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Chains and Resistance: The History of Slavery in the Americas

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Introduction

This book traces the long, uneven histories of slavery and emancipation across the Americas, from the first century of European expansion to the formal abolitions that culminated in the late nineteenth century. It asks how vast systems of coerced labor were built and maintained, how they were resisted and reimagined by the people forced to endure them, and how legal, economic, and cultural changes opened pathways—sometimes narrow and fragile—toward freedom. In doing so, it foregrounds the agency of enslaved and formerly enslaved people whose choices, strategies, and visions were central to the making of Atlantic societies.

Our approach combines archival research with personal narratives. Court petitions, manumission records, ship logs, bills of sale, runaway advertisements, plantation ledgers, and government decrees appear alongside life histories, testimonies, and oral traditions preserved in families and communities. Read together, these sources illuminate both the structures of power that shaped bondage and the everyday negotiations through which people carved out space for survival, kinship, worship, work, and rebellion. They also reveal the limits of any single archive: what was recorded, what was silenced, and how memory and documentation can speak to one another.

Slavery in the Americas was never a single institution. It took different forms in Portuguese, Spanish, French, Dutch, and British colonies and later in the independent nations that arose from them. Plantation economies—sugar in the Caribbean and Brazil; tobacco and rice in the early mainland; cotton and coffee in later expansions—depended on violent expropriation but also on intricate systems of credit, insurance, and imperial regulation. Law both codified racialized hierarchy and, at times, opened narrow legal avenues to contest bondage: provisions for self-purchase, freedom suits, military service, and ecclesiastical intervention. Regional variations in these frameworks, and the ways people navigated them, are central to the chapters that follow.

Resistance likewise took many forms. Flight produced maroon communities from the palenques of Spanish America to Jamaica's treaty maroons and Brazil's quilombos, which defended autonomy through diplomacy, warfare, and trade. Everyday forms of refusal—work slowdowns, sabotage, covert worship, clandestine education, and the maintenance of kin networks—challenged masters' authority and remade social life. Uprisings, from Tacky's War to the Haitian Revolution, transformed the political landscape and reshaped debates about rights, sovereignty, and citizenship throughout the Atlantic world.

Emancipation was not a single event but a series of contested processes. Abolitionist mobilizations, diplomatic pressures, military revolutions, economic shifts, and courtroom struggles dismantled legal slavery at different paces and with different consequences: the British apprenticeship system, the United States' wartime emancipation and Reconstruction, gradual abolition in Spanish America, and the late endings in Cuba and Brazil. Each pathway produced its own "afterlives" of coerced labor, racial ordering, and debates over belonging, access to land, wages, and political voice. Understanding emancipation as process rather than endpoint allows us to see continuities and ruptures across the hemisphere.

Attending to family, gender, religion, and culture reveals the intimate worlds forged under duress. Enslaved people built households and kin ties despite sale and separation; women and men faced differentiated burdens and devised distinct strategies for protection and advancement; spiritual practices braided African, Indigenous, and European traditions into new cosmologies; musicians, artisans, sailors, and healers carried skills that sustained communities and moved across borders. These histories complicate simple narratives of victimhood or triumph, showing instead a dense terrain of constraint and creativity.

The organization of the book mirrors these themes. Early chapters map the making of the Atlantic world and the rise of the transatlantic trade. The middle sections examine plantation economies, legal regimes, and the textures of daily life, followed by a multi-chapter exploration of maroon communities across regions. The final third turns to abolitionist politics and the varied routes to emancipation in the British Empire, the United States, Spanish America, Cuba, and Brazil, before closing with the legacies of slavery in labor markets, legal systems, and public memory. Throughout, we pair macro-level analysis with microhistories drawn from the archives and from personal narratives that illuminate human experience.

This book is intended for students of social and legal history, for researchers seeking a comparative framework, and for general readers interested in how bondage and freedom were made in the Americas. By centering survivor agency and regional diversity, it argues that the history of slavery is not only a record of domination but also a record of world-making by those who refused to be defined solely by chains.

CHAPTER ONE: Worlds Connected: Africa, Europe, and the Americas on the Eve of Conquest

The late 15th century was a period of dynamic transformation across three continents: Africa, Europe, and the Americas. Each region possessed intricate societies, established trade networks, and diverse political landscapes that would soon be irrevocably intertwined through a series of dramatic encounters. To understand the genesis of transatlantic slavery and resistance, one must first grasp the distinct worlds that were on the precipice of a profound, and often violent, convergence.

In Europe, the spirit of the Renaissance fueled a burgeoning curiosity and a thirst for knowledge that pushed beyond traditional borders. Technological advancements in shipbuilding, such as the development of the caravel, a nimble vessel combining square and lateen sails, enabled longer and safer voyages across open oceans. Complementary innovations in navigation, like the magnetic compass and the astrolabe, allowed sailors to determine their position at sea with greater accuracy, reducing the immense risks of venturing into unfamiliar waters. These maritime advancements were crucial for the ambitious journeys that would soon reshape global trade and power dynamics.

Beyond technological prowess, European motivations were a complex tapestry woven with economic ambition, religious zeal, and political competition. The Ottoman Empire's control over traditional land routes to Asia made access to lucrative goods like spices, silks, and precious metals both difficult and expensive. This spurred nations, particularly Portugal and Spain, to seek new sea routes to the East, hoping to bypass intermediaries and secure direct access to these valuable markets. The completion of the Reconquista in Spain, the centuries-long effort to reclaim the Iberian Peninsula from Muslim rule, instilled a fervent desire to spread Christianity and expand influence, further fueling the drive for overseas exploration.

Portugal, under the patronage of Prince Henry the Navigator, spearheaded much of the early European exploration along the African coast, beginning in the early 15th century. Their initial interests lay in the gold and ivory trade, establishing fortified trading settlements like Elmina in present-day Ghana. These methodical expeditions gradually pushed further south, with Bartolomeu Dias reaching the Cape of Good Hope in 1488, and Vasco da Gama successfully sailing around Africa to India a decade later. These voyages not only expanded European knowledge of the world but also set the stage for a dramatic shift in global trade patterns, moving from trans-Saharan routes to the Atlantic and Indian Oceans.

Meanwhile, on the African continent, vibrant and complex societies flourished long before European arrival. West Africa, in particular, was home to powerful kingdoms and extensive trade networks. The Kingdom of Kongo, for instance, established in the late 14th century, had grown into a prosperous trading center by the mid-15th century. Stretching inland from the Atlantic coast, it controlled a significant territory encompassing parts of modern-day Angola and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Kongo's economy thrived on regional trade in ivory, copper, salt, cattle hides, and indeed, slaves, with well-regulated markets exchanging these goods.

The Portuguese made contact with the Kingdom of Kongo in the early 1480s, establishing diplomatic relations and exchanging goods. Impressed by Kongo's organization and sophisticated trading systems, Portugal sent missionaries and teachers, and some Kongo kings, like Nzinga a Nkuwu (who took the Christian name João I), even converted to Christianity. This early engagement, while initially marked by diplomacy and cultural exchange, would gradually shift as Portuguese demand for labor, particularly for their burgeoning sugar plantations on islands like São Tomé, intensified the existing slave trade within the region.

Across the vast Atlantic, the Americas were far from an empty wilderness. They were home to a remarkable diversity of indigenous civilizations, many of which had achieved astonishing levels of social, political, and cultural complexity. These societies had their own intricate trade routes, agricultural innovations, and unique understandings of the world. From the dense urban centers of Mesoamerica to the vast networks of the Andes and the intricate communities of the Caribbean, life thrived in countless forms.

In Mesoamerica, the Aztec Empire stood as a formidable power in central Mexico, flourishing from around 1300 to 1521. At its height, the empire, a triple alliance of city-states with Tenochtitlan as its dominant center, controlled much of central Mexico and extended its influence through a combination of military conquest and trade. The Aztecs had a highly stratified society, sophisticated agricultural methods, and a rich religious tradition. Their capital, Tenochtitlan, built on islands in Lake Texcoco, was a bustling metropolis with an estimated population of 80,000 inhabitants by the time the Spanish arrived in 1519.

Further south, in the Andean highlands of South America, the Inca Empire reigned as the largest empire in pre-Columbian America. Originating from the Peruvian highlands in the early 13th century, the Inca expanded rapidly from 1438, eventually stretching across much of western South America, from modern-day Ecuador to parts of Chile and Argentina. The Inca were masters of engineering, building an extensive road system that facilitated the transport of goods, food, and soldiers across their vast and often challenging terrain. Their society was highly organized, with a centralized government led by the Sapa Inca, who was considered a divine ruler.

In the Caribbean, the Taíno people were the dominant indigenous group at the close of the 15th century, with established communities across the Greater Antilles, including Hispaniola, Cuba, Jamaica, and Puerto Rico, as well as the Bahamas. Their cultural ancestry could be traced to Arawakan-speaking people from the Orinoco River region of South America, who migrated into the Caribbean starting around 400 BC. The Taíno were sedentary agriculturalists, cultivating crops like manioc, sweet potatoes, maize, and beans. Their society was structured into chiefdoms, each governed by a hereditary leader known as a cacique, and they developed rich artistic and ritual traditions.

Beyond these major empires and kingdoms, countless other indigenous societies thrived across the Americas. In North America, extensive trade networks connected diverse groups. For example, the Mississippian culture, centered around sites like Cahokia in present-day Illinois, developed a vast trading system that reached from Wisconsin to the Gulf of Mexico and from the Atlantic seaboard to Oklahoma. These networks facilitated the exchange of raw materials like obsidian, copper, and shells, along with agricultural products and cultural practices, showcasing a continent far more interconnected than often portrayed.

The arrival of Europeans in the Americas would mark a dramatic turning point for these established civilizations. While Europe was undergoing a period of intense exploration and expansion, driven by a desire for wealth, power, and religious conversion, the Americas were already complex and thriving worlds. The interactions that followed would not be a meeting of the "old world" and an "empty new world," but a collision of distinct histories, cultures, and power structures, with devastating consequences for the indigenous peoples and profound implications for the global trajectory of human history.

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