Classical and Contemporary Social Theory
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Ghosts of the slave system

This chapter moves into the ghosts and phantasmagoria of the slave ships and the slavery plantations of the Americas. It first examines the historical methodologies of slavery as if the real slaves were ghosts. This means understanding the metrics of the dead of the African cargoes. Looking at how experience of the transported and the dead can be rendered visible in historical practice, it then moves on to the cultural spectrums of the ships and plantations. It examines the social effect of these accounts and the ways in which they are incorporated into social and political projects. In the American south these stories were often used by conservative ‘white folk’ to frighten children away from specific locations or away from interaction with other groups. In abolitionist discourse they were often used to indicate the horrors of an experience which had left its mark on the American psyche and for the political aspirations to emancipation.

More recent accounts of slave ghosts within fiction have looked at the kinds of social sedimentations of horror that appear in family lives indicating the continuing persistence of subjection and oppression. In the first part of the chapter we look at the idea of the slave ship as ghost ship – specifically the Brookes and problems of their representations and the representations of the dead. In the second section we look at the historical metrics of the dead and how the slaves were ‘ghosted’. In the next section we move on to the Zong slave ship and to the ‘spectres’ of the dead, examining ways in which haunting experiences have reflected the traumas of the middle passage and plantation experiences (see Davies 2007 and Redding 2011 on the social histories of haunting). In the last section we look at the textile metaphor for hauntings and illustrate how this might help us think about identity and haunting in African-American cultures.

The ghost ships

Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, our foremost historian of the ‘slave biography’, has argued that ‘it is time to make the invisible Africans visible’ (2065: xvi). Her profound methodological work on the archives of Louisiana and elsewhere have attempted to re-envision the African captives of the plantations. Her work examines the African cultures and their impact on the development of the American south and reasserts that Africanity is central to the development of American history. Of course her work on the biographies of slaves is a consequence of the wholesale elimination of African narratives of captivity and the submergence of their cultures in the wake of the slave ship. The narrative and themes of the slave ship and its cultures are explored elsewhere (Hudson 2016a), but as Marcus Rediker has argued, ‘the slaver is a ghost ship sailing on the edges of modern consciousness’ (2007: 12–13). The ship itself is both materiality and metaphor – as Paul Gilroy has argued: the slave ship is a chronotope for modernity and movement (1993). The elimination of almost all remnants of the ships has banished that materiality.

It is important to understand the maritime archaeology of the remnants of the ships and of the archaeology of the Africans on the plantations in order not just to reaffirm African-American presence and render them visible but also to witness to the immensity of the African holocaust and against those who would deny its historical reality. We will return in a later chapter to the machinic proliferations of images, but the documentation of the abyssal horrors of the slave trade have been pointed to by Roland Barthes in his study of the camera:

I repeat: a photograph, not a drawing or an engraving; for my horror and my fascination as a child came from this: that there was a certainty that such a thing had existed: not a question of exactitude, but of reality: the historian was no longer the mediator, slavery was given without mediation, the fact was established without method.

(Barthes 1993: 80)

So at once the African captive is conjured up again as a haunting spectre of that history. But there is also the fact of ‘ghosting’, that the captives were treated as if they were dead cargo rather than appearing as ‘literary ghosts’.

Esther Peeren has examined this question of the ‘living’ ghost (2014). She argues that ‘Literary ghosts may be defined as the dead reappearing in some sort of perceptible form to the living. Calling this type of ghost “literary” does not imply a belief that such reappearances actually occur; it merely indicates that this meaning of the word is generally accepted as the most common or straightforward one, forming the basis or any figurative usage’ (3). This figuration we know is common in haunting experiences but, in terms of dispossessed, captive and silenced communities there are those who are ghosts without having died. As Peeren has asked ‘what does it mean to live as a ghost, especially when this spectral metaphor designates a state of dispossessed?’ (4). This dispossesion is often about ‘unhomedness’ and indeed migration; the metaphorical ‘living’ ghost is part of a contesting series of political positions. As Peeren asks:

What does their status as living ghosts do for or to these people, generally considered to occupy marginal, contentious social positions? What kind(s)
of agency does their ghostliness generate or prohibit? And, finally, how does conceptualizing these groups as ghosts compare to other ways in which they have been or could be approached? (Peeren 2014: 5)

The kinds of agencies generated or prohibited, refuted or displayed within the use of spectral metaphors (Peeren 2014: 6–7) are not just individual agencies but powers which represent social formations, epochs, continents and civilisations. Examining our first ghost ship, that of the Brookes can help us illustrate haunting as both actuality and metaphor. The Brookes illustration emerged as a map of a specific Liverpool slave ship and its captives. The proliferation of this document in abolitionist circles was decisive in the ending of the slave trade. Its multiple versions are therefore hugely significant for understanding both the trade and its eventual abolition. The use of the illustration has been controversial specifically in the bicentenary memorialisation of the end of the trade with some commentators questioning the ethics of its use and further proliferation. This raises both technical and ethical issues about understanding the metrics and demographics of the slave trade which we explore in this chapter. The Brookes was a Liverpool slave ship which traded in the eighteenth century and became famous as an icon for abolition after its adoption and proliferation by the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade after 1788. The proliferation of illustrations of the Brookes have included multiple print and paper copies, wooden models, human drama structures, and artworks. It has been digitally dispersed across the world as a tool of education and to raise consciousness of the horrors of the middle passage (Hudson 2015b). The use and proliferation of the illustration has been subject to some critique specifically in memorialisations of the end of the slave trade in 2007 (Wood 2000, 2010a, 2010b). However, the dispersal and proliferation of the illustration has continued.

The Brookes illustration has become what Paul Basu calls a mnemonic terrain (2013: 116) in which the proliferation of the drawing has become the territory of a series of memory operations and contestations about the representation of slavery. James Walvin has noted the illustration as central to the propaganda machine of abolition. The Brookes itself was large for a slaver, holding 454 captives and weighing 320 tons, although there are accounts of its holding many more. Almost the entirety of the storage decks were used for the slaves who were packed tightly in rows although, as Walvin notes, this gives little sense of the peninsular horror of the slave holds (Walvin 1992: 46–47). The slave ships themselves have been seen both as floating camps of captive bodies but also as machines for the cultural transmission of African music and cultures to the new world. Paul Gilroy has seen the slave ships as ‘a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion’ of the middle passage (Gilroy 1993: 4). Ships generally were often perceived both as ‘wooden worlds’ and as microcosms of the wider world and its social relations (Rodger 1988).

The colloquy around Marcus Rediker’s work on the slave ship (Rediker 2007) has noted the power of the image of the Brookes with Boelhower seeing it as the ‘the single most effective tool in bringing an end to the slave trade’ (Moore et al. 2010: 7). Sean X. Goudie has noted the visual aspect of the slave ship – what it looked and felt like (Moore et al. 2010: 15). This, however, is almost impossible to understand as almost every material manifestation of the slave ship has disappeared except in drawing, paintings and in some narrative accounts of the passage. There have been some maritime archaeological excavations over recent years of a recently discovered Danish slaver (Svalesen 1995, 2000) and this has added immeasurably to our knowledge of the material artefacts of slavery but less to a full understanding of the machine of the ship as a whole entity. If, as Mike Sell has noted, the slave ship is ‘racism’s epiphenomenon metaphor’ (2001: 70), then we have to restore the totality of the ship as a way of understanding both the trade and the significance of slavery.

Marcus Wood has, over recent years, challenged what he calls the aesthetic representation of slavery and how far ‘aesthetic criteria [can] be applied to describe the torture and mass destruction of our own kind?’ (2000: 7). Slavery and its experience cannot be objectively recreated, collected, or recovered as a set of material artefacts. For Wood ‘there can be no archaeology of the memory of slavery that corresponds to an emotional identification with a lost reality. And yet a multitude of images have been made in England and America which purport to describe the history and the experience of slavery’ (7). It is worth quoting Wood at length:

Our cultures will never know what ‘really happened’ to the people who endured slavery. We may exhibit and look at artefacts, read lots of cargo, ship tonnages, the entries in punishment books, display caricatures, or paintings or models of slave ships, or the memorabilia of slave torture. There is abolition propaganda focused on anonymous slave sufferers, or on white personalities who spearheaded the abolition movements. There are grand narratives on large academic canvases, and there are heroic sculptures and friezes, almost always built to commemorate the emancipation moment. There are tragic little narratives encased within the texts of runaway slave advertisements. The question remains: are any of these things adequate, or even decent, memory tools? The material in this book is at one level a catalogue of emotional usurpation. The images reproduced mimic the experience of being a slave below deck on the middle passage, on the auction block, in a sugar or cotton field, waiting at table. Yet for each slave the experience was unrepeatable, irreducible and unre producible: all human suffering exists beyond the vulgarity of the simulacrum. Slavery caused a mass of suffering which the victims might never understand themselves let alone be able to, or wish to, communicate. The attempts of Western painters, sculptors, engravers, and lithographers to provide European culture with a record of slave experience is consequently a history fraught with irony, paradox, voyeurism and erasure. The testimony produced by
slaves themselves, which is frequently projected through white creative and economic filters, is equally complicated in its relation to whatever we understand as historical truth.

(Wood 2000: 8)

The 'unrecoverable' middle passage cannot repeat the trauma and neither can it depict it (Wood 2000: 14–16). As Wood says 'No slave boats were preserved: they were adapted to other trade and sailed on, and when they were out they were scrapped. Not one plank survives to bear silent testimony to the suffering they contained' (17). The visual representation of the Brookes that Wood discusses (17) is both a 'marshalled diagrammatic' (25) and an abolitionist icon: 'The conjuction of technical engraving with the depiction of a mass of black human flesh is a superb semiotic shock tactic' (27). As Wood argues:

The question of how to read the Description is further complicated for audience today because the accreted history of the image which we have inherited is not stable. The Description is a protean entity which from the moment of its publication appeared in an enormous number of popular mutations.

(Wood 2000: 32)

The visual encoding of the 'emancipation moment' (Wood 2010b: 164–165) in 2007 would repeat the tropes of emancipation and abolition but without really addressing the horrors of the trade itself.

In drawing upon a body of visual material developed by abolitionists in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, British popular visual culture in 2007 perpetuated a series of controlling stereotypes for the configuration of Atlantic Slavery...It was inevitable when the 2007 bicentennial arrived that the key elements within the visual archive of slavery would be drawn upon, reproduced, re-circulated, re-invented, re-combined, re-prepared, reactivated and for the most part reduced.

(Wood 2010b: 164)

The diagram was recirculated in different ways, sometimes straightforwardly, at others reshaping the image for the ends of abolition (Wood 2010b: 166). Wood does not deny the power of the illustration: 'But I do think there are right and wrong ways of coming at the memory of the Middle Passage, and that we need to be clear about how much abuse the "Description" of the Brookes can take' (176). Wood's critical commentary then rests upon three aspects: the actuality and possibility of recovery, the ethics of visualisation, and the imposition of meaning. In other words: can we display, should we display, and what happens when we do display?

The bicentenary of the abolition of slavery in 2007 further thrust into public discourse the ignominious history of slavery and abolition. As Ellis and Richardson have said of its significance: 'The transatlantic slave trade was the largest transoceanic forced migration in history' (2008: 1). The slave trade and the middle passage specifically led to the emergence of the new syncretic cultures of the new world and are of huge significance for understanding the cultures of captivity and oppression that are still present in contemporary struggles (Hudson 2012). Recent years have also witnessed a qualitative shift in both slavery studies and in the educational collections around slavery due to the emergence of new social machines like Wikipedia and new vast and complex databases and online digitalised archives. New practices around online collections and the rise of digital heritage studies (Parry 2007a, 2007b) have been accompanied by the emergence of new kinds of social relations and communities around digitalisation and new modes of knowledge accumulation.

The metrics of the dead

The development of new 'social machines' (Berners-Lee and Fischetti 1999; Donath 2014; Hendler and Berners-Lee 2009; Hudson 2015b; Tarte, De Roure and Willcox 2014) have increasingly enhanced the capacity for social navigation through vast aggregates of data at the same time as they create new user networks and communities. Some social machines are directly produced by or co-produced with communities and are often directly designed by or built around the aspirations of a variety of user groups. The different kinds of socialities around knowledge and data, in schools and communities, are often built around two general linked concepts – engagement and belonging. It is widely perceived that engaging students in data analysis is more effective if that data in some sense belongs to them and is relevant to their sense of meaning, social life-words, and ancestries – the world of what Marx called the 'dead generations' (Hudson 2000, 2002). Identity-work is therefore central to working with large datasets and can be a way of introducing quantitative data into complex interactions around meaning.

There has been much discussion over recent years of database-tracking populations from above for commercial, governmental or surveillance reasons (Beck and Burrow 2013; Savage 2013). Often social machines offer services and at the same time collect and collate information which is then used to engage or extract further information from user groups. The construction of databases of pest communities is itself based on official records of courts, trade, and mortality, and tracks the movement of populations by assessing multiple variables. Database construction therefore performs a triple function of supporting the survival of the aggregation, and the ongoing use and curation of data which could be potentially lost. Further, the production of digitally surrogate information extracted from one spatio-temporal moment is both de-materialised into open-access internet forms of circulation and extra-territorialised into potentially global locations of data access. This makes the database globally open to use by scholarship and by communities. This is made even more urgent by the loss of materiality of the artefacts of slavery of
which only few remnants survive in plantation and maritime archaeology (Svalseth 1995, 2009). The records can also provide the basis for the reconstruction of material artefacts and hint at the subjective experiences as well as the origins and destinations of the African captives. Digitalised objects such as the model of the slave ship L'Aurore, or digital surrogates such as the maps of the slave ship Brookes can sit alongside vast collections of images and data. Largely hitherto used by historians as a way of determining the numerical enumeration of the slaves and estimates of their transmission and mortality, a number of databases have been developed which are now central to understanding both slavery and the operations of identity-work in curriculum spaces. Questions of the status of curating and sustaining data still remain (Higgins 2011) as do questions about how far digital archives can be co-produced or used by schools (Carmichael 2011) and communities (Stevens, Flinn and Sheppard 2010).

Ideas and data about the Middle Passage (Baptist 2006; Baucom 2005) and the Black Atlantic have become central to understanding the historiography of slavery (Dubois and Scott 2010; Gilroy 1993). As the locus of transmission of captive populations the slave ships are often seen as the genesis of the new-communities of African-America (Christopher 2006; Rehfker 2007, 2013). The passage and captivity was, and still is to some extent, formative in the category of the slave and of the multiple and complex social identities of the new world (Byrd 2008; Landers 2010; Lovejoy 2008). The consequences for identity of the development of new web resources and the aspiration towards new curriculum spaces for slavery studies becomes even more urgent in the light of contemporary maritime migrations by refugees. It is also clear that whilst many databases are the result of official commercial, carceral and governmental organisations collecting information for their own ends, the involvement of schools and communities as generators of knowledge rather than users and recipients is important. The co-production of data and knowledge and the circulation of experience, stories and knowledge can measurably enhance data archives. Databases should retain their scholarly and professional focus whilst finding new online and physical spaces to interact with users. The fact that many people in communities have identities which are the complex production of slavery in terms of their lineages and identities means that the archival power of design-from-above should be questioned. The emergence of data from ancestors means that historians have a moral imperative to reflect on the socialities around data and what Moore and Pell call ‘the inevitable tyranny of archival practice’ (2010: 264).

The development of new data machines for historical research has been documented by Harvey and Press in their analytical survey of design and case studies (1996). They point to the emergence and ubiquity of databases and the ways they create and represent knowledge (xi). In the context of the development of the methodology of historical computing Harvey and Press have examined the challenges of both design and project management (xii). Questions of the visualisation, coding, aggregation of disparate materials, order and the stratification of resources are central to database production which is itself a decisive part of historical studies.

The design and development of databases is central to the transformation of research methods in history which is now underway: to the development of superior systems for the location of primary and secondary sources; to the creation of transportable research resources of value to scholars in many fields and many nations; to the vital process of record linkage; to the organisation, searching and sorting of research materials; to the analysis and presentation of historical information.

(Harvey and Press 1996: 1)

The structuring of a database is, for Harvey and Press, a logical collection and ordering of data for a multiple user audience (1996: 10). They provide a useful definition of this ordered structure:

a database is a collection of interrelated data organised in a pre-determined manner according to a set of logical rules, and is structured to reflect the natural relationships of the data and the uses to which it will be put, rather than reflecting the demands of the hardware and software.

(Harvey and Press 1996: 22, their italics)

The ordering and structure of a database depends on a series of interactions including the definition of what constitutes data and a management system to order and facilitate use including data entry and validation. It might also include electronic editions of books and pamphlets which themselves need to be photographed and transcribed. The structure of variables and coding emerges from the specific texts, images, sounds, and numbers of which the database is comprised.

Understanding databases means that we are immediately confronted with three problems. Firstly, there are problems in the origin, production and governance of the database including the recovery of materials, the input of data and the curation and sustainability of the data. Often the origins of databases lie in the individual enthusiasm of scholars, an specific but supersedes project, or an institution. There will probably not be a set of governance protocols for the system and it is generally owned by libraries and universities. They might allow open access/use/data extraction but, more rarely, open input. Secondly, there can be problems in the parameters and logical field of the data, its ordering and stratification and the search taxonomies. Thirdly, there are problems in the use and utility of the database for users and audiences and the wider social groups circulating around it and intervening in it. Often the user group may be the population from which the information has been extracted (or their ancestors); however, that population may not be part of the governance of the system.

Each of these issues – the production of the database, the decision on its data parameters, the communities of use are intensely pertinent to the study
slavery archives. We look here at two significant database projects here around slavery: the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database developed by David Eltis and Martin Halbert and the Slave Biographies: The Atlantic Database Network developed by Gwendolyn Midlo Hall and Walter Hawthorne specifically around insights into the ‘living ghosts’ of the slave system.

The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database (TSTD) has been developed since the original CD-ROM version in 1999 as a scholarly open-access system by David Eltis, perhaps the most distinguished scholar of slavery today in the Anglo-American world, and Martin Halbert (http://www.slavevoyages.org). The TSTD emerges from the work of what Gwendolyn Midlo Hall calls ‘the quantification school of Atlantic slave trade studies’ (2005: 28). Originally developed to create a ‘single multi-source dataset’ of slavery it is currently based around open access and restricted input with peer review of contributions added to the site on a three-yearly basis. The site itself includes maps, chronologies, lesson plans, maps, essays, images and a user guide. Its historical and discursive field of data extraction and presentation is based around the ships and their captive cargoes. For our purposes the supplementary materials on the site are most instructive for new curriculum innovations. Aside from the initial user guide to the site the US lesson plans for 9th to 12th grade students, developed in partnership with high schools, are outstanding in their guides to navigation and learning. The lesson plans around ‘Researching the Transatlantic Slave Trade’ by Christine Kadlosky and David Eltis (http://www.slavevoyages.org) outline a fascinating discursive field of access, operation and the manipulation of variables. The document outlines how to research the metrics of the trade, although for students Kadlosky and Eltis recommend that they begin their operations from an image of the model of the slave ship L’Aurore to situate their database analytics in a material entity at the beginning of their journey into the data.

One of the sections deals with the Zong voyage and massacre. The metrics of the Zong voyage have been described elsewhere by Ian Baulcom in his phenomenology of the spectral and commodification aspects of the trade (Baulcom 2005). Questions asked include the point of origin for the voyage (its location in space), the number of days of the voyage (its location in time), and the percentage of slaves out of the slave population of the ship who died. It is telling that no names survive for the captives, only numbers. The spatio-temporal locations of the ships are also marked in the section on the influence of winds and ocean currents on the temporal duration of voyage of slave ships more generally. Search taxonomies for the site include the name of the ship, captain, year of voyage, place of purchase, and the numbers of slaves on the ship. The very search taxonomy itself displays the origin of the database in official records of trade rather than located in the subjective human experience of the slaves and their names. This particular aspect of the trade is, however, central to the separate database constructed by David Eltis, Martin Halbert and Philip Misevich in the African Origins project (http://www.african-origins.org) where the initial search taxonomies begin with the slave name, country of origin and gender. This database was oriented to the slave name and its pronunciation from the beginning in order to properly assess the enunciation of specific names in dialect to assess territories of African origin.

The origin of the Slave Biographies: The Atlantic Database Network (http://slavebiographies.org) lie in the individually accumulated, private databases of Gwendolyn Midlo Hall and Walter Hawthorne. The Brazilian state of Maranhão had been the site of Walter Hawthorne’s Maranhão Inventories Slave Database (MISD) (see Hawthorne 2010a). Colonial lower Louisiana was the specific site of Hall’s Louisiana Slave Database (CMH). The combination of these two datasets were about a significant aspiration to understand both the specific and abstract elements of the slave system and its impact on specific territories in Brazil and Louisiana.

Our task as historians is more than to preserve images of primary sources; it is to interpret those sources by finding new ways to organize, share, mine and analyze as well as to preserve original materials which might otherwise be discarded or lost. Furthermore, new scholarship is interested in observing the large historical patterns and tendencies. Answering important questions about Atlantic slavery requires the gathering of larger amounts of quantitative data than one individual collection could ever hope to compile and interpret. Slave Biographies fills a real need. It will serve as a collaborative platform for researchers of African slaves in the Atlantic World to upload data they have collected and link it to other datasets, creating a much richer resource than the sum of the individual datasets.

(http://slavebiographies.org)

The new database was situated in the development of new analytical tools around the original private database. Like the TSTD it engages multiple scholars in its production but puts more emphasis on open input and the necessity of collaboration. Unlike the TSTD it is explicitly rooted in slave biographies rather than the ship, with the search taxonomies based around an initial structure of racial, gender, date, location (Brazil and Louisiana) and ownership details.

The database is rooted in an ethical practice outlined by Mandemakers and Dillon (2004) and is based around the sustainability, creation and recovery of documents and data. It also aspires to the creation of a ‘visualisation layer’ which will visually describe the strata of the documentation (see Whitelaw 2009). The potential visualisation of the data strata is made explicit in another site dedicated to the exploration of one slave voyage and its situatedness in history and geography. The Voyage of the Slave Ship Sally, 1764-1765 (Brown University) (http://cda.library.brown.edu/projects/sally/documents.html) has timelines and maps with hyperlinks to original documents and viewers are able to map the spatio-temporal locations, latitude, longitude and date.

The development of the Slave Biographies database is geographically more specifically located in specific territories than the more globalised TSTD. The data on the latter has been the basis of much scholarship including that of
Elnis himself on the global dimension of slavery. The specifically quantitative aspects of the latter are explored in Elitis and Richardson (1997) where they explore the relationship of 'numbers' to personal accounts and argue for the use of both (3). In advance of the construction of the full database Elitis and Richardson argued for the idea of a new 'multi-source' scholarly data-set specifically around the role of the ship and the voyage. The reconstruction of slavery voyages and, even more importantly, the creation of a single, consolidated database of voyages offers the best means available of charting the routes to slavery of Africans forced into exile from their homelands (3). One of the central aspects of the database was estimating and understanding the numbers of captives and specifically data on mortality rates in the middle passage (8-9).

The mortality data was assessed by Herbert S. Klein and Stanley L. Engerman (1997) in their analysis of long-term trends in mortality but they also note something important about the definition of the historical and discursive 'field' of data navigation in problems of defining the middle passage itself (Klein and Engerman 1997: 38). Klein and Engerman argue that understanding the specificity of a ship, a voyage and its mortality rates we can abstract to wider social forces.

Why is the middle passage such a widely studied event? First, it is the part of the slave trade system that provides the best recording of information dealing with the numbers of slaves involved and their mortality in transit. Second, there is the importance of European involvement in the middle passage and, unlike the internal movement of slaves within Africa, the European practice of detailed record-keeping and of government regulation of the transatlantic traffic in slaves.

(Klein and Engerman 1997: 39)

Because there is so much social data on the passage and the ships in terms of catalogues of the cargo, logbooks and so on, it means firstly that there is a data territory that can be collected, curated and mined and secondly that it might skew understanding to where the data is as opposed to where it is not. This has to some extent been rectified by recent scholars like Pier Larson who dislocates the geography of slavery away from the middle passage (2000). In more recent work Elitis and Richardson (2008) have provided a new assessment of the trade in the light of the scholarly work that they and others have done on the database. They stress the 'multiple' and collaborative nature of the project as the database is both built and reinterpreted by new generations of scholars (52). They also stress that current and future elaborations of TSTD2 will move attention away from the abstract and global aspects of the overall trade and towards its individual branches and component parts, becoming more specific as scholarly attention is more focused on the byways rather than the data highways of the middle passage (53).

The more geographically specific origins of the Slave Biographies database has also been part of the more micro-historical work of its originators. Gwendolyn Midlo Hall's work on Africans in colonial Louisiana (1992) and on slave plantations (1971) displays an intimate relationship with data collection and its significance for understanding the persistence and syncretism of African cultures in the new world. Africans in Colonial Louisiana by Gwendolyn Midlo Hall is perhaps the finest piece of scholarship on Africans in the new world and has inspired new generations of activists, scholars and musicians to think about the African origins of new world aesthetics. Further, her intimate relationship with the data has elaborated new ways of thinking about the specific biographies of slaves and ex-slaves in the territories of Louisiana and the creolisation of their African cultures (Hall 2005). The Slave Biographies database is the culmination of historiographical work that has spanned the last half century and Hall's work is hugely significant for understanding the subjectivities that were consequent on the trade. Hall's journey towards the database largely began with her initial research in Pointe Coupée parish, Louisiana and then to the slaves in all of Louisiana (Hall 2005: xvi). For Hall the question of self-definition is central in understanding the African origins of new world identities: 'The Louisiana Slave Database, 1719-1820, systematically sheds light on the circumstances under which African ethnicities were identified. All extant documentation indicates self-identification or, on occasion, identification by other Africans' (40-41), naming 217 different ethnicities (42).

The 'Black Rice' debate of 2007 and 2010 was between two sets of scholars involved in the different databases (Edelson 2010; Elitis, Morgan and Richardson 2010; Elitis, Morgan and Richardson 2010; Hall 2010; Hawthorne 2009b). Each set of scholars pointed to a different understanding of the origin of each database, the questions we ask of them, and what they can and cannot tell us. Hall specifically argues that TSTD 1 and 2 and the data that Elitis, Morgan and Richardson extract from them on the production of rice and African origins underlay the agency of African communities in the new world. For Hall, we should not overestimate the databases to answer all questions.

Historical databases are wonderful, innovative tools. They can integrate huge amounts of detailed, concrete data into broad patterns allowing for analysis over time and place. The vast quantity of information they contain and analyze is a great advantage, especially in making broad, comparative studies. Databases can answer questions that cannot be answered using more traditional methodologies, can partially or tentatively answer others, and can help answer still others; combining quantitative calculations with the findings of other disciplines, including archaeology, anthropology, linguistics, and geography, as well as traditional history. But there are some questions that are simply beyond their capabilities.

(Hall 2010: 138)

For Hall TSTD2 is rigid and omits important data on slave origins and biographies that might answer questions that the database originators want to
ask (2010: 139). Eltis, Morgan and Richardson deny that they are seeking to erase the skills and agency of Africans in the new world; they are pointing to the asymmetries of power in the slave system (2010: 171) and if that database on African origins is missing it is because it does not exist. The question of the display of human agency versus the structure of the database and its numerical imperatives (Hall 2010: 140) raises the vexed question about either human or machine or human + machine. Yet it is clear that understanding scholarly imperatives, the original data sources, and the aspirations of communities can be part of, at the same time, social relations around the machine: a social machine that both limits and enables certain kinds of possibilities dependent on what we ask of it and where the information comes from. Co-producing social machines with communities seems therefore to offer new possibilities for reflection and understanding of the social relations around the subsequent Atlantic world.

If we return to the original definition of Harvey and Press (1996: 22) that databases are structured and stratified collections of interrelated data defined by the logic of the field from which data was extracted, we can begin to observe the relation between data of a slave database and its historical and geographical origin and territory. But there is also the question of what Harvey and Press call the ‘pre-determined manner’ of database construction designed to reflect the territory from which the data is pulled (22). This immediately returns us to the three problems that emerge in databases of the slave world. The origin, production and governance of the database is of course often ‘pre-determined’ by the logical field from which it emerges and what we might call the natural contours of its geographical and historical moment. The parameters of that field are, however, the product of complex circulations of knowledge amongst scholars in a discursive field full of the capacity to define and exercise power. This is not to say that the production of that field is purely fabricated or discursive (Hudson 2000), but often the social relations and communities which are the very population from which data emerges (or their dead) are the object rather than the subject of these definitions. The restriction of user input (and sometimes access) to scholarly communities can often result in a database wielded upon and over populations rather than a resource useful to their own self-definition and self-determination.

If we think about this ‘pre-determination’ and ‘pre-definition’ of databases rather than ‘self-determination’ and ‘self-definition’, then the database is not just a reflection of a natural field but a refraction of systems of power to determine and define. If we are to take seriously the injunction that projects should be global, inclusive and use identity-work to engage students, then it is necessary to seriously think about the co-design and the co-production of archives and databases with communities. This would then mean the ‘co-determination’ and ‘co-definition’ of data fields and the parameters of databases, creating new social machines that are hybrids of data with self-determined sets of socialities and relations surrounding the use of those machines. The co-evolution of the machine/sociality intersection would raise exciting new possibilities around human-computer interactions as well as the interactions between collections, archives, memory institutions, libraries and the multiple communities of the living and the dead with which they are enmeshed.

One of the dangers of the co-design and co-production of databases is that the intervention of non-scholastic communities into access/input of databases could compromise the integrity and authority of both the inputted data and the interpretive analytics performed upon that data. This is why databases have to be genuinely co-produced and co-determined in formal and informal partnerships between libraries, universities and the communities of interest. In terms of university/school collaborations this means developing genuine curriculum spaces for the use of slave databases and the development of what might be called ‘wiki’ or ‘database play’ sections of archives where materials can be generated from within school groups as they ‘play’ with data and where groups can curate, assemble and reassemble elements of the data collection to create new assemblages of information and new narratives. There might be genuine ethical aspects with ‘playing’ with the data of the Zong massacre. Yet it is only through that play and manipulation of variables that we get some sense of the historical resonance and reality of the data. This might help us to come to terms with the official renditions of data and help support communities in understanding the use of that data to uncover historical crimes, identities, subjectivities and the revenants of our slave dead.

The spectres of the dead

The absolute imperative to generate the demographic metrics of the dead of slavery has to go hand in hand with understanding their spectrpic demographies. Vincent Brown (2008: 4) in his historical work on social death and slavery has outlined the relationship between death, colonialism and accumulation. His story of the songs of slave women symbolically representing death to their masters and promising retribution to them displays the fact that the dead are still active participants in the world of the living (4). Further, understanding the social relationships that mediate the living and the dead means that the process of dying, the deposition of the body and the work of mourning are essential facets of understanding the slave experience. As Brown says:

Practices surrounding death are ultimately grounded in perceptions of the unknowable and ineffable. Yet this is a story that can be told without metaphysical speculation. Attitudes toward death often lie at the heart of social conflict, and the dead are frequently objects of contention and struggle. If research from the fields of demographic, cultural and social history is drawn together, the practical ways that people make political meaning of death can be observed, described, and, ultimately, fashioned into a materialist history of the supernatural imagination.

(Brown 2008: 5)
This materialist history then is one in which the metric and the spectric are combined and Brown points very clearly to mortuary practices amongst slave populations as reflecting customs, authorities and ancestries which become particularly important as the dead become part of the social struggles and contestations of the living (Brown 2008: 6). Mortuary practices and self-identity are therefore reflections on historical origins and political destinations:

When the transatlantic slave trade dragged African men, women, and children into the grinding mills of American slavery, it shattered networks of belonging that connected the newly born to the long dead. The survivors of millions of deadly journeys had to reconstitute their social worlds wherever they landed.

(Brown 2008: 10)

The elimination of the landscapes of ancestry sever those vertical links with one's dead and the locations they are in are displaced horizontally as the slave ship moves over the horizon. Significantly, as Maya Angelou has pointed out, this can create new modes of ethnogenesis, solidarity and togetherness (1995: 269-277) often based on new kinship identities of people who travelled with each other as shipmates on the slavers and which persisted through the generations.

Leslie M. Harris, in her critically important study of the African Burial Ground of New York, has argued that the mortuary practices of the cemetery were enmeshed in complex cultural syncretisms inherited from the ships and the plantations from which the Africans had emerged.

The graves also demonstrated the ways enslaved African Americans attempted to hold on to African cultural traditions and to incorporate European traditions into their lives. Some graves contained cowrie shells; others, the remains of British and American military uniforms...the cowrie shells were representative of the hope that the dead would return to Africa in the afterlife.

(Harris 2003: 1; and see also Frohne 2015)

The decorations of cloth, textile and the body adornments will provide us with one of the great metaphors of memory to which we will return in terms of the warp and weft of human consciousness. But the process by which the material body disappears and the ceremonial and ritual elements of that are of profound importance for the African-American populations. As Vincent Brown argues:

In fact, the funeral was an attempt to withstand the encroachment of oblivion and to make social meaning from the threat of anomie. As a final rite of passage and a ritual goodbye, the ceremony provided an outlet for anguish and an opportunity for commiseration. Yet it also allowed the women to publicly contemplate what it meant to be alive and enslaved. The death rite thus enabled them to express and enact their social values, to articulate their visions of what it was that bound them together, made individuals among them unique, and separated this group of people from others.

(Brown 2009: 1232)

The constant threat of trauma and 'oblivion' was one reason why so much of the African-American experience became related to the ground of burial. Ritual allowed for new relationships between ancestors and descendants and ways of expressing trauma and loss marked in the very landscape itself. As Brown further notes:

The funeral was an act of accounting, of reckoning, and therefore one among the multitude of acts that made up the political history of Atlantic slavery. This was politics conceived not as a conventional battle between partisans, but as a struggle to define a social being that connected the past and present. It could even be said that the event exemplified a politics of history, which connects the politics of the enslaved to the politics of their descendants.

(Brown 2009: 1233)

For Brown the social death of slaves was a 'by-product of commodification' (Brown 2009: 1240). As cargo, goods, chattel, the slave was simply congealed capital and potential labour. Our second slave ship displays these relationships very clearly. The Zong massacre became central to abolitionist discourse and history due to the murder of its cargo for insurance purposes. Ian Baucom, in his analysis of the spectral commodities and regimes of capital has outlined the 'metrics' of the Zong:

Four hundred forty slaves. Four hundred forty items of property valued at 30 pounds each. Thirteen thousand two hundred pounds. Four hundred forty human beings. We know almost nothing of them, almost nothing of Captain Collingwood's conduct in "acquiring them", almost nothing of their entry, as individuals, into the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Not as individuals. As "types" they are at least partially knowable, or imaginable. Indeed what we know of the trans-Atlantic slave trade is that among the other violations it inflicted on millions of human beings was the violence of becoming a "type": a type of person, or, terribly, not even that, a type of nonperson, a type of property, a type of commodity, a type of money.

(Baucom 2005: 11)

What Baucom calls the 'speculative regime' of capital (Baucom 2005: 31) is one which discards and discharges living bodies into the sea. One which then haunted the abolitionist imaginary just as much as the Brookes. The
commodity of the slave — massacred and submerged in the Atlantic — haunted more than just abolition as it becomes a central image of aesthetics in the nineteenth century.

David Dabydeen’s poetic reflection on Turner’s painting Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and the Dying, more widely known as The Slave Ship reflects on the drowning head of one African captive.

My poem focuses on the submerged head of the African in the foreground of Turner’s painting. It has been drowned in Turner’s (and other artists’) sea for centuries. When it awakens it can only partially recall the sources of its life, so it invents a body, a biography, and peoples an imagined landscape.

(Dabydeen 1994: ix)

The ‘racial terror’ of the Zong massacre becomes for Paul Gilroy a central motif of the ‘Black Atlantic’ which will eventually transform whole epochs and civilisations (1993: 16–17). This alerts us to both the ‘living dead’ of the surviving slaves and the ‘dead living’ of the slave ghosts inhabiting our cultural imaginations.

Joanne Chassot’s meditation on the literary ‘envisoning’ of the Atlantic dead in the work of writers such as D’Aguiar, reflects on this idea of the ‘living dead’ of slavery as a double figuration, neither alive nor dead.

In literary and cultural studies, “living dead” is often used — without definition, and often interchangeably with the term “undead” — as a generic term and it has been applied to a variety of creatures in popular culture, from ghouls and vampires to ghosts and zombies. Rather than an umbrella term, I use it here in its more basic, literal sense as an oxymoron: if the ghastly quality of the figure powerfully conveys the life-threatening conditions of the slave ship’s hold, its dual character, as a creature that is both alive and dead, neither alive nor dead, allows Smallwood, D’Aguiar, and Deslauriers to explore the various and complex ways in which the Middle Passage challenges, troubles, sometimes utterly reconfigures, the boundaries of life and death.

(Chassot 2015: 92)

The motif and trope of the ‘living dead’ for Chassot is a symbolic configuration of the loss of ancestors and landscapes in the middle passage (2015: 97).

Patrick Polk, in his work on spiritualism and slavery examines a Boston séance at the height of the civil war in 1864. The ghost of a mixed race girl attempts to contact her illegitimate white planter father and states that ‘He will remember me — he will’ (Polk 2010: 24). As Polk says:

Surely a ghost, even one who was numbered among the living for but a decade or so could rightly assume that kith and kin would recollect her

without difficulty? If not, what would be the point in coming back? The very foundation of Spiritualism rested on the proposition that the distance between the living and the dead was never so great as to deny familiarity.

(Polk 2010: 25)

Polk also notes the political effects of this visitation, implicitly condemning her father, and appearing not in the plantations and landscapes of the south but in abolitionist and unionist Boston — ‘the timing was impeccable, predictable, and expressly provocative’ (Polk 2010: 25). The ubiquity of ‘negro child-spirits’ (26) and their own reflections, through the medium, on servitude and recognition also sometimes pointed to the idea that they had now claimed liberty, a liberty only available to them in the spirit world and not in the more earthly landscapes of the United States (32).

The dreams and flight narratives of the captives often culturally expressed their dislocations and transitions and often in hallucinatory terms. As Monica Schuler has argued: ‘Both the collective situation and the Africans’ worldview would have made them understand this ordeal as a process of dying — a passage from the world of the living in Africa to the world of the dead across the “river of salt”, the ocean’ (2005: 191). The process of social death, often accompanied by the actual death of vast numbers of shipmates, was a transition from human to commodity, from material frame into a kind of spectrality. Often this was expressed in the aesthetic and cultural terms of their homelands. Robin Blackburn notes that many slaves thought the white slaves were ghosts and the spirits of the dead come to take them away (2010: 395). Even more, the multiple suicides both on the ships and on the plantations were often about traversing back, through the transmigration of souls, to homelands and Africa, reborn not as captives, commodities or cargo, but into their original cultures and landscapes. Gwendolyn Midlo Hall notes this specific cultural aspect of Ibo captives:

Throughout the Americas, Ibo slaves were reputed to be suicidal. It was thought that their tendency to hang themselves stemmed from their belief in the transmigration of souls: that after death, they would return body and soul to their home in Africa. In Cuba during the nineteenth century, entire plantations of Ibos hanged themselves from trees simultaneously. They were mutilated to discourage other slaves from following their example, but other Ibos hung themselves from the same trees.

(Hall 1992: 255)

The accounts of mass suicides were often a reflection of the social deaths imposed upon the captives, and intimately related to the loss of culture and the elision of memory (Snyder 2010). Their cultures were ripped away from them or distorted and they became non-human beings. Even their voices were stolen from the slaves: ‘Tongues were stilled in shock, mouths moaned incoherently’ (Baptist 2006: 248).
Yet death was also a form of memorialisation where the relation between the living and the dead could be connected again. As Reinhardt has argued, landscapes can become ritually and ceremonially important locations and act as mnemonic devices which can reaffirm the ancestry and the verticality of the slave experience.

What is important about the slave cemetery at Capesterre Belle-Eau is that it symbolizes honor and respect for slave ancestors. It has become a place of devotion where the people can reconnect with their slave heritage. In this regard the slave cemetery is very much like the memorials to the maroons and to the drowned slaves: it turns nature into a sacred place where the memory of the past has been preserved. The sea, the forest, and the earth are history because they are the only witnesses of a past that was not deemed worthy of official historical accounts.

(Reinhardt 2006: 145)

The landscapes, like the African Burial Ground, become what Ian Baucom has called the ‘counter-archive’ of the slave experience (2005: 31). One of the most important literary tropes of this memorial experience to the dead and to the social death of the plantations lies in Toni Morrison’s Beloved (1987). History becomes a way of rethinking our pasts in the guise and the semblance of difficult ghosts – in this case a ghost-child (Anderson 2013; Krumholz 1992). The actual case upon which the novel is based – that of Margaret Garner – has been uncovered by Mark Reinhart, concentrating particularly on the tropes of memory and forgetting (2010). In recent years the fascination with the landscapes of ghosts has created a ‘dark tourism’ of haunted sites on plantations and battlefields, creating spectral representations of the African-American experience which themselves subordinate and render invisible the lives of the slaves (Miles 2015). The processes of memory and forgetting have to be based upon both metrics and spectres, upon actual historical practice which stands against the relegation of the dead, and to the cultural and social haunting of the African-American in the landscapes of the plantations and seascapes of the ships.

The warp and the weft of the dead

The burial rites and mortuary practices of the African-American dead have been pointed to by Leslie M. Harris in her work on the African Burial Ground (2003). This helps us attend to what we might call the ‘cloth’ metaphor of memory. The hybrid and syncretic dress, uniforms and adornments of the dead, point to the warp and weft of social and historical memory and their connection to the body as it passes beyond this world. Lesley Millar in her work on cloth, memory and representation (2007, 2013) has examined the repetitions of historical practices that weave ancestral knowledges into the cloths we wear. She looks at dress as codified text which can express the power of tradition and folk art and to textile as a language which is intimately related to the space and nature of localized cultures (Millar 2007: 6–8). For Millar, cloth acts as a witness to the body’s encounter with the world and to the shifting re-negotiations of marginalised and subjugated ‘in-between’ cultures (9–10).

Memory for Millar has little fixity, it is often ‘fugitive’. She notes the ways in which the ‘cloth’ metaphor can help us understand our biographies and the histories in which they are situated. For Millar, ‘Dissolving, slipping through the porous membrane of time, conflating experiences: memories are the wayward threads we use to reconstruct the narrative of our life’ (2013: 13). Working with cloth can be an act of recreation in which layers and stitches can express memory but, for Millar, memory can also be erasable as it wipes out and eradicates (13). Each fragment, each marking, as it is reborn holds, recycles and transforms memory: ‘Membrane, fold, thread and pattern: cloth and memory’ (15). The ‘cloth’ metaphor, as Millar notes, is about allusions to ‘threads, folds, stains, piecing, patching, layering’ (17). In a related work Ailing-Smith, Quarini and White have pointed to the direct relationship between textiles, death and mourning.

By using textiles to evoke the psychic pain of being marked, stained, repaired and remade it is possible to connect with the intense emotions of mourning. Mourning, melancholia and grief are all emotions that we experience through the course of life which indelibly mark our memory and all can be understood through the medium of cloth.

(Ailing-Smith, Quarini and White 2012: 5)

The ‘crumpled linen’ face of M.R. James, the stark Victorian clothing of the family of Paramore, the linen wraps of the slave ghost-child, the syncretic uniforms of the African Burial Ground. Each haunting displays the intimate relationship between the warp of memory and the weft of cloth. They become part of the deathly fictions of literary history just as much as they are part of the demographic testament to the dead of the middle passage.