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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.

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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,

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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 cocoo*. 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 cocoo* 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 Ap-pas 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 "*Domona!*" (quiet) against the din. Two other white men seemed to be especially important to everything that

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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.

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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

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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

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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

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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

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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

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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.

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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

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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

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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 wainscotting 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

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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.