Considering the Slave Trade: History and Memory

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I have been wondering about some way to express the importance of the Du Bois Institute slave trade dataset on which most of these nine essays are based. Perhaps by analogy. Astronomers knew of the vast range of cosmic phenomena before the Hubble Space Telescope existed, but that extraordinarily perceptive eye, coursing freely above the earth's atmosphere, has led to a degree of precision and a breadth of vision never dreamed of before and has revealed, and continues to reveal, not only new information but also new questions never broached before. So the Du Bois slave trade database, with its tracings of 27,233 Atlantic slave trade voyages, three quarters of which succeeded in disembarking slaves in the Americas, representing more than two-thirds of all Atlantic slave voyages, has made possible a precision and breadth of documentation in the history of the African diaspora no one had thought possible before and raises a host of questions never approached before.

And also, it must be said, it suffered glitches in its development not unlike those that afflicted the space telescope. Just as the Hubble's lens proved faulty and had to be repaired before it had the expected clarity, so the CD-ROM on which the slave trade data were inscribed needed months, even years, of adjustment and correction before it reached the state of accuracy and procedural clarity it now has. At its first public appearance, at Harvard's Atlantic History Workshop in April 1998, the CD-ROM itself could not be used at all, since it was still being cobbled together somewhere in Colorado, and so for that initial public performance the resourceful team of Eltis, Richardson, Behrendt, and Klein—particularly Eltis and Behrendt—had to funnel the data through an SSPS program, the relation of which to the non-performing CD-ROM only they understood. Nevertheless, the news, or some of it, came through that computerized squint clearly enough. The sheer scope and comprehensiveness of the database became vivid even then. Now the finished CD-ROM, with its data susceptible of the subtlest analysis, is publicly available. While the information it contains is not complete, as the compilers candidly explain (it is, for example, fuller on the British data than on the Portuguese, stronger on the eighteenth century than on the seventeenth), it is yet a record so full, so flexible in its manipulation, and so precise in what it contains that the whole subject, not only of the trade in slaves but slavery

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itself—its African origins, its demography and ethnography, its economy, its politics, and its role in the development of the Western Hemisphere—has been transformed. The exploitation of this resource has just begun, and as the authors show time and again in the essays above, there are as yet as many questions as answers.

What strikes one first in reading these papers drawn from the database and in thinking back to the other presentations at the 1998 Williamsburg conference on the dataset in which they originated, is the sheer force of numbers. I recall the first crude effort at such quantification forty years ago—it was merely punch-card tabulations—and marvel at how sophisticated the numerical calculations can be and at what can now be perceived just by assembling the numbers.

For numbers (if I may put it this way) count. There is much that numbers alone, sheer quantities, can reveal.

It matters that the overall magnitude of the African diaspora is now quite definitely known: that, as David Eltis explains, it is a fact that eleven million Africans were forcibly carried abroad, more than nine million of them to the Americas. It matters—it stretches the imagination to visualize—that at the height of the British slave trade, in the 1790s, one large slave vessel left England for Africa every other day. It matters that slave rebellions occurred on approximately 10 percent of all slave ships, that 10 percent of the slaves on such voyages were killed in the insurrections (which totals 100,000 deaths, 1500–1867), and that the fear of insurrection increased shipboard staffing and other expenses on the Middle Passage by 18 percent, costs that if invested in enlarged shipments would have led to the enslavement of one million more Africans than were actually forced into the system over the course of the long eighteenth century. It matters that the incidence of revolts did not increase with the decline in crew size, hence that slave-centered factors determined the uprisings. It matters that shore-based attacks on European slave ships were twenty times more likely in the Senegal and Gambia River areas than elsewhere in Atlantic Africa. It matters that shipboard mortality (only 50 percent of all slave deaths—the rest occurred in Africa or at embarkation) did *not* increase with the length of the voyages or with the number of slaves per ship ("tighter packing") but *did* vary according to African ports of departure. It matters that French slave ships left Africa with an average load of close to 320 captives; that one such vessel sailed with 900 slaves; that another lost 408 Africans on a single Atlantic voyage; that 92 percent of the "cargo" on another French vessel were children; and that the average number of captives on French vessels rose from 261 in the seventeenth century to 340 at the end of the eighteenth century. It is astonishing simply to attempt to visualize the consequences of the fact that in one year, 1790, French ships landed at least 40,000 slaves on the small island of St. Domingue, 19,000 of them (equal to the entire population of contemporary Boston) at the small port of Cap Français—and to consider the profound effect that fact must have had.

The numbers, newly generated in the Du Bois Institute database, are simply in themselves striking, signals of profound human experiences. At its crest, the British slave trade merchants built 15,000–20,000 shipboard "platforms" (racks for the confinement of enslaved Africans) for the 150–175 vessels they had in the trade. Almost a quarter of all blacks living in the British empire in the late eighteenth century lived on the single island of Jamaica, to which, overall, a million Africans were shipped, and such was the death rate there (between one-fourth and one-half of all newly landed slaves died within three years) that it took the importation of half a million Africans to increase the island's slave population by a quarter of a million. We now know that of the 96,000 slaves imported to the Chesapeake, all but 7 percent of them came directly from Africa.

There is a host of such numerical data in these essays and otherwise available in the Du Bois database. Numbers, simple quantities, matter. Magnitudes can make all the difference in our understanding. The accurate recording of them corrects false assumptions, establishes realistic parameters, and sets some of the basic terms of comprehension as one seeks to grasp the meaning of the greatest demographic phenomenon in Atlantic history before the migration of fifty million Europeans to the United States in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

But striking, informative, and challenging as the numbers in themselves are, they do not explain themselves and are not in the end the goal of inquiry. For, as Lorena Walsh writes, "numbers alone, however refined, tell us little about cultural transfer, transformation, or annihilation among forcibly transplanted Africans." Again and again the numbers provoke questions, new and important questions, that lead the authors to slip away from the quantitative data and probe for answers in the deep realms of social and cultural experience. Not all the questions the numbers raise can be answered: some explanations are reasonable inferences, some are informed guesses, some turn out to be simply discussions of the range of possible answers.

The most persistent explanatory theme that emerges from the articles is the importance of ethnic and regional differences among the African people and the effect of these differences on all aspects of the process of enslavement, the demographic transfers, and the resulting Euro-African-American world in the Western Hemisphere.

David Eltis is the master technician, the most deeply versed in the statistical details of the database, but his figures lead him into speculative explanations of why, over 350 years, the "center of gravity of the Atlantic slave trade moved slowly north away from West Central Africa." Perhaps it was "the time, resources, and adjustment of social structures required to establish a supply network or to break through to new sources in the interior." "The distribution of Africans in the New World," he finds, "was no more random than the distribution of Europeans." Why? Was it determined by African ethnicity? African agency, he concludes, shaped the trade far more than we had suspected.

Others resume the discussion in very specific ways. G. Ugo Nwokeji finds that to understand the structure of the African slave trade one must understand African conceptions of gender, and he demonstrates this in his elaborate discussion of the regionally differentiated roles of women in African economic, social, and military life. "Interregional differences in the gender division of labor," he concludes, help explain, if they do not completely explain, the observed sex ratios in the slave trade. And he produces a subtle explanation, in terms of domestic African ethnic and demographic changes, for the decline in the proportion of females who were forced to enter the Atlantic slave system from Biafra. The gender phenomenon in the slave trade, identified by numbers, he writes, can be explained only "in the framework of African culture and political economy."

David Richardson, analyzing slave revolts, which he meticulously quantifies, considers all manner of shaping circumstances but remains puzzled as to why ships that had more than the normal proportion of slave women were more likely to have rebellions and searches for an explanation in regional differences between slaves who did and those who did not revolt. He suspects that they largely derive from forces in Africa—the different regional and ethnic cultures and the timing and location of breakdowns in political order. But none of this is certain. Ahead, he writes, lies "a major research agenda" to uncover the complex "inter- and intraregional variations" that underlay the Africans' rebellions. One thing is definite: only an "African-centered explanation" will suffice.

A parallel discussion follows from the database's statistics on transoceanic mortality. "Differences in the internal conditions in Africa," Herbert Klein and his collaborators write, "had a marked, direct impact on mortality." The most effective statistical discriminant in mortality rates is the Africans' ports of departure. Why? The patterns are puzzling. The domestic backgrounds must explain the differences. "More detailed study of patterns of variations" is needed.

And for both David Geggus and Walsh, differentiated African cultures are the heart of the matter. The African roots of Haitian culture is no new theme, but in Geggus's article it is part of an array of cultural patterns on St. Domingue—those of "Congos," West Central Africans, Igbos, and the Ewe-Fon people. For him, as for the other authors, there is no blur of undifferentiated "Africans." For all, it seems, the numbers require explanations in terms of highly specified African ethnicities, languages, and behavior patterns—ethnicity alone, in Walsh's article, being the key to the creation of new African-American identities. The Chesapeake, her figures show, was no "bewildering mix of African peoples . . . isolated from one another by a 'Babel of languages.'" She knows precisely where the Chesapeake slaves came from, how and why they were distributed among the riverine districts of Virginia and Maryland, and something of the consequences of those patterns of distribution in terms of creolization, family and gender structures, languages, and spiritual life.

Even Stephen Behrendt, in his intricate explanation of the details of the

complex marketing system in the Atlantic slave trade—a wonderful example of the functional integration of the Atlantic world—finds that his firm numbers, which provide a lucid explanation of "transaction cycles on three continents," lead him into the less precise area of African agriculture, African trading patterns, and African entrepreneurship. And Trevor Burnard's and Kenneth Morgan's paper on the marketing of slaves in Jamaica, too, though based on rigorous statistical analysis, involves "heterogeneity of ethnic origins," the peculiar value placed on "men-boys and girls, none exceeding 16 or 18 years old," and a discussion of planters' preferences for people from specific African regions, based on assumptions of cultural characteristics.

But if the sheer force of numbers and the importance of African agency in all aspects of the slave trade strike one forcibly in reading these articles, so too does a more subtle element, identified in Ralph Austen's article. Obviously, the slave trade was a business, and a very profitable business, based on the "commodification" of human beings. One knows this to begin with, and one assumes at the start that we are dealing with a brutal, inhuman, devastating, tragic traffic that violates every shred of human sensibility. Even so, prepared as one is, as one reads these articles, one recoils at the clinical, accurate analysis of the trade—at the London merchant's reference to the salability of "small slaves and even Mangie Ones," at the reference to the "added value" of slaves by seasoning (sympathizing with the authors' sense of "the grotesqueness of the notion"), at the merchants' and planters' routine calculations of anticipated death rates, at the tricky supply problem of timber for "platforms" and iron for shackles, and at the normality of deaths in passage and as a consequence of insurrection. Informed as never before about the details of the slave trade, we can approach the subject objectively, impersonally, only up to a point, beyond which we find ourselves emotionally involved. The whole story is still within living memory, and not only for people of African descent. We are all in some degree morally involved and must consider the relationship of History and Memory.

That problematic relationship, as Austen points out, has until recently been discussed mainly in connection with another global catastrophe, the Holocaust, in which six million Jews were deliberately killed. It was the tormenting recollection of that disaster, still part of living memory, that led to the founding of a journal, *History and Memory,* edited in Israel, in which the subject is constantly analyzed. But the problem's fullest theoretical exploration has appeared in France, in Pierre Nora's seven-volume *Lieux de Mémoire*—sites of memory—referred to by Austen, of which a three-volume selection has appeared in English translation. Like so much of French methodological rumination, Nora's lengthy theoretical introductions and prefatory essays come across as rhetorical exuberance. But he has made the issue clear, and that issue lies at the latent foundation of the discussions in the articles above.

History—that is, historiography—Nora explains, is the critical, skeptical, empirical source-bound reconstruction of past events, circumstances,

and people based on the belief that the past is not only distant from us but also different. We look for differences in the past and for how those differences changed and evolved to create the world we know, which contains, however deeply buried, the residues of those past worlds. We avoid anachronisms of all kinds and seek to reconstruct the contexts of the past, the long-gone temporal and situational sockets in which past events and circumstances were embedded. As historians we shrink from telescoping past and present, hoping to explain the things that happened for their own sakes and in their own terms. And we select from the documentation what seems to illuminate the outcomes, which we, as opposed to the people in the past, are privileged to know. But we do so critically, skeptically, because we know that we can never recapture any part of the past absolutely and completely. So we keep our distance from the past, from the stories we tell, knowing that facts may be uncovered that will change our stories; other viewpoints may turn us away from what we now think is relevant, and other ways of understanding may make us reconsider everything.

But Memory, as Nora and others have explained, is something different. Its relation to the past is an embrace. It is not a critical, skeptical reconstruction of what happened. It is the spontaneous, unquestioned experience of the past. It is absolute, not tentative or distant, and it is expressed in signs and signals, symbols, images, and mnemonic clues of all sorts. It shapes our awareness whether we know it or not, and it is ultimately emotional, not intellectual.

Nora's project was based on his fear that France's memory of itself was fading, in part, he felt, because of the French historians' success in reducing the history of France to a critical contextualism in which no living memory can survive. So he set out to revive all those sites of memory, those Lieux de Mémoire, that contain and evoke the living, though fading, collective memory of the French people. Assembling a large team of historians, he and they wrote, and he published, short essays on everything he and they could think of as vital sites of French memory: Joan of Arc, the Eiffel Tower, Bastille Day, the Louvre, Verdun, the Protestant minority, the Tour de France, the genius of the French language, and so on, all this by way of bringing forward into current consciousness the cumulative, collective memory—not the history as a tentative reconstruction—of the French people.

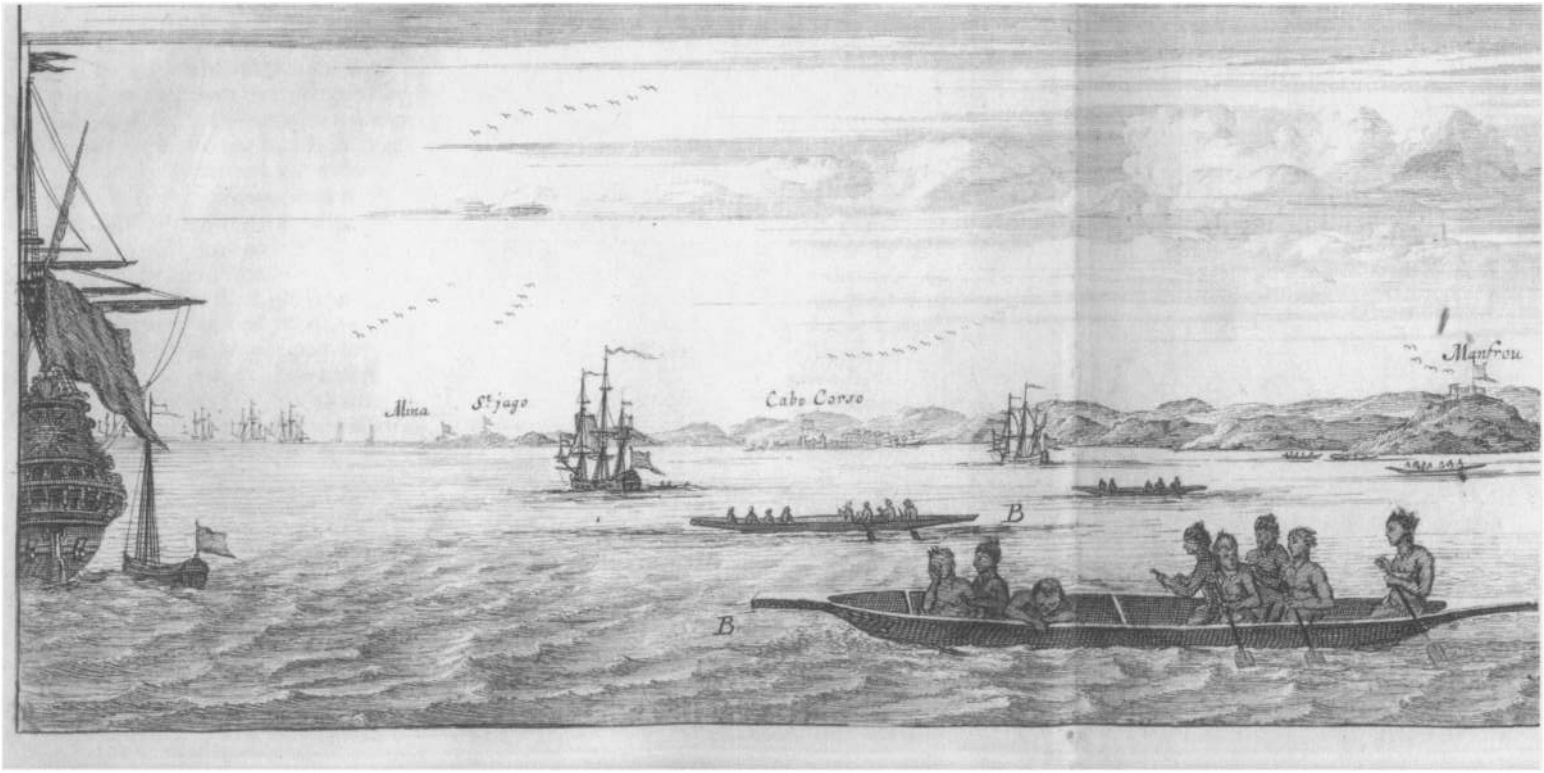
There is obviously a history of the Atlantic slave trade and the African diaspora, and the Du Bois database and these highly professional articles together with the editors' many other papers derived from it have greatly improved that story. The now publicly available CD-ROM will be a permanent source for the future enrichment of our critical, contextual understanding of that long-gone phenomenon. But the memory of the slave trade is not distant; it cannot be reduced to an alien context; and it is not a critical, rational reconstruction. It is for us, in this society, a living and immediate, if vicarious, experience. It is buried in our consciousness and shapes our view of the world. Its sites, its symbols, its clues lie all about us. It is the Middle Passage that every child reads about in textbooks. It is evoked in Alex Haley's

Roots and Steven Spielberg's *Amistad*—which are less history than memory. It is what troubles us so deeply about Jefferson and Monticello. It lies barely below the surface in every discussion of race relations in public policy.

All of this, I believe, is not history, as we professionally practice it, but collective memory. As such it is inescapable for all of us, white or black, and we cannot distance ourselves from it by the rational, critical reconstruction of the past. The history of the slave trade, so deeply explored in these essays, is a critically assembled, intellectually grasped story of distant events, but the memory of it is immediately urgent, emotional, and unconstrained by the critical apparatus of scholarship.

The deepest problem presented by these articles, it seems to me, is how to understand the Atlantic slave trade as both history and memory. For Philip Curtin's clinical analysis of the low numbers of the departures from Gorée and Gorée as a symbol of this enormous catastrophe are both true, though in different ways.

Perhaps history and memory in the end may act usefully upon each other. The one may usefully constrain and yet vivify the other. The passionate, timeless memory of the slave trade that tears at our conscience and shocks our sense of decency may be shaped, focused, and informed by the critical history we write, while the history we so carefully compose may be kept alive, made vivid and constantly relevant and urgent by the living memory we have of it. We cannot afford to lose or diminish either if we are to understand who we are and how we got to be the way we are.



"Negroes Cannoes carrying slaves, on Board of ships at Manfroe" by J. Kip, plate G, Jean Barbot, *A description of the coasts of north and south-Guinea . . .* (1688), vol. 5 of Awnsham Churchill, *A Collection of Voyages and Travels* (London, 1732), between pages 156 and 157. Courtesy, Earl Gregg Swem Library, College of William and Mary.