

Slavery Counted, Slavery Defined and Slavery Online

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The proliferation of computer databases and the digitization of sources online are transforming the profession. Scholars can now do substantial original research without needing to travel to distant archives. Massive collections of documents are at our fingertips. Online databases are encouraging the democratization of historical research. Sources once available to only a few are now readily available to anyone with internet access and there is no threat of digitized manuscripts or rare books being damaged by excessive or improper use. Slavery studies, in particular, have been radically altered by the availability of several new electronic databases. Two of the most important are [Voyages: The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database](#) [3] and [Slavery, Abolition and Social Justice, 1490-2007](#) [4]. Although these two databases have slightly different chronological focuses and general objectives, they are complementary. One is, primarily, a rich statistical analysis of the slave trade, and the other is a collection of digitized sources for the study of slavery.

Voyages is a unique database. Many databases focus on collecting and housing sources online, digitizing manuscripts, rare books, newspapers or images for a larger audience and occasionally transcribing them. In contrast, *Voyages*, is, primarily, an ongoing, collaborative, research project into one particular aspect of

slavery. As such, it is one of the most significant contributions in the last half century to the study of slavery in the Atlantic World. For decades, scholars working on the transatlantic slave trade had only vague estimates about the size and the structure of the slave trade. In the 1990s, Stephen Behrendt and David Eltis, after a chance meeting in the archives, began to conceptualize a project that would draw together widely dispersed data sets on the slave trade for a more systematic and methodical quantitative study of the size and nature of the transatlantic slave trade. They standardized their data inquiries and gathered evidence on individual voyages into a massive database. The results, first published on CD-ROM in 1999, were an extraordinary testament to the ways in which computers were transforming research. Although that first dataset was more detailed than anything in the literature, it had huge gaps in evidence for the Latin American trade. *Voyages* is a revised edition of that dataset. In the decade since the publication of that CD-Rom, David Eltis headed a team of researchers who have significantly expanded the data on the Latin American trade and on voyages that were not fully documented. *Voyages* now includes more than 35,000 individual slaving voyages (including more than 8,000 new voyages) and approximately 60 per cent of the voyages which appeared on the original CD-ROM have been revised to include more data. Whereas scholars once struggled to determine the exact size and nature of the trade, the *Voyages* data set is now large enough (approximately 80 per cent of all voyages) to be able to make careful estimates to fill the evidentiary gaps. *Voyages* now estimates that 12.5 million slaves embarked in Africa and approximately 10.7 million disembarked in the Americas, offering, seemingly, the final word in a long, surprisingly combative and often gruesome debate about the total volume of the trade—a debate in which the estimates seemed to be fraught with moral implications and a debate which, at times, seemed to be trying to weigh the quantity of suffering.⁽¹⁾ Far from simply resolving debates about total quantity, *Voyages* has helped specialists understand patterns in the slave trade with more precision than ever before. The new evidence, for example, now underscores the degree to which the slave trade continued in the 19th century after the 1807 Anglo-American abolition of the trade. The database shows that by the late 1820s the annual volume of slaves crossing the Atlantic had nearly matched the highest annual pre-abolition volumes.⁽²⁾

The construction of quantitative data in *Voyages* is refreshingly transparent. All of the data is downloadable into Excel or SPSS. Visitors to the website can explore exactly which variables have been imputed. In making their methodology so clear and explicit, the creators of *Voyages* have sidestepped the kinds of criticisms which were levied against earlier generations of cliometricians.⁽³⁾ There are downloadable codebooks for every variable in the database and clear instructions are given on how to perform searches. The database will allow users to construct maps and timelines drawing on the data and perform endless varieties in searches. Users can rely on either the known data or the combination of known data and the estimates of the researchers in their data queries.

To compliment the quantitative data, there are a series of interpretive essays, including an overview of the slave trade from David Eltis that draws predominantly from his book, *The Rise of African Slavery in the Americas*.⁽⁴⁾ Few would dispute Eltis' claims. Stephen Behrendt offers a fascinating new interpretation of 'Seasonality in the transatlantic slave trade', which will lead researchers to more carefully consider the role of agricultural cycles and seasonal and weather patterns in migration and trade patterns in the Atlantic World. This emphasis on the determinative forces of weather and seasons is an under-explored aspect of Atlantic history. As part of an outreach project, the database also includes teaching modules that will allow it to be used not only by researchers but as a pedagogical tool in grade schools or high schools. To assist in this pedagogical project, the database includes a range of contemporary maps.

A promising new addition to the *Voyages* project is the African names dataset. The names, gender and heights and shipping origins of over 67,000 Africans liberated from intercepted slavers in the 19th century after the abolition of the slave trade are now included with the voyages statistics. One of the limitations in using the database to explore the cultural origins of slaves is that the port of embarkation is the only indication of the slaves' cultural origins and these slaves were often brought from far inland, especially as the volume of the slave trade increased in the 18th and 19th centuries. By exploring the ethnic origins of these African names, the researchers hope to discover more about the cultures from which slaves in the middle passage came. Although that effort to track names is ongoing, *Voyages* is clear that it has been, for

the most part, unsuccessful. These names were transcribed by Europeans who were not always necessarily attentive to pronunciation or consistent in their spelling. Even if the ethnic origins of these names could be ascertained – and that will take an enormous amount of research – it is difficult to predict how this names dataset might restructure our interpretation of the ethnic origins of the enslaved Africans.

The names dataset does address one of the common criticisms of the slave trade database and of cliometric histories of slavery since the 1970s. Scholars have argued that an excessive reliance on statistics makes it difficult to appreciate the human face of the trade or the institution more broadly. Statistics efface the lived experiences of the Africans who were stolen from their homes and forced to endure the horrors of middle passage. *Voyages* does try to address the particularities of human experience and put a face to the numbers by offering one longer and two shorter vignettes about individual survivors of the trade. Unfortunately, the three stories come across as tokenism. Likewise, the images section contains only nine images of the slaves who experienced the middle passage. *Voyages* should make an effort to include more stories or images of individuals.

Although the strength of *Voyages* is its exhaustive research into one particular subject – the middle passage of the transatlantic slave trade – this focus could have some negative consequences. The experience of forced migration and dislocation was common in slavery. There were massive internal slave trades within Africa for example, from the upper to the lower South in the antebellum US and from the coast of Brazil to the interior after the discovery of gold and silver in Minas Gerais. There was also an overland trade from Africa to the Islamic world that both predated and outlasted the transatlantic slave trade. The scholarship has tended to highlight the middle passage, almost fetishizing its brutality, and overlooking other kinds of forced migration in slavery. More recent work, such as Walter Johnson's edited collection, *The Chattel Principle*, has begun to explore these forced migrations but the database could offer some comparative perspective on other forced migrations.⁽⁵⁾ Moreover, scholars must be aware that *Voyages* is a snapshot only of part of the transatlantic trade. It cannot trace the regions slaves were drawn from within Africa or their overland routes in any detail. It cannot reveal how many slaves were captured or died in this march to the coast or how long they remained slaves before they arrived on the coast. It also fails to explore the final passage of slaves. Groundbreaking research by Gregory E. O'Malley reveals that for a significant number of slaves disembarking in the Americas, the voyage was not over. Slave purchasers in ports in the Americas sometimes acted as middlemen, taking those recently arrived slaves to resell them in other areas of the Americas.⁽⁶⁾

Slavery, Abolition and Social Justice compliments *Voyages* well. It is broader in scope and concept but more limited in its contribution to original research. Whereas the assembling of the *Voyages* dataset was a massive research undertaking in its own right and enables to scholars to conduct new data inquiries on their own, *Slavery, Abolition and Social Justice* contributes to slave studies by supplying sources. It employs a loose definition of slavery, including forms of extra-legal or illegal bondage. It is a massive and growing collection of digitized rare books, manuscripts, maps, images and governmental records relating to slavery for the end of the 15th century through the 21st century. The sources, which are not restricted to the English language, are drawn from archives throughout the Atlantic World (including such rich collections as the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, Duke Library or the National Archives of the United Kingdom). Although the vast majority of sources relate to African slavery in the Americas, the site includes records relating to debt bondage and other kinds of coerced labour in 21st century Southeast Asia and the 20th century Middle East. The sources can be downloaded in their entirety in PDF files (a very useful feature) or they can be read online. The scanned pages are high quality reproductions, and are easily read. The digitized sources are a stimulating pedagogical tool, allowing undergraduates and graduate students the ability to study original documents without the aid of transcription – archival skills that are often underdeveloped in even advanced graduate students.

The coverage of *Slavery, Abolition and Social Justice* is expansive and there are gems in the collection (such as the Castle Wemyss Estate Papers for Jamaica), that will attract specialists but the collection privileges breadth over depth. There is not enough material on any particular subject to allow for deep specialist research. The justification for what is included is problematic and not clearly explained. If the point is to

include all examples of slavery, documents relating to ancient slavery (even if they had to be transcribed) would make the collection richer. There are a few in the collection but the authors could have included more on, for example, the Hammurabi Code. If the database intends to focus on slavery, broadly defined, from 1490–2007, there is little coverage of other forms of bondage and forced labour in the early modern era such as Native American slavery, convict labour, indentured servitude or the *encomienda* system. Although it is important to recognize the diversity of slave experience, there is enough diversity in African slavery in the Americas (which makes up the core of the collection) to make that point. It is unclear what scholarly goals will be attained by extending the coverage to debt bondage and human trafficking in the 21st century. The repositories from which these documents are drawn are, the contributors admit, from around the Atlantic World and the chronological bounds of the database –beginning in the 1490s as Europe was expanding to the Americas – suggest an Atlantic focus. *Slavery, Abolition and Social Justice* would be more effective if it focused on providing digitized sources and accompanying interpretive essays on African slavery in the Americas. It could have the potential, given the archives on which it draws, to be the most important online archive for that subject. Yet, the database professes global and more wide reaching ambitions. If the developers intend to make the website into a portal for global slave studies, the collections will have to expand to include repositories from beyond the Atlantic.

The collection of digitized sources is rich but there is little on the site to compliment these sources. Thus far, the site includes a scanty 13 interpretive essays. Four of these are guides to sources, explaining the provenance and significance of a certain digitized collection. The other nine interpretive essays are insufficient for a global study of slavery from 1490 to 2007. They fail to offer a thorough overview of the commonalities and varieties of slave experience. Give that the creators of the site are ambitiously using such a loose definition of slavery, an essay specifically addressing the changing definitions of slavery or the ways in which it might be defined should be included. Definitions of slavery are still contested and this site has the potential to highlight those contested definitions and allow both researchers and students to explore the issue. Ultimately, a definition of slavery that is too expansive threatens to make the study of slavery meaningless, indistinguishable from other forms of social oppression. The final version of *Slavery, Abolition and Social Justice* is not scheduled to be released until December 2010 and it remains to be seen how fully the gaps in coverage can be addressed.

These two websites are being produced not simply to further specialist research but also as pedagogical outreach programs and as part of a project of creating useable histories of slavery that will serve to correct social injustice. *Voyages* suggests that its data might be useful in reparations cases for the ancestors of enslaved survivors of the middle passage because it can help identify which early modern financial actors were heavily involved in the trade. *Slavery, Abolition and Social Justice* makes it clear with the title and with the inclusion of materials relating to debt bondage in the 21st century that it seeks to raise awareness of ongoing slavery. Kevin Bales, the world's premier expert on modern slavery, offers an interpretive essay on this topic, and the timeline included with the site concludes by pointing out that, in 2007, 'Slavery still persists in places all over the world such as the Sudan and Mauritania, despite being legally abolished'. In this sense the *Slavery, Abolition and Social Justice* database clearly, and even more explicitly than *Voyages*, melds social activism with a portal for slavery specialists. Although the social activism is admirable, it is the melding of these twin goals that produces an unclear focus in the database.

Online databases such as these are continually evolving projects. To evaluate them, one must think not only of what they currently offer scholars but also of what they have the potential to offer as they are developed and the aims of the project are essential to gauging this potential. *Voyages* is the culmination of almost two decades of sustained and collaborative research. The creators intended to assemble as much data as they could on every slave voyage from Africa to the Americas. They have achieved that goal more fully than anyone could have expected and the result is a database that will become a compulsory part of almost any research on slavery in the Americas and for many topics related to the Atlantic World. Not only can the database be used to explore slavery, it can be used to examine aspects of maritime life, African culture and economic history from the 16th through the 19th centuries. Although it is limited in scope to the middle passage, *Voyages* is a stunningly complete resource, a testament to the ways in which computers have

transformed historical analysis. *Slavery, Abolition and Social Justice* offers researchers and educators access to a wide variety of sources from archives across the Atlantic World which they might otherwise be unable to consult. Printed material in English from the 16th through 19th centuries pertaining to slavery is available in a variety of databases such as *Eighteenth-Century Collections Online* or *Early English Books Online*. *Slavery, Abolition and Social Justice* has the potential to become an essential access site for manuscript material relating to African slavery in the Americas but it has failed to fully achieve this goal yet because it is so ambitious in scope and because it seeks to define slavery as a form of oppression and control that exists in the absence of legal coercion. While such a definition is certainly tenable, it cannot be selectively applied and the creators of *Slavery, Abolition and Social Justice* will need to address several thin areas in their coverage.

Notes

1. David Eltis, 'The volume and structure of the transatlantic slave trade: a reassessment', *The William and Mary Quarterly*, (January 2001) <<http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/wm/58.1/eltis.html> [5]> [accessed 27 June 2010].[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. David Eltis, 'Was Abolition of the U.S. and British Slave Trade Significant in the Broader Atlantic Context? ', *The William and Mary Quarterly*, (October 2009) <<http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/wm/66.4/eltis.html> [6]> [accessed 27 June 2010].[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Herbert C. Gutman, *Slavery and the Numbers Game: A Critique of Time on the Cross* (Bloomington, IL, 2003 [1975]).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. David Eltis, *The Rise of African Slavery in the Americas* (New York, NY, 2000).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. *The Chattel Principle: Internal Slave Trades in the Americas*, ed. Walter Johnson (New Haven, CT, 2004).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Gregory E. O'Malley, 'Beyond the middle passage: slave migration from the Caribbean to North America, 1619–1807', *The William and Mary Quarterly*, (January 2009) <<http://www.historycooperative.org/cgi-bin/justtop.cgi?act=justtop&url=htt...> [7] [accessed 27 June 2010].[Back to \(6\)](#)

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[1] <https://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/5001>

[2] <https://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/5002>

[3] <http://www.slavevoyages.org/tast/index.faces>

[4] <http://www.amdigital.co.uk/collections/Slavery-Abolition-and-Social-Justice-1490-2007/Default.aspx>

[5] <http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/wm/58.1/eltis.html>

[6] <http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/wm/66.4/eltis.html>

[7]

<http://www.historycooperative.org/cgi-bin/justtop.cgi?act=justtop&url=http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/wm/58.1/eltis.html>

[8] <https://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>