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RICE, RESISTANCE, AND FORCED TRANSATLANTIC COMMUNITIES: (RE)ENVISIONING THE AFRICAN DIASPORA IN LOW COUNTRY GEORGIA, 1750–1800

Karen B. Bell

[The Negro business is a great object with us, it is to the Trade of this country, as the Soul to the Body, and without it no House can gain a proper stability, the planter will as far as in his power sacrifice everything to attain [N]egroes and those who have the disposal of them, will always command their Crops, which is everything to a Merchant; the prices with us are tempting to the adventurer, until importation takes place directly from the Coast, many will be sent in from the West Indies . . . but this is not the [channel] we would wish to attain them though–tis from the Coast only we wish to receive them.]

—Joseph Clay, Savannah Merchant.1

On 27 July 1768 the Georgia Gazette posted an advertisement from John Mulryne for two runaway enslaved Africans, Carolina and John. Both men had run away from the Thunderbolt province in Savannah. Carolina, a newly imported African from the “Guiney Country,” had run away several times before and “bore the mark of an old offender.”2 His co-conspirator John, “a mulatto” who spoke “bad French,” may have been a forced labor immigrant who came to Savannah through the inter-Atlantic trade with the French Caribbean.3 Both John and Carolina were very keen men whom Mulryne believed could “pretend to be free.”4 Georgia’s colonial slave codes were the main reasons enslaved Africans and “mixed-race” people of color would “pretend to be free.” The colony’s 1765 slave code granted several citizenship privileges to immigrating free people of color and provided them a measure of independence. The development of statutory restrictions on the free black and mixed race population evolved slowly in the years following the legalization of slavery in Georgia in 1750, but the colony lacked the organization for physically monitoring the increasing number of enslaved Africans. Moreover, Africans and mulattoes who ran away successfully transformed the inland areas of Savannah into havens for fugitives of the slave system. The Gazette’s description of these two runaways provides important cultural and ideological insights into African origins and ethnicity, resistance, and freedom in Low Country Georgia.5

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The legalization of slavery in Georgia in 1750 and the concomitant emergence of the transatlantic slave trade shaped the evolution of communities among enslaved Africans and African Americans in the late 18th century. In Low Country Georgia, as well as in other parts of the Diaspora, enslaved Africans perceived themselves as part of a cultural community that had distinct ethnic and geographical roots. Randomization was not a function of the Middle Passage. Although slave ships traversed the coast of Africa to secure captives, in some instances their cargoes were drawn from only one port. Principal ports included Goreé, Bonny, Calabar, Elmina, and those on the Biafaran coast; consequently, the ethnic and cultural composition of captive Africans transported to the Americas reflected great homogeneity. Slave ships bound for Georgia included captive Africans who shared a similar linguistic heritage such as the Malinke and Serer who spoke the Mande language. To a large extent, the transatlantic Middle Passage defined and shaped the New World consciousness of captive Africans and informed their perceptions of kinship, ethnicity, and community. Unfortunately, given this context, the voices of captive Africans have been difficult to hear. With but a few exceptions, their words and thoughts are absent from extant archival records. However, commercial and business records on the transatlantic slave trade to Georgia reveal the geographical dimensions of the trade, and the ethnic groups dispersed throughout the region. We also learn much about the various forms of resistance recorded in these materials, thus providing an important historical frame of reference for “hearing” the voices of enslaved Africans.

Physical and cultural resistance to enslavement became an integral element in the formation of African diasporic communities. As discrete communities based upon shared experiences, African diasporic communities were linked by regional origins, American destinations, and New World cultural exchanges. By examining materials as divergent as slave ship manifests, slave narratives, plantation records, and journals, a composite picture of the enslavement, forced migration, and cultural resistance of enslaved Africans emerges which, in turn, illuminates the extent of the transference of African cultural practices and knowledge systems in the Low Country. Three interrelated factors help to explain how and why enslaved Africans in the Georgia Low Country retained much of their African cultural identity: the ratio of the African and African American population to the white population remained disproportionately high in several Low Country counties by 1790, and this pattern continued throughout the era of slavery (see Table 1). Second, the continued importation of new Africans in the years following the 1808 ban on the slave trade persisted, which reinforced African cultural traditions and reduced assimilation; and third, the Low Country environment, with its string of barrier islands, separated the island communities from the mainland white population, which reinforced Africans’ collective identity and consciousness (see Figure 1).

Table 1: Population of Low Country Georgia, 1790

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Slave/Free</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>% Black Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chatham</td>
<td>8,313</td>
<td>2,426</td>
<td></td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberty</td>
<td>4,052</td>
<td>1,303</td>
<td></td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glynn</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>193</td>
<td></td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camden</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>221</td>
<td></td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: United States Population Census, 1790. There were 112 free blacks in Chatham County; 27 in Liberty County; 5 in Glynn County; and 14 in Camden County. By 1820, Camden County’s population was 65 percent black. The fifth Low Country county, McIntosh County, separated from Liberty County in 1793.
By 1790 three principal transatlantic diasporic communities had emerged in Georgia’s Low Country: the Savannah-Ogeechee district, located between the Savannah and Ogeechee rivers, contained Chatham County; the Midway district, located between the Savannah and Altamaha rivers, contained Liberty and McIntosh counties; and the Altamaha district, which stretched from the Atlantic between the Altamaha and St. Mary’s rivers, which included Glynn and Camden counties. These communities served as “watersheds,” the land area which contributes surface water to a river or other body of water. Thus, settlement in watershed areas involves participating in a complex and evolving ecological environment. The region’s five large rivers—the Savannah, Ogeechee, Altamaha, Satilla, and St. Mary’s—were vital to the growth of rice and served as the focal point for settlement.

The arrival of over 13,000 Africans in Low Country Georgia led to the development of the distinct Gullah/Geechee language, an English-based creole dialect with West African origins. This shared language made possible the establishment of a sense of community in the new territory. The cultural identity of these forced transatlantic communities emanated from shared African traditions and experiences, and intersecting social relations and linguistic connections. Building on both their African background and American experience, Africans in Low Country Georgia retained much of their African culture and used it to mount physical and cultural resistance to their enslavement. Cultural resistance represented a salient form of opposition to their legal and religiously sanctioned enslavement. As we shall see, the establishment of rice plantations along the coastal and inland areas of Georgia in the 18th century produced a unique environment for enslaved Africans to re-create social and cultural institutions. Functioning within the constraints of an inhumane system, Africans and African Americans established familial bonds, preserved agricultural techniques, re-created artistic expressions, maintained Islamic practices, and syncretized African religious concepts with Christian beliefs and practices.

THE COLONIZATION OF GEORGIA

Historians have generally perceived colonial Georgia as sui generis because of its small size and unique utopian intentions. Although James Oglethorpe was following a charitable impulse in founding the colony, its underlying purpose was to guard the British colonies “southern frontier” with Spanish Florida. Georgia’s trustees exaggerated about the abundance of natural resources in hopes that the European settlers would pursue alternatives to enslaved African labor. Georgia’s colonizers billed it as “The Promised Land,” and they offered land and the possibility for economic fulfillment to those who were willing to work hard. Prohibitions against slavery and drinking served the militaristic purposes of the colony, which included preparing soldiers for clashes with the Spanish. Colonial Georgia, like most of colonial North America, underwent significant demographic and cultural change due to immigration, forced migration, and Native American displacement.

The earliest attempt to grow rice in colonial Georgia was in 1739 by German settlers from Salzburg, but this was soon abandoned. Most of Savannah’s European settlers came to believe that only West Africans could withstand the environmental and health hazards associated with the “swamp work” required for rice production. However, in colonial South Carolina by the 1750s, the planter-merchants there realized that they overestimated the relative ability of West Africans to withstand intense heat and labor; and they needed to identify West African ethnic groups from rice growing regions. These regions included Senegambia the area in West Africa north of Sierra Leone; and the Windward Coast, the area from Sierra Leone to the west of the Rio Assini, including the Ivory Coast. Many of the planter-merchants who established rice plantations in the Savannah region had migrated from South Carolina, and they brought their preference for enslaved African laborers with them.

The demand for African enslaved labor increased with the establishment of rice and “Sea Island cotton” plantations in the late 18th century. As rice became a profitable export crop for merchants in Savannah, African captives arrived from the “Rice Coast” and “Grain Coast,” West Africa, the area extending from the Senegambian region to Sierra Leone. During the early period of Savannah’s involvement in the transatlantic slave trade between 1755 and 1767, 53 percent of enslaved Africans brought to Savannah originated from the Caribbean, while 35 percent came directly from the Rice and Grain coasts. In comparison, during the period between 1768 and 1780, 68 percent of slaves imported into Savannah originated from the Rice and Grain coasts. From 1764 to 1798, West African captives from rice growing regions accounted for 45 percent of enslaved workers brought to Savannah (see Tables 2-5).

Most voyages across the Atlantic Ocean traveling from West Africa to Savannah occurred between April and September. Merchants believed that seasonal changes affected the health of captive Africans considerably, and thus preferred to arrange for vessels to arrive during the relatively mild spring and summer months. In 1766, for example, all five slave vessels arriving in Savannah from Africa landed before November. This pattern continued with few exceptions through the 1790s. The duration of the voyage, combined with the prolonged confinement of captive Africans, increased the spread of infectious diseases. In an attempt to prevent the spread of infectious disease outbreaks in Savannah, city officials in 1767 authorized the construction of a multi-story quarantine facility, a “Lazaretto” (Italian for “pest house”) on the west end of Tybee Island. Prior to entering the Savannah port, captives coming directly from West Africa remained quarantined at Lazaretto where they were inspected for infectious diseases by a physician. Infirm Africans were kept at the facility and those who died there were buried on the west end of Tybee Island.
Table 2: Savannah Planter-Merchants Who Received and Sold West Africans from Rice Growing Regions, 1765-1771

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Firm</th>
<th>Origin of Africans</th>
<th>Quantity Sold</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ingliss and Hall</td>
<td>Gambia and Sierra Leone</td>
<td>667</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clay and Habersham</td>
<td>Gambia</td>
<td>320</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Graham/Ingliss and Hall</td>
<td>Rice Coast</td>
<td>340</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Graham</td>
<td>Sierra Leone</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Craig, MacLeod, and Co.</td>
<td>Isle of Banana (Sierra Leone)</td>
<td>237</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joseph Clay</td>
<td>Gambia</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert Watts</td>
<td>Bance Island, Africa</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cowper and Telfair</td>
<td>Windward Coast</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert Watts</td>
<td>Isle of Goree (Senegal)</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broughton and Smith</td>
<td>Senegal</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: “Inward Slave Manifests, Savannah,” RG 36, NARA, Washington, DC.

Table 3: African Captives Imported Into Savannah by Origin in the Early Time Period, 1755-1767

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Origin</th>
<th>Number of Africans</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Senegal, Gambia, Sierra Leone, Windward Coast</td>
<td>1,188</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Africa*</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Central Africa</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jamaica</td>
<td>353</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Christopher’s</td>
<td>430</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montserrat</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Kitts</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Croix</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curacao</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grenada</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Islands*</td>
<td>166</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arrivals from North America*</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>3,318</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 4: African Captives Imported into Savannah by Origin in the Middle Time Period, 1768-1780

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Origin</th>
<th>Number of Africans</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gambia, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Windward Coast</td>
<td>2,932</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gold Coast</td>
<td>287</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angola and West Central Africa</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Origin Unknown*</td>
<td>280</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caribbean*</td>
<td>337</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>4,336</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 5: African Captives Imported into Savannah by Origin in the Late Time Period, 1784-1798

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Origin</th>
<th>Number of Captives</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Isle of Goree (Senegal), Gambia, Sierra Leone, Windward Coast</td>
<td>2,829</td>
<td>45.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gold Coast</td>
<td>1,518</td>
<td>24.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Origin Unknown*</td>
<td>1,146</td>
<td>18.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Central Africa</td>
<td>335</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caribbean*</td>
<td>402</td>
<td>6.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>6,230</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The Middle Passage can be characterized as a space of “in betweenness” clouding over the cultural origins of captive Africans. As a voyage through death, the Middle Passage paradoxically asserted life through its destructive process. Within the marginal spaces of slave ships, captive Africans forged bonds of kinship and created forced transatlantic communities under desperate conditions. Captive Africans Lempster, James, Peter, Fanny, Silvia, and others who arrived on the same slave vessel, labored together on the Ogeechee rice plantation of James Read. Identified as “Gola slaves,” they maintained ethnic and kinship ties through their
forced migration, settlement, and collective escape from slavery. The ethnic and
cultural makeup of the West African supply zones for the Georgia Low Country
during the late 18th century included the Fula, Ibo, Gola, and Mande speakers such
as the Malinke, Bambara, and Serer.22

The late 18th century represented a critical period in West African history. The
thirty-year period from 1760 to 1790 was the most violent phase in the conflicts in
the hinterland region of Futa Jallon, the interior of present day Guinea. Intermecine wars,
caused by an alliance of Fulbe and Jallonke Muslims against non-Muslims, resulted
in a greater than one hundred percent increase annually in slave exports from the
region. From 1760 to 1780 the transatlantic slave trade peaked with an estimated
65,500 captive Africans reaching the Americas annually. Historian Walter Rodney
reported that 75 percent of the 18th century trade came from the West African interior.23

Between 1778 and 1783 the hostilities between the American colonists and the
British extended to Africa, as a result of the French alliance with the American
revolutionaries. This alliance exacerbated hostilities between the British and French,
who also waged war in Africa to maintain zones of influence over important slave
forts along the West African coast such as Saint James in the Gambia, Saint Louis
in Senegal, and Goree Island off the coast of Senegal. The Senegambian supply
zone provided the greatest number of captive Africans during the middle period of
direct importation to Savannah. Extending from the Senegal River to the Casamance
River and from the Atlantic coast to the upper and middle Niger valleys, this area
produced several conduits for the capture and sale of captive Africans. During the
1760s and 1770s captive Africans shipped from the Gambia and Senegal came from
sources closer to the coast. Beginning in the second half of the 1780s and continuing
through the next decade, Senegambia became a major center for the transatlantic
slave trade to North America.24 The two most important staging areas for this trade
were the coastal areas from lower Senegal to the lower Casamance valley; and the
area encompassing the middle and upper Senegal and Gambia valleys. The Wolof
people dominated these regions and maintained strong political centers in the
coastal states of Waalo, Kajor, and Baol.25

Islamic reform movements, which originated in Morocco and spread into
Senegambia during the first half of the 18th century, had a significant impact on the
coastal states of the Senegambian region and the direct trade to Savannah and other
parts of the Americas. Islamic expeditions coincided with periods of the worst
climatic crisis as well. A series of famines due to low rainfall spread throughout
Senegambia from the early 1700s to 1760. This period witnessed depopulation in
Senegambia as famine and the transatlantic slave trade took a heavy toll. The second
half of the 18th century witnessed a general improvement in climate and decrease
in disease outbreaks. The exceptions were in the south bank region of the Gambia,
which experienced low rainfall, and in the hinterland river valleys in the 1780s.26

In Waalo, ongoing conflict with North African Muslims from neighboring
Trarza culminated in a series of devastating raids in 1775–1776. The Muslims, who
were often subsidized by the French and English, captured between 9,000 and
10,000 West Africans during this period.27 These raids extended southward into
Kajor. Wars and raids resulted in the enslavement of large numbers of people from
Waalo and Kajor and from states on their borders through the end of the 18th
century.28 Some kings in Futa, who objected to the massive export of males in the
slave trade, retained men who were captured in raids. In some instances local rulers
preferred to integrate these captives into their societies.29

The second staging area for the trade, the upper Senegal and Gambia valleys,
produced a significant number of captives from the Senegambian region. The slave
trade from Gajaaga and the Gambia regions reached its peak in the 1780s when
one-third of the captives came from the interior beyond Gajaaga and two-thirds
from the Gambia. During this period of escalation in slave trading, the demand for
captives from the Senegambian region increased. Savannah merchant Joseph Clay
asserted in 1775 that captives from the Gambia were more preferable than the “Ibos,
Conga’s, Cape Mounts, and Angola Negroes,” arguably because of their knowledge
of rice cultivation.30 Although “Ibos” or Igbo people were not preferred, slave
traders captured Igbos like Carolina Underwood of Sapelo Island as a young man
in Georgia. During the 18th century, Igbos became significant actors in the
transatlantic slave trade, regulating trade and generating large numbers of captives
through raids and warfare.31

The transatlantic slave trade imposed serious restraints on agricultural
production, and paradoxically served to reinforce domestic slavery in West Africa.
In the Fouta Djalon territories controlled by the Fulas, Mandingas, and Susus,
captives not sold to European traders were used locally to cultivate rice and other
commodities.32 An indication of the production of rice in Sierra Leone, the
secondary slave supply zone, is provided by Major A.G. Laing who traveled to
Sierra Leone in June 1821. Major Laing observed that Falaba, the capital of the
Sulima Susus, had its own town, known as “Konkodoogoree,” where the enslaved
captives resided. Laing found the fields of that area the best-tilled and best-laid out
compared to any other region observed throughout his travels.33 Similarly, Chief
William Cleveland, a powerful mixed race slave trader, lived near the Banana
Islands of Sierra Leone in 1701 and maintained extensive rice fields cultivated by
slave labor.34 These early accounts of West African rice culture and its practices
often described the range of cultivation techniques employed. These travelers
reported on the construction of earthen embankments, canals, and sluices; the use
of tides, flood recession, and rainfall for planting; specialized implements for
preparing heavy soils; as well as the seasonal rotation in land use between rice fields
and cattle pastures.35
Recent scholarship by David Eltis, Philip Morgan, and David Richardson has challenged the contributions of diasporic Africans to rice production in North America. Based upon an examination of slave ships included in Voyages: The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, they argued that enslaved Africans from rice growing regions had very little impact on the development of the rice industry in South Carolina and Georgia.

According to Eltis, Morgan, and Richardson, the Rice and Grain coast region was a secondary zone in supplying African captives to the tobacco-producing Chesapeake region, as well as the South Carolina and Georgia coasts. However, Voyages: The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, which has been supplemented with the online Voyages Database, still undercounts the number of voyages from Africa, especially the number of direct voyages from the Rice and Grain coasts to South Carolina and Georgia. An examination of extant ship manifests from the Voyages: The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database reveals that 60 percent of slave vessels arriving in Georgia between 1755 and 1858 brought captives from rice producing regions in West Africa. The Senegambia, Sierra Leone, and the Windward Coast provided the largest percentage of slaves over a 103-year period. Although it may be difficult to determine the exact number of vessels that disembarked from West Africa and landed in Georgia, extant records of slave voyages underscore an identifiable pattern of securing captive Africans from rice producing regions.

In assessing the validity of the arguments presented by Eltis, Morgan, and Richardson, Gwendolyn Midlo Hall and Walter Hawthorne contend that a major problem with the Voyages: The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database is the exclusion of information on the ethnic makeup of those who arrived in rice producing regions of the Americas. Without such data, the overly broad conclusions reached by Eltis, Morgan, and Richardson are seriously undermined. The Mandinka, Bambara, and Wolof were rice-producing peoples who inhabited the Upper Guinea Coast and many ended up in the rice producing districts in Louisiana, Maranhão, Brazil, and Low Country Georgia in the 18th and 19th centuries. Moreover, the reliance on quantifiable evidence is questionable and does not take into account the relevant qualitative approaches such as Judith Carney’s "geographic perspective" on the dissemination of rice culture in the Atlantic World; or Edda Fields-Black’s use of sociolinguistic evidence to chart cultural transformations from the old worlds to the new.

AFRICAN TECHNOLOGIES AND RICE CULTIVATION IN COLONIAL GEORGIA

Indigenous African technologies developed and sustained rice cultivation in West Africa and the Americas. In 1914 French botanist August Chevalier recognized that the indigenous West African rice systems cultivated Oryza Glabberima, a separate and distinct African rice species. Earlier, in 1855 it was German Botanist Ernst Gottleib Studel, who identified and actually named the Oryza Glabberima species, assuming it was cultivated in other regions. Studel also concluded that this rice growing culture formed the nucleus of a sophisticated knowledge system that enabled the crop to be cultivated in both lowland and upland environments. Cultivation cycles ranged from three to six months and included such techniques as direct seeding, and broadcasting—the process of planting rice seedlings, and then transplanting. Women were central to the planting, milling, and processing of rice. In Senegambia and other areas settled by the Mandinka, rice was the women’s crop and they designed and managed the diverse microenvironments, monitoring water availability and determining salinity, flooding levels, and soil conditions. Milling rice with a mortar and pestle and winnowing rice in farmer baskets represented a transfer of specialized technology to the Low Country, based upon female farming systems in West African societies. Similarly, in the Low Country on several plantations during the colonial and antebellum periods, the labor force for cultivating rice was disproportionately female, and women were valued for both their productive and reproductive abilities. In the early 20th century Katie Brown and other Sapelo Island women continued to cultivate rice as their “money crop.” But these women had learned the techniques from their foremothers who passed on this specialized knowledge for rice cultivation.

The growth of rice in Georgia depended upon the tide-flow method, specific soil requirements, and the knowledge and skill of enslaved Africans and African Americans. The soil required for growing good rice crops consisted of clay and swamp muck. As a part of the subsoil, clay retained water well when flooded and thus prevented the fields from losing large amounts of water through leakages. The tide-flow method required the flooding and draining of rice fields based upon tidal fluctuations. Since rice requires fresh water, rice-growing lands were located above the salt-water lines on fresh water rivers, and places where the fresh water level could be raised by each high tide. African indigenous knowledge of rice culture provided the principles and flexibility for adapting rice production to conditions in the Georgia Low Country.

The production of rice requires both skilled and well-coordinated labor. Georgia’s rice industry placed enslaved men and women in both agricultural and non-agricultural jobs such as rice milling and grist milling. Rice plantations functioned as “huge hydraulic machines,” which necessitated the construction and maintenance of floodgates, trunks, canals, banks, and ditches. Men also worked as carpenters, brick masons, and blacksmiths; and they manned ferry boats, tugboats, drays, and steamboats, which sailed down the Altamaha and the Ogeechee rivers, the main arteries for transporting rice to markets.

Workers began preparing the soil for rice cultivation in January and continued until early March. They planted seeds in straight-line trenches four inches wide and
eleven inches apart. After flooding the fields for eight to nine days, men drained the water, and the fields were allowed to dry for ten days. Referred to as the “sprout flow,” this initial flooding resulted in the sprouting of seeds. A second flow, referred to as the “point flow,” occurred for eight to ten days. This flooding and draining of fields continued until the final flooding, referred to as the “harvest flow,” in September. Gathering rice required the use of sickles in which the workers grasped a handful of rice stalks with the left hand and swung the sickle with the right in a rhythmic pattern. After harvesting, they threshed the rice to remove the seeds at the threshing mill. Apart from threshing mills, workers pounded rice used for home consumption with mortars and pestles, and winnowed it in reed baskets made in West African styles.

Enslaved Africans labored on Georgia’s barrier islands for nearly a century, and they produced rice and Sea Island cotton within the confines of an isolated environment on Georgia’s six largest offshore islands—Cumberland, Jekyll, St. Simons, Sapelo, St. Catherine, and Ossabaw. This region is divided into seven natural ecosystems, including barrier islands, marine coast, estuaries and sounds, uplands, the mainland, rivers, and swamps. A culture of resistance, informed by an African identity and consciousness, permeated the marshlands and tidal rivers of Low Country Georgia, and extended to a host of smaller barrier islands and inland rice districts such as Skidaway, Butler, Argyle, and Whitemarsh islands.

HEARING THE VOICES OF ENSLAVED AFRICANS

The narratives of formerly enslaved Africans and African Americans, many considered “fugitives,” contain cultural expressions about the nature of resistance and the desire for freedom within transatlantic diasporic communities. Narratives of resistance represent a discourse on human agency, and describe the attempts of enslaved individuals to construct an identity, a life, and a set of relationships within the boundaries established by the slave regime. As a central epistemological category, slave narratives represent a distinct category of human experience and contain a body of ideas for confronting the contemporary discourses on power and authority. Narratives of resistance offer accounts of identity-formation under brutal, dehumanizing conditions and they generally reflect the oppressed circumstances for African Americans in the Low Country. There are utopian elements in the “private transcripts” of enslaved men and women, where an autonomous social space allowed the assertion of dignity and personhood. This can be understood through the experiences of Ben and Nancy who escaped their enslavement on James Read’s rice plantation in early December 1789 by crossing the Ogeechee River with several other captives. Prior to their escape, Ben and Nancy had married. Their marriage and their plans to escape slavery by way of Spanish Florida underscore the determination of enslaved Africans to subvert the structures and powers that defined the system of slavery. Like Ben and Nancy, Patty and Daniel, who labored on William Stephens Bewlie’s rice plantation, planned their escape from slavery by running away to Spanish Florida in May 1789. Nine months earlier, Patty had given birth to a son, Abram. Patty carried her son and additional clothing through the swamps of the Ogeechee Neck enroute to Florida and freedom.

Despite the exploitation and degradation, the men, women, and children who labored in the Low Country were able to subvert the aims of the task labor system and reduce the limitations on slave autonomy. The task system assigned each enslaved laborer a certain amount of work each day. Depending upon the weather and the required task, working under the task system was arduous and unhealthy. For enslaved women such as Sina and Eve on Rev. Charles C. Jones’s Montevideo plantation; and Patty and Nancy on Stephen Habersham’s Grove Hill plantation in 1856, rice cultivation and hoeing a quarter acre in inclement weather meant spending long hours in “cold, damp, and changeable weather in February or March.” In addition, like the men, women performed digging and cleaning tasks. For example, women used long-handled scoops to remove the mud that accumulated in the ditches. This meant that the health of enslaved women on the plantations was often poor, and they suffered from a variety of diseases and ailments such as fallen wombs, spinal injuries from backbreaking work in rice and cotton fields, fevers, pulmonary illness, rheumatism, and foot rot—caused by standing knee deep in water. On St. Simons Island the slave population on the Kelvin Grove plantation in Glynn County in 1853 totaled eighty-one, with forty-five (56 percent) women. Twenty-three of these women were field hands who cultivated rice and Sea Island cotton. While the task system allowed enslaved workers “an economy of time” to plant and tend their own gardens and raise livestock, coercion and brute force remained the central elements of the labor system. Phoebe and Cash, who were married on Rev. Charles Jones’s plantation in Liberty County, in the Midway district during the 1830s, expressed open hostility and resisted on numerous occasions the demands of slave driver Cato. As a field laborer and plantation seamstress, Phoebe made clothing for Cato and other enslaved workers and performed other valuable tasks on Jones’s Montevideo plantation. But given their rebellious behavior and Jones’s unwillingness to separate slave families, he sold the couple and several of their children in January 1854 to a slave trader from New Orleans.

CULTURAL RETENTIONS AND SYNCRETIZATION

The idea that the enslaved could transcend their physical oppression by returning to Africa represented a belief in a reverse transatlantic migration. Stories of flight back to Africa, preserved as intergenerational narratives within transatlantic
provides an important window through which to examine the language and religion of resistance within the discourse and cultural logics of slavery. The emergence of an alternate conception of contemporary realities. In 1803 newly arrived African captives, who were sold to John Couper and Thomas Spalding by the Savannah firm of Mein and Mackey, endured a second “voyage through death” down the Georgia coast from Savannah to St. Simons Island. Their confinement below deck created the conditions necessary to plot their resistance against the overseer and the crew. Landing near the marshlands, the Igbohs began singing and wading through the waters of the Altamaha River where twelve drowned in an attempt to reverse their forced migration.

Narratives of “freedom through death” contain the ideological underpinnings for an alternate conception of contemporary realities. In 1803 newly arrived African captives, who were sold to John Couper and Thomas Spalding by the Savannah firm of Mein and Mackey, endured a second “voyage through death” down the Georgia coast from Savannah to St. Simons Island. Their confinement below deck created the conditions necessary to plot their resistance against the overseer and the crew. Landing near the marshlands, the Igbohs began singing and wading through the waters of the Altamaha River where twelve drowned in an attempt to reverse their forced migration.

The historical memory of formerly enslaved Africans and African Americans provides an important window through which to examine the language and religion of resistance within the discourse and cultural logics of slavery. The emergence of a culture of resistance within African diasporic communities embodied a complex system of religious beliefs and linguistic practices in the Low Country of South Carolina and Georgia beginning in the late 18th century. The language developed by enslaved African Americans in that region emerged as a central component of their ontological praxis. This communal language spoken by enslaved Africans and their descendants provides important insights into how they understood and communicated their experiences. The lucidity of their symbolic and metaphorical language expressed the ways they transformed their experiences into images and stories that recounted both their oppression and liberation. The Spirituals and religious music of formerly enslaved African Americans from the Low Country have become oral texts that offer artistic expressions of their lived experiences. Dublin Scribben, who was born in West Africa and enslaved in Liberty County in the 1850s, fused English with his native language to express both the oppression of the Middle Passage and the symbolic rebirth of the individual. In the song “Freewill” [Freewill], the ocean serves as a metaphor for rebirth and freedom.

Going home to see the ocean
religion told New Jerusalem
I bring good news, a-tatta-ho!
My soul seen the ocean.

Similarly, expressions of “freedom through death” represent the ultimate conception of an end of physical bondage. In Liberty County, Abraham Scriven expressed profound grief upon being sold and separated from his wife, children, and parents in September 1858, vowing to meet them in heaven if he could not rejoin them on earth.

The persistence of African languages in the Low Country is documented in the accounts of planters and in the narratives of enslaved men and women and their progeny. Both John Couper (1759–1850) and his son James Hamilton Couper (1794–1866), who owned several plantations on St. Simons Island and along the Altamaha River, including the well-known Hopeton Plantation, expressed their belief that enslaved African Americans continued to speak and understand the “Foulah” language spoken in parts of Guinea. The gradual syncretization of African and English words to create a new language represented an important development for African diasporic communities in the Low Country. Through this language a rich expressive culture emerged in which men and women articulated their feelings, hopes, and dreams; and forged and maintained kinship networks characterized by a common bond based on familial and social relationships. As historians Margaret Washington Creel and Charles Joyner have demonstrated in their studies of the Low Country’s African American communities, the creation of the Gullah language helped an oppressed people to endure the realities of slavery.

In addition to language, religion played a key role in building and sustaining a culture of resistance among enslaved Africans and African Americans in the Low Country. Religion and religious activities helped diasporic Africans to survive under the conditions of enslavement. Anthropologists and historians Melville Herskovits, Sidney Mintz, Albert Raboteau, Robert Farris Thompson, Mechal Sobel, and others view the fusion of Christianity with African religious beliefs as a form of cultural resistance. Oppressed Africans and African Americans developed a strong religious consciousness that helped to shield them from the physical and psychological effects of enslavement. African’s worldviews, and the cultural beliefs and practices associated with them, were often expressed through Islamic and Christian concepts in the New World.
A community of extended, multi-generational families, tied by bonds of kinship, shaped the cultural meanings and performative practices of African American religion. First generation Africans provided the cultural and linguistic foundation for the development of syncretized religious traditions. The capture and forced migration of Salih Bilali from Maasina in the upper Niger valley floodplain illustrates this transition. Born in 1765, Salih was captured by slave traders in 1790 during the period the Bambara people were consolidating their control of the upper Niger. After his confinement at Annamboce, along the Gold Coast, European slave traders purchased and brought him to the Low Country in 1800 where he eventually became the “head driver” on John Couper’s Cannon Point plantation on St. Simons Island. Although he had been given the name “Tom,” he remained a devout Muslim and continued to refer to himself as Salih. 46 Linguist Annette Kashif found that the private or “basket” names of the Gullah people in the Low Country in the early 20th century were invariably African homophones. 69 Even though their memories of the meanings of their names faded with each ensuing generation, the Gullah people continued to use these personal names derived from West African languages as their older relatives had done. 70

When 88-year-old Ben Sullivan of St. Simons was interviewed for the Georgia Writers’ Project in the 1930s, he remembered that in addition to his father Bilali, and grandfather Salih Bilali, two other Muslims in the community, “ole Israel” and “Daphne,” continued to adhere to Islamic religious practices. Although written in dialect, Sullivan’s narrative describes the place of Islam within the religious life of this diasporic community. According to Sullivan, “ole Israel he pray a lot wid a book [perhaps the Qur’an] he hab wut he hide, an he take a lill mat an he say he prayuh on it. He pray wen dhu sun go up an wen dhu sun go down. . . . He aluz tie he head up in a wite clawt an seem he keep a lot uh clawt on hand.”71 Similarly, Daphne prayed regularly, bowing “two or tree times in duh middle uh dhu prayuh,” and was usually veiled.72 Sullivan, who was born in the 1840s, remembered many Africans whom he referred to as not “name,” an indication that a strong Islamic belief system continued to shape their social reality.73 Within this African and Islamic socio-religious context, the desire to maintain cultural practices that reflected an African identity persisted and often conflicted with the worldview of the planters. For example, it was reported that Africans such as “ole man Okra” and others on St. Simons Island built homes that were similar to those found in West Africa and used words and concepts from African languages to tell and retell narratives of their lost African homelands.74

Country markings also revealed the extent to which enslaved Africans reinforced ideas of kinship and African identity. Rosanna Williams of Tatamville, Chatham County, in the Savannah-Ogeechee district, received her father’s country marks at a very young age. Her father “Lunnon Dennerson” and grandfather “Golla Dennerson” whom Rosanna described as “King uh his tribe,” labored on Charles Grant’s plantation on the islands near Brunswick, Georgia.75 Rosanna was a member of the third generation of Africans in the North American Diaspora and confidently expressed her family’s origins in present day Liberia and revealed the circle markings on her chest, which in several West African cultures represent initiation into secret societies, as a symbol of her Gola identity. 76 As late as the 1930s African Americans in the Low Country continued to identify their African and Islamic roots with some degree of specificity. H. H. Miller, a resident of Tatamville, Chatham County, recounted that he knew “many of the ‘Golla’ tribesman who were brought to this country” when he was a boy in the 1870s. 77 The majority of these Africans may have been transported in November 1858 aboard the slave ship Wanderer, believed to be the last vessel to transport enslaved Africans illegally into coastal Georgia. According to Chatham County resident Toni Houston, slave trader Charles Lamar purchased these Gola Africans and sold them to local merchant James McMullen. 78 The extensive Gola presence in Low Country communities is apparent in naming practices and in the continued use of words from the Gola language. Among the terms Toni Houston remembered were musango for tobacco; mulafu for whiskey; sisure for chicken; and gombay for cow. 79

Both the First and Second Great Awakenings shaped the religious consciousness of enslaved Africans and African Americans in the southern states. Although religious conversions varied by location and African ethnicity, Christianity appealed to many African Americans in the Low Country because of the parallels between West African and Christian customs, rituals, and beliefs. The sacrament of baptism in particular corresponded with many Africans’ beliefs that certain bodies of water were sacred. 80 West African religious beliefs and practices continued to shape their lives even after their “conversion” to Christianity. As in other diasporic communities, African Americans syncretized elements of Christianity with the sacred beliefs and traditions they inherited from their West African heritage, and in doing so informed the contours of American religious culture. 81 Church records for Darien Baptist Church in McIntosh County near Sapelo Island reveal that over nine hundred enslaved Africans and African Americans attended services by 1860.82 In Liberty County on the plantation of Rev. Charles Jones, “Lucy” and other enslaved African Americans who converted to Christianity attached their own liberatory political meanings to the biblical messages. 83

In the 19th century many planters sought to control the religious practices of their enslaved workers. However, the evidence is clear that many enslaved African Americans embraced an Africanized version of Christianity. In 1860 in Georgia’s Low Country it was estimated that over 4,720 free and enslaved African Americans belonged to the African or “Colored” Baptist churches. 84 As Africanized Christianity emerged, Islamic practices underwent a transformation and Christian and Islamic identities were syncretized. This is clear in the descriptions of “Preacher Little,” a
peripatetic exhorter belonging to Sapelo Island’s First African Baptist Church in 1866. Even in their physical appearances Preacher Little and other Low Country African Americans were often described as “tall, lean and resembling Arab sheiks.”

Within African diasporic communities, enslaved Africans expressed their political will to resist enslavement and maintain their dignity. Their dislocation was the result of the slave trade, which simultaneously fostered physical and cultural resistance to enslavement that began during the Middle Passage and continued upon arrival in the Americas. A wide range of transactions resulted in African captives from the Rice and Grain coasts transforming the physical landscape of Low Country Georgia. As enslaved Africans altered the physical environment, African kinship, religious, and other cultural practices were also transformed in the New World and a distinct collective memory and African identity survived physical bondage. This collective memory served as the liminal space within which enslaved Africans re-envisioned their Diaspora, preserved in oral texts such as “When My Lord Calls Me I Must Go”:

I'm goin' to cross that ocean by myself[']

By myself[']

I'm goin' to cross that ocean by myself[']

When my Lord call me I must go

I'm goin' to weep like a willow, moan like a dove

I'm goin' to cross that ocean by myself[']

NOTES

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1 Letters of Joseph Clay, Merchant of Savannah, 1776–1798, vol. VIII, (Savannah, GA, 1913), 187.
2 Georgia Gazette, 27 July 1768.
3 Ibid.

(Re)Envisioning the African Diaspora in Low Country Georgia, 1750–1800


First hand accounts of the middle passage by Africans are scant. Narratives by Olaudah Equiano and Mary Prince are the best known. Additional voices are accessible at http://www.awesomestories.com/history/slav_voices_ohl.htm. For documentary evidence of an active illegal trade, see also RG 21, Records of the District Courts of the United States, Tentativa, Petitions, Sirenas, Anitop, Boxes 22, 23, 26, 28, National Archives and Records Administration (hereinafter cited as NARA), Southeast Region, Atlanta, GA; Senate Executive Documents, 35th Congress, 2nd Session, 1858–59, Vol. 7, Document No. 8, “Message of the President of the U.S. in answer to a resolution of the Senate relative to the landing of the barque Wanderer on the coast of Georgia with a cargo of Africans,” 1–2; For documentary evidence of an active illegal trade, see also RG 21, Records of the District Courts of the United States, “United States vs. William Warren: Indictment, 10/5/1860,” Archival Research Catalog (ARC) Entry 278412, NARA; The United States vs. William H. Carter: Indictment, 6/22/1860,” ARC Entry 278410, NARA; “United States vs. the brigantine, Chatsworth, 1861,” ARC Entry 278850. See also, John Blasingame, Slave Democracy, which shows that enslaved Africans continued to be transported to the United States as late as the 1850s. Following the 1808 ban, the U.S. enacted several laws to strengthen legislation. However, in clear defiance of the law American ships continued to import slaves with impunity. In 1841, America dispatched a naval unit, the U.S. African Squadron, to patrol the west coast of Africa. One of the main tasks of the U.S. African Squadron was enforcing the anti-slaving laws by apprehending American slave vessels. From 1841 to 1863, fifty American ships were arrested for slaving. Only one officer ever served a prison term commensurate to the sentence prescribed by law. The extensive anti-slaving legislation and the efforts of the African Squadron were circumvented by the lenient sentencing of U.S. judicial courts. In spite of consistent overwhelming evidence of guilt, the majority of ship officers brought to trial were exonerated of criminal charges. The failure of the judiciary to adequately punish flagrant law-breakers effectively sanctioned the continuation of American participation in the illegal transatlantic slave trade. Warren S. Howard, American Slaves and the Federal Law, 1837–1862 (Berkeley, CA, 1963); Robert Vanson, “The Law as Law-Breaker: The Promotion and Encouragement of the Atlantic Slave Trade by the New York Judiciary System, 1857–1862” Afro-Americans in New York Life and History 20 (July 1996): 35–58; W. E. B. Du Bois, The Suppression of the African Slave Trade to the United States of America, 1638–1870 (New York, 1970), Appendix D; W. W. Hazzard, Sirena Island Georgia, Brunswick, and Vicinity (c. 1825; rpt. Belmont, MA, 1974). Two of the larger barrier islands are St. Simons Island and Jekyll Island. St. Simons Island lies eighteen miles east of Brunswick, Georgia, and is approximately thirteen miles long and two miles wide. Jekyll Island lies south of St. Simons Island and is made up of 11,000 acres.


Ships were more likely to transport slaves from the islands to the mainland as British ships rarely engaged in the slave trade. Alexander Wylly also co-owned the sloop Charming Kitty, which brought thirty-one slaves from Senegambia to Georgia. Britain valued rice as a re-export crop to northern Europe. England consumed a very small quantity of rice, from 2,000-3,000 barrels. Portugal, Holland, and Germany were the largest consumers. They consumed nearly three-fourths of all rice imported. George Louis Beer, The Commercial Policy of England (New York, 1893), 98-99; Lumber was a scarce commodity in England since the Tudor era. England imported lumber for its industries from other European countries. In light of prevailing economic doctrines (comparative advantage), it was to England's commercial advantage to buy lumber from its colonies and export to the colonies woolens and other manufactures. Deerskins were transported to Savannah from Augusta, Georgia, which conducted a prosperous deerskin trade with the Indians. See James Eberhardt Callaway, The Early Settlement of Georgia (Athens, GA, 1949), 105-11.

Allen D. Candler and Lucian Lamar Knight, eds., Colonial Records of the State of Georgia, vol. 8 (New York, 1970). Trevor Richard Reese, Colonial Georgia A Study in British Imperial Policy in the Eighteenth Century (Athens, GA, 1963), 129; Deerskins were traded rice as a re-export crop to northern Europe. England consumed a very small quantity of rice, from 2,000-3,000 barrels. Portugal, Holland, and Germany were the largest consumers. They consumed nearly three-fourths of all rice imported. George Louis Beer, The Commercial Policy of England (New York, 1893), 98-99; Lumber was a scarce commodity in England since the Tudor era. England imported lumber for its industries from other European countries. In light of prevailing economic doctrines (comparative advantage), it was to England's commercial advantage to buy lumber from its colonies and export to the colonies woolens and other manufactures. Deerskins were transported to Savannah from Augusta, Georgia, which conducted a prosperous deerskin trade with the Indians. See James Eberhardt Callaway, The Early Settlement of Georgia (Athens, GA, 1949), 105-11.

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PoUtique sur la tralte des Negres Migration, and Slaves: Ethnicity and the Slave Trade in Colonial South Carolina which consisted of 20,000 men. The population of Baol is estimated at 3,000, which includes Lrunbai only, the population of Kajor was 3,000 in 1763. This figure represents the population of Dakar Village. In 1764, the

A. G. Laing, Economic Change, 126.

Economic Change in Pre-Colonial Africa: Supplementary Evidence

Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion "For a discussion of the emergence of rice culture in South Carolina, see Edda de Lajaille, Demography of Senegambia: A ParttA Reconstruction of the Population. Jean Gabrel


"Hall, Africa and Africans in African Diaspora," 142. Hawthorne, "From 'Black Rice' to 'Brown','' 155; Georgia Gazette, 1765-1771.

Carney, Black Rice, and Fields-Black, Deep Roots


"[Harper's Weekly, 5 January 1867,] "Sketches on a Rice Plantation," 6. For the African origins of planting rice according to the task labor system, see John Bassingame, The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South (New York, 1972), chap. 2; also Lydia Parrish, Slave Songs of the Georgia Sea Islands, 225–36, for African cultural expressions when cultivating rice.

"Inward Slave Manifests, Savannah, RG 36, NARA, Washington, DC; Donnan, Documents Illustrative of the History of the Slave Trade, 4, 612–63.


"Ralph Flanders, ed., Plantation Slavery in Georgia (Chapel Hill, NC, 1933), 85; Daina L. Ramey, "She Do a Heep of Work," 707–34; and Swing the Sickle for the Harvest Is Ripe: Gender and Slavery in Antebellum Georgia (Urbana, IL, 2007), 18–19.

"Cuffy Wilson, Currituck, Savannah; and Floyd White and Ryna Johnson, St. Simons Island, in Georgia Writer’s Project, Drums and Shadows, 169, 175–77, 184. See also Lawrence Levine, Black Labor Thought from Slavery to Freedom (New York, 1977).


"Rev. Charles C. Jones to Mr. Charles C. Jones, Jr., Montveidotco, 17 November 1856; Charles C. Jones, Jr., to Mrs. Mary Jones, 22 November 1856, in Robert Madison Myers, Children of Pride: A True Story Georgia, 265–66; Frances A. Kemble and Frances A. Butler Leigh, Principles and Privilege: Two Women’s Lives on a Georgia Plantation (Ann Arbor, MI, 1998); 245–61; William Davis, America’s Dark Days, 235, 238, 242, 264. Leslie Owens, This Species of Property: Slave Life and Culture in the Old South (New York, 1976), 21. Similarly, the records of Pierce Butler reveal a dismal experience for enslaved children. On Butler’s Island, 50 percent of children age 2 to 12 months died as a result of being underweight and exposed to malaria, influenza, whooping cough, lack of food, and in the case of slave ginnery, plantations, with children under the age of 5 comprising the majority of deaths recorded. For a discussion of enslaved African American children, see Wilma King, Silos Childhood: Slave Youth in Nineteenth Century America (Bloomington, IN, 1995); see also Marjorie Jenkins Schwartz, Born in Bondage: Growing Up Enslaved in the Antebellum South (Cambridge, MA, 2000).
THE LONGUE DURÉE OF AFRICANS IN MEXICO: THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF RACIALIZATION, ACCULTURATION, AND AFRO-MEXICAN SUBJECTIVITY

Irene A. Vasquez

In the past ten years the scholarship on African-descended peoples in Mexico has grown appreciably and diversified in several ways. The literature, which treats Afro-Mexicans as identifiable discrete populations, reveals complex and multivariate responses to colonial and national development. Much of the research impetus in this literature addresses the multiple and seemingly contradictory dynamics of the concurrent marginalization and the arguable integration of African-descended subjects. As a result of the social historical approaches and the research findings on the African Diaspora, African-descended peoples are illuminated as historical subjects who enrich our understanding of local and regional cultures, past and present. In particular, the history of Africans in the Americas brings into relief hermeneutic concepts and realities of racialization and social change, and informs our understandings of cultural production and reproduction.

Over time, Africans and people of African descent in Mexico displayed diverse cultural and social patterns. Africans lived as free persons and enslaved laborers with varying degrees of social mobility. These populations exercised agency in their day-to-day lives, despite living in highly racialized and oppressive circumstances. Their incremental integration into Mexican society as individuals, laborers, and leaders resulted from their ability to integrate into local communities. Yet, locally rooted and historically infused derogatory notions of blackness impacted their lives in many complex ways. For Afro-Mexicans today, persistent discrimination continues to limit their opportunities for economic advancement in Mexico, even though formally they are citizens entitled to full rights.

Mexico is an important site for interrogating African diasporic generalizations because of the diversity of the population and the range of social relations. The diasporic paradigm privileges African origin in providing historical and cultural linkages among African-descended peoples globally and often posits various “organic” meanings of “blackness.” There is within the paradigm an inherent

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