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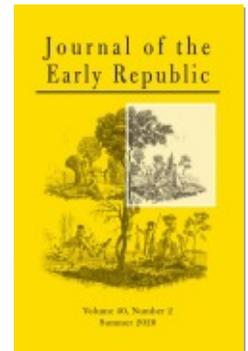
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"Brothers Gonna Work It Out": Imagining a Black Planet

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# “Brothers Gonna Work It Out”

## Imagining a Black Planet

JAMES H. SWEET

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I commend the editors of the *Journal of the Early Republic* for commissioning these provocative essays challenging concepts that are, arguably, the *raison d'être* of the journal and SHEAR. By framing the “early republic” through the lens of African and African-descended peoples, some might argue that the crucial project of American nation-building loses its primacy. Yet, as these essays powerfully demonstrate, African-descended peoples were at the center of American nation-building, even when they were not. The nation’s founding fathers excluded the vast majority of black people from full personhood, let alone political participation. For the enslaved, there simply was no “American republic.” Nevertheless, African American exclusion was etched into the very founding of the nation, as the Constitution allowed southern states to count slaves as three-fifths of a person for the purposes of white legislative representation. Political conflicts over the continuing exclusion of African Americans, via their enslavement, defined the early republican period. These conflicts culminated with the emergence of separatist nationalism in the South, interrupting the teleology of a single, unified “early republic,” even among white people. Ultimately, one of the motive forces behind nation-building in the early republic was the exclusion of black people.<sup>1</sup>

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1. For a more detailed and eloquent rendering of this argument, see David Waldstreicher, *Slavery’s Constitution: From Revolution to Ratification* (New York, 2009).

As Jason Young points out, this process of inclusion by exclusion was nothing new. Without Africans as “ciphers” into which Europeans emptied their economic, religious, and cultural anxieties, the modern nation–state would not have emerged in quite the same way. Nevertheless, the United States represented an exaggerated example, codifying black exclusion into the nation’s DNA. Ironically, white demand for the “excluded’s” labor ensured that their presence in the United States expanded exponentially during the early republic. The enslaved population increased six-fold between 1790 and 1860. The roughly 400,000 Africans that Europeans brought to the country became 4 million on the eve of the Civil War. Nearly 75 percent of blacks were under the age of 30. This younger, more politically savvy African “American” population frequently articulated its grievances and impatience with the nation’s false promises. As the late historian Colin Palmer suggested years ago, “If slavery’s end had not been hastened by the Civil War, a large, mature, and numerically confident slave population would, in all likelihood, have fulfilled white society’s nightmares.” Fear of a Black Planet, indeed. . . .<sup>2</sup>

But if the “early republic” excluded African-descended peoples from the nation–state, then where did they belong?<sup>3</sup> Historians of the black experience in the United States have done a remarkable job chronicling the ways African Americans forged their own identities and institutions between 1776 and 1860. I will not rehearse those here. As a historian of the African diaspora, I am most interested in the experiences of first-generation Africans in the Americas, wherever they might have been. Rebecca Shumway emphasizes the promises and pitfalls of thinking in “ethnic” terms when we write about these enslaved Africans. We all want to know more about the histories of first-generation Africans in the early republic, but our sources are scarce and our nomenclature imprecise. As Shumway notes, slave traders sometimes ascribed the names of the enslavers to the enslaved. In other cases, ethnonyms like “Ndembu,” “Kisama,” and “Mahi” were direct products of the history of slaving in Africa, and more appropriately reflect “refugee” status than any deep, ethnic histories. Nevertheless, African regional identities can tell us a lot about broadly shared histories of trade and cultural interaction, as well as political rivalry. The more detail we know about these histories, the

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2. Colin A. Palmer, *Passageways: An Interpretive History of Black America*. (2 vols.; Fort Worth, TX, 1998), 1: 252.

more accurate we can be in our assessments of the enslaved experience in the Americas.<sup>3</sup>

Beyond a more rigorous engagement with African histories and methods, historians of the early republic might also think more deeply about the conjunctural histories of enslaved Africans in the Americas. If, for example, more than 30,000 West Central Africans arrived in the United States between 1800 and 1807, did they share histories with the 185,000 West Central Africans that arrived in Brazil during the same period? Or the 50,000 that arrived in the British Caribbean? What might the West Central Africans in Charleston have had in common with those in Rio de Janeiro? By thinking of South Carolina's West Central Africans not as incipient (non) Americans, but rather as people with a common regional homeland and scattered kin across the Americas, we endow them with a different set of histories and future imaginaries.

One way to extend this line of thinking is through Haiti, the preeminent example of organized African resistance in the Americas. Historians have written at length on the Haitian Revolution's impact on the United States, but this is a very different project than thinking the Haitian Revolution as part of a common history of African peoples in the Americas. We know, for example, that rebellions and conspiracies—from Gabriel to Denmark Vesey—invoked Haiti as an inspiration. Julius Scott's *Common Wind* goes a long way toward capturing the circulations of knowledge and the shared imaginaries generated during this period. But what about the actual circulations of people? The majority of Haiti's rebels were Africans. More than 100,000 West Central Africans arrived in Saint-Domingue in the ten years leading up to the revolution. Increasingly, scholars are showing how Kongolese ideas informed notions of slavery, freedom, witchcraft, and warfare in Saint-Domingue. Even some of the white slaveholding refugees from Saint-Domingue to the United States were conversant in Kikongo. As the revolution unfolded, thousands of so-called "French Negroes" arrived onto U.S. shores. Surely,

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3. On "Ndembu," see Joseph C. Miller, "Central Africa during the Era of the Slave Trade, c. 1490s–1850s," in *Central Africans and Cultural Transformation in the American Diaspora*, ed. Linda M. Heywood (Cambridge, UK, 2002), 21–70, 46–47; on "Kisama," see Jessica A. Krug, *Fugitive Modernities: Kisama and the Politics of Freedom* (Durham, NC, 2018); on "Mahi," see James H. Sweet, *Domingos Álvares, African Healing, and the Intellectual History of the Atlantic World* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2011), 15–17.

some significant portion of these were Kikongo-speaking West Central Africans. Though we will probably never be able to recover evidence of such exchanges, it is worth imagining how Kikongo-speaking refugees of the Haitian Revolution might have interacted with those who made up the wave of Kikongo-speaking Africans that arrived in Charleston in the first years of the 1800s.<sup>4</sup>

Though African connections are difficult to “see” in the archive, we can be sure that “French Negroes” impacted slave and free communities in the United States. In 1794, refugees in Charleston allegedly organized a chapter of *Les Amis des Noirs*, demanding that their French masters in America adhere to the general emancipation issued in Paris. Charleston slave masters feared that these ideas would spread to their slaves and “produce a flame that can only be extinguished in blood.” Just three years later in 1797, authorities uncovered “a conspiracy of French Negroes to fire the city, and act there as they had previously done in St. Domingo.” At least two men, Figaro and Jean Louis, were executed and two more banished from the state. Even as late as the American Civil War, there were still enslaved men in the Carolinas who were veterans of the Haitian Revolution, including several who claimed to know Toussaint Louverture personally.<sup>5</sup>

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4. Julius S. Scott, *The Common Wind: Afro-American Currents in the Age of the Haitian Revolution* (London, 2018). See Mathew J. Clavin, *Toussaint Louverture and the American Civil War: The Promise and Peril of a Second Haitian Revolution* (Philadelphia, 2010); Douglas R. Egerton, *He Shall Go Out Free: The Lives of Denmark Vesey* (1999; rev. ed., Lanham, MD, 2004); James Sidbury, *Ploughshares into Swords: Race, Rebellion, and Identity in Gabriel’s Virginia, 1730–1810* (Cambridge, UK, 1997); Ashli White, *Encountering Revolution: Haiti and the Making of the Early Republic* (Baltimore, 2010). Christina Mobley, “The Kongolese Atlantic: Central African Slavery & Culture from Mayombe to Haiti,” PhD diss., Duke University, 2015; James H. Sweet, “Research Note: New Perspectives on Kongo in Haiti,” *The Americas* 74 (Jan. 2017), 83–97; John K. Thornton, “‘I Am the Subject of the King of Congo’: African Political Ideology and the Haitian Revolution,” *Journal of World History* 4 (Oct. 1993), 181–214. For example, see the 680-word, 120-phrase French–Kikongo dictionary in Louis-Narcisse Baudry des Lozières, *Second Voyage à Louisiane; faisant suite au premier d’auteur de 1794 à 1798* (2 vols., Paris, 1802) 2: 108–46. Baudry, who lived in exile in Philadelphia and New Orleans, penned the dictionary ten years after his departure from Saint-Domingue. Baudry’s famous brother-in-law, Médéric Louis Élie Moreau de St. Méry, also lived in Philadelphia from 1794 to 1798.

5. Rusticus to Gentleman, Aug. 7, 1794, quoted in Bernard E. Powers, Jr. “‘The Worst of All Barbarism’: Racial Anxiety and the Approach of Secession in

Not all "French Negroes" remained enslaved in the United States. Some gained their freedom and tried to eke out a living in the northern states. In 1802, a "gentleman" reported that he encountered a "drove of fourteen French negroes" in the New Jersey countryside "without any apparent object, and utterly destitute of any means of subsistence." The gentleman noted that he had encountered a similar group just a few days earlier. Remarking that the men were "unable to understand or make themselves understood," he wondered how these "miserable wretches" and 2,000 others like them would avoid starvation. A few years later, a partial answer came from Haiti.<sup>6</sup>

On January 14, 1804, just days after signing the Haitian Declaration of Independence, Jean Jacques Dessalines issued a decree that circulated in French and English in newspapers across the United States. The decree read, "Considering that a great number of native blacks and men of colour are suffering in the United States of America, for want of the means of returning . . . there shall be allowed to the captains of American vessels, the sum of forty dollars for each individual they may restore to this country." Dessalines's decree was a direct affront to American slaveholders. Moreover, the decree asserted a type of sovereignty and terms of political belonging that were unthinkable to most white Americans. If the United States was a nascent country built on the exclusion of black people, Haiti was a nascent country built on the inclusion *only* of black people. This is not to say that Haitians excluded "white" people from citizenship. On the contrary, as the 1805 Haitian Constitution made clear, white women, their children, Germans, and Poles could be naturalized as citizens. Alongside Haiti's mixed-race and majority-African population, these European-descended Haitians would henceforth "be known generically as Blacks." Thus, Haiti offered a radical inversion of the terms of race and citizenship that defined the American early republic. African Americans took notice. An estimated 13,000, mostly free blacks immigrated to Haiti in the 1820s on the promise of political freedom and a plot of land. The circulations of peoples and ideas between African-descended peoples in the United States and Haiti

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the Palmetto State," *South Carolina Historical Magazine* 112 (July–Oct. 2011), 139–56, esp. 144; "Charleston, November 22," *Massachusetts Spy; or, The Worcester Gazette*, Dec. 20, 1797. Also see Clavin, *Toussaint Louverture*, 136–37; Powers, "The Worst of All Barbarism," 145.

6. "French Negroes!" *Scioto Gazette* (Chillicothe, OH), Oct. 23, 1802.

ultimately speak to a sense of belonging that transcends our understandings of the modern nation–state.<sup>7</sup>

Bronwen Everill aptly suggests that scholars of the early republic should reframe their analyses of the American Revolution in “reciprocal comparison” with African revolutions like the *jihad* in Futa Toro. By destabilizing the “norm,” we can more easily tap into the circulations of African ideas and peoples that helped define the Age of Revolutions. While I agree that this approach is an important starting point, I am skeptical that scholars trained in European or American revolutionary traditions possess the conceptual or methodological tools to capture fully the African aspects of these contributions. If we think of the Haitian Revolution as an African revolution in the first instance, scholars of the Age of Revolutions need to conduct research in the languages, methods, and historiographies of the Caribbean, but also those of West Central Africa and other parts of West Africa. This is not a feat easily accomplished in a career, let alone during graduate school. Nevertheless, the questions that we pose across our traditional geographic “fields” are important through-ways to imagining new configurations of social and political belonging for peoples most often conceived in history as they were in life—as abject outsiders defined by their enslavement. When these imaginings come to life, as they did in Haiti, we also challenge our assumptions about the “early republic” and the inevitability of the modern nation–state.<sup>8</sup>

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7. “Government of Hayti. Arrete,” *United States Gazette* (Philadelphia), Mar. 29, 1804; “The Haitian Constitution 1805,” in Laurent Dubois and John Garrigus, *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean, 1789–1804* (2006; 2nd. ed., Boston, 2017), 181. Dessalines issued the decree on Jan. 14, 1804. It appeared in American newspapers in late March and early April. The “Preliminary Declaration” lays out the general terms of Haitian citizenship. Sara Fanning, *Caribbean Crossing: African Americans and the Haitian Emigration Movement* (New York, 2015).

8. For a more trenchant critique along these lines, see Paul E. Lovejoy, *Jihād in West Africa during the Age of Revolutions* (Athens, OH, 2016). Also see Lara Putnam, “The Transnational and the Text-Searchable: Digitized Sources and the Shadows They Cast,” *American Historical Review* 121 (Apr. 2016), 377–402; James H. Sweet, “Reimagining the African–Atlantic Archive: Method, Concept, Epistemology, Ontology,” *Journal of African History* 55 (May 2014), 147–59.