Amassing Global History

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The sometimes contradictory contributions to this "Current Debates" section have revealed that the scope and content of global history are far from clear. Significantly, the history of the word-concept 'globe' reflects such debates within the field of global history. This can be so because, like all words, the shifting meanings of the term 'global' betray its conceptual debt to the very processes 'global history' harnesses it to describe. Although the underlying root and its oldest meanings can be tracked back to proto Indo-European, the notion of 'global' as a descriptor of worldwide or universal, total phenomena (as in 'global variables' in computer science) solidified in the first half of the nineteenth century (OED, "globe," n.; "globe," v.; "global," adj.). At the same time that this semantic extension emphasized a particular, totalizing, and territorial character, the common conceptual heart of the preexisting meanings of 'globe' – encompassing meanings referring to a large and/or dense mass (of men, of earth), a throng or crowd, or a spherical form – became increasingly archaic. Likewise, the use of 'globe' as a verb naming the act of shaping into a sphere, smoothing over, unifying into a perfect body, or being so shaped, smoothed, or unified (the verb exists in both transitive and intransitive form) emerged alongside the decline of the massing, thronging, crowd at just the moment when the conceptual apparatus sustaining abstracted, universalizing modernity quite literally took shape around (the notion of) the globe. In this way, when we debate the scope of global history, we invoke these conflicting definitions: one an abstracted conceptualization of the territory of earth (and her inhabitants) as a unified entity and one as a simpler reference to amassed phenomena without the pretense of universality.

Practitioners of global history know all too well the tension of the 'global' scale of their work. As Pamela Crossley observes, there is no archive of global history (2021). As members of the European University Institute Global History Seminar frame the problem: how can we know the 'global' history of those left out of the definitive processes of globalization? (Ammermann et al. 2021). On the one hand, we seek to describe large-scale interactions and processes, often claiming their status as origins of or antecedents to those processes widely associated with the later, modern meaning of 'global'. On the other hand, studies of such undisputably global phenomena take pains to detail the decidedly uneven, distributed character of global processes masked through politicians' globing metaphors of democracy or wealth spreading and flowing around the world (Ferguson 2006). As this research shows, such metaphors globe

(smooth over) the uneven, unequal qualities of (dis)connectedness; there is a politics, of course, to invoking 'global' as a category of action and of study.

I would like to draw on this varied history of the meaning of 'globe' and its derivative forms to 'think with' scholarship that tends not to be integrated into global history as a field precisely because it seems irrelevant to later global processes. To be blunt, I would argue that the seeming lack of relevance is a product of historians' narrow methodological training. The stakes are high: in the absence of familiar archives, historians have ignored the deep histories of oral societies, creating a lacuna in our knowledge that reproduces the very hegemonies we seek to critique in our scholarship. Thus, I want to suggest a two-step move. First, global history has much to gain by building from methodological developments in early, pick-your-pre- (precolonial, premodern, prehistoric) histories, particularly of the global south. The philological tradition in History (and in history) combined with the role of documentation and record-keeping in the process of globalization have together produced the problem that historians don't have archives with a 'global' scale (Crossley 2021; Stanziani 2021). But to study the past with other archives also requires other methods, as those working in contexts before, outside, or at the margins of 'global processes' have long understood.

The use of language as an historical archive offers global history the possibility to ask new questions and rebalance how we conceptualize contributions to and engagements with global processes because language is, itself, a global (universal) phenomenon. The history of language has long served as an archive for the histories of speakers, but analysis of language need not be rooted in the textual study of ideas and practices named by durable (or changing) terms (e.g. philology; or, more relevant to New World contexts, the New Philology of Latin American Studies: see Restall 2003). Borrowing from the methods of comparative historical linguistics, historians can extend their study of the contingency of concepts and practices to the history of speakers whose worlds were preserved through the powerful speech of their community rather than the prescriptions, demands, and prognostications of the literate elite. Through the comparative approach of linguists, we can access deep, long histories even if the relevant languages were not documented at the time or remain undocumented even today. Although the domain of other disciplines in the study of most historical contexts (notably linguistics, archaeology, and anthropology), in African Studies, this work is undertaken by historians, who use the evidence in unique ways (Vansina 2006; for examples of this approach by Africanist historians, consider: de Luna 2016; Ehret 1998; Fields-Black 2008: ch. 2; Klieman 2003; Schoenbrun 1998; Stephens 2013; Vansina 1990, 2004). Harnessing other disciplines' methods, we can use languages as an archive from which to write global (massive) histories from the perspective of those left out of or marginalized in traditional global history archives and metanarratives.

Second, I want to draw our attention to the historical contingency of the concept 'global'. We use the concept to explain a process in which it was integral. We might

instead interrogate alternative histories of the power and contingent processes of amassment governed by alternative conceptualizations of the 'global', other ways of understanding the worlding effects of claims to worldliness – of what it means from different vantage points to participate in (to what degree? Or perhaps reject?) a shared vision of large-scale reach and integration and mutual influence through trade, social, or political networks or ties to metaphysical dimensions of the known world. After all, it was through the ambitions that fed from and fed into a *particular* notion of worldliness that globalization itself (and, indeed, the new, universal meaning of 'global') emerged. To avoid the limits of a 'multiple globalizations' approach (which might echo the limits of the 'multiple modernities' paradigm), we should root this enterprise in the richness of chronologically deep intellectual histories.

What, then, are the archives of an amassing, global history? What kinds of questions might we ask of those archives and how do we learn to hear them speak? Admittedly, my prescriptions thus far float abstractly, unmoored from historiography. Yet, the kind of global history we might write from alternative historical archives has not yet been written. Thus, I'll offer a proposal for research that might root a global narrative in the archives, methods, and perspectives that arise from the study of oral societies. Here, I'll use the historical context I know best – early Africa's history in the *millennia* before formal colonization – as an example of the kinds of global histories we might write from archives rooted in the communicative and exegetical traditions of oral societies. This research proposal bridges early and modern history through the narrative that most frequently serves as the first chapter of the integration of African history into global history: the Atlantic slave trade and its role in engendering global capitalism and modern political organization.

Twenty years ago, David Geggus lamented the paucity of written traces of enslaved Africans' political thought in the context of the Haitian Revolution: "[…] how are we to imagine the attitudes and beliefs of those Africans and children of Africans of two centuries ago […] those who in their native languages had no word for 'liberty' even though thousands of them died in its pursuit?" (2002: 42). As historian Laurent Dubois asked "would we recognize an 'African' political ideology if we saw one? Would it be possible to distinguish it from one rooted in 'European' traditions, or from the complex strands of Caribbean political thought emerging from within the plantation context?" (2006: 13; see also: Games 2006; Sweet 2011, 2014; Thornton 1993). This problem extends across the Atlantic context and, indeed, incorporates not only Africans but all oral societies involved in the Atlantic world. Arguably, the problem extends further, to all oral societies for all of human history, but most acutely for those periods before the invention or adoption of writing or the integration of oral societies into literate societies' record-keeping, ruminations, or political agendas.

For scholars of the African Atlantic, biography has emerged as a key method for recovering the intellectual worlds and political motivations of enslaved men and women whose acts in contexts of excruciating, violent power relations built from their own understandings of the world, of capitalism, of governance and, in ways large and

small, shaped the character of the modern, global world (this and the next several paragraphs draws from arguments in de Luna 2021; on biography, see Lindsay and Sweet 2013). But those whose lives were recorded in colonial archives with enough detail to support biographical treatment were hardly representative; we know their lives precisely because their actions did not follow the demands of colonial officials and enslavers. Moreover, their ideas were not reliably recorded in their own terms (or languages), much less contextualized within the wide-ranging, contested field of ideas we can be certain the enslaved produced as thinking men and women. As a scholar of early Africa's oral societies, I find that Geggus' articulation of his "intractable question" betrays its elegantly simple solution: we access such histories quite literally through the study of Africans' own words.

As I have argued elsewhere, to truly center Africans' intellectual contribution to the histories of slavery, colonialism, revolution, and capitalism in the Atlantic and, thus, Africans' intellectual contribution to the modern world, we need to understand not only what enslaved African slaves *did* (as recorded in colonial archives or institutions that perdure), but what they *thought* about it. To access that thought in the absence of its documentation, we need to tether the Atlantic's archives and methods to those used to recover earlier histories of oral societies' terms of debate in Africa (de Luna 2021; Sweet 2014). African words have long been a key resource for locating Africans' origins and, thus, decoding the meaning of their practices in the Americas, but the comparative method (adopted from the historical study of language in the discipline of Linguistics) allows us to move beyond questions of origins to explore enslaved Africans' fraught, contested efforts to build shared understanding within and across the language boundaries of Atlantic contexts.

Africanist historians applying these methods have taught us that words reveal durable ontologies (in root stems) as well as the historical processes by which such durability was sustained or rejected in changing circumstances (in changing meanings and morphologies). This can be so because language is, itself, a product of the history of its speakers; words bear the content of that history. Changes to African words' meanings and morphologies on both sides of the Atlantic (and homophonies with Native American and European words) recorded the terms on which African men and women who hailed from different linguistic communities came to form new meanings from common word roots in the convergent contexts of the Atlantic. It is this record of thinking about the world through words – the proposals of new names, the revision of prototypical meanings, the bridges built between ideational life and embodied experience through metaphor – that makes words an archive of African intellectual history, even if the exact dialogue of the debates is lost to us. The scale of this evidence matters. In oral societies it was *words naming ideas* – not testimonies, letters, and treatises – that were exchanged, debated, and revised in political projects. This history may not be quotable in the manner of traditional archivally-grounded historical scholarship, but it is knowable.

In Africans' Atlantic, such debates almost always occurred between speakers sharing – if one goes back far enough – a common linguistic and, therefore, intellectual heritage. Nearly every African enslaved and brought across the Atlantic spoke a language of the Niger-Congo phylum. Niger-Congo is the world's largest language family and linguists teach us that the evolutionary process of divergence slowly leads to the increasing numbers of Niger Congo languages in a process much like cell mitosis and to their expansion across more than half the continent. This process began more than seven millennia before the emergence of the Atlantic slave trade but it shaped the Atlantic in ways we have only just begun to investigate precisely because durable word roots common across the thousands of Niger Congo languages were redeployed in Atlantic contexts in the working out of revolutionary politics, the practice of different forms of Christianity, the changing character of kinship and affiliation, and the institutions of civil society that shaped the scope of formal political governance in modern nation states (consider the discussion of lwa, *-dʊ̀, loi, and roi in late colonial Saint Domingue in de Luna, 2021: 611–14). This could be so because ancient Niger Congo words and earlier multilinguistic interaction combined with durable morphologies (word forms) and phonologies (sound systems) and common-place, predictable sound changes to shape what enslaved men and women from distant parts of Africa could understand of each other in the Americas, both in terms of speech and in terms of the conceptual worlds underlying words spoken. In this way, words illuminate the content of contests between men and women of different backgrounds who fought to create alternative meanings in the world through arguments literally cast in the same terms.

The millennia-long history of the divergence and later contact between (convergence of) Niger Congo languages from Senegal to South Africa, Angola to Mozambique created the conditions in which Africans from different parts of the continent met again and again the common terms of their ancient (but not unchanging) intellectual heritage. Precisely because words' meanings could be adapted to new contexts, their roots served as an archive of thought that emerged each time a speaker encountered the root in another form of speech or in another related language. In much the same way, when Europeans speaking different languages wrote manuscripts and letters debating the qualities of a just monarch, the locus of sovereignty, or the origins of rights, they often drew on cognate terms with common history – even as the practices of governance varied distinctly across the continent and into the colonies. Each time they encountered cognate words and ideas by conversing with contemporaries or reading ancient and recent texts, Europeans similarly debated and refined new understandings of such word-concepts but they did so while also reflecting on words' durable core meanings.

As Africans were enslaved and forced across the Atlantic, ancient African histories of mobility, multilingualism, and intellectual exchange resurfaced to shape the political ideologies born of the Atlantic context. Certainly, enslaved people journeyed and lived with those with whom they shared fluent understandings (reckoned socio-

linguistically). And, of course, they met people they could not understand (or not at first), a group that often included their masters and enslavers. But in the grey zone in between, men and women navigated the partial apprehensions engendered by the particular, earlier linguistic histories of the African continent. Traditions of multilingualism, mobility, and convergence pressed upon the Atlantic world through enslaved people's efforts to endure and to engender their world's shifting meanings in conversation with each other, regardless of language, and in conversation with their enslavers.

Significantly, Niger-Congo languages did not interact in isolation. Over the millennia, words naming concepts and practices were borrowed from languages, like Arabic, that belonged to other language families encoding other intellectual traditions. The influence of Islamic ideas has long been studied in the Atlantic precisely because the literate tradition of Arabic allows us to know about the historical practices of Islam in West, North, and East Africa and, thus, parse out the precise, historically-contingent meaning of Islamic practices and ideas in specific African contexts so that they can be compared to iterations deployed in the Americas (Diouf 1998; Reis 1993). We can, in other words, reconstruct how African 'retentions' were used and whether that engendered some form of creolization or syncretism. The comparative historical linguistic method allows us to produce a similar archive attesting to interaction between intellectual traditions both within and beyond the wider Niger Congo family. Ideas named in African languages carried to the Americas from southeast Africa, for example, were shaped by networks that connected the Indian Ocean to deep interiors, networks encompassing both a range of narrow east Bantu (a late subbranch of Niger-Congo) languages but also South Asian (through trade) and even Austronesian languages (through mid-first millennium settlements of Madagascar by southeast Asian seafarers and interaction between those settlers and east African traders in the late first millennium). And, of course, the Austronesian language of Madagascar was also the inheritor of ideas developed in the context of earlier histories of southeast Asian interaction, particularly interactions between the Barito language brought to Madagascar and speakers of Javanese and Malay languages (Dahl 1951). All of this shaping work is encoded in language and accessible through the comparative method.

Although linguists have begun the meticulous work of documenting these many historical layers of exchange, the word-concepts borrowed, and, lastly, the changing meanings of word roots used to discuss changing conditions, historians have not yet tracked their historical impact in those east and central African societies from which enslavers captured people sent to the Americas. Thus, we might – but do not yet – have a *longue durée* intellectual history of the global south that could match in scale and scope more familiar stories, like that of the Silk Road or Age of Revolutions, tracking intellectual (and material) exchange in the global north. The development of such archives and stories might allow for a truly global history of networks of exchange of people, ideas, and materials in which our archives are more commensurate. Crucially, it would also allow for a 'fair(er)' (Ammermann et al. 2021) global intellectual history,

encompassing the very ideas and practices of worldliness itself, even those forms of worldliness that might not have endured but, by their very existence, impinged on the eventual shape that our hegemonic conceptualization of the 'global' would take.

We will better explain historical change if we can incorporate oral societies' ideas and institutions into our understandings of global histories by drawing on archives articulated in terms of those societies and at time depths that exceed their documentation by neighboring, trading, or colonizing literate societies. To do this work requires us to produce new archives developed through other disciplines' methods (at least for the time periods that pierce the violence of the colonial archive). It will also require us to face head-on the fact that the fields of our discipline are still primarily defined by a politics of knowledge that we each individually abhor. In American universities, for example, departments need several historians to teach American or European history to ensure chronological and geographical coverage as defined by those fields. In contrast, doctoral students in African History Ph.D. programs must prepare to teach the entire sweep of the continent's history, for that is the 'traditional' definition of the field (at least outside the African continent). That so many Africanists are then hired to teach 'world' or 'global' history further diminishes the impact of Africans' history on the curriculum on their own terms, relegating their significance to their role in stories populated by other populations. This, of course, foregrounds 'global' history from the perspective of Africa, but it also reinforces the idea that the histories of some parts of the world should or can only be known in higher resolution. We might instead wonder what collegial conversations might sound like in a department that balanced hires in geographical fields (Europe, North America, Asia, Africa, Latin America, and Global) or in modern and premodern histories or in textual and oral historical archives. Of course, there can never truly be an even representation of all of human history within our discipline and our departments. But a striving for it even through the crude categories of geography and chronology by which we define our fields is important because the very globalizing process we study as an historical object is also the greatest threat to the archives and knowledge that allows us to query its character, force, and development as a process. The rush to preserve dying languages and record oral traditions reminds us of these risks. In this way, globing (amassing) our discipline is not only about smoothing over the unevenness of representation but also prioritizing the work (through investment in the growth of marginalized geographical, chronological, or methodological fields) of documenting the past before the history of our own profession's intellectual commitments undermine its future ability to tell large-scale stories from all positions on the globe.

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