THE ROOTS OF THE AFRICAN DIASPORA:
METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN THE
ANALYSIS OF NAMES IN THE LIBERATED
AFRICAN REGISTERS OF SIERRA LEONE AND
HAVANA*

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I

Europe and the Americas have long dominated studies of transatlantic exchanges and much more is known about European participation in the Atlantic world than of its African counterpart. Current knowledge of how those parts of Africa located a few miles away from the African littoral contributed to the early modern Atlantic World is particularly sparse. This is despite the fact that the slave trade was the largest branch of transatlantic migration between Columbian contact and 1870, and that it is becoming apparent that Africans and indigenous Americans helped shape the new political and economic power structures, as well as the post-Columbian worlds of culture and labor.

Assessments of the impact of any group on the global stage must begin with the nature of the group itself, and thus efforts to raise the African profile in Atlantic scholarship and to focus on the agency of Africans must quickly face the contentious issue of ethnicity. From the broadest perspective, it is odd that the way the ancestors of the Atlantic World defined themselves should have become so much more con-

*We thank the Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, the University of Connecticut, the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute for Afro-American Research at Harvard University, and the Gilder-Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Abolition and Resistance at Yale University for the financial support that made possible the research on which this paper is based.

tentious among Africanists and Afro-Americanists than among those scholars who study Europe and Europeans overseas.\(^1\) At the outset of the reenacting of the Americas, the European state existed in nascent form in only Spain, Britain, and France. The predominance of the nation-state in the way the world is organized in the twenty-first century—rather than its status in 1492—has perhaps led scholars to stress the contrasts between Africa and Europe on issues of early modern nationhood, and, more generally, human identity.

In fact, it is not at all clear that most of the groups that made up these three western European countries thought of themselves in 1500 predominantly in terms of citizenship of their respective nations, and for Italians, Germans, and Scandinavians, language groupings, local political attachments, and many other associations that people use to define the society in which they live, were rather more important than broader conceptions of nationhood. The Germans who formed the largest group of Europeans arriving in eighteenth-century North America shared a language, but scarcely a conception of nationality, at least in the political sense. Their situation has some parallels with the enslaved Igbo, who likely formed the largest single African group entering North America (as well as several areas in the Caribbean) for a large part of the eighteenth century. Yet there is far more scholarly preoccupation over what the term “Igbo” means in the context of African-American culture than there is about “German” in Euro-American social and cultural evolution. We know that the term “Igbo” had referred to a certain group long before the German state was founded in 1870.\(^2\)

Scholarship on European migration long ago established the basic facts about the direction, composition, and, increasingly, the motivation of those involved in migration. In the African case, while the volume and direction of the slave trade between coastal points around the Atlantic is now reasonably well-known, we are still far short of this point. Debates on identity should begin after the basic facts are

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established. Indeed, it is Europeanists rather than Africanists who should be debating the components of group identity. For Africans, we still need to know where coerced migrants began their journey to the Americas, to which language groups they belonged, what relation, if any, they have with peoples living in the source regions today, and what temporal parallels there were between major political and military events and the marked fluctuations in the slave trade which the shipping-based data reveal.

II

A new method of measuring the composition of African groups forced into the New World and addressing the above issues is suggested by a rich but little used source. From 1819 to 1850 around 1.6 million people left Africa unwillingly, perhaps 15 percent of all Africans caught up in the transatlantic slave trade, despite Anglo-American abolition of the slave trade in 1807 and subsequent British attempts to suppress the traffic. As part of international efforts to suppress the traffic, the British signed treaties with several countries to establish courts of mixed (or joint) commission in selected Atlantic ports to adjudicate suspected slave ships and liberate any captives found on board. Beginning in 1808, naval cruisers could thus interfere with specified branches of the trade and, by mid-century, with all of it. As a consequence, for the last sixty years of the traffic there were always slave ships crossing the Atlantic that were liable to detention. Between 150,000 and 200,000 individuals disembarked at Havana, St Helena, Sierra Leone, Capetown, Rio de Janeiro, ports in Liberia, and several British Caribbean islands after naval cruisers diverted the vessels on which they were imprisoned. These, then, were vessels that set out to cross the Atlantic after acquiring captives in the usual way. Thanks to the recently published transatlantic slave trade database, there is now good information on where the captives embarked in Africa and where they would have disembarked in the Americas had the slave ship been allowed to complete its voyage. Whereas the slave ship is the basic record unit in the new slave trade CD-ROM, it is the individual on board that vessel that forms the record base of the reative African database currently under construction.

After 1818 many of the recaptives found themselves before international courts of mixed commission set up in Havana, St Helena, Sierra Leone, Capetown, Rio de Janeiro, and Liberia. When the captives disembarked in the port in which the court was located, officials
recorded personal details in large bound registers. Copies of both the Sierra Leone and Havana registers were sent to London and, though largely ignored by historians, the former records, at least, have been widely available in a published microfilm series for some time. Over a 2.5-year period between 1819 and 1844, the two courts processed several hundred vessels (many captured prior to embarking captives) and over 67,000 individuals. Each liberated African falling within the jurisdiction of the court was asked to provide name, age, and place of habitation. The court added height and sex of the person and a description of the most obvious cicatrizaton. In over 99 percent of the cases, the name that was recorded was clearly African. All information appears to have been mediated by an African interpreter, usually an earlier captive from the same part of the coast.

In the Havana registers, the identity of the interpreter is recorded. Despite the fact that the practice of recording place of habitation was quickly discontinued, the new data provide a solid basis for identifying ethnicity with minimal non-African mediation between the historical subject and the historian. In contrast to many plantation records in the Americas, the ethnic basis of many of the names is recognizable, and makes it possible to identify broad ethnic groupings, and in some cases, sub-groupings. With fieldwork and considerable help from African-based scholars in several disciplines, we expect to be able to draw inferences on the geography of the trade over the coming years.

The project speaks to both the histories of Africa and the Ameri-

3 Full references to the Public Record Office sources of the Sierra Leone data, all in the FO84 series, may be found in David Eltis, "Nutritional Trends in Africa and the Americas, 1819-1839." Journal of Interdisciplinary History 12(1982), 433-75. The Havana data are in FO313/56-62. David Northrup is the only historian to have exploited the ethnic potential of the Sierra Leone registers. Northrup, Trade Without Rulers: Precolonial Economic Development in Southeastern Nigeria (Oxford, 1978), appendix A, though his analysis was confined to the 1,200 records of Bight of Biafra captives for whom the registers supplied a country of origin designation. Roseanne Adderley has used the Havana records in her study of the communities established by the captives in the Bahamas and Trinidad, but her primary interest was not the reconstruction of the African origins of the nineteenth-century slave trade. See her ""New Negroes from Africa': Culture and Community among Liberated Africans in the Bahamas and Trinidad 1810 to 1900"" (Ph.D., University of Pennsylvania, 1996). The Sierra Leone records have also formed the basis of several studies of nutritional status and age and sex patterns in the slave trade.

4 The registers distinguish between "scores," "cuts," "marks," and "tattoos" on the one hand, which we take to be evidence of voluntary cicatrizaton procedures, and "scars," on the other. Scars are more likely to be the results of involuntary activity. Most of the latter would have little cultural significance.
cas. Given the relative paucity of written information on much of the African hinterland, the information embodied in this material will clarify the origins of the slave trade within the continent, and the status and ethnicity of the individuals involved. For the Americas, the project will help to identify the ethnic origins of the African diaspora with greater specificity. Although most of the captives did not land in the Americas, the information on origins and destinations in the Du Bois database makes it possible to use captives in the database as a proxy for the origins of those who made the crossing during the period.

How representative are these data? In the nineteenth century, people entered the slave trade from all of the eight major African areas of embarkation, with west-central Africa being easily the most important single region. However, the treaty system that provided the legal basis of the mixed commission courts—created essentially at British initiative—ensured that captures would not reflect the actual pattern of the trade. Treaty restrictions ensured that most of the cases adjudicated by the courts arose from detentions made north of the equator. Thus the regions and ports where the data are of most use are rather different from the overall pattern of the nineteenth century slave trade. Table 1 shows the regional distribution of the captives processed by the Havana and Sierra Leone courts, which between them accounted for over 90 percent of all cases brought before all mixed commission courts. No fewer than four out of every five captives in the sample embarked in the Bights of Benin and Biafra, whereas these regions supplied less than one-third of all captives carried from Africa at this time. The only other region significantly represented is Sierra Leone—ironically the region where the busiest court was located—and here the representativeness of the sample is about right as the proportion of captives from this region among the captives is about the same as the proportion of captives entering the trade as a whole in this period.

While Senegambia, the Windward Coast, and the Gold Coast are

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4Assessments of how representative are the Sierra Leone data in this and the next paragraph are based on comparisons of these data with the patterns of the overall trade described in David Eltis, "The Volume and Structure of the Transatlantic Slave Trade: A Reassessment," in *William and Mary Quarterly* (2001), 33-35, especially table 2.

5One reason for the creation of these detailed records was to monitor the possible re-entry of liberated Africans settled in villages in the interior of Sierra Leone. It is certain that in a very few cases individuals were captured by slave traders from these villages and re-entered the slave trade, though we have not so far come across anyone who appears in the registers twice.
Table 1. Regional Distribution of the Coastal Origins of Africans Registered at Sierra Leone and Havana after Disembarking from Slave Vessels, 1819-1844

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region of Embarkation</th>
<th>No of Recaptives</th>
<th>Row Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Senegambia</td>
<td>542</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sierra Leone</td>
<td>7,161</td>
<td>10.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Windward Coast</td>
<td>998</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gold Coast</td>
<td>637</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bight of Benin</td>
<td>27,590</td>
<td>40.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bight of Biafra</td>
<td>26,603</td>
<td>39.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West-Central Africa</td>
<td>3,836</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South-east Africa</td>
<td>591</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Regions</td>
<td>67,958</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


not represented in the sample, neither did they send many captives into the slave trade after 1820. By contrast, west-central Africa, whence departed over half the captives entering the Atlantic slave trade, accounts for less than one in twenty of the mixed commission recaptives. From the perspectives of the Americas, where the potential of the project for estimating the origins of arrivals from Africa should be obvious, we have been able to identify the intended port of disembarkation of nearly all the captured vessels, so that the captive sample may be used as a surrogate for the slave traffic to those parts of the Americas still receiving captives after 1818. Cuba and Bahia are overrepresented in our database; the French Americas and the large trade to Rio de Janeiro and points west and south of that port are underrepresented.

The concentration of the data in West Africa permits us to compare major embarkation points within the Bights of Benin and Biafra, as well as to assess patterns over the nearly quarter-century during which the two mixed commission courts registered recaptives. Table 2 shows the distribution of the recaptives by port of embarkation. In this period, as in others, the transatlantic slave trade was concentrated at remarkably few ports, and Table 2 reflects this pattern. Bias in the sample arising from treaty structures is confined to broad regions and does not affect ports within those regions—in other words, cruisers were equally likely to detain slave ships from any port within a given region. Thus, in both the sample and in the larger trade, over 70 percent of West African captives embarked from only eight ports, with Lagos and Bonny being by far the most important. Indeed these
ports each accounted for twice as many captives as did their next nearest regional rivals (Whydah in the Bight of Benin and Old Calabar in the Bight of Biafra), and probably embarked more than all the rest of the ports in their respective regions combined. The major preliminary implication of these patterns is that we have descriptions and nominal identities of several hundred captives per year for the major ports ranging over a quarter century. A detailed time series should be possible for the provenance zones of these major ports as well as broader comparisons between ports and regions using decennial or quarter-century groupings.

III

The core of the proposed analysis is the link between names and cicatrixation on the one hand, and ethnicity on the other. In the present data set, over 99 percent of the names entered by the court officials were single names and were clearly African. Nevertheless, the attempt to establish such a link raises some methodological issues that are the subject of the present paper. Because virtually no African or-

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7We do not assume that the few European-sounding names are, in fact, European, as some African and European names may sound similar. Where we cannot identify the African equivalent we must allow that such names may derive from yet-to-be-determined ethnolinguistic areas. In some instances, however, clerks enclosed the European name in inverted commas, (i.e., "Jack" and "Jim") or entered it as a second name, or an alias, in which cases we assume they intended the name to be read as European. Aliases are more commonly African than European, however.
thography existed before the mid-nineteenth century for the regions from which captured vessels sailed, the names themselves were entered into the registers phonetically. We do know that the courts employed interpreters drawn from previously captured vessels that had sailed from the same African ports as the vessel under adjudication.  

Reliance on the names of captives to derive ethnicity thus ensures a smaller European intermediary role in describing the way non-western or non-elite groups of people have identified themselves in the past than is the case for plantation and other commonly-used records of captives in the Americas.

It should be stressed that the linking of names and ethnicity carries no necessary implications for the definition of ethnicity itself. Of all the elements that go to make up an ethnic identity, only language and geographic location are essential to our analysis. We have a set of names which people who today identify themselves, for example, as Igbo, Efik, or Bayangi can recognize. Whether those populations on which the transatlantic slave trade drew in the 1820s and 1830s saw their group identities in these terms is largely irrelevant to our quest to establish a profile of the groups pulled into the slave trade, though as geography and language are fairly central to the way people see themselves, we would expect our findings to make a contribution to the broader debate on ethnicity and the extent to which it was transferred from the Old World to the New. This situation is not very different from the peasants of Brittany and Normandy who went to Quebec in the seventeenth century and the aforementioned German migrants who traveled from various parts of the Rhine to Pennsylvania in the eighteenth century. If a vessel carrying either of these groups had been stopped mid-Atlantic and the names and descriptions of everyone on board had been entered into registers without any indication of the nationality of the passengers or the political circumstances under which they traveled, would historians today have any hesitation in drawing inferences on the geographic origin and language of the passengers? As this European analogy implies, ethnolinguistic continuity in West Africa has been considerable over the centuries, though part of our research effort will be devoted to a careful tracing of migration since the ending of the slave trade.  

Work on the project in the form of entering the data into the computer and beginning the laborious task of developing plausible Afri-
can equivalents for the names that the clerks entered began in the
spring of 2000. All the data are now in machine-readable form, but
early in the project, the two principals decided to focus the initial
analysis on recaptives leaving from Bight of Biafra ports which at this
time effectively meant the Brass River, Bonny, New Calabar, Old
Calabar, and the Cameroons River. We have also decided initially to
focus on African names, rather than body-marks. So far we have
made tentative ethnic or linguistic identifications for about one third
of the captives leaving these ports. With appropriate contextual ad-
justments, we plan to replicate in other regions of Atlantic Africa the
methodological procedure laid down below. The Biafra section thus
forms a model for the larger project.

IV

As noted above, the primary data are subject to various influences,
which may be described as problems. First, as noted above, the names
were written before the orthographies of the corresponding African
languages came into being. The clerks who wrote the names did so
according to the phonetic conventions of the languages in which they
operated. For example, while English-speaking clerks entered the Si-
erra Leone records, the Havana records were the work of Spanish
speakers. This means that the names on the list can match the same
names written in current African orthographies only in coincidental
cases. To resolve the problem requires the verbal rendition of the
names in the register in as many variations as possible by persons
from the same linguistic background as the clerks.10

The next step is for individuals from African regions that supplied
particular ports with captives to transliterate the names in various
plausible forms. This process is particularly important in the Bight of
Biafra, where most languages are tonal. Thus differences in Igbo
names can be marked by small alterations in tone, variations which
clers could not be expected to mark in the registers they compiled. A
name like "Ada" may mean ádá in Igbo and Ádá in Isekiri. In addition,
dialectical differences are discernible. For instance, the name
"Ayogu" might be one of Igbo versions from different dialectical re-
regions—"Anyogu" in most parts of Igboland and "Ayogu" in nor-
ern Igboland. Here, the northern Igbo version seems closer, but the

10In the past twenty months we have pronounced and discussed between them-
selves 16,000 individual names, in addition to preparing and distributing tapes,
and pursuing separate discussions with the consultants listed below.
English language lacks the phoneme represented by the Igbo consonant “ny.” Specifying the exact form of the name given by a captive is risky in such a case, but at least the matching ethnolinguistic group is discernible.

Our basic strategy is to expose all but the most clearly identifiable of the names to experts in the ethnicities and languages of the regions that supplied the port from which vessels left. Apart from the literature on names and naming practices, there is considerable depth to the expertise available in Nigerian universities, as appendix A suggests, and on which we have begun to draw. In quite a number of cases, the names in the register and their modern counterparts have exactly the same spellings. Other common names leap off the page despite a variety of spellings. For Igbo females “Mgboli” appears as “Imbolee,” “Imbolay,” “Imbolee,” “Inbolee” and, given English-speakers’ discomfort with words beginning with combinations of consonants following on “M” and “N,” “Bolee“ and “Boley”. The male name “Okoronkwo” is written as “Okoronko,” “Coronquoh,” “Ochoronko,” “Okoranquah,” “Ocoromco,” “Ocoronquoh,” and several other variations. “Okoroofa” also has many forms (“Okraffoe,” “Ocrashoe,” “Okarafo,” “Ocrashoe,” “Karafoe,” “Okerafoe,” “Okarafoe,” and “Okarafoe”). But for most names, a wider assessment process is required. In the Delta region of the Niger River and the so-called Ejagham region of the old Ogoja province and Middle Belt region, where ethnic diversity is (and was) considerable, we are heavily dependent on others.

As the foregoing examples imply, in the absence of an orthography, the entries were influenced not only by English and Spanish orthographic and phonetic traditions, but also by the idiosyncracies of the various clerks that compiled the records. Different clerks had different ways of entering the names. In pre-quinine West Africa, staff turnover was extremely high. Clerks often died before they could establish a high degree of predictability in their entries. This problem manifests itself in several ways, some of which are eccentric. The individual

who registered recaptives from the vessel, *Nuestra Senora de Caridad* (voyageid 2325), for example, tended to use the letter “h” to start names starting with a vowel.\(^{12}\) Against our expectation of what we had come to identify as a pattern, his counterpart who registered recaptives from the vessels *Temerario* and *Esperança* (voyageids 2547 and 2546 respectively), both sailing from Bonny, tended to use “ch” for the k-like sound. We allowed for the ch-like sound at first, but found a complete dearth of such common Igbo names as “Okeke,” “Okafo,” or “Okoli,” that appear on all vessels in the sample that left this port. Only after making allowance for the hard “ch” sound, could we make sense of such names written as “Ochereche,” “Ochafo,” and “Ocholi.” This clerk’s “ch” thus represented the k-like sound, and his “Ocholey,” for example, is most likely “Okoli.” Besides such personal idiosyncracies, the linguistic and orthographic abilities of individual clerks varied considerably over the course of a quarter-century, as indeed did their descriptive skills in recording cicatization.

Nor were idiosyncracies confined to Europeans. Personal speech tendencies vary everywhere. The way different individuals articulate speech can fluctuate among persons with shared dialectical background—sometimes considerably. Some persons are not able to pronounce the letter “r” and render it as one would an “l”, so the name “Adaola” would emerge as “Adaora.” This particular tendency seems to be more prevalent among children. In some cases, individuals consistently swap the two sounds. Thus, even when the names are recorded accurately, the mispronounced letter might provide the critical sound distinguishing a name of one ethnic group from another, or one dialectical region of a language area from another. Elision, which characterized African as well as European speech, creates problems as well. Most Igbo names start and, more commonly again, end with vowels. In any combination of words, names included, the ending vowel of a word is dropped if the following word starts with a vowel.

Finally, naming practices change over time for no apparent reasons. This is particularly true of the allocation of names by sex. The

\(^{12}\)The term “voyageid” and all information on individual voyages derive from the unique identification number used in David Eltis, Stephen D. Behrendt, David Richardson and Herbert S. Klein, *The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade: A Database on CD-ROM* (Cambridge, 1999). The term “slaveid” refers to the unique identification number assigned to each of the individuals registered by the Sierra Leone clerks and entered directly into the new database. The Havana recaptives are assigned ids that follow on from the Sierra Leone numbers. Thus the last number in the Sierra Leone registers is 57,567, and the first id number from the Havana is 58001.
names "Agha," "Enu," and "Iro" are male Igbo names today, but their allocation to female recaptives in the registers indicates either a change in the gender of names or that there are female non-Igbo equivalents in other ethnic groups. For Cross River Igbo, there is also the possibility that a younger son could be given a female name when there had been no female offspring. Such instances occur in only a minority of the records, however, and faced with these often random patterns, researchers can do little more than be aware, sensitive, careful, and, above all, be prepared to collaborate with others.

Even if both renditions of names and recording procedures had been standardized and orthographies for sub-Saharan languages had been well-established at the time the courts of mixed commission operated, the fact remains that many names from the Biafran groups are combination of words. Names from Ijo-speaking peoples have a lower occurrence of these forms, and seem to be more standardized. Examples of such names are "Sotonye," "Sofiri," and "Sokari." The problem is most pronounced among the Igbo, where names can be coined at will from any combination of words or their abbreviations. As a consequence, although some names occur frequently, many Igbo names appear only once or twice in the records, even after allowance is made for the wide variety of spellings. Indeed, we have over 3000 separate Igbo names out of a total of 6000 so far identified, and over one-quarter of these appear only once in the registers. Even standard names are syntaxes, and we refer to them as standard because of the regularity and consistency in which they appear, notwithstanding ethnolinguistic variations.

For the Igbo, too, there is the further problem of the unusual way the orthography developed. One measure of the effectiveness of an orthography is the ease with which it represents phonemes in the corresponding language and, more importantly, the extent to which it captures these phonemes. The Igbo orthography is sorely lacking in the second regard and causes changes in people's names and words in favor of letters representing sounds from other dialectical areas. In other words, this tendency has altered the way people pronounce names that were hitherto pronounced in forms not allowed by the orthography. Thus, we resist the standardizing tendency of the

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13 We thank Onwuka Njoku for this information.
14 Thus, the vast majority of the identified names have the same gender as their 160-year-old counterparts. Thus, for example, "Chukwu," "Chukwuma," and "Okeke" are invariably registered against males rather than females. "Egbechi" and "Lolo" are consistently female.
15 G. Ugo Nwokeji, "The Biafran Frontier: Trade, Slaves and Aro Society, c. 1750-1905" (PhD., University of Toronto, 1999), 183-84.
present Igbo orthography, which obfuscates significant dialectical differences.

In view of these problems, some of the names in the database will be used for rather limited purposes or excluded from the analysis altogether. A minority of them in any event appear undecipherable, either because the English and Spanish clerks were insufficiently careful, or because usage of the name has lapsed, or the name itself has changed—sometimes in the latter case because of the way the orthography has developed. Yet present indications are that when our review process is closer to completion, we may have a tentative identification for no fewer than nine out of ten of the captives. This still leaves a further group—fortunately, much small again—that emerges as ambivalent (identified with more than one group) as a result of our screening processes. Our first recourse for this situation is to common sense. Thus, one would not expect too many Susu people to have embarked in the Bight of Biafra, for example, and selection of the geographically closest region (in sub-continental terms) as an identity appears called for. Some names, however, were simply multiethnic within a region.

Even here, useful information may be extracted where just two or even three groups are the possible identifiers. For such names, the various possibilities are listed, along with the potential memberships of groups. Thus “Atoh” who disembarked from an Old Calabar ship could be the Ibibio “Etoh”, the Igbo “Etoh,” or “Atoh,” a name among the Tikari in Western Cameroon.16 Our coding procedures reflect these possibilities, and such a combination may still be of analytical use if, for example, the intention is to establish the non-Igbo characteristics and share of peoples leaving a given port or region. On the other hand, there are just too many instances of names such as “Oga” and “Odu” showing up across ethnic lines within the Bight of Biafra, for them to be of use in pointing to either the geographic or linguistic origins of their bearers. For a minority of names then, there is no alternative to removing the name from subsequent analysis, unless other clues to identity emerge when the analysis is extended to cicatization.

16It is already becoming clear that, while the slave trade from the Cameroons River was very small compared to Bonny and even Old Calabar, many upland Cameroons groups entered the Atlantic slave trade through Old Calabar rather than Cameroons embarkation points. For precolonial trade links between what is now Nigeria and Cameroon see E.M. Chilver, “Nineteenth Century Trade in the Baminda Grassfields,” Afrika und Ubersee 45(1961), 233-57.
Despite the obvious limitations, it seems likely that our methods will provide a tentative identification of the vast majority of those leaving the Bight of Biafra, and even after eliminating multiethnic names, we believe this will be sufficient to add considerably to our knowledge of the provenance of the slave trade. Further, just as the identification process benefits from ongoing work outside history, so the end result should benefit non-historians. For example, while existing ethnolinguistic maps help in balancing the distribution of participants in the project, the project may help us to better understand the relationship among ethnolinguistic areas and basic changes in their characteristics over time, particularly the distribution of names by gender and cicatization. New information on past ethnic and sub-ethnic formations should emerge.

Above all, as with the CD-ROM on the transatlantic slave trade, the dataset and our analytical methods and procedures will be as transparent as possible. The original data are widely available on microfilm and we will ensure that the resulting database will also be widely available. A project website is already under construction, and given the fact that the new data set is much less complex than its recently published slave trade counterpart, there seems little need for a sophisticated interface and therefore publication in the form of a CD-ROM. The new dataset will clearly indicate our identifications of modern equivalents of names and our attributions of identity, both of which will therefore be subject to scrutiny and, no doubt, revision.

In summary, we hope that our research is the beginning of a long process of sifting, multidisciplinary consultation, and cooperation that will in the end provide the kind of hard evidence on the African origins of the transatlantic slave trade that the Du Bois institute’s dataset has provided for the middle passage and links between Africa and the Americas. Given the potential of the identified names to throw light on intergroup relations, ethnic formation, changes in naming practices, and the age and sex composition of specific linguistic and geographic groups, the new data will likely be of as much use to Africanists as to those studying the diaspora to the Americas. More fundamentally and to return to this paper’s starting point, we also hope that as a result of our research it will eventually be possible to know almost as much about ordinary Africans taken to the Americas as is presently known about their largely free European counterparts.