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### Extending the Frontiers: Essays on the New Transatlantic Slave Trade Database

David Eltis  
*Emory University*, [deltis@emory.edu](mailto:deltis@emory.edu)

David Richardson

Isaac Land  
*Indiana State University*

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## H-NET BOOK REVIEW

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David Eltis, David Richardson, eds. *Extending the Frontiers: Essays on the New Transatlantic Slave Trade Database*. New Haven Yale University Press, 2008. 377 pp., \$90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-13436-0.

Reviewed for H-Albion by Isaac Land, Indiana State University

### *Slavery By the Numbers*

The first systematic attempt to count how many enslaved Africans crossed the Atlantic was Philip Curtin's classic 1969 *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census*, which reckoned by entire centuries and necessarily relied on a great deal of educated guesswork. Since then, new technologies have enabled scholars to share evidence from a wide variety of sources on different continents, accumulating multiple sources of information on many individual voyages. There is no longer a high risk of counting ships and their cargoes twice (once on departure from Africa and again on arrival in the Americas). It is now possible to quantify how many slaves crossed the Atlantic in any given year with a high degree of accuracy. Databases allow us to sort the individual voyages according to many different variables, including the port of departure, the point of arrival in Africa, the mortality during the Middle Passage, and the American destination that ultimately received the human cargo.

The data discussed in this volume is derived from the substantial and wide-ranging update to the *Transatlantic Slave Trade Database* (searchable for free at <http://slavevoyages.org>) that has been carried out since the release of an earlier version of the database on CD-ROM in 1999 and the discussion of the initial findings in the *William and Mary Quarterly* in 2001. I will follow the convention

adopted by the editors and refer to the 1999 data as TSTD1, while the newest findings are TSTD2. Since 1999, 8,232 new voyages have been added to the database, and 19,729 of the voyages already included are modified to reflect new information. The editors remark that with this latest refinement of the data, it is possible that "this book will be the last to devote a major part of its thrust to assessing the overall size of the slave trade" (p. 53). The concluding essay by David Eltis and Paul Lachance offers a reappraisal of "rates of natural decrease" in the Caribbean, reminding us that estimates about the scope of the slave trade have also shaped the debate on other important demographic topics (p. 355).

It was already well known that Brazil took the lion's share of slaves from Africa; a concentrated effort to improve the coverage of ships flying the Portuguese or Brazilian flags has resulted in a 13 percent increase in the overall estimate of persons removed from Africa over the entire course of the slave trade (an additional 1.5 million human beings unknown to TSTD1), and an 11 percent increase in the equivalent estimate of enslaved persons arriving alive in the Americas (p. 45). The editors note that "it now appears that British dominance of the slave trade was confined to eight of the thirteen decades between 1681 and 1807" with "two long periods of Portuguese preeminence" on either side (p. 39). Indeed, even in several of the "dominant" British decades, Portuguese slave traders nearly tied them for the number one position. For example, in the period 1751-60, the British accounted for the shipment of 255,346 Africans, but the Portuguese transported 215,934 (table 1.6). The new numbers also force some reappraisal of the role of individual port cities in the trade as a whole: "Liverpool has often been viewed as the quintessential slave-trading port, but in fact the ports of Bahia and Rio de Janeiro were individually responsible for far more slaves reaching the Americas" (p. 39). Little-known Brazilian ports, such as Recife, sent out about two thousand slave ships in total, equivalent to Bristol's trade and exceeding that of Nantes (p. 122). Not surprisingly, raising our estimate of the number of slaves destined for Brazil also involves a notable increase in the weight of the Congo River basin and Angola, which figure more than ever as prime contributors of captives.

The essays in this volume are concerned with what was new in TSTD2, and this was -- by design -- mostly about rectifying gaps in our knowledge of the Luso-Atlantic world, which receives no less than four chapters of coverage. Although the French, the Dutch, and even the Duchy of Brandenburg (which launched fifty-six voyages, mostly in the 1690s) can boast chapters of their own, there is no chapter devoted to Britain or its colonies per se. As I have noted, however, the new data enables us to set Britain, its trade, and its colonies in a

broader comparative context with unprecedented accuracy. Some refinements also improve our knowledge of the performance of various British ports in comparison with each other. Considering the entire history of the slave trade, "London now appears to have been twice as important as Bristol and not far behind Liverpool, albeit with a trade that endured over a longer period" (p. 39).

Taking a hard look at the early and mid-nineteenth-century numbers also puts Britain's much-touted efforts to ban the transatlantic trade in a less flattering light. In the Luso-Atlantic world, the numbers of slaves enduring the Middle Passage went up, not down, after 1807. Although "about eighty-five vessels from Bahia were captured by British forces" between 1811 and 1830, which sounds impressive, this period and the two decades that followed marked the climax of the trade in Brazil (p. 146). The figures show that many hundreds of thousands of slaves were never intercepted. When British pressure made it inconvenient to disembark captives in the port of Salvador, they were simply set down on nearby beaches and islands (p. 140). In nearby Uruguay, slaves arrived as "colonists" from Africa, avoiding the rules while fooling no one (p. 37). The chapter on Cuba, illuminated by insights from the Cuban archives, paints a similar picture: slavers entered the island's ports "with complete impunity," while the "many hidden creeks" of the lower Congo River foiled the British patrols on the other side of the Atlantic (pp. 187, 192). It is particularly sobering to see that the numbers of captives departing from Sierra Leone's creeks and inlets showed little or no decline in the decades following 1807 (table 1.7); one would never guess that this part of the African coast was also the site of a bold experiment in freedom undertaken by former slaves from the Americas, and the place where the Royal Navy delivered its "recaptives" from intercepted slave ships.

One potential shortcoming of history by the numbers is that it may prejudice us in favor of the study of numerically larger groups, or of groups whose existence and movements are easiest to quantify. TSTD2 is so impressive, and so easy to access, that there is some risk that it could discourage historians from considering other, less well-documented populations that fell outside its purview. Native American slaves amounted to a modest fraction of the total of enslaved persons in the Americas, but in certain times and places they could be quite important, as demonstrated by Allan Galloway's prize-winning book on South Carolina, *The Indian Slave Trade: The Rise of the English Empire in the American South, 1670-1717* (2002). It would be unfortunate if our lavish, and entirely laudable, attention to the demographic rise of African Americans had the effect of eclipsing our awareness of Native American populations, which, despite the myth of the "vanishing Indian," did in fact persist and adapt, exercising an

**influence over colonial societies from beginning to end despite their diminished numbers.**

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