

## Sailing Through Darkness: A Closer Look at the Transatlantic Slave Trade

For nearly 400 years, slaving ships crossed the Atlantic, trading goods and human cargo via a triangular route known as the transatlantic slave trade. From the late 15th century until the late 19th century, ships transported cargo such as textiles, iron, firearms, and gunpowder from Europe to Africa's western coast. After their arrival in Africa, mariners traded these goods for captured Africans from the interior. Most enslaved Africans were taken from regions along the continent's western coast: Senegambia, Sierra Leone, the Windward and Gold Coast, the Bight of Benin and Biafra, and West Central Africa. Then, the second leg of the triangular voyage started, in which enslaved Africans were abducted to the Americas, where they were sold or exchanged for colonial goods, such as sugar or tobacco, that were carried back to Europe, where this triangular journey started anew. Roughly twelve million enslaved Africans were transported onboard slave vessels. Every African who ended up enslaved in the Americas had to endure the weekslong gruesome journey onboard a slaving ship. During the Slave Trade era, approximately 13 percent of African captives who embarked on a slave ship did not reach their destination and fell victim to the horrors onboard.<sup>1</sup> The slave trade, a primarily economic endeavour, was enabled by a fleet of slave ships, and more than twelve million captured Africans spent weeks onboard one of those ships crossing the Atlantic. The violent passage left captives physically and psychologically traumatised. Therefore, it is crucial to examine the nature of slaving ships.

This essay seeks to determine how far and in what ways slaving ships were unique spaces in the Atlantic world. First, this essay will turn to the historical debate surrounding slaving ships and examine the definition of 'slaving ships' and the 'Atlantic world.' Second, this essay will explore the conditions onboard a slave ship, the displacement of Africans, and the loss of womanhood through practices of sexual assault by seafarers. This essay argues that the

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<sup>1</sup> David Eltis, "Trans-Atlantic - about the Database," *Slave Voyages*, 2007, <https://www.slavevoyages.org/voyage/essays#interpretation/overview-trans-atlantic-slave-trade/the-middle-passage/6/en/>.

commodification of human beings led to the conditions onboard, accompanied by metaphysical alienation, all of which simultaneously turned women into objects of sexual gratification.

Slave ships are often theorised as a foundational space within African diaspora and the study of chattel slavery. The historiography of slave ships is a rich field with a variety of perspectives and methodologies. Some historians employ quantitative data to tell the history of slave ships and others rely on qualitative data. Thus, there are two primary lenses through which one can look at slave ships, an economic history approach and a social and cultural history approach. Scholars such as Stephanie Smallwood, Sowande' Mustakeem, and James Walvin have made significant contributions to our understanding of this dark chapter in history. Mustakeem delves deeply into archival records, produced by captains, seafarers, surgeons and captured Africans onboard slave ships and writes social histories in her book *Slavery at Sea: Terror, Sex, and Sickness in the Middle Passage*. Grounding her writings in the lived experience onboard a slave ship, Mustakeem explores the gendered experience of women and asserts that the slave ship “established the formative precursor of sexual expectations that sailors not only set into motion but brokers, auctioneers, and slaveholders further manipulated through market sales.”<sup>2</sup>

James Walvin, in his book *The Zong: A Massacre, the Law, and the End of Slavery* delves deeper into the Zong massacre and elucidates in detail the harrowing conditions of slave ships in chapter three of his book. Walvin's analysis of the slave ship asserts that the conditions of slave ships are unimaginable in and incomparable to any other maritime travel and points to the slave ship as foundational space for race relations in the Atlantic world: “The slave ship was the human crucible, which poisoned relations between black and white throughout the history of Atlantic slavery- and long afterwards.”<sup>3</sup> Stephanie Smallwood's groundbreaking book *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* underscores that every captive onboard a slave ship was an individual person exposed to the horrors of the journey. Smallwood argues that to tell the history of the Middle Passage, it is vital to look beyond the statistical

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<sup>2</sup> Sowandé M. Mustakeem, *Slavery at Sea: Terror, Sex, and Sickness in the Middle Passage* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2016), 90.

<sup>3</sup> James Walvin, *The Zong: A Massacre, the Law and the End of Slavery* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), 42.

analysis of the slave trade and perpetuate the African narrative in which captives continued to function as human beings despite the European attempts to completely eviscerate any sense of personhood. In chapter five “The Living Dead aboard the Slave Ship at Sea,” Smallwood elucidates the way in which the slave ship travelling the Atlantic Ocean was completely outside Africans’ cosmography and caused personal displacement.

To answer how far and in what ways slaving ships were a unique space within the Atlantic world, it is necessary to define what constitutes a ‘slaving ship’ and the parameters of the ‘Atlantic world.’ Slaving ships, are also known as slave ships or slave vessels and this essay uses the three terms interchangeably. Slaving ship specifically refers to vessels which were designed to transport captured Africans from Africa's western coast to places in the New World, such as Brazil, the Caribbean, or mainland America. There were smaller ships that were not primarily designated for the transport of human cargo yet carried a small number of enslaved Africans. These ships will not feature in this essays analysis as they did not create the same inhumane and deadly conditions as the larger crowded vessels, which were specifically built for the purpose of trafficking as many human beings as possible. Additionally, this essay is only concerned with slaving ships as unique spaces during the second leg of the triangular transatlantic slave trade, in which the transport of human cargo took place. The Atlantic world refers to the continents surrounding the Atlantic Ocean. Namely Europe, Africa, and the Americas. It also refers to the network of trade and maritime travel and exchange that started to develop in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century with the ‘discovery’ of the New World.

The conditions onboard a slave ship were distinctive from other naval vessels in the early and late modern Atlantic world. As mentioned previously, approximately 13 percent of captured Africans did not survive the voyage across the Atlantic, which amounts to over one and a half million deaths. While life expectancy in the early and late modern period was low, the high mortality rates among slave ships are due to the abhorrent conditions onboard such a vessel. Conditions which no other person besides captured Africans had to endure. Africans were tightly packed together below deck. As the slaving ship cruised woulthe African coast, the number of captured Africans grew and with each new person stored below deck, the space each person

could occupy dwindled.<sup>4</sup> Since European seafarers viewed captured Africans as profitable cargo, they designed slave ships in a way to maximise the number of captive Africans ships could carry.

National and personal economic interests drove the entire voyage. Said interests being the commodification of human beings into cargo to be sold and exploited for their future labour. The hollow deck below in which the Africans were crammed into often had raised platforms to utilise the height and volume of the hold, thereby forcing the captives to not only be crammed sardine-like next to each other but also on top of each other. Depending on their size, slave ships would carry over 500 Africans in a single Atlantic crossing. Pascoe Grenfell Hill, a priest in the Royal Navy, who witnessed much of the Slave Trade during his employment describes the dimensions of a seized slave vessel and number of captives on it. “The deck was crowded to the utmost with naked negroes, to the number, as stated in her papers, of 450.”<sup>5</sup> Hill described his journey on a seized slave vessel and recounts how the crew forced the captured Africans back below deck when the weather was too troublesome for them to be on deck:

*Then ensued a scene the horrors of which it is impossible to depict. The hands having to shorten sail suddenly, uncertain as to the force of the squall, found the poor helpless creatures ling about the deck an obstruction to getting at the ropes and doing what was required. This caused the order to send them all below, which was immediately obeyed. The night, however, being intensely hot and close, 400 wretched beings thus crammed into a hold 12 yards in length, 7 in breadth, and only 3 ½ feet in height, speedily began to make an effort to reissue to the open air.<sup>6</sup>*

Hill’s description gives an insight into how crammed and suffocating the inside of a slave ship was. The dimension he gives accounts for a space of roughly 70 square metres for 400 persons. Fresh air onboard a slaving ship was provided through overhead gratings and ventilators on the side of the vessel. These ventilators were designed to let in fresh air, while the ship was moving

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<sup>4</sup> Walvin, *The Zong*, 33.

<sup>5</sup> David Ricardo, Piero Sraffa, and Pascoe Grenfell Hill, “Fifty Days Onboard a Slave Vessel,” Chapter, in *The Works and Correspondence of David Ricardo* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press for the Royal Economic Society, 1951), 40–96, 41.

<sup>6</sup> David Ricardo, Piero Sraffa, and Pascoe Grenfell Hill, “Fifty Days Onboard a Slave Vessel,” essay, in *The Works and Correspondence of David Ricardo* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press for the Royal Economic Society, 1951), 40–96, 46–47.

through the Atlantic.<sup>7</sup> However, during stormy weather they had to be closed to not let in water. In addition, when the ship was becalmed or anchored at the coast it rendered the ventilators useless.

The lack of ventilation, sanitation and sheer amount of people confined in the hold created a horrendous smell, the extent of which is unimaginable. “I was soon put down under the decks, and there I received such a salutation in my nostrils as I had never experienced in my life: so that, with the loathsomeness of the stench, and crying together, I became so sick and low that I was not able to eat, nor had I the least desire to taste [anything]. I now wished for the last friend, death to relieve me.”<sup>8</sup> In his autobiography, Olaudah Equiano, a formerly enslaved person turned abolitionist, describes in detail the conditions during his journey across the Atlantic and the psychological effects they had on him. Wishing to die highlights the level of desperation and suffering African captives felt onboard slaving ships. The loathsome stench he is describing was a direct result of improper sanitation. Hundreds of captives were forced to relieve themselves in large buckets and tubs. Despite the presence of these buckets, Africans were repeatedly forced to relieve themselves where they lay since they were chained together, and the crowdedness of the hold made it increasingly difficult to reach the buckets.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, there was faecal matter everywhere. With diseases running rampant the hold of a slave ship became a prison for people who were regarded solely as property, devoid of any humanity. Walvin writes that “[a]t sea, and especially when storm-tossed, the sick and the healthy, the dead and the dying, endured unspeakably wretched conditions, their shackled lurching and sliding on the pitching decks, all lubricated by the human waste and the bilious discharge of seriously, often fatally, ill shipmates.”<sup>10</sup> Unless seafarers viewed the men and women below deck as strictly future profit, they could not have justified leaving humans in such unspeakable conditions. The European

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<sup>7</sup> Walvin, *The Zong*, 35.

<sup>8</sup> Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* (Auckland, New Zealand: The Floating Press, 1789), 64.

<sup>9</sup> Walvin, *The Zong*, 40.

<sup>10</sup> Walvin, *The Zong*, 40.

attempts to commodify and dehumanise Africans resulted in slave ships being vehicles of death and disease.

The process of commodification onboard slave ships produced an alienating experience on both a physical and metaphysical level. The voyage onboard a slave ship was a space of “unparallel displacement.”<sup>11</sup> Unlike European seafarers Africans lacked a culture of maritime travel. Olaudah Equiano recounts his unfamiliarity with the Atlantic and how he feared it when seeing it for the first time: “[N]ot being used to the water, I naturally feared it the first time I saw it.”<sup>12</sup> Most captured Africans were unfamiliar with the sight of the ocean. Some captured Africans would have been familiar with coastal waters if they lived close to the coast, but most Africans were only familiar with rivers. Besides the unfamiliarity of the ocean there was also the difference of languages among captives that would have made Africans feel isolated in addition to the peculiar sound and look of their captors.

Oceanic travel and slave ships did not only signify catastrophic demographic displacement of Africans but also each captured person’s personal displacement of their sense to locate themselves in space and time of their world. Smallwood writes that “the metaphysical aspect, the very habitat of the ship, the open sea – challenged Africa cosmographies, for the landless realm of the deep ocean did not figure in precolonial West African societies as a domain of human (as opposed to divine) activity.”<sup>13</sup> Because the ocean was not part of African cosmographies the journey onboard a slave ship proved extremely challenging, in addition to the abhorrent conditions, as Africans did not know how to categorise themselves in the open ocean. Continuously, oceanic travel challenged every African’s sense of direction, time, and spirituality. First, most Africans would only have been accustomed to land travel, in which one rests at nighttime. The continuous oceanic travel confounded African as to where they were and where they were going. Unlike the European seafarers, captured Africans were clueless about where they were travelling and how long that journey would take, since there were no Africans who

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<sup>11</sup> Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery*, 131.

<sup>12</sup> Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, 64.

<sup>13</sup> Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery*, 124.

embarked on slave ship that returned to warn them. All they knew of their destination and their captors were coastal community rumours.<sup>14</sup> In this space, in which a captured African only saw the ocean and no point of land, where the days were filled with horror, time effectively stood still.<sup>15</sup> The only thing that was certain was “the ship’s relentless motion [which] pulled the captives ever deeper into temporal and spatial entrapment.”<sup>16</sup> Along with the ship’s motion adding to seasickness, it was also such an unfamiliar feeling that it disabled African’s cognitive tools,<sup>17</sup> which aided their captors in dehumanising them. Smallwood writes that “[t]he slave ship at sea reduced African captives to an existence so physically atomised as to silence all but the most elemental bodily articulation, so socially impoverished as to threaten annihilation of the self, the complete disintegration of personhood.”<sup>18</sup>

In addition to disabling temporal, local, and cognitive skills, enslaved Africans were challenged by the absence of the earth. The earth was linked to mortuary practices<sup>19</sup> and thus a slave ship displaced Africans culturally from their spirituality, culture, and ancestors. As Africans lost their connection to the earth, they lost their connection to grave sites. Instead, the dead were simply thrown overboard, their bodies and ancestral connections were forever lost in time and space, since their bodies were never returned to the earth. Consequently, the slave ship inflicted a profound personal dislocation upon each captive, disrupting their understanding of self in space and time. Smallwood's insights into the metaphysical implications of the open sea underscore the clash between the unfamiliar oceanic environment and traditional African cosmologies. The absence of cultural familiarity with maritime travel compounded the challenges for captives, leaving them directionless, temporally adrift, and spiritually severed. The displacement extended beyond the physical realm, reaching into the cultural and spiritual dimensions, as the earth,

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<sup>14</sup> Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery*, 131.

<sup>15</sup> Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery*, 134.

<sup>16</sup> Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery*, 125.

<sup>17</sup> Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery*, 125.

<sup>18</sup> Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery*, 125.

<sup>19</sup> Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery*, 140.

intertwined with ancestral practices, was forsaken. The linguistic, geographic, spiritual, and cultural level of alienation led to a full body experiential alienation, which contributed greatly to dehumanising Africans and commodifying them.

The commodification onboard slave ships led to a profoundly gendered experience. On one hand enslavers and the conditions they created stripped every captive African of their humanity, including their gender. Every person had to endure the weekslong disorienting journey which left Africans dehydrated, diseased, or dead. Hortense Spiller writes that the “theft of the body – a wilful and violent [...] severing of the captive body from its motive will, its active desire. Under these conditions, we lose at least gender difference in the outcome, and the female body and the male body become a territory of cultural and political manoeuvre, not at all gender-related, gender-specific.”<sup>20</sup> The theft of bodies and forced immigration to the New World committed by European seafarers reduced every captive to one quantifiable number on a ledger, to the amount of physical space they occupied, to flesh.<sup>21</sup>

The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade-Database tracks voyages between Africa and America, of those 3693 recorded only 335 contain information about the sex-ratios onboard. Those 335 voyages indicate that slave ships carried both women and children.<sup>22</sup> The lack of data about the number of women onboard, Jennifer Morgan infers, reveals that captains did not prioritise accounting for the number of women on their ships but rather how many Africans total they carried.<sup>23</sup> Yet, once embarked women were treated differently based on their sex. Women and children were separated from the men via a wooden barricade and while men were shackled and manacled at their ankles and wrists, women, in general, were unbound by metal.<sup>24</sup> Was the

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<sup>20</sup> Hortense Spiller, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Diacritics*, 1987, 64–81, 67.

<sup>21</sup> Spiller, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” 72.

<sup>22</sup> Jennifer L Morgan, “Accounting for ‘The Most Excruciating Torment’: Gender, Slavery, and Trans-Atlantic Passages,” *History of the Present* 6 (2016): 184–207, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.5406/historypresent.6.2.0184>, 190.

<sup>23</sup> Morgan, “Gender, Slavery, and Trans-Atlantic Passages,” 191.

<sup>24</sup> Walvin, *The Zong*, 34.



separation of men and women due to the sailors wanting women to care for children onboard, or to prevent further insurrections? Or was it maybe so sailors had easier access to the women? During the passage “the [B]lack female body became the intentional locus of pain and violent aggressions, where instead of guns and knives, mariners used their hands, strength, genitals, and thus their entire bodies to enforce fear and compliance.”<sup>25</sup>

Although there is not a single autobiographical narrative about the experience onboard a slave ship of an enslaved female available,<sup>26</sup> there are plenty of narratives that recount instances of sexual violence and aggression towards enslaved women. Olaudah Equiano recalls that “*it was almost a constant practice with our clerks, and other whites, to commit violent depredations on the chastity of female slaves [...] I have even known them to gratify their brutal passion with female not ten years old.*”<sup>27</sup> Equiano’s account underscores the pervasive and systematic nature of sexual violence committed against Black women aboard slave ships. Women were thus subjected to most terrors men were subjected to as well as distinctly gendered violence which permeated every aspect of the slave ship. For instance, the constant sexual assault, often by different crew members, left women exposed to pregnancy and venereal diseases, which often resulted in their death.<sup>28</sup> Enslaved women were raped throughout the colonies by their enslavers and their children would follow them into slavery. However, the dynamics of sexual assault onboard a slave ship were different from those in the colonies.

The mariners committing sexual assault on those women were shielded by their whiteness and their position as sailors.<sup>29</sup> To elaborate, the typical sailor onboard a slave ship was from an impoverished background since a slave ship was an undesirable place to work. Slave ships reeked, they were disease ridden, extremely dangerous and had the highest mortality rate

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<sup>25</sup> Mustakeem, *Slavery at Sea*, 88.

<sup>26</sup> Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 12, no. 2 (2008): 1–14, <https://doi.org/10.1215/-12-2-1>, 3.

<sup>27</sup> Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, 205-206.

<sup>28</sup> Mustakeem, *Slavery at Sea*, 145-147.

<sup>29</sup> Mustakeem, *Slavery at Sea*, 87.

among seafaring occupations.<sup>30</sup> In this environment the mariners would enact revenge upon the captives for having to carry out repulsive tasks, such as cleaning up faeces below deck. Raping a Black woman was thus an act of violent sexual conquest, in which temporarily mariners reclaimed their sense of personal power over enslaved women.<sup>31</sup> Additionally, because Black women were regarded as cargo, rapists did not have to fear legal retribution. While viewed as cargo and dehumanised by the horrors of the voyage, the legal enslaver was far away in some European country and enslaved women were thus sexual hostages of poor seafarers and the boat's captain. By the time, the ship's owner would learn about the offences committed at sea the enslaved women would already have been sold in the New World. Moreover, any sailor would be financially resolved from any resulting pregnancy, because by the time it came to fruition he would be long gone and first and foremost any resulting child would be the property of the enslaved women's legal owner. Any sexual assault happened devoid of calculated future profit.

While documents detailing the cargo carried often did not consider gender because each person was given a certain amount of space, to women onboard a slave ship their gender was paramount to their experience. Their realities were grounded by the inescapability of their bodies. To illustrate, a pregnant woman's expanding belly would demand more space in a space where that is a precious possession. Moreover, pregnancy during the early and late modern period was a perilous undertaking in combination with spreading diseases, general dehydration and malnourishment pregnancies proved yet to be another potentially fatal condition for enslaved women.<sup>32</sup> Pregnancy and motherhood often lend women a protected status. Yet pregnancy or motherhood onboard a slave ship did not guarantee any safety towards African women. Smallwood highlights, that seafarers raped and assaulted pregnant women all the same.<sup>33</sup> So instead of being granted protection for fulfilling a woman's 'destiny,' enslaved women were exposed to a much more violent 'rite of passage:' the systematic rape of women of any age,

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<sup>30</sup> Walvin, *The Zong*, 45.

<sup>31</sup> Mustakeem, *Slavery at Sea*, 87.

<sup>32</sup> Mustakeem, *Slavery at Sea*, 147.

<sup>33</sup> Mustakeem, *Slavery at Sea*, 86.

condition, or familial ties. The slave ship imprinted on women onboard “legacies of physical and psychological pain in and on their flesh.”<sup>34</sup> Hence slave ships were the prelude of Black women being stripped of their womanhood and being culturally undone by sexual slavery. While women suffered the same alienation that men suffered, the commodification of humans into cargo meant that women were not only exploited for their future manual labour but were commodified for sexual pleasure in the present. Female bodies, despite age or pregnancy, could not escape their commodification brought on by the conditions and alienation of the slave ship.

To conclude, the slave ship was a unique space in the Atlantic world because of the inhumane condition, which were created for the commodification of human bodies. These conditions perpetuated dehumanising African captives and created cultural, linguistic, and geographical alienation. The lack of maritime culture left Africans metaphysically stranded in the ocean and disconnected the captives from their ancestral land. The disorientation and alienation experienced by Africans led to full body displacement, that facilitated the seafarers’ attempt to dehumanise and commodify them. This commodification of humans into cargo simultaneously commodified women’s bodies for sexual exploitation. Their commodification was not solely for their future labour in the New World, but for the mariners' pleasure and sense of power. Separated from the men they endured a sexual ‘rite of passage,’ signifying their status as property and objects of sexual gratification.

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<sup>34</sup> Mustakeem, *Slavery at Sea*, 87.

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