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978-1-107-01186-1 - An African Slaving Port and the Atlantic World: Benguela and its Hinterland

Mariana P. Candido

Excerpt

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## Introduction

The port of Benguela was a major outlet for the departure of slaves in the era of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Scholarship on the slave trade, however, has been focused on the part of the Atlantic and the African continent north of the equator. This book shows that the trans-Atlantic slave trade was a story of the South Atlantic and that Benguela and its population played a major role in that trade. Benguela was at the center of this story, and as I show throughout this book, became integrated into the world economy in the early seventeenth century. From the seventeenth century to the mid-nineteenth century, coastal and inland populations joined the Atlantic commerce, which had a profound effect on the subsequent history of the region and of West Central Africa as whole. In this study I move my analysis inland, following the pattern of both foreign merchants and the Atlantic commerce itself. The result is an analysis of the effects of the trans-Atlantic slave trade not only on the societies along the coast but also on those located inland, exploring political, economic, and social changes, moving away from a scholarship centered on demographic analysis. Although important, quantitative studies have disregarded changes brought about by the slave trade: shifts in how people organized and identified themselves, for example, or how gender dynamics were altered as a result of the sex imbalance. In exploring the political and social effects of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, I engage with a number of themes familiar to specialists on the slave trade and slavery in Africa, including the impact of climate and disease on local and foreign populations, the nature of colonialism and slavery and its intimate link with the slave trade, questions of new social groups and identities, and the overall significance

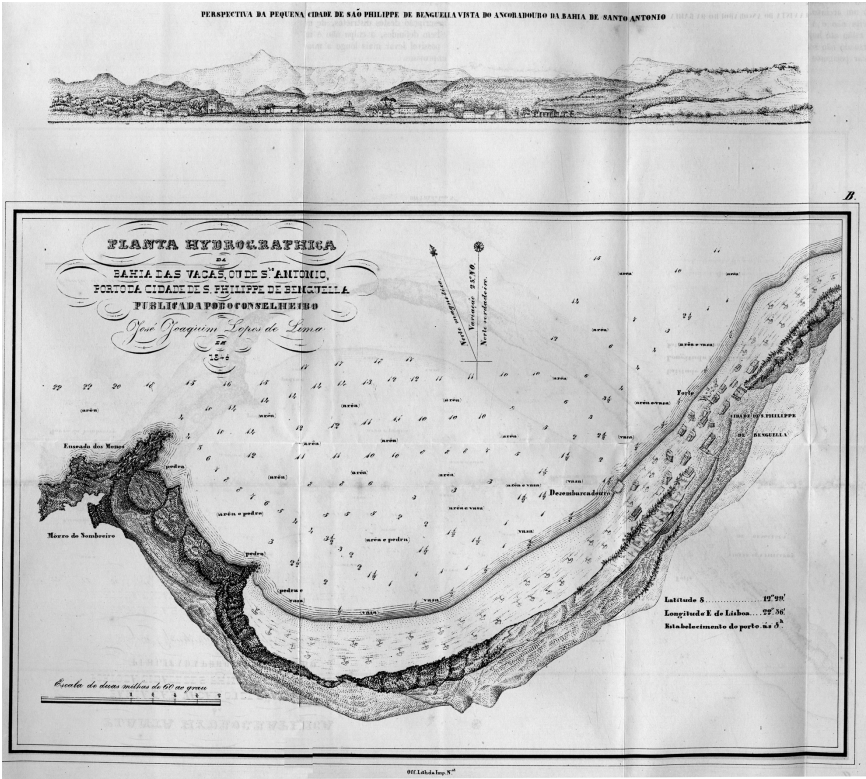


IMAGE 1. “Perspectiva da Pequena Cidade de São Philippe de Benguella, vista do ancoradouro da Bahia de Santo António,” in José Joaquim Lopes de Lima, *Ensaios sobre a Statística das Possessões Portuguezas*, vol. 3, part 2 (Lisbon, 1846), between pp. 26–27.

of the trans-Atlantic slave trade on African societies. This study is the first full-length history of Benguela and its hinterland to appear in English. Older histories, notably Ralph Delgado’s studies published in Portuguese in the 1940s, defended Portuguese colonialism, reflecting the era in which they were written, when Angola was still under colonial rule.<sup>1</sup> Although Portuguese officials and foreign traders are part of this story, a major role is given to the local African people who inhabited Benguela and its interior.

<sup>1</sup> Ralph Delgado, *O Reino de Benguela: do Descobrimento à Criação do Governo Subalterno* (Lisbon: Beleza, 1945); Ralph Delgado, *A Famosa e histórica Benguela. Catálogo dos Governadores, 1779 a 1940* (Lisbon: Cosmos, 1940).

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Situated on the central coast of present-day Angola, an indigenous settlement existed in what is now Benguela before the Portuguese invasion in 1617. From the early seventeenth century to 1975, Benguela was a Portuguese colony, sometimes autonomous from the central administration in Angola but generally under Luanda's control. Today, Benguela is the fourth-largest city in Angola, after Luanda, Huambo, and Lobito, with important fishing and agricultural industries. Unlike the castles on the coast of Ghana at Elmina and the Cape Coast, there is no remaining evidence of the fortress that once stood in Benguela, which was destroyed in the twentieth century despite its historical importance. In the beginning of the seventeenth century, soldiers and colonial administrators lived within the fortress. Later on, the settlement expanded beyond the fortress' walls, and in the eighteenth century, new administrative buildings were erected. Although the fortress is gone, reminders of a past that is intimately linked with the trans-Atlantic slave trade can still be seen in Benguela in the Nossa Senhora da Misericórdia Hospital and the Nossa Senhora do Pópulo Church. Regardless of the lack of monuments memorializing the slave trade and the near invisibility of Benguela in the historiography, this past should not be forgotten. The importance of this port in the Atlantic economy is reflected in the presence of people identified as "Benguela" in Brazil and elsewhere in the African diaspora, such as Cuba, Colombia, and Peru. Despite the wealth of historical evidence attesting to its importance, most of the scholarship on the trans-Atlantic slave trade has focused on ports north of the equator. The region where Benguela is situated is referred to as West Central Africa, which incorporates Benguela along with distinct ports such as Loango, Malembo, Cabinda, Ambriz, and Luanda.<sup>2</sup> This broader lens does not reflect how local people organized themselves or even how Europeans identified this region during the era of the slave trade. Rather, it is a cultural unity identified by scholars in the twentieth century and applied retroactively.<sup>3</sup> An

<sup>2</sup> Scholars describe West Central Africa as a unified region, although recognizing the plurality of languages, ethnicities, political organizations, and backgrounds. See, for example, David Eltis and David Richardson (eds.), *Extending the Frontiers: Essays on the New Transatlantic Slave Trade Database* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 19–22; Stephanie E. Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 104–5. Stacey Sommerdyk's dissertation discusses some of the incongruences of joining Loango, Luanda, and Benguela as part of the same region, when the organization of the slave trade was profoundly distinct. See "Trade and the Merchant Community of the Loango Coast in the Eighteenth Century," PhD dissertation, Hull University, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> John K. Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 191, 194.

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Africanist perspective on the slave trade forces Benguela to be studied in isolation in order to better explore its uniqueness. Only with specific studies will we be able to understand the specificity of the slave trade in different regions of the continent.<sup>4</sup> Thus this book is a contribution to a growing scholarship on African slave ports, redirecting our gaze to the South Atlantic by focusing on the importance of Benguela to the history of Africa, the African diaspora, and the Atlantic world.<sup>5</sup>

The study spans over 200 years. It starts with the first Portuguese expedition in what became known as “Benguela Velha” in the fifteenth century and traces developments until the mid-nineteenth century. In 1850, the Brazilian government banned slave imports, resulting in the decline of Benguela and its population in the Atlantic economy. The emphasis is on African agency, stressing the role of the local population in the transformations during the era of the slave trade. This study dialogues with the literature about African history and the Atlantic world, filling gaps in the scholarship, particularly when related to the role of Benguela in the South Atlantic.<sup>6</sup> The evidence and narrative presented here engage

<sup>4</sup> Lisa A. Lindsay, *Captives as Commodities: The Transatlantic Slave Trade* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice-Hall, 2007). For studies emphasizing specificity, see Stacey Sommerdyk, “Rivalry on the Loango Coast: A Re-examination of the Dutch in the Atlantic Slave Trade,” in *Trabalho Forçado Africano: O Caminho de Ida*, ed. Arlindo Manuel Caldeira (Porto: CEAUP, 2009), 105–18; and Mariana P. Candido, *Fronteras de Esclavización: Esclavitud, Comercio e Identidad en Benguela, 1780–1850* (Mexico City: El Colegio de Mexico Press, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> See Phyllis Martin, *The External Trade of the Loango Coast, 1576–1870: The Effects of Changing Commercial Relations on the Vili Kingdom of Loango* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1972); Robin Law, *Ouidah: The Social History of a West African Slaving “Port” 1727–1892* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2004); Kristin Mann, *Slavery and the Birth of an African City: Lagos, 1760–1900* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007). For studies with a strong African perspective on the Atlantic world, see Linda M. Heywood and John K. Thornton, *Central Africans, Atlantic Creoles, and the Making of the Foundation of the Americas, 1585–1660* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992); James H. Sweet, *Recreating Africa: Culture, Kinship, and Religion in the African-Portuguese World, 1441–1770* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Paul E. Lovejoy and David V. Trotman, “Enslaved Africans and their Expectations of Slave Life in the Americas: Towards a Reconsideration of Models of ‘Creolisation,’” in *Questioning Creole: Creolisation Discourses in Caribbean Culture*, ed. Verene Shepherd and Glen L. Richards (Kingston, Jamaica: Ian Randle, 2002), 67–91.

<sup>6</sup> For North Atlantic approaches, see, among others, Peter C. Mancall, *The Atlantic World and Virginia, 1550–1624* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Toyin Falola and Kevin D. Roberts (eds.), *The Atlantic World, 1450–2000* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008); and Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993). Some

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with wider debates about the impact of the trans-Atlantic slave trade on African societies and the economic, political, and cultural development of the South Atlantic system. Instead of a place seen as peripheral, Benguela occupies center stage in this analysis, in which the political, economic, and social changes that altered the region affect not only those who lived there but also the more than 700,000 slaves deported from its port. This book makes several contributions. First, it is the first book-length analysis of the history of Benguela and its hinterland. Second, this study is one of the few in English to emphasize the centrality of the South Atlantic during the era of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Third, it examines the importance of Brazil and Brazilian-born traders as merchants, colonial administrators, and military personnel, as well as slavers, emphasizing bilateral connections between Portuguese colonies. Fourth, the study demonstrates how involvement in the Atlantic economy led to a series of radical transformations in settlement patterns, political systems, and identities in the hinterland. In short, this book reexamines the effects of the trans-Atlantic slave trade in West Central Africa, moving away from a scholarship that has downplayed its impact. In so doing, it discusses the mechanisms of enslavement and identity formation in the interior of Benguela. Lastly, this is a contribution to the role of women in African history before the mid-nineteenth century. In this study, women are key historical agents, as traders and slaves, and they are not restricted to a single chapter. They are everywhere in this book, which simply acknowledges the fact that there is abundant information on women in Portuguese colonial sources. Women

scholars, mainly writing in Portuguese, have emphasized the specificity of the South Atlantic; see Fernando A. Novais, *Estrutura e Dinâmica do Antigo sistema Colonial (Séculos XVI-XVIII)* (São Paulo: CEBRAP, 1974); José H. Rodrigues, *Brasil e África: outro horizonte* (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1961); Manuel dos Anjos da Silva Rebelo, *Relações entre Brasil e Angola, 1808-1830* (Lisbon: Agência Geral do Ultramar, 1970); Corcino M. dos Santos, "Relações de Angola com o Rio de Janeiro (1736-1808)," *Estudos Históricos* 12 (1973): 7-68; and Pierre Verger, "The Influence of Africa on Brazil and of Brazil on Africa," *Journal of African History* 3 (1962): 49-67. For some studies in French, see Pierre Verger, *Flux et Reflux de la traite des Negres entre le Golfe de Benin et Bahia de Todos os Santos, du XVIIe au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Mouton, 1968); and Frederic Mauro, *Le Portugal, le Bresil et L'Atlantique au XVIIe siècle (1570-1670)* (Paris: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, 1983). For some studies in English, see Joseph C. Miller, *Way of Death: Merchant Capitalism and the Angolan Slave Trade, 1730-1830* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988); Lauren Benton, "The Legal Regime of the South Atlantic World, 1400-1750: Jurisdictional Complexity as Institutional Order," *Journal of World History* 11, no. 1 (2000): 27-56; Ana Lucia Araujo, *Public Memory of Slavery: Victims and Perpetrators in the South Atlantic* (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2010); and Walter Hawthorne, *From Africa to Brazil: Culture, Identity, and an Atlantic Slave Trade, 1600-1830* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

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traders were in many cases in charge of trade negotiations, serving as a vanguard of colonialism and Atlantic commerce. Each one of these points will be expanded throughout this book and will receive the attention it deserves in subsequent chapters.

The history of Angola and, more specifically Benguela forces us to readdress the use of conventional labels such as “precolonial” African history in reference to events on the continent before the Berlin Conference in 1884–5 and the partition of Africa among European powers. Like the Cape Colony, Luanda, and Algeria, the indigenous population of Benguela and its hinterland was under colonial subjugation well before the end of the nineteenth century. Thus this book is a history of early Portuguese imperialism. Yet it is also a study of the integration of Benguela into the world economy and how this process led to political and social changes in this region. The collapse and emergence of new states inland of Benguela, such as Kakonda and Viye, can only be understood in a context of expanding Portuguese colonialism and the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Although slavery probably existed before the arrival of the Portuguese in the region, their demand for captives altered the institution. Slave use expanded, as did raids and other mechanisms employed to capture people. The colonial zone on the coast and the establishment of the Portuguese fortress inland altered the landscape, introduced a new language and legal code, and contributed to the development of a local elite associated with the colonial state.

As an Atlantic port, Benguela was one of the major centers of the slave trade for more than 200 years, yet it was a small town with a population of only 1,500 to 3,000 people during the period under consideration. From 1600 to 1850, the relationship of this port town with the Atlantic world faced changes. It started as an alternative route to the copper mines and inland slave market, but soon it became a major port on its own. Ocean currents favored its development. It was located close to Luanda, the main Portuguese settlement in the African continent. Yet it was difficult to reach Benguela from Luanda. While captains were forced to sail to Benguela to access the northerly coastal currents that would take them toward the port of Luanda, it was extremely difficult to sail from north to south along the coast. Land routes also were a challenge because Kissama, the region between Luanda and Benguela, remained outside Portuguese control for most of the period analyzed here. Thus the population in Benguela, including colonial administrators, foreign and local merchants, and the free and enslaved Ndombe and other groups who moved into the Portuguese zone, enjoyed an unsupervised lifestyle.



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Benguela was a Portuguese colony that remained almost completely outside metropolitan control. Even the authorities stationed in Luanda had a difficult time overseeing and controlling the actions of Portuguese officers in Benguela. The governor of Benguela, judges, and other colonial bureaucrats in many ways relished their autonomy to make decisions on the collection of tax, the waging of war, and the punishment of criminals. Conversely, the presence of corrupt officials interested more in personal gain than in colonial consolidation represented a threat to the Portuguese Crown. Officials willing to break the law also were a menace to African rulers and their subjects.

This book engages with a series of debates in the historiography, which its contributions seek to reshape. I will introduce them briefly here and spend the next pages analyzing these major interventions. The first contribution is to reassess the impact of the trans-Atlantic slave trade on African societies. Throughout the book, these effects will be discussed, particularly the growing and devastating power of Atlantic pressure, which favored the decline of old chiefdoms and the growth of new communities and states associated with the Atlantic world. The effects can also be noted in the spread of diseases and environmental crises, as well as in the changing nature of alliances between Portuguese and African rulers. The second cluster of the historiography this study engages concerns the nature of the cultural changes provoked by colonial encounters, which focuses on the debate around creolization in the Atlantic world. As part of colonialism and the expansion of Atlantic commerce, Luso-African societies were formed along the coast and in the interior. This led to the emergence of new social groups, transformed family and household compositions, and eventually remade sexual roles. In sum, contact with the Atlantic world provoked changes to gender relations, as well as the interaction between landlords and strangers. The third debate revolves around the effects of Portuguese colonialism and the expansion of slave societies. The Portuguese presence introduced a new dynamic, linked to association with a global empire and the imposition of colonialism. Local trade was transformed not only in being reoriented toward the coast but also in the nature of the goods desired and the volume of production demanded. The slave trade, which predated arrival of the Portuguese, achieved a new status as the basis of commerce, trade, political ascension, and social relationships. It also accelerated changes to gender roles. The fourth historiographic debate this book engages relates to the expansion of enslavement and slave exports. Cycles of violence had a major impact on African and colonial societies constantly under the threat of warfare. Persistent

instability transformed the polities within the Benguela hinterland and was directly connected to changes in commerce and local institutions. I will explain each one of these contributions and show how this study reshapes these debates in the next few pages.

The first historiographic contribution is a major reassessment of the impact of the trans-Atlantic slave trade on African societies. Benguela was not an empty land before the arrival of Portuguese explorers; thus the people who inhabited this territory were profoundly affected by the Portuguese presence and the subsequent pressure of the Atlantic commerce. The largest group that lived along the coast was the Ndombe, who were organized under different chiefdoms along Cattle Bay (Baía das Vacas) and did not constitute a homogeneous group. Agropastoralists, they fished, hunted small birds and animals, and traded with groups established inland. The arrival of Portuguese explorers was probably seen as part of the normal movement of traders, not as an event that would forever alter relationships between the Ndombe and the outside world. The ruler of the state of Peringue,<sup>7</sup> living in what is now the urban center of Benguela, granted the Portuguese the right to trade after receiving a payment of tribute. This was initially seen as a commercial partnership; he did not expect the new arrivals to settle for the long term. Yet the Portuguese had already established merchant communities along the coast of West Africa, including building the fortress of Elmina, and they expected to do the same on the coast of West Central Africa. They failed in Kongo but were successful along the coast of the state of Ngola, where Luanda is now found. Thus, while the ruler of Peringue expected a short-term visit, the Portuguese explorer Manoel Cerveira Pereira intended to settle and establish a Portuguese colony. Different perceptions of trade agreements marked the foundation of the Portuguese colony south of the Kwanza River; however, the local population resisted territorial penetration. Gradually, autonomous states around Benguela entered into contact with the small Portuguese population stationed in the fortress. While most contacts were peaceful and based on exchanging trade goods, in the later seventeenth century, episodes of armed conflict shaped the interactions between the Ndombe and the Portuguese. While some Ndombe rulers managed to remain outside the influence of the Portuguese colony, others signed vassalage treaties that guaranteed

<sup>7</sup> Portuguese sources use the same term to refer to both the ruler and the political territory being ruled. Thus the chiefdom and the head of the group are identified by the same term, *Peringue*.



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easy access to imported commodities and brought them protection by the Portuguese army, including its firearms, cannons, and gunpowder. Similar to what had happened in the New World, where Spaniards were seen as allies by minor rulers against Aztec expansion, rulers of smaller African communities welcomed Portuguese support against stronger neighbors with whom they were in competition.

The alliances proved to be fatal and represented the end of autonomous political life for most rulers located along the bay of Benguela, demonstrating how the Portuguese presence led to political and economic instability. Yet specialists in West Central African history have claimed that the Atlantic economy and the trans-Atlantic slave trade had only minor impacts on local societies in West Central Africa.<sup>8</sup> Departing from this suggestion of continuity grounded in demographic studies, this book engages with the consequences of the trans-Atlantic slave trade in African societies. This study explores political changes, the collapse of old states and the emergence of new ones, and the subsequent shifts in the ways that people identified themselves. Societies in the interior of Benguela faced violent upheavals associated with the slave trade from its inception. Rulers were killed, removed from power, and co-opted into the trans-Atlantic slave trade from the early seventeenth century through the mid-nineteenth century. Constant competition for resources, subjects, power, and markets threatened alliances between African rulers and imposed fragmented polities with different degrees of connection to the colonial apparatus and the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

Treaties with the Portuguese required the payment of tribute, in most cases in the form of slaves. Rulers also were forced to open their territories to traders and their caravans and to welcome Catholic priests and colonial authorities. In exchange, they gained access to imported commodities. In the short term, this might have resulted in the survival of local political elites. However, in the long term, treaties with the Portuguese allowed the expansion of colonialism; brought about African dependence on imported commodities with a short lifespan, such as alcohol, gunpowder, and textiles; and led to the imposition of new elites who relied on their strong ties to Atlantic commerce. The violence that was

<sup>8</sup> John Thornton, "The Slave Trade in Eighteenth Century Angola: Effects of Demographic Structure," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 14, no. 3 (1980): 417–27; Joseph C. Miller, "The Significance of Drought, Disease and Famine in the Agriculturally Marginal Zones of West-Central Africa," *Journal of African History* 23, no. 1 (1982): 17–61; Joseph C. Miller, *Way of Death: Merchant Capitalism and the Angolan Slave Trade, 1730–1830* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988).

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required to generate the captives of war who fed the expanding need for cheap labor in the mines of the New World provoked political instability, displaced people who became refugees, and negatively affected agricultural production. Although political competition and warfare predated the arrival of the Portuguese, the level of violence was elevated to previously unknown levels and, once introduced, lasted more than 300 years. The continuous disruption of raids, warfare, and other acts of violence forced the Ndombe and neighboring African groups to restructure the institutions that organized their lives, but they did so without achieving the level of security and prosperity that might have been expected from their involvement in international trade. The demands and transformations imposed by the trans-Atlantic slave trade had a devastating impact on the hinterland of Benguela. As Walter Rodney, Paul Lovejoy, Joseph Inikori, Walter Hawthorne, and Toby Green have shown, we cannot separate economic decline, dependency, and political instability on the African continent at the end of the nineteenth century from the long history of the trans-Atlantic slave trade.<sup>9</sup>

The second historiographic debate this book discusses is the cultural transformation that the inhabitants of this region faced during this tumultuous period, which tends to be called “creolization” in the scholarship.<sup>10</sup> Acknowledging concern about the use of the term “Creole/

<sup>9</sup> Walter Rodney, *History of the Upper Guinea Coast: 1545–1800* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1980); Paul E. Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Joseph Inikori (ed.), *Forced Migration: The Impact of the Export Slave Trade on African Societies* (London: Hutchinson, 1982); Walter Hawthorne, *Planting Rice and Harvesting Slaves: Transformations Along the Guinea-Bissau Coast, 1400–1900* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2003); Toby Green, *The Rise of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade in Western Africa, 1300–1589* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

<sup>10</sup> Kamau Brathwaite, *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica, 1770–1820* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1971); Ira Berlin, “From Creole to African: Atlantic Creoles and the Origins of African-American Society in Mainland North America,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 53, no. 2, Third Series (April 1996): 251–88; Ira Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 24–36; Paul Lovejoy and David Trotman, “Enslaved Africans and their Expectations of Slave Life in the Americas: Toward a Reconsideration of Models of ‘Creolisation,’” in *Questioning Creole: Creolisation Discourses in Caribbean Culture*, ed. Verene Shepard and Glen L. Richards (Kingston, Jamaica: Ian Randle, 2002); Roquinaldo Ferreira, “Ilhas Crioulas: O Significado Plural da Mestiçagem Cultural na África Atlântica,” *Revista de História* 155, no. 2 (2006): 17–41; Linda M. Heywood and John K. Thornton, *Central Africans, Atlantic Creoles, and the Making of the Foundation of the Americas, 1585–1660* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 49–106; Jane Landers, *Atlantic Creoles in the Age of Revolutions* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).