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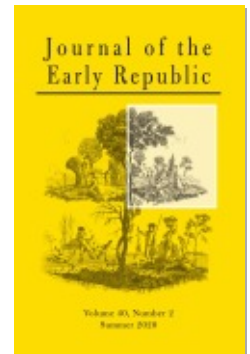
Naming Our African Ancestors: Pushing, and Respecting, the Limits

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Naming Our African Ancestors

Pushing, and Respecting, the Limits

REBECCA SHUMWAY

Historians of both early America and precolonial West Africa want to know more about the men, women, and children who were enslaved in Africa and brought to America. Each of these individuals had an important story to tell, as we can only glimpse in the rare documented accounts of Venture Smith, Olaudah Equiano, and a handful of others. What were their lives like in Africa, and from which part of the continent did they originate? How, exactly, did they lose their freedom? What factors led to their arrival in South Carolina or New York or elsewhere? How did they survive? And who among us are their descendants? Oral histories in both America and West Africa testify to attempts by descendants to remember lost family members and communities. And at least since the early twentieth century, academics have recognized the importance of tracing African American individuals back to specific cultures and landscapes on the African continent. The quest is implicit in Du Bois' writings on African geographies and cultures, and taken up with fervor by more recent scholars including Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, Michael Gomez, Paul Lovejoy, Linda Heywood, Isidore Okpewho, and

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many others. The desire to make these connections is further demonstrated by the popularity of DNA testing in recent years.¹

The following takes stock of some of the historical approaches now available for researching the African origins of enslaved people in the early republic, and some of the limitations that stubbornly remain. The goal is to provide insight, from an Africanist perspective, on what can be known (and should be investigated) and what cannot be known about the African backgrounds of these ancestors.

The best existing resource for finding out the African origins of enslaved Africans in any particular place in the Americas is the Transatlantic Slave Trade Database, accessible at www.slavevoyages.org. The database (hereafter *Voyages*) allows users to search for all known voyages of slave ships arriving at a particular place in the Americas, and to view the search results according to place of origin in Africa, date of arrival, and/or several other factors. *Voyages* also provides information about the total *estimated* voyages arriving in a particular place—that is, the voyages that are clearly documented in archival records *plus* voyages for which there is only partial or circumstantial evidence—which in many cases provides a more useful estimate of the number of enslaved people who actually came to a particular place. For example, a quick search of the database tells us that of the 389,000 enslaved Africans who arrived in mainland North America between 1628 and 1860, 92,000 came from

1. Most recently, Zora Neale Hurston's published interviews with Cudjoe Lewis in Hurston, *Barracoon: The Story of the Last "Black Cargo"* (New York, 2018). W. E. B. Du Bois, *The World and Africa; And, Color and Democracy* (1947; repr. New York, 2014); Du Bois, *Africa, Its Geography, People, and Products, and Africa, Its Place in Modern History* (1977; repr. New York, 2014); Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Slavery and African Ethnicities in the Americas: Restoring the Links* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2005); Michael A. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1998); Gomez, *Reversing Sail: A History of the African Diaspora* (New York, 2005); Paul E. Lovejoy and David V. Trotman, eds., *Transatlantic Dimensions of Ethnicity in the African Diaspora* (New York, 2003); Linda M. Heywood and John K. Thornton, *Central Africans, Atlantic Creoles, and the Foundation of the Americas, 1585–1660* (New York, 2007); Heywood, ed., *Central Africans and Cultural Transformations in the American Diaspora* (New York, 2002); Isidore Okpewho, Carole Boyce Davies, and Ali A. Mazrui, eds., *The African Diaspora: African Origins and New World Identities* (Bloomington, IN, 1999).

the region of Senegambia (24 percent); 45,000 from Sierra Leone (12 percent); 22,000 from the Windward Coast (6 percent); 56,000 from the Gold Coast (14 percent); 9,000 from the Bight of Benin (2 percent); 65,000 from the Bight of Biafra (17 percent); 92,000 from West Central Africa (24 percent); and 8,000 from Southeast Africa (2 percent).²

The question that follows is what do these numbers *mean*? How can they be useful in better understanding enslaved individuals and their lives? Many scholars have called into question *Voyages* and other studies that primarily focus on assessing the numbers of people enslaved, rather than more humanistic aspects of the slave trade and slavery, precisely because the statistics can seem so far removed from the human suffering and loss of life that the transatlantic slave trade involved. And part of my purpose here is to emphasize that *Voyages* and other sources for studying precolonial Africa do indeed have frustrating limitations. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that Africa is a continent—a really, really big one—and knowing which part of the continent someone comes from is a huge leap forward in understanding who they are, compared with simply labeling that person an “African.” There are significant cultural differences between the regions of Africa used in *Voyages*—some were Islamic, some had rice-growing knowledge, some had large-scale professional armies—and knowing which region an enslaved person came from can begin to add detail to an otherwise blank canvas.³

2. “About,” *Voyages: The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database*, <https://www.slavevoyages.org/about/about> (accessed June 6, 1999); “Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade —Estimates,” *Voyages*, <http://www.slavevoyages.org/estimates/HrPT8nJG>. The database was first released in 1999 as a CD-Rom, followed by an expanded web-based version in 2008, and another revised and expanded version released in 2019. As noted in the guidelines on how to use the database, numbers have been rounded to the nearest thousand. For information about the geographical extent of these regions, see maps in *Voyages*. See also Henry B. Lovejoy, et al., “Redefining African Regions for Linking Open-Source Data,” *History in Africa* 46 (2019), 5–36.

3. Most recently, see Jessica Marie Johnson, “Markup Bodies: Black [Life] Studies and Slavery [Death] Studies at the Digital Crossroads,” *Social Text* 36 (Dec. 2018), 57–79; Britt Rusert, “New World: The Impact of Digitization on the Study of Slavery,” *American Literary History* 29 (Summer 2017), 267–86. For humor and a rigorous discussion of issues related to African studies, including the pervasive stereotypes and misunderstandings of Africa and Africans, refer to the website “Africa Is a Country,” <https://africasacountry.com/about>.

To someone with a basic knowledge of precolonial African history, the specific African region of origins indicates, for example, whether a particular group of enslaved people who arrived in North America were likely to have known something about Islam and literacy, how to grow and cook rice (Senegambia and Sierra Leone—36 percent), or how to form and mobilize combat units. The data described above also immediately conveys the fact that the cultures of West Central Africa, which shared features of the ancient Bantu language, had a tremendous influence on North American culture. This last point is particularly true if one notes that some 30,000 people from West Central Africa arrived in North America at the beginning of the nineteenth century, infusing African American communities with a substantial dose of Bantu language and cultural influence relatively late in the history of U.S. slavery. Often, information about the region of origin will lead to other questions, particularly whether there was a war taking place in that particular region of Africa around the time of the ship's departure. Wars involving the Asante Kingdom, for example, can frequently be matched with periods during which large numbers of captives were available for sale on the Gold Coast.⁴

It is worthwhile, then, to use the database to get an idea of where in Africa people were coming from, and when (if only to avoid giving the impression that it doesn't matter to you, which it should!). But once you know the region or regions related to the particular African people in the early republic with whom you are concerned, you still have the problem of discerning how much can be assumed about someone based on the place from which they were sold on the African coast. Moreover, some of the regions in *Voyages* constitute a fairly small geographical area, and therefore quite correspond to relatively few precolonial states and societies (i.e., Gold Coast, Sierra Leone), while other regions—particularly West Central Africa—include a huge swath of the continent, in this case the entire territory between the equator and Cape Town.⁵

You could refer to those people who departed on slave ships from

4. "Estimates," *Voyages*, <http://www.slavevoyages.org/estimates/crNFUsER>; "Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade—Database," *Voyages*, <https://www.slavevoyages.org/voyages/scsDBVgV>. Most of these captives came to South Carolina, mainly in 1806–1807.

5. This inconsistency, and other issues, is discussed in Lovejoy, et al., "Redefining African Regions."

African ports within the Gold Coast region as “captives from the Gold Coast,” or “Gold Coast Africans,” or, referencing the largest language family in that region, “Akan people.” Each of these has its benefits and disadvantages. Referring to them as captives from the Gold Coast is probably the most accurate option, if what you know is that these people were made to board a slave ship somewhere within the Gold Coast region. On the other hand, obviously, it does not convey anything about the significance of this information. “Gold Coast Africans” is also quite accurate but has the added advantage of emphasizing the place of origin as a sort of identity beyond simply “African,” and removes the emphasis on “captive,” which may or may not suit your approach. If you choose to label all of the captives who left Africa from Gold Coast ports “Akan people,” you show respect for the cultural and linguistic diversity of the continent and recognize the tremendous influence of Akan speakers in the history of the region.

Some scholars have taken this approach to the next level by treating the “Akan diaspora” as a distinct cultural community linking modern Ghana and the places around the Atlantic world to which captives from the Gold Coast were taken. Be warned, however, that African ethnicities are just as fluid and contingent on historical change as all other ethnicities, and that labeling a person “Akan” attributes a history and culture to that person that may be far from their actual lived experience. The largest Akan-speaking group in Ghana is Asante, and the Asante Kingdom captured and sold hundreds of thousands of people into the transatlantic slave trade. Many, if not most of them, were considered legitimate candidates for enslavement by Asante precisely because they were *not* Akan speakers. It’s also important to know that in many African countries today, the minority groups within the population who speak lesser-known languages are often the descendants of people who were frequently raided and captured by the ancestors of the larger language groups and may still be treated as second-class citizens in their countries. Non-Akan people in northern Ghana, for instance, would surely bristle at being labeled Akan.⁶

6. Kwasi Konadu, *The Akan Diaspora in the Americas* (New York, 2010); Walter C. Rucker, *Gold Coast Diasporas: Identity, Culture, and Power* (Bloomington, IN, 2015). See also Kwame Arhin, “The Financing of Ashanti Expansion (1700–1820),” *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 37 (July 1967), 283–91; Donna J. E. Maier, “Military Acquisition of Slaves in Asante,” in

Should we sacrifice cultural references in the name of accuracy, then? Can we only refer to people in terms of the ports where their floating dungeons docked to load human chattel? I think not. What's required is a bit of nuance and explanation. An estimated one million people were sold to slave ships along the Gold Coast during the transatlantic slave trade. They were not all Akan speakers. They were, however, part of communities that were linked by trade (obviously—or the slave trade would not exist), and they were multilingual, as almost all African communities are today. People sold to slave ships along the Gold Coast would have likely understood at least some of the language of their captors and perhaps even their sellers. As a group, they would have been better able to communicate among themselves than with enslaved people purchased hundreds of miles away at another African port. These loose linguistic ties may have made a tremendous difference in collectively surviving and perhaps resisting slavery (in Africa), the middle passage, and new conditions of slavery in the Americas. The relative proximity of their homelands, in other words, is not irrelevant just because they did not belong to what we might call a single ethnic group.

To conclude, historians should be encouraged to use *Voyages* and other sources that document the African origins of enslaved people in the Americas in order to get a better sense of the particular cultural elements that may have significantly influenced the development of American cultures. But we should also be aware of the challenges and limitations of attributing ethnic or cultural identities to individuals based on the place from which they departed Africa. While they may be less satisfying, African regions of origin are often more accurate ways of identifying ancestors than modern-day ethnic labels.

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