Florence Hall’s ‘Memoirs’: Finding African Women In The Transatlantic Slave Trade

Abstract

This essay presents the previously unpublished ‘Memoirs’ of Florence Hall, an African-born woman enslaved in early nineteenth-century Jamaica. The brief text describes Hall’s childhood in Igboland (now southeastern Nigeria), her enslavement and journey to the Atlantic coast, her experience of the middle passage, and her arrival in Jamaica. There, the narrative abruptly cuts off. Evidently, the pages containing the rest of her story were lost. The text was likely written in the early nineteenth century, mediated by planter Robert Johnston, in whose papers the surviving text was found. As one of the only slave trade narratives from an African woman anywhere in the Americas, Hall’s ‘Memoirs’ offer a rare opportunity to consider the transatlantic slave trade at its peak from the viewpoint of a female captive.

Keywords: Florence Hall; transatlantic slave trade; Jamaica; Bight of Biafra; Igbo; slave narrative; middle passage.

Florence Hall’s ‘Memoirs’: Finding African Women in the Transatlantic Slave Trade

First-person accounts of Africans who survived the transatlantic slave trade are quite scarce. Documenting the lives of enslaved African women in the slave trade is especially difficult, and part of a broader challenge historians of slavery continue to face. As Jon Sensbach has observed, even the recent and welcome biographical turn in Black Atlantic history has found

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1 7,902 words, including notes.

it difficult to incorporate African and African-descended women, about whom there is precious little documentary evidence.³ Until recently, only about a dozen autobiographical accounts by Africans in the British colonies of the Caribbean and North America had been uncovered, and only two of these were from women. Another woman’s narrative—originally published in 1820 but long ignored and dismissed—was rediscovered about a decade ago.⁴ For these reasons, the ‘Memoirs of the Life of Florence Hall’ is particularly significant: a little known, unpublished account of enslavement, Atlantic crossing, and slavery from a woman taken from the Bight of Biafra to Jamaica in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century.⁵


⁵ ‘Memoirs of the Life of Florence Hall’, Powel Family Papers, collection 1582, box 46, folder 9, Historical Society of Pennsylvania (hereafter HSP), Philadelphia, Pa. In the early 1970s, Hall’s ‘Memoirs’ were identified in Afro-Americana 1553-1906: A Catalog of the Holdings of the Library Company of Philadelphia and the Historical Society of Pennsylvania (New Castle, Delaware: Oak Knoll Press, 2008 [G.K. Hall, 1973]). Since then, the only person to have considered the text at any length is literary scholar Nicole N. Aljoe in her Creole Testimonies:
The ‘Memoirs’ is a tantalizing fragment—a handwritten narrative, unsigned and undated, of which only the first four pages have survived. It is archived at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania in the papers of Robert Johnston (1789-1839), who owned at least two plantations in the parish of St. Ann, on Jamaica’s northern coast. The pages that contain the ‘Memoirs’ bear signs of editing in the same hand that wrote the text: there are words crossed out and insertions added. The text is written on a large sheet of paper, which was folded twice so as to form the four outermost leaves of a signature, the first two leaves of which were cut to allow them to open like an octavo-sized book. These first two leaves, constituting four pages front and back, contain the extant portion of the ‘Memoirs’. At the bottom of the fourth page, just as the narrator begins

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6 The HSP dates the narrative ca. 1820. Powel Family Papers collection guide, HSP.

7 Robert Johnston was born in Jamaica in 1783, where he and his older brother, James, inherited a plantation called Murphy’s Pen, which produced pimento (allspice), Madeira wine, and cattle. When Robert became a legal adult in 1804, he became part owner of the plantation. In 1818, he married Catherine Cole Taylor, daughter of planter John Taylor. When John Taylor died, Johnston inherited his Harmony Hill plantation. He moved his family to Rhode Island in 1833, anxious about their future in post-emancipation Jamaica. Powel Family Papers collection guide, HSP.
to describe Hall’s arrival and experiences in Jamaica, the text cuts off abruptly in the middle of a sentence. Presumably, the text originally continued onto another sheet or sheets, which are now missing. What is left is only the last four pages of the outer signature, which were left uncut, leaving only two fully accessible pages—which were not used for the ‘Memoirs’ but instead, at some point, as scratch paper for a series of mathematical calculations and sketches of some kind of tool.

Although our search for an understanding of who Florence Hall may have been must, of necessity, be pieced together from the clues that are available, some important information can be gleaned from the physical text itself and the archive in which it has been preserved. The paper itself is a large sheet of laid paper measuring approximately 10.5” by 16”; a torn edge, regularly spaced needle-holes, and hand-drawn pencil lines suggest that it was torn out of a bound account book or ledger. An elaborate watermark—including a fleur-de-lis surmounted by a crown and a date—indicate that the paper was made in France in 1797. This date does not tell us precisely when the text was written; unneeded or unused pages of ledger might have been torn out immediately or years after it was made. But it does indicate that the ‘Memoirs’ were recorded after the rise of the Anglo-American antislavery movement had made the trans-Atlantic slave trade a fiercely contended issue in Britain and its colonies.

Other clues help further narrow the dating of the text and identify its author. The fact that the existing copy was found in Robert Johnston’s papers obviously raises the question: What was his connection to the text? The handwriting in which the ‘Memoirs’ was written provides an

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8 Thanks to James Green at the Library Company of Philadelphia for his help analysing the paper on which the ‘Memoirs’ were written.
answer. A careful comparison of the handwriting in various documents in Johnston’s papers indicate that it was he, and not his brother, wife, daughter, or associate, who wrote out the text. The general size, slant and appearance of the handwriting in the ‘Memoirs’ closely match known examples of Johnston’s handwriting as do other distinctive aspects of his writing, including the rushed squiggle with which he wrote ‘the.’ The only aspect of the handwriting of the ‘Memoirs’ that is not paralleled in other samples of Johnston’s hand is the form of the ampersands, which he wrote several different ways in other documents. Moreover, the sheets of paper used for the ‘Memoirs’ were prepared for writing in the same manner as the other paper he used over the years: with the addition of faint guidelines drawn across the sheets. Moreover, the sketches at the back of the signature coincide with his habit of interspersing his writing with drawings. In this case, they seem to represent some kind of screw press, such as one used for extracting juice from grapes or other fruit, and may relate to the fact that Johnston’s plantations produced a Madeira-style wine or to his interest in making fruit preserves.9

Several other clues help narrow the timeframe in which Johnston could have written out the text. It seems unlikely that Johnston, who was born in 1783, would have written the text as a young child; he would have been only fourteen or fifteen years old when the paper was made. Moreover, shifts in his handwriting over time—including a shift in the way he wrote the loops on capital ‘J’ s, suggest that he wrote out the surviving text sometime after his 1809 departure from

9 The folder where the ‘Memoirs’ are archived also contains a detailed ‘summary of [the] process for preserving fruit’. See ‘Captain Bagnold’s [?] Memorandas for Jamaica’, Powel Family Papers, box 49, folder 6, HSP.
Jamaica to begin an apprenticeship under Dr. William Livingston in Edinburgh.\textsuperscript{10} Certainly, the text was not written out after 1836, when Johnston died. Indeed, he and his family had left Jamaica for Newport, Rhode Island in 1833, shortly before the end of slavery in the British Caribbean. Thus, we can say with some confidence that the text was written out by Johnston sometime between about 1810 and 1830.

It is possible that Florence Hall told her life story to someone other than Johnston and that he simply wrote out a copy, but there are strong suggestions in his papers that he was the one who listened to her story and served as her amanuensis. Starting with the ‘Sea Journal’ of his voyage to England in 1809, there are several indications that Johnston was keenly interested in the genres of memoir, travel narratives, and observation. His surviving papers are peppered with sketches of people, places, and things he saw during his travels and during his life in Jamaica—including drawings of black women carrying loads on their heads, interracial couples, and West Indian landscapes.\textsuperscript{11} Upon his return to Jamaica in 1818, after nearly a decade in Europe, Johnston, then in his mid-thirties, marvelled at the sights, sounds, and smells of Port Royal, at the mouth of Kingston Harbour, including the presence of ‘people of all ranks, ages, & sexes, military & civilian, finery & sloth, European activity & African indolence’, ‘the uncouth jargon of corrupted languages, the fumes of tobacco, the odour of rum & sugar’, and ‘lazy

\textsuperscript{10} ‘Sea Journal, from Jamaica to London’, 19 June–13 Aug. 1809, [fragment], Powel Family Papers, box 49, folder 7, HSP.

\textsuperscript{11} See Robert Johnston, Jamaican sketches, Powel Family Papers, box 52, folder 3, HSP.
blacks, marching along as perpendicular & stiff as a bar of iron, with their arms dangling at each side, and bearing on their heads baskets filled with fruits of the most lovely hue’.\textsuperscript{12}

Five years earlier, Johnston had embarked on an extensive European tour, publishing a memoir based on his experiences in Russia, Poland, and Sweden with an established London publisher: \textit{Travels Through Part of the Russian Empire and the Country of Poland; Along the Southern Shores of the Baltic} (1815).\textsuperscript{13} At least one other edition was published—by a New York press—a year later.\textsuperscript{14} The manuscript of this and other texts in his papers are formatted the same way as the ‘Memoirs of Florence Hall’—with the title centered at the head of the text, followed by a squiggled separator, and written out on paper with pencilled-in lines. Moreover, the Hall text seems clearly intended for publication or at the very least private circulation in Britain or North America, two locations where Johnston might have reasonably expected to publish another piece. The text has been edited for style and grammar with several insertions and deletions, such as changing the specific port of ‘Port Royal’ to ‘Jamaica’.

Why Florence Hall might have been willing to share an account of her life with Johnston is not immediately apparent, but it may have had something to do with his evolving ideas about slavery. Any slaveowner would have had a personal investment in the dehumanizing racism that underlay the institution of slavery as well personal relationships with at least some of the people [\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
  \item[12] Johnston, Jamaica journal, 25 June 1818, Powel Family Papers, box 29, folder 7, HSP.
  \item[14] Robert Johnston, \textit{Travels Through Part of the Russian Empire and the Country of Poland; Along the Southern Shores of the Baltic} (New York: Davis Longworth, 1816).
\end{itemize}]}
they enslaved. But there is no other known example of a planter eliciting a personal memoir like this from a slave or former slave. It may well be that during Johnston’s time in Europe between 1809 and 1818, when he was in his late twenties and early thirties, he did not feel especially defensive about his personal investment in the slave system—perhaps because the British antislavery movement had been focused primarily on ending the slave trade and not slavery itself and because, in the wake of getting the Abolition Act passed, there was a lull in antislavery activism. Indeed, Johnston might well have noted British readers’ interest in narratives like that of Oloudah Equiano (published in 1789) and thought that a memoir of another survivor of the middle passage might be an opportunity for him to acquire some cachet. By the late 1810s, however, as the politics of slavery shifted towards regulation of plantations and ‘amelioration’, or reforming slavery through new legislation and surveillance, Johnston became a leader of West Indian planter resistance to the efforts of the metropolitan government to regulate slavery. As chair of the Edinburgh Committee of West India Gentlemen in 1816, for instance, he petitioned Parliament against the proposed Registry Bill that aimed to curtail the illegal importation of African captives to British colonies.¹⁵

But even in the early 1830s, when the debate had shifted from amelioration to emancipation, Johnston’s attitude was more open that one might expect. He wrote several courtly letters to William Wilberforce in these years, for example, praising Wilberforce’s efforts to abolish slavery and making clear his opinion that while advocates of immediate emancipation would destroy the plantation system (he also blamed them for the 1831-32 Jamaican slave insurrection), he himself was also in favor of emancipation. Johnston was ‘a slaveowner by long

¹⁵ 1 March 1816, box 44, folder 9, Powel Family Papers, HSP.
inheritance’, he wrote, but he was nevertheless ‘sincerely desirous of concurring for the Extinction of slavery by any measure which may be compatible with the negro’s happiness & calculated to promote his civil and moral advancement’. Thus, given what we known about Johnston’s politics, it is not unlikely that he solicited Hall’s story and wrote the text sometime between his 1818 arrival back in Jamaica and his move to Newport a decade and a half later.

Even if we can establish that the ‘Memoirs’ were written out in the second or third decade of the nineteenth century by Johnston, we are still left with a more pressing question: Who was Florence Hall?

Whoever Hall was, it is understandable, given what we know of literacy rates among enslaved Jamaicans, that the narrative had to be related to an amanuensis. But to what extent does the written text reflect the story told by Florence Hall? And was Florence Hall even her real name? In the ‘Memoirs’, she tells us that her African name was ‘Akeiso’. (North Carolina-born Harriet Jacobs wrote *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* in the 1850s under the name Linda Brent. Her brother, John S. Jacobs, published his own narrative, ‘A True Tale of Slavery’, in four serialized instalments in a London magazine in 1860 and did not announce his authorship with a by-line—though within the text he did not bother to disguise a reference to his identity. Or, an

16 Robert Johnston to William Wilberforce, 16 Oct 1832 (quotations); Johnston to Wilberforce, 1 Sept. 1832, Powel Family Papers, box 45, folder 11, HSP.

even more basic question, was Hall a real person? It is not clear whether there was an enslaved
African woman named Florence Hall in Jamaica during Johnston’s lifetime. Moreover, the only
obvious indication that it is even a woman’s narrative is the title, which is written in the same
hand as the text at the top of the first page.

On the other hand, there are several clues that whoever Hall was, an authentic voice
shaped the text. With only the first four hundred words remaining, it is hard to get a sense of the

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18 Nicole Aljoe indicated that she was able to identify two women named ‘Florence’ in lists of
slaves in the Johnston papers at the HSP. See Aljoe, *Creole Testimonies*, 51-2; Aljoe, ‘Summary
of the Memoir of the Life of Florence Hall’, and Aljoe, personal communication to authors, 12
Dec. 2014. Evidently there were two such lists when the HSP compiled its finding aid for this
collection, but we were only able to locate one of these lists—from 1831—during repeated
searches in the fall of 2014 (‘List of Negroes on Retirement penn as served with clothing on the
28th of March 1831 by Hamilton Brown Esquire’, Powel Family Papers, box 46, folder 8, HSP).
This surviving list does not include anyone named ‘Florence’. It is possible that the missing list
contained a Florence. A search of the Jamaican slave registration returns (T 71 series, National
Archives, Kew, UK) revealed several African women named ‘Florence’, including a few from
St. Ann parish, but none owned by Johnston. We found no African-born women in the
registration returns named ‘Florence Hall’ from any parish and three creole women named
‘Florence Hall’.

19 There is nothing in the narrative itself that distinguishes it as the experience of a woman or
girl. We are grateful to the Library Company of Philadelphia’s Krystal Appiah for discussion of
this point.
text’s structure and narrative arc. Given the pace of the narrative, the fragment that remains seems to be from a text much smaller in scale than the book-length *Interesting Narrative* (1789) of Olaudah Equiano or even Venture Smith’s 1798 autobiography, which can be read aloud in little more than an hour. Nevertheless, Hall’s ‘Memoirs’ a different than most early slave narratives, which were explicitly abolitionist and sometimes related the narrator’s experience of conversion to Christianity. Presumably, if the narrative was fictionalized, it would more closely match conventional slave narratives.

Although brief and fragmentary, the ‘Memoirs’ is a rich narrative of enslavement, forced migration, and dislocation that corresponds to much of what historians know about the transatlantic slave trade and slavery. The narrator’s first-person perspective and stark depictions

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of physical and emotional suffering highlight the humanity of the enslaved in ways that are usually absent in slaveowner-produced documents.\textsuperscript{21} It is especially valuable because it is one of the only slave trade testimonies from an African woman anywhere in the Americas. Taking Hall’s ‘Memoirs’ seriously rather than discounting it because we cannot verify its provenance is an important step toward taking up Sensbach’s challenge to ‘redefine the very concept of narrative to include the kinds of archival fragments by and about African American women that usually constitute our chief source of information. Cryptic and incomplete though they are, these textual splinters represent a form of narration, a collective memoir left by women’.\textsuperscript{22}

Hall’s narrative begins with her birth in ‘the Country of the Eboe’, clearly a reference to Igbo, somewhere in the Bight of Biafra interior.\textsuperscript{23} The only specific clue the narrative offers


\textsuperscript{21} Thanks to Krystal Appiah for discussion of this point.

\textsuperscript{22} Sensbach, ‘Black Pearls’, 107.

\textsuperscript{23} The Bight of Biafra was the single largest region of embarkation for slaves taken to the British Caribbean in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, with approximately 238,319 captives disembarking in the West Indies. See \textit{Voyages: The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database} (hereafter Voyages database), \url{www.slavevoyages.org}, accessed 6 Dec. 2014. For Igbo and especially the debate over the extent to which Igbo was the primary means of identity for Africans in the Bight of Biafra in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see Douglas Chambers, “‘My Own Nation’: Igbo Exiles in the Diaspora’, \textit{Slavery and Abolition} 18, no. 1 (1997): 72-97; Michael A. Gomez, \textit{Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of
about her place of origin is that she grew up along the banks of the ‘Great river _______’. 24

Many rivers run through the Bight of Biafra and Igboland in particular, but the largest of these were the Benue, Niger, and Cross. Either Hall could not remember the name of the river, or Johnston could not decide how to spell it, or for some other reasons the name of the river is left blank. Gaps such as these suggest that the narrative is authentic, given that the author of a fictionalized narrative would have been free to choose any plausible river. As in Equiano’s narrative, Hall says she was captured as a young child—and as a result has a limited memory of her African childhood. She could ‘scarcely remember’ her life before being ‘taken, and sold to the white people’. At the time of enslavement, she was young enough to be ‘still unclothed’, with no work aside from occasional fishing and ‘guarding the fowls and chickens from Hawks’. The prepubescent Hall was captured, while playing one evening, by ‘a party of the enemy’, which she

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24 There is a blank space in the manuscript preceding “river.”
did not identify. She was then forced to march—at night—for fifteen days toward the coast. The ‘enemies of our country seized and sold us to the White people,’ Hall said, ‘for the love of drink, and from the quarrels of their chiefs’.

Upon reaching ‘the Great sea’, Hall was ‘consigned to foreigners and Slavery’—presumably aboard a British slave ship. Unlike most Africans enslaved in the Americas who left autobiographical accounts, Hall did not skip over the harrowing transatlantic crossing. As one of the ‘naked children’ not seen by sailors as a threat, Hall was allowed to move freely about the ship, as was customary for captive women and children. But she still suffered greatly: ‘food was sparing, and ever bad’, ‘punishment was frequent and sever[e], and death became so frequent an occurrence’ that the captives became numb to it.

25 Hall’s account of her capture corresponds to what historians know about the major ways that captives were produced in the Bight of Biafra, where ‘small scale raids and widespread kidnapping’ were more common than ‘wars and punitive raids’ (Gomez, Country Marks, 132). See also Nwokeji, Bight of Biafra, which emphasizes the role of the Aro trade diaspora.

26 ‘Memoirs of the Life of Florence Hall’.

27 Handler, ‘Survivors of the Middle Passage’, 25, 38.

28 Archibald John Monteith, who was also taken from the Bight of Biafra to Jamaica in the early nineteenth century as a child, similarly recalled in his autobiography that he ‘and 11 other boys were taken by the Captain into the cabin’ and allowed to move freely about the ship. See Vernon H. Nelson, ‘Archibald John Monteith: Native Helper and Assistant in the Jamaica Mission At New Carmel’, Transactions of the Moravian Historical Society 21, no. 1 (1966): 29-52.

29 ‘Memoirs of the Life of Florence Hall’.
After ‘a long voyage’, Hall reports, she arrived in Jamaica, probably landing at Port Royal. In the text, the words ‘Port Royal’ are scratched out and ‘Jamaica’ is written over them—a change that suggests something about the person who edited Hall’s ‘Memoirs’. \(^30\) There are two likely reasons to substitute ‘Jamaica’ for ‘Port Royal’. The first would be that Hall could not remember which port she arrived in, but then, why write Port Royal in the first place? The other reason for this change from the particular port to the broader name of the island would be that the editor was preparing the narrative for an audience unfamiliar with the specifics of West Indian geography—likely an audience in North America or Great Britain, where Johnston had connections and publishing opportunities.

Hall’s Igbo origins are not surprising given what we know about the British transatlantic slave trade in the late eighteenth century. For British ships, the Bight of Biafra in general and Bonny in particular became by the second half of the eighteenth century the most reliable region in which to embark a cargo of captives. As contemporary Alexander Falconbridge put it in 1788: ‘The time during which the slave ships are absent from England, varies according to the destination of the voyage, and the number of ships they happen to meet on the coast. To Bonny, or Old and New Calabar, a voyage is fully performed in about ten months. Those to the Windward and Gold Coasts, are rather more uncertain, but in general from fifteen to eighteen

\(^30\) We read this over-written word as ‘Port Royal’. Nicole Aljoe, puzzling over this same issue, suggested that the replaced word might be ‘Barbados’ (Aljoe, ‘Memoir of the Life of Florence Hall’, Early Caribbean Digital Archive, www.omekasites.northeastern.edu/ECDA/items/show/33, accessed 6 Dec. 2014).
months’. Historians have confirmed this impression, finding that during the second half of the eighteenth century, British slave ships loaded cargos in the Bight of Biafra more quickly than in other major trading regions, spending an average of about 110 days in the Bight of Biafra—which was about a month less than at the Gold Coast (137 days) or the Bight of Benin (145 days) and about two months less than in West Central Africa (162 days). Thus, a typical voyage spent just under four months on the Biafran coast before departing for the Americas.

It is possible that young Hall, or Akeiso, as she was known before arriving in Jamaica, made the voyage across the Atlantic aboard the British ship *Prince*, which transported captives from the Bight of Biafra to Port Royal in 1790, or one like it. The *Prince*, owned by Thomas Jones, sailed out of Bristol, England on 27 April 1790 under the command of Captain Michael Hainsley. Built five years earlier, the *Prince* measured 273 tons, was equipped with six guns, and set out with 40 crewmembes. Overall, this was a large ship for a transatlantic slave trader: vessels headed to West Central Africa and the Gold Coast averaged closer to 240 tons, and vessels headed to other regions were often under 200 tons. But the port of Bonny, to which the


32 Nwokeji, *Bight of Biafra*, Table 2.4 (p. 39), citing data generated by David Eltis. These fast loading times are even more remarkable given that slave ship cargoes at Bonny had the highest average rate of daily number of captives loaded per vessel, with 5.5 captives per vessel per day. See Nwokeji, *Bight of Biafra*, 40-1, Table 2.6, citing data generated by David Eltis.

Prince was headed, attracted unusually large ships—averaging just over 300 tons in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, which was considerably larger than ships headed the lesser Biafran ports of Old Calabar and New Calabar. The Prince was also relatively large compared to slavers headed to Jamaica from all regions of Africa: the average tonnage of a slaver headed into Jamaica was 157 tons in the late eighteenth century; and while overall tonnages rose in the second half of the eighteenth century from close to 200 to closer to 300 by 1808, ships headed to Jamaica from the Bight of Biafra were typically about ten to 15 percent larger than average. Akeiso thus endured the middle passage on a larger ship—with a greater number of captives and crew—than most captive Africans who originated from regions outside the Bight of Biafra.

The voyage of the Prince in 1790 was typical not simply in that the preponderance of captives heading to Jamaica in this period were embarked in the Bight of Biafra, but also in that its recorded principal port of slave purchase was Bonny. By this period, the Bight of Biafra was by far the most important region for British slavers—accounting for almost forty percent of all captives embarked on British slavers, almost twice as many West Central Africa (twenty-one percent) and the Gold Coast (eighteen percent). In fact, the channels of trade were far narrower

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34 Voyages database, accessed 2 March 2015; figures for captives for all periods and all places of origin with a principal place of slave landing as Jamaica.

35 During the entire period of the transatlantic slave trade, Bonny accounted for more captives than all other ports in the Bight of Biafra combined—some 59 percent of the total—and this was particularly true in the late eighteenth century, when Bonny accounted for fully two thirds of
than even these figures suggest. British slavers had a special relationship with the port of Bonny—by far the most important region for British slavers and Biafran sellers of captives. Bonny accounted for fully one in five captives, dwarfing the trade to any other port. For the Biafrans, more than two thirds of the captives leaving the entire region departed through the single port of Bonny. During this period, moreover, almost all captives departing Bonny—as many as 95 percent—on British ships. Consequently, for captives from Biafra in general and Bonny in particular, the most common destinations were British possessions in the Caribbean and especially Jamaica, Britain’s principal West Indian colony throughout the eighteenth century. Captives from the Bight of Biafra had about a 40 percent chance of being taken to Jamaica, and for captives at Bonny, this figure was more than 50 percent between 1776 and 1808, and as high as 67 percent during the 1790s.

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embarked Bight of Biafra captives. Voyages database, searching all voyages that began in Great Britain between 1776 and 1808, accessed 2 March 2015.

36 The Voyages database, accessed 2 March 2015, indicates that for slavers whose principle place of embarked captives was Bonny between 1776 and 1808, 77.8 percent were embarked on Liverpool slavers, 12.6 percent on Bristol slavers, and 5.3 percent on London slavers; the only other European port with a significant trade to Bonny was Nantes, which carried 3.3 percent of captives.

37 Vessels heading into the only other major Biafran ports of Old Calabar (which controlled about 13 percent of the slave trade) and New Calabar (which controlled only about seven percent of the trade) averaged, respectively, more than sixty and a hundred tons less than the tonnage of voyages for which Bonny was the principal place of slave purchase. Data from the Voyages
After a voyage of about two and a half months from Bristol, it was probably sometime in the middle of July when the *Prince* passed Niger River’s broad delta and anchored Bonny, an island just off the coast.\(^{38}\) There, over next two and a half months or so, the captain accumulated a cargo of probably about 400 captives. Many of these were probably girls, like Akeiso, given the dynamics of slaving in the Bight of Biafra in the late eighteenth century.

Captives from the Bight of Biafra in this period were more likely to be female—and particularly girls—than those from other regions. In this sense, Akeiso was representative of some of the most distinctive dynamics of the slave trade out of Bonny and the western (or “Nigerian”) stretch of the Bight of Biafra. It has long been known that throughout the transatlantic slave trade, considerably more women and girl captives were sold at Biafra than elsewhere along the African coast, where men and boys predominated. Historian G. Ugo database, selecting for voyages between 1776-1808, for which the principal place of slave purchase was the Bight of Biafra and the principal place of slave landing was Jamaica. For the percentage of Biafran captives headed to Jamaica (52 percent) versus all other destinations, the search was constructed for all captives between 1776-1808 for whom the principal place of slave purchase was Bonny; broadening the search to include the entire Bight of Biafra returns an average of 40 percent of captives headed to Jamaica.

\(^{38}\) This date is estimated using the known date of arrival in Port Royal (22 Nov. 1790) and the average length of the middle passage from Biafra to Jamaica (which the Voyages database indicates was about 67 days in the period between 1776 and 1808) and the average span of time slavers spent trading in Biafra (which Nwokeji, *Bight of Biafra*, identified as 109.7 days in Table 2.4 (p. 39).
Nwokeji has recently argued that the rise of the Biafran trade, and particularly the rise of Bonny in the eighteenth century, happened in an unusual fashion—not through the development of a centralized state (like Oyo or Asante) but rather through the expansion of a diasporan network of Aro merchants and warlords into the Biafran hinterlands south of the Benue River and east of the Niger (now known as south-eastern Nigeria), including central Igboland. Aro traders controlled as much as 70 percent of the flow of captives to the Biafran coast. The port of Bonny, which came to dominate the Biafran slave trade in the second half of the eighteenth century, largely served the expanding trade in captives from the Igbo heartland.\textsuperscript{39}

Both the broad cultural dynamics of this region and the modes by which the Aro obtained slaves were reflected in the captives sold on the Atlantic market. In general, men in the western Biafran hinterland played a more important role in agricultural production than in other African regions, particularly in growing yams; as a consequence there was less local pressure to retain women slaves.\textsuperscript{40} Moreover, relative lack of kolanuts for export and the fact that the Aro were not Muslims inhibited development of Saharan trade networks into Igboland, thus largely eliminating an alternate source of demand for women captives.\textsuperscript{41} As a result, in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, about 33 percent of Biafran captives (compared to 26 percent of captives from all other regions) were adult women and another ten percent (compared to seven percent of

\textsuperscript{39} Nwokeji, \textit{Bight of Biafra}, 5-6.

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 159-60.

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 168-70.
captives from all other regions) were girls—like Akeiso.\textsuperscript{42} (Children, in the British slave trade, were defined as younger than 13 to 14 years of age or shorter than 4’4”.\textsuperscript{43}) Overall, between 1776 and 1808, only about 47 percent of all Biafran captives were adult men, compared to about 53 percent in other major regions.\textsuperscript{44} This skew towards women captives in this period was particularly intense in the western Biafran ports of New Calabar and Bonny.\textsuperscript{45}

If Akeiso was loaded onto the \textit{Prince} or another British ship on the Biafran coast, where in the interior was she enslaved? Her self-identification as Igbo provides one clue, but a more precise answer is possible thanks to Nwokeji’s work on the Biafran slave trade. He has shown that the Aro networks that dominated the slave trade overwhelmingly obtained captives from a relatively small region: a seventy-kilometre perimeter to their west and northwest.\textsuperscript{46} Akeiso’s statement that she was born on the banks of a “Great river” further suggest that she originated in this region, through which the Benue River connected interior slaving zones to coastal ports.\textsuperscript{47}

\textsuperscript{42} For these figures, see G. Ugo Nwokeji, ‘African Conceptions of Gender and the Slave Traffic’, \textit{William and Mary Quarterly} 58, no 1 (2001), Table 1 (p. 67) (we were unable to locate the web-based supplement to this essay referenced in the article).

\textsuperscript{43} For the definition of ‘children’, see Glossary, Voyages database.

\textsuperscript{44} Nwokeji, ‘African Conceptions of Gender and the Slave Traffic’, Table 1 (p. 67).

\textsuperscript{45} Nwokeji, \textit{Bight of Biafra}, Table 6.2 (p. 155).

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 124.

\textsuperscript{47} At least two overland routes connected central Igboland to the coast, including Bonny, along the Benue River. See Nwokeji, \textit{Bight of Biafra}, 50-1. If Akeiso was from another area in Igboland, she may have been referring to the Niger or Cross River.
Sometime towards the end of September, the Prince set out across the Atlantic. The passage from Bonny to Jamaica typically took just over two months, and while the middle passage was always and everywhere traumatic and deadly, it was particularly horrifying on voyages from the Bight of Biafra and especially for Akeiso. Her experience was unusual compared to that of captives from other regions in several respects: she was a child, she was female, she was on a large ship, and she was departing from a region with unusually high mortality rates. Moreover, Igbo captives had a reputation for committing suicide more often than other African captives, perhaps because the Igbo ‘believed’, as Akeiso said, ‘that [captives] who died’ during the Atlantic crossing ‘were restored to their people and Country’. Although extant data is incomplete, it appears that by the end of the eighteenth century the middle passage to the Caribbean from the Bight of Biafra was far deadlier than that from other major African regions. Captives from the Bight of Biafra were more than twice as likely to die en-route as captives from most other regions. Mortality rates for captives from the Bight of Biafra to Jamaica fluctuated from voyage to voyage, but during the years 1791-93, when data from some 60 voyages is available, mortality rates ranged between 11 and 15 percent. After the Bight of Biafra, the largest number of captives that arrived in Jamaica came from West Central Africa (suffering a mortality rate as low as 2.6 percent) and the Gold Coast (suffering a mortality rate of 5.4


49 Data from the Voyages database, accessed 3 March 2015, selecting for voyages in which the principle place of slave purchase was the Bight of Biafra and the principal place of slave land was Jamaica.
percent). Surviving records do not indicate the number of captives on the *Prince* who died during the middle passage, but given average mortality rates, the number was probably about 33 out of a total number of captives that was probably about 396.

On 22 November 1790, the *Prince* arrived at Port Royal, its first place of landing in the Americas, with 363 surviving captives aboard. Five of the *Prince*’s crew had also died by the time the ship reached Jamaica. On 4 January 1791, having unloaded its human cargo and settled its accounts, the *Prince* set out on its return voyage, completing its round trip to Bristol on 10 February 1791, leaving its surviving captives to face their fates in Jamaica.

Whether or not Akeiso endured the middle passage on the *Prince*, its voyage was fairly typical of the broader slave trade to Jamaica in the late eighteenth century. The only unusual feature of the *Prince*’s 1790 voyage was that its recorded place of landing was Port Royal, rather than the much larger, neighbouring city of Kingston, the primary port of arrival for slave ships.

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50 Data from the Voyages database, accessed 2 March 2015. David Eltis and David Richardson, *Atlas of the Transatlantic Slave Trade* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), map 121, ‘Slave Mortality and Voyage Length for Slaves leaving African Regions for the Caribbean, 1776-1830,’ gives mortality rates for captives headed to the Caribbean from the Gold Coast, the Bight of Benin, West Central Africa, and Upper Guinea all averaged nine, eight, and seven percent, respectively, while captives from the Bight of Biafra endured mortality rates of fourteen 14 percent. However, as map 122 makes clear, mortality rates also varied by destination within the Caribbean, with voyages to the British Caribbean generally suffering lower mortality rates than voyages to other destinations.

51 This estimate is taken from the Voyages database record for the *Prince*, voyage 18080.
Only a handful of transatlantic slave trading voyages are known to have landed at Port Royal after 1750 and only one of these is known to have sailed from Bonny to Port Royal. Over the entire period of slave trade, some 930,647 African captives are known to have arrived in Jamaica and for about half of them (517,372) we know their port of landing; but after the American Revolution began to wind down in 1781, the data improved dramatically, and there are recorded ports of landing for about 85 percent of all captives arriving in Jamaica between 1781 and 1808. Almost 90 percent of those with known places of landing in this period arrived in Kingston (235,484 captives out of 271,019), which was presumably the location where the Prince captives were sold.

When Akeiso arrived in Port Royal, wherever she was sold and whatever part of the island she was taken to, she joined many other captives from the Bight of Biafra. Over the entire period of the slave trade, almost a third (31 percent) of all African captives arriving in Jamaica came from the Bight of Biafra, and in the years between 1781 and 1808 almost half (44 percent) did. During the same period, the next largest regions of origin, the Gold Coast and West Central Africa, accounted for only about 23 percent and 20 percent, respectively.\(^{52}\) Thus even after Akeiso was separated from her ‘shipmates’ she would have found people from Igboland with whom she could communicate as she adjusted to the deadly plantation world of Jamaica.

\(^{52}\) Figures here are based on the Voyages database, accessed 2 March 2015, giving numbers of disembarked captives on which for which the principal place of slave landing was Jamaica (a total of 930,479), and for which regions of African origin are recorded (741,498). From 1781 through 1808, 133,663 captives recorded as embarked in the Bight of Biafra arrived in Jamaica out of a total of 303,490 disembarked.
Because Hall’s narrative cuts off soon after her arrival in Port Royal, we have little information about her experiences in Jamaica. Yet she makes it clear that the memory of the Atlantic crossing haunted her as she struggled to adapt and survive, and that she was socially alienated and afraid. Like other enslaved Jamaicans, Hall would have been surrounded by the spectre of death and horrific scenes of violence. Indeed it is a miracle that Hall survived long enough to share her story, given Jamaica’s notoriously high death rates.\(^{53}\) In many ways, Hall left us with more questions than answers. When and how did she get the name Florence? And what about the surname, Hall? What kind of labour did she perform? Where on the island did she live? What was her connection to Robert Johnston? The surviving fragment of Hall’s ‘Memoirs’ does not answer such questions. Hall does tell us, however, that after she was stripped of her African name she soon forget her people and her country, though she obviously did not lose all memory of her African past: ‘Another name—a strange language, and another a new master, confused my mind, and while ignorance of each, made my labour more troublesome, yet the dread of punishment compelled me to work.[.]’\(^{54}\) At this point Hall’s narrative ends, a fitting coda,


\(^{54}\) According to specialists, ‘Akeiso’ is not currently identified as an Igbo name or a transliteration of any known Igbo name, though it may be a Yoruba name (a contraption of ‘Ake’ and ‘iso’) or a poor transliteration of what was once an Igbo name. Gloria Chuku, personal communication, 15 Dec. 2014; G. Ugo Nwokeji, personal communication, 15 Dec. 2014; Nwando Achebe, personal communication, 16 Dec. 16 2014; Folu Ogundimu, personal
perhaps, for the tale of one of several million African women forced into plantation labor in the Americas under the threat of violence and the dread of death.

[folio 1a]

Memoirs of the Life of Florence Hall

Africa is my Country—In the Country of the Eboe & on the banks of the Great ____ river, my people lived. The manner of my life before I was taken, and sold to the white people, I can scarcely remember beyond that I was still unclothed, sometimes employed in attending our people, while engaged in Fishing, at other times guarding the fowls and chickens from Hawks, or more frequently at play with other children. In one of those evening plays, while at a distance from our houses [folio 1b] a party of the enemy came around us, and drove us, into an enclosed place, and immediately secured us—our hands were tied—while in vain our cries and screams were raised, but raised unheard, if heard, unattended, and by force we were hurried along and rested not until the sun arose, and marked our distress and distance from our home[s?]. The day we lay concealed, and in the night our journey was performed. Day and night succeeded each other, in hunger, weariness, and grief at the end of the 15th night, our travelling was at an end,

communication, 17 Dec. 2014. Thanks to professors Chuku, Nwokeji, Achebe, and Ogundimu for their help identifying the etymology of ‘Akeiso’.
and the dawn of day shewed us the Great sea, and the ship, in which we were soon embarked, and left our Country, and our freedom, and consigned to foreigners and Slavery. The enemies of our Country seized and sold us to the White people, for the love of drink, and from the quarrels of their Chiefs—The white people received, and stripped us of all our beads, and shells, and while the naked children were permitted to walk about the ship, the men and women were chained and kept in darkness below places. Our food was sparing, and ever bad. Our punishment was frequent and severe, and death became so frequent an occurrence, that at last it passed on, without fear on the dying, or grief on those left behind, as we believed that those who died, were restored to their people and Country. A long voyage at length brought the ship to Port Royal, Jamaica. My Eboe name was Akeiso, the loss of which soon put an end to all recollections of my people—another name—a strange language, & another a new master, confused my mind, and while ignorance of each, made my labour more troublesome, yet the dread of punishment compelled me to work, [end of folio 1d; subsequent pages missing].
Notes