

Book Reviews

The Last Slave Ships: New York and the End of the Middle Passage. By John Harris. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020. 312 pp. Illustrations, maps. Paperback, \$22.00. ISBN: 978-0-300-26149-3.

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Reviewed by Marcelo Rosanova Ferraro

In 1927, an elderly African man named Oluale Kossola, by then known as Cudjoe Kazoola Lewis, narrated his tragic life story in a series of interviews. He still remembered the night when Dahomeans invaded his town in West Africa and decimated his people. Kossola survived the attack but was captured and taken to the coast. At the port of Ouidah, he joined more than one hundred other captives purchased by an American sea captain and forced by his crew to board the ship *Clothilda*. Then they sailed across the Atlantic and arrived in Alabama. The year was 1860, and this was the last slave ship to disembark in the United States. Still, American slavers continued to cross the ocean raising their national flag to avoid the intervention of the British Royal Navy. They sealed the fate of tens of thousands of West Africans who were taken to the sugar plantations of western Cuba. These were the final years of the illegal transatlantic slave trade, one of the riskiest and most profitable businesses in the mid-nineteenth century. Behind the scenes, bold and unscrupulous investors were based in one of the most important commercial and financial centers in the world: New York City.

The Last Slave Ships, John Harris's new history of capitalism and slavery, is focused on the crucial role of the United States in the illegal slave trade in the Americas during the 1850s and 1860s. In the aftermath of the abolition of traffic in Brazil, slave traders from across the Atlantic world (most of them from Brazil, Portugal, and Portuguese colonies in Africa) established themselves in the United States. They incorporated American ports like New York and New Orleans into their operations and reorganized the trade between Ouidah and Cabinda, in Africa, and Havana and Matanzas in Cuba. New York became the heart of this circuit of capital. In the early decade of 1850, slave traders turned Manhattan into a center of operations from which they gained access to credit and American ships to expand their businesses. An estimated 474 slavers passed around this circuit between 1853 and 1867 and victimized almost

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200,000 African men, women, and children. This was, according to Harris, the slave trade's final triangle.

One of the greatest contributions of *The Last Slave Ships* is the transnational history of capital, politics, and human trafficking in the mid-nineteenth-century Atlantic world. Harris ably connects the economic networks of the illegal slave trade to national politics in Britain, Spain/Cuba, the United States, and West African societies. Harris moves beyond traditional historiographies of the transatlantic slave trade by incorporating the contributions of scholars of African history. In doing so, he illuminates the intersection between political struggle in West Africa and the supply of enslaved people on the Atlantic coast. Harris integrates African societies into this transnational history of the illegal slave trade, and yet he convincingly argues that Britain and the United States were the main players in this global arena.

Harris offers a compelling argument about the role of the United States in the rise and fall of the final triangle. In the first chapter of his book, the author provides the reader with a history of the transatlantic slave trade and its transition to illegality in the early nineteenth century. Across the following chapters, he describes the economic activities of slave traders and the experience of captive Africans aboard illegal American slave ships. Social historians of slavery might expect more information about the experience of these victims, which would enrich the book indeed. However, it is very likely that sources about their lives before and after the trade are scarce.

The final chapters focus on the politics of abolition within imperial networks of Britain and national politics in the United States. Harris argues that changes in American politics were the key factor in definitively ending the illegal slave trade. After all, the rise of the Republican Party and the election of Abraham Lincoln dismantled the political hegemony and corruption networks that benefited slave traders based in North America. By focusing on political parties and institutions, however, Harris may have underestimated the contributions of the abolitionist movement to the ideological turn that preceded the Civil War and contributed to delegitimizing slavery and the illegal slave trade in the United States.

The Last Slave Ships makes important interventions in the academic field. Traditional histories of the transatlantic slave trade focused on either international politics or the role of these businesses in the making of modern economies in Europe and the Americas. More recently, many historians built large databases and developed quantitative research about slave voyages and the trade, while others illuminated the experience of enslaved subjects aboard slave ships. For this book, Harris combined various theoretical perspectives and methodologies

in his research, under the influence of new historians of capitalism and slavery. Although Harris reveals the personal experiences of a few enslaved Africans, the main contribution of his book is a narrative history of the political economy of the mid-nineteenth-century illegal slave trade.

The research background of *The Last Slave Ships* deserves a special note. The very nature of underground commercial activities poses methodological challenges to historians of the illegal slave trade. Yet Harris investigated consular records, legal sources, and private documents of slave traders and ably reconstructed the networks of the final triangle. Moreover, he provides readers with a clear and engaging narrative, which is accessible to wider audiences. The book is a groundbreaking contribution to the history of capitalism, international politics, and slavery, and it will no doubt inspire further research on the illegal slave trade in the nineteenth-century Atlantic world.

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The Colonial Life of Pharmaceuticals: Medicines and Modernity in Vietnam. *By Laurence Monnais*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019. 290 pp. Illustrations. Paperback, \$32.99. ISBN: 978-1-108-46653-0.

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Reviewed by Martha Lincoln

The practice of medicine in colonial settings is an inherently generative topic for historians. Medicine is viscerally material, directly affecting the physical body; at the same time, it is also highly culturally and ideologically significant, conveying the values, worldviews, symbols, and convictions of the individuals and groups who use it. Colonial encounters have historically brought dissimilar medical traditions into direct contact and hence, often, into conflict; in some instances, colonized places were also used by European researchers as laboratories for scientific and medical experimentation. The social, political, and economic tensions of colonial life can thus be read, writ small, in the dynamics of colonial medical