



African Women and the Atlantic Slave Trade

54

Nemata Blyden

Contents

Introduction	1060
Origins	1060
The Transatlantic Slave Trade	1061
Women in the Transatlantic Slave Trade	1061
Middle Passage on Land	1062
Middle Passage at Sea	1063
Historiography	1069
Conclusion	1069
Cross-References	1070
References	1070

Abstract

This chapter examines African women in the Atlantic slave trade, exploring what scholars know about their experiences in the trade and highlighting what remains to be known. From the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, millions of Africans were transported across the Atlantic Ocean. Women made up a large portion of those enslaved. The chapter considers the history of enslaved African women, considering how gender affected their experience, how women coped and resisted their enslavement, and how their lives were transformed by the trade.

Keywords

Africa · African women · Transatlantic Slave trade · Slavery · Middle Passage (s)

N. Blyden (✉)
George Washington University, Washington, DC, USA
e-mail: nemata@gwu.edu

Introduction

At the beginning of the sixteenth century, the first women and men from communities on the African continent were transported directly to the Americas. This began centuries of a trade which resulted in millions of African women and men being transported to the United States, the Caribbean, and Latin America. Demand for labor in the Americas transformed Africans into human commodities. While we know much about this brutal episode in human history, one gap still remaining in the literature of the Atlantic slave trade is the full-length perspective of women who experienced the horrific middle passage en route to slavery. No full length narrative akin to Olaudah Equiano's narrative of his captivity and enslavement exists for a woman. As one historian has noted studies of the slave trade do not "directly address the gendered nature of the Atlantic slave trade through capture and transportation on the slave ships, to arrival in the Americas" (Bush 2008). This chapter examines African women in the Atlantic slave trade, allowing us a "deeper insight into the transformations in women's lives" (Bush 2008). Women taken from their homelands in Africa were irreversibly changed even as they created new lives for themselves in the Americas. This chapter, therefore, strives as much as possible to present a perspective of the Atlantic slave trade through the eyes of women, an endeavor made difficult by the dearth of sources.

Origins

Scholars now know much about the places on the continent from which captives were derived, the destinations in the Americas to which Africans were taken, and can provide an assessment of how many were enslaved during the course of the Atlantic slave trade. Men and women were taken from the Gold Coast, Bight of Benin, Upper Guinea Coast, Bight of Biafra, and West Central Africa. African ports accounting for at least half of all the Africans deported to the Americas were Luanda (Angola), Whydah (Bight of Benin), Bonny (Bight of Biafra), Old Calabar (Bight of Biafra), Benguela (Southern Angola, Cabinda, north of the Congo River), and Lagos in the Bight of Benin (Lindsay 2008). Historians of the slave trade estimate that between 12 and 15 million Africans were taken from Africa during the course of the Atlantic slave trade, while about 10–12 million survived the journey. Final destinations in the Americas include the Caribbean islands, Brazil, and the United States (Curtin 1969; Klein 2010; Eltis 2007).

A tremendous amount of scholarship has been generated on the influences Africans brought to the Americas – religious practices, cuisine, and other elements of their individual and group cultures (Gomez 1998; Sweet 2003; Hall 2005; Heywood and Thornton 2007). Women, especially, would have contributed to retention of many elements of the cultural practices they had brought to the New World, passing them down to subsequent generations. One scholar has noted that before the large-scale migration of European women to the Americas, African women were responsible for significant numbers of births. Those who survived the ship's journey, he maintains, "were the women who gave birth to African American

culture and society” (Lovejoy 2006). Nevertheless, before women had an opportunity to contribute to societies in the New World, they had to survive the ship’s voyage across the Atlantic Ocean.

The Transatlantic Slave Trade

Much is now known about the operation of this trade which lasted for several centuries, and scholars can say something, however limited, about the experiences of African captives during the journey across the Atlantic Ocean. In the last 30 years, scholars such as Phillip Curtin, Paul Lovejoy, and Joseph Inikori, among others, have produced a great deal of literature on the Atlantic slave trade, showing it as a complex enterprise, with long-lasting impact on people in Africa, Europe, and the Americas. (Curtin 1969; Inikori 1982; Inikori and Engerman 1992, Eltis 2007; Klein 2010; Lovejoy 2011). Recognizing that it was central to the economic and social expansion of the West, and fundamental to the history of the United States, Latin America, and the Caribbean, scholars have taken great interest in understanding the trade over the centuries it operated. Much remains unknown about the Atlantic slave trade, but there are fundamental things about which historians agree with respect to the general shape and economic arrangement of the trade. The magnitude of the trade’s historical legacies for Africa and Africans, in particular, have prompted explorations of its impact in a variety of ways, not the least of which is on how the millions of Africans that were enslaved coped with the ordeal, how they survived it, and its lasting impact on their lives.

The shape of the trade, as it involved the sale of men and women from communities in Africa, meant that lives were destroyed, families torn apart, and violence meted out to those who resisted enslavement. European demand for slaves was met by African sellers who, in large part, determined the shape of the trade, at least in the early centuries of contact and trade. For that reason, in the early period of the Atlantic slave trade, women were not likely to be sold into Atlantic slavery. Demand for women in the internal slave markets on the continent, and European desire for male captives, meant that more men were sold than women to European buyers. Martin Klein and Claire Robinson have argued that women predominated as enslaved in African societies. Valued both for their reproductive and productive capacity, women played an important role in sub-Saharan African societies. Despite their importance to African communities, women were not spared. From the beginning of the Atlantic slave trade, women were among the captives snatched, branded, imprisoned, and loaded aboard slave vessels bound for the Americas (Klein and Robertson 1983).

Women in the Transatlantic Slave Trade

Most of what is known about women in the slave trade comes from the records of ship’s captains, ship logs, and other European observers. There is little information about enslaved women and men beyond cursory observations of their physical

appearance, their mortality rates, and records of infractions aboard ship, in some cases. Enslaved people were a particular kind of cargo, made into commodities by their European captors, and the sources speak to this peculiar form of trade. This meant that their enslavers sought to dehumanize and degrade their captives, providing them with the bare minimum allowing them to stay alive. Value was placed on a captive's life only in so far as profit could be made on her body.

While it is difficult to directly access the voices of women in their own words, there are sources that can give an insight into their experience of captivity. Given that women experienced the slave trade differently from their male counterparts, it is important to understand the ordeal they went through from the moment of capture. Scholars can only guess at, or make inferences about women's experiences from the available sources of European slave traders on the African coast, and on board slave ships. Recent discoveries of narratives from the perspective of women help to illuminate how women suffered during the slave trade, but much is still missing.

Middle Passage on Land

In his fictional account of the life of an enslaved woman, the author Lawrence Hill captures the horror of capture and slavery. *Someone Knows My Name* tells the story of Aminata Diallo taken as a young girl into slavery in the Americas. In vivid detail the protagonist describes her capture in the fictional town of Bayo. Coming home at the end of the day with her mother, they are surrounded by men with "faces like mine," who spoke in a "strange tongue." Her mother is killed trying to protect her daughter. The young girl's wrists are bound and a noose is placed around her neck. As she is transported to the coast bound for a slave ship to the Americas Aminata wonders: "How could this be? I prayed that this was a dream, but the dream would not relent" (Hill 2007).

Although few narratives of capture and enslavement in Africa exist, there are some accounts that can provide a glimpse into the experience of those snatched from their homes and eventually taken to the Americas. In his autobiography, published in 1789, Olaudah Equiano describes his enslavement in Africa in great detail, describing his capture and sale first to several African owners, then to owners in the Caribbean and the United States. Equiano describes his experiences at a coastal port in West Africa: "The first object which saluted my eyes when I arrived on the coast was the sea, and a slave ship, which was then riding at anchor, and waiting for its cargo. These filled me with astonishment, which was soon converted into terror when I was carried on board" (Equiano 2009). Likewise, other published narratives of male captives like Mahommah Gardo Baquaqua and Venture Smith chronicle the moment of their capture and captivity (Smith 2000). Few such accounts exist for women. While the story of Aminata Diallo is fictional, the novel evokes a sense of how women and girls lived through the Atlantic slave trade.

During the course of the trade, men, women, and children were traded to the Americas at different rates. Because women were valued in the internal trade fetching higher prices, and because European buyers sought to buy men, more

men were sold in the era of the Atlantic slave trade than women. Historians estimate that almost two thirds of Africans transported to the Americas were men. However, during the late seventeenth to the mid-eighteenth century larger numbers of women were sold into slavery. Scholars have attributed this to greater demand among European buyers for women due to their reproductive capacity, and higher prices demanded for enslaved males. Furthermore, there were regions such as the Bight of Biafra where more women were sold than men. Ugo Nwokeji asserts that from the 1650s to the mid-nineteenth century females were “consistently in the majority” (Nwokeji 2001). The nineteenth century also saw an increase in the number of children, especially girls, sold into slavery. Thus Aminata Diallo, as she retold the story of her captivity, remembers the many children with whom she was enslaved, remembering: “I think of the people who crossed the sea with me. The ones who survived. We saw the same things. Some of us still scream out in the middle of the night.” (Hill 2007).

The significant numbers of men and women taken from their countries left a vacuum in their homeland, resulting in separation from loved ones, death and painful memories of the lives they left behind. Women and girls, as illustrated by the fictional Aminata, experienced the Atlantic slave trade in particular ways. Snatched from their homes, girls, young women, and married women were likely to be taken as slaves. Alexander Falconbridge, a British ship surgeon on several slave ships between 1780 and 1787, interviewed African captives and chronicled their stories. Many of them were women. Describing the process of enslavement, he recounted what the enslaved had told him about the process. From his recollections something of women’s suffering can be gleaned: “I was likewise told by a Negro woman that as she was on her return home, one evening, from some neighbors, to whom she had been making a visit by invitation, she was kidnapped; and, notwithstanding she was big with child, sold for a slave. This transaction happened a considerable way up the country, and she had passed through the hands of several purchasers before she reached the ship” (Falconbridge 1788).

Middle Passage at Sea

The ship’s voyage across the Atlantic Ocean shapes the understanding of the Middle Passage, but Africans taken from their homes were subjected to several middle passages, beginning from the moment of capture and continuing with the trek to the coast, imprisonment in a hold at a coastal fort, boarding a slave ship, and journeying across the Atlantic. The walk to the coast from the location of capture could take several days or weeks depending on how far inland a woman was captured. Along the way enslaved women and men faced all sorts of hardship. They were subject to resale, humiliation, and violence.

Fictional accounts attempt to recreate the real experiences of enslaved Africans on this passage (Hailey 1976; Herstein 2002; Gyasi 2017; Moore 2018). Hill’s Aminata Diallo describes her long journey from where she was captured to the coast, as the coffle picked up more captives along the way. The story vividly gives an

account of attempted escape and recapture, and death and separation as those enslaved are taken farther from their homes. It also recounts experiences particular to women – pregnant women giving birth, a young girl experiencing her first menstrual flow, and the all too common experience of women being raped by their captors (Hill 2007). Falconbridge described the ordeal of pregnant women observing that some “who happen to be so advanced in their pregnancy, as to be delivered during their journey from the fairs to the coast; and I have frequently seen instances of deliveries on board ship” (Falconbridge 1788). In Aminata’s tale, a woman from her village, pregnant when captured, gives birth to a child on the journey to the coast. Many more gave birth aboard slave ships.

Once captured, women and men were marched to coastal prisons to await transportation across the Atlantic. The trip to the coast could take several weeks to months before an enslaved woman embarked on a ship, during which she might have been subjected to all sorts of indignities. On the African coast she could be imprisoned for weeks in one of the slave forts or barracoons. These prisons often at the lowest level of fort were dark and dank, and crowded, with hundreds of enslaved in small spaces (Lindsay 2008). Captives were fed the bare minimum, and food shortages were likely to impact the enslaved first. For African captives, “the abject conditions of their incarceration made this an exceedingly narrow range within which to subsist: between abject and benign starvation, between the absolute or near absence of food at worst and daily rations even at best too scanty and nutritionally limited to supply nourishment beyond a minimal level” (Smallwood 2008). This meant that captives were subject to illness and death.

Chained together in dungeons in coastal forts, there was little possibility of escaping their imprisonment. Some women avoided this plight by being employed as “castle slaves,” put to work preparing food, washing clothes, and performing other tasks for their European captors. At Cape Coast castle during the seventeenth century the Royal African Company employed many such women. These were the lucky ones who had the possibility of returning to their families if they could abscond. Many more African captives found themselves languishing in the holds of the forts for days or weeks awaiting embarkation aboard a slave ship (Smallwood 2008). In Hill’s novel, until she is put on board a slave ship, Aminata has hopes of becoming free: “Surely I would get free. Surely this would end. Surely I would find a way to flee into the woods and to make my way home.” (Hill 2007).

Once taken out of the castle prisons, the torment for the enslaved often continued with the “coasting” of slave ships along the West African coast, as it picked up more human cargo before sailing to the Americas. This could be weeks or months. Although some Africans were able to escape capture and enslavement before boarding a slave ship, many were not so lucky and ended up transported to the Americas or lost their lives on the voyage across the Atlantic Ocean. Ship captains, traders, and other Europeans often recorded attempts by Africans to escape before embarking, and after, before a ship set sail. Falconbridge recorded one such attempt by some women: “The night before our departure, the tent was struck; which was no sooner perceived by some of the negroe women on board, than it was considered as a

prelude to our sailing; and about eighteen of them, when they were sent between decks, threw themselves into the sea through one of the gun ports” (Falconbridge 1788). Knowing this was their last chance, it seems the women sought a way to escape, for once a ship sailed the possibility of flight was diminished.

The experience aboard ship across the Atlantic has garnered much attention from historians of the slave trade (Greene 1944; Lovejoy 2006; Taylor 2006; Smallwood 2008; Mustakeem 2016). This middle passage, which one historian has described as an “experience of motion without discernible direction or destination” for African captives, was perhaps the most horrific as women and men found themselves aboard floating vessels sailing to unknown destinations (Smallwood, p. 122). A tremendous amount of scholarship has been generated on the ship’s journey across the Atlantic, documented by scholars, and showing what the journey across the ocean entailed. Those who participated in the slave trade kept meticulous records of this leg of the slave trade, largely for economic reasons. Of primary concern for slave traders was being accountable to investors and shareholders. Profit, therefore, was paramount. The well-being of captured Africans was secondary. Scholars of the slave trade have mined the journals and records of participants in the slave trade to understand the full spectrum of its operation, revealing the structural elements of the trade.

More recently, scholars are using these sources to access the experience of enslaved Africans, however limited that information might be. In her examination of seventeenth-century slave trade records of several European nations, Angela Sutton maintains that “mentions of African women and the variety of ways in which they were treated by both African and European men in the European records can also reveal much about the power dynamics between and among European and African slave traders on the Gold Coast” (Sutton 2015). While these women did not speak directly, glimpses of their experiences can be caught in these secondhand accounts. The extent of women’s suffering in the middle passage will never be fully known, but from the fragmentary evidence mined from the documents of slave traders, we can imagine the horror they suffered.

The few records from their own perspectives, detailing the plight of African women on board slave ships, illuminate its horrors. These fragmentary accounts of women captured in Africa mirror Equiano’s experience. In 1783, Belinda, “the African,” a 70-year-old woman petitioned the legislature in the Massachusetts legislature for a pension. Recounting her life story Belinda Sutton chronicled her captivity and transportation to America providing a description of the ship’s voyage: “Scenes which her imagination had never conceived of, a floating world, the sporting monsters of the deep, and the familiar meeting of billows and clouds, strove, but in vain, to divert her attention from three hundred Africans in chains, suffering the most excruciating torment; and some of them rejoicing that the pangs of death came like a balm to their wounds” (Finkenbine 2007). There are no graphic details of her tribulation but the misery of her journey can be imagined.

Likewise, historians Randy Browne and James Sweet uncover the memoirs of Florence Hall, a woman enslaved in Jamaica in the late eighteenth century. She recalls the name she was born with – Akeiso – and remembers elements of her life

before her abduction. The splintered pieces of Akeiso's story that were uncovered are reminiscent of Aminata Diallo's ordeal. Akeiso details her memories of childhood in the "Country of the Eboe," and her capture by "a party of the enemy," who sold her to Europeans. Her description of the ship's voyage was cursory. Still a child she was "permitted to walk about the ship," while "the men and women were chained and kept in darkness below." She remembers the poor quality of the food and the punishment meted out to those enslaved on board ship (Browne and Sweet 2015).

The historian Jon Sensbach's recounting of the life of Rebecca Proten details the experience of women in the middle passage including the records describing "an unidentified African woman," who "brought a child into the world, nurtured it, kept it as clean as she could, and carried it to shore alive in the New World" (Sensbach 2015). The fortitude and strength required of such an act speaks to what that particular woman must have clung to in her past. Yet as the historian Stephanie Smallwood observes, "Each person pulled onto the slave ship embodied a social history: one or more distinctive places that were called 'home' and an indelible web of relationships comprising ties with immediate family and the extended network of kin" (Smallwood 2008). That may have been even more so in the case of women, who often were mothers or who had aspired to motherhood before their capture.

Aminata Diallo would surely have married in her village, had children of her own, and possibly followed in her mother's footsteps as a midwife, but her enslavement changed that trajectory. Even though she had a daughter in America, the circumstances under which she could be a mother were limited in enslavement. As Jennifer Morgan maintains, the childhood memories enslaved women carried would have included memories of marriage and birth ceremonies, in addition to other childhood memories: "Both mothers and daughters would feel the absence of the moment of puberty at which a girl came under her mother's care, to learn weaving, baking, and marketing," or in the case of Aminata, midwifery (Morgan 2004).

The experience on board slave ships created ties among those who survived the journey, forming connections of friendship and kinship as they endured the long journey to slavery. Women enslaved while pregnant gave birth on board ship helped by other women. Children, like Aminata Diallo, with no parents surely sought comfort with women on board ship who may have left their own children behind. On slave ships such a bond might have developed between a young girl and a woman. Fictive kinship relationships developed and persisted for those who might have ended up in the same place in the Americas. Indeed, the enslaved men and women constantly developed new familial bonds as those they considered kin were sold. Holding on to elements of what they had left behind and creating new bonds was a way enslaved women coped.

For the most part the suffering of, and brutality toward, women is gleaned from what others described. The accounts of the treatment they were subjected to were often terse, cursory entries in the ship logs of captains – records of death, beatings, illness, or other attacks on the bodies of captive women. Conditions on board ship were degrading for women and men. Once on board African captives were chained

in the holds of ships, forced to lie side by side. The spaces in which they lay were cramped cesspools of disease and filth. Some slave ships allowed women and children to move freely about on deck, but this could subject them to other deprivations – cruelty and sexual abuse from crew members. Falconbridge described the molestation women faced: “On board some ships, the common sailors are allowed to have intercourse with such of the black women whose consent they can procure. And some of them have been known to take the inconstancy of their paramours so much to heart, as to leap overboard and drown themselves. The officers are permitted to indulge their passions among them at pleasure, and sometimes are guilty of such brutal excesses as disgrace human nature. The hardships and inconveniences suffered by the Negroes during the passage are scarcely to be enumerated or conceived” (Falconbridge 1788). Falconbridge’s intimation that the captive women entered these liaisons willingly exhibits the power held over women’s bodies in these circumstances. Women were often used to entertain the crew, made to sing and dance for the pleasure of bored sailors. On board ships women bore a variety of torments – sickness, starvation, physical abuse, sexual exploitation, and death. The annals of the slave trade are filled with notations of torture, rape, and other humiliation. But we also get a glimpse of women’s responses, and they were not always passive. Female captives fought the notion that enslavement was their lot and responded accordingly.

Wherever and whenever they could, enslaved women resisted their capture, running away from barracoons on the coast, jumping overboard in waters off the coast, or revolting in mid sea. Resistance began, no doubt, at the moment of capture as depicted by Aminata Diallo whose mother died resisting the enslavers attempting to capture her daughter. Likewise, en route to the coastal forts women tried to run away, challenged their captors, and found ways to end their captivity. Women refused to eat, often dying of starvation. At the slave forts, women were often separated from men, but there are many accounts of women being among those who escaped from coastal forts where they awaited ships.

On board ships women continued to resist. Women were often not shackled but put above deck, and there too they resisted their captivity by jumping overboard or starving themselves. Ship’s captain logs described the many causes of death of the enslaved. One cause of death was through rebellion. Although men were most likely to be the leaders of shipboard revolts, women also took up arms aboard slave ships. In 1839 women were among those who revolted aboard the *Amistad*. Led by Sengbe Pieh the captives succeeded in taking over the ship demanding that the ship’s captain return them to their homelands (Rediker 2012). Women were part of other ship board revolts. In 1797 African captives aboard the ship *Thames* attacked the crew. The ship’s doctor described how the slaves armed with crude implements fought to free themselves. Although women were not part of the attack, he noted it was because there had not been enough time for the men to alert them (Greene 1944). Other accounts describe women, because of greater mobility aboard ship, smuggling weapons and ammunition to men to aid rebellion aboard ship. Because they were on the “periphery of white surveillance,” with less oversight, they were able to play a

supportive role (Taylor 2006). When revolts aboard slave ships were quelled, punishment was as likely to be meted out to women as men. When a group of captives mutinied on the slave ship *Robert* in 1721, a woman served as the lookout for the men, and stole the weapons that were used in their attempt to free themselves. The captain severely punished her for this act: “The woman he hoisted up by the Thumbs, whipp’d, and slashed her with Knives before the other Slaves till she died.” Clearly, this public display was meant to deter other women from attempting a similar act of rebellion (White 1985).

Resistance on board ship is typically represented as insurrection or revolts, but enslaved men and women responded to their captivity in other ways (Richardson 2001). Women resisted their captivity in subtler ways on board ship. Slave ship captain’s logs are filled with descriptions of women refusing to eat and committing suicide in that way. The logs of ship doctors were filled with entries of women dying of “lethargy,” clearly related to women either refusing to eat, or going into depression, leading to death. Falconbridge’s narrative spends much time depicting the plight of women. He describes many instances and cases of women’s despondency – from a woman who “pined for a considerable time,” and “refused all food and medical aid,” to a young woman “falling into a despondency” who later hung herself. In great detail he observed the psychological effects of enslavement on women: “I saw a young negroe woman chained to the deck who had lost her senses, soon after she was purchased and taken on board” (Falconbridge 1788).

While rebellion was a cause of death on slave ships, disease was more likely to kill enslaved women. The same diseases killed women and men, for the most part. Dysentery, smallpox, and scurvy were common on board slave ships, but diseases specific to women were also a cause of mortality. Sowande Mustakeem has described the many diseases to which captives were subject. Venereal diseases, in particular, most commonly affected women. When African captives on board ship fell ill, particularly with communicable diseases, the consequences could be dire (Mustakeem 2008).

Enslaved Africans were also murdered. The infamous case of the slave ship *Zong* in 1781 illustrates another way captives lost their lives. When the ship was stranded on its way to the Americas, its captain in order to collect insurance and conserve water threw over 130 of its captives overboard. As one historian has noted, slave traders who made the decision to jettison sick or dying captives “fully understood that potential buyers judged slaves’ financial worth according to their physical health” (Mustakeem 2011). So it was that in 1791 an African woman on board the slave ship *Polly* on contracting smallpox was tied to a chair, gagged, and blindfolded by the captain and crew and drowned in the ocean, for fear she would infect the rest of the ship (Mustakeem 2011). As in the case of the *Zong*, her story came to light only because a court case ensued. Yet while her story can be told, nothing more is known about this captive African woman. What was her name? Who was she? What were her origins? Was she a mother? A daughter? A wife? As one scholar has observed, “the irreparable violence of the Atlantic slave trade resides precisely in all the stories that we cannot know” (Hartman 2008).

Historiography

The stories of most women are absent in the history of the Atlantic slave trade, but increasingly these lives are being unearthed through innovative methodologies and mining of archives. Several scholars, as part of larger work on the Atlantic slave trade, have addressed the subject of women in the slave trade. The seminal work on women in slavery in Africa is perhaps Martin Klein and Claire Robertson's *Women and Slavery in Africa* (1983). Other scholars such as Jennifer L. Morgan and Deborah Gray White discuss the slave trade as part of larger studies on women in slavery in the Americas. The work of Barbara Bush and Verene Shepherd on women's lives in slavery in the Caribbean explores the African background and transit to the Americas, as well as how the ship's journey affected women in a variety of ways. Stephanie Smallwood's account of Africans turned into "Atlantic commodities" vividly exhibits the length to which Europeans went to maximize profits, and the consequences of those actions on Africans. More recently Sowande Mustakeem has explored the experiences of women and men on board slave ships, alerting us to the individual horrors African captives lived through, while Eric Robert Taylor highlights women's role in rebellion at sea. Other scholars have tried to access the voices of the many women taken into captivity (Klein and Robertson 1983; White 1985; Shepherd 2002; Morgan 2005, 2016; Taylor 2006; Mustakeem 2008, 2011; Bush 2008, 2010).

Conclusion

While much of what is available to elucidate these experiences is fragmentary, they allow the stories of enslaved women to be told, and scholars must continue to mine these documents, however patchy and sparse they might be. Sadiya Hartman has rightly noted that "the stories that exist are not about them [enslaved women], but rather about the violence, excess, mendacity, and reason that seized hold of their lives, transformed them into commodities and corpses, and identified them with names tossed-off as insults and crass jokes" (Hartman 2008). However, if historians of the slave trade omit these stories, African women disappear from history altogether. Hartman recognizes the difficulty of recreating the histories of these silent women asking, "how does one recuperate lives entangled with and impossible to differentiate from the terrible utterances that condemned them to death, the account books that identified them as units of value, the invoices that claimed them as property, and the banal chronicles that stripped them of human features? . . . How does one listen for the groans and cries, the undecipherable songs, the crackle of fire in the cane fields, the laments for the dead, and the shouts of victory, and then assign words to all of it? (Hartman 2008). The answer is complex.

The many silences in the archives do not allow scholars to fully access women's voices and experiences. Nonetheless, so as not to leave those voices silent, scholars excavate the voices of others, problematic as they might be. How, after all, can a

captain of a slave ship who has murdered a young African woman tell us anything about her? In the last two decades, historians of Africa, the Atlantic slave trade, and American slavery have attempted to read across the grain of the many biased and problematic records of the Atlantic slave trade. What is now known about African women in the Atlantic slave trade is measurably more than what was known even a decade ago, allowing us to understand the indignities, sorrow, loss, and death which millions of female captives faced over three centuries of the brutal trade in human bodies. Much remains to be known, and the burgeoning scholarship in the fields of African women's history, slave trade history, and African history will surely lead to more innovative histories that uncover the lives of African women in the Atlantic slave trade.

Cross-References

- ▶ [African Women and Globalization](#)
- ▶ [Challenges of Writing African Women's Histories](#)
- ▶ [Gender, Motherhood, and Parenting in Africa](#)
- ▶ [Researching Women and Gender in Africa: Present Realities, Future Directions](#)
- ▶ [Teaching Women's Studies in Africa](#)
- ▶ [Women in Pre-colonial Africa: East Africa](#)
- ▶ [Women in Pre-colonial Africa: Southern Africa](#)
- ▶ [Women in Pre-colonial Africa: West Africa](#)

References

- Browne, R., & Sweet, J. (2015). Florence Hall's "memoirs": Finding African women in the transatlantic slave trade. *Slavery & Abolition*, 37(1), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0144039X.2015.1074795>.
- Bush, B. (2008). "Daughters of injur'd Africk": African women and the transatlantic slave trade. *Women's History Review*, 17(5), 673–698. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09612020802316157>.
- Bush, B. (2010). African Caribbean slave mothers and children: Traumas of dislocation and enslavement across the Atlantic world. *Caribbean Quarterly*, 56(1–2), 69–94. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00086495.2010.11672362>.
- Curtin, P. D. (1969). *The Atlantic slave trade a census*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Eltis, D. (2007). 'A brief overview of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade,' Voyages: The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database. <https://www.slavevoyages.org/voyage/about>. Accessed 27 Apr 2018.
- Equiano, O. (2009). *The interesting narrative of the life of Olaudah Equiano written by himself*. Auckland: The Floating Press.
- Falconbridge, A. (1788). *An account of the slave trade on the coast of Africa*. Printed by J. Phillips. Retrieved from <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015063081023>.
- Finkenbine, R. (2007). Belinda's petition: Reparations for slavery in revolutionary Massachusetts. (Forum). *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 64(1), 95–104.
- Gomez, M. A. (1998). *Exchanging our country Marks: The transformation of African identities in the colonial and antebellum south*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

- Greene, L. (1944). Mutiny on the slave ships. *Phylon (1940–1956)*, 5(4), 346–354. <https://doi.org/10.2307/272039>.
- Gyasi, Y. (2017). *Homegoing: A Novel*. First Vintage books edition. Vintage Books.
- Hailey, A. (1976). *Roots: The Saga of an American family*. Garden City: Doubleday.
- Hall, G. M. (2005). *Slavery and African ethnicities in the Americas: Restoring the links*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Hartman, S. (2008). Venus in two acts. *Small Axe*, 12(2), 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1215/-12-2-1>.
- Herbstein, M. (2002). *Ama*. E-reads. New York, USA.
- Heywood, L., & Thornton, J. (2007). *Central Africans, Atlantic Creoles, and the Foundation of the Americas, 1585–1660* (p. 2007). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Hill, L. (2007). *Someone knows my name* (1st American ed.). New York: W.W. Norton and Company.
- Inikori, J. E. (1982). *Forced migration: The impact of the export slave trade on African societies*. New York: Africana Publishing Company.
- Inikori, J. E., & Engerman, S. L. (1992). *The Atlantic slave trade effects on economies, societies, and peoples in Africa, the Americas, and Europe*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Klein, H. (2010). *The Atlantic slave trade* (2nd ed., New ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Klein, M., & Robertson, C. (1983). *Women and slavery in Africa*. Madison, Wis: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Lindsay, L. (2008). *Captives as commodities: The transatlantic slave trade*. Upper Saddle River: Pearson Prentice Hall.
- Lovejoy, P. (2006). *The “middle passage”: The enforced migration of Africans across the Atlantic*. Ann Arbor: ProQuest Information and Learning.
- Lovejoy, P. E. (2011). *Transformations in slavery: A history of slavery in Africa* (p. 2011). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Moore, W. (2018). *She would be king: A novel*. Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press.
- Morgan, J. (2004). *Laboring women: Reproduction and gender in New World slavery*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Morgan, J. L. (2005). Women in slavery and the transatlantic slave trade. In A. Tibbles (Ed.), *Transatlantic slavery: Against human dignity*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.
- Morgan, J. L. (2016). Accounting for “the Most excruciating torment”: Gender, slavery, and trans-Atlantic passages. *History of the Present.*, 6(2), 184–207.
- Mustakeem, S. (2008). “I never have such a sickly ship before”: Diet, disease, and mortality in 18th-century Atlantic slaving voyages. *The Journal of African American History*, 93(4), 474–496.
- Mustakeem, S. (2011). “She must go overboard & shall go overboard”: Diseased bodies and the spectacle of murder at sea. *Atlantic Studies*, 8(3), 301–316. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14788810.2011.589695>.
- Mustakeem, S. (2016). *Slavery at sea: Terror, sex, and sickness in the middle passage*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Nwokeji, G. (2001). African conceptions of gender and the slave traffic. *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 58(1), 47–68. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2674418>.
- Rediker, M. (2012). *The Amistad rebellion: An Atlantic odyssey of slavery and freedom*. New York: Viking.
- Richardson, D. (2001). Shipboard revolts, African authority, and the Atlantic slave trade. *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 58(1), 69–92. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2674419>.
- Sensbach, S. (2015). Born on the Sea from Guinea: Women’s spiritual middle passages in the early Black Atlantic. In M. E. Bay, F. J. Griffin, M. S. Jones, & B. D. Savage (Eds.), *Toward an intellectual history of black women*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.
- Shepherd, V. A. (2002). Resistance and rebellion of African captives in the transatlantic slave trade before becoming seasoned labourers in the British Caribbean, 1690–1807 in Shepherd, V. In *Working slavery, pricing freedom: Perspectives from the Caribbean, Africa and the African diaspora*. New York: Palgrave.

- Smallwood, S. (2008). *Saltwater slavery a middle passage from Africa to American diaspora*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Smith, V. (2000). *A narrative of the life and adventures of venture, a native of Africa: But resident above sixty years in the United States of America, related by himself*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press Academic Affairs Library.
- Sutton, A. (2015). The seventeenth-century slave trade in the documents of the English, Dutch, Swedish, Danish and Prussian Royal Slave Trading Companies. *Slavery & Abolition*, 36(3), 445–459. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0144039X.2015.1067975>.
- Sweet, J. H. (2003). *Recreating Africa: Culture, kinship, and religion in the African-Portuguese world, 1441–1770*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.
- Taylor, E. (2006). *If we must die shipboard insurrections in the era of the Atlantic slave trade*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press.
- White, D. (1985). *Ar'n't I a woman?: Female slaves in the plantation South* (1st ed.). New York: Norton.