

From Fiction to First-Hand Testimony: Assessing the Reliability of Biographical Records of West Africans in the Era of the Slave Trade

Suzanne Schwarz
University of Worcester
s.schwarz@worc.ac.uk

Abstract :

In their poetry and pamphlet literature, abolitionist campaigners made extensive use of fictional cases of Africans to communicate their ideas about the suffering caused by the slave trade. James Currie and William Roscoe, for example, wrote about the plight of Maraton, who was torn away from the “groves of Angola,” whilst Hannah More imagined the “Sorrows of Yamba” whose infant died during the Middle Passage. In contrast, abolitionist intervention on the Sierra Leone peninsula from the closing decades of the eighteenth century provided unique opportunities for British officials to observe and comment on the physical characteristics and behaviour of free and enslaved individuals affected by the Atlantic slave trade. These accounts are not unproblematic, however. Drawing on examples of first-hand testimony recorded in a formal legal setting, as well as other types of formats used by Europeans to document their observations on individuals, this paper reflects on the factors affecting the reliability of accounts generated in Sierra Leone between c. 1790 and 1815.