“We were much better people than their own Countrymen”: Challenging the Reliability of the English Slaving Narrative as a Primary Source

by

Mahalia Sarah Binstock
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INTRODUCTION

“In a 1734 published account, British seaman William Snelgrave detailed his experiences while employed in the African slave trade.” So begins Sowande’ M. Mustakeem’s 2016 *Slavery at Sea: Terror, Sex, and Sickness in the Middle Passage*, a comprehensive study of “the social space of ships and the ocean as epicenters in the making and unmaking of” the millions of “transported slaves” who were seized from their African societies of origin and conveyed in the holds of European and American vessels into generational unfreedom in the New World over the course of three centuries. Mustakeem leads off her introduction with an anecdote from Captain Snelgrave’s *New Account of Some Parts of Guinea and the Slave-Trade*, wherein after making port at Jaqueen on the West African ‘Slave Coast’ in 1727, the author’s first mate happened to espy a fifty-year-old woman drowning in the ocean and hauled her to safety. Snelgrave himself, by his own telling, had been offered the chance to purchase the woman the previous day but had declined due to her age. Following her rescue, he learned that the local king had sought to punish her for facilitating his wives’ infidelities by selling her into slavery, and failing this had ordered her bound and cast to the sharks.

In Mustakeem’s reproduction, this unnamed woman was subsequently made a prisoner by Snelgrave and his crew, “[confined] within the hold and [forced] to journey across the Atlantic” to be “sold to an acquaintance of Snelgrave in Antigua,” the finale in a series of abuses which “provides a glimpse into the unpredictable and
often dangerous environments that slaves and sailors confronted” and “invites us to reckon more closely with complex factors of age, gender, value, and disposability of the black body amid the legal trade and traffic of people as commercial goods.”¹ But this recapitulation entirely omits a crucial segment of Snelgrave’s narration. According to him, the woman felt such gratitude towards her rescuers as to inform the other West Africans imprisoned aboard the ship that “as we had shown such Kindness to her, first in saving her Life, and since in taking care of her, who might be reckoned an useless Person to us, on account of her Age; so they had all the reason in the World to believe we were much better people than their own Countrymen.” For the remainder of the journey, she had supposedly devoted herself to keeping the other captives “in such Order and Decorum... that I had never the like in any Voyage before.” To reward her efforts, Snelgrave had been sure to sell her to “the Surveyor General of Barbadoes, and the Leeward Islands... and I was not a little pleased she had got so generous and good a Master.”²

Mustakeem may have excluded this material simply because she considered it irrelevant to the focus of her own analysis. She may have also wished to spare her reader the passage’s Afrophobia and paternalism, highly unpalatable to the sensibilities of a modern audience which understands the slave trade as a great atrocity of human history and William Snelgrave and his peers as its perpetrators. The notion that these ideas were held and expressed by an African woman confined on a

¹ Sowande’ M. Mustakeem, *Slavery at Sea: Terror, Sex, and Sickness in the Middle Passage* (University of Illinois, 2016), 1-3.
slave ship, who supposedly preferred her English captors to her “own Countrymen” including family and friends, is all the more distasteful; and moreover, registers even at first glance as implausible.

This last point, however, opens a troubling line of reasoning. If this one aspect of Snelgrave’s story is dubious, can the rest of it be trusted as factual? Can the rest of his *Account*? In fact, on what basis can Mustakeem or any historian definitively judge a slaver’s testimony to be essentially truthful and informative, or for that matter, fabricated and unenlightening? How can we know whether Captain Snelgrave actually “detailed his experiences while employed in the African slave trade” in his *Account*, or whether he detailed those experiences he wished us to believe he had had?

These were the same questions which occurred to me when I first encountered Snelgrave’s text excerpted in Elizabeth Donnan’s excellent collection of *Documents Illustrative of the History of the Slave Trade to America* while researching insurrections conducted by African captives aboard eighteenth-century English and American slaving vessels. In the course of this research, and of subsequent research into the treatment and experiences of women and girls in the slave trade (the original intended topic of this thesis), I came across and compiled a number of eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century documents which, like Snelgrave’s, contained the written recollections of English men who had worked and traded aboard slaving vessels on the West African coast as captains, surgeons, and sailors. In one sense, these firsthand accounts of the world of the slave ship seemed an invaluable resource, when so few
other primary documents offered anything more than inadequate glimpses into the
diverse lived experiences of the unwilling subjects of the Atlantic slave trade. And yet
even from my first contact with the writings of Captain William Snelgrave, Dr. James
Houstoun, former seaman William Butterworth, and others, I felt uneasy employing
them as sources in my historical writing.

Firstly, the texts bore striking similarity to one another in certain respects for
which I then had no explanation. Not only did they all include what appeared to be
incongruously extensive and detailed observations on the locales and cultures of the
West African coast, but these observations often concerned precisely the same
specific subject matter, such as soil quality. The authors also employed identical turns
of phrase, referring to the “manners and customs” of the people they had encountered
and the worship of the “fetiche” which all of these societies apparently practiced. I
had the sense that I was dealing with a very specific type of document, but one of
which I lacked knowledge and relevant context.

Secondly, Snelgrave’s account was not the only one to trigger my skepticism.
Many of the authors insisted that all West African cultures practiced human sacrifice,
including on children and “virgins,” with great volume and frequency and even
greater relish; some claimed that West African men boasted “thousands” of wives and
concubines; and some, like Snelgrave, would have their reader believe that the men,
women, and children they sold into slavery led far better, happier lives laboring on
West Indian plantations than they ever had as free citizens of their homelands, and
that these people felt nothing but thankfulness and affection towards the slavers who
had, in both senses of the word, delivered them. The more I interacted with these sources, the more I was convinced that, if it was too hasty to declare them false based only on a presentist feeling that their content was racist and self-serving, it was also inadequate to put my trust in the word of the white slave traders who had authored them without further inquiry.

All this was made more concerning by the fact that I had encountered these documents heavily cited as primary sources in a wave of recent and acclaimed social histories of the slave trade. As Mustakeem notes, studies of the trade have been primarily quantitative in nature for centuries, cataloguing the magnitude of the African diaspora and the economic trends of the slaving industry; I myself first became interested in reconstructing the slave trade from a human perspective after realizing how few existing secondary works took this approach. In the twenty-first century, a small group of historians including Mustakeem herself have begun to address this historiographical gap, conceiving of the slave ship as a space in which white officers, white sailors, and black captives coexisted, came into conflict, suffered, died, and survived. Eric Taylor, for example, published in 2006 a comprehensive study of shipboard insurrections conducted by captive Africans on vessels bound for the Americas, while in the same year Emma Christopher came out with a pioneering book on the working-class white seamen of the slave trade who occupied the roles of both oppressed and oppressor. These historians and a few others
have begun the undoubtedly worthy task of constructing a social history of the slave trade, building the foundation of a field Mustakeem terms ‘Middle Passage studies.’

This work, however, is attended by a problematic scarcity of sources. One chief reason that histories have typically been quantitative in orientation is that most extant sources from the trade are financial documents or maritime record-keeping. Far more ink has been devoted to noting the numbers, ages, sexes, prices, and profitability of African captives than their human identities and experiences. This new cadre of social historians seems to have been drawn to narratives penned by former slavers like Snelgrave for the same reason that I initially was: they represent some of a very few possible windows into the world and inhabitants of the slave ship itself.

Four recent and prominent ‘Middle Passage studies,’ including Mustakeem’s, Christopher’s, Taylor’s, and Marcus Rediker’s *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (2007), all draw significant primary information from William Snelgrave’s account, as well from one penned by abolitionist and doctor Alexander Falconbridge, the two of these narratives which have retained the most prominence since their publication. Each historian also makes use of at least two more of the accounts which I will analyze in this thesis.

And yet, as I will argue here, there is significant reason to doubt not only the objectivity but the general veracity of texts belonging to the unique subcategory of eighteenth- and early-nineteenth English literature which I have termed the ‘slaving

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narrative.’ I have reached this conclusion by situating the documents in the social, cultural and literary moments which produced them; divining their authors’ likely objectives and intentions in publishing them, based on this crucial frame of reference; and putting the works in conversation with one another. Understood and analyzed together in the pertinent context, slaving narratives reveal themselves not to be the journalistic nonfiction which modern scholars may mistake them for, but to belong instead to the bygone genre of travel literature, which was wildly popular in Britain throughout the period during which the narratives were written. This literary type arose early in the eighteenth century to allow the reading populace to join vicariously in the ever-multiplying and ever-farther reaching scientific and imperial forays which public and private British enterprises were making into territories across the globe. It was subject to stringent conventions of form and content, all of which are evident in slaving narratives if one knows how to look for them. And, most crucially, it was plagued by counterfeitors, who partially or entirely plagiarized, distorted, or fabricated accounts of voyages, motivated to do so by the unfortunate ease with which they could pass off untrue content as genuine and reap the ample profits. Contemporary reviewers were aware of the problem, but had no real method by which to discern which accounts were falsified or to what extent, and often endorsed fakes, some of which have gone undetected for centuries.

And so their very membership in this class of texts means that slaving narratives cannot be presumed factual or reliable. Their authors had just the same opportunity to doctor and contrive their depictions of both the people of West Africa
and of the slaving business as did any travel writer of the day. Moreover, three of the slaver-authors I will deal with in this thesis had a demonstrable reason to lie, and one which deeply problematizes the use of their documents as primary sources in social histories of the trade. In their accounts, Doctor James Houstoun, Captain Hugh Crow, and the Captain William Snelgrave quoted directly in Mustakeem’s *Slavery At Sea* all attempt to convince their readers of the moral validity and even benevolence of slaving and slavery, presenting explicit social, economic and ethical arguments. But it appears highly likely that a pro-slave trade agenda was also at work in these authors’ supposedly disinterested and faithful representations of the peoples, places, and events they had encountered while slaving on the African coast. As I shall discuss more thoroughly in my third chapter, Snelgrave’s narration of the middle-aged woman rescued from the sharks furnishes a perfect example: the woman’s alleged insistence that Snelgrave and other English slavers “were much better people than” her “own Countrymen” serves well the captain’s own assertion that West Africans were happy to exchange citizenship in cruel and ‘barbarous’ societies for the custodianship of kindly white masters on American plantations.

This thesis will serve as an intervention in the use of slaving narratives as primary sources in the evolving field of the social history of the African slave trade. Authors of ‘Middle Passage studies’ who have heretofore utilized these texts have lacked a crucial understanding of the nature of the documents themselves and of the slavers’ intentions and motives in creating them. Outlining her primary source materials, Mustakeem comments of “accounts that ship captains and surgeons
published” recounting their time in the trade that “widespread publication and construction of these narratives emerged for reasons unknown.” As I shall demonstrate, when the texts are placed in the proper historical, cultural, and literary context, the reasons behind their emergence become quite clear; and these very reasons call into question the extent to which slaving narratives can actually help to “extend a deeper gaze into the process of coastal trade conducted with local African rulers,” “the types of slaves offered, bought, and refused,” and “the more common aspects of life on a slave ship,” as Mustakeem asserts they do.4

By casting doubt on the reliability of these documents as sources of historical insight, I do not intend to imply that they should be discarded entirely. As Mustakeem points out, leaving aside a very few notable exceptions such as Olaudah Equiano’s Narrative, anyone wishing to reconstruct the trade’s social history through textual sources is inevitably “bound to the testimonies, memories, and selected narratives put forth by the very individuals who determined captives’ financial and social value while violently imposing the boundaries of life and death within which slaves were held;” scholars have no alternative but to attempt to extract whatever truth such sources can offer.5 My aim is to equip historians with the necessary literary and cultural context to interpret the representations of West Africa and of English slaving practices found in slaving narratives with an appropriately skeptical and discerning eye. Scholars utilizing these demonstrably untrustworthy texts must be prepared either to independently verify information derived from them, or, in the many cases in

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4 Mustakeem, 10.
5 Mustakeem, 13-14.
which this is impossible, to explicitly qualify such information as possibly distorted or untrue to their readers.

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The relative novelty of social studies of the slave trade, and of the employment of first-person narratives as primary sources for such studies, means that virtually no work of this kind has been done before. In defining a realistic scope for this project, I have chosen to work only with those texts which fall within certain parameters. By virtue of being written by English slavers whose careers took place in the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, the slaving narratives discussed in this thesis can be analyzed as products of the same historical, cultural and literary phenomena, and of roughly similar personal motivations. Accounts of the trade by slavers from countries other than Britain, such as Willem Bosman’s highly influential *Nauwkeurige Beschryving van de Guinese Goud- Tand- en Slavekust [A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea, Divided Into the Gold, the Slave, and the Ivory Coasts]* (1704); by writers who were not slavers themselves, such as *A New Voyage to Guinea* (1744), written in 1726 by a surveyor commissioned by the Royal African Company; or which were written before before 1700, such as John Sparke’s *The Voyage Made by M. John Hawkins Esquire, 1565*, must be investigated on their own terms, an undertaking which I hope this thesis will invite.

My first chapter will introduce and characterize the slaving narratives in question, as well as the limited historiography concerning them up to now. In my second chapter, I will define the development and nature of English travel literature;
demonstrate that the authors of the narratives in question purposefully crafted their texts as works of the genre; and outline the long history of plagiarism and fraud which renders travelogue of this era, including slaving narratives, so unreliable. My third chapter will reveal how slaving narratives which argue in favor of the trade are likely significantly compromised by their authors’ agendas, and what the consequences of this are for existing and future social histories which utilize these texts as primary sources.

For authenticity’s sake, I have reproduced historical writing as it originally appeared and have not altered spelling, grammar, or capitalization.
CHAPTER 1:
INTRODUCING AND DEFINING THE SLAVING NARRATIVE

Over the course of the hundred-odd years between 1725 and 1831, a small cohort of English sea captains, doctors, and crewmen published their recollections of life aboard eighteenth-century British slaving vessels trading on the western coast of Africa. These texts were consummate products of the mercantile, cultural, and literary moment of eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century Britain. English commerce in men, women and children from communities in West Africa, sold by the millions into New World slavery, was at its height throughout the 1700s. The economies of maritime cities like Liverpool and Bristol rested upon the trade, and much of the nation’s economy as a whole came to turn on the produce of African labor in British-American colonies. Meanwhile, a grassroots abolitionist movement was in full blossom by the century’s close, which successfully impelled Parliament to prohibit the trade, though not yet slavery itself, in 1807. The same period was the ‘Age of Reason,’ as well as of imperialism: both scientifically- and profit-minded Englishmen fanned out across the globe in search of novel knowledge to record and novel resources to exploit. Their countrymen who remained home were eager to vicariously participate in these projects, voraciously consuming written accounts of the strange lands and cultures that such voyagers encountered.

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6 See David Eltis, David Richardson, David Brion Davis, and David W. Blight, Atlas of the Transatlantic Slave Trade (Yale University Press, 2010).
Men like Captain William Snelgrave, Doctor Alexander Falconbridge and former seaman William Butterworth thus found themselves uniquely positioned to offer the reading public a firsthand account of both the distant and exotic ‘Guinea Coast’ of West Africa, where each of them had spent months or years doing business, and of the highly relevant and polarizing business of slaving itself, which each of them had at one time personally facilitated. The accounts they published were, indeed, as unique in comparison to other literature of the day as they were similar to one another. Each slaver-cum-author paid fealty to the conventions of eighteenth-century English travelogue when he chronicled with deliberate detail and analysis the locales and flora and fauna he’d encountered on slaving missions and styled himself an expert on West African custom. But each also departed from the standard form of travel literature to illustrate the mechanisms of the slaving industry and the world of the slave ship, and also to make their personal feelings on the morality of the trade emphatically known. In doing so, they created a small subgenre all their own. Though they have rarely been recognized as belonging to such a distinct category, these documents have each individually remained of perennial interest to historians up to the present day.

The content and structure which slaving narratives share are significant and meaningful from both a literary and a historical perspective. However, there remain important differences between each work, owing largely to the authors’ differing life histories and to the passage of time, as English literature overall evolved significantly as the eighteenth century progressed into the nineteenth. In the following section, I
will provide brief biographies of each slaver-author and brief summaries of the character of his work, and call attention to the most significant similarities and dissimilarities between them. Familiarity with each individual slaver and his work will also be useful for the reader in following my analysis in the following two chapters.

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James Houstoun M.D., according to his autobiography, was born to respectability and wealth in Scotland circa 1690, going on to be educated in medicine in the Netherlands and France. In 1725, he published *Some New and Accurate Observations Geographical, Natural and Historical. Containing a true and impartial Account of the Situation, Product, and Natural History of the Coast of Guinea*, which recounted his 1722 tour from ‘Sierra Leon’ (at the mouth of the Sierra Leone River) to ‘Whydah’ (modern-day Ouidah in Benin). Houstoun had been appointed “Physician and Surgeon-general to the Royal African Company’s Settlements in Africa” that year by the Company’s chief investor, the Duke of Chandos: he was to employ his medical expertise diagnosing the physical fitness of African captives to discern if they would make “merchantable” cargo.

Houstoun’s account is, on the one hand, a blatant attempt to curry favor with a powerful benefactor. The RAC, to whom he “Humbly Address’d” his tract, had suffered since 1692, when Parliament had revoked its royally-chartered monopoly

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over the British slave trade and opened the market to private investors. In the 1720s, the Duke of Chandos made an ultimately unsuccessful effort to reorient the Company towards identifying non-human resources to harvest from the African coast for European markets.\(^{11}\) Houston’s published missive to the “Honourable Court of Assistants” of the RAC and “his Majesty” Chandos is in large part devoted to descriptions of flora, fauna, and minerals he had encountered, and particularly focused on those which might “prove to the Advantage of the Company for Exportation,” such as indigo, cotton, and “Lixiviate fix’d salt.” Houstoun also shows eager initiative in assessing the RAC in comparison to its Dutch and Portuguese counterparts, proposing that Parliament be petitioned to grant the Company a new monopoly and suggesting several measures to make coastal slaving centers more profitable and efficient.\(^{12}\)

On the other hand, as Houstoun states in his 1753 memoirs, “I freely confess, I published that Treatise out of the Resentment I bore to the Governor of Whydah for the Injustice and Injuries done me.”\(^{13}\) Performing his duties at a slave factory, Houstoun had regularly clashed with the governor there, a “Mr. B--ldw--n,” whom Houstoun felt had “ruined the Trade here at Present” through his crooked dealings, and whom he claims had on one occasion wrongly confined him in a pestilential dungeon for thirty-three days. Houstoun considers it his “indispensable Duty” to


“detect the Barbarities and Villainies of your chief Agents Abroad, whom you are pleased to entitle Captain Generals and Chief Governors.” Houstoun was also “credibly informed that this Gentleman has given your Honours a false Impression of me, by writing you false and scandalous lies” and intends to “shew your Honours, and all the World, which of us Two have been the most faithful Servant to the Company.” Houstoun was clearly partially motivated to publish for general readership to defend his own reputation and publicly tarnish Baldwin’s.\(^\text{14}\)

As we shall see, Houstoun’s exhaustive observations on the natural features of the West African coast are standard course not only for slaving narratives but for all eighteenth-century travel literature. The extent to which his personal agendas with both his employers and his nemesis openly bleed into his narrative is, however, somewhat unconventional for a piece of travel literature of this era. The next three slaving narratives to be published, all before the turn of the century, would adhere far more closely to convention by assembling detailed descriptions of the coast and its inhabitants which catered only to the interests of domestic readers, and in which they themselves hardly figured except as narrators.

As an employee of the RAC, Houstoun is of course in full-throated support of the African slave trade. It is “the Hinge on which all the Trade of this Globe moves on… put a stop to the Slave Trade, and all the others cease of Course,” for “who digs the rich Mines of Peru and Brazil, &c? Nay, who sweetens the Ladies Tea, and the generous Bowl; and who reaps the Profit of all?” As for the African people who were

subject to the trade, Houstoun disdainfully summarizes that “their natural Temper is barbarously cruel, selfish, and deceitful, and their Government equally barbarous and uncivil... They exactly resemble their Fellow Creatures and Natives, the Monkeys.”

Houstoun would not be the only slaver-author to argue, both explicitly and implicitly, that the trade was justified by both its own profitability and by the ‘barbarity’ of the communities it besieged (see Chapter 3). However, the disparagement he directs at West Africans is certainly the most blanket and vitriolic to appear in any of the slaving narratives in question. Captains William Snelgrave and Hugh Crow, the other two authors to argue in the trade’s favor, both attribute at least some positive qualities to those Africans with whom they personally dealt for years (condescending as these attributions may in their own way be). Houstoun, who seems to have had less direct and cooperative contact with the coast’s black inhabitants, brooks no such ambiguities.

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Little autobiographical information can be gleaned from William Snelgrave’s only known publication, *A New Account of some parts of Guinea: and the Slave-Trade* (1734). Snelgrave notes that his first sea voyage was in 1704 as a purser aboard a slaving vessel commanded by his father, indicating that seafaring and slave trading were family professions, and reports captaining a handful of voyages himself to various West African ports from 1713 to 1730. Robin Law has also located Snelgrave aboard two additional voyages to Whydah and identified him as a plaintiff.

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in a 1735 court case over an Antiguan estate. Snelgrave also makes multiple references to doing business at Antigua and his acquaintances there. The slave trade was clearly a long-term career for Snelgrave, and a shaping influence on his life overall, as evidenced by his economic and personal ties to the major sugar island plantation which he steadily supplied with African bonded labor.

Snelgrave’s *Account* is divided into three parts. The first describes “*The History of the late Conquest of the Kingdom of Whidaw by the King of Dahomè. The Author’s Journey to the Conqueror’s Camp.*” In 1727, Snelgrave was a witness to the conquest of Whydah by King Agaja of Dahomey. Over the course of the decade, under Agaja’s leadership, Dahomey went from being a minor satellite kingdom to seizing control of the major slaving ports of Ardra and Whydah. (Dahomey would remain the dominant power, and the dominant supplier of black captives to white slavers, on the Slave Coast for over a century.) Snelgrave lays out the antecedents to the invasion, its events, and its aftermath, information purportedly derived from eyewitnesses. He also describes in detail his company’s visit in April 1727 to Agaja’s encampment at Ardra, where he paid tribute to the king, negotiated trade deals, and observed Dahomean military, culture, religious practice, and daily life.

One major aspect of the popularity of travel literature in eighteenth-century England was the intense curiosity British readers felt regarding human communities outside of Europe (see Chapter 2). Like most of the other slaver-authors, Snelgrave effectively caters to such interest with this in-depth documentation of an overseas

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17 Snelgrave, I-157.
military action and its actors. However, his portrayal is a telling reflection of the nature of his readers’ curiosity. Snelgrave is openly admiring of Dahomean military strength and of King Ajaga himself, remarking on his judicious policies, especially those regarding slave trading, and that “there was something in his Countenance very taking, and withal majestick. Upon the whole, I found him the most extraordinary Man of his Colour, that I had ever conversed with.” But the basis upon which Snelgrave judges the king exceptional among his African peers is that there was “nothing in him that appeared barbarous.” Elsewhere, he purports in vivid terms that child sacrifice, polygamy, and cannibalism are practiced by West African cultures to an appalling excess, which to Snelgrave plainly reveals them to be “barbarous brutish Nations.”

This perspective, contrasted against the supposed ‘civilization’ of European nations, was characteristic of most travel literature documenting non-European cultures, and permeates all six of the narratives of question. For pro-slave trade authors like Houstoun and Snelgrave in particular, it also served as a convenient rationale (see Chapter 3).

The third section of the New Account is a “Relation of the Author’s being taken by Pirates, and the many Dangers he underwent” in 1719, when Snelgrave’s vessel and crew were seized and held hostage by the infamous Thomas Cocklyn of the West African coast. Neither an aspect of travelogue nor related to his account of the slave trade, this section surely signifies that Snelgrave’s priority was to attract and entertain an audience. While his descriptions of a foreign land and an insider’s

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perspective on the slave trade are designed to appeal intellectual curiosity, this
‘relation of “the Author’s many Deliverances, and narrow Escapes from Death, 
during the time he was detain’d Prisoner by the Pirates” is an appeal to more
thrill-seeking, romantic sensibilities.¹⁹

The middle section of the New Account is the one to deal explicitly with the
slave trade, specifically “The manner how the Negroes become Slaves. The numbers
of them yearly exported from Guinea to America. The Lawfulness of that Trade. The
Mutinies among them on board the Ships where the Author has been, &c.” Here, even
throughout his discussion of the practical mechanisms of the trade and his narration
of several African insurrections aboard his ships, defending the trade’s ‘Lawfulness’
appears to be Snelgrave’s rhetorical priority. Unlike Houstoun, who takes for granted
that the trade’s profitability is an incontrovertible and uncontroverted justification for
its continuance, Snelgrave poses his arguments as a defense against an existing
opposition. In his preface, he notes that this entire section was “designed at first only
for a Friend’s Satisfaction, who has objected against the lawfulness of that Trade,”
and in the section itself acknowledges that “Several Objections have often been raised
against the Lawfulness of this Trade,” though he declines to “here undertake to
refute” them or to name them explicitly.²⁰

‘Lawfulness’ seems to signify both legality and morality in Snelgrave’s
rhetoric. His explicit arguments are largely political and philosophical in nature: he
asserts that those West Africans sold to Europeans as slaves are war captives, debtors,

¹⁹ Arne Bialuschewski, “Black People under the Black Flag: Piracy and the Slave Trade on the West
²⁰ Snelgrave, 157, Preface, 160.
criminals, or children sold by their own apparently morally bankrupt parents, all
excommunicates from their own societies, and that black slaves live “generally live
much better” on plantations “than they ever did in their own Country,” an argument
which his portrayals of ‘barbarity’ in West Africa are clearly intended to support (see
Chapter 3). In conclusion, Snelgrave allows that “like all other earthly Advantages,”
the trade is “tempered with a mixture of Good and Evil.”

Nearly a century later, Captain Hugh Crow would also come to his profession’s defense in his 1830
Memoirs, but with far more bitterness: by then the battle to preserve the slave trade
had already been fought and lost.

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Baptized in Essex in 1685, Dr. John Atkins served in the Royal Navy for
twenty-odd years, treating the sick and the wounded on war ships in the European
Atlantic and Mediterranean; in 1732, he would publish his first manuscript, The Navy
Surgeon, or, Practical System of Surgery, noted for containing the first European
accounts of many equatorial diseases and an advanced system for treating casualties
of naval conflicts. His second publication would recount a 1719 voyage to Africa.
That year, Atkins was appointed the surgeon of the Swallow on a mission to capture
pirates looting on the West African coast. Following the pirates’ capture and trial,
Atkins boarded the Swallow’s tender, the Weymouth, to serve as purser as it traveled
to Brazil and the West Indies. These two trips were the subject of his 1735 Voyage to

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21 Snelgrave, 158-161.
Guinea, Brasil and the West Indies; in His Majesty's ships, the Swallow and Weymouth.

Atkins’ *Voyage* is organized by the West African and West Indian locales at which he made port, and, as so much other travel literature of the era did, consists of observations of the geography, climate, flora and fauna, peoples and customs, and exports of each. Other smaller sections hold forth on topics such as “Currents on the Coast of Guinea,” “Pirates,” and “Hurricanes.” Interspersed throughout are meandering philosophical discourses on nature, man, and metaphysics: apropos of nothing, his narration of the Swallow’s departure from England detours for three pages into musings on the fate of the body and soul after death. Atkins seems to have fancied himself something of a Renaissance man, indicating more than once his familiarity with the works of “the incomparable Sir Isaac Newton.”

It follows, then, that he would offer such reflections on the slave trade and slavery. While the trip recounted in the *Voyage* was not itself a slaving operation, Atkins refers back to his time as a “young Trader” on a slaving vessel when summarizing the history and practices of Europeans engaged in “The Guinea Trade” in West African gold, ivory, and human captives. Atkins’ slaving career likely took place during a three-year gap in his naval service record from 1715 to 1718. By the time of his writing, however, the doctor has quite decisively made up his mind against the slave trade, which he calls, along with “the Settlement of Colonies,” “an extensive Evil” and an “Infringement on the Peace and Happiness of Mankind.” Atkins lists and


then refutes many common contemporary arguments to justify the trade of Africans, which are in fact almost exactly those included in Snelgrave’s *New Account*. He asserts that slaves are the innocent captives of brutal raids on defenseless communities, not war captives or lawbreakers. “To remove Negroes then from their Homes and Friends, where they are at ease, to a strange Country, People, and Language,” particularly when life on American plantations consist only of “hard Labour, corporal Punishment, and… Masters they wish at the D---l,” “must be highly offending against the Laws of natural Justice and Humanity.”

The fact that Atkins’ anti-slave trade argument seems exactly formulated to counter Snelgrave’s may be no accident. Atkins’ *Voyage* contains a lengthy passage explicitly engaging with and thoroughly refuting Snelgrave’s claim, in the *New Account*, that the Dahomeans and other West African groups practice cannibalism. In another section, Atkins rallies to the defense of pagan West African religions, asserting that, though ignorant and rudimentary and surely inferior to Christianity, the worship of natural place and objects is borne of a rational human awareness of the divinity innate to all creation. And yet, when discussing the differing skin pigmentation of Europeans and Africans, Atkins’ expert opinion appears to a modern audience somewhat less enlightened than he might have preferred: “tho’ it be a little Heterodox, I am persuaded the black and white Race have, *ab origine*, sprung from different-coloured first Parents.”

Like every other slaver-author and most English writers of the day, Atkins seems to have been compelled to maintain some

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25 Atkins, 162, 149-150, 176-178.
unbreachable gap of ‘Other’-ness between himself and West Africans, even despite his sympathy and empathy for them.

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Of the narratives penned by former slavers of their experiences in the English trade, Dr. Alexander Falconbridge’s may be the best and most widely remembered due to its prominence in the British abolition movement at the turn of the 18th century. Born in 1760, Falconbridge trained in medicine for a year as a young man before taking a contract as a surgeon aboard a slave ship out of financial necessity. Throughout the 1780s, he served as medical officer on four separate slaving trips to the Nigerian coast, before his horror at the routine brutality against and mistreatment of African captives and British seamen alike finally drove him to resign and become a student once more. In 1787, when abolitionist leader Thomas Clarkson came to Bristol to collect damning accounts of the trade, Falconbridge was ready and willing to provide the desired testimony. Falconbridge joined Clarkson on his travels to Liverpool and London to collect further proof of the trade’s amorality, at times serving as Clarkson’s bodyguard. In 1788, with help from abolitionist friends, Falconbridge published a 55-page pamphlet entitled An Account of the Slave Trade on the Coast of Africa. It was the first piece of propaganda produced by Clarkson’s abolition committee, which printed and distributed 6,000 copies of the work.²⁷

In his preface, Falconbridge is explicit that his Account is intended to “lay bare… the injustice and inhumanity of the Slave Trade” by “giving some account of

the hardships which the unhappy objects of it undergo, and the cruelties they suffer.”

Falconbridge also raises “a subject, which appears not to have been attended to in the manner its importance requires; that is, the sufferings and loss of the seamen employed in this trade,” whom Falconbridge had witnessed perish of disease, malnutrition, exposure and corporal punishment in numbers far surpassing that of other maritime industries. Falconbridge emphasizes that these realities “have fallen under my own immediate observation, or the knowledge of which I have obtained from persons on whose veracity I can depend.” “And happy shall I esteem myself,” he finishes, if his account “shall enable to me to render any service to a cause, which is become the cause of every person of humanity.”

Falconbridge goes on to describe the manner in which the African slave trade is conducted, from the trade deals European merchants establish with local African governments, to the months-long process by which they acquire a full cargo of captives from African traders, to the frenzied, avaricious auctions (apparently chiefly frequented by “Jews”) in the West Indies. Throughout, he provides specific and dramatic illustrations of the trade’s callousness and cruelty, such as the story of a “negroe woman” who told Falconbridge that she was kidnapped by African slavers on her way to visit a friend, “notwithstanding she was big with child.” He is no less detailed when he enumerates the miseries captives endure at sea, such as cramped and suffocating living quarters, treatments for the sick which kill more than they cure, and restrictions on captives’ movements below deck which force them, “as the necessities

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of nature are not to be repelled,” to “ease themselves where they lie” and contract further illness from the resulting sewage. He also plainly states that “officers are permitted to indulge their passions” among female captives “at pleasure, and sometimes are guilty of such brutal excesses, as disgrace human nature.” Such suffering leads African captives to resist their circumstances through insurrection, mass-suicide, and mental deterioration and madness, all of which Falconbridge narrates instances of. “From these instances I think it may be clearly deduced,” he concludes, “that the unhappy Africans are not bereft of the finer feelings, but have a strong sense of attachment to their native country, together with a just sense of the value of liberty.”

Falconbridge includes also a section on the poor “Treatment of the Sailors,” whose deprivation and abuse at the hands of vicious, vengeful officers he claims “falls very little short… less destructive to the sailors than the negroes.” This seems to be borne of genuine humanitarian concern, as well as an attempt to appeal to those readers who might be moved by the Africans’ plight but far more immediately concerned with the treatment of Englishmen, especially when the nation’s supply of able-bodied seamen is being so needlessly depleted. Ironically enough, fifty years later Hugh Crow would also assert that the ill treatment of English sailors was comparable to that of West African held captive on slave ships, but in his argument this was evidence that the sympathies of abolitionists were hypocritical, misdirected and uninformed.

29 Falconbridge, 1-36.
30 Falconbridge, 37-50.
Throughout his *Account*, Falconbridge focuses in particular on the morally corrupting effects of the trade on all sides. The kidnapping of inland peoples by coastal traders is a practice by which he says “Continual enmity is… fostered among the negroes of Africa.” He makes a point of noting that during the “late war” with the Dutch from 1780 to 1784, during which English slaving temporarily all but halted, black traders on the coast of both ‘Bonny’ (in modern Nigeria) and Angola had been “[obliged] to work for our maintenance” by “[digging] in the ground and [planting] yams,” a mode of subsistence far preferable by the standards of Protestant virtue. During this period, “peace and confidence among the natives” had been restored, only to be destroyed when slaving resumed. The corruption of the trade’s white perpetrators is even more dire. Excepting a personal acquaintance whom he does not wish to libel, Falconbridge asserts that “the common practice of the officers in the Guinea trade, I am sorry to say it, will… justify the assertion that, to harden the feelings, and to inspire a *delight in giving torture* to a fellow creature, is the natural tendency of this unwarrantable traffick.”

This *Account* differs notably from the other slaving narratives of this period. Rather than aiming first and foremost to provide a broad, comprehensive overview of a faraway place, its natural features, and its population, as the conventions of eighteenth-century travelogue demanded, and secondarily interspersing his views on the ethics of slave trading, Falconbridge’s main concern is to demonstrate that there is no ethical justification for the human misery slaving and slavery inflict. The scope of

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31 Bowen, *A new and accurate map of Negroland and the Adjacent Countries.*
32 Falconbridge, 14; 9; 46.
the main body of the text is thusly exceptionally narrow and pointed. However, the book’s final section is a clear concession to convention, providing a “short Description of such Parts of the Coast of Guinea, as are before referred to,” summarizing the features and cultures of “Bonny, or Banny,” “the Windward Coast of Africa,” “The Gold Coast,” “Calabar,” and “Angola.” 33 As I shall discuss in Chapter 2, this is a clear sign of the primacy of such conventions to contemporary readers and critics alike.

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For the better part of two centuries, the 1823 publication *Three Years Adventures, of a Minor, in England, Africa, the West Indies, South-Carolina and Georgia by Wm. Butterworth* was misattributed to Henry Schroeder, a turn-of-the-century copperplate printer from Leeds, after an 1853 obituary erroneously credited him with the work. ‘William Butterworth’ was thought merely to be Schroeder’s pen name; in fact, Butterworth was another printer living in Leeds at the same time as Schroeder, and the true author of the manuscript, with whom Schroeder had been confused. (It was Butterworth’s own descendent who researched and rectified this error in 2011.) 34

It seems especially important that the author of *Three Years Adventures* be properly identified, for among all those who published recollections of life aboard English slave ships, only Butterworth speaks from the perspective of a working sailor rather than a captain or surgeon. Born in Leeds in 1769, Butterworth would

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33 Falconbridge, 51-55.
eventually settle there to take up his father’s profession and raise a family, but not before spending his late adolescence at sea, voyaging to Africa and the Americas. At sixteen, enchanted by the stories of a visiting cousin who served in the Royal Navy, he ran away with a friend to the port city of Liverpool in search of seafaring adventure. There, a friendly and seemingly helpful stranger found him a position aboard the slaving vessel Hudibras. This stranger, Butterworth eventually discovered, was “one of those men, who infest the streets of large maritime towns, and profit by deluding youth” into entering a trade so dangerous, onerous and repugnant that “thousands deplored the day when they first engaged in so horrid a traffic.”

Butterworth narrates the Hudibras’s voyage to ‘Enshee Town’ (Henshaw Town in modern-day Calabar in Nigeria), its months-long stay there procuring a cargo of human commodities, and its subsequent journey to Grenada to dispose of the African captives for profit. Striking throughout are his remarkably human portrayals of the black men and women he encountered and often befriended. In Enshee town, he became close with a local Christian man, who enjoyed discussing African and European religion with his young white acquaintance and “showed a strong desire to learn to read and write, both of which I undertook to teach him.” Among the female captives of the Hudibras were several women that Butterworth describes with respect verging on admiration: an unnamed twenty-seven year old who showed “a dignified grace, calm resignation to her fate, and sweetness of temper, seldom expected from,

and much more seldom found in, persons just robbed of nature’s charter, freedom;”

‘Sarah,’ the captain’s “favourite” (he does not elucidate the nature of the favoritism),
universally respected by the ship’s company” and a marvelous singer and dancer;
and ‘Boatswain Bess,’ “of Amazonian prowess and courage.” In comparison, the
ship’s white male officers, who underfed and severely abused their sailors including
Butterworth, were “a disgrace to the form they had received from nature, and a
reproach to that system of religion, to which they professed attachment.”
(Falconbridge’s claims of sadistic and unfeeling officers are well borne out by
Butterworth’s testimony.) Narrating the multiple attempts at armed insurrection that
were planned and executed in tandem by the ship’s male and female African captives,
Butterworth remarks that

he must know very little of the human mind, who could
expect that men, suffering bodily pain and debasement, with
the loss of native freedom, should calmly resign themselves
to the will of their oppressors, like a lamb to the knife of the
butcher, without at least meditating how to escape the one, or
to regain the other.\(^{37}\)

By the same token, as other slavers before him, Butterworth describes with
revulsion rites of human sacrifice he had witnessed on the West African coast,
characterizing them as the horrific manifestation of “the delusion that these infatuated
mortals must suffer.” Butterworth believes African people to be “fellow creatures,
possessing powers capable of improving in a wonderful degree;” but as the term
‘improving’ suggests, he also considers them “degraded beings kept in the most
abject mental darkness” when unexposed to Western and Christian thought systems.

\(^{37}\) Butterworth, 34-35, 84, 80, 44; 42, 109.
This is functionally the same ‘barbarity’ to which James Houstoun had referred a century earlier and which all of the slaver-authors without exception attributed to West Africans, and which merely affirmed what most English readers already assumed to be true of the non-European, non-Christian world.38

It is also important to note the major shift in style and voice between those slaving narratives published in the eighteenth century and Butterworth’s nineteenth-century text. Snelgrave, Atkins, and Falconbridge’s books are decidedly works of reportage rather than autobiographical narratives. Even Houstoun, whose personal concerns take up significant space in his own writing, frames his Observations as a comprehensive set of just that, not his own story. However, conforming to evolving trends in travel writing in England overall (which I will address in full in Chapter 2), Butterworth centers his narrative around himself as a nonfiction protagonist and his travails in the brutal world of the African slave trade; it still features plentiful relevant details and observations on the coast, its people, and the slave trade, but these serve in large part to create a vivid backdrop for Butterworth’s subjective experiences and struggles. Crow’s book takes the same form, explicitly titled as Memoirs and following the author from birth to old age.

Writing as a professional in his fifties, Butterworth predicts that “Doubtless, many will wonder why the circumstances related in the following pages have been so long withheld from the public.” He names the 1807 abolition of the slave trade as one of several disincentives over the years to bother with writing his memories down.

38 Butterworth, 57; 61; 27-28; 33.
since legislators had already seen fit to “finally overthrow the system of cruelty practised in slave ships, not only on defenceless negroes, but also on the wretched crews.” It was only the exhortations of friends, he claims, that finally persuaded him to publish what is now one of very few extant windows into life in the British slave trade, and from the unique point of view of a young sailor who, in his subordinate position, seems to have identified far more with the African captives than with his fellow Englishmen. Even after Butterworth was able to escape the slave trade and find work in other shipping industries, the trauma of his months aboard a slave ship remained with him. Working on the first ship he sailed with after departing from the *Hudibras*, “each succeeding day brought with it new sources of pleasure to one like myself, who had felt the iron rod of oppression on board a slave-ship, and seen man degraded, insulted, and abused.”

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As their title suggests, the *Memoirs of the Late Captain Hugh Crow, of Liverpool: Comprising a Narrative of His Life, Together with Descriptive Sketches of the Western Coast of Africa; Particularly of Bonny* were published in 1830 one year after their author’s death. An introduction written by Crow’s executors explains that the deceased’s will had directed them to make suitable for publication the nearly-complete draft he had left behind. To this end, they finished the writing, making as few additions as possible while “adhering... faithfully and literally… to the style and phraseology of the author.” They also compiled from various “trusted”

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39Butterworth, ii-v; 177.
authors and sources an appendix that offers an overview of the West African places and peoples which Crow mentions throughout his narrative and added it to the manuscript before bringing it to print. By this time, this sort of catalogue of ‘observations’ verged on old-fashioned.

Before his death, Crow claimed that in publishing his goals were

first, to leave behind him a memorial of his respect and gratitude to those excellent individuals who had proved themselves his friends during his eventful career; and, secondly, to encourage, by his example, others who were left, like himself, to weather the storms of life, to that perseverance which leads to honour and respectability.40

Like Butterworth’s *Three Years Adventures*, Crow’s *Memoir’s* were primarily intended to relate the story of the author’s life. The anti-abolition polemic throughout the *Memoirs* suggest that Crow also wished to air a longstanding grievance to the reading public of England.

Crow was born in 1765 on the Isle of Man to a trading family. As an infant, he lost an eye in an unspecified accident, a disability that did not preclude him from an apprenticeship to a Whitehaven merchant, which inaugurated his long and storied career of seafaring and slaving. Crow steadily persisted in the latter occupation up until the trade was abolished in 1807, while occasionally finding himself embroiled in unrelated maritime adventures before and after. Aside from narrations of numerous trips to Bonny to purchase black captives for West Indian markets, Crow’s autobiography includes tales of a “Narrow escape from shipwreck” near Jamaica, the

“Author captured by a French ship, and carried to L’Orient [sic],” and “Jack alias Jane Roberts,” a woman who was posing as an adolescent male sailor when Crow made her acquaintance.\textsuperscript{41}

Crow represents himself, as his executors put it, as “an universal favorite with the kings, chiefs, and people” at Bonny, his favored trading port, as well as a prankster who came to be known there as “‘the play-man’” for his light-hearted jests. Crow’s sense of humor, such as it is, permeates his Memoirs: he delights in portraying the black men and women whom he claims as intimates as frivolous, capricious, avaricious, vain, drunken, stupid, and ridiculous. In one anecdote that apparently could not bear omission, Crow’s “friend Jue Jue House, a native merchant” becomes so intoxicated by plundered brandy that when his canoe capsizes he imagines “the accident was the act of his god” and flees in terror towards shore, believing he is being vengefully pursued by his ill-gotten gains and “crying in a most subdued and pitiful tone, ‘Ya Ya, what me do to me god!--puncheon of brandy go away! I no want you, puncheon of brandy! go away! I no want you at all!’” Crow’s disdain for his African acquaintances is also clear in his many descriptions of human sacrifice and cannibalism: despite his “repeated endeavours to persuade the great men and priests to abandon their cruel intention,” for example, the maidens of Bonny would always inevitably fall “victim to the ignorance and superstition of their tribe.”

Over one hundred years after Houstoun’s narrative was published, ‘barbarity’ was

\textsuperscript{41} Crow, v-vi.
still the primary lens through which West African culture was depicted and viewed by slaver-authors and by the English in general.\textsuperscript{42}

On the subject of the slave trade, Crow admits he is a convert to the cause. As a young man, he had received “several offers to go as second mate to the coast of Africa, but like many others I had not overcome the prejudice I entertained against the trade: I had an abhorrence of the very name of ‘slave,’ never thinking that at the time I was as great a slave as well might be.” Throughout his \textit{Memoirs}, Crow repeats the argument that sailors, factory workers, and other members of the working class in England are de facto ‘white slaves’ who suffer far more than their black counterparts, pointing to “the impressment of seamen” by force into naval service as a practice “much more arbitrary and cruel than what was termed the slave trade,” yet one which abolitionists have hypocritically ignored. Even Crow’s executors, who expound in their introduction upon the captain’s virtuous habits and generous donations to Manxian charities, are embarrassed enough by his references to ‘white slavery’ to hedge that they “do not wish, by these remarks, to be considered as offering any opinion on the correctness or incorrectness of the views held by the deceased, much less as identifying themselves with his sentiments, on the points at issue.”\textsuperscript{43}

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Since their publication, the above slaving narratives have been utilized regularly as primary sources in studies concerning a wide range of topics:

eighteenth-century West African cultures and economies, eighteenth-century British

\textsuperscript{42} Crow, 94; 85-86; 84; 29.
\textsuperscript{43} Crow, 72; xxviii-xxx; xviii-xix.
perceptions of race and blackness, the British abolition movement, and the history of
the British slave trade, to name a few.\textsuperscript{44} Almost never, however, have these
documents been themselves the central subjects of historical or literary analysis: no
one has identified, grouped or examined them as a distinct genre, despite the hybrid
elements of travelogue, slave trading accounts, and pro- or anti-slavery apologia
which uniquely characterize them. Historians have instead generally dismembered
slaving narratives for material which supports their own theses, without examining
the nature of the documents as a holistic whole or properly situating them in the
cultural and literary moment which birthed and fundamentally dictated their form and
contents. As I shall argue, this neglect deprives scholarly interactions with English
slaving narratives of a crucial understanding of the degree of objectivity and
reliability in their depictions of both West Africa and of the slave trade itself.

In attempts to reconstruct the places and peoples of West Africa or the English
slave trade, historians have referred to slaving narratives as catalogues of factual
information, leaving slavers’ authority and objectivity relatively unquestioned. In the
last forty years, the account of the Dahomey wars of the 1720s offered in William
Snelgrave’s \textit{New Account} has been used as supplementary evidence on “the Political
and Ritual Significance of Decapitation in Pre-Colonial Dahomey,” “Price Inflation

\textsuperscript{44} See Louis Taylor Merrill, “The English Campaign for Abolition of the Slave Trade,” \textit{The Journal of
Negro History} 30, no. 4 (1945): 382-99; Roxann Wheeler, “Racializing Civility: Violence and Trade in
Africa.” In \textit{The Complexion of Race: Categories of Difference in Eighteenth-Century British Culture},
90-136 (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000); J. Robert Constantine, “The Ignoble Savage, an
Legacies: Free to Enslave.” In \textit{Freedom's Debt: The Royal African Company and the Politics of the
Atlantic Slave Trade, 1672-1752}, 179-210 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013);
Jeffrey Glover. "Witnessing African War: Slavery, the Laws of War, and Anglo-American
Abolitionism." \textit{The William and Mary Quarterly} 74, no. 3 (2017).
in Pre-Colonial Dahomey," and “On the Origins of the Amazons of Dahomey,” an all-female royal guard, as well as in many other writings on West African societies, governments and economies.\textsuperscript{45} Inevitably, Falconbridge’s account has been frequently used to demonstrate the trade’s gruesome human toll, as in a 2016 article vividly titled “Accounting for ‘The Most Excruciating Torment’: Gender, Slavery, and Trans-Atlantic Passages,” where the author cites Falconbridge’s descriptions of women being driven mad by their enslavement.\textsuperscript{46} Even Butterworth’s account, relatively underutilized in scholarship, makes an appearance as a source of evidence of “Pidgins as Written Languages” in a 1986 article for \textit{Anthropological Linguistics}.\textsuperscript{47} In each case, the slavers’ statements and observations are treated as objective fact, and in each case, a historian makes use only of the specific passages from the narrative in question which is relevant to their topic, failing to take into account the construction of the larger document from which they are derived. Robin Law’s 1989 article on Dahomean decapitation practices, for example, cites Snelgrave’s purported observation of warriors carrying “thousands of dead Peoples Heads” without interrogation of the pro-slavery slave ship captain’s possible motives in exaggerating African ‘barbarity.’


\textsuperscript{46} Jennifer L. Morgan, "Accounting for “The Most Excruciating Torment”: Gender, Slavery, and Trans-Atlantic Passages," \textit{History of the Present} 6, no. 2 (2016).

\textsuperscript{47} Joan M. Fayer, "Pidgins as Written Languages: Evidence from 18th Century Old Calabar," \textit{Anthropological Linguistics} 28, no. 3 (Fall 1986).
Other scholars have aptly identified the racism, nationalism, and self-interest that often color and skew the authors’ representations of African people and of the slave trade, using such representations as examples of the Western cultural attitudes and biases they are analyzing. Such analysis turns a crucially skeptical eye to slavers’ objectivity and facticity, but again, disjoins the document, and in doing so almost always fails to recognize the larger literary influences that served as a mold for the overall text. Jennifer L. Morgan’s “‘Some Could Suckle over Their Shoulder’: Male Travelers, Female Bodies, and the Gendering of Racial Ideology, 1500-1770” notes John Atkins’ description of West African women’s breasts as “always pendulous, [stretched]” by nursing “to so unseemly a length and Bigness that some… could suckle over their their shoulder” as one of many European voices in the eighteenth century that portrayed African women as sexually grotesque, in a rhetorical exercise that helped to cement European racial concepts of black ‘Other’-ness and inferiority.48

But Morgan’s analysis misses where the overwhelming popularity, strict conventions, and often fictionalized nature of travel literature in eighteenth-century England come heavily to bear upon Atkins’ choice to document, and quite possibly embellish or invent, a strange foreign custom of the sort that a reader of such a travelogue would expect to be both ‘informed’ and entertained by.

As I discuss in my introduction, recent shifts in the orientation of the historiography of the Atlantic slave trade have made this lack of understanding of the nature and character of the slaving narrative all the more problematic and pressing. In

the last two decades, a wave of social histories of the Atlantic slave trade has brought slaving narratives into the limelight, as they represent a significant portion of a very limited pool of sources which scholars can tap for insights into the lived experiences of the eighteenth-century British slave trade. At this juncture, it is more important than ever that these documents be situated in a relevant cultural and literary context, understood in terms of the authors’ formative objectives, intentions, and biases, and put in conversation with one another. Only then can their usefulness in reconstructing a truthful picture of the slave ship be assessed from a properly informed and skeptical perspective.
CHAPTER 2:
THE SLAVING NARRATIVE AS TRAVEL LITERATURE

The reliability of the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century British slaving narrative as a primary source can be properly gauged only when it is understood as a fundamentally literary work. Were these accounts definitely journalistic, objective records of the West African coast and English slaving practices there in the eighteenth century, they would represent invaluable resources for social historians of the trade. And to a reader unaware of the wider literary tradition to which they belong, they may very well appear that way. Each volume, after all, presents thorough and comprehensive observations on the natural features, human cultures, and events which the authors encountered during slaving missions. Modern scholars may well assume--and in fact, have already assumed--that the only necessary consideration when interpreting these texts is the Afrophobia, Anglo-supremacy, and self-interest the authors may project; and that after accounting for these biases, what remains are depictions of more or less real events and phenomena.

Such an assumption, however, lacks vital insight into what sort of documents these are in the first place, or rather what sort of documents the authors intended to create. Close examination of the construction and contents of slaving narratives reveals that each was a conscious attempt to emulate and adhere to the conventions of one of the period’s most widely consumed and celebrated literary genres: travelogue. This literary type provided the authors with a pre-established framework for relating experiences of the world outside of Europe and Christendom, as well as a practically
guaranteed readership due to the genre’s feverish popularity. But moreover, and most relevantly, it also would have enabled and emboldened them to skew, twist, exaggerate, and invent the ‘facts’ they relayed almost to whatever extent they wished. For, as I shall discuss at the conclusion of this chapter, the very nature of the genre allowed numerous authors to pass off distortions, plagiarisms, and outright fabrications as genuine and objective accounts with great ease. This practice was notorious even in its own time, but proved nearly impossible to curtail due to the difficulty of conclusively disproving false accounts or even discerning them from factual ones. This is a problem which has led numerous fakes to go undiscovered for centuries at a time and with which modern literary historians still wrestle. Counterfeiters were well-aware of the likelihood of success and were powerfully motivated to attempt it, not only by the money and fame which a successful publication could accrue to them, but by the opportunity to shape the image of the people and places they misrepresented in English consciousness for centuries to come.

Placed in the proper context, then, the slaving narratives in question no longer appear nearly as journalistic or reliable as they might without it. Rather, the motivations which each of the authors may well have had to lie, and the considerable opportunity which each had to do so, reveal their works to be precariously dubious as sources of historical fact.

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Scholars have previously (if infrequently) identified slaving narratives as examples of travel literature. Yet they have rarely if ever been subject to literary analysis through this lens. This likely owes to the fact that scholars have chronically neglected to consider the literary character of eighteenth- and nineteenth travelogue in general. In 1934, historian R. W. Frantz lamented that “in spite of the fact that the travel-literature of the Restoration and early eighteenth century offers to the historian of ideas a field of uncommon interest, no detailed study of it has ever been made. Indeed, there exists no comprehensive examination of English travel-literature for any period.” At that time, his modest study of the genre’s evolution from 1660 to 1732 was “an attempt to open up a field well-nigh untouched.” Yet decades later, a review of Charles L. Batten’s 1978 *Pleasurable Instruction: Form and Convention in Eighteenth-Century Travel Literature* could still point out that though “travel books furnished one of the most popular modes of writing in the eighteenth century… scholarship has not really caught up with that fact,” naming Frantz, Batten and Percy G. Adams as the only historians to have by that time meaningfully examined travel writing as a literary genre in any way.

In *Pleasurable Instruction*, Batten complains that “Twentieth-century studies have almost uniformly ignored the literary value and distinctive literary

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characteristics of eighteenth-century nonfiction travel literature.” As I have noted regarding the historiography of slaving narratives, he points out that even within the limited existing scholarship on travel literature, “most treatments of the travel book are social histories” which take its content at face value without literary analysis. Mary Louise Pratt, who in 1992 examined the role of travel literature in European imperialism, also protests the fact that “scholarship on travel and exploration literature” tends to account for neither genre nor ideology; rather, “often it is celebratory” of the ‘accomplishments’ of imperial exploration and science or “documentary, drawing on travel accounts as sources of information about the places, peoples, and times they discuss.” Batten’s assessment of the hazards of such an approach is quite similar to my own:

socio historical studies face a methodological problem that renders their findings ambiguous at best and misleading at worst. By ignoring the literary conventions that govern what an author says, they assume that these accounts display the immediate, personal experiences of travelers... In fact, however, convention often governs a travel writer’s actions and descriptions.51

Despite the best efforts of a handful of scholars, this oversight persists in scholarship to the present day; eighteenth-century travel literature remains largely unexplored from a literary perspective and thus necessarily misunderstood.

In contrast, a former slaver in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries would have been hard-pressed to avoid the vast quantities of travel literature and literary analysis devoted to it published in his own time. As Batten puts it, the eighteenth century represented “a new era in which nonfiction travel literature achieved an unparalleled popularity.” Or, to quote a literary critic from late in the century directly, “Of all the various productions of the press, none are so eagerly received by us Reviewers, and other people who stay at home... as the writings of travellers.”

Humans have been dearly interested in worlds outside of their own for millennia. Percy Adams outlines a lengthy and quite varied pre-modern tradition of travel writing, ranging from third-century accounts of Christian pilgrimages to the Holy Land, to records left behind by Viking expeditions, to the personal memoirs of Ibn Batuta, an Arab traveller who travelled through Asia, Africa and Spain in the fourteenth century, all of which were widely read for hundreds of years. The popularity of travel literature in eighteenth-century Europe and England in particular, however, was explosive and unprecedented, for several key reasons.

Firstly, beginning in the second half of the seventeenth century, drastic improvements in the technology of travel, from vehicles to infrastructure to navigational tools, made it possible for a much larger and more diverse number of travelers to sojourn farther, with greater ease, and at less expense than ever before. Journeys through the British Isles and across the Continent on a route known as the

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“Grand Tour” became a fashionable form of recreation and a rite of passage, now accessible to not only the upper class but the growing bourgeoisie as well.\textsuperscript{54}

Secondly, the British Restoration of the late seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries, during which Isaac Newton and John Locke’s formative works of science and philosophy were published and the Royal Society of science founded, gave rise to the ‘Age of Reason’ and an intense cultural drive to document and analyze any and all observable phenomena on the planet. This impulse was inextricably tied to the nation’s ever-increasing imperial ambitions: ‘exploration’ and ‘discovery’ allowed Britain to take ownership of new territories and their resources on an intellectual front as well as a physical one. Improvements in maritime technology meant that the lands of Africa, Asia and the Americas were soon destinations not only for embattled explorers and first ‘settlers’ but throngs of ‘natural philosophers’ in pursuit of scientific knowledge and traders and colonizers in pursuit of land and profit.\textsuperscript{55}

This new generation of English travelers--among them men, women, aristocrats, laymen, scholars, missionaries, and frequently merchants, sailors, and doctors, just like the authors of the slaving narratives in question--trotted the globe in droves and wrote prodigiously of their experiences, generating what Adams calls “an unbelievable number of volumes.” One German observer referred to the phenomenon as an “‘epidemic’ that spread its germs by means of countless books.”\textsuperscript{56} British libraries struggled to stock their shelves with the constant influx of new travel

\textsuperscript{54} Batten, 2; Carole Fabricant, ”Eighteenth-Century Travel Literature,” in \textit{The Cambridge History of English Literature, 1660-1780}, ed. John Richetti (University of Cambridge, 2005), 711.
\textsuperscript{55} Frantz, 12-15.
\textsuperscript{56} Adams, 57; ix; 70.
narratives; the word ‘tourist’ became common parlance for the first time; and numerous anthologies of popular travel accounts were published. Furthermore, revered authors of the era such as Joseph Addison, Henry Fielding, Laurence Sterne and William Defoe embraced the genre, elevating it to a position of high visibility and respectability. Addison’s *Remarks on Several Parts of Italy*, originally published in 1705, saw at least thirteen editions as well as French and Dutch translations over the next one hundred years.

Accounts of sea voyages, far more like the slaving narratives in question, rose to just as much prominence. William Dampier went from being a well-traveled but impoverished pirate to earning a commission from the Royal Navy and a place in the literary canon with his lauded *A New Voyage round the World* (1697), which contained the first description of the Australian coast published in Europe. The text was in its sixth edition by 1717 and helped to inspire *Gulliver’s Travels*, Jonathan Swift’s classic parody of travel literature, in which the narrator alludes to Dampier by name. Half a century later, George Anson’s similarly farflung *A Voyage round the World* attracted 1,800 advance subscribers, saw numerous editions, and propelled Anson to fame and fortune. Captain James Cook’s published journals of his global travels and particularly his visits to Tahiti in the latter part of the century have retained their prominence to the present day.

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57 Batten, 2; Fabricant, 707; examples of anthologies include *A General History of all Voyages and Travels Throughout the Old and New World* (1708), *A Collection of Voyages: In Four Volumes* (1729), and *A Collection of Voyages and Travels* (1744).
58 Batten, 10-12.
By the time James Houstoun wrote the earliest of the slaving narratives in question in 1725, then, travel literature such as Dampier’s was abundant, visible, and in high demand. The obvious marketability of an account of somewhere as distant and unknown as West Africa could not have escaped the slaver-authors’ notice. Meanwhile, the established and entrenched conventions of travel writing would have been exemplified to them by the many successful models of such literature widely available at the time, as well as readily derived from mainstream literary criticism like that of Tobias Smollett, which strictly delineated what readers expected from travelogue.

And work directly from these models and instructions they did, as a comparison of slaving narratives with contemporary travel literature clearly reveals. Even as the conventions of travel writing evolved significantly in the last decades of the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth, so did the subgenre of the slaving narrative: Butterworth and Crow’s accounts, published in 1823 and 1831 respectively, differ decidedly in style from those slaving narratives which came before, and this evolution conforms exactly to overall trends in English travel writing.

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To demonstrate that slaving narratives were consciously crafted as travel literature requires a working definition of the genre itself, and of the standards of convention to which it was held. Here, I will define and address the form which English travelogue took for the majority of the eighteenth century: later, I will discuss how it came to change at the turn of the nineteenth.
A passage from a 1770 edition of Smollett’s *Critical Review* nicely summarizes how the reading public of eighteenth-century England saw and valued travelogue: as both a superior form of amusement and a rich source of knowledge.

A book of travels, in which the materials are in general important, and well managed, is one of the most entertaining and instructive of literary productions. There is a happy mixture in it of the *utile* [useful] and the *dulce* [pleasurable]; it amuses and captivates our fancy, without the fiction of romance; it gives us a large proportion of moral and political information, without the tediousness and perplexity of system.⁶⁹

The concept of *utile et dulce* is derived from the maxim of the Roman poet Horace: *Omne tulit punctum qui miscuit utile dulci / Lectorem delectando pariterque monendo*, or “He wins every hand who mingles profit with pleasure / By delighting and instructing the reader at the same time.” The ideal of ‘pleasurable instruction’ in literature was an “acknowledged cornerstone of neoclassical criticism” in the eighteenth century, and travel literature was elevated as its very embodiment. By cataloguing the geography, flora, fauna, and cultures of foreign lands for domestic readers, travel literature edified the individual and benefited the nation; by stimulating the reader’s imagination without descending into the falsehoods of fiction, it was a virtuous mode of entertainment.

Thus with travel books, the reader could “fill up many disagreeable intervals of time with a study which will always” both “entertain and improve the understanding” simultaneously; “In a word, there cannot be an easier or more wholesome diet for boundless curiosity, than the mental entertainment to be found in

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this species of reading, where pleasure and instruction go hand in hand.”

Accordingly, in 1789 the *Critical Review* highly praised William Coxe’s *Travels in Switzerland* by averring that “we can truly say, that we have not for a long time read any work from which we have derived so much entertainment and instruction.” The book was judged superior because it so effectively fulfilled Horace’s dictum.⁶¹

The particular emphasis on accurate and useful fact in eighteenth-century travel books was, in large part, in reaction to the travel writing of previous centuries, which no longer suited the tastes of post-Enlightenment, scientifically-minded literate Englishmen. During the Renaissance, voyagers had reported unbelievable encounters with mermaids, Anthropophagi, and monsters; accounts of seafaring adventures from the Elizabethan era were entirely too sensational and shallow. Eighteenth-century English men and women expected their nonfiction literature to be superior in scientific rigor and rationality to this romantic tradition.⁶² As the *Critical Review* explained,

> From the end of the fourth to the conclusion of the last century, descriptions of foreign countries were generally written by travellers, some of whom were of a romantic turn, whilst others were satisfied with appearances. Even the most candid were credulous… Half the pains, therefore, taken by writers of a philosophical inquisitive turn, who describe the countries in which they reside for some time, are employed in correcting or exposing the errors and impositions of preceding travellers, a province of natural knowledge which still presents us with unbounded fields of enquiry.⁶³

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⁶² Batten, 5; Frantz, 15.
One author similarly summarizes in his account of his trip through Scotland the “great Change in the Humour of the World, and by consequence in the way of Writing,” due to which “Natural and Experimental Philosophy has been much improv’d… and therefore Descriptions of Countries, without the Natural History of ‘em, are now justly reckon’d to be defective.”

The traveler was accordingly redefined as a discoverer and collector of true and important information, who “beyond the generality of mankind, possessed the advantage of being able to observe natural phenomena wherever they were to be found.” More than just a corrective measure, to compile and report accurate data scientific or otherwise on the world outside of England was considered a great service to both the nation and the human species. Late in the seventeenth century, the Royal Society produced a pamphlet entitled “Directions for Seamen, bound for far Voyages,” intended to instruct common sailors on how best to collect observations in their diaries during their voyages which would most help scientists to “to build a Solid and Useful Philosophy” of nature, “to the improvement of True Philosophy, and the welfare of Mankind.” Over a century later in 1789, Count Leopold von Berchtold’s Essay to Direct and Extend The Inquiries of Patriotic Travellers counseled that, of the different types of observation a travel writer may record, the next-to-most important are those which are “capable of increasing the prosperity of a traveller’s native country,” while the most important are those which “affect

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64 Martin Martin, *A Description of the Western Islands of Scotland...* (London: Printed for Andrew Bell, at the Cross-Keys and Bible in Cornhill, near Stocks-Market, 1703), vii.
immediately the welfare of Mankind.” Far less important are observations which may only benefit the observer or which are merely “ornamental.”65

On an individual level, this sort of ‘instruction’ was held to be of great benefit to a reader’s intellectual maturity. In 1759 the Critical Review asserts that “All wise men agree in the advantages resulting from travel, and the benefits arising from a knowledge of the world,” referring to Homer’s protagonist Ulysses as archetypal proof “that universal science and true wisdom are best attained by visiting distant nations,” exposure to which could grant them a new and more objective perspective on their own nation and on humankind generally. However, “As the bulk of mankind, from their peculiar circumstances… are precluded from improving their minds by actual visits to foreign countries… books of this kind are very judiciously substituted in the stead of these hazardous peregrinations,” allowing the reader to safely “roam at pleasure to different parts of the globe in the space of a few days, without stirring from the fire side [sic].” The Monthly Review revels in the advantages of this arrangement for domestic readers: while travelers themselves “undergo the fatigue, inconvenience, and expence” of physically visiting foreign countries, “we, in all the

65 Frantz, 15-16; Leopold von Berchtold, An Essay to Direct and Extend the Inquiries of Patriotic Travellers (London: Printed for the Author, 1789), 19-20. It is worth emphasizing here that the pretension to pure and scientific motives, as well as the conflation of the ‘good’ of England with the ‘good’ of all humanity, are ironic to say the least. At the turn of the seventeenth century, Richard Hakluyt began a tradition when he anthologized and promoted those European accounts of travels in Americas which best demonstrated the abundance of valuable commodities and trade opportunities which the ‘New World’ had to offer to English investors. The promise of profit helped numerous ‘explorers’ afterwards to procure funding for imperial missions which ransacked natural resources and visited violence, privation, and oppression upon human societies the world over. When travel writers documented natural features of lands outside of Europe, their observations of foreign resources were partly roadmaps directing their countrymen towards the most likely territories to seize and pillage. Their frequent characterizations of non-European cultures and people as inferior paved the way on a moral basis as well.
plenitude of leisure and an elbowchair, enjoy the pleasure and the profit, at so small a charge as--the price of the book.”

Thus, travel writers set out to capture every aspect of foreign lands and foreign peoples that they could, to import strange new worlds home on the page for the ‘pleasure’ and the ‘profit,’ both mental and literal, of their countrymen. That they sought to be comprehensive is an understatement. In a preface to a 1704 *Collection of Voyages and Travels*, one anonymous author recommends that “the principal Heads by which” a traveller should “regulate their Observations are

the Climate, Government, Power, Places of Strength, Cities of note, Religion, Language, Coins, Trade, Manufactures, Wealth, Bishopricks, Universities, Antiquities, Libraries, Collections of Rarities, Arts and Artists, Publick Structures, Roads, Bridges, Woods, Mountains, Customs, Habits, Laws, Privileges, strange Adventures, surprizing Accidents, Rarities both natural and artificial, the Soil, Plants, Animals, and whatsoever may be curious, diverting, or profitable.”

More than eight decades later, Count Berchtold’s *Essay* lists a similarly amazingly vast array of topics that a rigorous travel writer should investigate, such as a country’s “geography, population, the state of the peasantry, agriculture, cattle in general, black cattle, sheep, woods, mines, manufactures, inland and foreign trade,” and so on, very nearly ad infinitum.

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Many elements common to travel literature of this era can be made sense of as a way of signalling acquiescence to these standards and conventions. For our purpose, these serve as undeniable indicators that the authors of slaving narratives consciously worked to reproduce a long-established model.

Titles, early in the century in particular, were the chief way travel writers could advertise that their volume contained a desirable breadth of ‘useful’ information. The full title of Dampier’s famous *New Voyage round the World*, for example, clarifies that the book “[Describes] particularly The Isthmus of America, several Coasts and Islands in the West Indies, the Isles of Cape Verde, the Passage by Terra del Fuego, the South Sea Coasts of Chili, Peru, and Mexico,” and so on, listing more than ten other locales which Dampier visited, before specifying that it will report on “Their Soil, Rivers, Harbours, Plants, Fruits, Animals, and Inhabitants. Their Customs, Religions, Government, Trade, &c.”

Another intensely popular account, *Voyage to the South-Sea, Along the Coasts of Chili and Peru, in the Years 1712, 1713, and 1714*, translated from its original French, is subitled as “Particularly Describing the Genius and Constitution of the Inhabitants, As Well Indians as Spaniards… Their Customs, and Manners; their Natural History, Mines, Commodities…” The title page of Daniel Defoe’s equally widely-read *Tour Thro’ the whole Island of Great Britain* bills itself as “A Particular and Entertaining Account of

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68 Dampier, 17.
whatever is Curious, and worth Observation," going on to break down by Roman numeral eight distinct sections such as:

I.  *A Description of the Principal Cities and Towns, their Situation, Government, and Commerce.*

II.  *The Customs, Manners, Exercises, Diversions, and Employment of the People.*

III.  *The Produce and Improvement of the Lands, the Trade, and Manufactures.*

And so on, ending by promising that these are “Interpersed with Useful Observations.” As Adams points out, these were essentially advertisements of the ‘informative’ content which was so dearly sought from travel literature, designed to “attract a prospective reader’s attention and, at the same time, place their books in a popular tradition.”

The subtitle of Houstoun’s 1725 *Some New and Accurate Observations Geographical, Natural, and Historical* verifies that the book contains “a True and Impartial Account of the Situation, Product, and Natural History of the Coast of Guinea, so Far as Relates to the Improvement of That Trade, for the Advantage of Great Britain in General, and the Royal African Company in Particular.” This litany, with its step-by-step demarcation of the subjects of its author’s “Observations,” rings rather familiar, as does its promise to be “Accurate” as well as “True and Impartial,” as opposed to travel books of previous centuries. Atkins, too, pledges to give “a Genuine Account of the several Islands and Settlements of

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70 Houstoun, title page.
Madeira, the Canaries, Cape de Verd... and others on the Guinea Shore; Likewise Barbadoes, Jamaica, &c. in the West-Indies,” which shall describe “the Colour, Diet, Languages, Habits, Manners, Customs, and Religions of the respective Natives and Inhabitants,” and furthermore feature “Remarks on the GOLD, IVORY, and SLAVE-TRADE; and on the Winds, Tides, and Currents of the several Coasts.”

Meanwhile, the title page of Snelgrave’s *New Account of some Parts of Guinea and the Slave-Trade* bears striking similarity to that of Defoe’s *Tour*, with sections listed by Roman numeral describing thoroughly the information to be found in each of the books’ three parts, such as, for example: “The manner how the Negroes become Slaves. The Numbers of them yearly exported from Guinea to America. The Lawfulness of that Trade. The Mutinies among them on board the Ships where the Author has been, &c.” Surely these titles were intended to both ‘attract a prospective reader’s attention’ by promising unique insights into both the land of ‘Guinea’ and the inner workings of the slave trade, and to securely situate their texts in the ‘popular tradition’ of travelogue by emulating it with precision.

Falconbridge, writing later in the century, eschews this practice with his succinctly titled *Account of the Slave Trade on the Coast of Africa*. (The pamphlet’s title page simply adds that the author is a “Late Surgeon in the African Trade.”) This brevity suits the document itself: as I have already discussed, the doctor’s abolitionist agenda means his ‘observations’ are unconventionally limited in scope, geared

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71 Atkins, title page.
72 Snelgrave, title page.
73 Falconbridge, title page.
specifically towards demonstrating the trade’s harmfulness and immorality. However, Falconbridge proves himself to have been perfectly conscious of contemporary conventions. The final section of his *Account* furnishes a “short Description of such Parts of the Coast of Guinea, as are before referred to,” summarizing the geographies, climates, and flora and fauna of “Bonny, or Banny,” “the Windward Coast of Africa,” “The Gold Coast,” “Calabar,” and “Angola,” as well as the dwellings, tools, habits, religious practices, and temperaments of the people of each.\(^7^4\)

This four-page appendix indicates Falconbridge’s awareness that his readers expected or even demanded a comprehensive ‘pleasurable instruction’ when they read about a foreign land, and that providing it could only improve his book’s reception, despite the fact that his true goal was to provide a very specific and harrowing instruction indeed. It also serves as a microcosm of the sort of ‘useful’ information towards which travel accounts of lands distant from Europe were oriented in particular. ‘Exotic’ to the sensibilities of eighteenth-century English readers, the people and places of Africa, Asia, and the Americas were made subject through travel literature to a gaze curious yet fearful, possessive yet disdainful. Travel writers and their readers reveled in the exciting strangeness of world outside of Europe--while reaffirming repeatedly England’s natural superiority and sovereignty over it.

In helping readers to visualize lands with which they were totally unfamiliar, many travel writers began by establishing geography. When Falconbridge notes that

\(^7^4\) Falconbridge, 51-55.
Bonny is located “about twelve miles from the sea, on the east side of a river of the same name, opposite to a town called Peterforte-side,” he recalls Dampier, who precisely mapped areas from Panama to the Australian coast in his *New Voyage*, recording for example that “Bon-Airy [Bonaire in the Caribbean] is the Easternmost of the Dutch Islands… The middle of the Island is laid down in Lat. 12 d. 16 m. It is about 20 Leagues from the main, and 9 or 10 from Querisao [Curaçao], and is accounted 16 or 17 Leagues round.” George Anson and James Cook make similar geographic notes throughout their accounts: Anson spends an entire page denoting the exact latitudes and longitudes of a number of small islands off of the coast of Brazil, and Cook’s famous account of Tahiti begins with its exact latitude and longitude.75

Like Falconbridge, the other slaver-authors of the eighteenth century proceeded to collect geographical details of their own. Snelgrave begins his account by informing his reader that “That Part of Africa commonly called Guinea, is of a large Extent, beginning at Cape Verd, in 14 Degrees 30 Minutes North Latitude, and extending to the South and East, as far as the Coast of Angola; the River Congo, in 6 Degrees South Latitude, being the farthest place where the English carry on their Trade,” and goes on to give the latitude and longitude of each major trading center along the coast. Atkins provides his British readers with a familiar point of reference when he comments that the “Sierraleon River is very broad here [at the Cape], but in ten or twelve Miles rowing upwards, narrows to half the Breadth of the Thames at

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Alluding to the commonness of the practice, Dr. Houstoun promises not to “trouble your Honours” of the Royal African Company with the “Topography” of Sierra Leone, “seeing you can find it elsewhere,” though he does make brief comments such as that “the River of Sierra Leon forms several beautiful Islands, on one of which stands the Company’s Factory, about Eight Miles from the Mouth of the River.”

After sketching the geographical outlines of distant countries and kingdoms, travel writers then vividly colored them with climate, vegetation, and wildlife. Dampier gives the Cape of Good Hope an archetypal treatment. After remarking that he finds the Cape’s “latitude to be one of the mildest and sweetest for its temperature of any whatsoever,” he goes on to describe that

The soil of this country is of a brown colour; not deep yet indifferently productive of grass, herbs, and trees. The grass is short, like that which grows on our Wiltshire or Dorsetshire downs. The trees hereabouts are but small and few; the country also farther from the sea does not much abound in trees, as I have been informed. The mould or soil also is much like this near the harbour, which, though it cannot be said to be very fat or rich land, yet it is very fit for cultivation, and yields good crops…

From there, Dampier lists the region’s chief cereal crops (“wheat, barley, peas, etc.”), fruits (including “the largest pomegranates that I did ever see”), livestock, and indigenous wild creatures including “a very beautiful sort of wild ass in this country whose body is curiously striped with equal lists of white and black,” as well as ostriches, fish and seals.

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76 Snelgrave, 2; Atkins, 42; Houstoun, 2-3; 77 Dampier, 513-514.
Such elaborate summaries of a foreign land’s nonhuman attributes are characteristic of English travel literature which ranged outside of Europe. Anson, introducing to his readers to “the tract of country usually stiled Patagonia” in South America, describes in detail the “immense quantities of large timber trees” to the north of the Río de la Plata and the “light dry gravelly soil” to the south which “produces great quantities of long coarse grass,” on which, he adds, wild cattle, horses, and sheep graze. Cook’s account of Tahiti notes the “very uneven Surface” of the island which “rises in ridges which run up into the middle of the Island, and there form mountains” and the “rich and fertile” soil which is “well stock’d with fruit Trees” bearing “Bread Fruit, Cocoa Nuts, Bonanoes, Plantains, and a fruit like an Apple” and other crops like “sweet Potatoes.” He adds that the sea offers abundant fish and shellfish and that the land supports “tame Animals” such as “Hogs, Fowls, and Dogs, the latter of which we learned to Eat from [the Tahitians].”

Eighteenth-century slaving narratives feature passages on the natural world of West Africa resembling these exactly, not only in content but in language. “The Windward Coast of Africa,” Falconbridge editorializes,

has a very beautiful appearance from the sea, being covered with trees, which are green all the year. It produces rice, cotton, and indigo of the first quality, and likewise a variety of roots, such as yams, casava, sweet potatoes, &c. &c. The soil is very rich, and the rice which it produces, is superior to that of Carolina; the cotton also is very fine. It has a number of fine rivers, that are navigable for small sloops, a considerable way up the country.”

Of fauna, he reports that “The river of Bonny abounds with sharks of a very large size” (which, he adds, lie in wait near slave ships for the corpses of African captives

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78 Anson, 64-69; Cook, 88-90.
regularly cast overboard) and that the people of the “Gold Coast” have “hogs, goats, fowls, and abundance of fine fish, &c.”

Falconbridge is comparatively concise: Atkins’ *Voyage* is almost excessively laden from start to finish with details on the topography and vegetation of each and every West African locale he visited, far too many to summarize. He describes everything from the “rocky Mountains, with an Intermixture of little fruitful Plains” in Madeira; to the “Sandiness of the Soil, and Nearness of the Sun” in areas between the Niger, Gambia, and Senegal rivers; to the “Mangroves; Trees, or slender woody Shrubs, that spring from the low, watry Banks” of the Sierra Leone River; to the “Coco-trees… Nuts, Limes” and “Indian corn” which feed the people of Axim. He evinces an even greater fascination with the coast’s fauna, detailing at length the taxonomy and behavior of “Sucking-Fish,” “Fire-Flies,” and the “Petto [Potto],” nicknamed “Sluggard, from the Slowness of his March; he will grow lean in the time he takes to ascend a Tree, and never comes down till he has devoured all of the Fruit.”

Houstoun is similarly thorough: he appraises Whydah, for example, with much admiration as “an open, pleasant, plentiful fine champaign Country as any this Globe can produce,” with “a continual Verduré on a level Ground,” “extraordinarily fertile” soil which produces “four Crops yearly,” beans, potatoes, and two varieties of corn, and “all manner of Cattle, Fowl of all sorts, tame and wild and Fish in Perfection.” Elsewhere, speaking of the ”Animal Kingdom on the Coast,” he lists “the

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79 Falconbridge, 52-54.
80 Atkins, 24, 36, 42, 76, 47, 189-190.
vast Variety of the wild Kind, such as Elephants, Buffelers, Tygers, Boors, several sort of Harts, Hares, Porcupines, Hedge-Hogs, some amphibious Animals such as the Aligator and Sea-Horse,” as well as “a diminutive but more voracious Species of a Tyger” and “an infinite variety of Monkeys… and great Plenty and various Kinds of Lizards; and I have caught several Camelions here.” As I have mentioned, the doctor is also entirely explicit his assessment of the wealth that the RAC might extract from the coast’s natural resources, proposing of Cape Coast that “there might be raised here Plantations of Sugar Cane” and noting the “Pieces of Mountain Gold... which we purchase from the Natives, though they cunningly and industriously conceal from us how they come by it.” He almost wistfully imagines English possession of these mysterious gold mines, if only “we knew how to get at them.”

Of these eighteenth-century authors, only Snelgrave is somewhat remiss in this respect. He makes passing references to nonhuman features of the coast, such as “the Fertility” and “very rich Soil” of Whydah which helped to invite its invasion by Dahomey, but is for the most part far more forthcoming on human matters. However, like Falconbridge, he dutifully nods to convention in his Account’s introduction when he refers the reader to A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea, published in 1703 by the Dutch merchant William Bosman. “Mynheer Bosman’s Account of the Coast of Guinea” is “the most perfect History we have of that Country” for such information, Snelgrave opines, verifying that “whatever he mentions, as far my Observations have reach’d, I have found to be true.” With

81 Houstoun, 26-27, 34-35; 22, 24-25.
Bosman’s apparently excellent documentation of the land, plants and creatures of West Africa already in print, Snelgrave opts to avoid redundancy as he is “afraid of being tedious to the Reader.”\textsuperscript{82} His cognizance that his volume might be judged lacking without a description of the coast’s natural features, and his enlistment of another book of travels to fill the gap, are sure indications that he intended his own \textit{Account} to be understood as a work of travel literature.

The ‘Natives’ who so frustrate Houstoun by “cunningly and industriously” keeping their source of gold a secret are, of course, the same ones which he describes as homogeneously “barbarously cruel, selfish, and deceitful.” He is not alone in assessing the temperaments of various peoples of West Africa in such general and static terms, though not all slavers’ characterizations are so severe. Atkins remarks that those “Slaves” which hail from the Kingdom of “Melli [Mali]... faring softer from a better Soil, are not so hardy as those lower down.” Snelgrave deems the ‘Cormantines’ of the Gold Coast (a European descriptor for the many different peoples who populated modern-day Ghana) a “stout stubborn People… who are never to be made easy.” Falconbridge agrees that the people of the Gold Coast are “a bold, resolute people” and praises Angolans as “the mildest, and most expert in mechanicks, of any of the Africans;” though the inhabitants of Bonny are, less complimentarily, “extremely dirty and indolent.”\textsuperscript{83}

\textsuperscript{82} Snelgrave, 3, Introduction.
\textsuperscript{83} Houstoun, 33-34; Atkins, 36; Snelgrave, 168; Falconbridge, 51, 54-55.
This commentary on what we might now term the ‘national character’ of the inhabitants of a given foreign land was yet another standard component of eighteenth-century English travel literature. Pratt, discussing the eminent influence on English scientific thinking of Carl Linnaeus’s *Systema Naturae* with its standardized taxonomy for all living species, notes the separate and distinct categories for human beings—*European, American, Asiatic,* and *African*—which appear in the 1759 edition. While ‘Asiatics’ were “haughty, covetous” and “governed by opinion” and ‘Africans’ were “indolent, negligent” and “governed by caprice”, Europeans were pronounced “gentle, acute, inventive” and “governed by laws.” In fact, this association of different ethnic groups with a given internal character seems to have been informed by travel literature, rather than vice versa: numerous travel accounts before the advent of Linnaean taxonomy traded in the notion. Dampier’s famous 1697 description of the west coast of Australia informs the reader that “The Inhabitants of this Country are the miserablest People in the world. ...setting aside their Humane Shape, they differ but little from Brutes” and disparages the men among them as lazier and weaker than “one of our Ship-boys of 10 Years old.” In *A Cruising Voyage round the World* (1712), Woodes Roger wrote of the Khoikhoi people of South Africa (so-called ‘Hottentots’) that “they scarce deserve to be reckon’d of the Human Kind, they are such ill look’d stinking nasty People.” But travel authors could praise populations as well as denigrate them. Captain Cook informs his reader that the Tahitians’ “features are agreeable, and their gaite graceful, and their behavior to

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84 Pratt, 32.
strangers and to each other is open, affable, and Courteous, and, from all I could see, free from treachery”--though he adds that “they are thieves to a man, and would steal but everything that came in their way, and that with such dexterity as would shame the most noted Pickpocket in Europe.”

Regardless of how complimentary or not such descriptions were, the notion that all members of a non-European society were possessed of the same innate temperament and behaviors was objectifying, borne of an imperialist ethos. A 1798 edition of the *Universal Magazine of Knowledge and Pleasure* (note the reference to *utile et dulce*) condemns travel writers’ use of broad and superficial cliches to describe Europeans--for example, holding “an Englishman” to be universally “serious and morose: a Scotchman proud and overbearing,” and “a Frenchman, a fop, with paper-ruffles and no shirt.” But the same article goes on to qualify that while in so-called “civilized kingdoms… the individual cannot so well pass as characteristic of the species,” in so-called “savage nations, one character may perhaps still be found to pervade the whole mass.” The very descriptor ‘savage’ suggests what sort of ‘character’ this might be.

Eighteenth-century readers of English travel literature were interested in more than just the ‘character’ of foreign peoples. The phrase “manners and customs” constantly appeared in the body text of travel books and in their lengthy titles: we

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have already seen variations on it utilized by Defoe and Dampier, not to mention John Atkins. In 1758, Bishop Josiah Tucker reminded traveler-authors of

the grand Maxim, That the Face of every Country though which he passes, the Looks, Numbers, and Behaviour of the people, their general Cloathing, Food, and Dwelling, their Attainments in Agriculture, Manufactures, Arts and Sciences, are the Effects and Consequences of some certain Causes; which Causes he was particularly sent out to investigate and discover.  


Tucker’s ‘Maxim’ outlines some of the most common categories which
authors included under the umbrella of ‘manners and customs,’ from a people’s physical appearance and material goods to their day-to-day routines and habits to their cultural achievements. Dampier’s description of the people of Tonkin in Vietnam follows this formula almost exactly. He details their ‘Looks,’ describing them as of “a Tawny Indian colour” with hair “black, long and lank, and very thick;” their ‘Numbers,’ noting that “Tonquin is very populous, being thick-set with Villages;” and various aspects of their ‘Behaviour,’ including the ornamental blackening of teeth and frequent gambling. He summarizes their ‘general Cloathing, Food, and Dwelling,’ as well, informing the reader that the people of Tonquin wear “Silk or Cotton,” that “the staple Dish is Rice,” and that their “Houses are small and low” with mud walls and thatched roofs. Of their ‘Attainments,’ he admires that they are “ingenious in any Mechanick Science they profess,” particularly silk textiles and lacquer painting. He also remarks on their trade with the Dutch and English, royalty, marriage, religious festivals, language, and even their fire safety practices.

Dampier, 590-612.
Most of the eighteenth-century slaving narratives in question, while not quite so thorough, contained ample information on West African ‘manners and customs,’ just as they would have been expected to. Falconbridge records the “very poor huts, built of upright poles, plaistered with a kind of red earth and covered with mats” at Bonny; Atkins reports that at Sierra Leone, “Palaavers are their Courts of Judicature, where the principal of elderly Men amongst them meet in a Ring or under a Lodge to settle the Differences that arise amongst themselves;” and Snelgrave, recounting how “Our black servants had likewise handsom Clothes given them to wear about their middle,” gives the aside that this is “(according to the custom of the Negroes, who never cover more than that part.)”

Houstoun demonstrates his acute disdain for West Africans by openly subverting this practice: he notes that his RAC readers may “perhaps expect that I’m to entertain you with a Description of the natural Genius, political and religious Government and Customs of the Natives,” but insists that “I shall only say one Word,” going on to dismissively summarize them as violent, ignorant, corrupt and licentious and compare them to “Monkeys” in a few terse paragraphs. However, even he makes the incidental comment elsewhere that “they divide their Time by Moons.”

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89 Falconbridge, 51; Atkins, 52; Snelgrave, 70; Houstoun, 33-34, 8.
The eighteenth-century trope of ‘manners and customs’ has long been termed a sort of proto-anthropology or -ethnology in European imperial societies. Returning to Tucker’s ‘Maxim’, his emphasis on the duty of the traveler to discover the ‘Causes’ of a people’s ‘manners and customs’ is revealing. Documentations of alien cultures were as much geared to improving English understanding of ‘natural philosophy’ as records of botanical and zoological information were. Additionally, to study other cultures was supposed by many, at the time, to “[promote] and [facilitate] the intercourse of countries remote from each other; it dispels from our minds unreasonable and gloomy antipathies against those manners, customs, forms of government, and religion, to which we have not been bred.” Moreover, it could gift both travelers and readers a renewed, clear-eyed perspective on their own culture, allowing them “to unlearn some odd Peculiarities in our Manners...as possibly may have been contracted from constantly associating with one nation of men.”

However, as Fabricant well argues, this purported cosmopolitanism is belied by the ethos of the supremacy of European ‘civilization’ present in practically all eighteenth-century British travel literature that documented the non-white, non-Christian cultures of the world. While European culture, including its institutions of power and violence, were the products of a moral and civil society, hierarchies of power and violence in other cultures were inevitably found to be the substandard products of ignorance, superstition, and ‘barbarity.’ In relating as hearsay a ritual of

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torture and execution by hours of exposure to sun and insects inflicted upon a
criminal on the Philippine island of Mindanao, Dampier admits that “I did never see
any put to Death; but I believe they are barbarous enough in it.” The famed navigator
seems not to have realized the irony of such an accusation when at the time of his
writing the English still punished their own lawbreakers with strangulation hangings,
disembowelment, and burning at the stake.93

In eighteenth-century slaving narratives, these prejudices come through
especially clearly in the alternatingly condescending and shuddering manner in which
the authors document West African religion. Houstoun, Atkins, Snelgrave, and
Falconbridge all refer to the practice of ‘fetish’ or ‘fetiche’ worship. This was the
supposed idolatrous personification of objects or animals, a ‘superstition’ encouraged
by pagan ‘priests’ in order exploit their frightened followers. This concept was itself
introduced to European thinking by a piece of eighteenth-century travel literature:
William Bosman’s *A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea*, the very
text to which Snelgrave refers his readers as an authoritative description of the West
African coast. As William Pietz has famously argued, Bosman represented the
worship of ‘fetishes’ in Africa as “founded on the twin pillars of ‘superstition’ and
‘interest,’” making “African society… a world turned morally upside down by
officially enforced superstitious delusion that suppressed men’s reasoning faculties.”94

93 Fabricant, 708-713; Dampier, 361; J. S. Cockburn, “Punishment and Brutalization in the English
The slavers’ performative disapproval of one particular form of non-Christian practice, the worship of pythons at Whydah, bears this out. Houstoun mentions the practice specifically only in passing: “I can’t well leave this Place, without taking some Notice of the God of Whydah, the Snake.” Elsewhere, he summarizes that “as for their Religion, they only take their own unciviliz’d Method of becoming a Bubble to the different Fancies of the Bubblers; some worshipping Rocks, others Snakes, Spiders, &c. according to the different Humours of the Fetiche-Men,” and accuses said ‘Fetiche-Men’ of indulging themselves with “a great Number of Maiden Wives.”

Meanwhile, Atkins calls “Snake-Worship” “the most curious of their Customs,” and the result of “the superior Cunning of their Fetishers,” whose power is derived from “gross Superstition and fear.” By professing that “an Intercourse with the Snake, to whom they have dedicated their Service, capacitates them to stop or promote Plagues,” “the grand Fetisher, or High-Priest” and his acolytes are able “to humble the King himself on all occasions for their Service, and to drain both him and the People, in supplying their Wants.” Atkins also echoes Houstoun, claiming that “Fetish-Women, or Priestesses” who “live separated with a number of Virgins under their Care, devoted to the Snake’s service,” are frequently bribed by “rich Cabiceers” (West African slave dealers) for the chance to “debauch their Pupils; they pretend to the Girls, they have had some later Correspondence with the Snake, who intimates the agreeableness of her favouring such or such a Man’s Addresses.” Atkins, who

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95 Houstoun, 39, 34
elsewhere defends African religion as an ignorant but innate understanding of the divinity which imbues creation (which would, with education, naturally give way to monotheism and Christianity), here positions it as a malicious lie, oppressive and degrading to its misled followers.  

Snelgrave is similarly compelled to devalue the worship of pythons as empty delusion. In his narration of the conquest of Whydah by Dahomey, he describes the people of Whydah going “to make Fetiche, as they call it, that is, to offer Sacrifice to their principal God, which was a particular harmless Snake they adored, and prayed to on this occasion, to keep their Enemies from coming over the River.” “However this fell out formerly,” he continues, “it now stood them in no stead; neither were the Snakes themselves spared after the Conquest.” The Dahomeans purportedly “held [the snakes] up by the middle, and spoke to them in his manner: If you are Gods, speak and save your selves: Which the poor Snakes not being able to do, the Dahomes cut their heads off, ripped them open, broiled them on the Coals, and eat them.” Snelgrave presents this event almost as a fable, its moral being of course the falsity of West African religion.

For his part, Falconbridge makes no mention of snake worship at Whydah, though he does claim that the inhabitants of Bonny “reverence greatly a harmless animal of the lizard kind, called a Guana,” which are allowed to freely “run about the town” in “great numbers… being encouraged and cherished by the inhabitants.” However, he indicates his awareness that the implication of ‘fetish’ worship will not

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96 Atkins, 113-114.
97 Snelgrave, 10-12.
contribute to his cause of persuading English readers that Africans are human beings with their own dignity by first hedging that “The natives of Bonny believe in one Supreme Being.”

Following his description of the Dahomean desecration of pythons at Whydah, Snelgrave remarks that he finds it “very strange, the Conquerors should so far contemn the Gods of this Country, since they are so barbarous and savage themselves, as to offer human Sacrifices whenever they gain a Victory over their Enemies.” Snelgrave fixates in particular on the supposed prevalence of human sacrifice in West Africa. In his introduction, he reports witnessing “a sad Instance of Barbarity” at ‘Old Callabar’ (in modern Nigeria), where a king, “being fallen sick” took “the advice of his Priests” and ordered “a young Child about ten Months old, to be sacrificed to his God, for his recovery.” Next he relates an anecdote where yet another “Negroe-Child” was slated for sacrifice by yet another king, presumably once again manipulated by false clerics--Snelgrave is sure to mention the “two Priests standing by” the child when he first noticed it. Later in his account of the Dahomean conquest, Snelgrave describes witnessing the mass execution of 400 captives, men, women, and children, taken in the war, at the hands of a “Feticheer, or Priest,” whose corpses are later stolen and eaten by the villagers. (I shall deal with all of these passages in Chapter 3.) During the sacrifice itself, Snelgrave narrates himself informing an African also spectating that “our God had expressly forbid us using

98 Falconbridge, 51.
Mankind in so cruel a manner.” This self-congratulation is no doubt not only for Snelgrave’s benefit, but the benefit of his Christian, English, and ‘civilized’ readers as well.

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By the nineteenth century, the genre of English travel literature had transformed significantly as a result of the travel writer’s increasingly urgent pursuit of novelty in the last decades of the century previous. So many had held forth on the same familiar locales of the British Isles and Continental Europe that new narratives of the same well-trodden natural and urban landscapes were all but redundant, neither particularly pleasing nor particularly instructive. Critics condemned books such as Edward Thompson’s 1766 *Sailor’s Letters* for containing “nothing new,” and emphasized that only that which was “new” and “striking” was worthy of print. In search of the ‘new’ and the ‘striking,’ travelers fanned out geographically into less-visited area, sojourning to Russia, Scandinavia, and Iberia and then across the globe. Territory accessible to Englishmen was limited, however, and not everyone was able or willing to travel great distances for fresh subject matter.

And so finally, authors turned to craft rather than content for novelty, employing fresh styles and voices with which to portray familiar locations. The net trend was towards a far less observational and ‘instructive’ and a far more personal and subjective narrative voice. In his 1773 *Tour through Sicily and Malta*, Patrick Brydone offered poetic and vividly visual descriptions of Mount Etna and other

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99 Snelgrave, 12; Introduction
physical landmarks which lacked the ‘useful’ data that earlier readers and critics might have required but which, as the Monthly Review enthused, allowed the reader to “see every thing which he saw… feel all that he felt… share in his fatigues, and… partake of his raptures.” Others such as the influential William Gilpin, followed suit. These so-called ‘picturesque travels’ gave way to entirely ‘sentimental’ narrations of travel which centered on the author as a sort of nonfiction protagonist, documenting their emotional as well as physical journey and sketching the characters they encountered along the way. While authors still offered their observations on the places they visited, these served in large part to create an interesting backdrop for the action of the narrative itself.100

A prime example is The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano (1815), one of a very few documents known to contain an account of the slave trade from the point of view of an African captive. Equiano was kidnapped from his home in modern-day Nigeria as a child and sold in the Americas, eventually purchasing his own freedom and becoming a prominent writer and abolitionist in Britain. Though his book is probably best-known today for its eyewitness description of the ‘Middle Passage,’ Equiano also wrote extensively of his career as an enslaved and then free sailor, during which he traveled to locales from Turkey to the Arctic. Equiano’s Narrative is truly the story of his Interesting Life first and foremost; his adventures in foreign lands are colorful chapters in a larger coming-of-age narrative, rather than being the substance and point of the book. For example, narrating his time in Smyrna,

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100 Batten, 92-110; 77-81.
Equiano does note briefly that “this is a very ancient city” where “the houses are built of stone,” that here one can find “grapes, pomegranates, and many other fruits… the richest and largest I ever beheld or tasted,” and that “the natives are good-looking and strong made.” However, this short introduction is followed by a discussion of how he personally was treated by the Turks he encountered, who he believed to be “fond of black people,” and several of whom “gave me pressing invitations to stay amongst them.”¹⁰¹

William Butterworth and Hugh Crow’s narratives of their time in the English slave trade, published in 1823 and 1830 respectively, bear far greater resemblance to Equiano’s memoir-like *Narrative* than to, for example, Atkin’s *Voyage*, with its extensive, detailed observations on the land, plants, animals, and peoples of numerous locales, and relative lack of information about Atkin’s person or experience of the journey. Both books begin with engraved or lithographed illustrations of their authors’ likenesses, introducing their reader to their protagonists from the start. The title of Butterworth’s *Three Years Adventures, of a Minor in England, Africa, the West Indies, South-Carolina and Georgia* similarly leads with the book’s plot and protagonist and only then mentioning setting. The narrative centers on Butterworth’s journey from foolhardy youth to experienced and traumatized ex-seaman. Even the significant colorful details Butterworth provides on the African and American locales he visited--describing, for instance, the climate, vegetation, and make of houses in the Calabar village of Duke Town, and describing several dishes which are prepared out

of yams there—serve as the backdrop to his story of loneliness, abuse and privation, as well as excitement and adventure, as a ‘minor’ alone at sea.\textsuperscript{102}

Similarly, on its title page, Crow’s work is designated as his \textit{Memoirs} and subtitled as \textit{Comprising a Narrative of His Life}; this is finally followed by the promise of \textit{Descriptive Sketches of The Western Coast of Africa}. The book begins with the “Author’s early predilection for a seafaring life” and apprenticeship; later chapters recount his capture and imprisonment by the French, and the “Melancholy career of the Author’s son.” But, though this is primarily a personal memoir, it remains very much a work of travel literature, and might have even come across as old-fashioned in the 1830s. Interspersed throughout are numerous narrations of Crow’s voyages to Bonny and the West Indies, and much like Falconbridge’s \textit{Account}, the final section of the book offers a detailed commentary on the West African coast, with observations on the “natural history” and “manners and customs” of Accra, Bonny, Calabar, and so on.\textsuperscript{103}

Notably, both authors have the same preoccupation with human sacrifice as William Snelgrave had nearly a century earlier, and both utilise the phenomenon, as he did as, to demonstrate the ‘barbarity’ of West Africans. Butterworth relates with horror a decapitation which he witnessed as part of the funeral rites for a deceased chief of “Enshee Town” (Henshaw Town), an act borne, in his opinion, of “folly, superstition, and wickedness.” He hopes that “a minute description of so strange a custom may… convince my readers, of the mental darkness in which these poor

\textsuperscript{102} Butterworth, 32.

\textsuperscript{103} Crow, chapters I, II, IV, IX, X.
people live,” and someday inspire back home “the opulent, to send out men of pure principles, and persuasive powers, to turn them from the error of their ways… and to teach them how to appreciate their own value in the scale of creation” using “the enlightening influence of reason.” Even this author, who repeatedly stresses the evil and abuses of the slave trade to which he was witness, draws the arbitrary line of ‘barbarity’ when discussing a form of violence practiced in abundance in his own ‘enlightened’ homeland. Crow, too, as I have discussed already, relates numerous such occasions, including the sacrifice of a “virgin” which he claims to have done all he could to avert. The fact that this young woman had apparently “[expressed] her willingness to die,” while Crow’s own young female captives had not expressed any such consent to be enslaved and abused by white men, seems not to have occurred to him.¹⁰⁴

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Eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century slaving narratives faithfully reproduce so many of the conventions of form and content of contemporaneous English travel literature that it is difficult to imagine that their authors did not do so consciously, or that any of them did not intend for their texts to be read and understood as members of the genre. And it is exactly this fact which casts so much doubt on the objectivity and veracity of their content, due to the nature and history of the genre itself. Even in their own time, travel accounts were well-known for frequently containing fictitious elements or for being fabricated entirely. This was

¹⁰⁴ Butterworth, 52-61; Crow, 83-84.
sometimes merely a reflection of the very blurred line between nonfiction and fiction works in English literature at the time, and at many other times a deliberate act of deception. Most crucially, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century reviewers were—and modern scholars are—often left with no reliable method by which to prove or disprove the falsity of a given account. Those who knowingly represented plagiarized or manufactured narratives of travel as genuine were aware of this fact, and all the more emboldened by the likelihood of success.

In his 1962 *Travelers and Travel Liars*, Percy G. Adams identifies the three main factors that motivated eighteenth-century writers to partially or entirely fabricate travel accounts and knowingly pass them off as genuine: vanity, greed, and prejudice. A successful counterfeit could win its author status and accolades and significant profit from sales, and allow them to besmirch individuals, groups, and entire nations against which they bore bias. Meanwhile, the sheer volume of travel literature being published at the time provided ample sources to plagiarize and to become expert at mimicking, as well as convenient cover, which can still camouflage them to this day.

Thus motivated and protected from consequences, it is hardly surprising that so many undertook this deception, and that so many succeeded, often on a grand scale. The false accounts which Adams discusses include a 1708 essay attributed to the fictitious Admiral Bartholomew de Fonte which intimated the existence of the fabled ‘Northwest Passage’ in North America and was promoted for decades as factual by such respected figures as Arthur Dobbs and Benjamin Franklin; Defoe’s entirely fictional *Captain Singleton* (1720) and *Madagascar, or Robert Drury’s*
Journal (1729), both of which were considered genuine for much of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; and An Historical and Geographical Description of Formosa, published in 1704 under the false name of “George Psalmanazar,” which was widely discredited in its own time, but not before it had gone through multiple editions, been translated in French and German, and earned its sponsor an appointment to the army.\(^\text{105}\)

Examples such as the former made the practice notorious even in the eighteenth century, and tarnished all travel writers. In 1770, the Critical Review lamented that “Because there have been lying travellers, the veracity of almost every traveller is suspected.”\(^\text{106}\) Batten provides a sardonic poem from the period which alludes to the poor reputation of travelers at the time:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{We can get Tours--don’t make wry} \\
\text{faces} \\
\text{From those who never saw the} \\
\text{places!} \\
\text{I know a man who has the skill} \\
\text{To make you Books of Tours at will} \\
\text{And from his garret in Moorfields} \\
\text{Can see what ev’ry country yields.}
\end{align*}
\]

\(^{107}\)

The last two lines of the poem refer to the phenomenon of “fire-side travelers,” who never left home at all, totally inventing the experiences they discuss and plagiarizing others’ genuine accounts for realistic details. Defoe is the prime example; he wrote about Madagascar having never been there, but included so many vivid


\(^{106}\) T. G. Smollet, ed. The Critical Review 30 (1770), 196; Batten, 58-59.

\(^{107}\) Batten, 60.
details as to be highly convincing as a narrator. Complicating matters, other travelers really did voyage to foreign lands, but included falsehoods in the telling, often by reordering their itineraries after the fact and borrowing or fabricating specific sections. Jonathan Carver, who really did spend twelve years in the Great Lakes region, boasted in his 1778 *Travels Through North America* that it was the most original and expert text on the American Indian yet, and then proceeded to flagrantly plagiarize and jumble numerous passages from Lahontan, Hennepin, Adair, and Charlevoix.108

In *Pleasurable Instruction*, Charles Batten admits that “it is difficult if not impossible to make fine distinctions on the basis of content alone” when it comes to travel accounts of the era. He insists that “no sophisticated reader... can fail to see that Dampier’s *New Voyage* and Smollet’s *Travels through France and Italy* (1766) are basically nonfiction travel accounts” due to their construction, yet acknowledges that “these works may be partly fictional, and… may report some lies,” and that there is no conclusive or scientific method by which to distinguish their potential fictions and lies from their truths. An eighteenth-century reviewer makes much the same point in the *Critical Review*: “it is the business of judgement to discriminate betwixt appearance and reality” in travel books, and judgement alone.109

But where slaving narratives as primary sources are concerned, personal judgement is an inadequate basis on which to accept their content as factual and to employ it as evidence in scholarly works. It is one thing to interpret a slaver’s version

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109 Batten, 21; *The Critical Review* 30, 196.
of facts which can be independently verified, even if the relation itself is clearly biased; it is another to take him completely at his word when they cannot, since he is writing in a genre notorious for centuries for its furtive falsehoods. In his 2014 *Animals and Inequality in the Ancient World*, Neil L. Norman quotes directly Snelgrave’s story of Dahomean soldiers decapitating and devouring the pythons which were worshipped at Ouidah, and goes on to analyze this as a symbolic act of religious cannibalism connected to the later Dahomean adoption of snake worship. Norman does not, likely because he cannot, provide additional evidence demonstrating that this event truly occurred; and given both Snelgrave’s obvious bias against ‘barbarous’ non-Christian religion, and the extreme unreliability of any eighteenth-century travel account, there is in fact good reason to doubt that it ever did.\(^\text{110}\)

Crucially to my main arguments, and as I shall mention in the next chapter, this is of just as much relevance to slaver-authors’ discussions of slaving practices. Historians of West Africa and social historians of the Atlantic slave trade alike cannot simply assume that these sources are reliable: they are travel literature, and travel literature is famously unreliable. It is, of course, equally unsatisfactory to dismiss these sources entirely. Just as it is naive to assume they are entirely truthful accounts, it is overly cautious to decide that no truth can be derived from them whatsoever. To engage with slaving narratives responsibly, however, scholars must acknowledge their fundamental unreliability as a dimension of their analysis.

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CHAPTER 3:
PRO-SLAVE TRADE AGENDAS AT WORK IN SLAVING NARRATIVES

Manifestly, slaver-authors crafted their narratives as works of travel literature: therefore, by virtue of the long-established unreliability of the genre itself, scholars cannot assume that these documents are dependable as historical sources. They must handle not only the texts’ descriptions of the coast of West Africa and its inhabitants, but the eyewitness accounts which the authors offer of the English slave trade as well, with appropriate skepticism. Furthermore, as I will here argue, they must be especially cognizant of the motivation which three of the authors in particular had to distort and invent the truth on both counts: convincing their readers that the slave trade and African slavery itself were ethically justifiable practices.

All six of the texts in question feature their authors’ explicit arguments regarding the morality of the African slave trade and, by extension, of the institution of slavery throughout the British empire (see Chapter 1). It is, of course, hardly unexpected that former slavers writing for the general public would feel obliged to take a firm position on a practice which was ideologically questioned, if legal and normative, even early in the eighteenth century, and with which each of them had had direct, extended contact. It is less surprising still that their perspectives are highly polarized and correspond directly to their level of personal connection to the industry. John Houstoun, under the auspices of a state-chartered slave-trading company, and William Snelgrave and Hugh Crow, who built lucrative careers and personal
identities as slave ship captains, come to the institution’s defense with an array of justifications, from the proto-racial to the economic to the sociopolitical. John Atkins, Alexander Falconbridge, and William Butterworth, who were all contract employees with no long-term or personal stake in the slaving industry, come down firmly on the trade and slavery as indefensible evils.

This common element of pro- or anti-slave trade apologia is a reason beyond subject matter that slaving narratives should be grouped and analyzed together as a distinct subgenre within the greater category of travel literature. Most important, though, it should prompt historians to question the objectivity and veracity of the accounts penned by pro-slave trade authors in particular. For just as numerous travel writers of the era were powerfully motivated and enabled to embellish and fabricate content out of both self-interest and ideology, so were Houstoun, Snelgrave and Crow motivated and enabled to twist or invent their accounts of African cultures and peoples, and of the slave trade itself, in ways that would help justify the industry with which their own lives were so intimately entangled.

And indeed, inevitably, Houstoun, Snelgrave and Crow’s portrayals of West African communities and of the slaving industry all seem to conveniently imply that freedom in one’s homeland in West Africa is a fate far worse than lifelong bondage and displacement on an American plantation. Even where the narratives present their observations on West Africans and European slaving in an entirely separate section than their pro-slave trade arguments, a close reading of each document as a whole strongly suggests that the former have been at least partially skewed, if not partially
invented, to validate the latter, and many of these observations fail to pass muster when interrogated for accuracy. Despite this, social historians of the slave trade have already published prominent studies which take these authors at their word, even at their least credible.

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Dr. James Houstoun’s *True and Impartial Account* (1725) has largely been passed over by the recent spate of ‘Middle Passage’ studies. Should this field continue to expand in coming years, however, Houstoun’s firsthand observations and discourse on the African slave trade are almost certainly due for an appearance.

Said discourse is hardly equivocal. Houstoun declares the trade to be “glorious and advantageous… the Hinge on which all Trade of this Globe moves.” And in purely mercantile terms, his point is well-founded: “I say, put a stop to the Slave Trade, and all the others cease of Course. Pray who digs the rich Mines of Peru and Brazil, &c? Nay, who sweetens the Ladies Tea, and the generous Bowl; and who reaps the Profit of all?” Most modern commentators would agree that African slavery was the mechanism by which the Atlantic world so enriched imperial European powers of the era, and so acutely altered Old World tastes that European ‘Ladies’ required imported sugar for their imported tea.

Houstoun’s other explicit pro-slave trade argument is demographic. “Peopling the European Plantation Abroad… could be done from no other Country but this,” he asserts of the African coast, “without depopulating Europe.”

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111 Houstoun, 41, 43-44.
historian has argued that the trade significantly diminished West African coastal populations; moreover, the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade database holds that by the time Dr. Houstoun published his *Observations*, roughly 2.25 million black captives had been conveyed to the Americas aboard European vessels, a forced migration of a magnitude which a man who worked in coastal factories for several years could not have ignored.\(^{112}\) To present a logical argument, then, it follows that Houstoun must justify why it is acceptable to potentially depopulate one continent and not the other.

The doctor does provide such a rationale, though not in this section of his tract. Rather, without drawing an explicit connection, he supports his own position through his dehumanizing description of the peoples of Africa, which come roughly ten pages earlier in the document. In a brief passage, Houstoun employs a cluster of the most vicious versions of early English stereotypes about West Africans to indicate, without openly saying as much, that enslaving African people and in doing so disrupting or damaging African communities is no great atrocity:

Now your Honours may perhaps expect that I’m to entertain you with a Description of the natural Genius, political and religious Government and Customs of the Natives; I shall only say in one word, that their natural Temper is barbarously cruel, selfish, and deceitful, and their Government equally barbarous and uncivil; and consequently, the Men of greatest Eminency amongst them, are those that are the most capable of being the greatest Rogues; Vice, being left without any check on it, becomes a Virtue.

As for their Customs, they exactly resemble their Fellow Creatures and Natives, the Monkeys: And as for their Religion, they only take their own unciviliz’d Method of becoming a Bubble to the different Fancies of the

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\(^{112}\) Katherine Lamie, “The Impact of the Atlantic Slave Trade on West Africa: Polygyny and Female Reproductive Success.” *Nebraska Anthropologist* 31 (2007), 16-32; Slave Voyages Database. 2013. *Voyages: The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database*. Year range 1514-1725. This database is a collaborative and ongoing effort by numerous institutions and scholars to synthesize the most comprehensive dataset possible on the slave trade.
In his 1968 *White Over Black*, Winthrop D. Jordan demonstrates that long before the English slave trade was underway in earnest, exactly the image Houstoun paints ruled English perceptions of African cultures. That the plurality of West African governances, spiritualities, dress, and lifestyles did not resemble Christian or Islamic ‘civilization’ led numerous early British observers to conclude, as one did in 1554, that the “Moores, Moorens, or Negroes” were “without a God, lawe, religion, or common wealth,” and that their heathenism inclined them towards barbarity and violence.

The same sixteenth-century English writer referred to Africans as “a beastly people,” a sentiment that Jordan locates in numerous such accounts. At the same time that Englishmen first encountered people on the west coast of Africa, they first encountered chimpanzees there as well. These primates were said to have an insatiably “lustful disposition” that led them to pursue even human women; authors well into the eighteenth-century, notably our Dr. John Atkins himself, posited that these interspecies trysts actually occurred. While rarely going so far as to suggest that Africans were themselves apes, seventeenth-century authors like Edward Topsell did

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113 Richard Hakluyt, "The Second Voyage to Guinea Set out by Sir George Barne, Sir John Yorke, Thomas Lok, Anthonie Hickman and Edward Castelin, in the Yere 1554. The Captaine Whereof Was M. John Lok,，“ in *The Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques & Discoveries of the English Nations: Made by Sea Or Overland to the Remote & Farthest Distant Quarters of the Earth at Any Time Within the Compasse of These 1600 Yeares*, vol. 4 (J. M. Dent & Sons, 1907)
conclude that “Men that have low and flat nostrils are Libidinous as Apes that attempt
women.” Indeed, the stereotype that Africans were “beastly” and “bestial” was
inextricable from the stereotype that they were especially licentious, an idea dating
back to Leo Africanus, who wrote in one of the earliest ‘authoritative’ accounts of
Africa that “there is no Nation under Heaven more prone to Venery.” As Jordan
points out, in the time of the Protestant Reformation with its emphasis on
self-discipline and abstinence, Africans represented a convenient target for
unconscious projection of the unacceptable sexual desires that made English
observers so unconsciously ashamed of themselves.\(^{114}\)

Houstoun makes full use of all of these longstanding representations to
implicitly justify the slave trade and slavery beyond reproach. Communities built on
wicked vices rather than moral principles, the lies of charlatans rather than the laws of
God, ‘barbarity’ rather than ‘civilization,’ he suggests, are better reduced than
preserved. But even that is irrelevant, given how very “prodigiously populous” West
African men with their decadent multitude of wives and concubines have rendered the
coast. Here Houstoun relies upon conventional English ‘wisdom’ regarding African
licentiousness to portray the West African population as an inexhaustible resource. In
fact, Houstoun may well have witnessed an atypical increase in polygyny in West
African communities at the time, which multiple scholars have directly linked to the
effect which the Atlantic slave trade itself had on sex ratios on the coast. “Thousands”

of wives to a man, even to a king, however, is gross exaggeration. In the context of the ongoing discourse about apes, Houstoun’s invocation of “Monkeys” could well be his way of calling West Africans even baser than base. While the notion that Africans bred with and resembled apes was denigrating, it originated with the observation that chimps were strikingly anthropomorphic. Even Topsell, in his 1607 Historie of Foure-Footed Beastes, had carefully distinguished between primates without tails, who looked like and supposedly copulated with human beings, and those with tails, who were far more like animals.

This vitriolic portrait of West Africans is such that few modern historians would consider it objective or useful. But its blatancy is all the more helpful in demonstrating the connection, which Houstoun himself does not make explicit, between his descriptions of West African peoples and his pro-slave trade argument, and in identifying the same such connection in other slaving narratives with subtler biases.

Additionally, elsewhere Houstoun himself is less obvious: writing of an elderly black woman, “a Slave to our Company” dwelling on a coastal island, who took him in and fed him during a storm, he claims that “neither she nor any of her Species that ever I met with on the Coast, can give an Account of their Age; nor is there any of the Negroes that can count above Thirty Six.” Claudia Zaslavsky has written extensively on how, in fact, millenia of international trade rendered West

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116 Jordan, 29-32.
African cultures highly mathematical. Yet it is not difficult to imagine this sort of detail, when divorced from the context of Houstoun’s attempts to represent Africans as base, inferior beings deserving of enslavement, being mistaken for or misused as valid anthropological data.

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A decade later, Captain William Snelgrave also presented arguments in favor of the slave trade in his 1734 *New Account*. Far from comparing West Africans to animals in the process, however, Snelgrave’s rhetoric throughout his narrative takes their humanity for granted. Relating a friend’s capture by Dahomean forces, the captain editorializes that when the soldiers “laid hold on him,” they found that “he was a Man like themselves in all Respects, except Colour.” Elsewhere, he describes himself preaching to an African King to “do unto others as we desir’d to be done unto” and deems it “the grand Law of human Nature,” to which he clearly considers dark-skinned people just as subject as whites. He even goes so far as to refer to the slave trade as a “traffick in human Creatures,” acknowledging that in this sense it “may at first sight appear barbarous, inhuman, and unnatural.”

Nevertheless, Snelgrave sets out to prove that such an impression is too hasty. “Several Objections have often been raised against the Lawfulness of this trade,” he acknowledges, “which I shall not here undertake to refute.” Rather, he seeks to demonstrate the ‘Lawfulness’ of his profession on a basis of eighteenth-century British jurisprudence and philosophy, frameworks by which he implies African

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societies also operate. And yet many of his arguments are also founded upon the idea that these same cultures are endemically ‘barbarous’ and wicked, with practices that visit cruelty and violence upon scores of innocents. From this perspective, European slavers become merciful deliverers of the oppressed; as Snelgrave puts it, the trade is not only to the “Advantage” to Europeans, “but also of the Slaves themselves.”

Little supporting evidence accompanies these arguments in the section where Snelgrave states them explicitly. Such evidence is instead embedded throughout his narrative, in the form of numerous seemingly disinterested ‘observations’ which serve to cumulatively leave the impression, first, that West Africans define and permit slavery in the same legal terms that Europeans do; and second, that the same West Africans constantly abuse and kill one another out of ignorant religious ‘superstition’ and simple bloodthirstiness. More than one of these instances features Snelgrave’s version of a happy ending: white slavers intervene to rescue the poor West Africans from the cruel violence of their own societies and to unite them with a beneficent master in the Caribbean.

Snelgrave’s explicit arguments begin with the following summary of “The manner how the Negroes become Slaves:"

1. It has been the Custom among the Negroes, time out of Mind, and is so to this day, for them to make Slaves of all the Captives they take in War. Now, before they had an Opportunity of selling them to the white People, they were often obliged to kill great Multitudes, when they had taken more than they could well employ in their own Plantations, for fear they should rebel, and endanger their Masters safety.

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118 Snelgrave, 16; Introduction; 158-161.
2dly. Most Crimes amongst them are punished by Mulets and Fines; and if the Offender has not wherewithal to pay his Fine, he is sold for a Slave...

3dly. Debtors who refuse to pay their Debts, or are insolvent, are likewise liable to be made Slaves; but their Friends may redeem them: And if they are not able or willing to do it, then they are generally sold for the Benefit of their Creditors. But few of these come into the hands of the Europeans, being kept by their Countrymen for their own use.

4thly, I have been told, That it is common for some inland People, to sell their Children for Slaves, tho’ they are under no Necessity for so doing; which I am inclined to believe. But I never observed, that the people near the Sea Coast practice this, unless compelled thereto by extreme Want and Famine, as they People of Whidaw [sic] have lately been.

Relying on this summary as evidence, Snelgrave then lays out a case for how the slave trade benefits its subjects as well as its perpetrators:

First, It is evident, that abundance of Captives, taken in War, would be inhumanly destroyed, was there not an Opportunity of disposing of them to the Europeans. So that at least many Lives are saved, and great Numbers of useful Persons kept in being.

Secondly, When they are carried to the Plantations, they generally live much better there, than they ever did in their own Country; for as the Planters pay a great price for them, ‘tis their interest to take care of them.

Thirdly, By this means the English Plantations have been so much improved, that ‘tis almost incredible, what great Advantages have accrued to the Nation thereby especially to the Sugar Islands, which lying in a Climate near as hot as the Coast of Guinea, the Negroes are fitter to cultivate the Lands there, than white People.

Then as to the Criminals amongst the Negroes, they are by this means effectually transported, never to return again; a Benefit which we very much want here.¹¹⁹

Snelgrave’s discussion of war captives and criminals invokes a concept dating back to antiquity. In the sixth century, the Byzantine emperor Justinian wrote in his

¹¹⁹ Snelgrave, 160-161.
Institutes of the Roman principle that in war, a victor could enslave a defeated foe as a just and merciful alternative to killing them. Justinian’s writings were revived and translated into English in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and widely read throughout Britain; the mere fact that this doctrine of just enslavement was derived from an ancient and classical thought system validated it in the eyes of many readers. Influential English writers like Hugo Grotius and John Locke (himself an investor in the slave trade) adopted and propagated the idea in their own philosophical works, further legitimizing it and, crucially, expanding it to apply to domestic criminals as well as foreign enemies, or as Locke puts it, anyone who has “forfeited his own life, by some act that deserves death.”

Likely assuming his readers’ familiarity with the concept, Snelgrave presents West African cultures as traditionally adhering exactly to the Justinian law, asserting that “it has been the Custom among the Negroes, time out of Mind, and is so to this day, for them to make Slaves of all the Captives they take in War.” The fact that African “Masters” are apparently already overburdened with more of these captives than they can reasonably enslave necessarily destines “great Multitudes” for summary execution, since as the Romans would have it, death is the only alternative to bondage when dealing with prisoners of war. And so, Snelgrave concludes, the European slave trade is in fact a mechanism of Justinian mercy, by which “many Lives are saved, and great Numbers of useful Persons kept in being.”

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121 Snelgrave, 160.
The specific claim that many of the captives he trades in are debtors and criminals is almost certainly an allusion to Locke and Grotius’s broadened version of the Justinian principle. In addition, it could well have been intended to remind British readers that unfree labor and forced migration were not exogenous to their own culture. In the eighteenth century, “not less than half, and perhaps considerably more, of all the white immigrants to the [British] colonies were indentured servants, redemptioners, or convicts,” voluntarily or involuntarily bound to lengthy terms of unpaid labor upon their arrival in order to work off a prison sentence or to pay for their passage across the Atlantic. Neglecting to mention that, unlike European indentures, African slaves had no chance of reclaiming freedom for themselves or their children, Snelgrave implies that African societies have just the same prerogative to deprive their criminals and debtors of freedom as England does.

These juridical arguments correspond directly to a number of Snelgrave’s portraits of both West African cultures and of the slave trade itself, which would seem to show Justinian jurisprudence in action on the coast. Like Houstoun, Snelgrave does not openly name any such correlation himself; yet when the document is taken as a whole, it is hard to imagine it is accidental.

The assertion that West African wars generate such “great Multitudes” of war captives as to necessitate mass executions echoes the old notion that all Africans are extravagantly licentious, and thus extravagantly fecund. Like Houstoun, Snelgrave

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reports having observed this phenomenon for himself, making multiple references to
the practice of “polygamy to an excessive degree” on the coast, “it being usual for a
great Man to have some hundreds of Wives and Concubines, and meaner Men in
proportion.” Thus “the Countries are full of people.” But while Houstoun makes the
same claim to suggest the impossibility of depleting the coastal population through
slaving, Snelgrave uses it to imply that the overabundance of human life in West
Africa has greatly reduced its value there. During his 1727 visit to a Dahomean
military encampment, for example, he purports to have witnessed the
mass-beheadings of “four hundred” enemy captives, including terrified women and
children, in a ritual sacrifice sanctioned and conducted by the ever-pernicious
“Feticheers.”

Here is presented a real-world manifestation of Snelgrave’s claim that an
“abundance of Captives, taken in War” are “inhumanly destroyed” in West Africa, a
callous waste of “a great Numbers of useful Persons” who could have been spared
through Justinian enslavement instead. This alleged mass-sacrifice supports
Snelgrave’s position so neatly as to invite skepticism from any reader aware of how
frequently and facilely travel writers invented content to suit their own purposes.

Meanwhile, the account is almost impossible to confirm, or for that matter to
definitively deny. The most extensive modern study of sacrifice of military captives
in pre-colonial Dahomey is unfortunately unhelpful, given that Snelgrave’s narrative
serves as one of its main primary sources. Though historian Robin Law’s “evidence

\[123\text{ Snelgrave, 3, 160; 44-46.}\]
strongly suggests that the incidence of human sacrifice actually *increased* in certain West African societies” in the eighteenth century, he himself points out that this conclusion is problematic, as the evidence in question “consists basically of the testimony of contemporary European observers” and travel writers who were at this time given to “[emphasizing] those aspects of African societies which seemed exotic or barbarous, among which human sacrifice was very prominent.” This tendency to exaggerate, Law notes, “was further encouraged... by the use of the issue in polemics over the morality of the slave trade and colonial conquest,” whose authors alleged that European intervention in West African affairs would put a stop to such grisly killings.\(^\text{124}\)

Law’s treatment of Snelgrave and his peers here is an informed and appropriate one. He makes perfectly clear to the reader the possibility that the objectivity and accuracy of these accounts is compromised by their authors’ biases and imperial agendas. (He might well have also noted the established unreliability of eighteenth-century travel literature, were the genre more commonly studied and understood.) While he employs Snelgrave and his peers in his analysis, he makes explicit that neither he nor anybody can speak with certainty to the accuracy of such accounts. That there were actually as many as 400 captives sacrificed at a Dahomean encampment in 1727, that women and children were actually included among them, and that Snelgrave even witnessed such an event at all, are in no way proven ‘facts,’ and should not be presented as such.

Later in the text, Captain Snelgrave recounts a number of “Mutinies among [African captives] on board the Ships where the Author has been.” After one such insurrection in 1721 had been foiled, he relates, the men who had attempted it informed him via an interpreter 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, ever the pedagogue, reminded the men that “they had forfeited their freedom before I bought them, either by Crimes, or by being taken in War, according to the Custom of their Country.” Snelgrave reports that the insurrectionists were chastened and reduced to “begging, ‘I would forgive them, and promising for the future to be obedient, and never mutiny again, if I would not punish them this time.’”

Snelgrave would have his reader believe that his rebellious and defiant captives needed only to be reminded of the Justinian-Grotian-Lockean principle of just enslavement to become instantly contrite and docile. Whether or not this event actually occurred is, again, essentially impossible to confirm or deny. But the implication that West African men determined enough to regain their freedom as to stage a mutiny against armed captors not only understood their own enslavement in exactly the legal and philosophical terms that a contemporary English reader would have, but readily acquiesced to it on this basis, is questionable at the least, especially given that this is one of Snelgrave’s exact rationales for the slave trade.

125 Snelgrave, 157-161.
Snelgrave pivots from legal and philosophical considerations when he restates Houstoun’s economic case, summarizing that the “great Advantages” which “have accrued to the Nation” due to African slavery on British sugar plantations are an ends which justify their means and adding the afterthought that black slaves “are fitter to cultivate the Lands there, than white people” since they hail from an equatorial climate. But the point which he expands on the least in this section is that “When [captives] are carried to the Plantations, they generally live much better there, than they ever did in their own Country.” While he posits that “as the Planters pay a great price for them, ‘tis their interest to take care of them,” he fails to explicate how a life under a planter’s ‘care’ is superior to one lived free in West Africa.

Or rather, he fails to explicate it in this particular portion of the text. His Account as a whole does not want for portrayals of Africans’ ‘own country’ as a land of cruelty, mercilessness, and brutality--in a word, ‘barbarity.’

Snelgrave does not shy from detail when narrating the supposed 1727 decapitation of 400 prisoners at a Dahomean military camp, recounting the “great Shout” given by the “Rabble” in attendance when the first victim was slain and a headless body being left to lie “a little while on the Ground, that the Blood might drain from it.” He takes special care to note that while “the Men went to the side of the Stages, bold and unconcerned… the Cries of the poor Women and Children were very moving,” indicating that mercy was not shown on a basis of gender or age. As if
reveling in the horror, Snelgrave adds that the following morning, the heaped corpses of the sacrificed captives had disappeared. According to his interpreter, they had been “taken away in the night by the common people, who had boiled and feasted on them, as holy Food.”

This specific allegation of cannibalism is one which John Atkins, in his own narrative, finds so incredible as to specifically attack, citing Snelgrave by name, from no less than nine angles, including the rather salient points that this information was received as hearsay and that numerous reports of man-eating on the coast had already by that time been debunked (not to mention that the Dahomeans would not be so eager to sell slaves to European traders if they were to “lose a Breakfast by it now and then.”) Robin Law (whose histories of Dahomey seem to have brought him into contact with Snelgrave often) emphatically agrees that “Snelgrave’s... assertion that [human sacrifices] were eaten by the people is certainly incorrect, cannibalism not being in reality a Dahomian practice.” Whether Snelgrave was merely misinformed by his interpreter or indeed purposefully manufactured this untruth, its utility in helping him to paint Dahomean culture and religion, and West African culture and religion in general, as grotesquely ‘barbarous’ for his English readers is obvious, and its inclusion casts further doubt on other such narrations of ‘barbarity’ which are already dubious to begin with.

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126 Snelgrave, 3; 44-46; 51-52.
At Old Calabar in the year 1704, a young Snelgrave working on his father’s slaving vessel allegedly “saw a sad Instance of Barbarity.” The local king, having fallen ill, was directed by “his Priests” to have “a young Child about ten Months old… sacrificed to his God, for his recovery.” Snelgrave describes seeing “the Child after it was killed, hung up on the Bough of a Tree,” a tableau surely intended to shock and disgust.

From here Snelgrave goes directly on to relate another example of child sacrifice in the same place in 1713, “where I had the good fortune to save a Child from being sacrificed, as the other poor Infant had been.” Meeting with a different king there, Snelgrave encountered a “little Negroe-Child tied by the Leg to a stake driven in the Ground, the flies and other vermin crawling on him,” with “two Priests” malevolently “standing by.” After learning that the wretched and helpless child was slated for sacrifice to the king’s “God Egbo, for his prosperity,” Snelgrave kindly purchased the child as a slave. By chance, Snelgrave had the previous day “purchased the Mother of the Child (tho’ I knew it not then).” “On my coming on board,” the captain witnessed a poignant reunion: “no sooner was the Child handed into the Ship, but this poor Woman espying it, run [sic] with great eagerness, and snatched him out of the white Man’s arms that held him. I think there was never a more moving sight than on this occasion, between the Mother and her little Son.”

According to Snelgrave, when the “300 Negroes” already held captive aboard the ship learned of their captor’s great act of charity though the interpreter, they express en masse “their Thankfulness to me, by clapping their Hands, and singing a
Song in my praise,” and by remaining perfectly docile as they were conveyed to
American slave markets. Snelgrave did one final service for the the mother and child
by telling an Antiguan planter he knew “this remarkable story,” prompting the man to
buy them and to be “a kind Master to them.”\textsuperscript{128}

A remarkable story to be sure. The only other evidence to indicate that child
sacrifice occurred at all in West Africa at this time is, unsurprisingly, another travel
account, this one by the Scottish Archibald Dalzel, which alleges a single instance of
the mass sacrifice of children along with adult women and men.\textsuperscript{129} Snelgrave’s
citation of multiple such sacrifices as routine religious rites, however, leaves the
impression that they are widespread and frequent and implies that West African
children are far safer in the hands of white masters across the ocean than with their
own communities. Indeed, the conclusion of the latter story goes beyond implication.
As for the 300 captives allegedly hailing Snelgrave as their white savior in song, we
need look no further than the captain’s own account for reason to doubt that this event
ever took place. Recounting a failed insurrection attempt during another slaving
mission, Snelgrave comments that the failure had been due in part to the fact that
“above one hundred of the Negroes then on board, being bought to Windward, did not
understand a word of the Gold-Coast Language” spoken by the rebellion’s organizers,
“and so had not been in the Plot.”\textsuperscript{130} The hundreds of captives who supposedly sang
an ode to Snelgrave almost certainly also came from diverse communities and would

\textsuperscript{128} Snelgrave, Introduction.
\textsuperscript{129} Law, “Human Sacrifice in Pre-Colonial West Africa,” 68n76.
\textsuperscript{130} Snelgrave, 169.
also have spoken different languages; how they would have coordinated an
impromptu ‘Song in’ anyone’s ‘praise,’ Snelgrave does not attempt to explain.

Snelgrave’s story of the older woman rescued from the sharks (see
Introduction) shares some telling similarities with this one. Having refused to
purchase a female captive due to her being “turned of fifty” and too old for plantation
labor, Snelgrave later learned that the local monarch had ordered her thrown to the
sharks for helping his wives to conduct adulterous liaisons. After being rescued by
Snelgrave’s crew, the woman showed her gratitude by informing her fellow African
captives that “as we had shown such Kindness to her, first in saving her Life, and
since in taking care of her, who might be reckoned an useless Person to us, on
account of her Age; so they had all the reason in the World to believe we were much
better people than their own Countrymen [italics mine].”

Once again Snelgrave’s apparent benevolence persuaded the African captives,
especially the “female Negroes, who used always to be the most troublesome to us,”
to be “kept in such Order and Decorum by this Woman, that I had never the like in
any Voyage before.” The reward Snelgrave bestowed upon the woman for her help is
a familiar one. In Antigua, the “Surveyor General of Barbadoes, and the Leeward
Islands, on my Recommendation, bought her, and I was not a little pleased she had
got so generous and good a Master.”

Given Captain Snelgrave’s assertion elsewhere that West African captives
“carried to the Plantations” across the Atlantic by white slavers “generally live much

131 Snelgrave, 98, 102, 105-106.
better there, than they ever did in their own Country,” each of these last two
anecdotes takes on the cast of parable. Their near identical formula--an African party
who is particularly defenseless by virtue of age or gender nearly becomes the victim
of a hideous local act of ‘barbarity,’ but is spared at the last minute and granted
happiness through the beneficence of slave traders--would certainly seem to convey
the same moral: that, of course, “we were much better people than their own
Countrymen.” The African people to whom Snelgrave ascribes this perspective
apparently preferred all white people to even their own spouses, children, families,
and friends. This alone raises serious questions as to whether these events occurred, at
least in the manner in which Snelgrave relates them.

And yet, when each of the above anecdotes appeared in recent and acclaimed
social histories of the slave trade, the scholars who analyze them raise no such
questions. In his 2007 *The Slave Ship: A Human History*, Marcus Rediker recounts
the story of the mother and child and goes to far as to point out Snelgrave’s hypocrisy
and cognitive dissonance in “[thinking] of himself as the savior of families as he
destroyed them” and “[imagining] a humane outcome for two as he delivered
hundreds to a plantation fate of endless toil and premature death;” as we have seen, in
the introduction to her *Slavery at Sea* (2016), Sowande’ M. Mustakeem furnishes the
story of the elderly woman rescued from the sharks as an example of the “complex
factors of age, gender, value, and disposability of the black body amid the legal trade and traffic of people as commercial goods.”

These are insightful examinations of the events as Snelgrave reports them. But nowhere in the midsts of their analysis does either Rediker or Mustakeem question Snelgrave’s reliability as an author; nowhere does either historian meditate on the potential willingness to bend or abandon the truth of a white man who was deeply determined to convince his readers that the trade in human beings to which he had dedicated his adult life offered both Europeans and Africans “Benefits, far outweighing all, either real or pretended Mischiefs and Inconveniencies.”

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Unlike both Houstoun and Snelgrave, Captain Hugh Crow penned his Memoirs decades after the slave trade had already been prohibited by an 1807 act of British Parliament. Thus, rather than advocate for the trade’s continuation, he laments its demise, and polemicizes the successful abolitionist movement as the uninformed folly of hypocrites. One explicit critique to which he returns repeatedly is that the working-class English represent a caste of ‘white slaves’ who suffer harder labor and worse abuses than any African on a slave ship or Caribbean plantation. He harps on the point that “the impressment of seamen” by force into naval service is “much more arbitrary and cruel than what was termed the slave trade,” but that “our great statesmen” (such as abolitionist leader “Mr. Wilberforce,” who bears the brunt of


133 Snelgrave, 161.
Crow’s rhetorical scorn) “are regardless of such evils at home, and direct their exclusive attention to supposed evils abroad.”

Arguing that whites are just as degraded and oppressed as blacks, however, does little to justify the African slave trade, or African slavery on British-American plantations, which would not be abolished until several years after Crow’s death. To this end, Crow once again employs many of the same explicit arguments that both Houstoun and Snelgrave do; and these arguments seem to have the same implicit presence in his depictions of West African people and slave trading as they did in the two previous pro-slave trade narratives.

Partway through his Memoirs, Crow takes the remarkable measure of proclaiming that he himself does not favor slavery. “I owe it to myself,” he says, “here to disclaim being a friend to slavery. God forbid that I should favour a system through which my fellow creatures should suffer any species of oppression, hardship, or injustice!” Having covered himself thus, Crow goes on to argue that “the traffic in negroes is permitted by that Providence that rules over all, as a necessary evil” for the success of English colonies; that by abolishing the African slave trade Britain has merely “transferred” it “to other nations” who “carry it on with a cruelty to the slaves, and a disregard of their comfort and even of their lives, to which Englishmen could never bring themselves to resort;” and that in his own estimation, “the negro slaves of the West Indies are generally happier there than when they lived as slaves in their

\[134 \text{ Crow, 72.}\]
own country, subject to the cruelties and caprice of the inland chiefs, and living in a savage state.”

As with both Houstoun and Snelgrave, this last argument comes heavily to bear upon the manner in which Crow portrays West African societies. Like Snelgrave, he emphasizes practices of human sacrifice as evidence of the ‘cruelties’ and ‘savage state’ which Africans are evidently so blessed to leave behind, and like Snelgrave invokes female victims to show the full extent of this ‘barbarity.’ As I have mentioned previously, Crow claims that “it was the custom [at Bonny] to sacrifice a virgin, of fifteen or sixteen years of age, as a propitiatory offering to Boreas, the god of the north wind.” Prior to the sacrifice, Crow reports, he had attempted to intervene, just as Snelgrave claimed to have, making “repeated endeavours to persuade the great men and priests to abandon their cruel intention.” Unlike Snelgrave, these endeavours were unsuccessful, “and another young woman was added to the list of those who had fallen victims to the ignorance and superstition of their tribe.” Better a slave to an educated and ‘civilized; white master than a ‘victim’ of the ‘ignorance and superstition’ of a black ‘tribe,’ is the likely intended implication.

As I discuss in Chapter 1, Crow also depicts Africans as universally capricious, petty, and ridiculous, repeatedly using their vanity, drunkenness and foolishness as the punchline of anecdotes. As David Brion Davis has noted, it is a long-standing practice of slave societies to demean and dehumanize adult slave populations by representing its members as the “degraded man-child,” “docile but

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135 Crow, 175; 133.
136 Crow, 83-84.
irresponsible, loyal but lazy, humble but chronically given to lying and stealing; his behavior... full of infantile silliness and his talk inflated with childish exaggeration.”

Crow infantilizes even African monarchs, as when he describes a King Pepple of Bonny comically struggling to remove a pair of red boots which he vainly coveted despite their being so tight that “he could only straddle, without bending a knee, after the fashion of a pair of tongs,” an anecdote summarized in a chapter heading as “Ludicrous situation of King Pepple in tight boots.” Surely this is the frivolous ‘caprice’ of West African ‘chiefs’ of which Crow would like to convince his reader: any social order led by such a ‘degraded man-child’ must be a dysfunctional farce.

The idea that Africans were innately childlike and the idea that Africans were innately ‘barbarous’ were two sides of the same coin; both perspectives suggested that this was a people incapable of building and maintaining its own civil society, in desperate need of European intervention and sovereignty.

The contentment and gratitude of the Africans whom he himself had conveyed to the West Indies which Crow describes is equally as earnest and childlike. At the close of his account of an 1800 slaving voyage, he is sure to note that when his ship docked at Kingston in Jamaica, “the blacks were so healthy, and so few deaths had occurred amongst them, that I was, a second time, presented with the bounty of £100 awarded by the government.” Not only was he an excellent caretaker of African bodies, Crow would have his reader believe, but also of their happiness. Docked at Kingston once again in 1806, Crow narrates how “a number of black men and

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women… all dressed in their best” had come aboard his ship “very anxious to see” him. “They all rushed into the cabin,” Crow reminisces fondly, “and crowding round me with gestures of respect, and with tears in their eyes, exclaiming--”God bless massa! how poor massa do? Long live massa, for ‘im da fight ebery voyage”--and similar expressions of good will and welcome.” Noting how well-dressed the Africans were in fine European clothing--the women “neatly dressed in calicoes and muslins” with their hair “tastefully arranged” and “long gold earrings,” the men “in white shirts and trousers, and flashy neckcloths, with their hair neatly plaited”--Crow proudly deemed “the whole… at once clean and cheerful, and I was glad from my heart to see them.”

Any modern reader familiar with the long-documented brutality and deprivation inflicted upon black laborers on West Indian plantations in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries should have difficulty stomaching this representation. A 2011 study of life expectancies on a Barbadian sugar plantation highly similar to those of Jamaica found that “activity stress and abuse, coupled with disease and malnutrition, culminated in high mortality and replacement” among both male and female African slaves. It is truly difficult to imagine a reality in which these enslaved African were as hale, hearty and content as Crow reports, or nearly so fond of the man who had forcibly transported them to Jamaica as he would like his reader to think.

139 Crow, 73; 120-121.
Crow has received nearly the same airtime Snelgrave has in the spate of social studies of the slaving industry published in the last two decades. He has also been subject to just as little of the skepticism which pro-slave trade slaving narratives so dearly warrant. Rediker, discussing the occasional employment of captives as deckhands aboard vessels en route to the slave markets of the Americas, informs his reader that “Hugh Crow trained some enslaved men to work the ship’s cannon in 1806, in the event of an attack by a French Privateer. In return,” Rediker continues, quoting Crow directly, “the enslaved ‘were each provided with a pair of light trowsers, a shirt, and a cap.’ They ‘were very proud of this preferement.’”141 The great pleasure that captive and enslaved Africans supposedly took in his ‘preferement’ seems to be a favorite theme of Crow’s; he also repeatedly emphasizes their wonder and delight with items of European clothing as mean as a pair of ill-fitting red boots or ‘light trowsers,’ as if to a deprived and ignorant African these represented finery. Rediker, for his part, has not made these considerations, or has at least withheld them from his reader. In reiterating Crow’s version of these events directly and without further comment, he not only represents a demonstrably dubious source as a reliably factual one, but passes up an opportunity to interrogate or contextualize Crow’s denigrating representation of Africans.

To Rediker’s credit, elsewhere his analytical skills have served him better. He notes in passing of Crow’s slaving career that the captain’s “ebullient personality

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141 Rediker, 216.
seems to have made him something of a favorite among the traders he dealt with,” and then rightly adds, “or so he sought to suggest in his memoir.”142 This brief qualification is neither cumbersome nor intrusive in Rediker’s analysis, but it crucially prompts the reader to view Crow’s text from an entirely different perspective than they might have without it. For, as Philip Curtin has put it, it is always necessary to account for where European portrayals of Africa from this period are “more European than African.”143 This especially holds for texts like Houstoun’s, Snelgrave’s or Crow’s, which were explicitly written in part to justify and defend European exploitation which came at the dire expense of so many Africans. Just as with all English travel literature of the era, the depictions of the places, peoples, and industries offered by slaving narratives such as these cannot be responsibly represented as simply true. Rather, they must be discussed and understood as very well being that version of the truth which their authors’ ‘sought to suggest’ to their contemporary readers and to posterity.

142 Rediker, 207.
CONCLUSION

In the introduction to his *The Slave Ship: A Human History*, Marcus Rediker summarizes the dire scholastic oversight which he aims to address: “the slave ship and its social relations have shaped the modern world, but their history remains in many ways unknown.” Undoubtedly, the Atlantic slave trade was one of the most globally significant phenomena of the modern era. Over the course of three centuries, it fundamentally shaped the cultures, economies, and political systems of the Old World and the New. On a human scale, the trade was no less consequential, and for none more than the millions who were wrested from communities on the African continent, carried across the Atlantic Ocean by American and European slavers, and sold as chattel in the Americas. Their stories, which have gone largely unheard for so long, are of inestimable value in understanding the mechanisms and social construction of the institution of African slavery overall, the ramifications of which still define human societies to the present day.

But the project of accessing and disseminating these stories is of just as much importance for its own sake. While the European and American slavers who visited “almost unthinkable violence, terror, and death” upon the African subjects of the trade rarely expressed concern for the humanity of their captives, we who live in a world built and enriched by these people’s labors, traumatized by the injustice and brutality they suffered, and inhabited by their descendants cannot forsake them.\(^{144}\)

The efforts of Rediker, Sowande’ Mustakeem, and their peers in the last two decades

\(^{144}\) Rediker, 10, 13.
to access and reconstruct the abuse that captives underwent, the strategies of survival they implemented, and the battles they fought for their own liberty are not only groundbreaking but paramount and laudable.

In furthering this undertaking, future scholars will almost inevitably turn to narratives penned by the very white men who exercised violent control over black captives’ bodies and fates in the slave trade as primary sources. But if these narratives are to be allowed any amount of authority over modern representations of such captives, they must first be understood as products of the literary, socioeconomic and cultural conditions of their own era and interrogated from every relevant angle. Social historians of the trade must account for the fact that slaver-authors, along with all travel writers of the day, were free to affirm the supremacy and sovereignty of English ‘civilization’ over ‘barbarous’ lands like West Africa at however much expense to objectivity and facticity that they wished. And these historians must be especially vigilant in dealing with narratives written explicitly in defense of the slave trade, for their authors were at the same liberty to embellish and contrive a version of reality that would justify the slaving profession and objectify and denigrate West African societies and people in the process.

Houstoun, Snelgrave, and Crow all present the portraits they paint of “Natives” who are analogous to “Monkeys,” hapless child sacrifices, and buffoonish kings as objective, eyewitness accounts of African individuals connected to or commodified by the slaving industry. But evidence exists which strongly suggests that these figures are in all likelihood actually distorted or invented archetypes, real
human beings reduced to literary devices which the authors employed to support their own pro-slave trade agendas. When historians of the trade reproduce depictions such as these without at least qualifying them thus, they obfuscate the very human history they wish to retrieve and clarify. Worst of all, they grant the authors of slaving narratives the very prejudicial sway over modernity’s perception of eighteenth-century West Africa and the slave trade which they seem to have hoped to achieve. Surely it is time to deny these slavers any power in death to manipulate and misdirect our understanding of the identities and experiences of the human beings whom they dominated, abused and sold in life.
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