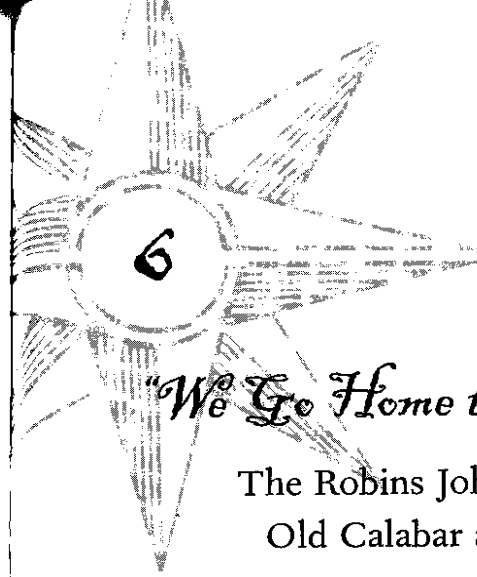


The Two Princes of Calabar

verted to Christianity and were baptized, took every opportunity to attend preaching and other religious meetings, and pored over Scripture. Their heartfelt conversions mark yet another step in their acculturation after over six years spent in the Americas and England. Encouraged by aspects of Efik religion and culture, including a receptivity to English culture, by the nature of evangelicalism, and by the Wesleys' personal interest in the plight of slaves, the Robin Johns found a faith that sustained them through their trials and tribulations and enabled them to challenge their captors and win their freedom. In a letter to Charles Wesley, Ancona probably spoke for Little Ephraim as well when he gave thanks to the "almight[y] great God" who had protected him "from all great Danger" and "gave me knowledge to remember what I have suffered."²⁰



"We Go Home to Old Calabar"

The Robins Johns' Legacy in Old Calabar and England

*A*fter several months in Bristol, the Robin Johns hoped that their long-sought voyage home was about to begin; in mid-August they wrote Charles Wesley that "our good friend Mr. Jones is fitted a ship out for us[;] we suppose she will be ready in about five weeks." He also reported that he had heard from his brother, Grandy King George, via a captain recently back from Old Calabar who had passed on the good news that Little Ephraim and Ancona were alive and on their way home. By February 1774 the vessel Jones had outfitted, the *Maria*, was ready to leave and set sail, but it was forced to come back in again, "the Wind being Contrary for We go home to Old Calabar." Six days later the ship still remained in port, and Little Ephraim and Ancona wrote

The Two Princes of Calabar

Charles to thank him for his gift of religious books. They expressed their gratitude to Charles and his family for their prayers that they would arrive safely "in our Deserved Country." They sent love to the entire Wesley family, and wished for a "Knowledge of God Equall to your self." They signed themselves, "your poor and Loving Brethren Till Death." On March 12, 1774, the *Maria* set sail. The ship had not been fitted out especially for the Robin Johns. It was a slave ship, the veteran of several voyages, and on its previous voyages had taken on 525 slaves in Africa, 437 of whom had been delivered to the Caribbean. William Floyd was the ship's captain. In yet another twist to the story, Floyd had been present at the massacre where the Robin Johns were captured, serving as second captain on board the *Indian Queen*, and had given the crucial deposition in the Robin Johns' case before Lord Mansfield.¹

With high hopes, Little Ephraim and Ancona set out for home, only to face further trials. The *Maria* wrecked off a desert island called Boa Vista, an accident that Ephraim and Ancona blamed on the drunken incompetence of Captain Floyd. Apparently, "the vessel was dashed to pieces against ye rocks & sunk & all ye crew escaped only with theyr lives in a small Boat after which they were near starved." Rescued by a passing ship, the Africans returned to Bristol "drest in borrow'd rags." They ran to Charles's house, but he was away, and they hurried to the home of Elizabeth Johnson. Even though

"We Go Home to Old Calabar"

"all was disappointment," she took them in and found them "greatly distressed but yet confident," and "above all," she reported that they "are at a loss to know ye voice of God." Their Methodists friends rallied around them; as Miss Johnson put it, "our pain for them is not to be described."²

Despite their outward confidence, the enormous setback affected the men, especially Ephraim. Elizabeth Johnson found them to be "very gratefull [and] desirous of doing every thing they can to oblige they are as assiduous as they can be both to read & understand, it is an arduous task for them to take in ye sense, but I Bless God I see He does assist them." She noted, however, that "Ephraim is greatly altered[,] more thoughtful & humble. He often speaks of feeling in his Heart . . . I frequently see great heavings of heart upon Ephraim[,] I believe he sees & fears approaching difficulties. Seems so full for Mr. Jones's expenses." Ancona, by contrast, "is as easy as a Bird without care or fear." Miss Johnson reported that they spent their time studying Scripture and attending services, where "some of our preachers felt great union with them[,] talked with them & prayed for them." She added, "it seems as if they are appointed for usefulness[,] you would be pleased to hear how they see the idleness & stupidity of theyre past lives," probably another reference to their involvement in the slave trade. They also humored their hosts by attempting to learn skills that the English believed would be useful at home;

for instance, they studied gardening and agriculture, and learned to make butter and cheese.³

Thomas Jones posed one problem. Apparently his kindness had been exhausted or, more likely, the Africans were proving more of an economic liability than an asset. He complained of the large sums he had spent on their upkeep, and refused to have anything more to do with them. Miss Johnson told Charles Wesley that the Robin Johns had given Charles as much information as they could about their circumstance, but she believed that "much has been concealed . . . [the] barbarity by poor Mr. Jones . . . has increased much[.] He will . . . seem to *have pleasure in ye wreck of ye Ship.*" Little Ephraim, however, refused to see that duplicity and, like a trader-prince and Ekpe member, worried about paying the debt he had accumulated. He asked Charles Wesley, "One Question I have to aske you before we Leave England which is most on my Mind that this how shall I pay My good friend Mr. Jones who has been so kind in Laying out so much money to save us[?]" Ephraim could see only one way to repay Jones—a chilling one considering his own experience. He wrote, "if we must not sell slaves I know not how we shall pay[,] which I have a great desire to doe."⁴

That the Robin Johns considered reentering the slave trade after their own experience with its horrors may be shocking to modern sensibilities, but the princes operated within an African system of ethics that their conver-

sion to Christianity could not entirely erase. They returned to a society in which slavery and the slave trade were deeply embedded; indeed, there was little opposition to "the trade in principle, on the part either of African societies collectively or of their ruling elites." Nor was their view exceptional in the wider Atlantic World. Opponents to slavery and the slave trade were still a tiny minority in Europe, and were scarcely heard at all in the slave-holding societies of the Americas. African societies recognized slavery as an institution governed by a set of rules; "they felt strongly that there were legal limits to who could be enslaved and when." As the Robin Johns argued before Lord Mansfield, they had been illegally enslaved by the laws of their own country. They did not suggest that enslavement itself was illegal, only that their own enslavement had been in violation of Efik law and custom. Their case "reflected the existence of a class, as well as a racial, dimension to the operation of the slave trade," distinctions that Africans and European slave traders understood very well. Indeed, the efforts of slave traders such as Thomas Jones to liberate members of the African slave-trading elite who had been wrongfully enslaved actually served to legitimate the enslavement of other Africans and reinforced their own reputation for fair dealing. African elites sought to establish "a proper order of enslavement and an orderly slave trade," one that was conducted by African rules, not governed by the greed and arrogance of European traders. As the long

conduct of the trade suggests, African and European slave traders had arrived at mutually understood rules about who should be enslaved, though individuals on both sides sometimes violated those rules. Still, "it seems clear that African thinking on the slave trade closely paralleled that of contemporary (pre-abolitionist) Europe." If the Robin Johns chose to ignore Wesley's views on the subject, it is no more than many white Methodists did, and was in keeping with the selective creolization process in which Africans incorporated the aspects of European culture that best suited their own needs.⁵

By September 1774, a reluctant Jones, still bound by the agreement before Mansfield's court, had arranged another passage, and the Robin Johns prepared to depart. Their letters to Charles Wesley were even more affectionate than previously. Casting aside the more formal salutations that had characterized their correspondence ("Revd Sir," or "Reverend father in God," for example), they addressed the final letters before their departure to "My Dear Charles." Little Ephraim promised "never to forget" his friend, and added "our kindest love a waits your sister & Brother[,] accept the same for yourself." He added "P[.]S[.] I Desire your sister to write to me." Ancona's affectionate nature shines though in his heartfelt farewell to Charles, "I fear this will be the last I shall be able to write to you . . . you have bin so good to us that we can never thank you enough for your love to us but now we must take our Leave with Litting [letting]

you know how kind our Bristol friends have been to us." Even John Wesley came to say his farewells and give them his blessing. Ancona continued, "we had a very Blessed time last night with Mr. Wesley who offered us up in a very solemn manner to God and we Humbly hope his prayer will be heard[.] I must conclude with kindest love to all." Ephraim could not resist adding one last note to his brother's letter, "I hope . . . we shall hear from one another again[.] I now bid you farewell Dear Charles." On October 14, 1774, Ephraim and Ancona sailed for Old Calabar on board the *Cato*, a slave ship owned by Jones.⁶

Their Bristol friends worried as the brothers embarked on their journey, and the Methodists in Bristol missed their exceptional brothers in Christ; as one of them wrote to Charles, "We remember them at ye Room (the New Room in Bristol where Methodist services were held) & doubt not but you do still more at London." Over a year passed before the good news arrived; Charles wrote happily that "my 2 African Children got safe home." Ancona wrote back that they were welcomed at Old Calabar, but their newfound religious views caused some problems initially; "many of their countrymen . . . [who] wondered and laughed at first, were now glad to sit by and hear them read the Bible." No doubt they read from one of the Bibles Charles sent with them. Evidence suggests that Little Ephraim did engage in the slave trade after his return; he had little

choice, as he suggested to Wesley, given the economic importance of the trade to Old Calabar and his position in the family. Oral tradition from Old Calabar relates that Little Ephraim and Ancona were responsible for the spread of Christianity there after their return. One Calabar historian wrote, "It is a well-known fact among the Efiks of Old Calabar that . . . two Efik graduates of Ambo Otu [also Mbo Otu or King Robin] descent from Obutong [Old Town] were carried away in the 1767 'bombardment.' It was they who came in the nineteenth century back to Calabar to lead the Old Calabar 'nobles' to demand the coming of the Presbyterian Mission."⁷

But is this oral tradition reliable? Did the Robin Johns invite the first Presbyterian missionaries to Old Calabar? The chronology raises serious doubts. The Presbyterian missionaries arrived in Old Calabar in 1846, far too late for the Robin Johns to have been involved. A closer examination of the record reveals that the oral history was not completely wrong, though different events had become somewhat conflated over time. The minutes of the 1778 Methodist Conference record a discussion about the establishment of an African mission in Old Calabar, a discussion that lasted several hours and "was marked by deep piety, sound sense, and powerful eloquence." The proposal to send Methodist missionaries to Africa originated with Little Ephraim and Ancona, who apparently remained in contact with their Methodist friends and "desired that Missionaries might be sent to instruct them

[the Efik] in the English language, and the great principles of Christianity." Their "faithful friend" Elizabeth Johnson had died since their departure, but she remembered the Robin Johns and left a legacy of £500 to support a mission to Old Calabar. The Conference approved the mission and appointed two missionaries, brothers named Syndrum who were natives of Germany but members of the Methodist Society at Bristol. They arrived in Old Calabar, and "were treated by the uncle of the princes with all possible attention." Despite the promising beginning, the Syndrum brothers quickly succumbed to the dangerous diseases of West Africa, long a graveyard for Europeans who lacked immunities to tropical diseases. When news of their deaths reached England, Dr. Thomas Coke sent a circular to all young Methodist itinerant preachers asking for volunteers to continue the work. At least one volunteer came forward, but John Wesley refused to accept him, and the mission was abandoned.⁸

So the oral history from Old Calabar was not entirely wrong; the Robin Johns were responsible for bringing the first Christian missionaries to Old Calabar, but in 1778 not in 1846. It may be that their efforts to bring missionaries left a lasting impression among their countrymen and if so that may help explain why the rulers of Duke Town and Creek Town invited missionaries to return to Old Calabar in the 1840s. In 1843 British officials undertook negotiations in Old Calabar for a treaty to

abolish the slave trade there. Eyo Honesty II of Creek Town, King Eyamba of Duke Town, and Willy Tom Robins of Old Town sought missionaries primarily as teachers, just as the Robin Johns "desired that Missionaries might be sent to instruct them in the English language." Eyo Honesty, the chief advocate for opening a mission in Old Calabar, became king of Creek Town in 1825 and could well have known the Robin Johns. He, too, spoke and read English and served as a cabin boy on an English vessel in his youth. It does not appear that the Robin Johns' efforts to teach Christianity made any lasting impression in Old Calabar; at least the early missionaries found no trace of Christian worship there.⁹

As their correspondence with the Methodists indicates, the Robin Johns were not completely forgotten in England. English Methodists held them up as examples of heathens who had converted and serialized their story in the *Arminian Magazine* in 1783. Other writers used their story as an example of "the excellency of our laws, which do not tolerate slavery in any part of the United Kingdom." Although the Robin Johns did not speak out against the slave trade in England as Equiano did, their story was employed by opponents of slavery including Wesley, Anthony Benezet, and Thomas Clarkson. In 1787, a group of Quaker abolitionists, joined by a handful of other reformers including Granville Sharp and Thomas Clarkson, organized an antislavery society. The group was opposed to both slavery and the slave trade,

but ultimately agreed that taking on both of these "evils" at once was likely to fail. After considerable debate, they agreed that "by aiming at the abolition of the Slave-trade they were laying the axe at the very root," and they called themselves the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade. Clarkson, whom Samuel Taylor Coleridge described as "the moral steam engine" of the movement, set out to collect evidence for the Society's campaign and began to organize local societies. Clarkson headed for Bristol, and as he approached the city on horseback, he began to doubt the wisdom of attacking a commerce that was so vital to the city's prosperity, but concluded that "no labor should make me shrink, nor danger, nor even persecution, [should] deter me from my pursuit."¹⁰

As Clarkson sought evidence of the evils of the slave trade, he began to hear rumors of the Massacre of 1767 and the capture and enslavement of the Robin Johns. Like Benezet, he recognized that the massacre was just the sort of event the opponents of the trade needed. He wrote that even though "this cruel transaction had been frequently mentioned to me . . . as it had taken place twenty years before, I could not find one person who had been engaged in it, nor could I come, in a satisfactory manner, at the various particulars belonging to it." His luck changed when he met Henry Sulgar, a Moravian minister in Bristol, who provided him with "authentic documents relative to the treacherous massacre at Cala-

bar." Through Sulgar, Clarkson obtained the depositions from *The King v. Lippincott*, the 1773 court case involving the Robin Johns. Clarkson was shocked by what he read:

The knowledge of this tragical event [the Massacre of 1767] now fully confirmed me in the sentiment, that the hearts of those, who were concerned in this traffic, became unusually hardened, and that I might readily believe any atrocities, however great, which might be related of them. It made also my blood boil as it were within me. It gave a new spring to my exertions. And I rejoiced, sorrowful as I otherwise was, that I had visited Bristol, if it had been only to gain an accurate statement of this one fact.¹¹

Like Benezet before him, Clarkson recognized that the bloodbath could provide damning evidence against the trade and arouse public sympathy.

After gathering a good deal of damning information on the trade at Bristol, Clarkson traveled to Liverpool, where Captain Thomas Chaffers introduced him to Captain Ambrose Lace over breakfast. Clarkson did not connect Lace with the Massacre of 1767 until the captain mentioned Old Calabar; then, Clarkson wrote,

a kind of horror came over me. His name became directly associated in my mind with the place. It al-

most instantly occurred to me that he commanded the Edgar out of Liverpool, when the dreadful massacre . . . took place. Indeed I seemed to be so confident of it, that, attending more to my feelings than to my reason at this moment, I accused him with being concerned in it. This produced great confusion among us. For he looked incensed at captain Chaffers, as if he had introduced me to him for this purpose. Captain Chaffers again seemed to be all astonishment that I should have known of this circumstance, and to be vexed that I should have mentioned it in such a manner. I was also in a state of trembling myself. Captain Lace could only say it was a bad business. But he never defended himself, nor those concerned in it. And we soon parted, to the great joy of us all.¹²

The Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade had not been idle in Clarkson's absence. Committee members began to solicit support from friends across the country and in America. Support came from prominent individuals such as John Wesley, who offered to publish and distribute a new, enlarged edition of his *Thoughts upon Slavery* with favorable mention of the Society and its work, and Josiah Wedgwood, who joined the committee. More important, perhaps, the Society quickly gained support from cities, towns, churches, vestries, and other civic organizations. All sorts of public

and private meeting places were opened to the Society, and it launched a remarkably successful petition drive. The Society's press was kept busy virtually around the clock as thousands of circulars and antislavery pamphlets rolled off it. Petitions condemning the trade began to pour into Parliament, and in 1788 Parliament began an investigation into the conduct of the trade. The Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade appointed Clarkson to gather evidence to be presented to the parliamentary committee.¹³

Both the slave-trade faction and the abolitionists felt confident of victory, and both groups "began a long game of calculating the most favorable time to stop examining or cross-examining witnesses." Clarkson had collected massive documentary evidence about the evils of the trade, but the parliamentary committee planned to hear from witnesses. Most of Clarkson's informants were sailors whose rough manners and lack of education made them poor candidates to appear before the gentlemen in Parliament. Many people who sympathized with the movement questioned Clarkson's tactics, including Wesley, who warned that "to *hire* or *pay* informers has a bad sound and might raise . . . insurmountable prejudice against you." In addition, many of his witnesses still depended on the trade for their livelihood, and he "found it difficult to prevail upon persons to be publicly examined on this subject."¹⁴ Proponents of the trade had no such problems; they could call on prominent merchants, West

Indian planters (members of both groups sat in Parliament), and others who moved in high circles.

As a result, the investigation did not go very well for the abolitionists, and Clarkson knew that if a vote were to be taken, the supporters of the trade would be victorious. He set out on another trip to try to persuade more men to testify, but despite growing public opposition to the trade, he could not persuade most of his informants to testify in public. He traveled sixteen hundred miles and took information from forty-seven people, only nine of whom agreed to testify. In the meantime, however, prominent witness after witness testified to the importance of the trade for British commerce and the health of the empire, to the benefits of the trade to the Africans themselves (including the benefits of Christianity), and to the dangers that abolitionist agitation posed in stirring up rebellion in the sugar islands. Parliamentary maneuvering delayed the hearings. Discouraged but undaunted, Clarkson set out once again to find informants willing to testify. He searched particularly for men with firsthand knowledge of the conduct of the trade in Africa. He traveled from port to port, and even boarded over 160 warships in search of sailors with such information. Finally, on board one of those warships, he found George Millar, "a very respectable person," who had been on board the *Canterbury* during the Massacre of 1767. Millar was willing to testify! In addition, he found Isaac Parker, the sailor who had lived in Old Calabar for

several months, one of the few Englishmen who had actually taken part in a slave-raiding expedition with African slave traders. Parker, too, was willing to take the stand.¹⁵

With these successes, Clarkson "returned now in triumph." His important new witnesses, when added to those who had already agreed to appear, made the opponents of the trade "more formidable than at any former period; so that the delay of our opponents, which we had looked upon as so great an evil, proved in the end truly serviceable to us." One after one, Clarkson's witnesses appeared before the committee, and their graphic and moving testimony had a major impact on the parliamentary investigation and on public opinion. Descriptions of the massacre played an important role in the hearings by focusing attention on the atrocities of the trade and on the violence and duplicity of the English slave traders. Clarkson's witnesses provided vivid and gruesome images that openly shocked the members of the House of Commons. Even the humble origins of most of Clarkson's witnesses ultimately proved to be an advantage, though, as Wesley had expected, opponents of abolition questioned Clarkson's witnesses about their low salaries and about any subsidies or payments they had received from the antislavery advocates. Supporters of the trade claimed to have "produced persons in elevated life and of the highest character as witnesses," while opponents of the trade "had been obliged to take up with those of

the lowest condition." By 1792 the parliamentary debates had exposed the horrors of the trade to the English people, who were further moved by abolitionist literature, by the conversion of more and more clergymen, aristocrats, and other notables to the cause, and by a successful boycott of rum and sugar to oppose the traffic in human flesh. Even fashion played a part; Josiah Wedgwood turned out thousands of cameos bearing the seal of the Society, a black man in chains on his knees with the motto "Am I Not a Man And A Brother." They appeared inlaid on gold snuffboxes, on women's bracelets, or on pins in women's elaborate hairstyles. As Clarkson put it, soon "the taste for wearing them became general; and thus fashion, which usually confines itself to worthless things, was seen for once in the honourable office of promoting the cause of justice, humanity, and freedom." By 1794 the indefatigable Clarkson had made seven trips across Britain in search of information and logged 35,000 miles. Despite swelling opposition to the African slave trade, Parliament was reluctant to abolish it outright since such a move might open the door to other even more radical reform measures and could encourage slave uprisings in the sugar islands (a slave rebellion on Dominica added to these fears). The result was a compromise in which the House of Commons passed a resolution on April 3, 1792, calling for the gradual abolition of the trade. In 1805 Parliament went further and made it illegal for British ships to supply slaves to any foreign market or

to any captured territory, an act that cut off more than half of the total British trade. Parliament finally abolished the trade in 1807.¹⁶

Even in Bristol, once the primary slave-trading port in England, the slave trade fell increasingly into disfavor, in large part because of the strength of dissenting sects such as the Methodists and Quakers. In 1791 a former mayor of the city informed William Wilberforce, the abolitionists' chief parliamentary spokesman, that "the slave trade is growing disgraceful," and the first anti-slave trade committee outside London was convened in Bristol. Prominent antislavery spokesmen, including Coleridge and Wesley, attracted large audiences there. When in 1788 Wesley prepared to deliver a stinging antislavery sermon at the New Room (where the Robin Johns had worshiped with their Methodist brethren), he announced his topic in advance to attract the largest possible congregation. The room was filled "from end to end" with "high and low, rich and poor." None was disappointed, for the occasion was one of the most exciting in Wesley's long career. As Wesley reported:

About the middle of the discourse, while there was on every side attention still as night, a vehement noise arose, none could tell why, and shot like lightening through the whole congregation. The terror and confusion were inexpressible. You might have imagined it was a city taken by storm. The

people rushed upon each other with the utmost violence; the benches were broken in pieces, and nine-tenths of the congregation appeared to be struck with the same panic . . . In about six minutes the storm ceased . . . and all being calm, I went on without the least interruption. . . . It was the strangest incident of the kind I ever remember . . . Satan fought, lest his kingdom should be delivered up.

He followed that meeting with a day of fasting and prayer and asked God to "make a way for them [slaves] to escape, and break their chains in sunder." The proponents of the slave trade in the city were not completely overcome. When the House of Commons rejected Wilberforce's motion for a bill to abolish the slave trade in 1791, church bells pealed (Church of England bells, no doubt), bonfires and fireworks lit the skies, and sailors and workers were given a half-day holiday. Still, by the 1790s it must have appeared that antislavery had taken the city by storm, a change that would have seemed almost impossible when the Robin Johns first stepped ashore there twenty years earlier.¹⁷

Wesley did not live to see the abolition of the trade he so despised, though he went to his grave with the matter on his mind. The last letter he wrote was to Wilberforce, calling on his old ally to continue to fight the good fight; "Go on," Wesley urged, "in the name of God and in the power of His might, till even American slavery (the vil-

est that ever saw the sun) shall vanish away before it." At eighty-seven, Wesley was growing feeble. He spent his final days reading "a tract wrote by a poor African," Equiano's narrative. He died on March 2, 1791, and according to Wilberforce his dying words were "Slave Trade."¹⁸

The parliamentary committee was certainly correct when it described the Massacre of 1767 as a "remarkable transaction."¹⁹ Forty years after the event, the massacre and the capture and enslavement of the Robin Johns continued to reverberate in Britain. Little Ephraim Robin John and Ancona Robin Robin John had their roles to play in the British abolition movement and in the first attempts to introduce Christianity to Old Calabar, but they may be most important as an illustration of the complex and remarkable history of the eighteenth-century Atlantic World. As Paul Gilroy wrote, the Atlantic was "continually crisscrossed by the movements of black people—not only as commodities but engaged in various struggles towards emancipation, autonomy, and citizenship." The princely Little Ephraim and free-spirited Ancona help counter the tendency to reduce Africans who suffered the horrors of the slave trade to commodities and numbers. Albert Camus in *The Plague* wrote that prisoners and exiles experience the profound suffering of living with memories that have no purpose. Prisoners and exiles they may have been, but the Robin Johns refused to give up their memories of home and their relationship with each other. Clearly, for these men,

memory had a purpose. Memory nurtured them through the harsh realities of slavery in the Americas and kept alive their determination to return home. Their experience cannot be fully understood without recognizing the distinctive culture from which they came, a reminder of the importance of ethnic diversity among enslaved Africans. Old Calabar's strong economic, linguistic, and cultural ties to Britain, its creolized merchant elite and their unusual level of literacy and their understanding of trade, gave the Robin Johns a set of skills that most enslaved Africans lacked. Most, but not all, for their experience can be compared to that of creolized Luso-Africans, for example, and to the other Atlantic creoles whose stories are only beginning to be told. The Robin Johns were cosmopolitan products of the Atlantic World, and they became a part of the three worlds that composed it—Africa, the Americas, and Europe. Despite their years away from home and their deeper engagement with English culture, the Robin Johns remained Efik; and more than that, they remained Efik slave traders. They moved through the eighteenth-century Atlantic World in ways that would have been unthinkable for enslaved Africans without their knowledge and understanding. They were determined to return home and to their elite positions in the slave-trading society of Old Calabar. The Robin Johns made the most of their skills and accomplished what very few Africans did in the eighteenth century—escaped slavery, freed themselves, and returned to their "Deserved Country."²⁰