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Defying Social Death: The Multiple Configurations of African Slave Family in the Atlantic World

James H. Sweet

THE study of the slave family has a long and venerable history in the American academy, punctuating debates over the very nature of slavery itself. For most of the twentieth century, scholars assumed that the slave family was either nonexistent or an abject failure. The earliest scholars of slave communities depicted prolific mothers, carefree children, and disinterested fathers all under the tutelage of a benevolent, patriarchal slave master. Challenging the idea of the master's kind treatment of his slave "children," E. Franklin Frazier, Kenneth M. Stampp, and others argued forcefully for the social dislocation and utter disruption of male-centered slave families, brought about largely by the master's brutalities.¹ Though the source of dysfunction shifted to slaveholders, the impacts on slave communities still suggested family rupture and sexual licentiousness. Even as late as 1967, Orlando Patterson concluded that "the nuclear family could hardly exist within the context of slavery" where "promiscuity [was] the norm."²

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¹ On masters as benevolent patriarchs, see Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, *American Negro Slavery: A Survey of the Supply, Employment and Control of Negro Labor As Determined by the Plantation Régime* (New York, 1918); Gilberto Freyre, *Casa-grande e senzala: Formação da família brasileira sob o regime da economia patriarcal* (Rio de Janeiro, 1933). For the view that masters were the primary cause of social breakdown in slave families, see E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Family in the United States* (Chicago, 1939); Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South* (New York, 1956).

² Orlando Patterson, *The Sociology of Slavery: An Analysis of the Origins, Development and Structure of Negro Slave Society in Jamaica* (London, 1967), 167 ("nuclear family"), 9 ("promiscuity"). For a review of the early literature on the slave family in the United States, see David Brion Davis, "A Review of the Conflicting Theories on the Slave Family," *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, no. 16 (Summer 1997): 100–103. On more recent debates, see Damian Alan Pargas, "Boundaries and Opportunities: Comparing Slave Family Formation in the Antebellum South," *Journal of Family History* 33, no. 3 (July 2008): 316–45.

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In the 1970s a new generation of scholars challenged the widespread belief in family instability and sexual pathology. Herbert G. Gutman's pathbreaking book demonstrated that in spite of the corrosive effects of slavery, enslaved men and women often forged enduring, two-parent households where relatively stable families emerged. For Gutman, the formation of families proved slave agency, resiliency, and determination to order their interior lives in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles. Contrary to Gutman, others argued that stable families merely served masters' social and economic interests. Thus, slave marriages actually facilitated the natural reproduction of the labor force through childbirth, and family ties meant that slave workers were far less likely to run away. Still other scholars challenged the assumption that a "stable" family was one that consisted of a male slave and his subordinate wife and children. These authors pointed out that family stability was not contingent on the patriarchal model of slave masters. Indeed, the exclusion of slave men from institutional power meant that wives and mothers were often seen as equal partners in slave marriages and crucial decision makers in the day-to-day affairs of families. The most recent works on slave family seem to underscore the variability of family structures, demonstrating that the male-headed nuclear family was not as prevalent as Gutman and others had assumed.³

³ On family stability as a demonstration of slave agency, see B. W. Higman, "Household Structure and Fertility on Jamaican Slave Plantations: A Nineteenth-Century Example," *Population Studies: A Journal of Demography* 27, no. 3 (November 1973): 527–50; Higman, "The Slave Family and Household in the British West Indies, 1800–1834," in "The History of the Family, III," special issue, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 6, no. 2 (Autumn 1975): 261–87; Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750–1925* (New York, 1976); Higman, "African and Creole Slave Family Patterns in Trinidad," *Journal of Family History* 3, no. 2 (June 1978): 163–78; Michael Craton, "Changing Patterns of Slave Families in the British West Indies," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 10, no. 1 (Summer 1979): 1–35; Higman, *Slave Populations of the British Caribbean, 1807–1834* (Kingston, Jamaica, 1995); Robert W. Slenes, *Na senzala, uma flor: Esperanças e recordações na família escrava—Brasil sudeste, século XIX* (Rio de Janeiro, 1999). The idea that masters used the slave family as a tool for promoting stable and profitable businesses can be found in Robert William Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman, *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery* (Boston, 1974), 126–44; Manolo Florentino and José Roberto Goés, eds., *A paz das senzalas: Famílias escravas e tráfico atlântico, Rio de Janeiro, c. 1790–c. 1850* (Rio de Janeiro, 1997). Among those historians who emphasize the centrality of women in slave families, see Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (New York, 1985); Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York, 1985). Finally, for more recent works highlighting the diversity of slave family structures, see Brenda E. Stevenson, *Life in Black and White: Family and Community in the Slave South* (New York, 1996); Larry E. Hudson Jr., *To Have and To Hold: Slave Work and Family Life in Antebellum South Carolina* (Athens, Ga., 1997); Wilma A. Dunaway, *The African-American Family in Slavery and Emancipation* (Cambridge, 2003); Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia, 2004); Emily West, *Chains of Love: Slave Couples in Antebellum South Carolina* (Urbana, Ill., 2004).

Despite the richness of the historiography on slave families, the animating questions in most of these works relate to the power of male and female sexual partners within the structures of American slavery. Such approaches largely ignore iterations of family that defy normalized heterosexual biological reproduction. In short, references to family almost always assume groups of people related by marriage or blood. But were these configurations of family the only ways of conceiving social reproduction? Even if scholars accept that American slave communities moved inexorably toward the model of the nuclear family, how do we account for first-generation Africans who persistently flowed into these communities with very different histories and sociocultural models?⁴ Did first-generation Africans simply accept the profound social alienation that tore them from biological kin, or did they arrive in the Americas with the tools to create other expressions of family? If Africans arrived with flexible and expansive notions of the social bonding patterns we call “family,” perhaps we should look beyond the normative assumptions of a single category that is biologically determined. Such a move would prompt us to view slave family less as a reaction to slavery and the desires of slave masters and more as a product of the imperatives that dictated social relations of Africans in their homelands, extending to the Americas. Such a move would also reframe old ideas about so-called fictive kin, placing adoptive, corporate, spiritual, and intellectual families alongside biological ones as part of a broader structural social norm.

Between 1500 and 1800, Africans represented nearly four out of every five immigrants to the Americas. These Africans should seemingly play a crucial role in any accounting of family history in the Atlantic world. Yet they remain mostly absent from the long and distinguished list of studies on the topic. The reason for this exclusion has as much to do with the development of the field of family history and its emphasis on European legal categories as it does with differing African understandings of family. First-generation Africans did not easily embrace European institutions of church and state and therefore appear in disproportionately small numbers in the written record. Hence they are easily forgotten and ignored in broader studies of Atlantic families. At the same time, the conditions of African enslavement and the demographic trends in the slave trade suggest the profound challenges in the construction of new biological families. Enslavement permanently separated Africans from families in their

⁴ In addition to Herbert G. Gutman's early work, scholars from other parts of the Americas have pointed to the gradual embrace of the nuclear family as one expression of a developing creole consciousness in slave communities. See for instance Herman L. Bennett, *Africans in Colonial Mexico: Absolutism, Christianity, and Afro-Creole Consciousness, 1570–1640* (Bloomington, Ind., 2003); Trevor Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire: Thomas Thistlewood and His Slaves in the Anglo-Jamaican World* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2004), 186–90.

homelands. Males outnumbered females by a margin of two to one in the Atlantic slave trade, constraining the potential for African reproduction in many places in the Americas. In extreme instances men constituted more than 90 percent of the African population, especially in occupations such as mining and cattle ranching.⁵

Evidence may be lacking, but it seems worthwhile to ask how the social and sexual lives of these men were transformed through the slave trade. In many African societies, slaving resulted in higher ratios of women to men, thereby expanding the institution of polygyny. The expectations of men enslaved in these settings would have been turned upside down in the Americas, where African women were scarce. What types of social networks did these men create in the absence of women willing to procreate with them? Did sexual identities and practices change in such skewed demographic settings?⁶ Did new sexual configurations serve to empower African women? Though these questions, and others related to African family, often remain difficult to answer, they can begin to be unraveled through a critical interrogation of current categories of analysis as well as through a creative reading of European colonial sources.

Unlike most scholars of Europe and the Americas, scholars of Africa have tended to focus on the household as the primary conceptual category for analyzing family. The reasons for this concentration on the household are manifold; among the most compelling, however, is that the majority of African societies have not been ordered according to the small, nuclear units that have come to define European notions of family. Indeed, in some instances, as with the BaKongo, “the family has never been a clearly defined

⁵ The starkest examples come from the mining regions of Brazil in the first half of the eighteenth century. In Vila Rica, male slaves outnumbered female slaves nearly 11:1, in Mariana 13:1, and in São João del Rei an astounding 27:1. Laird W. Bergad, *Slavery and the Demographic and Economic History of Minas Gerais, Brazil, 1720–1888* (Cambridge, 1999), 104.

⁶ For the impact of high male-to-female ratios in the slave trade on Central Africa, see the works of John Thornton: Thornton, “Demography and History in the Kingdom of Kongo, 1550–1750,” *Journal of African History* 18, no. 4 (1977): 507–30; Thornton, “The Slave Trade in Eighteenth Century Angola: Effects on Demographic Structures,” *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 14, no. 3 (1980): 417–27; Thornton, “Sexual Demography: The Impacts of the Slave Trade on Family Structure,” in *Women and Slavery in Africa*, ed. Claire C. Robertson and Martin A. Klein (Madison, Wis., 1983), 39–48. Ample evidence exists of same-sex behaviors in early Africa and the diaspora, including among ritually powerful men who took on the social roles of women in places such as Angola, Nigeria, Portugal, and Brazil. Unfortunately, scholars and activists have tended to rely on Western categories such as “sodomy,” “pederasty,” “homosexuality,” and “gay” to represent these behaviors. None of these categories accurately represents the social histories of most of these men. For a critique, see James H. Sweet, “Mutual Misunderstandings: Gesture, Gender and Healing in the African Portuguese World,” *Past and Present*, no. 203, supplement 4 (2009): 128–43.

unit, nor is it identified by any particular word in the language.”⁷ Hence, emphasis rests on broader, more flexible categories of social organization. A household consists of one or more communal buildings on shared land, occupied by members of varying statuses, from natal kin to slaves. At its core, the household is a combined unit of economic and social reproduction.

Across precolonial West Africa, wealth, power, and prestige were measured primarily in people, not in land or money.⁸ Thus, patriarchs placed a premium on expanding the number of dependents in their households through polygynous marriages, childbirth, adoption, pawning, and enslavement of outsiders. Hierarchies between insiders and outsiders existed in households, with the slave occupying the position of the archetypal outsider. These slaves might bear a permanent stigma as “marginal-to-society,” but they could transcend their social status by bonding to the new group, steadily integrating and forging deeper ties of belonging. This process of moving from outsider to insider was similar to that experienced by wives and natively privileged children, who also had to learn the expectations and modes of reciprocity that were crucial to the strength of the kin group. As a result of these arrangements, distinctions in status among wives, children, and slaves were never as great as those that would later develop under European legal regimes.⁹

At a practical level, members of African households built dwellings, tended cattle, harvested crops, engaged in trade, cooked, raised children, and protected one another in times of war. Reciprocal responsibilities meant that individuality was not only frowned on but dangerous. Crimes committed by individuals were attributed to the household, individual economic debts were the responsibility of the group, and so on. When breaches in the code of conduct occurred, heads of households linked by kinship and marriage (village elders and other powerful men) decided collectively on a proper course of action, always with the aim of restoring balance and social cohesion to the community. In short, a person was a person only insofar as he or she belonged to a broader community, and the community was defined by the number and quality of the people in its ranks.

This allusion to the quality of people in a particular community highlights the importance of knowledge as a source of power. In addition to the

⁷ Wyatt MacGaffey, “Lineage Structure, Marriage and the Family amongst the Central Bantu,” in “The History of the Family in Africa,” special issue, *Journal of African History* 24, no. 2 (1983): 173–87 (quotation, 174).

⁸ On wealth in people, see John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400–1800* (Cambridge, 1998), 72–97.

⁹ See Igor Kopytoff and Suzanne Miers, “African ‘Slavery’ as an Institution of Marginality,” in *Slavery in Africa: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives*, ed. Miers and Kopytoff (Madison, Wis., 1977), 3–81. Also see Shula Marks and Richard Rathbone, “The History of the Family in Africa: Introduction,” in “The History of the Family in Africa,” special issue, *Journal of African History* 24, no. 2 (1983): 145–61.

extended household groupings that we might call family, there were dozens of overlapping communities of craftsmen, hunters, warriors, traders, and priests spread across West Africa. These groups formed their own discrete, hierarchical communities of knowledge that knit together broad regions, sometimes characterized by sharp political differences. Community leaders desired the services of the most dynamic and clever of these specialists, utilizing their knowledge to strengthen their household and village communities. Thus, the measure of power was not simply the “accumulation” of people; power was also “compositional,” dependent on the depth and breadth of knowledge possessed by a community.¹⁰ In this way, families encouraged novelty through multiple layers of self-realization. A man could be a dutiful, subservient son or slave, but he could also be a powerful warrior or a master blacksmith. Individuals constantly tried to invent new ways to empower themselves within the contexts of their various household and corporate kin communities. Meanwhile, political leadership implied the capacity to mobilize and harness the different bodies of knowledge necessary to strengthen households, villages, and clans.

To be alienated from the collective wealth, power, and protection of one’s home community pushed the enslaved to the edge of social death. Nevertheless, African forms of reciprocity offered outsiders pathways to bonding with their new communities. The absorption of these strangers occurred at multiple, overlapping levels of kinship—through marriage, religious initiation, corporate belonging, military service, and so on—none of which were understood as fictive categories of inclusion. Indeed, these varied and dynamic processes of integrating outsiders were essential to African social reproduction. By definition, then, even the lowliest dependent in a community was attached to it by some sliver of belonging, and these were the generative beginnings of kinship and family relations.

For those thrust into the Atlantic world, the alienation of chattel slavery represented an even starker, more profound rupture. In recent years the idea of social death as the archetypal experience of African slaves has received renewed attention in Atlantic historiography. For some, the dislocation and commodification of African bodies in the Atlantic world strongly affirm slavery as the equivalent of social death.¹¹ For others, social death was a slaveholding ideology against which the enslaved fought in order to assert a politics of belonging. From this perspective, slavery was

¹⁰ Jane I. Guyer and Samuel M. Eno Belinga, “Wealth in People as Wealth in Knowledge: Accumulation and Composition in Equatorial Africa,” *Journal of African History* 36, no. 1 (1995): 91–120.

¹¹ The classic expression of slavery as social death is Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982). On commodification and social death, see Stephanie E. Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge, Mass., 2007).

not so much a permanent condition as a “predicament, in which enslaved Africans . . . never ceased to pursue . . . regeneration.”¹² To the extent that the predicaments of the Atlantic world were often extensions of the predicaments of West Africa, enslaved Africans relied on their flexible understandings of kinship in their construction of new communities. Slaves might be pushed to the precipice of social death. But the strands of social belonging were always there to seize and claim one’s personhood. Few let these opportunities pass. Thus, it was precisely through this politics of belonging that new African slave families emerged, as alienated individuals persistently sought creative ways to stave off isolation and constitute themselves as social beings.

Although alienation was no doubt deeply felt by many enslaved Africans, the stability of African family or kinship, particularly in war-torn areas where slaving was frequent and sustained, should not be exaggerated. In these regions violence and unrest constantly threatened the survival of communal networks. War, drought, famine, and slaving produced thousands of dislocated peoples who sought refuge in areas protected from these threats. Sometimes people made these internal African migrations collectively, thereby insuring the survival of some social connections. However, the forces of dislocation were often so profound that it was impossible to sustain kinship ties. Groups of strangers would thus come together to build new communities out of whatever sociocultural ground they shared. As was the case in their home communities, people often rallied around those with specialized knowledge that was situationally useful. In some cases, alienated refugees gathered around warriors who promised protection from slaving. For example, in Central Africa mixed groups of Kimbundu- and Kikongo-speaking refugees settled in the forbidding terrain of southern Kongo in the early seventeenth century. These refugee bands fled warfare and slave trading, creating new peoples under the leadership of soldiers known as *ndembu*. In other instances, refugees gathered around powerful healers who promised redemption from famine, disease, and slaving. In eighteenth-century Benin, such communities formed around vodun priests devoted to Sakpata, the earth deity. These new communities mimicked many of the hierarchies and patterns of reciprocity that characterized those of African households, thereby underscoring the primacy of the group over the individual. Focusing on these social relationships makes it possible to better understand the boundaries and limitations of familiar categories of kinship, marriage, patriarchy, and even slavery itself.¹³ Ultimately, “family” was a

¹² Vincent Brown, “Social Death and Political Life in the Study of Slavery,” *American Historical Review* 114, no. 5 (December 2009): 1231–49 (quotation, 1248).

¹³ Anthropologist Murray Last emphasizes this important cautionary note: “whereas the formal structure of kinship rules in a culture may sometimes change very slowly, the importance given to those rules, or to certain aspects of them, can fluctuate

variable, moving target—a composite of ideas and understandings, determined by natal and corporate kinship, that structured sociability, especially in highly unstable societies. This flexibility, born of African circumstances, would serve the enslaved well on their journeys through the Atlantic world.

In the absence of natal kin, Africans created new points of connection with their fellow slaves.¹⁴ In some instances, these connections cohered with broad regional affinities carried from the West African coast. For example, many Africans designated as “Angolas” in colonial documents shared a Kimbundu lingua franca, a belief in the power of health and healing through ancestral spirits known as *kilundu*, and at least some exposure to Portuguese cultural influences. Likewise, those designated as “Minas” shared affinities of language (*lingua geral de Mina*), spirituality (vodun), and exposure to imperial influences (kingdom of Dahomey). As already suggested, these deep-level, core cultural understandings coalesced in various African regional settings, leading to social connection and the potential for making new peoples. These processes gained even greater urgency in the Atlantic world, where African “ethnics” forged various configurations of family based on these shared cultural understandings.

At the most basic and easily understood level, Africans married endogamously. That is to say, across the Americas Angolas married Angolas, Minas

sharply over relatively short periods of time.” Last, “The Importance of Being Kin-Less” (paper presented at a conference hosted by the School of Oriental and African Studies, London, September 1981), 1, quoted in Marks and Rathbone, *Journal of African History* 24: 153. On the rapid transformation of Central African refugees into *ndembu*, see Joseph C. Miller, “Central Africa during the Era of the Slave Trade, c. 1490s–1850s,” in *Central Africans and Cultural Transformations in the American Diaspora*, ed. Linda M. Heywood (Cambridge, 2002), 21–69, esp. 46–47. Arguably, these communities organized around war camps became the ideological and structural basis for similar Maroon communities in the Americas, the best example of which is the Brazilian *quilombo* of Palmares. For refugees united under the leadership of vodun priests, see James H. Sweet, *Domingos Álvares, African Healing, and the Intellectual History of the Atlantic World* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2011). Ultimately, as historian Megan Vaughan has put it, the best way to understand the African family is to “approach the subject ‘sideways.’ . . . So a study of non-familial relationships may tell us more about the ‘family’ than a direct approach would.” Vaughan, “Which Family? Problems in the Reconstruction of the History of the Family as an Economic and Cultural Unit,” in “The History of the Family in Africa,” special issue, *Journal of African History* 24, no. 2 (1983): 275–83 (quotation, 281).

¹⁴ Though the majority of Africans apparently entered the Atlantic world without immediate friends or family, there is scattered evidence suggesting that some kin groups were enslaved together. See the example of the Remire plantation in seventeenth-century French Guiana where “it is quite likely that these people [the Africans] either knew each other before their sale in America or at the very least had common friends and family.” Thornton, *Africa and Africans*, 198. For similar examples from Mexico and Brazil, see Colin A. Palmer, “From Africa to the Americas: Ethnicity in the Early Black Communities of the Americas,” *Journal of World History* 6, no. 2 (Fall 1995): 223–36; James H. Sweet, *Recreating Africa: Culture, Kinship, and Religion in the African-Portuguese World, 1441–1770* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2003), 32.

married Minas, and so on. The rates of endogamous marriage depended on demographic possibilities, but it is abundantly clear that, where possible, Africans chose to form conjugal unions among those with whom they shared common social and cultural understandings. For example, in sixteenth-century Cuba, 78 percent of Arara married other Arara. Similarly, 55 percent of Biafara married Biafara, 48 percent of Bran wed Bran, and 44 percent of Zape united with Zape. In seventeenth-century Mexico City, 89 percent of Angolas married other Angolas. Likewise, 64 percent of Brams chose other Brams as their spouses. In eighteenth-century Rio de Janeiro, 82 percent of Angolas married Angolas, and 43 percent of Minas married Minas.¹⁵ The decisions of these Africans to marry partners of the same “nation” were not random or abstract. Africans who shared common cultural ground through language, spiritual beliefs, and so on naturally gravitated toward one another in the Americas.

Though Catholic marriage records provide a glimpse of family formation, one should not assume that Christian marriage was the norm among African slaves. It bears remembering that men were demographically dominant in many slave societies, often blunting opportunities for female companionship. Yet African men still gravitated toward one another along lines of national affinity, reconstructing all-male, or mostly male, social groups in the Atlantic world. As with endogamous marriages, African men formed intimate social circles based on their common linguistic, cultural, and social histories. In some instances, deep individual bonds grew and coalesced into broader kin groups. For example, in 1566 two Jolof slaves, Antônio and Zambo, conspired to hire a boat that would carry them from Lisbon back to Africa and the “land of the Moors.” Antônio, who had been in Portugal for many years, convinced the younger Zambo that such a journey was possible—the two men referred to one another affectionately as “brother” throughout their conversations.¹⁶ Once assured of the plan’s efficacy, Zambo enlisted a very recently arrived Jolof named Pedro to join them in their plot. Finally, Zambo also offered passage to a thirteen-year-old Jolof girl named Antônia, who had been his Atlantic shipmate five years earlier.¹⁷

This small collection of Jolofs from the Senegambia region exemplifies the direct invocation of kinship idioms (“brother”) as well as indirect, but no less meaningful, assertions of filial commitment and responsibility.

¹⁵ On Cuban slave marriages, see Alejandro de la Fuente, *Havana and the Atlantic in the Sixteenth Century* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2008), 167. For Mexico, see Palmer, *Journal of World History* 6: 233–34. And for Rio, Mariza de Carvalho Soares, *Devotos da cor: Identidade étnica, religiosidade e escravidão no Rio de Janeiro, século XVIII* (Rio de Janeiro, 2000), 125.

¹⁶ “Processo e confissão de Antonio negro jalofo,” Feb. 18, 1566, Inquisição de Lisboa, Processos, no. 10870, fol. 9 (quotations), Arquivo Nacional da Torre do Tombo (ANTT), Lisbon, Portugal. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

Zambo's friendship with Antônio was the narrow foundation on which a broader web of communal relations grew. Zambo's adoption of the recently arrived Pedro indicates a sense of obligation and stewardship toward his less knowledgeable countryman. Likewise, Zambo's relationship with Antônia indicates a long-standing paternal interest dating back to their time together on the slave ship, when Antônia was only eight years old.¹⁸ Ultimately, these mostly male Jolof slaves constructed family out of shared language, culture, and history as well as the individual threads of reciprocal relations that bound them all together.

Though these smaller, more intimate kinship groups were likely the norm among Africans in the Atlantic world, mostly male social groups could evolve into larger communities modeled on organizational structures from the African past. These included warrior communities such as the *asafo* companies of the Gold Coast and the *kilombos* of West-Central Africa, each of which served as an organizational basis for runaway slave communities in the Americas. In Jamaica so-called Kromantis adopted elements of the *safu* tradition into the governing principles of Maroon villages such as Nanny Town, and in Brazil "Angolans" embraced structures and symbols of the *quilombo*, most prominently in the famous runaway community of Palmares. In Cuba the Igbo secret society known as *Ekpe* reemerged as *Abakuá*. For newly arrived African men familiar with these hierarchical, corporate communities in their homelands, all-male societies may have been their first point of entry into American communities of belonging. The individual relationships within these communities remain mostly hidden, but it can be surmised that some of these men found lasting companionship among their fellow initiates. At the same time, these communities likely provided the social space through which individual males could be introduced to female companions, eventually resulting in natal families.¹⁹

¹⁸ Any consideration of African slave family must take account of the growing numbers of orphaned children that entered the Atlantic trade. Estimates suggest that children constituted around one-quarter of all slave cargoes; however, proportions climbed steadily over the years, so that by the end of the trade in the 1860s, children represented upward of 40 percent of all slaves arriving in the Americas. See *Voyages: The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database* (<http://www.slavevoyages.org>) for statistical figures. See also Gwyn Campbell, Suzanne Miers, and Joseph C. Miller, eds., "Children in European Systems of Bondage," special issue, *Slavery and Abolition* 27, no. 2 (August 2006); and, more recently, Campbell, Miers, and Miller, eds., *Children in Slavery through the Ages* (Athens, Ohio, 2009).

¹⁹ On *asafo*, see Kenneth M. Bilby, *True-Born Maroons* (Gainesville, Fla., 2005), esp. 140–43; Werner Zips, *Nanny's Asafo Warriors: The Jamaican Maroons' African Experience* (Kingston, Jamaica, 2011). For *kilombo*, see Stuart B. Schwartz, "Rethinking Palmares: Slave Resistance in Colonial Brazil," in *Slaves, Peasants, and Rebels: Reconsidering Brazilian Slavery*, ed. Schwartz (Urbana, Ill., 1992), 103–36. For *Ekpe* and *Abakuá*, see Ivor L. Miller, *Voice of the Leopard: African Secret Societies and Cuba* (Jackson, Miss., 2009); G. Ugo Nwokeji, *The Slave Trade and Culture in the Bight of Biafra: An African Society in the Atlantic World* (Cambridge, 2010), esp. 77–79. All of these corporate orga-

In those instances where Africans eventually found opposite-sex partners, it appears that most rejected the Catholic Church as a sanctioning body for their unions. In eighteenth-century Brazil, for instance, from 85 to 90 percent of all children born to African mothers were born out of Christian wedlock. This does not imply the absence of long-lasting unions between Africans. On the contrary, there is abundant evidence of unmarried couples appearing at the baptismal font multiple times with their common, “natural” children.²⁰ Regardless of whether or not culturally similar couples married according to Western Christian norms, the implication of these unions was continuity, as African men and women aligned themselves with others from their same nation, building broad webs of kinship and passing on knowledge to their Creole offspring.

Across the diaspora, African mothers were especially important in this community-building process. Since masters were not bound to recognize the paternal claims of African men whose children were born outside of Christian wedlock, these men were more readily sold away and alienated from their families. Mothers often took the responsibility of educating children in communal norms, simultaneously preparing them for lives as American slaves and passing on legacies from the African past. Even in those instances where children were the products of sexual coercion at the hands of white men, African women often treated their offspring as part of a matrilineal line that was socially and culturally African. Thus, for instance, we find a third-generation, mixed-race woman living in early eighteenth-century Bahia (northeastern Brazil) taking part in Central African-derived *calundu* ceremonies and speaking in the “language of Angola.”²¹ This woman, Lourença, *mulata*, had learned the rituals from her mixed-race aunt, Ignes, who had learned them from her Angolan mother.²²

Though Lourença and Ignes were blood relatives, ritual communities were less dependent on blood ties than on shared social and cultural kinship. Just as in Africa, natal kinship communities overlapped with communities of knowledge that promoted broader empowerment. Ritual leaders (*calunduzeiros*) such as Ignes invoked ancestral spirits who could offer remedies for

nizations underwent significant transformation in their transfer to the Americas. For example, women became prominent in Jamaican *safos* and Brazilian *quilombos*.

²⁰ Sweet, *Recreating Africa*, 35–37. The emphasis on baptism among Africans highlights the importance of this sacrament above all others in the Afro-Catholic world. For more on distinctions among “legitimate,” “natural,” and “illegitimate” children, see Linda Lewin, *Surprise Heirs*, vol. 1, *Illegitimacy, Patrimonial Rights, and Legal Nationalism in Luso-Brazilian Inheritance, 1750–1821* (Stanford, Calif., 2003).

²¹ Sweet, *Recreating Africa*, 218–19 (quotation, 218).

²² For more on *calundu*, see James H. Sweet, “The Evolution of Ritual in the African Diaspora: Central African *Kilundu* in Brazil, St. Domingue, and the United States, Seventeenth–Nineteenth Centuries,” in *Diasporic Africa: A Reader*, ed. Michael A. Gomez (New York, 2006), 64–80. Similar forms of ancestral devotion among Central Africans could be found in Saint Domingue and the United States.

a variety of illnesses that plagued slave communities. These ancestral spirits were integral to notions of family and community. To insure the prosperity of the community, members frequently offered ancestors ritual sacrifices of cows, goats, chickens, and alcohol. In these ritual settings, ancestral spirits could inhabit the bodies of mediums, but only if the mediums utilized their specialized knowledge and power effectively. These ancestors would then offer their divinations and remedies, serving to fortify and protect the entire community.

Ultimately, there were at least three layers of family embedded in these Angolan-derived ritual communities. At one level, there were very small numbers of natal kin, such as Lourença and her aunt Ignes. In addition, there was always a blood connection between the calunduzeira and the spirit that possessed her. When the calundu possessed Ignes, the ancestral spirit was also likely related to her niece Lourença. Perhaps it was even Ignes's Angolan mother, Lourença's grandmother. Whatever the case, deceased family members often played important roles in the lives of the living, highlighting the virtual impossibility of social death. The ability of ritual experts to collapse time and space, drawing the power of these long-dead African ancestors to colonial American communities, served as a durable social connection when temporal family members so often succumbed to forced removal, death, disease, and other ill effects of slavery. Finally, a third layer of new family members could be adopted into the community through their devotion to the dead and their willingness to contribute to the community's collective well-being. The lines of reciprocity between individuals, ritual communities, and ancestors freely accommodated such arrangements. Again, with the frequent threat of alienation, isolation, and the absence of biological kin, the integration of strangers into ritual congregations served as a creative means of regenerating family and empowering the group.

In some instances, the perceived power of the group was tied directly to the memory of historically important political figures. Indeed, some enslaved Africans claimed the ability to raise deceased ancestors who were legendary historical actors in West Africa. For enslaved spirit mediums, the ability to channel a proven warrior, liberator, or king tapped into potent memories of political power and redemption in the homeland, memories that had particular salience in American slave communities. For individual slaves, the invocation of a well-known, powerful figure triggered shared memories that could generate new communities of belonging. These communities simultaneously drew on the power of the past through the ancestral spirit and built new temporal power based on this shared history. For example, in 1742 in the mining regions of Brazil, a slave named Manuel Cata performed divinations using metal tubs and mining pans. Cata, who was from the kingdom of Savalu in the northern part of what is today the

country of Benin, performed his divinations by turning the metal vessel upside down, rubbing it with corn husks, and chanting, “Asió bosu bosu.” After a short time, a voice emerged from underneath the pan, and Cata began asking it questions in “the Mina language.” Among other things, the voice revealed the sources of illness and news of events overseas. Cata claimed that the voice was that of his deceased grandfather, who had been “diviner for the king of his land.”²³

In the 1730s Savalu was a persistent threat to the dominance of the regional empire of Dahomey. Dahomean king Agaja ordered the execution of one of his top military advisers in 1733 on the suspicion that he planned to desert to Savalu.²⁴ Cata’s ability to channel another sovereign, or a proxy of that sovereign, was more than an expression of spirituality; it was also a direct political threat to King Agaja. It seems very likely that Cata landed in Brazil as a slave precisely because of this threat. That he continued to draw large numbers of followers in Brazil well into the 1740s is testimony to the enduring memory and power of his grandfather. As “diviner for the king” of Savalu, Cata’s grandfather represented stiff opposition to the Dahomean banditry and brigandage that sent thousands of slaves to colonial Brazil. In Brazil Cata provided a direct pathway to this powerful force of resistance, not only through the individual kinship idiom represented by his grandfather but also through collective fealty to the Savalu king. In this way Cata’s family constituted multiple layers—from the patriarchal Savalu king, to his diviner grandfather, to his many followers in Brazil, who constructed collective power from their memories of the past.

Cata was by no means alone in his fusion of politics, family, and healing in colonial Brazil. Other Dahomean slaves carried small ancestral altars known as *asen*. These altars consisted of an iron post, usually around two feet in length, on top of which sat an enclosed calabash-shaped figure, also constructed of iron. Diviners and healers made offerings of food, blood, and alcohol to the *asen* in order to draw specific ancestors or groups of ancestors to earth to consult on urgent issues. Fearful of the diffuse power of these ancestors across Dahomey, Agaja proscribed divination with *asen* and banished practitioners to the Atlantic slave trade. The continued use of these ancestral shrines in Brazil points to yet another creative configuration of family in African slave communities. The knowledge necessary to construct the *asen*, empower it, and render it useful required a larger community that shared a belief in the potency of these ancestors. As with other

²³ Inquisição de Lisboa, Cadernos do Promotor, no. 107, livro 299, fols. 25–38 (“Asió bosu bosu,” fol. 33, “diviner,” fol. 32), Sept. 10, 1745, ANTT; Inquisição de Lisboa, Cadernos do Promotor, no. 102, livro 295, fols. 12–17, Apr. 2, 1740, ANTT. Also see Sweet, *Domingos Álvares*, 130–32.

²⁴ Robin Law, *The Slave Coast of West Africa, 1550–1750: The Impact of the Atlantic Slave Trade on an African Society* (Oxford, 1991), 294, 325.

forms of African community building, the ability to harness the power of deceased ancestors conveyed power and strength that often formed the foundation for new idioms of kinship, both at home and in the diaspora.²⁵

By now, it should be clear that culture and memory played vital roles in the regeneration of family among African slaves in the Americas. For the most part, these idioms of kinship developed in small-group settings, as people did their best to stave off the alienating effects of slavery and forge new ways of belonging. While most Africans built fragile families out of the instability of American slavery, a precious few succeeded in parlaying their intellectual capital into truly remarkable community enterprises. These instances provide a glimpse of the complex and interwoven ideas of family among Africans in the Americas, ideas that bore the potential for profound social and political transformation.

Perhaps the most famous example of African intellectuals' power to effect political change occurred in Haiti. Scholars have debated the extent to which Vodou contributed directly to the outbreak of the Haitian Revolution, but there can be little doubt that spiritually powerful Africans harnessed the energies of unrelated slaves and their deceased ancestors to improve their collective condition. Describing these ritual communities explicitly through the idiom of family in the late eighteenth century, French lawyer and historian M. L. E. Moreau de Saint-Méry wrote that they were led by

two ministers who claim they were inspired by God, or where the gift of inspiration is really manifest for their followers, they bear the pompous names King and Queen, or that despotic master and mistress, or finally the touching title of father and mother. During all their lives they are the leaders of the great *Vaudoux* family, and they are extended the unlimited respect of those who compose it. . . . One can hardly believe the extent of dependence the *Vaudoux* chiefs hold over other members of the sect. There is not one of these who would not prefer all of the worst misfortunes that threaten him if he does not assiduously attend the meetings, if he does not blindly obey all that the *Vaudoux* demands of him. . . . In short, nothing is more dangerous in every respect than this *Vaudoux* cult, founded on the extravagant notion—but one which can become a terrifying weapon—that the ministers . . . know all and can do all.²⁶

²⁵ On the use of *asen* in colonial Brazil, see Sweet, *Domingos Álvares*, 132–39.

²⁶ M. L. E. Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Description topographique, physique, civile, politique et historique de la partie française de l'île de Saint-Domingue* (Philadelphia, 1797), 1: 46 (quotation), 50–51.

François Makandal, a runaway slave most likely born in West Africa, personified the terror described by Moreau de Saint-Méry. Legends claim that Makandal was the ringleader of a large group of Maroons that poisoned cattle, slaves, and slave masters in Saint Domingue's Northern Province. Makandal allegedly taught his followers the secret powers of roots and herbs, drawing on his knowledge of the natural and spiritual worlds. After many years on the run, Makandal was finally captured and condemned to be burned at the stake in 1758. Prior to his execution, he declared the inviolability of his power, claiming that he would turn himself into a fly to avoid the flames. When the day of his execution arrived, he mounted the stake wearing a sign that read "Seducer, Profaner, Poisoner."²⁷ The pyre was set alight, but as Makandal frantically fought to escape the flames the stake collapsed. The assembled crowd let out shouts of glee: "Makandal saved!"²⁸ Soldiers quickly cleared the plaza of witnesses, reassembled the pile, and finished the task. For many, Makandal's prophecy had miraculously come true. He had escaped death and flown back to the hills to reconvene with his ritual family, which would continue to foment revolution. Regardless of the veracity of the legend, Makandal's knowledge of the natural and spiritual worlds was a catalyst for community building and resistance to slavery that drew together large groups of unrelated Africans and their ancestors. Makandal's memory persisted well into the revolutionary period and beyond, as all manner of powerful symbols—talismans, dances, and even Vodou priests—were generically known as "makandals." In death, perhaps more than in life, Makandal inspired kin-like groups of belonging that transcended time and space, linking the revolutionary potential of the living with the spiritual power of the dead.²⁹

During almost the same period that Makandal came to prominence in Saint Domingue, an African named Domingos Álvares built an ever-expanding network of reciprocal social relationships in Rio de Janeiro, some of which were explicitly translated into family idioms. Like Makandal, Álvares utilized his intellectual gifts to effect profound social and political change. Álvares was a healer and vodun priest and eventually used his skills to earn his manumission. By the early 1740s, he presided over three healing centers and a ritual ground (*terreiro*), claiming dozens, if not hundreds, of followers. At the core of his enterprise was the *terreiro*, where he

²⁷ M. [L. E.] Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Loix et constitutions des colonies françaises de l'Amérique sous le vent* (Paris, [1785]), 4: 217–18 (quotation, 4: 217).

²⁸ Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Description*, 1: 652–53 (quotation, 1: 653).

²⁹ For more on Makandal, see Pierre Pluchon, *Vaudou, sorciers, empoisonneurs de Saint-Domingue à Haïti* (Paris, 1987), 170–72; Carolyn E. Fick, *The Making of Haiti: The Saint Domingue Revolution from Below* (Knoxville, Tenn., 1990), 59–75; Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 2004), 51–52.

constructed an elaborate shrine to the vodun of the earth, Sakpata. Álvares's command of the esoteric knowledge necessary to invoke Sakpata's blessings in Brazil rendered him a vehicle for building ritual family and community. As a consequence of his knowledge and power, Álvares attracted a small group of devotees, most from the so-called Mina coast of Africa, who were initiated into his ritual family. This new community redefined each member's personhood, linking him or her to an ancestral vodun (in this case, Sakpata), a "father" *vodunon* (Álvares), brother and sister *vodunsi* (fellow initiates), and other congregants. Each of the devotees adopted new ritual names—such as "Captain," "Old Man," "Long-Bearded One"—that indicated a particular quality of the deity.³⁰ The devotees also took on specific roles in the frequent rituals performed at the terreiro. The most important of these roles was assumed by the woman named "Captain," who always acted as the primary medium for the divinity in Álvares's terreiro. She was responsible for much of the ritual choreography—dancing, sacrifices, and so on—that drew the vodun into the ritual space for consultation.

Interestingly, the Captain's role seems to adhere closely to that of the *hungan*, literally "chief of the divinity." In vodun, the *hungan* was second only to the *vodunon* in terms of rank. If the *vodunon* was absent from the ritual space, the *hungan* took over leadership of the *vodunsi*. Given the Captain's signal importance to the community, one wonders if Álvares viewed her as an equal partner in his therapeutic enterprise, in similar fashion to the way male-female couples usually presided over vodun communities in Dahomey. It is impossible to know the Captain's actual name or the full contours of her relationship with Álvares outside of the ritual setting. What is known is that by the early 1740s, Álvares claimed to be "married" to a freedwoman named Maria da Rocha, who was "from Allada on the Mina Coast."³¹ I have pored over parish marriage records for the entire time Álvares was in Rio de Janeiro, and there is no record of his marriage to Maria da Rocha. Nor is there a record of the baptism of their daughter, born in 1741.

The absence of Álvares from the official church record is not surprising. Like most Africans, he probably never married in the Catholic Church at all. This raises the intriguing question of whether his claim to marriage with Maria da Rocha was a euphemism for their shared leadership over the family of *vodunsi* at his terreiro. If Álvares actually married, it is inconceivable that his partner would not have played an integral role in his congregation. Perhaps Maria da Rocha was the Captain, a vodun devotee with ritual knowledge gained in Allada and shared with Álvares as his new ritual and

³⁰ Inquisição de Évora, Processos, no. 7759, fols. 16–48, ANTT. Also see Sweet, *Domingos Álvares*, 126–27.

³¹ Inquisição de Évora, Processos, no. 7759, Genealogia, fols. 59–61 (quotation, fol. 59v), Mar. 15, 1743, ANTT.

life partner in the Rio terreiro. Álvares himself claimed that his “parents” were named Afnage and Oconon, both names associated with Sakpata initiation and worship.³² Portuguese documents plainly suggest that these were his natal parents; however, Álvares very well may have understood his birth to be ritual rather than natal, thereby calling into question simple conclusions drawn from the colonial archive. At the very least, the common threads that tied Álvares, Maria da Rocha, their daughter, and the vodunsi should draw attention to the varying ways that Africans reconstituted family and kinship in the diaspora. The lines of reciprocity between vodun, vodunon, and vodunsi in Álvares’s ritual community mirrored those between ancestors, powerful men, and wives and children in his homeland. The number and quality of people in the family defined its strength and prosperity. Thus, Álvares’s marriage and the birth of his daughter were not his alone; they belonged to everyone in his ritual space, as well as to the vodun. To be sure, natal ties still mattered, but where social conditions prevented the construction of blood families, ritual families filled a crucial void, ultimately facilitating the creation of new blood ties and new peoples.

Álvares’s ritual space was not the only venue for the expression of family idioms. His healing centers were yet another nexus of community building in Rio de Janeiro. The healing centers drew clients from miles around the city, the vast majority of them African slaves and freedpeople. These clinics served as incubators for initiation into the more intimate confines of the ritual community, as those benefiting from therapy sometimes elected to relocate to the terreiro and devote themselves to the vodun. More often, however, Álvares’s clients simply received diagnoses and remedies for specific ailments in a “cash for cures” exchange. Though these relationships adhered closely to the tenets of the market and crass capital exchange, the product on offer was Álvares’s knowledge of the Dahomean spirit world. This system of knowledge, and the kinship idioms it implied, became naturalized to the everyday life of colonial Rio de Janeiro. As the medium of a vast store of therapeutic knowledge that he shared with his ailing clients and as the widely known head of a ritual community, Álvares operated very much like a father figure. As a result, people across the city knew him primarily by the moniker “Father Domingos.” When Álvares shuttled between his various obligations through the city’s streets, he carried with him a calabash full of medicines. According to one slave woman, young children feared Álvares. If they cried or misbehaved, their mothers would warn, “Watch out, there comes Father Domingos with his little calabash!”³³ Apparently, the specter of Álvares and his calabash was frightening enough to silence even the most delinquent children.

³² Ibid.

³³ Inquisição de Évora, Processos, no. 7759, Testimony of Maria de Jesus, fols. 33v–34v (quotation, fol. 34v), Aug. 21, 1742, ANTT.

This widespread knowledge of Álvares's powers illustrates the depth of community building in his public healing practice in Rio. Though the slave women who made these comments may not have been among Álvares's closest followers, they constituted a significant slice of a much larger community that naturalized vodun to Rio's urban space. On the one hand, Álvares and his calabash were dangerous forces to be feared. On the other hand, "Pai Domingos" was the "father," the widely acknowledged leader of a healing community. The title *father* was at once an implicit reference to the kinship ties that bound members of his community and an allusion to the broader sense of deference and respect that his position commanded. Even in their casual, joking remarks, slave women passed on to their children knowledge of the powerful links among kinship, power, and healing.³⁴

I do not want to suggest that African corporate and religious structures were the only avenues toward realizing new communities. Indeed, the Catholic Church itself became a locus for new forms of kinship for some Africans, as lay brotherhoods performed much the same function as communities of Angolans practicing calundu or Minas practicing vodun. Across the Atlantic world—first in Spain and Portugal, then in Mexico, Brazil, and Cuba—Africans of the same nation could be found paying devotion to a common ancestor (saint), building altar shrines around images of that ancestor, and offering celebrations in his or her honor. In return, the ancestor or saint was expected to relieve the ills of the devotees. These lay brotherhoods operated through the idiom of family with ranked hierarchies of so-called brothers and sisters whose most important responsibility was the protection of their brethren, both in life and in death. Among other benefits, membership in a brotherhood ensured a proper burial. Perhaps most tellingly, members of these communities enriched the brotherhoods through their bequests, often leaving significant sums of money to the community on their deaths.³⁵

³⁴ All of the preceding discussion is from Sweet, *Domingos Álvares*, 123–29.

³⁵ As the pioneering work of Stephen Gudeman and Stuart B. Schwartz demonstrated, Catholic godparenthood was yet another avenue toward building family networks in the Americas. See Gudeman and Schwartz, "Cleansing Original Sin: Godparenthood and the Baptism of Slaves in Eighteenth-Century Bahia," in *Kinship Ideology and Practice in Latin America*, ed. Raymond T. Smith (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1984), 35–58. New kin communities also formed around groups of enslaved Muslims in places such as Spain, Portugal, Mexico, Peru, Brazil, Jamaica, Trinidad, and the United States. For the best synthesis of the history of enslaved Muslims, see Michael A. Gomez, *Black Crescent: The Experience and Legacy of African Muslims in the Americas* (Cambridge, 2005). For lay brotherhoods, see Patricia Ann Mulvey, "The Black Lay Brotherhoods of Colonial Brazil: A History" (Ph.D. diss., City University of New York, 1976); Jane Landers, *Black Society in Spanish Florida* (Urbana, Ill., 1999), 108–10; Soares, *Devotos da Cor*; Elizabeth W. Kiddy, *Blacks of the Rosary: Memory and History in Minas Gerais, Brazil* (University Park, Pa., 2005); Nicole von Germeten, *Black Blood Brothers: Confraternities and Social*

One powerful and early example of the strong kinship connections engendered by Catholic brotherhoods comes from seventeenth-century Mexico. In 1626 Juan Roque of the Zape nation died in Mexico City, where he had been a member of the Zape brotherhood of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception.³⁶ Roque's membership in the confraternity represented one layer of family for him in Mexico, but it was not the only one. Roque's Catholic marriage to Isabel de Herrera, also Zape, produced one child, a Creole daughter named Ana María. In his last will and testament, Roque requested that he be buried in the church of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception, his body carried to the church in a funeral procession led by his Zape brothers. He also bequeathed several houses to his daughter, Ana María.

Subsequent to Roque's death, members of the confraternity looked after Ana María, offering her financial advice and protecting her interests in the city. In this way, they performed the role of surrogate parents to their deceased "brother's" daughter. When Ana María died in 1630, intestate and without heirs, the rental income from her properties began flowing to the confraternity. In support of their claim to the properties, four Zape men, all members of Immaculate Conception, testified that Roque had instructed Ana María to bequeath the properties to the confraternity in the event that she should die without heirs. Witnesses claimed that Ana María had reiterated her father's desires just fifteen days before her death, and that was why the confraternity had taken control of her estate. Ultimately, the Zapes maintained their hold on Roque's properties until the mid-1640s, earning the confraternity more than a thousand pesos during the span of less than fifteen years. Thus, Roque protected the financial legacy of his natal family and his corporate, religious family alike, as much in death as in life.³⁷

Though further quantitative study is required, it appears that Africans sometimes left as much, or more, of their disposable property to confraternities

Mobility for Afro-Mexicans (Gainesville, Fla., 2006). In Cuba these confraternities had faded in importance for Africans by the nineteenth century and had been replaced largely by mutual aid societies known as *cabildos*. On *cabildos* as expressions of African forms of corporate kinship, see Philip A. Howard, *Changing History: Afro-Cuban Cabildos and Societies of Color in the Nineteenth Century* (Baton Rouge, La., 1998); Matt D. Childs, "The Defects of Being a Black Creole: The Degrees of African Identity in the Cuban *Cabildos de Nación*, 1790–1820," in *Slaves, Subjects, and Subversives: Blacks in Colonial Latin America*, ed. Landers and Barry M. Robinson (Albuquerque, N.Mex., 2006), 209–45.

³⁶ In Spanish America, *Zape* was a designation for Africans from the coast of present-day Sierra Leone.

³⁷ All of the information on Juan Roque comes from the remarkable set of documents transcribed by Nicole von Germeten, "Juan Roque's Donation of a House to the Zape Confraternity, Mexico City, 1623," in *Afro-Latino Voices: Narratives from the Early Modern Ibero-Atlantic World, 1550–1812*, ed. Kathryn Joy McKnight and Leo J. Garofalo (Indianapolis, Ind., 2009), 83–103.

and friends as to their surviving heirs. For example, on his death in Rio de Janeiro in 1741, the Mina-born freedman Francisco Gomes bequeathed 25,000 *reís* to the three brotherhoods where he held membership. He left none of his free third (*terça*) for his son and only a few conditional gifts for his wife. João Ribeiro Santarem, also from the Mina coast, split the free portion of his assets between his two executors, who received 10,000 *reís* each, and two confraternities, Nossa Senhora do Rosário, which received 20,000 *reís*, and Santo Antônio da Mouraria, which obtained 12,000 *reís*. Santarem left nothing for his son Ignácio, who years earlier had tried to poison him, a crime for which Santarem banished the young man to Angola. Finally, a childless Angolan woman, Branca Ferreira, left 10,000 *reís* to the Rosário brotherhood and another 4,000 *reís* to the brotherhood of Santo Elesbão and Santa Efigênia. She also left 4,800 *reís* to a five-year-old slave boy named Gregorio, the son of her slave Maria.³⁸

It is important to remember that the majority of those who were members of Catholic confraternities in Brazil were African freedpeople and not slaves. Thus, they possessed the social and financial independence to join these institutions. Nevertheless, their expansive notions of family and community can be clearly seen in their bequests. Just as in Africa, natal kin could be rejected if they were disloyal. Conversely, “subjects” could be elevated to family status through devotion to their masters. Perhaps most important, the collective brotherhood often took precedence over forms of individual accumulation. Whether through the integration of strangers into corporate communities of kin from the same African nation or through the power of long-dead ancestors drawn to spiritual communities, Africans found ingenious ways to forge meaningful and enduring social connections. To be sure, these were sometimes bare, minimalist versions of family, but there was absolutely nothing fictive about these arrangements. These expansive kinship structures had a long history in Africa and were readily adapted to accommodate the arduous conditions of the Atlantic world. Given the right set of circumstances, these nascent communities could grow and prosper, eventually producing the sorts of natal families with which Europeans were more familiar.

Ultimately, we should recognize natal kinship as a constituent element of broader social conceptions of family, rather than as the “real” or norma-

³⁸ Key here is “disposable” property. According to colonial law, children stood to inherit two-thirds of each parent’s estate. The remaining third could be bequeathed as the deceased saw fit. Here, I am only discussing this “free” third of the estate. In the majority of cases, wives and children stood to inherit a significant portion of this third, but the trend among Africans seems to have been significantly different. All these cases are taken from Nossa Senhora da Candelária, Óbitos, Arquivo da Cúria Metropolitana do Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. See Francisco Gomes (Jan. 4, 1741); João Ribeiro Santarem (Sept. 7, 1743); Branca Ferreira (Dec. 13, 1740).

tive structural form. African Atlantic families operated at several overlapping registers not always apparent to Europeans. This is by no means to diminish the crucial importance of natal kin; it is simply to say that natal kin were often one expression of broader communities. The poignancy of these multi-layered interconnections is demonstrated powerfully in cases such as that of Roque, his Zape confraternity brothers, his Zape wife, and his Mexican-born daughter, or of Álvares, his “wife,” his daughter, and his ritual family, including the spirits of the deceased. It can also be seen starkly and beautifully in cases where idioms of kinship emerged on the slave ship itself. In nineteenth-century Jamaica, the term *shipmate* was the equivalent of “brother” or “sister.”³⁹ Relationships were so indelible that sexual relations between fellow travelers were considered incest. Children born to Africans in Jamaica referred to their parents’ shipmates as uncles and aunts.⁴⁰ Similar patterns existed in Brazil, where African men’s attachments to shipmates were understood to be like those with their wives and children. Brazilians called these shipmates *malungos*, a Kimbundu word associated with ancestral symbols of authority carried by sea to establish a new hierarchy of lineages in a given territory.⁴¹ In extraordinary circumstances these Brazilian shipmates even managed to return to Africa altogether as “one family.”⁴²

In 1821 the British navy intercepted the slave ship *Emilia* as it was crossing from Lagos to Rio de Janeiro. The ship was in violation of the international abolition of the slave trade. Its cargo of 392 Yorubas, Hausas, Nupes, and Gbe was carried to Rio, where a mixed commission court ordered the Africans to be apprenticed for fourteen years. Though not legally slaves, the captives from the *Emilia* were treated like chattel during many years of grueling labor in

³⁹ Thomas Winterbottom, *An Account of the Native Africans in the Neighbourhood of Sierra Leone*. . . (London, 1803), 1: 212; J[ohn] Stewart, *A View of the Past and Present State of the Island of Jamaica*. . . (Edinburgh, 1823), 250n.

⁴⁰ James Kelly, *Voyage to Jamaica, and Seventeen Years’ Residence in That Island*. . . , 2d ed. (Belfast, 1838), 45.

⁴¹ Henry Koster, *Travels in Brazil* (London, 1816), 443. The Kimbundu meaning of *malungo* can be found in Joseph C. Miller, *Kings and Kinsmen: Early Mbundu States in Angola* (Oxford, 1976), 55–56.

⁴² Walter Hawthorne, “‘Being now, as it were, one family’: Shipmate Bonding on the Slave Vessel *Emilia*, in Rio de Janeiro and throughout the Atlantic World,” in “ReCapricorning’ the Atlantic,” ed. Peter M. Beattie, special issue, *Luso-Brazilian Review* 45, no. 1 (2008): 53–77. General treatments of shipmate relations can be found in Patterson, *Sociology of Slavery*, 150; Sidney W. Mintz and Richard Price, *The Birth of African-American Culture: An Anthropological Perspective* (Boston, 1992), 43–44. Similar strict adherence to family idioms existed in Islamic West Africa, where “milk kinship” established a direct bond between a wet nurse, the children she breast-fed, and her own natal children. Milk ties were equivalent to blood ties, and marriages between milk siblings were considered incest. See Rebecca Popenoe, *Feeding Desire: Fatness, Beauty, and Sexuality among a Saharan People* (London, 2003), 93–97; Timothy Cleaveland, *Becoming Walāta: A History of Saharan Social Formation and Transformation* (Portsmouth, N.H., 2001).

Rio. Remarkably, the *Emilia* shipmates managed to stay in touch with one another during these years, and in 1836 sixty-eight survivors sailed back to Lagos together. Among these survivors were forty heads of household, who carried with them twenty-five wives, sixty-three Brazilian-born children, and one grandchild. Additionally, they carried fifty-four mostly “Mina” friends, as well as thirteen slaves. Whether the 234 passengers on the British ship *Porcupine* settled together once they arrived back in Lagos is a matter of conjecture. Nevertheless, the collection of ethnic strangers on board the ship in 1821, three-quarters of whom were male, had grown into a very large extended family by the time they returned to Lagos almost fifteen years later. This family included unrelated ethnic strangers who had all become “Mina” in Brazil, Brazilian-born children, and even a handful of slaves.⁴³

Insofar as they made the remarkable return trip to Africa, the *Emilia* survivors represent an exceptional case; however, their experiences point to the broader possibilities born of the most meager politics of belonging for slaves in the Atlantic world. Out of the “predicaments” of the slave ship and forced apprenticeship, these unrelated, mostly male Africans built on their slim connections, eventually reproducing themselves in a most remarkable and creative fashion. Nobody died a social death, and nobody conjured fictive kin. Such ideas simply reify the notion of biological families as the essential structures of belonging, obscuring the ways that African communities in the Atlantic world endured, adapted, and in some cases thrived, building one slender thread at a time. The aggregate of these multiple, varied, and overlapping threads *was* the African slave family, constantly moving forward, defying social death.

⁴³ Hawthorne, *Luso-Brazilian Review* 45: 53–77.