

## West Africa Historical GIS and the Liberated Africans Project

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Thank the directors Neil Friastat, Matthew Kirschenbaum, and Trevor Muñoz for inviting me and thanks to Stephanie for organizing all my travel and accommodations. It is truly an honor to be here today and have the chance to talk about two projects I am in the process of integrating.

My talk today is divided into two parts based on my primary research question, which is to understand when and where people came from in West Africa; and when and where they went in diaspora.

My research largely builds upon the methodologies and collaborations of *Voyages: The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database*. *Voyages* is arguably one of the earliest Digital Humanities Projects concerned with the history of slavery and this database continues to be one of the most significant contributions to the study of Africa and the African Diaspora.

This project began to take shape with the publication of Philip Curtin's nominal study *The Atlantic Slave Trade* in 1969, which was the first attempt to quantify the total number of people absorbed into the trans-Atlantic slave trade. The result of Curtin's estimation resulted in a collaboration to database slaving voyages archives in Europe and the Americas. By 1978, hard-copy published lists of voyages that were multi-sourced began to emerge from electronic datasets using some of the earliest versions of SPSS.

Jumping ahead to 1999, *Voyages* was the first electronic dataset, which was released on CD-ROM, and contained over 27,000 *Voyages*, and a few years later, *Voyages* went online. This dataset is constantly being updated and currently contains over 36,000 voyages, animated maps, self-generating data visualization tools, estimates of the 12.5 million people involved and additional databases related to approximately 100,000 enslaved Africans liberated from slave ships after 1807. Each dataset, which focuses on the voyages, includes well over 30 variables.

While *Voyages* is continuing to expand and incorporate other data, such as information on the Inter-Caribbean and Indian Ocean slave trades, my work will hopefully contribute to *Voyages*, the history of pre-colonial Africa and the abolition of the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

Today I will be talking about two DH projects, which I am building simultaneously. The first, called West Africa Historical GIS, is an ambitious project where I am attempting to catalogue geo-political transformations of pre-colonial sub-Saharan West Africa; and the second project is a massive collaboration I have initiated, called The Liberated Africans Project, which will organize and make searchable digitally worldwide collections of archival data for over 200,000 enslaved Africans liberated from slave ships, canoes and baracoons under the umbrella of British abolitionism after 1808.

Let's begin by talking about the evolution of maps of Africa, both from the perspective of primary and secondary sources, most especially the problems researchers face when trying to visualize the geo-political representation of sub-Saharan Africa during the era of the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

### **Discuss the old maps of Africa on the power point**

Muhammad al-Wazzan

### **Four Key Problems with Primary and Secondary Source Maps**

First, primary source maps do not always reflect indigenous representations of Africa's internal geography, but rather depict changing European perspectives about the coastline and trading ports. Next, the secondary source maps illustrating large regions tend to lack detail due to the spatial limitations of paper. Such maps generally contain a selection of toponyms, and any political, ethnic or linguistic boundaries are approximated. Third, the most detailed secondary source maps tend to focus on smaller regions and their fragmentation throughout the historiography makes it challenging to envision the complexity of the bigger picture. Last, many historical maps are "timeless" because their titles reflect extended periods of time, or indeed, none at all.

### **The solution is where Digital Humanities can come into play and begin to illustrate geo-political transformations using Geographic Information Systems, or GIS.**

The main goal of West Africa Historical GIS is to create an online platform containing open-accessed maps and databases illustrating the geographic, political and migratory history of pre-colonial sub-Saharan West Africa; especially as it relates to the trans-Atlantic slave trade. This collaborative project involves researching the secondary literature for geographically referenced data, consulting with a network of specialists for accuracy and inputting information into a complex network of databases designed to operate with Geographic Information Systems (GIS).

To initiate West Africa Historical GIS of this project was to create a map of the Bight of Benin hinterland at a single point in time. I choose to build upon Robin Law's map in 1780, but expand the regional focus to include the region around the kingdom of Oyo.

### **Explain your maps and build it up to the video, explain the historiography in the video**

### **Explain how QGIS influenced the data fields and input.**

### **Explain how animated maps of the geo-political transformations of pre-colonial Africa will heighten user experiences with Voyages.**

### **Knowing when and where towns were destroyed will help explain where people came from**

### **Show the animated map from Voyages**

Slate Magazine in June 2015, problem had a modern day map of Africa.

## **My Second Project, which ties into *Voyages* and West African Historical GIS,**

Between 1808 and 1866, over 200,000 enslaved Africans were emancipated in an international effort to suppress and then abolish the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Intervention and prevention mostly involved the British Royal Navy (along with Portuguese, Brazilian, and Spanish naval ships) capturing slave ships and raiding coastal barracoons. They would then escort the people responsible for engaging in the illegal slave trade, along with the rescued captives, into naval courts and bilateral commissions located in Africa and the Americas. This feature of global antislavery produced voluminous documentation in multiple languages, including court proceedings of over 500 trials and judgments; nominal registers of over 100,000 liberated men, women and children; and other materials describing settlement and labor obligations for Liberated Africans. Although the Atlantic slave trade lasted for almost four centuries, over one quarter of the estimated 12.5 million Africans swept into the trade were embarked after the passing of Britain's Act for the Abolition of the Slave Trade in 1807. Liberated Africans, though a relatively small fraction of the total, were among the last generation to experience what W.E.B. Du Bois described as "the most magnificent drama in the last thousand years in human history."

"The Liberated Africans Project" will reconstruct, on a case-by-case basis, widely dispersed archival evidence from an exceedingly rich, transnational collection of primary sources made by some of the world's earliest international human rights courts. While there has been a great deal of research conducted on the implementation of abolitionism as a humanitarian campaign, especially on British policy and the Royal Navy, this project takes a different approach by focusing on the human consequences and experiences for the supposed African beneficiaries of this anti-slave trade movement. The long-term outcome will be a dynamic and interactive website that scholars, students and the general public can utilize to explore the history of antislavery and international human rights law, as well as the demography and ethnolinguistic composition of the post-1807 trans-Atlantic slave trade, principally from the perspective of the Africans involved. The project examines the enduring interest in the history and memory of slavery through evidence that allows rebuilding the life histories for tens of thousands of Liberated Africans from embarkation, through their trial, and final distribution as "apprentices" or "free laborers" throughout the Atlantic World.

Grant from the Hutchins Center,

Key collaborators: SL – Suzanne Schwarz, Richard Anderson; Brazil – Daryle Williams, Nielson Bezerra; Cuba and Caribbean – Myself, Maria del Carmen Barcia; US – Sharla Fett; South Africa – Patrick Davies; East Africa – Matt Hopper

MATRIX created KORA - Walter Hawthorne, Dean Reahberger, Lindsey Gish, etc...

KORA is an open-source, database-driven, online digital repository application for complex multimedia objects (text, images, audio, video). The application ingests, manages, and delivers digital objects with corresponding metadata that enhances the research and educational value of the objects. KORA's flexible architecture can accommodate any metadata scheme allowing for individualized digital collections with differing contents and metadata structures.

## **Conclusions**

### **Current State of Digital Humanities**

- 1. Mass digitization, now requires new ways to organize globally and beyond the classic archival protocols.**
  
- 2. Problems of silos of information, and getting these stand-alone projects to “talk to one another”**
  
- 3. Sustainability, Server Space and advancement of technology – CD ROM obsolete**
  - a. A current moment with technology sometimes dictates how data is entered**
  - b. Things get out of date too, Voyages looks old and clunky now. Non-responsive**
  
- 4. How to Evaluate DH Projects**
  - a. AHA Guidelines – too ambiguous, but on the right track**
  - b. AHR Exchange: Reviewing Digital History**
  
- 5. Availability of Certifications for faculty and students**
  
  
- 6. Grants and collaborations**
  - a. Have to collaborate, share ideas, including grant applications, etc...**