Middle and Final Passages in the Atlantic Slave Trade

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Summary

By current estimates, over 450,000 Africans arrived in North America as captives. While the dreaded "Middle Passage" has justifiably commanded public and scholarly attention, the men, women, and children who arrived in North American aboard slave ships actually experienced multiple passages. Virtually all were born free and subsequently enslaved, enduring intra-African journeys of various lengths before arriving at the coast for sale to Europeans. Then, after an Atlantic crossing averaging two months, American planters and merchants transported them by land and sea to their eventual destinations. Although the fundamentals were similar across time, the particular circumstances and hence the journeys themselves varied greatly. Before the 1800, most captives wound up working on plantations near the Atlantic coast. After 1800, as the cotton boom took hold, it was much more common for Africans to journey far into the American continental interior. Over 95 percent of all Africans arrived between 1700 and 1807, the vast majority in the Chesapeake and Charleston. This influx allowed specific African ethno-cultural groups to form clusters and speech communities, although these waned when the foreign slave trade became illegal in 1808. An illegal slave trade persisted up to the Civil War, but it was much smaller than the pre-1808 trade. It differed also in its reliance on the Caribbean as a transhipment point for captives, rather than on Africa.

Keywords: transatlantic slave trade; intra-American slave trade; middle passage; resistance; shipmates; creolization

The Process of Enslavement in Africa

Slavery has existed on all inhabited continents, and Africa is no exception. All of the major empires since ca. 1000 CE—Ghana, Mali, Songhai—had slavery to some degree. However, it is important to recognize that the nature and significance of slavery in African societies varied greatly. One common feature was that enslaved status was almost always limited to people who were understood to be outsiders, whether for reasons of language, culture, politics, or religion. By convention, outsiders could be bought and sold without restriction, as property in essence if not always in name. The children of enslaved mothers, however, were considered to have moved closer to insider status, and could usually not be sold away. Subsequent generations often became even more closely integrated into their societies and treated almost as kin, although the taint of enslaved origins endured.[1]

In Africa as elsewhere, slavery before 1500 tended to be a relatively minor "social institution" rather than a major economic institution. The growing European demand for enslaved Africans as colonial laborers altered the nature of slavery in Africa. Over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, several African states took advantage of the slave trade to acquire military power and wealth. These included Segu, Kaabu and Futa Jallon in upper Guinea, Asante, Allada, and Dahomey in lower Guinea, and Kasanje in Central Africa. The wars of conquest waged by these states, sometimes but not always motivated by a desire to control and profit from the slave trade, produced large numbers of captives, many of whom were marched to the coast for sale. As European demand for captives soared, it subverted African systems of criminal justice and debt. Judicial processes dispatching people into Atlantic slavery became ever more common. In some cases, relatives were able redeem a person from captivity, but because this required a lot money (or additional captives), it was rarely an option for the non-elite.[2]

Although personal narratives of enslavement in Africa were once thought to be very rare, historians now recognize that quite a few exist, a few hundred at least. Taken together, these autobiographical testimonies reveal the variety of circumstances that led to enslavement, as well as the captives' status as exploitable, saleable outsiders. Mohammadu Sisei, a teacher who lived near the Gambia River, was enslaved during a war. His captors marched him to the slave-raiding state of Kaabu, where he worked for five months before being put aboard a ship.[3] Others lost their freedom to kidnappers, for whom the existence of a market in human beings offered a path to quick profit. Kidnappers often took advantage of travelers in unfamiliar lands, and especially of children, who were easy to overpower. One woman from the interior of the eastern Gold Coast recalled hearing rumors that soldiers from Asante were roaming the area, seizing children, whom they gagged and put in sacks. Kidnappers surprised her family, killing her brother and cutting off her sister's hand to get a gold arm ring, then sold her to coastal traders. Another man from the Gold Coast told of incurring great gambling debts, which his father had to pay. When his father eventually refused to pay anymore, the man was enslaved by his creditors.[4] Finally, Europeans slave traders occasionally seized captives themselves, especially when they thought they could get away with it. However, the fact that Africans were much more powerful than Europeans on land, coupled with the fact that people quickly learned to avoid risky situations, meant that only a small fraction, probably less than one percent, of all captives lost their freedom in that way.[5]

Most of the Africans sold to European slave traders were male. The proportion varied from region to region, but in the aggregate almost two-thirds of all captives put aboard ship were male.[6] Three factors combined to bring this about. First, American planters favored male captives for heavy labor. Second, many African societies valued female captives over males, both for their labor and for their ability to have children, which increased the owner's

enslaved retinue. Finally, women made up a majority of those dispatched into the trans-Saharan trade, which in some areas provided a partial counterweight to the transatlantic trade. This unbalanced sex ratio had an effect on American plantation societies, slowing the development of a creole, or American-born generation.[7]

In Africa, the value of a captive increased with distance from the initial point of enslavement. This was due not only to the fact that escape was easier in familiar environs, but also because the cultural and linguistic differences between captor and captive widened with distance, accentuating the captives' outsiderness and exploitability. The initial passage in the slave trade, then, was usually a journey within Africa from the point of enslavement to a more distant point of sale as part of a caravan. In most cases, the caravans were organized by networks of African merchants specializing in long-distance trade, such as the Juula and Jahanke of upper Guinea, the Aro on the Bight of Biafra, or the Lemba of Central Africa. Transit to the coast could take weeks or months and cost many captives their lives.[8] Salih Bilali, who was enslaved near Jenne on the Niger River in the 1780s, travelled first to Segu and then was transferred multiple times before eventually arriving on the Gold Coast at Anomabu, a journey of at least 700 miles.[9] If the rainy season arrived before the caravan reached the coast, or if prices there were low, the captives might halt and be put to work for several months before continuing their journey. Often, a captive would be sold serially from one merchant to the next, each trader moving the person further from home. However, research from the 2000s and later revealed that not all captives travelled such distances. In certain eras and locales, most captives were enslaved within one hundred miles of the coast. The captives from the schooner *Amistad* (which was not a transatlantic slave ship but it did transport people who had arrived aboard one) are a good example. All of them came from the within a hundred or so miles of Gallinas, on the coast of modern Sierra Leone.[10] The

variability highlights the importance of regional African histories to any understanding of the slave trade.

Upon arrival at the coast, captives were usually housed in a fort or a smaller installation before being put aboard ship. The type of installation and the amount of time spent in them varied. Some were full-fledged castles, such as Cape Coast Castle on the Gold Coast or Bunce Island in the Sierra Leone River, but just as often they were cruder log structures known as "barracoons," some of which even lacked roofs. During the eighteenth century, when slave trading was legal under US and British law, traders usually transported captives to the ship a few at a time as they were purchased. This meant that a captive might spend weeks or even months aboard ship before embarking on the Atlantic crossing. Confinement, whether in the castles or aboard ship, further sickened captives and contributed to the high mortality of the Middle Passage. Data from the slave trading forts on the Gambia and Sierra Leone suggest that between 10 and 30 percent of all captives died awaiting transportation.[11] Practices changed during the illegal era of the nineteenth century. To avoid British Naval patrols, slave traders avoided loading captives gradually and instead kept them hidden on shore until immediately before departure for the Americas to speed the process.[12] This practice was no better for the captives' health, as it still involved the imprisonment of hundreds of people over long periods of time in horrendous conditions.

The Atlantic Crossing

The term "Middle Passage" originated in reference to the triangular sailing pattern traced by most North Atlantic slave ships, once thought to be the norm for the trade. Recent work has shown that almost four in ten slave ships sailed a bilateral route from an American to an African port and back. In the slave trade to North America, bilateral routes were common in New York and in South Carolina after 1804. For that reason, the term "Atlantic crossing" is more accurate than "Middle Passage."

Most of what is known of the Atlantic crossing comes from sources that were created by Europeans, such as log books and eyewitness testimony. Collectively, these sources detail the standard practices followed aboard slave ships. Security was the paramount concern. Shackles were essential equipment, and vessels also carried a small arsenal of cutlasses and firearms. A few captains even used dogs to control the captives. And because slavers believed that women inspired men to rebel, slavers almost always segregated captives by sex into different "apartments" below decks. Because slave traders knew that healthy captives fetched higher prices than sick ones, they forced them to exercise, bringing separate groups of men and women on deck each day. To guard the captives, crew members stood behind a large wooden "barricado," or wall, which was topped by swivel guns, a cross between a large shotgun and a small artillery piece. Men and women took their meals separately, with food usually consisting of rice or beans served en masse in a tub.[13]

The psychological experience of crossing the Atlantic in the hold of a slave ship is elusive. Although hundreds of Africans left autobiographical testimony behind, few devoted much attention to the crossing itself. That in itself is a major statement, as more than one narrator found the experience beyond words. A number of historians have suggested that the Atlantic crossing was the moment when captives—which is to say people--became commodities.[14] And undoubtedly, the records of any slave ship treat people in exactly that way, appraising, enumerating, and writing them off as losses when they died. The problem with that view is that the captives had already been commodified by the time they arrived aboard ship, bought and sold multiple times and transferred from one merchant network to another.

A more useful way to understand the function and meaning of the Middle Passage is as a link between one system of slavery in which outsiderness was calculated in reference to

politics (as in warfare), religion, or culture, and another in which outsiderness and enslavability were calculated primarily in reference to race. Many narrators noted that fact, struck by the whiteness of their captors. When the young boy named Sitiki saw his first white person, he "scrutinized him closely to see what kind of being I could make out." Ofodobendo Wooma, also a child, was sure that the men who inspected and purchased him were "devils." But while virtually everyone noted the racialized nature of the slave ship, some processed it in more complex ways. Muslims, many of whom came from areas where they might have encountered lighter-skinned Moors and Arabs, were sometimes less struck by the difference in appearance, describing their keepers as "Christian" rather than "white."[15]

It hardly needs pointing out that shipboard conditions were horrific. The passage to North America averaged 65 days, but could vary by a month on either end. Apart from a short period of forced daily exercise, most captives remained shackled below. Blood, feces, and sea water ran across the deck. To maximize capacity, slavers built platforms against the bulkheads for captives to lie upon. This left those above and below without enough room to sit upright, forcing them to lie on their sides for months on end. Meanwhile, shackles tore skin from wrists and ankles, leading to infection. Vessels becalmed in the equatorial doldrums cut water and food rations, which further weakened and killed many. Disease ravaged captives and crew alike, with intestinal maladies as the most common and small pox the most feared. Crews, often outnumbered 10:1, beat captives with whips and clubs to terrorize them into submission. The documentary record also contains examples of sexual assault, which we must assume to be only the tip of the iceberg.[16] About 15 percent of all captives who survived the journey to the coast to be placed aboard ships died before reaching the Americas, although as with voyage length, that proportion could vary greatly. Because each captive death represented a loss to investors, captains kept a close count.[17]

Rebellion was common aboard slave ships, despite the best efforts of the crew. Historians believe that one voyage in ten saw some kind of overt resistance, ranging from full-scale uprisings to foiled plots. Interestingly, captives were just as likely to rise in mid-ocean as they were within sight of land.[18] This speaks to a certain determination to overturn enslavement, whatever the cost. Most revolts were crushed by heavily-armed crews, and defeated rebels often jumped overboard, denying their bodies to their captors. Suicide, accomplished both by jumping overboard and by refusal to eat, was a common mode of individual resistance. Some vessels even carried a special apparatus, known as a *speculum oris*, to force open the jaws of those refusing food.

One of the more important, yet elusive products of the Atlantic crossing was the formation of strong bonds among those who travelled aboard the same vessel. These "shipmate" relationships existed throughout the Atlantic World, and survivors of the passage often regarded them as a form of kinship. It is often supposed that ethnolinguistic diversity aboard ship prevented captives from communicating with each other, but the fact that most slave traders operated over established commercial networks and purchased captives in a single coastal region meant that captives stood a very good chance of finding others who spoke the same or related languages aboard the vessel.

The best empirical study of the shipmate relationship involves former captives from an illegal Brazilian ship, but the conclusions can be generalized to other locales to a greater or lesser degree. The *Emilia* sailed from the Bight of Benin in 1821 with 392 captives, 71 percent of whom were probable Yoruba speakers. British patrollers captured the vessel, and the captives were "liberated," which meant that they became "free Africans," an intermediate status between free and enslaved in which they were hired out to employers for fourteen year terms. Over the years, many of the shipmates kept in close contact with each other, having

bonded both on the basis of shared language and experience. We know this because in 1836, sixty of the former *Emilia* captives petitioned to return to their homeland, something that was not available to typical enslaved person. Although their status as free Africans allowed the men and women of the *Emilia* to maintain their bonds and act collectively, we can be certain that the connections among those who remained in captivity and in close enough proximity to one another were just as strong. Shipmate bonding based on shared culture and language helped captives to find belonging in the otherwise-alienating environment of the slave ship and carried over into their new lives in the Americas.[19]

Caribbean Stopovers and the Intra-American Slave Trade

Virtually all vessels destined for North America called initially in the Caribbean. Barbados, the easternmost island, was a common port of call, but it was not the only one. Stopping in the Caribbean served many purposes, with the chance to replenish water and food stores foremost among them. Some captains also took the opportunity to offload captives that they judged too ill to survive the passage to the North American mainland. These they left with local merchants, who sold the captives as quickly as possible. Sometimes those continuing onto North America were allowed to land temporarily, where they would be kept in a merchant's yard. However, temporary landing in the Caribbean required special permission, since most colonial governments taxed imported captives. More often, captives *en route* to the mainland colonies remained aboard ship. A British surgeon who boarded a Savannah-bound ship in Barbados noted that the captives spent the day on deck but slept below, where it was so crowded that it was "scarcely possible to set a foot between their naked bodies." For these and other captives, a stop in the Caribbean did not translate into even a temporary reprieve from shipboard confinement.[20]

A brisk intra-American trade operated from the Caribbean, which should not be confused with the temporary stopovers of the transatlantic trade. One out of every six

captives who landed in the Caribbean was eventually transhipped to another New World destination, including North America, another Caribbean island, or the Spanish American mainland. Despite the shorter distances, intra-American voyages had death rates that were comparable to transatlantic voyages, since the captives began these journeys in a weakened state. In the North American case, the significance of the intra-American slave trade varied greatly in both time and space. As a general rule, it was most important to those colonies where the demand for captives was too weak to attract the bigger transatlantic vessels. Before the emergence of large-scale plantation agriculture in North America before the mid seventeenth century, it was the intra-American and not the transatlantic trade that delivered most captives. Interestingly, the famous "twenty and odd" Africans who arrived in Jamestown in 1619 were not among them. They had set sail from Angola to Mexico but their vessel was attacked by English and Dutch privateers, with the latter then transporting some of the captives to Virginia—a disrupted transatlantic voyage, in essence.[21]

The fame of this cohort notwithstanding, Africans, both free and enslaved, had been in North America for almost a hundred years before 1619, and up to about 1650, a majority had arrived via some form of intra-American trade. Florida had an especially long involvement in the intra-American trade. The first known enslaved Africans (not counting the free blacks who accompanied Juan Ponce de Leon on his 1513 Florida expedition) were those brought from Hispaniola to modern-day Georgia by Lucas Vázquez de Allyón in 1526. Because Allyón's men transported them for their own use, it can be argued that this did not represent a true slave trade, but after the founding of St. Augustine in the 1560s, a very low-volume Cuba-Florida trade did develop. After the British takeover in 1763, most of the Africans arriving in Florida were transhipped from South Carolina and Georgia. In the second Spanish period, after 1783, the slave trade from Cuba continued, but it appears to have involved mostly creole, rather than African-born captives.[22]

The intra-American slave trade was also an important source for the larger plantation colonies. Prior to 1660, the intra-American slave trade was the principal source of African captives for the Chesapeake, and it remained so for Carolina well into the eighteenth century. Even once the transatlantic slave trade became well-established, the intra-American trade continued both as a supplement and as a way to supply smaller, outlying markets, such as North Carolina and Maryland.[23] Louisiana's history of French, Spanish, and American rule presents a more complicated case. Under France, Louisiana relied on the transatlantic slave trade from the Bight of Benin and Senegambia. After the shift to Spanish rule in 1763, Louisianians turned to the intra-American trade, since Spain had no African trade of its own. Transatlantic slave trading revived somewhat under American rule after 1803, operating alongside a vigorous intra-American trade originating in primarily in South Carolina but also drawing on the Caribbean.[24]

The intra-American slave trade continued into the nineteenth century, even after 1808, when the foreign slave trade became illegal. In fact, from that date until the abolition of slavery in 1865, the intra-American trade was just about the only way for enslaved Africans to arrive in the United States. Twenty-two transatlantic slave ships are known to have disembarked captives in North America between 1808 and 1820, mostly in Spanish Florida. This was not a regular trade, however, as many were Spanish ships that had been captured by pirates. After 1820, only seven transatlantic slave ships are known to have landed captives in North America, but of these at least four of these had been captured by the Navy and the Africans were eventually liberated. Most captives arriving in North America after 1808, then, came via the Caribbean. Often, they entered in ones and twos, as coerced, clandestine passengers aboard vessels from Cuba and other places where slavery was legal. Larger, more organized trades operated as well, particularly in Texas. During the 1810s, pirates under the command of the Lafittes of New Orleans landed captives from the Caribbean in east Texas to

evade U.S. officials, and then smuggled them across the border into Louisiana. In the 1830s, when Mexican Texas began to develop its own plantation economy, smugglers purchased 1,000 or so Africans in Cuba and transported them to the lower Brazos River, where they formed the largest African-born community in the antebellum United States.[25]

However, frequent rumors to the contrary, the total number of African or foreign-born captives landed in the United States after 1820 was very small, certainly nowhere near enough to have a significant demographic impact. No evidence exists for large-scale illegal landings of captive Africans on the American mainland after 1808. Had the numbers had been truly significant, they would be reflected in the censuses of 1870 and 1880. While several hundred Africans do appear in the censuses, most of them are easily connected with known populations such as the cluster in Texas, or with particular vessels, such as the *Clotilda* in Alabama and the *Wanderer* in Georgia. Nor is it the case that illegality prompted people to suppress documentation of African-born captives. For the cases mentioned, documentation is abundant, with Africans appearing in probate inventories, plantation records, court records, and after emancipation in the censuses of 1870 and 1880. One of the *Clotilda* captives was even the subject of a book by Zora Neale Hurston. So while the vast majority of Africans arriving in North America after 1820 were smuggled in from the Caribbean, the numbers were very small in proportion to the domestic slave trade that channelled an estimated one million people from the upper to the lower South.[26]

Captive Sales and Final Destinations

Whether they arrived via the transatlantic or the intra-American trades, captives generally faced sale very soon after making port. Most colonies mandated a quarantine period, often ten days, during which the ship's crew would shave and oil the captives to make

them appear as healthy as possible. Physicians also examined the captives for signs of contagious diseases. Captives who died while in shipboard quarantine were often thrown overboard. In 1807, the single-most prolific year of the American slave trade, the problem was serious enough that Charleston officials decreed a fine of $100 for anyone found throwing corpses off a ship.[27]

Commission merchants in the American ports organized three types of sales: "scrambles," auctions, and private sales. The scramble was most common for transatlantic slave ships during the colonial era, especially in Charleston, though the practice seems to have waned after the American Revolution. Scrambles took place either in a merchant's yard or aboard the ship, where captives were grouped by sex, age, and overall state of health, as judged by the merchant in charge. Usually, the sale began with the strongest "prime" men being led into the yard or onto the deck of the ship, at which point a crowd of buyers set upon them, physically and violently seizing the captives they wanted, after which the merchant recorded their choices.[28]

Transatlantic traders favored this type of sale because it was in their interest to sell the captives as quickly as possible, before too many sickened and died. The scramble was much faster than auctioning the captives one at a time, and the often-furious competition among buyers led them to overlook illnesses and injuries. Captives not taken in the scramble were labeled as "refuse slaves" and sold at auction afterwards at bargain prices. Speculators bought large numbers of "the refuse," hoping enough would survive to recoup their investment through re-sale, though many did not. Physicians also speculated in "refuse slaves," hoping to nurse them to health for re-sale. Although most captives sold via the scramble went on the first day, due to the significant numbers of ill and injured captives, it still took two weeks for the average sale to finish. Sometimes however, when the demand for captives was not strong,

buyers trickled in at irregular intervals, negotiating prices one captive at a time, which drew out the sale.[29]

The second mode of sale was the more familiar auction. This method was common in the intra-American trade, where the smaller shipments of captives meant that the sale would not last too long. Auctions did occur at times for transatlantic slave ships. The Royal African Company held them during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, and they were also common for the post-revolutionary transatlantic trade. Robert Johnson, who landed in Savannah aboard a transatlantic slaver in the 1790s, recalled being prodded and probed by prospective buyers, after which a "jabber[ing]" man brought down his mallet, finalizing his sale to a local planter.[30] Auctions were also the main mode of sale for the domestic slave trade and would continue so through the antebellum period. Private sales were the least common sales method since they depended on extremely wealthy buyers, who were relatively few. Some were pre-arranged, with a small number of buyers contracting to purchase an entire human cargo, while others were conducted by invitation only at a factor's yard or warehouse.[31]

The average buyer purchased a relatively small number of captives. This matters greatly because it has a bearing on the viability of the shipmate relationship and the newly-arrived Africans' ability to connect with people of similar background. The sales records for twenty-one vessels that arrived in Charleston between 1753 and 1758 show that the average purchase was about three captives. There was much variation, with some large planters and speculators walking away with twenty, even fifty captives from a single vessel, while about half of all purchasers took home a single captive. Sales in the Chesapeake, where demand and overall numbers were lower and where there was no central port comparable to Charleston, were proportionately smaller. More than two-thirds of those who purchased captives from the

Margaret in 1718 took a single captive. Only three buyers took four or more, and the largest single purchase was six. These numbers underscore the fragility of the shipmate relationship in both regions. Most captives disembarking in the Chesapeake found themselves on farms and plantations with no shipmates at all. Most of those arriving in Charleston did end up with at least one shipmate, but high death rates—an estimated one-third died within the first year—would have reduced those chances.[32]

The sale was not the end of the journey, however. Immediately following the sale, slaveholders transported the captives to their final destinations. During the colonial era, these journeys were comparatively short. In 1755, for example, more than half of the captives who arrived in Charleston aboard the slave ship *Hare* went to purchasers who lived within twenty miles of the port, with most of the rest transported to burgeoning rice and indigo plantations twenty-five or more miles to the northeast of Charleston. Only four of the *Hare* captives were brought into the backcountry, which as yet had few white settlers. In most instances, the captives either walked or, if they were lucky, took water transport to the plantation, arriving within a few days at the most.[33]

As the planation system expanded ever deeper into the continental interior, these overland journeys lengthened. When plantation agriculture spread into the Virginia Piedmont during the 1760s and 1770s, for example, slavers shortened the journey (and reduced the chances of loss due to death or flight) by sending their vessels as far upriver as possible to places like Bermuda Hundred, just outside of Richmond. The same happened as the settlement of the Carolina backcountry accelerated in the 1760s. While most captives travelled into the interior with their purchasers, networks of speculators and merchants emerged to channel them to eager buyers who could not easily visit the ports. Such networks existed even in Quaker-dominated Pennsylvania, where merchants habitually marched small

groups of captives, most having arrived via the intra-American trade, into the interior in search of buyers. Onward travel of this sort undoubtedly took a toll, further weakening those who had been fortunate enough to survive the transatlantic passage.[34]

After the American Revolution, African journeys to North America became even longer. In 1783, Britain ceded the territory between the Appalachians and the Mississippi River to the United States, resulting in a wave of settlers into the Old Southwest. While many of the settlers brought American-born bondpeople with them, they also turned to the intra-American slave trade. Over one thousand Africans landed in Gulf Coast ports from the Caribbean each year during the peak period of 1785-1789. Ibrahima Abdul Rahman was one of them. Captured in battle in 1788, he was shipped to the British Caribbean island of Dominica. There, along with fifty-six others, he was purchased by a speculator who transported him to New Orleans, then a Spanish possession. Fourteen of Ibrahima's shipmates perished on the 1,600-mile journey across the Gulf of Mexico. The captives were then put up for sale and purchased by planters who came in from as far away as Natchitoches, Louisiana, near the border with Texas. After spending a month in New Orleans, Ibrahima and 25-30 companions were sent upriver to Natchez, Mississippi, which would have taken anywhere from two to four weeks. The time elapsed from his capture to his arrival in Natchez was about seven months.[35]

Extended journeys like Ibrahima's became the norm in the first decade of the nineteenth century as some 73,000 Africans arrived in North America, more than in any other period.[36] This massive wave was the result of several factors. The first was the invention of the cotton gin, which set off a boom at that spread plantation agriculture deep into the continental interior. The second was the acquisition of Louisiana from France in 1803, which placed the port of New Orleans in American hands and provided still more land for cotton, as

well as sugar cane. The final factor was a reversal of policy in the state of South Carolina in 1803. In 1787, alarmed at the growing trade imbalance with Britain, the main supplier of captives, the state legislature had banned their importation. Upcountry planters, desperate for labor, agitated for a reopening, while Lowcountry planters, worried that a resumption of the trade would devalue their large slaveholdings, ensured that the policy remained in place. The Louisiana Purchase prompted the legislature to rethink matters, as members realized that re-opening the trade could both increase the supply of laborers to the upcountry plantations and satisfy Lowcountry planters by making Charleston the main transshipment point for the rest of the South. Accordingly, on January 1, 1804, the slave trade became legal once more in South Carolina.[38]

Between 1800 and 1809, an estimated 29,000 Africans entered the Georgia and South Carolina upcountry. Another 7,000 wound up in Louisiana, with another 9,000 arriving in Natchez, almost all transhipped from Charleston via New Orleans. Even Tennessee, which as yet had very few large plantations, imported about 2,250 Africans over the decade. In all, a remarkable 17 percent of all of the Africans landed in the North America arrived during the final four years of the legal slave trade, between 1804 and 1807, almost all through the port of Charleston. Like Ibrahima Abdul Rahman in 1780s, these men and women endured capture, shipment to the African coast, a transatlantic crossing, transhipment to New Orleans, followed by a long journey up the Mississippi, and concluding with a trek through the backwoods to their eventual destinations.[39]

Finally, it is worth noting that for a very small minority, the final passage was a return voyage to Africa. The circumstances varied widely. In a few cases, high-born Africans who had been abducted by slave traders, such as Ayuba Suleiman Diallo and the brothers Little Ephraim and Ancona Robin John, were returned in order to placate political rulers and

African slave merchants, on whose cooperation the trade depended.[40] A larger cohort of returnees consisted of the men and women who took advantage of a British offer to shelter captives who fled from rebel slaveholders during the American Revolution. Approximately 3,000 fugitive "Black Loyalists" evacuated along with the British in 1783. In 1792, after suffering from cold and mistreatment in Nova Scotia, some 1,200 of them departed for Sierra Leone, where abolitionists had founded a "free" settlement. Most of the "Nova Scotians," as they are known in Sierra Leonean history, were not African-born, and even those who were did not necessarily come from the region, so in most cases this was not actually a return "home," although in a few cases it was.[41] By far the largest category of returnees consisted of people taken from illegal vessels in the nineteenth century by the naval vessels tasked with enforcing the nation's anti-slave trade laws. Up to the Civil War, the Navy transported some 1,800 "recaptives," as they were called, to Liberia for settlement. Tragically, liberation often entailed an additional Atlantic crossing, which involved physical coercion and disease similar to the slave ships, all of which drove death rates for the entire journey above 50 percent. And as with the Nova Scotians, very few of these recaptives actually came from the part of Africa where they were re-settled.[42]

The Cultural Impact of the Slave Trade

Although it was far from the sole determinant, the slave trade strongly influenced African American demography and culture. The precise nature of this influence has been the subject of longstanding scholarly debate, with some arguing that the trade produced a Black population that was too heterogeneous to allow for the continuation of African cultural practices, instead producing a new "creolized" (hybrid, blended) culture based on African and European materiel. For these scholars, the Atlantic crossing takes on a special significance as the crucible in which linguistic, ethnic, and cultural diversity was superseded by certain fundamental, shared "African" characteristics.[43] Other scholars have argued that the highly

structured nature of the trade did indeed bequeath a measure of cultural coherence, which in turn allowed African speech communities to flourish and specific African cultural practices to take root. A process of creolization did take place, most of these scholars would argue, but it was a slow one.[44]

The difficulty, of course, is that both positions have some validity, depending on the era and the place. In terms of time, approximately 95 percent of all foreign (Africa and the Caribbean) captives arrived in North America between the years 1700 and 1807, against about 4 percent for the period before 1700 and about 2 percent between 1808 and 1860. Africans arriving in the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries would have found it quite difficult to form speech communities; the numbers alone imply that people would have had little choice but to adapt quickly, though that does not mean that they forgot who they were or where they came from. The eighteenth century, on the other hand, was a period of tremendous in-migration, with the pre-1776 African-born share of the enslaved population never dropping below 36 percent, despite the continuous growth of the creole (American-born) population. The long eighteenth century, then was the crucial period, a time when Africa, in John K. Thornton's words, was not "surviving," but "arriving" in North America. It is during this era that entholinguistic clusters were most likely to exist, although varying local conditions meant that they were hardly inevitable.[45]

Geography was another factor that influenced the formation of specific African ethnolinguistic enclaves and the pacing of creolization. A majority of Africans (55 percent) arrived initially in Charleston, while another 33 percent arrived in the Chesapeake. Interestingly, Charleston and the Chesapeake attracted vessels from different regions of Africa. Nearly half (46 percent) of all Africans arriving in Charleston embarked from ports in Upper Guinea. Although it was a linguistically and culturally diverse region, many people

shared a common Mande culture and spoke related languages. The Carolina Low Country was therefore likely dotted with pockets of Mandinka-speakers, especially between about 1750 and 1810.[46] Another 28 percent of the Africans who arrived in Charleston came from ports in the Kikongo-speaking regions of West Central Africa, strongly influencing local culture.[47] West Central Africa's relative cultural and linguistic unity meant that it had a strong influence on Low Country plantations. The Chesapeake also drew on two principal regions, Upper Guinea at 31 percent and the Bight of Biafra at 35 percent, together accounting for two-thirds of the African-born population. Lorena Walsh has proposed that Igbo speech communities likely existed in the Chesapeake during the mid-eighteenth century, particularly in lower Virginia and the Upper James River. These would have declined significantly after 1775, when the slave trade to Virginia halted permanently.[48]

Conclusion

The emphasis placed on the "Middle Passage" in both popular and scholarly circles is well deserved. The labor of the 450,000 survivors of the ordeal is of unquestioned centrality to American economic development, while the spiritual practices, aesthetics, and creativity they brought with them—shaped and molded by the experience of captivity--is of immeasurable importance to American culture. A full assessment of these forces, however, must begin by recognizing both the complexity and historicity of this coerced migration, as Africans arrived in North America via many paths. It is just as important to understand the many journeys taken within Africa prior to enslavement, and those journeys taken after disembarkation in America, as it is to understand the Atlantic crossing itself. These passages do not explain everything about the African experience in North America, but they do constitute an essential starting point for further inquiry.

Discussion of the Literature

For many years, scholarship on the slave trade focused on its total volume, or what critics have called the "numbers game." Since the publication of the Transatlantic Slave Trade Database in 1999 (online as *Slave Voyages* since 2008), and the subsequent creation of a complementary intra-American slave trade database, the question has been largely, if not entirely put to rest. From these two databases, it appears that about 10.5 million Africans arrived in the Americas, with slightly more than 450,000 transported to North America.[49]

With the "numbers game" mostly settled, recent work has focused on other questions. Of particular importance are several studies examining the experience of the slave ship and the Atlantic crossing, emphasising the themes of terror, disorientation, commodification, and "social death," while deemphasizing quantitative approaches.[50] Many of these studies are implicitly concerned with the origins of African American culture and identity, and in the aggregate have emphasized the break with Africa and the formation of new creolized cultures. For these historians, the experience of the slave ship is particularly significant because it marks a sharp disjuncture with Africa as the starting point for new African American identities. Other historians, often Africanist by training, while certainly not denying the violence and terror of the slave ship, have placed more importance on specific African regional histories. With feet planted firmly in Africa, they have seen greater transatlantic continuity, although most now scrupulously avoid the notion of "pure" cultural transfers. Many (though not all) of these historians have embraced the *Slave Voyages* database because it confirms the notion of a highly structured slave trade, which in turn supports the thesis that Africans often arrived in the Americas in culturally and linguistically coherent groups.[51]

The debate over the strength and coherence of African cultures in colonial America has led some historians to explore autobiographical and biographical narratives of African-born men and women. For many years, historians assumed that narratives of this kind were virtually non-existent, apart from a handful of well-known examples. Over the past decade or so, historians have unearthed hundreds of narratives, most of them very short and embedded within travelogues, missionary accounts, and other incidental sources. Additional narratives and biographical detail has come from work done on "liberated Africans," or those removed from illegal slave ships. Although highly mediated, these sources allow historians to explore many topics for which there was previously very little empirical evidence, such as enslavement and the process of shipmate bonding. They also document the persistent memory of Africa and of African languages and religions, countering the notion that captives underwent a process of "social death," in all but the most abstract sense.[52]

One of the major developments of recent years has been renewed attention to the intra-American slave trade. Older interpretations stressed its importance, with the implication that many captives were already "seasoned" or acculturated by the time they reached North America, but historians working in the 1970s and beyond stressed the importance of direct captive importations from Africa. Work by Gregory E. O'Malley has renewed attention to the intra-American trade, showing that it accounted for about 15 percent of all Africans arriving in North America while demonstrating that the vast majority of those who were transported did not remain long in the Caribbean. This finding has significance for the debate on creolization, suggesting that the intra-American trade had a randomizing influence that worked against linguistic and cultural coherence in North America.[53]

"Final passages," or the transportation and dispersion of captives to inland points, especially during the critical period of 1804-1807, which accounted for 17 percent of all

enslaved Africans arriving in North America, have been understudied. By current estimates, over 15,000 Africans were transported from Charleston to New Orleans and beyond, almost all during this four-year period, but as yet there are only a few examinations of the organization or the experience of these journeys.[54] The illegal slave trade of the nineteenth century, by contrast, has attracted more attention, although caution is in order because some works greatly overstate its scale and scope. There are now a few studies of local communities and one excellent study of a shipmate cohort, the former *Clotilda* captives.[55]

Primary Sources

As a consequence of its commercial nature, the transatlantic slave trade is extremely well-documented, with ships' papers being of particular importance. An excellent starting place is Elizabeth Donnan's four-volume collection from 1935, consisting of slave-trader correspondence, ships' papers, and newspaper articles, from American and British archives.[56] The richest archival collection is the Slavery Collection at the New-York Historical Society, although many of the documents are reproduced in Donnan's volumes. Other significant archival collections can be found at the Newport Historical Society, the Rhode Island Historical Society, and the Bristol (Rhode Island) Historical and Preservation Society, although it should be borne in mind that many of the vessels represented in those collections transported captives to the Caribbean rather than to North America. A number of these collections are now available on microfilm in the Papers of the American Slave Trade series.

The arrival of Africans in North America can be studied through other types of sources. Among the richest are the Papers of Henry Laurens, which contain a wealth of information on captive sales in South Carolina and related topics.[57] These can be supplemented very nicely by the account book for the firm of Austin & Laurens from Yale's Beinecke Library, which is now available online. Eighteenth-century newspapers routinely printed stories about slave ships and announcements of captive sales, which are useful for studying both the transatlantic

and intra-American trades. Newspaper advertisements for runaways are another key source, often the only way to a glimpse Africans as individuals, rather than as statistics. Planter records tend to be disappointing in this regard, often recording the purchase of captives but not much more. A few selections from the correspondence of Virginia's Robert "King" Carter, available online, are the exception, offering a glimpse of the "seasoning" and renaming processes.[58] Estate inventories are similarly disappointing, although sometimes it is possible to glean names and other information from them.

Sources for the African side are predictably scarce, and where they exist are almost always mediated by Europeans. Numerous European travel narratives address the process of enslavement, though most simply recapitulate the familiar typology of warfare, kidnapping, and conviction of a crime. Mungo Park's account of the slave trade as it operated in Senegambia in the 1790s stands apart as the most detailed and insightful travel narrative. Park also traveled with a Jahanke captive caravan and even took passage aboard a South Carolina-bound slave ship.[59] The Royal African Company records at the British National Archives contain numerous volumes detailing the operation of the slave-trading forts on the African coast. The Paul Cross Papers at the South Caroliniana Library are also rich, detailing the operations of a slave trader who later relocated from the African coast to Charleston.

Narratives by and about Africans are abundant but scattered. Eventually, several hundred of these will be made available online by the Freedom Narratives Project, but in the meantime readers can consult existing published collections. Those compiled by Philip D. Curtin,Allan D. Austin, and Vincent Carretta contain some of the richest testimony.[60] One of the best collections of shorter narratives comes from the work of the Moravian missionary C.G.A. Oldendorp, who interviewed several dozen Africans in the Danish Caribbean during the 1760s.[61] Oldendorp aggregated their testimony for publication, but it is possible to

disaggregate many of the narratives. The English-language edition of his volume is heavily abridged, but it is still worth consulting.[62]

Finally, and counterintuitively, information on Africans transported illegally into North America during the nineteenth century is comparatively abundant, most of it connected with one of the known episodes of illegal importation. But in those localities where they existed, evidence found its way into plantation records, Freedmen's Bureau records, the census, and court records.[63]

Links to Digital Materials

- *Slave Voyages*, www.slavevoyages.org
- Equiano's World, http://www.equianosworld.org/
- Austin & Laurens Account Book 1750-1758, Beinecke Library, Yale University, https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/2030713
- Slavery Collection, New-York Historical Society, https://www.nyhistory.org/slaverycollections/
- The Diary, Correspondence, and Papers of Robert "King" Carter, 1701-1732, online at https://www.christchurch1735.org/research/research-room/robert-king-carter-papers

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Notes

[1] Paul E. Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa*, Third Edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 1-8.
[2] Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery*, 18-23.
[3] Sean M. Kelley, "Enslavement in Upper Guinea During the Slave Trade: Biographical Perspectives," *African Economic History* 48, no. 1 (2020): 47-50.
[4] C.G. A. Oldendorp, *Historie der Caribischen Inseln Sanct Thomas, Sanct Crux, und Sanct Jan*, eds. G. Meier, S. Palmié, P. Stein, and H. Ulbricht (Berlin: Verlag für Wissenschaft und Bildung, 2000), 1: 484.
[5] Sean M. Kelley, "The Dirty Business of Panyarring and Palaver: Slave Trading on the Upper Guinea Coast in the Eighteenth Century," in *Slavery, Abolition, and the Transition to Colonialism in Sierra Leone*, Paul E. Lovejoy and Suzanne Schwarz, eds. (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2015), 94-97.
[6] *Voyages: The Transatlantic Slave Trade Database*, online at https://www.slavevoyages.org/voyage/database#statistics.
[7] Joseph C. Miller, "Introduction," 1:6 and Paul E. Lovejoy, "Internal Markets or an Atlantic-Sahara Divide?: How Women Fit into the Slave Trade of West Africa," 1:259-279, both in *Women And Slavery: Africa, the Indian Ocean World, and the Medieval North Atlantic*, Gwyn Campbell, Suzanne Miers, and Joseph C. Miller, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
[8] Philip D. Curtin, *Economic Change in Precolonial Africa: Senegambia in the Era of the Slave Trade* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1975), 59-91, 271-278; Bruce Mouser, "'Walking Caravans' of Nineteenth-Century Fuuta Jaloo, Western Africa," *Mande Studies* 12 (2010): 19-104; John M. Janzen, *Lemba: A Drum Affliction in Africa and the New World* (New York: Garland, 1982), 3-7.
[9] Philip D. Curtin, ed., *Africa Remembered: Narratives by Africans from the Era of the Slave Trade* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1967), 145.
[10] John W. Barber, *A History of the Amistad Captives* (New Haven: E.L. and J.W. Barber, 1840), 9-15.
[11] Colleen E. Kriger, *Making Money: Life, Death, and Early Modern Trade on Africa's Guinea Coast* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2017), 122.
[12] David Eltis, *Economic Growth and the Ending of the Transatlantic Slave Trade* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 130, 136.
[13] Marcus Rediker, *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (New York: Viking, 2007), 291-300; "The History of George Dale, a native of Africa, 1790," online at the National Archives of Scotland, https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/research/learning/slavery/the-history-of-george-dale-a-native-of-africa-1790.
[14] Stephanie E. Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa into American Diaspora* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 33-64.
[15] Patricia C. Griffin, ed., *Odyssey of an African Slave* (Gainesville: Florida University Press, 2009), 166; Daniel B. Thorp, "Chattel With A Soul: The Autobiography of a Moravian Slave," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 112, no. 3 (1988): 448; Ala Alryyes, *A Muslim American Slave: The Life of Omar Ibn Said* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011), 63; Curtin, *Africa Remembered*, 162.
[16] Sowande' M. Mustakeem, *Slavery at Sea: Terror, Sex, and Sickness in the Middle Passage* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016), 131-155.
[17] Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery*, 155-152; *Slave Voyages*, https://www.slavevoyages.org/voyages/UO6lL5Nw.

[18] Stephen D. Behrendt, David Eltis, and David Richardson, "The Costs of Coercion: African Agency in the Pre-Modern Atlantic World," Economic History Review 54, no. 3 (2001): 456-468.
[19] Walter Hawthorne, "'Being Now, as it were, one Family': Shipmate Bonding on the Slave Vessel *Emilia*, in Rio de Janeiro and throughout the Atlantic World," *Luso-Brazilian Review* 45, no. 1 (2008): 53-77.
[20] George Pinckard, *Notes on the West Indies* (London: Longman Hurst, Reese, and Orme, 1806), 1:229-337. Despite the obvious evidence of illness and over-crowding aboard the vessel, Pinckard was actually an apologist for the slave trade.
[21] Engel Sluiter, "New Light on the '20. And Odd Negroes' Arriving in Virginia, August 1619," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Ser. 54, No. 2 (Apr. 1997): 395-398. The original vessel, the *San Juan Bautista*, later sold some captives in Spanish Jamaica, but this happened after the attack.
[22] Jane Landers, *Black Society in Spanish Florida* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 10-15, 157-159, 161; *Voyages* (intra-American database), https://www.slavevoyages.org/voyages/UO6lL5Nw.
[23] O'Malley, *Final Passages*, 187-200.
[24] Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 56-95, 276-315; Kevin David Roberts, "Slaves and Slavery in Louisiana: The Evolution of Atlantic World Identities," (Ph.D. diss., University of Texas at Austin, 2003), 133-138; *Voyages* (intra-American database), https://www.slavevoyages.org/voyages/4v0DgxxD; *Voyages* (transatlantic database), https://www.slavevoyages.org/voyages/bBOQjXLQ.
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[26] Kelley, "Blackbirders and Bozales;" Sylviane A. Diouf, *Dreams of Africa in Alabama: The Slave Ship* Clotilda *and the Story of the Last Africans Brought to America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Zora Neale Hurston, *Barracoon: The Story of the Last "Black Cargo"* (New York: Harper Collins, 2018).
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[31] Kelley, "Scrambling for Slaves," 3-5.
[32] Austin & Laurens Account Book, 1753-1758, Beinecke Library, Yale University; Charles M. Flanagan, "The Sweets of Independence: A Reading of the 'James Carroll Daybook, 1714-1721,'" Ph.D. Thesis, University of Maryland, 2005, 239-244.
[33] Sean M. Kelley, *The Voyage of the Slave Ship Hare: A Journey into Captivity from Sierra Leone to South Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 137-140.
[34] Gregory E. O'Malley, "Slave Trading Entrepôts and their Hinterlands: Continued Forced Migration after the Middle Passage to North America," in *Ambiguous Anniversary: The*

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[35] Terry Alford, *Prince Among Slaves: The True Story of an African Prince Sold into Slavery in the American South*, 30th Anniversary Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 29-38. See also Allan D. Austin, *African Muslims in Antebellum America: A Sourcebook* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1984), 121-263.

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[38] Adam Rothman, *Slave Country: American Expansion and the Origins of the Deep South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 83-89; Lacy K. Ford, *Deliver Us From Evil: The Slavery Question in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 81-100.

[39] Michael Tadman, *Speculators and Slaves: Masters, Traders, and Slaves in the Old South* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 12, 226.

[40] Curtin, ed., *Africa Remembered*, 17-59; Randy J. Sparks, *The Two Princes of Calabar: An Eighteenth-Century Atlantic Odyssey* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 70-106.

[41] Alexander X. Byrd, *Captives and Voyagers: Black Migrants Across the Eighteenth-Century British Atlantic World* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008), 177-199.

[42] Sharla M. Fett, *Recaptured Africans: Surviving Slave Ships, Detention, and Dislocation in the Final Years of the Slave Trade* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 4. Most of those liberated from American slave ships by the U.S. Navy were *en route* to Cuba, not the United States.

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[49] Both databases can be accessed at *Slave Voyages*, www.slavevoyages.org.

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[51] Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*; Gomez, *Exchanging our Country Marks*; Heywood and Thornton, *Central Africans*; Rucker, *Gold Coast Diasporas*; Kelley, *Voyage of the Slave* Ship Hare.
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