

CHAPTER THREE

The African and European Slave Trades

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The dynamic set of processes by which millions of Africans were captured, sold, and transported to Western Hemisphere plantation societies was one of the most tragic chapters in human history. The opening-up of Atlantic World commerce, spearheaded by the Portuguese in the early fifteenth century, spawned a set of sizable migrations – both voluntary and forced – from the Old World to the Americas. Most of this movement was centered in West and West-central Africa, which accounted for roughly 75 percent of all transoceanic migration before the American Revolution. Ironically, less is known about the details of this massive movement of people than the much smaller migration of Europeans. Even so, this trade in black flesh and the rise of racialized slavery throughout the Americas has been keenly studied by historians for the past few decades (Eltis 2000; Mann 2001).

An impressive array of research centers, academic journals, professional organizations and university press book series have developed in the field of Atlantic World slavery, greatly enhancing scholarly understandings of this subject. Endeavors such as the Nigerian Hinterland Project based at York University – which focuses on enslaved African exports from the Bights of Biafra and Benin – have sought to trace the various “Diasporas” which originated in the Niger River Delta as a result of the transoceanic and trans-Saharan slave trades. Project organizers Paul Lovejoy, Robin Law, David Trotman, and Elisée Soumonni hope to trace a variety of slave routes, which included such destinations as North Africa, Arabia, and the Americas, greatly expanding prior understandings of the scale and extent of the African Diaspora. In addition, two projects sponsored by UNESCO – the Slave Trade Archives Project and the Slave Route Project – will help bring to light additional sources and further details regarding the African role in the creation of the Atlantic World (Mann 2001; Heywood 2002).

In recent years, the most impressive work on the slave trade has been performed by scholars at the W. E. B. Du Bois Institute for Afro-American Research at Harvard University. Named after a true pioneer in the field, this institute sponsored a project that sought to provide more reliable estimates on the volume and nature of the Atlantic slave trade. Co-edited by David Eltis, Stephen Behrendt, David Richardson, and Herbert Klein, this meticulous effort has produced the most thorough and