



Written by [Dennis Behreandt](#) on March 22, 2021

Published in the April 5, 2021 issue of [the New American](#) magazine. Vol. 37, No. 07

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## Slavery and Dehumanization

Anastácia trembled in fear, and backed farther into the corner of the dark, sweltering room. The monster had come again for her, and approached slowly and menacingly. His eyes gleamed with lurid desire, and as beads of sweat ran down his dust-streaked face, he mouthed sounds in the alien language he spoke. Each guttural syllable from the monster pierced her heart and soul with terror.



Artwork: Karridi E. Kelly

Wiry and strong, the sweaty, dirty man's hands grasped Anastácia and forced her to him. She shrunk from his grasp and cried, her blue eyes shedding tears of terror and outrage that flowed like rivers down the dark skin of her regal cheeks. Once she was a princess famed in her distant home as much for her wisdom and kindness as for her beauty. Now she was sunk to a mere object whose physical presence and spirit alike were nothing more than prey for the demon-drunk slavers of Brazil.

Her beauty was not merely physical — she glowed with the inner beauty of grace and intelligence and confidence, and she was targeted by evil precisely for these qualities. The squalid creatures who first captured her, enslaved her, and finally delivered her to the distant shores of far-away Brazil sought to quench their demon thirst on the oppression of her goodness and her beauty. To satisfy their own evil, disfiguring bloodlust, they sought to conquer and consume her essence.

And so it was that the slaver grasped her and forced himself on her once again. But frightened unto death itself, and powerless, Anastácia in her heart would never, could never, give in to the violent advances of her captors. Small and weak though she might be in bodily form, her spirit was as a mighty warrior, and by the grace of God she would never give in, never in terror give up, no matter the circumstance, no matter the consequence.

As the monster forced his lips to hers, she spat at him and screamed a blood-curdling battle cry while she writhed under his grasp with all her might. Her legs kicked with all the force she could muster, and her knee, brought up with the force of all her straining sinews, found a target in the monster's abdomen. A gasp of air burst from the his lungs as her spittle dripped in rivulets from his disgusting beard. That was the last thing she saw and remembered before the monster's bony fist collided with her temple and her consciousness drowned in an infinity of nothingness.

She awoke with her hands and feet bound behind her back and affixed to a splintered wooden post. A crowd had gathered around her and though a few onlookers averted their gaze, brave and beautiful and



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unconquered Anastácia saw a multitude with bloodlust in their eyes, shouting monstrous words and shaking their fists. It was as if a tide of demonic evil had submerged the entire world around her.

Courageously, she held her head high and fixed her gaze on her monster. Step by step he approached with clanking cast iron and leather instruments of torture grasped in his fists. The monster smiled his lurid smile, revealing three remaining yellow and rotting teeth protruding at tilted angles from his skull.

Anastácia, princess of her far-away land across the great Atlantic, beloved by her people and more beautiful than the mythical Helen of Troy, straightened herself and gazed with indomitable will at her oppressor. Under her smooth, dark skin, her lithe muscles strained against her bonds. She made no sound, but the intensity of her gaze let the assembled pack of onlookers know: She would never be conquered.

In his language, her monster, now standing before her, growled, “Let no-one be tempted by this harlot. She’ll work shackled and collared in the field and her face will always be covered by this muzzle.”

With that two henchmen rushed to her and took the muzzle and forced it over her face, buckling it so tightly behind her head that blood welled up, dripping down the back of her neck and onto her shoulders while she shook her head in defiance. Her monster, in a quick motion, snapped the cold iron collar around her neck. She choked from the pressure as one of the henchmen secured a padlock to the back of the collar.

With his face drawn close to hers, she could smell the monster’s fetid breath as he leered into her clear, sparkling blue, and defiant eyes. As he did so, his left hand began to tighten the thumbscrew affixed to the side of the collar — and with a few turns, a needle-sharp point of iron dug into the side of her neck. More blood flowed as agony shot through her like a lightning bolt.

Still defiant, tears welled in her eyes, pouring in a river down her face, as an unfathomable sadness for the state of mankind filled her heart.

## **Torture and Dehumanization**

The preceding story, embellished as it is, nonetheless is one possible version of the events that are thought to have occurred in the life of Escrava Anastácia. There are several versions of her story, brought down to the present day entirely by oral tradition.

Universally described as possessing unbelievable beauty and striking blue eyes, she is, in all versions of her story, the victim both of depraved sexual aggression by her captors and of courageous, chaste, and heroic resistance to the slave trade.



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**Slave ship:** Treatment of those imprisoned for slave transport was unspeakably horrifying, and once at their destinations, treatment of the enslaved was barbarically brutal. (*Photo credit: PHOTOS.com/Getty Images Plus*)

Her story was traced out in some detail by scholars Jerome S. Handler of the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities and Kelly E. Hayes of the Department of Religious Studies at Indiana University in the academic journal *African Diaspora* in 2009.

“Despite the differences in details in various accounts, Anastácia’s story is invariably one of enslavement, sexual exploitation, great hardships, and brutal death,” Handler and Hayes wrote.

Interest in the story of Anastácia has never waned, and has only become more popular over the years in Brazil, where at one point an effort was made by Catholics in the country to see her canonized by the church. “For many of her devotees,” Handler and Hayes continue, “what makes Anastácia special are not the circumstances of her enslavement, but her martyr-like qualities in reacting to her slavery: her stoicism, serenity and virtuous suffering.”

Another elemental component of Anastácia’s story is that of dehumanization. Perhaps it is the core of her story. Enslavement requires the violent restriction and overthrow of the most important characteristic of humanity, the God-given unalienable rights of individual personhood: the right to life, to liberty, and to independent existence. As practiced during the horrific Atlantic slave trade, the implements of slavery, including shackles, collars, and masks, were used to physically control the enslaved, but equally importantly, were used to remove their humanity from view. The story of the forced muzzling/masking of Anastácia features this aspect distilled to its essence. Her physical beauty, and her ability to express that beauty — innate elements of her humanity — were quite literally masked so as not to threaten the regime of the slavers.

## Pure Evil

There is nothing more evil than the unjust dominion over the very life of a person by some other person. Acquiring that dominion requires the destruction of the personhood and the utterly complete dehumanization of the victim. Just how thoroughly slavery erased individual rights is, ironically, recorded in one former slave’s manumission.

Olaudah Equiano, also known as Gustavus Vassa (the name given to him by his “owner”), through



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tenacious industry ultimately arranged to purchase his freedom while enslaved on the Caribbean island of Montserrat. In his autobiography, Equiano explained why he thought it necessary to record the text of his document of manumission — the document that gave him his freedom.

“As the form of my manumission has something peculiar in it, and expresses the absolute power and dominion one man claims over his fellow, I shall beg leave to present it before my readers at full length,” he wrote.

That document reads:

*Montserrat* — To all men unto whom these presents shall come: I Robert King, of the parish of St. Anthony, in the said island, merchant, send greeting: Know ye, that I the aforesaid Robert King, for and in consideration of the sum of seventy pounds current money of the said island, to me in hand paid, and to the intent that a negro man-slave, named Gustavus Vassa, shall and may become free, have manumitted, emancipated, enfranchised, and set free, ... the aforesaid negro man-slave, named Gustavus Vassa, for ever, hereby giving, granting, and releasing unto him, the said Gustavus Vassa, all right, title, dominion, sovereignty and property, which, as lord and master over the aforesaid Gustavus Vassa, I have had, or which I now have, or by any means whatsoever I may or can hereafter possibly have over him the aforesaid negro, for ever. In witness whereof, I the above said Robert King, have unto these presents set my hand and seal, this tenth day of July, in the year of our Lord one thousand seven hundred and sixty-six.

Equiano was overjoyed at finally securing his freedom. “I who had been a slave in the morning, trembling at the will of another, was become my own master, and completely free. I thought this was the happiest day I had ever experienced.”

Long before he had come to this happy day, he had experienced the utterly dehumanizing character of slavery after his capture by a trio of slavers who abducted him and his sister from their home while their parents were away. Equiano was but 11 years old when he was captured and sold into slavery.

Crying out for help to passersby as they were transported against their will, Equiano recounted: “My cries had no other effect than to make them tie me faster and stop my mouth, and then they put me into a large sack. They also stopped my sister’s mouth, and tied her hands.”



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**Former slave:** A witness to and victim of deprecation and dehumanization, Olaudah Equiano was captured and enslaved with his sister when only 11 years old. His autobiography on the slave trade was published in 1789 in London. *(Photo credit: wikipedia.org)*

During his captivity, Equiano witnessed repeatedly the results of the thorough dehumanization of slavery, and the “tools” that were used to achieve oppression through dehumanization. The impact of the endemic dehumanization was not just evident in its effect on the slaves, but also on the slavers, whose cruelty and inhumanity was applied equally without regard to race. Equiano related one scene that terrified him after being brought aboard his first slave ship.

Of those commanding the ship, he said, “I had never seen among any people such instances of brutal cruelty; and this not only shewn towards us blacks, but also to some of the whites themselves. One white man in particular I saw, when we were permitted to be on deck, flogged so unmercifully with a large rope near the foremast, that he died in consequence of it; and they tossed him over the side as they would have done a brute. This made me fear these people the more; and I expected nothing less than to be treated in this manner.”

There was much, indeed, to fear. Recounting what he witnessed in the West Indies, he noted that “it was very common in several of the islands, particularly in St. Kitt’s, for the slaves to be branded with the initial letters of their master’s name; and a load of heavy iron hooks hung about their necks. Indeed on the most trifling occasions they were loaded with chains; and often instruments of torture were added. The iron muzzle, thumbscrews, etc. are so well known, as not to need a description.”

As in the story of Anastácia, slave women were frequently raped by their owners, ostensibly to build up the population of slaves but certainly for carnal gratification as well. Equiano relates the story of James Tobin, “a zealous laborer in the vineyard of slavery” who Equiano says was given a tour of a French slaver’s plantation on “the island of Martinico.” According to Equiano, the slaver showed Tobin “many mulattoes working in the fields like beasts of burden; and he told Mr. Tobin these were all the produce of his own loins! And I myself have known similar instances. Pray, reader, are these sons and daughters of the French planter less his children by being begotten by a black woman?”

This horrific treatment of enslaved women was the norm. “I used frequently to have different cargoes of new negroes in my care for sale,” Equiano relates, “and it was almost a constant practice with our



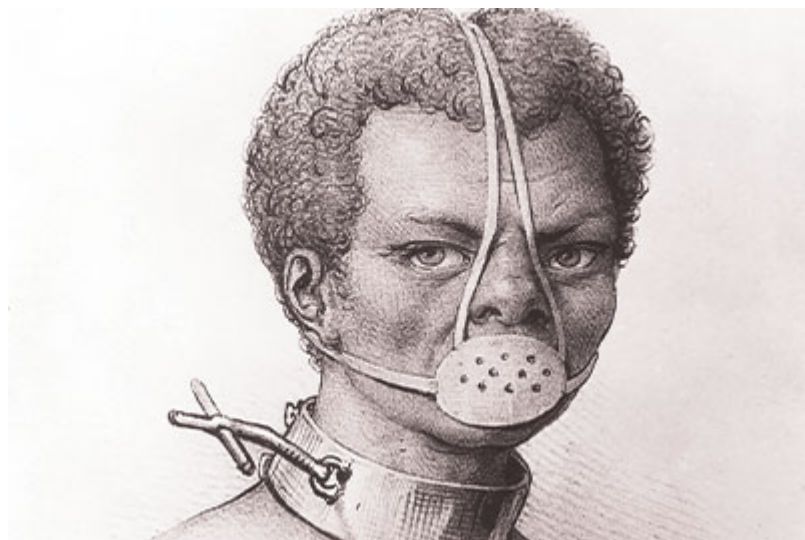


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clerks, and other whites, to commit violent depredations on the chastity of the female slaves; and these I was, though with reluctance, obliged to submit to at all times, being unable to help them. When we have had some of these slaves on board my master's vessels to carry them to other islands, or to America, I have known our mates to commit these acts most shamefully, to the disgrace, not of Christians only, but of men."



**Cruel, no matter to whom:** The illustration of a masked slave, created by French artist and writer Jacques Etienne Victor Arago, was of a masked male slave; however, it's an image that is often associated with the captivity of a princess, Escrava Anastácia. (*Photo credit: wikipedia.org*)

Of the complete dehumanization required by the practice of slavery, Equiano asks, "Is not the slave trade entirely a war with the heart of man? And surely that which is begun by breaking down the barriers of virtue involves in its continuance destruction to every principle, and buries all sentiments in ruin."

Florid prose by modern standards that, nonetheless, emotionally describes the utter, devastating, and demonic dehumanization that slavery represents.

## Masks

Among the means of torture and dehumanization that Equiano observed while on his travels as a slave was the use of the mask. In one case, he related the appearance of a slave woman in Virginia that recalls the use of a mask/muzzle to submerge the personality and humanity of Anastácia.

While in Virginia, he was summoned to the home of a plantation owner who had become ill. Equiano's job was to fan the man to keep him cool. Of the incident, he recalled:

When I came into the room where he was I was very much affrighted at some things I saw, and the more so as I had seen a black woman slave as I came through the house, who was cooking dinner, and the poor creature was cruelly loaded with various kinds of iron machines; she had one particularly on her head, which locked her mouth so fast that she could scarcely speak; and could not eat nor drink. I was much astonished and shocked at this contrivance, which I afterwards learned was called the iron muzzle.



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## Mask Traditions

That masks are used to transform a person's identity, up to and including full dehumanization, is attested by mask usage traditions from around the world.

An account of facial masking using paint is provided by Nicholas Black Elk in *The Sacred Pipe: Black Elk's Account of the Seven Rites of the Oglala Sioux*. Describing the significance of face painting, Black Elk relates: "By being painted, the people have been changed; they have undergone a new birth, and with this they have new responsibilities, new obligations, and a new relationship. This transformation is so sacred that it must be undergone in darkness; it must be hidden from the view of the people. But when the curtain is taken aside, they come forth pure, free from ignorance, and must now have forgotten all troubles of the past."

A similar function performed using masks comes from Nigeria, according to author Christine Price in her 1978 book *The Mystery of Masks*. According to Price, "The mask from the Afikpo people of Nigeria is ... sacred and kept hidden when not in use. Masks like this one, made from hollow painted gourds, are worn by the eldest sons of important families when they are accepted as members of a men's secret society."

The transformative power ascribed to masks is described by authors Amanda Earl and Daniele Sensier in their 1995 overview of mask traditions, *Masks: Traditions Around the World*. Earl and Sensier write: "When people put on masks they are usually disguising themselves, and can almost feel they have become other persons, or animals, ghosts, or whatever the mask represents. In fact, in some religions it is believed that the wearer actually changes into a spirit or ancestor."

Discussing traditional mask usage in South American native cultures, Earl and Sensier point out the role masks have had in those cultures in coercing behavior. "Controlling people's actions was another purpose of Amerindian masks, such as those of the Tierra del Fuego Indians who once lived in the southernmost region of Argentina," they write. "Men wore masks to represent spirits who were thought to frighten women and make them obedient to men."

## Social Control

The relationship of masks to social control informed and motivated by fear is alive and well today. As in far-flung traditions that used masks as key parts of initiation rites meant to transform a person from one being into a new, and presumably better, being, modern mask usage, ostensibly meant to thwart a virus, also provides a means of initiating social control and allowing the "initiated" to signal their belonging to the initiated group.



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**Treating humans like animals:** Dehumanization during the slave trade included branding slaves with the initials of an “owner’s” name. (Photo credit: [SlaveryImages.org](#))

Rites of initiation, in occult practice (occult, in this case, hewing to its precise definition of “hidden” or “secret”), are intended to transform a person from a previous state to a new state. The wearing of a mask first occludes the wearer’s true and God-given persona, then forces the assumption of a new persona. This is a key part of most occult initiation rituals. As James George Frazer notes in *The Golden Bough*, his groundbreaking exploration of primitive rituals and worship, basic initiation involves the symbolic killing of the initiate and bringing him to life again. The old person, having undergone the process, is gone. Typically, life has been taken and then restored using some sort of totem — perhaps a bean or a medicine bag — and the new person is brought into existence through “an exchange of life or souls between the man and his totem,” as Frazer puts it.

In this sense, the tools of torture, including the muzzle or mask used to oppress and enslave the victims of the Atlantic slave trade, demonstrated to the enslaved that their old life as a free person had ended. That person had died and could never be resurrected.

The intense psychological impact was to generate great mourning and despair, something experienced by Olaudah Equiano. After his initial abduction, he longed to escape, and opportunity to do so eventually presented itself while he was still in Africa. Having accidentally killed a chicken with a carelessly thrown stone, he ran away in fear of being flogged for the crime. Hiding in the bushes for an entire day while his captors searched for him, he overheard them discussing his escape.

At one point as he hid, a search party was so near him, he recounted, “that I even heard their conjectures as they were looking for me; and I now learned from them, that any attempt to return home would be hopeless. Most of them supposed I had fled towards home; but the distance was so great, and the way so intricate, that they thought I could never reach it, and that I should be lost in the woods. When I heard this I was seized with a violent panic, and abandoned myself to despair.”

Rather than chance all for freedom when he had a prime opportunity to do so, the young slave felt his former life lost forever. “I at length quitted the thicket very faint and hungry, for I had not eaten or drunk anything all day; and crept to my master’s kitchen, from whence I set out at first, and which was an open shed, and laid myself down in the ashes with an anxious wish for death to relieve me from all





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my pains.”

In Equiano’s case, a mask was not among the tools used to cause him to experience the ritual death of his former life as a free person, but in the greater theater of the slave trade, the mask or muzzle was one of the instruments that commonly contributed to that transformation, as Equiano witnessed several times, and as the oral tradition of Anastácia attests.

## Virus Masks

The relationship of masks to oppression and ritual transformation has not been lost on some in the context of the COVID-19 panic and pandemic, as illustrated by the recent use by some protesters of an image of a masked slave.



**Protest:** Two women demonstrating against COVID mask-wearing in California held a placard with the image drawn by Arago, along with a provocative slogan. They were immediately condemned by cancel culture for supposedly promoting slavery — though their real meaning was obvious. *(Photo credit: Twitter/Black Professor Crown @WonderKing82)*

In the period from December 1817 to January 1819, according to Jerome Handler and Kelly Hayes, French artist and writer Jacques Etienne Victor Arago sketched a portrait of a Brazilian slave wearing a slave mask/muzzle. Though Arago said the image was of a male slave, it has gone on to be associated with the story of Anastácia. Notably, Arago also provided a description of slaves he witnessed wearing the mask. In one example he said he saw two slaves “whose faces were covered with tin masks [*masque de fer-blanc*] with holes made for the eyes.” Later he wrote of seeing another slave “whose face is entirely covered with an iron mask [*masque de fer*] which has two holes for the eyes, and which is locked behind the head with a strong padlock.”

In the context of the pandemic, Arago’s depiction of the masked slave appeared on a placard held by protesters demonstrating against coerced mask-wearing. Alongside Arago’s sketch on the placard was the slogan: “Muzzles are for dogs and slaves. I am a free human being.” The two women who were photographed holding the sign at the protest in California were viciously criticized for their “racist” placard, which clumsily seemed to indicate that perhaps since muzzles “are” for slaves, slavery must be justified. While this — or other racist overtones — is almost certainly not what the two women meant to indicate, as is typical of cancel culture, one of them, Gretha Stenger, was forced to grovel for



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forgiveness. In her apology she wrote: “My intent was to take a stand for the freedom of all human persons and I mistakenly held a sign that conveyed the opposite. Please know that I respect the dignity of all people and I sincerely regret any suffering it caused.”

The history of the transatlantic slave trade is among the most repulsive episodes in the human story. Though slavery is nothing new, persisting yet today and reaching back through time even to ancient Sparta and earlier, the industrialization of the transatlantic “trade” was an atrocity of specifically intense evil dehumanization and horror.

Though it may be discomfiting to consider, masks were among the instruments of torture, control, and dehumanization that were used by the wretched criminals who abducted and enslaved their fellow humans. And, though masks have just as often been used historically for entertainment and celebration, they have also long had a darker role in schemes of representational sacrifice, transformation, and social control.

Looking backward at the awful record of history where human rights and dignities are concerned will leave one often dismayed — and even despondent — at the frequency and ferocity of the tyrannies and evils visited upon the innocent. On this basis alone, there is no reason to conclude that similar depredations are impossible now or will be impossible in years to come. Prevention of those outcomes in the future depends on gaining understanding of the ways in which these evils were perpetrated in the past, the methods employed, and the instruments used. And one of those methods, however uncomfortable it may be for some to admit under current liberal orthodoxy, has been compulsory masking.



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