

REVIEW ESSAY

Recaptive Africans and U.S. Émigrés: Creating Communities and Journeying to Africa in the Nineteenth Century Atlantic World

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Sharla M. Fett. 2017. *Recaptured Africans: Surviving Slave Ships, Detention, and Dislocation in the Final Years of the Slave Trade*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press. 312 pp.

Lisa A. Lindsay. 2017. *Atlantic Bonds: A Nineteenth Century Odyssey from America to Africa*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press. 328 pp.

At first glance, the similarities between *Recaptured Africans* and *Atlantic Bonds* seem superficial. Sharla M. Fett focuses on 1,800 recaptive Africans, who were first enslaved in Africa, captured by U.S. naval vessels during voyages to Cuba, transported to Charleston and Key West and housed in recaptive camps, and later sent to Liberia. Lisa A. Lindsay, on the other hand, analyzes James Churchwell Vaughan, a free person of color whose father advised him to leave South Carolina and seek his fortune in Africa. However, the stories of Vaughan and the captives have many striking similarities. In both cases, Africa loomed large. But, as both historians illustrate, it is not entirely correct to place the U.S. and Africa into a simple unfree/free dichotomy. Thus, both books suggest more nuanced perspectives about Liberia and colonization. Furthermore, Fett and Lindsay discuss the problem of sources and illustrate how historians can successfully excavate hidden or obscured histories. Finally, both affirm the importance of using an Atlantic World lens when talking about slavery and freedom in the nineteenth century.

Fett examines the contraband slave trade and focuses specifically on the “odyssey of roughly 1,800 African children, men, and women seized by the U.S. Navy from illegal slave ships headed for Cuban markets and brought temporarily into the United States” (p. 4). She discusses captives from four ships: the *Echo*, *Wildfire*, *William*, and *Bogota* and analyzes the social experiences of this overlooked group of people. While historians have spent a great deal of time discussing U.S. slave trade suppression, they have paid little attention to how U.S. authorities treated African captives. This is likely a function of the relatively small size of this group. Nevertheless, Fett argues that scholars should pay more attention to captives because

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<http://www.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v17/v17i4a6.pdf>

their collective efforts to escape apprenticeship and form new families “recreated fragile social groupings that defied the social annihilation imposed by slave traders and would-be rescuers” (p. 10).

Any study of recaptives would be incomplete without a discussion of congressional legislation about the international slave trade. Fett contends that U.S. policies evolved in a significant way during the antebellum era. Initially, U.S. law “treated recaptive status as virtually indistinguishable from that of chattel slavery” (p. 23). Many Jeffersonians, who did not approve of making concessions to federal power and fretted about increases in the free black population, wrote provisions into the 1807 law prohibiting the international slave trade that left the disposition of recaptives to state and territorial legislatures. Thus, in the period between 1807 and 1819, recaptives were often auctioned off to planters. However, a shift in federal policy occurred in 1819. New legislation prohibited the selling of recaptives by states, gave the federal government power over recaptive disposition, and linked recaptives with the American Colonization Society. This created “an alternative to reenslavement,” although, it should be stated, “it functioned more as a deportation order than a repatriation policy” (p. 29).

Fett is particularly concerned with how people in the U.S., both black and white, used recaptives for different ends. For instance, naval officers and slavers authored texts that illustrated how recaptive encampments “could be represented as venues of white imperial benevolence and ethnological exhibit” (p. 33). These accounts, she contends, formed a slave trade ethnography, an influential literary genre that shaped how people understood recaptives. When naval escorts brought the *Echo* to Charleston white southerners generally reacted with curiosity and opportunism. Slavers first sought, unsuccessfully, to gain possession of the recaptives. Proslavery apologists used recaptives to “refute the colonizationist vision of African ‘civilization, commerce, and Christianity’” (p. 59). Some white sightseers even chartered vessels to take them on sightseeing tours of the recaptive camp at Fort Sumter. Illustrated weeklies, in discussions of recaptive camps in Charleston and Key West, conveyed two messages about recaptives: they were “beneficiaries of U.S. benevolence” and a “rare opportunity for ethnographic observation” (p. 89). White people were not the only group interested in recaptives. Free black activists “linked the illegal slave trade and the Liberian removal of recaptives to broader vision of emancipation and black progress” (p. 100). Protests by James W. C. Pennington against the illegal slave trade “shaped African American formulations of a concept of human rights in a climate of hardening inequality and racial determinism” (p. 102).

Fett does an excellent job illustrating how recaptives became, in the eyes of many contemporaries, objects that could be exploited for a specific purpose. But that is not the entirety of the story. Through fine-grained analysis, she reconstructs the social worlds of recaptives and explores the contours of life in recaptive camps in Charleston and Key West, on the ships to Africa, and in Liberia. In “the midst of social isolation, despair, and uncertainty,” she asserts, “enslaved captives began to build the communal networks through which they might comprehend their ordeal” (p. 47). On the *Echo*, before the ship arrived in Charleston, some slaves plotted insurrection, but the uprising proved unsuccessful. Recaptives possessed language skills and knowledge of legal processes and could sometimes advocate on their own behalf. Those housed on Key West, in a camp characterized by “an ambiguous blend of protection and incarceration” (p. 81) began to reassert control over their lives. Many formed

hierarchies that gave adult men and women particular authority, likely because of the presence of so many young recaptives. Recaptives moved freely throughout the camp and often engaged in musical expression and dancing. Furthermore, recaptives practiced forms of mourning that mirrored West Central African collective expressions.

After spending a period of time in Key West and Charleston, recaptives made another journey across the Atlantic to Liberia. "Slave ship survivors in transit" Fett observes, "responded to the social crisis of death and loss by building shipmate communities through the day-to-day art of innovation amidst scarcity" (p. 125). Again, she offers a sensitive and nuanced description of captive social worlds and demonstrates how they were agents, rather than passive victims. On the ships, they improvised social worlds, developed their own rituals of mourning, sought out healers among their fellow shipmates, and "reasserted corporate belonging through artistic creation" (p. 151). Recaptives who survived and landed in Liberia "continued to confront death, dislocation, and dependency" (p. 157). Almost all were apprenticed to black American emigrant households or missionary stations. Many of them protested new forms of servitude and abuse. As in the other chapters, Fett successfully illuminates life for recaptives in Liberia. She discusses how some of them protested abuse, others attempted to escape to their previous homes, others sought to maintain shipmate networks, and still others found status within church circles.

Where Fett analyzes roughly 1,800 recaptives, Lindsay focuses on one family. According to family history, Scipio Vaughan, an African, was captured in Africa and shipped to the United States, where he married a Cherokee woman. On his deathbed, he encouraged his children to return to Africa. His son, James Churchwell Vaughan followed his advice and "found his father's people, reestablishing ties broken by the Atlantic slave trade" (p. 3). However, as Lindsay began to conduct research, some of the elements of this story unraveled. Scipio Vaughan, for instance, was born in the United States. James Churchwell Vaughan did travel to Africa, but he did not find his father's people. However, the history Lindsay unearths proves as fascinating as the family legends and reveals "new ways of viewing connections between Africa and America" (p. 5).

Because this is the story of a family, Lindsay begins by exploring Scipio Vaughan's life in South Carolina. Although he spent most of his life as a slave, he was, at the time of his death, a free man who owned land and real estate. Furthermore, because his Cherokee wife was free, Vaughan's children were also free. Lindsay concludes that at the end of his life Scipio not only gave his children a precious head start "in the dangerous world of slavery and white supremacy" (p. 42), but also sound advice: travel to Africa. James Churchwell Vaughan, alone among his siblings, chose to follow his father's advice. He left the U.S. for Liberia in 1852, a logical decision because free people of color occupied a liminal space in the United States. In addition, predatory white officials in South Carolina utilized legal chicanery to take advantage of his family. Like the recaptives Fett discusses, James Churchwell Vaughan formed strong ties with his fellow shipmates and likely named several of his children after fellow passengers.

Liberia seemed initially to present a counterpoint to the United States. As Lindsay notes, if Vaughan "left the United States frustrated that black people there could never truly be free, he had firm grounds for optimism when he stepped foot on African soil" (p. 77). However, he

chose to leave Liberia less than three years after he arrived. Lindsay suggests that Vaughan became alienated by the fact that Liberia was a settler society that was, in its way, as exploitative as South Carolina. While Liberians waged war against slavery and the slave trade, Vaughan, and others, had to confront the presence of unfree labor, specifically apprenticeship. Furthermore, Liberia seemed to be developing a plantocracy. Although Vaughan prospered, thanks to his carpentry skills, he, like the recaptives, found life in Liberia was no bed of roses.

In 1855, Vaughan accompanied missionaries from the Southern Baptist Convention to Abeokuta. His association with the missionaries proved transformative. Vaughan received an education in Yoruba language and culture and became a Baptist. Lindsay embeds Vaughan's life in the context of war between indigenous African kingdoms. Vaughan became collateral damage during a war, when his house was looted and most of his property stolen. Despite the turmoil, however, Vaughan established a new homestead, avoided "any identification with Yoruba political communities" (p. 138), married, and formed a family. Due to violence against Christians in Abeokuta, Vaughan and many other people fled to Lagos. In Lagos, he worked as a carpenter, used some of his profits to invest in real estate, opened a hardware business, and established the foundations of economic success. Indeed, within a few years, despite the turbulent nature of his life before arriving in Lagos, Vaughan's attained an economic footing secure enough to allow him to send his relatives in the U.S. a significant amount of gold coins.

Lindsay juxtaposes Vaughan's success in Lagos with the struggles of his family in South Carolina. Where many of his relatives did not fare well in postbellum South Carolina, Vaughan "was able not only to enjoy a comfortable standard of living, but also to pass along wealth and opportunity to the generations who followed him" (p. 171). Although Vaughan faced setbacks, such as a fire that destroyed his home and the death of several of his children, he nevertheless laid the foundations for a Vaughan dynasty in Africa. The crucial difference between Lagos and South Carolina was the fact that Lagos colonial officials "*wanted* Africans to succeed, not only to vindicate their rule but also to provide tax revenue for the official treasure" (p. 179). On the other hand, "despite its economic illogic, white elites in the American South instead wanted African Americans to fail, in order to validate and perpetuate their subordination" (p. 179).

The final years of Vaughan's life were rather quiet, but he nevertheless continued to exert an important impact on Lagos. He and several other members of the Lagos Baptist Church grew disgusted with missionary racism. They decided to secede and form their own church. The resulting Native Baptist Church, later the Ebenezer Baptist Church, "is considered a watershed in the history of Nigerian nationalism" (p. 205). Vaughan died on September 13, 1893 at age 65. As Lindsay comments, he "would be remembered with affection and pride, and not only in Nigeria. In the United States too, younger generations of his family would keep his name alive for more than a century—a prospect he probably never anticipated" (p. 214). Indeed, Lindsay illustrates the connections between Vaughan's descendants in Africa and his relatives in the United States and how the two groups of people maintained links with each other, sometimes by writing and sometimes by visiting. She concludes by remarking "though it might seem surprising to Americans today, Vaughan's brightest future turned out to be in Africa" (p. 232).

Both Lindsay and Fett confront the problem of sources. As Fett notes, there are plenty of sources discussing recaptives: writings of naval officers, reports from U.S. marshals and government agents, legal proceedings, and the records of the American Colonization Society.

However, “the archive of evidence on U.S. slave trade suppression is marked by a virtual erasure of first-person testimony from these specific recaptive adults and youth” (p. 7). This absence, in turn, threatens to silence key aspects of the recaptive social experience. Fett, therefore, should be commended for the subtle ways she uses fragmentary or partial evidence to recover recaptive voices. In addition, Lindsay states that James Churchwell Vaughan “did not lead the kind of life best suited for conventional biographies” (p. 5). Case in point, she only found one signed letter from him. Lindsay, like Fett, casts a wide net for sources. Both books could be successfully utilized in a historical methods class to talk about how historians should analyze people who seemingly left few traces on the historical record.

In addition, both authors caution against creating a simplistic free/unfree dichotomy between Africa and the U.S. Although Lindsay observes that Vaughan found a brighter future in Africa than in the United States, she also contends that his journey “was more complicated than leaving a land of slavery for one of freedom” (p. 75). Liberia looms large in both accounts. In Lindsay’s telling, Vaughan did well in Liberia because his carpentry skills were in high demand. Many of his fellow shipmates, however, did not fare so well and “death loomed over Liberian settlers” (p. 83). In addition, the captives Fett analyzes became apprentices in Liberia. Although captives were spared the horrors of Cuban sugar plantations, “the alternative of Liberian apprenticeship incorporated slave trade refugees into a Liberian colonial order birthed by U.S. second slavery politics” (p. 184). The presence of apprenticeship likely alienated Vaughan. For that matter, as Lindsay comments, outsiders “continued to point out the similarities between Liberia’s labor system and American slavery” (p. 99). Both authors do readers a service by illustrating messier and more complex histories that analyze degrees of freedom in the Atlantic world. Fett’s captives inhabited a liminal world and their status hovered somewhere between emancipation and enslavement. Both books reveal the robustness of slavery and the fragility of freedom in the nineteenth century Atlantic world.

Fett and Lindsay offer detailed and nuanced analysis of slavery and freedom in the nineteenth century Atlantic world. Both books successfully illuminate the social worlds of people and families often overlooked by historians and thus do an excellent job excavating hidden histories. Both also will work quite well in graduate seminars and will appeal to scholars interested in U.S. history, African history, transnationalism, race, and slavery and emancipation.

