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Projects of Nutmeg and Indigo

Knowledge and Ignorance in a Late-Seventeenth-Century Slaving Company

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▼ **ABSTRACT** This article explores the history of projecting within the Royal African Company (RAC), the English slaving company that held the monopoly on English trade with the western coast of Africa in the late seventeenth century. It examines how the slaving company sought to extract profit through the application and collection of natural knowledge. It focuses on the company's nutmeg and indigo projects of the 1690s as projects in which knowledge, labor, and power intertwined. Amid concerns about retaining its monopoly, RAC nutmeg and indigo projects each sought to enact large-scale environmental transformations of areas adjacent to the company's slaving forts. The RAC's efforts to introduce nutmeg to West Africa highlight the company's repeated efforts to acquire African natural knowledge in order to apply it for profitable ends. Yet knowledge acquired by the company relating to West African indigo production was ignored in its plans for establishing plantations in the 1690s. Although the company's leaders frequently emphasized that attentiveness to local knowledges was essential to its financial success, in the case of indigo it ignored the knowledge it had previously collected and instead embraced the type of large-scale restructuring of labor and environments that often characterized early modern projecting.

▼ **KEYWORDS** Royal African Company; projects; slave trade; natural knowledge; history of knowledge; history of ignorance

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In the last decade of the seventeenth century, projects and joint stock companies had become so thoroughly part of the tapestry of English life that Daniel Defoe famously declared his "The Projecting Age." In his 1697 "An Essay Upon Projects," Defoe asserted that "every new voyage the merchant contrives is a project."[1] This article examines not one commercial voyage but the history of projecting within the commercial activities of an English slaving company in the late seventeenth century. It focuses in particular on the nutmeg and indigo projects of the Royal African Company (RAC) in the 1690s as undertakings in which knowledge, labor, and power intertwined. The turn of the eighteenth century marked a critical moment for the company as the period when its monopoly on English trade with the western coast of Africa was endangered and eventually lost. It was a context in which it was "too risky not to take action."[2]

The RAC was responsible for the enslavement and forcible transportation of more captive Africans than any other institution during the three-hundred-and-fifty-year history of the transatlantic slave trade. Over 150,000 African men, women, and children were forced to board slave ships employed by the company between 1672 and 1712.[3] The late seventeenth century marked a period of growing demand for enslaved laborers on English plantations in the Americas, as planters increasingly turned to enslaved rather than indentured laborers to perform the back-breaking work of tending, harvesting, and processing staple commodities in English America. To meet this demand, the RAC maintained a series of trading outposts (or "factories") along the West African coast from which its agents could negotiate with local African rulers and merchants.[4] English commerce with West Africa pre-dated the creation of the RAC by more than a century. Trade in gold rather than enslaved Africans motivated most early English trading ventures with West Africa, while the chartered monopoly company provided its typical structure. The company known as the Royal African Company dated to a royal charter of 1672, which gave the company a monopoly on all English trade with the western coast of Africa from Morocco to the Cape of Good Hope. The company's monopoly was never fully observed, with independent English merchants regularly trading in Africa in violation of the RAC's monopoly. By 1690, the validity of the monopoly itself was in question.[5]

The monopolistic trading rights enshrined in the RAC's charter derived their authority from royal prerogative, but after the Revolution of 1688 it was

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1 Defoe, "Essay Upon Projects," 8.

2 Keller et al., "Projects," 14.

3 *Slave Voyages*; Pettigrew, *Freedom's Debt*, 11.

4 Kriger, *Making Money*, 36–48; Davies, *Royal African Company*; Pettigrew, *Freedom's Debt*.

5 One estimate suggests that approximately one quarter of enslaved Africans brought to English America between 1674 and 1686 were transported by independent slave traders, in violation of the company's monopoly. See Richardson, "The British Empire," 445. See also Davies, *Royal African Company*; Pettigrew, *Freedom's Debt*.

no longer clear that the English crown had such authority. Independent slave traders wasted no time challenging the RAC's monopoly in court. In early 1689, the Court of King's Bench found that the monarch had the power to create monopoly companies but not to grant to those companies the right of forfeiture. This meant that the RAC had a monopoly but no practical means of enforcing it. Only an act of Parliament that enshrined in statute the rights granted in the company's royal charter would restore the RAC's exclusive trading privileges. Independent slave traders, however, lobbied for the African trade to be opened to all merchants. The 1698 "Ten-Percent Act" that Parliament ultimately passed fell far short of the company's hopes. It recognized the RAC's royal charter, but it opened the African trade for thirteen years to anyone who paid a 10 percent duty on the value of their cargo. Parliament allowed the Ten-Percent Act to lapse in 1712, thereby fully deregulating the British trade with Africa. The 1690s represented a pivotal transitional decade when the RAC's monopoly stood on uncertain ground, challenged by legal disputes and political opposition but not formally curtailed by statute.[6]

In its trade with West Africa, RAC leaders in the 1690s saw a situation ripe with possibility despite the uncertainty of the company's monopoly. The early modern use of the word "situation" invoked not only a physical location but also the opportunities and risks that could be realized in that space through the application of art and knowledge.[7] The RAC in the late seventeenth century saw potential profits in the introduction of new commodities, the appropriation of African natural knowledge, and the restructuring of geographies of labor in West Africa. Its plans sought to transform the physical space, while exploiting and extracting natural and human resources. As historians Robin Law and Christopher Brown have shown, at moments when profits from the RAC's primary trade in gold and African captives was in doubt, it tended to look to expand its trade in natural commodities.[8]

The RAC undertook new experimental commercial ventures in West Africa in the 1690s, each marked by significant uncertainty and risk. Among these initiatives were projects centered on indigo and nutmeg that aimed to bring about large-scale environmental transformation. The nutmeg project sought to introduce a non-native plant species to the region, while the indigo initiative attempted to establish extractive plantations in Africa rather than in the Americas. These two projects reflected a broader confidence that environments were fungible and that plants could be successfully cultivated in environments distant and distinct from where they originated. The history of projecting offers a valuable framework for understanding the RAC's ventures during this period, highlighting the speculative nature of its commercial ambitions and the

6 Davies, *Royal African Company*, 97–152; Mitchell, "'Legitimate Commerce,'" 545–46; Pettigrew, *Freedom's Debt*, 4–13, 37–44.

7 Keller et al., "Projects," 11–13.

8 Law, "'There's nothing grows,'" 128–29; Brown, "Origins," 151.

place of knowledge within its attempts to reshape West African ecosystems and reinvigorate the company's trade.

Projects and projecting emerged as significant conceptual and practical frameworks for envisioning large-scale interventions in commerce, industry, and society during the early modern period. Projects encompassed a wide range of planned future interventions, typically framed as efforts to apply new natural, mechanical, or "useful" knowledge to improve industries or to benefit society. They hinged on a belief that humans had the ability to shape the future on an ambitious—and sometimes improbable—scale. Common examples of early modern projects included the adoption of new inventions, the identification of new natural commodities, the transplantation of foreign commodities, and the application of novel agricultural or industrial methods. Initially projecting was the domain of courtiers and the inventors and merchants with whom they collaborated, but by the late seventeenth century it was typically organized through subscriptions or joint stock companies.[9] Like many of their contemporaries, RAC leaders frequently employed language such as "discovery" and "improvement" to describe the projects they undertook during the seventeenth century. These phrases tended to suggest an absence or an underutilization of resources where there was none. Such framing also obscured the violence, coercion, and expropriation upon which efforts of resource extraction and profit generation in the early modern world were frequently based. "Projecting," by contrast, invites us to consider unequal power dynamics, exploitative speculation, and the labor history of knowledge production.[10]

Focusing on the history of projecting within the RAC in the late seventeenth century helps bring to the forefront connections between the histories of knowledge, slavery, and colonialism. Mark Govier's pioneering article highlighted the entwined histories of the New World plantation complex and natural knowledge production by tracing linkages between the RAC and the Royal Society of London for Improving Natural Knowledge. Among these connections was that over a third of the original subscribers to the RAC, and half of the company's initial leadership, were also members of the Royal Society.[11] Recent scholarship has greatly enriched our understanding of the entangled histories of slavery and early modern science and medicine in the Atlantic World. This work has shown how enslaved labor, Indigenous and African knowledge, and colonialism shaped scientific inquiry and the production of natural knowledge. While much of the focus has been on plantation societies, studies on the slave trade have revealed its role in enabling the production and circulation of scientific and medical knowledge. The expansion of slavery and

9 Keller and McCormick, "Towards a History," 424–29; Yamamoto, *Taming Capitalism*; Keller, *The Interlopers*.

10 Keller et al., "Projects"; Keller and McCormick, "Towards a History," 425.

11 Govier, "Royal Society," 203–17, esp. 204–8.

the development of natural knowledge were mutually reinforcing. Naturalists exploited the commercial networks of the transatlantic slave trade to obtain specimens from around the Atlantic basin, including many that would otherwise have been inaccessible. The slave trade also served as a transformative site of medical and scientific knowledge production—knowledge that in turn often served the economic and ideological interests of slavery and colonialism.[12] The RAC's nutmeg and indigo projects in the 1690s were deeply entwined with the slave economy and British colonialism. The company's search for new avenues of commerce was intended to complement the inhuman trade in commodifying peoples, not to replace it.

Matthew Mitchell's insightful work has revealed how knowledge and its transit was central to the RAC's risk management strategies within the business of enslaving. Mitchell argued that the company's network of outposts along the West African coast enabled it to collect timely information about African consumer priorities. Among the greatest financial risks facing a slaving company was that of a poorly selected cargo of consumer goods for the outbound voyage to Africa. Outbound cargos needed to reflect the correct type and balance of consumer goods in demand in a particular region of Africa at a particular moment in time. A poorly selected cargo of goods could drag out the process of purchasing enslaved Africans by months, increasing mortality rates and reducing the voyage's likely profits. With hundreds of potential consumer goods from which to select and constantly evolving consumer preferences, the RAC relied on agents stationed at its coastal trading forts to relay accurate and current information about African consumer demand. Mitchell argued that commercial knowledge relayed in a timely fashion represented one of the RAC's principal commercial strategies for mitigating risk.[13]

The circulation of knowledge played a similarly vital role in the RAC's efforts to mitigate risk amid uncertainty regarding its monopoly in the 1690s. Company leaders repeatedly instructed agents in West Africa to observe the local uses of drugs, dyes, food, and perfumes, asserting that the acquisition and application of local knowledges would reveal new commercial opportunities. While knowledge was integral to the RAC's commercial strategies in both its nutmeg and indigo projects, its approaches in the two cases diverged. In the case of nutmeg, the company followed its often-articulated process: gathering information from various sources, transmitting it to London, and subsequently testing the viability of a new commodity in West Africa. In contrast, with indigo the company initially collected relevant information about African indigo production but disregarded this knowledge a few years later when attempting to establish indigo plantations in the region. As scholars of

12 For example see Barcia, *Yellow Demon of Fever*; Delbourgo, *Collecting the World*; Gómez, *Experiential Caribbean*; Herschthal, *Science of Abolition*; Murphy, *Captivity's Collections*; Parrish, *American Curiosity*; Schiebinger, *Plants and Empire*.

13 Mitchell, *Prince of Slavers*, 9–20.

the history of ignorance have demonstrated, circulation can be a key site of knowledge production, but equally revealing are instances where knowledge fails to circulate. As Renate Dürr argued, "it is necessary to recognize the importance of *ignoring* and *forgetting* as essential practices within the process of knowledge production."[14] In the case of indigo, the RAC had gathered commercially valuable knowledge about African indigo production—the very type of information it consistently instructed agents to acquire. However, the company prioritized the logic of projecting—pursuing ambitious, transformative change on a grand scale—over the application of localized knowledge. To produce indigo in Africa, the RAC sought to impose a plantation labor regime modeled on the Caribbean system, ignoring the more adaptable and efficient West African approaches to indigo cultivation that its agents had gathered information about a few years earlier.

Transplanting Nutmegs

Stowed onboard an RAC vessel bound for West Africa in 1699 was a box containing twenty-four seeds for a tree so desired that access to it had led to bloodshed and war earlier in the century. *Myristica fragrans*, an evergreen tree indigenous to the Banda Islands in modern Indonesia, was (and is) the source of nutmeg and mace. Mace, the red covering surrounding the tree's seed, and nutmeg, the seed itself, were highly sought after as spices and drugs in seventeenth-century Europe. Competition over control of the nutmeg trade during the early seventeenth century led to an undeclared war between the English and the Dutch, as well as the Dutch massacre of the native Bandanese people.[15] The extraordinary demand for mace and nutmeg had multiple causes, but among them was that *Myristica fragrans* was difficult to grow outside of its natural habitat. The leadership of the RAC calculated that the nutmeg tree could be grown at great profit in areas close to the company's West African factories. The RAC's nutmeg project reflected confidence that environments could be transformed and situation dramatically reshaped through the application of natural knowledge.

Agents at RAC factories in Sherbro Island, Gambia, and Cape Coast Castle received two dozen "live Nutmeggs" seeds in 1699. Typically, the freshly harvested seed of *Myristica fragrans* was converted into the commodity known as nutmeg through a multi-week drying process. A "live Nutmegg" would therefore refer to one that had not been dried to preserve it as a spice and was viable for propagation. Although company directors did not explain how they procured the nutmeg seeds, they declared that they "are informed they

14 Dürr, "Introduction," 1. See also Kourany and Carrier, *Science and the Production*; Proctor and Schiebinger, *Agnotology*; Schiebinger, *Plants and Empire*, 226–41; Verburgt and Burke, "Introduction."

15 NA, Kew, RAC, Letter Books, T70/51, f. 31; Milton, *Nathaniel's Nutmeg*, 1–8; Reid, *Southeast Asia*, 273–74, 278.

will grow & may come to perfection in Guiney." To help bring the valuable seeds to perfection, company leaders instructed agents to investigate the most suitable growing conditions for nutmeg in West Africa. They sent seeds to the company's "sever'll factories," in order "that tryall may be made in each place." Company directors instructed each agent who received nutmeg seeds to experiment to determine which of the local microclimates near their respective slaving factory best suited the trees by planting a few in "diverse places" and "at divers seasons of the year" while reserving the remainder of the seeds they were sent. Wherever seeds successfully sprouted, agents were instructed to "plant the rest in that Ground." Mindful of the prodigious value of the plants —and the history of violent competition associated with them—the directors warned their agents to "be very carefull to secure the place" where the seeds successfully germinated, in order to protect the valuable nutmeg plants. By simultaneously sending nutmegs to multiple factories and instructing agents to plant them in distinct microclimates, the company could efficiently test multiple growing conditions in a short period of time. The RAC's network of agents and trading factories in West Africa made such efforts possible. The directors informed their agents that they "shall expect acc[oun]t" of their nutmeg experiments.[16]

Likely there was little for the agents to report, given the highly specific growing conditions required by the nutmeg tree and the difficulties associated with propagating *Myristica fragrans* from seed. Even today, nutmeg trees grown from seed experience a 50% failure rate because there is no reliable way to distinguish viable female seeds from the non-viable male seeds that are produced in equal numbers. The combination of the botanical profile of *Myristica fragrans* and the silences in the historical record regarding the fate of the nutmeg trees strongly suggests that the plan to cultivate nutmeg in West Africa proved unsuccessful. Yet the attempt to introduce nutmeg into cultivation at RAC factories illuminates the company's efforts in the late seventeenth century to find new ways to profit from its African trade. In particular, it brings into focus the ways the company's plans to transform environments were proceeded by efforts to extract and collect knowledge.

The directors of the RAC prefaced their foray into nutmeg cultivation by declaring that they had "been informed" that the East Indian spice would flourish if introduced into West Africa. Although they never identified its sources, natural knowledge provided an impetus for the company's experiments with nutmeg. Similarly, many of the company's projects for reinvigorating its African trade began with unspecified reports about the natural world. Around the same time that the RAC sent nutmeg seeds to West Africa, company leaders declared that they had been "reliably informed" that camwood grew near Cape Coast Castle, that large quantities of pepper grew near Whydah, and

16 NA, Kew, RAC, Letter Books, T70/51, f. 31, 35, 41, 51, 52.

that Africans used a local plant to expel poisons.[17] The fragmentary nature of surviving RAC records for the late seventeenth century makes it difficult to identify the sources for these claims, but similar efforts by company leaders in the early eighteenth century to collect knowledge about West Africa offer some possibilities. During the 1720s, RAC officials in London regularly interviewed returning slave ship captains, surgeons, and slaving agents. They cited slaving mariners and slaving agents recently returned from West Africa as their sources of knowledge about potential natural commodities flourishing in the gardens of slaving factories, about the regions of West Africa where valuable dyewoods could most commonly be found, and about the possibility of ginger production along the Gold Coast.[18] Natural knowledge collected from returning slaving agents and mariners formed the foundation for plans to find new ways to extract profit from trade with West Africa.[19]

RAC officials urged agents in the 1690s to cast a wide net in their search for natural knowledge and potential natural commodities. The instructions that Robert Loadman, RAC agent in Sherbro, received were repeated almost verbatim in letters to agents at Cape Coast Castle and Gambia in 1699: "Send us for samples any Roots, bark of trees or leaves, or any thing else that the Natives use for Physick, Dying or painting any thing and endeavour to find out some mines of silver or coper."[20] Similarly, in September 1699, company directors wrote to Nicholas Buckeridge, Mr. Howsley, and Samuel Wallis, factors at Cape Coast Castle, emphasizing that by providing botanical and mineral specimens they would ensure "that if any such thing to be found wee may reap the benefit thereof." They noted that "samples have been brought us formerly which have proved right." According to the company's leaders in London, the company had "reap[ed] the benefit" of the circulation and application of natural knowledge from West Africa.[21] Agents at each factory were expected to survey the botanical and mineral resources near their respective trading factories, searching for new sources of commodities already familiar to company leaders as well as unfamiliar ones that could be added to the company's trade.

Thomas Corker and Paul Pidar, agents in Gambia, were instructed in 1699 to show some of the nutmeg seeds they received to local Africans in order to determine "if they have any growing in the Country." If so, the agents were to encourage "them to bring you quantities" of the valuable spice. "Live nutmeggs" could thus also serve as a tool for gathering and extracting African botanical and commercial knowledge.[22] Loadman's instructions in 1699 commanded him to provide samples of roots, bark, leaves, or "any thing else" used

17 Ibid., f. 31, 35, 44, 49, 51.
18 Murphy, *Captivity's Collections*, 66–67.
19 Keller et al., "Projects," 2.
20 NA, Kew, RAC, Letter Books, T70/51, f. 30. See also f. 34, 49.
21 Ibid., f. 44.
22 Ibid., f. 51.

by local Africans as drugs, dyes, or paints. It is unclear from surviving records whether Loadman or his counterparts at other RAC factories sent specimens to London. However, collections sent to English naturalists during the 1690s, as well as collections made in response to similar requests by company officials in the early eighteenth century, reveal how the company acquired African specimens and natural knowledge in the pursuit of new commercial opportunities.

John Smyth, RAC chaplain at Cape Coast Castle, obtained a collection of forty-six plants esteemed by Africans along the Gold Coast for their medicinal properties and shipped the preserved plants to an apothecary in London around 1693. Each plant included a label affixed that indicated its local name, the medicinal properties Africans near Cape Coast ascribed to it, and how it was prepared by local people as a medicament. For example, *assrumina* "pounded and rub'd on the Legs, kileth the Worms that breed there," while *attrow* would provide relief to swelling if first boiled and applied externally. Smyth's herbaria labels highlighted and materially embodied African medical and natural knowledges that had been appropriated from their original contexts.[23]

A similar set of herbaria specimens and descriptions was sent to the RAC in 1723. Company officials had requested that John Tinker, Captain General at Cape Coast Castle, obtain samples of plants used locally as drugs and send the collection to London. The resulting collection contained at least twenty-one plant specimens which were transported to London on the slave ship *Clarendon* and eventually became part of the founding collection of the British Museum.[24] The individuals who selected, gathered, and preserved the specimens are obscured in the surviving sources. Most likely this physical and intellectual labor was undertaken by enslaved peoples employed at Cape Coast Castle or by Fante people who controlled most of the Gold Coast. The preserved plants were accompanied by detailed descriptions of how to prepare medicaments from the plants, where the plants could be located, and by what local names the plants were known. For example, *Conto Isha* "Is a root…that grows common on the coast, the bark of which is made use of by the natives to cause a fluxation of blood after births the stopping of which is often occasioned by the catching cold, the dose is about the quantity of 2 drams boiled up with the same sort of Malaguetta into a draught night & morning to be taken."[25] It is unclear who wrote the descriptions that accompanied the plant specimens. Whoever did so had a familiarity with European medical and natural historical knowledge systems, as well as with the medical knowledges and practices of African peoples along the Gold Coast. But, fundamentally, the true authors of

23 Petiver, "A Catalogue," 680; Murphy, *Captivity's Collections*, 21–22, 39–47.

24 NHM, London, Manuscript Catalogues 3:956–60; HL, San Marino, Stowe Manuscripts, Chandos to Capt. General Tinker, Dec. 9, 1723, Stowe 57, XXIII, f. 135. For more about the *Clarendon* collection and its place within the collections of James Petiver and later Hans Sloane, see Murphy, *Captivity's Collections*, 49–50, 60–63.

25 NHM, London, Manuscript Catalogues 3:960.

the medical and natural knowledges embodied in the *Clarendon* collection are unnamed West Africans whose knowledge RAC officials sought to appropriate and extract.

The RAC's efforts to introduce nutmeg into cultivation in West Africa during the 1690s reflected the company's broader strategy of acquiring and applying local knowledges to identify profitable natural commodities for trade. The RAC's nutmeg project exemplified its efforts to gather, relay, and apply local knowledges. The company's instructions to its agents reflected a model of knowledge production in which its commercial infrastructures facilitated the transfer of natural knowledge to London, where it would inform the commercial strategies to be pursued. Those strategies included projects that would transform environments and, in the case of indigo, reimagine geographies of labor and commerce.

Planting Indigo

Most of the plantation economy in the early modern Atlantic World was premised on a specific geography of coerced labor: Enslaved laborers were forcibly removed from Africa and then compelled through violence to toil elsewhere, most commonly in the Americas. Yet alternative geographies of coercion, violence, and labor were possible. In the late seventeenth century, the RAC experimented with one such alternative geography by establishing plantations in West Africa. Rather than produce commodities such as indigo and sugar in the Americas using slave labor transported across the Atlantic, company officials hoped to produce these commodities in West Africa using enslaved Africans as the primary labor force.[26] At various points, the company experimented with plantations to produce staple crops such as tobacco, sugar, ginger, potash, and cotton, but its earliest sustained attempt to establish a plantation was with indigo.[27] The RAC sought to cultivate and process indigo along the Upper Guinea Coast beginning in 1692. Although the company's plans for establishing indigo plantations were nearly contemporaneous with its efforts to introduce nutmeg into cultivation in West Africa, the role played by local knowledges was distinct. In the case of indigo, the local African knowledges about indigo acquired by the company a few years earlier did not ultimately shape its plantation strategy.

Indigo cultivation and production techniques developed independently in multiple regions of the world, in some cases centuries before the European textile industry began to use the vivid and iconic blue dye. Indican, the chemical compound found in indigo plants, can be found in varying levels

26 This idea was not unique to the RAC. For example, the Dutch pursued a similar program in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Law, "'There's Nothing Grows,'" 116–37, esp. 120–22.

27 Law, "King Agaja," 137–63; Law, "'There's Nothing Grows,'" 118, 122–24.

in scores of plants throughout the world's tropical and subtropical regions. For example, Spanish colonizers in the sixteenth century marveled at the high-quality textiles dyed with indigo produced in the Incan and Aztec empires. Indigenous expertise in indigo production, as well as the presence of *Indigofera* plants native to the Americas, inspired Spanish colonizers to experiment with large-scale cultivation of indigo in their territories. Such efforts were particularly successful in regions where Indigenous peoples were already highly skilled in indigo production, such as Guatemala. During the seventeenth century, French and English colonials followed the Spanish example, establishing plantations in the Caribbean that drew upon both Indigenous knowledge and knowledge acquired from their European rivals. The indigo processes that developed on American plantations involved back-breaking labor in difficult and often disgusting conditions. Large-scale indigo production in the Americas on plantations was almost always based on coerced labor. In the late-seventeenth-century English Caribbean, this labor was typically undertaken by enslaved Africans.[28]

The West African method for processing indigo was markedly different from the physical and chemical processes employed elsewhere. Both the indigo dyestuff and the plants from which it could be derived long pre-dated the RAC's presence in West Africa. At least two plant species that were used to make indigo grew along Africa's western coast: *Indigofera tinctoria*, which likely was introduced from India by Muslim traders hundreds of years earlier, and *Lonchocarpus cyanescens*, a species thought to be indigenous to coastal West Africa. The two plants were each adapted to a specific climate. *Indigofera tinctoria* thrived in areas of West Africa with drier conditions, while the vine-like *Lonchocarpus cyanescens* preferred forested areas that received more rain. The West African method for processing the two species of indigo plants produced fewer impurities because it used only the leaf, not the roots and stems of the plant. Perhaps more importantly, the West African method was significantly less labor-intensive and unpleasant. In the seventeenth-century Caribbean, indigo processing required two or three separate cisterns, each dedicated to a discrete step in the chemical process of converting the plant to a dyestuff. Multiple cisterns increased the productivity of the process but also increased the labor required. Further, the Caribbean method included a full fermentation step in an open, uncovered cistern, which produced noxious smells and attracted legions of flies. In the West African method, indigo was not fully fermented until it was used as a dye, and even then it was kept covered.[29]

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28 Balfour-Paul, *Indigo*, esp. 2–4, 13–30, 63–67; Kumar, *Indigo Plantations*, 29–30; Terrall, "African Indigo," 6–8.

29 Balfour-Paul, *Indigo*, 26–27, 60–62; Kriger, "'Our Indico Designe,'" 102, 106, 113; Kumar, *Indigo Plantations*, 25–41; Law, "'There's Nothing Grows,'" 117; Terrall, "African Indigo," 6–11.

In the 1690s, indigo presented a highly profitable commercial opportunity due to English dyers' strong preference for the dye, coupled with its limited global supply and increasing market value. English dyers prized indigo's vibrant blue, unusual level of colorfastness, and ability to produce a wide range of other hues when combined with other dyestuffs. Dyers particularly valued indigo's potency. Indigo could be used in significantly smaller quantities than woad, the traditional European source of blue dye. English dyers in the late seventeenth century sourced some of their indigo from the English Caribbean, especially Jamaica and the Leeward Islands, but most of it was imported from India, the French Caribbean, and Spanish America. Even so, supply was insufficient to meet the demands of the English textile industry, and prices for indigo rose rapidly during the last decades of the seventeenth century.[30]

As Colleen Kriger's insightful work on the RAC's indigo plantations has shown, the company began to explore the possibility of producing indigo along the Upper Guinea Coast beginning in the mid-1680s. Company officials requested that its agents send samples of locally produced West African indigo to London for testing, similar to its instructions to agents in the 1690s about natural commodities ranging from drugs to perfumes. RAC leaders also gathered information from returning company ship captains about the local processes employed to produce the dye. Encouraged by what they learned, the company began to pursue the establishment of indigo plantations in earnest during the 1690s.[31]

The company's plan for establishing indigo plantations was premised on the wholesale transportation of knowledge relating to methods of cultivating and processing indigo. The RAC plan did not call for employing West African knowledges relating to indigo collected during the previous decade. It sought instead to leverage the infrastructure of the slave trade to reproduce the agricultural and industrial processes of the English Caribbean in West Africa. Its plan included the introduction of foreign species of indigo. Although it is unclear whether the indigo seeds introduced by the company were for species indigenous to the Americas or India (or both), it is evident that the company did not propose to use either of the indigo species found in West Africa for hundreds of years. Despite the RAC's expressed interest in acquiring samples of potential African commodities and extracting local knowledge on their uses and production methods to inform its commercial activities, the company ignored this model when it came to indigo.

To implement indigo production based on the Caribbean model, the RAC leveraged its commercial infrastructure to acquire and transport the necessary knowledge, supplies, and labor. Utilizing its vessels and personnel engaged in

30 English dyers continued to rely on imported sources of indigo until the 1740s, when South Carolina became a major supplier of the dyestuff. Balfour-Paul, *Indigo*, 27–70; Kriger, "'Our Indico Designe,'" 99–100; Kumar, *Indigo Plantations*, 25–41.

31 Kriger, "'Our Indico Designe,'" 98–115, esp. 101.

the slave trade, the company transported both free and enslaved individuals knowledgeable about indigo production, along with essential supplies, from the Caribbean to the Upper Guinea Coast. The itinerary traced by the RAC vessel *The Experiment* highlights how the company leveraged the commodification and enslavement of African peoples in order to facilitate the transplantation of a new agricultural system. *The Experiment* departed London in February 1692 loaded with "several vatts & Engines" intended "for the making of Indico." The machinery and equipment used in processing indigo was unloaded in Sherbro. The vessel was then reconfigured as a slave ship, and RAC agent Henry Gibson was instructed to purchase 150 enslaved Africans along the Upper Guinea Coast to be transported on board *The Experiment*. Instead of exchanging the African men, women, and children onboard *The Experiment* for plantation products in the Caribbean, the company's instructions indicated that they should be exchanged for "further quantities of Indico seed & both white and black men experienced in the raising and making of Indico with tooles." As instructed, Gibson oversaw the reconfiguration of *The Experiment* as a slaving vessel, the purchase of 111 captive Africans, and the departure of the vessel for the Leeward Islands. After some delay, *The Experiment* arrived in Antigua in August 1693. Of the 111 enslaved Africans who originally embarked aboard, 86 survived the middle passage. *The Experiment* returned to Sherbro the following February with seeds, tools, and personnel for the company's West African indigo plantations.[32]

RAC slave ships such as *The Experiment* facilitated the transplantation of knowledges and expertise, as well as cisterns and seeds. While company leaders only used the term "expert" to describe the handful of men they intended to form the plantation's managerial class, a broader group involved in the indigo project held specialized knowledge about indigo and its production. Company officials recruited at least five individuals whom they described as "experts" to oversee the RAC's indigo plantation along the Upper Guinea Coast over the course of a decade. All five claimed expertise based on their experience in indigo production in the Caribbean. Richard Bridgman, for example, was "recommended to us as a person experienced in the raising & making Indico" in the Leeward Islands.[33] However, these company-designated "experts" were far from the only ones with sophisticated knowledges about indigo cultivation and processing. The enslaved laborers transported from the Caribbean and compelled to toil on the RAC's indigo plantations also included experts. Company officials obliquely acknowledged this knowledge in their instruction that *The Experiment* return to West Africa from the English Caribbean with "both white and black men experienced in the raising and

32 The vessel continued to be listed as part of the York Island factory, although it is not clear whether the vessel made additional transatlantic slaving voyages. *Slave Voyages*, voyage ID 9705; NA, Kew, RAC, Letter Books, T70/50, f. 129; Kriger, "'Our Indico Designe,'" 107–8.

33 NA, Kew, RAC, Letter Books, T70/50, f. 129; Kriger, "'Our Indico Designe,'" 106–7.

making of Indico." Company officials likely had in mind the knowledge of enslaved laborers who had been compelled to work on indigo plantations in the English Caribbean. The long history of indigo cultivation and production in West Africa meant that some laborers on RAC plantations—both free laborers who had always resided in Africa and enslaved laborers forcibly transported from the Caribbean—likely had expert knowledge related to the distinct West African methods of indigo cultivation and production. The RAC's transplantation to West Africa of both Black and White individuals with indigo expertise resulted in the presence of two competing knowledges about indigo on RAC plantations.

Competing knowledges contributed to the challenges faced by the RAC's indigo plantations. Thomas Corker, chief agent at Sherbro, complained to his superiors in London in 1697 that, "The natives insist on their own methods of working with indico."[34] As Kriger has argued, African laborers on the company's indigo plantations had good reason to prefer West African methods of processing indigo over the techniques imported from the Caribbean. African laborers understandably preferred methods that were not only more familiar but also less labor-intensive and unpleasant. This contributed to the frequency with which enslaved laborers on RAC plantations ran away and made free laborers difficult to recruit.[35] The company attempted to address this problem by transporting enslaved laborers from other regions in West Africa to work on the indigo plantations in the Upper Guinea Coast. As company leaders wrote to Corker and Francis Bowman in Sherbro, the laborers forcibly transported from other regions of West Africa "will have no dependence but on yourselves, therefore you must encourage them, & see that they mind the business for which they are sent."[36]

Additional difficulties faced by the RAC's indigo plantations along the Upper Guinea Coast were myriad. The plantations were plagued by undercapitalization, mismanagement, and insecurity of possession. Simply getting imported indigo seeds to germinate proved challenging. Company officials also reported difficulties getting seedlings to grow into mature plants. They described frequent rains that "rott the roots & makes the Leaf fall before it comes to its growth."[37] The likely culprit was a mismatch between the varieties of foreign indigo cultivated and the microclimates in which the company's indigo plantations were located.

More fundamentally, ignorance undermined the RAC's plantation project. Despite repeated directives in the 1690s for agents to observe African natural knowledges—and earlier efforts in the 1680s to gather knowledge specifically about indigo in West Africa—these insights did not shape the company's

34 Quoted in Kriger, "'Our Indico Designe,'" 115.
35 Ibid., 112–14.
36 NA, Kew, RAC, Letter Books, T70/51, f. 10, 43.
37 Ibid., f. 128; Kriger, "'Our Indico Designe,'" 102, 114–15.

plans for its indigo project. Instead, the RAC embraced the logic of projecting, attempting to transplant a foreign labor regime and foreign processes for cultivating and processing the dye, in order to establish a plantation on the Caribbean model.

Conclusion

RAC officials returned to the idea of establishing plantations in West Africa to produce staple crops such as indigo in the early eighteenth century. Ultimately, these efforts proved no more successful than the company's initial project to establish a West African indigo plantation on the Caribbean model in the 1690s.[38] By the second decade of the eighteenth century, the RAC's commercial activities had already seen a dramatic decline because of the full deregulation of the British slave trade with West Africa in 1712. Company leaders during the early eighteenth century periodically returned to the idea that they could identify new ways to profit through trade with West Africa, including by identifying new natural commodities in which to trade based on African natural knowledges. The most extensive of these efforts was in the early 1720s under the leadership of James Brydges, 1st Duke of Chandos. Over a period of four years, Chandos encouraged a flurry of new activity designed to survey the natural resources of West Africa and to identify new commodities for the direct trade between Africa and Europe. Chandos's instructions that company agents in West Africa collect African knowledge regarding drugs and dyes, acquire samples of potential natural commodities, search for new sources of mineral wealth, and experiment with the cultivation of commodities such as indigo and cotton echoed those made by company officials in the 1690s. While his efforts were more extensive, they ultimately proved no more successful. During the second quarter of the eighteenth century, the RAC largely subsisted on annual Parliamentary appropriations for the upkeep of the company's trading forts in West Africa. When Parliament ended these subsidies in response to rumors of financial mismanagement, the company formally dissolved in 1752.[39]

The RAC's failure to introduce nutmeg and indigo plantations to West Africa in the 1690s highlights the ways that histories of projecting can illuminate the entangled histories of knowledge, labor, and power. The uncertain future of its trade in the late seventeenth century encouraged the RAC to experiment with novel projects to reshape the environment, reengineer geographies of coerced labor, and extract natural knowledges in the search for new avenues of profit. Undergirding and facilitating these experiments were the unequal power dynamics, violence, and expropriation fundamental to chattel

38 Law, "'There's Nothing Grows,'" 122–25, 130–37; Law, "King Agaja," 154–58; Mitchell,"'Legitimate Commerce,'" 556–76; Murphy, *Captivity's Collections*, 49–70.

39 Pettigrew, *Freedom's Debt*, 11; Mitchell,"'Legitimate Commerce,'" 544–78.

slavery. *The Experiment*'s voyage to exchange commodified men, women, and children for indigo seeds, tools, and expert laborers, for example, illustrates how the commodification of nature could rely upon the commodification of people. Violence, expropriation, and unequal power dynamics constitute a thread throughout the histories of the RAC's nutmeg and indigo projects.

These projects can also be understood within the histories of ignorance. The company's efforts to introduce nutmeg cultivation in West Africa demonstrates how it sought to gather and apply local knowledges, systematically collecting information from various sources and testing the viability of new commodities in the region as part of its commercial strategy. Although the company's leaders frequently emphasized to its agents that attentiveness to African knowledges was essential to its financial success, in the case of indigo it ignored the local knowledge it had previously collected, including methods more suited to West African environments. Instead, the company embraced the type of large-scale restructuring of labor and environments that often characterized early modern projecting. Historians of ignorance have demonstrated that "ignorance is more than a simple negative of knowledge."[40] Whereas historians once viewed ignorance simply as what was not yet known, scholars today have identified a complex taxonomy of different forms of ignorance. The RAC's indigo project reveals these layered histories, as the company disregarded local knowledge about indigo—not due to a lack of information, but as a consequence of colonial and commercial priorities.

About the Author

Kathleen Murphy is a professor of history at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo. Her research examines the intersections of science and enslavement in the early modern Atlantic World, as explored in her recent book *Captivity's Collections: Science, Natural History, and the British Transatlantic Slave Trade* (UNC Press, 2023).

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40 Verburgt and Burke, "Introduction," 1.

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