

# I

## FROM AFRICA TO THE AMERICAS

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The African Diaspora in the Americas was violently created by the institutions and individuals who engineered as well as profited from five centuries of transatlantic slaving. Any examination of the coerced mechanisms through which this diaspora was born must confront the central ideas of “slave” and “trade.” This chapter will begin with those ideas and then provide a broad overview of transatlantic slaving as a necessary context for this book’s foci on race and health in the African Diaspora.

For most of us in the Americas, the first image that comes to mind when we hear or see the term “slave” is that of an enslaved African. Indeed, many of us still view Africans principally as (former) “slaves,” rather than as humans first. The word “slave,” however, derives from the Greek term *sklavos* (referring to the large number of Slavic peoples under captivity) and the Latin *sclavus* (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 “slave.”

Our use of the phrase “transatlantic slave system” instead of 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, 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, and their laboring lives. The term “trade” conjures up an image of an exchange of goods 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 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—that is, the colonies and later nations established by Europeans in the Americas. 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 a further 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 public. In most historical instances members of distinct and sometimes collaborating 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” reaffirms 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 because 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 pawning (using valuables or individuals as collateral for credit and the establishment of trust) contributed a small number of captive Africans to the transatlantic system since pawns, in the form of gold or humans, guaranteed a loan and theoretically prevented one from being ar-

bitrarily seized and sold because 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 slaving 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 by transatlantic slaving. 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.

### *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 slaving 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 knowledge 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 coastal African communities for captives. By the fifteenth century, these African captives were increasingly replacing the “Slavs” and other captives in Portugal, Spain, and France. The African captives by Portuguese slaving voyages as well as by 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 (present-day Istanbul) 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 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 Amerindians (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, coffee, 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. 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.

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. One African region, the area from Senegambia to the Ivory Coast, accounted for 42 percent of such revolts, but that region 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 61 recorded attacks occurred on ships by land-based

Africans in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Africans 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 endless voyage of transatlantic slaving were 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. Overall, 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 13-15 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. 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 clear 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 Brazil and the Caribbean were major destinations for enslaved Africans. Brazil received many 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 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 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 15–20 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 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 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 and satisfaction of demands for sugar, rum, tobacco, and coffee. This quest for pleasurable stimulants unleashed European “free market” forces unto 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 eighteenth century Europe and North America at the very height of human trafficking within a European-managed slaving system is just one of several contradictions of the era—a contradiction exacerbated by “free market” forces that needed both skilled and unskilled labor to meet growing demands. A range of people participated in this system, though at different levels, but always with dire consequences for African societies.



Several 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 and its system of credit was introduced 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. Indeed, if capital was the catalyst for the transatlantic slave system, credit was the driving force that kept the system in motion. For African societies, the cannibalizing and capitalist impact of transatlantic slaving was enormous and as unquantifiable as the number of Africans removed from their homelands first to Europe and then to the Americas and Asia in the last half of the millennium. For those who arrived in the Americas, the terror and violence of capitalist greed only continued, morphing thematically into mass enslavement, mass segregation (Jim Crow, debt peonage), and mass incarceration. Those who remained on the African continent witnessed the growth of local forms of enslavement, which 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. 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.