

The Subject in the Plot: National Boundaries and the “History” of the Black Atlantic

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Abstract: As a new field and analytical category, the African diaspora promises to re-map the histories of Africans and their dispersed descendants. In what ways has the promise of diaspora been confounded by a preceding intellectual legacy? By focusing on the nation-state and its genesis in nineteenth-century German Romantic thought and that of its critics, this article questions the unproblematic relationship that now exists between history and the African diaspora. Specifically, the author suggests that the nation continues to inform the very meaning of diaspora despite the intentions of some scholars to challenge the conventional framework (history: the narrative of the nation). By drawing on a vast body of literature from various disciplines, this heuristic article explores, among other themes, specific reading and writing strategies that inform the work of scholars on the African diaspora.

Résumé: En tant que nouveau domaine et nouvelle catégorie d'analyse, la diaspora africaine promet de re-tracer les histoires des Africains et de leurs descendants dispersés. De quelles façons la promesse de la diaspora a-t-elle été sapée par un héritage intellectuel antérieur? En nous concentrant sur l'état-nation et sa genèse dans la pensée allemande romantique du dix-neuvième siècle et celle de ses critiques, cet article remet en question la relation non problématique qui existe aujourd'hui entre l'histoire et la diaspora africaine. Plus spécifiquement, l'auteur suggère que la nation continue d'informer la signification même de la diaspora malgré les intentions de certains chercheurs de remettre en cause les données conventionnelles (histoire = récit de la nation). En se basant sur un vaste corps de littérature issu de disciplines diverses, cet article heuristique explore, entre autres thèmes, des stratégies de lecture et d'écriture spécifiques qui informent le travail des chercheurs sur la diaspora africaine.

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Historical consciousness in modern society has been overwhelmingly framed by the nation-state. Yet, despite the certainty that a history belongs to a nation, the nation itself remains a highly contested phenomenon

—Prasenjit Duara

We are aware of the fact that the changes of our present history are the unseen movements of a massive transformation in civilization, which is the passage from the all-encompassing world of cultural Sameness, effectively imposed by the West, to a pattern of fragmented Diversity, achieved in a no less creative way by the peoples who have today seized their rightful place in the world.

—Edouard Glissant

Any examination of a given epic form is concerned with the relationship of this form to historiography. In fact, one may go even further and raise the question whether historiography does not constitute the common ground of all forms of the epic.

—Walter Benjamin

On the eve of the German Romantic movement, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, the German philosopher and purported intellectual patriarch of the nation-state, prefaced his lectures on the “philosophy of history” by observing that “the peculiarly African character is difficult to comprehend, for the very reason that in reference to it, we must quite give up the principle which naturally accompanies all our ideas—the category of Universality” (1956:93). Hegel then rendered the African (a cultural type), into “the Negro” (a racial being), an object of nature who, unlike other people, never succeeded in becoming the subject over nature. According to Hegel, “the Negro” represented a reflection of “natural man in his completely wild and untamed state.” He attributed “the Negro’s” unchanging nature to an inability to “realize his own being,” making him incapable of forging “any substantial objective existence—as for example, God, or Law.” Lacking moral sensibility and respect for humanity but rife with passion and unrestrained “sensuous volition,” “the Negro” displayed a willful disregard for “political constitution.” In the context in which “universality exists only as arbitrary subjective choice,” Hegel concluded that among such people “the political bond can therefore not possess such a character as that free laws should unite the community. There is absolutely no bond, no restraint upon that arbitrary volition. Nothing but external force can hold the State together for a moment. A ruler stands at the head, for sensuous barbarism can only be restrained by despotic power. But since the subjects are of equally violent temper with their master, they keep him on the other hand within limits” (98).

Instead of valorizing this “violent temper” as a quest for unbridled freedom, Hegel deemed such sentiments as “capable of no development or culture” (1956:98). Concluding his remarks on “the Negro” and his place in

world history, Hegel noted that “at this point we leave Africa, not to mention it again. For it is no historical part of the World; it has no movement or development to exhibit. . . . What we properly understand by Africa, is the Unhistorical, Undeveloped Spirit, still involved in conditions of mere nature, and which had to be presented here only as on the threshold of the World’s History” (99). In contrast to “the Negro,” the cultures active in “the World’s History” exhibited the Spirit “which the perfect embodiment assumes—the State” (17). Through Universal History—“the exhibition of Spirit in the process of working”—nations and thus individuals acquired self-realization and freedom. The “Greeks,” “Romans,” and “Orientals” manifested the Spirit in varying degrees, yet Hegel maintained that “the German nations under the influence of Christianity were the first to attain the consciousness, that man, as man, is free” (18). Since the Spirit did not emerge among “the Negro,” Africa displayed neither change nor history but remained shackled in bondage. For Hegel, slavery represented an inevitable condition for “the Negro,” a person without history, for “Society and the State are the very conditions in which Freedom is realized” (41).

The impulse to dismiss Hegel’s assertions as the ranting of a nineteenth-century cultural chauvinist seems warranted, but such responses to like-minded thinkers would also necessitate the dismantling of the Western canon since racialists and ethnocentrists, not relativists, laid modernity’s groundwork. Today, Hegel’s views on “the Negro’s” disposition no longer reign ascendant in the intellectual pantheon of the West. Consequently, theorists insist on a formalist reading of Hegel’s working, divorcing his racist and racist sentiments from his philosophy. Few, however, have questioned whether this compartmentalization undermines Hegel’s philosophical reflections. From the theorists’ perspective, Hegel’s reflections—both transcendent and universal—can be neatly preserved once disentangled from his ideological disposition—the particular and the parochial. But by exorcising Hegel’s anthropological speculations, scholars undermine the *a priori* on which his intellectual edifice rests, since cultural notions are constitutive of historical views, ideas about the nation-state, and the historicity he brings to theorizing about the West’s emergence. As cultural effects, Hegel’s theories about history, the nation-state, and historical development invariably reflect the particular and the parochial.¹ A formalist reading obfuscates the ways in which the text always embodies the cultural. Thus, textual analysis and history writing represent one and the same gesture.² For the most part, theorists manifest little interest in seeing Hegel’s philosophical system, as opposed to his anthropology, as a cultural effect.

Yet linear History (with a capital *H*)—derived from the Enlightenment and a concept on which Hegel elaborated in order to historicize Western modernity—constitutes a European cultural effect, a discourse that defined the past by determining its coordinates and the subjects of that order. In the defining process, linear History has silenced and rendered

invisible the forms through which some people constitute their collective memories. "History," notes the Martinican poet and novelist Edouard Glissant, "is a highly functional fantasy of the West, originating at precisely the time when it alone 'made' the history of the World" (Glissant 1989).³ As a discourse, it identifies which ensemble of texts stand as legitimate sources and through which method a people can inscribe their past. Herein also lies Hegel's importance: Hegel's ideas about "the Negro" as a people without a nation-state and therefore a past entered the Western canon precisely at History's founding moment as a discipline in Europe and the United States. His assumptions about the symbiotic relationship between national identity, "political constitution," and the making of history represent a universal of the discipline and among the historically minded.

For many historians, Hegel's greatest intellectual legacy does not reside with the dialectic but in positing the nation as History's leitmotif and organizing principle. In this respect, Hegel embodied the *zeitgeist* of nineteenth-century German intellectuals interested in discerning History's laws and lessons in which they saw the nation-state as wielding a guiding, if not dominant, role. "Oriented to the state," Dorothy Ross (1991) concluded, "the German academic class tied historicism to national purpose." This phenomenon was not limited to nineteenth-century Germany, nor Europe for that matter, since at the very founding of History as a discipline in the United States, George Bancroft, William M. Sloane, and their successors saw the nation and those at its helm as propelling the grand narrative. As a staple of German historicism, Hegel's ideas crossed the Atlantic when America's intellectual patriarchs imported the German historical method on the basis of its exemplary nature.⁴ Ross observed that "for the first time Americans were forced into an awareness of historicism as a premise of their own world. The historicist theories of Hegel, Comte, and Spencer now began to be taken seriously as analytical structures that underlay the course of American as well as European history. Historicist methods that promised to capture the complex particularity of human affairs gained new authority. The larger numbers of students who took graduate studies in German universities augmented historical influences." Such intellectual assimilation was not, however, limited to professional historians like George Bancroft, Andrew White, Herbert Baxter Adams, and William M. Sloane or American antiquarians of European descent (Ross 1991:58,71,76).

African American Historicism and "histories" as Counterdiscourse

Prominent African Americans, especially black nationalists, posited similar views about the relationship between history and the nation. According to Wilson Moses (1989:94–95), Alexander Crummell, "like Emerson, Carlyle, and Hegel," linked "theological historicism with liberalism . . . destiny and

national duty.” Manifesting a view of history that resembled the history of whites, in form if not in content, was not unusual for nineteenth-century black nationalists. From their earliest presence in the Americas, Africans and Creoles expressed their identities, personal memories, and thus histories borrowing Christian and subsequently Western tropes. As they pined for representation in the guise of freedom and citizenship, individuals like Henry Highland Garnet, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Edward Blyden, Maria Stewart, Alexander Crummell, Mary Ann Shadd Cary, and Martin Delaney embraced the nation for salvation. As civilizationists, moreover, they held a firm belief that the black nation—based on their competing illusions of race and to a far lesser extent the experience of slavery and their African heritage—occupied a special role in history.⁵ “They spoke of the need for a black nationality,” observed Wilson J. Moses, “and yet they borrowed the very rhetoric of black nationalism from American and European racialistic theories” (1989). For many black nationalists of the period, “Africans,” “Coloreds,” and “Blacks”—the contested terms with which the various persons of African descent referred to themselves—needed to realize that they constituted a dispersed nation within nations. Based on their historicism, nineteenth-century black nationalists, like the German nationalist Hegel, saw the nation as the vehicle through which they could be subjects—free persons and citizens—in their own right. Keenly aware of their precarious freedom, many of these nationalists, who must also be seen as historians, held the view—like their European counterparts—that only through wielding the national helm could Africans in the Americas achieve their quest for representation and preserve their distinctiveness.

Revisionist Practices and the African Diaspora’s Genealogy

Despite some notable exceptions, the prevailing historicism among the descendants of Africans and Europeans conflated the nation with history well into the twentieth century. After World War II, U.S. scholars increasingly questioned this assumption by asking where and how, and more recently if, the subaltern narratives of gender, race, and class—as opposed to elite narratives—could be incorporated into the grand narrative. Subaltern narratives, nonetheless, remained marginalized precisely because most historians confined History, with its linear impulse, to the nation-state. Addressing this question of conceptual reconciliation, albeit from a slightly different perspective, Dorothy Ross observed that “the problem is less that of synthesis . . . than of narrative coherence, a problem of joining the kind of subjects social-cultural history has constructed to plots embedded in inherited grand narratives” (1995:667). The twentieth-century historian’s subjects, in other words, had no place in a nineteenth-century plot. This question of fit emerged clearly in the works of political and economic historians but also among social historians, for they too displayed a keen

preoccupation with the nation and its defining of History. While scholars have increasingly dispensed with the grand narrative's form, its content—centered on the nation-state—still remains largely in tact. “It is a totality,” notes Glissant “that excludes other histories that do not fit into that of the West.” By rendering “histories” invisible, History commits violence against a past that is both of and beyond the nation-state (Glissant 1989:75).

Of late, scholars studying Africans and their dispersed progeny have modified the semantic domain through which they represent their subjects' experiences. Since these experiences transcend national boundaries, a number of scholars have embraced a new lexicon in which the African diaspora—with its focus on local mobility, regional movements, and transnational dispersal—seems more appropriate than circumscribed referents like “Negro,” “black,” or “African American” history. By employing the language of diaspora—including displacement, routes, boundary crossing, fragmentation, hybridity, roots, and creolization—some historians have envisioned liberating their field from the stasis in which it has been conceptually but not empirically mired since the mid-1980s.

It would appear that the concept of diaspora promises to remap the experiences of Africans and their New World descendants. A number of scholars insist, in fact, that the field's refined understanding of “experience” propels their inquiries beyond history's most salient boundaries—the nation and nation-state. For scholars of a movement culture, diaspora—as a method of inquiry—envisions a more expansive geographical scope and enhances the grand narratives' textual depth while simultaneously resisting the stasis and essentializing tendencies characteristic of an older historiography. Though vowing to introduce a new cartography (centered on but not confined to the black Atlantic), the history of African diaspora still draws heavily on existing national narratives and minority histories which initially inscribed the African and creolized past.⁶

Despite these ambitious intentions, the preoccupations of previous histories and historiographies continue to define the burgeoning field's agenda and its foreseeable trajectory. Walter Benjamin, the German literary theorist and modernist critic, identified the stifling effects of discursive antecedents, noting that “any examination of a given epic form is concerned with the relationship of this form to historiography. In fact, one may go even further and raise the question whether historiography does not constitute the common ground of all forms of the epic” (1968:95). Thus any effort to define the African diaspora, to identify its scope and the objects of its focus must, according to Benjamin, contend with earlier historiographical and theoretical practices and the discursive domain in which all identified and self-identified histories of the African diaspora remain implicated.

In the preface of his seminal but now contested book, *Roll, Jordon, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (1972), the ever-candid Eugene Genovese identified the national imperatives defining African-American historiography.

The question of nationality—of “identity”—has stalked Afro-American history from its colonial beginnings, when the expression “a nation within a nation” was already heard. . . . Some historians, black and white, interpret the Afro-American experience as a separate national experience; others, black and white, interpret it as a more or less ethnically distinct component of a single or national experience. In this book I refer to the “black nation” and argue that the slaves, as an objective social class, laid the foundations for a separate black national culture while enormously enriching American culture as a whole. *But that separate black national culture has always been American*, however much it has been drawn on African origins or reflected the distinct development of black people in America. (1972:xv)

Genovese’s observations underscore the nation’s salience in defining the meaning of culture, identity, and the significance of Africa in African American history. As a new epic, the early history of the African diaspora must contend with a historiography clustered around the role of Africa, or the lack thereof, in the study of the black Atlantic, related concerns about culture, and the perennial questions about identity. Slavery represented the centerpiece around which historiographical concerns with Africa, culture, and identity revolved. In relation to the study of slavery, these historical themes plotted the experiences of Africans and their New World progeny. As the foundational referent of the African experience in the Americas, the study of slavery still occupies a central place in the colonial, minority, national, and diaspora historiography. For over forty years, slave studies have enhanced our understanding of African persons and their long neglected experiences. Such studies have, in fact, sensitized us to the disparate manifestations of slavery—but still leave a lot unsaid about the meanings individuals imposed upon and derived from their experiences as enslaved persons.

Beginning in the late 1960s, a growing number of critics questioned the structuralist formulation informing the study of slavery and produced a litany of manuscripts directing scholarly attention to the social and cultural domains. Although cultural and, especially, social historians revised our understanding of the African and Creole experiences, many historians concerned with history as outcome quickly chided the field’s social and cultural preoccupation. They argued that a political narrative defined around the nation constituted the proper subject of history. Even Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene Genovese, prominent critics of structuralism, turned against their erstwhile social-historical allies. In what signaled an early salvo against scholarship valorizing the subaltern’s social and cultural perspective, Fox-Genovese and Genovese proclaimed that “there can be no worthwhile social history that is not informed by theory—by coherent interpretations of social process in general and political economy in particular. By politics we do not mean simply the ‘high politics’ of the struggle for state power, although that remains *the decisive question*” (1983:198–99). The study of slavery has paid a costly price for this and other prominent defec-

tions that interestingly enough coincided with the transformation of liberals into neoconservatives. As a field, slavery now exists as a marginal appendage of the diverse yet overlapping national histories of the western hemisphere and teeters on the brink of being moribund.

The study of slavery's intellectual malaise seems incongruous in light of the growing volume of works on race and racialized cultural formations in the fields of literary and cultural studies—a concern which paradoxically social and cultural historians helped spawn. This malaise becomes even more glaring given the literary and cultural theorists' historical concerns and insistence that all narratives are fragmented, contingent, and derive from dispersed, fractured, and hegemonic sources—the hallmark of slave studies and arguably the single most important methodological contribution made by social historians of slavery. Indeed, the centrality of this claim and its methodological implications elicited an almost visceral reaction among those historians who insisted and continue to maintain that the (real) story should only be transformed in light of evidence and political relevance. As distinct methods have emerged in recent years which question efforts to recover “the subject,” the insistence that new “truth” claims can only be substantiated on the basis of further empirical research (read as: more studies but not different questions) threatens to position the study of Africans in the New World as an antiquarian enterprise.

Revisiting the Fundamentals

Tensions between political and sociocultural specialists are not alone in undermining the study of Africans and their Creole progeny. Even as diaspora emerges as a new field of inquiry, our understanding of the “African past” remains hopelessly static and oblivious to history in Africa. Over a half-century ago, the cultural anthropologist Melville Herskovits rightly noted that though the historical relationship between the present-day Negroes of the United States and Africa admits of no debate, there is little scientific knowledge of what has happened to this African cultural heritage in the New World. Statements bearing on the absence or retention of Africanisms, even though these are drawn out of differing degrees of familiarity with the patterns of Negro life in this country, share one character in common. That is, their authors, whether lay or scholarly, not only are unencumbered by firsthand experience with the African civilizations involved, but the majority of them know or, at all events, utilize but few, if any, of the works wherein these cultures are described. (1941:3)

Africa simply constitutes a given, a place with a recoverable and functional past. A past that can be harnessed and positioned to fit various cultural, historical, and national agendas. Such views remain insufficient, devoid of conceptual rigor, and have grave repercussions for the histories of the African diaspora. If ahistorical and impoverished cultural analysis or

willful misreading plague the study of the African past, then the “Africa” that emerges simply reflects the discursive imaginary. Of course, all representations of “Africa” reflect shifting cultural imperatives and diverse national needs, but those depictions positing an immutable and unchanging symbolic referent with an authentic and usable subject render the greatest violence. Essentialism of this sort—a by-product of the discursive articulations from which representations of Africa materialize—have been difficult to avoid. Historians, unfortunately, have displayed a marked proclivity not to enter the discursive fray, often neglecting to realize that their representations of Africa, or lack thereof, also reflect discourse at work. For instance, most historical scholarship on colonial slavery produced in the wake of the Freyre-Tannenbaum-Elkins debates restricts the discussion on Africa to the enslavement process. Such a glaring omission may be indicative of the enduring nature of “the myth of the Negro past” whereby scholars assumed that slavery transformed cultural types into racial beings, Africans into blacks. Africans as blacks, moreover, allowed scholars to contain and thereby inscribe “slave culture” into the national narrative as a neatly discernible phenomenon. Though guided by a quest for a recoverable African past and an unwillingness to dispense with a manageable culture (i.e., the ability to invoke and juxtapose an “African” culture), recent scholarship on colonial slavery has started entering the arena heretofore largely conceded to essentialists of varying types, including the strategic mysticism of Afrocentrics.

Historians have paid scant attention to the philosophies of culture informing the encounter, the experiences, and cultural formations that flourished among Africans in the Americas. On the pretext of lacking archival sources, most historians have shied away from this domain. Thus they valorize the archive and its contents with a certain truth value despite an increasing awareness that the archive was complicit in the colonial project. Even now, long after modernity’s inaugural regime of violence ended, the archive still perpetuates colonialism through acts of classifying, defining, prioritizing, voicing, and rendering the subaltern subject invisible—more effectively than its architects ever imagined. In spite of the archive’s limitations, the encounter between Europe and Africa involved more than just the corporeal interaction of peoples—ideas about human nature, ontologies, epistemologies, competing ways of reckoning and ordering the past came into contact and, for centuries, coexisted despite being subsumed under the physicality of the encounter and the process of enslavement. In *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa the African*, Equiano underscores this phenomenon. Recalling his initial encounter and reaction to seeing Europeans, Equiano brings into relief that part of the eighteenth-century “Eboe” cultural system to which he was privy.

The first object which saluted my eyes when I arrived on the coast was the sea, and a slave ship which was then riding at anchor and waiting for its

cargo. These filled me with astonishment, which was soon converted to terror when I was carried on board. . . . I was now persuaded that I had gotten into a world of bad spirits and that they were going to kill me. Their complexions too differing so much from ours, their long hair and the language they spoke (which was very different from any I had ever heard) united to confirm me in this belief. . . . When I looked round the ship too and saw a large furnace or copper boiling and a multitude of black people of every description chained together, every one of their countenances expressing dejection and sorrow, I no longer doubted my fate. (1976:25)

Though forged through a new system of signification, the encounter Equiano outlines embodied divergent, if not multiple, meanings for its various African and European participants. Years after this encounter, Equiano still seems to be groping for language that could convey how he as an “African” perceived and processed this ordeal. By describing the initial interaction with whites through phrases and words like “filled me with astonishment,” “terror,” “dejection,” “sorrow,” “despair,” and “filled with horrors of every kind,” Equiano sought not only to appeal to his readers’ antislavery sentiments but also to relate the profoundly alien nature of that experience. To simply gloss over Equiano’s sense of wonder as a misunderstanding born of youthful exaggeration or a flight of fantasy denies the existence of culturally distinct perceptions that often flourish in the context of the “same” event. Historians trained in the West seem unwilling to inscribe this and similar responses as cultural reactions emanating from discrete ontological systems.⁷

In the historiography of slavery, experiences like Equiano’s have been rendered into the “culture” of the enslaved and juxtaposed against the master’s History. Anthropologists, among the first to question this dichotomy, now seem reluctant to translate their fieldwork into meaning that would place their subjects’ experiences into a universal framework. Instead, and as a result of their discipline’s “crisis of representation,” anthropologists have been bringing the West into relief and have exposed the purported universal as Europe’s particularity.⁸ As the Africanist Steven Feierman poignantly reminded us, “without the native, without the slave, the bondsman, or the barbarian, the central values of the West are difficult to imagine” (1995:51). Taking their cue from anthropologists, but out of the context of anthropology’s epistemological crisis, historians seek to bypass the thorny issues informing the culture-history divide. Even though they insist on this juxtaposition, historians perpetuate what Emanuel Levinas termed “ontological imperialism” which has the effect of positing a universal subject who obviates the “other’s” existence (Young 1990:13). At stake are competing historical representations. The anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot elegantly identified this contest and its leading agent as power—a phenomenon that actively silences but still leaves traces of an audible past, even while muting the working noise of history. Silences, in other words, do have a history (1995). Equiano’s reaction, defined and

marginalized as culture (silencing through exile), needs to be seen as the subject of history and inscribed as an historical phenomenon.

African Americanists, unfortunately, continue to employ cultural theories focusing ostensibly on folkways, underscoring Alfred Kroeber's influence and that of the formative generation of North American anthropologists who committed themselves to preserving Native American "culture" (Herskovits 1941). Such theories postulate the recoverability of "culture" and assert that cultural encounter and acculturation enable scholars to distinguish the authentic cultural forms from synthetic manifestations. John Blassingame, author of the influential *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (1972) and a proponent of this static model, stated that "acculturation in the United States involved the mutual interaction between two cultures, with Europeans and Africans borrowing from each other.... The similarities between many European and African cultural elements enabled the slave to continue to engage in many traditional activities or to create a synthesis of European and African cultures" (20). Clearly, Blassingame reduces acute and profound differences—status, gendered, ethnic, and cultural—into manageable wholes. Such a compartmentalized view of culture precludes seeing the concept itself as an outcome of a social process. Only if we accept the standard ambiguous metaphor of culture as a way of life does this seem obvious enough. But not all peoples classify their lives and its component parts as aspects of the same system. Blassingame's perspective also overlooks process and the circumstances through which people produce, represent, and ascribe meaning to something outsiders define as culture. On the grounds that they essentialize "culture" along with "experience" and "tradition," anthropologists have largely disavowed encounter and acculturation as analytical devices informing their cultural theory. Anthropologists have, in fact, deemed the encounter model—still employed by African Americanists throughout the Atlantic World as the standard trope for examining the interaction between Africans and Europeans—a classic with which they historicize and map developments in the discipline.

In their critique of the encounter model over twenty years ago, Sidney Mintz and Richard Price cautioned readers that "the task of combining a theory of change with a system of classification for Afro-America still remains to be carried out." Though historians of colonial slavery embraced *An Anthropological Approach to the Afro-American Past: A Caribbean Perspective* (1976) with a vengeance, they ignored Mintz and Price's caution about the preliminary nature of their assertions.⁹ Most scholars utilized *An Anthropological Approach* in a functional manner as they simply described culture while ignoring the authors' emphasis on the ways in which the enslaved subjects were defined by their enslavers and constituted themselves. "Africans in any New World colony," Mintz and Price maintain, "became a community and began to share a culture only insofar as, and as fast as they themselves created them." In stark contrast to their readers, Mintz and

Price through the language they employed—they “became a community,” “began to share,” and “they themselves created”—stressed process and the multiplicity of cultural formations even while they represented “Africans” as a given subject. Since anthropology’s more innovative work has and continues to center on subjectivities including the sites, discourses, and means whereby they are always being reconstructed, the African Americanists’ insistence on folkways, in the guise of form, is rather lamentable. Recent anthropological theory would be of immense conceptual value to scholars of the black Atlantic, for it offers a multiple-layered discursive terrain through which we can *inscribe* and simultaneously *historicize* experience without inflicting the violence inherent in strategic yet essentialist representations of black subjectivities.¹⁰

Until recently most scholars whose work centered on the black Atlantic manifested little interest in the construction of the black subject. Working from the assumption that slavery and race represented the principal nodes around which the lives of Africans and their descendants revolved, historians relegated the subjectivities of the enslaved and the nominally free to the material and discursive domains. On grounds that gender elicited varying responses, feminists and womanists criticized representations of the black subject whom they saw depicted as a heterosexual male. While such interventions engendered the black subject, the *process* through which subjectivities emerge remains largely unexplored. Few scholars have asked how, when, why, and under what circumstances slavery and racial oppression produced a black consciousness. Scholars who, in the mid-eighties, began to question the use of race as a meaningful category of analysis prompted this line of inquiry. By interrogating race as a given—in the first instance as a biological concept—they subjected the epistemological essence underlining the study of Africans and their progeny in the Atlantic world to scrutiny. Suddenly, scholars of Afro-America and the African diaspora found themselves forced to defend their intellectual enterprise and its principal trope on the basis that the fictive also embodied a material and historical meaning. In the aftermath of this exchange, historians insisted on historicizing race and racialized social formations (Roediger 1991). Some historians who initially accorded race primacy in their intellectual enterprise started contextualizing its various meanings and questioned the existence of a distinct black subject largely by noting that blackness brought whiteness into relief. Yet a significant number of African Americanists continue to view destabilized notions of race with suspicion verging on anti-intellectualism.¹¹

This crisis of representation has not been limited to the New World. Americanists, as we have seen, also subscribed to an unproblematic Africa *a priori* which posits a distinct subject. This stands at odds with the scholarship on precolonial Africa ranging from the fifteenth through the nineteenth century which underscores that “Africans” in the same region, despite manifesting cultural similarities, did not wield overarching identities. Even with the European presence, Africans maintained disparate iden-

tities that predated the new strangers' arrival and allowed them to distinguish the new strangers from the more familiar ones—other Africans (Brooks 1993). In all likelihood, this process continued in the Americas, but history writing, in complicity with the archive, obscured the multiple meanings subsumed under the terms “African,” “slave,” and “blacks.” Steven Feierman (1995) identified this phenomenon as “the tension between the accustomed language in which historians construct their explanations, and the historical experience of Africans, which cannot be encompassed by that language.” A certain irony accompanies the application of this imported system of signification and its fixed referents. Driven by national imperatives and historiographies reflective of various national academies, slavery's historians have saddled the quintessential non-person—the slave—with a distinct nationality.

In the U.S. this presents a particular quandary akin to “our original sin.” But slavery's burden, Fox-Genovese and Genovese (1983:391) concluded, transcends national concerns; after all, bondage “fell not upon our country alone, not upon the slaveholding countries of the Western Hemisphere alone, but upon the world.” By viewing modern slavery in this global manner, Fox-Genovese and Genovese contributed to the early mapping efforts of C. L. R. James and Eric Williams which anticipated the geographical scope of the black Atlantic with its multiple and overlapping histories. But by posing the issue of slavery in terms of the world's burden (read, the white man's burden), they also underscored their white liberal condescension and missed an opportunity to theorize how slavery via the black Atlantic had a “great bearing on ideas of what the West was and is today.” Understanding colonial slavery in this more expansive manner requires an analytical device transcendent of the myopia characteristic of the nation-state and national historiographies. Given its genealogy and those of its practitioners, can a black Atlantic perspective represent an epistemological break? Is it conceivable to bring into relief the African diaspora's long neglected narratives all the while avoiding the nationalist and structuralist straightjacket through which the slave subject has been presented? In short, can one inscribe a past without being sucked into the canonical vortex? Paul Gilroy, a relentless critic of the nation on grounds of its ethnocentrism, observed that “the slaves' perspectives require a discrete view not just of the dynamics of power and domination in plantation societies dedicated to the pursuit of commercial profit but of such central categories of the Enlightenment project as the idea of universality, the fixity of meaning, the coherence of the subject, and, of course, the foundational ethnocentrism in which these have all tended to be anchored” (1993:45,55). The narrative that follows participates in the black Atlantic project outlined most recently by Gilroy, but its genealogy traces back to the earliest African presence in the Americas. In the sense that it maps a different route—one that engages an earlier temporal period in which Iberians played the leading role that decenters Gilroy's Anglocentric

endeavor—this narrative seeks to shift postcolonial scholarship from its anchor in modern, and especially British, imperialism.

Travel, Christian Discourse, and an Early Modern History

Luisa de Abrego was a freed woman and accused bigamist, whose trial before the *Inquisidores* in Mexico City is recorded in a series of documents dating from 1575 and 1576. Through her experience I explore the tension informing the construction and inscription of a black Atlantic narrative into the history of the early modern Spanish Atlantic. For students of the African diaspora, the act of recovery remains a central preoccupation. Yet this process also calls for a nuanced inscription and historicized representation of the African past.¹² Although this method is fraught with severe, if not irreconcilable, difficulties, it promises to undermine the stasis and reign of invisibility that governs our understanding of Spain's and New Spain's "black" experience. By questioning the representation of a *distinct* black subject, Luisa's experience in a small, yet meaningful, way calls for a reassessment of the African and Afro-mestiza/mestizo past and, by implication, the prevailing assumptions about racial and gender identities in Spain and New Spain. Such an endeavor promises to dislodge the experiences of ethnic Africans and their descendants from the nationalist chokehold that renders their narratives invisible.

Luisa de Abrego emerged slowly from the Inquisition's dank and dreary dungeon. After nearly a year of confinement, she took rather tentative steps. Gradually her senses adjusted to Mexico's familiar aromas, its dry and dust-filled air, and the cacophony that poured forth from all directions. As she left the Inquisition's offices on February 17, 1576, and walked in the direction of Santa María, Luisa finally realized that her ordeal was over. Luisa's incarceration, however, was merely the judicial phase of her ordeal, which began when "without being called" she appeared before the Holy Office in order to "discharge her conscience" (AGN).¹³

As Luisa put distance between herself and the Inquisition, the burden she had carried for three years gradually waned. In 1573 in Zacatecas, Luisa had witnessed the arrest of an accused bigamist which raised doubts about her own innocence.¹⁴ Frightened, this believer revealed her concerns to a confessor and eventually to the Inquisitors in Mexico City.¹⁵ After her self-indictment on February 28, 1575, an ecclesiastical constable led the frightened woman into the fetid cellars to await her fate. Despite differing on Luisa's guilt, God's earthly agents absolved this thirty-year-old Spaniard of African descent and self-described *vecina* of Mexico City.¹⁶ By absolving Luisa, the judges lifted the burden that had motivated the confession—a spiritual burden that provides a glimpse of Luisa's consciousness.

In 1561, Luisa's ordeal began in Jerez de la Frontera, sixty miles south of Seville. That year Jordan de Herrera, a free black, approached Luisa's

employers requesting permission to marry their fifteen-year-old servant. Juan Luís and his wife promised their blessings if Luisa consented. But Jordan did not act with haste. "One day while cleaning and with my mistress absent," Luisa recalled that Jordan "[re-]entered the house." He asked if "I had reflected on my masters' promise" to which "I said yes." Then Jordan "took my hands" and asked "me to be his woman and wife as ordained by the Holy Mother Roman Church." Luisa acquiesced and Jordan stated that "he receives me as woman and wife and consents to be my husband." Following this brief ritual, the newlyweds continued holding hands, embraced and kissed but, according to Luisa, did nothing else since they "did not have the place for more."¹⁷

After this ceremony, Luisa and Jordan saw each other "two or three more times," yet always in the presence of Juan Luís. Luisa recalled that Jordan "did not speak to me." Instead, Jordan communicated with Juan Luís because he wanted Luisa to live with him in doña's Esteban's house. Juan Luís was skeptical of this arrangement—skepticism he manifested by questioning Jordan about his legal status and his ability as a "man . . . to maintain and sustain" Luisa. Evidently, the two men haggled without resolution, leading Luisa to remark that "I never saw Jordan again."¹⁸

Despite the failed negotiations, Luisa and Jordan's relationship actually floundered for different reasons. After the wedding, Luisa left Juan Luís for another, unknown employer, in whose house she fell gravely ill. During Luisa's absence from Jerez her acquaintances, including Jordan, believed that she had actually departed for Seville, her birthplace. After two months, she recovered and returned to Jerez de la Frontera where she lived with the *mulata*, Juana de Granado. Soon Luisa learned that Jordan had abandoned her for another woman. As a group of female servants passed the house, Luisa asked about their destination only to be told "that they were heading to the Jordan de Herrera's wedding."¹⁹ Luisa's initial reaction was "to go and disrupt the wedding," informing those present that "I was his wife," although she could not "prove it" in the absence of witnesses. Instead, Luisa returned to Seville and during her five-year tenure there met Miguel Rodriguez, a Segovian cloth shearer and soldier, with whom she eventually sailed for Florida.²⁰ In the San Augustine *presidio*, the couple exchanged wedding vows in the presence of garrison officials and Miguel's comrades.²¹ Nine months later, the newlyweds were on the move again and eventually settled in Zacatecas.

In Zacatecas, Luisa witnessed the arrest of an alleged bigamist which enveloped her with an assortment of fear and guilt. "I was scandalized in my heart," Luisa noted, "about what had happened with Jordan." Luisa informed Miguel about her concerns and he responded by soliciting the advice of friends,²² though their conclusion that Miguel was the legitimate spouse did little to assuage Luisa's conscience. Thus she sought her confessor's advice, and he decided in favor of Jordan. Alarmed by Luisa's confession, Father Curiel informed Miguel that a "plot of the devil" had been

uncovered.²³ He exhorted Miquel to keep Luisa at bay and threatened that continued “carnal access” would constitute “mortal sin.” While Miguel testified to having heeded Father Curiel’s warning, Luisa claimed otherwise.²⁴ By February 1575 the combination of guilt and fear finally compelled Luisa to throw herself at the Inquisitors’ mercy.

After listening to her confession, the *fiscal* (prosecutor) queried Luisa on her religious beliefs. He asked if she thought of Jordan as “her legitimate husband” after their exchange of vows.²⁵ “Yes,” Luisa replied, but when “I saw that he married another woman I did not think of him as such nor did I understand that the marriage was validated.”²⁶ Then the *fiscal* asked if Luisa had “copulated” with Jordan “as if with her husband and how many times.” Luisa retorted that she had not had intercourse “nor any other interaction” but the holding of hands, embracing, and kissing, “because there was no place for more.”²⁷ At this point, the interrogation ended but resumed at eight o’clock the following morning. After some brief introductory remarks, the *fiscal* again questioned Luisa about having carnal interaction with Jordan “as if between husband and wife.” “Since I was cleaning near the door,” Luisa insisted, there was no place to have intercourse. “For this reason,” she claimed, they had abstained.

As a Christian, Luisa recognized the legality of her vows and on that basis nearly disrupted Jordan’s bigamous wedding. But this same acumen also alerted her to the frivolity of this course of action. Luisa was well aware that she lacked witnesses “with whom I could prove it.”²⁸ Luisa’s betrothal and desire to contest Jordan’s bigamous marriage were not the sole indices of her Christianization. As she unveiled herself before the inquisitors, Luisa revealed her extensive participation in the sacraments of the Catholic Church. This involvement began in Europe but as an adult in the Americas, Luisa maintained her ties to the church. In Florida, she and Miguel opted for a Christian wedding. Following the publication of the banns, they were united with the Church’s blessings. The wedding drew most of San Augustine’s residents, including such prominent citizens as Pedro de Valdés, Governor Pedro Menéndez’s brother-in-law, and the unnamed wife of a scribe. Both served as *padrinos*.²⁹ Whereas the confession is not mentioned in the context of Florida, in Zacatecas Luisa repeatedly sought spiritual solace. Out of moral obligation and racked with fear—an intrinsic feature of Catholicism—Luisa frequently “discharge[d] her conscience” before God’s elect.

In outlining her Christian narrative, Luisa surely privileged that which was Catholic. Yet this narrative, and especially the act of its construction, magnify Luisa’s discursive strategy which, in turn, underscores her Europeanization, especially her Hispanization. While the confessional narrative says little about Luisa’s actual beliefs, it and her responses to the *fiscal* highlight her systematic exposure to Catholicism. Such exposure facilitated Luisa’s cultural interaction with Christians and Christian institutions. Indeed, the ease with which Luisa sallied through the Hispanic world implies that she embodied the early modern.

Conclusion

Despite the richness of Luisa's case, it and hundreds of similar narratives occupy an ambiguous space in early modern history—a history that predated the nation-state. But in the historiography of early modern Castile and the Indies, as contemporaries referred to Spanish America—the nation embodied in the designation of “colonial”—such narratives have little, if any, place. The anachronistic use of a national framework simply relies on a subject who identifies or is identified as belonging to the incipient nation and who places her or his interests in the nation above all others. The truly “national” subject—Spaniards, Indians, and mestizo constructs of the colonial encounter—subordinated all else to the nascent *patria* (country), conceived in the language of kinship and territorial loyalties (“son/daughter of [*hijo/a de*] or from [*de*]”). Among Africans and even mulattoes, in contrast to *Castellanos* (Spaniards), *Indios* (Indians) and *Mestizos* (the mixture of these), historians see ethnicity, race, and legal status as master trumps prevailing over any and all “national” sentiments. Luisa, therefore, is African, not Spanish, a freed black who lacks her own *república* or a fixed place in the *república de los Espanoles* (commonwealth of Spaniards) and, therefore, a place in the national/colonial historiography.

As Luisa's case makes clear, context poses numerous vexing problems for the student of the African diaspora. By being deemed persons of African descent—a master trope that naturalizes the African past as the mother of all trumps—black subjects lack a fixed corporate status. Given this liminal status, the historians of such subjects become academic hybrids, for their scholarship is situated at the margins of various historiographical boundaries. They are Africanists, Europeanists, Americanists, and diaspora scholars all at once. But in a scholarly world defined by boundaries, especially those configured around the nation-state, hybridity and liminality are synonymous. Thus historians read and/or position Luisa's and similar narratives within defined historiographical boundaries that reproduce their marginality, if not invisibility. Luisa de Abrego easily traversed boundaries, and her experiences cannot solely be seen as those of an African without doing violence to her other selves. Even in the Americas, however, the initial subjectivities did not remain static, for Africans and their descendants constantly reconstituted themselves and are constituted as *bozales*, *criollos*, and *mulatos*, but also as *mulatos* and *criollos* of varying generational depth. The subjectivities of Africans and their descendants were constantly constituted and reconstituted throughout the Atlantic world in accordance to spatial locality, evolving language, materiality of the *república*, and temporal, among other, dynamics that defy generalities associated with a nationalist framework. While the shifting discursive domains alongside the ubiquitous nature of the performative resist any simple categorization, open-endedness represents the one salient manifestation.

The subjects of the African diaspora, like Luisa de Abrego, remain elu-

sive and, therefore, largely invisible, because History, modern and early modern, remains wedded to the nation and nation-state. As lived experience, the African diaspora is both of and beyond the nation, thus making History as it is currently conceived too limited in scope to represent the routes that defined and define the black Atlantic's cartography. The crisis of representation constitutes a problem of history writing and the plot to which the historiographical traditions, but not the subject, remained and remain beholden.

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Notes

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1. By identifying history, the nation, and development as cultural effects, I want to disrupt the naturalized assumption that such domains represent universals, in form and content, irrespective of time and space. Historians understand this phenomenon when applied to "time" but not as clearly with regard to culture or culture through time. Western social theory, especially among historians, invariably renders all peoples and cultures as universal subjects operating through the same logical (Western) assumptions. In this sense there are no "others" who reckon time, space, and culture differently but only primitives inscribed on the same temporal sphere but at an earlier stage. In short, they are within the same temporal frame but at a more rudimentary level. This depiction does not account for distinct ontological reckoning but simply different temporal reckoning (Fabian 1983).
2. I am, of course, deeply indebted to Poovey (1988, 1995); Bakhtin (1991); Carby (1987); Gates (1987); Jameson (1981); and Peterson (1995).
3. By distinguishing between "History" with a capital H and "histories," Glissant (1989:64,93) makes it clear that he does not want to dispense with history altogether. "The struggle" for Glissant resides with History, since "the cross-fertilization of histories means repossessing both a true sense of one's time and identity: proposing in an unprecedented way a reevaluation of power."
4. Ross (1991:58,71,76); in the field of anthropology, a similar process of intellectual borrowing transpired, though in the U.S. British anthropologists great-

ly influenced the discipline. Through the work of Franz Boas, a German anthropologist, metaphysical concepts like *Volksgeist* and *Nationalcharacter* entered American academia and in the process shaped its cultural concepts (Stocking 1996). In Latin America, the Comtian influence defined the second half of the nineteenth century manifesting itself in the imagining and construction of the nation. During this period and due to the Comtian and Spencerian influence, whitening became a “national” imperative and ideal that policy-makers implemented through immigration policies and by circumscribing history and nationality around whiteness. In the process historians deemed the presence of Africans and their descendants as a distinct “black” experience situated beyond the nation and thus its history. This marks a decisive moment during which elites rendered persons of African descent invisible in historical writings and as national subjects (Graham 1990; Wright 1990; Skidmore 1973).

5. See Appiah (1992:3–46); Mudimbe (1988:98–134).
6. Despite the proliferating use of the term *diaspora* among historians, the concept largely remains under-theorized. The word often stands in for the black experience beyond the territorial border of the U.S. But if this then encapsulates the diaspora, some critical questions remain. When, why, and how do the national experiences of, say, Haitians, Jamaicans, and Belizians become “diasporic”? These questions are complicated by the fact that migration from and to a fixed point stands in for diaspora as opposed to a framework that posits circulation of peoples and ideas, not to speak of the performative. In short, scholars tend to shy away from seeing diaspora as a permanent state. Lewis (1995) is the only historian so far who has consciously attempted to theorize the African diaspora. Most theorizing about diaspora has transpired in anthropology, sociology, literary theory, and cultural studies (Clifford 1997:244–77; Brah 1996). British scholars have been critical in remapping the African diaspora’s cartography (Gilroy 1987, 1993; Mercer 1994; James & Harris 1993). For an overview see Baker, Diawara, & Lindeborg (1996); Morley & Chen (1996).
7. Similar glimpses and fragments proliferate throughout the black Atlantic but most merely linger unused since the canonical tradition valorizes quantity which usually emerges in the following form: “This is a fascinating case *but* how many more can you materialize?” “The examples you cite are quite compelling *but* can the argument be sustained on the limited cases you present here?” For a discussion of this matter see Price (1990:285). For the last thirty years Price has been the unquestioned champion in piecing together an African American history and cultural system from minutia. In reading the fruits of Price’s labor, Carla Peterson’s concerns about black literary production and theory come to mind:

I emphasize at the outset the need to ground literary scholarship in historical specificity. I would argue that so much of our history has yet to be recovered, we are not yet in a position to theorize in a totalizing fashion about black literary production, either by constructing a literary canon of masterpiece texts; by formulating a black aesthetic based on the cultural matrix of the blues, the vernacular, or folk expression; or, more narrowly, by insisting upon the existence of a transhistorical black feminist aesthetic. Such theorizing tends to elide historical difference and to underestimate the complexity of African-American experience, thus promoting notions of an essential or authentic racial blackness that misunderstands the ways in

- which African-Americans have been marked not only by the social category of race but also by gender, class, religion, and region.” (1995:4)
8. See Boon (1982); Marcus & Fischer (1986); Clifford & Marcus (1986); Fox (1991); Asad (1993).
 9. For U.S. scholars working outside of slave studies Geertz (1973) represented the most widely employed anthropological referent and provided the standard definition of *culture*. See Ortner (1994, 1997).
 10. See Scott (1991:773–97); Butler (1992:3–21). On colonial regulation, see Cohn (1987:224–54, 632–82; 1996). For students of Michel Foucault and Edward Said, Cohn’s work might resemble those of the philosopher or that of the literary critic. But as Nicholas Dirks notes in the preface to *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge*, “long before the powerful theoretical proposals of Michel Foucault made ‘knowledge’ a term that seemed irrevocably linked to power, and before Edward Said so provocatively opened the discussion of the relations between power and knowledge in colonial discourses and Orientalist scholarship, Bernard Cohn had begun to apply an anthropological perspective to the history of colonialism and its forms of knowledge” (1996:ix).
 11. Implicit in this reaction is the notion that as “foundational phenomena,” racism and slavery produced a distinct black subject from which successive black subjectivities emanated, although there is increasingly grudging recognition that in the early modern period slavery and racism manifested distinct forms and in succeeding historical periods continued to produce different incarnations. Yet even the most astute and nuanced students of slavery have found it difficult to assert that the complexities of slavery and its corresponding racial attitudes could actually elicit structures of feelings that were not necessarily predicated on race and racial cohesion. See Ira Berlin (1980, 1996).
 12. Hall (1995) has been exemplar.
 13. AGN, Inquisición, 103, expediente 6, Votos de los Inquisidores, February 17, 1576, Mexico City; AGN, Inquisición, 103, expediente 6, Declaración de Luisa de Abrego, February 28, 1575, Mexico City.
 14. AGN, Inquisición, 103, expediente 6, Declaración de Luisa de Abrego, February 28, 1575, Mexico City.
 15. Nearly an entire year separated Luisa’s initial confession and her self-indictment before the Inquisition. Ibid; AGN, Inquisición, 103, expediente 6, Juan de Pinillos, March 26, 1574, Mexico City; AGN, Inquisición, 103, expediente 6, Juan de Vega, March 27, 1574, Mexico City; AGN, Inquisición, 103, expediente 6, Blas de Avila, March 27, 1574, Mexico City.
 16. Two of the six judges voted to absolve Luisa, three called for an auto-da-fé, and one called for her to “hear mass in the chapel of the Holy Office” wearing the penitent garb of a bigamist. Lacking a consensus, the judges absolved Luisa. AGN, Inquisición, 103, expediente 6, Votos de los Inquisidores, February 17, 1576, Mexico City.
 17. AGN, Inquisición, 103, expediente 6, Declaración de Luisa de Abrego, February 28, 1575, Mexico City. Although the *audiencia* with the Inquisition is dated February 28, 1575, it actually lasted two days.
 18. The details about the Jordan’s unsuccessful encounter with Juan Luís were revealed on February 29, 1575. In her deposition before the Inquisition, Luisa stated “he did not take me since later [after the conversation with Juan Luís] he left the house on the account of anger and I never saw Jordan again.” Ibid.

19. Ibid.
20. Ibid; AGN, Inquisición, 103, expediente 6, Miguel Rodriguez, March 27, 1574, Mexico City.
21. Evidently, the marriage between Luisa and Miguel took place in 1566. AGN, Inquisición, 103, expediente 6, Juan de Vega, March 27, 1574, Mexico City; AGN, Inquisición, 103, expediente 6, Blas de Avila, March 27, 1574, Mexico City; AGN, Inquisición, 103, expediente 6, Miguel Rodriguez, March 27, 1574, Mexico City.
22. Luisa recalled telling Miguel about her doubts since he “revealed the case to various persons.” It is conceivable that these “persons” included Juan de Vega and Blas de Avila. Juan de Pinillos testified before the Inquisition that Juan and Blas had informed him of the bigamous affair. In the *Indies*, Blas testified, he had only spent time in Mexico City and Florida. Yet this did not preclude his Segovian compatriots from maintaining contact over great distance. AGN, Inquisición, 103, expediente 6, Juan de Pinillos, March 26, 1574, Mexico City; AGN, Inquisición, 103, expediente 6, Juan de Vega, March 27, 1574, Mexico City; AGN, Inquisición, 103, expediente 6, Declaración de Luisa de Abrego, February 28, 1575, Mexico City.
23. AGN, Inquisición, 103, expediente 6, Miguel Rodriguez, March 27, 1574, Mexico City.
24. Under interrogation, Luisa claimed that her confessor, not the “Church,” bears responsibility for her year-long separation from Miguel. According to Luisa, Miguel “went to complain to the provisor” about their separation. The ecclesiastical official ordered a reunification since “the Church gave her as wife.” Reunited, Luisa testified that Miguel “slept with me one night.” Afterward, Luisa returned to her confessor “to give account” of their “*carnal acceso*.” Miguel also alluded to the competing advice he received from the provisor, who “told me do not listen to the said Curiel.” Curiel and the provisor were in all likelihood voicing the conflict manifest between the secular and the regular clergy.
25. This interrogation took place on February 28, 1575, immediately after Luisa confessed before the Inquisition. After being asked, “do you know the reason why you have been called,” the standard procedure enabled the accused or witnesses to reveal matters that went against the faith. A significant part of the confession and testimony involved biographical details of oneself or others, including ages, race, occupation, mobility, and patterns of interaction with friends, neighbors, and kin. In contrast, the cross-examinations were narrowly focused on the chronology and evidence of sinful behavior. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid.
28. The fiscal underscored the importance of witnesses by repeatedly asking Luisa if anyone knew of her *desposada* with Jordan. Luisa simply reiterated that Juana de Granada was the only person who knew.
29. AGN, Inquisición 103, expediente 6, Blas de Avila, March 27, 1574, Mexico City; AGN, Inquisición 103, expediente 6, Miguel Rodriguez, March 27, 1574, Mexico City.