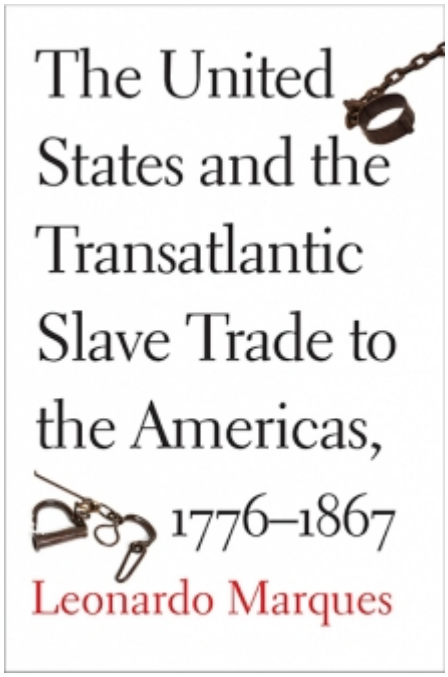
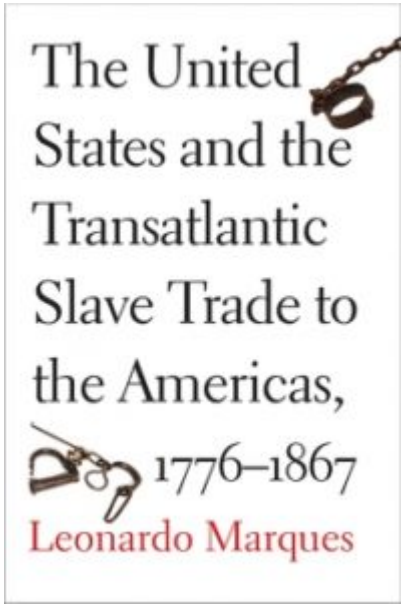
Selling Misery Abroad





Leonardo Marques, *The United States and the Transatlantic Slave Trade to the Americas, 1776-1867.* New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2016. 328 pp., $40.

More than 150 years since the conclusion of the Civil War, we live in a world rife with forced migration and less-than-free labor. In many places across the globe, refugees flee their war-torn homelands and all that they have ever known in search of safety in strange new societies where mixed fortunes await them. Elsewhere, the desperately poor attempt to cross national borders in the hopes of providing better lives for themselves and their families. The private prison complex makes vast profits for its investors on the backs of prisoners, many of

whom are young men of color. In other cases, people, women and children in particular, are bought and sold by unscrupulous predators along well-worn national and international networks of human trafficking. The victims' new lives are defined in large part by exploitation and a lack of freedom. The twentieth century witnessed forced migration and unfree labor on an epic scale. Nazi labor camps and the genocidal efficiency with which millions of people were transported to their death during the Holocaust and the Soviet Gulag exhibited two of humanity's lowest points. In the midst of all of this suffering, dislocation, and exploitation, the transatlantic slave trade and Atlantic slavery stand out as particularly cruel and horrifying examples of forced migration and unfreedom.

Few topics in Atlantic history elicit more debate or stronger feelings than the transatlantic slave trade. Spanning close to three centuries, the trade in African men, women, and children stands alone as history's largest forced migration, with at least twelve million people captured, sold, transported, and bought. The enslaved who survived the horrors of the Middle Passage provided the labor that served as the economic bedrock on which Atlantic empires and modern nation states were built. Today, tens of millions of descendants of the enslaved live across the Americas and elsewhere, often in harsher socioeconomic circumstances than their fellow citizens. Those who remained in Africa dealt with loss, dislocation, and disruption as their lives and societies were systematically exploited to feed the labor demands of faraway European colonies in a process that began as a proto-capitalist phenomenon and concluded as one that was at the heart of nineteenth-century capitalism. The impact of the slave trade and later European imperialism are intensely felt in Africa today. In fact, the legacy of the slave trade has led some to argue that reparations are warranted for this grievous injustice.

Given the immense significance of the transatlantic slave trade and the institution of slavery, it is hardly surprising that scholars have studied and debated these topics for centuries. Some historians have sought to understand the complex interplay of ideas about race, culture, economics, and empire that led to the rise of slavery and the slave trade. Many of these inquiries have been forced to address the challenging topic of African involvement and complicity. Some have concerned themselves primarily with numbers, seeking to quantify the lives of millions of men, women, and children. Such scholars have been aided immeasurably by the creation of *Voyages: The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database*. Others have examined the economics of the slave trade and its larger impact on regional, imperial, Atlantic, or global economies. Historians have taken cultural approaches to the slave trade, seeking in particular to understand the extent to which African cultures survived the trade and enslavement. Social historians have painted harrowing portraits of life and death aboard slave ships. Others have analyzed shipboard rebellions, or topics

related to health, technology or seafaring. Political studies have sought to understand the fight to abolish or defend the slave trade and slavery.

Leonardo Marques adds his voice to the field of slave trade studies with *The United States and the Transatlantic Slave Trade to the Americas, 1776-1867.* Based on a 2013 Emory University PhD dissertation, Marques's book focuses on the role that citizens of the United States and their ships played in the slave trade to other parts of the Americas in the eras spanning from independence to shortly after the conclusion of the Civil War. Impressively researched in English, Spanish, and Portuguese-language archival and published primary sources, deeply conversant with an expansive historiography, and making nimble use of the *Voyages* database, *The United States and the Transatlantic Slave Trade to the Americas* seeks to correct a field of study which, in Marques's opinion, has been hindered by the persistent influence of W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Suppression of the African Slave Trade*, the failure to expand chronologically beyond c. 1820, and an overly dismissive attitude about the effects of anti-slave trade legislation.

Marques seeks to correct these perceived shortcomings by illustrating the effectiveness of U.S. slave trade legislation and analyzing the landscape of international law that U.S. slave traders had to navigate. The author's argument unfolds over six chronologically organized chapters. It begins with the creation of a truly American branch of the transatlantic slave trade, which emerged between independence and 1807; moves to a transitional period (1808-1820), in which the traffic was abolished to the U.S. but American merchants figured out ways to continue to ply their trade; shifts to an approximately forty-year era in which U.S. merchants conducted brisk (largely contraband) business in Brazil and Cuba, and concludes with the era of the Civil War, which turned out to be the event that finally ended American involvement in the slave trade.

At the heart of Marques's analysis is an attempt to understand the seeming dissonance between the fact that ships flying the American flag imported around one million Africans to other countries (many illegally) but only 100,000 or so slaves to the U.S. (most prior to 1808). In other words, how did a nation that was, legally at least, cut off from the African slave trade after 1808, and had only a moderate tradition of transatlantic slave trading as an independent nation, come to play such a substantial role in the traffic? The answer lies in demand, greed, small communities of mutual interest, transatlantic geopolitics, and a mosaic of international law that excluded subjects and citizens of some empires and nation states from the trade, but often provided Americans with loopholes to participate in this traffic.

Complicating matters further, the first half of the nineteenth century was a time in which the U.S. was becoming one of the hemisphere's most prominent slave societies as well as the major incubator of both pro- and antislavery thought in the Americas. Accordingly, the topic of legal and illegal slave trade became the source of much debate among activists, politicians, and the public as the republic careened toward Civil War.

This is a book about slave traders (captains, ship owners, and investors, largely), their ceaseless quest for profit as they sought to satisfy a demand for labor, a quest that had little regard for laws, national loyalties, or timing, and the forces that influenced the buying and selling of people. The story of these men and the political, legal, and economic forces that shaped their lives and actions is situated in multiple corners of the Atlantic world, from Rhode Island to the American South, from the coast of Africa to Brazil and Cuba. The latter two places receive the majority of space due to their continuing demand for Africans well into the nineteenth century. Marques also places his findings within various national and colonial histories, which are then situated in dialogue with each other. For example, legal developments within the early American republic are presented alongside the political culture of the contemporary British empire and the economic landscape of post-independence Brazil. In this sense, the book is a good example of the recent historiographic turn that might be called "U.S. and the World." What emerges within Marques's Atlantic and international framework is a lively analysis of the role that American citizens, their ships, and their flag played in transporting Africans across the Atlantic world, long after the slave trade to the United States had been abolished.

The United States and the Transatlantic Slave Trade to the Americas has a number of strengths. The book's evidentiary base is impressive. Marques's dual Atlantic and international framework is thoughtful and effective. Most importantly, the author is largely successful in meeting his goal of detailing and analyzing American involvement in the transatlantic slave trade between independence and the Civil War. There are, however, some shortcomings to the book. For one, the book sometimes reads like a dissertation, which is exactly what it was just three years before publication. Second, very few Africans appear in the book. This is, of course, a political and legal history that states clearly that its primary focus is slave traders. At the same time, however, this is a political and legal history that seeks to explain how a million or more men, women, and children were violently uprooted from their homelands, forced to endure the Middle Passage, and then sold into slavery. The voices and experiences of these people demand a place in a study of the transatlantic slave trade. Regardless of this shortcoming, *The United States and the Transatlantic Slave Trade to the Americas* is a valuable book that adds to Atlantic and international history, as well as our understanding of slavery

and the slave trade.

This article originally appeared in issue 17.3.5 (Summer, 2017).

Nathaniel Millett is an associate professor of history at Saint Louis University. He is the author of *The Maroons of Prospect Bluff and their Quest for Freedom in the Atlantic World,* which won four prizes. Thanks to a Fulbright Fellowship in London and a Weatherhead Fellowship at the School for Advanced Research in Santa Fe, he has made major progress on a book that considers the role that indigenous people played in the Anglo-Caribbean between the sixteenth century and the middle of the nineteenth century.