

Saltwater Slavery

*A Middle Passage from Africa
to American Diaspora*

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Turning Atlantic Commodities into American Slaves

Having already been bought and sold at least once in Africa, captives deported across the Atlantic aboard European ships again became the object of calculated attention and scrutiny on arrival in the Americas. In superficial details, the New World setting where the slave ship ended its transatlantic journey appeared more similar than not to the African setting where the voyage had begun. Just as that coastal market was the portal through which captives had entered into the slave ship, only through the portal of another market could they leave the slave ship alive.

Beneath the surface, however, the American market was different from that on the African coast in important respects. Buyers and sellers engaged in competitive valuation focused on the African captives, but the agendas that drove that contest were distinct from those which had driven market activity on the African coast. The merchant or commercial concern that had been represented as a buyer of people on the African coast was in this context a seller of human commodities. Here the wholesale production of slave cargoes that was the business of the supply-side market on the African coast met its correlate: the American market was the final site of retail transaction. The agenda behind this market was the sale of commodified labor: it was here that human commodities became American slaves.

As in Africa, in America those responsible for documenting the activities of the market produced two categories of textual “accounts,” the one an official account recorded in the ledgers and remittances of sales, the other a more informal account recorded in the running commentary of correspondence and marginalia, where anecdotal observations appeared. And here again it is in the dissonances between these two accounts that we can discern something of the captives’ own testimony.

“Account of Sales of Negroes by the *James*”

It was in the English merchants’ interest to effect an easy complementarity between African and American markets—to ensure that the merchandise acquired on the African coast corresponded as closely as possible to what Americans wanted to buy. The end point of the dealers’ efforts was the accounts and invoices that agents prepared when the sale of a cargo was completed. Upon concluding the sale of captives delivered to Barbados aboard the *James*, for instance, the company agents on hand drafted an “Account of Sales of Negroes by the *James*, Capt. Peter Blake” (Fig. 6.1).¹ Together with Blake’s “Account of Mortallity,” the summary of transactions over the constituent bodies in the cargo produced the numbers that would define the outcome of the voyage in narrowly quantitative terms of profit and loss.

In a few lines scribbled at the bottom of the invoice they prepared, the Royal African Company agents at Barbados did the arithmetic for the voyage of the *James*: 372 captives sold by the company agents, 51 dead on the voyage from Africa to America, 7 delivered to Blake for payment of his commission. In all, 430 units of human property purchased on the African coast with the company’s goods now were accounted for. Sale of the 372 men, women, and children, distributed to buyers in fifty transactions over the course of three days, produced “nett proceed” in currency credit and sugar in the amount of “four Thousand eight hundred thirty

[To view this image, refer to
the print version of this title.]

6.1 “Account of Sales of Negroes by the *James*,” May 1676, T70/937.

four pounds five Shillings Six pence Sterling and one hundred fifty six thousand four hundred pounds of Muscavado Sugar.”²

In the correspondence that accompanied the invoices, the sellers of human cargoes on the American market left another transcript as well, one that reveals some of the details of this final stage in the commodification of African captives. In this as in any retail market, the fit between supply and demand was not self-evident but rather was developed in the interplay between sellers, buyers, and the commodities themselves. The invoices produced in the American market, like the equivalent records of the African coastal market, present sales of slaves only as a series of quantitative facts, a reflection of purely mercantile preoccupations. The agents’ correspondence, however, opens a window onto the social world that animated the American market.³

When Captain John Woodfine brought his ship the *John Bonadventure* to anchor at Jamaica on 7 June 1682, 521 African captives were aboard. All appeared to be “good slaves” whom the agents intended to “expose to sale” eight days from that date. Ten Africans died in the intervening week, and the agents accordingly delivered 116 persons to Captain Woodfine for his commission and freight on delivery of 511 slaves. Once the sale was under way, however, another man perished. Since this death occurred after commission and freight charges had been calculated, the agents had to record the loss in the invoice they forwarded to London. They absolved themselves of responsibility for the miscalculation by explaining that the man in question had been “a very Likely Negroe to the eye.”⁴ Did the agents speak truthfully, or were their words a mere deceit? Did this captive’s outward appearance in fact convince the company agents that he was in good health, or had they cynically paid commission and freight on a man whose imminent death they could foresee? It does not matter for our purposes any more than it

did for theirs, for what their words clearly convey is that the end of the ocean crossing returned captives to the regime of the market-place, where another's gaze held the power to define them.

In purely commercial terms, it was in the interests of the English merchants, whose aim had been to buy cheap on the African coast, to sell dear in America. Their task was complicated, however, by two factors. First, the commodities they sold to American buyers were not the same commodities purchased on the African coast. In Africa, European traders obtained lots of human freight adequate to constitute a complete cargo. In the Americas, the desired commodity was the ideal embodiment of labor power. Second, as success for English mercantile concerns hinged on their earning a profit on their investment in human trafficking, it was the American agent's job to exact a price for the human commodities sold on the American market that would exceed the costs associated with their production. As "carrying merchandise to the African coast from Europe doubled the price of that merchandise and carrying slaves from Africa to the Americas also doubled the price of slaves," the costs built into the price agents needed to obtain for the people they sold were high.⁵ The equation rested on a contradiction, though: the transport system that doubled the price of human commodities when they reached America also greatly diminished their quality. Having been physically and psychologically traumatized by the violence of their commodification, the people who disembarked from slave ships in the Americas were the antithesis of what planters wanted to buy.

Making the African supply side correspond to the American demand side of the market, in other words, involved more than simply transporting goods from one side of the Atlantic to the other. It required also a transformative power of representation—marketing. Commercial success in the American market hinged on a trick: if agents in the American markets were successful, it was because they convincingly represented the exceedingly damaged goods they

received as the ideal embodiment of labor power that their customers were looking to buy.

Following English cultural assumptions regarding the appropriate division of labor among the sexes, the planters came hoping to find twice as many men as women. And in further consideration of the physical demands they expected to impose, the planters had no interest, when inspecting the African cargoes, in specimens that were either small children or adults past their prime. The sellers' rhetoric and zeal notwithstanding, neat correspondence between African supply and American demand was unrealizable: it was not possible in any consistent way to obtain twice as many men as women in the African market; it was not possible to obtain only captives in the prime of their productive years; it was not possible to obtain only captives in good health.

In actual practice, then, the value that captive people had in the African market necessarily diverged from their worth in the American market where they were to be sold. Negotiations between English mercantile concerns and Anglo-American purchasers over their respective interests determined where and under what conditions African captives could leave the slave ship.

“They Choose Them as They Do Horses in a Market”

“When they are brought to us,” Richard Ligon of Barbados said in the mid-seventeenth century, “the Planters buy them out of the Ship, where they find them stark naked, and therefore cannot be deceived in any outward infirmity. They choose them,” he continued, “as they do Horses in a Market; the strongest, youthfulest, and most beautiful, yield the greatest prices.”⁶ Yet of course these commodities were not horses, but people about whom there was much more to know than what the eye could register about sex, age, strength, or “beauty.” Attaching value to superficial visual cues in this way, prospective buyers gambled that visual inspection of the

naked bodies offered sufficient confirmation of what they wanted and needed to know. They pinned their hopes on what few details they could glean about the captives' background and qualities.

In this regard, the American slave market was as compelling a theatrical stage as any to be found in Renaissance England; for here, where the commodification of Africans bore fruit in the sale of their bodies for profit, packaging and the power of illusion held sway. On the American market the sellers broke the composite—the cargo—down into the individual units of human property that would be offered for sale to planters. There the captives were convincingly fashioned into slaves—the human machinery that would plant and harvest the crops of sugar, rice, and tobacco that drove the colonial American economy.

“The 17th & 18th wee appointed for theire Sales.”⁷ With these words, the agents of the Royal African Company on Jamaica set the wheels in motion. Both the *Sarah Bonadventure* and the *Allepine* had arrived from Africa on Sunday, 9 July 1682, the former in the morning, the latter in the afternoon.

The arrival of a slave ship commenced a period of roughly a week during which agents prepared to stage their show: the presentation of African cargoes to prospective American buyers. The preparations began with food. The fresh food and water agents generally sent aboard newly arrived slave ships provided a welcome change, intended to “refresh” the slaves before sale. Starchy foods that would be the mainstay of the slaves’ diet on the plantation, potatoes, yams, plantains, or peas, gave the undernourished Africans a much-needed nutritional boost before they went ashore.⁸

The quantity and type of food provided varied according to the perceived need of the Africans on each ship. The 207 people who reached Jamaica aboard the *London Merchant* in 1675 received a full range of provisions. Limes and tobacco were sent aboard “for

ye Negroes refreshment," along with a barrel of mackerel, twelve bushels of peas, and 2,170 pounds of potatoes, whereas the 299 captives aboard the *Phineas & Margaret* received 6,060 pounds of potatoes and five bushels of peas when that vessel arrived in 1681.⁹ Agents spent five pounds and ten shillings on provisions for the 550 Africans aboard the *Sarah Bonadventure* when they arrived in Jamaica in November 1677, the captain's own provisions for them having been "spent."¹⁰ Many "leane and sickly ones" were among the 490 Africans who reached Jamaica aboard the *Sarah Bonadventure* in 1680. Their hunger and illness had been "occasional from the want of Provisions throughout the voyage" from Angola, so potatoes, limes, 4,644 pounds of yams, and more than 14 bushels of peas were sent aboard upon the arrival of the vessel.¹¹

Next, attention turned to the factor that would matter most in the captives' upcoming performance: their physical appearance. The aesthetic preliminaries for marketing African captives as slave laborers went beyond what could be achieved with a brief reprieve from the extreme nutritional deprivation on shipboard. Hoping to divert the audience's eye from the all too noticeable ravages of the Atlantic voyage, captains and agents made sure that heads were shaved and bodies were bathed, in order that lice-infested hair, skin stained with bodily fluids, or other such undesired testimony to the violence and unsanitary conditions of the slave ship would be concealed from view.

So important was the appearance of physical vitality that oil of one kind or another was used to give captives' skin a superficial luster and mask the depletion, weakness, and exhaustion that would otherwise have been evident. This was not a gratuitous embellishment but rather an indispensable element in the preparation for sale. Peter Blake gave the captives aboard the *James* "Fresh wa-
ter to wash & palme oyle & tobacco and Pipes," and on one occasion when palm oil was not available, the company agents in Antigua used "mantigo" (probably from Spanish *manteca*, mean-

ing “lard”) instead, to “rubb them before Sale.”¹² When the *Elizabeth* reached Barbados in August 1688, among the expenditures made in association with the sale of the slaves was two pounds, ten shillings paid in cash for one barrel of generic “Negro Oyle.”¹³

Finally, about one week after the ship had come to anchor, the day of sale arrived, bringing buyers and sellers into negotiation over the assemblage of human wares on display. Sellers, of course, aimed to project onto the captives those values that would allow the cargo as a whole to “sell to Advantage.”¹⁴

At the carefully staged performance surrounding the sale of captive Africans, the agents responsible for overseeing the process were keen to cater to their audience’s comfort and pleasure. In the seventeenth century, when slave sales in the English Caribbean generally took place on shipboard, prospective buyers were ferried out to the slave ships in boats provided by the company. The norms of hospitality required agents to serve wine and “refreshments” to prospective buyers, to keep the mood jovial and the atmosphere pleasant.

The money spent for “boathire on board & on shoare” in the sale of slaves delivered to Barbados was a standard item included in nearly all the accounts remitted to London by company agents in Barbados—in the case of the *Lenox* in May 1677, ten shillings—as was the amount, two pounds and change, expended for “wine, brandy, [and] mobby Sugar” to serve the buyers.¹⁵ After the *Convert* arrived in July 1680, the agents spent one pound for “boathire on board to muster the negroes at arrivall & to deliver the Commission & Freight Negroes & the 3 daies of Sales,” as well as six pounds, one shilling, and nine pence, for “provisions with wine, Brandy, Sugar etc. the 3 daies of Sales.”¹⁶

Similarly, when the Africans aboard the *William* were sold in Jamaica in November 1674, the agents spent ten shillings to send a messenger to Yallahs Bay “to give notice of ships arrivall and sale,” six pounds for “wine, Brandy and Victualls on board at the sale day to Entertaine the Country,” and fourteen shillings, sixpence for

“boat huyre to and from the Ship on sale day.”¹⁷ In selling the Africans aboard the *Vyne* in February 1680, the agents paid one pound “for boathire untill all Sold” and four pounds, one shilling “for a Treat aboard at Sales.”¹⁸ Wine, bread, and olives were the fare served on the “day of Sale” when the slaves crowded aboard the *Mary & Margaret* were sold on 24 May 1699.¹⁹

In the American market, Anglo-American planters were motivated by the universal buyer’s aim, to acquire maximum value at minimal cost. For the planters who came down to the harbor-side seeking to purchase new slave laborers, the threat of making a bad investment loomed large. Like buyers in any market, they had to weigh the commodities on display against the ideal in their minds’ eye.

The physical condition in which many of the Africans entered the marketplace proved an even greater disappointment to the buyers than the scarcity of young males for sale. Bodies shaved, washed, and oiled to supply the illusion of health could not completely conceal the truth. Of the 214 persons who departed from the Gambia River aboard the *Coaster* on 1 July 1680, 34 had been lost by the time the ship reached Barbados at the end of the month. By marketplace standards, they were an ideal assemblage of Africans: there were nearly twice as many adult men as adult women, and men and boys together made up two-thirds of the cargo. But their bodies betrayed both the usual sufferings of the middle passage and the violence meted out to those who had tried to change their course in the Atlantic. “Some good men amongst them,” the agents reported, “but the Women very bad and as wee conceive many of the men are much the worse for being soe Loaded with Irons as they have been all the voyage the Captaine saying they are very unruly and once designed to Rise and Cutt him and his People off, so durst not trust them otherwise.”²⁰

The bodies of some appeared swollen with dropsy when they were put up for sale. Such was the condition too of those who

reached Nevis aboard the *Supply* in September 1681. On arrival, of the 235 purchased at Calabar, only 59 remained, and those “very dropsicall, soe that wee were glad to put them off as well as wee could,” the agents explained.²¹ Others bore the painful evidence of unhealed maladies suffered on the long journey. Many of the captives who reached Barbados in July 1684 aboard the *Coaster* were judged to be “elderly,” and their skin was “bursten” with sores.²²

Cargoes that included too many women, too many children, too many older people, or too many ravaged by hunger and dysentery appeared with such regularity that the agents came to refer to them as “ordinary.” It was a label that was applied to many slave cargoes that deviated in one way or another from the ideal sought by buyers. When the *Welcome* reached Barbados on the morning of 12 May 1681, the cargo earned the description “very Ordinary Negroes, being most of them women & very Old Slaves.” The vessel had departed Old Calabar on 12 February with 227 Africans aboard; exactly three months later, fewer than 70 percent of their number remained: 51 men, 90 women, 12 boys, and 8 girls.²³ The “very Ordinary” cargo of Senegambians aboard the *Ann* when that vessel reached Barbados in October 1680 included people who were not only “old” but also “Poore & Blind and many burst ones.” Their condition, together with “the little esteeme those Negroes have here,” kept many prospective buyers away, causing the slaves to “Ly Long on our hands & goe off att Low prizes.”²⁴

On all accounts, the planters frequently were disappointed, as they were when the *Hannah* reached Barbados in June 1688. Reportedly, the cargo of 416 Africans purchased at Whydah lost no more than 13 on the ocean crossing and arrived “in good condition.” But with 187 women and only 172 men, the cargo was “ill sorted as to males and females” among the adults: according to the company agents, such an “extraordinary” number of women would “much impaire the sales.”²⁵ Indeed, when Edwyn Stede sent the invoice for the sale of the cargo to company officials, he re-

minded them, “Its the company’s interest to give a consideracion to have 2/3 men.”²⁶ When the *Elizabeth* arrived later that summer, having also departed from the company’s factory at Whydah, there were again more women than men aboard the vessel. While the 154 women constituted 45 percent of the 345 Africans made available for sale, only 124 men among that group (36 percent) were put up for sale.²⁷ Worse still, the Barbados agents complained that “above thirty men” in the cargo were deemed to be “superannuated.”²⁸ Similarly, the Angolan cargo of slaves aboard the *Carlisle* included more women (188) than men (157) when it reached Jamaica in September 1681.²⁹ Though the Africans aboard this vessel appeared “indifferently well flesht” when they arrived, the agents complained that “there were a great many old ones amongst them,” and two slaves, the one “mad,” the other “bursten,” brought complaints from disgruntled buyers.³⁰ The repeated arrival of cargoes dispatched from Whydah with “as many Woemen as men” moved the company officials to remind the agent hired to manage the factory there of the conditions of his contract, and to clarify its meaning. “Your articles,” they wrote, “sayes the Major part men, and you drive it soe hard [as] to make that Major part not to be above one person, the number of Women exceeding doeth much disparayes [disparage] the whole cargoe.”³¹ A simple majority of men was not sufficient to meet the company’s goal.

Apart from the great proportion of women who helped sustain the flow of enslaved migrants to the Americas were many whose small size betrayed their extreme youth and many whose advanced age was too obvious to be concealed. Indeed, children—those judged to be less than fourteen years old—made up 27 percent of the Africans shipped aboard Royal African Company ships in the years 1673–1725.³² After viewing the 415 Africans who arrived at Nevis aboard the *George & Betty* on 3 December 1681, the agents reported that the cargo was “most women, amongst which was about 40 children under the age of 8 Yeares to our best Judge-

ments.” For his part, the captain, protesting that the matter was outside his control, explained that “they could not buy soe many men & women without that number of Children” on the African coast. For their part, the agents suspected that the captain had concealed other slaves aboard the ship, in the intention of smuggling them ashore. “Wee believe something elce in it, which wee hope in Little time to discover,” they wrote.³³ Once the agents accounted for 17 Africans who had died at the port and for those given over to the captain in partial payment of his commission and freight charges, there remained 301 slaves to be sold for the company’s profit, of whom more than a third (34 percent) were judged to be children: the count was 87 men, 111 women, 69 boys, and 34 girls.³⁴ Two days later the *Alexander* entered the harbor at Nevis carrying a cargo of 311 slaves purchased on the Gold Coast and in the Bight of Benin that included more women (115) than men (74), and also a rather high proportion of children (41), who accounted for 18 percent of the 230 persons sold by the company’s agents.³⁵ When the *Prosperous* reached Barbados in September 1681 carrying 476 slaves from Angola, the 142 children aboard made up 30 percent of that number, while the largest group comprised the 189 women, accounting for 40 percent of the cargo.³⁶

When the *Two Friends* arrived at Barbados on 17 March 1683, the agents complained that the Africans aboard were “but indifferent being many elderly amongst them nigh ½ of the men being of 40 to 50 yeares old or more.”³⁷ And when the *Coaster* arrived nine months later, the 172 persons who appeared before the agents “proved but very Indifferent Slaves many being very old & poore & others Burst decreipt & Lame & Blind.”³⁸ The agents responsible for the sale of the company’s slave cargoes recognized four demographic categories in their presentation of the human commodities for the slave marketplace: men, women, boys, and girls. Thus, while it has been possible to analyze the proportion of children represented among the Africans reaching the English West Indies in the

seventeenth century, it is not possible to do the same with regard to those who occupied the other end of the age spectrum. Frequent complaints about “superannuated” slaves among the cargoes, however, remind us that in the transatlantic flow of migrants the presence of another category of people further eroded the number that could be counted as male adults in their prime: the elderly and emigrants already in late middle age.³⁹

The Geography of the American Slave Market

Out of the interplay of American demands and African supply emerged a geographical hierarchy of value: place of origin could figure heavily in determining where captives would end up entering their American enslavement. At one end of the spectrum stood Africans from the Gold Coast, the most coveted of all Africans who came to the Anglo-Atlantic world. The wealthy and powerful Barbados planters exerted their buying power to attract to their tiny island about half the ships departing from the Gold Coast, while their counterparts in Jamaica and the Leeward Islands took what they could get of the remainder, and fewer than a thousand went to the Chesapeake colonies. At the other end of the spectrum stood the Biafrans. Though they were not well liked, they were cheap and plentiful on the African coast, and thus Anglo-American colonists who wished to participate in the slave trade could not entirely avoid purchasing them.

It was only by an accident of timing that the captives aboard the *Sarah* went to York River in Virginia in June 1721. The orders that had accompanied the ship when it had left London the previous September directed the agents at Cape Coast Castle to “freight her with negroes and consign to Franklin Willis and Charles Chiswell, our agents at Virginia.”⁴⁰ But new orders were sent in December, when the *Cape Coast* frigate was dispatched to obtain a cargo on the Gold Coast and deliver it to Barbados: “Regarding *Sarah*, Capt.

Bulcock, which we ordered you to slave for Virginia. If this reaches you in time, we would have her cargo also consigned to Barbados.”⁴¹ As it was June by the time the revised instructions reached Cape Coast Castle, news that the 250 captives aboard the *Sarah* were intended for the cane fields of Barbados reached the agents’ hands just as the cargo arrived in Virginia, to be dispersed instead into the world of tobacco farming.⁴²

The consignment to Virginia took the slaves aboard the *Sarah* out of the mainstream that carried more than 60 percent of cargoes from the Gold Coast to Barbados or Jamaica in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Like buyers in any market-place, Anglo-American planters were quick to develop a set of assumptions about the relative quality of the human commodities they purchased, and slaves from the Gold Coast—referred to as Cormantines in the English Americas—were consistently and highly praised by Caribbean planters throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁴³ The market strength of Barbadian planters in the seventeenth century, and of their Jamaican counterparts in the eighteenth century, ensured that their preferences were honored.

The opening decades of sustained slave exports from the Gold Coast tied the region at first nearly exclusively to Barbados in the 1660s and then to Jamaica and Nevis in the following decade. Occasional cargoes from the region began to appear in the other major areas of European colonization in the last quarter of the seventeenth century: sites of Dutch, Danish, and French colonizing efforts in the Caribbean, areas of English expansion in the Leeward Islands, and Virginia, whose planter elite reshaped the course of that English North American colony’s labor regime by turning abruptly and decisively away from English indentured servants toward African captives.

At the turn of the eighteenth century Jamaica rose to prominence, eclipsing the claim Barbados had made in the preceding century on

one of every two who survived the ocean crossing from the Gold Coast. The numbers of slaves pouring into Virginia and core areas of the Caribbean grew. Over the first quarter of the new century, the American market scattered Gold Coast peoples throughout the circum-Caribbean region, from the Chesapeake Bay to the Carolinas to the shores of the Rio de la Plata in South America; from Veracruz in the Gulf of Mexico to Portobelo, Panama, on the southern curve of the Caribbean Sea; from Saint Domingue to Guadeloupe, both sites of rapidly expanding slaveholding in the French Caribbean.

With a jump start of some twenty years on the other English colonies in the exploitation of slave labor, Barbados was already deeply committed to slavery by the 1660s and was home to no fewer than 175 “big planters”—those who owned sixty slaves or more—in 1680.⁴⁴ Thus, at the Barbados slave market there was no shortage of buyers to purchase from the Royal African Company’s ships, and many of them were financially solvent enough to be a safe credit risk for the company. The exercise of market controls was deemed unnecessary there, meaning that the island’s planters were free to pick and choose at will among the human commodities on display.⁴⁵

Both wealthy and poorer planters in Barbados came aboard the ships eager to buy enslaved laborers, and by the time a day’s business was concluded, buyers had negotiated the individual terms by which their transactions would be governed. For example, the first transaction concerning the 202 Africans delivered to Barbados by the *Arthur* in May 1678 assigned ownership of one woman to Richard Salter, in exchange for 3,000 pounds of sugar. In the second transaction, Richard Farr chose four men at a cost of 3,800 pounds of sugar per head “to pay by March.” He was followed by Colonel James Carter, who claimed thirteen men, five women, and one girl, “ye men at £20, ye woemen at £18, the Girle at £11,” to be paid in bills of exchange by 1 May of the following year.⁴⁶

The transactions—forty-eight in all—continued aboard the *Arthur* for two days, as buyers negotiated the best terms they could, given their resources. A few were able to pay in “ready mony,” but most relied on the company’s willingness to invest in their future prospects. Wealthier members of the planter class could buy large groups of slaves on generous terms of credit; for instance, Doctor Thomas Cole and Elisha Mellowes together purchased twelve men and four women, paid for with bills of exchange due “½ in 6 months, the other ½ at 12 months.” But Lawrence Rees was to pay the sixteen pounds charged for the woman he took home in three months, and William Alamby was to deliver out of his current harvest the 2,800 pounds of sugar due in exchange for one girl.⁴⁷ When the negotiations were complete, the planters returned to shore alone. Within a few days, the slaves they had picked out would follow. Having completed transactions for all but twenty-odd “refuse” slaves on Saturday, 27 May, for example, the agents at Barbados went aboard the *James* the following Monday, where they removed “& delivered 80 slaves which were part of the 118 which were sould on Satturday.”⁴⁸

The size and demographic composition of groups sold in Barbados ranged widely, and most of the early transactions in slave sales involved significantly more men than women, as the island’s wealthiest planters picked out the most highly valued slaves—the adult men—first. The demographic description of the groups in which Africans left the slave ship tended to vary according to the timing of the sale transaction. Indeed, women were “more than 2.5 times more likely to be sold in the second half” of the sale.⁴⁹ For those aboard the *Arthur*, for example, the first twenty-four of forty-eight transactions were pretty much skewed in favor of men. Just over half the cargo (53 percent) was sold, but twenty-four groups included 67 percent of the cargo’s men and only 34 percent of the women aboard the ship.⁵⁰

When Barbados was already England’s colonial crown jewel, in

the second half of the seventeenth century, Jamaica was a diamond in the rough, whose full potential had yet to be realized. Seized from the Spanish crown in 1655, the island had as an English colony experienced little plantation development by the time the Royal African Company was chartered in 1672. By comparison with Barbados's 175 "big planters," slaveholders in young Jamaica were less wealthy. Though consolidation of large estates was well under way, Jamaica's planter class was "still in embryo," and most were "fairly small entrepreneurs by Barbados standards."⁵¹

Jamaica was fast becoming an island of extremes, however, where most sugar planters owned a sizeable number of slaves and relatively few small slaveowners could be found. Of fifty-four Jamaica sugar planters whose estates were inventoried in the last quarter of the seventeenth century, only six owned fewer than twenty slaves, and, more to the point, "the great majority had at least forty, and seven of them more than a hundred slaves."⁵² The development of such large slaveholdings was reflected in the buying patterns of Jamaican planters when they attended the Royal African Company's sales. In a sample of 3,693 Africans sold in Jamaica in the years 1674–1693, only 20 percent were sold in groups numbering fewer than five slaves, and only 5 percent were sold singly.⁵³

The burgeoning Jamaican plantocracy, though its numbers and slaveholdings remained small by comparison with those of its Barbadian counterpart, was eager to follow in the footsteps of Barbados. The Royal African Company could rely upon these large planters to visit Port Royal harbor often and to purchase larger rather than smaller groups of slaves. But these men alone could not sustain a viable market for slaves. The market in Jamaica, unlike the older one in Barbados, still lacked the capacity to absorb an entire cargo once the most highly valued slaves were taken. Moreover, Jamaican slaveholders did not have sufficient credit with the company for the enslaved persons they took with them when they left the marketplace. Allowed to make selections in a setting free of market con-

trols, the small but ambitious group of Jamaican sugar planters were likely to do just as their counterparts in Barbados did. Taking for themselves the strongest, healthiest-looking men, together with a small proportion of women and children, the big planters would have left behind the dregs of a cargo, for which the agents would have been hard-pressed to find buyers. Had the company disposed of the slave cargoes sent to Jamaica in this fashion—selling its most profitable cargo to buyers unlikely to pay their debts when bills of exchange came due and incurring the expense of maintaining slaves slow to sell in the market—it would have suffered terrible losses in its business there.

This set of circumstances prompted the company to sell a large proportion of slaves in Jamaica in units of standard size and composition according to sex. After turning over whatever slaves were due to the captain in payment of commission and freight charges, the company agents usually sorted one-half to two-thirds of an African cargo into uniform “lots,” which were sold to the planters at a standard price per head. The criterion for determining the composition of the lots is not entirely clear, for the agents rarely commented directly on the matter; however, their records clearly indicate that only adults were sold in this manner—children were never included in the lots.

The ratio of men to women generally reflected that of the cargo as a whole. As a result, the lots generally favored men only moderately, and groups composed of equal numbers of men and women were not uncommon. For buyers, the lot system employed in Jamaica meant that planters who came aboard the Royal African Company ships seeking the best-looking slaves in a cargo were compelled to take also some of those generally valued less—women and “ordinary” men. For the Africans, the system meant that a large proportion of the groups that left Port Royal harbor together en route to the plantations included at least some women among their number.

For example, when the *John Bonadventure* arrived in June 1686 with 431 Africans from the Gold Coast and the Bight of Benin, the agents went aboard and first delivered 107 slaves to the captain in partial payment of freight charges and commission. Of the 324 Africans who were to be sold for the company's account, the agents found 190 adults (59 percent of the remaining cargo) who appeared sound enough for sale by lot; these were sorted into thirty-eight groups of 5 slaves—3 men and 2 women—each to be sold for 110 pounds (or 22 pounds per head). Men made up 59 percent of the 274 adults available for sale, and there were one and a half times more men than women in the lots.⁵⁴

Not all the cargoes delivered to Jamaica were divided into lots.⁵⁵ Occasionally, the company received a small proportion of slaves out of cargoes delivered on private contract, these usually being those rejected by the contractor as being too young or too old to comply with the contract stipulations. Such persons the agents usually sold at random. Other cargoes were too small, or too sickly, to warrant sale by lot; for example, the *Providence* arrived from the Bight of Biafra in 1680 with a “miserable parcell” of ninety-five persons, of whom sixty-four were delivered to the agents, after commission and freight charges had been settled with the captain. Selling the slaves at random, the agents managed to dispose of half the cargo on the first day of sale, but more than two weeks went by before the rest of the Africans were sold.⁵⁶

Most of the cargoes that were not put into lots were sold to Spanish-American buyers who, much to English planters' dissatisfaction, frequently purchased slaves from the company, particularly in the 1680s. Upon reaching Jamaica after the long ocean crossing, these Africans left one slave ship for another and endured a second voyage to Spanish-American ports at Portobelo and Cartagena. From there the slaves were dispersed throughout South America.⁵⁷ The Spanish-American colonists were discriminating customers, and in some cases, the partial cargoes sold to them were choice

slaves sought after by the island's planters. But generally the Spanish-American market served as an outlet for cargoes from African regions not favored by the Jamaicans, or occasionally for cargoes that had arrived in particularly bad condition, as was the case with the *Charles*. Having reached Jamaica early in 1681 with a cargo of 217 sickly Africans from the Bight of Benin, the agents found that the people were so ill from the spread of dysentery and smallpox, that "for makeing them into such Lotts as wee usually sell unto the Country wee could not find above fifty foure that would passe muster, the rest being Refuse and Boys & Girls soe very small that divers of them were under eight yeaeres old." Three days after their arrival, all but 3 of the 163 Africans to be disposed of by the company agents were sold to Capt. John Croaker, a Spaniard who regularly did business with the company.⁵⁸

By comparison with Barbados and Jamaica, with their large demand for slaves, the less developed Leeward Islands remained a relatively peripheral market throughout the seventeenth century. On the whole, the Leeward planters were low on both cash and credit, having barely begun to convert their tobacco farms to sugar cultivation. As a result, the cargoes the Leewards attracted were not only fewer in number but also smaller in size.⁵⁹ Nevis was by far the most prosperous of the islands for most of the period and served as the Leeward entrepôt for the Royal African Company until the mid-1680s, much to the disgruntlement of planters in Antigua, Montserrat, and Saint Christopher. The company sent most of the Leeward cargoes to Nevis and expected the planters from the neighboring islands to make their purchases there. The company formally established independent factories at Antigua and Montserrat in 1686. "Wee have lately setled Factors at Antegua and Montserratt," the company's London officials wrote, "places to Leeward of Barbados, but not soe farr as Jamaica by much & they desire to have none but small vessells to come to them, none to bring to their Islands much above 200 Negroes at a time."⁶⁰ For their part, the

planters complained that by the time they got to the sales held at Nevis, none but the “refuse” slaves were left.⁶¹

A 1678 Leewards census showed that in Nevis, the most developed of the four islands, eight planters owned more than sixty slaves. In addition, forty-five middling planters each held between twenty and fifty-nine slaves: these slaveholders owned almost half the slaves on the island. In Antigua, only six planters had large slaveholdings (of more than sixty slaves); while on Montserrat and Saint Christopher (for which figures on slaveholding are less readily available) only about three planters in each location owned at least sixty slaves.⁶²

As in Barbados, in the Leeward Islands slave sales operated without market controls. The company agents there usually did set uniform prices for the most promising-looking men and women—potential workers whom they hoped to sell at profitable rates—but they did not sort the slaves into standard units. Like their counterparts sent to Barbados, Africans sold in the Leeward Islands left the slave ships in groups of widely varying size and composition. The strong presence of middling and small planters in the Leewards meant that Africans who landed there were more likely to be sold in small groups or alone. In a sample of 2,362 slaves delivered to the Leewards in the years 1674 to 1693, nearly 50 percent left the ships in groups of fewer than five slaves. Because 14 percent of the slaves delivered there sold singly, Africans who landed in the Leeward Islands were two and a half times more likely than those sent to Jamaica to leave the slave ship alone, without the company of shipmates.⁶³

Would-be slaveholders in Virginia were considered to be the Royal African Company’s least creditworthy customers in the seventeenth century. For this reason, the company was willing to send its ships to the Chesapeake Bay only if the sale of an entire cargo was guaranteed by prior contract. By this arrangement, a group of London merchants “agreed in advance with the company to buy

cargoes or fractions of cargoes at a fixed price payable in London.” A local representative of the London merchants took responsibility for receiving and disposing of the slaves upon their arrival in Virginia. Thanks to this method, the company could count on “a guaranteed market and price, few or no agency costs, no debts, no lawsuits for the recovery of debts, and no problem of how to remit effects from the West Indies to London.”⁶⁴

Though the sale of cargoes consigned to Virginia was handled by prior contract, the company did appoint an agent there whose responsibilities included oversight of the cargoes’ delivery. Cargoes arranged by contract were no less subject to fraud than those sold by the company’s own agents, and so the company needed to hire persons to represent its interests in Virginia, as it did in the West Indies. Thus, although no systematic record of their disposal was preserved, some details can be gleaned regarding the delivery and sale of enslaved Africans sent to Virginia.

John Seayres was a newly appointed company agent when the *Katherine* reached Virginia on 20 September 1678.⁶⁵ According to Seayres’s report, 399 slaves had boarded the ship on the African coast—350 by the terms of the contract and an additional 49 above that number.⁶⁶ “Before day the Night of his Arrivall,” the ship’s captain (Thomas Bossenger) smuggled ashore “46 of the Choicest and best Negroes of the Ships Loading,” hoping to quietly sell them to three persons well positioned to conceal the deceit: the collector and deputy collector of His Majesty’s Customs (Col. Warner and Major Smith) and the comptroller general (Mr. Phillip Lightfoot).⁶⁷

The captives having suffered terrible mortality on the Atlantic crossing, only 30 percent of them remained alive, and their number soon would decrease further. In addition to the forty-six, Seayres reported, “there was only 74 left Alive After ye Expiration of 7 dayes”—this being the window of time following a ship’s arrival during which the death of African captives were counted toward the Royal African Company’s losses rather than toward the cargo

for which the contractor had agreed to pay. Of those seventy-four, thirteen appeared too old, too young, or too sick to be accepted by the contractor's Virginia representatives.

It was Seayres's responsibility to go aboard the ship to sell these thirteen "refused" slaves "by the Inch of Candle"—an auction at which prospective buyers offered competitive bids on each slave for as long as it took a candle to burn down by one inch. The method "was generally considered fair," writes economic historian David Galenson, "because it guaranteed a minimum time available for bidding, preventing an auctioneer from making quick sales to favored customers. The method was known to produce disputes, however, for disagreements could arise over who had been the final bidder before the flame flickered out."⁶⁸ But this surely was not a concern with regard to the thirteen persons Seayres was prepared to dispose of, for he reported that "five of that Number Dyed before I came aboard to sell them." Seayres auctioned only 6 of the remaining eight, because the other 2 "were dezesed [diseased] which no Body would bid for." One of these also died, while the other was sold by some other means.⁶⁹ The contractor's Virginia representatives sold the remaining 61 slaves and remitted bills of exchange to the company for them, which together with bills for the 46 the captain had tried to smuggle (minus 1 who died) made for a total of 106 people sold by contract.⁷⁰

The "Refuse"

For the agents responsible for selling slave cargoes, the drama of the market consisted in the contest over terms and prices—how high the average price per head was, how much the arrival of another ship would affect the outcome of a sale already under way, and so on. But as agents fretted over such details and crafted explanations for disappointing outcomes, a fundamental truism presented itself to the captives themselves. Whatever the agreed-upon price or

terms of payment, the bargaining unfailingly produced the same outcome: down to the weakest and the sickest, every single person in a newly arrived cargo was sold. Cargoes that suffered extraordinary incidence of disease or levels of mortality, endured exceedingly long ocean crossings, or whose demographic profile left much to be desired had the same fate as those which won buyers' admiration. All cargoes "found" a market somewhere in the Americas. No cargo found to be full of "superannuated" or poorly "sorted" or "meane" captives was rejected outright and returned to the African coast.⁷¹

Indeed, those who came to be called the refuse found their own specialized secondary market dominated by men whose enterprise was to purchase these unfortunates at low rates, in the hope that whichever among them recovered could be sold again for profit. Such transactions generally took place toward the end of the sale, when negotiations for all the other captives had been completed, and the "refuse" was all that remained. Out of the Africans who arrived in Barbados aboard the *Speedwell* in May 1681, this was the group of fifty-one slaves sold to Samuel Smart for the grossly reduced sum of two hundred pounds.⁷²

Two Africans, a man and a woman, were "remaining under cure" and as yet unsold when the agents at Jamaica finished the sale of the cargo delivered in the *Sarah Bonadventure* in November 1677.⁷³ Following the conclusion of the sale held aboard the *John Bonadventure* in July 1680, there remained thirty-one Africans who were "brought on shoare to be sold," of whom one was dead when the agents balanced their accounts. The others were sold "to sundry persons for cash."⁷⁴ It is impossible to determine how many Africans reached the ports of the English colonies only to die there, but the number appears to have been substantial. Historian David Eltis has suggested that 95 percent of those delivered in English ships during the years from 1662 to 1713 were sold, the remainder being either dead or unmarketable.⁷⁵ This figure perhaps does not

seem remarkable in the aggregate; however, when it is remembered that these losses to death and illness were measured within the small space of about one week between arrival and the tallying of sale proceeds, the continuing deadly impact of the Atlantic migration becomes readily apparent.

All this time the trauma of the ocean voyage continued to take its toll, particularly among those individuals who arrived in especially poor physical condition. Deaths at the port varied from ship to ship as can be seen from sale of the slaves brought in the *Sarah Bonadventure* and the *Vine*, which arrived in Jamaica in January 1680, the former ship with 470 slaves on board, the latter bringing 276 to harbor.⁷⁶ When the sale of the slaves began a week later, only two persons in the *Vine*'s cargo had died in the interim; the *Sarah Bonadventure* group, however, having arrived "meanly condition'd," had lost twenty of its number.⁷⁷ Having endured a "long Voyage" to Barbados, 130 "poore, miserable" and "very leane" people (mostly women, boys, and girls) arrived aboard the *Eglet* in August 1683. The condition of the survivors, together with news of the "greate mortality" that had occurred aboard the vessel, made "people unwilling to buy," the agents explained, "for which reason they goe off very heavily & at meane rates though all possible care hath bin used by Feeding & otherwise since they came hither to make them appeare & sell the best might be."⁷⁸ Those aboard the *Charles* had struggled against the common twin occurrence of smallpox and dysentery during their voyage from the Bight of Benin, and once they reached Jamaica on 20 January 1681, their suffering continued, "3 or 4 dying every day," although, as the agents noted in writing of the voyage, "wee observe that all possible care and cleanliness hath been used aboard & good order in accomodating the Sick."⁷⁹

Sick, frightened, without orientation to time or place, and with

bodies and minds bearing the weight of months of horror witnessed in the ocean crossing, most Africans proceeded through the processes of sale quietly. As buyers and sellers negotiated prices and terms of credit, the marketplace fiction that people were commodities remained, for the most part, intact. Some few, however, broke the silence. Through their loud, aggressive, and angry behavior, they placed themselves on the margins, though never fully outside the bounds, of the marketplace.

Africans who made known their refusal to play their prescribed role in the colonial economy from the moment of their arrival were deemed by the planter class to be too dangerous to bring into the heart of the plantation landscape. Among the Africans brought to Jamaica aboard the *Providence* in January 1681, one woman revealed herself to be “betweene mad & Foole, soe that noe body would give any thing for her or accept of her for nothing, being dangerous to be Kept in Port Royall or any Plantation where fyre may doe hurt.” After some time, the woman was “sold” to a buyer from the remote north side of the island for 20 shillings. That amount being “about the Like sume” as what was expended to keep her all that time, the agents considered it unnecessary to include the transaction in their account book.⁸⁰ Similarly, at the conclusion of proceedings to disperse the cargo delivered aboard the *Diligence* in October 1676, after accounting for six slaves given to the captain toward his commission and one slave man who died during the sale, a “mad Woman” remained unsold; and when the sale of captives arriving aboard the *Marygold* came to a close in June 1677, “Two Mad Negroes Remained unsold.”⁸¹

Finally, for some the transatlantic voyage ended in the violence that erupted among Africans themselves. When the *Eglet* came to anchor at Nevis on 24 February 1682, 119 Africans were on board, but when they were mustered onto the main deck by the company agents, one among them did not show up to be counted. Four days later, when the ship was sent to Saint Christopher for sale,

the missing African was discovered hiding onboard. “Found among the Cask in the bottom of the Shipp,” the man was forced to go ashore and submit to the workings of the marketplace. Before any of the island’s planters could pretend to own his “very Lusty” body, though, he determined his own fate and that of another of the Africans around him. “That night for what reason noe body knowes,” the agents reported, he “cut another Negroe mans Throate & Stabd him in the Brest & when he had soe done hanged himself in the Place.”⁸² Though we cannot know what provoked his act of murder and suicide, a few clues point to one possible interpretation. Upon further inquiry, the company agents learned that “the Negroe [who] . . . hanged himself . . . was much abused with blowes.”⁸³

Whether these “blows” took place in the middle passage or after arrival the agents did not say. But when the invoice of the cargo’s sale was prepared, only the hanged man was listed as a loss; the other dead man was not counted as part of the cargo. Who was this man murdered by another African in the midst of the sale of a slave cargo? Perhaps he was one of the anonymous slave personnel employed in various capacities harborside, perhaps one of the linguists whose task was to board newly arrived ships and convince wary Africans that they would not be eaten once onshore, or perhaps a man whose dialect or facial markings betrayed him as an enemy to the man who took his life. Like the actions of “mad” slaves, events such as this one, whose causes were known only to those most directly involved, exposed the human complexity of the drama unfolding in the New World slave markets.

Amid all the activity and events that made up the slave marketplace, Africans looked on and struggled to make some sense of the scene in which they were the center of a sinister kind of attention. While the men (and occasionally women) who purchased slaves balanced such factors as the amount they could afford to spend, specific needs for their labor force, and the quality of the slave cargo on display before them, African migrants saw themselves

sorted, separated, and regrouped into so many parcels of men, women, boys, and girls who would venture into unknown worlds together. Groups of newly purchased Africans climbed over the sides of the ship to be ferried ashore, and the pain of separation—for they might not see again the familiar faces of those with whom they had shared the ocean voyage—marked the end of one phase of their migration experience. The fear and anticipation all felt about what lay ahead marked the beginning of a new stage in the captives' lives.