

Far Cry from a Fantasy Voyage: The Impact of the Middle Passage on Slave Societies across the Atlantic World

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In 1997, acclaimed producer and director Steven Spielberg turned public attention to the 1839 case concerning the illegal slave trading activities of Spanish slave traders Jose Ruiz and Pedro Montez through his film, *Amistad*. Following the oceanic passage of close to five hundred bondpeople stowed aboard the ship, *Tecora*, the surviving captives were landed and placed for sale in Havana. A total of 53 Africans were purchased soon after by Ruiz and Montez who then placed them aboard the vessel, *La Amistad*. The ship set sail during the evening hour of midnight en route to the island of Puerto Principe, yet on July 1st, three days into the ship's passage, a bondman held aboard, Cinque, along with several of his fellow shipmates carried out a violent revolt against their captors.¹ The ensuing rebellion, which claimed the lives of several seamen including ship captain and owner Roman Ferrer, encompassed only a small part of the

film's story. Instead, amidst the backdrop of three hours, audiences witnessed the fate of the vessel's captives as they were forced to the center of a legal battle that erupted within the North American Supreme Court justice system concerning their 'right' as slaves to freedom. Despite heightened criticism the film sparked among scholars and historians regarding its historical inaccuracy, this now decade-old film continues to be a primary visual source utilized for the rather graphic depiction it offers of experiences likely common aboard a slave ship.

Similar to Spielberg's film, bicentennial anniversaries already underway commemorating abolition of both the British and American slave trade systems have come to the forefront of public and scholarly discussions, helping to revive interest in this complicated history. As such, significant attention has turned towards the role of abolitionists, anti-slavery organizations, and



monumental court cases critical in altering the system of mercantilism based on slaving common across the Caribbean and much of the Americas. Perhaps lost amidst applause of the tireless efforts these individuals and organizations exerted based on ideals of anti-slavery is that, these abolitionist motives could not have occurred without the widespread bartering, sale, and movement of people as goods, which characterized operation of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. Once purchased, bondmen and women became the human 'cargo' itemized alongside items ranging from tobacco, sugar, pork, cloth, and rum, commonly listed on manifests that ship captains used to verify account sales to distant merchants. The domestic slave markets in which enslaved Africans were often 'imported' altered their lives as they became bargaining chips used for the exchange of wealth between merchants, planters, and seamen. Yet, it was the oceanic crossing repre-

sented through the infamous 'Middle Passage' that funneled these virtual human commodities into various Atlantic ports. This essay builds upon the existence of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade by interrogating the economic, cultural, and social underpinnings of the forcible movement of African people that I contend impacted New World slave societies.

The effects of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade were multi-faceted. As scores of men, women, and children were transported and made available for purchase by interested planters, demographically this created a significant increase in the sizeable population of colonial settlements. Difficulties persist in attempting to determine the 'official' numbers of bondpeople forced within the trade. Conservative estimates speculate that close to 10-12 million captives were forcibly removed from West Africa and landed in ports across the Atlantic. Yet, other scholars contend that

a more feasible calculation lies between 50 and 100 million, owing to the unreported losses of bondpeople during their initial procurement, coastal holdings, once aboard ship and following their arrival into designated ports.

Critical to these discussions, however is consideration of the legal and illegal slave trades. Beginning with the Portuguese in 1441, this systemic process of buying and selling human chattel created an economic explosion for over 400 years as different nations sought to gain monopoly over the trade of African people. Towards the demise of the legal slave trading period, the British passed legislation in 1807 to ban the legal importation of enslaved Africans, while the same law was implemented in North America in 1808. Yet, several years later, the illegal slave trading period gained fertile ground, where it is estimated that from 1820 to 1880 close to 2.3 million Africans were illegally procured and sold into Brazil and Cuba.² Due to the active involvement of private slave traders and instead of established slave trading companies, this eliminated the requirement of ship captains to report the numbers of Africans procured and transported. Even more, as slave traders sought to evade the efforts of the British Royal Navy to suppress slave trading activities, the subversive tactics they engaged in for profitable gains continue to pose a challenge to scholars' ability to unearth a wide array of sources characterizing slave trading during this fraudulent period.

These numerical debates give further validity to better understand the role Africans' presence played once they were transplanted within Atlantic slave societies. The gradual increase of bondpeople within colonial settlements set into motion heightened racial fears among planters. These con-

cerns became manifested in the widespread creation of legal statutes and slave codes devised to dictate the dimensions of racial bondage to which many captives found themselves subjected during this time. Cuba ranked among the earliest of the colonies to initiate a legal response to the proliferation of African people within its island. As such, planters felt it necessary to control the lives of enslaved and free people of color, which resulted in the successful implementation of their 1574 Black Codes. Similar strategies of legal reformation took place in other colonies including Barbados with their 1661 Slave Code; the adoption of "Code Noir" in 1685 within the French colonies based on an edict ordered by Louis XIV; and in 1696 South Carolina adopted a system of Black Codes similar to the earlier Barbadian law, which provided the legal framework that other slave societies in the British colonies of North America drew upon. In 1705 Virginia also imposed boundaries among bondpeople by banning their movement among plantations, while granting slave-owners the liberty to punish enslaved Africans without penalty, even at the risk of their death. Although the limitations imposed within Atlantic plantation communities varied, they each sought to effectively regiment the lives of people of African descent. Yet, the perceived necessity of these racialized laws could not have transpired without the forced migration of bondpeople into slave societies through the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade.

The Economic Strains of Benefit

The most recognized ramifications of the slave trade were the economic contributions that filtered wealth across much of the Atlantic World. The buying and selling of captives led to a significant increase of prof-

it gain for individuals and companies actively involved. However, this economical growth also occurred in a myriad of other ways. As seamen journeyed aboard slave ships traveling to West Africa, a variety of goods were often carried to use in exchange for the sale of African people. These items typically ranged from glass, beads, silk, rum, and even guns. Although negotiations for the exchange of goods commonly took place through the system of bartering, it was not uncommon for money to also transfer through the hands of slave traders. The availability of jobs created another route of economic advancement where merchants, ship captains, coopers, carpenters, stewards, seamen, surgeons, and ship builders were able to find employment, which the slave trade helped to provide. Likewise, various manufacturers profited from the heightened demand planters exerted for African people, which furthered the growth of industries. Resources including iron, wood, cooper, and brass proved vital to the slave trade; particularly iron which helped to create the chains, shackles, and brands used to maintain Africans in bondage.³ As wealth was accrued through jobs and industry expansion, partially stemming from the slave trade, this also permitted the rapid growth of various seaport communities in places such as Liverpool, Charleston, Newport, and Providence.

The Cultural Implications of Slaving

Circulation of captive Africans also bore significant cultural influence on the societies they entered. The preferences for certain types of Africans that ship captains used during coastal sales were largely dictated by merchants and planters. Therefore, the range of captives placed aboard slave ships were far

from culturally homogeneous. Instead various African ethnicities made up the human 'cargo' including Fante, Bakongo, Yoruba, Ewe, Akan, Melimba, Angola, and Igbo. Inter-ethnic interactions that emerged within the Middle Passage helped to form the base of cultural influences African people carried into slave societies. Although stripped from their families, communities, and former homelands, their cultural understandings survived the Middle Passage. Once bought and sold into their respective plantation communities, they often transmitted elements of their previous West African heritage related to philosophy, spirituality, musical traditions, dance, agricultural practices, language, art, and literature. The circumstances of bondage enforced the alteration and even the loss of some aspects of their former cultural practices due in part to generational displacement. Yet, in many instances bondpeople were forced to adapt to their new surroundings, where once in close contact with slaves from other ethnic variations, their efforts to create a communal base gave birth to an amalgamated culture rooted with a West African influence. These cultural contributions shaped not only their owners' lives, but similarly the societies within which they were forcibly placed.

The Social Implications of the Atlantic Slave Trade

Along with economic and cultural influences, there was also the social impact the slave trade had on Atlantic World societies. The movement of ships charting the oceanic passage brought distant lands in close contact while also engendering interactions among populations of people across lines of race, gender, and class. During the legal slave trading period, merchants typically dictated seamen's future involvement within the

West African trade. Once docked, seamen and slave traders of varying continents came into contact with coastal African merchants for the possibility of purchasing available captives. In many cases during their often-extended coastal stays, relationships formulated among ship captains from different nations as they negotiated the exchange of needed goods, including enslaved people. Following the conclusion of sales, however, ship captains, seamen, and surgeons made up the primary category of people who interacted on a daily basis with enslaved Africans aboard ships.

Captive Africans carried through the Middle Passage often differed according to both gender and age. The most highly desired slaves were males between 15-30 years of age where on many ship manifests adult male captives, along with 'men-boys' and 'boys' were recorded. There was also a range of female captives listed as 'cargo,' which typically included women, 'women-girls,' and 'girls.' Another group of people common aboard slave vessels, although omitted in discussion among many studies of the slave trade, were captives who seamen and planters referred to as 'old.' Despite being consistently overlooked and undervalued by slave traders, following the port arrival of ships these bondpeople were also offered for sale. In addition to 'elderly' captives, nursing infants, young children, and new mothers also survived the oceanic passage and were sold to interested buyers. Recounting the range of bondpeople included within Atlantic slave markets counters traditional understandings that suggest vendue sales primarily included healthy prime male slaves. These discussions also highlight the complex situations compounding both planters' and merchants' involvement within the slave trade. For instance, following the purchase of bondpeople, slave-owners were confront-

ed with the task of not only managing the physical and medical conditions of newly arrived captives, but also designating someone to offer care to younger and elderly bondpeople. As for merchants, however, if any captives remained unsold, they were subjected to episodes of profit decline owing to a longer port stay along with having to provide sustenance and transport 'refuse slaves' into other regions until an interested purchaser was sought.

The Culture of Social Order and Violence

Set at sea for weeks and often months at a time, the interaction of seamen and enslaved Africans within the Middle Passage formulated a unique culture. As these floating societies drifted further across the Atlantic Ocean, sailors devised social orders of conduct, which governed the lives of black people. These imposed boundaries concerned captive stowage aboard ships, the types of food Africans received, the use of security measures, and also the punishments meted out against rebellious captives. Typically outnumbered by their African 'cargo', the primary concern for many seamen was protecting themselves against their overthrow through instigated ship rebellions. Bondmen on many occasions were considered the primary threat to the security of slave vessels. Yet, stereotypes also often circulated concerning Africans from different nations and their perceived proclivity to engage in insurgency, which led to enforced heightened precautions against particular bondpeople such as Angolans, Coramantees, and Igbo captives.

Despite the range of methods seamen employed to counter insurgency, resistance remained a common feature of the Middle Passage. Bondpeople consistently drew upon

ungovernable behaviors aboard slave ships, especially through ship revolts and suicide. Although male captives were targeted as potential rebels and confined in the bottom holding of ships, this did not deter their efforts of finding means to engage in open rebellions against their captors. Black women continue to remain historically invisible within broader narratives of the slave trade; yet, they, alongside their fellow male captives, also willingly engaged in violent strategies towards their freedom. The successful implementation of some slave ship rebellions can be attributed to the active involvement of bondwomen.

There were also subtle yet equally defiant modes of resistance bondpeople carried out through suicidal means. Jumping overboard was the most common and rather public method of suicide sailors confronted as they sought to hinder bondmen and bondwomen from successfully carrying out their deadly endeavors. Some captives refused all food and medical aid offered for their improvement while others took an even more extreme route by hanging themselves. There was also the belief held among different slave traders concerning some Africans' capability of holding one's breath till their death and even employing the means of 'self-strangulation' by swallowing their tongues in order to free themselves from bondage.⁴ However, due to the consistency of captive resistance within the Middle Passage, however, it was not uncommon to learn of seamen's use of 'cat'o'nine tails to whip disobedient captives,' the use of a speculum-oris for forced feeding methods, thumbscrews, public decapitation, or the construction of ship netting to quell future insurrectionary motives. Outside the use of punitive measures, however, the effects of Africans' resistance were three-tiered. First, the death of captives at

sea created an economic blow, causing a reduction in the numbers of bondpeople ship captains had available for later sale. Likewise, if a captive arrived into port battered, bruised, or even psychologically unstable, this lowered the value at which they could be sold. Lastly, these belligerent behaviors were not reserved primarily for bondpeople's ship passage. Instead, these motives came to shape the evolution of Atlantic slave societies where once transplanted, newly arrived Africans adapted these former strategies and applied them to the landscape of plantation communities.

Conclusion

In 2007, we stand at a crossroads in understanding the entangled history of people, wealth, and geographic locales intimately connected to the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. Although commemorative activities proliferate across universities, churches, museums, and libraries throughout England, the Caribbean, and North America; the question still looms, how can we ensure that future generations never forget this critical aspect of global history? As abolitionists are revered for the courageous spirit they exemplified in speaking out against the immorality of the slave trade, will we also remember the lives of those voiceless and still nameless men, women, and children placed at the center of this global economic venture fueled by greed?

In the late nineteenth century, historian W.E.B. Du Bois gave close scrutiny to the operation of the Atlantic Slave Trade through his 1896 Harvard dissertation. Although monographs investigating the intricately complex system of slave trading continue to proliferate, much more work lies ahead; particularly as it relates to historical and cultural memory. This is evidenced by

the fact that the movement and subsequent sale of Africans as goods through the slave trade is often lost amidst popular understanding of the notorious ‘triangular trade.’ Even more alarming, however, is some students continued conflation of Middle Passage experiences with ‘fantasy voyages’ as offered aboard all-inclusive cruise lines. Due to this pressing reality, scholars, writers, teachers, musicians, and poets are faced with great challenges, not the least of which is related to the arduous task of creatively locating the few yet scattered remnants relating to the slave trade loom heavy. Even more critical for them is devising the most effective methods for translating the importance of the study of this history in an effort to enforce cultural remembrance.

The current growth of migration studies has propelled three primary themes within scholarly conversations; the movement of people, commodities, and ideas. In comprehending the evolution of the Atlantic Slave Trade, these same three themes were similarly operative in the forced migration of captive Africans where people formulated the idea to relegate other people into commodities in effort to place them on the global market for sale and further exploitation. As human ‘cargo’, bondpeople were transported and funneled into ports across places like Jamaica, Georgia, Cuba, Virginia, Charleston, and Barbados. Once displaced, these Middle Passage survivors and their

descendents bore significant impact on the ‘new’ homelands and communities that they entered. Moving beyond statistical queries, in studying the varied bondpeople forced aboard slave ships as thinking and feeling human beings, we give further validity to their lives and the experiences they underwent within the slave trade and beyond. As such, we rightfully recognize the restless spirits of those women, men, and young children forced through the infamous “Door of No Return,” where once aboard ship they were subjected to dangerous oceanic passages and forced to start new lives separate from their families and located in unfamiliar territories spread across the many corners of the Atlantic World.

Bibliography

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- 4- William D. Piersen briefly discusses this occurrence among bondpeople in his classic essay “White Cannibals, Black Martyrs: Fear, Depression, and Religious Faith as Causes of Suicide Among New Slaves,” *Journal of Negro History* 62 (April 1977): 135.