

Remastering embraces a paradox of limits and possibilities — a better rendition of the same master copy. It is in this terrain of structural constraint and youth agency that Livermon has imaginatively interpreted kwaito and its creative possibilities.

doi:10.1017/S0021853721000645

Gender and the Economics of Emancipation in Angola

Slave Trade and Abolition: Gender, Commerce and Economic Transition in Luanda

By Vanessa S. Oliveira. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2021. Pp. 272. \$79.95, hardcover (ISBN: 9780299325800).

Catarina Madeira-Santos 

Ecole des hautes études en sciences sociales

Keywords: Angola; urban; land tenure; slavery; slavery abolition; marriage; gender

In his 1968 classic *Luanda, 'ilha' crioula* (Luanda, a creole island), the Angolan historian Mário António was the first to bring to the fore the active role of Africans, their cultures, and their languages in the social and cultural history of colonial Angola's capital city.¹ In his book *A economia de Luanda e hinterland no século XVIII*, the historian José Carlos Venâncio for the first time analysed the inextricable relationship between the city and its rural hinterland.² An increasing interest in the history of the transatlantic slave trade and the emergence of Atlantic enclaves in West Africa and West-Central Africa have since complexified both perspectives. Vanessa Oliveira's work is an important contribution to this emerging historiography. Set against the backdrop of about 3,000,000 enslaved people shipped mainly to Brazil from Luanda over the span of four centuries, this elegantly written book constantly moves between, and spatializes, the transimperial and individual scales. The main focus is on the period between 1815 and 1867, when Angola transitioned from a major transatlantic slave-trading hub to a centre of so-called 'legitimate commerce'. The book is thus situated at the crossroads of the history of abolition, gender studies, and urban history. It investigates the strategies of Luanda's merchant community in dealing with abolition, focusing particularly on the *Donas* — wealthy African and Luso-African women married to, or in union with, Portuguese and Brazilian white slavers, as well as members of the militia or government — who acted as linguistic and knowledge intermediaries with Mbundu societies since the seventeenth century.

This book reconstructs the connections between, and impact of, the political-judicial decisions imposed by empires involved in abolitionist policies and pressures exerted from below by African and Luso-African actors. Furthermore, Oliveira utilizes a *jeu d'échelles*, or constantly changing historical scales, approach to emplot these transformations within the space of the city itself. She argues that four historically interlinked spaces have shaped Luanda — the Atlantic, the city, the *arimos* (the immediate interior composed of agricultural lands), and further afield, the hinterland of slave trade networks. The book addresses the first three at length. During the early decades of the

¹M. António, *Luanda, 'ilha' crioula* (Lisboa, 1968).

²J. C. Venâncio, *A economia de Luanda e hinterland no século XVIII: Um estudo de sociologia histórica* (Lisboa, 1996).

nineteenth century, the Atlantic space underwent substantial legal and political changes in several stages: following the British ban on the slave trade north of the equator (1815), the Portuguese prohibition (1836) of the transatlantic slave trade from its colonies south of the equator, the Anglo-Portuguese 1842 treaty establishing a mixed supervisory commission, and, finally, the 1850 closure of Brazilian ports to slave ships. Oliveira argues that each international event triggered successive reconfigurations of the city and its agricultural hinterland because of the adaptations, opportunities, and strategic choices on the part of the main key actors. The *Donas* were notable among these actors. Many were initially slave- and landowners who over the course of this period accumulated enough capital to become slave traders, thus controlling all three spaces.

Indeed, one of the book's main originalities consists in linking and studying these spaces through a simultaneous reading of an impressive and heterogeneous archival corpus — legal texts, travelers' accounts, administrative documents, petitions, legal disputes, wills, marriage contracts, and property and accounting registers — scattered across numerous collections and countries. Oliveira meticulously analyses them to reveal fragments of African and Luso-African women's own trajectories, matrimonial alliances, widowhoods, and marriage strategies, as well as how *Donas* constituted their assets and thus managed their slaves, land holdings, and estates in the face of changing circumstances. She subtly reconstructs the social roles, trajectories, and changing social relations to bring to light the plasticity of Luandan society. She uses these fragmentary stories to reveal personal and collective experiences, choices, and strategies in response to evolving abolitionist policies. She thus avoids the pitfalls of much current historiography — including postcolonial and Atlantic history — which, in opting to trace individual life stories, tends to celebrate the fragment and too often refrains from offering broader perspectives.

The social construction of racial categories is a recurrent theme of the book. Since they spoke Portuguese, professed Christianity, and dressed and lived like Europeans, some Africans and Luso-Africans were traditionally 'perceived as whites or mixed race and were, theoretically, protected against enslavement' (21). However, after 1850, with the development of commercial agriculture and commodity extraction, Europeans started relying less on urban Luso-African intermediation, shifting instead to African expertise from further afield. Consequently, Oliveira argues, the perception of whiteness changed to become associated with phenotypes.

The *Donas* were not the only Luandans to take advantage of the changing economic and social relations in abolition-era Luanda. A particularly innovative chapter focuses on the register book of the Terreiro Público (regulated public market), a record of the agricultural producers and the quality and quantity of foodstuffs sold. The register provides an ideal vantage point for observing the relationship between the city and the agricultural hinterland, bringing to light the multifarious social and economic communities with disparate social and economic roles. We thus get a glimpse of free Africans, in particular *pretas livres* (free Black women), who cultivated communal land to feed their families and who sometimes managed to market a small surplus.

The multiple insights and originalities of this book naturally whet the reader's curiosity, especially in regard to the discourses that women developed about themselves and their relations with other *Donas*, on the one hand, and the way broader society in turn perceived them, their mobility, and their success. One would have liked to know a bit more about these interpersonal aspects. Similarly, although Oliveira deconstructs the 'rags-to-riches' myths in the retelling of the social mobility of the *Donas*, she says frustratingly little about the place of such rumours in the construction of gender in Luandan society. But these are some of the avenues that she will certainly follow up on in her further research. The current book is a major contribution to the history of abolition, port cities, and gender in Angola, providing an original and stimulating analysis of Luanda during this largely understudied transition period.