Critical Historiography

Biography in African History

Lisa A. Lindsay

Abstract: This paper charts the rise and transformation of biography as a form of Africanist history writing. Biography in African history, as in other fields, has included attention to nationalist heroes as well as the lives of slaves, women, and other subalterns. Recently, some Africanist historians have embraced transnational life histories, particularly those situated in the "black Atlantic" of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Some themes, methods, and limitations of such biographies are discussed in relation to the author's own project on a nineteenth century immigrant to West Africa.

Résumé: Cet article décrit l'essor et la transformation de la biographie comme une forme d'écriture de l'histoire par les africanistes. La biographie dans l'histoire africaine, comme dans d'autres domaines, s'est concentrée sur les héros nationalistes ainsi que sur la vie des esclaves, des femmes et d'autres subalternes. Récemment, certains historiens africanistes ont choisi d'écrire des histoires de vie transnationales, en particulier celles situées dans "l'Atlantique noir" des XVIIIe et XIXe siècles. Cet article se penche sur certains thèmes ainsi que sur certaines méthodes et limites de ces biographies en relation avec le projet de l'auteur sur un immigrant du XIXe siècle en Afrique de l'Ouest.

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Introduction[1]

For the better part of the past decade I have been piecing together the life story of a little-known African American who spent much of the second half of the nineteenth century in West Africa. "A biography of sorts," is how I often describe it when asked about my project. My ambivalent answer comes from my sense that *biography* means a certain kind of life history – typically the kind selling well at commercial bookstores, focused on the individuality of an already-famous figure, and based on abundant sources. Instead, I was working to resuscitate someone who appears fleetingly in the historical record and whose unusual story nonetheless reveals broad processes affecting many of his contemporaries. These and other variations on what can be meant by the term *biography* prompt me to consider the ways that historians of Africa have approached life histories. What are the possibilities and limitations of focusing a historical study around one person?

I did not become a historian with the intention of writing a biography. Biographies are attractive because they take the shape of narratives and they create a sense of empathy between readers and their subjects. But while envying their mass appeal, professional historians have tended to disparage biographies. They are the quintessential Great Man history, centered on a noteworthy person in order to see how that individual shaped his, or occasionally her, society or country. They frequently depict their subject as a singular genius, unmistakably distinctive from the rest of his or her society. And they often are unabashedly nationalistic, focused on how this particular individual helped to forge his great nation.

These elements of biography have been no less true for Africa than for the United States or the United Kingdom. Praise singing could well be considered an oral form of biography. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, coastal elites in Anglophone West Africa merged this form with printed eulogies in the missionary tradition to produce sketches of important figures from within their ranks.[2] In the 1960s, more professional historians wrote biographies of powerful figures from the colonial era – George

[1] This paper began as part of a round-table on "Keywords in African History" at the 2015 annual meeting of the African Studies Association. I thank Lynn Thomas for conceiving and organizing the panel, other fellow participants Julie Livingston and Kenda Mutongi, and the audience members who took part, particularly James T. Campbell and Jonathan Reynolds. John Wood Sweet and Luise White helped with my initial conceptualization of the paper. I also appreciate the comments of the two anonymous reviewers for *History in Africa*.

[2] See: Michel R. Doortmont, *The Pen-Pictures of Modern Africans and African Celebrities by Charles Francis Hutchison: A Collective Biography of Elite Society in the Gold Coast Colony* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2005), especially the "Introduction"; Adeoye Deniga, *African Leaders Past and* Present, 2 volumes (Lagos: Tika Tore Printing Works, 1915).

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Taubman Goldie, Jan Smuts, or African kings and chiefs – but by the 1970s and into the 1980s they also centered on African nationalist or proto-nationalist leaders like Tshekedi Khama, Jomo Kenyatta, Hastings Banda, Moshoeshoe, Sol Plaatje, Tom Mboya, and Amilcar Cabral.[3] The *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* produced a steady flow of biographical studies of great Nigerians, starting in the 1970s and continuing to the present. With the 1978 publication of the *Dictionary of African Biography*, it was clear that biography was thriving in African history, and that its subject was a nationalist actor, typically male.[4] "Great Man" biography was part of the nation-building project, intended to inspire, to show what was accomplished and how, and to instill feelings of patriotism by encouraging readers to identify with the biography's subject. Even as African nationalism has lost much of its youthful optimism, such biographies continue to find their places in bookstores, libraries, and living rooms inside and outside of Africa.[5]

[3] John E. Flint, *Sir George Goldie and the Making of Nigeria* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960); W.K. Hancock, *Smuts. The Sanguine Years* (volume 1) and *Smuts. Field of Force* (volume 2) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962–1968); Joan Joseph, *South African Statesman: Jan Christiaan Smuts* (New York: J. Messner, 1969); Mary Benson, *Tshekedi Khama* (London: Faber & Faber, 1960); Gervas Clay, *Your Friend Lewanika: Litunga of Barotseland 1842–1916* (London, Chatto & Windus, 1968); Sven Rubenson, *King of Kings: Tewodros of Ethiopia* (Addis Ababa: Haile Selassie I University in association with Oxford University Press, 1966); Norman R. Bennett, *Leadership in Eastern Africa: Six Political Biographies* (Boston: Boston University Press, 1968); Jeremy Murray-Brown, *Kenyatta* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1972); Mervyn Hiskett, *The Sword of Truth: The Life and Times of the Shehu Usman Dan Fodio* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973); Philip Short, *Banda* (London/Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974); Leonard Thompson, *Survival in Two Worlds: Moshoeshoe of Lesotho, 1786–1870* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975); David Goldsworthy, *Tom Mboya: The Man Kenya Wanted to Forget* (Nairobi/London: Heinemann, 1982); Patrick Chabal, *Amilcar Cabral: Revolutionary Leadership and People's War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Brian Willan, *Sol Plaatje: South African Nationalist, 1876–1932* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1984). George Shepperson and Thomas Price, *Independent African: John Chilembwe and the Origins, Setting, and Significance of the Nyasaland Native Rising of 1915* (Edinburgh: The University Press, 1958) was a very early nationalist biography.

[4] Mark R. Lipschutz and R. Kent Rasmussen, *Dictionary of African Historical Biography* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1978).

[5] The *Ohio Short Histories of Africa* series offers new, highly readable biographies of Thabo Mbeki, by Adekeye Adebajo; Julius Nyerere, by Paul Bjerk; Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, by Pamela Scully; Ken Saro-Wiwa, by Roy Doron and Toyin Falola; Frantz Fanon, by Christopher J. Lee; Emperor Haile Selassie, by Bereket Habte Selassie; Thomas Sankara, by Ernest Harsch; Patrice Lumumba, by Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja; Govan Mbeki, by Colin Bundy; the poet Ingrid Jonker, by Louise Viljoen; and Steve Biko, by Lindy Wilson. Five of these are compiled in Lindy Wilson, Bereket Habte Selassie, Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja, and Ernest Harsch, *African Leaders of the Twentieth Century* (Athens OH: Ohio University Press, 2015).

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My biography project is hardly a hagiographic account of a political leader, however. James Churchwill Vaughan, its subject, ultimately did lead a small-scale protest movement in colonial Lagos, but he never held political office. His major success, beyond sheer survival of the many calamities that befell him, was to make a life for himself and his family in Africa far beyond what he could have achieved, and what his embattled family members achieved, in his home state of South Carolina in the mid-nineteenth century. Vaughan was certainly an exceptional individual – and this is part of the appeal of his story – but I also wanted to use his life to illuminate the challenges and strategies faced by many people in the time and places in which he lived. That is, I wanted to combine elements of biography with those of life history, an approach quite familiar to Africanists, and microhistory, a method of social historians.

Life histories entered Africanist historical studies through anthropology, with its long tradition of incorporating them into ethnographic work. As in Mary Smith's *Baba of Karo* (1954), the life history generally took the form of an extensive record of a person's life told to and recorded by another, emphasizing the experience and perspectives of the individual.[6] Rather than chart the achievements of great leaders, life histories sought to reveal broad features of social life through emblematic – or particularly talkative – informants. Such studies were relatively uninfluential, however, until in the early 1980s feminist anthropologists invigorated life history as a method for deeper understanding women's consciousness. Marjorie Shostak's *Nisa* presented the self-narrated autobiography of a fifty-year-old San woman from northeast Botswana, organized by stages in the life-cycle and sharply separated from the ethnographer's commentary. First published in 1981, it has become a bestselling classic in anthropology.[7] *Baba of Karo* was reissued the same year. Jean Davison's *Voices from Mutira: Lives of Rural Gikuyu Women* featured translated and edited oral memoirs from seven Kenyan women.[8] In these and other works, anthropologists endeavored to hear and transmit women's voices and to understand the circumstances they described. They were deeply influenced by the feminist project, not specific to Africa, of women making meaning of their lives through narrative.[9]

Meanwhile, within the historical profession, social history – focused on peasants, workers, slaves, women, and families – was flourishing, and with it,

[6] Mary F. Smith, *Baba of Karo: A Woman of the Muslim Hausa* (with an introduction and notes by M.G. Smith and preface by Daryll Forde) (London: Faber & Faber, 1954).

[7] Marjorie Shostak, *Nisa, the Life and Words of a !Kung Woman* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1981). Also see: Susan N.G. Geiger, "Women's Life Histories: Method and Content," *Signs* 11–2 (1986), 334–351.

[8] Jean Davison with the women of Mutira, *Voices from Mutira: Lives of Rural Gikuyu Women* (Boulder CO: Lynne Rienner, 1989).

[9] Personal Narrative Group, *Interpreting Women's Lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).

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a new method emerged: microhistory. Just as feminist anthropologists sought to uncover perspectives overlooked by studies of the powerful, social historians like Europeanists Carlo Ginzburg and Natalie Zemon Davis endeavored to understand broad social dynamics through close examination of individual lives or particular local events involving specific, named people.[10] Their subjects were not noteworthy because they were exceptional – except insofar as they had left written records of their lives – but instead were interesting because they were ordinary, showing how regular people lived, acted, and thought through particular times. Indeed, microhistory as social history is a method with an implicit argument: that history is made by a wider range of people than literate elites, and that historical forces and ordinary people act reciprocally on one another. Even when these studies centered on individual lives, though, these were not traditional biographies – not least because their fragmentary sources did not make a sustained examination of a whole life possible.[11]

As they were for anthropologists writing life histories and historians of Europe and America writing microhistories, the 1980s and early 1990s were fertile years for Africanist social historians, some of whom focused on individual lives. Unlike traditional biographers, they were interested in understanding the ways historical forces were experienced, and even shaped, by ordinary people; and since their subjects did not leave extensive (or even any) written records, they relied heavily on oral testimonies. Even studies based in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries like Marcia Wright's *Women in Peril: Life Stories of Four Captives in Nineteenth Century East-Central Africa* and the chapters collected in Claire Robertson and Martin Klein's edited volume *Women and Slavery in Africa* drew largely on written versions of oral histories collected by missionaries, which poignantly showed how experiences of slavery were shaped by gender and age as well as other circumstances.[12] Other books were based on oral histories

[10] Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller* (New York: Penguin, 1982); Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1984). Other foundational works in this vein are Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on her Diary, 1785–1812* (New York: Knopf, 1990); Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Basic Books, 1984).

[11] On the distinction between biography and microhistory, see: Jill Lepore, "Historians Who Love Too Much: Reflections on Microhistory and Biography," *Journal of American History* 88–1 (2001), 129–144.

[12] Marcia Wright, *Women in Peril: Life Stories of Four Captives in Nineteenth Century East-Central Africa* (Lusaka: NECZAM, 1984); Claire C. Robertson and Martin A. Klein (eds.), *Women and Slavery in Africa* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983). For another study based on archival documents, see: Patricia Romero (ed.), *Life Histories of African Women* (London: Ashfield Press, 1988). The life stories in Wright's book, with additional material, were later released as *Strategies of Slaves and Women: Life-Stories from East/Central Africa* (New York: Lilian Barber Press, 1993).

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collected and interpreted by the author, such as Timothy J. Keegan's *Facing the Storm: Portraits of Black Lives in Rural South Africa*, which portrays four men's life stories as illustrations of changing struggles for security and autonomy as South Africa transitioned from other forms of segregation and oppression to formal apartheid. In *Three Swahili Women: Life Histories from Mombasa, Kenya*, Sarah Mirza and Margaret Strobel present translated and transcribed interviews that reveal the diversity of Mombasa society, the salience of Swahili identity, and processes of female socialization and solidarity. Belinda Bozzoli's *Women of Phokeng: Consciousness, Life Strategy and Migrancy in South Africa, 1900–1983* showcases interviews with twenty-two elderly women conducted by Mmantho Nkotsoe, revealing their lives as urban workers and builders of households.[13]

Such studies helped to transform our understandings of African history: they showed the centrality of women in slavery, for instance, or what it was like to live through South African segregation and apartheid. More fundamentally, they emphasized the agency of people even in "tight corners," the messiness of historical change, and the varieties of responses to it.[14] However, as with many anthropologists' life histories, these historical studies often fell short on analysis in an effort to let their subjects speak for themselves. In fact, oral testimony was seen as so important for getting to the "real" experiences of ordinary people – "recovering their voices" – that large block quotations were often published with only minimal commentary by the researcher. Not only did this sometimes leave particular historical developments unexplained; it also assumed that as long as the researcher presented the interviewee's words without much editing, the testimony could be taken at face value.[15] Newer studies like Stephan

[13] Timothy J. Keegan, *Facing the Storm: Portraits of Black Lives in Rural South Africa* (London: Zed, 1988); Sarah Mirza and Margaret Strobel, *Three Swahili Women: Life Histories from Mombasa, Kenya* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989); Belinda Bozzoli, *Women of Phokeng: Consciousness, Life Strategy and Migrancy in South Africa, 1900–1983* (Portsmouth NH: Heinemann, 1991).

[14] John Lonsdale, "Agency in Tight Corners: Narrative and Initiative in African History," *Journal of African Cultural* Studies 13–1 (2000), 5–16. These are themes outlined for African life histories in general in Dennis Cordell's introduction to his edited volume, *The Human Tradition in Modern Africa* (Lanham MD: Roman and Littlefield, 2012).

[15] For some of the resulting criticism and defenses, see: Leslie H. Townsend, "Out of Silence: Writing Interactive Women's Life Histories in Africa," *History in Africa* 17 (1990), 351–358; Kirk Hoppe, "Whose Life Is It, Anyway?: Issues of Representation in Life Narrative Texts of African Women," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 26–3 (1993), 623–636; Heidi Gengenbach, "Truth-Telling and the Politics of Women's Life History Research in Africa: A Reply to Kirk Hoppe," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 27–3 (1994), 619–627; Kirk Hoppe, "Context and Further Questions: Response and Thanks to Heidi Gengenbach,"

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Miescher's *Making Men in Ghana* (2005) and Stephanie Newell's *The Forger's Tale* (2006) emphasized the importance of context in the collection of oral histories and the ubiquity of self-fashioning among historical, and ordinary, people.[16] That is to say, they reminded readers that people can present themselves in different ways on different occasions, and the most interesting insights come not so much from noticing the phenomenon but from probing *how* and *why* given individuals fashioned themselves in given circumstances, and to what effects.

These days, Africanist historians only rarely engage and explore the sustained narrative of one individual life. With their micro-historical and interdisciplinary training, they can be sensitive and effective biographers, especially of seemingly "smaller" lives like the South African sharecropper Kas Maine, rendered with great nuance by Charles van Onselen.[17] More often, though, Africanists incorporate snippets of life stories gleaned from archives, "tin trunk histories," or oral history fieldwork to incorporate personal experiences into broader narratives of social and political change.[18]

Yet Africanists are helping to revitalize the genre of biography in one area: transnational history, particularly of the "black Atlantic."[19] Together with historians of the Americas, a number of Africanists have produced new studies – including mine – that follow specific individuals of African descent through wide geographic circuits of the eighteenth and nineteenth century Atlantic world, revealing not only their extraordinary personal

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International Journal of African Historical Studies 28–2 (1995), 359–362; Luise White, "Review: Anthologies about Women in Africa," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 28–1 (1994), 127–133. A later life history, whose author sought a productive balance between original testimony and scholarly interpretation, is Berida Ndambuki and Claire Robertson, *"We Only Come Here to Struggle:" Stories from Berida's Life* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).

[16] Stephan F. Miescher, *Making Men in Ghana* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005); Stephanie Newell, *The Forger's Tale: The Search for Odeziaku* (Athens OH: Ohio University Press, 2006). These themes were heralded in: Luise White, Stephan Miescher and David W. Cohen (eds.), *African Words, African Voices: Critical Practices in Oral History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001).

[17] Charles Van Onselen, *The Seed is Mine: The Life of Kas Maine, a South African Sharecropper, 1894–1985* (Oxford: James Currey, 1997).

[18] "Tin trunk histories" comes from Karin Barber (ed.), *Africa's Hidden Histories: Everyday Literacy and Making the Self* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006); also, Derek R. Peterson and Giacomo Macola (eds.), *Recasting the Past: History Writing and Political Work in Modern Africa* (Athens OH: Ohio University Press, 2009).

[19] The term "black Atlantic" comes from Paul Gilroy, who conceptualized it as a cultural zone of hybridity and creativity created out of the trauma and racial violence of the slave trade. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

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sagas but larger-scale dynamics.[20] This trend has come about as the study of the slave trade has flourished, new research technologies have become widely available, and much is made of transnationalism both in current life and in the study of history.[21] Clifton Crais and Pamela Scully's *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus: A Ghost Story and a Biography* is grounded in the social and political life of South Africa's Cape Colony while linking it to broader currents in European intellectual history. Also tracing his subject from South Africa to Europe, Roger Levine imaginatively reconstructs the activities, strategies, and even perceptions of the Xhosa chief and Christian missionary Jan Tzatzoe against the backdrop of deepening colonialism and hardening racism. James Sweet's *Domingos Álvares, African Healing, and the Intellectual History of the Atlantic World* traces its remarkable subject from present-day Benin to several parts of Brazil and Portugal, bringing to life circuits of power and resistance that connected far-flung localities. *Divining Slavery and Freedom*, by João Reis, illuminates the complexities of Atlantic slavery though the life story of a Brazilian slave exported from Lagos who exercised religious and political leadership in diverse, overlapping social spheres.[22] Other studies highlight biographical approaches to Atlantic slaving and slavery even if they are not full-blown biographies, including *Amistad's Orphans* by Benjamin Lawrence, as well as recent projects by Roquinaldo Ferriera, Sandra Greene, and Kristin Mann.[23] Rebecca Scott and Jean Hébrard, in their transatlantic,

[20] Notable "black Atlantic" biographies or mini-biographies written by Americanists include Jon F. Sensbach, *Rebecca's Revival: Creating Black Christianity in the Atlantic World* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); Jane G. Landers, *Atlantic Creoles in the Age of Revolutions* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2011); Randy J. Sparks, *Africans in the Old South: Mapping Exceptional Lives across the Atlantic World* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2016). For an overview, see: Lisa A. Lindsay and John Wood Sweet (eds.), *Biography and the Black Atlantic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014).

[21] The most important new research tool for the study of the Atlantic slave trade is *Voyages: The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database*, compiled by David Eltis *et al.* and available at www.slavevoyages.org. For a quick introduction to the relatively new interest in transnationalism among historians, see: *Perspectives on History* 50–9 (2012), published by the American Historical Association.

[22] Clifton C. Crais and Pamela Scully, *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus: A Ghost Story and a Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009); Roger S. Levine, *A Living Man from Africa: Jan Tzatzoe, Xhosa Chief and Missionary, and the Making of Nineteenth-Century South Africa* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011); James H. Sweet, *Domingos Álvares, African Healing, and the Intellectual History of the Atlantic World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); João José Reis, *Divining Slavery and Freedom: The Story of Domingos Sodré, an African Priest in Nineteenth-Century Brazil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

[23] Benjamin N. Lawrance, *Amistad's Orphans: An Atlantic Story of Children, Slavery, and Smuggling* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014); Roquinaldo Ferreira, *Cross-Cultural Exchange in the Atlantic World: Angola and Brazil during the Era of the*

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multi-generational family study *Freedom Papers: An Atlantic Odyssey in the Age of Emancipation* call this approach "micro-history set in motion." As they point out, "[t]here is, of course, nothing 'micro' about the Atlantic world of the nineteenth century, but even on that wide canvas the deepest analysis may emerge from close attention to the particular."[24]

Transnational life histories are not sweeping accounts of aggregate phenomena, just as other life histories are not. They do, however, illustrate connections, options, and comparisons. By following people over distances, readers get a sense of the political, social, and economic geographies that were more relevant, or just as relevant, in particular times and places as the colony or nation. We learn of the mobility of people's worldviews – as in James Sweet's Domingos Álvarez, whose commitment to healing reflected an anti-authoritarian worldview that likely got him enslaved in Dahomey and certainly resulted in his oppression by the Catholic Inquisition in Brazil and Portugal. And we see how strategies honed in one place could be used in another – as with Jan Tzatzoe's self-portrayal as a model Christian African in both South Africa and to audiences in Britain, or in Scott and Hébrard's Afro-Caribbean-European family's insistence on writing as a safeguard of freedom.

"Black Atlantic" biography shares with the most recent trends in African life histories an orientation toward social history, or the histories of ordinary people and subalterns; and it pays particular attention to "self-fashioning," especially as its subjects moved through different locations and contexts. This latter characteristic particularly sets these studies apart from traditional biography, which has been focused on capturing the thoughts and actions of a stable subject.[25] Crais and Scully, in fact, found it so impossible to reconstruct any stable subjectivity on the part of Sara Baartman that they subtitled their book *A Biography and a Ghost Story*. Emphasizing the continual self-fashioning of his subject, Vincent Carretta termed Olaudah Equiano, with perhaps ironic understatement, a *self-made man*.[26] If, as a generation of social

Slave Trade (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Sandra E. Greene, *West African Narratives of Slavery: Texts from Late Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Ghana* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011); Kristin Mann, "The Illegal Slave Trade and One Yoruba Man's Transatlantic Passages from Slavery to Freedom," in: Philip Misevich and Kristin Mann (eds.), *The Rise and Demise of Slavery and the Slave Trade in the Atlantic World* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2016), 220–246.

[24] Rebecca J. Scott and Jean M. Hébrard, *Freedom Papers: An Atlantic Odyssey in the Age of Emancipation* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 5.

[25] See the forum, "AHR Roundtable: Historians and Biography," *American Historical Review* 114–3 (2009), 573–661.

[26] Vincent Carretta, *Equiano, the African: Biography of a Self-Made Man* (Athens OH: University of Georgia Press, 2005). Also see: Vincent Carretta, "Methodology in the Making and Reception of *Equiano*," in: Lisa Lindsay and John Wood Sweet (eds.), *Biography and the Black Atlantic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 172–191.

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history as shown, flexible and relational identities have been a hallmark African humanity, "microhistories set in motion" offer glimpses of this principle in action and may serve as models for biographies set anywhere.[27]

Three major themes of transnational life histories – mobility, politics operating at multiple scales, and self-fashioning – may be exemplified by briefly returning to my recent book *Atlantic Bonds*.[28] Its central figure, an African American man named James Churchwill ("Church") Vaughan, lived between 1828 and 1893. A decade before the American Civil War, Vaughan set out to fulfill his formerly enslaved father's dying wish: that he should leave his home in South Carolina for a new life in Africa. With help from the American Colonization Society, he went first to Liberia, though he did not stay there long. In 1855, Vaughan accepted an offer of employment in Yorubaland – about which Americans knew virtually nothing – with Southern Baptist missionaries. Over the next four decades in today's southwestern Nigeria, Vaughan became a war captive in Ibadan, served as a military sharpshooter in the ultimately ruined town of Ijaye, built and re-built a livelihood in Abeokuta and Lagos, led a revolt against white racism in missionary churches, and founded a family of activists. Following Vaughan's journeys from South Carolina to Liberia to several parts of Yorubaland enables a view of linkages across the nineteenth century Atlantic world as well as a comparison of related and similar phenomena in various settings. His story reveals the ubiquity of slavery, or relations much like it, and the ambiguities of freedom in a range of Atlantic world locations. With his transatlantic outlook and connections, Church Vaughan could compare the particular forms of oppression for black people in the American South and different parts of West Africa like almost no one else in his time. In his adopted home of Lagos, his transcontinental perspective opened up new possibilities and critiques as well as creative new alliances.

One of the insights of this study has to do with the ways the African diaspora affected Africa itself. Black Atlantic migrants like Vaughan often could draw on lessons learned in multiple contexts as well as dispersed practical networks in their struggles for security and dignity. When in 1888 Vaughan led a rebellion against white missionaries in colonial Lagos, for instance, he and his allies – some with diasporic or enslaved backgrounds and others without – linked colonial racism to the history of Atlantic slavery, referring to the mission church as a "barracoon." Their diasporic consciousness went beyond the level of analysis and discourse, however, to something more concrete. The rebels' strategy of separation from the mission church paralleled the contemporaneous development of all-African

[27] For a brief summary as it relates to collective identities, see: Richard J. Reid, *A History of Modern Africa: 1800 to the Present* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 218–221.

[28] Lisa A. Lindsay, *Atlantic Bonds: A Nineteenth Century Odyssey from America to Africa* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

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American religious and educational institutions in the Reconstruction South, which Vaughan and some of his allies knew about from their contacts in the United States. Thus, Vaughan's links to America shaped his own life as well as broader developments in West Africa. In fact, the church he helped to found, Lagos's Ebenezer Baptist Church (originally called the Native Baptist Church), was the first non-missionary Christian church in West Africa, spearheading a much wider movement of church independence and cultural nationalism.[29]

Atlantic Bonds, like other "black Atlantic" biographies, also reveals "self-fashioning" at work. Through the twentieth century – that is, after his death – Church Vaughan has been remembered in his family not only for his accomplishments, but for something more intriguing. According to a story handed down through generations, when Vaughan went to Yorubaland, he was in fact returning to the homeland from which his father had been enslaved. He knew this because he saw "country marks" on people's faces that matched his father's. This tale has fascinating implications – not least that it would make Vaughan perhaps the only African American (that is, from the United States) ever to undo the family separation of the slave trade by reconnecting with his specific African relatives.[30] In fact, it is such an appealing story that *Ebony* magazine published a version of it in a feature on the U.S. and Nigerian Vaughans in 1975.[31] But as I learned to my disappointment, it's not true: Church Vaughan's father was born in Virginia, not Africa, and there is no evidence that the tale was ever told during Vaughan's lifetime or immediately afterward.[32]

So how did this story come to be part of Church Vaughan's legacy? Reconstructing a genealogy of the "country marks" tale itself, I eventually concluded that it originated with Vaughan's Lagos-born daughter, who told it when she visited her cousins in the United States in the 1920s. Her visit highlighted and reinforced the ties between the two branches of the family, but it also made clear the vast differences in their prospects and experiences.

[29] James Bertin Webster, *The African Churches among the Yoruba, 1888–1922* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964).

[30] Some formerly enslaved Africans and their descendants did, in fact, reconnect with their relatives and country people in Africa – though these returnees came from Brazil and Cuba rather than the United States. See: Mann, "The Illegal Slave Trade," and Lisa Earl Castillo, "Mapping the Nineteenth-Century Brazilian Returnee Movement: Demographics, Life Stories and the Question of Slavery," *Atlantic Studies* 13–1 (2016), 25–52.

[31] Era Bell Thompson, "The Vaughan Family: A Tale of Two Continents," *Ebony* 30–2 (1975), 53–64.

[32] For an early version of this argument, see: Lisa A. Lindsay, "Remembering His Country Marks: A Nigerian American Family and its 'African' Ancestor," in: Lisa A. Lindsay and John Wood Sweet (eds.), *Biography and the Black Atlantic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 192–206.

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Vaughan's daughter Aida Arabella Vaughan Moore was wealthy and cultured, married to a barrister who had recently been elected to the Lagos Legislative Council. While some of her American cousins were prospering after migrating north, they as well as the more embattled ones she visited in South Carolina faced a relentless environment of white supremacy, including a rash of deadly "race riots" early in the decade that touched some of them personally. I surmise that that Mrs. Moore described her father as a returning Yoruba descendant – and by implication her U.S. cousins also as Yoruba-Americans – as a way to make common cause and express solidarity. Then the story took on a life of its own. Altogether, the tale of the country marks does not reflect Church Vaughan's self-fashioning as much as his daughter's efforts on his behalf, but it does point to the opportunities provided by mobility to remake oneself – a consistent phenomenon in many life histories, especially transnational ones.

In practical terms, transnational biographies are difficult to execute: they require the discipline of following the subject where that person went, through a range of locations, archives, and sources.[33] When they focus on relatively obscure subjects, as my book does, they require needle-in-haystack sleuthing and painstaking piecing together of fragments of evidence. But they often offer valuable insights into African and broader dynamics. Histories of mobile people, whether they lived centuries ago or more recently, challenge scholars to rethink political geography from the bottom up. They show the specific networks that made up what are commonly glossed as "global" forces and the movement of people and political ideas among them. They also help us to uncover structural features of political economies, because by mapping individuals' strategies, we illuminate the obstacles or opportunities they faced. And transnational life histories combat the unfortunate tendency some have to think of Africa as always "behind" the rest of the world by putting Africa and other places in the same temporal frame.

Just as an earlier generation of life histories prompted a re-examination of oral history methodology, so transnational microhistories reveal the limits of documents, especially those seen in isolation. The most famous example is probably Olaudah Equiano, whose *Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* (first published in 1789) detailed his origins in West Africa and capture by slavers, but who also signed documents, discovered by Vincent Carretta, placing his birth in South Carolina.[34] In Scott and Hébrard's *Freedom Papers*, a succession of documents produced in Haiti and New Orleans rather than one by itself

[33] For an exploration of some of the challenges, along with a fascinating human-scale story, see: Jean Allman, "Phantoms of the Archive: Kwame Nkrumah, a Nazi Pilot Named Hanna, and the Contingencies of Postcolonial History-Writing," *American Historical Review* 118–1 (2013), 104–129.

[34] Carretta, *Equiano, the African*.

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shows the persistent efforts of a formerly enslaved African woman to ensure the freedom of herself and her Saint Domingue-born daughter. In a work-in-progress by Kristin Mann, a Lagos court case seemingly about the inheritance rights of children turns out to be – when read along with documents about the same people in Brazil – about the relationships and resentments between a former master and his former bondspeople.[35] In my study, American-produced documents about "country marks," when read against obituaries and other descriptions produced in Nigeria, are revealed as evidence of affiliation and aspiration rather than direct genealogy.

I am certainly not arguing that historians should all produce life histories, traditional biographies, or even "biographies of sorts." Nevertheless, life histories, whether in set motion or located largely in one place, belong firmly in our repertoire of approaches into the African and diasporic past. They help us to understand relationships between structure and agency, revealing how individual lives, social processes, institutions, and contexts affect one another. At the same time, Africanist life histories of whatever variation help to redefine what "biography" is. Along with the Great Men – of Africa as well as elsewhere – we have ordinary people doing great things, people living through extraordinary circumstances, people who reinvented themselves, and people whose viewpoint makes us see things in new ways. To read and write "biographies of sorts" is to get to know people whose lives shaped the world, even if we have never heard of them before.

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[35] I thank Kristin Mann for sharing with me a preliminary chapter of a study tentatively titled *Transatlantic Lives: Slavery and Freedom in West Africa and Brazil*.

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