



ABSTRACT

The Transatlantic slave trade is often taught in the United States through the lens of its impact on enslaved Africans in the Americas, with little emphasis on the profound consequences it had on West African societies. This paper reflects on my personal academic journey in New York University Accra's "Black Atlantic" course, which sought to expand the understanding of slavery from the perspective of the African continent, specifically Ghana.

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Before traveling to Ghana to study at New York University Accra, the history and significance of the Transatlantic slave trade, and particularly the internal trades that occurred in West Africa, were not topics commonly explored in depth in the United States public school system. When the slave trade was mentioned, the information only pertained to the system of trading where African men, women, and children were shipped across the Atlantic Ocean and landed in the Americas. The narrative of the slave trade would then shift to what an enslaved person's life was like on plantations, and in American society, ignoring the impact of that same trading system on West African people and nations back on the continent. The critically acclaimed novel turned television miniseries *Roots* by Alex Haley served as the way that many African Americans and White Americans alike, took a glance into the story of how one family, based on Haley's genealogical research, got involved in the transatlantic slave trade starting from the character Kunta Kinte's capture and enslavement in the Gambia.¹ By beginning the story of Alex Haley's roots in West Africa, Gambia, in the mid-1700s, audiences were at the very least introduced to the slave trading system that had been impacting West Africa, especially the Gold Coast for centuries, which now serves as a point of study for students who want to know more about the legacy of slavery and its contribution to the formation of The Black Atlantic.

Although *Roots* is critically acclaimed for its chronicling of lives that dealt with the transatlantic slave trade, it mostly examined an African American family's life in various eras of United States history, while the perspectives and experiences of those who remained in West African nations were left unsaid. The Black Atlantic course taught at New York University Accra serves to give students, from the diaspora, and elsewhere, the opportunity to learn about the slave trade from the West African perspective, with specific relevance to Ghana's history and

¹ (*Roots* 1977)

the people of Ghana's silenced stories of the horrors of slavery and the major economic gains made from trading with Europeans. It is within this context that this reflection paper will explore the books, *Abina and the Important Men: A Graphic History*² by Trevor Getz and *The Door of No Return: The History of Cape Coast Castle and the Atlantic slave trade* by William St Clair, while also reflecting on a semester full of deep interrogation of the systems of slavery that impacted every side of the diaspora, starting with the people of the Gold Coast.

The country of Ghana, formerly known as the Gold Coast has a significant place in world history as a nation that was impacted by slavery, the Atlantic slave trade, and internal trade, for centuries, adding to its cultural landscape today. While watching the waves of the Atlantic Ocean on the country's coast, one cannot help but think about the lives that were changed due to the capturing, enslavement, and shipping of Africans across those same waters. The coast also holds the history of European and Ghanaian relations, with forts such as Cape Coast Castle and Elmina Castle still standing today. The architecture of the castles alone tells a story of the people who controlled the estates and the people living within. The written accounts of life within and outside the castle and around the then-bustling Cape Coast Fante communities provide deeper perspectives on how the slave trades affected each aspect of a person's life. In the book, *The Door of No Return: The History of Cape Coast Castle and the Atlantic slave trade*, historian William St. Clair notes that within "Western tradition, literacy has usually been seen as liberation, a means of taking possession of knowledge, of fixing it, and of rendering it durable"³ which provides insight on how audiences should interrogate the stories of the past written in books and found in court documents as in the case of Abina Mansah, a woman who fought

² Getz, Trevor R., and Liz Clarke. 2012. *Abina and the Important Men: A Graphic History*. N.p.: OUP USA

³ St Clair, William. 2009. *The Door of No Return: The History of Cape Coast Castle and the Atlantic Slave Trade*. (N.p.: BlueBridge), 69.

against enslavement in 19th century Ghana. St. Clair's thorough analysis of the inner workings of Cape Coast Castle includes chapters describing the castle's construction and strictly utilitarian use as the emporium of the nation that had the largest share of the trade.⁴ The castles that historically lined the Gold Coast, which few can still be seen today, can be described as factories, sprouting up in the wake of the Portuguese-built Elmina Castle in the 15th century, "solving the problem of physically conducting trade thousands of miles from the European manufacturing base."⁵ The architecture of forts such as Cape Coast Castle depicts its purpose as a large "defended warehouse within which goods people- could be temporarily stored" with the waves of the Atlantic ocean constantly brushing up against the castle walls.⁶

The Economics of the slave trades that involved Europeans and the chiefs of the ethnic groups who occupied the Gold Coast, including the Fante people who heavily populated the Cape Coast area, were illustrated in both St. Clair's book and historian Trevor Getz's graphic novel *Abina and the Important Men*.⁷ The castle itself was essentially "built, rebuilt, modified, and maintained with the consent of local African political and religious leaders whose territory it was situated."⁸ Rent continued to be paid throughout the height of the slave trading era of the castle to the king of Efutu, then to the leaders of the Fante confederation who conquered and absorbed Efutu and later the Asante Kingdom, through a temporary conquest of the Fante people.⁹ The changes in who required payment from the European governors/nations point to the internal conflicts that occurred with the various ethnic groups of modern-day Ghana, especially

⁴ (St Clair 2009,57)

⁵ (St Clair 2009, 52)

⁶ (St Clair 2009, 51)

⁷ (Getz and Clarke 2012,)

⁸ (St Clair 2009, 39)

⁹ (St Clair 2009, 39)

the Asante, who were integral in the capturing and enslavement of Africans, acquiring large numbers of enslaved people through wars with neighboring groups.

From the early 1700s to the 1750s the Asante gained prominence as a nation that had an effective military organization, lavish celebrations to honor loyalty, successful wars of conquest, and required other states to pay human tributes to the Asante kingdom. By the mid-1800s, the Asante had reached every region of Ghana, raiding and conquering all of the Volta Region and spreading terror through Cape Coast, where the British controlled the castle. The Asante used slaves, prisoners of war, and people of conquered ethnic groups and communities, as members of their military, agricultural workers and miners, and skilled artisans such as Kinte weavers. To pay tribute to the Asante, tributary states such as Dagbon and Gonja in northern Ghana raided each other, contributing to an environment where people constantly lived in fear of being raided, traded, or killed. At Cape Coast Castle the governors of the fort knew that many of the enslaved people that walked through their doors, shackled together, came from the Asante “but did not originate from Asante, but rather came from communities conquered by, and subject to the Asante empire, or who had been brought to Asante as slaves from further inland.”¹⁰

Although the Asante were successful in conquering many territories and gained economic success through their trading of slaves, during the 1800s they engaged in wars with the British and the Fante who had a history of working alongside each other in Cape Coast. The 19th century brought along new advancements in technology, the Industrial Revolution, and the emergence of palm oil production as the British shifted away from slavery towards abolition and the end of slave trading. This shift was not appreciated by many chiefs and enslavers of the Gold Coast ethnic groups, especially the Asante who had acquired great wealth based on their

¹⁰ (St Clair 2009, 200)

involvement in both external and internal slave trading and who prided themselves on the political and economic power they gained without working with the British. The Asante also controlled the “principal palm oil-producing regions and the major ports of the area,” providing a challenge for the British who were investing more energy and effort into controlling the region.¹¹ Through a series of conflicts between the Asante and the Fante as well as the Asante and the British, came the retreat of the Asante from the coast back to the inland forest region. The British marked their territories as The Colony and The Protectorate, located on the coast, representing how even if the British moved towards abolition, colonialism, a new form of enslavement was on the rise. In the year 1876, two years after slavery was abolished throughout Britain and extended into the Gold Coast, prohibiting “all manner of dealing and trading in the Purchase, Sale, Barter, or Transfer of Slaves, or of Persons intended to be sold, transferred, used or dealt with as Slaves, practiced or carried on, in, at, to or from any Port of the Coast or Countries of Africa” the story of a young woman born in the Asante Kingdom and sold into slavery on the plantations of palm oil planters in Saltpond begins.

Trevor Getz’s Graphic novel illustrated by Liz Clarke, takes audiences into the life of Abina Mansah, whose story Getz found in court transcripts from 1876 in the Gold Coast. Out of the primary source, the legal documents, came the illustrative interpretation of Abina’s journey from being enslaved in Saltpond under palm oil plantation owner Quamina Eddoo, to escaping to Cape Coast where James Davis, a mixed-race court interpreter, helps her take her case to court, claiming that she was wrongfully enslaved and brought against her will from Adansi. What transpired in the courtroom of Cape Coast Castle, under British magistrate William Melton, is a testament to the sides of slavery in Ghana that everyday people would not typically get to

¹¹ (Getz and Clarke 2012, 103)

witness through a primary source such as court transcripts, that detail a case led by a young Asante-born woman. The important men in the title speak to the men of the court case and the larger system of patriarchy that held the lives of seemingly unimportant women and men in its hands. In chapter 6: “Abina Silenced, Abina Redeemed” the situation of the enslaved children who worked as carriers, domestic workers, and net halers on fishing boats in the Gold Coast colony revealed how “English Justice was supposed to eliminate slavery but instead it had just shifted it onto the backs of children.”¹² The destinies of these enslaved young people, such as Abina, were held in the palms of important men, who in the case of Abina and many others, took the side of self-preservation rather than a true acknowledgment of the lives of wrongfully enslaved. Self-preservation and a sense of disregard for the embodied experience of being enslaved, stripped of agency and free will, can be recognized in the ways that the important men continuously spoke about not wanting to disrupt the system of slavery or British rule within the Gold Coast. The British engaged in a “civilizing mission” throughout Abina’s lifetime that sought to grant people freedom and equality, although they felt as if Africans were not worthy of “self-rule and self-determination” approaching the mission of civilization from a standpoint of superiority.¹³ In the Cape Coast region, many British leaders opposed getting rid of slavery in its entirety because the wealth of their colony was built on the backs of enslaved Africans, and through their relationships with important men such as Quamina Eddoo, who provided them with palm oil.

The complex history of economic success linked to extracting and exporting the Gold Coast’s resources and the social relations that were put in place to balance power between Europeans and Africans were the main reasons why stories such as Abina’s end with judges such

¹² (Getz and Clarke 2012, 67)

¹³ (Getz and Clarke 2012, 105)

as William Melton who ruled in favor of “powerful men who were sympathetic to slave ownership and not to young, female slaves.”¹⁴ The stories of other people directly affected by slavery have been silenced not only by their circumstances in the time in which they lived but also by the literary culture that archives exist in, favoring written accounts over oral storytelling.

The writers of books such as *Abina and the Important Men: A Graphic History* and *The Door of No Return: The History of Cape Coast Castle and the Atlantic slave trade* hold the lives and experiences of the people living either inside Cape Coast Castle or outside on palm oil plantations, in their written telling of these stories. Students and readers of these resources have the opportunity to learn not only about the shipping of enslaved Africans across the ocean made possible through forts such as Cape Coast Castle but also the lives of the people who remained in modern-day Ghana after the slave trade was abolished, both the British who encouraged “palm plantations as an economic alternative to slave trading”¹⁵ and the African nations who found ways to continue engaging in slavery. Ghanaians of today live with a history that many residents claim that “nobody remembers anything about” or, even more intriguing, “nobody talks about that.”¹⁶

Historians and scholars such as Getz, St. Clair, and Dr. Kofi Baku, professor of the Black Atlantic Course at NYU Accra, have spent their lives researching the multi-layered systems of slavery in modern-day Ghana, uncovering and sharing the stories of the people directly impacted by centuries of slavery. By organizing the class in a way that deeply explored Ghana before colonization, through colonization and the fight for independence, and lastly, as a country that lives with the legacies of slavery both external and internal, students studying at NYU Accra can

¹⁴ (Getz and Clarke 2012, 109)

¹⁵ (St Clair 2009, 249)

¹⁶ Holsey, Bayo. 2008. *Routes of Remembrance: Refashioning the Slave Trade in Ghana*. N.p.: University of Chicago Press.(2)

leave the course, more informed about the creation of the Black Atlantic and the African Diaspora. Through historical accounts found in books such as *Routes of Remembrance Refashioning the Slave Trade in Ghana*,¹⁷ and lectures given by Dr. Baku on how the territories separated by the Atlantic Ocean developed a system of migration, trade, colonialization, and intellectual and cultural exchange that defines the Black Atlantic, my outlook on the slave trade began to shift from a perspective that favored Diasporan narratives of those who endured slavery in the Americas to a perspective that takes the people and systems that existed on the continent before European involvement into account.

The final chapter of *The Door of No Return*, titled “What do we tell our children” asks readers, those of Ghanaian descent and the Diasporans how Cape Coast Castle and more importantly the stories of the people who experienced slavery should be explained to the younger generations.¹⁸ Should the castles be celebrated for their beautiful architectural structures or recognized as dungeons that supported a system of capturing, enslaving, and shipping Africans across the Atlantic Ocean? Should graphic novels such as *Abina and the Important Men* be shared with caution as the author, illustrator and even the anonymous clerk who transcribed the transcript tell the stories of enslaved people like Abina, from a partly subjective viewpoint, potentially wrongfully interpreting the situations?¹⁹ A key takeaway from the research covered in the Black Atlantic Course, either through lectures, group discussions, or books, is that first, the stories of the Africans who lived underneath, within, and outside of the castles must be told and actively recovered from the archives, both physical documents and oral ways of recall that remain. Focus can then be put into how history can be made more accessible to everyday people

¹⁷(Holsey 2008,).

¹⁸ (St Clair 2009, 261)

¹⁹ (Getz and Clarke 2012, 116)

and how monuments such as Cape Coast Castle and Assin Manso can be promoted and used to educate people or provide spaces for healing for those of the diaspora.

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