

The
SLAVE
SHIP



A Human History



MARCUS REDIKER

VIKING

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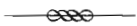
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To Wendy, Zeke, and Eva

with love and hope





Introduction

Lying in the bottom of the canoe in three or four inches of dirty water with a woven mat thrown over her travel-weary body, the woman could feel the rhythmic pull of the paddles by the Bonny canoemen, but could not see where they were taking her. She had traveled three moons from the interior, much of it by canoe down the rivers and through the swamps. Several times along the way, she had been sold. In the canoe-house barracoon where she and dozens of others had been held for several days, she learned that this leg of the journey was nearing its end. Now she wiggled upward against the wet torso of another prostrate captive, then against the side of the canoe, so she could raise her head and peer above the bow. Ahead lay the *owba cocoo*, the dreaded ship, made to cross the "big water." She had heard about it in the most heated threats made in the village, where to be sold to the white men and taken aboard the *owba cocoo* was the worst punishment imaginable.¹

Again and again the canoe pitched up and down on the foamy surf, and each time the nose dipped, she could glimpse the ship like an oddly shaped island on the horizon. As they came closer, it seemed more like a huge wooden box with three tall spikes ascending. The wind picked up, and she caught a peculiar but not unfamiliar odor of sweat, the pungency of fear with a sour trail of sickness. A shudder rippled through her body.

To the left of the canoe, she saw a sandbar and made a decision. The paddles plashed gently in the water, two, three, four times, and she jumped over the side, swimming furiously to escape her captors. She heard splashes as a couple of the canoemen jumped in after her. No sooner had they hit the water than she heard a new commotion, looked over her shoulder, and saw them pulling themselves back into the canoe. As she waded onto the edge of the sandbar, she saw a large, stocky gray shark, about eight feet long, with a blunt, rounded snout and small eyes, gliding alongside the canoe as it came directly at her. Cursing, the men clubbed the shark with their paddles, beached the watercraft, jumped out, and waded, then loped after her. She had nowhere to run on the sandbar, and the shark made it impossible to return to the water. She fought, to no avail. The men lashed rough vine around her wrists and legs and threw her back into the bottom of the canoe. They resumed paddling and soon began to sing. After a while she could hear, at first faintly, then with increasing clarity, other sounds—the waves slapping the hull of the big ship, its timbers creaking. Then came muffled screaming in a strange language.

The ship grew larger and more terrifying with every vigorous stroke of the paddles. The smells grew stronger and the sounds louder—crying and wailing from one quarter and low, plaintive singing from another; the anarchic noise of children given an underbeat by hands drumming on wood; the odd comprehensible word or two wafting through: someone asking for *menney*, water, another laying a curse, appealing to *myabecca*, spirits. As the canoemen maneuvered their vessel up alongside, she saw dark faces, framed by small holes in the side of the ship above the waterline, staring intently. Above her, dozens of black women and children and a few red-faced men peered over the rail. They had seen the attempted escape on the sandbar. The men had cutlasses and barked orders in harsh, raspy voices. She had arrived at the slave ship.

The canoemen untied the lashing and pushed the woman toward a rope ladder, which she ascended with fifteen others from her canoe,

everyone naked. Several of the men climbed up with them, as did the black trader in a gold-laced hat who had escorted them from the canoe house to the *owba coccoo*. Most of the people in her group, herself included, were amazed by what they saw, but a couple of the male captives seemed strangely at ease, even speaking to the white men in their own tongue. Here was a world unto itself, with tall, shaved, limbless trees; strange instruments; and a high-reaching system of ropes. Pigs, goats, and fowl milled around the main deck. One of the white men had a local parrot, another a monkey. The *owba coccoo* was so big it even had its own *ewba wanta* (small boat) on board. Another white man, filthy in his person, leered at her, made a lewd gesture, and tried to grope her. She lunged at the man, digging her fingernails into his face, bringing blood in several places before he disentangled himself from her and lashed her sharply three times with a small whip he was carrying. The black trader intervened and hustled her away.

As she recovered her composure, she surveyed the faces of the other prisoners on the main deck. All of them were young, some of them children. In her village she was considered middling in age, but here she was one of the oldest. She had been purchased only because the clever black trader had sold a large group in a lot, leaving the captain no choice but to take what he was offered, all or none. On the ship she would be an elder.

Many of the people on deck seemed to speak her language, Igbo, although many of them differently from herself. She recognized a couple of other groups of people from her home region, the simple Appas and the darker, more robust Ottams. Many of the captives, she would learn later, had been on board the ship for months. The first two had been named Adam and Eve by the sailors. Three or four were sweeping the deck; many were washing up. Sailors handed out small wooden bowls for the afternoon meal. The ship's cook served beef and bread to some, the more familiar yams with palm oil to others.

The main deck bustled with noisy activity. A white man with black skin, a sailor, screamed "*Domonal*" (quiet) against the din. Two other white men seemed to be especially important to everything that

happened. The big man on board was the captain, whose words caused the other white men to jump. He and the doctor busily checked the newcomers—head, eyes, teeth, limbs, and belly. They inspected a family—a husband, wife, and child—who had come aboard together from her canoe. The man was taken, with tears in his eyes, through the barricado door into the forward part of the ship. From beyond the barrier, she heard the cries of another man getting *pem pem*, a beating. She recognized his anguished intonation as *Ibibio*.

Soon after she had been examined, a white man barked at her, "Get below! Now! Hurry!" and pushed her toward a big square hole in the deck. A young woman standing nearby feared that she did not understand the order and whispered urgently, "*Gemalla! Geyen gwango!*" As she descended the rungs of a ladder into the lower deck, a horrific stench assaulted her nostrils and suddenly made her dizzy, weak, queasy. She knew it as the smell of *awawo*, death. It emanated from two sick women lying alone in a dark corner, unattended, near the *athasa*, or "mess-tub," as the white men called it. The women died the following day, their bodies thrown overboard. Almost instantaneously the surrounding waters broke, swirled, and reddened. The shark that had followed her canoe had its meal at last.

The story of this woman was one act in what the great African-American scholar-activist W. E. B. DuBois called the "most magnificent drama in the last thousand years of human history"—"the transportation of ten million human beings out of the dark beauty of their mother continent into the new-found Eldorado of the West. They descended into Hell." Expropriated from her native land, the woman was forced aboard a slave ship to be transported to a new world of work and exploitation, where she would likely produce sugar, tobacco, or rice and make her owner wealthy. This book follows her, and others like her, onto the tall ships, those strange and powerful European machines that made it all possible.²

The epic drama unfolded in countless settings over a long span of time, centering not on an individual but rather a cast of millions.

Over the almost four hundred years of the slave trade, from the late fifteenth to the late nineteenth century, 12.4 million souls were loaded onto slave ships and carried through a "Middle Passage" across the Atlantic to hundreds of delivery points stretched over thousands of miles. Along the dreadful way, 1.8 million of them died, their bodies cast overboard to the sharks that followed the ships. Most of the 10.6 million who survived were thrown into the bloody maw of a killing plantation system, which they would in turn resist in all ways imaginable.³

Yet even these extraordinary numbers do not convey the magnitude of the drama. Many people captured in Africa died as they marched in bands and coffles (human trains) to the slave ships, although the lack of records makes it impossible to know their precise numbers. Scholars now estimate that, depending on time and place, some portion between a tenth and a half of the captives perished between the point of enslavement and the boarding of the slave ship. A conservative estimate of 15 percent—which would include those who died in transit and while being held in barracoons and factories on the coast—suggests another 1.8 million deaths in Africa. Another 15 percent (or more, depending on region), a million and a half, would expire during the first year of laboring life in the New World. From stage to stage—expropriation in Africa, the Middle Passage, initial exploitation in America—roughly 5 million men, women, and children died. Another way to look at the loss of life would be to say that an estimated 14 million people were enslaved to produce a "yield" of 9 million longer-surviving enslaved Atlantic workers. DuBois's "most magnificent drama" was a tragedy.⁴

The so-called golden age of the drama was the period 1700–1808, when more captives were transported than any other, roughly two-thirds of the total. More than 40 percent of these, or 3 million altogether, were shipped in British and American ships. This era, these ships, their crews, and their captives are the subjects of this book. During this time the mortality rate on the ships was falling, but the sheer number of deaths remains staggering: nearly a million died throughout the slave trade, a little less than half of these in the commerce organized from

British and American ports. The numbers are more chilling because those who organized the human commerce knew the death rates and carried on anyway. Human “wastage” was simply part of the business, something to be calculated into all planning. This would be denounced as murder pure and simple by the African writer Ottobah Cugoano, himself a veteran of the Middle Passage, and others who built a transatlantic movement to abolish the slave trade in the 1780s.⁵

Where did the souls caught up in the drama come from, and where did they go? Between 1700 and 1808, British and American merchants sent ships to gather slaves in six basic regions of Africa: Senegambia, Sierra Leone/the Windward Coast, the Gold Coast, the Bight of Benin, the Bight of Biafra, and West Central Africa (Kongo, Angola). Ships carried the captives primarily to the British sugar islands (where more than 70 percent of all slaves were purchased, almost half of these at Jamaica), but sizable numbers were also sent to French and Spanish buyers as a result of special treaty arrangements called the *Asiento*. About one in ten was shipped to North American destinations. The largest share of these went to South Carolina and Georgia, with substantial numbers also to the Chesapeake. The drama would continue in a new act after the captives stumbled off the ships.⁶

On the rolling decks of the slave ship, four distinct but related human dramas were staged, again and again, over the course of the long eighteenth century. Each was meaningful in its own day and again in ours. The players in these dramas were the ship captain, the motley crew, the multiethnic enslaved, and, toward the end of the period, middle-class abolitionists and the metropolitan reading public to whom they appealed in both Britain and America.

The first drama centered on the relations between the slave-ship captain and his crew, men who in the language of the day must have neither “dainty fingers nor dainty noses,” as theirs was a filthy business in almost every conceivable sense.⁷ Captains of slavers were tough, hard-driving men, known for their concentrated power, ready resort to the lash, and ability to control large numbers of people. Violent command applied almost as much to the rough crews of the slavers as

to the hundreds of captives they shipped. Discipline was often brutal, and many a sailor was lashed to fatality. Moreover, for sailors in the slave trade, rations were poor, wages were usually low, and the mortality rate was high—as high as that of the enslaved, modern scholarship has shown. Sailors captured this deadly truth in a saying:

Beware and take care
Of the Bight of Benin;
For the one that comes out,
There are forty go in.

Many died, some went blind, and countless others suffered lasting disability. Captains and crews therefore repeatedly clashed, as could be suggested even by names: Samuel Pain was a violent slave-ship captain; Arthur Fuse was a sailor and mutineer. How did captains recruit sailors to this deadly trade in the first place, and how did these relations play out? How did relations between captain and crew change once the enslaved came aboard?⁸

The relationship between sailors and slaves—predicated on vicious forced feedings, whippings, casual violence of all kinds, and the rape of women captives—constituted the second drama. The captain presided over this interaction, but the sailors carried out his orders to bring the enslaved on board, to stow them belowdecks, to feed them, compel them to exercise (“dance”), maintain their health, discipline and punish them—in short, slowly transform them into commodities for the international labor market. This drama also witnessed endlessly creative resistance from those being transported, from hunger strikes to suicide to outright insurrection, but also selective appropriations of culture from the captors, especially language and technical knowledge, as, for example, about the workings of the ship.

A third and simultaneous drama grew from conflict and cooperation among the enslaved themselves as people of different classes, ethnicities, and genders were thrown together down in the horror-filled lower deck of the slave ship. How would this “multitude of black people, of every description chained together” communicate? They found

ways to exchange valuable information about all aspects of their predicament, where they were going, and what their fate would be. Amid the brutal imprisonment, terror, and premature death, they managed a creative, life-affirming response: they fashioned new languages, new cultural practices, new bonds, and a nascent community among themselves aboard the ship. They called each other "shipmate," the equivalent of brother and sister, and thereby inaugurated a "fictive" but very real kinship to replace what had been destroyed by their abduction and enslavement in Africa. Their creativity and resistance made them collectively indestructible, and herein lay the greatest magnificence of the drama.⁹

The fourth and final drama emerged, not on the ship but in civil society in Britain and America as abolitionists drew one horrifying portrait after another of the Middle Passage for a metropolitan reading public. This drama centered on the image of the slave ship. Thomas Clarkson went down to the docks of Bristol and Liverpool to gather information about the slave trade. But once his antislavery sentiments became known, slave-trading merchants and ship captains shunned him. The young Cambridge-educated gentleman began to interview sailors, who had firsthand experience of the trade, complaints to register, stories to tell. Clarkson gathered this evidence and used it to battle merchants, plantation owners, bankers, and government officials—in short, all who had a vested interest in the slave trade and the larger institution of slavery. The success of the abolitionist movement lay in making real for people in Britain and America the slave ship's pervasive and utterly instrumental terror, which was indeed its defining feature. The "most magnificent drama" had a powerful final act: the shipbuilder's diagram of the slave ship *Brooks*, which showed 482 "tight-packed" slaves distributed around the decks of the vessel, eventually helped the movement abolish the slave trade.

The year 1700 was a symbolic beginning of the drama in both Britain and America. Although merchants and sailors had long been involved in the trade, this was the year of the first recorded slaving voyage from Rhode Island, which would be the center of the American slave

trade, and from Liverpool, which would be its British center and, by the end of the century, the center of the entire Atlantic trade. At the end of May 1700, the *Eliza*, Captain John Dunn, set sail from Liverpool for an unspecified destination in Africa and again to Barbados, where he delivered 180 slaves. In August, Nicholas Hilgrove captained the *Thomas and John* on a voyage from Newport, Rhode Island, to an unspecified destination in Africa and then to Barbados, where he and his sailors unloaded from their small vessel 71 captives. Hundreds of slavers would follow from these ports and from others in the coming century.¹⁰

Despite shifts in the numbers of people shipped, as well as their sources and destinations, the slave ship itself changed relatively little between 1700 and 1808. Slaving vessels grew somewhat larger in size over time, and they grew more efficient, employing smaller crews in relation to the number of the enslaved shipped. They certainly grew in number, to handle the greater volume of bodies to be transported. And their atmosphere grew healthier: the death rate, for sailors and for slaves, declined, especially in the late eighteenth century. Yet the essentials of running a slave ship, from the sailing to the stowing, feeding, and exercising of the human cargo, remained roughly the same over time. To put the matter another way, a captain, a sailor, or an African captive who had experienced a slave ship in 1700 would have found most everything familiar a century later.¹¹

What each of them found in the slave ship was a strange and potent combination of war machine, mobile prison, and factory. Loaded with cannon and possessed of extraordinary destructive power, the ship's war-making capacity could be turned against other European vessels, forts, and ports in a traditional war of nations, or it could be turned to and sometimes against non-European vessels and ports in imperial trade or conquest. The slave ship also contained a war within, as the crew (now prison guards) battled slaves (prisoners), the one training its guns on the others, who plotted escape and insurrection. Sailors also "produced" slaves within the ship as factory, doubling their economic value as they moved them from a market on the eastern Atlantic to one on the west and helping to create the labor power that animated

a growing world economy in the eighteenth century and after. In producing workers for the plantation, the ship-factory also produced "race." At the beginning of the voyage, captains hired a motley crew of sailors, who would, on the coast of Africa, become "white men." At the beginning of the Middle Passage, captains loaded on board the vessel a multiethnic collection of Africans, who would, in the American port, become "black people" or a "negro race." The voyage thus transformed those who made it. War making, imprisonment, and the factory production of labor power and race all depended on violence.

After many voyages and stalwart service to the Atlantic economy, the slave ship finally hit stormy seas. The opponents of the slave trade launched an intensive transatlantic agitation and finally forced the slavers to stop sailing—or at least, after new laws were passed by the British and American governments in 1807 and 1808 respectively, to stop sailing legally. The traffic continued illegally for many years, but a decisive moment in human history had been reached. Abolition, coupled with its profound coeval event, the Haitian Revolution, marked the beginning of the end of slavery.

* * *

Curiously, many of the poignant tales within the great drama have never been told, and the slave ship itself has been a neglected topic within a rich historical literature on the Atlantic slave trade. Excellent research has been conducted on the origins, timing, scale, flows, and profits of the slave trade, but there exists no broad study of the vessel that made the world-transforming commerce possible. There exists no account of the mechanism for history's greatest forced migration, which was in many ways the key to an entire phase of globalization. There exists no analysis of the instrument that facilitated Europe's "commercial revolution," its building of plantations and global empires, its development of capitalism, and eventually its industrialization. In short, the slave ship and its social relations have shaped the modern world, but their history remains in many ways unknown.¹²

Scholarship on the slave ship may be limited, but scholarship on the slave trade is, like the Atlantic, vast and deep. Highlights include

Philip Curtin's landmark study *The African Slave Trade: A Census* (1969); Joseph Miller's classic *Way of Death: Merchant Capitalism and the Angolan Slave Trade, 1730–1830* (1988), which explores the Portuguese slave trade from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century; Hugh Thomas's grand synthesis *The Slave Trade: The Story of the African Slave Trade, 1440–1870* (1999); and Robert Harms's elegant micro-history of a single voyage of the *Diligent* from France to Whydah to Martinique in 1734–35. The publication of *The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade: A Database*, compiled, edited, and introduced by David Eltis, Stephen D. Behrendt, David Richardson, and Herbert S. Klein, represents an extraordinary scholarly achievement.¹³ Other important studies of the slave trade have been literary, by writers such as Toni Morrison, Charles Johnson, Barry Unsworth, Fred D'Aguiar, Caryl Phillips, and Manu Herbstein.¹⁴

What follows is not a new history of the slave trade. It is, rather, something more modest, an account that uses both the abundant scholarship on the subject and new material to look at the subject from a different vantage, from the decks of a slave ship. Nor is it an exhaustive survey of its subject. A broader history that compares and connects the slave ships of all the Atlantic powers—not only Britain and the American colonies but also Portugal, France, the Netherlands, Spain, Denmark, and Sweden—remains to be written. More attention also needs to be trained on the connecting links between, on the eastern Atlantic, African societies and the slave ship and, on the western, the slave ship and plantation societies of the Americas. There is still much to be learned about the "most magnificent drama of the last thousand years of human history."¹⁵

The shift of focus to the slave ship expands the number and variety of actors in the drama and makes the drama itself, from prologue to epilogue, more complex. If heretofore the main actors have been relatively small but powerful groups of merchants, planters, politicians, and abolitionists, now the cast includes captains in their thousands, sailors in their hundreds of thousands, and slaves in their millions. Indeed the enslaved now appear as the first and primary abolitionists as they battle

the conditions of enslavement aboard the ships on a daily basis and as they win allies over time among metropolitan activists and dissident sailors, middle-class saints and proletarian sinners. Other important players were African rulers and merchants, as well as workers in England and America, who joined the cause of abolition and indeed turned it into a successful mass movement.¹⁶

Why a human history? Barry Unsworth captured one of the reasons in his epic novel *Sacred Hunger*. Liverpool merchant William Kemp is talking with his son Erasmus about his slave ship, which, he has just learned by correspondence, has taken on board its human cargo in West Africa and set sail for the New World.

In that quiet room, with its oak wainscoting and Turkey carpet, its shelves of ledgers and almanacks, it would have been difficult for those two to form any true picture of the ship's circumstances or the nature of trading on the Guinea coast, even if they had been inclined to try. Difficult, and in any case superfluous. To function efficiently—to function at all—we must concentrate our effects. Picturing things is bad for business, it is undynamic. It can choke the mind with horror if persisted in. We have graphs and tables and balance sheets and statements of corporate philosophy to help us remain busily and safely in the realm of the abstract and comfort us with a sense of lawful endeavour and lawful profit. And we have maps.¹⁷

Unsworth describes a "violence of abstraction" that has plagued the study of the slave trade from its beginning. It is as if the use of ledgers, almanacs, balance sheets, graphs, and tables—the merchants' comforting methods—has rendered abstract, and thereby dehumanized, a reality that must, for moral and political reasons, be understood concretely. An ethnography of the slave ship helps to demonstrate not only the cruel truth of what one group of people (or several) was willing to do to others for money—or, better, capital—but also how they managed in crucial respects to hide the reality and consequences of their actions from themselves and from posterity. Numbers can occlude the

pervasive torture and terror, but European, African, and American societies still live with their consequences, the multiple legacies of race, class, and slavery. The slaver is a ghost ship sailing on the edges of modern consciousness.¹⁸

To conclude on a personal note, this has been a painful book to write, and if I have done any justice to the subject, it will be a painful book to read. There is no way around this, nor should there be. I offer this study with the greatest reverence for those who suffered almost unthinkable violence, terror, and death, in the firm belief that we must remember that such horrors have always been, and remain, central to the making of global capitalism.

Life, Death, and Terror in the Slave Trade

A voyage into this peculiar hell begins with the human seascape, stories of the people whose lives were shaped by the slave trade. Some grew prosperous and powerful, others poor and weak. An overwhelming majority suffered extreme terror, and many died in horrific circumstances. People of all kinds—men, women, and children, black, white, and all shades in between, from Africa, Europe, and the Americas—were swept into the trade's surreal, swirling vortex. They included, at the bottom, a vast and lowly proletariat, hundreds of thousands of sailors, who, in their tarred breeches, scuttled up and down the ratlines of a slave ship, and millions of slaves, who, in their nakedness, crouched on the lower deck. They included, at the top, a small, high, and mighty Atlantic ruling class of merchants, planters, and political leaders, who, in ruffles and finery, sat in the American Continental Congress and British Parliament. The "most magnificent drama" of human commerce also featured in its dramatis personae pirates and warriors, petty traders and hunger strikers, murderers and visionaries. They were frequently surrounded by sharks.

Captain Tomba

Among a gang of dejected prisoners in a holding pen, facing purchase by a slaver, one man stood out. He was "of a tall, strong Make, and bold, stern aspect." He saw a group of white men observing the bar-

raccoon, with "a design to buy," he thought. When his fellow captives submitted their bodies for examination by prospective buyers, he expressed contempt. John Leadstine, "Old Cracker," the head of the slave factory, or shipping point, on Bance Island, Sierra Leone, ordered the man to rise and "stretch out his Limbs." He refused. For his insolence he got a ferocious whipping with a "cutting *Manatea Strap*." He took the lashing with fortitude, shrinking little from the blows. An observer noted that he shed "a Tear or two, which he endeavoured to hide as tho' ashamed of."¹

This tall, strong, defiant man was Captain Tomba, explained Leadstine to the visitors, who were impressed by his courage and eager to know his history, how he had been captured. He had been a headman of a group of villages, probably Baga, around the Rio Nuñez. They opposed the slave trade. Captain Tomba led his fellow villagers in burning huts and killing neighbors who cooperated with Leadstine and other slave traders. Determined to break his resistance, Leadstine in turn organized a midnight expedition to capture this dangerous leader, who killed two of his attackers but was finally taken.

Captain Tomba was eventually purchased by Captain Richard Harding and taken aboard the *Robert* of Bristol. Chained and thrown into the lower deck, he immediately plotted his escape. He combined with "three or four of the stoutest of his Country-men" and an enslaved woman who had freer range about the ship and hence better knowledge of when the plan might be put into action. One night the unnamed woman found only five white men on deck, all asleep. Through the gratings she slipped Captain Tomba a hammer, to pound off the fetters, and "all the Weapons she could find."

Captain Tomba encouraged the men belowdecks "with the Prospect of Liberty," but only one and the woman above were willing to join him. When he came upon three sleeping sailors, he killed two of them instantly with "single Strokes upon the Temples." In killing the third, he made commotion that awoke the two others on watch as well as the rest of the crew, sleeping elsewhere. Captain Harding himself picked up a handspike, flailed at Tomba, knocked him out, and "laid

him at length flat upon the Deck." The crew locked up all three rebels in irons.

When the time came for punishment, Captain Harding weighed "the Stoutness and Worth" of the two male rebels and decided it was in his economic interest to "whip and scarify them only." He then selected three others only marginally involved in the conspiracy—but also less valuable—and used them to create terror among the rest of the enslaved aboard the vessel. These he sentenced to "cruel Deaths." He killed one immediately and made the others eat his heart and liver. The woman "he hoisted up by the Thumbs, whipp'd, and slashed her with Knives, before the other Slaves till she died." Captain Tomba was apparently delivered at Kingston, Jamaica, with 189 other enslaved people and sold at a high price. His subsequent fate is unknown.²

"The Boatswain"

Leadership among the captives arose from belowdecks during the Middle Passage. A sailor aboard the *Nightingale* told the story of a captive woman whose real name is lost to posterity but who came to be known on board the ship as "the boatswain"—because she kept order among her fellow enslaved women, probably with a fierce determination that they should all survive the ordeal of oceanic crossing. She "used to keep them quiet when in the rooms, and when they were on deck likewise."

One day in early 1769, her own self-constituted authority clashed with that of the ship's officers. She "disobliged" the second mate, who gave her "a cut or two" with a cat-o'-nine-tails. She flew into a rage at this treatment and fought back, attacking the mate. He in turn pushed her away and lashed her smartly three or four more times. Finding herself overmatched and frustrated that she could not "have her revenge of him," she instantly "sprung two or three feet on the deck, and dropped down dead." Her body was thrown overboard about half an hour later, and torn to pieces by sharks.³

Name Unknown

The man came aboard the slave ship *Brooks* in late 1783 or early 1784 with his entire family—his wife, two daughters, and mother—all convicted of witchcraft. The man had been a trader, perhaps in slaves; he was from a village called Saltpan, on the Gold Coast. He was probably Fante. He knew English, and even though he apparently disdained to talk to the captain, he spoke to members of the crew and explained how he came to be enslaved. He had quarreled with the village chief, or "caboceer," who took revenge by accusing him of witchcraft, getting him and his family convicted and sold to the ship. They were now bound for Kingston, Jamaica.⁴

When the family came on board, noted the physician of the ship, Thomas Trotter, the man "had every symptom of a sullen melancholy." He was sad, depressed, in shock. The rest of the family exhibited "every sign of affliction." Despondency, despair, and even "torpid insensibility" were common among the enslaved when they first came aboard a slave ship. The crew would have expected the spirits of the man and his family to improve as time passed and the strange new wooden world grew more familiar.

The man immediately refused all sustenance. From the beginning of his captivity aboard the ship, he simply would not eat. This reaction, too, was commonplace, but he went further. Early one morning, when sailors went below to check on the captives, they found the man a bloody mess. They urgently called the doctor. The man had attempted to cut his own throat and had succeeded in "dividing only the external jugular vein." He had lost more than a pint of blood. Trotter stitched up the wound and apparently considered force-feeding the man. The throat wound, however, "put it out of our power to use any compulsory means," which were of course common on slavers. He referred to the *speculum oris*, the long, thin mechanical contraption used to force open unwilling throats to receive gruel and hence sustenance.

The following night the man made a second attempt on his own life. He tore out the sutures and cut his throat on the other side. Summoned to handle a new emergency, Trotter was cleaning up the bloody wound when the man began to talk to him. He declared simply and straightforwardly that "he would never go with white men." He then "looked wistfully at the skies" and uttered several sentences Trotter could not understand. He had decided for death over slavery.

The young doctor tended to him as best he could and ordered a "diligent search" of the apartment of the enslaved men for the instrument he had used to cut his throat. The sailors found nothing. Looking more closely at the man and finding blood on his fingertips and "ragged edges" around the wound, Trotter concluded that he had ripped open his throat with his own fingernails.

Yet the man survived. His hands were secured "to prevent any further attempt," but all the efforts came to naught against the will of the nameless man. Trotter later explained that "he still however adhered to his resolution, refused all sustenance, and died in about a week or ten days afterwards of mere want of food." The captain of the ship had also been informed of the situation. Captain Clement Noble said the man "stormed and made a great noise, worked with his hands, and threw himself about in an extraordinary manner, and shewed every sign of being mad."

When Thomas Trotter told the man's story in 1790 to a parliamentary committee investigating the slave trade, it set off a flurry of questions and indeed something of a debate. Members of Parliament with proslavery sentiments sided with Captain Noble and tried to discredit Trotter, denying that willful suicidal resistance could be the moral of the story, while antislavery MPs supported Trotter and attacked Noble. An MP asked Trotter, "Do you suppose that the man who attempted to cut his throat with his nails was insane?" Of this Trotter had no doubt: he answered, "By no means insane; I believe a degree of delirium might [have] come on before he perished, but at the time when he came on board, I believe that he was perfectly in his senses." The man's decision to use his own fingernails to rip open his throat was an entirely rational response to landing on

a slave ship. And now the most powerful people in the world were debating the meaning of his resistance.

"Sarah"

When the young woman came aboard the Liverpool slave ship the *Hudibras* in Old Calabar in 1785, she instantly captured everyone's attention. She had beauty, grace, and charisma: "Sprightliness was in her every gesture, and good nature beamed in her eyes." When the African musicians and instruments came out on the main deck twice a day for "dancing," the exercising of the enslaved, she "appeared to great advantage, as she bounded over the quarter-deck, to the rude strains of African melody," observed a smitten sailor named William Butterworth. She was the best dancer and the best singer on the ship. "Ever lively! ever gay!" seemed to sum up her aura, even under the extreme pressure of enslavement and exile.⁵

Other sailors joined Butterworth in admiration, and indeed so did Captain Jenkin Evans, who selected this young woman and one other as his "favourites," to whom he therefore "showed greater favours than the rest," likely as small recompense for coerced sexual services. Slave-ship sailors like Butterworth usually detested the captain's favorites, as they were required to be snitches. But for the nimble singer and dancer, the sailors had the highest esteem. She was "universally respected by the ship's company."

Captain Evans gave her the name Sarah. He chose a biblical name, linking the enslaved woman, who was likely an Igbo speaker, to a princess, the beautiful wife of Abraham. Perhaps the captain hoped that she would share other traits with the biblical Sarah, who remained submissive and obedient to her husband during a long journey to Canaan.

Soon the enslaved men on the *Hudibras* erupted in insurrection. The goal was to "massacre the ship's company, and take possession of the vessel." The rising was suppressed, bloody punishments dispensed. Afterward Captain Evans and other officers suspected that Sarah and her mother (who was also on board) were somehow involved, even though the women had not joined the men in the actual revolt. When

questioned closely, with violence looming, they denied having any knowledge, but "fear, or guilt, was strongly marked in their countenances." Later that night, as male and female captives angrily shouted recriminations around the ship in the aftermath of defeat, it became clear that both Sarah and her mother not only knew about the plot, they had indeed been involved in it. Sarah had likely used her privileged position as a favorite, and her great freedom of movement that this entailed, to help with planning and perhaps even to pass tools to the men, allowing them to hack off their shackles and manacles.

Sarah survived the Middle Passage and whatever punishment she may have gotten for her involvement in the insurrection. She was sold at Grenada, with almost three hundred others, in 1787. She was allowed to stay on the vessel longer than most, probably with the special permission of Captain Evans. When she went ashore, she carried African traditions of dance, song, and resistance with her.⁶

Cabin Boy Samuel Robinson

Samuel Robinson was about thirteen years old when he boarded the *Lady Neilson* in 1801, to sail with his uncle, Captain Alexander Cowan, and a motley crew of thirty-five from Liverpool to the Gold Coast, to Demerara. The stout Scottish lad made a second voyage with his uncle, in the *Crescent*, to the Gold Coast and Jamaica in 1802. He kept journals of his voyages and used them when he decided, in the 1860s, to write a memoir. His declared purpose was to counter the abolitionist propaganda of his times. He admitted that the slave trade was wrong, even indefensible, but he had heard "so many gross mis-statements respecting West Indian slavery, and the horrors of the 'Middle Passage,'" he wanted "to disabuse the minds of well-meaning people, who may have seen only one side of this question." By the time he finished the account of his life, he could boast, "I am the only man alive who served an apprenticeship to the slave trade."⁷

Robinson grew up in Garlieston, a coastal village of southwest Scotland, where he heard an older local boy spin yarns about a voyage to the West Indies. Robinson was spellbound. He described his

path to the slave ship: "an irresistible desire for a seafaring life so completely carried me away, that it became a matter of perfect indifference to me where the ship went, if not to the bottom, provided I was aboard her—or in what trade engaged, if not a pirate." Since any ship would do, his uncle's involvement in the slave trade closed the deal.

Robinson's experience aboard the slaver seems to have been typical for a ship's boy. He got seasick, he got laughed at and picked on by the old salts, he got into fights with the other boys. One day when sent up to the tops, he found himself "swinging sixty or seventy feet one way by the roll of the ship, and again as far again in an opposite direction." At that moment, he recalled, "I certainly thought myself far from home." He was terrified by the sharks that circled the slave ship, and when the *Lady Neilson* arrived at the Rio Sestos near Sierra Leone, he stood amazed by the sight of a large fleet of canoes manned by naked African men: "I gazed on this wonderful spectacle in a state of perfect bewilderment. It was a scene worth coming all the way to look upon." When the enslaved were brought on board his vessel, he seems to have shown little interest, even in the boys his own age. One of his most significant encounters was with drunken and tyrannical Captain John Ward of the slaver *Expedition*, on which Robinson was forced to work his homeward passage after his ship was condemned in Demerara. One day Ward thought the boy was not working hard enough, or moving fast enough, so he decided to "freshen his way" by lashing him with a two-inch rope. To escape his wrath, Robinson jumped from the mizzen shrouds to the main deck and severely injured his ankle, which in the long term proved his undoing as a sailor.

When Robinson looked back on his original motivations to go to sea, he reflected, "The ocean paradise which loomed so brightly in my imagination, now appears considerably shorn of its beams." He cited the "brutal tyranny" of the officers (including his uncle), the "beggarly" quality of food and water, and the isolation from "moral or religious training or good example." Having gone to sea as a buirdly boy, he asked, at the end of his second slaving voyage, "What am I now? A

poor sallow skeleton, needing a staff to enable me to crawl along the street; my hopes of following the profession of my choice blasted in the bud, and my future prospects dark indeed."

Sailor and Pirate Bartholomew Roberts

Bartholomew Roberts was a young Welshman who sailed as second mate aboard the *Princess*, a 140-ton Guineaman, as a slave ship was called, out of London for Sierra Leone. He had apparently worked in the slave trade for a while. He knew navigation, as the mates of slavers had to be ready to assume command in the not-uncommon event of the captain's death. The *Princess* was captured in June 1719 by Howell Davis and a rowdy gang of pirates, who asked Roberts and his mates on the prize vessel if any of them wished to join "the brotherhood." Roberts hesitated at first, knowing that the British government had in recent years left the corpses of executed pirates dangling at the entrance of one Atlantic port city after another. But soon he decided that he would indeed sail under the black flag.⁸

It was a fateful decision. When Davis was killed by Portuguese slave traders not long afterward, "Black Bart," as he would be called, was elected captain of his ship and soon became the most successful sea robber of his age. He commanded a small flotilla of ships and several hundred men who captured more than four hundred merchant vessels over three years, the peak of "the golden age of piracy." Roberts was widely known and just as widely feared. Naval officers on patrol spotted him and sailed in the opposite direction. Royal officials fortified their coasts against the man they called "the great pirate Roberts." He acted the part by strolling the decks of his ship dressed as a dandy, in a lush damask waistcoat, a red feather in his hat, and a golden toothpick in his mouth. His motto as a pirate was "A Merry Life and Short One."

Roberts terrorized the African coast, sending the traders there "into a panick." He so despised the brutal ways of slave-trading captains that he and his crew enacted a bloody ritual called the "distribution of

justice," dispensing a fearful lashing to any captured captain whose sailors complained of his usage. Indeed Roberts gave some of these drubbings himself. Slave-trading merchants responded to this threat to their profits by persuading Parliament to intensify naval patrols on the coast of West Africa. HMS *Swallow* found and engaged Roberts in February 1722. Roberts stayed upon deck to lead the battle and encourage his men but took a fatal volley of grapeshot in the throat. His mates honored a long-standing pledge and dumped his still-armed body overboard. The naval vessel defeated the pirates, captured the survivors, and took them to the slave-trading fortress at Cape Coast Castle, where they were tried and hanged en masse. Captain Chaloner Ogle then distributed corpses up and down the African coast so local slave traders could hang them up as a message to sailors. Ogle made it a special point to visit the king of Whydah, who had promised him fifty-six pounds of gold dust "if he should secure that rascal Roberts, who had long infested his coast."

Sailor and Petty Slave Trader Nicholas Owen

Nicholas Owen was a real-life Robinson Crusoe, a picaresque Irish sailor who went to sea after his spendthrift father had squandered the family fortune. He crossed the Atlantic five times, three times on slavers, twice with calamitous ends. One voyage culminated in mutiny when Owen and four of his mates, tired of "severe usage" by their captain, seized what Owen called "that liberty which every European is intitle to." Near Cape Mount south of Sierra Leone, the sailors made an armed escape and lived for months on the run, subsisting on wild rice, oysters, and the hospitality of the indigenous people. The second disaster came a year or so later, when other Africans proved not so friendly, cutting off Owen's ship in revenge for a recent kidnapping by a Dutch slave ship. His ship plundered and he taken prisoner, Owen lost everything—four years' wages, all in gold, and trade goods he had planned to sell to augment his pay. The natives knew their captives to be English rather than Dutch and therefore spared their lives. They

eventually released them to a Mr. Hall, a local white slave trader, for whom Owen went to work. Soon Owen set up on his own, settling into the ruins of a small slave-trading fortress on York Island in the Sherbro River and working as a middleman, connecting local African groups to European traders.⁹

Owen began to keep a journal in order to "lay open to the world the many dangers of a seafaring life." He was his own best example. He had suffered natural dangers while he lived and worked "upon that angry element." This he could tolerate, because the sea had "no respect to persons"—it could kill a prince as easily as a common jack-tar. The deeper problem was that "a saylor that has no other means to satisfy the nececereys of this life then sailing the sais [seas] for wages." He depended entirely on money for subsistence. Owen made the point through comparison: "I look upon him to be more miserable then a poor farmer who lives upon his labour, who can rest at night upon a bed of straw in obscurity, then a saylor who comforts himself in the main top by blowing of his fingers in a frostey night." He railed against "scrapeing the world for money, the uneversal god of mankind, untill death overtakes us."

Owen sought to escape wage slavery by becoming a petty slave trader. He could have gone back to sea, even back to live "among Christians and my native people." He decided instead to live among what he called "a barbarous people that nous [knows] neither God or a good quality in man." And he acknowledged that it was a choice: "Some people may think it strange that we should stay so long among people of the above charetar, when we have so many oportunitieys of going of[f] the coast home." He worried that if he went home, tongues would wag and he would be called "the Mallato [mulatto] just come from Guinea." So he opted instead for what he himself saw as an idle, indolent life at the edge of empire, subordinating others to the ruthless rule of the "uneversal god of mankind." The choice resulted in failure, as Owen well understood and his miserable journal makes clear. He died of a fever in 1759, penniless and alone. He had long been "much inclin'd to melloncholy."

Captain William Snelgrave

Captain William Snelgrave was gathering a cargo of Africans on the "Slave Coast" of Benin to transport to Antigua when, to his surprise, he was invited by the king of Ardra (also called Allada) to visit. This presented a dilemma. On the one hand, Snelgrave dared not refuse if he wanted to curry favor for future supplies of slaves. But, on the other hand, he considered the king and his people to be "ferce brutish Cannibals." The captain resolved the dilemma by deciding to visit and to take with him a guard of ten sailors "well armed with Musquets and Pistols, which those savage People I knew were much afraid of."¹⁰

Canoeed by escorts a quarter mile upriver, Snelgrave found on his arrival the king "sitting on a Stool, under some shady Trees," with about fifty courtiers and a large troop of warriors nearby. The latter were armed with bows and arrows, swords, and barbed lances. The armed sailors took a guarded position "opposite to them, at the distance of about twenty paces" as Snelgrave presented gifts to a delighted king.

Snelgrave soon noticed "a little Negroe-Child tied by the Leg to a Stake driven in the Ground." Two African priests stood nearby. The child was "a fine Boy about 18 Months old," but he was in distress, his body covered with flies and vermin. Agitated, the slave captain asked the king, "What is the reason of the Child's being tied in that manner?" The king replied that "it was to be sacrificed that night to his God *Egbo*, for his prosperity." Upset by the answer, Snelgrave quickly ordered one of his sailors "to take the Child from the Ground, in order to preserve him." As he did so, one of the king's guards ran at the sailor, brandishing his lance, whereupon Snelgrave stood up and drew a pistol, halting the man in his tracks and sending the king into a fright and the entire gathering into a tumult.

When order was restored, Snelgrave complained to the king about the threatening action of the guard. The king replied that Snelgrave himself "had not done well" in ordering the sailor to seize the child, "it being his Property." The captain excused himself by explaining that his religion "expressly forbids so horrid a Thing, as the putting of

a poor innocent Child to death." He added the golden rule: "the grand Law of human Nature was, To do to others as we desir'd to be done unto." The conflict was ultimately resolved not through theology but the cash nexus, as Snelgrave offered to buy the child. He offered "a bunch of sky coloured beads, worth about half a Crown Sterling." The king accepted the offer. Snelgrave was surprised that the price was so cheap, as traders such as the king were usually "very ready, on any extraordinary occasion, to make their Advantage of us."

The rest of the meeting consisted of eating and drinking the European food and liquor Snelgrave had brought for the king. African palm wine was also on offer, but Snelgrave refused to drink it, as the wisdom among slave-ship captains was that it could be "artfully poison[ed]." The sailors had no such worries and drank avidly. Upon parting, the king declared himself "well pleased" with the visit, which meant that more slaves would be forthcoming. As the Europeans canoed back to the ship, Snelgrave turned to a member of his crew and said that they "should pitch on some motherly Woman [among the enslaved already on board] to take care of this poor Child." The sailor answered that "he had already one in his Eye." The woman "had much Milk in her Breasts."

As soon as Snelgrave and the sailors came aboard, the very woman they had been discussing saw them with the little boy and ran "with great eagerness, and snatched him from out of the white Man's Arms that held him." It was the woman's own child. Captain Snelgrave had already bought her without realizing the connection. Snelgrave observed, "I think there never was a more moving sight than on this occasion, between the Mother and her little Son."

The ship's linguist then told the woman what had happened, that, as Snelgrave wrote, "I had saved her Child from being sacrificed." The story made its way around the ship, through the more than three hundred captives on board, who soon "expressed their Thankfulness to me, by clapping their Hands, and singing a song in my praise." Nor did the gratitude end there, as Snelgrave noted: "This affair proved of great service to us, for it gave them a good notion of White Men; so that we had

no Mutiny in our Ship, during the whole Voyage." Snelgrave's benevolence continued upon arrival in Antigua. As soon as he told the story of child and mother to a Mr. Studely, a slave owner, "he bought the Mother and her Son, and was a kind Master to them."

William Snelgrave could thus think of Africans as "fierce brutish Cannibals" and think of himself as an ethical, civilized redeemer, a good Christian with qualities that even savages would have to recognize and applaud. He could think of himself as the savior of families as he destroyed them. He could imagine a humane outcome for two as he delivered hundreds to a plantation fate of endless toil and premature death. His justifications in place, he could even invoke the golden rule, which would soon become a central saying of the antislavery movement.

Captain William Watkins

As the *Africa*, a Bristol Guineaman captained by William Watkins, lay at anchor in Old Calabar River in the late 1760s, its prisoners were busy down in the hold of the vessel, hacking off their chains as quietly as they could. A large number of them managed to get free of the fetters, lift off the gratings, and climb onto the main deck. They sought to get to the gun room aft and the weapons they might use to recover their lost freedom. It was not unusual, explained sailor Henry Ellison, for the enslaved to rise, whether because of a "love of liberty," "ill treatment," or "a spirit of vengeance."¹¹

The crewmen of the *Africa* were taken entirely by surprise; they seemed to have no idea that an insurrection was afoot, literally beneath their very feet. But just as the mutineers "were forcing open the barricado door," Ellison and seven of his crewmates, "well armed with pistols and cutlasses," boarded from a neighboring slave ship, the *Nightingale*. They saw what was happening, mounted the barricado, and fired above the heads of the rebels, hoping to scare them into submission. The shots did not deter them, so the sailors lowered their aim and fired into the mass of insurgents, killing one. The captives made a second attempt to open the barricado door, but the sailors held firm,

forcing them to retreat forward, giving chase as they went. As the armed seamen pressed forward, a few of the rebels jumped overboard, some ran below, and others stayed on deck to fight. The sailors fired again and killed two more.

Once the crew had regained control of the situation, Captain Watkins reimposed order. He selected eight of the mutineers "for an example." They were tied up, and each sailor—the regular crew of the *Africa*, plus the eight from the *Nightingale*—was ordered to take a turn with the whip. The seamen "flogged them until from weariness they could flog no more." Captain Watkins then turned to an instrument called "the tormentor," a combination of the cook's tongs and a surgeon's instrument for spreading plasters. He had it heated white hot and used it to burn the flesh of the eight rebels. "This operation being over," Ellison explained, "they were confined and taken below." Apparently all survived.

Yet the torture was not over. Captain Watkins suspected that one of his own sailors was involved in the plot, that he had "encouraged the slaves to rise." He accused an unnamed black seaman, the ship's cook, of assisting the revolt, "of having furnished them with the cooper's tools, in order that they might knock themselves out of irons." Ellison doubted this, calling it "supposition only, and without any proof of the fact."

Captain Watkins nonetheless ordered an iron collar—usually reserved for the most rebellious slaves—fastened around the neck of the black seaman. He then had him "chained to the main mast-head," where he would remain night and day, indefinitely. He was to be given "only one plantain and one pint of water per day." His clothes were nothing more than a pair of long trousers, which were little "to shield him from the inclemency of the night." The shackled seaman remained in the foretop of the ship for three weeks, slowly starving.

When the *Africa* had gathered its full cargo of 310 slaves and the crew prepared to sail away from the Bight of Biafra, Captain Watkins decided that the cook's punishment should continue, so he made ar-

rangements with Captain Joseph Carter to send him aboard the *Nightingale*, where he was once again chained to the main top and given the same meager allowance of food and water. After ten more days, the black seaman had grown delirious. "Hunger and oppression," said Ellison, "had reduced him to a skeleton." For three days he struggled madly to free himself from the fetters, causing the chains to rub "the skin from several parts of his body." The neck collar "found its way to the bone." The "unfortunate man," said Ellison, had become "a most shocking spectacle." After five weeks in the two vessels, "having experienced inconceivable misery in both, he was relieved by death." Ellison was one of the sailors charged to throw his body from the foretop into the river. The minimal remains of the black seaman were "immediately devoured by the sharks."

Captain James Fraser

When Thomas Clarkson visited the slave-trading port of Bristol in July 1787 to gather evidence for the abolitionist movement, he sought the advice of a man named Richard Burges, an attorney opposed to the commerce in human beings. Their conversation turned to the captains of slave ships, which prompted an impatient Burges to howl that all of them deserved "long ago to be hanged"—except one. That one was Captain James Fraser of Bristol, a man who spent twenty years in the slave trade, voyaging five times to Bonny, four times to Angola, and once each to Calabar, the Windward Coast, and the Gold Coast. Nor was Burges the only abolitionist to praise Fraser. Alexander Falconbridge, the physician who penned a searing indictment of the slave trade, sailed with Fraser, knew him well, and said, "I believe him to be one of the best men in the trade." Clarkson, too, eventually joined in the chorus of praise.¹²

Captain Fraser ran an orderly ship with a minimum of coercion, or so he claimed when he testified before a parliamentary committee in 1790: "The Angola slaves being very peaceable, it is seldom necessary to confine them in irons; and they are allowed to go down between the decks, and come up on deck, as they find the weather warm or cold."

They were, as a result, "cheerful" on board. He added that he treated the Bonny and Calabar slaves differently, as they were more "vicious" and inclined to insurrection. But here, too, he was moderate by the standards of the day: "As soon as the ship is out of sight of land I usually took away their handcuffs, and soon after their leg-irons—I never had the Slaves in irons during Middle Passage, not even from the Gold and Windward Coast, excepting a few offenders, that were troublesome in the ship, and endeavouring to persuade the Slaves to destroy the White Men." He always provided the enslaved with clean apartments, exercise, and "frequent amusements peculiar to their own country." He offered abundant food to which they were accustomed in their native land. For those who refused to eat, Fraser explained, "I have always used persuasions—force is always ineffectual." The slaves who sickened got a special hospital berth, and "the surgeons always had orders, as well as free leave, to give them any thing that was in the ship."

Perhaps the most unusual statement he made to the parliamentary committee was the following: "we generally appoint the most humane and best disposed of the ship's company to attend to the Slaves, and serve their provisions." He would not tolerate abuse: "I have, with my own hands, punished sailors for maltreating the negroes." It followed logically from these practices that mortality for sailors and slaves on his ships was modest (with one exception of an epidemic). He insisted that he always treated his sailors with "humanity and tenderness." He cited as proof of this their reenlistment on subsequent voyages, some three or four times as he recalled. Indeed Falconbridge sailed with him on three voyages.¹³

Falconbridge contradicted Fraser's testimony in several key respects: he thought a greater proportion of the enslaved were kidnapped than Fraser was willing to admit and that Fraser himself would buy the kidnapped without asking questions. The material conditions on the ship were worse than the captain suggested, and the enslaved were not cheerful or peaceful, as proved by numerous suicides. He added, however, that Captain Fraser "always recommended to the planters never

to part relations or friends." And Fraser did as he said regarding the crew: he treated them "exceedingly well; he always allowed them a dram in the morning, and grog in the evening; when any of them were sick, he always sent them victuals from his own table, and inquired every day after their health."

Captain and Merchant Robert Norris

Robert Norris was a man of many talents. He was an experienced and successful Liverpool slave-ship captain who made enough money to retire from the sea and carry on as a successful merchant in the slave trade. He was also a writer, a polemicist on behalf of the slave trade, and something of a historian. In 1788 he wrote and published anonymously *A Short Account of the African Slave Trade, Collected from Local Knowledge*. The following year he produced a history of a region of West Africa based on his personal knowledge: *Memoirs of the Reign of Bossa Ahádee, King of Dahomy, an Inland Country of Guiney*. In the latter he bemoaned the existence of so little historical writing about Africa, then offered his own explanation: "the stupidity of the natives is an insuperable barrier against the inquirer's information." Norris represented the Liverpool interest in the parliamentary hearings held between 1788 and 1791. He was one of the slave trade's very best public defenders.¹⁴

As the first to testify before the Committee of the Whole of the House of Commons in June 1788, Norris described the Middle Passage in detail. The slaves had good living quarters belowdecks, he explained, which sailors cleaned thoroughly and regularly. Air ports and windsails ventilated their apartments and admitted "a free Circulation of fresh Air." The enslaved had more than enough room. They slept on "clean boards," which were more wholesome than "Beds or Hammacks." They ate plentiful, high-quality food. The men and boys played musical instruments, danced, and sang, while the women and girls "amuse[d] themselves with arranging fanciful Ornaments for their Persons with Beads, which they are plentifully supplied with." The slaves were given the "Luxuries of Pipes and

Tobacco" and occasionally even a dram of brandy, especially when the weather was cold. Such good treatment, explained Norris, was in the captain's self-interest, as he stood to make a 6 percent commission over and above his salary on the slaves delivered healthy and alive on the western side of the Atlantic. Norris explained to the members of Parliament that "Interest" and "Humanity" were perfectly united in the slave trade.

And yet the one surviving document Norris wrote that was not intended for publication tells a different, rather less-idyllic story. Norris kept a captain's log for his voyage in the *Unity* from Liverpool to Whydah, to Jamaica, and back to Liverpool between 1769 and 1771. A week after weighing anchor at Whydah and setting sail to cross the Atlantic, Norris noted that "the Slaves made an Insurrection, which was soon quelled with ye Loss [of] two Women." Two weeks later the enslaved rose again, the women once more in the lead and therefore singled out for special punishment: Norris "gave ye women concerned 24 lashes each." Three days later they made a third effort after several "got off their Handcuffs," but Norris and crew soon managed to get them back into their irons. And the following morning they tried for a fourth time: "the Slaves attempted to force up ye Gratings in the Night, with a design to murder ye whites or drown themselves." He added that they "confessed their intentions and that ye women as well as ye men were determin'd if disappointed of cutting off ye whites, to jump over board but in case of being prevented by their Irons were resolved as their last attempt to burn the ship." So great was their determination that in the event of failure they planned a mass suicide by drowning or self-incineration. "Their obstinacy," wrote Norris, "put me under ye Necessity of shooting ye Ringleader." But even this did not end the matter. A man Norris called "No. 3" and a woman he called "No. 4," both of whom had been on the ship a long time, continued to resist and died in fits of madness. "They had frequently attempted to drown themselves, since their Views were disappointed in ye Insurrection."

Merchant Humphry Morice

On board Humphry Morice's ship the *Katherine*, the enslaved died of many causes, noted Captain John Dagge in 1727–28. A man and a woman jumped overboard and drowned, one on the African coast, one during the Middle Passage. A woman perished of "Palsey and lost the use of Limbs." A man expired "Sullen and Mallancholy," another "Sullen (and a Foole)." "Sullen" usually meant that the cat-o'-nine-tails did not work on the person so described. Others died suddenly, with a fever, with "Swelling and Pains in his Limbs," with lethargy and flux, with dropsy, with consumption. One grew emaciated ("Meager") and passed away. Another nineteen died, mostly of dysentery. One boy managed to "Run away wh[en] the Doihmes Came." Perhaps the Dahomeys were his own group.¹⁵

All of these nameless people, plus the extraordinary number of 678 delivered alive by Captain Dagge to Antigua, belonged to Humphry Morice, scion of a leading merchant family in London, Member of Parliament, friend and close associate of Prime Minister Robert Walpole, and governor (first officer) of the Bank of England. He was involved at the highest level of global trade, finance capital, and the economy of the British Empire. He owned a sumptuous family estate in the Cornish countryside and a magnificent home in London. Servants attended the gentleman's every wish. Through marriage he had forged strategic connections to other powerful merchant families. He was a member of the ruling class.

Morice was, moreover, one of the free traders who led the attack against the chartered monopoly of the Royal African Company in the early years of the eighteenth century. He was the employer of slave-trade captain William Snelgrave. He was the main influence in persuading Parliament to dispatch HMS *Swallow*, which defeated the pirate Bartholomew Roberts on the coast of Africa in February 1722. Morice traded to Europe (especially Holland), Russia, the West Indies, and North America, but the heart of his trading empire lay in Africa. He was London's leading slave trader in the early eighteenth century.

The *Katherine* was one of a small fleet of slave ships owned by Morice and named for his wife and daughters. (One wonders how wife Katherine or daughter Sarah felt in knowing, if they knew, that the enslaved aboard the ships named for them had the letter *K* or *S* branded on their buttocks.) Morice's ships represented almost 10 percent of London's slave-trading capacity at a time when the city owned almost as many Guineamen as Bristol and more than Liverpool. They made sixty-two voyages, carried between £6,000 and £12,000 worth of well-sorted cargo to Africa, and transported almost twenty thousand people to New World plantations. This number does not include the many his captains sold for gold to Portuguese ships on the African coast. Gold, Morice liked to say, did not suffer mortality in the Middle Passage.

Morice was an engaged merchant and shipowner. He made it his business to learn the details of the trade, which he expressed in careful instructions to his team of captains. He explained how trading practices varied from one African port to the next. He knew that staying on the coast too long gathering a cargo risked higher mortality, so he worked out cooperative practices among his ships to evacuate the slaves quickly. He instructed his captains to buy slaves between the ages of twelve and twenty-five, two males to a female, "Good & healthy, and not blind Lame or Blemished." He no doubt followed the advice of his Jamaican factors about the "Defects to be carefully avoided":

Dwarfish, or Gigantick Size wch are equally disagreeable
 Ugly faces
 Long Tripeish Breasts wch ye Spaniards mortally hate
 Yellowish Skins
 Livid Spots in ye Skin wch turns to an incurable Evil
 Films in ye Eyes
 Loss of Fingers, Toes, or Teeth
 Navells sticking out.
 Ruptures wch ye Gambia Slaves are very Subject to
 Bandy legs

Sharp Shins
 Lunaticks
 Idiots
 Lethargicks¹⁶

He also explained how the slaves should be fed, how their food should be prepared. He demanded that both sailors and slaves be treated well. He put surgeons and limes (to combat scurvy) on his vessels before it was a common practice to do either. He told his captains to be sure to "get your negroes shaved and made clean to look well and strike a good impression on the Planters and buyers."

It is impossible to know precisely how much of Morice's great wealth in estate, land, ships, stocks, and funds derived from the slave trade, although it is possible to know that whatever the profits, he thought them inadequate to sustain his style of life. He took to defrauding the Bank of England (of approximately £29,000 total; almost \$7.5 million in 2007 currency) by making up false bills of foreign exchange and to mismanaging funds of which he was trustee. When Morice died in disgrace on November 16, 1731, he was in a far different situation from those who died aboard the *Katherine* or any of his other ships. But the death of this fabled slave trader was horrible in its own way. People whispered, "'Tis supposed he took Poyson."

Merchant Henry Laurens

In April 1769, Henry Laurens, one of early America's wealthiest merchants, wrote to Captain Hinson Todd, who was seeking a cargo in Jamaica to carry to Charleston, South Carolina. Laurens was an experienced slave trader and he was worried that Todd was not. He therefore cautioned that if the Jamaica merchant "should Ship Negroes on board your Sloop, be very careful to guard against insurrection. Never put your Life in their power a moment. For a moment is sufficient to deprive you of it & make way for the destruction of all your Men & yet you may treat such Negroes with great Humanity." It was an odd but revealing statement. Laurens instructed the captain to treat with "great

humanity" the very people who would, given a split-second chance, annihilate him and his entire crew. Such were the contradictions Laurens faced, and not he alone. He knew the brutal realities of the slave trade and the resistance it always engendered, and yet he tried to put a human face on the situation. Perhaps he feared that he had scared the captain, who might then overreact and damage his dangerous but valuable property.¹⁷

Laurens had by this time already built a fortune through booming Atlantic commerce, the slave trade in particular. In 1749, at the youthful age of twenty-five, he had formed a mercantile partnership, Austin & Laurens, which expanded to include a new partner, George Appleby, ten years later. More than half of the slaves imported into the American colonies/United States came through Charleston, which served as a distribution point for the entire lower South. His firm played a leading part, and Laurens himself grew knowledgeable about the various African ethnicities who arrived aboard the slave ships. He expressed a strong preference for Gambian and Gold Coast peoples as plantation workers and a decided distaste for Igbo and Angolans.¹⁸

Like Humphry Morice a generation earlier, Laurens organized the importation of about sixty cargoes of slaves. Unlike Morice, who was usually a sole owner and investor in his voyages, Laurens spread the risk by pooling money through partnerships. He wrote, "The Africa Trade is more liable to such Accidents than any other we know of, so it highly concerns such as become adventurers in that branch to fortify themselves against every disappointment that the trade is incident to." The trade was hazardous, as he cautioned Captain Todd, but it was also lucrative, "gainful," or, as he once put it, "the most profitable." By 1760, Laurens was one of the richest merchants not only in South Carolina but throughout the American colonies.

Laurens made a conscious decision to withdraw much of his business from the slave trade around 1763, although he remained involved by taking numerous slave cargoes on consignment, as suggested by his letter to Captain Todd. He had lost both a partner and a wealthy backer, which may have limited his ability to hedge the risk. Or perhaps

the wealthy merchant simply no longer wished to be an "adventurer." In any case he turned his attention—and his slave-trade profits—to becoming a planter, a land speculator, and a politician. He accumulated vast tracts of land and over time he acquired six plantations. Two, Broughton Island and New Hope, were in Georgia, and four were in South Carolina: Wambaw, Wrights Savannah, Mount Tacitus, and Mepkin. The last of these, his main residence, was 3,143 acres, on which several hundred slaves produced rice and other commodities for export, which were then shipped thirty miles down the Cooper River to Charleston and from there pumped into the Atlantic economy.

Laurens turned his economic power into political power. He was elected to office seventeen times, serving in the South Carolina assembly and the Continental Congress, ascending after a short time to the presidency of the latter. He helped to negotiate the Treaty of Paris, which gave the American colonies their independence, and he was selected to represent South Carolina in the Constitutional Convention of 1787 (although he declined to serve). This man who had counseled Captain Todd never to put his life under the power of enslaved Africans owed his wealth, standing, and genteel life to his own decision to keep hundreds, indeed thousands, of lives under his own power, as a planter and a slave-trade merchant.

"The Greedy Robbers"

Sharks began to follow slave ships when they reached the Guinea coast. From Senegambia along the Windward, Gold; and Slave coasts, to Kongo and Angola, sailors spotted them when their vessels were anchored or moving slowly, and most clearly in a dead calm.¹⁹ What attracted the sharks (as well as other fish) was the human waste, offal, and rubbish that was continually thrown overboard. Like a "greedy robber," the shark "attends the ships, in expectation of what may drop over-board. A man, who unfortunately falls into the sea at such a time, is sure to perish, without mercy." Young Samuel Robinson recalled the chill of the voracious predator: "The very sight of him slowly moving round the ship, with his black fin two feet above the water, his broad

snout and small eyes, and the altogether villainous look of the fellow, make one shiver, even when at a safe distance." Sharks were especially dangerous when trade was carried on in boats and canoes, in high surf, between the slavers anchored offshore and the trading forts or villages on land. They swarmed around the smaller craft, occasionally lunging out of the water to bite an oar in half, hoping all the while, as one nervous trader noted, "to see the Bottom of our Canoe turn'd upwards." Sharks were known as the "dread of sailors."²⁰

Sharks became an even greater dread as members of the crew began to die. Captains sometimes made efforts to bury deceased sailors ashore, as, for example, in Bonny, where corpses were interred in shallow graves on a sandy point about a quarter mile from the main trading town. But when the tidal river rose, the current sometimes washed the sand away from the bodies, causing a noxious stench and inviting hungry sharks. On most stretches of the coast, slavers had no burial rights, which resulted in what Silas Told saw happen to the cadaver of a former comrade in the harbor of São Tomé around 1735: "the first [shark] seized one of his hind-quarters, and wrenched it off at the first shake; a second attacked the hind-quarter, and took that away likewise; when a third furiously attacked the remainder of the body, and greedily devoured the whole thereof." Crews tried to outsmart the sharks by sewing a dead sailor into his hammock or an old canvas sail and enclosing a cannonball to pull the body to the bottom, hopefully uneaten. This strategy often failed, as a sea surgeon noted: "I have seen [sharks] frequently seize a Corpse, as soon as it was committed to the Sea; tearing and devouring that, and the Hammock that shrouded it, without suffering it once to sink, tho' a great Weight of Ballast in it."²¹

If the shark was the dread of sailors, it was the outright terror of the enslaved. No effort was made to protect or bury the bodies of African captives who died on the slave ships. One commentator after another reiterated what Alexander Falconbridge said of Bonny, where sharks swarmed "in almost incredible numbers about the slave ships, devouring with great dispatch the dead bodies of the negroes as they are thrown overboard."²² The Dutch merchant Willem Bosman described

a feeding frenzy in which four or five sharks consumed a body without leaving a trace. Late-arriving sharks would attack the others with blows so furious as to "make the sea around to tremble." The destruction of corpses by sharks was a public spectacle and part of the degradation of enslavement.²³

Sharks followed the slavers all the way across the Atlantic into American ports, as suggested by a notice from Kingston, Jamaica, that appeared in various newspapers in 1785: "The many Guineamen lately arrived here have introduced such a number of overgrown sharks, (The constant attendants on the vessels from the coasts) that bathing in the river is become extremely dangerous, even above town. A very large one was taken on Sunday, along side the Hibberts, Capt. Boyd." Abolitionists would do much to publicize the terror of sharks in the slave trade, but this evidence comes from a slave society, before the rise of the abolitionist movement. More came from Captain Hugh Crow, who made ten slaving voyages and wrote from personal observation that sharks "have been known to follow vessels across the ocean, that they might devour the bodies of the dead when thrown overboard."²⁴

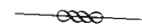
Slaving captains consciously used sharks to create terror throughout the voyage. They counted on sharks to prevent the desertion of their seamen and the escape of their slaves during the long stays on the coast of Africa required to gather a human "cargo." Naval officers used the fear of sharks, too. In the late 1780s, an African sailor from Cape Coast, who had been brought to Jamaica by a Liverpool Guineaman and somehow managed to escape slavery and find a berth on a man-of-war, killed a shark that had made it dangerous for sailors to swim or bathe around the vessel. He might have been a hero to his mates, but the commanding officer took a different view. As it happened, that shark had "prevented a number of desertions," so the African sailor "got a merciless flogging" for killing it. Naval officers were even said to feed sharks to keep them around their vessels.²⁵

So well known was the conscious use of terror by the slave captain to create social discipline that when Oliver Goldsmith came to write

the natural history of sharks in 1774, he drew heavily on the lore of the slave trade. The histories of terrorism and zoology intersected. Goldsmith recounted two instances:

The master of a Guinea-ship, finding a rage for suicide among his slaves, from a notion the unhappy creatures had, that after death they should be restored again to their families, friends, and country; to convince them at least that some disgrace should attend them here, he immediately ordered one of their dead bodies to be tied by the heels to a rope, and so let down into the sea; and, though it was drawn up again with great swiftness, yet in that short space, the sharks had bit off all but the feet.

A second case was even more gruesome. Another captain facing a "rage for suicide" seized upon a woman "as a proper example to the rest." He ordered the woman tied with a rope under her armpits and lowered into the water: "When the poor creature was thus plunged in, and about half way down, she was heard to give a terrible shriek, which at first was ascribed to her fears of drowning; but soon after, the water appearing red all around her, she was drawn up, and it was found that a shark, which had followed the ship, had bit her off from the middle." Other slave-ship captains practiced a kind of sporting terror, using human remains to troll for sharks: "Our way to entice them was by Towing overboard a dead Negro, which they would follow till they had eaten him up."²⁶



The Evolution of the Slave Ship

Thomas Gordon introduced his book *Principles of Naval Architecture* (1784) with a sweeping statement: "As a Ship is undoubtedly the noblest, and one of the most useful machines that ever was invented, every attempt to improve it becomes a matter of importance, and merits the consideration of mankind." He captured, as a naval architect should, the tall ship's combination of grandeur and utility as he suggested the importance of its technical refinement and specialization. He noted that the progress of naval architecture could not be confined to this or that nation but belonged properly to all of mankind, whom the ship had helped to connect around the globe. Perhaps most important, he saw the ship as a machine, one of the most useful ever invented. He knew, of course, that the European deep-sea sailing ship—of which the slave ship was a variant—had helped to transform the world from the era of Christopher Columbus to his own time. It was the historic vessel for the emergence of capitalism, a new and unprecedented social and economic system that remade large parts of the world beginning in the late sixteenth century. It was also the material setting, the stage, for the enactment of the high human drama of the slave trade.¹

The origins and genesis of the slave ship as a world-changing machine go back to the late fifteenth century, when the Portuguese made their historic voyages to the west coast of Africa, where they bought

gold, ivory, and human beings. These early "explorations" marked the beginning of the Atlantic slave trade. They were made possible by a new evolution of the sailing ship, the full-rigged, three-masted carrack, the forerunner of the vessels that would eventually carry Europeans to all parts of the earth, then carry millions of Europeans and Africans to the New World, and finally earn Thomas Gordon's admiration.²

As Carlo Cipolla explained in his classic work *Guns, Sails, and Empires*, the ruling classes of Western European states were able to conquer the world between 1400 and 1700 because of two distinct and soon powerfully combined technological developments. First, English craftsmen forged cast-iron cannon, which were rapidly disseminated to military forces all around Europe. Second, the deep-sea sailing "round ship" of Northern Europe slowly eclipsed the oared "long ship," or galley, of the Mediterranean. European leaders with maritime ambitions had their shipwrights cut ports into the hulls of these rugged, seaworthy ships for huge, heavy cannon. Naval warfare changed as they added sails and guns and replaced oarsmen and warriors with smaller, more efficient crews. They substituted sail power for human energy and thereby created a machine that harnessed unparalleled mobility, speed, and destructive power. Thus when the full-rigged ship equipped with muzzle-loading cannon showed up on the coasts of Africa, Asia, and America, it was by all accounts a marvel if not a terror. The noise of the cannon alone was terrifying. Indeed it was enough, one empire builder explained, to induce non-Europeans to worship Jesus Christ.³

European rulers would use this revolutionary technology, this new maritime machine, to sail, explore, and master the high seas in order to trade, to fight, to seize new lands, to plunder, and to build empires. In so doing they battled each other as fiercely as they battled peoples outside Europe. Thanks in large part to the carrack, the galleon, and finally the full-rigged, three-masted, cannon-carrying ship, they established a new capitalist order. They rapidly became masters of the planet, a point that was not lost on the African king Holiday

of Bonny, who explained to slave-ship captain Hugh Crow, "God make you sabby book and make big ship."⁴

The ship was thus central to a profound, interrelated set of economic changes essential to the rise of capitalism: the seizure of new lands, the expropriation of millions of people and their redeployment in growing market-oriented sectors of the economy; the mining of gold and silver, the cultivating of tobacco and sugar; the concomitant rise of long-distance commerce; and finally a planned accumulation of wealth and capital beyond anything the world had ever witnessed. Slowly, fitfully, unevenly, but with undoubted power, a world market and an international capitalist system emerged. Each phase of the process, from exploration to settlement to production to trade and the construction of a new economic order, required massive fleets of ships and their capacity to transport both expropriated laborers and the new commodities. The Guineaman was a linchpin of the system.

The specific importance of the slave ship was bound up with the other foundational institution of modern slavery, the plantation, a form of economic organization that began in the medieval Mediterranean, spread to the eastern Atlantic islands (the Azores, Madeiras, Canaries, and Cape Verde), and emerged in revolutionary form in the New World, especially Brazil, the Caribbean, and North America during the seventeenth century.⁵ The spread of sugar production in the 1650s unleashed a monstrous hunger for labor power. For the next two centuries, ship after ship disgorged its human cargo, originally in many places European indentured servants and then vastly larger numbers of African slaves, who were purchased by planters, assembled in large units of production, and forced, under close and violent supervision, to mass-produce commodities for the world market. Indeed, as C. L. R. James wrote of laborers in San Domingue (modern Haiti), "working and living together in gangs of hundreds on the huge sugar-factories which covered North Plain, they were closer to a modern proletariat than any group of workers in existence at the time." By 1713 the slave plantation had emerged as "the most

distinctive product of European capitalism, colonialism, and maritime power."⁶

One machine served another. A West Indian planter wrote in 1773 that the plantation should be a "well constructed machine, compounded of various wheels, turning different ways, and yet all contributing to the great end proposed."⁷ Those turning the wheels were Africans, and the "great end" was the unprecedented accumulation of capital on a world scale. As an essential part of the "plantation complex," the slave ship helped Northern European states, Britain in particular, to break out of national economic limits and, in Robin Blackburn's words, "to discover an industrial and global future."⁸

The wide-ranging, well-armed slave ship was a powerful sailing machine, and yet it was also something more, something *sui generis*, as Thomas Gordon and his contemporaries knew. It was also a factory and a prison, and in this combination lay its genius and its horror. The word "factory" came into usage in the late sixteenth century as global trade expanded. Its root word was "factor," a synonym at the time for "merchant." A factory was therefore "an establishment for traders carrying on business in a foreign country." It was a merchant's trading station.⁹

The fortresses and trading houses built on the coast of West Africa, like Cape Coast Castle on the Gold Coast and Fort James on Bance Island in Sierra Leone, were thus "factories" but so, too, were ships themselves, as they were often permanently anchored near shore in other, less-developed areas of trade and used as places of business. The decks of the ship were the nexus for exchange of Africa-bound cargo such as textiles and firearms, Europe-bound cargo such as gold and ivory, and America-bound cargo such as slaves. Seaman James Field Stanfield sailed in 1774 from Liverpool to Benin aboard the slave ship *Eagle*, which was to be "left on the coast as a floating factory."¹⁰

The ship was a factory in the original meaning of the term, but it was also a factory in the modern sense. The eighteenth-century deep-sea sailing ship was a historic workplace, where merchant capitalists assembled and enclosed large numbers of propertyless workers and used foremen (captains and mates) to organize, indeed synchronize,

their cooperation. The sailors employed mechanical equipment in concert, under harsh discipline and close supervision, all in exchange for a money wage earned in an international labor market. As Emma Christopher has shown, sailors not only worked in a global market, they produced for it, helping to create the commodity called "slave" to be sold in American plantation societies.¹¹

The slave ship was also a mobile, seagoing prison at a time when the modern prison had not yet been established on land. This truth was expressed in various ways at the time, not least because incarceration (in barracoons, fortresses, jails) was crucial to the slave trade. The ship itself was simply one link in a chain of enslavement. Stanfield called it a "floating dungeon," while an anonymous defender of the slave trade aptly called it a "portable prison." Liverpool sailors frequently noted that when they were sent to jail by tavern keepers for debt and from there bailed out by ship captains who paid their bills and took their labor, they simply exchanged one prison for another. And if the slave ship seemed a prison to a sailor, imagine how it seemed to a slave locked belowdecks for sixteen hours a day and more. As it happened, the noble and useful machine described by Thomas Gordon benefited certain parts of mankind more than others.¹²

*Malachy Postlethwayt: The Political Arithmetic
of the Slave Trade, 1745*

Malachy Postlethwayt was a British merchant and a lobbyist for the Royal African Company. Striving in the mid-1740s to persuade Parliament to subsidize the slave trade by paying for the upkeep of the fortresses and factories in West Africa, he asserted the centrality of the slave trade to the British Empire. His own position and economic interests perhaps made him exaggerate his claims on behalf of the trade, but, when viewed from the longer perspective of the eighteenth century, after the slave trade expanded dramatically beyond what he could have foreseen, some of his thoughts would become basic ruling-class wisdom about the trade and its place in a larger "political arithmetic" of empire.¹³

Postlethway stated his main argument in the title of his first pamphlet, *The African Trade, the Great Pillar and Support of the British Plantation Trade in America*, published in London in 1745. He began with the claim that “our *West Indian and African Trades* are the most nationally beneficial of any we carry on.” He knew that the plantation revolution had transformed the empire and that both depended on the shipment of labor power. As for the plantation and slave ship, “the one cannot subsist without the other.” He also pointed out that the slave trade was important to Britain’s rising capitalist manufactures: a slave ship’s “Cargo rightly sorted for Africa, consists of about Seven-Eights *British Manufactures and Produce*; and they return us not inconsiderable profit.” He repeated a long-standing argument that would become controversial in debates in the 1780s: the slave trade created a “great Brood of Seamen” and was therefore a “formidable Nursery of Naval Power.” The slave ship thus produced both slave and seafaring labor power.

Postlethway mounted his defense of what he politely called the “Africa Trade” because he knew that some people, even as early as the 1740s, had already turned against what they angrily denounced as the “slave trade”: “Many are prepossessed against this Trade, thinking it a *barbarous, inhuman, and unlawful Traffic for a Christian Country to trade in Blacks*.” But, like all slave traders, he had convinced himself that Africans would be better off “living in a civilized Christian Country” than among “Savages.” In any case, humanitarian concerns were trumped by national economic and military interest: the slave trade represented “an inexhaustible Fund of Wealth and Naval Power to this Nation.” By promoting the Africa trade, Parliament would promote “*the Happiness and Prosperity of the Kingdom in General*.” Britain’s Atlantic system depended on the resources, labor, and wealth of Africa and America. In so saying he anticipated William Blake’s famous illustration half a century later, *Europe Supported by Africa & America*.¹⁴

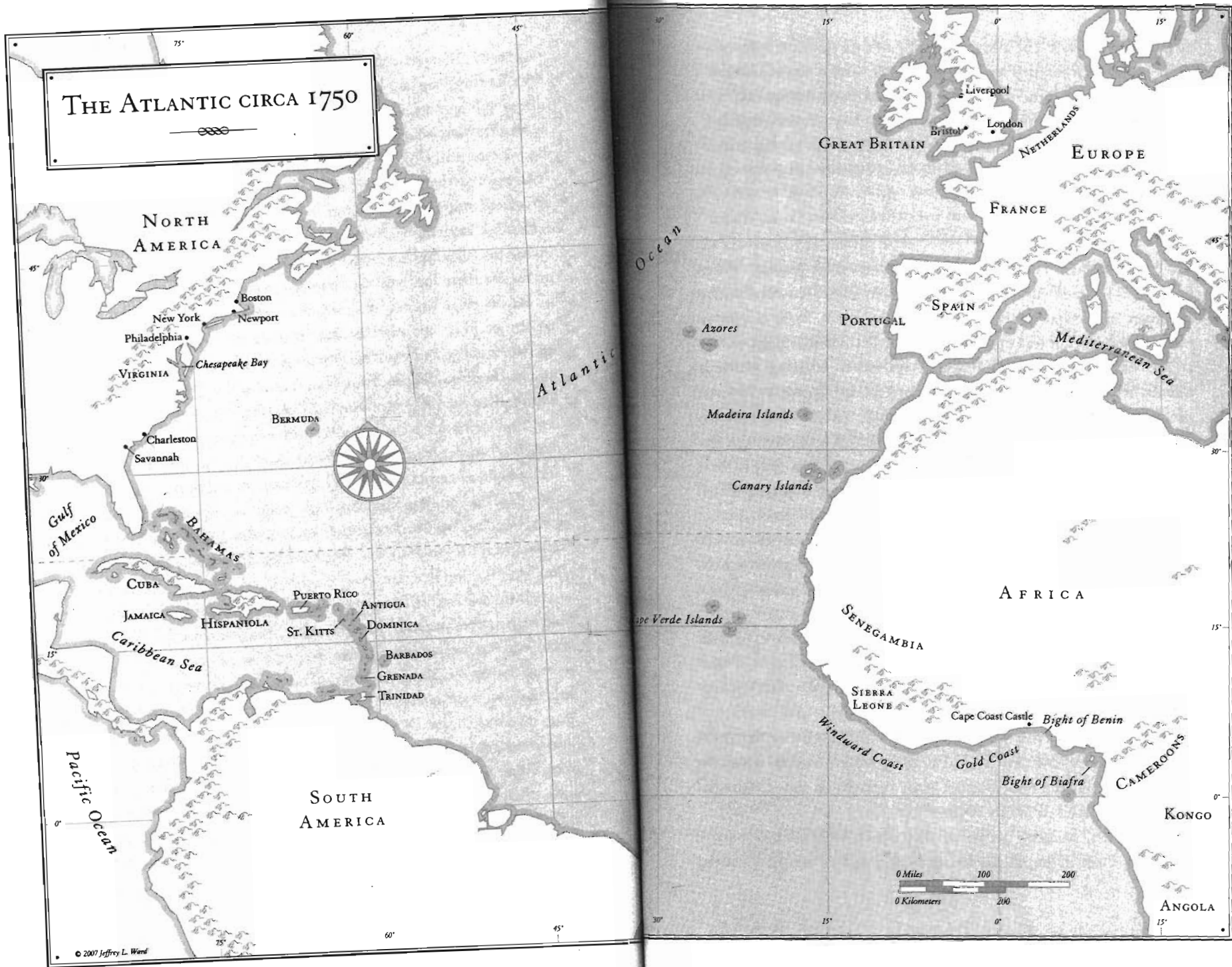
Postlethway’s view of a “triangular trade,” in which the ships proceeded from a European (or American) port with a cargo of manufactured goods to West Africa, where they traded for slaves, to America,

where they traded for plantation produce such as sugar, tobacco, or rice, became the dominant way of viewing the slave trade for the next two and a half centuries. Recently scholars have discovered that the trade was not strictly triangular, because many slave ships could not get a return cargo in the West Indies or North America. Yet the notion of a triangular trade remains valuable, because it permits a visualization of the three essential corners and components of the trade—British or American capital and manufactures, West African labor power, and American commodities (sometimes raw materials).

By the time Postlethway wrote, around 4 million Africans had already been delivered by slave ships to ports of the western Atlantic. Like almost all other European maritime states, Britain played an important role in the early phases of the slave trade, chartering and subsidizing Postlethway’s own employer, the Royal African Company, a trading monopoly, in 1672. Slave trading was so expensive and demanded such a concentration of resources that private capital alone could not originally finance it. Beginning in the early eighteenth century, the so-called free traders finally triumphed over the regulated monopolies, but only after the state had helped to build the infrastructure for the trade. Indeed this is what moved Postlethway to petition for compensation and support in a deregulated age.¹⁵

British and American merchants took their chances in a trade that had high entry costs and enormous risks. In earlier days small investors, the middling sort, including artisans, might make money by buying a partial share or putting a little cargo in a Guinea ship, but by the eighteenth century the trade was firmly in the hands of merchants who had huge sums of capital and in most cases carefully acquired experience and knowledge of the trade. As John Lord Sheffield wrote in 1790, this meant that the trade was carried on by “men of capital, and transient adventurers will be discouraged from engaging in it.” Profits for these big merchants could be extraordinary, as much as 100 percent on investment if everything went right, but the losses could also be immense, because of the dangers of disease, insurrection, shipwreck, and capture

THE ATLANTIC CIRCA 1750



by enemy privateers. The average rate of profit for slave-trade investors in the eighteenth century was 9 to 10 percent, which was considerable but not excessive by the standards of the day. Postlethwayt had such profits and a larger imperial system in mind when he noted that Britain, and indeed all the maritime powers of Europe, was raising "a magnificent Superstructure of *American Commerce and Naval Power* on an *African Foundation*."¹⁶

Joseph Manesty: A Slave Ship Built, 1745

Liverpool merchant Joseph Manesty wanted two ships "for the Affrica trade," and he knew just how he wanted them built. He wrote to John Bannister of Newport, Rhode Island, on August 2, 1745, to place a transatlantic order. It was a perilous moment for traders, as England was at war with both France and Spain, and indeed Manesty had only months before lost a new slave ship, the aptly named *Chance*, to a French privateer. Still the profits of the trade beckoned, and men like Manesty carried a surging Liverpool past London and Bristol as the leading slave-trading port in the British Atlantic.¹⁷ Manesty traded vigorously to West Africa between 1745 and 1758, as primary owner of at least nine vessels (and a minority owner of several others) and as the employer of Captain John Newton.¹⁸ He wrote to Bannister that "no trade [was] push'd with so much spirit as the Affrican and with great Reason"—high profits!—but added that "ships are so scarce here that none is to be had at any rate or I should have engaged one this spring."¹⁹

Manesty's first instruction was that his prison ships were to be built of "the best white Oak Timber." The woodlands of New England were rich in high-quality, relatively rot-resistant white oak, and Manesty wanted to use it. He also demanded careful attention to the quality of the masts. He wrote five weeks later, "as both Ships are design'd for Guinea a great regard must be had to the goodness of their Masts on the whole." A broken mast was not easily replaced on the coast of Africa and could spell ruin for a voyage.²⁰

The vessels, Manesty wrote in fine detail, were to be "Square stern'd," 58 feet in length, 22 feet in width, and 10 feet deep in the

hold, with a height of "5 feet twixt Decks" for the incarceration of the enslaved. The main mast was to be 60 feet long, the main yard 44 feet, the main topmast 30 feet; "all the other Masts and Yards in proportion." Vessels in the slave trade needed to be sturdy and durable, so Manesty insisted that both vessels be built with heavy "2½ and 3 Inch plank with good substantial bends or Whales" (wales, thick wooden joints bolted on the side of the vessel). He wanted the bulkheads to be a "Solid beam," and he demanded that "the Gun Wall on the Main Deck [be] 14 Inches Solid." The vessels would be well armed to defend themselves against privateers, although the number of cannon was not specified. In a postscript to the letter, Manesty added, "2 Gun Ports Stern."²¹

Manesty requested that the hulls of the slavers be "middling," that is, "sharp" enough for speed, to reduce the duration of the Middle Passage and hence mortality among the enslaved, and "full" enough for stability and carrying capacity, for armaments and the sometimes-bulky commodities to be carried to the African coast and from American plantations back to Europe. He wanted a full-bodied vessel that would not pitch a lot, to reduce the effects of excessive motion on the human cargo. He wanted the sides of the vessels flared "for the more commodious stowing [of] Negroes twixt Decks." Another characteristic he desired was "rounding in the Top as the other Decks, for Messing [feeding] Negroes on lower deck laid fore and aft." The ribs or timbers were to be "left high enough to Support Rails all round the Vessel," probably in part to facilitate the addition of netting designed to prevent suicidal slaves from jumping overboard. Finally he wanted sheathing to protect against the worms that would bore through the hulls in Africa's tropical waters. He ordered an extra lining of deal boards coated, as was standard, with tar and horsehair, to be tacked on while the vessels were still in the stocks. Vessels would later be sheathed in copper.²²

Probably because of the war and the dangers of capture, Manesty wrote that he "wou'd have as little money laid out on the Vessels as possible." He wanted "Plain sterns," no quarter windows, and little or

no work to be done by joiners in the captain's cabin. He wanted everything done in a "frugal Suitable manner." It is not known how much money Manesty paid for the vessels, but Elizabeth Donnan notes that in 1747 a Rhode Island vessel could be bought at £24 old tenor per ton.²³ By 1752 the price had risen to £27 per ton for a sloop, £34 per ton for a "double decker." Prices were about one-fifth less in Swansea, in nearby Massachusetts, where the vessel might have been built. Assuming that seven pounds old tenor equaled one pound sterling, and estimating that Manesty's two-deck vessels were to be around a hundred tons carrying capacity, each would have cost a little over £500 (about \$130,000 in 2007). Larger ships would run to £700 (\$182,000) and some to well over £1,000 (\$260,000), but ship costs were nonetheless modest in relation to the value of the cargoes to be shipped in them.²⁴

Manesty realized that certain essential items for the vessel were available more cheaply in Liverpool, so he arranged to send over "Cordage, Sails, Anchors, Nails" as well as a trading cargo. By June he had already dispatched some of the materials—"Sheating Nails and single Spikes"—and he hoped that the carpenters who were working on the vessels might be willing "to take Goods on acco't of these Vessels," no doubt because wages in the American colonies were relatively high. Manesty knew that it would take the shipwright about a year to finish the vessels, which meant launchings in August 1746. He would send a master for the first vessel in April of that year, to oversee the finishing details and to sail the vessel to Africa as soon as it was ready. In his eagerness to trade for slaves, he added, "shou'd it happen that a Vessel of or near the Dimentions of one of these order'd can be immediately bought Cheap with you or of any other size suitable for Affrica I shou'd choose to do it and build only one if that can be done."²⁵

Manesty could have had his slave ships built in a variety of places, or he could simply have bought a vessel or two that were built for other trades and had them converted for slaving. This latter would have been the preferred solution for most merchants, as the vast majority of vessels employed in the slave trade had not been built specifically for it. The types detailed below—sloops, schooners, brigs, snows,

and ships—were all more or less standardized by the 1720s. Hull form, sail, and rigging would change relatively little over the next hundred years, although sharper, faster ships came to be preferred in the early nineteenth century.²⁶

Had Manesty ordered his vessels a few years earlier, he might have gone to London or Bristol, the dominant slaving ports of the early eighteenth century. But by the time he wrote to Bannister, Liverpool was eclipsing both in the slave trade and in the building of slave ships. As timber grew scarce, some merchants turned to shipbuilders in the American colonies, where prices were lower. Increasingly, the ships that went into the African trade were, as English merchants described them, "plantation-built." They were constructed in New England, especially in Rhode Island and Massachusetts; in the upper South, Maryland and Virginia; and, after the 1760s, in the lower South, primarily South Carolina. Especially popular among slave-ship merchants was the Bermuda sloop, built with native red cedar that was light, strong, and rot-resistant. As the oak forests of northeastern America were slowly depleted over the course of the eighteenth century and the cost of bringing timber to the coast increased, a preferred source became southern pine, which meant that much of the wood for the slavers was hewn by slaves, many of whom had crossed the Atlantic on slave ships. Liverpool shipbuilders even imported pine from the slave-based colonies of Virginia and Carolina with which to build Guineamen in their own yards. This suggests one of the ways in which the slave trade helped to reproduce itself on an international scale. The ships brought the laborers and the laborers cut the wood to make more ships.²⁷

The shipbuilders of Liverpool, soon to be the capital of the slave trade, began to custom-build slave ships around 1750. Shipbuilding had long been central to the commercial prosperity of the city, and as the city's merchants invested more and more heavily in the trade to Africa, they ordered ships from local builders. In 1792 there were nine yards for the construction of ships, another three for boats. Most ships were built in "the pool," the tidal inlet on the river Mersey. In the last

two decades before abolition (1787–1808) Liverpool shipwrights built 469 vessels, on average 21 per year. (The shipbuilding firm that undoubtedly had the best—and, to merchants, most soothing—name was Humble and Hurry, named for shipwrights Michael Humble and William Hurry.) By the 1780s the abolitionist movement had managed to politicize shipbuilding in the slave trader's strongest base. William Rathbone, a leading Quaker merchant, refused to sell timber to any yard that made slavers. Nonetheless slave ships continued to be launched at Liverpool right up to the moment of abolition, after which they had to be converted to other purposes.²⁸

Former seaman-turned-artist Nicholas Pocock drew an image of a Bristol shipyard, owned by master shipwright Sydenham Teast, in 1760. It is not clear if any of the vessels pictured were slave ships, but it is clear that Bristol was at this time deeply involved in the slave trade and that Teast himself was an investor. Based on his work, one can imagine how it took a small army of workers to build a slave ship, especially one of average size, two hundred tons. The master shipwright directed the complex effort, which involved dozens of workers and began with the laying of the keel and the attachment of the ribs. As the hull grew, staging was built around it, so that planking could be attached inside and out, and faired. Caulkers filled the seams between the planks with oakum (unraveled hemp). As soon as the hull was complete, new craftsmen arrived, and the scene grew even busier. Joiners built rails and finished the interior. Blacksmiths attended to the ironwork (and later brought on board the anchors). Masons laid the bricks that supported the galley (the slaver required a special furnace and hearth), while a tinman lined the scuppers and a glazier installed glass stern windows. Masts, blocks, and cordage required mast and spar makers, who worked with block makers and rope makers; then came the riggers to put their system in place. Sailmakers provided the canvas, and the boatbuilders brought aboard the yawl and the longboat, with sweeps carved by the oar maker. Coopers contributed the barrels for cargo, provisions, and water. Depending on how much decoration and luxury the person buying the ship wanted, then came

the painters, wood-carvers, and finishers. Finally arrived the butchers, bakers, and brewers for victualing the vessel.²⁹

Shipbuilding was an ancient craft, in which highly specialized knowledge was passed down over the centuries through a system of mastery. For most of the eighteenth century, shipwrights still built “by eye,” or from models, which means that there are relatively few surviving scale drawings of the vessels of this era. Shipbuilders used published works, such as William Sutherland's *The Shipbuilder's Assistant* (1711) and *Britain's Glory; or, Ship-Building Unvail'd, being a General Director for Building and Compleating the said Machines* (1729), both influential. Other widely read authors included John Hardingham, Mungo Murray, Fredrik Henrik ap Chapman, Marmaduke Stalkart, William Hutchinson, David Steel, and Thomas Gordon.³⁰ Shipbuilding was a truly international craft, as shipwrights themselves moved around, much to the worry of governments. More tellingly still, the ships themselves moved around, making for a relatively easy transfer of craft, knowledge, and technology. Shipwrights routinely studied the vessels produced in other nations to assess the state of the art at any given moment. This helped to diffuse a general uniformity of design and production. Slave ships of all European nations were roughly similar in design and construction during the eighteenth century.³¹

And yet “science” was slowly entering and transforming the craft, as suggested by the entry “naval architecture” in the 1780 edition of William Falconer's *Universal Dictionary of the Marine* and by the formation in 1791 of the Society for the Improvement of Naval Architecture, to gather and disseminate scientific information across national boundaries on a variety of subjects. The society publicized works on subjects ranging from naval affairs and tactics and military defense to physics (fluids and matter) and mathematics (tables). It staged competitions and offered prizes for scientific proposals on how to compute the tonnage of ships, how to strengthen ship-body construction, how to get rid of bilge, how to proportion masts and yards, how to prevent and control fire on ships, how to save a sinking ship. It wanted to encourage thought on “the laws respecting bodies moving through the water with

different velocities." The science also had its graphic manifestation, as the drawing of ships took on more careful proportion and greater perspective, as reflected in the image of the *Brooks*.³²

Captain Anthony Fox: A Slave Ship's Crew, 1748

An unusual document surviving in the archive of the Society of Merchant Venturers in Bristol gives a well-rounded view of a slaving crew, the workers who would sail the machine named the *Peggy* to Africa on August 13, 1748. Captain Anthony Fox drew up "An Account of Men Belonging to the Snow *Peggy*" (a two-masted vessel), which gives abundant information about himself and his thirty-eight men. They ranged in age from fifteen to forty-two, Captain Fox and two other men being the oldest on board. The average age was twenty-six, and, for the common seaman, the age would have been even lower were we able to exclude the ages of the officers, who were usually older. (For all the information he recorded, Fox did not indicate which jobs the men performed.) Despite their relative youth, almost a third of the crew—twelve of thirty-nine—would come to a premature death on the voyage. Captain Fox also recorded "size," by which he meant height. Perhaps he was conscious of this because he was the tallest man on board at five feet ten inches. The average was five-six.³³

The men on board the *Peggy* were well traveled. One of the columns in Captain Fox's account was "where borne" rather than the usual "place of abode." The crewmen of the *Peggy* were mainly from the port cities of Britain, but broadly so, from England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland. A few came from overseas—there were four Swedes on the ship, and others from Holland, Genoa, and Guinea. Captain Fox himself was born in Montserrat. The crew members had sailed on various merchant and naval craft from Britain to Africa, the West Indies, North America, the East Indies, and the Mediterranean, Turkey in particular. Several men had been demobilized after the War of Austrian Succession in 1748. Their previous ships included men-of-war such as the HMS *Russell*, HMS *Devonshire*, HMS *Torbay*, and HMS *Launceston*. One man had served on the "*Salamander Bomb*."

The African sailor John Goodboy had sailed previously on the "Defiance Ship of War."

Captain Fox also recorded "complexion," probably in order to identify runaways should he need to do so at some point in the voyage. As it happened, the captain had only two categories for complexion—"browne" and "blacke." Most people were "browne," including the captain himself. Those he considered "blacke" included Robert Murray of Scotland, Peter Dunfry of Ireland, Perato Bartholomew of Genoa, and the African John Goodboy.

The division of labor on Fox's *Guineaman* would have been similar to what prevailed on all eighteenth-century deep-sea sailing ships, with a few special features. A typical slave ship had a captain, a first and second mate, a doctor, a carpenter, a boatswain, a gunner (or armorer), often a cooper (barrel maker), a cook, ten to twelve seamen, a handful of landsmen, and one or two ship's boys. Larger ships would have a third and even a fourth mate, mates for the doctor and the various skilled workers, especially the carpenter and gunner, and a few more seamen and landsmen. The unusual aspects were the number of mates, the necessity of a doctor, and the number of sailors and landsmen. These additional members of the crew reflected the special dangers of the slave trade, the need for larger numbers of people to guard the slaves and to withstand the mortality of the African coast and Middle Passage. The division of labor allocated responsibilities and structured working relations among the crew, forming a hierarchy of laboring roles and a corresponding scale of wages. A slave ship, like a man-of-war, required a wide variety of skills. It was "too big and unmanageable a machine" to be run by novices.³⁴

The organization of labor on the slave ship began with the captain, the first person hired and the last to be discharged by the shipowner at voyage's end. He was the representative of the merchant and his capital throughout the voyage. His charge was "to manage the navigation and everything relating to [the ship's] cargo, voyage, sailors, &c." He hired the crew, procured the ship's provisions, oversaw the loading of the original cargo, and conducted all the business of the voyage, from the

buying of the slaves in Africa to their sale in the Americas. He saw to the navigation of the vessel, tended the compasses, and gave the working orders. On the smaller ships, he ran one of the two watches. He was the monarch of his wooden world. He possessed near-absolute authority, and he used it however he saw fit to maintain social order aboard the ship.

Most slave ships had at least two mates, because the threat of mortality required that several people be on board who knew navigation. The chief mate was second in command, although much inferior in power to the captain. He commanded a watch and during the alternating time tended to the basic functioning of the ship. He managed the daily routine and set the crew to work. He minded the security of the vessel, making sure that the enslaved were under control. He also oversaw their feeding, exercise, and health. He often took responsibility for "stowing" the captives belowdecks. In those areas of Africa where the trade was carried on in boats, he took charge of one of them, which meant that he often conducted trade, bought slaves, and ferried them back to the ship.

Captain William Snelgrave touched upon most of these responsibilities in "Instructions for a first mate when in the road att Whydah," written for chief mate John Magnus in 1727. His main concern was security. He advised close control, especially of "ye strong rugged men Slaves." Check their chains closely; place sentries on guard and have them fire their arms at the evening meal (to prevent "insurrection"); make sure none hijack the ship's boat or jump overboard. Store the victuals safely and cleanly; boil well the slaves' "dab-a-dab" (a mash of horsebeans, rice, and corn) to avoid sickness; and give them water three times a day, tobacco once a week, and a dram of corn brandy on a cold morning. Divert them with music and dance in the evenings. He suggested that some of the enslaved be employed to clean between decks and that they get "a dram every day when they do their business well." If smallpox breaks out among the enslaved, isolate the sick person immediately to prevent contagion. If sailors get sick, give them special foods—sugar, butter, oatmeal. He

added, "When any Slave dies lett Mr. Willson with some officer be present at the time of committing them to the water: noting the day of the month and sickness which they died off." In the event of the death of a sailor, "take an Inventory of what he leaves; and naill the things up in his chest." The chief mate had many responsibilities, as did, in diminishing proportions, the second, third, and fourth mates after him.³⁵

The doctor's difficult job was to keep the crew and the slaves alive from one side of the Atlantic to the other. He assisted in the purchase of slaves, carefully inspecting each one for signs of sickness or debility, knowing that the healthy would have the best chance of surviving the stay on the African coast and the Middle Passage and of fetching the highest prices in America. Once the slaves had come aboard, the doctor tended to them daily, attempted to answer their complaints, diagnosed illnesses, and prescribed medications. He also treated the crew, who themselves suffered a host of maladies once they crossed the pathogenic barrier reef into West Africa. Early in the eighteenth century, only the larger ships carried a doctor, and the smaller, faster American slave ships, most of them out of Rhode Island, rarely carried one throughout the century; taking instead a "recipe book" for medicines to be used by the captain. After the passage of the Dolben Act, or Slave Carrying Bill, of 1788, all British slave ships were required to have a doctor on board, and the doctor himself was required to keep records of sickness and death on the voyage.³⁶

The carpenter, an important specialist in the wooden world, was responsible for the structural soundness of the ship and its various parts. He checked the hull regularly, forcing oakum and wooden plugs into the seams of planks to keep the vessel tight. He also repaired the masts, yards, and machinery. He gave the slave ship several of its distinctive characteristics. During the outward passage, he built the barricado on the main deck and the bulkheads and platforms on the lower deck, effectively transforming a generic merchant ship into a slaver. He paid special attention to the longboat and the yawl, especially when they were important to trade, as on the Windward Coast. The carpenter

had learned his craft through apprenticeship and sometimes trained a mate on the ship.

The lesser officers and skilled workers included the boatswain, gunner, cooper, and cook. The boatswain, like the mate, was something of a foreman. He was responsible for the rigging, kept up the cables and anchors, and on some vessels took charge of the female slaves. The gunner, or armorer, was responsible for the firearms, the ammunition, and the artillery, as well as the locks and chains. He was crucial to an era in which trade itself was regarded by many as a form of warfare and to a vessel that was in effect a floating prison. The cooper built and repaired the casks and hogsheads in which many commodities (especially sugar and tobacco) were shipped and preserved, as well as food and especially water; he might also perform other wood-working tasks. On the slave ship as on other vessels, the cook was sometimes an older seaman who had seen better times and was now unable to go aloft or perform heavy physical labor. Or he might, alternatively, be an African-American, with the "black cook" emerging in the eighteenth century as a familiar figure on ships of all kinds, including slavers. His job was an arduous one, for he had to feed up to three or four hundred people twice a day. According to the crew and probably to the enslaved (if we had any evidence of their view), the cook would not have been considered a "skilled" worker.

The common seaman was a person trained to sail a ship—to "hand, reef, and steer," as the old phrase had it. He knew how to climb up and down the ratlines, how to set the sails, how to knot and splice the lines, and how to steer the ship. By 1700, seafaring labor was roughly the same everywhere. Sailors circulated from ship to ship and found the tasks performed and the skills required by each to be essentially the same. An "able seaman" knew how to do the work of the ship in all aspects. Slavers also had on board, at lower wages, "ordinary seamen," usually younger and less-experienced men who were still learning the mysteries of a dangerous occupation. The sailor on a slave ship was also a prison guard. He spent a lot of time supervising and guarding the enslaved as

they washed, ate, danced, and sat on the main deck. This was the ship's reproductive or domestic labor.

Most slave ships, especially after 1750, had a number of landmen on board. These were young, unskilled workers, sometimes from the countryside, sometimes from the city, who signed on to Guineamen when laboring jobs along the waterfront were hard to find, as they often were in peacetime. Their work consisted mainly of guarding the slaves, although they would also be deployed for any variety of unskilled manual labor aboard the ship or ashore. During the course of the voyage, they would learn the ship's work and after two or three voyages qualify as ordinary seamen. Until then they ranked only above the ship's boys in the working hierarchy. The boys, usually between the ages of eight and fourteen and one, two, or three in number, were being "bred up to the sea" by serving an apprenticeship, usually to the captain himself. Like Samuel Robinson, they performed odd jobs and were the object of no small amount of horseplay and even cruelty.

*Thomas Clarkson: The Variety
of Slaving Vessels, 1787*

A vessel of almost any size could be a slave ship, as the abolitionist Thomas Clarkson discovered, to his utter astonishment, in June 1787. He had journeyed from London to Bristol to gather evidence about the slave trade. He was especially interested in the "construction and dimensions" of the ships and the packing of the bodies of would-be plantation workers. Having a few months earlier gone aboard Captain Colley's *Fly*, a more-or-less typical two-hundred-ton ship that lay at anchor in the Thames, Clarkson had a clear image of the slaver in mind. He was shocked to find at Bristol "two little sloops" that were fitting out for Africa. One was a vessel of only twenty-five tons; its master intended to pick up seventy slaves. The other was even smaller. It measured eleven tons and would take on board a mere thirty slaves. One of Clarkson's companions explained that vessels of

this size sometimes served as tenders, going up and down West African coastal rivers, gathering three or four slaves at a time and delivering them to the big ships anchored off the coast and bound for the New World. But the tiny vessels discovered by Clarkson were said to be slavers in their own right and would transport their own captives to the West Indies.³⁷

Clarkson did not believe it. He even wondered whether his informants were trying to trick him into making absurd statements about the slave trade that could be easily refuted and thereby "injure the great cause which I had undertaken." He learned that one of the vessels had been built as "a pleasure-boat for the accommodation of only six persons" on the Severn River and that one if not both were to be sold as pleasure craft after they delivered their slaves in the West Indies. Clarkson decided to measure both vessels and to ask one of his companions to find the builder of the vessels and get his measurements, too. The official information corresponded with Clarkson's own figures. In the larger vessel of the two, the area where the slaves would be incarcerated measured thirty-one feet in length by ten feet four inches in width, narrowing to five feet at the ends. Each slave, he calculated, would get about three square feet. In the smaller vessel, the slave room was twenty-two feet long, eight feet (tapering to four feet) wide. The height from keel to beam was five feet eight inches, but three feet were taken up by "ballast, cargo, and provisions," leaving for thirty slaves four square feet each and about two feet eight inches of vertical space. Still incredulous, Clarkson had four persons make separate inquiries to confirm that the vessels really were going to Africa. All four found the original declaration to be true, and indeed Clarkson himself soon confirmed the matter through official documents in the Bristol customhouse.³⁸

Clarkson would have been even more astonished to learn that the eleven-ton vessel he found was not the smallest on record. A ten-ton vessel called the *Hesketh* sailed from Liverpool to the Windward Coast and carried thirty enslaved people on to St. Kitts in 1761, and vessels of the same size would deliver slaves to Cuba and Brazil in the middle of the nineteenth century. Two eleven-ton vessels, the *Sally* and the

Adventure, made voyages from Rhode Island to Africa in 1764 and 1770. As Clarkson learned, even the smallest vessel could be a slave ship.³⁹

At the other end of the spectrum was the *Parr*, a 566-ton behemoth built by shipwright John Wright in Liverpool in 1797 and named for owners Thomas and John Parr, members of an eminent local slave-trading family. This was a square-sterned, double-decked ship, 127 feet long on deck and 32 feet broad, with three masts, quarter galleries, and a woman's figurehead on the prow. The ship was heavily armed, boasting twenty eighteen-pounders and twelve eighteen-pounder carronnades. A contemporary noted, "She is looked upon by judges to be a very beautiful vessel and the largest employed out of this port in the African trade for which she was designed." Built to accommodate seven hundred slaves and requiring a crew of one hundred sailors, the *Parr* proved to be not only the largest Liverpool slaver but the largest of the entire British Atlantic. Still, it came to a bad and sudden end not long after Wright and his gang of fellow shipyard workers launched it. In a trade infamous for human catastrophe, the *Parr* suffered one of the greatest of them all: in 1798, on her first voyage, to the Bight of Biafra, Bonny in particular, after Captain David Christian had reached the coast and taken on board about two hundred slaves, the ship exploded, killing everyone on board. The cause of the blast is unknown.⁴⁰

If the diminutive eleven-ton sloop Clarkson found represented one end of the spectrum and the massive *Parr* the other, what were the most typical vessels in terms of design and size? Slave traders in Britain and America most commonly employed the sloop, schooner, brig, brigantine, snow, bark, and ship (which was both a specific type and a generic label for all vessels). Guineamen tended to be middling in size and carrying capacity: they were smaller than ships employed in the East and West Indies trades, about the same size as those that sailed to the Mediterranean, and larger than the craft involved in Northern European and coastal commerce. Like vessels in almost all trades in the eighteenth century they tended to increase in size over time, although

this trend was more apparent in Bristol, London, and especially Liverpool than in the New World. American slave-ship merchants and captains preferred smaller vessels, especially sloops and schooners, which required smaller crews and carried smaller cargoes of enslaved Africans, who could be gathered more quickly on shorter stays on the African coast. British merchants preferred somewhat larger vessels, which required more logistical coordination but also promised greater profits while sharing some of the advantages of the smaller American vessels. Vessels built for one port might not work for others, as Liverpool slave-trade merchants made clear in 1774 when they said of the American slaver the *Deborah*, "though she was constructed in the usual manner for the Trade from Rhode Island to Africa," presumably to carry rum, "she would by no means suit for the Trade from Liverpool."⁴¹

The smallest vessel Clarkson saw was a sloop, which was not uncommon in the slave trade, especially out of American ports. The sloop usually ranged from 25 to 75 tons, had a single mast, fore-and-aft rigging, and a mainsail attached "to the mast on its foremost edge, and to a long boom below; by which it is occasionally shifted to either quarter." It was fast in the water and easily maneuvered, with shallow draft and light displacement. It required a modest crew of five to ten. An example of this kind of vessel appeared in the *Newport Mercury* (Rhode Island) on January 7, 1765. Offered for sale was "a SLOOP of about 50 Tons, compleatly fitted for a Guineaman, with all her Tackle. Likewise a few Negro Boys."⁴² Captain William Shearer provided a more detailed description after his sloop the *Nancy* was seized by a mutinous crew on the river Gambia in April 1753. Built in Connecticut only nine months earlier and measuring 70 tons, the *Nancy* was square-sterned and deep-waisted, had six air ports cut into each side, carried four small cannon, and was steered by a wheel. Most of the exterior had been painted black. The stern was yellow, matching the curtains in the cabin and a small frieze nearby. Another frieze was painted the color of pearl, while the area around the ports and the roundhouse were streaked with vermilion. Captain Shearer added

that the vessel "has no Register or Custom House Papers relating to the Cargo," perhaps because the crew had destroyed them. His final comment was that the *Nancy* "is an exceeding good going Vessel, and sails extremely well both upon a Wind and large."⁴³

Two-masted vessels were common in the slave trade. The schooner, which emerged from American shipyards in the early eighteenth century, was exemplified by the *Betsey*, sold at public auction at Crafts North Wharf, Charleston, South Carolina, in 1796. It was described as "a good double decked vessel, well calculated for a Guineaman, about 90 tons burthen, and may be sent to sea immediately, being in good order." The brigantine, or brig, and the snow (snauw), which had the same hull form but different rigging, were especially popular in the slave trade, largely because of their intermediate size. They ranged from 30 to 150 tons, with the average slaver running to about 100 tons. Vessels of this size often had more actual deck and aerial space per ton than larger ones, as pointed out by Sir Jeremiah Fitzpatrick, M.D., in 1797.⁴⁴

According to William Falconer, the compiler of one of the greatest maritime dictionaries of the eighteenth century, the ship was "the first rank of vessels which are navigated on the ocean." It was the largest of the vessels employed in the slave trade, combining good speed and spacious carrying capacity. It had three masts, each of which carried a lower mast, a topmast, and likely a topgallant mast. As a man-of-war, the ship was something of a "moveable fortress or citadel," carrying batteries of cannon and possessing huge destructive power. As a merchant ship, it was more variable in size, ranging from 100 tons up to a few at 500 tons or more, like the *Parr*, and capable of carrying seven hundred to eight hundred slaves. The average slave ship was the size of the first one Clarkson had seen, 200 tons like the *Fly*. Not far from typical was the *Eliza*, which was to be sold at public auction at the Carolina Coffee House in Charleston on May 7, 1800. Lying at Goyer's wharf, with "all her appurtenances," for any prospective buyer to see was the copper-bottomed ship of 230 tons, "fitted for carrying 12 guns, a remarkable fast sailer, well adapted for the West India or African

trade, exceedingly well sound in stores, and may be sent to sea at an easy expense."⁴⁵

As the slave trade grew and changed over the years, the Guinea-man evolved. Most slavers were typical sailing ships of their time, and most of them were not built specifically for the trade. Vessels of many sizes and types remained involved in the trade for the full duration of the period from 1700 to 1808, but a more specialized slaving vessel did emerge, especially from the shipyards of Liverpool, after 1750. It was larger and had more special features: air ports, copper bottoms, more room between decks. The ship underwent further modification in the late 1780s, as a result of pressures created by the abolitionist movement and the passage of reform legislation in Parliament to improve the health and treatment of both sailors and slaves. The slave ship, as Malachy Postlethwayt, Joseph Manesty, Abraham Fox, and Thomas Clarkson all from their varying vantage points knew, was one of the most important technologies of the day.

John Riland: A Slave Ship Described, 1801

John Riland read the letter from his father with rising horror. The year was 1801, and it was time for the young man to return to the family plantation in Jamaica after his studies at Christ Church, Oxford. His father gave him precise instructions: he would journey from Oxford to Liverpool, where he would take a berth as a passenger aboard a slave ship. From there he would sail to the Windward Coast of Africa, observe the purchase and loading of a "living cargo" of slaves, and travel with them across the Atlantic to Port Royal, Jamaica. Young Riland had been exposed to antislavery ideas and now had serious misgivings about the commerce in human flesh; he had, he noted, no desire to be "imprisoned in a floating lazaret-house, with a crowd of diseased and wretched slaves." He took comfort from a classmate's comment that recent abolitionist accounts of the Middle Passage and the slave ship had been "villainously exaggerated."⁴⁶

It so happened that the senior Riland, like the son, had begun to entertain doubts about slavery. His Christian conscience apparently

told him that the young man who would inherit the family estate should see firsthand what the slave trade was all about. The dutiful son did as the patriarch commanded. He went to Liverpool and sailed as a privileged passenger with a "Captain Y——" aboard his ship, the *Liberty*. Riland used the experience to write one of the most detailed accounts of a slave ship ever penned.⁴⁷

When Riland stepped aboard the vessel he would take to Africa and across the Atlantic, the captain apparently knew that he was no friend of the slave trade. The man in charge of the wooden world was determined, therefore, to present the ship and its practices in the best possible light. He tried, wrote Riland, to "soften the revolting circumstances which he saw would develop themselves on our landing [in Africa]; during also our stay on the coast, and in our subsequent voyage to Jamaica." He referred to the purchase of more than two hundred captives, the close crowding, the inevitable sickness and death. The captain also undertook to educate his young passenger. He sat with him night after night in the captain's cabin (where Riland slept and ate), conversing with him by the dim light of swaying lamps, explaining patiently how "the children of Ham" benefited by being sent to American plantations such as the one the senior Riland owned.

Soon after the captain had secured his "living cargo" on the African coast, he informed Riland that now he would see that "a slave-ship was a very different thing from what it had been represented." He referred to the abolitionist propaganda that had changed public opinion in England and abroad. Against all that he would show his passenger "the slaves rejoicing in their happy state." To illustrate the point, he approached the enslaved women on board and said a few words, "to which they replied with three cheers and a loud laugh." He then went forward on the main deck and "spoke the same words to the men, who made the same reply." Turning triumphantly to Riland, the captain said, "Now, are you not convinced that Mr. Wilberforce has conceived very improperly of slave-ships?" He referred to the parliamentary leader who had trumpeted the horrors of slave transportation. Riland was not convinced. But he was intrigued, and he was eager to learn

whether the captain might be telling the truth. He therefore observed closely "the economy of this slave ship."⁴⁸

In describing a medium-size vessel, apparently a bark or ship of approximately 140 tons, Riland began with the lower deck, the quarters where 240 enslaved people (170 males, 70 females) were incarcerated for sixteen hours a day and sometimes longer. Riland saw the vessel's dungeonlike qualities. The men, shackled together two by two at the wrists and ankles and roughly 140 in number, were stowed immediately below the main deck in an apartment that extended from the mainmast all the way forward. The distance between the lower deck and the beams above was four and a half feet, so most men would not have been able to stand up straight. Riland did not mention platforms, which were routinely built on the lower deck of slavers, from the edge of the ship inward about six feet, to increase the number of slaves to be carried. The vessel was probably stowed to its maximum number of slaves according to the Dolben Act of 1788, which permitted slave ships to carry five slaves per three tons of carrying capacity.

On the main deck above, a large wooden grating covered the entrance to the men's quarters, the open latticework designed to permit a "sufficiency of air" to enter. For the same purpose, two or three small scuttles, holes for admitting air, had been cut in the side of the vessel, although these were not always open. At the rear of the apartment was a "very strong bulk-head," constructed by the ship's carpenter in a way that would not obstruct the circulation of air through the lower deck. Still, Riland considered ventilation to be poor down below, which meant that men were subjected to a "most impure and stifling atmosphere." Worse, they had too little room: the space allotted was "far too small, either for comfort or health." Riland saw that the men, when brought up from below, looked "quite livid and ghastly as well as gloomy and dejected." Having been kept in darkness for many hours on end, they would emerge each morning blinking hard against the sunlight.⁴⁹

The midsection of the lower deck, from near the mainmast back to the mizzenmast, was the women's apartment, for the *Liberty*, unlike

most slavers, did not have a separate area for boys. To separate the men and women, therefore, a space of about ten feet was left between the men's and women's quarters as a passageway for the crew to get into the hold, where they stowed trading goods, naval stores, and provisions (food and water, probably in oversize "Guinea casks"). Fore and aft, the women's room was enclosed by sturdy bulkheads. The women, most of whom were not in irons, had more room and freedom of movement than the men, as only about forty-five of them slept here. The grating lay, boxlike, about three feet above the main deck and "admitted a good deal of air," thought Riland. Those down below might have begged to differ.⁵⁰

Two additional apartments were created beneath the quarterdeck, which was raised about seven feet above the main deck and extended to the stern of the vessel. The aftermost of these was the cabin, where hung the cots of the captain and Riland himself. But even these two most privileged people shared their sleeping space as every night twenty-five little African girls gathered to sleep beneath them. The captain warned his cabinmate that "the smell would be unpleasant for a few days," but reassured him that "when we got into the trade winds it would no longer be perceived." Riland's gentlemanly sensibilities apparently never recovered, for he later wrote, "During the night I hung over a crowd of slaves huddled together on the floor, whose stench at times was almost beyond endurance."

The situation was similar in the other, adjacent room, which opened up onto the main deck. Here slept the surgeon and first mate, who also shared the space: beneath them each night lay twenty-nine boys. Other spaces on the main deck were reserved for the sick, especially those with dysentery, who were "kept separate from the others." Sick men were placed in the longboat, which had a tarpaulin thrown over it as an awning; sick women went under the half deck. Very little room was left for the sailors, who hung their hammocks under the longboat, near the sick, hoping that the awning would protect them from the elements, especially nightly dews on the African coast.

Riland emphasized another feature that was literally central to the

social organization of the main deck—the barricado, a strong wooden barrier ten feet high that bisected the ship near the mainmast and extended about two feet over each side of the vessel. This structure, built to turn any vessel into a slaver, separated the bonded men from the women and served as a defensive barrier behind which the crew could retreat (to the women's side) in moments of slave insurrection, but it was also a military installation of sorts from which the crew guarded and controlled the enslaved people on board. Built into the barricade, noted Riland, was a small door, through which might pass only one person at a time, slowly. Whenever the men slaves were on the main deck, two armed sentinels protected the door while "four more were placed, with loaded blunderbusses in their hands, on top of the barricade, above the head of the slaves: and two cannons, loaded with small shot, were pointed toward the main-deck through holes cut in the barricade to receive them." The threat of insurrection was ever present. The captain assured a nervous Riland that he "kept such a guard on the slaves as would baffle all their efforts, should they attempt to rise." They had already tried once while on the coast of Africa and failed. When the slaves were brought above, the main deck became a closely guarded prison yard.

Riland noted the ship's longboat, where the sick men slaves were isolated, but he did not explain its significance to the ship and its business. This strong vessel, up to thirty feet in length, with a mast and often a swivel cannon, could be sailed or rowed and was capable of carrying a sizable burden. It could even be used to tow the ship when becalmed. Slavers also usually carried a second small craft called a yawl, which had a sail but was more commonly rowed by four to six sailors. These two vessels were critical to a slave ship, as almost all trading on the African coast was done at anchor, requiring an endless traffic back and forth to the shore, carrying manufactured goods in one direction and the enslaved in the other (in African canoes as well). Both boats usually had shallow hulls for easy beaching and for stability when carrying valuable cargo.⁵¹

Other features of the slave ship, on which Riland did not remark,

were nonetheless important. The gun room, usually near the captain's cabin (as far away as possible from the apartment of the enslaved men), would have been presided over by the vessel's gunner and closely guarded. Special large iron or copper boilers would have been part of the cook's domain in the galley, so he could prepare food for some 270 people, both the enslaved and the crew. Netting, a fencelike assemblage of ropes, would be stretched by the crew around the ship to prevent slaves from jumping overboard.⁵²

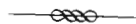
Because slave ships like the *Liberty* spent long periods of time on the coast of Africa gathering their human cargoes, they usually had another special feature, that is, copper-sheathed hulls, to protect them against boring tropical worms, or molluscs, a prime example of which was *Teredo navalis*, the shipworm. By 1800, copper sheathing was common, even though it was a relatively recent technical development. Early in the eighteenth century, the hulls of vessels bound to tropical waters were sheathed, usually with an extra layer of deal board, about half an inch in thickness, tacked to the hull (as Manesty had ordered). Beginning in 1761, the British Royal Navy, which patrolled regularly in the tropics, experimented in copper sheathing, with success. Within a few years, slavers were being sheathed, although experimentation continued, and by the 1780s the practice had become common, especially on larger vessels.⁵³ The 350-ton *Triumph*, formerly a slaver called the *Nelly*, was built in Liverpool and announced for sale by auction in Newport, Rhode Island, in 1809 as "coppered to the bends" and "copper fastened."⁵⁴ In the last quarter century of the slave trade, from 1783 to 1808, one of the features most commonly emphasized in the sale of any given slave ship was its copper bottom.⁵⁵

By the time the *Liberty* sailed in 1801, some of the larger slave ships used windsails to enhance ventilation and improve the health of the enslaved belowdecks. The windsail was a funnel tube, made of canvas and open at the top, hooped at various descending sections, and attached to the hatches to "convey a stream of fresh air downward into the lower apartments of a ship." The windsail had been devised for use on men-of-war, to preserve the health of the sailors, and had now been

applied to the slave trade, although inconsistently. One observer noted a few years earlier that only one in twenty slavers had windsails, and the *Liberty* was almost certainly among the vast majority without.⁵⁶

Riland also noted the chains used to bind the men slaves aboard the *Liberty*, and here he touched upon another essential part of a prison ship: the hardware of bondage. These would have included manacles and shackles, neck irons, chains of various kinds, and perhaps a branding iron. Many slave ships carried thumbscrews, a medieval instrument of torture in which the thumbs of a rebellious slave would be inserted into a viselike contraption and slowly crushed, sometimes to force a confession. A sale on board the slave ship *John* announced by the *Connecticut Centinel* on August 2, 1804, featured "300 pair of well made Shackles" and "150 Iron Collars together with a number of Ring-Bolts Chains &c. In suitable order for the confinement of slaves."⁵⁷

These distinctive characteristics made Guineamen easy to identify after a catastrophe, when, for example, a brig without masts was "driven ashore upon a reef" in Grand Caicos in the Bahama Islands in 1790. It was known to be "an old Guineaman, from the number of handcuffs found in her."⁵⁸ A few years later, in 1800, Captain Dalton of the *Mary-Ann* found another ghost ship on the coast of Florida. It was a large vessel lying on its side, without sails, full of water, with no crew members in sight. It turned out to be the *Greyhound*, of Portland, Maine, recognizable to the captain as a slaver "by the gratings fore and aft." John Riland suffered no such disaster, but he was well aware that he had boarded a peculiar sort of machine. Its capacity to incarcerate and transport African bodies had helped to bring into existence a new Atlantic world of labor, plantations, trade, empire, and capitalism.⁵⁹



African Paths to the Middle Passage

In late 1794, about a hundred miles up the Rio Pongas from the Windward Coast, two bands of hunters from rival Gola and Ibau kingdoms ventured into disputed territory in pursuit of game. An Ibau man speared the animal, or so one of his countrymen later insisted, but the Gola claimed the prize as rightfully their own. A fray ensued, in which a Gola man was killed and several Ibau severely wounded. The Gola took flight, and the Ibau brought the game home in triumph. But soon the outraged king of Gola raised an army and invaded the nearest Ibau lands, destroying a couple of villages and taking prisoners whom he promptly sold as slaves. Dizzy with success, he pressed on to his enemy's capital, Quappa, hoping to subjugate the entire kingdom. After several furious battles and at last a tactical miscalculation that allowed his warriors to be trapped, the king retreated and escaped but lost seven hundred of his best fighters to the Ibau. Once the captives were safely bound and confined, the king of the Ibau sent word down the rivers to the coast that he wished to trade with the "Sea Countries." He found a taker when the slave ship *Charleston* arrived on the coast. Captain James Connolly sent Joseph Hawkins with an African guide through the dense forest to purchase one hundred Gola warriors and march them to the coast.¹

Meanwhile the "greatest warriors" of the Gola lay naked in their place of confinement, "bound indiscriminately together by the hands