

CREOLE NUMEROLOGY AND THE HAITIAN REVOLUTION

Over the past 40 years, no scholar has written so deeply or prolifically on the histories of Saint Domingue and the Haitian Revolution as David Geggus. Indeed, the scale of the research required to compile the population database of enslaved people in Saint Domingue across different labor sectors from 1770 to 1791 is a testament to years of work in French archives—I can think of no other scholar of Haiti who could make that heavy lift. As an outsider to the field of Haitian history, I am grateful for his intervention and to the editors of *The Americas* for giving me the opportunity to respond.

Geggus is right. Scholars should have paid more attention to the demographic evidence that he, and others, have compiled over the years. I plead guilty to following the overinflated estimates of the Congolese and African presence in Saint Domingue. My only defense is that I was following a 20-year trend, not only among Africanists, but also among scholars trained in Caribbean and Haitian history.

The purported verification for these inflated numbers, the Transatlantic Slave Trade Database, demonstrates that 263,440 Africans arrived in Saint Domingue between 1784 and 1791, with roughly 44 percent coming from West Central Africa. For those not immersed in local archives, this at-your-fingertips data suggests a majority-African, largely Congolese presence in the colony's population of around 500,000 in 1791. Of course, as Geggus points out, arrivals do not equal survivals. The mortality rate for newly arrived Africans was extraordinarily high. Thanks to Geggus' painstaking research, it would now be more accurate to estimate that almost half of Saint Domingue's total population was African, with roughly 24 percent hailing from West Central Africa.

We could accept Geggus's accounting and move forward on the basis of the important snapshots he provides. But there is an undertone to Geggus's

interpretation that is utterly dismissive of the idea that Africans made meaningful intellectual contributions to Saint Domingue slave society and the Haitian Revolution. Admittedly, sources that reveal the interior thoughts of early Africans in the diaspora are sparse. For this very reason, the discovery of a Congo-language vocabulary in *any* American slave community is worthy of exploration, whether Congo speakers made up half, one quarter, or even five percent of that population. Although Geggus seems to believe that demography tells the real story of Baudry's *Vocabulaire Congo*, I want to suggest how we might look at his numbers a little differently.

Geggus's population figures for Saint Domingue's enslaved population are persuasive snapshots, but they belie broader demographic trends that amplified African and Congolese impact in Saint Domingue. Geggus acknowledges that children under 15 years of age constituted nearly half of all enslaved Creoles in Saint Domingue. If one removes children from the count of the enslaved population, adult Africans outnumbered adult Creoles by a margin of more than two to one, and the number of adult Congos was nearly the same as the number of adult Creoles. In short, among the adults most likely to be formulating political strategy and fighting in the Haitian Revolution, Africans far outnumbered Creoles, and among Africans Congos were predominant. Arguably, this is a more important historical starting point than Geggus's broader population snapshot.¹

Tens of thousands of Africans arrived in Saint Domingue every year in the eight years immediately preceding the revolution. Geggus reminds us that at least a third of these Africans died within two years of their arrival in the colony. But where do these deceased Africans appear in Geggus's census figures? In a sleight of hand that will be familiar to many critics of quantitative approaches to slavery and the slave trade, Geggus treats these tens of thousands of deceased Africans as a separate category of people that never actually existed in Saint Domingue.² They just disappear.

Geggus tells us that between 1789 and 1791, 84,300 Africans arrived in Saint Domingue, succumbing at a rate of 25 percent in the first year and 10 percent

1. Geggus's argument in "Kongomania and the Haitian Revolution" for the proportionally larger number of Creoles to Africans on sugar plantations of the northern plain is also an important corrective. However, his assertion that adult Creoles outnumbered adult Africans is debatable. If we take his estimate that 37 percent of Creoles in the north were children (fn. 53) and apply it to his Table 3, the numbers of adult Creoles and adult Africans were roughly the same (accounting for African children at 4 percent).

2. On the deceptions of quantitative approaches and numeracy, see for example Stephanie E. Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007); and Jennifer L. Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery: Gender, Kinship, and Capitalism in the Early Black Atlantic* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021). For broader considerations of archival erasures, absences, and empty spaces see Marisa J. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016); and Jessica Marie Johnson, *Wicked Flesh: Black Women, Intimacy, and Freedom in the Atlantic World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020).

in the second. Meanwhile, the existing enslaved population (not including any Africans who had arrived in the preceding two years?) died, or were born, at “normal vital rates of 5 percent mortality and 1 percent natality.” Add the 67,000 surviving “new” Africans to the 442,370, and voilà, we have the roughly 510,000 enslaved at the start of the revolution.

In Geggus’s defense, it is not possible to count the dead as living (at least not in a census), but these thousands of Africans, nearly half from Congo, arrived and died in Saint Domingue year after year. What language did they die in? Surely, it wasn’t Creole. Although many probably died in solitude, slave masters had an interest in nursing their slaves back to health. Who knew of their pains, their pleas, and their last dying thoughts? Was Kikongo the primary language of death and dying in Saint Domingue? How did surviving Congo-language speakers interpret these serial deaths? These questions cannot be answered by census figures and mortality rates, but it is precisely through the consideration of quantitative data like Geggus’s that the questions might arise. Bringing these spectral presences back into the narrative is crucial because doing so recalibrates the colony’s history, especially its African history. Though demographic studies cannot accommodate the spirits of the dead, these spirits continued to play powerful roles in the histories of the living in Saint Domingue. Congolese men and women would have attended to the rapid expansion of this spirit world just as obsessively as Geggus attends to the demography of the living.

My questions about the intellectual history of Saint Domingue and the ideas informing the Haitian Revolution arose from similar sorts of questions in colonial Brazil, where West Central Africans also represented a sizable proportion of the population a century earlier. In March 2013, the *École des Hautes Études* (EHESS) invited me to conduct a month-long seminar on the topic “Africanizing the Atlantic World.” The second lecture in the series was titled “Reimagining the African Atlantic Archive.” Drawing from many years of research in Portugal and Brazil, I wanted to demonstrate the ways that a more capacious approach to the archives could shed new light on African histories in the Atlantic World. Rather than accept the erasures of the African past implicit in the archival record, I urged scholars to read African archaeologies, oral traditions, material cultures, and historical linguistics into the archival fragments. Doing so, I suggested, could help build a new archive that more accurately reflected the epistemologies and ontologies that drove African “histories.”³

3. Many of the ideas from the Paris seminar were later published in work by James H. Sweet. Among these works is “Reimagining the African-Atlantic Archive: Method, Concept, Epistemology, Ontology,” *Journal of African History* 55 (2014): 147–159. See also the following works by Sweet: *Recreating Africa: Culture, Kinship, and Religion in the African-Portuguese World, 1441–1770* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); *Domingos Alvares:*

Since my presentation in Paris was in front of an audience conducting research mostly on Francophone topics, I sought out examples of African-language evidence in French colonial sources, much as I had done previously for Brazil. I was aware of Moreau de St. Méry's recording of Congo-language chants and the broader scholarship engaging "Kongo" in Saint Domingue, including Geggus's own pioneering 1991 article on Congolese contributions to Haitian voodoo.⁴ On the day before my presentation at EHESS, I consulted Gallica, the French National Library's online catalog, hoping to locate one or two examples. When Baudry's *Vocabulaire Congo* emerged from the search, I was stunned—I had never heard of it. A quick Google search indicated that *no* previous scholar had used the *Vocabulaire Congo*. I quickly added Baudry to my presentation for the following day, using my find as a kind of show-and-tell, a workshop-style exercise.

In the audience on the day of my presentation was an American graduate student, Christina Mobley, who was conducting dissertation research on Congo and Haiti. I told Mobley that I had no interest in pursuing the Baudry material for my own work and that she was welcome to take it and run with it. She subsequently conducted research using Baudry's personal papers and other sources demonstrating Congolese influences in Saint Domingue.⁵

Then, just a week after the seminar in Paris, I attended a conference in Barbados where I shared some of the Baudry material in my presentation. In attendance at the conference were Laurent Dubois and John Thornton, neither of whom were aware of the *Vocabulaire Congo*. At this point, I was content to leave Baudry behind, figuring that others would build on my suggestions in Paris and Bridgetown. I am not an expert on Saint Domingue nor present-day Haiti; nor am I an expert in the methodologies of African historical linguistics. However, I believe that historians of Africans in the Americas have much to learn from African words, and I have worked to gain a better understanding of linguists' methods. Several years passed, but I still wasn't satisfied that the Congo vocabulary was being given the attention it deserved, so I thought a short "research note" would be an appropriate provocation.

African Healing and the Intellectual History of the Atlantic World (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press 2011); and "Calundu: A Collective Biography of Spirit Possession in Bahia, 1618-Present," in *The Gray Zones of Medicine: Healers and History in Latin America*, Diego Armus and Pablo Gómez, eds. (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2021), 40–54.

4. David Geggus, "Haitian Voodoo in the Eighteenth Century: Language, Culture, and Resistance," *Jahrbuch für Geschichte Lateinamerikas* 28 (1991): 21–51.

5. Christina E. Mobley, "The Kongolese Atlantic: Central African Slavery & Culture from Mayombe to Haiti" (PhD diss.: Duke University, 2015).

One of my inspirations for the research note was Geggus's 1994 historiographical article "The Haitian Revolution: New Approaches and Old," published in the *Proceedings of the Meeting of the French Colonial Historical Society* in 1994 and republished in 2002. In this critical review, Geggus asks fundamental questions about the relationship between demography and ideology in driving the Saint Domingue slave revolt of 1791. He invites "a reading of the revolution that takes seriously differences between African and Creole slaves," and he acknowledges royalist, classist, enlightenment, and African ideologies as potential contributing factors. Though he was addressing what is now an older historiography, many of the questions Geggus raised are no less pertinent today than they were 30 years ago. He concludes the article with an open question: "How are we to imagine the attitudes and beliefs of those Africans and children of Africans two centuries ago. . . those who in their native languages had no word for 'liberty' even though thousands of them died in its pursuit? This, in my opinion, remains the most intractable question facing historians of the Haitian Revolution."⁶

Geggus seemed to understand that African languages matter. However, he also suggested that Africans—alienated from their homelands, shackled in the bottom of ships, then worked relentlessly in Saint Domingue—went blindly to war in the name of a concept they could not understand, as though French notions of "liberty" were the only possible inspiration for the revolution. Today, faced with an actual vocabulary of Congolese words spoken in Saint Domingue, Geggus does not pause to ask what such a source might tell us about Congolese ideas. Instead, he retreats to the colonial archive, arguing that the *Vocabulaire Congo* is insignificant because only 24 percent of the enslaved were Congolese. Then, using the same colonial archive, Geggus asserts that the leaders of the revolution were nearly all Creoles, dismissing any ideological or political importance that might be drawn from Congolese-language sources.

Creole leaders appear in the archive because they spoke languages the French universally understood; even some rebel leaders were literate. Meanwhile, the nearly one-third of the adult enslaved population that came from Congo (and other Africans) communicated orally. Their leadership structures, moral philosophies, and political strategies would have been largely unintelligible to those constructing the French colonial archive, so only their "savagery" in war survives. Geggus re-inscribes this otherness when he facetly reduces the

6. David Geggus, "The Haitian Revolution: New Approaches and Old," *Proceedings of the Nineteenth Meeting of the French Colonial Historical Society* 19 (1994): 154–155; David Geggus, *Haitian Revolutionary Studies* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2002), 42.

“impact” of the Congolese on the Haitian Revolution to their role as “foot soldiers” and to “the areas of magic and religion,” areas that Africanist historians have long demonstrated are at the center of moral and political contestation.

Baudry’s *Vocabulaire Congo* is a window onto the lost orality of those politics—the words, ideas, and thoughts that *might* provide insight into Congolese histories in Saint Domingue. This approach does not diminish the intellectual contributions of Creole leaders, but rather adds new dimensions to the history that is already well known from the colonial archive. It might also suggest new or different motivations of the nearly one-third of adult slaves in Saint Domingue who were from Congo.

When I wrote that Congolese ideas “penetrated into the very fabric of eighteenth-century Saint Domingue society,” I didn’t think I was writing anything controversial. Yet, the faulty demographic evidence leads Geggus to question the “credibility” of such a claim. Médéric Louis Élie Moreau de Saint-Méry, Drouin de Bercy, and Michel Étienne Descourtiz wrote on Congolese music, dance, and religion, including in their works a number of words and chants derived from Congolese languages. A rich historiography on Congolese influences in Saint Domingue includes works by Wyatt MacGaffey, John Thornton, Carolyn Fick, Laurent Dubois, Hein Vanhee, and Terry Rey. Consider Geggus’s own archival data. How could one-third of the adult slave population be Congolese and their ideas *not* penetrate into the larger society? The quality of the evidence in the *Vocabulaire Congo* is admittedly unique, but its revelations about Congolese cultures and ideas are not.

Geggus also rejects my suggestion that Baudry may have been more than merely conversant, perhaps even proficient, in Congolese languages. What originally impressed me was the extent to which Baudry was able to recreate his Congo vocabulary—mostly from memory—ten years after fleeing Saint Domingue. Geggus argues that Baudry “had been able to salvage his written notes on the language” when he left Saint Domingue and that he also “benefited” from the knowledge of an African ship captain who helped him with his research. However, Baudry himself explained clearly his process in constructing the vocabulary: he reported that he had compiled vocabularies of “all the jargons of Africa” with “sufficient accuracy,” but that he had lost them when the revolution began. According to Baudry: “Chance has left me some notes on the language of the Congos; these notes, refreshing my memory, allow me to compose a fairly complete vocabulary.” In carrying out this process, Baudry

observed that Congo was the “easiest” of the African languages and in fact aided him in the understanding of others.⁷

Here, Baudry underscores the way his recovery of “some” notes stoked memories of a relatively “easy” Congo language. While this is not evidence of Baudry’s proficiency, it does suggest the primacy of Congolese languages among other African languages spoken in Saint Domingue. It also suggests that Baudry grasped some version of Congo vocabularies and phrases better than he did other African languages. Finally, Baudry seemed to recognize his iteration of “Congo” as a foundational language that allowed for comprehension of other African languages spoken in Saint Domingue.

Baudry was mistaken in believing he had produced an authoritative version of a singular “Congo” language. In fact, the *Vocabulaire Congo* includes attestations of enslaved people from diverse regional language groups within the Kikongo Language Cluster.⁸ Nonetheless, Baudry’s claim that “Congo” aided with comprehension of other African languages indicates a close relationship between the various languages within the Kikongo cluster, as well as with related Bantu languages of West Central Africa. This relatedness points precisely to the common proto-Bantu origins of root words, as well as the linguistic convergences and divergences, that allow scholars to construct new histories. For me, Baudry’s qualitative assessment of “Congo,” his alleged conversations with enslaved Congolese, and his recognition of African-language cognates of “Congo” equate to some deeper knowledge of the language. Geggus, meanwhile, would have us dismiss the *Vocabulaire Congo* as an outgrowth of Baudry’s “general linguistic interests rather than any special status the language had in Saint-Domingue.”

To demonstrate the potential promise of the vocabulary as a source for Congolese intellectual and political histories in Saint Domingue, I examined the epistemological tensions in Baudry’s French-to-Congo translations of four words. Geggus takes me to task for each of my analytical interventions, save the word *macoute*.

In the following section, I will address his critiques in order: *brigand* = *n’doki*, *France* = *m’poutou*, and *esclave* = *vika*.

7. Louis-Narcisse Baudry des Lozières, *Second voyage à Louisiane: faisant suite au premier de l’auteur de 1794 à 1798* (Paris: Charles, 1802), 2:74–75.

8. Kathryn M. de Luna, “Sounding the African Atlantic,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 78 (2021): 603.

BRIGAND = N'DOKI

The word *ndoki* comes from the proto-Bantu root *-dog*, meaning “to bewitch or curse.” Its noun derivative *dògi*, meaning “witchcraft, spell, poison,” is widespread across West Central Africa.⁹ Ideas about *ndoki* as a source of immorality and social rupture date back to the very earliest Bantu languages. In contemporary Kikongo, *ndoki* continues to imply the “invisible powers” most often associated with witchcraft.¹⁰

I argued that Baudry’s use of *ndoki* for brigand (bandit) meant that he viewed the Haitian rebels as witches and the revolution as an act of witchcraft. *Brigand* was the term French colonists, including Baudry, frequently used in manuscript documents to describe rebel slaves. According to Geggus, I failed “to note that Baudry used *ndoki* to translate “poisoner” (*empoisonneur*) and “scoundrel” (*coquin*) as well.” Because of these alternate translations, Geggus concludes that Baudry’s interlocutors probably taught him *ndoki* “as a smearword, in its broader connotations of ‘those having evil designs.’” Geggus supports this overly broad “connotation” by quoting from his own earlier work, rather than from any expert source on the definition of *ndoki*.

To be clear, *ndoki* has a very specific meaning related to the unexplainable hidden powers of those who bewitch, cast spells, or use poison. If Baudry’s Congo-speaking interlocutors offered *ndoki* as a “smearword” for *brigand* and *coquin*, who were they smearing and why? The more logical conclusion is that Baudry used *ndoki* to smear Congo-speaking brigands and coquins as “witches,” an interpretation that makes far more sense contextually than the other way around. If the audience for Baudry’s dictionary consisted primarily of French planters who would have been looking for ways to translate ‘bandits’ and ‘scoundrel’ in a slave society, casting them in Congolese languages as the most dangerous, socially disruptive figures makes perfect sense.

Baudry’s parallel use of *ndoki* to describe “poisoner” only reinforces this point. The “poisoner” utilized powerful substances from the natural world to maim and murder surreptitiously. French slaveowners in Saint Domingue resorted to the idiom of “poisoning” in describing their widespread fear of African “witchcraft.” One need look no further than Makandal.¹¹ Even if Baudry did

9. Africa Museum (Tervuren, Belgium), Bantu Lexical Reconstructions 3: 1100, 1103-1105, https://www.africamuseum.be/en/research/discover/human_sciences/culture_society/blr, accessed August 6, 2023.

10. For a detailed discussion of the meanings of *kindoki*, see Simon Bockie, *Death and the Invisible Powers: The World of Kongo Belief* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1993).

11. Diana Paton, “Witchcraft, Poison, Law, and Atlantic Slavery,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 69 (2012): 235–264. Also see de Luna, “Sounding the African Atlantic,” 592–602; and (anticipated) John D. Garrigus, *A Secret*

not understand the full scope of the malevolent supernatural power implied in *ndoki*, he would have at least been forced to reconcile the disparate meanings of “scoundrel” and “poisoner.” Either way, these epistemological tensions point to the promise of inquiries in historical linguistics that Geggus seems all too quick to reject.

FRANCE = M'POUTOU

Geggus ridicules the idea that first-generation Congolese speakers in St. Domingue would have had no conception of France. I would find it “astonishing” if enslaved Congolese *did* understand the idea of “France.” In 1775, a French missionary in Congo, Jean-Joseph Descourvières, recorded the word *m'putu* as “Europe, or any country beyond the seas in relation to the Negroes.”¹² Years later, British missionary W. Holman Bentley clarified the term’s derivation: “Originally the native corruption of the name for the Portuguese [*Portuguesa* = *Mputulukezo* = *Mputu*], it has now become the name for the white man’s country, in the belief that the Europeans were a small tribe, living away in the land under the sea . . . ; hence, *Mputu* means Portugal, the white man’s land, Europe.”¹³

Basing his argument on other instances of the term *poutou* in Baudry’s vocabulary, Geggus declares that Baudry understood the word simply to mean “country, territory, land—including *pouto fioté* (land of the blacks).” But Geggus provides no explanation for why France, a specific country, would be glossed generically as “land” or “territory,” with no modifier. Which land? Which territory? The answer lies in Baudry’s distinction between *poutou* and *m'poutou*.

In a footnote, Geggus dismisses Baudry’s use of the noun prefix *m'* before the word *poutou* as insignificant. However, in the three instances where Baudry uses the *m'* prefix, he references things from overseas or Europe. In addition to referring to *m'poutou* as France, Baudry describes coconut (*coco*) as *loubango m'poutou*, and pepper (*poivre*) as *dongou m'poutou*. Coconuts and pepper were both overseas products introduced to Congo-language regions by Europeans. In each of these phrases, the term *m'poutou* does not mean “land” or “territory.” Rather, it means “overseas” or “Europe,” as in “European kola nut” for

Among the Blacks: Slave Resistance before the Haitian Revolution (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2023), esp. chapt. 4, “Makandal, Congo Diviner.”

12. Jean-Joseph Descourvières, *Dictionnaire congo et français*, 1775. Manuscrits de la bibliothèque municipale de Besançon MS 524, main copyist Cuénot, fol. 413.

13. W. Holman Bentley, *Dictionary and Grammar of the Kongo Language, as Spoken at San Salvador, the Ancient Capital of the Old Kongo Empire* (London: Baptist Missionary Society, 1887), 357.

loubango m'poutu (coconut).¹⁴ These unique instances of the term *m'poutu*, with its noun modifier, all imply “Europe.” Thus, Baudry’s interlocutors understood “France” to be *m'poutu*, derived from “Portugal” and expanded generically to include all of Europe.

The implications of this finding underscore Geggus’s long-standing assertion that we need to better understand the differences between African and Creole slaves and their roles in the revolution. Clearly, Congolese speakers had different ideas about “France” than did their Creole counterparts, who extolled the distinct virtues of French “*liberté*.”

ESCLAVE = VIKA

Of the four words I examined in the research note, the Kikongo terms for “slave” were the most complicated and my conclusions the most speculative. I was clear that the glosses on *bica*, *pika*, *vika*, and *montou* were ambiguous, but the evidence from Congo suggested that the term ‘*vika*’ for chattel slave was a relatively recent linguistic innovation that derived from the terms *-pika* (*-bika*), meaning “to arrive” as in a “new settler” or “stranger.”¹⁵

Initially, I drew on Jan Vansina’s research from 40 years ago, but new work by Marcos Leitão de Almeida demonstrates that *vika* (*-pika*) did not derive from (*-bika*).¹⁶ Using more complete linguistic data, Almeida argues that *vika* (*-pika*) instead derives from the verb *-pik*, meaning “to stake; to support something with something else.” For Almeida, the *vika* was a dependent outsider, the opposite of one who was honored and respected in his community. Nevertheless, the “one who stakes” required a “stakeholder,” a patron who served as primary benefactor in a relationship of mutual dependency. Almeida demonstrates that notions of the *vika* as an abject outsider, alongside assumptions of mutual dependency, persisted beyond the era of the Atlantic slave trade, when West Central Africans introduced numerous other ways of describing slaves. Terms like *tere*, *dongo*, *yombe*, and *nsundi* sat side by side with *vika* to mean slave. However, the new terms often

14. The practice of naming European products with variations of *mputu* in Kikongo dates back to the sixteenth century, when Filippo Pigafetta and Andrew Battell noted that Congolese called “Portugal grain” (maize) *mazza manputo* and *mas-impoto*. These were to be distinguished from local types of corn, including *masanga* and *masembala*. Pigafetta, *Relatione del Reame di Congo et delle circonvicine contrade* (Rome, 1591), 40; Andrew Battell, *The Strange Adventures of Andrew Battell of Leigh* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1901), 67.

15. Jan Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforests: Toward a History of Political History in Equatorial Africa* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 278.

16. Marcos Abreu Leitão de Almeida, “Speaking of Slavery: Slaving Strategies and Moral Imaginations in the Lower Congo (Early Times to the Late 19th Century),” (PhD diss.: Northwestern University, 2020), 141–142.

implied the complete dehumanization of dispensable chattel that could just as easily be killed as sold away.¹⁷

Though I regret that Almeida's dissertation was not yet available to me when I wrote the research note, my mistaken association between *-bica* and *vika* does not change my argument. In fact, Almeida's research reinforces my suggestion that the ambiguities of *vika*, in both Africa and in the diaspora, need to be taken seriously. In his response, Geggus willfully ignores my argument (via Grandpré) that *montou* was also frequently used for "slave." Indeed, it is the *only* word Grandpré uses for *esclave*, and he distinguishes these ordinary, "bought" slaves (*montou*) from those who were "sons of the land."¹⁸ The term *montou*, among other words, was available to Baudry and his Congolese informants to describe a category of "bought" slaves, even as *vika* evolved into a similar and perhaps more rigid term meaning "chattel slave."

Nevertheless, *vika* emerged from a broader field of meanings referring to a kinless outsider who enters into an unequal relationship of mutual dependency defined by servitude. Any *vika* who did not receive adequate food, housing, or protection possessed the right to switch masters. The implications of this broader definition of slavery might have had important implications in a place like Saint Domingue, where evidence of *petit marronage* has been noted in the historiography for many years.

Geggus concedes that the practice of escaped captives using a friend or family member to negotiate the runaway's return to his or her master was "well established in Saint-Domingue." Geggus adds that the practice "has no discernible connection to Congo slaves." Yet, I provide evidence of several fugitive Congolese who indicated a desire to return to former masters. Even if Geggus rejects the suggestive evidence of master switching, he never entertains the question of how the negotiated return of runaways became "well-established" in Saint Domingue. He again falls back on "Creole" knowledge, explaining that Creoles were "undoubtedly best positioned when seeking pardons, because of their kin connections and longer time in the colony."

Assuming Congo speakers did not possess this local knowledge, what would have prompted them to return to their enslavement? And what is Geggus's evidence that Creoles were responsible for establishing the practice in the first place? Understanding the ambiguities in Congolese ideas about slavery and captivity

17. Almeida, "Speaking of Slavery," 265–269.

18. As further evidence, see Descourvières's entry for *esclave*: "m'vika pl. ba-vika, ou se sera aussi de mu-ntu pl. ba-ntu." Descourvières, *Dictionnaire françois et congo*, 1773, manuscrits de la Bibliothèque Municipale de Besançon, MS 525, main copyist Cuénot, fol. 277.

provides a new approach for considering practices of petit marronage in Saint Domingue, one that is at least worthy of exploration.

Similarly, Congolese understandings of the relationship between livestock, runaway slaves, and the switching of masters merit greater attention. Almeida elaborates these connections, noting the ways that the term *nkombo* (*-gombo*; goat) also came to mean “deserter, runaway slave” across West Central Africa in the eighteenth century.¹⁹ The word *nkombo/gombo* appears twice in Baudry: once, predictably, for *cabrit* (goat; *konbo*), but then, curiously for “bull pizzle, whip” (*singa gombo*).²⁰ The translation for *singa gombo* is “goat whip,” but if the goat (*gombo*) was a “runaway slave,” the meaning changes dramatically to a specific instrument aimed at curbing marronage.

When I found the unusual cases of three runaway Congolese who carried bridle halters, allegedly looking for horses, it was hard to ignore the resonances to fugitive slaves in West Central Africa as metaphorical livestock, searching for new masters. To be clear, in a database of over 17,000 runaway ads, only three ads describe enslaved people looking for horses while carrying halters in their hands. All three of the fugitives are identified as Congos, and all three cases occurred in 1782. Geggus explains this coincidence by suggesting that the halters must have been a “prop to camouflage the slaves’ escapes.” Statistical odds would suggest other explanations. Why *only* Congos? Why *only* in 1782? If carrying horse halters was a clever way to disguise fugitive status, why didn’t Creoles adopt the practice? Geggus is predictably silent on these most pertinent questions. Congolese livestock and master-switching metaphors provide at least one plausible explanation, supported by contextual linguistic and ethnographic evidence.

In his zeal to reject almost any argument I make, Geggus runs roughshod over many of his own past assertions. In my discussion of the earliest stages of the Haitian Revolution, I build on a historiography that suggests that early rebel leaders demanded reforms to the system of slavery—introduction of a three-day work week, abolition of the whip, and others. Contrary to what Geggus asserts, I am uninterested in the question of full emancipation. Rather, I want to better understand the philosophical origins of this ameliorative, “reformist” impulse. Why would Africans agree to return to the plantations, even after the stunning military victories of 1791?

19. Almeida, “Speaking of Slavery,” 293–299.

20. Baudry des Lozières, *Second voyage à Louisiane*, 115, 134.

In his response to my research note, Geggus argues that the reformist approach was an invention of Creole leaders who sold out the “insurgent masses.” Geggus is loath to acknowledge that these “insurgent masses” were dominated by Africans who were apparently devoid of any leadership, moral philosophy, or strategic vision. Yet Geggus himself offered a very different explanation some years back: “The apparent ambivalence of earlier rebels with regard to ending slavery might best be explained by the predominance among them of Africans with indigenous traditions of bondage (who might reject their own enslavement but not single out slavery as an institution to destroy). . . . So far as I can tell, slave rebels rarely demanded freedom as a right.”²¹ In my research note, I offer the ambiguities of *vika* as evidence of the “indigenous traditions of bondage” that might have inspired Congolese soldiers to return to work. Amelioration had everything to do with marronage, because every “slave rebel” was, by definition, a “deserter, runaway slave,” or *nkombo/gombo*.

Of course, scholars have the right to change their minds, often as a result of new evidence coming to light or a new consensus emerging in the field. Geggus asserts that “many historians” argue that the “reformism came from the leaders, who were elite slaves and freemen of color, not their African followers.” In searching Geggus’s footnotes to find the “many historians” who make this argument, one finds only two citations, both from Geggus. In the most extensive of these articles, Geggus argues that “demands for limited reform of slavery. . . [were] doubtless in response to pressure from the rank-and-file insurgents.”²² In my note, I suggested new evidence that might explain the “pressure from the rank-and-file insurgents,” building on the historiography of scholars like Geggus. In his response, Geggus at once contradicts himself and disavows his previous claims.

To be clear, it was this historiography that inspired my methodological inquiry into Baudry’s *Vocabulaire* in the first place. I was also inspired by my analytical probing of the ways speakers of Congo languages might have interpreted aspects of slavery and the Haitian Revolution. If Geggus was merely upset that I did not cite him more fully in my short research note, that would be one thing. But he seems to want to repudiate *my* suggestion that Africans offered their ideas or strategies to the Haitian Revolution, including his own previous gestures in that direction. If that is the case, he should explain why.

21. Geggus, “The Haitian Revolution: New Approaches and Old,” 147.

22. David Geggus, “Print Culture and the Haitian Revolution: The Written and the Spoken Word,” *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 116 (2006): 312.

If anything, Geggus's demographic evidence underscores the importance of adult speakers of Congo languages in the slave population of Saint Domingue. However, his blind devotion to the colonial archive, with its predictable emphasis on Creole leadership, obscures potential African contributions. By highlighting the orality of Congo speakers in Saint Domingue, I offer some provisional thoughts on how language might offer new insights into Congolese intellectual and political histories, building on the impressive scholarship of historians like Geggus, Laurent Dubois, John Thornton, and others. I wanted my research note to move the dial forward methodologically and epistemologically. Though Geggus apparently now sees little value in attempting to understand Africans' intellectual and political contributions in Haiti, others do.

Shortly after my note's publication, Sara Johnson produced an award-winning article that examined Baudry in his Saint Domingue context, addressing some of the violent epistemological ruptures between him and enslaved people in Saint Domingue. Independent of my claims, Johnson came to the same conclusion in recognizing the importance of Kikongo as a potential *lingua franca* in the colony.²³ More recently, Kathryn de Luna published an award-winning article, providing a far more nuanced approach to Baudry's Congo-language material than I did. De Luna uses her deep methodological grounding in historical linguistics to demonstrate that the African histories of Saint Domingue may not be as unimportant as Geggus seems to think. De Luna smartly challenges some of the assertions in my research note, even as she takes seriously my methodological intervention and my suggestion that Congo words conveyed political morality in Saint Domingue. Indeed, de Luna pushes categories of political meaning in words like *makandal*, *mindélé*, *bafioté*, *ng'anga*, and *lwa* much further than my limited skills would allow.

Ultimately, I agree with de Luna that the "unstately archives of oral societies demand a different style of empiricism and narrativity, but what appear as limits can also be seen as openings into new methods of reading, writing, and even rendering the archive."²⁴ Such "new" approaches build on findings gleaned from the archive, but they break free from the colonial logics that are the obsession of European and Creole "histories." De Luna's suggestion of moving toward a new evidentiary rendering of the archive offers perhaps the

23. Sara E. Johnson, "'Your Mother Gave Birth to a Pig': Power, Abuse, and Planter Linguistics in Baudry des Lozière's *Vocabulaire Congo*," *Early American Studies* 16 (2018): 7–40. Johnson continues these fascinating epistemological inquiries in her forthcoming book, *Encyclopédie noire: The Making of Moreau de Saint-Méry's Intellectual World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2023).

24. De Luna, "Sounding the African Atlantic," 616.

best example of the kinds of research I hoped my note would inspire and offers even greater promise for the future.²⁵

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25. For forthcoming works using historical linguistics methods, see Marc A. Hertzman, *After Palmares: Diaspora, Inheritance, and the Afterlives of Zumbi* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2024); and the book manuscript of Chelsea L. Berry, “Poisoned Relations: Medicine, Sorcery, and Poison Trials in the Contested Atlantic, 1680–1850” (PhD diss.: Georgetown University, 2019).