The social and legal forces at play in 19th-century America have left us little access to the writings of everyday African Americans during the slavery era. Using a little-known data source – letters from semi-literate settlers in Liberia – this paper investigates the language of non-elite African Americans.

First, a quantitative approach reveals dialect differences based on region and degree of interaction with whites. Then, a qualitative look at ethnic self-naming (colored, African, Sons of Ham) investigates how those same writers built a sense of African American nationhood, decades before better-known nationalist movements.

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