JUMPING OVERBOARD: EXAMINING SUICIDE, RESISTANCE, AND WEST AFRICAN COSMOLOGIES DURING THE MIDDLE PASSAGE

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ABSTRACT

JUMPING OVERBOARD: EXAMINING SUICIDE, RESISTANCE, AND WEST AFRICAN COSMOLOGIES DURING THE MIDDLE PASSAGE

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This dissertation examines slave ship mortality, slave ship suicides, and resistance through the lens of traditional West and West Central African cosmologies. The results offer an alternative analysis of suicide by drowning as a form of resistance during the Transatlantic Slave Trade. The cases examined in this study recount the testimonies of slave ship captains, surgeons, crewmembers, and linguists who travelled onboard slave ships in the Middle Passage and subsequently documented their experiences. This study proposes that the slave ship engendered a new spatial phenomenon for many enslaved West and West Central African people. Interpreted through this lens, these sources offer evidence that the cosmologies of these enslaved people, in the context of the torturous experiences on slaving vessels, encouraged self-destruction as one of many forms of resistance and one that offered the prospect of a spiritual return back to Africa. The evidence from the cases reveal at least three overlapping practical concepts that informed captives' decisions to leap overboard: agency, martyrdom, and transmigration.

I analyze these cases through the lens of traditional West and Central West African cosmologies, utilizing Africana Critical Theory and slave suicide ecology to develop a critical frame for understanding what motivated suicides by drowning. In doing so, I arrive at an alternative interpretation of these events that resists the implicitly White Supremacist framing found in many earlier historical accounts.

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PREFACE

Over a period of 400 years, millions of African women, men, and children were stolen from their homes for the express purpose of creating wealth for their captors. More than 35,000 voyages, from which approximately 5,000 ships still lay at the bottom of the ocean, transported these captives, many of them to their deaths. Their names were not recorded, their histories forgotten. In the minds of their captors, slave ship captains, and their crews, these people were simply commodities, less than human.

As of this writing, in the year 2018, the African continent still suffers from critical economic, political, and societal conditions that are the living legacy of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. The President of the United States, Donald Trump, recently referred to Haiti and African nations as "shithole countries."[1] This comment, which seeks to stabilize these countries as ahistorically undesirable places, obfuscated the history of imperial and colonial relations when, in fact, Trump's wealth, and the wealth of millions like him, is the result of a long exploitation of the African continent by European, stealing both her natural resources and her human and intellectual capital.

This dissertation is dedicated to those whom we have forgotten, to those brave and courageous persons who leaped from ships into the sea, seeking a return home, to Mother Africa, and to their ancestors. May they rest in peace, and may these words bear witness to their bravery and tenacity.

[1] President Donald Trump speaking during a news conference with Norwegian Prime Minster Erna Solberg in the East Room of the White House on Jan. 10, 2018, in Washington.

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INTRODUCTION

In 1789, Dr. Alexander Falconbridge, a former slave ship surgeon, described the deaths of the final surviving captives aboard the *Zong.* He writes, the "outraged misery [they] could endure no longer; the ten last victims sprang disdainfully from the grasp of their tyrants, defied their power and leaping into the sea, felt momentary triumph in embracing of death."[2] The *Zong* had overrun its intended landing in Jamaica. The captain allegedly panicked over the possible loss of water and opted to drown 132 of the African captives onboard to preserve precious water supplies for those deemed most marketable. Falconbridge describes the 10 men who leaped from the *Zong* as experiencing "momentary triumph." The former surgeon interprets the manner of their suicides as demonstrating a final act of resistance, preventing their bodies from being used for the profit of their captors. Additionally, some evidence suggests that these captives may have believed they would return to Africa after death. If this is indeed the case, as I will argue in this dissertation, these 10 men were the epitome of suicide by drowning as a form of resistance. In some cases, specific forms of resistance, most notably those that demonstrate a desire for agency, martyrdom, and transmigration, can help explain why these and others leaped from ships at sea. Some of these suicides, I argue, were not simply efforts at self-annihilation. To investigate this explanation, I analyze five case studies of slave suicides at sea, finding evidence therein that each of the suicides described had a reason and a purpose.

This dissertation is the result of my interests in the discourse about seaboard resistance tactics, West and West Central African cosmologies, and Middle Passage mortality as they relate to suicide by drowning within the context of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. It examines the

[2] Testimony of Alexander Falconbridge, Thomas F. Buxton, *The African Slave Trade*, 94-95. See also Testimony of Alexander Falconbridge, *Abridgement of the minutes of the evidence, taken before a Committee of the Whole House, to whom it was referred to consider of the slave trade*, (1789-1790), Part II, 231.

experiences of enslaved persons who decided to commit suicide by drowning as a way of escaping slavery. The unchecked and unpunished inhumanity displayed towards captives onboard slave ships arguably laid the foundation for a global disdain for the African via the subsequent testimonies and narratives. I posit that the slave ship was the most important mechanism of the New World globalization, and the evidence demonstrates how philosophies of race, Black inferiority, and White supremacy were codified onboard these vessels as African captives were indoctrinated into their future existence in the diaspora. The narratives also demonstrate how the slave ship served as an incubator for concepts of racial separation that undergirded the new global economy and the development of a capitalist society. The significance of the research in this dissertation lies in the notion of space. A major portion of existing scholarship about slavery focuses on land, plantations, merchants, dealers, and slave owners. However, I wanted to discover if the available evidence pointed to a motive or set of motives that prompted seaboard captives to hurl themselves from slave vessels and how much of the evidence could be quantified to show any relationship to religious beliefs as motivating factors. This research reveals that a significant portion of the history of slavery and slave mortality occurred in the Middle Passage during transport to the New World.

In the many stories of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, seaborne resistance tactics and their connection to traditional West and West Central African cosmologies have not been afforded the same amount of attention as the New World plantation experiences of the enslaved. The case studies I examine confirmed that one of the elements of the Transatlantic Slave Trade was an attempt by slavers and plantation owners at maintaining control over their property by restricting their movement, emotions, and ability to build community. The slave ship captains, plantation owners, and their surrogates sought to control and "dictate" what their captives ate, when they

ate, when they slept, where they slept, and when they exercised. This effort at controlling the spatial environment for these captives was an essential component of the journey before ships even arrived in the Americas. Confounding their captors, many of the enslaved found ways to violate this spatial regimen, leaping into the sea and taking their own lives. The case narratives assert that little effort was made to protect or bury the bodies of African captives who died onboard the slave ships. The bodies of the deceased were frequently thrown overboard or used for shark bait. I contend that this type of behavior towards the captives informed their commodification and led to the further development of these vessels as incubators and conveyors of racism. According to Willem Boseman, "the destruction of corpse by the sharks was a public spectacle and part of the degradation of enslavement."[3] Falconbridge describes how "sharks swarmed in most incredible numbers about the slave ships, devouring with great dispatch the bodies of the negroes as they are thrown overboard."[4] Further, according to Marcus Rediker, "slaving captains consciously used sharks to create terror throughout the voyage."[5] On yet another occasion, an African sailor who had sailed to Jamaica in the 1780s killed a shark who had been menacing the sailors as they bathed. However, the sharks were being fed by the Naval officers to keep them around, thereby preventing desertions and insurrections, so the sailor was flogged mercilessly.[6]

Among the many types of deaths suffered by enslaved captives, from diseases, to cutting their own throats, to bashing their heads against the hull of the ship, the most dramatic of the self-murders was suicide by drowning.

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[3] Willem Boseman, *A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea*, London, 1705, 282.
[4] Alexander Falconbridge, *An Account of the Slave Trade on the coast of Africa, 1788*, Printed by J. Phillips, George Yard, Lombard Street. MDCCLXXXVIII, Rare Book, Manuscript and Special Collections, Duke University Libraries, 67.
[5] Marcus Rediker, *The Slave Ship A Human History*, New York, Penguin Group, 2007, 39.
[6] Marcus Rediker, 38-39.

I went into the archives hoping to find traces of the actual voices of captives on board ship, but it soon became clear that the picture they offer of the Middle Passage slave ship experience was from a Eurocentric perspective and lacked the voices of enslaved persons. I felt that my task was to illuminate the experiences of these missing people and specify more clearly what led to these suicidal drownings. The evidence, as I will argue, suggests that the conditions onboard the vessels and the tenuous nature of seaborne enslavement fueled an increase in suicide by drowning. Within the cosmology of some West and West Central Africans, the Ibo in particular, physical death was not the end of their existence. They believed they were tethered, physically and emotionally, to their land, and that they would reconnect spiritually to their communities and families via multiple rebirths after death.[7] According to Daniel Walker, "African cosmology formed the basis of the slave's belief in transmigration."[8] Since the victims perished without leaving testimonials, I relied on the narratives provided by slave ship interpreters, some of whom were West Africans, as well as eyewitness accounts and testimonies recorded by the Parliament of Great Britain and slave ship captains' log books and memoirs. I contend that many instances of suicide by drowning in the Middle Passage were acts of resistance or insurrection informed by West African cosmological discourse. This integration of suicide by drowning as a form of resistance motivated by traditional African cosmologies contributes to the existing scholarship regarding the Middle Passage as well as to mortality and resistance studies. By cosmology, I mean the manner in which some West African and West Central African ethnic groups understood the universe and the afterlife. Importantly, the European captors overlooked the intensity with which their captives viewed the universe, life,

[7] Manuel Barcia, *Seeds of Insurrection: Domination and Resistance on Western Cuban Plantations, 1808-1848,* Baton Rouge, Louisiana, University Press, 2016, 72.
[8] Daniel Walker, "Suicidal Tendencies: African Transmigration in the History and Folklore of the Americas," *Griot*, Fall, 1999: 18,2; ProQuest, 10.

and family and therefore misinterpreted acts of suicide as simple self-annihilation. My study offers a corrective to this misinterpretation that interrogates the existing literature on slave ship mortality, seaboard resistance, and slave ship suicides and reexamines the accounts of these events through the frame of traditional West and West Central African cosmologies, particularly relating to transmigration. Finally, I examine the horrors of the Middle Passage and the role of court documents and initiatives in the public sphere to further demonstrate why nautical suicidal resistance requires further examination.

To uncover the suicidal motivations of enslaved captives, I approach the data on the Middle Passage through a lens informed by Africana Critical Studies. I was interested how the experiences of captives were filtered through West and West Central African religious cultures and traditions. Within these traditions were three contingencies—agency, martyrdom, and transmigration—that often operated in concert. To understand how these contingencies might have operated in the context of the slave ship, I examine ethnographic studies that present, in many cases, an apparently objective assessment of several West and West Central African traditional religions, cultures, and worldviews. Using this approach, I discovered that many of the migrating West African groups, such as the Gâ, Akan, Ashanti, and the Ibo, held similar views on transmigration, suicide, and the afterlife. This approach sheds light on why individuals from some of these groups committed suicide and initiated shipboard insurrections. Interpreters or linguists on some of the vessels testified about their experiences. When asked, these interpreters offered assessments of certain events, lending their African voices and perspectives to the discourse. Also, in one of the cases I examined, the interpreter recounts how one victim explained why he preferred drowning and being eaten by sharks to bondage.

The dissertation is divided into five chapters. Chapter one is the Literature Review, the Background of the Study, the Research Objective, and the Research Questions. The literature review is written from a broad perspective, integrating maritime, insurrection, and mortality studies. This chapter explores my sense of the Middle Passage and the meaning we might make of the tragic deaths as it relates to the discourse surrounding slave ships. This examination includes conversations that interrogate a multiplicity of maritime vantage points. The headings of chapter one are as follows: Mortality Studies and West and West Central African Belief Systems, Insurrection and Resistance Studies, and The Economy that Fueled the Transatlantic Slave Trade.

Chapter two contains the Methodology, which includes the Research Design and explains the Case Study approach I use. It also examines the literature on the role and importance of the slave vessel and highlights the mortal dangers of the slave ship.

Chapter three is entitled Over Land and Sea and explores the nature of the journey forced upon millions of captured African people who were stolen from their villages and families, trekked across land, and imprisoned before being loaded on to the slave vessels that would eventually land them in the New World. This chapter also includes a discussion of the collaboration between Africans and Europeans conducting slave raids.

Chapter four introduces the foundation for using primary source data relating to drowning by suicide. This is followed by the presentation of five cases studies that speak directly to the main thesis of the dissertation. I show that the mortality rate on slaving vessels was a major concern for merchants, slavers, and plantation owners.

Chapter five provides an overview of the case studies and includes my Analysis. These cases are extracted from onboard testimonies and eyewitness accounts of slave ship captains, attorneys, and slave ship surgeons.

Finally, the conclusion contains a summary and recommendations for future research. In this section, I restate my main thesis, discuss and summarize my findings, and provide insight into the implications of my study.

Five terms are critical to this dissertation and its analysis: suicide, transmigration, martyrdom, slave suicide ecology, and agency.

Suicide is "the act or an instance of intentionally killing oneself."[9] Emile Durkheim, the father of the sociological study of suicide, defined suicide as a term "applied to any death which is the direct or an indirect result of a positive or negative act accomplished by the victim himself."[10] In this study, I examine suicide from a lens that offers an alternative analysis of the reasons people take their own lives given a particular historical positionality and context. Specifically, I identify in captives' motivations to commit suicide a cosmological belief in the transmigration of souls.

Transmigration, sometimes called metempsychosis, is based on the idea that a soul may pass out of one body and reside in another (human or animal) or in an inanimate object. The idea appears in various forms in tribal cultures in many parts of the world—Africa, Madagascar, Oceania, and South America, among others. The notion of transmigration was familiar in ancient Greece, notably in Orphism, and was adopted in a philosophical form by Plato and the

[9] *American Heritage Dictionary* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1985)
[10] Emile Durkheim, translated by John A. Spaulding and George Simpson, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology* (New York: The Free Press, 1951), 42.

Pythagoreans. The belief gained further currency in gnostic and occult forms of Christianity and Judaism and was introduced into Renaissance thought by the recovery of the Hermetic books.[11]

A martyr is someone who suffers persecution and death as a punishment for advocating, renouncing, refusing to renounce, or refusing to advocate a belief or cause as demanded by an external party. This refusal to comply results in the punishment or execution of the martyr by the oppressor. Originally applied only to those who suffered for religious beliefs, the term is now often used in connection with people imprisoned or killed for espousing a political cause or engaging in acts of rebellion. Most martyrs are considered holy or are otherwise deeply respected by their followers, becoming symbols of exceptional leadership and heroism in the face of difficult circumstances. Furthermore, martyrs often play significant roles in the affirmation of religious views.[12]

Suicide Slave Ecology, a concept introduced by Terri L. Snyder, examines the emotional, psychological, and material conditions that fostered suicide. For my study, Synder's theorization is useful for examining power relations exercised through kidnapping, forced migration, and rape, as well as other sources of power, including religious beliefs and gendered social constructions.[13] Simply put, slave suicide ecology is a way to quantify and understand the suicidal behavior of slaves. Snyder's concept is useful for my study because it takes into account the complexity of enslaved people's experiences of brutality and racism in the midst of their longing for home. Suicide slave ecology offers a way of interpreting and demystifying the tumultuous experiences of these captives at sea by deciphering how they justified self-destruction.

[11] http://mb-soft.com/believe/txo/transmig.htm
[12] https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/martyr
[13] Terri L. Snyder, "Suicide, Slavery and Memory in North America." *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 97, No.1 (June 2010), p.42.

Because religion is central to understanding the behavior of these enslaved captives, I include an examination of several West and West Central cosmologies. In an attempt to understand the meaning of "African Cosmologies" and their constituent elements, I first explore and historicize various relevant cosmological views. Etymologically, the term "cosmology" is derived from the Greek words *cosmos* and *logos*, meaning "universe" and "science" respectively. Put together, they reference the "science of the universe."[14] An attention to these cosmologies illuminates the differences between the ways in which captors and captives understood life and their place in it.

Finally, each of the preceding terms hinges on the idea of agency. Agency refers to the thoughts and actions that express people's individual power. The core challenge at the center of the field of sociology is understanding the relationship between structure and agency. Social structure refers to the complex and interconnected set of forces, relationships, institutions, and elements that together shape the thoughts, behaviors, experiences, choices, and overall life courses of people. In contrast, agency is the power people have to think for themselves and to act in ways that shape their experiences and life trajectories. Agency can take individual as well as collective forms.[15]

[14] Ikechukwu Anthony Kanu, *The Dimensions of African Cosmology,* FILOSOFIA THEORETICA JOURNAL OF AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY CULTURE AND RELIGIONS, Vol. 6, No 2-2017, 553.

[15] Nicki Lisa Cole, Agency, *A Sociological Definition,* https://www.thoughtco.com/agency-definition-3026036

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

This dissertation grows out of my interests in the scholarship and primary sources that suggest a connection between suicide by drowning and forms of resistance by enslaved Africans. I argue for the importance of understanding these suicides in the context of West African cosmologies, drawing on existing scholarship on the Transatlantic Slave Trade, Middle Passage Slave Mortality, and Slave Ship Insurrections. When I began, I sought a deeper understanding of what motivated seaboard captives to hurl themselves into the sea. Did they hope to swim back to Africa? How did the onboard conditions lead to these decisions? Additionally, how many instances of suicide by drowning can be clearly connected to West African cosmological beliefs in transmigration? In essence, my research seeks to identify the connections between suicide, resistance, and West African cosmology. Though studies have been done on Middle Passage mortality, none have yet examined suicide by drowning as a cosmologically motivated form of resistance. Other studies that focus on resistance similarly fail to connect acts of onboard resistance with the captives' cultural and religious beliefs. However, the primary source data demonstrates clear instances in which the captive's suicide by drowning was directly or indirectly undertaken as an act of resistance motivated by a cosmological belief in transmigration.

According to many eyewitnesses, conditions aboard slave vessels were horrendous, and these ships frequently became breeding grounds for all sorts of abhorrent behavior motivated by European racism. The evidence suggests that the negative beliefs harbored by captors aboard slave ships were themselves shaped by the published narratives of their predecessors: slave traders, ship captains, sailors, and merchants. European, mainly British, French, Dutch and Spanish, narratives published in the 17th and 18th centuries predisposed European readers and

immigrants to the notion of White supremacy and African inferiority, and these behaviors were manifested aboard the slave vessels.

My contribution to Middle Passage mortality studies and resistance discourse is to highlight the integration of West and West Central African cosmologies, agency, and martyrdom with the notion of transmigration as constituent components that motivated some of the suicidal drownings within the context of slave suicide ecology. It is important to establish that agency, and in some cases martyrdom, are fundamental aspects of West and West Central African views of independence and spiritual acumen. According to Roy Finkenbine, captives were known to harbor spiritual beliefs about the connection between death by drowning and the afterlife:

> Many slaves resisted by trying to jump overboard. When the vessel was still near the African coast, this was a realistic attempt to return home. Once the coast was out of sight, however, this too was an act of suicide. This act carried *potential religious significance*. Many slaves, especially those from the Kongo-Angola region of West-Central Africa, believed that the water would carry them home to Africa in a spiritual sense. Crews reacted by erecting an elaborate network of nets and poles over the sides of the ships to catch slaves who jumped. They also kept a vigilant eye whenever slaves were on deck for fresh air and exercise. Even so, slaves sometimes eluded the nets and made it into the water.[16] (Italics mine.)

Finkenbine introduces several critical observations: 1) He implies that the captives jumping overboard with such persistence constitutes a form of resistance to enslavement. 2) The vessel's proximity to land is an important factor when attempting to understand the motivations that would prompt captives to jump from the vessel. 3) Once the coast was no longer visible, leaping overboard was no longer an attempt at regaining the shore but instead seemed to have been suicide motivated by religious beliefs. 4) These suicidal behaviors were persistent enough to prompt the ship's crew to institute preventative measures, the netting, to re-capture the would-be

[16] Roy E. Finkenbine "Resistance during Middle Passage." In the American Mosaic: *The African American Experience*. ABC-CLIO, 2010-. Accessed January 25, 2016. http://africanamerican2.abc-clio.com.ezproxy.gvsu.edu/.

jumpers. However, Finkebine uses the words "potential religious significance." Thus, my central inquiry is to more fully determine to what extent suicidal drownings as acts of resistance may have been motivated by traditional West or Central West African cosmologies and belief systems.

Research Design

Patrick Manning's assertion that "[t]he history of Africans and people of African descent, a complex story in itself, lies at the center of the history of humanity"[17] prompts us to turn a critical eye on historiography as we know it. Historians have mis-used publications and other narrative sources about Africans from self-proclaimed experts that may have been biased in their assessments of the contributions, strategies, and struggles of African people during the Middle Passage. Working against that traditional approach, I use those same assessments, including the misrepresentations of African culture they demonstrate, to construct a reparative history that seeks to capture the voices and lives that are otherwise absent and unheard .

This study examines Parliamentary testimonies, seeking to understand the motivation for suicidal drownings as a form of resistance. I utilize the mixed study method for interpreting and analyzing the data. Five distinct areas of scholarship related to the Transatlantic Slave Trade frame the discussion: maritime scholarship, mortality studies, revolt and insurrection studies, and ethnographic and African traditional religious studies. That is, I used the historical method in conjunction with case studies to examine primary and secondary source materials. I closely examine ethnographies, interrogating the notes of persons who lived among Africans and

[17] Patrick Manning, *The African Diaspora: A History Through Culture*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2009, XV.

composed extensive data about the Ibo, the Hausa, the Asante, and the Ga. Africana Critical Theory provided a lens for examining primary source data, taking into account the role of racism and White supremacy when interrogating West and West Central African cosmologies and worldviews.[18] I blend these methodological approaches to help explain the role each of the following played within a slave suicide ecological framework: religious belief systems, agency, and martyrdom. In doing so, I seek to understand why some captives chose suicide by drowning as a form of resistance during the Transatlantic Slave Trade. I examine primary source data, accounts written between the years of 1720-1820 that mention captives committing suicide by drowning in the Middle Passage. I chose the case study method because it was the most reliable way to argue for the necessity of exploring suicide and mortality studies and the role of the West and West Central African's worldviews regarding resistance and transmigration.

Suicide and Africana Critical Theory

In examining the scholarship on suicide in the African context through the lens of psychology and psychiatry, I use Africana Critical Theory as a working methodology. In doing so, I focus on the role of religious beliefs as influencers of suicide by drowning and analyze African cosmology and agency as prime motivators of the notion of a "good death." Russell Adams argues for a paradigm shift in the manner in which African peoples are interpreted, analyzed, and explained.[19] Volumes of studies and much scholarship focuses on the Transatlantic Slave Trade, and these studies cover topics ranging from economics to the numbers of males verses females captured, the ages of enslaved persons, nutrition and sickness, and geopolitics, among others. However, as noted above, African American and African Studies (AAA) as a

[18] Serie McDougal, *Research Methods in Africana Studies*, 2.
[19] Russell L. Adams, *Intellectual Questions and Imperatives in the Development of Afro- American Studies (1984), The African American Studies Reader*, edited, by Nathaniel Norment, Jr, Durham, Carolina Academic Press, 2007, 377.

discipline has been charged with the responsibility of *changing the way* the world views persons of African descent, which requires a re-evaluation of the traditional social theories used to interpret African experiences. AAA therefore challenges the ways in which African experiences, religions, worldviews, and cosmologies have been traditionally interpreted.

Joseph Harris states that, "[t]he history of Africa is relevant to the history of Black people throughout the world. This is partly because persons of African ancestry are disbursed throughout the world and partly because of the general derogatory image Africans and Black people everywhere have inherited from Western history."[20] Harris assesses the implicit biases and unfavorable interpretations in non-African scholarship about African people and insists on the need for alternative approaches to writing about African people and their descendants. Specifically regarding the need for alternative approaches to understanding African experience of Transatlantic Slave Trade, Harris states,

> A recognition of the magnitude of this problem is the acknowledgement of the heavy burden on the shoulders of the historian who seeks honestly to reconstruct the black historical experience, but who at the same time realizes that even before that task can be fulfilled, a solid historical foundation must be established by confronting and destroying the multitude of myths fashioned by Europeans of yesteryear and transmitted to the contemporary world. [21]

Writing in 1972, Harris points out that the enormous amount of non-African scholarship on the Transatlantic Slave Trade requires us to reconstruct and debunk that scholarship when it overlooks the role of racism and White supremacy when examining the captive Africans' expression of self-worth and humanity. Harris' observations remain relevant today.

Joseph E. Holloway, a Professor of Pan African Studies at California State University-Northridge and a specialist in cross-cultural studies relating to Africa and Afro-Americana, states

[20] Joseph E. Harris, *Africans and Their History*, New York, New American Library. 1972, 11.
[21] Ibid., 11.

that for centuries, scholars have studied the enslaved Africans' resistance in the Americas and their lived experiences on the plantation, but little attention has been given to the patterns and motivation for revolts aboard slave ships during the Transatlantic crossing between 1650 and 1860.[22] Marcus Rediker, the Distinguished Professor of Early American History and Atlantic History at the University of Pittsburgh, states further that

> even less attention has been given to the slave ship environment, religion, agency and martyrdom and their roles in fueling those revolts, insurrections and other forms of resistance. Within the rich historical literature on the Slave Trade and through the many stories and tales that have been told about slavery, the slave ship itself has been a neglected topic.[23]

Rediker argues that though previous studies have examined various aspects of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, limited inquiry has been devoted to the roles of religion, agency, and martyrdom as they relate to slave ship insurrections. To Rediker's list, I would add suicide as a relatively unexamined shipboard phenomenon.[24]

This section describes the methodological tools I use to highlight the connections between resistance, African traditional belief systems, and mortality at sea. I introduce my theorization about the motivations for suicidal drownings, interpreting my findings through a lens of Africana Critical Theory (ACT).[25] I also examine David Eltis' *Transatlantic Slave Trade Database* to authenticate the dates and times of the vessels mentioned in the sworn testimonies. After examining the evidence, I conclude that many cases of self-destructive behavior fall into three main categories: religious faith in the afterlife (also known as transmigration), the exercise of agency, and pursuing martyrdom as a means of regaining honor.

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[22] Joseph Holloway, *African Insurrections on Board Slave Ships*, http://slaverebellion.org/index.php?page=african-insurrections
[23] Marcus Rediker, *The Slave Ship*, New York, Penguin Group, 2007,10-11.
[24] Ibid.,10-11.
[25] Serie McDougal, "Research Methods in Africana Studies", p.2.

I chose ACT as my primary means of examining the source data as it informs my examination of Ibo religious traditions and their usefulness for explaining captives' suicide by drowning. Russell Adams posits that African American Studies is a tool for documenting the history of the Black experience.[26] He states that "the primary purpose of the Afro-American/Black Studies consists of the research and instruction designed to help *change the way people*[27] perceive the social world, particularly the aspects of race and the Black experience."[28] This approach emphasizes the role of religious belief systems, agency, and martyrdom within a slave suicide ecological framework as an explanation of why some captives chose suicide by drowning over slavery. John S. Mbiti, in his book entitled *African Religion and Philosophy*, asserts that when speaking of African religions, one must refer to them in the plural:

> There are about one thousand African peoples (tribes) and each has its own religious system. These religions are a reality which calls for academic scrutiny and which must be reckoned with in modern fields of life, like economics, politics, education, and Christian and Muslim work. To ignore these traditional beliefs, attitudes and practices can only lead to a lack of understanding of African behavior and problems. Religion is the strongest element in traditional background and exerts probably the greatest influence upon the thinking and living of the people concerned.[29]

Mbiti challenges scholars to consider the differences between African and non-African worldviews as a starting point. Avoiding or ignoring these differences leads to misunderstanding how important religion is to every aspect of the African's existence. Therefore, to get at the answers that would satisfy my inquiry, I examine captains' logs, surgeons' memoirs and eyewitness accounts recorded by the Parliament of Great Britain. I especially sought sources that

[26] Russell L. Adams, *Intellectual Questions and Imperatives in the Development of Afro- American Studies (1984), The African American Studies Reader*, edited, by Nathaniel Norment, Jr, Durham, Carolina Academic Press, 2007, 377.
[27] The italics are mine.
[28] Adams, 377. The italics are mine.
[29] John S. Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy*, London, 1.

utilized interpreters or linguists to describe events that occurred aboard slave ships. Applying this method helped me to interrogate the data through the lens of an African worldview. As I read the documents, I sought out references to religious practices, cosmological notions, or cultural anomalies that might provide insight into the experience of the captives, particularly as those experiences may have been overlooked, misinterpreted, or underestimated by their European captors. Reading the documents in this way, I listened for the voices of the captives and discerned a continuity in the way many West and West Central Africans responded to bondage. Viewing the data with a focus on the captives' acts of resistance through a lens of religion and culture shed light on the importance of land, family, religion, and a belief in the afterlife for understanding why some captives elected to commit suicide by drowning. The captives' views of the afterlife provide a context for examining agency and transmigration as essential motivators for committing suicide at sea. Furthermore, understanding the importance of dancing in the context of African communal fellowship proved invaluable when interpreting the multiple times whippings or beatings are mentioned in connection with "messing or dancing" on these ships. For instance, African communal cultures connect dancing with jubilance and joy. When captives were forced to dance aboard slave vessels with the goal of strengthening them for eventual sale, they often refused and were punished severely. Dancing under duress aboard a slave slip lacked the context of joy and jubilance they would have usually connected with the sound of the drum. Their refusal was a rebellion that in some cases led to death.

Testimonies in the *Abridgement of the minutes* help to illuminate the plight of the men, women, and children who were forced to migrate to the New World on slave ships. Africana Critical Theory allows me to highlight the role of the captives' cosmologies in explaining their suicidal behavior. As a theoretical lens, ACT helped me read against the grain of testimonials

that are often overtly racist, espousing the then-developing ideology of White Supremacy in how captive behaviors were observed and interpreted. This approach illuminates the similarities among the cosmologies of many migrating West African groups, such as the Gâ, Akan, Ashanti, and Ibo, particularly concerning beliefs about transmigration, suicide, and the afterlife. Though there are significant differences in how each of these groups express their beliefs, I believe each offered cultural and cosmological traditions that members drew on when making sense of their plight during the Middle Passage. While West and West Central African peoples are not monolithic, they use similar approaches to solve the same problem. ACT is helpful when examining why some groups committed suicide and initiated shipboard insurrections while others did not. Along with accounts by Europeans involved in the trade, interpreters on some of vessels also lent their African voices and perspectives to the record. Historian Stephanie Smallwood helps explain the presence of these voices:

> European Cultures, in conjunction with coastal African cultures, developed a rumor-based body of knowledge of their own about the Atlantic arena. Though experience beyond the coastal waters was rare among resident Africans before the nineteenth century, small numbers of them crossed the Atlantic aboard European vessels and subsequently returned to Africa as witnesses to the world beyond the inshore waters. Particularly along the Gold Coast, where European settlement was so extensive, African men, occasionally taken to Europe to learn English, returned to the Gold Coast and found employment as interpreters.[30]

For the recently enslaved Africans, the slave ship engendered a new spatial phenomenon, and the torturous experience aboard encouraged self-destruction as a means of exacting freedom, honor, and spiritual return to Africa. The eye witness accounts extracted from the *Abridgement of the minutes of the evidence taken before a Committee of the Whole House, to whom it was referred to consider of the slave-trade, (1789-1791*) provide critical answers to my inquiries as to why so many captives drowned themselves at sea.

[30] Stephanie Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery*, 130.

Some West and West Central Africans revolted by jumping overboard, and eyewitness testimonies provide support for the theory that these suicides were religiously motivated. As I mentioned above, I employed Serie McDougal's Africana Critical Theory to frame my analysis toward an understanding of African worldviews regarding slavery, death, and the afterlife. In doing so, I arrive at a different perspective on the role of suicide in these cosmologies and particularly in the context of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Examining the role of cosmology and transmigration in the belief systems of different ethnic groups reveals the importance of cultural and religious factors for understanding how captives acted on their desperate desires for freedom.[31] In particular, such an understanding requires a consideration of the differences between the African worldview and its cyclical character and the more linear worldview of their European captors.

[31] William Piersen, "White Cannibals, Black Martyrs: Fear, Depression and Religious Faith as Causes of Suicide Among New Slaves," *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 62, No.2. (April 1977),147.

RESEARCH QUESTION

On May 8, 1788, William Dolben, an abolitionist employed by Oxford University, rose to speak on the floor of the House of Commons. He urged his colleagues to consider a most pertinent and evil event—the rampant deaths in the Middle Passage. He called attention to the conditions on board slave vessels that were causing thousands of men and women to perish at sea. He warned his listeners that if something was not done immediately "[a]s many as 10,000 lives, slaves, and British seamen, could be lost."[32] Dolben made such an impression on his colleagues that they voted to adopt slave ship packing regulations, and ships were subsequently required to maintain loading manifests in order to remain in the Trade. These so-called Dolben's Act regulations stated that a slaving vessel of fewer than 150 tons could only load five persons per three tons of the vessel. Vessels above 150 tons were limited to three men per two tons.[33] These regulations were put in place to reduce overcrowding and tight packing on vessels; however, overcrowding, disease, and sickness were not the only causes of death. Many captives leapt over the sides of vessels, finding death in the open seas.

My central research seeks to answer the following questions: What motivated these men and women to commit suicide by jumping overboard, and how did their cosmology, agency, and resistance or desire for martyrdom factor into their decision? In my analysis of primary sources, I identified several connections between suicide by drowning, West and Central African cosmology, and resistance. Some of my key findings include the following: 1) Suicide attempts on slave ships were not always connected to bigger revolts or insurrections, though they were forms of resistance. 2) In some of the narratives, the suicidal drownings are described as

[32] Thomas Clarkson, History of the Rise, Progress and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave Trade (London, 1839), 296ff.
[33] Buxton, The African Slave Trade,122-123.

motivated by religious belief. 3) First-person narratives by the victims themselves are not available. 4) However, eye witness accounts by ship linguists and interpreters provide some evidence for understanding what motivated these drownings from an African perspective. 5) Captains and their crews were aware some of their captives held religious beliefs about suicide by drowning and took steps to prevent captives from leaping overboard. 6) Some who drowned themselves had no apparent religious motivation at all. Drawing on the findings listed above, I re-interrogate previous studies that focus on slave resistance but stop short of considering suicide. Some of the available narratives illustrate the captives' cosmology and view of the afterlife. My examination of the primary source data clearly shows that suicide by drowning was in some cases an act of resistance motivated by a cosmological understanding that included transmigration back to Africa.

CHAPTER 1

SITUATING THE STUDY (PRECURSORS TO THE TRANSATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE)

This chapter examines the on land experiences of the men, women, and children who were sold into slavery due to various causes, including in the course of wars amongst families and nation groups. Others were sold into slavery after being kidnapped or as punishment for a crime, and still others were born slaves. Those who wanted to sell or purchase people did so without discrimination. Their goal was to acquire as many Black bodies as possible for transport to the New World. The captives stolen from Africa were not a homogenous group. Boubacar Barry in his book, *Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade*, informs us that there had been cultural and demographic blends and exchanges in the Senegambia region since the fifteenth century.[34] This observation demands that scholars not treat African people and cultures as though they constitute one monolithic group and leads to an inquiry as to how these societies developed and what types of relationships, networks, religious views, and concepts of the afterlife were in play.

Though the captives were accustomed to community and tribal kinship, they faced many cultural and linguistic barriers to developing community with each other at sea. These stolen people came from many different national and ethnic groups, classes, and backgrounds. James Frazer, who spent twenty years in Africa engaged in slave trading, testified that some captives were content with their initial condition as slaves because they were born into slavery and

[34] Boubacar Barry, *Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998, 3.

seldom expressed resentment against those who sold them.[35] However, other testimonials clearly paint a portrait of suffering captives, overcome with a sense of loss and longing for home.

The fears and traumatic stress experienced within the context of brutality, assumed racial superiority, and enslavement, I argue, are the foundation for a slave suicide ecology. This interpretive framework helps to contextualize suicide by drowning as a form of resistance. As Sowande M. Mustakeem states, "bond people underwent tremendous sorrow from initial capture to their displacement into distant slave societies."[36] She points out that enslaved persons desperately attempted to escape their bondage, and these attempts were not always acts of resistance but behavioral manifestations of their various states of incarceration.[37] For example, "melancholy" was frequently cited in testimonials as the primary reason for captives' low countenance and sulkiness. Isaac Wilson, a former surgeon in His Majesty's Navy who served on the Elizabeth in May of 1788, states that he was on a ship that took on 602 slaves. Of the 602, 155 died from melancholy. He claimed to have heard them say, in their language, that they wished to die, and he claimed that they brought about their own deaths just by thinking about it hard enough.[38] "Melancholy" or "fixed melancholy" is a term frequently used to describe a longing for home expressed in the captives' moans and groans. The literature supports the proposition that seaboard death rates increased when captives exhibited "fixed melancholy."

This chapter covers four themes. First, I discuss the trade relationships between Northern Africa and Portugal, including the role of village raids and the kidnapping of innocent African men, women, and children for the Transatlantic Slave Trade. The next section discusses

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[35] Testimony of James Frazer, *Abridgement of the minutes of the evidence, taken before a Committee of the Whole House, to whom it was referred to consider of the slave trade*, (1789-1790), Part.II.,3-4.
[36] Sowande M. Mustakeem, *Slavery at Sea, Terror, Sex, and Sickness in The Middle Passage*, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 2016, 106.
[37] Sowande M. Mustakeem, 106.
[38] Testimony of Isaac Wilson, *Abridgement of the minutes of the evidence, taken before a Committee of the Whole House, to whom it was referred to consider of the slave trade*, (1789-1790), Part II, 219.

mortality and West and West Central African belief systems with a focus on the role they played in deaths at sea. The high suicide rate in the Middle Passage had numerous effects on the Slave Trade. This third section is a brief discourse on insurrection and resistance studies. Resistance studies, which examines various forms of non-compliance, supports my argument that many deaths at sea were acts of resistance. In the context of slavery, resistance manifests itself in many forms. Enslaved Africans resisted their captivity as a way of exercising agency and self-determination, and these acts of defiance occurred as individual decisions as well as group insurrections. Resistance appeared as faux sicknesses, work slow-downs, the damaging of equipment and machinery, and running away, to name a few. Less overt means of resistance consisted of stealing property or profit from their oppressors. The most crucial and often most misunderstood forms of resistance were when women terminated their pregnancies or committed infanticide, killing their offspring to save them from enslavement. In so doing, these women deprived their captors of their offspring. Plantation owners were also aware that those who prepared their meals could poison them as well.

Finally, I examine the role of abolitionists in bringing the horrors of slavery to the public sphere and the use of court documents as further support for resistance and mortality studies. Any close examination of slavery and the Middle Passage would be remiss if it failed to account for the many ways in which captives rebelled against their enslavement. Though resistance has been documented as taking on many forms, from starvation to work stoppages, little attention has been given to suicidal drowning as a form of resistance, in part because most scholarship on slavery focuses on land-based rebellions.

Northern Africa and Portugal

The area of West Africa known as Guinea, New Guinea, and the Gold Coast, according to Albert van Dantzig, was appealing to many of the nations of the western world because it was one of the few gold producing areas open to traders of all nations.[39] After the 1700s, the Lower Guinea coast became an important source of slave labor for the West Indies and Latin America.[40] The Dutch had begun to make contact with the low Guinea coast as early as 1595 when they sought gold to finance their wars against Spain. However, the initial incursion into Africa by Europeans was led by Prince Henry, "the Navigator." Prince Henry was a member of the Royal Portuguese family and partly responsible for opening up the early exploration of Africa to the Portuguese in the early 1400s.[41] According to James Rawley, the Portuguese were the first to open the Atlantic Ocean, which started the Atlantic Slave Trade, and they were the first to establish an overseas European empire.[42] Rawley further argues that the Mediterranean had long been the center of maritime enterprise and trade, including the trafficking of slaves[43]: "Portuguese caravels were small, fast and light, unlike the Mediterranean galley and round boats. These vessels were ideal for African pathfinding."[44] The thirst for riches and conquest fueled the maritime journeys of the Portuguese in general and Prince Henry in particular. From 1415 to his death in 1460, Prince Henry was driven by great voyages of discovery and animated zeal against Muslims, greed for gold, and his quest for the legendary kingdom of Prester John.[45] Prince

[39] Albert van Dantzig, "*WILLEM BOSMAN'S NEW AND ACCURATE DESCRIPTION OF THE COAST OF GUNIES; HOW ACCURATE IS IT*?", History in Africa, Vol.,1,1974, 101.
[40] Ibid., 101.
[41] Talmage Anderson, & Stewart, James, *Introduction to African American Studies*: TRANSDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES AND IMPLICATIONS, Baltimore, IMPRINT EDITIONS, 2007, p.50.
[42] James Rawley, A., *The Transatlantic Slave Trade: A History*, London, University of Nebraska Press, 1981, 18.
[43] Ibid., p.18.
[44] Ibid., p.18.
[45] Ibid., p 18-19.

Henry learned of the gold mines in Wangara, the great city of Timbuktu, and the various trade routes that led to Western Africa from his school of sailors.[46] Though Prince Henry was primarily preoccupied with ocean navigation and maritime arts, his efforts sparked European exploration, which eventually resulted in the Transatlantic Slave Trade.[47]

Slavery as a concept is not unique to Africa. On the African continent, "[p]ersons who were conscripted to slavery were generally captives who had been conquered or subjugated as a result of intergroup or intra-group conflicts and warfare."48 Their social conscription was not based on skin color, and in many cases, captives were able to return to a reasonable status in society. The form of chattel slavery that became the norm in North America simply did not exist in Africa. As Rawley states, African slavery was an integral part of the complex social structure and "not characterized by class or caste."[49] It was an integral part of the complex social structure.[50] In other words, slavery in the African context cost the lives of many of the Africans, but the brutality congruent with North American slavery based on skin color was unknown in African slave systems.[51]

According to Rawley, the "White men's rationalization that the slave trade substituted American slavery is false. There does not appear to have been, as has been claimed, a reservoir of slaves in Africa ready for export at the time of the European contact."[52] European explorers and colonialists created a system of prejudice based on skin color that was designed to support the enslavement of Africans for profit. Prior to the Atlantic Slave Trade, slaves were usually the

[46] Ibid., 50.
[47] James Rawley, *The Transatlantic Slave Trade: A History*, London, University of Nebraska Press, 1981, 50.
[48] Ibid., 49.
[49] Ibid., p.11.
[50] Ibid., p.11.
[51]Rawley p.11.
[52] Ibid., p.11.

same race and nationality as their slaveholder and in many cases were permitted even to marry within the slave holding community.[53] The incursion of Europe into Africa, the raping of the Continent, and the marketing of Black bodies built an empire for America fueled by the Transatlantic Slave Trade, which eventually became known as the Middle Passage.[54]

In his autobiography, Olaudah Equiano describes how some Africans were captured before being loaded aboard:

> One day, when all our people were gone out to their works as usual, and only I and my dear sister were left to mind the house, two men and a woman got over our walls, and in a moment seized us both. My sister and I were separated, and I ended up in the hands of a slave dealer who supplied the Atlantic slave ships. Six months later I found myself on board a slave ship.[55]

Dr. Alexander Falconbridge also provides testimony regarding the frequency of persons who were kidnapped and sold to slavers, indicating that some captains were aware that the people they were buying had been kidnapped.[56]

Mortality Studies and West and West Central African Belief Systems

Studies on the mortality of African captives have taken several forms; however, not all studies on Middle Passage suicides take into account the percipient psychological causes of anguish that preceded some of the suicides. In the context of this dissertation, I focus on the mortality of captives at sea as well as the psychological distress that made them more likely to attempt suicide. I begin with the initial contact between African persons and their slave catchers. The journey from the interior of the continent to the coastline, coupled with diseases contracted while traveling and the unsanitary castles and forts that awaited them, contributed to the

[53]Talmage Anderson & Stewart, p.49.
[54] Ibid., p 50.
[55]Olaudah Equiano. *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, Written by Himself.* Edited by Robert J. Allison. New York: W. Durell, 1791. Reprint, Boston: Bedford Books, 1995, 47-48. Annotated by Colleen A. Vasconcellos.
[56] *Abridgement minutes,* Part II, 227, 243.

captives' physical, emotional, and psychological distress. Additionally, in some cases, depression and a desire for freedom resulted in self-destruction at sea. Klein, Engerman, Haines, and Shlomowitz describe the arduousness of the overland voyage:

> The march to the sea, which often was conducted in stages, with sales to various intermediaries, would have had varying death rates depending on distance, diet, and diseased environments as well as whether the enslaved were also made to carry goods to the coast. Losses on the coast before sale and departure reflected the length of the waiting time until the cargo was completed, and the vessel sailed. Changing efficiencies in marketing and the frequency of voyage arrival could affect mortality by their impact on the length of the period in coastal barracoons on board vessels prior to sailing.[57]

Even before captives were loaded onto slave vessels, many suffered from diseases acquired either en route to the Guinea coast or after being housed in the contaminated and filth-ridden slave quarters.

As such, the Diaspora as a mode of migration is central to the transformation of a people from Africans to African Americans. Consequently, the study of African culture prior to and after the Middle Passage, and the subsequent slave trade, is crucial for a complete understanding of slavery in the Americas and elsewhere.[58]

Though my research focuses primarily on the experiences of enslaved Africans in the Middle Passage, this initial discussion examines the circumstances that preceded their voyages and how they arrived at the ships in the first place. Brown states that [set up the quote, here]

> In the eighteenth-century British slave trade, mortality rates among captives during the crossing range between 10-15 percent. These numbers improved over the course of the century, as the percentage fell in response to improvements in ship design, health, and medical care, as well as late eighteenth century legislature that regulated the numbers of Africans carried on each ship and stipulated that bonuses would be paid if captains and

[57] Herbert S. Klein, Stanley Engerman, Robin Haines and Ralph Shlomowitz, "Transoceanic Mortality: The Slave Trade in Comparative Perspective", *The Williams and Mary Quarterly*, Vol.58, No.1, New Perspectives on the Transatlantic Slave Trade (Jan., 2001), 99.

[58] Carmen P Thompson, "Middle Passage." Gale Library of Daily Life: Slavery in America. Ed. Orville Vernon Burton. Vol. 1. Detroit: Gale, 2008. 6-8. U.S. History in Context. Web. 25 Apr. 2014.

> surgeons ensured better survival rates. . . Ailments acquired during travel to the coast overwhelmed the captives once they entered the deadly conditions of the ships.[59]

The regulation mentioned above refers to the Dolben's Act of 1788. However, the Portuguese, along with the Spanish, first introduced ships as a means of transporting labor. The movement and the long seaward journey from Africa to North America created dietary concerns for human cargo. As the Transatlantic Slave Trade increased in capacity and technology, slave vessels because increasingly well-suited to their tasks: "Initially, regular merchant ships were converted to slave ships especially fitted to hold human cargo. By the second half of the eighteenth century, however, vessels were designed and constructed specifically for the Trade. They were sleek, narrow vessels with special grates and port holes to direct air below deck."[60] As the technology of slave vessels improved, so did the need for medical services aboard. Slave merchants began hiring carpenters and surgeons. The surgeons were primarily charged with minimizing the number of deaths at sea so as to preserve the ship's cargo. Some of the accounts of the surgeons proved to be unreliable. An example of this unreliability was noted earlier in the discussion about the Zong. The captain was formerly the surgeon, and it was his mis-calculation that led to the deaths of 132 captives. He, however, was reliant on the fact that he could recoop his loses under the "perils at sea" clause of the merchants' insurance policy. According to Covey and Eisnach, "[e]merging knowledge of nutrition in the eighteenth century indicated that certain fruits and vegetables would prevent scurvy. Actually what was known at the time stemmed from scientific tests conducted by slave surgeons in the British Royal Navy in 1747 in which they

[59] Vincent Brown, *The Reaper's Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2008,44-45.
[60] Herbert C. Covey and Dwight Eisnach, *Recollections of African American Foods and Food Ways from the Slave Narrative*, 2009, p, 46.

concluded that lemon juice prevented scurvy (beta force 2007)."[61] The surgeons state further that, "[s]cience had not yet determined that it was vitamin C in these foods that produced this effect, but it was known that citrus fruits were among the foods that could prevent scurvy, and so at about this time, it became common practice to load such foods, limes in particular, onto slave vessels for the Middle Passage."[62]

Covey and Eisnach's assertions are well documented in the meticulous manifests of British and Dutch ships. According to Holloway, the most common food aboard slave ships was the African yam. The yams seemed to provide the necessary nutritional value needed for the voyage while assisting in combating sea sickness and scurvy. One slave merchant noted that roughly 200 yams per slave were required for sustenance during the Atlantic crossing. The ship's log of the slave vessel *The Elizabeth* on a 1754 voyage to Rhode Island lists provisions of yams, plantains, bread, cornbread, fish, and rice. In another account, the logs of the slave ship *Othello* in 1768 lists hundreds of baskets of yams taken aboard for the slaves as well as smaller quantities of plantains, limes, and peppers. James Frazer stated that caffada, calavances, plantains, bananas, yams, sweet potatoes, and pumpkins flourished in Angola, one of the seaports on his journeys.[63]

Though there were attempts through dietary measures to lessen the death rate in conjunction with the actual treatment of captives, many factors influenced shipboard mortality. First, the period from capture to sailing significantly exceeded the period of sailing from Africa to the New World, although the density of the population was greater aboard the ships than at earlier stages of the captives' journey. Second, variations in the internal conditions in Africa had a marked and direct impact on mortality, not to mention a significantly indirect effect on the

[61] Herbert C. Covey and Dwight Eisnach, *Recollections of African American Foods and Food Ways From the Slave Narrative*, 2009, p.47.
[62] Ibid.,47.
[63] Testimony of James Frazer, Abridgement minutes, Part II,3.

strength and mental composure of slaves at the start of the Middle Passage. Care and treatment on slave vessels could correlate with significant differences in shipboard mortality for slaves and for crew. Third, because the numbers of those enslaved and entering into the Transatlantic Trade varied with internal African political and economic conditions, such as warfare and famine, there should be some obvious link between such conditions and mortality in the transatlantic crossing. At present, too little is known about the relations among economics, climate, disease, and mortality because knowledge concerning the interconnections of the specific factors in Africa is limited and because the information about how rapidly such changes in African conditions might modify human behavior has not been adequately determined.[64]

Though attention has been given to the connection between the difficulties of land travel and the complex role of Africa and her inhabitants during the early stages of the Trade, the data make it clear that Africa and her people deeply influenced the building of America's social structure. The interactions between African captives and European merchants forged the foundation for the New American colonies, though the different influences of various African cultures are difficult to parse. Captives learned from each other aboard the ships. According to George Rawick, most discussions of American development have ignored, side-stepped or treated slavery and its aftermath as minor themes. I contend that the connection between the cosmology of the captives in the Middle Passage and the resulting suicide rate should also be counted as an area that has been largely unexplored. Rawick states that "emphasis has been placed instead upon geographic conditions, upon technological achievements and the organization of industry, upon ideological uniqueness, and upon governmental practice and

[64] Herbert S. Klein, Stanley Engerman, Robin Haines, and Ralph Shlomowitz, "Transoceanic Mortality: The Slave Trade in Comparative Perspective", 94.

constitutional theory."[65] Such focus has left unexamined the cosmological worldviews of African captives and how much they depended on religious views to help them navigate their experiences in the Middle Passage. Ikechukwu Anthony Kanu states that African worldviews, as underlining principles of cosmology, are basically religious, and they give a sense of purpose and direction to the lives of people, enabling them to act purposefully and exercise a measure of control over their environments.[66]

This dissertation argues that the experiences of the African captives cannot be divorced from the psychological stresses, religious commitments, ingenuity, and emotional challenges of those kidnapped and forced into involuntary migration. In order for the Atlantic Slave Trade to remain an economic success, its conductors were compelled to attend to the physical and nutritional needs of their captives.

However, the research makes it clear that food preservation was of constant concern as it determined the ability of the captives to survive during the long voyage. Coupled with the dependence on salted meats, this attention to detail exacerbated the prevalence of scurvy, fevers, flux, and dysentery.[67] Captives also suffered from friction sores, ulcers, and wounds as a result of injuries sustained from fights and whippings.[68] These conditions contributed to their desire for freedom, even when their only avenue of attaining it was through death. Maritime medicine developed in the process of the Trade as well as slave vessel technology.[69] In the midst of these developments, the captives' desire for freedom must be examined in its various phases of

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[65] George A. Rawick, *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography: From Sun Up to Sun Down, The Making of the Black Community*, Westport, Greenwood Press, 1972, xiii.
[66] Ikechukwu Anthony Kanu, *The Dimensions of African Cosmology*, FILOSOFIA THEORETICA JOURNAL OF AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY CULTURE AND RELIGIONS, Vol. 6, No 2-2017, 553.
George A. Rawick, *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography: From Sun Up to Sun Down, The Making of the Black Community*, Westport, Greenwood Press, 1972, 602.
[68] Ibid.,602.
[69] Ibid.,602.

evolution. The literature reveals how attempts to escape from slavery on these vessels took many forms. The enslaved were known to starve themselves, cut their own throats, and leap over board. Many of the West and West Central African captives would have been unfamiliar with sea vessels and sea travel. Faced with such an unknown and alien environment and coupled with the brutality of ships' crews, rampant sexual abuse, and general weariness, many of these captives chose self-destruction at sea. The voyage to the New World was one of fear, trepidation, harsh punishment, sickness, and disease.

Drowning, one of the most frightening ways to die, was one of the most frequent causes of death for African captives during the Middle Passage. Furthermore, George Francis Dow, an American Antiquarian born in 1868, describes the other hazards of falling overboard:

> Great numbers of sharks always followed slave ships, as if they knew that one or more bodies would be thrown daily, to their ravenous jaws. These sharks usually swim in company and when a dead slave is thrown over-board, one shark would bite of a leg, another an arm, while others would sink down with the body and all this happen with much less time than it takes to? describe the gruesome feast.[70]

However, before being loaded on the ships, many African captives were force-marched for miles across country to the Gold Coast. Simply stated, the trek and eventual loading of African captives onto slave vessels was the first step towards the development of the American slave culture and the economic growth of the colonies. The men and women who survived the journey proved the depth of fortitude and determination to live even when chained, starved, and beaten by their captives. Marcus Rediker points out that capitalism drove the Transatlantic Slave Trade and little concern was given to the captives and their experiences en route. History reminds us that once they were boarded, the brutality was immense. In the midst of such tragedy, I attempt to provide a window into the courage they displayed. Even those who survived the journey to the

[70] George Francis Dow, *Slave Ships and Slaving*, Canada, General Publishing Co, LTD, 2002, Kindle e-book version Loc.483.

ships and eventually rebelled by jumping overboard exhibited a tenacity that often goes underrepresented. One historian stated that a subjugated people, reduced to and held in a condition little better than that of domestic animals, is not likely to make much history. As uneducated slaves, Blacks were obviously in no position to lead noteworthy careers. They could not become doctors, lawyers, military leaders, architects, engineers, or statesmen.[71] Very few sources record the valor, tenacity, and the desire for freedom at all costs that were consistently demonstrated by African captives. Eric Taylor states that,

> In the year 1788 the former slave ship captain John Newton published an antislavery pamphlet entitled, *Thoughts Upon the African Slave Trade.* Newton refers to the African rebels as patriots. He clearly uses revolutionary rhetoric to challenge his audience not to see insurrection as the violent embodiment of savage and uncivilized Africans but as a fundamental assertion of humanity.[72]

Insurrection and Resistance Studies

Between the years of 1898 and 1914, Atlanta University produced more than 2100 pages of research by Black scholars. Included in this group were W.E.B. DuBois, (first name) Woodson, Lorenzo J. Greene, Charles H. Wesley, E. Franklin Frazier, Ralph J. Bunche, Charles S. Johnson, Abram Harris, and Sterling Brown.[73] As Black scholars emerged within the academy, the trajectory and purpose of the research about slavery and Africans and their diasporic relatives changed drastically. One such scholar, Dr. Manning Marable, argued that the study of African Americans is a study of "a struggle rooted in the concept that human beings collectively made their own history, fought to maintain their unique identity as a people and to

[71] Peter Chew, "Black History or Mythology' Blaming the 'Sambo' image on white historians, Negroes are attempting to produce an equally false picture of their racial past)," *American Heritage,* Volume 20, Issue 5 (August 1969): 7.
[72] Eric Taylor, Antislavery, Abolition, and the Atlantic World: If We Must Die: Shipboard Insurrections in the Era of the Atlantic Slave Trade, Louisiana, Louisiana University Press, 2006, p.169.
[73] Nathaniel Norment, Jr., THE AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDIES READER, Durham, Carolina Academic Press, 2007, 396.

secure by whatever means, the economic and political tools for self -determination and self -reliance."[74] I interpret Marable to mean that a true observation of Africans and their diasporic offspring must take its initial cues from Africa herself. Therefore, the culture and cosmological views of the captives are central to the examination of the Middle Passage experience.

Early European studies of the Atlantic Slave Trade conjured visions of naive Africans, European slave raids, and human beings sold for mere trinkets.[75] Historians characteristically avoided discussions about the trade except in conjunction with its abolition.[76] Up until the publication of Rawley's *The Transatlantic Slave Trade: A History*, no one-volume history of the Atlantic Slave Trade existed.[77] My research suggests that the historiography on the Transatlantic Slave Trade should address themes that overlap with mortality studies, African religious and cultural beliefs system studies, and resistance studies.

The Economy that Fueled the Transatlantic Slave Trade

The early plantations of the English and French were producers of tobacco. However, when the "Dutch introduced sugar to the French and English colonies it led to the development of a profitable booming economy and world market for sugar."[78] The result of the booming economy was an increase in the demand for free labor. Since sugar was more labor intensive than tobacco, the need for slaves intensified. While few studies show a clear correlation between the deaths of enslaved captives and this sugar boom, this increase in slave transport clearly exacerbated the mortality rates aboard slave vessels. The introduction of sugar played a critical

[74]M. Marable, "The Modern Miseducation of the Negro: Critiques of Black History Curricula," in *Black Studies curriculum Development Course Evaluations, Conference,* ed. Institution of the Black World (Atlanta: Institute of The Black World, 1981), C1-C28.
[75] James A. Rawley, *The Transatlantic Slave Trade: A History*, London, University of Nebraska Press, 1981, 1.
[76] Ibid.,1.
[77] James A. Rawley, *The Transatlantic Slave Trade: A History*, London 1.
[78] Talmage Anderson & Stewart, James, *Introduction to African American Studies: TRANSDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES AND IMPLICATIONS*, Baltimore, IMPRINT EDITIONS, 2007, 50.

role in the Atlantic Slave Trade.[79] The demand for African slaves increased due to the development of the plantation system of agriculture and the volatility of sugar harvesting.[80] Rawley states that "the severe manual labor of cultivating sugar required hands in numbers that as it turns out could be supplied only from Africa."[81] Studies have shown that sugar cultivation was more lethal than coffee, tobacco, or cotton, and this lethality is dramatically increased when factoring in onboard mortality.

Rawley further states in a study of Jamaica that "[w]herever slaves were not engaged in the production of sugar, their chances of survival were greater."[82] Though there was an influx of Europeans to the New World, the demands of labor required other sources of human power. Why were African slaves so popular in the Trade? According to Rawley, the Amer-Indians were the slavers' first choice, but the diseases imported to the New World by Europeans substantially decimated the indigenous populations. Buxton states that the several African born diseases were obtained by the captives as they waited in the Barracoons could not be inoculated.[83] By some estimates, the aboriginal population in America decreased from fifty-four million in 1492 to six million in 1650, due to largely to sickness and starvation.[84] In response, Britain increased its slave trading commerce to accommodate the need for human agricultural resources. Britain reigned supreme and prospered handsomely due to the large numbers of enslaved Africans brought to the West Indies. Millions of Africans were shipped to Barbados, Jamaica, Trinidad, Bermuda, Bahamas, and other Spanish islands such as Cuba and Puerto Rico.[85] Though the

[79] Ibid.,51.
[80] James Rawley, A., *The Transatlantic Slave Trade: A History*, London, University of Nebraska Press, 1981, 12.
[81] Ibid.,12.
[82] Ibid.,13.
[83] The African Slave Trade and Its Remedy, 114-115, 116-117.
[84] James A. Rawley, *The Transatlantic Slave Trade: A History*, London, University of Nebraska Press, 1981,12.
[85] Talmage Anderson & Stewart, James, 53.

numbers of Africans brought to the U.S. were minimal in comparison, the plight of the Africans and their journey remains significant.

The commercial empire of the New World—based mostly on the production and disbursement throughout Europe of sugar, tobacco, precious metals, coffee, indigo, and cotton—was fueled and supported by African slave labor.[86] Both these commodities and their producers were ferried back and forth across the Atlantic on ships or caravels. However, historically speaking, the conversation among scholars at the time was not concerned with the slaves but with the accumulation of wealth and power, and the creation of a capitalist society. Scholars and historians were focused almost exclusively on the rise of capitalism and the commercial revolution taking place.[87] Though the movement of enslaved Africans was essential to the progress of the New World, the discussion regarding human trafficking was far from the headlines of early historiographers. In one sense, the early studies on slavery, the Transatlantic Slave Trade, and the Diaspora focused on the arrival of enslaved Africans and how they coped with and survived life on the plantations in North America and the West Indies. The majority of these studies focused on how crucial slave labor was to the sugar industry, food production, and the expansion of commerce and capitalism into the Caribbean and Brazil.[88]

Many of these studies were written by scholars to support their theses assigning various notions of inhumanity to Africans and working to prove their inferiority to Europeans. Furthermore, most of these studies are concerned with North America, the West Indies, Latin America, and Brazil as viewed by non-African scholars, and the voices represented in them are

[86] James A. Rawley, 3.
[87] Ibid., 8.
[88] Rawley., 9.

those of White scholars, White plantation owners, White merchants, and White people in general.

W.E.B. DuBois directly addresses the lack of African perspectives in the literature: "Since the rise of the sugar empire and the resultant cotton kingdom, there has been consistent effort to rationalize negro slavery by omitting Africa from World history, so that today it is almost universally assumed that history can be truly written without reference to negroid peoples."[89] Here, DuBois critiques how history has been recorded for centuries, the mindset of the recorders and the publishers, as well as the effect the publications have had on their audiences. He reminds us that a large portion of the history of the world has been written about Africa but not by Africans, a context that diminishes the perspective of the captive and posits the captor's narrative as the norm. Secondly, his observation points to the absence of cosmology and agency on the part of African people's historical and cultural development before the European maritime incursion.

My research seeks to address the absence DuBois references, reconstructing from testimonials and narratives the African perspective. I seek to surface the voices of those lost during the Middle Passage and what motivated their behavior. Early European scholars presented West and West Central African peoples as one monolithic group, for the most part, because they were not interested in learning the cultures, languages, and customs of their captives, basing their assumptions of their captives' inferiority simply on skin color.

However, the captives aboard slave vessels came from diverse peoples and cultures. Commenting on the wide variety of origins, Nwokeji states, "The Bight of Biafra supplied an

[89] W.E.B. DuBois, *The World and Africa: An Inquiry into The Part Which Africa Has Played In World History*, New York, International Publishers, 1946, p, vii.

estimated 13 percent of all African captives transported to the New World, it is only third to West Africa and the Bight of Benin."[90] This means that examining several aspects of African culture, or Africanisms, is undeniably important to the discussion of the Middle Passage experience. Religion and family values were entwined in the cultures of these enslaved people and important for any examination that seeks to understand their perspectives and motivations. Whereas Falola and Childs focus on the Yoruba dispersion from Yoruba Land, Nwokeji focuses primarily on the Ibo, which he states made up the largest group of Africans to reach North America and the Caribbean during the eighteenth century.[91] However, from the forced meeting of these two readily identifiable ethnic groups comes the development of pidgin beliefs that soon became a part of the New World identity of the captives. The acknowledgment of these differences and connections are important to this discourse. For example, the Ibo allegedly presented significant problems for slave traders due to their willingness to self-destruct. Not all Middle Passage captives were Ibo, yet as one examines the different ethnic groups, their religious beliefs and their views of the afterlife present certain commonalities, particularly regarding the concept of transmigration. Falola and Childs argue that "African American historiography has been almost exclusive to race, racism, and the overarching racial consciousness among the enslaved and their descendants while largely ignoring the specific, cultural, social and historical legacies of specific African cultures."[92] Here, the authors emphasize the importance of understanding the experiences of enslaved Africans in terms of their rich and diverse cultural contexts. Answering this call, the next chapter examines the

[90] Ugo G. Nwokeji, *The Slave Trade and Culture in the Bight of Biafra: An African Society in The Atlantic World*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2010, xiii.
[91] Ibid., xiii.
[92] Ugo G. Nwokeji, *The Slave Trade and Culture in the Bight of Biafra: An African Society in The Atlantic World*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2010, xii.

literature on maritime studies with a particular focus on places where these studies fall short of connecting shipboard observations of captives' acts of resistance and agency with the cosmological and cultural frameworks that would have informed those acts.

CHAPTER 2

HISTORIOGRAPHY OF MARITIME LITERATURE

Chapter one explored the land conditions of kidnapped Africans as a precursor and contributor to their subsequent deaths by drowning. This next chapter turns toward an examination of the slave vessel and the challenges its environment represented for the captives. Since the slave vessel was the only means of transatlantic travel, I begin with a review of existing scholarship in this area, examining how earlier studies drew from and interpreted primary sources on the Middle Passage. In a separate chapter, I discuss in greater detail the direct evidence from those primary sources.

Literature on Sea Vessels and Their Tragedies

The following sources focus on slave vessels and the tragic events that took place on board. The historiography regarding slave ships falls into three categories. The first category concerns the slave ships themselves. Texts in this category are as follows: *The Diligent,* by Robert Harms; *The Zong,* by James Walvin; *The Amistad Rebellion,* by Marcus Rediker; *The Slave Ship: A Human History*, by Marcus Rediker; *Slave Ship Guerrero,* by Gail Swanson; *Dreams of Africa in Alabama: The Slave Ship Clotilda and the Story of the Last Africans Brought to America,* by Sylviane A. Diouf (Archaeologists have recently located the wreck *Clotilda* off the coast of Alabama); and *Spirit Dive,* by Michael H. Cottman. Each of these sources focuses specifically on the voyages of individual ships that recorded enormous losses of life by drowning. Though the *Diligent*, the *Zong*, and the *Guerrero* each recorded tragic drownings, one tops them all when it comes to the murder of captives at sea—the slave ship *Leusden*. In *The Slave Ship Leusden: A Story of Mutiny, Shipwreck and Murder,* historian Leo Balai describes this loss of life:

> On Jan. 1, 1738, the Leusden, a Dutch West India Company slave ship carrying nearly 700 African men, women and children through what is now Suriname, became caught in a terrible storm. Fearing that the captives would scramble for the vessel's few lifeboats, the captain ordered the crew to shut the hold and lock the Africans below deck. Six hundred and sixty-four people suffocated or drowned while the boat sank in the Maroni River, and the crew escaped the greatest tragedy of its kind in the Atlantic slave trade.[93]

The second category of sources in this literature is comprised of studies of mutinies that occurred on board slave vessels. These are represented in books like the *Slave Ships and Slaving,* by George Francis Dow; *Captain Conot: Or an African Slaver*, by Brantz Mayer; *The Adventures of An African Slaver*, by Theodore Conneau; *Slave Ships, Sailors, and Their Captive Cargo's 1730-1807*, by Emma Christopher; *The Slave Dancer*, by Paula Fox; and *A Slavers Log Book*, by Captain Theophilus Conneau. These books are somewhat biographical and include dialogues from diaries, eyewitness accounts, captains' logs, and testimonies from slavers and passengers. Though these sources include sporadic mentions of slave revolts, the major portion of each of these texts eludes my research focus.

The third category includes seminal studies in which African voices are represented. These studies also analyze the role of gender and the commodification of enslaved people and use quantitative methodologies. Books in this category are *The Slave Trade: The story of the Atlantic Slave Trade 1440-1870*, by Hugh Thomas; *The Transatlantic Slave Trade: A History,* by James A. Rawley; *The Forgotten Trade*, by Nigel Tattersfield; *African Voices of the Atlantic Slave Trade*, by Anne C. Bailey; *The Trade, The Owner, and The Slave,* by James Walvin; *Women and Slavery in Africa*, by Claire C. Robertson and Martin A. Klein; *Strategies of Slaves and Women*, by Marcia Wright; *Captives as Commodities: The Transatlantic Slave Trade*, by Lisa A. Lindsay; *Extending the Frontiers: Essays on the New Transatlantic Slave Trade*

[93] Leo Balai, *The Slave Ship Leusden: A Story Mutiny, Shipwreck and Murder,* Amsterdam Press, 2015, Preface.

Database, by David Eltis and David Richardson; and *Guns, Sails, and Empires: Technological Innovation and the Early Phases of European Expansion 1400-1700*, by Carlo M. Cipolla.

Resistance Literature of Seaborne Insurrections, Suicide, and Cosmology

Historiographies regarding seaborne insurrections and suicide have not experienced the same amount of scholarly attention as the abovementioned slave ship studies. Nevertheless, seaboard insurrections did occur, and rather frequently. In his book entitled *Antislavery, Abolition, and the Atlantic World: If We Must Die: Shipboard Insurrections in the Era of the Atlantic Slave Trade*, Eric Taylor chronicles the volatile nature of the seaborne transport of West and West Central African captives. The potential for insurrection and captive resistance at sea was ever present. However, many of these texts that examine primary sources stop short of connecting insurrections and revolts with the religious beliefs, cosmologies, or transmigration expectations of the captives. In the worldviews of many European captors, enslaved captives were oblivious to universal truths and were thus often viewed as heathens and barbarians. Whether consciously or unconsciously, this type of subhuman designation blinded the captors to the true essence of African humanity, culture, and desire for freedom. For example, Taylor narrates one insurrection catalyzed by captives flinging themselves overboard:

> As the shallop set sail, it must have seemed to Hawkins and his crew that the worst part of their journey to the coast was behind them. But when two of the Africans on deck suddenly jumped overboard as the vessel sailed through a narrow part of the river, it became clear that the captives would not give up without a fight. Although one of these men probably escaped to shore, the other was quickly recaptured, and the ensuing commotion generated by the cries of the slaves on deck set in motion a concerted effort by all the slaves to stage a full insurrection.[94]

[94] Eric Robert. Taylor, *Antislavery, Abolition, and the Atlantic World: If We Must Die: Shipboard Insurrections in the Era of the Atlantic Slave Trade*, (1). Baton Rouge, US: LSU Press, 2006. ProQuest ebrary. Web. 28 December 2016.

Taylor's research, along with David Richardson's *Shipboard Revolts, African Authority and the Atlantic Slave Trade*, demonstrates that slave revolts were hardly limited to on land insurrections. Captives pursued freedom at all cost.[95] On-ship insurrections occurred at sea as well as during lake and river transports. Richardson disputes the claim made by Eugene Genovese in his book entitled *From Rebellion to Revolution: Afro-American Slave Revolts in the Making of The Modern World* that African captives were docile and amenable to their captive plight. Richardson contends that an examination of the patterns of revolts at sea near the coast of Africa and during the crossings reveals that the rebelliousness of the captives actually assisted in reducing the number of Africans taken from the continent.[96]

Not all slave ship revolts were successful, of course, but multiple records of slave ship insurrections date as far back as the early 1500s. One example is the Portuguese ship *Misericordia,* captained by Estevao Carreiro. All but three of the crew were killed during a slave revolt that occurred between Sao Tome Island and Elmina, and the insurrectionists achieved their freedom.[97] A book entitled *Portuguese Rule on the Gold Coast, 1469-1682* describes the prevalence of such events:

> Captain Nichols of Boston lost 40 of his slaves by an insurrection but was able to save his vessel. A person known only as Carroll told of a successful slave insurrection aboard a New Hampshire vessel commanded by Captain John Majors of Portsmouth. The Africans revolted, killing the entire crew and seized both the schooner and its cargo. Also, in June of 1764, a sloop named the *Adventure,* belonging to Rhode Island or New London, was trading in Sierra Leone on the West Coast and suffered a similar fate. The master Captain Joseph Millar died as did all his hands, except two. It was reported that the "Negroes soon after availing

[95] David Richardson, "Shipboard Revolts, African Authority, and the Atlantic Slave Trade," *William and Mary Quarterly* LVIII (January 2001),69. *See also* Eugene D. Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution: Afro-American Slave Revolts of the Modern World,* Baton Rouge, 1979, xxiii,2.
[96] Ibid.,2.
[97] John Vogt, Portuguese "Rule on the Gold Coast, 1469-1682", Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1979. (Vogt. *Portuguese Rule* 58; *Vogt. Sao Tome-Principe, 461*.)

> themselves of that opportunity, came off from the shore and killed the two surviving men, and then took possession of, and pillaged the Vessel.[98]

The incidents mentioned above are only a sample of the numerous slave ship revolts that occurred at sea. Slaving Europeans kept rather astute records of slave ship activities, a fact that renders puzzling the general lack of research on revolts and insurrections. The recorded insurrections, such as those described above, provide important historical insight into the skills, ability to organize, and tenacity of enslaved captives. This information stands in direct contradistinction to claims in earlier scholarship that captives were largely docile.

Lorenzo Greene's *Mutiny on Slave Ships*[99] argues that Herbert Aptheker's *American Negro Slave Revolts*, which focuses on slave revolts on land, miscalculated the willingness of African captives to submit to enslavement, pointing out that the presumed natural docility of Africans to subordination was a farce. Green argues that Aptheker misreads the Africans' aversion to slavery entirely and places plantation revolts in their appropriate context as the second stages of rebellions that began at sea.[100] Daniel P. Mannix and Malcolm Cowley's *Black Cargoes: A History of the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1518-1865* and Okon E. Uya's "Slave Revolts in the Middle Passage: A Neglected Theme" reveal that neglected themes of the slave trade include the frequency of these voyages as well as the ruthlessness of the crew and their callousness regarding the captives' lives. Mannix examines the roles of White and Black sailors as participants in the deaths of nearly forty million African captives. Howard Jones' *Mutiny on The Amistad: the saga of a slave revolt and its impact on American abolition, law, and diplomacy* is

[98] John Vogt, Portuguese "Rule on the Gold Coast, 1469-1682", Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1979. (Vogt. *Portuguese Rule* 58; *Vogt. Sao Tome-Principe, 461*.)
[99] Lorenzo Green, Mutiny on the Slave Ships, *Phylon,* (1940-1956), Vol.5, No. 4 (4th Qtr. ,1944,348.
[100] Ibid., 348.

one of the more fascinating texts because it is the only analysis of an African seaborne revolt in which the captives seized the ship, won their freedom, and returned home.[101]

Scholars have shown that slave ship insurrections took on numerous forms and were unpredictable. In the previous quotation from Taylor, the captain and his crew had relaxed somewhat and assumed they were in for a smooth sail. However, the captives had plans of their own. This source reminds us of the tenacity of the captives and their willingness to drown if need be during the act of escape. We are also informed that at least one of the captives could swim. This raises two essential concepts about those who committed suicide while at sea. The first is that all of those who jumped over board were not attempting to kill themselves. Second, as I mentioned above, if land was still visible, some jumpers likely believed they could swim back to shore. Others, however, whose primary purpose was self-destruction, were motivated by religious beliefs.

Aboard slave ships, the mortality rate was extremely high, a fact testified to by Dr. Alexander Falconbridge:

> The slaves' experience was dreadful. He tells of a ship that had 700 slaves, (more than three each ton). They were so tightly packed that they were forced to lay on top of one another. This occasioned such a mortality among them, that without meeting unusually bad weather, or having a longer voyage than common nearly half of them died before the ship arrived in the West Indies.[102]

Falconbridge states further that many captives were emaciated from lack of food or deliberate starvation. They were so tightly packed that they were forced to travel on their sides. Many suffered from sea sickness, especially the women, and the movement of the vessel caused

[101] Howard Jones', *Mutiny on The Amistad: the saga of a slave revolt and its impact on American abolition, law, and diplomacy*, Oxford Press, 1987, Introduction.
[102] Thomas F. Buxton, *The African Slave Trade*, Philadelphia, Merrihew and Thompson, 1839,91.

their bare skin to be rubbed off by the planks.[103] On another occasion, Falconbridge testified that Luke Collingsworth, the master of the slave ship *Zong*, convinced his crew on November 29, 1789, to jettison live persons from the ship. According to testimony, Collingsworth had lost sixty slaves and seven Whites, and a great number of slaves were sick or dying and not likely to live.[104] By drowning his captives, he hoped to insure that his losses would be covered by insurance. Slaves were commodities, and insurance underwriters were likely to reimburse merchants for their losses if they could show that the captives died to ensure the preservation of more sellable cargo.[105] John Spears states, discussing a similar incident, that if a slave died from disease or lack of water on the ship, the cost of the death was paid for by the ship's owner; however, "If he threw, overboard some of them so that he would have enough food and water to abundantly nourish those remaining, he could collect the price of those thrown into the sea from the underwriters."[106]

In other words, if an enslaved person was thrown overboard to save water and food to nourish others of marketable quality, insurance companies were obligated to repay the losses. An example of this argument for insurance claim protection and compensation is found in John Spears' book, *The American Slave Trade: An Account of its Origin, Growth and Suppression*:

> And touching the adventures and peril which we, the assurers are content to bear, and do take upon us in this voyage, they are of the seas, men of War, Fire, Enemies, Pyrates, Rovers, Thieves, Jettisons, Letters of Mart, and Countermart, Sarprizals, Taking at sea Bartary, of the Master, and Marines, and all the perils, Losses, and Misfortunes that have and shall come to the hurt, Detriment or Damage of the said Goods and Merchandize, or of said vessel, her Tackle, Apparel and Furniture, or any part thereof.[107]

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[103] Testimony of Alexander Falconbridge, *Abridgement of the minutes of the evidence, taken before a Committee of the Whole House, to whom it was referred to consider of the slave trade*, (1789-1790), Part II, 231.
[104] Buxton, *The African Slave Trade*, 93-95.
[105] Testimony of Alexander Falconbridge, Thomas F. Buxton, *The African Slave Trade*, 94.
[106] John Spears, *The American Slave Trade: An Account of its Origin, Growth and Suppression*, Charles Scribner and Sons, New York, 1900, 73.
[107] Spears., 35.

The above quotation reveals the nature of commodification undergone by enslaved captives. Notice that the captives are referred to as possibly "damaged goods or items that had been jettisoned." This affirms the idea that these men and women were considered cargo and were therefore expendable. Their loss was covered under insurance policies as "Perils at Sea." Mr. J.A. Hall testified that:

> He remembered an instance when a woman being bought with her child about six weeks old, the child was very cross from sickness, and made much noise at night. The boatswain wished much to throw it overboard, and solicited the captain's permission to do it, alleging it would not live and if it did it would fetch nothing; which requests the captain received with horror and detestation.[108]

As far as the boatswain was concerned, the life of a six-week old baby was expendable if it would not fetch a fair price at auction.

It is this level of greed that, I argue, may have led to possible dishonest or misrepresented reporting and recording of events. The captains' and crews disregard for the humanity of their captives made them likely to misunderstand their captives' behaviors, including their reasons for jumping overboard. Falconbridge states, as I noted in the introduction regarding the surviving captives aboard the *Zong*, that "outraged misery could endure no longer; the 10 last victims sprang disdainfully from the grasp of their tyrants, defied their power and leaping into the sea, felt momentary triumph in embracing of death."[109] Here, Falconbridge describes these men as experiencing "momentary triumph," embracing death as a form of resistance by not allowing their bodies to be used for the profit of their captors. I argue that these ten men were the epitome of suicide by drowning as a form of resistance. In another instance that was reported by *The Foreign Slave Abstract*, according to "M. Maignan, the ships surgeon, the Negroes, who had

[108] Testimony of John A. Hall, *Abridgement of the minutes of the evidence, taken before a Committee of the Whole House, to whom it was referred to consider of the slave trade*, (1789-1790), Part II, 218.
[109] Testimony of Alexander Falconbridge, Thomas F. Buxton, *The African Slave Trade*, 94-95.

hitherto remained shut up in the hold were brought upon deck in succession in order that they might breathe a purer air. But it became necessary to abandon this expedient, salutary as it was, because that many of those Negroes, affect with Nostalgia (a desire to revisit their native land) threw themselves into the sea locked in each other's arms."[110] We are not told whether these people were of the same ethnic group, or whether they shared a religion, language, or culture. What we do know is that they shared a desire to resist further enslavement through drowning.

According to a field study conducted amongst the Ashanti of West Africa by Robert Rattray, the personal contempt for Africans and the overall attitudes held by many European slavers made them likely to misinterpret the behavior of their captives.[111] In other words, the acts of self-drowning that European testimonials describe as self-annihilation had, in some cases, a much deeper spiritual and personal meaning to those who chose suicide over slavery.

Igbo Religious Views, Cosmologies and Their Relationship to Suicide and Resistance

The following is a brief introduction to Igbo religious views and cosmologies that may have influenced suicide and other acts of resistance. Cardinal Francis Arinze describes the beliefs of the Ibo: "Subjectively, religion is the consciousness of one's dependence on a transcendent Being and the tendency to worship Him." And "objectively, religion is the body of truths, laws and rites by which man is subordinated to the transcendent Being." The objects of Igbo religious belief and worship are reduced to three: "God, non-human spirits and the ancestors."[112]

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[110] *The Foreign Slave Abstract of the Information Recently Lain on the Table of The House of Commons on the Subject of The Slave Trade; Being a Report Made by A Committee Specially Appointed For the Purpose to the Directors of the African Institution on the 8th of May 182*, London, Ellerton and Henderson, Johnson Court Fleet Street, 1821, 83.
[111] Robert S. Rattray, *Ashanti*, Oxford, At the Clarendon Press, 1923, 86.
[112] Francis A. Arinze, Sacrifice in Ibo Religion. Ibadan, Nigeria; Ibadan University Press, 1970. p.8

Francis Arinze became an ordained a priest at the age of twenty-five and a bishop just seven years later. He was named cardinal in 1985, when he was fifty-two, making him one of the highest-ranking African clerics at the time. Arinze was born November 1, 1932, to an animist family of the Ibo tribe in Eziowelle, Nigeria. When he was nine years old, he converted to Catholicism.[113]

Based on his personal upbringing, Arinze describes Ibo people as 1) conscious of a religious guiding principle of life that holds great influence over their decisions; 2) holders of a transcendental, God-induced worship and sense of dependency; and 3) believers in religious complexities that can be reduced to "God, non-human-spirits and the ancestors." We find a similar, tri-unity understanding of God in the Christian belief system that also produces a worship experience wherein the godhead is reduced to God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. The acknowledgement of these similarities is important because one must be consistent when attributing legitimacy to a religious perspective. Cardinal Arinze's initiation into religion came from his traditional West African parent. Therefore, his personal testimony and knowledge of Ibo cosmology lends credibility to his assertions and observations of the power and longevity of the Ibo religious belief system. Thus, the challenge for the captives was to comprehend how their belief system would explain their dilemma. The slave ship was a horrendous experience without a predicate, and the captives would have had little previous experience with which to compare it.

[113] Austin Cline, "A Profile of Cardinal Francis Arinze." ThoughtCo. https://www.thoughtco.com/cardinal-francis-arinze-profile-250474 (accessed October 15, 2017).

Marcus Rediker describes "the slave ship as a diabolical machine, and one big tool of torture."[114] The sadistic environment of the slave ship represented the primary element of mental torture that characterized the journey through the Middle Passage. Included in Rediker's depiction of the slave vessel is the general unfamiliarity with the sea itself, which was common for both many European mariners and Africans aboard. The horrors of the unknown sea coupled with the brutality that was part and parcel of the Trade produced what Terri L. Snyder calls "slave suicide ecology":

> From the start of the transatlantic slave trade, mariners, merchants, and masters exchanged reports of slave suicide along with their human traffic, and they noted alarmingly that captive Africans often responded to enslavement by destroying themselves. Some ship captains kept account of their cargo losses for investors and insurers; one study of surgeons' logs for the period 1792–1796 reveals that 7.2 percent of captive Africans killed themselves at some point during capture, embarkation, or along the middle passage.[115]

Even though some captains maintained logs about suicide at sea, very few if any attributed these suicidal drownings to West African cosmology. To the contrary, several such logs were kept to collect insurance on the loss of their cargo via various means. As it relates to the Ibo, one explanation for some of the suicides concerns the relationship that the Igbo had with their God and their relationship with the land. Cardinal Francis Arinze argues that "[a]mong the Igbos there is belief in one Supreme God, to whom there is no access. They believe that God is the Supreme Spirit, the creator of everything. No one equals him in power. He knows everything. He is altogether a good and merciful God and does harm to no one."[116]

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[114] Marcus Rediker, *The Slave Ship: A Human History*, New York, Penguin Books, 2007, p. 348.
[115] Terri L. Snyder, "Suicide, Slavery, and Memory in North America",
Journal of American History, Volume 97, Issue 1, 1 June 2010, Pages 39–62,
Published: 01 June 2010, p.63.
[116] Francis A. Arinze, *Sacrifice in Ibo Religion*. Ibadan, Nigeria; Ibadan University Press, 1970. p.10.

Thus, the Ibo captives likely experienced the torment and brutality on slave vessels as definitively not a punishment from their God, whom they believed "does harm to no one." Falola and Njoku expand on this aspect of Ibo beliefs:

> To explain the propensity for suicide as groups and individuals, one has also to understand the cosmology of the Igbo and the attachment to the land of their birth. The Igbo have a real attachment to the land (*ala*) literally and symbolically. The unit of production was the family, consisti1ng of man, his wife or wives, and their unmarried children. The production unit had access to the land for production, rituals, burials and so forth. Land was not just a factor of production; it remained a link with the ancestors. For instance, the umbilical cord of a new born child was buried in ancestral land—that way, the Igbo can make the connection between the living and the land and between the land and the ancestors. Up rooted from the connection with the land and the ancestors, which was vital to the identity, the Igbo responded emphatically by committing what may be described as "acceptable abomination." In the context slavery, *suicide was perhaps a justifiable evil* and one that the ancestors would be willing to accommodate. This *rationality was, of course, lost to New World scholars, it is a fact that scholars failed to link to Igbo cosmology*, attitude toward death, and the fundamental belief in life after. Amid the inhumanity of slavery, the Igbo, like many other slaves responded in unique ways, *sometimes taking their own lives—the ultimate form of resistance.*[117] (Italics mine)

As mentioned above, the minds of enslaved captives and their understanding of the universe was seldom taken into consideration by their captors when drownings occurred. For these captives, their connection to the land of their ancestors was essential to their understanding of family, culture, religion, and longevity. Therefore, even if suicide was not their preferred way of dealing with the involuntary migration forced upon them, death by suicide became in some instances "a justifiable evil."[118]

For instance, the following quotation is an excerpt from a slave ship drowning where the victims, after leaping from the ship, raise their hands in victory. Daina Ramey Berry makes a similar assertion, describing death as akin to freedom in her book, *The Price for Their Pound of*

[117] Toyin Falola, Raphael Chijoke Njoku, *Igbo in the Atlantic World: African Origins and Diaspora Destinations*, Indiana, Indiana University Press, 2016, p.178-180.
[118] Ibid., p.178-180.

Flesh. Berry questions why captives would rejoice at their own deaths. With respect to the miseries of the Middle Passage, he had said so much on a former occasion that he would spare the feelings of the committee as much as he could. Therefore, he claims to describe the scene on board ship as simply as possible, confirming the previous accounts of wretched conditions. The description he then offers is similar in many ways, featuring the same suffocation caused by tight-packing, the same scenes of slaves forced to dance in fetters, the same melancholy singing, the same force-feeding, the same despair, the same insanity and other abominations that famously characterized the trade. In other instances, however, captives resolved on death to terminate their woes. Some destroyed themselves by refusing sustenance, in spite of threats and punishment, while others threw themselves into the sea. Many of the latter, while drowning, were seen to wave their hands in triumph, "exulting" (to use the words of the eyewitness) "that they had escaped."

The quote from Falola, Toyin, Njoku, and Raphael Chijoke provides some insight into the jubilance demonstrated by a few persons who had thrown themselves overboard and were rejoiced at their accomplishment. Is it possible that their exuberance was related to their cosmological and religious beliefs about the afterlife? Is it possible that their rejoicing was the result of a wish to rid themselves of the shipboard misery and to commune with their ancestors? The testimony from the *Abridgement of the minutes of evidence* may bring some clarity to the underlying conditions that ignited a response motivated by cosmology or agency. The *Abridgement minutes of the Committee of the Whole House* records the following testimony of the horror that led to many suicides at sea:

> Something better than a pint of water, after they are fed, served twice, was the daily allowance of a slave; and after being fed in the afternoon, the boatswain was taking one, and the mate the other side of the deck, they are made to dance, and flogged with a cat if they do not. In fine weather, they are brought on deck between eight and nine in the

> morning, and put down again at four, there to remain until the next day. He has known them to refuse their food in consequence of being confined; ill treated, to induce them to eat; they are flogged, and put into irons separately both hands handcuffed; both legs shackled, a collar round their neck, with a chain, and often the thumb-screw applied, to take the stubbornness out of them. This is his task, and sometimes from their ill treatment, they attempted to jump overboard; as others have gone mad and died in that situation.[119]

The bitter treatment of the captives and the rampant onboard abuses induced enslaved persons to respond to their circumstances with drastic measures, which included refusal of sustenance, self-mutilation, and suicide by drowning. Still others are said to have gone mad. Though we are not told whether those who leaped from the ship were Ibo, some primary sources indicate that Ibo captives were prone to suicide. Falola and Njoku explain some Igbo suicide attempts through an examination of Igbo cultures and their relationship to the land and their ancestors. According to Falola and Njoku,

> Slaves of Igbo origin were loathed in North America primarily for what Gomez and others have identified as the frequency by which they committed suicide. The myth about Igbo suicidal tendencies proved to be remarkably resilient and the identity of Igbos as trouble makers crystallized on a wider scale and were inspired by racist stereotypes, even among slaves. Like other slaves, the Igbo employed old strategies including revolts and escape, but they also devised new strategies in their struggle, including suicide.[120]

According to Falola and Njoku, Igbo suicides became legendary in the Trade. Although the accounts of these suicides were motivated by racist stereotypes, they reveal how African cosmology fueled the captives' desire for freedom and motivated their exercise of agency and resistance. The evidence supports the notion that the brutal environment of the slave ship fueled

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[119] Abridgement of the minutes of the evidence, : taken before a Committee of the Whole House, to whom it was referred to consider of the slave-trade, [1789-1791] by Great Britain. Parliament. Committee of the Whole House, Publication date 1789 Topics Slavery, Slave trade
Publisher [London : s.n. Collection bplill; bostonpubliclibrary; americana
Digitizing sponsor Boston Public Library Contributor Boston Public Library
Language English
Volume Pt.3-4, p.11.

[120] Toyin Falola, Raphael Chijoke Njoku, , p.178.

an increase in resistance, and suicide by drowning became one of the "new strategies" of rebelling against slave traders while at sea.

John Fountain, who resided in Accra from 1778 to 1789, testified that the two ships he sailed on were not initially equipped with nets because they had high rails. He recounts, however, that nets were then installed to prevent the slaves from jumping overboard while near the shore.[121] Dr. Alexander Falconbridge describes how "slave ships were fitted up with a view to prevent slaves from jumping over-board, particularly at Bonny where these precautions were necessary. Falconbridge recounts an incident on the *Alexander* when a captive forced his way through the netting and drowned or was devoured by sharks."[122]

This evidence strongly suggests that religious beliefs in the transmigration of the African spirit back to Africa at the moment of physical termination influenced the thinking of many captives.[123] According to John Stewart, who lived among the Jamaican people and studied slavery and the moral conditions of the island in the 1800s, there is "[o]ne opinion they [slaves] all agree on, and that is the expectation that after death, they shall first return to their native country, and enjoy again the society of kindred and friends, from whom they have been torn away in an evil hour."[124] Stewart claims that African captives were neither shy nor silent about their beliefs in the afterlife, and in some cases, the belief in an actual return to Africa after death motivated them to take their own lives.

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[121] Testimony of John Fountain, Esq., *Abridgement of the minutes*, Part I, 54. See also the testimony of James Frazer, *Abridgement of the minutes*, Part II, 22.
[122] Falconbridge, *Abridgement of the minutes*, 232.
[123] Daniel E Walker: Suicidal Tendencies: African Transmigration in the History and Folklore of the Americas", *The Griot*, 18:2 (Fall 1999), 10-18 "Examines suicides in the United States influenced by transmigration, the African belief that upon death, one's soul is transported back to Africa. Explores ways in which slaves transformed their memories of suicide into folklore and explains how folklore and written accounts may reveal more about the nature of slavery and the motivations of African slaves in America."
[124] John Stewart, *A View of the Past and Present State of the Island of Jamaica: With remarks on the Moral and Physical Condition of the slaves and on the Abolition of Slavery in the Colonies*, New York: Negro Universities Press, Reprint 1969, 280-281.

Some European captors must have been aware that these religious ideas promoted suicide and therefore adopted preventative measures.

In his book, *The African Slave Trade*, Thomas Fowell Buxton uses the word "religion" in several different contexts and over twenty-seven times. In each of these contexts, the author emphasizes the need for slaves to relinquish their religious views and convert to Christianity—the latter being a religious instrument suited to controlling the behavior of slaves. Religious studies have shown that traditional African religions were prime motivators for the behavior of the captives and an alternative examination of the suicidal attempts at sea may be better understood when viewed through a lens that integrates West and West Central African traditional religious views with the insurrection attempts.

Kofi Asare Opoku describes African cultures as permeated by religion. He asserts that, in Africa, "life is religion and religion is life."[125] Within the context of African worldviews, no dichotomy separates the sacred and the secular, a major distinction from the spiritual perspectives of their European counterparts. In the mind of the African person, religion gives meaning to life in the present world and the world hereafter.[126] An understanding of the cosmologies of West and West Central African people is essential for understanding how suicide by drowning might have functioned as a form of resistance. When people find themselves in situations of oppression and trauma, for which they have no reasonable explanation, they often turn to religion. Also, since many of the captives were probably raised with certain cosmological expectations regarding death and the afterlife, they were likely to believe that death would lead them to eventually rest with their ancestors. For instance, the Ibo believed that they were always under the watchful eye of their ancestors. Similarly, the Hausa and Fulani participated in

[125] Kofi Asare Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, Accra, FEP International Private Limited, 1978,1.
[126] Ibid.,1.

ancestor veneration and relied on the oversight of their forebearers to help them make sense of life.

As has been well documented from the early days of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, mariners, merchants, factors, and masters exchanged reports of slave suicides. These records note that captive Africans often responded to enslavement by destroying themselves.[127] Isaac Wilson recounts the story of a man who was resolved to die by starvation. He refused to eat despite many attempts at persuasion, including whipping with the "cat" (leather strips fastened to a short hand-held pole) and the *speculum oris*, but he kept his teeth still fast.[128] This encounter continued for days, and on day five, the man asked in his own language for water. Assuming he was going to give in, his captors complied, but after drinking, he once again shut his teeth. On the ninth day, he died.[129]

The preceding testimony makes it abundantly clear that some of the captives were resolute in their refusal of slavery as well as in their willingness to commit suicide if need be. In the same testimony, Wilson states that he has known slaves to jump overboard at sea.[130] What if these attempts were not intended to effectuate self-annihilation but rather to hasten the victims' journeys into the afterlife? Some of these self-destructive impulses may have had a deeper meaning in the minds of the enslaved captives than was apparent to onlookers. The evidence from the cases I examine makes it clear that many of the captives were resolute in their willingness to suffer and even die rather than be held captive and sold into slavery.

[127] Terri L. Snyder, *Suicide, Slavery, and Memory in North America*, 39.
[128] Testimony of Isaac Wilson, *Abridgement of the minutes*, Part II, 221-222.
[129] Ibid, Part II, 221-222.
[130] Ibid., Part II, 222.

There is also evidence that shipboard suicides were a response to the physical, emotional, and psychological experiences that accompanied the trauma of captivity.[131] One other reason for offering an alternative interpretation of these suicides by drowning concerns the psychological effects of seaboard incarceration—often referred to as melancholy. Isaac Wilson, recounting a voyage from 1788 captained by John Smith, stated that though the crew and slaves were treated fairly well, the 602 tightly-packed captives were gloomy, pensive, and clearly suffering from melancholy, as expressed in their countenances.[132] Melancholy is also referred to as insanity in other contexts. Dr. Thomas Trotter described this melancholy as manifesting in several ways. He documented that noises, groans, and delirium usually accompanied people suffering separation from family and friends. Though men and women experienced the same symptoms, Trotter adds that women, who were frequently diagnosed with "sullen melancholy," often presented in a condition that led to hysteric fits.[133] Daniel Walker offers this assessment: "for many of the Africans brought to the Americas as slaves, the idea of returning home pervaded their existence, in many cases this sense of longing was so great that individuals even committed suicide in hopes of making a spiritual return to their former homelands."[134] In other words, self-destruction in the minds of some victims may have been a way to return, spiritually, back to Africa. As I will discuss later, the Ibo believed in a spiritual rebirth that happened in the afterlife.

Many European captors were unfamiliar with their captives' beliefs in the meaning of life, the world, and the world hereafter, and therefore misinterpreted, in their ignorance, the

[131] Terri L. Snyder, *The Power to Die: Slavery and Suicide in British North America*, University of Chicago Press, 2015, 25.
[132] Isaac Wilson's testimony, *Abridgement of the minutes*, Part II, 219.
[133] Testimony of Dr. Thomas Trotter, *Abridgement of the minutes*, Pt. II, 37 & 40.
[134] Daniel E Walker, "Suicidal Tendencies: African Transmigration in the History and Folklore of the Americas", *The Griot* 18:2 (Fall 1999),10.

behaviors they witnessed. As Professor E.B. Idowu so aptly states, Africans are "a people who are in all things religious."[135] Regarding the multiple dimensionality of the spirit in many African religions, Antonio Bly states that many slaves fought their captives on multiple planes—the physical as well as the spiritual.[136] He states further that though few surviving sources support this argument, the notion of religious resistance cannot be denied.[137] Likewise, Michael Gomez and Rediker agree that suicide can be viewed as one of the most prominent forms of slave revolt, especially among the Ibo. Self-destruction cannot and should not be taken lightly. The tragedy that continues to repeat itself in this research concerns the tension between hopelessness and hopefulness that inspired onboard suicides. Though we will never know for certain what was in these people's minds, and though suicide at sea took many forms, the act of self-drowning, in my estimation, constituted the ultimate form of rebellion and demonstrated a deep belief in the afterlife. Further support for my contention that suicide by drowning was a form of resistance can be found in the reverence held by many West African peoples for the gods of the sea. According to Kofi Asare Opoku, the Ibo, the Yoruba, and the Akan all worshipped spirits that governed the sea:

> The god of the sea was one of the most important divinities in West African Traditional religion and his influence extends far beyond the coastline. In Ghana he is called *Bosompo,* by the Akan, *Nycnmc TSawe** by the Gâ, and *Nyigbla* by the EWE. Tuesdays are dedicated to him and there is no fishing on those days. Sacrifices are offered to him annually in order to ensure an abundant fish harvest as well as safe passage for the fishermen who venture out to sea.[138]

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[135] Kofi Asare Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, Accra, FEP International Private Limited, 1978, 1. (See also, *Orita*, Ibadan *Journal of Religious Studies*, Vol. 1, 1967,11.)
[136] Antonio Bly, "Crossing "The Lake OF Fire: Slave Resistance During the Middle Passage, 1720-1842", *Journal of Negro History*, Vol.83, No.3, (Summer,1998),182. It is clear that their behavior was revolutionary.
[137] Antonio Bly, Crossing "The Lake OF Fire: Slave Resistance During the Middle Passage, 1720-1842", *Journal of Negro History*, Vol.83, No.3(Summer,1998),182.
[138] Kofi Asare Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, Accra, FEP International Private Limited, 1978, 60.

The men, women, and children transported on slave vessels brought with them everything they had learned as children about the power of the sea.

Another example of the West African perspective of water can be found in a well-known folktale from 1803. The story follows Ebo or Igbo captives who survived the Middle Passage, were sold near Savanah Georgia, then loaded onto a ferry to St. Simon's Island.[139] During the trip, the captives rose up against their captors and forced the crew into the water where they drowned. When the boat landed on the island, "the Igbo took to the water and drowned themselves—an act that most scholars have understood as a deliberate collective suicide. The sight of the fatal immersion is referred to as Ebos Landing."[140]

What might have motivated this act of collective suicide? David Richardson, confirming the noted frequency of slave revolts, adds an essential caveat. He states that "the evidence relating to slave revolts comes almost exclusively from non-African sources and from descriptions provided by those instrumental in enslaving Africans."[141] Hence, one ought not attribute unquestioned credibility to interpretations of such events provided by the oppressors. Therefore, the lens I bring to this attempt to understand the motivations of such acts of apparent self-annihilation includes a West African cosmological perspective. In doing so, I hope to develop a more detailed and accurate interpretation of these events.

It is fair to assume that when vessels were still close to land, at least some of those who jumped intended to swim back to shore. According to the testimony of Alexander Falconbridge, many of them did just that. However, that is not the only reason that captives leaped from the ships. The evidence shows that many captives leaped over board and drowned, and there is

[139] Terri L. Snyder, *Suicide, Slavery, and Memory in North America*,39.
[140] Ibid., 39.
[141]David Richardson, Shipboard Revolts, "African Authority and The Atlantic Slave Trade", *William and Mary Quarterly 58, no 1, (2001),*72.

reason to understand these acts as forms of resistance. What motivated these men and women to self-destruct? Many of them were efficient swimmers, yet they leaped overboard so far from shore that they could not have hoped to swim home.[142] How much of the European narrative can we trust? For some West Africans, slavery was shameful, and one way of regaining respectability was self-destruction. Regarding the preponderance of data about the tenacity of African people and their religion, David Richardson states that "No longer is it possible to argue for the myth of slave docility and quiescence."[143] Therefore, the captives in this study are described as rigorous, tempestuous, and active participants in their own attempts at freedom even when their only path to it was through self-destruction.

The evidence also affirms that drowning oneself was sometimes seen as an act of faith in the afterlife. That is, many of the captive Africans were religious and believed in life after the termination of one's physical existence. In particular, the cosmologies of the Ebo, Hausa, and Fulani all indicate such a belief. People from these cultures expected the afterlife to offer solace to those who had lived respectably. In some West African groups, death is referred to as simply a means of returning home to Africa.[144] Since a positive view of suicide by Africans is not universal, however, these suicides require investigation simply because of their frequency. Therefore, this study introduces and interrogates case studies, primarily testimonies, that demonstrate support for the notion that some suicides by drowning were acts of faith/religion, agency, and or martyrdom

[142] Archibald Dalzel, *The History of Dahomy, an Inland Kingdom of Africa: compiled from authentic memoirs; with an introduction and notes*, London, 1793, 19.
[143] David Richardson, Shipboard Revolts, "African Authority and The Atlantic Slave Trade", *William and Mary Quarterly 58, no 1, (2001),*72.
[144] *Abridgement of the minutes of the evidence*: Volume Pt.4,19.

Finally, Kofi Asare Opoku states that "[a]mong the Yoruba and Benin peoples of Nigeria, the sea god is known as *Olokun,* Owner of the Sea, and is worshipped not only in the coastal areas but also in the inland places such as Ile Ife and Iesha, where he is believed to dwell on a sacred mountain.[145] *Olokun* is said to live in great splendor under the sea with a host of attendants and mermaid wives."[146]

The captives' cosmological beliefs, particularly with respect to the afterlife, shed significant light on their shipboard behaviors. What the Europeans interpreted as simply suicide could have instead been a religiously-motived hastening into the next life. The next chapter reviews the literature I examined to form my thesis.

[145] J.O. Lucas, *The Religion of the Yorubas*, C.M.S. Bookshop, Lagos, 1948,129.
[146] Kofi Asare Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*,61.

CHAPTER 3

SUICIDE BY DROWNING: REVIEW AND INTERROGATION OF COSMOLOGY AND MORTALITY LITERATURE

To fulfill the objectives of this dissertation, I examined evidence and testimonies from the *Abridgement of the Minutes of the Evidence Taken from the Whole House, to whom it was referred to consider of the slave trade, 1789-1790*. These sources focus primarily on slave ship voyages that recorded suicides by drowning as well as seaborne revolts and insurrections. Each of these, I contend, were motivated by the religious belief systems, desire for agency, and embrace of martyrdom of the West and West Central African captives, the Ibo in particular. I discuss the methodology used in my examination of these sources in chapter 4.

Linda Kay Kneeland, in her study on slave suicide, emphasizes the importance of considering multiple angles when interpreting the meaning of these deaths**:**

> A small minority of slaves apparently responded to their suffering with suicide. However, before we can evaluate why some African slaves in America committed suicide, we must turn our attention to suicide in general, and to modern theories on suicide and how they apply to slave suicides. Then the information available regarding suicides and attempted suicides of slaves can be contextualized within the current psychological and sociological theories regarding suicide. To begin evaluating slave suicides, it is necessary to examine two points: what constitutes a suicidal act, and why do people choose to end their lives.[147]

Though Kneeland primarily examines cases of slave suicides on land, the principles she outlines are also useful for understanding what drove suicidal attempts at sea. Seaboard suicides were antecedents to the suicides that occurred on land, and this fact is often overlooked.

Isaac Wilson describes how one man on a slave vessel starved himself for several days until his body was emaciated from malnourishment. When the man asks for water, Wilson interprets his request as evidence of increasing mental instability. After a few more days, the

[147] Linda Kay Kneeland, *African American Suffering and Suicide Under Slavery*,33.

man died, according to Wilson, from "melancholy, a certain wildness of countenance and insanity."[148] The slave ship, as described in Wilson's recollection as well as others, created a perfect context for suicide. Of course, the nature of the historical record makes it impossible to determine exactly how many captives committed suicide. Relevant factors include the following: 1) The records of these deaths were kept by slave ship captains and insurers and are therefore not likely to contain a true accounting untainted by financial and other interests; 2) those who self-murdered seldom left notes; and 3) an honest accounting of these suicides is unlikely to have been recorded by the authors of the social, emotional, and psychological conditions in which self-murder could manifest.

The evidence, however, informs us that millions of Africans were forcibly extracted from their homelands, and many died before they reached their intended destinations. Thus, the mortality rate of the Transatlantic Slave Trade was enormous and presents numerous complications as to how many actual suicides took place during the over 35,000 voyages. Describing the enormity of the issue, Marcus Rediker states,

> Over the almost four hundred years of the slave trade, from the late fifteenth to the nineteenth century, 12.4 million souls were loaded onto slave ships and carried through the "Middle Passage" across the Atlantic to hundreds of delivery points stretched over thousands of miles. Along the way, 1.8 million of them died, their bodies cast overboard to the sharks that followed the ships.[149]

Millions of African bodies were cast overboard, and literally thousands of other bodies were deliberately drowned by the captains of slave vessels. Examples of these atrocities include the *Leusden,* where 644 Africans were trapped by their captain in the hold while the ship sank off the Coast of Suriname; the *Zong*, where 132 Africans were thrown overboard off the coast of Jamaica in an alleged attempt to save water for more marketable slaves; the *Brilliante*, where 600

[148] Testimony of Isaac Wilson, *Abridgement of the minutes*, Part II, 221-222.
[149] Marcus Rediker, *The Slave Ship: A Human History*, New York, Penguin Books, 2007,5.

Africans were chained to the anchor of the ship that dragged them 50,000 fathoms beneath the water to the sea floor; and the *Prince of Orange*, where 100 men jumped overboard after being told that they would be eaten by Whites, and 33 of them drowned.

Taking up Kneeland's charge, I consider the complexity of suicide from a social and psychological perspective as well as with regard to African cosmologies and belief systems. In doing so, I encountered other sources on suicidal research. For instance, Henri Collomb and René Collignon, a French psychiatrist and psychologist, worked with Frantz Fanon to construct a cultural and gender-sensitive analysis in mental health studies.[150] According to them, "[s]tudies of suicide in the colonial period were for the most part simple extensions of the argument about the rarity of 'real' depressive illness in African subjects. The very low rates of suicide quoted by these studies were, in their review of the literature, highly questionable."[151]

Collomb and Collignon's was largely dismissed by European scholars who believed persons of African descent to lack the sensibilities of their European counterparts. However, Isaac Wilson and Dr. Thomas Trotter both testified that melancholy was one of the primary reasons for the loss of slaves while at sea. Wilson stated that this debilitating state, melancholy, produced "symptoms which included the lowness of spirit and despondency: these two symptoms coupled with the refusal to take nourishment caused the flux and soon carries them off."[152] Dr. Trotter, a former surgeon in the Royal Navy, states that the symptoms of melancholy in slaves included extreme anguish as a result of being separated from their families and their homeland.[153]

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[150] A.J. Bullard, "The critical impact of Frantz Fanon and Henri Collomb: race, gender, and personality testing of North and West Africans", *Journal of Historical Behavioral Science*, 2005, Summer, 41 (3), 225-245.
[151] Henri Collomb and René Collignon, "Les conduites suicidaires en Afrique," *Psychopathologie Africaine* 10 (1974), 55.
[152] Testimony of Isaac Wilson, *Abridgement of the minutes*, Part II, 224.
[153] Testimony of Thomas Trotter, *Abridgement of the minutes*, Part II, 36-37.

Though the studies by Collomb and Collignon do not directly address the Transatlantic Slave Trade, they remind us that many slavers and other participants in the trade were under-educated about the cultural contexts of their captives. As such, they were not equipped to grasp either the specific psychological challenges these captives experienced on slaving vessels or how West and West Central African cosmologies influenced how they responded to captivity. Furthermore, Collomb and Collignon's research affirms the role of depressive illness as an initiator of suicidal tendencies. While examining the source material, I discovered that the slave trade and the slave ship records harbored numerous accounts of captive Africans who demonstrated melancholy and sulky behavior, and this behavior frequently led to different types of suicide.

One other example of melancholic behavior is described by Dr. Thomas Trotter. In the following account, Trotter introduces the role of interpreters on slave vessels and describes the debilitating nature of melancholy. In his narrative about time spent serving on the *Brookes* in 1783, he describes the onboard conditions:

> Slaves, on being brought on board, shew signs of extreme distress and despair, from a feeling of their situation, and regret of being torn from friends and connections; many retain those impressions for a long time in proof of which, the slaves being often heard in the night making an howling melancholy noise, expressive of extreme anguish; he repeatedly ordered the woman, who had been his interpreter, to inquire the cause; she discovered it to be owing to their having dreamed they were in their own country, and finding themselves when they awake in the hold of a slave ship. This exquisite sensibility was particularly observable among the women, many of whom on such occasions, he found in hysteric fits.[154]

Trotter's account captures the severity of mental anguish experienced by captives almost immediately upon being loaded onto vessels. For example, he describes all of the following: 1) once aboard, captives immediately show signs of "extreme distress and despair"; 2) the loss of

[154] *Abridgement of the minutes of the evidence:* Volume Pt.,3-4, 37.

family and friends was understood to be a significant component of their depression; 3) the feeling of distress was not easily assuaged, and captives carried it with them for a long period of time; 4) they expressed their depression with groans and moans; 5) the depression was so tempestuous that they dreamed about freedom, and when they awakened to their misery, their moaning began again; and 6) depression drove some of the women to hysteria.

Collomb and Collignon demonstrate further that their focal group (African people) were not monolithic, nor do they all ascribe to the same religious views regarding suicide. However, the evidence suggests that many of the West and West Central African groups who were transported to North America held cosmological views that included a belief in transmigration. Notwithstanding, the paucity of intentional scholarship regarding the issue of suicide as it relates to resistance among African captives lends credence and purpose to my research. Few studies offer interpretive conclusions on the integration of suicide, resistance, and West African religious thought. This is primarily due to the volumes of European propaganda that posit notions of African intellectual inferiority. For example, Collomb and Collignon state that "in many African communities suicide was viewed as a quintessentially 'bad' death, one that denied the perpetrator a place in the spirit world of the lineage. However, there were also marked variations in approaches, even between neighboring peoples, with some groups viewing suicide not as a crime but as an act of bravery."[155]

These different beliefs about suicide in various African contexts provide an opportunity to inquire about suicide from an unbiased cultural and racial perspective. However, two claims from the above quote require further examination. First, some West and West Central African

[155] Henri Collomb and René Collignon, "Les conduites suicidaires en Afrique," *Psychopathologie Africaine* 10 (1974), 55.

peoples were aware of the realm of the spirit, and captives held multiple views on suicidal behavior. Thus, the captives' view of God may not have been in the spirit of the Christian God, but their belief systems did and do represent an awareness of a dimension of existence beyond the material world. Second, though all the captives may have been African, there were significant in-group differences in their views of death in general and suicide in particular.

Alfred Métraux, a scholar and ethnographer who spent time among the inhabitants of Haiti, states that

> In fact, Africans enslaved in the Americas seem generally to have believed that the Land of the Dead was located on the other side of the Atlantic, in their African homeland. In the voudou religion of Haiti to the present, indeed, it is thought not only that the gods live in Africa ("Guinée"), but also that the souls of the dead go there.[156]

According to Mary Fields, "[m]ost people (African people) as a regular habit, never drink and never eat without throwing a small portion on the ground for their forefathers. To sleep without a vessel of drinking water by the bedside is to risk being disturbed by a thirsty forefather during the night."[157] Fields' ethnographic observation of the omnipresence of ancestors was and is foundational to understanding West and West Central African religious views regarding transmigration. Fields' account demonstrates the longevity and continuity of a belief in transmigration that was present among captives in the Transatlantic Slave Trade and is still present among West African descendants in the Diaspora.

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[156] Alfred Métraux, Le vaudou haïtien (Paris: Gallimard, 1958), 80. (*Le Vaudou Haïtien* by Alfred Métraux First issue: Gallimard, coll. "Human Species", Paris, 1958., Repris in Coll. "Library of Human Sciences", Paris 1968. Available in the collection "Tel", This book by Metraux, is the first non Haitian discussion on voodoo. Its focus is on voodoo as a social and cultural West African originated phenomenon, which helps to explain the cosmology of some West Africans as it relates to the role of water in their religious beliefs systems. Another study that examines West African religious retentions was done by Melville Herskovits, entitled, *Life in a Haitian Valley*, Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1937.

[157] Mary Fields, *Religion and Medicine of the Gã People*, 196.

The evidence affirms that the very nature and environment of shipboard enslavement intensified the captives' need for and acknowledgment of their religious leanings as a means of understanding their plight and responding to it. William Pierson argues, based on his observations of traditional African religions and his studies on transmigration, that these beliefs led some enslaved Africans, in America and at sea, to commit suicide. In doing so, they hoped to return home, and in some cases, suicide even represented "a form of religious martyrdom."[158]

Mortality Studies and West and West Central African Belief Systems

This section provides a brief excursus on previous scholarly discussions of and inquiry into Middle Passage mortality. It is followed by a discussion of several West and West Central African belief systems, primarily those that have a transmigration motif as a part of their cosmology. Relying on European analyses of slave ship events proved frustrating.

According to Herbert S. Klein, Stanley Engerman, Robin Haines, and Ralph Shlomowitz, "[d]eath in the Middle Passage has long been at the center of the moral attack on slavery, and during the past two centuries estimates of the death rate and explanations of its magnitude have been repeatedly discussed and debated."[159] Historians estimate that over 7 million Africans were extracted from the African continent from 1701-1825. The loss of life in the Trade was astounding, even to many Europeans, and eventually led to its abolition in Britain. My sources were eye witness testimonies describing events aboard slave vessels. These testimonies were both delivered orally before the British Parliament and recorded in books and other written correspondence.

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[158] William D. Piersen, "White Cannibals, Black Martyrs: Fear, Depression, and Religious Faith as Causes of Suicide among New Slaves," Journal of Negro History 62 (1977),151, 153-55. See also *Abridgement of the minutes* and the testimo*nies* provided by seaboard eyewitnesses.

[159] Herbert S. Klein, Stanley Engerman, Robin Haines and Ralph Shlomowitz, "Transoceanic Mortality: The Slave Trade in Comparative Perspective", *The Williams and Mary Quarterly*, Vol.58, No.1, New Perspectives on the Transatlantic Slave Trade (Jan., 2001),99.

For instance, Dr. Alexander Falconbridge, a former surgeon who served on several slave vessels during the Transatlantic Slave Trade, described his experiences in a book entitled *An Account of the Slave Trade on the Coast of Africa.* In the Preface, Falconbridge makes it clear that slave trade was detestable in the eyes of many people, and he explains why: "the following sheets are intended to lay before the public the present state of a branch of British commerce, which, ever since its existence, has been held in detestation by all good men, but at this time more particularly engages the object of general reprobation."[160]

The records consistently describe conditions on board slave vessels as characterized by deprivation, punishment, and cruelty. Using an analytical frame informed by slave suicide ecology, I argue that these conditions generated the context for rampant suicides among captives. For example, Falconbridge begins by describing suicide by starvation: "Upon the negroes refusing to take sustenance, I have seen coals of fire, glowing hot, put on a shovel, and placed so near their lips, as to scorch or burn them. And this has been accompanied by threats, of forcing them to swallow the coals, if they any longer persisted in refusing to eat."[161] Food and shared meals are an important part of African culture, and refusing sustenance is both normally out of character and a violation of hospitality. Understanding this cultural norm provides a context for understanding the significance of self-starvation aboard slave vessels.

The frequency of death by starvation and other means of resistance added to the mortality rates but is also foundational to understanding how a slave suicide ecology developed in the midst of constant death. According to Thomas Buxton, slaves who died while the ship was close to shore were simply thrown into the sea where they were often eaten by sharks, alligators, or

[160] Alexander Falconbridge, *An Account of the Slave Trade on the Coast of Africa*, London, Printed by J. Phillips, George Yard, Lombard Street, MDCCLLXXXVIII, 1792, Preface iii.
[161] Ibid., 23.

vultures.[162] When we consider the importance of burial rites in African cultures, one can only imagine the mental anguish experienced by those who remained aboard at seeing their fellow captives treated so. The death toll was also increased by slave ship patrols and chases. Untold numbers of captives died when their vessels were under attack. Rather than get caught with contraband, some captains would elect to jettison their cargo. Thomas Fowell Buxton testifies to this fact: "We know that several slave vessels are annually wrecked or foundered at sea though it is impossible to arrive at anything like exact numbers. Many negroes also are thrown overboard, either during a chase or from death because the vessel lacked enough provisions and water."[163] Because these enslaved captives were considered less than human, their treatment was not reflective of any sense of compassion or mercy. Buxton states further that the women aboard were subject to unspeakable rape and brutality, so much so that many of them leaped over board to escape the crew and their unwanted passions. Falconbridge states further that:

> The night before the departure, the tent was struck: which was no sooner perceived by some negroe women on board, than, it was considered as a prelude to our sailing: and about eighteen of them, when they were sent between decks, threw themselves into the sea through one of the gun ports; the ship carrying guns between decks. They were all of them however, excepting one, soon picked up; and that which was missing, was not long after taken about from the shore.[164]

Falconbridge's testimony sheds light on another vessel, the crew, and the enslaved in the preceding quote. First, we learn that women as well as men were willing to leap into the sea as a measure of resistance and agency. We also learn that they were sufficiently familiar with the structure of the ship that they knew they could fit through the gun wells. Furthermore, at least one of the captives in Falconbridge's testimony was a swimmer who is said to have been recovered close to shore.

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[162] Sir Thomas Fowell Buxton, Sir. *The African slave trade and its remedy.* New York; London, 1840.,119.
[163] Ibid., 34.
[164] Alexander Falconbridge, *An Account of the Slave Trade on the Coast of Africa*, 31.

Unlike the continental movement of Africans among Africans, Klein notes that, [t]he Transatlantic Slave Trade represented a major international movement of persons, and, although only one part of the movement of slaves from the point of enslavement in Africa to their place of forced labor in the Americas, shipboard mortality was its most conspicuous and frequently discussed aspect."[165] After the introduction of the Dolben's Act of 1788, the first systematic discussion of the distinctions between deaths in the Middle Passage and in the Trade as a whole appeared in Thomas Fowell Buxton's *The African Slave Trade and Its Remedy* in 1839:

> Buxton distinguished mortality resulting from the following: the original seizure of slaves, the march to the coast, and detention before sailing (whether owned by African or European traders); the sufferings after capture (at the hands of the British Antislavery Patrol) or after landing at Sierra Leone or other ports; the Middle Passage; and initiation into New World slavery or 'seasoning' as it is termed by the planters.[166]

Studies on the mortality of African captives have taken several forms. In this study, I am primarily interested in examining the role of cosmology in the suicides of captives who drowned themselves at sea. However, I begin with the initial contact of African persons with their slave catchers. The journey from the interior of the continent to the coastline, coupled with diseases attracted while traveling and the unsanitary castles and forts that awaited them, contributed to the physical weakness and mental depression of captives while increasing their desire for freedom. This desire, I argue, sometimes manifested in self-destruction at sea. This is confirmed by Klein, Engerman, Haines, and Shlomowitz, who state that

> The march to the sea, which often was conducted in stages, with sales to various intermediaries, would have had varying death rates depending on distance, diet, and diseased environments as well as whether the enslaved were also made to carry goods to the coast. Losses on the coast before sale and departure reflected

[165] Herbert S. Klein, Stanley Engerman, Robin Haines and Ralph Shlomowitz, "Transoceanic Mortality: The Slave Trade in Comparative Perspective", *The Williams and Mary Quarterly*, Vol.58, No.1, New Perspectives on the Transatlantic Slave Trade (Jan., 2001), 99.
[166] Ibid., 99

> the length of the waiting time until the cargo was completed and the vessel sailed. Changing efficiencies in marketing and the frequency of voyage arrival could affect mortality by their impact on the length of the period in coastal barracoons on board vessels prior to sailing.[167]

Even before the captives were loaded onto slave vessels, many of them suffered from diseases and sicknesses acquired either en route to the Guinea coast or after being housed in the contaminated and filth ridden slave quarters. Sheridan notes, "the term Guinea is the European name for portions of the West coast of Africa extending from Sierra Leone to Benin."[168] As such, the Diaspora as a mode of migration is central to the transformation of a people from Africans to African Americans. Consequently, the study of African culture prior to and after the Middle Passage, and the subsequent slave trade, is crucial for a complete understanding of slavery in the Americas and elsewhere.[169]

Historian Vincent Brown provides context for the overall mortality rate in the Trade:

> In the eighteenth-century British slave trade, mortality rates among captives during the crossing range between 10-15 percent. These numbers improved over the course of the century, as the percentage fell in response to improvements in ship design, health, and medical care, as well as late eighteenth century legislature that regulated the numbers of Africans carried on each ship and stipulated that bonuses would be paid if captains and surgeons ensured better survival rates. Ailments acquired during travel to the coast overwhelmed the captives once they entered the deadly conditions of the ships.[170]

Besides the actual treatment of slaves on ships, many other factors influenced their mortality.

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[167] Herbert S. Klein, Stanley Engerman, Robin Haines and Ralph Shlomowitz, "Transoceanic Mortality: The Slave Trade in Comparative Perspective", *The Williams and Mary Quarterly,* Vol.58, No.1, New Perspectives on the Transatlantic Slave Trade (Jan., 2001), 99.
[168] Richard B. Sheridan, R. B. (1981). "The Guinea surgeons on the middle passage: The provision of medical services in the British slave trade", *The International journal of African historical studies,*601.
[169]Thompson, Carmen P. "Middle Passage." *Gale Library of Daily Life*: Slavery in America. Ed. Orville Vernon Burton. Vol. 1. Detroit: Gale, 2008. 6-8. U.S. History in Context. Web.25.
[170] Vincent Brown, *The Reaper's Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2008, 44-45.

Among these factors are the following: 1) The period between capture and boarding the vessel often significantly exceeded that of sailing from Africa to the New World, though the density of the population was greater on board ships than at earlier stages. 2) Variations in the internal conditions in Africa had a marked and direct impact on mortality as well as a significant indirect effect on the strength of slaves at the time of boarding. Mortality studies conducted by contemporaneous British researchers determined that better care and treatment of captives aboard slave vessels correlated with lower rates of shipboard mortality for both slaves and crew. 3) At present, too little is known about the relations among economics, climate, disease, and mortality of captured people because little evidence from the time paid attention to these specific factors.[171] However, this lack of evidence does not rule out the need to examine captive human behavior under this type of stress when discussing the elements of suicide at sea.

The development of capitalism and the discovery of the New World had two things in common—the slave ship and the slaves. Along with these two commodities came the horrors of sea travel and the economic explosion that helped to form the world as we know it. In the midst of all of this progress, African captives were dying, some taking their own lives to resist the role being forced on them through European capitalistic endeavors. Many of their actions proved bold.

Consequently, the experiences of African captives, in many of the accounts, have been divorced from their psychological stress, their religious convictions, their ingenuity, and the emotional challenges brought on by their kidnapping and involuntary migration. Therefore, I contend that the trauma associated with kidnapping was the first stage of the psychological

[171] Herbert S. Klein, Stanley Engerman, Robin Haines and Ralph Shlomowitz, "Transoceanic Mortality: The Slave Trade in Comparative Perspective", *The Williams and Mary Quarterly*, Vol.58, No.1, New Perspectives on the Transatlantic Slave Trade (Jan., 2001), 94.

disorientation that often preceded attempts at suicide, regardless of the age of the captive. Dr. Thomas Trotter stated that he "had many boys and girls onboard, who had no relations in the ship: many of them told him they had been kidnapped in the neighborhood of Anamoboe, particularly a girl of about 8 years, who said she had been carried off from her mother, by the man who sold her to the ship."[172]

The evidence reveals that the journey to the slave vessels was a long and arduous trek for many of those who would eventually be sold to European merchants for passage to the New World. Captives were stripped away from their families and communities and had no one to converse with after trekking from their native lands to the vessels. Once aboard the vessels, the accommodations were hot and constricted due to the need for heavy artillery and supplies.[173] The ship's hold was unsanitary and a breeding ground for all sorts of diseases, including dysentery, diarrhea, opthalamia, malaria, smallpox, yellow fever, scurvy, typhoid fever, tapeworm, sleeping sickness, trypanosomiasis, yaws, syphilis, leprosy and elephantiasis.[174] All of these conditions created a sea journey primed for suicide. The Guinea ship was a breeding ground for a geographical cocktail of European, African, and American diseases. The research suggests that these diseases contributed to the physical as well as the mental and emotional illnesses of the enslaved captives. Additionally, seasickness was one of the primary causes of slave ship captive misery, likely exacerbating another common condition that was generally known simply as melancholia. Dr. Alexander Falconbridge testified that the "principle causes of

[172] Testimony of Dr. Thomas Trotter, *Abridgement of the minutes*, Part II, 36.
[173] Richard B. Sheridan, "The Guinea surgeons on the middle passage: The provision of medical services in the British slave trade", *The International journal of African historical studies*,1981,602.
[174] Richard B. Sheridan, "The Guinea surgeons on the middle passage: The provision of medical services in the British slave trade", *The International journal of African historical studies*,1981,602.

dysentery among the slaves were despondency, sudden transitions from hot to cold, breathing putrid air, wallowing in their own excrement, while being chained."[175]

They were fed "horse beans and unclean corn usual condiments of palm oil, salt pepper, the beans were from England and the rice was winward, and the Indian corn at the Anamaboe."[176] Captives also suffered from friction sores, ulcers, and wounds because of injuries sustained from fights and whippings.[177] These types of conditions further fueled the captives' desires for freedom or death. Furthermore, while a rudimentary maritime medicine developed in the Trade, slave vessels offered little respite for the mental anguish experienced by the captives.[178]

A significant portion of contemporary scholarship regarding the Middle Passage and the Transatlantic Slave Trade focuses primarily on epidemiology, insurrection, and revolts on board. The data illustrates how the slave ship served as a floating prison and a factory for the commodification of African captives. Scholars such as Sowande M. Mustakeem, Eric Robert Taylor, Marcus Rediker, Emma Christopher, Anne C. Bailey, and Stephanie Smallwood bring the slave ship into a new dimension of analysis by delving into the lived experiences of the African captives while at sea and their responses to enslavement. However, their studies focus primarily on the slaving vessels, the practice of commodification, and the terror, sex, sickness, insurrections, and mortality that were all endemic to the Middle Passage.

Slave Suicide Ecology and Africana Critical Theory

Slave Suicide Ecology (SSE) is a term introduced by Dr. Terri L. Snyder who proposes

[175] Testimony of Alexander Falconbridge, *an abstract of the evidence delivered before a select committee of the House of commons, in the years 1790 and 1791, 49.*
[176] Witness, Dr. Trotter, *Abridgement of the minutes,* Pt.1-2., 39.
[177] Richard B. Sheridan, 602.
[178] Ibid.,602.

SSE as a way to quantify the suicidal motivations of captives. This concept takes into account the brutality, racism, and longing for home experienced by the captives as well as the discriminatory views held by European slave traders. SSE is a way of interpreting and demystifying the tumultuous experiences that occurred at sea while deciphering how the captives justified self-destruction.[179] The slave ship environment created such a traumatic experience that resistance in the forms of religion, agency, and martyrdom were the only reliable responses to their seaborne treatment. Throughout the history of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, studies that focus on African agency, insurrections, religious views and rebellion have been an essential part of the historical narrative, but according to Snyder, "self-destruction in the context of North American slavery has been overlooked."[180] However, in comparison to the overall discourse on the Middle Passage, few studies focus on suicide by drowning as a means of demonstrating agency motivated by religious beliefs in transmigration. Snyder describes the prevalence of such suicides:

> The history of slavery in early America is a history of suicide. On ships crossing the Atlantic, enslaved men and women refused to eat or leaped into the ocean. They strangled or hanged themselves. They tore open their own throats. In America, they jumped into rivers or out of windows, or even ran into burning buildings. Faced with the reality of enslavement, countless Africans chose death instead.[181]

Snyder makes a bold claim when she states "early American history is a history of suicide." The priority that she places on self-murder is significant and paramount to the

[179] Terri L. Snyder, "Suicide, Slavery and Memory in North America." *The Journal of American History,* Vol. 97, No.1 (June 2010), 42.
[180] Terri L. Snyder, *The Power to Die: Slavery and Suicide in British North America,* University of Chicago Press, 2015, 25.
[181] Terri L. Snyder, *The Power to Die: Slavery and Suicide in British North America*, University of Chicago Press, 2015, 25.

discussion of slave mortality. Some of her descriptions of seaborne events are taken from Parliamentary archives, some of which will be discussed later.

The evidence also underscores the frequency of self-destruction among captive Africans as recorded in captains' logs, folklore, abolitionist arguments, and surgeons' memoirs. All of these highlight the preeminence of slave self-destruction by drowning as an essential phenomenon of the Middle Passage that is often neglected.

For instance, narratives concerning two slave ships, *The Zong* and *The Prince of Orange*, provide examples of captives who jumped overboard both to demonstrate to other captives how to die and to prove their lack of fear of the afterlife.[182] In another instance, captives were literally thrown overboard to save duty fees. Still others, though in pain, leaped overboard in search of a good death. John Spears noted that

> Accordingly, one hundred and thirty-two of the most wretched slaves were bought on deck. Of these one hundred and twenty were thrown to the sharks that swarmed the ships; but ten seeing that they were to be thrown over, and that most of the sufferers were writhing in abject terror—these ten struggled to their feet, and in spite of the cramps and weakness, staggered to the rail plunged over, that they might show the others how to die.[183]

This act of self-murder was a demonstration of how to die with dignity and a clear exercise of agency. By leaping from the ship, despite the conditions of extreme duress, they chose the time and manner of their own deaths. Though the preceding quotation is recorded from the perspective of the captor, one must question if the presence of an African sailor or interpreter assisted the recorder with his interpretation of the event. Nevertheless, the preceding quote makes it clear that many visualized freedom by martyrdom to encourage others to follow suite

[182] Extract of a Letter from on board Prince of Orange of Bristol, Capt. Japhet Bird. Boston Weekly New Letter, Sept. 15, 1737.
[183] John Spears, *The American Slave Trade*,73.

and join them in a return to Africa. In the minds of many West African captives, death was simply a transition from one state of existence to another.

In the form of an inquiry, Kenneth Marshall makes it clear that the tenacity needed to survive the Middle Passage can only be connected to the religious views of the captives:

> Surely, then, the stolen Africans had a great need for divine intervention and consolation. In numerous traditional and pre-colonial West African societies, men comprised the priesthood and were reputed to possess magical and other such powers. As among the Mende the religious life of the society was typically placed under the aegis of the group, namely the eldest or family patriarch who often performed the ceremonies to communicate with the spiritual ancestors that explained the destiny of man. . . Would such big and spiritually endowed men descend into the frightening hold, which many captives possibly perceived as entering, "a world of bad spirits," without the cosmologies that defined their sacred place in the universe?[184]

Marshall's observation is fundamental to my analysis of the importance of an Africana lens when examining the slave ship suicides for two reasons. First, he places the weight of discerning the solution to the plight of the kidnapped Africans squarely upon the shoulders of the divine. Since males made up a significant portion of the average slave vessel, it is reasonable to assume that there may have been a spiritual leader on board. Second, in many West African cultures, religious beliefs are taught and practiced from an early age. These captives would have remembered their upbringing. Further, I submit that the duress of their situation led them to rely even more heavily on their religious training. As I stated above, to be African is to be religious. As Snyder notes, "[f]rom the start of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, mariners, merchants and, masters exchanged reports of slave suicides along with their human traffic and they note

[184] Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*, New York, Penguin Press, 1995,185. Equiano describes his fear and his initial encounter on board the ship. He states that he knew that he had just entered the world of bad spirits. See Also Kenneth Marshall, "Powerful Righteousness: The Transatlantic Survival and Cultural Resistance of an Enslaved African Family in Eighteenth-Century New Jersey", *Journal of American Ethnic History*, Vol. 23, No.2 (Winter, 2004),31.

alarmingly that captive Africans often responded to enslavement by destroying themselves."[185] Since this type of rebellion was a constant threat to the slave-owners, slave merchants, ship captains, and their crews, these Europeans introduced safety measures in shipbuilding and construction to prevent the loss of life via self-destruction at sea. Safety nets were installed along the decks to forestall any captives who might attempt to leap overboard.

[185] Terri L. Snyder, *The Power To Die, Slavery and Suicide in British North America*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2015,23.

CHAPTER 4

PRESENTING PRIMARY SOURCES USED FOR CASE STUDIES

This chapter introduces the foundation for the use of the primary source data on drowning by suicide in the context of Middle Passage mortality studies. The increasing mortality rate of captives in the Middle Passage became a major concern for merchants, slavers, and plantation owners. Early scholarship on Middle Passage mortality was concerned primarily with the nutrition of the captives, the constant reign of diseases at sea, legal codes, economics, and the effects these issues had on death rates. However, the primary sources also contain substantial data on suicide as a major contributor to the Middle Passage death toll. This chapter introduces my approach to primary source data with a particular focus on suicide by drowning and its precipitants. The examination of the case studies and a detailed analysis of the documents used for the case studies is presented in chapter five.

The Dolben Act of 1788 reflected Britain's effort to intervene in the Trade by implementing regulations intended to lessen the alarmingly high mortality rates of captives. Contextually speaking, this chapter takes into account the nutrition, technology, legal codes, punishments, and events that preceded many of the suicidal drowning deaths of Africans aboard ships. The putrid conditions on board contributed to the disorientation that was experienced by the captives. The testimonies used in my analysis are critical to my thesis that West and West Central African cosmologies in conjunction with resistance played an important role in the decision of the captives to commit suicide by drowning. The narratives in the documents that I examine were from persons who served on various slave vessels, on plantations in the West Indies, or in the Colonies. The testimonies were given during Parliamentary procedures of 1790-

1791. These inquiries sought to reduce the death toll of African captives during their transatlantic voyage.

According to John C. Miller, "[h]istorical interest in slave mortality on the high seas has engendered an increasingly sophisticated investigation of the reasons why Africans died aboard the sailing vessels that carried them from Africa to the New World."[186] Miller states that "[t]echniques of statistical inference from scattered and often problematic reports of slave deaths during the Middle Passage have recently extended the analysis to consider the behavioral data in terms of modern epidemiology, demography, and other notions beyond the intellectual horizons of the participants in the trade."[187] He continues his assessment by stating that "[a]lthough the theoretical objective implicit in such quantitative study is a balanced and simultaneous consideration of all possible causes of slave deaths, conclusions based on these new methods have so far tended to focus on the single crew distinction between the immediate consequences of the abuses that slaves suffered at sea as opposed to the delayed effects of debilitating conditions that they might have encountered earlier, along the largely undocumented African slave trails, in the Barracoons and on the beaches."[188] I agree with Miller's assessment and add that the aforementioned studies were also limited in their analysis of how the preceding conditions affected the captives emotionally and how their emotions and religious beliefs combined factored into their decisions to commit suicide by leaping from the ships. Miller goes on to state that, "the eighteenth-century originators of the debate on the causes of slave mortality established the broad framework that still confines historians who concentrate primarily on

[186] Joseph C. Miller, "Mortality in the Atlantic Slave Trade: Statistical Evidence on Causality", The Journal of Interdisciplinary History, Vol.11, No.3 (Winter, 1981) p. 385.
[187] Ibid., 385.
[188] Ibid., 385.

distinguishing causes of mortality in Africa from others introduced during the ocean crossing."[189] This is why I introduced slave suicide ecology in conjunction with Africana Critical Theory as my investigatory frameworks for analyzing the data. Further, my research suggests that the arduous journey over land forced upon captives before being loaded onto slave vessels contributed to the likelihood of suicide once they were at sea. Hence, I analyze Parliamentary testimonies in an attempt to answer some of the mortality questions that heretofore have been under investigated.

Many captives were taken from the interior of the continent. Their captors led them on a disease-filled and treacherous journey that ended with forced migration aboard strange vessels. The onboard conditions presented psychological and emotional traumas that they then had to cope with in the Middle Passage. Also important in regards to the amount of data that speaks to my research conundrum is acknowledging the paucity of actual voices of the captives themselves. The closest we get to the actual voices of captives are the testimonies of linguists and interpreters. Before discussing the source data, the following discourse represents the genesis of the mortality discussion that led to the recording of the testimonies used here as case studies.

Sir William Dolben, a member of the House of Commons in 1788, introduced a document entitled "The Passage of the Slave Trade Regulation Act of 1788."[190] The purpose of the Trade Regulation Act of 1788 was to challenge the inhumane suffering experienced by enslaved captives aboard slave ships during the Middle Passage. Dolben argued that the slave ship afforded cramped quarters, unhealthy conditions, high levels of disease, poor water quality,

[189] Joseph C. Miller, "Mortality in the Atlantic Slave Trade: Statistical Evidence on Causality", The Journal of Interdisciplinary History, Vol.11, No.3 (Winter, 1981) p. 386.
[190] James W. LoGerfo, Sir William Dolben and the Cause of Humanity: The Passage of the Slave Trade Regulation Act of 1788, 18th Century Studies, Volume 6, no 4, (Summer, 1973), p.431.

and cankers caused by chains and shackles.[191] Dolben estimated that as many as 10,000 lives, both slaves and British seamen, could be lost if these egregious conditions were not addressed immediately.[192] However, several questions arise from Dolben's concern. Whether he was truly motivated by concern for the humane treatment of the captive or the simple potential for economic loss, his arguments led to the eyewitness accounts that provide a glimpse into the everyday workings of the slave vessel.

The primary sources examined are the *Abridgement of the minutes of the evidence: taken before a Committee of the Whole House, to whom it was referred to consider of the slave-trade, 1789-1790, parts 1,2,3 and 4* (AMCWH). The AMCWH is a four-volume collection of testimonies and observations that are foundational to my study of the plight of the men, women, and children who were forced to migrate to the New World. In conjunction with the AMCWH, I examined the notes of Captain William Snelgrave, entitled *A new account of some parts of Guinea, and the slave-trade, containing, I, The History of the late conquest of the Kingdom of Whidaw by the King, by William Snelgrave* as well as the *Foreign Slave Trade, Abstract of the Information Recently Laid On The Table Of The House Of Commons of the Subject of the Slave Trade Being A Report Made By A Committee Specially Appointed For The Purpose, To The Directors of the African Institution on the 8th of May, 1821*; *The African Slave Trade and Its Remedy, by* Thomas Fowell Buxton; and *An Account of the Slave Trade on the Coast of Africa*, by Alexander Falconbridge, a former surgeon on several slave vessels.

These parliamentary procedures, diary notes, and Abstracts focus on events that occurred during the Middle Passage, and the primary voices are those of the captors, not the captives. This

[191] James W. LoGerfo, Sir William Dolben and the Cause of Humanity: The Passage of the Slave Trade Regulation Act of 1788, 18th Century Studies, Volume 6, no 4, (Summer, 1973), p. 451.
[192] Ibid., 431.

collection of testimonies reproduced in over 600 pages of eyewitness accounts comprises over forty-three narratives. The diary notes from William Snelgrave, a former slaver and merchant on the West Coast of Africa, provide one of the most extensive primary source documents available to scholars seeking to examine the high seas drama of the Middle Passage. His employers, or benefactors, were the Merchants of London, who had invested in the Trading of slaves and other commodities to and on the Coast of Guinea.[193] Guinea encompasses the Bight of Biafra, the Bight of Benin, and some parts of west central Africa. Snelgrave testified that one of the reasons that he composed this "history" is due to the commendation and appreciation he received from members of the Merchants Council.[194] He also states that they, the merchants, are the best Judges of the Truth of what he has relayed to them. Snelgrave was supported by and earned his living on the continent of Africa. Living among the people there, he became a self-styled expert on African culture and behavior while regularly reporting his experiences and observations to his benefactors, the Merchants.[195] In his text, composed between 1719 and 1721, he firmly asserts the credibility of his account, reminding his readers that many of them have not ventured to the continent and are therefore unfamiliar with the "Manners and Customs" of the "barbarous and brutish Nations, that have been and are still on the Globe."[196] Thus, since people in the 17th and 18th centuries, many of whom were literate, relied on comparatively well-traveled people, like Snelgrave, as sources of information about both Africans and the Slave Trade, a reexamination of these narratives was essential to my research.

[193] William Snelgrave, *A New Account Of Some Parts of Guinea, And The Slave Trade: The History Of The Late Conquest Of The Kingdom Of Whidaw*, London, 1734, 2.
[194] Ibid., 2.
[195] William Snelgrave, *A New Account Of Some Parts of Guinea, And The Slave Trade: The History Of The Late Conquest Of The Kingdom Of Whidaw*, London, 1734, 3.
[196] Ibid., 23.

When I examined the primary source literature about the Transatlantic Slave Trade, it became apparent, as is already noted in the literature, that when slave ship captains, crew men, and merchants who served in the Trade corresponded with their constituencies, they described Africans as "brutes, beasts and savages." These descriptions predisposed Europeans at home, both commoners and royalty, to notions of White supremacy and racism. Significantly, none of these accounts, though they are presented as "accurate," represent the captives' perspective. Phillip Curtin reminds us that "the Europeans were not always noble and accurate in their views of the African."[197] The high mortality rates of the Trade in the nineteenth century replaced the romantic interest in Africa with humanitarian concerns of the slave trade movement.[198] Of course, this former romantic interest in Africa was more concerned with the financial resources that could be extracted from the continent than with respect for Africans as human beings.

I analyze each of the sources by taking into account the witnesses' occupation, time of service, the ship they may have served on, and the location where they resided. Some of these sources are obviously biased and constructed to promote the economic value of the Trade. A list of the key persons in my examination and their occupations can be found summarized in (Table 1) Table of Witnesses and their Occupations & Locations (see page 90).

[197] Philip, D. Curtin, Africa Remembered: Narratives by West Africans from the Era of the Slave Trade, The University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 1967, 4.

[198] Ibid., 4-5.

Witnesses Names	Witness Testimony Dr. Alexander Falconbridge	Witness Testimony Dr. Samuel Athill	Witness Testimony Alexander Willock, Esq.	Witness Testimony John Wedderburn	Witness Testimony George Hibbert, Eqs.	Witness Testimony Isaac Wilson	Witness Testimony Lord Shuldham	Sir George Young
Occupation	Ships Surgeon	Surgeon and appointed counsellor 1786. He attend 8-9000 slaves.	Attorney and merchant. He owned 500 slaves and several properties. Resided in Antigua	Property owner, owned 5000 slaves. Native of Great Britain and lived in Jamaica	Was a merchant for London and has provided extensive accounting figures on production on the island of Jamaica	Surgeon,Majesty's Navy		
Name of Ship								
Locations		Antigua, birth place.		Jamaica			West Indies	Captain
Years at Sea	1780-1787							4 Voyages
Years in the Trade			36 years	27 years				1767,1768,1771 and 1772.
Abolition concerns								

Witnesses Names	Witness Testimony Admiral Barrington	Witness Testimony Henry Ellison	Witness Testimony Admiral Marriott Arbuthnot	Witness Testimony Admiral Richard Edwards	Witness Testimony Captain John Ashley Hall	William Snelgrave	Attorney Robert Norris
Occupation			Admiral				Accounting
Name of Ship							
Locations	West Indies		West Indies, St. Kitts and Jamaica	West Indies	London, West Indies and Africa		
Years at Sea					1772-1776		
Years in the Trade				1731,1735,1760–1761			
Abolition concerns							

Table 1: Table of Witnesses and Their Occupations and Locations

Table 1 (cont'd)

Witnesses Names	Stephen Fuller	Sir Peter Parker	Lord Rodney	David Parry, Esq.	John Orde, Esq.	Sir Archibald Campbell	Sir R Payne
Occupation	Attorney	Captain of the man of war on the leeward islands.		Attorney	Midshipman, lieutenant in the navy & Governor		Governor Genreal
Name of Ship							
Locations	Agent in Jamaica		Served in Barbadoes, Martinique, Antigua, St Kitts, Guadeloupe and Jamaica for 3 ½ years."	Barbadoes	Jamaica and Dominique	Martinique, Guadeloupe and Dominique	Leeward Islands
Years at Sea							
Years in the Trade	1739-1772		7 years	7 years	6 years		
Abolition concerns							

Witnesses Names	Sir John Daliing	Lord McCartney	Commander Allan Gardiner	Admiral William Hotham	Thomas Norbury Kirby	Alexander Douglas, Eqs.	James Tobin, Esq.
Occupation	Soldier and governor of Jamaica, and served in Havana 1781	Governor			He owned two sugar plantations and served as an attorney.	St. Kitts, from 1749-1771. He managed two estates and leased 100 male and 115 female captives.	Attorney
Name of Ship							
Locations		West Indies, The Grenadines and Tobago	West Indies		A native of Antigua left in 1762 and returned 1780.		Lived in Nevis
Years at Sea							
Years in the Trade		1776-1779				22 years	12 years
Abolition concerns							

Table 1 (cont'd)

Witnesses Names	Dr. Robert Thomas	John Hankey, Esq.	John Anthony Rucker, Esq.	John Greg, Esq.	James Morley	John Castles	Jamies Baillie, Esq.
Occupation	Surgeon attended to 4000-5000 slaves annually.	Attorney	Attorney, would not have used his land if he'd known Britain would have prohibiting against slavery.	Attorney, Secretary of the King's Commission and Auctioneer.		Surgeon	Attorney
Name of Ship					Medway		
Locations	St. Kitts	He owned lake land parcels in the Ceded Islands.	He owned land in Grenada, Caracas and St. Vincent.	Ceded Islands	Gunner	Grenada, He purchased some uncultivated land and supplied it with slaves fromAfrica.	Granada
Years at Sea					6 Voyages		
Years in the Trade	9 years	1764		20 years		1766-1788	He owned property in Granada, St. Vincent and he was an attorney in St. Kitts for 16 years.
Abolition concerns			He was concerned that there were not enough slaves to breed and maintain work force.				

Table 1 (cont'd)

Witnesses Names	Alexander Campbell, Esq.	Sir Ashton Warner Byam,	Gilbert Franklin, Esq.	James Frazer	Captain Thomas Bolton Thompson	Captain John Hill	George Baillie, Esq.	Sir George Young
Occupation	Attorney, and owner of 1200 slaves.	His Majesty's Attorney General.	Attorney	First mate, second mate and commander.	Captain: served as second lieutenant of the Royal Navy	Captain John Hill	Attorney	
Name of Ship					Grampus, Nautilus	Wasp		
Locations	He resided in the West Indies. He also owns two sugar plantations with 300 slaves.	Lived in Antigua.	Wets Indies owned a number of slaves. He figured a way to prevent lock jaw in the lives of slave children. He and his partner owned 400 slaves			He was in Goree and Ganbia	Resided in South Caroline, Georgia and Charleston as a merchant.	Captain
Years at Sea								4 Voyages
Years in the Trade	1754-1763	1765-1770		20 years	1784, 1785, and 1786, 1787	1781-1782	1756 planter and 1767 Commissioner, General of Georgia 1762.	1767,1768,1771 and 1772.
Abolition concerns								

CASES	Witness Testimony Dr. Alexander Falconbridge	Witness Testimony Clement Noble	Witness Testimony James Morley	Witness Testimony Dr. Thomas Trotter	Witness Testimony James Frazer	Witness Testimony Isaac Wilson	Witness Testimony Sir George Young
Jumped Overboard	Ships were fitted to prevent slaves from jumping overboard., (AM,II), p.232.	x (AM,III)p. 48 Women referred to as insane) and drowned		x (AM III) p.38 and drowned		X A few men jumped overboard.(AM,II),p .220. X,After refusing to eat some men jump overboard. (AM,II) p.222.	
Throwing Themselves Overboard							
Attempting To Jump Overboard							
Thrown Overboard		x Baby, (AM,III) p.53	x,Dead, (AM,III) p.63			4	x Threaten to if not sold, (AM,III) p.80. p.
Beaten and Thrown overboard							
Falling Overboard		x x x (AMIII), p.47, 48, 50 and drowned		x			
Drowned	(AM,II),p.15, 232, 233	x			x	x 2 People drowned. (AM,II),p.221, 228.	
Drowned Themselves						x	
Agency	x more than 20 jumpers	x		x			
Transmigration							
Retaining Honor							

Table 2: Primary Cases and Their Descriptions

Table 2 (cont'd)

CASES	Witness Testimony Henry Hew Dalrymple Esq.	Witness Testimony Henry Ellison	Witness Testimony James Towne, A Carpenter	Witness Testimony Mr. Claxton, Surgeons mate	Witness Testimony Captain John Ashley Hall	New Account of Some Parts of Guinea: William Snelgrave	Number of Instances
Jumped Overboard		x, 6 Women flogged 6 overboard 5 drowned. (AM,III). p.147 Boy jumps overboard and drowns, (AM,III),p.148.	Some jumped overboard due to ill treatment, shackles, hands, feet, neck and thumb screws. (AM,IV),p.11. Even Guinea sailors even where sharks abound.(AM,IV), p.16.	x (AM, IV) p. 19-21		A Negro struck a sailor and then jumped overboard., p.180	
Throwing Themselves Overboard	x, Due to cruel treatment slaves begged to throw themselves overboard, (AM,III) p.119			Men threw themselves overboard drown believing the would return to Africa. The captain cut off thier heads			
Attempting To Jump Overboard							
Thrown Overboard		Man too old for sale. Head cut off and thrown overboard. (AM,III) p. 143.			Baby being thrown overboard. (AM,II), p.218.	Man's head cut off and them thrown overboard.p183-184 Transmigration mentioned by Snelgrave.	
Beaten and Thrown overboard		After refusing food. Woman is beaten and thrown overboard. (AM,III) p.147.					
Falling							
Drowned						Many drowned trying to swim to the shore, p.15. 80 killed and many jumped overboard and drowned, p.190.	
Drowned Themselves						Two men drowned themselves after the mutiny failed p.167.	
Agency			x	x		x	
Transmigration				x		x	
Retaining Honor			x				

Of the witness testimonies examined in Table 1, eleven were either captains or admirals on slave ships**;** five were surgeons or practiced medicin**e** on a plantation or while at sea; eighteen were attorneys; seven were Governors; and one was the Secretary of the King's Commission and an Auctioneer.

After separating the witnesses by occupation and using an exegetical approach, I examine each testimony in search of both references to the specific behaviors I am researching and language that suggests a biased perception of African captives. The terms I searched for first were "jumped or leaped overboard." I wanted to discover the frequency of these terms in their testimonies and whether the terms "jumped or leaped overboard" were connected to self-destruction (suicide) or escape attempts.

In sixty-four cases, the eyewitness used the terms drowned, overboard, jumped overboard, leaped, or leaped overboard to describe suicidal drownings that occurred during the Middle Passage. The five cases that follow speak specifically to the notions of agency, martyrdom, and transmigration. Clearly, once the ships were at sea, the captives who leaped were not attempting to swim back to shore. Instead, their decision to leap from these vessels in the middle of the ocean was a statement of resistance, rebellion, agency, and faith.

The five cases I examine represent testimonies of slave ship captains, surgeons, admirals, and governors who travelled aboard slave ships and were able to provide eyewitness accounts of their experiences of the Middle Passage. Table #3 depicts the key descriptors mentioned by the witness as they relate to suicide (see page 91).

In examining the testimonies, I sought to discern what motivated each captive to commit suicide through a close reading of the witness's description of the event. Therefore, in the cases that follow, I give each case the opportunity to speak for itself. In examining these cases, I draw

on two interpretive frameworks: 1) Africana Critical Theory (ACT) helped me take into account the role of religious beliefs, cosmology, racism, and White supremacy as influencers of suicide by drowning, and 2) Slave Suicide Ecology (SSE), which was useful for framing the emotional and psychological trauma experienced by these captives. In so doing, I sought to determine whether the narratives contained any evidence that would help me understand why persons of West and West Central African descent jumped overboard. Indeed, these eyewitnesses frequently mention their awareness of the captives' motivating factors.

Further, Africana Critical Theory allowed me to highlight the role of the captives' cosmology in the context of White supremacy as a significant part of the decision-making process and to better explain their suicidal behaviors. By employing Africana Critical Theory, I framed the discussion of suicide within the confines of an African worldview, including the captives' perspectives on life, death, and the afterlife. In so doing, I sought to arrive at an alternative perspective on what led to some of these self-drownings.

The evidence suggests that several West and West Central African societies, for example the Igbo, held to a cosmological view known as transmigration. Transmigration is a belief system of rebirth held by some West and West Central African societies. They believed that physical death was not the end of their existence but an opportunity to re-connect with their ancestors and to continue providing direction and spiritual oversight to their societies and families after death. Though the specific cosmologies of the many ethnic groups are not a primary focus of my research, the religious beliefs of the Ibo, Ashanti, and other West African societies that adhered to a tradition of transmigration are essential in the discovery and support of my argument.

Though resistance studies about the Middle Passage have been undertaken on several academic fronts, the examination of the interconnection of religion and cosmology, as well as

agency and martyrdom, as motivations for suicide by drowning as an alternative form of resistance has not received adequate attention.

My interpretation of these cases frames the experiences of captives within the context of racial discrimination and White supremacy by using SSE. As noted by Cruz, "[t]he concept of slave suicide ecology connotes the emotional, psychological and material conditions—that fostered suicide as they relate to the examination of power relations such as kidnapping, forced migration and rape, as well as other sources of power that include religious beliefs and gendered social constructions."[199]

The results of my research demonstrate that in order to reach a better understanding of what motivated suicides by drowning as an alternate form of resistance by enslaved captives an alternative exegetical method and hermeneutical analysis is required. Africana Critical Theory coupled with slave suicide ecology allows for an interpretation of events by peering through a lens that analyzes the roles of White supremacy and racism while surfacing the captive's point of view. Speaking of White supremacy and racialized murder, Thomas Roberts writes,

> The ruffians who command these slave ships will attempt to silence the heart rending meanings and to chase away the sullen despondency of their victims by application of the lash on their naked backs. When a British cruizer chases a slaver, it is no uncommon thing for the brutal captain to *throw his cargo overboard*, One of these inhuman wretches when chased enclosed twelve negroes in as many casks, and threw them into the sea, to influence the British commander to slacken his sail to save them, and consequently to afford the ship an opportunity to escape with the rest of the cargo. (Italics are mine). [200]

[199] Mimi Cruz, *Suicidal Tendencies, Professor Awarded Prize for Research on Slavery and Suicide*, Calstatefullerton.edu/spotlight/2011sp/Terri-Snyder-Award.asp.

[200] The cruel nature and injurious effects of the foreign slave trade: represented in a letter, addressed to the Rt. Hon. Lord Brougham and Vaux by Roberts, Thomas, fl. 1836; Brougham and Vaux, Henry Brougham, Baron, 1778-1868 Publication date 1836 Topics Slave trade, Slavery, Slavery, Slaves, Slave trade Publisher Bristol : John Taylor Collection bplscas; bostonpubliclibrary; americana Digitizing sponsor Associates of the Boston Public Library / The Boston Foundation Contributor Boston Public Library Language English, p.5.

The above quotation affirms what scholars already knew about the attitude held by many of the slavers regarding African people. Roberts' narratives indicates the following: 1) brutality and violence were often the primary tools used to quiet the moans and despondency of the captives; 2) captains and crew, described here as "ruffians," behaved with a lawlessness and disregard for the captives' lives; and 3) captives were often murdered by being thrown overboard. It was not uncommon for a portion of the slaves to be drowned in an attempt to slow down pursing British authorities. Regarding the captives who witnessed such atrocities, I wanted to discover, if possible, what they experienced emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually and how these traumatic episodes influenced their actions to escape enslavement. Eric Taylor states, "the choices of resistance open to Africans during the Middle Passage boiled down to suicide or revolt."[201]

Therefore, by using Africana Critical Theory within the context of slave suicide ecology as my interpretive apparatus, I find that the evidence reveals the cosmological and religious perspective of enslaved captives. This perspective assisted me in understanding why some chose to drown themselves by leaping into the sea. This alternative qualitative research method is essential to my analysis because Africana Studies as a discipline focuses primarily on "the formulation of data driven, reliable conclusions about the genuine problems and challenges faced by people of *African* descent."[202] Therefore, examining the challenges faced by these captives through a lens that considered their point of view was essential.

One of the essential components of the captives' decisions to live or die was not only their traditional religious views but also their belief the afterlife. Therefore, a cursory

[201] Eric Taylor, *If We Must Die*: *Shipboard Insurrections in the Era of the Atlantic Slave Trade*, Louisiana State University Press, 2006, pp.5 & 17.
[202] Serie Mcdougal, III, The Future of Research Methods in Africana Studies Graduate Curriculum, *Journal of Black Studies*, Published online, 8 February 2011, p.280.

understanding of the captive Africans' belief systems regarding death and the afterlife is pertinent to my inquiry. Dr. Marimba Ani emphasize the importance of incorporating African epistemologies in an examination, like mine, of African experiences in the Middle Passage:

> It would be the mission of the African social scientist, at home and in the diaspora, to devote their energies to the radical reconstruction of the disciplines in which they are trained. Without such an approach, African peoples run the risk of incorporating the theoretical, mythological and ideological models of white social science into their own methodologies, thereby unknowingly internalizing the values of Western European society, including the negative image of Africa which white racialism and culture created.[203]

Ani makes it clear that a radical exegetical and hermeneutical approach to the study of African peoples is essential. She warns us against using Western social sciences assessment and methodologies for examining African peoples and their cultures. Taking Ani's argument into consideration regarding methodology, Africana Critical Theory allows me to *relocate* the enslaved African person's voice, experience, and religious acumen into the center of the discourse from its historical location on the periphery.

I examine the Ibo's worldview as only one of many West and West Central religious perspectives. In my examination, I challenge the traditional European understanding of suicide, and I frame it by way of African Critical Theory as a form of resistance during the Middle Passage. I contend that answering my research questions about drowning, suicide, and resistance in the minds of the captives required considering important differences between West African and European worldviews. Specifically, I needed to consider the cyclical character of the former in contrast with the more linear nature of the latter. According, to William Piersen, "many slaves believed that death in Africa was

[203] Marimba Ani, "The Ideology of European Dominance", *Western Journal of Black Studies*, 3, no.4 (1979), 249.

preferable to the unspeakable horror that awaited them across the Atlantic."[204] Thus, fear of the unknown led to many suicides, especially by drowning.

I situate my research during the years 1720-1820, within the burgeoning array of Transatlantic Slave Trade, Middle Passage, Diaspora, and Self-Destruction and Mortality scholarship. I interrogate several documented cases of Africans deliberately committing suicide by drowning as a means of procuring their liberty or seeking to regain lost honor through a brave death. Many of these suicides, I contend, were motivated by a desperate desire to escape intolerable conditions. Joseph Miller describes one example of such conditions in the practice known as "tight packing" aboard slave ships:

> The originators of the eighteenth-century debate on the causes of slave mortality established the broad framework that still confines historians who concentrate primarily on distinguishing causes of mortality in Africa from others introduced during the ocean crossing. Abolitionist critics of the slave trade blamed maritime conditions, especially "tight packing," or high densities with which European slavers crowded people into holds of their ships, for most of the slave deaths occurring during the Middle Passage.[205]

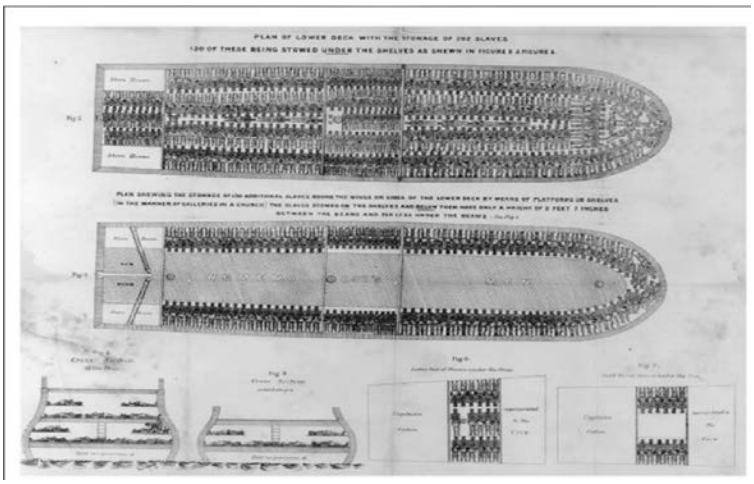

Figure 1: Crowded Slave Ship

[204] William Piersen, White Cannibals, Black Martyrs: Fear, Depression and Religious Faith as Causes of Suicide Among New Slaves, The Journal of Negro History, Vol. 62, No.2. (April 1977), p.147.
[205] Joseph C. Miller, "Mortality in the Atlantic Slave Trade: Statistical Evidence on Causality", *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Vol.11, No.3 (Winter, 1981), p.386.

Though overcrowded conditions (see figure 1) were a violation of The Slave Trade Regulation Act of 1788, also known as the Dolben's Act, these conditions played a formidable role in many of deaths. Legally, slave merchants were permitted to load five persons per three tons on a ship.

Additional practices on board slave ships further contributed to an environment in which people, particularly captives, were inclined to seek extreme measures for relief. In other words, the atrocities that were normal practice aboard slave ships undergirded the slave suicide ecology. For example, Thomas Buxton, recounts that when a slave died on board, his or her body was thrown overboard to be devoured by alligators or sharks.[206] Captain Ramsey, the commander of the *Black Joke* in 1831, states:

> that he saw the sharks tearing the bodies of the negroes who were thrown overboard by the slavers and had it not been for the fortunate rescue of two of the slaves of the *Rapido*, who had been flung into the sea shackled together, and who were brought up from under by a boat hook, the vessel would have escaped condemnation, as all her slaves had been thrown overboard or landed in canoes, before they came up with her.[207]

The Middle Passage was a perfect storm for suicide attempts, whether in the course of an insurrection or not. Suicide, for many captives, was an avenue for escaping the abuses inherent in their captivity and forced migration. A large number of deaths, additionally, were likely motivated by a desire to escape intolerably crowded conditions.

According to Kenneth Marshall, "the Middle Passage has received scant attention in American slavery historiography, primarily because it is difficult to analyze. For the most part, White seaman and not the African captives themselves discussed the Middle Passage's horrific

[206] Thomas Fowell Buxton, *The African Slave Trade*, 84.
[207] Ibid., 113.

temporal natures."[208] Therefore, alternative methods of interpretation are critical for understanding what we know about some West and West Central Africans, particularly their worldview as it related to enslavement, their relationship to the land, and their responses to captivity. Employing such an interpretive framework lends itself to a perspective that is consistent with the captives' religious experiences and concepts of land and ancestral connections as reasons for much self-destruction by drowning.

The boundaries of each case study to be presented are as follows: 1) Each case occurs on a slave vessel during a voyage in the Middle Passage. 2) The vessels are at sea making the transatlantic crossing for 30 to120 days. 3) The captives are usually bound by chains or some type of fetter at one time or another, and they often get free. 4) The captives leap overboard from the ships while at sea. 5) Jumpers who are recovered explained their reasons for jumping overboard to an interpreter or a linguist.

The evidence demonstrates that in some cases, this self-destructive behavior could be characterized within at least three categories: 1) religious faith and transmigration, 2) agency, and 3) seeking a so-called "good death" as a means of regaining honor. By necessity, I relied on an interpretation of eyewitness narratives to fill in the gaps. What follows are the detailed analyses of five cases that support my main thesis.

[208] Kenneth Marshall, Powerful Righteousness: The Transatlantic Survival and Cultural Resistance of an Enslaved African Family in Eighteenth-Century New Jersey, *Journal of American Ethnic History*, Vol. 23, No.2 (Winter, 2004), p.27.

CHAPTER 5

DETAILED ANALYSIS AND INTERROGATION OF PRIMARY SOURCES AND CASE STUDIES

In this chapter, I analyze five cases. Case 1 involves Eboe Suicide and transmigration. Case 2 examines the notions of transmigration, the good death, and triumph. This case supports the notion of transmigration and illustrates the murderous nature of slaving and the triumph experienced by one who escaped it by jumping overboard. From the water, he raised his hands in victory. Case 3 involves a woman in resistance and a brief gender analysis. This case introduces the notion of agency as the motivator for the suicide. Case 4 involves dismemberment as an attempt to discourage insurrection and suicide. This case demonstrates the extreme cruelty of the slavers and explores how that cruelty led to both insurrections and suicide attempts. Case 5 shows how the concepts of agency, martyrdom, and the good death operate. Even when their deaths were imminent, captives exercised agency in choosing the manner of it.

Case Number One: (Eboe Suicide and Transmigration) (see also Figure 4 in the Appendix)

This case is taken from the *Foreign Slave trade: abstract of the information recently laid on the table of the House of Commons on the subject of the slave trade: being a report made by a committee specially appointed for the purpose, to directors of the African Institution on the 8th of May 1821.*

> I went also to witness the cruel sight. I went to be convinced and to deplore. There were about 300 miserable beings, without distention of sex, packed close together in the above mentioned store-room, upon the bare earth, without coverings for their bodies, except some of them, had only a piece of cloth to cover the middle. Some were sick, and a few presented the human shape in a most dreadful form, being reduced to mere skeletons. But generally speaking, the great part appeared to be in good health. They are of the Eboe nation; and I am informed that King Pepper got them from the interior. He supplied them very slowly, which accounts for the long detention of the *Fox*. She took in 328 at Bonny, whereof about twenty-eight died, some of whom jumped over board and drowned themselves, and I am told, with the e*rroneous hope of getting back to*

their own country. (italics mine)[209]

The Analysis of Case Study Number One

This case begins with an observation of the shipboard conditions faced by a majority of African captives. The narrator witnessed many cruel sights and deplorable conditions. He recounts that the captives were kept naked and not separated by sex. He adds that women and men packed together in this fashion showed evidence of high levels of anxiety and sulkiness. It is hard to imagine that the women did not feel violated and ashamed. The narrator describes the 300 captives on this ship as "miserable." What prompted this characterization remains obscure. Was it being chained below deck, tightly packed, and often without sufficient food and water? Was it their dark skin—black and mysterious? Were his European sensibilities offended by the lack of modesty afforded these men, women, and children? Was Black skin, in his mind as in the minds of many European traders, evidence of inferiority? Other than the ample evidence of assumed racial superiority on the part of White Europeans, we are left to guess at other frameworks and motivations that may have informed this narrator's perception of events. We know the captives he described were Ebo, and many of them had been on board the ship for quite some time. As other sources confirm, slave ships often lingered off the Gold Coast until they were filled with as many Black bodies as possible. He states that the captives were taken from the interior and supplied slowly by King Pepper, so they had already experienced an arduous journey from their homes to the ship. Furthermore, captives were likely housed with persons with whom they had little or no relationship and may have even been kept in close quarters with

[209] *Foreign Slave trade: abstract of the information recently laid on the table of the House of Commons on the subject of the slave trade: being a report made by a committee specially appointed for the purpose, to directors of the African Institution on the 8th of May 1821*, African Institution (London England), Ellerton and Henderson, birney collection: americana: Johns Hopkins University, 132-133

tribal enemies. Isaac Wilson, another source, tells us that he heard slaves complaining of the heat, the ill effects of which led to further sickness and even death.[210] Each of these components simply complicated the captives' situations at sea and increased the desire to escape.

The explanations of the suicides provided by the interpreter demonstrate the important role of interpreters or linguists who were often called upon to assist the Europeans. For example, Dr. Falconbridge remembers two instances when interpreters were employed to explain how a pregnant woman and an elderly man and his son were captured by professed kidnappers while working in the fields picking yams.[211] Thus, some of the captains and crews were exposed to or made aware of some of the customs and religious views of their captives, including transmigration, through the intercession of linguists.

By examining the role of West and West Central African belief systems, particularly with regard to transmigration, I discovered that religion was one of the prime motivators and influencers of suicide by drowning. According to John Stewart, "[o]ne opinion they [slaves] all agree on, and that is the expectation that after death, they shall first return to their native country, and enjoy again the society of kindred and friends, from whom they have been torn away in an evil hour."[212]

After examining the primary sources, I find sufficient evidence to forcefully argue that many of the suicides were attempts not at self-annihilation but at achieving a transition into the afterlife.

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[210] Testimony of Wilson, *Abridgement Minutes*, Part II, 219-220.
[211] Testimony of Falconbridge, *Abridgement Minutes*, Part II, 226.
[212] John Stewart, *A View of the Past and Present State of the Island of Jamaica: With remarks on the Moral and Physical Conditions of the Slaves and on the Abolition of Slavery in the Colonies* (New York: Negro Universities Press, Reprint 1969), 280-281.

My interrogation of primary and secondary source materials and the use of the case study method helps to re-enforce my thesis. The case study method established the frame for my research as I reviewed previous scholarship on the Middle Passage. My challenge with existing scholarship was to highlight the interconnectedness of West African cosmology, racism, and resistance. For the most part, previous scholars have underrepresented these essential elements as contributing factors to suicidal drownings.

Since each of my five cases occurred on a slave vessel during a voyage in the Middle Passage, the focus of my inquiry was directed at the captives' experiences. This enabled me to support my first assertion that the slave ship environment itself provided incentives to captives to escape it though drowning. Furthermore, the extensive time at sea and the arduousness of the voyages contributed to the captives' longing for home and freedom. The case study method also helps to explain the importance of examining the traditional religious views of specific groups of captives.

Though captives came from many different West African cultures and traditional cosmologies, I chose the Ibo as a model of a nation that believed in the transmigration of the spirit after death as is demonstrated in this case. Jason R. Young argues for the importance of religious belief in understanding the experience of captives:

> Indeed, slave spirituality played a critical role in the re-socialization of the slave body and behavior away from the brutalities of the master class. In effect, slaves looked— at least in part— to the realm of the spirit to express their discontent with slavery's collusion with the dawn of a new era of juridical and philosophical thinking that formalized and justified the exercise of violence.[213]

Though Young's argument traces the experiences of the captives while on land in the American South, many African traditions and cultural rituals were retained by captives, both in

[213] Jason R. Young, *Rituals of Resistance: African Atlantic Religion in Kongo and the Lowcountry South in the Era of Slavery*, Baton Rouge, US: LSU Press, 2007, 14.

the Middle Passage and after arriving in the New World. I contend that the religiously-motivated suicides that occurred at sea were simply precursors to what happened once the captives arrived on the plantations. Captives experienced severe violence during the Middle Passage, beginning with their capture and continuing through their disembarkation. To cope with these extreme circumstances, they must have drawn on their cultural and spiritual understandings of both this world and the next. Thousands of unknown captives, beyond those in this case, made similar decisions, and many of them will never be accounted for. However, though they remain unknown, their commitment to freedom and to their African-ness has not gone unnoticed. For example, Terry L. Snyder argues that

> If historians have not looked deeply at enslaved peoples acts of self-destruction, in part it is because suicide is an intricate historical problem to study; in the context of slavery, it is doubly difficult. For the most part slaves did not leave suicide notes. Therefore, we appear to lack direct written evidence of their intentions. For the pre-Revolutionary period, we have almost no accounts of slave suicide from the viewpoint of the enslaved people.[214]

The above quotation from Snyder points out the shortage of research regarding suicide during the Transatlantic Slave Trade, plantation occupation, and the lives of Africans in North America. However, Snyder offers several important reasons for this neglect. My research supplies additional evidence that though some traditional African religions did not wholly support suicide, they had a view of self-destruction that differed from their European counterparts. By focusing on religiously-motivated resistance in the Middle Passage, I posit insurrection at sea as a precursor to the numerous revolts on land. One historian, Margaret Fields, through an ethnological study lends support to this assessment:

> Conducting pioneering work on the Gâ recognized this same inherent belief in the regeneration of souls. Her work gives a detailed description of the process and structure of re-birth. For the Gâ, "the dead can be reborn again only in their own

[214] Terri Snyder, *The Power to Die*, 16.

> families, a grandfather as a grandson, or a dead first child as a second child ..." The Gâ word for reincarnation is *gblomo*, signifying a recurring cycle.[215]

Field's research purports that in many traditional African religions, life and death are intricately woven into the fabric of a cyclical existence where the dead simply transition into another form or state of existence; thus, the notion of suicide as simple self-annihilation is somewhat moot. Allen Anderson, an Anglo-Zimbabwean theologian and Professor of Mission and Pentecostal Studies at the University of Birmingham, is frequently cited as one of the foremost scholars on Global Pentecostalism from an African traditional perspective.**[216]** He describes this complicated African understanding of the interconnectedness of life and death:

> In the religions of Africa, life does not end with death, but continues in another realm. The concepts of "life" and "death" are not mutually exclusive concepts, and there are no clear dividing lines between them. Human existence is a dynamic process involving the increase or decrease of "power" or "life force," of "living" and "dying," and there are different levels of life and death. Many African languages express the fact that things are not going well, such as when there is sickness, in the words "we are living a little," meaning that the level of life is very low. The African religions scholar Placide Tempels describes every misfortune that Africans encounter as "a diminution of vital force." Illness and death result from some outside agent, a person, thing, or circumstance that weakens people because the agent contains a greater life force. Death does not alter or end the life or the personality of an individual, but only causes a change in its conditions. This is expressed in the concept of "ancestors," people who have died but who continue to "live" in the community and communicate with their families."[217]

Anderson is extremely instructive here as to the role and importance of the afterlife, including transmigration, in some West African traditions. He states that death is not the end of life nor does it alter the personality of the person who dies, but it is a transition into the realm of the spirit and the presence of the ancestors. The ancestors are important, he states, because they

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[215] Margaret Field, *Religion and Medicine of the Ga People* (London: Oxford University Press, 1937, 197.
[216] Allen Anderson, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Allan_Anderson_(theologian)
[217] Allen Anderson, *The Encyclopedia of Death and Dying,: African Religions, http://www.deathreference.com/A-Bi/African-Religions.html*

live in the community and communicate with their families. David Richardson focuses on the role of slave revolts at sea, stating that whether as organizers or victims of the Transatlantic Trade, Africans were a major influence on the course of history between 1500 and 1850.[218] The influence, however, is often undetected because the lens used to examine various events by the non-African scholar is often devoid of the West African point of view or Africana Critical Theory.

In other words, existing research on the Transatlantic Slave Trade has often been from the perspective of the captors. Therefore, the worldview, cosmology, and cultural traditions of the captives have remained unexamined. As a corrective, this dissertation is concerned with both Africans as people and their thought processes and experiences as humans, not commodities, aboard slave vessels. As long as persons of African descent are viewed through the lens of merchandise, commodification, and property, the captives' beliefs, religions, and worldviews will remain missing from the historical narrative. In her book entitled *Fighting the Slave Trade*, Sylviane A. Diouf points out the significance of these early racist structures:

> Race, racism, color and culture are factors that have determined the nature and extent of social and sociological relationships of Black people in America since their involuntary arrival in 1619. More than a century earlier, European philosophers and explorers had pronounced the native inhabitants of the African continent as inferior in relation to the race, color and culture of the Europeans.[219]

Thus, race and European assumptions of superiority play a pivotal role in the way evidence has been presented, examined, and analyzed in the historical narrative. Racist ideologies in many of those texts, whether explicit or implicit, have therefore contributed to the lack of attention to the role of African cosmologies in the Trade. Sowande Mustakeem argues

[218] Sylviane A. Diouf, *Fighting the Slave Trade*, Ohio University Press, Athens, 2003,200.
[219] Talmadge Anderson and James Stewart, *African American Studies: Transdisciplinary Approaches and Implications.*100.

that, "[r]ecent scholarship on the transatlantic slave trade has undergone considerable shifts within the historiography, turning attention to the various human populations involved, violence, historical memory, the ending of the American slave trade, and the differences in slaving across the centuries."[220] In other words, the Transatlantic Slave Trade and its participants are still undergoing rigorous scrutiny. My research confirms that scrutiny by integrating several new caveats to the discourse. These caveats consider the humanity of African peoples and the role of religion, agency, and martyrdom in the context of racism and White supremacy. Furthermore, according to William Pierson,

> Drowning was the other most widely reported method of suicide. Death by hanging or drowning seems to have been especially connected by the slaves to their beliefs in translation back to Africa. In the minds of later generations of Afro-Americans there was a clear link between death by water and the long water passage, which brought the Africans to America.[221]

One of the questions that arises from the abovementioned assessment is how accurately suicides were reported. As this case clearly shows, the narrator and the captain were well aware of the captives' belief in transmigration, even if they did not concur with the philosophy. One must ask whether these suicides were genuine attempts at self-destruction, acts of resistance undertaken with religious motivations, or (most pernicious) ploys on the part of the recorder or surgeon to insure that an insurance claim could be appropriated. In this above case, the captain claims that the captives' motivations for jumping overboard, though "erroneous in his mind," hinged on their belief in a safe return to Africa.

Finally, Toyin Falola and Raphael Chijoke Njoku offer the following explanation for one of the reasons for suicide by drowning on the part of some Ibo captives. They begin with a

[220]Sowande Mustakeem, "I never have such a sickly ship before": Diet, Disease, and Mortality in the 18th Century Atlantic Slaving Voyages, *The Journal of African American History:* 93 (Fall 2008), 476.
[221] William D. Pierson, White Cannibals, Black Martyrs: Fear, Depression, and Religious Faith as Causes of Suicide Among New Slaves, *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol.62, No 2 (April 1977),153.

question:

> But how did the practice of suicide so despised in Igboland become very much associated with them in diaspora? The Igbo abhorred suicide in their traditional society. Victims were not given normal burial but were thrown into the "evil forest." Special rituals are often performed by the priest of *Amadioha* (the god of thunder) before victims of suicidal death were buried. To explain the propensity for suicide as groups and individuals, *one has also to understand the cosmology of the Igbo and the attachment to the land of their birth*. The Igbo have a real attachment to the land (*ala*) literally and symbolically. The unit of production was the family, consisting of man, his wife or wives, and their unmarried children. Up rooted from the connection with them and the ancestors, which was vital to the identity, the Igbo responded emphatically by committing what may be described as "acceptable abomination." *In the context slavery, suicide was perhaps a justifiable evil and one that the ancestors would be willing to accommodate*. This rationality was, of course, lost to New World scholars, a fact that scholars failed to link to Igbo cosmology, attitude toward death, and the fundamental belief in life after. Amid the inhumanity of slavery, the Igbo, like many other slaves, responded in unique ways, sometimes taking their own lives—the ultimate form of resistance."[222]

The above quotation gives further support for my thesis, and this case study shows that traditional West African cosmology influenced some of the suicides by drownings. In addition, Falola and Njoku establish several points of support for my argument as to why the Ibo, among other African nations, engaged in suicidal behavior: 1) The quotation acknowledges that suicide was a despised practice among those who resided in Iboland. Suicide was frowned upon, and those who engaged in it were deprived of the usual traditional religious burial rites. This observation establishes the centrality of the Ibo's connection to the land in their religious belief systems. 2) When an Ibo's village family was decimated through kidnapping or the sale of a loved one, the link between their ancestors and the land was also affected. As other scholars have demonstrated, maintaining a connection to the land was an essential component of Ibo culture; therefore, once they were loaded on the slave ships, sustaining their identity and tribal continuity

[222]Toyin Falola, &, Raphael Chijoke Njoku, *Igbo in the Atlantic World: African Origins and Diaspora Destinations*, (Indiana, Indiana University Press, 2016), 178-180.

became a challenge. 3) Once removed from their ancestral identity, several Ibo persons emphatically committed what may be described as an "acceptable abomination." Separation from one's family, culture, and land could force anyone toward what might appear to be drastic measures. However, when faced with a daily reality such as that faced by captives aboard slave ships, what may be drastic becomes a place of safety for those whose cosmology goes beyond the material world. Emmanuel M. P. Edah, states

> The Igbos are among this group of Africans. Their idea that human beings can come back to life after death is basic to their conception of reality. The argument is this: if human beings after passing away from this visible world can come back after a certain period has elapsed and be born again, there must have been a place where they remained within that period. That place could not have been this visible world; otherwise they would still be continuously visible to the living and not have passed away.[223]

Suicide then becomes an escape to a non-visible reality that offers the promise of a return or rebirth to the material world, after a period of time. 4) Therefore, slavery, and all the depravity that accompanied it, created the opportunity for suicide to become a justifiable evil and one that the ancestors would accommodate. 5) Since European supremacy and White racial hegemony were the guiding principles in much of the earlier research, scholars failed to connect the Ibo cosmology and their attitude toward death and the afterlife to suicidal drownings as a form of resistance. 6) According to Falola and Njoku, "[a]mid the inhumanity of slavery, the Igbo, like many other captives responded in unique ways, and sometimes taking their own lives—was the ultimate form of resistance."[224]

Case Number Two: (Transmigration, the Good Death and Triumph) (see also Figures 6-9 in the Appendix)

This case was extracted from the *Abridgement of the minutes*. It is the testimony of Mr.

[223] Emmanuel M.P. Edeh, *Towards an Igbo Metaphysics*, (Chicago, Loyola University Press, 1985), 74-75.
[224] Toyin Falola, &, Raphael Chijoke Njoku, *Igbo in the Atlantic World: African Origins and Diaspora Destinations*, (Indiana, Indiana University Press, 2016), 178-180.

Claxton who describes the loss of life aboard the slave ship *Garland*:

> Mr. Claxton who sailed in the *Garland*, (under the leadership of) Captain Forbes for Africa in 1788, as surgeon's mate, and there on the Bonny Coast. They had 250 slaves 132 of who died from the flux. The ship was so crowded that they could not even lay on their sides if they did otherwise, it created quarrels among them: they were stowed so close, that that they could not go among them with shoes without danger of hurting them. Slaves whose fluxes accompanied with scurvy, and such edematous swellings of the legs as made it painful to move at all, were made to dance, as they call it, and whipped with a cat if they were reluctant. The slaves both when ill and well, were frequently forced to eat against their inclinations. Were whipped with a cat if they refused. They used other, means still worse, and too nauseous to mention. The parts on which the shackles are fastened are often excoriated by the violent exercise they are forced to take, and of this they made many grievous complaints to him. That slaves when first brought on board, are commonly dejected, he shows by an instance of nine purchased on his passage from Bonny of the Isle of Bombe, who were all very much dejected: one girl in particular, clung to the neck of her seller, and though only ten or twelve years old, could not be comforted. She continued three or four days in that situation. The whole cargo appeared, more or less afflicted, on leaving their country. Some had such an aversion leaving their native places, that they *threw themselves overboard, on an idea, that they should get back to their own country*. (Italics mine) The captain, in order to obviate this idea, *cut off the heads* of those who died, intimating to them, that if determined to go, they must return without their heads. The slaves were accordingly brought up to witness the operation, one man excepted who was at length, against his will, forced up, seeing when on deck, the carpenter standing with his hatchet up ready to strike off the head, with violent exertion he got loose, and flying to the place where the nettings had been loosed, in order to empty the tub, he darted himself overboard. The ship bought to and a man was placed on the main chain to catch him, which he perceived and dived under water and rising again at a distance from the ship, made signs, which words cannot describe, *expressive of his happiness in escape*. He then went down, and was seen no more. One of the tubs being set near where the nettings were lashed to the bulk-head, some of the slaves who had premeditated an escape, under the presence of eating themselves contrived while sitting on the tubs, to unloose the lashing, so that two actually threw themselves overboard, and were lost. A third was caught when three parts over.[225]

The Analysis of Case Study Number Two (Transmigration, the Good Death and Triumph)

This case best represents the need for Slave Suicide Ecology as a frame for understanding suicide by drowning as a remedy offered by a religious belief system in the context of racism,

[225] *Abridgement of the minutes of the evidence*: Volume Pt.4,19. (Italics mine)

brutality, and psychological trauma. It is also supported below by several other short narratives that coalesce transmigration and agency.

The Garland was a large, 525-ton vessel built in Portsmouth that sailed under the flag of Great Britain. Of the initial 250 captives on board, 132 of them died—a little more than half. The captain was William Forbes. The vessel departed the Bight of Biafra and the Gulf of Guinea on May 15th, 1788 and arrived in the Spanish Caribbean almost a year later on April 2nd, 1789.[226] The concentration of flux, scurvy, and edematous swellings of the legs and other body parts made the voyage arduous, and the constant harassment by the crew made moving around the vessel even more painful. The physical discomfort experienced by the captives led to several skirmishes and other problems on board. Chained to strangers and seasick from the rolling of the ship, the captives tended to quarrel. They were forced to lie on their left or right sides in a spoon position for 30 to 60 days with only occasional breaks to get fresh air. Even though many of the captives were unable to stand comfortably, they were forced to dance in an attempt to strengthen them for sale. Those who refused were whipped with the cat or endured other forms of punishment that are too nauseating to repeat.

Let me just note here that seldom are punishments omitted in testimonies under the guise of how horrible they were. It has been well established by Middle Passage scholarship that slave ships were floating prisons, torture chambers, and death traps. The odor of the ships could be recognized several miles from port. Also, the forced dancing, which was otherwise known by the captives as a form of celebration, added one more level of outrage.

Buxton states that the obvious discomfort of the captives did nothing to dissuade their oppressors from forcing them to dance. Those who were considered not healthy enough for sale

[226] Eltis, *Transatlantic Slave Trade Database*, Voyage, Id. #81551.

were often discarded to spare the captain or merchant the expense of landing taxes on property that would not pay dividends.[227] Floggings and beatings were the primary means of counteracting what may have been viewed as recalcitrant behavior. The captives in this case analysis are referred to as being "dejected." This term is sometimes used interchangeably with "melancholy" or "sulkiness" and speaks to the state of mind of the captives who already suffered the psychological toll of the long and arduous journey to factories on the Gold coast. That treacherous trek consumed many. Once on board, no kindness or humanity were exhibited by the captain and his crew. As if to underline this fact, the narrator references the case of a small child, only 10 or 12 years of age, who clung to the neck of the person who sold her.

How callous and unfeeling must one be to see a young child experiencing this type of mental anguish and torment and still allow them to be shuttled off to an unknown place without friends or family? In these crucial moments, one's faith, religion, or belief in a higher power must intervene before a person loses their mind, or in the words of the witnesses "demonstrate[s] symptoms of melancholy." Some captives felt such despair at leaving their homeland that they threw themselves overboard, and I contend that their religious beliefs motivated some of these suicides. They hoped that by drowning they would return to Africa, gaining access to the afterlife where they would be once again in fellowship with their ancestors.

The religious beliefs of African captives had as much validity as the Christian belief in an eternity in heaven with Jesus. Furthermore, the narrator describes preventative measures adopted on the shop to prevent what the captain feared would be an all-out exodus predicated on a belief in transmigration. The captain went so far as to cut off the heads of captives who died, intimating that if they were going to "return" to their country, they would have to do it without their heads.

[227] Thomas F. Buxton, *The African Slave Trade*, 143.

For several of the West and West Central African nations who believed transmigration, one could only return home and meet their ancestors if one's body was intact after death. Additionally, the ship must have travelled quite a distance from shore because of the terminology used regarding the man who first jumped overboard. The document states that the ship was "brought to," a nautical term meaning to turn the vessel around, before the man dove under the water, swimming out of range. At the end, he offers signs of happiness at having escaped.

Therefore, in my analysis of the case, I offer the following suggestions of a multilayered motive for jumping overboard: 1) The captives had an aversion to being separated from their homes and families; 2) they immediately expressed sulkiness, melancholy, and emotional distress or psychic disorientation; 3) some of them resolved that death via drowning was an acceptable remedy to their situation (a good death); 4) some demonstrated their relief by lifting their hands in the air in a sign of triumph even as they drowned; and 5) the fact that their resistance was religious in nature was well known to the captain. The captain was familiar enough with the cosmology of his captives that he knew dismemberment would prove distressful because of *their belief in transmigration back to Africa*.

Case Number Three: (Women and Resistance) (see also Figure 9 in the Appendix)

In the following case, I introduce the intersection of race and gender. This case focuses on the captives' ill treatment on board and their responses to it. Dr. Thomas Trotter served as a surgeon in the Royal Navy on board the *Brookes* slave vessel.

> He remembers an instance of a woman who perished from refusing food; she was repeatedly flogged, and victuals forced into her mouth, but no means could make her swallow it, she lived for the four last days in a state of torpid insensibility. . . .

> A woman jumped over board and was taken up, and was chained to the mast, but being let loose again made a second attempt, was again taken up, and expired under the floggings given her in consequence.[228]

The Analysis of Case Study Number Three

Case number three focuses on the plight of women at sea, taking into account the emotions, fears, psychological trauma, and violence of the slaving voyage as experienced uniquely by female captives. In this case, suicidal resistance takes the form of agency and the concept of slave suicide ecology becomes more evident and more complicated. This case introduces the intersections of race, White supremacy, and gender. In the two previous cases, the men captives were the primary subjects in the research, but in this case, the subject is a woman. Women played a major role in the Slave Trade through their tenacity and courage. They resisted in multiple ways, securing cutlasses for battle and protecting young children who had been separated and sold away from their parents. This case highlights the diabolical nature of race plus gender oppression, and how it frequently played out on board these vessels.

Dr. Trotter introduces the narrative by explaining how the first woman died who did not jump overboard. She was flogged to death for refusing to eat. This case illustrates the following: 1) Instances of floggings on board slave vessels were frequent. In this case the flogging and eventual death was a consequence of the woman's resistance. In a racially-charged environment that also shows little respect for women, her refusal to comply added angered her oppressors. 2) By refusing to eat, she was taking back her right to consume food as she saw fit. In the mind of the oppressor, the woman had no rights, and her refusal simply ignited his ire toward her. In his

[228] Testimony of Dr. Thomas Trotter, *An abstract of the evidence delivered before a select committee of the House of commons, in the years 1790 and 1791*, on the part of the petitioners for the abolition of the slave trade, James Phillips, George Yard, Lombard Street, 51-52.

mind, her sole responsibility was to obey instructions. The right to choose food of her own volition would have also been culturally significant since fellowship around food was a hallmark of West African traditions. By refusing sustenance, she deprived her captors of the right to dictate how she lived and how she died. 3) She is said to have spent four days in torpid insensibility, an indication of the psychic toll slave ship incarceration played on her mental and emotional stability. Sowande Mustakeem is instructive here, stating that "trapped within a degrading and contentiously violent world of uncertainty, slaves measured the cost of freedom, no matter how dangerous. With their bodies no longer their own, it leaves open the question on the deeper meaning of self- sabotage within slavery at sea."[229] 4) The second woman, who jumped overboard on multiple occasions, also demonstrated agency. Her attempts at drowning herself provide intimate insight into the brutal nature of slaving and the mercy that was not extended even to women. Instead, women were also treated with a level of abuse that was unimaginable. In this case, the woman was beaten severely for her unwillingness to eat and her repeated suicide attempts. Captive women were often brutally raped and beaten while at sea. Mustakeem makes this assessment: "self-sabotaging practices did not extend to one particular ethnicity, gender or age of captives within the Middle Passage. Instead, a diversity of bond-people utilized this ultimate act of personal sacrifice, further exposing the calamitous interactions and thus the risk of business that sailors were forced to contend."[230] Undoubtedly, being forced to watch and or endure this type of treatment created a psychic disorientation for the captives.

[229] Sowande M. Mustakeem, *Slavery at Sea: Terror, Sex and Sickness in the Middle Passage*,108.
[230] Ibid.,107.

The exercise of agency by the captive slave was fueled by a desire for freedom, but it was also ignited by the constant surveillance and attitude of entitlement expressed by the captain and his crew. These conditions created what Mustakeem calls the runaway slave.[231] In the context of the Middle Passage, I interpret the runaway slave to be that person who escapes mentally, emotionally, and psychically as well as physically, when opportunity permits.

Below is another quotation that further reveals the malevolent attitude of European captors towards the enslaved captives. The *Richmond Examiner* posted a comment in 1853 that quantifies the feelings and perspectives of many Europeans during the period regarding the Transatlantic Slave Trade. The article demonstrates just how foundational the belief in the inferiority of persons of African descent was to justifying the brutality of the slaving community:

> The plain and inevitable deduction is this: that the Negro is a totally distinct race from the Caucasian; that the Negro is the connecting link between man and the brute creation, that the Negro race is designed by nature to be subordinate to and dependent upon the white or superior races: that the Negro race is the result of a different act of the Creator from that which originated the Caucasian, and is, consequently, beyond the scope of those abstract axioms which declare that all races are of one blood and have equal rights natural, social, and political.[232]

The quote above emphasizes (as existing literature also confirms) how Europeans in general and slavers in particular viewed their human cargo. In the minds of many Europeans, enslaved Africans were all of the following: 1) a creation separate and distinct from the Caucasian race; 2) an extension of the brute or under civilized creation with an affinity to the animal kingdom; 3) created to be subordinate to the white race; 4) outside of any system of equality in social or political intercourse; and 5) not considered to be persons with the ability to

[231] Mustakeem,107.
[232] The Richmond Examiner, .4, (Josiah Priest, wrote the section in his book, Bible Defense of Slavery, 6th edition (1853 reprint, Detroit, MI: Negro History Press).

produce anything of global sustenance and, therefore, not afforded the same human considerations as their captors.

This attitude of racial superiority blinded European captors to the culture and worldview of their captives and prevented them from hearing their voices as human cries and moans. This in turn encouraged the brutality that undergirded the need to exercise agency by the captives. In another narrative involving brutality experienced by female captives, Henry Ellison states that:

> The women making a little noise over head while the captain was dining, he came out, and with a wire cat began to flog among them: 6 jumped overboard, 5 of which were drowned. The other he ordered to be ducked at the crotchet-yard arm: she was led up and down a dozen times; he believes she died he thinks the next day. . . Women were whipped and beaten by Captain Carter but not as often as the men.[233]

In this narrative, the women were making noise due to their plight and probably the discomfort that came with being incarcerated at sea. On several occasions, witnesses testified that women captives cried, moaned and voiced unintelligible expressions. In the above narrative, the women are severely punished for making "a little noise" while the captain was dining. From this, it is safe to assume that they were not near the shore but already at sea. We can also assume that they were at sea because of the mention of the "crotchet yardarm," a horizontal portion of the mast. When a rope was attached to the yardarm, one could suspend a person and dunk them in the water at will. Today, this would be an extreme form of waterboarding, especially if the ship were moving under winded sails. We are also told that the captain flogged the women with a wire cat. The cat o' nine tails is an instrument frequently used to punish captives who refused to take in sustenance or who were thought to be guilty of undesirable behavior. The cat was known to cause extreme pain and left welts on the body of the recipient. Additionally, this particular cat

[233] Abridgement of the Minutes, contribution by Henry Ellison, 146-147.

was made of wire, which left an even more pronounced mark on the flesh while causing excruciating pain. We are not told whether the six women coordinated their suicide attempts, only that five drowned, and the one that did not died the next day. We also have no window into their motivations and whether they were influenced by religious beliefs, but they clearly felt the need to exercise what agency they could.

On another occasion, aboard the slave ship *Alexander*, a woman who had shown signs of melancholy, and had attracted dysentery, refused sustenance. When asked by the interpreter why she would not eat, she replied that she wanted to die, and she did. Many others expressed the same sentiment.[234] My argument for the misinterpretation of behavior of the captives is important because, according to Stephanie Smallwood, "Africans knew that the sea was controlled by powerful deities whose benevolence was the real source of the sea's gifts to them and whose disfavor was the source of the sea's destructive potential."[235] Smallwood states further that "the logic found in many traditional African belief systems is that there is no dichotomy between the sacred and the secular, the physical and the metaphysical were not separate spheres but rather integrally bound together and manifest in the material world."[236] I contend that not comprehending this insight about West and West Central African cosmologies led to misunderstandings and misinterpretations by European slave traders, and that the concept of a cyclical worldview held by the captives led to occasionally underestimating the behavior and motivation for suicide by drowning as a means of solving their physical as well as spiritual dilemma.

[234] Testimony of Falconbridge, *Abridgement Minutes*, Part II, 229.
[235] Stephanie Smallwood, p. 129. See also William Boseman, *A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea*, Barnes and Nobles, 1873, 368, 383.
[236] William Snelgrave, 30.

Case Number Four: (Insurrection leads to Dismemberment to Discourage Transmigration) (see also Figure 10 in the Appendix)

> William Snelgrave states that while at sea one of the captives killed a White man. The murderer was brought out and a rope was fastened under his arms in order to hoist him up to the Fore-yard Arm to be shot to death. This some of his country man observing, told him (as the linguist informed me afterwards) "That they would not have him be frightened; for it was plain that I did not design to put him to death, otherwise the Rope would have been put around his neck, to hang him. For it seems they had no thought of his being shot; judging he was only to be hoisted up to the Yard-arm, in order to scare him: But they immediately saw the contrary for as soon as he was hoisted up white Men who were placed behind the Barricado on the quarter deck, fired Musquets, and instantly killed him. This struck a sudden Damp upon our Negroe-Men, who thought, that, on account of my Profit, I would not have executed him. The Body being let down upon the Deck, the Head was cut off, and thrown overboard. This last part was done, to let our Negroes see, that all who offended thus, should be served in the same manner. For many of the Blacks believe, that if they are put to death and not dismembered, they shall return again to their own Country, after they are thrown overboard. But neither the Person that was executed, nor his Country of *Cormantee* (as I understood afterwards) were so weak as to believe any such thing; tho' many I had on board from other Countries had that opinion. When the execution was over I ordered the Linguist to acquaint the Men Negroes, "That now they might judge, "no one that killed a White Man should be spared: I thought it proper now to acquaint them once and for all, That if they attempted to mutiny again, I should be obliged to punish the Ringleaders with death in order to prevent further mischief. [237] (Italics are mine.)

[237] Snelgrave, 183-184.

Figure 2: Slaves Defying Their Captors

Africans caught up in the Transatlantic Slave Trade defied their captors in a variety of ways. The evidence informs us that the captives employed numerous creative measures to resist and to seize some modicum of control over their circumstances. Their cosmology played an important role in how they understood life and death.

The Analysis of Case Study Number Four

This narrative describes the execution of a captive who killed a White man in the midst of an insurrection at sea (see Figure 2). It also provides insight into how slave suicide ecology develops under extremely oppressive and violent circumstances. Hangings and dismemberments were a constant part of life in the Middle Passage.

William Snelgrave's testimony provides several insights into how race, violence, and transmigration played out at sea. We are also informed as to how European captors acquired knowledge about transmigration and what attempts were subsequently made by some captains who understand the belief in transmigration to be a motivation for suicide and resistance. Snelgrave informs us that he is made aware of the conversation between captives: the linguist tells him that the captives thought he was bluffing. Race and skin color inferiority are highlighted as it is made clear that Black men are not to kill "White men." The murderer who is killed dies

by surprise because the captives on board the ship assumed that since they had been purchased by Snelgrave for sale they were immune from being shot after the insurrection was put down. We are told that the murderer was hoisted onto the Fore-yard Arm in the same manner as the woman in the previous case who was dunked twelve times. This seems to have been a frequent form of punishment. The victim's companions attempt to comfort him, telling him not to worry and that the captain is only trying to frighten him. They tell him that if the captain intended to kill him, the sailors would have placed the rope around his neck and not under his arms. The captives were clearly aware that they had some worth and believed that the captain would rather sell them than kill them. However, this idea proves to be a miscalculation. Snelgrave decided to make an example out of the murderer in an attempt to prevent further insurrection attempts. Though the murderer and his comrades are said not to believe in transmigration, Snelgrave is well aware of its place in the minds of some African captives. Consequently, he orders the head of the murderer to be severed and thrown into the sea. This action accomplished the following: 1) It dissuaded other offenders with the threat of a similar punishment; 2) communicated to those who believed in transmigration that they could not return to their country; 3) revealed that even though the captives had differing cosmological belief systems, Snelgrave had heard enough of transmigration to threaten beheading as a punishment to encourage obedience; 4) established that the linguist was either a member of a group who believed in transmigration or was aware of the belief system. The linguist may have familiarized the Europeans with the potency of this belief as a motivator for resistance. Snelgrave proves to be shrewd in his shipboard management. On two separate occasions, we are told that the linguist explained events to the captain. Snelgrave uses his linguist to keep him and his captives informed that he is aware of some of their beliefs and that he is ruthless enough to take whatever measures are necessary to prevent further on

board incidents. I posit that by being influenced by a growing racial prejudice, many Europeans misinterpreted and may have misrepresented their African captives' devotion to the spirit sphere—the sea and the earth. These misrepresentations diminished or minimized the role of African cosmologies in Middle Passage suicides. However, sometimes the evidence is unpredictable, and there is a thin line between a religiously-motivated suicide and choosing martyrdom. Based on testimonies from previously examined cases, we know that some captains were well aware of their captives' belief in transmigration. Several slave ship captains attempted to remedy this belief in the afterlife by mutilating their captives. John Spears offers this observation:

> When the slaves tried to kill themselves because they believed in the resurrection and a life in their old homes after death, some of the slaver captains mutilated the bodies of the dead by cutting off and carrying along the heads or others portions of the bodies and telling the slaves that thus the dead would be wholly unable to exist, or at any rate to enjoy the life they hoped for after death.[238]

Case Number Five (Eaten by Sharks as Form of Agency, Martyrdom and the Good Death) (see also Figure 11 in the Appendix)

> A young man aboard one of the ships was frequently beaten in very severe manner for very trifling faults. . . . After being beaten once he jumped overboard but was recovered and when asked why he leaped into the sea his response was that he'd rather be eaten by sharks than to be treated so cruelly on a daily-bases.[239]

[238] Spears, *The American Slave Trade: An Account of its Origin, Growth and Suppression*,73.
[239] Alexander Falconbridge, *An Account of the Slave Trade on the coast of Africa, 1788*, 40-41.

The Analysis of Case Study Number Five

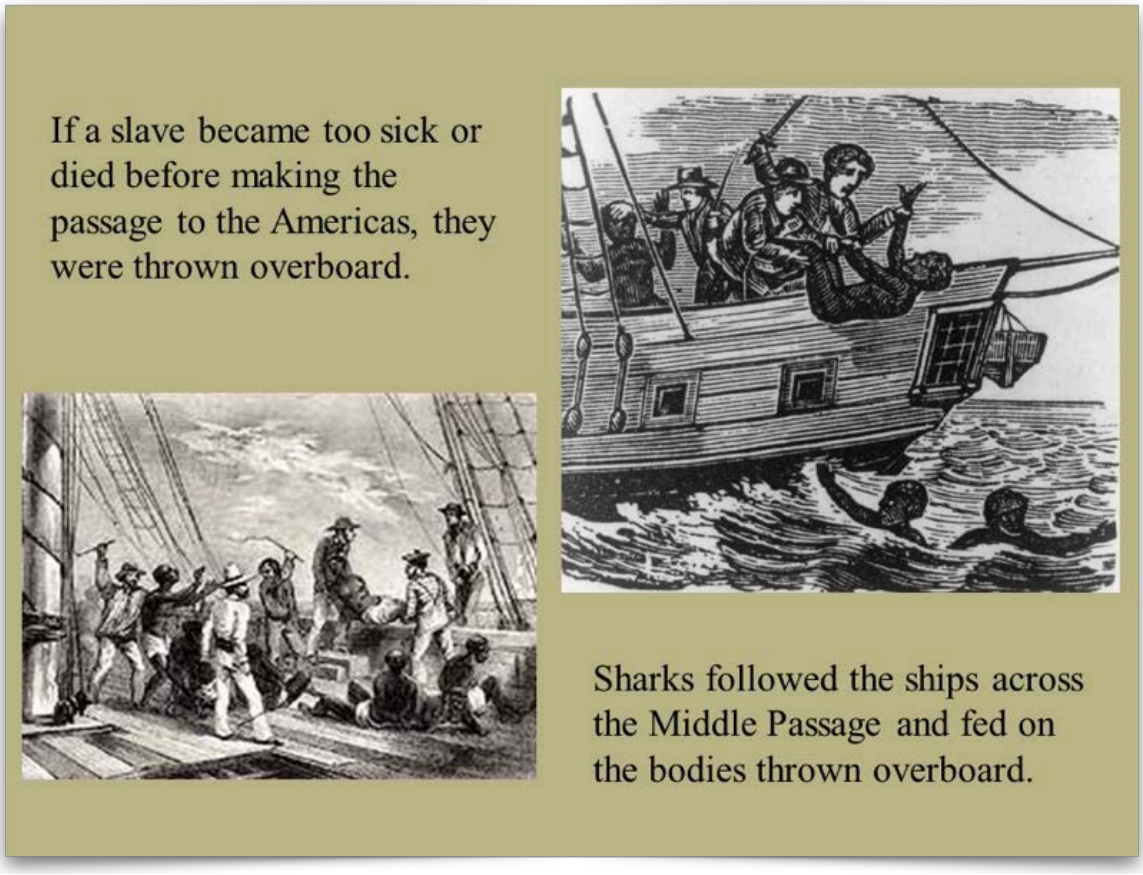

Figure 3: Slaves Thrown Overboard

The brutality experienced by the captives was unsurmountable, and many of them elected death by drowning as a form of resistance predicated on their belief in transmigration. However, in this narrative, the victim states that he would rather be devoured at sea than remain captive and sold into slavery. Even in this case, the captive made a conscious decision to exercise agency as a means of reclaiming his freedom.

To study the self-destructive behavior of African captives at sea without considering the brutality witnessed and experienced by the captives makes for an impotent analysis. The cases above mentioned brutal acts of mutilation and body dismemberment that were common during the Middle Passage. Whippings and floggings were customary tools of the oppressor to ensure

control of the captives and keep them in their place. I am also convinced that this type of brutality witnessed on the ships was similar to and a precursor to what many of the captives would experience once they were sold. There is no doubt that horror stories about what awaited the captives were discussed on board by linguists, sailors, and other slaving professionals. I believe that the anticipation of these events motivated some of the captives to jump overboard. Such brutality was meant to frighten those captives who believed in transmigration and discourage them from rebelling because a dismembered body would not return, in spirit, to Africa. I mentioned above that some of the brutal acts were too horrible to mention; however, I want to introduce a pretext for the beatings before the analysis of this last case.

Agency and martyrdom are strange bedfellows. They tend to reveal themselves in ways that draw attention, honor, and tenacity to the person who has made a choice to defy the ruling class and to make a statement: The young lad in the last case narrative has decided to take his own life after having received several beatings. One might assume that his decision is primarily based on what he has experienced while at sea, and that may be true in part. However, I find his story more resonant with the line delivered by the character Erik Killmonger in the billion dollar grossing movie *The Black Panther*, who stated: "Bury me in the ocean with my ancestors who jumped from the ships because they knew death was better than bondage.[240]" According to James Towne,

> The slaves in the West Indies worked from four in the morning, till very late in the evening; if they come but a moment after their time, they are flogged with whips by the drivers, to whom they must come ready stripped for their punishment to save time. Some though lame, are obliged to work; if they complain they are called lazy and flogged by the driver. Has seen slaves laid down and stretched out to four stakes in the ground and so received 40 or 50 lashes. He has seen them swang up to a crane, with weights at their feet to stretch them, so as to enlarge the wounds of the whip; men and women alike. After flogging, they bring ebony switches full of thorns, and with these flog them again, to let

[240] In *Black Panther*, Erik Killmonger, a protagonist played by Michael B. Jordan, makes this statement just before he dies.

> out the bruised blood. To increase the severity, they use a manner of whipping which they call crossing. They then pickle them, to keep flies from blowing, and maggots from breeding in their wounds.[241]

The above narrative reveals the level of brutality that was meted out at sea. The goal usually was not to kill the person because the merchandise needed to remain marketable, but many captains were fond of making examples of individual slaves as a means of discouraging resistance. Like Killmonger, the young man described above experienced the brutal beatings and punishment meted out for mere trivialities. The beatings were frequent and severe, prompting the young lad to commit suicide by leaping from the ship. The narrative does not state that the lad was seeking death in hopes of transmigration, and we know not all captives held such beliefs. Furthermore, the young man exclaims that he would rather be eaten by sharks than be a slave, and dismemberment was believed to be a disqualifier for transmigration back to Africa. Therefore, it is safe to assume that his leaping from the ship was an act of agency or an embrace of martyrdom, and his boldness certainly reflects a desire for a good death as one of his own design. Such a death denied his oppressor the ability to use his Black body for profit. His death could also inspire others to resist. This case is one of the few that include the victim's own words rather than an explanation provided by a translator or linguist. In this case, we have the very voice of an African rebel who chose suicide by drowning as his final form of resistance.

Finally, the pursuit of agency requires one to exact their will over and against the odds that would bind them to the will of another. Brutality can be a motivating factor for one's pursuit of agency. Though the following event occurs on land, it provides a picture of the underlying horrors experienced by African captives who may have participated in making a choice to live or die. Thomas Buxton provides an example of extreme violence and the response to it:

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[241] Testimony of James Towne, *Abridgement minutes*, 12-13.

> In 1770, during a slave hunting expedition "the grown men were all killed and were then mutilated, parts of their bodies being always carried away as trophies; several of the old mothers are also killed, while others frantic with fear and despair, kill themselves. The boys and the girls of a more tender age are carried off in brutal triumph.[242]

The slave trade was a violent and brutal business. Many persons who engaged in human trafficking were referred to as the dregs of the earth. As one can see from the account above, murder and mutilation were common. When people find themselves at the mercy of others, their sense of self-preservation becomes tantamount to all other decisions. Kneeland states that,

> What is critical in each situation is the individual's unwillingness to endure further pain. As psychologist Robert Litman said, "People commit suicide because they cannot accept their pain, because the pain does not fit in with their concept of themselves, with their personal ideal."[243] The pain reaches a point where it seems unendurable and the person no longer wishes to continue dealing with it. Suicide is viewed as a way to end the pain. A suicidal person has a desire for life a certain way and is unwilling to live with the other available options. Two individuals, both within the same culture, can experience similar difficulties and as a result, one will consider or attempt suicide while the other does not. In the mind of the suicidal, death becomes a viable option. At a point they define within themselves, they are simply not willing to accept life on the terms they are facing.[244]

Kneeland arrives at several crucial observations of the mental state of suffering people who might consider suicide: 1) That similar religious and cultural views may lead to different responses. In other words, even those captives who believed in transmigration may have had different responses to their dilemmas. 2) Pain and the ability to manage that pain are also critical to the decision of whether to go on living. 3) The pain has redefined what life means to them, and they decide that life with pain is not an option.

Crews were usually outnumbered by their captives, so they relied on displays of extreme brutality to maintain control. The more brutal the punishment, the more it promoted suicidality.

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[242] Thomas Buxton, *The African Slave Trade and its Remedy*, 74-75.
[243] Edwin S. Shneidman, *The Suicidal Mind*, 160.
[244] Kneeland, 36-37.

Sowande Mustakeem adds this observation: "In cutting off slaves from their former lives, starved, overcrowded in unsanitary conditions, and subject to a constant threat of intrusive violence, the Middle Passage made the meanings of slavery much more vivid, keeping bond people's desire to escape the long-term prospect of degradation and brutal hardship."[245] Mustakeem posits a description of slave vessel conditions that were intimately woven into the fabric of the Middle Passage. The captives' lives, as they once knew them, were gone, and captives faced a constant threat of unbridled brutality. What Mustakeem does not state here but is described elsewhere is that the constant cruelty added to the sulkiness of the captives.[246] The more they were stressed and brutalized, the more difficult they became to manage. Alexander Falconbridge also testifies to captives' apparent attitude toward their captivity and their consequent willingness to self-destruct:

> He has known several slaves on board refuse sustenance; with a design to starve themselves. Compulsion was used on every ship he was on too make them take their food. He has known many instances of their refusing to take food or medicine when sick because they wish to die. A woman on board the *Alexander,* when being asked by the interpreter what she wanted, she replied, nothing but to die and she did die. Many other expressed the same thing.[247]

Based on earlier discussions about the willingness of the Ibo to self-destruct, we might infer from the above account that the woman in question was Ibo. The woman expressed her desire to die and then, apparently, did so. And in doing so, she exerted agency to determine the time and manner of her own death. On another occasion, Alexander Falconbridge provides just the antidote for this argument. He describes a conversation he had with a young man who had

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[245] Sowande Mustakeem, M. *Slavery at Sea, Terror, Sex, and Sickness in The Middle Passage*, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 2016,116.
[246] Sulkiness is another word for recalcitrant or difficult to manage. See Buxton, *The African Slave Trade and Its Remed*y, 134.
[247] *An abstract of the evidence delivered before a select committee of the House of commons, in the years 1790 and 1791*, on the part of the petitioners for the abolition of the slave trade., James Phillips, George Yard, Lombard Street, 51.

declared his intention to leap overboard: "Upon my inquiring of the young man, if he knew the danger to which he exposed himself by jumping overboard, he replied, 'that he expected to be devoured by the sharks, but he preferred even that, to being treated daily with so much cruelty.'"[248]

Manuel Barcia Paz describes the captives' desperate desire to return home, sometimes through self-destruction:

> Instead of passively awaiting their destiny by succumbing to the rigors of bondage, many African captives attempted to quicken the transmigration process by committing suicide. These individuals developed, "such an aversion to leaving their native places that they threw themselves overboard, on an idea that they should go back to their own country."[249]

Two important observations can be made from the above quotation: 1) Agency and religion are connected. These individuals took their lives into their own hands, believing that death would bring them back to Africa. 2) They believed in their ability to participate in the quickening of their own afterlife experience. Through self-destruction, they hoped to escape their current circumstances and enter the next phase of their eternal destiny.

Suicide, Agency, Martyrdom, and Transmigration: A Synopsis of Both Land and Sea

I next turn to a synopsis of the three above-mentioned concepts—religious beliefs, agency, and martyrdom, which I contend influenced some of the captives to self-destruct by drowning. While I am by no means suggesting that these three concepts were the only motivators of slave suicides, the evidence, placed within the context of a slave suicide ecology frame, shows that these concepts and beliefs served frequently as determining factors in some of the decisions of those who committed suicide by drowning. According to Daniel Walker,

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[248]Alexander Falconbridge, *An Account of the Slave Trade on the coast of Africa, 1788*, Printed By J. Phillips, George Yard, Lombard Street. MDCCLXXXVIII, 41.
[249] *Abstract of the Evidence Delivered Before a Select Committee of the House of Commons in the Years 1790-1791* on the Part of the Petitioners for the Abolition of the Salve Trade, 44.

> Enslaved Africans who made it to the America alive found that the myriad psychosocial assaults, including the attack on place, continued. Even though they survived the slave ship, they were still out of place in the New World. For them, the rewards suicide offered still remained tangible. Nowhere was this more evident than in the nineteenth-century Cuba, where masters often burned the bodies of suicide victims in a futile effort to end the belief in transmigration.

The constant threat of brutality and violence did not cease once the captives arrived in the New World. Kneeland argues that suicide emerges in times of crisis:

> At a fundamental level, suicide occurs when a person initially makes the conscious decision that suicide is a viable option and then determines it is the best or only choice in their current circumstances. Edwin Schneidman, an expert on suicide, writes that "suicide is the result of an interior dialog. The mind scans its options; the topic of suicide comes up, the mind rejects it, scans again; there is suicide, it is rejected again, and then finally the mind accepts suicide as a solution, then plans it, and fixes it as the only answer."[250]

The psychic trauma of being chained, possibly to a sick or dead person, on the slave vessel left very few choices for the captives. In the midst of the physical sickness, home sickness, fear, death, and brutality, suicide became a welcomed and viable solution. This is especially true considering the role of religion and the belief in transmigration as contributing factors in the decision-making process.

Furthermore, William Pierson contends that "in certain instances, West Africans [in the New World] considered suicide an admirable act" sanctioned by their religiosity."[251]

In addition, the idea of death by jumping over board as being an admirable or desirable act is made clear by Equiano's account on board his first slave ship, the *Ogden*.

> The ship was filling up with troubled spirits of the deceased, whom the living could neither bury properly nor provide with offerings. . . . The Bight of Biafra, have one of the highest mortality rates of any slaving area, and the eight months it took the *Ogden*, its enslaved cargo made matters worse. Equiano soon grew sick and was expected to die. Indeed his death wish returned as he hoped to put an end

[250] Kneeland, 36. See also Edwin S. Shneidman, *The Suicidal Mind*,15.
[251] William D. Pierson, White Cannibals, Black Martyrs: Fear, Depression, and Religious Faith as Causes of Suicide Among New Slaves, *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 62, No.2 (April,1977), 151.

> to his miseries. Of the dead thrown overboard, he mused. Often did I think the many of the inhabitants of the deep more happy than myself. I envied them the freedom they enjoyed, and as often wished I could change my condition for theirs. Equinao considers those who jumped overboard to still be alive, happy and free, and apparently still in touch with people on the ship.[252]

Equiano's account of his experience on board the *Ogden* is informative for several reasons. He speaks of the spiritual dimension, usually overlooked by non-African scholars, that troubled those on board because they were unable to perform the proper rites of burial for the dead. The rites of burial were extremely important in many West African nations. Captain Cook stated that "slaves who died onboard were not interred on shore but were simply thrown overboard. Invariably sharks and alligators would consume the dead bodies. Should the corpse be washed ashore, they were left for the vultures to consume."[253] In moments of crisis, one's religious values will always rise to the forefront. Equiano's narrative leads to the following conjectures: 1) The captives were aware of the need for their spiritual connection; 2) some captives hoped to die and seemed unafraid of death; 3) those who had been thrown or who leaped overboard experience pleasures not afforded him; and 4) those who jumped seemed to be "alive, happy and free." His assessment is a clear indication that he was familiar with a view of the afterlife that was not predicted or understood by his European captors.

Any study of the Transatlantic Slave Trade is limited in its clarity if it does not consider the role of the slave ship. These vessels transported millions of Africans and served as the incubator of a slave suicide ecology. Further, my research centers around the experiences of enslaved captives while at sea but not to the exclusion of the fundamental beliefs of the captives.

[252] Marcus Rediker, *The Slave Ship*,120-121.
[253] Thomas Buxton, *The African Slave Trade*, p. 119.

The following is an account of one suicide as recounted by a ship's surgeon, Dr. Thomas Trotter, who testified before parliament in 1790. Trotter considers the sanity of a person who refused to eat and eventually ripped his throat open with his bare hands.[254]

> The man came aboard the ship *Brookes*, along with his family. He was distraught because he had been convicted of witchcraft. The man had been a trader perhaps in slaves; he was from a village called Sultan on the Gold Coast. He spoke English and he explained to the crew that he had quarreled with a chief who took revenge on him and his family by selling them to the ship. This ship was headed for Kingston Jamaica. While onboard, he attempted to starve himself to death and he refused all sustenance. Early the next morning he was found lying in a bloody pool of his own blood. The man had attempted to cut his own throat. Trotter, the surgeon, was called to assist in saving his life. The following night the man made a second attempt on his life. After the second attempt, the man began to speak to Trotter. Trotter's testimony of the event was that the man stated, "that he would never go with the white man." He then looked wistfully at the skies and uttered several sentences that Trotter could not understand. He had decided for death over slavery. When asked if the man was insane or not. Trotter responded that he was not insane.[255]

The preceding narrative answers several questions regarding the steps some of the African captives were willing to take to gain their freedom. Though this narrative does not discuss suicide by drowning, it is a discourse about the conditions that form the backdrop of self-murder, deadly choices, and desperate agency. The man in the narrative made it clear to Dr. Trotter that slavery was not an option. Death by his own hands was a better solution to his dilemma. During the same Parliamentary session, one of the members of Parliament suggested that this suicide was more indicative of the man's insanity than of his resistance. However, Trotter makes it clear that this man's introspective decision and willingness to rip his own throat open with his own hands was in direct response to landing on the slave ship. Further, this captive

[254] The Testimony of Thomas Trotter, 1790, *HCSP*,73:83,88,92; Testimony of Clement Noble, 1790. See also, Marcus Rediker, *The Slave Ship*, 17-18.
[255] Ibid., 17-18.

clearly expresses his refusal to be a slave. Megan Vaughn comments on the racist assumption that African people could not and did not take their own lives:

> African people, it was argued, did not suffer from introspection and guilt, and so one rarely encountered depressive illness among them. And since suicide was linked to depression in this literature, rather than to aggression, it followed from this that they rarely killed themselves. This was less a theory than a discourse, but it has had a long and vigorous life.[256]

Though Megan Vaughn's observation of suicide among West African peoples is post-Transatlantic Slave Trade, it reminds us once again of the derogatory way in which people of West and West Central Africa were viewed and have traditionally been studied. The European slavers, in other words, might have assumed that their captives were unlikely to commit suicide because they lacked the intellectual capacity to be sad about their captivity. However, Dr. Trotter testifies, during his Parliamentary inquisition, that introspection and despair led this particular captive to take his own life.

Marcus Rediker refers to slave vessels as tall, powerful European machines[257] that served as both factories and prisons. Thus, the centrality and the climate of the slave vessel should not be underestimated when seeking to ascertain why there was such a frequency of suicide by the captives. William Pierson states that:

> Early **s**tudies of the Transatlantic Slave Trade have shown that many of the initial African encounters with Europeans were fraught with confusion and fear. African captives typically found the European world of slavers strange and frightening. Samuel Ajayi Crowther recalled a typical reaction when relating his fears of being sold to the Portuguese. This fear drove him to depression and ultimately thoughts of suicide.[258]

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[256] Megan Vaughan, "Suicide in Late Colonial Africa: The Evidence of Inquests from Nyasaland", *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 115, No. 2 (APRIL 2010), 387.
[257] Marcus Rediker, *The Slave Ship: A Human History*, New York, Penguin Books, 2007, 4.
[258] Curtin, 307-308.
William D. Pierson, "White Cannibals, Black Martyrs: Fear, Depression, and Religious Faith as Causes of Suicide Among New Slaves", *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol.62, No 2 (April 1977), 147.

Due to the violence committed against them, many slaves frequently resisted with acts of real violence. Most often, resistance took the form of attempted uprisings while at sea. Historians estimate that insurrections took place on about one of every ten slave ship voyages during the Transatlantic Trade. Although many of these occurred when vessels were at or near the African coast, about a third took place during the Middle Passage. Slaves bided their time over the course of a voyage, looking for opportunities to revolt, to kill or capture the crew, to seize the vessels, and to return if possible to Africa. The vast majority of these slave revolts were quickly and brutally extinguished. When they were foiled in an attempted uprising, slaves sometimes jumped overboard in mass suicides. On occasion, these revolts succeeded.[259]

For instance, Antonio Bly and Equiano posit these two important events in support of my argument:

> Apart from starvation, many slaves resisted their enslavement during the crossing by jumping overboard. Despite the crews' efforts to closely watch the slaves and erect nets to prevent them from jumping, many slaves still managed to make it overboard, sometimes in pieces. Interestingly, most slaves saw their suicide as a means by which to return home. Therefore, it is not surprising to discover in some Middle Passage accounts, instances where slaves jumped overboard and bade farewell to their friends who rejoiced in their escape.[260]

The above quotation connects transmigration with agency as the jumpers committed suicide. Drownings during the Transatlantic Slave Trade were common. Some cases of drownings may have been related to revolts or insurrections while others represented attempts at exercising religious beliefs, seizing agency, or embracing martyrdom. In the preceding quote, the recorder makes a point to mention that the leapers "bade farewell to their friends who rejoiced in their

[259] Roy E. Finkenbine, "Resistance during Middle Passage." In the American Mosaic: *The African American Experience*. ABC-CLIO, 2010.
[260] John R. Spears, *The American Slave Trade: An Account of its Origin, Growth and Suppression,* New York, 1900, Charles Scribner and Sons,77.

escape."[261] Did the jumpers believe they would return to Africa, or were they simply excited by their own deaths?

A re-examination of various drowning suicides through the lens of Africana Critical Theory yields some previously unanswered questions about how West African cosmology served as a motivator of resistance and the desire for self-determination. Mustakeem states that

> Fundamentally, the transatlantic slave trade was largely based on violence. Yet, violent incidences surrounding their enslavement were not the sole cause of death for bond people. Sickness and disease similarly prevailed, fostered by the incubation of contagious and often deadly illnesses that circulated and spread in the bowels of slaving vessels.[262]

The evidence reminds us that both captives and sailors died on board these vessels. However, the conditions were more conducive to self-destruction among the captives.

According to Antonio Bly, in his book *Crossing the Lake of Fire: Slave Resistance in the Middle Passage,* "whether slaves considered suicide as an act of resistance against the regime that brutalized them is difficult to determine."[263] He goes on to state that some slaves used the threat of suicide as a bargaining chip and that many of the assertions about the purposes of the suicides[264] are conjectures made by others who interpreted the events after they had occurred. However, Michael Gomez and Marcus Rediker both agree that suicide can be viewed as one of the most prominent forms of revolt, especially among the Ibo. I agree that by employing a different hermeneutical framework of analysis, one can draw different conclusions regarding the

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[261] John R. Spears, *The American Slave Trade: An Account of its Origin, Growth and Suppression,* New York, 1900, Charles Scribner and Sons,77.
[262]Sowande Mustakeem, "I never have such a sickly ship before": Diet, Disease, and Mortality in the 18th Century Atlantic Slaving Voyages, *The Journal of African American History:* 93 (Fall 2008), 476.
[263] Junius Rodriguez, ed., Encyclopedia of Slave Resistance and Rebellion, Volume 2: O-Z and Primary Documents, Greenwood Press, Westport, 2007, 494.

multiple acts of seaboard suicides. When discussing the mortality rates of the enslaved, Alexander Falconbridge describes the extreme conditions endured by captives on board vessels:

> The causes of the disorders which carry off the slaves in such numbers can be ascribed to a diseased mind, sudden transitions from heat to cold, a putrid atmosphere, wallowing in their own excrement, and being shackled together. A diseased mind, he says is undoubtedly one of the causes for many of the slaves on board who refused medicines, giving as a reason that they wanted to die, and could never be cured.[265]

Disorientation was one of the byproducts of the kidnappings, marches to the coast, and the eventual loading on to slave vessels headed to the New World. As stated above, the effects of the sea voyage were devastating. Daniel Walker states that "for many of the Africans brought to the Americas as slaves, the idea of returning home pervaded their existence, in many cases this sense of longing was so great that individuals even committed suicide in hopes of making a spiritual return to their former homelands."[266]

Another example of this cosmological difference driven by different worldviews is illustrated in the lives of African seamen who served on slave ships and other vessels but revered the water from a different perspective than their European counterparts. In his book entitled *Black Jacks: African American Seaman in the Age of Sail,* Jeffery Bolster states that:

> African born sailors and some of their descendants in America fashioned a new cultural self-consciousness that linked meaning and experience in ways foreign to whites and that reflected Africans' fusion of the sacred and the secular. Many Africans felt the power of the water in profound and immediate ways. Across West Africa, the surface of the water served variously as myth and ritual as the boundary through which spiritual communications occurred. And intercourse with spirits, both benign and evil, affected the daily life of the African.[267]

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[265] Testimony of Dr. Alexander Falconbridge, *An abstract of the evidence delivered before a select committee of the House of commons, in the years 1790 and 1791*, 48-49.
[266] Daniel Walker, Suicidal "Tendencies: African Transmigration in the History and Folklore of the Americas", *The Griot* 18:2 (Fall 1999),10.
[267] W. Jeffrey Bolster, *Black Jacks: African American Seaman in the Age of Sail*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1997, 62.

Bolster affirms several key elements of West African cosmology that support my argument for a paradigm shift when examining the role of water, religion, and self-destruction as they relate to resistance at sea. These elements are the following: 1) African-born sailors maintained a self-consciousness of the fusion of the sacred and the secular that was foreign to their European sailing comrades. 2) "Many Africans felt the power of the water in profound and immediate ways."[268] I interpret Bolster to mean that he intuited that the water held spiritual significance for some of these sailors. 3) The surface of the water served as a means of communication between the material sphere and the spiritual sphere.[269] 4) The intercourse between the benign and evil spirits were acknowledged daily by the African sailor as part of their religious belief systems. These four elements provide evidence for my assertion that understanding the suicidal behaviors of African captives requires seeking observations that may conflict with what European observers have recollected.

An article in the Port Cities Bristol states that "[t]he experience of the Transatlantic Slave Trade took the enslaved Africans away from their roots. The process of commodification was a conscious effort by slave owners to remove the identity of the slaves."[270] Therefore, their ethnicity, religious beliefs, culture, and cosmological understanding of their humanity was constantly under scrutiny and challenge. Megan Vaughn, when speaking about how Europeans viewed their African captives, states that

> Africans were not fully formed individuals and were incapable of taking responsibility for their own actions. Their fears and anxieties were externalized, their own misdeeds and harmful thoughts projected onto others. Unfamiliar with

[268] Bolster 62.
[269] Ibid., 62.
[270] Bristol Portcities, http://discoveringbristol.org.uk/slavery/after-slavery/wider-world/african-diaspora/identity-and-roots/

> the experience of guilt, lacking the internal world of introspection, they rarely fell into anything approaching suicidal despair.[271]

This is the second occasion where Vaughn mentions how Europeans adhered to an incomprehensibly inaccurate assessment of the African captives' mental states. The traumas of the Middle Passage were not merely physical but also emotional and psychological. Thomas Buxton recounts that when captives refused to eat, they would have burning coals placed near their lips. If they continued to refuse sustenance, these coals would be forced down their throats.[272] Many captives were extracted from positions of respect and honor within their communities. Finding themselves in such a debased condition was unconscionable and difficult to rectify.[273] However, their religious views assisted them in making sense of the condition and provided ways to think about active solutions. According to Huston Smith, "[e]very religion is a blend of universal principles and local settings. The former when lifted out and, made clear, speak man to man, whatever his time and place. The latter, a rich compound of myth and rite, can never make its way into the emotional life of the outsider."[274] Smith's assessment of religion makes it clear that the particular and place-bound aspects of African rites and customs, as evidenced by their known beliefs in transmigration, would have remained unintelligible to Europeans. Smith is actually co-signing Dr. Mbiti's assessment as well.

For many centuries, African religions and philosophy have been subjected to misinterpretation, misrepresentation, and misunderstanding. They have been despised, mocked, and dismissed as primitive. One need only look at the earlier titles of accounts published by European slave merchants and traders to see the derogatory language used, the prejudiced

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[271] Megan Vaughan, "Suicide in Late Colonial Africa: The Evidence of Inquests from Nyasaland", *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 115, No. 2 (APRIL 2010), 388.
[272] Thomas Buxton, The African Slave Trade, 125.
[273] Nigel Tattersfield, *The Forgotten Trade: Comprising the Log of the Daniel & Henry of 1700 and Accounts of the Slave Trade from the Minor Ports of England, 1698-1725*, London, Jonathan Cape, 1991, 142.
[274] Huston Smith, *The Religion of Man*, Perennial Library, Harper and Row, New York, 1965, 4.

descriptions given, and false judgments passed upon African religions. In missionary circles, their traditions have been condemned as superstition, satanic, devilish, and hellish. In spite of all these attacks, African traditional religions have survived; they dominate the background of African peoples and must be reckoned with even in the middle of modern changes.[275] Kofi Asare Opoku asserts that**:**

> Death is the inevitable end of man, but the attitude towards it is everywhere ambivalent. In general, West Africans regard death not as the end of life, but as a transition from the present earthly life to another life, and of the spirits. It is a journey which man must make in order to reach the life beyond and continue to live as an ancestor. The dead, therefore, do not remain in the grave, but become spirits and proceed to the spirit world, called *asamando*, by the Akan.[276]

One of the expectations of this research is to shed light on how hegemonic biases have allowed for the misinterpretation of African captives. Kofi Opoku makes it clear that the Akan captives who lived during the Transatlantic Trade believed in life after death. They believed that death was nothing to be afraid of, for in the minds of those who believed in transmigration, the return to the motherland was a welcome prospect. Supporting ethnographic studies proclaim that the spirit realm was readily acknowledged in many West and West Central African belief systems. For instance, G.T. Basden makes this claim regarding the Ibo: "There appears to be no distinction between soul and spirit; for all practical purposes they are held to be identical. Their belief in the spirit life is exceedingly tenacious, and with it their profound conviction of the existence of a future state."[277]

There are two propositions to be extracted from these two quotes: 1) The Akan and the Ibo have religious belief systems that consist of a well-established concept of the spirit world and

[275] John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, London, HEINEMANN, 1969,10.
[276] Kofi Asare Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 133.
[277] Basden, *Among the Ibo*, 99.

both believe in life after death. 2) Both Opoku and Basden, studies developed in two different time periods, speak of systems that are still in practice, giving credence to my assertion that transmigration was a substantial part of African belief systems during the Transatlantic Slave Trade. According to Basden,

> African cosmology formed the basis of the slave's belief in transmigration. Throughout much of West Africa, the philosophy of reincarnation is pervasive. The anthropologist G.T. Basden explains that among the Ibos of Southern Nigeria, there is "a strongly grounded belief in the perpetuation of individuals by the medium of repeated births. Provided a spirit conducts himself, worthily ... he will be reborn at an appointed season and he will resume his life in this world."[278]

Basden contends that the African belief in rebirth was and is a pervasive cosmological perspective of several West African religious and philosophies, and he has support from other scholars as well. The ethnologist Margret J. Fields found that the Gâ people of West Africa believed in the regeneration of souls. Her ethnographic study provides a detailed description of the process and structure of re-birth. Fields states, "for the Gâ, the dead can be born again only in their own families, a grandfather as a grandson, or a dead first child as a second child ... The Gâ word for reincarnation is gblomo, signifying a recurring cycle."[279] Finally, Manuel Barcia states that "[a]ccording to the log book of the ship *Hannibal,* which was captained by Thomas Phillips, kept between 1693 and 1694, the Negroes who starved to death or who willingly drowned themselves did so in the belief that once dead they would return home to their own country and friends again."[280]

The notion of a religiously motivated transmigration back to Africa after death was not a pipe dream. In the context of the Middle Passage, the belief in transmigration played a powerful

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[278] Daniel E. Walker, Suicidal Tendencies: African Transmigration in the History and Folklore of the Americas *The Griot* 18:2 (Fall 1999),10.
[279] Margaret J. Fields, *Religion and Medicine Among the Ga People,* 197.
[280] Manuel Barcia Paz, *Seeds of Insurrection: Domination and Resistance on Western Cuban Plantations, 1808-1848,* Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University, 2008,73.

role in the decision to commit suicide by drowning. Therefore, it is safe to assume that suicide by drowning was inextricably linked to the religious belief systems that saw transmigration as a motivation for resisting slavery and regaining self-worth.

In the preceding case number 4, the captain was aware of a belief system that included spiritual transmigration back to Africa as part of the beliefs of some of the captives who attempted suicide. He punished several captives with dismemberment in an attempt to dissuade others from further attempts. The first and second cases acknowledge the role of suicide, agency, and resistance that are attributed to the Ibo captives who chose suicide by drowning as a means of transmigration. In the end, though one cannot state that every suicide was motivated by the belief in transmigration, eyewitness testimonies prove that some of the suicides and suicide attempts were motived by a religious belief in a spiritual return back to Africa.

Though this dissertation is not focused on insurance claims, I think it is important to at least mention why I question the motives of some of the interpreters of the onboard events. For example, in the following testimony from Thomas Buxton, he explains what occurred on board a vessel that arrived in Guadeloupe on June 21, 1819 after the outbreak of a contagious eye disease. Note the reference to an insurance claim:

> The danger of the infection and perhaps the cause which produced the disease, were increased by a violent dysentery, attributed to the use of rain-water. The number of the blind augmented every day. . . Of the Negroes thirty-nine had become blind, twelve had lost one eye, and fourteen were affected with blemishes more or less considerable. . . It was stated that the captain caused several of the negroes who were prevented in the attempt to throw themselves overboard to be shot and hung, in the hope that the example might deter the rest from a similar conduct. . . upwards of thirty of the slaves who became blind were thrown into the sea and drowned . . . because no one would have brought them. . .while throwing them overboard the expense of maintaining them was avoided, while a ground *was laid for a claim on the underwriters by whom the cargo had been insured*, and who are said to allowed the claim, and made good the value of the slaves thus destroyed.[281] (Italics mine)

[281] Thomas Fowell Buxton, *The African slave trade and its remedy,* 117.

While suicide was a regular occurrence on slaving vessels, in the situation described above it is clear that 1) the murder of those attempting to leap overboard was used as a deterrent to others, and 2) that there were ulterior motives (i.e. insurance claims) for the recovery of those captives who were unsellable. Buxton states that several captives who were ill were brought to the deck to receive some fresh air, and he describes them as filled with nostalgia as they locked arms and leaped over board together.[282]

[282] Ibid.,116.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In a recent movie about a fictional African country that is ahead of its time in technology and the home of superhero Black Panther, one of the main characters, Erik Killmonger, delivers a powerful statement right before his death: "Bury me in the ocean, with my ancestors that jumped from the ships because they knew death was better than bondage."[283] Killmonger's statement reveals the historical generative remembrance of past acts of rebellion by African peoples. He encourages us to be advised that there was a connection between suicide and resistance within the context of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. In stating that, like his ancestors, he preferred death by drowning to enslavement, he references a shared understanding of slave suicide as a form of resistance..

In this dissertation, I examine slave ship mortality, slave ship suicides, and resistance through the lenses of traditional West and West Central African cosmologies. My primary thesis is that some of the suicides in the Middle passage were informed by the religious beliefs of the captives and should be understood as deliberate acts of resistance. I further argue that there is an underrepresentation in the slave mortality scholarship that analyzes the cosmologically motivated suicides by drowning as a form of resistance within the context of the Middle Passage. I presuppose the notion that the slave ship engendered a new spatial phenomenon for many enslaved West and West Central African people. Testimonies and case studies used in my analysis are critical to my thesis that West and West Central African cosmologies in conjunction with resistance played an important role in the decision of the captives to commit suicide by drowning. My analysis connects resistance to personal insurrection by examining the motivations of those who jumped from vessels into the sea.

[283] Quote from the movie, "The Black Panther."

I find that the evidence reveals connections between captives' religious views, which were not always apparent to their captors, and their suicidal behaviors. The evidence also highlights the role of European supremacy and White racial hegemony as guiding principles in much of the earlier research, which caused some scholars to fail to connect the Ibo and other cosmologies, in particular their attitudes toward death and the afterlife, to suicidal drownings as a form of resistance. I concluded that amid the inhumanity of slavery, the Ibo, like many other captives, responded in unique ways, sometimes taking their own lives as the ultimate form of rebellion and resistance. By examining several West African religious views, I arrived at a better understanding of why captives leaped from slave ships into the sea, finding evidence that at least some of these deaths were acts of resistance. I also concluded that earlier scholars neglected to take into account the important role played by African cosmologies when decisions about rebellion and death were paramount.

Furthermore, the centrality of religion in the lives of African peoples made it necessary to examine religion as a motivator for suicidal resistance. I have argued that in some cases drowning oneself was an act of faith in the afterlife and related to the phenomenon known as transmigration. Studies of slave ship records and eyewitness testimonies have informed us that many of the captives were taken from the Ibo, the Gâ, the Akan, the Yoruba, the Fulani, and the Hausa groups, all of which are of West and West Central African heritage. Many of these groups practiced similar religious beliefs.

Throughout much of Western history, many scholars have perpetuated the fallacy that African understandings of spiritual power, invincibility, and conjure were nonsense. However, I contend that this failure to recognize the prominence of African religious traditions led these

historians to devalue the role of the spiritual realm in the mind of the captive African. This, in turn, limited the manner in which the African understanding of the afterlife has been recorded.

I agree with both Mbiti and Opoku who imply that one cannot understand the religions, cultures, or spiritual comprehensions of Africans unless one has taken the time to become familiar with the traditions and customs of these communities.[284] As Mbiti asserts, "Africans are notoriously religious, and each people has its own religious system with a set of beliefs and practices."[285] Therefore, I argue in this dissertation that the barbaric nature of the Transatlantic Slave Trade and the limited sources of communication led to various miscalculations on behalf of some of the recorders on board ship. The data presented in this dissertation revealed that what European captors recorded as simply suicide was likely one of the captives' ways of attempting to transition from one state of being to another.

African consciousness, worldviews, and religious practices were and are essential components in comprehending the experiences of captives in the Middle Passage. The evidence provided in this dissertation makes a compelling case that any attempt at explaining why so many captives resisted, revolted, and even jumped overboard at sea must take into account the religious beliefs and practices of the captives.

Regarding my methodology, I utilized a book entitled *Qualitative Methods in Africana Studies, An Interdisciplinary Approach to Examining Africana Phenomena*. In it, James Conyer poses the question, "What is Africana Studies?" He answers the question by stating that, "Africana Studies is the global Pan Africanist study of African phenomena interpreted from an Afrocentric perspective. Perspective signals the commonality in the school of thought, among

[284] John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 1.
[285] Ibid., 1.

those scholars who contribute to this interdisciplinary body of knowledge."[286] I applied Conyers' assessment by factoring into the discourse the role of a worldview that is Afro or African-centric as opposed to one that is Eurocentric or Euro-American centric. This model emphasizes the role of the African conjurer or African cosmologies. Previous examinations of the religious worldview of the captives often underestimated the validity and reverence afforded the conjurer and the supernatural expectations of his followers. Conjurers or spiritual leaders held long-standing reverence for these captives, and the importance of these figures may have intensified at sea. As an Africana scholar, I took into account the drastic differences between the way the ocean voyage was experienced by the African versus the European. In the case of the Ibo, the memory of the land and its role in ancestral connections were and are essential to survival. Thus, a key component of my research was an assessment of the African experience that affirmed the importance of West and West Central African consciousness, particularly with regard to the role of religion and their relationship to the land.

Though enslavement eventually required the relinquishing of one's language, status, rites of passage, cultural practices, music and worship styles, which were central to their core existence, were central to the captives' survival. Shackled by manacles on hand and foot, they could not be deprived of their minds or memories. The evidence suggests that some suicidal drownings were connected to many of the captives' traditional values and principles of civility and self-pride. Further, even as they were being held captive, the social, kinship, and religious practices that were a part of their upbringing were not easily forgotten.

Contrary to the European slave merchant communities' beliefs, West African people were not all the same. Thus, I have addressed how these differences manifested themselves in

[286] James L. Conyers, Jr., *Qualitative Methods in Africana Studies, An Interdisciplinary Approach to Examining Africana Phenomena*, Lanham Maryland, University Press of America, 2016, xi.

times of stress, anxiety, and fear. To understand the phenomenon of self-murder on board slave ships, I examine the role of West African consciousness and religious practices, and how consciousness, circumstances, and worldview would lead captives to respond to the stress and bewilderment of the slave ship.

According to Huston Smith, "[e]very religion is a blend of universal principles and local settings. The former when lifted out and, made clear, speak man to man, whatever his time and place. The latter, a rich compound of myth and rite, can never make its way into the emotional life of the outsider."[287] Smith asserts that one who is unfamiliar (in this case, the European as it relates to African religious belief systems) with the rites of passage and customs of another religion is unable to make sense of its practices. Such individuals tend to focus on cultural dissimilarities instead of seeking commonalities. By employing Africana Critical Theory as an alternative framework for interpreting the evidence, I follow the path of other Black, continental African scholars and researchers who have uncovered the disparities created by using a Eurocentric worldview as a universal framework for the evidential analysis of the African/Black experience.

It is important to note that European colonialists brought religious views that were very different from the views of the West and West Central Africans. In the minds of many Europeans, African people were barbaric and uncivilized. Thus, European slave merchants made few attempts to understand African worldviews or religions. As I have argued, there were differences in the ways that some Africans viewed suicide, and it is those differences that I posit led many of the African captives, the Ibo in particular, toward self-destruction in general and drowning in particular.

[287] Huston Smith, *The Religion of Man*, Perennial Library, Harper and Row, New York, 1965, 4.

Dona Richards (Marimba Ani) states, "Western European social theory is either irrelevant or dangerous to people of African descent."[288] African social climate, cultures, and worldviews have been overlooked or perniciously misinterpreted by the traditional historical and social theoretical narratives, which offer an untrustworthy perspective on African cultures. Richards states further that "[c]ontrary to the propaganda of academia white social theory does not represent a universally valid and objective body of thought, nor a neutral tool to be used for the purpose of understanding human experience."[289]

Theories and propositions of social and cultural behavior provide models for reality; however, in many cases, the realities of Black people have been placed within the context of other racial groups. These other groups have created models for solving problems and answering questions that are not germane to, or consistent with, the reality of people who have been oppressed and or colonialized.[290] Further support for my interpretive method is found in a statement by George C. Bond when he claims that Africanists must employ methods, theories, and constructs that validate the African experience: "[T]he theoretical constructs, assumptions and biases of European scholarship have hindered an accurate appraisal and assessment of African culture."[291] Thus, an African-centered discourse that begins with the acknowledgment that Africana Critical Theory is uniquely qualified to answer questions pertaining to West and West Central African religious experiences and their worldviews is essential to further discourse on suicide by drowning.

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[288] Dona Richards, "The Ideology of European Dominance", *The Western Journal of Black Studies, Vol.* 3. No. 4, Winter 1979, 244.
[289] Ibid., 244.
[290] James L. Conyers, Jr., *Qualitative Methods in Africana Studies, An Interdisciplinary Approach to Examining Africana Phenomena,* 209.
[291] George C. Bond, "A Caution to Black Africanists", *Python*, (1960), Vol. 32, No.1 (1st Qtr., 1971), 94.

Africana Critical Theory, as I have applied it, is first and foremost a rigorous discipline that focuses on the lived experiences of persons of African descent, whether on the continent or in the Diaspora. Its thrust is concerned with both the triumphs and the mundanity of Black experience. One of the reasons that Africana Studies is so broad is because of the multi-faceted, multidimensional nature of what it means to be Black in this world.

Therefore, true Africana Studies includes the history of how Black people have been systematically excluded from western scholarship in word, deed, and practice. My use of Africana Studies and Africana Critical Theory as foundational methods of examination were able to address the need to reconnect ideas and cosmological outlooks of those who are in the Diaspora with our fore-parents' notion of liberation. Having said that, it is important to state that Africana Studies as a method, in this dissertation, purports that it does not begin with the enslavement of Africans in America but with their heritage and ancestral roots in Africa. Therefore, any legitimate academic study of Transatlantic mortality must include a discussion of the culture, languages, religious beliefs, and cosmologies of Western continental African ethnic groups.

Since the African American/African experience does not occur in a vacuum, African American Studies has a unique and significant history that intersects with every academic discipline and cultural construct. Africana Studies fills the gap left by the inadequate and oftentimes academically nefarious literature that has led to misunderstandings of captives' onboard responses to enslavement.

Since my research is an investigation into suicide by drowning as an attempt at expressing religion, agency, and martyrdom connected to resistance, I used a methodology that allowed for a worldview that was antithetical to the European perspective and affirmed African cultures,

experiences, and understanding of the world around them, their families, and their view of the afterlife. I was not able to uncover any early European sources that interpreted the African experience acts of resistance, especially through self-destruction, in a positive light.

Therefore, since the goal of the research was to ascertain, as accurately as possible, the culture, nature, and causes of social behaviors among the people or group being studied, I sought out alternative ways of interpreting the data. Further, when we study persons of African descent and those in Diaspora, it is necessary to include the role of slavery, brutality, oppression, colonialism and other European-imposed impediments to growth, success, life, and other obstacles in our analysis and interpretation of the data. Africanists must examine the underlying racial and White-supremacist undertones that make up the ethos of European ideologies and traditional social theories.

This embedded White supremacist social theory led me to seek alternative methods of analysis for understanding Black and African experiences in the Transatlantic Slave Trade.

It is not enough to simply repudiate the negative images of Africans, which Whites produced, assimilated, and exported. Rather, social scientist must look critically at the theoretical assumptions and presuppositions on which the disciplines are founded. Therefore, unlike many Eurocentric and Euro-American methodological frameworks, which place Africa in a deficit position, this dissertation takes into account the roles of slavery, Jim Crowism, race, oppression, and the promotion of White supremacy. Together, these elements form the canon of intellectual discourse about Africa as deficient and devoid of the capacity necessary to examine various African worldviews.

Since I have demonstrated that suicide by drowning can be viewed as a form of resistance that reveals itself in the form of religion, agency, or martyrdom, an alternative framework of

evidentiary analysis was incumbent. In order to demonstrate the validity of these conceptual claims, it was necessary to challenge the universality of the way in which the Western worldview of Africa, her people, and most importantly suicide, resistance, and self-destruction have been presented in the Eurocentric historical analysis.

My research interrogates the experiences of the captives while on board the slave vessels and examines the motivations behind the deliberate commission of suicide by drowning while seeking to understand how these deaths correlate to faith, agency, and martyrdom. The evidence demonstrates that racism and inhumane treatment on board these vessels forged an environment of rebellion and fear that led some captives to jump over board, relying on their religious belief in transmigration. I also took into account that drowning was not the only form of self-destruction exhibited by enslaved captives. However, my research shows that the religious beliefs that motivated suicide by drowning were particularly connected with expressions of resistance, agency, and martyrdom and are one of the less studied areas within the literature on the Transatlantic Slave Trade. While examining the faith, agency, martyrdom, and worldview of the captives in the context of the horrors of the slave vessel, the data clearly revealed that racism and White supremacy were also motivators of the captors to maintain the racial distinctions between the African captive and the European slaver. The dissertation further highlighted the horrific onboard experiences of African captives in an attempt to address why some of them chose to drown themselves. For some, death was their way of returning home to their families. The results help us to further understand the depth of the inhumanity experienced by the captives by focusing on the lives and lived experiences of those lost at sea.

The sources used in this dissertation reveal that these societies ascribed to a worldview that believed in the transmigration of the spirit of a person who no longer existed in the physical

realm. This notion of transmigration became so popular that slave ship technology was advanced to prevent the frequency of potential suicides.

Second, the evidence clearly suggests that some, but not all captives, drowned themselves because they simply refused enslavement. This refusal was not necessarily a denial of transmigration. Though these two concepts may have been connected, their connection was not necessary for one to leap from a ship mid-voyage. Third, psychological studies support the notion that the slave ship engendered a spatial environment that was conducive for suicide by drowning, and I have shown that one of the ways of defining that context is through an interpretive tool known as slave suicide ecology, a phrase coined by Dr. Terri L. Snyder.

Fourth, there is a need for a research methodology and an analytical framework that takes into consideration the role of religion as it relates to life, death, and suicide in the Middle Passage. Overall, I found that the evidence shows clear connections to the religious beliefs of many of the suicide victims in the form of transmigration, agency, and martyrdom.

In many traditional West and West Central African religions, life and death are intricately woven into the fabric of a cyclical existence, where the dead simply transition from one state of (physical) existence into another state of (spiritual) existence. Therefore, I submit that acts of suicide might have been misinterpreted as simple acts of self-destruction by European recorders, especially since most captors thought very little of African intellectual prowess. Religious traditions were powerful antidotes to the slave experience, and any attempt to understand the frequency of suicide by drowning without considering these traditions is necessarily incomplete.

We need more data that separates the number of suicides specific to country of embarkation and ethnic group association. This data would be helpful in determining what role

religion played in self-destruction by ethnic group and by region. I focused on the Ibo as a model group who had different reasons for leaping overboard and for what has been termed as suicide.

It would also be helpful to understand what percentage of the enslaved, separated by age, gender, and ethnic group, elected drowning as opposed to other means of suicide. Existing studies support the notion that the Ibo were prone to self-destruct, and many slave merchants shied away from purchasing them whenever possible, but there are three other groups who also believed in transmigration and utilized suicide as a means of resistance in pursuit of rebirth. Is it possible that other groups who believed in transmigration were just as prone to suicide as the Ibo? Further research into the place that water held in the religions and customs of West and West Central Africans will offer insight into why suicide by drowning may have become one of the preferred means of resistance and self-destruction.

Therefore, it is incumbent upon future research regarding suicide by drowning to examine the mortality rates of enslaved persons from multiple ethnic groups. In so doing, we can discover if these tendencies were present, and if in fact the Ibo were more prone to suicide than other West and West Central African seaborne enslaved populations.

APPENDIX

	Spain/Uruguay	Portugal/Brazil	Great Britain	Netherlands	U.S.A.	France	Denmark/Baltic	Totals
1701-1725	0	120,414	107,866	17,349	1,290	40,458	863	288,240
1726-1750	0	536,696	554,042	83,095	34,004	259,095	4,793	1,471,725
1751-1775	4,239	528,693	832,047	132,330	84,580	325,918	17,508	1,925,315
1776-1800	6,415	673,167	748,612	40,773	67,443	433,061	39,199	2,008,670
1801-1825	137,654	910,246	283,959	2,339	109,198	49,686	16,316	1,509,398
Totals	148,308	2,769,216	2,526,526	275,886	296,515	1,108,218	78,679	7,203,348
Data Allocated from the Transatlantic Slave Trade Data Base								

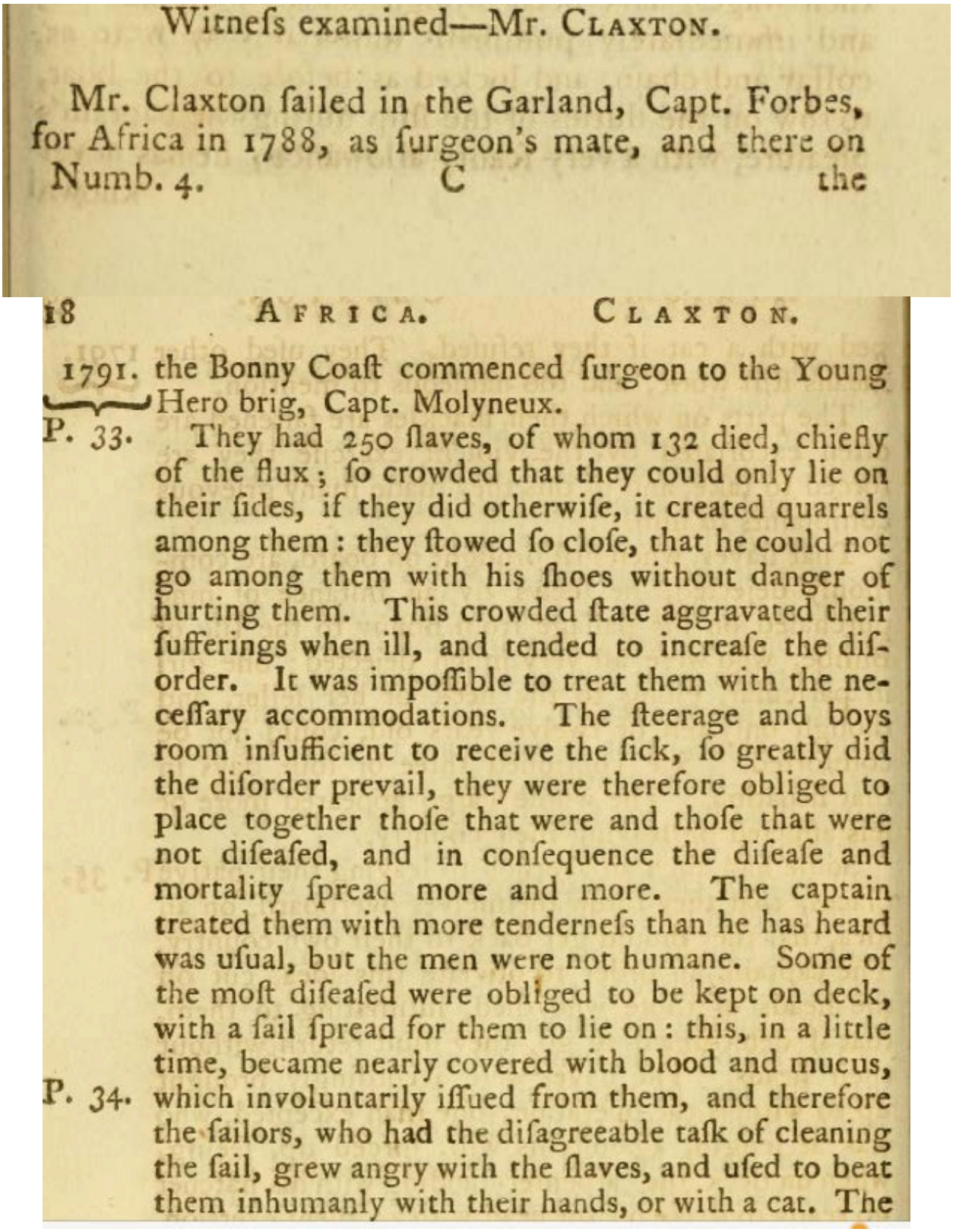
Table 3: Slaves Embarked 1720-1820

Data extracted from the Transatlantic Slave Trade Data Base:
http://www.slavevoyages.org/voyages/EnFvByeN

went also and witnessed the cruel sight. I went to be convinced and to deplore. There were about 300 miserable beings, without distinction of sex, packed close together in the above-mentioned store-room, upon the bare earth, without even planks to serve as beds. They had no coverings for their bodies, except some of them, who had only a piece of cloth to cover their middle. Some were sick, and a few presented the human shape in a most dreadful form, being reduced to mere skeletons. But generally speaking, the

greater part appeared to be in good health. They are of the Eboe nation; and I am informed that King Pepper got them from the interior. He supplied them very slowly, which accounts for the long detention of the Fox. She took in 328 at Bonny, whereof about twenty-eight died, some of whom jumped over board and drowned themselves, and, I am told, with the erroneous hope of getting back to their own country.—Three hundred must have been landed, because at the sale there remained 294, a few having died since their arrival. Circulars were sent to the different

Figure 4: Case Study Number One: Eboe Suicide Transmigration



Witneſs examined—Mr. CLAXTON.

Mr. Claxton ſailed in the Garland, Capt. Forbes, for Africa in 1788, as ſurgeon's mate, and there on

Numb. 4. C the

18 AFRICA. CLAXTON.

1791. the Bonny Coaſt commenced ſurgeon to the Young Hero brig, Capt. Molyneux.

P. 33. They had 250 ſlaves, of whom 132 died, chiefly of the flux; ſo crowded that they could only lie on their ſides, if they did otherwiſe, it created quarrels among them: they ſtowed ſo cloſe, that he could not go among them with his ſhoes without danger of hurting them. This crowded ſtate aggravated their ſufferings when ill, and tended to increaſe the diſorder. It was impoſſible to treat them with the neceſſary accommodations. The ſteerage and boys room inſufficient to receive the ſick, ſo greatly did the diſorder prevail, they were therefore obliged to place together thoſe that were and thoſe that were not diſeaſed, and in conſequence the diſeaſe and mortality ſpread more and more. The captain treated them with more tenderneſs than he has heard was uſual, but the men were not humane. Some of the moſt diſeaſed were obliged to be kept on deck, with a ſail ſpread for them to lie on: this, in a little time, became nearly covered with blood and mucus,

P. 34. which involuntarily iſſued from them, and therefore the ſailors, who had the diſagreeable taſk of cleaning the ſail, grew angry with the ſlaves, and uſed to beat them inhumanly with their hands, or with a cat. The

Figure 5: Case Study Number Two: Transmigration, the Good Death and Triumph

them inhumanly with their hands, or with a cat. The ſlaves in conſequence grew fearful of committing this involuntary action, and when they perceived they had done it, would immediately creep to the tubs, and there ſit ſtraining with ſuch violence as to produce a prolapſus ani, which could not be cured. The ſame puniſhments were inflicted for the ſame cauſe on thoſe who were not quite ſo ill.

Slaves, whoſe flux was accompanied with ſcurvy, and ſuch cedematous ſwellings of the legs as made it pain to move at all, were made to dance, as they call it, and whipped with a cat if they were reluctant.

The ſlaves both when ill and well, were frequently forced to eat againſt their inclinations. Were whipped

Figure 6: Case Study Number Two (cont'd): Transmigration, the Good Death and Triumph

ped with a cat if they refuſed. They uſed other means ſtill worſe, and too nauſeous to mention. 1791.

The parts on which their ſhackles are faſtened are often excoriated by the violent exerciſe they are forced to take, and of this they made many grievous complaints to him.

That ſlaves, when firſt brought on board, are commonly dejected, he ſhews by an inſtance of nine purchaſed on his paſſage from Bonny to the Iſle of Bimbe, who were all very much dejected: one girl in paricular, clung to the neck of her ſeller, and though only ten or twelve years old, could not be comforted. She continued three or four days in that ſituation. The whole cargo appeared more or leſs afflicted on leaving their country.

Some had ſuch an averſion to leaving their native places, that they threw themſelves overboard, on an idea, that they ſhould get back to their own country. The captain, in order to obviate this idea, cut off the heads of thoſe who died, intimating to them, that if determined to go, they muſt return without their heads. The ſlaves were accordingly brought up to witneſs the operation, one man excepted, who was at length, againſt his will, forced up, ſeeing, when on deck, the carpenter ſtanding with his hatchet up ready to ſtrike off the head, with a violent exertion, P. 35.

Figure 7: Case Study Number Two (cont'd): Transmigration, the Good Death and Triumph

up ready to ſtrike on the head, with a violent exertion, he got looſe, and flying to the place where the nettings had been unlooſed, in order to empty the tubs, he darted himſelf overboard. The ſhip brought to, and a man was placed on the main chain to catch him, which he perceiving, dived under water, and riſing again at a diſtance from the ſhip, made ſigns, which words cannot deſcribe, expreſſive of his happineſs in eſcaping. He then went down, and was ſeen no more. A ſtrict watch over them was now kept, yet ſtill they found means to elude all precaution. One of the tubs being ſet near where the nettings were laſhed to the bulk-head, ſome of the ſlaves who had premeditated an eſcape, under P. 36. pretence of eaſing themſelves, contrived, while ſitting

C 2 on

1791. on the tubs, to unlooſe the laſhing, ſo that two actually threw themſelves overboard, and were loſt. A third was caught when three parts over.

Once imagined an inſurrection was intended.—(See particulars.)

Figure 8: Case Study Number Two (cont'd): Transmigration, the Good Death and Triumph

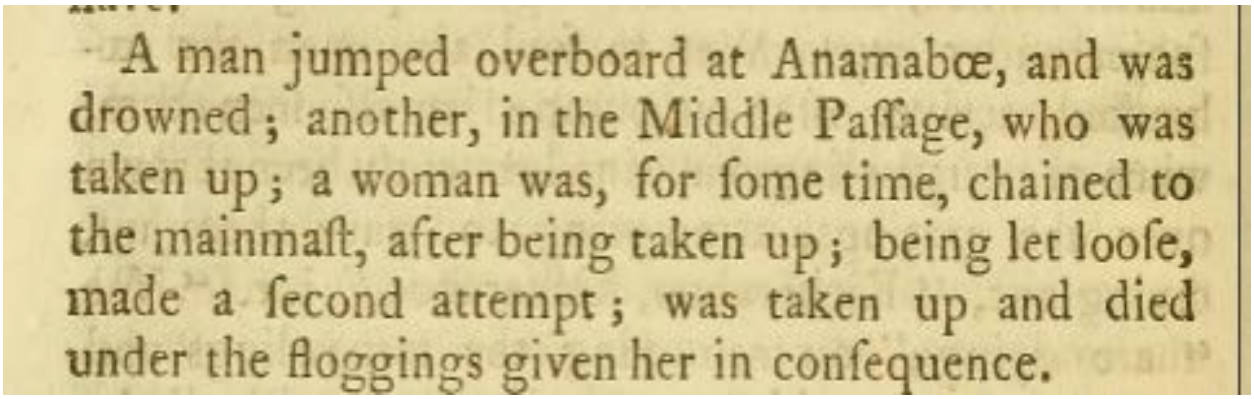

A man jumped overboard at Anamabœ, and was drowned; another, in the Middle Paſſage, who was taken up; a woman was, for ſome time, chained to the mainmaſt, after being taken up; being let looſe, made a ſecond attempt; was taken up and died under the floggings given her in conſequence.

Figure 9: Case Study Number Three: The Women and Resistance

being run out, the Murderer was carried on the Ship's Forecaſtle, where he had a Rope faſtened under his Arms, in order to be hoiſted up to the Fore-yard Arm, to be ſhot to death. This ſome of his Countrymen obſerving, told him, (as the Linguiſt informed me afterwards) " That " they would not have him be frightened; " for it was plain I did not deſign to put " him to death, otherwiſe the Rope would " have been put about his neck, to hang " him." For it ſeems they had no thought of his being ſhot; judging he was only to be hoiſted up to the Yard-arm, in order to ſcare him: But they immediately ſaw the contrary; for as ſoon as he was hoiſted up, ten white Men who were placed behind the Barricado on the Quarter-deck, fired their Muſquets, and inſtantly killed him. This ſtruck a ſudden Damp upon our Negroe-Men, who thought, that, on account of my Profit, I would not have executed him.

The Body being let down upon the Deck, the Head was cut off, and thrown overboard. This laſt part was done, to

let our Negroes ſee, that all who offended thus, ſhould be ſerved in the ſame manner. For many of the Blacks believe, that if they are put to death and not diſmembred, they ſhall return again to their own Country, after they are thrown overboard. But neither the Perſon that was executed, nor his Countrymen of *Cormantee* (as I underſtood afterwards,) were ſo weak as to believe any ſuch thing; tho' many I had on board from other Countries had that Opinion.

When the Execution was over, I ordered the Linguiſt to acquaint the Men-Negroes, " That now they might judge, " no one that killed a white Man ſhould " be ſpared:" And I thought proper now to acquaint them once for all, " That if " they attempted to mutiny again, I " ſhould be obliged to puniſh the Ring-" leaders with death, in order to prevent " further Miſchief." Upon this they all promiſed to be obedient, and I aſſured

Figure 10: Case Study Number Four: Insurrection Leads to Dismemberment to Discourage Transmigration

A young man on board one of the ſhips, was frequently beaten in a very ſevere manner, for very trifling faults. This was done ſometimes with what is termed *a cat*, (an inſtrument of correction, which conſiſts of a handle or ſtem, made of a rope three inches and a half in circumference, and about eighteen inches in length, at one of which are faſtened nine branches, or tails, compoſed of log line, with three or more knots upon each branch), and ſometimes he was beat with a bamboo. Being one day cruelly beaten with the latter, the poor lad, unable to endure the ſevere uſage, leaped out of one of the gun ports on the larboard ſide of the cabin, into the river. He, however, providentially eſcaped being devoured by the ſharks, and was taken up by a canoe belonging to one of the black traders then lying along-ſide the veſſel. As ſoon as he was brought on board, he was dragged to the quarter-deck, and his head forced into a tub of water, which had

had been left there for the negroe women to waſh their hands in. In this ſituation he was kept till he was nearly ſuffocated ; the perſon who held him, exclaiming, with the malignity of a demon, " If you want drowning, I will drown you myſelf." Upon my inquiring of the young man, if he knew the danger to which he expoſed himſelf by jumping overboard, he replied, " that he expected to " be devoured by the ſharks, but he preferred " even that, to being treated daily with ſo much " cruelty."

Figure 11: Case Study Number Five: Eaten by Sharks as Form of Agency, Martyrdom and the Good Death

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