

Saltwater Slavery

*A Middle Passage from Africa
to American Diaspora*

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Harvard University Press
Cambridge, Massachusetts
London, England

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For John W. Blasingame
1940–2000
with gratitude for his great generosity of mind and heart

First Harvard University Press paperback edition, 2008.

Figures 3.1, 3.2, 5.1, and 6.1 are reproduced courtesy of the
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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Smallwood, Stephanie E.

Saltwater slavery : a middle passage from Africa to American
diaspora / Stephanie E. Smallwood.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-674-02349-9 (cloth : alk. paper)

ISBN 978-0-674-03068-8 (pbk.)

1. Slavery—United States—History—17th century.
2. Slavery—United States—History—18th century.
3. Slaves—United States—Social conditions—17th century.
4. Slaves—United States—Social conditions—18th century.
5. Slave trade—United States—History—17th century.
6. Slave trade—United States—History—18th century.
7. Slave trade—Africa—History—17th century.
8. Slave trade—Africa—History—18th century.
9. African diaspora. 10. Africans—Migration—
History. I. Title.

E441.S65 2007

306.3'62097309034—dc22 2006043511

to the crooked lines (social, cultural, epistemological) that shaped their Atlantic world. It affords an analytical and conceptual category that defines the Atlantic in historical time and place in a fresh way. It places the emphasis not on the African “background” of American slavery, on migration (focusing on captive Africans as “migrants” instead of “slaves”), or on the “middle passage” as a metaphor for all that was wrong with New World slavery. Instead, the concept of saltwater slavery illuminates what *forced* migration entailed.

The social geography of black life in the Atlantic arena was demarcated by the blurred and bloodied boundaries between captivity, commodification, and diaspora. Slaves did not so much leave one behind and enter another as proceed involuntarily, propelled always by agendas and agents other than themselves. With no itinerary and no directional control over their movement, captives had no clear cognitive map to guide them through the transition from land to water, the shift from smaller to larger ships, or the passage from coastal waters to open sea. The migration of the black captives was an unforgiving journey into the Atlantic market that never drew to full closure.

Considering the “saltwater” dimension of slaves’ lives allows us to piece together a picture of a place, a time, and an experience that does not otherwise figure in the archival record. Such an analysis of what happened to captive Africans in the Atlantic offers something we cannot get at simply by including Africa in our histories of African America or by singling out African captives as involuntary migrants or by naming the Atlantic crossing the middle passage. Here is a history of American slavery that begins in Africa and the Atlantic, in the saltwater slavery of peoples in motion, a diaspora shaped by violence encompassing the African, Atlantic, and American arenas of captivity, commodification, and enslavement.

1

*The Gold Coast and the
Atlantic Market in People*

When the captives boarded the *Sarah* in the winter months of 1721, at least some of those consigned to the ship had an idea where they were headed.¹ After several centuries of commercial and cultural exchange with Europeans, people from the coastal polities of the Gold Coast possessed an understanding of the wider Atlantic world unmatched in other African regions. Whereas many other Africans feared that their captors had cannibalistic intentions, most residents of the Gold Coast understood that Europeans planned not to eat them but rather to put them to work in distant homelands. No less than for Europeans, the “world” had become, for coastal Africans at least, Atlantic in scope.²

Even “sensible” captives from the Gold Coast, however, would find their geography of the Atlantic world woefully inadequate when it came to following its slave routes. By the eighteenth century, the practices of forced Atlantic migration and chattel slavery had grown to such proportions, that departure from the Gold Coast aboard a slave ship in 1721 could lead a captive to no fewer than fourteen American destinations. Topping the list was Jamaica: a third of ships sailing from the Gold Coast in the period between 1721 and 1725 delivered their human cargoes to work in the cane fields of England’s premier sugar-producing colony. Next in the line of likely destinations were the mainland Dutch Guiana colonies

(Suriname and Berbice), where nearly 20 percent of the people exported from the Gold Coast in this period ended their journeys. At least a thousand (10 percent) went to Barbados, and another thousand to each of the Dutch Caribbean island colonies, Curaçao and Saint Eustatius, while the remainder went in varying numbers to the Danish Virgin Islands, Virginia, Antigua, Cuba, Rio de la Plata, Saint Christopher, mainland Spanish America, or Montserrat.³

Moreover, if English traders had their way, captives from the Gold Coast were soon to be en route to Brazil. The scheme was to persuade Brazilian slavers to bring gold from that colony's newly developed mines at Minas Gerais and exchange it for slaves at English forts on the Gold Coast.⁴ Through this alchemy, proceeds would return to English hands in the form of the gold that African labor had extracted from Brazilian mines, and that gold would in turn be converted back into (embodied in) commodified labor, now available to begin the process anew. In this way, England's Royal African Company would enjoy the greatest possible gain (in hard currency) while avoiding the great expense and risk associated with transporting human commodities to American markets.

Neither Brazil, Barbados, nor Virginia was represented on the captives' own mental maps of the Atlantic world. But that is not to say that the African concept of space was static and unchanging. On the contrary, the geographical context of those who inhabited the Gold Coast had changed dramatically in the two and a half centuries since strangers displaying excitement at the sight of gold and overzealous interest in it had first appeared in those parts. So much so that through the alchemy of the transatlantic commerce in people captives from the Gold Coast were intricately bound to a geography of American places whose coordinates they could not know.

The Gold Coast in the Atlantic World

When they rounded the promontory they would call Cabo das Tres Pontas (Cape Three Points) early in the year 1471, Martim

Fernandes and Alvaro Esteves encountered villagers whose lives centered on extraction of fish and salt from the sea—and something else: men whose personal adornment signaled their possession of, and perhaps willingness to trade in, gold. A half century of eager exploration had passed since Afonso Gonçalves Baldaia found an inlet some three hundred miles south of Cape Bojador and declared it to be the mouth of the legendary “River of Gold,” known since the thirteenth century to both Christian and Arab geographers as the gateway to “fabled lands where spices and precious metals were as common as salt was in Portugal.”⁵

In 1442, a decade after Baldaia turned geographic myth into cartographic reality, Antão Gonçalves had become the first Portuguese mariner to lead an exploratory expedition that actually yielded gold. When captives who had been seized the previous year in the vicinity of Baldaia's Rio do Ouro (the southern coastal boundary of the present-day territory of Western Sahara) had revealed some familiarity with Sudanese and Saharan trade routes, their possession of such priceless knowledge earned them their release from European slavery. Returning with those lucky few from this first group of people exported from Africa aboard European ships, Gonçalves ransomed two of the captives in exchange for “a buckler, several ostrich eggs, and a small quantity of gold dust.”⁶

Three decades later, the expedition led by Fernandes and Esteves in 1471 proved the merit of Portugal's long exploratory enterprise in Africa. For these two mariners had come upon a place where “huge quantities of the purest gold could be exchanged for cheap trade-goods of cloth and metal.” The site entered into European cartography accordingly, as *a mina do ouro* (the gold mine), or simply El Mina (the Mine).⁷

Extending from the western side of Cabo das Tres Pontas to the promontory the Portuguese designated as Cabo das Redes, “because of the many nets that were found here when this land was discovered,” the so-called mine occupied more than a hundred miles of coastline when mariner Duarte Pacheco Pereira surveyed the re-

gion before the close of its first decade of European contact.⁸ By the end of the sixteenth century, the Afro-European gold trade reached as far east as Accra, and the whole region from Axim (just west of Cape Three Points) to the Volta River, encompassing 230 miles, was known as the Gold Coast.⁹

More than two thousand miles distant from the coastal Saharan site that first received a Portuguese name associated with gold, this forested region between the Tano and Volta Rivers that was drawing Portuguese attention held one of the world's richest deposits of gold ore. For this reason, the territory that entered the European geographic imagination as the "Mine of Gold" in the second half of the fifteenth century also occupied an important place among the major trading centers of the western Sudan.

In the main, West Africa's impenetrable southern forest belt did not attract long-distance traders from the ancient urban centers of the western Sudan. Such sophisticated commercial and cultural hubs as Awdaghost, Timbuktu, Jenne, and Gao thus marked the southern termini of the great trans-Saharan trade routes. Forest peoples brought kola nuts and dried fish to market in Timbuktu and the other trading centers situated at this point where the northern reach of the forest met the southern edge of the savanna, and they carried away textiles and other goods received in exchange. Sudanese trade goods thus traveled south beyond the savanna deep into the forest belt, but for a long time Sudanese traders on foot did not.¹⁰ Gold, however, had made the area that would draw Portuguese interest the exception to that broader pattern, giving Sudanese traders reason to venture deep into the forest pocket that became known as the Gold Coast. Far less is known about this period than about the centuries following European arrival, but by using archaeological evidence and traditional histories, together with contemporary European sources, it is possible to sketch, at least in broad outline, some key elements of the region's social and political landscape.

On the basis of archaeological evidence indicating a marked shift in pottery style, it is thought that Akan-speaking peoples entered the forested region between the Ofin and Pra Rivers beginning around the turn of the eleventh century. They absorbed or displaced Guan-speaking groups already there and developed a social order dedicated to meeting the Sudanese demand for gold.¹¹ From the eleventh century to the time of Portuguese arrival, commercial and cultural ties to the Sudan brought material resources from outside the forest zone (Saharan textiles and other luxurious imports, salt, and slaves). Those ties encouraged development of a settled social order and a sedentary agricultural society in the forest, along with the accompanying sociopolitical institutions.¹² That this had taken place by the time Europeans came to the region is evidenced not only by the Portuguese mariners' encounter with men (probably merchants) who wore gold ornaments, but also by a system of gold weights and measures derived from those in use at Jenne, Timbuktu, and other Sudanese commercial centers.¹³

The historical shift from more nomadic hunter-gatherer communities to permanent agricultural settlements that was under way at this time received a powerful impetus from commercial and cultural interaction with the Euro-Atlantic system in the fifteenth century. The beginning of Afro-Portuguese exchange opened a period characterized by an intensified pace of migration and settlement, following the adoption of maize (the American cultigen introduced by the Portuguese), and by the southerly pull of Atlantic commerce. It was this mixture of dynamic forces that tipped the historical balance, so to speak, in favor of sustained settlement, formation of towns, and ultimately transition to the landscape of centralized polities represented on European maps of the African landscape.

The two centuries that passed after the arrival of the Portuguese were a time of dramatic change in nearly every facet of life in the region: much of the political, economic, social, and cultural terrain of African life in the seventeenth century would have been unfamiliar

to the people who greeted the first Portuguese ships in the fifteenth century. At the outset of the Afro-Portuguese encounter, the locus of urban settlement and state formation was the northern fringe of the forest—at such places as Begho and Bono Manso, some two hundred miles distant from the coast.¹⁴ When the Dutchman Pieter de Marees visited the area at the turn of the sixteenth century, the tiny coastal fishing and salt-making villages Pereira described had been replaced by proliferating dense urban port towns. Where Pereira had identified only a handful of villages and towns beyond Cape Three Points, no fewer than seventeen settlements now stood along the coast from Axim as far as Chinka, just short of the Volta River. Many port towns, such as Shama, Elmina, Cabo Corso, Mori, Kormantin, Accra, and Chinka, were outlets for gold; others were marketplaces for agricultural produce, fish, or cattle.¹⁵

The maize Portuguese mariners brought from the Americas quickly attained a prominent place among the agricultural staples in the Gold Coast. It could be seen growing “in abundance” all along the coast, together with other New World plants such as pineapples and sweet potatoes.¹⁶ Its high yield and protein content made maize a food staple far superior to the sorghums and yams that were indigenous to West Africa. By the substantial boost it gave to average caloric intake, the New World import fueled dramatic population growth throughout the southern forest region. No longer the periphery to a Sudanese center, the region’s Atlantic littoral now was a center in its own right: a magnet that drew people and trade from all sides to its burgeoning “central places,” it was the leading edge of a social order characterized by the population density, ethnic plurality, and economic diversity typical of urban centers.¹⁷ Thus, in addition to the fishermen, salt makers, and common peasants who dominated the coastal towns, it was not uncommon to find intermingled with them “interpreters,” “toll-takers,” and representatives (*batafo*) of upland traders.¹⁸

The Place of People in the Atlantic Market

From the beginning, slavery and slave trading played crucial roles in the Afro-European commerce that developed in the Gold Coast. Indeed, from 1475 to 1540, more than 12,000 people passed through its coastal ports as human commodities.¹⁹ These, however, were not slave exports from the region. Rather, people were among the goods that African merchants wanted to buy from their new Portuguese trading partners.

Within the first decade of establishing commercial relations with the Portuguese, the Gold Coast had become an importer of people enslaved elsewhere in Africa. Gold-bearing African merchants traveling to the coast from upland forest territories required large retinues of porters to transport the bulky European goods they purchased. To meet this need, it was a simple matter for Portuguese traders to supply slaves alongside the textiles and metals they sold to African buyers.

Making their way to “the Mine” in 1479, for example, an interloping Spanish fleet stopped on the Windward Coast, where local traders presented items they hoped would draw European trade, offering “women and children for sale.” Eustache de la Fosse, a Flemish adventurer traveling with the fleet, reported that the Spanish ships purchased the slaves and subsequently “resold” them “without difficulty” when they reached the Gold Coast.²⁰ Indeed, an established routine for bringing slaves into the region had already taken shape by the end of the first decade of Afro-European trade here. During the time that de la Fosse was at São Jorge da Mina Castle, he witnessed the arrival of two Portuguese vessels returning from voyages eastward to Calabar (the Bight of Biafra), “with some 400 slaves to be sold on the Gold Coast.”²¹

The Gold Coast fell well behind Europe and the Atlantic islands among destinations for the more than 150,000 slaves (mostly from

Coast entailed more than a simple directional reversal in the flow of people through local maritime markets. Merchant elites that had once purchased people reduced to captivity elsewhere were now asked to produce exportable captives and sell them alongside the gold brought to the coastal markets. To assuage concerns registered by local leaders, the Portuguese imposed geographic restrictions on the developing export trade in slaves, in order to protect the territories of central Gold Coast polities with which the Portuguese could not afford strained relations. Accordingly, “after about 1590” the Portuguese made proposals that the king should “set aside a strip of coast ten leagues on either side of São Jorge and exempt that area from slaving activities.” This solution was not put into practice, however, until 1616. By that date, “the pressure was great to permit open slaving operations all along the Mina coast,” and “the Brazilian demand for African labor was so strong that the Portuguese crown permitted slaving operations to be conducted within Mina itself.”²⁷

When it arrived on the Gold Coast in 1619, the Portuguese ship *San Francisco* signaled not only the return of slave ships after at least half a century of negligible human traffic in coastal markets there, but also a new role for slave ships. Laden with goods suitable for buying people from the region’s merchant elite, the *San Francisco* was there not to deliver a human cargo from elsewhere, but rather to obtain people enslaved there in the Gold Coast: “a premium price of about 20,000 réis” could be had for “a prime Mina slave” in Pernambuco or Bahia.²⁸ When the *San Francisco* departed, eighty-odd members of local Gold Coast communities had been offered as commodities in exchange for the goods the ship delivered, and had now become cargo themselves, en route toward the slave market at Cartagena.²⁹

Over the course of the seventeenth century, what had been an exclusively Portuguese arena became a site of close competition among European colonizing nations, as French, Dutch, and English

the Bight of Benin and the Kongo), exported aboard Portuguese ships from the mid-fifteenth century through the first two decades of the following century.²² Thereafter, the steady flow of slaves entering the area through the maritime market slowed considerably. A maverick mariner’s search for a western route to Asia having brought the New World into the European universe; the Atlantic arena was shifting, imperceptibly at first, into a new alignment. The first stirrings of American impact on the Gold Coast were felt in the second half of the sixteenth century, when demand in the Americas grew sufficient to divert slaves purchased in Africa into transatlantic routes that terminated in the major Spanish-American markets at Veracruz, Cartagena, and Lima.²³

More than 700,000 Africans boarded ships bound for the New World in the first half century (1580–1640) of slave trading along the transatlantic routes that brought the Americas into the orbit of European and African worlds. Few of these ships, however, departed from the Gold Coast.²⁴ Indeed, with the decline of slave imports in the Gold Coast came the virtual disappearance of slave ships there. The immediate impact of the American market was not to reverse the direction of the slave traffic but rather to eliminate the region’s maritime market for slaves altogether.²⁵

American developments began to reverberate in the Gold Coast, however, around the turn of the seventeenth century. The interest of Portugal in developing the nation’s sole colonial possession in the Americas turned Brazil into the first New World sugar producer and gave the Portuguese crown its own American market for slave labor. The establishment of sugar plantations in Brazil, and the decision to exploit African rather than indigenous Indian labor to run them, had already put some 50,000 Africans from Senegambia, the Bight of Benin, the Bight of Biafra, and especially the Kongo, en route to the Americas before 1600.²⁶ Soon that demand was felt in the Gold Coast.

The impact of the American demand for slave labor in the Gold

henceforth be felt on the Gold Coast as it had elsewhere in Africa in the preceding two centuries.

It is impossible to determine the volume of slave exports from the Gold Coast in the first half of the seventeenth century with any accuracy, except to say that it remained quite small by comparison with that from other regions of Atlantic Africa. Of 10,053 slaves purchased by the Dutch in "Guinea" from 1637 to 1645, only a little more than 17 percent (1,721) came from the Gold Coast region—an average of barely 200 slaves per annum. In contrast, during the same period the kingdom of Allada in the Bight of Benin exported an average of just over 500 people per annum through its main port at Jakin, while a yearly average total of close to 400 people departed through Calabar and other ports in the Bight of Biafra aboard Dutch slave ships. Meanwhile, Angola alone supplied more than half (55 percent) of the 26,286 slaves imported to Brazil by the Dutch between 1630 and 1653.³⁴

Given the presence of Portuguese, Dutch, and English slave traders on the Gold Coast at various times in the first half of the seventeenth century, it is plausible that at least several thousand enslaved Africans boarded European slave ships there during this period. In the century to come, the stream of departing slaves would increase dramatically. While the Dutch are estimated to have exported 9,263 African slaves from the Gold Coast between 1662 and 1700, their English counterparts (interlopers in violation of the Royal African Company monopoly included) exported an estimated 55,288 slaves from the region during the same period.³⁵ In short, slave exports from the Gold Coast never fell below an average of 1,300 people per annum in the last four decades of the seventeenth century. By that point, one ship carried away as many captives as had arrived in an average year during the preceding century. Exports in the 1660s were four times what the average annual volume of slave imports had been a century earlier and would grow exponentially in the half century to come (Table 1.1). As the market

incursions challenged the Portuguese claim to a monopoly on European trade in Africa. Dutch traders led the effort to undermine Portuguese rule at the beginning of the seventeenth century and initiated an assault on São Jorge da Mina Castle that ousted the Iberians in 1637. By the middle of the century a different configuration was firmly in place.³⁰ The Dutch and the English became the key European players; and for the African sellers of gold, competition between these and other European traders became enormously profitable.³¹ Moreover, for African merchants with insufficient access to gold, ships like the *San Francisco* represented an expansion of opportunity—a fresh avenue to wealth and power. But the new dynamics marked the beginning of a century of change on the Gold Coast that would have more ambiguous consequences for other Africans there.

Dutch and English slave ships began to appear with regularity after the middle of the seventeenth century. But it was England in particular that envisioned a role for the Gold Coast in its Atlantic system, one as open to trade in slaves as in the trade for gold. When Charles II chartered a company to oversee England's trade in Africa in 1672, people were considered a standard component of exports from the Gold Coast. Describing the Royal African Company's trade settlements on the Gold Coast, an "Account of the Limits and Trade of the Royal African Company" explained that the agent-general stationed at Cape Coast Castle "furnishes thence all their under-factories with goods, and receives from them gold, elephants' teeth and slaves."³²

To be sure, gold remained the primary focus of all Afro-European trade on the Gold Coast until the beginning of the eighteenth century.³³ But a rapidly growing demand for labor in Barbados, the Leeward Islands, newly acquired Jamaica, and even the tobacco-producing Chesapeake colonies meant that English traders would look to the region to serve as a dual market for the purchase of gold and people, and the pull of the Atlantic market for slaves would

Table 1.1 Seventeenth-century Gold Coast slave exports compared with sixteenth-century slave imports.

Decade	Average annual exports	Ratio of exports to imports ^a
1662–1670 ^b	888	4:1
1671–1680	1751	8:1
1681–1690	1267	6:1
1691–1700	1709	8:1
1701–1709 ^c	2760	13:1
1710–1719	3518	17:1
1720–1729	4708	23:1

a. Using an estimate of about two hundred average annual slave imports, 1500–1540, in Ivana Elbl, “The Volume of the Early Atlantic Slave Trade, 1450–1521,” *Journal of African History* 38 (1997): 31–75.

b. Export figures for 1662–1700 from David Eltis, *The Rise of African Slavery in the Americas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), Table 7–1.

c. Export figures for 1700–1729 from David Richardson, “Slave Exports from West and West-Central Africa,” *Journal of African History* 30 (1989), Table 5.

for slave labor in the Americas began a period of explosive growth, it pulled a torrent of captives from the Gold Coast into a very different role in the Atlantic world than had been offered to their ancestors two centuries before.

War, the State, and the Consequences of Captivity

In its eighteenth-century expansion as well as in its seventeenth-century beginnings, the current of men, women, and children leaving the Gold Coast aboard European slave ships comprised for the most part people reduced to captivity by war. But as neither warfare nor its social consequences were unknown phenomena in the seventeenth century, explaining the region’s shift to slave exports entails something more than a simple chronicling of the rise to power of centralized “states.” Understanding of how and why a region that had been an importer of people from elsewhere became an exporter

of its own people requires analysis of the relation between emergent institutions of political authority and the Atlantic market economy, by then firmly rooted in the Gold Coast. For it was because of the complex interplay of these factors that the consequences of captivity began to take a decidedly unanticipated turn by the end of the seventeenth century.

During his residence on the Gold Coast from 1614 to 1620, Samuel Brun observed that warfare nearly always led to the taking of heads.³⁶ Not only were men beheaded, but it also was common practice summarily to execute women and children. “The Blacks say it is better to strangle women and children than men,” explained Brun, “because then they will not reproduce quickly; and the children, if they came of age, would want to seek revenge.”³⁷ Similarly, when Michael Hemmersam was at Elmina in the 1640s, he observed that in war, “whoever gains the upper hand lets none of the other side live.” As he explained, “even if they shoot someone dead, they nevertheless cut off his head.”³⁸

When Wilhelm Johann Müller began his seven-year residence as chaplain at the Danish fort Frederiksborg (near Cape Coast) in 1662, however, it no longer was customary to neutralize the threat posed by surplus prisoners of war by executing them. By then the sale of such captives on the coast had emerged as a means to achieve the same end—and to purchase European trade goods at the same time. Thus, Müller explained, whereas persons wounded or killed in warfare were beheaded according to custom, a different fate befell prisoners who were taken alive. “But if someone falls into the enemy’s hands unharmed and alive, he is tied with cords and taken prisoner, and must remain a bondsman for the rest of his life,” Müller wrote. “In order that the masters do not have to worry about bondsmen running away,” he continued, “prisoners are sold to far-off places. This,” he surmised, “is why so many slaves are sold annually on the Guinea coast and exchanged for goods.”³⁹

The growing market for human beings gave casualties of war—

captives made vulnerable by war's destabilization—an unaccustomed commercial value. The result in the seventeenth-century Gold Coast was a shift in the potential consequences of captivity, from the give-no-quarter policy observed by Samuel Brun in the early part of the century to the direct link between warfare and enslavement that became apparent at mid-century. When two English ships from Barbados appeared at “Comany” (Komenda) in December 1658, a Dutch report noted that the English vessels sought between them 220 slaves, “of which they had already obtained 80.” The English trade “giv[es] us a great reduction in receipts,” the Dutch complained, “for what the Blacks can obtain for slaves, they need not give any gold, and through such are the wars so waged.”⁴⁰

But the logic of African engagement with the Atlantic market for slaves was more complex and more nuanced than Müller or other European observers could comprehend. The wars Müller observed and the captives who appeared at the littoral in growing numbers reflected larger historical processes accompanying the region's economic integration into the global current of Atlantic commerce.⁴¹ The changing political salience of two institutions—the state (*oman*) and the matrilineal (*abusua kesee*)—that were central to the social organization of Akan-speaking communities helps explain the changes Müller witnessed.

In brief, the *oman* derived its claim to authority from the idiom of kingship; its corollary, the *abusua kesee*, articulated authority through the idiom of kinship. The two institutions are thought to have developed contemporaneously in the formative centuries of the settled agricultural social order. By the time Müller wrote, in the second half of the seventeenth century, however, the power vested in kingship, or stools (the ultimate symbol of the power of the state), presented a formidable challenge to the importance of the matrilineal and its expression of power and authority based on kinship. The reasons it was not possible to load ships at the Gold Coast before the second half of the seventeenth century were, on the one

hand, the enormous local demand for labor and, on the other hand, the absence of states or other institutions with sufficient political power to enslave people on such a massive and sustained scale.⁴²

The rise of states in the Gold Coast was accompanied by two economic developments central to their function as institutions of territorial and political aggrandizement. First, the importing of European firearms introduced a new instrument of military might. Second, the exporting of people in the Atlantic slave trade served to broaden access to the Atlantic economy and also provided an expedient means for managing the human by-product of expansionist state building. By adding war captives to the flow of gold exported through Atlantic market channels, states turned surplus people into valuable commodities.

Firearms imported from Europe were in regular use among coastal peoples by the middle of the seventeenth century, and the unprecedented power they afforded to those who acquired them and mastered their use was evident in new missile tactics that appeared on the battlefield and new approaches to statecraft that shaped the region's political geography.⁴³ To suggest that the introduction of firepower *caused* the rise of centralized states would be to misrepresent the relationship. Political centralization was a process already well under way among the Gold Coast communities at the time of the Portuguese arrival. But the integration of guns was sharply reflected in the kind of influence wielded by the states that appeared fully formed in the second half of the seventeenth century: gun-toting armies mobilized to serve political leaders whose power came from their participation in Atlantic commerce.⁴⁴

The adoption of European guns in the second half of the seventeenth century changed the way wars were fought and dramatically expanded the geographic scope of warfare. In the first half of the century, military power was relatively well balanced between the polities of the coast and those of the forest hinterland. According to historian Ray Kea, “no single state was militarily stronger than its

neighbors," and no state was able to use military power to pursue territorial conquest. Warfare was primarily defensive or "was limited to comparatively small-scale offensive operations, embracing tens rather than hundreds of square miles."⁴⁵

While conflicts were frequent among the numerous polities, usually the prearranged battles were over after only a few days. De Marees observed in 1602, for example, "The wars do not last long; they are started with great speed and also quickly ended."⁴⁶ Müller noted that there had been instances where "the enemy, having obtained the upper hand, practiced great violence, stealing, plundering, [and] burning the houses," but in general, he wrote, such destruction "happens very seldom, since they are usually content with a hard fight, especially when they notice that one of the parties in dispute is a match for the other." He went on: "This is why a war for which people have prepared for such a long period comes to an end in two or three days."⁴⁷

After midcentury the kind of short-lived military encounters Müller witnessed increasingly gave way to more extensive and destructive wars of territorial expansion and commercial aggrandizement. These conflicts, and the associated trail of vulnerable and displaced persons reflected the growth of states able and willing to wage systemic military campaigns against neighboring territories.⁴⁸ Through diplomacy and militarism, such polities became still more powerful, forming alliances with some and pressuring others into relationships of dependency.

In this way, the states that took root along the coast and in the forest hinterland vied for place and power in the region's rapidly evolving Atlantic market—Denkyira, Akwamu, and Asante chief among them. Denkyira was the first of these states to show up on European maps of the region, as it emerged as a major force controlling gold supply routes leading to the western ports of the Gold Coast in the second half of the seventeenth century.⁴⁹ In the closing decades of that century, Akwamu made its presence felt near the lit-

toral in the eastern Gold Coast and became the engine of the region's emerging export market for slaves.⁵⁰ Asante rose to prominence in the central forest hinterland and staked a claim to regional dominance by its decisive defeat of Denkyira at the turn of the eighteenth century.⁵¹

Akwamu had its roots in the early sixteenth-century migration of a northern Akan-speaking group—the Abrade—into southern forest territory thirty miles inland from Elmina, where they founded a town in the vicinity of present-day Twifo-Heman.⁵² The Abrade were primarily traders, who facilitated and capitalized on the late fifteenth- and sixteenth-century development of commercial routes directing the flow of gold toward new markets on the coast. A splinter group of the Abrade continued to move eastward until the end of the century, when they settled in the Nyanaoase district, on the northern edge of the Ga-speaking polities around Accra.

The Abrade settlement was at first welcomed by the Accra rulers, whose growing power as middlemen in Afro-European trade centered on their ability to control access to the seaboard. As clients of the Accra rulers, the Abrade traders helped consolidate control of the northern Accra frontier and the trade routes down to the coast. As a result, a large gold market established at Abonse, near Nyanaoase, "by the third decade of the seventeenth century" formed a boundary beyond which upland merchants transporting gold were not permitted to travel. The Abrade merchants consolidated their control over the main routes into Accra and then extended their reach to other north-south routes to such a degree that by the middle of the century nearly all trade in the vicinity of the kingdom flowed into and out of Abonse. "By this period," Ivor Wilks has suggested, "it becomes possible to speak of the Akwamu kingdom of Nyanaoase, which, although still technically under Accra, was rapidly becoming more powerful than its patron."⁵³

The Accra region had been a major outlet for gold brought to the

coast by traders from Akyem and other upland gold-producing states. Akwamu's initial aim had been to control the trade in gold in the region. But when it became clear that dominance over Akyem was an untenable aim, Akwamu turned to the other type of commerce in the region's Atlantic market: the trade in people. With its production of captives, the area now became a more reliable outlet for slaves than for the precious metal.⁵⁴

Under the direction of the Akwamu ruler Ansa Sasraku, a relatively benign pattern of growth gave way to a decidedly militaristic policy of imperial expansion during the last quarter of the century. First, rising tensions between client and patron were resolved when Akwamu seized control of Great Accra, the kingdom's capital city, in 1677; then the kingdom's three main seaboard towns fell in 1680–1681, thereby completing the subjugation of Accra and securing Ansa Sasraku's status in the region as the head of a powerful expansionist state.⁵⁵

During the brief lull between the two principal campaigns against Accra, the neighboring Ladoku kingdom also was brought under Akwamu jurisdiction. Campaigns against polities in the Akwapim hills to the east and Agona to the west followed, bringing rapid conquest of the former and defeat of the latter polity by the end of the decade. The fall of Agona, formally acknowledged in 1688–1689, ended a twenty-year alliance between the two states. For two decades, friendly relations with Agona had been an essential aid to Akwamu's defense of its western border with Akyem and an important strategic means to "prevent Akyem and other inland traders from bypassing Accra and Akwamu control by trading to the coast through Agona." Then, however, Akwamu turned to a strategy of repeated assaults against Agona in the 1680s, to avert "an Akyem alliance with Agona which would have provided Akyem access to such coastal settlements as Winneba and Apam."⁵⁶

In the meantime, Akwamu regularly skirmished with neighboring states throughout the period—Tafo to the northeast, Akyem to

the northwest, Assin to the southwest, and Allampo, a coastal town near the mouth of the Volta River that was a major supplier of slaves for the Atlantic market. When Ansa Sasraku died shortly after the Agona conquest, the Akwamu state claimed jurisdiction over an eighty-mile stretch of coast from Winneba to the Volta River, and a vast hinterland that reached as many miles inland. The drive for territorial conquest continued under new rulers, so by the turn of the eighteenth century Akwamu's military presence was felt as far east as Whydah.⁵⁷

Many of the captives produced by Akwamu's military campaigns were marched to the state's capital district at Nyanaoase, where their labor as slave cultivators supported the fledgling military power by feeding it.⁵⁸ Among the likely outcomes for captives of elite status were ransom and prisoner exchange, while ritual murder remained the fate of some (if no longer most) nonelite combatants. War captives, particularly men, who were not absorbed into the slave population of Akwamu were taken along the forest paths that led down to the coast and eventually found themselves in the holds of European slave ships.

For women, war captivity generally meant further subjection to the processes of circulation and exchange that had already shaped their gendered roles in their communities. Female captives were often made to leave their homes to join the conquering group. In this way, victors acquired both the productive and the reproductive labor of defeated communities. The human spoils of war produced two forms of wealth: if assimilated as slave laborers and wives, war captives supplied productive and reproductive labor; alternatively, if disposed of through sale, war captives could be made into profitable commodities and exchanged for European goods on the Atlantic coast.

As long as local demand remained high (through the second half of the seventeenth century), more captives became slaves in the Gold Coast than were put aboard European ships for export. But

when it was convenient or expedient to do so, African elites with access to captive people could find a seller's market at the region's waterside towns in the closing decades of the seventeenth century. Indeed, by this time gold could be purchased from Europeans in exchange for captives, making the sale of people in the Atlantic market a means of obtaining hard currency. Accordingly, in 1686, Royal African Company officials ordered agents to end a practice that had evolved in the increasingly competitive market for human beings in the Gold Coast: "Wee find it necessary [to] absolutely forbid you to use any Longer that Custome of buying Negroes with Gold if ye People will not take Goods for their Negro Slaves lett them keep them."⁵⁹

The opportunity to substitute people for all or part of the gold generally required to buy imported textiles transformed both the political and the social economy of the region. On the one side of this new channel of economic exchange, a substantially wider spectrum of would-be entrepreneurs was able to participate in the accumulation of wealth afforded by Afro-European trade. On the other side of those transactions stood people from within the communities of the Gold Coast who now had value on the Atlantic market. The vulnerability of life lived at the far periphery of social networks suddenly portended a new category of terrible consequences. In the closing decades of the seventeenth century a pattern was establishing itself, as wars involving Akwamu, Tafo, Assin, Akyem, Agona, Fantine, Akwapim, Ladoku, and doubtless other polities, began to send some among their captives to the waterside.⁶⁰

Gold being the most prized commodity the region had to offer to the Atlantic market, that "subterraneous treasure" blunted the full force of the market's fast-growing demand for captives through the end of the seventeenth century. But by the turn of the eighteenth century, the region's gold fields were reaching the point of exhaustion at the same time that American gold deposits in Brazil, coming into production, provided an alternate source of supply in the

global market. The movement into new arenas of colonial enterprise—centered on gold and other mineral resources (diamonds) in Brazil, on rice in South Carolina, and on continually expanding sugar production in Portuguese, English, and French-American colonies—brought about an enormous expansion in the American demand for slave labor.

In this context, Asante, like Akwamu in the preceding century, was positioned to respond creatively, turning into opportunity the very circumstances that might have appeared to portend a declining role for the Gold Coast in the larger Atlantic economy.⁶¹ When Akwamu began to assert its power in the eastern Gold Coast in the last quarter of the seventeenth century, the Asante polity was a tributary of Denkyira. But by the turn of the following century, a member of the Asante ruling family—who had once resided at the Denkyira capital as an apprentice in warfare and statecraft but had returned to the Asante capital at Kumasi and led successful campaigns against neighboring polities—was looking to lead an attack against the ruler of Denkyira Ntim Gyakari.⁶²

Osei Tutu's decisive victory over the Denkyira king in a series of battles that concluded in 1701 elevated the power and authority associated with the title Asantehene to new heights. His success marshaling supernatural forces to aid the Asante army in its battle against the mighty Denkyira state and his introduction of innovative forms of military and political organization formed the backdrop for the creation of the Golden Stool (*sika dwa*). The ultimate symbol of statecraft and kingship, the Golden Stool reflected the idea that the Asante state and its leader, the Asantehene, embodied secular authority possessing the highest spiritual sanction.

The simultaneous rise of an Atlantic market for slave exports and of states whose power derived from engagement with the Atlantic economy brought about social upheavals in the central and south-

ern forest communities of the Gold Coast. Imperial expansion, warfare, and competition for preeminence in the Atlantic commercial sector sent thousands of people into captivity and growing numbers into saltwater slavery. Arguably, none saw more of the disruptive side of the region's involvement in the Atlantic system than those who occupied the lower rungs of society. The Atlantic market for slaves changed what it meant to be a socially, politically, or economically marginalized person. Though full "belonging" remained an unattainable goal for the most marginalized, such as slave women, it was nonetheless true that even those at the bottom of the social hierarchy were bound in a mutually obligatory relationship to some corporate group.⁶³ Captives "acquired through war, kidnapping, or purchase" joined a community as a "trade" or "bought" slave, and were vulnerable to further involuntary displacement through resale until they were well along the path of assimilation. But assimilation was the operative process that governed the exchange of people.⁶⁴

At this juncture, however, in place of the dreaded experience of incorporation into a new African community—an experience nonetheless familiar from hearsay—some captives found themselves sent to the waterside markets. Captivity for these unfortunates was not a temporary status while they were en route to the less vulnerable position of the slave (one who, though debased, "belonged" to a community). Rather, theirs was a "social death," a form of exile to which no end was foreseeable.⁶⁵ They inhabited a new category of marginalization, one not of extreme alienation *within* the community, but rather of absolute exclusion from *any* community. In this sense, the commercial opportunities that accrued to traders who exchanged people for goods soon rendered the Atlantic market for slaves something more than a means for dealing with war prisoners who could not be assimilated. Any and all who were vested with political power over subordinates—husbands over wives, elites over peasants and slaves, as well as the victorious over the van-

quished—could and did find incentives to send people down to the waterside.

The flourishing of trade in captive people so soon after initial Afro-European contact, and in nearly every coastal area where Portuguese mariners alighted, suggests that slavery and slave trading were already well established throughout much of precolonial West Africa before the arrival of the Portuguese. But the development by the turn of the sixteenth century of a Portuguese trade network putting thousands into circulation annually as commodities in coastal Africa indicates also a shift of enormous proportions. It is a change to which the Dutch mariner Pieter de Marees alluded when he explained the absence of an export market in slaves on the Gold Coast at the turn of the seventeenth century. "They also enslave one another," De Marees observed of the Gold Coast, "but not in the same manner as in Angola or Conge [Kongo], for it would not be possible to load ships here with blacks." De Marees explained, "They do not have at their disposal a multitude of Captives," and so on the Gold Coast "they cannot be purchased in large numbers."⁶⁶

The Portuguese had not introduced slave trading in African regions where no such commerce had existed prior to their arrival. But through the commerce they did introduce, they helped initiate a dramatic and abrupt shift in the scale of slave trading. The multiple channels of trade through which people flowed as commodities in the new Atlantic arena reflected a profound transformation—one that institutionalized markets for people and practices for treating people as commodities that had been tenuous at best, and in certain places nonexistent, before Portuguese intervention. Purchasing "in large numbers" and dealing in "multitudes" of captives transformed the very nature of captivity.

From the place Portuguese mariners named El Mina in Africa in the fifteenth century to the American place they came to call Minas Gerais in the seventeenth century, the Gold Coast was a player in

the production of local and global wealth in the Atlantic economy, but the nature of the African region's role and the consequences had changed dramatically. In this sense, the Royal African Company's Brazilian scheme was the ultimate farce, for it meant that a part of Africa named by the Portuguese for its export of gold now was being tapped instead as a supplier of human commodities for export to the gold mines developed by Portuguese colonizers in America. In the end, the Brazilian scheme faced too many obstacles to pick up much momentum. For one thing, as the company's chief agent at Cape Coast Castle explained the limitations of the plan in June 1721, the Portuguese would "barter only with Gold for Young Men (from 18 to 20) and Women Boys & Girls they buy with Tobacco" (the latter being the more valued commodity by far at nearby Whydah).⁶⁷ Also pressing was Brazilian anxiety about violating of crown policy. A contract that had been reached with Brazilian ship owners willing to exchange gold for slaves at the English fort at Whydah "broke off" in 1723 for this reason, "there being so strict a prohibition against bringing Gold from Brazil to Africa," the agent at Whydah explained, "that they could not comply with it."⁶⁸

For the most part then, Brazilian gold mines received relatively few captives from the Gold Coast. But the Gold Coast became one of the leading suppliers of African slaves to other Atlantic markets in the first half of the eighteenth century, as captives ousted gold after 1700 to become the region's prime export commodity.⁶⁹ The Gold Coast was in actuality becoming a slave coast.

2

Turning African Captives into Atlantic Commodities

The sloop *Cape Coast* was carrying gold, corn, and slaves obtained on a trading voyage to Winneba on 6 September 1721, when its human cargo seized an opportunity to overpower its captors. "The Captain being a shore, the Slaves rose, kill'd one man and a Boy, and run the Sloop ashore and escaped." Several weeks later, officials at the castle reported what news they had gathered about the event. "Severall Goods" had been on board the vessel that were "the remains of her trading Cargo at Annamaboe," but what was not already "stole by the Natives" had "received damage by the Salt Water." The same was true of the ninety-two chests of corn that had been put aboard by the company agent at Anomabu.

As for the vessel's human cargo, it was reported, "ten of the Slaves have been taken up by the Towns people which we are afraid will be all that is to be expected of the Seventeen; the others missing have had time enough to make their escape to some distant part, if not otherwise mett with by those who think it their Interest to conceal them." Finally, giving their summary assessment of what had transpired, the officials called attention to implications greater than the sum of the economic losses incurred. "It would be a very unaccountable history," they observed, "that Thirteen men & four boys Slaves should attempt to rise upon Seven White Men was it not that it seems they were all out of Irons by ye Master's orders."⁷¹

By pointing to the captain's foolhardy departure from standard procedure, the officials shielded themselves from the disturbing image of slaves overpowering their captors and relieved themselves of the uncomfortable obligation to explain how and why the events had deviated from the prescribed pattern. But assigning blame to the captain for his carelessness afforded only partial comfort, for by seizing their opportunity, the Africans aboard the *Cape Coast* had done more than liberate themselves (temporarily at least) from the slave ship.

Their action reminded any European who heard news of the event of what all preferred not to contemplate too closely: that their "accountable" history was only as real as the violence and racial fiction at its foundation. Only by ceaseless replication of the system's violence did African sellers and European buyers render captives in the distorted guise of human commodities to market. Only by imagining that whiteness could render seven men more powerful than a group of twice their number did European investors produce an account naturalizing social relations that had as their starting point an act of violence.

Successful African uprisings against European captors were of course moments at which the undeniable free agency of the captives most disturbed Europeans—for it was in these moments that African captives invalidated the vision of the history being written in this corner of their Atlantic world and articulated their own version of a history that was "accountable." Other moments in which the agency and irrepressible humanity of the captives manifested themselves were more tragic than heroic: instances of illness and death, thwarted efforts to escape from the various settings of saltwater slavery, removal of slaves from the market by reason of "madness." In negotiating the narrow isthmus between illness and recovery, death and survival, mental coherence and insanity, captives provided the answers the slave traders needed: the Africans revealed the boundaries of the middle ground between life and death where human commodification was possible.

Turning people into slaves entailed more than the completion of a market transaction. In addition, the economic exchange had to transform independent beings into human commodities whose most "socially relevant feature" was their "exchangeability."² The process began at the littoral, the border where the African landscape disappeared into the sea. It was here that captives came face to face with the market in human beings. Captives who may have been sold one or more times previously now stood at the center of transactions that put them finally, irreversibly, en route to saltwater slavery. The shore was the stage for a range of activities and practices designed to promote the pretense that human beings could convincingly play the part of their antithesis—bodies animated only by others' calculated investment in their physical capacities.³

The methods by which traders turned people into property that could move easily, smoothly through the channels of saltwater slavery took the form of both physical and social violence.⁴ Along the coast, captives felt the enclosure of prison walls and the weight of iron shackles holding them incarcerated in shore-based trade forts or aboard ships that functioned as floating warehouses as captives were accumulated. The practices that underwrote African commodification also reflected a rationalized science of human deprivation. Through the trial and error of experiment and observation, European traders determined what constituted a prison that was "too crowded," or shackles that caused too much discomfort, as was determined to be the case at Cape Coast Castle in the first decade of the eighteenth century, when the chief agent there shared the observation: "Double Irons are too painful for ye Slaves."⁵

The littoral, therefore, was more than a site of economic exchange and incarceration. The violence exercised in the service of human commodification relied on a scientific empiricism always seeking to find the limits of human capacity for suffering, that point where material and social poverty threatened to consume entirely the lives it was meant to garner for sale in the Americas. In this regard, the economic enterprise of human trafficking marked a water-

shed in what would become an enduring project in the modern Western world: probing the limits up to which it is possible to discipline the body without extinguishing the life within.

The aim in this case being economic efficiency rather than punishment, this was a regime whose intent was not to torture but rather to manage the depletion of life that resulted from the conditions of saltwater slavery. But for the Africans who were starved, sorted, and warped to make them into saltwater slaves, torture was the result.⁶ It takes no great insight to point to the role of violence in the Atlantic slave trade. But to understand what happened to Africans in this system of human trafficking requires us to ask precisely what kind of violence it required to achieve its end, the transformation of African captives into Atlantic commodities.

“Slaves in Chaines”

Everywhere that the slave trade evolved into a significant commercial enterprise, it relied on a variety of institutions geared toward the accumulation of captives: coastal settlements where African brokers collected captives for sale to Europeans; and the shore-based and floating factories (trade forts and coasting slave ships) where Europeans assembled purchased captives into human cargoes. Various sites of incarceration, therefore, became a regular feature of the African coastal landscape from the second half of the seventeenth century on.

In the earliest days of English slave trading on the Gold Coast, African captives were probably housed in the same ground-floor rooms used to store trade goods in the coastal forts and trading factories.⁷ As the volume of Africans incarcerated within the walls of these settlements increased, however, their presence convinced European officials that the threat of escape or insurrection called for strategies specifically geared to the traffic in human beings. Thus, varying types of prison facilities were designed at the Royal African Company's more important posts.

Each of the English trade settlements at Cape Coast, Accra, and Anomabu included a space for housing captives purchased for export. A dungeonlike underground prison was built into the rock foundation at Cape Coast Castle by at least 1682, when Frenchman Jean Barbot described the facility. At the smaller, satellite posts, English factors devised facilities of varying types to house the men and women they purchased. Captives resided at the different coastal settlements for as little as a few days or as long as several months. Those purchased at the smaller settlements might be sent to the castle almost immediately, provisions often being in especially low supply at these sites. Alternatively, they might reside at these outposts for some length of time, where their labor might often be exploited in the routine maintenance and repair of buildings at the settlements.

The Royal African Company officials used an unabashedly precise lexicon to refer to the captives they purchased for shipment to American slave markets, to distinguish these “shipping slaves,” or, still less subtly, “slaves in chaines,” from the enslaved people who lived and worked at the company's fort at Cape Coast, called castle slaves, or Arda slaves (in reference to the place from which most of them came).⁸

Viewed from the water, Cape Coast Castle was an especially imposing sight. Rising abruptly above the shoreline, the fortress was rendered “almost inaccessible” by the large rocks that guarded its perimeter.⁹ Coming ashore at the landing place just past the eastern end of the castle, captives entered through the nearby side gate, before being led to the prison where “slaves-in-irons” were housed until ships arrived to carry them away. Barbot considered this “slave house” to be the castle's “most noteworthy item” when he described the site in 1682. “Cut into the rock, beneath the parade-ground” that formed part of the castle's large, open courtyard, the facility “consist[ed] of large vaulted cellars, divided into several apartments which [could] easily hold a thousand slaves.”¹⁰ Barbot observed, “The keeping of the slaves thus under ground is a good

security to the garrison against any insurrection."¹¹ Once inside this dungeonlike space, slaves could hear the loud violent surf that crashed against the rocks on the other side of the prison walls.¹² A drawing of the castle rendered in 1682 illustrates vents built into the ceiling, though they did little, as will be seen, to relieve the suffocating closeness of the dark space below.¹³

The location of James Fort, seventy miles to the east at Accra—nearest to the wars that plagued the eastern Gold Coast and downwind of Cape Coast Castle—meant both crowded conditions and lengthy stays in the slave prison. Warfare waged by Akwamu produced a steady supply of captives, but the long windward voyage to the castle made it difficult to dispatch the captives there in a timely fashion. Thus, captives generally accumulated at the fort for weeks before either a coasting vessel arrived to transport them to the castle or a slave ship appeared to take them directly aboard.

The officials who operated the fort at Accra fashioned a space to hold slaves by fitting the hollow core of the fort's defensive bastions, or "flankers," with ventilation shafts, transforming these dank chambers into spaces deemed suitable for imprisoning captives awaiting shipment.¹⁴ Built of bricks made on-site by African laborers, the fort's northwest bastion served as "lodging for our women slaves," while the southwest bastion made a "prison for men."¹⁵

The physical security of such enclosures was dubious. Unusually heavy rains (so strong "that since the memory of man the like has not been known") in May 1694 "washed down" the northwest flanker and damaged other parts of the fort at Accra, leaving the facility with "no lodging for our women slaves," as the factor explained. The damage was no surprise, for the structures were "built of nothing but stone and red earth," the latter substance making a mortar that "cements no more than the sand on the sea shore." These conditions the factor promised to remedy in rebuilding and repairing the facilities. In August, the northwest structure used to

house women had been "secured," and repairs completed by November made three of the fort's four bastions "sufficiently strong." There remained only the southwest flanker, "under which is our prison for men," which "wee now designe to strengthen," the factor wrote, "by joyning a substantiall wall of 4 or 5 foot thick." This wall, he hoped, would "be a great security to the mens prison which is under itt." He noted, "The Old Flankers were built without any foundation and itt is a very easie thing for the slaves to breake their Prison."¹⁶

At Anomabu's Charles Fort and other smaller trading factories at Anishan, Agga, Komenda, and Sekondi, the company agents housed captives in whatever makeshift spaces were available, particularly in the last quarter of the seventeenth century, when the volume of slave exports from the Gold Coast remained modest. Charles Fort, at Anomabu, for example, was a structure of mud-and-thatch "turf" when Barbot viewed it in 1679, and when he visited again three years later, efforts to rebuild had resulted in only a new "compact main building" and four bastions built of slave-made bricks. The fort's outer wall "consist[ed] merely of a turf circle, 7–8 feet high," Barbot reported, while "various lodgings . . . for the paid blacks and the slaves" were "built of the same material."¹⁷ As the traffic in slaves grew rapidly at the turn of the following century, prison facilities like the ones at Cape Coast, Anomabu, and Accra began to appear in greater number.¹⁸

A burden of iron around the limbs being an obvious and effective impediment to escape, shackles were an important element in the arsenal of tools used to physically disable captives during their incarceration in coastal factories. "Please advice me," the agent at a new factory at Komenda asked: "What I am to do concerning the purchasing of slaves which daily come hither to be sold, I have not irons to put any in so desire you to send up some by the canoe that brings up the [trade] goods."¹⁹ A variety of implements served different aspects of the task: "short irons" binding captives' wrists en-

sured that slaves could neither raise a hand to strike their tormentors nor seize a weapon, open a door, or scale a wall without great difficulty; “long irons” around the ankles likewise held captives fast.

Though shackles were always in demand by factors and ship captains procuring slave cargoes, the inefficiency of English operations on the coast made irons a luxury that none could rely on. “Pray send some short irons,” requested Arthur Richards, the factor at Anishan, writing in February 1681, only weeks after the establishment of a new factory there.²⁰ Eight months later Ralph Hassell, the factor at Accra, requested both long and short irons, “for wee have none here,” he complained. “I bought three men and three women yesterday & am afraid of their running away for wont of irons to put them in.”²¹ When Peter Blake, captain of the *James*, tried to retrieve “30 paires of shackells” on loan to the factory at Anomabu in January 1676, he was told that the factor “had slaves in them, and could not let them out lest they should run away.”²²

Although factors relied heavily on shackles to manage captives, it does not appear that slaves wore irons at all times while incarcerated at the coast. For one thing, the numerous requests for irons indicate that shackles were often in short supply.²³ In July 1697 one hundred Africans and “considerable more” were expected in the slave prisons at Accra, for example, when the factor sent word of his dire need for irons. “Not having a pair in the [fort] but what is in use,” he would be forced, he wrote, to “keep what men I buy out of irons till return of the canoe” that would transport them up to Cape Coast Castle.²⁴

Even when irons were on hand, they did not stand up well to the corrosive effects of humidity, and they were often found to be in a useless state of disrepair. Forty captives (“most of them men and boys”) aboard the *Cape Coast* in March 1682 watched as some of the irons intended for their limbs fell apart in the captain’s hands: “I wish I had a few more irons,” the captain wrote, “for believe I shall

have occasion for them having but 25 pair aboard and some of them the rust has eaten quite out for when I go to make use of them they break in the eye of the shackle.”²⁵ In October 1691, almost all the irons at Accra were in need of repair. They “are out of order for want of bolts which I desire may be fixed and sent by the sloop,” the factor reported. “If we should meet with slaves,” he warned further, “we should want them, the good ones we have are but few.”²⁶

Escape from onshore settlements and coasting slave ships was a course of action that nearly every person sold to Europeans on the coast envisaged and many attempted. For some, opportunity, together with personal strength and luck, brought success, and they were able to liberate themselves from exile into slavery across the Atlantic. In practice, irons and prison walls often failed to hold the captives. Lapses in security at the settlements presented numerous opportunities for Africans to attempt to free themselves, and where slave irons were not in regular use, the poorly constructed walls already described often figured in escape plots.

James Fort at Accra was crowded with more than fifty captives, and corn was in short supply in July 1682, when a group of thirteen men and one woman “undermined the prison walls and got out.” Despite the presence of a guard stationed at the prison door, they escaped in the middle of the night.²⁷ Similar conditions prevailed when some of the sixty captives in the fort in March 1687 managed, “in one night’s time,” to dig through three and a half feet of a six-foot wall and, after being discovered, tried to attack the garrison. Having lost this opportunity to escape, some of the rebels found themselves among a group of forty-five men and women sent up to Cape Coast Castle that month.²⁸

Other opportunities to escape appeared whenever captives were taken out of the prisons and put to work at such tasks as cutting wood, gathering stones, or making “swish,” the mud clay used in the construction and repair of the European settlements.²⁹ Though these tasks generally were reserved for the Arda castle slaves, their

counterparts in irons were sometimes put to similar work—particularly at the satellite posts, where castle slaves were often in short supply.³⁰ When such labor was performed away from the immediate confines of the settlements, captives sometimes found their best, and perhaps only, chance to run away.

On one occasion, the need for lime to repair the buildings at Accra created an opportunity for ten men to make their escape. Sent out “in long irons to go and cut wood for burning of the same,” the two “bumboys” (slave foremen) assigned to supervise the work crew were no match for them, “10 of the lustiest men in said irons.”³¹ When the group arrived at the work site and the men in irons “found their advantage,” they “seized the said bumboys and wounded one of them in the back.” Only two of the men in irons returned to the fort, one of them wounded.³² Similarly, two who were employed making swish for a newly established factory at Winneba found their window of opportunity when the bumboy sent along to supervise them “went away and left them to themselves,” which “carelessness” enabled the two to break out of their leg irons and run away.³³

Though slaves once onboard ship faced far more difficult obstacles, the two to three miles of rough coastal waters that separated the vessel from the shore did not deter captives determined to seize this last opportunity to prevent expulsion into an alien Atlantic world. On occasion, individuals managed to escape from slaving vessels while still on the coast; the only means for captives to regain land was to swim ashore, unless they were assisted by the canoe men responsible for bringing them out to the ships.³⁴ In January 1683, for example, one male slave was taken out of the slave prison at the castle to go aboard the *John & Thomas*, “in lieu of a man slave that ran away from on board” the ship.³⁵

At other times, slaves actually organized themselves to revolt against the white crew and seize control of a ship. In January 1686, the slaves aboard the sloop *Charlton* killed the entire crew while the

vessel stood off Little Popo in the Bight of Benin. Once the crewmen had been removed as a threat, the slaves proceeded to cut the cable that held the ship’s anchor, after which the vessel ran aground. No doubt some slaves were killed or at least seriously injured by the violent smashing of the hull, but presumably some survived the wreck and succeeded in making their escape.³⁶ The captives aboard another vessel, an English interloper procuring slaves not far from Accra, found their opportunity to revolt when many of the crewmen went onshore to fill the ship’s water barrels. Though the captives managed to kill the ship’s doctor, boatswain, and two other crewmen, a hundred slaves also were killed in the fighting that ensued, and the surviving rebels were eventually subdued.³⁷

“The Reason of the Slaves Dying So Fast”

Turning captives into commodities was a thoroughly scientific enterprise. It turned on perfecting the practices required to commodify people and determining where those practices reached their outer limits (that is, the point at which they extinguished the lives they were meant to sustain in commodified form). Traders reduced people to the sum of their biological parts, thereby scaling life down to an arithmetical equation and finding the lowest common denominator.

This was especially, painfully, evident with regard to captives’ need for food. European accounts describe a wide variety of plant and animal foods supported by the landscape of the Gold Coast littoral, including maize, millet, yams, bananas, pineapples, peas and legumes, goat, fowls, chickens, oxen, buffalo, pork, fish, and shellfish. Commodification removed captives from that landscape of abundance and put them into a situation of unmitigated poverty.

Having lost the ability to oversee their own nourishment, captives were forced to subsist instead on rations—meals whose content and size reflected a calculation balancing the cost of the slaves’

maintenance against their purchase price. The task before factors on the African coast was to ensure that the “cheapness in the price” paid to obtain captives would “sufficiently make amends for the charge of keeping them.”³⁸ Dalby Thomas warned when he wrote to his superiors as the chief factor at Cape Coast Castle in 1704, “You are not like other traders, for if we have goods here we are buying Negroes and they eat and dye as too many have done of late.”³⁹

Meant not to support health but rather simply to ensure subsistence, the diet on which captives tried to survive provided, at best, a consistent intake of nutritionally empty calories. At Cape Coast Castle and the other English factories, slaves generally received a daily allotment of corn dressed with malagetta pepper and palm oil. African women prepared the grain following local custom. First, it was ground into a coarse meal, by means of a millstone known locally as a cankey stone; then it was mixed with water, shaped into “large round cakes, the size of two or three fists,” and boiled to a dense consistency. The resulting breadlike porridge was also called cankey.⁴⁰ In March 1686, for example, the factor at Accra notified the castle, “We shall want corn and a kettle to boyle Canky in for the slaves.”⁴¹

Though we do not have evidence regarding the treatment of captives under the control and in the possession of African traders, Africans who brought slaves to the waterside for sale made the same kinds of economic choices as their European counterparts, by determining the least possible expenditure that could be made on food and water to sustain the captives for the time the traders anticipated having them in their possession.

All things being equal, the general practice at the Royal African Company trading factories was to provide rations in the amount of roughly one- to two-tenths of a bushel of corn per person per day. In June 1682, for example, the factor at Accra reported that his imprisoned population of more than fifty slaves “eats a chest of corn

everyday,” a chest generally containing a thousand stalks, which amounted to “about five Bushels” of grain.⁴² At Cape Coast Castle, authorities listed nine chests of corn allotted “for castle’s use” in January 1682. Assuming that this corn was used to feed the eight “chain slaves” in the prison, these captives also consumed nearly one-fifth of a bushel of grain per day.⁴³

Often, however, things were not equal, for the supply of corn in the local markets regularly fell short of European demand, and the price frequently exceeded what the company’s factors were permitted to spend. When the number of captives rose, officials at Cape Coast Castle, for example, usually held expenditures on food constant. While incarcerated on the African coast, captives therefore suffered under a calculation according to which economic considerations weighed more heavily in the balance than human need.

Captives held at Accra’s James Fort frequently faced shortages of food, when there were too many captives for the quantity of provisions stored. When corn became scarce, efforts at the local markets to purchase a supply for the captives often failed. And when the factor at this most isolated of the company’s Gold Coast settlements sent frantic requests for additional supplies, or for a vessel to dispatch the captives, authorities at the castle were not quick to respond. With no more than six chests of corn in the fort, and “none to be had for money at any rates” in the local markets, the captives held at the fort in June 1683 were suffering. “Beg a supply within this week,” the factor wrote; “else must send what slaves I have to Cabo Corso in the 5-hand canoe for they will be starved else.”⁴⁴

The preferred practice was to send captives up to Cape Coast from Accra when the number at James Fort approached fifty. But in the frequent instances when the castle officials failed to send a vessel to retrieve the captives, it was not uncommon for groups as much as twice that size to be crowded into the slave prison at Accra, and slaves purchased at Allampo often added to the already crowded conditions there.⁴⁵ In June 1687, the captain of the sloop

Adventure was forced to deposit fifty captives at the fort when poor sailing conditions made it impossible for him to reach the castle before running out of food and water. "Do not know when I will be up at Cape Coast Castle," he reported on June 29, "the breeze continuing much out and leeward currants so that I cannot get off, I have been 10 days from Allampo and have not got three leagues of ground, and corn wood and water spends apace." The captain had sent men out in his canoe to purchase more corn, "and by chance with much ado and some cost have got some water here, else I should not have had a drop to drink." He continued, "My wood is almost gone and of that I can get none."

New orders having already been sent directing the captain to deposit his cargo at Accra and return to Allampo for more, this contingent of captives was spared further deprivation.⁴⁶ Having been succored by four chests of corn sent from the fort, they reached Accra themselves by July 8, the fort now being "plenty with slaves," as the new arrivals brought the number there to "upward of 100 and odd."⁴⁷ One week later almost all who were in the fort went aboard the slave ship *Maynard*.⁴⁸ If they had continued under such circumstances, the captives aboard the *Adventure* would probably have died of dehydration and starvation before reaching the castle; the captain's new orders to carry them to Accra rather than proceed in all likelihood prolonged their lives, at least for the time being.⁴⁹

Meanwhile, the *Adventure* returned to Accra on 25 July 1687, this time depositing forty-eight new captives (twenty-six men and twenty-two women) procured at Allampo.⁵⁰ With this new supplement, the number of people in the fort again approached a hundred, and the factor was forced to cease buying any more, "by reason corn is here so scarce and none to be procured for money." Given that the prisons were full and food was in short supply, the situation was growing dangerous for the ninety-four captives held there.⁵¹ There being "not above 30 chests left" of the fort's supply

of corn, the captives were forced to subsist on exceedingly small rations. Now only three chests of corn were expended every two days—a 20 percent drop from the tenth of a bushel generally allotted per day. "I cannot keep them much longer without further provisions," the factor warned, hoping to hasten the return of the sloop.⁵²

Though orders did come soon, instructing the sloop captain to bring "what slaves he can conveniently carry" up to the castle, the message also conveyed the unwelcome news that no additional food supplies would be sent to Accra. As a result, most of the small quantity of corn left in the fort would have to accompany those people selected to depart aboard the *Adventure*; as a consequence, the thirty-odd who would remain would be subject to ever more pitiful conditions. The vulnerability of these captives was plainly evident to those responsible for their preservation. "What to do for them I know not," wrote the factor at Accra. He could find "no manner of provisions for their subsistence unless," he explained, "wee buy fish and give them half allowance in Canky."

On 7 August, thirty men and thirty women, "with all things convenient for their passage up," boarded the *Adventure*, and they departed for Cape Coast Castle two days later. In the fort there remained "but 14 chests of damaged corn" to feed the captives still held there. In their weakened condition, illness had begun to encroach. "We have lost more slaves of the smallpox" was the report from Accra on the day the *Adventure* departed, and one of the captives aboard the sloop was sent back on shore for "being newly taken with the same."⁵³

Most enslaved Africans brought to the waterside for sale probably experienced the range of conditions encountered by three women originally purchased at the English factory at Winneba in April 1695. Sent up to Cape Coast Castle, their ill appearance upon their arrival caused them to be rejected by the officials there. When they returned to the trading outpost at Winneba, the factor claimed

that they did not appear as "they were when I bought them" and offered the opinion that "the scarcity and want of corn brought them so low." No doubt the factor spoke in part to protect his own position, and it is impossible to know more precisely the women's condition at the time they were purchased at Winneba, or what they had endured before that.

Rations at the factory in April appear to have been especially scanty, for the recently established settlement apparently received few or no regular supplies from the castle as yet, and corn was available locally only at a higher price than that authorized by the castle officials. Upon the captives' return to Winneba in May, however, conditions seem to have improved. For "now," the factor remarked, "they begin to grow and look very well." Nonetheless, the factor chose to "send three more in room of them having already 2 more by me," which decision perhaps gave these three women further opportunity to regain some measure of vitality before facing the challenges that lay ahead in the Atlantic waters.⁵⁴

Food shortages notwithstanding, the rations provided in the English settlements certainly may have represented an improvement over the food supplied in the preceding days, weeks, or even months that had passed since the slaves' initial capture and arrival at the waterside. For the impoverished among Gold Coast communities in general, and for persons of any rank seized, removed from the protections of kin and community, and given over into the hands of African slave dealers, regular and adequate food surely was not guaranteed. Also, war captives were unlikely to have been well fed during this interim; and even those who may have spent some period of time as slave cultivators before their sale on the coast were among the most materially impoverished members of their communities. It is possible, in fact, that the relatively lengthy time that enslaved Africans might spend incarcerated here at the waterside settlements could, under certain conditions, in fact provide a chance for rest and some minimal restoration of health.

For most, however, 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. Captives passed this time negotiating an unpredictable course between reliable sustenance and starvation. Some recovered their physical strength, but some also starved to death.

It fell to the agents at the factories, who oversaw the day-to-day work of buying people and packaging them for export aboard English slave ships, to construct the epistemological foundation on which the enterprise of commodification stood. Through trial and error, observation and experiment, the agents assembled a body of lore suited to the exigencies of human trafficking. Their reliance on empirical evidence reflected the broader shift toward a "new" scientific discourse in post-Restoration English society.⁵⁵ Accordingly, when a rash of deaths occurred in the slave prison at Accra in February 1694, John Bloom, the factor stationed there, reported the problem to his superiors at Cape Coast Castle along with his laboriously musings about the probable cause. "Sundry of our slaves being lately dead and others falling sick daily makes me get to think that they are to[o] much crowded in their lodging and besides have not the benefit of the Air."⁵⁶

Upwards of a hundred men and women were being held at Accra when that wave of illness and death swept through. The small openings cut into the prison walls for ventilation did little to counteract the heat and closeness of the air when the rooms grew so crowded.⁵⁷ Awareness of these stultifying conditions supplied Bloom with the evidence he needed to solve the puzzle—to "make [him] think" that with more than a hundred bodies within its walls, the prison had surpassed the limit beyond which the human property it held was likely to expire.

In a similar incident, a belated discovery about local culinary

technology reveals the contradictions inherent in the practice of human commodification. The backdrop was the Royal African Company fort at Accra, where the company agent Edward Searle learned that the stones used to grind corn had important consequences for the valuable merchandise in his charge. The grinding implements available in the region ranged from those “as hard as marble” to others “as soft as sandstone,” and as Searle was to discover, it mattered what type of stone one used to prepare the cankey fed to captives at the fort.⁵⁸ The millstones produced locally at Accra were of the “soft” category, and it was these the factor had purchased for the captives’ use. “I never heard till now,” Searle explained in December 1695, “that the free people here buy their stones from other places,” those obtained locally “being only in a manner sand.”⁵⁹

Searle was relieved to learn of his mistake because, by his analysis, the discovery solved a mysterious problem he faced. In the preceding month, captives he purchased had been dying without apparent cause and in alarmingly rapid succession. Now the untenable loss of company property could be checked. “I judge the reason of the slaves dying so fast is chiefly the fault of the Cankey stones grinding away amongst the corn,” he wrote, “for here is lusty good slaves taken with the gripe one day and dead the next, others fall dead at once and no other reason can I think of them.”⁶⁰

We recognize in hindsight that the rate and timing of mortalities at the prison suggests an outbreak of infectious disease among the captives. It is not the cause of death, however, but rather the wretched circumstances of captives’ existence that call out for interpretation. For Searle, his discovery offered the explanation for an otherwise implausible outcome: the bewildering disappearance of precisely those men and women to whom the descriptions “lusty” and “good” could be applied.

For the captives themselves, though, when “lusty” slaves died without warning, it merely confirmed something they all knew only

too well: what the Europeans empirically determined to be conditions adequate to support life the prisoners recognized as calculated deprivation that did not sustain life but attempted only systematically to control its depletion. Whether they died or not, all of them, even the captives who appeared healthiest, knew that the mouthfuls of stone they were made to ingest were one more indication of the impossibility of existence under such conditions, and of their own utter alienation from the most basic norms of everyday life.⁶¹

The documentation European buyers produced in their line of work reveals the important role language played in the process of commodification. Commercial records represent the people captured, whether sick or healthy, young or old, injured or strong, as equally suitable for exchange on the Atlantic market. European slavers on the African coast relied on the power of language to make the slave cargo truer to expectations, to present a reality that would reflect the beholder’s fantasy. Thus, bodies that visibly ran the gamut in age and physical condition became in the sellers’ descriptions a collection of uniformly “likely” or “lusty” workers available for sale.

Consider incidents aboard the *Cape Coast* brigantine, for example. Two days after boarding the vessel at Allampo in 1682, a woman who refused to eat and displayed a “sullen” demeanor died suddenly. According to the captain’s report, she was “as likely a slave as any I have on board.” Within the week, another slave, “one of the best men that [Towgood] had on board,” also died, overtaken by a “violent feavour” just days after coming aboard. The two captives themselves, their testimony having been silenced not only in death, but more fatefully by their enslavement while they were living, now yielded up an explanation in response to the probing of the autopsy knife. Upon opening the dead woman’s body to assess the cause of her death, the ship’s doctor found her internal organs to appear “verry sound but starv’d for want of eating.”⁶² The body of the dead man provided few clues to the immediate

cause of his death, but it did expose the physical trauma of his captivity. Observing mysterious scorch marks on the man's tongue, Towgood surmised that the unusual wounds were produced "through the Negroes beating of him when hee was panyard [kidnapped]." ⁶³

As we see in such terms as "slaves in chains," "lusty slaves," or "likely slaves," merchants used a special lexicon to cast their human wares in the mold of the qualities buyers desired in the people they purchased. In a single word, "lusty," purveyors captured the image of the ideal slave, and in their deployment of this hyperbolic term daily disavowed the weakness and exhaustion apparent in nearly all who fell victim to Atlantic captivity. Through this designation traders made a pretense of offering what the market demanded, by depicting the absence of outright illness as evidence that these were bodies brimming with vitality.

The Social Death of the Saltwater Slave

The imperatives of a market that valued people as commodities imposed a nearly impassable gulf between captives and any community that might claim them as new members. Captives learned that when they reached the littoral, their exchangeability on the Atlantic market outweighed any social value they might have. The price put on their persons pushed most captives beyond the possibility of eventual reintegration as members in any community. The crisis of captivity on that coast, in other words, was that only with great difficulty or great luck could the prisoners' "commodity potential" be masked or converted back into social currency.

On occasion, families or communities sufficiently near at hand and powerful to secure the "redemption" of their members were able to effect their return. For example, two were fortunate enough to be released from the chains in February 1712, when agents at Cape Coast Castle credited the "shipping slaves" account "for Re-

demption of a free man." Likewise, the woman taken out of the slave prison to join the "Castle working slaves" six months later most probably was the beneficiary of intervention on the part of a "cabosheer" or other well-placed member of the local elite. ⁶⁴

Besides the rare good fortune of "redemption," resale to other buyers might very occasionally take captives out of the castle and away from the slave ship. When need or lucrative opportunity arose, for example, agents at the castle sometimes sold captives to local Africans or to other European trading interests. Thus, on the same day that agents spent tobacco to buy two men, they also sold four men, seven women, and three boys for a quantity of tobacco valued at three marks, six ounces. ⁶⁵ But such instances of accommodation in efforts to "redeem" persons known to be held captive aboard a European ship occurred only seldom. Moreover, those re-deemed usually won their liberation at the expense of others, sold in their stead.

For most, in contrast to those few whose status made it possible to be "redeemed" from the Atlantic market, the only way out was escape. Those who managed that feat found that, here again, the most powerful force opposing their desperate efforts to return to a place of social belonging was not the physical constraint of prison walls and iron shackles, but rather the market itself. Whether they burrowed their way under prison walls, broke out of the irons on their legs, or swam away from coasting vessels, the captives who managed to work free of European ships and settlements were easily recognized as "slaves in chains" on the run and were extremely vulnerable to recapture and resale. Exhausted, emaciated, or injured from the traumas experienced thus far, escapees could not easily disguise their condition; nor was it easy to hide from those whose commercial interests had led to the fugitives' sale into slavery in the first place.

Nor long after the eight men in irons made their escape from a work detail at Accra in December 1687, the English factor knew

"where they [were] sheltered" and hoped to have the men back in his possession soon, "Ahenisha having promised to see them returned."⁶⁶ Similarly, one of the two men who escaped from Anomabu in June 1687 was back in chains and aboard a canoe bound for Cape Coast Castle one month later. Isolated and vulnerable once beyond the walls of the castle, he was unable to travel very far before falling into the hands of local cabosheers, who chose to return him to the English fort for the price of "3 peize."⁶⁷ Transactions such as this one, whereby Europeans paid for the same captive twice, were frequent, reflecting the power the market held to ensure that captives bore the indelible mark of commodification.⁶⁸

"Please tell me," Arthur Richards asked, "what price I am to pay to Africans who return runaway slaves?" Richards was the factor stationed at Anishan in July 1681 when local elites offered to retrieve several captives who had escaped from English settlements—for a price. Having given money to one official "in part for two runaways that he says he will fetch back again, saying he knows where they be," Richards was engaged in negotiating a price for the return of runaways whom leaders at nearby Anomabu offered to deliver. For these, he had "offered . . . 3 angles each head," but the African "captain" with whom he was negotiating would "not deliver . . . any," Richards complained, "if I will not give him 6 angles for each."⁶⁹

Escaped captives were of course most vulnerable to recapture when they were far removed from the physical and social landscape with which they were familiar. Once transported to Cape Coast Castle, for example, men and women originally purchased at the leeward ports were beyond the reach of the towns and communities where they might be able to find assistance. This was in all likelihood the case for a man who escaped from Cape Coast and traveled some forty miles before he was recaptured at Winneba. "Here is a cabosheer not far from hence has stopped a man slave, which on examination is found to run away from Cape Coast Castle,"

the factor reported in May 1695. According to his testimony, extreme hunger was what compelled him to run. Visible evidence of malnourishment was perhaps also what caught the attention of the cabosheer who seized him.⁷⁰ The factor at Winneba offered "the usual allowances" to buy the man back, but the offer was not sufficient; the cabosheer indicated that "he [would] not deliver" the fugitive "for less than his damands." Whatever the company's "usual" price for reclaiming escaped captives, it did not measure up to the two pieces of cloth (one "say" and a "blue perrett") demanded by the cabosheer.

There were other avenues the cabosheer could follow, however, to exploit his opportunity. He might choose to keep the captive, thereby adding to his own retinue of dependents. Alternatively, he might decide to sell the man elsewhere, given the numerous opportunities to do so in the strong domestic market for slaves within Gold Coast society. In this instance, when the factor at Winneba made overtures to comply with the counterdemand, the cabosheer responded that he had already "sold the slave to a Quomboe [Akwamu] man who has carried him away."⁷¹

Negotiations like those just described demonstrate a truism for all captives at the littoral: escape did not, in itself, alter slaves' status as a market commodity. As long as fugitives remained at large, they could try to put distance between themselves and the European settlements. But as they tried to return, if not "home," then to any alternative place of social belonging, they discovered that time and circumstances were firmly against them. It is not possible to put a figure on the fugitives from European ships and settlements who were retained within the domestic slave market, rather than returned to European ownership. Because the price for slaves was highest along the coast, though, sooner rather than later the commercial tide inexorably returned to the water's edge most of those who had escaped from European captivity.⁷²

That was the case for an Arda castle slave who made his escape

from the fort at Accra in June 1695. The man had been part of a group of four slaves brought westward to the Gold Coast from Benin in an African trading canoe accompanying a European slaver. Sold to the factor by an African dealer, the man ran away soon after being put to work at the fort. By sending the three others up to the castle, the factor at Accra prevented them from executing their plan to escape as well, and meanwhile tried to obtain information regarding the fugitive. At the time that he reported the incident, no news had materialized.⁷³ The fugitive had successfully escaped the European settlement, but eventually he was returned to James Fort at Accra. Perhaps the new owner had made an arbitrary decision to convert the man into currency; perhaps debt made his sale a necessity; or perhaps the reason for it, as before, was that he had committed some crime or misdemeanor. Whatever the circumstances, in April 1697, two years after his escape, the man was returned to European possession in exchange for an ounce of gold. The factor considered it "better to be at the charge than to lose him, was it only for example for the rest."⁷⁴ The market was everywhere, always shining a light on the captive's "exchangeability."

The collective assault of the practices used to herd together captives at the littoral was greater than the sum of its parts. Physical incarceration and social alienation played a role; but ultimately the power of these and other constraints lay not in their immediate material effect but in the overarching system justifying the commodification of Africans. The most powerful instrument locking captives in as commodities for Atlantic trade was the culture of the market itself. On the coast captives were marked as commodities both physically and figuratively, for the market forged power relations that bound "chaine slaves," more securely than irons could do, to the European ships waiting offshore. As a result, captives and those who claimed to own them understood that saltwater slavery menaced them with "social death" of unprecedented proportions.

After an attempt at mutiny failed, for instance, slaving captain

William Snelgrave engaged the cohort of Gold Coast captives who had tried to escape from his slave ship in a dialogue about what had occurred. Through the linguists posted aboard the ship during its stay on the coast, Snelgrave asked "what had induced them to mutiny," to which they replied that he "was a great Rogue to buy them, in order to carry them away from their own Country; and that they were resolved to regain their Liberty if possible." Snelgrave's reply, that the captives "had forfeited their Freedom before [he] bought them," articulated the standard European reasoning. "They being now my Property, I was resolved," Snelgrave said, "to let them feel my Resentment, if they abused my Kindness: Asking at the same time, Whether they had been ill used by the white Men, or had wanted for any thing the Ship afforded?" When the captives conceded, according to Snelgrave, that "they had nothing to complain of," he then "observ'd to them, 'That if they should gain their Point and get on Shore, it would be no Advantage to them, because their Countrymen would catch them, and sell them to other Ships.'"⁷⁵

Indeed, what was at stake here was the possession of captive people. For just as the singular interest of African and European traders was to own captives as exchangeable commodities, so too was ownership the idiom in which communities laid claim to the persons incarcerated at the waterside market. Because kinship ties were the institutional glue that most immediately bound the self to society, the disappearance of a community member left an absence that portended consequences both for the individual and for those left behind. The scale of geographic displacement and the state power that underwrote the exchange of people on the Atlantic market made it impossible for most to "regain their Liberty": somewhere a family or community cried out for the return of every person made to disappear aboard a slave ship.

Among Akan-speaking communities, for instance, the man called to leave home to go to war did not relinquish the roles that most

spiritual labor and more on the social use of the slave incorporated as a permanent marginal into a network of affiliation after ritual break with his old kin ties and ancestral protectors." Among the Imbangala peoples of Angola, for example, the ritual creation of the slave entailed his or her symbolic severing of ties with familial relations, followed by a period of kinlessness and subsequent introduction and attachment to the owner's network of kin. Indeed, throughout precolonial sub-Saharan Africa, where slavery functioned generally as a means of acquiring dependents and incorporating them into the family or community, "the newcomer, unless he was a 'trade slave' destined for resale, was forced to deny his natal kin ties and acquire certain fictive kin bonds to the master and his family."⁸⁰

Nonetheless, insofar as this was a process—a rite of passage—the social death represented in slavery gave rise both to the pain and suffering of social abnegation and to its corollary, the anticipated relief and catharsis of rebirth. To be sure, this was not a return to full personhood. Indeed, it was precisely the function of the slave to inhabit forever a place of liminality: the socially dead did not, could not, ever return fully to social life. But the crucial point is that the slave did return to some measure of social personhood. She moved through the purgatory of virtual kinlessness toward some kind of social belonging.

Insofar as the captives siphoned into the Atlantic too were socially dead, their dilemma was the same as that of all who suffered the marginalization of enslavement: the alienation from their society of birth. In all the ways it robbed them of the markers of their social existence, the violence of commodification signaled to captives—stripped of material adornment, physically displaced, torn from the social embrace of kin and community—that they had been doomed to social annihilation. But for the saltwater slave the social death was something more, something horrifyingly different.

As those who witnessed Job Ben Solomon's departure aboard a

slave ship attested concerning those who disappeared into the Atlantic market, because they were never seen or heard from again, theirs was understood to be the uniquely dishonorable death associated with murder or cannibalism—the antithesis of a proper demise: those who left on the slavers were neither venerated, like the deceased, nor suspended in the balance between marginalization and integration, like local slaves, but rather consigned to an interminable purgatory. If the slave's bane in general was the limiting of his capacity for full social life, the saltwater slave was menaced with a fate more ominous still, the perpetual purgatory of virtual kinlessness.

Saltwater slaves were thus threatened in their capacity to die honorably and thereby continue to exist meaningfully, as dead kin connected with the community of the living, as beings able to make a transition to their proper ancestral roles. Their disappearance threatened to put saltwater slaves beyond both the physical and metaphysical reach of kin. Would the exiles be able to return home to offer protective intervention, to promote the integrity and continuing prosperity of the kinship group? Would their deaths take place in isolation? Would their spirits wander aimlessly, unable to find their way home to the realm of the ancestors?

We cannot know how communities made sense of the loss of family members to the slave trade, how various coastal African communities incorporated such departures into their intellectual systems. Yet some of the scattered evidence is striking for the clarity of the conceptualization of African commodified beings that were its product. In some Atlantic African communities it was believed that persons who departed in this way did in fact return but traveled not on the metaphysical plane of the ancestors but rather transmured as wine and gunpowder, on the material plane of commodities—an idea suggesting that the special violence of commodification produced not only social death, but more ominous still a kind of total annihilation of the human subject.⁸¹

Undoing their objectivization as goods to be bought and sold, therefore, required not only that captives escape the physical hold exerted on them by the forts, factories, and other coastal facilities used to incarcerate them but, more difficult still, that they reverse their own transformation into commodities, by returning to a web of social bonds that would tether them safely to the African landscape, within the fold of kinship and community. For most, as we have seen, distance made return to their home communities impossible. The market, they learned, made return to any form of social belonging impossible as well. If they managed to escape from the waterside forts and factories, their value resided not in their potential to join communities as slave laborers, wives, soldiers, or in some other capacity, but rather in their market price.

For most, the power of the market made it impossible to return to their previous state, that of belonging to (being “owned” by) a community—to being possessed, that is, of an identity as a subject. Rather, the strangers the runaways encountered shared the vision of the officials at Cape Coast Castle: the laws of the market made fellow human beings see it as their primary interest to own as commodities the escaped captives, rather than to connect with them as social subjects. More often than not, then, captives escaped only to be sold again.

As Snelgrave’s language articulated so clearly, the logic of the market meant that enslavement was a misfortune for which no buyer needed to feel the burden of accountability. Indeed, according to the mercantile logic in force, buyers (of whatever nationality) *could* not bear the weight of political accountability. Buying people who had no evident social value was not a violation or an act of questionable morality but rather a keen and appropriate response to opportunity; for this was precisely what one was supposed to do in the market: create value by exchange, recycle someone else’s castoffs into objects of worth.

Thus, then, did the market exert its power—through its lan-

guage, its categories, its logic. The alchemy of the market derived from its effectiveness in producing a counterfeit representation; it had become plausible that human beings could be so completely drained of social value, so severed from the community, that their lives were no longer beyond price: they could be made freely available in exchange for currency. The market painted in colors sufficiently believable as to seem true the appalling notion that “a human being could fail to be a person.”⁸²

Something akin to this understanding perhaps motivated the actions of a man newly purchased who, “of his owne will sprange into the tank” while a group of castle slaves were drawing water from the cistern at Charles Fort in Anomabu, in May 1687. Two men from the garrison plunged in to try to retrieve the captive, but his will prevailed: “After some tyme brought him up but dead though endeavourd what we could to gett life in him by rouleing him on a cask and hanging him by the [ankles] but all in vaine.” He “had not been 1/2 an hour in irons” when he committed the act. One measure of the loss comes from Ralph Hassell, the agent who, describing the dead man as “one of the lustiest men slaves I have seen [in] a long time,” stated the magnitude of the loss as he conceived it, in the idiom of the market. Of course we cannot know fully what impression the slave intended his self-inflicted death to leave. But we do know something of the effect it did have: by making his “lusty” body lifeless, the man through his decisive act undid what the market quite deliberately had sought to produce and robbed it of the considerable quotient of labor power embodied in his person.⁸³

Here at the littoral, then, individual paths of misfortune merged into the commodifying Atlantic apparatus—the material, economic, and social mechanisms by which the market molded subjects into beings that more closely resembled objects—beings that existed solely for the use of those who claimed to hold them as possessions. Once they reached the shore, captives either succeeded in

their efforts to retreat back into the protective web of kinship and community, moved forward into the slave ship's landscape of terror, or died there at the water's edge. The terrible lesson all the captives learned was that the system in place put them up against nearly impossible odds. For most captives there was no way out of the one-way current moving inexorably, like a rip current's undertow, away from the water's edge, carrying its saltwater slaves out to sea and beyond the horizon. At the littoral, captives discovered that they had passed the point of no return.

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The Political Economy of the Slave Ship

Laden with guns and gunpowder, iron bars, knives, and, most important, a half-dozen varieties of textiles, the *Sarah Bonadventure* was a floating marketplace. Its cargo of trade goods, valued at 2,351 pounds sterling when loaded on board in London in November 1676, had been carefully sorted to draw Gold Coast merchants on deck to negotiate terms of exchange. Trade commenced on 28 February 1677, and thereafter varying quantities and assortments of goods changed hands between the ship's captain, Thomas Woodfine, and his African counterparts. When Woodfine prepared to depart five months later, among the items he had purchased from the African traders were 134 marks, 6 ounces, 15.5 angles of "good Arcaney Gold" (Fig 3.1).¹

Captive people also had come aboard: like the precious metal, they had been bartered; they had been offered as commodities by African traders who would not, or could not, use gold to buy European goods. One transaction yielded two Perpetuanos (a variety of woolen cloth), three paper Bralls (a variety of Indian cotton), and one sheet in exchange for two persons; another converted seven persons into seven Perpetuanos, six paper Bralls, two sheets, and fourteen knives; a third put four Nittones (Indian cotton), five muskets, and a half a barrel of gunpowder in the possession of a trader who left three persons behind and weighed out three angles to com-