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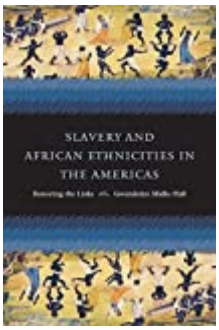

Gwendolyn Midlo Hall. *Slavery and African Ethnicities in the Americas: Restoring the Links.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005. xxi + 225 pp. $34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2973-8.

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Africans in the Americas

Gwendolyn Midlo Hall's new book is a study of the role of African ethnic groups in the creation and development of post-Columbian American cultures. The book challenges, as the author puts it, "the still widely held belief among scholars as well as the general public that Africans were so fragmented when they arrived in the Western Hemisphere that specific African regions and ethnicities had little influence on particular regions in the Americas" (p. xv). Although Africans made significant contributions to the development of American society and culture, "Africans and their descendents," laments Hall, "have received very little recognition for their contributions and sacrifices and very few of the benefits" (p. xvi). As Hall makes clear in a spirited preface–a section entitled "Truth and Reconciliation"–rectifying this historical amnesia is both a scholarly necessity and a moral right. "It is time," she writes, "to make the invisible Africans visible" (p. xvi).

Hall takes up this task in seven chapters and a conclusion. The book eases into its work with a meditation on the historiography of the origins and economic consequences of New World slavery. Here Hall tilts with scholars who have sought to understand the rise of the Atlantic slave trade in the context of the history of systems of African slavery. "Europeans," Hall argues to the contrary, "did not simply tap into a preexisting supply of slaves or a slave trade in Africa" (p. 16). Rather, European traders created new markets for slaves on the African coast, and over time these markets created tremendous benefits for Europeans and European colonial society, all at incalculable costs to Africa (pp.16, 20-21). This is the moral context in which the rest of the book is very firmly set, which helps to establish the volume's strong voice, but which also forms the genesis of an apology for slavery in Africa that emerges periodically throughout the rest of the study.

In two largely methodological chapters, the author attacks the question of how scholars of Afro America should sensitize their work to the historical importance of African ethnicitiess. Hall argues that American documents are reliable indicators of African ethnicity; that many such documents–plantation records, notarial records, etc.–offer a window into the ethnic self-consciousness of Africans in the Americas, and do not

simply reflect the ethnographic whims of the master classes; that scholars interested in unpacking the meaning of African ethnicity in the Americas should approach their subjects with exquisite attention to both historical context and to how notions of ethnicity varied over time and space; and that, given how the Atlantic slave trade unfolded over time, African migrants "from the same ethnicities and regions" tended to be clustered in certain regions in the Americas (p. 79). These last two points are especially critical to charting the kinds of research programs Hall wants to encourage for exploring the ethnic links between Africa and the Americas.

The remainder of *Slavery and African Ethnicities* consists of a series of case studies. One chapter explores the slave trade from what Hall calls Greater Senegambia. Another surveys the parts of Lower Guinea conventionally known as the Ivory, Gold, and Slave coasts. One chapter apiece is dedicated to the Bight of Biafra, and to what Hall refers to as the Bantulands of West Central Africa and Mozambique. Each of these chapters raises critical issues specific to the regions in question. The slave trade from Greater Senegambia to the Americas (especially to Spanish America during the period of the Portuguese *asiento* and to portions of North America that would become the United States) has been, according to Hall, significantly undercounted in principal accounts of the flow and direction of the Atlantic slave trade. Consequently, the impact of Senegambians on culture and society in the Americas–in such areas as metallurgy, husbandry, rice and indigo cultivation, and slave resistance–has yet to be fully acknowledged. The chapter on the Ivory, Gold, and Slave coasts argues that the remarkable linguistic diversity of this part of Lower Guinea was mitigated in the Americas by the shape and flow of the regions' slave trade and its focus on certain groups of people who spoke "very similar or mutually intelligible languages" (p.107). Here, Hall also addresses the knotty problem of identifying the Mina–a ubiquitous ethnic designation in French, Spanish, and Portuguese America but one whose African precursor is not readily apparent. Hall's work on the slave trade from the Bight of Biafra cautions scholars not to take contemporary American stereotypes disparaging Igbo slaves from this part of Africa too much to heart. Beginning in the late eighteenth century, Igbo women were highly sought after, especially when planters began to place a premium on reproduction. Hall is also convinced that Igbo was a self-conscious ethnonym of long standing among Africans from behind the Bight of Biafra. The chapter on the Bantulands proceeds along the same lines as the other case studies, outlining the scope and nature of the slave trade from this region and identifying the impact such migrants had in various parts of the Americas.

Taken together, the four case studies seek to illustrate and develop the principal points outlined in the book's methodological essays, and to begin to redress the shortcomings touched upon in Hall's reflection on the state of slave trade historiography. At moments the case studies and the book succeed remarkably. Hall's work on the meanings of Mina is a virtuoso effort in mining the changing and various meanings of an African ethnic term in the Atlantic world. The book's enumeration of the regional limitations of the seminal Atlantic Slave Trade Database will be, for the most part, well taken. The book's continuing return to the methodological necessity of exploring African ethnicity in the Americas with ample regard for historical context and change over time and place is necessary and important.

But *Slavery and African Ethnicities in the Americas* is not without shortcomings. The most worrisome among them are owing, I think, to the book's form. Argumentatively, the volume proceeds more as an essay than as a monograph. There are, of course, benefits to this. Throughout, the author's voice and point of view are clarion. But this clarity of purpose and position exacts, at moments, a high toll as far as the volume's historiographical positioning and documentary analysis are concerned. Too often the book's most peppery historiographical criticisms, though strong and hard flung, appear to be directed at no one in particular. Thus when Hall charges eminent current historians with "excusing and rationalizing" the slave trade and American slavery, the reader cannot be exactly sure of whom she writes (p. 8). Similarly, when confronting some of the most highly fraught interpretive questions surrounding the nature and consequence of African ethnicity in the Americas, the book too often charges ever forward when the difficulty of the questions at hand require and would reward a break in the pace. Thus, in her chapter on "Lower Guinea: The Bight of Biafra," Hall reviews pertinent Africanist literature on the problems involved in taking Igbo as a self-conscious category of ethnic identification, but chooses not to really grapple with the questions such literature raises. So after marshalling the work of Joseph Inikori, Kenneth Dike, and Felcia Ekejiuba to the effect "that a pan-Igbo identity as we know it today did not exist during the Atlantic slave trade era," Hall claims, nevertheless, that scholars of American slavery "cannot help but be impressed by the large numbers of Africans identified or self-identified as Igbo in American documents" (pp. 129, 130). The author chooses not to grapple with or ex-

plain this apparent contradiction, a matter pertinent not only among Igbo slaves in the Americas but important too for the study of other Africans in the Americas who came to embrace certain ethnic names as slaves that they may never have called themselves in Africa. Given the book's subtitle–*Restoring the Links*–this is the kind of issue on which the volume should have more than simply touched.

A book committed to using ethnicity as a way of rendering Africans as "concrete human beings" necessarily runs the risk of essentializing ethnicity or reifying ethnic characteristics in the name of humanizing its subjects (p. xiii). Hall's book is cognizant and careful of these dangers, but it is unable to completely avoid them. So, at times, the language of ethnicity appears as a problematic substitute for the people that such language was meant to draw for us in greater detail. "African ethnicities transshipped from Cartagena de Indias to Peru," Hall writes at one point, "were mainly from Greater Senegambia" (p. 87). "These ethnicities," Hall writes at another moment, "identified themselves clearly as distinct peoples living in extended geographic areas" (p. 48). The slight conceptual leakage between ethnicity and personhood apparent in these statements are not uncommon in the book (pp. 26, 28, and 51, for instance). Throughout, such slippage implicitly raises the question of what the language of ethnicity obscures about black life in the Americas, as the book as a whole explicitly and energetically takes on the matter of what it illuminates.