

MULTIRACIAL REPRESENTATIONS OF SELF, OTHERNESS, AND 'DISALIENATION'
ON THE MIDDLE PASSAGE: c1770-1810

On Monday, 18 April 1791, William Wilberforce spearheaded a House of Commons motion to abolish the slave trade. Deliberations on the bill lasted two full days. Wilberforce was in top form, having opened the debate with a persuasive appeal to conscientious and pragmatic members of the House alike. Abolition, he argued, 'was indispensibly [sic] required of them, not only by religion and morality, but by every principle of sound policy'.¹ Yet as a detailed report of the debate reveals, Wilberforce's rhetorical eloquence failed to move the Agent for the Islands, John Stanley:

He ... *represented* the stories, concerning their [slaves'] distresses in the Middle Passage, as exaggerations and falsehoods; and as to their treatment in the West Indies, he was himself witness that it was, in general, highly indulgent and humane.²

The historical record has since revealed Stanley's negationism for what it was. But it is interesting to note that the stenographer who recorded Stanley's disingenuous remarks reached for the concept of 'representation'. To be sure, in 1791 that term did not connote all it does today. But to think of Stanley's disparagement of slave testimony as a kind of representation, according to our contemporary understanding of that term, certainly does underscore the potential for partisan historical narratives to distort as well as reveal, and to actively shape meaning as well as capture it. Eighteenth-century representations of the Middle Passage, black and white, are no exception. The slaver voyage served as a trope through which colonisers and the colonised re-evaluated conceptions of self and otherness in response to their violent induction (or inducting, as the case may be) into the New World.

¹ *The Debate on a Motion for the Abolition of the Slave-Trade in the House of Commons: On Monday and Tuesday, April 18 and 19, 1791, Reported in Detail* (London: W. Woodfall, 1791), p. 2.

² *Debate on a Motion*, p. 69. My emphasis.

Two of Frantz Fanon's analytical tools, 'epidermalization' and 'disalienation', aid our understanding of what literate Africans attempted to articulate and achieve in their representations of the Middle Passage. On the one hand, it was in textual representations of this coded space that the torturous process of internalising or 'epidermalizing' the black inferiority complex began in earnest.³ On the other hand, we can just as easily read the gut-wrenching narratives of Afro-English and African-American luminaries as therapeutic attempts to come to terms with chattelism and dehumanisation. Like Fanon, those involved in this 'disalienation' project sought to 'help the black man [sic] to free himself of the arsenal of complexes that has been developed by the colonial environment'.⁴

These black voices continue to speak to Atlantic historians. Scholars who have sought faithfully to reconstruct the horrors of the Middle Passage have gleaned much from the well-known, if problematic, texts of Olaudah Equiano, Quobna Ottobah Cugoana, James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, and Boyrereau Brinch. But slave testimonies did more than simply document the banalities of evil on the much-maligned second leg of the triangular trade. I approach these texts not as repositories of Middle Passage minutiae, but as self-presentational narratives worthy of study in their own right. In doing so, it becomes evident that partisan representations and evolving collective memories may have shaped eighteenth-century identity politics more radically than did historical actuality.⁵

Yet these black voices, by themselves, tell a fractured and incomplete story. Their intermittence reminds us that in our zeal to revivify the Other, we must refrain from writing the coloniser out of history altogether. Our preoccupation with the skewed power relations between subjugators and the subjugated obscures the mutual processes of meaning-making and identity negotiation in which these groups engaged. These value-laden 'in-between

³ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (London: Pluto Press, 1986), p. 43.

⁴ Fanon, *Black Skin*, p. 30.

⁵ On the causal potency of representations, as distinct from the historical actuality on which they are (often loosely) based, see Steven Knapp, 'Collective Memory and the Actual Past', *Representations* 26, no. 1 (1989), pp. 123-49.

spaces', to borrow a term from Homi K. Bhabha, actively produce (rather than merely reflect) racial and cultural difference.⁶ Against this background, I read a multivocal dialectic of representations into subaltern texts, the empathetic writings of white abolitionists, and the self-conscious journals of slave traders. Ultimately, the thematic unity of multiracial antislavery literature reveals that class and race were inextricably intertwined in the late-eighteenth-century Atlantic world.

This essay traipses a formidable body of secondary literature. Eric Williams, James Walvin, and Folarin O. Shyllon have schooled a generation of Atlantic historians in the art of subverting Anglocentric histories of the slave trade.⁷ Williams, in particular, has cast a long shadow over the historiography of the barbarous commerce. His seminal thesis—that abolitionism gained traction only after slave-trade profits declined—was, for a time, a scholarly truism.⁸ Even today, it remains unfashionable to cite antislavery agitation and the Anglo-American pangs of conscience in accounting for the watershed year of 1807.

⁶ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 1-2.

⁷ Eric Williams, *British Historians and the West Indies* (New York: Scribner's, 1965); James Walvin, *Black and White: The Negro and English Society, 1555-1945* (London: Penguin, 1973); Walvin, *Black Ivory: A History of British Slavery* (London: HarperCollins, 1992); Folarin O. Shyllon, *Black Slaves in Britain* (London: Institute for Race Relations and Oxford University Press, 1977).

⁸ Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1944). The 'Eric Williams Thesis' or 'Decline Thesis', as it has come to be known, has not gone unchallenged. Its most persuasive critic, Seymour Drescher, argues that the British slave trade remained profitable even in the post-American Revolutionary era—so profitable, in fact, that abolition was akin to economic suicide, or 'econocide'. Only a transformed political culture more ardently committed to individual rights and liberty, argues Drescher, could overcome the economic boon that commerce in slaves continued to represent: Drescher, *Econocide: British Slavery in the Era of Abolition* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997); Drescher, *Capitalism and Antislavery: British Mobilization in a Comparative Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987); Drescher, 'The Decline Thesis of British Slavery Since Econocide', *Slavery & Abolition* 7, no. 1 (1986), pp. 3-23; Drescher, *The Mighty Experiment: Free Labor Versus Slavery in the British Emancipation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). Drescher and Selwyn H. H. Carrington, a defender of the Decline Thesis, are engaged in a continuing debate on the underlying causes of abolition. See, for example, Carrington, *The Sugar Industry and the Abolition of the Slave Trade, 1775-1810* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002); Carrington, 'British West Indian Economic Decline and Abolition, 1775-1807: Revisiting Econocide', *Canadian Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Studies* 14, no. 2 (1989), pp. 33-59; Carrington, 'The State of Debate on the Role of Capitalism in the Ending of the Slave Trade', *Journal of Caribbean History* 22, no. 1-2 (1988), pp. 20-41; Carrington and Drescher, 'Debate: Econocide and West Indian Decline, 1783-1806', *Boletín de estudios latinoamericanos y del caribe* 36 (1984), pp. 13-67. While a detailed analysis of the debate is beyond the scope of this essay, the consensus among scholars is that the most satisfactory explanation probably lies somewhere in between the polar extremes of economic and politico-cultural causation. For an erudite overview of the present state of the debate, see David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

Consequently, most scholars have unduly emphasised the macro-processes of historical change that led up to abolition. Like Philip Gould, I attempt to recapture ‘what gets lost in the story of the triumph of liberalism’: those microhistorical processes shaped by antislavery literature and the cultural zeitgeist of the late eighteenth century.⁹ While the rise of industrial capitalism may have presaged the slave trade’s demise at the macro-level, economic causation fails to account for (or, at least, is excessively cynical towards) the humanitarian streak of abolitionist representations.

Naturally, these representations laid emphasis on the horrors of the Middle Passage. Dovetailing as their research agenda does with that of postcolonialism, recent histories of the Middle Passage have complicated the unbending unidirectionality of power relations between coloniser and colonised. By illuminating how Africans creatively asserted their agency to shape representations of the Middle Passage, in addition to how white abolitionists used their own texts to facilitate that process, my study is cast in the same mould.¹⁰

Yet it is not historians, but scholars of cultural studies and postcolonial literature who have mapped the most innovative research directions. Maria Diedrich, Henry Louis Gates Jr., and Carl Pedersen have argued for the cross-disciplinary articulation of a ‘Middle Passage sensibility’ that blurs the boundaries between history and fiction. The symbolic fertility of the Middle Passage, they contend, yields ‘a spatial continuum between Africa and the Americas, the ship’s deck and the hold, the Great House and the slave quarters, the town and the

⁹ Philip Gould, *Barbaric Traffic: Commerce and Antislavery in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 3.

¹⁰ See especially Eric Robert Taylor, *If We Must Die: Shipboard Insurrections in the Era of the Atlantic Slave Trade* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, c2006); Marcus Buford Rediker, *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (New York: Viking, 2007). Other histories of high seas revolt include David Richardson, ‘Shipboard Revolts, African Authority, and the Transatlantic Slave Trade’, *William and Mary Quarterly* 58, no. 1 (2001), pp. 69-92; Stephen D. Behrendt, David Eltis, and David Richardson, ‘The Costs of Coercion: African Agency in the Pre-Modern Atlantic World’, *Economic History Review* 54, no. 3 (2001), pp. 454-76; Daniel P. Mannix and Malcolm Cowley, *Black Cargoes: A History of the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1518-1865* (New York: Penguin, 1978), pp. 104-130; Okon E. Uya, ‘Slave Revolts of the Middle Passage: A Neglected Theme’, *Calabar Historical Journal* 1, no. 1 (1976), pp. 65-88. For a unique study that parses the racial and class anxieties of multiracial sailors, whose plight often equalled that of their captive cargoes, see Emma Christopher, *Slave Ship Sailors and Their Captive Cargoes, 1730-1807* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

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outlying regions'.¹¹ In part, this study is an attempt to initiate a dialogue between Atlantic historians and their literary colleagues, who have for too long spoken in monologues about the representational potentialities of this Middle Passage sensibility.

Uprooted from central Nigeria in 1756, Olaudah Equiano, or 'Gustavus Vassa' as he was more commonly known in his own day, led an exceptional and varied life as a slave, sailor, abolitionist writer, astute businessman, amateur evangelist, and civil servant. Embittered by his dismissal from the Sierra Leone repatriation project for having exposed government corruption, Equiano wrote and published an eloquent autobiography entitled *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* (1789). With its strong abolitionist overtones and gripping narrative, Equiano's text, like those of Ottobah Cugoana and Ignatius Sancho, quickly became a mainstay of eighteenth-century antislavery literature.¹² Given its representational significance, *The Interesting Narrative* is our point of departure.¹³

¹¹ Maria Diedrich, Henry Louis Gates Jr., and Carl Pedersen, in *Black Imagination and the Middle Passage*, ed. Diedrich, Gates Jr., and Pedersen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 8. See also Barnor Hesse, 'Forgotten Like a Bad Dream: Atlantic Slavery and the Ethics of Postcolonial Memory', in *Relocating Postcolonialism*, ed. David Theo Goldberg and Ato Quayson (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), p. 158, who articulates the Middle Passage sensibility in sociological terms. Hesse explains that Atlantic slavery is often considered an aberration of history, a 'singular event ... [liberal-democratic discourse] ignore[s] the racialized trajectories of continuity and reconfiguration in contemporary social relationships, governance, and cultural representations'. Emphasis in original.

¹² Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (Alberta: University of Alberta Press, 1987), p. 107, has dubbed *The Interesting Narrative* 'the most important single literary contribution to the campaign for abolition'.

¹³ Brycchan Carey, *British Abolitionism and the Rhetoric of Sensibility: Writing, Sentiment, and Slavery, 1760-1807* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 139-42; Vincent Carretta, 'Three West Indian Writers of the 1780s Revisited and Revised', *Research in African Literatures* 29, no. 4 (1998), pp. 73-86; Carretta, *The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings: Olaudah Equiano* (New York: Penguin, 1995), p. 235. Carretta, *Equiano, The African: Biography of a Self Made Man* (Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2005), draws upon baptismal records and a ship muster roll to suggest that Equiano was in fact born a slave in North Carolina, rather than an Igbo in present-day Nigeria. Overlooking the possibility that Equiano, as a former slave, may have had valid reasons for falsifying the details of his birth, Equiano's supposedly American origins do not invalidate the representational significance of his influential text. Indeed, *The Interesting Narrative* is its own truth, divorced from the question marks that hang over the authenticity of its authorial voice. For a similar critique of Carretta's Carolina nativity thesis, see Paul E. Lovejoy, 'Autobiography and Memory: Gustavus Vassa, Alias Olaudah Equiano, the African', *Slavery and Abolition* 27, no. 3 (2006), pp. 317-47.

In 1757, during a pit stop in Guernsey, the twelve-year-old Equiano found a ‘little playmate’ in Mary, the infant daughter of his then master’s ‘mate’. Although she ‘delighted’ him, Mary’s whiteness was a source of much discomfiture for Equiano. ‘I had often observed’, he wrote, ‘that when her mother washed her face it looked very rosy; but when she washed mine it did not look so’. Equiano reacts frantically to this mundane detail: ‘I therefore tried often times myself if I could not by washing make my face of the same colour as my little playmate ... but it was all in vain; and I now began to be mortified at the difference in our complexions’.¹⁴ His self-loathing would not look out of place among the angst-ridden pages of Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952): ‘My blackness was there, dark and unarguable. And it tormented me, pursued me, disturbed me, angered me’. Equiano’s ‘third-person consciousness’ of his physicalised otherness, his blackness, is ‘solely a negating activity’. Ultimately, he yearns for nothing short of ameliorative whiteness.¹⁵

By 1759, his baptismal year, Equiano had begun to epidermalise the black inferiority complex. Recalling his mystical first impressions of Europeans, Equiano describes this process viscerally: ‘I no longer looked upon them as spirits, but as men superior to us; and therefore I had the stronger desire to resemble them; to imbibe their spirit, and imitate their manners’.¹⁶ To that end, Equiano’s ‘great curiosity to talk to books’, just as he had seen white men do, fuels his determination ‘to be able to read and write’.¹⁷ James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, a Nigerian prince on a course for Barbados (and later New York), recalls a similar experience in his autobiography. Like *The Interesting Narrative*, Gronniosaw’s account bespeaks the internalisation of his own worthlessness:

¹⁴ Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*, 7th ed., vol. 1 (London: Olaudah Equiano, 1793), p. 71.

¹⁵ Fanon, *Black Skin*, pp. 117, 110-111.

¹⁶ Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative*, vol.1, p. 86.

¹⁷ Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative*, vol. 1, p. 69.

As soon as my master had done reading I follow'd him to the place where he put the book ... I open'd it and put my ear down close upon it, in great hope that it would say something to me; but was very sorry and greatly disappointed when I found it would not speak, this thought immediately presented itself to me, that every body and every thing despised me because I was black.¹⁸

The longing among slave narrators for English literacy is telling. The African's otherness, explains Fanon, is inversely proportional to her mastery of the lingua franca. Those who speak like the European are a cut above their linguistically challenged peers, 'closer to being a real human being'.¹⁹

So it was for Equiano. By '[embracing] every occasion of improvement', be it acquiring proficiency in the English language or converting to Christianity, Equiano vigorously grafts whiteness onto his skin. He becomes, on his own account, 'almost an Englishman'.²⁰ Yet therein lies the rub. Equiano is *almost* an Englishman, *almost* in the white fold. But not quite. If, as Hegelian dialectics suggest, language implies recognition and vice versa, Equiano only ever attains 'pseudo-recognition' because his new tongue, unlike himself, is indelibly marked by whiteness. According to Fanon, for the Other to speak the language of her oppressors is simultaneously to be complicit in two interrelated acts of colonial violence: the imposition of white culture, and the suppression of indigenous culture.²¹

But if it is upon his tongue and corporeal body that Equiano affixes his racial inferiority, then it is in the Middle Passage that Equiano discovers his moral *superiority* over the coloniser. Within the textual parameters of *The Interesting Narrative*, Equiano rarely passes up an opportunity to strip slavers and slave owners of their moral authority. Recalling

¹⁸ James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince, Written by Himself*, ed. Walter Shirley (Bath: W. Gye, 1770), pp. 16-17.

¹⁹ Fanon, *Black Skin*, p. 18; Nigel C. Gibson, *Fanon: The Postcolonial Imagination* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2003), p. 17.

²⁰ Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative*, vol. 1, p. 85.

²¹ Gibson, *Fanon*, pp. 29-30.

his inaugural Middle Passage experience, Equiano writes: ‘the whites looked and acted, as I thought, in so savage a manner; for I had never seen among any people such instances of brutal cruelty’.²² This is hardly a remark in passing. Equiano decries the ‘loathsomeness of the stench’ below deck, the suicidal impulses of his ‘wearied countrymen’, and the ceaseless ‘shrieks of the women’ and ‘groans of the dying’.²³ These images simply do not square with Equiano’s laudatory praise of ‘men superior’ to their captive cargo. Nor do they assuage our suspicions that Equiano’s self-professed fondness for his original master, British naval officer Michael Pascal, reflects anything beyond a desire to endear himself to the least inhumane subjugator.²⁴ Try as *The Interesting Narrative* might to convince us of the inherent goodness of the humane slave owner, whom Equiano aspires to emulate, a deconstructionist reading of the text impels us to challenge this undergirding assumption.

This ‘double reading’ of *The Interesting Narrative* illuminates the co-existence Equiano’s inferiority and superiority complexes. Throughout the text, Equiano repeatedly invokes Christianity and its attendant humanitarianism to chastise whites for treating the enslaved so callously. While recounting particularly depraved instances of brutality, for example, Equiano sardonically labels the perpetrator or their acts ‘Christian’. Only in this ironical way is it possible for Equiano to recall a ‘Christian master [who] immediately pinned [a] wretch down to the ground at each wrist and ankle, and then took some sticks of sealing wax, and lighted them, and dropped it all over his back’.²⁵ Equiano is even bold enough to go beyond the thinly veiled jibe. Witness his sharp rebuke of one Mr. Drummond, reputedly the owner of 41,000 slaves, for having amputated the leg of a captured runaway: ‘I told him that the Christian doctrine taught us “to do unto others as we would that others should do unto

²² Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative*, vol. 1, p. 49.

²³ Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative*, vol. 1, pp. 47, 51-53.

²⁴ Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative*, vol. 1, p. 76. Our suspicions are later confirmed when Equiano protests against Pascal’s decision to sell Equiano to his second master, Captain Doran, despite having promised to free him. To add insult to injury, Equiano ‘only got one sixpence’ for his services during the Seven Years’ War. Pascal had ‘taken all [his] wages and prize money’: Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative*, vol. 1, p. 115.

²⁵ Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative*, vol. 1, p. 138.

us”’. Flustered by this frank remark, Drummond deems it necessary to explain himself: ‘answering [before God] was a thing of another world; what he thought and did were policy. ... He then said that his scheme had the desired effect—it cured that man and some others of running away’.²⁶ Equiano’s contempt for men of Drummond’s ilk bespeaks his ambivalence towards Europeans more generally. Again, we are forced to question the sincerity of Equiano’s yearning to ‘resemble them’ and ‘imbibe their spirit’.

Through the unconscious cultivation of textual undecidability, Equiano uses representation to turn racial hierarchies on their head.²⁷ Although the Fanonian inferiority complex has inscribed itself into his corporeal body, Equiano therapeutically practices disalienation through the implicit (and at times explicit) assertion of his moral rectitude. Christian benevolence and common decency, rather than skin complexion, are determinative of the role one plays on board the slave vessels in *The Interesting Narrative*. Equiano’s self-righteousness certifies him fit to ‘man the deck’ in spite of, or perhaps even because of, his blackness, which grants him an unrivalled capacity for empathy. Conversely, the morally impoverished whites whom Equiano censures are relegated to the squalid holds of representational inconsequentiality below.²⁸ Equiano wields representation as a tool of disalienation, a rhetorical weapon with which to upturn the slave vessel and its peculiar distribution of power. His autobiography is the figurative complement to literal acts of shipboard resistance. Indeed, attempts to capsizes the slave vessel were not just symbolic. One

²⁶ Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative*, vol. 1, pp. 134-135.

²⁷ Derrida views undecidability as the oscillation between binary opposites and interpretive possibilities within a text. For our purposes, Equiano oscillates between veneration and condemnation of the coloniser: Derrida, *Limited Inc.* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988), p. 145. See also Honglim Ryu, ‘Ethics of Ambiguity and Irony: Jacques Derrida and Richard Rorty’, *Human Studies* 24, no. 1-2 (2001), pp. 11-12.

²⁸ In his analysis of *The Interesting Narrative*, Gould, *Barbaric Traffic*, pp. 134-37, argues that the gulf between representation and actuality is great indeed, for Equiano traded in slaves to buy his freedom. Equiano speaks the language of the ‘commercial jeremiad’ to position himself against the excesses of the slave trade. In this way, he cultivates two parallel moral narratives: one in which he is ‘capitalist agent of his own liberation’, thereby exempting himself from complicity in the trade, and another in which he is the blameless victim of racial subjugation and thoughtless commerce.

bemused sailor had ‘known all the slaves unanimously to rush leeward in a gale of wind, on purpose to upset the ship’.²⁹

That Equiano draws upon Judaeo-Christian morality as a vehicle of disalienation is not problematic. Indeed, Equiano interprets Christianity as the codification of his *own* religion. Upon being introduced to the Bible by his mentor and father figure, Daniel Queen, Equiano was ‘wonderfully surprised to see the laws and rules of [his] country written almost exactly here’.³⁰ Aside from Equiano’s nostalgic conceptualisation of morality, however, there is no reason to think that disalienation must entail a return to the pre-colonial idyll. As Magali Rabasa observes, such reversion is not only impossible in a post-contact world, but also ‘entirely beside the point’.³¹ Rather, the point is to feel worthy enough to shed the White Mask—that ‘arsenal of complexes’ Fanon grapples with—while existing *among* the coloniser. As Bhabha argues, ‘to exist is to be called in relation to an Otherness, its look or locus’.³² Were Equiano to abscond to Nigeria, his awareness of that Otherness and his unresolved relationship to it could scarcely qualify as disalienation.

While we might suppose that Fanonian disalienation is an intensely personal experience, the excesses of the slave trade impelled whites to engage in soul-searching of their own. Like literate Africans, they too put quill to parchment. In much the same way that Equiano figuratively capsized the slave vessel, white representations of Middle Passage barbarity undercut race as a definitive marker of ‘civilised’ and ‘savage’ cultures. Consequently, deeds replaced skin complexions as the determinants of civility and respectability in the latter half of the eighteenth century. In this way, explains Philip Gould,

²⁹ Thomas Clarkson, *The Substance of the Evidence of Sundry Persons on the Slave-Trade, Collected in the Course of a Tour Made in the Autumn of the Year 1788* (London: James Phillips, 1789), p. 23.

³⁰ Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative*, vol. 1, p. 112.

³¹ Magali Rabasa, ‘Remembering Fanon: Zapatista Women and the Labor of Disalienation’, in *Thinking Gender Papers* (Los Angeles: University of California, 2008), p. 3.

³² Bhabha, ‘Remembering Fanon: Self, Psyche and the Colonial Condition’, foreword to Fanon, *Black Skin*, p. xv.

white antislavery texts decoupled historical progress from progressivism.³³ Abolitionists, black and white, were unified by their combined challenge to Montesquieu's sweeping assertion that 'commerce cures destructive prejudices'.³⁴ Tracing the synchronicity of multiracial representations of the Middle Passage harkens back to a time when the subversive narratives of black and white disenfranchisement overlapped and informed one another—what Marcus Rediker and Peter Linebaugh have dubbed the 'hidden history' of the Revolutionary Atlantic.³⁵

It is timely, then, to consider a representation that fused both narratives into one. Among the ephemera buried in a 1788 edition of *The Weekly Entertainer* is the first-person account of an English sailor, identified only as 'Byronus', literally confronting a slave vessel as its Middle Passage voyage drew to a close. In the process, Byronus confronts his own demons:

And that vessel, said the Captain to me, as I stood by his side upon the deck, is now returning from Africa, with a cargo of slaves for the markets at Barbadoes [sic] and elsewhere. The speech struck deep in my breast; I felt that repugnance so natural to a man, when conscious of the barbarity of his fellow-creatures;—my eyes were rivetted [sic] upon the vessel, as it passed gently over the bosom of the ocean; the tears which were gathered in them obscured my sight; I hastily wiped them off,—even the captain, who had long looked upon this scene with an eye of indifference, suddenly felt the impulse of nature, and wept; his generous temper had a great effect upon me; I silently grasped his hand, and retired, distressed and thoughtful, to my cabin.³⁶

³³ Gould, *Commerce and Antislavery*, p. 48. On the other hand, Gould points out that antislavery writers reinscribed civilised-savage dualism into their texts by continuing to appeal to these hierarchical distinctions, albeit for the purposes of inverting them. 'Satire', writes Gould, 'depends upon the "savage" presence of the African, creating tonal ambiguities; while the slave trade makes us savage, we are more civilized than heathens'.

³⁴ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of Laws*, eds. Anne M. Cohler, Basia Carolyn Miller, and Harold Samuel Stone (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 338.

³⁵ Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000), pp. 327-53.

³⁶ Byronus, 'The Slave Ship: A Fragment', in *The Weekly Entertainer; or, Agreeable and Instructive Repository: Containing a Collection of Select Pieces, both in Prose and Verse; Curious Anecdotes, Instructive Tales, and Ingenious Essays on Different Subjects*, vol. 53 (Dorset: J. Langdon, 1788), pp. 203-204.

Byronus' self-questioning is the equivalent of Fanonian disalienation for the remorseful European experiencing guilt by association with the slave trader.³⁷ 'The white man', explains Fanon, 'is sealed in his whiteness', much like the 'black man in his blackness'. But whereas the African is conditioned to view whiteness as her panacea, the coloniser, whose identity is intimately bound up with enforcing bondage, 'slaves to reach a human level'.³⁸ Byronus is no exception. He considers himself complicit in the slave trade by virtue (or vice) of his very whiteness.

Using representation, however, Byronus squares off with his self-loathing. Struck by 'the barbarity of his fellow-creatures', his tears betray a redemptive consciousness of his own moral failure by omission. Byronus gives rhetorical life to what one British pamphlet described as the guilt felt by 'a nation which has so long silently acquiesced under [the criminality of the slave trade]'.³⁹ Across the Atlantic, soon-to-be Founding Fathers were no less shamefaced by their connivance in the trade. Benjamin Rush opined that 'future ages ... when they read the accounts of the slave trade (if they do not regard them as fabulous) will be at a loss which to condemn the most, our folly or our guilt'.⁴⁰ For those whose sins were ones of commission, the disalienating impulse was more intense. Haunted by his past life as an

³⁷ On guilt and hubris, as distinct from humanitarianism, as catalysts for abolition, see Christopher L. Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), p. 26, and esp. pp. 438-49. Brown argues that British imperatives for abolitionism were predominantly self-centred, bespeaking a crisis of collective moral superiority rather than a selfless humanitarian impulse. While Byronus fits this profile, albeit loosely, his empathetic streak and pseudonymous authorship align him closer to limelight-shunning abolitionists such as Granville Sharp and Anthony Benezet, rather than the self-aggrandising likes of Thomas Clarkson or John Newton.

³⁸ Fanon, *Black Skin*, p. 11. On the oft-neglected white identity crisis discussed in *Black Skin*, see Robert Bernasconi, 'The European Knows and Does Not Know: Fanon's Response to Sartre', in *Frantz Fanon's Black Skin, White Masks: New Interdisciplinary Essays*, ed. Max Silverman (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), pp. 109-110.

³⁹ *A General View of the African Slave-Trade, Demonstrating Its Injustice and Impolicy: With Hints Towards a Bill for its Abolition* (London: R. Faulder, 1788), p. 12.

⁴⁰ Benjamin Rush, *An Address to the Inhabitants of the British Colonies in America, upon Slave-Keeping* (Norwich: Judah P. Spooner, 1775), p. 7. The moral narrative of collective responsibility also appeared in late-eighteenth-century American periodicals. See, for example, 'Remarks upon the Slave Trade', in *The American Museum, or Universal Magazine: Containing Essays on Agriculture, Commerce, Manufactures, Politics, Morals and Manners*, vol. 5 (Philadelphia: Mathew Carey, 1789), p. 429, in which the author presents the following rhetorical questions: 'Where is the human being that can picture to himself this scene of woe, without at the same time execrating a trade which spreads misery and desolation wherever it appears? Where is the man of real benevolence, who will not join heart and hand, in opposing this barbarous, iniquitous traffic?'

exceptionally brutish sloop captain, Reverend John Newton felt ‘bound in conscience to take shame to [himself] by a public confession’.⁴¹ Evidently, Africans and Anglo-Americans alike experienced alienation within their assigned colonial identities, albeit for different reasons.

Bi-racial narratives of disalienation, culturally specific though they may be, do not run parallel to one another. Byronus plays with representation and form to bridge the experiential gap separating coloniser from colonised, white from black, and powerful from powerless. Having retired to his cabin, Byronus explores the ‘wretched recesses’ of the slave ship in his ‘mind’s eye’. He beholds ‘a figure bent over his chains in sullen dignity; his dark eye wandering about with all the restlessness of destroyed happiness’. So wild has his imagination run by this point that Byronus hears the slave ‘muttering [an] incoherent and piteous complaint’. He must make sense of it. The captive takes hold of Byronus, speaking through his quill:

[N]o more shall these arms direct the unerring shaft against the monarch of the woods; no more shall my spear rouse the savage tyger from his den; they may wander in freedom, I must mourn in slavery. When again shall I hear the echoing conch-shell of the warrior? never. When shall I delight in the music of my countrymen? Oh! never; no sound will reach these ears, save the horn that rouses me to labour; no music will ever touch them, save the clanking of fetters!⁴²

For a fleeting moment, coloniser and colonised have merged into one. Byronus is overwhelmed, mesmerised, and taken aback by the enormity of the black inferiority complex. Only the intrusion of his equally shaken captain rouses Byronus from his trance, ‘[destroying his] meditations’.⁴³

⁴¹ John Newton, ‘Thoughts upon the African Slave Trade’, in *The Posthumous Works of the Late Rev. John Newton; Rector of the United Parishes of St. Mary Woolnoth, and St. Mary Woolchurch Haw, London* (Philadelphia: W. W. Woodward, 1809), pp. 227-28. Newton went on thus: ‘I hope it will always be a subject of humiliating reflection to me, that I was once an active instrument in a business at which my heart now shudders’.

⁴² Byronus, ‘The Slave Ship’, p. 203.

⁴³ Byronus, ‘The Slave Ship’, p. 204.

White representations exhibited more than introspection and empathy for the plight of captive cargoes. In response to Stanley's assurances that slave testimony consisted of 'exaggerations and falsehoods', white abolitionists legitimated African allegations of Middle Passage brutality. Essayists and pamphleteers, in particular, adopted the trope of the public inquiry and the accompanying credibility of its inquisitorial processes. These rhetorical tactics mirrored the evolving politics of antislavery. Spurred on by public pressure and the flowering of popular abolitionism on both sides of the Atlantic, the frequency of government inquiries into the slave trade crescendoed as the eighteenth century drew to a close.⁴⁴ In the Anglo-American common-law tradition, inquiries set store by corroborative testimony, arguments on both sides of the question, and the careful scrutiny of oral evidence.⁴⁵ Given the publication and dissemination of inquiry proceedings and parliamentary debates on abolition, it was not long before their rhetorical hallmarks appeared in antislavery texts.⁴⁶

Thomas Clarkson's *Essay on the Comparative Efficiency of Regulation or Abolition* (1789) is a case in point.⁴⁷ A Cambridge-educated minister, award-winning essayist, itinerant abolitionist, and co-founder of the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade, Clarkson was not unfamiliar with the art of persuasion. Even the title of his essay, to say nothing of the comparative aspect of Clarkson's study, bespeaks the image of impartiality and rationality he sought to foster among his self-involved readership. Pragmatic indicia such

⁴⁴ See generally Drescher, 'Public Opinion and Parliament in the Abolition of the British Slave Trade', *Parliamentary History* 26, no. 2 (2007), pp. 42-65; Christopher L. Brown, 'The British Government and the Slave Trade: Early Parliamentary Enquiries, 1713-83', *Parliamentary History* 26, no. 2 (2007), pp. 27-41.

⁴⁵ Drescher, 'People and Parliament: The Rhetoric of the British Slave Trade', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 20, no. 4 (1990), pp. 561-80, locates in late-eighteenth-century British parliamentary debates on abolition 'a moral versus economic dichotomy inherited from the pre-political period'.

⁴⁶ See, for example, U.S. Congress, *Annals of Congress*, 1st Cong., 2nd Sess. (11 February 1790), pp. 1224-233; *Observations on the Evidence Given Before the Committees of the Privy Council and House of Commons in Support of the Bill for Abolishing the Slave Trade* (London: John Stockdale, 1791); *The Debate on a Motion for the Abolition of the Slave-Trade, in the House of Commons, on Monday the Second of April, 1792, Reported in Detail* (London: n.p., 1792); U.S. Congress, *House Journal*, 3rd Cong., 1st Sess. (28 January 1794), pp. 49-50; *The African Slave Trade: Or a Short View of the Evidence Relative to that Subject, Produced Before the House of Commons, Interspersed with Such Remarks as Naturally Flowed From It ...* (Edinburgh: J. Guthrie, 1795).

⁴⁷ Clarkson, *An Essay on the Comparative Efficiency of Regulation or Abolition, as Applied to the Slave Trade, Shewing that the Latter Only can Remove the Evils to be Found in that Commerce* (London: James Phillips, 1789).

as ‘efficiency’, rather than basic human decency, called the slave trade into question.⁴⁸

Clarkson was not alone in cultivating this pretence to judiciousness and even-handedness. An abolitionist tract published in 1788 canvassed the ‘advantages and disadvantages of the slave-trade, politically considered’. Through a series of logical propositions, the anonymous author methodically weighs up the merits (few) and demerits (many) of the trade.⁴⁹ The charade of disinterestedness, then, served as the white abolitionist’s rhetorical foot in the door.

Though Clarkson had an abolitionist axe to grind, he remained wedded to his veneer of objectivity. When it comes time to recount the typical Middle Passage experience, for example, Clarkson chooses to hang back and reproduce the testimony of three anonymous slavers in place of his authorial voice. The data, he suggests, speaks for itself: ‘that there are evils, which [slaves] additionally experience during transportation, will be evident from the following accounts’.⁵⁰

Quite apart from facilitating a dispassionate consideration of the ‘evidence’, the temporary abdication of Clarkson’s authorial voice has exactly the opposite effect. We are presented instead with repentant captors testifying on condition of anonymity, as if shamed by their complicity in the barbarous commerce. Clarkson explains that the evils of the trade have stirred these ‘good gentlemen’ to action, impelling them to ‘furnish [him] with their evidence upon that subject’. These reformed seamen are so fearful of persecution that sloop and place names, which offer clues as to their identities, are redacted. Sentiment pervades

⁴⁸ Even in the late eighteenth century, the denotational overtones of ‘efficiency’ stood apart from morality. The sixth edition of Samuel Johnson’s popular English dictionary defines efficiency simply as ‘the act of producing effects’ or ‘agency’: Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language: In Which the Words are Deduced from Their Originals, and Illustrated in Their Different Significations by Examples from the Best Writers, to Which are Prefixed, a History of the Language, and an English Grammar*, 6th ed., vol. 1 (London: J. F. and C. Rivington and others, 1785), n.p.

⁴⁹ *A General View of the African Slave-Trade*, pp. 13-14.

⁵⁰ Clarkson, *Comparative Efficiency of Regulation or Abolition*, p. 29. Rediker, *The Slave Ship*, pp. 320-26, argues that Clarkson, despite his incidental concern for the welfare of the enslaved, identified more with the plight of brutalised seamen than that of the captives belowdeck. The prolificacy of Clarkson’s abolitionist writings owed much to his frequent and emotionally exhaustive interactions with disillusioned seamen. The upshot, explains Rediker, was that Clarkson made ‘sailors and their experience central to the abolition movement’.

their testimony. One sailor, at a momentary loss for words, explains that the ‘miserly’ of the enslaved ‘is not easily to be described’, while another openly admits to their ‘sufferings’ being ‘inconceivably great’.⁵¹ In these ‘confessions’ of sorts we locate the non-fictional equivalent of Byronus’ moral self-scrutiny.

Notably, these testimonies paint the same overall picture of shipboard squalor: one of claustrophobia-inducing confinement, sickness, and unsanitary conditions, to name but a few of its defining features. The consistency across all three accounts attests to Clarkson’s rhetorical mimicry of the public inquiry’s inquisitorial procedures. Indeed, most inquiries laid emphasis on the independent corroboration of anecdotal evidence and the need to measure unsubstantiated allegations against reliable sources. To make these structural similarities explicit, Clarkson supplements the sailors’ testimonies with an ‘appeal to the evidence of the Liverpool delegates, during the last sessions of Parliament’.⁵²

This fixation on credibility is also apparent in Carl Bernhard Wadstrom’s *Observations on the Slave Trade* (1789). We are told of a French slave-ship captain who, having ‘[fallen] short of provisions and water’, took to poisoning his human cargoes. Anticipating the incredulity of his readership, Wadstrom insists this barbaric vignette ‘has been authenticated by the respectable authority of several French gentlemen’.⁵³ The rhetorical logic of authentication, borrowed shamelessly from the public inquiries and parliamentary debates of the era, loomed large in white representations of the Middle Passage.

In the authorial credentials of certain abolitionist writers, we find yet another rhetorical tactic that channelled the authority of the public inquiry. Neutral observers, supposedly without a vested interest in either abolishing or perpetuating commerce in human

⁵¹ Clarkson, *Comparative Efficiency of Regulation or Abolition*, pp. 29-30.

⁵² Clarkson, *Comparative Efficiency of Regulation or Abolition*, p. 31.

⁵³ Carl Bernhard Wadstrom, *Observations on the Slave Trade, and a Description of Some Part of the Coast of Guinea, During a Voyage, Made in 1787, and 1788, in Company with Doctor A. Sparrman and Captain Arrehenius* (London: James Phillips, 1789), p. 30.

chattel, compiled their ‘accounts’ and ‘observations’ of the trade. These representations belied the unassuming language of their titles, for they were anything but anodyne.

Shipboard surgeons, in particular, exploited their medical credentials and scientific objectivity to great rhetorical effect. In the preface to his *Account of the Slave Trade on the Coast of Africa* (1798), Dr. Alexander Falconbridge professes to ‘[leave] it to abler pens to expatiate more at large on the injustice and inhumanity of the *Slave-Trade*’. Having confessed to lacking the wordsmith’s eloquence, Falconbridge reveals himself a humble student of Baconian induction: ‘I shall endeavour to ... [recite] a number of facts which have fallen under my own immediate observation’.⁵⁴ The stage is set for this student of science to ‘diagnose’ Middle Passage mania:

It frequently happens that the negroes, on being purchased by the Europeans, become raving mad; and many of them die in that state ... On board a ship in Bonny River, I saw a young negroe woman chained to the deck, who had lost her senses, soon after she was purchased and taken on board. In a former voyage ... we were obliged to confine a female negroe, of about twenty-three years of age, on her becoming a lunatic. She was afterwards sold during one of her lucid intervals.⁵⁵

Falconbridge commands the authority of a trained physician reciting his patients’ medical histories. That the second ‘subject’ was ‘sold during one of her lucid intervals’ is telling. The shrewd slave trader, unburdened by Falconbridge’s conscience and medical expertise, exploits the intermittence of his human cargo’s mental frailties in order to turn a profit. The subtext is clear: commerce in slaves breeds not only lunacy—the antithesis of Enlightenment reason—but also uncivilised indifference to it.

We turn next to an abolitionist pamphlet published in London in 1798. Plotting the evils of slavery from the ‘horrors of the Middle Passage’ to the abysmal ‘state of the

⁵⁴ Alexander Falconbridge, *An Account of the Slave Trade on the Coast of Africa* (London: James Phillips, 1798), p. 3. Emphasis in original.

⁵⁵ Falconbridge, *Account of the Slave Trade*, p. 32.

plantation', the pamphlet liberally cites an inquiry abstract as compelling evidence for its assertions. The pamphleteers, identified only as Darton and Harvey, openly aspire to objectivity and transparency. They write in a bid to dispel two reactionary myths: 'that the treatment the Slaves meet with in the West-Indies amply counterbalances their previous sufferings', and 'that the condition of the labouring poor in England, is much harder than that of the Negroes in the West-India Islands'.

To that end, the 'design of the ... Extracts [of inquiry evidence] is to enable the public to form an impartial and decisive judgment upon the subject'. Among the evidence reproduced is a 'Bloody Catalogue' of 'extraordinary punishments'. A one Mr. Fitzmaurice, who had proffered evidence to the British House of Commons, is quoted as having witnessed an especially barbarous Jamaican planter 'dropping hot lead upon the Slaves'. We are reminded here of Equiano's eerily similar account of a 'Christian master' who revelled in such sadism. To curb our scepticism, Darton and Harvey once again insist, 'all the facts that have now been adduced are of unquestionable authority, having been extracted from the Evidence laid before the House of Commons by eye-witnesses'.⁵⁶ Again we see that white abolitionists were eager to link their representations with the public inquiry and its rigorous standards of proof. In doing so, they augmented the credibility of their black literary counterparts.

At a broader level, the pamphlet's subtext is consistent with the Rediker-Linebaugh model of a Revolutionary Atlantic. Specifically, the pamphlet alludes to the establishment's Herculean efforts to sever two of the many-headed hydra's troublesome crania: black power and working-class agitation. By 1798, they had been acting in unison for some time. As noted

⁵⁶ *Remarks on the Methods of Procuring Slaves with a Short Account of Their Treatment in the West-Indies* (London: Darton and Harvey, 1798). Even when white abolitionists did not explicitly invoke the authority of public inquiries, it had a subtle influence on their language. Alexander Falconbridge, for example, joined the chorus of vindictory white voices in his having been '*credibly informed*, that a certain captain in the slave trade poured melted lead on such of the negroes as obstinately refused their food': Falconbridge, *An Account of the Slave Trade*, p. 23. My emphasis.

in the pamphlet itself, slave-trade apologists depicted the English working class as worse off than their enslaved brethren, thus hampering their identification with exploited Africans. Pro-slavery advocates had good reason to fear that the hoi polloi would rally around the abolitionist cause were it not for such a propaganda campaign. As early as 1788, the working-class inhabitants of Manchester, many of whom stood to gain from the Afro-Caribbean trades, amassed 10,600 signatures in support of an abolition petition.⁵⁷ Even Clarkson recalled his surprise at having found ‘a spirit rising among the people there for the abolition of the Slave-trade’.⁵⁸

It is against this background of class-based activism that Darton and Harvey’s tract must be understood. Their pamphleteering openly resisted the bifurcation of shared socio-economic interests among marginalised blacks and whites. By the late eighteenth century, workers and bourgeois employers alike strove to ‘dignify and ennoble’ wage labour. If ever there were an apotheosis of *unpaid* labour, it was human bondage. Naturally, then, this motley interest group took up the abolitionist flag with gusto.⁵⁹

Ironically, even those who owed the trade their ‘livelihoods’, loosely described, fanned the flames of abolitionist agitation. In 1787, much to the consternation of profiteering merchants and captains, seamen who came ashore in Liverpool flocked to Clarkson’s table at the King’s Arms. There they aired ‘their grievances, if it were only in the hope of being able to get redress’.⁶⁰ Those grievances were legitimate. His redemption notwithstanding, Newton was frank enough to brand seamen ‘the refuse and dregs of the Nation’.⁶¹ Their treatment befitted the description. Seamen’s plight, explains Christopher, was the *cause célèbre* that inspired many an abolitionist in the late Atlantic world, Clarkson included. Tars, in turn, were

⁵⁷ On Manchester’s vested interests in the slave trade, see Drescher, ‘Public Opinion’, p. 48.

⁵⁸ Clarkson, *The History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave-Trade by the British Parliament*, vol. 1 (London: R. Taylor and Co, 1808), p. 415.

⁵⁹ Davis, *Inhuman Bondage*, p. 248.

⁶⁰ Clarkson, *History of Abolition*, p. 392.

⁶¹ Newton to D. Jennings, 29 August 1752, quoted in Christopher, *Slave Ship Sailors*, p. 28.

perturbed by the ever-expanding rift between their centrality to capital and their social status, which was scarcely better than that of the enslaved.⁶² Yet we cannot discount the possibility that something more than self-interest or the circumscription of racial boundaries was at work. When, on 15 June 1791, a federal grand jury was empanelled to indict Captain James D'Wolf on a charge of murder, only a little-known sailor by the name of John Cranston testified to 'a Negro Woman [having been] thrown over Board the Vessel, while living'.⁶³ Were it not for common experiences of oppression among the free and unfree, Cranston's damning testimony, much like the sincerity of Byronus' identification with human chattel, would have been an inconceivable act of Fanonian disalienation.

The interconnectedness of class with race is also borne out by multiracial representations of shipboard rape and sexual violence. With more than a tinge of disgust, Quobna Ottobah Cugoano recalled, 'it was common for the dirty filthy sailors to take the African women and lie upon their bodies'.⁶⁴ Equiano, writing from his unique vantage point as an African slave trader, was of the same mind: 'it was almost a constant practice with our clerks, and other whites, to commit violent depredations on the chastity of the female slaves ... I was, though with reluctance, obliged to submit to at all times, being unable to help them'.⁶⁵ Given the unsettling nature of their subject matter, it is not difficult to understand why Cugoano and Equiano wrote in generalities. On the other side of the Atlantic, fellow slave narrator Boyrereau Brinch filled in the odious details:

During our confinement in this prison the common sailors were allowed to come into the house and ravish the women in presence of all the assembly. Fathers and mothers were eye witnesses to their daughter's being dispoiled [sic]. Husbands beheld their

⁶² Christopher, *Slave Ship Sailors*, pp. 9-10, 14-15, 91-121. See also Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 77-90.

⁶³ John Cranston's Testimony to the Grand Jury, 17 June 1791, quoted in Rediker, *The Slave Ship*, p. 343.

⁶⁴ Quobna Ottobah Cugoano, *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, Humbly Submitted to the Inhabitants of Great-Britain* (London: Ottobah Cugoano, 1787), p. 10.

⁶⁵ Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative*, vol. 1, p. 133.

wives in the hands of the beastly destroyers. Children bore testimony of the brutality practised upon their mothers.—‘Behold their abomination in the sight of the Lord.’
2nd Ezekiel.⁶⁶

The moral outrage of slave narrators is mirrored in Falconbridge’s text, but in a way that recasts both seamen and slaves as victims of the soulless captain’s insatiable lust.⁶⁷

Falconbridge would have us believe that class, rather than race, dictated the sexual politics of the Middle Passage. Whereas the ‘common sailors are allowed to have intercourse with such of the black women whose consent they can procure’, captains and higher-ups ‘are permitted to indulge their passions among them at pleasure, and sometimes are guilty of such brutal excesses, as disgrace human nature’.⁶⁸

The common sailor, we are told, is a true gentleman, even a defender of womanly virtue. By some perverse logic, his courtship consists of ‘procuring’ a slave’s consent. Sexual violence is thus the preserve of godless captains drunk on absolute power.⁶⁹ It was in this vein that James Field Stanfield, the abolitionist bard and one-time seaman, took aim at his former captain in a letter to Clarkson. Though his sense of decorum ‘obliged’ him to write with restraint, Stanfield adverted to the ‘brutality ... practised by the captain on an unfortunate female slave, of the age of eight or nine’. His ‘heart [bled] at the recollection’.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Boyrereau Brinch, *The Blind African Slave, or Memoirs of Boyrereau Brinch*, ed. Benjamin F. Prentiss (St. Albans, Vermont: Harry Whitney), p. 103.

⁶⁷ Sailors, of course, were the chief perpetrators of sexual violence against African women. Yet several captains condemned the culture of sexual subjugation aboard slavers, either out of concern for crew discipline or their captive cargo. In 1796, the captain of the Rhode Island slaver *Mary* recalled demoting an officer for breaching the female slave quarters: Log of the *Mary*, in Elizabeth Donnan, *Documents Illustrative of the History of the Slave Trade to America: Volume III: New England and the Middle Colonies*, vol. 3 (Washington: Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1932), pp. 374-76. An entry in Captain John Newton’s journal dated 31 January 1753 chastises a rapist among the crew for his ‘brutelike’ behaviour: quoted in Taylor, *If We Must Die*, p. 35. In a similar vein to *The Interesting Narrative*, we see in several slaver journals the textual cultivation of non-racial distinctions between the brutish and the humane, rather than those between white and black.

⁶⁸ Falconbridge, *An Account of the Slave Trade*, pp. 23-24.

⁶⁹ Rediker, *The Slave Ship*, pp. 242-43, notes that the issue of ‘consent’, which Falconbridge promptly skirts over, is a thorny and probably fictional one aboard the slaver, where even seemingly non-violent sexual interactions occur against a background of coercion and grossly unequal power relations.

⁷⁰ James Field Stanfield, *Observations on a Guinea Voyage, In a Series of Letters Addressed to the Rev. Thomas Clarkson* (London: James Phillips, 1788), p. 33.

But where Falconbridge and Stanfield read class stratification into shipboard sexual liaisons, Cugoano and Brinch call attention to the complicity of ‘common sailors’ in the worst kind of violence. How do we explain this disparity? Once again, the Rediker-Linebaugh model proves instructive. In Falconbridge’s text, sexually oppressed slaves and socially oppressed sailors are presented with a common enemy on whom to train their crosshairs—the ravenous slave-ship captain, who represents the Hercules to their hydra. Were Falconbridge or Stanfield to suggest that rank-and-file sailors molested African women, the multiracial hydra might have turned on itself. Small wonder, then, that John Newton only ever hinted at the ‘wanton rudeness of white savages’ towards ‘women and girls’. Mindful of the Pandora’s box he was prying open, Newton cut himself short. We are unconvincingly told that sexual trauma ‘is not a subject for declamation’.⁷¹ Through the sanitised lens of white abolitionism, it is not difficult to see why. Unwavering representational honesty would have sullied the sailor’s unblemished image as a poster child for Middle Passage victimisation.⁷²

Reflecting on his long and illustrious ‘career’ as a slaver captain, Hugh Crow saw nary a distinction between his human cargoes and the riff-raff who kept his seaborne torture machine well-oiled:

Severity, ... if not cruelty, which will admit of no palliation, must be employed to keep *slaves* in order and subordination, whether they be black or white; and there is not, in my opinion, a shade of difference between them, save in their respective complexions.⁷³

⁷¹ Newton, ‘Thoughts upon the African Slave Trade’, p. 239.

⁷² Rediker, *The Slave Ship*, p. 241.

⁷³ Hugh Crow, *Memoirs of the Late Captain Hugh Crow, of Liverpool; Comprising a Narrative of His Life, Together with Descriptive Sketches of the Western Coast of Africa; Particularly of Bonny ...* (London: Longman, Rees, Orme, Browne, and Green, 1830), p. 22. Emphasis in original.

Stanfield, in an ode to his former captain, gave the sentiment a poetic twist: '*Pallid or black—the free or fetter'd band, / Fall undistinguish'd by his ruffian hand*'.⁷⁴ Such attitudes among the elite were potent indeed. They impelled brutalised seamen to bear all to Thomas Clarkson, a man who worked tirelessly to abolish their trade. They gave John Cranston the courage to testify against his former captain, a man so untouchable that not even a murder charge thwarted his election to the United States Senate. They prompted Manchester's hard-nosed labourers to support abolition, even as they were happily reaping the benefits of the trade.

Attitudes like Crow's also made possible a multivocal dialectic of representations, one that subversively collapsed the distinctions between class and race in the late-eighteenth-century Atlantic world. As we have seen, these representations were part and parcel of a multiracial disalienation project. Africans sought to confront and dismantle the black inferiority complex, whereas whites attempted to recapture a humanity cast adrift at sea. In *The Interesting Narrative*, Equiano substitutes Christian benevolence for skin complexion as a marker of civilisation. Thomas Clarkson's essay opens the floor to penitent sailors. Byronus encapsulates the guilt of an Atlantic world that turned a blind eye to unspeakable atrocities. In their own peculiar ways, each of the representations discussed in this essay served as an impetus for collaborative disalienation.

Multiracial representations of the Middle Passage interacted in a host of ways. At times, the linkages were explicit: recall Byronus' inscription of the black authorial voice into his text. More frequently, however, black and white representations engaged in a tacit dialogue. Clarkson, Falconbridge, and Darton and Harvey have demonstrated that the trope of the public inquiry—and, by extension, the irreproachability of its inquisitorial method—was

⁷⁴ Stanfield, *The Guinea Voyage, A Poem in Three Books* (London: James Phillips, 1789), p. 19. Emphasis in original.

the most potent weapon in the rhetorical arsenal of white abolitionists. Whether intentionally or not, its deployment lent credence to the raw and unvarnished testimony of slave narrators.

At a more fundamental level, what made rhetorical collaboration on this scale possible? What united this motley crew of disparate individuals under a single banner? Rediker and Linebaugh have convincingly argued that terror, in all its guises, was the great unifier. Aboard the slave vessel, terror cascaded downwards: from captain to officers, officers to sailors, and sailors to the enslaved.⁷⁵ With the benefit of hindsight, one pseudonymous Liverpool writer put it succinctly: ‘the captain bullies the men, the men torture the slaves, the slaves’ hearts are breaking with despair’.⁷⁶ The language of oppression was universal indeed. Equiano, like the common sailor, trembled with indignation at being bilked of his wages. Ashore, wage labourers feeling the sting of social ostracism heeded the clarion call of abolitionism, for it epitomised their grievances like no other cause. Even bourgeois employers, Davis argues, were in the thrall of free-labour ideology.⁷⁷ Terror and oppression, served with a side of self-interest, sowed the seeds of multiracial discontent. Little by little, they bridged the gap between the metanarratives of black power and working-class agitation, affirming the interconnectedness of class with race.

That representation is reductive of human experience is a point well taken.⁷⁸ Yet the alternative—a wistful retreat to macrohistory—is surely unwarranted. We do well to remember that economic histories of abolitionism, illuminative though they may be, are ultimately complicit in the ‘violence of abstraction’ perpetrated by slave-trade merchants and profiteers of old.⁷⁹ Insulated from the experiential dimensions of the trade, macro-historians

⁷⁵ Linebaugh and Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra*, p. 14; Rediker, *The Slave Ship*, p. 239.

⁷⁶ ‘Dicky Sam’, *Liverpool and Slavery: An Historical Account of the Liverpool-African Slave Trade* (Liverpool: A. Bowker & Son, 1884), p. 36.

⁷⁷ Davis, *Inhuman Bondage*, p. 248.

⁷⁸ See generally Marcus Wood, *Blind Memory: Visual Representations of Slavery in England and America, 1780-1865* (New York: Routledge, 2000), esp. pp. 8-11; Elizabeth Kowalski Wallace, *The British Slave Trade and Public Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), pp. 42-43.

⁷⁹ Rediker, *The Slave Ship*, p. 12.

Christopher Beshara
Beauchamp Historical Prize

tally the figures, crunch the numbers, and focus exclusively on the 'big picture'. The complexity of human behaviour, to say nothing of the enormity of human suffering, is cast aside. Instead, every historical actor is reduced to an unconscious tool of the economic superstructure. Contradictory evidence is dismissed as statistical aberration. Such histories are woefully inadequate. For the quintessentially human element that drives any successful form of socio-political activism, abolitionism included, we must look to representation. Our gaze must be critical, lest *misrepresentation* taint our analysis: consider Stanley's rosy portrayal of the Middle Passage, Falconbridge's revisionist take on shipboard sexual politics, or even Equiano's gloss on his connivance in the slave trade. Yet the need to cultivate a critical eye is not reason enough, or at all, to reject the ethos of cultural history.

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