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—Trevor Getz

I

Naming and Framing a Crime Against Humanity

African Voices of the Transatlantic Slave System, ca. 1500–1900

Kwasi Konadu

GLOBAL CONTEXT

The purpose of this chapter is to enlarge our understanding of Africa in the era of the transatlantic slave system, to draw attention to African experiences during that period, and, finally, to explore how Africans themselves interpreted the process of transatlantic slaving through their own ways of making sense of the world. Beginning in the late fifteenth century, this global system of commerce reached its height in the eighteenth century, having grown out of Africa’s earlier connections with the globe through long-standing trans-Saharan, Mediterranean, Red Sea, and Indian Ocean trade. Owing to the endurance of Africa’s historic relations with Eurasia through these trade networks, transatlantic commerce and human trafficking would surpass rather than replace them, even as the global economy gradually shifted from the Indian Ocean world in the east to the Atlantic Ocean world in the Western Hemisphere.

Since the beginnings of the transatlantic slave system in the fifteenth century, enslavement has been the focus of an enormous number of books,
pamphlets, and articles, making it a topic that college students in African or African American history courses anticipate and to which African (American) history is often reduced. Yet, despite this mountain of "slave trade" literature, a cruel irony of the transatlantic system is that its documentation tells us very little about those who suffered the most—the Africans. Thus my aim is to reveal in those documents of repression the humanity of the people being repressed. While we have a far greater quantity of sources and therefore know much more about African lives under the transatlantic system than about the enslavement of Africans across the Sahara desert or the Indian Ocean, excavating those lives is not an easy task. Indeed, the sheer terror and violence of the transatlantic system not only attacked the bodies and humanity of Africans caught in its grasp, it also transformed these individuals in terms of the numbers representing them etched on ledgers and in log books, thereby subjecting them to the violence of abstraction.

Where can we search for Africans’ perspectives and accounts of their experiences in this system? While much can be learned about African lives from the numeric data and observations recorded by European slaving companies and their agents, we must move beyond the statistics that silenced African voices during the transatlantic era, for the silences of the past continue to stubbornly shape our present understandings about racism, pervasive stereotypes about Africa and Africans and those in its diasporas, and the meaning of the transatlantic slave system as a crime against African humanity. A synthesis such as this chapter, which looks at central themes in the African experience of the transatlantic slave system, cannot fully address these important contemporary issues. However, as an examination of transatlantic slaving through African eyes and experiences, it can provide an integral perspective on these issues and on the study of the transatlantic slave system itself.

**Naming and Framing a Crime Against Humanity**

The historical events discussed in this chapter are usually referred to as the "Atlantic slave trade" or "African slave trade." I have instead chosen to use the phrase "transatlantic slave system" to emphasize the systemic reach of transatlantic slaving, which extended well beyond commerce, encompassing the culture and ecology of African communities as well. The naming of this historical process is not a purely academic issue. Many African societies have long known what western scholars have begun to suspect: that words themselves have power, and that their meaning is situational. In other words, names and labels can affect how we perceive a person, place, or historical process.

The first word we must examine in the name of this set of experiences is "slave." For most of us, the first image that comes to mind when we hear or read this term is that of an enslaved African. Indeed, many of us still view Africans principally as (former) "slaves," rather than as humans first. Historically, however, the word "slave" derives from the Greek term *sklavos* (referring to the large number of Slavic peoples under captivity) and the Latin *clavus* (meaning both "Slav" [Slavic] and "slave"). Our own racialized contemporary vision of the slave as African is packed with more than five centuries of indelible images very different from those of the Greeks or Romans: "blackness" as a synonym for "Africans" and as the demonic opposite of a Judeo-Christian "whiteness," and pejorative ideas of Africans and their worldwide descendants as barbarous, idolatrous, and without beauty and intelligence. It is only recently that some scholars have begun to define these humans under captivity as "enslaved Africans"—a phrase that more accurately underscores their condition within the transatlantic slave system than does the crude and intellectually violent word "slaves."

My decision to use the phrase "transatlantic slave system" rather than the more commonly employed "slave trade," "African slave trade," and even "transatlantic slave trade" is also important. For one thing, the term "trade" embedded in each of these labels conceals the violence of the system: the raids, captures, escapes, and uprisings, the incarcerations at coastal ports, the languishing of men, women, and children in the holds of ships, the disease, suffering and death on those one-way Atlantic crossings, commodification, the lives of laboring. The term "trade" conjures up an image of an exchange of commodities for other commodities or capital, and little of this straightforward arithmetic occurred, though it was certainly a part of the process of converting Africans into property or chattel. Moreover, combining
either "slave" or "African" with "trade" only leads us once again into the trap of equating "slave" with "African," making them interchangeable terms with equivalent meanings. Nor is the use of "African" strictly accurate. So much of the trafficking in enslaved Africans revolved around European capital, and within this system African labor created a great deal of wealth and industries for the benefit of European and neo-European societies (i.e., the colonies and then, later, the nations established by Europeans in the Americas). Thus some critics might suggest that we refer instead to "European slave trade." That argument does have weight and can be applied in many cases, but it is similarly insufficient. Substituting one homogenization (i.e., "Africans sold other Africans") for another (i.e., "Europeans bought and enslaved Africans") does little to get the full story right. For example, this simplification would make it difficult to understand the experiences of powerful merchants of mixed African and European parentage and of both genders who were active players in the transatlantic slave system but, according to their own accounts, were neither "African" nor "European."  

There is one additional danger of homogenizing and oversimplifying this system as African. For far too long, the sound bite that "Africans" sold or enslaved other "Africans"—or, Africans sold their "brothers and sisters"—has rolled almost effortlessly off the tongues of scholars, students, and the general public. In most historical instances, members of distinct and sometimes partnering African societies, even those linked by clan affiliations, viewed others not as "Africans" (in the sense of a shared, continental identity) but, rather, as specific cultural groups—that is, as individuals of "foreign" or captive origins, criminals, war captives, and vulnerable people who could become enslaved. To cast a wide net of inhumanity upon all Africans by suggesting that "Africans sold Africans" reafimms the violence of homogenization and reduces historical processes that shifted according to time, place, and people to a simple matter-of-fact statement. In much the same way that Christian Europeans sold their war captives to Muslims and did not see this transaction as putting their "countrymen" into slavery, some Africans exchanged members of other groups without viewing those destined for export as fellow "Africans." In cases involving the kidnapping and pawning of kin on ac-

ount of debt, the kidnapped or pawned individual was usually seized by force and without the consent of the debtor; sometimes, the debtor (usually a male) would also be seized, put in chains, and exported from his homeland. It should be noted that the institution of pawnng (using valuables or individuals as collateral for credit and the establishment of trust) contributed only a small number of captive Africans to the transatlantic system inasmuch as pawns, in the form of gold or humans, guaranteed a loan and theoretically prevented one from being arbitrarily seized and sold on account of a defaulting debtor. In many of the slaving regions in Africa, however, there were few valuables (in the eyes of Europeans) other than people, and European merchants and their agents almost always preferred to trade in humans. In short, the mechanisms through which Africans found themselves as captives defy homogenization and should temper our urge to reduce the matter of transatlantic slavery to African depravity.

How we define a subject such as international slaving and thus frame it is a crucial part of the process by which we restore the humanity not only of those millions of Africans who violently died under its systemic weight but also of their descendants who still suffer in a racialized global order made possible in part by the transatlantic slave system. Indeed, one meaningful way to hold accountable the transatlantic slave system—including its institutional and individual beneficiaries—for its crimes against African humanity is to tell its human story on both sides of the Atlantic. For we now know quite a bit about the intricacies of the transatlantic slave system.

However, we know comparatively little about the enslaved Africans who were brought to the Americas and those who remained in Africa and in some state of captivity. In Africa and in the Americas, those who were literate or became so under captivity left us a few autobiographical accounts of their experiences (whereas many of the untapped sources for the era of the transatlantic slave system remain archived in African and African diasporic art, song, ritual, and memory). Accordingly, the next section of this chapter surveys the experiences of those enslaved Africans, bringing out patterns and overarching themes across wide geographical areas while providing specifics that make those patterns and themes more tangible.
AFRICAN EXPERIENCES

The Origins of the Transatlantic Slave System

The transatlantic slave system was an outgrowth and expansion of prior commercial systems centered on the Mediterranean region from the Atlantic to western Asia. These systems connected Europe, western and southern Asia, and northeast and North Africa, including those areas of interior Africa where captives were carried across the Sahara by Arab-Muslim merchants to coastal ports. By the early thirteenth century, Italian (specifically Genoese and Venetian) merchants had already established slaving ports using captive “Slavs” and other peoples to produce sugar for export within a commercial system that stretched from the Atlantic, through the Mediterranean, and to the Black Sea (in and around the Crimean peninsula). On the Atlantic end of this network the Iberian nations of Portugal and Spain, after the former and then the latter rose from under Arab-African Islamic rule, were aided by the Italian model of plantation slavery and soon extended the network to islands off the northwest and west central African coast in the 1400s. Portugal and Spain dominated the transatlantic slave system until the mid-seventeenth century, and Britain and Portugal would continue that dominance until the early nineteenth century, when the British made international slavery illegal. The Portuguese and Spaniards would control the trafficking in captive Africans until Cuba and Brazil abolished the system of transatlantic slavery in 1886 and 1888, respectively.

The Reconquista—the centuries-long Christian retaking of the Iberian peninsula from Islamic control—set the stage for the transatlantic slave system. Through this process, the Portuguese expelled their Muslim overlords almost two centuries sooner than the Spaniards, acquired some essential nautical knowledge and technologies through Muslim scholars (who obtained their know-how from as far as China), added cannons to their vessels, and established plantations off the coasts of western Africa (e.g., Madeira islands and São Tomé) while raiding African communities for captives. By the fifteenth century, these African captives were increasingly replacing the “Slavs” and other captives in Portugal, Spain, and France. These early African captives were victims of Portuguese slaving voyages as well as of Arab slaving across the Sahara and through north African ports in Morocco, Tunisia, and Libya. This Africanization of the trade in enslaved humans reached a new level in the late fifteenth century when the Ottoman Turks captured Constantinople (what is now Istanbul, capital of present-day Turkey) and diverted the flow of eastern Mediterranean and Black sea captives, including Christian Europeans sold by their countrymen, from the northern Mediterranean to the lands of Islam. The production of Christian Europe’s sugar by enslaved labor and the sources of such labor then shifted west toward the Atlantic, eventually stretching from northwest to west central Africa in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

In the 1440s, the first recorded group of African captives from the West African region of Senegambia reached the capital of Portugal. Upon arrival, naked and terrified, they were paraded through the streets of Lisbon as a “barbaric” spectacle to be gawked at by onlookers. A century later, enslaved Africans were commonplace in Portugal. Captive Africans in Lisbon, one of the largest cities in sixteenth-century Europe, are estimated to have accounted for 10 percent of that city’s population. The first enslaved Africans destined for the Americas left from such cities as Lisbon and Seville, Spain. Once in the Americas, their skills and labor were utilized on plantations, in mining operations, and at urban enslavement sites. By the end of the seventeenth century, Africans had almost fully replaced enslaved Amerindiens (from various societies) and indentured white laborers (many of whom became planters) as the primary source of labor in the Americas for the production and exportation of sugar, rum, molasses, tobacco, cotton, indigo, precious metals and minerals, luxury items, and, indeed, some of the very irons used in their physical bondage. These so-called saltwater Africans brought with them not only their experience with large-scale agriculture (especially root crops and rice) and their iron-working and textile skills but also some immunity against certain parasitic diseases, such as malaria. With only a small number of exceptions, these captive Africans did not return to their homelands to recount their experiences or observations. Theirs was a one-way voyage—first as captives, then as commodities packed below and above slave vessels’ decks, and finally as valuable yet often uncontrollable property.
Experiencing the "Middle Passage"

As noted, sources providing African perspectives on the Atlantic crossing from Africa to the Americas are very few in number. Africans traveled this "middle passage" on vessels that made multiple crossings, each time adding another thick layer of blood, sweat, urine, excrement, uneaten food, and death to the lower decks. The upper decks of these vessels were also encrusted with similar matter resulting from the floggings of captives who refused to dance, jump, or sing. Ultimately, they served as platforms from which some captives jumped or were forcibly thrown overboard. In The Slave Ship: A Human History, maritime historian Marcus Rediker describes the sheer violence and terror on board the slave vessel, at once a machine of death, a social institution, and a vehicle that prepared the enslaved for the continued terror to be experienced once their sea-bound journey ended. His apt summation of the slave ship's preparatory role is worth quoting at length.

The slave ship had not only delivered millions of [African] people to slavery, it had prepared them for it. Literal preparation included readying the bodies for sale by the crew: shaving and cutting the hair of the men, using caustics to hide sores, dying gray hair black, and rubbing down torsos with palm oil. Preparations also included subjection to the discipline of enslavement. Captives experienced the "white master" and his unchecked power and terror, as well as that of his "overseers," the mate, boatswain, or sailor. They experienced the use of violence to hold together a social order in which they outnumbered their captors by ten to one or more. They ate communally and lived in extreme barrack-like circumstances. They did not yet work in the backbreaking, soul-killing ways of the plantation, but labor many of them did, from domestic toil to forced sex work, from pumping the ship to setting the sails. It must also be noted that in preparing the captives for slavery, the experience of the slave ship also helped to prepare them to resist slavery.3

Historians have amassed a total of 388 recorded cases of enslaved African uprisings on board vessels close to African waters or en route to the Americas.4 One African region, the area from Senegambia to the Ivory Coast, ac- counted for 42 percent of such revolts but contributed only about 12 percent of the total number of recorded captives who found themselves under the transatlantic slave system. By contrast, west central Africa accounted for more than 45 percent of all the (recorded) captives embarked for the Americas but experienced only 11 percent of the revolts, supporting European slavers' belief that such captives were less likely to resist.

Resistance to enslavement took place not just aboard ship but also when captives caught sight of a slaver or raiding party or realized that a visit to the European fort would be the last time they saw their relatives or smelled the aroma of locally prepared foods. Africans' responses to capture and enslavement included attacks on European forts, and at least sixty-one recorded attacks on ships were carried out by land-based Africans in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Africans also built fortresses, fortified towns, resettled in hard-to-find places, transformed habitats and the ways in which they occupied land, diverted rivers, and burned down European factories. In addition, they employed young men in militias to protect and defend communities. Africans also used medicinal plants for camouflage, ritual cleansing, and protection as well as poisonous plants and thorny trees and bushes for general resistance. A variety of resistive strategies led to rising costs for the slavers—costs that, in turn, factored into the decline of the transatlantic slave system. In short, enslaved and potentially enslaved peoples employed protective, offensive, and defensive strategies irrespective of their origins in Africa, including resistance to capture and deportation. Such resistance, however, was interlinked with accommodation to, and participation in, the slave system—regardless of whether the captivity occurred on the African coast or on board slave vessels en route to foreign lands.

The Shape and Scale of the Transatlantic Slave System

The captives and vessels that constituted the middle passage were part of a transatlantic slave system that was linked to the spread of sugar cane production. In fact, the earlier westward movement of slaving and sugar production across eastern Asia into the Mediterranean and southern Europe, and then on to coastal Africa and the Americas, came full circle to the Pacific
in the nineteenth century. In the Caribbean basin, sugar and slavery also started in the east—specifically, in Barbados—and then moved westward throughout the region. These movements of people and the sugary products that came to define slave societies in the Americas were supported by two distinct yet mutually reinforcing sets of prevailing winds and ocean currents—in the north Atlantic and the south Atlantic—that created two sub-slaving systems within the broader transatlantic world. The north Atlantic currents turned clockwise north of the equator, and thus this sub-slaving system was based in Europe and North America. Most captives taken into this system were procured north of the Congo River (in what is now the Democratic Republic of Congo) and shipped primarily to the Caribbean and North America and, in some cases, to the South American ports of Buenos Aires and Montevideo. The British, especially after the mid-seventeenth century, dominated this north Atlantic system. The southern system, by contrast, was largely controlled by the Portuguese (whether in Brazil or Portugal). In this latter system, the Atlantic currents turned counter-clockwise and the traffic in captive Africans was based primarily in Brazil. The source of captives for the south Atlantic market was chiefly west central Africa, with relatively smaller numbers coming from the bights of Benin and Biafra and southeast Africa (e.g., Mozambique), especially during the nineteenth century. Southeast Africa was linked to both sub-slaving systems, demonstrating that the trade winds and ocean currents did shape where captive Africans were drawn and where they landed. In another sense, however, the multiple movements of Africans transcended wind and water. On the whole, the north and south Atlantic slaving sub-systems shared much in common, ultimately forming a transatlantic system driven by demand and greed—as evidenced by the increasing number and price of captive Africans, and the increasing quantity of the sugar they produced, between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Over the course of those four centuries, approximately 13 to 15 million Africans living across a broad swathe of the continent from Senegambia to west central and southeast Africa embarked for the Americas, but only about 50,000 went to Europe (see Map 1.1). These numbers are still being debated, however, and any set of numbers attempting to quantify an acknowledged
crime against (African) humanity must be digested with caution. For instance, how, in the absence of verifiable records or recollections, do we calculate the human cost to Africa? We cannot quantify such factors as disease, abortions, suicides, mortality in the quest for captives and after their capture, or unscrupulous merchants who discarded or undercounted captives to evade fees levied upon them. Even the most sophisticated transatlantic studies cannot and do not account for these factors; rather, their economic and statistical models focus, almost religiously, on volume, prices, supply, cargo, expenses, profits, losses, competition, and partnership without much attention to the qualitative, human dimensions of their African subjects. Yet the numbers do have a place, for they tell us something significant about long-term patterns.

Recent scholarship suggests the vast majority of outbound Africans left their homelands in six major coastal regions: the territory between Senegambia and the Ivory Coast (Côte d’Ivoire), the Gold Coast, the Bight of Benin, the Bight of Biafra, west central Africa, and southeast Africa. However, regions of embarkation should not necessarily be conflated with regions or ports of origin: many captive Africans were drawn from political and, at times, religious areas wider and more inland than the major coastal ports—some traveling hundreds of miles to the coast on foot. We can certainly imagine thousands of captive families and friends in and around the vast west central African region being led through forests, over rocky pathways, and across river water to the Atlantic, since this region accounted for about 45 percent of all recorded Africans who left for the Americas.

As for points of debarkation, the relatively early start of the Portuguese in establishing sugar plantations off the African coasts and in Brazil, and the equally early importation of captive Africans to Portugal and to the Americas along the south Atlantic currents, meant that Brazil and the Caribbean were major destinations for enslaved Africans. Brazil received a large number of captives; almost the same percentage who had left west central Africa landed in the Caribbean, giving this region and South America (including Brazil) close to 95 percent of the approximately 13 million captives who landed in the Americas. But the Caribbean was also shaped by peoples and cultures other than those of west central Africa. Indeed, the

Gold Coast and the Bight of Biafra were the only two other regions to contribute more than a million Africans in shaping the Caribbean basin. It may surprise readers that of the recorded 13 million Africans who reached the Americas as captives, perhaps no more than 4 percent landed in North America, entering the colonies through a limited number of major ports in Georgia, South Carolina, Virginia, Maryland, and southern Louisiana as well as in northeastern cities such as New York and Boston.

The vast set of statistical data analyzed by historians such as Joseph Inikori and David Eltis reveal something else about the African experience under the transatlantic slave system: almost two-thirds of the captives were adult males and 15 to 20 percent were children, most of whom came in the eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth century, especially from west central Africa. In the nineteenth century as a whole, about half of the captives from west central Africa were children. Surprisingly, mortality rates were highest in the Bight of Biafra, which, unlike west central Africa, had little history of kingdoms or centralized political structures and entered the transatlantic slave system as late as the late seventeenth century. It is likely that these mortality rates were linked to high morbidity rates, which in turn were related to poor diet: captives were being fed (uncooked) starchy and "foreign" foods (e.g., cassava, corn, and rice) that were inconsistent with their indigenous diets. In fact, the major cause of morbidity during the Atlantic crossings was gastrointestinal disease. In other words, the rate of sickness and possibly the frequency of death boiled down to what these captive Africans ate and how much clean water they received. African deaths were recorded (if records were kept at all) with a skull symbol, and the bodies were thrown overboard without ceremony. (In contrast, seamen's deaths were recorded with a cross and the bodies were thrown overboard after a Christian-like ceremony.) The data we have from the European companies, merchants, and bankers who organized and profited the most from the transatlantic slave system are quite silent on fundamental and still-debated questions, such as how to pragmatically redress the system's impact on African societies and their descendants and why this international enslavement happened in the first place.
Why did the transatlantic slave system happen? The short answer has to do with the greed and pleasure of European colonists and their homeland supporters, who voraciously sought the cheapest labor for the production of and satisfaction of demands for sugar, rum, tobacco, and coffee. This quest for pleasurable stimulants unleashed European “free market” forces onto the world, creating a slave-based globalization and peaking during the period referred to as the European age of “enlightenment.” The spread of the enlightenment ideals of freedom and reason across Europe and North America in the eighteenth century during the same time that human trafficking increased within a European-managed transatlantic slave system is just one of several contradictions of the era—a contradiction exacerbated by the fact that those “free market” forces needed both skilled and unskilled labor to meet growing demands. A range of people, both African and European, participated in this system, though at different levels, but always with dire consequences for African societies.

A number of factors contributed to enslavement on the African side of the equation, including drought, famine, debt, warfare, raiding, and kidnapping or pawning. The drought, clearly beyond Africans’ control, influenced the outcome of causative factors such as warfare and the raiding of villages, and other human-determined causative factors existed in African societies prior to European involvement to varying degrees. But there is little doubt that the availability of European capital in Africa drove the exponential growth of firearms for use in raids or wars—an outcome that not only further harmed those most affected by drought and famine but also increased levels of debt and pawning. This capital was brought in by bankers, captains and crew members, merchant-banking families, and insurance companies from Portugal, Spain, France, Britain, the Netherlands, Germany, Sweden, and the European societies of the Americas.

AFRICAN PERSPECTIVES ON THE TRANSATLANTIC SLAVE SYSTEM

As rare as they are, records of African perspectives on the transatlantic slave system can be found in at least two major slaving regions in west central and West Africa. These two regions represent geographic bookends, since the vast majority of captive Africans departed their homelands from the four-thousand-mile coastline between these two regions. The African “voices” presented in this section have in some cases been muffled or altered by the historical recorder or editor in the source material and will be edited here only for clarity and with minimal analysis to facilitate the reading of each perspective in context.

Context and the Gold Coast

By lumping together Senegambia, Sierra Leone, and the Windward coast under the broader West African region called the “Upper Guinea coast,” we find that there are six major slaving regions along the approximately four thousand miles of African coastline from Senegal to Angola. The Gold Coast (present-day Ghana) is one of these, its trade name reflecting Europeans’ interest in the precious metal. It became the third-largest slaving region in West Africa. Exporting about 1.2 million captive Africans between 1600 and 1850, the Gold Coast, as its name suggests, was an early and competitive magnet for all the major and minor European slaving nations and their respective trading companies. Chartered by the European states, these national trading companies were given a monopoly over those states’ trading interests in the region. To these companies, captive Africans were human cargo irrespective of their cultural origin or their importance in the society from which they came. Companies such as the Dutch West Indies Company and the Royal African Company of England emerged in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, having been officially sanctioned by their governments. Private European ships, however, often circumvented the monopolies of national trading companies and conducted a substantial part of the enslavement commerce.

Whether employed by national companies or private ones, the Portuguese merchants and sailors who encountered the Gold Coast found communities—the most important of which were Akan societies—with sophisticated cultural knowledge and commercial skills developed over centuries of local and regional trade. The Portuguese and Europeans who followed remained
largely on the Gold Coast littoral and knew very little about the interior. Thus, the coastal ports of embarkation were significant contact points between European nationals and Akan (and other indigenous) societies. However, although the coastal towns grew in population and in commerce, the greater parts of the Gold Coast population lived in large towns and villages of the interior. Here, a trade network known as the Akani dominated the gold trade between the hinterland and the coast. In the seventeenth century, the western and central Gold Coast trade was controlled by the state known as Denkyira in the interior, whereas in the east of the region it was dominated by Akem and Akwamu. Meanwhile, merchants, porters, interpreters, and slavers from coastal settlements such as Accra, Kormantin, Elmina, Cape Coast, and Anomabu became inextricably bound to the movement of goods and captive people between the interior and the transatlantic slave system. By the mid-eighteenth century, both Akwamu and the Akani network collapsed, and Denkyira and Akem came under the rule of the growing Asante state. After this time, the commerce in European goods (including firearms) and captive Africans was firmly controlled by the Asante in the interior and by their Fante trading partners on the coast. More than a half-million souls—almost half the Gold Coast's total exported captive population—departed the Gold Coast between 1750 and 1800.

The Asante Empire spent much of the eighteenth century—the height of the transatlantic slave system—extending its vast dominion and incorporating new territories and resources, including the men paid as tribute by conquered states. These war captives were political assets, for they had cash, labor, and tributary value. However, Asante wars of expansion contributed less than is commonly thought to the half-million Gold Coast captives exported in the second half of the eighteenth century, for there was little Asante warfare between 1760 and 1800. The Asante economy was not built around the exportation of captive peoples, although firearms and gunpowder procured from European merchants facilitated Asante's military innovations and territorial expansion. Moreover, a significant number of eighteenth-century captives acquired by war or trade were not exported to the Americas but, rather, were incorporated into commoner families, contributing to the demographic and economic expansion of the agrarian village system. In other words, many non-Asante captives were assimilated after a generation or two into the Asante social order. For the Asante, several categories of servile labor existed: akoa (subject), domum (captive), odonko (captive person from northern Ghana), akyere (often condemned criminals and captives intended for sacrifice), and awowoa (person pledged or given as surety for the debt of a kin). These categories of servile labor and status, as well as their changing meaning over time, must be distinguished because grouping such social identities together under “internal African slavery” would do little to clarify the relationship between domestic captivity and the demands of the transatlantic slave system.

If the Asante wars of expansion are not to blame for the increase in the export of captives from the Gold Coast in the late eighteenth century, how are we to account for the departure of at least 1.2 million Africans through Gold Coast ports? The answer can be found in Europe. Compared to the major European slaving nations, Gold Coast societies were significantly less able to exploit the transatlantic slave system, in that they lacked key industries and their port cities were built primarily for fishing, salt, and commerce in goods rather than human beings. Within Europe, by contrast, the transatlantic slave system spawned the development of British port cities like London, Bristol, and Liverpool. The growth of these cities drove demand for stimulants such as coffee and sugar, provided the financial capital to create and satisfy even more demand, and funded the increasing Portuguese, Dutch, British, French, Swedish, Danish, and German (Brandenburger) presence on the Gold Coast during the eighteenth century. These outcomes in turn transformed domestic forms of servile labor on the Gold Coast to feed the transatlantic slave system, while suppressing local economic activities. Writing at the peak of the transatlantic slave system in the eighteenth century, Gold Coast captive Ottobah Kobina Cugoano argued quite accurately: "If there were no buyers there would be no sellers." In short, some Gold Coast farmers, merchants, and rulers became sellers of the enslaved, but they did so in an early capitalist system that was out of their control—a system in which they, too, were exploited, receiving cheap linen and metals in exchange for commodified humans.
Gold Coast Captive Perspectives

At the height of the transatlantic slave system in the eighteenth century, more than 6.5 million captive Africans left their homelands for the Americas. It is not surprising, then, that nearly all first-person accounts by (once) captive Africans appeared during that century. Even these are only a very limited set of documents. Africans who were literate, who became literate under captivity, or who had their accounts transcribed were few in number. In many instances their accounts emerged after they had won or received their freedom, often after a long period of enslavement and usually as part of a religious conversion or an abolitionist cause. Nonetheless, among their key themes are their departures from Africa. These departures often occurred during warfare, when they were kidnapped by slave raiders, or after they were torn from their homes and families as a result of their own or a relative’s debt. These mechanisms of enslavement and the various positions in society from which a range of captives were drawn, including the Africans’ experiences under the transatlantic slave system, take center stage in the following passages.

We begin with Belinda (Royall), so named by her owner Isaac Royall, one of wealthiest Loyalists in eighteenth-century Massachusetts. Although there is some debate about who aided Belinda in crafting her account and whether her transcriber embellished some of its content, we know about Belinda’s early life from a few versions of a petition she presented to the General Court of Massachusetts in 1783. Perhaps her transcriber took some creative license with the seventy-year-old Belinda’s words, or possibly her memory of events that occurred when she left the Gold Coast at twelve years of age was less than precise. Nevertheless, we can be assured that the content of Belinda’s account, including this first-person description of her youth in Africa, was not fictional.10

Seventy years have rolled away since, on the banks of Rio da Valta [Volta River], I received my existence. The Mountains, covered with spicy forests; the valleys [valleys], loaded, with the richest fruits... Before I had twelve years enjoyed the fragrance of my native groves, and before I had realised that Europeans placed their happiness in yellow dust [gold], wherein I carelessly marked my infant footsteps, even when in a sacred grove... a band of white men, driving many Africans before them in chains, rushed into the hallowed shades.

Could the tears, the sighs, the supplications from tortured parental affections, have blunted the keen edge of avarice, I might have been rescued from that agony which thousands of my country’s children have experienced. ... I was ravished from the bosom of my country. ... Scenes which imagination never conceived—of a floating world—the supporting monsters of the deep, and the familiar meetings of billows and clouds, strove, but in vain, to divert melancholy attention from three hundred Africans in chains, suffering the most excruciating torments;—some, however, rejoicing that the pangs of death ensured them freedom. Once more my eyes were blessed with a continent ... only to know that my doom was slavery, from which death alone could emancipate me.

The laws had rendered me incapable of receiving property [in Massachusetts]; and though I was a free, moral agent, accountable for my own actions, yet I was never a moment at my own disposal. One of his [Isaac Royall’s] meanest servants robbed me of my innocence by force, and at an age when my youth should have been my security from pollution. Fifty years were my faithful hands compelled to ignoble servitude, for the benefit of a cruel, ungrateful master, until [he] fled and died... My face is now marked with the furrows of time and my frame feebly bending under the oppression of years; while, by the law of the land, I am denied the enjoyment of one morsel of that immense wealth, a part whereof hath been accumulated by my own industry, and the whole augmented by my labour.11

The court ruled in Belinda’s favor for what amounted to reparations for her years of slave labor, although she received only a few years’ pension from the estate of Isaac Royall. Following another successful petition in 1787, we learn nothing more about Belinda or her daughter Prine.

At the time of Belinda’s embarkation in the 1720s, another captive, though not originally from the Gold Coast, embarked through a Gold Coast port and found himself on a Dutch slaving vessel to Barbados. That male
captive was James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, who came from Bornu in what is now northeastern Nigeria. He was exported to the Americas and eventually freed and relocated to England, where he composed his biography (published in 1772) around the age of sixty. In that account, which is heavily shaped by his conversion to Christianity, Gronniosaw tells us about his capture in great detail and includes a brief mention of his Atlantic journey:

[One day,] a merchant from the Gold Coast (the third city in GUINEA) [who] traded with the inhabitants of our country in ivory &c. . . . he expressed vast concern for me, and said, if my parents would part with me for a little while, and let him take me home with him. . . . He told me that if I would go with him I should see houses with wings to them walk upon the water, and should also see the white folks; and that he had many sons of my age, which should be my companions; and he added to all this that he would bring me safe back again soon. . . . When my dear mother saw that I was willing to leave them, she spoke to my father and grandfather and the rest of my relations, who all agreed that I should accompany the merchant to the Gold Coast. . . . [If] I could have known when I left my friends and country that I should never return to them again[,] my misery on that occasion would have been inexpressible. . . .

I had a very unhappy and discontented journey. . . . I cannot recollect how long we were in going from BOURNOU to the GOLD COAST; but as there is no shipping nearer to BOURNOU than that City, it was tedious in travelling so far by land, being upwards of a thousand miles. . . . I was soon informed that their King imagined that I was sent by my father as a spy, and would make such discoveries at my return home that would enable them to make war with the greater advantage to ourselves; and for these reasons he had resolved I should never return to my native country. . . . [Eventually, the king said] he would not kill me, and that I should not go home, but be sold for a slave. . . .

A few days after[,] a Dutch ship came into the harbour, and they carried me on board, in hopes that the Captain would purchase me. As they went, I heard them agree, that, if they could not sell me then, they would throw me overboard. . . . [A]s soon as ever I saw the Dutch Captain, I ran to him, and put my arms round him, and said, "father, save me." . . . And though he did not understand my language, . . . he bought me for two yards of check, which is of more value there, than in England. . . . I was exceedingly sea-sick at first; but when I became more accustomed to the sea, it wore off. My master's ship was bound for Barbadoes [Barbados]. When we came there, . . . I was sold for fifty dollars.12

Another Gold Coast captive who followed a route very similar to Gronniosaw was Venture Smith, born around 1729. Smith was kidnapped and taken to the British fort at Anomabu on the Gold Coast and transported to Barbados around 1737, but he relocated to New York and, eventually, to Rhode Island. Smith purchased his own and his family's freedom at age thirty-six but narrated his story at age sixty-nine. In the passage that follows, Smith recalls the series of events leading up to his deportation as a child. His account begins with his capture by a slave raiding party and the death of his father, who was killed before his eyes:

The army of the enemy was large. I should suppose consisting of about six thousand men. Their leader was called Baukurre. After destroying the old prince [Smith's father], they decamped and immediately marched towards the sea, lying to the west, taking with them myself and the women prisoners. . . . All the march I had very hard tasks imposed on me, which I must perform on pain of punishment. I was obliged to carry on my head a large flat stone used for grinding our corn, weighing, as I should suppose, as much as twenty-five pounds; besides victuals, mat and cooking utensils. Though I was pretty large and stout of my age, yet these burdens were very grievous to me, being only six years and a half old.

The invaders then [captured another community of peoples] . . . and moved on their way towards the sea. . . . They then went on to the next district, which was contiguous to the sea, called in Africa, Anamaboo [Anomaba]. The enemies' provisions were then almost spent, as well as their strength. The inhabitants . . . attacked them, and took enemy, prisoners, flocks and all their effects. I was then taken a second time. All of us were then put into the castle and kept for market. On a certain time, I and other prisoners
were put on board a canoe, under our master, and rowed away to a vessel belonging to Rhode Island. ... While we were going to the vessel, our master told us to appear to the best possible advantage for sale. I was bought on board by one Robertson Mumford, steward of said vessel, for four gallons of rum and a piece of calico, and called VENTURE, on account of his having purchased me with his own private venture. Thus I came by my name. All the slaves that were bought for that vessel’s cargo were two hundred and sixty. AFTER all the business was ended on the coast of Africa, the ship sailed from thence to Barbadoes. After an ordinary passage, except great mortality by the small pox, which broke out on board, we arrived at the island of Barbadoes; but when we reached it, there were found, out of the two hundred and sixty that sailed from Africa, not more than two hundred alive. These were all sold, except myself and three more, to the planters there. The vessel then sailed for Rhode Island.\textsuperscript{13}

As in the case of Venture Smith, other Gold Coast captives found themselves in a predicament regardless of their social standing in local society. From the same port of Anomabu, William Unsah Sessarakoo (also possibly known as William Ansa Sasraku), a "young prince of Annamaboe," was duplicitously enslaved and, like Smith, sold to a planter in Barbados around 1744. However, unlike the previous Gold Coast captives, Sessarakoo was not only liberated in 1749 but managed to return to his family on the Gold Coast a few years later. In the passage that follows, Sessarakoo (or more likely his biographer) recounts the way he actually left the Gold Coast, thinking he was bound for England to be educated:

Under \textit{a} happy Delusion he [Sessarakoo] compleated his Voyage from the Road of Annamaboe, to Bridge-Town in Barbadoes. When the Captain had sold him, and he was put into a Boat to be carried to his Master, he thought he was going on board the Ship that was to carry him to \textit{England}. But what Language can express his Surprize, when from the rough Usage that he met with from two Slaves that were in the Boat, he had no Room left him to doubt that his Condition was the same with theirs? ... He saw numbers in the like Condition, from a Variety of Accidents, but none of them in any Degree comparable to that which had brought this heavy Lot upon him. He was ashamed however to shew less Courage than the rest, or not to oppose Misfortune with equal Steadiness of Mind; he resolved therefore to bear, tho’ he could not be reconciled to his Fate, and to sustain without complaining a Calamity it was out of his Power to remove. In this sad State his Innocence afforded him the only Consolation: ... it rather heightened than abated his other good Qualities, which gained him universal Esteem, while in the low State of a Slave.\textsuperscript{14}

The next Gold Coast captive, reportedly also a Fante, was Ottobah Kobina Cugoano, who was kidnapped around the age of thirteen and sent to Cape Coast Castle. He was then shipped to Grenada and, finally, like a number of other freed captives, to England in 1772. It was here that he published his account at age thirty. In the following excerpt, Cugoano relates his capture and experience on board the slave vessel:

I WAS early snatch’d away from my native country, with about eighteen or twenty more boys and girls, as we were playing in a field. We lived but a few days’ journey from the coast where we were kidnapped, and as we were decoyed and drove along, we were soon conducted to a factory, and from thence, in the fashionable way of traffic, consigned to Grenada. Perhaps it may not be amiss to give a few remarks, as some account of myself, in this transposition of captivity.

I was born in the city of Agimaque, on the coast of Fanny; my father was a companion to the chief in that part of the country of Fante, and when the old king died I was left in his house with his family; soon after[,] I was sent for by his nephew, Ambro Accasa, who succeeded the old king in the chiefdom of that part of Fante, known by the name of Agimaque and Assince. ... [Captured by a group of armed individuals,] [s]ome of us attempted, in vain, to run away, but pistols and cutlasses were soon introduced, threatening, that if we offered to stir, we should all lie dead on the spot. ... Next day we travelled on, and in the evening came to a town, where I saw several white people, which made me afraid that they would eat me, according to our notion, as children, in the inland parts of the country. ... I saw many of my miserable
countrymen chained two and two, some handcuffed, and some with their hands tied behind. We were conducted along by a guard, and when we arrived at the castle, I asked my guide what I was brought there for, he told me to learn the ways of the brownlow [Twi: abonfo, “white people” in common parlance], that is, the white-faced people. I saw him take a gun, a piece of cloth, and some lead for me, and then he told me that he must now leave me there, and went off. This made me cry bitterly, but I was soon conducted to a prison, for three days, where I heard the groans and cries of many, and saw some of my fellow-captives. But when a vessel arrived to conduct us away to the ship, it was a most horrible scene; there was nothing to be heard but the rattling of chains, smacking of whips, and the groans and cries of our fellow-men. . . . When we were put into the ship, we saw several black merchants coming on board, but we were all drove into our holes. . . . [A] plan was concerted amongst us, . . . but we were betrayed by one of our own countrywomen, who slept with some of the headmen of the ship, for it was common for the dirty filthy sailors to take the African women and lie upon their bodies; but the men were chained and pent up in holes.15

Despite the British abolition of transatlantic slaving in the early nineteenth century, international and domestic forms of slaving continued unabated. Though the Gold Coast then became a very marginal participant, the story of Asante captives John Joseph and his unnamed sister shows that Gold Coast captives were still being exported to the Americas from this region or an adjacent one into the mid-nineteenth century. Here, Joseph recounts his journey and the continued terror experienced in North America:

I, JOHN JOSEPH, the subject of this narrative, am a native of Ashantee [Asante], in Western Africa. I was born of respectable parents, my father being a distinguished Chief. . . . When I was about three years of age, my father engaged in a deadly war with one of the [local Gold Coast societies], and in an unsuccessful encounter with the enemy he was completely routed, and a great many of our tribe taken prisoners. The enemy ransacked my father's habitation, and savagely dragged me and my beloved sister, from the arms of a dear distracted mother. We were then taken to the coast, together with three hundred prisoners of war, where we were put on board a slave ship, sent to New Orleans, in the state of Louisiana [Louisiana], South America [southern United States], and there sold as slaves. I was bought at the public auction, by one Mr. Johnstone, a cotton planter, in New Orleans. I was then put by him in the calaboose, or prison (a place for keeping slaves when they are brought from Africa, and also runaway slaves,) I was kept there until I was old enough to work, when I was placed on a cotton plantation. My occupation there was to press the cotton, under the superintendence of what is called the negro-driver, who often punished me very severely for the least fault, in a most cruel and inhuman manner. . . . After my inhuman punishment, I was heavily laden with chains by night, to prevent any possibility of my escape from this den of horrors, and on one occasion[occasion] on my remonstrating with my cruel persecutor he struck me a blow on the mouth with the butt end of his whip which knocked out three of my front teeth.16

Joseph was later resold to slaveholders in South Carolina and Virginia. Eventually he escaped to England in 1843, converted to Christianity, and then related his account. What became of his sister he does not say, and we do not know.

**Context and West Central Africa**

The coastline of west central Africa stretches is approximately 1,200 miles long, stretching from the island of Fernando Po (Bioko) to the south of Benguela in present-day Angola. This section focuses on the two major slaving regions in west central Africa: Kongo and Ndongo (Angola). Like the Gold Coast, west central African societies such as the Kingdom of Kongo had early encounters with the Portuguese in the late fifteenth century. However, the disparate nature of those encounters would shape the two African regions' histories in totally different ways. The Kongo-Angola region fell under the sway of Catholicism and early Portuguese slaving and colonization via the Portuguese colonial states in Luanda and Benguela, whereas the Gold Coast resisted Christianization and remained a small-scale net importer of captives (from neighboring peoples) until the mid-seventeenth century. But
like the Gold Coast, the Kingdom of Kongo enjoyed an early history of economic prosperity quite some time before the Portuguese arrived on its coastline. The economies of west central Africa, which relied on the trading of cloth, copper, shell, and iron goods—and the use of currencies made from these commodities—were not wholly dependent on domestic forms of servile labor or slave trading, though the region had extensive commercial markets that could have been used for slave trading, and captive laborers were indeed present in the area.

West central African societies prior to the arrival of the Portuguese valued people above property and goods—though in some cases subjugated peoples with a captive ancestry or “foreign” origins, as well as those under the patronage of another, risked exportation when their patron or holder had to settle a debt or purchase desired European goods. The Portuguese entry into the region was highly transformative, however. A few decades after the Portuguese arrived on the coast of Kongo in 1483, their influence and colonization of the coast reached as far as the Kongo capital of Mbanza Kongo (renamed Sao Salvador) and, later, Angola. This influence had two related consequences. First, the system of various-sized independent communities and large states in the region became (more) stratified as the transatlantic slave system grew and as the number of predatory groups and “big men” (what historian Joseph Miller calls “warlords”) increased to facilitate the workings of that system. Second, societies using captive laborers, whether war captives or subjugated persons who had been “inherited,” turned into slave raiding and slave trading societies. Some societies without a centralized political system were transformed into slave trading communities, and some slave raiding societies became trading societies indirectly linked to the transatlantic slave system. In northwestern Angola, the Imbangala state of Kasanje (ca. 1620–1912), for instance, became a major supplier of European goods to the new series of slave “frontiers” in the east as well as a key supplier of captured Africans destined for the Atlantic coast of Angola in the west and eventually to the Americas. In both Angola and the Kongo, the transatlantic slave system made it possible to exchange people (captive criminals, kidnap victims, and individuals secured from the interior) for political power in the form of imported European goods and guns—a process that widened the cycle of violence involved in the importation of captives from the interior and of guns from the Atlantic coast. Those “big men” of local origin, including so-called Luso-Africans of mixed African-Portuguese parentage and praçeros warlords (Portuguese settlers with large estates worked by enslaved Africans who had been secured through slave raiding), were dependent on credit extended from the Atlantic—credit that allowed them to buy guns and captive Africans. Indeed, if capital was the catalyst for the transatlantic slave system, credit was the driving force that kept the system in motion.

If the major human actors in the drama of the transatlantic slave system in west central Africa were suppliers and buyers from Portugal, Brazil, Britain, and the Kongo-Angola region, the key nonhuman factors were disease, malnutrition, drought (which facilitated the capturing and selling of enslaved Africans), and the very organization and violence of the transatlantic system. Though both Luso-Africans and droughts (accompanied by malnutrition) were much less common on the Gold Coast, in the Kongo-Angola region they sustained a European system in which wealth was created (in a gold- and silver-based capitalist economy) by transforming Africans into captives and captives into precious metals. The latter, in turn, found their way to Europe in exchange for goods. As one early-eighteenth-century British slave ship captain was instructed, “turn your whole Cargo of Goods and Negroes into Gold,” for these “Negroes” were “a perishable commodity” and “the Portuguese [sic] chiefly [brought] Gold from Brazil to purchase their Negroes.” Viewed from this capitalist perspective, the high mortality among and violence toward African captives (as well as potential captives) was a low business risk for European merchants, investors, insurance companies, and the wealthy among them. Moreover, as historian Marcus Rediker has argued, the violence of the transatlantic slave system was central to the rise and movement of global capitalism. Meanwhile, the impact on west central African societies was enormous: transatlantic slaiving altered sex ratios and led to depopulation, created social hierarchies and political fragmentation, introduced new forms of domestic enslavement, and encouraged materialist values in societies that valued people above all.
West Central African Perspectives

In the Kongo-Angola region, very few first-person accounts exist for those who were enslaved. For this region, there is no Olaudah Equiano—the eighteenth-century "Igbo" African whose account of his capture, Atlantic crossing, life in North America, and freedom and involvement in abolitionist movement in Britain remains a staple literature. However, we do have internal accounts by rulers who participated in the transatlantic slave system in the Kingdom of Kongo and in Angola during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. These perspectives, plus a brief account by one captive who made the Atlantic crossing to Cartagena (Columbia), complement those shared by Gold Coast captives and enlarge our understanding of the human toll taken by the transatlantic slave system.

We begin with several excerpts from the voluminous letters of Nzinga Mbemba (Afonso I, ruler of Kongo, ca. 1509–1542), the first and perhaps most reputed promoter of Christianity and Europeanization in the Kongo. After the death of Afonso’s father Nzinga Nkuwu in 1509, a power struggle ensued between Afonso and his “half-brother” Mpanzu a Kitima. With Portuguese military support, Afonso and his supporters defeated what he called “our enemies” and developed a special relationship with the Portuguese crown and certain Portuguese merchants and clerics stationed in the Kongo thereafter. The following passages from his extensive writings focus on the transatlantic slave system. In a letter to Manuel I, king of Portugal (dated October 5, 1514), Afonso or his clerk wrote the following:21

Then there arrived in our kingdom a ship of Gonçalo Rodrigues which had gone to Mina [Gold Coast] and had come for [two Portuguese Catholic] fathers, who had been here a long time. We therefore sent them away and gave each of them, and Gonçalo Rodrigues, 1500 manilhas [copper bracelets used as currency] and 150 slaves.

[After the arrival of some Portuguese priests] . . . we gave them [money] so that they all began to deal in buying and selling. We [told them] . . . if they were to buy some slaves, they should not purchase any women . . . Yet notwithstanding they began to fill the houses with whores, in such a fashion that Father Pero Fernandes impregnated a woman in his house and she gave birth to a mulatto . . .

[W]e sent a letter to your Highness and another to Queen Dona Leonor—and with our relatives we sent 700 manilhas, many slaves, parrots, animals, and civer cats. . . . Each of them [masons] already had bought from 15 to 20 slaves . . . Those masons left, and took as many slaves and goods as they had, and no more than three remained here. We dispatched the said ship promptly and sent 200 manilhas and 60 slaves to Fernão de Melo, aside from those we gave to his servants; and we sent our nephew Pedro Afonso on the ship, with a letter to your highness in which we gave an account of affairs here, and sent your Highness 200 manilhas and certain slaves, so that Pedro Afonso could take them to Portugal and buy us some clothes there . . . [In] the large ship and the caravel we sent two of our nephews, with our son Dom Francisco—and 500 slaves for both ships, with 30 extra slaves, so that if some of the 500 slaves died their number could be made up from the 30 . . .

And Dom Pedro took 190 slaves—that is 100 of ours and 90 for your Highness—to make up for those who had remained here because they were too thin. With him went all our nephews, and he was to convey our obedience to the Pope . . . Some priests came . . . and they all began to buy slaves—in spite of the fact that Your Highness’ instructions forbade it. And then we posted our own decree that no one was to buy slaves except the factor.

In another letter from Afonso to João III (dated July 6, 1526), Afonso talked about the destruction of his kingdom at the hands of the Portuguese nationals he had invited to live in Kongo:22

Your Highness should know how our Kingdom is being lost in so many ways that it is convenient to provide for the necessary remedy, since this is caused by the excessive freedom given by your factors and officials to the men and merchants who are allowed to come to this Kingdom and set up shops with goods and many things which have been prohibited by us . . . And we cannot reckon how great the damage is, since the mentioned merchants are taking every day our natives, sons of the land and the sons of our noblemen and vassals and our relatives, because the thieves and men of bad conscience grab...
them wishing to have the things and wares of this Kingdom which they are
ambitious of; they grab them and get them to be sold; and so great, sir[,] is
the corruption and licentiousness that our country is being completely de-
populated.... [1] It is our will that in these kingdoms there should not be any
trade of slaves or outlet for them.

In October 1526, Afonso again wrote to João III, king of Portugal, com-
plaining of the ways in which imported European goods have created a
predatory environment among his people:

Moreover, in our kingdoms there is another great inconvenience which is of
little service to God, and this is that many of our people, keenly desirous as
they are of the wares and things of your kingdoms, which are brought her
by your people, and in order to satisfy their voracious appetite, seize many
of our people, freed and exempt men; and very often it happens that they
kidnap nobleman and the sons of noblemen, and our relatives, and take them
to be sold to the white men who are in our kingdoms; and for this purpose
they have concealed them; and others are brought during the night so that
they might not be recognized. 23

And as soon as they are taken by the white men they are immediately
ironed and branded with fire, and [then] they are carried to be embarked....

And to avoid such a great evil we passed a law so that any white man living
in our Kingdoms and wanting to purchase goods in any way should first in-
form three of our noblemen and officials of our court whom we rely upon
in this matter.... [1] If cleared by them [the appointed noblemen and officials]
there will be no further doubt nor embargo for them to be taken and em-
arked. But if the white men do not comply with it they will lose the afore-
mentioned goods [i.e., enslaved peoples]. And if we do them this favor and
concession it is for the part Your Highness has in it, since we know that it is
in your service too that these goods are taken from our kingdom.

Judging from these letters, the internal decline of independent Kôngo
began during Afonso’s reign. Its disintegration accelerated after his death as
the country dissolved into warring factions seeking the throne. This situation
came to a head when Kôngo-Portuguese relations deteriorated as a result
of the Portuguese invasion of Angola in the 1520s, followed by a crippling
civil war after the death of anti-Portuguese ruler Garcia II (r. 1641–1661)—
an outcome that led to further internal squabbling. The Portuguese invasion
of Angola brought another important ruler into the picture—Njinga
Mbande of Ndongo and Matamba—and the complex alliances between the
Portuguese and Africans, especially rulers such as Njinga, sustained Por-
tuguese influence in its coastal enclaves, while extending that sway into the
interior through such alliances. 24 Born around 1582 in the Kingdom of
Ndongo, Njinga was the eldest child of King Mbandi Ngola (whose name
was the source of name “Angola”). After claiming the throne in the wake of
her brother’s suicide in 1624, Njinga, like Afonso, was also Christianized
(baptized as Ana de Sousa) and engaged in the transatlantic slave system in
competition with other local rulers. In an early letter to the Portuguese com-
mander in eastern Angola (dated March 3, 1625), Njinga wrote:

I will give you an account of how as I was sending some slaves to the market
of Bumba Aquianço: Aire came out with his army, and robbed me of thirty
slaves of those I had sent[.] I sought satisfaction against my vassal [and] my
army met with nine men who were with the Tiger [a Portuguese field com-
mander] in the land, and putting upon these nine who went to meet my army
outside of Pedra [(a fortress,)] it pleased God that they were defeated by mine
where I brought back six alive.... Your Grace, send me a hair net and four
yards of gram for a cover, and a bedspread of montaria, and good wine, and a
arroba of wax from Vellas, and a half dozen Indian colored cloths and two or
three table cloths of Kendas, some red, blue and wine-colored rubies, and a
sun hat of blue velvet, or the one that you wear, and 100 folios of paper. 25

In another letter to the Governor General of Angola (dated December
13, 1655), Njinga wrote the following words in the context of peace treaty
negotiations beginning in 1626 with the Portuguese:

I have complained so much to the past governors, who have always promised
to return my sister [captured by the Portuguese in battle], to which end I
have given infinite slaves and done thousands of banzos [trading goods], and she was never returned but after wars were made to disquiet me and make me always go about as Jaga [Imbangala; fierce warriors used as mercenaries by Njinga and the Portuguese], using tyrannies, some as not allowing children, this being the style of quilombo [military encampment], and other ceremonies, with [which] I have completely given up. . . .

Concerning the two hundred slaves which Your Lordship asks for the ransom of my sister D. Barbora [Kijunji], it is a very rigorous price. I have given the slaves which Your Lordship already must know, to past governors and ambassadors, outside mimos and secretaries and servants of your house, and many residents, that already today I feel tricked. That which our Lordship wishes me to give would be 130 slaves, the 100 I will send when my sister [is] in Embaca [Mbaka; a Portuguese fort].

Near the end of her life, Njinga wrote a letter (dated June 15, 1660) to Antonio de Olivdeira de Cadornega, resident historian and slave dealer in Angola, about runaway captives. In it, she responded to the claim that she harbors them:

The letter which your grace wrote to me concerning your runaway people which my people sold or stole, this is said by people who wish ill to the peace and Christianity, because if your grace could ask all the Pumbeiros [agents dispatched by merchants to acquire inland captives] of the whites who come to my Court with the goods of their masters to trade, your grace would know that the blacks of your grace are so backward that when we sell slaves to them, they inform us that the slaves were well watched over and captured; they say of them that they are villains[,] they send free slaves to do your service to say to Your Grace that in this my banza [capital town] many old free women fled to me as the said people say; of the newer people: If they were here they could make diligent [inquiries concerning the "slave" status of those offered for sale].

By the time of Njinga's death in 1663, more captive Africans had departed the Kongo-Angola region than had departed the Gold Coast throughout the period 1440–1820. Many of these captives endured a terrible journey from the interior to the ports of west central Africa, but that experience did not—and could not—prepare them for the violence and fear they experienced upon embarking for the Americas. In the following account of a journey across the Atlantic in 1659, Jose Monzolo, an enslaved African from the Kingdom of Kongo residing in Cartagen, focused on a widespread belief among captive Africans from Senegambia to Angola:

When they left their own country, they believed that the Spanish [or another European slaving nation], whom they called whites, brought them to kill them and to make the flags for the ships from their remains, for when they were red it was from the blood of the Moors [Africans], and desperately fearing this many threw themselves in the sea on the voyage.

For the captives who arrived in the Americas, the terror only continued. Even those who remained on the African continent witnessed the intensification of local forms of enslavement that eventually transformed, in the late nineteenth century, into an extractive colonial economy based on cash crops (e.g., coffee, cocoa, oil palm), natural resources (e.g., timber, bauxite, gold, diamond), low-paid contract and migrant laborers, and taxation systems that funded the colonial state. Thus, the termination of domestic slavery by European colonists only brought African labor within the European currency-based world economy, where many became bound to slavery by another name.

QUESTIONS

1. Describe the ways in which Africans became synonymous with the ideas of "slave" and the "slave trade." What are some useful ways to talk about the "slave trade"?

2. What were the key mechanisms and forces, both local and international, that led to the capture, enslavement, and exportation of enslaved Africans from Senegambia to Angola?

3. What significant cultural or socioeconomic ideas, themes, or perspectives about the eighteenth-century Gold Coast and the transatlantic slave system
can we draw from the accounts of Belinda (Royall), James Gronniosaw, Venture Smith, William Sessarakoo, Ottobah Cugoano, and John Joseph?

4. What significant cultural or socioeconomic ideas, themes, or perspectives about sixteenth- and seventeenth-century west central Africa and the transatlantic slave system can we draw from the accounts of Nzinga Mbemba (Afonso I), Njinga Mbande, and Jose Monzolo?

5. How might the transatlantic slave system and the Americas have looked then and today if the enslaved labor force between 1500 and 1900 was predominantly European and not African?

FURTHER READINGS


NOTES

1. On Indian Ocean and trans-Saharan commerce in Africa and world history, see, respectively, Edward A. Alpers, East Africa and the Indian Ocean (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2009), and Ralph A. Austin, Trans-Saharan Africa in World History (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

2. For more on these powerful merchants and other individuals of mixed parentage, see Peter Mark, Portuguese Style and Luso-African Identity: Precolonial Senegambia, Sixteenth-Nineteenth Centuries (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), and George E. Brooks, EuroAfricans in Western Africa: Commerce, Social Status, Gender, and Religious Observance from the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2003).


10. In the extant sources, Belinda was consistently referred to as an "African" rather than by the more common term "Negroe," implying North American birth.


14. William Ansah Sessarakoo, *The Royal African or, Memoirs of the Young Prince of Annamaboe.* ... (London: W. Reeve, G. Woodfall, and J. Barnes, 1790), pp. 42–44. Readers should note that the authorship of this account is in question, for it contains very little on Sessarakoo’s life; in fact, “The Royal African” is a novel based on Sessarakoo’s presence in mid-eighteenth century England. They should also note that Sessarakoo was the son of powerful Fante merchant and de facto ruler John Corranoo, whose well-known dealings and scuffles with the Royal African Company of England and the French are a large part of what led to Sessarakoo’s enslavement and his return home.


27. MMA, vol. 12, p. 289.
