protector. In a society without landed property and the social status associated with it, a strong measure of one's social worth among the Yanomami centered on collective mutual dependency. One of the worse things in this type of society is to not have relatives or kinship attachments, to be alone.

At two different times, over the course of her twenty-four-year captivity, Helena Valero was "married" or entrusted to men without her consent. Helena attempted to make sense of her interactions with the Yanomami according to the conceptual tools and language of her former world. She puts her "marriages" in that frame. She later spoke of each man as her "husband," despite the drastic differences in the meaning the term holds between the Yanomami context and modern Western traditions. In societies without written law, there was less standardization. Among hunter-gatherer peoples, in native Amazonian communities, marriage was often not expected to be a permanent condition. They endured only as long as desired by the couple. Nor was monogamy standardized, at least for high-ranking men, and in some cases, also for women.

When she married her first husband a leader of the Namowei-thari band, Husiwe, Helena had barely entered her teens, and it was not something she had sought. She acquiesced to it because it resolved some of her immediate survival challenges as the primary social dependence through which she could draw material resources. Helena accepted the dominant male authority associated with that dependence. Yet, she was surprised by the physical violence to which Husiwe subjected her, even though, she described it as more or less equal to his treatment of his four other wives. She noted one difference. She and another indigenous, captive wife did not have local relatives who could mediate against Husiwe's full authority. Both were more vulnerable, less protected

outsiders. More important to their position with the Yanomami were the sons they bore. Sons were a measure of the survival of the group. And any future daughters were to be married off to other bands in order to build strategic alliances. Helena had no input with such plans.

This discussion of kinship allows us to see another important behavior that distinguishes slavery in many hunter-gatherer societies from what we commonly find in its eighteenth and nineteenth-century Western forms. In the former, slavery and kinship with captors were not mutually exclusive. Nonetheless, no children born to captive mothers were designated slaves in the Amazonian systems. By contrast, in Western forms existing through the 19th century, infant enslavement was the legal norm. Western slavery was multi-generational, descending almost exclusively from the mother's status. The Roman legal notions of *partus sequitur ventrem* reemerged in the slave codes of European empires in the Americas. Free mothers bore free children. Enslaved mothers bore enslaved children, regardless of the status of the fathers (Rodrigues Periera, 2022; Morgan, 2018; Curtis, 2000; Dorsey 1994). And the frequent situation of a male owner fathering a child with an enslaved woman did not immediately improve the status of either mother or child. With only a few exceptions, such as the initial freedom granted in the French imperial context, both generally remained enslaved (Rodrigues Periera, 2022 pp. 33-39). We should note that this fact does not falsify the statement made above that “no one is born a slave.” Even in the Western case, slavery for the newborn is not a natural condition. Powerful humans chose to apply this degraded status to some of the most powerless among them. They made these infants into slaves.

Because of the patrilineal descent emphasized amongst Amazonian Indigenous peoples, children born to captive mothers were designated the offspring of their husbands. However, among some groups, such sons were often given lower status in comparison to children of local wives. Such children were subject to greater physical and verbal abuse, again to the point of sacrifice. They would have to prove themselves of exceptional worth when becoming adults, and the daughters could be traded off at any time. The threat hovered around them for the smallest infraction (Cameron 2016 p. 52; Santos-Granero, 2009 p. 82). While captive women's offspring were not themselves captives and had acknowledged kin relations within the capturing community, they were not treated as equals. In Helena's case, her co-wives through Husiwë initially insisted that she murder her newborn son because he did not at first appear to have some of the facial features that resembled the Yanomami. Helena fiercely defended him, and Husiwë did also (Valero, 1984 pp. 247-248). The need for such defense demonstrated that differences in captivity and genealogical origin mattered. Unfortunately, research into native Amazonian communities has not documented the number of generations over which such difference was recognized.

The differentiation of the children of captive mothers from those born to local mothers also speaks to another factor central to slave systems – the control of enslaved people, or the methods used to coerce them towards their masters' will. Control methods exist in physical and psychological forms and varied across slave systems. Control could take the form of nonlethal pain, murder as a threat to surviving captives, isolation, withholding of food, exposure to challenging weather, or material and social rewards for those who won their captor's favor. The personality and preferences of individual enslavers were also at play and tempered by what was accepted as permissible by their respective communities.

For preliterate, nomadic societies, without written law, like the Yanomami, information about their methods for controlling slaves are typically limited to either the observations of literate outsiders or the archaeological analysis of material artifacts and human remains. Both sets of data only approximate the realities of slave control. Outsiders often obtain only momentary glimpses of slavery, over a few days or months. They often do not have access to private behaviors and the secrets intentionally guarded by locals. Archaeologists can only interpret enduring and accessible material remains, for which location, environmental conditions, and community norms are factors in their modern interpretation. And the study of subjugation and oppression from the material record is often done in relation to the “free” norm, which in itself is not easily established (Cameron, 2011; Webster, 2008). These limitations make multi-source corroboration of information on slavery among preliterate people tentative, without consensus on their reliability. While brutality and coercion are undoubtedly aspects of slave control, we cannot describe the forms with any precision. Even when we acknowledge the most slaves were beaten, we are left with questions about intensity, frequency, who inflicted the punishment, and what were common deviations from the norm.

Such uncertainty exists when we consider beliefs in African American popular culture about the different forms of control experienced by field slaves, house slaves, or “fancy girls.” It is not difficult to accept that field slaves were more likely to experience physical abuse, as their labor was directly tied to the plantation profits of their owners. In their domestic proximity to slaveowners, house slaves were likely subjected to greater psychological torture. And the “fancy girls” forced into prostitution were subjected to unimaginable levels of sexual abuse. Oral histories from the U.S. slaveholding period speak to individual cases of these experiences. Such testimony is well documented in the exceptional collection of oral histories from formerly enslaved people in the United States (Work Projects Administration, 1941). But we have no means to assess their scope. Law and associated legal cases provide a greater clarity on such control and also provide some insights on differences between slave systems. Take for example contrasting approaches to slave prostitution in the 18th and 19th century Atlantic world. In colonial Spanish America, slaveowners faced no legal consequence for raping the Black women

they enslaved. However, they could be held criminally liable for forcing these same women into prostitution, despite the legal acceptance of female prostitution within the region (Morrison, 2018). By contrast, in the antebellum U.S. South, slaveowners faced no legal restriction for either the rape or prostitution of slave women. The community standards of control and acceptable brutality differed in the two regions, yet violence remained in each.

In Helena Valero's case, the Yanomami women were the ones to teach her what was expected of her status. At first, because Helena was still a preteen, she was not given to a man, as would have been typical of older female captives. She was placed in the care of an older woman, the chief's sister. She and other senior women continually watched Helena to prevent her escape. They expected her to learn their language quickly and when she did not, she was beaten. She was hit on other occasions enough to bleed. The women overseeing Helena could vary from generosity and care to violent brutality. For example, after being marched along with other captive women into a settlement of a second Yanomami band, the Karawetari, a senior, local woman almost immediately offered her own hammock for Helena to rest, noting "You must be tired after such a long walk" (Biocco, 1970 p. 42). By contrast, her fellow captives, the women from the Yanomami Kóhóróshi-thari (the band who had first captured Helena) were subjected to verbal insults as they entered the new village. This abuse was motivated by the long history of conflict between the two groups. Here, violence within slavery was not defined neither by the individual owner, nor by permanent laws. Instead, the historical relations between communities were also factors.

Verbal abuse was the least of the challenges faced by captive women among the Yanomami. As with most other slave systems, beatings and rape were frequent. Either could be imposed by any free member of the community for arbitrary reasons. Although she avoided any mention of her own sexual experiences, Helena recounted the case of a woman who was raped collectively by the men in a village when she attempted to leave her husband for another man. It was only after this ordeal that the woman could safely stay with the new man. One should note that even Yanomami women within their home communities were subjected to similar punishment. The difference with captive women was the scope of the infraction that was believed to merit a particular punishment. For them, even a minimal slight could earn severe physical harm and even death.

On several occasions Helena was subjected to homicidal attacks but managed to escape each. In one situation, because of the special treatment her fellow captive women believed Helena was receiving because of her non-Indigenous status, they gifted her eggs she did not know to be poisonous. However, when Helena shared the eggs with two young, local girls, one died. Helena's efforts to explain the accident were ignored and the entire community attempted to kill her. She barely escaped, only to wonder the rainforest lost for several months and eventually, turn herself in to the Namowei-theri, another Yanomami band, once again a captive. Once there, Husiwë, who would later become her first "husband," attempted to kill her over an incorrectly perceived insult. After escaping again and returning, fortunately, Helena had local defenders who encouraged Husiwë to "marry" her instead. She became his fifth wife, in a marriage that was initially filled with violence.

Despite these traumatic situations, Helena maintained a sense of herself and a sense of personal agency. In the early years of her first marriage, she ran away after having been beaten. At another moment Husiwe broke her arm after he believed her negligence had led to the death of a favorite dog. As she lay immobilized, healing, she threatened that she would leave permanently if he hit her again. She said he never again did. That allowed their relationship to shift into a more peaceful and respectful pattern. They began to discuss the differences between their respective cultures. Husiwë claimed the superiority of Yanomami spiritual beliefs and funerary practices, but Helena assertively disagreed and defended her right to voice her own views, "If you all bully me, it's natural that I will speak harshly and defend myself. I will not let you all dominate me just because there are many of you against only one me. I am only speaking the truth" (Valero, 1984 p. 175).

Such struggles to maintain internal self-worth operated for slaves in all oppressive systems. Captors or owners chipped away at the enslaved person's individual identity and value. This had some superficial success. Slave dissimulation, or the hiding of one's true thoughts, are found throughout U.S. slave testimonials (Work Projects Administration, 1941). However, full dehumanization was rarely complete for the enslaved. Their resistance spoke to this fact. It existed in both small, covert forms and larger-scale, collective action, from slowing labor to mass rebellion. Additionally, many of the slave systems structured by written laws recognized the humanity of the enslaved by creating standard paths to freedom. These included, at times, militarily defending the capturing community or individual owners, religious conversion, marriages with captors, family ransom, and self-purchased liberation.

No clear, legal options for freedom existed in pre-literate slavery. Beyond escape, one path to freedom seemed to exist amongst the Yanomami—the death of one's master. Helena implied that once her first husband Husiwë was killed in inter-tribal warfare, she no longer belonged to anyone. She was free to leave. Unfortunately, she still did not know the route back to the outside, creole world. Helena left her first husband's community, but now with two children, she could not survive in the forest for long. Instead, she intentionally decided to place herself back into a marriage with another Yanomami man. Helena was like so many other enslaved people who carried with them the memory of their previous kin and the hope of return. In contrast with Helen, captured women from other Indigenous groups could act on that hope. They fled with great frequency as their familiarity with the

territory increased their chances of escape. Despite Valero's seven attempts to escape, it was only once she learned of the location of a new settlement of "whites" that she was finally able to leave. Her odyssey had taken 24 years, but during that time, "despite the beatings and other abuse she received, she was treated like a [valued] good, something that interested the Yanomami" (Valero, 1984 p. 12). All slaves lived in that condition.

Conclusion

Helena's life among the Yanomami is not just an exceptional story of survival. It has comparative, analytical value for the general study of slavery, revealing to readers another form of slavery that does not fit the Atlantic world patterns familiar to most. Helena's story demonstrates that slavery was not exclusively about economic production or physical labor. Enslaved people also provided "social capital" for their enslavers. Possessing slaves allowed the captor to demonstrate power, control over others. In societies with few permanent forms of wealth or property, such control augmented one's status. The violence an enslaver inflicted upon the slave stood as a threat even for free people within the same society. That violence constantly displayed potential to spill beyond the acceptable boundaries of the slave.

While the archaeological and anthropological sources available to access slavery in preliterate societies remain limited and cannot fully describe methods of controlling the enslaved, Helena's experience highlights its three-way negotiation, where the expectations of the individual enslaver, community norms, and the enslaved's self-determination interacted through a range of human objectives and emotions. Direct, physical violence was not the only way to control a slave. While surveillance by older women and beatings by her husbands were substantial, for Helena, her inability to survive the rainforest without her Yanomami captors was the single largest factor in her conformity to Yanomami expectations and the greatest deterrent to her escape. This greatly differentiated her from Indigenous, female captives. Escape was an option Helena only exercised when she was on the verge of being murdered. Helena instead accommodated herself to marriage with her captors and having children who entered their patrilineage. Freedom was permissible with the death of her first husband and then when her second husband needed to escape intertribal violence.

As a final note, it is interesting to observe the energy the Yanomami directed toward intertribal violence and capture even as the outside white and creole world was slowly encroaching on their territory. The people we now collectively call "indigenous" did not see themselves as such. Their view of community was much smaller, focused on their immediate bands. They were accustomed to capturing or killing those across these small divisions. Whites were perceived as a distant, outside danger, but also useful for material things. Indigenous traditions didn't create unity against this. Neither racial slavery nor racial resistance was part of their conceptual world.

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