THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

When The Family Feuds: Black Cross-Cultural Conflict and the Miseducation of Slavery in Contemporary America

by

Osa Fasehun

July 2021

A paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in the Master of Arts Program in the Social Sciences

Faculty Advisor: Ryan Cecil Jobson
Preceptor: Mary Ella Wilhoit

***Abstract*:**

Several generations of false textbook narratives and convenient whitewashing of historical accounts have given birth to a multitude of erroneous accounts of the Atlantic slave trade and slavery. Some narratives have been corrected in academic canon through rigorous archival investigation and ethnography; however, the widespread narrative that has had a pernicious life—not even an afterlife—in contemporary discourses is the notion that 'Africans sold their own kinfolk into slavery.' Neither textbook accounts nor academic scholarship have reached a consensus on the language or vocabulary necessary to address the African role in the Atlantic slave trade. Using archival investigation, semi-structured interviews, and online ethnography, I examine the relationship between academic scholarship, textbook history, and informal discourses on slavery. I will show that the narrative of wholesale African blame for the slave trade has negatively impacted Black intra-racial relations between Black diasporic groups in the United States. I will also explain how textbook accounts gloss over essential facts about Atlantic slavery: the chattelization of enslaved Africans of various ethnic and ethnoreligious differences, U.S. and European implied allowances for slavery and slave trading long after abolition efforts were made, the frequency of slave rebellions in the Americas, and the logics of slaveholding societies in Brazil and the Caribbean that are deeply linked to the conditions of slavery in the United States. This thesis aims to trouble and challenge the myth of mass African complicity and to prove how it contributes to anti-blackness, allows European and American accomplices to offload guilt for slavery and the slave trade, and deflects attention away from arguments that favor reparations for chattel slavery.

Introduction

The year 2020 saw the largest pandemic of the 21st century, the aftermath of racialized healthcare, employment, and education disparities, and the largest protests for racial justice in recent history in the United States. 2020 was a year of great racial reckoning and by that year's summer, Black America was in shock that Kentucky Attorney General Cameron, a Black man, chose not to indict the police officers involved in the murder of Breonna Taylor, on a botched police raid and no-knock order that was not even meant for her. Activist Tamika Mallory responded to this ruling with the provocative remark that Cameron was "no different than the sellout Negroes that sold our people into slavery."

I was watching the speech on the news, in shock and disbelief, worried that Mallory's provocative message would circulate further. The remark was pithy, scathing, but dangerous. In the following weeks, I watched as that portion of Mallory's speech was incorporated into a message that Black female rapper Megan Thee Stallion displayed in live performances at music award shows to raise awareness about the Black Lives Matter movement and the failure to protect Black women in America. Megan Thee Stallion interpolated Mallory's words in her hit song "Savage," with the leading words of the chorus,"*I'm a savage*." Her performances raised awareness about police brutality against Black women while simultaneously spreading a corrosive narrative about African identity.

This narrative of Africans "selling their own people" into slavery is not new but has been embedded in formal and informal discourses on slavery in the United States for centuries. Of course, a great deal of academic scholarship over the last half-century has corrected many misleading narratives about slavery. However, the African role in the slave trade vis-à-vis the White role remains inadequately addressed. In fact, prominent scholars in academia have falsely

offloaded blame for Atlantic chattel slavery to Africans—past and present—contributing to slavery denial. This project aims to trouble the particularly widespread narrative of African complicity in the slave trade that has a pernicious life—not even an afterlife—in the present day.

Much of the history of slavery has been misunderstood, misused, or distorted over time. For instance, it is not often taught that only about 5 percent of the 12.5 million slaves on the Middle Passage were imported directly to the United States, while the majority of the captives were shipped to Brazil and the rest of the Caribbean. Many Americans are not aware that, contrary to conventional wisdom, there are records of slaves in the United States who were freed as late as 1867. What many also do not understand is that both Black and African identity were constructs of European invention, and the general ignorance of this fact troubles our understanding of Africa's past as well as its present (Hurston 2018). In fact, Blackness or Africanness were not salient identities for Africans during the trans-Atlantic slave trade—and oftentimes to this day—, a truth that challenges the insidious narrative that "Africans sold their own people into slavery." This thesis examines how this paradoxical narrative of precolonial Africans selling their own kinfolk was developed and circulated, with the working hypothesis that this homogenizing narrative derives from a convenient whitewashing of the Atlantic slave trade, one that better facilitates the displacement of blame from white slaveholders to African middlemen in the slave trade and their descendants, and also pits different African diasporic groups against each other. This historical and ethnographic project will uncover what has perpetuated a narrative that has negatively impacted Black intra-racial relations in the Americas and derailed progress towards eradicating white supremacy and racial capitalism.

Discourses about African complicity, while paradoxical, have nevertheless gained traction among groups of African descent through informal discourse and circulation in elite

circles. In 1994, Jerry Rawlings, then-Ghanaian President, apologized for Africans' role in slavery, causing other African leaders to follow suit (Shenoy 2019). One should bear in mind that it was only in 2008 when the U.S. House of Representatives issued a formal apology for slavery and other racial injustices during the Jim Crow era, despite the U.S. government being a direct beneficiary of slave labor and a complicit bystander in the extralegal violence against Black Americans (Lewis 2016). The apology for Jim Crow-era injustices acknowledges that even after the legal end of slavery, the 'afterlife of slavery' as coined by Saidiya Hartman, remained part of America's cultural landscape for most of the twentieth century and sadly continues into the present day (Hartman 2007: 6). One of my interlocutors once reasoned, in provocative fashion, that "pretty soon, Black people are gonna be apologizing to White people for slavery!"

These moments of negligent generalization blur the lines between the histories of African ruling and merchant classes and the histories of everyday Africans, marked by constant warfare with European invaders, village raids from warring tribes, and frequent slave kidnappings. Ghana's "Year of Return," a tourist attraction to encourage resettlement to Africa and to welcome Africans in the diaspora in the spirit of pan-Africanism, has also rapidly shifted the discourse on slavery. Discourses on tensions between African diasporic groups—colloquially known as "diaspora wars"—are now more common and have brought an often suppressed subject to the fore: the role of Africans in the Atlantic slave trade.

In this paper, I will elaborate on the widespread narrative of Africans selling their own kinfolk being false and corrosive, along with four other subarguments. First, the generally temporary, punitive tradition of slavery in Africa was drastically different from the lifelong, racialized chattel slavery in the US and the rest of the Western hemisphere. To that end, I will also prove that historical narratives have been fashioned to present European and American

powers as moral heroes in the eventual end of slavery and the slave trade, when their moral arguments for banning the slave trade were disingenuous. My other argument is that the magnitude of resistance of US enslaved people has been deliberately omitted from popular history. Lastly, the considerable number of Africans enslaved in Latin America and the Caribbean has also been neglected in U.S. textbook history canon, and this omission contributes to the maintenance of myths that help offload guilt for the maintenance of slavery in the United States.

I will begin by providing a thorough literature review of narratives on African involvement in the Atlantic slave trade, citing the diverse arguments present in the field. Next, I will describe the narrative as it has currently manifested in colloquial discourses. To illustrate these forms of discourse, I will draw from my ethnographic research to provide several vignettes of anti-Black discourses on the slave trade. Subsequently, I will explain how U.S. history education glosses over fundamentally important facts about Atlantic slavery—namely the chattelization of enslaved Africans of various ethnic and ethnoreligious differences, U.S. and European implied allowances for slavery and the slave trade long after abolition efforts, the frequency of slave rebellions in the Americas, and the majority of African captives of ending up in Brazil or the Caribbean during the Atlantic slave trade. The goal of these subarguments is to elucidate academic scholars' lack of consensus around the African role in the slave trade, and the significance of transnational history in teaching a more accurate, nuanced slavery education to persons living in America.

Theoretical Engagement

There are two major frameworks that I depended on throughout this work. My working hypothesis, that this homogenizing narrative derives from a convenient whitewashing of the

Atlantic slave trade, derives from the theoretical framework introduced by Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995) in *Silencing the Past*. The production of history has a direct impact on the present. For instance, the tunnel-vision focus on US American narratives of slavery in school curriculum—or as Africana scholars have dubbed it, "African American exceptionalism"—directly relates to Trouillot's arguments about how Western canon amplifies *certain* sources of the past and consequently silences others. With the exception of the Haitian Revolution, the individuals that I interviewed for my ethnography did not recall other anti-slavery rebellions or movements outside of the United States. Trouillot argues that there are four steps to historical production: 1) sources ; 2) archives; 3) creation of facts (historicizing) ; and 4) the production of retrospective significance. Passing through each stage of the process, there is more opportunity for knowledge to be absent, or as Trouillot would preferably say, silenced. This phenomenon determines what kinds of sources enter archives; written sources, as Western conventions of recordkeeping, are prioritized over oral sources. The "recalling of facts" also privileges those with formal education in a verbal or written Western language, thereby leaving out various individuals who could otherwise contribute to historical production and allowing historians to impose their own interpretations to create "fact" (Ibid 1995: 54). When the process is complete, what emerges is the canon that is packed with so many assurances about sources, archival material, and empirical facts that it becomes difficult to challenge or amend (Trouillot 1995).

My attention to the procedures of historical production allows for the paradox of my research to find resolution. In an effort to counter African American exceptionalism, my ethnographic research not only grapples with questions about the Black American pasts and presents, but also makes audible the voices of Black immigrants, of Africans, and of enslaved

Africans and Afro-Caribbeans. The fuller truth about Atlantic slavery might remain absent from textbooks and standardized school curriculum because it does fit the desired narrative. I intend for this project to uncover what has perpetuated a myth that has negatively impacted Black intra-racial relations in the Americas and derailed progress towards eradicating white supremacy and racial capitalism.

I also ground this project's findings with the conceptual framework of negrophobia[1], which I refer to as *anti-blackness*. Psychoanalyst and decolonial theorist Frantz Fanon (1986) defined negrophobia as a notion of Black inferiority, savagery, and wickedness that pervades the minds of both European- and African-descended people in the history of White-Black relations. I considered the terms anti-Africanness or *Afrophobia* but decided against them out of concern that they would be misconstrued as describing enmity strictly towards Black people of immediate African descent. At its roots, anti-blackness entails a crude undervaluation and denigration of African ancestry. My conception of anti-blackness, then, extends to all Africans —enslaved Africans, mixed-race Africans, descendants of enslaved Africans. Fanon admits:

> As I begin to recognize that the Negro is the symbol of sin, I catch myself hating the Negro. But then I recognize I am a Negro … neurotic situation in which I am compelled to choose an unhealthy, conflictual situation fed on fantasies [that are] hostile and inhuman" (Fanon 1986: 197).

In short, *anti-blackness* is an abbreviated name for the neurosis that has plagued Black and White communities and pathologized African-descended people as an 'inferior race' that exhibit a "natural sloth" (Feagin 2013: 54). As Joe Feagin succinctly argues in *The White Racial Frame*, a "hierarchy of biologically distinctive races" existed in the United States as early as the seventeenth century (Ibid 2013: 49). More importantly, white power brokers of that time did not

[1] I use *anti-blackness* instead of *negrophobia* to avoid confusion; the latter word may inadvertently cause one to think *phobia* (or fear). Africans and Afro-descendant people have been rendered as phobogenic objects in the global imagination, but anti-blackness is linguistically clearer terminology for this work.

simply attribute this behavior to select Africans; the so-called "barbarous" and "savage" nature of Africans was deemed pathological (Ibid 49). Anti-blackness is embedded in most, if not all, misinformed accounts of slavery. Specifically, the narrative that Africans sold their own kinfolk into slavery perpetuates the eugenicist logic of black savagery and wickedness.

Methodology

To argue that the narrative of mass African complicity has a corrosive impact on Black people across the African diaspora, I have developed a mixed-method study, drawing on archival investigation, personal interviews, and digital ethnography. I also inspected popularly prescribed school textbooks on the history of Atlantic slavery. The ethnographic portion of my project involved interviewing American descendants of slaves and African and Afro-Caribbean immigrant families in the tri-state area to gain an understanding of their knowledge of slave history and their experience with slavery education. In addition to interviewing older Black adults, I also worked with adults between ages 18-30, who are not as removed from the academic setting, to ensure that I had ample ethnographic material to put my findings about academic material in conversation with contemporary Black diasporic perspectives. Leaning into the virtual format that has been especially critical to the lives of many Americans amid the COVID-19 pandemic, I also conducted digital ethnography by analyzing the thoughts and opinions on intra-racial conflicts expressed by Black Internet users, in comment sections on news publications and posts or threads on social media platforms (e.g., Twitter, YouTube, Clubhouse, etc.). I have used pseudonyms (or generic terms) to refer to all my interlocutors. I am using the terms 'collaborator' and 'interlocutor' to refer to those who took part in this project.

One needs to disentangle the discussions of slavery in the physical—and virtual—world that have contributed to intra-racial conflict, xenophobia, and anti-blackness. By conducting

discourse analysis of Black discussions of slavery on virtual platforms, assessing the learning materials typically used to teach slave history in school, and interviewing Black African and African diasporic families in the United States, I hope to challenge the essentialist narrative of race betrayal that has been perpetuated for far too long.

Existing Literature

Historian Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has argued repeatedly that the culpability for slavery in the Americas belongs "to white people and black people [Africans], on both sides of the Atlantic, complicit alike in one of the greatest evils in the history of civilization" (Gates 2010). Marcus Rediker, however, makes clear that slavery as "an ancient and widely accepted tradition [...] usually reserved for war captives and criminals" was transformed dramatically by the presence of Europeans (Rediker 2007). In regions of West Africa where the transatlantic slave trade was most extensive, the developing trade in the eighteenth century resulted in an increased stratification of Africans into slaveholders and non-slave holders, ruling- and low- classes. The significance of slavery in West Africa, the salience of merchants as a powerful and authoritative class, and the sheer number of slaves in the region all increased as well.

Zora Neale Hurston's posthumously published book *Barracoon: The Story of the Last "Black Cargo"* made a similar argument, noting that the Atlantic slave trade transformed internal slavery and slave trading into an essential enterprise for African economies that made other African groups "subject to capture and deportation" (Hurston 2018: 153). Hurston argued that this point generated the belief that "Africans" sold their own people (Hurston 2018). Moreover, she noted, Europeans and Americans tend "to generalize the varied ethnic groups as "Africans"—despite the multidimensional diversity of people in Africa—, further feeding into this narrative of race betrayal" (Ibid: 153). This manuscript had been prepared since the 1920s ,

but failed to publish at the time, in part, because of its mention of the African role in the Atlantic slave trade.

More recent scholarship has offered counterstorytelling examples that demonstrate the contradictions of slavery history as told in textbook accounts and popular scholarship. Scholars in the groundbreaking *1619 Project* have put the spotlight on African figures whose complicated pasts involve resisting slavery or actually being victimized by the implications of the slave trade, such as Queen Njinga of Ndongo. While it is true that at times Njinga worked extensively to expand the slave trade, she lost her two sisters to Portuguese captors in the 1600s (Elliot and Hughes 2019). She later "provided shelter for runaway slaves" in the conquered region of Matamba. Indeed, without the brokerage of African middlemen, the Portuguese had already seized a vast number of slaves through brutal war campaigns against Ndongo "in order to trade slaves and conquer the region," which began around the time that Njinga was born (Heywood 2017; Pantoja 2020). The 1619 Project missed an opportunity to put her involvement in the slave trade in context. Additionally, if the contributors of the 1619 Project know that 1619 was not when slavery in America began, the very naming of *1619 Project* may feed into the kind of trap that Trouillot alludes to: the imposition of certain accounts of history that effectively silences other accounts.

Historian Ira Berlin (1996) argued that by the mid-seventeenth century America, Afro-descended people or "Atlantic Creoles" as historians would later call them, "participated in almost every aspect of life in New Netherland," a Dutch settlement that is now the East Coast of the United States. Atlantic Creoles were mixed-race black Americans in pre-colonial America, often the descendants of slaves and indentured servants, with ancestral and linguistic ties to Africa, Europe, or the Americas (Berlin 1996). Atlantic Creoles—enslaved and free—in New

Netherland could sue, owned and amassed property, and a variety of activities that white lawmakers in the American South would later summarily forbid, based on dubious claims of Black incapacity (Berlin 1996). 1619 may not need a date for commemoration, as it neither marked the beginning of American slavery nor the entrenchment of permanent chattel slavery along racial lines in the Americas. As Ciara Torres-Spelliscy argued, when there is a focus on the 13 colonies in the Americas, British colonies, the slavery in other parts of America disappears, and even somber commemorations like the 1619 Project unwittingly "sanitize further the messy history" (2019; Trouillot 1995: 116). She reported, as Edwin Williams did in 1949, that slavery existed a full hundred years before 1619, so the Black slaves in the Spanish colony of Florida "were erased from the standard narrative of American history" (Torres-Spelliscy 2019).

Similarly, Sandra E. Greene narrates the lives of three wealthy slave owners in late 19th-century West Africa, including Amegashie Afeku, a man from present-day Ghana who had "risen from slave descendant to a position of respect and influence," and still chose to amass his wealth to own many slaves and adamantly oppose abolition, despite his slave heritage (Greene 2017). These accounts add considerable nuance to a typically truncated version of slave history, particularly one that eludes discussion of the fact that traditional slavery on the African continent often served as a punitive system or direct consequence of war, but unlike American chattel slavery, was not a system of racialized, lifelong, hereditary bondage.

While most enslaved Africans died anonymously, there are some accounts of freed persons with dreams of returning to their homeland, who were not sold by "their own people" and sometimes belonged to social classes that one may think were shielded away from the horrors of slavery. The African man that Hurston interviewed, Kossola Oluale, was only 19 when his village was raided for slaves by the neighboring Dahomeyan kingdom (present-day Benin),

resulting in him being illegally purchased by shippers riding the *Clotilda*—the last known ship to bring African captives to the US—despite the Atlantic slave trade having been banned in America some 50 years earlier (Hurston 2018). Samuel Ajayi Crowther and his Yoruba family, for example, were captured by Fulani warriors that raided their village (Osogun) in present-day Nigeria in 1821, sold to Portuguese slave traders, and eventually freed when the slave ship leaving for the Americas was intercepted by a British Royal Navy ship patrolling the coast to enforce the 1807 Abolition of the Atlantic Slave Trade (Page 1889). Despite being an "Owu prince," Scipio Vaughan was still captured by European slave traders and shipped to the United States in 1805 (Campbell 2006: 329; *The Nation* 2015). On his deathbed in 1840, Scipio made his free-born sons promise to return to Africa and, according to Scipio's great-great-granddaughter, when one of the sons "found the tribal scars which matched his father's, he knew he was home" (Pye 1986: 52). The Atlantic slave trade was dramatically expanding when Muslim nobleman Ayuba Suleiman Diallo of present-day Senegal was captured and sold by Mandingoes, who then shaved his head and beard to make it look like he was a war captive, rather than a slave taken in a slave raid (Irvin Painter 2005).

Indeed, victims of the slave trade were of diverse ethnic and geographic origin and families throughout West Africa were torn apart, even royal and noble families. In a review of James T. Campbell's *Middle Passages: African American Journeys to Africa, 1787-2005*, William E. Allen concluded that Campbell's telling of "Ayuba's story debunks a common fallacy about African slavery, namely that Africans sold their kinfolk into slavery" and acknowledges that "slave traders generally enslaved captives from outside their ethnic group" (Allen 2007: 374).

But if there is academic scholarship that debunks the narrative that Africans sold their people into slavery, why does this narrative persist to exist?

Existing scholarship about the African role in the slave trade allows one to clearly conclude that the story of slavery is not as simple as one of "owners," and "owned," and that African ethnic groups could not be lumped together during that time in history. However, much of the scholarship mentioned above was not produced with the overt intention of correcting the common misconception that Africans "sold each other," a narrative that not only serves as an alibi for the problematic application of "savage" to Black and African people, but also breeds or exacerbates tensions between African diasporic groups on both sides of the Atlantic (Feagin 2013). Still, this myth has had a pernicious life in the American imagination throughout the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries. Moreover, the existing scholarship does not seek to present definitive answers as to whether Africans wholesale can be held to the same standard of culpability in the Atlantic slave trade as white slave traders, or even if it is historically accurate to say that they sold "their own."

The academic scholarship that offers more nuanced understanding of slavery history (e.g., Campbell, Rediker, etc.) is often so far removed from standardized education that many Black people in the United States lack a sufficient understanding of the history, contributing to problematic Black intra-racial relations in America. Neither academic scholarship nor textbook history have reached a consensus on how to discuss the African role in the Atlantic slave trade. There ought to be a definitive answer about whether to assign equal or comparable blame to Africans as white culprits in the slave trade. My project will show that blame assigned to African chiefs and kings for slave trading should pale in comparison to American and European

complicity in the mass exportation, racialization, torture, sexual commodification, financial exploitation, and lifelong enslavement of African victims.

Moreover, the narrative has generally manifested in colloquial discourse in two forms: 1) assigning blame should be assigned to Africans wholesale, forgetting that "Africans" comprised an array of diverse ethnicities; or 2) that blame should even be assigned to modern-day Africans as the descendants of "people who sold their kinfolk" into slavery. This narrative of mass African complicity can be—and has already been—deployed to weaken or deflect attention away from arguments for reparations for descendants of African slaves in the United States, a nation whose legacy of systematic dehumanization and racism should not be minimized. The goal of my project is not to victimize or indict any group within the African diaspora, but to uncover a fuller history of slavery that might serve to unite members of the diaspora, rather than divide them.

A Digital Dive into Diaspora Wars

My first official venture into examination of online discourses on slavery began in 2021 on the United States' most popular social media platform: YouTube. I had reasoned that individuals most interested or knowledgeable about Atlantic slavery would frequent short educational videos on YouTube about the lives of enslaved people. Since my interactions with people in social media were generally text-based and not videographic, I drew from many identifiers to locate Black interlocutors in my ethnographic research, from usernames, to personal profile images, to the style of their writing, to other emblems of ethnic difference that offer some racial legibility for social media users. Admittedly, there is a small potential margin of error for racial identification, in that some social media users could theoretically use profile pictures of Black people or Black-sounding names, when they themselves are not of African descent. Such social media accounts could belong to trolls, bots, or individuals who have felt

personally connected to a particular image of a Black person that may derive from a meme, television series, or film. As such, I tried to also assess other identifiers typically found on social media platforms before choosing my online 'field sites' and interlocutors: national flags that users add to their profiles to show their national pride, captions that hinted at their racial ancestry, among others. My digital ethnography was not limited to inspecting solely Black interlocutors, but I was invested in witnessing discourses around slavery that people of African descent were directly engaging.

In the first ethnographic moments in my online ethnography, I carefully observed a YouTube video about the renown abolitionist Harriet Tubman that was published around the time that the live-action film *Harriet* (2019) was airing in U.S. theaters. I checked the comment section and came across a YouTube user with a username that I recognized as a Ghanaian name. The user's comment under the video could be paraphrased as, 'she [Harriet] was such an incredible woman. Did you know that her family is originally from Ghana?'. Not long after that post was made, as the timestamp of the post would prove, another commenter rebutted something along the lines of: 'How dare you mention her like that! She is African American. Ghanaians sold her ancestors into slavery.' I gathered from the context of this rebuttal that the respondent was Black American[2]. Diving further into YouTube as a fieldsite, I discovered more incendiary comments on other video documentaries on slavery. Under one video that addressed the role of Africans in the slave trade in typical truncated fashion, a commenter said that Black Americans are "descendants of Shem" whereas Africans are "descendants of Ham" and that "Africans sold us to the white man with the help of the Chinese and Arab." The commenter concluded by identifying as a Hebrew, or one of the Children of Israel.

[2] To avoid confusion, I use the term 'Black American', rather than African American, to refer to American descendants of enslaved Africans. 'African American' is often used in official or federal documents as a catch-all term to include all Black people with some racial ancestry from Africa or the African diaspora.

December of 2020 seemed to be a particularly contentious time for intra-racial Black textual exchanges online. I read through various Twitter threads from that month, all addressing discourses on slavery, sometimes in civil terms, other times not so much. One commenter in one of these threads wrote in response to a staunch advocate of the ADOS (American Descendants of Slaves), a divisive hashtag movement that advocates for specific restitutions and affirmative action policies to be carved out for Black Americans, separate from African and Afro-Caribbean immigrants. The commenter included screenshots of Google search results for articles of West African leaders apologizing for slavery, with a personal explanation that monetary reparations by West African governments could be obtained, given the large number of recorded apologies by West African officials[3]. One commenter—whose profile hosts the Jamaican and US flag emojis—calmly offered the counterargument that African leaders were "tricked" and unaware of the defining characteristics that distinguished Atlantic chattel slavery from traditional slavery in Africa that was more "similar to a prison system."

The former commenter parried the counter-argument as if it were an asinine remark, stating that it would be "patronizing" or paternalistic to think that Africans were 'duped' by white co-conspirators and that Africans were likely content with however they were being paid for the 'human cargo' they traded away. He minimized the White role in the slave trade, going on to say that only Europeans should be held complicit in the slave trade, not Americans. This commenter bore a photo of a fighter jet as his profile picture and a Twitter username consisting of various emojis that feature crossbones. Based on the nonchalant tone in his Twitter replies, he seemed to be participating in the discourse as though it were a rhetorical exercise, not a

[3] Among the Google results was a 2018 *All Africa* article summarizing a Nigerian king's apology for traditional rulers' involvement in the slave trade, 2014 *Atlantic* opinion piece that recalls Ghanan government's 2006 apology to Black Americans, and an *NBC* article that cites Benin president Mattieu Kerekou's 1999 apology to African Americans for his country's participation in the slave trade and subsequent apologies by Benin officials.

soul-baring debate about a sensitive topic. Upon reflection, I concluded that the user was likely a white supremacist and race-baiter ingratiating himself into a discourse about Black diasporic groups to divert attention away from the complicity of the United States government in slavery. My reasoning behind assuming that the commenter is White becomes clearer in the subsequent vignettes of online 'diaspora wars' that I present. I have dubbed him "Darkbait" hereafter.

Deeper Perspectives

Sasha[4] is a young college graduate whose family is originally from Ghana. She spent her childhood in New York City public schools. When I interviewed her via Zoom conference, she shared that she grew up reading first-person narratives about slavery, like *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs, which made her more knowledgeable about the condition of slavery than any of her classes taught her and likely allowed her *nigrescence*[5] to happen more quickly. When I asked Sasha what she knows about ADOS and discourses about reparations, she seemed somewhat familiar but not completely sure. When Sasha proceeded to search for "Yvette Carnell" in Google Images, I saw her eyes widen as she exclaimed, "yup, that's her!" Sasha admitted that she was intrigued by ADOS, but "the group or the term gives [her] conflicted feelings." Sasha recalled watching a talk featuring Carnell that made her wonder if Carnell was a Trump supporter. She was impressed and enthusiastic about the fact that Carnell was discussing reparations for slavery, but "towards the end," Sasha felt uneasy. However, Sasha has her own reservations about reparations being distributed to Black people other than American descendants of slaves. "How can you give reparations to somebody with land back home? …" Like Jamaican and Caribbean friends with mad land," she asked rhetorically. Sasha determined

[4] I use pseudonyms for my interlocutors.
[5] Nigrescence is a five-step process of racialization, coined by William Cross (1991) that Afro-descended immigrants generally undergo in order to fully identify with the Black racial identity in America, since it may be different or absent in their home countries. The stages include traumatic racial experiences, a reframed worldview based on racial identity, an internalization of one's race, and lastly a stable investment in the Black plight (Smith, 2014: 70-71).

that “it was probably the xenophobic comments that made me think [Carnell] was a Trump supporter.” Moreover, Sasha concluded that reparations was not really feasible, concerned that small amounts of money would be distributed to Black people and they would be castigated if they complained of more systemic issues going forward. I asked her if she was aware of viable reparation efforts, like a recent scholarship being developed in Georgetown University to compensate the descendants of the 200 slaves that were sold by the university in the antebellum period. She was not aware of any reparation programs.

Luis is another recent college graduate, of Afro-Latino descent, from the Northeast. He went to charter school education where he got a somewhat nuanced education on slavery, one that was more in-depth than my other interlocutors had shared. Unlike some of his college peers who started taking Africana Studies courses, Luis knew since high school that many other European powers, “besides the British and Spanish,” engaged in the slave trade. It was only in college, however, that he got a chance to learn about slavery in other parts of the Americas. When Luis arrived, the charter school administration revised the curriculum, trying “to make it seem like they were not blaming Africa” for slavery in fear of being seen as white supremacists. From Luis’s understanding, “they knew the population they were serving” was predominantly Black and Brown and did not want any “uproar.” That fear is likely what kept the school from teaching about slavery other than the White and European role in the slave trade. His history teacher, though, taught that North American slavery was the most brutal form of slavery. Outside of the classroom, when Luis volunteered (presumably for school community service), an older white man once approached him saying, “ya know, in Africa, they sold their own brothers and sisters.” Luis emphasized that these older white folks, because he was Black, were “persistent” in telling him this narrative. At the time, Luis assumed that their words did not reflect the full story

but did not know exactly how to counter the narrative. Darkbait from Twitter comes to mind, as I consider the persistence with which he and those older white folks from Luis's adolescence peddled the damaging narrative that Africans sold 'their own.'

While it is admirable that West African leaders and officials have been proactive in taking responsibility or offering compensation, there are continuity issues that trouble this line of thinking. Even if the pre-colonial territories of such African nation-states, like the Dahomey Kingdom (of Benin) or the Asante Empire (of Ghana), financially benefited from the slave trade, such polities did not have a measure of continuity. First, the people that constitute the Republic of Ghana are not all the same ethnicity as those who inhabited the Asante Empire. Colonial regimes and arbitrary demarcation of borders denied most African territories the chance to have such continuity, a chance to a self-determined path towards development when European counterparts were thriving through independence and global capitalism that was birthed by the Atlantic slave trade. European colonization caused the Yoruba people, for instance, to be split among at least three different countries: Nigeria, the Republic of Benin, and Togo. Secondly, even if there had been a fluid continuum from one political regime to another, whatever wealth that was acquired through the slave trade by pre-colonial African territories would have been taken by European powers who colonized the majority of the African continent from the 1880s into the 20th century. Darkbait from Twitter placed emphasis on the 'supply-side' of the slave trade (African traders) without focusing on the demand-side (White slavers). Darkbait's reasoning is based on "formulas of banalization," when "the entire string of facts, gnawed from all sides become trivialized," and the significance of an event is consequently silenced (Trouillot 1995: 97). Certainly, some West African traditional chieftancies could be identified as participants in the slave trade, but entire countries on the demand-side of the slave trade—like

Great Britain and the United States—have not been so forthcoming about an apology or efforts to provide reparations (Lewis 2016). It was only in 2007 and 2008, respectively, when the U.S. House of Representatives and Prime Minister Tony Blair (on behalf of Britain) apologized for slavery.

Clubhouse is a new social media platform that was launched in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic to allow users to join various audio conversations ("Rooms") for the sake of learning from each other and building community across common interests. In each "Room", there can be moderators, rules, official clubs, and other features to make the experience feel like a conference call—with strangers from all over the world. While Clubhouse was launched during the COVID-19 pandemic to be an emblem of good and bonding through common aspirations, it soon became a popular field site for online Black 'diaspora wars.' This year, I entered a "room" for a club on the app that hosts regular sessions to discuss issues pertaining to all persons of the African diaspora. The only way to speak or ask a question was to tap the "raise hand" button and hope that a moderator of the room would call on me in a long queue of participants. Inevitably, I was only able to participate in the room as a listener. The topics (slavery, xenophobia, the African "brain drain") were sensitive, but the discourse was not humane. Two themes permeated the several-hour-long discussion: feeling scorned and "selling out." African speakers listed off racist encounters with Black Americans, Haitian speakers talked about feeling slighted, etc.

One Black American speaker suggested that African immigrants deserted their countries, interjecting, "Their own people are selling them out! It's you people that's selling them out." Another shared that she is married to a West African man and loves to learn about African culture to have a sense of cultural belonging, but then spent several minutes denigrating West African women for giving her "dirty looks" whenever she visited her husband's home country.

African and Afro-Caribbean speakers chimed in to share their grievances of being called "African booty scratchers," immigrants who came from a "banana boat," and other demeaning epithets by their Black American counterparts. One Black speaker interjected, "There were black people that were in America before the white man stepped foot here, so did those black people also sell their own people as slaves as well?" I am inclined to think he was alluding to Atlantic Creoles, who, in fact, owned slaves, but many Atlantic Creoles themselves were once enslaved or unfree persons. There was also a significant difference between slavery in early precolonial America and racialized, lifelong chattel slavery from the late seventeenth century onward. One may think that little knowledge can be acquired in such contentious "rooms," but the kinds of issues that cause Black cross-cultural conflict were apparent throughout the time I listened. And while it is not always the central topic, the myth of Africans selling their own people has appeared in virtually all of my ethnographic observations of intra-racial Black discourses.

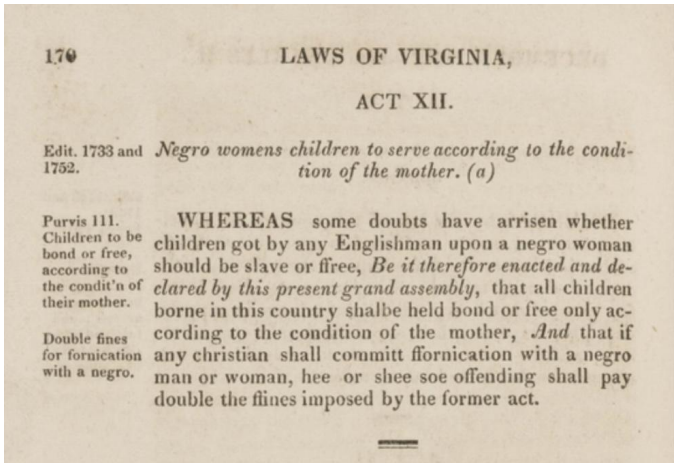
The Invention of Africa

In response to the African Scramble in the 1880s (when major European powers convened to partition Africa amongst themselves), Black leaders of African descent met in 1893 to condemn this carving-up of the continent. African American studies historian Rayford W. Logan (1965) contended that pan-Africanism only emerged as a prominent movement to develop a bond of solidarity among African and African diasporic people after World War II (90). According to seminal Black social scientist W.E.B. DuBois, it was during the 1900 Pan-African Conference that the word "Pan-African [was] in the dictionaries for the first time" (Logan 1965: 91).

By and large, the Pan-Africanist movement was an idea that owes its prominence to Black people of the Western hemisphere long before Africans ever took on the philosophy and

movement for their own anti-colonial projects. The leading architect of Pan-Africanist movement, Henry Sylvester Williams, was Trinidadian-born, and "like all the early Pan-African meetings, the participants at the Pan-African Conference were drawn almost entirely from the Caribbean, American or European diaspora rather than from Africa itself" (*New Internationalist* 2000). Indeed, Africans were not the pioneers of pan-Africanism ; they were to be central beneficiaries of its mission. It was particularly after World War II that African territories proactively developed their own programs to promote a pan-African consciousness, such as the All African Peoples' Conference (AAPC) and the Organisation of African Unity (OAU). Pan-Africanism as a movement and philosophy was embryonic for Africans before this period. How, then, can one say that Africans sold fellow Africans during the Atlantic slave trade if they were not socialized to think of different ethnic groups as kin?

What was so different about Chattel Slavery in the Americas?



170 LAWS OF VIRGINIA,

ACT XII.

Edit. 1733 and 1752. *Negro womens children to serve according to the condition of the mother. (a)*

Purvis 111. Children to be bond or free, according to the condit'n of their mother.

Double fines for fornication with a negro.

WHEREAS some doubts have arrisen whether children got by any Englishman upon a negro woman should be slave or ffree, *Be it therefore enacted and declared by this present grand assembly*, that all children borne in this country shalbe held bond or free only according to the condition of the mother, *And* that if any christian shall committ ffornication with a negro man or woman, hee or shee soe offending shall pay double the ffines imposed by the former act.

Figure 1: Laws of Virginia (Virginia Historical Society)

Historians and anthropologists alike have contributed to scholarship that acknowledges the difference between traditional slavery in Africa and slavery in the Americas. Adding to Rediker and Hurston's arguments that African slavery was traditionally meant for war captives and criminals, Phillip Igbafe wrote that "slavery in ancient Benin cannot be likened to the slavery

of ancient Rome or to that of the Americas deriving from the Atlantic slave trade" (Igbafe 1975: 421). Enslaved people in the Benin Empire could own private property, rise to a level of distinction in society, and "there were strict provisions for emancipation" (Ibid 1975: 421). In the Bacon's Rebellion of 1676, a moment in slave resistance history that suggested discontent with the condition of slavery even during the earliest years of of enslaved African presence in the American colonies, historian Edmund S. Morgan suggests that slavery would soon be reconstituted by Virginians in the late 1600s to ensure more control over slave labor. Acknowledging that free and unfree Africans fought alongside lower-class Europeans (indentured servants) in this early colonial rebellion, Morgan writes forebodingly, "[r]esentment of an alien race might be more powerful than resentment of an upper class. Virginians did not immediately grasp it. It would sink in as time went on" (Morgan 1975: 270). By this point, Virginia had already established the 1662 *partus sequitur ventrem* doctrine, an aberration of English common law, determining that Black children born in the Virginia colony would be free or enslaved "according to the condition of the mother" (seen in Figure 1). Surely enough, the Virginia Slave Codes of 1705 were passed as a way to exercise more control over the enslaved African population, like banning enslaved Africans from bearing arms, establishing the right to seize runaway slaves, etc. To be sure, American chattel slavery was an aberration from both African *and* English contexts concerning bondage and freedom.

The history of Atlantic Creoles offers a retrospective counter to myths of Black inferiority because this history marked a time in colonial America when black and white slaves were generally treated similarly and when Black people in America were not pathologized as infantile savages in need of masters. As more settlements in pre-colonial America hardened into *slavocracies*, newly arriving African captives had rapidly less of a chance at acquiring the

"patterns of residence, marriage, church membership, and godparentage" that were common features of the lifestyles of the earlier arriving Atlantic Creoles in North America prior to the 1660s (Berlin 1996: 31). Chattel slavery in the Americas was an exceptionally racialized bondage but also bondage of a more sexual horror and sadistic violence.

Sexualized practices and other corporal abuses played a central component to the inhumanity of enslavement in the Americas. Enslaved African women, who were often raped by slave owners or forcefully "bred" to produce slave children, neither owned their ovaries, nor their wombs, nor their breast milk. The breasts of enslaved Black mothers were virtually yanked from the mouths of their babies, so the mothers could wet-nurse the white children of their slave masters. Daina Ramey Berry explores the commodification of enslaved Africans categorically and contends that Black women's "bodies were catalysts of nineteenth-century economic development, distinguishing US slavery from bondage in other parts of the world" (Berry 2017: 14). In the absence of the international slave trade to constantly replace the slave laborforce in the early 1800s, child-bearing Black women were made into a lucrative commodity. Enslaved men, too, neither had control over their reproductive organs, nor rights to protect their wife and children. Enslaved Black males could only watch as their whole families were sold off by their slave owner, and "[b]y law no slave husband could protect his wife from physical or sexual abuse at the hands of a white man" (Grier and Cobbs 1980:69). These practices occurred throughout the Americas but were very pronounced in the United States. The interplay between sexualization and commodification are signature features of chattel slavery in the Americas. The odious practices of enslavement—rape, forced procreation, coerced wet-nursing, the sale and smuggling of enslaved corpses for medical education and research and the commodification of enslaved Black bodies—in the Americas are not comparable to slavery anywhere in West or

Southern Africa, from where slaves in the Americas originated (Berry 2017). Moreover, not even African slave trading chieftaincies can be held respsonsible for the *internal* US slave trade, the trans-America slave trade, slave prostitution, or the slave cadaver trade.

Formulas of Guilt Offloading

In 2018, an Igbo Nigerian journalist Adaoubi Tricia Nwaubani penned a *New Yorker* article about her great-grandfather being a famous slave trader in present-day Nigeria. According to her, Nwaubani Ogogo Oriaku carried a "slave trading license from the Royal Niger Company, an English corporation that ruled southern Nigeria," and sold captives to white merchants who would then "legally" ship them to Cuba and Brazil. The British had banned the international slave trade and was supposed to be deterring slavery and the slave trade, even though slavery was still being carried out by the Dutch and Spanish. More interestingly, a family friend of hers told her that Nwaubani Ogogo's name was mentioned in a textbook at a U.K. university where he was teaching history (Nwaubani 2018). This is not simply a "formula of banalization," as Trouillot (1995) would argue, but one of guilt offloading that vehemently shifts blame onto Africans, even in textbooks. Nwaubani cites a British missionary who remarked that the social hierarchy between slave and free-born in Igboland will remain "until the conscience of the people functions," all while the British Crown was still granting slave-trading licenses to Africans (Nwaubani 2018). To quote an article that summarized Marika Sherwood's 2007 book on British slavetrading after 1807, "British slavers and capital were still involved in the trading of African people to plantations in major slave societies like Brazil, Cuba and the United States for years after the slave trade's official abolition" (Brown 20). These sources are nowhere in U.S. textbook accounts; the British are often painted as agents of change whose moral consciences compelled them to gradually rid the African continent of the odious instution of slavery by

outlawing the international slave trade. While it is profound that Nwaubami and her family are taking responsibility for their ancestor's role in the slave trade, it does not mean that their involvement implicates all of Igboland, all of Nigeria, or all of Africa. Moreover, the British moral arguments against slavery of the time seem disingenuous if the British granted Nwaubami a slave-trading license, and later returned the slaves they had seized from him and "apologized to him" (Nwaubani 2018; Nwaubani *BBC News* 2020). Britain tacitly allowed Igboland, part of the British colony of Nigeria, to maintain slavery well into the 1940s (Nwaubani 2020).

I interviewed a close relative with a wealth of knowledge about slavery. She (Veronica) revealed to me that a relative who was kin to my maternal-great-great grandmother was abducted by slave traders. As the son of a Nigerian immigrant family, I foolishly assumed that the chances of anyone in my family being a direct victim of slavery—and learning about them—were slim. This ancestor of mine was no more than a teenager and too young to locate her hometown when she was kidnapped and sold by slave traders, eventually coming into the hands of a white slave trader, still in southern Nigeria, who found her to be "too beautiful and regal-looking" to ship to the Americas, and in Veronica's words, "so he kept her." I wondered to myself if this ancestor was raped, or compelled to do intense or harsh labor. I was also disturbed to learn from Veronica that this kidnapping occured sometime in the 1870s, long after the international slave trade was abolished and when the British was supposedly deterring slavery. Fortunately, my ancestor was eventually found by her cousin in the Lagos area, but by then, she had given birth to a child and had been free for some time. However long it was that she was kept unfree, she was left behind in Lagos by the white man who, retrospectively, was probably British because Lagos was a British colonial possession even before the official colonization of Nigeria.

Not long after Veronica emigrated from Nigeria to the United States, she had heard a white lay person on the news offloading guilt to Africa because "they sold their own people into slavery." Her textbooks claimed that Africans sold other Africans in exchange for guns and mirrors, but upon reaching the United States and realizing that the afterlife of slavery (racism) was entrenched in society, she was certain that she was not taught the full story of slavery. Growing up, Veronica often heard the saying "*as rich as Da Rocha*," which referred to Candido Da Rocha, the son of an enslaved African taken to Brazil, who had returned to Lagos as a returnee and became Nigeria's first millionaire. "The Vaughans, the Forsyths, the Da Rochas, Braithwaites, DaCostas, Da Silvas, Doughertys, Johnsons—so all those people are to blame for slavery? They were victims," said Veronica. I agreed with her in our conversation; assigning blame to Africans in that sense would be tantamount to victim blaming. These returnees generally resided in Lagos. Veronica also told me that freed Africans in Brazil saved up money to return because of homesickness and racism that they experienced in Brazil. A band of Africans, originally from Guinea, even put their money together to get a ship for Badagry, Nigeria. Many of these families, like the DaRochas, achieved great success upon returning to Africa. Considering cultural assimilation and intermarriage, it would be hard to differentiate modern descendants of African families who *might* have owned slaves from the descendants of African returnees with slave ancestry.

Popular History vs. Racist Elision: The Silences in Textbook History

Popular history often offers truncated, neatly-packaged narratives of history that may misinform readers—and they are usually packed in textbooks. I will use the historiography of slave resistance in textbooks as a central example to present the contrast between slave studies in textbook history and in academic scholarship. Like the narrative of mass African complicity in

the slave trade, the textbook accounts of slave resistance contribute to anti-Blackness and create further barriers to understanding the myth of 'Africans selling their own kinfolk' as a false, pernicious narrative.

Intentional revisionism of American history has occurred since the dawn of the 20th century, such as the Lost Cause mythology and—in more scholarly circles—the Dunning School of thought. In *Forever Free: The Story of Emancipation and Reconstruction*, historian Eric Foner wrote the following about the Dunning School of "Reconstruction historiography" that was named for a Columbia history professor and his followers:

> The account of the era rested, as one member of the Dunning school put it, on the assumption of "negro incapacity." Finding it impossible to believe that blacks could ever be independent actors on the stage of history, with their own aspirations and motivations, Dunning et al. portrayed African Americans either as "children," ignorant dupes manipulated by unscrupulous whites, or as savages, their primal passions unleashed by the end of slavery.(xxii).

In direct response to the Dunning School of pseudohistory as prefaced by the assumption of Black inhumanity and inferiority, W.E.B. DuBois published *Black Reconstruction* to unleash an "indictment of a historical profession that sacrificed scholarly objectivity" for eugenicist racism (Foner 2005: xxvi). The fourth chapter of DuBois's book was particularly progressive in its chronicling of enslaved people striking and stopping their work for the Confederate states during the Civil War, negating the slaveholder myth that slaves were complacent, or even content, about their lots in life (DuBois 1935). DuBois was expounding on the limits of "narration." Similarly, in *Silencing the Past*, Trouillot examines the French assembly's dismissal of the news of a slave rebellion in Saint-Domingue (Haiti): "slaves could not conceive of rebellion on their own," it

was “impossible for fifty thousand of them” to organize so quickly, and the French troops “would have defeated them” (1995: 91). The narrator claims to know the full story because he is actively creating “fact,” not unlike a Dunning School scholar. DuBois’s book being published during the Great Depression, racial differentials between the number of Black versus White readers, readership of Black scholarship, and the White preferences for White versus Black scholarship all culminated in a failure to impact mainstream Black and White audiences (Parfait 1935: 286). DuBois’s book only sold less than two thousand copies within three years of its publication (Ibid 286). Few texts would ever be as powerful in shifting historiography of slave resistance and the nature of slavery than Herbert Aptheker’s book on slave revolts during United States slave history. Arguably, Aptheker’s thesis also represented a tipping point that countered the Dunning School of thought.

Herbert Aptheker was among the groundbreaking slavery scholars who challenged the portrayal of enslaved Africans in his 1943 book *American Negro Slave Revolts,* a seminal work in the field in which he reported 250 slave revolts and conspiracies to disprove the notion that slave rebellion was a rare phenomenon. In a review of Aptheker’s impact on slavery scholarship, Herbert Shapiro contends that the views of John D. Hicks, author of 1937 *The Federal Union*—that Black people were “a really primitive people,” making attempted rebellions “extremely rare”—was the conventional wisdom of the day (Shapiro 1984:56). One could say that Americans had argued that Black people were too compliant and cognitively inferior to *think* to stage a slave revolt or conspiracy, let alone plan one. If over 250 slave rebellions that were painstakingly recorded almost 100 years ago could be omitted from textbook canon, it is no surprise that the myth of mass African complicity in the Atlantic slave trade has been inadequately addressed in U.S. textbook accounts.

To this day, popular history would lead one to believe that organized or large-scale slave insurrection was uncommon, particularly in the United States. In fact, a *Barron's* A.P. United States History test preparation book, one that I myself used in high school to prepare for the A.P. exam, stated that while "the main fear of slave owners was violent, open rebellion by their slaves [...] outright rebellion was not common" (50). The book cites the Stono Rebellion of 1739 as "the most famous slave rebellion of the colonial period [...] initiated by 20 slaves" that "led to the death of 20 slave owners and the plunder of half a dozen plantations" (Ibid 50). *Barron's* AP U.S. test preparation book fails to mention large-scale slave rebellions *after* the Haitian Revolution, an insurrection that many historians agree was a watershed moment for inspiring hope in enslaved Africans in the United States and striking fear in the hearts of slaveholders throughout the Western hemisphere. Even the historicization of the 1803 Ibo Landing, the site of the "fatal immersion" into the sea of a group of enslaved Igbo people, in popular history deemphasizes the fact that these Igbo slave captives staged a slave mutiny on a slave ship—a successful one (Snyder 2010: 39). This disregard of the fact of rebellion constitutes a "formula of erasure" (Trouillot 1995: 96). Whether their drowning was a "deliberate, collective suicide" or an ancestral march towards the sea back to Africa (the latter of which I am more inclined to believe), the Igbo captives "rose from their confinement in the small vessel, [...] revolted against the crew," and killed their captors as a powerful act of slave resistance (Ibid 39). Moreover, one of my interlocutors (Ruby) shared that she did not learn about the Ibo Landing from high school in suburban New Jersey, but rather from a think-piece she read in her thirties on Beyoncé's 2017 visual album *Lemonade*, in which the author claimed that imagery of the music video "Love Drought" drew inspiration from these defiant Igbo captives. She hardly learned any slave rebellion history in school, save for the Haitian Revolution and Nat Turner's Rebellion.

Most importantly, this section in *Barron's* on "Resistance to Slavery" conveniently fails to mention the German Coast Uprising of 1811 in what is now Louisiana, led by the slavedriver (an overseer of slaves that is also a slave) Charles Deslondes who was inspired by the victory of the Haitian Revolution several years prior. Despite its low casualty number on the slave owner's side, the German Coast Uprising was likely the largest slave rebellion in United States history; *Smithsonian Magazine* asserts that "more than 500 enslaved people took arms" in the uprising (Fessenden 2016). The significance of these slave rebellions in the United States should not be marked by the number of white civilian casualties, but rather by the frequency and magnitude of these slave revolts.

Even if one questioned Aptheker's criteria for identifying slave revolts, it would be absurd to contest the existence of the 250 slave revolts and conspiracies that he recorded in American history (Aptheker 1943: 162). Aptheker also reasoned that it "was highly probable that all plots, and quite possibly even all actual outbreaks, that did occur, and that are, somewhere, on record, have *not* been uncovered" (Ibid 161). Indeed, 250 slave revolts were likely a very conservative estimate, seeing that it was within the interests of white slaveholding societies in America to conceal as many episodes of slave insurrections and conspiracies as possible.

Aptheker's perspective seemed grounded on moral convictions about the humanity of enslaved Africans, the frequency of slave rebellions that was conveniently omitted from American historiography before his work, and the fact that the main cause for slave rebellions was the cruelty "that was characteristic of the institution of American Negro slavery" (Aptheker 1943). He found no proof to corroborate any suggestion that Nat Turner rebellion was incited by abolitionists and reasoned that the rebellion was not an isolated episode but rather a peak of a multitude of revolts, which would continue deep into the nineteenth century (Shapiro 1984: 56).

Nevertheless, over forty years later, Shapiro still needed to note that "textbook accounts of the revolts are remarkable for their brevity and/or their distortion of the historical record" (Ibid: 71). Shapiro's sampling of textbooks suggests that authors post-Aptheker continued to push the narrative that slave revolts—or resistance in general—were uncommon. Certain slave revolts get some attention in textbooks, like the Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner rebellions, but Weinstein and Gatell's *Freedom and Crisis* offers the same pre-Aptheker "conclusion: Slave revolts were uncommon in the antebellum South" (Ibid: 72). This phenomenon in historiography presents one of a few reasons why honest, nuanced accounts of slavery have yet to reach the masses. While it is true that scholarly writing may be less accessible to the average reader, the myth of slave complacency could easily have been corrected without excessive detail.

While they are not reliable for providing a well-rounded education on slavery, popular U.S. textbooks and study prep books are not entirely flawed. *Barron's* textbook features a side-note that reads, "In an essay that addresses slavery in the colonial period, do not ignore slavery in the northern colonies [...] New York had an especially large slave population" (Resnick 2005: 53). This book refused to bolster a common fallacy that slavery in the North was benign or nonexistent. Sasha had shared with me that there was a time in adolescence when she thought "there was no slavery in the North." Based on her recollection, stories involving slave narratives idealized Northern states as the quintessential refuge for enslaved people. The second edition of Thomas A. Bailey's *American Pageant* elaborates on some of the sexual horrors of slavery pertaining to Black enslaved women's right to body autonomy: "Breeding slaves, as cattle are bred, was not encouraged" […], but […] Women who bore thirteen or fourteen babies were regarded as "rattling' good breeders" (Bailey 1961: 365). The textbook, however, overlooks the fact that enslaved women were often raped by their slave owners and forced to conceive their

children. The 2006 edition omits slavery as a root cause of the Civil War, hinting at the influence of Lost Cause mythology. Moreover, when newer editions of textbooks repeat gross historical errors, trust in such textbook accounts ought to be completely broken.

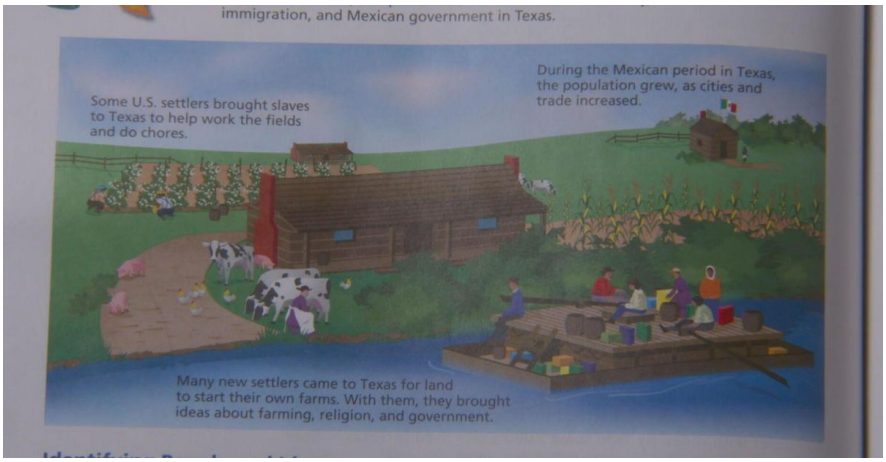


Figure 2 : Image in *American Pageant* (Photo by CBS News)

One page of the most recent edition of *American Pageant*, arguably the most popularly prescribed textbook in America, features an illustration of slaves working in a plantation and one of the captions reads, "Some U.S. settlers brought slaves to Texas to help work the fields and do chores" (Kennedy and Cohen 2020: 198; see Figure 2). Referring to the hard, strenuous, day-long labor of enslaved Africans as "chores" grossly mischaracterizes the hardships of slavery. Enslaved Africans were purchased, brought to plantations, and forced to work in the fields and in the house. Iconography matters, too, as the image above presents a Southern slave plantation as an idyllic farm where slaves amicably pick cotton for their masters, omitting the presence of the slave overseer that whips slaves into submission or fatigue and malnourishment of the slaves that contributed to high mortality rates. Additionally, a map of the Americas in the text described enslaved Africans in 1775 as "immigrants," blurring the fact that they were forcefully separated from their families and shipped across the Atlantic (Kennedy and Cohen 2020).[6]

A multitude of contextual histories is essential to having a nuanced understanding of Atlantic chattel slavery. Moreover, the combinatorial power of the misinformed accounts about

[6] The map exists in both the 16th edition, and then the 17th edition that was published in 2020.

slavery help give the illusion that the blame for slavery and the slave trade can be attributed to Africans wholesale. Believing Garraty, Hicks, or Dunning and his followers would give one the impression that Africans as a people were more "primitive" and savage so that the idea of having such a barbaric disposition as to sell one's own kinfolk is not too far-fetched.

African American Exceptionalism vs. Transnational Pedagogy

Halfway into each of my semi-structured interviews, I asked my interlocutors to make an estimate of how many of the 10 million African captives who survived the Middle Passage were shipped to the United States. All except one interlocutor assumed that between 40 or more percent of enslaved Africans were sent to the United States. The discernable shock on their faces, as I revealed that the actual percentage was no more than 6 percent, was expected. They were surprised to learn that over 50 percent of the enslaved Africans were shipped to Brazil and the Caribbean. In Brazil and the Caribbean, slaves needed to be imported because slave death rates were so high, and birth rates so low. My interlocutors are of ages spanning from 22 to 70, are all possessors of college or graduate degrees, and most received their K-12 schooling on the East Coast. This phenomenon—the ignorance of slavery in the rest of the Western hemisphere—is characteristic of the African American exceptionalism that is embedded in America's teaching about Atlantic chattel slavery.

The United States education on history follows a pattern of centering the lives of Americans over anyone else, so unsurprisingly, African Americans are positioned as the protagonists in narratives of slavery while the other African diaspora groups are deemed the supporting characters. One Black African Twitter user alluded to this pattern in one of the numerous Twitter debates I read concerning 'diaspora wars,' writing that ADOS supporters believe themselves to be the only protagonists "in the story of oppression." Of course, teaching a

more transnationally-focused history would allow Americans to have a well-rounded understanding of Atlantic slavery and perhaps a stronger sense of solidarity with other Black diasporas. For instance, the Slave Code of Barbados—a British colony that was also a slaveholding society—predates Virginia's 1662 *partus sequitur ventrem* law by one year. Simply put, Barbados's slave code codified the chattel slavery of enslaved Africans before Virginia (and likely inspired it), even though popular history presents Virginia as the slave colony that had the most horrific implications on chattel slavery. Certainly, Barbados slave codes influenced the slave codes of South Carolina and Georgia, and outside of North America, inspired the 1664 Jamaican slave code and the 1702 Antiguan slave code (Hadden 2001: 12; 14). The British colony of Barbados would continue to set the tone for future practices, which would often become trademark features of Western slaveholding societies. Few U.S. textbooks address non-American or transnational circumstances surrounding slavery, except the Haitian Revolution, that is mentioned for causing a seismic shift in slaveholding societies but discussed almost ritualistically, as if it relieves textbook historians of the guilt of not providing a broad multisited analysis of Atlantic slavery.

There was an intercolonial slave trade, and many of the harrowing features of slaveocracies—slave patrols, slave passes, hunting dogs, monetary incentives for slave retrieval—were borrowed and shared between societies in the New World. Slave patrols and their antecedents, for instance, were present in Barbados before the practice was adopted by North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia. Moreover, the ideas for Barbados slave codes originated from laws devised by Spanish and Portuguese colonies, such as *hermandad* in Cuba who retrieved enslaved runaways, or *rancheadores*—paid slave catchers who were often accompanied by slave-hunting dogs (Hadden 2001: 10).

This fluid exchange between societies in the Western hemisphere could allow for a continuity of slavery in one society even if slavery were eradicated in another. A more transnational approach might aid in debunking Lost Cause mythology, like the notion that U.S. Southerners seceded from the Union because of states' rights. States' rights has long been touted by Lost Cause believers as the principal cause for the Southern secession and the Civil War when slavery was, in fact, the point of contention that ultimately led to all-out civil war between the North and South. Despite how relatively thorough Luis's slavery education was in high school, his history teacher taught him that some slaveholders fought in the Civil War for states' rights. In the decade after the Civil War, there was a massive exodus of ex-Confederates from the South to live in other societies in the Western hemisphere that still allowed slavery. Some of the expatriates came with enticing incentives from foreign-Confederate allies, like Brazilian emperor Dom Pedro II who promised the *Confederados* land for little money, subsidies for their immigration, speedy process towards citizenship, among other perks for coming to Brazil (Greenspan 2020). Indeed, as many as 10,000 Southerners emigrated to North or Latin American societies for their new homes. Most of them emigrated to Brazil, the last society in the West to abolish slavery (Ibid 2020).

Brazilian historian Luciana da Cruz Brito argues that Brazil was a hotspot for ex-Confederate expatriates because slavery was still legal there until 1888 (Greenspan 2020). Not only were there agricultural and technological incentives for Brazil's emperor to welcome Confederados to help further modernize the country, but "It was public policy in Brazil to whiten society" (*branqueamento*) by encouraging European-descended immigrants to settle there. (Ibid 2020). By the late nineteenth century, as many as 3,500 Confederados were living in Americana, a Brazilian town named after its largest demographic (Ibid 2020). Brito's studies also reveal that

some ex-Southerners smuggled enslaved Black Americans into the Brazilian border, flouting U.S. and Brazilian laws in the process (2020). Ex-Confederates were steadfast in their will to leave the States to own slaves in a slaveholding society, despite the linguistic, religious, and cultural barriers that they endured as they attempted to adapt to Brazil, all which counters the Lost Cause myth that Southerners seceded based on states' rights.

The stakes for countering myths about slavery are quite high, as far too many prominent Black icons have accepted whitewashed narratives about slavery without questioning them since the nineteenth century. Frederick Douglass cited the African role in the slave trade as reasoning "against repatriation schemes for the freed slaves," even though returnee movements happened in the tens of thousands (Gates 2010). Like Aptheker, "Du Bois had been interested in writing a book on Nat Turner, although he believed that the primary manifestation of revolt was in the running away of slaves" (Shapiro 1984: 53). In the 1950s, Harlem Renaissance author Richard Wright pondered before embarking on a trip to Africa, "What would my feelings be when I looked into the black face of an African, feeling that maybe his great-great-great-grandfather had sold my great-great-great-grandfather into slavery" (Campbell 2006 : 296)?

In May of 2018, Black hip hop artist Kanye West remarked in an interview for TMZ, "When you hear about slavery for 400 years...for 400 years? That sounds like a choice. You were there for 400 years and it's all of y'all. It's like we're [Black people are] mentally imprisoned." The first error in Kanye's statement is the common misconception that U.S. chattel slavery went on for 400 years; chattel slavery in the United States actually lasted for about 250 years. More importantly, Kanye, perhaps due to a lack of knowledge of slave resistance, doubts that slaves knew they were enslaved. That day, the Black Twitter community, including Black academics and activists, were appalled by his statements. Marc Lamont Hill tweeted that there has "NEVER

been a moment in history when Black people didn't resist slavery" before listing off different methods of resistance, while Black civil rights activist DeRay Mckesson argued that Kanye West's sentiments are fodder for white supremacists who blame Black people for their oppression (see Figure 3). These two public figures' statements were true in more ways than they may realize. Hill's tweet somewhat glossed over slave insurrections as a key characteristic of slavery, and Mckesson may not be aware that victim-blaming by 'racist white ring folks' may have retroactively extended as far back as precolonial America.

Figure 3: A Tweet by DeRay Mckesson (Photo by Author)

Rather than apologize for his false and hurtful statements, Kanye West stood his ground by logging onto Twitter and tweeting a quote that was falsely attributed to the escaped enslaved-woman-turned-abolitionist Harriet Tubman: "I freed a thousand slaves[;] I could have freed a thousand more if they only knew they were slaves". In doing so, Kanye helped perpetuate yet another false narrative. One must not blame these public figures for their views; textbook accounts of slavery are generally misleading and their scholarly equivalent has proven to be inconsistent. These feelings of shame, embarrassment, and trauma could be remedied with better education on slavery.

Conclusion

My journey into textbook analysis for this project began when I read an illuminative quote from a textbook by a respected Black historian that reads: "African involvement in the Atlantic slave trade has always pained African Americans. Americans often think of Africa as

one country and Africans as all the same people. According to this way of thinking, Africans were 'raiding and capturing ‘their own people’ (Irvin Painter 2005). Well before embarking on this project, I borrowed this textbook from my former high school library and was inspired by its effort to address this specific narrative, that is, until I read on. An explicit mention of this narrative is powerful, but the text’s subsequent passages fell short of countering the false, pernicious tale and did not provide further context about the factors in Africa—the multiplicity of ethnicities in Africa, or the African families (like mine) who lost their relatives to slave raids and captures, or the enslaved Africans who returned upon freedom, or the Europeans who feigned the abolition of the slave trade and carved up the African continent soon after. How do arriving scholars of color help decolonize the curriculum if we do not know how to counter misinformed interpretations of the past that are embedded in Western canon?

Given the arguments I listed above in my project, there is enough evidence to prove that it is misleading and damaging to say that Africans sold their own kinfolk into slavery. More scholarship on African activity during the slave trade, when put in conversation with the American and European activities, can actually bolster arguments for slavery reparations, but a failure to demystify myths and half-baked truths can indirectly hamper efforts to proving entitlement to reparations. There exists a ritual of assigning guilt to victims for their own oppression, not unlike other myths about marginalized groups (e.g., “Black-on-Black” crime in America, blaming Jews (Hebrews) for the crucifixion of Jesus, re-assigning guilt to Jews for the Holocaust simply because some Jews were involved, etc). None of these narratives are genuinely rational, but their permanence in the modern imagination speaks to a greater evil. Concerning the Black diaspora, that greater evil is *anti-blackness* and it has no afterlives; it has never left us.

Reference List

"The History of Pan-Africanism" 2000. *New Internationalist.* https://newint.org/features/2000/08/05/simply/

Allen, William E. *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 40, no. 2 (2007): 374-76. Accessed July 1, 2021. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40033954.

Aptheker, Herbert. 1943. *American Negro Slave Revolts*. (New York, New Edition).

Bailey, Thomas A. 1961. *The American Pageant: A History of the Republic*. 2nd edition. D.C. Heath and Company.

Berlin, Ira.1996. "From Creole to Africa: Atlantic Creoles and the Origins of African-American Society in Mainland North America" *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 53. 251-88.

Brown, Matthew. 2020. "United Kingdom finished Paying Off debts to Slave-owning Families in 2015" *USA Today*. https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/factcheck/2020/06/30/fact-check-u-k-paid-off-debts-slave-owning-families-2015/3283908001/

Campbell, James T., *Middle Passages: African American Journeys to Africa, 1787-2005*. 2006. Penguin Press.

Coombs, John C. ""Others Not Christians in the Service of the English": Interpreting the Status of Africans and African Americans in Early Virginia." *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 127, no. 3 (2019): 212-38. Accessed July 13, 2021. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26743947.

Du Bois, W. E. B.1935. "Chapter IV: The General Strike". *Black Reconstruction*. Harcourt.

Duncan, Jericka, Shannon Luibrand, and Christopher Zawistowski. 2020. "Map in widely used U.S. history textbook refers to enslaved Africans as "immigrants," CBS analysis finds" *CBS News*.

https://www.cbsnews.com/news/the-american-pageant-map-in-widely-used-us-history-textbook-refers-to-enslaved-africans-as-immigrants-cbs-news/

Elliott, Mary and Hughes, Jazmine. “A Brief History of Slavery You Didn’t Learn in School” *New York Times*.2019.https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/19/magazine/history-slavery-smithsonian.html

Fage, J. D. 1969. 1969. "Slavery and the Slave Trade in the Context of West African History." *The Journal of African History* 10, no. 3: 393-404. http://www.jstor.org/stable/179673.

Fanon, Frantz. 1986 [1952]. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Trans. Richard Philcox. (New York: Grove).

Feagin, Joe. 2013. *The White Racial Frame: Centuries of Racial Framing and Counter-Framing*. 2nd. ed. New York: Routledge.

Fessenden, Marissa. 2016. “How a Nearly Successful Slave Revolt was Intentionally Lost to History” *Smithsonian Magazine*. January 8, 2016. https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/its-anniversary-1811-louisiana-slave-revolt-180957760/

Foner, Eric. 2005. *Forever Free: The Story of Emancipation and Reconstruction*.

Gates Jr., Henry Louis.“Ending the Slavery Blame-Game” *The New York Times*. 2010. https://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/23/opinion/23gates.html

Greene, Sandra E. *Slave Owners of West Africa Decision Making in the Age of Abolition*. 2017. Indiana University Press

Greene, Sandra E. *West African Narratives of Slavery: Texts from Late Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth Century Ghana*. 2011.

Greenspan, Jesse. 2020. “The Confederacy Made Its Last Stand In Brazil” *History.com*. Updated Jun. 22, 2020.

Grier, William H., and Price M. Cobbs. 1980. *Black Rage*. New York: Basic Books, Inc.

Hadden, Sally E. 2001. *Slave Patrols: Law and Violence in Virginia and the Carolinas.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Hartman, Saidiya. *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux. 2007. pg. 6.

Hurston, Zora Neale. *Barracoon: The Story of the Last "Black Cargo."* New York: HarperCollins. 2018.

Irvin Painter, Nell. 2005. “Captives Transported, 1619-ca.1850” *Creating Black Americans: African-American History and its Meanings, 1619 to the Present*. Oxford University Press.

Igbafe, Philip A. 1975. "Slavery and Emancipation in Benin, 1897-1945." *The Journal of African History* 16, no. 3: 409-29. Accessed July 10, 2021. http://www.jstor.org/stable/180474.

Kennedy, David; Cohen, Lizabeth. 2020. *The American Pageant: A History of the American People*. 17th edition. Cengage Learning.

Lewis, Danny. 2016. “Five Times The United States Officially Apologized”. *Smithsonian Magazine*. 2016. https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/five-times-united-states-officially-apologized-180959254/

Logan, Rayford Whittingham. 1965. "The historical aspects of Pan-Africanism: a personal chronicle". *African Forum.* 1: 90-104. Available at: http://www.freedomarchives.org/Documents/Finder/Black%20Liberation%20Disk/Black%20Power!/SugahData/Essays/Logan.S.pdf

Morgan, Edmund S. 1975. *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company).

Nwaubani, Adaobi Tricia. 2018. “My Great-Grandfather, the Nigerian Slave Trader” *The New Yorker*. Available at: https://www.newyorker.com/culture/personal-history/my-great-grandfather-the-nigerian-slave-trader

Nwaubani, Adaobi Tricia. 2020. “My Nigerian Great-grandfather sold slaves” *BBC News*. Available at: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-53444752

Page, Jesse. 1889. *Samuel Crowther: The Slave Boy Who Became the Bishop of the Niger*. New York, Chicago: F. H. Revell. https://archive.org/stream/samuelcrowther00pageuoft#page/n5/mode/2up

Pantoja, Selma. 2020. “Njinga a Mbande: Power and War in 17th Century Angola.” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History*. https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.013.326

Parfait, Claire. 2009. "Rewriting History: The Publication of W. E. B. Du Bois's "Black Reconstruction in America" (1935)." *Book History* 12: 266-94. Accessed August 3, 2021. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40930547.

Pye, Michael. 1986. “Slave to a proud past.” *The Observer*. London, Greater London, England. https://www.newspapers.com/image/?clipping_id=21218822&fcfToken=eyJhbGciOiJIUzI1NiIsInR5cCI6IkpXVCJ9.eyJmcmVlLXZpZXctaWQiOjI1NzgxMTg2NywiaWF0IjoxNjEyNTk5OTg2LCJleHAiOjE2MTI2ODYzODZ9.EGQzZ_IgQ6Iqav_dlcRbrWPmCroUxViEHyLfWLaXRhk

Rediker, Marcus. 2007. *The Slave Ship: A Human History*. Penguin Books.

Resnick, Eugene V. 2012 [2005]. *Barron’s AP United States History*. Barrons Educational Series.

Shapiro, Herbert. 1984. "The Impact of the Aptheker Thesis: A Retrospective View of "American Negro Slave Revolts"." *Science & Society* 48, no. 1: 52-73. Accessed July 1, 2021. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40402559.

Shenoy, Rupa. 2019.‘Willful amnesia’: How Africans Forgot—and remembered—their Role in the slave trade”. *The World*. www.pri.org/stories/2019-08-20/willful-amnesia-how-africans-forgot-and-remembered-their-role-slave-trade

Smith, Candis Watts. 2014. *Black Mosaic: The Politics of Black Pan-Ethnic Diversity*. New York: New York University Press. 70-71.

Snyder, Terri L. 2010. "Suicide, Slavery, and Memory in North America." *The Journal of American History* 97, no. 1: 39-62. Accessed July 12, 2021. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40662817.

Thompson, Adeniyi. 2015. “Demise of Adewale Thompson’s wife revs nostalgia about late jurist.” *The Nation*. https://thenationonlineng.net/demise-of-adewale-thompsons-wife-revs-nostalgia-about-late-jurist/

Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. 1995. *Silencing the Past : Power and the Production of History*. Boston, Mass. Beacon Press.