Lose Your Mother

A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route

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black country was born in slave pens and barracoons and holding cells. When the path home disappeared, when misfortune wore a white face, when dark skin guaranteed perpetual servitude, the prison house of race was born. And so too was the yearning for the black promised land and the ten million trees that would repel the enemy's advance and stand in for all of those gone and forgotten.

TWO

Markets and Martyrs

WHEN THE BUS DEPOSITED ME at the lorry park in Elmina, I refused to heed the voice telling me, "There is nothing here for you."

Except for the castle, no visible signs of slavery remained. All about me, the commerce of everyday life proceeded in its banal course. A jagged row of blue kiosks, home to lottery agents, seamstresses, chop bars, and makeshift stores, looped around the Benya River. The banks of the river swarmed with people: market women installed behind their stands traded Dutch print fabric, Lever Brothers soap, secondhand *obruni* clothes, iridescent lipsticks, and cut-rate nail polish. Others, less optimistic about the prospects of a sale, stretched out on straw mats, babies curled beside them, hidden behind black bricks of *kenkey* (fermented cornmeal wrapped in a plantain leaf). Shoppers haggled for better prices, hoping to return home with a few cedis in their pockets. Clerks, unsullied in their oxford shirts and ties, exited chop bars and strolled to their offices. Tourists drenched with perspiration scuttled en masse to the slave dungeon. Schoolchildren swept through the streets in their brown uniforms like clouds of dust. Street hawkers offered oranges, groundnuts, and toilet paper, piercing the air with their yelps. Adolescent girls, haloed by hair burnt the color of sienna from cheap perms, sold small bags of cold water

for fifty cedis. Children played guilefully, having abandoned their errands. Entrepreneurs, technocrats, and fashionable wives snaked through the crowd armored in the icy world of air-conditioned Pajeros and Land Rovers and untouched by the sweat and dust of the outside. Tro-tros crammed with passengers rushed through the streets, indifferent to the swarms of ambling pedestrians.

I recoiled from the whirl of life spinning about me and threatening to pull me under. It had been more than a year since I had first visited Elmina, and the town I pictured barely resembled the one spread out before me. I had remembered the town as a graveyard, so I was disturbed by the greetings shouted back and forth between market women and the peals of laughter, which interrupted conversations in languages I could not understand. The smell of grilled plantains and the astringent odor of sweat breaking through the white veneer of bath powder made the air pungent and sweet and heavy. Waves of heat rose from the bodies of lovely black and tawny complexioned girls who were vigorous and alive and who would bear even more life. It was to my eyes a terrible beauty. It didn't seem right that this prodigal and teeming display of life brushed against the walls of a slave warehouse and failed to notice it.

I would have preferred mourners with disheartened faces and bowed heads and the pallor of sadness coloring the town. Or at least something Gothic: bloodstained ruins, human skulls scattered like cobblestones in the street, the castle draped in black crepe. Instead I found myself immersed in the prosaic conduct of everyday life—the petty negotiations, squabbles, and contested transactions key to good bargaining. The orchestrated dance between buyer and seller replayed endlessly in the sea of makeshift stands.

FOR CENTURIES, Elmina had been famed for its thriving trade. In the Middle Ages, merchants crossed the Sahara loaded with textiles and salt, which they exchanged for gold on the coast. Malian cavalry units raided the farmlands of the forest and transported thousands of captives southward. With these slaves they purchased bags of gold dust and sacks filled with nuggets. By the fifteenth century, the news of the Akan gold fields had spread in the ports of Andalusia and Portugal. European sailors and merchants listened eagerly to rumors of naked people with fists bulging with gold and eager to trade it for old clothes and other trifles. Twice-told tales goaded adventurers, entrepreneurs, and seamen to traverse the Atlantic.

When the Portuguese arrived, they called the area "Mina de Ouro" or "El Mina" after the gold mines of which they had come in search. From the fifteenth century onward, three hundred miles of the Guinea coast were referred to as "the Mine" and centuries of common use made a proper name of Europe's exploits. The Portuguese landed hungry for gold and eager to find its source. They exchanged textiles, used garments, metal hardware, shells and beads, wine, and slaves for gold, which filled the treasury of Portugal's kings with the greatest supply of this precious metal that Europe had ever known. The gold obtained from the Akan financed the Portuguese slaving efforts in Benin and Kongo, the first major sources of slaves in the Atlantic trade.

When the Europeans arrived in Guinea, the land of the blacks, "there was no servile class simply waiting to be shipped." Raids and kidnapping inaugurated Europe's trafficking in African slaves. Over the span of a few decades, commercial agreements forged between Europe's merchant princes and Africa's royals commenced the transatlantic slave trade proper and established the protocols of theft, kidnapping, and war.

The Afro-European trade in slaves did not begin in Ghana as it did elsewhere with Africans selling slaves and Europeans buying them. It began with Europeans selling slaves and Africans buying them. The Portuguese started out as middlemen in the internal slave trade. They kidnapped and purchased slaves from Kongo and Benin and sold them on the Gold Coast. For each slave sold to African merchants and royals, the Portuguese received three to six ounces of gold. Slaves fetched better prices on the Gold Coast than they did in Lisbon. The gold transported from El Mina spurred the traffic in slaves and rewarded the Portuguese with the premier place in the Atlantic slave trade for its first two centuries.

By 1600, the Portuguese had enslaved and exported nearly half a million Africans. In the first century and a half of the trade, the majority of slaves were shipped to the Atlantic islands and to Europe. By 1700, two

million Africans had been captured, seized, and sold as slaves to European traders from all nations.

The Gold Coast entered the slave trade as an exporter of slaves at the end of the seventeenth century. In 1637 the Dutch commandeered Elmina Castle, and a few decades later the Atlantic slave trade shifted into high gear. The selling of slaves had become more lucrative than the gold trade because of the demand for labor in the plantation economy of the Americas. By the end of eighteenth century, there were sixty slave markets in Ghana. The merchants and royals of Elmina, like those of other major coastal towns, acted as intermediaries in the Atlantic slave trade. Elmina was a gateway between the African hinterland, the entrepôts of Western Europe, and the plantations of the New World.

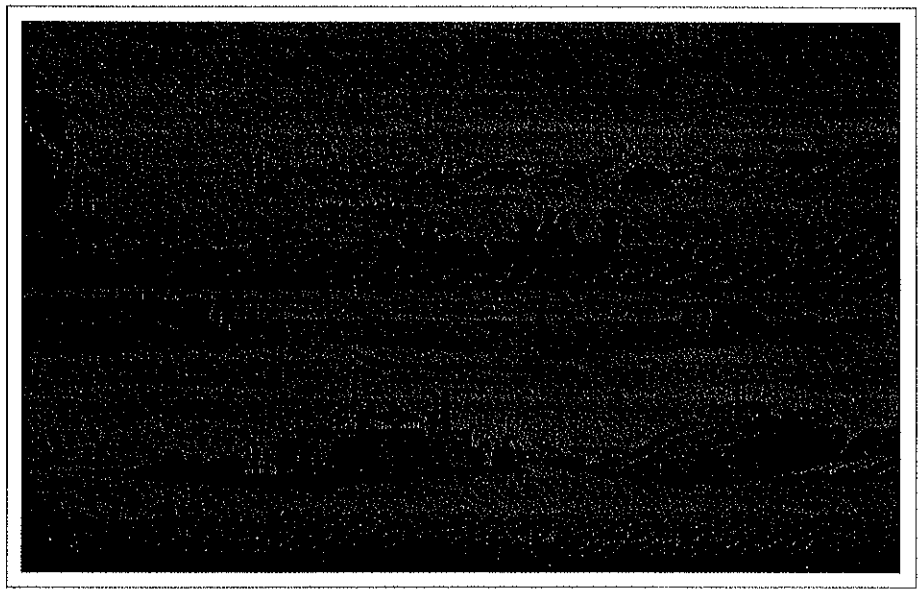
Elmina was a boomtown with inns, dancing houses, gambling dens, brothels, artisan guilds, merchant-broker firms, and wealthy sprawling compounds. Rich men, criminals, rogues, skilled laborers, prostitutes, and growing numbers of the poor resided in the coastal settlement. The population consisted of nearly twenty thousand residents. The town had been as large then as it was now. As the numbers of captives taken from the coast increased to the tens of thousands, the population of Elmina declined rapidly. A smallpox epidemic, the harsh governorship of the director general of the Dutch West India Company, and the instability, wars, and skirmishes endemic to the trade prompted many of the town's residents to relocate elsewhere and at a safe distance from the dangers of the coast. While the royals and merchants benefited from the traffic in slaves, the commoners experienced only its chaos and dangers. This state of emergency made traveling on public roadways unsafe and the threat of captivity unremitting. By the first decades of the eighteenth century, according to the Dutch governor of Elmina, the settlement had become a ghost town and the Gold Coast a slave coast. Over the course of the eighteenth century, the population of the town expanded and contracted in response to the vagaries of the slave trade.

The storerooms of Elmina, which had once held bolts of cloth, copper and porcelain basins, kegs of liquor, brass bracelets, and other trade goods, filled with captives. The majority of them were seized from the north and sold on the coast by African brokers to European traders. Ships

crowded the harbor in wait of human cargo. By the first decade of the eighteenth century, large wooden cargo vessels of two hundred tons anchored offshore were commonplace sights. The boats resembled wooden houses with wings because of their great flying sails. Canoes carried small lots of slaves from the shore to the ships. Hundreds of captives were packed between the decks. The stink of sweat and waste and disease thickened as the cargo was completed. The reek of slavers could be detected five miles off the coast.

The townspeople would have grown accustomed to the stench. Watching the canoes ferry the slaves offshore, some might have wondered why none who boarded those ships were ever seen again, and the curious might have speculated about what happened to them in the countries across the water. No doubt there were those who preferred not to think about them at all.

TAKING IN THE FESTIVAL of color and sound before me, what I found troubling was that the scars of slavery were no more apparent in



Elmina than in Boston or Rhode Island or Charleston (or Lisbon or Bristol or Nantes). Only the blessings of the slave trade remained, according to the town's residents, by which they meant their modernity. The Atlantic slave trade had introduced them to literacy and Christianity, and of this they were very proud. Images of Jesus abounded, as if salvation rather than secondhand goods were for sale. The Son of God wearing his crown of thorns illustrated kiosks, and "Blood of the Lamb" and "Jesus Saves" christened open-air beauty shops. Propagating and luminous, the many heads of Jesus encircled the town, overseeing exchange and pledging deliverance. A defiant driver emblazoned his van, "Try. Let God rest." A lone kiosk was adorned with hagiographic portraits of Tupac and Biggie Smalls; the hip-hop saints vied with the Son of God for devotees.

For the ever-increasing throngs of Pentecostals, Christ promised a future unencumbered by history; he was the antidote to recollection. Nothing could have been more at odds with my own desire than the aspiration of the faithful to enter the world anew, to be born again cleansed of the past. What we shared was the wish to resurrect the dead. I wanted to redeem the enslaved and they wanted to give the repentant a new life. The congregants were steadfast in their belief, whereas I wavered and doubted. My pessimism was stronger than my longing. In my heart I knew my losses were irreparable.

I scanned the town, hungry for a detail or trace of the hundreds of thousands of persons deported from the Gold Coast. I tried to imagine how many sacked villages and abandoned dwellings and destroyed families and orphaned children made up this number. But I was unable to translate a string of zeros into human figures or to hear the clamor of slaves assembled on the beach or to catch a whiff of their fear as they stood before the ocean. I tried to calculate how long it would have taken to embrace each one and whisper good-bye. If each farewell took as long as a minute, it would have added up to seven hundred and seventy-seven days, a little over two years, which didn't seem like enough time. Besides, there had been no one to see them off and say I love you and we will never forget you. These words were of no use now.

The old town surrounding the market had changed little in two centuries, except of course that there were no small lots of slaves for sale. The

stone houses on Liverpool Street and Buitenrust Lane, in which Dutch traders cohabited with their "local wives," were lined up along the road, robust and stationed like sentinels. Fort St. Jago, nestled on the hill, still overlooked the town. Elmina Castle sprawled on the rocky point of the peninsula. The Atlantic roared as it approached and recoiled beneath the underbelly of the castle. The intimacy of civilization and barbarism was everywhere apparent in the castle's dazzling vastness, architectural prowess, and unabashed monumentality.

The castle appeared inviolate, which made me want to deface it, to inflict damage commensurate with the wreckage of the slave trade. I would have preferred to find Elmina Castle in a heap of stones. I would have preferred a Jacobin bloodbath: the captors trounced, their throats slit, and their heads planted on pikes along the beach and a band of slaves celebrating their ruin; or the soldiers poisoned by the very same slave women who washed their clothes, prepared their meals, and fellated them; or the castle set ablaze by the mixed-race offspring of the Portuguese governor.

Now it was too late for retribution. The director general of the Dutch West India Company hadn't resided there since the nineteenth century. The Portuguese were ousted almost four hundred years ago. The Akan royals and merchants were dead. The captives had been scattered. Those I wanted to harm were not within my reach. Those I wanted to rescue were gone. The banks, shipping companies, insurers, nation-states, manufacturers, and ports still thrived, but they were too powerful for any blow or kick or complaint of mine to make them cry out in pain or wish they were dead.

FROM THE SMALL BRIDGE spanning the Benya River and connecting Elmina Castle to the town, I couldn't quite see the yard where the Portuguese corralled their captives and where the Dutch branded the human property of the Dutch West India Company. The perimeter wall of the castle blocked any view of the courtyard, but this didn't stop me from looking. Nor did the river stench of dried fish and human waste drive me from the overpass.

People strode past me wiping their drenched brows with madras

handkerchiefs, walking determinedly but with sparse and conservative steps designed to avoid any undue expenditure of energy in the oppressive midday heat. Most failed to notice me and simply pushed past, shuffling onward in an elusive quest for shade. A few heads turned, curious about why I was standing frozen in the middle of traffic and allowing myself to be trounced by the sun's harsh rays. I couldn't imagine that anyone wondered why I was here or what held my attention in the distance. Glances tempered with disdain, amusement, and pity: another American here to cry about what happened so long ago. The polite ones waited until they were a few feet away before angling their heads back; others, bolder, stared nakedly. A woman muttered to her friend in English for my benefit, "Americans come here to cry but they don't leave their money behind."

An octogenarian brushed by me as I loitered on the bridge. He walked a few steps ahead of me, then turned around and asked, "Is it negro or nigra?" The old man's words fell upon me like a hail of stones, stinging and accusatory, openly decrying what could be skirted in a gaze—the isolation of my implacable grief and the unbridgeable gulf between stranger and kin. I caught myself before Brooklyn rushed from my mouth in a string of profanity. I looked at the man's face; either he was sincere or he was crazy, so I settled for returning his gaze with a stony stare that I hoped translated into a polite "Don't fuck with me."

Chance encounters in the street made plain the difference between how I saw myself and how I was seen by others. In my estimation, I was the aggrieved; to others I was a privileged American and as such was required to perform regular acts of penance. My ignorance regularly collided with that of passers-by. To my hoary inquisitor I was an oddity. "Who and what are you?" was what the old man wanted to know. His curiosity was counterbalanced by detachment, and for this reason his assessment of me was more judicious than my assessment of him. My first thought was *old fool.*

I doubted he had ever wasted an afternoon daydreaming about my arrival, whereas I had dreamed of living in Ghana since I was in college. I had imagined a world less racist than the one from which I came. I had

longed for a country in which my inheritance would amount to more than dispossession and in which I would no longer feel like a problem. Three months in Ghana were enough to disabuse me of these notions. People might call me the white man, but no one treated me as one. In supermarkets and banks, I grew accustomed to clerks and tellers calling white people to the front of the line, to the rude way Syrian and Lebanese storeowners treated their black customers, to there being one set of rules for white people and another for blacks. Black life was even more expendable in Africa than in the United States; only the particulars varied.

I was already angry, so it was not surprising I heard the old man's question as fighting words. His clear doubts about my identity dashed whatever hopes I had of losing myself in a sea of black faces and experiencing the intimacy and anonymity of the crowd. When I calmed down, I realized that he was only trying to name me, to figure out exactly who I was, which he was smart enough to know was not something that he could take for granted. After all, I was a stranger. His words acknowledged what we didn't share—a common identity. I had been named in another place and under disparate circumstances. I was a mystery, so the only assumption he made about me was lodged in the form of a question.

In truth I knew no more about the old man than he knew about me. As a boy he might have attended the blackface minstrel and vaudeville shows staged in Cape Coast by traveling actors inspired by Al Jolson and heard the word "nigger" for the first time in a "plantation song"; or his father might have used that word or a similar one when he told him stories about the black troops from Barbados and Jamaica who had helped the British defeat the Asante empire (in a war that has been described as a case of chickens coming home to roost); or "nigger" might have been the only word he could discern in the X-rated gansta rap that played uncensored on Ghana radio, precisely because no one could make out the words of the explicit lyrics; or he might have picked up the word "nigger" from the reruns of *Roots*, which were regularly aired on Ghana TV; or a friend of his who had studied at Lincoln University might have told him this was what black people were called in the United States; or he might have overheard a group of boisterous Americans in town bandying the word back and

forth like a term of endearment, or complaining bitterly that they didn't expect to be treated like niggers here.

It dawned on me that the man's question explained why I was standing on a bridge and gawking at a castle. Negro or nigra—it tethered me to the past. I lost my footing in the world swirling about me: the shoppers plodding their way through the labyrinth of the market, the manifold faces of Jesus, the mottled sea of umbrellas shading market women. Everything regressed, and archaic forms assumed their place. I mistook a market woman selling dead *obruni* clothes for a sixteenth-century *feitor de roupa velha* (factor of used clothing). One era settled upon another. The apparitions of slaves and sovereigns hovered above the town.

THE PORTUGUESE BUILT Elmina Castle in 1482. Ten years before Columbus stumbled onto Hispañola and professed to discover it, the trade post and military fortification was erected. It was the first durable European edifice constructed in sub-Saharan Africa. Clearly the Portuguese had intended to put down stakes. Things didn't turn out as they expected—they never found the goldfields of which they had come in search—but they resided in Elmina for 150 years before the Dutch expelled them from the fort.

It would be tempting to say that in 1482 the handwriting was already on the wall. It would be easy to trace a straight line from then to now, as if the twelve million who arrived in the Americas, or the millions who were slaughtered in war; left for dead on the trail; killed by dysentery, cholera, and dehydration; or dumped in the Atlantic were sentenced to their fate when the ground was broken for the castle. In hindsight it would appear as if the demise of centuries could be foreseen in the exchange of gifts and promises between a Portuguese captain and an Akan viceroy.

In an apocalyptic account of history, the end is inevitable and destruction can be traced to the most innocuous and routine beginnings, like the exchange of salutations and vows of love on the Atlantic coast. The certitude of hindsight gives the demise an inevitable cast. But there were no black clouds casting a shadow on the Portuguese when they arrived, nor

were storms brewing on the horizon. The heavens did not weep. All the omens that might have betrayed something terrible about to happen failed to appear or went unnoticed. Who knew then the price to be paid for love? Who knew the cost of naming the world anew? Who could have imagined the worlds destroyed by the horse and the musket, or the death reaped by luxury goods, or that sugar, coffee, and tobacco would transform three continents? It was not possible to foresee the Portuguese royal insignia scored along the West African coast as far south as Angola or to anticipate the crucifix branded onto the breasts and arms of captives. Nor could anyone have known that the gold revenue earned from El Mina would enable the Portuguese to become the masters of the slave trade in its first two centuries. So is it fair to blame two men meeting one late afternoon on a beach in Guinea for more than forty thousand slaving voyages that transported nearly twelve million Africans to the Americas?

Deciding the matter of cause and effect is, by necessity, belated; causality is the benefit of retrospection. One apprehends the signs of an inevitable demise only in hindsight. It is like trying to figure out when things began to change in a failed relationship: are the signs visible only after things have ended badly, or were the signs always there and you just failed to heed them? Only in looking back can the course from now to then be traced; or can we say, "Ah, this is how it began"; or weigh contingency and necessity, chance and causality; or wonder if the seemingly inexorable character of events was little more than the collective force of circumstance, accident, and caprice.

The randomness and contingency of history nonetheless produces two classes, winners and losers. Like men at a gaming table, over the course of time the gap between these groups will become bigger and bigger. The exchange of vows of love and friendship between two men one afternoon in 1482, albeit a kind of fiction, was one of the many occasions in the early modern period that set in motion a new order. Chance events engendered a racial global order so intractable that it now appears fated.

The record of the encounter between Europe and Africa is a litany of stories about events that never happened. Myth is the threshold of

history. On the slave route, it is no different. It all begins with apocryphal tales of knights and princes, with searches for Utopia, quests for fabled kingdoms, visions of the Garden and premonitions of the Fall. The "land of the negroes," wrote a Portuguese chronicler, seemed "a gracious fruit garden ordained for the sole end of their delight." As late as the eighteenth century, Europeans still imagined Africa as paradise or Eden. Not even Marx was able to resist the language of the Garden when recounting the violence that inaugurated modernity. In his essay on primitive accumulation, he described the scene of the Fall, which in his account was triggered not by the plucking of the apple but by the commercial hunting of black skins.

Two men meeting on the Guinea coast was yet another myth of beginning. Imagination created the event by endowing one afternoon with undue significance. Gods and kings appointed the central players. Cartographers drew the imaginary places. The royal scribes of Portugal authored the written account, so it began with Diego de Azambuja at the helm of his ship.

ON JANUARY 19, 1482, ten caravels and two transports loaded with four hundred tons of timber, bricks, tiles, stone, and mortar, and with a small pinnace in tow, set anchor off the coast of Guinea. Diego de Azambuja, the captain of the expedition, espied the landscape and recorded its features: the stark headlands, red cliffs, small bays, and the river winding through the town and slicing it in half. Surveying the coast, he decided on

the best location for the trading fort: the narrow peninsula at the mouth of the river. It was an ideal spot, protected by the bay, the river, and the rocky shore, and offered suitable defense from enemies.

When Azambuja landed on the beach, six hundred men and a handful of women accompanied him. Among this company were the not yet legendary Bartolomeu Dias and Christopher Columbus, and the nameless—an army of soldiers, artisans, manual laborers, impoverished dreamers, exiled convicts, slaves, and prostitutes. The captain and his officers laid claim to the territory with the symbols of their sovereign and God, planting the royal insignia in the landscape and hoisting a banner with the royal escutcheons. With this elaborate ceremony, they took possession of *terra nullius*, no-man's-land; the following day they requested permission to do so.

Decked out for his meeting with the Akan statesman, Captain Azambuja cut a striking figure clothed in a jerkin of silk brocade with a golden collar of precious stones. The men posted at his side were also dressed in silk to impress "King" Caramansa with the riches of Portugal, although it was the riches of Guinea, the famed goldfields, that Azambuja and his men hoped to command. Through the mouthpiece of his black slave, who in all likelihood had been seized from Mina years earlier, Azambuja explained the purpose of his mission, which was to build a storehouse in Mina for the king of Portugal. *Fala de preto*, black man's speech or slave Portuguese, was the language of diplomacy; it bore little resemblance to the courtly language and embellished speech represented in the royal chronicles.

The captain began his remarks by declaring his love and that of his king: "The knowledge that the King, his Lord, had of Caramanca's [*sic*] desire to serve him well, as he had striven to show by the rapid lading of his ships when they arrived in that part; and because these things proceeded from love, the King wished to repay them with love, which would be more advantageous than his [Azambuja's], for it was love for the salvation of his soul, the most precious thing that man had, because it gave life, knowledge, and reason, which distinguished man from beast."

To which Caramansa replied: "Friends who met occasionally remained better friends than if they were neighbors." According to the royal chronicle, "He did not speak thus to disobey the commands of the

King of Portugal, but for the benefit of the peace and trade he desired to have with those who might come to that port . . . with peace between them, his people would be more willing to hear of God, whom he wished them to know."

Azambuja convinced Caramansa to change his mind, whether with threats or a flurry of sweet words is anyone's guess. The two men reached an accord. In exchange for love, salvation, and rent, Azambuja gained permission to build a storehouse for the lord of his country. At least that was the story told in the royal chronicle, a story that established Portugal's rights of occupation and deterred other European princes from commanding title to Mina. But the captain and the viceroy were just stand-ins for a greater set of social forces—emergent maritime technologies, merchant capital, competing trade interests, and divergent political stratagems.

Even the king's scribes disagreed as to exactly what happened on the beach that afternoon in 1482. It is impossible to know whether Caramansa granted the Portuguese permission to build the fort or if they proceeded to build without it, since beneath the silk brocade of Azambuja and his men were hidden firearms in case of need. If the bargain had been rejected and the gift of God spurned by "idolaters," then presumably the force of arms would have achieved what "love speech" failed to accomplish. Needless to say, love had many expressions. Once the settlement had been completed, a portion of Elmina was torched to protect trade and establish peace firmly. Love was the language of dominion, and its offspring were men and women in chains.

SOON AFTER THE fort was erected, the courtyard began to fill with slaves. Every fifty or so days, a ship loaded with slaves arrived at the fort. The slaves disembarked in small groups of one to two hundred. Between five hundred and one thousand slaves passed through the fort each year. By 1540, anywhere between ten thousand and twenty thousand slaves had been confined within its gates.

A handful worked inside the garrison, mostly girls and women assigned to the soldiers for their personal use; the rest (anywhere from one

hundred to one hundred fifty slaves) were chained in the courtyard in wait of buyers. Some hunkered against the walls of the fort, others skulked about as far as the ropes and chains would allow. The women sat curled and slump shouldered, aware of their nakedness because of the gaze and groping of soldiers. The children's eyes darted about nervously with the fear plain on their faces.

Caravels had ferried the captives from the Slave Rivers of Benin and the ports of Kongo to Elmina. In a single expedition to the Slave Rivers, the Portuguese sometimes returned to the fort with as many as four hundred captives. Most of those taken from Benin were girls and women between the ages of ten and twenty. The *oba* (king) of Benin had restricted the sale of men and boys and eventually prohibited it. Each woman seized by the Portuguese had her right arm seared with the cross.

Locked away in the courtyard were also the ones stolen from Kongo. Prisoners of war taken by marauding armies; artisans, farmers, healers, weavers, fishermen, and metalworkers captured in raids on their towns and villages; undesirables, criminals, and troublemakers sentenced to slavery; and students, the sons of Kongolese nobles, kidnapped in São

Tomé on their journey to seminary in Lisbon, all shared the same fate. Kongo was a Christian kingdom. The *mani-Congo* (king) Dom Affonso had converted to Catholicism in 1490. The spread of Christianity among royals and nobles and the commerce in slaves proceeded apace, since the royal converts tied their fortunes to the slave trade.

The ubiquitous crucifix had spearheaded the great numbers of captives headed to the slave ports.

IN HONOR OF the patron saint of Portugal and their newly discovered African El Dorado, the Portuguese bestowed the storehouse with the name O Castellano de São Jorge or São Jorge de Mina, Saint George of the Mine. Like the hallowed and melodious names of slave ships—*Christ the Redeemer, Amistad, Blessed, John Evangelist, The Lord Our Savior, Recovery, Trinity*—so too the saintly eponym of Elmina Castle, São Jorge, announced the sacred errand commenced on the Guinea coast.

A religious crusade against infidels—*ad propagandam fidem* (for the propagation of the faith)—had inaugurated the slave trade forty years earlier on the upper Guinea coast. In 1444, the Portuguese had seized two hundred thirty-five captives in a raid for chattel.

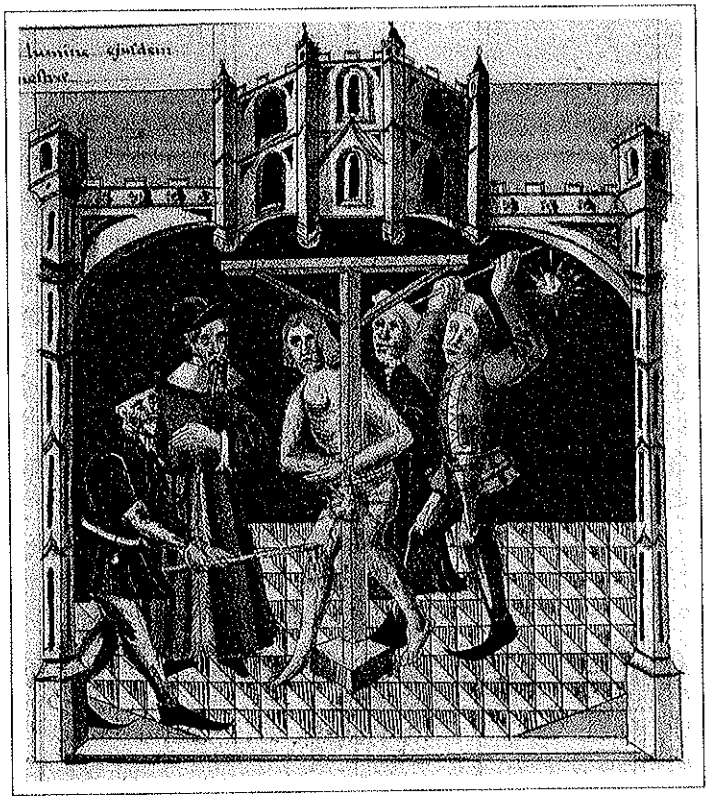
Upon catching sight of the village of "Moors," the soldiers attacked, crying out, "Saint George," their patron and protector, and, "Portugal." The royal chronicle depicted the rout as booty gained with the Lord's blessings: The Portuguese attacked the villagers, "killing them, and seizing as many as they could. There you would have seen mothers forsaking their children, husbands abandoning their wives, each person trying to escape as best they could. And some drowned themselves in the water; others tried to hide in their huts; others, hoping they would escape, hid their children among the sea grasses where later they were discovered. And in the end our Lord God, who rewards every good deed, decided that, for their labors undertaken in his service, they should gain a victory of their enemies that day."

Saint George had many faces: martyr, proselytizer, celibate, submitter, procreator, soldier, and heretic. The villagers of the Rio de Oro experienced the avenging knight and the carnage conducted in the name of *our Lord God.*

The Age of Discovery required a man of arms, and George fit the bill. The conquering knight personified civilization pitted against beastly antagonists and monstrous races. The dragon slayer mounted on his steed antedated the charge: "Exterminate all the brutes." It would be hard to imagine a better representative of the Portuguese errand or a saint more suitable to the task.

Saint George was also a martyr among martyrs. Most saints endured one particular torture to evidence their faith. But the hapless George suffered virtually all the tortures known. Saint Sebastian's body pierced with arrows and Saint Agatha's slashed breast and Saint Peter's crucifixion paled in comparison.

In Palestine, Saint George was imprisoned. He was tortured with iron spikes, scourged, and his skull was crushed. In Persia, he was poisoned by the king's magician. In Nubia, an eyewitness averred that he was tortured



for seven years and killed four times. First, he was roasted over a flaming pit, but he was resurrected. Then his body was divided in two by a double-bladed saw, but again he defeated death. Next he was dismembered, but angels assembled his body parts and pieced him back together, and last he was boiled in a cauldron of oil. In Greece, he was bound to a post and his flesh lacerated with rakes and burned with a flaming torch.

The trial of saints and the anguish of martyrs would be put to the test in the holding cells of the castle and beyond. Did Saint George also provide an emblem for the suffering of slaves or a vision of life resurrected? In the Gold Coast, his ears were cut off and then he was put to death. In São Tomé, he was drowned in the sea. In Dahomey, he was decapitated. In Kongo, he was asphyxiated in a barracoon. In Santo Domingo, boiling sugarcane was poured on his head and withered the flesh on his body. In Barbados, he was flogged with a seven-headed whip. In Cuba, he was filled with gunpowder and blown up with a match. In St. John, he was burned at the stake, sawed in half, and impaled. In Maryland, he was hanged and decapitated. In Georgia, he was covered with sugar and buried in an anthill. In Curaçao, his face was scorched and his head cut off and

placed on a pole for the amusement of vultures. In Surinam, they cut off his hands and crushed his head with a sledgehammer. In Trinidad, he was dismembered and his body parts were thrown into the Atlantic. In Brazil, his ears were chopped off and a dagger buried in his back, his putrefied head displayed in the central square. In Panama, a sword disemboweled him. In Lima, he was paraded through the streets, beaten with the lash, and his wounds were washed with urine and rum. In Jamaica, he was force-fed excrement and burned on a pyre. In Grenada, he was shoved into a kiln and roasted. In Paramaribo, they cut his Achilles tendon and amputated his right leg. In Virginia, he was skinned. In Texas, his feet were bound and he was dragged through the streets by a horse. In New York, he was beaten with cudgels and hanged from a lamppost. In North Carolina, they burned him with torches and threw his body into quicklime. In Mississippi, he was cut to pieces on a wheel of blades. In Washington, D.C., he was mounted like a beast of burden and driven to death. In Alabama, he was tied to a cross, scourged by flaming torches, and beaten with chains. In Louisiana, his belly was sliced open and his entrails spilled out.

In the face of such torments, some allowed themselves to dream that the defeated might rise and the world be transformed. Broken bones, severed appendages, and charred limbs didn't stop them from swearing oaths to destroy their enemies, or rejoicing that they were going home, or taunting their masters, "You can roast me today, but can't tomorrow."

THE SIGNS AND SYMBOLS of Saint George's world were firsthand knowledge to the slaves imprisoned in the fort. The crucifix and a cursory baptism had ushered them into slavery. In the horrible trials endured by saints, there is, at least, the gift of consolation provided by faith affirmed and the promise of being liberated from the stench of the grave. But no solace can be found in the death of the slave, no higher ground can be located, no perspective can be found from which death serves a greater good or becomes anything other than what it is. The slaves corralled in the yard of the castle experienced the death of slaves—they lived and breathed, but they were dead in the social world of men. They were "commodities in the hands of merchants and use-goods and patrimony in the hands of

buyers." Seized from home, sold in the market, and severed from kin, the slave was for all intents and purposes dead, no less so than had he been killed in combat. No less so than had she never belonged to the world.

The dead were reborn as new identities were foisted upon them. But what the slaves knew intimately was that "neither death nor rebirth was glorious"; rather, they were part and parcel of the life of the commodity. Slavery annulled lives, transforming men and women into dead matter, and then resuscitated them for servitude. Toiling away in the aftermath of death could only be a curse, not a miracle, and Saint George was the exterminating angel.

The lives awaiting them after Elmina were to be spent excavating gold in the mines of the forest, slogging away as head porters and hauling the luxury wares of merchants from the coast to the savanna; clearing land, tilling soil, and harvesting maize and millet; catering to sexual appetites and bearing children in the role of concubines and wives; joining the ranks of low-level functionaries who attended the royals: caretakers, umbrella holders, fan wavers, hammock carriers, gun and sword bearers, personal attendants, sweepers, cleaners, and executioners; suffering the knife and living as a eunuch; passing between the hands of slave traders in a string of interior markets from Elmina to Jenné; heading for a life in the cane fields of São Tomé after being rejected by all the buyers at Mina; laboring as domestic servants and silver miners in Mexico; and toiling away in Lisbon alongside thousands of other black slaves.

Gold dust; copper basins; brass bracelets, bars, and pots; colored textiles; linen and Indian cloth; barrel-shaped coral beads; strings of glass beads; red beads fashioned from bones; enamel beads; felt caps; and horsetails—all these determined the worth of slaves and provided the measure of their existence. The Portuguese referred to them as *braços*, arms or units. The Spanish called them *pieça de India*, which roughly translated into an "Indian piece." A *pieça* was a "mercantile unit of human flesh," which often comprised more than one human being. A male slave in the prime of his life was the standard against which other slaves were measured. Slaves possessing limited physical abilities or who were elderly constituted a fraction of a *pieça*. Two boys or a mother and her child might equal one *pieça*. The Dutch called them *leverbaar*, that is, a healthy or deliverable male or female slave.

The exchanges between persons and things, or property rights exercised in people, were common modes of acquiring wealth in Africa. Unique to the Atlantic slave trade was the immense scale of accumulating persons and the great violence and death required to produce wealth; and this predatory accumulation was often described by the enslaved in the language of "being eaten" or as sorcery. And to their eyes, the Europeans were sorcerers of the worst kind. Who could deny that white men gained their strength from black flesh? It was clear for everyone to see: they possessed the power to transform the bones of slaves into gunpowder, to convert blood into wine, and to dine on their organs.

I COULD NOT DETECT any blood or bones or gunpowder. I had tried, desperately, to wrench tragedy from the landscape and had failed. It had produced the opposite effect. I was blind to everything but the insignificance of the past and the unremarkable routine of the present. Little that I saw seemed noteworthy. Perhaps I had even been mistaken about the ghosts. In the sprawl of the market, I was the creature out of step with time. I was the sole revenant. Even the castle looked spanking new and resplendent in its fresh coat of white paint, as if it were untarnished by the filth and blood of its history.

The African-American residents of Elmina had complained that the refurbishment of the castle offended the dead and "whitewashed the black man's history" by camouflaging the foul character of the place. But the paint was like perfume on a rank body; it exaggerated the stink rather than diminished it. The castle was picturesque in a way that made you cringe, unless, of course, you forgot the cost of its grandeur. And it was easy to forget the slaves crushed under the weight of all that monumentality.

I began to fear that perhaps John was right. Maybe there was no point to being here. I had not wanted to believe this. I was stubborn, so I had convinced myself that I could unearth what others hadn't, but I was wrong. All I could see was a five-hundred-year-old trading fort, a monument to a past that no one wanted to remember.

Monuments, like graves, are intended to preserve the dead and to suspend the past. But everything I could see refuted this. I still thought of the castle as a tomb, but if it were, then where were the mourners? Didn't a gravesite require the company of the bereaved?

In Ghana, they took the work of mourning seriously. Professional mourners were employed at funerals. These expert grievers ensured that the deceased received the proper amount of crying and keening to guide them into the spirit world. The failure to properly mourn the dead was considered a transgression. If not sufficiently honored, the deceased would punish the living by wreaking havoc among them or sending trouble and misfortune their way. Glorifying the dead was imperative, because it determined the esteem with which the deceased would be received in the afterlife. Funerals were costly and extravagant, and people often complained the dead received better treatment than the living and too often at their expense. *Abusua dò funu*: The family loves the corpse.

But there were no corpses that I could tend in Elmina. There were no bodies draped in fine cloth, or rum poured down the throat of the dead, or dirges sung around the laid out figure. No one had sent a message announcing the death of slaves with a pot of palm wine, or fired shots to notify their neighbors, or tied their wrists with amulets and packets of gold dust for the journey to the next world. No one did these things for them, or fasted, or held a wake for two nights with drumming and dancing. No one placed burial gifts alongside the corpse or whispered messages that were to be delivered to dead relatives in the land of ghosts.

"Africa was a land of graves without bodies." It was a line I recalled from a poem by the Ghanaian poet Kwadwo Opoku-Agyeman. The poem was about the millions of people who disappeared from Africa during the slave trade and the empty homes, deserted villages, and open graves left behind in their wake. But it made no mention of mourners. Were there no mourners because the graves were empty?

IF YOU ASKED the peddlers selling drinks and peanuts outside the castle or the children playing at the foot of the hill about what happened inside

its walls, few could tell you. Most of Elmina's residents, with the recent exception of schoolchildren, had never set foot inside the castle, despite its status as a World Heritage Monument, or in any of the other forts scattered along Ghana's coast. I had colleagues at the university who had grown up in this area, literally in the shadows of the castle, who had never entered it or even inquired about its purpose. No one I spoke with could recall asking a parent about the edifices that lorded over the coast, or shared with me an adolescent adventure about scaling the walls of the castle, sneaking across the bridge, peering into the moat, or dashing through the courtyard. No one volunteered any stories about the slaves sold across the water.

They were baffled that what had happened more than a century ago could still hurt me, although the same individuals recited proudly their family genealogies back ten and eleven generations. I couldn't do the same. I could go back only three or four generations. If Ghanaians wondered why so many from the Americas crossed the water to cry about slave ancestors, it was not because Ghanaians honored their ancestors any less but because of the shame associated with slave origins. To revere your forbears was one thing; to speak openly of slave descent was a different matter altogether. Silence was the only reasonable position to be assumed by a descendant of slaves. Yet each year ten thousand African-American tourists traveled to Ghana and none of them failed to visit the slave dungeons. Ghanaians wondered what kind of people boasted of slave ancestry. Or made such a big show of emotions.

With a shrug of resignation, a taxi driver or clerk or seamstress would tell me that Ghanaians had too many pressing concerns in everyday life to ruminate about the past. The average daily wage was less than a dollar a day and per capita income was two hundred seventy dollars a year. Each year the cedi plunged in value. The unemployment rate was 30 percent. Most laborers didn't make enough in a day to buy a loaf of bread on their way home. "We don't have time to ponder and worry about slavery," they explained with exasperation to another rich American. And all Americans were rich in their eyes.

When I thought of slavery, the images that came most readily to mind

were of scorched villages, the corpses abandoned en route to the coast, the filthy hold of slave ships, the bones heaped on the floor of the Atlantic, the breasts and genitalia bared on the auction block, the steel bit in a woman's mouth, the iron mask clamped on a man's face, the white master with a whip in his hand, and ripped apart black flesh. What I discovered was that when Ghanaians, at least those of the elite classes in the south, thought about slavery, they envisioned a "distant cousin from the north" washing clothes and preparing meals in a well-appointed home, the pretty slave wife of their grandfather, or the foreigners in their village. They exulted in the wealth of slave-trading ancestors, if only because it was less humiliating to have been a merchant than to have been a slave. "People pride themselves that their great-grandfathers rather kept slaves, and were not among the numerous slaves that abounded," as one man explained. "To be called a slave is an insignia of shame." The dishonor of the slave had persisted, as had the dignity and self-respect of the affluent and the powerful. The regret was that the wealth had not lasted. In Elmina, they lamented, "In those days we were rich, but now we're poor. The Dutch boat has left Elmina."

Few dared to mention the slaves chained in holding cells or taken off the coast, and if they did, they explained that African traders didn't know how badly the whites treated the slaves across the water. Others called the Atlantic slave trade the European trade, insisting that the West alone was to blame. It sanitized the whole ugly business and permitted them to believe that they were without scars.

Kofi, an assistant curator at the castle's museum, confided that it was difficult for him to think of slavery as a terrible fate. "There were slaves in my family," he told me. "My grandfather owned slaves. I never thought much of it. They were treated no differently than anyone else." I doubted that Kofi believed this, but he supposed that I was gullible enough to accept it as the truth. The terror of slavery, he tried to convince me, had been confined to the Americas.

Terror was what I took for granted. My own understanding of slavery and Kofi's could not have been more contrary. Which wasn't surprising since he was the son of a slave owner and I was the daughter of slaves. In

Ghana, kinship was the idiom of slavery, and in the United States, race was. The language of kinship absorbed the slave and concealed her identity within the family fold (at least that was the official line), whereas the language of race set the slave apart from man and citizen and sentenced her to an interminable servitude. But, as I found out, the line between masters and slaves was no less indelible, even when it wasn't a color line.

Talking with Kofi, I wondered if the problem was mine. I had presumed that the black world shared a thread of connection or a common chord of memory based upon this, our tragic past. In this assumption, I was proved wrong. I didn't experience what Ralph Ellison described as the "identity of passions," which connected the black world through our common suffering and history of struggle. I soon found out that most people didn't have a clue as to the scope of the transatlantic slave trade and didn't imagine that it had any lingering effects, which made them no different from the average American. And if they knew otherwise, they were disinclined to discuss it.

Months later when I met Kwadwo, I asked him, "Where are the mourners?" The poet proceeded to explain, "We, as Africans, are ashamed for our participation in the slave trade, and for this reason are unwilling to talk about the very issue that brings most of you here. And on both sides there is ignorance and a failure to understand one another's lives." It was his way of telling me there weren't any mourners.

I DON'T WANT to paint too simple a picture of things. Slavery was a bitter pill for black folks everywhere. My brother and I argued vigorously about its lasting impact. Were our lives still disfigured by slavery, or were we just haunted by stories of the past that no longer served us? Peter accused me of exaggerating the link between the past and the present and downplaying black people's responsibility in doing badly. My brother was one of those "working two jobs" black men, trying to do better than make ends meet, pay the mortgage, juggle the debts, and have just enough to take care of his family. But he was barely keeping his head above water and he could not forgive himself for this, so he was hard on himself and

even harder on black folks. He made no excuses for his failures, so he made none for those of the race.

Whenever Peter and I quarreled, he tried to win the argument simply by speaking louder, which wasn't easy since I could get pretty thunderous myself. During the pitch of battle, my father would weigh in with a measured judgment uttered at an even louder volume. A house full of Hartmans yelling at the top of our lungs about slavery in my parents' modest lower-middle-class dwelling populated by more televisions than persons and outfitted with Ethan Allen furniture set off by muddy abstract paintings, which had been purchased in shopping malls, and cluttered with treadmills and exercise bikes and obsolete encyclopedias and dusty copies of the *Negro Almanac* and *The Miseducation of the Negro*, and dog-eared issues of *Jet*, *Ebony*, *Time*, and *Newsweek* would have made most Ghanaians laugh at the absurdity of it all or suck their teeth in resentment. The fury and the abundance, no doubt, would have made their heads spin.

Whenever we had our "what's wrong with the race" conversation, my brother would punctuate his argument with, "Slavery was a long time ago." I would answer back about the uneven playing field, the disparity between white and black wealth, racial profiling, the war being waged against the poor, and the prison system. He didn't deny these facts; to the contrary, our description of the present wasn't all that different. We simply drew dissimilar conclusions about who was to blame and where to go from here.

"Black people have always been in crisis," he remarked. "We've never been wanted in America, at least not since the Emancipation Proclamation. It's still no excuse for not doing better." No matter how vehemently he and I disagreed, what we both accepted was that the experience of slavery had made *us* an *us*, that is, it had created the conditions under which we had fashioned an identity. Dispossession was our history. That we could agree on.

The solidarity I felt with other black people depended largely on this history, whereas in Ghana their identity as Ghanaians and as Africans depended on silencing a past in which elites sold commoners and southerners viewed northerners as disposable people and alienable goods. The

lines of division between kin and stranger, neighbor and alien, became hard and fast during the era of the Atlantic slave trade. It decided who lived and died, who was sold and who was protected. In Ghana, slavery wasn't a rallying cry against the crimes of the West or the evils of white men; to the contrary, it shattered any illusions of a unanimity of sentiment in the black world and exposed the fragility and precariousness of the grand collective *we* that had yet to be actualized.