Memories of Madagascar and Slavery in the Black Atlantic

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Contents

Introduction

A Particular Ancestral Place

In 1796 a woman, reported to be a slave, managed to bring a court case regarding her captivity in Maryland. In the case, *Negro Mary v. The Vestry of William and Mary's Parish* of October 1, 1796, the petitioner claimed to be the daughter of a woman who had been captured in Madagascar a generation before, enslaved in North America on her arrival. It is astounding, from a contemporary point of view, that a woman slave in 1796 would be so well informed regarding British law. Nevertheless, on the basis of the former status of her mother, the enslaved woman in Maryland argued that she should be set free. Madagascar, she said, "was not a place from which slaves [usually] were brought." Her point of view was that Madagascar, and thus Malagasy people, should not be considered as legally imported labor, as in the normal course of the slave trade. It was true that under the New East India Act of 1721, American colonists could no longer legally obtain East India goods unless through Britain, or bring slaves from East India region ports.[1] Unfortunately for Mary, the judge ruled that she could be set free only if she could provide documentation of the original status of her mother. Having thus responded, the judge cleverly avoided the question of whether "out-of-bounds" slavery in Madagascar was a sufficient charge for changing slave status. He knew it would have been exceedingly uncommon for a person such as the enslaved plaintiff to produce papers documenting her claim.[2] Furthermore, the court argued that since it was known that "petty provinces" in Madagascar made war on each other to produce slaves for the European

trade, they should normally fall under the same classification as slaves from the African continent.[3]

The case described above gives evidence of the sense of difference that may have been common among Malagasy slaves brought to the English colonies of North America and their compatriots who arrived after independence in the years before the Civil War. The fact that an enslaved woman in Maryland somehow had the wherewithal to take her petition for freedom to the court is remarkable; the fact that she called on her identity as a descendant of a Malagasy goes against most popular assumptions that a first-generation slave in the North American colonies would *not* identify by a parent's pre-capture ethnicity, or "tribal" affiliation. Consequently, exploration of the conditions that would produce such an event can potentially tell us more about the process of creolization that took place on American plantations and more specifically, the experience of descendants of Malagasy slaves in that process.

In the following pages I have taken on the challenge of exploring the conditions that might have created or allowed a "Negro Mary," or any self-identified Malagasy descendant who had slave or free progenitors in what has become the United States of America, to invoke Madagascar as a signifier of difference. This book was therefore written with the intention of contributing to the study of African diaspora communities in the Americas as well as the study of Malagasy diasporas. It presents an example of how Malagasy captives got caught up in the nexus of two major slaving networks of the modern era: the Indian Ocean and transatlantic slave trades. The Indian Ocean island of Madagascar stood at the intersection of these two systems, and the island furnished slaves at various times to the Indian Ocean world as well as to the Americas.

The dispersal of people from Madagascar throughout the Indian Ocean is well known, but little scholarly attention has been directed toward the trade of captives from Madagascar to the Americas.[4] Thousands of slaves from Madagascar were exported to American ports, from Argentina to Canada, and the trade lasted from the seventeenth into the nineteenth century.[5] One of the destinations of Malagasy

captives during the eighteenth century was the Commonwealth of Virginia. Later, during the nineteenth century, Malagasy contract laborers, merchants, sailors, and slaves traveled to American ports and eventually became part of black communities.

Though my intent is to open a door on one aspect of the New World slave experience that helps us better understand local histories of African Americans, these stories are also part of a larger history of the relationship of North America to the Indian Ocean. This relationship started during the era of pirates, in the seventeenth century, and peaked much later, in the second half of the nineteenth century, with Yankee traders and the pull of the spice trade, British maritime expansion and control of the "Indies," and the establishment of American diplomatic and commercial representation at Majunga (Mahajanga), in northwestern Madagascar, in the 1820s. Official consulates later served the United States in Antananarivo, in central Madagascar, in the late nineteenth century.

The narratives are discussed in the context of the era of the transatlantic slave trade and shortly thereafter, focusing on the period between 1719 (when large numbers of Malagasy slaves were imported into the Commonwealth of Virginia) and 1850 (when there were still incidents of foreign slave smuggling into mainland America, and indentured servants arriving to the Americas from the Indian Ocean region).[6] After 1850 (and until the mid-twentieth century), most Malagasy people who arrived in the United States or Europe were either Christian refugees traveling under the auspices of church missionary societies or sailors on steamships, and that history is beyond the scope of the present volume. This volume begins with the rash of entrepreneurial forays to the western Indian Ocean carried out by American colonists and ends in the period when Britain was a major maritime power and the War of 1812 was past.

For this story of Malagasy slaves and early immigrants to the Americas, I draw on two kinds of sources: historical documentation and contemporary narratives of remembrance of ancestors from Madagascar. In order to take full advantage of these two compelling but disparate ways of looking at history, the book has a rather

unusual approach to treating the historical and ethnographic material gathered in the course of research. In order to make clear which information is drawn from documented historical accounts or from family oral tradition, chapters begin with a review of the available information in the historical record and are followed by a section devoted to family oral traditions and their analysis, presenting ethnographic commentary on the style, content, and uses of these narratives.

The text suggests the possibility that slaves and early free-black immigrants from Madagascar, as well as their descendants in Virginia and a few other places in the American South, remembered, reinvented, and imagined a particular geographic site they held in common. It is also about the pervasive sense of loss that contemporary families express about their separation from an ancestral geography that is symbolized, for them, by a specific ancestor from a specific place. I explore ethnic negotiation and identity formation among Malagasy newcomers to North America and their Afro-Malagasy, creole descendants by drawing on family narratives that are woven from memories and stories passed down by successive generations. With family ideas of a particular ancestral place came an allegiance to a particular history and to an inheritance of stories that describe a sense of difference from other families, and other stories, in the African American community.

My intent is to provide a reflection on the process of creolization that led to African American identity by following one strand: the legacy of slaves and early free immigrants from Madagascar. Whether the legacy I mention above is direct descent or creations of assumed genealogies, it is a received notion deriving from ideas and thoughts of Madagascar. The approach here is not statistical but rather focuses on historical context and memory. It addresses the problem of family historical narratives as received testimonies of a past that has been embroidered and otherwise transformed in narratives stretching over successive generations. The meaning of narratives of Madagascar is explored, therefore, as an example of the complexity of memory work as it affects group identity.

It is a difficult, almost impossible enterprise to corroborate the genealogies suggested in the stories collected, because there are few existing records linking any Malagasy slave or early immigrant with particular African American descendants, although there are many African Americans who claim Malagasy descent, as "Negro Mary" did. There is, thus, a dialogue that continues throughout this volume between ethnographic analysis of the storytellers and their narratives, on one hand, and historical documentation, on the other. Today's family narratives, as I see them, are not a recent response to public memory enterprises but, on the contrary, are built on remnants and reconstructions of much earlier narratives.[7]

Family oral traditions offer a unique way of understanding how people experience history. The archives, which offer multiple sources of slave lists, do not reveal the transition that most slaves or early black immigrants experienced between their ethnic identities and their newly appointed racial identities. For example, while names are by nature meant to identify (a person, a thing), in the case of slaves they also hid, or even erased, personal identities. In North America once the slave received a name—his or her "slave name"—that person's past identity and place of origin was effectively lost to future generations, because African and Malagasy names suggested linguistic or ethnic origin. Moreover, origin as a criterion of reference quickly went into disuse by slave owners (usually with the first country-born generation). If a document such as a diary or journal ever recorded the naming of individuals in a group of slaves from Madagascar, then the descendants of each slave might yet be traceable in plantation records. Unfortunately, no such record has yet been found, and records of this sort are notoriously rare for any slaves in North America. Moreover, slaves coming to the Americas generally could not read or write in English and rarely in Arabic[8] and, thus, did not leave their own written records. This fact seems apparent, but the simplicity of this problem has often led to its invisibility, particularly for those outside the academy who want to understand or contribute to African American discourse on identity, such as the descendants of slaves. Nor has the

existence of African American stories of Malagasy ancestors been common knowledge. It is not surprising, then, that this is the first scholarly publication to attempt to situate ancestor stories of Madagascar told by contemporary African Americans in a historical context.

It is always difficult to find material evidence that demonstrates the accuracy of oral histories in the case of illiterate societies, and this is especially true of disempowered communities. How does one corroborate an oral tradition that has been passed down by a repressed minority? In this case, I have chosen to present such narratives chronologically so that historical evidence provides a background, even though there are few documents that directly substantiate Malagasy origins. But family oral-history narrators do seek to tell a chronologically based story, and the purpose of the story is to frame the present in relation to the past, specifically, a shared family past. This chronological feature exposes a desire for coherence and logic—an attempt to order the past, to signal what should be remembered and, hence, to give meaning to the present.

The infamous Middle Passage was not long enough for people to forget who they were: the average time from West Africa across the Atlantic was two and a half to three months, and from the western Indian Ocean about three months more. Over generations, people did forget much about where they came from, and it must be imagined that remembrance was in many ways painful and underlined the powerlessness people felt. Yet if family oral history is any indication, then within the cultural aggregate that has been the African American community, traces of ethnic particularities from diverse sources and very specific experiences remain in perpetually new and ever-changing configurations, for example, as embodied practices, as folk tales, or family historical narratives. The Madagascar example, based on a less known minority population among North American slave imports, provides circumstantial evidence of how ethnic or national clusters from Africa and its islands responded to the imperative to integrate into existing black communities, enslaved or free, in the New World.

My research has shown that authenticity is not a concern of the family oral narrative insomuch as families accept that they are not

pure Malagasy, but do argue that they are of Malagasy descent. Their focus, which they clearly admit, is on their identities as people of a mixed heritage that *includes* an ancestor from Madagascar. This is an aspect of the narratives that is approached in various ways throughout the book, as we seek to understand why the "Madagascar" lineage was remembered or otherwise noted, especially in contrast to other less visible or forgotten stories, such as those on continental African descent. This book is thus not a project in search of "lost authenticity" but of offering a context for a particular kind of family oral tradition through exploring the historical record.[9] For understanding the internal significance of the Malagasy lineage and thus the Malagasy story, I turn to ethnography and discussions in anthropology on memory and identity.[10]

In contrast to archival materials, family oral traditions give a sense of the tension and displacement experienced by slave descendants. I find that the practice of the family narrative is intentional; its purpose is to transfer information. However, the family oral narrative depends principally on memory, unlike professionally written histories as we know them today. The problem of understanding the past through family oral histories lies in a gray area between memory, mnemonic behaviors, and available historical evidence.

Recent historical research has pioneered alternative ways of looking at slaves who arrived in the New World, and this volume draws on these new theoretical perspectives and findings.[11] We know that when enslaved captives arrived on American shores, they did not yet see themselves as simply "black" people or Africans. We can take the narrative of Olaudah Equiano, known also as Gustavus Vassa, as an example.[12] There has been considerable debate regarding whether Equiano was indeed born in Africa and transported as a youth on a slave ship, or born in the Caribbean of Ibo parents, or born in South Carolina. Nevertheless, any reading of his history gives evidence of the importance of ethnicity to Equiano's own story of himself. He spoke of himself as a displaced Ibo person and as an African.[13] Paul Lovejoy, for instance, in "Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa—What's in a Name?" suggests that the methodological issues regarding the Equiano debate relate to how historians engage oral tradition and literary

custom with the archival record.[14] This volume addresses issues of the Equiano debate, suggesting there is a reasonable probability that most, if not all, of the family narratives derive from a family history linked to the slave cohort of the eighteenth century or slaves smuggled into the United States in the nineteenth century. It also suggests that contemporary family narratives of free Malagasy immigrants likely stem from accounts of lived experiences. As with Equiano, there are no written sources to lend credibility to a claimed identity that precedes the American experience. However, I am most interested in what importance the narratives have for the people who use and recite them. I am less concerned with proving that they are "true," because the written documentation necessary to make that claim has not been found and perhaps was never written.

In the case of the nascent African American community of the eighteenth century, the racial concept of "black" people in America as a new, homogeneous group was being constructed at the same time that various Europeans acquiesced to new identities of being "white" and American. Later, in the early days of the republic and particularly in the mid-nineteenth century, prior national or ethnic origins were to have little public meaning for those blacks born on American soil. In response to the problems of understanding past black identities, some African American genealogical narratives are presented here as a way to explore how some people today imagine and remember their ancestry beyond being "black" or "mixed" in the United States, where laws governing racial identity have been strictly applied until very recently.

The contradiction implicit in adjusting to a new, despised identity while holding on to an older, more dignified one applies to early immigrants of African and Malagasy descent as well as to slaves. For example, the particular ethnic or national identity of (nonwhite) sailors who "jumped ship" or otherwise opted to remain in America, and of black women who arrived as personal servants to white families (discussed in chapter 4) was rarely registered by customs or immigration offices due to the very nature of their arrival. They were most often registered simply as "black sailor" or "black servant." In the mid-nineteenth century, most whites had very little understanding of

African ethnicities and perceived African difference as tribal, savage, and primitively formed. Such identities were deemed irrelevant, if not an obstacle, to being an American. Blacks rightfully assumed that public discourse on African identities would not suit their cause for citizenship. Within the black community, insistence on difference was not highly appreciated and sometimes perceived as antisocial. Unity was the most important operational theme.

African and Malagasy identities, first and foremost, were shaped by language, custom, and geography, and from Madagascar, as elsewhere, captives arrived with particular language and ethnic affiliations. Their first allegiances were to their lineages, their clans, and their ethnic groups. Among those who came to North America, the most numerous were the Ibo and related groups; the Wolof and other Senegambian ethnicities such as the Bambara, Mande, or Diola; and people from Central Africa, notably the kingdoms of Kongo and Ngola. People from the island of Madagascar, from Mozambique, or from the Yoruba city-states were distinct minorities in North America. Most knowledge of these affiliations did not last into the nineteenth century, yet some slaves held on to family lore that described their origins, even while they were busy becoming creoles.

A black person who arrived in North America in the nineteenth century, whether as a captive or as a free person, had to perform two identities simultaneously: one that acquiesced to the general category of black and one that enlisted various strategies to hold on to an identity that essentially was covert. This basic tension has always been at the heart of the African American experience and is perhaps what led W. E. B. DuBois to his thesis of double consciousness.[15] Narratives from descendants of early free immigrants show that Madagascar receded into a sometimes glorified past and was usually discussed only in the home and among relatives, as people quickly sought to live and possibly even prosper in the segregated black community.

Identity is relational and depends to a great extent on how one is perceived, to what extent cultural norms are shared between self and others, and opportunities to externalize beliefs about one's self, one's community, and even the universe. Without the opportunity to act on personal beliefs and morals, for example, or to speak one's language,

many behaviors that were once normal become extravagance in a new setting. Since African and Malagasy societies perceived the individual as an expression of group identity, involuntary separation from one's group in violent circumstances must have presaged an acute identity crisis and an existential conflict, as it would for any person in such events.[16] In looking at the problem of culture, power and place, identities, like the contents of cultures themselves, are historically contingent. Identities are not simply affected by changing schemes of categorization, or discourses of difference, but may be actually constituted or interpolated by them,[17] and thus epistemological differences (and ontological shifts) are a lived experience. The case of a self-ascribed Malagasy identity must be examined in this context.

Oral Traditions and Family Narratives

The practice of the narrative in the twenty-first century is as much a result of a community experience of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—including public acknowledgment within the African American community of a "Malagasy," "Madagasco," or "Madacasar" identity—as it is the result of individual proclivities, fashion, or personal design. The numbers of slaves on the ships, the dates and conditions of sale, of transfer by inheritance, and even of escape appear in planters' correspondence, account books, and newspapers. What does not appear so clearly is the human qualities of the slaves, which have been preserved in oral traditions. Similarly, in the case of free arrivals, the circumstances of the alliances they formed or contracts they signed that brought them to America are not referred to in great detail in the narratives. The fact that this information is absent in all the narratives of free immigrants suggests a common theme.

The narrative of the ancestor is a story intended for a lineage, even though that lineage might have been partially fictive. In the threatened black communities of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, siblings may have shared one mother and had different fathers or some other variation of household kinship. Repetition over generations signifies nevertheless the oral tradition's importance to family as

an important tale to be told. The centrality of the family as the source of, and often the only place to assume, a Malagasy descendant identity gives evidence of a sort of household-level or extended-family project of self-identification. This sort of family identity is layered and complex. Moreover, each narrative suggests a reading of social and symbolic space (where and when narratives are recited and by whom) in relation to continuously reassembled information that has traveled through generations, in the sense in which Pierre Bourdieu talks of symbolic social space, the variability of positionality through time, and cultural capital.[18] This always contemporary performance nevertheless reconstitutes a past sense of urgency for listeners because the information is shared in order that it not be forgotten.

Each ancestor from Madagascar serves a symbolic function as a claim to humanity that predates and survives the calamities of captivity, enslavement, and exile. In this case, the symbolic space to which I refer is not Bourdieu's referent of class but an ethnicity claimed and possibly reified—and certainly sanctified as a special and impermeable quality that each family holds. The ancestor narrative's dynamic quality derives from its function as more unconscious ideology than physicality, more metaphysical than biological, and is part of family cultural repertoire and its cultural capital. This function is addressed in the concluding chapter, which discusses how history is learned through reenactment and stories or lived in traumatically induced and transmitted narratives, and in the moral character of memory.

A neat line from a specific Malagasy village to the early captives who came to America or from those captives to the people who tell their story today cannot be drawn. Most details of slave ancestors' lives before captivity have been lost, if they were ever transmitted, as discussed above. The narratives show an internal struggle and dialogue whose main forum was the slave community or the segregated black community. Though the narratives are told through the aegis of the family, it is also useful to consider the possible meanings of the aggregate of families who share this practice of storytelling to question the metanarrative, the possible overall meaning of the narratives as a collection of stories. The subject of this book is, therefore, not the biography of an individual or individuals, but rather an

attempt to describe a disparate group of people with common origins and common practices. It is a sort of ethnographic biography of an experience.

Commenting on Michael Lambek's essay on remembering as moral practice, Maurice Bloch observes that there are instances where "questions of individual memory are developed by means of a public idiom and conversely the memory burdens of individuals contribute to the reproduction of that idiom and its ability to continue to commemorate the past [in Madagascar]."[19] This description could also describe others' cultural practices, such as those whose stories are in this volume. Their family narratives seem to be about, and used by, a network of families and are in fact sustained by such networks. In fact, the stories defy biological logic. They supersede the intricate mathematics of subdivision in genetic histories. If such beliefs are not based on the force of physical proof or on the evidence of an essentialist self-view of purity, what is the logic of their persistence? Do these narratives also have some moral functions? The answer to these questions is the main theme of this book.

Ethnographies and History

The work of memory is not the same as the work of history, for memory follows its own purposes and logic, focusing on selected events and discarding others. Memory exists in a fluctuating personal dialogue between what was and what is. Consciously or unconsciously, a story may be changed according to the narrator's relation to the past or to the present. The work of history, on the other hand, is consciously intentional. It represents a concerted effort to bring together different kinds of material evidence to demonstrate that an event, or series of events, occurred. In writing on the subject of African American family stories about ancestors from Madagascar, I have sought to engage the thorny issue of the oral narrative as memory and as history. As I suggest earlier, this volume is characterized by the tension that exists between the oral historical narrative, on the one hand, and written histories and the archive, on the other. This book necessarily employs

an interdisciplinary approach, using history and ethnography, to look at family oral narratives in a historical context.

My intention has not been to write a history of early Malagasy arrivals in the United States but rather to present diverse stories together in historical context and to fashion a picture of the larger story that this assembly creates. The discussion in this volume, thus, is not based on past quotes from written slave narratives and autobiographies (although a few will be included) but on contemporary claims, collected over the last two decades, to Malagasy descent among African American families. Their stories are often frustratingly shallow and lacking in detail and description. Yet, the bare quality of these testimonies is itself a marker of the conditions under which the stories originated and were passed down. The silences speak loudly of the limited social space and time that was available for first-generation descendants to learn about the country of their mothers or fathers.

As the narratives themselves show, their recollection and performance is a practice that continually enhances family solidarity and, thus, individual rootedness. The pronounced interiorality of these performances (limited to home and family) underlines their value as a source of joy and wonder that should be protected. The wonder is that the ancestor survived to tell the tale; the joy is that the current generation works at the survival of the tale itself and thereby on the continued commemoration of the ancestor. Their stories serve as both history and entertainment because the story finishes in the present generation, to be later embellished and modified by coming generations. The profane of today becomes the sacred of tomorrow.

Global history is the not the only form suitable for recounting the past in a globalized world, and as Natalie Zemon Davis has stated, "local storytelling" may serve a global program toward decentering the mainstream historical narrative.[20] By tracing a series of local stories about Madagascar and using primary sources, I demonstrate that first-person testimonies and other historical accounts can be employed to expand the view of a local situation to its global causes.[21] In this way the reader's attention can be drawn to the potential that local histories of slaves can bring to understanding early modern global dynamics.[22] These considerations are primary concerns addressed in

this volume: how local stories lead to global histories and how ethnography can complement and stimulate new perspectives of and questions regarding the historiographic project.

Historic research has contributed a great deal to furthering our understanding of slave communities in the Americas. Earlier ethnographic overemphasis on "remaining" or "surviving" cultural traits among slave descendants probably led to the failure among earlier scholars to read instances of the dynamic creolization and hybridization processes that took place from the seventeenth through the eighteenth centuries, which entailed various African responses to plantation and urban culture in colonial America.[23] Searches for "Yoruba culture" or "Wolof practices" have in some ways prevented us from seeing the nuances that actually tell a far more succinct story. However limited they may have been, early ethnographic studies of New World African diaspora communities were, however, critical in drawing scholarly attention to the presence of a rich field of inquiry that had previously been obfuscated by racism in and out of the academy.

Early on, sociological and anthropological studies of African American communities in North America argued that discernible evidence of particular "national" cultural traits or ethnic affiliations were no longer in evidence by the time of emancipation. This view was particularly true of the African American sociologist E. Franklin Frazier, who argued that no discernible, particularly African-derived behaviors existed, and that "American Negroes" by and large practiced a culture that was a successful synthesis of African and European cultures, with an overwhelming prevalence of western European culture.[24] The anthropologist Melville Herskovits disagreed and argued that even though no direct evidence of specific African cultures or ethnic groups was present, an aggregate African-derived culture had resulted from the importation of slaves from various parts of the continent, and this aggregate presented what could be considered a New World African cultural dynamic based on African-originated practices in religion, the arts, and family structure.[25] In the 1970s, anthropologists Sidney Mintz and Richard Price introduced a more dynamic model. They

stressed the amalgamation of various African influences and the invention of a new Atlantic Afro-American culture, which, by virtue of the conditions of its development in various slave societies, had some discernible African traits that could be identified, but in new forms of expression.[26]

Beyond the African creolization and African hybridized cultural core discussed by Mintz and Price, both respectively and together, lies a territory that is increasingly being explored and illuminated through research in African history and the transatlantic slave trade.[27] The recent burst of intellectual productivity of Africanist and Americanist historians has shown that for any given slave environment a continuum of more or less African continental cultural expression could be found, due to the constant arrival of new slaves, which continued in some places up to the mid-nineteenth century. Scholars have recently demonstrated that chronology, geography, and demographics have everything to do with what cultural syncretizations or borrowings did or did not take place in New World African diaspora communities.[28] The present volume draws on this perspective of ethnic and identity transformation over time as impacted by such factors as geography and settlement patterns.

Specific information on points of embarkation and arrival has allowed new perspectives and greater understanding of the formation of the African diaspora communities of the Atlantic. We now know that trade and credit networks affected who went where and thus had much to do with the sorts of African cultural practice and cultural negotiation that took place in any given American site.[29] Recent scholarly work argues for close attention to the dynamic and synergetic nature of slave identities in the New World.[30] Increased research on New World slave cultures in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has revealed that not only regional differences and differences in plantation regime but also differences of management style and local social practices among planters had much to do with the evolving character of slave communities.[31] For example, Robert "King" Carter in colonial Virginia had the tendency to purchase and settle "lots" of slaves led to cultural clusters of slaves from common or proximate cultural origins.[32]

Paying attention to local narrative and slave demographic patterns suggests posing questions concerning what African ethnic differences may have meant in plantation life, and the use of archival materials to evaluate social processes that characterized slave life from the point of view of their cultural lives, rather than the cultural universe of their masters.[33] At the same time, it is important to recognize that there was significant cultural borrowing between black slaves and their masters.[34] My book draws on both concerns, as the settlement of Malagasy slaves was dictated by the labor needs of the white families who owned them, and their cultural experience was dictated by their relationships with those whites and other Africans and creoles that whites owned. These issues were critical to understanding the processes of layering and hybridization that characterized the founding slave communities of the Americas.[35]

It is thus not a question of choosing between the creole (Mintz and Price) versus "pure" African (Herskovits) continuity arguments, but rather of assessing which framework best relates to specific contexts *through time*. My thesis is, then, that if any African, Malagasy, or other specific cultural practices, memories, or material-culture expressions remain in any observable form, they are to be found in the contrast of their specificity to the general creole nature of African American self-definition and practices through time.

The Madagascar example, ironically, is from outside the African continent. Yet this difference in geography provides an important example of self-definition that may tell us more about the processes of rapid and deep change that characterized African American experiences in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The continued arrival of "saltwater" Negroes into already creolized communities and the paucity of archival evidence of specific African responses to the communities they encountered in New World societies make ethnohistoric analysis of this layering and integrative process difficult, if not impossible. It is noteworthy, however, that what is important to the oral narratives of slave descendants is often not what was important to early chroniclers of the American slave experience.

Collection and Analysis of the Stories

This study is more concerned with community experience and less focused on individuals, as my starting point is groups of people who arrived on ships, and the text continues with groups of people and their stories. The individual testimonies are about family groups and communities; they are narratives about the collective. In fact, seldom did any story confine itself to the life of the narrator. The social and cultural currency the narratives represent is to be brought out, admired, and shared among fellow believers and family members.

I have used a wide lens to examine images of capture, slavery, and constraining conditions for free blacks in the early part of the nineteenth century as recounted by families today and as represented in the historical literature. Though some of the stories I collected are little more than anecdotes, their existence is important and merits serious inquiry. Life stories or individual oral histories would have been insufficient to the project of understanding the larger issues of the origins and persistence of practice of these family narratives. This monograph proceeds, therefore, from the viewpoint of a historical ethnography of a group experience. It is a study of how and why some people resisted simply being "negroes" or "blacks," or even to be dominated by other African ethnic groups. I have sought to understand how some families instead fashioned a composite, layered identity of being "negroes" who were also, in some primordial way, children of people from Madagascar.

As a social anthropologist, I have relied on ethnographic method in my interactions with various families and individuals and the Internet to maintain and sometimes sustain communication. As much as possible I have used historical context to weave many disparate threads together. What is to be learned from the emerging tapestry of texts can be gleaned neither solely from the substantive matter of the stories nor from the documented histories of slaves and slaveholders in Virginia. There is a lot to be learned from what was not said, both in the archives and the family stories, the emotional textures of what was remembered with pride or with shame, as well

as the ideas that are repeated both within each narrative and among the narratives as a body. At times, I used my own African American identity to dig down to emotions and my own memories of hearing "the old folks talk" in order to extrapolate what the slave experience might have been and how the early immigrants might have felt. My mother's great-grandfather is claimed as a Malagasy ancestor, so I have mined my own childhood experience of hearing that story for a notion of how to behave when listening to others' stories.

The material in the book is drawn from a collection of some thirty family narratives gathered over an extended period of time from face-to-face interviews, e-mails, focus group interviews, and telephone conversations. On a few occasions I learned that I had interviewed two or three people who were actually from the same core family group. The narrators are generally self-selected; they are all people who self-identify as descended from either an enslaved Malagasy person who arrived in the American South or a very early free immigrant from Madagascar. It seems that word of my research quickly spread among online communities, and at least a third of the stories I followed up on came to me via genealogy sites or direct e-mails from people who were interested in my work. The fact that I set up a website on the topic was surely important in helping me gain access to personal stories about "Madagascar ancestors."[36]

I was also aided in my analysis of oral and written narratives by public responses to lectures I gave on my research over the years.[37] Some testimonies are from genealogical sites, where queries about Malagasy ancestors occur with surprising frequency—both on Afro-centered genealogical websites such as *afrigeneas.com* (run from Mississippi State University) and other more widely used search engines and genealogy study communities such as *rootsweb. ancestry.com, ancestry.com,* and *cyndislist.com.* I followed numerous leads based on hearsay, often calling people on the telephone to chat with them, inform them of my research, and ask if they would like to share their own families' stories.[38] Since I began this research, some ten years ago, no six months have passed without a query about my work from people searching for information about ancestors from Madagascar.

In evaluating the nineteenth-century-focused narratives, the presence or absence of descriptions of the experience of slave ancestor arrival were used as rough indicators of the approximate age of slaves and migrants when they arrived, supposing that age impacted the migrating person's ability to situate him- or herself in a new setting and pass on their story of capture. Thus, for my analysis, the more elaborate the story, the more likely it was handed down by an adolescent or adult. For example, some narratives of immigrants explicitly named white patrons, places of origin in Madagascar, or occupational and other social details.

If my supposition is correct, the Malagasy slaves who were imported illegally were children or adolescents when they arrived in the nineteenth century, and they would have understood less of what was happening to them, especially once embarked to the United States. There is, thus, a possible interesting contrast between slavery stories inherited from enslaved adults and stories inherited from, or significantly impacted by, enslaved children.[39]

The Book's Structure

Each chapter contains a section, "Family Oral Traditions," that proceeds with excerpts from oral narratives and ethnographic discussion about the content and style of the narratives individually and collectively. The ethnographic-essay approach focuses on social meaning, the symbolic importance of the narrative as origin story, and the internal logic of the intergenerational repetition of the narrative. The text analyzes the narratives in this context of cultural production. The model of *habitus,* or *disposition,* is thus engaged in the book's discussions of the practices and meanings of the family oral traditions.

Chapter 1 of this volume is devoted to presenting a summary description of Madagascar in a historical context that provides an understanding of how the slave trade of Madagascar's northeastern coast developed. (I have also included a glossary in order to make the information on Madagascar more accessible to nonspecialists.) Chapter 2 introduces the slave cohorts of 1719–21 who ultimately arrived

in the Commonwealth of Virginia. It includes a review of available historical documentation of slave arrivals and relevant histories of slave owners meant to aid understanding of the lives of their captive labor force. Chapter 2 also describes the trajectories traveled by captives from Madagascar that finally brought them to various Virginia households, discusses the conditions the slaves encountered upon arrival in Virginia, and gives particular attention to cultural and social issues Malagasy captives probably faced as new arrivals in an already settled but constantly changing slave community.

Chapter 3 extends the story to the era of the children of planters who were the original investors in the Madagascar slave shipments and is drawn from archival as well as secondary research. I have chosen to focus primarily on the case of Robert "King" Carter, one of the primary investors, and his descendants, because there is much more historical documentation available on the Carter family. The chapter also presents a few brief slave descendant stories in counterpoint to the detailed information that the archives provide about the lives of white planter families. The stories gathered from contemporary slave descendants seem to hark back to the time of the children of the eighteenth-century Malagasy captives. Chapter 3 addresses how and why stories of Madagascar may have transited through generations and households in antebellum Virginia and whether the proximity of "shipmates" and the existence of shipmate networks may have contributed to the longevity of the narratives.[40] I discuss the social environments that could have enabled slave descendants to pass information from one generation to the next, and the relationship between geography and kinship networks is explored. What were the social units that supported the creation and transmission of these stories? Were there actually Malagasy slave communities in America? These are the key questions this chapter addresses.

Chapters 4 and 5 look at narratives that appear to have originated during a later era. As in preceding chapters, I begin with a historical discussion. In chapter 4 my focus is on the nature of illegal slave trading in the southern United States and the quality of life of slaves in general at the beginning of the nineteenth century. To illustrate conditions of the period, I turn to social histories written about Virginia, of

which there are sufficient number to draw a general understanding of the challenges the black community faced. In the ethnographic section of this chapter, I present stories that point to the probable arrival of a number of illegal transshipments of slaves from Madagascar through Cuba or Brazil to the Lower South of the United States, and also to the arrival of free Malagasy who may or may not have been manumitted somewhere outside the United States before arrival. Here I hope to provide a sense of how archival records can silence alternative histories. Drawing on Michel-Rolph Trouillot's discussions of silence and history, I argue that certain oral traditions remain because they are kept alive as narratives that contradict or supplement the mainstream story, suggesting something different from, or more than, what is written on paper—or does not appear at all—in the official record.[41] The narratives seem to remain as stubborn rejoinders to both a written and unwritten record that denies their existence. The stories suggest to us that descendants of slaves and de-territorialized immigrants have been invisible people who suddenly appear in the twentieth century with cultural and national identities they do not always name as American.

What historical conditions could have encouraged free or recently manumitted Malagasy to travel to America during the period of slavery, and were they aware of the earlier arrivals? What do their family narratives tell us about their integration into the African American community? Did they knowingly marry into families of Malagasy descent whose progenitors were slaves, and why were they willing to do so? These are other questions that I attempt to answer in chapter 5.

In chapter 6, the concluding chapter, I explore how the overlapping effects of geography and history have had ramifications for the survival of all the "Madagascar stories" and the durability of the idea of a Madagascar ancestral homeland among some African American families. The text interrogates the persistence of the idea of Madagascar and the credibility of Malagasy origins *within* the general African American community over time. It also addresses the character of these stories as a metanarrative reflecting one stream in the process of creolization of African and Malagasy slaves. By metanarrative I mean,

in this instance, the cumulative effect of all the stories considered as a larger story, perhaps recalling a period when ethnic differences and self-defined historical trajectories were being negotiated and reconfigured in public and private discourse in the African American community, even while precise references to these processes do not appear in the stories.