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About 200 years ago, a free black woman named Francisca da Silva was enslaved in the Angolan city of Benguela after facing accusations of murder. Her alleged victim was Diniz Vieira de Lima, a slave dealer born in Benguela who had died while seeking medical assistance for a long-term illness in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Francisca was enslaved by de Lima’s mother, Dona Maria Ferreira da Silva, who had ordered Francisca’s arrest after accusing her of using witchcraft to commit the crime. Dona Maria was likely born in Benguela or thereabouts, and she was one of the *donas* of Benguela – women who commanded prestige and social standing in the city. Prior to de Lima’s death, Francisca had had a close relationship with Dona Maria; she not only worked as a servant in Dona Maria’s house, but was also her goddaughter. When de Lima died, however, Dona Maria declared that Francisca was a witch and enslaved her. Dona Maria planned to ship Francisca as a slave to Brazil, but Francisca managed to regain her freedom by petitioning the Benguela government.¹

This book draws on the lives of people like Francisca in an effort to understand the pluralistic landscapes of society and culture in Angola during the era of the transatlantic slave trade. The passage from Angola to Brazil constituted perhaps the most traveled route of the slave trade from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century. While approximately one-fourth of the Africans taken to the Americas were shipped from Luanda and Benguela, Brazil received almost half of the enslaved Africans taken to the Americas. More importantly, the two regions were deeply intertwined by the slave trade, since approximately half of the Africans taken to Brazil

¹ “Requerimento de Francisca da Silva” on March 20, 1829, AHA, cód. 7182, fl. 137.
might have been shipped from Luanda and Benguela. Perhaps because of the staggering magnitude of these numbers, most of the scholarship on the ties between Angola and Brazil is framed by macrostructural issues. Unsurprisingly, this top-down approach has left several crucial questions unanswered, mostly related to the social, cultural, and political dynamics of Angola. As literary historian William Boelhower has stated, “Reliance on structure is equivalent to promoting a view from nowhere.”

In contrast, this book develops a microhistory of the Atlantic world that seeks to understand the broad contours of society and culture in Angola by reducing the scale of analysis from macrostructure to micro-scopic observation. Recently, the history of the Atlantic world has been refocused toward microhistory and an examination of life stories that highlights personal trajectories and the ways people experienced everyday life. By “tracing individual paths and analyzing either their individual

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social relations, political, economic or social strategies,” biographical studies provide an entry point for viewing the visceral and sometimes poignant ways people like Francisca lived their lives. As Alison Games observes, “With enough such [biographical] stories, we might piece the Atlantic together in new, richly detailed, complex ways, putting people in the middle of a chaotic kaleidoscope of movement.”


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Several months prior to forcing Francisca into confinement, Dona Maria petitioned the Benguela administration for permission to join her husband in Rio. Her request was in keeping with a pattern of high transatlantic mobility among wealthy residents of Benguela, a city from which an estimated seven hundred thousand Africans were shipped as slaves to Brazil between the early eighteenth century and the mid-nineteenth century. Dona Maria stated in her request that she wanted to travel with her son Thomas and two domestic servants, one of whom was Francisca da Silva. She would have traveled to Brazil on one of the ships that carried slaves from Benguela to Rio, the primary destination of slaves shipped from Benguela, as “there was no other way for people to travel abroad” from Angola.

After learning that her husband had died in Rio, however, Dona Maria cancelled her trip and turned against Francisca. In her petition to the Benguela administration, Francisca stated that Dona Maria had accused her of “witchcraft, saying that she had thrown a spell [feitiço] on a young black boy to kill the brother-in-law of Diniz and that the soul [zumbi] of the brother-in-law killed her [Dona Maria’s] husband in Rio de Janeiro.” This accusation illuminates the religious fabric of coastal and internal Angola, where the belief that the souls of the deceased (zumbi) could take actions against or effect change in the lives of the living was widespread among both the free and the enslaved. Indeed, a few years before the incident that culminated in the loss of Francisca’s freedom, a report stated that Africans “give the name of zumbi to all people who die and say that these are the souls of the deceased, which can be brought to

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9 “Requerimento de Maria Ferreira da Silva” on September 13, 1828, AHA, cód. 7182, fl. 105.
10 “Carta do Governador de Angola” on March 1, 1799, AHA, cód. 7, fl. 72v.
11 “Requerimento de Francisca da Silva” on March 20, 1829, AHA, cód. 7182, fl. 137.
earth through magical arts performed by some slave or even a relative of the deceased.”

While in custody, Francisca sought to defend herself by saying that instead of harming Dona Maria’s husband, she had in fact attempted to cure his illness. Although Francisca never used the expression *gangas*, this was the term that Africans used to refer to religious authorities like her. James Sweet has written that “there was fluidity between the two [religious and secular] worlds that allowed ancestral spirits to remain engaged in the everyday lives of their surviving kinsmen.” Individuals like Francisca were essential to connecting these two worlds. Aided by chanting and dancing, *gangas* were expected to transcend the boundaries of the temporal and spiritual worlds through ceremonies – *xinguilamentos* – that involved spiritual possession, animal sacrifices, and offerings to spirits. Equally important, Francisca added that Dona Maria herself had been deeply involved in the healing ceremonies, reflecting the fact that African customs also prevailed among members of the social elite in Benguela. As Francisca explained to authorities, the widow had “ordered the sale of a cow to make traditional medicine.”

By placing Africans and their descendants at the center of their own histories, scholars have reinvigorated studies of Atlantic history. Yet this approach presents several practical and methodological challenges, including the difficult and arduous work of identifying and collecting archival sources at different – and sometimes remote – sites on both sides of the Atlantic. On a methodological level, a key question pertains to the reliability of what historian Lara Putnam describes as the “telling example,” or the reliance of biographically oriented studies on
the personal trajectories of subaltern individuals: “How can we make claims about the prevalence or the impact of these transatlantic negotiators, if the conditions of source preservation are such that those whom we catch are by definition atypical?”

This book addresses this potential limitation by developing thick descriptions of individuals based on detailed analysis of a vast and eclectic array of primary sources, many of which have rarely—if ever—been used by scholars of Africa and the Atlantic world. Since many of these documents were produced in Angola, they permit a nuanced unpacking of the everyday workings of slaving and a contextual narrative in which events are shaped not only by forces beyond an individual’s control but also by the individuals themselves. This “microhistory of the ordinary” would not reach its potential without connecting microlevel events with macroscale processes. Microhistory, as Lüdtke has observed, “is fruitless and an antiquarian enterprise if not coupled with a reconstructive linking together of the individual elements in a network of interrelations.”

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These words are echoed by Ouweneel: “Despite its focus on the intensive study of particular lives, communities, or unusual events, microhistorical enquiry does not merely confine itself to the local, the specific, even the marginal.”

Except for a relatively brief period of Dutch occupation between 1641 and 1648, the coastal enclaves of Luanda and Benguela and their immediate environs have been under Portuguese influence since the seventeenth century. Of course, this situation was only sustainable due to the complex alliances between Europeans and Africans. If there was any external challenge to Portuguese control, it was from Brazil, the single largest destination of enslaved Africans shipped from Angola. The two Portuguese colonies were deeply connected by more than 300 years of slave trade, and traders from Brazil and Portugal ventured into the Angolan interior (sertões), where they would buy slaves, often with goods imported from Brazil and Portugal – weapons, gunpowder, rum, and textiles.

The relationship between Angola and Brazil was mostly, though by no means exclusively, bilateral. It derived not only from Brazil’s insatiable demand for enslaved laborers, but also from broader transformations in the economy of the south Atlantic in the seventeenth century. These
changes positioned the Brazilian city of Salvador and later Rio as hubs of the Indian textile trade – the most sought after commodities of the trade in the Angolan sertões – and they facilitated Brazilian hegemony in the south Atlantic.\(^\text{27}\) Portugal established protectionist policies to bolster metropolitan commercial supremacy in Angola, first at the end of the eighteenth century and then after Brazil achieved independence from Portugal in 1822. However, these policies failed because of the deep commercial, cultural, and social connections developed across the Atlantic. Despite Angola’s continuing trade with the Brazilian cities of Salvador and Recife, its strongest ties were with Rio de Janeiro until slave trading to Brazil ended in the 1850s.

In Benguela – where Francisca da Silva lived and almost lost her freedom – Brazilian influence was perhaps more pronounced than in Luanda, where the Luanda elite and Portuguese merchants competed and associated with Brazil-based sponsors. In the 1730s, for instance, merchants from Rio played a pivotal role in the expansion of the Benguela slave trade. Benguela became a focal point for the shipment of slaves to Brazil, and by the early eighteenth century, developed lasting links with Rio in the wake of the discovery of gold in Minas Gerais. This drove up the demand for labor in Brazil and accelerated the slave trade in southern Angola. Between 1796 and 1811, at least eighty-nine percent of the slave ships that set sail from Benguela were bound for Rio, and a report from the 1810s suggests that merchants based in Rio may have owned or co-owned many of the ships used to transport slaves.\(^\text{28}\)

Despite acknowledging the centrality of the slave trade to the relationship between Angola and Brazil, I conceive of the south Atlantic as a single cultural and societal unit not exclusively concerned with the trade’s economic dynamics. Indeed, much of Angola’s malleable cultural and social milieu derived from its multidimensional ties to Brazil. Brazil was the source not only of funds for the slave trade, but also of political and criminal exiles (degredados) who staffed Angola’s “colonial” administration. This relationship had a strong military component. For instance, Portuguese control over Luanda had been reclaimed from the Dutch in 1648 by a flotilla sent from Rio, signaling Angola’s strategic importance.


\(^{28}\) Slavevoyages.org. I thank Daniel Domingues for help in confirming this information. See also “Ofício do Desembargador Fiscal” on April 10, 1811, IHGB, Dl 1132, 05
in the south Atlantic slave system. Later, troops deployed against the kingdom of the Congo in the 1660s hailed from Brazil, which also provided soldiers who helped Portuguese forces defeat the Ndongo kingdom in 1672. “Brazilian” soldiers participated in wars that contributed to the development of slaving in Benguela in the early eighteenth century.

As discussed in Chapter 6, the relationship was so strong that political developments in Brazil could potentially reverberate across the Atlantic. Equally important, Brazilian influence extended to the social and cultural milieus of both Luanda and Benguela. In addition to Portuguese nationals, the local elite comprised of an amalgam of locally and Brazilian-born merchants who remained deeply attached to Brazil by way of religion, culture, and family connections. “The lifestyle of wealthy Luanda residents resembles that of a Brazilian city. Their food ways are as full of strong ingredients as in Brazil. The dialect that they use in the domestic affairs is the Brazilian language.” Some of the Luanda women who could speak Portuguese fluently did so with a distinct Brazilian accent due to their travels to Brazil and interactions with individuals born and raised there.

In the 1790s, for example, one of the tutors of the daughters of the Luanda elite was Tereza Joaquina da Conceição, a woman born in Rio who had migrated with her husband to Luanda.

In the interior, Africans referred to Brazil as mueneputo pequeno, a term that mirrored mueneputo grande, generally used to refer to continental Portugal, which suggests that Africans were cognizant of the deep ties that linked Angola to Brazil.

The pluralistic cultural and social milieus of coastal Angola raise key questions as to how this region related to other African regions affected by the slave trade. Robin Law and Kristin Mann have coined the term...
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Atlantic Community to refer to the intense commercial and cultural ties between Bahia and the Bight of Benin. Law and Mann’s focus on Africa and African agency in the development of the diaspora differs from Paul Gilroy’s understanding of the black Atlantic, which is oriented to North America and excludes Africa. According to Law and Mann, the slave trade between Bahia and West Africa was characterized by highly fluid cross-cultural communities that grew out of the key role played by culturally mixed individuals – mostly merchants – who formed transatlantic connections between Bahia and the Bight of Benin. In their words, “The links and reciprocal influences between Brazil and Africa are better understood through the concept of an Atlantic community: that is, through the study of the historical development of a community of people with shared relationships and cultures that bridged the Atlantic.”