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Africa and Africans in the African Diaspora:
The Uses of Relational Databases

GWENDOLYN MIDLO HALL

African American Studies, better labeled Negro American Studies, are for the most part superficial and incomplete, referring to black people without knowing them. The typical researcher cannot disengage from the tendency to present them as fragmented and superficial, without seeing Africans as individuals coming from a society with rules and values of its own . . . as someone torn from a particular culture that could not be erased by the simple act of crossing the Atlantic. From human beings full of culture and knowledge, they have been transformed into mere merchandise: tons of ebony.

Nicolás Ngou-Mve, "Historia de la población negra en México"

IN THEIR 2007 *AHR* ARTICLE "Agency and Diaspora in Atlantic History," David Eltis, Philip Morgan, and David Richardson make two major claims: (1) that the article presents a new, superior model for interpreting the formation of culture in the Americas, and (2) that it challenges the belief that Africans played an important role in the introduction and technology of rice cultivation and processing in the Americas. For their conclusions about rice, they rely mainly on calculations from the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, Version 2 (referred to hereafter as TSTD2) as a tool

I owe a deep debt to the National Endowment for the Humanities and the taxpayers of our country, who funded the expansion of my Louisiana Slave Database as part of National Endowment for the Humanities Collaborative Research Contracts numbers RO-22619-1901 and 1993, "Africans in Spanish and Early American Louisiana," with Patrick Manning as co-investigator. I also received major financial support from the Guggenheim Foundation, as well as generous contributions from the French Ministry of Culture, the Program for Cultural Cooperation between Spain's Ministry of Culture and United States Universities, and the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities. Steven Mintz has given generously of his enthusiasm, time, and support for nearly a decade now, including with this article. Paul E. Lovejoy, Director of the Harriet Tubman Institute for Research on the Global Migrations of African Peoples, York University, Toronto, Canada, and his graduate students and our colleagues in this network have played a very special role. I am grateful to Maureen Hewitt, Editor-in-Chief at LSU Press, for her foresight and enthusiastic work in preparing the CD-ROM version of the database for publication (*Databases for the Study of Afro-Louisiana History and Genealogy, 1699–1860: Computerized Information from Original Manuscript Sources*, 2000). Other colleagues have given their time and attention to help and encourage me after Katrina and to make this article much better than it was: O. Vernon Burton, Rina Cáceres, Yvonne Captain-Hidalgo, Judith A. Carney, Douglas B. Chambers, Matt D. Childs, Howard Dodson, Joseph C. Dorsey, Christopher Dunn, David Hackett Fischer, Michael A. Gomez, Rebecca L. Hall, Joseph E. Harris, Susan Heywood, Joseph E. Inikori, Aondofe Joseph-Ernest Iyo, Eileen M. Julien, Jane I. Landers, Juan Manuel de la Serna, Joseph C. Miller, Nell Irvin Painter, Ibrahima Seck, Ned Sublette, Ibrahim K. Sundiata, and John K. Thornton.



FIGURE 1: Mandinka women displaying bundles of African and Asian rice, 1987. Photo by Judith A. Carney.

to study the distribution of enslaved Africans from rice-growing regions in Africa to regions in the Americas that exported rice to Europe.¹

The authors claim to have made a great new discovery about culture formation in the Americas. They then revive and reprise an unrelated discussion from a 1991 forum in the *William and Mary Quarterly*, criticizing a book by David Hackett Fischer titled *Albion's Seed*. Fischer's book is about British colonizers of the United States. Scholars have never claimed that British cultures were erased by the transatlantic crossing. Its methodology has not served as a model for African diaspora studies.²

The article distorts the work of the many scholars it criticizes. Our varied methodologies are reduced to a monolithic advocacy of static "seed" cultures brought over from the Old World and continued as "enclave cultures" in the Americas. "Rather than frame the issue as solely one of transfers and conduits," the authors write, "we should also think of transformations and overlapping circuits. Rather than posit that slaves and planters always acted knowingly, we should entertain the possibility that they often responded to unseen market forces. Rather than assume that migrants remained conservatively attached to traditional ways, we might also view them as experimenters and improvisers" (1332).

The scholars criticized in "Agency and Diaspora" share only one interpretation:

¹ David Eltis, Philip Morgan, and David Richardson, "Agency and Diaspora in Atlantic History: Reassessing the African Contribution to Rice Cultivation in the Americas," *American Historical Review* 112, no. 5 (December 2007): 1329–1358.

² "Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America—A Symposium," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 48, no. 2 (1991): 224–308.

that the knowledge and culture of Africans from particular coasts and ethnicities were not erased by the transatlantic crossing. This historian, for example, has written that the process of culture formation (creolization) responded to various, changing factors in the Americas, including the patterns of introduction of Africans from particular regions and ethnicities; gender proportions and patterns of mating and parenting; how rapidly migrants began to procreate and the extent of biological merger among diverse peoples; the demographic and military strength of the Native American population; whether the geography facilitated runaway slave (maroon) communities; the economic, strategic, and military priorities of the colonizing powers; the extent of manumission of former slaves and their demographic strength and social status; military and police uses of slaves and free people of color; the labor demands of the major exports as the economy evolved; and policies of social control reflected in various European political and religious traditions and institutions and how effectively they were enforced. Concepts and definitions of creolization in the Americas vary among the scholars whose work is criticized in "Agency and Diaspora." The most recent version is Linda Heywood and John Thornton's conclusion that the Charter Generation of Africans who molded the Creole cultures of British and Dutch America before 1660 were largely Europeanized, Catholic West Central Africans.³

The rest of the article minimizes the significance of African technological transfer to the Americas in the planting and processing of rice. Although some anecdotal qualitative sources are used, the argument relies overwhelmingly on calculations made from TSTD2. David Eltis, Stephen Behrendt, David Richardson, and Manolo Florentino deserve great credit for their tireless work on this database, including its impressive technological advances over the first version, TSTD1. Thousands of new Brazilian and Portuguese voyages have been added, correcting the Anglo-focused distortion of TSTD1. The database has been made more user-friendly and is accessible to the public free of charge as an open-source work. It enables users to make calculations, corrections, and additions. It can answer many important questions about the transatlantic slave trade. But when it comes to certain kinds of questions, its limitations must be taken into account. It cannot answer the questions about rice posed in "Agency and Diaspora."⁴

Historical databases are wonderful, innovative tools. They can integrate huge amounts of detailed, concrete data into broad patterns allowing for analysis over time and place. The vast quantity of information they can contain and analyze is a great advantage, especially in making broad, comparative studies. Databases can answer questions that cannot be answered using more traditional methodologies, can partially or tentatively answer others, and can help answer still others, combining quantitative calculations with the findings of other disciplines, including archaeology, anthropology, linguistics, and geography, as well as traditional history. But there are some questions that are simply beyond their capabilities. It all depends on the

³ Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Slavery and African Ethnicities in the Americas: Restoring the Links* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2005), 166–167; Linda M. Heywood and John K. Thornton, *Central Africans, Atlantic Creoles, and the Foundation of the Americas, 1585–1660* (Cambridge, 2007). See my review of Heywood and Thornton's book in *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 39, no. 3 (Winter 2009): 463–464.

⁴ TSTD2 calculates 5,099,816 enslaved Africans landed by Portuguese and Brazilian voyages and 2,733,323 by British voyages.

questions that a given database is designed to answer. Databases can be more rigid than qualitative sources. In using them, scholars must keep in mind that just because something is not included in a historical document or a database, that does not mean that it did not happen. There is important information that has never been documented; there are documents that have not yet been found and studied. TSTD1 and TSTD2 were designed to contain only documented and studied voyages of slave trade ships that crossed the Atlantic. "Agency and Diaspora" hardly considers the redistribution process that took place when these new Africans were first sold in the Americas, then reloaded onto other ships and subsequently moved by water and/or land to other places before reaching their varied final destinations. In this process, they were sometimes clustered by their region of origin and/or ethnicity when buyers were able to purchase the new Africans they preferred.⁵

There are problems with rigidity as well as the omission of important data in TSTD2. It was created from research into original manuscript documents carried out by many historians during the past forty years or more. Each record covers a specific transatlantic slave trade voyage. The fields in a database contain information about the individual records that it includes. They are designed to answer the questions the creators of the database want to ask, not necessarily to provide the information contained in the original documents. Unless a database has been designed to be flexible, once the fields have been defined and a substantial amount of data has been entered, adding new fields can be laborious, time-consuming, and expensive. TSTD2 remains locked into the same questions that scholars have asked since the publication of Phillip D. Curtin's *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census* in 1969, but with a notable limitation: there is no field for the entry of data on African ethnicities. Except for a few entirely quantitative questions, such as gender, age category, and deaths when this information was recorded in the documents and then noted and published by the historians who studied them, TSTD2 does not focus on information about the enslaved Africans on the ships. The fields were not changed between TSTD1 and TSTD2.

Obviously, historians record only what they think is important, and we cannot tell what those who did the original research chose not to record. In some cases, information that indeed was recorded by the scholar who conducted the initial research will not be entered into the database because no field was created for it. Such omissions may have included information about African ethnicities that Eltis, Morgan, and Richardson dismiss as inaccurate and perhaps therefore unimportant (1349). Was information about the ethnicities of Africans on transatlantic slave trade voyages documented? Yes. To what extent? Without consulting the original documents, we cannot know. If there were no fields in TSTD2 in which this information and the contents of these original documents could be recorded, this data is not available to us. Thus a crucial advantage of using original manuscript documents is lost. Perhaps there is very little information in transatlantic slave trade documents about the Af-

⁵ Joseph E. Inikori, "The Known, the Unknown, the Knowable and the Unknowable: Evidence and the Evaluation of Evidence in the Measurement of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade" (unpublished paper presented at the Conference on the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, Williamsburg, Virginia, September 1998); Hall, *Slavery and African Ethnicities in the Americas*, 68–79; Douglas B. Chambers, "Slave Trade Merchants of Spanish New Orleans, 1763–1803: Clarifying the Colonial Slave Trade to Louisiana in Atlantic Perspective," *Atlantic Studies* 5, no. 3 (2008): 335–346.

ricans aboard the ships; or perhaps, as Nicolás Ngou-Mve observed, those who conducted the research using the original documents did not consider this information important enough to record. Thus when the editors of TSTD2 did not do the initial research themselves, the information in the database is twice removed from the original sources. Ngou-Mve calls on historians to look at all the documents again, even if other historians have already studied them. This writer's experience with transatlantic slave trade voyage documents is limited to Louisiana, but it supports Mve's conclusion.⁶

Historical databases and new media need to go beyond purely quantifiable questions. As Daniel J. Cohen suggests, "Focusing on the full potential of the medium and being sure that digital history is not simply an echo of quantitative processes or algorithms to the abundant digital record in the service of source discovery and analysis is extremely important . . . and equally important are the networking and collaborative possibilities of the medium—that is, focusing on human rather than machine activities."⁷ The search and visualization capabilities of advancing technology facilitate these advances. Visualization will allow us to consult the original documents whose contents have been filtered out by rigid, purely quantifiable databases and their questions.

During the past two decades, there has been a seismic change in perception about documents relating to Africans and their descendants throughout the Americas. The shift has been from a belief that original manuscript sources did not exist or were extremely rare to a recognition of the truly extraordinary abundance of documents in archives, courthouses, ports, museums, and private collections housed throughout the Americas. This writer's database about Louisiana slaves was initiated in 1984. Focusing on people who were enslaved, it was created almost entirely from original manuscript documents. It contains almost all of the information about each description of a slave entered into the database from original documents, including unquantifiable data.⁸

THE LIMITATIONS OF TSTD2 call into question Eltis, Morgan, and Richardson's critique of Judith A. Carney's well-known work about the transfer of rice cultivation from Africa to the Americas. She carried out a truly impressive range of varied and exhaustive research and used it judiciously and well. Carney is a multilingual, multidisciplinary geographer who was inspired to study original historical documents by the pioneering work of historians Daniel C. Littlefield and Peter H. Wood. Her grasp of geography and agricultural technology enhances her insights into the meanings

⁶ Nicolás Ngou-Mve, "Historia de la población negra en México: Necesidad de un enfoque triangular," in María Elisa Velázquez Gutiérrez and Ethel Correa Duró, eds., *Poblaciones y culturas de origen africano en México* (México, 2005), 39–64, 51; Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Baton Rouge, La., 1992), 56–95.

⁷ Remarks by Daniel J. Cohen in "Interchange: The Promise of Digital History," *Journal of American History* 95, no. 2 (September 2008): 463.

⁸ The Louisiana Slave Database can be found at <http://www.ibiblio.org/laslave>. The search engine can be used for many fields, and the entire database can be downloaded free of charge in several formats. For a discussion of its origin and possibilities for other databases to be created from various types of original manuscript documents housed throughout the Americas, see <http://afropop.org/multi/interview/ID/76/Gwendolyn+Midlo+Hall-2005>.

of such primary sources. From the earliest manuscript sources and publications of Portuguese observers, beginning with the mid-fifteenth century, she thoroughly documents the well-established, widespread, complex cultivation of rice in varied environments along the coasts of Upper Guinea and up its rivers. She makes use of a variety of approaches, including documentary sources on both sides of the Atlantic throughout the five centuries of the Atlantic slave trade and in-depth field work in Africa and the Americas. In contrast, Eltis, Morgan, and Richardson base their conclusions on the flimsy evidence of what they found documented for twenty voyages of the Royal African Company visiting Gambia and Sierra Leone between 1779 and 1788. The sample of voyages they used is very small and limited in time because there was no field to record such information in TSTD2; thus they had to consult original documents. Nevertheless, they state: "From this evidence, women did not mill rice on the Middle Passage" (1347).

It is possible that women milled rice on slave trade trips but that those activities were not recorded in the documents; or that documents survive but have not yet been found; or that the original researchers did not record this information; or that they did record it, but it was not included in TSTD2. Carney has evidence of women pounding seed rice on a slave trade ship in 1796, pointing out that it is only one such clearly documented case. She speculates about how rice seeds could have been introduced into the Americas without drawing firm conclusions. She discusses evidence for multiple and varied directional introduction of rice between Africa and the Americas over the centuries. Carney could not possibly have claimed, as Eltis, Morgan, and Richardson state, that "a single enslaved African woman carrying a few grains of rice in her hair can become all that is necessary to sustain the thesis" (1357). One of the major points she makes in *Black Rice* is that the Columbian exchange involved the transfer not only of seeds, but of systems of cultivation as well, including processing techniques from places of domestication to elsewhere in the Atlantic world. That is why she uses the word "systems." Eltis, Morgan, and Richardson take the word "systems" out of context (1333) and then dismiss her entire work with unsupportable criticisms.⁹

"Agency and Diaspora" is correct in stating that "Part of the strategy for keeping valuable property alive on the transatlantic crossing was to ensure that slaves received food to which they were accustomed" (1347). The authors say that more millet than rice was placed on the twelve slave trade ships they studied, which left Upper Guinea between 1779 and 1788. But rice, not millet, was an important food crop in the Americas. The authors suggest that Africans as well as Europeans might have improvised their eating patterns in the Americas, minimizing enslaved Africans' preferences for rice (1354). Did the need to enable enslaved Africans to follow their traditional eating patterns in order to keep them alive disappear after the Atlantic crossing?

Eltis, Morgan, and Richardson criticize Carney for overstating the role of women in rice production in the Americas. They point to the relatively high male ratios on voyages arriving from Upper Guinea. But these calculations tell us nothing about sex ratios among slaves from rice-producing ethnicities, or about masters' preferences

⁹ Judith A. Carney, *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001), xii, 66–67, 144–145, 154–157, 164–167.

TABLE 1.
Gender Balance of Upper Guinean Ethnicities in Louisiana (age 15–39), 1719–1820

	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Total</i>
Bamana	n = 205 87.2%	n = 30 12.8%	235
Mandingo	n = 353 67.9%	n = 167 32.1%	520
Nar/Moor	n = 49 70.0%	n = 21 30.0%	70
Poulard/Fulbe	n = 80 69.6%	n = 35 30.4%	115
Wolof/Senegal	n = 225 61.5%	n = 141 38.5%	366
TOTAL	n = 912 69.8%	n = 394 30.2%	1,306

Calculated from Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, Louisiana Slave Database, 1719–1820.

for women of these ethnicities. They write that “the number and percentage of Africans with rice-growing experience must have been far below the total number of slaves leaving Upper Guinea” (1348). This is no doubt true, but therefore their studies of gross gender ratios among slaves leaving the entire Upper Guinea coast are not clarifying with respect to rice producers. Throughout most of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, enslaved warriors were sent down the Senegal and Gambia rivers in large numbers, mainly Bamana (Bambara) during the 1720s, before the designation “Bambara” took on wider, vague, generic meanings. Many captured warriors were shipped to the Americas from Senegambia and Sierra Leone, tilting gender ratios toward males. Male ratios were highest among the ethnicities most often captured in warfare, as well as among cattle herders. Gender ratios among Africans from Upper Guinea varied in accordance with ethnicity. Some captured warriors came from rice-producing ethnicities, for example Bamana (Bambara) and Mandingo. The male ratios on slave trade ships that the authors present (1350–1351, Tables 5–7) tell us nothing about whether masters cultivating rice in Carolina, Georgia, and northeast Brazil preferred women from rice-producing ethnicities.

A stronger case can be made about preferences for women who knew how to produce rice by focusing on mean prices by gender among rice-cultivating ethnicities. In Louisiana during the 1770s, the mean price for women from two rice-producing ethnicities inventoried on estates, Mandingo and Wolof, was higher than that for men. Among the Bamama (Bambara), another rice-producing ethnicity, the mean price was slightly lower for women than for men during the 1770s and higher for women than for men between 1810 and 1820. The mean price for Wolof women was higher than the price for men throughout the Spanish period (1770–1803). The rice-producing skills of these women might at least partially account for this atypical price pattern.

Eltis, Morgan, and Richardson claim that calculations from TSTD2 prove that Africans from Upper Guinea could not have introduced rice or systems for its cultivation and processing to the Americas, nor did masters who planted rice prefer them or choose them (1335–1338, Tables 1 and 2). They argue that few slaves from Upper Guinea arrived in rice-exporting regions when this crop began to be cultivated. For later periods, they dismiss the significant impact on transatlantic slave trade patterns of the relatively high proportion of enslaved Africans brought from rice-producing regions in Africa to rice-exporting regions in the Americas, pointing to factors other than the preferences of slave buyers (1335, 1342, 1345). This is not

TABLE 2.
Mean Price by Gender of Rice-Producing Ethnicities Inventoried on Estates in Louisiana, 1770–1820

<i>Decades</i>	<i>Ethnicity</i>	<i>Number of Males</i>		<i>Standard Deviation</i>	<i>Number of Females</i>		<i>Standard Deviation</i>
		<i>Mean</i>	<i>Mean</i>		<i>Mean</i>	<i>Mean</i>	
1770–1779	Bamana	7	282.66	26.904	3	266.67	61.101
	Mandingo	18	297.78	87.753	5	312.00	45.497
	Wolof	9	235.56	107.251	5	288.00	56.619
1770–1803	Wolof	96	321.87	236.861	188	331.23	260.229
1810–1820	Bamana	45	420.22	261.008	7	511.43	316.882

Calculated from Hall, Louisiana Slave Database, 1719–1820. Explanations of price data, price conversion formulas, and studies of mean prices by gender and ethnicity by decade for Africans inventoried on Louisiana estates can be found in Hall, *Slavery and African Ethnicities in the Americas*, Appendix A, 173–179.

news. This writer's book, *Slavery and African Ethnicities in the Americas: Restoring the Links*, cited several times in "Agency and Diaspora" in other contexts, has an entire chapter devoted to various evolving patterns in the entire Atlantic slave trade, including market forces. Preferences among buyers for slaves of particular ethnicities are treated as only one factor.¹⁰

It is unclear what the calculations from TSTD2 cited by Eltis, Morgan, and Richardson can prove about whether there was an African impact on rice production and processing in the Americas. How many people did it take to introduce and develop rice in varying environments? Was there only one introduction of rice, after which the masters knew everything they needed to know about its cultivation despite the varied and changing environments and ecosystems used in its production over time? Did there have to be a majority, or a large minority, of enslaved Africans arriving from Upper Guinea at the time rice began to be produced, or a higher percentage of Upper Guineans among all slaves arriving in both the Caribbean and the Atlantic Coast colonial United States, even though rice was rarely exported from the Caribbean, and the colonial East Coast United States was a marginal region for the transatlantic slave trade (1337, 1338, Table 2)? Documents from Louisiana show that the Company of the Indies asked only for several slaves who could teach them how to cultivate rice.¹¹

Carney perhaps understates, and Eltis, Morgan, and Richardson do not mention, the possible role of Madagascar in the introduction of rice to America. Immigrants from Ceylon began to populate Madagascar in about 800 A.D., bringing with them Asian sativa rice and techniques for its cultivation and processing. TSTD2 contains records for ten voyages arriving in Barbados from Madagascar between 1664 and 1683, and seventeen voyages arriving in the East Coast colonial United States from Madagascar between 1686 and 1721. There were also slave trade voyages from Madagascar by smugglers, privateers, and pirates of several nationalities that are not re-

¹⁰ Hall, *Slavery and African Ethnicities in the Americas*, 55–79.

¹¹ "Instructions pour le sieur Herpin, commandant du vaisseau *l'Aurore*, destiné pour la traite des nègres à la coste de Guynée," July 4, 1718, Section Marine, Archives Nationales, Paris, series B42B, folios 201–204.

corded in the database. Aside from the voyages from Upper Guinea entered into TSTD2, any one or more of these voyages or one or more of the 749 voyages whose provenance is listed in TSTD2 as “Africa port unspecified” could have brought seed rice and enough Africans who knew how to cultivate and process it and who could have taught their masters these skills. Conclusions about the role that Africans played or did not play in the introduction of rice into the Americas cannot be drawn from TSTD2, whose calculations are based on African regions, not African ethnicities. Carney’s careful, exhaustive, multilingual, multidisciplinary field work and studies of documents in several languages over the wide sweep of time and place in the Atlantic world are much more convincing. In addition, Edda L. Fields-Black’s book *Deep Roots*, which uses mainly sociolinguistic evidence along with traditional historical sources, establishes the time depth and variety of rice cultivation involving inheritance, innovation, and borrowing among several ethnicities living along the Rice Coast of Upper Guinea and their transfer to the Americas over time.¹²

Eltis, Morgan, and Richardson conflate rice production with the export of rice to Europe. This narrow definition enhances their argument that masters fully controlled the decisions relating to the production, processing, and marketing of rice. Production by maroon (runaway slave) communities is dismissed as unimportant. The domestic market for rice is dismissed as subsistence production, or a “system that generated exports rather than the export itself” (1343). Food crops were introduced and exchanged throughout the Atlantic world. Slaves worked their own garden plots, and they produced and sold all types of foods, including rice, corn, beans, fruits, vegetables, eggs, poultry, pork, ham, and smoked beef. In South Carolina, Jamaica, and Louisiana, slaves were the major suppliers of food to towns and cities. Europeans and Africans—especially the first generation—and Native Americans preferred to eat the cereals they were accustomed to. In Louisiana, Europeans preferred wheat, Native Americans preferred corn, and Africans preferred rice. But those preferences did not always determine the types of cereals they consumed. Everyone ate whatever they could get during the frequent wars, when imported food was cut off and food was hoarded by speculators, and also during hurricanes and floods, when rice survived better than any other crop. Even for the Carolina plantations that produced rice for export to Europe, the authors of “Agency and Diaspora” exaggerate the power and control that masters had over their slaves. Europeans were not all-powerful, certainly not in matters of economy and culture. They, too, were strangers in a strange, dangerous, and hostile world. Control was not always firmly in their hands, especially during the early, most crucial stages of the formation of the economy and culture. William Dusiaberre’s study of life on the rice plantations of Carolina and Georgia demonstrates that masters and their families were often absentees from that environment of deadly fevers. Masters could not get white overseers to work in the rice swamps. During the nineteenth century, black slave overseers were the supervisors of the slave laborers. But the most trusted slave overseers were often the leaders of slave conspiracies and revolts.¹³

¹² Edda L. Fields-Black, *Deep Roots: Rice Farmers in West Africa and the African Diaspora* (Bloomington, Ind., 2008).

¹³ Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 21, 24, 123–124, 343–375; William Dusiaberre, *Them Dark Days: Slavery in the American Rice Swamps* (New York, 1996); Robert L. Paquette, “The Drivers Shall



PLANTING THE RICE.

FIGURE 2: "Planting the Rice," from T. Addison Richards, "The Rice Lands of the South," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, November 1859, 726.

"Agency and Diaspora" minimizes the interest of buyers in the skills of new Africans: "Buyers of slaves in the Americas wanted a cheap supply of undifferentiated labor for field work, and transatlantic suppliers sought locations in Africa where they could obtain large numbers of slaves quickly and at reasonable cost" (1339). The Louisiana Slave Database records an impressive range of expertise among African-born slaves. Thousands of the Africans arriving in Louisiana came from regions that were well known for certain skills. Although we can query the Louisiana Slave Database about the skills listed for African-born slaves, it cannot tell us that they brought such expertise with them, even though we know that particular skills were

Lead Them: Image and Reality in Slave Resistance," in Robert L. Paquette and Louis A. Ferleger, eds., *Slavery, Secession, and Southern History* (Charlottesville, Va., 2000), 31–58.

widely practiced in their African homelands. But it is highly suggestive of skills transferred by enslaved Africans arriving in the Americas.

Timing gives us even stronger evidence for the transfer of African technology and skills. Having complained for years that they could not find anyone who knew how to produce and process indigo, the Louisiana colonial authorities asked French colonial authorities to send someone who possessed such knowledge. Shortly after Africans began arriving from Senegambia, Louisiana started to produce indigo, beginning in 1721 on an experimental basis, and soon as the major export crop. In French Louisiana, the captains of the first two Atlantic slave trade ships that arrived from the African coast in 1719 had both been officially instructed “to try to purchase several blacks who know how to cultivate rice and three or four barrels of rice for seeding which they were to give to the directors of the Company of the Indies upon their arrival in Louisiana.” The first ship, *l’Aurore*, stopped at Cap Lahou on August 28, 1718, where these instructions could have been carried out, and then went on to Whydah to buy slaves. Rice production in Louisiana expanded rapidly thereafter, as almost all transatlantic slave trade ships began coming from Senegambia. During the French administration (1699–1769), rice was shipped from Louisiana to the French Caribbean and to Spanish Pensacola. It was widely cultivated in swampy soils, which did not require irrigation, while indigo, corn, and other crops were cultivated on the same farms and estates on higher lands near the rivers. During the Spanish administration (1770–1803), rice was shipped to the French Caribbean and to Havana as Cuba’s sugar monoculture expanded. Louisiana began to satisfy Cuba’s needs for foods of all kinds, including rice. Did whites teach clueless Africans all these skills? It seems obvious that the diverse peoples of Louisiana—Africans, Creoles, Cajuns, Canadians, French, Germans, Spanish, Canary Islanders, and Native Americans—taught each other.¹⁴

Eltis, Morgan, and Richardson seriously overstate what we can know from calculations derived from TSTD2 about the distribution of Africans in the Americas. We have seen that newly arrived Africans were often sold and then transferred to final destinations outside the colony where they first landed. Documents created and housed in the Americas show that at each stage of their redistribution, buyers could, and often did, select Africans from particular coasts and/or ethnicities. In Cuba, Manuel Barcia and Matt D. Childs have found clustering of African ethnicities on plantations, among cabildos de naciones, and among slave rebels. In St. Domingue/Haiti, Gabriel Debien and David Geggus found clustering of African ethnicities on individual estates. In Spanish Louisiana, Upper Guineans were clustered dispro-

¹⁴ The practitioners of such skills include cowboys, breeders of cattle and horses, horse trainers and groomers, leatherworkers, tanners, saddlers, shoemakers, butchers, cooks, bakers, confectioners, pastry chefs, chocolate makers, rum makers, cigar makers/tobacco stemmers, goldsmiths, silversmiths, potters, indigo makers, tailors, hat makers, charcoal makers, basket makers, oven makers, barbers, wigmakers, spinners, coach/cart drivers, plantation managers, overseers, foremen, masons, painters, plasterers, chimney builders, stone engravers, millers, blacksmiths, tool makers, tool sharpeners, metalworkers, makers of fireworks, wheelwrights, cart makers, woodsmen, hunters, fishermen, lumbermen, carriers and squarers of timber, sawmill workers, carpenters, cabinetmakers, locksmiths, brick makers, sailors, navigators, sounders, shipbuilders, sail makers, oar makers, caulkers, coopers, innkeepers, street vendors, butlers, domestics, personal servants, seamstresses, laundresses, hospital workers, nurses, midwives, doctors, dentists, surgeons, musicians, and linguists/interpreters of languages. Calculated from Skill fields in the Louisiana Slave Database.



FIGURE 3: Acadian girl with mortar and pestle used for hulling rice. From the *Rowley Signal*, January 20, 1904.

portionately in St. Charles Parish, which produced rice, and in St. Landry Parish, where cattle were raised. St. Landry Parish contained a far higher proportion of Upper Guineans among African-born slaves than any other parish: 67.9 percent (73 percent male) among slaves with identified birthplaces. In West Africa, breeding and herding were not practiced east of Upper Guinea because of the tsetse fly. St. Landry Parish remains the traditional place of Afro-Creole cowboys and zydeco music. Transatlantic slave trade voyages alone cannot tell us nearly as much as Eltis, Morgan, and Richardson claim about the gender proportions among African ethnicities or the distribution of Africans at their final destinations in the Americas.

HISTORICAL DATABASES ARE EXTRAORDINARY new tools, and more scholars should learn to use them and to create them. They should be used widely, but wisely and judiciously, with an understanding of their limitations. But depending on how they are designed and the questions they are programmed to answer, they can be rigid and inflexible, locking in outmoded research and questions and not allowing for new ones. Databases are not a higher form of knowledge that can somehow trump other kinds of research. Scholarship is not a zero-sum game. When scholars overstate the questions that a database can answer and criticize others' work through the use of irrelevant calculations, it seriously undermines our difficult but essential task of informing our colleagues about the unique value of historical databases in producing broad, comparative studies. We need to appreciate what others have done and encourage diverse scholars to use a variety of methodologies in doing the important work they do best. Despite the vast complexities of these questions, the long list of senior scholars and the new generation criticized in "Agency and Diaspora" are constantly making new discoveries, the value and impact of which will be enhanced by rapidly advancing technology.

There has been much progress in historical methodology since World War II. We have developed social history: history from the bottom up. Concepts of the positive values of race mixture and creolization have been introduced through the work of José Vasconcelos of Mexico, Gilberto Freyre of Brazil, and Edward (Kamau) Brathwaite of Barbados.¹⁵ Our greatest strength is our growing acceptance of diversity. We live in a rapidly shrinking world where ethnic and religious conflicts are stirred up and exploited by ambitious political, military, and religious bureaucracies and economic elites. It is not so much that people are intolerant of "the other" as that social systems and their ideologues provoke and exploit these conflicts. History is applied art, science, and literature that can teach mutual appreciation and respect among peoples. The authors of "Agency and Diaspora" have taken a great leap backward in this task. As TSTD2 is revised and improved, its editors need to make it more flexible and avoid drawing invalid conclusions from evidence that is indirect, incomplete, and flawed, or our work will be discredited by overreaching. The calcu-

¹⁵ José Vasconcelos, *The Cosmic Race: A Bilingual Edition*, trans. and annotated by Didier T. Jaén (Baltimore, 1997; Spanish ed., 1920); Gilberto Freyre, *The Masters and the Slaves (Casa-Grande and Senzala): A Study in the Development of Brazilian Civilization*, trans. Samuel Putnam (New York, 1946; Portuguese ed., 1935); Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica, 1770–1820* (Oxford, 1971).



FIGURE 4: Women pounding rice in Mandinga, Mexico, 1988. Photo by Judith A. Carney.

lations from TSTD2 that Eltis, Morgan, and Richardson cite in their article might seem impressive, but these historians do not look at what they do not want to see, and they cannot look at what they do not have. Their conclusions far outrun their evidence.

Gwendolyn Midlo Hall is Professor Emerita of Latin American and Caribbean History at Rutgers University and an International Advisory Board Member of the Harriet Tubman Resource Centre on the African Diaspora, York University, Toronto, Canada. Her awards include the Distinguished Service Award, Organization of American Historians (2004); Knight of the Order of Arts and Letters elected by the National Assembly of France (1997); and John Simon Guggenheim Fellow (1996). Her book and database publications include *Slavery and African Ethnicities in the Americas: Restoring the Links* (University of North Carolina Press, 2005); *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Louisiana State University Press, 1992), which won nine book prizes; *Social Control in Slave Plantation Societies: A Comparison of St. Domingue and Cuba* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971); and the Louisiana Slave Database and the Louisiana Free Database, 1719–1820, <http://www.ibiblio.org/laslave>. Her works in progress are her memoirs, “Daughter of New Orleans: Crossing the Color Line, 1929–2009”; “Diversity, Race Mixture, Slavery, and Freedom: Louisiana, 1699–1820”; and the Western Hemisphere Slave Database. She has lectured internationally in English, French, and Spanish.