PROJECT TITLE: **Transatlantic Slave Trade: Make or Break Identities**	
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SCHOLARSHIP & RESEARCH

1. **Primary Investigative Question(s)** – What identities were formed, changed, or solidified because of the transatlantic slave trade?

2. **Contextual Essay** –

The transatlantic slave trade lasted for nearly three hundred years, covering the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. Over that time period approximately thirteen million men, women, and children were transported across the seas. Did this abrupt change to daily life influence their identities, or were they able to maintain their traditions and cultures? For many, they were able to maintain their traditions and blend them with their new homes. For others, what they were forced to leave behind not only impacted their lives, but their identities as well. The enslaved, merchants, captain and crew all felt the damage caused from the forced assimilation of a people. These effects helped shape the identity that many were forced to take on, or create for themselves.

The slave trade from Africa began long before colonizers and Europeans arrived. In Guinea African royals would kidnap and raid competing tribes. This occurred because of the tremendous wealth and natural resources available in the region. Traditionally kings would enslave competing tribal members as a sign of dominance. Those tribes less powerful did not have the strength or ability to remain free from becoming captives. (Morgan, 37) When the Portuguese arrived along the coast of Guinea they called it "the Mine", a name which refers to the three hundred miles of coastline that was exploited for Portuguese kings. With the trading of such wealth from the Akan people thus began an Afro-European trade union. This union enabled Europeans to trade goods for riches and human cargo and then sell that human cargo to other African Kingdoms, such as in Ghana. Enslaving other Africans with European assistance and approval expedited the tradition and growth of the transatlantic slave trade. For the African enslavers the individuals they traded were just another commodity. The cycle of identities began to change. It was no longer individuals born into slavery that were transported. Families were disintegrated, tribes were dissolved, mothers were stripped from children, and husbands from wives. Once captured they were taken to holding forts along the coasts where they would await their anticipated destiny.

It was here at the root of departure from their homelands that these individuals began to have a shift in identity. The slave traders who had once mainly focused on tangible wealth and riches shifted their attention to human trafficking, thus loosing sight of what, or who, a human being was. To them

Africans were solely commodities used for human gratification and monetary growth. For the Africans being enslaved their identity also slowly started to shift. Various tribes were pushed together, forced to learn each other's languages and some small traditions. Assimilation between African nations began before most had reached the Americas.

Ancient and modern slavery began to take on similar attributes. Those that were enslaved of the male gender were often called "boy". This was done at any age, and from an adult male perspective robbed him of his manhood. Young men and adults became equals whereas traditionally Africans celebrated a patriarchal society. The term stripped the men of their single identity and classified them as one, no matter what ethnicity, age or background. (Morgan, 37) Young women, unfortunately, tended to lead a less favorable fate once taken from their homes. They were subjects to the corrupt men on board the slaving vessels. Many were depleted of their virtue and innocence of youth. Creating an identity of nothing more than cargo to be bought and sold, used, and then disposed of. These women would often become mothers to "fatherless" children. (Hartman, 81) Masters, ship captains, and crew members would not claim ownership to heathen, or what was considered by the Dutch, bastard children. The mother's mark determined the child's fate, no matter what race or position the father had. Even the unborn child was branded by the mother as already being born into and as a slave. A womans' identity as a mother was changed by the forced relations performed by many Europeans involved in the transatlantic slave trade.

The Middle Passage has become known as the passage between Africa and the Americas, and also the point of no return for many Africans and their identities. It was during this initial stage of being captured and forced to port towns to await transportation that up to forty percent of the enslaved met their fates. This is the moment where "they had been torn from their homelands and kin and reduced to the status of chattel, bereft of human ties, and completely under the control of strangers". (McMillan, 56)

Surgeons were usually on hand to assist in the transportation of the human cargo. It was there that their viewpoint on humanity was affected. These surgeons had to choose what to identify with. Should they decide to inspect these individuals as cargo, livestock, or as the human beings they were. More often than not, surgeons chose to focus on the enslaved as individuals as much as they could. John Atkins, who was a surgeon for the Royal Navy, visited Sierra Leone in 1721. There he noticed the state of those that were enslaved. He noted that they had become very dejected. Another surgeon, Thomas Trotter, made reference in his memoirs that " the slaves show signs of extreme distress and despair from a feeling of their situation and being torn from their friends and connections". (McMillan, 56) The surgeons recognized these people as being from families, communities, and having their own lives before being enslaved. They also recognized how their identities had changed into feeling as if they had lost who they were, and where they came from.

For those that survived the Middle Passage they were able to find new identities. Stripped from their homelands and families, the approximate eleven million slaves that made the Middle Passage came from various cultures and ethnic backgrounds. They spoke different languages, and in Africa they would have only associated with their own kin. They did have one common bond, and that was, they were survivors. Central Africans that were transported to Brazil created a term for these individuals that built such strong bonds although they were not kin. The term malungu was used for that purpose of describing those that were close as family because of all that they adored together. In that sense a new identity of family relations was created. Some bonds that were formed lasted for generations. (Lindsay, 97)

After the slaves had landed in the Americas they were forced to change their cultures and traditions rapidly. This form of acculturation happened swiftly because Africans were taken from their homelands, families, and tribal customs. They were put into a system that required rapid transformation. If, as a slave, there was no compliance to this new identity, the likelihood of survival was very grim. With this acculturation came new cultures, traditions, and changes in identities. African and non-African cultures were mixed to create new customs and beliefs. One of the strongest symbols of this change, and the influence of European traders, was the identification of ethnicity from name preservation. Traditional

Africans that did not want to lose sight of their identities would secretly keep their traditional names, along with their Christian names given to them from Europeans. They would then pass their name on to those born in the Americas. Two examples of these are Louis Congo, and Sam Bambara. The Christian name is English, while the surname stems from Africa. These names are common in Louisiana, even today, showing the legacy left behind from the transatlantic slave trade. (Lindsay 100) These traditional names were symbolic because they often represented where the individual was from, and their status hierarchy in the family. Taking this from the enslaved was imposing that they no longer identified themselves as Africans, and were strictly property named by their master. (Lindsay, 100)

Slave holders also fluctuated with identity. They were forced to decide what type of person they should be, or become once they became slave holders. Both parties depended on one another for success. John B. Adger, a Presbyterian minister wrote that "They [the negroes] belong to us. We also belong to them….See them all around you, in the streets, in the dwellings, a race distinct to us, yet closely united to us…they are not more truly ours than we are truly theirs". The reaction to the statement was disbelief from southern slave holders in the Americas. They felt that their identity was, and should always remain the superior man, with the more powerful intellect, that should rule over the wretches that were shipped here from abroad. (Patterson, 339)

Those that worked the slave ships also felt the sting of their identities slipping away. Crew members felt as if they were slaves to their captains. They were malnourished, whipped, and even executed. For those that were maltreated they took their vengeance out on the enslaved. This was a struggle for identities. The crew did not want to be in the same class with the slaves, the only way to elevate themselves was to belittle and treat the enslaved inhumanely. By doing so they were able to maintain their position above the enslaved and keep them in their lowly station.

John Newton worked on and eventually became a slave ship captain. Prior to that, he was forced into the royal Navy at age eighteen. While serving in the Royal navy he caused problems and was flogged in front of the whole crew for disobeying the captain. He then transferred to the slave ship Pegasus and created problems there, so they eventually stranded him in West Africa where he became a slave to Princess Peye. There he was treated as a slave. He eventually was rescued and went back to England in 1748. Those experiences he had influenced his identity and how he would treat others. Being a slave himself, it would seem he would be compassionate on those he was responsible for on his slave ship. That was not so, the same atrocities took place from his crew as any other slave ship. It was not until much later in his life that he realized the terror and thievery that was inflicted on the lives of many innocent individuals, families, and communities.

The transatlantic slave trade was an inhumane, economic venture from Africans and Europeans that shaped the identities of those involved. This practice often left families, communities, tribes, and individuals with an altered state or sense of self. Any aspect of the transatlantic slave trade influenced the individuals involved. From being a passenger on a vessel carrying slaves, to a surgeon, a captain, crewmember, or any of the enslaved, what they had previously identified with shifted as they became involved. The influence of this shift can be reflected in culture with African roots today.

Annotated Bibliography –

Ball, Charles. *Slavery in the United States: A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Charles Ball, A Black* Man (New York, 1837). Retrieved from http://www.vgskole.net/prosjekt/slavrute/23.htm

Summary: This document helps us to see what traditions and customs remained with the Africans that were transported to the Americas. Charles Ball was one of those transplanted slaves. He survived in Maryland and explains the tradition and custom of burying an infant from a West African village.

Burnside, Madeleine. *Spirits of the Passage.* Simon and Schuster Editions: New York, New York: 1997.

Summary: Contained within this book are several primary source accounts of the slave trade. There is an overview of the start of slavery and the continuation to have the slave trade became abolished. Rituals and customs are discussed and how they continued to live on through the transportation and deportation of Africans across the seas.

Drake, Richard. *Revelations of a Slave Smuggler.* Metro Books, Inc: New York, New York. c. 1860.

Summary: This is a detailed account of Captain Richard Drake who led slave smuggling voyages for aver 50 years. Although Richard Drake is on his deathbed while writing his account the reader is able to receive a view into the life of a man who committed many atrocities and is now regretting them. This book fulfills the purpose of the lesson by giving the student to evaluate his life, and what events may have caused him such misery as he quit the slave trade. He was never able to gain peace of mind, or happiness once slavery was abolished.

John Barbot, "A Description of the Coasts of North and South Guinea," in Thomas Astley and John Churchill, eds., Collection of Voyages and Travels (London, 1732). Retrieved from http://www.vgskole.net/prosjekt/slavrute/1.htm

Summary: This document provides incite to what slaves were struggling with. Slavery came from within African nations and this discusses how several Kings were absolute rulers that would sell individuals that did not please them or obey their whims. Children were often sold into slavery without their mothers, thus separating family units.

Falconbridge, Alexander. An Account of the Slave Trade on the Coast of Africa (London, 1788). Retrieved from http://www.vgskole.net/prosjekt/slavrute/7.htm

Summary: Alexander Falconbridge was a surgeon on board a slave vessel. Being a part of the transportation of slaves altered his perception of what the slave trade was. His perception changed as an altered state of reality unfolded before him as human beings were treated as cargo. Because of his graphic experiences and involvement in the slave trade he later played a role in the abolition movement.

Hartman, Saidiya V. *Lose Your Mother : A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route.* New York : Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007.

Summary: Saidiya traces her footsteps back to Ghana to look for her roots and trace the history of African Americans to the transatlantic slave trade. She identifies several aspects of cultural influences from Ghana that can be seen in the Americas now, and realizes how the slave trade influenced the individuals involved.

Lindsay, Lisa A. *Captives as Commodities The Transatlantic Slave Trade*. Pearson Education, NJ 2008.

Summary: An overview of how the slave trade was based on economic factors, which ultimately led to a shift in treatment of people involved in the entire slave trade process. The author also addresses the fact that slavery evolved from Africans themselves. From that a discussion on how Europeans became involved, and eventually the evolution of the transatlantic slave trade it's self.

McMillan, Beverly C. Ed. *Captive Passage: The Transatlantic Slave Trade and the Making of the Americas.* Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington D.C. 2002.

Summary: This is a compilation of authors and editors that specialize in the transatlantic slave trade. Four hundred years of history is covered focusing on the social aspect of experiences from Africans, Europeans, and Americans. The emotional and psychological impact of the slave trade is also developed, as well as the complete history of the beginning and transformation of enslavement to the abolishment movement.

Patterson, Orlando. *Slavery and Social Death*. Harvard University Press, 1982.

Summary: This complex and detailed account of slavery across all spectrums of culture, ethnicity, and history is accounted for. Comparisons are made between different regions and societies over time. The issue of how slavery functioned in African and European society is addressed in a comprehensive, non-biased format.

A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture Smith, A Native of Africa (New London, Conn., 1798; expanded ed., Hamden, Conn., 1896). Retrieved from: http://www.vgskole.net/prosjekt/slavrute/4.htm

Summary: From childhood to adulthood, this discusses the events that changed his life throughout the slave trade. As a son of a King in Guinea he describes how conflicting tribes kidnapped him and his family from their homeland. He details his events traveling to Barbados and being sold and then traded. Eventually his life led him to America where he continued building his family and eventually bought his own freedom.

Randolph, Peter. *Slave Cabin to the Pulpit* (Boston, 1893). Retrieved from http://www.vgskole.net/prosjekt/slavrute/24.htm

Summary: A comparison of Christianity between African culture and embedded European traditions and culture relating to Christianity. This source describes how traditions and cultures are so entrenched in both Africans and Europeans. Slavery may have caused some forced assimilation, but the traditional roots are still apparent in this document.