



Kathleen S. Murphy, *Captivity's Collections: Science, Natural History, and the British Transatlantic Slave Trade*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2023, ISBN: 9781469675909, 256 pp.

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From the late 17th century until the slave trade was abolished in Britain in 1807, natural history specimens were among the commodities trafficked from West Africa and, for two decades, Spanish South America. The entanglement of natural history and the slave trade, Kathleen Murphy argues, was not casual or accidental but pursued systematically to the advantage of major English naturalists who deliberately sought out ship surgeons, sea captains, and others in that trade who were in positions to collect plants, insects, shells, occasional animals, and artifacts. Using records connected with museum specimens along with private journals and letters, she underscores the deliberate and direct human activities that furnished the cabinets of major collectors during the long 18th century of exploration and natural history classification. Detailed attention to the processes of identifying, acquiring, preserving, boxing, and then transporting specimens also reveals how much the agents relied on the knowledge, skills, and physical strength of local people, typically enslaved or otherwise under imperial authority.

Britain's deep involvement in the slave trade has been well-documented. The Royal African Company (RAC) used its monopoly to build "factories," fortified warehouses along the coast of East Africa for holding slaves. With natural history objects in increasing demand, these transit points were convenient for acquiring natural history objects as well. Although the RAC lost its monopoly in 1686, its established structures and system grew along with the rapidly increasing demand for slaves. Furthermore, in the early 18th century, Britain negotiated the Asiento treaty with Spain, which gave the South Sea Company monopoly of the legal slave trade to Spanish America between 1713 and 1739. British collectors quickly recognized that this shipping trade could be a conduit for medicinal and ornamental plants and other

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exotica. Because it took time to acquire the captured African women and men, and even children, ship staff might spend several weeks before there was sufficient human cargo to sail to the Americas where, again, they might spend long days awaiting the sale of those captives.

Correlating major transit routes with acquisition records and museum specimens, Murphy documents the concentrations of natural history specimens within these slaving entrepôts in East Africa, Spanish South America, and the Caribbean. Central to her account are the records relating to ship surgeons who provided information and specimens to London patrons. Slaving ships employed surgeons to deal with diseases and injuries of their crew, but they also evaluated potential slaves, worked to keep them alive while in transit, and managed their healthy appearance when they reached slave markets. The surgeons' time on land provided opportunities to gather plants and prepare them for shipping. Company-appointed factors built substantial homes in Sierra Leone and Cape Coast Castle, for example, where they hosted officers and were instructed to watch for other potential commercial products. These local entrepreneurs assigned their servants to help gather specimens, serve as translators, and provide physical labor for their visitors. Murphy identifies these transactions through painstaking research in journals of ship officers, private and official correspondence, and accession records to demonstrate the intimate ways that patrons, officers, slavers, and slaves were intertwined in the 18th-century natural history enterprise.

This study underscores the point that those involved were not naïve about the nature of the trading vessels that carried natural history cargo from slaving sites. Murphy focuses on several English patrons, notably James Petiver, Hans Sloane, Dru Druby and others located primarily in London. They deliberately sought out ships whose trade routes triangulated from Britain to slaving ports in West Africa to transit points like Jamaica to British colonies in the Caribbean and Southern states, including, for two decades, South America, before returning to England. Apothecary James Petiver, for example, was particularly interested in medicinals, offering medicines, books, and pamphlets to ship officers who might return with sought-after specimens. Pragmatic about the realities of trafficked humans, he deliberately recruited officers on slaving ships to collect for him. When frustrated by their scant results, he urged them to take advantage of locals to help collect, particularly noting that enslaved captives might provide local knowledge inland from the coastal sites where ships anchored. By the time of his death in 1718, Petiver's natural history collection was among the largest and most diverse in Britain. His specimens, through various sales and exchanges, ended up in the British Museum. Later collectors pursued similar strategies, with their holdings now in museums in London, Glasgow, Edinburgh, and European cities.

With dedicated sleuthing, Murphy found trace commentaries that revealed the reliance of collectors on the labor of the Africans, enslaved and free, for their local knowledge of the landscape. They were intimately engaged in every aspect of this process, from providing the physical labor on inland expeditions to collecting, packaging, and preserving specimens for the perilous journal back over unsteady seas and salty water. Pointing to the long-standing erasure of local informants, Murphy teases out the infrequent and casual references that document their presence and point to their multiple roles. They identified native species, described potential dyes and

therapies, and distinguished between plants and their uses. The contributions were rarely recorded as such by field collectors. Brief notices in correspondence were used to lend credibility to a claim about potential medical use of a plant or to excuse any carelessness in preparation for shipping. Murphy's persisting inclusion of these points reinforces and extends what scholars know of the knowledge and labor of slaves and others caught in the natural history network that has been otherwise unrecognized and largely invisible. Inevitably, Murphy observes, the indirect acknowledgment implies that native information is simply raw material from which new knowledge will be attained through study and experimentation.

From the 1680s until the British abolished slavery in 1807, the trade in slaves and in natural history expanded in tandem. The collaboration of British naturalists, ship surgeons, and traders proved commercially beneficial as evident today in museum collections and archival records. The evidence leaves no doubt that the naturalists deliberately exploited that connection and were complicit as they discussed how to use communication and transportation networks of the traders who facilitated the deadly traffic in slaves. A few, notably Quaker John Fothergill who denounced the "wicked cargo" of those in the triangular trade, became abolitionists. Murphy also follows the intermittently repentant collector Henry Smeathman who, after a career with slavers, had hoped to establish an agricultural colony in Sierra Leone. Having made the case for the deeply entangled entrepreneurial histories of natural history and slavery, Murphy concludes with an observation, perhaps an assertion, that museums who benefit by holding specimens can now discover ways to make that history more visible and the current study of such materials more inclusive.

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