Introduction

This book is about the relationship between the two great slave empires of the 19th century—the U.S. and Brazil—in the context of the African Slave Trade, with the accent decidedly on North America. This is not a book about slavery in Brazil; though the narrative engages four continents, the primary focus is on the U.S., more specifically, the role of U.S. nationals as slave traders and sojourners in Brazil; i.e., this book is also a social history about the impact of Brazil on the U.S. It is very much a story that involves Brazil (and Africa) in the eyes of the U.S.—and not vice versa, and it is very much a story about the role of U.S. nationals in the African Slave Trade. It is also a story about the continuing rivalry between London and Washington that had exploded in war in 1812 and then festered as the U.K. abolished slavery in the Empire in the 1830s.

This book argues that U.S. slavery is better understood in hemispheric terms—the Slave South saw in an alliance with Brazil a formidable hedge against a future relationship with the North and, for that matter, a hedge against continuing pressure from London to abolish slavery, a hedge that could mean triumph in a Civil War, if need be.

Two leading characters in these pages are former Virginia Governor, Henry Wise—John Brown’s executioner—and Matthew Fontaine Maury, a Virginian of a stature comparable to Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson. As Minister to Brazil, Wise crusaded vigorously against the illicit slave trade to Brazil, while Maury advocated strongly for deporting enslaved U.S. Negroes to the Amazon for the purpose of developing this region; he was also part of a cabal that had designs on seizing the Amazon from Brazil: their ostensibly separate initiatives are best comprehended in unison, i.e., if Brazil could draw upon the labor of enslaved African-Americans, there would be no need to draw upon the illicit trade, which was dominated by forces in the U.S. Northeast and their lust for Brazilian territory was of a piece with their boundless
expansion westward in North America. This was one more source of regional tension that was to explode in Civil War. Likewise, the flood of U.S. nationals who arrived in Brazil on their way to the California goldfields got a glimpse of a brutal slavery that enhanced abolitionist sentiment and also exacerbated regional tensions. This relationship with Brazil was an aspect of a larger phenomenon: the blurring of citizenship boundaries as slavers changed flags in midocean routinely; those who sought to profit from the slave trade often thought that U.S. nationality provided protection and altered citizenship accordingly; diplomats in foreign capitals often acted on behalf of more than one nation; at times it seemed that slave trading was the prime preoccupation of certain diplomats, notably—though not exclusively—those of Portugal serving in New York, who advocated kidnapping Africans and compelling them to be “American,” albeit enslaved. This frayed idea of citizenship contributed to thinking in the Slave South that was evolving away from allegiance to Washington and toward a firmer relationship with Brazil.

**Contours of the African Slave Trade**

Between 1500 and 1800, more Africans than Europeans arrived in the Americas, while recent research suggests that between 12 million and 20 million Africans were shipped against their will by Europeans and European colonists to the New World up to the latter stages of the 19th century. By one estimate 100 million Africans lost their lives as a result of the maritime slave trades. Between 1600 and 1850, “approximately 4.5 million enslaved Africans went to Brazil, ten times as many as went to North America and indeed more than the total number of Africans who went to all of the Caribbean and North America combined.”

Luanda, Angola offered a shorter sea passage to Brazilian ports than most slave-hunting grounds—35 days to Pernambuco; thus, after 1575, Angolans predominated in the Black Brazilian population.

Yet despite the length and breadth of the era of the African Slave Trade, more than 40 percent made this perilous voyage in the ninety years prior to “final suppression in 1867,” and it was during the 1840s that “the transatlantic slave trade probably reached an all-time peak.” Brazil imported well over one million slaves (half of them illegally) during the first half of the nineteenth century compared with an estimated three million slaves during the previous 300 years. From 1835 to 1855
alone, 500,000 Africans were smuggled to Brazil, an essential element of what has been termed “the largest forced emigration in history.”

Hence, historians estimate the Brazilian slave population around 1820 to be two million, i.e., two-thirds of the country’s total population. In the following decades, U.S. nationals played a key role in skewing further the population of Brazil with their avid smuggling of the enslaved and allowing their flag to be deployed for the same function. In a sense this was appropriate since by 1825, according to Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman, these two nations contained 67 percent of the total enslaved population in the Americas. Thus, to gain a fuller understanding of “American” slavery, we must examine the U.S. and Brazil tie, particularly since the latter nation provided succor for slavery in the former.

As W. E. B. Du Bois observed, the “American slave trade”—i.e., that of the western hemisphere—during its busiest and most profitable stage “came to be carried on principally by United States capital, in United States ships, officered by United States citizens, and under the United States flag.” More precisely, as this illicit business rose in the 1840s, enslaved Africans were transported disproportionately on ships made and/or registered in the U.S. and flying the U.S. flag and, as time passed, increasingly these ships carried U.S. crews and were financed by U.S. capital. The Stars and Stripes began to appear regularly in the foreign slave trade when it was introduced into the Cuban trade following the signing of the comprehensive Anglo-Spanish treaty of 1835. From 1838 there were reports of its appearance in the Brazilian trade and its use increased rapidly during the years 1840–51. Despite federal laws prohibiting the participation of U.S. citizens and U.S. vessels in the slave trade, U.S.-built ships left Baltimore, New York, Providence, Boston, Salem, and other New England ports for Brazil, where they were either sold to U.S. nationals acting as front men for slave dealers or sold directly to dealers. Moreover, “a great many of the slave traders (Portuguese, Brazilians, and others) who chose to seek a safe alternative to the Portuguese flag found it in the Stars and Stripes.” The provision of vessels was critical, as this industry was major in the U.S., and the staunch refusal of the U.S. to allow its flagged ships to be searched by the Royal Navy of London was similarly important. As time passed and particularly as the Civil War approached, these U.S. nationals’ role became even more prominent in this business.

This Brazilian slave trade as a whole was more profitable than that of
any other national slave trade; it was a “veritable El Dorado.” During the pivotal 1840s, “there were probably more slaves traded at the Valongo market in Rio de Janeiro than all the New Orleans markets put together.” Yet, the importance of this African Slave Trade to Brazil has not been sufficiently recognized in the nation that was one of its principal beneficiaries—the U.S. Not least, this historical amnesia elides the profound point that this odious commerce “constituted a sort of unsuspected and, very often, deliberately concealed genocide,” contributing to the sad fact that “the African population declined significantly as a proportion of the world’s population between 1700 and 1900, a decline that can be attributed in large part to the effects of slavery and the slave trade.” This occurred as simultaneously much of the wealth of the major nations of Europe and North America was built on the labor and suffering of millions of Africans.

Deport U.S. Negroes to Brazil?

Those in the U.S. in the 19th century who advocated on behalf of an African Slave Trade that was illegal represented the most disunionist and pro-slavery faction of secessionists; indeed, a significant percentage of secessionists in the Lower South actively promoted or sympathized with the slave trade cause on the eve of disunion. This trend lay at the forefront of slavery expansionism and southern nationalism. These notorious “fire-eaters” placed Brazil near the center of their dream of a transcontinental empire of slavery, particularly in the 1850s, when it seemed that slavery was encountering a roadblock in its westward expansion. Thus, lamented the key abolitionist, William Lloyd Garrison, in 1854, “Brother [Wendell] Phillips was right: ‘the future seems to unfold a vast slave empire united with Brazil, and darkening the whole west.’” That very same year a group of men with “grandiose ideas” created the “Knights of the Golden Circle” who plotted to realize Garrison’s worst nightmare—forcing a “great slave empire” that blanketed the hemisphere.

The most articulate and influential advocate of a Brazil strategy was the celebrated Virginian, Matthew Fontaine Maury—renowned scientist and powerful Confederate, who ranks in the state’s annals alongside Robert E. Lee. He saw the Amazon famously as the “safety-valve of the Union” and envisioned deporting U.S. Negroes (accompanied by slave
masters, of course) to this still relatively underdeveloped region as an advance guard of Dixie colonialism. “It is easier and quicker,” argued Maury, “for sailing vessels from the Amazon to make the voyage to New York, than to Rio; and a vessel can make the passage quicker from New York to Rio, than she can from the Amazon to Rio.” Thus, he concluded, it would be “wise to transfer the slaves of the Mississippi Valley to the valley of the Amazon”—an analysis that was taken quite seriously at the time in the Brazilian Foreign Ministry, as Maury’s provocative words were translated and discussed. In a carefully worded response, replete with loopholes and ambiguities—a classic “non-denial denial”—U.S. Secretary of State William Marcy assured his Brazilian counterpart that he should not take seriously “certain newspaper articles” which “created the [impression] on the mind of [Brazilians]” that a “steamer of the United States is in the Amazon.”

Maury was among many in the U.S. who cast a ravenous eye on Brazilian territory. There was a continuity of interest among those who wanted to seize land in South America and those who wanted to ship enslaved Africans from the U.S. to this continent—with the former accompanying the latter as this aggression was being consummated. Strikingly, as thousands of U.S. nationals traveled by ship to Rio on their way to California during the 1848–50 “Gold Rush,” a number of them scrutinized carefully the military defenses of this South American giant. W. Grayson Mann, who had served recently as secretary to the U.S. Minister in Brazil, urged the infamous soldier-of-fortune, William Walker, in mid-1857 to “change his focus” from seizing the minnow that was Nicaragua and turn his attention to the whale that was Brazil, claiming that he would then join Walker to help prevent “the fairest portion of God’s Creation rotting away in the hands of a decrepit race incapable of developing its resources.” Mark Twain was among those in the U.S. who “was fired with a longing to ascend the Amazon” and “tried to contrive ways to get to Para” there. He left Keokuk, floating down the Mississippi heading for this town, though—in a journey that may have been more fanciful than real—“he never got any further than New Orleans.” Not surprisingly, the articulate African American, J. H. Banks, agreed with the not uncommon opinion on the eve of the Civil War that the “aim of the slave power is to unite with Brazil and extend the disunion of slavery to the Pacific.”

The idea of deporting U.S. Negroes to the Amazon—championed by Maury—was gaining traction, even as the Civil War proceeded. In
1862, a committee of the House of Representatives on “Emancipation and Colonization” considered this notion, arguing that “no one can have failed to observe the power and influence which Great Britain has exercised and the substantial advantages she has obtained in all the countries around the Gulf of Mexico, through the instrumentality of Jamaica Negroes, who are to be found scattered in small settlements through these regions.”

A few years earlier, in 1858, a “group of Republican leaders from the border states and the West introduced legislation to subsidize black colonization in Latin America” in an “attempt to rebut the Democratic image of the Republicans as proponents of ‘Africanization’ of the territories. . . . in the border states especially, they added, espousing colonization was essential to building a Republican Party base among poor whites.” This scheme was revived with a vengeance by Washington’s Civil War ambassador to Brazil, James Watson Webb, a comrade of South Carolina’s pro-slavery leader, John C. Calhoun. But the Brazilian Minister of Foreign Affairs, though finding Webb’s plan “highly interesting” that deserved to be “seriously pondered” rejected this mass deportation since “nothing of that sort may possibly be tried in our country, as we have a positive law which expressly interdicts the admittance of any freed Negroes within our limits.”

Undeterred, Washington queried a number of Latin American nations within Spain’s sphere of influence about accepting deported U.S. Negroes. But Madrid’s man in Haiti warned sternly that their presence would be a danger to those of European descent in Santo Domingo and could foment countless local and global conflicts. On the day the Emancipation Proclamation took effect, the U.S. legation in Brazil’s neighbor, Ecuador, briskly informed Washington that “in accordance” with instructions from his government, he had queried “the Ecuadorean government on the subject of Negro Colonization. I find them entirely averse to it,” this after he had “a conversation with the President at his house” where in line with certain hemispheric norms he “expressed strong antipathies against the Negro race. He regretted that there are so many of them in and about Guayaquil and added that it would be very fortunate for the white race in America if it could rid itself of the Negro element either by transferring it back to Africa or in some other way.”

Even after the “Emancipation Proclamation,” London’s man in Washington reported that the “President of the United States sent for me” and “told me that he had been for some time anxious to speak to me in
an informal unofficial manner on the subject of promoting the emigration of coloured people from this country to the British colonies.”

Certainly the inability of Washington to secure a foreign destination for Negroes aided in compelling U.S. leaders to accept a black presence on these shores. On the other hand, London’s reluctance to accept this precursor of “ethnic cleansing” was not necessarily motivated by humane considerations but was more of a reluctance to embrace a stigmatized group or to do any favors for a nation, i.e., the U.S., it had already warred with and with which it endured a continual conflict.

In the run-up to this deportation scheme, sharp conflicts had emerged between London and Washington, not least because of the former’s efforts to enforce the ban on the illegal slave trade, which had Brazil as its foremost destination. J. H. Banks spoke for many of his fellow African-Americans when he chose to “look upon [Britain] as the friend of the coloured race. It is a common opinion among the slaves that slavery will be terminated by a war between England and the United States.” Like a number of U.S. Negroes, he chose exile in Britain. Would more U.S. Negroes defect to the venerable foe that was the U.K., if plans accelerated to ship them out of the country?

From the other shore, as John C. Calhoun saw it, London’s prosecution of anti-slave trade regulations was hypocritical and self-interested, intended to “‘destroy the peace and prosperity of both’” Brazil and the U.S. and “‘transfer the production of rice, cotton, sugar and coffee’” from these two nations to London’s “‘possessions beyond the Cape of Good Hope.’” When the legislature in Texas, a state that was long a site for illegal smuggling of enslaved Africans, moved in 1857 toward the legal reopening of the trade, the solons of the Lone Star State argued that abolitionist pressure from London was compelling this conclusion.

Accordingly, the U.S. Minister to Spain, Washington Irving, informed Secretary of State John C. Calhoun about conversations he had engaged in concerning “prosecuting the scheme of organizing a coalition between the French and Spanish colonies, Brazil and the Southern parts of the United States to protect themselves from the Abolition intrigues and the machinations of England.” Washington “had refused” to “participate in the new [global abolitionist] initiatives and continually refused to countenance the idea of an antislavery league,” while steadfastly refusing to grant the British Navy authority to search suspected slavers bearing the U.S. flag, which encouraged pirates of various nationalities
to hoist this banner. Then, during the Crimean War the British, who had the “largest” anti–slave trade “force on the coast” of Africa, “were obliged to reduce it very materially,” which was like a dream-come-true for U.S. slavers.

Consequently, as the Civil War approached, Washington was informed by London that “the slave trade continues to be carried on, on the African coast, and almost exclusively by vessels sailing under the American flag, and provided with genuine American papers. . . . American citizens engage in it almost with impunity.” Of “170 slave-trading expeditions fitted out in little more than three years preceding 1862”—a time when the trade was reaching new heights in its centuries’ long history—“no fewer than 74 were known to or believed to have sailed from New York, 43 from other American ports, 40 from ports in Cuba, and the rest from European ports.” Relations between London—the prime enforcer of strictures against the slave trade—and Washington, whose nationals were the prime scofflaws, had deteriorated to the point that even during the midst of the Civil War officials in Cape Town, a major listening post for the monitoring of this illicit commerce, were informed that the U.K. “may shortly be engaged in a war with the United States.”

The U.S. and the Slave Trade to Brazil

The U.S. was the principal market for Brazilian coffee during the 1820s and early 1830s, suggesting that North Americans were a beneficiary in a major crop of an economy driven by slave labor. It was not surprising when in early 1826 the President of Baltimore’s Chamber of Commerce spoke warmly of “the great magnitude of our Commerce with the rich and extensive Empire of Brazil and with the provinces of Rio de la Plata.” This region was absorbing a “larger proportion of the produce of our Country than any other branch of our South American trade.” As the flag followed commerce—and vice versa—the U.S. legation in Brazil often was studded with self-interested businessmen. William Wright of Maryland—whose family was prominent in Brazil’s economy—also represented the U.S. in this giant nation. His connections to the slave trade caused some abolitionists to fret that such diplomats would be less than aggressive in enforcing the bar against this evil commerce. Manuel Pinto de Fonseca of Rio de Janeiro, a major figure
in the unlawful slave trade, “had business connections with the U.S. firm of Maxwell, Wright and Co., also located in Rio de Janeiro”—which, of course, was the prize jewel of the Wright family of Maryland. This company “facilitated the financing of U.S. slavers by Brazilian entrepreneurs and the sale of newly imported Africans to plantations. Wright and Company was the largest U.S. merchant firm in Rio de Janeiro from the 1820s through the 1840s” and also had extensive interests in Cuba, the West Indies, and Europe.51

Though they literally wrote the book on U.S. trade with Brazil,52 Wright and Company were not singular as there were other U.S. firms josting for influence in this enormously profitable business.53 Interestingly, Wright was not unique in being a diplomat tied to slave traders54: this was a pattern that was not uncommon and given the official capacities of these men, this tie obviously facilitated the continuation of the illicit trade.55 Though a consensus has emerged that the illegal trade to Brazil had dropped off sharply by the early 1850s, that decade continued to witness human shipments by those with U.S. ties, particularly the Portuguese Company [Companhia Portuguesa] in New York.56 Certainly, the powerful U.S. was quite lax in monitoring the slaving inclinations of those whose ships carried their flag and whose “citizens” carried their passports.57

As Salem, Massachusetts lost out to Boston and New York City for regional prominence in the 1820s, it pushed into new markets, particularly in East Africa, where “some American vessels were engaged in the [slave] trade, buying the slaves at Mozambique principally and transporting them to Brazil and South America.”58 There was “an overwhelming predominance of American influence in Zanzibar during the latter half of the nineteenth century,” as slave sales increased in prominence.59 U.S. influence in East Africa had increased to the point that “Britain had already shown herself desirous of thwarting American rivalry in the East and lent ready credence to rumors of a possible American annexation of Delagoa Bay, which Portugal had practically abandoned for the convenience of our [U.S.] whalers.”60

The question of whalers and their intersection with the latter stages of the African Slave Trade is not insignificant. In New England, whaling peaked during the 1835–45 decade, then went into a steady decline. At the same time, the crews, which formerly had been comprised “‘almost entirely of Americans,’ ” began to change; there was a “steady replacement of African-Americans and Afro-Indians” by “European
immigrants, chiefly Portuguese.” This was “the stimulus for the first wave” of “[Lusophone] immigrants in the 1850s, most of them destined for New Bedford.”61 This replacement occurred as the whaling fleet was being converted into a slaving one; whalers “often engaged in the slave trade. Sometimes they would fit out in New Bedford or Long Island Sound ostensibly for the nobler game but, quite, unbeknown to the crew” would become a slaving expedition.62 Jettisoning African-American mariners facilitated this process.63

Disguising slavers as whalers was a prominent tactic deployed to deceive the British Navy. As for the U.S. Navy, which was sworn to disrupt the trade as well, it was often not up to the task. Until 1857, the “U.S. squadron never consisted of more than seven ships and the average was less than five. The British squadron . . . never numbered less than 12 and averaged 18. Furthermore, the U.S. squadron was based on the Cape Verde Islands, which were almost 3000 miles and at least a month’s sail from the southern slave trading area.”64 This was notably unfortunate as time passed since “the trade was never so flourishing as in the five years preceding the Civil War.”65 Even the Spanish Foreign Ministry—sited in a nation where slave trading, particularly to Cuba, was rampant—took note of the “sudden and increased activity in the slave trade” in 1859, and the “well established fact that nearly the whole of the fleet is fitted out in Boston, Portland, New Bedford and other eastern ports.”66

Was U.S. Slavery Influenced by Hemispheric and Global Trends?

The eminent Dixie diplomat, Duff Green, was among the many in his region who had a firm “belief that foreign relations were important to strengthening the South’s political position.”67 As slavery came under sharper attack from abolitionists in the 1840s—coincidentally as the slave trade enjoyed a rebirth—pro-slavery forces banded together across borders. Thomas Jollivet of France, a pro-bondage advocate, “made contact” with Green, “an apostle of American slavery, when the latter was in Paris in 1842” and went on to rely on the “slavery apologist John C. Calhoun in his writings, suggesting a community of interests between the French and American plantocracies.”68

Furthermore, there was a transnational recognition that prices of crops produced by slave labor were significantly influenced by transna-
tional forces. As U.S. nationals accelerated the smuggling of enslaved Africans to Brazil in the 1840s, they were able to increase the crops that were grown there, which ultimately provided a challenge to U.S. hemispheric dominance, which in turn increased pressure in this nation to reopen the African Slave Trade (just as it energized those in the Slave South who opposed the illicit slave trade to Brazil).69 High sugar prices during this era, which were driven in no small part by a decline in English staple production, were causing more slaves to be imported into Cuba and Brazil from Africa, thereby stimulating the slave trade—and the bank accounts of some U.S. nationals.70

In Buenos Ayres [Aires] one Briton opined giddily that the U.S. Civil War would “transfer the production of cotton from America to British India and other countries which are much more under our influence than America was or ever could be.”71 A U.S. diplomat in Brazil disagreed, though this was of small comfort to Washington; Secretary of State William Seward was informed, as the Civil War raged, that “a great development has been given to the resources of this province by the rebellion now so unhappily [occurring] in our country. If ‘cotton is king’—his throne promises to be removed to Brazil. The stimulus given to the culture of that staple, if not soon withdrawn will give to this Empire the monopoly which we formerly possessed.” Prices of this crop had increased a staggering fourfold.72

Consequently, defenders of slavery recognized that the peculiar institution was heavily dependent on currents from abroad. For example, Brazil’s legation in Washington analyzed extensively Nat Turner’s slave revolt in Virginia, seeking signs of whether this contagion might spread.73 Even in faraway Buenos Aires, where slavery was hardly prominent, note was taken of this chilling revolt.74

Likewise, a few years later the U.S. legation in Bahia, Brazil analyzed extensively a slave revolt in this province, seeking signs of whether this contagion might spread. The U.S. Consul reported on a “most serious insurrection of the black population . . . had it not been discovered a few hours before, the consequences might have been dreadful.” A U.S. merchant there spoke of the “great state of alarm and fear that he would continue to have” as a result and was elated that “men from the American Corvette Erie which Captain Percival had kindly lent him [aid] to protect his house as he did not consider himself safe. I heard that Capt. Percival has landed detachments to protect the American Consul and other merchants had offered his assistance and protection
to the Consuls of other nations.” Brazilian elites could not be indifferent to slave revolts in the U.S., just as U.S. elites could be affected by slave revolts in Brazil.

Just as Liberia was seen in Washington as a convenient dumping ground for free Negroes, thought to be inherently subversive of slavery, there was a similar sentiment in Brazil. Similarly, Madrid monitored carefully the rebellion led by John Brown, no doubt worried about what it meant for Cuba—still languishing in human bondage. In short, pro-slavery forces in the Americas recognized that the viability of the peculiar institution was deeply influenced by hemispheric and transatlantic currents.

“Africanization,” or the fear of growing numbers of Africans in Brazil, also deeply influenced segments of U.S. opinion about the feasibility of reopening the slave trade in their own nation. The influence, as an outgrowth of their numbers, of those deemed to be “black” in Brazil—notably their role in the military—was also frightening to some in North America. One U.S. emissary cautioned his superiors about undue interference in the internal affairs of Brazil. “We should cautiously abstain in this country above all others, from lending the smallest breath of encouragement to insurrection” he warned nervously, since “the physical force of the country is out of all proportion black or colored; no insurrection can be of long continuance without ending in a servile war.” This was a “tragedy,” potentially “fatal.” The “catastrophe I [envision],” he added apocalyptically, “is that Brazil may become a black military despotism,” a “disastrous” outcome, he thought. Hence, the “palpable conclusion” he outlined was that “our interests, commercial, political & domestic, lead us to further the repose, the political harmony & the general prosperity of the entire Brazilian Empire.” Would smuggling more Africans into the U.S. similarly increase the possibility of “servile war”?

As opinion was souring in certain circles in the U.S. about the viability of slavery, the U.S. Consul in Pernambuco, Brazil thought he espied a similar sentiment in Brazil. “I believe,” he announced that “the most intelligent men in this Province are satisfied that the solution of the labor question lies in the abolition of slavery.” Hence, the “ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment to the American Constitution was an act of great importance not only in the United States, but also in Cuba, Puerto Rico and Brazil.” It was a blow in the long run to slavery in
the hemisphere and, most of all, to the clandestine and illegal African Slave Trade to Brazil which had enriched a number of U.S. nationals.

The California Gold Rush and the African Slave Trade to Brazil

As the illegal slave trade to Brazil was increasing, another sizeable movement—albeit voluntary—was taking place. The “discovery of gold in California was to trigger the greatest mass migration in the history of the young Republic up to that time, 80,000 in 1849 alone and probably 300,000 by 1854.” The preferred route west was around Cape Horn with a stop in Rio de Janeiro. Hence, in “the first three months of 1849, eighty-six California ships put into the harbor” there; “sometimes a dozen arrived in a single day, bearing as many as a thousand passengers.” Their distinctive presence allowed U.S. slavers not to stand out so boldly, thus, helping them to avoid detection. On the other hand, many from beyond the confines of the U.S. South had no specific knowledge of the horrors of African slavery and, thus, Rio was shocking to many, helping to spark abolitionist sentiment. “Slave markets horrified visitors, especially those from New England” according to the scholar, Rhoda Blumberg. “Unlike southern slaveholders, they had never witnessed humans for sale.” Nor had many previously witnessed some of the surreal scenes that greeted them in Rio. As enslaved Africans flooded into Brazil and the ships carrying them were hounded by the British Navy, some of the more unscrupulous skippers decided to dispose of the evidence by throwing their cargo overboard, while other Negroes sought to escape by diving into inky waters. As one U.S. national put it, “the harbor is constantly covered with the bodies of blacks,” who “are known to [have] thrown themselves in to escape. . . . I have seen them myself left by the tide on the strand.”

Strikingly, as these Euro-Americans were repulsed by the dreadfulness of Brazilian slavery, a number of African-Americans viewed this nation differently, using this South American example as a means to discredit the awfulness in North America they were compelled to endure. Brazil, thought Frederick Douglass, was the “only country where the Negro could rise to a high position in society, even to that of judge or major general, if he were possessed of character and talent.” His fellow black abolitionist, Martin Delany, concurred. Ironically, both of
these sentiments—Brazil as “racial” horror and Brazil as “racial” paradise—served to undermine slavery in the U.S.

Yet neither school of thought seemed to grasp the point that the infrastructure of the illegal trade captained by U.S. nationals and serving Brazil probably had a spillover effect in the U.S., increasing the number of enslaved Africans brought to the U.S., particularly as this commerce increased as the Civil War approached; that is, as Africans were dragged across the Atlantic and Britain sought to foil their landing in Brazil, it made sense for these slavers to head northward to Cuba and New Orleans. Following Du Bois, the scholar Robert Hall estimates that “between 1808 and 1860” about “250,000 Africans” were “imported into the United States,” which is probably on the high end but provides a glimpse of the dimension of the problem.88 In 1859, the U.S. Department of Interior dispatched an agent to the “southern states” to investigate the “extent of importation of Negroes direct from Africa.” After “widely conversing with a number of gentlemen of intelligence” and traveling to Wilmington, North Carolina, Charleston, Florida, and elsewhere he emerged with a mixed view, receiving credible reports of hundreds of recent imports to northern Florida.89 British emissaries in Texas provided numerous reports over the years of enslaved Africans being smuggled into this nation, then state.90 Certainly the momentum provided by the clandestine trade to Brazil—spearheaded by U.S. nationals—contributed mightily to the flouting of law that led to Africans being brought forcibly to North America. Just as cracking down on the sale of illicit drugs in one neighborhood often drives it into adjacent neighborhoods, something similar was happening with the illicit slave trade.

Likewise, when the Slave South decided to secede from the U.S., many wondered how and why they thought they could prevail against a more populous and more industrialized North, but this thinking elides the reality that the Deep South had sound cause to think that it could rely on the Deepest South—i.e., an alliance with Brazil—along with its former patron, Portugal, and Spanish Cuba and could thus prevail and ensure that slavery in the hemisphere would triumph.

Confederate Exiles in Brazil

After the Civil War, some U.S. nationals—particularly from Dixie—reluctant to reside under the rule of the government they had just sought
to overthrow and unwilling to relinquish their fondness for slavery, migrated to Brazil, where this institution continued until 1888. In 1867, the New York Times noticed one “Southern gentleman,” who “thinks that in Brazil he can own slaves, can do as he pleases, go where he likes and retain his old views of the inferiority of the Negro.”

He was among the thousands who made this journey southward, a number of whom tried to bring enslaved Africans with them. This capital flight too was noticed by a British diplomat in Puerto Rico, who was informed of a “cargo of slaves shipped off the coast of Florida” that “had called off Vieques for the purpose of obtaining provisions in order to continue her voyage to the coast of Brazil.” He moaned that this “traffic may be carried on with success, a traffic which is even more barbarous than the African slave trade, from the fact that these poor Negroes of the southern states who have received the one great benefit of the late American civil war . . . should again so treacherously be driven into bondage.”

Like the illegal trade to Brazil and the U.S., one can only speculate about the number of erstwhile U.S. Negroes who were kidnapped and taken to Brazil after the Civil War. The conclusion of this terrible war ultimately was a devastating—though, intriguingly, not necessarily a fatal—blow to this criminality of illicit slave trade.

In sum, this book is an account of the diplomatic history of the U.S.–Brazil relationship—with an accent on North America—in the context of the acceleration of the African Slave Trade. But lurking above both of these nations is Great Britain, whose intervention slowed down the attempt to bring even more enslaved Africans across the Southern Atlantic. In highlighting the role of such figures as Matthew Fontaine Maury, I seek to underscore the pivotal role played by Brazil in the mind of certain leaders of the Slave South to the point where not only it bolstered their idea that they could prevail in the Civil War but also served as a refuge once that conflict ended so disastrously for them.