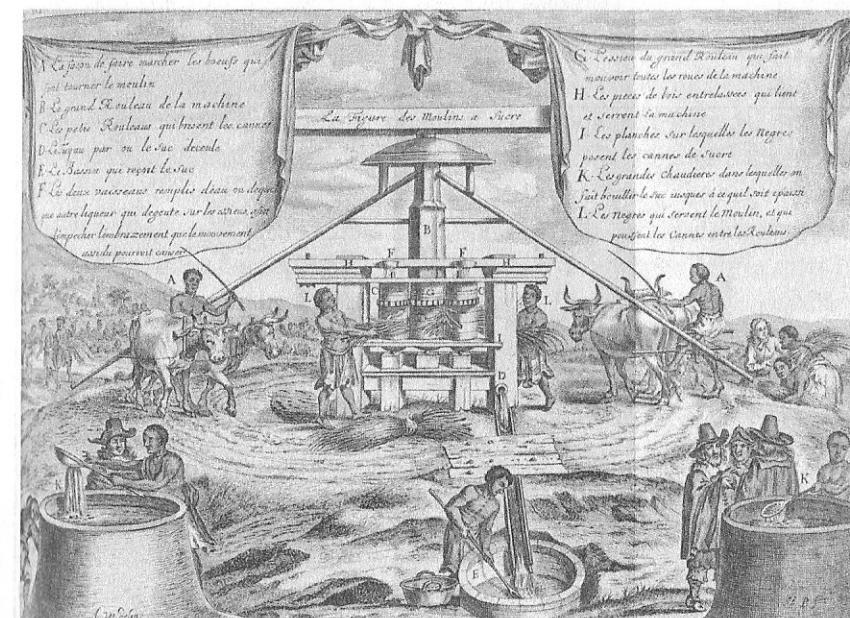


Another testament to slavery's significance on a worldwide scale can be obtained by comparing the enslaved workforce to that of the emerging system of industrial wage labor. At the end of the eighteenth century, some six million persons of African descent lived in the Americas, with more than four million of them in slavery. Add to these an African population of at least four million in slavery and those in slavery in the Old World diaspora and one sees that this huge slave workforce dwarfed the number of industrial laborers earning wages in Europe and North America, who totaled at most a few hundred thousand at this time.

### Metamorphoses in the Atlantic Diaspora

Two great regions were put in close contact with each other through the Atlantic slave trade: the Americas as a whole (but especially the Atlantic coastal regions) and West and Central Africa. These two areas changed in close interaction with one another from the mid-sixteenth to mid-nineteenth centuries. Increases in wealth and population of one generally came at the expense of the other, but there also were a few instances, such as cuisine, where the contacts benefited both regions.

As sugar production expanded in the Caribbean and Brazil, the principal destinations of captives arriving in the Americas were plantations where sugar, tobacco, or indigo was the principal product. These establishments had much work to do in addition to field labor: carpentry and masonry, blacksmithing, sewing and tailoring, handling of horses and carts, handling of boats, cooking, washing, domestic service, hair and other grooming, handling cattle, marketing, and plantation management. The mines required digging, carpentry, masonry, and ore sorting, processing, and transportation. In addition, while large groups on plantations and mines dominated the institution of slavery, many slaves were held individually or in small numbers in households. These shared the full burden and responsibility of running the house and lived in intimate connection with their masters. Their subordination was direct and personal rather than institutional. Slavery was mainly about work—in the Old World and in sub-Saharan Africa, and especially in the Americas. Figure 3.2 shows a sugar plantation of the seventeenth century, though from the perspective of the masters rather than of the slaves. The image nonetheless provides a reminder that—in agriculture, mining, transportation, construction, and household work—it was black slaves and free people of color who played the most central role in construction of colonial economies and, thereby, in the creation of the transatlantic economic system. Work and the work discipline that emerged from successive eco-



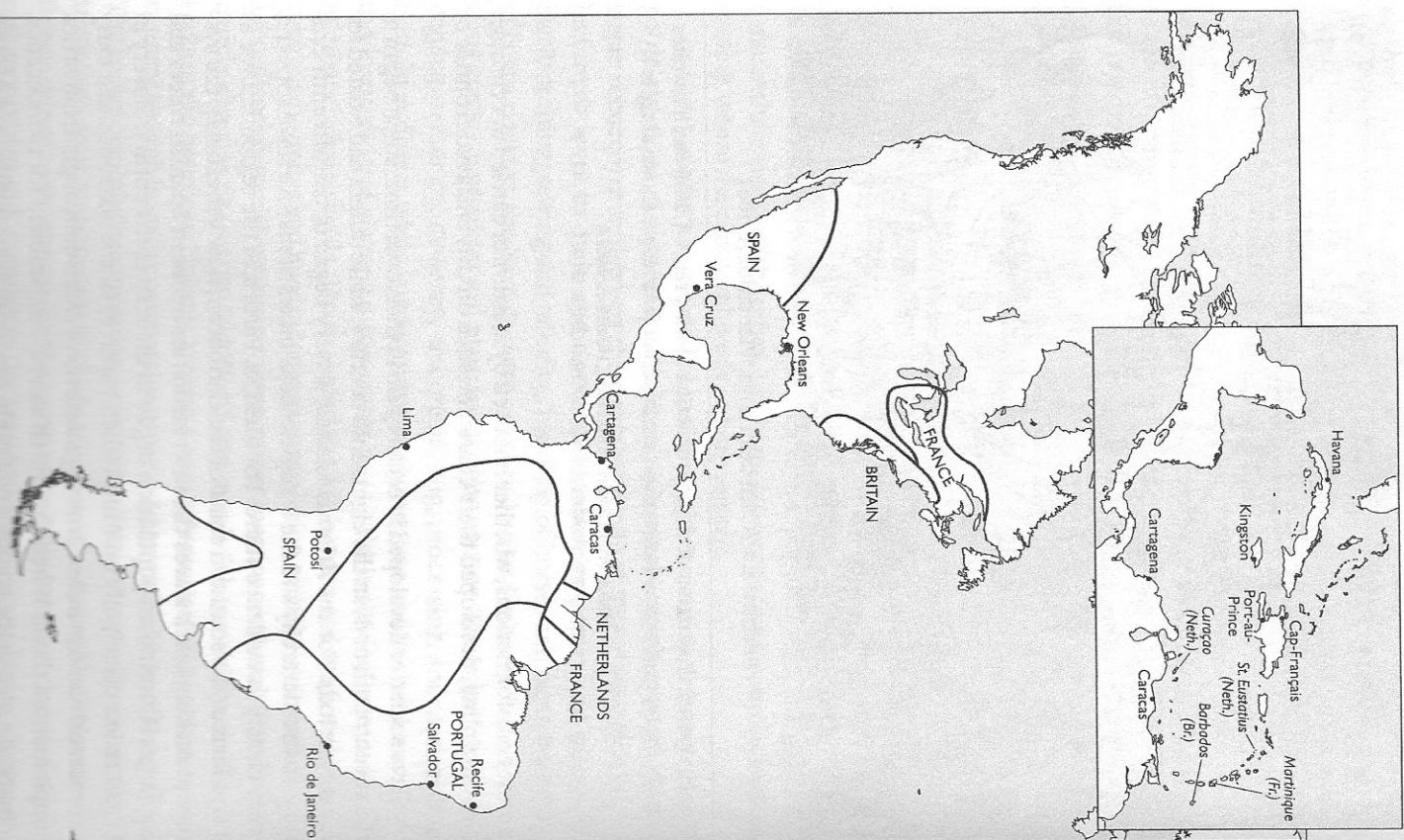
**FIGURE 3.2** Caribbean Sugar Plantation, c. 1665

This composite illustration of sugar production in the French Caribbean illustrates a range of the types of work. Most workers are male, but females are shown at right.

Source: From Charles de Rochefort, *Histoire naturelle et morale des Isles Antilles de l'Amérique* (Paris, 1665)

nomic transformations, whether imposed by masters or carried out through self-discipline, developed their characteristics on this enslaved frontier of modernity.

Slave societies developed in each region in their own time: some began in the seventeenth or even the eighteenth century, while others had existed for longer periods. For the Atlantic islands, slavery began in the fifteenth century, so the hierarchy and the complex social mixes of mature slave societies were clearly in evidence there. For Mexico, Peru, and the region known as Terra Firme (the southern coast of the Caribbean, now Venezuela), the system of making black slaves the intermediaries between Spanish rulers and the larger Amerindian population began in the sixteenth century. Slavery in Brazil relied principally on Amerindian captives in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, but growing numbers of captives brought from Africa supplemented them. When the Dutch seized Pernambuco for two decades, it marked a step in the colony's evolution toward greater numbers of African slaves, an experience shared by several Caribbean islands.



In the mid-seventeenth century, a wave of new colonies came into existence, governed by the powers of northern Europe. Curaçao, Guyana, and New Amsterdam for the Dutch; Barbados and Jamaica for the English, along with Virginia and Carolina; Martinique and Guadeloupe for the French; the Danish West Indies; and the Swedish colony along the Delaware River. Still other colonies began later: the French in St. Domingue at the beginning of the eighteenth century and in Louisiana in the 1720s. Trinidad, barely populated at the time, was opened by the Spanish to French settlers in 1777. In each case, the experience of charter generations newly arrived from Africa or from other American colonies repeated itself. These individuals set the initial patterns of the settlements, under the direction of their white masters and often in interaction with Amerindian populations. After a generation, the initial populations of immigrants came to share the colony with native-born creoles. In the third generation, an increasingly complex mix of different backgrounds emerged, including additional arrivals from Africa, perhaps from different regions than earlier waves. The immigrant populations were mostly young adults. There were hardly any older persons and very few children. The creole population began simply with children, and only after more than half a century might it include significant numbers of the elderly.

Most of those sent across the Atlantic were men and women between the ages of twelve and thirty. Still, significant numbers of young children and older people made the voyage. Death rates were severe at every stage of travel, even after arrival. On the Atlantic voyage, 5 to 25 percent of those who boarded the ships failed to leave them alive. Similar death rates are presumed for the months of capture, travel, and detention in Africa before they embarked. Additional fatalities occurred as slaves traveled from their initial landing point in the Americas—Salvador, Rio, Barbados, Curaçao, Charleston—to their final destination. The latter could be as far from the ocean as Potosí, Minas Gerais, Mexico City, or Kentucky. Not all migrants from Africa were enslaved, however: Rodrigo da Costa Almeida, a Luso-African born in Angola, made his fortune as a slave trader in the Angolan interior, and then moved in 1713 from Luanda across the Atlantic to Bahia, where he established an important family.

The delivery of captive Africans—each forced to take on a new slave identity—soon created a range of new ethnicities in the Americas. The names of African ethnic groups gave way to New World labels; thus the terms Congo and Angola were applied to people from these large and variegated regions: “Bambara” referred to people from the upper Niger Valley, “Coromanti” to those dispatched from the Gold Coast, and “Arda” or “Arda” for many people sent from the Bight of Benin. These New World terms commonly linked

people who spoke similar languages. Indeed, the words "Ibo" and "Yoruba" (or "Nago"), which developed as ethnic terms in the Americas, ultimately gained acceptance in Africa. In this mix of African ethnicities, the "creole" or locally born people of African descent became, in effect, the creole (or Afro-creole) ethnic group of Venezuela, Barbados, or any other territory. Creoles were defined by language as well as birth: they spoke the Portuguese-based (or other) creole language of their territory as a native language. Creoles, however, could also be broken down by color into additional ethnic groups. For instance, in the French colonies, the term *mulâtre* (mulatto) tended to refer to free people with European and African ancestors. This became an ethnic label rather than a phenotypically based label: slaves with white ancestors were labeled as "slaves" rather than "mulattos." On the other hand, for the black people who lived out their lives in Europe, usually after birth or a stay in the Americas, it was their status as a minority rather than their specific origins that labeled them. Regardless of color or birth, they tended to be known as "blacks" or "people of color."

Enslaved African women appear, according to some records, to have borne children rather commonly within a year or two of their arrival in a colony. The pattern seems significant, but one is left to speculate as to its meaning. Did the women decide to have children, or was the decision imposed on them by men? Were the fathers black or white, slave or free? One can imagine the children resulted from rape, as the incoming women fell victim to white masters or to black male slaves who had few other areas in which to exercise power. Or one could imagine that the young women arrived in a new region that would be their home, for better or for worse, and decided they would benefit from having someone to love and thus sought an opportunity to bear a child. African captives were ripped away from their families when they began their voyage and had to construct new ones as they lived out their new lives. They also had to replace the society and ritual life of their previous existence.

The number of children born in the Americas to women from Africa was generally smaller than the number of children born to slave women who themselves were born in the Americas. This is partly because the women captured and sent across the Atlantic lost their earlier children to separation or untimely death. But women from Africa were also sometimes unwilling to bring children into the new world of slavery and found ways to abort unwanted pregnancies. New families of American slave society centered principally on the nurturing efforts of the women, whether they were African-born or creoles. Some had male partners for short or long times who joined them in sustaining the family unit. But marriages were rarely formalized among slaves in the Americas.

The women who came to the Americas were almost entirely from the coastal regions of Africa. The ethnicity of female slaves from West Africa was primarily the Wolof in Senegal, the Mandé of Sierra Leone, the Akan-speakers of the Gold Coast, the Gbe-speakers and Yoruba-speakers of the Bight of Benin, and the Carabali and Igbo-speakers of the Bight of Biafra. The male slaves of the Americas, in contrast, came from interior groups such as the Bambara, Chamba, and Hausa, in addition to the coastal ethnicities. The explanation of this continuing pattern can be found in the costs and benefits of slavery as seen through African eyes. As African slave holdings expanded along with the overseas slave trade, African buyers consistently preferred female slaves over males. Females performed work that was much in demand—farming and household chores—and they were perhaps more easily controlled than males. As a result, African merchants paid higher prices for females than for males. European purchasers, in contrast, paid higher prices for males than for females, based on their valuations of males and females and their sense of the productivity of men and women on New World plantations. As a result, male captives from the interior were sent to the coast for export, while female captives from the interior were purchased and held within Africa.

Close to the coastline, female slaves were as likely to be sent to the Americas as to be purchased for local exploitation. This pattern is less clear in Central Africa, because of the greater uniformity in language and culture of the region: slaves from Central Africa were usually known simply as "Congo" in the New World, whether they came from the Angolan coast, the interior of Lunda, or the forested valley of the Congo River. Yet if the economics were similar, then it may be that most female captives from Central Africa were from the coastal regions and Kongo in ethnicity. To the degree that mothers and fathers passed distinct traditions to their children in the slave community, one can suggest that slave mothers handed down the customs of the African coastline to their children and that the mores of the African interior were passed on mainly by fathers.

Slave families of Africa and the Americas were mixed in various fashions. Of course men and women of the same African nation or ethnicity tended commonly to set up households, especially for the least-represented ethnicities, to share their language and home culture. But it was also common for fathers and mothers in slave communities to be of different nations and of different religious traditions. Another sort of mixed family was that based on "fictive kinship": the adoption of brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, following the tradition of closeness among shipmates. In other cases, families were mixed among slave and free, black and white. There certainly were

cases where a free white man took an African woman as a full partner who lived in his house and whose children he recognized as his own—with the man perhaps freeing the children and even their mother. More often, however, free white men took lovers among slave women and declined to recognize their children, though they may have provided some support to their offspring. At the extreme were the men who had children with their slaves and later sold their own children. In the Americas, many black men, especially the African born, were left without families except for the fictive “brothers” with whom they worked. In Africa, enslaved women had no family except their masters; the children were theirs to nurture but belonged to their owners.

The eighteenth-century Jamaican planter Thomas Thistlewood recorded in his diary his every act of sex with his principal slave mistress Phibbah and his nearly equal number of sexual subjugations of more than 130 slaves—mostly women he owned—over more than three decades.<sup>10</sup> Thistlewood never recorded the feelings of the women involved in these episodes, but he commonly made small payments to them. Phibbah remained with Thistlewood to the end of his life, living in a manner in some ways similar to that of a free person. His young slave Sally became demoralized under the pressures of slavery, however. She ran away frequently, sometimes after having sex with Thistlewood, and accepted punishments for this and other misdeeds. She even stole food from a woman who had been her shipmate. Thistlewood’s diary also recorded events in the life of his first slave, Lincoln, who himself became a patriarch with three wives, though Thistlewood maintained sexual access to Lincoln’s two principal wives, Sukey and Abba. Thistlewood controlled all these slaves with threats and violent punishments.

In the first generation or so of a slave community, families consisted simply of parents and children. Only after several generations did they come to include grandparents and great-uncles who could pass on their wisdom and maintain family traditions. Even as slave families began to extend and strengthen, other forces intervened to reduce their size and influence. The masters could sell family members and claim women for themselves. The arrival of new slaves from Africa increased the proportion of young, unconnected individuals.

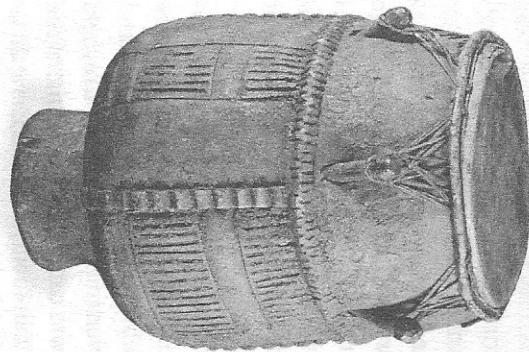
While Africans arrived in the Americas in slavery, a portion of their descendants and sometimes even the immigrants themselves were able to gain freedom. Women did so in greater numbers than men as their owners and lovers let them go. Owners also sometimes freed their slave children or elderly slaves. Many slaves bought their own liberty. (In Spanish territories, *coartación* gave slaves the legal right to know their purchase price and

gain freedom by paying it.) In addition, slaves or free persons purchased the freedom of their parents, children, spouses, or others. Escaped slaves sometimes gained recognition as free people in another region. By 1800, 10 percent of the U.S. black population was free, and somewhat larger portions of blacks were free in the Caribbean (even before the end of slavery in Haiti), in Brazil, and especially in the Spanish mainland territories. Free populations of color often specialized in artisanal work, such as that of coopers, tailors, and seamstresses. In rural areas, they became independent peasant farmers and sometimes slave owners.

Arrival in the Americas meant introduction to a new culture at many levels for each enslaved African. Almost everyone received a new name. Some had the strength of conviction to retain their previous names as well and pass them on to succeeding generations or even impose their use on owners and co-workers. One common compromise was using the given name of the dominant culture and a second name of African identity: Maria Caravali or José Congo. Masters generally provided clothing, but each person had something to say about what to put on each day and how to wear it. The complex story of changing patterns of dress in Africa and the diaspora through the agency of slavery and slave trade is worthy of more careful research. In the Americas, masters and European standards of dress had much to say about how Africans dressed, yet each person retained the habits of their homeland and their individual preferences. In Africa, great quantities of textiles were imported from India and later from Europe in exchange for slaves, and these imports influenced the creation, design, and wearing of garments in Africa. Perhaps a thorough review of images and texts for the Atlantic as a whole will clarify the patterns and the meaning of the developing standards of dress among black people in the early modern world.

A bit more can be said about African musical instruments and their arrival and modification in the Americas. To discuss musical instruments of West and Central Africa, one must begin with drums. The music of these drums and accompanying instruments was associated with every sort of social activity, including birth, death, marriage, initiation, and worship of nature spirits or high gods. A range of drum types was shared across West and Central Africa. They were commonly carved out of logs and sometimes had elaborate figures on the drum body. Drumheads, usually made of goat-skin, were held in place by nails, pegs, and laces.

Such instruments had been played for thousands of years, but innovations in drumming spread repeatedly. An interesting question is whether actual drums crossed the Atlantic along with the idea of the drum. One is reminded of the common story of how captive Africans on slave ships were unshackled



**FIGURE 3.3** Drum, late seventeenth century

This beautifully carved drum is a relatively small forty-six centimeters in height. The drumhead is held taut by pegs and cords. It was collected in Virginia but was created in Africa (as indicated by the tropical cordia and baphia woods). Drums of similar style are known in several areas of West and Central Africa.

Source: Courtesy of the British Museum.

from time to time, brought on deck, and commanded to dance. But if they were really to dance, why not have them dance as usual, to a drumbeat? And if there is to be a drummer, should it not be someone who can drum with some skill? The beautiful drum shown in figure 3.3 was collected in Virginia; it was likely created in Africa. Perhaps crew members purchased drums and played them, or perhaps the slaves onboard were induced to drum. Such thinking raises the possibility that drums and other musical instruments, along with other elements of African material culture, crossed the Atlantic with some regularity. Drums and drumming are documented throughout the African diaspora: slave owners periodically sought to ban drum playing, most consistently in North America, but the drums and related forms of percussion survived or reappeared almost everywhere in the Americas.

One popular instrument, the mbira, features tuned metal keys plucked with the thumb, often with a gourd attached as a resonator. The instrument developed perhaps two thousand years ago in Zimbabwe, once the adoption of iron-ore smelting allowed metallic keys to replace those made of bamboo. Mbiras came to the Americas and gained importance, especially in Brazil. A related instrument is the xylophone—in fact the term “marimba” came to mean both xylophone and mbira in the Caribbean and Brazil. Xylophones clearly came to the Americas from Africa, but they may have come by other routes as well. The xylophone or marimba took hold in various parts of the Americas and remains part of the African diaspora’s musical tradition. A form of marimba was developed separately by the Mayan people of Guate-

mala, but it was played in a much different way from that of Africans of the diaspora.

Cuisine is one area in which Africa and the Americas gained from the exchange between the two regions. Oil palms, African yams, bananas, plantains, rice, millet, and sorghum came to the Americas from Africa, plus akee, okra, and earth peas. In addition, African methods of cooking became widely influential in the Americas. In the stews, a basic starch (yam, rice, millet, sorghum) was served with a source of protein (such as fish, shelffish, meat, or beans) that was marinated in a sauce that included peppers. The stew was then garnished with greens and served with fruits on the side. The foodstuffs of the Americas provided new ingredients for such stews, both in Africa and in the Americas: new starch (maize, manioc, and sweet potato), new forms of protein (peanuts), new spices (chili peppers), new materials for marinades (tomatoes), and new fruits (pineapples). African fashions of eating, such as the West African tradition of eating from a common bowl and eating with the fingers, survived more unevenly in the Americas.

Africans in the Americas entered a world where Christianity was the religion of the master class. The Catholic powers—Spain, Portugal, and later France—tended to baptize African slaves and treat them formally (if not fully) as part of the Christian community. Some Africans who came to the Americas were indeed Christian—especially those from Central Africa, and a much smaller number from West Africa. White Protestants (the Dutch and English) showed little interest in the souls of their slaves and left them to their own practices. Some slaves were Muslims, and those schooled in the Islamic faith could speak and perhaps read and write Arabic. This group grew in time, in part because of the continuing expansion of Islam in West Africa. Most Africans, however, professed religious traditions specific to their homeland. In the mix of religious practices of the Americas, the black populations were left to develop an eclectic set of spiritual traditions.

Michael Gomez, in a thorough analysis of African cultural contributions to slave life in the American South, gives attention to the growing proportion of the American-born even during the eighteenth century. He acknowledges but counters the argument of Melville Herskovits, who concluded that since blacks and whites in the United States lived in close proximity, black culture was unlikely to survive. The strongest contrary evidence was that of New England, where William D. Pierson showed the liveliness and distinctiveness of the black community, even if it was tiny. In Louisiana, free mulattoes and quadroons were the first to baptize their children and often had formal church marriages, following a strategy aimed to preserve and advance their position in free society through dedication to formal social

values. North America was unusual among slave-importing regions in that it imported nearly equal numbers of females and males, along with a large proportion of children. This pattern resulted in part from the marginal position of the North American market, whose purchasers took mainly the cheaper slaves, but it also enabled the black population to grow more rapidly. Gomez emphasizes that Muslims were significant among New World slaves from the start and suggests that, because Muslims were often of elite status, they experienced tense relations with those of other religious backgrounds.<sup>11</sup>

While it is possible only in the rarest of cases for individuals in the Americas to trace their ancestry back to Africa, records do exist that clearly indicate the migration patterns, year by year or at least decade by decade, in which people left each region of the African coast and arrived in each region of the Americas. These patterns, if studied with sufficient care, may yet reveal more specific information on the relationship between the black populations of each American region and their African ancestors. Certain examples have already been analyzed in detail: for instance, the sudden increase in Central African imports to Charleston in the 1720s provides background for the Stono rebellion of 1739.<sup>12</sup>

Did African culture survive in the Americas? Scholars have devoted great energies to modeling and interpreting the fate of African culture and the basis of black culture in the Americas. Four basic models are now under debate, and one can be certain that the discussion will continue. One straightforward model is that of dominance: the power of the masters was sufficient to limit slave behavior to the extent that black culture in the Americas owed nothing to Africa and everything to conditions in slave society. A second model, nearly the opposite, is that of survival: Africans found ways, even under oppression and deprivation, to sustain the essence of their cultural heritage, so that black culture in the Americas developed primarily as a continuation of African traditions. A third model is that of syncretism: blacks in the Americas assembled the elements of various African cultures and European cultures into a cultural mosaic that drew eclectically on many ancestries. A fourth model is that of creolization: blacks in the Americas combined elements of African and European traditions with their own ingenuity to create a distinctly new culture. As the debates have continued, scholars have recently turned to combining the basic hypotheses to produce more nuanced interpretations of cultural change in the African diaspora.<sup>13</sup>

Language studies provide one of the many approaches to analyzing the fate of African folkways. In most cases, the speech communities of Africans in the Americas have been distinctive, but the nature of the distinction has varied widely; African languages continued to be spoken in the Americas,

especially in the eighteenth century, but also later, as with Yoruba and Kimbundu in nineteenth-century Brazil. Creole languages developed on the model of Crioulo, with its Portuguese lexicon and Atlantic grammar. Creoles with a French lexicon became the principal languages of St. Domingue, Martinique, Guadeloupe, and elsewhere; creoles with an English lexicon became widely spoken in Jamaica and along the Carolina coast. Spanish as spoken in Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic took on a rhythm and vocabulary that owed much to African inputs. The patterns of change and preservation in language may be different from those for religion, dance, dress, or philosophy. Like the other components of cultures, however, the evolution of language does not lend itself to a simple summary of cultural survival patterns.

Not all Africans in the Americas lived in slavery. Through manumission and escape, significant free populations grew up, notably in Brazil but also in the French colonies of the Caribbean and in Spanish colonies of the mainland and the islands. Many of the free people of color were artisans, living in towns and practicing their trades. In addition, peasant or free farming communities were able to form in Minas Gerais, Venezuela, St. Domingue, Hispaniola, and Suriname. Several scholars have compared the peasant communities of Suriname with those of Africa, and it would be useful to expand these comparisons to see how other New World communities of independent farmers—for instance in New Granada and Minas Gerais—compared with peasants in Africa. The free black communities of the Americas up to 1800, living in a world dominated by slavery, had the opportunity to define their relationships with black slave populations, Amerindian communities, poor white communities, and the white elite. In the legal arena, their options were restricted by “caste laws” created to keep them out of political and religious institutions dominated by whites. Such rules were formalized, especially by the Spanish but also by the Portuguese and French colonial regimes and by legislatures in English colonies. People of color, free and slave, were commonly registered in separate books from whites for baptisms and funerals. Nonetheless, free people commonly sought to remain very close to the church, perhaps rising in prestige as a result. One response to caste-law restrictions was the formation of separate Catholic brotherhoods for the blacks.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, free people developed specializations as artisans and sometimes established profitable farms, purchasing slaves to expand their production. Since military service was very important in the Spanish empire, free people of color often volunteered and sought to rise high in rank in militias and the regular army. As free populations grew in size and diversity, there developed a complex discourse on the precise combination

of color for each individual. For instance, in two censuses of artisanal families of Buenos Aires in the 1790s, a majority of the individuals were given different racial labels in the second census than in the first. This discourse enabled families to press suits and protests to officials, complaining about implementation of the caste laws. In addition to these campaigns of social mobility, there were examples of discreet “passing,” as some of the people of color gained acceptance as white.

The metamorphoses of black communities in the Americas, though continuous, maintained visible underpinnings of African society and culture. The cultural changes were substantial, but there was no way simply to impose European ways on large populations of African origin. The metamorphoses in quality of life were paralleled by changes in the quantitative dimension of life in the Americas. In 1500, the combined population of West and Central Africa was perhaps fifty million, while that of the Americas in total was fifty million or more. But by 1600, the American population had fallen to perhaps ten million, principally but not only from disease, and it hardly increased during the seventeenth century. During the eighteenth century, the black, brown, and white population of the Americas grew while that of the western coast of Africa declined, but nineteenth-century African populations remained closer. For people of African ancestry alone, the diaspora population of the Americas reached some six million in 1800, about 30 percent of the total populace. The African-descended population of the Americas in 1800 was therefore about one-tenth of the population of West and Central Africa and about one-twentieth the population of the African continent.

### Expansion of the Old World Diaspora

The Old World diaspora—more precisely, the populations of black people in regions to the north and east of sub-Saharan Africa—had existed for many centuries as a result of migration and settlement by Africans of free and slave status. In the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, an estimated ten thousand persons moved annually from sub-Saharan Africa into the Old World diaspora. Of the captives dispatched each year, the majority crossed desert or ocean to be settled in the “near diaspora” of North Africa, Aralbia, and (far to the south) Madagascar. A minority of the total went beyond these regions, across further lands and waters, to the “far diaspora” of Europe, the Middle East, South Asia, and distant islands of the Indian Ocean. Late in the eighteenth century, the slave trade to the Old World diaspora grew sharply and continued expanding well into the nineteenth century.<sup>15</sup>

The Middle Passage of captives destined for the Old World diaspora paralleled the Atlantic crossing in time and mortality. For those crossing to the “near diaspora” of the Old World, death rates were highest on the route to North Africa and somewhat lower on the way to Arabia and Madagascar—the number of fatalities is not known with precision but has been estimated at 15 percent of captives starting the journey. For those making the long trek across the Sahara, the distance could reach two thousand kilometers. The crossing was dangerous and exhausting; on occasions whole caravans lost their lives. For those sent by sea from the Horn and from Mozambique, the voyages across the Red Sea to Arabia and across the Mozambique Strait to Madagascar were safer than the Atlantic, yet the usual problems of shipboard mortality remained ever present.

Captives traveled across the Sahara on foot, while camels carried other trade goods and supplies. Good leadership and timing were critical qualities for the caravan leaders, who were mostly of Tuareg ethnicity in the western desert, Kanuri ethnicity in the central desert, and Arab ethnicity in the east. In all cases, they needed to avoid storms and reach widely spaced sources of food and water. Along the Red Sea and the East African coast, large and small dhows carried captives to their destinations. These flexible and maneuverable craft, with lateen sails and hulls of planks lashed together with cords, were built from lumber wherever it was available. Far to the south, the slave trade to and from Madagascar relied not only on dhows but on outrigger canoes powered by square sails and paddles.

While the largest number of captives probably traveled from sub-Saharan Africa to the near diaspora, the slave trade did operate in both directions: Andalusian women and others from the Mediterranean were sent in captivity to the western savanna, Yemeni captives were sold in Ethiopia, and Malagasy captives were sold on the African mainland, especially as Dutch vessels brought cargoes from Madagascar to the Cape Colony.

Even within the near diaspora, destinations of African captives ranged over a huge area. To begin with, many captives went no further than the Sahara itself. Regular demand for laborers emanated from the desert salt mines of Taghaza and from the more northerly oases, where dates and wheat were grown. North of the desert, the long rule of Mulay Isma'il in Morocco (1672–1727) saw substantial purchases of black captives for the large military force the king maintained. Purchases of captives in Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya, all under Ottoman rule, were steady but modest. Egypt, a major center of population with an elite that required domestic servants, imported large numbers of girls. Along the Red Sea route, significant numbers of captives were delivered to South Arabia and the Hijaz. All these regions thus