

Embedded Slave Narratives: The Search for Personhood in Pre-Twentieth Century Travel Media

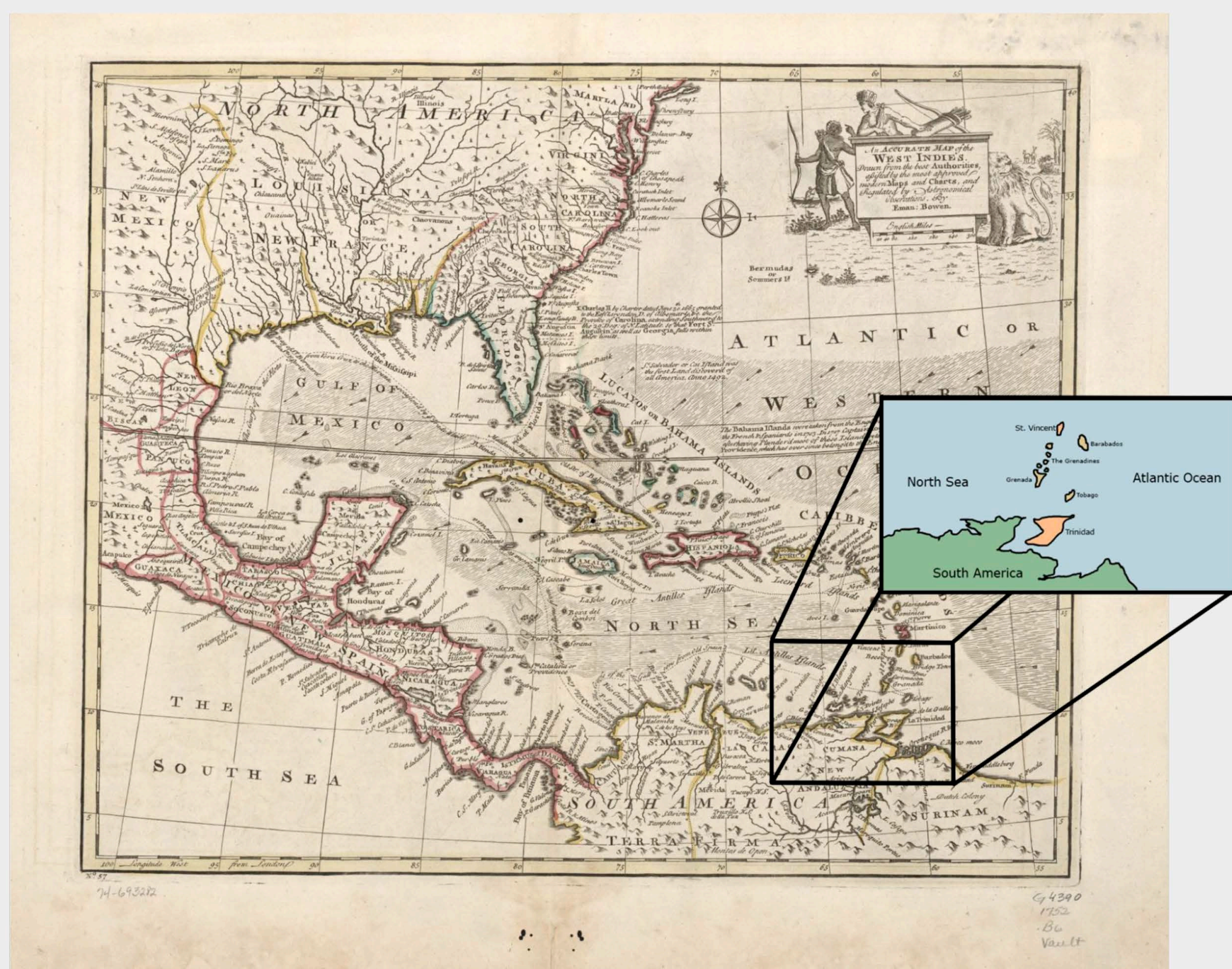
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Abstract

“Embedded Slave Narratives” investigates the literary history of enslaved Caribbean peoples found within pre-twentieth century media. The investigation uses texts from various sources found on the Early Caribbean Digital Archive. Particular to the embedded nature of these narratives, they are rarely fleshed out—often, they are snippets written by white outsiders. Transcribing these stories requires deeper engagement than copying the written words. Two major issues arise when engaging with these texts: the determination of what a narrative must contain, and the process of adding context to embellish the narrative without obscuring it. This poster focuses on a narrative found in *Domestic Manners and Social Condition of the White, Coloured, and Negro Population of the West Indies. Volumes 1 and 2* (1833). Using transcription, as well as further archival research from sources such as the Centre for the Study of the Legacies of British Slavery, “Embedded Slave Narratives” attempts to recover stories of enslaved peoples and establish a procedure for engaging with these types of histories that affords them the respect and academic rigor they deserve.

Introduction

Nineteenth century travel media portrays itself as both an objective account of life away from Europe and a subjective source of entertainment. However, far from being objective historical sources, these accounts are prime examples of the intersection of colonialism and cultural development. There are many snippets to be found within these texts that show the lives of enslaved peoples amidst the shifting political landscape of the West Indies.



This map, sourced from a period map, shows the region of the West Indies that *Domestic Manners* describes.

Bowen, Emanuel, -1767. An accurate map of the West Indies. Drawn from the best authorities, assisted by the most approved modern maps and charts, and regulated by astronomical observations. [London, 1752] Map. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <www.loc.gov/item/74693282/>.

A.C. Carmichael's *Domestic Manners* (1833) recounts the five years she spent on the islands of St. Vincent and Trinidad. While her book is structured as an informative guide to the West Indies and its culture, she gives accounts of enslaved people that merit further analysis. The process of documenting and writing about these embedded narratives explores the criteria by which narratives are labelled and the methods with which they are told and embellished.

Methods

In this project, a narrative must pass qualitative judgement: it must contain sufficient descriptive information about a person. First, the narrative must be distinct from the writer's own narrative. A name can humanize a person, but if their presence is repeated, it is not necessary. Repetition establishes personality and allows their story to develop. All stories that *might* be considered narratives (of a person) are compiled into a single document to better analyze the development of their stories and interactions with others.

After a narrative is identified, it is copied into a working document. There, items that need explanation are identified. Contextual information—for example, the geographical location of an estate and its function—provides important insight into the writer's biases towards their subjects and allows their implications to be better understood. Research on cultural context is especially important because all language is a tool, and rarely an objective one. To understand the ideas and references behind descriptions is to understand the nuances and implications of a specific narrative. This research is then added to the working document as a reference source.

Analysis

Description

V's narrative is contained in two pages (314–315, Vol. 1) of *Domestic Manners* as an interview with Carmichael.

V. was born in the Ebo (Igbo) tribe and was sold and brought to St. Vincent to work in the fields. Carmichael describes him as appealing to his masters and writes that he prefers to stay in St. Vincent rather than return free to his home country.

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Misses, a me glad too much, when me sent a coast o' Guinea for a Backra to buy us."

V. was a common field negro, a quiet but not an intelligent negro, apparently attached to his master, worked well for him, and had his own grounds in very good order; he was not given to fighting;—had many comforts in his house, such as tables, chairs, good bedstead, and crockery-ware, and was always neat and tidy on holidays and Sundays. V. was never in disgrace, and merited the title of a good negro.

What nation are you of V.? "An Ebo."

Would you like if massa were to free you, and send you to your own country again? "Eh, eh, misses, me no like dat; me country wicked too much." They don't eat men in Ebo, do they? "No, misses, dey no eat men; but raw beast-flesh warm be very nice, me tink dat good yet; S. can tell ye same tory, misses: Ebo eat no men; when Ebo take people in a war from a grandee massa, Ebo no eat 'em: Ebo sell 'em a Guinea coast;—but when Coromantee take a

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people when they go war with grandee massa, da Coromantee eat all of dem." How do they eat 'em? "Misses, me no seed dem eat 'em, but me heared in Ebo 'bout it; and old granny F. tell a me 'bout it, when she take by the Coromantees. Dey cook a men in dat place. Misses, Africa wicked too much, me rather go dead afore me go back dey." Were you slave there or free? "Me free man one day, slave to 'ther day; no good people dey, cheat too much." How old were you when you left Africa? "Me one big man."

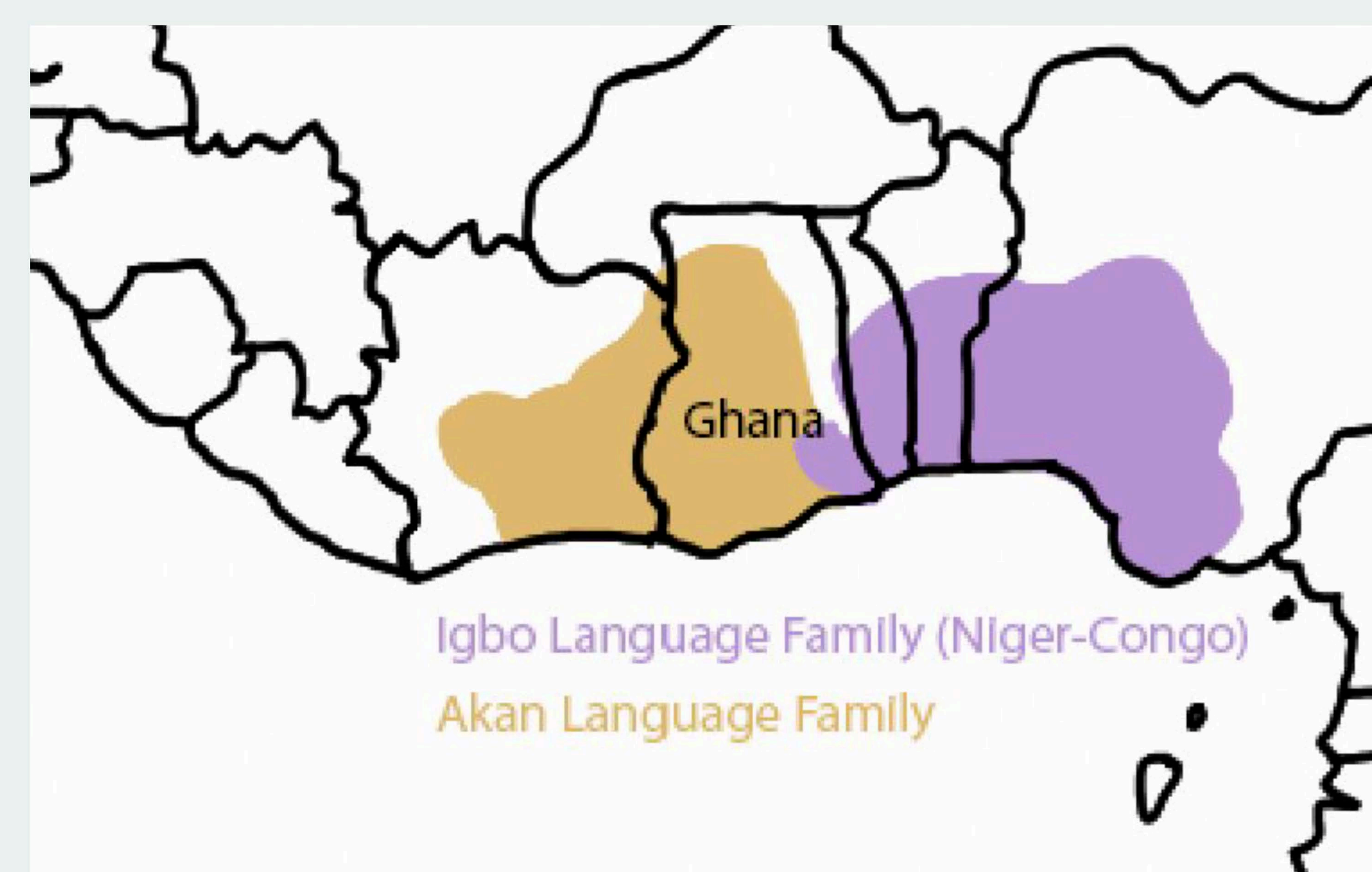
Carmichael, A. C. *Domestic Manners and Social Condition of the White, Coloured, and Negro Population of West Indies*. Whittaker, Treacher, and Co., 1833.

Politics of Language

The qualities that Carmichael considers to be those of a “good negro” reveal her views on enslaved people. Intelligence and beauty, despite being admired traits, are not assigned to V., but Carmichael treats this with little more than neutrality. Instead, his compliance (his attendance of church, his behavior while working, his loyalty to his master) are all lauded. Condescending on its own, the title “good negro” is used over and over to reward V.'s subjugation and to distance him from his humanity and agency.

Furthermore, the comforts (luxuries) that V. has—“tables, chairs, good bedstead, and crockery-ware”—suggest that Carmichael does not believe them to be necessities for him, nor are they common among enslaved people.

Both of these are examples of the implications that hide within the author's language, and they showcase the way language shapes the understanding of enslavement.



This map shows the sociolinguistic distributions of the Akan and Igbo peoples by language families and highlights the country of interest, Ghana.

Heine, Bernd, and Derek Nurse. *African Languages: An Introduction*. Cambridge University Press, 2000.

"Mali: Interactive Exploration." *Virginia Museum of Fine Arts* | <https://www.vmfamuseum/learn/resources/mali-interactive-exploration/>.

V.'s Journey

“Ebo” is another transcribed form of the tribe known today as the Igbo, who live primarily in Nigeria, but also along the Gold Coast of Africa. As V. describes the Guinea coast and can recall much conflict with the “Coromantee,” a word for the enslaved Akan people, it is likely he is from Ghana, where the two groups overlap.

The question “*What nation are you of?*” is repeated often throughout the text and highlights enslaved peoples' diverse backgrounds—an effect of European colonization. The Gold Coast was a major source of export and exploitation for Europe at the time and suffered accordingly.

Another aspect of European colonization that is hinted at is the effect on Africa itself. As V. is from the Gold Coast (likely modern-day Ghana), his words can only speak for that region. When he describes the constant conflicts and the selling of captives at the Guinea coast, he is alluding to the socioeconomic impact of slavery and colonization. His reluctance to return alludes to the instability of his home country.

Igbo-Art & Life in Africa-The University of Iowa Museum of Art. <https://africa.uima.uiowa.edu/peoples/show/Igbo>.
Akan-Art & Life in Africa-The University of Iowa Museum of Art. <https://africa.uima.uiowa.edu/peoples/show/Akan>

Next Steps

At this point, almost all information needed to complete this process is known. The narrative will be moved to a .txt file to be ingested into the archive, and the contextual research will be used to write an abstract. Metadata will also be recorded. These components will form the narrative's archive entry. After this process is completed for each narrative in the text, the scholarly introduction is written. This introduction uses the acquired context as well as further sources that delve into the book's impact and the author himself.

In transcribing and researching these narratives, a process is developed for interacting with texts. To engage with marginalized stories, it is important to approach them in a way that uplifts and avoids overwhelming them. It is, of course, important to do research about a narrative to find further context, but treating narratives with respect also necessitates allowing them to stand on their own as full sources.