

# Captivity's Collections: Science, Natural History, and the British Transatlantic Slave Trade

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## Review

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**Keiser, Jr., K. Howell**

**Murphy, Kathleen S.** *Captivity's Collections: Science, Natural History, and the British Transatlantic Slave Trade*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. 2023. Paperback. \$29.95. ISBN 9781469675916. Pp. 256.

Kathleen S. Murphy's *Captivity's Collections* stands at the intersection of history and science. Her story follows mariners, naturalists, surgeons, and slave traders who acquired "natural historical specimens through the exploitations of the British transatlantic slave trade." (4) The trade itself and the growth of natural history enterprises, according to Murphy, were co-dependent. The relationships between these two activities has largely gone unnoticed in historical literature, yet one cannot attend a natural history museum today and not grasp these dark connections illuminated in *Captivity's Collections*. The growth of knowledge in the eighteenth century – a development which had profound implications for the era that is this journal's focus – largely took place at the expense of African peoples. While this book may be outside the bounds of traditional reviews, it is nevertheless accessible and, in many respects, complimentary to the intellectual developments that experienced marked maturation by the antebellum period.

Murphy grounds each chapter in personal stories. She begins with the story of John Burnet, a slave ship surgeon experiencing his first voyage on the Middle Passage. Burnet's profits, however, were not only from the forced sale of enslaved people. He "doubly" profited "from the trade, as a slave ship surgeon and as a naturalist." His collections included a "sickly armadillo, an African shell, fie preserved fish, three medicinal plants, and...an ostrich egg." (1) Although some individuals collected out of "intellectual curiosity," Murphy observes that most

endeavored to capitalize on the natural history craze “because they stood to gain by so doing.”  
(4)

Oftentimes, the acquisition of these goods was left to the slave traders and professionals themselves; but more often than not the task was left to enslaved Africans, indicating that the exploitation of their labor began long before their arrivals at New World plantations. The chapter on English apothecary and naturalist James Petiver makes this most clear. Petiver, for example, orchestrated slave trade routes in such a way that African laborers would succeed in acquiring highly sought after plants, insects, animal fossils, and other *naturalia*. As an apothecary owner, the cinchona plant – necessary for the production of Quinine, a malaria medication – was particularly desired. (63)

Ultimately, Murphy masterfully illustrates how the slave trade served as a “conduit” for scientific enterprises. (8) The shared history of these two developments reshaped not only science, but also economies and cultures. Murphy is thus certainly correct to contend that “the history of natural history in the early modern Atlantic world cannot be told without reference to the history of the slave, slavery, and colonialism.” (183) For students interested in the early origins of the slave trade, and the ways in which it shaped knowledge of nature from the eighteenth to nineteenth century, much can be gained from *Captivity’s Collection*. It is time to answer Murphy’s call. We must think about the uninvestigated “nature of slavery’s profits.” (184) This is as much a story of human suffering as it is a story of natural history.

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